

THE ISSUE OF NOISE ECHOES FROM THE PAST.

The sweet sound of a Harley rolling down a backstreet strikes a mellow chord someplace deep within most riders. All is right with the world. But for some others, it's just noise.

Since day one, Harley-Davidson Motor Company and Harley riders have faced the issue of motorcycle noise as it has ebbed and flowed through the years. Today, it's reaching new heights as complaints about excessive motorcycle noise are rapidly growing in intensity and volume.

Negative news stories in the U.S. regarding motorcycle noise have increased more than 400 percent over the past 10 years. In the last year, communities across the country have upped their efforts to curb motorcycle noise. Some communities have gone so far as to institute outright bans on motorcycles. It's this current state of public sentiment that's most troubling.



Founders Quiet the Critics

It was an uphill battle for the early builders to coax sufficient power out of those small displacement motorcycle engines. So most early manufacturers left their exhausts wide open.

But something compelled the Harley-Davidson founders to move the noise issue and the suppression of it to the forefront of their engineering goals.

Early on, they may have recognized that a motorcycle creates a unique relationship between man and machine; a motorcycle moves a rider's mind as much as it moves his body. And in order to share that experience with the broadest audience, motorcycles would have to gain social acceptance. Harley-Davidson had to build support for the sport. So quieting down the machines was a direct way to quiet down the critics.

In Harley-Davidson's first sales brochure in 1905, its third year of operation, the company cited its muffler design as a key feature: "In our Muffler we have departed somewhat from the general practice of motorcycle construction and have made one large enough to be noiseless ..."

By 1912, the Motor Company positioned itself against noise: "Our claims that the Harley-Davidson is the cleanest, most silent, most comfortable, and the most economical motorcycle made, are rather broad, but can easily be verified. As for silence, the Harley-Davidson is known everywhere as 'The Silent Gray Fellow.'"

But some models weren't made to remain "silent" all the time. Harley-Davidson, as well as most manufacturers, had developed a mechanical cut-out that would allow the muffler to be bypassed to gain more horsepower by allowing the exhaust to flow out with less restriction.

Riders in those days opened up their muffler when they needed more power, but that was only legal outside of the city limits. If a rider left his mufflers open in town, the local authorities would escort him to the nearest Justice of the Peace to pay a fine.

Harley-Davidson dealers and early motorcycle



organizations, such as the Federation of American Motorcyclists (forerunner of today's American Motorcyclist Association), joined in to help keep the peace and promote a positive image of the sport by encouraging courteous riding practices, much in the same way that the AMA does today.

The motorcycle noise issue resurfaced in continuing waves but concern about rider behavior rose sharply in the late '40s and '50s. After World War II, many returning veterans had learned to ride WLAs in the military and came home with a new love for motorcycling. They grabbed any motorcycle they could find. Many of them chopped off the rear fender and seat post, then mounted the seat directly to the frame. They created their own style of motorcycle — the chopper. These motorcyclists began to ride together, hang out together and ... party together.

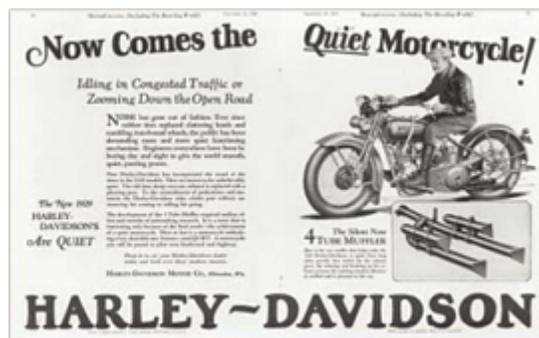
This new lifestyle was destined for a head-on cultural collision. And that's exactly what happened in a little town called Hollister, Calif., in 1947. A large motorcycle club spent the weekend partying and carousing and made it to the pages of *Life* magazine. It created a national outrage. Hollywood capitalized on the opportunity and produced the 1954 movie, "The Wild One," with Marlon Brando.

The movie glorified antisocial behavior, which was then emulated by many across the nation. Part of this rebellion included riding with loud pipes. That led to a public outcry and crackdown by law enforcement. It was at the discretion of the patrolman whether the offender's motorcycle was too loud. Some patrolmen would shove a nightstick into the offender's muffler. If the baffles were missing, they would write a ticket. But that seems like nothing compared to what is happening in many communities to an ever-increasing extent today.

Riders' Actions Change Public Perceptions

So what can be done to avoid renewed and broader restrictions and enforcement? The answer may lie in the heritage of this great sport and the legacy that has been left by early motorcycle pioneers.

In the mid-fifties, it was the so called "outlaws" themselves that saw their passion, their lifestyle, slipping through their fingers. A few of them volunteered to help ease the situation by communicating and working with their fellow motorcyclists to promote safe, respectful riding practices. A *Popular Science* article from 1955 signaled that change and presented a positive image of motorcyclists. This was the beginning of a period when motorcycling would become more broadly accepted.



1929 advertisement was a sign of those times, hopefully not the future.

Today, the issue of noise is back and it is growing. Once again, it may take the efforts of strong-minded and dedicated motorcyclists to lay the issue to rest. Looking back, we see decades of Harley riders doing whatever was necessary to keep the sport alive. By recognizing the problems and riding more responsibly, they gained widespread respect and acceptance of their sport. Now

riders have the opportunity to continue that tradition so that future generations can enjoy motorcycling as much as we do today.

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