
Harley Owners Group (HOG) – New South Wales Chapter

HOGS – The Official riding club of Harley-Davidson – Established 1983

Biker Article – January 2020

Excelsior and Henderson Motorcycles – A Brief History



Our sponsoring dealer is located at 153 – 165 Parramatta Road, Concord NSW 2137

As well as writing ride blogs for our Chapter I occasionally enjoy doing some research on motorcycle related subjects. With this I am also endeavouring to make our Chapter Hoggies the best informed bikers on motorcycle trivia! So read on and enjoy this article about the brief history of Excelsior and Henderson Motorcycles.

This article includes 45 downloaded images and information sourced through Google.

The motorcycle industry began slowly in the U.S. at the dawn of the 20th century, but soon exploded into life, becoming a veritable springtime of manufacturers. Hundreds of small factories emerged between 1900 and 1920, as the formula for making a motorcycle – adding a motor to a bicycle – was intuitively easy to replicate. In the early years, during those 3 decades preceding the Great Depression of the 1930's, more than 300 American motorcycle manufacturers were represented in the market. Names such as Henderson, Thor, Excelsior, Ace, Cleveland, Iver-Johnson, Sears, Pope, Waverley, Reading-Standard, Dayton, Yale, New Era, Pierce, Deluxe, Emblem, and Minneapolis were all very familiar to American riders. Some of these manufacturers had only a brief lifespan for a year or two, and several made fewer than a dozen machines. Others lasted a decade or more, but only Indian and Harley-Davidson made it past the Great Depression. But that period prior to WW1 was the pioneer era for motorcycles bringing new concepts in design, engineering, style and manufacturing. The industrial revolution was in full stride.

Although most of the work of these motorcycle manufacturers has disappeared from public view over 80 years ago, their craft survives and endures.

Let's look at a brief history of Excelsior and Henderson motorcycles.



Image 1 – The Excelsior logo.

Excelsior Motor Manufacturing Company was an American motorcycle manufacturer operating in Chicago from 1905. As Excelsior motorcycles gained popularity with their excellent performance and reliability, another Chicago company considered entering the motorcycle market – The Schwinn Company owned by German-born mechanical engineer Ignaz Schwinn. Schwinn had been producing bicycles for some time but the downturn in bicycle sales around 1905 forced him to look at other opportunities and he decided it prudent to buy an existing motorcycle brand rather than develop a new one. Fortunately for him, a successful motorcycle manufacturer was looking to sell right in Chicago. Schwinn made an offer to buy Excelsior Motorcycles but it took another 6 years to complete this purchase by 1911. By 1914 the Excelsior brand was proving to be one of the most successful manufacturers of motorcycles in the world. By 1928, Excelsior became the third-largest U.S. motorcycle manufacturer behind Indian and Harley-Davidson. While in business, the company built a wide array of motorcycles in four-cylinder and V-Twin configurations, and built a few racing bikes.

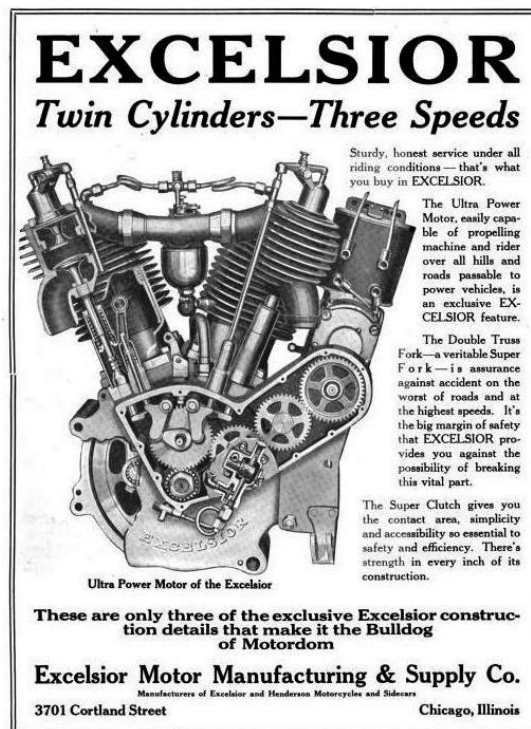


Image 2 - The marketing says Excelsior is “The Bulldog of Motordom”, whatever that means!



