



CHAPTER 5

MANY POSSIBLE FUTURES

I was only twelve years old when World War II ended, but I was already dreaming of owning a motorcycle. I had plenty of inspiration—motorcycles were everywhere when I was growing up, and my ears perked up every time I heard one go through our neighborhood. I saw new bikes being built on those visits to the factory with my dad and was eager to check out all the workers' bikes in that old garage. My father rode to work every day, often coming home with some new bike or prototype. He rode all year round, adding a sidecar for stability when it started snowing, taking John and me for rides. I examined every new bike my dad brought home in detail, waiting for the day when I could get one of my own.

With the long war finally over, returning servicemen went back to work. America had come out on top, and people were buying goods again after a decade of the Depression and years of war rationing. The Harley-Davidson factory was operating at peak efficiency thanks to those military contracts, and the company was ready to take advantage of opportunities that developed with the booming postwar economy. For four years our dealers had been starved of inventory due to our

wartime commitments. Now they had military surplus vehicles in their showrooms along with shiny new models to sell to riders who'd been pining for a new motorcycle.

As president of the company, my father led the way in mapping out an expansion plan to steer the company through this new era. The first part of the plan was unveiled in November 1947 at the big Harley-Davidson Dealer Convention in Milwaukee. The Department of Defense had built a huge factory west of the city for A. O. Smith to use for military production, fabricating bomb and torpedo casings and propellers for fighter planes. The plant was mothballed when the war ended, and Harley-Davidson was able to purchase it to expand our manufacturing footprint. Our new Capitol Drive factory was right on the train line, and like our Milwaukee plant on Juneau Avenue it had a big railroad siding for shipping. As a special event for the dealers, our marketing people announced an evening “Mystery Ride”—they put all our dealers on a train and took them out to that big new factory. Nobody knew what the destination was, and when they pulled that train up alongside the new plant, they invited everybody in and announced, “This huge factory now belongs to Harley-Davidson, and [it] will allow us to expand to meet future demands.” We obtained quite a bit of land along with the factory, which we used when we built our Product Development Center in the 1990s.

As part of the event at the “mystery” location they showed dealers our newest model, the 125cc “S” lightweight. Harley-Davidson built its reputation with big, powerful bikes, but we had also made smaller bikes since the 1920s, recognizing their value for attracting new riders and just getting around town. The S was smaller than anything we'd made to that point; it was actually adapted from a German design made available to us by the US government. The same plans were given to the British and Russians as part of war reparations—distributing German technology to help rebuild Allied industry.

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That little S model would play a big role in getting young people like me on their first motorcycle, but it wasn't the bike I was dreaming of owning. I loved the big, customized Harleys I'd see guys riding in our neighborhood. We lived in Wauwatosa, a suburb of Milwaukee that was between the original Harley factory and the new plant in Butler, a few miles farther west. I was fascinated by the Knuckleheads I'd see around town, with the custom seats and bags, unique wheel inserts, horns, all sorts of unique parts and accessories. Each rider added his own interpretation with different paint and add-ons. In my dreams I wanted one of those beautiful bikes, but I couldn't have one at that time. I've still got a drawing of a motorcycle like that, done when I was fourteen. I tried to capture every detail of a custom Knucklehead; I even put my initials on the saddlebags in the add-on letters the way riders would do it at the time.

I was always drawing motorcycles; that's been the story of my life. When other kids were playing baseball, I wanted to be sketching. Don't get me wrong—I enjoyed outdoor activities as much as other kids. For weeks each summer my brother, John, and I went to Red Arrow Camp on Trout Lake, up in northern Wisconsin. We hiked and swam, did woodworking and crafts. Other times our parents would take us to our grandfather's cabin on Pine Lake. I loved the outdoors, but I always found time to draw.

We were especially excited to go to local races and hillclimbs. Those events really fired my dreams of riding. Around that time Harley-Davidson introduced a new stripped-stock racing model, the WR—a sort of racer cousin to the military WLA. One of our Wisconsin dealers, Ray Tursky, was an accomplished racer, and he got one of the first WRs from the factory. We have that bike in the museum collection and it's got a great history. Ray was great to watch, a local legend. My dad would take me to visit the racing department at the factory, and that was exciting because Harley-Davidson was winning a lot of big national races with the WR.

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In 1948 I finally got my first bike—a black 125cc S model. I was only fifteen, but with my dad watching over me I learned to ride it on the back streets in our neighborhood, and before long I felt in complete control. I got a black leather motorcycle jacket for Christmas and was a full-fledged rider. I rode that bike everywhere. That was the beginning of my riding days, creating fun memories that are still vivid in my mind. A unique part of that S model was the peanut fuel tank, whose shape was later used on our race bikes and became an instant hit on our late 1950s Sportsters. Versions of that tank were a common sight on chopper-style motorcycles in the 1960s and 1970s; it became an influential classic, but it showed up first on that little 125.

