



MY STORY

by

Eric Chitty '13



My favourite action picture,
taken in 1946.

My life of ups and downs

by Eric Chitty

JUST introducing Eric Stephenson Chitty, born at Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on April 28th, 1909. Yes, folks, that's me! But my parents are only Canucks by adoption. Dad is a Londoner and lived out Hammersmith way. Mother was a school teacher in Birmingham. Soon after they married they hit the trail for Canada. Dad, one of the pioneer consultants in advertising, quickly found a job in Toronto but preferred to live outside the city. He bought a lot some miles off which was in quite a wild spot. That first home was made of wood. It was during my early years that Dad and his friends, in their spare time, built that good solid brick structure we call "The House of Chitty." I have two brothers—Kingsley, the eldest, and young Leslie, who made a bit of a name for himself as a cycle racer. Then there's sister Marjorie.

Learning to skate is the first recollection I have of early youth. There's natural ice for many months in the year in Canada where youngsters take to skating as kids do over here to soccer. At school, a mile or so away, I played ice hockey, also soccer, being a centre forward in both games. As soon as I was able I went to Technical College for a two year course in such things as mechanics, printing, chemistry, brick-laying, etc. While all this was going on

Fair-haired, wise-cracking Eric Chitty doesn't know the meaning of the word defeat, on or off the track. King Bruce's spider had nothing on Eric when it came to perseverance. His story is a success story with a difference, an eight year battle with adversity which would have broken a less stouter-hearted spirit.

JIM STENNER.

another family out from England settled almost opposite our homestead. They opened a car repair service as a spare time occupation. I gave a hand as a general help and so got on nodding terms with the internal combustion engine.

Occasionally I'd go up country to a place called Agincourt, about 20 miles to the north, to lend a hand at a rest farm for racehorses. Here they were turned out of training for a time. It was good fun. Often I rode the animals at exercise and being a wee chap of 4ft. 8ins. I was, at the age of 14, asked to train as a jockey. I liked the idea. Dad gave his O.K. At once came my first accident. Told to exercise the winner of that year's King's Plate, a Canadian classic, which had been "loose" for a week or so—the horse's stable name was "Topi"—I hadn't ridden far down a lane when a dog dashed out of a field under the feet of my mount. "Topi" stumbled. In trying to pull him up I was shot over his head with one foot caught in the stirrup. Then he fell on top of me and in his scramble to get up sent me flying along the gravel. My left ear was almost severed.

When "Topi" was on all fours again he promptly ran at me! If you know anything about horses you'll say "impossible." I thought so too until it happened! Grabbing the reins with both hands from my position on the "floor" I held "Topi" off for a few seconds. As my grip, through weakness, was about to relax someone seized his head. The owner of the dog had raced to my rescue—in the nick of time. A visit to hospital, 7 stitches in the ear, and I was back next morning, head in bandages, ready to try again. You know the old saying about losing one's nerve. This time all went well. However, my riding carrer fizzled out a few months later when I began putting on too much weight.

I wasn't without a steed for long. At 15 I managed to borrow an old belt driven Enfield motor cycle from a friend of the family. I did all the usual things. Rode the bike, took it to bits, put it together again, not once but many times. My first job was as an apprentice in engineering. That didn't last many months. One day the boss swore at me. Out I walked! You see I had been pretty strictly brought up. Dad was a Methodist, also a lay preacher, as

O - U - C - H



Not posing but recovering from a crack in the ribs after crash at Milwaukee speedway, 1935.

you would say in this country. There was a row afterwards, a heck of an uproar, for I'd been apprenticed for 7 years. I wouldn't go back. In the end I got myself apprenticed to the firm next door in electrical and mechanical engineering. I served the full time. Most evenings were spent in school studying draughtmanship, machine designing, and so on.

My great pal, Bill King, a lad of my own age, was the proud owner of an ancient 4-cylinder Henderson bike. We rode it turn and turn about. Soon I wanted my own machine. Spotting a brand new Indian, purchasable for 75 dollars down, I immediately went into a ways and means huddle with myself. By cutting out entertainment and the current girl friend, who lived a dollar fare away, I reckoned the money could be saved. Those three minutes on the phone explaining to the girl why I wouldn't be seeing her any more were more than awkward!

