

Image
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Motorcycling has been around for around 100 years now. Over this time the image of motorcycling has gone through lots of incarnations. In the early years I'm sure cyclists were considered fools on the new fangled contraption. Roads were pretty much dirt, few and far between. It took lots of skill to ride those early bikes. As the car and motorcycles took off, roads were paved and horses were relegated to trails. Motorcycles with sidecars rivaled early autos for the family transportation. During world war two motorcycles were used to replace the horse for the cavalry. Harley and Indian had a big bidding war to get the government contract to provide motorcycles to the army. Harley won that war. After World War II the car took over as the choice for transportation on American roads.

There were thousands of motorcycles, which were brought back from the war, and young men bought them and the custom age began as riders started to bobbed fenders and change the stock looks of their bikes. Then came the chopper age. Many of these riders were considered rebels and outcasts and the bad boy image for motorcyclist began to take hold. A 1950's picture in Life magazine taken after a riot erupted at a Holister, CA rally has been credited with the start of this bad image. The reporter staged this photo. Groups like the Hell's Angels, Diablo's and others really made this image take hold. Hollywood came in and pretty soon if you wore black leather and rode a bike you were bad news.

In the 70's Honda came to the USA with the new targeted demographic for motorcycles. They tried to change the image back to nice with the slogan "you meet the nicest people on a Honda". A slogan that is still true today. New riders came to motorcycling but the bad boy image stayed with us. As time passed more and more people came to the sport and the bad boy image is still there but it is pretty much a thing of the past. A new term came around, "1 percenter". This is a term the bad boys gave to themselves as normal folks who just happened to ride motorcycles soon out numbered them. We still have some problems with businesses who do not want to cater to motorcycles, but the reason has changed from bad people to some cyclists are just too noisy.

Throughout the 70's, 80's, and 90's the sport saw several different incarnations take off and the making of specialty use motorcycles the norm. Road racers, touring bikes, dirt bikes, scooters, and stunt bikes all went their own direction. Motorcycle clubs changed to people who like to ride their discipline and pretty much obey the laws from the lawbreakers. Several cities across the US now hold large motorcycle rallies that draws thousands of riders and millions of dollars for the host city. The sport is still growing in all areas. The newest fad to change our image is the rash of motorcycle programming on the cable stations. Shows like American Chopper, Southern Iron, Biker Build off and Motorcycle mania have given the custom chopper lots of exposure. I am not sure if showing a guy put a \$100,000 motorcycle together with a hammer is good exposure but I think the exposure is good for us. Many large corporations like Lincoln-Mercury, Snap on, Mueller Welding, and Trim Spa have commissioned some of these rolling works of art.

Only a very small section of our large group is being shown. Most of these bikes made on these shows are built only for looks and are not really for riding any distance. Very few programs dedicate any time to all of the other areas of motorcycling. Speed channel does a good job of covering every other area with shows like Two Wheel Tuesday and American Thunder.

Today's images are varied. Some see the high-speed reckless crotch rocket guys; some see the noisy loud chopper or Harley guys or the dirt bikers wrecking the environment. Very few notice the low key touring people, the commuters, or the Sunday afternoon recreational riders.

On the whole our image over the century has gone from "what is that noisy thing" to as low as you can go to a strange mix that we currently give off. Fortunately we are going in the right direction and our image will get better. GWRRA has started the Motorcycle Awareness Division. This is to help educate the general public about motorcycling. This should help our image even more. Most people who get treated to a motorcycle rallies in their town soon learn that motorcyclists are some of the nicest people you can meet. Besides how many other groups wave at each other as they pass on the highway.