

Women and Motorcycling

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The second National Conference of Women and Motorcycling will be held July 13 -16, 2000, in Athens Ohio on the campus of Ohio University. The first (ever) Women and Motorcycling National conference was held nearly three years ago, also in late July - in 1997. More than 150 years ago, in upstate New York, the very first national convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition of women was held at Seneca Falls, in Seneca County, New York, on July 19th and 20th, 1848. Men also participated in these deliberations.

It is notable that a century and a half later, almost to the day, women will again gather, arriving from all parts of the nation, to celebrate and to assess the social situation of females in this democracy. On this occasion, however, women will arrive not by horse and carriage but on motorcycles. The focus of this convention will be related to a particular activity enjoyed by women, and that activity is the sport of motorcycling.

At the historic gathering of women in 1848, women united to voice their grievances about the denial by government and society of their most fundamental human rights: the vote; the right to own property; the right to work, pursue a career outside the home and to be entitled to keep the wages they earned; the right to divorce; to fair consideration in the matter of guardianship of children; to respect for the integrity and self-possession of their own bodies as physical persons; and for their constitutional right to the pursuit the fulfillment of their self-determined goals and their own happiness.

The Women and Motorcycling Conference of the year 2000 will focus on the specific aspect of women and motorcycling. Today, I want to focus even more specifically on women's involvement in the motorcyclists rights movement, or, as we might also term it, the sphere of motorcyclists' political activism. There is an inescapable parallel to be found between the progress made by

women in American civic life and the progress made by women who have been and are at present active in the motorcyclists' rights movement. In each case, the role of women participants, whether in citizenship, or membership, has evolved. This evolution has not occurred automatically or accidentally, but as a direct or indirect result of women, and men who also perceived the injustices and inequities suffered by women, as well as other marginalized, devalued citizens, and who persistently lobbied, agitated, and sacrificed in order to secure the reality of freedom, enshrined as the ideal of American democracy.

Women discovered the sport of motorcycling, almost from its very inception. As a matter of historical record, we don't have any documentation as to the exact time and place where the first woman swung her leg over the seat of a motorcycle and headed off down the road. However, archival evidence clearly portrays women riders enjoying the sport on the earliest available bikes. The historical record also clearly documents the wide range of geographical locations, the length and difficulty of various journeys, and the remoteness of destinations where these pioneering women riders ventured. We marvel especially, at the courage of those early solitary women riders.

There were unending obstacles to surmount. There were, of course, as we are all well aware, obstacles having to do with the mechanical function of the machine, and even more in that day than our own, the quality or availability of fuel, replacement parts and assistance. But the obstacles encountered were also, as we are aware, environmental. There were environmental obstacles not just in the sense of environment as weather, climate, and terrain, but also in the social environment of the time. These, too, are a kind of hindrance with which we are all too familiar.

If there is one thing present company is well sensitized to, it is the concept of fairness - of fair opportunity to determine what is or is not in our

own individual best interest, and without infringing on a similar right of any other individual, the freedom to pursue the direction we determine best suited to our preferences, talents and even our idiosyncracies. Women motorcyclists in the early decades, and even well into the second half of the twentieth century, persisted in enjoyment of the sport they came to love. Even while enduring hostile receptions in many of their travels and associations, they felt, as we feel, that to have the right to pursue happiness in this way, was well worth the aggravation they encountered.

And just what is this quality we value so highly that comes with the activity of motorcycling? For almost anyone who has experienced and become addicted to motorcycling, the answer is always the same: it's the sense of freedom you feel when riding a motorcycle. We all find a common bond in this feeling. We all express this exhilarating sense of breaking out of the constraints in which society, language, background, family or community have entangled us. We all express this sensation - the almost "spiritual" release from limitations of all sorts imposed on us by the institutions of our culture, and the perceptions of others whose frames of reference have, more often than not, and more rather than less, been received - that is to say, handed down by custom and tradition as part of the "system." We find astride a motorcycle, an escape from so much in life that has kept our horizons narrow and our imaginations stagnant.

Women, no less than men, have come to know the joys of motorcycling, and with it, the higher plane of existence that enhances every aspect of our lives. It's the abstraction, "freedom" made tangible, immediate, and once experienced, unforgettable. Women, no less than men, become responsible, piloting a motorcycle, for reaching their destination under their own power - and for enduring the elements, the discomforts, even the injuries, the fatigues and the rigors and uncertainties of the road. And women have risen through the ranks of the once entirely male-dominated motorcyclists' rights movement to assume leadership roles and to join with their brothers in protecting and promoting the activity we all love so dearly. We worked hard in the early days in

mostly anonymous supporting roles, doing the day to day organizing and record-keeping, or arrangement of the details of various social and educational functions. Many of us were merely companions, and never aspired, or thought to aspire to anything more ambitious or challenging. But the movement itself, as well as the momentum in the culture at large, contained and nurtured the seeds of change.

