

Sunday, June 27, 2010

We all, I believe, learned something during John Conley's overnight ride to St. Louis. Rain arrived at the same time we all reached Fox Valley Cycles, so everyone donned their rain gear in preparation for the 9:00 AM departure. We all thought—and that included the local weather forecasters—that we were faced with scattered storms that would peter out as we moved south. Besides John and myself, those riding were Kellie Becket, Jim Cromwell, Eddie Cullins and his grandson Adrian, Mark Frueh, David Moore, and Chris Tracy.

John's plan called for a scenic tour going down, a fun-filled night at The Original Springs Hotel in Okawville, Illinois (one of the puzzle answers on FVC's 2010 Participation Challenge), a visit to a motorcycle museum in St. Louis on Sunday, and the fast way home. Very generally, it worked as planned. More specifically, it did not.

The rain seemed to be ending about an hour into the trip, and John stopped at a gas station in La Moille, Illinois (really . . . look it up), where we all took off the rain gear, now uncomfortably hot. I needed a sugar fix, so I bought a Twinkie. It was stale.

John seems to have a fondness for bridges, and we crossed one into Iowa where we made a u-turn and came back to Illinois. No Iowans were harmed during this little foray into their state. Later, we would cross over the Mississippi into Missouri on one bridge and right back into Illinois on a parallel bridge.

Anyway, somewhere between the Iowa incursion and the Mississippi crossings into Missouri, the skies became blue, the temps headed up, and all was right with the world. We seemed a bunch of happy campers, as we pulled into a McDonald's for a late lunch—I think John is on a diet; therefore, everyone is on a diet. This would be the closest I got to a substantial meal the entire trip.

Hilly country greeted us, as we moved south along the Great River Road. Everyone complains about Illinois being nothing but flat prairie and cornfields; however, parts of the state (up by Galena, down by St. Louis and the entire southern tip of the state) are quite hilly and scenic, and this was my first experience in the southwestern corner of the state.

Not surprisingly, when we finally reached the Mississippi, we found it to be quite high. In one small town—it may have been Hamilton—our route required that we ride through a short stretch of mud and river water. To my surprise, the levees are a substantial distance from the river. I cannot comprehend the quantity of water required to reach them; although, I know it happens from time to time.

Just a couple of miles down the road and unbeknownst to those of us in the front of the formation, Kellie's bike began to run sluggishly and then stopped, literally in the middle of nowhere—other than our bikes, no traffic, and no buildings could be found on this stretch of road. John finally noticed the absence of three bikes and went back to see what had happened. Fortunately for Kellie (and for all of us), we had John and Jim with us. Both are certified Honda mechanics.

After a period, we heard Kellie working the bike through its gears at maximum RPM as she came roaring up to us. We all thought the problem (something about a petcock, and other than being a suggestive word, few of us knew it was the fuel shutoff valve) solved.

Back on the road, the skies in front of us turned quickly black, and we stopped to put our rain gear on again. We would keep it on the rest of the long day.

John made another of his bridge crossings back into Missouri, as rain began to fall. We lost Kellie again, along with Mark. Poor positioning of the mechanics in the formation meant that none were with her. We did not know her location, or what had happened. Eventually locating them via cell phone—she had stalled on the bridge, of course. Jim headed back to assist, while the rest of us moved up the road to a gas station/convenience store. Everyone indulged in a junk food feast.

The rain became something biblical, and Kellie, Jim and Mark were able to conduct some serious testing of their rain gear. My rain gear kept the rain off, but I soon found myself soaked in my own sweat. I made a note to buy something better as soon as I got home. Chris bought an Illinois map (don't you think one of us would have had one). We were all tired of the scenic route, and we tried to plot the shortest distance to our destination. Unfortunately, we were in Missouri on the west side of the Mississippi, and there were no short routes to our destination in Illinois.

Meanwhile, Jim and John determined that, in addition to the aforementioned petcock, Kellie needed a new fuel line. After a bit of research, they headed out to Lowe's where they purchased garden hose, baling wire and chewing gum . . . okay, they really purchased some clear plastic tubing as a fuel line replacement, but how exciting is that? Our dreams of arriving by six, going to drink beer while watching Kellie and David sing karaoke rapidly faded.

After a lengthy delay, during which Jim performed heroically—I have no idea what we would have done without him—we continued south. Mark now led the formation, as we headed out into rain and lightning. Although, technically still daylight, the storm made it black as night.

Like many, I had grown weary of our little adventure and looked forward to a shower, a beer and a meal. Moving ever closer to St. Louis, traffic grew heavier, the rain kept falling and real darkness joined the pseudo-darkness.

We zipped along, but now cars gave us less respect as they jockeyed for position and forced their way into our group several times. The heavy rain restricted visibility; windshields became opaque, and visors clouded with condensation. Curving and hilly roads demanded attention that conflicted with our growing fatigue. Motorcycles became difficult to see amidst the glaring headlights, street lights and advertisements. I counted on the leaders to keep us safe. I had no idea of our exact location.

At some point, Mark took pity on us and pulled into a gas station. I looked at my mileage; we had traveled nearly four-hundred miles. But there were promises to be kept, and miles to go before we slept (my apologies to Robert Frost).

Approaching St. Louis, the pace of the rainfall slackened to the point it resembled a normal rain, and I stopped looking for an ark. Eventually, we left Route 61 and entered the Interstate system. Passing the Arch, we east back to Illinois. I know that gave everyone a bit of a mental lift.

We were looking for I-64, and that pretty much was the extent of my knowledge as to our location. We rolled into one of those spaghetti-bowl ramps—one-lane wide with no shoulder, just a wall—that lead from one Interstate to another. Still raining, it was wet with puddled water.

