

## 100 YEARS OF THE AMA

BY JOHN BURNS, JACK EMERSON  
AND KEATON MAISANO  
PHOTOS: AMA ARCHIVE

**F**ear itself is a hard thing *not* to fear when you lose your livelihood after a cushy decade or three of 20th-century prosperity, especially when all about you are losing their heads at the same time. If you're going to panic, best to do it before everybody else...but few saw the Great Depression of the 1930s — the longest and deepest economic downturn in the history of the U.S. and the world-wide economy — coming.

In an era when the societal safety net consisted of soup kitchens and daytime baseball — before federal bank deposit or unemployment insurance — it was quick and easy to be wiped out.

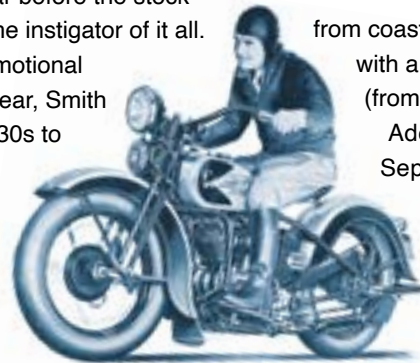
America's motorcycle companies weren't immune by any stretch. By 1936, 98 percent of the hundreds of manufacturers of the day were gone. Only Harley-Davidson and Indian survived.

Still, the sport of motorcycling survived, and in many ways thrived. There was the inherent thrill of it all, of course. But there was more. There were things to do on one's motorcycle...places to ride to; friends to ride with; hillclimbs, races and rallies to attend; and most importantly, adventures to have.

The AMA had a lot to do with that, organizing races, rallies and Gypsy Tours, encouraging clubs to form and hold their own events, and promoting the sport to the masses.

And E.C. Smith, who became the full-time secretary of the AMA in October 1928 (a year before the stock market crash of '29), was a prime instigator of it all. Armed with a projector and promotional films from Firestone and Goodyear, Smith roamed the country during the '30s to organize clubs and club activity.

It worked. In a 10-year flurry that saw him cropping up with industry leaders, civic officials, legislators, club members and plain-Jane "Joe motorcyclists"



from coast-to-coast, Smith built a national organization with a membership of 17,390 (from 4,500) and 1,000 (from just 65) chartered clubs.

Adolf Hitler's tanks would invade Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, an act that kickstarted WWII but also launched the beginning of the end of the Great Depression...which in turn would help motorcycling grow quickly and substantially in the post-war period. We'll cover that next month.

# 1930S



**THE GREAT DEPRESSION KILLED OFF MOST MOTORCYCLE MAKERS, BUT THE SPORT AND ITS ADHERENTS SURVIVED, AND IN MANY WAYS THRIVED**

### AMA OFFICIAL PUBLICATION

In 1932, the AMA designated *The Motorcyclist* magazine as its official publication, providing its blossoming member base with — as AMA President Jim Wright described — a “real riders’ paper, full of news, kinks, ideas, personalities and suggestions.” Wright continued by saying *The Motorcyclist* “will tie together the sport and the industry.”



### MAJESTIC 350 — FRANCE

By 1930, hub steering was no longer a novelty, but stamping out and enclosing a motorcycle in steel panels, as in automotive practice, was a novel concept compared to the typical bicycle tube frame. The original Majestic used an American four-cylinder Cleveland engine mounted between the hidden frame rails and cooled by air passing through the lovely louvered bodywork. Bolstered by the thin, compound-curved sheet metal, the Majestic was stiff and light — less than 350 pounds — and presaged both stamped-steel motorcycles like the Honda Super Cub as well as later fully-faired ones.



### THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING...

...opens in May, in New York City — the world's tallest building, at 1,454 feet. In spite of the fame generated by a giant ape climbing it in *King Kong* (1933), the 102-story building didn't turn a profit for its owners until 20 years later. After 9/11, the Empire State was New York's tallest building again for a while.