Image 3 - Excelsior is one of the legendary American motorcycle marques. The new big red logo with the gold "X" appeared on the fuel tanks of Excelsior motorcycles after the Schwinn takeover of 1911.



Image 4 - An early V-Twin engine of the Excelsior.



Image 5 - Excelsior also partook in many competitive race forms including board track racing until it was stopped for safety concerns. The end of the board track era saw hill climbing on the ascent – the practice of “vertical drag racing” up freakish hills across the country – and Excelsior Big Valve racers proved very much suited to this.



Image 6 - Pictured, a 1914 Excelsior. In 1910, Excelsior introduced an engine configuration they would become famous for, and one they would produce until 1929: the notable ‘X’ series. The first was the “Big X”, a V-Twin measuring 61 cubic inches (1,000 cc), which was the mainstay of Excelsior production through the 1910’s and into the 1920’s. This bike was originally single speed only, then with 2-speed and then 3-speed gearboxes.

The company claimed this bike was the “fastest motorcycle ever”. Production of the Big X continued until 1924, when it was replaced by the Super X. The Super X was America’s first motorcycle with a 45 cubic inch (750 cc) V-Twin engine.



Image 7 - Many Excelsior's were exported with Europe and Australia receiving a large number of shipments.



Image 8 - The Excelsior Super X was manufactured from 1925 to 1931. It was the most famous Excelsior motorcycle manufactured and was the first American forty-five cubic inch motorcycle (750 cc). Arthur "Connie" Constantine, Assistant Chief Engineer at the Harley-Davidson Motor Company, drew up plans for a mid-sized V-Twin to compete against the

very successful Indian Scout. When he presented the unauthorized project to co-founder Walter Davidson, he was reprimanded for wasting the company's time. Constantine resigned his position at Harley-Davidson and offered his services and his project to Excelsior. Both were accepted, leading to the introduction of the Excelsior Super X in 1925. The design proved to be competitive in motorsports in its first year despite competing against motorcycles with engines of greater capacity. This bike went on to win many board races setting many world records in the process.

This smaller motorcycle was believed to be a more suitable companion product for the Henderson four-cylinder motorcycle after Schwinn acquired Henderson Motorcycles in 1917.



Image 9 - The Super X was restyled to become a modern cruiser in 1929, but it was also the last of the Excelsior-Henderson's as the company abruptly closed in 1931 due to the Great Depression after the Wall Street stock market crash. This crash was devastating to all industries in the U.S. and the effects were immediate, and motorcycle sales fell drastically. Although the company had many orders from Police forces and dealers alike, Ignaz Schwinn

decided that the depression was going to get worse and so he decided to quit while ahead. In the summer of 1931 he called a department heads meeting and bluntly announced with no prior indication - "Gentlemen, today we stop"! He then went back to concentrating on his core bicycle business. He went on to become the dominant manufacturer of American bicycles through most of the 20th century.

Read on to learn about the Henderson motorcycles!

Now let's look into the history of Henderson Motorcycles.

