

RIDE REPORT: Kinzua Bridge, Columbus Day 2019

We were to have been a group of five but 2 riders from Virginia had to cancel at the last minute because of health issues. This left me in Eastern PA, Peg from Boston, and Matt from Florida; you could say we had the East Coast covered. I have known Peg since I lived in Boston in the 80's. She is a great rider and no stranger to cool temperatures. We would be riding across the low mountains of central PA, and in October, the weather could do just about anything. I was thinking that Matt, on the other hand, being from Florida, might be less accustomed to cold weather riding. Still, I knew from previous rides that he is tough as nails, and I had plenty of gear to supplement his 'kit'. Matt rides like a demon and is active in the VJMC:

The Vintage Japanese motorcycle Club. It took two trips to the airport to gather them up, and we watched the weather forecast, got to bed early, and reconvened Friday morning at the breakfast table.

You can see 'tropical' Matt is well wrapped up, but even with the throat coat that I provided, the jet helmet with face shield would prove to be inadequate. Peg is excited to start out on the GS550ES; I remember when she raced her Honda 550 at



Loudon. Matt is less excited perhaps about the R90/6. I hope that he will grow to appreciate its virtues. I will start out on the Moto Guzzi 850T3; very pleasant. All three bikes have decent alternators, so Peg and I are bringing our plug-in electric vests to keep warm. I come up with a battery powered vest for Matt. With the spare batteries and the charger, he'll be OK. He doesn't have a winter riding coat per se, but the super heavy leather coat that he prefers has mystical powers, or so he claims. The sun, at least, is shining as we bundle up, carefully remembering to prevent excessive fogging by only exhaling downwards as we shove off on our 4-day odyssey.

WE START OUT on small roads. Very small. We ride through Unionville, Mortonville, and Wagontown, then cross the Octoraro Trail, once used by native tribes to get from home to hunting grounds. We enter Amish country in Schafferstown, with a stop for lunch at the Diner in Myerstown. The bikes are running well, the weather is decent, life is good. We switch bikes and head out from lunch, picking up nearby Route 645 which runs up and down two small mountains, treating us to sweepers, with a hairpin or two thrown in, and excellent views of the surrounding valleys. After Pine Grove, we hit Route 125, where riders on sport bikes often test their skills. This “Little Switzerland” in PA is all ours today, and it is a rider’s delight. We pause momentarily between the peaks and someone notices that the Moto Guzzi is covered in oil, especially the rear wheel and tire: not good. There doesn’t seem to be anything radically wrong, so we go on the assumption that the crankcase was just a bit overfilled. Matt finds a local farmer working in his barn and manages to ‘borrow’ a couple of old rags and a can of aerosol solvent; nice going Matt! We soon have the rear tire de-greased and are ready to roll on, though at a reduced rate to allow for the possibility of a re-occurrence. There will be no further Guzzi issues.

In Shamokin, we stop at Dunkin for coffee and to check for leaks. All is well. We’re about 120 miles out and nearing the end of day one. We ride through Sunbury and right past the Edison Hotel, the first building in America to get electric lights. Mr. Edison supervised the installation personally and chose the location for its proximity to the Pennsylvania coal fields, a convenient source of power. We navigate a short stretch of Route 11 through Selinsgrove which seems longer than it is due to Friday afternoon traffic. Leaving Route 11, it’s a very short hop to The Blue House on the Hill, secluded at the end of a long dirt driveway, where we will spend the night, and it turns out to be a real gem. One never quite knows what one will get when reserving accommodations through the internet, but this place takes the cake. Our jaws literally drop as we enter. It seems that Alice in Wonderland has met a mad Mennonite interior decorator and together they have built an abode that amazes and fascinates us. The moment the door is opened we are stunned by incredible detail work in every direction. There is carved filigree wood trim all around, a pool table, a ping pong table, ornate embellishments and knick-knacks in every corner, high ceilings with hanging chandeliers, artwork of all sorts, a piano, plush sofas and chairs, and other fine furnishings. Dual winding staircases lead to two bedrooms upstairs, and there are lovely porches on all sides, assuring lovely views of the sunset to come.



The property's owner



The proprietors tell us their interesting story. A wealthy New York businessman built this house for a weekend farm-home away from his home in the big city. This couple did the farm work for him as hired help. When he passed, they were given first right of refusal and did in fact purchase the property. They live in the small, separate apartment downstairs. We pick up our dropped jaws, explore a little, decide that the provisions in the kitchen will do for dinner, and pick our beds. A peaceful sunset follows misty mountain farm views, and a star-studded sky caps it all off. We sleep well in the luxurious beds.



Peg rising...



...Sun setting



Not exactly 'roughing it', eh? But look what was waiting for us in the kitchen the next morning.....



