53
Norton

COMING & GOING

Notes from the grass at the Legend of the Motorcycle Concours d'Elegance

BY KEVIN CAMERON

AT THE MOMENT I FEEL A BIT LIKE I'M A COMET THAT HAS sailed in from deep space to whip tightly around the sun, then begun the long trip out again. I just attended the Legend of the Motorcycle Concours in Half Moon Bay, California, where I walked up to a 1956 MV Agusta four-cylinder Grand Prix bike and standing next to it was Nobby Clark. There is no greater repository of racing lore anywhere in the known universe, as this man worked with Redman, Hailwood, Agostini, Roberts, Lawson and others. The things I only wish I knew, Nobby Clark knows.

Nearby was the Honda RC181 four-cylinder 500cc racer for which Mike Hailwood had Ken Sprayson make a special chassis. In 1967, I saw Hailwood's factory 500 go into high-speed weaves on corner exits at the Canadian GP at Mosport, in Ontario. Forty-some years later, kneeling in the grass (this concours took place on a golf course) for a better view, I could see the single large downtube that is the central feature of this chassis extending back just below the large under-engine oil sump.

I asked Nobby if that was the original fork, a spindly looking affair with small tubes, a cast-steel single-pinch-bolt lower crown and axle slightly offset to the front (by about 10mm)–not much different from what you'd see on a stock CB72 Hawk 250 streetbike of that time. Yes, he said, that was the right fork. Upon returning home, I found in a book a photo of what was probably that very bike in its pre-Sprayson form (no large downtube) with the offset-axle fork, visually the same as I'd seen in Half Moon Bay.

I remembered that the early Honda 250 Fours had trouble with

PHOTOS BY ROBERT STOKSTAD

Coming & Going

high oil temperature, so I asked Nobby about this. He said that at the fastest tracks–Spa and Monza–the oil came close to 200 degrees Centigrade (392° F) and that a return line to the external tank had burst; its rubber gave up under that temperature. The solution was oil-coolers, which I remember seeing hanging from their lines when the fairings were off at the Canadian GP.

Nearby was a Marvel motorcycle, manufactured in 1911 in Hammondsport, New York–Glenn Curtiss' town. The bike had a Curtiss engine with a single rocker arm operating both valves by a push-pull rod. When the rod pushed, the rocker depressed the exhaust stem. When it pulled, the rocker opened the intake. Thus, no valve overlap was possible. No less a designer than Ferdinand Porsche penned a V-Eight in 1910 with this feature; indeed, it had a brief period of fashion. That ended abruptly when one of the regulars at Britain's Brooklands Speedway, Victor Horsman, suggested to a friend, G.E. Stanley, that he interchange his Singer's intake and exhaust cams. The resulting timing, which had valve overlap, worked so well that it killed the mechanically neat single-rocker valve system dead.

(Above) Triple winner of Special, Preservation and Best of Show awards was this stored-since-1910 Indian torpedo-tank production racer of 1908, shown by Vince Martinico. (Left) Long and delicious row of MVs. Number 1 racebike is the 1956 500 Four of the type used by John Surtees to win his first world championship.

There was another interesting feature: Standing to the left of the bike, I could see that the engine's cylinder was forward of center on the crankcase by maybe a half-inch. This was a common tuning technique in France at that time and is still practiced today. Offsetting the cylinder reduces the angularity of the con-rod on the power stroke, thereby slightly reducing friction.

Thirty years ago, I wouldn't have cared about these machines. I was busy building racebikes and history was irrelevant. Somehow that changes, and I'm not talking about nose-blowing nostalgia. I now want to know how time's arrow flies, not just look at its small cross-section in my own moment.

The Velocette before me is a good example. Its nearly vertical front downtube got that way from mass-placement experiments made by Velo's race team in the 1930s. Today, R&D means keyboard hotties seated at workstations or long rows of test cells. Back then, it was a few men with questions, a bike, a race circuit, rider Stanley Woods and some lead weights taped to the chassis in various places. What they learned became Velo's far-forward engine placement.

As 1956 began, MV Agusta was the pretender and Gilera the royal family, having won five 500cc titles since the war. Here is a 1956 MV 500 four-cylinder of the general type that John Surtees (now in China directing a mysterious new racing operation) rode to the first of that company's many 500cc championships. See the swingarm pivot, passing through both the chassis and a massive lug on the back of the gearbox? The Guzzi V-Eight had this feature, as well. The tradition persists to this day on Ducatis.

