

Comstock Chapter News

Antique Motorcycle Club of America

Fall 2017

President's Message



It was this time last year that I was out of town and unable to attend the September Comstock Chapter monthly meeting. At that meeting, I was elected to lead this fine group of antique bike enthusiasts into the future. Although I wasn't looking for a job, I decided that I needed to step up to the plate, support the chapter, try to generate some interest and make things happen. This year, I didn't miss the September Comstock Chapter monthly meeting, I couldn't because I was the president. Plus, I didn't want to miss the meeting because I wanted to have a say about who the next president may be. As it turned out, it didn't matter if I showed up or not, I was re-elected. I guess I will take the re-election as a compliment, but here is the deal, I need more help.

A lot of our members participate in several antique bike functions throughout the year, but rarely do they report or provide photos from those events. I don't know about you, but it is my opinion that chapter events, reports of the events, photos, stories, and an informative website, are what bring value to being a member of the Comstock Chapter. It takes a considerable amount of time to plan events, report on the events, prepare quarterly newsletters and maintain the website. Don't get me wrong, I have not done all of the work myself, but I need more contributions from you, the Comstock Chapter members. For those who have contributed in the past, thank you, and please consider doing another write-up. For those who have not contributed, but have something to share, please do. If you are not comfortable writing, don't worry, we will massage your write-up and make you sound smart. In addition to event coverage and photos, if you have an idea for a ride or an event, let me know. The 100/100/100 ride and Saturday Coffee were suggestions by chapter members that have turned out to be popular events.

I must admit that I have enjoyed my first term as president and getting to know the Comstock Chapter members. Although it is time consuming, I have also enjoyed preparing the Comstock Chapter newsletter and managing the website. The amount of participation at Chapter events has been encouraging and motivating. This year, over twenty members, spouses and children attended the second annual Chapter picnic, and more than fifteen members and spouses attended the Meadows' 30th annual Chili Cook-off. Saturday Coffee has been a popular event as well, averaging nine members, spouses, and children riding their antique bikes to each gathering.

In a few weeks, the Comstock Chapter will be hosting its inaugural road run. To date, fourteen riding entries have been received and twenty are signed up for the banquet. I am planning on having a great time and I hope others plan on joining the fun.

I hope everybody had a great summer. Enjoy the fall riding season and remember, send me stuff.

Rodd Lighthouse

AMCA National Show and Swap – Dixon, CA

By Rodd Lighthouse



1949 Powel P-81 Chassis

As the president of the AMCA's Comstock Chapter I am supposed to make every effort to attend AMCA National events in my area, at least that's what I told my bride. I had been to Dixon before, and I enjoyed the event, but I was only there on Saturday. This year, I headed out Thursday afternoon so I could find our vendor space to promote the Comstock Chapter.

On the way to Dixon I was thinking that it would be cool if I could find some Powell parts for my recently acquired 1949 rolling chassis Powell P-81 scooter. After checking in, finding my vendor spot, and hitting the head, I checked out the offerings, as many vendors were already set up and selling their junk. Upon exiting the restroom, the first thing I saw was an engine sitting on a table. From 20 yards away, it looked like a Powell P-81. As I approached, my heart started pounding, I was now looking face to flathead at the Holy Grail, a Powell P-81 fairly complete engine. After some hemming and hawing, consulting with a Powell expert, pointing out flaws and negotiating, a price was agreed upon on. My wad of cash was almost depleted, but I was jacked.

Fortunately for me, Gene Shields took some of my junk to Dixon, which I was able to sell out of his vendor space to replenish the coffers. Although I screwed up an opportunity to score a Velocette engine, too much indecisiveness, I did find some more gems including a cute little tool box for a future project, a rider's hand book for the 1934 H-D, a beautiful Velocette scrambler gas tank and other miscellaneous Velo parts, and a NOS seat for a Simplex Servi-Cycle.