1931

1930



TT RACING, SAN PEDRO, CA



### HELMETS

Floyd Clymer (Pico Street, Los Angeles) would mail-order you a nice competition lid like this one, which the AMA now mandated for competition, for around \$10. An English-made helmet offered by Pink-Voichik (New York) was “made of highly compressed wood pulp and linen laminations, completely suspended from the head by linen webbing and Sorbo rubber pads,” and cost \$9.50.

### 1932 INDIAN CHIEF

This historic Indian addressed the tremendous success and popularity of its smaller brother, the Scout, by adopting the same sort of graceful, streamlined look Indian would become known for. Meanwhile, E. Paul DuPont had bought a controlling interest in Indian, bringing with him a thorough operational revamp with the option of painting your Indian in an array of colors produced by his DuPont Paint company. Two thousand Chiefs were sold in 1932, a number that seems low — but Harley-Davidson only sold 3,700 motorcycles total in 1933, the low point of the Depression.

# 1932



### PIN ME

During the AMA's growth to 17,390 members and 1,000 chartered clubs in E.C. Smith's first decade as secretary, the AMA in 1934 began the practice of giving service pins to its members. For each year that a member renewed his or her membership, one would receive a membership card and a pin that displayed the total number of years the individual belonged to the AMA.



# 1933

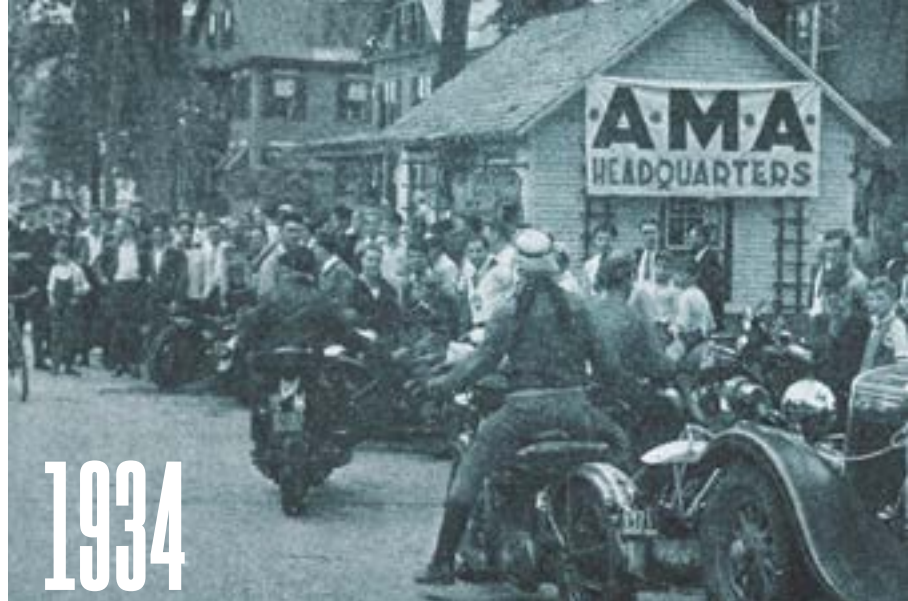


### COLOR ME

In the early 1930s there weren't any exciting new H-D models, and since every H-D had been painted in the same olive drab green since 1917, no pressing need for anyone to buy a new one. But in 1933, and probably taking a cue from its rival Indian the year before, the Motor Co. began offering bikes in a variety of two-tone colors. Those colors, “combined with hand-painted pinstriping and art deco-inspired tank logos, created some striking new looks,” wrote Aaron Frank in his book *Tales from the Archives*. Apparently, it worked; H-D sold 11,000 bikes in Depression-soaked 1934, a 300-percent increase from the previous year. Premium paint is a lesson the Motor Company never forgot.

