

Steve Miller: In search of the bikers of yore

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STURGIS - It seems like you just can't find a hard-core biker when you need one, even at Sturgis.

The Sturgis rally used to be full of hard-core bikers - guys who poured beer on their Cheerios, ate bolts for fiber, engaged in recreational knife fights, chained their women to their choppers and smiled only when setting fire to a Kawasaki. Sort of the Greatest Generation of motorcycling. Ah, the golden era.

The rally still isn't really a family-oriented activity. Plenty of women - and occasionally men - are wearing only the bare minimum legal requirement for clothing. And a lot of the T-shirt slogans are still pretty raw. But it seems like the rally gets better-behaved every year.

Sturgis Police Chief Jim Bush points out that the average biker is now 42 years old and able to afford a \$15,000 to \$20,000 (or more) motorcycle and spend thousands more for custom paint, seats, handlebars, saddlebags, etc. "These are mature, successful people," Bush said. Mostly, they're not the sort who get in fights and end up in jail.

They're here to have fun, let their hair down a bit, buy some new leather chaps or other clothing and accessories for their weekend motorcycle rides. Their biggest hangover might be the credit-card bill they get in September.

For them, motorcycles are a hobby. Most of them don't want to work on their bikes. Harley-Davidson and the other major bike manufacturers build bikes now that don't need as much maintenance as bikes of old did.

In fact, some of them aren't even riding Harleys to the rally. An increasing number are riding bikes made by Honda, Yamaha, Kawasaki, Suzuki, BMW, Triumph, Victory or other manufacturers, although some of the bikes look a lot like Harleys.

Here's where I needed that hard-core, no-compromise biker. I'd interviewed a number of people who rode non-Harleys to the rally. They explained why they liked their bikes and said they were glad nobody was hassling them about it.

But I wanted to balance the story with comments from some hard-core Harley riders. I found a few, like "Nuttso" Schroeder from Bismarck, who has ridden Harleys for decades and says nothing rides like a Harley. But he doesn't have heartburn with folks who ride something else.

So I set out one day on Main Street looking for a hard-core, longtime Harley rider who remains intolerant toward anything that isn't made in Milwaukee or at least America (such as Victory or one of the many customized choppers).

How to spot a longtime, hard-core Harley rider? First, he or she should show some signs of age.

As I walked east on Main, I saw a man with some gray in his beard and headed for him, notebook at the ready, then stopped. He and his female friend were wearing matching orange Harley scarves. Nah, that's a shopper, not a hard-core biker. Besides, his haircut was much too good. And his beard was neatly trimmed.

Then, I spotted another older biker, this one a lot scruffier. His beard was untrimmed. His salt- and-pepper hair was long and wild. His leathers were well-worn. But before I could get to him, he'd jumped on an old Honda Gold Wing with faded paint and jetted west on Main. So much for no compromise. I finally found a few longtime Harley riders on Main Street, but they turned out to be quite tolerant of the non-Harley bikes.



J.C. McCreary looked a little scary on his black motorcycle customized with skulls and skeleton parts. He qualifies as hard-core, having ridden Harleys almost exclusively since 1954. J.C. turned out to be a pussycat. His ominous-looking bike turned out to be a 2001 Victory. And he trailered it here from Florida.



By now, I had walked to the area in front of Gunner's Lounge, where Hells Angels have hung out at past rallies. I didn't see any Hells Angels, but I did see a group of heavily muscled, tough-looking guys. They were clustered around a fierce-looking, shirtless man with a baseball cap, a long, wild, red beard, arms that looked like they could bench press a Gold Wing, and a metal tusk through his nose.

Just who I was looking for. With some trepidation, I approached the burly biker, who identified himself as Mark "Hawgs" Holmes of San Diego.

Unfortunately, for my purposes, "Hawgs" turned out to be a nice guy, with a live-and-let-live attitude. Although he rides a Harley, he doesn't care if people ride other bikes. He doesn't consider himself hard-core.

What about the tusk in his nose? Hawgs said a friend took him for a septum piercing on his 50th birthday last year. (The septum is the wall dividing the nasal cavity.)

Hawgs explained that there is a small spot in the septum that is skin, not cartilage. That's where he has a 10-gauge hole. When Hawgs is not wearing the tusk, he keeps a clip in place to hold the hole open so it's always ready.

He patiently showed me how he screws the two-piece metal tusk into the hole in his septum. Hawgs is a friendly, free spirit and describes himself as a semi-retired leather maker and custom tailor. But he graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1975 and flew KC-135s for six years.

Now, he hauls a stuffed gorilla named Koko on the back of his Harley and talks about her almost as if she's real. Riding behind him, "She just takes the wind like nothing," Hawgs says. The burly, tough-looking guys around him are part of a group he calls Hawgs Dawgz. The 60-plus members gather for 10 days at Sturgis every year. They have a good time. Enjoy the camaraderie.



"Most of these guys I see only one time a year," he says. "There's a lot of undry eyes before we take off every year."

Undry eyes. That means tears. I give up.

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