

Motorcycling and Political Involvement: The Early Years

by "Crazy Paul" Ecochard

The motorcyclists' rights movement began in 1903 out of a need for uniformity and fairness in motorcycle racing. At a convention of 92 motorcycle enthusiasts from the New York Motorcycle Club and the Alpha Motorcycle Club, 44 members contributed \$2.00 each to form what became the Federation of American Motorcyclists (FAM). The FAM, because of poor funding and no real strength or authority, did not survive World War I. It was dissolved in 1919.

In July 1919, at a meeting of the Motorcycle and Allied Trade Association (M&ATA), a great deal of emphasis was put on the void left by the defunct FAM. Indian, Excelsior, and Harley-Davidson companies (the Big Three) were anxious to get back into competition and development of new products. To fill that void they formed the M&ATA Riders Division and appointed A.B. Coffman to chair the Rules Committee.

Because not all the dealers read the rules with the same interpretations, protests and abuses were common. The M&ATA saw a need for a separate organization to help develop the sport. Thus, in July of 1924, the AMA was formed. A.B. Coffman became its first chairman by September. The AMA logo first appeared on the 1925 Rule Book.

Formation of the FAM was the first of three significant events to occur between 1903 and 1924 that affected motorcycling in the U.S. The second, after World War I, was enactment in Europe of tariffs that shut off the importing of U.S. goods. This closed the ports to the Indian and Harley-Davidson companies, which previously had enjoyed a huge export business.

The third was Henry Ford, his Model T and the assembly line. Through his attention to efficiency of production, the cost of the Model T went from \$850 in 1909 (three times the cost of a motorcycle) to \$400 by 1919 (about the same price as a motorcycle with a sidecar).

This was the end of the motorcycle's heyday as a viable means of transportation. The motor-

cycle industry realized that in order to survive, they had to sell sport, excitement, and entertainment. During the period from 1929 to World War II, the AMA developed into a well organized sanctioning body for all motorcycle racing events, and for road clubs.

During the sixties, the AMA promoted two programs, called "Best Wheel Forward" and "Two Wheeled Wisdom." The first dealt with public image: dress neatly, use a safety helmet, clean leather or sports attire, proper footwear. An overall neat outfit can do a great deal to gain acceptance and improve the popularity of the sport in the eyes of the public. "Two Wheeled Wisdom" was aimed at improving motorcyclists' riding skills and knowledge.

Motorcycling basically rolled along happily until 1966, when Congress passed a law designed to empower the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to force mandatory helmet laws on the states. That act of Congress, more than any other event in the history of motorcycling, provided the spark that brought to life the MROs that we know today.

Bibliography

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I'm 47 years old, and work in Atlantic City, NJ as a maintenance mechanic for Bally's Grand Casino. I helped form the Ocean County Chapter of Jersey ABATE in 1987, and have been a rider education instructor since 1991. I'm a member of the AMA, MRF, and HOG. I ride a 1991 FLHS approximately 25,000 miles a year.

I've attended six of the last ten Meetings of the Minds. At most of these seminars someone talks about not reinventing the wheel. After researching this article for the 3rd edition of the White Papers, it seems that the wheel has been reinvented quite a bit. The concerns of bikers have been the same since the first motor was put on a bicycle. The environment, personal freedom, noise and safety are still things we must deal with. We have been reactive in our quest for our freedom. We must become more proactive. We are slowly moving ahead. Keep fighting. Ride free and safe.