

“The Meek Don’t Win”
Easyriders and the Construction of Biker Community

by

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Abstract

Bikers and outlaw motorcycle clubs have long been meaningful symbols of what is wrong with society. They were the not-a-citizen, symbols of sexual, social and criminal deviance. Uniquely qualified as non-conformists, they were made to order for the media's need to communicate just where the line was between propriety and criminality.

Publications produced by and for bikers can easily be dismissed as junk, as undeserving of critical attention. It is important to remember, however, that these magazines demonstrate that space exists to question consensus opinion. They developed to minister to the needs of a specific audience, one that considered itself oppressed. Freedoms enjoyed by "citizens" seemingly did not extend to bikers who led a hardscrabble, sometimes criminal, existence. "Biker rags," as a response to class antagonism, maintained and validated the culture's existence.

Forsaken by a country that preached equality, harassed by police and flushed through the justice system, bikers were society's castoffs. The media-created image of bikers made it necessary that they discover their own voice in order to maintain identity. This genre study of biker magazines exposes *Easyriders* as the first publication to attempt to reach out to bikers and create a sense of community through education, coordination and celebration. *Easyriders* and the magazines that followed in its path spoke to a specific audience through language and imagery it could interpret, re-making bikers as the ideological heirs of freebooters and pioneers.

“The Meek Don't Win” *Easyriders* and the Construction of Biker Community

Beginning with news reports from Hollister, California, in 1947, the American public received a cohesive and overwhelmingly negative image of bikers that continues, to some degree, to color our perceptions of everyone who sits astride a motorcycle. In the 1960s the country's knowledge of motorcycle culture was augmented by Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels* and a brace of biker B-movies which cemented in the public mind an image of sexual and social deviants bent on destroying the moral fabric of the nation.¹ That cliché image, as well as the framework of perceptions the news media used to make sense of the phenomena of outlaw motorcycle clubs, the so-called “one-percenters,” has changed only slightly since Hollister's rioting and Marlon Brando's portrayal of Johnny, the brooding leader of the pack.

What was it about motorcyclists and bikers that incited such a response? It might be easier to ask what it was about bikers and outlaw motorcycle clubs that did not incite moral outrage. From the beginning the one-percenters' manner of dress was provocative. So too was their lack of personal hygiene, their insobriety and the physical menace they cultivated with every swagger. The biker's marginal existence was an invitation for the news media, in their role as moral entrepreneurs and watchdogs of the public good, to exhibit a negative example.² Bikers became the “not-a-citizen,” symbols of sexual, social and criminal deviance, and as the epitome

¹ Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gang* (New York: Ballantine, 1967).

² The concept of media as moral entrepreneurs comes from Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

of unacceptable behavior.³ Uniquely qualified as non-conformists, they were made to order for the media's need to communicate just where the line was between propriety and criminality.

Mainstream media used bikers and outlaw clubs to warn of potential danger and to remind readers and viewers that they lived in an imperfect society which required vigilance and sacrifice. The same information was available to readers of *Easyriders*, a publication produced by and for hardcore bikers and motorcycle enthusiasts. But in the 1970s *Easyriders* defined what it meant to be a good citizen of the motorcycle subculture. It reminded bikers of the need to challenge and to question society's rules and regulations. The strategy was to take the mainstream image of bikers and outlaw clubs and spin it 180 degrees. *Easyriders* insisted that bikers represented American ideals and were, in fact, the last true patriots. An examination of the magazine's first decade reveals a publication that not only celebrated the biker lifestyle, but stressed education and coordination as the means to build community and survive in an unfriendly, overly civilized world.

From a cultural studies perspective, communication is “not the act of imparting information or influence, but the creation, representation, and celebration of shared beliefs.”⁴ Indeed, “a ritual view centers on the sacred ceremony which draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.”⁵ John Fiske suggests as well that where there is class antagonism – perceptual differences between the social system and those who are forced to live within it – “new popular tastes and pleasures” develop. When we better understand those tastes Fiske feels it is possible to validate

³ For a fuller discussion of the concept of the “not-a-citizen,” see Ross S. Fuglsang, “Motorcycle Menace: Media Genres and the Construction of a Deviant Subculture” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Iowa, 1997).

⁴ James W. Carey, “Mass Communication Research and Cultural Studies: An American View,” in *The Mass Media in Germany and The United States*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979), 412.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 412.

the antagonist's lifestyle and "trace the ways in which various formations of the people maintain and strengthen their own sense of difference from the social relations and identities, the knowledges and behaviours proposed for them by the hegemonic order."⁶

One method of understanding these new popular tastes is to analyze them as a genre, a body of texts that provides a consistent view of the way things are. Genres use their own vocabulary to speak to a like-minded audience. Jane Feuer argues that genres bypass the "interpretive community" by restricting the use of signs and controlling those "ideological constructs that provide and enforce a prereading."⁷ Feuer goes on to describe three approaches to examining genre: aesthetic, ideological and ritual. The ritual approach, which "sees genre as an exchange between industry and audience, an exchange through which a culture speaks to itself," seems most appropriate for an examination of *Easyriders*.⁸ It is understood, as well, that part of the ritual is to promote, protect and maintain the cultural norms and values of the prospective audience.

