

HARLEY-DAVIDSON PIONEER

# ALFRED RICHARD CHILD

A MAN OF "FIRSTS"

1906,  
Alfred R. Child,  
15 years old,  
Greenwich  
Royal Naval  
School.

**M**y Dad, Alfred R. Child, was born in Chichester Sussex, England on May 20, 1891. He graduated from Greenwich Naval School, but couldn't follow his father's footsteps in the Royal Navy due to defective vision. He was apprenticed to a corn broker, and the very thought of it made him take matters into his own hands. He "borrowed" a gold coin from his father, wrote a note of apology, attended the last public hanging in London, and ran away from home to America.

His trip over was spent as a steerage steward mopping up the malodorous vomit of seasick immigrants who were not allowed on deck for fresh air.

On September 7, 1907, he jumped ship in New York and by the end of the day had talked his way into a job as an elevator operator. The manager of the building took the newcomer home with him for dinner and so began a series of jobs culminating in his becoming a "collars and cuffs" man or haberdasher to the wealthy gentry living in the ornate mansions in New Jersey and Long Island.

Interestingly enough, September 22 of the same year, 1907, the Harley-Davidson Motor Company of Milwaukee was born. It was just a question of time before the two met.

In 1912, my mother, Elizabeth Fogden, ran away from the same town in England to come to New York to marry Dad. They were childhood friends, and she was a trained couturière to the wealthy in Chichester, thus adding to Dad's collars and cuffs business.

Naturally, Dad needed transportation, so he purchased a brand-new 1914 3-speed Sidecar Harley 3414 K from George Wood, the New York Harley-Davidson dealer. So began his love affair with motorcycles. The 3414 K was the 34th machine made at the start of 1914. Total price was \$265. It was called "The Silent Grey Fellow" and was the first production model in America with a 3-speed transmission and adequate external expanding rear wheel brake. In December of this year, my brother, Richard Child, was born in Astoria, Long Island.

By this time the 1914 sidecar job was traded in for a 1916, and, finally, he owned the 1917 electrically equipped Harley. He also was the proud father of my sister, Eleanor, who was born in August of that year while her mother was on vacation in Newport, Rhode Island.

With more sales experience behind him and a growing family about him, Alfred Child applied for a job at Harley-Davidson. Arthur Davidson, super salesman of the firm, came down to look Dad over and hired him to be the area supervisor for the East Coast (north of New York) and Eastern Canada.

In the spring of 1922, Arthur Davidson promoted a rally at Rochester, New York. Dad drove Walter Davidson down to it in a new 1923 model sidecar outfit to let all the dealers, customers and mechanics see the latest and the best. Floyd Clymer, Dudley Perkins, and many others came for a week of hill climbing, track races, and other sports. The actual 1923 machine Dad drove that day, minus the sidecar, is on display in the Harley-Davidson Model Museum.

It was during this time that the "Founding Four," William A. Davidson, Walter C. Davidson, Arthur Davidson, and William S. Harley met with Dad at the Rochester Hotel and offered him the opportunity of becoming the Company's first overseas export representative. His first assignment—Africa!

Dad was a busy guy. He moved his family from Garden City, New York, to Milwaukee and began to prepare himself for his new adventure. He attended Joe Ryan's Service Manager's School for dealers, checked in on Harry Devine's extensive parts department, where, since 1908, Harley-Davidson parts had





