

Jun 17

Strapping it On

In October 1996, I rode my new yellow and black Honda Valkyrie, a monster of a motorcycle, up to Woodstock Vermont to go on a very chilly ride through the fall foliage of New England. I was meeting our good friends Frank and Barbara O'Connell at their place on the Ottauquechee River, called Robinson Farm. It was a notable farm because it has a massive barn that sits on the hillside and rises to something like five stories and, as I recall, was the largest private barn in the state. The O'Connells had moved up the hill to a house on Westerdale Road and they used Robinson Farm as a guest house. I had arrived early and put my beloved Valkyrie into the barn and was in there cleaning its chrome bits. All of a sudden a short man with a narrow pigtail under a ball cap came into the barn. He had a big smile on his face and two forearms loaded with motorcycle tattoos. He introduced himself as Walt Lynd, and explained that he was a childhood friend of Frank's and hailed from Ovid, New York, a small town between Seneca and Cayuga lakes, just north of my home town of Ithaca. Walt began what came to be a very warm and memorable relationship that covered the next twenty years of riding together, with an apology. He explained that he had done the unthinkable, he had not ridden up from the Finger Lakes to Vermont, but had rather put his full-dress Harley onto a motorcycle trailer and hauled it up by car, sitting next to his lovely wife, Sandy. Walt explained that he never thought he would do such a "Mamby-Pamby" thing as trailering his bike when there was perfectly good road to ride on. I got it. I would never be caught dead trailering a bike when I could be riding it. I was 42 years old and about as dumb as a rock when it came to such things.

Today I am in my 70th year and good old Walt left us more years ago than any of wanted him to depart. He had been the Chairman of our American Flyers Motorcycle Club ever since that fateful organizational trip to Vermont in 1996. I had been the Secretary/Treasurer and Ridemaster of the Club for all those years and more. He had modified a tattoo on his shoulder to submit as the team logo and I had had my one and only tattoo placed on my left shoulder and submitted it as my contender for the AFMC logo. My tattoo won. Walt just smiled and kept on truckin'. My years of AFMC leadership have finally come to a logical end. It was anything but a clean break. I bobbled the ball on a planned ride to Morocco this fall and didn't bother to plan a ride to Utah as I had for countless years before. There were many factors at play ranging from the aging out of fond older members (like the O'Connells), new members with questionable activities (manufacturing and promoting assault rifles for children) and way too much political flak in the air between members that got along quite well on the road, but couldn't help but mix it up about politics at the dinner table. So, another Club member planned a ride for this month to Arizona and New Mexico and was kind enough to let me join as a mere

rider with no other responsibilities for leadership or planning. Kim and I head off for that ride later this week.

It is 376 miles from our house to Phoenix where we will stay with our other long-time AFMC pals, Steve and Maggie Larsen. We will stay with them Sunday night and then meet up with Mark and Jeanne Dilly (organizers of the ride), Ann Sardini and Chris Shriver and, eventually, riding in from Colorado, Rob and Urch St. John. We will ride for five days to Alpine, in the hills of Eastern Arizona, and then down to Las Cruces, New Mexico. From there we will ride up to Socorro, New Mexico and bake ourselves back into Arizona to Holbrook, from which we will launch our return to Phoenix. That will be about 1,100 miles of riding and from the look of my weather app, it will be a warm ride the whole way, ranging from 90-100 degrees. None of the days are particularly long rides, so with all the stops, we should have no trouble staying hydrated and cool enough to survive the ordeal. I always booked our rides to Utah for May to avoid the heat of the Southwest summer, but I am still happy that this ride got planned, even though it is a month into the summer heat.

