

RetroTours RetroRide RetroReport: April 15th 2010

Sure, I'd like to write a detailed description of the ride so that it is available as a historical point of reference, But it's already been nearly a month and memories fade fast at this age. I remember it was an Italian bike theme. Ride Italian bikes for Italian food. These are the bikes that we rode:



1971 MotoGuzzi 750
Ambassador

1973 Benelli 650 *Tornado*

1973 Laverda 750 SF

1978 Moto Morini 500
Strada

1975 Ducati 860 GT

You have to admit, the Italian bikes have very classy model names: *Tornado*, *Ambassador* and *Strada*. Sounds like a band of super heroes.

To sheppard this herd we used German iron. Doug mostly rode the lead on a 1974 BMW



R90/6 and I took up the rear on a 1977 BMW R100S/EML side car rig hauling baggage, snacks, tools and first aid.



The riders included (L to R):

George Brown, retired teacher: Tennessee
Keith Silfee, a local bank account executive
Joel Samick, RetroTours operator
Richard Backus, editor: Motorcycle Classics
Bill Wells, small business owner: a nursery
Ilya Kriveshko, software engineer: Boston
Doug Snyder, ex-real estate mogul

Despite our disparate backgrounds, we are one and all horribly addicted to riding and to old bikes.



It was closer to 8:30 when our 8 AM departure materialized; not bad at all for a group of 7. George, Richard and Ilya had overnighted at my place and everyone had waivers and bike safety checks done before cob Thursday night. The parking area in front of my garage looked like base camp alpha with clothing and baggage and gear strewn all about as people buttoned and zipped and put in ear plugs and switched from light to heavy gloves and put stuff away and plugged in their electric vests and took stuff out again. Everyone's helmet finally got buckled then somewhat comically everyone had to cold start strange bikes for the first time, remember which side the shifter was on and which way to move the lever to get from neutral into first gear. As they say, "Every ride begins in First Gear" but was that up for first down for second or down to first and up for second? No wait that's the **brake** pedal, *it* doesn't shift *either* way.



The route is always carefully planned to have only right hand turns for the first few miles giving everyone a chance to acclimate before trying to cross a live lane of traffic. So we made our way in an ever enlarging spiral, turning only right, heading a bit north and a bunch west, aiming for Berkeley Springs, W by God VA. The route immediately took us through some of SE PA's loveliest horse farm country, where Amish wagons sporting electric turn signals and brake lights trot along the margins at a steady 20 mph. The locals are accustomed and don't mind waiting for a clear spot to pass. It reminds us that life's pace does not always have to be electron quick. Local motorcyclists often pull in the clutch as they pass with the engine at a quiet idle. The Amish are famous for the excellence of their steeds and they rarely spook. Still, horses are animals and they may be slightly less predictable than the humans piloting cars. Then again, maybe we humans are the less predictable. I suppose it all depends on one's point of view.

Doug pulls us over after about 50 miles in the shadow of the dam and bridge that form the



southern end of the Conowingo Reservoir. Here in the empty parking area next to the Mighty Susquehanna the air has a delightful taste and feel. It feels and tastes like freedom. Opening the sidecar's voluminous trunk, I produce bottled water and granola bars. We tailgate and bond over crunchy sugared oats, swapping lies and commenting on these strange bikes that we are riding; relics from a time long past. No GPS, no cell phones, no computers, no freaking worries. Man, I do remember the 1970's, and riding these bikes on the back roads brings those great feelings flashing back; what a rush!

But we have miles to cover and we are moving on again, refreshed after our short respite, we follow a winding creek, marveling at the total lack of traffic at this hour in this place until, that is, we reach Hanover. Besides great pretzels, Hanover PA is famous for traffic. Several routes converge in the bustling downtown area and the traffic lights seem to average 90% red and 10% green. Our air cooled engines are like sharks that need to swim to breath. Without the cool breeze of our own forward motion we begin to suffocate and overheat. Carburetion begins to unravel along with concentration. Bikes stall riders curse bodies sweat until finally we pop out the other side. That wasn't too bad really, cute town, no?

