

100 YEARS OF THE AMA

BY MITCH BOEHM
PHOTOS: AMA ARCHIVE

“When my grandfather’s brother Arthur and his friend Bill Harley decided [in 1902] to motorize a bicycle...they didn’t set out to start a big company...and they certainly didn’t dream that motorcycles bearing their names would become globally recognized symbols of American power and freedom. They shared a dream of [a motorized bicycle] that would speed up hills and power through mud.

They were just young guys thinking, ‘We gotta go down the road on two wheels!’”
— Willie G. Davidson, *Ride Free, A Memoir*



It’s not much of a surprise, and maybe it’s where Arthur and Bill got their inspiration in the first place, but the creation and development of bicycles and two-, three- and four-wheeled powered vehicles in the mid-to-late 1800s and very early 1900s had much of that same *gotta go down the road* sentiment baked into the foundation.

There was work for powered machines to do in those early days, for sure, both wheeled and non-wheeled, and on farms and in factories. But cruising a parallel path to all that pesky and sweaty labor was the desire to move...to go places, to travel, often with friends, and do it at a pace

which makes 2024 our 100th anniversary. And while the mainstream motorcycle movement had been a thing for 20 or so years before the AMA’s creation, the root system of our sport, the early manufacturers such as Harley-Davidson and Indian, and this very organization, are inexorably linked.

Motorcycles (and automobiles) altered the very fabric of life in America (and much of the rest of the world) dramatically in those early days of powered travel. The machines advanced quickly to offer more speed, range,

durability and performance, yet there developed an innate need for something more — but something less tangible — than simply travel and movement.

Motorcycles weren’t just transportation in those very early days, as automobiles were. As today, they were exciting, emotional and challenging conveyances, ones that not only demanded a modicum of skill to operate safely and properly (and fully), but ones that generated a powerful thirst among enthusiasts for fun, camaraderie and social connection through shared experiences such as recreational riding, event participation, moto-political activism, and competition.

Quenching those social and competitive thirsts, and harnessing them for the good (and defense) of the sport by gathering, registering, supporting and inspiring like-minded enthusiasts, demanded a decent level of organization. In motorcycling’s earliest days, this organizational effort took the form



SETTING THE STAGE

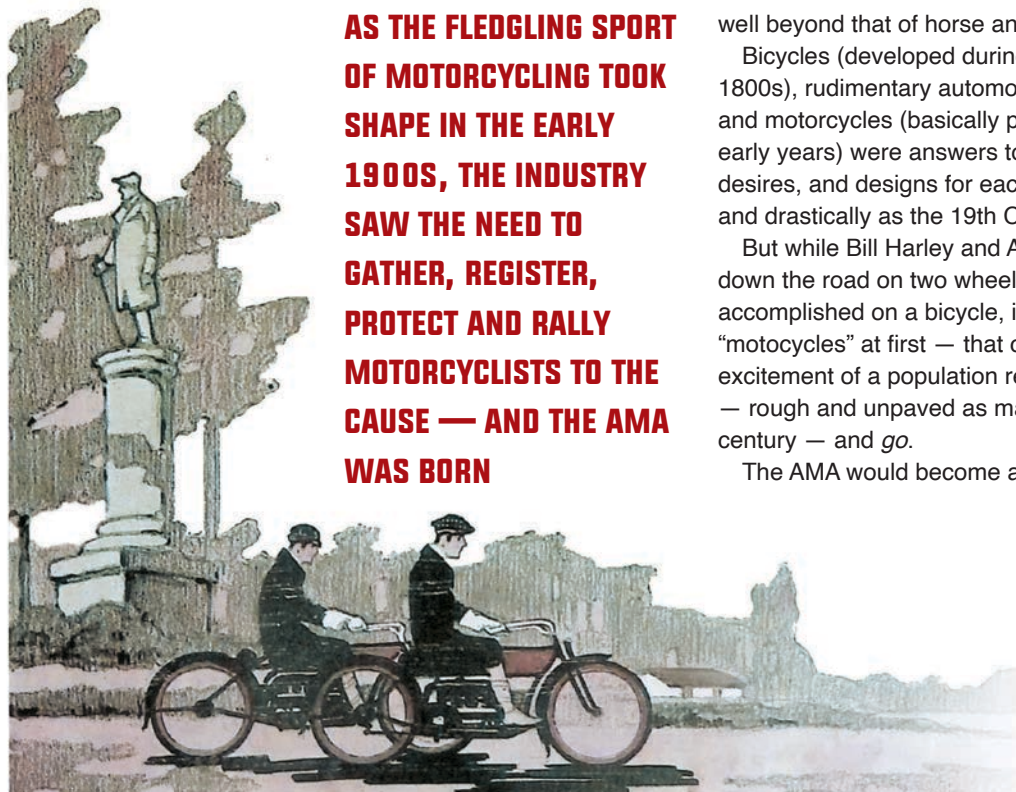
AS THE FLEDGLING SPORT OF MOTORCYCLING TOOK SHAPE IN THE EARLY 1900S, THE INDUSTRY SAW THE NEED TO GATHER, REGISTER, PROTECT AND RALLY MOTORCYCLISTS TO THE CAUSE — AND THE AMA WAS BORN

well beyond that of horse and buggy.

Bicycles (developed during the middle and late 1800s), rudimentary automobiles (of the early 1900s) and motorcycles (basically powered bicycles in those early years) were answers to many of those dreams and desires, and designs for each would improve both quickly and drastically as the 19th Century turned to the 20th.

But while Bill Harley and Arthur Davidson’s “getting down the road on two wheels” thinking could be accomplished on a bicycle, it was motorcycles — “motocycles” at first — that captured the attention and excitement of a population ready to get out on those roads — rough and unpaved as many were at the turn of the century — and go.

The AMA would become an official entity in 1924,



Wheels, wheels and more wheels...the late 1800s and early 1900s were full of ‘em, and on all sorts of contraptions, too, from early leg-powered “running machines” (top middle) to big wheelers (above) to motorized bicycles to board-track racers (far left), sidecars and more. Exciting times, for sure.



100 YEARS OF THE AMA

of a member organization known as the Federation of American Motorcyclists, or FAM, which registered nearly 9,000 enthusiasts before its demise just after WWI.

The MMA, or Motorcycle Manufacturers Association, came next, with none other than H-D's Arthur Davidson as Treasurer, but was soon supplanted by the M&ATA, or Motorcycle and Allied Trades Association, a more manufacturer- and aftermarket-oriented organization that filled the FAM's social- and competition-oriented voids by establishing the AMA for the very reasons listed above.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves here. First a little history...

ROOT SYSTEM

An obsessive might trace motorcycling's DNA to 4000 BC and the very first wheels, which are thought to have spun pottery, or maybe the wheels of the wheelbarrows or Roman chariots that came later...or any of the thousands of wheeled mechanisms developed during the industrial revolution of the 1700s and early 1800s.

