

# **Chris' Ultimate Coast to Coast Ride**

## **Chapter 1 Beginnings**

In the fall of 2003, I began planning a motorcycle ride for the next summer. I had just finished competing in the Butt Lite III, and had done reasonably well in the seven day event. My first choice was to compete in the 2003 Iron Butt Rally. After several years of endurance riding experience, and competing in smaller rallies, I felt that I was ready to attempt a ride in the IBR. I had only one obstacle to that goal. I had no guaranteed spot in the rally and would only get to enter the rally via the general drawing. The odds of earning a spot in the rally through the drawing were not good. Still, I waited for the entry process to open up and began thinking of alternate endurance rides as back-ups to riding in the Iron Butt Rally.

In late 2003, entries for the Iron Butt Rally opened up. I filled out my application, said some magical incantations, and sent the entry off with low expectations. But one never knows. Unfortunately, several weeks later, I received the expected news that I had not made it into the rally. I was somewhat heartened when Mike Kneebone, the head of the Iron Butt Association, sent me a note that had drawn a reasonably low number on the waiting list and there was still a chance to make it into the rally. Though I was quietly hopeful for a slot, I did not think there would be much movement on the waiting list. Entries had been drawn much later than usual, meaning there would be fewer riders dropping out of the rally because of unforeseen circumstances. I began working on a back-up ride plan.

Near the end of January, 2003, I had pretty much given up on getting into the Iron Butt Rally, and had decided to take a stab at the Ultimate Coast to Coast Ride. This is an IBA extreme endurance ride, and is described by the Iron Butt Association as a ride to “cross North America from Key West, Florida to Deadhorse, Alaska (also known as Prudhoe Bay, Alaska) in 30 days or less. The ride can be completed in either direction; Alaska to Florida OR Florida to Alaska. Additionally, this ride will take you to the far-north. You can expect snowy conditions EVERY MONTH of the year. The only practical time

to plan this ride is in July and August. Even then, you may face snow storms, road construction and endless miles of impassable road. Additionally, in Canada and Alaska you are dealing with more wildlife than in the rest of North America. You should be prepared for encounters with bears, moose and other large animals that will cross your path.” Sounded like fun!

The main obstacle (of many) would be to safely travel the 414 miles (each way) of the Dalton Highway, also know as the Haul Road, that stretches from just north of Fairbanks, crosses the Arctic Circle and ends at Prudhoe Bay on the Arctic Ocean on the north coast of Alaska. This road is “Highway” in name only and can be challenging to even the best riders in good conditions. In bad weather, it is often impassable. In all weather, the road beats the hell out of rider and bike. It is a very remote area indeed.

I was also planning on completing the ride in considerably less than 30 days allowed. Shane Smith had set the record for the ride during the 2001 Iron Butt Rally, making the trip in 5 days, 6 hours, 31 minutes. Paul Taylor owned the record for seconded best time, also during the 2001 IBR, 5 days, 11 hours, 18 minutes. I had no illusions about completing the ride anywhere near times like these. I picked a goal of 6 days to do the ride. That sounded like a respectable, round number.

So I set off planning the ride. The first thing I was going to need was a motorcycle.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Preparations**

As Spring, 2002 approached, I began searching for a new bike. I was currently riding a 1999 BMW R1100RT, that was set up for endurance riding. I had quickly decided that the RT would not be suitable for this ride. I believed the bike could make the ride, but I did not want to destroy it on the Dalton Highway. I fully anticipated a mishap or two during the ride, so I decided on a bike that was more ‘mishap-friendly’. I decided on a BMW 11xxGS for the ride. The bike was fully capable of handling the rigors of the far north, yet also

comfortable for long stretches on interstate. I know there are lots of other bikes as capable, if not more so than the GS, but the GS had another advantage. I had ridden them before and because I owned the RT, I was more than familiar with the BMW R-bike engines. It may be a small advantage, but in the event of a breakdown, it could be very important.

I further narrowed my choice of bikes down to either the GS Adventure or the standard GS with a Touratech Tank. The Adventure cost more, but had many of the features I wanted and would be putting on the bike anyway. Since I tend to put a lot of miles on bikes, I also was looking for one of these bikes used, but with low mileage.

I began searching for the bike. I constantly searched E-Bay and even put bids in on some bikes. I lost all the auctions. I watched Cycle Trader daily. I called dealerships and talked to the sales people I knew. After a few weeks of searching, I came across a 2002 R1150GS Adventure with 3,000 miles in Oklahoma that looked like it would fit the bill. A couple weeks later, I was flying to Oklahoma to pick the bike up and ride it back to Maryland. This was the first expenditure of many that I would make.

One of the things I had decided very early on, was that cost was not going to be a consideration for this trip. I don't mean to say that I spent money foolishly or wasted money, but if there was something I felt should be on the bike for the trip, it was going to be on the bike, no matter the cost. I was not going to fail because there was something I needed that I didn't purchase or because I purchased a lower quality item that failed to perform.

This was an expensive route, but I was going to be investing a considerable amount of time and effort into the ride and I wanted to give myself every chance to succeed. Safety was also a paramount concern. I intended to return to Maryland in the same condition as I left. Besides, it almost seems un-American if you don't have at least one or two credit cards maxed out! Fortunately, I was able to transfer a lot of the items I needed from the RT to the new GS. After several months, the bike was equipped as follows:

- Aeroflow Half-Fairing: I replaced the standard windshield with the tall Aeroflow screen.
- Motolights: The standard 35 watt lamps, were replaced with 50 watt lamps with a narrower beam.
- PIAA 910 Driving Lights: These were mounted on the Aeroflow Bracket.
- HID High Beam. I used the kit a kit that BMW uses to retrofit their cars with HID lights.
- Metzler Tourance Tires
- Marsee Tank and Tail Bags, Scotchguarded
- Rev-Pack Expedition Bag, Scotchguarded
- Jesse Odyssey Luggage
- Garmin Street Pilot III GPS with the 125 MB memory cartridge. The entire route could be loaded, eliminating the need to carry the laptop with me. I also carried the 32 MB memory cartridge with other maps loaded.
- Valentine One Radar Detector with the audio adaptor
- Archos Jukebox MP3 Player with somewhere around 75 CD's loaded and probably another 200 individual songs.
- Pre-Paid Cellular Phone with AT&T, with service in all of North America, including Alaska
- Autocom Pro-M1 to integrate all audio devices
- Custom Ear Plugs with monitors from EAR Inc.
- Bob's Wrist Rest throttle friction lock
- Throttle Rocker
- Hyperlites
- Run-N-Lites (rear only)
- Ram Mounts for the GPS and the V-1
- Heat Troller Thermostat for Gerbings Heated Clothing
- Camel Back Hydration system, filled with water only.
- 3-M Plastic Headlight Protectors on both the high and low beam lenses.
- BeadRider Custom Seat, of course!
- Bike Cover
- Xena Disc Lock
- Digital Thermometer
- Extensive First Aid Kit. This included narcotic painkillers and other medications I got from my doctor as a precaution when discussing the trip with him. I also carried an assortment of cold/flu/illness medications with me. Though I had never been to Prudhoe Bay, I was pretty sure they would not have a CVS pharmacy there.
- Streamlight Stinger Rechargeable Flashlight with Charger wired into the bike. I also carried three other light sources

Another item on the bike was added by the previous owner, Ty Wood. Ty had removed the tank and had a layer of Line-X (bed liner) sprayed on the front of the tank, serving as a permanent tank protector of sorts. Great idea. Looks great and really protects the tank.

I carried an extensive tool kit, including adding a small air compressor to repair flats. I tried to carry anything I thought I would need to make an emergency repair. The tool kit included just about everything I would need, should I decide to take the bike apart during the trip. This included full roll of duct tape, the universal repair tool. I also carried quite a few straps and bungees. I also carried a set of ratcheting straps in case I had to extricate the bike from a difficult position by myself. These straps would become very important during the trip.

Among the documents I carried were the standard license, registration, passport, Canadian and US Insurance cards and road side assistance card (Good only in the continental US). I also carried maps for every state/province that I intended to cross. I also carried a current service manual for the bike and a copy of the Milepost. I had intended to carry a copy of the BMW MOA Anonymous book, but I forgot to pack it and so it stayed at home. This book contains a directory of good Samaritans that will lend different levels of assistance to riders in trouble across North America.

I carried one extra gallon of fuel as a precaution. This gallon was kept in four separate 1-quart fuel containers. I tried to pad and protect them as much as possible, realizing that in the event of a high speed 'uh-oh', I did not want to be anywhere near them should they rupture. The 8-gallon tank on the bike gave me a reasonable range of about 300 miles. I knew there would be areas up north where fuel was scarce, especially at night.

Most of my riding gear stayed the same, but I added/upgraded a few items. I also decided to keep the clothes to a minimum. This lightened the bike and made it easier to find things. I also kept like things in the same place. Cold weather gear together, rain gear together, gloves together, etc. This would save me a lot of time on the road and make things easier to find. Here is a list of the riding gear I used:

- Nolan X-Lite Helmet with Clear and Tinted Visors. I do not use sunglasses.
- Small Flashlight, Velcroed to the side of the helmet
- Both Visors were equipped with a Sunblocker tint strip.
- BMW Savannah 2 Jacket with Gore Tex Liner

- BMW Savannah (1) Pants with armor added
- BMW Gore Tex Boots with those liquid insole thingees...
- One pr. Gore Tex pants, from a golfing supply store.
- One pr. Windproof/waterproof lined pants from sporting goods store.
- One set (top and bottom) Polypropylene underwear.
- One pr. Deerskin gloves
- One pr. Neoprene gloves, similar to scuba diving gloves; for riding in the rain.
- One pr. of heavy waterproof ski gloves.
- Gerbing electric jacket and socks. No pants.
- One heavy sweatshirt and one sweater
- One lined neck wrap
- One long sleeve mock turtleneck shirt
- Three Under Armor T-shirts
- Seven pairs of socks
- Five Pairs of Silk Underwear
- One pair of padded Bicycle Riding Shorts
- Survival Kit. Enough to make a crude shelter, start a fire, emergency food and water.

The only things I planned to change every day while riding were socks and underwear. I planned on changing T-Shirts every other day. I simply was going to add layers of clothes the further north I got, until I would be wearing most everything I was carrying. Seemed like a good plan.

While I was busy equipping the bike, I started doing as much planning on the actual ride as possible including looking at the route to ride. I had already decided to ride south to north. I thought this might keep me fresher near the end of the trip when I was sure to be very tired. The direct route covers just over 5500 miles. The route goes Florida-Georgia-Tennessee-Kentucky-Illinois-Wisconsin-Minnesota-NorthDakota-Manitoba-Saskatchewan-Alberta-BritishColumbia-Yukon Territory-Alaska.

A lot of people ask me what style of riding I use. The best thing I can say to describe it would be stubbornly-consistent. I am not a very fast rider. In fact, when I drive in a car, I often frustrate my passengers with my slow pace. Since I was not willing to increase my speed to unacceptable levels to reach my 6 day goal, I had to save time in other areas. I am fortunate enough

to be able to function well on very little sleep. I usually eat only once a day, so I am able to save time on meals.

