

Year 1 (August 16-18, 2002)

975 miles

Riders:

Rick Hays (1)
TJ Hays (1)
Ray Gilley (1)
Steve Fahrenkrug (1)
Brice Hochstetler (1)



Initiation - A Travelogue
By Richard Hays

Morning dew hung heavy on the lawn as we rolled out of the driveway Friday on route to Lake of the Ozarks. There were Ray and Steve, who were friends of mine from college, my brother-in-law Brice, my brother TJ, and me. This was our first trip so it was a new concept to ride without fear of making it home on time, no concern for the tongue lashing and added honey-doos that were always lurking behind the front door. There'd be no repercussions on this ride, not today anyway, not even tomorrow, that whip wouldn't crack until Sunday.

The plan was to head down the more scenic route from Omaha along the Loess Hills to Hamburg, IA, then hop on the interstate for a quick ride south. Evidently, "the gods" had other plans for us. Storm clouds began to roll up the highway in a game of chicken we couldn't win and let loose a few sprinkles to make sure we knew they were serious. We bailed on our original plan and turned east onto Highway 34 to avoid the sheet of water we could see falling from the sky a few miles ahead. The alternate route managed to keep us dry, but added at least 50 miles to the trip. Steve said he knew of a motorcycle shop along Highway 34 somewhere near the I-35 interchange just a couple of hours away, so we thought we'd make the best of our detour and check out some of the new eye candy on the showroom floor.

We'd been moving east for an hour and a half when "the gods" tracked us down to unleash their next sadistic prank. TJ and Brice each drove sport bikes and enjoyed the versatility of them. For instance, they could run with two wheels on the pavement or choose the bike's economical feature of riding on one, doing their part to save the rubber tree forest or at least make up for what they wasted burning off their back tires at stop lights. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate the power and speed of a sport bike, but every time I look at somebody on one it reminds me of Wiley Coyote mounted on a sizzling ACME rocket, clutching it nervously, wondering; is it gonna work? Is it gonna blow up? Or will it just leave without me? Well anyway, they were entertaining us by showing off some of their "skills" at 60 mph when TJ's backpack worked its way loose from the netting that held it tight to his back seat. It slipped down between the tire and the fiberglass body molding, dangled above the tire for a moment, then slowly slithered down inch by inch until it touched the tire and was ripped into the wheel well, jamming



between the tire and frame. The wheel let out a screech as it locked up, leaving a trail of melted rubber and smoke behind him. The bike shimmied back and forth as the white cloud chased him. He shifted his weight into the slide trying to keep the bike from dropping or at least hold off the crash until he could slow down a little. As he and the bike slowed he slid from the pavement to the gravel shoulder and came to a stop, amazingly still upright. The stench of scorched rubber rode in on the billowing smoke and dust that finally engulfed him.



His backpack was split open like a gutted carcass. The rear tire looked like it had been scalped, and actually bounced slightly, making a thud sound like an unbalanced washing machine every time the tire made a revolution. Luckily, we were on our way to the bike shop anyway, so we were close enough he could limp his bike there.

At the dealer, we looked around for what seemed to be somewhere close to forever while TJ tried to get his bike into the shop to install a new tire. After we had seen everything in the store at least twelve times, the rest of us went outside by the bikes to wait. I had purchased some Harley Davidson scratch remover compound inside and was trying it out on my brand new paint to get rid of the scuff my bag had worn from being strapped down for comfort instead of functionality when I heard what sounded like a giant pissed off bumble bee, the signature sound of the sport bike. Evil Kneivel himself couldn't have captured the attention of his audience more than the mechanic driving Tj's bike at Mach 1 down the access road right in front of us. TJ came running out of the bike shop in disbelief, a feeling that quickly turned to anger. I'm sure it didn't help his mood that we were all snickering like a pack of hyenas. When the mechanic returned, TJ met him in the back where the mechanic stated the obvious, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were waiting here."

We finally got back on the road and headed south toward the Ozarks after the tire fiasco had cost us two and a half hours. Added to our route change earlier we were now about 5 hours behind where we had thought we'd be.

We stopped in Chillicothe, MO at the Golden Corral for dinner; Mistake. There were so many smokers I double checked the sign above the register to make sure we hadn't wandered

into some study group for lung cancer. At times it was hard to see across the restaurant. I expected them to issue a radar screen with our dinner tray like the airliners use to see their way



through the clouds, but they expected us to find everything on our own. I suppose people make fewer trips to get food for fear of losing their way, sucked up by the fog and never seen again, keeping food costs down and profits high.

Once we hacked up the phflem from dinner, we drove on for another few hours until we arrived at Sedalia. It seemed to be a good place to stop for the night. We were ready for a few beers and some sleep. We pulled over to get gas so I went into the gas station to purchase beverages for our first night, we had definitely earned it. Steve started calling hotels from the payphone outside the station. He soon found out that the Missouri State Fair was in town and there wasn't a room to be had for miles. Now I had this case of Coors Light that I had to strap onto my back seat which was half the width of the case.