But many historians place the beginnings of what we know as a motorcycle with the first bicycles of the middle 1800s, with Karl von Drais' *laufmaschine* ("running machine") often recognized as one of the first. The first pedal-crank bicycle is said to have come from Germany's Philipp Moritz Fischer, who "rode" a leg-propelled Draisine bike as a young man and who is said to have built the first bike powered via pedals, presumably due to sore legs from the *laufmaschine*.

Many of those early bikes had pedals connected directly

to the front wheel, and many of those wheels were of huge diameter, several times larger than the rear wheel, which caused all sorts of safety and control problems until the so-called "safety" bicycles — bikes with similarly sized wheels front and rear — came about in the later 1880s.

By that point, steam engines had been around for well over 100 years (Thomas Newcomen is credited with the

concept), and naturally, some were installed onto early bikes, with Frenchman Pierre Michaux and Boston's own Sylvester Roper getting credit by many for doing it first in the 1860s with their steam velocipedes.

But as internal-combustion engines — first built in commercially successful guise by Etienne Lenoir and, later, Nicolaus Otto — became more common and functional, it was only a matter of time before they found their way between — or onto, or alongside — the frame rails of two-wheelers.

First to do it, of course, were Gottlieb Daimler and Wilhelm Maybach of Germany, who built the Daimler-Maybach Reitwagen in 1885 — a replica of which sits proudly in the AMA's Motorcycle Hall of Fame. Their creation was both large and heavy, its thick wood frame and wheels looking more like a farm implement than what we'd consider a motorcycle. But it was the first and it led the way.

BOOM TIMES

As the 20th century neared, the motorcycle landscape took a grand leap forward, with many of these new bicycle companies fitting small internal-combustion engines to



MOTORCYCLES WEREN'T JUST TRANSPORTATION IN THOSE VERY EARLY DAYS, AS AUTOMOBILES WERE. AS TODAY, THEY WERE EXCITING, EMOTIONAL AND CHALLENGING CONVEYANCES...

their designs and offering them for sale to the public on a far wider scale than ever before.

France's Peugeot is credited as the first of these, offering a powered model in 1898, and as engine technology began to improve at a rapid rate, many more new (and old) companies followed suit, including Royal Enfield (1901), Hendee/Indian (1901), Triumph (1902) and, in 1903, Harley-Davidson, just to name a few.

The first motorcycle magazine was actually a bicycle bi-weekly known as *The Bicycle World*, first established in 1877. It morphed into *The Bicycle World and Motorcycle Review* shortly after the turn of the century, and served as the journal of the "wheelmen," as enthusiasts were called in those early days.

Aside from their use in travel and leisure riding, these early motorbikes were also used to pace bicycle races, though it didn't take long for pace riders to realize the potential of racing these motorized two-wheelers. As early as 1905, motorcycle racing had established itself as a sport with a future.

Competition was percolating in Europe, as well, with a particularly unsafe race near Paris in September of 1904 causing the participating countries — Austria, Denmark, France, Germany and Great Britain — to join together and form the *Fédération Internationale des Clubs Motocyclistes* (FICM), which would in 1912 become the

FIM we know today.

Between riding and travel and racing and social get-togethers and much more, a lot of ground was shifting on the motorcycle landscape in those very early days, with large numbers of clubs being formed across the country and all sorts of racing and non-racing activities taking place. In fact, it was a local club that created the spark that ignited the formation of the FAM, the first national motorcycle organization.

FIRST FAM

Spurred by the first major legislative problem to confront motorcyclists — a New York law requiring registration of motorcycles as motor vehicles [*imagine that!* — Ed.] — a committee was formed by the New York Motorcycle Club in early 1903 to gauge the need

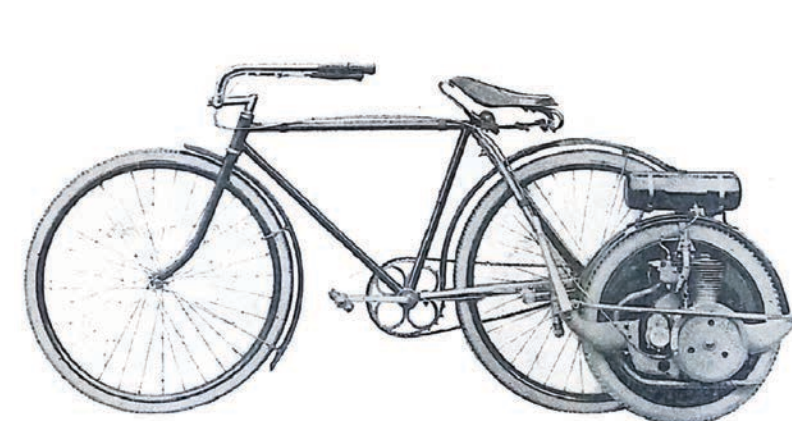
and desire for a national enthusiasts' organization, one that would support the sport and enthusiastic adherents.

Having found plenty of support for such an organization among club members and the burgeoning industry, the Federation of American Motorcyclists (FAM) was formed that summer, with a constitution that sounds plenty familiar:

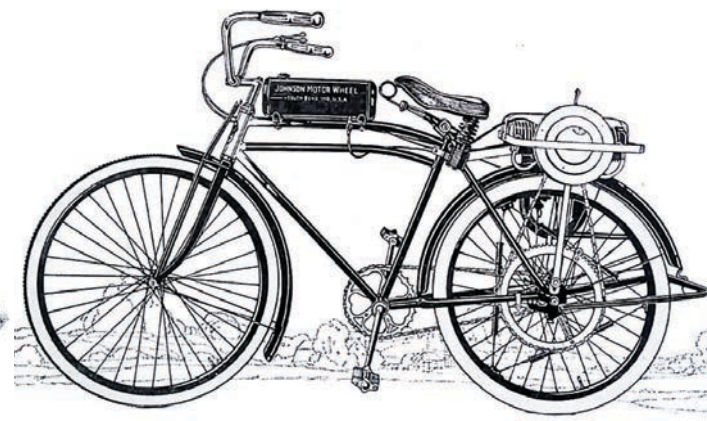
CONSTITUTION Article 1: The title of this organization shall be the Federation of American Motorcyclists. Its objectives shall be to encourage the use of motorcycles and to promote the general interests of motorcycling; to



Above: The first Harley-Davidson, circa 1903, one of just a few built that year. This one sits in H-D's factory museum in Milwaukee, Wis. The Daimler-Maybach Reitwagen (left) of 1885 gets credit as the first internal combustion-powered motorcycle. Though cumbersome and heavy, it led the way to all sorts of lightweight motorized bicycle designs (below).