### GYPSY TOURS

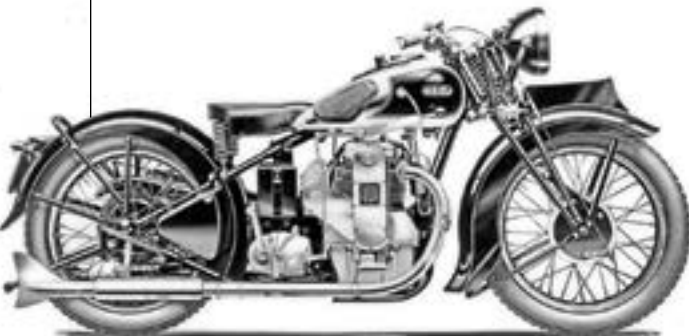
Following the AMA taking over the increasingly popular Gypsy Tours in 1924 — a time in which the events saw a participation of over 75,000 riders per year — Gypsy Tours evolved from nationwide locations on one coordinated weekend to more independent events that allowed Gypsy Tours to run in conjunction with different races. Despite the Great Depression and a drop in participation, the rallies continued throughout the '30s.



# 1934

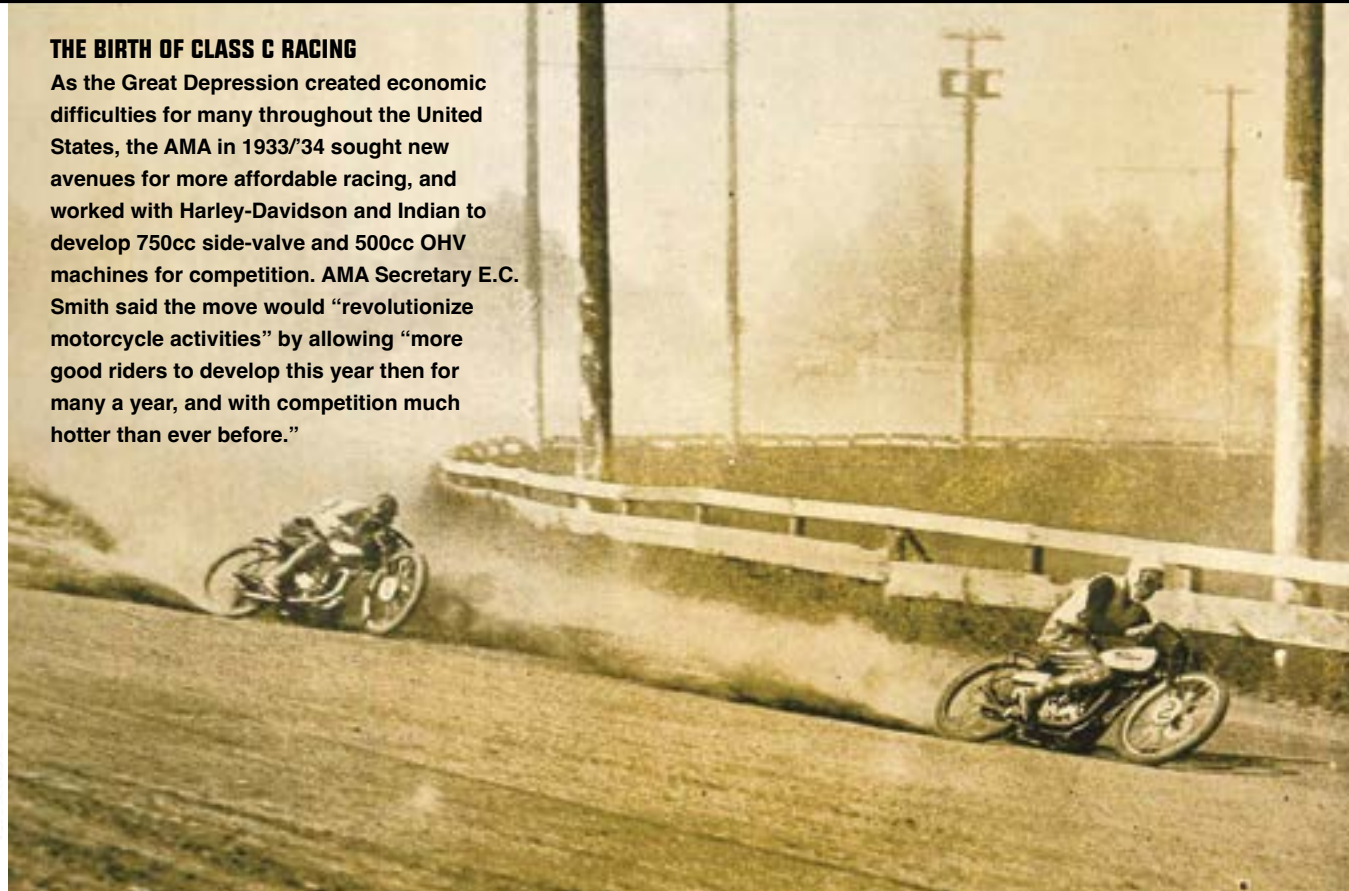
### 1931 ARIEL SQUARE FOUR — ENGLAND

Before he became synonymous with Triumph, Edward Turner was shopping his Square Four design around, looking for work. BSA rejected it, but Ariel bit — and so the Ariel Square Four was born. Most of the first 4F models displaced 601cc and were produced until 1936, when the completely redesigned 995cc 4G took over. Not many were ever produced, since English manufacturing continued to be craft-based (read, expensive). Still, these were very nice motorcycles, which continued being built until 1959. Ten years after the last AS4 was produced, the 1969 Honda CB750 became the first successful mass-produced four-cylinder.