As previously stated, the reason for going to Dixon was to promote the Comstock Chapter and the Chapter's upcoming Comstock Classic. Throughout the course of the meet, I met with representatives of the Fort Sutter, Ishi, Yerba Buena, Phoenix Road Runner, and Oregon Trail chapters and provided them with fliers and entry forms to the Classic. I also attended the AMCA's Chapter President's West Coast Meeting. I met a bunch of nice people, including Dave Mull, Comstock Chapter member from Bishop, California, and am hoping to see them at the Classic in October.



Powell P-81 Engine

I'm already looking forward to next year to continue my search for more Powell parts. I need a clutch, clutch cover, coil, ignition cover, and carburetor.

The Monster of the Salt

By Mark Gardiner

Reprinted with the permission of Mark Gardiner

In 2001, Mark Gardiner gave up his career in advertising, and moved to the Isle of Man to live out his childhood dream of racing in the TT. After returning to the U.S., he wrote a memoir of that experience, *Riding Man*, which is now in development as a feature film. His column, *Backmarker*, looks at everything from the motorcycle industry as a whole to intensely personal 'inside stories.'

“This should be a movie” The Monster of the Salt

I started writing about motorcycles and motorcycle racing in 1994. Over the last, oh, almost 20 years, I’ve uncovered a few stories that have made me think, “This should really be a movie.” One in particular, a story I called *The Monster of the Salt*, has finally prompted me to do something about it. I’ve teamed up with a veteran producer and the cinematographer who shot *Dust to Glory*, and we’re going to produce it.

The story begins, at least the way I tell it, in Paris. I think it was about November 2003 that I attended a vintage bike show. A gaggle of French bikers were gathered around an old Triumph, elbowing each other and pointing at it.

I heard one say, “C’est le monster du lac salé!”

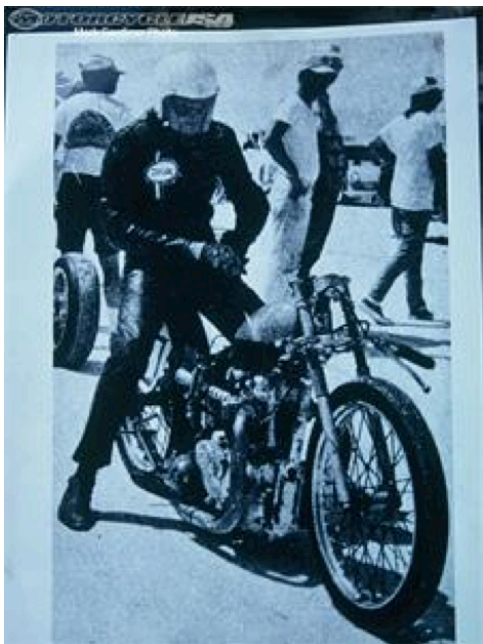
That piqued my curiosity, so I asked the owner – a guy named Laurent Romuald – if the bike was an old Salt Flats racer. “No,” he told me wistfully, “but it’s my dream to run it on the Bonneville Salt Flats.”



Laurent Romuald, one of the top motorcycle restorers in France, looks on as artist Denis Sire tries out le monster du lac salé.

They say art imitates life, but Laurent’s bike was a case of life imitating art imitating life. His bike was a replica of one that figured in a graphic novel written and illustrated by Denis Sire. Sire was an avid motorcyclist and a popular author/illustrator of French graphic novels in the ’70s and ’80s. His stories were set in Rock ’n Roll-era America—hot rods, flat track, desert racing, Buddy Holly; he loved that stuff.

This grainy image, pulled from a 1967 edition of the French car magazine *L’automobile*, served as the only reference for an illustration that appeared in Sire’s graphic novel *6T Melodies*.



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One day while Denis Sire sat in his studio seeking inspiration, he flipped through an old car magazine and found a photo spread, of action on the Bonneville Salt Flats from 1967. A single, grainy, black and white photo of a guy on a Triumph motorcycle, captioned with the name 'Nira Johnson,' caught his imagination. With nothing else to go on, he made up a little story about an American racer with that name, and a fast Triumph he dubbed, 'Le monstre du lac salé'. That translates as, the Salt Lake monster. (The Great Salt Lake and the Bonneville Salt Flat are a hundred miles apart, something Sire might have known if he'd ever actually been to the United States.)