We, as motorcycle rights activists, know and have preached for decades that we can't afford to be exclusive and elitist. We need diversity and the strength that a broader spectrum of experience, perspective and skills make available to our cause. We need - we desperately need, if we are to survive and prosper, all the resources we can muster. This message has been taken to heart by women who have been involved in this movement for a long time. Realizing that they, too, had valuable skills and ideas to contribute, they ventured to gain a wider and more direct influence in basic policy decisions. Think about, for those of you who are veterans of motorcyclists' rights activism, the world of motorcyclist rights 20 years ago. How many women were there occupying leadership positions at the district, regional or state levels? How many at the national level? Of those few who may have occupied elected positions, even in local MRO chapters, how many were in policy-making positions as opposed to the more familiar female assignments as record-keepers, that is, secretaries and treasurers? Look around today. How has the picture changed? Nearly thirty years ago, I was there at the formative gatherings of the Western Pennsylvania Cycle Riders Association. I understood the issues at least as well as males who were involved. But, in essence and in fact, I was no more than an observer. I was present when ABATE of Pennsylvania was incorporated in the mid- 70s at our family cabin on the Susquehanna river in South Central Pa. I made and served the blueberry pancakes. I bought, hauled, and iced- up the beer. I watched the kids. I was there for the entire meeting, but I was excluded. I was not invited to offer my thoughts or ideas, nor did I even feel that I should be. Yet I had earned a college degree from a well-respected institution, minoring in individual and

social psychology. I pursued graduate studies, and had at least as adequate a grasp of the issues under consideration as most males present. I was a voracious reader, intellectually curious, an accomplished person, and a competent writer. I had a lot to offer at the time. But none of that mattered. I failed to qualify as a founder, simply because of my gender. In private discussion with my compatriot and husband, my views were expressed, and valued. But to this day, I have never even been recognized as participating in the founding of ABATE of Pennsylvania. Such is the power of social conditioning. It is so pervasive it conceals itself as merely a social construct, and legitimizes itself as the natural order. No one even thinks to question it - to critique it as an unexamined assumption.

That is why, when we reflect on the courage of our forbearers, it is not so much a matter of their courage in speaking out for certain rights. It is primarily having the courage to deeply penetrate the assumptions and conventions of one's social environment and to have the insight to see beyond them or through them, and having done that, to voice those insights. Such insights are often treated as heresies at the time. Progressive ideas often receive a hostile reception that not only finds them alien and perhaps incomprehensible, but downright dangerous - and the powers-that-be will stop at nothing to preserve the status quo. The champion of these new concepts bears the burden of proof in an environment where she or he must first reinvent and redefine most of the concepts and the language that is used. New ways of thinking don't take hold quickly or automatically, especially if they challenge the credibility of long-accepted traditional modes of thought. It is a testimony to the changes that have taken place that I am standing here and speaking to this assembly. It is a testimony to this shift of perception that we have backed so many women legislators sympathetic to our philosophy, and worked cooperatively with them for mutual benefit.

The MRF BOD presently has five female members on a board consisting of over twenty members. I remember when I was elected to the board, that to have more than one female board member

was a historic step beyond tokenism. I also clearly remember, remarking to Tom Pauley, the MRF President -elect and immediate past treasurer, that I look forward to the day when the notion of how many women versus how many men were on the board would be meaningless. He agreed wholeheartedly, adding that for the time being, we needed to encourage more women members to take on responsibilities of the board. I think that as the enlightened activists which we believe ourselves to be, we can enthusiastically say that hoped-for day has arrived, and women serving as board members are simply board members.

But we need to extend this limited reality beyond the sphere of politically aware and astute motorcyclists, to the ever larger (we hope) culture of motorcycling itself. One segment of this larger motorcycling culture is the increasing ranks of women motorcyclists. It is, in the interest of recognizing the opportunity for all of us as self-created motorcyclist rights "experts" if you will, that I focus these remarks. With the advent of the first Women in Motorcycling conference, we let an unprecedented opportunity for positive information about grassroots and organizational political action escape us. While there was, among the various sessions, a general presentation about the area of legislative involvement, it was not prepared by those of us who had the longest and most down-in-the-trenches experience. It was unfocused, vague, inaccurate as to our history, ignorant about the development of our philosophy and our accomplishments, and it made no mention of our planned legislative agenda for the forthcoming year. This occurred in part because there were not enough women with grassroots political background involved in all crucial phases of planning. This is a situation that we activists among the steering committee members have lobbied hard to redress.

