

Retro Tour addendum

Bob Gould sent me some photos he took from our Retro Tour:



One of the 104, five rider starts to Section one of the Rattlesnake Enduro



The Pennsylvania Grand Canyon



L to R: Joel Samick, Yours Truly, Steve Costallas, Pete Elliot, and Bob Gould



Inside Woodward Cave



After following Joel on an intermittently rainy, dusty dirt road



Getting hosed off at the car wash

Posted by Dave Roper at 11:55 AM No comments: 
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Sunday, August 2, 2015

Retro Twin Shootout

As recounted in the following post, last weekend I went on a Retro Tour, riding five different twin cylinder motorcycles from the '70s. I've decided to do a separate post on the bikes. How to categorize them? A '72 Laverda SF 750, a '73 Norton Commando Combat Fastback, a '75

Ducati 860 GT, a '76 Yamaha RD 400, and a '78 Moto Morini 500. The only thing they all have in common is that they are twins. Three are Italian, one Brit, one Japanese. Four are four-stroke (two OHC, two pushrod), one two-stroke. Three are parallel twins, two are V-twins. Three are 5 speed, one four speed and one 6 speed. Two are disc brake front and rear; two are disc front, drum rear; and one is drum front and rear. Two are electric start, three kick only. Two are 750s, one 400, one 500 and one 860. Yet, they were all perfectly compatible for a tour together.



I started on the Yamaha, a bike I had only briefly ridden on the street in the '70s, after having roadraced RD 350s and an R5C and TD-3 Yamaha. The bike was immediately comfortable, with the best seat of the bunch and soft, supple suspension. I was very much a 'sit up and beg' riding position that was quite comfortable, though I found the footrest too far forward, a trait I found true of all of the bikes to a greater or less or extent. With its rubber mounted motor, it was very smooth and quite quiet. There was a slight surge at steady, light throttle, and I wondered if it would have benefited from dropping the needles a notch. The clutch and shift were flawless. It kick started very easily. It was too softly

sprung and dampened to be ideal scratching on the back roads, but steered very well and must have been the lightest of the bunch, so it was very agile. The brakes were excellent. It smoked very moderately and oil consumption may not have been much more than the Norton or Laverda. But, the fuel consumption was much greater than the four strokes and would go on reserve at about 75 miles and we always gassed up before 100 miles. It started the tour with 42,219 miles on the clock.



Next I rode the Laverda, and it was probably the greatest contrast to the RD 400 I had just gotten off of. It's a big, heavy bike and that weight is up high. Everything was stiff and heavy. Heavy clutch pull, stiff notchy shifting, hard seat, stiff springing, the most vibration on any of these bikes, a stiff, awkward ignition switch in the aftermarket headlight, and easily the loudest of the bikes, with it's aftermarket mufflers.



The drum front brake took the most effort, but actually work quite well.



But, on the other hand, the Laverda was solid. It started instantly with the button. The motor had excellent power with no flat spots. It may have had the best handlebars of the bunch, but again, the footrest were too far forward. Oddly, it had Lucas switch gear, which is not exactly intuitive, but worked well. And, oddly, it had ND instruments which worked well. It did have a problem with downshifting and I consistently would get a false neutral shifting down from 5th to 4th and 4th to 3rd, though sometime it undershifted and sometimes overshifted. I warmed up to the Laverda on my second go on it, on the fast, smooth, flowing Rt. 144 south out of Renovo, and was glad I wasn't on it for the dirt roads. It started the tour with 41,017 miles and no one was aware of the motor every being apart.



Next up was the newest of the bikes, the '78 ('79? I.D. plate said 10/78) 500 Moto Morini. This was also electric start, which was handy as perhaps the idle was set on the low side and it stalled at lights a couple of times. It was quite light and agile with decent suspension. The brakes were very good. The handlebars were too wide and footrest too far forward for me, the seat decent. Vibration was moderate, though with a 72 degree V-twin, it wasn't as smooth as the 90 degree Ducati. The dry clutch was extremely grabby and very hard to be smooth with. Apparently, the 500s sold in this country were converted to left side shift that didn't work too well. This one was converted back to right side and was OK, but had quite a long throw. It also had an aftermarket 2 into 1 exhaust. While most of the time it ran fine and had no trouble keeping up, on long, uphill climbs it would hesitate some and I wondered if the carburetion was off. The Veglia instruments were useless. The Morini started the tour with 20,924 miles on it.