Now the roads straighten out some as we angle SW and cross into MD. Historic Taneytown comes and goes and we pick up route 77: due west over the Catocin Mountains. First though there is a lunch stop in Thurmont. We have gassed up and switched bikes by now, and I feel it is imperative that we eat something before ascending the low pass just west of town. Low blood sugar and strange bikes make for poor bed fellows. Need to feed the troops. There is not a lot to choose from though for eateries and we settle on the only place we can find, a pub where you'd expect the beer to be far better

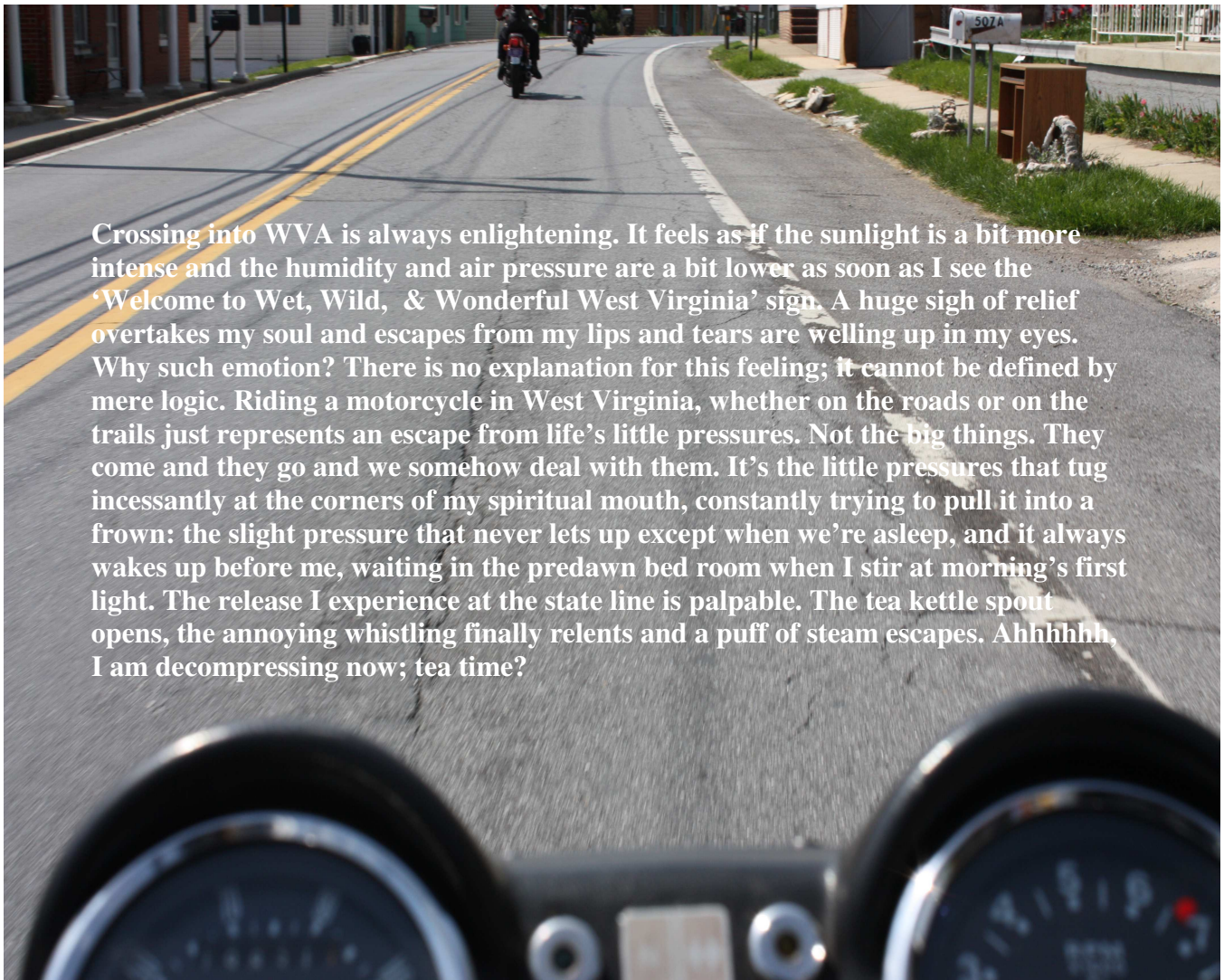


than the food. What a pleasant surprise! The food is decent, and the atmosphere is priceless. The waitress knows just how to handle our little gang of stubbled middle aged men and the other patrons are willing to talk. Plus, even without AC the place is cool inside, especially after we dominate the dining room with our doffed riding gear. I step outside to admire the bikes and to check for any larger than usual puddles under them when I am verbally engaged by two gents holding down a bench on the sidewalk. They claim to have had 5 feet of snow on this here Main Street not 4 weeks ago. What a winter, but just a memory now. It's warming up big time and I hear no complaints. Fully sated we re-gear and saddle up. We must be quite a spectacle pulling out: our bikes emitting much noise and smoke as we wobble back into the flow.