My bike started to fishtail. *Hydroplaning!* I slowed and moved toward the right wall. The fishtailing stopped, and I pulled back out into the lane only to have it start again. Stopping, I looked behind—a flat tire . . . my brand-new tire was flat! Murphy and his law still rule the world. Could I have picked a more unfavorable location . . . apparently, as I soon discovered, I could. All the bikes swerved around me, except for Eddie. I had to keep moving or be run over, so I chugged along at about ten to twenty miles an hour. Anything over that caused the bike to fishtail. Eddie put his flashers

on and stayed behind me. Cars whipped by us. I tried not to think about them, as I looked for a safe place to pull over. Getting off the ramp and onto an Interstate, I now realized I had no clue where to go, and I could no longer see the other bikes. The other riders did not realize that Eddie and I were missing until they were several miles down the road. I knew I couldn't ride all the way to Okawville on a flat tire. Eddie started honking his loud air horns at me, so I pulled over to the inadequate shoulder. I'm guessing that consideration of roadside emergencies was not part of the planning process when the Interstate was designed.

I get down on my hands and knees, and using the light from Eddie's Gold Wing as he pushed my bike forward, I tried to see what was wrong with the tire. I could see nothing. Eddie had a can of Seal 'N' Air that I sprayed into the tire to quickly inflate it. It didn't work. Learning that I had Honda Roadside Protection, Eddie wanted me to call for a tow; however, not knowing our location, I did not call.

Eddie thought he could see a gas station sitting just to the north of the Interstate, so we pushed my bike back down the road until we could make the exit, and I rode it the mile or so to a BP gas station, a little oasis of light and relative safety.

I got down on my hands and knees and again looked at the tire - still nothing. I remembered that I had a can of the Seal 'N' Air, also, but it was a waste of time. Other than filling the tire with a lot of slimy gunk, nothing happened. Finally, I called Honda; however, there really wasn't much they could do at eleven on a Sunday night. Eddie asked the BP manager if we could leave my bike parked there all night. They told us to park it right in front, so they could watch it. By this time, Mark had arrived. That proved to be a good thing as neither Eddie nor I understood where we were in relationship to where we wanted to be. All we knew was that we were in East St. Louis: a city with a very bad reputation.

I gathered everything I could from the bike and stashed it on Eddie's and Mark's bikes, crawled on the back of Eddie's, and away we went. I was grateful for both of them, because I have no idea what I would have done otherwise.

Arriving at the Original Springs Hotel close to midnight, we found everyone else in various states of disarray and confusion about what had happened. Notified that the Burger King—the only place to eat that late on Sunday—was going to close at midnight, Kellie ran down and purchased a large number of sandwiches and fries. I ate a cheeseburger and some fries. The bar across the street was also on the verge of closing. Chris took drink orders and ran over to get them. Quickly returning, she told us that none of the drinks ordered were available. I changed my order to a Miller Lite.

As she ordered my drink, Chris told the bartender about a guy passed out on the front stoop. "Oh, his name is Pooter, and he ends up there every night." The bartender told the waitress, dressed in short shorts with "Security" printed across her butt, to go get him. She woke Pooter and made him go home. Chris got my beer and returned with it. I drank it immediately. Such is life in Okawville.

Soon John and Jim came back from the bar where they had been "slamming drinks" (their phrase) trying, I guess, to make certain they made their quota for the day. They each carried a couple extra drinks. I took one of John's and drank it immediately.

After a shower, I crawled into bed at one-thirty Sunday morning. Failing to note that the old hotel actually had air-conditioning, I suffered in hot, stuffy conditions all night and woke at four-thirty - short night.

Monday, June 28, 2010

After a cup of coffee, and with the aid of Chris, Jim and the lady working behind the counter at the hotel, I began a round of calls to find a place that could replace the tire. Monday is, of course, the day most motorcycle dealers are closed. Those few that were open either did not have what I needed, or they had the tire, but no tube or vice versa. Eventually, someone suggested Niehaus Honda in Litchfield, Illinois. Wonders never cease. They were open and had the tire and the tube. The drawback: it is fifty-two miles from East St. Louis to Litchfield, and my insurance only pays for thirty miles.

I rode with Eddie, and Mark led us back to the BP station. Much to my surprise my bike was still there and everything was still on it. Also, the neighborhood did not look to be quite as threatening in the daylight. Waiting for the tow truck, I ate a small package of Lorna Doone shortbread cookies.

I called Honda.

"Are you in danger?" That is always the first thing they ask.

"That's questionable," I said.

"Do you need a police presence?"

"No, I don't think that is necessary, but I really don't want to stay here any longer than necessary." That was partly true, but I said it mainly to try and make them hustle the tow truck to my rescue.

Much to my surprise, the tire guy at Niehaus said the tire was still good (it had picked up one small nail). I repeated that I had driven two or three miles on it while flat. Their tire guy told me that he had checked it carefully and could not find any damage. I accepted that, as I could not believe they would pass up the opportunity to sell me a new tire.

I finally met up with the rest of the group (minus David who had continued on to Tennessee ), and we made a fast, but uneventful ride home. At the Bloomington gas stop, I had another Twinkie. It was stale, also.

Lessons Learned:

- Some rain gear is better than others. The non-breathable kind is a misery after a long period of wear.
- Get the cell phone numbers of everyone in the group. We were lucky that we just happened to have the numbers we needed.
- Having a mechanic riding with you is a great way to reduce your levels of stress.
- Having friends who don't leave you on the side of the road: priceless.