A week after my eighteenth birthday I walked into that shop and planked down the cash. The proprietor casually mentioned that perhaps I would like to try my luck at a meeting which had been arranged over a half mile dirt track course at Newmarket, about 40 miles from Toronto. I made the trip. After stripping the bike I won the novices event. I cornered with the left foot forward pushing through the loose dirt, a style I've always kept. My headgear? Just a cap! The prize? A silver medal, that's all. From then on I rode whenever I could, in scrambles, hill-climbs, road races, speed and reliability trials. A fair share of the honours came my way. In 1929 I traded in the Indian for a new 350 c.c. A.J.S., an exchange which produced fine results.

Building a side-car I tried three wheel racing as well. I'd go as far as Montreal and Quebec, 350 miles away, for motor cycle meets at week-ends. I'd leave Toronto when the works closed, camp out, compete in the races, and returning by night reach the front door of the factory on Monday morning often with a couple of minutes to spare. That year I won cups galore though I had a pretty bad spill on the half-mile Exhibition track, Toronto. In the handicap—I was on scratch—an opponent sliced across as I was coming through fast on the inside.

The front wheel was knocked clean out of the forks, which dropped into the dirt. Over the top I whizzed like a stone from a catapult, shattering a 4 inch wooden post into fragments. Yet I was lucky. A badly swollen neck, which kept me in hospital 7 days, was the only real damage.

My best 1929 effort was in the 24 hour endurance run at Bell Fountain, Ontario. Over a 16½ mile rough circuit, which included only one mile of paving or real road, I covered 495 miles in 18 hours 50 minutes riding time.

In 1930 I began going places. I now had a Rudge which took me into second berth in the Canadian 10 and 25 mile championships on a half mile track. I was awarded the Castrol Trophy for the best all round performance by an amateur motor cyclist in Canada that year, which incidentally was eventful in other ways, for I met Miss Eugenie Stead, of Toronto, at a club scramble and persuaded her to become my passenger in side-car events. We certainly caused a sensation when turning out together for the first time at the speed hill climb, at Bayview, near Toronto. To use a girl as passenger... well... some of the older motor cyclists



Eugenie in the side-car, the driver—that's me ! Year—1931.

nearly exploded! However, we took first place at 75 m.p.h. We have been together ever since. Yes, you've guessed it. In due course Eugenie consented to become my wife.

Speed was so much in my blood that I wasn't content with the bikes. Ever in search of thrills I became mechanic and spare driver to Graham Oates on speed boats. I was with him when he set up several world records. Perhaps I was overdoing it. Whatever the reason I had a nervous breakdown near the end of 1930 and was warned by the doc. to quit for at least twelve months.

So 1931 started quietly though I accompanied Oates on a 3,000 mile non-stop car ride for Castrol. Next speedway or short-tracking, as we call it over there, started at Ulster Stadium, Toronto, on a quarter-miler. Feeling much better I rode and shared with Jimmy Ferguson, still a big noise in motor cycle sport in the Dominion, the honours. I slipped over to Cleveland, Ohio, several times; one never to be forgotten night I cleaned the programme before the largest-ever crowd of about 3,000. After racing I walked into the office to be paid. Alas, the promoter had vanished with the takings. There was no more speedway at Cleveland!

In 1932-35 the slump hit Canada pretty badly and me too, as you'll hear. Having finished my apprenticeship I was now the second highest man on the payroll at the works. My employers had to reduce staff. They offered me piece-work. Instead I determined to carve out a career as a full time professional in motor cycle sport. Two Californian promoters opened a circuit of speedways at Chicago, Indiana, Milwaukee, Detroit. With Toronto thrown in, on the face of it things looked pretty rosy. At least that's what I thought. Instead I found that travelling and medical bills from constant track crashes swallowed up everything I could make. Chicago is some 650 miles from Toronto so my mileage must have been terrific. Journeys were made in a battered old car.

Which meant that I was practically broke when winter came along. It meant taking any odd job. I have tried selling vacuum cleaners and adding machines, have dug ditches during a three months' spell as labourer, have been a garage hand, and once was in charge of a small fleet of

lorries for 7 dollars or 35/- a week! My lowest point came when I was forced on public relief for two months. Through it all Eugenie stood by with never a murmur, word of reproach, or suggestion that I should quit speedways and settle down.

The circuit I mentioned ran two years. Though racing was good, the crowds just wouldn't come. Compared to the Britisher the North American is not motor cycle minded. That was the reason for the failure, I guess. On these tracks I beat the others as often as they beat me. It was nearly a case of curtains at Milwaukee, where in a four man mix-up I finished under all the motors. A rear chain whipped the tops off two fingers of my right hand. Four days after I



On stripped road bike ready for racing on half mile dirt track near Toronto, 1930.

