

The 17th Annual MMOC Wine Country Ride

Life is but a series of ups and downs thrown at us, with curves dealt for good measure, too. In my mind's eye, a motorcycle ride-route should also be curvaceous, undulating and by all means mirror a roller coaster E-ticket ride, with the exception of the, ahem, inverted portions, dontchano. Diabolical you say? As we gathered poolside in Williams, California July 6th at the Quality Inn for attitude adjustment hour, a bazillion talking heads basking in the 90-degree heat wondered out loud about the following day's routes, departure times and degree of difficulty. Not to worry; let's enjoy this cool-for-Williams afternoon, partake of the suds, savor the vino and re-tell lies and war stories from years past. In a couple hours, we'll be seated for our 6:30 reservation at Louie Cairo's excellent Italian restaurant five blocks distant, and tomorrow morning at the riders' meeting, we'll discuss all that and more.

With three chase vehicles to ferry us to dinner, we're stacked like cord wood, interior and exterior, in the beds of each pickup looking for all the world like a hooptie crossing into the U.S. at Tijuana or Nogales. Mark Murray gets lit up by the local constabulary, who takes exception to the boisterous revelers constituting a "load." As the "load" complies with the officer's wishes and beats feet the last block to the restaurant, several "loadees" are heard to utter "Badges, we ain't got to show you no stink'n badges." Insanity, and we haven't even begun the ride yet! Inside Cairo's banquet room, we're seated like Michelangelo's Last Supper, awaiting our feast. "It's time for introductions, and those of you that can stand, please do so." Representing Oakland: Yours truly and Rhoda, Mike Nichelini, Matt Greb, Cliff Heanes, Paul Pabon, Steve Stark, Kent Thornberry, Bob Holland, Greg Smith and Jaime Buna. San Francisco's delegation: George and Barbara Firchow, Doug Foss and Reba, and Rene LaPrevotte and Susan Johnson. Los Angeles put forth J.J. Leonard, Jack Blacklock, Baron Laetzsch, Ron Bryan, Gary Smith, Bob and Vi Hossfeld and Kerry Ray. San Jose had Jerry and Robbi Albericci and Dave Stengel in house. Ever-present Life Member Mary Ann Mann represented Broadmoor. Chuck Nicolls, Mo-Desto; Alan and Barb Knox, Campbell; Mark Murray, San Leandro; Mike and Jeanie Roes, Alameda County; and Mike Mauser, Arizona DPS. Hell-A basin Honoraries Kenny and Gwen Williams joined long-standing Jeff Heanes from Graeagle, and our newest rookie, Terry Edis, from Nevada. Wow, forty humanoids, 8 of them who are new to the MMOC ride, from California, Oregon, Washington, Nebraska, Arizona and Nevada, on six brands of thirty motorcycles and two chase vehicles, our largest participation, ever! Let's enjoy the ambience, mangiare, and see you back at the pool. Wednesday morning dawns bright and clear, and for Williams, cool at 70 degrees. Let's have a riders' meeting: "Rhoda has a route handout sheet for those of you wishing one; we'll leave in 15 minutes, and please ride in a staggered formation at three second intervals as there will probably be deer on this route (this would prove to be prophetic!). We have about 85 miles to cover until lunch and gas in Hopland, then another 85

miles to Fort Bragg. And, for the first time ever, we will divide into two groups with a chase vehicle behind each; the more adventurous at the front, sightseeing at the rear.”

As we transition from downtown Business 20 onto the gentle, sweeping and undulating CA 20 west, our procession is perhaps half a mile long and loooooking good. Within 30 miles, we’re spread out over half as many counties, a beautiful accordion! Eight miles before our first turn onto CA 53 south, Bambi is grazing on the right shoulder, about one foot from the roadway. As we approach at 60 mph, it’s time to throw out the anchor, just short of ABS intervention, and test our reaction times. The first 15 or so riders become intimately familiar with the rear wheel of the bike to their front; others further back have not a clue why we’re performing stoppies on a public road! We turn left onto CA 53 south in unison, and eight miles later onto CA 29 north. Although the handout route sheet clearly specifies mileage ‘til the next turn, inexplicably the trailing Lewis and Clark and Magellan trio of the Hossfelds, Nicolls and Knoxes make a left four miles short of CA 75 and set out for South America. For 16 miles, the two chase vehicles flash highbeam lights and honk horns to advise of their errant ways, to no avail. The Firchows and the Holland-Murray duo in the pickups arrive late for lunch, and we all have a good laugh on the “explorers,” who by now are approaching Brazil. As Nicolls would say, many hours later, “We thought it was the bumpy road causing your lights to go high and low.” Here’s your sign!

