

RetroRideReport:  
**A BRIDGE ACROSS TIME: 2012**

# Joel's Vintage Runs



## VINTAGE RUN 2000

September 22-29, 2000

Bob Gould  
Alan Hurwitz  
Wayne Nadow  
Bob Nagowski

Joel Samick  
Frank d'Arcangelo  
Chuck Gould  
Peter Elliot

**‘Joel’s Vintage Runs’ later became RetroTours, Inc.**

**Bob** Gould still rides a lot and is into BMW's. His wife Sue made the T-shirt pictured above with him on the Laverda looking at the bridge. Bob makes Micatech saddlebags and sells them at rallies across the country. This has kept him away from RetroTours recently but he's due; I'm sure we'll see him again soon.

**Alan** was killed on his bike about 18 months ago. He was an incredibly talented rider and a wonderfully positive human being who once said: "The thing that scares me the most about RetroTours is that I feel like I could just keep on riding forever." He is.

**Wayne's** had some serious health issues and rides his bicycle a lot; motorcycles not so much. I remember that as we pulled into the parking lot at the New River Gorge he got all sideways in some gravel, put a foot down and saved it. It was an impressive slide. I spent a few hours at the local Walmart that night repairing the BSA footrest.

**Bob** Nagowski is still crazy, still riding with RetroTours and still collecting vehicles. He just bought an Aprilia Tuono to round out his sport bike collection. On the 2000 run he fell asleep in the motel with his helmet and jacket on. Later on the same trip he was so tired that he forgot to put his foot down at a stop and he and the Benelli tumbled comically down a grassy slope.

**Frank** has major issues with his neck and can't ride except for short commutes to work on his Seca 650. I remember him racing a bareback tractor truck on a mountain road in West Virginia. The Norton won, but just barely. Them locals can really drive on those mountain roads.

**Chuck** has accumulated over 100 'micro-cars' and still does a RetroTour most every year. I remember him on the diminutive RD400 pulling out in front of a huge loaded logging truck racing down a steep mountain road. BAD IDEA CHUCK! We watched in horror as the driver hit the air horns and Chuck nailed it, darting ahead, leaving the truck awash in a massive cloud of 2 stroke smoke.

**Peter** (AKA 'Cagiva Pete') still rides regularly. He left his sneakers at a motel with \$300 hidden in one. Alan took charge and got them Fed X'ed to us. The money was still there! Pete's old dog Otto finally died last year. He (Peter not Otto) has a new girl friend now and it looks serious. I like her a lot and just hope that he's allowed to come on a RetroTour again soon. I will see them both at the Rhinebeck vintage rally next week.

I had been inviting friends to come to Pennsylvania to ride my old bikes since the 90's. I just had too many bikes to ride myself; I needed help. That's what friends do: they help. Sometime around the turn of the century it occurred to me that people might actually pay to ride the old bikes. Maybe not enough to actually generate a profit, but anything would help offset the expense of keeping the old hulks of iron in running condition. I got 7 friends to agree to a date and having just seen an amazing fold out photo of the New River Gorge Bridge in National Geographic Magazine, I chose that as the destination and a 7 day romp across the back roads of West Virginia, Tennessee and Virginia was laid out. The rest is history.



When I called the May 25, 2012 ride “A Bridge Across Time” I was thinking that I would do a re-run of the year 2000 trip to Fayetteville, West Virginia twelve years after the original. This time it would be a four day trip over Memorial Day weekend. This would require 4 hard riding days of maybe 300 plus miles each. On old bikes on back roads it’s a bit of a stretch for old riders to make that kind of mileage. It would be wise to choose bikes with comfort, range and reliability.

Steve has been smitten by the RetroTours virus: it’s in his veins, and we share the affliction. He has a late 70’s Triumph and a lovely old CB750 plus several other cool bikes in his shed but when he wants to really lay down the miles he prefers to ride with RetroTours. He signed up for this ride very early on and he was still the only reservation as the departure date neared. I might have considered canceling the ride with only the one rider signed up but the truth is I would have gone on this one alone if necessary. I wanted it. I *needed* it. Steve had specifically asked to ride the Triumph Bonneville but only 1 week ago it did a 300 mile day and developed an unhealthy tapping noise at 3,000 rpm. It didn’t seem to be worsening and it didn’t sound destructive; maybe a worn cam follower? I agonized over which bikes to take on this run and wound up preparing 5: the Triumph, the BSA Lightning, the CX500, the TX750 and the Moto Morini. In the end I decided to throw caution and logic to the wind and we rode out on the Triumph and the BSA.

