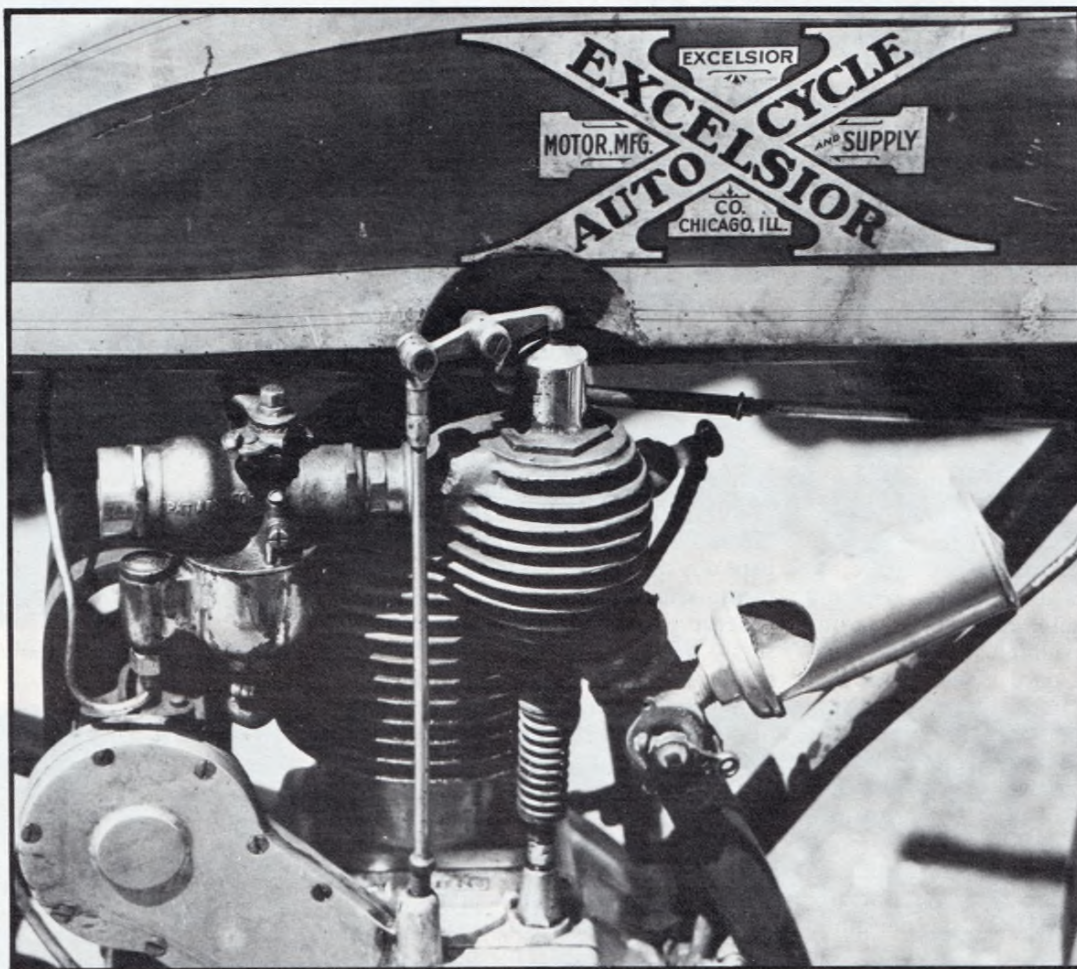


# Visalia



## *The Rescue Mission Syndrome*

By Phil Schilling

• Visalia is an abbreviation in motorcycling. The name refers both to a place and an event. Visalia, the town, sweats in the furnace-country of California, about 200 miles north of Los Angeles. The event is the CAMA Rally, the annual gathering of the Classic and Antique Motorcycle Association. To the unknowing, Visalia could be a grapefruit-label. To motorcycle enthusiasts, Visalia means an array of old motorcycles, spread out on a shopping center parking lot.