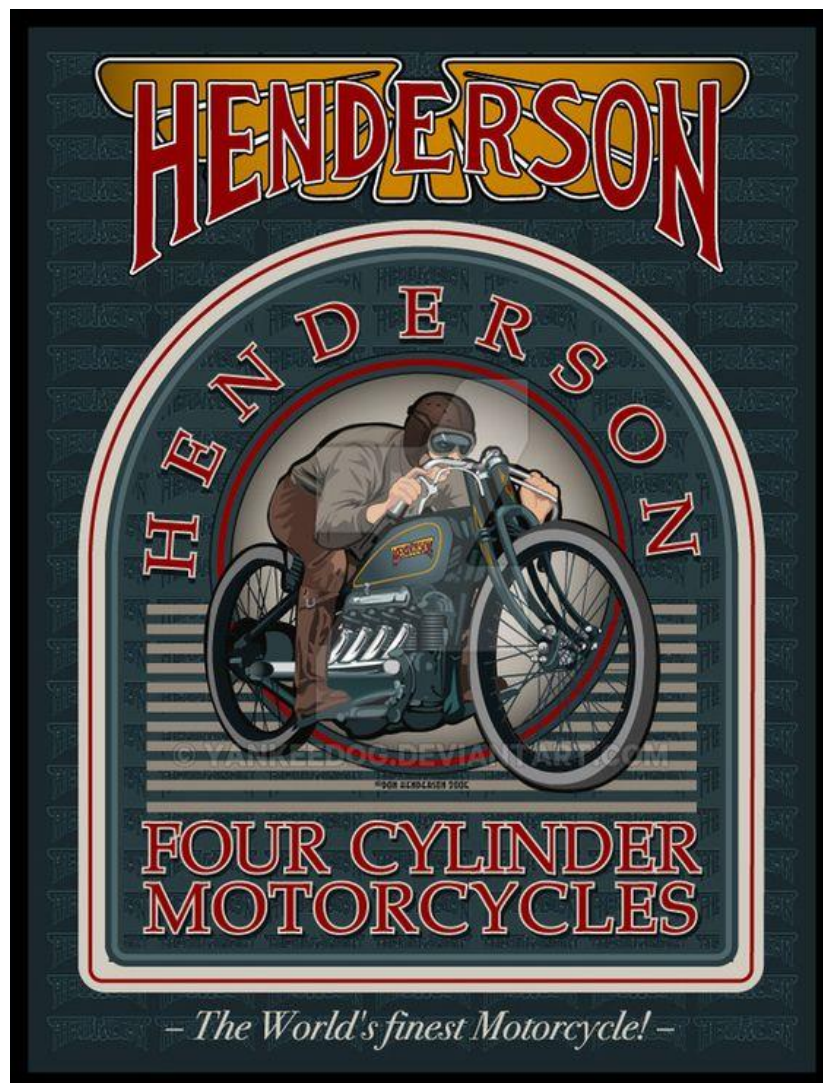


Image 10 - Henderson Motorcycles made their first motorcycles in 1911 and right from the start only made inline four-cylinder engines which became their trademark style of motorcycle. These were among the fastest motorcycles of their time and were popular with Police Departments in the U.S.

In 1917, Ignaz Schwinn looked to expand his motorcycle business and thought a 4-cylinder bike would nicely complement his line of singles and V-twins. Due to financial reasons and shortages in raw materials, the Henderson Company of Detroit offered to sell out to Excelsior in 1917. Soon after, production of Hendersons, now labelled Excelsior–Henderson, were transferred to the Excelsior factory in Chicago. Excelsior–Henderson was thus the amalgamation of two original brands that were founded in 1905 and 1911 respectively, and became one of the symbols of America's manufacturing and engineering prowess during the Roaring Twenties.

In 1922, Excelsior–Henderson became the first motorcycle manufacturer to record a top speed of 100 mph (160 km / hr). This record helped the Henderson Company boost sales in the U.S. and also to export machines to England, Japan, and Australia where they were marketed extensively.



Image 11 - Henderson fours were the largest and fastest motorcycles of their time. Their ultra-long wheelbase also made them comfortable and stable at speed. Their in-line four-cylinder engine and long wheelbase would become Henderson trademarks.