The story appeared in a comic book called 6T Melodies. It was so popular that Laurent Romuald decided to build a replica of the bike in the comic.

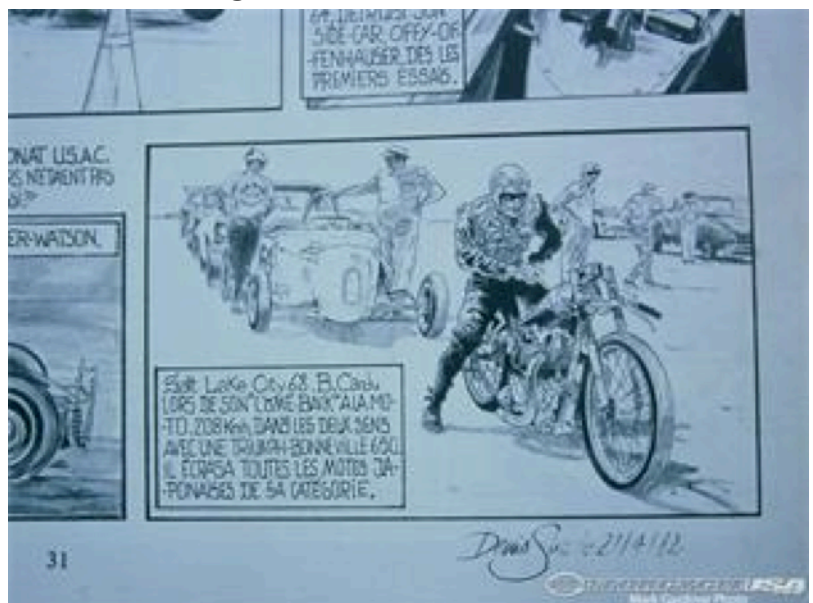
I was born in 1959," Laurent told me, "the same year as the Bonneville." He grew up to become one of the top French experts on British Twins, with a beautiful shop on the outskirts of Paris called Machines et Moteurs. He called Denis Sire to tell him his plan.

"Good luck," Sire told him. Then he explained that he'd made it all up based on a single old photo. "But," he went on, "I think I still have the magazine, I'll bring it over." The two were soon fast friends. They blew up the magazine photo but there wasn't much detail to be seen there. They also searched for any mention of Nira Johnson in other old magazines, hoping to trace him, but came up empty. So in the same way that Sire had imagined his American stories, Laurent had to imagine the bike.

"I could see it was an early Bonneville motor in a rigid frame," he told me. "It looked like a drag bike, so as I built it, I asked myself 'What would an American drag racer have done in the '60s?'"

The French have held America in special regard since the days of Lafayette; deep in their subconscious, they see the American Revolution as the one that worked. And for Laurent and Denis, growing up in the 1960s and '70s, America represented freedom, wide open spaces, and sense of potential that they felt was unavailable to them in France. I loved the idea of these two French guys creating an in-the-metal version of an imagined bike, ridden by an imagined rider, in an imagined version of the 'States.

When I met with Laurent and Denis, in Laurent's shop, they showed me the



The photo of Nira Johnson was turned into this illustration of fictional racer 'Bill Carbu'.

original magazine, hoping that I'd be able to tell them something, anything, about Nira Johnson. But the name didn't ring any bells with me. In fact, I told them that not only did I not know who he was, I'd never even encountered the name 'Nira' at all; I thought it might have been some kind of typo.