Between here and Phoenix there is a lot of nothing. It is pretty much desert the whole way. I have not ridden a lot this year so far because there have been endless days of rain and now June Gloom. It's 8:30am right now on the hillside and as I look out, all I see in any direction is foggy mist, not exactly inviting weather to hop on the bike and take it for a spin into the warmth of the inland valley and mountains. But between here and Phoenix, the desert changes those atmospheric conditions and sits in its normal sizzling state with temperatures in Phoenix hanging in at about 105 degrees. I expect that the ride from here to there, which would take me over the mountain to Palm Desert and then across the long Mojave stretch of Rt. 10 into Arizona would take about six hours if I rode at a forced march pace. That is a lot of hot weather to ride through on a bike and no one I know thinks that's a lot of fun. For ten years I owned a beautiful AFMC trailer that I had specifically to allow me to get over these sorts of stretches without the discomfort of frying my ass in the desert heat. But as part of my disengagement with leading motorcycle tours, I sold the damn thing this year, just in time to miss having it when I most needed it.

As I was talking with Steve about the best route to take from here to his house on Sunday, I began dreading the heat of the midday, when I would hopefully arrive at his house. I lamented the sale of my trailer and he asked why I didn't rent one. I hadn't thought of that. I immediately went on the U-Haul website and found that they offered rental motorcycle trailers and they were available for hire here in Escondido. U-Haul is the ubiquitous provider of moving materials and equipment for middle America. Very few remnants of our motorized 20th Century history are more reminiscent of Americana

than dragging a U-Haul trailer across the country, usually loaded with college furniture or the stuff of Steinbeck's Joad family. And here's the thing, U-Haul's are for the Everyman and they are not expensive. I paid \$13,000 for my AFMC trailer and sold it for \$5,500 a decade later. By my math, assuming I used it ten times (a generous estimate), it amortizes out at about \$750 per use, plus interim storage charges of another \$1,200 per year, so almost \$2,000 per use. This rental for a week (I will leave it at my friend Steve's house while we ride the rails into New Mexico and back) will cost me \$150. What a bargain. I actually think that will be less than the cost of the added gas had I ridden myself with Kim following me in the Mercedes.

So instead, I will load up this rental trailer on Saturday, strap on my BMW R1250GS Adventure with the \$25 tie-down ratchet straps that just arrived from Amazon this morning, and spend a cool and refreshing morning driving across the desert with my lovely wife. Kim is happy. I am happy. And my old buddy Walt is smiling at me from heaven because he has the last laugh on me. Sooner or later we all have to do the Mamby-Pamby thing by strapping it on.

Jun 20

Back in the Back

Today we started our motorcycle ride through Arizona and New Mexico. I really haven't ridden much since our ride through Northern Spain and Portugal last October. That has mostly been a weather-related issue, but there has also been some dust in the air around our club membership that I have previously described and have no desire to rehash. This ride was organized by one of our Phoenix members, so, naturally, it started and will end in Phoenix. Phoenix seems to be your normal American city, best characterized as urban sprawl. We stayed with Steve & Maggie and Ann & Chris stayed with Mark (the Ridemaster) & Jeanne. As I've mentioned in a recent story, Kim and I drove into Phoenix from our hilltop dragging a U-Haul motorcycle with my bike in tow. That part of the operation came off flawlessly. My buddy Mike had helped me mount it and strap it down and it all held together just like it was supposed to. As we crossed the Sonoran Desert, and the temperature climbed to 105, I was sure I had made the right call to not start the trip with that kind of a day's ride.

Steve & Maggie kicked off the festivities by hosting dinner at their house for the eight of us plus our emeritus members Steve & Karen, who have stopped riding, but not stopped being dear friends who enjoy sharing old ride stories. This being sizzling summer in Phoenix, Maggie turned on their patio misters and we enjoyed our meal on the patio with the sunset as the backdrop and the misters keeping us nice and cool. It's

amazing how well has learned to adapt to any climate, something he will need to do more and more as our global climate conditions continue to worsen and get more and more severe. After a good night's sleep, we all arose early to saddle up. Kim and Maggie had to head off to meet Ann near the car rental place. Steve and I went off early to gas up and meet the rest of the riders at a convenient McDonalds. We went wheels up at 8:30, which was pretty much on plan.

