

## ***Memorial Day 2002: Front Royal, Skyline Drive, Covid 19.***

The country is just beginning to open back up. Large groups are frowned upon and social distancing is the norm. This will probably be true for the foreseeable future. Our group of 3½ riders was ready to comply with local restrictions while scouting out the Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia landscapes for signs of life, and we took all the recommended precautions. We tied masks around our necks, ready to pull them up anytime we removed our helmets to get gas or take-out food. We “tailgated” off our bikes or sat well apart while eating. We stayed in separate motel rooms. It was encouraging and fascinating to see how folks were coping with the idea of getting to the new normal: how to live with a very nasty virus which, let’s face it, is not going away anytime soon.

Richard drove down from his home in Eastern Long Island Friday, enjoying the low volume of traffic and getting here in only 4 hours even on Friday: rush hour day. He stayed here overnight in his private bedroom with dedicated bathroom. Recently retired, Richard has done dozens of RetroTours over the years and is well travelled in general, but somehow, has never been to Skyline Drive. This is a bucket list ride for him.

Don is 77 years old and on his 4<sup>th</sup> tour. He still rides a big Honda regularly, and his wife also rides her own scooter; reputedly she is a demonically fast rider. Don drove from New Jersey early on Saturday morning. Breakfast was scheduled for 7:30. It had rained throughout the night and the deluge was especially impressive right around dawn. I got a phone call from Don at 6:45 or so. He was already in Pennsylvania but wanted to make sure that ‘rain or shine’ also meant ‘maelstrom or shine’. I re-assured him that we would be riding one way or the other, and he made it in time for breakfast. I was thinking to drag out breakfast as much as possible, hoping for the rain to let up, and was not disappointed. It stopped raining right on time and we were able to put kickstands up just a few minutes past the scheduled departure time of 8:30. Being a practical sort, Richard had his rain gear on. Don and I took the more optimistic approach and were rewarded with sunshine at the Mason-Dixon Line which we crossed just 20 miles from home. Yes, we dodged a bullet and stayed dry. It didn’t just stop raining, it turned into a glorious day as we crossed the Susquehanna River and made our customary pit stop at Eisenhauer Harley Davidson. Usually there would be rock and roll music and a big crowd of Harley riders congregating in the huge parking lot. Today we were greeted at the door by a masked salesman. It was eerily quiet for a Saturday morning, but at least they were open and coping with the necessary restrictions rightly imposed by Maryland’s governor. Although the anticipated free coffee was missing, Richard was unable to control himself and bought a half-helmet that was on sale. We jammed it into his tank bag and rolled on down the road on the 1977 Yamaha XS750, the 1974 BMW R90/6, and the 1978 Honda CX500. We angled south and west across rural farmlands, stopping briefly for gas before reaching Poolesville where we hoped to meet another rider and to find lunch before getting on Whites Ferry for a nostalgic cruise across the Potomac River into Virginia.

**Richard (left) and Don at the Harley shop.**



The restaurant door was locked, and a sign posted on it advised that orders could only be taken by telephone and delivered to the curb. The management was obviously

serious about complying with the new rules for the limited opening of businesses. Unfortunately, the telephone number was *not* posted so I banged on the door and got a menu. Bruce Isaachsen pulled up on his cool, retro, Kawasaki W650, and besides joining us for the ferry ride and a few road miles, he bought lunch. Positive outcome...thanks Bruce. Neither Bruce nor Richard knew of the other's participation on this ride, but coincidentally they already knew each other, having roomed together 3 years earlier at the Ride 'Em Don't Hide 'Em Getaway in Seven Springs, PA. What are the odds? We were admonished not to sit at the restaurant's empty outdoor tables, so we stood more than 6 feet apart in the parking lot and devoured some very tasty sandwiches. Normally, on a beautiful Memorial Day Weekend day like this, this restaurant would be packed, and we would have to wait at least 30 minutes to be seated. Today, there was just one take-out customer and us. Lunch was over before we knew it and we saddled up for the 10-mile ride to the ferry boat.

