



Harley-Davidson founders: Arthur Davidson, Walter Davidson, William Harley, and William Davidson



Bill Davidson



1936 EL, OHV, V-Twin

Great Garages

THE HARLEY-DAVIDSON MUSEUM: HOGS GONE WILD

Written by David M. Brown

Jump on the nearest "hog" and visit The Harley-Davidson Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Owned by the 109-year-old company, the 130,000 square-foot Museum complex opened to the public in July 2008 at 400 W. Canal St., just a mile from the spectacular Santiago Calatrava-designed Milwaukee Art Museum. The founding year for the company, 1903, is emblazoned on the building.

Opened the same year the company celebrated its 105th anniversary, the museum is also just two miles from the original headquarters of Harley-Davidson, founded by William S. Harley and brothers Arthur, Walter and William A. Davidson. That building is on the National Historic Register.

More than 500 vehicles and thousands of artifacts comprise the museum's 109-year old collection. One piece of paperwork, now on tour, shows that Elvis Presley purchased a Harley-Davidson just days before he became famous with "Heartbreak Hotel." Some of the motorcycles are on display, and the rest, many in original condition, are carefully stored.

"The originators of the company had the foresight to keep things, so we have one motorcycle for every year the company's been in business," says Bill Davidson, vice president of the museum and the great-grandson of co-founder William Davidson. "We have many of the items stored in humidity-controlled rooms."

As the bikes celebrate American cultural history, the museum architecture is inspired by Milwaukee's industrial heritage, including a skeleton of 1,200-plus tons of galvanized steel beams. Surrounded on three sides by the Menomonee River, the campus includes green spaces and a landscaped river walk. Also available is the Motor Bar & Restaurant, Cafe Racer and The Shop retail store.

Of the many exhibits, one, Custom Culture, shows how Harley-Davidson motorcycles have impacted American pop culture and Hollywood, especially through the rebel biker image. Recent special exhibits include True Evel: The Amazing Story of Evel Knievel (summer 2010); Collection X: Weird,



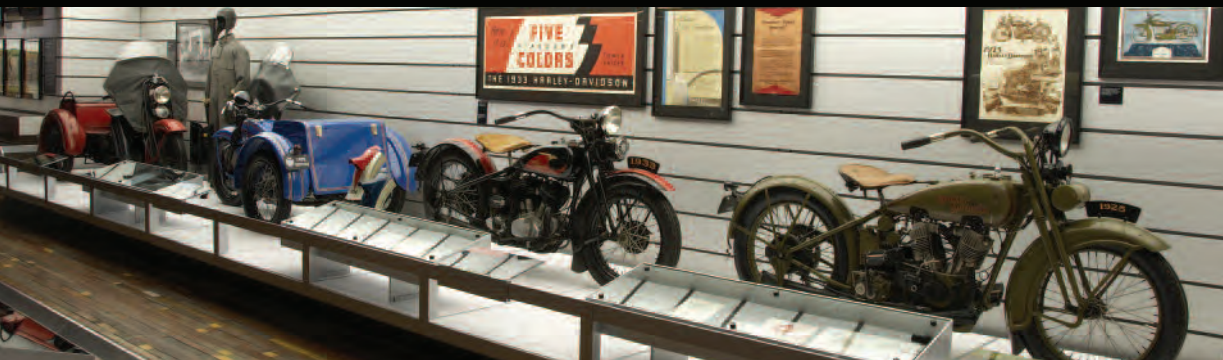
The oldest known Harley-Davidson motorcycle in existence, Serial Number One



The Engine Wall featuring 30 Harley-Davidson engines



King Kong is a 13-foot long, 1,000-pound motorcycle



1942 WWII, Side-Valve, V-Twin



Board track racing was the height of popularity in the early 1900s

Wild Wonders of the Harley-Davidson Museum (summer 2011); and most recently, Worn to be Wild: The Black Leather Jacket in summer 2012, now at the EMP Museum in Seattle.

Bill kindly two-wheeled us in to see the museum and discuss some of the motorcycles:

• **Harley-Davidson Serial Number One** — “This is the oldest known Harley-Davidson motorcycle in the world. We restored it about 15 years ago after much discussion. But, it had come to a point in time where we were concerned about deterioration, so we very carefully completely restored it. In doing so, we learned a lot. It’s a single cylinder putting out three horsepower. We actually found a ‘number one’ stamped inside the engine case.

“The founders worked hard to design a purpose-built chassis because so many of the early motorcycles were essentially bikes with motors; these just didn’t hold up to the power. This first motorcycle offered buyers durability and reliability. We’ve placed it in a beautiful display case with lights in the wooden floor, which represents the shed in my great-great-

grandparents’ back yard where the motorcycle was built. The company actually had that shed until 1969, when, by accident, a contractor destroyed it doing some restoration work.”

• **Racing Motorcycles on the Board Track** — “The track is a replica of what we were doing in the 1920s. Many of these tracks were built with two-by-fours and up to two miles in length with 45-degree banking, which is what we have replicated. Safety concerns ended these in the ‘20s. Few of these racing bikes were made, and we have mounted five on the track as it might have appeared, say, in the Midwest at the time. These bikes were amazing: twin cylinders, no brakes, direct drive, 100 miles an hour and total-loss oil systems.”

• **WLA Harley-Davidson Motorcycle** — “This one was created for the U.S. Army during World War II and is in the Military Gallery. This was pulled directly from the assembly line, as is the case with many of the motorcycles in the museum’s collection. The company produced motorcycles for both World War I and II, mostly for Europe: 90,000 motorcycles were produced for WWII, and 60,000 of these motorcycles

were WLA models.

“We actually made a prototype shaft drive design for the government with a sidecar unit, but it just didn’t meet the needs for the project. The museum has a Harley-Davidson and the Military exhibit, which showcases heroic veterans’ stories and Harley-Davidson’s patriotic efforts.”

• **Exploded Knucklehead Motorcycle** — “It’s in the Engine Room in the museum. We created the so-called knucklehead — it’s because of the shape of the overhead-valve configuration — to improve performance. It ran in production from 1936 to 1947. We have created an exploded bike, so that visitors can see all of the components, including engine chassis and front end.

• **King Kong and the Rhinestone Harley** — “These motorcycles are located in the Custom Culture Gallery, and they show how the Harley-Davidson culture means customization: No two Harleys are synonymous; no two Harleys are alike.”

The museum also offers a variety of special opportunities such as the Harley-Davidson Museum® Shop Class, a series of

evening or weekend classes taught by instructors from Harley-Davidson University; Harley-Davidson’s service training for dealership technicians; Steel Toe Tours, a visit to the Harley-Davidson Museum and the Pilgrim Road Powertrain Operations manufacturing facility; and Back Road Tours, which offer in-depth explanations of selected museum exhibits and provide a glimpse into the private areas of the Harley-Davidson Archives.

“We cater to all walks of life at the museum,” Bill says. “Children love it, spouses love it, families love it. It’s a great place to come and visit and enjoy the motorcycles and history. After all, this isn’t just a piece of Harley-Davidson history; it’s American history, too.”

For more information on the museum’s galleries, exhibits, special events, tickets, and more, visit www.h-dmuseum.com or call 414.287.2789.

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