

I LEFT FOR

RENO

A story of the 2010 westward travels of Bill and his Harley.
written and photographed by William R. Peterson



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The 2010 NACo Annual Conference was held at the Reno-Sparks Convention Center in Reno/Washoe County, Nevada from July 16 – 20, 2010. Normally, I would fly to the conference but decided to use an alternative transportation mode - my 2001 Harley Davidson Road King. Often, I would take seven to 10 days in September every year, and head to the wide-open western spaces for a ride, but that year, another September commitment precluded that tradition.

ISAC President Chuck Rieken (former Cass County Supervisor) wanted me to be at the ISAC Scholarship Golf Fundraiser in Des Moines on Wednesday, July 14, so that left only two days to make the trip to Reno. My first conference activities started the morning of Saturday, July 17. While my original plan was to leave right after the ISAC golf outing on Wednesday evening and ride to North Platte, Nebraska – stifling temperatures and a late afternoon series of severe thunderstorm rolling along I-80 in Nebraska and into Iowa changed those plans. Riding to North Platte would have broken the 1586-mile trip to Reno into three segments, but I am not sorry I missed riding through the 50 mph winds and hail that hit Omaha and eventually Des Moines. In retrospect, adapting to change, and luck, might be key words describing this trip.

Instead, I left at 4:30 am, Thursday morning, July 15. My goal now was to ride to Salt Lake City by that night – 1,068 miles. I hit the Starbucks in North Platte (411m) at 11:00 am; had lunch at Cabela's in Sidney (530m), Nebraska at 1:00 pm (MST); ate dinner in Rock Springs (882m), Wyoming at 6:30 pm; and stopped for gas in Evanston (983m), Wyoming about 8:15 pm. At this point, I was thinking the final 84 miles to Salt Lake City were looking like a piece of cake, and it was for about 40 miles. Just as I came down into a valley near Echo, Utah, where I-80 and I-84 merge, the gear shift lever that connects to the transmission linkage came apart; this meant I couldn't shift gears. I pulled off to the side of I-80. Amazingly, as darkness descended on the valley and with trucks flying around the curve, I was able to make a temporary repair and get back on the road. I made it safely to my hotel into Salt Lake City sometime after 10:00 pm – 17.5 hours in the saddle. I am no mechanic, so putting this mechanism back together with the one tool I had on my bike was at the outside edge of my mechanical abilities. I finished up the repair properly in the parking lot of my hotel the next morning before heading to Reno.

Friday morning, July 16, I hit the road around 8:30 am for the trip from Salt Lake City to Reno. If I had been smart, I would have left a few hours earlier, but the 520 miles to Reno seemed like a short trip compared to the previous day. I-80 west of Salt Lake City to the Nevada border (122m) crosses over a mountain ridge or two, and then along the Great Salt Lake. Have you heard people say Iowa is flat? It is not! The last 50 miles in Utah is flat and passes through the Bonneville Salt Flats State Park. I stopped for gas in Wendover, Utah. The gas station was about one hundred feet away from the Nevada border. It was easy to spot because of a broad white line painted across Main Street. The first Nevada casino was right across the line.

Great Salt
Flats –
Unknown
couple.



The ride from Wendover to Lovelock (305m), Nevada was hot and dry – temperatures were over 100 degrees. Nevada has a county named Humboldt too! I pointed out to Humboldt County Supervisors Harlan Hansen and Carl Mattes when I saw them in Reno that it didn't look anything like the green fields of Humboldt County, Iowa. Harlan and Carl both agreed. They were in a car an hour or two ahead of me on I-80 that day. They stopped to take a picture of the sign welcoming them to Humboldt County, Nevada; they noted the outside temperature was 104 degrees.

