

Good Country for Old Men

As I sit here in my room at the Navajo-run View Hotel I am momentarily focused on getting the fine red Monument Valley sand out of my ears. It's been a windy day on the high desert of Southern Utah. Today we spanned the state from Torrey to Mexican Hat. Technically, we are staying in Arizona even though the View driveway starts out in Utah. My guess is that the Navajo care not about the state line, but that's a big deal to the folks on this trip. A big topic has been the tactical re-domestication to the lower income tax systems of Florida and Arizona. This group is old enough to focus on state income tax, but not so old as to be concerned about estate tax rates. When the talk shifts from Arizona to Utah we will know that we are in the Clubhouse Turn. This is all good tax country for old men.

On that night in October, 1996 when we sat around the dining room at Robinson Farm, creating the organizational principles for AFMC, we naively asked everyone for their ages. We were shocked to learn that Arthur Einstein was an unfathomable 63 years old. Last night, I took another age survey and found that the age range of the male population of the ride was 56 to 81 (once again the high end compliments of Arthur "Living Legend" Einstein), but this time the mean age was 65 and the median was 63 with the most common age (5 riders) being 63. So it turns out.....we've become old men without noticing. But old men who ride motorcycles for fun, and especially who ride in this high desert country are good old men rather than grumpy old men. What make them considerably less grumpy is the lower tax rates and the free entry into the national park system. We are perhaps the only group that gets regularly carded at the toll booths, having to prove our seniority to skeptical rangers.

Yesterday, a handful of us rode out of the Lodge at Red River Ranch, our preferred Western clubhouse over the years, and rode down Rt. 12 to Boulder, where we took the magnificent Burr Trail down to Bulldog Landing on Lake Powell. This is such a remote and primitive area that my mind went to the Coen brothers' movie with Javier Bardem matching wits with Tommy Lee Jones, declaring that this was "No Country for Old Men". And I found myself thinking that our particular group of old men, with no shortage of alternative venues to frequent, is drawn every May to Southern Utah and/or Arizona to recreate themselves and restore their souls. Hence the more positive spin on the rejuvenating power of this red rock country.

Over the years, different members have tried to move the May trip to other places. These were fine trips to California, New Mexico, Texas and the like, but sooner or later the consensus returns to planning next year back in Southern Utah. For some reason, the red rocks of Zion, Bryce, Glenn Canyon, Capital Reefs, Canyonlands and Moab are the altars on which our old men pray best. We used to brave late snow in a Park City and ride south. We now start warm in Las Vegas and head north. We used to stay at the Best Western or Chuck Wagon and now prefer the comforts of our Lodges and fine cuisine of Cafe Diablo. Robert Redford may be haunted by waters, but we are haunted by these canyons. When the half light of the canyon falls on the cottonwoods we old men are drawn over and over to each other and to the re-telling of tales of rides past.

But a river runs through it and this year, in addition to new riders like Ann and Michael Spezia, Lisa Grogg and Jonathan Bednarski, we inducted three new members in Nik Bednarski, Jeff Grogg and Steve Winter. We keep replenishing our collective soul while the old standbys like the Marins, O'Connells, Kirby's, Larsens, Pittendrighs, Einsteins and Kevin Ward (still on probation) keep coming back for more. We missed others like the Meadors, St. John's, Bielmans and, of course, our permanently departed like Walt, JJ, Santa Barbara Bob and others. We also have promises to rejoin next May from the long lost Larry Klane and Jay Ladd. Meanwhile, Bruce Rauner takes up the far less serious and complicated affair of proposing to fix and run the State of Illinois. Making that state a good place for old men is one helluva challenge (Illinois is ranked 50th among the states in both pension funding and post-retirement medical funding).

We got a rare treat this year compliments of Cliff Scott who set up a visit for us in Rockville, Utah with the Vesco's Racing Team, where we got to see the world's fastest wheeled vehicle (470 mph and reaching for 500+ mph this year at Bonneville). My personal favorite was the personalized picture of Burt Munro and his World's Fastest Indian. The salt flats were particularly good country for that old Kiwi man.