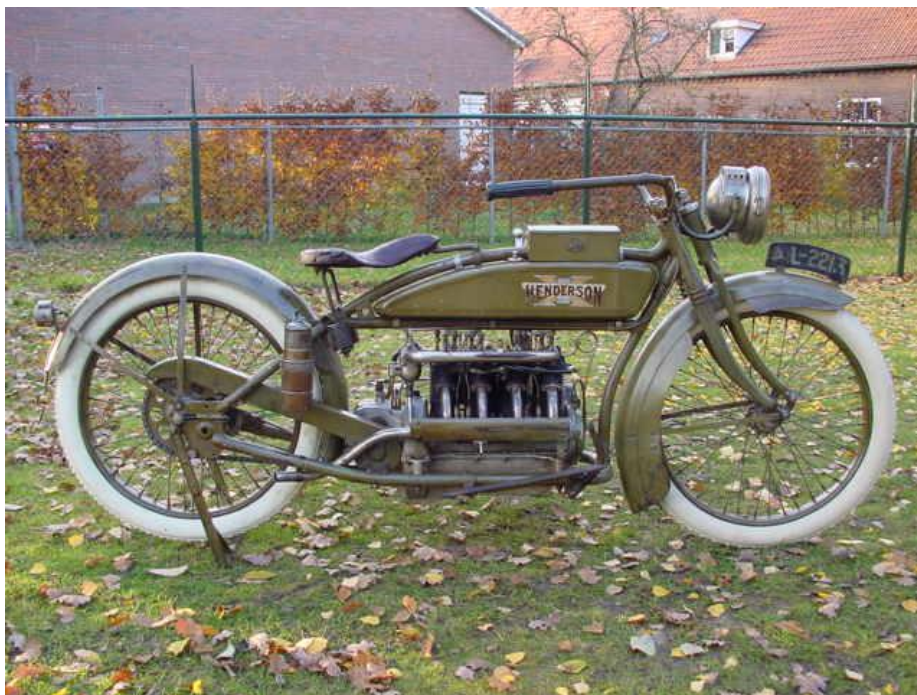


Image 12 - A 1918 Henderson built by Excelsior. These were described as the "Duesenberg of Motorcycles". Henderson had a reputation for performance and engineering excellence. Check out the handlebars on these things!



Image 13 - That reference to a Duesenberg, what is it you ask?! Duesenberg was an American manufacturer of high-end luxury automobiles from 1913 – 1937.

Duesenberg cars were considered some of the best cars of their time and were built entirely by hand. The finished cars were some of the largest, grandest, most beautiful, and most

elegant cars ever created. Pictured here is a 1935 SJ La Grande Duel Cowl Phaeton. A Duesenberg SJ Convertible sold for \$ 4.5 m in March of 2013.



Image 14 - A 1931 Duesenberg. The interior and body of the car would be coach built to the new owner's specifications.

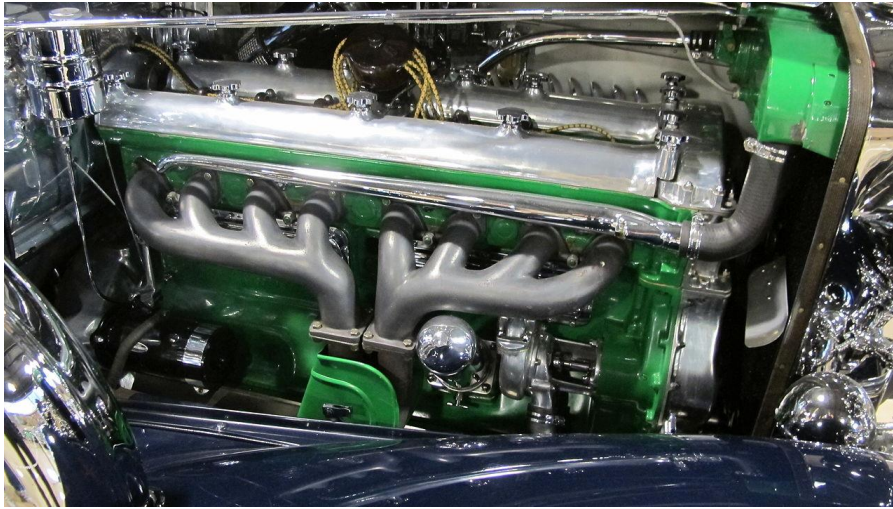


Image 15 - The engine of the Model J Duesenberg. This model was capable of a top speed of 119 mph (192 km/hr). Advertisements for this car stated "The World's Finest Motor Car". With the market for expensive cars severely undercut by the Great Depression, Duesenberg folded in 1937.

Now back to my article!



Image 16 – A Henderson 4-cylinder - the stuff of dreams!

