HELL'S ANGELS -- A STRANGE AND TERRIBLE SAGA OF THE OUTLAW MOTORCYCLE GANGS

Hunter S. Thompson
Chapter 1

California, Labor Day weekend ... early, with ocean fog still in the streets, outlaw motorcyclists wearing chains, shades and greasy Levis roll out from damp garages, all-night diners and cast-off one-night pads in Frisco, Hollywood, Berdoo and East Oakland, heading for the Monterey peninsula, north of Big Sur ... The Menace is loose again, the Hell's Angels, the hundred-carat headline, running fast and loud on the early morning freeway, low in the saddle, nobody smiles, jamming crazy through traffic and ninety miles an hour down the center stripe, missing by inches ... like Genghis Khan on an iron horse, a monster steed with a fiery anus, flat out through the eye of a beer can and up your daughter's leg with no quarter asked and none given; show the squares some class, give em a whiff of those kicks they'll never know ... Ah, these righteous dudes, they love to screw it on ... Little Jesus, the Gimp, Chocolate George, Buzzard, Zorro, Hambone, Clean Cut, Tiny, Terry the Tramp, Frenchy, Mouldy Marvin, Mother Miles, Dirty Ed, Chuck the Duck, Fat Freddy, Filthy Phil, Charger Charley the Child Molester, Crazy Cross, Puff, Magoo, Animal and at least a hundred more ... tense for the action, long hair in the wind, beards and bandanas flapping, earrings, armpits, chain whips, swastikas and stripped-down Harleys flashing chrome as traffic on 101 moves over, nervous, to let the formation pass like a burst of dirty thunder ...

They call themselves Hell's Angels. They ride, rape and raid like marauding cavalry -- and they boast that no police force can break up their criminal motorcycle fraternity.
-- True, The Man's Magazine (August 1965)

They're not bad guys, individually. I tell you one thing: I'd rather have a bunch of Hell's Angels on my hands than these civil rights demonstrators. When it comes to making trouble for us, the demonstrators are much worse.
-- Jailer, San Francisco City Prison

Some of them are pure animals. They'd be animals in any society. These guys are outlaw types who should have been born a hundred years ago -- then they would have been gunfighters.
Birney Jarvis, a charter member of the Hell's Angels who later became a San Francisco Chronicle police reporter

We're the one percenters, man -- the one percent that don't fit and don't care. So don't talk to me about your doctor bills and your traffic warrants -- I mean you get your woman and your bike and your banjo and I mean you're on your way. We've punched our way out of a hundred rumbles, stayed alive with our boots and our fists. We're royalty among motorcycle outlaws, baby.
-- A Hell's Angel speaking for the permanent record

... The run was on, "outlaws" from all over the state rolled in packs toward Monterey: north from San Bernardino and Los Angeles on 101; south from Sacramento on 50 ... south from Oakland, Hayward and Richmond on 17; and from Frisco on the Coast Highway. The hard core, the outlaw elite, were the Hell's Angels ... wearing the winged death's-head on the back of their sleeveless jackets and packing their "mamas" behind them on big "chopped hogs." They rode with a fine, unwashed arrogance, secure in their reputation as the rottenest motorcycle gang in the whole history of Christendom.

From San Francisco in a separate formation came the Gypsy Jokers, three dozen in all, the number-two outlaw club in California, starved for publicity, and with only one chapter, the Jokers could still look down on such as the Presidents, Road Rats, Nightriders and Question Marks, also from the Bay Area, Gomorrah ... with Sodom five hundred miles to the south in the vast mad bowl of Los Angeles, home turf of the Satan's Slaves, number three in the outlaw hierarchy, custom-bike specialists with a taste for the flesh of young dogs, flashy headbands and tender young blondes with lobotomy eyes; the Slaves were the class of Los Angeles, and their women clung tight to the leather backs of these dog-eating, crotch-busting fools as they headed north for their annual party with the Hell's Angels, who even then viewed the "L.A. bunch" with friendly condescension ... which the Slaves didn't mind, for they could dump with impunity on the other southern clubs -- the Coffin Cheaters, Iron Horsemen, Galloping Gooses, Comancheros, Stray Satans and a homeless fringe element of human chancre's so foul that not even the outlaw clubs -- north or south -- would claim them except in a fight when an extra chain or beer bottle might make the crucial difference.