**Steve poses with the two British bikes on the morning of our departure.**



Did someone say comfort, range and reliability? I must admit to a bit of trepidation; this would be a long hard haul for the 2 veteran Brits. Twelve hundred miles in 4 days on 40 year old motorcycles is not something to be taken lightly. I was nervous about the new noise in the Triumph engine but I wanted to honor Steve's request to ride it. Once the Triumph was chosen the BSA only made sense as a running mate. We ate a hearty breakfast here early on Friday morning then checked out the bikes, loaded up and headed out under misty skies. One way or the other, this was looking like a real adventure.

“**ADVENTURE:** An exciting unusual experience. Also a bold, usually risky undertaking with an uncertain outcome.”

Steve and I started out by riding north a bit on Route 82 which is a thing of rare beauty, originating in Delaware and following a torturous path paralleling the Red Clay Creek. It passes within a mile of the house, through Kennett Square Borough, then north through some spectacular horse farm country to Coatesville and beyond. From Coatesville we turned west on 372 which we were able to follow for a good distance, passing horse drawn buggies carrying Amish families through the country-side, and finally crossing the Susquehanna River at the Holtwood Dam where we paused for a short break to admire the views of the rushing water and to double check our equipment. The morning was misty and though it was not raining the roads were wet and greasy and our wheels sprayed the mist up onto our pant legs. As soon as we paused the mist lifted like magic and the sun began to peek out, heating things up substantially. We instantly went from cold and damp to hot and damp.

We next took to smaller roads and cut directly south and west to pick up another great one: SR 216 into Hanover. Continuing southwest we crossed into Maryland and, making some good time now, angled towards 340 which inter-connects Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia at Harper's Ferry. For expediency I had included about 15 miles of highway on Route 15. As we approached the entrance to this short section of highway we came up on a group of 8 nice modern Harleys riding in formation. There was a bit of traffic and since there were just two of us we easily passed the group and took it up to 60 or 65 mph, settling into a comfortable speed. In my rear views I saw the Harley Hoard coming up behind us; they were cruising at the limit: 70 mph.



Old British twins cruise beautifully and comfortably at 50 or 55 mph. 60 or 65 mph is not too bad-- just a bit buzzy perhaps. As the Harleys pulled away from us I began to think that we should really show them what a good running pair of British bikes were capable of. Back in 'the day' there was a real rivalry between HD and the upstart British "lightweights" and now some force from the past exerted an influence on me that I could not resist.

I began to twist the throttle a bit more and Steve followed on the BSA as we reeled in the Harley group. In a few miles we were part of the formation, cruising along with them at 70 mph. Everything felt good. The short highway stretch would be ending very soon and we would be in some light traffic again. I wanted to be ahead of the formation before the highway ended so I tucked in and increased speed to a bit over 75 mph. Steve on the BSA followed. We eased past the Harleys and pulled away, flirting now with 80 mph. My tach read nearly 5,000 rpm for the last few miles as I searched for a smooth engine speed where the tingling in my hands would be a bit more bearable. We lost sight of the Harley crew as the divided highway ended and I felt a real sense of pride. Britain's best had surely shown those damn Americans who rules the highways. We caught a red light just north of Charlestown, West Virginia. Steve pulled up beside me and we grinned at one another, feeling quite smug until I noticed smoke rising from his engine which was absolutely COVERED in motor oil as was the swing arm, the mufflers, the rear wheel shocks and fender.

I shouted "I think we should just pull in right here" and Steve, his feet slipping and sliding off of the drenched footrests could hardly disagree. We eased the bikes down a side road and pulled into a convenience store, killing the engines as soon as possible. We parked at the extreme end of the parking lot where the tragic ecological disaster we were about to unleash would be a bit less noticeable. Terrible visions of what might have happened flashed through my mind but I was thankful on two counts. First the BSA was still running and sounding normal, and second and most importantly, the Harley guys never saw us laid low. Hopefully they're still talking about those two fine running Brit bikes that flashed past them on Route 15 at unimaginable speeds. Long live Britania!