DAY TWO began with coffee in the kitchen, once we got the knife away from that pesky little doll. We loaded up and headed out for Coudersport in the northern part of the state. The weather was quite cool and breezy; it looked like we might see some rain. Our way out was a small farm road which led us to Mifflinburg. Here we stopped for gas and some locals asked us if we had ever heard of “The Sidecar Guru” who lived in nearby Middleburg. Coincidentally, Peg knew of the place, and her friend even had a sidecar rig built by Claude Stanley of Freedom Sidecars. At Peg’s urging, we decided to abandon our planned route for a spell and search out this tiny corner of three wheeled heaven. Mr. Stanley was very hospitable and showed us many of the crazy projects he was working on. This guy is one hell of a fabricator who knows everything there is to know about building, setting up, and driving sidecar rigs. A true old-school artist, and a real character to boot. The tour of his place was a rare treat. Afterwards, we found a tiny village restaurant where we were the only patrons and enjoyed a hearty brunch.



Even Matt, who swears that he hates sidecars, wears a huge grin as he samples one of Claud’s creations. Truly masterful.

Claude with one of his wilder conceptions....

It's an all-aluminum sidecar of gargantuan proportions, with a full-length luggage rack on top. Aluminum is used because at this size, if it were steel, it would need a V-8 to pull it. In addition to building conventional and one-off sidecar frames and bodies from scratch, Claude has engineered some very clever solutions to sidecar suspension, brakes, and lean-out adjustment systems. If you are thinking about a sidecar, this is the guy you want to talk to. And if you're not, maybe you should be.



After brunch we backtrack about 15 miles to regain our route. We begin to zig-zag west and north, past farms and through state forest lands, slowly gaining altitude. In Lock Haven on the Upper Susquehanna, we stop for a quick lunch and to warm up a bit. The weather is getting cooler. Next is a stretch of undeveloped State Forest. There are more Autumn foliage colors appearing as we continue north and turn onto Hyner Mountain Road. After cresting, we rush downgrade then turn left, heading up again, through the hairpins to Hyner's View. The five-mile climb brings us to a dead end: a cliff one thousand feet above the river. Here, there is a stiff breeze blowing, a view to die for, and a determined

parasailer trying to get airborne. When you are about to jump off a 1,000-foot-high cliff, you want your wing to inflate properly: you must get it right. The brisk gusts will make for a thrilling flight, but the take-off is tricky. The pilot has done this hundreds of times before and he knows to be patient. After a dozen or so abortive attempts he finally gets his wing properly inflated and is aloft. What a thrill that must be!



From here, it's still 70 miles to Coudersport, but first we must pass through 'The Town That Time Forgot': Renovo, PA. It's usually a pretty sleepy town, but today there is a Fall Festival in full swing. We get detoured around the crowded town on the weirdest detour which includes some dirt road, some railway bed, and some grassy trail. Normally I would stop in town for a break, but the hour is getting late and the temperature continues to drop through the low 50's. We turn due north on Route 144 and make our 70 miles efficiently, starting to shiver a bit perhaps at the higher altitudes. Finally, after a solid 180 miles we find our stopping point at the Westgate Inn, our furthest point north. The rooms are comfortable and warm, and dinner is a very short walk away. Coudersport, with 2,500 residents, is named for an early Dutch settler named *Couder* (say it like 'cloud-er) who helped plan this *port* on the Allegheny River; hence Coudersport. It has an ice mine in which ice forms during summer and melts in the winter. Eliot Ness of the Untouchables lived out his final years here. Today, there is much natural gas and fracking in the area, with the attendant environmental consequences. Tomorrow we plan an attack on the Kinzua Sky Walk.





DAY THREE. Coffee and continental breakfast at the motel, wipe the frost off the seats, and we're on our way, heading due west now, with the mercury hovering in the mid-thirties. BRRR! It's going to be a sunny day and the temperature will rise, but for now, well, there are very few clothes left in the tank bags: we're wearing them all. There is cold misty fog in the valleys as we push on towards Smethsport. We pull over for 2 minutes every ten miles just to

warm up a little. It's about 35 miles to the Kinzua Sky walk so the frigid ride is at least a short one. After Smethsport, with its grand old colonial style mansions, we turn off at the sign for the skywalk and soon we are in the interesting display building learning about this 'Eighth Wonder of the World'. Built in 1882 with iron, the 2,000-foot-long, 300-foot-high trestle stood for over 100 years. Heavy trains, loaded with coal, had to cross at 5mph for safety; even so, the structure would sway. It was rebuilt with steel in 1900 and continued in service until 1959 when it was sold to the state as a tourist attraction. Tourist trains crossed the Kinzua Gorge until restoration of the bridge was begun in 2002 but it all ended in 2003 when an unusual-for-the-area tornado struck, bringing down the center sections. The Skywalk, built from the remains, allows visitors to walk out halfway across the gorge, then to survey the remains of the support towers on the valley floor, 300 feet below a transparent mid-air viewing deck. Especially in the Autumn, the view is phenomenal, and at 9 AM on a cool Sunday morning, we have the place nearly to ourselves.