As I have explained, this is not my ride, I am a mere joiner, and glad to be responsibility-free. Mark headed the team and knows the territory the best. He was followed by Chris, then Steve and I took up my position as the sweeper, as we call it, back in the back, followed by the Princess Van with Kim at the wheel, Maggie as navigator and Ann as the snack wrangler. Off we went for over an hour of traversing the urban sprawl of Phoenix with the thermometer rising steadily and chasing us towards the cooler hills to the Northeast. We were headed towards Globe and then on to Alpine and we had an unusual schedule to keep. Because it is the newest wannabe national holiday, Juneteenth, the dinner restaurant in Springerville needed us seated at 4pm. Now we are an aging crew that prefers eating early, but that was early even by our standards. What it meant was that we stopped for brunch instead of lunch and then rode through to Springerville before going to Alpine to check into our cabins for the night. That was a bit of a timing challenge, so we took detours to Sunrise Ski Area and then Greer Park, where we stopped for a mid-afternoon drink on a warm, but not so hot in the mountains, day.

All the way, I rode sweep and enjoyed both the scenery and the familiar sight of a row of bikes in front of me. You don't get that pleasure when you lead, and you are always checking your mirror to see if you still have all your ducklings. Mark tells me he likes me riding sweep especially because he can so easily identify the end of the line of bikes thanks to my bright yellow fog lights. That's not why I have them (it's really for general visibility...anything so cars can see you better), but I'm glad they help. The first day of these rides is also a rediscovery of all the motorcycle muscle memory and the soreness born of lack of use since the last ride. People aren't aware of how much exercise is involved in motorcycling. They assume it's easy just sitting on top of the machine, but that's far from so. Just wrestling the bike on and off a trailer is a workout. Then when you're riding you need all kinds of core strength to muscle around a 750 pound beast that you're straddling. While riding, you are using your shoulders and arms in ways that you soon remember as they stiffen up and get sore on that first day. But the real slave of these rides is our poor aching backs. This is where the core strength comes in. You are sitting upright with no backrest and by the end of a long first riding day, nothing feels quite as good as getting off the bike and searching for a nice hot shower, I can actually feel myself readjusting to this new yet familiar exercise as the day goes on. So long as

we stop to rest and stretch every once in a while, I know it will get better as the afternoon progresses.

We usually plan our first day's ride with all of these issues in mind. They are usually a bit shorter to allow everyone to adjust back into their riding back. I suspect that the part of these rides that everyone loves the most (other than the beautiful scenery at every turn) is the meal and socializing stops. There is something comforting to be back with old riding friends, swapping old and new tales at every meal. We have finished one of our five days of this and there is still lots to talk about. Five days has always proven to be the perfect length of ride (at least domestically). We hit on that formula 28 years ago and pretty much stick to it to this day. That way, with one arrival day and one departure day, it works out to a perfect week and is thus, "just right".

Tomorrow we head down off this mountain to Las Cruces, New Mexico. I think we lose an hour and will then gain it back the day after. We have added Rob & Urch, who rode down from Colorado, so we will be five bikes and one Princess Van tomorrow. I will be back in the sweep position again tomorrow, hoping that my back will be back in good riding form. I know it will be strong by Friday, but it would make for a nicer ride if it started behaving tomorrow.

I am back in the saddle again, which is one of my favorite places to be. I wish I enjoyed everything as much as I enjoy motorcycle touring. This has been my number one passion since I was sixteen, when I rode my new Triumph TR6R 650 Tiger from London to Rome across the channel to Boulogne and through the Mt. Blanc Tunnel into Aspet onto the Autostrada. I got a big kick out of it then and I get a big kick out of it now. I don't remember any back pain back then, but that's what 60 years of hard living will do to your back. There is something appropriate in riding at the back of the pack for me these days. I'm not sure when I will drop off the line altogether, but I hope it isn't any time soon. As long as my poor old back keeps coming back for more, I will be mounting up for more.