I initially planned on staying in a hotel every other night and sleeping in the “Iron Butt Motel” (picnic table, ground, etc.) every other night. I had done this with some success during the Butt Lite III. I discussed this strategy with other, more experienced, long distance riders. Two riders favored another approach, namely Leonard Roy and Paul Taylor. Paul told me that he had stayed in a hotel every night during the 2001 Iron Butt Rally. Leonard stated that he would get a room, even if only for a half an hour when on a ride. Both thought the quality of a short rest in a hotel, vastly outweighed a longer rest on a picnic table.

I also looked at the rides of other successful riders. Rick Miller had gotten progressively stronger during the BLIII by getting plenty of rest during the early days of the rally. While a lot of riders in the rally were deteriorating in condition as the rally went on, Rick had saved his best ride for the last leg to finish strongly. I decided that if this approach worked well for better and more experienced riders than myself, why try to reinvent the wheel?

I started working with Microsoft’s Streets and Trips to plan a route and stop locations. I planned on leaving Key West at 6:00 AM. I would ride every day from 6:00 AM to 2:00 AM. I planned to stay in a hotel every night and start riding at 6:00 AM the next day. I thought I could get at least 3 hours sleep every night, allowing for a half hour on each end to check-in, unload the bike, check-out, load the bike. I also planned on staying on east coast time for the entire ride. This would get somewhat confusing the further west I went, creating some problems for me.

The only food I planned on eating were power bars, with possibly the occasional beef jerky snack. I knew from experience that I could keep fuel stops to between 10 and 15 minutes. I also carried Red Bull energy drinks with me as a stop-gap measure, if I needed it. As it turned out, I drank one Red Bull with a power bar every morning. This seemed to work very well. I also knew from other rides that I would probably lose between 10 and 15 pounds during the ride.

If I was able to stick to this schedule, I would arrive in Prudhoe Bay in about 5 and 1/2 days. Of course this would be riding in a perfect world. No traffic, no bad weather, no fuel problems, no bike problems, no problems at the border...no problems period. As anyone who has done any distance riding will tell you, this is not realistic. I was pretty sure that I would encounter many setbacks during the ride that would slow my progress, but, what the heck....at least I had a plan.

Based upon this riding pattern, I anticipated stops in the following areas:

- Night 1: Paducah, Kentucky
- Night 2: East of Winnipeg, Manitoba
- Night 3: Near Dawson Creek, British Columbia; start of Alaska Highway
- Night 4: Whitehorse, Yukon Territory
- Night 5: Fairbanks or Coldfoot, Alaska

I looked further at the timing of the ride, specifically what day and date would be best to start. I was worried about traffic back-ups around major cities. I was also concerned about construction zones along the Alaska Highway that could cost valuable time. Another consideration was the availability of fuel when riding at night in desolate areas.

I bought a copy of the Milepost and studied it whenever I had time. I received much needed advice from the Long Distance Riding List on the internet. Of the people that offered advice, Jack Gustafson deserves great thanks. Jack lives in Alaska and provided first hand information on road conditions, fuel stops etc. Other folks also helped without even knowing. Joe Zulaski, a frequent contributor to the LD list provided help by posting his experience on the Dalton Highway during the 2001 Iron Butt Rally. I read everything I could that I thought would help me.



I was worried about oil and tire changes. The first was easy. I decided to use synthetic oil and make no oil changes. The bike would go 12,000 miles on one oil change. The overwhelming amount of miles would be highway miles, so I reasoned this would be okay. The tires would be more problematic. I first thought about a tire change in Fairbanks. Logistically this was going to be tough, because I did not know for sure when I would be there. I was also concerned about shredding a tire on the Dalton Highway. After much debate and getting advice from anyone who offered it, I decided to put a new set of tires on the bike right before leaving Maryland and trying to make the entire trip on one set. A tire change on the way home would be no big deal. A tire change on the way north would be a serious time issue. I took a chance.

After I thought I had gotten all the information I could gather, I set a departure date of July 26, 2003 to leave Maryland. I would allow three days to reach Key West, more than enough. Nancy, my girlfriend, would fly down to Key West to see me off. We would spend a few days relaxing. I planned to leave Key West Thursday morning, July 31, 2003 at 6:00 AM. This would allow me to take advantage of riding on the weekend when traffic should be lighter and hopefully, construction would not be occurring on the Alaska Highway. Nancy would fly back to Maryland after seeing me off.

Nancy would be my pit crew. She also would monitor my trip, keeping friends apprised of my progress. Though she is never thrilled with me riding alone, I think she is getting used to it. She knows that I am very aware of my limits and have no desire to push those limits into a danger zone. I don't think she would ever say that endurance riding is a "safe" activity, but I think she knows how far I go to achieve a safe ride. She is a rider too and a very proud member of the Iron Butt Association. She displays her SS1000 certificate on her office wall for all to see. During my trip, she would be available 24 hours a day for whatever help I needed. She also endured months of me blabbering on about every possible minute detail.

I provided Nancy with a detailed itinerary of my route. She would know exactly where I should be at any point in time. I would also keep her updated on where I was and how many hours ahead of or behind schedule I

was. She would also watch for weather that would be in front of me. I couldn't do anything about the weather. I wouldn't be changing my route, but I would be ready for how miserable I was going to be. I actually quit looking at the weather in Alaska about two weeks before I left because there was never any good news. Rain was in every forecast, except when there was the possibility of snow in the far north.

I also had the help and support of Rob and Tina Hollaender of Motolight and I want to thank them for that support. Not only do they foolishly sponsor my insane activities, they are both avid riders. Rob knows quite a bit more about bikes than I do. He was available 24 hours a day during the ride. I felt confident that if something went wrong with the bike, I could reach out to Rob if I couldn't figure out what was wrong. I also knew if Rob couldn't figure out what was wrong, he would damn well find someone who did, no matter what time it was. Support like this is hard to find.

With this type of safety net in place, I felt pretty confident, that should something unfortunate happen, someone would come looking for me. And that someone would have at least an idea of where I might be. I felt with the number of power bars that I carried, I could last until either help found me or some hungry member of the Ursine family found me, whichever came first.

The last thing I did was create a flip chart of maps. Sort of a poor man's Trip Ticket. This was not to be used for navigation. I would do all my navigating via the GPS. This flip chart would be used by me to know if I was ahead or behind schedule. I highlighted points along the route, usually at border crossings with the date and time that I should be hitting that spot, based upon the Thursday morning starting time. This method had worked well in the past. I found that calculating where I was and comparing it to where I should be kept me on schedule. Doing the time/distance calculations also keeps me fresh on an otherwise numbing section of interstate.

With all that done, it was time to ride.

### Chapter 3 Southbound to Key West

I pulled the bike out of the garage, Saturday morning, the 27th of July. Nancy was there and took pictures of me and the bike. The GS felt overloaded, though I knew it was not. The Adventure is a very tall bike and with a full tank and fully packed, it can be a handful at slow speeds. I also knew that a lot of the clothing I was carrying was only for Key West. It would be coming home with Nancy when she flew back to Maryland.

The weather was wonderful. I had put about 7,000 miles on the bike in the last few months, getting used to the bike and making sure all the accessories worked well. I headed south on I-95, the main north/south artery on the east coast. Navigation was not an issue. Ride south until you hit water. I had no particular plans on where to stop, but as I approached South Carolina, I decided to stop at the "World Famous Thunderbird Inn" in Florence, SC. They have clean, inexpensive rooms and a fantastic breakfast buffet. The locals eat there, so it must be good.

As I rode, I called Nancy on the cell phone and asked her to see if she could reserve me a room at the Thunderbird Inn. I was about an hour or so away from the hotel and was worried that they might not have a room on a Saturday night. The first problem on the ride reared its' ugly head. The cell phone set up was not working well. I could hear Nancy, but she couldn't hear me very well. This problem would continue for entire ride. I never was able to fix it. I eventually gave up on using the cell phone while moving and made calls while stationary.

With no reservation in hand, I decided to stop at the Thunderbird anyway. Luckily, they had a room available, which I gladly took. I pulled the bike around to the room and happily started unloading the bike. Though I occasionally leave items on the bike, most of the time, I pull everything off. I do this so often, I can usually pull everything off the bike in a couple of minutes. Having that first floor room with the exterior entrance is a must.

As I emptied the Jesse Bags, my heart leapt into my throat. One of the bags was hanging by a thread. Two of the mounting bolts holding the left

bracket had come free. The bag was resting against the exhaust pipe. Fortunately the bolts were still there, unable to drop out because they were wedged against the bag. Everything in the bag had been superheated. The tools I kept in the bag were so hot, you could not hold them. My most important tool, the roll of duct tape, had been melted into a huge blob.

After unloading the bike, I assessed the situation. All the tools, including the voltmeter, seemed to be fine. I replaced the bolts in the bracket and tightened them with a little extra elbow grease. It was time to get the pit crew busy.

I called my pit crew, Nancy and added a couple of things to her luggage; a new roll of duct tape and a small tube of medium Loc-Tite. I probably should have used Loc-Tite on the bolts when I installed the Jesses. In fact, in the recesses of my mind, I think I recall somewhere in the instructions telling me to do this. I decided to Loc-Tite not only the Jesse bolts, but any other bolt I saw that looked remotely important to holding the bike together.

I locked and covered the bike. With that done, I got organized in the room and went to sleep, with visions of the Thunderbird's breakfast buffet dancing in my head.

The next morning, after eating my fill at the buffet, I continued south on I-95. There was not much to say about the ride. Long and boring. The Jesse Bag stayed attached. I had intended to stop somewhere near Miami, but continued on south instead. I did not want to deal with Miami rush hour on Monday morning. Nancy would be in Key West by noon Monday and I wanted to try and arrive around the same time.

I ended up stopping at the start of the Keys, drenched in sweat. It was hot and humid. Who would have thought it would be so hot in south Florida in July? I checked into a Quality Inn, unloaded the bike and grabbed some dinner at the local Scottish restaurant. McDonalds. At home, I rarely eat fast food, but on the road, it just seems like a sinful pleasure.

The next morning I loaded up the bike and headed for Key West. My destination was a little over 100 miles away, but it seemed to take forever. With heavy traffic and few passing lanes, it took nearly three hours to reach Key West. I also noticed that many of the small towns along the way had set up dummy radar traps. The V-1 detector constantly screamed in my helmet. This tactic tended to slow traffic down even more. I tried to note where these false traps were located, for the ride north four days hence, when my pace would be more enthusiastic.

I met Nancy at the hotel and we settled in. We spent the next few days being tourists and relaxing. A final close inspection of the bike revealed no other problems. I applied the Loc-Tite to every bolt in sight and placed the tube in my tool box. Nancy had apparently taken my instruction to bring a full roll of duct tape to heart. She produced the largest roll of duct tape I had ever seen. The thing had to measure a foot across! If the bike did break down, I would be able to wrap myself in duct tape, stick a few stamps on my head and hop to the nearest mailbox. I stashed the tape on the bike.