The use of genre, to some extent, ensures popularity because it must meet the expectations of a particular audience; the application of previously successful plots and familiar images, characters and themes should guarantee the attention – and correct interpretation – of a specific audience. The way to understand genres, and explain their evolution and the changing fortunes of popularity and production, Barry Keith Grant explains, is as "collective expressions of contemporary life that strike a particularly resonant chord with audiences."⁹ Grant describes a contract between the generic work, its creator and the audience, with the work embodying conventions

⁶ John Fiske, "Popularity and the Politics of Information," in *Journalism and Popular Culture*, eds. Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks (London: Sage, 1992), 62.

⁷ Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 118.

⁸ Feuer, 119.

⁹ Barry Keith Grant, "Experience and Meaning in Genre Films," in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 116.

which will communicate the “appropriate meaning” to the primary audience.

The image of motorcycle culture in the mainstream news media received a challenge when *Easyriders*, “Entertainment for Adult Bikers,” debuted as a bi-monthly in 1971. An editorial staff of experienced cyclists saw the magazine as a chance to reach all bikers and to address the issue of motorcycling as a way of life rather than just transportation: “A big part of it is the simple thumbing of your nose at established society. A bike, a chopper, is just about the ultimate in ‘look at me — I’m different and I’m proud of it.’”¹⁰ Those eager to condemn the magazine saw no need for naked women in a magazine dedicated to motorcycles. A few complained that it further damaged motorcycling’s already poor image. Others, however, discovered a magazine that addressed an audience long ignored. “I want to compliment you on your rag,” one reader wrote. “All other chopper magazines appeal to a mass audience, which unfortunately includes 12 and 13 year old kids.”¹¹

A year and a half after its inception, in December 1972, *Easyriders’* staff announced the magazine would publish eight times a year. By 1976 it was monthly. Despite competition from more than a dozen established motorcycle magazines *Easyriders* openly embraced the “badass biker” image and carved out a successful niche. Its readers were not the country’s motorcycle enthusiasts, they already had magazines devoted to their interests. It was not for AMA members, motorcycle racers or dirt-bike riders, either. For the *Easyriders* reader, motorcycles were not just transportation or recreation, they were, quite simply, a way of life. *Easyriders* was a magazine for *bikers*, men who defined themselves by what they rode.

Writing in the 10th anniversary issue, editor Lou Kimzey explained that his staff’s original intent was to produce “a magazine for the readers — not a vehicle from which

¹⁰ Don Pfeil, “Pfeilings,” *Easyriders*, June 1971, 12.

¹¹ Rex Sheedy, “Hawg Rider,” *Easyriders*, February 1972, 8.

to sell ads. No road tests, no new products columns, no advertising ass-kissin' at all."¹² Other magazines could do those features. Kimzey stressed the magazine's honesty, an attribute which allowed its writers to "mingle with all bikers, even the really heavy ones," and the importance of brotherhood.¹³ Fights between motorcycle clubs, he argued, were just what the anti-bike forces wanted: "Don't forget there are some types that would just as soon see us all kill each other — it would save them the trouble. And don't forget the Nixon era when feds encouraged fighting among members of organizations and between organizations."¹⁴

In 1971 *Easyriders* was an oddity among magazines addressed to motorcycle riders. Its crass humor and lowbrow fiction were mixed with glossy photos of righteous Harleys and buxom women. At the same time, it spoke respectfully to a community of disenfranchised bikers, tailoring its editorial stance to a grim constituency and deriding the idea of co-existence and compromise. Despite rifts among bikers and paranoia concerning their own marginal standing in society, the magazine maintained its credibility with bikers while educating them and creating a sense of community for all riders. The mission *Easyriders* seemed to set for itself in its first decade was threefold: educate, coordinate, and celebrate.

Kimzey and *Easyriders* adhered to the no road tests or tech tips pledge for a number of years. There was no need then to educate its readers on how to build and repair motorcycles. Instead the magazine trained its attention on those institutions bent on destroying the biker subculture. In its third issue *Easyriders* announced the formation of an organization that would eventually become ABATE, A Brotherhood Against Totalitarian Enactments. For the first few years the ABATE pages, "Dedicated to

¹² Lou Kimzey, *Easyriders Special 10th Anniversary Edition*, June 1981, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

Freedom of the Road,” offered a healthy dose of information from around the world. The section, a monthly collection of news stories about laws affecting bikers and of the various slights they suffered, became *Easynews* in the late 1970s. Its new motto: “If it’s for the betterment of bikers, we’ll print it.”