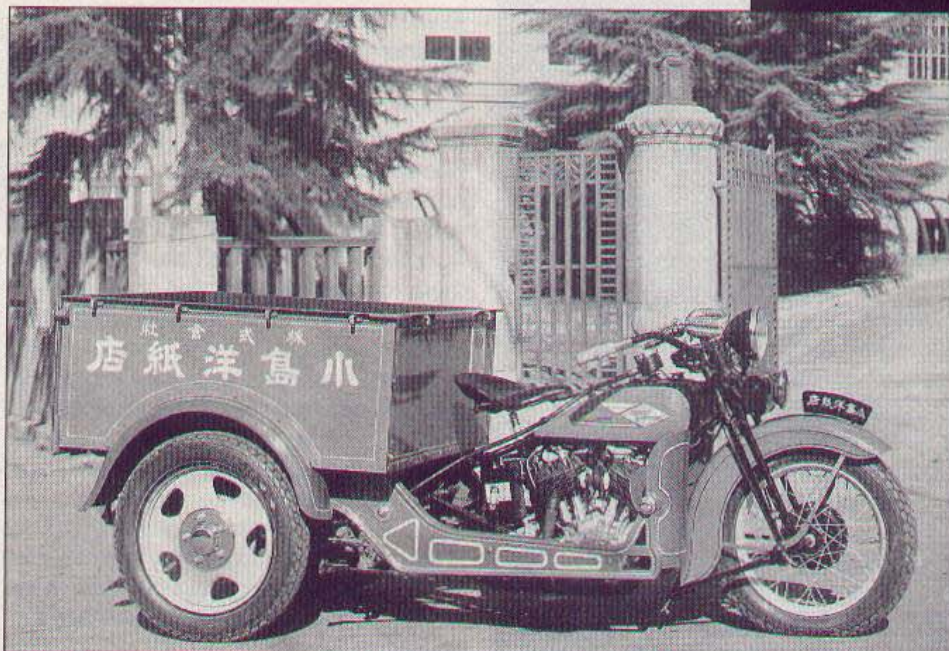
been standardized and available for instant shipment to dealers..

He met Walter Kleinhagen, advertising manager; George Appel, the electrical genius who worked out the bugs in the former Remy electrical system back in 1916; Ted Miller, domestic sales; and Erich Von Gumpert, export sales manager.

In the Engineering Department, Dad met the brilliant William S. Harley and his assistants Arthur Constantine, Bill Ottaway, and Arthur Herrington.

It was Arthur Davidson, with the approval of the other founders, who set the course for Dad's sales trip to Africa. He was to be equipped with the new 74 JD with the Royal Tourist, wide-bodied, large-capacity, H-D-made sidecar, and he was expected to use it.

Dad sailed to Southampton, England, then on down to Capetown, reaching the southern tip of South Africa three weeks



Harley-Davidson 74-inch Flathead, Japan; below, Fred Barr and wife.



Harley-Davidson dealer, Washington, D.C., 1921.

later. His assignment: demonstrate that H-D was a first-rate company and to offset the fact that Indian was the most popular Big Twin machine in South Africa at the time.

In Capetown, Dad met and helped Mr. A.R. Callow expand and improve his newly acquired Harley-Davidson franchise. After four months of touring South Africa and showing off his sidecar outfit, Dad began the rest of his journey. In Zululand, the chief nicknamed him Meshla Mami or "four eyes."

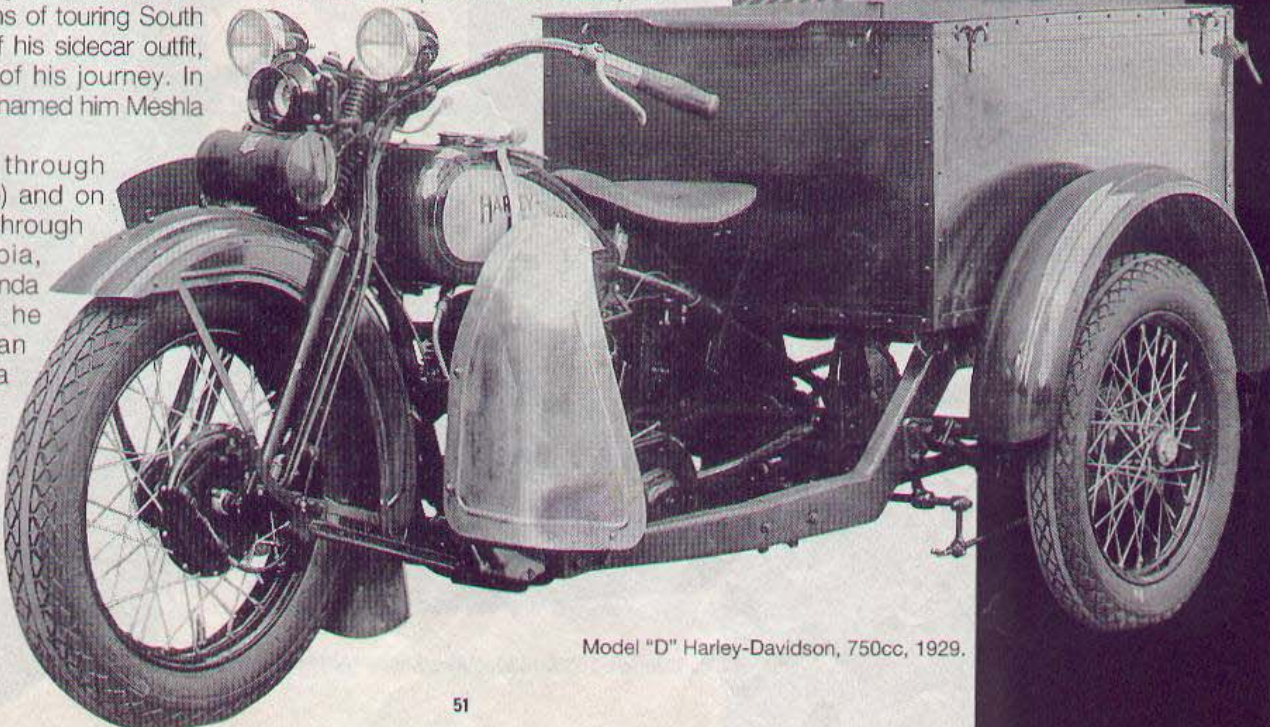
He traveled on through Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and on up toward Uganda, through what is now Zambia, Tanzania, and into Uganda itself. He wrote that he traveled more than 1,500 miles in Uganda alone, over smooth-surfaced, narrow paths that had been laid out by the 7-foot ruler of the country, the "Kabaka" who had 33 wives and one Rolls Royce, but no motorcycles!

