

The "Old Englishman's" motorcycle gets a new lease on life

John Lombardi likes to live in the past. So much so, that his kids have taken to calling him "dinosaur."

But perhaps it's lucky for the rest of us that he does, because otherwise a valuable piece of Houston memorabilia would be gone.

Sitting, protected by a tarp, in Lombardi's garage is a 1965 Velocette MSS 500 motorcycle. It's blue and grey, and it shines like a new dime.

Over the past 10 years, Lombardi has slowly restored the old bike, piece by piece, to its former glory.

In fact, it looks so good some people might have difficulty recognizing it as the same run-down old motorcycle that rolled up and down the streets of Houston for years during the '70s.

Anyone who lived in town then will remember "the old Englishman," Ewart Swann, who rode around town on his broken-down motorcycle with his little dog, Snowy, tucked snugly in the side car, complete with goggles, leather hat and scarf.

By all accounts, Swann was a gentle, yet wonderfully eccentric old man, and not one easily forgotten.

Touring the streets of Houston on the Velocette, he loved to stop and talk, and talk, and talk.

But he had such great stories to tell it was hard to mind. Swann and Snowy had been everywhere on that bike.

After buying the Velocette new in London, England, Swann set out on an adventure that, for three years, took him across England, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, the U.S. and Canada.

Says Lombardi, with whom Swann became close friends, for the old man losing Snowy was akin to losing a close family member.

In 1976, several years be-

its restoration in 1985.

He worked at it, bit by bit, over the next 10 years, completing one job, moving on to something else for a while, and then coming back to work on the bike again.

Lombardi laughs when he thinks about the way the bike looked when he got it.

He recalls endless hours of stripping off layer after layer of paint, which the old man had slapped on with a brush.

Now, he says, "a Velocette purist would probably roll over and die" if he saw the blue and grey bike.

"Velocette was kind of like Ford," he says. "You had your choice of color as long as it was black."

Restoring the bike had a particular effect on Lombardi. His general passion for history and machines found a focus with the Velocette.

"I'm a real British cycle nut," he says. "But in all the years I rode British bikes as a kid, I'd never heard of the Velocette."

Today, ask him anything. Chances are he'll be able to answer pretty well any question to do with the bike or the company that made it.

As Lombardi got more involved with the restoration of the cycle, he joined the Velocette Club of North America, an organization "dedicated to the preservation of Velocettes."

Every three months he

receives a copy of "Fish-tails," the club newsletter (so named because of the fish-like shape of the Velocette's tailpipe.)

As far as Lombardi knows, his is the only Velocette in B.C., north of the lower mainland.

So for Lombardi, preserving such a piece of history was important. Not just so it could sit under a tarp in a garage, however.

"What I really enjoy now, is taking it out and having people ooh and ah," he says. "It's a magnet for people."

A lot of times people remember, says Lombardi, and ask "Is that the old Englishman's bike?"

Since restoring the Velo, Lombardi has put about 800 miles on it, often with his own dog, Pugsly, riding along in the side car sporting goggles and a scarf.



Lombardi and Pugsly with the restored Velocette

He picked up the dog and the side car in Iran.

Iranian tradition dictated that Swann's hosts give him a gift for staying with them while he waited for repairs to be done on the motorcycle.

The gift was Snowy. Logic might suggest that a dog is not the most appropriate gift for a man who travels by motorcycle, but Swann rose to the occasion and had a 1956 Czechoslovakian side car installed for Snowy's riding comfort.

The two were inseparable for 14 years, until Snowy died.

fore Swann returned to England, he gave the motorcycle to Lombardi, who had been offering to buy it for the previous two years.

With more than 100,000 miles on it, the bike was a mess; the engine had seized, the frame was in three pieces, and the front tire was barely hanging on.

"Swann never cared much for looks," says Lombardi.

"He was non-materialistic."

For Lombardi, the sorry state of the motorcycle presented a challenge.

The bike sat for nine years, until Lombardi began