After our noon feast, California 253 west issues forth a 19-mile roller coaster, corkscrew-ribbon of asphalt bordered by mountains, rivers, open plain and meadows. It’s beautiful, but CA128 west is more verdant, the giant Redwoods along its track coalescing to form a green blur for 30 miles before merging onto CA 1 north, and our final 21-mile leg into Fort Bragg. As expected, the coast is much cooler, but not enough to dampen our spirits, as it’s now parking lot hospitality time! With a good size hot-tub to warm the soul, many soak away the afternoon chill; others bask in the hot air BS flowing around our impromptu tailgate party.

With the sun rapidly setting on the horizon, some wag suggests food. A 200-foot walk to Highway 1 offers pizza and Chinese food; 20-plus hearty souls instead opt for seafood at the marina one-quarter mile distant. Silver’s on the wharf proves to be an excellent choice; a comely waitress rearranging tables to seat our throng and beckon beverages. We are surrounded by Chardonnay-swilling Sierra Club aficionados wearing earthentone khaki garb and speaking in hushed tones as they gaze lovingly on the tranquil harbor water. In contrast, we’re off the charts fashion-wise with unkempt black riding-leather clad duos, loud-print Hawaiian shirt adorned revelers, and all manner of disarray in between. An emerging pattern is coming to the forefront, too. On this, the second of four nights on the road, Bob Holland is again “working” our merry group with jokes and one-liners, a la Don Rickels. His nonstop, incessant jaw-flapping has all of us bent over in gut-wrenching raucous laughter; likewise, the waitress, as we loudly proclaim him to be insane! Patrons on the periphery are chortling, too, trying not to be too

obvious. "Pay him no mind. He was abandoned at birth" became a common mantra! Somehow, hours later, we adjourned for the night.

As the morning fog burns away Thursday, it's time to parallel the jagged Pacific Ocean coastline for 130 miles, and en route visit two historical light houses before brunch, Fort Ross after, and then venture inland 38 miles to the beautiful Ferrari-Carano winery on the east side of the coastal mountain range. The repetitive admonition about deer and rider intervals is again mentioned, we pose for a photo-op in front of the very appropriate Mendocino County Mental Health Clinic, and bid adieu to Fort Bragg.

California Highway 1 in this region is dotted with hundreds of hamlets, defined not by concrete malls, mini-businesses, nor even street lights, but small clusters of rural-route mailboxes adjacent to the road. Posted 55 MPH by CalTrans, you'd have to have a Kamikaze mindset or be stupid-lucky to maintain 45 MPH. Why? Most of the upscale residences are on rock outcroppings or cliffs far above the Pacific Ocean offering forth spectacular views for residents and motorists alike; they are also more heavily forested for privacy and provide owner-planted vegetation, which deer love to forage on. On this cool and low overcast morning, we are constantly braking as herds graze much too close for comfort. On the fourth of six encounters, one confused fawn jumped over Mary Ann Mann's front fender as we slowed to a stop! Her utterances weren't as pretty as the countryside, but completely understood! Braking skills suitably honed, we dine at the quaint Rollerville Café at the entrance to Point Arena Light Station. Great food and much needed hot coffee offsets the morning chill and harrowing tales of suicidal four legged beasts.

Twenty miles south, Gualala has the only gas station for hundreds of miles capable of servicing our throng in a timely manner. An hour later, we converge on Fort Ross State Historical Park for a photo opportunity. On this date, officious Ms. Rangerette demands we contribute to the state coffers for that privilege, and we begrudgingly do so. Some of our group insisted on getting their money's worth via sightseeing on the grounds. Others beat feet and whipped their two-wheel mounts into submission on Stewarts Point-Skaggs Springs Road, venturing towards our winery tour and lodging in Healdsburg. This "road" is a contradiction in terminology: The first 20 miles on the western end is best described as a horribly twisty and very narrow goat path, a rough and potholed logging trail more suitable for dual-sport motorcycles, or all of the above.

From the mountain summit, the next five-mile downhill leg on the east side is identical, primarily serving as a shortcut for twisted locals. It takes us more than an hour to cover 25 miles; then, the last 14 miles opens up into the most pristine high-speed, on camber roller coaster playground in the west, offering constant radius turns and great line-of-sight with nary a tar strip nor patched pot-hole! What's very hard to fathom is this

“road,” from beginning to end, is entirely within Sonoma County, yet its maintenance is in stark contrast from the ocean to inland! Go figure.

