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An E-H Perspective

by Tim Leary

When I spoke with Victor a while back about contributing to MMM again, we talked about a few different ways that I might be able to make myself useful: Making beer runs during production week, chasing deadbeat advertisers with a stungun, or licking envelopes for the mailings to paid subscribers. After intense negotiations, we settled upon the most immediate need: 'Tique Geek. MMM needed someone to exhume long-forgotten yarns about antique and vintage bikes, as well as about highlights in motorcycling history. I gladly accepted the assignment, as I was intimately familiar with the role. I had dutifully served in that position with MMM once before and relished giving today's riders an 800-word snapshot of the days of yore.

For this assignment, however, I needed not travel very far back in time for the final act of this historic run has just concluded. Yes my asphalt amigos, I'm referring to the tumultuous ride that we all lived through – that of the Excelsior-Henderson Motorcycle Manufacturing Company. Given the recent final curtain falling, I thought I would take the opportunity to reflect on these classic marques, both old and new, and craft an epilogue.

When Chicago's Excelsior Motor Manufacturing and Supply Company began production of Excelsior motorcycles in 1907, it quickly leapt to the forefront of more than 200 American motorcycle manufacturers of that era. Yes, even Indian and Harley-Davidson couldn't keep up with Excelsior's production and popularity. The company's reputation for producing technologically-advanced, quality machines at a fair prices kept bikers of the day devouring dealers' supplies as well as speed records.

In 1911, the Henderson brothers of Detroit cranked out their first motorcycle. Their goal was to produce unequivocally the finest motorcycles in the world. The brothers' inline-four engine ran as smoothly as a sewing machine and was surrounded by

elegantly shaped sheet metal with the finest paint job of any bike available. Although never designed to be used for competition, the Henderson's unsurpassed durability and reliability made it the bike of choice for many endurance racers. Hendersons were so superior to any other bike that these endurance racing records often stood for decades at a time when mechanical technologies advanced rapidly – an incredible feat.

Gradually, H-D and Indian did surpass Excelsior's production numbers, but Excelsior easily remained part of the "Big Three" as they were known. Excelsior further distanced itself from its next-closest competitor in 1917 when it and Henderson joined forces. Excelsior moved the Henderson production to Chicago, bringing under one roof the highly respected reputations of technology and luxury, as well as creating the first references to the combined name Excelsior-Henderson.

With the rebirth of the Excelsior-Henderson brand in 1993, the founder(s) of the new company wanted to carry forth the original company's traditions. Certainly Excelsior's reputation for technology and Henderson's quality, but also the more obscure traditions such as giving employees a well-equipped factory and a positive work environment, and the overriding emphasis on producing the highest-quality machines more so than attaining market dominance.

Now that round two of the Excelsior-Henderson saga has come to an end, surely there are many that consider the new Super Xs collector's items. That means giving them a good wash, several coats of wax, draining the oil and putting them back in the crate, right?

That depends on who you ask. Some dealers will tell you yes. Motorcycle auctioneers will definitely answer to the affirmative. Current Super X owners will tell you "HELL NO, MAN – these bikes are made to RIDE!" Most owners will tell you that putting one of these bikes back into its crate would be the equivalent of keeping thoroughbred War Emblem penned in its box stall.

This is exactly the kind of brand enthusiasm that riders had when the factory ceased production in 1931. Owners kept their bikes on the road well into the 1040s, '50s and even '60s. As then, Excelsior-Henderson enthusiasts today are keeping the brand alive with clubs, rides and rallies. Unlike their Grandbiker brethren, however, modern E-H enthusiasts are aided by the speed of the Internet. Online, owners can find club info -- ehridersclub.com, superxowners.com--new and used parts and service from a variety of sources--xmanproducts.com, superxparts.com--and a wealth of free advice from former factory wrenches (Yahoo's Excelsior-Henderson-Resource-Board). At least one of the enthusiast owners, Bobby "X-Man" Baldwin, has engineered performance parts and mechanical "tweaks" to make the bikes even more powerful and sound. And, although not online yet, the buyer of all remaining E-H parts, Swift Motorcycle of Phoenix, AZ, will be offering parts for sale relatively soon. All things considered, Super X riders will be able to keep their bikes roaring for many years.

If history repeats itself and in another 60 years some brothers revive the Excelsior-Henderson brand, my money's on the majority of today's bikes still being daily riders.

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[Archives](#), or [M.M.M. Main Page](#), or the [MC History Main Page](#)