



My Winter Vacation

February 1979

Bruce Grant



Monday, February 27th 1979, I prepare to make an escape from the non-motorcycling season. I've been looking forward to this, but now it seems so ridiculous. There's a nice warm house, a wife and two little ones, and I'm going off to freeze on a motorcycle. Mary Beth has no more sense than I; she comes out with her Brownie box camera to record the event and say good-bye.

A neighbour has attributed my strange behaviour with motorcycles to a mid-life crisis. Maybe so, but this has been going on for an awfully long time. Perhaps teen-age angst has merged directly into mid-life crisis and I never noticed the difference. Will this continue then as I slip, oblivious to the change, into the age of physical decline and confusion? Will my neighbour then give me credit for all those years in the saddle? Or will he just say "there's no fool like an old fool"? Is there a way to alter this tragic chain of events? Do I care? No, not really.



I know from past experience that out there on the open road and far from home, I'm going to be on another plane of existence. There's no explanation for that; you just have to understand.

Buzzing along on the 401, it's a bit shivery but not too bad really, when I hit a patch of ice. Suddenly I'm down on my bum, sliding along beside the bike. I slide a long way, long enough to take in this whole new experience. This icy pavement is not the "other plane of existence". A woman driving right behind me is wearing a caricature of a shocked expression. I watch her face while sliding along just in front of her.

When we all get stopped, I find only a broken mirror and some scratches on the bike. I have so many layers of clothing that I look like a teddy bear, but this has saved me from scrapes. I ride off, waving to this woman who is still in shock. Well, good for her; she set out on a long boring journey down the 401, and now she will have a story to tell.

Soon I hear the speedo cable screaming, the needle spins up to 120 MPH and then goes bust. Now I'm feeling really daunted. Only two hours out; I've crashed, my machine is falling apart and I'm freezing. Maybe this is a dumb idea, maybe I should go home. But the impulse is checked because you can't turn around on the 401. It'll be better, I argue, once I get south of the Poconos. It'll be better, even if I have to walk. I win the argument and continue on my journey.

Riding through Syracuse on an elevated expressway, there's freezing rain, it's dark and I've had to remove my face shield because it loaded up with ice. In the rush hour traffic, I squint through almost closed eyes to follow the tail lights ahead. A car comes alongside, the driver shouts and points to my rear carrier. One of my bags is gone, all my tools. Here in this maelstrom of ice and salt and machinery, someone has noticed and reached out to help. I drive back alone the side and find the bag lying in the centre lane.

There's no thought of going back now; it's as far to go back as to go ahead. If I don't freeze first, I'll make it to my first stop. The freezing rain continues and ice completely covers the bike. The front wheel grows icicles that radiate in all directions from the hub. The iron leg shields catch the spray and build up thick slabs of ice, but thanks to them, my feet feel OK.

I make frequent coffee stops, gulping the stuff down quickly. Five minutes in the warmth of the restaurant and I'll start shaking so hard that I can't drink any more. Back out on the road, the shaking soon stops. No danger of frost bite; it's just not that kind of cold, but, oh my, it's unpleasant.

Climbing into the Poconos, the rain turns to snow and it gets colder. On the way down the southern slope it clears and I can feel it getting warmer. See? It's just like I said.

The first stop is Dan Martin's place in Lansdale Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. It's after midnight when I pull in there, but Dan and Sandra have to stay up with me until I can stop shaking and get settled down. That's 400 miles to-day.

I flop into a nice warm bed and five minutes later, or so it seems, I awake in bright sunshine and smell the coffee. It's so quiet here, so warm and cozy. Am I alive?

Dan and Sandra are old friends; we have a good long breakfast, talk and bring the bike into the workshop for a checkup. Feeling pretty good except for swollen eyes, I get away at noon, leaving the heavy winter clothing with the Martins. Won't need that stuff again.

The route is south along the coast, through Chester, Wilmington, Dover and Ocean City with warm sunshine all the way, a real good all-day ride. This is what I came out for, not such a dumb idea after all.

The destination is Orlando Florida, where the Antique Motorcycle Club of America holds a winter rally. There has to be a destination, see, else you don't know if you're going the right way, and you'll get back home not knowing if you ever arrived.

The motorcycle is a 1942 Harley Davidson model WLC, a military machine built for the Canadian Army. It called out to me from the classified ads in the Ottawa Citizen: "I need a good home" it cried, "I'm a veteran, I deserve better than this." The machine had been stripped down to make a dirt bike, then it was raced around in the sand until it wouldn't go any more.