Visalia draws collectors—and four-foot children with endless inventories of sticky fingerprints. Rope corridors keep the touch-it set at bay, but casual passers-by, on their way to Penny's Garden Shop Sale, can stop to gaze absent-mindedly at gas tanks, resplendent in fourteen coats of lacquer. Restorers compose the hard core of the Visalia

meet. Though all restorers are collectors, not all collectors are restorers. *To restore* requires a different frame of mind than simply *to collect*.

Scratch a collector hard enough, and at some level you'll see traces of a banker and broker. Collectors deposit motorcycles like so many objects tucked away in private vaults. Collectors enjoy motorcycles; they appreciate the machinery. They work on their collections which undergo changes at the edges, swapping, trading and buying—with discrimination of course. The collecting activity itself assumes a momentum quite separate from motorcycles themselves.

Collectors savor motorcycles; restorers rescue machinery. The restorer holds a god-like power over rusted hulks and tatty hardware. By grace of his intervention, decrepit motorcycles are saved





Floyd Clymer's emporium: not quite dead.

from decay and in some cases extinction. The restorer exercises sovereign power, absolute and without limit, in saving things nearly gone to ruin. In a world laced with compromises, restoration provides a niche where an individual has the power to set everything back in its proper place. Are restorers frustrated totalitarian types? Not really. There's never been a rescue without a sense of power, whether it be the Salvation Army dredging bums off the curbstones or a restorer piecing an ancient engine back together.

The rescue-imperative generally attaches itself to orphaned models. Honda 350 twins are not an endangered specie; so long as there is a factory to backstop owners, individual keepers of the marque do not usually exhibit a shepherd's mentality. However, once a motorcycle has been discontinued, then something curious begins to happen. Certain owners (current, former or aspiring) organize and begin to see themselves in a savior role—that's the genesis of all those marque-rescue clubs seen round the world.

Ponder the case of the Indian. Indian motorcycles intrigue collectors/restorers in a way that Harley-Davidson machines simply do not. Perhaps Indian made more than its share of memorable models, but Harley-Davidson's past contains some elegant designs as well. Indeed, the Spring-

field company built some genuine losers. But, Indian motorcycles are *in* because old Indians are extinct.

If a particular motorcycle attracts enough loyalists in its heyday to create an owner's club, that is an absolute guarantee against the model's ultimate disappearance. Though a motorcycle such as BSA's DBD34 Gold Star may be discontinued, there's no way those thumpers will ever vanish from this earth.

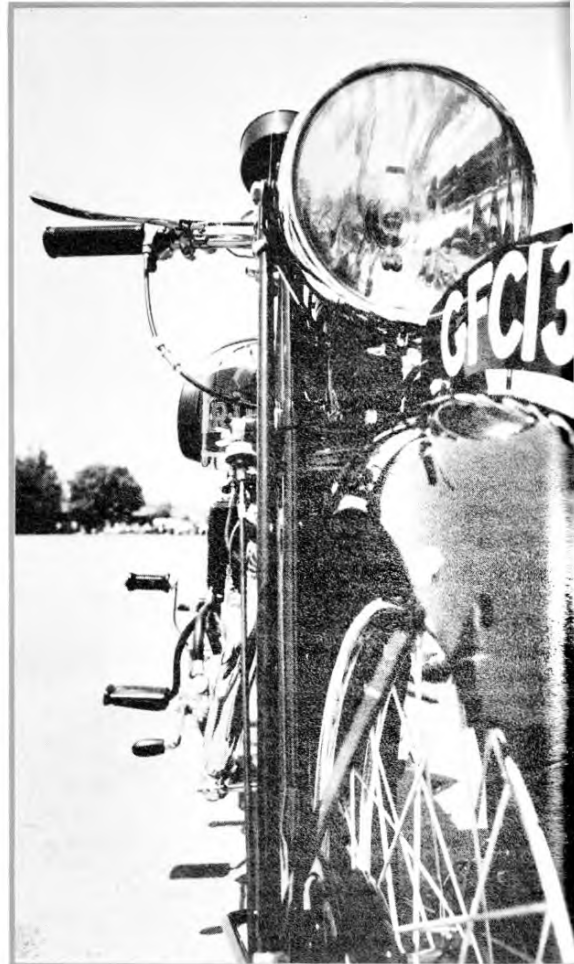
Motorcycles made immortal by insistent partisans need not be great machines. Though many classicists would gasp at the idea, the best motorcycles ever manufactured are being built *now*. That really doesn't matter. Engineering excellence may not qualify a machine for lasting greatness. Engineering nightmares have been celebrated as great designs by those who respond to an arresting solution on paper—but haven't the faintest notion of what design good engineering practices might dictate. Admission to Motor Culture's Hall of Fame doesn't necessarily hinge on comprehensible fairness; like old-fashioned Calvinism, mortals might be absolutely amazed by the choices God makes for the Elect.

