



# A Rare find, Indeed

By Gary Westphalen, Thunder Roads West Virginia  
Photos by Moe Vetter

"What a treasure!" trumpets George Yarocki, author of the book *Early Indian History*. "Very exciting news, indeed!"

"Categorically speaking, it's a pretty rare bike," says Dale Walksler, founder of the [Wheels Through Time Motorcycle Museum](#) in Maggie Valley, North Carolina.

"It's very possible that it is the oldest surviving, un-restored Indian," says Indian motorcycle aficionado Steve Rinker of Romney, West Virginia ([BucksIndianMotorcycles.blogspot.com](#)).

The motorcycle these three knowledgeable guys are talking about is a 1903 Indian, recently found residing in a western Maryland garage. This machine has traveled through time to us from the very dawn of the motorcycle age. There aren't but a handful of older motorcycles on the planet. To understand the place this bike holds in history, we have to travel back to the late 1800s.

Bicycle racing, first on dirt ovals and later on wooden tracks called velodromes, was the big spectator sport of the day. Competition between the men who raced their bikes was fierce, and George Hendee was the best. He was America's first national cycling champion, and won 302 out of 309 races. Hendee retired from racing in 1892 and moved into the manufacture of bicycles. By

1898 the Hendee Manufacturing Company of Springfield, Massachusetts was producing bicycles with the Indian brand name and he was sponsoring numerous riders and race events throughout New England.

Carl Oscar Hedström, whose family had emigrated from Sweden to the United States when he was a boy, was also fascinated by bicycles, but in a different way. Though he loved bicycling around the streets of New York City, the mechanics of these machines was his interest and he began designing and building bicycles that were ever lighter and faster.

About this same time, a curious machine was developed to improve the bicycle racing experience. Called a pacer, the machine was essentially a tandem bicycle that had an engine mounted on it. Pacers were used on the track to help gather up the field of competing bicycles in order to get a clean start to the race. During the race, the pacer also ran out ahead of the bicycles, allowing for greater speeds as they drafted behind it.

Pacers had a reputation of being unreliable, so Hedström applied his engineering expertise and designed a much-improved pacer. When George Hendee saw Hedström's pacer at a bicycle race in Madison Square Garden in 1900, he



Carl Oscar Hedström poses with the first Indian Motorcycle.

asked the young engineer to come to work for him in Springfield, with the goal of developing a motorized bicycle that could be mass-produced. They built a prototype and demonstrated the first Indian Motorcycle (the "r" wouldn't be added until some years later) to the public in May of 1901.

"Factory records show that there were three prototypes built in 1901 and one was taken apart, and the parts used in another motorcycle," says George Yarocki. "Which motorcycle, is not known and the parts could have been used in one, or both, of the remaining 1901 prototypes." Yarocki

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This 1903 Indian, recently uncovered in a western Maryland garage, is one of the oldest motorcycles in existence anywhere in the world.

## 1903 INDIAN MOTORCYCLE

has been following a lead based on a 1922 photograph in a newspaper that shows a man riding what may well have been one of those prototypes, but has yet to succeed. "That would probably be the most valuable bike in the world if we could ever find it," George tells *Thunder Roads West Virginia*.

Hedström took his engine design to the Aurora Automatic Machine Company in Aurora, Illinois, a company that had the capacity to build the 1.75 horsepower motors in large quantity. Hendee began building a network of dealerships. In 1902, the Hendee Manufacturing Company produced a total of 143 Indian Motorcycles.

As production ramped up in 1903, 376 motorcycles would be produced. The serial number on this particular bike is 548. Yarocki says company records show that this serial number means it was produced late in the year of 1903. Obviously, there was no Division of Motor Vehicles at the time, so no registry exists that would tell us who was its original owner.

