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## New museum revs up as 'hog' turns 105

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By Mary Bergin, Globe Correspondent | August 31, 2008

MILWAUKEE - Harley-Davidson celebrates its 105th birthday this weekend, with no end in sight.

Bikers and others routinely linger at the new Harley-Davidson Museum, along the Menomonee River downtown. The 20-acre campus, which opened in July, is a burgeoning place of pilgrimage as well as a showcase for all things Harley.

Jeff and Helga Raddatz, who live 20 miles away in Big Bend, will have visited several times before getting a chance to walk through the museum's 14-foot-tall doors today. Admission during the birthday bash was by lottery, which is how the couple snagged their tickets.

Jeff Raddatz has owned Harleys since 1971 and figures he's ridden a half million miles on them since the 1960s. Little Noah, a Papillon sporting a Harley dog tag, rides in a pouch between the couple on short excursions.

Jeff Johnson and Pete Fina of Fresno, Calif., came to town on their Harley Sportster and Electra Glide Classic, respectively. It was a spontaneous decision, made during a hailstorm at the annual Sturgis Rally in South Dakota, a day's ride away.

"Our first time on this side of the Mississippi," Fina said. "There's no bad weather for riding," Johnson insisted. The duo spent a couple of hours inside the museum, twice that much time roaming the grounds, and returned the next day for more.

The \$75 million Harley complex exudes an air of supremacy, from the museum's 80-foot-tall towers of exposed galvanized steel to the daredevil stance of a larger-than-life outdoor statue of a 1930s racer.

About 140 vehicles and upward of 16,000 smaller artifacts fill 130,000 square feet. What visitors see is the best from Harley's archives of 450 bikes and tens of thousands of other relics.

The company's founders were sticklers for keeping and preserving, including everything from corporate correspondence to odd bike accessories. Parts of the collection had been displayed in assorted ways, but the artifacts most often were in cramped storage, eventually filling one floor of a former Harley factory.

Now what isn't on display is stored on the museum campus, and visitors can glimpse - from behind glass - ongoing restoration and other archival work. A walkway links this building to the museum. A third structure houses a retail store, banquet space, and casual and fine dining restaurants.

Steve and Chris Petrie of suburban Milwaukee treated daughter Meredith to a 16th birthday meal at Motor, which offers fine dining in a relaxed setting. "We were trying to find somewhere her friends hadn't already been for dinner," Chris said. The birthday girl carried dessert leftovers: a pie-cheesecake-cookie-ice cream combo.

The Petries say they will probably get around to seeing the museum when out-of-town guests visit.

Self-guided tours begin with a climb up a flight of steel steps to the 1903 gallery. In a glass cube surrounded by a square of soft light sits the oldest known Harley: Serial Number One.

The motorized bicycle was nudged into action by peddling and stopped by using coaster brakes. The halo of light matches the dimensions of the 10-by-15-foot shed where the vehicle was built, just 3 miles away.

In the same gallery are Harley-Davidson's original stock issue, the minutes from the first corporate board

meeting, info about the first Harley dealer (a piano tuner), and the first merchandise catalog.

In wide hallways between galleries is a parade of motorcycles in chronological order, most pulled right from the assembly line. There are Harleys used in mail delivery, military service, and movies. The 1956 machine Elvis Presley bought right before "Heartbreak Hotel" made him a star is here. So is Russ Townsend's 1973 Harley, which the Pennsylvania man gussied up with thousands of rhinestones and enough lights to require an extra alternator.

Elsewhere is evidence of wild man Joe Petrali, who kicked up dust, attention, and adrenaline by racing uphill on his Harley. This was hill climbing, and nobody did it better in the 1930s than Petrali, who earned 49 national championships before his 1938 retirement. Competitors were prone to skidding or tumbling, and if bucked off, it was crucial for the displaced driver to engage a kill switch on his wrist to prevent the riderless vehicle from careening toward spectators.

A computer offers personal exposure to this extreme sport, through design and testing of a bike for hill climbing. The lesson is one of speed vs. torque.

Motorheads can use touch-screen kiosks to delve into topics. Artistic design, interactive exhibits, and extraordinary tales about average people broaden the appeal for those with little interest in motorcycles.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is the museum's effort to entertain and amuse children. Ages 5 and up receive Road Pack activity kits, which reward them for breaking secret codes and paying attention to exhibits.

"It was an unexpected bonus," said David Wolf of Baroda, Mich., who with his wife, Krista, brought son Jeremy, 8, and 5-year-old twins, Lauren and Sean. "I envisioned a bunch of bikes and memorabilia, then an 'OK, let's go' after 10 minutes."

"We had a list of motorcycles to find in the museum," said Jeremy. Hard or easy? "Fun," he decided. Children not old enough to read can play by matching pictures with exhibits.

Amusing children is a priority because "if you don't have something for kids to do, adults aren't happy," said Jim Fricke, curatorial director. Sometimes interaction captivates multiple generations, like the loud can smasher which explains how an engine works. The smasher's big bang of 15,000 pounds per square inch of force, equals one piston explosion on a Harley.

At the end, visitors can straddle Harley models in the Experience Gallery, then pretend to ride as they watch scenery roll by on a 20-by-60-foot video screen.

"It was more than I expected," said Fina. "I knew I'd see a lot of older bikes, but not some of these displays, like how Harleys were used during World War II."

He and Johnson also took in the free, one-hour Harley powertrain factory tour in the suburb of Wauwatosa before starting their 2,000-plus-mile trek back to California.

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