I know I am time-shifting, but such is the habit in the navigation of the minds of old men. Our opening night was at Hank's at Green Valley Ranch in Las Vegas, which was our launching point the next morning. From there we went north past Lake Las Vegas, Lake Mead and Valley of Fire to St. George and Hurricane. In typical Flyer fashion, before we got to Mesquite we had lost half the group to a rerouting through, rather than past, Valley of Fire. Whether they forgot, got lost or just wanted to see it all again matters not, for old men can do as they please. We had completely lost Russ, an old man who keeps looking younger and younger, who suited up, but never

went wheels up...not an unusual event by any stretch of our recollection. And who the hell knew where Woo, Cliff and the Bednarski twins were.

After our Vesco's stop and turkey sandwiches for all, we paid our respects to our primary cathedral at Zion. This involves being awe-struck by the grandeur from below, being annoyed at the tunnel traffic and flow of early-season RV's, and ripping it out through the east entrance to Rt. 89.

From there we sped past the hoodoos of Bryce and raced up the Escalante Staircase and over our favorite sweeping mountaintop, Lion Mountain, and into the barn in Torrey. Here the hot tub has the best Western scenery imaginable with the bison grazing on the front yard and the red cliffs reflecting the sunset in the back yard. This is, indeed, very good country for old men.

For those who did not ride back to Bryce or go into Capital Reefs for a hike, the Burr Trail provided vibrant scenery and wonderful traffic-less roads. Even the gravel switchback was pleasant with unprecedented scenery and freshness. At Bullfrog we saw just how low the draught has taken Lake Powell. The shriveling of this once-grand man-made lake seems almost emblematic of our times. The follies of old men trying to slow or direct Mother Nature seems as hopeless a battle in this dry, unforgiving, yet somehow beautiful landscape as trying to capture on film the beauty of this vast land.

On Tuesday we waved goodbye to Dave and Charlene at the Lodge at Red River Ranch and headed East on the Bicentennial Highway. At Glenn Canyon we were amazed that there was literally no water in Lake Powell this far north. This could have been all covered in water one day (as per Arthur) or flooded by an ice dam (as per Kevin's latest geo-anthropological theory), but right now, it is dry as a bone and back to being desert. Somewhere near Natural Bridges, the Morgan Tricycle, driven by Karen and Maggie, skidded to an abrupt stop with a seized transmission. I am reminded of Jim Sweeney's Excelsior breakdown and am glad that I have chosen to ride BMW's over the years (though my old LT did seize in Moab one year as I recall). After much wrenching and retrofitting and unpacking/repacking, the Morgan was squeezed into the newly christened AFMC trailer. The effort was later memorialized by Steve Larsen in a touching and poignant toast to Flyer camaraderie.

We need to stop and mention that Steve Larsen lost his mother to the ever after that same day. She had died that very afternoon and Steve commented that his mother would be glad that he was among good friends doing what he loved best. His story about her was that she told everyone

she was 103 when she was really 91 and that the extra 12 years were for the double duty during Steve's misspent youth.

The group then headed down The Trail of the Ancients to our favorite Mesa switchback, Moki Dugway. Barbara got bitten several times on the way down by the gravel gods and took some of the shine off that pretty Indian. After another Navajo fry bread taco lunch in Mexican Hat, we all headed into Monument Valley and rode through our own private Forrest Gump moments on the straightaway heading in.

We chose to heed TripAdvisor and stay on the Navajo Reservation at the View Hotel. It sports a 17 mile drive to the monuments that was way too rutted and bumpy for mere mortal street bikes, though Kevin braved the quicksand and almost lost Steve's V-Strom in the process. Despite the great views at The View Hotel in Monument Valley, we had to go over to Goulding's for dinner. Our Navajo cookout was in a hidden box canyon. Sand-infused steak and chicken never tasted better. Just as we posed for our group photo, a small sand storm whipped through the hidden canyon, right into our faces. Our grimaces implied a painful experience out here in the Valley of the Ancients, but in reality we had a fine time huddling from the wind and listening to Happy Birthday to Jeff played on Navajo drum. It went something like this:

"Hey-ey-ey-ey Hey-ye-ye-ye Happy Birthday Hey-ey-ey-ey Hey-ye-ye-ye"

