Once I was with Phil Irving and a chap approached us carrying a copy of *Tuning For Speed* published in the USA. The fellow wished Phil to sign it. Phil advised as both his publisher and he had not been recompensed, he did not wish to add insult to injury by signing someone else's production. The book's owner was confused and couldn't or didn't want to try to understand Phil's point of view.

Getting back to U.S. published books. I have recently purchased second hand copies of Paul Richardson's *Vincent Owner's Handbook* which appears to be based upon a 1955 edition and Phil Irving's *Motorcycle Engineering*. Does anyone know whether these were genuine publications or pirate editions? Maybe someone like Roy Harper might have the answer.

Anyway Walter Elias Disney's company may not have written any of the classics but 60 years ago a firm named Disney in Melbourne sold a classic called 'The Vincent'!

---

**Besse Wendt: American Vincent Hill Climbing Champion: Part 1**

Bill Hoddinott

Malcolm T. ‘Beese’ Wendt (pronounced ‘bee-zee went’) is a name many of my fellow whitehairs will remember as a great American Vincent hillclimb champion of the 1960s! Now 73 years of age, from 1964 to 1969 he was seven times American Motorcyclist Association National Champion and Canadian National Champion Hillclimber on his Indian and Vincent bikes. His hillclimbing career stretched from 1959 clear to 1999 and his racing achievements were often noted in the magazines of the day.

Most readers will be aware of the unique and historic American sport of motorcycle hillclimbing, where a local motorcycle club organises a climb right up the unimproved slope of a small mountain to the top. The course may be anywhere from 200 to 1,000ft in length and the angle of ascent anything from 20° at the bottom to almost vertical near the top!

The sport appeared in the First World War era in Pennsylvania and by the early 1920s had become important enough that the Indian and Harley-Davidson companies were manufacturing special machines for it for selected sponsored riders. The climbs were spectacular to watch and the sport was widely publicised in the weekly newsreels shown in local theatres nationwide in that day and for decades later.

![Beese and his wife Shelby today.](Photo courtesy: Bill Hoddinott)

![Beese and Glen together posing with their trophies as 1965 National Champions.](Photo courtesy: Bill Hoddinott)
In its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, crowds of 15,000 and more were not unusual at some meets. 20 to 25 AMA-sanctioned events — plus other ‘outlaw’ hillclimbs — were held in the eastern (mountainous) part of the USA every season. A similar series was conducted in Canada. The sport is still active today, but on a smaller scale.

Your scribe had the privilege to be present at the famous Wellsboro, Pennsylvania VOC International Rally in 1976, when Vincent co-designer (with Phil Vincent) Phil Irving was Guest of Honour. Beese Wendt, who has lived all his life in York, Pennsylvania, brought his well-known Vincent hillclimb bike out to the meet. I had the pleasure of being in a small group of onlookers along with Phil when the latter asked Beese to fire it up so he could hear what it sounded like! Which, to our delight, Beese obligingly did. He was using nitromethane ‘straight from the can’ (98 per cent with 2 per cent methanol) and no-one who was present will ever forget the large, loud, violent BARK of the exhaust of the machine, at a mere idle. We could well imagine what it was like at FULL throttle, climbing a hill! VOC Member Larry Feece of California, then living in Indiana, attended a meet many years ago when Beese had the bike out. His word to describe the Vincent at full song on the hill was, ‘THUNDER!’

I must thank VOC Member Cary Lindsey of Richmond, Virginia for suggesting this interview and putting me in touch with Beese. We had an intense and enjoyable four hour telephone chat and he was glad to answer every question about how his Vincent racer was built and maintained and just what the hillclimbing sport entailed for a rider in his time. I dare say that nowhere else has all this unique lore EVER been published, and it is a pleasure to present it to you now!

Bill Hoddinott: Beese, thank you for agreeing to an interview for the journal of the Vincent H.R.D. Owners Club about your hillclimb racing years ago. When I was a young fella in the 1960s reading the monthly motorcycle magazines you and Glen Kyle were often shown racing hillclimbs.

Beese Wendt: Sure Bill, it will be a pleasure. You know my Vincent hillclimb championship bike came to me from Glen Kyle, but I had two more later. I started racing hillclimbs in 1959 on an Indian, but not long after that Glen started to turn up at the big meets with his Vincent and it was no time before he was AMA National Champion! That machine was FAST, much better than anything else out there. Glen was a super-good rider and we got to be friends. I studied him for years and I wanted to buy his bike SO BAD! Finally I got the chance. I'll tell you all about that later.

