

Seeing America on Thirty-One Gallons a Day

by Bob Higdon

A lot of riders like the Iron Butt Rally, but Swamp Thing really loves it. In 1991 he steered his sublimely ugly BMW into a Louisiana bayou in the middle of the night, earning his timeless nickname. When they dragged him from the muck and pumped out his lungs, he decided he'd had so much fun that he promptly had the Iron Butt Association's logo tattooed on his arm. Mike Kneebone, the founding father of the invitation-only club and organizer of the 1993 event, knew he had a dedicated fan in Rick Schrader. For this year's running, Kneebone gave Swamp Thing plate number 1, then drew lots for the remaining starting positions. No one complained.

They don't run this event every year, which is consistent with a sizeable body of psychiatric opinion that says that they shouldn't run it at all. But when Kneebone's invitation list went out in November 1992, the rally was overbooked within two weeks. They were coming from everywhere. One innocent first-timer, Steve Attwood, arrived with a Moto Guzzi Le Mans he'd shipped from his home north of London, England, a bike similar to the one he and his wife had ridden around the world a few years ago. You need credentials to be invited to this party.

They are true believers, these riders, and tougher than last week's bread. The top guns average better than 1,100 miles a day, every day, for eleven straight days. Aside from five checkpoints, which are open for two hours each, there are no planned layovers. The official motel sponsor of the event is a picnic table at an interstate rest area.

Larger-than-life events inspire painful cliches: A test of rider and machine, the march of time, larger than life, and worse. But banalities troop out of the woodwork on the Iron Butt, rested and ready for war, much like the riders themselves. Most people have never ridden a motorcycle; of those who have, only a small fraction have ever ridden a thousand-mile day. The Fearsome Forty who gathered south of Fort Worth on the last day of August had done the long days many times; they liked sitting on the edge of eternity, dangling their toes in the cold waters of the sixth standard deviation.

At 11:00 on Tuesday morning the bell rang and they leaped into the cauldron of mid-summer Texas. Before the 264th hour tolled, there would be an atomized universal joint, seized valves, croaked carbs, oil seepage to challenge the Exxon Valdez, and two charging system failures that threatened to turn the motorcycle into an electric chair. And that was just one bike! The toll on the riders --- physical, emotional, and masochistic --- awaited a suitable saturation point. It always comes.

At the riders' meeting the evening before, Kneebone had smiled and said, ""Seven of you have told me that you could do 2,000 miles in a day."" He paused briefly. ""We'll see."" He didn't tell them that the Guinness record for a single day on a bike is 1,705 miles. And that Kneebone himself holds it. He reviewed the rules and the format for this year's rally. There weren't a lot of questions; they knew what they had to do.

The concept is straightforward, like pulling out fingernails. Start in the middle of Texas and ride to Los Angeles in 35 hours. If you arrive before the checkpoint window slams shut, you get 4,000 points. If you visit some out-of-the-way places - the ashes of the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, for example -

and answer a question or two, you pick up bonus points. Repeat at five other checkpoints. The boy or girl with the most points at the end of the rally wins. There are no handicaps for Doug Packard's KLR650 thumper, for Don Dingbaum's tiny CBR600, or for extremely senior citizens like Garve Nelson (69) or Ardys Kellerman (more than 59). It's pure merit and pure American, something even Englishman Attwood could appreciate, even if he wasn't entirely sure where Los Angeles might be.

All other factors being equal --- and they nearly were in the '91 Iron Butt when the difference between first place and third was six points --- they go to unimaginable lengths to maximize their competitive edge. If Kneebone hadn't restricted gasoline carrying capacity, Morris Kruemcke's Gold Wing would have waddled along with thirty-eight gallons. He claimed to have once ridden over 1,200 miles without his feet touching the ground. To avoid those annoying bathroom stops, Kruemcke employed a space-age drainage device. No one wanted to see it, but no one doubted it either. Eddie James from Minnesota was zap- ready with three radar detectors. Ron Major, the '91 winner, had engineered water flow through his hand grips, enabling him to dial any setting from pre-boiling to springtime in the Rockies. If you didn't have a fuel cell, you were starting this rally below the basement. The Butt had come of High-Zoot-Tech Age.

After the first couple of obligatory accidents and hospitalizations before midnight of the first day, neither of which was the rider's fault, things settled down to normal, at least by the Butt's standards. Kruemcke's Wing and grandmotherly Kellerman's BMW wanted to go to California by way of oil rigs in Louisiana, which gave them a 100+ point lead at the first checkpoint. Reasonable people suspected that Kruemcke's 64 mph average for the first 35 hours wouldn't hold up. And indeed their brief flirtation with fame went up in flames when both he and Kellerman failed to make the next checkpoint on time. Other lemmings would follow their hopeless lead over the cliff.

The second leg, featuring a ride to Spokane, WA via either San Francisco or a far tougher run through central Wyoming, saw a new leader, Jan Cutler, the eccentric owner of Reno BMW and promoter of even stranger endurance events than the Iron Butt. To nearly everyone's amazement, Great Britain's Attwood had remembered to drive on the right for 4,000 miles, was averaging an incredible 1,200 miles a day, and had edged into second place. Joe Mandeville, a California judge, was close behind Attwood. One-third of the way through the event, one-third of the starting field was missing in action, a kind of two-wheeled Pickett's Charge. Swamp Thing was whipped; Mrs. Swamp Thing told him to come home. He did, thus exiting less spectacularly than he had in 1991.

