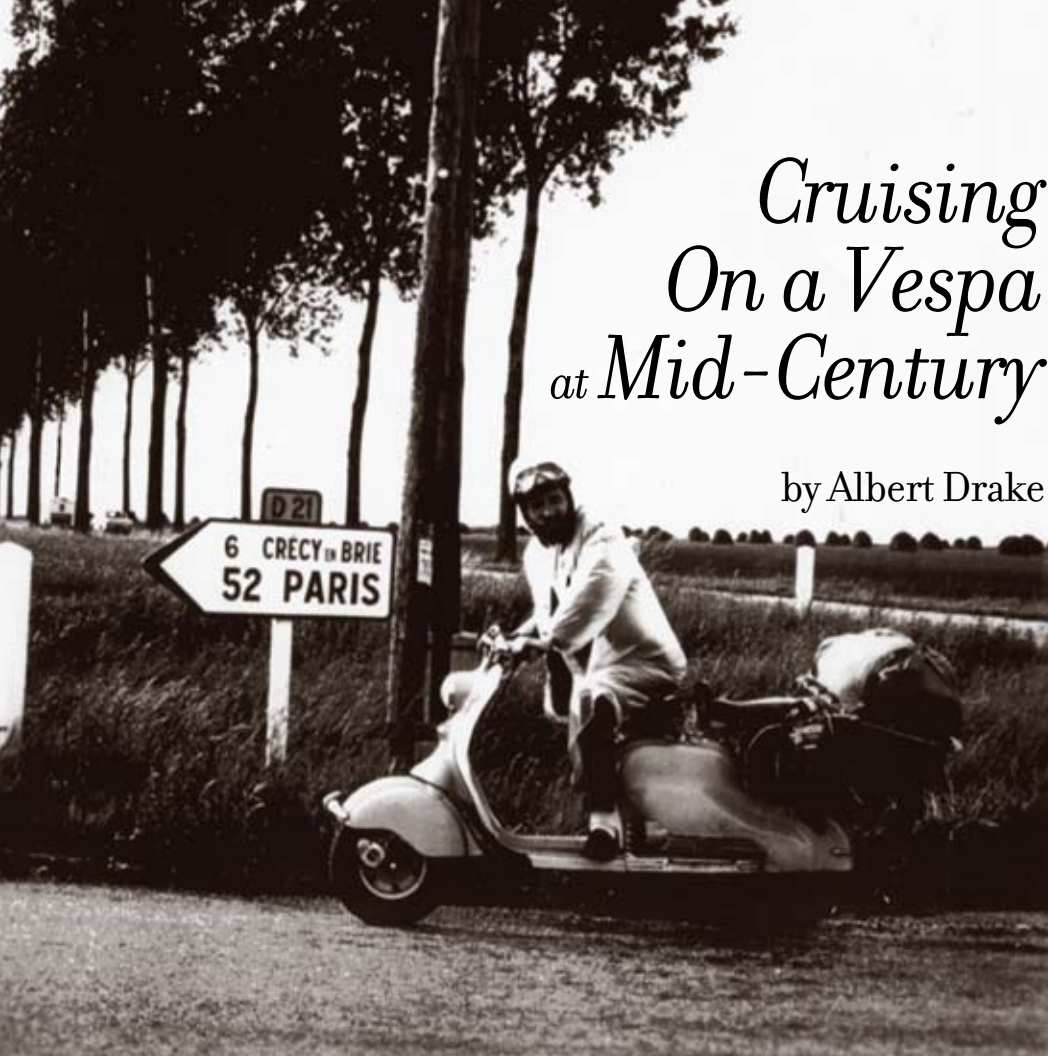


# Cruising On a Vespa at Mid-Century

by Albert Drake



Contrary to the headline, here's our man touring France in 1962 on a Lambretta...



...and astride his 1951 BSA Gold Star

After nearly 50 years, I could be wrong, but I have long believed that I owned the first Vespa scooter delivered in Portland, Oregon.

