

## **RIDE REPORT: JAPANESE GIRO / SEPTEMBER 15-17, 2018**

Hurricane Florence was making landfall in the Carolinas as final preparations were being made for this Saturday, Sunday, Monday adventure. We were all watching the forecasts like hawks, and while it appeared that we could catch a window of reasonable weather, two of the riders cancelled, leaving a group of five. We updated our rain gear and hoped for the best.

On Friday night, Richard arrived from eastern Long Island and John drove in from New Jersey. Matt flew in from Florida and I set out to pick him up in the sidecar outfit, hoping to impress. I had forgotten that Matt would be arriving sans helmet, so he had to endure 45 minutes of wind his eyes. Furthermore, I found out later that he hates sidecar machines. How was I to know? I guess I succeeded, at least, in making an impression. These three spent the night here, and we were joined by Ed from Allentown who arrived at 6:45 AM for our 7:30 breakfast/riders' meeting.

As usual, waivers were collected, and everyone chose the bike they wanted to start out on. We planned to switch bikes every 75 miles, so everyone would get a chance to ride them all.



***HEADING OUT EARLY SATURDAY UNDER CLOUDY SKIES. THE RAIN SUITS ARE STILL PACKED AWAY.***

We set out westward on back roads with a short stop in Oxford, PA. A few miles beyond, we enter Maryland then ride over the Connewingo Dam to cross the Susquehanna River. Our route southwest takes us through some posh neighborhoods to the west of Baltimore, and across several scenic reservoirs before leading to Frederick. We close up formation to bypass the city on a short maze of ramps that dumps us onto Old Route 40, one of the original old roads west. From Sharpesburg, we cross the Potomac into Shepherdstown, West Virginia, and pull up to the Bavarian Inn, which looks a little too upscale for a such as us. The hostess is accommodating however, and the food is tasty and satisfying. A small traffic jam is encountered as we leave; the college football game has just let out.



***LUNCH STOP AT THE BAVARIAN INN, SHEPHERDSTOWN, WV***

Passing through Martinsburg, we pick up the Tuscarora Pike, a delightful mountain road that follows a high ridge, affording remarkable views of the valley below. The Pike leads us to the Shanghai Gap, where the road narrows and twists torturously as it surmounts the mountain pass. Matt is on the XS650 and I am riding the T500. We play-race at 30-40 mph, wearing foolish grins the whole time. My grin turns into a frown when I pull the clutch at the end of the road and feel the cable snap. I do carry spares, and we attack the poor Suzuki like a team of four surgeons. Well, surgeons in training perhaps, but we have the new cable installed in no time. I could have maybe ridden for a bit with no clutch, but just ahead is an unfamiliar dirt road, and I am glad to have a clutch that works.



***"THE OPERATION WAS A SUCCESS: THE PATIENT LIVES."***

After passing Unger's Store, the road turns to dirt, as expected. Despite the recent heavy rains, the surface is hard packed and relatively easy to negotiate, even for the big GL1000. In a short while it ends at Route 522, about 12 miles south of Berkeley Springs. Here, we refuel and look for supper; not as easy as it sounds. The first restaurant has gone out of business, the second is too close to closing, and will not seat us. The third is so expensive that while I am in the men's room, the others walk out. The manager and I hunt them down and show the lunch menu, much more reasonably priced. We eat well and enjoy. Just across the street we find an ice cream parlor for dessert.

It's not far to the cabin from here. We ride west on Route 9, passing Berkeley Castle which is up for sale. Only \$1.5 million, if you know anyone in the market for a castle. We cruise the curves for about 15 miles and reach our cabin, called, somewhat appropriately, "The Nut House". It is way, way back in the woods, on the side of a mountain, at the end of a long-ish dirt road. We each claim a bed, confirm that the TV and our cell phones do not work here. A nice soak in the hot tub and a snoot (John has brought a large bottle of Vodka) is available for those who wish to partake before we settle in for a good night's sleep. What hurricane? So far, so good; no rain.

We actually get the kick stands up at 8 on Sunday morning. The sun is out now, the sky is blue, and we are riding our vintage Japanese motorcycles on the back roads of West Virginia. It

doesn't get any better than this! We are heading for Terra Alta, a tiny village situated at 3,000 feet of altitude, about 100 miles to the west. We ride on tiny back roads, there is virtually no traffic. Our first stop? "The 50-Mile Café", for breakfast. The idea is to ride 50 miles then stop at the first place, which may be 100 miles out. Today though, the 50-Mile Café is comfortably near, and we decide to sit outside on the patio, eating breakfast and chatting up the friendly locals in Springfield, WV, about half distance to Terra Alta. By the time we leave the clouds are starting to move in, but the rain suits are still packed away.



From breakfast we cross in and out of Maryland, following the border west, passing through Fort Ashby, Keyser, and Oakland, enroute to McKee's Sky Ranch in Terra Alta.