*In Poolesville we hooked up with Bruce on his W650*



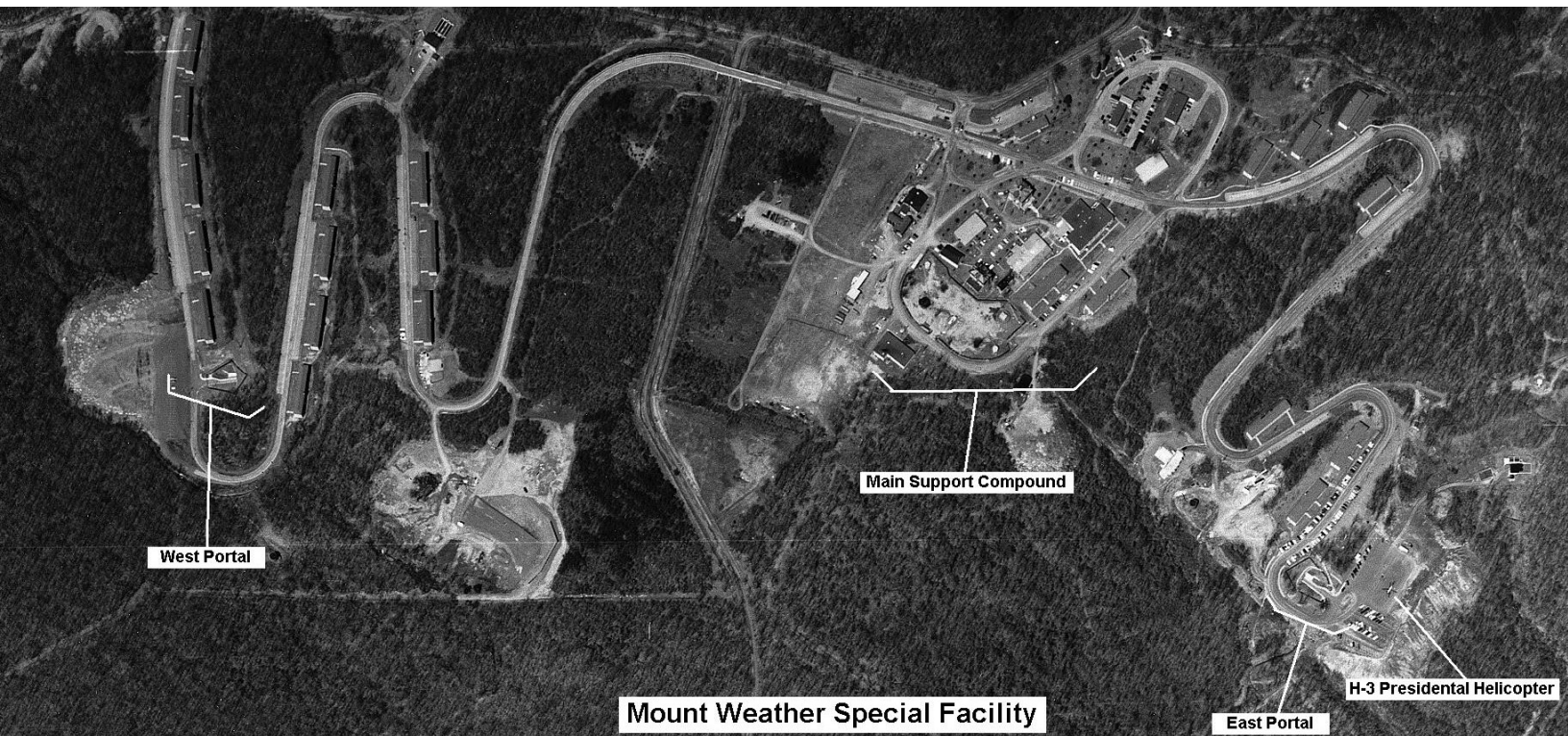


*Aboard the Jubal A. Early, crossing the Potomac.*



On the Virginia side there must have been a bad accident down the road because we quickly ran into a road closure and detour. Oddly, it was the same unmarked detour we took the year before. At least I knew where the dirt road detour ended up. Bruce departed somewhere just past Paeonian Springs, after which we took to highway-like Route 7 for about 12 miles, then turned up Blue Ridge Mountain Road which climbs rapidly to the summit of Mount Weather. Here there is a tall barbed wire fence enclosing a government facility which includes 600,000 square feet of secure underground space and over 400 acres. This is where Congressional leaders were helicoptered to right after the 9/11 attacks on Washington DC and New York City.





