

Racing Roots

STURGIS MOTORCYCLE RALLY

Grows From Humble Beginnings To Major Biker Party PART 1

BY WENDY PITLICK

When about nine racers and 200 spectators turned out for the Jackpine Gypsies' first annual racing event in 1938, the Gypsies knew they had started something great.



They just didn't know it would get to be quite so big!

Started with an idea to increase business in the Sturgis area by staging a motorcycle racing event, the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally began as motorcycle racers flocked to the Black Hills to compete for \$750 in prize money, and have some fun at a carnival and dance at the community hall. They camped in local businessman and fellow biker J.C. (Pappy) and Pearl Hoel's backyard, and spent the weekend doing all things motorcycles.

Pepper Massey, Sturgis Historian

Even then, the Jackpine Gypsies knew they had a winner as a head-

line in the next year's paper on Aug. 3, 1939 read "Speed demons to thrill motor fans," and the next year's three-day event drew riders from 10 different states and two Canadian provinces. The races in 1939 were dubbed as one of the greatest celebrations in the Black Hills, with future predictions pointing to further growth.

1940s



In 1938, nine racers and about 200 spectators showed up for the first annual Black Hills Motor Classic.

In just two short years of hosting the races, the Jackpine Gypsies knew they would need to continue to come up with different events to continue drawing people to the area. The 1940s started off with a bang, as the first weekend in August drew spectators to watch a burning wall crash, jumping exhibits, and various motorcycle stunts. Spectators watched in excitement as the racers they had come to know intimately through camping with them at the Hoel home wowed the crowd. Some rode Indians, others rode Harley Davidson's, but all were motorcycle enthusiasts who were happy to be in the Black Hills. For awhile it seemed that the event would continue to draw people

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Be safe out there-the life you save may be your own

to town to party with the Gypsies and enjoy the races, but everything changed just two short months after Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, when the event came to a halt.

"The reason it stopped during the war was very practical," said Interim Sturgis Motorcycle Rally Director Pepper Massey, who is the former director of the Sturgis Motorcycle Museum and a Rally historian. "Most of the people who were racing, when you talk to the old guys, they were all overseas fighting."

But after World War II ended, the bikers came back with even more enthusiasm than before. The war had left much devastation around the world, and bikers were looking for opportunities to play hard. Once again, they looked to the races in Sturgis. That year, according to archives from the Sturgis Motorcycle Museum, the net return on the Rally was at a whopping \$2,000, which was significantly higher than the first year's \$544.

"The Motor Classic is shown to be a real community booster and created purely for the benefit of the community," an article in the Black Hills Press stated about the event. Indeed it was, as just a few short years later in 1949, city officials had to block off Main Street to accommodate the hundreds of bikers who had roared into the Black Hills for the races.

1950s



By 1955, the Black Hills Motor Classic had more than 100 percent growth, and all forecasters predicted the family racing affair would continue to draw more spectators from all over the country.

As bikers continued to enjoy and appreciate the many freedoms of riding, more people began to hop on bikes and head to the Hills for the growing Black Hills Motor Classic, as it was dubbed at this time. In August of 1950, 388 bikers rode to Sturgis for the annual races. "You will get the thrill of seeing hundreds of motorcycles assembling to start the nationally known Gypsy tour and one of the fastest race events in the country," one reporter from the Sturgis Tribune wrote in anticipation of the Rally.

But the 50s brought more than just additional bikers to the races. It also drew some unlikely participants, as Dot Robinson, founder of the

Motor Maids of America and a pioneer lady rider, announced that her group would be attending in 1952.

The increased interest drew even more events, as in 1953 the American Motorcyclists Association brought the five-mile AMA National Race back to Sturgis, and one block of Main Street was closed for fancy riding exhibitions. As word spread across the country, more and more racers rode to the Black Hills to compete, until in 1957 riders from every state in the country were in Sturgis for the weekend, and the Black Hills Motor Classic was rated as one of the biggest 10 races in the country. In 1959, about 60 racers competed and 545 spectators registered at the Gypsy headquarters.

1960s



By the 1960s, the Rally had outgrown Pappy and Pearl Hoel's backyard, and bikers began to set up camp at the Sturgis City Park, where the Chamber of Commerce hosted a free feed for all participants.

By the 60s, the crowd for the Black Hills Motor Classic had grown exponentially to more than 700 bikers, who had long since moved their party from the Hoel's backyard to the Sturgis City Park. By 1963, the once weekend event was extended to four days in order to accommodate the masses, and to capitalize on the event that had become a boon for the small Black Hills town. Still considered a family event, bikers paid \$1 a day to camp at the city park and the Chamber of Commerce hosted a free feed for the bikers every year.

After 25 years, a comprehensive count of racers and spectators put the crowd at about 1,500 in 1965, and by 1969 the motels in town were booked solid while spaces in the park quickly filled up. The Chamber fed 2,000 bikers that year, and forecasters called for even more growth in the coming years.



As the Black Hills Motor Classic began to draw more and more people, the city of Sturgis opted to close Main Street for bike parking. However, a newspaper article from the 1950s reported that bikers were instructed to "park their bikes and not interrupt the festivities with unnecessary motor noise."

1970s



By the 1970s, the Black Hills Motor Classic had become the premier destination for motorcycle racers and fans.

But the growing crowds at the city park and the rapidly growing events soon got out of hand, as the 70s saw the advent of wild parties associated with the Rally.

"The 60s and 70s were a tumultuous time in the country," Massey said. "There was a lot of change and a lot of angst. You could feel some of that during the Rally. People were a little different, it was a little edgier."

The 70s were also when prices started to go up, as the Gypsies discovered their net profit in 1971 was only about 60 cents, including \$10,628 in receipts and \$10,627 in disbursements. At that time, the board raised the ticket prices to \$3, up significantly from the original 50 cents.

As the crowd began to swell to more than 5,000 in 1973, museum archives reveal that city officials were hesitant to compare 1974 with previous years because the crowds were nearly impossible to count.

By 1976 18,000 bikers rode into town only to be temporarily stormed out as golf ball sized hailstones pummeled the Northern Black Hills. But the races went on, as racers competed for \$81,000 that year.

While Outlaw motorcycle clubs had become somewhat of a problem in previous years, by 1978 the Meade County Sheriff reported very little trouble as arrests were down by 70 percent from 1977. However, bikers still partied hard in the city park, as burnouts and burning outhouses became the norm, and law enforcement officials began to steer clear of the park during the Rally due to the large volume of people and wild activity.

Information compiled from archives at the Sturgis Motorcycle Museum and Hall of Fame and from interviews with local Sturgis historians. To learn more about the history of the Rally or motorcycling, visit the Sturgis Motorcycle Museum and Hall of Fame, 999 Main St., Sturgis, S.D.

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