

## **Bikers: Modern-day Cowboys or Ruthless Outlaws?**

by Lyle Hart

Motorcycle riders—bikers—as a group have been stigmatized by society as renegades. They are looked upon as a subculture of nomadic vagabonds whose only purpose in life is to roam the highways at their leisure, party at the drop of a hat, and terrorize the communities they enter. The media has perpetuated that perception since the early days of motorcycling, and Hollywood has followed suit with a plethora of “Biker movies” that depict them in the worst light. However, a closer look at the subculture of bikers will reveal something completely different—a brotherhood and camaraderie that is parallel to that of a military unit. Many individuals and groups use motorcycles—Harley-Davidsons—as a fantastic mode of transportation. It would be hard to find anyone who hasn’t witnessed bikers riding down the interstates, whether “on a fall outing, in a parade, making a statement, or raising money for charity” (Hog). The giving and generous nature of bikers disproves the myths created by their adversaries. Although they carry a negative stereotype and the majority of society commonly avoids them, bikers are the most charitable and most giving of the many subcultures that exist in the U.S.A.

In order to fully understand this subculture, its history will need to be learned. It all began with the invention of motorcycle. A look at transportation over the ages will show the parallel changes. In the era of the Roman Empire, transportation needs led to the development of the coach for a group of travelers and the chariot for an individual; in the days of the “Old West,” the prim and proper had wagons while the cowboys—the itinerants of the day—had horses. The invention of motorized transportation in the late 1800s created the desire for individual transportation of a personal nature. The motorcycle became the first form of [individual] mechanized transportation and has evolved into the works of art seen today (Art).

Although an American named Sylvester Roper developed a steam-powered motorcycle in 1867, German inventor Gottlieb Daimler invented the true predecessor of today’s motorcycle, a wooden bicycle retrofitted with a gas engine, in 1885. When engineer Nicolaus

Otto invented the first Four-Stroke Internal-Combustion engine, Daimler—then employed by Otto—built it into a motorcycle frame. William Harley and Arthur and Walter Davidson continued the efforts of Daimler and Roper after the latter went into the automotive field, and in 1903 they created the Harley-Davidson Motor Company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Even though they intended for Harleys to be used as transportation vehicles, most were used as racers and, with the quality Harley-Davidson engine, they did very well (Inventors).

The growth and popularity of motorcycling—and of Harley-Davidson—increased to a point enthusiasts were compelled toward one another. In banding together, they formed informal groups and associations. Eventually, those informal groups grew into the founding associations from which modern motorcyclist rights organizations evolved. The Federation of American Motorcyclists formed in 1903 and in five short years established the first organized rally. At that rally, Walter Davidson, then president of the Harley-Davidson Motor Company, climbed aboard one of Harley-Davidson's early models to compete in an endurance race around New York City. In that race, he proved the reliability and worthiness of his motorcycle against twenty-two different brands of motorcycles ridden by eighty-four racing competitors (Fuglsang). The Harley-Davidson motorcycle gained the respect of riders and, although many other manufactures—Indian, Henderson, and Excelsior, to name a few—existed at the time, Harleys became the bike of choice. Soon motorcyclists joined forces and developed the first group outings at the onset of this new craze. Milwaukee, Wisconsin was the site of one of these early popular rallies, the “Good Fellowship Tour,” held in 1913. Patterned after that Milwaukee rally, riding organizations like the Federation of American Motorcyclists and the Motorcycle and Allied Trades Associations, which later combined to become the American Motorcycle Association, created “Gypsy Tours.” Those groups would hold Gypsy Tours on the same day, all across the country. Various functions would take place at the culmination of a ride to some spacious scenic area where they frequently had “races, hill climbs, ‘Tourist Trophy’ and dirt track events.” Other events were held to demonstrate a rider's skills: seeing how slow one could go; riding up a board; and racing around a course where ribbons were snatched from stakes (AMA). These gatherings brought validity to motorcycling, but motorcyclists were far

from becoming mainstream. Horse buggies and the occasional horseless carriage mainly traveled the roads in the early 1900s and “Boneshakers”—as early motorcycles were referred to—intimidated and somewhat terrorized the drivers, the occupants, and the horses of the buggies, as well as their motorized counterparts.