We rented a scooter while in Key West and rode all over the island in flip-flops, shorts and no helmets. It felt pretty nice, since I knew I was going to be spending the better part of the next week wrapped up like a bug in a cocoon. We also succeeded in receiving a performance award (parking ticket) on the scooter. Some meter maid had to be very bored, I thought, as I looked at a \$50.00 parking ticket for putting the scooter in a bike rack. 25 other scooters at the same rack received the same award. Well, we always do whatever we can to support the local economy when visiting new places.

After three days of trying to sample every frozen fruit drink on the island, it was time to get rolling north. We awoke at 5:00 AM on Thursday morning. I had packed my luggage the night before. After showering and a quick snack, I packed the bike. Surprisingly, I had a lot of space left over. I filled my camelback with ice water and was set to go. Nancy followed me over the Key West Police Station on our trusty scooter. We had stopped there a couple of days ago and found that there should be plenty of officers at the station as this should be shift change. I had two officers sign my witness form and headed to a nearby gas station to get my first receipt.

## Chapter 4 Day One

My ride officially started at 6:15 AM EST on Thursday, July 31, 2003. We headed down to the Southernmost Point Marker. Nancy took my picture in front of the marker with the bike. I dug out my glass vial to take my water sample. As one of the Sunshine State's domicile challenged individuals looked on in bewilderment, I carefully reached down and tried to fill the vial. Unfortunately, the tide was low. I had to get down on my hands and knees and stretch out as far as I could to fill the vial. Water sample, starting receipt and witness forms in hand, I said goodbye to Nancy and headed north.



**Begining in the Dark**

As I worked my way through the Keys, I soon began to realize that I had gotten off to a very good start. There was very little traffic and whenever I did hit traffic, it seemed to be just as a passing zone came up. I cleared the Keys and hit the Florida Turnpike in just under three hours. One small hurdle

overcome. With only one road in and out of the Keys, even a small accident could have led to a huge delay.

As I traveled north on the Turnpike, I marveled at the number of police cars. The V-1 radar detector was rarely silent for a very long time. When compared to I-95, just a few miles to the east, there was very little traffic on the Turnpike. That probably has something to do with the fact that you can't swing a dead cat without hitting a police car or a toll booth. By the time I exited the Turnpike at I-75, I was nearly \$20 poorer. It would be the most expensive toll road I would ride the entire trip.

I continued north on I-75, passing through Ocala, Gainesville and up toward Georgia. By the time I hit Georgia, it was approaching 3:00 PM, just a little over 8 hours into the ride. Though I never thought of Florida a particularly 'long' state, I was glad to be done with it. After nearly 600 miles of riding in hot, sticky weather, I was happy to be out of Florida. Even though there was no real difference, I just felt cooler being out of Florida.

As I rode further north through Georgia, I realized that I would be hitting Atlanta at an evening rush hour. I was a little over an hour ahead of schedule, so I had some time to spare. When riding in rallies, I often like to think of time as a form of money. The more ahead of schedule you were, the more you had in the bank to draw on when needed. When things get tough, you withdraw some of that saved time from the bank to get back on schedule. I had been hoping to build up a nice little nest egg of time to draw on later in the ride, when I would surely need it. Besides the pending crush of rush hour traffic, I noticed something else. Dark, ominous clouds began piling up to the west. This is never a good sign on a hot, summer afternoon.

Traffic stopped briefly just south of Atlanta. A horrific accident had occurred on southbound I-75. As I passed the accident in the north bound lanes, a medical evacuation helicopter was landing in the southbound lanes. Traffic southbound was backed up for miles. Having seen quite a few accidents over the years, this one appeared to be very bad one. Paramedics were performing CPR on one person, while another appeared to be still trapped in one of the vehicles. The accident was a clear and sober reminder

to pay attention to what I was doing. And another small hurdle cleared. The accident delayed me for only about 10 minutes as opposed to the interminable delay facing drivers going the other way.

I headed around Atlanta. Just west of the city, traffic came to a familiar crawl. No accident traffic here, just too many people trying to get out of town. I sat in traffic looking up at the ever darkening skies. Suddenly, the skies opened. If there is anything worse than riding in the rain, it has to be sitting in the rain, barely moving.

As any experienced rider will tell you, put your rain gear on BEFORE it starts raining. As I sat there with my rain gear tucked safely away in my luggage, I wished I had run into that experienced rider to tell me to put my rain gear on. As so often happens, I had gone one exit too far and now sat trapped in traffic in a thunderstorm getting drenched. Eventually, I made it to the next exit and found the shelter of a gas station to change clothes. As I sat there dumping the water out of my boots and wringing out my socks, a couple pulled in next to me.

As her husband pumped their gas, the wife came over to me and told me that they had seen me on the highway in the storm and had been worried sick that I was going to tip over in the rain. She told me that the radio was broadcasting severe weather alerts for the entire region. She asked how far I was going. I assured her that I was only going to be on the road for a little while longer and that I would be very careful. She and her husband wished me luck as they drove off into the storm.

After emptying my boots and wringing my socks, I slipped my Gore-Tex pants on under my riding pants and put my Gore-Tex liner in my jacket. I switched to my neoprene gloves which I use for rain. I also switched to my clear visor, as I thought the chances of running into any sunshine at this point to be somewhat remote. I hopped back onto the GS and rode off into the gloom.

Riding in the rain has never really bothered me, and as with anyone who rides regularly, I have ridden through some true gully-washers over the years. In fact, Nancy and I have quite a reputation for attracting foul weather



whenever we head cross-country. We both took the MSF courses in the rain at separate times. I even pulled off the daily double by taking the Experienced Rider Course in the rain. Rain happens. A few years ago, while working at an open house Morton's BMW, Nancy was talking to a new rider. The weather was somewhat iffy that day and the fellow was a little concerned about riding in the rain. He told Nancy that he had never ridden in the rain and asked her if she had ever ridden in the rain. She calmly answered, "Oh, yes, almost exclusively." To this day I can clearly recall the befuddled look on his face.

I headed north toward the hills of Tennessee and Kentucky, as the rain pounded me. The skies had long since darkened. Like I said, I don't mind rain. Lightning, on the other hand, scares the hell out of me. For the next couple of hours, I hit cell after cell of severe thunderstorms. As I passed through each storm, I would keep my head and shoulders as close to the bike as possible. I reasoned this would make the lightning pass right over me. Visibility dropped to nothing. I resorted to riding with my flashers on, pressing on at speeds under 30 mph at times. This was horrible.

Several years ago there was a long, interesting thread on the LD Riders List dealing with lightning. Could lightning hit a bike or was a bike insulated like a car? I don't really know the answer. I suspect a lightning strike would cause severe damage to rider and bike, but deep in my heart, I secretly prayed the posts that claimed the bike and rider were insulated were the correct ones. I hope to never find out which answer is correct.

When riding through weather like this, it often occurs to me that no one in their right mind would do this. I was not even through the first day and I was miserable. Water was seeping in, slowly but insidiously seeping, making its way wherever there was the slightest opening. My visor consistently fogged over. Water ran down the inside of the visor whenever I cracked the visor to clear it. More thunder rolled and lightning danced across the sky. I rode on into the night.

As I rode north of Nashville, the storms subsided. I was beginning to dry out. For some reason, I began thinking, "Oh, that wasn't so bad." This of course was absolutely nuts, because as I said before, it had been horrible. I

crossed into Kentucky and checked my progress. As incredible as it seemed, I had put some more time in the bank. I was now more than two hours ahead of schedule. I kept going over the figures in my head, thinking I had to have made a mistake somewhere. But it kept coming up the same. Despite the traffic and weather, I had increased the “lead” I had over my schedule.

I had intended to stop in Paducah, Kentucky for the night. I quickly changed that plan and decided to keep riding past my 2:00 AM deadline. I pulled into a Best Inn in Marion Illinois around 2:00 AM CST (3:00 AM EST) on the morning of the August 1<sup>st</sup>. I had covered a little over 1300 miles. Though I had lost some time over the last few hours of the ride, I was still around an hour ahead of schedule.

I checked in and got a first floor room with an exterior entrance. I quickly unloaded the bike and settled into the room. I undressed, leaving the clothes in a line across the floor. In three hours, I would re-dress in the same clothes, picking them back up off the floor in reverse order. I set the Screaming Meanie (countdown timer) for three hours and immediately dozed off.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Day Two**

I have never gotten used to being jarred out of a deep sleep by the Meanie in a strange location and this time was no different. I bolted up in bed as the timer went off. I took a quick shower, had my power bar breakfast and loaded the bike in the early morning darkness. By 5:30 AM CST (6:30 AM EST) I was on the road, heading north.

Two states surprised me on the trip, just by the amount of time it took to ride through them. Florida was the first and Illinois was the second. I seemed to be in Illinois forever. Illinois also distinguished itself by having the stupidest toll on the trip. In northern Illinois, as I approached the Wisconsin border, traffic ground to a halt. Being early on a Friday morning, I was sure that an accident was the cause. As I inched forward, I began mentally making

withdrawals from my time bank. After about a half hour, I saw the cause for the back up. A toll booth with only 2 active lanes lay ahead. Not only that, the toll was a 10 cent exact change toll. Unbelievable.

I began scrounging through my tank bag looking for anything in the way of change. I eventually found a quarter to toss in. If I had not found the quarter, the State of Illinois would have been 10 cents poorer, because I was just going to ride through. A half hour lost to a toll that can't possibly pay to even maintain the equipment. As I sat in the traffic, I did some ciphering. I figured about 3 cars per minute per lane and came up with a gross income of \$36.00 per hour state revenue generated. And this of course assumes traffic is always backed up at the toll, even in the dead of night. Subtracting costs, maintenance and salaries, I would bet this toll ends up in a negative deficit. I have no idea if this is true, but it killed the time as I sat in traffic. And people wonder what endurance riders think about while riding all those miles alone. Ten cent tolls would be an answer.

I continued north into the Wisconsin Dells. Having ridden through the Dells a couple of times, I still do not know what a Dell is. I assume the "Farmer in the Dell" childhood rhyme has something to do with an agricultural product in Wisconsin, but if anyone really knows what a Dell is, drop me line and let me know. I'm thinking it could be some type of hill, but being there were a lot bovine types in this area, it may very well be a Wisconsin cow.

North of Madison, Wisconsin, I dodged another bullet. Traffic on I-90 south was back up for miles and miles due to construction. As I headed north, I waited for the proverbial hammer to fall as I was sure construction had to be coming up. The hammer never fell. I began feeling guilty about passing the cars stuck on the other side of the interstate. The cars on the other side were not even moving and the back-up went on forever. Had the construction been on the northbound side, my time account would have been overdrawn quickly.

By the time I had put the Dells behind me and turned west towards Minneapolis, I was three hours a head of schedule. It was around this time that I realized that if I was able to maintain this pace and stay out of trouble,

that I would have a chance at bettering Shane Smith's record time for the ride. My mind was trying to recalculate where I was in relation to the record. I was also fully aware that much tougher riding lay ahead of me, but, heck, this gave me something more to cipher on. This was probably more important than thinking about 10 cent tolls.