Over and over again I have said that there is no way out of the present impasse. If we were wide awake we would be instantly struck by the horrors which surround us ... We would drop our tools, quit our jobs, deny our obligations, pay no taxes, observe no laws, and so on. Could the man or woman who is thoroughly awakened possibly do the crazy things which are now expected of him or her every moment of the day?
-- Henry Miller, in The World of Sex (1,000 copies printed by J.N.H., for "friends of Henry Miller," 1941)
People will just have to learn to stay out of our way. We'll bust up everyone who gets in our way.
-- A Hell's Angel talking to police

On the morning of the Monterey Run, Labor Day 1964, Terry the Tramp woke up naked and hurting all over. The night before he'd been stomped and chain-whipped outside an Oakland bar by nine Diablos, a rival East Bay cycle club. "I'd hit one of their members earlier," he explained, "and they didn't appreciate it. I was with two other Angels, but they left a little bit before me, and as soon as they were gone, these bastard Diablos jumped me outside the bar. They messed me up pretty good, so we spent half the night lookin for em."

The search was futile, and just before dawn Terry went back to Scraggs' small house in San Leandro, where he was living with his wife and two children. Scraggs, a thirty-seven-year-old ex-pug who once fought Hobo Olson, was the oldest Angel then riding, with a wife and two children of his own. But when Terry came down from Sacramento that summer to look for a job in the Bay Area, Scraggs offered bed and board. The two wives got along; the kids meshed, and Terry found a job on the assembly line at a nearby General Motors plant -- in itself a tribute to whatever human flexibility remains at the shop level in the American labor movement, for Terry at a glance looks hopelessly unemployable, like a cross between Joe Palooka and the Wandering Jew.

He is six feet two inches tall, 210 pounds heavy, with massive arms, a full beard, shoulder-length black hair and a wild, jabbering demeanor not calculated to soothe the soul of any personnel specialist. Beyond that, in his twenty-seven years he has piled up a tall and ugly police record: a multitude of arrests, from petty theft and battery, to rape, narcotics offenses and public cunnilingus -- and all this without a single felony conviction, being officially guilty of nothing more than what any spirited citizen might commit in some drunk or violent moment of animal weakness.

"Yeah, but that rap sheet's all bullshit," he insists. "Most of those charges are phony. I've never thought of myself as a criminal. I don't work at it; I'm not greedy enough. Everything I do is natural, because I need to." And then, after a moment: "But I guess I'm pushin my luck, even if I'm not a criminal. Pretty soon they'll nail me for one of these goddamn things, and then it's goodbye, Terry, for a whole lot of years. I think it's about time I cut out, went East, maybe to New York, or Australia. You know, I had a card in Actors' Equity once, I lived in Hollywood. Hell, I can make it anywhere, even if I am a fuck-up."

On another Saturday he might have slept until two or three in the afternoon, then gone out again, with a dozen or so of the brethren, to find the Diablos and whip them down to jelly. But a Labor Day Run is the biggest event on the Hell's Angels calendar; it is the annual gathering of the whole outlaw clan, a massive three-day drunk that nearly always results in some wild, free-swinging action and another rude shock for the squares. No Angel would miss it for any reason except jail or crippling injury. The Labor Day Run is the outlaws' answer to New Year's Eve; it is a time for sharing the wine jug, pummeling
old friends, random fornication and general full-dress madness. Depending on the weather and how many long-distance calls are made the week before, anywhere from two hundred to a thousand outlaws will show up, half of them already drunk by the time they get there.

