

Southern Minnesota  
9.4.97 Homing Pigeons

I turned the Chrysler battlewagon into the parking lot of the Black Hills Motorcycle Museum. Mike and I saw the rider at the same time. I pulled up next to the bike. Its owner was about to enter the building.

""Hey, Leonard!"" Mike yelled.

Leonard Roy turned around. For a moment he didn't recognize us. You see the same elevator operator in your office building every day for twenty years, but if you see him throwing a Frisbee around on the beach, he might as well be from the moon for all your brain can recall.

Bong. Something clicked in his head and he smiled. We asked him how he was doing.

""Great,"" he said enthusiastically. ""I got six hours of sleep last night.""

""He's lying,"" I said to Mike without enthusiasm. We hadn't gotten six hours of sleep last night.

""No, really,"" Leonard protested. ""I've been in a motel every night except the first night.""

""More lies,"" I said.

We walked into the museum. A grizzled Harley vet came toward us. I'm always careful with these guys. They seem playful enough until you get a couple of hundred liters of beer into them. Although it was 10:00 a.m., still this was Sturgis SD, the home of the oldest, raunchiest, most homicidal, post-Raphaelite, rip-up-the-streets, lock-up-your-women biker rally of them all, a nose-buster that makes Daytona's bike week seem like a Tupperware party.

""You guys with the Iron Ass rally?""

""Iron Butt, right,"" Mike said. He introduced us.

""And I guess you want to take the picture?"" he asked Leonard. With his full-bore Aerostich suit, he was the only one of us who looked like an actual Iron Ass. Mike and I looked like we'd been sleeping in a car for ten days, which was what we'd been doing.

Leonard trooped off happily to take a picture of a 1915 motorcycle that actor Steve McQueen once owned. That was worth 106 points to Leonard. I didn't even want to see the bike. I wanted to be in Chicago with this rally behind me, drinking a couple of hundred liters of beer.

While we waited for him to come back, we glanced at the sign-in sheet. Four of our people had been there last night, including first and second place riders Peter Hoogeveen and Rick Morrison. Phil Mann (24th), a BMW rider who won a mileage contest a few years ago by pounding out an unbelievable 113,000 miles in six months, and Suzy Johnson (10th), had also signed in before the museum closed at 1800. Leonard was the fifth Butt to show up this morning.

""You see who's not on this list?"" I said to Mike.

""The Mikes, Stewart and Stockton. Dale Wilson.""

""And Tom Loftus.""

""And Eddie James,"" Mike said, staring hard at me. We'd just clicked off the names of the 3rd through 7th riders overall at Yakima. If they hadn't come to Sturgis, where had they gone?

Leonard reappeared with his Polaroid photo. We walked outside with him. He went through his pre-flight boarding process, which included spraying some stuff on his sunglasses to clean them off. I would bet folding money that by now he's done this drill so often and in the identical order that a rocket grenade coming through the parking lot wouldn't throw him out of synch. We had turned a normal human into an automaton. The behaviorist, B. F. Skinner, would be proud of us. He once taught a pigeon to walk without bobbing its head up and down. I think he got a Nobel Prize for that. Or maybe 106 bonus points.

""Where to now, Leonard?"" Mike asked.

""Wall Drug,"" he replied cheerfully. ""Then the Badlands.""

""Then Chicago, right?""

""Right! See you tomorrow morning."" Leonard Roy cranked up his big bike and rode off. Not once did he bob his head.

He has the fever. He doesn't look as if he does, but he does. He's working hard but he makes it look easy. He was in 50th place in Maine. Then 45th. Then 30th. In Yakima he was 23rd. He wants to be in the top twenty. You just know it. He didn't spend the night in Sturgis. He was in Hot Springs, many miles to the south, last night. Sturgis is not on the way to Chicago from Hot Springs.

Mike and I drove up the street to the Country Kitchen for breakfast.

""Didn't Superman grow up in Smallville?"" I asked.

""Yes,"" Mike said. ""But he lived in Metropolis as an adult.""

We discussed briefly whether Metropolis IL was the man of steel's actual home, or whether it was a metaphor for a larger city like West Palm Beach. Of late the intellectual quality of our conversations has taken something of a nose dive. If I had the time, I'd go to a bookstore and find some Dr. Seuss poems. Hell, if I had the time I'd just Yahoo through the web on a search for ""Daily Planet."" I'd find out where that newspaper is published. We'd pin the big guy's real home town down in a hurry.

""So why didn't Leonard just go to Metropolis to take a shot of the Superman statue for 1,201 points instead of coming here for a lousy 106?"" I wondered.

""Going to Metropolis would add about 650 miles to his route, that's why.""

""Well, some of these guys are going there,"" I said. ""I can feel it.""

I pawed idly at my blueberry pancakes, thinking of Superman's rippling figure cast in bronze. I've never seen it. I have, on the other hand, seen what the pigeons have done to Popeye's statue in Chester IL. If they'd desecrate the mighty sailor's wizened face, why should Superman fare any better? I hope there's no kryptonite in their droppings.

We plow along I-90 tonight, reeling off mile after dull mile. The digital trip odometer in the multi-function readout probe of our Chrysler starcruiser tells us that we've done 711 miles since Gillette this morning, a dog day average so far. We have maybe 350 to go before we find the Hilton from whence we began this odyssey. It's a moonless, windy night with occasional rain, the temperature at 60F and dropping. It's Martin Hildebrandt's kind of weather, not mine. I wish I were in Chicago right now.

I wish all of them were in Chicago tonight, safe somewhere in a coop. But they're not. They're out flying around somewhere.

Bob Higdon