### THE BIRTH OF CLASS C RACING

As the Great Depression created economic difficulties for many throughout the United States, the AMA in 1933/'34 sought new avenues for more affordable racing, and worked with Harley-Davidson and Indian to develop 750cc side-valve and 500cc OHV machines for competition. AMA Secretary E.C. Smith said the move would “revolutionize motorcycle activities” by allowing “more good riders to develop this year than for many a year, and with competition much hotter than ever before.”



### STREET TIRES

Relax, your Goodyear dealer will help you get what you need: The POLICE SPECIAL (top) “is a favorite of state and municipal departments.” The CENTER TRACTION (middle) is “popular for all-around service.” The new ALL WEATHER, “with its high-flanged, self-cleaning tread, grips at all angles on all roads.” According to this 1934 ad, more riders were on Goodyear than all others combined.



### DRY SUMP TECH

“Regardless of speed or weather,” read *The Motorcyclist* in 1935, “Indian dry sump is fully automatic. Exactly the proper amount of lubricating oil is delivered in a constant stream and under positive pressure through the crankshaft to the motor bearings. Then the sump pump withdraws the hot oil from the crankcase, filters it, cools it, and returns it to the tank where it is again ready for another fast trip through the motor.” It really did beat the old hand pump, and oil all over your jodhpurs.



1935

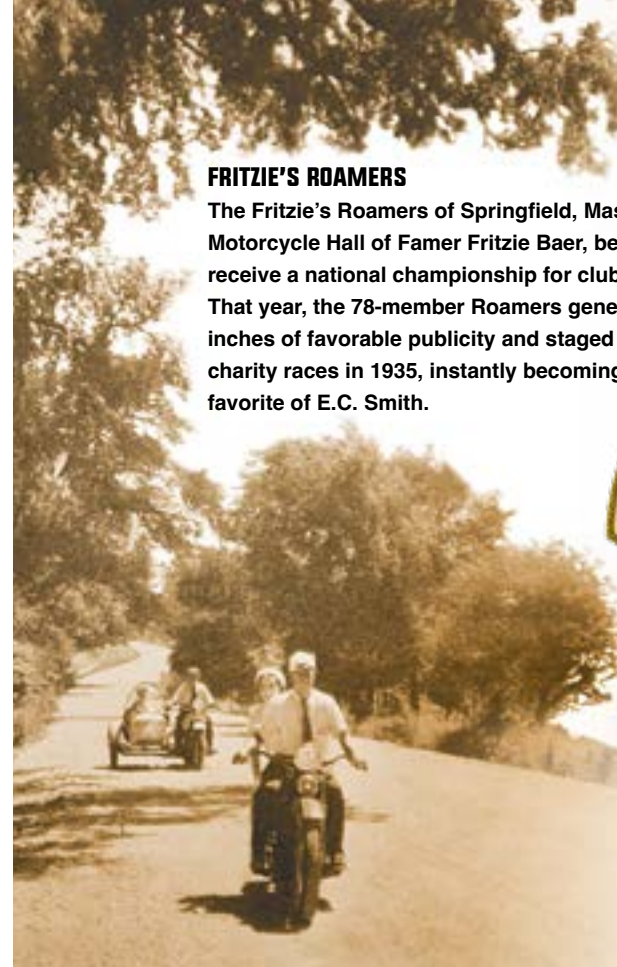
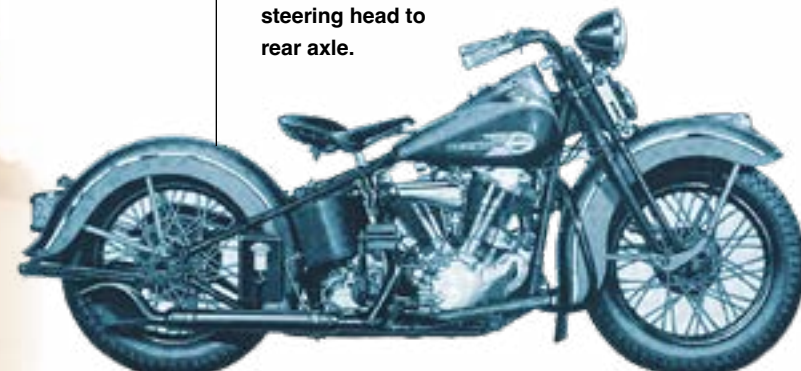
### FRITZIE'S ROAMERS