By nine o'clock that morning both Terry and Scraggs were on their feet. Vengeance on the Diablos could wait. Today, the run. Terry lit a cigarette, examined the bumps and welts on his body, then pulled on a pair of crusty Levis, heavy black boots, no underwear and a red sweatshirt smelling of old wine and human grease. Scraggs drank a beer while his wife heated water for instant coffee. The children had been put with relatives the night before. The sun was hot outside. Across the Bay, San Francisco was still covered in a late-lifting fog. The bikes were gassed and polished. All that remained was the gathering of any loose money or marijuana that might be lying around, lashing the sleeping bags to the bikes and donning the infamous "colors."

The all-important colors ... the uniform, as it were, the crucial identity ... which the Attorney General of California has described with considerable accuracy in a fuzzy but much-quoted official document titled "The Hell's Angels Motorcycle Clubs."

The emblem of the Hell's Angels, termed "colors," consists of an embroidered patch of a winged skull wearing a motorcycle helmet. Just below the wing of the emblem are the letters "MC." Over this is a band bearing the words "Hell's Angels." Below the emblem is another patch bearing the local chapter name, which is usually an abbreviation for the city or locality. These patches are sewn on the back of a usually sleeveless denim jacket. In addition, members have been observed wearing various types of Luftwaffe insignia and reproductions of German Iron Crosses. Many affect beards and their hair is usually long and unkempt. Some wear a single earring in a pierced ear lobe. Frequently they have been observed to wear belts made of a length of polished motorcycle drive chain which can be unhooked and used as a flexible bludgeon.

The Hell's Angels seem to have a preference for large heavy-duty American-made motorcycles[Harley-Davidsons]. Club members usually use a nickname, designated as their "legal" name, and are carried on club rolls under that name. Some clubs provide that initiates shall be tattooed, the cost of which is included in the initiation fee. Probably the most universal common denominator in identification of Hell's Angels is their generally filthy condition. Investigating officers consistently report these people, both club members and their female associates, seem badly in need of a bath. Fingerprints are a very effective means of identification because a high percentage of Hell's Angels have criminal records ...

Some members of the Hell's Angels as well as members of other "disreputable" motorcycle clubs belong to what is alleged to be an elite group termed "One Percenters," which meets monthly at various places in California. The local Hell's Angels clubs usually meet weekly ... Requirements for membership or authority to wear the "1%-er"
badge are unknown at this time ... Another patch worn by some members bears the number "13." It is reported to represent the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, "M," which in turn stands for marijuana and indicates the wearer thereof is a user of the drug.

This compact description of rancid, criminal sleaziness is substantially correct except for the hocus-pocus about the one percenter. All Angels wear this patch, as do most other outlaws, and all it means is that they are proud to be part of the alleged one percent of bike riders whom the American Motorcycle Association refuses to claim. The AMA is the sporting arm of the Motorcycle, Scooter and Allied Trades Association, a fast-growing motorcycle lobby that is seeking desperately to establish a respectable image -- an image the Hell's Angels have consistently queered. "We condemn them," says an AMA director. "They'd be condemned if they rode horses, mules, surfboards, bicycles or skateboards. Regrettfully, they picked motorcycles."

The AMA claims to speak for all decent motorcyclists, yet its fifty thousand or so members rode less than five percent of the 1,500,000 motorcycles registered in the United States in 1965. As one of the trade magazines noted, that left a lot of outlaws unaccounted for.