This spot was roughly mid-way from Wendover to Reno. It was here that I started to see rain clouds on the western horizon, but they always seemed to stay just out of reach. I began to imagine what it was like for travelers through this area before cars and motorcycles – and wondered if those clouds were a mirage. I took a break in Lovelock (93m to Reno) to rehydrate and could see the clouds stacked up against the mountains just east of Reno. I put on rain gear, because I was about to catch up to that mirage. I managed to slip through a break in the thunderstorm avoiding the lightning and heavier rain. I couldn't avoid the temperature change; it is surprising how cold 70 degrees feels when you have been riding in 105 degrees for five hours. Not only did the rain cool the air, but it cleared it too. The last 30 miles into Reno through the mountains were under a crystal blue sky – beautiful! I got lost in Reno looking for the Atlantis Hotel, but I still made into the hotel around 4:30 pm (PST). I parked my filthy, bug-encrusted Harley under the canopy by the front door to hotel, unloaded my bags, and didn't look at it again for three days. I was able to shower, meet up with fellow ISAC staff member Rachel (Bicego) Bennett (She flew to Reno.), and get to a meeting of state association legislative staff that evening.

Saturday, July 17, through Tuesday, July 20, I spent attending various NACo Annual Conference events. Sunday morning, July 18, was the first NACo General Session. The keynote speaker was Dr. Robert Reich – who is always an informative and entertaining speaker. Monday afternoon, July 19, Joe Dittmar, 9/11 Survivor, keynoted the second general session. Iowa county officials heard Mr. Dittmar's presentation at the 2008 Fall School of Instruction in Coralville. Mr. Dittmar was at a meeting on the 105th Floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center when the North Tower was hit on September 11, 2001. The South Tower was hit 18 minutes later. Joe Dittmar tells the story of his experiences – there wasn't a dry eye in the house. My Reno hotel was connected to the convention center via a skywalk, and I happened to run into Joe on his way back to the hotel. I introduced myself and reminded him that he had spoken at our conference in 2008. I thanked him for again sharing his story with us. He told me this was his 65th presentation in 2010 – all done for contributions to a foundation he created for the families of 9/11 victims. He still holds down a full-time job in the insurance industry. Tuesday, July 19, I joined the rest of the Iowa delegation at the NACo Annual Business Meeting and Election of Officers. The election of officers was a no-brainer since all the candidates but one had dropped out. After the business meeting, several Iowa county officials met with Ilene Manster, NACo Membership Coordinator, to discuss

strategies for increasing the number of Iowa counties that are members of the NACo. By the time the meeting ended, there was just enough time to take a quick run up to Lake Tahoe before the evening's conference-wide event, NACo President Glen Whitley's Inaugural Gala Reception. Lake Tahoe is just west of Reno and a beautiful blue deep-water lake nestled in the mountains. It was a nice change of scenery from the rather drab colors of downtown Reno.



Overlook at Lake Tahoe

Once again, the NACo Annual Conference was a source of very useful information, gained during both the regular conference workshops and conversations with the many people in attendance. The Reno/Washoe County community did a nice job of hosting the event, and the people were very friendly. It was a community experiencing tough times with unemployment rates approaching 15%. Iowa's unemployment numbers at that time were half that number. Iowans felt fortunate to come from a state that was doing better fiscally and economically than many other states. While conferences are generally fun and interesting, it is always good to get back home to Iowa. And, just in case you are wondering, I didn't shoot anyone in Reno (Johnny Cash). Rachel, what about you?

Yosemite National Park





With the conference over, I headed south down Hwy 395 into California early Wednesday morning, July 21st. Bob Hadfield, former executive director of the Nevada Association of Counties, had recommended a route to Yosemite National Park with a stop for breakfast at a diner in Bridgeport, California. Great recommendation, Bob! South of Bridgeport at Lee Vining, I caught Hwy 120 over Tioga Pass down into Yosemite. The ride over Tioga Pass (elevation - 9665 ft) was terrific, and a little chilly, but once I was over the pass and down into the Yosemite Valley temperatures rose rapidly. It is a beautiful place with lots of great sights, but this time of year it was really crowded. As often happens, I had a conversation with a fellow biker who happened to be from Maui. He and his friend were on their annual motorcycle trip. Every year they fly into San Francisco and rent motorcycles. They both said Maui is beautiful, but it gets a little boring riding around in a 200-mile circle. The 428-mile trip out and back to Yosemite took around 13 hours.



