



Bessie Stringfield

HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

Listen to the story: <https://jonincharacter.com/bessie-stringfield/>

Bessie Stringfield was the first Black woman to cross the United States on a motorcycle in 1930.

Bessie Stringfield loved motorcycles and she taught herself how to ride, practicing on her upstairs neighbor's motorcycle. When her adoptive mother found out, she reminded Bessie that "nice girls" don't ride around on motorcycles. It was her way of saying that it wasn't a proper thing for girls to do in the 1930s. But Bessie couldn't give up on something that she was discovering a passion for.

When she turned 16 years old, her mother gave in and bought her a motorcycle of her own. It was a 1928 Indian. (The Indian Motorcycle Company was America's first maker of motorcycles.)

Bessie loved riding a motorcycle so much that, in 1930, she opened a paper map, flipped a penny on it and decided to ride her motorcycle wherever it landed. This started her on her first of eight journeys across the United States.

Her spirit of adventure for the open roads could get very dangerous because many places were not welcoming to Black people, especially a Black woman who was by herself.

Bessie lived in a time where there were Jim Crow laws in many Southern States. These laws made it so Black people were treated unfairly. In Bessie's case, she would encounter angry white people who would run her off the road and many motels wouldn't let her spend the night there because she was Black.

Bessie learned ways to stay safe by meeting friendly Black families who'd let her sleep in their homes. And if that wasn't available to her, she'd park in a gas station and sleep on her motorcycle.

Traveling the United States on a motorcycle was a physically uncomfortable experience too. The highway system we enjoy today, with its wide and paved roads, wasn't put in place until 1956, about 16 years after Bessie's first ride. The quality of roads varied from state to state. Add that to the fact that motorcycles at that time didn't have the same suspension systems, so every time Bessie hit a bump in the road, she really felt it. And in 1930, there were a lot of bumps.



Bessie learned to be her own mechanic so when her motorcycle broke down, she could fix it on her own. She put her skills to good use when she served in the U.S. Army during World War II. She was a civilian motorcycle dispatch rider caring messages, documents, and orders between military units. And she was the only woman in her unit.

Her military work meant she got to spend even more time riding across the United States by herself with only the open road and her motorcycle. This was her favorite way to be.

After the war, she moved to Florida and bought her own house. She started the Iron Horse Motorcycle Club and rode around Miami earning herself the nickname, the “Motorcycle Queen of Miami.”

She still faced discrimination and unfair treatment. The local police would try to stop her from riding. But, after impressing the police captain with her motorcycle tricks, like making figure 8s, they never bothered her again.

Bessie Stringfield’s courage and adventurous spirit helped break down barriers for both women and Black riders.



Glossary

Motorcycle: An engine powered, two-wheeled vehicle that people ride for transportation or fun.

Jim Crow Laws: Laws that enforced racial segregation and discrimination in the Southern United States until the mid-20th century.

Discrimination: Treating someone unfairly or differently based on their race, gender, or other characteristics.

Mechanic: A person who fixes and maintains machines, like motorcycles.

Dispatch rider: Someone who delivers important messages, documents, or orders quickly, often on a motorcycle.

Civilian: A person who is not in the military or armed forces.

Club: A group of people who share interests and often meet or do activities together.

Stunt: A daring or impressive feat performed, especially on a motorcycle, to show skill and bravery.

Legacy: Something passed down from the past, like stories or traditions, that continues to inspire and influence people.

Give it Some Thought

- How did Bessie show courage and determination when facing discrimination and challenges on her cross-country trips?
- Why do you think Bessie learned to be her own mechanic? How did this skill help her during her journeys?
- How did Bessie's story inspire you or make you think differently about challenges you might face?
- If you could ask Bessie one question about her adventures, what would it be?
- How does Bessie's story encourage you to pursue your passions and dreams, even when others might doubt you?

Use Your Imagination

Here are some activities you can do that are inspired by the story of Bessie Stringfield:

Color Page

Color the motorcycle similar to Bessie Stringfield's motorcycle on the next page while you listen to her story.

Design a Motorcycle Adventure

Draw a motorcycle road trip adventure for Bessie Stringfield as if she was traveling to your community. Include landmarks, buildings, parks, and your favorite places to visit.

Write a Letter to Bessie

Write a letter to Bessie Stringfield, asking her questions about her adventures, how she overcame challenges and followed her passion. Imagine how she might respond. Now, write a letter from Bessie where she answers all of your questions.

Create a Motorcycle Safety Guide

Create a guide or poster on motorcycle travel that Bessie could use to find tips on staying safe and caring for her motorcycle while on the road.

Outdoor Exploration

Go on an outdoor exploration adventure, such as a nature walk or bike ride, to experience the sense of freedom and adventure that Bessie Stringfield enjoyed during her motorcycle travels. How did it make you feel?

