

1957 Rikuo

QR750



ONE OF HARLEY-DAVIDSON'S LESSER-KNOWN VENTURES INTO OVERSEAS MARKETS

BY JIM O'CLAIR

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY QUATTRO VALVOLE

Harley-Davidson has publicized little about their Asian expansion during the Twenties; however, the company did send sales representatives to Africa and the Far East in search of new business markets, including China and Japan. With the popularity of their police bikes, Harley was relying on selling them to Pacific Rim countries for use in their military and police fleets as well. Arthur Davidson sent English-born salesman Alfred Childs to Japan in 1924 to attempt to obtain some of the heavyweight motorcycle business that was proving to be very successful for Indian at that time. Childs negotiated a deal with the Sankyo Company to import Harley-Davidson motorcycles and repair parts to Japan; sales were modest at first, but blossomed when the Japanese military began to purchase Harleys with sidecars for use in their Army. Business was good for a few years at Har-

ley of Japan, and an extensive dealer base was formed to sell and service the bikes. That all changed in 1929 when the stock market crashed and the value of the yen dropped dramatically. Harley stopped exporting bikes due to costs, and it looked as though their Japan expansion had ended.

Alfred Childs came up with the idea to have Harley actually build the bikes in Japan to save costs. Although the company executives resisted the idea, Childs persisted and eventually, Harley-Davidson signed an agreement with Sankyo to send technology and expertise to Japan to help with production at the newly built Shingawa factory near Tokyo. Sankyo agreed to pay for the actual blueprints to build the bikes and royalties on each bike sale. The royalties has a lot to do with Harley-Davidson remaining solvent during the Depression.

Production began in 1935 under the

new brand name Rikuo, which aptly means King of the Road. Initial production was based on the J-Model Harleys and used Japanese versions of either the Harley 45-cu.in. or 74-cu.in. side-valve engines.

After Rikuo refused to buy blueprints to duplicate Harley's new "knucklehead" engine in 1936, the business arrangement soured and Harley stopped any affiliations with the manufacturer by 1937. This just so happens to be the same year Japan invaded China. The factory continued to produce the Harley-based bikes for the military and police departments, with well over 18,000 produced before the outbreak of World War II. The Rikuo model with the highest production numbers was the Model 97, based on the Harley 74-cu.in. side-valve engine, and many were fitted with driveshafts and sidecars for military use.

After the war, Rikuo resumed production in 1947 with limited production runs of less than 2,000 per year. Most sales were to police agencies. Sankyo sold the Rikuo Company to Showa in 1950, a company that would eventually design the front fork assemblies on later model Harleys. New models were introduced based on other bikes as well: Aw Model A was copied from a single-cylinder 350cc OHV BSA and introduced in 1953, and a model F 247cc OHV bike was cloned from a BMW and released in 1956.

Our example bike is a 1957 model RQ750. The model exaggerated a bit, as the engine was actually 747cc and produced roughly 22hp. Produced from 1953-'57, the RQ weighed in at over 500 pounds, with a top speed between 65 and 70 MPH. The seat was mounted on a pogo similar to the Harley heavyweights of the time and the brake was on the left side of the bike, which can make for a very interesting ride to American bike enthusiasts. Rikuo added one additional model, the RT, in 1958, but ceased production in 1959, with a few bikes built into 1960 with leftover parts. Very few are seen here in the U.S., and the values of these bikes have increased recently as more collectors learn the story of the Japanese-built Harleys. 🏍️

