Built on Honor: Harley-Davidson Company
By Cassandra Kasten
Word count 2,496
“Life offers few guarantees, but generally the harder and longer you work, the more likely you will succeed.” William Davidson, co-founder of the Harley-Davidson company said these words of truth. Through hard work and determination the founders created a legacy of high speeds and the idea you can achieve anything. The Harley-Davidson company has a long history of ups and downs. The company went from struggling, to stand on its own, to struggling through the Depression, and came out on top as one of the biggest motorcycle companies.

Bill Harley and Arthur Davidson were the original two founders of Harley-Davidson. Arthur Davidson was a man who enjoyed sharing his ideas and what he had to say. His best friend was Bill Harley who was an intense man with a quiet personality. Together they balanced out each other. Many of their friends said they were insane because of instead of chasing after girls and running around playing sports, they spent their free time working in a basement. They continued to work towards their dreams, even when the work was hard, they didn’t give up. (Barnes page 3) One day as Arthur and Bill had difficulty getting up a hill on their bikes on their ways home, the boys had the bright idea of building a motor for their bikes. It was 1891, they were both ten. At this point they didn’t dream that they would own the number one motorcycle company in America. Nor did they think a hundred years later kids around the world would know of the fast and powerful Harley-Davidson motorcycle. They never dreamed they would become rich and famous, all they wanted was to get home faster. (Barnes p. 1 and 2)
In 1896 there was already 250 bicycle companies, and approximately 4 million bicycles in Milwaukee. Bicycles were easily fixed, easy to use, and didn't cost much causing them to be so popular. Motorcycles were different though, many considered these to be mysterious and somewhat dangerous. Some had messed around with the idea of motorized bikes, but many found themselves unsuccessful. Due to the bicycles' small frame it was difficult to build an engine of small size and lightweight. (Barnes page 3)

Arthur came from a working family, so he wasn't a stranger to hard work. Arthur’s two older brothers, William and Walter Davidson along with their father William C. Davidson worked for the Milwaukee Road Railway. William C. Davidson was a carpenter while his two sons, William and Walter worked to keep the trains running and made parts. The boys learned quite a bit while watching the railroad men work. With so few motorcycles, how did Bill and Arthur even know about them? The most likely answer is they saw one that was owned by Edward Pennington, an inventor. (Barnes p. 7) Pennington took his motorcycle to Milwaukee in 1895, people lined up on Grand Avenue to catch a glimpse of the motorcycle. It's likely that one or maybe both boys, who were now fourteen, were there that day.(Barnes p. 7 and 8)

In 1896 the dream Arthur and Bill had about building a motorcycle, was put on hold, due to the Harley family move to the north side of Milwaukee and Arthur Davidson moved to the home of his grandparents in Cambridge, Wisconsin. Although they were now living away from each other they stayed in contact by the occasional visit and letters. (Barnes page 10) This worked well for many years.
Missing his childhood friend Bill, who was living in Milwaukee, wrote to Arthur in 1900 that there were some good job opportunities as pattern makers. Not long after this Arthur moved back to Milwaukee, and started working at the same company as Bill, the Pawling and Harnischfeger company. (Barnes p. 12) One day as Arthur and Bill were talking to their colleagues about their idea to build the engine for a motorcycle, Emil Krueger, a German draftsman extended an offer to help. Emil and Bill then proceeded to draw a detailed blueprint of the engine. (Barnes p. 13)

Henry Melk traded full use of his tools for a complete set of parts for the engine so that he could make his own motorcycle. Henry lived just a few miles away from the Davidson household. Henry had important tools like a drill press and a lathe, a piece of equipment used for making precise metal parts. On top of this he also had an engine that ran on gasoline to power these tools. (Barnes p. 16 - 17)

Crafting small parts was extremely frustrating work that took hours because they had to fit together perfectly in order to have a working engine. Gas motors are very complex. To create energy, small explosions need to happen when air and gasoline are compressed by a pistol in a cylinder. The piston only works when air is ignited by an electric spark in the cylinder. These explosions push the pistol up and down which causes the crankshaft to turn. The transmission is connected to the crankshaft which causes the back wheel of the motorcycle to spin, which in turn pushes the motorcycle forward. (Barnes p. 17) If even one part was out of place or crafted incorrectly the engine wouldn't work.
After two years of hard work, Arthur and Bill had many parts. Unfortunately they couldn’t get the parts to fit. After working long nights and weekends the engine still refused to work. But they were determined, so instead of just quitting they went looking for help. (Barnes p. 19) But where would the find someone willing and capable of helping?

