

## RetroTours Lite: November 2010 ride to Jim Thorpe, PA

This ride was designed in response to comments from previous riders. Not every rider desires 350 mile days at relatively high speeds on unfamiliar old bikes. Jim Thorpe is 100 miles as the crow flies and with a circuitous back roads route I expected to cover 135 miles one way, traveling at slower speeds on small roads which makes sense when temperatures are expected to be in the 40's. I also wired each bike for an electric vest which draws no more current than a head light so that hopefully even our antiquated charging systems might help keep us comfortably warm, especially with the headlights turned off.

The number of riders remained in a state of flux until the last moment, ranging from 7 to 11. People have lives and things happen, so usually a few riders make deposits but then have to cancel. The deposits are non-refundable to enable me to make pre-paid reservations, but I do allow riders to apply a forfeited deposit to a future ride. On this trip there would be 6 bikes which was my original target; I would have gladly made room for a few more but this was the theoretical ideal. Three riders flew in from New England: Don and Bill from Massachusetts and John from New Hampshire. I collected them from the Philadelphia airport and they stayed at my house Thursday evening. The very rainy weather made all flights late but we kept watching the progress reports and rendezvoused easily. Even delayed flights are more pleasant than the 8 hour drive, especially when the cost is only 59 dollars one way.



Three local folks arrived early on Friday morning to join us for a buffet breakfast: newlyweds Rob and Kristen, and Jonathan.

Everyone had to fill out pages of weavers and perform a safety check on the bike that they picked to start out on. I would be riding the 1977 BMW R100S/EML sidecar rig.

Inside the sidecar I planned to carry

everyone's luggage along with snacks tools and first aid supplies. The other bikes prepared for this trip were a 1970 Triumph Bonneville, a 1971 Moto Guzzi Ambassador, a 1977 Harley Davidson, A 1978 Honda CX500, and a 1974 BMW R90/6. The newlyweds would ride two up or Kristen could sit in

the sidecar if I tied a few of the bags to the rear carrier rack. Each person would start on their chosen bike and keep an eye on it for the weekend, but we planned to switch bikes every 50 miles or so allowing everyone to experience each of the bikes.

The weather was a definite factor. After weeks of unusually warm temperatures, Thursday was a soaker leading up to a much colder spell. We purposely dragged our feet on Friday morning to let the rain end completely and made a 10 AM departure, dressed very warmly for the cool air. Riding bikes with no weather protection is a whole another ballgame compared to most modern bikes which have at least a small windscreen to deflect the cold. Nearly everyone had electric vests which help immensely. The first stretch was only 25 miles or so and we stopped just north of Downingtown to check out the “world’s smallest church” but first we adjusted our protective gear: some of us were too hot while others were a bit chilled. Then we crossed the street to the church.



Francisco Cannella came here from Palermo, Italy to work the nearby quarry in the 1920's. He vowed to attend church every day for the rest of his life if the good Lord allowed him to earn enough money to bring his wife and family over from the old country. He worked hard and accomplished this but it was 9 miles down a torturous twisty dirt road to the nearest church in Downingtown. That same road is paved now of course and Route 282 is a delight for motorcyclists. Francisco wound up building a church in his front yard out of the local flagstone. It is about the size of a tool shed: just big enough for an altar and three people. He prayed there daily for the rest of his life, honoring his vow, and his descendants live in the adjacent house to this day.

We stopped next at Hopewell Furnace, a historic restored village with warm public bathrooms and, after switching bikes, continued north through Fleetwood, home of former National Flat Track Champion Chris Carr. Kristen had been riding pillion behind her husband but as he took his turn on the XLCR which is not really rated for passenger work, we shifted some luggage and she rode the next 50 miles in the 'chair'.