Jun 20

Fort Apache

We are in Apache country on the border between Arizona and New Mexico. Yesterday we took a scenic side trip on Rt. 72 that actually took us right past the historic Fort Apache, but I neither knew that at the time nor did we stop. I suspect that at that time of the day we were all bone weary and perhaps not as interested as we might have been

in the morning. Fort Apache was actually only one of eleven U.S. Army forts set up in the area in the mid-to-late Nineteenth Century to combat the Apache Indian uprisings led by the likes of Geronimo and Cochise. This was all part of our national history of settling the west and taking away the native lands of Native Americans and displacing them to Reservations as per the Indian Removal Act of 1830, as put in place by none other than Andrew Jackson, one of the less empathetic presidents in our national history. In the early days of the hostilities, it was Cochise who led the tribes against the scattered troops (think *Dances With Wolves*). It was the classic indigenous people versus "progress" program with the Army falsely accusing Cochise of kidnapping and using that as an excuse to rain down the fury of the cavalry on them. After fifty years of skirmish conflicts, the U.S. threw the gloves off and sent 5,000 troops into the region, stationed at those eleven forts and finally in 1886 secured some semblance of peace by getting Geronimo and his renegade band of 30 warriors to surrender.

I've never been a student of the history of Native Americans, but it is hard not to get into it a bit when you are riding these roads wondering what made this relatively unpopulated area so damn important to settlers a hundred and fifty years ago. If it was so important, you would think we would have done something with the place since then, but this area, where the conflict was the greatest, is still a rugged and relatively barren land with lots of natural beauty and still very little progress. I am writing this from inside our cabin abode for the night before heading out down the road for a bit of breakfast before our ride down to Los Cruces, New Mexico today. I am expecting to see a lot more of the same sort of scenery and still a dearth of progress. It kind of makes me think that we inflicted all sorts of harm on these people for no particularly good reason other than our Manifest Destiny (A term we coined at the time to justify our removal of native peoples in deference to the urge for white people to settle any free land that existed in the newly minted western reaches of the country).

When I brought up the issue of reparations in regard to the Native Americans, it was suggested that we had already done that with Indian Casinos. It occurs to me that the casino enablement and the tax-free status were actually quite creative and progressive

means of dealing with the reparations issue. No one would mistake that as a perfect dollar-for-dollar attempt to make up for what the white man cost the Native Americans, but it is a form of reparation that is both productive and forward-looking. Some might challenge the productivity, but let's just say that if there are casinos that are going to be built for people to entertain themselves, then allowing Native Americans an ability to have an advantaged and viable business opportunity to better their lot is not such a bad thing. I have noted that the reservations near me that have casinos also have what look to be excellent local infrastructure like fancy administrative buildings and the best looking firehouses you will ever see. Of course, the dark side of all of this and the vestigial history of abuse can also be seen in the ramshackle houses not so far away with nice shiny cars in front. There may never be any way to make up for what these indigenous people were forced to give up in terms of their way of life and the gradual cultural corruption that ensued.

Today I will look for more Apache signs as we head south to Las Cruces. Maybe I'll have to add some Mexican heritage and harm that our white forefathers inflicted on them during the Mexican-American War that took place about the same time as the Apache Wars. We rode south on 180 from Alpine to Silver City, where we had pre-located a nice spot for lunch. Well we thought it would be a nice place, but it fell a tad short of that. I should have suspected a gap in the quality of the place when I fist spoke to the hostess/waitress. We have all come to accept tattoos on young and even not so young people. And I think we are even mostly used to a lot of tattoos, but every once in a while someone surprises you, as this hostess/waitress did. Besides being a bit surly about whether we should sit inside or outside ("I don't know...that's up to you") she had amongst her plentiful tattoos a notable tattoo under her chin and written in Gothic script, "Unrepentant". That's sort of a dead giveaway that you're not dealing with someone all that happy with her job, or maybe her life overall. I'm pretty sure she wasn't a Native American of either Apache or any other tribal affiliation. I doubt her issues had a lot to do with Native Americans, so that may not be where we should lay blame for our less than wonderful lunch. That said, there just is no end to the devastation of conquest that man has inflicted on his fellow man as he marched forward in his

occupation of all the empty spaces on the Western frontier. And we were riding through one of the great scenes of the crimes all day.