Consider the postwar Indian Scouts and Warriors. Some collectors dote lovingly on these models which were Yankee-flavored imitations of British vertical twins. Perhaps one can argue that these Springfield twins were important motorcycles and deserve preservation. Significant they surely were in a perverse way: the machines were such engineering (read warranty) disasters that they rang out Springfield's death knell in frenzied excitement.

CAMA is an umbrella organization. Under that cover a diverse crowd assembles, as collectors gather together to reaffirm their taste and judgement with like-minded fellows. A club composed of individuals with hard-set ideas about motorcycles has potential for disintegration. Collectors who fancy machines of the nineteen-teens may sniff in contempt at motorcycles built after the Great War. Anglophiles who worship British machines of the forties and fifties may see no merit in old chuffers which glisten with brasswork. Early Indian enthusiasts may shrug at those last V-twin Chiefs. With that kind of splintering dynamic, a collectors' club, especially one like CAMA, could frag itself into oblivion. CAMA doesn't fall apart because there's a category for everyone.

The categories are broad. "An Antique is basically any motorcycle greater than 30 years old." This class subdivides into five decades. By CAMA standards a Classic is "basically a motorcycle of rare or unusual qualities that is produced on a limited basis and that is recognized as a standard of excellence." The Classic category breaks apart in three sections. Antique Classic: "A motorcycle that is an Antique but is also of such 'rare and un-

