

Journal of A Bike Trip From Hell

A weekend biker on a weekend jaunt - July 2 - July 4, 1993

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Well it was really no big deal, just a guy going back to his 30th high school reunion and wanting to make the 7 hour trip something other than an eye-glazing sit behind a windshield. The vehicle of choice was a 1987 BMW K-75T, a shaft-drive, fuel injected, really smooth running touring bike, but with no fairing other than a 3/4 windshield. The bike was in good shape, 26,000+ miles, the only wear showing was worn foam hand grips. No biggy normally.

I'm a small business owner, I have an engineering support business, my clients rely on me for prompt response to their technical problems and I am involved in a number of civic/professional organizations. Both of these things conspired to delay my launch from 10 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. on a sunny Friday, July 2, 1993. The reunion was supposed to kick off at 5:00 p.m. at O'Haras in Bedford, Iowa, 400 miles north of my home in Tulsa.

I finished my breakfast meeting, returned my panicked client calls and gathered up my stuff. I was in a real hurry now, other activities had conspired to cause me to put off final packing until that morning. My host in Bedford, aware that I raised cockatiels, had asked me to bring him one. I made a small wire traveling cage and packed that on my bike along with my clothes and water. My dog was tied up in the back yard with plenty of shade, food and water and a neighbor to watch out for him, my plants were watered, my birds and fish were well stocked, my house was locked up tight and I was on the road, heading north.

The wind felt good, hot and dry, I had a long sleeve shirt for sun block and a set of Key coveralls just in case I did some inadvertent sliding over the pavement. Rolling east on the toll road to Joplin I met my first small delay, a ten minute wait to pay a \$2.50 toll to the Oklahoma turnpike authority...it's not easy to sit in slow moving traffic on a bike. Stopped traffic is OK, but slow moving traffic on a hot day gets oppressive and ten minutes seems like an eternity. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why I wanted to do the toll road if I had to lose this much time, I still can't.

The end of the turnpike was no more than 5 minutes behind me when, just before Joplin, I saw a line of stopped cars. Road construction, I-44 narrowing down to 1 lane. I pulled in the line behind a big truck and started the ordeal. 40 minutes later, 40 minutes of holding the clutch in, tiptoeing the bike and watching self-important assholes cut into the front of the line, I was 2 miles further down the road than when I had first pulled in behind the truck. Oh well, the bird was doing well, the wind felt good, the evaporating sweat made me feel pleasantly cool and, so far, no one had demonstrated a desire to hassle a biker by running up really close behind me or pushing me out of my lane. For all that I was grateful.

North on U.S. 71, a quick gas stop in Carthage, back on 71 and on north. This is a boring stretch of highway but the fastest way to Bedford. The speed limit is 55, I kept the speed down to 60 or so, all law enforcement officers seem to have a thing for bikes. In Tulsa and one memorable time on this same stretch

I have been singled out of a crowd of moving vehicles, all of which were moving faster than my bike, to be told to "...keep it down, the speed limit is ???? here you know!" I have a great deal of respect for law enforcement officers, they do a rough job and risk their lives every time they stop a strange car on the highway. They do great. But it really irritates me that, even if I am being passed by people in Oldsmobiles and pickup trucks, the cops think my bike is flying along at illegal speeds. I don't understand it.

So, despite the fact that motoring slower than prevailing traffic is a recipe for death on a motorcycle, I kept the speed down below 60 and watched the cars stream by me, I didn't want a ticket. The sun was shining, the bird was screeching and I was getting closer to the reunion.

Time passed, clouds began to rise in the north. Not dark, but I could see the reflection of the sun off of the white billows. No threat, I was making good time, no delays on this stretch. Just about Butler, Missouri, south of KC, the sky ahead was becoming more threatening, much darker and closer to the ground, but no water yet. On toward Harrisonville, just about 291 I started to get a few drops, nothing threatening, just irritating. I had to bring my visor further down, water drops sting like fury when they hit skin at 60. It got darker as I went further, closing in on both sides by this point and looking really bad. I had rain gear on my bike, stuffed in my tool compartment. If things got bad I could pull off under an underpass, derig and get dressed, no problem.

All of a sudden with little warning the heavens opened up. It got darker and it poured, poured. A deluge. Visibility immediately dropped to 1/4 mile, my personal visibility dropped to a few yards, MC visors don't have windshield wipers and I wear glasses.