The Fritzie's Roamers of Springfield, Mass., led by AMA Motorcycle Hall of Famer Fritzie Baer, became the first club to receive a national championship for club activities by the AMA. That year, the 78-member Roamers generated 2,100 column inches of favorable publicity and staged two charity races in 1935, instantly becoming a favorite of E.C. Smith.



### 1936 HARLEY-DAVIDSON MODEL E AND EL

The first production H-D with overhead valves and recirculating oil, the all-new 61-cubic-inch V-twin was twice as cool and provided almost twice the power of the Flathead it replaced — 37 hp for the E and a claim of 40 for the EL. It was originally called “the OHV engine,” or “the 61”, but would eventually be known as the Knucklehead thanks to the shape of its rocker covers (and the popularity of The Three Stooges.) The “Knuck” ran until 1948, when it was replaced by the Panhead. Recognize any current design themes here? The Fatbob tank with instruments on top; the chrome pushrod tubes; the hardtail line from steering head to rear axle.



### OFF ROAD TIRES

Mostly all tires were of the “off-road” variety in the 1930s, since most roads were still unpaved, and traction was fungible. The most you could hope for was that your tires held most of their air without flying apart, so advertising was particularly important. Firestone touted its TRIPLE-SAFE TIRE, with a “scientifically designed tread of especially tough rubber to protect you from skids on turns and layovers” and a “Patented Gum-Dipping Process to protect against blowouts!”



### THE AMA SAYS, “SAFETY FIRST”

With a focus on safety, E.C. Smith and the AMA initiated a nationwide safety program in 1936. Run in cooperation with the National Safety Council, prestigious AMA awards were presented to individuals and clubs who rode the most accident-free miles on a motorcycle.

1936

AMA Motorcycle Hall of Famers Arthur Davidson, Walter Davidson, William A. Davidson and William S. Harley — all nattily attired — try to act nonchalant as they inspect the motorcycle that the future of their business probably depended on — a 1936 61-inch E model.



### AMA CLUB GROWTH

In 1936, E.C. Smith established activity contests for AMA clubs, in which points were awarded for various activities that benefitted the perception of motorcyclists nationwide. At year's end the AMA recognized the most deserving club members by awarding trophies to various club officials, in turn creating an incentive for riders to be active members in clubs.