Walter Davidson, Arthur’s older brother was a talented machinist, who was capable of building complicated parts for things such as locomotives. The problem, Walter was working over fifty miles away at Katy Road Railway in Parsons, Kansas. (Barnes p. 20) So Arthur wrote a letter to Walter promising him a ride on the motorcycle if he came to Milwaukee. (Barnes p. 20)

This may not have been the best idea seeing as the motorcycle wasn’t even put together. Arthur’s unorthodox plan worked, although Walter had probably believed that the motorcycle was already built. When Walter got there he was surprised and angry upon seeing just a pile of parts on the basement floor. (Barnes p. 20 and 21)

After Walter had cooled off slightly, Arthur challenged his brother saying, “If you can do better, then go to it!”. A good thing for Bill and Arthur, Walter was extremely competitive and began to help the two young men. (Barnes p. 21) Walter was a creative and energetic man who now was focusing his efforts on the motorcycle. Quitting his old job, moving back to Milwaukee, and getting a new job at Milwaukee Road railcar.

Once again there were experiments in the Davidson’s basement. Soon Mrs. Davidson was complaining about the dirt being tracked all through the house and the loud noises constantly coming from the basement. (Barnes p. 22) This was enough to
drive anyone up a wall. The worst part of all this was one day gasoline fumes came in contact with an open kitchen flame, causing a small explosion. Although the house didn’t burn down, Mrs. Davidson was at her breaking point. (Barnes p. 22 and 23)

Something need to change.

“The woodshed days. That’s part of the story that gets lost in every history,” said William H. Davidson co-founder of the Harley-Davidson company. (Wagner p. Preface XV) Some may not realize but the days Bill and the Davidson brothers spent inside a woodshed behind the Davidson house, this was a very important part of their history. People might think that it was the founders idea to work inside of a woodshed, it was actually Mr. Davidson’s idea after a conversation with his wife. “You will have to do something about all this mess in the basement. I won’t put up with it any longer.” Mrs. Davidson told her husband, not likening it when his wife was unhappy, he crafted a 10 foot by 15 foot woodshed for the boys the the back yard. Janet Davidson, their sister painted “Harley-Davidson Motorcycle Co.” on the door, and just like that they had their first factory. (Barnes p. 23) An early customer of Harley-Davidson had once said, “My heavens. I’ve been riding a machine built in that shed.”, upon seeing the woodshed. (Wagner p. 82) I don’t blame him for being a bit taken aback I would too, after seeing the woodshed.

1903 at last they had done it, built their very first motorcycle. They must have been the happiest men alive as they watched Walter ride down the street, being the first to ride it after remembering the promise. (Barnes p. 24) Under two horsepower, weaker than nowadays leaf blowers, the engine was too small. This was not the reliable
machine Harley-Davidson had hoped for. The engine couldn't fit the bike frame, the carburetor barely worked, so it was back to the drawing board, or more accurately back to the woodshed. (Barnes p. 25) This was not the only issue with early motorcycles.

Due to early motorcycles not having a clutch, that keeps the motorcycle running at a stop sign they were dangerous to ride in cities. If a rider wanted to stop, when starting again they would have to get off then run to get the motorcycle started again. Because of this many riders didn’t stop at stop signs. This caused disastrous results. The rider would race through stops not following traffic laws. They would weave through traffic sometimes colliding with innocent pedestrians. Whenever someone heard a motorcycle coming they would rush for the sidewalks. (Barnes page 34) This was a extremely dangerous problem that would later be solved.