To that end, the title of the government relations session for the 2000 Conference has been changed to "Support Your Sport," and a team of AMA staff and volunteer motorcyclist rights activist presenters will design and conduct the session. But it is not in presentations alone that the importance of political involvement on behalf of motorcycling is communicated. It is done every

bit as effectively through the more informal conversations and spontaneous exchanges which always make up a major part of any get-together. I encourage as many of you as possible to attend, and if I didn't say it already, as with the convention of 1848, men are also welcome to attend and enjoy the program, festivities, fellowship and fun. I emphasize that this conference is open to women who enjoy any aspect of motorcycling: racing, motorcycling competition, political activism, touring, instructing, and of course, women who prefer riding as passengers.

And what a program it is! There will be a block party with live music to which the whole town of Athens is invited. Included will be a ride-in show of women's bikes with awards in various categories. There will also be a women's motorcycle precision drill team performance. In addition to the workshop format you are all accustomed to, there will be a group ride to the new AMA headquarters in Pickerington, with welcoming ceremonies, tours of the Heritage Museum, and a selection of mini-tech sessions set up on the AMA campus, including the very heavily requested demonstration and hands-on instruction on the techniques of righting a downed motorcycle. A banquet will crown the event featuring speakers and awards. There will be many great photo-opportunities for the media, and that can all carry over as positive coverage for us as well.

The framers of our founding principles of government, by, for and of the people, with heavy emphasis on the protection and enhancement of individual rights, expressed ideas that were at the time unfulfilled ideals. These ideas conveyed the spirit of something much larger than even the scope of the imaginations of these visionary revolutionaries could possibly appreciate within the context of their time. They only sensed, but did not yet grasp fully, the far-reaching implications of the concepts they articulated. It fell to others, who came after them to reflect on these principles, to gaze backward and through to their own present, at the reality of civic participation, and compare it with the kind of reality that had yet to be achieved. As always, in freeing ourselves from the conventions of the present, we must struggle to peer forward into the murky unknown, as if it

were a foggy road at night. We must aim the beam of our headlight, our intelligence and our compassion at the vastness that confronts us. It takes some redefining: redefining of just what constitutes an "individual" ; what is essentially "human"; who is to be included when we speak of the rights to which an individual is entitled; an most important of all, who is to do the defining. From our present perspective that might seem to be a "no-brainer" and yet brave and determined women, such as Susan B. Anthony and Sojourner Truth, logged thousands of arduous miles simply arguing that they, too, were persons, and citizens and as such were entitled to the full protection of their rights under the U.S. Constitution. For 45 years, the right to vote for women was brought before legislators and for 44 years it was defeated. African-Americans did not win the enforcement of a similar right until past the half-century mark.

The slogan of the first National Women and Motorcycling Conference was "Defining Our Way." It was of singular importance to us to state clearly that it was up to each of us to figure out who, and what we are and want to be, both as individuals, and in such special cases as we should identify ourselves as any kind of group with commonalities for a particular purpose. It was significant for us that we not be arbitrarily stereotyped. Specifically, we did not wish to be constrained within any scheme in which we had no authorship or control over decisions shaping our individual or collective destinies, whatever the case may be. Defining ourselves to our own satisfaction, demanding the liberty to revise our self-definitions, in order to reflect our ongoing needs and expectations, is not something women motorcyclists, or women in general, or motorcyclists of any description, or members of any community, for that matter, should fail to insist upon as Americans. We are the exemplars of these freedoms and we have an obligation to be seen by the world as living embodiments of these ethical standards.

Each and every successive generation must advance along the road a bit farther toward the realization of our ideals. The founders of American democracy brought ancient concepts of ratio-

nality, respect for the institutions of representative government and principles of fairness together, within a single document. Beautiful as these ideas are, expressed in the language of words, without translation into form and action they remain only high-toned words. The abstract concepts are meaningless unless embodied and actualized by human activities. That is why it is so critical that we are seen as motorcyclists, and why we think it important to be seen as women motorcyclists. As flesh-and-blood creatures, we convey a profound metaphor for freedom, which even a small child finds irresistible.

A metaphor is an image that we use for communicating the understanding of a difficult abstract concept in terms of a concrete physical state or image. We use an image people can easily relate to, to describe what words alone can never capture, such as a particular feeling, like love or freedom. Think of the face of every child you've ever seen waving to you from a car rear window. As the embodiment of freedom, our message, just by being seen, is instantaneous, powerful, moving and inspirational. We excite envy, awe, and the spirit of adventure and discovery that is uniquely human.