From the bridge, we ride about 40 miles ‘over the mountain and through the woods’ to the town of Emporium, where a log cabin style restaurant has great pancakes and plenty of hot coffee. Well fed and

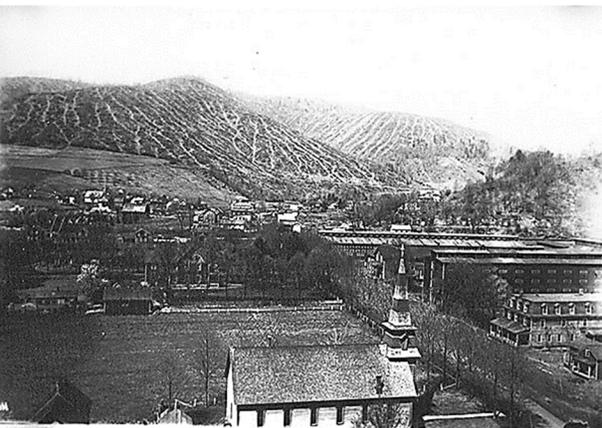
warmed, we settle into a relaxed cruise along the Susquehanna River on Route 120, heading east now, all the way back to Renovo.

The Fall Festival is petering out by now and we make it through town easily, picking up wonderful, deserted Route 144 south. This

rode passes through 40 miles of verdant forest, endless in every direction. The unbelievable thing is that by 1900 the countryside

here was 100% denuded by aggressive forestry practices. There was not one tree—nothing but mud and rocks—as far as the eye could see. Replanting began in 1915 and today, conservation in PA has produced tens of millions of acres of healthy forest.

The view from Renovo circa 1898: not a tree in site and erosion running rampant.





Un-faired bikes in cold weather require effective protective gear, preferably electrically heated. By wearing his rain suit over his warmest layers, and using an electric vest, Matt was able to block the wind and stay warm enough, but the wind did get to his neck eventually. We constructed a cardboard and duct tape extension to his flat shield that looked like “Darth Vader meets Winnie the Welder”. It must have worked; he didn’t remove the extension until we got home. This is Matt ready to shove off from the Emporium Diner. I think he is beginning to like the BMW; at least his feet are toasty warm. He looks ready to deal with the Corona Virus, doesn’t he?

Winnie the Welder, along with Rosie the Riveter were icons of WWII, when women filled industrial jobs previously held by men who were ‘over there’ fighting.



This will be a 350-mile day. As we continue east and south, we drop out of the mountains and the temperature, thankfully, moderates. After Lewistown and Mifflin, we pick up Route 74 South which takes us over a low mountain pass with hairpin turns and long views. At one high point we explore a dirt 'road' that leads to an antenna tower deep in the woods. The weather is improving, the riding is sublime. At the end of a very long and eventful day, we descend upon York and find the La Quinta Inn. There is hot tub and a pool, and a cool gear-head themed restaurant just across the parking lot. We turn up the heat and are asleep as soon as our heads hit the pillows.



Parked up at La Quinta, York



Steak, fast cars, motorbikes, and beer. I'll have another please.

COLUMBUS DAY dawns bright, promising warm riding at last. After breakfast in the lobby we ride five miles to the Harley Davidson Vehicle Operations facility. Here, engines arrive from Milwaukee and are put into frames that are built on site, then festooned with body work that is also fabricated and painted right here. The factory tour is amazing, especially since this plant has expanded recently and added jobs to replace a shuttered facility in the mid-west. No one gives us grief for riding non-American iron. We spend an hour being guided through the bustling operation. Everything is ultra-modern and clean, and safety is emphasized. Surprisingly, the workers do not have uniforms. Management feels that productivity is higher when employees can dress as they see fit, and many of them look like bikers because they are. A visit to the ubiquitous gift shop has us searching for small, non-fragile trinkets to bring home. We are on the road again before noon, with only 75 miles to home. The sun is out; the sky is blue. The tank bags fill up again as we shuck bulky gear. The GS550ES has been amazing; it has no idea that it's only a 550: running with the 'big boys' is no problem. I find the seating position slightly cramped, but Peg and Matt are lovin' it. Somehow it seems too modern...almost like cheating, but fun!



Check out Matt's 'welding helmet' on the back of the BMW seat.