I loved my 125 S and was so excited as a young man to have it to ride, but it stayed stock for only about a week—right away I started customizing it. It took on various shapes of fenders and paint, or no fenders and new trim. I guess I knew from that day on where I was going. I moved up to a 165 within a couple of years and lost track of that 125 S, but many years later my family found a really nice one at a swap meet and surprised me with it for Christmas, so I've got that in my collection and it brings back fond memories.

The new lightweight and the new factory were big news in 1948, but they were just part of the story. With that second factory gradually coming online, the main Juneau Avenue factory was working overtime as we had our biggest production year ever—close to thirty thousand motorcycles—and a new heavyweight engine to replace the Knucklehead. The new engine was given a nickname by our customers—the Panhead—because the engine top end resembled an upside-down pan. That nickname came a little later; back when it was introduced customers called it the “OHV,” referring to its overhead valves. The new engine was lighter than the Knucklehead, with aluminum heads that ran cooler than the older cast steel heads. There were a number of other important technological improvements—it was quite a feat of

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engineering for the time. We made ten thousand of those little lightweights, which was pretty amazing, but we made fifteen thousand Panheads—that was still the meat and potatoes of our business.

The big change for 1949 was both technological and cosmetic: we replaced our springer front suspension with new hydraulic front forks. The first Harley-Davidson motorcycles had no mechanical suspension; it was a hard ride like a basic bicycle. After just a few years we added spring suspension to smooth out the ride, with the springs concealed in the front fork tubes. As the bikes got bigger and heavier, we needed bigger springs, so by the 1920s we added big springs above the fender on the front end. As that front end evolved, it became a great example of functional design: everything in the suspension was exposed; there was no attempt to disguise or beautify it. It had its own practical beauty, particularly the redesigned version used on the Knuckleheads. That springer was a classic—we actually brought it back in the 1980s, and the springer front end has remained a favorite of customizers. But the technology was advancing in the postwar period, and our engineers knew that hydraulic shocks would give a smoother ride.

For the new hydraulic front end we needed a new design, and for the first time in our company's history, we looked beyond our engineering department and brought in an outside designer. And not just any outside designer, but one of the acknowledged pioneers of industrial design: Brooks Stevens, who had his offices right in Milwaukee. Brooks Stevens was one of the first-generation pioneers of industrial design, a founder of the Industrial Designers Society of America. That movement had begun to take hold in the 1920s and 1930s, driven by the idea that products should do more than just work; they should also be beautiful, with a form that expresses their function and makes you want them in your home or office. Stevens had designed everything from furniture to clothes dryers to passenger trains, and Harley brought him on board to

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help style key parts of the Hydra-Glide, our new flagship model with hydraulic front suspension.

The design that resulted from that effort is gorgeous: the way the big headlight sinks into the upper enclosure; the simplicity of the single tube within a tube of that burly front fork. It makes quite a statement. Stevens's other big design move was the straight cut on the leading edge of the front fender, with the shiny trim to set it off, repeated with the trim on the straight cut bottom of the rear fender. Then the three trim pieces on the rear fender parallel those lines and echo the lines stamped into the cover around the headlight. It all comes together in a striking way, and the front fender being cut straight was quite different for motorcycles. Traditionally the circular shape of the fender followed the wheel. That straight cut was a significant styling treatment that we've never gone away from; it's become kind of a trademark design.

The late 1940s were also a momentous time for me personally. I started high school at Wauwatosa High. I was interested in art, and my school had no art program, but I had lots of other interests to keep me busy. During those years I started dating Nancy Schewe, a girl from our neighborhood who went to Holy Angels Academy, a Catholic high school in Milwaukee. That was the most important thing that happened to me in those years: we went steady through high school and stayed together our whole lives. I don't know how much she thought about motorcycles before we started going together, but she got interested and would ride and go to the races with me. Whatever it was, we did it together.

Of course we did all the normal high school things together, such as going to her prom. Back then, if you had a girlfriend, you'd give her a ring or a bracelet. I gave Nancy a bracelet with a motorcycle on it. I got it at our local Harley dealership, and she wore that bracelet and kept it her whole life. Sixty-four years later, in 2015, the Harley-Davidson Museum curated an exhibit on my life and career—our life together,

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really—and they made a one-off version of that bracelet in solid gold. They presented it to me when the exhibit opened, and I gave it to Nancy.