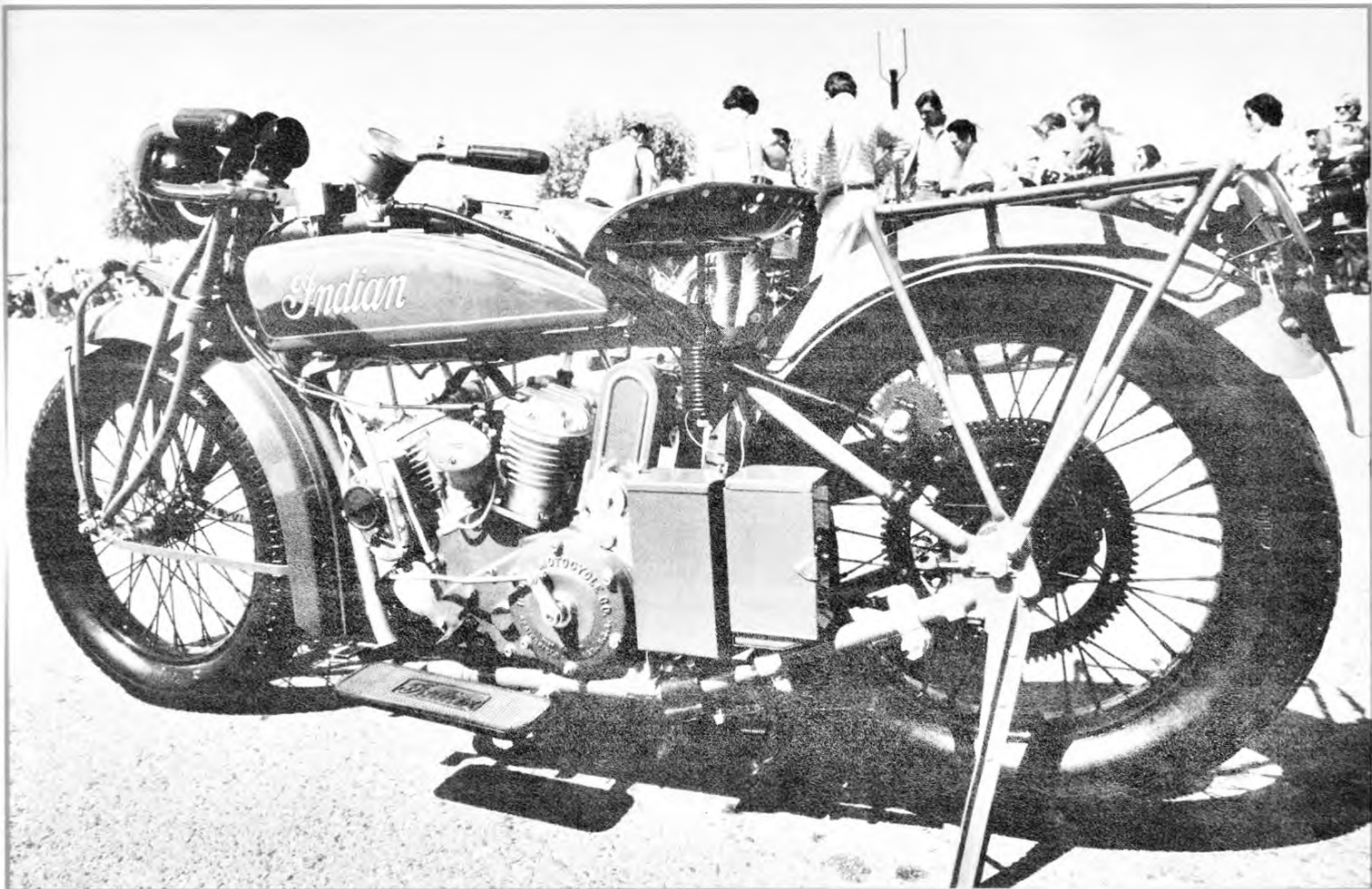
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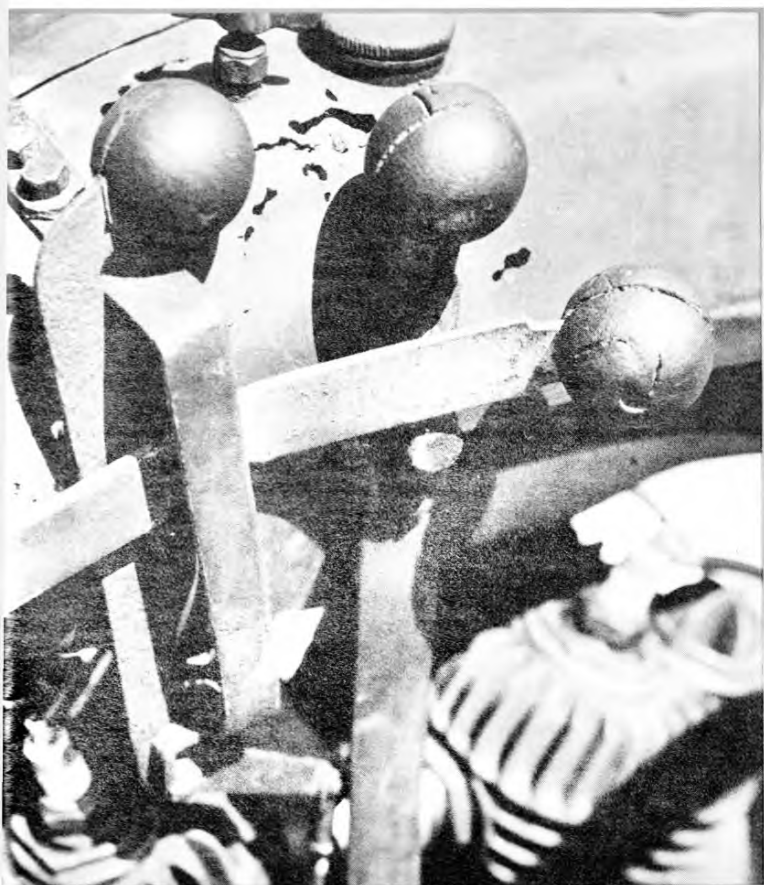
A dazzling HRD shimmers in the intense Visalia sun.