After lunch, with the thermometer rising as we headed south and into the heat of the day, the two women in the group who had been riding, opted to join the other three in the Princess Van for an afternoon of shopping while the menfolk headed off for Las Cruces like a posse on horseback. Here's the thing about that though, when it gets over 98.6 degrees, the faster you go (as in on a motorcycle rather than on horseback), the hotter you get. In other words going faster has no cooling effect. Luckily, Steve had given me a wet neck gator, which I donned once it was hot enough. It really did help keep me cooler where it mattered most. All I kept thinking as we rode through the Gila National Forrest on a lovely road that wound its way through the forrest, up and down the Apache hills, was that I needed to stay hydrated. Every time we stopped (which never seemed often enough on a day like today) I tanked up on Gatorade or water until I was out. I hadn't slept well at 8,000 feet the night before, so I was dragging for sure by late afternoon. On the last stretch down Highway 25 for 60 miles, it got particularly bad so I was popping Werther hard candies to keep my mouth salivating. To do that I needed to put the bike on cruise control and slow down while I did a one-handed Candy unwrap, something I know how to do, but is never elegant. Apparently, this caused my riding partners to think I was going delirious, so they stopped more than even I needed. I only learned this at dinner and we had a good laugh about it once I explained the candy unwrapping. I wonder if the horse soldiers or Apaches had this sort of problem?

From Las Cruces, tomorrow, we will head north through the White Sands National Park towards Alamogordo. This will be a well-timed visit since the movie called *Oppenheimer* is due for release later this month and I expect we will shift our gears from considering man's inhumanity to man in the Nineteenth Century to man's inhumanity to man in the Twentieth Century. No candy unwrapping for me.

Jun 22

Creatures of Comfort

This is the third day of a five day motorcycle ride we are taking through Arizona and New Mexico. I know what you are thinking, that it might be too hot in the American Southwest for that sort of thing. I would like to expand the term of art to "Mad dogs, Englishmen and Motorcyclists go out in the noonday sun." I am sitting in the lobby of the Hotel Encanto in Las Cruces, New Mexico early this morning, waiting for the rest of the gang to gather, get breakfasted and ready to depart. I have arisen early to take care of a lingering expert witness obligation, so I packed up as quietly as I could (never quite enough apparently from the protestations from Kim, who was trying to sleep), took my gear to the car, cleaned my motorcycle and swapped out my helmet for the full-coverage one that will be hotter, but leave my crisping skin less burdened with excess UV. It was 107 in Phoenix, 93 in Alpine and here in Las Cruces it was 102 when we pulled in yesterday afternoon. It's about 85 this morning, so I'm expecting another hot one today. One might well ask why the hell I or any of us do this. Why do we do anything that brings added discomfort to our lives? Good question that I find (especially this morning) is worth exploring.

I think it is fair to suggest that comfort becomes a bigger part of the equation as we age, and by extension that is saying that in our youth we prioritize comfort much lower on the list of issues since all the hormonal flows tell us to do and do and do some more and only rarely tell us to consider whether it will hurt or even feel good while we are doing it. As we age and as we spend more time considering the things that will likely lead us to focus on our comfort versus the whole doing thing, we get this conflicted feeling that we are, indeed, allowing ourselves to age sooner than we need to. If we are not doing, then who are we? It all becomes an identity crisis. Well, there is no finer place to face that identity crisis when your primary passion is motorcycling, than on a motorcycle trip in the heat of the Southwestern sun. I have been rightly accused many times of overthinking things, but I think (there I go again) that everyone on this trip feels these things to one degree or another and in one way or another, whether they acknowledge it or not. Maybe the secret to success in such things is to not acknowledge these thoughts, to simply ignore them and pretend that they don't exist and then they are more likely to go away.

On Sunday, after busting a gut loading the motorcycle on the trailer on Saturday, I told Kim (with an over abundance of optimism) that I would be sore the first day of riding and then good to go for the rest of the ride. I had that half right. I was sore Monday...and Tuesday....and today, now that the ride is over for the day and I'm

luxuriating at the Best Western Socorro. I started out feeling OK in the morning when I began this story, but by lunch time and after only 120 miles of riding (though it took us 4 hours on the bike due to a stop at White Sands National Park and one particularly long construction delay on a mountain pass), I was sore and hot and ornery. Mostly it was the combination of the heat and the saddle soreness, but it didn't help that I had a bike fall into my bike at a gas stop (just a routine bike trip accident) and my fog lights are now attached by duct tape and my right boot lost its zipper in the altercation. Oh well, worse has befallen me on plenty of other trips, but the soreness is the one that's getting to me today. Yesterday it was the heat, but today the lower back is making me feel like Methuselah.