The next day takes me down the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, 17 miles long, a great engineering project. At the entrance to the Dismal Swamp, a sign advises “Lights on at all times”, and yes, it’s dismal. Eventually, the swamp yields to sunshine and dry land and the road carries on to Myrtle Beach.

By now I have quite forgotten my name, address and occupation; I’m a traveller, a rolling stone, some guy on an old Harley, no fixed address. It feels great!

It’s a long flat ride through the Carolinas and Georgia. My old bike can’t keep up with traffic on the Interstate and there’s nothing to see out there anyway. So, we putt along on the #17, a two-lane highway, an endless landscape with stove pipes, dusty little towns and pick-up trucks.



I pull up to a corner near Savannah with a flat tire. This is not so bad because there's a gas station just across the street. Right beside me is one of those cabins with a verandah across the front. An old whiskered negro is snoozing in a stuffed chair. He opens one eye briefly, but takes no further interest in the traveller.

As I spread out the tool kit in the dust, another man approaches, a younger man from the gas station. He studies his strange visitor and the machine from every angle, takes plenty of time to form a conclusion, then he speaks, — slowly. "Dat sho is a ode motacycle"

We talk about it while I work. He's interested in my little stories and sees the humour that is in every little event. From time to time he dashes, not too quickly, to his gas pumps.

"Reckon it won't be very long now" says he, "the way things is goin'. . . ."

"The tire?"

"No, — Armageddon! Yep, the way this ol' worl's goin' it gon' be real soon".

"You s'pose I got time to fix this here tire?" (by now I am starting to talk like he does) He laughs. "Oh yes." He can't say just how much time is left, but he's sure there's enough time to fix a tire.

I have very little patience with religious zealots who appear on my doorstep, but this time I'm on his doorstep. For a zealot, he's quite gentle and humourous, and he explains it all to me patiently, as one explains things to a simpleton. I listen and work.

The old man on the verandah raises his head, opens both eyes at once and speaks:

"Abraham!"

"Huh?"

"Shaddap!"

I know where I have seen this man before. He is the figure of God painted on the ceiling of the sistine chapel, with the shaggy head and the pointed finger. Abraham obeys and returns to his gas pumps. I finish my repair alone.

When I've got the wheel assembled, I carry it over the street, where Abraham helps me with the air hose. "Thanks Abe."

Soon I'm back on the road.

I have discovered the best way to arrive in Florida. Ride your bike down a minor road called the A1A to the St John River. There's no bridge. You leave behind the red dust of stove-pipe alley and cross the water on a little ferry boat. Cross the river at night and watch the twinkling lights along the shores, feel the tropical dampness of the river, take in the sounds and the smells and the soft movement of the boat through the current. When you start up again, you will feel that you have entered a very special place.

Mind, I didn't say that Florida would keep the promise.
I just said it was a great entrance.

Next day, I set up my tent at Maguire Airport, a small grass airfield near Orlando, where the meet will take place. This wheezy rider and his lady arrive on a beat-up Kawasaki. He likes my bike, tells me I should sell it to him.

He's tough looking, like an old leather boot and he stands almost on my toes while we talk. How do you refuse a guy who stares right down into your face with a third eye tattooed on his forehead?

He tells me about his thirty years working in the Cyclo-drome and about riding with Hell's Angels. His only recollection of Canada has to do with crashing his Harley through a show-room window in Montreal. I still won't sell him my bike, but I'd nominate him for best antique biker from the early period.



A guy from Antique Harley Works in Tampa drives in hauling a closed trailer. He's got an army bike, same as mine except it's the US Army version, in perfect condition. He tells us how he built the entire motor from new-old-stock parts. Several people are conscripted to help him ease it out of the trailer. — "Careful now, don't scratch it."



I had thought of washing the road dirt off my bike for the show, but no, no way!



Best restored, 1941 Harley





THE MAGUIRE MEET

by Anne Fitzpatrick

The 1979 Orlando Meet, sponsored by the Florida Chapter and held at Maguire Airport, turned out to be an international as well as a national meet. We were pleased to have Swedish member Bertil Lindahl and his wife Rigmor with us for most of the weekend. Bertil was presented with an AMC watch job as a remembrance of the meet.