In spite of mainstream society’s overall disapproval of these two-wheeled adventurers, they soon proved to be a valuable resource to the country. The military used motorcycles as early as 1913, and General John J. Pershing’s vehicle of choice in the pursuit of Pancho Villa was the Harley-Davidson motorcycle. By 1917, the U.S. military purchased about one-third of all Harley-Davidson motorcycles produced. Motorcycles were put to use in many different sections of the military including communication, transportation, reconnaissance, combat, and some were even used as ambulances (Gregory). During World War I and World War II, motorcycles were incorporated into the nation’s war machine and were driven by a unique brand of soldier—rebellious, daring, adventurous. Their duties put them in harm’s way more often than the average foot soldier and they slowly developed an almost iconoclastic stature—similar to pilots and bombardiers. “[After World War II, these] combat veterans roamed America’s roads in cohesive groups; the forerunners of the maligned American motorcycle gang, these vets did *Easy Rider* long before Hollywood did” (Art 1946).

The city of Hollister, California hosted a Fourth of July rally every year since the 1920s, and in 1947, the world saw these motorcyclists in a brand new light. News coverage of a “brawl in the streets” brought *Life Magazine* to town. The photo on the right appeared in *Life*.

Don Middleton, shown in this photo, rode up to Hollister for the “Gypsy Tour” rally that year. Coverage of the event was already printed



in the *San Francisco Chronicle* when reporters from *Life* were sent to cover the event for their magazine. When they arrived, the action of the event had already taken place and began to ebb. They desperately needed a photo to accompany their article. “. . . they swept as many bottles as they could find into a pile, borrowed Don Middleton’s motorcycle, and asked if he would be willing to pose--beer bottle in hand--for a few pictures” (Official). “ ‘Lock up your daughters! The Huns are on a roll! Your town [may] be next’ was the word in 1947 as presented by [the] *Life* magazine article about [Hollister] . . .” (Legends). Their article and photograph they staged changed America’s perception of motorcycle riders forever. “Gus Deserpa, the fellow in the background of the [staged] photo, witnessed it all. Gus, a lifelong Hollister resident, lives there to this day.” “That incident later spawned the cult film [photo right], *The Wild One*, launching Marlon Brando’s film career and forever cementing the ‘Biker’ image in American history” (Official). That image has stayed in America’s mind for nearly sixty years and at times has only worsened. The news media, the entertainment genres, and other avenues of public awareness have kept the negative image alive, seldom reporting on the newsworthy acts of selflessness and charity performed by Bikers across the country. Even the AMA, “the world’s premier member-driven motorcycling organization,” drew on the events of Hollister to discredit Bikers and to further segregate them from the rest of motorcycle enthusiasts (AMA). After Hollister, the AMA said, “. . . that ninety-nine percent of the motorcyclists are good people enjoying a clean sport, and it’s the one percent that are anti-social barbarians” (Carlo). They were referencing what they considered “Outlaw Bikers”—the Boozefighters and the Pissed Off Bastards of Bloomington, the forerunners of today’s Hells Angels. “This put-down actually delighted the known outlaws, who saw it as affirmation of their presence, and [they] began wearing patches denoting themselves as “One Percenters,” the ultimate imprimatur of the hardcore badass biker was born into legend as well” (Legends). Although they wear the one percent patch with pride, members of motorcycle clubs, including



the Hells Angels, want the public to understand the disillusioned fact expressed in the cliché, “One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel.” In *Seconds Magazine*, Chuck Zito, President of the New York City chapter of the Hells Angels, stated as much in an interview. He said,

Individuals in many organizations do a lot of different things. Most recently, fifteen cops from New York City’s 48<sup>th</sup> Precinct were indicted for various crimes—drugs, shakedowns, extortions, et cetera. Does that mean we’re going to condemn the whole police department for what a few individuals did?