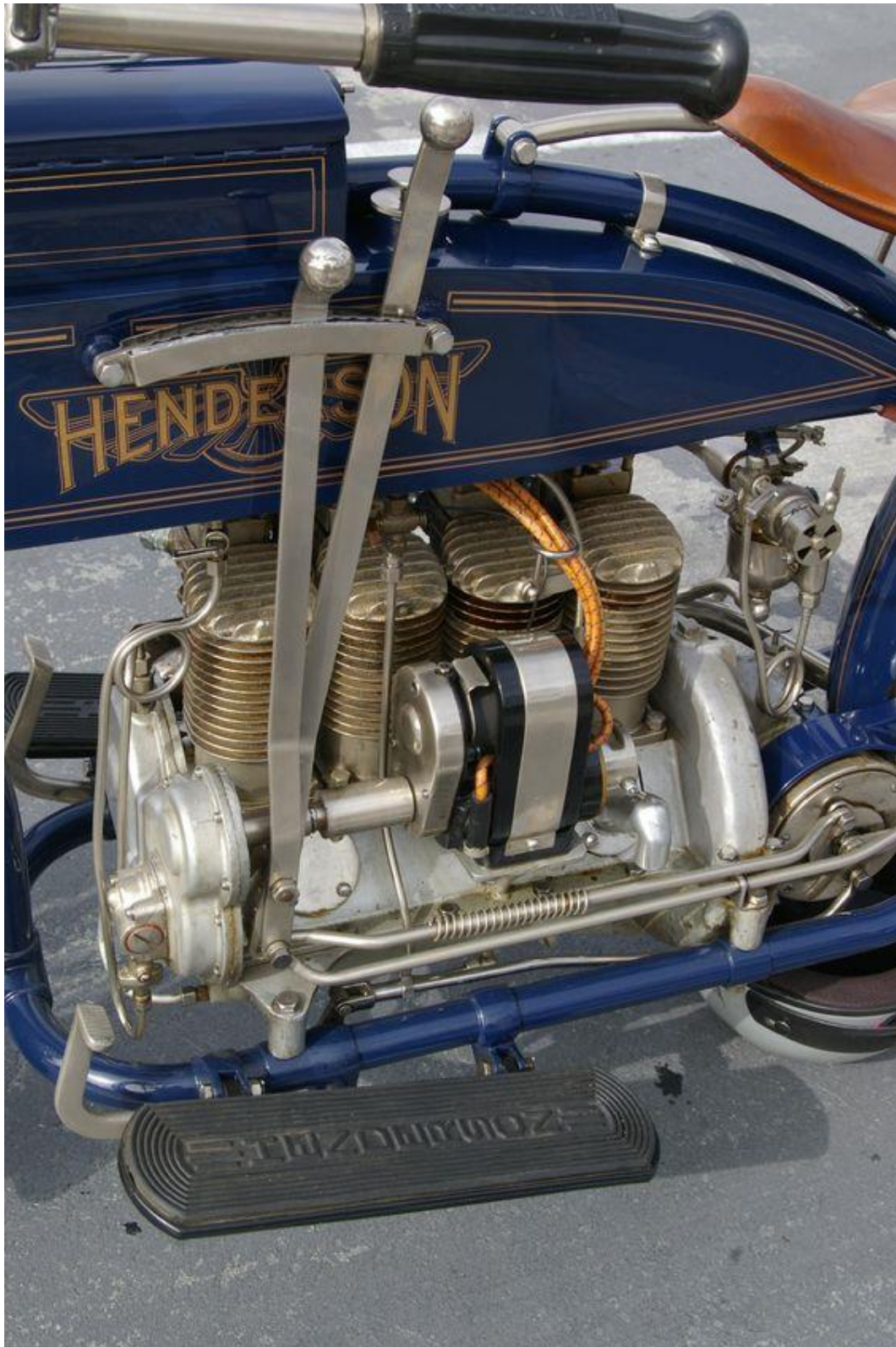
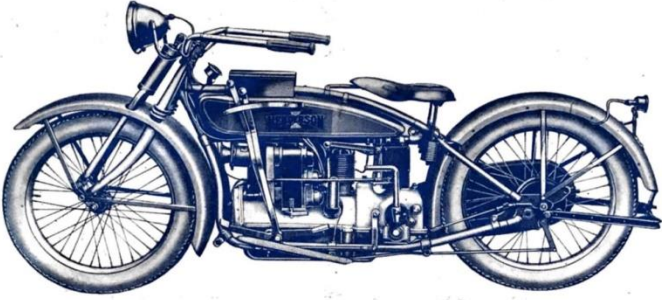


Image 17 - A very distinctive feature of the Henderson was its inline 4-cylinder motor and on the early model, a lovely “torpedo” shaped fuel/oil tank - a very attractive machine and as you can see, beautifully built and it became an immediate international news item. Even Henry Ford bought himself a Henderson. But it was an expensive bike which eventually made it unfeasible during the Great Depression.