I had passed through the Minneapolis/St. Paul area during the BLIII. The second checkpoint had been located just north of the Twin Cities in Monticello, MN. I had gotten stuck in traffic on I-94 heading out of St. Paul a year ago. This time would be no different. I have come to the decision the term Twin Cities means twice as much traffic. Especially on a Friday evening rush hour. Here I made a riding mistake that nearly ended the ride.

I was hot, miserable and sitting in traffic. The more I sat, the more frustrated I became. I made a lane change from a dead stop without fully looking to my right. As I pulled into the right lane I saw a vehicle in that lane bearing squarely down on me. STUPID! Tires squealed behind me. I hit the throttle as hard as I could. Whoever the lady was, I am thankful she was a pretty good driver. She swerved her vehicle onto the shoulder and slid between me and the guardrail, missing both by the narrowest of margins. She pulled over up ahead. I don't know if she thought she had hit me or was stopping to calm herself down. My heart was thumping. I was cursing myself. What a stupid way to get squished. I couldn't even complain about the stupid lady on the cell phone. This accident would have been all about the crazy biker from Maryland. This time it was the motorcyclist who hadn't seen the car.

After finally clearing the Twin Cities area, I headed into western Minnesota. There was very little traffic, high speed limits and beautiful countryside. Weather continued to be perfect as I crossed into North Dakota. As I passed through Fargo and turned north to Canada, I thought about the movie Fargo, and the vast barren areas it portrayed. I know the film was shot someplace else, but the feeling was the same. There were large areas of emptiness, with little or no traffic. I don't even know what the speed limit was between Fargo and the Canadian Border. No one seemed to really care. I passed some cars and cars passed me. I saw a couple of police cars

in this stretch, and I don't think they cared much about the speed limit. The miles slipped away as daylight dwindled down.

I could see storms off in the distance, but none seemed to be in my path. Clouds just towered above the horizon. I could see the lightning strikes and the rain coming down, but I knew they were no threat. I think this is one of the best things about riding out west. You can see storm cells miles and miles away from you. Back home, by the time you see it, you are nearly in it.

I pulled into Pembina, North Dakota, desperately needing gas, just as the last vestiges of daylight slipped below the horizon. I gassed up and switched to my clear visor for the night ahead. I was about to lose a serious chunk of time due to a navigating error.

I never cease to amaze Nancy with my incredible lack of any sense of direction. It confounds her that I still get lost going to her house, even though I have been there hundreds of times. Yet, I can safely navigate via the GPS all over the country, often to obscure locations, with little trouble. It would seem that it is true, that you become so dependant on the GPS, that a long distance rider can't find the kitchen without one.

Pembina, ND is a major border crossing into Canada. I-29 passes the town and heads straight into Canada, where it becomes Canadian Route 75. In other words, finding Canada should not be a problem! I had pulled off I-29 and into a gas station to fuel up. As I was leaving the station, the GPS was guiding me away from I-29 and pointing me east. For some reason, this seemed perfectly normal to me. I followed the GPS, moving farther away from the Border crossing at Pembina. For some reason, the GPS wanted me to cross the border near Emerson, Manitoba.

I wound my way through dark, deserted streets, thinking this must be one small border crossing. I eventually ended up at a US Customs checkpoint, south of Emerson. I spoke to the inspector there, who informed me the border was closed on the Canadian side and would not open until the next morning. I was stunned. How can you close a country? I was told that I could go to Pembina and cross there. I stupidly asked 'where is Pembina?',

even though I had just been there. As he gave directions, I came to the realization that I was just there. Wasted time.

I headed back to Pembina, cursing myself the whole time. The stupid mistakes were going to continue. I passed the gas station where I had just refueled 45 minutes before. Just beyond the gas station, I jumped back on I-29 north and came to the border crossing about a mile later. I waited in line, happy to have finally found Canada. As I pulled into a long line, there was only one lane open at Canadian Customs. Just after I pulled into the line, another lane opened up and I quickly hopped out of line and went to the open lane.

I was asked the routine questions. No weapons. No tobacco. No alcohol. The Canadian Inspector advised me to pick up some bear spray, since I told him that I was heading to Alaska. He wished me luck and sent me on my way. I had intended to ride north to Trans Canadian Route 1 and take that west. The GPS was acting up. It kept directing me to make a U-Turn. I knew I wanted to head in a general northwest direction, avoiding Winnipeg. I had a sense of disorientation and was not sure of my route at all. And the GPS kept screaming to make a u-turn. I finally relented and made a u-turn.

For some strange reason, the GPS kept routing me south. I came back to the border crossing at Pembina. I knew I didn't want to re-enter the United States, and meet the same Customs person for a second time in a half hour. I cursed myself again and made another u-turn. This time I kept going north until I finally hit TC 1, no matter how much the GPS objected. Two stupid blunders had easily cost me an hour. I had a couple of other times where the GPS wanted to route me well out of my way. I learned to ignore these variations when they occurred in the future. Other riders had told me the GPS would lose some of its accuracies the further north I went.

I pulled into Barney's Motel in Brandon, Manitoba around 2:00 AM CST (3:00 AM EST) Saturday morning. I was pretty tired, but felt that I had rode a pretty good ride that day. I was about 100 miles ahead of schedule and had put another 1200 miles behind me. I unloaded the bike got into bed

even quicker than the night before. I set the Meanie for 3 hours and was quickly asleep.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Day Three**

The routine was the same as I awoke a short time later. I showered, dressed, had my power bar breakfast, loaded the bike and headed out in the pre-dawn light around 6:00 AM CST (7:00 AM EST). I quickly became accustomed to measuring everything by kilometers instead of miles. Though I will admit that adhering to a speed limit of 100 KPH, became somewhat of a challenge, given the higher limits in the US. Still, I managed to cross Manitoba without incurring the wrath of any of the Canadian Mounties.

Entering Saskatchewan, towns became fewer and farther in between. I also noticed that Saskatchewan had a particularly good crop of large and colorful insects at this time of year. My windshield quickly became a bug encrusted haven. The screen was soon somewhat disgusting, but still very colorful. Anyone who could ride through these swarms in an open face helmet would be a truly tough rider. This would not be me though.

The winds picked up as I approached Regina. Then it got really windy and even windier. This quickly became very fatiguing. The wind came from the sides, came from the back but rarely from the front. It seemed to come from both sides at once. It pulled at my clothing, dangerously ballooning up my jacket on several occasions. My chin became bruised as the wind constantly tried to rip off my helmet. I rode leaning into the wind and it still would push me across two lanes. There was very little traffic so I rode to give myself as much reaction time as possible. But as the hours droned on, I was tiring from fighting the wind. I began to look back fondly on those times when I had ridden through thunder storms around Atlanta. It was a close call as to which was worse.

I stopped in Regina. Trash cans were blowing across the street. Anything not nailed down or secured was at risk from being uprooted. I parked the bike very carefully, so the bike would not be blown over. The lady working at the station told me a particularly strong front was passing over western Canada. I would find out how strong the front had been later in the ride.

I pressed on into Alberta. I rode through Edmonton, passing the home of the Oilers, their NHL team. The winds had finally calmed and the weather again was fairly perfect. I banked more time as I crossed western Alberta and headed into British Columbia.

The Alaska (formerly known as the Alcan Highway) Highway starts in Dawson Creek, BC and continues over 1400 miles to it's terminus in Delta Junction, Alaska, south of Fairbanks. While it is advertised as being 100% paved, this can be misleading. The Highway is littered with 'construction zones'. These are parts of the road that are being repaired, straightened or just being worked on for whatever reason. Because of the short summer season, all such construction is compacted into just a few months. These zones can be a few hundred yards or stretch on for miles. They can also be of varying composition ranging from hard packed dirt (good) to light gravel (okay) to heavy gravel (not so good) to mud (bad) to heavy mud (very bad). And of course, the conditions also cover everything in between. Conditions can change frequently depending on what day or even time of day you are there.

There also seems to be some type "oil" which is sprayed on the Highway when construction crews are putting the finish on the tar chip roads. Very nasty stuff that makes your brakes useless until you can get it all off your brake pads. But other than all of this crap, the Alaska Highway is 100% paved!





**Sheep along the Alaskan Highway**

As I pulled into Dawson Creek, I knew none of this, other than there might be construction on parts of the highway. My idea of construction definitely had an east coast slant. I would learn to hate construction zones on the highway for an entirely different reason.

I happily rode along the Alaska Highway, feeling the adventure was really about to begin. I was finally on the road I had read so much about. This was very cool. I still felt very strong and pressed on. I had planned on stopping east of Dawson Creek, but I wanted to put some more time in that time bank before stopping. I continued on into Fort St. John and finally checked into the Quality Hotel around 10:00 PM PST (1:00 AM EST). I quickly unloaded the bike and fell into bed. I had ridden another 1100 miles toward my goal. More importantly, I was still around 100 miles ahead of schedule. Once again, I set the Meanie for 3 hours and fell into a deep slumber.

## **Chapter 7**

### **A Very Long Day**

I awoke with a start a little later as the Meanie announced it was time to rise and greet a new day. As I got into the shower, I noticed for the first time my body was beginning to show some wear. My muscles were sore and

tired. I had my usual power bar breakfast and got dressed. I loaded the bike and went to the front desk to check out. The young lady behind the desk made some comment about me getting an early start on the day, which I found somewhat odd, because I didn't think it was that early. I was operating on east coast time and had once again, forgot about the time change. I was actually checking out of the hotel around 2:30 AM PST. No wonder she thought it was early.

I went out to the bike and started suiting up to ride. The night air was noticeably colder than it had been just a few hours earlier. I put my heated jacket on, but rejected other cold weather gear, as I thought the sun would be up in an hour or two. I was seriously mistaken and would ride a long time before the sun came up.

As I started to pull out, the desk clerk came running out frantically waving at me. I stopped to see what she wanted. She was saying something about Fort Nelson. I was anxious to get going and did not want to get into a conversation with her, especially since I was wearing ear plugs and could not hear much of what she was saying. She said something again about Fort Nelson and I replied, "Yes, I am going to Fort Nelson." She just stood there and stared at me. I gave her a friendly wave and headed off into the night. I didn't know it at the time, but this was going to be a very long day. A very long day indeed.

Since I had started riding on the Alaska Highway, I had seen numerous moose warning signs. I had mixed reactions to them. I really wanted to see a moose on the trip, but I was also aware of the hazard they posed to motorcyclists. I figured it would be nice to see them by the side of the road, at a good distance. As I left Fort St. John, moose signs became more frequent. In fact, they were so frequent I came to expect a moose around every corner. They were never there.

I was pretty sure I was in deer, elk or caribou country. Some type of four legged creature that could ruin my trip was probably lurking about. I was also pretty sure there was a bear or two in the woods around me. I cut my

speed way back. I was significantly below the speed limit, constantly scanning the road side for those tell tale signs. I never saw anything.

What did happen was that I was getting cold very quickly. After an hour or so, my hands and feet were very cold. I kept looking at the clock on the bike and wondering when the sun comes up around here. I didn't want to stop and take the time to put my heated socks on, nor did I want to switch to my heavy winter gloves just yet. So I rode on thinking the sun would be coming up any minute. I began thinking no wonder the sun is out at midnight up here. It doesn't even rise until 9:00 AM!