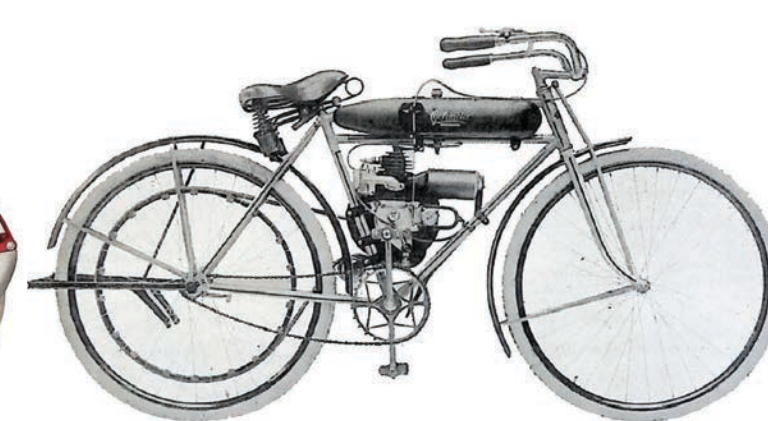
SMITH MOTOR WHEEL



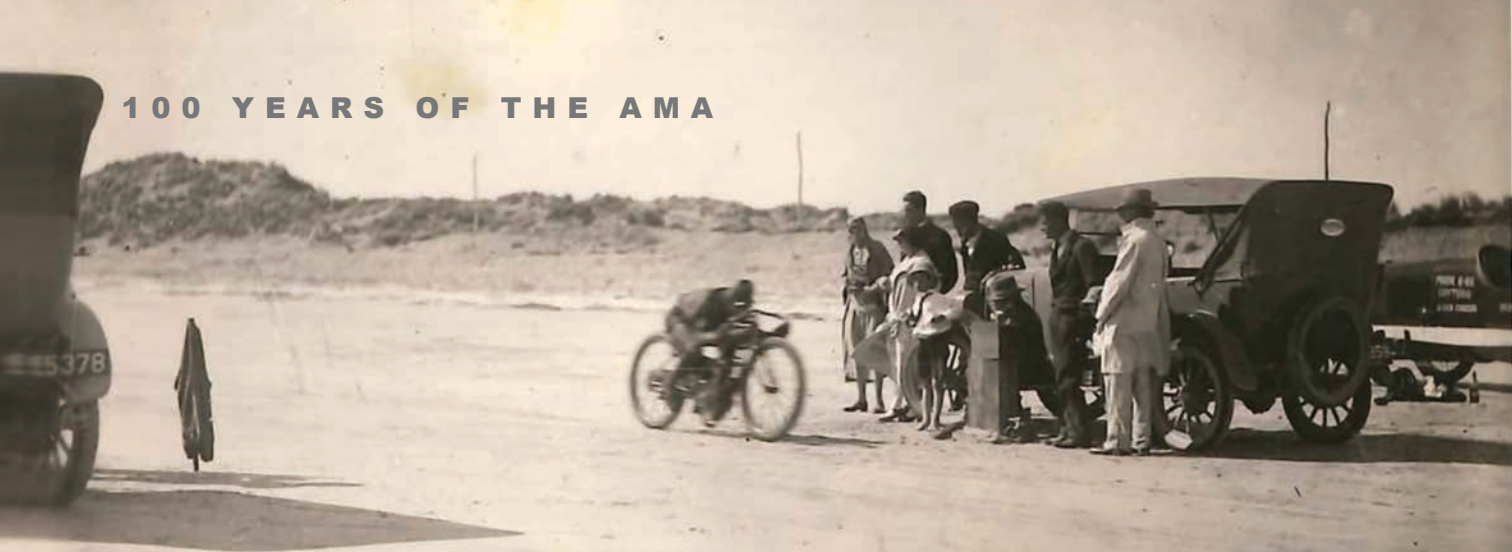
JOHNSON MOTOR WHEEL



DAYTON MOTOR BICYCLE



CYCLEMOTOR



AS BIKE SALES AND MOTORCYCLE ACTIVITY INCREASED DRAMATICALLY IN THE YEARS AFTER THE FAM'S CREATION, A SIMILAR MOVE TOWARD ORGANIZATION — ONE THAT WOULD EVENTUALLY LEND SHAPE TO THE FUTURE AMA — TOOK PLACE IN THE RISE OF TRADE ORGANIZATIONS.

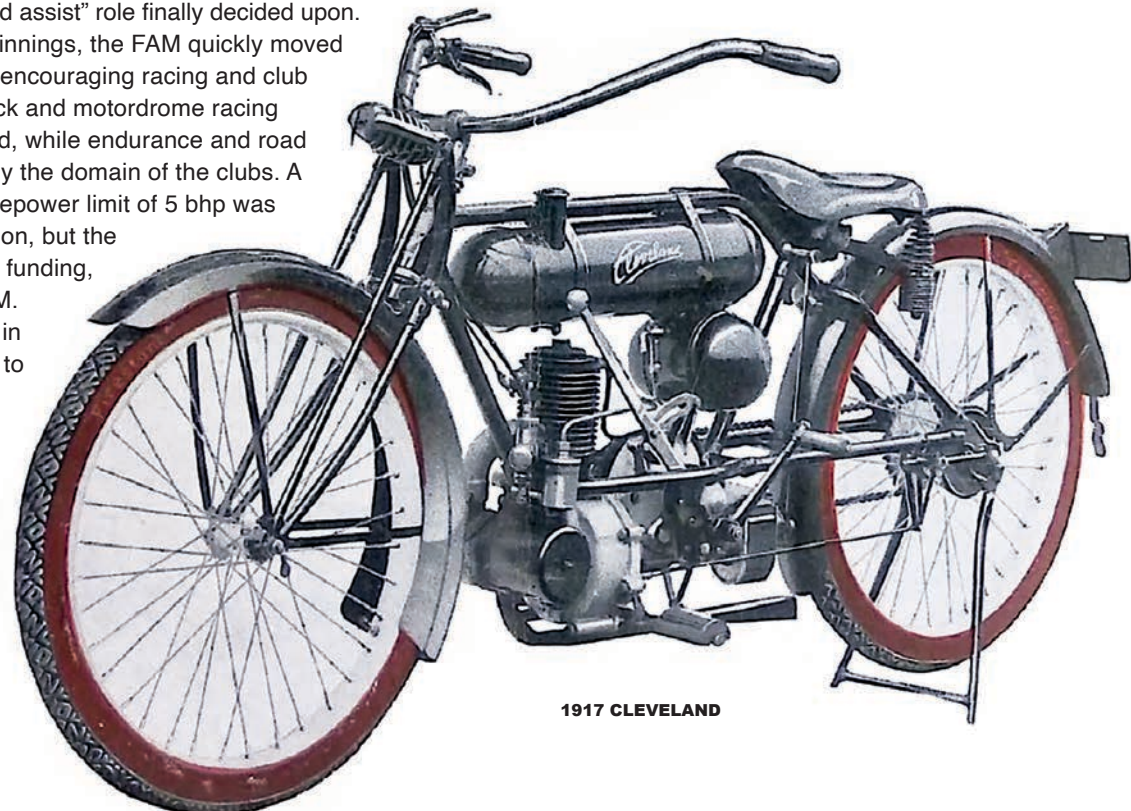
ascertain, defend and protect the rights of motorcyclists; to facilitate touring; to assist in the good roads movement; and to advise and assist in the regulation of motorcycle racing and other competition in which motorcycles engage.