CHICAGO POLICE USE



HENDERSON FOURS EXCLUSIVELY

And so do the Police Departments of Detroit and many other important Cities, for no other motorcycle is so especially adapted for the service. The four-cylinder unit powerplant of the Henderson is simple, rugged and dependable. It is suspended low to insure ease of balance and safety on slippery streets. It is the only motorcycle engine equipped with a true pressure-feed oiling system which forces oil into all bearings, sustaining motor efficiency and preventing wear of working parts. Its smooth, even pull enables throttling to a walking pace in traffic—and getting away like a flash in emergencies. And furthermore, the smooth running and absolute freedom from jerks means riding comfort and economy of tires, chain and motor parts, while Henderson quietness is another feature especially valuable in Police work.

The most enthusiastic supporters of the Henderson are the Police Departments that have been using them. If you're interested in making your Department more effective, we shall be glad to refer you to Police Chiefs who have put the Henderson through the only real and conclusive test—daily service over extended periods.

EXCELSIOR MOTOR MFG. & SUPPLY CO.
3701 CORTLAND STREET **CHICAGO, ILL.**

Image 18 - The factory counted on a large portion of their sales to law enforcement, especially with their four cylinder models.



Image 19 - The Henderson machines continued to be a favourite with Police forces in the U.S. with more than 600 different forces choosing the brand over such bikes as the Harley-Davidson and Indian.



Image 20 - Gorgeous! You would join the Police force just to get to ride this, wouldn't you?!

Excelsior-Henderson is notable as one of “The Big 3” motorcycle makers alongside Harley-Davidson and Indian. They fought hard on the dirt tracks, race tracks, hill climbs and sales floors and in their 1920s heyday, the competition between the Big 3 made for the most exciting racing anyone had ever seen between the fastest and most advanced racing bikes in the world. But larger forces were at work in the marketplace, far beyond the company’s control, that determined their fate.



Image 21 - Check out the bow tie on the coppers and helmets weren't even invented yet! These 4-cylinder Police pursuit motorcycles were capable of 100 mph.



Image 22 - In 1928 the final version of the new Henderson Streamline series was introduced known as the Deluxe. The improvements included the addition of a front brake, rounded teardrop tanks and lower riding positions giving a thoroughly modernized appearance.



Image 23 - Pretty, pretty, pretty!



Image 24 - A final year production 1931 Excelsior – Henderson KJ Streamline model. It had a top speed in excess of 110 mph.

These bikes were admired the world over and were in many ways the most attractive and technically interesting motorcycles built in the U.S.



Image 25 - The Henderson 4-cylinder engine was globally acclaimed as a superb design. Indian also made a 4-cylinder motorcycle but not Harley-Davidson.



Image 26 – WA-HOW!!! This is a Henderson in-line 6 cylinder!!! And going by the tank, it's an early model Henderson possibly built in the 1920's. No information can be found about this bike, whether it was an in-factory prototype or custom built.

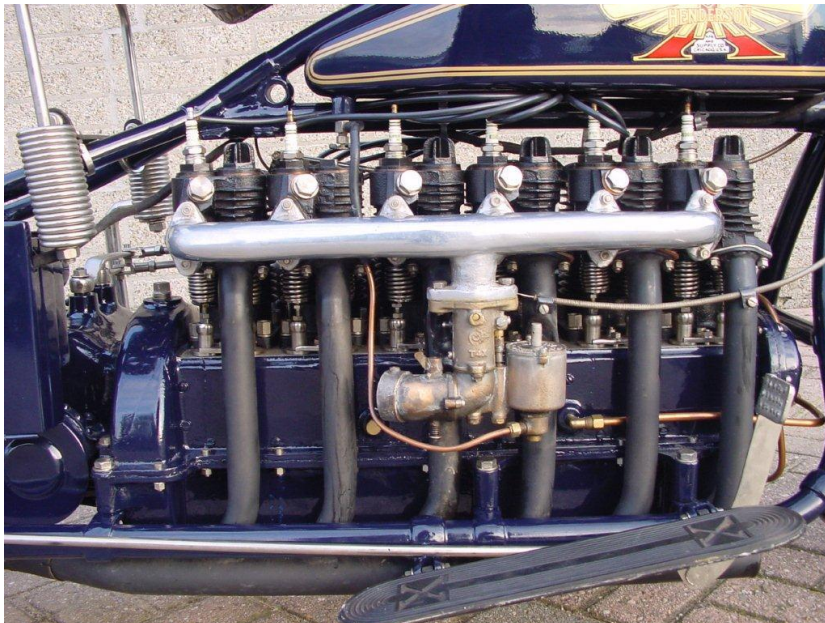


Image 27 – A close-up of the in-line 6-cylinder engine.