Up front is a handling revolution, the then-new telescopic fork. European teams had just passed through an enthusiasm for leading-link forks. Why not teles? People found them bendy and loose-feeling. MV's new tele had an offset axle, allowing longer engagement between tube and slider, easing manufacture by allowing the tooling to pass completely through the slider. And, unlike link forks, it didn't have heavy stuff behind the steering pivot causing nasty pendulum steering effects in bumpy corners.

MVs and Gileras in this time were growing brakes–bigger drums, more shoes, more cams. Why? Read race reports of the time and learn how many riders had to slow when their feeble, undersized brakes overheated. Now I'm remembering something…a photo of one of these 1956 bikes, showing two riders talking with Count Agusta. There is this very type of fork–leading axle, external spring. The riders are Carlo Bandirola, on the bike, looking resigned in his quilted leathers, as if something is just not right. Standing next to him is lean, tall Umberto Masetti, who achieved two 500cc titles on

Giacomo Agostini (kneeling, left) considers an MV Agusta 750 America. The racing 750 MV on which he led the 1972 Imola 200 likewise had shaft drive. Had it not failed to finish, Paul Smart might not have won that race on the bevel-drive Ducati V-Twin, and the history of motorcycles since then might be quite different.

Gilera. All three men are gone. This machine remains.

The tales and the sounds reverberate, but these bikes weren't very fast by our standards. In 1957, John Hartle on MV's new six-cylinder 500 raced Dickie Dale on the flat-Twin BMW at Monza, the Beemer making maybe 65-70 hp. Each bike on the front row of a 125 GP event today is making more than 60 hp.

I missed the start-up of the 1935 Husqvarna 500 V-Twin. Had the team bikes not been dropped by a dockside crane, they might have accomplished great things in the TT. This engine–originally designed by Folke Mannerstedt–is a modern reproduction, made from a photograph by a talented designer/machinist.

I stood and drank in the chassis details of Manx Nortons from 1948 onward. None of these bikes has pinch-bolts on its upper fork crown, but at the time, the Norton fork was considered state-of-the-art and was widely copied. Would I like to see the beginning of overhead cams at Norton? Here was a CS-1 (CS for "Cam Shaft") production version of Walter Moore's 1927 sohc design, big as life. There was turmoil at Norton, so Moore was off to NSU two years later to design a similar engine for the Germans. So many stories start right here and lead in so many directions. I love these hearty, bulbous castings!

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

A 1914 Excelsior starts up. All these bikes are required to run in order to be judged. Without sound, this concours would be as absurd as a wine-viewing (no wine is poured and none tasted). The vibration is so great! As the whole machine shakes up and down, all its parts flex and chatter in unison. I think of why this is so. The bike–still clearly in the process of evolving away from the bicycle–is very light in relation to the masses of its two pistons. The reasoning is the same as why modern Fours over 1000cc often have secondary balance shafts. Their piston mass is too much for the mass of the machine.

Rattle, clatter…I wonder at the raw enthusiasm it took to love this action. Smoke rolled out, reminding me of early movies and stills of board-track racing. What? No oil-scraper rings? Engineers knew all about them back then–Frederick Lanchester had advocated them before 1910. Trouble was, >

TANKS, AGO

Truth be told, I'm not much of an autograph hound. Never have understood the appeal of having some celeb or sports star sign a scrap of paper just to prove I was in his/her exulted presence.

However.

There I was at the Legend Concours, my 1960 MV Agusta TREL 125 in line with 37 other MVs, part of the Featured Marque display, when walking down the row I spotted Giacomo Agostini hisownself. Darn guy, now 66, still looks like an Italian movie star. Probably could have been one, too, if he weren't busy winning 15 world roadracing championships, 122 individual Grands Prix and 10 Isle of Man TTs, most of his glory coming on Count Agusta's fabulous "fire engines," of course.

Agostini also holds the distinction of winning the first-ever 500cc world championship with a two-stroke when he jumped ship to Yamaha in 1975. His last GP win, though, was back aboard an MV at the 1976 German Grand Prix held at the challenging Nürburgring circuit. Fittingly, it would be Agusta's final GP race win and the last for a four-stroke until the MotoGP class came into being in 2002.