BH: Great, Beese! But let's start at the beginning. People will be wondering how you got that nickname!

BW: Oh yeah, that. Before I got into racing I had a BSA I rode around on the street for a long time. The other guys had Harleys, which I couldn’t afford. And they ribbed me all the time by calling me ‘Bee-zee.’ Somehow that nickname has stuck to me ever since!

BH: I gather you were born and raised in York, Pennsylvania, what was your working life?

BW: Out of high school I got a machinist apprenticeship at a big industrial plant here, BMY Co., which made Army tanks. This involved huge castings for the tank hulls and turrets and machining as needed.

After a time there were layoffs and I switched to the Naval Ordnance Plant, a government operation which made turrets for battleships and other really big stuff. After a while the American Machine and Foundry company bought the NOP so now I was working for AMF. They were well known for making bowling alley equipment and were a diversified manufacturing outfit.
As everybody knows, about 35 years ago AMF bought the historic Harley-Davidson Motor Company and operated it for a few years, so our plant here turned into Harley production. In 1981 AMF sold the motorcycle operation back to a group of Harley managers and other investors and we turned into Harley-Davidson, Inc.

I continued on at the company and retired in 1999 as a tool, die and gauge inspector. I must say I enjoyed all my years working for Harley-Davidson!

BH: How did you get into hillclimb racing?

BW: There was lots of it around here and it was a very popular sport in the 1950s. I started out with an old 101 Indian Scout 45 flathead in 1959. It was my great good fortune to fall in with two hillclimb men who became my mentors and friends for many years in the sport: Tom Paradise and Howard Mitzel. Both of them had raced Indians for years on the hills and Howard, in particular, had been a very famous top star of American hillclimbing for decades before WWII. They called him ‘The Old Man of the Mountains.’

Tom had an early 1930s Sport Scout 45 flathead hillclimb bike he had raced for a long time, and in 1962 when my 101 blew up he decided to put me on it.

BH: What was that bike like?

BW: Old school of the period: stock frame and wheelbase, lighter Indian girder front fork, a small Whizzer tank, big rear sprocket, chain on the back tyre, and the engine hopped-up as much as possible running methanol only. This was a top-notch Class 'B' ‘Amateur’ bike. Class 'A' was supposed to be the ‘Professional’ category then.

BH: How did it work out?

BW: Tom and Howard and I went to the meets, and it took a while to learn this particular skill, but I must have taken to it. In 1964 I took my first Canadian National Hillclimb Class ‘B’ Championship. In 1965 I took both the AMA and Canadian National Championships with Tom's bike — running in Class ‘C’ in Canada that year — and in 1966 took both the Canadian and AMA National Championships in Class ‘B’. All with this same Indian. We had SO much fun in those years!

BH: Okay, by this time Glen Kyle was the big star in Class ‘A’.

BW: Right, he was National Champion with his Vincent and as I said, I was watching him and learning from him. And I wanted his Vincent! My Indian was a top bike, but his was SO much better. I wanted to move on to the next level, and Tom and Howard wanted me to as well.

I kept asking Glen, and he didn’t want to sell it. Finally, for some reason I don’t know, maybe he had some health problem or whatever, at the beginning of 1967 he said he would sell it.

BH: Glen was a very famous figure in the 1960s and got a lot of ink. What was he like? I see the photo in your scrapbook of the two of you together with your Championship trophies in 1965. He looks to be about your own age.

BW: Glen was from Goshen, Indiana and he was a nice guy. Very quiet and very deep. Highly intelligent and original. He had built his own Vincent hillclimb bike using the Rapide power unit with a Series ‘B’ Girder front fork and his own design of rigid frame with extended wheelbase. Everything very, very light. You know light weight is the essence of the racing motorcycle. He was also a leader in the use of nitromethane which was just coming in at the time for hillclimb bikes. Guys were afraid of it because of its reputation for wrecking equipment and some were just mixing ten per cent at first with methanol,
which really doesn’t do anything. But Glen went into nitro and advanced very quickly, up to 70 per cent which gave the engine tremendous power. And he learned how to use it and not hurt the engine.

Glen didn’t like to talk about how he built his bike, for obvious reasons. Guys would tell me how they tried to get something out of him, and all he would do was change the subject — say, ‘Oh, look at those cute girls over there’ and so forth. He wouldn’t tell people a THING!