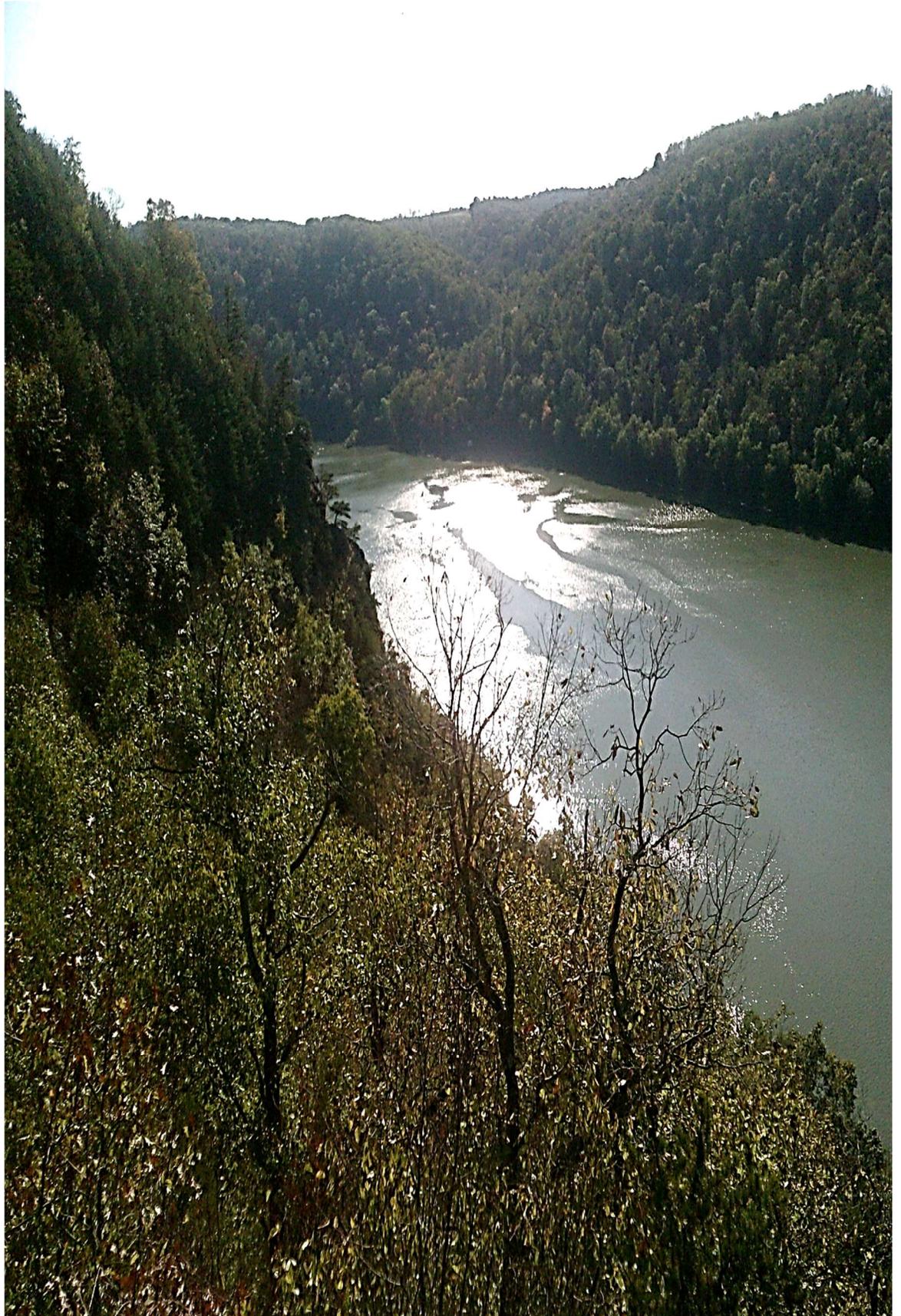
Leaving HD, we parallel the old Lincoln Highway on Route 462, making a beeline through Hallam to Wrightsville. The Lincoln Highway was one of the first transcontinental roadways, starting in Times Square and ending at Lincoln Park in San Francisco. Our time with 'The Linc' ends at the Susquehanna, where we pause for an upscale lunch before crossing the river and following the east bank southwards.



After lunch at the John Wright restaurant, a stranger shows interest in our classic bikes. Give him a business card! In the background, the grand Columbia-Wrightsville Bridge waits to be crossed.

Nearing home, we make one final stop at The Pinnacles, after enjoying the rapidly warming weather and the ride along River Road. A quick rest, a look at the view, and we are heading through the heart of Amish country, passing several horse-drawn buggies through Quarryville and on to home, where snacks and drink await us on the back deck. Matt finds a guitar hanging on the wall and entertains us.

“How good and pleasant it is, for brothers and sisters to sit together.”



*On Tuesday I run Matt and Peg back to the airport. It has been an adventurous 4 days.
The bonds that we have formed will last as long as the memories.*