After a few more month of tampering and experimenting they finally got a well working motorcycle. With the new machinery they had the skill and time to perfect their motorcycles. (Barnes page 34) This was the start of the take off of the Harley-Davidson company. Henry Meyer was a friend of the founders of Harley-Davidson who hated walking to work. In 1903 after a little begging he became Harley-Davidson's first customer. This motorcycle had a very long life. It went about 100,000 miles and had three owners. (Barnes page 33) After this successful motorcycle Harley-Davidson continued to improve the design. The 1904 motorcycles ran extremely well the engine being strong enough to go up steep hills. With the new machinery they had the skill and the time to perfect their motorcycles. (Barnes page 34)
With the excitement of fast motorized bikes came the excitement of racing them, but racing with motorcycles is no easy feat. It took some practice but after a while the riders of Harley-Davidson learned how move without crashing at such high speeds on the race courses. Board-track racing was one of the popular form of motorcycle racing but it was also quite deadly. The founders of Harley-Davidson didn’t think they could support such a dangerous sport. Arthur even said “The killing of half a dozen riders every season and the occasional killing of a few spectators shows motorcycling causes injury instead of benefit.” Which shows what a dangerous sport this was and how some people began to disapprove. (Barnes page 67 and 68)

With the dangers of board-track racing Harley-Davidson didn’t enter this kind of race for many years. However this did nothing to stop the problem as board-track racing grew in popularity riders outside the company competed in the races. Harley-Davidson began to worry about losing customers because many Indian motorcycles were winning. (Barnes page 68)

In 1914 after Bill Harley made a racing department that built motorcycles made for the high speeds of board-track races the company re-entered. The other founders still feared that the racers would hurt themselves they started to encourage others to only use one-cylinder engines that could not reach extreme speeds. (Barnes page 37) Soon after these rules were put in place so the safer engines were the only ones available. Attracting the social media’s attention as they started to win caused a large increase of customers. (Barnes page 37)
Many other companies were already selling their motorcycles. Most of them being owned by older men with far more knowledge on the subject and experience selling products. All so much further along than the Davidson brothers and Bill. (Barnes p. 29)

It was obvious to Harley-Davidson that they needed to up their game, if they wanted a successful company. During the early months of 1906 it became even more important to the company to build and sell their products. Around fifty motorcycles were made this year starting to sell on the first of February. This was also the year the first Harley-Davidson motorcycles made it the the West Cost. (Wagner p. 82) This was the start of expanding the company. July fourth, 1906, Arthur Davidson rode his motorcycle from Milwaukee to Cambridge to visit family and friends. Later during this visit Arthur sold said motorcycle to George Dykesten, then taking the train back home. (Wagner p. 83) Showing Arthur as quit a salesman.

The 1909 Harley-Davidson catalog was a lot more put together and professional looking than all the past ones. In the sixteen page catalog there was a winged hourglass symbolizing the company’s ability to overcome time and space. It also included colorful pictures of the woodshed and the yellow or cream brick factory on Chestnut Street. All this was themed around their slogan “Built on Honor”. (Wagner p. 158)

A symbol of America’s most successful motorcycle companies the Juneau plant was built between the years 1910-1923. (Wagner p. preface XV) It is important to realize how vital the woodshed was, but it’s also good to know about the other factories. Before the red brick factory was there was two buildings before it the wooden original built on this site between 1906 and 1907, and the yellow or cream plant that stood from
1908 to 1909. Then there was the 1903 to 1906 woodshed in the Davidsons back yard. These four workshops were the shoulders where Harley-Davidson was created.

(Wagner p. preface)

When people had a bit of extra money motorcycles had been fun to drive, but during the depression few had the money needed to have a motorcycle. In the year 1933 the Harley-Davidson company only made 3,703 motorcycles. The lowest number since the beginning. During this year the founders debated closing the factories. (Barnes page 72 and 73) Sidecars to transport caskets for funeral homes, halling farm equipment, delivering mail, and carrying groceries these were just some of the changes to the Harley-Davidson motorcycles during the Great Depression. All this was done for one reason, to keep customers happy and buying. (Barnes page 73)

Overcoming many challenges the Harley-Davidson company is now the most popular motorcycle brand in the country. Strong motorcycles and the speed to get anyone’s heart racing caused success to be Harley-Davidson’s middle name.
Bibliography


This book was important to my paper because it had a lot of good information in it, and the information was easy to find with not alot of digging.


This book was my most important resource because it was written by the grandson of one of the founders who put personal stories in it, like how Bill and Arthur came up with the idea. I also fond most of my quotes in this book.

1