El Capitan

Two different views in
Yosemite National Park

Thursday, July 22, I rode from Reno to Arcata (340m), California. This took me north up Hwy 395 to Susanville, California. I caught Hwy 44 west out of Susanville through Laasen National Forest. I stopped for lunch in Old Station – not much there but a small café with great home-made baked goods and pies. The berry pie I had for desert was awesome! The ride from Old Station west was hot with temperatures above 100 degrees. California Hwy 44 ends in Redding for some reason so I took Hwy 299 (Eureka Hwy). Hwy 299 takes you through Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, Trinity National Forest, and into Six Rivers National Forest all the time gradually climbing back into the mountains. Temperatures remained high until Willow Creek where you finally head downhill toward Eureka. The areas that I passed through to this point looked like they could burn in a flash. During this 45-mile downhill ride temperatures dropped from around 95 degrees to the high 50s as I got to the coast. I was shivering by the time I found my hotel in Arcata. That night after dinner, I met up with former ISAC staff member Cris Plocher and her husband Orrin. Cris was ISAC's first fiscal analyst. Cris left ISAC in 2002 so that she and Orrin could move to McKinleyville, where they now live. Orrin has an environmental consulting business, and Cris works as a data analyst for Humboldt County, California. They loved seeing a fellow Iowan and Hawkeye (both are University of Iowa grads) – at least they said they did.



"Abronia latifolia" or Yellow Sand Verbena
– common along Pacific Coast

Pacific Ocean in Redwoods National Park



Friday, July 23, I rode up Hwy 101 through Redwood National Park and then on to Grants Pass (191m), Oregon. The ancient redwoods serve as a reminder what a little blip we are in the history of this planet. The redwood forest is amazingly quiet and peaceful. I took I-5 southeast from Grants Pass, caught Hwy 234 north to Hwy 62 in the Umpqua National Forest with the goal of getting to Crater Lake National Park (128m). The ride to the park was wonderful but Crater Lake itself was an amazingly beautiful. I wanted to stay longer, but it was after 5:00 pm already so I headed out the north entrance of the park, with the hope of getting to Corvallis before dark. North of Crater Lake, I caught Hwy 138 (still in the Umpqua National Forest) and headed for Roseburg (128m) where I would pick up I-5. Hwy 138 is a great road for motorcycles; winding, along a rushing river, through mountain valleys. I was behind schedule and I was pushing it. As I approached a sharp curve in the road, a deer stepped out of the trees to the very edge of the road. She stood at the edge of the road and seemed to look straight into my eyes. My response was to slow down - I was unsure what she would do. As I braked and approached the curve, she calmly walked back into the woods. When I got to the curve, I could see that it was littered with gravel and small rocks. If I hadn't slowed down and taken that curve at the speed I had taken the previous 1000 curves, the gravel might easily have thrown me. My first thought, "Was she warning me to slow down?" She seemed to be communicating with me. Do you believe we have spirits watching over us? Is this a strange, random coincidence? Whatever it was, I made it through that corner. Roseburg to Corvallis (115m) was uneventful. As I pulled away from a stoplight two miles from my hotel in Corvallis, I heard a ping in my engine. By the time I rolled into the hotel parking lot about 9:30 pm, I knew I had a serious problem.



Redwoods National Park, California

The Big Tree – Redwoods National Park





2001 HD Road King – Redwoods National Park



Crater Lake – Crater Lake National Park, Oregon

Saturday, July 24, I spent the day trying to get the Harley repaired. I rode 15 miles from Corvallis to the nearest Harley-Davidson dealership in Albany. They quickly decided they couldn't fix my bike, so they put my bike in a trailer and hauled us to the dealership in Salem. No charge for that help! Late Saturday afternoon, the service manager took me into the shop area to see the mechanic. I was disheartened when I saw my engine in a hundred pieces. The diagnosis was a broken spring on the cam chain tensioner. The bad news was: they didn't have the parts to do the repairs; it was 5:30 pm on a Saturday night; and their mechanics don't work on either Sunday or Monday. Assuming they could get the parts from Portland on Tuesday morning, it would be late afternoon sometime before repairs would be done and I could get back on the road. The dealership said I could pick out a loaner to ride while my bike was being repaired. My first four choices were rejected, and I ended up with gold Fat Boy. I shouldn't complain because it was free, but it was ugly! I headed back to Corvallis.



