

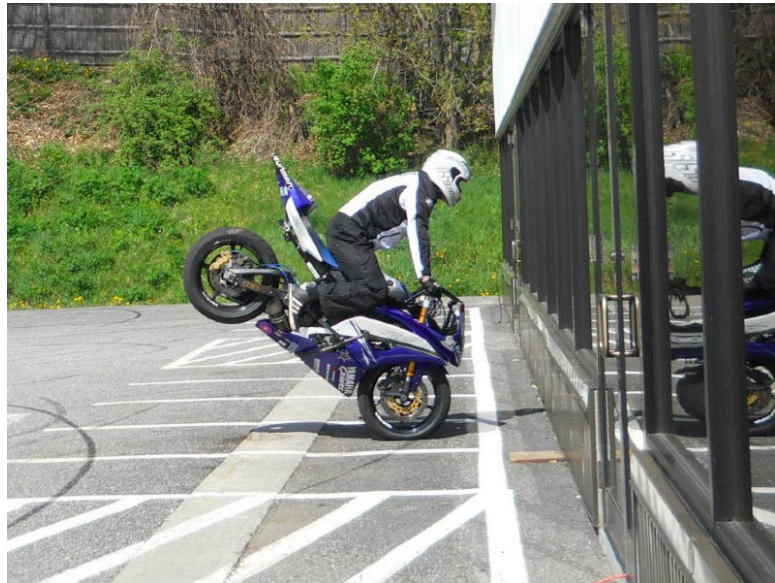
## RetroRideReport: The Snake, July 2012

### Day One:

It's 10:30 at night and I'm writing by candlelight in the Howard Johnson's Motel in downtown Staunton, Virginia. Although temperatures are still in the 90's the door to our room is wide open and the air conditioner is silent. There were very few cars in the parking lot when I tried to check in half an hour ago but the manager said he couldn't rent me a room because he couldn't make a key; he didn't even know which rooms were currently occupied or which needed to be cleaned. Huge swaths of Virginia and West Virginia are without electricity after a freak wind storm blew through bringing down thousands of trees and power lines. It's the Saturday night before July 4<sup>th</sup> but no one anticipated fireworks like these.

Twenty-four hours ago Don and I were watching the weather channel from RetroTours' home base in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. As we saw what was happening in Appalachia I commented: "We may see the aftermath". Actually we are *experiencing* the aftermath; we have ridden into a disaster area. The severe storms quickly moved east past the mountains and passed through SE PA, waking us at 3 or 4 AM on the morning of our departure. In any case we had elected to postpone leaving by a few hours not only to let the weather pass but also to catch three times XDL National Champion stunt rider Bill Dixon who was performing at Powersports East in Bear, Delaware that morning.

It was worth delaying our departure because Dixon's display of controlled havoc on a motorcycle was unbelievable! This guy has some serious skills; I still can't get it out of my head.



Oh No Mr. Bill.....not the showroom window!

I even hung around to get my shirt autographed which I guess makes me the world's oldest 'groupie'. Bill and his partner Dave Cutler hung out at our place for several days and I can tell you that they are both extremely polite and well spoken young men as well as extreme sport champions. It's no

wonder that Yamaha sponsors Bill: he is an excellent ambassador for Yamaha and for motorcycling in general. We all got to do several short rides on RetroTours bikes, Yamahas of course. Bill really liked the 1973 TX750 while Dave chose the '77 XS650. I would have totally dusted them both of course except that I was under a severe displacement disadvantage on the '76 RD400. (IN MY DREAMS!)

Don Harris and I, on the Benelli 650 Tornado and the Suzuki T500, left directly from the stunt show and cut west, paralleling the Mason-Dixon (no relation to Bill....or is there?) Line through Maryland, then angled southwest towards Front Royal, Virginia. At one point a huge downed tree entangled in high tension lines forced us to take a 20 mile detour; a portent of what lay ahead. We stopped for dinner at Mr. B's Barbeque, bypassed Winchester and Front Royal and then picked up Route 42: a magnificent 2 lane that runs the length of western Virginia, sandwiched between Route 81 and the WV state line. This used to be 'The Way' south before the superslab and as nice as the scenery is on Route 81, the old road is infinitely more interesting. Progress may be slower than the on the highway, but the ride is far more delightful and very much more in the spirit of RetroTours.

