

TRAVELS

SOUTH OF THE BORDER, DOWN SHENANDOAH WAY

The weight of the loaded machine thrust the centrestand into the earth, leaving both tires at rest on the stubbled surface of old growth. The gas pipeline right-of-way cut a 50-yard swath through the brush. At sundown it seemed the most attractive site encountered in several hours' riding. It had become clear that public camping areas were in short supply on U.S. 219 through western Pennsylvania. A mile along a sideroad, the right-of-way looked green and inviting in the lingering rays of the August sun.

I laid out the nylon tent on a soft patch of ground, cleared of sticks and stones and with the stubble stamped flat. The cooling fins of the bike engine made tinkling, shrinking sounds. A hundred yards away occasional cars passed along the secondary road. I watched to see whether the drivers noticed my presence as I set up camp. Only a couple seemed aware. Then a car slowed abruptly and stopped, and the driver got out and strode toward me.

The stocky figure approaching through the gathering dusk was clad in blue. I moved out to meet him, assembling my thoughts around an opening phrase, "I suppose you're going to tell me I shouldn't be here."

The man halted some steps away and replied, "No, I'm sure you're welcome to stay, but I thought I should stop..." And his voice trailed off. He seemed friendly enough, but clearly hesitant.

I tried again, "Are you saying it's OK for me to stop here overnight?" He shifted his position uneasily and the waning sun illuminated the Arco patch on his uniform shirt. The man was not a pipeline security officer as my trespasser's conscience had surmised. He shuffled his feet and toed a clod with one sturdy boot.

"You can stay if you like, but I thought I should tell you, we've had some shootings."

He had my rapt attention. "Shootings? What kind of shootings?"

He seemed intent, now that he had begun. "An old man and a young boy were shot, several days apart, within the past week. We don't know who did it, but believe he's still around. People hereabouts don't go outdoors after dark; and we keep the doors locked when we're in. So, when I saw you setting up the tent, I thought I should stop and tell you. You don't have to leave as far as I'm concerned, but I know I wouldn't stay if I was you..."

Little remained of the sun's western glow and he seemed anxious to depart, now that he had done what he had felt obliged to do. I thanked him and he left.

The August air was warm, but an early evening breeze rustled adjacent trees and tufts of long grass around obstructions skirted by the pipeline mowing crew. I considered ignoring the warning. Trying to locate another campsite along strange roads, in the dark, had little appeal.

But the woods were ominous now, and my earlier awareness of weariness had been replaced by a more visceral instinct. I reloaded the motorcycle, returned the mile or so along the secondary road to the highway and continued - south on 219 to Ebensburg, east on 22 to Duncansville, then south again on 220. Thirty-five miles later, around Claysburg, a country church loomed out of the darkness and I rode into the lane. I set up the tent between the rear of the church and its cemetery, remembering something my Dad used to say whenever someone expressed fear of a graveyard - "The dead won't hurt you; it's the living you need to beware."

I settled finally around 11, listening to the distant, pained lowing of an un milked cow across the fields.

My watch read 2 A.M. when I awoke to the crunch of wheels on the gravelled church lane. An idling engine died momentarily, then was cranked to life and gravel spewed from spinning wheels as the car reversed its course and accelerated away along the deserted highway.

Clearly the driver, perhaps spurred by a fearful companion, was reluctant to share the area with a vagabond cyclist.

Sleep returned slowly and I reviewed the Monday which had just passed. I had left home in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, around 9, paused for an internal clutch adjustment at Grimsby and crossed the U.S. border at Buffalo. I had never ridden on mountain roads, and found the Alleghenies a revelation. Some hills and curves were especially exhilarating when tail-gating tractor-trailers tried to accumulate momentum for uphill stretches by pushing 70 or 80 mph, and me, on the downgrades.

I was headed for Skyline Drive in Virginia, to experience the twisting and turning, rising and falling I had read about. Halfway into Pennsylvania, I wondered whether I needed much more than I was getting.

The Ducati had clocked 384 miles - its longest day-trip yet in a 2,000 mile life. I read somewhere that the Ducati Meccanica test engineers nicknamed the GT750 "longlegs" - I think "super leggera" in Italian. The V-twin does convey that kind of impression. It has a sort of loping gait which may have something to do with the long wheelbase and the fact that engine rotation is opposite to the norm. In any case, the Iron Duke does cover ground in long strides, with a rhythm or pace remarkable in my experience. Certainly, less jarring and easier on the rider than my former mount, a Yamaha 650 XSLB. Had I been astride the X8650, likely at the end of 384 miles I'd have been in the graveyard to stay.

I awoke before 6, in a grey misty dawn, packed up, used the outdoor facilities and rolled south. Because I had covered 100 miles or so more than planned the day before, I decided to make a short side excursion to Gettysburg; so, at Cessna, headed east on route 30. It soon became apparent that what was wispy mist on the hillsides and peaks was dank, dense fog in the valleys. And I added minimal visibility to my list of mountain-riding new experiences.

In a couple of hours the rising sun burned off the lingering remnants of fog, about the time I reached Chambersburg, just short of starvation. Tuesday breakfast in a House of Pancakes was made more pleasant by a cheerful waitress whose parents had just returned from a Skyline Drive trip by Harley.

MOTO GUZZI DUCATI



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