Absolutely not, but by the same token the Hells Angels do not want to be categorized by the actions of a few of its members (Carlo).

The bad image society has of bikers is hard to shake. Media outlets and law enforcement consistently, and at times collectively, have had their hand in creating the difficulty motorcycle clubs have in keeping their image clean. Chuck Zito went on to say,

Myself, I don’t drink, I don’t smoke, and I never took a drug in my life but I am supposed to be this drug-taking, drug-selling Hells Angel and belong to a criminal organization. The thing that pisses me off, and it’s happened time and time again—almost every article I read about the Hells Angels is even by the Government or some other law enforcement agency or some jerk-off trying to make a quick buck off our name, and they write a book about the club...but yet none of them know jack shit about what they are talking about. When people hear about the Hells Angels, they don’t know if it’s myth, rumors, or just plain bullshit. Even if we get a distraction [on legal issues or media misstatements] later on down the road, the damage is already done(Carlo).

That damage is hard to control, yet bikers still do a tremendous amount of good in spite of the lack of coverage or publicity they receive for it. Organizations outside of the motorcycling realm have begun to notice. Sometimes, albeit seldom, the news media actually takes notice, as was the case when reporter Jean Morris wrote an article for the July 6, 2003, Life and Leisure section of the *New Hampshire Sunday News* titled “Riding with the Hells Angels, for Charity.” The writer took part in a charity run the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club

held; she experienced first hand the brotherhood of the club, the freedom of the road, the intimidation by law enforcement, and the charitable nature all bikers experience (2). The run was set up to benefit a homeless shelter supported by the Christian organization, The Salvation Army. Ms. Morris posed the following question:

How did this surreal juxtaposition of heaven and hell happen? Eddie, the president of the Laconia Chapter of the Hells Angels, said, ‘They sent us a letter six months ago asking for help.’ He displayed the letter, dated March 28, from Salvation Army Major Karen Dickson. The letter said, ‘We really need some help and sometimes it comes from unexpected places. . . .My thought is that perhaps your Hells Angels [motorcycle] club might be interested in some positive press and TV coverage.’ [The reporter] asked Eddie if [they] were doing it for ‘the good PR’. ‘No,’ Eddie said emphatically. ‘There is no ulterior motive. There isn’t one person in this whole organization that made two cents on this except the Salvation Army (Morris).

Ms. Morris rode a rented Harley-Davidson and traveled the roads with the Hells Angels to a deserted drive-in where a rally was held at the conclusion of the run. The reporter witnessed the arrival of the police and the interaction they had with the Hells Angels. Allegedly responding to a report that “the drive-in was overrun by bikers,” they checked permits for the live band and vendors before leaving (Morris). Despite the police presence, the writer and the bikers continued to have a great time, which is normally what happens at a motorcycle rally. As always, the run and the rally were a success. Ms. Morris reported that,

By 2 p.m., the tally from the ride was expected to exceed \$5,000.00. [Ms. Morris] asked Major Dickson if she thought people would get upset because she partnered with the Hells Angels. ‘Jesus didn’t say, “I’ll deal with this one and I’m not going to deal with that one”. Everybody has good in them and everybody is affected by homelessness,’ she said. (Morris)

Another instance of the media actually reporting a positive story about bikers took place in the cover story for issue 223 of Cincinnati’s *City Beat* magazine. Brad King wrote an

amazing story about the American Federation of Riders, a riding organization in Ohio. The AFR got their start when a few bikers had come together after hearing of a local tragedy. They heard that the parents of a young girl had been killed in an accident. Not unopposed by public opinion, they held a run that collected nine-thousand two-hundred dollars, which was placed in a trust for the girl. That started it all for the group, and the founders incorporated the group into a non-profit organization.