The Free, Ugly Gold HD Fat Boy

I was planning on being back to work on Wednesday, July 28, but waiting for the Harley to be repaired made that impossible. Fortunately, I wasn't out in the middle of nowhere when this happened - and trust me, there are lots of nowheres in the west. Although my Harley was in Salem, I stayed in Corvallis - home to Oregon State Beavers. The city of Corvallis has a population of about 50,000. My hotel was within walking distance of their downtown area which is vibrant. It reminded me of downtown Iowa City in many ways. The breakdown allowed me to catch up on my sleep, email, and do a little work. I had my laptop with me. Saturday and Sunday night, I stayed in Corvallis but had to change hotels on Monday, July 26, so I moved up to Salem. Salem is Oregon's state capital.

Tuesday, July 27, I checked out of my hotel around 1:30 pm and was expecting my bike to be done before 3:00 pm. When I got to the dealership, they said it would be closer to 5:00 pm, so I headed to the nearest Starbucks to use their wireless. I got back to the dealership around 4:30 pm. Finally, at 5:00 pm, I got back the Harley back. That night, I had a hotel reservation in Lewiston (385m), Idaho. I took I-5 north to Portland (47m), hit their rush hour slowdown on I-205, and finally connected with I-84 heading east out along the Columbia River. This is a beautiful drive through the Columbia River Valley. I was on I-84 until it ran into I-82; headed north to Kennewick (213m), Washington. At Kennewick I caught Hwy 12 through Walla Walla and into Lewiston (133 m). The sun was down by the time I got into Kennewick, so I had about two-and-a-half hours in the dark. Eastern Washington is dismal territory in daylight - brown sandy hills of wheat stubble - but with a full moon glowing off the brown grasses, it was a terrific ride. The moon was so bright that everything seemed luminescent. I got to Lewiston around 1:00 am, checked into my hotel, had a bowl of stale cheerios, and went to bed.

Wednesday, July 28, I left Lewiston around 9:00 am headed for Billings (560m), Montana. I stayed on Hwy 12 through Idaho. This is great ride on a motorcycle and runs along the Clearwater River and through the Bitterroot Mountains. This is also home to the Nez Perce Indian Tribe and part of the route that Lewis and Clark took on their trip to Oregon in 1803. The 220 miles through this part of Idaho is rugged wilderness with few towns. You pass Lolo Hot Springs and climb Lolo Pass before Hwy 12 takes you down the hill into Missoula.

I caught I-90 in Missoula and headed for Billings (344m). I stopped at a rest area about 20 miles west of Butte to put on rain gear, because I could see dark clouds on the horizon. Storms move in fast in this area and before I could get into Butte, I got hit with a real devil. Very strong winds, heavy rain, and nickel sized hail - which sting at 60 miles an hour. Finally, I got into Butte and pulled under a gas station canopy. I filled up with gas, waited 10 minutes for the rain to subside, and then hit the road again. There was no more hail and the rain had become just a light drizzle, but the wind was still strong. I still had 220 miles to go to Billings and managed to stay ahead of heavy rain, but the wind gusts were still 30 mile per hour plus. I stopped for gas in Bozeman and talked with a couple from Alberta (also on a Harley) who were headed west. I still had on my rain gear. The woman said you are going to roast because it was hot around Billings. I was freezing from riding in the rain and told them they would be cooled off before long if they kept heading west toward Butte. The ride from Bozeman to Billings was good; I finally got a nice tail wind and warmer temperatures. I hit the hotel in Billings around 9:30 pm.

After a quick shower, I headed to a restaurant next to the hotel. I opened the door for a couple going into the restaurant and then followed them inside. The hostess said: "three for dinner?" They said, "no, just two" and then looked at me and said: "are you by yourself? Why don't you join us for dinner?" Uncharacteristically, I said "Sure, why not." Larry Raglione and his wife Renee lived in Vancouver, Washington. He was a retired police officer. They travel around to different Cabela's teaching classes required for individuals wishing to obtain concealed weapon permits. They were an interesting couple and very enjoyable dinner company. Coincidentally, they both ride Harleys - although they weren't on their Harleys for this trip.

