

I keep telling myself it's too old to run so well, but the busy chatter of valves and exposed rocker arms proves me wrong. I let out the clutch, and the great torque carries me away. I shift into second, then high gear. I am captivated.

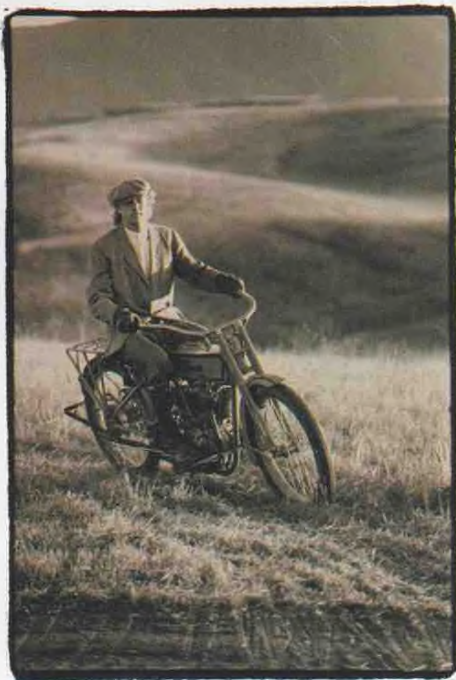
By John Stein



1915 Harley-Davidson Magneto 3-Speed







● ABOUT THE CLOSEST I EVER CAME TO ONE of those rather unlikely-looking Lord Byron-era motorcycles was in a friend's garage. It was a 1919 Triumph (if there ever was such a thing), and it was sitting there collecting bugs and spider webs and dust and placidly lounging around as if it were through with all that silly *running* business. The friend of a friend had a Norton Manx too, and that held more fascination for me because

after all, it actually looked like a motorcycle and even if it never got used any more, at least I could imagine it going.

But I do remember a few things about that old wheezer in the back of the shop. It had a bulb horn with the rubber ball all checked and rotten, tall, skinny tires with diagonal tread, and a cobby-looking engine with oil and soot all over it.

The dust seemed perfectly natural. I could visualize it: dirt roads, aproned mothers, and chickens running around all in an uproar, and this thundering beast tearing past on the drive with its pilot hanging onto the cowhorn bars and his body draped out over the rear fender, scarf flapping behind. The cloud of dust would take minutes to settle, then the kids would go out to look at the tire marks and stare off down the road in amazement.

I started thinking recently about what it must have been like to really ride one of those things, and the more I puzzled, the more I began wanting to find out. When I started riding there were disc brakes, overhead and double-overhead cam engines, desmodromic valves, four valves per cylinder; I had little idea what it would be like to engage in hand-to-hand combat with a motorcycle as old as my grandfather, a good old-fashioned, God-fearing, Republican-voting, manual-retarding, leather-and-spring-saddled, castor-leaking *motorcycle*.

