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November/December 2015

# BARN FIND VINCENT

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COMES OUT OF HIDING



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# MAGGIE, THE ABANDONED BEASTY

## 1949 Vincent Black Shadow

Story and photos by Glenn Bewley

The mythical Vincent in the barn. It's the holy grail of vintage motorcycles, the find every vintage motorcycle junkie dreams about. And sometimes, the dream comes true.

This all started one night with a phone call from an old friend. He'd been contacted by a man in Philadelphia whose company had purchased a home at a tax foreclosure sale. A cleanup crew had gone to empty the house, and cleaning the garage out the crew came upon an older, unfamiliar motorcycle. They sought the advice of my friend, who runs a vintage motorcycle website. I specialize in Vincent restoration ([classicmotorcycleengineering.com](http://classicmotorcycleengineering.com)), so he pointed them my way.

The people on the Philadelphia end really knew nothing of motorcycles. They sent some photographs showing a Vincent, and I spent several hours over several nights talking to the owners about what they had found. Initially, I thought it was just a beater Black Shadow with some nice parts. They said they appreciated my help and that they would have to figure out what they were going to do with the bike, and would get back to me. Things went quiet.

Months later, I called the Philadelphia people and asked if the Vincent had been sold. It had not — they had moved it to a garage and basically forgotten about it. My call reminded them they needed to sell it, so they asked me for a figure I would be willing to pay. They pulled me up a bit, and a deal was set.

### First blush

The bike was a 1949 "transition" Series C Black Shadow, but wearing the upper frame member (the upper frame member, or UFM, is the steering head and oil tank of the Vincent) from a Series B Black Shadow, along with Brampton forks, which would have been correct for a Series B machine. I







Tachometer is from a Vincent Grey Flash (above). Rare Lucas KVF-TT racing magneto (right) was another surprise.



happened to know of a Series B Black Shadow that was not numbers-matching. It belonged to a dear friend we had lost several years ago, and the bike had been inherited by his son. I called the son and asked him for the numbers from his bike, and I was stunned to discover that not only was the UFM on the bike I was buying the match to his bike, the one on his bike matched the machine that was soon to be mine!

I hired Dan, a shipper I use, with instructions to give the bike the best look over he could, checking that the engine and gearbox were free before accepting it. On the day he collected it, Dan called and said the gearbox seemed tight, with trouble catching fourth. I pondered the issue, then threw caution to the wind and pulled the trigger on the deal.

A few weeks later I collected the bike and took stock in what I had. Walking around her, I realized what a specially equipped machine she was. There, ready to offer sparks, was a virtually unused Lucas KVF-TT racing magneto. There, ready to fuel the beast, was a pair of 32mm Amal 10TT9 carburetors on their long intake manifolds. There, ready to free her sound and power, was a pair of super thin (0.031-inch wall) Lightning 2-inch pipes. There, ready to keep the pilot aware, was a rev-counter from a Vincent Grey Flash. There, ready to carry her down the road, was a set of Borranni alloy rims, shod with an Avon Speedster front tire and Avon Racing rear. This purposeful machine was, for all intents and purposes, a full Lightning spec bike.

Missing from the bike was everything that could hold her back.

There was no generator, no battery, no lights, no front brakes and no speedometer. The rear suspension had been replaced with tubular struts. The standard gas tank was gone, replaced by a pair of homemade fiberglass tanks, set low to let the rider get tucked in. The standard seat was gone, replaced by a long, thinly padded perch made of light-gauge aluminum plate stretched between the rear of the UFM and the rearmost fender stay.

That she had survived intact all these years — and found her way into my hands — was a wondrous thing. Apparently it's true: Even a blind squirrel occasionally finds a nut.

## Second look

I started investigating the bike, and from the numbers stamped on every cover I removed I discovered she had started life as — and indeed still was, except for the UFM — a fully numbers-matching Black Shadow.

The photographs of the bike showed strange plugs where the spark plugs should be and also in corks inserted into the carburetors. These turned out to be dehydrator plugs. Common in the aircraft industry, they're filled with a desiccant to protect engines from moisture during long-term storage. There were also dehydrator canisters inside the primary case, the exhaust ports were taped over, and where oil lines had been removed the remaining orifices were taped as well. Whoever had owned or worked on this machine was very caring and careful in putting it away.

