

Tukufu: Our final story takes a ride through the forgotten history of America's most famous motorcycle company. [Steppenwolf's "Born to be Wild" plays] It's 1904, and two young guys named William S. Harley and Arthur Davidson rolled out their very first motorcycles for sale. The rest of the story is the stuff of American dreams. By 1920, the name Harley-Davidson conjured up notions of freedom and the open road, and the company had grown into the largest motorcycle manufacturer in the world. Recently, a New Jersey man tracked down a vintage Harley that hadn't seen the light of day for more than half a century, and he suspects that an unusual symbol on the gas tank may reveal a fascinating history: that his bike saw service during World War I behind the lines on the bloody battlefields of France.

Frank Katina: When I first saw the cross on the motorcycle, I thought it was unusual. I just went through every book that I had trying to find anything about it. And I really couldn't find anything.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I'm in Flemington, New Jersey, to meet motorbike collector Frank Katina. This is a nice-looking bike. Have you gotten this up and running?

Frank: No, I haven't ridden it, and as a matter of fact, I'm going to work on trying to start it.

Tukufu: Is that right? What can you tell me about this bike?

Frank: I got this bike in a town north of Milwaukee. Gentleman I bought it from bought it in the mid-'40s, put it in the barn, and it sat in his barn from around 1946 till last summer, when I picked it up.

Tukufu: What can I find out for you?

Frank: It has this Red Cross of Lorraine painted on the side of the tank here. From what I could find out, the Cross of Lorraine was associated with the French and the military around World War I.

Tukufu: So you think this motorcycle saw action in World War I?

Frank: That's what I'd like to find out. I'm not sure.

Tukufu: Since the bike doesn't run, it's difficult to travel with it. So I'm taking pictures for my investigation. It's an impressive machine, but who knows just how old it is? I know Harley-Davidson started making bikes around the turn of the century. What I don't know is if they made motorcycles for use in World War I. The motorcycle turned up in Wisconsin, which is Harley-Davidson's home turf. So I'm heading to their headquarters in Milwaukee. Bike restorer Bill Rodencal tells me the company had modest beginnings at the turn of the century.

Bill Rodencal: They started out in a 10x15 shed in the back of the Davidson's' house just across the street. The company expanded into a multi-billion-dollar corporation and cultural icon.

Tukufu: Bill says much of that market stronghold dates to the early days, when the upstart company beat out competitors to supply the U.S. military's need for motorcycles in World War I.

Bill: In 1917, about a third of our production went to the war effort, and in 1918, almost half of our production went into the war effort.

Tukufu: And how many of those ended up in Europe?

Bill: Actually, all of them.

Tukufu: All 15,000 bikes ended up over in Europe. Their size, speed, and maneuverability made motorcycles the perfect mode of transportation behind the lines. By 1917, the army was using so many motorcycles that Harley-Davidson opened the quartermaster school to teach mechanics how to keep Harley motorcycles running. And in a world-famous photograph, the first American to enter Germany after the signing of the armistice, Wisconsin's own Corporal Roy Holtz, was shown arriving on a Harley. Bill shows me a vintage World War I military motorcycle.

Bill: This is a 1919 F.U.S., and you can see the wider fenders here that gave it the ability so the mud wouldn't get compacted underneath the fenders. Carbide headlight—there was an actual flame in here, and they could use the bike at night. And the most important thing is it's got a three-speed gear box transmission in here for the final drive.

Tukufu: I show Bill Frank's motorcycle. He doesn't recognize the cross but says these machines were originally painted gray and won the nickname the "silent gray fellows."

Bill: You can see some of that original gray paint underneath that darker brown paint. It's a very early bike. This is a single cylinder, chain drive, single speed. If you look at the V.I.N. number here, it lets us know that it's a 1914 10b model. 1914.

Tukufu: So this motorcycle could have actually been in France during World War I.

Bill: Probably not; this bike's a little bit early for that. Bill says that Harleys weren't shipped to World War I Europe until 1917. By that time, Frank's bike was completely outdated.

Tukufu: So if this is a French military symbol, what's it doing on a Harley? I need to dig deeper into the history of this cross. Kim Munholland specializes in French history and says the cross has roots in that country's past all the way back to the middle ages.

Kim Munholland: It was taken up by Joan of Arc and was used to rally the forces against an occupation—the British occupation. From that point on, really, the meaning of it is this idea of a patriotic resistance.

Tukufu: Kim says the symbol appeared in both World Wars I and II. Perhaps is most remembered as the symbol chosen by General de Gaulle during the Second World War. Was the Cross of Lorraine used anywhere other than France?

Kim: I can remember when I was very young, I saw the Cross of Lorraine on stamps that you bought for eradicating tuberculosis, for example.

