

2013 Very Boring (it wasn't) Rally

By Rand Rasmussen (raconteur)

I didn't make VBR 1 or 2, but I decided that under no circumstances would I miss VBR 3. My son-in-law Adam and I were riding there—leaving at 5:30 a.m.—ahead of the rest of the family, who were leaving several hours later in Susan's Honda Pilot., and staying in a Canal Park Hotel. Making the trip extra fun was the fact that, other than the 300 mile trip home from the seller's house, this would be the first long trip for Adam on his “new” bike. Plus, he's a nice guy.

A few years ago, Adam purchased a 1973 BMW R-75/5. He worked hard to fix it up but, as anyone who restores very old bikes knows, they are almost never a bargain—however inexpensive their initial cost. In fact, even if they are given to you for free, they will often cost thousands to restore to reliability—especially if they have been sitting fallow in storage. And Adam is not a restorer; he just wanted a bike he could ride. But, as old bikes are prone to do, it kept breaking. And Adam, to his credit, kept fixing it. This year, however, something serious crumped in his transmission. Adam dutifully towed it to my house on a trailer and we put it in the shop up on the lift, and prepared to dig into it. I called my friend Charlie Coons to double check my diagnostic plans, but I also asked him to keep an ear out for a good, used BMW Airhead in the price range of \$2,000, as I thought the /5 transmission would be a deal breaker. Chaz mentioned that he knew where there was a really nice BMW R-1150 Oilhead for sale at a fair price (his own.) When I got to the shop I told Adam about Charlie's bike. As he listened, his attention became fixed, and I could practically hear his enthusiasm for digging into the /5 leak away: Phhhsssssssssstttt.

Adam went into the house and called Charlie and got every detail about the 1150—a pretty easy feat since Charlie is an engineer, and you know how they are about details. Adam told me he was going to check with his credit union the next day about getting a loan. I told Susan that he wouldn't get a wink of sleep that night, and I was right. Anyway, to make a long story even longer, Adam got the loan on Tuesday, and he and our daughter Kati asked if we would be willing to watch the grandkids (no sweat there) and the dogs (willing to, but not as much enthusiasm) while they drove from Fargo, ND to Pine Island, MN to pick up his “new” bike—a distance of 313 miles one-way. They left at 1:30 in the afternoon, and I heard the car and the 1150 pull back up to our house at 2:08 a.m. Wednesday. (If anyone is interested in a 1973 BMW R75/5, or parts therefrom, let me know. It is mostly complete, with the exceptions of the trans being crumped, and the gas tank being completely roached. It even has all the rare parts—the parts that are usually gone (side covers, original seat with chrome rail, good wheels, fenders, and a professionally rebuilt speedo/tach with fewer than 100 miles on the rebuild.)

Meanwhile, back at the ranch...Adam and I got up at 5:30, showered (separately) and got our gear gathered and out to the bikes. It was still dark, but the eastern sky was beginning to lighten. The temperature was in the very low 50's, so we both plugged in our electrically-heated garments, and set off. It being so early, we made quick work of the traffic lights in north Fargo, then north Moorhead, and finally, Dilworth. Before long, we were out on the morning prairie, with the sun coming up on our left front, and the city fading in our mirrors. As our speed increased, I began to feel cold; my almost-new Aerostich electric jacket liner didn't seem to be heating as well as it should have been heating on full-power. I looked down at the controller: funny, I didn't remember the power light on the rheostat being amber; I thought it was red! Somewhere in the reptilian core of my brain, a little amber light went off: the power light is red—at least when it is plugged-in correctly and not in reverse. The amber light is to remind me that I can be an idiot at times. Even though it was foolish of me, I managed to unplug and reverse the rheostat while riding. Ahhhhhh! (Don't try this at home—or anywhere else on a moving

bike for that matter.)

Adam and I both started with full-tanks, and with the agreement that Walker—our ½ way point—would be our first stop. By the time we got to Detroit Lakes, we had daylight with us. Indeed, for the rest of the morning we traveled into a very bright sun. But I didn't care, and I think Adam didn't care either. We were in the rolling hills and dense woods of northern Minnesota, headed for Duluth—absolutely one of our favorite destinations—and bound for a motorcycle rally; what's not to love? As I slipped through the gentle curves of Highway 34 east, the opening line of Jim Croce's I've Got a Name kept running through my mind: "Like the pine trees lining the winding road..." And so they were...