Oh lord, how it rained! Cars immediately started to pull off, so did I. It didn't help. Obviously I was not in a nice, closed car, but beyond that the wind was straight out of the north and blowing like hell...yes, like hell. It was hell. Even stopped the rain was driven so hard by the wind that it stung my cheeks. I was in no immediate danger on the shoulder, even the vehicles that hadn't stopped were moving very slowly. I was wet to my skin from head to foot, thank goodness it wasn't chilly. Hypothermia is a killer and it could set in very easily on a motorcycle, but it was still warm out, just very, very wet.

Helmet visibility is virtually unrestricted, just a small slice out of the edges, so I could see up quite well. Lightening was illuminating the clouds, it was impressive.

Sitting on the shoulder was no help, I was getting beaten by the wind and rain. I started to motor slowly down the shoulder. Cars were stopped frequently, I had to peer ahead through glasses and visor covered with drops of water, it was not a good situation. I watched carefully, pulled out on the road to pass stopped cars and made some minimal progress. I wanted to get to an overpass. I finally found one, it was taken by a truck, a line of trucks actually, apparently they wanted something to block the wind and the first truck served that purpose. I was miserable, no end was in sight, I pulled onto the road and motored up to 45-50. The bike was sticking really well. Road oil and water frequently make an ice-slick surface on a rainy road, but this time the rain had apparently already washed the loose oil off because I had good traction for accelerating and breaking and wasn't hydroplaning at all...really good, I'd say.

I kept motoring north, glancing ahead with fair visibility by cocking my head back to raise the visor. This gave me a good check on the road ahead. Then I would lower my head and navigate off of the line on the right side of the road. I alternated this way as long as I could, although there were times when the wind was driving the rain so hard that I couldn't see the white line on the right side of the road, no kidding. It

was incredible. The water was coming across the road in waves 2-3 feet apart, the road swept almost dry between them. At one point a bolt of lightning dropped out of a cloud on my left, traveled under the clouds to my right, re-entered a cloud and then, Shazam!!, a huge bolt hit the ground to the right of the highway. I wondered what my chances of getting hit were, I figured they might be pretty good, but I wasn't very well grounded so I figured I had a reasonable chance of living through it. I motored on hoping to get out of this really bad stuff as soon as possible. I didn't think it could be raining this hard everywhere.

Just south of KC, I don't remember exactly where, the rain started to let up some. It didn't stop, but at least I had reasonable visibility. Of course there was a "good news/bad news" aspect to this, because the cars were moving now. I tried the right lane, too busy with on-ramp traffic, I tried the left track of the left lane but fast moving cars came up behind me too often, so I chose the middle lane and 50-55 mph. This looked like a recipe for death to me, but I kept a good lookout ahead and behind me, gave myself plenty of space between the car in front and kept everything as steady as I could.

The scene was almost surrealistic, something out of an end-of-civilization movie. Cars on both sides of me, a thin soup of dirt, road oil and rain-water suspended over the highway by passing vehicles and the red tail lights of cars in front and to the sides of me. Thoughts of violent death drifted through my head. Any mistake at this point, too quick a move, or not quick enough a move, any contact at all would put me down in a blender of automobile undercarriages and rubber tires. I was sure it wouldn't hurt for very long. The red tail-lights glowed in the mist and I held it really steady, motoring through KC during a rainy Friday afternoon rush hour.

In retrospect this whole thing seems nuts to me, as I sit here writing this, but I tell you, compared to what I had just gone through this was nothing and I was grateful for the break. But the thoughts of a violent death were certainly high in my mind and I did what I could to keep that in the fantasy realm.

The rain let up by the time I got to the north end of KC, the road dried out and I could relax then. This was the first time that I realized that my hands were cramped from gripping the handlebars so tightly and my body was so tense that a muscle in my back wouldn't loosen up, it felt like I had pulled it. The worn foam grips made a big difference now, I had been squeezing the grips so hard my hands were numb from the vibration. I didn't hear the bird anymore, I was afraid it might have drowned. The cage was covered with mesh cloth and aluminum foil was over the top, but I didn't know what might have happened to the bird, I was worried that I might be carrying a dead bird, I felt really bad...so bad I was afraid to look.

I planned to pull off for fuel at Platte City, just north of KC, however another road construction event just ahead of the turnoff cost me another 30 minutes of tiptoeing and clutch-gripping to get 1 mile. I was very unhappy, but warm and dry, by the time I got through that.

