

Day 5

West Texas

8.30.97 The Things They Do

If Mike and I were competing in the rally this year, we'd be in 62nd place right now. We've made both checkpoints on time (3000 x 2), have all our gas receipts (1000 x 2), and have visited two bonus locations (26 points for picking up a copy in Portsmouth NH of the oldest continuously operating newspaper in North America and a whopping 48 big ones for visiting the racist Pedro statue in the hopelessly cute tourist trap of South of the Border). That's 8,074 fine points, Bubba, ahead of Bill Weyher and Martin Hildebrandt at 8,000, Fritz and Phyllis Lang at 7,679, and, of course, Manny Sameiro at -7,000, who will really have achieved something if he can get back to a score of zero.

Weyher, on a BMW R1100GS --- a bike that's faster than our rental car --- hasn't gotten a bonus point yet. I don't know why.

Hildebrandt has no bonus points either, nor will he get one unless it happens to fall into his tankbag, but that's because he's on a 175cc Zundapp, the smallest displacement motorcycle ever ridden in the Iron Butt and the second oldest bike in this year's event. Martin came from Hanover, Germany to torture himself on that slug. With a top speed of perhaps 65 mph downhill with a tailwind, simply making checkpoints on time is more than anyone can reasonably expect.

The Langs, on a BMW (he) and a Harley (she), are on their third Butt with nary a finish yet. They actually have more bonus points than Mike and I do, but they also took a 470 point late penalty in Florida, avoiding a miss by just 26 minutes. It seems that the relationship of time, speed, and distance goes out the window when Fritz finds someone to talk to or to help. On the way to Daytona he spent ninety minutes looking for someone else's lost car keys. That accounted for all but four minutes of their late appearance at the checkpoint, thus proving once again the wisdom of Leo Durocher's observation that "nice guys finish last."

So Mike and I are feeling pretty comfortable right now. We were considering making our move up the leader board on this long leg, but we decided to hold off for another day or so. We don't want to peak too early. The bonuses always grow larger as the rally wears on. Saving our strength, that's the motto of the dynamic duo.

Now if you're thinking, "Hey, is it really fair to compete in an air-conditioned battleship with a Chrysler logo, two people driving, against a field of solo motorcyclists?," I admit that you have a tiny but partially valid point. But I would note that 1) we almost always leave a checkpoint after every other rider has departed; 2) we have to arrive at the next checkpoint four hours before it opens; 3) all but a handful of the bikes in the field are faster than our car, accelerate more rapidly, brake in a shorter distance, and are less visible to radar than this hulking steel wad; 4) not many of the bike contestants are cranking out 750 words every day, as your esteemed war correspondent does, under conditions that I modestly submit would make Sarajevo look like a playpen at the Beverly Hills' McDonalds; 5) we spend eight hours each day cross-checking documents and scoresheets, coordinating the efforts of rally workers, and tracking the movement of riders as they wander off the map into areas described only with the ominous phrase "Here dragons be;" and 6) I'm getting old.

Minor jests aside, I don't know how, much less why, these riders do the things they do. Mike and I had not spent more than eight hours in a real bed during the first 4.5 days of the rally. I doubt many of the riders were doing better than we were. The last couple of days, with higher speed limits in the west, have been somewhat easier for us, but the pressure on the top riders is cranking up. This is the twilight zone where the ultimate Iron Butt equation appears: Pressure + Fatigue = Bunnyland.

The giveaway bonus on the leg to California had to be Wilk's restaurant in Atoka OK. It was worth 860 points and was reachable by any competent biker, even a tired one. A rider wishing to get credit for this bonus was required to check in with the restaurant's owner, the wife of one of the contestants, between 2300 and 2400. The instructions further stated: "Stop for 60 minutes (requires sign-in and sign-out, see below) and purchase the Iron Butt Special Meal." The sign-in/sign-out section had this message: "WARNING: Your stay at Wilk's must be one hour or more."

For an Iron Butt rider this has to be an irresistible bonus: you get paid to rest for an hour. There are clean opportunities for sleeping before and/or after you have 860 points in hand. No one could pass this up, right? No one could misunderstand those simple instructions, right?

Mike called the restaurant just after midnight this morning. He spoke to Boyd Young's wife, who was running the bonus sign in. They talked for a few moments. Then I saw Mike sit straight up.

"You're kidding!" he said to the telephone mouthpiece.

I watched him as he continued to listen. Then he turned to me.

"Hoogeveen and Crane didn't show up."

As I write this, some sixteen hours after that telephone call, I don't have a clue where those two motorcyclists --- in first and fourth place at Daytona --- went. As far as I can tell, they have gone to where the dragons be. If I could have placed a bet on the one bonus location where every potential winner would absolutely show up, it would have been Atoka.

Then it got worse. We were told that one rider checked in, left the restaurant on his bike for some reason, then later returned to sign out. Maybe some explanation for ignoring two specific instructions to sit down and shut up will be forthcoming. I hope so. We'll know tomorrow when the next whirlwind erupts at the Orange CA checkpoint.

We'll cross two time zones today, do 1,105 miles in 15 hours, run through 100F temperatures part of the time, and have a late lunch at Chuy's in Van Horn. It's my favorite Tex-Mex restaurant. My opinionated friend Jeff Brody says that Chuy's isn't even the best Tex-Mex spot in Van Horn. I don't care. I'll get #2 on the menu with iced tea and maybe an extra gordita, buy a T-shirt, and say hello again to a truly nice guy. For a few pleasant minutes I'll be able to stop worrying about why people do the things they do.

Bob Higdon