

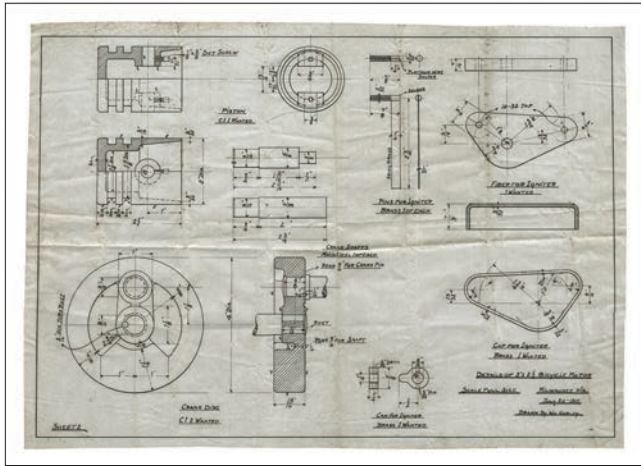
Mixed Media

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The Harley-Davidson Motor Company Archives

By Bill Jackson, Archives and Heritage Services, Harley-Davidson Motor Company

In 1901, Milwaukee teenagers William Harley and Arthur Davidson discussed building a small motor to attach to a bicycle. Within two years, they sold a working motorcycle to a neighborhood friend and committed to starting their own business.



William Harley's 1901 drawing of bicycle motor parts

Early Days

Harley-Davidson Motor Company started small. Understandably, the early years were defined by a basic product line (one motorcycle model) and a small number of advertisements. But, by the end of their first decade, multiple models and a full line of motorcycle parts, accessories, and rider apparel were offered. The founders' vision was to keep motorcyclists on the road and enjoying Harley-Davidson motorcycles as much as possible.

Their vision also included growing a wide-ranging network of dealers who were supported by the Harley-Davidson Motor Company. Arthur Davidson took ownership of recruiting dealers and providing them with the tools to sell and service the motorcycles. Low cost, and often no-cost, items provided by the Motor Company included handbills, exterior signs, letterhead, wall clocks, and retail displays, among a host of other marketing materials and "dealer aids." The company wanted a top-tier retail experience for riders. In the 1970s, an increasingly large number of licensed products augmented the motorcycle accessories and dealer aids. From affordable coffee mugs to exclusive, limited-edition collectibles, a vast array of objects came to market. While the goal of the Harley-Davidson Motor

Company Archives is not to collect all Harley-Davidson products, the archives strives to get a best-possible cross section of ephemeral items.



Examples of Harley-Davidson dealer aids

Many of these items provide archival storage challenges, particularly those that contain liquids or are used as motorcycle care products. Motor oils, lubricants, and cleaners are collected for their packaging, and some eventually need to be purged of the original contents for long-term preservation. For decades, motor oil was sold in cardboard containers with tin top and bottom pieces. Over time, the oil can seep into the cardboard, permanently staining it and causing separation from the top or bottom pieces.

Targeted Collecting

The main attraction of the Harley-Davidson Museum in Milwaukee is an unmatched collection of original Harley-Davidson motorcycles. At the 1919 Chicago Motorcycle Show, Harley-Davidson showcased the latest models along with a display of past motorcycles to show the evolution from the early years of Harley-Davidson. From an early age, the founders began the practice of retaining original vehicles from the assembly line and keeping them in original condition. They also placed advertisements in magazines asking owners of older models to consider selling their motorcycles back to Harley-Davidson. Over the years that followed, engineering used some models for experimentation, but the clear goal was historical displays

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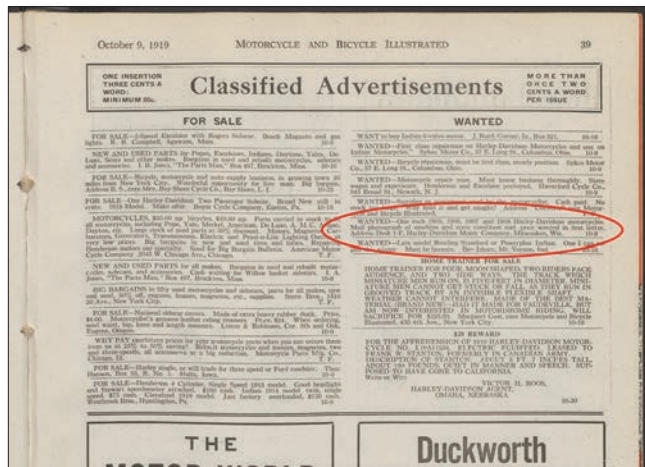
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Carol Street, Assistant Editor

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for factory tour guests. Successive company leaders and others ensured that the collecting practice continued.