At one point in his journey Dad was offered a bride for his motorcycle. I remember him giving me a "bridal box," which held the complete bridal attire: a beaded wooden ring and bracelet, a necklace, and a very small beaded g-string. I always wondered how he got them.

One day I asked him how he managed to travel through an area with no bridges and few roads. He casually assured me that he was followed everywhere and when he reached a river there were many warriors who carried his cycle, lifted on poles balanced under the sidecar chassis. As for the roads, there were always a few worn-down paths to follow.

Dad headed through Kenya to Mombasa. His sidecar outfit had seen its day. He signed up a wealthy Indian bicycle dealer as a Harley-Davidson motorcycle dealer, sold the man his battered machine, and took an order for three sidecar-equipped bikes.

From the seaport of Mombasa, he →



Model "D" Harley-Davidson, 750cc, 1929.

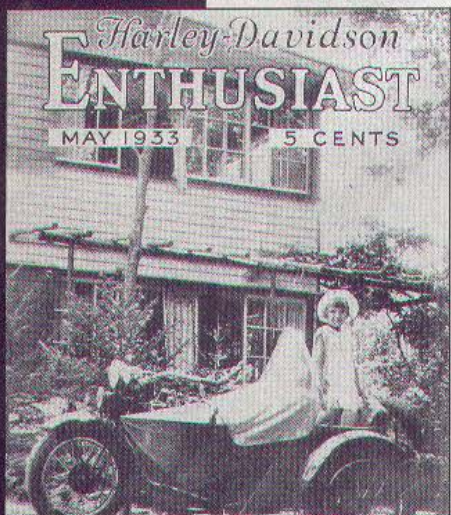




Touring in Japan, 1925.



At the Kanaya Hotel, Nikku, 1930-31.



sailed up the coast of Africa to Aden in Southern Arabia and up to the Red Sea. He disembarked at Port Said, took a train to Cairo to see a dealer, rejoined the ship to Naples, Italy, and then sailed home to Milwaukee after eight months on the road.

Dad had orders for more than four hundred machines and had sold 50 of them to the native dictator of Mombasa. It was truly an incredible journey, by an incredible man.

After he returned, inquiries for possible dealerships were sent to Milwaukee from the Neppon Jidosha Car Company of Tokyo and the Charles Cable Company of San Francisco.

