

Day 4

Central Louisiana

8.29.97 Swamp Thing's Last Stand

I hate this place. In the jungle on each side of the interstate there are things that have arrived here directly from the Paleozoic era in undiluted form --- 500-foot death adders, 9,000-pound alligators, spiders the size of compact cars, and other nightmares that zoologists are too afraid to examine. At any time of day coming through the Atchafalaya Swamp is eerie, but at dawn and dusk it's positively frightening. Louisiana is the Land That Time Forgot, and with good reason.

Fortunately, Mike and I are squeezing our way through while it's still daylight. The traffic is heavy on the eve of the Labor Day weekend but manageable. If we can average just forty miles/hour for a while, we should be able to get out of here alive. Not everyone does. The movie "Dead Man Walking" was in part about a vicious double homicide that occurred not far from where we are.

Even if Louisiana doesn't kill you, it can change your life. It changed Swamp Thing's.

No one has ever loved the Iron Butt Rally more than Rick Shrader and no one has ever done worse competing in it. Any athlete can have a bad streak --- Hall of Fame Dodger Gil Hodges once went 0-21 in the world series --- but Shrader's slump is now in its seventh year. With his latest strikeout yesterday, surely a new Swamp Thing Rule will be formulated: three whiffs and you're out.

In 1991 he was a rookie Butt aboard a dishevelled, thudding BMW R65. As pets and owners begin to resemble each other with age, so had Rick and his rat bike melded imperceptibly into a single, dramatic unit. He had the mien and carriage of a pre-homeless person, the look one gets about a week before the eviction. Sporting a variety of Druidic tattoos, a vengeful, wiry beard, a thousand-yard stare, and a rich supply of doomsday theories interwoven with dark veils of conspiracy and meta-voodoo, Rick Shrader was not about to be confused with any physician, lawyer, saintly grandmother, or CPA on the starting line of an endurance motorcycle rally. But in truth, if you could withstand Rick's initial over-the-top impression, you'd discover a quite remarkable, good-hearted character.

Three-quarters of the way through the '91 IBR, Shrader made history. Apparently falling asleep, he ran off the road into a Louisiana bayou and sank. Rescuers pulled him out. He was unhurt, but from that moment he carried a new name: Swamp Thing. And although he didn't know it at the time, that spectacular exit from the rally marked the high point of Swamp Thing's IBR career. Never again would he run so flawlessly or for so long.

Most of us celebrate victory. Rick celebrated the disastrous '91 Butt by adding another tattoo to his arm, the logo of the Iron Butt Association. Mike Kneebone was suitably impressed by that unusual display of dedication.

When Shrader applied for a slot on the 1993 Iron Butt, he was honored with being named Rider #1.

Though details are understandably sketchy, by most accounts Rick went into orbit on about the third day of the '93 IBR, wandering around in Nevada's high desert on a random trajectory for a day or so until someone at mission control nudged him back into a path for re-entry. Englishman Steve Attwood, the eventual winner of the rally, came across Shrader during one of Swamp Thing's low passes near the

earth and tried to talk him down. Rick went home early with his second DNF. That year is known as The Year Swamp Thing Didn't Crash.

At night in the Grand Canyon during the '95 Butt, he judged the object in front of him not to be a curb. It was a curb. Again he was unhurt, but he'd bent both wheels, a terminal condition that produced a third straight DNF and a record that as of yesterday stood unbeaten and untied. In spite of himself, Swamp Thing was nearing the very apex of comic immortality.

But no one's laughing today. Rick had an accident yesterday --- one in which he didn't even fall over --- on the way to the Florida checkpoint. He was admitted to the hospital in Daytona late yesterday afternoon and underwent surgery on his right knee. We don't have any further word on his condition but we do extend to Rick and his wife Jean our most sincere hopes for a full recovery. He may be gone from the rally but he is sure not to be forgotten. You'd be more likely to forget a typhoon coming through your kitchen.

It's inevitable. Bikes will break, riders will tire, and someone will fall. But behind those raw truths are some awesome statistics. In the first three days of this event contestants have ridden in excess of 212,000 miles. An average motorcyclist covers 2,000 miles in a year. Ten Iron Butt riders surpassed that in forty hours on the leg from Maine to Florida. When one has an accident, as Rick Shrader and Manny Sameiro did, the safety Nazis begin to swarm, forgetting that between them those two guys probably have more than one million miles in their wake. They go down sometimes, but it's an uncommonly rare event when they do.

It's the bikes that normally take it in the chops on a big ride. This year is no different. Jim Barthell's Kawasaki ate its sprockets on the first day. Dr. Dan Cooper's BMW croaked with a fuel problem. Marty Jones' Kawasaki ground to a halt with a charging system failure. Marty recovered, but missed the first checkpoint. The transmission on Jim Geenan's Moto Guzzi went south. An electrical problem on Frank Parsons' Honda finished his rally. Leonard Aron's 1946 Indian, a DNF in 1995, fared no better this year. It went out with a massive oil leak on the way to Florida. Today an unspecified case of bike angst sent Bob Grange's BMW home early, while engine problems on Ken Hatton's Kawasaki wiped him off the potential finisher list. It's a fast bike, that ZX-11, almost as fast as Hoogeveen's Blackbird, but it has failed Hatton now in three consecutive IBRs.

I caught up to Karol Patzer as she was packing up her bike yesterday in the AMI parking lot.

"California's that way, Karol," I said, pointing toward the sinking sun.

She smiled wanly. I think she's feeling a little blue. Two years ago, as a rookie, she was the top finishing woman. Three days into this event she's in 38th place overall, well behind Fran Crane (4th) and Mary Sue Johnson (10th).

"Hey, stop worrying," I said. "Remember that the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor fortune to men of understanding, but time and chance happeneth to them all."

"This isn't a race, and I'm not a man," she corrected.

"It's from the Book of Ecclesiastes, kid. I speak metaphorically."

"I know."

She'll be all right. She can ride with anyone. Last June she left Minnesota on Friday, got to Oklahoma in time for a two-hour Iron Butt Association meeting on Saturday, turned back home, and was at work on Monday morning. Two days later she rode back down to the middle of Texas for a motorcycle rally, spent a day there, and rode back home. I grow weary thinking of it.

Get on the bike, ride into the sun for a few days, hope it keeps working, and don't fall off. And if you do fall off, try to do it in a bayou. Swamp Thing tells me that, up to a point, water is easier to smack through than concrete.

Bob Higdon