The only surviving example of a 1909 Harley-Davidson 5-D motorcycle



Example of Harley-Davidson's advertisement seeking older models of motorcycles, as seen in a 1919 Motorcycle and Bicycle Illustrated

This targeted collecting carries into the present day. For each new model year, the most significant new or improved vehicle is selected by the archives staff for permanent preservation. With the motorcycle coming from the factory, little needs to be done. The fluids are purged, and batteries are removed. The motorcycles are not operated on roads, which means exposure to dirt and sunlight will not add to any long-term wear. This means that restoration of these vehicles should not be necessary in the future. When a restored vehicle is acquired from private ownership, the level of restoration is considered. Overall, the closer to original condition a motorcycle can be acquired, the better.

Film and video are commonly a cornerstone of a business archives. In the case of Harley-Davidson, there is no small amount of corporate-produced video for dealer meetings, training, and internal communications. More urgent to address are the obsolete video formats, such as U-matic and VHS, which are being converted to digital. The opening of the Harley-Davidson Museum in 2008 has inspired owners of family home movies to donate them to the Harley-Davidson Archives. Some of the films document key moments in motorcycle history, with one example being the first Daytona 200 motorcycle race in 1937.

And, of course, rounding out the larger archival collection is an extensive collection of apparel. Not only can Harley-Davidson vintage apparel be rare, it is also prized by the collector community. In fact, more focused collecting of vintage riding apparel came late to the Harley-Davidson Archives, beginning in the 1990s. Apparel can often require more preservation attention than motorcycles. Threats to items include leather decomposition or moth larvae in the case of wool.



Jacket of the Motor Maids from Illinois, the first national women's riding club

What are some of the most unexpected items? Numerous cans of Harley-Davidson beer represent company anniversaries and other events when the company partnered with breweries. For the 105th anniversary of Harley-Davidson Motor Company in 2008, a partnership with Fender Guitars resulted in three Harley-Davidson Anniversary Guitars. One guitar remained with Fender, one came to the Harley-Davidson Archives, and the final one was auctioned for charity.

So, what aids the Harley-Davidson Archives in collecting and storing such a wide range of items?

Collections Planning

A written collections plan is important for any archival or museum collection. The Harley-Davidson strategy addresses the thematic and historical gaps important to the goals of the organization and the community of stakeholders. The collecting goals of the Harley-Davidson Archives also specifically emphasize criteria of significance, authenticity, condition, uniqueness, and originality among others. The archives does not attempt to collect “one of each” vehicle or item, but to focus efforts and resources as well as to understand when something fills a gap and when it does not. Emphasis is also placed on exhibit potential and storytelling in the Harley-Davidson Museum.

Cataloging

The level of description applied to some collections is very detailed. While it can be more time consuming, the benefits are numerous. An example is film and video cataloging, in which the archives will go as far as entering the names of key individuals in the film, vehicles, and locations. Time and again, this has the benefit of aiding current-day productions. During the launch of a recent Sportster model came several requests for legacy footage of Sportsters for retrospectives.

Efficient Storage

Motor vehicles don't always lend themselves to easy storage, especially a 13-foot-long streamlined Harley-Davidson Sportster used to break the land speed record in 1970. As the Harley-Davidson Museum was under construction, the decision to add a mobile racking system for accessing stored motorcycles was easy. Smaller artifacts can very often be consolidated into boxed storage in stacking trays. Of course, other objects are best in open-shelf storage, often because of their size and weight.

Handling, Security, and Environment

Policies also dictate the handling of vehicles and strict protocols about access to collections and exhibit areas. Environmental conditions in all collection spaces are logged throughout the year. Because the Harley-Davidson Museum often borrows objects for exhibit from other institutions, all security and environmental standards are optimized to ensure the confidence of the lenders.

The most recent efforts in preservation aimed at the growing number of digital objects match those of archives worldwide. Harley-Davidson history continues onward and is not limited to the distant past. The written collections plan is presently being amended to reflect policies to ensure digital items are not lost to time or obsolescence.

Work in the Harley-Davidson Archives is never boring, and preservation and storage challenges do not abate. This article has discussed the formats and types of documents and artifacts of Harley-Davidson history. However, central to all that the company hopes to do is to share the stories of the people who made the company brand and name so recognized.