In 1956-57 I worked in an automotive warehouse at n.w. 10th and Flanders St. Sometime during that year, a Vespa dealership opened at 10th and West Burnside, on a pie-shaped piece of land across from the building which then housed Wentworth and Irwin, a Nash dealership, and which now houses Powell's City of Books, (the world's largest bookstore according to The Guinness Book of Records.) I drove past the Vespa dealership twice a day, and I could see the two or three scooters on display. What got me to stop was the Vespa with a sidecar that appeared one day; it was terribly cute, and I was impressed by the simplicity of the torsion bar suspension. I knew right then I wanted one.

I grew up at a time when scooters were practical transportation, because new cars were unavailable during WWII and hard to get for several years after the war. A sporting goods store near my house had a row of new Servi-Cycles for sale, and occasionally I'd see a Whizzer motorbike, or a Doodlebug or a Hiawatha or Cushman scooter. I'd find a motorized scooter in the classified ads and I'd try to convince my

father that I could use it on my paper route. I never got a scooter, but I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how I could adapt a small motor to my bicycle. When I turned 16 I built a hot rod, and after graduating from high school I had motorcycles, including a beautiful BSA Gold Star, which was sanitary and quick.

By 1957 I was moving away from cycles and hot rods. In the fall I began classes at Portland State College full-time, and I was thinking lofty thoughts and hanging out with a better class of people, so I abandoned my old ways. I bought a car coat, Ivy League pants with a little belt in the back, penny loafers, paisley shirts and V-neck sweaters. As I changed, so did the world. In Portland it became possible to buy beer by the pitcher and to walk around in the tavern with a glass of beer and to throw peanut shells on the floor, just like people did in the joints in 'Frisco. A coffeehouse opened near psc, where Beatniks drank espresso, played chess and read *On the Road*.

In this kind of atmosphere, it seemed a good idea to buy a Vespa scooter. Actually, I can't remember exactly why I bought one, but I know I was thinking of the larger world. I wanted to go to Europe. I wanted to enjoy things I'd read about in Esquire and Playboy,

such as seeing a bullfight, eating gazpacho and paella, cruising the Riviera on two wheels and drinking the *vin du pays* of many countries. I wanted to wear a Harris tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows, suck on a pipe and carry a slim black umbrella. On a more mundane level, the city was installing parking meters around the college and it was getting increasingly difficult to find a parking space for a car. Also, there was a ceramics professor at psc who rode a Vespa he'd bought in Italy, and he made the scooter sound like fun transportation.

So, one day in the spring of 1958 I went to the dealership and bought a 1957 Vespa 150 for \$250. It had been brought to Portland by the dealership's mechanic, used as a demonstrator, and was now fitted with a 1958 engine and titled as a 1958 model. I can't recall the mechanic's name, but I remember that he had a sister, an attractive young woman with reddish-blond hair, who took classes at psc.

The scooter was in beautiful condition, and had a luggage rack, the only accessory. It was quick! I was told that the mechanic had milled down the head to raise the compression, and had gutted the muffler to reduce backpressure. I never had the scooter apart, so I can't

testify that those modifications had been done, but I do know that the scooter, although quiet, would run past 55 MPH on the speedometer, 5.5 MPH faster than the top speed stated in the owner's manual.

I loved riding that Vespa! After the various problems I'd had with chains and sprockets on motorcycles, I admired the Vespa's engine/transmission/final drive construction, and the fact that the engine had only three moving parts! It seemed that the designers had thought of everything. The lights ran off the magneto, making a battery unnecessary. Below the seat was the fuel lever; when I ran out of gas, as I often did, I'd flip it over to the reserve level, which would always get me home, and later to a station.

On the left side of the body was a compartment that held the factory tool kit and tire pump, two-stroke oil and a measuring can, a couple rags, and other miscellaneous stuff—with room left over. Behind the seat was a pillion for an occasional passenger, and behind that was the optional luggage rack, which would carry a decent load.

I could've gotten a spare tire, which bolted in place under the rack, but changing a tire was no problem. One Saturday morning, in a hurry to get to my job in a gas station, I found that the rear tire was flat. I laid the scooter on its side, and using a wrench that came with the scooter, I removed the four bolts that held the wheel to the hub. Using the socket on the other end, I removed the bolts that held the two-piece wheel together, cold-patched the tube, reassembled the wheel, pumped up the tire with the factory hand pump and was on my way in 10 minutes.