Route 77 west of Thurmont gets extremely twisty and follows a rushing creek through damp shaded woods. Over this easternmost Appalachian pass, we stop to check maps; the route sheet seems to be broken. It just doesn't work. Wait, there's a local truck driver, he might know where this road is. Of course he knows it, just not by the number from the map. A few simple directions and Doug's excellent homing instincts put us on the right path straight away, and we continue along "The Route", which eventually crosses the Potomac River and suddenly we're in West Virginia.



Crossing into WVA is always enlightening. It feels as if the sunlight is a bit more intense and the humidity and air pressure are a bit lower as soon as I see the 'Welcome to Wet, Wild, & Wonderful West Virginia' sign. A huge sigh of relief overtakes my soul and escapes from my lips and tears are welling up in my eyes. Why such emotion? There is no explanation for this feeling; it cannot be defined by mere logic. Riding a motorcycle in West Virginia, whether on the roads or on the trails just represents an escape from life's little pressures. Not the big things. They come and they go and we somehow deal with them. It's the little pressures that tug incessantly at the corners of my spiritual mouth, constantly trying to pull it into a frown: the slight pressure that never lets up except when we're asleep, and it always wakes up before me, waiting in the predawn bed room when I stir at morning's first light. The release I experience at the state line is palpable. The tea kettle spout opens, the annoying whistling finally relents and a puff of steam escapes. Ahhhhhh, I am decompressing now; tea time?



It's time for a gas stop and a check on bearings. It's not far now and we are glad because it's been a long day. I wonder if we will ever be able to keep our dinner date which is 35 miles beyond the cabin where we plan to stay. We need to keep moving to satisfy our slightly too full schedule but nature intervenes in the form of a very intense thunder storm. People have their rain suits and helmets on but I abort: best to wait this out a bit and see what we have here. The next thing you know the sky opens up and spits out sideways rain that defeats our rain gear even though we are standing under the gas station canopy. The wind gusts up to 60 mph and hail is attacking us. Retreat! We take shelter inside the convenience store and wait for the storm to pass. It's over in 15 minutes, but I was slow to get out the rain gear and I am completely soaked which is actually pleasantly refreshing after the long ride through the heat of the day. The others keep their rain gear on since the roads are soaked but as I'm already drenched, I forego mine in the hopes that the now cool dry air might dry me out. Thirty five miles later and we are picking our way down a long dirt road searching for "The Homestead".





It turns out that The Homestead is quite a find. It was suggested to me by a co-rider in Baja several years ago. I think Jake said that his uncle was the proprietor. Ed George just turned 85 two weeks ago. He lives alone in Berkeley Springs, WVA having outlived several wives. Before retiring he was with the CIA for 35 years. Ed never volunteered much detail about his work with the CIA; for all I know he might have been an on staff accountant. He did mention in passing that he was stationed in Saigon during and after the Viet Nam War. At any rate, some years ago he hired a few “drunk West Virginia carpenters” to dismantle and move and reassemble a 200+ year old log cabin that he bought. It was moved to a stunning piece of land with a

fabulous view at the end of a long dirt road and equipped with wood burning stoves, gas oven and range, washer dryer and modern plumbing and electricity.



This place has quite a history and with high ceilings and short door frames (taxes in colonial days were based on the door frame size) it features three bedrooms, two full bathrooms and a jaw dropping nighttime sky packed full of stars. We unload and everyone stakes out a bed settling into our cozy cabin retreat for two nights.

Rain threatens and there are some sprinkles. In order to make our dinner reservation in historic Winchester, Virginia we have to roll out in 45 minutes, fully re-suited up; this after a very full day on the road, and the cabin is so alluring, who wants to leave? Actually no one as it turns out. A brief group discussion around the large dining room table confirms that for a change, the guys will succumb to common sense: seventy miles in the rain for Thai food? Not tonight, thanks just the same.