A spirited debate quickly arose on the subject of competition, and whether motorcycle racing should share racetracks with auto racing organizations (it should not, it decided), and whether the FAM should “absolutely control” racing or simply serve in an advisory capacity, with an “advise and assist” role finally decided upon.

From small beginnings, the FAM quickly moved in the direction of encouraging racing and club activity. Board track and motordrome racing emphasized speed, while endurance and road runs were primarily the domain of the clubs. A self-imposed horsepower limit of 5 bhp was a bone of contention, but the biggest issue was funding, with Treasurer E.M. Estabrook stating in 1909 that rebates to

districts should be discontinued because [the districts] could operate without those funds, while the national organization needed the money to continue to build core strength. It's an element that would be discussed in later decades.

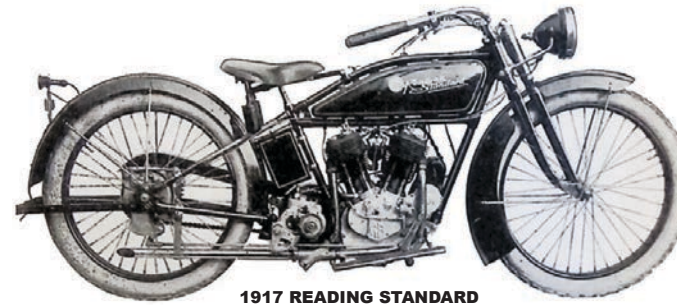
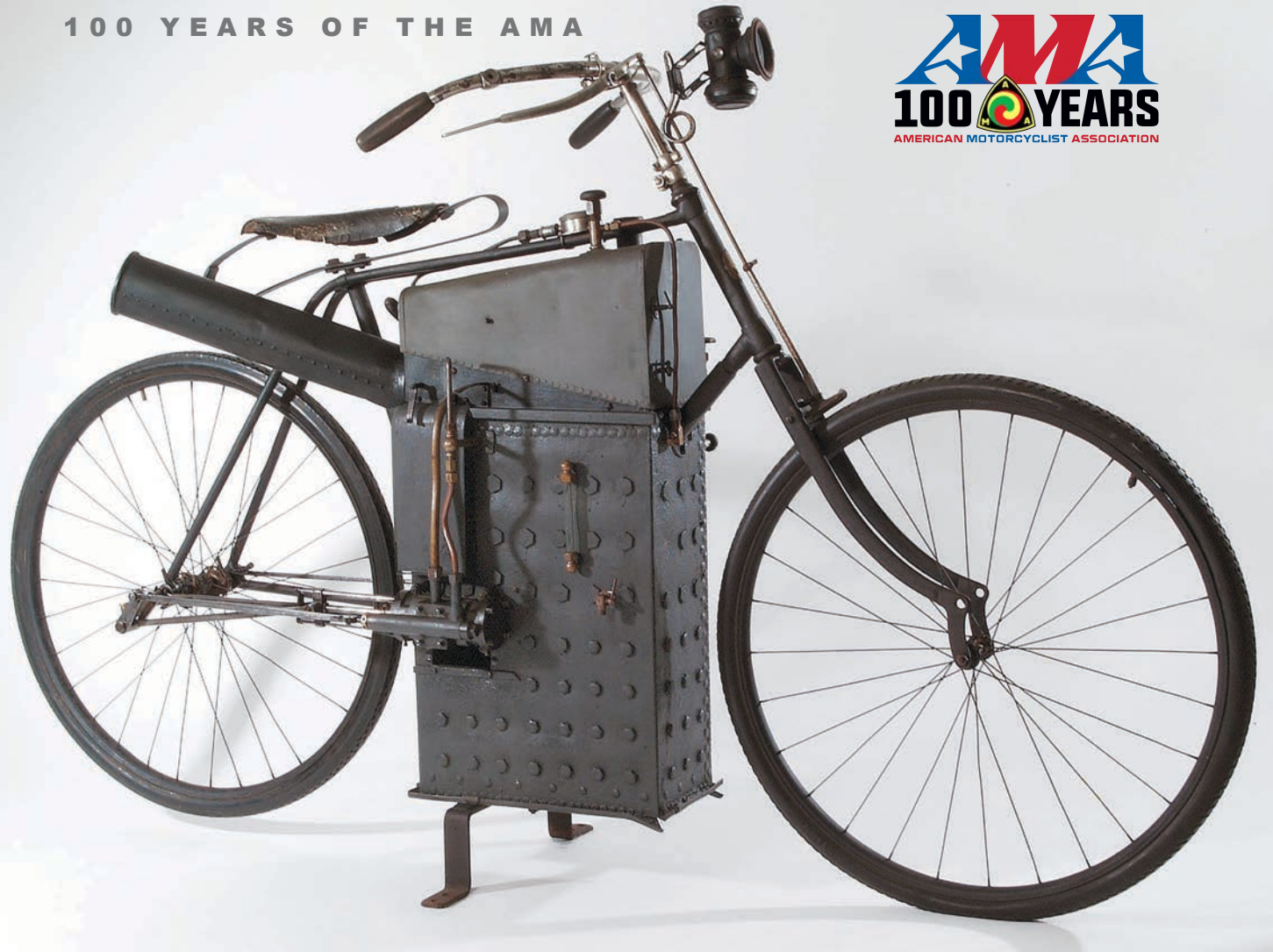
As bike sales and motorcycle activity increased dramatically in the years after the FAM's creation, a similar move toward organization — one that would eventually lend shape to the future AMA — took place in the rise of trade organizations comprised of



1917 CLEVELAND

Top: It didn't take long for enthusiasts to start racing one another and doing speed trials on their bikes. Right: A Cleveland single, with its telltale tank. Right: The cover of *The Bicycling World and Motorcycle Review* from 1912.