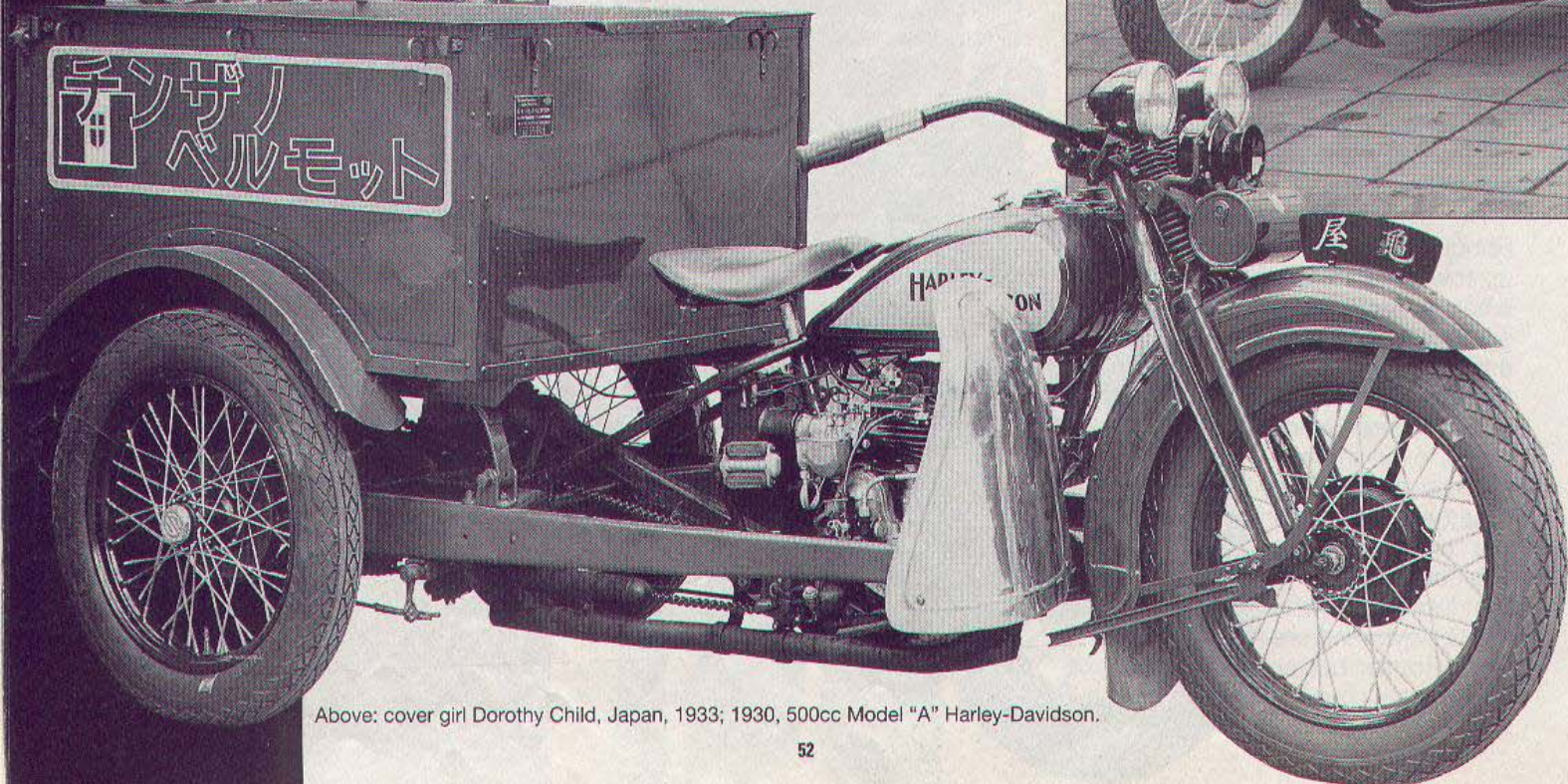
Early in 1922, Neppon Jidosha Car Company asked for a small trial order of some 1000cc Harley-Davidson twin cylinder machines. The company was headed by Baron Okura.

Charles Cable Co. of San Francisco requested machines for a merchant in Ulan Bator, capital of Inner Mongolia. Cable placed a substantial order for that year and the next.

There was one fly in the ointment—neither Neppon Jidosha nor Charles Cable ordered any spare parts! The Motor Company was adamant about backing up its machines with capable mechanics and factory parts. In Inner Mongolia it was camels and goats.