The original plan had us meeting Justin Mackay-Smith, direct descendant of Thomas Jefferson (yes, the dead President) and his wife and friends. This would have given our group a chance to become acquainted since Justin will lead us tomorrow on his GPS/ disc brake/ modern suspension equipped Vincent Black Prince once we rendezvous 2 hours southwest of the cabin. I do remember disdaining GPS on vintage rides, but Justin has communed with Phil Vincent himself on this, and

surprisingly, Phil doesn't mind. Anyway, years of living and riding in the area have conferred an amazing road sense upon the man so it makes sense to let him show us 'The Way' in spite of his fondness for modern gadgets. Also his bike is really amazing: the stuff Richard Thompson sings about, and Justin rides his Vincent like the wind wending its way across the British countryside.



But what about dinner?



We're hungry and we have only breakfast provisions at the cabin. I call Ed George to ask for a recommendation for dinner. He has only one: The Troubadour. It's located a far piece down a long stretch of convoluted dirt roads, he says, and it's a theme restaurant: a tribute to Patsy Cline.

Embarrassingly, I don't even know who Patsy Cline is, or rather was. Ed edifies me: a country singer from these here parts and quite popular too. He offers to lead us to the Troubadour in his car as the directions are quite inexplicable.



I counter offer him a ride in the sidecar and without hesitation, he accepts; must be the CIA training. At my insistence, he even agrees to sit and eat with us. Now we're talking! Five Italian (and one German) motorcycles follow me through the damp darkness down dirt roads to Ed George's house. Luckily he is standing in his driveway waving his arms frantically as we fly by. One gravel-road-pre-ABS brake check later and we have all them bikes hauled down safely and Ed is climbing a bit stiffly into the chair. He has a weird Bob Dylan hat turned backwards on his head which is craning forward into the wind and his eye are all squinted up and tears are

flowing out until he puts on his huge old-guy glasses which are probably for reading but they happen to really block the wind quite nicely. And he's right: we never would have found it had he not come along. Up, down, around and around, left/right, right/left all on unmarked dirt roads and finally just as it starts to sprinkle again we're there. Before entering the restaurant we explore the "meat smoker outdoor museum" which features unusual ways to smoke dead animals, including one smoker shaped like a huge six shooter.



Amusement for people who live in the mountains I suppose. Inside it's a bit of rare local color. Everyone knows Ed and we get real good treatment and decent food to boot. Several locals stop by our tables to chat it up with Ed and us, including at least one "drunken West Virginia carpenter". Ed says they like to drink and fight a lot, but they *do* know how to swing a hammer. Everyone is totally warm and charming. A better dinner, Thai food or not, would be difficult to imagine. We leave late, take Ed home and retire to our cabin to get a good night's sleep for an early departure and our 'Rendezvous with Justin and the Black Prince'. Sounds a little Walt Disney-esque, don't you think?

Bill awakens first to fulfill his self imposed breakfast chef duties. The smell of bacon, eggs and coffee fills the olfactory sensors in our brains stirring unfathomable memories as we gradually convene over the food. We depart relatively soon after eating: Justin is an



on time individual and we don't want to keep him waiting. A short stop at a "National Geographic" viewpoint just beyond Berkeley Castle lets us feast our eyes over the twisted river and its lush valley. Cameras strain to hold it all in and we don't even take off our helmets because we've gotta keep moving. The roads in West Virginia are *all* amazing. There *are* no bad roads. Go in any direction you like; it's all good. Soon we descend into the small town of Moorefield whose gas station is our meeting point. Besides Justin, we meet up with the entire local high school girl's fast pitch soft ball team. It doesn't take much to get them to pose with us for pictures; still more local color. I love it!



Now Justin takes the point as we attack the really back roads with a vengeance. Spectacular views of coal mining ops and wind



powered generators adorn the mountaintops. Lunch is in Fairmont over 100 miles to the west and of course we still have to return to the cabin: an ambitious day, perhaps foolish. Lady luck is with us though; we make good time with no difficulties at all.



Several hours of riding through 'Almost Heaven' lands us at Muriales Restaurant, family owned and operated for over 40 years with closely guarded recipes for majestically huge meatballs, pasta and sauce. We restrict our alcoholic intake to one bottle (for all 7 of us, not for each of us) but there are no limits placed on pasta consumption. Carbo loading works for marathon riders as well as marathon runners: at least it works for me. Plus it's becoming rather cool out there. Our antiquated barely adequate charging systems will be working hard to drive electrons through our plug and play vests fast enough to keep us warm; huge heaps of oxidizing pasta in our guts will help. The food is great, the atmosphere sublime.