As we made our way southwest I felt as if we were 'leaving Babylon': leaving the congestion behind and entering a world where the pace is more laid back. Things flowed smoothly as the road curved seductively through gorgeous valleys nestled between the Appalachian and Shenandoah Ridges. A bit past 7 o'clock we decided to call it a day somewhere north of Harrisonburg. We began to look for motels but after stopping at a half dozen we realized that no rooms were available anywhere. Fourth of July travelers and people displaced from their homes due to wind damage had claimed what was available and many motels were closed because of no power.

At first we hopped up onto 81 and continued south, stopping at every exit that had a motel sign. Then we tried Route 11 which parallels 81 and stopped at *every* motel, even the very scary looking run down mom and pop rent-a-room-for-\$100-a-week places. Nothing. Things actually got worse as we headed south. Limbs, debris, and entire huge uprooted trees were everywhere sometimes only leaving room for a motorcycle to squeak by. It looked like a bombed out war zone and it was evident that there was no power anywhere. Pulling into Staunton, VA, normally a bustling college town on a balmy summer's night was like riding into the apocalypse. Except for emergency vehicles few people were about. The complete utter darkness was pervasive and it was way too quiet; even the insects were out of commission. Spooky!

We were exhausted. We pulled into a bank parking lot right downtown and were fully prepared to sleep exactly *there* on the parking lot. While Don checked in with his wife by cell phone I asked a local if there was a motel in town and was directed to this Hojo just around the corner. I wasn't expecting much but I begged and groveled and eventually the manager agreed to put us up for \$50 cash; the credit card machine was down. We got a candle from the lobby and are grateful now for cold showers and shelter even without lights or AC. At least we have a bed! Tomorrow we plan to traverse the rest of Virginia and land in Mountain City, Tennessee where Route 421 and our trip along 'The Snake' begins.

Route 42 afforded many idyllic views





## Day Two:

Waking up in Staunton the town seems to us to have a certain ‘apres disastre’ atmosphere. It’s Sunday and folks are saying power may not be back until Tuesday. We are concerned about finding functional gas pumps but luck out and find a small station on the outskirts of town that somehow is an oasis of electrical power. We fill the tanks then head directly west to regain Route 42 south. Oddly this route has several gaps: it just peters out; ceases to exist but then begins again 20 or 30 miles later. These voids are bridged by tiny country roads that follow creeks through parklands dotted with campsites and give extra variety to our riding as well as a good look into the rural countryside of far western Virginia.

Somewhere near Oriskany, on one of these tiny connecting roads, I get into a decreasing radius right hander a little hot then check my mirror only to see Don going straight off the road! “Oh shit” I’m thinking “that’s gonna leave a bruise”. But when I circle back, incredibly, Don is high up on a grassy knoll, upright and uninjured. He hit an earthen ramp beyond the shoulder of the road at exactly the right spot: a few feet to either side would have certainly resulted in a wreck. Don is shaken, but OK. It’s so easy to lose concentration for a moment! It’s time for a break. After several granola bars and a gulp of water pulse rates have returned to normal. We consider how lucky we are and resume at a slower pace. A bullet has been dodged.



Don: shaken, not stirred but OK



Late in the day and we are done with Route 42 in the far southeastern corner of Virginia. Cutting south on Route 52 we pop into the northwest corner of North Carolina then work our way to the west into Tennessee, stopping at a motel right on our route where the desk jockey, Shiva (like the multi armed Indian God) directs us to the local Italian eatery. Decent accommodations and the electricity even works as we are to the south of the affected area now. Damn if the pool isn't busted though; a major disappointment after riding through 100 degree heat all day although I must say it isn't too bad if you're moving. Belle from Georgia, a cute 20 year old, pays us a visit to mooch a cigarette but settles for one of my cigars which we pass around like a joint.

### **Day Three:**

We reached our stopping point at the convergence of Kentucky, Ohio and West Virginia just as a brilliant full moon pops up over the ridge. It's Monday night and compared to Staunton our accommodations have been drastically upgraded. No shower, but we've got power! We just booked the only room at the only motel in Louisa, Kentucky (population 2,000). From here we can just see the bridge over the Big Sandy River which leads to West Virginia. It's an unusual concrete structure with a right turn in the middle and it spans both forks of the river. This motel is a bit unusual too.