Eventually, as I approached Fort Nelson, the sun started creeping above the horizon. I drove on the wrong side of the road trying to catch the sun's rays. Slowly, I began to warm up. It looked like it was going to be a glorious day. I didn't notice it at the time, but I had not seen one vehicle on the road since leaving Fort St. John. Nearly 250 miles passed without a vehicle coming or going. I would soon see why.

As I got closer to Fort Nelson, I started seeing the devastation. Along both sides of the road, trees had been splintered and thrown down by an incredible force. Power and telephone lines were strewn amongst the trees. Some of the trees were across the road, though the road was still very passable. Ice glistened off the fallen trees. It was all very eerie yet quite beautiful. The destruction was in pockets and spread out over a large area leading into Fort Nelson.

I pulled into the first gas station in town. The trip odometer moved up toward 270 miles, so I was approaching the limits of my range. Two sawhorses stood in front of the pumps with a simple sign on both. "No Power No Gas". It hit me like a sledgehammer. In an instant I knew what the hotel clerk had been trying to tell me. I could read her lips in my mind. "Fort Nelson has no power!" I was not immediately worried, but I could see 'worry' from where I was. Surely, out here in the middle of nowhere, somebody would be operating on generator power. I moved on through town to the next gas station. Again, there was no power. They were not even open. It was the same story all over town.

I saw a man trying to use a pay phone around the side of the station with no success. I rode over to him to see if I could find out what had happened. He told me that a series of tornados had come through two days ago and the town had been without power since then. Two Days!? Now I was officially worried. He had been stranded there with his wife waiting for the power to come back on. No one seemed to know when that would be. Based upon what I saw riding into town, I didn't think it would be too soon. He did not know how far north the power outage extended as he was traveling south. He did know he could not make the next 100 mile stretch south to the next town. As the saying goes, "Houston, we have a problem."

I started ticking off my options. I could stay and wait to see if the power was restored this morning. I thought this to be a long shot. The next town on my map was Summit Lake, over 100 miles away. No one knew if they had power or not, but it did not matter. I knew I could probably eek out another 60, maybe 70 miles using the fuel left in the bike and the gallon I carried in reserve, but I would never make 100 miles. I could backtrack 100 miles to Sikanni, fill up and then set out for Summit Lake. This was a safe, but time consuming option. There was another option, but I didn't see it at the time. With no idea of what to do, I continued north, praying that there would be some source of fuel along the way. As a last resort, I thought I could wave someone down and get gas from them. I reasoned everyone up here must carry extra fuel. Of course, it would probably be diesel fuel.

I rode north, keeping my speed way down and trying to be steady with the throttle. I coasted down hills, I climbed slowly. Mostly I stared at the fuel gauge, willing it not to move. I left town with two bars still on the gauge. A few miles outside of town, it dropped to one bar. I pressed on. It then occurred to me what I should have done back in town. I should have stood in the middle of town and yelled at the top of my lungs that I would pay \$100.00 for 8 gallons of gas. I carried a siphon hose with me for just such an occasion. I never should have left town without being certain I could make it to the next town. As I silently cursed myself again, the last remaining fuel bar disappeared from the gauge. It was like being stabbed in the heart. I knew I had about 30-40 miles left on reserve, plus the one gallon I carried.

I fought the urge to turn around and pressed on. I ducked low behind the windshield to make myself more aerodynamic. I still had not seen any vehicles on the road since leaving the Fort St. John. I had gone nearly 300 miles without passing anyone. I thought to myself, well at least it couldn't get much worse. The weather was good and if I had to wait by the side of the road to be rescued, well so be it. I began planning when I would put the extra gallon in the tank. I did not want to run the engine dry and risk having problems with a restart. I decided to put it in after hitting 30 miles into the reserve.

A few miles later, I rounded a curve and saw a large black object in the middle of the road. My mood lightened. My first moose! At least I was going to see some wildlife. I wanted to get close enough for a picture without startling it. As I got closer, I killed the engine and glided to a stop some 50 yards from the moose. But it was not a moose. It was a bear. A very large bear. Things had just gotten worse.

There he sat. Smack dab in the middle of the road. His butt could not have been more centered on the road. He sat on the center line with paws in each lane like a big, black dog. He looked at me. I looked at him. There we sat, neither one of us doing a thing. I tried to figure out what he was doing, but had no clue. Maybe bears up here like to scratch their bums on the road. Who knew? An old joke ran through my head. What can a large bear do when sitting in the middle of the road? Anything he wants. Ha...Ha!

I thought about honking the horn to scare him off. Then I remembered reading an article before I left about some motorcyclist honking his horn at a moose or bear or some other type of woodland creature. It startled the animal into charging right at the bike. I scratched horn honking off of my to-do list. At least I was not running out of gas while sitting there. I then tried to decide what kind of bear it was. I know little about bears, but I did know he wasn't white, so he wasn't polar bear. I classified him the only way I could. He was a non-polar, big bear! I suddenly became worried about being too close to him. The roadway was only one lane each way here, with very narrow shoulders. Swinging a quick u-turn while a bear charged could present a

problem. Riding past him was not an option. There just wasn't enough room to be sure you would safely make it without being swatted, or worse.

I slowly began backing the bike, my eyes still transfixed on my new found friend. I switched on the ignition to put some distance between us. And then, he just got up. His movement startled me at first. He had sat so still for so long. As if bored with our encounter, he slowly sauntered into the woods. He was gone, just like that. I started up the bike and cautiously rode on. Running out of gas might be a little more complicated than just sitting by the side of road and waiting for help. I tried to decide if a bear could smell power bars. I also regretted not picking up any bear spray.

Shortly after my bear incident, I came across a small store sitting beside the road. Some trailers were also there, probably serving as hotel rooms, but more importantly, two gas pumps were there. My heart leapt. I let out a huge scream. I was not going to get eaten by a bear. Oh Happy Day! There was a long line of vehicles waiting at the pumps. I pulled right up to the front, not even thinking about cutting in front of everyone else. I didn't care. I was not going to be eaten by a bear. That was all that mattered.

Some other cars were parked in the muddy lot in front of the store. People were just starting to mill about. Apparently, many had spent the night there, sleeping in their cars waiting to buy gas when the store opened in the morning. After parking the bike I went up to the door to see when they opened. It appeared the store was also the home of the husband and wife that owned the store. The sign stated they opened up at 10:00 AM. It also said they would be closed for a week starting later on today for vacation. Timing is everything, I thought.



**Fuel Stop in Steamboat**

I looked at my east coast watch and saw that it was after 11:00 AM. What the heck is going on? Don't these people want to make money? I began walking around the house/store banging on windows to see if anyone was around. In essence, I was making an ass out of myself, since it was really only a little after 8:00 AM here. The wife came out and stated she would open up as soon as she took a shower. They had power to pump gas. It was around then I realized what time it really was. From that point on, I was very careful to pay more attention to the time changes and the correct local time.

As things turned out, the couple could not have been nicer. The husband manned the cash register and provided free coffee to all the weary travelers. Everyone talked about where they were going and where they had come from. It felt good to have some interaction with other people, if even only for a few minutes. The wife stated that they were down to only 700 liters of gas in their tank. She expected to be out of gas by noon. With no success, she had tried to arrange an emergency delivery of gas for today. She did not know how long they would be out of gas. Everyone knew Fort Nelson was out of power, which is why they had stopped there and not continued on south.

Once again fortune smiled upon me. The wife gassed my bike up first, her rationale being that the other trucks and vehicles in line would seriously dent her supply. She would have to ration sales to make sure that everyone got something. I paid for my gas, profusely thanking everyone for letting me

go first and to the couple for opening up early. I looked at the receipt as I got ready to pull off. Steamboat, British Columbia. Not on my map, nor is it in Streets and Trips, nor on the GPS. But I can tell you that the two residents of Steamboat have my thanks and appreciation. I wish I had gotten their names so I could drop a note of thanks. If anyone is ever in Steamboat, BC, stop in, have cup of coffee and tell them I will remember their hospitality for a long time.

## **Chapter 8 Into the Great Far North**



**Caribou on the Road**

The next part of the Alaska Highway, going through Summit Lake and onto Muncho Lake was simply stunning. Breathtaking views of crystal clear lakes, mountain tops and deep valleys. I was star-struck trying to take it all in. Wildlife was everywhere. Caribou were on and beside the road. I passed and rode through a large herd of wild buffalo grazing right next to the road. I thought I could reach out and touch them, but they were twice as big as me and my bike. They seemed gently enough though. I saw wild stone sheep on the road. They apparently enjoy the salt on the road and simply lick the road.



There were several herds of the sheep. They were wary of me, but did not run off when I stopped next to them and snapped a few pictures. This was fun and it was turning out to be quite a morning.



**Alaskan Highway Near Stone Mountain**

I also had finally seen a couple other cars. Not exactly a traffic jam, but it felt nice to know you weren't the only thing on the road. I had traveled somewhere near 400 miles without seeing another car on the road. I found this to be unbelievable. I would soon encounter the parade of RV's that travel up and down the Alaska Highway.

North of Summit Lake, I passed by Stone Mountain, with its' imposing views. The highway winds along the side of the mountain providing stunning vistas. Severe drop-offs tend to get your attention as well. Going past Stone Mountain, I began descending toward Muncho Lake. One of the few cars on the road came around curve up ahead. As the car came out curve approaching me, it slowly began drifting across the double yellow line into my lane. At first this didn't concern me much, thinking he had just taken the curve a little wide and he would soon adjust. Still, I moved over in my lane toward the shoulder and reduced my speed.

This quickly escalated to sheer terror as the car continued coming into my lane, directly at me. I swerved violently to the right. A scream rose out of

my throat. I braced for the inevitable head on collision. My front tire dug into the gravel on the shoulder and began plowing toward the edge of shoulder. The car continued coming at me, swerving back to my left just before striking me. He overcompensated when he finally realized where he was and caused his rear tire to fishtail onto my shoulder, showering me with debris. I was going to go down and this was not going to be good. Gravel filled my face shield.

I struggled to keep the bike up as the rear of the car sailed past me. My front tire kept tracking through the gravel toward the drop-off. I pushed as hard as I could on the bike to get it back on road. Slowly, oh so slowly it seemed, the front of the bike began tracking back toward road. When it finally pulled itself back onto hard top, I braked to a quick stop. It was only then that I realized that I was still screaming. I stood there shaking trying to figure what had just happened. It had happened so fast and was over in less than a second. I got off the bike to check for damage. My hands shook so bad, I nearly couldn't get my helmet off.

Gravel had gotten into my jacket. I was covered with dust. I took the jacket off and shook it out. I was mainly concerned that I had cut a tire or had lost a light in the rock spray coming off the oncoming car, or as I was now calling it, "the motherfucking car of death". Outside of a few scratches in the face shield, all appeared to be as it should be. No damage that I could find.

It was as close to death I had ever come to on a bike. I thought what a stupid way to die. I also thought if I had gone off the edge of the road and been killed, everyone would just say, "Oh he was just too tired and drove right off the mountain." And there would be nothing to contradict that notion. The car had not stopped, and I doubt he knew what happened to me. The fact that no one would ever know that I had died because someone had forced me off a mountain bothered me.