There's always time for a good motorcycle yarn.



*This 1926 37-cubic-inch Indian honors the past without embellishing it. A good historian and careful craftsman must know when to stop.*



*Where others see disaster, the restorer sees a beginning.*



*A finish better than any factory: does the HRD represent the real or ideal?*



usual' quality that it is in a distinct class. Examples would be Brough Superiors, BSA Goldstars (sic), Excelsior Manxman, KTT Velocettes. . . ." Vintage Classic: "A motorcycle that has not been produced for over 15 years or its manufacturing company has been out of business for over 5 years." Modern Classic: "A motorcycle of limited production that possesses the 'rare or unusual' qualities necessary to make it a standard of excellence in its own time."

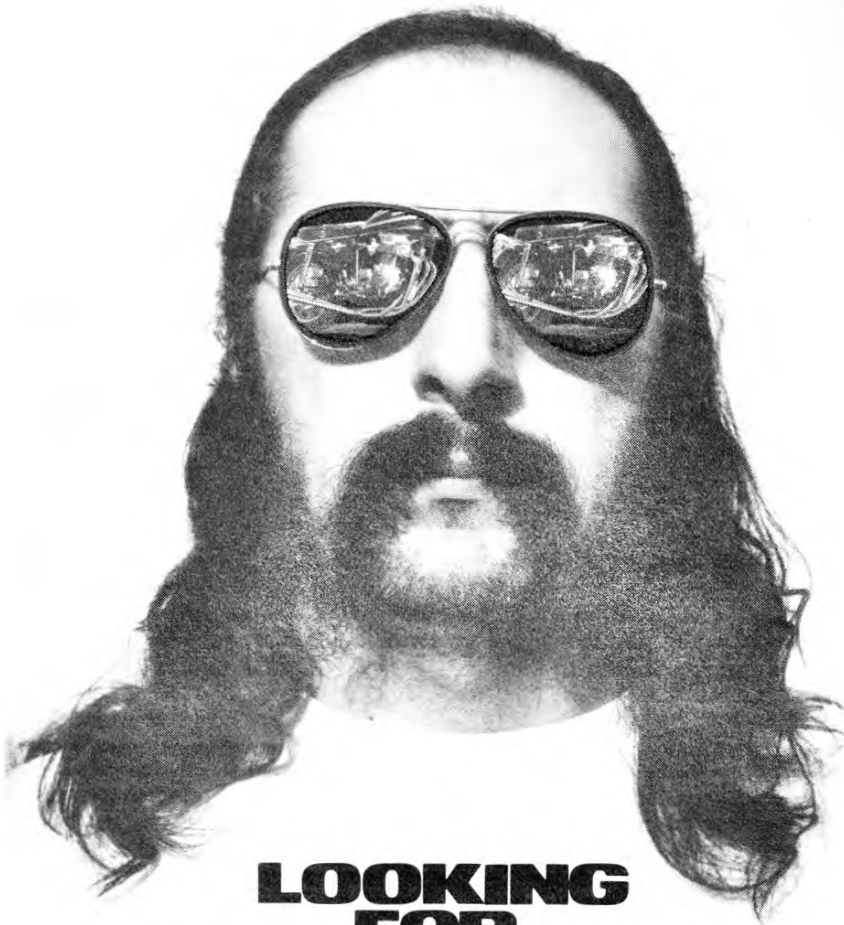
Tolerance there must be. You can get impassioned disagreement on issues of definition and therefore inclusion. But that's not all. There's an implicit assumption that "rare and unusual qualities" and production on a "limited basis" have something to do with "standard of excellence." The premise is hardly faultless. One could argue convincingly that CB-550 Hondas should qualify as Modern Classics (save the fact that they don't meet the "limited production" phrase). You'll not see the CB-550s next year at Visalia, for CAMA collectors intuitively "know" what "classics" are even though razor sharp definitions are difficult to devise. After all, one must talk about "technical excellence" yet find a way to exclude CB-550s and include Munch Mammoths.