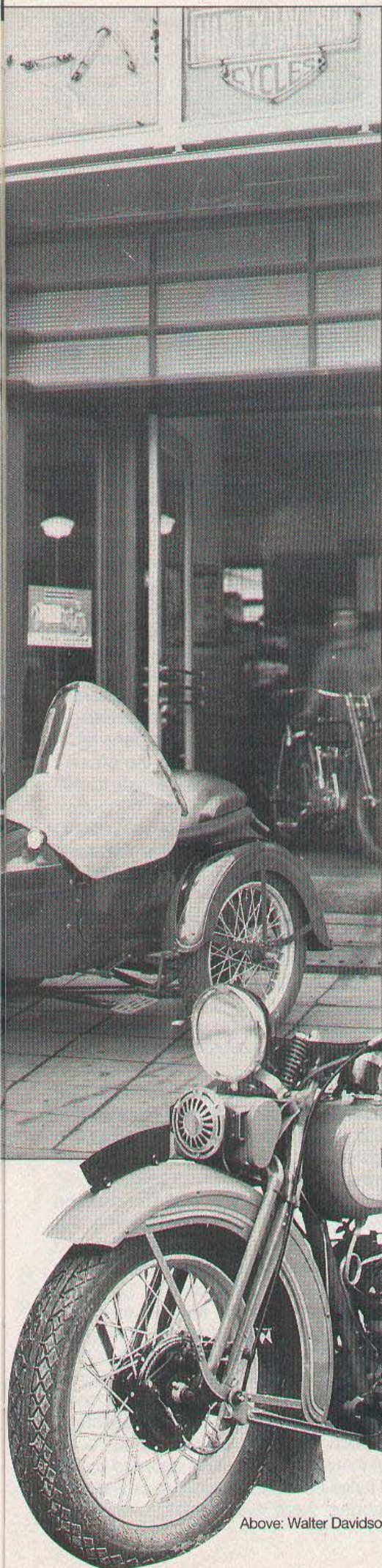
It was while Dad was finalizing his plans for his next trip that Charles Cable came to Milwaukee in person to request sole distribution rights for Japan, Korea, and Manchuria. The whole situation became, as the British say, "a sticky wicket."

In September of 1923 a disastrous earthquake occurred in eastern Japan. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed or maimed. Steel railway rails were twisted in figure 8s.



Above: cover girl Dorothy Child, Japan, 1933; 1930, 500cc Model "A" Harley-Davidson.





Examples of this destruction are still exhibited in the Yokohama Municipal Museum. The roads and streets of Japan became impassable.

On top of all this misery, Congress passed the Asiatic Exclusion Act of 1924. It was under this cloud that my father was sent to determine what to do about Japan and the Far East.

Dad arrived in Yokohama and was invited to a series of meetings with Baron Okura of the Nippon Jidosha. The Baron had been educated in both England and the United States, but while language was no problem, attitude was. He insisted that regardless of any complaints about his company's service and repair without spares, that Milwaukee should grant him the continuation of his yearly contract.

Dad's translator and later right-hand man introduced him to another very interested potential dealer, Mr. Fukui, who was an executive not only of Sankyo Co., a huge pharmaceutical manufacturing outfit, but he was also involved with a subsidiary export-import company, Koto Trading.

It seemed that some or all of the Harleys going to the Charles Cable Company were being diverted from Mongolia to Japan and being sold by the Koto Trading Company right under the nose of Baron Okura!

Under these somewhat slippery conditions, Dad negotiated a deal with Sankyo Pharmaceuticals to take over Harley-Davidson sales under the strict Milwaukee provisions, and more importantly to him, a stipulation that he, Alfred R. Child, would be the "keeper of the keys" as the managing director of sales of the newly constituted Harley-Davidson Sales Company of Japan. Sankyo Company had the money, and Dad had the savvy. It was an ideal situation for the Motor Company. After a serious

depression in the United States, Japan offered a wide-open market for a commercial and transportation vehicle capable of traversing the devastated roads in Japan.

