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Harley-Davidson's Oriental Interlude

By Harry V. Sucher
Part I

Alfred Rich Child enters the story; a most remarkable man whose subsequent connection with the Harley-Davidson Company and whose later activities within the industry were to have a significant bearing on the course of the country's motorcycling history. He was born in Chichester, Sussex, England on May 20, 1891, the son of a retired officer in the British Navy. In





Harley sidecar outfits escorting the Japanese Emperor Hirohito's car. Circa 1934. Courtesy of the Harley-Davidson Motor Company Archives. Copyright H-D.



Alfred Rich Child, circa 1950.

common with many other sons of naval personnel, he had spent his early youth as a cadet in the Greenwich Royal Navy School, from which he had graduated in 1907. It was during this period that he first became familiar with motorcycles, as one of the instructors rode an early Ormonde machine. Following his graduation, Child's father proposed that he should apprentice himself to a corn broker, but young Child demurred at the confinements of a desk job, and the limited future as an office clerk.

The elder Child insisted, and in the ensuing family conflict engendered by his refusal, he ran away from home and took passage to New York City in a Cunard liner working as a mess steward. Arriving at his destination with but three dollars in his pocket, he immediately obtained a job in an office building as a maintenance man and elevator operator. Passing through a series of varied employments, he was, for a time, a butler and handyman on the Long Island estate of William Thaw, whose son Harry was involved in the noted shooting fray with architect Sanford White over the favors of Evelyn Nesbet, a well known New York courtesan. During this period, Child rode an early "camel back" Indian owned by William Thaw.

Noting the lack of opportunity in being a servant, Child conceived the idea of establishing a traveling clothing supply and haberdashery business to serve the house staffs of the great Long Island estates, as their isolation and lack of transportation made it difficult for them to travel to stores. Child's transport for this enterprise was a 1914 Harley sidecar outfit, purchased from a dealer in New York City.

A short time later, soon after the start of World War I in Europe, he obtained his first substantial employment as a petty office in the U.S. Coast Guard, based on his experience as a naval cadet. His initial assignment was aboard a cutter whose function was to carry personnel, to board and search cargo and passenger ships leaving New York harbor for Europe for possible contraband that would aid the Central Powers. Even at this early stage of the war, U.S. sympathies were for the Allies.

It was at this time that Child contracted a severe case of influenza, a worldwide scourge of the later war period, and after he recovered sufficiently to return to duty, he was posted in the Passport Office. In those days the Coast Guard had the sole government jurisdiction not only for the issuing of passports, but also was empowered to collect income taxes for departing aliens who at that time were forced to declare any income derived during their stay in the United States.

It was in the performance of these duties that Child met David Weistrich, an English Jew, who owned a wholesale bicycle parts supply concern in New York City. The latter urgently required a quick passport to enable him to make a trip to Holland to collect a \$50,000 debt owed to him by a firm in that country. As the proposed journey was most critical to Weistrich's fortunes, and as Child was able to expedite the clearance of his passport, the two struck up an immediate friendship. Noting Child's obvious executive abilities, Weistrich told Child to look him up following his return from Europe.

Child joined the Weistrich sales force as a traveling representative in the late fall of 1918. His initial travels were scheduled through the Southern states, and Child elected to utilize a J Model Harley sidecar outfit, which could carry his samples. As Weistrich had, in the meantime, acquired the franchise for the wholesaling of New Departure coaster brakes and other bicycle parts, Child could now offer a broad line of highly-saleable products. In addition, he carried a line of small oil lanterns made of copper, which sold for a dollar and were very popular sellers where rural electrification was still two decades away. Then Weistrich became ill, and turned the management of the business over to his brother-in-law. Child recalled that he did not get along too well with the man, as the latter proposed to reduce his formerly lucrative commission agreement. Casting about for a new selling opportunity, and after some reflection, he decided to apply to the Harley-Davidson Company for a sales position, being by this time favorably impressed with the ruggedness and dependability of their machines.

Child contacted the factory, and soon received a telegram from sales manager, Arthur Davidson. The two ultimately met in the old Algonquin Hotel on 28th Street in New York City. Davidson was initially concerned about Child's ethnic background, particularly relating to whether or not he was Jewish! (Child still had his British accent.) Upon being assured of his pure Aryan background, Davidson next inquired whether his business and ethical concepts had been unfavorable influenced by his connection with a Jewish-owned firm, and if such might render him unfit to become associated with a strictly gentile-owned company. While this episode might appear preposterous in the light of today's racial and ethnic toleration, such was not the case in the United States in the early 1920s. As white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon culture was predominant in America, most people were suspicious of foreigners, particularly following the victory of social radicals in Russia. Racial and ethnic prejudice did not materially abate until well after World War II.

