Talking of Frenchmen, Jean Pirot penned Part Four of his series about riding Vincents from Paris to Barcelona. In this edition, they get to their destination — eventually, and then head homewards a couple of days later. But not without various incidents; more next month.

Finally, Floggers Corner had a genuine one-owner 1951 Series ‘C’ Black Shadow for sale in Luton. It was fully renovated and not yet run-in. The ad says: “No stripped threads and no oil leaks — not even official ones. Unemployment dictates sale. £3,000 with spares and literature”. OK, sounds nice — so who bought it — 25 Years Ago?

Besse Wendt: American Vincent Hill Climbing Champion: Part 3

Bill Hoddinott (Continued from Page 26 of MPH 732.)

BH: What about the timing chest?

BW: Standard Vincent racing parts drilled as much as possible for lightness. Black Lightning cams, but later I did try some Andrews cams in it. But as I say with a nitro engine all the power comes from the fuel. Other details are less important as long as everything is strong enough to stand the pressure.

BH: How much spark lead did you use?

BW: Nitro burns slow and I used anything from 33 to 66°. Sometimes I mixed propylene oxide in the nitro for an ‘exciter’.

BH: I remember watching you start the machine up in 1976 at Wellsboro and was impressed it would start on a kickstarter. When it fired I remember you stood alongside and opened and closed the two petcocks — one for each carburettor, as it warmed up a little. It looked like you had to keep closing them down when it was cold to keep from overloading the cylinders with fuel. Then when they both warmed up, they would take the full open petcock keeping the float chambers full. At that point the BARKS got serious!

BW: That’s right, Bill, that was what it wanted with the 98 per cent nitro. I got to know that engine. As I said before, it would be competitive with anything today if fitted with the Hilborn injection everybody uses now. The Hilborn is much better for fuel than any carburettor can be.

BH: You mentioned you had three Vincent hillclimb bikes.

BW: Right. First, the Glen Kyle bike which came to me with his lengthened rigid rear frame and Vincent Girder front forks. I was constantly looking to improve it and made an even longer rigid rear frame for it, with telescopic front forks. Ultimately I made a springer rear fork for it when that style came in.

My second Vincent was based on a 1951 Black Shadow with my homemade frame, and I used the Vincent Girdraulic front fork on that one. The engine was like the other one, but one time I made a mistake with it, turning around on the hill and riding down with the throttle shut and the engine turning, but I forgot to button it so when the nitro loaded up in the cylinders it EXPLODED! So hard the bottom end was destroyed, and at the same time both cylinder heads broke in the middle. That shows you what happens if you make any mistakes with nitro.

The third one I got from Herb Reiber, a well-known former Washington, DC Vincent dealer. It was built for the so-called ‘Sportsman’ class hillclimbing, with lights and so forth. People were supposed to run their road bikes in this class. I did a couple of Sportsman races with it.
In those days Vincent bikes and engines were cheap so I had several spare engines and plenty of parts.

**BH:** What happened during the 1970s?

**BW:** I kept on racing my Vincents all during the 1970s, and I won a lot of events, but I was never able to put together enough points for the Championships. A lot more competition came in during that time. In 1979 I retired for a while, and concentrated on raising my kids. By the 1990s I missed the racing and had more free time again, so I went back out and competed some more, now with an XR-750 which was the thing. I had a lot of fun and won my share, but at my age now I was happy just to be in the top ten. In 1999 I retired for good. There is a price to pay in this sport, you know. Jumping up the bumps climbing a mountain you are going to fall off. I broke my arm, ribs, and leg different times and even my back — I heard it snap! — one time. So I have some aches and pains today, but I'm okay, I can still enjoy riding my Harley on the road and all.

**BH:** Beese, give us a look back at how the sport was organised in the 1960s when it drew such big crowds.

**BW:** There would be 20–25 AMA-sanctioned meets per season in the eastern states, April to October and they would be put on by local motorcycle clubs on a traditional basis. There were meets in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, Indiana, Michigan and New England. Crowds of 15,000 to 25,000 were not uncommon so the clubs could make a good deal of money on them and they knew how to run a good event. Courses varied, naturally, from 200–1000ft or so, and angles from 20º to near vertical. Jumps and bumps on them could get you twenty to thirty feet in the air. The start was the MOST important part of the run and where you would win or lose. When you were ready to go, you had your throttle wide open and left it there, controlling your engine with the mag kill button. Drop your clutch and GO, the chain on your rear wheel throwing dirt madly. Bounce up the hill and on a jump, you button your engine to prevent over-revving. At the top, you tried to keep from going right down the other side! I remember that Muskegon, Michigan was the toughest hill at the top, since there was hardly any stopping room up there. I asked Glen Kyle how he handled it and here's what he said: "Grab the button, turn the throttle off, grab the front brake, and head for the return path!" All this while you're up in the air, you see! But when Glen was winning the championships, his Vincent was so much better than anything else out there he could shut off near the top to keep control of the thing, and still win the event.