I put my bag on top of it and strapped the monstrosity down as tight as the bungi cords would stretch, leaving the seamed end of the box toward my back. As long as I kept the bumps and turns to a minimum and pushed it back into place once in awhile seemed to ride "ok". Now on the 12th hour of a 6 hour trip, it was dark and we were all exhausted, but we had to drive on.

Every place we tried was booked, so we kept moving. Town after town it was the same story. Finally, we stopped at a super 8 in Warsaw to check with them. They were full also, but did call around for us to find the only rooms available in town were at a motel appropriately called the River's End (Damn gods).

As we turned onto the unlit rocky road next to the river and entered the eerie blackness of the River's End Motel lot, I couldn't help thinking I had seen this place in some cheesy horror



flick from the 80's. The parking lot was lined with tall, ghostly trees slowly swaying in the darkness. The large rocks used in the parking lot popped like champagne corks off of our tires as we coasted toward the only evidence of human existence, a red neon light that read "office". We'd been riding since 8:00am

and it was now 10:30pm, so exhaustion beat out our better judgment and we booked two rooms.

We only hung out for about a half hour before going to sleep. TJ kept complaining about having to dodge several silver objects bouncing down the road since we left Sedalia. I'll plead the fifth on that one.

The next morning, I was relieved to find no one had been mutilated in their sleep or received the "deliverance" treatment (we *were* entering hillbilly country). The overnight rain pooled all the dust from the days ride into a trail of spots from fender to fender. We each wiped our bike down with dingy "white" room towels and sped off to breakfast at everyone's favorite American staple of health, McDonalds. Just as we sat down to eat, a monsoon floated in from the west. We ran out to salvage what we could off the bikes and brought it inside to dry.

Once it stopped raining we drove to the Truman Reservoir Observatory. It's a good thing we took the time to clean the bikes, I'd have hated them to be dirty when all that road grime from the fresh rain jumped up and coated them. At the reservoir there were some pretty fantastic views of the lake and dam, along with a lot of cultural



history of the area, fossils, artifacts, and other archeological finds from the original construction of the lake.

Next stop: Jacob's Cave. Rolling through the forest of trees down the mile long entrance road to the cave and seeing the canopy of leaves above us letting just a crack of sunlight in here and there could have been a painting entitled serenity – until you looked to the road. It was more like an ATV trail through the trees. Weaving the bikes down this path of cavernous potholes and washboards took away any relaxation the rest of the scenery may have offered. About three quarters of the way in I swear dueling banjos began to echo in the leaves as they rustled.

The parking lot was no better than the road. We had to dig through a nearby trashcan for soda cans to put under each kickstand so the bikes wouldn't fall over in the muddy lot while we



were inside. The gift shop and entrance to the cave was an old building with a beehive the size of a bowling ball hanging above the front door. We all managed to get inside without being attacked, but I know they were there, taking a break from their little bee ho-down to stare at us through the entrance of the hive, smiling a toothless hillbilly grin, leaning in and nudging each other with their wings saying something like, “That’n there, with the bald spot, he’s mine when he comes out.”

This was the first time I had been in a cave of any size so I was amazed by the formations and underground springs, but the highlight of the experience turned out to be listening to the hillbillies fight in the gift shop at the end of the tour.

“Ya cain’t run this place without me,” the employee shouted. “I’m the only thang keepin this place goin!”

The owner's cheeks blossomed a deep red. "I've bin runnin this place fer years before ya came," he said.

"Yeah! But it was a wreck whin I got here!" the employee interrupted.

Listening to them argue was like watching two tree sloths race, definitely amusing, but you weren't gonna learn any secrets to excel in the event. For just a second I thought they would each take their teeth out and start throwing them at each other, but you can't have everything. The owner fired him right there on the spot with the five of us standing within ten feet of them.

After stowing our jaws back to their upright and locked positions we rode into Osage Beach, stopping at a souvenir shopping area for the unfortunate family members that didn't get to come on this fiasco. We had lunch at a lakeside sport's bar. While there it was suggested that we head toward home and get some of the next day's trek out of the way. So we rode in that direction, following some of the back roads.

When we found ourselves ready to stop for the night it turned out we were approaching, you guessed it, Sedalia; no rooms. We ended up driving west to Warrensburg an hour or so away and found *one* room available.

We got some beer and planned to burn what little was left of our evening by watching the Tua vs. Moorer fight on HBO. About the time we cracked the first beer open the fight was over. We had seen it in its entirety twice before we took the first drink and three times before the second. The fight ended after less than 30 seconds and only three or four punches. Everyone loves a big punch knockout but come on, the hillbilly fight was longer than that! Ray, TJ and I went and grabbed some really bad seafood and Captain D's just across the parking lot from the hotel. Afterward we watched a little TV and went to sleep.

Sunday as I woke I heard the faint sound of a whip cracking. The deities had thrown their entire bag of tricks at us. We had survived them all, won even, and had plenty of campfire fodder for years to come. Ideas for next year rumbled around in my head on our way back. We had miles of interstate in front of us, but the adventure was over, it would be all flat, straight, and fast from here.