Soon, the group had held many other charitable events. They raised funds for various charities, shelters, and even established scholarships. All through the 1980s, the group had held runs and rallies to benefit one charity or another. At their peak, they donated more than ten thousand dollars to a center for wayward youths called Center of Hope, so the center would be able to construct an administration building. Unfortunately, the AFR experienced some loss of revenue with every event they held. Paying to rent someone else's land led the Riders to look into purchasing some property of their own to hold the rallies. They even intended to allow the local soccer club free use of the property when the Riders were not using it themselves (King).

A meeting of the local Planning Commission was held to determine if the Riders would be able to purchase the land and acquire the needed permits for the rallies. Two members of the Riders were present to state their case. The meeting was also open to the public and a disproportionate number—seventy-five to one hundred—of their neighbors showed up. “ ‘The last words I heard before I left rather abruptly was, ‘Is it OK if we start shooting them now?’ recalled Herman [, former chairman of the Riders]” (King). The charitable nature of bikers was evident when the Riders held a three-day event called a Poker Run. More than two thousand bikers rode during the event, which raised nearly forty-seven thousand dollars that they planned on using to buy the land, pay administration costs, and put toward charity. However, the public image of bikers threatened to close the organization (King).

Eventually, the Planning Commission voted in favor of the Riders and after finally getting approval on the land and the permits, the Riders held a rally where the members of the community were openly invited and encouraged to attend. They were asked to come and

witness what they vehemently opposed. “‘A few neighbors didn’t like [the Rider’s purchase],’ Aurora Mayor Leon Kelly says. ‘It’s a small town and when things change, people don’t like it’”(King). “‘There were some concerned parents,’ [said] former soccer association president John Weichold, whose organization had a hotdog booth at the rally. ‘They really did [not] understand what the AFR is all about. I think we helped the AFR a little by helping people see the AFR was for the kids. They look different, that’s all there is to it. And it’s hard to change that way of thinking.’” The enforcement officer for the Dearborn Zoning Commission said that he thought things ran smoothly, and the Dearborn Sheriff’s Office noted that there were no complaints from the rally (King). Slowly, the community had accepted them and they were soon able to focus on the kids again.

Even though acceptance was gained in that Ohio community, the American society as a whole, finds it difficult to accept the differences bikers present to the average citizen. Even with the acceptance problems they constantly experience, bikers have not let society’s perception keep them from the basic charity that they feel. In researching this paper, the writer found only a few documented examples, although first-hand knowledge can verify hundreds—if not thousands—of charitable acts that take place yearly. Two of the documented examples have been mentioned already. Two other examples include a short blurb in the *Tucson Citizen*, which reported wheelchairs were being purchased for residents of a center used by the elders of the Papago Indian tribe with funds the Hells Angels raised in a sponsored run this past June (Kornman). Another instance was reported through a motorcycle news wire service. The Motorcycle Newswire stated that bikers helped Harley-Davidson contribute over fifty million dollars in a twenty-four year period to the Muscular Dystrophy Association. The money for MDA was amassed through dealer-sponsored rallies, runs, cook-offs, pin sales, raffles, and other fundraising events bikers have participated in over the past quarter century (Newswire). That’s more than two million dollars a year to a single charity. Unfortunately, the majority of new articles, stories, and reports about bikers still show them in a negative and sometimes criminal light.

In the November 11, 2002, edition of the *Delaware County Daily Times*, Cindy Sharr wrote that police showed up in force at a Bikers Against Child Abuse (B.A.C.A.) rally and harassed several of the riders who had participated in many prior versions of the annual event. Even though police said their strong presence was because they received intelligence that [rival] members of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club and the Pagans Motorcycle Club were going to be in attendance, the bikers that were harassed and ticketed were not members of either club (Sharr). “Hundreds of uniformed police officers and emergency response teams from across the county, accompanied by many police chiefs, lined MacDade Boulevard and the surrounding streets in what some said was a pre-emptive show of force. Every police department in the county was represented” (Sharr). Local law enforcement tried to explain their heavy-handed tactics with the following statement:

‘It was a safety issue,’ said Darby Police Chief Robert Smythe, noting that in the past few weeks his police department had received ‘intelligence’ about possible problems from outlaw bikers. Smythe said strong showing from local law enforcement was meant to prevent any problems from occurring at the benefit-not a reflection of B.A.C.A., which he stressed, has nothing to do with outlaw bikers (Sharr).

