

VINTAGE VIEW

By John Cooper

Off-road events were a true test of endurance

"It was 1953, and Canada's first two-day endurance run. The start was at the Glen Eagles Hotel on the eastern edge of what is now Metropolitan Toronto. The organizers, Ron Jackson and Don Charters of the British Empire Motor Club, said to bring enough money to buy gas for 500 miles. Let's see; that means about \$5 for gas, \$1 to enter, \$2 for a bed plus \$3 for food—better take \$15 just in case!"

So goes the tale by Bill Sharpless of his experiences in the first Corduroy Enduro, the

fall classic event still running today.

"Sounded like just the thing for a teenager on a 500 Norton twin who had already completed two short road enduros. Some of the other machines were real dirt bikes with knobby tires, a single high muffler and a bash plate. But most were ordinary road bikes like mine—heavy, wide, little ground clearance and non-folding kickstarters, footrests and gear levers. But the odd one had the modern swingarm rear suspension or a Grasshopper rear tire.

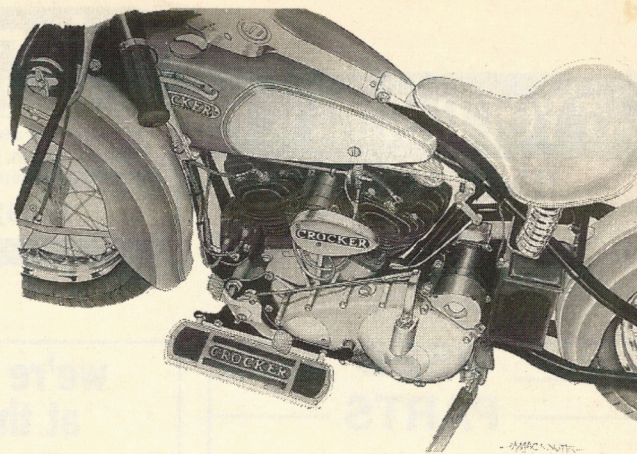
"Compared to my previous experience that first day seemed endless—miles of

trails, gravel roads, abandoned railways and power lines, plus river crossings, challenging hills and the infamous Haliburton rocks. It was scheduled to be less than a five-hour ride, but with no gas or lunchtime allowance and having to make up any lost time (not check-to-check scoring) and a 450 lb motorcycle with five inches front and three inches rear travel, and running late, you can imagine how long it actually felt."

Sharpless completed day two, and "of the many insect bites I received that weekend, there was one that had a permanent effect on my DNA—the enduro bug."

It didn't get any easier the next year. "I had hoped to have a more suitable bike for the '54 Cord but unfortunately I needed a reliable road bike more than a competitive dirt machine, so my shiny new 650 Ariel twin was it.

"Removing parts was a first priority, so off came all the lights, generator, battery, regulator, mufflers, sidestand and footrest rubbers. The front 'pedestrian slicer' wasn't removed because of the Ontario law requiring three licence plates. Then on went a block front tire and a trials rear (not enough room for knobbies). Last was my "state of the art" enduro equipment—a plastic-covered aluminum plate for the route sheet and a bicycle-accessory clock.



"What a gruelling day that Saturday was: started at 8 a.m. and 283 miles long! With a 30 mph average that meant nine hours and 26 minutes with no gas or lunchtime allowance. Not only were we unable to keep up, but we all ran out of daylight with several miles to go and no lights. Wondering what to do next, we noticed a headlight bouncing along on the trail behind us. We were amazed when it turned out to be little Ken Aston on his stock 1,000 cc Vincent! So superman Ken played Piped Piper and led us back to Gold Rock where we ate ravenously.

"The only other riding incident I remember from that event of 40 years ago was my brief encounter with the eventual winner, Gerald Robarts, on a Harley 750 K. He caught up with me on one of those exciting Haliburton logging roads that all Cord riders have stories about. I knew Gerald, and how he excelled at all forms of motorcycle competition, but this was his first Cord and I was a veteran! I remember that even though I was riding over my head he still pulled away."

Sharpless went on to become one of Canada's premier off-road competitors, winning the Cord three times. The sport has become dramatically more specialized, and the concept of stripping a big-bore street bike to ride enduros would be unheard of today.



A 650 cc Ariel twin could be a competitive enduro mount in 1954.

PHOTO BY PETER JACKSON