The most direct route from Spokane to the third checkpoint south of Chicago does not lie by going backwards to the Pacific Ocean or to the top of Pike's Peak in Colorado, but Cutler and the pack on his heels took those alternative routes for large bonus points. Unfortunately, Cutler misread the opening time of the Chicago checkpoint by twelve hours, decided he probably couldn't average 105 mph even on I-90 all night long, and wobbled toward the nearest Motel 6. At the half-way point, averaging 1,150 miles a day, Joe Mandeville was on top, with Canadian Peter Hoogeveen, Ron Major, and Attwood close behind. The rally seemed sure to be taken by one of these four riders.

In Gorham, Maine, the fourth checkpoint, following a quick trip to the top of Mount Washington in New Hampshire, Attwood and several other riders lay in a shed for an hour's rest. At 8:00 p.m. they were roused to set off for Florida. Eddie James, earlier hospitalized in Nevada for food poisoning on the second leg, noticed a Guzzi with British plates still in the parking lot. ?Que? They found Attwood, padlocked inside the shed, snoring away.

One disaster averted, another quickly took its place: Ten minutes after leaving Gorham, Ron Major was broadsided by a car running a stop sign. His beautiful ST1100, perhaps the most exotic of the highly-prepped endurance battlewagons, lay on the road with an "X" in its headlight, and Major's collar bone wasn't feeling all that well either.

Coming out of the mountains of West Virginia, Joe Mandeville cruised along on his BMW K1100RS toward Daytona Beach. With two checkpoints remaining, in the best shape of his life, and having averaged over 550 miles every day since the middle of April, the rally was his to lose. And then the albatross that circles over Iron Butt leaders dived and bombed. Mandeville turned on the wrong road, lost several hours, and watched silently as nine days of relentless effort headed down the storm sewer. He was time-barred in Daytona. Hoogeveen, who had lost the '91 rally by a heart-breaking two points, also went astray, joining the judge in the Not-Ready-for-Prime-Time circle. Half the field had missed checkpoints, an attrition rate large even for the Iron Butt.

The eyes of England, perhaps those of Di herself, now fell on Steve Attwood, who took the lead with Mandeville's demise. Surviving a scary deterioration of his front wheel bearings, he staggered into the Daytona checkpoint and replaced the wheel. Utah's Frank Taylor, riding steadily, slipped into second place, but remained more than 350 points behind Attwood. It seemed an unbeatable lead.

In third position was Tom Loegering who struggled to survive a series of mechanical failures that would have made a sane man call Dr. Jack Kevorkian for help. With almost comic regularity, Loegering was losing hours at each checkpoint with emergency repairs to every part of the bike except the paint, yet gaining position on every leg. His bike would fail again on the last leg, dropping him to seventh place. He had finally run out of time to recover, but he never ran out of heart. It was quintessential Iron Butt, a story of indomitable will, good for the ages.

Kneebone knows that riders hate to backtrack, so he had the Mother of All Backtracks waiting in Mansfield, Texas: Show up at the "finish," check in, ride 500 miles to Oklahoma, then 500 miles straight back for the real finish. It was simple and sadistic. Attwood headed straight for Mansfield. On the tenth day, for the man who rode the unfaired, low-bars Guzzi without computerized road atlases, auxillary fuel, or even a simple radar detector, life was finally becoming sweet. If he could hold on for just forty-three more hours, the Low-Tech Hero would trounce the guys on the Intergalactic Cruisers who had laughed at him the week before.

The flat tire came on the outskirts of Fort Worth. In twenty minutes, working in brain-sucking heat, Attwood pulled off the wheel and tire, patched the tube, and was on his way. Having repaired ten punctures in three months while riding through India apparently was good experience. When asked why he didn't use the CO2 cartridges he was carrying in the BMW tire repair kit instead of pumping the tire by hand, Attwood said that he was saving them for an emergency. That may be an example of retro-English wit.

Twenty-four hours remained. The albatross circled. The second full moon of the month of August, the infamous blue moon which is known to leave people crying alone, slunk toward the western horizon. Nine hundred miles slipped quietly behind the Guzzi's tires. Attwood headed into Wichita Falls, TX. Four hours were left. Then the bird dived a final time.

Frank Taylor sat at the finish, wondering where the leader was. The last checkpoint had been open for ninety minutes; in a half-hour, Attwood would be time-barred, lose 4,000 points, and hand the victory to Taylor by default. Taylor didn't want to win this way, but he would take it. His wife stood at his side, trying not to cross her fingers. The shadow of a bird in flight crossed her face.

And then in the distance the sound of a dying Guzzi was heard, chugging on one cylinder. Attwood slogged into the parking lot, a spark plug in his pocket, and a dazed smile on his face. Nearly 150 miles earlier, making a last gas stop, the bike would not restart. Feverishly tearing it down, Attwood finally yanked one of the plugs and sped as quickly as he could, at 45 mph and 18 mpg, back to Mansfield. It wasn't fast, and it wasn't pretty, but it was enough. After 12,458 miles in 11 days, England had finally reconquered America.

It is billed as The World's Toughest Motorcycle Competition. That may be an understatement. You be the judge. But don't ask the riders for their opinion --- right now they're taking a nap.