

SWISS MINE TOUR, OCTOBER 27 & 28 2012

(Outrunning Hurricane Sandy)

It's between Christmas and New Year's between the 2012 riding season and 2013. The days are very short just now and it's cold and raining as well as dark. I've been fixing bikes and burning wood but I'm too tired for all that right now; the perfect time to catch up on the last few ride reports.

A certain type of rider relishes the additional element of uncertainty that the weather imparts to Mid-Atlantic Autumnal motorcycling and this ride had WEATHER in spades. The weather services were going off the charts with talk of super-storms, perfect storms and hurricanes, coastal flooding and widespread power outages. At one point the projected track of the ever more powerful storm was exactly over my house! We checked it on Google Earth, zooming way in and literally, it passed over the garage with all the bikes in it. Still, it was all mere conjecture as far as I was concerned. I had 6 riders with deposits and the bikes were ready with tank bags in place. As the forecast worsened 2 of the (more sensible) riders cancelled by Wednesday. The other 4 were calling and emailing to see if we were really going. Me? I was committed; or maybe I should have *been* committed. My feeling was that we should continue as planned and if things got too nasty we could always cut it short and high tail it home. After all, Jim Thorpe, our furthest point from home base was only 100 miles as the crow flies and if the crow flies down Route 476 he can be home in less than 2 hours. While some waited until the last minute to make up their minds, in the end all four riders came through. That should be Riders with a capital 'R'.

RIDE ON!

It seemed that we might very well get the weekend finished before the worst weather hit and conditions were actually quite acceptable on Saturday. We didn't leave too early so as to allow temperatures to warm up a bit. Don and Mike, repeat customers, came in by bike and car from Buffalo and New York City respectively while Dave and Tom were first timers. Dave sells bikes at a central PA shop while Tom had flown in the night before from California. Several riders stayed over the night before our departure.

We chose up bikes, ending up with the Harley XLCR, the Ducati 860 GT, the Laverda 750SF, the BMW R90/6 and the little RD400. The RD may be half the size of the others or less, but it manages to hold it's own very nicely, its main weakness being a very short range. As this ride was forecast at under 400 miles over 2 days we planned to swap bikes about every 75 miles to allow everyone to ride each bike so the limited range was a non-issue. The leaves were just past peak coloration and everything that is wonderful about the fall was happening all around us: brisk fresh air, open roads and powerful air cooled motors. The bikes were as hungry for travel as we were. I made some very warm riding gear available to those in need and off we rode, plugged in and stoked.



OUR FAITHFUL STEEDS

Everyone acclimated quickly to the bikes which were slightly awkward due to the tall tank bags which held our rain gear and toiletries. The bulky cool weather gear changes the nature of riding a bit but we were, at least, 'in the wind'. Mike was actually slightly too warm in his new one piece suit. We headed north and found ourselves on rural Route 896 before too long which turned out to be perfect since Tom from California had expressed an interest in the area's Amish culture. Route 896 passes right by Green Tree Hardware where on a Saturday morning there are usually dozens of horse drawn buggies and Amish families shopping for farm supplies. The kids come along for the ride and for the free donuts. There is also free coffee for the adults and the chilled motorcyclists on vintage machines.



THEIR FAITHFUL STEEDS

Unlike the modest Amish folk, the horses don't mind having their picture taken. We hung around taking in the sights and sounds for about 30 minutes, drinking coffee and relieving ourselves which was actually quite a project due to our layered approach to combating the cool temperatures.



As the day wore on the temperatures climbed into the ‘downright comfortable’ zone and as we peeled layers we stuffed our tank bags and bungee nets. We meandered around some very lovely back roads enjoying the smells and sights of Autumn. A short stop for gas and then a longer stop in Minersville at a tiny greasy spoon where the atmosphere was dingy and the food not so great either but it definitely had the local flair that permeated the area: economic depression where coal was once King. Over a mountain and through a village or two and we found ourselves at the Pioneer Coal Tunnel in Ashland. Here, the Reading Anthracite Coal Company rents an inactive coal mine to locals who have worked hard to make it into a historic tourist attraction. We wound up spending some time here since we wanted to see everything which included an electric train ride deep into the mine and a steam train ride through some back country, all narrated expertly by local employees. We learned quite a bit about mining; not an easy way to make a living, and about local politics: Obama is not well liked here because of his “War on Coal” and the locals who basically have no work greatly resent the array of wind mills atop area ridges while the coal mines beneath remain dormant due largely to the governments current emphasis on newer cleaner sources of power. It doesn’t take many men to operate 20 or 30 wind mills and what happens when there is little or no wind? Why not develop ways to clean up coal *as well as* newer technology? There is enough coal here to run our country for decades. Why can’t we dig it?



HI-HO, HI-HO IT'S OFF TO WORK WE GO.....

..... ACTUALLY, OFF TO THE UNEMPLOYMENT LINES

(Dave shooting Mike, Tom and Don)