Anyway, what would you do? Me, I delved into my clean-up kit, found a Sharpie used for touching up paint chips, approached the great man and asked him to sign my 125's gas tank, just below the pennant decal signifying MV's 15 *Campione del Mondo* titles from 1952 to 1959. Before Ago's time at MV, sure, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

Can you clearcoat over magic marker without having it run?

–David Edwards

The Editor's Turismo Rapido Extra Lusso 125 came back from Half Moon Bay with two awards–a third-in-class medallion and Agostini's signature on the fuel tank.

For more photos of The Legend Concours, go to *www.cycleworld.com*

(Right) In the company of John Burns, examining a brass-era direct-drive Marvel. Horseshoe magnets supplied flux for the wound-rotor magneto, mounted ahead of the cylinder to preserve primitive insulation from engine heat. The horizontal head-steady quelled the wrenching of the engine's firing impulses.

oil scrapers tended to make the top rings wear too fast. Cars and motorcycles smoked right through the 1930s.

A prewar BMW sidevalve came to life with a slow kick and idled languidly as if its crankcase contained millwheels. Rollers were slid under a Bultaco TSS roadracer's rear wheel and its single cylinder ring-dinged to life. While Yamaha had its throttle-proportional metered two-stroke "Autolube" system, Bultaco simply arranged a drip from a small oil tank, its outlet at the carb bell. Straightaways were long in 1960s European racing and the simplest technology was the best. No pump is as reliable as gravity. There was one man at Bultaco who formed the exhaust pipes for these racers, using techniques familiar in old-time body shops. He was a "metal tailor."

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

I marveled at a Matchless G45, the parallel-Twin pushrod 500 that carried the flag until Matchless decided to enlarge the 350cc 7R Single as the G50 of 1958. Few G45s were built and this is a lovely example. Earlier bikes had prominent flat surfaces but this one is positively pudgy with convexity. Matchless Twins of this period uniquely had a center main bearing (Triumph, BSA, Enfield and Norton parallel-Twins–the majority opinion–had only two main bearings), but machining limitations made it the design's Achilles' heel. Somewhere in my files I have a copy of Jack Williams' protocol for correctly centering this bearing. In so many cases, the success or failure of designs depended on having the right "foreman fitter."

Nearby was a long row of MVs, mostly the production pushrod Singles with their egg-inspired crankcases, but with a peppering of racers including one very nice factory 125 dohc machine, its camboxes up on "legs" so cooling air could blow directly across the head fins. It was clear from inspection that MV liked a wide chassis with the swingarm inside it, braced solidly to the back of the engine.

And here were Giacomo Agostini and Phil Read in the flesh, titanic champions of the 1960s and '70s. As always, Ago is smiling, always a photo op. They have ridden up from L.A. in company with Eraldo Ferracci, who was last year involved in a new Superbike effort from MV/Cagiva. Their presence makes Hailwood's absence seem very loud, but even immortal mortals don't live forever.

On the three-cylinder MV 500 was a pair of the forward-offset clip-ons that Ago favored. How can those MV (Read)-vs.-MV (Ago)-vs.-Yamaha battles of the early 1970s be a third of a century ago? Time passes quickly when we're having fun.

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

Who are these collectors? You might expect them to be the Lintless Ones sometimes seen at upscale car shows, their >

faces still pink from valet shaves. Not so. I sat in the Ritzy (by definition) restaurant and watched the many coming and going. I saw quite a few of the hard faces of self-made men, often walking with a limp. Motorcycles aren't for everyone, but they are the choice of this group. A limp? Well, you could get such a thing by having made a few two-wheel experiments in your youth. If my trucking company or software shop had brought in a pile of money, I'd have that G45 or one like it. And my face would dare anyone to argue otherwise.

A collector's helper flicked dust from yet another gem-like bike. I looked upwind to see the source of the dust. There was only the Pacific Ocean, its rollers completing their long journey from Asia and Australia.

PUTTIN' ON THE RITZ

Dissolution of the Bad Boy Image?