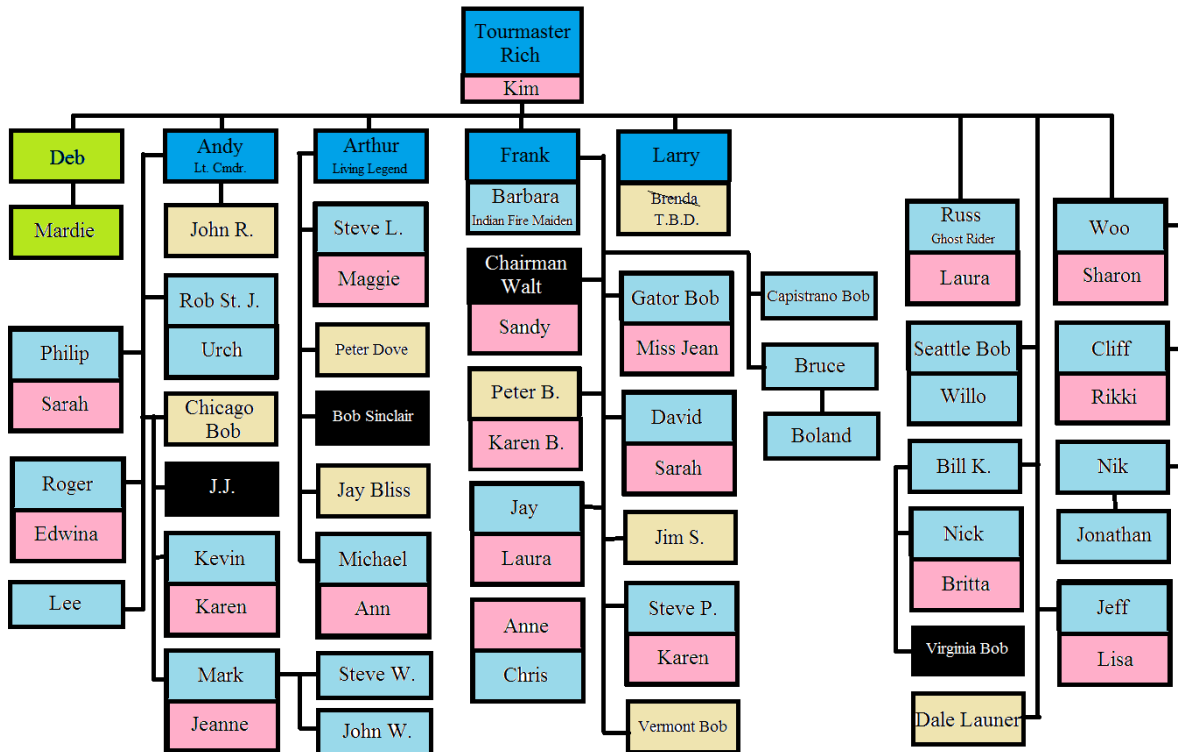
The next morning we waved good goodbye to Woo and Cliff so that they could get back to Camarillo for a wedding. That gave Nik the opportunity to toast Woo at dinner later that evening, bringing a tear to everyone's eye. Old men need to memorialize, eulogize, toast and roast.

We had a relatively uneventful day's ride down through the Arizona sand to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. We spent the afternoon unloading the Morgan and reconstituting the AFMC trailer back into a bike transport vehicle. Staying right on the rim provided a beautiful morning sunrise over the Canyon.

Our last riding day was spent with several of us reaching north to the Western Canyon to the Grand Canyon Skywalk. This is that metal and glass cantilevered structure that gives everyone who wants to pay and wait the opportunity to suspend themselves over the Grand Canyon with its 2,000 sheer drop and test their vertiginous stamina. This is less of a test for old men than it seems to be for their slightly less old womenfolk. Bob Kirby deserves special mention for riding all the way to the Skywalk, taking

the bus to within 50 feet of the Skywalk itself and then choosing to not go and turn around to ride out ahead to Las Vegas due to an unwillingness to wait his turn. Only Bob.

We had a good sized group for the final dinner back at the Green Valley Ranch. The Phoenix group was tucked away in their beds, but the rest of us were up for a last night of tale telling. The talk turned to the AFMC family tree and I have agreed to update it, so here goes:



Before anyone gets too upset, here is the key:

- Dark Blue – Charter Members
- Light Blue – Riding Member (Active)
- Beige – Riding Member (Inactive)
- Pink – Non-Riding Member (Two wheels only – Sorry Karen)
- Green – Crew
- Black – Immortal Members