1931



Above: In racing kit at home.

Right: My favourite position at West Ham. early 1936



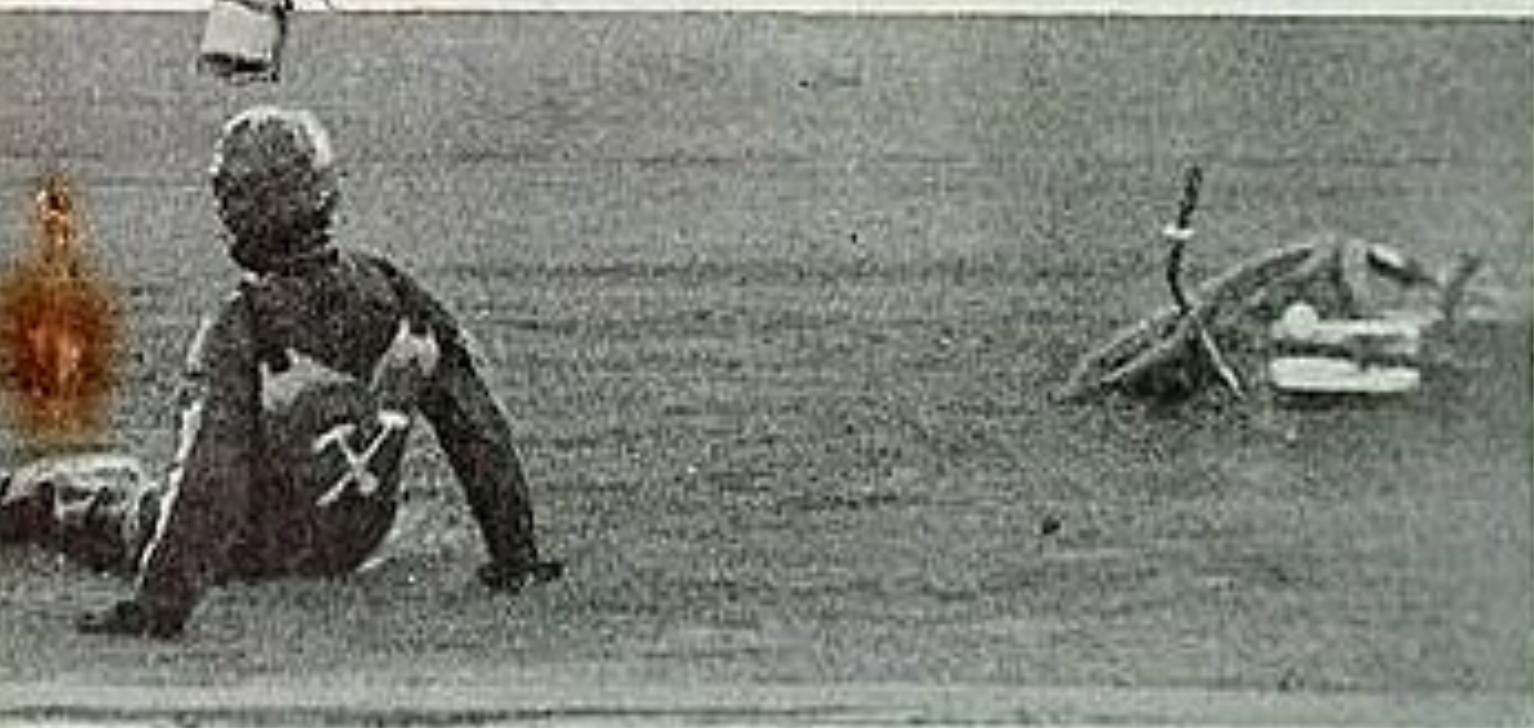
1929



Left: At speed, 1939.



Right: All set for a 350 mile trip to Montreal complete with camp kit!





Rivals at Ulster Stadium, Toronto. Left to right: Johnny Spiegelhoff, "Slippery" Mills, Jimmy Ferguson, Johnny Millett.

recovered consciousness in hospital and found myself strapped down! I had been violently delirious. The injury turned septic. Gangrene set in. Driven half crazy with pain I got up one night, slipped into an empty operating theatre sterilised a pair of tweezers, cleaned the wound, and poured iodine over the hand! As I fainted a nurse entered the room. I refused to remain in hospital. The authorities insisted. Dressed in exceedingly "brief" pyjamas I marched into the hospital lobby, making so much noise that in the end they let me go.