I rode the '75 Ducati 860 GT next. I raced George Vincensi' several times in the '70s and probably rode my brother's briefly in the late '70s. I've always felt that if one is going to put up with twin cylinders, it should be 90 degree and this bike did nothing to shake that belief. It has a magnificent motor--very smooth and torquey. The clutch and shift are excellent, though it was hard to find neutral. The brakes were the best of the bunch. When I mentioned to Joel that the light dampening in the rear ruined the otherwise excellent handling, he cranked up the dampening in the Ikon shocks and it was much better. It's a big, heavy, long bike. It had the best riding position and though the bars are too wide, they're in the right place, as are the footrests. The seat is O.K. The turn signal switch was awkward. This was the hardest bike to start. I found it best to put it on the center stand, which was remarkably easy to use for a bike this big and heavy. Once or twice Joel had to start it for me as he was the master, but I got it most of the time. It was quite quiet, but with a great sound when opened up. It started the tour with 32,239 miles.



Finally, the '73 Norton Commando Combat Fastback. It least we think it's '73 as it had no date stamped on the I.D. plate. I bought a '74 MK2A 850 Commando Interstate new at Lloyd Bros. in Hamilton Scotland and put about 40K miles on it before I got rid of it in '83, but I guess I hadn't ridden one since, and I had forgotten what nice bike they are. For the most ancient design (and a bit of a lash-up) of the group, it works remarkably well. It's kickstart only, but starts quite easily. It's only four speed, but shifts very nicely with a very nice clutch and, with it's torquey motor, it's not a problem. It had good power and sound. The ergonomics were pretty good with good bars but, again, the footrest too far forward. With the Isolastic engine mounting, the bike shakes like crazy from about 1500 to 2500 rpm, then becomes totally smooth. However, sometimes it's not practical to avoid that 1500-2500 rpms. The brakes were decent. It had a slight 'hinge in the middle' feel to it but really steered and handled very well, with Hagon shocks replacing the original Girlings. It started the tour with 45,937 miles.

So, may we have the envelope, please?

In 5th place, I'm going to put the Laverda. Hard, stiff, top heavy and loud. But, I have to say it felt very solid and was utterly reliable. And, it was quite fast.

4th place goes to the Moto Morini. Agile and pretty convenient, but not as refined as the rest with balky clutch, some vibes, and useless instruments.


3rd goes to the Norton. Not so sophisticated and convenient with kick start and only 4 speed, but really a very nice bike with a nice balance between comfort, handling and speed.

May we have a drum roll, Please?

I'm going to give a tie between the Yamaha and Ducati. They are very different bikes, but both great fun. They both have great motors, though for different reasons. They're both very smooth. The RD has that two stroke 'hit', but with a good power band due to the reed valve induction. The

Ducati has effortless, bottomless torque, but is moving a much heavier package. They both handle well, though the Yamaha trades off it agility with squishy suspension to the Ducati's slightly ponderous stability. Both have excellent brakes, shift and clutch. They're both very comfortable. The Yamaha's black mark is it fuel consumption; the Ducati, it's starting.

But, none of these are bad bikes and what a treat to be able to sample them back to back on some magnificent roads with great companions.

Posted by Dave Roper at 5:59 PM No comments: 

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Retro Tour

It started when I Googled 'Silk 700S', an obscure British motorcycle. I own the 2nd Silk sold and only 130 some odd were made. But, through Google, I discovered that an old friend, Joel Samick, owned one, too. I know Joel from AAMRR road racing in the mid '70s to early '80s. Joel was one of the fast guys and won the '81 F1 championship. Not long after that, he and his wife, Lynn Nathan (who also road raced), retired from racing and eventually opened a Honda dealership in Bear, De., which is now a multi-line dealership, Powersports East.

Over the years, Joel collected a bunch of twin cylinder bikes from the '70s and organized a few rides on these bike for his buddies. After a while, he decided to make a business out of it, Retro Tours, leading 1, 2, 3, or 4 day tours on his bikes. I called Joel after not having talked to him for about 25 years and we got caught up and talked Silk for a while. I decided to sign up for a 4 day tour that he had coming up, even though he told me his Silk wouldn't be going on the tour as it was making a bad noise.