Continuing on scenic curvy back roads, we crossed Route 78 then rode over a mountain pass on a bumpy dirt road crossing the Appalachian Trail enroute to our lunch stop at a tiny Chinese restaurant in Snyder, PA. We departed at 2:30 or so and it was definitely time to add a layer of clothing as temperatures were dropping into the mid 40's as we gained altitude in the late afternoon. Fortunately, it was not much further to Jim Thorpe and we arrived at Mary's Guest House exactly on time at 4 o'clock.

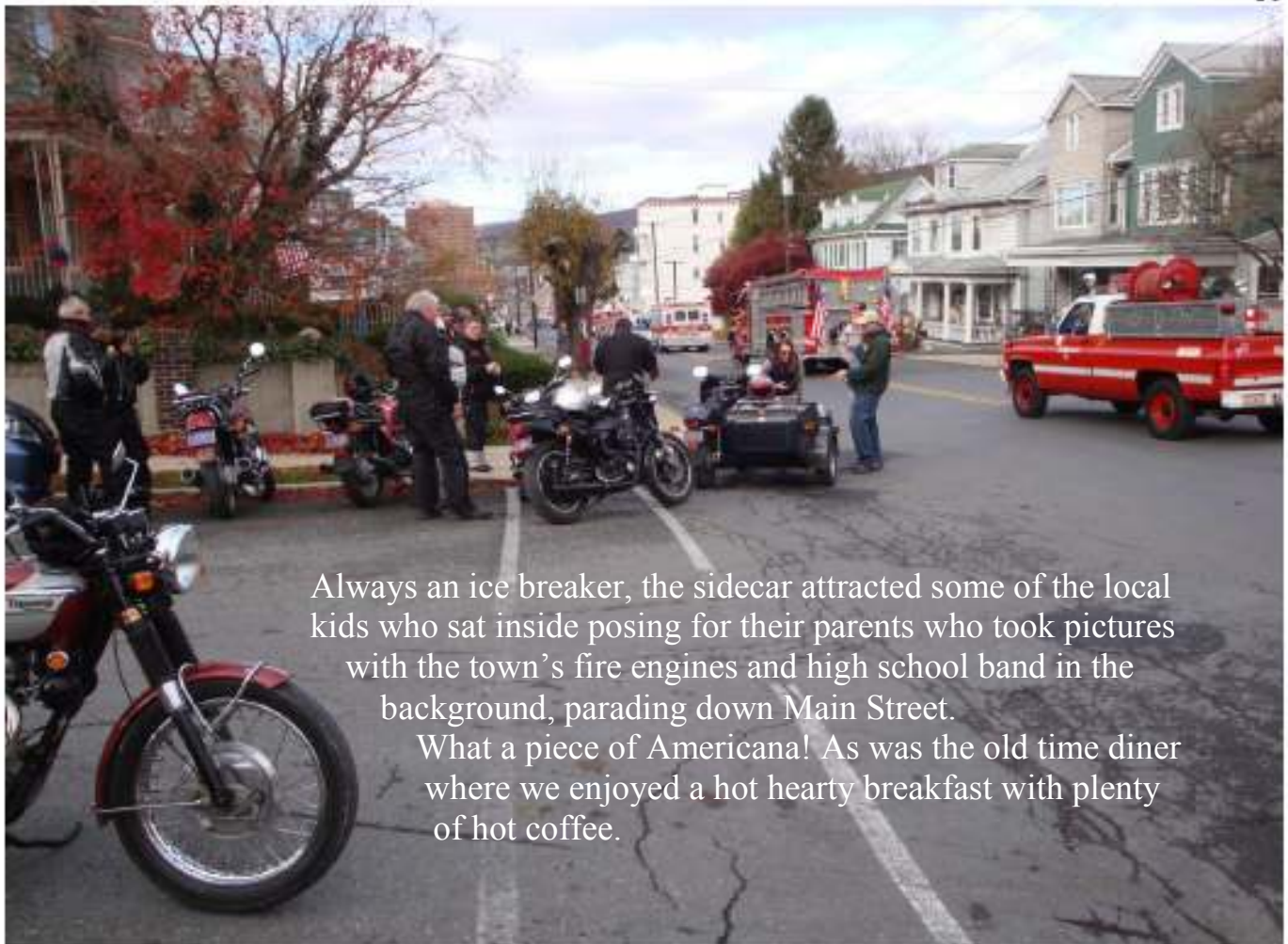


Off street parking is scarce in this tiny town so it was fortunate that our guest house included one parking space; just adequate for 5 bikes and one sidecar rig. We unpacked and checked in and took about 45 minutes to decompress in preparation for a fascinating 1 hour guided walking tour provided by our host, Tom. Jim Thorpe has an intriguing story, beginning with the discovery of anthracite coal lying at ground level in the 1700's. The subsequent discovery of new techniques for burning this readily obtainable

energy laden resource led to applications which in essence sparked the worldwide industrial revolution. The infrastructures which evolved to extract and transport the coal led to Mauch Chunk (as Jim Thorpe was originally known) to become the richest town in America in the mid 1800's. Much of the main street known as "Millionaires' Row" has been preserved or restored. This unique architecture, the town's location in a valley between several sharp peaks, and the mountain stream that now flows right under the main street make the town feel like a Swiss Alpine village: it is truly special.

Following our tour we relaxed for a bit then walked around town cruising for food, settling on a pub to sample the local cuisine along with local wines and brew. Yuengling Beer is famous here and trying some seemed appropriate since we planned to visit the oldest brewery in America where it is made. On Saturday morning we left at 9:30 thoroughly bundled up; the mercury had slipped into the mid 30's overnight! Pottsville is the home of the Yuengling brewery and is also a city with ties to the era when coal was king. We rode there fairly directly, with stops to warm up and to wait for a small town parade to pass in Tamaqua.

10



Always an ice breaker, the sidecar attracted some of the local kids who sat inside posing for their parents who took pictures with the town's fire engines and high school band in the background, parading down Main Street.