Sometimes, as in September 1975, the section contained a state by state rundown of pending legislation affecting motorcyclists. As Connecticut was considering changes to its helmet law, *Easyriders* included names and addresses of representatives so readers could write letters voicing their support for the law’s repeal.¹⁵ Similarly, the May 1976 ABATE pages provided a mailing list of organizations in the U.S., England and Canada that “defend our right to the road and improve the conditions we ride in.”¹⁶ The October 1980 *Easynews* pages reported that a military blood bank pulled out of a planned blood drive because the sponsor, The Cavemen Motorcycle Club, seemingly gathered for “one big orgy.” “They’re just like a bunch of animals out there,” a spokesman said. “Neither I nor the blood bank wants to be associated with that sort of thing.” The slight was obvious: “The blood bank’s last-minute decision to pull out of the event will probably do more to damage the club’s public image than any public perception of bikers could ever do.”¹⁷

Legal discussions were common in *Easyriders*’ early issues, framed as reminders that bikers, though it was often hard to tell, had the same rights as citizens. A feature similar to the ABATE pages was “Rap Sheet,” a collection of briefs written by lawyer John Warren Giles and billed as “legal news in everyday language.” The May 1977 section included information on wiretaps, firearm permits and police surveillance.¹⁸ The article “Constitution—What Constitution?” offered an amendment-by-amendment screed on the new meaning of democracy in a country that had lost sight of its

¹⁵ “The Uselessness of Helmets,” *Easyriders*, September 1975, 58.

¹⁶ “Your Brothers for Freedom of the Road,” *Easyriders*, May 1976, 29.

¹⁷ “Bikers’ Offer Turned Down,” *Easyriders*, October 1980, 46.

¹⁸ John Warren Giles, “Rap Sheet,” *Easyriders*, May 1977, 16–17.

founding ideals: “It means that the government tolerates the actions of its citizens until such time as it decides to withdraw any given right or privilege.”¹⁹ Similarly, the article “Know Your Legal Rights When You’re Roused” outlined Miranda rights, defined probable cause and described what constituted an illegal search because “it is only good sense that you, the biker, should know at least what your rights are. It could save you a lot of lost time in some local pokey, or a lot of green, or both.”²⁰

Another article described the Consumer Protection Act and the Consumer Credit Code, informing readers that with the right knowledge some laws could be used to the bikers’ advantage. “You may be able to turn the tables on the dealer. The dealer who thought he had hooked a sucker may find a shark in the boat with him that’s too big for him to handle,” it concluded.²¹ Other articles outlined changes in gun laws, described how to use the Freedom of Information Act, and argued a prisoner’s constitutional right to uncensored mail.²² On occasion the magazine ventured directly into politics, as in the June 1976 issue that featured an interview with the Libertarian Party presidential candidate. Roger MacBride, in a bow to readers, called helmet laws an “especially gross” example of paternalistic government.²³

If by chance the law didn’t work for readers, the article “Getting Lost” provided advice and information on how to “go underground.” Despite the author’s disclaimer that he was not advocating doing anything illegal, he did allow that “there are some perfectly legal reasons for leaving town.”²⁴ Critical advice included the necessity of backing down from fights, appearing calm and happy at all times (“A hunted man looks hunted”), and blending in with the surroundings. Probably the most difficult

¹⁹ Bob Collins, “Constitution—What Constitution?” *Easyriders*, November 1976, 19.

²⁰ Leonard Strong, “Know Your Legal Rights When You’re Roused,” *Easyriders*, December 1972, 54.

²¹ Grease, “Let the Seller Beware,” *Easyriders*, May 1976, 21.

²² “The Kennedy–Rodino Anti-Gun Bill,” *Easyriders*, July 1980, 30–31; John Warren Giles, “The Nitty-Gritty about the Freedom of Information Act,” *Easyriders*, March 1977, 22–23; John Watson, “FOIA Part II,” *Easyriders*, April 1979, 50–51+; Bob Collins, “Right to Write” *Easyriders*, December 1975, 46.

²³ “Presidential Candidate Blasts Helmet Laws,” *Easyriders*, June 1976, 22.

²⁴ The Falcon, “Getting Lost,” *Easyriders*, September 1977, 15.

advice he offered was for interested readers to change social habits: “If you hang around with bikers exclusively, you may have to start getting into car-freak bars or go-kart tracks. Sorry, but it’s the hard truth, and we all know there are dudes who’ll turn you in for cash or a chance to get at your scooter.”²⁵

“Target Defendant Tactics” presented a lengthy transcript of a California prosecutor discussing legal strategies that effectively frustrated outlaw clubs. An editor’s note said the article gave “bike clubs the opportunity to see the tactics used to disrupt a club’s solidarity and cast a bad light on members trapped in the court system.”²⁶ While all the tactics outlined by the prosecutor seemed legitimate, such as filing cases separately and dragging them out as long as possible, whether they followed the spirit of the law is another question. The prosecutor rationalized that for too long outlaw clubs used the law to their benefit. Instead, he wanted to “make it just as nasty for him as he has made it for somebody on the streets.”²⁷

