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OUTLAW MACHINE: Harley-Davidson and the Search for the American Soul

By Brock Yates

Little, Brown. 249 pp.

If he'd wondered what these renegades were up to and pulled over the 75 Harleys I rode with on U.S. 25 in mid-July, the trooper would have found they were surgeons, carpenters, teachers, troopers, grandparents. Many were women, some atop their own cruiser, others perched behind their significant biker.

You meet the nicest people on a Harley. Their age averaged 45, though they spanned five decades. They spoke Harleyspeak, where hogs don't swill table scraps and owning a full dresser doesn't mean you just did your laundry. They were joining 10,000 other Harleys at a South Carolina rally.

What he could never have done is pull over 75 folks on Suzukis, or any bike other than Harley. Riders of German BMWs, Italian Moto Guzzis, Japanese Yamahas insist, with ample reason, that their bikes are vastly superior, yet none inspires cult-like devotion. We admire perfection; we never love it. Germans cherish efficiency, Italians panache, Japanese technological precision. But Americans love Harley, this burnished behemoth that quakes and roars and leaks and demands attention like a petulant bride. Only Harley riders, notes Brock Yates, feel brand loyalty sufficient to tattoo their bikes' logo on their body.

With intelligence, authority and macho zest--and enough socio-political insight to justify its grandiose subtitle--*Outlaw Machine* explains the lure, makes clear why when you buy a Harley you get not just a bike but a family.

Says Yates, we love the Harley because it is "uncompromising honest... so elemental, so lusty, so purely and classically American." Its first model appeared in the same year as the first World Series, 1903, and its image was cast by outlaws in the overblown Hollister "riot" of 1947.

A *Life* photo of a drunken beefy Tulare Raider or Booze Fighter or Pissed Off Bastard (the gangs partying brashly in Hollister, Cal.) indirectly inspired the Brando film *The Wild One*, where Brando's bikers terrorize a town. Meanwhile, in very real life, "angry youths rebelling against the smarmy Ike and Mamie Good Life" had formed the Hells Angels, shaped in the late 1950s by the organizational genius of Sonny Barger, the Luciano of denim, into the most feared and glamorized club in America.

Renegades rode Harleys. Try as it might, Harley-Davidson could not shed the image. It made the outlaw machine.

Charting the company's evolution from William Harley and Arthur and Walter Davidson's first motorized bicycle to today's majestic Road Kings, Yates argues that Harley couldn't thrive until it embraced its outlaw mystique. We see Harley's first trademark V-twin in 1909, the inspired launching of its own magazine in 1916, its 1922 price-fixing with Indian, its defining classic 1936 Knucklehead model.

Following Indian's 1953 demise, Harley became America's lone motorcycle, but soon imports threatened. Barely surviving under the clueless though supportive brief ownership of AMF, Harley finally realized how to prosper: the technological leap of its Evolution engine and, crucially, the awareness by third-generation owner and authentic biker Willie G. Davidson of Harley's don't-you-dare-fence-me-in appeal. It is the mustang for roaming today's frontier: 100 percent All-American say those who sneer at Honda and Kawasaki riceburners actually made by Yanks in Ohio and Nebraska.

By the nineties, Harley became our most fashionable emblem of in-your-face virility. Boomers had to have one. Harley had always drawn the discontented, the burned-out, the restless, and now that's most of us. Mild-mannered college professors could climb on and instantly chair Hell's Curriculum Committee.

But if Harley's prosperity is a consummation devoutly to be wished, there's the RUB, the Rich Urban Biker. Lawyers and dentists on Sundays now shun their Polo knits, donning boots and leathers to become faux-outlaws on Westchester and Bethesda highways, basking in Harley's paradoxical confluence of chic and bad-to-the-bone images, a doublethink possible only in a country that's always lionized the wolfish renegade, its Jesse James and Pretty Boy Floyd. Each weekend, fiftysomething executives escape the corporate cookie-cutter, update doo-wop to doo-rags, and resurrect their rebellious youth.

Yates can ramble--a chapter about Daytona's Bike Week wanders into analysis of the computer age, then to Harleys as art--but his meandering always stays interesting and itself echoes the rhythm of a good motorcycle tour and drifting reflectiveness of a rider's mind.

If you want to know why 20 gleaming Harleys just passed your minivan, and on one some greybearded outlaw or cardiologist wore a tee-shirt reading "I'D RATHER SEE MY SISTER IN A WHOREHOUSE THAN MY BROTHER ON A HONDA," *Outlaw Machine* is the second most pleasurable way to find out.