We arrived in Louisa just after dark following a wonderful and very long day. I was so tired at that point that I didn't feel like searching for a motel so we asked a local if Louisa had a motel. The friendly young man and his girlfriend insisted on taking us right to this, the only show in town. The manager told us he had no rooms available (sort of a theme on this trip) but something about the way he delivered the message made me press him a little harder until, under pressure, he conceded that there *was* one room available but that the shower was out of commission. We used this fact-oid to negotiate a really low rate, made due with a 'bird bath' then just made it to the pizza joint next door before they locked the door. Half a pizza and some antipasto has improved my attitude considerably. I am ready to reflect back upon the day.





**We left Mountain City (Shiva, Belle of Georgia) 'Riding the Snake' (Jim Morrison?). From North Carolina we followed Route 421 across extreme southwestern Virginia into Tennessee (Mountain City) then followed it northwest deep into the mountains of Kentucky. The road through Shady Valley, just west of Mountain City is the section that earned Route 421 the name "The Snake" and it is truly an amazing bit of asphalt engineering. The twists and turns are uncountable, each one smooth and banked to perfection. Really, really fun! I became giddy and could not stop giggling inside my helmet. One has to ask: "Why would anyone build a road with this many sharp curves?" It just seems crazy!**



But what a ride! Unlike the Tail of the Dragon, traffic here is very sparse and the best part? The road continues for another 250 miles on either side of Shady Valley! Some sections are straight and wide but mostly it's a narrow crooked road that traverses lush mountainous terrain. Our progress is slow as we stop frequently to enjoy the views.

At one small gas station/variety store we attract the interest of some local folk with our strange old motorcycles. Somewhat surprisingly people here associate readily with the Benelli; brand recognition is high because Benelli rifles are well known and highly regarded. One long haired Harley rider calls his brother who soon appears. Richard Mosley admires our dirty old bikes then invites us to follow him to his place 10 miles away to check out his pride and joy: an Indian motorcycle. Hook ups with locals add spice to any trip and we are quick to accept the invitation. Soon we are admiring his 2004 Indian and his Yamaha Star. The Indian may not have been built at the original Wigwam in Springfield, Mass. but it has special meaning for Rick as he inherited it from his brother who passed a few years back. It also appears to be really well put together.

As we spend some time jaw-ing it becomes apparent that Rick is one very interesting guy. He beat up the principal on the way to dropping out of high school and ran with a group of heavy duty outlaw bikers for several years, narrowly missing jail time before becoming a marine and serving through 3 tours of active combat duty



in Viet Nam. Upon returning to civilian life he followed a straighter path and wound up becoming a lead instructor for the National Job Corps. He has since retired and enjoys riding both of his bikes regularly, having racked up over 35,000 miles on the Yamaha Star. We thank him for his hospitality and resume our trek to the northwest, crossing several high peaks (over 4,000 feet) until finally we turn east on the Daniel Boone Parkway (the road's been renamed for some congressman but I prefer to honor ole Dan'l Boone).



4,000+ foot peaks provide viewing entertainment as well as riding entertainment.



#### **Day Four:**

We woke up at 6 this morning and had breakfast in Louisa, KY then got an early start, crossing the river into WVA. I forgot my map of WVA so we simply meandered a bit east and a bit north finally discovering that we had actually wandered a bit too far west when we found ourselves several hours later in Huntington, WVA, a stone's throw from the Ohio state line; not very efficient routing perhaps but quite enjoyable nonetheless. We explored some lovely back roads and did a chain adjustment on the lawn in the shade next to the East Lynn post office.

During this routine maintenance we were approached by Pasquale, a Mexican living in Michigan and working 'on the road' where ever car ports needed to be erected. He generously offered us the use of his tools, then hung out for a bit and told us about himself. He was born in a barn in a remote part of central Mexico. Like so many others he came to The States to work hard earning money to send back to his family. He always wanted a motorcycle and after buying a 'beater' to learn on he purchased a new Honda Shadow. He desperately wanted to ride it from Michigan to Texas but was hesitant. Like many he felt insecure about weather, possible mechanical woes, etc. He could hardly believe that we were riding 35 year old bikes on a 5 day 1500 mile trip and hopefully we inspired him to take a trip of his own. Pasquale was yet another example of the friendly and interesting people we met throughout our travels due to the attraction of our vintage bikes.



Next we explored East Lynn Lake and found the dam that made it. In Huntington we finally found a map and a functional gas station: a second line of storms had knocked out power *again*. The crews brought in from surrounding states basically had to start over and they worked very hard all week doing an amazing job in very difficult circumstances. With a route laid in we were ready to ride for Elkins, West Virginia, completely on the other side of the state. I planned to head directly for Route 33 which crosses WV from west to east while providing lots of crooked asphalt for entertainment.