Research presented at the 1980 Motorcycle Safety Conference provided *Easyriders* yet another opportunity to refute regulations aimed at motorcyclists. The article is interesting for its temperate discussion of helmet laws and its acknowledgement that bikers often bear some responsibility for accidents. But the most important aspect of the conference, according to authors Hal and Lee Kendall, is that for the first time lawmakers and researchers sat down with hardcore motorcyclists and listened. The authors believed the conference was a turning point. “The way is open for safety experts to enter the real world and try to recognize our problems through our eyes instead of running to legislators with laudable causes and forcing upon us laws that we cannot physically comply with,” the article concluded.²⁸

Educating readers on legislation and on their rights was the first step in the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁶ “Target Defense Tactics,” *Easyriders*, February 1980, 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁸ Hal and Lee Kendall, “Motorcycle Safety Conference–1980,” *Easyriders*, October 1980, 91.

construction of a biker community. Coordinating the faithful was an additional step, and in that first decade *Easyriders'* efforts demanded that bikers and motorcycle enthusiasts rally against discriminatory legislation and work together to protect their freedom. In the October 1971 issue the article "Street Legal Chopper Circa 1973?" suggested that in two years motorcycles could be weighed down by dozens of state- and government-approved gadgets and gizmos, all intended to protect the motorcycle rider from himself.²⁹ In 1977 "The Muffler Sniffers" didn't just deride the DOT (Department of Transportation) cover-up of unsafe helmets, it attacked the EPA's emission standards for motorcycles. The author surmised that the government's plan was not just to wrest power from the states, but to force American cities to accept more mass transit. The call to fight bureaucracy was loud and clear: "Do we fight now for the continued right to ride our bikes or other personal vehicles, or do we wait until we're jostling in line to crowd onto the government RR (read cattle) cars."³⁰

The DOT came under attack again in the September 1975 article "Pappy's Last Great Fight," the story of Don (Pappy) Pittsley and a beginner's guide to Congressional lobbying. Pittsley, a motorcyclist and registered lobbyist, was fighting the DOT's practice of withholding federal funds from states that did not enact federally mandated safety measures. For a hearing on the state's helmet law Pittsley organized speakers, brought in experts to testify and filled the meeting hall with motorcyclists. When the hearing was over "it was evident that the bikers were well received by the committee.... The key was the overall good behavior of this large group and the obviously well prepared presentations with strong arguments."³¹

Easyriders did not miss an opportunity to proclaim legal victory, or to portend dire results if bikers did not work together. An early legal victory came in February 1972.

²⁹ "Street Legal Chopper Circa 1973?" *Easyriders*, October 1971, 16-17.

³⁰ Ed Armstrong, "The Muffler Sniffers," *Easyriders*, September 1977, 27.

³¹ Ed Armstrong, "Pappy's Last Great Fight," *Easyriders*, September 1975, 30.

Denver area bikers, with the aid of ABATE, convinced the state to reconsider a law regulating motorcycle suspensions.³² As has been noted, the ABATE and *Easynews* pages functioned as a forum for members to inform their brothers of regional activities and changes in state regulations, and to warn them away from cities where bikers were unfairly harassed by community law enforcement. The organization also offered motorcyclists the chance to fight for their own interests: “We must start now to put a stop to bad laws. We must educate the people who make the laws. We must present our side of the story, and we must present it from a position of strength, and in a professional, dignified manner.”³³

Along with efforts to coordinate legislative battles, *Easyriders* regularly advised readers how they could make their voices heard over the din of anti-bike forces. “A Letterwriter’s Guide to Congress” detailed how individuals could voice their opinion.³⁴ “The Do’s and Dont’s of Fighting Anti-Bike Legislation” again laid out ABATE’s strategy for navigating the bureaucratic maze, which included arranging for lobbyists and publicity.³⁵ But after years of fighting helmet laws, police harassment and “the myriad other infringements laid on us by a squirming bureaucracy,” the frustration showed in the article “The Meek Don’t Win.”³⁶ Strategies of patience and diplomacy were joined by civil disobedience and the possibility of violence: “Violence as an incidental tool used to accomplish particular goals, as in response to inflicted violence, is a strategic weapon that must not be discarded. And above all, don’t run from inflicted violence.”³⁷

The article foregrounded *Easyriders*’ familiar patriotism, noting, “We were born as

³² “Late Flash! Colorado Suspension Law Modified,” *Easyriders*, February 1972, 27.

³³ “The Power!” *Easyriders*, October 1972, 49.

³⁴ “A Letterwriter’s Guide to Congress,” *Easyriders*, August 1976, 30.

³⁵ Ed Armstrong, “The Do’s and Dont’s of Fighting Anti-Bike Legislation,” *Easyriders*, March 1973, 12-15.