We made Walker, on the very beautiful—despite its rather unappetizing name—Leech Lake. We stopped at the Holiday Station there, bought gas, used the rest room, bought a snack and then stood out by the bikes for 15 minutes and ate and talked. Adam was obviously enamored of his new bike, and I have been in love with mine for years, so we had a lot in common. It was so pleasant standing there talking in the warm sun, I was almost reluctant to get going. Finally we did though. Still needed the electrics—even at 8:00. From Walker we proceeded east on 200, going through Remer, then Hill City. We crossed the Mississippi, and took the short left-right jag at Jacobsen's Landing and on toward our rendezvous with highway 2, nine miles west of Floodwood. The woods are incredibly dense along that stretch, and were a delight to ride. Only a mile before highway 2 we passed a small, densely-wooded lake that I have wanted for years to jump into, but never have. Someday I will.

We turned right onto highway 2 east for nine miles, and took a break at Floodwood. Neither of us really needed gas, but, as long as we were stopped we bought it anyway. After that, it was pretty much the same routine as Walker, except we texted Kati and Susan respectively, and found they had just left Fargo. Adam and I re-suited for the remaining 50 or so miles, and gunned east at 65, passing some cars at the designated passing lanes, and being passed by others. We normally take the 194 cut-off and enter Duluth through Hermantown, but the only thing I knew about the Spirit Mountain Ski Resort was that it was located on the south end of town, so we bore right on highway 2, with Adam leading. At the juncture of I-35W I caught a glimpse of a sign which I thought directed me south on the frontage road. Adam continued across the freeway. After a few miles, when I didn't see any signs pointing to Spirit Mountain, I climbed on I-35W north, and was immediately rewarded with a brown sign proclaiming, "Spirit Mountain Resort & Lodge Next Exit." I followed the signs to registration, where Adam was just taking off his helmet:

"Where'd you go?" he asked.

"I mis-read the sign," I said.

"I couldn't figure out why you had turned"

"Oh well."

At registration I met one of my best friends, Charlie Coons, (from whom Adam bought his bike.) If you are one of the three people in the motorcycling community who do not know Charlie, it is hard to describe him; Charlie must be experienced. Tall, slender, bearded, leaning toward handsome, Charlie is generous with his time and expertise. He is always willing to help another rider, and is the mechanical consultant to many—me included. "Witty," "glib," "opinionated," "kind"—these are all adjectives that describe Charlie. But the feature for which he is most widely known is his, ahem, "thriftiness." (One time, when I asked Ron at Judson Cycle if he'd seen Charlie lately, he replied: "Yeah, he came over

here last week to change the air in his wallet.”) It is well known that Charlie will squeeze a quarter until the eagle screams (his son John actually had WWCP? bumper stickers made up, which stands for: "What Would Charlie Pay?" The stickers keep selling out to all of Charlie's friends, and John has to keep ordering more.) So it came as no surprise, when I told Charlie that we planned to pick up a set of Ortlieb Dry Bags saddle bags for Adam's bike, he started in with his usual canned harangue about how much things cost, how recklessly people spend money, etc.

Of course, that required me to remind him that if he hadn't been so damn cheap Adam would already have bags as they would have been included in the sale of the 1150. Chaz responded that he had promised those bags to John before he decided to sell the bike. Okay, fair enough. But that was followed by his usual retort that it "must be nice to be rich." I replied, "Chaz, you're one of my best friends. I don't get to see you nearly enough, but I have only been with you for five minutes and you are already annoying the shit out of me." Since Charlie lists "annoying the shit of Rand" under "Job Skills" on his resume, for him the rally was off to a flying start. He flashed a satisfied smile, and we started talking about where to camp. This is the nature of our friendship—always has been, probably always will be.

The view from registration, at the top of the ski slope, was truly spectacular! The entire bay separating Duluth, MN and Superior, WI could be seen from a promontory of hundreds of feet of elevation. The high bridges linking the two cities and the lift Bridge in Canal Park were also visible in the clear, unpolluted air, as was the great blue body of Superior beyond. It was warm but not hot in the sun. I was at the front end of a two-day event, to which I had been looking forward, and I was with people I liked. It doesn't get much better than that. I secured my helmet to my trailer, tossed my gloves up on the fairing's dash, and coasted down the steep hill and out onto the grass field between the chalet and the ski hill. Adam followed on his bike.

Setting up camp from a trailer is simple. Nothing to unstrap, unroll or dig out; everything is just loosely laid in the trailer box. I set-up my ten-year-old North Face mesh tent, attached the rainfly, but rolled it up and tied it off, laid out my Thermarest, fluffed-up my Big Agnes sleeping bag and inflatable pillow, and generally made myself at home. At frequent intervals, Adam and I involuntarily stopped talking to gaze in wonder at the panoramic view. After 20 minutes I was set up. Adam decided he would be staying with Susan, our daughters Sheyenne and Kati (his wife) granddaughters Allie and Payton ("The Quilters" I call them collectively) and grandson Gabe in a hotel in Duluth, so he did not prepare to camp. As continued to happen for the whole rally, people stopped by to ask me about my trailer, which always draws interest because it uses bicycle wheels. I then headed up to the vendor area to sign copies of my book *The Revised I-94 Reader*, should anyone actually show up who wanted their book signed.