There's general agreement within CAMA: Mammoths are classics (or will be) but CB-550s aren't. That should tell you something about "collecting" in general, something far broader than CAMA. All choices dealing with "classics" are fundamentally political selections. Deciding which vehicles are classics—and which ones aren't—is a political exercise. CB-550s must stay outside CAMA. But inside the club, a wide assortment of machinery must be tolerated, although some rare-and-exotic things, like the Mammoth, were never first-rate sporting motorcycles. CAMA—at some level—has recognized the political dynamic of collecting.

Are there limits? Yes and no. Frank Conley, CAMA's chief, is quite content with broadly inclusive categories for machinery. But membership is quite another thing. He does not relish an explosive growth. Each year the ranks of CAMA flex outward, with the addition of another fifty members. And every year a few more machines appear in the parking lot—about 225 in 1974. Conley almost singlehandedly organizes the rally and publishes *The Bulletin* of CAMA.

In descending order, Conley believes in himself, CAMA, other people, and institutions. He is CAMA. It is his club: Conley started, nursed and operates it. And if you don't like the way he runs it, he'll cheerfully refund your money and bid you farewell. CAMA has poor prospects of ever becoming an over-institutionalized bureaucracy because Conley doesn't believe in progress by committee. In his view, all the grunt-work in an organization

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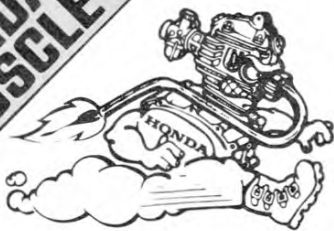
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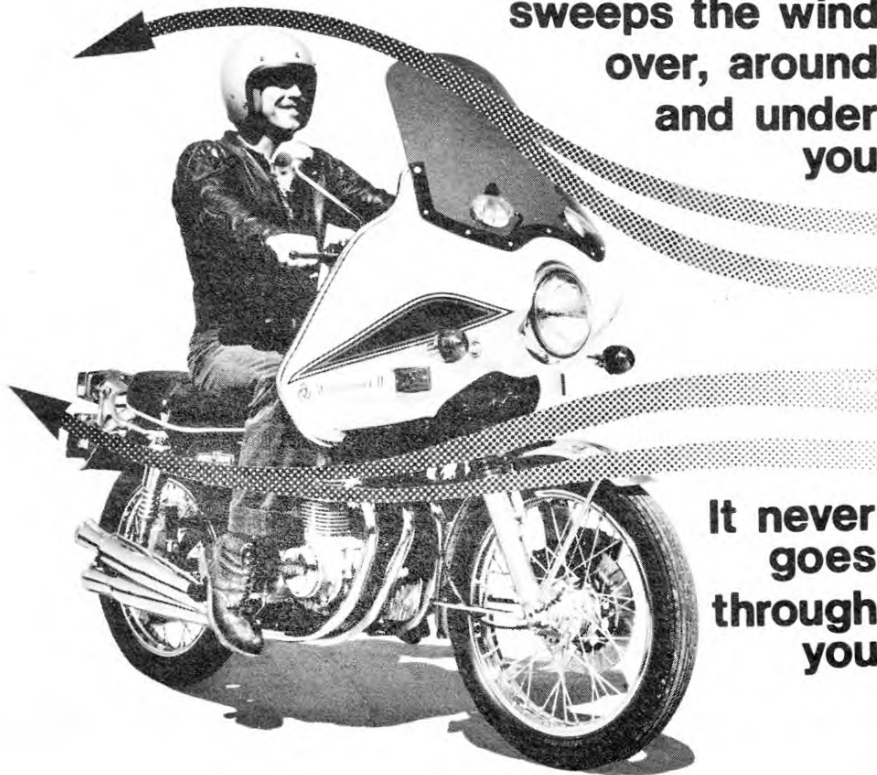
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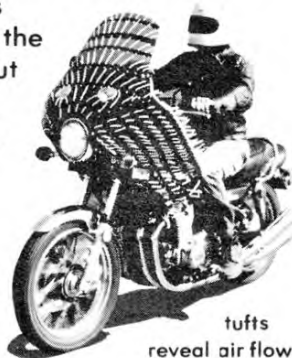
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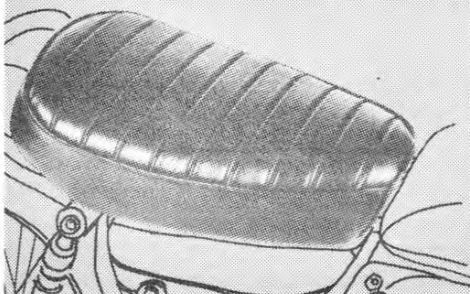
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comes down to one individual doing a task anyway; any advise-and-consent committee can help some other club.