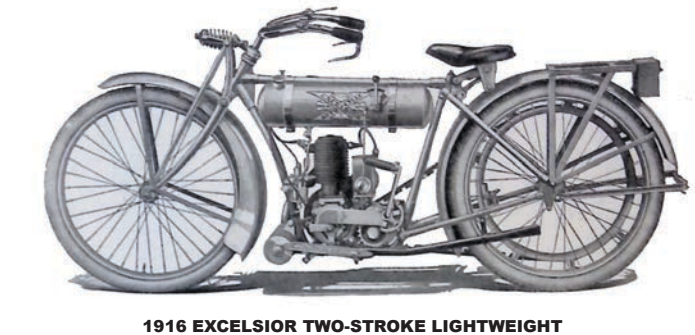
1917 READING STANDARD



1912 INDIAN 8 VALVE



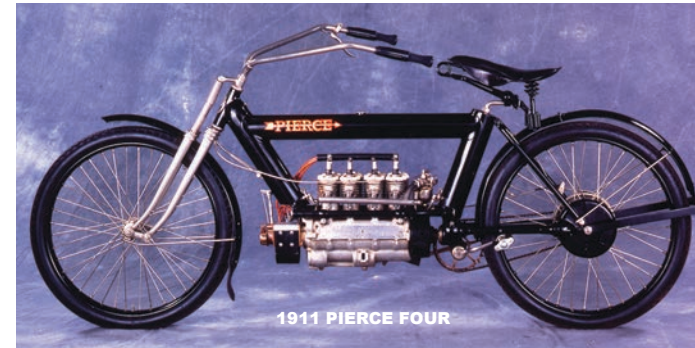
1914 HARLEY-DAVIDSON WILLIS



1916 EXCELSIOR TWO-STROKE LIGHTWEIGHT



1924 CLEVELAND



1911 PIERCE FOUR



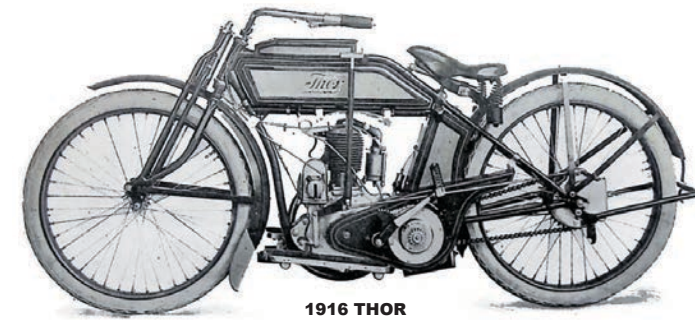
There is some disagreement on what constitutes *the first motorcycle*, but it's pretty hard to argue that AMA Hall of Famer and Massachusetts resident Sylvester Roper's original velocipede steamer (below) of 1868 doesn't rank as at least 50% of the very first wave. (French father and son Pierre and Ernest Michaux built something similar a year or so earlier.) Roper's steamcycle burned charcoal and rolled on wooden wheels, but a powered cycle it was, and if you buy the idea that a steam-powered two-wheeler was indeed a motorcycle (as many do), then these two – Roper and Michaux – beat Daimler and Maybach to the punch by more than a dozen years. Roper built several versions of his steamer over the years, the final iteration of 1896 (above and left) using a production-spec bicycle as a base.



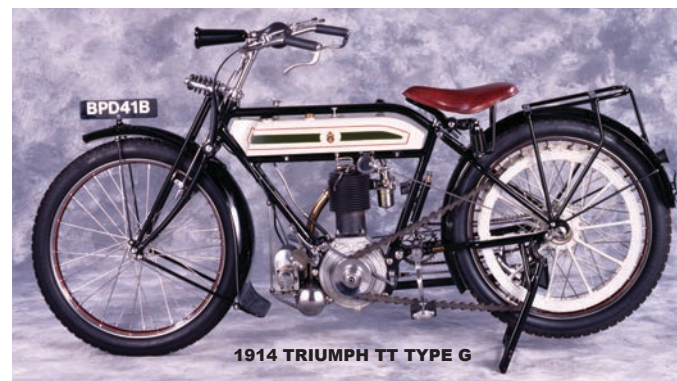
With each stoking of the coals, Roper's bike would run for seven miles, and reach speeds of 30 mph. While demonstrating it at a local bicycle race, the 73-year-old Roper is said to have died of a heart attack.



1908 INDIAN TWIN



1916 THOR



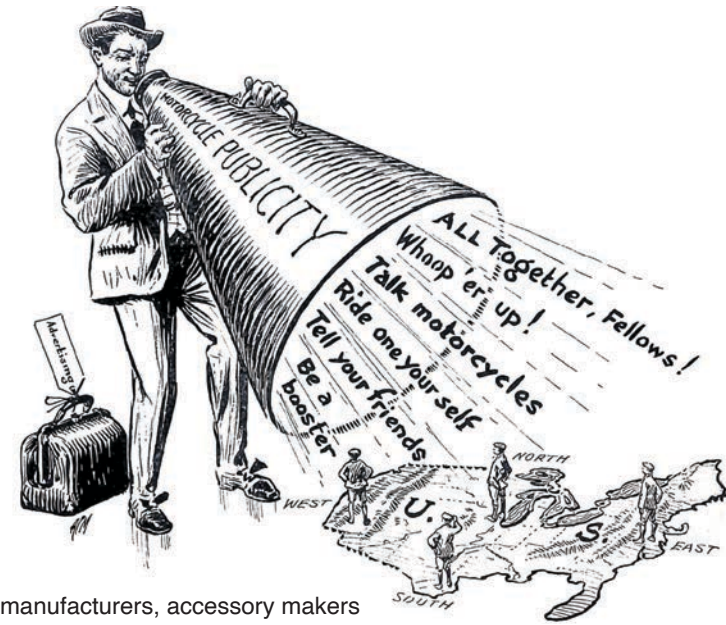
1914 TRIUMPH TT TYPE G



1905 INDIAN SINGLE



By 1910, H-D production was more than 3000 units annually, and Harleys were becoming part of American culture, in windows, shipping crates, garages and on the road. Right: H-D Motor Company founders (left to right) Arthur Davidson, Walter Davidson, Bill Harley and William Davidson.



manufacturers, accessory makers and distributors, a primary example being the establishment of the Motorcycle Manufacturers Association, or MMA, in 1908.

These outfits, which included bicycle and motorcycle makers, began to hold shows and conventions demonstrating the growing strength of the two-wheeled industry, and worked in concert with the FAM on a range of pro-industry items — legislation (supporting good, fighting bad), racing rules, and assorted other regulations. It's noteworthy that a fellow named A.B. Coffman of Consolidated Manufacturing of Toledo, Ohio, was elected president of the MMA in 1911 (remember the name), and that Arthur Davidson of the fledgling Harley-Davidson firm was appointed treasurer.

THE M&ATA

By 1915, the FAM boasted a membership of 8,500, but due to mismanagement and the effects on the country and motorcycling of the war in Europe, membership had fallen to just over 3,300 by 1917. Organized motorcycling might have suffered a major blow with the deterioration of the FAM had it not been for a Nov. 15, 1916, meeting of manufacturers and related companies, the result of which was the formation of the Motorcycle and Allied Trades Association (M&ATA).