I signed a few copies of TRI94R—mostly for friends of mine—and I had a fun time talking with the many people who passed by my table. Adam and I put in a request to have a set of black, Ortlieb Dry Bag panniers delivered from RiderWearHouse to the rally site. (They had tons of goods on display, and could deliver anything in the catalogue in about 30 minutes. So, my advice if you attend VBR-4—unless you are Charlie—is to bring lots of money!) We then rode into Duluth for an excellent lunch at the Saigon restaurant in the Dewitt-Seitz building in Canal Park. Adam and I are both musicians, so we checked out our favorite music store, Rosewood Music, on the third floor of the D-S building, but the sign said that the proprietor and luthier, Michael, was up at the Ukulele Carnival in Two Harbors, MN. We rode back to the rally site, and spent the remainder of the afternoon in conversation with our neighbors, one of whom, Bill, an ex-cop, had owned a 2004 R1150 and was eager to talk with Adam about the bike, who was eager to listen and ask questions.

About 4:15, Adam and myself headed back into Duluth to meet the family. Andy Goldfine, the Main Brain behind Aerostich, had graciously included Susan and me on a dinner cruise, and the invitation sternly warned us to be ready to board at 5:00 sharp! Susan and I walked the 500 meters from her hotel to the boat slip, only to find that the cruise had been delayed until 6:30. We passed the 90 minutes in pleasant conversation with various others who had not received the revised schedule. When the most stressful thing going on in one's life is sitting in a cool, shady boat harbor talking with other motorcycle enthusiasts while waiting for a free dinner cruise, well, life ain't too bad! The cruise was very pleasant. Andy and Shirah made the rounds and spoke to each of the guests, and Shirah kindly invited us to join them at their table as Susan and I were sitting alone. But Susan and I get so little time alone together, that just sitting and talking in those very pleasant surroundings, was a thin slice of heaven for us. The boat rocked gently on the swells, the evening breeze was cool, our conversation was intimate and harmonious, backed-up by the deep hum of the diesel, and we were doing something we has never done before. The 90 minutes passed quickly.

I got back to the rally site at something like 10. I got out my banjo and started playing music and singing. Although there was a campfire a few dozen feet away, I was reluctant to just barge over and interrupt the conversation with music (I have a pathological fear of being that annoying musician, constantly insinuating himself into social situations and causing people to think, "Oh, no; here he comes again!") Thus, I tend to wait for invitations.) I did get a number of people who walked over to enjoy a few songs, and met a new friend, Dave, who brought his travel guitar. That was a fun and unexpected little cameo in what was already turning out to be one of the best rallies to which I had ever been. I hit the rack about midnight—late for me. Sleeping was pleasantly cool.

Saturday dawned cool and lovely. I schlepped around the rally grounds for a while, and then went to watch the Observed Trials riders practice. I napped for an hour on a bed of soft green grass in front of the lodge then, with two new friends—Joe and Dave—caught a ride on a golf cart to go look at the Trails course. At 10:45 I left for Duluth to meet Susan for lunch. Because of Lake Superior, Duluth is often a cool city (two years ago, on my way to the BMWRA National at Chippewa Falls, WI it was 78 degrees at the top of Miller Hill, but 41 degrees down in the harbor.) But on Saturday morning it was warm in the Harbor, and Susan and I ate outside at Little Angie's—one of our favorites—then I headed back to Spirit Mountain, and she and "The Quilters" headed for their favorite quit shop, Hannah Johnson's in east Duluth.

Mid-afternoon, brought a call from Kati, wondering if my grandson Gabe could come to the rally site to goof around and to watch the Trials riders (apparently, an 11 year old boy was a little bored with the quilting going on in the hotel room; who would have guessed?) I made the appropriate arrangements, and met them at the registration table. Gabe, my friends Charlie and Annette, Adam and me watched the Trials with fascination. Gabe, who had never seen them before, was particularly impressed, giving them his highest praise: "Awesome!" After an hour, Adam took Gabe to the alpine slide and zip line. I walked back to my tent and sat and BSed with Dave and Joe. An hour later, Adam and Gabe came back. I asked Gabe how the rides were: "Awesome!" He sure gets a lot of mileage out of that one phrase. Plus, as an added bonus, he knew his sister would be jealous.