In fact, at this point, nothing is known about the bike's history until somewhere around 1960. It was around that time that Charles Alder of Taneytown, Maryland, bought the bike from a woman whose husband had recently died. "He bought it for 20 dollars," says Steve Rinker. "It was hanging in the basement of the house. Obviously, it was a dry basement. I have talked to a few other guys who knew Charles from the past, and they seemed to think that the previous owner was a dentist. His son Charlie Alder was 14 years old when they got the motorcycle. He remembers that he and his father picked the motorcycle up and brought it home, and they have kept it ever since." Charles Alder, Rinker says, passed away a few years ago and Charlie was killed in a motorcycle accident last summer.

One day last fall, out of the blue, Steve Rinker's phone rings. On the other end is a friend of his who owns an auction company. "He says, 'I have found a 1903 Indian moped.' I said, 'No. You didn't find a 1903.'" Steve remembers saying. "I said, 'You don't have a 1903 Indian. Trust me, you don't have it!' He said, 'Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Everybody I've talked to, they swear there's a 1903 moped.' I said, 'Well, first of all, they're not



mopeds. They were motorcycles. You propelled them like a bicycle in order to get them running, but you couldn't ride them like a bicycle." A moped, you can still pedal like a bike. Anyway, I said, 'Hey, I'd love to see it.' He said, 'Well, it's going to be sold.' I said, 'Yeah, I would love to go see the thing.'"

The bike, the auctioneer explained, will be put on an estate auction, along with several other bikes the Alder's owned. For the auction company to gain some insight into the value and authenticity of this bike, they arranged for Steve to see it. As they are driving to the garage, Steve remembers telling the auctioneers, "I'm 98 percent certain we're not going to see a 1903. Somebody's got their years confused somewhere along the way."

As the men enter the garage, they see the outlines of five cloth-covered motorcycles. "The first one we uncovered was a 1926 Harley-Davidson JD. Charles had restored this motorcycle," says Steve. "The next one we came to is a 1923 Harley JD. The next one was a 1917 Harley. It was supposed to have been five Indians. Well, the first three were Harley-Davidsons, so my expectations now are almost one-hundred percent sure we would never see an Indian."

But under the fourth sheet there was indeed an Indian, albeit a 1919 model. "Here's the Indian they've been talking about," Steve remembers thinking. "I looked at the auctioneer and said, 'You know, this isn't an '03.' Then we jerked the cover off the last motorcycle, and I just stood there. He hit me on the shoulder, and

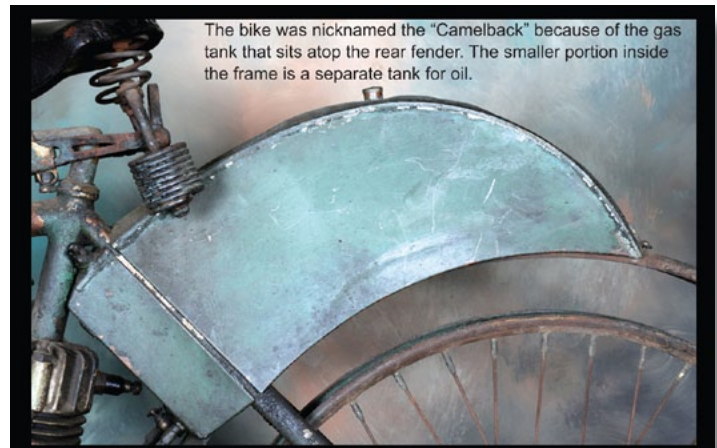
said, 'Hey! Is that a 1903?' And I'm just looking at it, and he says 'Hey! What is it?' And I turned around and said, 'It's a nineteen-oh-thhh...it's...it's...it's a Camelback Indian! There it is!'"

Rinker was stunned. For a vintage Indian collector, this is akin to witnessing the dawn of time. "I've seen four restored motorcycles up to this one. Then, all of a sudden, I find this bike in its un-restored condition," he tells me as we talk about the day he first saw this bike. "You and I have talked in the past, old bikes are only original once. You want to try to preserve anything you can, as long as it's still original. It was really truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me. These bikes are so rare to find. They made it through the Depression, through both World Wars. They never got scrapped. Kids didn't trash them or beat them up. I mean, face it, it's nothing more than a bicycle, essentially, with a little gas tank on the back. So, to survive the time is pretty extraordinary."