Make no mistake, I am enjoying the scenery and especially the camaraderie of the ride. We've all known one another a long time, so there are lots of old stories and new ones too, but none of that is helping my aching lower back, sore upper back and tender butt. We started the day with a visit to White Sands, which neither Kim nor I had ever seen before. It is part of the White Sands Missile Range or Proving Ground as it was called in 1945 when the 3,200 square mile desolate and relatively inhospitable site was designated as the place where the U.S. would test the first nuclear weapon. The designation happened in July 9, 1945 and the test explosion, called Trinity, took place one week later at a top secret site just south of where we are staying tonight. In fact, we ate dinner at the Original Owl Cafe in San Antonio, New Mexico, the closest place to that fateful site that exists. In between White Sands and the Owl Cafe, we went through Ruidoso, a year round resort town of sorts, where we had lunch at Tina's Cafe. I feel like we're tip-toeing through hallowed ground for humanity in this place and all I can think about is how uncomfortable I'm feeling all day long on the bike.

So, back to the issue of why discomfort takes such a front and center role in our day-to-day existence. I'm guessing the reason is that its hard to get past it to the more important aspects of life when you aren't comfortable. For my part, I find everything I am doing and seeing this week really important and interesting and I don't want any of it derailed by my daily discomfort. But there is nothing I can do about that right now. We have been watching the Titanic submersible story where monied adventurers have paid a ton of money to go down and risk complete and utter discomfort and possibly death in order to experience something few other humans can. Once they launch, the risk management options are limited and the outcome will be what it will be. The same is true of this sort of motorcycle trip, obviously on a very different scale of risk and with a far less limited membership of the club of possible and likely participants. But, once the trip is underway, I can do only so much to cauterize the discomfort, all I can really do is grin and bear it. Maybe I can also wish it away, but that seems unlikely after three days.

I have two more days of riding ahead of me and I already have a bit of a broken wing in that my riding boots are now a Rube Goldberg affair that will have duct tape all over them, just like my bike with its fog lights. None of that will clearly make me any more comfortable and may actually make me less comfortable. We will be heading into the mountains again tomorrow and then on Friday we will be back in the race home to sizzling Phoenix, which has not cooled off in the past week. Then I load up the bike again on the trailer and we spend six hours on Saturday driving ourselves and my broken bike and messed up boots home to our hilltop.

I can already tell that our ride home will be spent weighing the pros and cons of motorcycle touring at this stage of life and with my discomfort with the rigors of riding. That will not be an easy conversation, having nothing to do with Kim and everything to do with me and my sore ass. And, of course, between me and my ass are all my feelings about aging, about health and fitness and about my personal passions and identity. It's not quite a Thelma and Louise moment, but it comes close for me.

Jun 23

How the West Was Won

Let me start by relieving everyone by saying that the last three days of riding have now turned a corner with my body. What I mean is that I was much less sore today from the ride than I had been any of the last three days. I don't know if that means it now takes three days of pain to get two days of pleasure, but today was, indeed, a pleasant ride through what seemed to me to be true western landscape. These were not well-travelled roads with tourists, quite the contrary. We barely saw any cars on these desolate roads all day except at the towns on either end of the day and where we stopped for lunch.

We started the day in Socorro, New Mexico at the Best Western. While the hotel was just fine, and generally convenient for motorcyclists since we could park right in front of our rooms, it did bring back memories of how we started out discovering the western wonders lo those twenty-eight years ago when we would hop from one Best Western to the next. I think in those days, Best Western hadn't yet discovered the benefits of the pillow-top mattress or the flat-screen TV, but everything else is pretty much unchanged, including the breakfasts. This morning's offering included fried eggs that looked like they came out of a fried egg machine, if such a thing exists. The bagels were certainly not up to New York, or even Escondido, standards. So, we launched forth at 8am, which was really 7am a few miles to the west since Arizona likes being on its own time zone, which at this time of year happens to coincide with California time. As we headed towards the Arizona border, the first thing we came across was the VLA (Very Large

Array) radio astronomy observatory. It was hard to miss since as far as the eye can see there were huge satellite dishes running diagonally across the road we were driving on. Given the western Big Sky distances, I counted 16 from my motorcycle seat covering several miles. I have learned that there are 28 in the full array with 27 operational at all times in a Y-shaped configuration. This array has been in place for almost 50 years and is a major data gathering site for cosmological evidence all across the universe of everything from black holes to strange movements in the center of the Milky Way. We didn't stop because there really wasn't anything like a visitor center or anything...just miles of astronomical hardware.