Our reality was that we had a situation, but no one was panicking as we began to deal with it. At first I thought that an overfilled oil tank, which is the frame itself of course, might have expanded during our high speed run and splooged all over. It wouldn't be the first time. Then as a large oil slick began to form under the bike we began to look for the source in earnest. Maybe some errant engine part poked a hole in the crankcase? Maybe an oil line came off or split. As we peered at the bike I noticed the head steady, a

hefty steel bracket that ties the top of the valve cover to the frame, lying under the rear of the tank, hung up in the fuel hoses. Suddenly it hit me. I had done a routine valve adjustment about 2 weeks before in preparation for this ride. I must have forgotten to tighten the head steady! Steve was gracious as always and suggested that it could have just vibrated loose during our high rpm run. While that possibility exists, I knew in my heart that I had just suffered a mild brain fart and left the damn thing loose. It was amazing that it waited 150 miles to fall off and even more amazing and quite fortunate that it didn't bounce out onto the road and become lost forever.

I wasn't positive, but I was pretty sure that somehow the dropped head steady was responsible for the leak. I began to unroll tool kits as Steve went inside to purchase a roll of Bounty paper towels: the 'better picker upper' and some drinking water. It was right around 12:30 and the sun was beating down pretty good. We began mopping up operations right away and used the entire roll of towels. Steve mopped while I pulled the tank and fished out the bracket. All three bolts had backed out completely and gone MIA. The question was, are the now empty threaded holes in the top of the valve cover blind, or do they go all the way through? Assuming the latter, we would have identified the source of the leak. I was hopeful that this would be the case and confirmed it by probing the holes with a bit of safety wire. All we would need would be three new bolts to re-fit the bracket. I had a spare quart of oil; with me, but what size/ thread pitch bolts did we need? I was apprehensive that some obscure Whitworth size would not be locally available, complicating matters considerably.

Luckily, as we were cleaning things up, one of the bolts dropped to the ground. Now at least I had something to match. I jumped on the Triumph to ride less than 1 mile to an automotive supply store where I found exactly what we needed. Meanwhile Steve had moved our little work area to a shaded spot and we were able to complete repairs quickly and effectively. Only  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a quart of motor oil was missing so I felt confident that no damage had occurred internally. We had conversations with several locals during all this and everyone was very friendly, interested in our old bikes and sympathetic towards our situation. By 2 o'clock we were back on the road, continuing south into the heat of the day. We decided to duck out of it for a bit and enjoy a real southern treat: barbequed chicken at Mr. B's in White Post, Virginia. Suitably refreshed we continued south on route 340 until intersecting Route 55 where we turned west. This would be the last turn: Route 55 would take us over several mountain passes and into West Virginia. Elkins lay 130 miles to the west. I hoped our mechanical challenges would be behind us now.





“.....awesome scenery”: Seneca Rocks

Really, there *are* no bad roads in West Virginia. Route 55 is one of many enjoyable pathways west; it winds up and down mountains, through valleys, following rivers and offering a bit of everything including some awesome scenery. It is quite enjoyable to be able keep your head up rather than referring constantly to the map in the tank bag as you follow route signs to stay on 55 for over 100 miles. Both bikes were running sweetly as we made our way to Elkins, coming down off the mountain and pulling into the Econo Lodge at 8 PM with nearly an hour of daylight in reserve.

The parking lot was peppered with Gold Wings and Harleys and all manner of road machinery; riders of all types appreciate this prime riding country. The Econo Lodge has a hot tub and I had been focusing on it for the past several hours; it had been a long, hot day in the saddle. We were switching bikes every 100 miles but still, 350 miles is pushing it. I couldn't believe it: the hot tub would not be opening for the season until the next day! Oh well, a hot shower would have to do. Dinner was deemed unnecessary, the TV never even got turned on. We slept deeply and were up early, hungry and anxious to find 'Scotty's': a local eatery that came highly recommended for a great breakfast. We found it and confirmed that breakfast there is good. And LARGE.