Investigating the shifting, it was indeed quite stiff. I pulled

the kickstart cover and the shift shaft came out with some effort, coated in very gummy oil. After a quick trip to the parts washer and cleaning its bore with parts cleaner and a bottle brush, the gearbox worked as well as any I've known.

Excited, I pulled the timing cover, its insides covered with the black color that comes from nondetergent oil. The timing pinion, missing the automatic timing device of a standard street bike, was a solid unit with a factory tach drive adaptor. The steady plate outboard of the timing gear showed no sign it had ever been removed and the original bronze large idler gear was in place. Curious to see what cams were in the machine, I was a touch disappointed to find they were stamped "1" — the standard road-going cams of early Vincents. Race cams were Mk 2 and later road cams were Mk 3. Every clue leads me to believe that when this machine was built, factory race cams were in short supply.

Having assured myself that the bike was mechanically sound, I decided to give her a few kicks to check compression. I was disappointed to find only 60psi per cylinder, but then I realized I hadn't removed the air-restricting corks and dehydrator plugs from the carburetors. Removing them and checking again, it went to 90psi. Not bad for something that had sat for so many years, especially considering my awkward kick on the left-side lever while trying to hold the bike up!

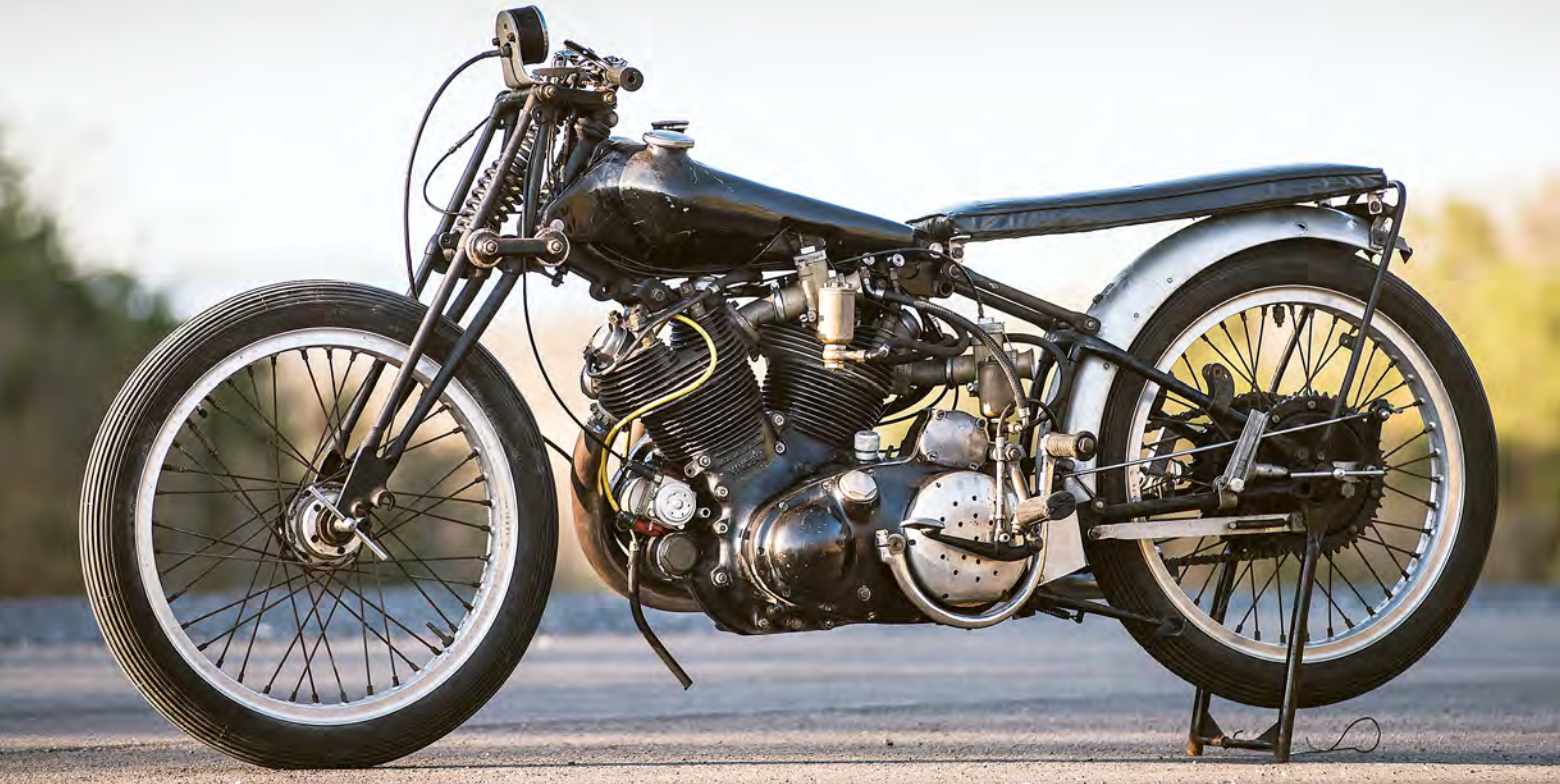
The bike was pushed into a corner for the next two months, during which time the Machine Registrar at the Vincent Owners Club (VOC) confirmed that my bike and my friend's were indeed wearing each other's UFM. As it