We showed up at Lynn and Joel's house in Kennett Square, Pa., north of Wilmington, De. As each person going on the tour showed up, they got to pick a bike from a short list of his twins that were ready to go. Bob Gould was first and he chose the '72 Laverda 750 SF that he had owned at one time.



'72 Laverda SF with Joel on the left and Bob on the right
Bob had picked up Pete Elliot in Old Chatham, N.Y. on his way down from his home in Webster,
N.H. Pete chose the '73 Norton Commando Combat Fastback.



I chose the '76 Yamaha RD 400 in a close decision over the '75 Ducati 860 GT.



Luckily, Steve Costallas, who showed up Fri. morning as he lives about 20 miles away in Coatesville, Pa., chose the Ducati.



Joel was initially going to ride the '73 Benelli Toronado but, after we discussed it, he decided to take a vote among us and we chose the '78 Moto Morini 500 for him.



The Benelli Tornado that DIDN'T go on the tour



The '78 Moto Morini 500 that was taken in place of the Benelli

We all loaded tank bags on the bike we chose, but we were going to rotate the bikes we rode every 100 or so miles. The tour headed north west with the first stop at Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site, one of the earliest place iron was smelted in the U.S. Joel was eager to show us the bellows powered by a big water wheel which got the charcoal fired furnace up to a temperature to smelt iron ore and we caught a demonstration of sand casting that was used to make plates to build stoves.

From Hopewell we headed north, getting gas (and swapping bikes--me onto the Laverda) in Kempton, then Mexican lunch near Tamaqua. After lunch, we headed west to Ashland where we went into the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine, a tour especially interesting to me as I had just started reading a book about the 33 Chilean miners trapped in a collapse for 69 days in 2010. From there, north again to Bodnarosa cabins in Beach Haven on the Susquehanna River.



Joel barks orders at Bodnarosa Cabins.

We rode a few miles down to Bandit's Roadhouse in Berwick for dinner. In the morning, it was back to Berwick for some breakfast the a few miles further to Bill's Old Bike Barn. I had stopped there maybe 5 years ago on my way to Mid-Ohio and was blown away by the place. Since then, a good deal more has been added. While this a a great bike museum, it's much more than that. Bill and his wife collect just about anything from say 1900-1975 and have created a 'Main St.' with specialty shops: a camera store, a shoe store, a telephone store, a beauty salon, a dentist office, a police station, a bar, etc., etc. While the predominant marque is probably H-D (with plenty of Aermacchi made H-Ds), there are plenty of Brit and European bikes too, with an especially good representation of Moto Guzzi, as Bill was a dealer at one time.



A early-mid 30s NSU designed by former Norton designer Walter Moore



A late 30's Velo MAC in front of the camera store



A picture in Bill's garage



A Rolls Royce pick-up truck



A Moto Guzzi Galletto with a wicker side car



The elegant gas cap on a Moto Guzzi Airone Sport. I have one like this on my Dondolino. Push the lever to the left and it seals the cap; push it to the right and it opens the cap.



Then there were all the signs, posters and ads on the walls. I was especially taken with this one as I worked with Jimmy Chann at Electric Boat in Groton, Ct. in the 70's. One could easily spend a day in Bill's Old Bike Barn and not see everything. It's absolutely amazing and highly recommended. But, we had riding to do, so headed west in early afternoon. After a quick stop at the double covered bridge near Forks, Pa., we gassed up and got some lunch. Now I was on the Ducati and we rode to Hyner View. After viewing the man made wonders, now we were viewing the natural wonders, high above the West Branch of the Susquehanna River.



Hyner View looking northwest

Apparently, this is a popular spot for hang gliding, but unfortunately, none was going on while we were there.



This is the ramp the hang gliders pump off



Looking south

From Hyner View, it was a short ride into Renovo for our 2nd and 3rd night's stay at Yesterday' Hotel. When we got there and checked in, we met some guy's admiring the bikes. They were from Minnesota and were there for the Rattlesnake National Enduro. Sunday, we had no fix itinerary, so this answered the question of what we were going to do. I had somewhat regretted missing the USCRA's one day Moto Giro before the International trials in R.I. this same weekend, and seeing a National Enduro went some way to make up for that. But first, Joel insisted that we must bowl in the manually set bowling alley in the basement of the hotel. This was an opportunity for Joel to humiliate us with his bowling prowess. I had a cut throat duel with Bob for last place and, though I got a couple more points, he got a strike.