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Terry and Scraggs left the house about ten, taking it easy on the two-mile run through downtown Oakland, keeping the engine noise down, aware of the stares from passing motorists and people on street corners, observing stop signs and speed limits, then suddenly accelerating a half block from the house of Tommy, vice-president of the local chapter, where the others were waiting. Tommy was living on a quiet, deteriorating residential street in East Oakland ... an old neighborhood with small, once-white frame houses sitting close to each other on tiny lots and sparse front lawns worn down by generations of newsboys delivering the Oakland Tribune. Now, on this holiday morning, his neighbors were out on front porches or at living-room windows, watching the awful show build up. By eleven about thirty Hell's Angels were there, half blocking the narrow street, shouting, drinking beer, brushing green dye on their beards, gunning their engines, adjusting their costumes and knocking each other around to get the feel of things. The girls stood quietly in a group, wearing tight slacks, kerchiefs and sleeveless blouses or sweaters, with boots and dark glasses, uplift bras, bright lipstick and the wary expressions of half-bright souls turned mean and nervous from too much bitter wisdom in too few years. Like the Angels, the girls were mainly in their twenties -- although some were obvious teen-agers and a few were aging whores looking forward to a healthy outdoor weekend.

In any gathering of Hell's Angels, from five to a possible hundred and fifty, there is no doubt who is running the show: Ralph "Sonny" Barger, the Maximum Leader, a six-foot, 170-pound warehouseman from East Oakland, the coolest head in the lot, and a tough, quick-thinking dealer when any action starts. By turns he is a fanatic, a philosopher, a brawler, a shrewd compromiser and a final arbitrator. To the Oakland Angels he is Ralph. Everybody else calls him Sonny ... although when the party gets wild and loose he
answers to names such as Prez, Papa and Daddy. Barger's word goes unquestioned, although many of the others could take him in two minutes if it ever came to a fight. But it never does. He rarely raises his voice -- except in a rumble with outsiders. Any dissenters in the ranks are handled quietly at the regular Friday-night meetings, or they simply fade out of the picture and change their life pattern so as never again to cross paths with any group of Angels.

If the gathering at Tommy's was a little disorganized, it was because Sonny was serving time in the Santa Rita Rehabilitation Center, for possession of marijuana. With Sonny in jail, the others were keeping the action to a minimum -- even though Tommy, in his quiet, disaffiliated sort of way, was running the show pretty well. At twenty-six he was a year younger than Barger: blond, clean-shaven, with a wife and two children, making $180 a week as a construction worker. He knew he was only filling in for the Prez, but he also knew that the Oakland Angels had to make a tough, full-strength appearance at the Labor Day Run. Anything less would forfeit the spiritual leadership back to southern California, to the San Bernardino (or Berdoo) chapter -- the founding fathers, as it were -- who started the whole thing in 1950 and issued all new charters for nearly fifteen years. But mounting police pressure in the south was causing many Angels to seek refuge in the Bay Area. By 1965, Oakland was on its way to becoming the capital of the Hell's Angels' world.

Prior to their ear-splitting departure, there was a lot of talk about the Diablos and what manner of lunacy or strange drug had caused them to commit such a sure-fatal error as an attack on a lone Angel. Yet this was a routine beef, postponed [1] and forgotten as they moved onto the freeway for an easy two-hour run to Monterey. By noon it was so hot that many of the riders had taken off their shirts and opened their black vests, so the colors flapped out behind them like capes and the on-coming traffic could view their naked chests, for good or ill. The southbound lanes were crowded with taxpayers heading out for a Labor Day weekend that suddenly seemed tinged with horror as the Angel band swept past ... this animal crowd on big wheels, going somewhere public, all noise and hair and bust-out raping instincts ... the temptation for many a motorist was to swing hard left, with no warning, and crush these arrogant scorpions.

At San Jose, an hour south of Oakland, the formation was stopped by two state Highway Patrolmen, causing a traffic jam for forty-five minutes at the junction of 17 and 101. Some people stopped their cars entirely, just to watch. Others slowed to ten or fifteen miles an hour. As traffic piled up, there were vapor locks, boil-overs and minor collisions.