During high school I started competing in enduros, and Nancy would cheer me on. I was just extending the family tradition: both my father and my great-uncle Walter had been endurance-run champions. I competed in local events, never in a national, but I won a few trophies. When I traded up to a 165cc bike my senior year I became more of a threat in those competitions.

One great memory from those years is a trip to the Indianapolis 500. That was the major auto racing event of the year, and my dad organized a family trip in May 1949 to attend. My brother, John, and I were excited for weeks before the race. A family outing like that was special because my dad was so devoted to the business; he spent every waking hour trying to make the Motor Company succeed. He wasn't really an outdoors guy like his father, who loved to hunt and fish. There are a number of pictures of my grandfather William A. and Bill Harley posing near their motorcycles with big strings of fish. The pictures of my father show him at work, or on his motorcycle, or at the races. He devoted his entire life to running the business, but he also enjoyed the sport, so it was a real treat to take a trip like that down to Indianapolis.

John and I each came home from that trip with die-cast souvenir race cars to add to our collections. I had begun collecting little race cars years earlier. I've remained fascinated by those aerodynamic forms. I kept collecting them my whole life, gradually bigger and more detailed ones until I could acquire the real thing. I've got a gorgeous Knucklehead-powered midget racer in my collection, toys and models throughout the house, and a couple of beautiful vintage race cars, like the ones they would have raced at Indy in the 1930s. I love the rounded slipper shape of those vintage open-wheel racers—big engine compartment up front, little cockpit in the rear. If you're into speed and racing, I think it's natural to be interested in cars as well as motorcycles. I just find those

shapes to be inspiring, along with the finishes, the numbers, the wheels: everything functional, focused on performance.

On the subject of speed, Harley-Davidson came out with an exciting new bike the year after I graduated from high school, the K model. John and I got new Ks, our first big bikes. The K was Harley's answer to the British vertical twins, Triumph, BSA, Norton, beautiful bikes that started flowing into our country following World War II and became quite popular. Those British twins fit with what a lot of young Americans wanted in the postwar period, and they were inexpensive because the English economy was depressed. Wages and expenses over there were lower than in the US, and our government had relaxed import tariffs to help rebuild the British economy. Harley-Davidson's prices were going up due to rising expenses, and sales dropped off dramatically with all these cheaper imports flooding the market. We needed something new to compete in that market, and the K model was it.

Our engineers took a fresh start in designing the K model. It was an upgrade to our early side-valves, but it was a clean-sheet-of-paper design. Like the Sportster that would come along in a few years, it had an integrated lower end—engine and transmission all in one case—and an integrated foot shifter more in tune with what was popular at the time: hand-clutch and foot-shift. Our earlier bikes were the other way around, with a hand-operated shifter on the tank and a foot-operated clutch. We eventually went to the foot shift on all our bikes except some of the police models—police officers preferred the hand shift in some circumstances. But the younger riders wanted that foot shift like the imported bikes had.

Another new feature on the K model was the rear suspension—shock absorbers on the rear wheel. That was a big difference from our other bikes, which had a solid rear frame, because without rear suspension the bike moves with every change in the surface of the road. The seats were sprung on those older bikes, which softened the blow considerably, but

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the rider still felt the big bumps. Being able to move that rear wheel up and down isolates you from being beat up. It's a safer and more pleasant ride. The only bikes today that don't have rear suspension are the customs. Customizers like to build them that way because the frame can be much lower to the ground, and you don't have the shock absorbers breaking up that long straight line of the frame from the top of the front forks all the way down to the rear axle. Those bikes are called hardtails, which they truly are. If you want to create a nice custom and you want it really on the ground visually, you can do that if you don't have to provide for any movement in the rear tire, but you give up a lot of riding comfort.

None of that would have entered the mind of a young person buying a motorcycle in the early 1950s. The chopper movement was still a decade away; you had hardtails like our Panhead and Knucklehead, the older designs, and you had the new bikes with rear suspension and other new features. The K model was designed to compete in that arena.

Thinking back to the 1950s with my dad running the company, there was tremendous enthusiasm for this bike. They were already working on the racing version, which would go on to be very successful. The big twins like the FL Panhead were still our biggest sellers, but this was the new baby on the block, and everyone was excited about it. John and I were both thrilled to trade up to the new K. Of course, it wasn't long before I started customizing mine. Within a year or so I'd trimmed the fenders and put a different fuel tank on it, then a different seat, headlight, paint, exhaust system. I loved that bike; I wish I still had it!