I thought of a friend, Jim Young and how he had died when going off the road. I wondered if someone had forced him off the road. I looked back at the road and the gravel shoulder. There was no evidence of what had occurred. No one would ever have known how it happened. I slowly began to

realize that riding the motorcycle was not what almost killed me. It had saved me. Had I been in a car, there was no doubt there would have been a head on collision at a substantial speed. Only by being on the bike had I been able to squeeze between the car and edge of the road. This made me feel a little better, but only a little better.

I got back on the bike and slowly continued on. Every car I past for a long time was studied hard and long for any threatening move. I should have enjoyed the ride around Muncho Lake a little more, but I was still quite shaken. My mind came back to focus quickly as I hit my first construction zone near Watson Lake.

At first, I didn't know what to make of hit. No one was around. There were some barricades up, some type of caution sign but the road just ended. There was nothing. No construction workers, no tractors, no trucks, no nothing. I thought I must have missed a sign or something. There was just nothing here. The road ended and there was just dirt everywhere.



**Typical Construction Zone on the Alaskan Highway**

As I sat there trying to figure out what to do, a pick up truck came up behind me, drove past the barricades and continued on through piles of dirt. Well, when in Rome.... I fell in behind the truck and followed him. He seemed to know what he was doing. The dirt was hard packed and smooth. It was pretty easy going, although I did stay far enough behind the truck to avoid the dust cloud. About a half mile later, we emerged on the other side.

So that was a construction zone. Pretty neat. I would find out that they were not all like this one. Not at all.

It had been one heck of a day up to this point. Just to recap to this point for those that may have not been paying attention. Up early, no power, no gas, big bear, gas up, buffalo, caribou, sheep, no moose, near accident, construction zone. I was also able to cover the large portion of Alaska Highway between Fort Nelson, BC and Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, during the daytime, when fuel was readily available. Had I hit this section at night, I would have had to stop and wait for gas stations to open up in the morning.

I pulled into Whitehorse, YT a little after 6:00 PM PST (3:00 EST) to gas up. I also decided to put all my cold weather gear on, since I planned on riding well into the night. After refueling, I quickly stripped down to my riding shorts right at the island. I started layering up, including the electric socks. The owner of the station was just locking up. He asked me where I was heading to tonight. I told him I intended to be in Fairbanks by morning and then up to Prudhoe Bay the next day. After the usual bewildered look, he told me he didn't think so. I said, "Not only that, but I'll be back here in a few days and you can buy me a soda if I make it. If I don't, I'll buy you one." He kind of chuckled and replied, "We'll see", as he walked off.



**More Dirt and Gravel on the Alaskan Highway**

All bundled up and ready for coming night, I set off toward Kluane Glacier region. At this point, I was not only significantly ahead of my schedule, but I was also ahead of the record pace by several hours. I encountered a few more construction zones, all of fairly short duration and in reasonably good shape. None of them had any workers present. Every vehicle was left to their own devices to pick their route through.

I arrived in the Kluane Glacier region as the sun was just starting to drop behind the mountains to west. I rode along the highway, peering up at the mountains and massive glaciers. Kluane Lake is formed by the runoff from the various glaciers and it is huge. The highway works its way from the southeast side of the lake and then over to the western side of lake. It follows the shoreline of the lake to the north, passing the small towns of Destruction Bay and Burwash Landing. As I approached these towns, darkness started to fall and along with it came the first few drops of rain.

By the time I refueled in Destruction Bay, the rain had started coming down in earnest. There were large areas of construction in this area. Between the rain and the mud it created, my progress significantly slowed. As I slid, slogged and churned my way through each construction zone, every vehicle on the road would pass me. I tried to stay as much to the right as possible, but often the safest (easiest) path would be in the middle of the road or even to the far left.



**Approaching the Kluane Glacier Area**

Because I was hitting these areas on the weekend, there were no back-ups, no pilot cars and no delays. This turned out to be a two-edged sword. Because there was no one working, no one was there doing any grading or other maintenance that would maintain the quality of the road through the zone. The zones were filled with deep vehicle tracks, water filled gullies, large rocks and wheel bashing potholes. The more it rained the worse it got. And as darkness closed in, seeing and navigating through the zones got tougher and tougher.

The next 150 miles to the Alaskan border was pure hell. Rain poured down. The road beat the hell out of me and the bike. My speed dropped to under 20 mph in many spots. I was praying to just keep the bike upright. Once total darkness fell, the construction areas were impossibly treacherous. I often could not even tell which way to go. Other vehicle traffic became non-existent, which was at least somewhat of a blessing in that I didn't have to worry about being run over by a speeding 4x4 flying through the mud.

I began to long for the border and US roads. I thought clearly the roads had to be better on the US side. Obviously the Canadians knew nothing about road building. No one would actually refer to this crap as a road. I began to dread the construction signs. Every time I cleared a zone, it seemed that as soon as I got up to 40 or 50 mph, I would hit a sign for another zone. I cursed the signs. I cursed the engineers. I cursed any and everything that came to mind.

And I was tired, very tired. Events were catching up to me. I was also beginning to get cold and wet. Water was working its way into the crotch of riding suit and working its way up and down underneath. It was also working its way up my sleeves and down from the neck. And it just rained harder.

Lighting was quickly becoming a problem. Both Piaa lights had been jarred loose so their aim was now off. The rain made them even less effective. The powerful lights would simply reflect off the raindrops and back at me. The Motolights worked fine, but they were constantly being covered over by mud. The first few times this happened I would stop and clear them, but I soon gave up on that and just rode on.

Mostly as I rode, there was nothing. No towns, no gas stations, no hotels. I really needed to stop and regroup. But there was no place to stop. I was around 50 miles from the border working my way through the umpteenth construction zone when I made a serious mistake. I had somehow lost the road and was riding in soft mud about 20 feet right of the road. The bike sank into the mud. I then compounded the problem by stopping and losing all my momentum. When I put my feet down, I knew the bike had sunk quite a bit in the mud. I couldn't see how far, but I could feel it. Just standing there the bike was pretty unstable. I slowly twisted the throttle. The rear wheel spun. Uh-oh...and the rain just kept coming down.

I just sat there, in the rain, in the dark, in the mud. I had no idea what to do. I thought about just dropping the bike and then trying to figure out a way to pull it out. Then I decided to just wait for a vehicle to come by and to try to get some help. Surely one of those trucks would have a rope or a chain to pull me out. So I waited. But no one came. Five minutes went by and I still sat there in the rain, in the mud, in the dark. After about 10 minutes, I decided this was not a very good plan. I could be sitting here for quite a while, and even if someone went by there was no guarantee they would stop in this storm to see if I needed help.

I finally decided to spin the rear wheel until one of two things happened. The bike would either sink in the mud up to the Jesse Bags or the rear tire would grab something to pull itself out. I said a prayer for a big rock to be under the tire and started spinning. Straddling the bike, I was able to get a small rocking motion going. I tried to keep my weight off the bike. Finally, the tire bit something and the bike lurched forward. I held on as the bike started pushing its way through the mud. I tried to slowly guide it toward the road, finally hitting some firmer gravel. I didn't stop again until I was back on hardtop. Another bullet dodged. I trudged on.

I finally reached the border. Soon I would be on good old American roads! I crossed the 20 mile no man's land between the two checkpoints. That section was terrible. I crept along, barely making 20 mph. When I finally arrived on the US side, there were 2 or 3 inspectors working the one lane. They just stared at me. I had to look like a drowned rat. I was happy to pull in

under the overhang and to be out of rain for the first time in hours. I wouldn't have objected to a full and complete search and even a few hours in dry warm cell would have been fine at this point.

After a few questions they cleared me back into the US. One of the inspectors told me that I probably should look for a hotel and that the weather was supposed to get worse! I didn't think that was possible. I made some comment about the road being terrible on the Canadian side and asked if they were any better on the US side. My morale went even lower they said "no".

How could this be? Americans do everything better, right? Could it be that the road sucks, because the road just sucks and is very difficult to maintain? In my beaten state, I did not want to think that. I had too far to go still. A more reasonable answer occurred to me. A Canadian firm had the contract to work the US side of the highway. Yeah, that had to be it. I was grasping for anything.

I pulled out of the checkpoint very depressed and tired. I wanted off this bike and off this road. But mostly I just wanted to be anywhere but where I was. I started dreaming of home and a warm, dry bed. That was all I thought about. I began just dreaming about getting off the bike and kicking into some ditch. I knew I was hitting the wall and could not go much farther. I had to get off this bike and get some rest.

I rode looking for anyplace to stop. Anywhere that would give me shelter from the rain. There was nothing. I rode on. As I approached Tok, AK, the rain slackened and actually came to a stop. This lightened my mood somewhat, but I still needed rest. I pulled into Tok, some 100 miles from the border, around 2:00 AM. I re-fueled the bike and asked the clerk about hotels. He said there were three in town. One was closed for repairs. The other two were right around the corner.

I rode to the first. There was a sign on the door. "Closed for the night. Go Away." I knocked anyway. No answer. I went to the other hotel. No sign, but the same result. I put the bike on the center stand and tried to sleep sitting on the bike. I have been able to do this with varying success in the past. This time it didn't work.



I went back to the gas station and told the clerk I couldn't get a room. I also told him that I really needed to get some sleep. I told him I would pay him if I could just sleep on the floor of the store for little while. He told me that it would be against company policy to let me do that. Yeah, right. I asked if I could try to get some sleep in the parking lot and he said that it would be okay.

I went back outside in the cold and found a dry part of the lot to lie on. I set the Meanie for two hours, shoved it under my helmet and went to sleep. I woke less than an hour later, shivering from the cold. The rain had started up again. This really sucked. I felt a little better and decided to try and make the next town to look for a hotel. I plugged the electrics back in and began to warm up again. I got back on the bike and rode on.

I arrived at Delta Junction, the end of the Alaska Highway, a while later. The rain continued to come down, though not as heavy as before. The sun was also starting to come up. I was now pretty thoroughly soaked to the skin, but with the electrics, I was able to stay fairly warm. I felt reasonably awake after my short nap. Fairbanks still beckoned some 100 miles to the north. I thought I could make it there, get a hotel room for a few hours and then tackle the Dalton Highway after getting some serious rest.

As I pushed on toward Fairbanks, the rain increased again. I kept telling myself, just 70 more miles, just 60 more miles, etc. Fairbanks became my goal. Get there, get dry and get rested. I also knew I was well ahead of a record pace for the ride at this point. I thought I could get some good sleep and still have a good shot at the record. The rain became heavier.

Just south of Fairbanks, I saw my first moose and not in a good way. I must have come upon the accident shortly after it occurred. The moose was lying in the middle of the road, apparently dead. The minivan that had hit the moose was off to the side of road. There wasn't much left of the van. It appeared everyone, with the exception of the moose, was okay. I felt bad for the lady that had been driving the minivan, but I also felt bad for the moose. Even though the moose was dead, it is still an eye opener to see how big they are first hand. I hoped to see one in a better setting before my trip ended.