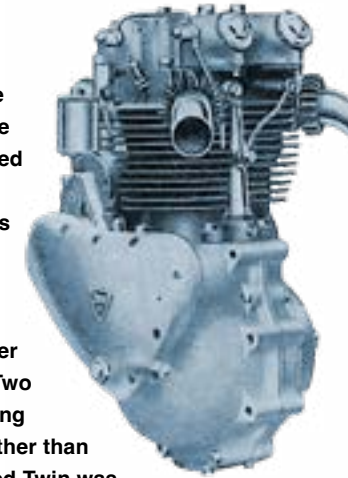
### JACK PINE ENDURO

The Lansing Motorcycle Club in Michigan began staging the Jack Pine Enduro in 1922; the 1934 event sounded particularly fun, as described by Oscar C. Lenz: "We have had rain on the Jack Pine before, and usually it was welcome as it made the sand rideable. This year, every rider was about as wet as he could get by the second check...you can only get so wet, then it just rolls off. We soon found ourselves in real trouble — mud. It was exactly one mile long and not deep. It might as well have been as deep as it was long." Where do we sign up? Mark your calendar for the 2024 JPE: Aug. 18.



### 1938 TRIUMPH SPEED TWIN

If not for Edward Turner being hired by Triumph (who'd been building singles since 1903), Triumph would've been another name added to the scrap heap in the '30s. It needed more power to compete, but bigger singles vibrated and burned lots of fuel. Legend has it that Val Page saw an Ariel Square Four (Turner's earlier genius design) running on a test stand without its front crankshaft, and noted it didn't vibrate much at all. Turner and Triumph took the idea and ran with it: Two smaller side-by-side pistons rising and falling together through shorter strokes ran smoother than one big piston. The light and powerful Speed Twin was a huge success, and set the pattern for decades of British parallel twins to come.



1938



### LACONIA

The legend of Laconia reaches back to 1916 and a several-day Gypsy Tour event at Weirs Beach on the southern shores of Lake Winnepesaukee. The event grew over the years, with the first Laconia national race event happening in 1938 thanks to the vision of Fritzie Baer, who used his promotional skills to get racers such as Ed Kretz and fans to show up for the inaugural event in the mountain region near Loudon, N.H.



1937



### THE DAYTONA 200

At the turn of the 20th century, Daytona and Ormond Beaches were little more than that... beaches, long, flat ones with one or two hotels, where car and motorcycle people gathered to see how fast they could go. In 1937, when flat-out speed runs were becoming a bit too brisk for safety, Daytona Beach persuaded the Savannah 200 race to relocate, and the Daytona 200 was born. AMA Motorcycle Hall of Famer Ed "Iron Man" Kretz won the first one on the 3.2-mile beach course (which narrowed during the race thanks to an incoming tide!) on an Indian Scout sponsored by Floyd Clymer.



### BONNEVILLE

Top-speed people found a forever home on a flat stretch of dried-up salt lake outside of Wendover, Utah. In September of 1938, AMA HOFer Freddie Ludlow showed up to ride a pair of Indians to new Class C records through a one-mile time trap: 120.747 mph on a 74-ci Chief, and 115.125 mph on a 45-ci Scout. The streamlined 61-ci Arrow had less success, at first filling with dust, later encountering endeavor-ending speed wobbles. *The Motorcyclist* put it all into perspective: "Meanwhile it proves that speed is not child's play. It must be scientifically handled, it is very expensive, and is a pastime for the experienced."





### THE STURGIS RALLY IS LAUNCHED

Founded in 1936 and chartered in 1937, the Jackpine Gypsies Motorcycle Club in Sturgis, S.D., is one of the AMA's oldest chartered off-road clubs. Led by local Indian dealer Pappy Hoel, the club teamed up with the city of Sturgis to hold the Black Hills Motor Classic in August 1938, centered around a Gypsy Tour of the surrounding area, a half-mile dirt-track race, and a large party. Eighty-six years later, the Sturgis rally shares the distinction with Daytona Bike Week as the biggest motorcycle gathering in the world, drawing in around a half-million rugged individualists over 10 days every August. The attraction today is the same as it was then: riding, racing and one large party spread all over the Black Hills. The Jackpine Gypsies were inducted into the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame in 1997.

