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The Roads Not Taken

[Note: the opinions expressed in this report, as in all of the other reports recently submitted concerning the progress of the rally, are solely those of the Iron Butt Association and not those of the author. Even if they were the opinions of the author, he wouldn't admit it. If he admitted it, he was lying.]

The shortest, quickest route from Los Angeles to Yakima is straight up I-5, a highway of such staggering ugliness that its own designers disavow any knowledge of it. I won't set tire upon it absent a court order, especially since one of the most beautiful roads in the country, U.S. 395, does the same job to the east of the Sierras. The 395 may be the second prettiest road in America; certainly it is no worse than third.

There is a beautiful section of road back home that I enjoying riding, Maryland state route 67, running in part from Rohersville up to Boonsboro. It reminds me of the 395, except that it's about 13 miles long while its big brother in the west runs for more than 1,300. Still, if you're a motorcyclist condemned to live east of the Mississippi, you take what you can get, even for just fifteen minutes at a stretch.

All United States, as Julius Caesar would say, are divided into three parts: everything to the east of the Mississippi; everything between that river and the Rockies; and everything to the west thereof, except that Julie would have said it in Latin. Your view of what constitutes a good bike road depends upon where you live.

East coast riders are understandably self-conscious about their lack of decent motorcycle-friendly roads, principally because compared to other parts of the country, 97.4% of their routes, by actual measurement, stink.

Sure, the Blue Ridge Parkway is a fine 45 mph ride over towering 3,500-foot ridges. But that's about it. Lists of Top Ten Bike Roads always pump up the virtues of Vermont 100, U.S. 50 in West Virginia, and Deal's Gap. I do like Vermont roads, but only because I can legally overtake Ichabod's mule train on a double yellow line. Anyone who wants to head west of Gore WV on the 50 had better stencil his blood type on his helmet; there isn't a dirtier road this side of Islamabad. And I once counted the "319 curves in 11 miles" on the Deal's Gap. Assuming that an arc of one-fifteenth of one degree constitutes a curve, I came up with 210 of them. I call it No Big Deal's Gap and have said for years that if it were west of the Mississippi, no one would bother to ride it.

As for the midwest, I'll take the homeliest thing they can throw at me over most of the roads in the east. The problem in that wonderfully relaxing blank land isn't the roads; it's the wind. If you can overcome that, you can overcome anything.

But when God wants to ride a motorcycle, She heads west.

Riding the Iron Butt is a lot like having your finger on the switch that will launch a nuclear missile toward Yeltsin's dacha on the Aral Sea, a job that is 99% boredom and 1% pure terror. It is point-to-point riding with a vengeance, Point A being the last bonus location you visited and Point B being the next one on your list. Almost without exception, big bonus spots aren't sitting at rest stops on the interstate. They're hiding in nasty little holes down a bad road or in the middle of a city. Usually the farther off the straight-line route they are, the more they're worth. Frequently they're down a dead-end road, which means you're going to pay to get there and you'll pay to get back out.

Day after day is the same: you hump it down some interstate that is interchangeable with fifty others until your eyes glaze over, ride some number of tough miles on a marginal road, try to remember not to screw up your photo, get back on the bike, and do it again. The worst part is that you have virtually no control over the roads you're going to be riding for hours on end. Mike Kneebone and Ed Otto know what the optimum travel path is, though they leave it to you to figure out what it might be. If you don't follow it, you're wasting your own time, and that's a commodity that is more precious during these eleven days than the gifts of the magii.

But that's only if you want to win. If you don't care about points but care only about finishing, then the rally takes on a decidedly less malevolent tone. Chuck Pickett, a man the size of a Pepsi vending machine, has not been having a good week. Being 23 minutes late to Maine and more than an hour late to Daytona helped stuff him down into 59th place. He was going nowhere, and even there he'd probably have been late.

Enough, he said. The different drummer he was hearing inside his weary head was playing a back beat. He showed up in California well before the late clock started ticking. I checked him in on the computer.

"You went to Deal's Gap? Why?" I asked, stunned. It was a nothing bonus, made worse by being totally out of the way.

"Nice road," Chuck said, a comment that would have made fine sense to any motorcyclist except one doing the IBR.

"And Mt. Evans? Tell me it's not true."

"Nice road," he said. It is that. It's also a one-way trip up a 14,000-foot mountain in Colorado, the highest paved road in America.

"These two bonus spots aren't worth much," I said.

"After what I did on the first two legs, I'll settle for a pretty ride."

Chuck Pickett is probably coming up the 395 tonight. For bonus hunters, this road is an irradiated wasteland. For Pickett on this golden summer day it will be a memory that nothing can ever overlay. He'll want to see it again. If he does, it probably won't be on the Butt.

The Oddball Files: Part B ----- Riders who finish the event, depending upon their final points tally, will receive a bronze, silver, or gold medal. The people who have opened up their businesses to host checkpoints on this year's rally have already won a gold medal. At Reynolds Motorsports in Gorham they had sandwiches and soft drinks for the riders (and, perhaps more importantly, for selfless rally workers like me). More sandwiches and sodas showed up at the American Motorcycle Institute in Daytona. There we also were given a large, air-conditioned classroom to check riders in. We'd been expecting a tent in a hot parking lot. At Irv Seaver's BMW dealership in California, we had the usual food and air-conditioning, but there was more. Electric clothes guru Pat Widder was there with a motorhome --- complete with shower and bed --- and an electronic link to post photos to the internet at seven second intervals. Paige Ortiz, the rally T-shirt designer, brought fruits and vegetables. But the biggest applause went to Jay Curry, the producer of the shirts. They weren't clapping for Jay or his shirts though, but for the half-dozen masseuses he'd brought with him.

----- Phil Jewell, the only English-speaking (as opposed to American-speaking) entrant, is uploading reports of his travels through a wireless Motorola messaging device, including e-mailing data at each gas stop to a relay station that converts Phil's progress into a map. You can check his web page at <http://www.vrtisc.com/ibphil>.

----- Our investigators have discovered that there is a spy for Motorcyclist Magazine among the contestants. We have narrowed his identity to one of the riders in the 22nd to 61st places in the standings. Until we trap the individual, all contestants are advised to watch their mouths.

----- Dale Wilson wasn't the only rider who took a giant leap forward in the standings at the California checkpoint. Mike Stewart went from 29th the 5th. When Wilson is asked the reason for his meteoric rise through the pack, he credits Stewart and Bob Ray for helping him plot strategies for the coming leg.

----- Grandmother Ardys Kellerman is not just the oldest female rider in the rally. She's the oldest rider, period. Now on her third Iron Butt at age 64 and holding, is she slowing down a step or two? Not a chance. For a 1,200 point bonus on the last leg, she crossed the country from Jacksonville FL to San Diego CA, a distance of 2,350 miles, in under 48 hours. My grandmother never did that.

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