³⁶ Ed Armstrong, “The Meek Don’t Win,” *Easyriders*, June 1976, 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

a nation in disobedience to the crown.”³⁸ Protest runs (an assemblage of bikers and motorcyclists that moves, “runs,” from one point to another) were one way that organizers attempted to peaceably disobey helmet laws. Clubs overcame a variety of attempts to block such a run in Oregon, all to make their argument visible to the public and to lawmakers. A photo feature in the November 1976 issue commemorated the event, and despite the fear that “motorcycle gatherings might appear to the public as threatening mobs,” the event was deemed a success.³⁹ The next year, however, a similar protest run in Ohio was not so fortunate. The headline, “Columbus Cops Use Gestapo Tactics to Break Up Peaceful (and legal) ABATE Helmet Protest,” pretty much sums up the story of a run on the state capital that attracted thousands of motorcyclists, all riding helmetless.⁴⁰

Protest runs didn't just bring unfair laws to the public's attention, they brought together all types of bikers. “Dresser riders to dirt riders are standing with their outlaw brothers on this issue,” an article noted. “Everyone has learned to respect the endeavors of others to prevent a free sport from being cluttered with restrictive laws.”⁴¹ It was that sense of community and brotherhood that *Easyriders* regularly trumpeted as a way to promote and protect motorcycling as a way of life. In “Scooter Trash Stick Together” *Easyriders* focused on the advantages of working together to win the war against discriminatory legislation: “Don't get sucked in by other rags sayin' East Coast this, California that, and Midwest in between — as far as scooter people go, it's one big family, and it'd be a happy one except for those stinkin' laws laid down on us by those bickerin' straights.”⁴²

Deaths and funerals have always brought communities together, and it is no

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁹ “In the Wind at Protest Runs,” *Easyriders*, November 1976, 40.

⁴⁰ “Columbus Cops Use Gestapo Tactics to Break Up Peaceful (and legal) ABATE Helmet Protest,” *Easyriders*, March 1977, 44.

⁴¹ “In the Wind at Protest Runs,” 42.

⁴² “Scooter Trash Stick Together,” *Easyriders*, May 1976, 41.

different in the biker community. A regular feature in *Easyriders* was “A Tribute to Brothers Lost,” a column of free obituaries and memorials for downed riders. “In the Wind,” a monthly section dedicated to photos sent in by readers, featured a biker funeral in March 1977. The article notes that the magazine could include funerals every issue, but did not want to give off such a “dismal vibe.” These pictures were different, however, the article noted. The deceased was a “member of our special breed,” an outlaw motorcycle club, and the photographs “revealed the ties that bind brothers together – together now and for as long as the patch is there as a bond. Together, and stronger than many blood relationships.”⁴³

Easyriders recognized the publicity outlaws elicited. In fact, in the article “This Type of Bullshit is Past” the magazine blamed the clubs’ turf wars for attracting unnecessary attention: “The sensational publicity of motorcycle gangs roaming the streets probably forced the responsibility down on the cops. They had to act ‘cause the outlaws were scaring the citizens to death.”⁴⁴ Rather than condemning the fighting, however, the article argued the only winner was law enforcement and “once the heat began breathin’ down on the bikers in an area, nobody got to ride.” Peaceful coexistence was the answer, the article concluded, because “there are too many good things happening, too many chicks out there, for us to spend our time beating on other bikers, or vice versa. And it sure as hell is too good a lifestyle to lose.”⁴⁵

All motorcyclists suffered some negative consequence due to the activities of outlaw motorcycle clubs like the Hell’s Angels. Law-abiding bikers, the independents, and those not affiliated with major clubs all suffered police harassment, anti-bike legislation and social opprobrium. They paid for their lifestyle choice, some with their lives. But society’s sympathy was ever with the automobile driver, the “cager,” who,

⁴³ “In the Wind at a Brother’s Funeral,” *Easyriders*, March 1977, 28.

⁴⁴ “This Type of Bullshit is Past,” *Easyriders*, April 1977, 13.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

after a fatal accident, claimed, “I didn’t even see the motorcycle.” Some bikers took the easy way out and rid themselves of motorcycles, but *Easyriders* readers did not. Consequently, the magazine’s most important community function was as a monthly celebration of the biker lifestyle. Each issue, through its editorial content and fiction, invoked the primary themes of independence and individuality and boasted the moral superiority of motorcyclists, pushing aside momentarily the dreary reality of most bikers’ lives.

Easyriders provided bikers a self-image they could be proud of, even if they were out of a job and their only possession was their chopper. The magazine served as the moral compass of biker culture, endeavoring to define what inclusion in the “brotherhood of bikers” required, and, ultimately, establishing what amounted to a code of acceptable behavior. A clear declaration of *Easyriders*’ principles, a sort of biker manifesto, was published in 1977. Invoking images of the gunslinger and the American frontier, the article portrays bikers as the last of a dying breed, throwbacks to an era when men accepted the consequences of their actions and protected their personal liberties. Modern men, the editorial suggested, have ceded those liberties to a safe and suffocating government: “Most people are so chickenshit they’d rather have a Hitler or a Nixon call the shots than bear the burden of running their own lives.”⁴⁶ Bikers, on the other hand, remained true to America’s libertarian ideals and should be applauded instead of harassed. It was clear to the editors that America needed bikers more than it needed the “pitiful clown” who “long ago had all the real man squeezed out of him. He’s signed his life away to work for some rich bastard or some government agency. And what he wants most is his precious security.”⁴⁷

