

Racing Roots

STURGIS MOTORCYCLE RALLY

Grows From Humble Beginnings To Major Biker Party *PART 2*

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1980s

By the early 1980s the bikers' days in the Sturgis City Park were nearing an end as city officials had grown weary of the smell of burning outhouses. In 1982 city officials put the kibosh on camping in the park, and such venues as the Buffalo Chip Campground and Glencoe Camp Resort were born. Located outside the city limits, the campgrounds offered a place where bikers could spread out, enjoy live entertainment, and party without worrying about the constraints of being in town. Spreading out proved to be beneficial to everyone, as law enforcement officials reported that the bikers behaved well, despite the crowd of 30,000. Bikers were happy too as liquor store sales showed record totals for the week with Harley Davidson's introduction of the Harley beer. Approximately 1,059 cases were sold that year.

According to Massey, the 1980s also saw a movement nationwide that would directly result in a boom at the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. Dubbed as the RUB movement (Rich Urban Bikers), wealthy public figures such as Malcolm Forbes, Jay Leno, and Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a U.S. Senator from Colorado, had made it public that they were motorcycle lovers.

"Prior to that, and some of this still exists today, the image of the Harley rider has always been the rough and tough biker. Sort of the bad boy image. The 80s saw people of wealth and intelligence riding. That made the public think it was OK, that maybe it wasn't that bad," Massey said. In addition to changing the image, the 80s saw Harley Davidson introducing the Sportster 883, billed as a woman's Harley, opening the doors for more riders. This all combined to increase the crowds at Sturgis even more as in 1985, 48,000 bikers from 50 states and 10 countries showed up for the celebration.

1990s

By 1990 numbers at the Rally were anybody's guess as the 50th anniversary started with a bang. City officials were blindsided as they estimated more than 350,000 bikers had come to town to celebrate, over 200 percent more than previous years. In the mid-80s, the Rally had grown from about 70,000 to more than 100,000, so city officials expected growth. But the huge influx of people who came out in droves was completely unprecedented as city crews scrambled to contain the crowds, and law enforcement was significantly overwhelmed.

After the 50th anniversary, the same bikers continued to come every year and the numbers at the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally would forever be estimated in the hundreds of thousands, with at least 300,000 to 400,000 expected every year. 1991 saw Rally headlines, as it was the first year no bikers or residents died during the event that had become



When hundreds of thousands of bikers started showing up for the annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, city and state officials began to take notice and made significant efforts to welcome the visitors, as this banner strewn across Main Street illustrates.

less of a family affair and more of an adult party atmosphere.

2000s

By August of 2000, much of that changed as city officials began to work hard to reconstruct the face of the event that had become the state's largest tourist attraction. Bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue each year through at least 700-800 transient vendors, city and state officials began to take control of the economic treasure that was the Rally. By the 60th anniversary, the city had Rally organization down pat, and while more than 650,000 bikers showed up that year, officials reported that it ran smoother than ever before.

"You could feel the difference," Massey said in comparing the 50th anniversary to the 60th. "It was huge, but it was calmer."

Larger coffers and more selection industry wide had something to do with the significant increase in numbers as the custom motorcycle industry began to take off and after market products began to become the most sought-after items in the industry. For the first time in the history of motorcycling, the general population of bikers could afford higher-priced, custom motorcycles, and the industry took full advantage of that on the streets of Sturgis.

With the increase in dollars spent on the motorcycle industry, came an increase in Rally sponsorships and crowds, and by 2001 the city of Sturgis decided to create its own Rally department. The department would work with the hundreds of vendors who applied for transient merchant licenses within the city limits every year, and would solicit sponsorships from such companies as Jack Daniel's, Snap On, Harley Davidson, and other well-known names throughout the industry. It was a corporate event, but the bikers who continued to come for the party didn't seem to care as they paid inflated prices and planned their vacations around the Rally that had once again become a family event.

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