Tukufu: At this point, all I'm sure of is that our mystery motorcycle was manufactured in Milwaukee and somehow wound up back in Wisconsin years later. I've contacted the Wisconsin historical society and asked them to e-mail me their registration records for Harley-Davidson bikes for 1914 and '15. The registrations don't list serial numbers, so there's no way to connect Frank's bike to any specific name, but there are a couple of unusual registrations—not to individuals but to institutions. These bikes are registered to state tuberculosis sanatoriums and to the Wisconsin Anti-Tuberculosis Association. Remember: Kim Munholland said the National Tuberculosis Association used the Cross of Lorraine as its symbol. But why would sanatoriums, places for the sick to convalesce, need motorcycles? It's an intriguing link. Was our bike somehow connected to the efforts to fight tuberculosis? The Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison

has extensive archives on the turn-of-the-century public-health campaigns. It seems that the fight against tuberculosis was one of the first and the biggest. I found some interesting old films, and this one is from the 1930s. Tuberculosis was the scourge of the 19th and early 20th centuries. While the stigma of disease meant families kept infections quiet, the epidemic raced through overcrowded cities and tenements. By the turn of the century, 450 Americans died every day from the disease. Tuberculosis was simply called the white plague. It wasn't until 1882 that German bacteriologist Robert Koch discovered the disease was spread by airborne sputum when sick people coughed. In 1904, the National Tuberculosis Association was formed. And look at this: the letterhead for the Wisconsin Anti-Tuberculosis Association, same color, same style as the cross on Frank's bike. This document even has a doctor from Paris who proposes that the ancient Lorraine Cross be made the emblem of the fight against the white plague. By 1912, the cross was the official emblem of the fight against T.B. in the United States. But I'm still not sure how Frank's bike is related to any of this. Mary Ellen Stolder was a nurse in the last tuberculosis sanatorium in the state before it closed in the 1970s. She says that although T.B. was commonly associated with big cities, at the turn of the 19th century the disease ran rampant in rural communities, too.

Mary Ellen Stolder: Tuberculosis was feared. It was dreaded. It was part of the American consciousness.

Tukufu: Then Mary reveals an interesting piece of history. She says that Wisconsin ran an aggressive and, in many ways, revolutionary public-health campaign. They were superbly organized, very similar to political campaigns of the late 20th century: move in, organize, get the word out, then move on. It was unprecedented to focus on a single disease, and it predated, of course, any Madison Avenue methods of advertising. Led by charismatic Theodore Werle, the Wisconsin health workers used public slide shows to turn good sanitation into a public crusade. There probably was not an individual in Wisconsin that was not aware of the dangers of tuberculosis by the 1920s. Mary gives our investigation what may be a crucial break.

Mary: The Wisconsin campaigners carried their message to the community in a unique way. This was a time in which, you know, automobiles were not common. They would hop on a motorcycle or they would get into a Model T, and they would reach every single hamlet in the state of Wisconsin.

Tukufu: Have you ever heard that Harley-Davidson bikes were used in the campaign?

Mary: It's tantalizing to think that they were used, but I'm afraid I don't know.

Tukufu: I'm heading back to the Harley-Davidson headquarters, where archivist Bill Jackson has gotten me access to the company's private records. Bill says that in its early days, Harley-Davidson was in a bare-knuckles fight with other motorcycle and car makers, and advertising was seen as giving the young company a crucial advantage.

Bill Jackson: This was an era where the motorcycle was a competitor to the car in terms of its usefulness in commercial purposes. Harley loved to convey that motorcycles could be used in work. It wasn't just a vehicle you would use for sporting purposes or to go fishing or to take your best girl around. Harley-Davidson loved to test out new products. They loved groups that put a lot of miles on those parts to see if they were going to last. When you first described the symbol to me, it rang familiar, and I remembered certain Harley-Davidsons that did not have normal-looking logos on the gas tank. This could take a while.

Tukufu: Bill and I have to dig pretty deep in the archives, but eventually, we find what we're looking for, and I'm pretty sure it's going to surprise Frank.

Frank: Hey! Good to see you again.



Episode 9, 2006: Harley-Davidson Motorcycle, Flemington, New Jersey

Tukufu: Back in New Jersey, I tell Frank that although Harleys made a valiant contribution to the war effort, his bike was made in 1914, three years before any Harley was shipped to France.

Frank: So we know how the cross got on it?

Tukufu: Well, your bike does have a just as interesting and exciting a history behind it. These are photographs that were taken by the company's official photographer, roughly between 1912 and about 1916. Normally, Harley-Davidson didn't give motorcycles to charity groups and non-profits, but Harley-Davidson donated a number of motorcycles to the Wisconsin Anti-Tuberculosis Association so that they could travel around the state of Wisconsin and educate people about T.B. I mean, this looks exactly like our bike right here. They heightened the "Harley- Davidson" on the gas tank so it would stand out in the photo. That tells us this was shot for publicity. The company wanted people to see not only the Harley-Davidson but the association's logo.

Frank: Wow, that's fascinating. I never would have thought.

Tukufu: I also found a key account of Harley-Davidson's involvement in this early public-health campaign. Let me show you this. It came from Wisconsin health worker Theodore Werle and describes an encounter with one of the Harley-Davidson founders. "Arthur Davidson took me out to the rear of the Harley-Davidson plant. There stood a shiny new belt-driven motorcycle with the double cross on the gas tank. 'She's yours,' they said, and so started my career careening over an awful lot of Wisconsin for years."

Frank: All the research and everything I've known about motorcycles, I've never, ever, ever heard of anything like that before.

Tukufu: Your motorcycle is one of the motorcycles that were used in this most courageous fight against tuberculosis.

Frank: That's fantastic.

Tukufu: You got a valuable piece of history right here.

Frank: Okay, and I have a surprise for you. I got it running. Would you like to hear it run? [Engine rumbling]
[Laughter]