In “Heroes” the magazine’s effort to sanctify cycling recalled the military’s motorcycle corps. “Hold up your heads, bros,” the article cheered, “‘cause you’re

⁴⁶ Kimzey, “A statement: Bikers — A National Resource,” *Easyriders*, September 1977, 87.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

the proud descendants of an elite band of biker bums and scooter trash.” The piece ended with the hopeful admonition, “Ride free and stay tough, brothers; they just might need us again.”⁴⁸ Another article, subtitled “Why Bikers are Bikers,” alluded to motorcycle outlaws as modern-day Vikings, but with new terrain and new challenges.⁴⁹ Whatever the mythic image used to redefine the bikers’ sense of self, there was reassurance that the lifestyle was valuable, that it would survive.

Each monthly issue of *Easyriders* contained more than the regular editorial features such as Easynews and Rap Sheet and rhetoric-filled articles on helmet laws and emission standards, however. The magazine featured women, generally naked, draped across righteous Harleys and inviting readers to enjoy the biker lifestyle. The magazine finally felt it needed to address an obvious question in the October 1980 issue: “Why do grubby bikers get all the broads?” The mystique of the biker, *Easyriders* readers were informed, was that women, not unlike men, want freedom and excitement. And how better to experience life than with a biker who “ain’t sittin’ on his ass till his teeth rot.” Bikers are men of action and “that’s what makes a biker attractive, no matter how grubby the fucker is. It’s his life and the intensity with which he live it — to the max.”⁵⁰

Far more important to the construction of the biker image, however, was *Easyriders*’ “leg wettin” fiction. Each issue was fat with stories that reiterated themes of freedom and brotherhood. The biker genre’s familiar images, characters and plots were folded into stories where bikers enjoyed sympathetic, sometimes heroic roles and always came out winners. In *Easyriders*’ first year it published two lengthy stories which featured the adventures of Reno, Jere, Tiny and the rest of the celebrated Booze Fighters MC. In “Joint Venture” the club visits revenge on a “narc”

⁴⁸ D. Swift, “Heroes,” *Easyriders*, January 1979, 28.

⁴⁹ Renegade, “A Day in the Life,” *Easyriders*, February 1980, 30.

⁵⁰ Renegade, “Mystique: Why do Grubby Bikers get all the Broad’s?” *Easyriders*, October 1980, 75.

who defiled Reno's motorcycle.⁵¹ The second story, "Fringe Benefits of Owning a Chopper," was a clearer delineation of the advantages that accrue to bikers. This time the bikers shuck and jive the morning away at a pool hall, then go for a ride to the beach where beautiful women swoon over manly men on powerful motorcycles.⁵²

The story's conclusion sees the bikers roused by a pair of police officers. One, a rookie, wants nothing more than to prove his mettle by locking up the bikers. The more experienced officer, however, seems to accept the fact that bikers are often singled out: "Most descriptions given by complaining people are exaggerated, to make the culprits appear more menacing than they really are."⁵³ The three avoid arrest by working together and providing each other an alibi. When bikers work independently, as happens in "Trip Cancelled," the results are deadly. Gordo Boyle, a "very intelligent dude," carefully cases the motorcycle shop he plans to rob. But he treats his biker accomplice as a tool and plans to leave him hanging once he has sold the stolen merchandise. Unfortunately, Gordo is too smart for his own good and dies during the commission of the crime.⁵⁴

Other stories implied that bikers should deal with each other honestly and never burn a brother. "Goodby, Wally" and "The Lyingest Cyclist I Ever Knew!" focused on liars and braggarts who were always to be avoided and never trusted.⁵⁵ Likewise Larry Cole's story "The Snitch" suggested that even the bond between warring clubs is closer than the bikers' ties to society and law enforcement. Preacher overhears plans to raid the Knights, a rival club. Though the Knights are skeptical they listen to his story, and together they make fools out of the police.⁵⁶ In "Harley Heaven" Grease learns the consequences of stealing from other bikers by spending a hellish afterlife

⁵¹ Louis Bosque, "Joint Venture," *Easyriders*, October 1971, 24-25+.

⁵² Louis Bosque, "The Fringe Benefits of Owning a Chopper," *Easyriders*, February 1972, 24-25+.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁴ Bill Lance, "Trip Cancelled," *Easyriders*, December 1975, 16-18+.

⁵⁵ Donald P. McVey, "Goodby, Wally," *Easyriders*, May 1973, 16-17+; Weird Willie, "The Lyingest Cyclist I Ever Knew," *Easyriders*, June 1976, 20-21.