We visited the Ferrari-Carano Winery, arguably the most exquisite and plush estate in the wine region of California, then motored six miles into Healdsburg. At registration and poolside, there was no unanimity on the 44 miles of “road” we had just covered. Some loved it, some hated it, and few had no opinion. If I had thin skin, my feelings would have been hurt. Newbies Stark, Thornberry and other nameless souls who have led a sheltered life, questioned my sanity, in four-letter expletives no less, while Greg Smith and La Prevotte, along with Rores, me and others, were stoked, at least by the 14-mile Moto GP sprint.

At dinner this night, Rhoda and I, along with the Roreses sat in a booth in the hotel’s restaurant trying to quietly recap the day’s events. In a room 50 feet removed sat 15 to 20 of our compatriots at a long table captained by Bob Holland. Captive audience in hand, he again proceeded to deliver a steady stream of gags, lies and jokes. We tried to ignore their infectious laughter, but couldn’t; other diners did likewise, but couldn’t. The waitresses were howling as the hot air blew and all had fun. Friday morning, July 9th, is crystal clear and time to visit the heart of central California’s wine region on our final day of back-road exploration. Sonoma and Napa Counties offer forth thousands upon thousands of acres of varietals; vines emblazoned with fruit in hues from green to golden yellow to red. At our subdued pace, the aromas are pungent and perhaps acidic, yet familiar and welcoming, nonetheless, to those of us who have visited some of the fantastic cellars in the region. For more than 50 miles on 6 different roadways, we gaze upon row after row of foliage planted on rolling hillsides beckoning us to detour and whet our whistles with a quality vino. We begrudgingly resist and ride through en route to our early lunch stop at the Silverado Brewing Company in Saint Helena. Offering excellent brewed-on-site beers, homemade lemonade, and great food-fare, we gorge ourselves for an hour, then venture east. As we transition into Yolo County, the scenery becomes more barren, but interesting, nonetheless, as we own the roads vacated by 4, 10 and 18-wheelers. One of Lake Berryessa’s many overlooks offers a sun-drenched view of the cool waters below. We hydrate and then course winding tarmac for 65 miles into Woodland for our celebratory final evening festivities. With an excellent pool and hot tub at our disposal, tomfoolery once again rears its head as one nameless soul is seen sitting on the bottom of the pool in a lawn chair, complete with umbrella, while a couple other anonymous souls.....still partially clothed, drip-dry deckside in the hot afternoon sun after an impromptu “dip.” Many hours later, after a local meal, and as the sun sets, it is time to reflect on the ride and give thanks to the participants.

Over the course of three days, we traveled more than 500 miles on mostly secondary roads, never set tire to tarmac on

an Interstate, and with the exception of one 12-mile stretch on US 101, avoided freeways. Our senses of sight, sound and smell were overloaded daily; we often piqued the lean-angle sensors built into our cranium, too, and camaraderie was abundant from beginning to end. It's not often you can assemble 40 people into a cohesive group for three days and four nights, but all seemed to genuinely have fun. The route handout sheet was a qualified success as it allowed some to detour from our planned path for various reasons, and others to hang back and arrive at scheduled stops at their leisure. Everyone seemed to ride at their own pace, which greatly adds to issues of enjoyment and safety! George and Barbara Firchow continue to amaze me with their generosity as they travel yearly from Lincoln, Nebraska (!) to join in on the festivities, and joining them in the other chase vehicle was the dynamic-duo of Mark Murray and Bob Holland, he of One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest fame! Their coordinated efforts greatly contributed to our comfort, safety and on-time schedule and cannot be overlooked!

As I alluded to at the beginning of this long-winded discourse, E-ticket rides at Disneyland and Great America are no more diabolical or different than what we encountered this year.....if you so desired!

Stay tuned for information on next year's 18th Annual MMOC Ride, which will be to Cedar City, Utah where we'll spend four nights at the same hotel, allowing us to tour the north rim of the Grand Canyon, and Bryce and Zion National Parks during a three day span. This region, new to at least this scribe, promises beautiful scenery and roadways, and as always, an excuse to ride. Tentatively, we'll be there during the second week of July 2011, sometime between the 4th and 8th. Also, I'm working on commemorative T-shirts and the logistics to get them to Utah, perhaps via a chase vehicle. Any questions or comments, I can be reached at hos6350@sbcglobal.net. And remember to visit www.mmoc.org for updates. Thanks, all. It was truly a great ride!

Dennis M. Brown, *Touring Executive Ride Director*