I arrived in Fairbanks around 7:00 AM, Sunday morning. I did not know what to do. But I saw a McDonalds and decided some hot chocolate sounded good. I was shivering pretty hard at this point, as well as being soaked through. I ordered two hot chocolates and immediately began stripping off the wet clothes. I created quite a stir, but I didn't care. I was near a collapse. I had been riding for nearly 30 hours, much of it in horrible conditions.

I drank the first two hot chocolates and went back for more. I decided on a little breakfast. I had eaten nothing other than power bars since Wednesday. This ride had been so much harder than I had anticipated and I still had over 400 miles of probably worse road to go to reach Prudhoe Bay. I was ready to call it quits. The last thing I wanted to do was get back on that bike.

I called Nancy. I told her I was done. I didn't want to do this. I didn't want to be here. I did not think the Dalton Highway would be passable in this weather. This had been too hard. She listened and was supportive. And then she delivered a swift kick in the pants. If I didn't finish this ride, I would regret it for a long time. Whether I actually made it up the Dalton Highway was not important as long as I felt I had given it my best. And she was right. She wished me best and said to call her as soon as I knew what I was going to do.

The couple at the table next to me had been watching me with special attention. The lady came up and asked me if I was one of those "Iron Butt" riders and if I was going to Prudhoe Bay. I replied that I guess I was one of those riders, but I didn't feel particularly like one at this point. I hadn't decided about going to Prudhoe Bay, but that was my goal. I asked if they had been up there. Neither one had been any further than the Arctic Circle. The lady replied that when she rode up in her Jeep, the road had not been too bad. She wasn't sure what the road would be like in this weather.

I thanked them for their input. I finished my breakfast and started thinking about getting a room. I needed somewhere to dry my clothes and maybe stash some gear to lighten the bike. As I sat there, I remembered one of pet peeves about every McDonalds I had ever been to. None of them have

paper towels in the bathroom. They all have warm air hand dryers. I nearly sprinted to the bathroom to check out the bathrooms.

Eureka! Warm air hand dryers! I immediately went back out and retrieved all my wet clothes and started drying them all one by one. There I stood in my underwear drying each piece of clothing one at a time. An employee came into the bathroom. He took one look at the nearly naked guy and turned around and left. Twenty minutes later, I was not only dressed but I was nice, warm and toasty in my now dry and warm clothes. I felt tons better. I was still tired, but I felt a lot better than I had when I pulled into the parking lot.

The Dalton Highway actually begins about 84 miles north of Fairbanks. I decided to ride up to the start of the highway, just to see what it looked like. At that point I could make a go or no go decision. If I decided not to go because of weather or fatigue, then I would come back to town and get a hotel room for a few hours. As I pulled out of the parking lot, the rain subsided again, and a small sliver of sunshine began to peek through the morning sky.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Road From Hell**

I rode up to the start of the Dalton Highway. I quickly became tired once again. I really needed to stop and get some rest. I decided to pull off and grab a quick nap at the next turnoff. Just as I had decided that, I came up to the start of highway. Pavement ends, the Dalton Highway was about to start. The Milepost guidebook describes the Dalton Highway thusly:

“The highway is named for James William Dalton, an Arctic engineer involved in early oil exploration efforts on the North Slope of Alaska. It was built as a haul road between the Yukon River and Prudhoe Bay during construction of the Trans-Alaska pipeline, and was originally called the North Slope Haul Road. Construction of the road began April 29, 1974, and was completed 5 months later. The road is 28 feet wide with 3-6 feet of gravel

surfacing. Some sections of road are underlain with plastic foam insulation to prevent thawing of the permafrost beneath the surface.”

“The Dalton Highway is unique in its scenic beauty, wildlife and recreational opportunities, but it is also one of Alaska’s most remote and challenging roads. On some sections of gravel road, the washboard can be so severe your teeth rattle. Calcium Chloride is used only in limited areas on the road to control dust; it is corrosive to vehicles and slippery when wet. There are several steep (10-12 percent) grades. Flat tires are a common occurrence on this road. Watch for ruts, rocks and dust in dry weather, potholes in wet weather and trucks and road maintenance equipment at all times. There are soft shoulders and abrupt drop-offs from gravel road to tundra; pull over with care. Services along the Dalton Highway are limited.”

Approximately 25% of the 414 miles is paved. Unfortunately those sections are never long enough, but they do give rider and bike some needed respite during the ride. Being able to make it up the Dalton Highway was the part of the ride I feared most.

Prior to this ride I had very little dirt riding experience. In fact, the vast majority of my dirt riding experience had come during the past 24 hours on parts of the Alaska Highway. I knew there were better, more experienced riders than myself who had tried to make it up the road and failed because of weather, road conditions, bike breakdowns, tire failure or any number of reasons beyond their control. Towing a disabled bike off the Highway was extremely expensive. I did not know if I would make it, but there was only one way to find out. I pointed the bike north and left the world of pavement behind.

The beginning of the Highway was thick, heavy mud, almost clay-like. After a few miles, I gained a little confidence, though at the rate I was going I might reach Prudhoe Bay sometime in September. I tried different methods. I rode in tire tracks, I rode outside tire tracks, I rode in the middle and I rode on the edges. Nothing seemed to work all the time, but I started to get more comfortable. Crossing deep tire tracks was always a thrill as the mud tried to rip the handlebars from your hands.



**Haul Road, South of the Brooks Range**

As I climbed through the first moderate grades, the bike pulled smoothly through the mud. I held my breath waiting for the rear tire to slide out, but it held firm. I learned to completely pull off the road and stop as trucks flew by. Some truck drivers would slow, others just flew by, showering you with mud, rocks and dirt.

I had just finished climbing a small grade and saw a truck start up the hill behind me. I pulled over to wait and let him pass. Taking a few minutes to rest didn't hurt either. As the truck went past, his right, rear tire threw out a golf ball sized rock. It flew straight and true striking me in the middle of face shield. The rock would have hit me square between the eyes had my shield been up. As it was, the shield cracked but was still serviceable. I quickly learned to duck way down when passing any truck.



**Waiting for the Truck (visible over my windshield)  
to Climb the Grade in Front of Me**

After the first 30 miles or so, the surface turned to hard packed gravel, almost stone surface. I was able to pick up speed here, moving up to 50 mph at points. I was beginning to think this was going to be a lot easier than I thought. I was zipping along riding down a grade when I hit something at the bottom. I don't know what it was, rock, pothole...it didn't matter. The handlebars were pulled from my hands and the bike bottomed out. My head went down and struck my tank bag, as the bike continued on in full tank-slapper mode. As my head came up I was able to grab the left handlebar and gain control of the bike. I coasted to a stop. Okay, perhaps I had been hasty about the "easier than I thought" thing. I continued on a little wiser and much more cautious.

I came across a tour bus a while later that had stopped to allow everyone to get off the bus and take pictures of the pipeline. I thought this might be the Arctic Circle monument, though I was still some 50 miles short of that. I stopped and asked what was going on. This turned out to be a mistake as nearly everyone on the bus seemed to want to have their picture taken with the crazy guy on the bike, covered with mud. I didn't want to get off the bike for fear that it would tip over in the mud, so I dutifully stood there while group after group trudged over to me in the mud to have their picture taken. It really didn't take very long and gave me a short break from the road. As I pulled off,

I chuckled to myself about all the tourists that would be heading back to Fairbanks with shoes covered in mud up to the ankles.



**Typical Haul Road Grade**

I reached the bridge across the Yukon River at milepost 55. The bed of the bridge is constructed of wooden planks. I was not too worried since the bridge regularly held trucks much heavier than me. It was quite a long way down though. I rode on, getting banged, bounced and generally bashed around.

I stopped for gas at the Hot Spot Café just past the Yukon River. After I pulled off the road into a muddy lot, I gassed up from the back of a pickup truck loaded with fuel barrels. This stop turned out to be unnecessary. I had more than enough fuel to reach Coldfoot, AK, the halfway point on the highway. And I could not reach Prudhoe Bay without refueling in Coldfoot. I wasted time for this stop, but I had been paranoid about running out of gas, since my exploits near Fort Nelson.

A short time later, I reached pavement again. The pavement would continue on until north of the Arctic Circle at milepost 115. I wished it would go much further, but I took advantage of the smooth ride while it lasted. I decided not to stop at the Arctic Circle monument for the obligatory photo opportunity. I could do that on the way back and did not want to waste the time doing it now. Most people turn around at the circle and head back to

Fairbanks, but I was continuing on. North of the Arctic Circle, I would be entering the land of the midnight sun.

Sadly, the pavement ended way too soon. I arrived in Coldfoot tired and muddy, but overall in good shape. I had been on the road now for over 36 hours with only my short nap on the ground in Tok, yet still, even though I was tired, I was not sleepy. I was only 244 miles from my goal and I wanted to push on. This would be the last of any services until I reached Prudhoe Bay. The weather continued to be excellent with plenty of sunshine, little wind and no storm clouds in site.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Land of the Midnight Sun**

The road heading north out of Coldfoot was excellent. Smooth and hard packed. I made the best time here as I did on any other section of the highway with the exception of the paved parts. I was easily able to maintain 50+ mph. Unfortunately this would come to an end soon enough. I began my random and frequent encounters with the haul road water trucks and graders. This was an insidiously evil combination.

Working together, these two vehicles turned decent stretches of highway into slippery quagmires. The water trucks would soak long stretches of road and the graders would tear the road up. This is necessary to keep the dust down and to keep the road open all year round. Without such maintenance, the road would just disintegrate to the point that no vehicles could pass through. The road fell into a predictable pattern. Very wet mud with standing water, graded dirt and gravel with large piles in the road and then smoothed over dirt that would cake up all over the bike. As the dirt and gravel dried out, the road got easier to ride on. Eventually though, you were riding across nearly bare rock. And then you would come across another work crew and the pattern would start again. This pattern would continue all the way to Prudhoe Bay.



Riding north out of Coldfoot, I could soon see the mountains of Brooks Range looming ahead of me. The mountains reach an elevation of 9,000 feet. The peaks were covered with fresh snow. The highway cuts through the range at the continental divide via the Atigun Pass at an elevation just over 4600 feet. The 12% grade going up through the pass is very steep, probably the steepest on the entire highway. I stopped at the bottom of the climb to the pass near milepost 242. The extreme drop off on the edge of the road was protected by a guardrail. This was good and bad news. The guardrail was heavily damaged all the way up, where vehicles, presumably trucks had slid against the guardrail, probably on their way down.

The guardrail would keep me from sliding off the steep dirt road, but I would be on the guardrail side of a truck, should a truck start its descent while I was going up. Not an inviting proposition. There would be nowhere to hide. I had noticed on one of the smaller passes that the trucks seem to wait at the top of the pass until they have a clear path to the bottom with no other vehicles trying to go up while they are going down. I don't know if this is some sort of policy, but as I sat at the bottom of the pass and looked up, I sure hoped it was.

I started up the mountain. I kept staring ahead hoping no trucks would appear. The road was actually pretty good going up. Although very steep, it was dry and clear of many of the larger rocks that I had seen below. The dirt held firm with only minimal sliding. I reached the top of the pass and pause to look around. The avalanche warning sign reminded me not to dawdle, but still, it was breathtaking. I could see for what seemed like forever on both sides of the range. I reminded myself to take some pictures on my return trip from this point. I started down the other side of the pass.