The gas and oil tanks over the rear fender are why these early Indians got the "Camelback" nickname. The hump behind the rear frame of the bike held about a gallon of gasoline and the little portion inside the framework was a separate tank for the oil. Hendee produced this same design from 1902 until 1908, and the serial numbers are the only way to verify the exact year of production.

"The insides of that engine are very simple, but very well made," says Dale Walksler from his

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The bike was nicknamed the "Camelback" because of the gas tank that sits atop the rear fender. The smaller portion inside the frame is a separate tank for oil.

office in the Wheels Through Time Motorcycle Museum. "When that bike was built in '03 it was just the most charming little bike." Dale has unique knowledge about the 1903 Indian, because he not only owns one, he rides and has even raced it! "I always claim that my '03 is the oldest running Indian anywhere. I don't know of an earlier serial number than mine that runs."

Dale Walksler has raced his 1903 Indian several times on the track at the Barber Motorsports Museum in Birmingham, Alabama. He may be the only man alive today who knows what it feels like to ride this bike. "It's a huge burst of energy," he tells *Thunder Roads West Virginia*. "The sad thing is, all the years that we raced the early bikes at Barber's, nobody ever recorded a lap time. So, we never really measured how fast they went. Last year we measured lap times and I raced a 1911 Indian. It averaged 48 miles-per-hour for three miles on a road course.

The '03 honestly is not that much slower. The little bike only weighs about 90 pounds. So, you've got a 90 pound bike with enough power to push it. That bike ought to go near 40 miles-per-hour. You've got to ride with one hand, because you have to have your right hand on your throttle and timing, while your left

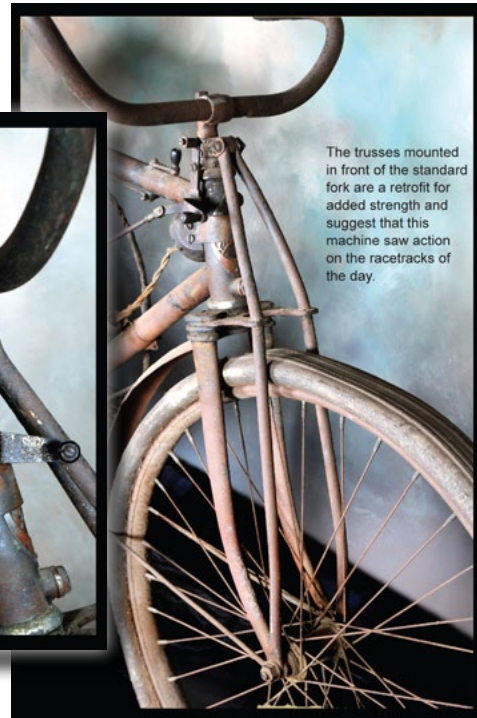
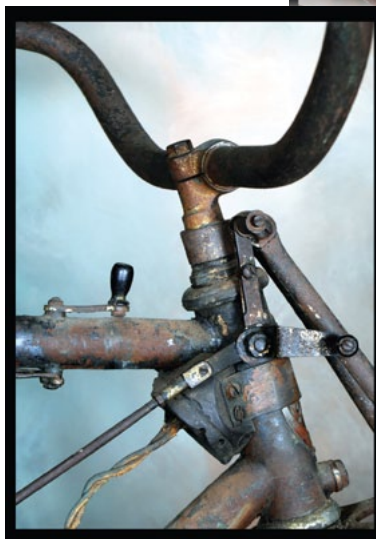
hand is keeping you on course. You're almost always adjusting throttle and spark, so you're almost always riding with one hand." You can see several videos of Dale prepping and racing his 1903 Indian on his website at [WheelsThroughTime.com](http://WheelsThroughTime.com).