Moving up from my 165cc single, the K model felt amazingly big and powerful. It had a 45-cubic-inch engine, the same size as our earlier flatheads, like the WLA. That translated to 750cc in European measurement—bigger than most of the popular English bikes, which were 650s. I couldn't wait to get out and compete on that bike. I loved enduros: riding through the woods and rivers and water crossings, like my father did winning the Jack Pine. It might

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seem strange to want to take your shiny new street bike out in the mud, but competition was in my blood.

Back then you didn't have motocross-style enduro bikes, which are lightweight and agile, with long-travel forks and all that good stuff. Riders competed on big street bikes, which made it more of a challenge. Those runs were often held on farmers' lands; the organizers would explain the nature of the event and the farmers would say, "Sure. You can do that." There's not much of that land left anymore so endurance runs like that are a thing of the past. But I would take my headlight off, attach a competition speedometer that tracked average speed over time, and compete. And I won some enduros on that K, got a few trophies. Then I'd bring it home, shine it up, and set it back up for the street.

My brother and I took our first long ride on those K models. We rode down to Dodge City—it's a nice route through the Midwest, and we just had a desire to be on the road and in the wind. Back then there weren't all the events and rallies like there are today; we wanted to figure out a place to go, and we were both racing enthusiasts, so we decided on Dodge City.

If we were going to ride our motorcycles to some distant location, we wanted to go to a race, and Dodge City's was steeped in history. It was the biggest motorcycle race in the US back in the early days of our company. Our factory race team first established its reputation there in 1915–16, so of course John and I were aware of the significance of that track. Anybody who knows racing history has heard of it. The Dodge City race had shut down in the 1920s, but they brought it back in the 1950s, and it was a natural destination for us. That was a neat ride, just John and me. We stopped in Springfield, Illinois, another famous racetrack that we would visit often later in life, then kept going to Dodge City. It was a huge track in the middle of a farm field back then, and it was hot—Kansas in early July. We knew the team racers, followed them carefully, so it was exciting to watch the Harley team run on that famous track.

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Back home John and I would go to events at the Milwaukee Mile, at State Fair Park. They ran AMA championships on that dirt mile, one of the more famous mile tracks in the nation. It's long ago been paved over, but John and I being racing fans, we spent lots of time there. One of my favorite photos is of John and me on our two customized K models at State Fair Park. Most Harley riders had a custom bike. I was never without one. It's natural to want to personalize your Harley-Davidson, and we were all at it strong back then.

While all of that was happening I was going to college in Madison, a hundred miles from Milwaukee, studying art at the University of Wisconsin. I spent a lot of time going back and forth between college and home. Nancy was going to Mount Mary College, just outside of Milwaukee, studying to be a teacher. Weekends and holidays I'd come home to spend time with her, see John and my parents, race, and ride. Nancy would ride with me; we'd go to races in the area. It was sometimes hard to focus on my studies in Madison when my whole life was back in Milwaukee.

I was learning a lot in my art classes. Our teachers had us work in many different mediums: woodcuts, lithographs, watercolors, oils. I was most intrigued by the watercolors; it's a really difficult medium to master, but that's the one I stuck with. After fifty-plus years, I think I'm getting a handle on it. I love doing it.

Art students all have dreams of becoming successful artists, but the art world is broad, with lots of directions to go in and different ideas of what counts as success. I was becoming a better artist, improving my technique and adding new skills, but my classes weren't totally fulfilling. I was as proud of the design I had come up with for the tank of my customized K model as I was of the best painting I did for school, and my teachers couldn't really relate to that. The art program at UW fell under the School of Education, and as we got further in our art studies there was a lot of talk about going into teaching. That's where many students

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ended up; very few artists get to the point where they can support themselves through their art, let alone support a family. Nancy was excited about the prospect of teaching. I wasn't. I took my art studies seriously, but I was reading *Hot Rod* magazine, more interested in race cars and motorcycles. A trip to the drag races could be as inspiring as a visit to an art gallery. My two great interests weren't connecting.

Then, during my third year at the university, something happened that changed my life. I saw an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine that talked about a school in Los Angeles called ArtCenter. It was a unique school with different types of curriculum—automotive design, photography, commercial art, fashion design. The article had big color photos of different classes: students making clay design models, plein air painting, all kinds of things that resonated with me. I had been fascinated by the West Coast car culture that I read about in *Hot Rod*, and I was already deeply interested in design. When I found out there was a school out where all that hot rod stuff was happening—where I could study not only art but automotive design—I knew that was where I needed to be. So I showed that article to my mother and father and I said, “You know what, I think that would be a very good place for me to study.” We talked about it for quite a while and decided I would do that: leave the University of Wisconsin and go to Los Angeles to study at ArtCenter.