Conspiracy theories about this place abound, but for us, it was all about the fantastic weather, our bikes running great, and a curvy road through a mountain forest. On top of this high ridge there are also some 'homes of the rich and famous': veritable gated castles on manicured grounds, surrounded by stone walls. We descended at the far end and joined Route 50 for a short distance before turning onto another back road that leads into Front Royal. On this road, at 118 miles from our last fuel stop, Don coasted to a halt, then switched to reserve for the last 8 miles to our final fuel stop of the day.

We checked into our air-conditioned rooms around 4:30. The outside temperature had climbed into the 80's. After resting for a few hours, we ordered take-out (of course) from the adjacent Thai restaurant and did the 'tailgate-on-your-motorcycle' thing, which was becoming routine. The sky was clear, and I anticipated sweet views along Skyline Drive in the morning. We walked down Front Royal's Main Street which was closed to vehicular traffic. The restaurants were seating customers in small groups at outdoor tables. We hit the sack early after agreeing to meet in the lobby at 6 AM for a light take-out breakfast from Dunkin', across the street.

Ominous clouds could be seen along the Blue Ridge as we rolled out at 6:45 and climbed up to the gated entrance of Skyline Drive. There was no toll taker this early in the morning, so we rolled through and continued climbing. We slowed for a good look at the first few pull outs but waited for more altitude to stop and fully take in the anticipated magnificent views, a mistake. Unfortunately, the clouds that we saw from the motel way down below soon engulfed us in a thick fog that made forward progress difficult; we crawled along, riding by Brail, at about 30 mph. Sometimes conditions take over and there is little to be done, it was beyond our control,

so we pressed on, stopping to rest once or twice but totally robbed of the scenery that we came for. We exited at the first opportunity after 35 miles. Immediately the sun came out and we enjoyed some excellent riding and great views; all was not lost. Skyline Drive will still be there next time, and hopefully the sun will cooperate.



*How about that fantastic view? We were literally 'in the clouds'.*





From Skyline Drive we jogged slightly west then turned north through Fort Valley to close the loop back at front Royal. This segment made up for the cloud cover on the ridge with zero traffic on curvy mountain roads through George Washington National Park. There were several highlights, including a water crossing and, finally, a view to die for. We cruised through the verdant forest for 40 miles or so before popping out onto Route 55 back into Front Royal.





We circled around the block several times looking for the obscure ‘back door’ out of F.R, finally finding Happy Creek and Dismal Hollow Roads. These we followed through Markham and Linden, entering North Virginia’s horse country. Through tidy villages and stately mansions with horses at pasture we three continued on. Now the weather threatened again, the temperature cooling as mist settled in. We thought of stopping for rain suits, but never really got wet, dodging yet another bullet. Crossing the Catoctin Gap, we reached 2,000 feet of elevation near Cunningham Falls State park and once more encountered thick fog. Unlike Skyline Drive, there were scads of tourists about, some walking alongside the shoulder-less roadway, which made negotiating the slick curves a little scary. We stayed smooth and slow, descending into drier conditions through Thurmont, Taneytown, and Westminster, eventually gaining Route 851 which parallels PA’s southern border; a fun way to get back east.

We soon entered Amish country and re-crossed the Susquehanna at the Holtwood Reservoir



which had more parked cars and folks out enjoying the day than I remember seeing in the past. Back at home, Lynn, as usual, had a delicious meal waiting for us, and we ate and drank for a good hour before Don had to shove off. Richard and I retired early. We had covered 550 miles on the two-day tour. The bikes ran well, the riders rode well, and the weather, well, it didn’t rain on us and we did get some sun. It felt wonderful to have gotten out after being in isolation for two months. America is waking up carefully, and we all feel optimistic, having seen folks starting to put their lives back together. I think it’s time.

***2020: A motorcycle rider enjoys socially distanced Chipotle for lunch. He does not seem especially pleased, but is surely smiling on the inside.***