When speaking about the present condition of this 1903 Indian, Steve Rinker says, "This thing is 95 percent there. A lot of the little things are there like the trickler on top of the carburetor where you prime it; the little spring inside of that still works. I've cranked the bike over. It's got awesome compression. I don't think it would take long to get the motor to run."

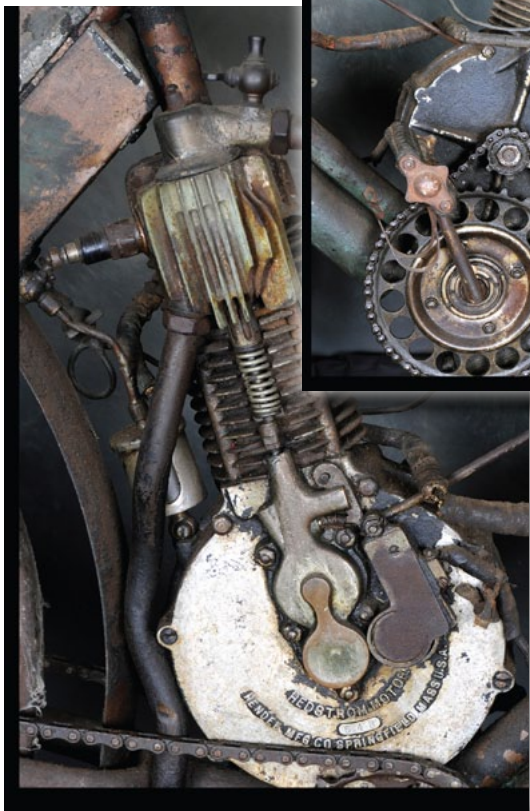
The Camelback tanks appear to be complete and undamaged by time. The frame is solid and the control linkages are functional, with one exception. "There was a linkage that went from a hand grip that would work the decompression lever," Steve notes. "That linkage is missing." One of the rear fender braces is also missing, as is the battery tube that would have held several dry cell batteries which provide the bike's source of ignition.

There have been some modifications made to this bike, which were probably all done within the first few years of the bike's existence. The pedals and left side sprocket, for instance, appear to be a 1905 update. "The guy was riding this!" Steve points out. "This was his mode of transportation. He had to do what he had to do. So when his 1903 pedals broke, he couldn't just throw his motorcycle away, because this was all he had! He got a new set of cranks. It was an upgrade for him. We do it today with our modern-day vehicles."

"The handlebar neck seems a bit longer than normal," George Yarocki



The trusses mounted in front of the standard fork are a retrofit for added strength and suggest that this machine saw action on the racetracks of the day.



tells *Thunder Roads West Virginia* after examining our photos of the bike. "The frame head casting seems to have been altered with added set screw lugs, and third, the remaining top of the battery box is held with a homemade clamp covering the badge."

The most curious upgrade is on the front forks. The extra trusses mounted forward of the traditional bike forks were not standard equipment. "The first use of the fork trusses on standard models appeared on the 1910 loop frame with the advent of the leaf spring," George says. Their retrofit to this machine suggests it had an exciting life. "The '03 model with these added indicates an early recognition of a weakness in the fork, and no doubt were added for racing and/or cross country competition, both of which were going on at that early date."

By now, you're probably wondering about the value of this motorcycle. We all are. Estimates given to *Thunder Roads West Virginia* are all over the map, so there's no point in speculating. We'll find out on April 21, 2012, when the bike goes up for auction at the County Fairgrounds in Frederick, Maryland.

"I've got a small private collection," says Steve Rinker, "and I wouldn't feel right owning the bike. I really wouldn't. I would love to have it, don't get me wrong. When you think about the historical value of the motorcycle, it would really be a wonderful exhibition for some museum somewhere, and hopefully that's where it will go. But whoever gets it, it's just a wonderful piece to find."

George Yarocki agrees. It is, he says, "All in all, a great piece of history."