And so it came to be. I called up Bud

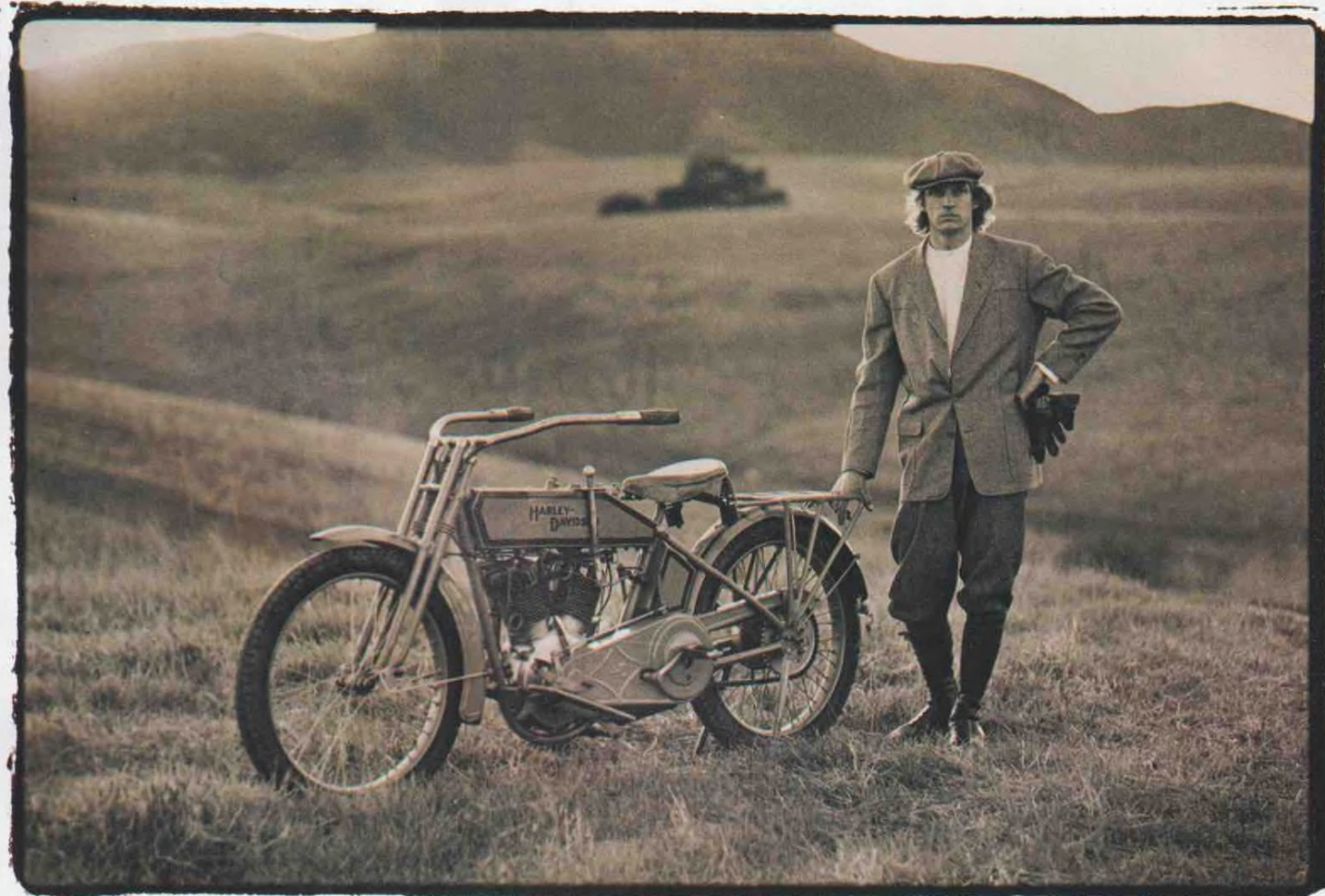
Ekins and supposed that I might take one of his old champs out and run it around a bit just to see what it was like. I half-expected him to say, "Just how *old* are you anyway, boy?"

But he didn't. I drove on over to his shop one day and had a look at all of his old-timers. Bud has about 130; long, dark rows of motorcycles sitting on two levels. There are Indians, Excelsiors, Hendersons, Popes and all sorts of hardware I had never even heard of. Some of the bikes are restored and look the picture of health. But many must have endured hard winters somewhere in South Dakota, and they look a fright. These are the absolute best. They have old cracked 'Forties license plates, rusty metal, rotted rubber parts, and old empty carbide/water acetylene headlamps that guided their long-since-departed owners home after a day of picnics and changing flat tires in the countryside.

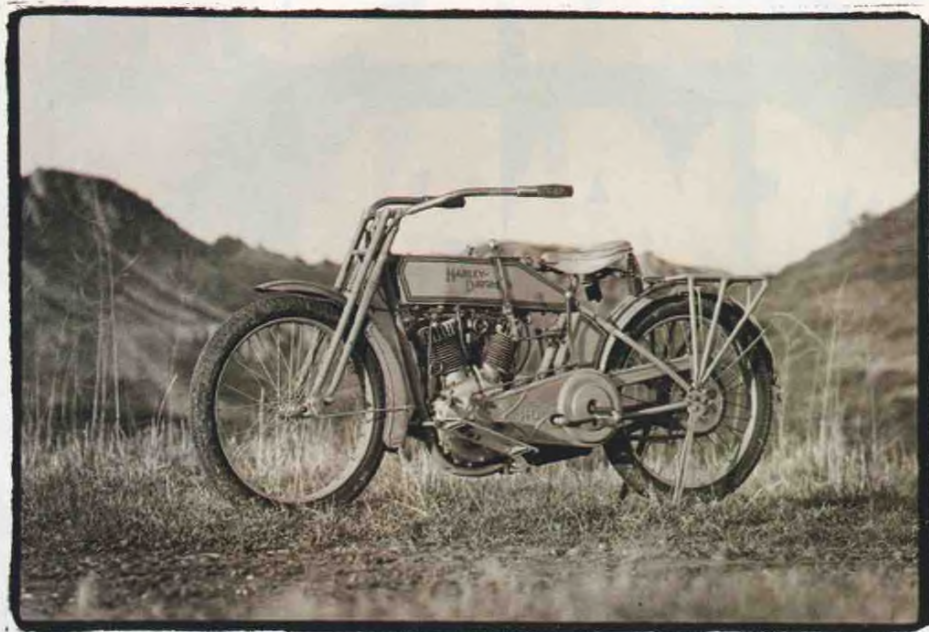
Bud asked what year I was interested in, and I told him around 1915. I'm glad he didn't question why. All I could have replied was something about chickens and dirt roads and friends of friends' garages. So he showed me this 1915 Harley-Davidson V-twin: a Magneto Three-Speed. I said it looked just fine to me, and so he pulled it out of line and walked it over to the other side of the garage, where he checked the oil and gas supply. They

