

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

Benjamin F. Hardy

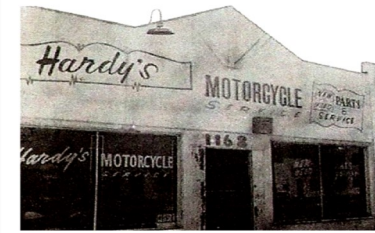
(July 25, 1921 – January 15, 1994)

“Builder of the Iconic Easy Rider Captain America Chopper”



Benjamin F. Hardy was on July 25, 1921, in Los Angeles, California. As a child, “Benny”, as he was called by his family, was interested in mechanics and motorcycles.

In 1946, at the age of 25, Benny opened Hardy's Motorcycle Service Shop in South Central, Los Angeles, California. He was well known in the black community and the local motorcycle club community as the go-to guy for all things motorcycle related. He built motorcycles and “choppers” from scrap parts and junk bikes he collected after accidents. He was also well known in the Watts area by black motorcyclist's clubs and custom bike enthusiasts.



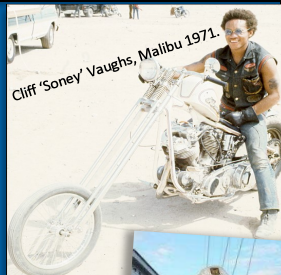
In the early 1960's, actors Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda were developing the storyline for the 1969 movie “Easy Rider”. The independent “road drama” movie featured two bikers who travel throughout the American Southwest, carrying large sums of money concealed in the gas tanks of their motorcycles. When Hopper and Fonda approached Harley Davidson motorcycles and asked for a couple of free bikes to be used in the film, one which would be destroyed during the filming process, Harley Davidson declined. Harley Davidson didn't want their bikes associated with the “outlaw” film. Fonda decided to call on Cliff “Soney” Vaughns, a black man, motorcycle enthusiast, and filmmaker, from the South-Central L.A. area to build some bikes to be used in the film. Cliff immediately called on his motorcycle mentor, Benny “The King of Bikes” Hardy, to work with on the project. The two men along with three other mechanics used old police motorcycles and built two bikes that would become the stars of the film: the “Billy Bike” and the “Caption America Chopper”, which featured an American Flag painted across the large gas tank. The Captain America bike, made from a 20-year-old, heavily customized Harley-Davidson panhead, is considered the most iconic motorcycle ever built. It became a symbol of a generation and an anti-establishment means of travel.



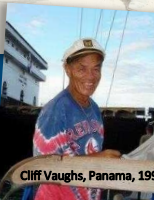
The 'Billy' bike was typical of the custom motorcycles Black bikers were riding in L.A. at the time. The custom bikes featured drag bars, large exhaust pipes, high handlebars, extended front forks, and heavy chrome pipes - many features that were Benny Hardy trademarks. The pair also built additional replica bikes of each motorcycle for the end of the movie where the bikes are destroyed. As history would have it, Benny and Soney's historic contributions to the iconic film were overlooked at the time. The film earned 60 million worldwide and cost only \$400,000 to make. Despite the film's financial success, Benny and Cliff were paid only \$1,250 per bike, with no movie credits.



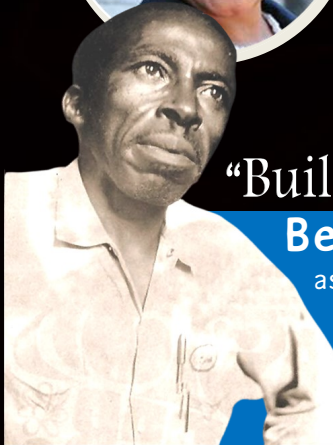
After the movie, Soney Vaughns produced a motorcycle safety film, 'Not So Easy', featuring Peter Fonda, Evel Knievel, and the LAPD motorcycles drill team on Harley-Davidsons. In 1976, he left the U.S. to live on a yacht in Mexico. He was a longstanding member of the historically black Motorcycle Club “Chosen Few MC” out of Los Angeles. Benny Hardy kept running his motorcycle business and enjoyed some notoriety within the black biker community who continued to support his shop.



Benjamin “Benny” Hardy died on January 15, 1994. Twenty years after his death, the iconic Captain America chopper sold for \$1.35 million. In 2008, Benny's work was featured in the exhibit “Black Chrome” which highlighted Black Motorcycle Culture, at the California African American Museum. The 2009 documentary, “History of the Chopper”, recognized “Benny” Hardy and “Soney” Vaughns as the builders of the Easy Rider choppers. Clifford “Soney” Vaughns died on July 2, 2016.



Soney Vaughns was a civil rights activist who worked with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Stokely Carmichael in the late 1950's and early 1960's. There is a famous 1964 photo of Soney being pulled by the National Guard, while protesting in Cambridge, Maryland.



Benny Hardy