Judging by the license plates seen in the parking lot, many Northern enthusiasts used the meet as a chance to get away from the cold and snow. We counted 17 different states and one from Ontario. The Florida weatherman rose to the occasion and provided a warm, sunny weekend.

For most of the day Saturday, there seemed to be as good a show in the parking lot as on the display field. Motorcyclists have an uncanny knack for sensing a hidden machine and seemed to cluster around a trailer or van just before it was unloaded. As the doors opened, there could always be heard the oohs and ahs of admiration. Over the course of the weekend, we counted nearly 50 different machines. Besides the ever-present Indians and Harleys, we spotted Flying Merkel, FN, Ner-a-car, Triumph, New Hudson, Sunbeam, Henderson, Velocette, Simplex Servicycle, Maico, Johnson Motor Wheel Whizzer and Cushman.

Two members were also entering machines in exhibits in Daytona in connection with Speed Week: Paul Pearce and his 1917 Indian opposed and Bob Romig and his 1916 Indian with sidecar.

A word of thanks to John Bowman and his Florida mem-

bers for a job well done. Everyone seemed to enjoy the location as it provided plenty of space for riding. The banquet was also a success with 80 in attendance and a most enjoyable film provided by Alex Longstaff.

There was a total of 38 machines judged, 11 in the antique class, 23 in post-antique and 4 in power cycles. "Doc" Parr served as chief judge, assisted by Harold Culp. Bud Cox and Ed Higgins in the antique class; Frank Fitzpatrick, Andy Batsleer and Marv McCleary in post-antique; George Brown and Paul Pearce in power cycles.

Trophies were awarded as follows:

Antique 1900-1929 Incl.: Best restored #1 - 1917 Indian - Paul Pearce; Best restored #2 - 1916 Indian w/sidecar - Bob Romig; Best running unrestored - 1926 Sunbeam - George Brown; Most original - 1928 Indian - Andy Batsleer; Most unique - 1922 Ner-a-car - Bob Brennan; Brought longest distance - 1912 Harley - Mike Gagliotti; Oldest - 1902 FN - Woody Carson.

Post-Antique 1930-1949 incl.: Best restored #1 1941 H-D w/sidecar - Wray Mordough; Best restored #2 - 1942 Indian 4 - Joe Hassett; Best running unrestored - 1941 Indian 4 - Logan LaChance; Most original - 1947 Harley - Henry Selmer; Ridden longest distance (2000 miles) - 1942 Harley - Bruce Grant.

Power Cycles (up to and including 1949): Best restored - 1919 Johnson Motor Wheel - John Van Vleet; Best running unrestored - 1949 Whizzer - Jim McCormick.





Brought longest distance, 1912 Harley, Mike Gagliotti, Buffalo NY

On Sunday morning they give out the awards. I get the prize for longest distance ridden, that it to say, for not trucking the bike over from Tampa. Mr Perfect Harley doesn't win anything. Around noon, the tent comes down and we're off to Daytona where thousands of bikers have begun arriving for next week-end's annual Speed Week. It's fun to hang around, meet the people and drink beer, but a week of this would be worse than the freezing rain. Time to go.

At Jacksonville I indulge in a motel with a bath tub and a real bed. Next morning, just out of the front door, I take this picture to mark the beginning of the return trip. There's a phone booth right beside me, but I'm not ready to make contact with the real world that I must return to. I will hear about this decision later.



The generator has quit. I can still putt along for now, but there won't be any night riding if I can't get it fixed. In Alma Georgia I find Sweat's Electric Co, apparently the main industry in this dusty little place. As I unroll the tool kit several good ol' boys come out to watch, ask questions and tell good ol' motorcycle stories.



Inside the generator, I find a broken wire that just needs a terminal clip. One of the lads brings the part from the shop and the repair is quickly done. Now I approach Mr Sweat (Can that really be his name?) who has been watching all this through the window.

"All them fellas" he wants to know, "was they fixin' or was they jes' watchin'?"

"They us jes' watchin'" (I can't help it)

"Be a coda dall"

"Huh?"

"Co da dolla"

I feel stupid. Why don't I understand what he's saying? To make him understand what I'm asking, I empty a pocket onto the counter, some change and small bills. He reaches into the pile and takes out a quarter. That's it. Quarter Dollar!

I ride all day; stove pipe alley stretches before me. It's ride, stop for gas, ride, stop for a burger, ride again. . . . As it gets dark, I'm aware that the headlight is blown, probably from fooling around with the generator and regulator. I have a spare lamp with a low-beam filament that still works.

