



# THE TEMPLE OF RUMBLE



THE HOG FAITHFUL FINALLY GOT A PLACE TO WORSHIP WHEN THE HARLEY-DAVIDSON MUSEUM OPENED IN MILWAUKEE, THE TOWN WHERE FIRST BIKE WAS BUILT 105 YEARS AGO. **DIETER LOSSKARN** WAS INVITED TO THE OPENING

**WILLIE G DAVIDSON IS BEAMING.** He is standing in front of the \$75-million museum which took two years to build, wearing his trademark black leather cap, dark-blue skull T-shirt, thick silver necklace, shades, black jeans and riding boots. His steel-grey-bearded look has not changed over the years – a bit like the bikes that bear his name.

When his great-grandfather Arthur, together with buddy William Harley, built their first machine in a three-by-five metre wooden shed in 1903, nobody could have imagined the success story of America's oldest motorcycle manufacturer, told here on the walls of this spectacular building. As early as 1915 someone at the factory had

the foresight to pull one bike off the assembly line each year. These bikes, all in pristine condition, form the heart of the exhibition. Outside, a trio of gunmetal-grey buildings built of brick, glass and steel-girders pay tribute to the 'motor'-manufacturing part in Harley-Davidson as well as Milwaukee's industrial past.

The western side of the museum building is dominated by a massive 13 x 67-metre glass wall which has a louvre system to control the amount of light let inside, to protect the exhibits from overexposure to sunlight.

The 20-metre-wide streets leading up to the three buildings are painted in Harley's signature orange. The idea is that the muse-

um starts in the street, where bikers can park and check out each others wheels before entering the huge metal entrance doors.

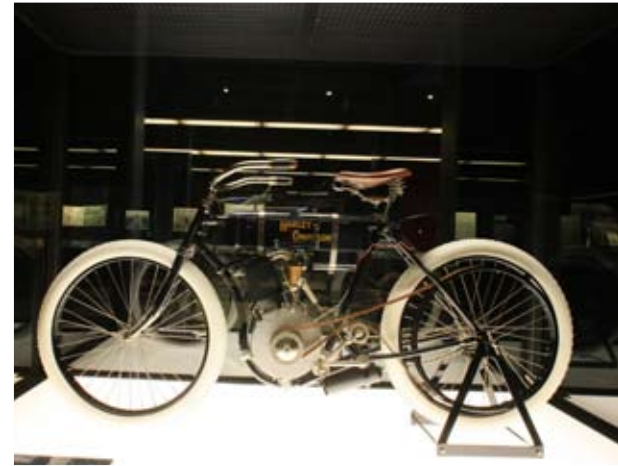
Willie G's personal gift to the museum is an almost seven-metre-high bronze statue of a hill climber, in tribute to Harley's sporting past and present.

Inside the museum it's dark and somewhat cathedral-like. The museum experience starts on the second floor in the 'ready to rumble' engine room, displaying every motor ever built by the company.

A walk through the exhibits is to witness the evolution of motorcycles – from flimsy bicycles with strapped-on fuel receptacles to chromed and heavily modified customs with



**TAKE A BIKE (FROM LEFT):** Every Harley-Davidson ever built has a representative; 'No. 1', the first Harley to take to the road; Russ Townsend's rhinestone bike



detailed engines and outrageous paint jobs. The famous No. 1 is presented in a sealed glass exhibit ringed by a halo, resembling a holy shrine. Overhead lights shine onto the authentic factory flooring, outlining the exact dimensions of the wooden shed where the first bike was built. This is the oldest Harley-Davidson motorcycle known in existence. Some of the parts which can be seen feature the number '1' stamp issued at the time of production to denote they were cast from the first moulds. Row upon row of objects of worship are exhibited in an imaginative way. A boulevard of dreams, sorted chronologically, with tons of additional exhibits from motor clothes to original sales brochures. There are US mail, police and military bikes, both from the First and Second World War.

Around the corner is an impressive life-size replica of a 1920s board track built specifically for the museum. Hugely popular in the 1900s, board track riders raced at bone-breaking speeds of up to 190km/h with no brakes. Oil spills turned the wooden boards into an extremely slippery surface, but obviously created a very entertaining spectator sport. It was eventually outlawed in the 1930s. Board track racing established the company's racing heritage with the infamous wrecking crew – a fearless team who unwittingly provided the inspiration for current models like the 2008 XR 1200. Their mascot was a piggy, forever connecting Harleys with hogs. Over the years, customisation has continued to be Harley-Davidson's jewel in the crown. With more than 8 000 customisations on offer, it was only fitting to dedicate a large part of the museum to this theme. One of the extrovert exhibits here is Russ Townsend's rhinestone bike. He decorated his 1973 FLH Electra Glide model with thousands of red, white and blue rhinestones. Russ added many lights, as well as homemade light bars and trim. The bike required an extra alternator just to cope with the electrical load. Naturally the two bikes, which jump-started most motorcycle careers after the release of the 1969 cult movie *Easy*




## THE BOARD TRACK RIDERS RACED AT BONE-BREAKING SPEEDS OF UP TO 190KM/H - WITH NO BRAKES

*Rider* are displayed as well. Despite the fact that neither Dennis Hopper's 'Billy bike' nor Peter Fonda's 'Captain America' survived the film production. Remember the rednecks with the shotgun in the pickup? Peter Fonda played an integral part in creating the faithful replicas for the museum. Bike-builder James Beck painstakingly constructed them by studying over 300 still shots from the film.

Suspended high above in the ceiling is another iconic bike: a replica of the XR-750 that dare-devil stunt driver Evel Knievel used in 1975 to jump across 13 buses in London's Wembley Stadium. He subsequently lost control during the landing and was badly injured. The Wembley bike is even bent and damaged in the same places. The paintwork is by the artist that Knievel used – and yes, there are real \$100 bills decorating the tank.

Elvis Presley's red and white 1956 model KH features, along with its January 1956 paperwork, which notes he bought it from a Memphis dealer, with payments of \$50.15 a month. He notes his occupation as 'self-employed vocalist'. This happened a few

months before 'Heartbreak Hotel' hit the top of the charts, catapulting Elvis into stardom, making him as much an icon as the bike he was riding.

Fitting to the myth and Harley's famous slogan 'Come ride with us', the museum visit ends with a ride. A couple of Harleys are 'parked' on flexible stands and endless landscapes are projected across a screen in front of the 'bikers'. That should convert some more unbelievers to America's precious metal. 

### YOU NEED TO KNOW...



**Exhibits:** More than 450 motorcycles, a further 8 000 artifacts and 15 000 photographic exhibits in different galleries.

**Visitors:** 350 000 visitors per year from all over the world are expected. The site can accommodate up to 15 000 bikers at a time, 1 000 inside the museum. There is a restaurant and museum shop.

**Web:** [www.h-dmuseum.com](http://www.h-dmuseum.com)

**Info on Milwaukee:** [www.visitmilwaukee.org](http://www.visitmilwaukee.org)