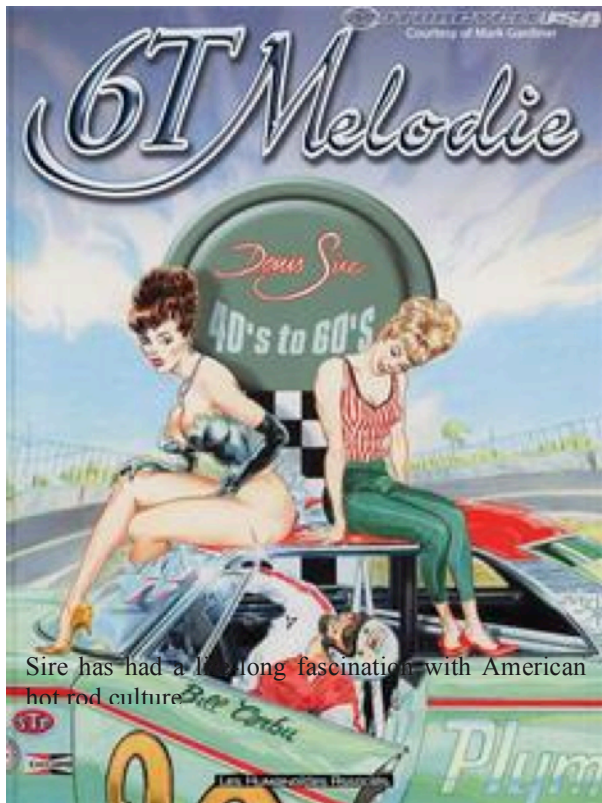
Still, I loved the idea of bringing their bike to the U.S., and having them experience Bonneville. I promised them that I'd do what I could to help. When I got back here, I did my own search for Nira Johnson and also drew a blank. I put up a blog post about Laurent, Denis, and le monstre du lac salé on the old Road Racer X web site. I concluded that story with an appeal for any documentary filmmakers who wanted a great subject to get in touch.

No one did. Other stories competed for my attention. I forgot about Laurent and Denis.

Years later, out of the blue, I got an email from a total stranger that read, "I'm a friend of Nira Johnson, and I have his old motorcycle. Call me."

I just about crapped. The stranger – a consulting engineer and AHRMA racer from Nevada named Rodd Lighthouse – had grown up with Nira as a family friend. He'd recently convinced Nira to sell him his old bike. Talking to Rodd, I realized that even though I'd never heard of him (and neither had Google) Nira had been quite a successful drag racer in Southern California in the '60s.

"You may not know," Rodd added, "that he was a black man."



This is why I don't write fiction; I could never make this stuff up. (If I had waited another couple of years, my friend John Stein would have completed his book **Motorcycle Drag Racing: A History**, and I would have learned who Nira was by reading it.)

Rodd sent me a bunch of pictures of the real 'monstre du lac salé', which is only a little worse for having been stored 40 years. The bike still has the tech stickers from that 1967 event at Bonneville.

And he gave me Nira's phone number. Johnson's now 80, but talking to him always reminds me that, if motorcycles don't kill us, they keep up young. He laughed when I told him that he was famous, at least to French motorcyclists, as a white guy.

This is how Nira came to be on the Bonneville Salt Flat in 1967...

I was born in New York, in the Bronx, in 1933. I got into motorcycles in the air force, in around '53 and rode on the street until '56. I was in SAC [the Strategic

Air Command-MG] on a B-36 flight crew.

When I got out to California in '58, a couple of street incidents – people pulling out in front of me, making left turns in front of me – I never got hurt too bad, just scuffed up, but it made me think, street riding isn't any fun any more.

I met up with a couple of guys, Scotty and Marquez, riding around L.A. They took me drag racing. Those two had a twin-engined Triumph dragster that they'd bought from Joe Dudek. [I asked about last names for his two racing buddies – MG] That's a good question. It was probably Charles Marquez because Scotty called him "Chuck".

Bill Johnson was riding for them. I was going out [to the races] with them and every now and then, Bill couldn't make it. They said, You're about the same size as Bill, why don't you race it? So, I started riding it.

Scotty and Marquez were hard-pressed for money, and their bike was a fuel burner; they couldn't come out every weekend. I wanted to race more, so I bought my own bike from a guy in '63. He'd started to build it but never finished. It was basically a rigid, pre-unit Triumph frame that had a Cub front end. I started building my own engines. I modded the frame and refined it, and I built my own 650cc engines.

I dropped a few valves here and there, but never really blew one up. I refined the heads, tried different cams. I was obsessed and ran every weekend at Lyons, Colton, Irwindale, Fontana, Bakersfield, all over.

