

Bessie Stringfield

Although it's traditionally been a male-dominated past-time, more and more women are taking to the open road on a motorcycle, whether it's a sport, cruiser, or touring bike. According to the Motorcycle Industry Council, there are nearly four and a half million women motorcycle riders on the road today. In fact, one of every 10 motorcycle owners is a woman and the number of women motorcycle riders is increasing at a higher rate than the number of male riders – 28 percent versus 7 percent.

That was not always the case. In the 1920s it was rare to see a woman riding a motorcycle down the road. It was even rarer to see a black woman in the saddle. But Bessie B. Stringfield never let that stop her. She is credited with breaking down barriers for both women and African-Americans. At age 16, Bessie wanted a motorcycle, and although “good girls didn't ride motorcycles”, Bessie was given a motorcycle, a 1928 Indian Scout. Bessie did not have any lessons or prior knowledge on how to operate a motorcycle but just climbed on the bike. She was a natural – a gift she attributed to “The Man Upstairs”.

By age 19, Bessie began her journeys throughout the lower 48 states. She would toss a penny on a map and where it landed would be her destination. Thus began eight long-distance, solo rides across the United States. During the era of segregation and racial prejudice, especially in the Deep South, Bessie remained fearless. One time she was followed by a man in a pickup truck who ran her off the road. She drew courage from her Catholic faith and “The Man Upstairs” and the values she learned from her adoptive mother. At the age of 19, she became the first African-American woman to travel cross-country solo. She also rode throughout Europe, Brazil, and Haiti.

“If you had black skin, you couldn't get a place to stay,” she said. “I know the Lord would take care of me and He did. If I found black folks, I'd stay with them. If not, I'd sleep at filling stations on my motorcycle.”

During World War II, Bessie worked for the Army as a civilian motorcycle dispatch rider. The only woman in her unit, she completed rigorous training maneuvers. With a military crest on the front of her own blue [Harley-Davidson](#), she carried classified documents between domestic bases for four years. In between her travels, Bessie wed and divorced six times but had no children. Settling in Miami in the 1950s, she became a licensed practical nurse. She also founded the Iron Horse Motorcycle Club. Once, disguised as a man, Bessie won a flat track race but was denied the prize money when she took off her helmet. Her antics, such as riding while standing in the saddle of her Harley, attracted the local press. The reporters called her the “Negro Motorcycle Queen” and later the “Motorcycle Queen of Miami”. She was especially happy on Milwaukee iron. In addition to her first bike, the Indian Scout, Bessie owned 27 Harleys. She said, “To me, a Harley is the only motorcycle ever made.”

Late in life, Bessie suffered from symptoms caused by an enlarged heart. The doctors wanted her to quit riding. She told her doctors, “If I don't ride, I won't live long. And so I never did quit.” Bessie died in 1993 at the age of 82.

In 1990, Bessie Stringfield was honored in the [American Motorcycle Association's \(AMA\)](#) inaugural exhibit, “Heroes of Harley-Davidson.” In 2000, the AMA created the Bessie Stringfield Memorial Award to recognize outstanding achievement by female motorcyclists and in 2002, inducted Bessie into the Motorcycle Hall of Fame.