Forty days after arriving in Japan, Dad became "the keeper of the keys." He boarded the Empress of Scotland with a National City Bank of New York, irrevocable letter of credit in gold dollars covering the purchase of 350 Harley-Davidson motorcycles, each equipped with sidecar, \$20,000 worth of factory genuine replacement parts and \$3,000 of factory dealers repair tools. More important for Dad, it covered an agreement that Alfred R. Child would be Managing Director of Sales of the new Harley-Davidson Sales Company of Japan, his recompense to be 5 percent of the landed cost on all Harley-Davidson products.

Both Milwaukee and my father were extremely happy campers on December 25, 1924.

Dad returned with his family, the 350 sidecars outfits, spare parts, and design and construction of Philippine mahogany bins to fit the specific sizes of the parts to be delivered.

In 1925, no motorcycles were being manufactured in Japan. Indian Motorcycle was for many years a competitor of Harley-Davidson in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and England. In Japan, Indian was strongly entrenched, but within three years Harley-Davidson became King of the Road and the principal importer of motorcycles, sidecars, and replacement parts.

While other motorcycles like Norton, AJS, Matchless, Moto-Guzzi from Italy, Husvarna from Sweden, and, in 1927, the shaft-drive BMW, were also on the scene, only the Harley-Davidson was a ruggedly built, carefully engineered, heavy-duty machine capable of being used as a commercial carrier of materials. Dad and the company

Model "D"  
Harley-Davidson, 750cc,  
with a rear car, 1929.

Above: Walter Davidson Jr. in front of the Harley-Davidson Sales Co., Tokyo, 1937.



imported hundreds of 1000cc units along with the newer 350cc single-cylinder machines developed in 1925 and 1926, without rear wheels, to fit Japanese rear built cars.

Imitations of Harley-Davidson's rear cars, 1925-1927, plus the import of J.A. Prestwich proprietary engines from England, created the start of an enormous and remarkable Japanese motorcycle industry.

