

Cool women on hot bikes

Kerstin Schlote February 7, 2015

Cheryl Swinamer hated her pimples.

As a teenager in 1969, she went to a drugstore and picked up a box of Stridex Cleansing Pads. She opened the jar, peeled off the lid that hid an advertised prize and read, “You won a motorcycle.”

The motorcycle, a 65cc red Honda with a grey seat, arrived in a crate while Swinamer was in school. Her father opened the package and stared at a puzzle of motorcycle parts. He didn’t want his daughter to find her prize in pieces, so he dropped by the next motorcycle shop. When Swinamer returned from school, she danced around her assembled motorbike.

As the only 17-year-old girl in Riverview, New Brunswick, who owned a motorbike, she would take her sisters and girlfriends for rides. The boys in school asked if they could borrow her Honda to practise for their license. Other girls said she only wanted to show off, that she felt better than anyone else. But Swinamer just smiled.

“It’s a freedom,” she says, now 61. “The freedom of being one with nature, with the wind and the sun. A feeling of flying, soaring. Even when you drive through the countryside and you get that farm-fresh smell of cows and pigs.”

After she got married in 1974, children and housework took up most of her time. Swinamer, now MacLaggan, decided to sell her Honda to the mailman, who had eyed it in their driveway. For years she missed motorbiking until her husband picked up their common hobby in 1995. About 20 years later, she found out about the [Motor Maids](#), joining the [Atlantic Canada District](#), and was enthralled by the association’s history.



The Motor Maids



Motor Maids was established in 1940, after two women scoured the United States for fellow female riders. The Motor Maids has grown from 51 to more than 1,300 members today. It is the largest and oldest female riding organization in North America.

Women who age from 16 to more than 90 years old travel hundreds of kilometers to go ride with the “gals,” attend meetings and annual conventions including the Motor Maid’s 75th anniversary. The three-day celebration will take place in Moncton this summer and will also be the first convention ever held in Atlantic Canada.

Denise Pelrine, Atlantic Canada district director, and her team have been planning the celebration for years. From as far as California, about 300 to 500 women will explore New Brunswick on two wheels. One Maid, Gloria Struck, will celebrate her 90th birthday at the convention. A biker since her teens, she plans to leave her home in New Jersey on her Harley Davidson Heritage Softail.

“Age doesn’t make a difference,” said Denise Pelrine. “The Motor Maids are a very supportive, friendly bunch. We always encourage other female riders to join no matter how much experience they have.”

Across North America

All Canadian Motor Maids belong to one of 38 districts. While members from the west join the geographically closer American districts, those in Quebec and Ontario form the Eastern Canada body, and riders from the Maritimes and Newfoundland belong to the Atlantic Canada district, which has tripled its membership in two years.

Gail Neilson



The first member in the Atlantic district was Gail Neilson. The New Brunswicker heard about the association when her son married a Motor Maid from Ontario in 1989. The Atlantic Canada district didn't exist at that time, so Neilson rode her motorbike across three provinces to meet with the group. Motor Maids have to arrive on two wheels to events, unless they're a Golden Life Member, which means membership for more than 50 years.

Before social media, all communication among North American Motor Maids happened via mail.

"You had to wait weeks to see, for example, photos from the latest meeting," said Neilson, who will turn 75 at the big event this summer.

She believes Facebook has brought the groups closer together, because members can update their friends with instant messages and pictures. The women also use Facebook to ask others to join for a ride.

Riding with the gals

Motor Maids usually spend a whole day biking. On a 300 to 500 kilometer ride, they stop regularly for snacks, laughs and discover attractions such as museums, markets, little boutiques and cafés. Their white leather vests attract the attention of locals who are sometimes surprised to see a group of women on heavy machines.

According to Kathy Ames, co-assistant district director, seniors and women have become the quickest growing population among motorbikers.

"Forty years ago, women were still more housebound. Now, they are professional women who are used to be assertive, used to do what they want and don't say, 'That's a man thing, I can't do that.'"

Ames joined the group after her sister-in-law met Motor Maids at the annual Moncton Motorbike and ATV Show, where they always have a booth.

"They are us, they are our age and older," the 51 year old said. "The majority of them are grown women. When the kids leave, then it's time for mom to do what she always wanted to do."



About Kerstin Schlote



Hello, bonjour und guten Tag, I grew up in Germany and loved visiting countries such as France, Italy and Hungary to get to know their cultures, their languages and also their cuisines. When I moved to Canada, I was fortunate to meet people from around the world. As a journalist, I take these experiences with me. I am always curious to learn more, whether it might be someone's life story, the newest inventions and findings, or a possible answer to daily phenomenons and riddles.