The scooter was terribly inexpensive. Gas cost between 16 and 20 cents a gallon, and two-stroke oil wasn't much. The mileage was around 150 miles on a full tank. A license plate was either \$2.50 or \$3.00 a year, and I never did have any insurance. I replaced the spark plug with some frequency. I rode that Vespa for five years, and the only expense, besides spark plugs, was a control cable and a new inner tube, the result of taking on a passenger without increasing the tire pressure, as per the manual. I never did any maintenance, other than washing the scooter—maybe I waxed it too. But the total cost of riding that Vespa for five years was around \$25!

I had lots of fun with that scooter. I met girls who just had to have a ride. I'd park it anywhere—between cars, on the grass, on the sidewalk. I'd park it in front of a funky-fashionable tavern like the Pink Bucket and enter wearing my car coat, Ivy League slacks and penny loafers, looking, I thought, very smooth.

I cruised from place to place all night, and when I came home, often very late, that scooter was so quiet my mother never woke up.

And yet, sometimes I look back, especially late at night, and wonder whether I should have owned that scooter. Sometimes, these nights, I stare into the darkness and celebrate the notion that I'm still alive. The problem was that I expected that Vespa to be two machines: a quiet, classy scooter that would get me around town in style, and a fast grand prix machine. I had ridden motorcycles for several years, and some of the bikers would get gas at the station where I worked. They'd always give me some guff, indicating that they considered the Vespa a toy. That was a reason for riding the scooter hard. I'd ride between rows of cars at a stop light, as I'd done on motorcycles, and when the light changed to green I'd grab a handful of throttle and run it through the gears, speed shifting. It seemed impossible to over-rev the engine, and so I kept it wound up.

It rains a lot in Portland, and while the legshield kept my lower body dry, my upper body was quickly soaked. One morning, after a short ride, I was really wet, so I stopped at an army surplus store and bought a cloth coat with a snap-in alpaca liner. Rain could not penetrate that liner, and the coat, with the hood raised, gave me a sense of protection. Of course, I never wore a crash helmet. It scares me now when I think of leaving psc, going up Broadway, then downhill, through a couple right turns, merging with traffic and then entering a left hand curve and heading over the Ross Island Bridge, going as fast as I could. On a motorcycle I could just lay it over, but the smaller wheels on the scooter required a different kind of control, similar to certain kinds of skiing.

By dumb luck, and a smidgen of skill, I had only one accident in five years. My wife and I rode from Eugene to Ashland, to attend the Shakespearean Festival, using what is now 1-5, and although we had about 50 pounds of camping gear on the rack, we kept up

with traffic. Most of the time there was a logging truck or a bus close behind. At Azalea the road widened to a third lane, which was a slow lane for trucks, and they had deposited a sheen of oil. When we hit that oil, the rear tire spun like mad, the engine turned an impossible 20,000 RPM and we went down; my wife fell off, but I hung on to the bars as the Vespa slid and slid, seemingly forever. On our return, at my wife's insistence, we took Highway 99, a slower route.

In 1962 we headed for Europe, and I sold the Vespa to a German student in Eugene, Oregon for \$195, a little less than I'd paid for it. We got to Europe, and in Roosendaal, Holland, I bought a used Lambretta scooter. I was told it was a 150cc but it turned out to be a 125cc model, which put us at a disadvantage in places like the Pyrenees. The two scooters were quite different, and because the Lambretta had shocks on both sides of the wheels and the engine in the center, I think it was the better scooter on a long journey, while the Vespa was better in town.

I've told myself many times that I'd like to have another Vespa, but only when the price of gas forces others to ride something with two wheels. Part of what saved me from disaster was that traffic was greatly reduced in those days. It's hard to explain, but look at photographs taken during the 1950s in a city like Portland, and unless the photos were taken at rush hour, the streets are almost empty. That was also what made riding a scooter so much fun.



*Ah, here's the scooter in question. "...the only [photo] I have. It just happened to be there when I took a photo of the house."*