We had reached our ambitious goal for day one and the reward was a shorter distance required for day two. We headed out of Elkins on a main route but very quickly found a back road to take us south through numerous mountain villages in Randolph and Webster counties. Mabie, Cassity, Adolph, Helvetia and Webster Springs flew by followed by Camden on Gauley, Hominy Falls and Mt. Lookout. On a whim, we turned down a tiny barely paved road no wider than a driveway, following a sign marked 'Rich Mountain Battlefield'. Within a mile the road turned to graded dirt and we followed it up and up, 5 miles to the top of a high pass where we stop to admire the views and read the historic markers.



There is no one else around. The silence of the wooded mountain top is palpable. As we explore the trails and markers I can sense the presence of the Union and Confederate soldiers who battled here in 1861. At the very start of the Civil War, over the course of a rainy night and the day that followed, 4,000 Union soldiers worked their way up through the deep forest and attacked less than 2,000 Confederates who held this strategic position which controlled the important Staunton-Parkersburg Pike (the dirt road we road up on) and defended it bravely.

Finally through sheer force of numbers the Union soldiers prevailed, paving the way for northwest Virginia to become the independent Mountain State of West Virginia. The railroads and resources of that newly formed Union state would figure prominently in the outcome of America's Great Civil War.





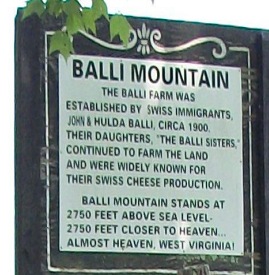
## ALMOST HEAVEN

After our 10 mile dirt road  
detour into history  
we resume paved byways  
then traverse *another* 15 mile section  
of dirt road.

Why do we take these old bikes  
onto rough dirt roads?

To discover what we miss  
when riding the highways.  
Real America:  
*not* found at "exit 47B."

And sometimes  
without planning for it  
we come across  
a person or a place  
that is burned into our memories.





As the temperature and humidity go through the roof we arrive at the back door of the New River Gorge Bridge. It's hot. We've covered 200 miles already and now we retreat to the Canyon Rim Visitor Center to take in the obligatory views of the gorge and the bridge. We sneak cold drinks into the mini theater which is air conditioned wonderfully; beyond all reason really, which is just right for us. 15 minutes early for the next 11 minute show, we sit in the plush chairs with our backs well supported, sipping our drinks and de-humidifying. The movie explains the history of the area: basically the white man came and exploited the resources. When they ran out he felt guilty and made the mined out remnants into a national treasure.

Senator Byrd then got the federal government to fund the 'Highway to Nowhere' which required building the longest single span bridge in the hemisphere. At 900 feet above the New River it reduced travel time across the gorge from 45 minutes to one minute. We of course needed to first cross on the old road which winds down from on high to the old bridge just 20 feet above the river's surface, then up the other side to join the highway in Fayetteville. Luckily this serpentine strip of asphalt has been made one way. We re-cross over the high bridge and head on to old Route 60 which we follow south and east to the junction of Route 92.





At White Sulphur Springs we seek shelter for the night. The motel looks OK from the road with an attractive mural depicting a brown bear in the mountain forest. The front of the motel and the office look OK too but our room is around the back and it's....a ghetto. At least the proprietor allows us to use his hose to wash our bikes. They are amazingly caked with dust and dirt. We sleep easily and get an early departure; I would like to make it at least to Harrisonburg tomorrow so we have an easy shot at home on Monday.

We are a bit bleary eyed on Sunday morning. We decide to find breakfast at the '50 mile café': any suitable eatery at around the 50 mile mark. I get out of the parking lot first and turn right, then wait for Steve who must have stalled or something. I'm looking right at him as he pulls out and turns LEFT, which brings him directly onto highway 64. I give chase and catch him in a mile or two but the first exit is 20 miles in the wrong direction. We pull onto the ample breakdown lane and troll along at 5 mph for a bit. It's 8 AM on Sunday morning and there is no traffic in sight so we bang an illegal u turn and are soon back on track, heading northeast on Route 92. Before long we intersect Route 39 and turn east, crossing at once into Virginia as we crest a gorgeous mountain pass. It's cool but warming and the sun's rays filter through the branches as we negotiate series after series of 20 mph switchbacks; like running the rapids. British bikes were made for this!