There are places in the South where you ride through miles and miles of uninhabited pine forests. In such a place the engine decides to stop for the night. It coughs and clatters and back-fires; it runs down slower and slower and shoots flames out the tail pipe. A truly operatic death scene.

This is a really dark place; the sky is overcast, there are no lights, no moon, no stars and I can't even make out the tops of the pines against the sky. Sitting there on the dead bike, I try to work through a list of possible causes. How does it go, that old cowboy song, — I'm so lonesome in the saddle since my horse died?

With a flashlight I poke around until the problem turns up, a fouled plug. A tiny speck of carbon. I clean it up and gratefully pull back onto the road.

On highway 301 in Florence, South Carolina there's a garage, a very old garage, old enough maybe to have some old headlight bulbs. It's after midnight, but the door is open and a man is standing in the bright light of the office. He's old too.

"Would you have some old Mazda lamps, the kind with the flange base, six volts?"

He's a wiry, nervous little guy, moves quickly like a squirrel, and he talks fast too. Must be the only fast talker in the Carolinas. We scurry into a back room and climb over a jumble of boxes filled with ancient auto parts. On two of the metal shelves there is an assortment of Mazda lamps.

"Look at this mess! Had a nigger in here not long ago to clean the place up and look at this. If ya need something done ya don't need a nigger. Look at this mess."

It seems to me that nothing has been thrown out of here in the last fifty years and it's himself who makes all the decisions. But I'm not arguing. This is Florence, South Carolina, and this is the old South talking to me. I'm looking at a hoard of antique lamps, neatly stacked in their little boxes on two shelves, and I need a Mazda lamp. No, I don't argue.

Out front again, I spread out the tool kit, open up the headlight and start trying lamps. These lamps weren't only made for Harleys, they were for Tin Lizzies and Durants and whatever. The trick is to find one that will work OK. I've got lamps and tools spread all over the front steps.

A car pulls in, slides past me, and stops, facing out to the highway with the engine still running. It's a shabby old car with Alabama plates and a noisy exhaust. Two young black men jump out and raise the hood. They think maybe they need a shot of brake fluid. The old man stands in his doorway.

"I don't fix cars at night. I'll sell ya a can of fluid."

"Can you check it for us and put it in?"

"No"

They stand by the car, holding up the raised hood, the engine still rumbling. He steps back to his desk and opens a drawer, then comes back to his position in the open door. He stands there and looks at them; they look at him. I'm sitting between, on the step. The engine rumbles. Waiting.

The two men let down the hood and drive away into the night. We hear the clatter of the engine far down the road until it disappears into the buzz of the fluorescent lights. I turn and see the old man standing over me with a gun in his hand. He steps inside and puts it away in the drawer.

It's 2 AM now, a long day since I left Jacksonville, but I don't feel a bit sleepy. We fill the tank and the jerry can too, so I can ride all night. The new lamp puts out a dull orange glow; it doesn't project a beam. It's like riding in fog by following the white line just in front of the bike. There's an illusion of great speed, and detachment from the real but invisible world.



At 4:30 AM it's raining. It started very light, but now it's getting more persistent. I'm running low on gas a few miles north of Lumberton, North Carolina, as good a place as any to pitch a tent and go to sleep.

Away again at 10 AM in a very light drizzle. US 301 is a real good two-lane road that was the main highway until they built the parallel interstate I-95. Now it carried local traffic and old Harleys. I ride until midnight and flop into a motel in Baltimore. The next day, a short ride takes me to the Martins' place and some much needed motorcycle maintenance. I need some maintenance too.

Thursday March 8th is the last ride. Up until now I have taken alternate routes and seen everything for the first time. To-day's ride is on the same old freeway, and it's cold, and it's just a dash home.

Pulling off the 401 at Prescott, just 50 miles from home, I see a police car following close behind. He lights up the flashers and pulls me over.

"There's nothing wrong" he says, "I just wanted to get a good look at your bike."

Oh, fine, I'm freezing out here, I'd like to get home, and I'm not feeling chatty. But he's chatty, oh yes, has to know all about the bike, and what make is it? "Harley" And what year would it be? "42" And how far would you be going on such a cold day on such an old motorcycle? "Ottawa" This last information really amazes him, "all the way to Ottawa!" He waves good-bye at last and returns, shivering, to his nice warm cruiser.

One more hour and I'll be in my nice warm house.