It's just past 3:30 when we reverse direction and head back east, using route 50 which extends nearly all the way back to Berkeley Springs, crossing several substantial peaks enroute and touching briefly into Maryland. This is a dream road: as curvaceous as a sexy Italian woman and with ample passing zones to get past slower moving vehicles and on this day, *all* other vehicles are 'slower moving'. We find out why Mt Storm is so named: man it *is* cold up there. Even in August I bet, but it's only April! I actually start to shiver at one point before putting on my electric vest. In the

end I give up the vest to Keith who is also running out of calories. By sharing the warmth we make it, barely, back to our cabin just past nightfall, after a final gas stop where we meet 'Mr. Iron Butt' who rides past on his ZX then does a quick U-turn to say hello. His bike has an auxiliary fuel cell mounted where the passenger seat normally resides. It has ABS, GPS, and lots of other letters I can't even remember. There's a fire extinguisher, a cell phone, a CB radio, a weather radio, a computer with satellite uplink, antennas for each and at least 4 clocks all set to different time zones. One tube is to drink water from and another tube expels waste water. The funny thing is: we talk and admire his bike for about 15 minutes and he



never shuts off the engine or gets off the bike. There's a sticker on it which says "11,000 miles in 11 days". We decide that he definitely eats meals on his bike and if he doesn't sleep on it, he at least sleeps in the "riding position". Then on the way out of town we stop at one of West Virginia's natural wonders: a drive through liquor store where you can stay in your car while a cute girl brings you your booze and puts it

in the trunk in exchange for a small gratuity. Pictures please! We make it work even though we're on bikes.

We arrive totally exhausted back at 'The Homestead' a little after dark, pretty much according to plan and promptly set to work reducing the wood pile to ash via the large wood burner in the living room. Vents in the ceiling allow hot air to find its way to the second floor but we set about self-medicated after our marathon day so that it hardly matters. We drink and we talk our life stories and we laugh and we do what guys will do after an epic group ride. And what a day it has been! The atmosphere in that cabin that night becomes a rare thing that will probably never be equaled; deep secrets which I can never mention are revealed. At some point after the whiskey bottle somehow becomes empty I fall asleep and sleep the sleep of the dead. I must point out, however that Richard nodded off first and I have the photos to prove it.



We sleep in a bit Sunday morning, George taking a turn as chef. I invite Ed George and



his step-daughter-in-law (or some such modern fractured family relation) Bridgette to breakfast. We don't really have enough food, but we make due. Bridgette supplements her income from school teaching with her

photography and wants to 'snap a few' which of course suits us just fine. She is nearly as colorful a character as Ed and I she remarks that we're slower departing than a bunch of high school girls, which we are, being somewhat hung over, overtired and just generally disorganized, as a bunch of guys tend to get when there are no women folk around to impress. Finally around 11:30 we get ourselves shoved off. The sun is hidden by overcast skies and the weather is cooler yet. The return route east was chosen to be simpler and more direct than our westward trek out to allow for a reasonable departure time, possible mechanical woes and plain old worn out pilots. Still, it seems to drag on and on as only the last day's ride home can. Some of the roads are stunning, some are tedious, but on the

whole, the day seems a bit anticlimactic. In the end, there is nothing left in our luggage bags: we are wearing it all. I decide, in retrospect probably unwisely, to skip lunch and press on, eating only granola bars at gas stops, banking on a hot meal at home being prepared by my wife Lynn. This gets us home on time, but rather exhausted and cold. Lynn as always, delivers in spades: steaks and potatoes. A few guys split right away to meet other obligations, but the bulk of the group hangs out after dinner and basks in the glory of our accomplishment. We covered 850 miles in three days, made several new friends and met a bunch of fascinating people. Our 5 Italian and 2 German Big twins from the 70's had barely missed a beat. There really were no mechanical delays, in spite of the fact that we had well and truly put the stick to these bikes. Man we rode our asses off! What a ride!



I had to write something down. As I told Richard, “in their own mind, everyone is a writer” but for me, these written words are like photographs of our journey. Just like a camera that gets a few really great shots if you keep pointing and shooting, I hope that some part of what I have written can affect some of the people who may take the time to read it. I think I can speak for every member of our little group when I say that on this trip, we really accomplished something. We definitely “rode a piece of the past(a) on the path less taken”.