I wasn't specifically trained as a mechanic. I started out in Vo-Tech high school in New York. Then in the Air Force, when I started riding, I learned as I went. I threw a primary chain through a case when I had my first BSA. Some buddies had more knowledge and helped me out. A guy named Denny Harris had a background with hot rods. He was from California, and probably inspired me move to California when I was discharged.

When I started drag racing, I bought books, read, learned, experimented. I'd have to find my log book to remember exactly how much power I ever got from the Triumph. I think it was about 56 horsepower. Shell Thuett had a shop in Lynwood or Bellflower. I became good friends with one of his mechanics, Jimmy Enz, and they had the only dyno around, so that's where I did a lot of my tuning.



I finally met the real Nira Johnson and saw the original 'monster' at Miller Motorsports Park, in 2008.

I liked to keep things reliable, and was looking to make it better for the least amount of money. The pre-unit Bonneville had a three-piece crank, and when they went to unit construction, they put in a better, two-piece one. So I used that. I polished it, and took off some weight. I ported it; lightened and polished the rods... I wanted to put in bigger valves but it was too expensive. When I finally went and did that British thing, I got some factory 12:1 pistons. [In '62 or '63 a group of American drag racers were invited to England to put on a series of demonstration races—MG]

I ran what they called Class B/Gas. In the beginning I ran in the high 11-second range, with trap speeds around 110 mph. At the end its development, the bike was hitting 116-118 mph. I finally got 119 in England, but I wouldn't trust their timing!

There weren't too many Harleys that were any faster, so I'd sometimes bump up a class, too. After a while, people were helping me out a little. Promoters would pay my expenses to show up. Sometimes, when other guys saw that I was there, they'd just roll their bikes right back onto their trucks and go home!

As far as the Bonneville Salt Flats goes, I only raced there one year. I went up to check it out a couple of years earlier, and decided I wanted to run there. I ran the drag bike, almost unchanged, really. I just swapped the rear tire and gearing, and took it to El Mirage [dry lake, near L.A.–MG]. I also took it to Willow Springs to shake it down.

I was using Harmon-Collins cams, and they had some they said were "too radical for drag racing" so I got them to grind me some of those.

Jimmy Enz and I went up the same year. My bike ran good, but the record was set by Dudek and Johnson, at speeds that were unattainable on a gas 650 – they were either running alcohol or fuel – so they ran in the high 140s, and my best runs were in the 130s.

After running on the salt, I changed the rear wheel and put it back on the strip till '69. Jimmy Enz died young, of cancer.

Rockwell offered me other opportunities, so I moved back East. I was too busy working to race, and the bike just moved around with me. I was a technician, then an R&D engineering manager. I worked on the Minuteman missile project.

I actually went to France for Rockwell a couple of times. The first was in the late '70s, and the second time was in '83. I had no idea I was a character in a comic book over there, until Rodd clued me in. I was kinda' surprised.



Denis Sire, a French graphic novelist, in his studio in Paris.