After some discussion, Child was able to convince Davidson not only of his pure Aryan background, but also of his fitness to undertake a job, and he was put to work under Theodore A. (Ted) Miller, Arthur Davidson's assistant in charge of domestic sales. His first base of operation was from his home in Garden City, Long Island, from which he operated as a sales representative and area supervisor for the states of New York and New Jersey, New England and Eastern Canada. Following this, he was reassigned to the Southern States. Child recalled that he was no doubt sent to this territory because of his previous experience in the area, and because Harley sales in the deep south, up to this point had not been spectacular. As in the case of other factory representatives, he was provided with vouchers for his expenses for fuel, oil, food and lodging. With characteristic Scottish thrift, Arthur Davidson informed him that due to the exigencies of post-war inflation, the company was now forced to allow him up to 80 cents a



Theodore A. Miller, Arthur Davidson's assistant in charge of domestic sales. Courtesy of the Harley-Davidson Motor Company Archives. Copyright H-D.

day for meals and up to \$1.50 per night for hotel rooms, but in no case were these figures to be exceeded! Child's assignment was to personally call on the approximately 48 dealers. To offer them help with sales promotion and sales techniques, and to act to iron out any real or imagined problems they might have with their relations with the factory. He was also ordered to see to it that the dealers take delivery of crated machines languishing in railroad freight depots, as, in line with the company's strict pay-on-delivery policy. A sight draft for the local bank had to be presented to take delivery. It was his idea to take photographs of each dealer and his premises with his own camera, so management could correlate their sales performance with their public image. This was a factor in determining the annual dealer review for the yearly franchise renewal.

In the spring of 1921, Child was next assigned to Milwaukee, where he was still involved in the Sales Department, and he accordingly moved his family from Long Island to Milwaukee.

The export of Harley-Davidson machines to Japan and the Orient during the early 1920s involved a most complex set of circumstances, and therefore requires a separate chapter in itself. At the outset, it is sufficient to say that it was not only critical as a necessary adjunct to an export program necessary for the company's survival, due to a depressed domestic market, but was also instrumental in Japan's development of its own future auto and motorcycle industries. It may be noted that Indian was already entrenched in Japan, with an active agency in Tokyo importing 600-700 machines per year, about 40% of them being sidecar outfits. Prince (later Emperor) Hirohito rode such an outfit for some years.

A handful of Harleys was imported to Japan by the Army during 1912 and 1917, but, curiously enough, no spare parts were ever ordered. No doubt the Army officers involved believed quite literally the Harley advertising statements that their machines were largely trouble-free! In the Spring of 1922, an import firm in Tokyo, Nippon Jidoshe K.K., headed by the young Baron Okura, which had been importing limited numbers of American automobiles since 1919, sent Milwaukee a small trial order of 74 cubic inch J Model electrically-equipped machines. During the following year they imported another dozen machines, ignoring company suggestions that they stock a few of the more critical categories of spare parts. It was during this period that the Charles Cable Company, an import-export firm in San Francisco, wrote to Milwaukee stating that they were presently doing business with a merchant in Ulan Bator, the capital of Inner Mongolia. They suggested that if they could obtain the distributorship for all Harley products in Inner and Outer Mongolia, they would place substantial orders with the company, and pay against documents placed in San Francisco banks.

In the meantime, the Charles Cable Company placed some substantial orders for machines that same year. Payments were made on delivery from funds deposited in San Francisco banks,

and for some reason it was thought in Milwaukee that somehow the Charles Cable Company was supplying machines and other commodities to Ulan Bator. However, it soon became cause for concern that no spare parts were ever ordered. Charles Cable insisted that the Mongolians had their own spare parts, although it was difficult to imagine that an area encompassed by the Gobi Desert and, under an economy based on the breeding of goats and camels, could possess machine shop facilities to carry on such work.

At this point, Alfred Rich Child, who had just returned from his epic journey on Harley's behalf through South Africa, was informed by the company that he should soon be preparing himself for a survey of the Japanese and Far Eastern area regarding a potential motorcycle market.

On September 1, 1923, the Kanto area of Japan was devastated by a catastrophic earthquake that killed or injured thousands of people and left millions homeless. During this period, Charles Cable visited Milwaukee and had a conference with Eric Von Gumpert, still Harley's titular head of the export department, but more properly functioning as traffic manager. Charles Cable suggested that the time was ripe for appointing him Harley-Davidson's distributor for Japan, Korea and Manchuria. On order from management, Von Gumpert informed them that, at the moment, the Japan Automobile Company of Nippon Jidosha the official distributor for the company's products in Japan, and that, pending a survey by Alfred Rich Child as Export Sales Representative, they would make no other appointments.