Left: Fred West, Indian, promotional photo. Don Emde Collection.
Above: Joe Wolter leading Excelsior teammates Jake DeRosier and Charles Balke, summer 1912. Don Emde Collection.

**"IF EVERY MOTORCYCLE CLUB IN THE COUNTRY WERE TO ADOPT A SIMILAR RESOLUTION,
THE ROADS AND HIGHWAYS WOULD SOON BE FREE OF THIS NOISY PEST."**

HARLEY-DAVIDSON'S ENTHUSIAST

One of that organization's primary purposes was to revitalize the FAM, but instead, and for a handful of reasons, it quickly became the dominant force in motorcycling, less through its own design than the FAM's failures and the effects of WWI.

Despite its industry control, the M&ATA had in common with the riders of the nation a genuine desire to increase the scope of organized activity. WWI had cut deeply into that activity, and while the war had provided a healthy market for service machines, the post-war era dictated that activity be organized not only for the benefit of riders, but also to generate demand for new and used motorcycles, parts and accessories. Was this industry control self-serving and Capitalistic? Absolutely. But during a time of the sport's foundational growth, plenty practical.

With the demise of the FAM, the M&ATA quickly went about the business of registering clubs. Noting the wealth of motorcycling activity, including competition events, tours, endurance runs, hillclimbs, race meets and record trials to be enjoyed during the 1919 season, the M&ATA urged clubs to register with its Education Committee, which spread the word about



A.B. Coffman

events and activities, and offered valuable information on the promotion of club events.

GYPSY TOURS

The M&ATA also carried on the competition function of the old FAM with its emphasis on oval track, boardtrack/motordrome racing and hillclimbing, and also spent considerable time on what was to become an institution in American motorcycling and, later, the AMA — the Gypsy Tours.

The origin of the Gypsy Tours can be traced to 1913 and what was billed as a "Good Fellowship" tour in Milwaukee. By 1920, similar events featuring all sorts of fun and games, skills tests, mileage challenges and more were being held all over the country, with the M&ATA designating them Gypsy Tours and setting a single, coordinated weekend on which all were conducted. That year, some 30,000 riders took part in Gypsy Tours, with 50,000 engaging in 1921, and a whopping 75,000 taking part on

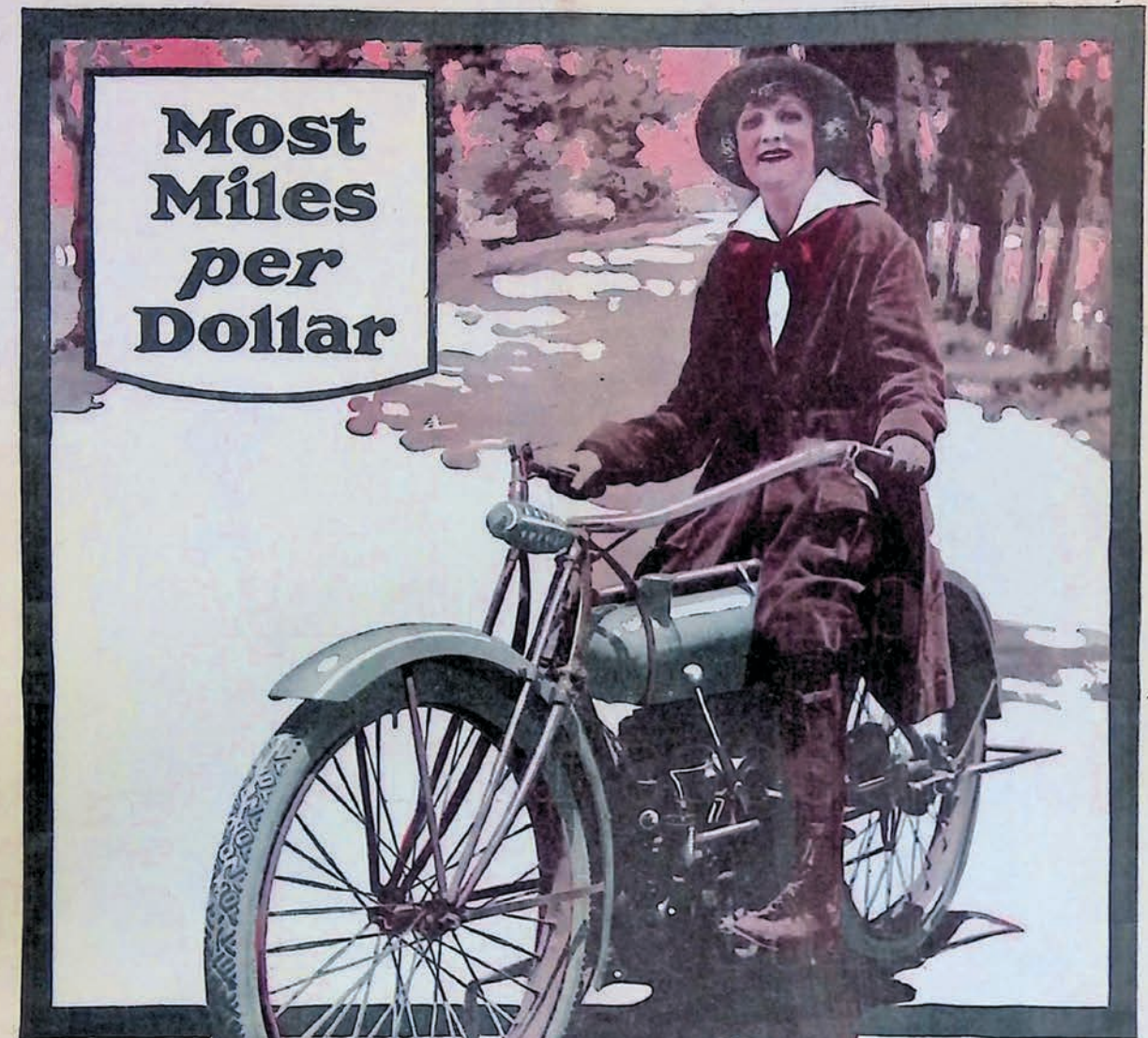
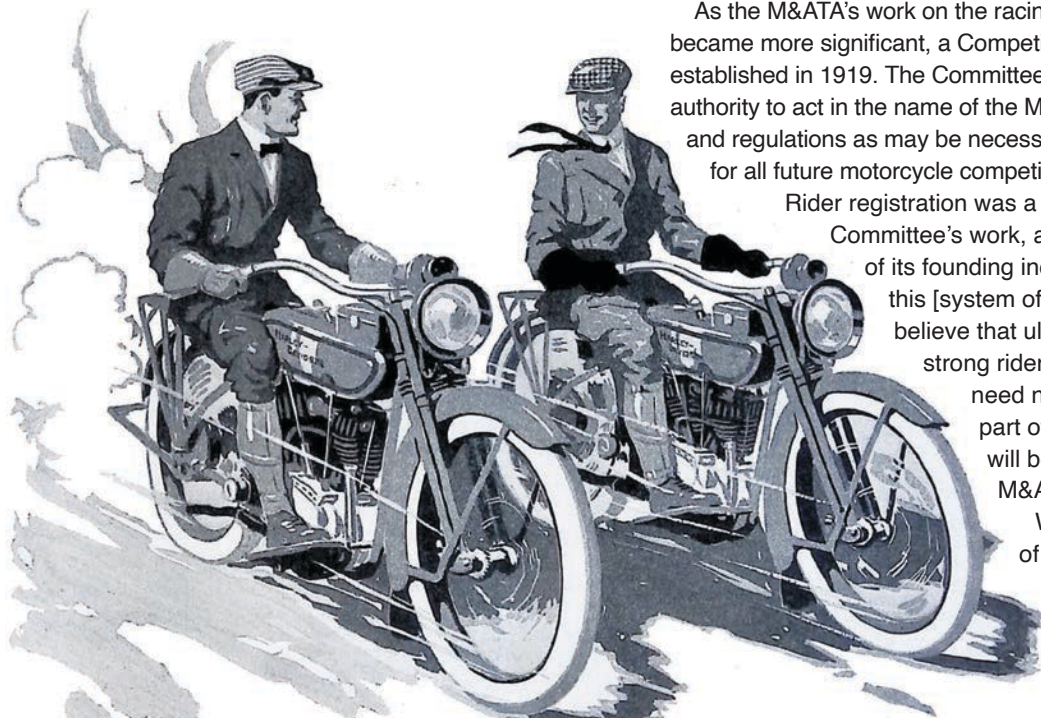
June 18-19, 1922. The Gypsy Tours became a major membership generator for the M&ATA, and would do the same for the AMA down the road.