Restoring old motorcycles requires a strong will—and certain kind of vision too. Trying to rebuild something that was bolted together more than half-century ago will give the phrase "deferred gratification" a whole new dimension. Most people who try restoration exhaust their psyches and file the parts away. For most restorers it's necessary to have a powerful vision of the finished product for that image must sustain him through hours of frustration and despair. Lose that vision and the momentum collapses. Until the very end of his labors, the restorer deals with interrelated but disconnected parts; he can see only parts; the sum he must carry around in his head.

Now strange things happen inside heads. Carry that picture in your mind long enough, and it becomes a Platonic Ideal: the perfect chair, the perfect HRD. There's a snag in all this; the ideal is not reality. And when restorers try to elevate their restoration to a Platonic Ideal, the product serves Clio poorly. The result is over-restoration, the Bitch-Goddess of the classic genre. Indian Scouts (circa 1926) might look better with chrome rims and stainless steel spokes—but that wasn't the way the machines came off the assembly line in Massachusetts.

Factories originally finished old motorcycles to standards far lower than those found in Visalia's parking lot. Paint wasn't as good in 1920 or 1950 as in 1970, and old-time hand-stripping was less perfect than you'd like to imagine. Manufacturers were less concerned with finish and cosmetics than contemporary manufacturers are. After all, classic motorcycle engines seep, leak and even squirt oil when running. Why should factories have bothered with intricate detailing when state-of-the-art engines chugged along spreading oil deposits? Look carefully at a classic motorcycle after it has run for an hour, and you'll be shocked how incongruent old engines and perfect paint can look. Moreover, motorcycle factories in days past worried far more about paint durability than mirror finish. That was a proper ethos for days when sharp rocks were as much a part of roads as dust. Only in the recent past has commercial paint shown its substance both in finish and durability.

Visalia 1975 will resemble Visalia 1974. Frank Conley will host a larger meet, and wonder whether the world is better for that. Small knots of enthusiasts will gather to dispute what manner of red was genuine Indian red. The old chuggers will snort and pop and bark and settle down to even running. Restorers will be there with newly-rescued models. And over-restorations will present an interpretation of the past which honors both a marque and a vision. Perhaps that is inevitable for the past is dead and history only fiction. ©

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