Millionaires' Row, Jim Thorpe, Pa

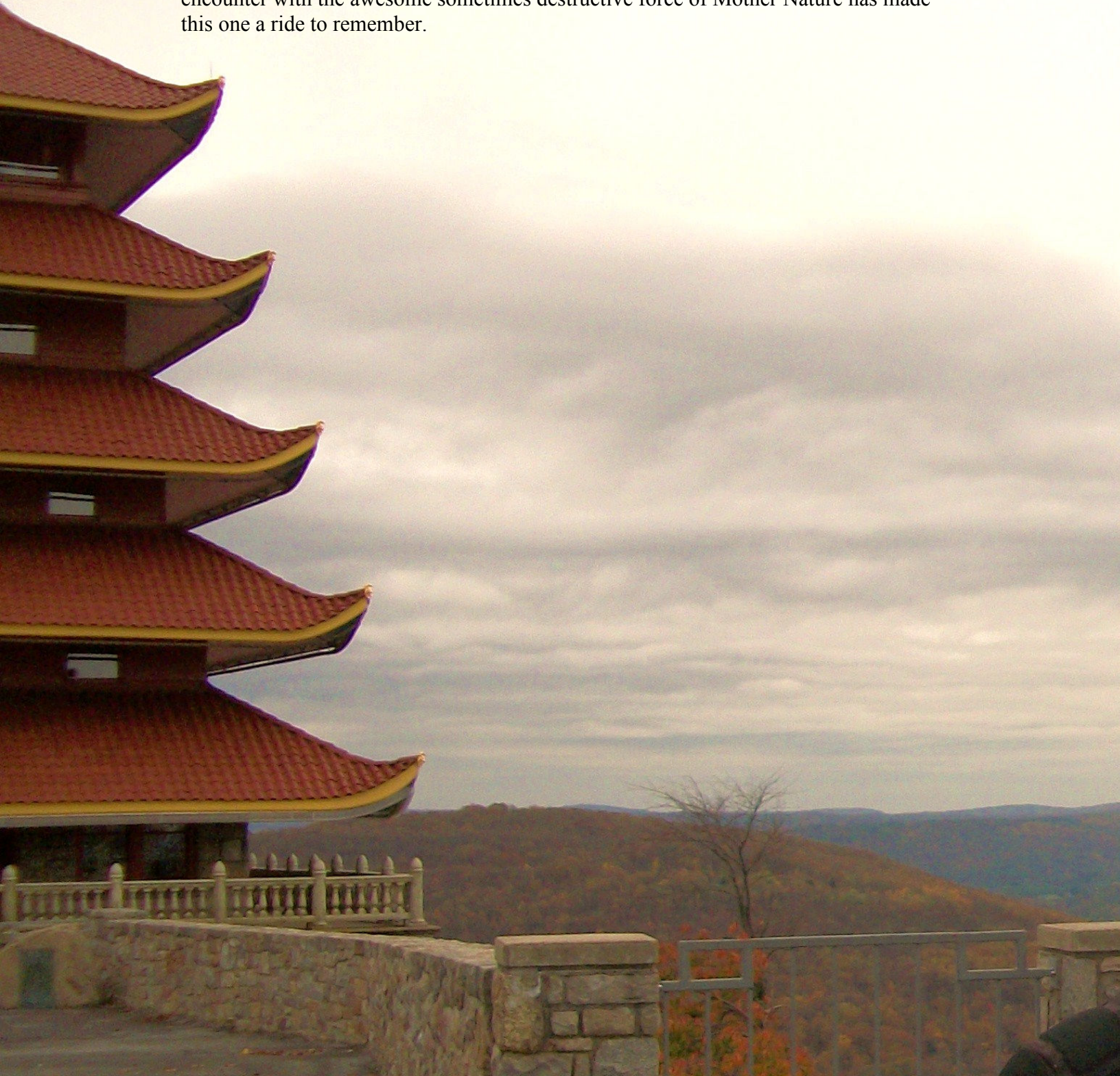
Finally we depart and though the day is waning we elect to also visit the other end of this massive coal vein which is located beneath the former town of Centralia. The vein caught fire in the 60's and still burns, forcing the melting road to be rerouted and the town to be evacuated and bulldozed. From here we cruise directly by the huge wind mills that we saw in the distance from the coal mine. Now we can hear the 'whoop-whoop' as the huge propeller blades cut through the air at high speed.

At the sight, Don Quixote comes to mind but we have no time for jousting just now as the daylight is failing and the temperature is plummeting. The tank bags are emptying again and our girth is growing as we don more layers. At a slower pace now due to darkness and cold we make our way to Jim Thorpe arriving just after night fall. It's *very* cool and we are tired. There's a lot to do in town but we decide to take a quick walk around then head for our motel about 5 miles away. The hurricane has not yet arrived but there is a hint of rain in the air and we will need a good night's rest to face whatever is in store on Sunday. We check in, enjoy a huge hot meal and a drink nearby then pass out.

I stick my head outside the motel room door on Sunday morning and yes, it is raining, but not too bad. In fact by the time breakfast is finished the rain has stopped and the roads are just damp in spots. As we ride up into the mountains it seems that Sandy might spare us after all. We stop in one small town for coffee with the college kids. The coffee is hot and good but the clientele makes me feel old. Hell, I *am* old aren't I? Oh well, I guess it beats the alternative. We all seem to be living on borrowed time now as the sky is closing in, yet the rain holds off as we snake around and spiral into the edge of Reading where we enjoy a ride down Skyline Drive. OK, so it's not North Carolina but it's still pretty cool. The Drive terminates at The Pagoda, an architectural anomaly that overlooks the city of Reading.



Another cuppa hot stuff and we head off for the final leg, through Oxford then east to Kennett Square. The clouds threaten ever more ominously. We stop for a final gas tank top off about 3 miles from the house and just as we finish fueling the sky just opens up! The rain is torrential but it's only 3 miles to home so we grit our teeth and bring 'em in. Sure, we get wet but only for 5 minutes, then it's hot showers and a great meal in front of a roaring fire thanks to my wife Lynn. We can't believe our luck. The machines performed beautifully: no issues at all. We rode nearly 400 miles in the dry and only 3 miles in the rain. As the incredible scope of Hurricane Sandy becomes clear over the next few days we all come to realize that we truly have dodged a bullet. Our close encounter with the awesome sometimes destructive force of Mother Nature has made this one a ride to remember.





Back Row: Dave Lankford, Robesonia, PA, Tom Garland, Seal Beach, CA,
Don Harris, Buffalo, NY, Mike Kenny, New York, NY