In the morning, we gassed up and now I'm on the Norton. We headed up Rt. 144 towards Cross Fork where the Enduro was being held, but after a few miles, came upon a downed tree that totally blocked the road. There was nothing to do but turn around and go back to Renovo, then head west a ways and head north again at the first opportunity. Then we overshot the turn off in Cross Fork so the 13mi ride

to the Enduro turned into a 50mi ride. But, it was a gorgeous 50 mi. ride with the last bit a fun dirt road to the first section of the Enduro. The local fire company was serving a killer breakfast after which we watched the first section. Apparently, Enduros have changed quite a bit recently, and now there's no penalty for being early, but that's unlikely anyway as the average speed is set very high and virtually every one loses point for being late. So, it seemed like a hare scrambles except riders were sent off in groups of five. The first section was a 6.1 mile loop that started as a series of switchbacks in a big field, then went into the woods, back into another field, back through the woods, and back to the start.




The Rattlesnake National Enduro started in this field.

After the last bike had finished the 1st section (there were 520 entries), we suited up and headed north. We stopped for fuel in Galeton and, while we were stopped, a shower came through, so we waited it out. Then we headed east, with me back on the RD 400, and went to the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania. It's much like Hyner View, a dramatic high promontory over looking an river, in this case Pine Creek, with a superb road to get there. It looked like more rain, so we put on rain gear and skirted south of Wellsboro and headed south west in a round about way back to Renovo. This involve a

couple of long dirt roads and, with intermittent rain and dust, we got caked, esp. me as I couldn't resist staying on Joel's tail. We came to one dead end, but Steve had a smart phone and he and Joel worked out a way to continue with only a bit of back tracking. We gassed up just east of Renovo (me now back on the Laverda), and got an early dinner before we got into town. We went to a coin operated car wash and hosed down the bikes and me. After a beer in the hotel bar with talk of Bigfoot sightings, we took a walk around town, a town that time has passed by. It was at one time a major railroad hub for the timber industry, but that was all gone now. There is hope that converting the abandoned Penn. R.R. maintenance building into a power plant run on the abundant natural gas in the area.

Mon. morning, we headed south on Rt. 144, a superb, smooth, flowing road, and I began to enjoy the Laverda more. Gas in Milesburg (now back on the Moto Morini), through Bellefonte, and east to an interesting tour of Woodward Cave, an extensive cavern with stalactites and stalagmites and some evidence of native people's habitation. Heading east from there, we stopped for a break in Shamokin and chatted with two brothers on modern bikes. One said that he was a student at the Motorcycle Technology Center in York. He said that one of the staff there was into vintage m/c racing. I asked who that was. He said 'Bucky'; I said 'Bucky Sexton'; he said yes. Small world.

Steve had to get back home, so he left us from there and the four of us carried on south east, gassing up in Terre Hill. I had the Ducati for the final leg. After a while, I noticed that the headlight wasn't working. Again. This happened before and Joel had to go into the fuse box and wiggle a wire. We topped the bikes up in Kennett Square just before arriving back at Joel and Lynn's home. Lynn served us another sumptuous meal and Bob, Pete, and I spent the night there before taking off in the morning. It was a fabulous trip. Joel led us on great roads at a lively pace. He and I often went ahead, but everyone ran their own pace and there was little waiting, as all were good riders. And, interesting people who got along well. I was the oldest, having just turned 67, a few years older than Joel and Bob, who had been roommates in boarding school. Pete is 55 and Steve was the kid at 49. The three of them had all been on Retro Tours before. Joel does a through job of maintaining the bikes and, other than the wonky wire on the Ducati, the only other mechanical issue was a split fuel hose on the Morini that had to be trimmed back. It was a great treat riding these different classics back to back. Retro Tours is not luxury touring. There is no chase vehicle carrying one's wardrobe, so pack light. There was no 'Fine Dining'. It's for people who want to ride, not be pampered. Having said that, it is a luxury to be able to sample a variety of great classic twins, led by someone who really knows the roads and knows how to ride, and with broad enough interests to stop at fascinating sites. I expect to be doing it again.

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