One of the wee tiny lines on the map took us through extreme back woods. The 'road' was a narrow paved lane about 20 miles long. We averaged 15 mph and it seemed as though the road would never end but it finally delivered us to Route 119 from which we easily gained 33 East which would take us all the way to Elkins. First we stopped at Spence and celebrated rediscovering 'civilization' with a huge Chinese buffet lunch. Don and I are both large men and I for one was very hungry at that point. I remember the waitress/proprietor approaching us and 'asking' "You all done, right?" then making a grab for our plates and silverware.

Alas, her meager profits flew out the window as we used our lightening fast reflexes to grab a firm hold on the silverware in preparation for yet another trip through the buffet line. A half quart of synthetic motor oil satisfied the Benelli as well, and a broken exhaust stud was noticed and repaired with safety wire. Our timing was perfect and the fates seemed to be with us as it rained very hard but only while we were eating. Furthermore the restaurant was located directly next to an Auto Zone so needed supplies were right at hand.

Sated and suitably repaired we headed east and ran out the fuel tanks then refilled, expecting to reach Elkins in 2-3 hours. Motel reservations were called in. We enjoyed making good time through the sweepers until Don pulled up with a flat rear tire; he had picked up a small nail. We had 2 spare inner tubes but found the first one to be 'pre-punctured' due to chaffing while being transported. With one good tube in hand we removed the rear wheel from the Benelli and that's sort of when the fates turned against us. The sky darkened rapidly then amidst flashes of lightening and loud thunder the sky just opened up big time and it began to pour torrentially. We asked the friendly local whose driveway we were working in if we could shelter under his deck and he agreed also offering hot drinks, some tools and better shelter inside if we wanted it. As a line of thunderstorms rolled through we worked between the downpours squatting in the mud and managed to get everything ship shape in about an hour. We rode the last 50 miles tired, dirty, wet and cold.

Brennon of Elkins

In Elkins we got some good ole southern style fried chicken (OK it was just KFC) and found the motel with help from Brennon who chatted with us for a bit while we all admired the blood red sun setting behind the mountains. The motel was far more expensive than what we had become accustomed to and comparatively luxurious but also kind of creepy. It was a refurbished hospital and the rooms were, well, *hospital* rooms. The staff seemed to have an arrogant attitude and there were lots of signs telling us what *not* to do. Not as though we had a choice: there were few available rooms left in the town by the time I called to make reservations. We slept well that night despite the strained atmosphere.





### Day Five:

The next morning we arose and headed northeast aiming for Kennett Square. There were some interesting byways through northwestern Virginia then we cut another corner of WV and found the elusive and very technical Shanghai Pass enroute to Martinsburg. Sweltering temperatures and very high humidity forced a break next to a Civil War battlefield. We were both tired and sore and moderated our pace to compensate. In truth, the last day always seems to drag on but we persisted and made it to the thankfully thoroughly air conditioned house at a good hour. A delicious meal thoughtfully prepared by my wife Lynn was waiting. We watched Moto GP on TV and retired. Don was on the road early Thursday morning riding his BMW back to Buffalo. You might say he loves to ride.





Both bikes performed flawlessly and we covered close to 1700 miles over five days of riding. The Suzuki surprised us by consuming very little two stroke oil. We carried 4 quarts but only used two. The T500 'left with one broken rear wheel spoke and returned with three, but there was a stainless steel heavy duty spoke set waiting for us at home which will be installed this week. The Benelli just ran and ran without complaint. Even the dodgy front brake seemed to bed in and work better and better as the miles piled on. I adjusted the valve clearance and reworked the breather catch bottle after our outing and both bikes are ready to do it again.

Our arses were mighty sore by the end but we felt good inside. We had survived record temperatures and a natural disaster as well as a flat tire in a thunderstorm. Some of the roads were simply indescribable. The riding was phenomenal. I had projected about 250 miles per day but with detours we actually rode a bit more, maybe 325 per day. Next time it would be great to have a few more riders, one more day and a greater variety of bikes but naturally, there are not too many of us willing to make the time to enjoy 5 consecutive days of riding classic bikes. This ride may be for 'the few' but if you check the RetroTours schedule you will find rides of various lengths and daily distances, and I hope you can find one that suits you. Get in touch, and let's....

**....RIDE A PIECE OF THE PAST ON THE PATH LESS TAKEN!**