On her eightieth birthday in January of 1882, in an address to Congress, woman suffragette and life-long rights advocate Elizabeth Cady Stanton likened the lot of a woman to that of a lone individual in a boat. She lived before the introduction of the motorcycle, but her chosen metaphor was not unlike that of a woman piloting a motorcycle. She said:

"No matter how much women may prefer to lean, to be protected and supported, nor how much men may desire to have them do so, they must make the voyage of life alone, and for safety in an emergency, they must know something of the laws of navigation. To guide their own craft, we must be captain, pilot, engineer; with chart and compass to stand at the wheel; to match the wind and waves and know when to take in the sail, and to read the signs in the firmament over all. It matters not whether the solitary voyager is a man or a woman. Nature having endowed them equally, leaves them to their own skill and judgement in the hour of danger, and, if not equal to

the occasion, alike they perish. To appreciate the importance of fitting every human soul for independent action, think for a moment of the immeasurable solitude of self. We come into the world alone, unlike all who have gone before us; we leave it alone under circumstances peculiar to ourselves. No mortal has ever been, no mortal ever will be like the soul just launched on the sea of life. There can never again be just such environments as make up the infancy, youth and manhood of this one. Nature never repeats herself, and the possibilities of one human soul will never be found in another. No one has ever found two blades of ribbon grass alike, and no one will ever find two human beings alike. Seeing then, what must be the infinite diversity in human character, we can in a measure appreciate the loss to a nation when any large class of the people is uneducated and unrepresented in government. We ask for the complete development of every individual, first, for his own benefit and happiness.... Again we ask complete individual development for the general good; for the consensus of the competent on the whole round of human interest; on all questions of national life, and here each one must bear his share of the general burden. The chief reason for opening to every soul the doors to the whole round of human duties and pleasures is the individual development thus attained, the resources thus provided under all circumstances to mitigate the solitude that at times must come to everyone.... Nothing strengthens the judgement and quickens the conscience like individual responsibility. Nothing adds such dignity to character as the recognition of one's self-sovereignty; the right to an equal place every where conceded; a place earned by personal merit, not an artificial attainment, by inheritance, wealth, family, and position. Seeing, then, that the responsibilities of life rest equally on man and woman, that their destiny is the same, they need the same preparation for time and eternity. The talk of sheltering a woman from the fierce storms of life is the sheerest mockery, for they beat on her from every point of the compass just as they do on man, and with more fatal results, for he has been trained to protect himself, to resist, to conquer. Such are the facts of human experience, the responsibilities of the

individual. Rich and poor, intelligent and ignorant, wise and foolish, virtuous and vicious, man and woman, it is ever the same, each soul must depend wholly on itself.”

Very true. We “ride in” solo and we “ride out” solo. But in between those two events it is also true that we are social creatures. We have no choice in this, because our socialization begins the moment we are born. We are cultural through and through. We are all products of a lifetime of social and cultural conditioning. Society. Culture. The advent of these phenomena in history marks a quantum evolutionary step that explodes with complexity. Change at the genetic level takes place over eons. Change at the cultural level is tremendously fast, and getting exponentially faster. The Internet and globalization are examples of this.

The essence of any society is cooperation. It evolves naturally. We as motorcyclist’s rights activists have witnessed this kind of evolution firsthand. We have experienced it for ourselves because in our struggle for survival, feedback from our environment has taught us that cooperative relationships enjoy a much higher success rate. They provide not only a better way of improving the individual’s survival, but allow us to use a division of labor. This means we can take on ambitious, complex projects, divide and subdivide the various tasks necessary, and tackle them working in parallel, and orchestrate all of that activity in the pursuit of a common goal. Cooperation allows us to continually improve the quality of our lives. If you must spend most of your time watching your back for danger, hustling on the spur of the moment in response to contingencies, and be always poised to fight or flee, you haven’t the available time or energy sit back, analyze your situation and reflect upon the usefulness of your strategies and the possibilities for adapting them.

As individual motorcyclists, we are virtually powerless to effect or affect the kinds of change required to promote our interests. We can not function as isolated agents on a scale of the size and complexity of government. However, in well-organized group effort, we have discovered real power. We are now using this advantage in the competitive game of life. Each of us, has not just

our own knowledge and experience as a resource, but, now, the opportunities to share the talents, expertise and perspectives of others. We’ve made the evolutionary leap! We’ve tapped the resources available in motorcyclists and non-motorcyclists alike. We’ve learned to network, to build coalitions, but we haven’t opened things up for ourselves the way we still could.

Rhetoric is easy. Idealism is appealing. But unless rhetoric gets translated into meaningful action, it has no meaning in the real world. We have to be seen, and see each other on motorcycles because that translates the abstract word “freedom” into the embodied reality. Let’s move ahead with giving substance to the form of noble ideas. And let’s do it the smart way. Let’s do it together! Let’s let freedom ride!