happened, some friends from the area where the second bike lived agreed to bring its UFM to be swapped for mine. Pulling the UFM off my bike, I found it had been drilled at the rear to accommodate the nonstock gas tanks and that the tab that receives the rear hold-down bolts on a standard machine's tank had been cut off. I fabricated and welded on a new tab and filled the holes.

With the engine uncovered, I decided to peer inside. Removing the cylinder heads, the rear head (actually a front head with left side intake — a common conversion) was incredibly clean inside, as if the bike had only been started for a short test with that head installed. The front head had considerably more carbon, but both were well ported, to the point that I could scarcely feel the transition from the long factory Lightning manifolds into the ports.

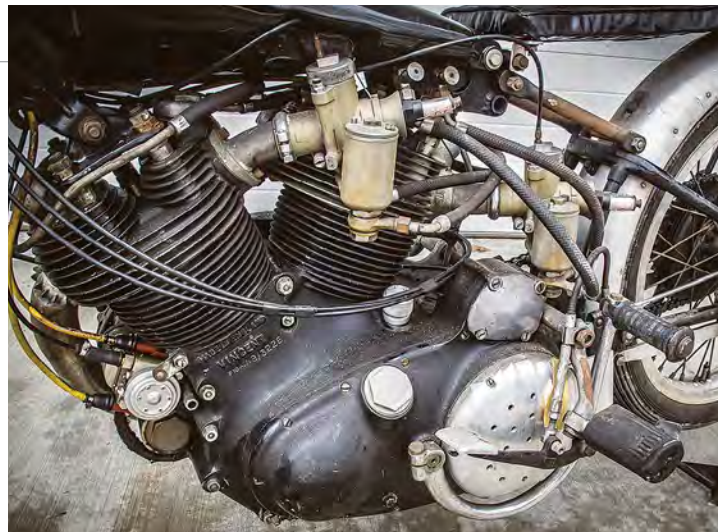
Pulling the valves to check guide clearances, I found the heads still had the third valve spring that was used on early Shadows, but dropped by the factory in about 1950. The lower guides and valves were in very good shape, although the guides themselves were a bit oversized. I made new guides and rebuilt the heads, leaving the third springs out.

Looking at the cylinders, I found it was equipped with 0.020-inch oversized 9:1 compression ratio Specialloid pistons. The cylinder linings were original (recognizable by how the cylinder wall oil feed holes are made) and had no doubt been over-bored only due to a change from the original Shadow 7.3:1 pistons. I am not a huge fan of Specialloids, mainly due to their ring design, and as I have JE Pistons make pistons



Owner Glenn Bewley with Maggie.





As found: Dehydrator plugs were screwed into the spark plug threads and inserted into corks in the carburetors.

for me in this compression, I decided to resleeve the barrels and replace the pistons with standard size (84mm) bores. I reassembled the bike with its fresh top end and reinstalled the UFM, not bothering with the oil lines and pushrods as I was pushed for customer work. She was again relegated to a corner to await further attention another day.

### Getting back to it

Some months passed, and I stayed busy with customer machines as well as building a 1950 Red Rapide to pull my Blacknell Bullet sidecar, a bike I had promised to friends from the U.K. who were going to participate in the Hillbilly Vincent Owners 2014 Blue Ridge to Barber Rally in Maggie Valley, North Carolina.

