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MR. & MRS. TUCSON

Musselman Honda: Building Community for 80 Years

By Alisa Clickenger

Over the years, motorcycles have changed. The industry has also faced numerous challenges during the past century. One constant for local enthusiasts has always been there, though. Musselman Honda continues to be a motorcycle Mecca for Arizona riders. Their secret is simple: strong community ties, generosity and an excellent consumer satisfaction record.

Few motorcycle dealerships can trace their history as far back as Musselman Honda, a Tucson bike shop where four generations work together. Musselman Honda, started in 1945, has weathered nearly 80 years in business and continues to make an impact on local riders to this day. The dealership sells the full range of Honda ATVs, side-by-sides, street motorcycles, dirtbikes and scooters as well as Honda parts, accessories and power equipment.

Musselman Honda does have one priceless asset that no other dealership will ever hope to rival: Helen Musselman, the heart of the operation.

Helen, or 'Granny' as the family refers to her, started the business with her husband Darvin "Pappy" Musselman, as an Indian Motorcycle franchise. They added the BSA franchise in 1955, which Helen recalls "was a better seller

than all the others." In 1959 Honda entered the American market, and Helen and Pappy became one of the very first Honda dealers in the United States. To this day Musselman Honda is still located in the same historic building where they started in 1945. Helen Musselman, aged 102, still works at the dealership every day from Monday to Friday from nine to five. For Helen, this isn't a business – it's a way of life.



Helen's History

Helen grew up on a farm in Iowa with no modern conveniences, walking a mile to a one-room schoolhouse every day, milking cows and mowing lawns in her spare time. She dreamt of being a bookkeeper when she grew up, but she had to quit school because her parents couldn't afford her uniform. After Helen left school, she married Darvin "Pappy" Musselman in 1930 and gave birth to her daughter Donna shortly afterwards.

At the time Darvin was an elevator boy in a hotel, but he was always working on his motorcycle and learning everything by himself. "He always wanted to open a motorcycle store," says Helen, still sharp as a tack. During World War II Pappy enlisted in the army and Helen worked at the military base in Douglas, Arizona, selling uniforms to army cadets. As a side hustle, Pappy was fixing people's motorcycles and cars to make ends meet.

When Pappy mustered out of the military service, he and Helen moved to Tucson, where they acquired an Indian "Motorcycle" franchise and jump-started their dealership dreams. Helen was new to motorcycles before meeting Pappy, but she readily embraced his passion. The couple would go on motorcycle rides near Tucson and Phoenix, and they gradually got to know the local motorcycle community, meeting people at the races and other events. Because many of the locals preferred Harley-Davidson motorcycles, selling Indians was a struggle, but Pappy and Helen managed to change the stubborn minds.

"Back then, motorcycles were bought by working class people, and it would take weeks to persuade somebody to buy an Indian instead of a Harley," says Helen. "After Indian went bust in the early 1950s, we started selling Norton, BSA and Royal Enfield. Pappy would build a race bike out of these brands, and we'd go to the races. This was our way to advertise locally.

"Back then, Tucson was a small town, and business was very slow at first. We worked all the time, going to races in the evenings in Phoenix and around Tucson," she explains. Darvin Musselman raced bikes till the end of his time, earning the nickname "Pappy" because he was always the oldest racer on the track.



PAPPY & INDIAN FOUR - 1938 MODEL

You Meet The Nicest People On A Honda

"My husband always said that once you got a motorcycle, you'd always be addicted to it!" laughs Helen. In 1959, Pappy and Helen were among the first American dealers to get a Honda franchise, which was a considerable risk at the time.

"At first, people didn't trust Japanese bikes, but as customers realized that these bikes were remarkably sturdy and reliable, the little Hondas gained popularity. It felt like the market had changed almost overnight. With Honda, we got the type of customers we always wanted to reach. The little Honda Cubs even became popular among local kids who would deliver newspapers on them, as back then, you could get a motorcycle license at the age of 14."

With their famous "You meet the nicest people on a Honda" ad campaign, the Japanese motorcycle manufacturer did something unexpected. Instead of marketing motorcycles to returning GIs and blue collar workers, Honda aimed at urban families and college students - and the strategy worked, says Helen.