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1915 Harley-Davidson Magneto 3-Speed



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were in order, and there was even a bit of air in the tires. Bud gave the bike to me, along with instructions for running and caring for it. We loaded it into the van, and I made a bee-line to the most desolate original road I knew of—the old Grapevine just northeast of Castaic, California.

This Harley is not exactly like the motorcycles of today. Its basic size and weight are similar, but most of the fine details are different. The '15 has a 60-inch wheelbase: about the same as a full-sized 1970s streeter. It weighs 320 pounds, and displaces 61 cubic inches, or about 1000cc. The 1915 Harley is awfully light (about 200 pounds less than a '79 Sportster); it hasn't any lights, and only one brake. But it does have a spring saddle (with exactly five springs), floorboards, a rear wheel stand, a rack and a tool box.

Any color was available as long as what you wanted was gray. And there is a distinct lack of chrome, mainly because chrome plating was not introduced until 1930.

The frame appears much like that of a bicycle: it's got single front and rear downtubes. There is no rear suspension, and minimal front. Its travel is controlled

by springs only. The frame's cast connecting lugs are brazed to its straight tubes. The wheels are 28-inchers, and carry very square-sectioned three-inch tires.

The engine is a true delight. It's a V-twin, with overhead intake valves and side exhausts. The intake valves have long, almost straight, exposed pushrods and rockers with oiling cups at the top. The right twistgrip is a throttle, and the left is both a spark retarder and compression release. These latter controls are connected and used for starting and stopping the machine. The carburetor has no air cleaner, but it does have two air adjustments. One is a flapper-valve choke and the other is a simple window-type air inlet for adjusting the final mixture.

A regular old mechanical oil pump lubricates the wet-sump engine, and a separate oil container in the gas tank provides extra 70-weight if it's needed. This carrier has a hand pump you can push if the engine requires that extra bit of oil during a long hot climb. To eliminate blown head gaskets, each cylinder and head pair is one cast piece; to do a valve job, you have to pull out the intake valve

assemblies—including the valve seats—and this in turn clears the way to the exhaust valves and seats.

The final drive appears no different from contemporary motorcycles. There are a pair of sprockets and a chain on the left side of the bike.

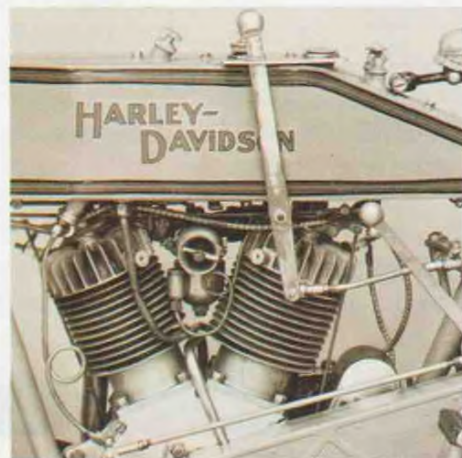
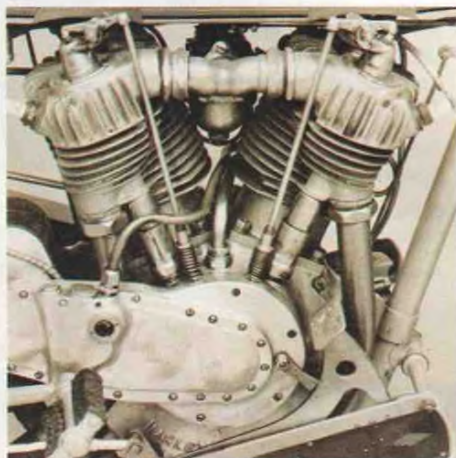
One of the twin fuel tanks has a cap which doubles as a priming syringe; you fill it up with gas and squirt it into a petcock on each cylinder on cold days for easier starts.