**Coming Down Atigun Pass**

I could see there would be no other vehicles in my way on the descent, but I was still worried about a low side slide. I kept the bike in second gear and stayed off the brakes all way down. Upon reaching the bottom of the pass I was elated to be through with what I thought would be the last major obstacle to a strong finish. The weather was considerably cooler on the north side of the range but not uncomfortably so. I turned up the heat slightly and rode on.



**Top of Atigun Pass**

The further north I rode, the sparser the trees and vegetation became. The wind also began picking up. I began seeing more wildlife as I went. Still

no moose, but caribou lingered just off the road. One of the more remarkable things happened, shortly after spotting my first caribou. I was riding along on a reasonably good patch of road, when I looked down and to my left. Running along beside me was a small caribou, probably not more than a few months old. It was almost like being chased by a dog, though he didn't seem to trying to catch me as much as run beside me. If I slowed, he slowed. If I sped up, he sped up. It was almost like he thought I was an adult caribou just running down the road.



**Caribou on the Arctic Plain**

After about a half of a mile of this, he just veered off into the grass and disappeared. I stopped for a second and wondered if I had imagined the whole thing. I pinched myself and it hurt. It seemed to have really happened. When I later told Nancy about the encounter, I got the “Yeah, right” response.



**North of the Brooks Range, Looking Back at Atigun Pass**

I also realized that I had been right to travel south to north for the entire ride. I do not think I could have ridden on an interstate as tired as I was for a couple of reasons. The boring nature of interstate riding would quickly make me too sleepy to continue on. The second reason would be the readily available hotel rooms that would prove to be too big of a temptation to continue on. Either way, I would have stopped to get some rest.

On the Dalton Highway, though tired, it was challenging enough that I never did get very sleepy. I did realize that my reactions were slowing down and I reduced my speed accordingly. There were no other vehicles around to worry about and my speed rarely hit above 30 mph north of the Brooks Range. Once over the Range, I believed it was a forgone conclusion that I would make Prudhoe Bay. I kept my speed down and simply kept chugging along.

When I reached the top of coastal plain that led into Deadhorse my morale got a huge boost when I hit pavement again. I raised my fist and prepared for quick triumphant entrance into town. But this was not to be. The pavement would again end well before I reached town.

Up on the coastal plain, the wind really picked up. This final section of the highway experiences the worst weather of the entire highway. Snow poles are used to mark the highway when it is obscured in snow. There are no trees, no shrubs nor any distinguishing landmarks of any kind that I could

see. Only flat grasslands with the wind whipping through for as far as you can see. I stopped and looked behind me. I could see no sign of the mountains I had crossed. They had long since disappeared below the horizon.

I was ready to be done. This was at the limits of my riding. I started the countdown to Prudhoe Bay all back on dirt road again and with the familiar water trucks in my path. Thirty miles, twenty five miles. At twenty miles I actually started getting a little giddy. Ten miles. Shortly there after, I could see a small bump on the horizon. The outcropping consisted of nothing more than what appeared to be concrete and steel bunkers and buildings. I rode into town standing on my pegs.

To finish the ride, I needed a timed and dated receipt. I looked for an obvious gas station but nothing jumped out at me. Then I spotted the Arctic Caribou Inn, one of the two hotels in town. I parked the bike in front and went in. I asked the clerk if the hotel's receipts printed the date and time. He stated that they did. I said, "Sell me something...anything." I bought a postcard and carefully checked for the date and time. They were there. I then set out to find a witness.



**Arriving in Prudhoe Bay**





I located the police officer in town, maybe the only one, but certainly the only one working in a town with a permanent population of 25. After getting his signature, I got the hotel clerk to also witness the end of my ride. And as luck would have it, I also got the last room in the hotel, at a cool \$160.00. I didn't care. I would have paid a lot more.



**A Very Dirty Bike**

I rode across the lot to the Post Office where you can have a picture taken of you and your bike upon arriving. The clerk shot some Polaroid's and asked where I was from. I told him I was from Maryland but that I had just

ridden in from Key West. I told him that I believed I had just set the record for the run from Key West to Prudhoe Bay. He took all my information for their "Wall of Fame" and told me to stop by the next day.

I went back to the hotel to finish checking in. It was then that I realized I had already lost the first receipt from the hotel. I bought more post cards and was more careful with this receipt. There was only one thing more I wanted before going to sleep; one ice cold beer to celebrate. Sadly the clerk told me there was no place to get one in town. Somewhat dejected, I unloaded the bike and carried my mud encrusted luggage to the room. The room was small, but I did not care. It had a bed and that was all that mattered.

I called Nancy and told her that I made it and was safe and sound. Remarkably, I can't get a cell phone signal sometimes 5 miles from my house, but here at the top of the world, she came in crystal clear.

It had been over 43 hours and some 1900 miles since I had checked out of the hotel in Fort St. John, BC. It had indeed been one very, very long day with some of the hardest riding I have ever done. I will never forget it. Key West seemed to be a distant memory. I had left there 4 days, 18 hours and 49 minutes ago. I had bettered the previous record by more than 11 hours. I immediately went to sleep with all my receipts safely tucked under the mattress of the bed. My ride was done.

Nothing is official until the Iron Butt Association says so, but I do not anticipate any problems. I have submitted my paperwork and receipts and I am awaiting verification of the ride. At some point, I am sure someone will do this ride in less time, but it feels nice to be the first one to break the 5 day barrier. My non-riding friends ask me what I get for doing this. I reply, "nothing...maybe a piece of paper." And I just smile.

## Chapter 11 Homeward Bound

I awoke the next morning. I wanted to get on the road as soon as possible before any weather could move in and trap me here. I carried my luggage out to the bike. The temperature on the bike read 32 degrees. A strong wind was blowing off the ocean. I still had one more thing to do before I left town. I walked down to the water and filled my glass vial. I taped it shut and stashed it safely in the finger of a glove, right next to my other vial of water.

As I left the clerk at the hotel told me snow was moving in. I was not going to dawdle. I actually got lost trying to leave town after refueling. It seems stupid but all the buildings looked alike. I nearly drove down the runway that services the town. I was finally able to locate the Dalton Highway again, without the embarrassment of asking someone where the one road out of town was located.

I headed south across the coastal plain as the temperature dropped into the 20's. Snow began blowing horizontally across the landscape. It made the road a messy, quagmire once again. Fortunately the road is very flat until you get off the plain, so I just kept sliding along. Off the plain, the snow subsided and the sun started coming out. Before leaving the Dalton Highway, I would hit more rain, more sun and more rain again. The climate seemed to change every hour or so. On the trip north, I had not encountered one drop of precipitation once I started on the Dalton Highway. I had been very lucky.





**An Arctic Snowstorm**

I took more pictures going south and tried to see more wildlife. Still, I saw no sign of the elusive moose. There were plenty of caribou though. No bears around that I saw, though they had warnings posted in Prudhoe Bay from what appeared to be some recent problems with the Grizzlies in the area.

Atigun Pass had a fresh coat of snow that made the crossing somewhat tricky, but I was considering myself an old hand at dirt now. I was actually sliding through some curves, sort of enjoying it. I also knew what was ahead and was not worried. The Dalton Highway was no longer this scary demon that was going smack me silly. This is not to say the road was any better. It was still the worst piece of crap road I had ever been on. To even call it a highway is a joke.

I stopped at the Arctic Circle and got some pictures. There was even another person there so I was able to get me and bike in front of the marker. I passed the Yukon River and entered the lower section of the highway, which I still think was the worst part. I was determined to not drop the bike at this point. I managed to stay upright, despite a scary moment here or there.



**Arctic Circle on the Way Home**

When I finally reached pavement at the end of the highway, I just got off the bike and looked around. I shot some pictures of the bike. Mud was everywhere. I was a mess, the bike was a mess, but both had survived over 800 miles of the best pounding the Arctic could give. I hopped back on the bike and rode back to Fairbanks. It had taken me 13 hours to make the ride up to Prudhoe Bay on the haul road the day before. The return trip only took 10.



**Blessed Pavement Again**



**Back toward Fairbanks**

I spent the night in a hotel in Fairbanks and left early the next morning. I stopped at a car wash and tried to get some of the mud off the bike, at least to the point where the license plate could be seen and the lights, front and back, would work.

South of Fairbanks, I finally found what I had been looking for the entire trip; the elusive moose. I passed it and saw it standing by the side of the road. I swung a quick u-turn and pulled over. I turned the bike off and got the camera out. A momma moose and her calf were grazing on the side of the road. Momma was not concerned, but the calf remained shy and stayed partially hidden in the bushes. I sat by the side of the road and watched them for about a half an hour. At times, momma would graze up to within 10 feet of me. It almost seemed that I could reach out and touch her. Though tempted, I stayed motionless when she got close. The calf made sure to keep mom between me and him.



### **The Elusive Moose**

I was amazed at their size and how much they could eat. They eventually worked their way back into the woods. I got back on the bike and rode on. As I worked my way south, I saw lots of other bears, caribou, stone sheep and goats, but no more moose. And of all the bears that I saw, none could compare to my friend outside Fort Nelson. All of them seemed very small, and none of them were bold enough to sit in the middle of the road. They would just timidly scamper across. I had learned to look for a hump on the back as a sign that the bear was a grizzly. I can't remember if my friend had a hump or not, but I like to think he did. It makes a better story.

The section of the Alaska Highway that had been such a horror just a few days earlier was now nothing. The road conditions had changed that quickly and of course, I was now riding through during the day in perfect weather. I was shocked by the difference and wondered if I had imagined how difficult the road had been on the way north.

I worked my way home over the next five days, never pushing anything too hard. I did ride straight through from Minneapolis to Maryland, a little over 1,000 miles, but that was only because I was ready to be home and tired of staying in hotels. I had ridden some 12,000 miles since leaving home at the end of July.

## Chapter 12

### No Place Like Home

A few days after being home, I started to take inventory on the bike for damage. I hadn't touched the bike since pulling it into the garage. Aside from dirt and mud being everywhere, including be burnt into the cylinders, here is the tally of the major damage:

- Aeroflow Fairing cracked
- Face Shield cracked
- Left engine guard cracked at the skid plate
- Oil leak at the engine seal with the transmission
- Run-N-Lites blown. The inside of the lights were literally packed with mud
- Both lamps in the Motolights cracked. One continued to work even when broke!
- Jesse Bag mount broke on the right bag. I made it home with the bag strapped to the mount.
- Rear tire was shot, but it got me home. The Metzlers had done their job.

There were some other minor dings and scratches but nothing major. Almost everything listed above was replaced or repaired at no cost by the manufacturers including, Aeroflow, Jesse, Motolight and BMW. You can't beat that.

Winter has long since descended on us here in Maryland and the temperatures have been hovering just above zero for what seems to be forever. When I first returned home, I was sure I would never head back to Prudhoe Bay again. Now, several months removed from the experience, I find myself wanting to go back again this summer. A ride begins with just a few thoughts of some distant destination. The adventure begins from there. This summer may just be in time for another adventure. My pit crew has been voicing some complaints about a real vacation. We shall see.