COMPETITION COMMITTEE

As the M&ATA's work on the racing side of the ledger became more significant, a Competition Committee was established in 1919. The Committee would "have the authority to act in the name of the M&ATA to make rules and regulations as may be necessary for proper control... for all future motorcycle competition in the U.S."

Rider registration was a key part of the Committee's work, and the announcement of its founding included this: "Out of this [system of rider registration] we believe that ultimately will come a strong riders' association which need not and should not be a part of the M&ATA, but which will be affiliated with the M&ATA..."

W.H. Parsons, editor of *Motorcycle and Bicycle Illustrated*, was named first chairman of the



The Call of the Trail

Next time you feel the longing for the out-of-doors get on the motorcycle and go! You'll gather up new strength and spirits. It's better than medicine. This is doubly true when you ride on Firestones. Miles a-plenty with safety and comfort are built into these tires by an organization unrivaled in the industry.

Note the winners who choose and stick to

Firestone
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For assurance of prompt attention to your wants, mention *Motorcycle and Bicycle Illustrated*

Committee, and in the first edition of the magazine following his appointment he'd write the following: "This plan of registration is not an organization of a riders' association, though it is expected that this will be the foundation upon which eventually will be built a strong and efficient rider organization which will be affiliated with the M&ATA."

In just a few years, this would become the AMA.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

Racing and Gypsy Tours kept the M&ATA plenty busy, but the group was doing even more on the side. In a statement that rings familiar today, M&ATA President Walter Davidson of Harley-Davidson said, "One of the

most important tasks ahead is to watch and combat in every way possible unfavorable legislation."

One of the first recorded government-relations activities on behalf of motorcyclists came from the aforementioned A.B. Coffman, by now a general manager at the M&ATA. Coffman sent a letter of protest to U.S. Senator Thomas Watson of Georgia, who had called motorcycles "devilish" in a speech promoting highway regulation.

Coffman's letter, which pointed out numerous positives of the motorcycle as a practical mode of transportation and its significant role in WWI, was published in the motorcycle magazines of the day, and served notice to politicians that motorcyclists were indeed a large contingent demanding fair treatment. In turn, the letter served as an example to motorcyclists across the country on how to deal with political threats in a respectful and effective manner.

The Committee also fought against excessive noise,

which was as big a problem then as it is now. The New Jersey Motorcycle Club, which would subsequently become the first club chartered by the AMA, went on record in 1922 as opposing further use of the loud, exhaust-system "cut out" (basically a muffler bypass), and indicated it would cooperate with police in running down offenders.

Harley-Davidson's *Enthusiast* noted that, "...this resolution is one that all thinking motorcyclists with the good of the sport at heart would like to see grow. If every motorcycle club in the country were to adopt a similar resolution, the roads and highways would soon be free of this noisy pest."

BIG MOVES

Now dealing with racing, excess noise, caustic legislation, membership generation, events such as Gypsy Tours and a host of other initiatives, M&ATA



NERACAR

"MOTORING ON TWO WHEELS"

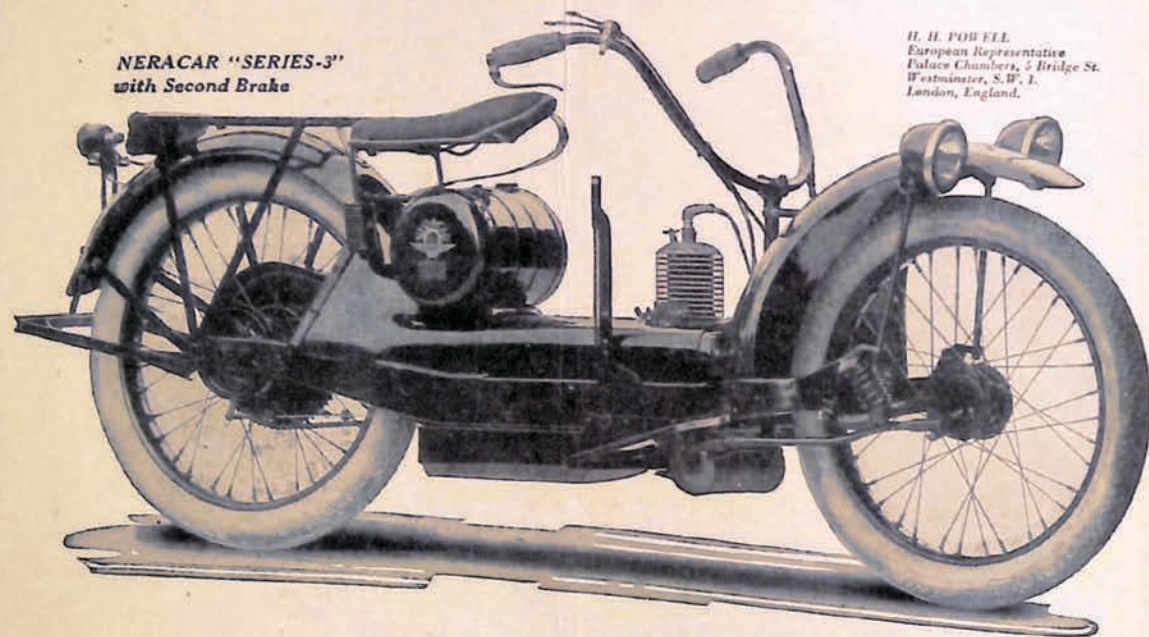
Saturday Evening Post Advertising Campaign Starts March 27th

Send in your orders at once. Have machines on your floor. Take advantage of this Transportation sales campaign.

