



THE WAY I SEE IT *by Genevieve Schmitt*

History Revisited

The contestants knew they were part of something bigger than themselves.

TODAY WE CALL THEM PIONEERS, but in 1915 when Effie and Avis Hotchkiss hopped on their 1915 Harley-Davidson sidecar to ride it from one coast of the US to the other, they were just answering the call of their

adventurous spirits. Actually, Effie was the adventurous one. Her mom, Avis, went along for the ride because it was the only way she'd let her daughter embark on such an audacious journey. That's when the sidecar was attached to the motorcycle. Mom rode alongside daughter on the cross-country, two-wheeled odyssey, the first-ever sidecar transcontinental trip by two women, which crowned them pioneers.

There are those today who enjoy hearing these stories. And there are those who immerse themselves in these kinds of pioneering tales, those who dig for untold stories and yet-to-be-discovered photographs. Cris Sommer Simmons is one of those people. Cris loves motorcycle history so much that she authored a book chronicling women motorcyclists from the first half of the 20th century, women who rode when it was not socially acceptable. The photos and stories in her coffee-table hardcover book, *The American Motorcycle Girls: 1900-1950* shed light, for the first time ever, on the lives and personalities of these daring women.

For several years, Cris lived vicariously through these ladies. What would it have been like to live and ride a motorcycle during those early days of motorized two-wheeled transportation and be a woman at that? The question would permeate Cris' mind as she stared at the 1915 Harley-Davidson three-speed V-twin she and her husband, Pat Simmons, lead singer of the Doobie Brothers, own. The bike is much like the one Effie and Avis rode.

Imagine Cris' excitement when an opportunity arose to answer part of her question: what would it be like to ride a motorcycle during those days? The Motorcycle Cannonball Endurance Run was announced early last year with organizers seeking hearty souls to ride pre-1916 motorcycles from one coast to the other. "Nobody has ever done anything like this before," Cris says. "I knew I wanted to be a part of it." For months, she and Pat prepared their old steed, rebuilding the engine, putting on fresh tires, making sure the aged motorcycle could handle the transcontinental journey. On September 16, 2010, she, along with 44 other riders, gathered ceremoniously in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, for the first day of what would be a history-making, two-week, 3,294-mile excursion all the way to Santa Monica, California.

Cris knew this ride would be more than a test of mettle for her and her vintage bike. She'd also be writing a new chapter in history by being the only American woman in this endurance run. She assembled an all-female support crew, Athena Ransom, Laura Klock, and Toast Boyd, and named them Team Effie to honor the pioneering rider.

After two weeks on the road, Cris and her 95-year-old motorcycle rolled down Santa Monica pier coming in 20th in a field of 37 riders who made it the whole way. "It was one of the most incredible experiences of my life," Cris says, smiling from ear to ear. "It was hard, but the camaraderie and the friendship of the riders helping each other was amazing.

That's what I'll take away the most."

If you've ever been a part of a special event like this in motorcycling, you know the kind of camaraderie Cris is talking about. For 17 days, a group of die-hard, vintage-motorcycle enthusiasts got together to ride the motorcycles they admire so much. Their endless hours of tinkering and toying would be put to the ultimate test. And, boy, were they tested. But everyone rallied round each other. The contestants knew they were part of something bigger than themselves. "What was amazing was the teamwork of everybody helping each other," recalls Cris. "Like, I broke a pushrod and someone was there to loan me one. Somebody else's mag went out, and I had a spare with me. Everybody was helping everybody."

Not surprisingly, Cris plans to write a book about her Cannonball experience, an experience made all the more special because she was able to revisit history. In the wee hours of the first day of the run, Cris walked out to the beach in North Carolina and scooped up some water from the Atlantic Ocean in a jar, just as Effie and Avis did nearly a century ago. That jar traveled with her in her saddlebag across the country. When she arrived in Santa Monica, Cris walked down to the water's edge and slowly poured out some of the Atlantic Ocean water into the Pacific Ocean, just as Effie and Avis did. Cris then went a step further, stamping her own personal mark on this revisitation of history. "I couldn't let go of all of the water. I just had to keep some, so I poured out half and then I scooped up some from the Pacific and mixed the two waters together. I now have that jar on my desk." A symbol of a moment in time. A moment in history. **AIM**

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