Back in Toronto my own doctor successfully treated the injury. Then it was arranged to stage the Canadian quarter-mile speedway championship at Ulster Stadium. At the very last moment I decided to ride. The hand was by no means healed, as I quickly found out. I could grip the handlebars right enough, but couldn't leave go. After each heat that hand was prised from the bars. All the same I had the good luck to come out on top with maximum points. In the field were Jimmy Gibb, Goldie Restall, Johnny Millett, George Pepper, Elwood Stillwell, Bob Sparks, Bruce Venier, all of whom subsequently rode for English league clubs.

In this period I was in and out of hospital about twelve times. Fortunately I have bones which mend twice as rapidly as those of most people. That's what the medical men say. One year I had trouble when crossing the U.S. border en route for Chicago. I had very little money. The American customs officials wouldn't let me pass. Eventually becoming hoppin' mad, I wrote to the President explaining the circumstances. Sure enough within 14 days the O.K. came through. In 1934 I met Johnny Hoskins in Toronto. He offered me a contract in England. It sounded too good to be true.

Came 1935. I thought I'd try the Eastern U.S. speedways for a change. The sport was catching on there. The New York circuit of Patterson New Jersey, Staten Island, West New York, Freeport, Union City was averaging 10,000 a meet. On the provincial circuit of Hertford, New Haven, Atlantic City, Philadelphia they were getting about 7,000-8,000 a night. In charge of all was "Sprouts" Elder, who helped pioneer the game in England in 1928-30. I applied to race



In Canada and the States it was customary for each rider to supply two "pushers-off" with caps and sweaters, as shown. The jersey I've got on here I still wear for luck under my riding leathers.

on the New York tracks. No one had heard of me. So I was told to go to the provincial centres. In my very first race, at New Haven, I broke the track record set up by Goldie Restall. In fact I broke all the records on these four speedways, beating up visiting New York "big boys" Jimmy Gibb, "Crocky" Rawding (who later came to New Cross) and Benny Kaufman (subsequently with Wimbledon, then Southampton).

In the end I was allowed into the major circuit. Then came another bad crash. Leading in a race at Philadelphia I over-slid. As I was getting up another fellow ran slap bang into my chest. In hospital with internal injuries I saw many anxious faces. At last I persuaded a medical student to talk. "We didn't figure you'd last this long; you can't anyhow for more than a few days," said he! By now I knew my own body pretty well. It had taken too many knocks! I also knew that apart from a spot of internal trouble caused by a few broken ribs I was more or less O.K. I managed to get a call through to my wife in New York. She came down post-haste, and after much argument took me off with her. Within a few days I was in the saddle.

I entered for the 1935 Eastern U.S. Championship, but the organisers, ruling that I hadn't been on the circuit long enough, refused my entry. This I considered pretty rough, and said so. After much argument it was agreed that if anyone dropped out I could go in. Three days before the "do" Mark Porter was injured. Replacing him, I finished fourth, three points behind the winner, Jimmy Gibb. "Crocky" Rawding was second, Benny Kaufman third.

That winter I returned to Toronto, broke to the wide once more. I did some serious thinking. The life wasn't fair to Eugenie and our daughter Carol Ann. Should I give it one more try? I remembered the Hoskins offer, and cabled Johnny. By return came the one-way fare to West Ham. Dad found the fares for the rest of my family. Arriving at Victoria Station, we were met by Johnny, Jim Stenner, plus a battery of photographers. No one knew that all the cash I had in the world was a ten shilling note.

We were whisked off by Johnny to "digs" he had found in Browning Road, East Ham. Next day I met Vic Martin,

partner then with Johnny at West Ham. Vic asked if I would like an advance of £100. That got me over temporary difficulties. Next worry: Could I live up to my publicity reputation? You see, all London had been told I was a champion rider. I realised that I could never challenge, much less beat, the best, at least for three months.

For two meetings I couldn't do a thing. On the third night I tumbled in front of an opponent. He couldn't avoid me. The collision resulted in a broken knee-cap. Not being able to afford to lay off for a while — that £100 had steadily dwindled—I rode with the knee almost the size of a balloon. Funds reached a record low ebb. I cut down on the meals. Once it was reduced to one a day; to forget, I spent a lot of the time in bed resting the knee and trying to sleep. I felt I couldn't let on to the management that my affairs were in a parlous state. They had been so decent when I arrived.

