



Patrick Chase

Dispatch From A Velocette

Kickin' Through Texas On A '59 Venom Clubman By Ruth Reebel

This can't be safe! I thought. What are they doing?

My eyes got bigger and bigger as I watched Allan and Jim pull off their belts. This was their solution to fixing my motorcycle?

My 1959 Velocette Venom Clubman had lost all compression after a downhill, engine-off race. I was pleased to finish in second place, considering it was my first ride on the twisty road from the Fort Davis Observatory in Texas, and I'd only ridden my Velocette a few times before this trip.

But now I was paying the price for my

fun. My motor's intake valve was stuck open, and kicking did no good.

I guess the guys had seen this problem before, and the tow-rope they made from their belts was going to get me going again. Jim got on my bike, and Allan fired up his 1954 Velocette MSS. I mentioned the shift pattern was one down, three up (on the right) and pointed to the electronic ignition switch. Off they went. When they turned and came back, my bike was running!

This was just one of many neat experiences I had on what's known as the

"British Singles Ride to Big Bend." No, it's not a group of unmarried people from England looking for a turn in the road. It's a collection of dedicated owners of single-cylinder motorcycles manufactured in England, headed for a national park in Texas.

I signed on for the ride from Vanderpool, near San Antonio, to the Davis Mountains and the Big Bend Park. Debbie Johncock, Allan's wife, was our support crew, driving sweep in the truck and pulling a trailer full of tie-downs and tools.

The chase truck was a new experience

for me. As an avid BMW rider, I always trusted my bike to get me where I was going. I had always figured that if a motorcycle is in a trailer, then it's being stolen.

But a 55-year-old Velocette is not a modern BMW, and Southwestern Texas is very desolate and rugged. There are miles and miles of beautiful, traffic-free highways where the odds of finding a part for a vintage machine are nil.

Two other non-Velocette vintage bikes were on the trip. Jim Aylesworth was riding a solid 1956 BSA Gold Star, which

never missed a beat. Dave Hartner's beautifully restored 1954 AJS model 18 did not fare so well. It suffered a magneto problem early on the trip, then holed a piston a few days later. He joined Debbie in the truck.

Luckily, I didn't get the opportunity to spend so much time with Debbie, despite the tough time I always had bringing the bike to life. Indeed, I experienced another minor victory on this trip when on the sixth day, riding at the south-most area of the park near the Rio Grande River, I got up the nerve to stop the engine with no help

in sight—no people, no cars, no cell-phone coverage and no backup plan. The silence was deafening.

After a quick, nervous drink of water, I kicked the Velocette back to life. I did it!

Last month a motorcycle friend asked me, "Why ride a 50-year-old bike so far?" That question gave me pause.

It would be easier to ride the BMW or the Ducati (or even drive the Subaru), but memories of breakdowns, oil leaks, mastered challenges, and like-minded travelers will keep me smiling for a long, long time.

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