Image 28 – WA-HOW X 2!!! Another Henderson in-line 6 cylinder, only this time on a later model bike (going by the tank design). Again, little information can be found on this bike, it's possibly a factory prototype and if it is it would be an incredibly rare machine. Someone is lucky enough to own it!



Image 29 – WOW – WOW – WOW!!! It's unbelievable! If it is a factory prototype, it is possible that this bike was not put into production due to the onslaught of the Great Depression. Making an obviously very expensive bike like this during those times would clearly be unfeasible.



Image 30 - Though founded in 1905, the Excelsior Company enjoyed its greatest success after being purchased in 1911 by Ignaz Schwinn, of bicycle-building fame. Schwinn also added the Henderson Motorcycle Company to his portfolio in 1917. Their departure left a legacy of some of the greatest motorcycles created in the United States.

As mentioned above, of the more than 300 American motorcycle manufacturers that existed prior to the Great Depression, only Harley-Davidson and Indian were to survive it.

More Below!



Image 31 – The latest Excelsior-Henderson logo.

In the early 1990's, motorcycles were booming in the U.S., especially in the heavyweight cruiser market. There is always tremendous enthusiasm in the American Motorcycle market for heritage brands hence the time was right for an Excelsior–Henderson revival. The name Excelsior–Henderson holds a unique mystique and heritage that sparks the passion of a multitude of motorcycle enthusiasts. This iconic brand with such a rich history deserved another chance.

The Excelsior-Henderson name had been quietly waiting for the right combination of capital and inspiration to roar back to life.



Image 32 - In 1993, Daniel Hanlon secured the trademarks and rights to the Excelsior–Henderson brand and founded the Excelsior–Henderson Motorcycle Company based in Minnesota with an investment of over \$ 100 million. The Dan Hanlon Company's first and only motorcycle was to be called the Excelsior–Henderson Super X, named after and inspired by previous Excelsior–Henderson bikes.

The company designed and built a limited production run of nearly 2,000 Super X motorcycles between 1998 and 2000 with styling that paid homage to Excelsior–Henderson models of the past.



Image 33 - The distinctive looking
Excelsior-Henderson Super X of 1999.



Image 34 - The front of the 1999
Excelsior-Henderson Super X.



Image 35 - The tank logo is somewhat reminiscent of models of the past.



Image 36 - The instrumentation of the 1999 Super X.



Image 37 - The 1999 Super X has a sophisticated DOHC 4-valve fuel injected V-Twin motor of 1386cc displacement with belt final drive.



Image 38 - The 1999 limited production series was individually numbered.

Unfortunately the company of Dan Hanlon also succumbed to the financial turmoil in the marketplace at the time and ran out of funds prompting a bankruptcy filing and closure of its Minnesota factory. Since then the Excelsior–Henderson brand has been dormant, again awaiting someone to relaunch its revival. In January of 2018 the brand and its associated intellectual property went to auction at the Mecum’s auction in Las Vegas, Nevada but on this occasion failed to sell.

With India, China and to a lesser extent Indonesia now the main drivers of growth in world two-wheeled sales, and with their thirst for brands with a strong heritage, there is every likelihood that the Excelsior-Henderson name that was once a pillar of America’s Big 3 motorcycle manufacturers may be sold overseas.

The vintage Excelsior–Henderson motorcycles still in existence today are highly collectible and are celebrated examples among the best early motorcycles ever created. It is clear that the interest in the brand and the endearing respect for its creations has not waned in the past century. Examples of their value from a recent auction are \$ 539,000 for a completely original, unrestored 1912 Henderson Four with its original paint and original tyres, and \$ 150,000 for a 1913 Henderson Four. Also, a 1928 Excelsior went for \$ 117, 500.

