

HONDA'S AMERICAN JOURNEY

GOLD WING, HONDA'S TOP MOTORCYCLE, FINDS ITS DESTINY IN OHIO

Moving production to the U.S. in 1979 put the bike in the big leagues

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Automotive News

Honda's Gold Wing is a luxury touring motorcycle built for America's wide open roads.

Honda started production of the Gold Wing motorcycle to Marysville, Ohio. Honda says the first Gold Wing came off the Marysville line on May 1, 1980.

Ken Peterson, co-director of the 4,000-member Gold Wing Road Riders Association, Texas District, calls Honda's flagship bike the "Cadillac of motorcycles."

"It is supersmooth, superquiet," says the 73-year-old Peterson, who rides cross country on a 1998 1500cc Gold Wing modified with a trike kit -- his wife, Barbie, in back.

But it took the launch of production in Ohio in 1980 to put the Gold Wing in the big leagues. Making the Gold Wing in America helped enthusiasts take Honda seriously as a big bike maker. Ohio production gave **Honda Motor Co.** the motivation to move the Gold Wing up to the next level.

The bike also enlarged the number of Honda enthusiasts in the United States, a loyal group that buys products ranging from lawn mowers to autos.

When the 1975 Gold Wing GL1000 debuted in Germany at the Cologne Motorcycle Show in October 1974, touring was the bike's secondary function. The GL1000 had no windshield. It had neither saddlebags nor a place for luggage.

But it was shaft-driven instead of chain-driven, meaning less maintenance and the ability to take on vast stretches of highway without hesitation. The Gold Wing was built for reliability, durability and high performance, says Ray Blank, senior vice president of Honda's motorcycle division.

"It was a 1,000cc, liquid-cooled, low-mounted, four-cylinder horizontally opposed engine," Blank says. "It was really a high-performance bike. There was really nothing like it at the time."

Cycle gets respect

Turning point: Honda starts producing the Gold Wing in Marysville, Ohio.

When: 1979

Significance: Shifting production from Japan to Marysville helped give the Gold Wing a new high-end touring identity. The motorcycle attracted more Honda enthusiasts in the U.S.

The Gold Wing was born at Honda's r&d center in Asaka-dai, Japan, according to *Gold Wing, The First 20 Years*.

Though Honda does not release sales figures for the Gold Wing, in 1975 "some 5,000 were sold in the first year, far fewer than had been predicted," says the book. Soon after the Gold Wing was introduced, its popularity grew in North America, with 80 percent of its production being shipped to the United States and Canada.

A U.S. plant became "vital," the book says. Honda moved Gold Wing production to its first U.S. factory in Marysville, Ohio, in 1980.

That was just as the Gold Wing entered its touring phase with the introduction of the GL1100 in 1980 -- the first year the bike came with saddlebags and trunk, Blank says.

The GL1500 debuted in 1988, redesigned from the ground up. It is the first Gold Wing with a reverse gear. The GL1800 arrived in 2001 with an aluminum frame that shaved 25 pounds off the previous steel design.

The Gold Wing has not undergone a major overhaul since. But over the years it has acquired luxury-carlike amenities such as heated seats, satellite radio, an airbag and a navigation system.

The 2010 Gold Wing is being built in Marysville, but Honda will halt U.S. production this year. Production of Honda's bikes will be consolidated at the company's new motorcycle factory in Kumamoto, Japan.

Steve Saunders, 48, of Dublin, Ireland, operates a Gold Wing Web site visited mostly by Americans. He says he put 2,000 miles on a borrowed 14-year-old GL1000 in 1990 during a European tour. He bought his Gold Wing the next year and has owned six since. He says: "The bike gives you a sense of freedom."

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The Gold Wing entered its touring phase with the GL1100 in 1980.