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The Indian Chief that almost made it to Pompeii

A family machine, a postwar Europe, and two brothers who rode farther than they should have.

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My fathers 1947 Indian Chief in 1952. The picture is restored with Google Nano Banana.

My father owned a 1947 Indian Chief. In 1952, he and his brother pointed it toward Italy and went, from Linköping, Sweden. They came back mostly intact. The bike — especially the indian on the front fender — did not.

In 1950s Stockholm, he parked it unlocked on Nybrogatan. Theft wasn't really a risk. Left-hand throttle. Foot clutch to the left. The three-speed hand shifter is located to the right of the tank. The right grip handled ignition advance. If you didn't already know the dance, you wouldn't get twenty meters before stalling. Confusion was the security system.

The photo above is of his actual bike, a working machine equipped with a passenger seat, luggage rack, and mirror. Not the polished catalog beauty taken from a flattering angle, like in the internet image below of the same model year. Same beautiful machine, different purpose.



Stolen image of the world's most beautiful motorcycle (credit to the owner).

The model itself — the 1200 cc side-valve Chief — arrived in the U.S. in 1946 for around \$500. In Sweden, it appeared in spring 1947 at 4,200 kronor (SEK), a staggering price at the time. Import bans returned early in 1948 due to the currency squeeze, so not many came in. My father bought his Chief second-hand in the late winter of 1952 for 3,000 kronor. It had 12,000 kilometers on the clock (7,500 miles). For a time, he co-owned it with his brother.

The plan: Pompeii

They had two weeks' vacation and stole a third. The goal was Pompeii.



The Chief in 1952, ready for travel. The picture is restored with Google Nano Banana.

This shot shows the bike and my uncle just before departure, a suitcase strapped on one side for the road to Naples. The black gas pump you see to the left of the frame stood outside my grandmother's country store in Rök.

The route out: Germany, Switzerland, Milan, Rome. They rode in turns and mainly slept under the open sky — parks, woods, anywhere quiet and free. Money was short; the road was long.

The breakdown came in Fondi, halfway between Rome and Naples. The Chief coughed once and died for good. A local workshop shrugged. Then a Swedish car happened by. They waved it down for a tow back toward Rome and hit a seam of luck: the driver was an auto electrician. He took one look, asked for welding gear, and put a new tungsten pad on a worn breaker point while the onlookers shook their heads at the idea that you would weld a motorcycle back to life at the roadside. The engine fired on the first try. It ran fine. Time, however, had run out. They turned north from Rome. Pompeii would be for another trip.

They crashed four times in total, once properly in Switzerland. They nearly rode off a cliff in the Alps. One day, they cleared four passes in a row and slept in their clothes again because there wasn't much point in changing when you'd be back in the saddle before sunrise. The return went via Genoa and the Brenner Pass to Bern, then Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam. They crossed the old Zuiderzee dam and experienced their last breakdown in Denmark, where a friendly workshop quickly sorted things out.

They climbed every tower they could find: St. Peter's in Rome, Ulm's cathedral (Europe's highest church then), the Eiffel Tower. A Swiss franc was 1.18 kronor, my father noted, and Swedes felt roughly as well-off as the Swiss in those days — another detail that stayed with him.

They reached Helsingborg, Sweden after dark. Hotels were full. They ended up sleeping in separate bathrooms. At home, my grandmother — who had received exactly one postcard, from Switzerland, mentioning a crash and that they were "fine" — had been living on nerves alone. The total distance was over 8,500 kilometers (5,300 miles), on a machine that drank oil as readily as petrol.

Back in Stockholm, the Indian continued to serve as a daily mode of transportation. In 1957, my father traded it for a Volkswagen Beetle and got 600 kronor for the Chief.

By then, he and his brother had put 70,000 kilometers on it (43,500 miles). The next owner — young, overconfident — put it straight into a stone cairn.

Why has it never been stolen

He always liked telling the Nybrogatan detail. In an era before steering locks and alarms, the Chief was safe by design — by bad design, if you want the truth. Left throttle, foot clutch, hand shift, ignition advance by your right hand. It required choreography and coordination. Few had both. If you grew up on modern controls, you'd sit there confused, and the bike would sit there with you.

What he thought about the machine (and what was wrong with his)

My father never romanticized the Chief. He respected it. He also thought it was a poor design in key places. The side-valve motor had proper oil circulation, but the cast-iron valve guides weren't lubricated. That meant worn valve stems and new guides after a six thousand miles or so. In the 1950s, the job cost about 300 kronor. The power was 34 horsepower, which was considered a lot back then. If you wanted the peak of the market, you dreamed of a Vincent Black Shadow at roughly 60 horsepower and well over 6,000 kronor — beyond most wallets. For context, the Volvo PV444 launched under 5,000 kronor and still cost around 10,000 in 1959.

His own used Chief was tired despite the low mileage. It burned a liter of oil every 100 kilometers. Fuel consumption was 6,5 liters per 100 km. The ignition was battery-based, which made it easy to start. The gas tank were split into two: 8.5 liters and 5 liters with manual petcocks. When one ran dry, you shut it and opened the other. Sensible riders filled up before 200 km because running a tank dry at night on a mountain road was not a hobby. The tires were fat — Volkswagen-Beetle fat. It was a heavy, handsome bike that demanded your attention.

A personal postscript

Years later, I made a similar Italy run myself — on a Japanese standard bike from 1981. It was faster, lighter, and infinitely more forgiving. But the stories that stick weren't about smooth miles. They were about the near cliffs and the bathroom hotels, the tungsten pad welded back onto a breaker point while the town stares, and **two brothers** who almost made it to Pompeii and came home with **everything that matters**. And, of course, that **my grandmother** — who ran the country store where that gas (bensin) pump stood — was in pieces. The only postcard she'd received came from Switzerland and basically said: *We crashed. We're fine*. That was it.

Fact box — Indian Chief 1200 (1947)

- **Engine:** 1200 cc side-valve, 34 hp. Full oil circulation — but **unlubricated cast-iron valve guides**. Result: after ~10,000 km the valve stems wore. New valves and guides cost SEK 300 in the 1950s.
- **Ignition:** Battery ignition. Easy to start. **Right twist** for timing advance.
- **Transmission & controls:** 3-speed tank-mounted hand shift; foot clutch; left-hand throttle; right grip for ignition advance; battery ignition. Not beginner-friendly.
- **Fuel:** Dual tanks (8.5 L + 5 L) with manual switching; practical range $\approx$ 200 km before caution
- **Tires:** Extra-wide, roughly VW Beetle dimensions
- **Economy (this bike):** ~6.5 L/100 km ($\approx$ 36 mpg US); oil use ~1 L/100 km when worn. Yes, per 62 miles. That's not a typo.
- **Sweden pricing:** SEK 4,200 new in 1947; SEK 3,000 used in 1952; SEK 600 trade-in in 1957
- **The 1952 ride:** ~8,500 km (~5,280 miles), 4 crashes, 0 Pompeii.

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