"They wrote tickets for everybody they could," said Terry. "Things like seats too low, bars too high, no mirror, no hand hold for the passenger -- and like always they checked us for old warrants, citations we never paid and every other goddamn thing they could think of. But the traffic was really piling up, with people staring at us and all, and finally, by God, a Highway Patrol captain showed up and chewed those bastards good for 'creating a hazard' or whatever he called it. We had a big laugh, then we took off again."
We get treated good here [in Monterey]. Most other places we get thrown out of town.
-- Frenchy from Berdoo talking to a reporter not many hours before the Angels were thrown out of town

Between San Jose and the turnoff to Monterey, 101 rolls gracefully through the rich farming foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains. The Hell's Angels, riding two abreast in each lane, seemed out of place in little towns like Coyote and Gilroy. People ran out of taverns and dry-goods stores to stare at these fabled big-city Huns. Local cops waited nervously at intersections, hoping the Angels would pass quietly and not cause trouble. It was almost as if some far-ranging band of Viet Cong guerrillas had appeared, trotting fast in a tight formation down the middle of Main Street, bound for some bloody rendezvous that nobody in town even cared to know about as long as the dirty buggers kept moving.

The Angels try to avoid trouble on the road. Even a minor arrest in a country town at the start of a holiday weekend can mean three days in jail, missing the party, and a maximum fine when they finally come to court. They know, too, that in addition to the original charge -- usually a traffic violation or disorderly conduct -- they will probably be accused of resisting arrest, which can mean thirty days, a jail haircut and another fine of $150 or so. Now, after many a painful lesson, they approach small towns the same way a traveling salesman from Chicago approaches a known speed trap in Alabama. The idea, after all, is to reach the destination -- not to lock horns with hayseed cops along the way.

The destination this time was a big tavern called Nick's, a noisy place on a main drag called Del Monte, near Cannery Row in downtown Monterey. "We went right through the middle of town," recalls Terry, "through the traffic and everything. Most of the guys knew Nick's, but not me because I was in jail the other time. We didn't make it till about three because we had to wait in a gas station on 101 for some of the guys running late. By the time we got there I guess we had about forty or fifty bikes. Berdoo was already in with about seventy-five, and people kept coming all night. By the next morning there were about three hundred from all over."

The stated purpose of the gathering was the collection of funds to send the body of a former Angel back to his mother in North Carolina. Kenneth "Country" Beamer, vice-president of the San Bernardino chapter, had been snuffed by a truck a few days earlier in a desert hamlet called Jacumba, near San Diego. Country had died in the best outlaw tradition: homeless, stone broke, and owning nothing in this world but the clothes on his back and a big bright Harley. As the others saw it, the least they could do was send his remains back to the Carolinas, to whatever family or memory of a home might be there. "It was the thing to do," Terry said.

The recent demise of a buddy lent the '64 affair a tone of solemnity that not even the police could scoff at. It was the sort of gesture that cops find irresistible: final honors for a fallen comrade, with a collection for the mother and a bit of the uniformed pageantry to make the show real. In deference to all this, the Monterey police had let it be known that they would receive the Angels in a spirit of armed truce.
It was the first time in years that the outlaws had been faced with even a semblance of civic hospitality -- and it turned out to be the last, for when the sun came up on that bright Pacific Saturday the infamous Monterey rape was less than twenty-four hours away from making nationwide headlines. The Hell's Angels would soon be known and feared throughout the land. Their blood, booze and semen-flecked image would be familiar to readers of The New York Times, Newsweek, The Nation, Time, True, Esquire and the Saturday Evening Post. Within six months small towns from coast to coast would be arming themselves at the slightest rumor of a Hell's Angels "invasion." All three major television networks would be seeking them out with cameras and they would be denounced in the U.S. Senate by George Murphy, the former tap dancer. Weird as it seems, as this gang of costumed hoodlums converged on Monterey that morning they were on the verge of "making it big," as the showbiz people say, and they would owe most of their success to a curious rape mania that rides on the shoulder of American journalism like some jeering, masturbating raven. Nothing grabs an editor's eye like a good rape. "We really blew their minds this time," as one of the Angels explained it. According to the newspapers, at least twenty of these dirty hopheads snatched two teenage girls, aged fourteen and fifteen, away from their terrified dates, and carried them off to the sand dunes to be "repeatedly assaulted."