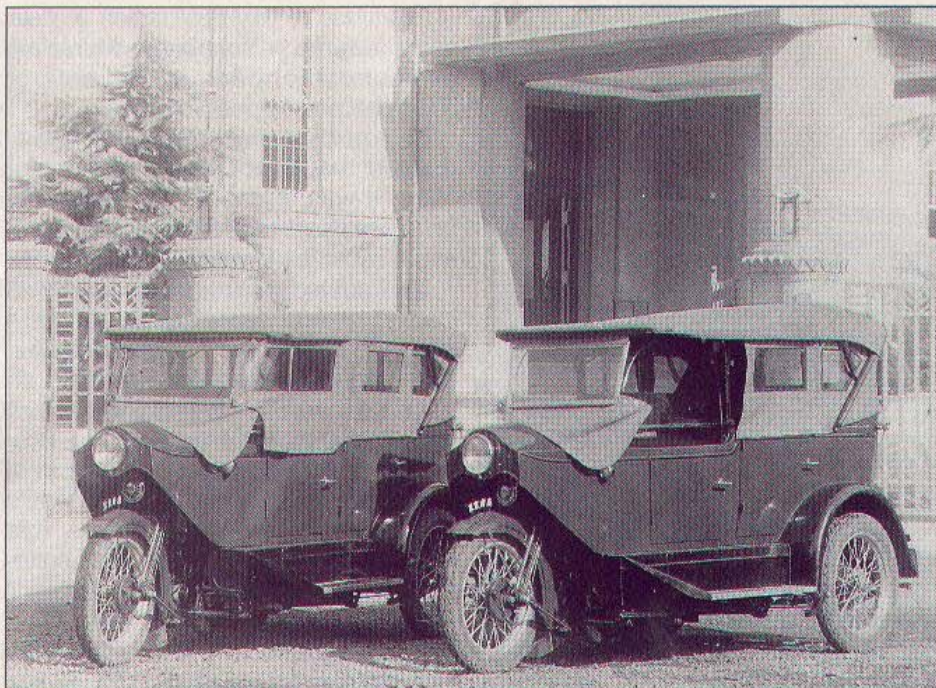
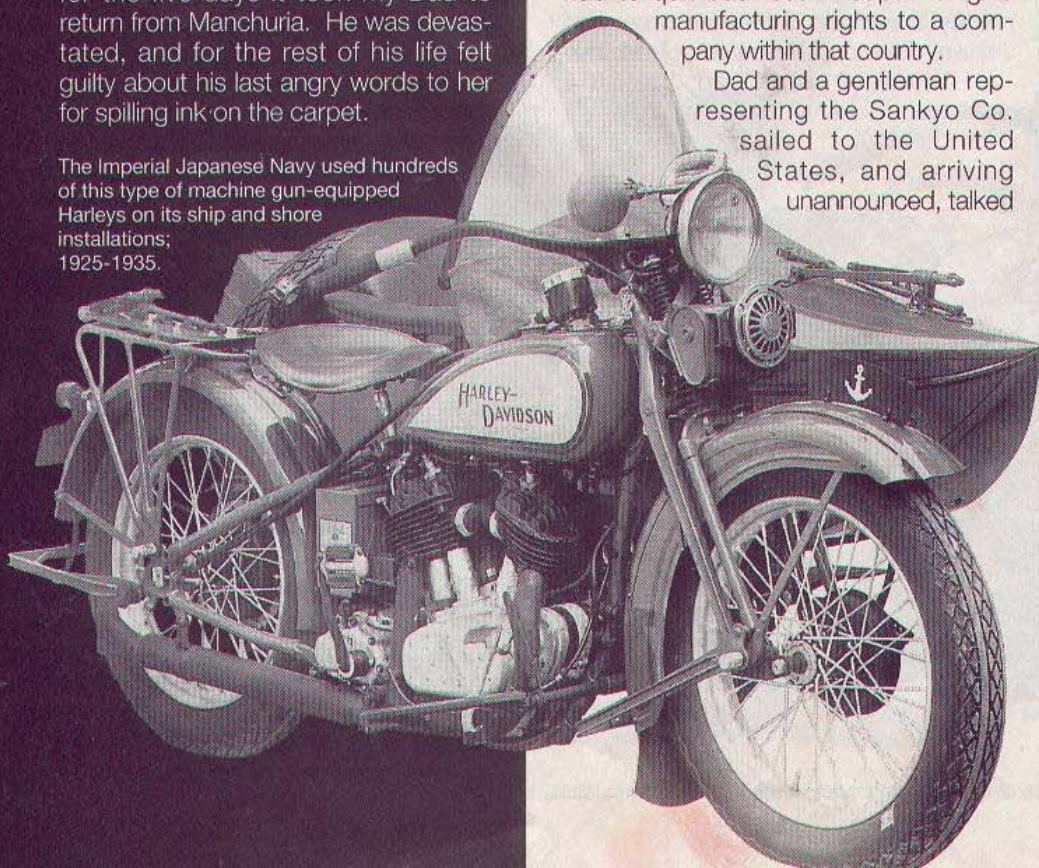
The Mazda rotary-engined mini car of 1977 had its origin back in 1927 in Kyushu as a three-wheeled rear car patterned exactly after the Harley-Davidson 350cc commercial rear car.

Sankyo Co. was also in the pharmaceutical business, supplying almost all medical products to the Imperial Japanese Army, so it was natural that the Harley-Davidson became the standard vehicle for the army.

The Imperial Navy, all prefectural and city offices, and the postal service purchased hundreds of Harleys. By 1929, Chinese and Manchurian war lords, Chang Tso Lin and his son, Chang Sulang, and later Chang Kai Shek, bought as many as 200 sidecar units in a single shipment.

In the years 1927-28 my sister Barbara and I were born, and business was booming for Alfred R. Child. Dad had built two homes, one on the bluff overlooking Yokohama, and one on the beach at Kamakura. At our mountain home he enlarged a smaller cabin in Karuizawa called High Nuf. Only High Nuf remains in the family. Life was very good and then tragedy struck. My little sister, Bobbie, passed away in her sleep and was placed in a block of ice for the five days it took my Dad to return from Manchuria. He was devastated, and for the rest of his life felt guilty about his last angry words to her for spilling ink on the carpet.

The Imperial Japanese Navy used hundreds of this type of machine gun-equipped Harleys on its ship and shore installations; 1925-1935.



74-inch commercial rear bar chassis with passenger bodies—full weather protection.

1928 proved to be both a professional and personal turning point for Dad and import business in Japan.