—Remember how you wanted Neracars in 1923, and couldn't get them? Don't be caught this year—order now.

If no dealer in your city—Write for plan.

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Palace Chambers, 5 Bridge St.
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London, England.

100 YEARS OF THE AMA

Directors met in Cleveland, Ohio, on May 15, 1924, to formulate a major restructuring and re-alignment of the so-called "registered riders division" of the M&ATA — a move spurred by A.B. Coffman, and one that would lead at that very meeting to the creation of the American Motorcycle Association.

From the outset, the creation of the AMA was largely a name change, in that the previous Competition Committee was now the Competition Committee of the American Motorcycle Association. The stated purpose of the AMA was to assume the responsibility for *all* rider activity, pure and simple. Sanctions would be issued, and events such as Gypsy Tours, the National Rally and the new National Six-Days Trial (a road version of the then-new and highly popular European ISDT) were to be run under the auspices of the AMA.

All M&ATA-registered riders in good standing automatically became AMA members (and were given an attractive gold and enameled pin) with dues of \$1 per year; all M&ATA-registered clubs were immediately chartered (with the New Jersey Motorcycle Club granted AMA charter No. 1); and registered dealers were given a large window sign telling "all rider members of the AMA that this dealer is one of them..." — the latter a precursor to today's Business Member Program.

The AMA's new slogan that "An organized minority can always defeat an unorganized majority" was all about strength in numbers, and an indication of the AMA's dedication to protecting the interests of its riders from unfair legislation.

Motorcycle and Bicycle Illustrated lent considerable support to the new AMA, editorializing, "Within the next 12 months there should be membership of 25,000 in the AMA. Have you joined? Get on the bandwagon. Be one of the boosters."

Editor W.H. Parsons (the first chairman of the M&ATA's Competition Committee, remember) added this: "The AMA was born to succeed the registered riders division of the M&ATA...and while there was no change in personnel,

it is hoped that rider interest and initiative will increase until the organization becomes strong enough to stand on its own without financial or administrative assistance from the manufacturers, which has been necessary to keep things going for the last five years."

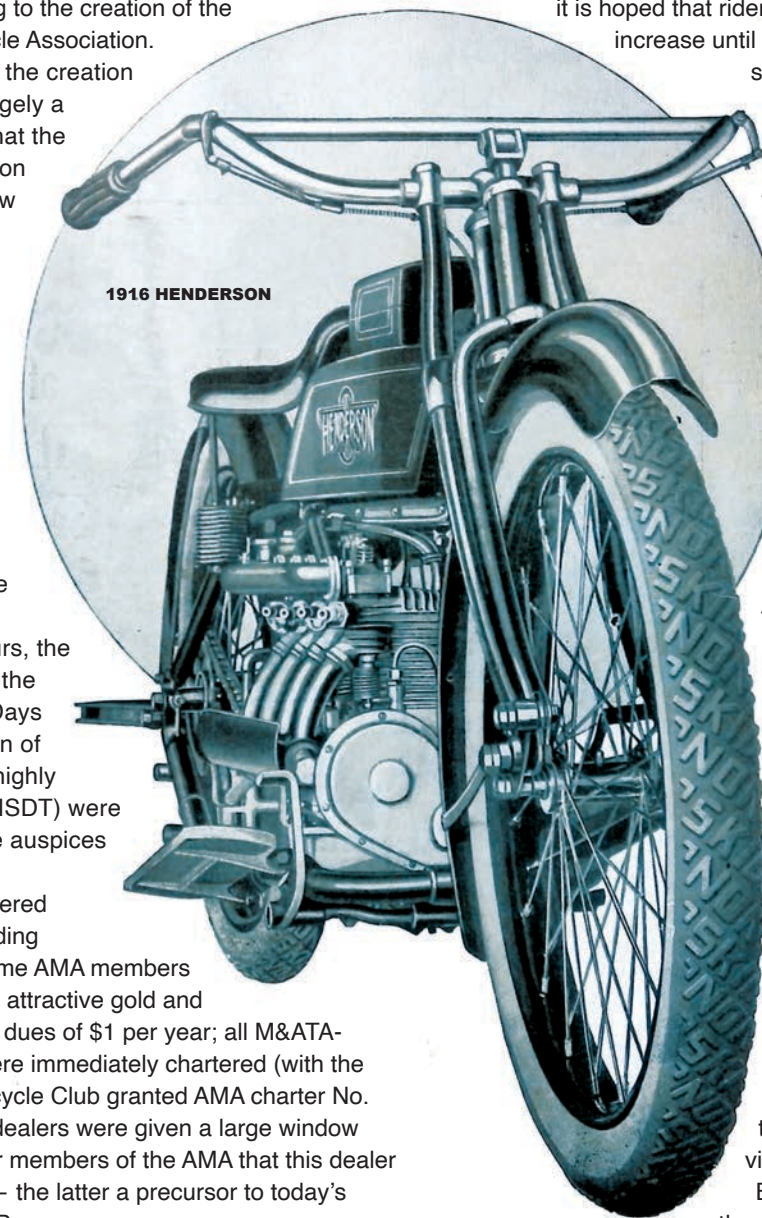
And the first Secretary of the AMA, the person tasked with overseeing the new organization? A.B. Coffman, of course. Coffman was a visionary in many ways, as he not only saw the need for this specific organizational structure, but understood the need for it to be funded by motorcyclists instead of primarily by manufacturers so that it *remained focused on the needs of motorcyclists*. He knew that that particular element helped everyone, OEs and aftermarket alike. Coffman's position was not full-time in those days, but he dedicated much of his time and effort to promoting the AMA from offices in Chicago.

Coffman wasn't alone, though. There'd be more visionaries to come.

But for now, our hat's off to the pioneers of motorcycling

and the AMA...from the pottery makers and chariot drivers, to the early bicycle and internal-combustion designers, to the Daimlers and Maybachs and Davidsons and Harleys and Hendees of the world, and others — individuals who saw what motorcycling could be, and laid the groundwork for 100-plus years of fun, excitement and camaraderie.

Look for Part II of motorcycling and the AMA's history next month, when we cover the craziness of the Roaring '20s. **AMA**



1916 HENDERSON

100 YEARS OF THE AMA

1914 Harley-Davidson
Model 10B single.
Owner: Steve Klein.
Photo: Michael Lichter