Tom McKee, his wife Deb, and their family have graciously opened their doors to us, so we can view an amazing collection of "Wheels and Wings". Tom collected old airplanes before getting into motorcycles, and his 250-acre farm includes a dirt airstrip. Terra Alta's altitude have blessed it with clean, dry air and in years past it was a vacation destination for the rich and famous, including Henry Ford. The old Model 'T' dealership in town is now a restaurant, there are historic mansions and several automotive museums and other pots of interest in the vicinity. In addition, Tom hosts AHRMA events here, including road rides, motocross events and Adventure on/off road rides. The collection of motorcycles and associated paraphernalia that we are privileged to see is only a fraction of what is there, but it is amazing. After viewing the collection, we ride into town for lunch at Shorthorn's Saloon and Family Restaurant: the former Ford dealership. Then Tom opens up one of his numerous storage buildings for us to crawl around in, American Pickers style. The real American Pickers have been here three times! Some very rare Harleys, Hendersons, Excelsiors, and Indians are in the collection. Along with an assortment of Japanese bikes including a pristine Suzuki RE5 and a Bridgestone 350.



**THESE ARE SOME OF MY FAVORITE HARLEYS**



**MINT 350 BRIDGESTONE**



**EVER HEARD OF A 'CYRUS'? ME EITHER. THIS ON WAS RESCUED FROM A DUMPSTER!**



Included in the motorcycle paraphernalia is this tribute to Gary Nixon (#9). Some decades ago, Nixon visited Tom's high school for 'Professional Day'. He did a wheelie on the way out and ran afoul of the local constable. You might say it made a big impression on Tom.



Next, we ride into town for lunch. Across the street from the restaurant is another of Tom's storage buildings, this one packed to the gills with rusty treasure. We have to turn sideways to get between the piles and who knows what's hiding underneath? It seems like half the town's population is having lunch, and of course, everyone knows Tom. The restaurant is packed with pictures and artifacts from the past, when Model 'T's plied the roadways. Back in the day, there were over 50 people employed here.

***SOME SERIOUS PICKIN'; GOING ON IN THERE.***



*JOHN, ED, RICHARD, AND MATT*

*AT LUNCH IN SHORTHORN'S SALOON*

After lunch we head east for the cabin, finding Route 50 before long. Tom and Adam ride along with us for a while, Tom on his Indian. The clouds thicken, and the inevitable rain arrives. A light rain lasts just a short while as we run along at 60-



70 mph, through sweeping curves that dissect the mountains. Surprisingly, the rain stops after a bit, and we cross the Potomac into Maryland on a funky, primitive, water level toll bridge. Then we follow the river east a short ways to our planned stopping point: The Paw Paw Tunnel.

This tunnel was dug by hand through solid rock under a small mountain in the mid 1800's. Passing through the tunnel is a canal used to barge goods south to DC. Mules towed the barges through the tunnel to bypass shallows and rapids in the Potomac. It shut down after a few years, having been made obsolete by the railways. Today, we walk through the darkness along the mule path, marveling at how well the 150-year-old tunnel has held up.



***RICHARD AT PAW PAW, FOCUSING ON THE PROVERBIAL 'LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL'.***

From the tunnel, we ride across the river to re-enter West Virginia at Paw Paw. Route 9 runs straight south before making a 90° bend to reach Berkeley Springs without going over the mountain that lies in the way. Instead, we turn onto County Road 18 which is 'the old road'. It is a delightful single lane without markings, no cross roads, and no traffic. It goes straight up and down the mountain, through the woods in a series of sharp bends and hairpins. This is West Virginia riding at its best and we are loving it. We stop at Great Cacapon, not far from the cabin, where the same 4 or 5 guys are sitting on the deck that I see every time I am here. We nod at one another, I think they recognize me as well. We descend on the general store and scoop up dinner provisions. Back at the cabin we feast on pasta and sausage (and beer, HMMM). We know we will see rain tomorrow on the way back east, but we are prepared to deal with it.



On Monday morning we again pass through Berkeley Springs, then take Route 522 north, crossing the narrowest part of Maryland before popping back into Pennsylvania. The Suzuki's drum front brake has begun to stick. We make a quick temporary repair after liberating a bungee cord.

On the way home, we pass through Gettysburg. A light rain has been following us; we are putting our rain gear to good use, and it seems to be working thus far. Near York, PA, the rain lets up and I, being the optimist that I am, pack my rain gear away. We re-cross the Susquehanna at the Holtwood Dam, and then, about 10 miles from home, Mother Nature decides to show these irreverent motorcyclists who's boss and makes a massive shock and awe display of Her power with an absolutely Biblical downpour; the remnants of Florence have caught up to us at last. This close to home, I really don't mind the lashing. In fact, it is somehow liberating; Baptismal even. We experience the raw, unleashed power of Nature and live to tell. Home at last, I change into dry clothes. We park the bikes, unload and head upstairs for a beer or three and Lynn's famous short ribs and baked potato.

**HEY JOHN, ARE YOU SURE IT'S A GOOD IDEA TO PUT AWAY THAT RAIN SUIT?**





All smiles! We rode into the hurricane and survived. Well, not quite. Actually, we only had about 50 miles of rain out of 700 miles covered. I'm pretty sure everyone is happy that we didn't cancel the ride. I know I am.

The riders, left to right:

John Larcher, New Jersey  
Richard Anderson, New York  
Matt Celender, Florida  
Ed Richmond, Pennsylvania  
Joel Samick (not shown), RetroTours

The bikes:

1976 Honda GL1000  
1975 Suzuki T500  
1977 Yamaha XS650  
1976 Kawasaki KZ750 twin  
1978 Honda CX500