**BH:** What kind of gear ratios were used running one-gear only hillclimbs?

**BW:** Glen was running 10.48 to 12.0 ratios using big rear sprockets only. As I said, I made my own 16 and 18 tooth crankshaft sprockets so I was able to run from 9.0 to 12.5 to suit my estimate of the best choice for various courses.

**BH:** What kind of prize money was there?

**BW:** The rule was a 60/40 split between Class ‘A’ and Class ‘B’ since Class ‘A’ was supposed to be the more professional class with more expense for the equipment. The event winner might take a US$75 purse, is all. We were out for the fun and the glory in those times and if we got enough money to cover our expenses, we were happy. Some seasons I might have earned US$1,500. In those days five us would pile into an old 'bathtub' Nash Ambassador car with all our bikes loaded into a trailer behind, and fly down the highway 90 miles an hour across several states to get to a meet. I worked a lot of night shifts in those days so I'd head out Saturday morning and get back early Monday, grab some sleep and go to work that evening. When you're young you can do those things. As noted, I raced in the Canadian championships as well, which were run similar to the American, but on a slightly smaller scale.

**BH:** What ultimately happened to your Vincent bikes and parts?

**BW:** Some years back Somer Hooker bought out all my remaining Vincent stuff and he had a deal going with Larry Feece who wanted to acquire my first Vincent. Larry has that today and I have recently been in touch with him.
BH: OK, to finish up, let me ask you about the domestic side. That’s a big part of the life of a man.

BW: Shelby and I will soon celebrate our 55th wedding anniversary. I’m grateful to her for putting up with my racing all those years. We raised three children together, our sons Jimmy and Johnny and our daughter Kelly. Jimmy and Johnny both work for Harley-Davidson here in York and they’re getting close to retirement themselves!

BH: Okay, I guess that covers about everything. Beese, thank you so much for taking the time to give us this interesting story! I know all the Members of the Vincent H.R.D. Owners Club around the world will enjoy it very much. Any final thoughts?

BW: Just to express thanks to all the friends and sponsors who helped me down through the years.

The World’s Longest Roadtest
— Tony Rose: Part 15
Relayed by Jacqueline Bickerstaff — The World’s Longest Roadtest.
Originally printed in MPH 50, February 1953

Black Shadow MKB 465. 3rd January 1953. Mileage 92,342

Engine: No decline in performance from last month — lot of noise, but no signs that anything is going to break. Tried to nurse it this month but just can’t. Still find myself bashing away in the middle 70s for hours on end. Habit, I fear. There is a spot of vibration at 80-ish and perhaps at long last, those mains have just a spot of shake or roughness. We shall see when the sardine-can gets ripped open by the Boffins. I shall make a point of passing the 100,000 mile mark at over 100 solo or 85 with the chair. I am going to try for 1,350 miles each week for the next month including a trip to Rab for a big test report on the heap.

General: Clutch, head races, gearbox, spring frame etc., perfect as ever. Dampers lose oil every 3,000. Rear brake no longer does — front poor too. Think the Duron linings glaze over? Have approached Lucas to see if they can improve my lights. The magneto has been first class throughout the test — one new set of bearings at 51,000 miles and several sets of points. The cam ring resembles a switchback! Had a bit of water in the magneto, this month but Member G. Birchall of Maghull fixed all this with Bostic and now I ride through the largest puddles for the fun of the thing. I see that Mr Avon has done it — first in with a square section sidecar tyre — congratulations!

Plugs: Now on FE50 as there seems to be a little oil up front. After over 90,000 miles experience on these splendid plugs, I wish to state that I consider them to be the very best that money can buy. They do their job very much better for far longer than the rest.

Throughout this test several types of clothing equipment have been tried. Far too many were found unsuitable for the 80mph for 200 miles stuff that the Vincent can dish out, but one has stood the test. In its latest guise, the Black Barbour Suit, special for Vincents, is superb. Nothing can penetrate it, warm, ultra smart — this suit will help me to do a grand final month’s mileage although we are in mid-winter. I even ‘feel’ like a Black Shadow in it. I can say ‘Best Ever’ to Duncan Barbour for a super suit.

I still honk the Jet 80 around and what a very nifty chair it is, Gets away like an ice-cream on a hot rear pot!

Replacements this month. Grease in junction box, new rear chain, spokes in both wheels, battery again, steering damper plate, tyres. This month’s tip—have you tried Filtrate 60 plus graphite for the primary drive? Perfect!

Have you found your new Membership Card(s)?