



## THE WAY I SEE IT BY GENEVIEVE SCHMITT

# Who I Admire

When I started riding a motorcycle 20 years ago, I was often asked which female motorcyclist inspired me to ride. My answer always had me looking back in history, citing one or more of the women

considered pioneers in motorcycling. Those women who rode in the early 1900s did so a) when it was not socially acceptable for a woman to ride, and b) when riding a motorcycle on the dirt streets was a challenging feat. Two such women I especially admire are Augusta and Adeline Van Buren. In 1916, the sisters rode from New York to California, becoming the first females to do a cross-country trip on solo motorcycles. They had to contend with washboard roads, heavy rains, and mud for much of the way.

Today, with the increase in the number of women taking to two wheels, I now can look to my peers and friends to find women I admire and who inspire, friends like Cris Sommer-Simmons. Cris was recently in the spotlight for writing the coffee-table book *The American Motorcycle Girls: 1900-1950* that chronicles pioneering female riders. Cris' research must have really moved her because, in September, she's embarking on a momentous, challenging motorcycle ride. She'll be piloting a 1915 Harley-Davidson motorcycle from coast to coast, reminiscent of the Van Buren sisters. Cris is riding that rusty old kickstarter across the country in the Motorcycle Cannonball Run, and get this — she'll be the first American woman to do so. Hooray! There's one other woman participating, and she is from Europe. This event, now filled to capacity, signed up a limited number of riders who are required to make the 3,320-mile transcontinental ride on pre-1916 motorcycles. Lucky for Cris, she and her husband, Pat, own the old two-wheeler, which must be one of the reasons she even thought of doing this ride. Riders will leave Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on September 10, following a painstakingly mapped out route that avoids interstates for all but 100 miles. Approximately two weeks later, they will arrive in Santa Monica, California, and the rider with the fastest time wins the trophy. The last time I communicated with this mother of three, she was dismantling the aged machine and hauling it to a mechanic for a thorough inspection and rebuild. While the bike is getting its overhaul, Cris is revamping her motorcycling wardrobe, searching for a vintage riding outfit so she can dress the part. Now there's a woman I admire: one who's reaching beyond personal boundaries, doing something most women wouldn't consider, and inspiring us all in the process.

Another inspiring woman is someone I met at last summer's American Motorcyclist Association International Women and

Motorcycling Conference. Lois Pryce, otherwise known as "Lois on the Loose." That nickname stuck with her after she published a book by that title chronicling a ride she did from Alaska to Argentina all by herself. Lois is a fiery redhead with a personality to match. Working a nine-to-five job staring at cubicle walls was no match for the passion stirring inside her to create excitement in her life and see the world. A motorcycle license was her ticket to freedom from what was shaping up to be a traditional life. After her Lois on the Loose tour, she decided to ride across the entire continent of Africa, again, all by herself. Hearing her speak at the closing banquet of the conference with her cute-as-a-button British accent, I realized (as I'm sure many of the ladies in the room did) that Lois is like a lot of women — adventurous, vibrant, full of energy, and a dreamer. What sets Lois apart though from most of us, man or woman, is that she dreams big and then sets out to achieve those dreams no matter what perceived danger or fear may be looming. In fact, when asked if she was ever scared on her journeys, she mentions only one time. It was when she was forced to take a train for safety reasons in the Congo. She rode in a flatbed wagon with a troop of 40 marauding, armed Congolese soldiers who were all drunk and stoned. After several hours sitting there frozen in terror, she tried to sneak a chocolate biscuit out of her luggage. The biggest soldier spied her covert actions and demanded at gunpoint that she hand over the entire packet of biscuits.

There are many more women embarking on extraordinary, life-changing journeys, setting records, and reaching new heights. Take, for instance, my friend Carla King who continues to vacation in far-out places like China, India, and Morocco all by herself on a motorcycle. There's Doris Moron, who, at 53, sold everything to ride solo around the world. And my friend Laura Klock who's set records for riding her bike really, really fast at the Bonneville Salt Flats and encouraging, yes, encouraging, her two daughters to follow their dreams of doing the same. I am humbled to be part of this generation of pioneering female motorcycle riders.

*Genevieve Schmitt is the founder of WomenRidersNow.com, the leading source of motorcycling lifestyle news and reviews. E-mail her at [gschmitt@womenridersnow.com](mailto:gschmitt@womenridersnow.com).*