Personally, it started with a bruise on the palm of his left hand with radiating red streaks up his arm. His first operation cost him his left arm below the elbow. Ultimately, he had to have his whole arm amputated at St. Luke's Hospital in Tokyo. I never even thought about his missing arm, and it certainly didn't slow him down. In later years he created a story for his great grandchildren about rats eating his arm off that insured nightmares and wide-eyed respect.

Professionally, the yen-dollar cross rate became impossible for importers. The stranglehold meant that Harley-Davidson had to quit business in Japan or give manufacturing rights to a company within that country.

Dad and a gentleman representing the Sankyo Co. sailed to the United States, and arriving unannounced, talked

the Motor Company into negotiating a contract to grant them exclusive rights to manufacture all Harley-Davidson products in Japan.

The founders were, in Dad's words, "astounded at our temerity in suggesting it." But the severe depression in the United States, plus a very substantial cash payment, turned the tide. Sankyo promised never to sell Japan-made Harleys anywhere outside the country and would make every effort to sell Milwaukee cycles also.

Dad hired Fred Barr, a 24-year veteran of the motorcycle industry, whose boss was "Big Bill" Davidson. Fred and his family moved to Japan for three years, setting up the Harley-Davidson Factory in Shenogawa, Tokyo from 1929-32. My Dad gave him credit for being the father of the present Japanese motorcycle industry.

The policies that built Harley-Davidson in Japan are common today, but in those days automotive and motorcycle repairs were done on dirty floors. Harley-Davidson in Japan developed the concept of work benches, paraffin cleaning cans for spares, and many other innovations.

Under Fred Barr's direction, the Shinagawa factory was turning out Japanese-made replicas of the standard JD 74 Milwaukee-made Flatheads, the model in greatest demand.

Surprisingly, the Milwaukee-made models were selling well at the higher (almost double) prices.

Mr. Morikichi Sakurai, who designed and developed the "rear car" for commercial use, became Barr's assistant. Subcontractors produced various components from blueprints supplied by Mr. Harley in Milwaukee. No Japanese personnel were ever sent to Milwaukee



and no other Americans were employed. By 1935 Fred Barr and his family returned to America, after being presented, by the Tameiki Company, with gifts and a world tour in appreciation of his efforts.

Trouble was brewing both in the political and manufacturing area. Milwaukee developed a cradle-framed, overhead-valve-motored machine which was shipped to the Tameiki plant to test for the Japan market. My brother, Richard, tried it out for a distance of over 15,000 miles—he reported that it was a disaster! Milwaukee wanted Tameiki Co. to acquire the manufacturing rights at a much higher licensing fee. The Japanese plant would have to retool for a machine that did not seem suitable for its market.

A Mr. Kusanobu, director of Sankyo's pharmaceutical operations in New York, dropped in on the four founders in Milwaukee and proceeded to put his foot in his mouth.

Kusanobu expressed resentment at the increased licensing fee and the 5-percent commission paid to Alfred R. Child since 1924 by the Tamecho Co. He felt this commission cost should have been shared. He said Tameiko would continue to manufacture the Harley-Davidson flathead-type machine, changing its name to the Rikuo or King of the Road. And, finally, he insisted that Child be withdrawn from any association with Tameiko Sales Outlet or Sankyo would cease to finance the exports of Harley-Davidson into Japan. The discussion became so heated that Mr. Kusanobu was almost tossed out of the meeting by Walter Davidson Jr.

Dad came out of this smelling like a rose. Alfred R. Child became the exclusive distributor of Harley-Davidson motorcycles for the whole of Japan, Korea, North China, and Manchuria.

The honeymoon did not last. In 1937 the Japanese military was engaged in hostilities in North China and Manchuria. A Colonel Fuji, liaison to import and domestic purveyors to the military, came and advised Dad to leave the country immediately with his family. Colonel Fuji also knew of my father's friendship with Mr. Fukui of the Sankyo Co. Mr. Fukui offered to buy all of Dad's H-D products, and Dad, with the approval of the four founders, sold his homes and his business and came home to the USA.

What happened after Pearl Harbor—his Lockhead experiences and later as Mr. BSA in the USA? That's another chapter in the book of a man of "firsts."

*This article was written by Dorothy Child Jones, daughter of Alfred R. Child. She resides in Van Nuys, California.*

**Strap on  
the leathers  
and take it full  
throttle.**



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