There is something pleasantly odd about the scene. Three hundred vintage motorcycles occupying the 18th fairway of the swank Ritz-Carlton in Half Moon Bay. For the third year running, the immaculately manicured grass of the luxury hotel's golf course has been made available to display an impressive array of cherished, significant two-wheel iron that is The Legend of the Motorcycle.

Standing on the seaside patio, gazing out over this beautiful spectacle, I can't help but think about an incident that took place 61 years ago in a small Northern California town just 70 miles from here that dramatically maligned the public's perception of motorcycles.

The infamous events of a July Fourth weekend in the sleepy little town of Hollister have become biker folklore and contrast this atmosphere of smiling, grey-vested hotel staff and the parade of well-dressed spectators sipping tall, thin glasses of champagne.

The incident came about courtesy of the 1947 Gypsy Tour Motorcycle Rally that had chosen Hollister for an Independence Day gathering. Some 4000 bikers descended on the small agricultural town, overwhelming its citizens and taxing the police force of seven. Police logs document about 50 arrests, mostly for drunkenness and traffic violations. Not a bad score given the circumstances.

Unfortunately, a writer covering the story for the *San Francisco Chronicle* decided to embellish the facts to secure some ink in the paper. The headline for his article was "Bikers Take Over Town." He took it one step farther, publishing the now-famous staged photo of a drunken, slovenly biker reclined on his Hog, surrounded by a sea of empty beer bottles. The story went out over the wire and was picked up by local newspapers, culminating with publication in *Life* magazine. That image became the calling card for motorcyclists and threw us into a void of negativity that has taken 60 years to extricate ourselves from.

A real irony here is that the motorcycle clubs of that period had been formed, to a large degree, by returning G.I.s at the close of World War II. In many cases, these young men, forced into premature manhood by the horrors of war, felt alienated from the very country they had risked their lives for. They'd been unwittingly hard-wired into adrenaline and found it difficult to re-acclimate to small-town life. A good number of vets sought out former Army buddies, embracing the intense bonds of friendship forged on the battlefield. They scooped up surplus motorcycles, chopped and bobbed them, and set out to recapture their aborted adolescence. Hence, the motorcycle gang was born.

Unfortunately, Hollywood plucked a sensational script from the Hollister incident and stuck Marlon Brando on the seat of a Triumph, playing a hoodlum whose gang terrorizes a decent American enclave in *The Wild One*. Law-abiding citizens in small rural towns everywhere were dead-bolting doors and loading shotguns in anticipation of the seemingly imminent threat of invading motorcycle gangs coming to deflower their daughters. The film's success launched a cottage industry of bad biker films throughout the '50s and '60s, depicting motorcyclists as unwashed, amoral hoodlums and perpetuating a lot of bad juju with the public. The emergence of truly menacing gangs with criminal overtones like the Hells Angels and the Pagans didn't do much to assuage the image–even if they mostly bumped each other off in turf wars. If you rode a bike, you were trouble.

There were countermeasures, though. In the early '60s, a simple ad campaign began to turn the tide of public perception: "You meet the nicest people on a Honda." Suddenly America was given a fresh face for the motorcyclist. They were good, clean kids jetting off to class on their 50cc step-throughs. Steve McQueen helped curb some of the negativity, applying his superstar status and super-cool persona. *Easy Rider* was a monumental turning point, depicting its chopper-riding protagonists as introspective men who die at the hand of ignorant rednecks–not the other way 'round. The movie pretty much killed the exploitation biker film and put an end to Hollywood's celluloid erosion of relations between bikers and the public. By the '70s, a combination of Vietnam, the gas crisis, the struggling economy and the embarrassing disgrace of Watergate made Americans realize there were more pertinent threats to their wellbeing than the threat of marauding biker gangs–which had failed to materialize on their doorsteps after all. After two decades, the general public was forced to abandon the erroneous, archetypal image it had been fed and gradually began to accept motorcycles.

It's Sunday morning, the day after the Legend event. The Ritz-Carlton's greens men are carefully erasing the remnants of tread imprints left behind by glorious vintage machines. Sixty-one years after the spark of the Hollister "riots" ignited a maelstrom of bad blood and put us on a collision course with America, here we are, welcomed with open arms to the Ritz. As I pull out of the hotel on a BMW K1200GT, the white-gloved valet smiles and waves. We've come a long way, baby.

–Jeff Buchanan

PHOTO BY ANDREW WHEELER