Harley-Davidson (est. 1903) and Indian (est. 1901) also nearly succumbed to the Great Depression. Harley-Davidson scraped through the early 1930’s with an infusion of cash from Japan selling its old tooling and leftover parts supply to make motorcycles under license in Japan. It’s still little known that the “Dabbitoson Harley Motorcycle Co. Japan” was the secret saviour of the Screaming Eagle! As for Indian, it just scraped through the Great Depression via a takeover by the DuPont family (E.Paul DuPont decided he’d rather double down and buy a majority stake in the company than see his family’s six-figure investment go down the drain). After that Indian had a very tumultuous history with the original company closing in 1953, then followed by no less than eight attempts to revive the brand before its current owner, Polaris Industries, gave the name the corporate substance and support it needed for a full resuscitation. Harley-Davidson is the only company that endured continuously since it was founded (in 1903). Schwinn bicycles thrived through the rest of the 20th century but never again produced motorcycles.

Read on to learn a bit about the Rikuo!

The Japanese Rikuo

The Stranger than fiction saga of Harley-Davidsons Stepchild!

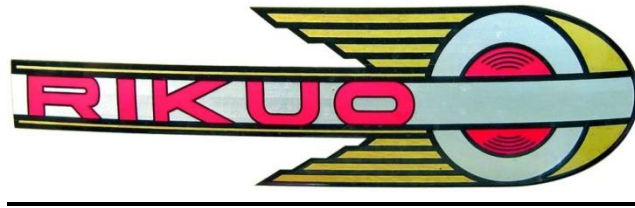


Image 39 – The Rikuo Motorcycle logo.

In the early 1920's, over 50% of all American-made motorcycles were exported. And Harley-Davidson owned the lion's share of this world market. Harley-Davidson was one of the most popular motorcycles in Japan with it being the official mount of the Japanese police, army and even the Imperial Guard. In this period the demand for Harley's in Japan was so strong that Milwaukee established a complete system of dealers, agencies and spare parts throughout the Japanese Islands, all of it under the banner of the Harley-Davidson Sales Company of Japan. At this stage Japan hadn't become a truly industrialized nation yet. With the Great Depression looming, worldwide export markets floundered and then the landscape changed in the fall of 1929 following the Wall Street Stock Market Crash, where the value of the yen dropped by half, effectively doubling the price of imports from America. At this time Harley-Davidson was on the verge of bankruptcy and looked to Japan to make up for their losses. So at this time it was suggested that Harleys be manufactured in Japan under license. Harley engineers came over to set up the factory using idle machines and tooling, and to show their Japanese partners how to build bikes. With Harley providing the knowhow and Sankyo providing the financing, the first real motorcycle factory in Japan was built in Shinagawa near Tokyo in 1929 known as "Dabittoson Harley Motorcycle Company". Harley-Davidson personnel were also sent to Japan to enable Harley-Davidson VL flathead motorcycles to be built under license. Thus the Japanese Motorcycle Industry was started, nurtured and expanded with the expertise, engineering and encouragement of Harley-Davidson! Harley-Davidson themselves did not publicize this Japanese connection! This profitable arrangement quite probably contributed substantially to Harley's solvency during the depression. Then with the clouds of World War 2 on the horizon, Sankyo took over full control of the plant and all Harley-Davidson personnel were asked to leave Japan, effective immediately. The plant name was then changed to Rikuo which translates to "Continent King". By the outbreak of World War 2, approximately 18,000 motorcycles had been produced with most of them going to the Japanese military and Police departments.

Rikuo manufacturing eventually stopped in 1959 with operations going into bankruptcy in 1960, then the brand ceased to exist in 1962.



Image 40 - A Japanese Rikuo motorcycle.



Image 41 - By 1935, the Shinagawa plant was building complete machines, assembled from parts made in Japan.



Image 42 - The Japanese continually made minor modifications to the design to suit their requirements.



Image 43 - A look at the instrumentation of the Rikuo. These Rikuo bikes are now sought after by collectors worldwide as they learn the story of the Japanese-built Harleys! And with this, their value is increasing rapidly.



Image 44 - A military version Rikuo dubbed Type 97. These were made entirely from Japanese-made components.



Image 45 - The Rikeo Type 97.

Well I hope you found this article interesting. I certainly did.

Ride Safe

Sergio Editor / Historian