BH: How was the engine set up in general when he was running it?

BW: He had inch and a quarter or so Dellorto carburettors on it and a Joe Hunt magneto which had been adapted to the Vincent mag flange. You realise that the Class ‘A’ overhead bikes were limited to 750cc (plus a permitted 0.080" overbore) to compete against the 1,200cc Harley and Indian flathead hillclimb bikes. So Glen had to reduce his 1,000cc Vincent to suit the class. He had it de-bored and de-stroked. Like most it was running high-gear-only and geared down with huge rear sprockets so this would work.

BH: Okay, what kind of deal did you make with Glen to get his bike?

BW: I’ll tell you what I did, and everybody thought I must be crazy I couldn’t afford to buy it straight out, so we made a deal for US$1,700 cash, which was more than ANYBODY had ever paid for a hillclimb bike up to then, and two stipulations. First, that Glen would team with me for that whole season and help me learn how to handle the bike, and second, that I would give him half the purses I could earn with it for that year!

BH: Wow, quite a deal!

BW: Yeah, and we both held up our ends of the bargain. But the first thing I found out when I tried to ride the Vincent was that it was such a ROCKET, so much more than I ever had under me before, that I couldn’t RIDE it! I told Glen, jeez, this is just TOO much, we’ve got to slow it down so I can ride the thing!

So we de-tuned it some and I went to the meets and met Glen and I did learn to ride it. And got some purses that I split with him, but no championship for me THAT year!

BH: Ah, but I see in the records here that in 1968 you did win the Canadian National Class ‘A’ Championship with your Vincent.

BW: Yes, that’s right, and in 1969 I took the AMA Class ‘A’ Championship with it as well.

I might add that I learned how to use the nitromethane like Glen showed me, and before long I went right on up to 98 per cent, pouring it straight from the can. I loved that bike! I’ll tell you that if I had it today, with the Hilborn fuel injection they use now, it would still be competitive.

BH: I’m sure that you started to try to improve and develop it as soon as you got it, what did you do to it?

BW: When you have a serious hillclimb bike and run every weekend all season long, you have to work on it all the time. There are repairs from dropping it, ordinary maintenance, or you try to improve it.
Glen had been using the Vincent triplex primary chain and doing all his gearing with the rear wheel sprocket. I wanted to cut the weight so went to a one-row chain and ran it dry on two smaller front sprockets I made, 16 and 18 teeth. By using these and back wheel sprockets from 56 to 72 teeth I could get a wider range for various hillclimb courses. Dunno if this really mattered that much but it made me ‘feel’ better.

For a tensioner I just ran the chain on the original tensioner blade. The runs were only for a few seconds, you know, so you could get by with this. The primary chain ran on one row of the teeth on the Vincent clutch sprocket. I deleted the Vincent mainshaft spring shock absorber and ran the front sprockets solid on the splines of the mainshaft with a nut. This worked fine.

BH: What about your clutch and gearbox?

BW: I brazed wider ears on the clutch drum and set the clutch up with three solid Black Lightning primary plates, with the normal clutch shoes. This required a spacer ring between the primary cover and the clutch cover. Rigged up a foot clutch with a cable from the pedal to the regular Vincent release and now I had a clutch that could hold ANYTHING, and it was either IN or OUT. Nothing in between, but this was fine for my purposes.

Everything was removed from the gearbox except the mainshafts, the double gear and its fork because I only wanted high gear. So now I had four neutrals and top gear.

To start, with the engine running, I would step on my clutch pedal, put the gearbox in top gear using the indicator lever on the kickstart cover, raise the revs to a suitable level — I could tell by the sound, didn’t need a tach — turn the throttle wide open, but controlling the revs with the kill button so they didn’t go TOO high, then step off the clutch and the button at the same time and let ‘er RIP! On the way up the hill, if I needed to kill power momentarily, I used the button. This is the way I had learned to do it with the Indian for years, and it worked like a charm. Most other guys did the same thing rather than use the throttle — the engine responded to the button quicker than the throttle.

BH: The one-row primary chain evidently could hold the power, but I imagine you replaced it often.

BW: Well sure, it didn’t cost much. You had to do that. Rear chains too. The shocks on them were tremendous. You didn’t want them breaking during a meet.

BH: Beese, for the next part let’s go into the engine internals. To be continued....