1939

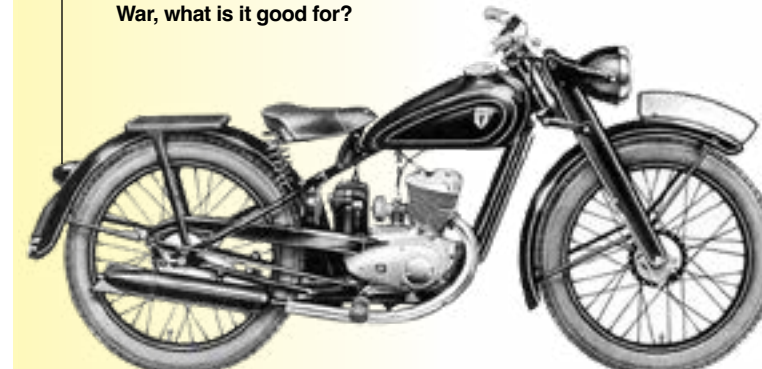


### BSA GOLD STAR

The Blue Star of 1932 began the Birmingham Small Arms factory's reputation for reliability. The Blue Star begat the 1936 Empire Star, which did a 107-mph lap of Brooklands to win Wal Handley a Gold Star badge. The next model, circa 1939, was naturally named after that badge. Sporting an OHV alloy single of either 348 or 499cc, the Gold Stars became known for performance as well as reliability, sold in huge numbers, and continued in production until 1963.

### 1939 DKW RT125

No doubt the most imitated motorcycle in the world, this little German two-stroke was simple, sturdy and affordable. DKW pioneered Schnürle two-stroke loop scavenging along with a highly efficient arrangement of transfer ports, which raised the RT125's performance head and shoulders above its competition. After WWII, the Soviet Union took plans, tooling and even several dozen personnel as war reparations to MMZ in Moscow and to a factory in Kovrov, where it produced copies of the RT. WFM of Poland made a modified version of the RT125 (under SHL 125 and Sokół 125 brands), which later became 175cc bikes produced until 1985. RT125 plans were also taken to the U.K., where they became the BSA Bantam, and to the U.S. where they took the form of the Harley-Davidson Hummer. In Japan, Yamaha took a breather from musical instruments to reverse engineer the RT as its first motorcycle, the YA-1, produced from 1955 to 1958. RT125 copies were built by at least eight different entities in at least six countries. War, what is it good for?



### DEALERS JOIN TOGETHER

E.C. Smith's skillful promotion of the American Motorcyclist Association paid off within the country's dealer network when 1936 and later model-year dealer meetings were sanctioned by the AMA. Harley-Davidson and Indian were the prominent forces in American motorcycling at the time, and admission to their annual dealer meetings required an AMA membership.

### SPEEDWAY BOOMS

Speedway racing boomed in popularity when it made its way to America through the stories of Ray Tauser, Cordy Milne and Jack Milne, who spent time in Europe and Australia. "In 1932, [Night Speedway] was a real small child," E.C. Smith penned. "But in 1933 it grew and grew plenty. The future possibilities are so great." In 1938, Smith reported the previous year of racing saw the AMA sanction 370 night speedway races — the most of any discipline by more than 200 events. In 1937, the aforementioned Milne, hailing from Pasadena, Calif., won the World Speedway Championship in front of 50,000 fans in Wembley Stadium in England.



### 24-HOUR DISTANCE RECORD

At the western end of the country, AMA HOFer Fred Ham, assisted by a team of West-Coast friends, rode the new OHV Model EL Harley-Davidson 1,825 miles around a 5-mile oval on Muroc Dry Lake (next door to Edwards AFB) in 24 hours, setting a slew of new distance records. The first 50 miles were covered at an average speed of 91.4 mph; average speed over the whole 1,825 miles was 76.6 mph.



1940

### BMW WORLD SPEED RECORD STREAMLINER

BMW first jumped into the top-speed contest in 1929 with its star rider Ernst Henne coaxing a 736cc Boxer up to 137.58 mph on Germany's first autobahn. By 1936, flush with cash from a Nazi government eager to show German superiority in all things, BMW showed up with this wind-tunnel sculpted racer; underneath was a downsized, 493cc DOHC Boxer with a Zoller supercharger claimed to boost power to around 105 hp at 8000 rpm. Henne went 169 mph on it. Shortly afterward, a Brough-Superior went 1 mph faster, and a Gilera Rondine went 170.4. Having none of that, Henne returned in '37, went 173 mph, and retired. The record stood until 1951. AMA