Time had gotten away from me, and the Rapide was only completed and the car attached and test-driven the day before the start of the rally. It occurred to me the racer may be a good bike to take along for the rally, so the next morning found me and several VOC members and friends furiously working to install the pushrods and adjust the valves, mount the tank, change the gearbox and engine oils, and generally make the bike presentable. The rear tire, which had been holding air, had opted out, but I loaded the bike anyway.

Arriving to the rally late in the day I unloaded, and the next morning the bike corral revealed two race-replica bikes. The owners, both good friends of mine, had done spectacular jobs on their machines and later on they started their beasts to great enthusiasm. Then they started berating me to start the abandoned beast.

Frankly, with as little as I'd done to it, I was doubtful as to the wisdom of this move. I had never put fuel in the tanks and didn't even know if they would hold same, nor had I looked at the magneto beyond checking it for a spark. I hadn't touched the carburetors other than to check the main jet size to be sure they weren't set up for methanol. And besides, the rear

tire was flat.

But sometimes I'm a sucker to peer pressure, and before the end of the day I had Coventry Spares ship me a tube for the rear tire. The morning found me in a friend's race trailer removing the tube from the rear tire, and in another testimony to when the machine may have been built I found the rear tire had an Avon Tyres red rubber inner tube.

A few friends and I started looking at things so far untouched. The carbs were essentially new, but the cables were grungy. We oiled them as best we could, then removed the fuel lines and shot oil up onto the petcock corks. With the thought of the bike not starting looming over me, I sought solace in the fact that the fuel tanks with their four Ewatts petcocks would surely never hold







**Lucky man:** Friend Jake Hall gives Maggie a run through the hills of Tennessee in front of Glenn's camera.

fuel and I would be saved, because starting the bike would be obviously hazardous due to the possibility of fire. I figured I'd get a few condolences, for which I would cover up my happiness, and get on with the rest of the rally.

### First fire

With that thought in mind, I wheeled the machine out to the street. As a crowd gathered we poured some race fuel — just a cup or so — into the tank. We had rerouted the fuel lines so that only one tank was being used, and to everyone's amazement not a drop of fuel fell from the taps or the lines. It was completely dry.

My friend Pete had pulled his starting rollers out so I could move the oil around in the engine a bit before starting. With great trepidation, I wheeled the bike backwards onto the rollers and gave Pete the nod. We spun the engine for several seconds and then stopped. Frankly, in my excitement, and given the odd position of the levers, I wasn't sure which lever I'd pulled, the clutch or the valve lifter. Erring on the safe side, we ran her up again for a few seconds and let her come to a stop for a second time. Deciding it was go big or go home, I tickled the carburetors and we let her spin again. As soon as the rollers got the engine up to a steady speed, I dropped the valve lifter.

She fired immediately. I'm talking about on the next combustion stroke. It was glorious and raucous and wonderful. She ran a bit rough as I gave her a little stick, and then I realized that unlike a road Vincent, this special needed a bit more attention. I advanced the magneto and she got smoother and smoother under throttle. Thirty seconds of running with a hand on the throttle and I dropped off, and she sat there and idled. No one in attendance was more surprised than I. Nor anyone more pleased.

Despite the fact that she had no rear suspension, no front

brakes, 2-inch open pipes and no lights of any sort, I could not resist the temptation. Disengaging the clutch, I snicked her into gear and headed onto the highway in front of the rally headquarters. Being used to the short gearing of my road-going hot rod Vincent, I chugged her a bit starting into the street, but with a bit of throttle she quickly caught up, pulling strong in first and second, which is as high as I went; I didn't want the police to rain on an otherwise fine day. I brought her back to glorious applause, basking in the warmth of her reception as I accepted congratulations from all around, especially those who had been instrumental in getting her started (watch the first start and run of Maggie at [MotorcycleClassics.com/maggie-first-run](http://MotorcycleClassics.com/maggie-first-run)).

Later that night, a Hillbilly Vincent Owners member wandered into the room I was sharing with another Vincent owner just as I was saying that although I didn't normally do so, the bike had performed so well I should name her. Without missing a beat, she offered the name, marking the location where the bike first burst into life after so many years: Maggie, the Abandoned Beast.