After shaking off the willies of SETI and ET and wondering if Jody Foster was hanging around somewhere, we kept heading west back into Alpine and eventually to Eager, Arizona. Chris observed that the New Mexico countryside was considerably different than the Arizona countryside. I tried to get underneath that observation because it all looked like lovely western landscape of one type or another to me, but he just said it seemed different. Along the way we did see some real working cowboys moving cattle just like on *Rawhide*, except this time they were trying to get them across the road. When Mark waved at the cowboys that seemed to upset them since it must be some sort of signal for the cows to start moving across the road since they started moving in that direction. The day's riding line-up was Mark, Chris, Steve and then me bringing up the rear. That meant that it was suddenly a race between about 300 head of cattle and me. I didn't actually find it all that close or scary, but I heard from Mark later that he was genuinely worried that I might be hanging some beef around my handlebars.

We then got a text message from Ann as to where the Princess Van had chosen for us all to gather for lunch. It was in Eager and it was a quaint little place called the Pink House, an 110-year-old western Victorian house now run by a team of young women who offered up a wonderful menu that we enjoyed at tables on the front lawn under the cottonwood trees. I cannot think of any scene more western than that lunch of Texas toast, lemon chicken and rice soup, and grilled cheese and bacon. Meanwhile Kim had a salad with strawberries while Kim and Jeanne had pear and Brie sandwiches. It was perhaps the culinary and ambiance highlight of this particular western trip.

From that spot, we all went off together heading for Holbrook, Arizona where we were bedding down for the night. However New Mexico and Arizona differ, the stretch between Eager and Holbrook is, in a word, flat. In addition to flat, it is featureless until we got to the Rainbow Forrest Petrified Wood Gift Shop. It was quite a shop with more variations on the petrified wood front than I could have imagined. While at the shop Mark made a command decision on a hot afternoon after a long ride already. As he said, he "read the room" and decided that riding another 28 miles to go through the petrified

forrest park (which I am told is more or less just a lot of road and dirt) for a total of 50 miles versus driving 17 miles to the next Best Western was our best course of action.

For me, it had been a long enough day, but a good day, a better day than the prior three based on my improved back soreness. I enjoyed the very chilly pool in the 95 degree afternoon, and it was just what the doctor ordered. But wait, my friend Rob, who lives in the Republic of Colorado, one of the first states to liberalize the sale of cannabis for medicinal and recreational use, gave me a small vial of 1000mg CBD salve that is called Deep Tissue that he said works wonders on sore backs. I pocketed the vial and thanked him and he reminded me that it is available by mail order without a prescription.

I've found myself wondering how in hell the real men and women who tamed the west one hundred and fifty years ago rode the trails that we now have nicely paved. Did they travel 200-250 miles in a day on horseback? No. Maybe 30-40 if they were tough enough. Did they marvel at the magnificent landscape? Probably if they had the time to look up from the dust on their boots. Did they have a cold hotel pool to jump in at the end of the day? Well, maybe a cool stream here and there (not too many near this exact spot). Might they have had a pleasant lunch outside a Victorian house on the prairie somewhere? Perhaps.

I marvel at the thought of our forefathers making light of all that we take for granted or, worse yet, gripe about. Best I can tell, they didn't have BMW motorcycles to take them 10X as far every day or 1000mg CBD salves to help them out. But then again, they didn't have 28-dish radio astronomy observatory arrays searching the heavens for answers and we do. I guess every generation has its way of making sure what needs to happen happens. That is, after all, how the West was won and how we all get through our times on this planet.