A fuel stop just south of St. Joe was mandatory, I stopped at the pump and nervously peered into the mesh swathed cage on the back of the bike. I could make out a little head with an incredibly erect topknot, a sign of health and excitement. Everything was OK. As I should have expected, actually, since I had gone to some length to make sure the cage was protected from wind and sun, yet well ventilated. But the storm had been really intense and I had worried about the little bird. But it was OK, no problem.

The rest of the trip into Bedford was warm, dry and uneventful. The smells of the farm country and the warm evening sun made up for the misery I had just been through. Powerful bikes were made for 2-lane

roads, there is virtually no problem passing anywhere there is a passing zone, the marks were planned for underpowered cars. The trip on up 71 through Maryville was great.

Just past Maryville there was a sign "148 closed, Detour". Well, guess what, 148 was my route, I went crazy! It looked like a 50 mile diversion to me! I came all this way to see former classmates and it looked like I would miss the entire evening event! I cranked the bike, the exhaust let out a strong growl and I leaned the bike into a long left turn away from my destination. Sanity returned when less than 1/4 mile down the road there was another sign sending me back to the right. I grabbed the brake levers, nosed it down to an acceptable speed and very quickly turned right onto 148. The soft colors of evening and smells of damp vegetation and farms were wonderful. I was alert, happy and totally immersed in the biking experience. It finally hit me that I was going to see folks that I hadn't seen for a minimum of 5 years, longer in most cases. So, less than 30 miles south of Bedford I started to think about the event I was traveling to and to recall old friends and events. The intensity of the day had taken its toll.

The evening was wonderful, the next day even better, a hot, glaring sun and brisk wind making a short trip to my boyhood haunts a full body experience in enjoying the present and past all at the same time, it was great.

I was staying with a boyhood friend and his family, they treated me well and I believe the comfort and warmth of staying with friends instead of in a motel made the reunion for me.

I attended a reunion dinner Saturday evening and found out that most of the remaining activities were planned for late Sunday afternoon, later than I planned to stay. I made a quick decision to motor out of Bedford that evening. I wanted to get an early start on Sunday, work beckoned for Monday in any event, and my dad had just had surgery. If I got out on Saturday evening I could visit him about 60 miles southwest of Bedford and strike out for home at a reasonable hour Sunday morning. I filled my belly, videoed my old friends and hit the road, rolling into Rockport, Missouri about 10 p.m.

A nice visit, a good breakfast and I hit the road again 8:15 a.m. on Sunday. Beautiful, cool, blue sky, bright sun, perfect! I decided to bike with shorts and a short-sleeved shirt for a while early on, no traffic and soft sun. Not a good idea from a risk-management standpoint, but it was fun.

West on 136, then south on 75, another detour in Nebraska, less than 20 extra miles I'd guess, but gosh! I'd done more detours and road constructions on this trip than in the last 10 years!

It stayed cool, I kept moving south. A high layer of gray clouds bothered me somewhat, however the sun kept showing through regularly and there was blue sky overhead. By the time I got to Sabetha, Kansas I was getting chilly. I stopped, got back into my long sleeve shirt and coveralls and hit the road. The cloud cover was increasing, it was looking grimmer, I suspected I might get wet. I was right. About Holton, north of Topeka, it started. Light at first, then getting heavier, but never like it was on Friday, just steady rain. Visibility was no problem except for water on my glasses, but even that was manageable, I slowed to 50 and took the chance with cars passing me.

Topeka came and went, no let-up yet. Just south of Topeka, Forbes field, it started coming down in sheets again. I had planned to stop in Topeka, but it had let up and I had gone on. I was getting cold now, I had been running in this stuff for an hour and it was taking its toll. I remembered a little town south of Topeka, started with an L and then there was a town that was just half-way that I usually stopped in for

fuel and food, I didn't remember the name. I was so cold I didn't think I could make another 50 miles without stopping, I motored south of Topeka in a grim mood.

Light rain, heavy rain, light rain, heavy rain...but always rain. I got ahead of it once, stopped to fuel up...I don't remember the town, but I was starting to dry out when I stopped and I wanted to stay ahead of it, so I gassed up and hit the road. Just as I passed the south edge of town it started again, I was sure I could get ahead of it. I was wrong. I looked ahead, I could see maybe 3-5 miles. Rain. Nothing but rain and the blue haze that comes with it. I kept motoring, but now I was looking for shelter, I was shivering. As long as I was shivering I knew I wasn't dropping into irreversible hypothermia, but I was damn sure cold.