I'm up at the Grapevine, opening the right-side gas tap and reaching down under the carb to the tickler. I push the tickler down until some gas spills out the bottom, then set the three-position choke knob. I climb aboard and reach down with my left foot to make sure the clutch is engaged. Then I put my feet on the pedals and, standing up, turn the compression release in and swing the heavy crank around. It's not an easy chore even with the compression release. When I'm pedaling my best, I open the throttle a little and disengage the compression release. The engine makes a puff-puff sound and spits back through the carburetor throat.

I am concerned about being thrown over the handlebar. I try again but the engine doesn't start. It's very awkward to turn the engine over from astride the machine, so I climb off. I stand to the right, and reposition the pedal to where I can get a good purchase on it. Then I push down, letting out the compression release at the point the crankshaft spins fastest. The engine starts immediately. I back off the throttle, and the engine settles down to a fast idle. It sounds like a room full of typewriters. The external valves and rockers are flailing, clattering away. The tailpipe puffs a bit of smoke; I am reassured to see the engine is getting some oil.

I roll the bike forward and hinge up the rear stand. I climb on again. The Harley vibrates, but I hardly notice. I try the throttle. In goes the foot clutch, and I move the shift lever into first gear. The cogs grind. I let out the clutch, slow and smooth. The bike rolls forward. I move around on the single saddle to get com-

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fortable. It's an easy reach to the very long handlebar. My feet are on the floorboards.

Next is second gear: I push in the foot clutch and move the shift lever with my left hand. The gear change is smooth, but it takes me quite a while to do it. I release the clutch and the bike surges forward.

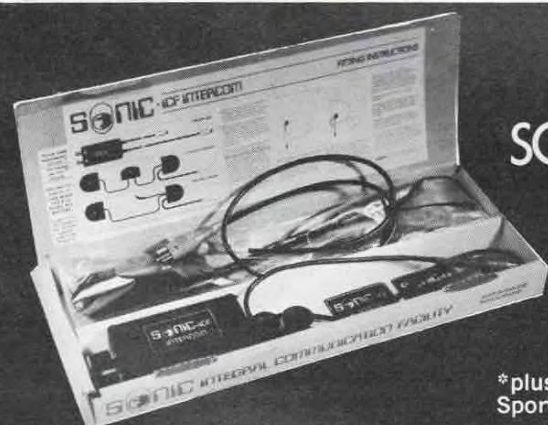
I stay in second gear to get the feel of the bike and road. I'm not wearing a helmet, and the wind rushes past my ears. I take some corners, and notice the way the bike rolls up on the square edges of the tires. It steers as if by sailboat tiller. The predominant sound is still the noise made by the engine and valve train, although there is now the distinct boom-boom of the exhaust mixed in. I slow way down for a corner with the rear brake, and the exhaust smoke passes me in a cloud. There is a breeze blowing. First gear does not seem necessary, as the engine pulls from incredibly low rpm and seems quite happy to be in second.

There is a straight stretch of road, and I rev up the engine. At about forty miles per hour I shift to third gear, which seems like an overdrive. I troll along for a bit and then open the Harley up. There are some bumps on the road and I sail right over them. All of a sudden I notice how smooth the ride is. I know there's no suspension in back and hardly any in front, but still the bike rides well. Then I realize the seat and its five springs are taking all the pain out of the rough road. The bike moves up and down over the bumps, and I stay level. I'm going about sixty now, and wishing for some goggles. The wind is washing tears out of my eyes and they are streaming back along my cheeks. I'm not cold, but I shiver anyway. This is incredible. I shout for joy.

I wonder what it all means. I'm riding this 1915 Harley-Davidson because I want to see what it was like to ride an old motorcycle, but I'm also discovering what it was like to be a rider in the 'Teens:

I was a person of not inconsiderable wealth, as motorcycles and automobiles were basically expensive playtoys of the rich. I was adept enough mechanically to keep the bike running and attend to its basic needs, even though mechanics was a relatively new science for the layman. I was granted speed and freedom never before available to man, and in a truly individual manner. I was tapping the energy of the mechanical revolution, the ingenuity of man for my own purposes.

I come around another slow corner and shift up to high. The torque carries me along a tree-lined road. I reach up and spin my cap around so the wind doesn't blow it off. Then I turn on the gas and lean down over the handlebar while moving back and sitting over the rear fender with my feet on the pedals. My scarf's trailing out behind, tugging at my neck. Sun flashes rake the roadway and I fly over a rise, scattering chickens and raising a cloud of dust in the air.



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