⁵⁶ Larry Cole, "The Snitch," *Easyriders*, November 1975, 14-15.

staked out on a golf course, “showered, shaved, given a crew cut and sprayed with the most fragrant underarm deodorant.”⁵⁷

Unlike the intelligent Gordo Boyle, characters created by J. J. Solari, who wrote regularly for the magazine for 20 years, were never troubled by intelligence. Rather, their stupidity was used to puncture society’s inflated sense of superiority. “Bike Telethon” is a fitting example, relating the story of a club that presents a telethon against death as a means of raising money. The television station and the news media think they are using the club, but in the end the bikers deceive everyone, including the mindless audience that pledges money for the cause. Viewers who watch the telethon’s unlikely blend of sex, nudity and profanity are revealed as no less decadent than the bikers.⁵⁸ In Solari’s “The Secret Technique,” bikers embarrass a police officer who envies bikers their ability to attract women.⁵⁹ And in “The Pasadena Run” bikers enter a float in the Rose Bowl parade, with predictable results.⁶⁰

If there was one consistent element to *Easyriders*’ early fiction it was that bikers were down on their luck. But being broke, out of work, or estranged from a wife or girlfriend was to be expected. The resourceful biker found ways to survive despite the down times. In “Two Easy Rip-Offs” a biker who is “too proud to borrow and too dumb to save” hustles a meal while pimply-faced convenience store clerks leer at his girlfriend.⁶¹ Broke and desperate, the protagonist of “Gotta Job” passes a test of pride and stamina to earn his keep.⁶² And finally, in “The Gift Horse,” a biker whose girlfriend has run off with a “140-pound puss engineer with a shag rug and a BankAmericard” picks up \$200 by knowing when to play it smart.⁶³

⁵⁷ “Harley Heaven,” *Easyriders*, August 1976, 68.

⁵⁸ J. J. Solari, “Bike Telethon,” *Easyriders*, June 1976, 12-13+.

⁵⁹ J. J. Solari, “The Secret Technique,” *Easyriders*, July 1979, 28-29+.

⁶⁰ J. J. Solari, “The Pasadena Run,” *Easyriders*, September 1975, 18-19+.

⁶¹ Judd Boyle, “Two Easy Rip-Offs,” *Easyriders*, December 1975, 13.

⁶² Comissar, “Gotta Job,” *Easyriders*, August 1980, 56-57+.

⁶³ Sam Starkey, “The Gift Horse,” *Easyriders*, April 1979, 34.

The themes of education, coordination and celebration united in the cautionary tale “Death of a Chopper.” Set in the future when government legislates every aspect of its citizens’ lives, and where motorcycles are illegal because they are too dangerous, Rebel takes a last ride and experiences the freedom others have given up. Government was able to act unilaterally to deny bikers their freedom because motorcyclists had refused to act as one. “We should have backed those people like ABATE, long before we did,” Rebel muses. “We should have been united then. Standing asshole deep in unity on the front steps of every fuckin’ state building that housed a bill that restricted us from our cause.”⁶⁴ His last act of defiance is to give the finger to the police as he crashes into a roadblock.

It was only natural that *Easyriders* would, in time, become required reading for the biker wannabe. In his book *Hog Fever*, Richard LaPlante details the beginning of his own motorcycle fervor as he leafed through an issue. “*Easyriders* was as much about biker lifestyle as it was about the motorcycles themselves,” he writes. “The pictures of wide, open roads, the bikes, and the people who rode them acted like a catalyst to me, bringing back a strange longing for ‘sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll.’”⁶⁵ Each issue emphasized freedom and hard-line resistance to a conformity which ran counter to the true American spirit.

In the summer of 1996 *Easyriders* celebrated its 25th anniversary. To mark the occasion the magazine re-printed issue number one and packaged it with a fat anniversary edition that looked back on 25 years of accomplishment. The Easynews section noted, “The creation of *Easyriders* magazine in the early ‘70s coincided with the first real attack on motorcyclists’ rights.”⁶⁶ But even though the magazine’s

⁶⁴ Rabbit Cole, “Death of a Chopper,” *Easyriders*, July 1975, 19.

⁶⁵ Richard LaPlante, *Hog Fever* (New York: Forge, 1995), 32.

⁶⁶ “Looking Back, Seeing Ahead,” *Easyriders*, June 1996, 19.

impact on motorcycling and the biker lifestyle must be recognized and acknowledged, it was clear as early as the magazine's 10th anniversary edition that it had moved away from its original intentions.

Not only had the featured motorcycles become more glamorous, more expensive and less roadworthy, but tech tips, advice columns and product reviews had made their way on to pages. Even more revealing was the decision by the Harley-Davidson Motorcycle Company to advertise in the pages of *Easyriders*. In May 1981 two advertising spreads hailed the new Harley models, one a Sturgis edition, named for the yearly gathering of the faithful in Sturgis, South Dakota. The company had only sporadically advertised in the magazine in the 1970s, then stopped completely in 1978 because, as Lou Kimzey wrote, it did not like the *Easyriders* image of bikers. But when AMF (American Machine & Foundry) dumped the company and it was purchased by a consortium of Harley faithful in 1981, it was reborn — for a new breed of rider.