I left Billings on Thursday morning, July 29, around 9:30 am and headed for Sioux Falls (660m), South Dakota. I took I-90 to Hwy 212 just south of Crow Agency, Montana. Hwy 212 is a two-lane road that saves about 45 minutes when heading from Billings to Spearfish, SD. The highway passes through the Crow and Cheyenne Reservations, past the Custer Battlefield, and into Belle Fourche, South Dakota. This is a wide-open space in eastern Montana, and the road is great. Keep an eye on the gas gauge in this area, because there are long-distances between services. I picked up I-90 again in Spearfish.

The next stop was Rapid City for gas; rainclouds were on the horizon. A guy at the station said, "You aren't heading south are you?" I told him I was headed east on I-90. He said an hour earlier a storm had come through with baseball sized hail. I was glad I had slept in a little in Billings. I found out later a record sized hail stone had fallen just south of Rapid City an hour before I arrived. I put on rain gear expecting rain, but luckily it was only a drizzle. The rain gear came off when I stopped for gas in Kadoka. I stopped again at Chamberlain around 8:30 pm and still 140 miles to Sioux Falls. A guy and his girlfriend were trailering their bike west. He said it was raining hard in Sioux Falls when they drove through earlier. The wind was starting to pick up as I left Chamberlain, and I could see lightning to the north. I hoped to make it to Sioux Falls without having to stop for gas again, but a strong headwind and riding 75 miles an hour was causing the Harley to suck up gas fast. I stopped again in Mitchell for gas to make sure I had enough to get into Sioux Falls. The lightning was getting closer and more intense, so I put the rain gear back on but hoping I wouldn't need it. After Mitchell, I got ahead of the front, and the wind started helping. This was also the best section of road on I-90 in South Dakota - smooth as glass. Finally, I got to my Sioux Falls hotel around 11:00 pm, ate breakfast for dinner at a local restaurant, and arrived back to the hotel just as the lightning, rain, and thunder hit Sioux Falls. It was a real gully washer with rain totals up to four inches in the area.

Friday morning, July 30, I left Sioux Falls around 8:30 am. I had 275 miles to Norwalk, IA and was ready to be home. Several miles of I-29 south in South Dakota was limited to one lane due to flooding from the previous night's rainstorm. It was pretty good riding weather with temperatures in the high 60s and low 70s, and some sunshine. It was a little windy, but I kept the Harley at 75. I made trip in less than five hours. After 16 days on the road, there was no place like home. I did try clicking my heels together a few times on the trip, but I guess I didn't have the right magic for that to work. I got back to Norwalk around 1:00 pm. I unpacked the Harley, had lunch with my wife Mary, and took a nap. About 4:30 pm that afternoon, I was awakened to my four-year old granddaughter Ellie jumping on me and hugging me - saying "Pampa, I missed you!" Grace (granddaughter number two who was 18 months) walked in saying "Hi, Papa! Hi, Papa!" It was the perfect homecoming! What could be better than that?

This will not be remembered as my most enjoyable trip. Being stuck in Corvallis, Oregon for three days was hard. The trip disruption was both expensive and kept me from reaching Cannon Beach, my planned destination, and one of my favorite places on the Oregon coast. The experience did have its wonderful moments though - salt flats in Utah, desert in Nevada, multiple falls in Yosemite, giant redwoods in northern California, and Crater Lake in Oregon. Many places are known and get attention from everybody, but every mile has its own special beauty. A unique smell, temperature, and wind direction, and if you pay attention, you can feel and sense every one of these differences. The people along the way were kind, helpful, and almost always interested in where you are from; and where you are going. Motorcycling this way is a solitary endeavor, and it requires complete concentration on the task at hand, because not paying attention can have consequences. There is little time to reflect on the plight of others or the state of the world. That is why I found it so relaxing. I better not get too analytical or those familiar with "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" by Robert Pirsig, might question my sanity. It was a little crazy. Start to finish, the trip was about 4,910 miles. End of story!



Grandaughters, Ellie – 4 years old, and Grace – 18 months



MANY PLACES ARE KNOWN AND GET ATTENTION FROM EVERYBODY,
BUT EVERY MILE HAS ITS OWN SPECIAL BEAUTY. A UNIQUE SMELL,
TEMPERATURE, AND WIND DIRECTION, AND IF YOU PAY ATTENTION,
YOU CAN FEEL AND SENSE EVERY ONE OF THESE DIFFERENCES