Out of the team I dropped. I knew that my contract would not be renewed for the following season. In desperation I took myself and bike off in an old car round the provincial speedways at Cardiff, Liverpool, Southampton, and elsewhere. At Cardiff I swept the board on my first appearance, getting seven firsts. At the other two places I shattered the track records set up by Bill Kitchen and Jack Parker. In fact, I did so well that I was recalled to ride for the Hammers. In my very first heat I led for three laps. Then the motor quit. The track mechanic had forgotten to fill the tank with fuel. But I won my other races. From then on fortune, which I had never known on the cinders, smiled though that "dame" still had a few good hard knocks in store. In the winter I remained in England getting a number of engagements as a crooner—crooning is another little sideline of mine. I also made a number of gramophone records.

On the track, I continued to improve in the next two years, but had all sorts of mishaps. In 1937, a year in which I reached the World Championship final, finishing bracketted eighth with Morian Hansen of Denmark, I had the misfortune to break bones in both arms. In October of that year I went home, but the wife fell ill. I took her down to warmer country in the States. On returning, I had a cable

to say that a cycle business in England in which I had taken an interest, had hit the slide.

The 1938 season, therefore, was worrying. I needed every penny I could get to settle up business affairs. At first everything went well. The many big solo events I won included the London Riders' Championship at New Cross. On a later visit to New Cross I crashed badly and was in hospital on the danger list with concussion for some days. Also a wrist was fractured. Resuming, I came off again, chipping both shoulder blades. Returning once more, I broke another wrist bone. This produced a long stay on the wrong side of the fence.

However, 1939 was my best-ever year until the war came along. After a spell as a War Reserve policeman I took a job in a shipyard down Barking way, working on M.T.B.'s. For nine months I was busy. Then feeling I should do something more active, I volunteered as a fighter pilot in the R.A.F. I got through the medical, passed my examinations, only to be turned down because I was two months over age! I went to an aircraft factory, starting as an estimator and rate fixer; within three years I was in charge of the works.

During that period I was called up for the Royal Navy. Surviving at Romford a three-day examination, I was passed for a commission and booked for a floating base workshops. Unfortunately the Ministry of Labour stepped in. Said they: "You must stay at the factory." I made one more attempt to get into uniform. Applying for a commission in the R.E.M.E., I was interviewed by a selection board at Hampstead and selected. Necessary papers, etc., were given me. I was told I would be leaving for Eritrea within ten days. Next morning I called at the factory to say I was leaving. The management refused to let me go and insisted that I should come back twenty-four hours later. When I returned the local manpower board was in session. The Board ruled I should remain pending a decision. After a fortnight the War Office informed me that the Ministry of Labour would not grant a release.

Somehow I contrived to get away and ride at every one of the Belle Vue war meetings, on several occasions winning



Bill Matthews, winner of the 200 mile road race classic at Daytona Beach in 1941, is one of Canada's greatest all-round motor-cyclists. His speed of 83.68 m.p.h. in winning a ten mile race at Springfield, Illinois, is claimed to be a world record for a one mile dirt track.

the unofficial British Individual Championship. When riders were pooled in March, 1946, I was drawn by West Ham and was nominated skipper of the club. I guess you know all about my tumbles and successes during that season.

During the winter of 1946-47 I toured the continent with the British team and then paid a visit to the folks in Toronto, the first since pre-war days. While there I contacted Bill Matthews, one of Canada's best all-rounders on a motor cycle. Bill, I'm convinced, will make the top grade on this side of the water in time.

West Ham are a colourful team to-day. A few days before the season opened that great "white line" artist Tommy Croombs was asked by our promoters, Arthur Atkinson and Stan Greatrex, if he would like to race again. Though he hadn't ridden since 1939 Tommy found himself saying "Yes!" Why he still doesn't know! However, Tommy soon found his scoring form. A few weeks later Cliff Watson, a New Zealander who served his cinder apprenticeship at Sydney joined the Hammers "Empire" team, then came Cliff Parkinson.

My greatest friend, George Pepper, was killed in the war. In 1937 George, a well known motor cycle ace in Canada, came over to ride in the Isle of Man T.T. races. Afterwards I persuaded him to try the cinders. He took to 'em like a duck to water. Drafted to Newcastle he became captain of the team there and almost unbeatable. Had George lived he would, I am certain, have been a world beater on the speedway. Joining the R.A.F. he became a crack night fighter pilot, earning the D.F.C. and bar. One morning he took his plane up on test. It nose-dived into the ground.

Finally I reckon I must be in love with motor cycle sport because during my career I have fractured 44 bones! The left collar bone has gone 6 times, the right 4.

