Bill Harley and Arthur Davidson

Innovation on Two Wheels
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Innovating means doing something in a new way. Sometimes people need to be innovative to fix a problem.

That is what Bill Harley and Arthur Davidson were. It was hard for them to ride their bicycles up hills, which was a problem for them. So they used innovation to improve the motorcycle to make travel easier. This led to them creating the world famous Harley-Davidson Motor Company.
William (Bill) Harley and Arthur Davidson became friends when they were young boys. They were both born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Bill was born on December 29, 1880. He was a tall and quiet boy. Arthur was born on February 11, 1881. He was short and liked to talk.

The boys went fishing a lot. It was hard for them to ride their bikes up the hills to the lake. This was a problem for them.

Arthur and Bill saw a motorcycle in Milwaukee in 1895. They knew that this was the answer to their problem and would help make riding up hills easier. The boys wanted to learn more about motorcycles so they could make their own.
In 1896, Bill moved to the north side of Milwaukee, and Arthur moved to a farm in Cambridge, Wisconsin. Living in different cities did not end their friendship. They wrote letters to each other about their new homes and lives. Arthur worked as a pattern maker and Bill drew bicycle designs.

**Pattern Making**

These are **molds** that are used to make metal machine parts. A pattern maker creates wood pieces that are used to form molds like this. These wooden pieces are called patterns. To make a mold, sand, metal, or plastic is poured around the pattern. Once it hardens, the pattern pieces are taken out leaving spaces and dents in the mold. Now metal can be poured into the mold so identical parts can be made over and over again. This is called casting.
Arthur met Ole Evinrude in Cambridge. They started fishing together. But their boat did not have a motor, so their arms would get tired from rowing. This was a problem. Ole’s answer to this was to invent a boat motor to make water travel easier. Like Ole, Bill and Arthur wanted to make land travel easier. Their goal was to be innovative and improve the motorcycle engine.

Arthur moved back to Milwaukee in 1900. The boys started worked in Arthur’s parents’ basement trying make their own motorcycle, but they needed help. Ole knew a lot about motors. He told them how to build a better one. Arthur’s brother, Walter, also helped them.
Walter, Bill, and Arthur built their first motorcycle in 1903. But it was not very reliable. It did not have very much power, and it did not go very fast. They wanted to make it better.

So, Bill went to college in Madison, Wisconsin to become an engineer. He learned as much as he could about gas engines so that he could improve the motorcycle. Arthur and Walter stayed in Milwaukee and kept working on the machine.

The team made and sold about seven motorcycles in 1905. Bill, Arthur, and Walter wanted to make even more, but they needed more room to build. They bought a new factory in Milwaukee in 1906. They built 50 motorcycles that year.
Bill graduated from college in 1907. Harley-Davidson also became a company that year. The men all worked for the company. Walter was the president, Bill was an engineer, and Arthur was a salesman. Another Davidson brother, William, began working at the company in 1907. He was put in charge of the company’s workers.

The four partners worked long hours. Walter and several other men rode Harley-Davidson motorcycles in races to show others how good the motorcycles were. This made the bikes very popular. More than 20,000 motorcycles were sold in 1914!

Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-2546.

Walter with one of the Harley-Davidson motorcycles in 1908.
People called the motorcycles either “Harley-Davidsons,” or just “Harleys.” “Hog” and “bike” were also nicknames for the motorcycles.

**H.O.G.**

Hogs aren’t just pigs. People began calling Harley-Davidson motorcycles “hogs” in the 1920s. A team of boys that raced the motorcycles had a pig as a **mascot**. Every time they won the race, they would drive around with a pig on one of their motorcycles to celebrate their victory.

In 1983, a group of people created the Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) to promote the biker lifestyle and **culture**. Group members gather to go on motorcycle rides together. Today, there are over 1,400 official H.O.G. chapters around the world!

Riding a Harley is more than a hobby for some people; it is a lifestyle.

Here are two pictures of Harley riders and their bikes. The top one is from 1908. The bottom image is from 2005.

Notice how the bikes and the Harley owners clothing have changed!
The Harley-Davidson Motor Company made more and more motorcycles. Harleys became well known around the world because they were so sturdy. In 1942, the Davidson brothers’ sons and Bill Harley’s son became the new company leaders.

Harley-Davidsons weren’t just ridden for fun. People like these police officers used them to do their jobs.
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Both Bill and Arthur worked at the company for the rest of their lives. Bill spent a lot of time at the factory making new Harley models. He also liked to hunt and golf. Bill died from a heart attack on September 18, 1943.

Arthur enjoyed raising cows on his farm. He also **donated** a lot of money to the Boy Scouts. Arthur and his wife died in a car crash on December 30, 1950.
Arthur and Bill were very good business leaders. They even made it into the Labor Hall of Fame in 2004 because they treated their employees well and made reliable motorcycles that were used during World War I and II. Bill and Arthur used innovation to create the Harley-Davidson Motor Company. The business they started in their parents’ basement is now one of the top companies in Wisconsin and the United States!

Innovations like the motorcycle change the way people live their lives. What innovations have changed the way you live your life?
Glossary

culture (n) . . . . . . . . . a way of life; how people do things
like eat, take care of their young, travel, etc.

design (n): . . . . . . . a plan or a pattern used to make
something

donate (v): . . . . . . to give money, materials, or time to a
person or a cause

engineer (n): . . . . a person trained to design and build things
like engines, machines, and buildings

innovate (v): . . . . to improve something that already exists

mascot (n): . . . . . a person, animal, or thing that represents a
group and is supposed to bring good luck

mold (n): . . . . . . . a hollow form that a substance like sand
or metal is poured into to make a specific shape or tool

motorcycle (n): . . . a two-wheel vehicle that has an engine;
can also be called a bike or motorbike

reliable (adj): . . . . dependable; able to be trusted