What a piece of Americana! As was the old time diner where we enjoyed a hot hearty breakfast with plenty of hot coffee.



The timing of our arrival was perfect: the last brewery tour began as soon as we parked in Pottsville and stuffed our huge pile of cold weather riding gear into the sidecar. Two hours later we had seen it all and even sampled a wee brew. We suited up, swapped bikes again, and headed back north via more mountain roads which avoided any developed areas. As one would expect in the mountains, the temperatures dropped

rapidly as the sun sank in the sky. An accumulating afternoon cloud cover added to the effect and we were feeling pretty 'cool' by the time we got back to Jim Thorpe at 4 o'clock. Even so, we took the time to visit the Jim Thorpe monument and learn the story of this Native American Olympic athlete who was dishonored by his Texas home town. They didn't even want him buried there, and so it came to pass that his remains were moved to Pennsylvania where the town of Mauch Chunk was desperately seeking a way to re-invent itself through tourism after the coal industry crashed.



Our final stop before returning to our guest house was at the supermarket where the seven of us divided up the shopping list and loaded the sidecar with provisions for dinner and Sunday's breakfast. It so happens that Bill is an enthusiastic cook; he even brought his spices with him, and we gorged on pasta with turkey sausage and meat sauce, wine, salad and desserts. It was delicious, and working together to shop, prepare and clean up added much to our group's growing sense of camaraderie.

After dinner some people hung out to drink beer and retire early but most of us made it to an 8:30 concert at the Mauch Chunk Opera House, built in the late 1800's and renowned for its excellent acoustics. The Angel Band entertained us with melodious 3 part vocal harmonies and much original blue grass type music. I slept good that night!

Sunday proved to be the nicest weather of the weekend with sunny skies all day and temperatures warming steadily as we descended southwards

from the mountains. It was still quite cool at first though, so we began with a short ride to the Lehigh Gorge, where the white water has cut trough through the rocky cliffs, then swung back through town for a ride-by tour of several mansions and little neighborhoods. Finally following a torturous route along quiet streams and valleys that went straight up and down Blue Mountain,



where 'For Sale' signs made it seem as if the entire ski resort mountain top was up for grabs; signs of current economic realities I suppose.