The reaction of law enforcement to the B.A.C.A. rally is typical. The allegations of “intelligence” rarely are substantiated, and the claims are seldom, if ever, visualized. Still, the harassment happens on more occasions than just those reported.

Despite the adverse publicity bikers receive, their inherent generosity cannot be overlooked. In support of bikers and in support of this paper, a listing of various events that are held annually will help the average person see the proverbial light that is seldom shed on bikers. Every event listed below is held to raise money for a charity, an organization, an individual, or a group whose very existence is shored up by the support of bikers. Many are sponsored through motorcycle organizations, several are sponsored by so-called “Outlaw Clubs,” while others are put on in conjunction with the charities themselves. Some of the charity events are listed on websites such as the one belonging to America Biker Events.

Their site shows many different including these charity events:

30 July 2005- Hazelton, PA 'Helping Hands rally and Poker Run'

5-6 Aug. 2005- Seneca, SC 'Charity poker Run and Shriner Parade'

7 Aug. 2005- Narrows, VA 'Poker Run for Little Avery Mullins'

27 Aug. 2005- East Syracuse, NY 'Charity Poker Run'

10 Sept. 2005- 'Cranston, RI '[Animal] Rescue Ride'

11 Sept. 2005- Utica, NY 'Heroes Among Us' Run and Rally (American)

The site for a riders' organization called "Rebels with a Cause," which is out of California showed these events on their site:

24 July. 2005- Take A Ride on Tanya's Side poker Run to benefit one of Sacramento's favorite personalities in their biker community "Our Tanya" who is suffering from an incurable neurological disorder " Stiff Person's Syndrome"

21 Aug. 2005- Walt's Ride For [the] Make-A-Wish [foundation]

18 Sept. 2005- Scott Ivey's Run For Teens benefits Sacramento Emergency Family Housing and WIND Youth

18 Nov. -

21 Nov. 2005- RWC's hope For The Holidays Toy Run- Holiday Miracles Journey benefits Southern California Hope For The Holidays (Rebels)

Locally, the web site for A.B.A.T.E. (American Bikers Aiming Toward Education [or American Bikers Against Totalitarian Enactments, as it was originally known]) of Nebraska had a number of events, including these held for charity:

20 Aug. 2005- District 8 Staff for Santa Run

11 Sept. 2005- District 6 Annual Toy Run

24 Sept. 2005- District 8 Toy Run

26 Sept. 2005- Fremont Area Bikers Toy Run

8 Oct. 2005- District 7 Toy Run

12 Nov. 2005- District 13 Toy Run (ABATE)

Obviously, with this many events held in different locations over just a short, five-month period, it is easy to see many more of these events do take place annually, across the country. To think that any other segment of society gives as much to charity is hard to believe. Although some larger organizations may claim higher dollar amounts given to charity, few if any can boast about the number of events they hold or about the number of individuals who participate in order to achieve the amount of donations they generate.

In conclusion, bikers are not part of a large multi-million dollar corporation. They are not a political party. They are not outlaws. They simply exist as a very large, loosely connected group of individuals who know what freedom is all about. Anytime freedom is infringed upon, they will react. Their subculture is one that embodies personal liberties and a willingness to fight against any opponent in order to maintain those liberties. Most bikers see liberty's greatest adversary as one that changes the quality of another's life. Whether that foe emerges as the loss of a family's bread-winning loved one, a debilitating illness, a medical hardship, or some other burden that limits the liberties of another, bikers are ready to help. It can truly be said that as subcultures go in America, bikers are the most charitable and giving.

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