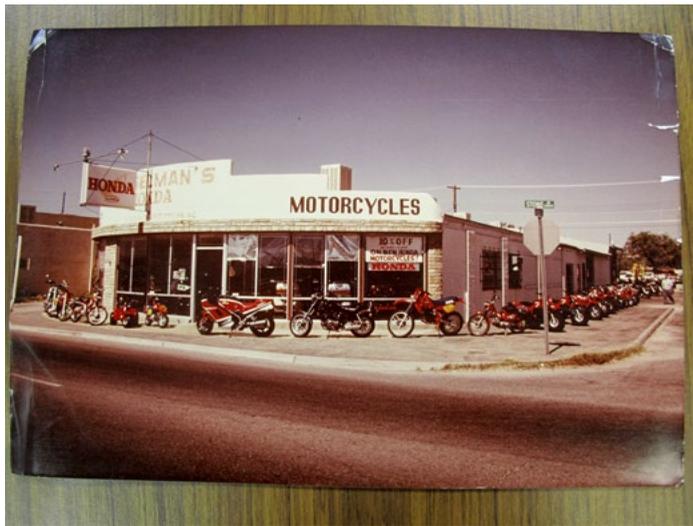
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Click the arrow to play Todd Huffman's video for Honda: Honda Kokoro #2 - Helen On Wheels. Ride back to 1959 to see Helen Musselman's original Honda dealership.



Building Community Today

Selling motorcycles isn't just a way to make a living for any of the Musselman family. It's about connecting and being a part of the local community. Mark Kingsley, Helen's grandson and Musselman Honda's General Manager, has inherited and expanded on this philosophy. Kingsley takes after his grandfather and is very mechanically minded... he also shares Pappy's belief that the service department is the lifeblood of the dealership.

Further building community, Kingsley also runs the nearby MC Motorsports Park, an off-road park and motocross track hosting local races and helping kids get into motorcycling. "I set up the off-road park and MX track nine years ago, and I did it under my own name rather than the dealership's because I wanted all local dealers to get involved."



Honda soon became a popular choice among younger, college-educated people. "As Honda progressed, producing 100cc, then 250cc, 450cc bikes, and finally, the Gold Wing, so did we, and we never looked back."

In 1961, Helen and Pappy went to Japan to meet Soichiro Honda himself. "They called us Mr. and Mrs. Tucson over there," she remembers. Although taking on the Honda franchise in the early years was a risk, it more than paid off in the long run.



Together we rise? "This is about the community and getting young riders into the sport," Kingsley explains. MC Motorsports Park is used by local riders and kids, and it's a beloved spot for the local motorcycle community to meet, train, race and just enjoy motorcycles together.

Nowadays Honda is once again gaining popularity among younger people, especially college students who can't get enough of the Grom, and Musselman Honda continues to support rider training in the nearby Pima Community College. "Tucson is small, and rider training is a great way to bring new riders in and create a new generation of dedicated motorcyclists," Kingsley adds.



Grateful Generations

Thanks to the family's dedication to the local community, Musselman Honda has become not only a familiar landmark in Tucson but also a place to get everything and anything motorcycle-related, just like generations before. "About 40% of our customers have family that have purchased a bike from us. Everybody in Tucson knows us," claims Kingsley. According to him, the main attraction is still, without doubt, Helen.



Over the years Helen has accumulated a collection of antiques and memorabilia which now make up a small museum inside the dealership. "People come to see the museum and talk to Helen from all over North America and even Europe. For example, we recently had some Swedish riders drop by simply because they'd heard about Helen."

However, it's not just historical curiosity and habit that draws people to Musselman Honda. Pappy and Helen were convinced that the customers' needs came first, so they always had plenty of spare parts on the shelves, and their mechanics readily worked on any bikes, however old or beat up, so that people could continue to ride.

"To an extent, we still do this today. We have more parts, including older parts, in stock than most dealerships, and we happily work on older bikes," says Kingsley. Enabling people to keep riding their beloved bikes seems to be a solid strategy to keep generation after generation of motorcyclists coming in.

"This is also why Helen still comes in to work," concludes Kingsley. "For us, this is a way of life, it's just what we do."

Helen celebrates her 102nd birthday on June 20th, 2019! 🎂



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