To further complicate the situation, in the Spring of 1924, the Congress of the United States passed a rigid immigration law severely limiting the immigration of Asiatics into the United States, which included Japanese. This was a tremendous blow to Japanese pride, and the Japanese Ambassador in Washington, D.C. immediately demanded an exception to the ruling for his countrymen, on the threat of "serious consequences." When such a ruling was not forthcoming, violent demonstrations erupted in every city in Japan from Hokodate to Kagashima.

It was in this hostile atmosphere that Alfred Rich Child disembarked at Yokohama in July, 1924, from the Canadian Pacific Liner *Empress of Canada*, and registered at Tokyo's Imperial Hotel. It became evident that Charles Cable had contacts in Japan as well as in Ulan Bator, as Child was invited a few days later to dine with the Baron Okura, who had been educated in both England and the United States and spoke excellent English.

During his meeting with Okura, Child pointed out that Harley's management was dissatisfied with the sales results so far achieved by his staff of Nippon Jidosha, as well as their total disregard for the necessity for maintaining a stock of spare parts. Okura, on the other hand, continued to defend both his own and his employee's sales policies, and demanded that Nippon Jidosha be granted a continuation of their present yearly contract. After several futile attempts to resolve the matter, Child broke off all negotiations with this group.

The great earthquake of the September 1, 1923 which swept its ways through the Kwanto district in a brief moment, played its wrathful havoc to the extremity in Yokohama city, laying waste nearly 90% of the whole city and burning to ashes the entire properties of the whole citizens, founded and accumulated in 60 over long years of toil and hardship. It did away with all the cultural establishments and organizations of the prospering city to complete destruction, leaving only a barren and desolate area with its crumbling remains. The photograph here from the hill of Minami-Ohtamachi shows the actual state of the city immediately after the catastrophe.



It was at this juncture that an English-speaking native named Yamada, who once represented the Izu Peninsula Tea Growers as a lobbyist in Washington, introduced Child to one Genjiro Fukui, a U.S. educated individual, who was one of three founders of a now prestigious pharmaceutical manufacturing concern, the Sankyo Company Limited of Muromachi, Tokyo. During Child's conversations with Fukui, it was revealed that he and one Ichit Taguchi headed the Koto Trading Company, an import and export subsidiary of Sankyo Company Limited.

It then became apparent to Child that Charles Cable was secretly diverting some of the motorcycle shipments, originally consigned to Mongolia, to Japan, and in effect, 'bootlegging' them to the Koto Trading Company right under Nippon Jidosha company's nose, in spite of their so-called exclusive sales rights to act as Harley-Davidson agents.

Perceiving the duplicity of the Koto organization, Child then opened negotiations with the three principals of the Sankyo Company in view of appointing them Harley-Davidson distributors for Japan, subject to certain conditions to be laid down by Milwaukee. It was obvious that in view of the earthquake-devastated Japanese roads, 1200cc Harley sidecar, sidevan, or three-wheeled rear car would be, for several years, an ideal vehicle to use under these conditions.

During an exchange of cablegrams between Child and Milwaukee, it was decided that Child should be the titular head of the agency, in view of the double-dealing that had been experienced between Charles Cable and the Koto organization. During this time, Baron Okura attempted to intervene on his own behalf, but was informed that his company would receive

no more machines. At this point, three principals of the Sankyo organization were agreeable to the condition that Child should remain in Japan to act as a liaison between themselves and Milwaukee. To this end, Child produced a letter of credit from the National City Bank of New York to cover the purchase of 350 Big Twin machines, mostly with sidecars. Also included were \$20,000 worth of replacement parts and \$3,000 worth of dealer's repair tools. In addition, the whole transaction was covered by an agreement that Child would be the Managing Director of a newly formed Harley-Davidson Sales Company of Japan. His recompense was to be 5% of the landed cost of all Harley-Davidson products. The wholesale cost of the machines was augmented by freight, crating and excise duties paid at the port of entry.

Following the consummation by cable of the details of his export agreement, Child sailed for the States on the *Empress of Canada*, where, he landed in Vancouver. There he met Arthur Davidson who was just returning from a sales trip to Australia and New Zealand. Arthur was justly congratulatory of Child's Japanese effort, as he had originally discouraged the initial sales attempts in that country due to the current anti-American sentiment following the Asiatic Exclusion Act.

Child met with the Four Founders in Milwaukee to finalize the details of the export of machines to Japan. In August, 1924, he returned to Toyko to organize the import machinery. He had previously hired Harry Devine, the factory Harley parts manager who had already enjoyed nearly 20 years of experience with the parent firm, to accompany him.

Part II will appear in the Spring, 2006 issue.

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