Eventually we made our way into Reading from the west, where the Harley began to act up a bit. It ran fine down the road but the battery would die if we parked it for more than a few minutes. It acted like an ignition switch fault; even with the key turned off several electrical loads were still drawing the battery down. Since it was fine while underway, we decided to deal with it later, remembering to simply disconnect the battery as soon as we reached our final destination. Meanwhile, we carved up the hairpins to the top of the last ridge before Reading proper which brought us to The Pagoda where we stopped for the stunning view and a cup of hot tea.



At the turn of the last century a quarry located on the site created an unsightly scar on the mountain top which was clearly visible from town. In response to public outrage, the land owner built a 7 story oriental style pagoda with the intention of starting a resort overlooking Reading. He was unable to obtain a liquor license however and in 1910

sold the property to a local businessman who turned it over to the city a year later for \$1.00. In those days before radio and telephone The Pagoda was used to communicate to the general public via Morse code sent with red and white lights. We climbed up 7 flights of stairs to enjoy the view before departing on the final leg of our journey.

The Harley had to coast most of the way down the mountain before it recharged the battery enough to start up and we escaped the city by means of a short run on the bypass highway. I was afraid the Harley might quit on the crowded road with little or no breakdown lane, but it made it home without incident.

We quit the highway for route 10 ASAP and were treated to Lancaster County scenery which, on Sunday afternoon, included numerous Amish families riding horse drawn buggies home from church meetings. Bill claims to have seen one buggy occupant sending text messages, but his observation remains unconfirmed and may be related to 'rider fatigue'.

We arrived home perfectly on time: just past 4 PM. Bikes were unloaded and left where parked to be dealt with later. We all sat at the big table inside for some of my wife Lynn's best hot stew, warming up and reliving parts of the weekend. Alas but the end of these trips is always kind of sad. We all have lives to get back to and lots of catching up to do. After we all said our goodbyes I ran the three New Englanders back to the airport and returned home to park up the RetroTours Lite Fleet.



Everyone got along great all weekend long and rode really well in conditions that were not necessarily ideal. It has to be said that Kristen fit in with the guys perfectly: she was a real trooper and lots of fun to hang out with. Her husband Rob was very adept at adjusting to the various control layouts, especially since he had never ridden a vintage bike before! Jon from Pennsylvania has more experience piloting ultra lights than motorcycles, but he had no trouble maintaining a pace and with his curly white beard and signature 'Tam-o-Shanter' hat, kept everyone engaged and entertained. John from New Hampshire may be closing in on 70, but the man has got 'game': even without electric riding gear, and with only a shorty helmet, he never once seemed to mind the cold temperatures. Maybe living in the far north country has turned his blood thick? Don has a different outlook on the cold. He survived a near death experience involving snowmobiles and thin ice a few years back and he is very meticulous about buttoning and zipping and folding all his gear. It actually got to the point where I was telling him to start suiting up while the rest of us were still ordering dessert. Besides being a great cook, Bill is an expert restorer of old motorcycles and also owns and operates a motorcycle related business.



We all got to try each of the bikes for at least 50 miles, and finished the trip on our original choice. We had covered close to 400 miles in 3 days on 6 thirty-five year-old bikes. Riders' ages ranged from 34 to 68. Temperatures had ranged from 32 to 52 degrees but even without fairings everyone had fared quite well: a true outdoor adventure. The riding was relaxed, giving ample opportunity to look around at the lovely countryside and enjoy the vintage riding experience. Best of all, we 7 enjoyed a bit of a break from our busy routines and everyone came away from the trip with fantastic feelings of having made new friends, a great esprit de corps, a new appreciation for Pennsylvania's beauty and history and of course, great classic motorcycling.



[www.retro tours.com](http://www.retro tours.com)