



Bessie Stringfield

The life and times of African-American motorcycling pioneer Bessie B. Stringfield seem like the stuff of which legends are made. Bessie has been written about in books, magazines and newspapers. She has been mentioned in television documentaries, and someday there may be a film dramatization based on her life story. In 1990, when the AMA opened the first Motorcycle Heritage Museum, Bessie was featured in its inaugural exhibit on Women in Motorcycling. A decade later, the AMA instituted the Bessie Stringfield Award to honor women who are leaders in motorcycling. And in 2002, she was inducted into the Motorcycle Hall of Fame.

Bessie – BB as she was known among friends – would probably be amused and yet proud of all the attention. Referring to her adventures and her 60-plus years of riding, she once quipped: "I was somethin'! What I did was fun and I loved it."

In the 1930s and 1940s, Bessie took eight long-distance, solo rides across the United States. Speaking to a reporter, she dismissed the notion that "nice girls didn't go around riding motorcycles in those days." Further, she was apparently fearless at riding through the Deep South when racial prejudice was a tangible threat. Was Bessie consciously championing the rights of women and African-Americans? Bessie would most likely have said she was simply living her life in her own way.

In interviews with author Ann Ferrar, Bessie revealed how she drew courage from two things: Her Catholic faith in Jesus Christ, whom she called "The Man Upstairs," and the values she learned from her adoptive mother.

Early on, Bessie had to steel herself against life's disappointments. Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1911, as a child she was brought to Boston but was orphaned by age 5.

"An Irish lady raised me," she recalled. "I'm not allowed to use her name. She gave me whatever I wanted. When I was in high school I wanted a motorcycle. And even though good girls didn't ride motorcycles, I got one."

She was 16 when she climbed aboard her first bike, a 1928 Indian Scout. With no prior knowledge of how to operate the controls, Bessie proved to be a natural. She insisted that the Man Upstairs gave her the skills.

"My [Irish] mother said if I wanted anything I had to ask Our Lord Jesus Christ, and so I did," she said. "He taught me and He's with me at all times, even now. When I get on the motorcycle I put the Man Upstairs on the front. I'm very happy on two wheels."

She was especially happy on Milwaukee iron. Her one Indian notwithstanding, Bessie said of the 27 Harleys she owned in her lifetime, "To me, a Harley is the only motorcycle ever made."

At 19, she began tossing a penny over a map and riding to wherever it landed. Bessie covered the 48 lower states. Using her natural skills and can-do attitude, she did hill climbing and trick riding in carnival stunt shows. But it was her faith that got her through many nights.

"If you had black skin you couldn't get a place to stay," she said. "I knew 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." She laid her jacket on the handlebars as a pillow and rested her feet on the rear fender.

In between her travels, Bessie wed and divorced six times, declaring, "If you kissed, you got married." After she and her first husband were deeply saddened by the loss of three babies, Bessie had no more children. Upon divorcing her third husband, Arthur Stringfield, she said, "He asked me to keep his name because I'd made it famous!"

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. She learned how to weave a makeshift bridge from rope and tree limbs to cross swamps, though she never had to do so in the line of duty. With a military crest on the front of her own blue Harley, a "61," she carried documents between domestic bases.

Bessie encountered racial prejudice on the road. One time she was followed by a man in a pickup truck who ran her off the road, knocking her off her bike. She downplayed her courage in coping with such incidents. "I had my ups and downs," she shrugged.

In the 1950s, Bessie bought a house in a Miami, Florida suburb. She became a licensed practical nurse and founded the Iron Horse Motorcycle Club. Disguised as a man, Bessie won a flat track race but was denied the prize money when she took off her helmet. Her other antics – such as riding while standing in the saddle of her Harley – attracted the local press. Reporters called her the "Negro Motorcycle Queen" and later the "Motorcycle Queen of Miami." In the absence of children, Bessie found joy in her pet dogs, some of whom paraded with her on her motorcycle.

Late in life, Bessie suffered from symptoms caused by an enlarged heart. "Years ago the doctor wanted to stop me from riding," she recalled. "I told him if I don't ride, I won't live long. And so I never did quit."

Before she died in 1993 at the age of 82, Bessie said, "They tell me my heart is three times the size it's supposed to be." An apt metaphor for this unconventional woman whose heart and spirited determination have touched so many lives.

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Year Inducted: 2002

Achievements:

In the 1940s, "The Motorcycle Queen of Miami" broke down barriers for women and African American motorcyclists at the same time, completing eight solo cross-country tours and serving as a U.S. Army motorcycle dispatch rider.