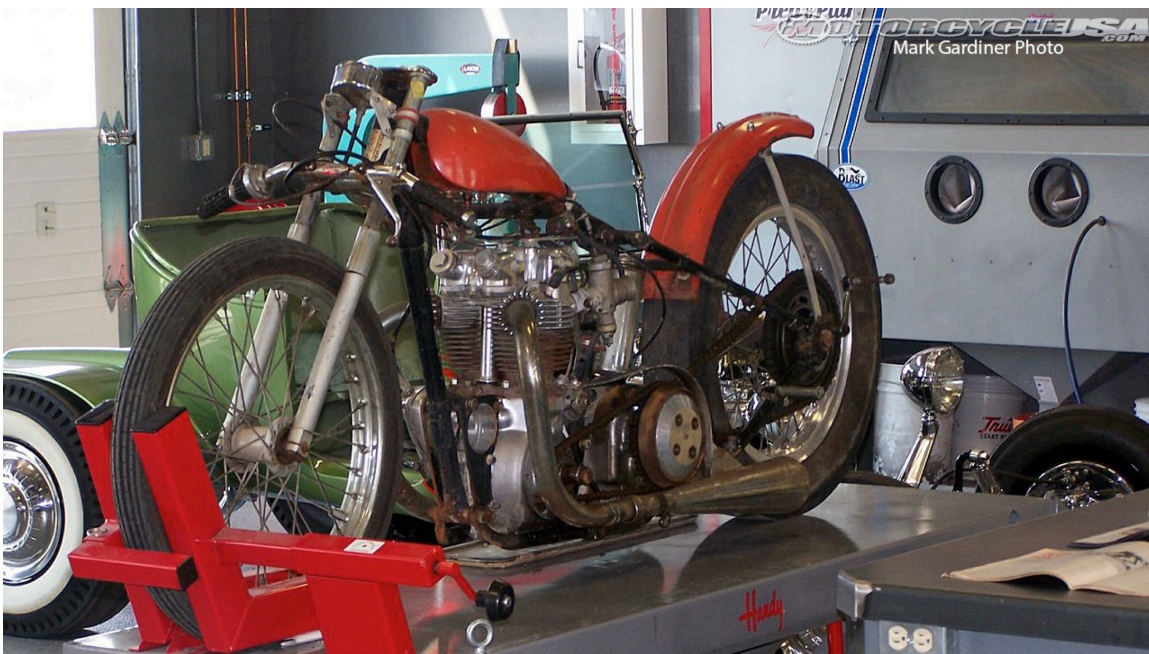
I thought that just bringing the French monster to Bonneville was film-worthy. But once I realized that the French guys and their bike could actually encounter Nira and his bike, I made it my mission to bring them all together.

One of the things that fascinated me about the replica-of-the-comic-book bike was that Laurent Romuald, the builder, had almost nothing to go on. He'd correctly guessed that it would have been typical of a '60s-era drag bike, and built it up by asking himself: What would an American hot-rodder have done?

Well, Nira's bike hasn't run since Speed Week, '67. Before it can run on the salt again, it needs to be gone through. And Laurent and Nira will do that together on camera.

Laurent doesn't speak English, and Nira doesn't speak French, but they share the language of Triumph. They'll be fine. And it's not just the machine that was fabricated; both Laurent and Denis Sire have also, over the years, fleshed out an imaginary Nira Johnson. So it will be fascinating to see them meet the real McCoy.

For all that, though, I believe that this film's about more than motorcycles. Americans see foreign crowds shouting, "Death to America" on CNN every night. But the truth is more complex. While the American government manages to infuriate a lot of people (including many Americans!) the idea of America is still incredibly popular all around the world. And as obscure as Bonneville and land-speed racing is, it's a very inclusive sport. Nira Johnson wasn't just a successful drag racer, he lived the American Dream.



This film's about that, and about two young guys growing up in France, dreaming of an America they only knew from hot rod magazines and rock 'n' roll music.

One guy that fell in love with the story was Tom Guttry. We met on an unrelated film project; he's part of the team of producers who are developing Riding Man as a feature film. Tom recruited Kevin Ward, who's one of the most experienced motorsport cinematographers out there; he was the Director of Photography for the great doc Dust to Glory. The three of us made a pact; we agreed we'd make this film for no pay, if that's what it took to bring it to the screen. Since then, we've also picked up commitments from a talented editor (Chris Hover), musicians (Nick Hinton and Zack Downes) a VFX ace (Brant Wells) and a top effects guy in Steve Austin. (No, our Steve Austin is not The Six Million Dollar Man, but if you had to actually hire and pay this crew, it would cost tens of thousands of bucks a day, so the film will punch well above its budget.)

I know that we could provide great value to sponsors (Triumph leaps to mind, but there are others) who could get making-of webisodes and other spin-off media. But with some of the key people now in their

80s, we're running out of time. So we've decided to crowd-fund it.

If you agree that this is a great pro-American and pro-motorcycle story, help us get *Monsters of the Salt* made; visit our **Indiegogo page** and pledge a donation. Just as important, tell your friends. Tweet about *Monsters*, link to it on your Facebook page... hell, write it on bathroom walls.

One way or another, we're going to get this movie made. Watch this space for details, eh?