We've been getting phenomenal gas mileage at our moderate rate of travel: around 60 miles per gallon. Even so, the Triumph is getting scary-low and there are no open gas stations on these mountain roads on the Sunday morning of Memorial Day Weekend. I coast the downhills to extend my range and manage to cover about 10 dead-engine miles which gets us to a tiny general store with a pump. Just up the road is a breakfast stop where we are the only patrons. The oatmeal is so fantastic that I am compelled to order a second bowl. The '50 mile café': located 87 miles from our motel.

After the stunning run down Route 39 we turn north on Virginia Byways. We parallel the Blue Ridge Parkway, the scenery is still darn good and there are no campers traveling at 30 mph. In fact, there is no traffic whatsoever. We stop here and there to admire scenery then pull into Natural Chimneys Park for a bit of time 'off-bike' and to check out the attraction. A local guy on an old Honda Magna checks in and we converse. He has a rusty hulk of a Moto Guzzi back at home. We talk old bikes. After some exploration and a good cigar we resume our way north, sticking to the byways which include some dirt road sections. We're weary and cruising slowly which suits the bikes to a 'T' and allows us to rubberneck, taking in lots of scenery. We keep a steady pace and exceed expectations by making it all the way to



Winchester, an easy one day ride from home. We decide to find a motel near a movie theatre and take a little break from the grind. After all this *is* a vacation.

### THE CHIMEYS









I'm thinking as we leave the lovely byways and turn onto Route 522 into Winchester, that we'll be lucky and see a motel next to an air-conditioned movie theater before we get into town but I'm wrong and now we're smack in the middle of the historic city with no idea where to go. In a weak moment I suggest to Steve that he utilize his fancy pantsy I phone thing and locate a motel near a theater but the internet is no help. Just then I spy a probably somewhat inebriated couple walking unsteadily towards us, and barefoot. Now I'm thinking: "These must be locals. How far can you get, barefoot in the city?" Sure enough, we ask for a cheap motel with a theater and are directed to make one turn and go 6 miles out of town where lo and behold there is a maybe-a-bit-too-cheap motel where they only take cash and they don't want your name. We check in and I plug in the lamp which blows the fuse and we have to switch rooms. The other guests include a few people with obvious issues and two neighbors are practicing crashing their brand new Chinese motor scooter in the parking lot, dressed only in shorts and helmet-less, of course, only they really don't need the practice as they are quite skilled at crashing.

Things quickly get much better though as we walk ½ mile to a brand new theater where you can order dinner and a beer while watching the movie and eat it right in your seat during the show! The very best of America! The movie is about radioactive bald Russian pygmy albino cannibals squatting inside the Chernobyl reactor and it REALLY SUCKS but the food is decent and we are very content. The walk back is punctuated by a very intense storm on the horizon that approaches quickly, lightening flashing and wind gusting up to 50 mph. We hustle and are panting as we reach the room just before a meteorological Armageddon rains buckets on out bikes for most of the night. The morning however dawns clear and cool.

The ride from Winchester, VA to Kennett Square, PA would stand alone as a very nice ride through the countryside but the extreme quality of the riding on this trip makes it seem almost anti-climactic. We sneak east, paralleling the Mason-Dixon Line, just inside of Pennsylvania, then take a break near the Conowingo Reservoir watching teens in their underwear jump off a bridge into murky but cool water. I'm tempted to join them but can't feature riding the last hour in stinky wet underwear so we eat a granola bar then make the final 50 miles to home. As usual, my incredibly accommodating wife Lynn has an unbelievable meal waiting for us and yes, we are hungry.

Breaking bread gives us a chance to decompress and contemplate our boring normal lives to which we are compelled to return. The British bikes have run beautifully, never missing a beat really. Aside from what squirted out after our (self induced) near catastrophe on day one, they have used just  $\frac{3}{4}$  quart of motor oil between them while covering a bit over 1,000 miles in 4 days. We have ridden roads and seen sights. An adventure has been accomplished. Life is good.