One of my few (mild) complaints I had about VBR-3 was that the company setting up the sound system for the evening's band performance felt compelled to pipe recorded music over the speakers all afternoon and evening. It wasn't that the music was loud or obtrusive; it was just that I and two other musicians I met all agreed that we enjoyed whiling away our afternoon hours at rallies by playing and singing music of our own. I noticed that it made similar trouble for the wandering violinist. At about 6:00, after skipping the group picture, Gabe climbed on the back of my bike and I brought him back up

to registration to meet his mom in the Pilot. Adam and I then led the way into Duluth for a light supper of sandwiches in their hotel room. Then it was back to Spirit Mountain for me, where I spent the remainder of the daylight hours talking with Lori Petrick, Jim Rasmussen and Anita and Randy (didn't get last name; sorry) from my own Red River BMW Motorcycle Club. As darkness fell, the band fired up. They were a good band—a sort of fusion between folk, rock and country. After the concert ended, I got out my banjo again and played with Dave until it was obvious it was time to turn in. The night was pleasantly cool, and sleep came easily for me.

Sunday morning. The packing went quickly - as is always the case when one tows a trailer where nothing has to be rolled, stuffed or strapped. Several other rally-goers commented on the swiftness of my pack-up routine. About 20 minutes from the time I opened my eyes, I was saying goodbye to my neighbors and working my ear plugs into my ears. I started my bike and trailed slowly up the grass hill toward the access road, careful to limit throttle so as not to slip the rear tire on the grass. One last look at the amazing vista and I was borne up and out of the Spirit Mountain Resort for the last time. I stopped at the station at the corner of I-35, filled my tank, and got an orange juice to drink, then I blasted down the acceleration ramp onto I35 for the now-familiar 6 or 7 mile trip to Duluth.

I met Susan at the hotel and we walked over to the Amazing Grace Coffeehouse, where the omelets are out of this world! I enjoyed a quiet breakfast with my wife—the kind of which we seem to get too few. I told her I planned to leave right after breakfast to beat some of the heat, which was expected to reach near 100. I texted Adam, that if he planned on riding with me, he needed to be ready to go by 8:00. Susan and I walked back to the hotel and stopped at their room. Adam was still asleep and had not gotten my message. He showed no interest in getting up, so I would be riding solo for the trip back to Fargo. Susan walked me out to the bike and remained there while I suited-up. A final kiss and I was on my way.

A hard right put me on Lake Avenue which, if you have never been to Duluth, is the paved equivalent of a down-hill ski run. I am not certain of the exact gradient of this hill, but I think that a sign warning “Incredibly Steep% Grade Ahead” would cover it. Up and up for a half-mile or so. Stop signs required some genuine pressure on the brakes to keep my rig from heading south. More steepness greeted me at the corner of Highway 53, but then the grade relented a bit. As always, I turned for one last, longing look at Lake Superior, reflecting a shimmering, blinding, pre-natural shade of beautiful blue in the morning sunlight. Then it was up, and over Miller Hill—and right into a Holiday Station where I needed to stop after only five or so miles due to three cups of tea and two large glasses of water with my breakfast. A few miles later, I turned west on 194, crossed Midway Road, and went under Highway 33.

The morning temperature was very pleasant. I was motoring away from the sun. I had fond memories of a fun rally running through my mind. My bike snored along at 65, with that buttery-smooth, mellow sound and feel common to all well-tuned boxers. Soon I was at the left turn which allowed me to quit Highway 2 and motor west on Highway 200. Open road bracketed by thick trees and the occasional farm. No cars, no traffic, no cops means, essentially, no speed limit, but I kept it at a steady 65 anyway. In 26 miles I passed through Hill City, and another 19 after that, through Remer—but I stopped at neither. I knew I could make Walker, only another 35 miles after that.

Walker ended up being my only stop (more-or-less.) I had planned to catch lunch there, but I was too early. Anyway, I didn't feel like stopping, but only riding. I did buy gas, a snack of some sort and a Diet Pepsi, but 10 minutes was about all the break I could tolerate, and soon I was on my way again. The trip from Walker to Fargo—about 120 miles—breaks into three sort of natural segments: Walker to

Park Rapids (27 miles); Park Rapids to Detroit Lakes (39 miles) and; Detroit Lakes to Fargo 50 or so.) It was in the 90's by the time I hit Detroit Lakes, but with only 45 miles to go I knew I could make it. Somewhere in the stretch between DL and Fargo I got an ear tickle (you know, the kind that feels like a bug is trying to work its way past your ear plug and into your ear, even though there never is one there?) I finally succumbed to the torture at Glyndon, MN less than 15 miles from home, pulled over, took my helmet off and reset my ear plug. Twenty minutes after that I was pulling into my very own yard.

It had been a great rally! Tons of fun, and I cannot wait for VBR-4. And who knows, by then my granddaughter Payton or grandson Gabe may be riding along with me—on their own bike.