By the 1990s *Easyriders* had little use for the world of outlaw bikers, or even of the working class bikers that supported it through the 1970s. Sylvester Stallone's photo on the January 1989 cover was evidence that motorcycling had become chic and so too had *Easyriders*. The magazine's focus was less on entertaining and educating an audience of hardcore bikers and free spirits and less willing to stand up to mainstream authority. It was content to offer readers a mix of highly stylized bikes, softcore pornography, trendy lifestyle features and expensive merchandise. The magazine reached a new level of self-promotion when the December 1988 issue included a 32-page pullout advertising section featuring expensive leathers, T-shirts, jewelry and assorted biker knick-knacks — all officially licensed by Harley-Davidson and *Easyriders*.

Easyriders' readership had changed, attracting more middle-class bikers and professionals who enjoyed riding their high-priced status symbols on weekends. So what were they getting from *Easyriders*? Community building and learning the biker's

code could no longer be the objective. The answer is they identified with the lifestyle and with men who were free to do the things they could only hope to some day experience. In “400 Years of Riding Free – Sorta,” L. Clayton Johnson stroked readers’ egos and exploited that sense of identification by telling them they were ideologically related to “free-spirited” Vikings, medieval knights, pirates, frontiersmen and cowboys. They were fundamentally different from citizens who “wake up in the mornin’ sayin,’ ‘Stop it.’ All day, every time they see somebody enjoyin’ life or enjoyin’ bein’ alive, they say, ‘Stop it.’”⁶⁷

Peter Larsen believes genres are systems that “function ‘ideologically’ in the sense that they reproduce and reinforce beliefs of how social reality is (and should be) structured.”⁶⁸ Clearly, the first decade of *Easyriders* expressed a singular perspective on the way things ought to be. *Easyriders* spoke to a specific audience through language and imagery it could interpret. It was, moreover, a voice for a community. Rob Anderson, Robert Dardenne and George Killenberg note that “within a pluralistic society, packets of smaller communities, both territorial and associational, struggle to retain identity and solidarity within a larger community of competing values, priorities and goals.”⁶⁹ Their analysis suggests the essence of community media is to define and establish its values, resolve problems that divide it and connect people through “shared experience and fate.”⁷⁰

Though it did not own the niche for long, the first decade of *Easyriders*’ existence was a crucial one for what it revealed about bikers, motorcycle enthusiasts and one-percenters. Forsaken by a country that preached equality and inclusiveness, harassed by police officers and flushed through the justice system, disowned by

⁶⁷ L. Clayton Johnson, “400 Years of Riding Free – Sorta,” *Easyriders*, August 1988, 37.

⁶⁸ Peter Larsen, “Textual Analysis of Fictional Media Content,” in *A Handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communication Research*, eds. Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Nicholas W. Jankowski (London: Routledge, 1991), 129.

⁶⁹ Rob Anderson, Robert Dardenne and George Killenberg, *The Conversation of Journalism: Communication, Community and News* (New York: Praeger, 1994), 99.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

citizens and the American Motorcycle Association, bikers were an oppressed lot. The media-created image of bikers was predominantly negative, making it necessary they discover their own voice. *Easyriders* was the first magazine to reach out to them and create a sense of community through education, coordination and celebration. For good or ill, *Easyriders* helped make it possible for the lifestyle to survive long enough to be subsumed into the larger minority culture.

Easyriders' creation of the biker anti-hero through its fiction, moreover, was a self-conscious expansion of myths — the outlaw and the loner among them — which had been suggested by other media. The magazine re-made bikers as the last representatives of American freedom, as the ideological heirs of freebooters and pioneers. They were, the magazine suggested, wise in their ignorance and resolute in their outsider status. Their deviance was freely and proudly acknowledged, but it was not due to mere criminality, brazen sexuality or dislike of 9-to-5 employment. Instead their deviance was denoted by the singular desire to be free, to remain outside the mainstream. If there was one thing that bikers and motorcyclists suggested to citizens, it was that they were unencumbered by the demands of society. They could pick up and go at a moment's notice.

That *Easyriders* in time moved smoothly into the mainstream should not deny the fact that it was subversive. *Easyriders* was not only free to criticize, it was expected. The magazine chose to take its stand against laws whose only reason for existence was to protect those who did not want to be protected. Its formula for at once entertaining and addressing bikers' concerns revealed the value in its original position, the attractiveness of the message to a broad spectrum of readers, and the disparity between their definition of what "ought to be" and what citizens believed.

In the end, it seems only fitting that as a parting shot at the social mainstream one-percenters coined "citizen" as a derisive term for those who willingly recognized society's legal and moral boundaries. *Easyriders* did not preach anarchy or the

overthrow of the government. It was, in fact, fairly level-headed, sometimes mainstream, in the advice it offered to readers who wanted to change the system and protect a way of life. In many ways this made *Easyriders* even more dangerous. Truly subversive magazines can be shut down; *Easyriders* used the law to benefit its readers and to celebrate their differences.

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