Maggie fired the next day, and again at the Barber Vintage Festival at the end of the rally. On the kickstarter! Future plans are up in the air, but I am considering taking her to the East Coast Timing Association timing runs in Ohio just to give her the thrashing for which she was built. Beyond that, options abound. Frankly, I'm too large to race the bike myself, and I don't tend to own machines I can't ride on the road. She could easily be built into a standard Black Shadow, but I think she is a solid representation of a period in which the mighty Vincent was king, and I think she is more interesting in her scruffy glory than many of the freshly restored replicas currently out there. I may have to find a home for her where the public can enjoy seeing the way it was done — hot rodding a Vincent — back when it was done! **MC**

## The bike in the barn

If there's an old bike nut who hasn't dreamt about finding the fabled "bike in the barn," I've never met them. It's an alluring, tantalizing dream, enveloping as it does so much more than just buying an old bike. I mean, hell, anybody can do that; it just takes money. But the bike in the barn, that's different. Finding it takes not only that most impossible to predict ingredient — luck — but, we want to believe, the knowledge and skill to identify that diamond in the rough and bring it shining back to life.

I've actually "found" a bike in a barn, literally, but I'm not sure it meets the vision most of us have when we think of that fabled barn find. For one thing, it's not particularly rare. A 1966 Honda CA95, the last of the Baby Dreams, it's definitely a pretty cool old scooter, but not cool enough to inspire the kind of lust envy you feel when you hear about someone awakening an old Vincent or Indian from its long-lost slumber. For another, it was in a friend's barn, so even though the bike had been languishing for years, it's not like it had really been lost to time, a vital component of a true barn find. It does, however, have something of a cool story behind it, in my opinion an essential ingredient for a barn find.

Years before I happened across it, the Honda had been found sitting in another barn somewhere in the open expanse of Oklahoma. Its first owner was a Shriner, who, as many Shriners apparently do, rode it only in Shriner parades. At least that's the assumption, given the bike's approximately 1,200 and supposedly original miles. True to its Shriner roots, it's been festooned with a few extras, including a period set of Bates bags and chrome freeway bars and fender guards. Shriner Red paint, now looking more raspberry than red, dresses the tank, side covers and bag lids.

Then there's Glenn Bewley's barn find, a discovery incorporating the essential elements of the best barn find; luck, rarity, and an incredible back story — at least what's known of it or can be reasonably inferred. Glenn tripped across the bike, a 1949 Vincent Black Shadow, after it was found tucked away not in a barn, but in a garage in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where it had apparently been hiding for decades. And it gets better.

What Glenn found wasn't just any Vincent (as if there is such a thing). It was a hot rod, a special, a bike probably built for the speed trials that used to run regularly at small airports across the country. And it wasn't just any special. Based on an early Series C Black Shadow, it's looking likely that it was built by none other than Gene Aucott, the first Vincent dealer in the U.S., who opened shop in Philadelphia in 1946.

Apparently, Aucott liked and encouraged building hot rod Vincents, and it doesn't seem much of a stretch to think he had a hand in this bike. Glenn, a Vincent specialist himself (a fact that certainly played a role in his finding the bike in the first place), has had contact with Gene's son, who told him their basement used to be full of the same desiccant plugs Glenn found carefully screwed into the Vincent's spark plug holes and into corks in the carburetors.

Then there's the issue of proximity; the house where the Vincent was found was only five miles from Aucott's old shop.

Glenn has coaxed the Vincent back to life (see his story starting on page 16), but he's not sure what to do with it next. He's pondering selling it at Bonhams' Las Vegas auction in January, but only because he favors riders. He wants it to stay as it is, but as it is, it just isn't a bike he can ride. That thought actually saddens him a little, because it's such an obviously special machine. Whatever Glenn decides, his find is inspiring, proof positive that barn find bikes really do exist, that they're still out there waiting to be found. It's the stuff of dreams, dreams that occasionally come true.

Richard Backus  
Editor-in-chief



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BILL UHLER, *PUBLISHER*

OSCAR H. WILL III, *EDITORIAL DIRECTOR*

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MOTORCYCLE CLASSICS (ISSN 1556-0880) is published  
bimonthly by Ogden Publications, Inc.,  
1503 S.W. 42nd St., Topeka, KS 66609-1265  
For subscription inquiries call: (800) 880-7567  
Outside the U.S. and Canada:  
Phone (785) 274-4360 • Fax (785) 274-4305

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receive a corrected address within two years.

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Printed in the U.S.A.