The little L town came and went, Burlington appeared to be the half-way town where I usually stopped, I was hungary, maybe that would be a good place to stop. I thought about going into an air-conditioned place sopping wet and decided maybe it would be a bad idea, I'd just get colder. I kept moving, it kept raining, I was shivering and miserable, I didn't know how much longer I could hold out.

Burlington appeared ahead, 35 then 30 mph, I was numb but alert, shivering but not uncoordinated. I cut my speed to just over the posted limit and drifted through town. I was in the left lane, a couple of cars caught up with me, one pulled around me on the right, the other stayed close on my tail. The vehicle on the right pulled ahead and moved left, signaled for a left turn. I pulled right, things were getting a little too close for comfort here, the vehicle ahead turned left at a stop light. I had been going at or below the speed of the other cars all the way through Burlington. I was watching my speedometer, I have had one ticket in the last 10 years, it was on my bike and I knew how much law enforcement folks liked to bust bikers, it is not just a myth, it is real as hell. Whether they do it unconsciously or on purpose I don't know, but I know they do it, so I'm real careful. Posted 30, I looked down, whoops! 35!, backed off a little, I knew my tolerance band was small on a motorcycle.

Motoring on past the Pizza Hut where I usually stop (I make this run 4 or 5 times a year) I was still wet, sopping wet, and decided to forgo food until I dried out, the rain was just letting up. I was shivering like crazy, my hands were cramped from the tension.

And there it was. A little car with flashing lights coming up behind me. I was sure it wasn't to congratulate me on taking good care of my bike, I just thought Oh, Shit, what now? Busted for 35 in a 30?

No. No such luck. The lady cop proceeded to tell me I had run a 20 at 39. Well, I admitted to 35, I didn't see 20 anywhere and still don't recall seeing it, I'd say 50:50 she was lying, but I was too beat to argue. She took my license and walked back to her car after a very stiff discussion of why she stopped me. I was really cold. My clothes were still sticking to my skin, the hairs on my arm and my yellow tee-shirt showed through the white long sleeved shirt I had on. My license was wet when I pulled it out.

I waited, glanced around. It seemed to be taking a long time, I got off my bike. The lady cop was sitting in her car, talking to some other fat civilian lady who was stuffing a hamburger in her face. I was shivering, imagined at least that I was on the verge of hypothermia and was totally furious with myself for missing the sign, if it was really there, and with the fat female cop for busting me instead of the 2 locals who had to be right on me where she described the wicked thing I had done, right at the light. Well, maybe I was wrong about this lady, maybe she was much nicer than she appeared, maybe I had made a mistake and she was just doing her job. I walked back toward her vehicle. "Stay with your vehicle, sir" she snapped. Yeah, snapped. It had been over 5 minutes now, I was freezing and the rain was starting to

catch up, the light was moving south. Her friend was stuffing more food in her mouth, they seemed to be chatting. What on God's earth could they be talking about? Damn! Take me to jail! I'd love it, it would be warm and dry! Over 10 minutes after the little...not so little actually...sweetie stopped me, she hoisted herself from her vehicle and came waddling toward me, rolls of fat hanging over her pistol belt. I got the distinct feeling that I had made this lady's day. She and her fat friend spent plenty of time looking out from their hamburger scented auto, she was either stone blind or sure I was soaked to the bone, one of the two, and her demeanor suggested that she was thrilled to the max to have made me spend the maximum amount of time suffering while she wrote my name, tag number and amount of the fine on a 3 x 6 sheet of paper. Yep! She sure did increase my respect for law enforcement. Yep, made me feel like a child molester, she sure did, what a macho witch cop, I was really impressed. "Sir I've got to tell you...", I've never heard such a stiff, unfriendly presentation in my whole life, what did she think I was going to do, burn her town down? Well, I'd be happy at this point to watch that happen but I'm not interested in doing it myself, all I want is out of Burlington, Kansas. Damn! It'll take me 2 years of not stopping in Burlington just to get even for the ticket amount. I think I'll not stop for at least 4 years to make sure they are properly punished for the way I was treated by this surly chunk of poor-example-of-women-in-law-enforcement (I disrespect any officer of the law, male or female, who gets so wrapped up in their power trip that they lose sight of the fact that their job is to protect law-abiding citizens like me, not humiliate them and force-feed them a ration of official bullshit, even when they do miss a speed sign...if it was really there).

Oh well, I made a mistake, it'll cost me \$60.50, forget it and get home, Richard! I was tempted to roll back into town to see if the sign was really there, but even if I videoed it I'd have to come back on July 22, the judge would throw my evidence out of court and this overfed shrew would probably find something else to bust me for. I just wanted outa' Burlington, headin' south. I can see why bikers get a little out of the mainstream in their (lack of) respect for law enforcement officers. But I'm always happy to see a highway patrol car roll by, it makes me feel good to know they are out there when I'm rolling down the highway on a bike, so I guess I'll not let this little experience do any permanent changing of my attitude about police, only about Burlington, Kansas.

The rain was picking up, my shirt sleeves had started to dry but my shoes and under my coveralls were still soaked, I should have stopped. But I didn't. Rolling along at 60, good traction, good open visibility but poor visibility from under my visor and rain spotted glasses, I began to think about dying again. Not much chance it would really happen. Not many cars, lots of room, good highway, but still...rolling along at 60 in a moderate rain, semi-hypothermic and filled with negative thoughts about a small town cop on a power trip, all this conspired to make me think I was wandering a little too close to the edge on this one. I was, I should have stopped.

I thought about cowboys from a century ago, riding across these same hills on horseback. They would have gotten this same experience from a sudden rainstorm. They had to be a bunch of tough dudes. I can see why cow towns had a little trouble once in a while. And I can see why bikers are perceived as tough guys...they really are. This is the first time I had ever ridden this far in the rain and despite the fact that I was miserable and wanted to stop really bad, I felt good about myself. Risk of violent death and all, I was experiencing something that generations of Americans had dealt with, I was being whipped on by mother nature. If I knew where the line was between perseverance and foolishness, I would be OK. If I didn't I would die, just that simple. I judged the risk acceptable, I motored south. I didn't know how much longer I would be able to hold on, I was taking it one town at a time.

The irony was that each time I would approach a town the rain would seem to let up and the sky would

get lighter. This was not just due to slowing down, it really happened. I would get enthused that I might be able to dry out and get warm and would decide to go on. And each time the sky would close in a few miles south of town and the rain would pick up. I got really sick of it.

This went on and on. From other experiences like this one, intense, life-threatening outdoor experiences, I knew this would end, and if I didn't relax my guard it would end pleasantly with no permanent damage. That was the only thing that kept me going, I knew that if I could hold out it would end and I would be warm again.

Sure enough, about 5 miles north of Independence the sky suddenly brightened up and the rain stopped. A stop at the Golden RG's in Independence made me feel better, my shoes and pants were still wet but my shirt and coveralls were pretty dry, I was feeling lots better.

A few sprinkles between Independence and Bartlesville, nothing but a few drops, no problem. A few cars took it upon themselves to accentuate my vulnerability by crowding me from behind, but it was easy enough to get ahead of them and stay out of their way.

There was an incredible wind south of Bartlesville that made the end of the trip memorable, gusts would blow my bike from one side of my lane to the other. And just about at the Tulsa County line a black wasp flew into my helmet and lodged itself under the bow of my glasses...stinger first. The pain was intense, I pulled off, lifted the front of my helmet and the wasp, apparently no worse for the wear, flew out. What an irony! Motor through what I had just come through and be killed by anaphylactic shock from a wasp sting! Ha! My head hurt, but I suspected I'd be OK despite my musings about the wasp sting.

The last 20 miles of the trip were an exercise in self-control. I wanted to open the bike up and get home, but I didn't want a speeding ticket, certainly not 2 in one day, so I kept it down and just let the traffic blow by me. It ain't fair. Selective enforcement.

I finally made it into my driveway, 3:30 p.m., July 4th. Alive, no worse for the experience except a little lighter on cash due to the ticket, and quite proud of myself for having managed to come through the events of the last 48 hours unscathed. The motorcycle had turned a noteworthy but rather traditional class reunion event into a really exciting and fulfilling personal experience. I won't be able to share my feelings about the trip with anyone who hasn't experienced something similar, but I know what I did and it was great. I'll probably do it again, I hope it turns out as well.

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