

RIDE REPORT: JOHNSTOWN JAPS July 16-18, 2021

Johnstown has always held a fascination for me. The Great Flood there killed over 2,200 people in 10 minutes (you can google it). The funicular was operational the last time I was there and riding it up and down the mountain side was a treat. To top it all off, the surrounding area is very scenic, and the roads are curvy and lightly travelled. As an added bonus, the Flight 93 Memorial is just a short ride away.

Five riders signed up for this tour, all of whom were repeat offenders. Andy took ill—not Covid, thankfully-- and wisely cancelled at the last minute. Rick lives on the east end of Long Island and drove in the day before after leaving home at 4 AM to beat the NYC traffic. Don lives in New Jersey and showed up for breakfast bright and early Friday morning, as did Fred who lives within 10 miles. Robb flew in from San Francisco a few days early and he and I did a custom warm up tour on Thursday, using the RD400 and Honda CB500T. We did about 150 miles on these little bikes: what a blast!

This ride was listed as an all Japanese event, and in keeping with that theme, 7 or 8 were prepared, and over breakfast, we chose the 5 bikes listed below.

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|-------------------------|----|----------------------|---------------|
| Richard Anderson..... | NY | 1976 Honda GL1000 | 15,6741 miles |
| Don Alexander..... | NJ | 1976 Kawasaki KZ750B | 38,978 miles |
| Fred Shuffelbarger..... | PA | 1977 Yamaha XS650D | 44,674 miles |
| Robb Harman..... | CA | 1978 Honda CX500 | 34,695 miles |
| Joel Samick..... | PA | 1983 Suzuki GS550ES | 6,116 miles |

Lynn prepared a nice morning repast and after getting some coffee in and out we head down to the bikes to finish loading, then head west at around 8:30. We bypass downtown Kennett Square and a short stretch of dirt takes us to a branch of the Brandywine River which we follow on a lovely one-lane through Mortonville and Modena before bypassing Coatesville. Rural Route 372 leads us into Amish country and continuing west, we skirt York and pick up Route 234. Now we make some time, as the lightly travelled, mostly straight road heads due west. The weather is decent, but clouds are building as we progress. Passing through endless apple orchards around Biglerville, after stopping for lunch at a diner with lots of local flavor, we finally find ourselves at Rayestown Lake, closing in on our destination for the night. I had rented a farm house which was near enough to Johnstown and also to the Flight 93 Memorial. We stop by the lake for a rest, where we chat with some locals who are drawn to our old bikes. We toy with the idea, then pass on taking a quick swim and I call our host to let them know we are close. As we follow Route 56 west over a high mountain ridge, searching for a tiny dirt road that will (hopefully) lead us down to the farm, we ride into a biblical downpour.

Just as we crest the ridge, I spy a wall of water in front of us and without hesitation, we pull under a tiny shelter next to a bar, just big enough for our 5 bikes and us. Close lightning strikes and booming thunder claps accompany torrential rainfall as we huddle under the noisy tin roof, amazed at this display of Nature’s power and our incredibly good fortune: we didn’t even get all that wet. After 20 or 30 minutes, things calm down and with a directional pointer from a local, we find our way through a short maze of narrow roads to the farm, a 250+ acre spread. The resident family lives in a recently constructed modern home and rents out the adjacent primitive old farmhouse, our home for the weekend. Our

hosts are super nice and let us park out bikes inside their garage after moving their car out into the rain. Also in the garage were several tank-like, electric motorized, all terrain wheelchairs for anyone who has lost mobility. In addition to renting out the old farmhouse, these folks take veterans and others on hunting excursions. Great people!

We each claim a bed (or a couch) for the night and with some provisions that we have carried, and some found in the kitchen, we scrap together dinner, dry our damp gear, and retire for the night. It has been a great day's ride.

Saturday, we arise and head towards

Johnstown. On the way we stop for a massive chow-down at a locally famous restaurant that our host has recommended. The weather is sunny and warm as we reach Johnstown. The downtown area is in a low valley. When the town was rebuilt after the Great Flood, residents were encouraged to move to a high escarpment, and the vertical railway was built to carry them to work in the factories below. Getting to the top from downtown is complicated, and we must navigate a maze of tiny

residential streets that hairpin up the mountain. Suddenly, I count one less headlight in my mirror. Circling back, I am relieved to see that no one has tipped over on the steeply cambered roadway, but Don on the Gold Wing is stopped on the side of the road. Hondas never break down....or do they?

A quick inspection reveals a failed main fuse. The terminals have some corrosion, and the resultant heat build-up has melted the filament. Hondas of this era use a unique, tiny lead strip for a main fuse, quite different from anything else. Typically, there is a spare mounted nearby but not this time. I am able to Maclver the fuse until we can make a permanent repair, but in the process, stupidly, I put the ignition key in the tool tray that fits under the locking 'shelter': the storage compartment located where the fuel tank normally is. So great, the fuse is repaired but the key is locked away. My heart begins to race as I contemplate destroying the pristine bodywork by prying open the locked shelter lid, or maybe I can hot wire the ignition. All 5 of us are parked on the non-existent shoulder of a very steep and narrow sharply curved roadway. Five heads are better than one, and as we brainstorm solutions, someone suggests trying the keys from the other 4 bikes. It's a super longshot, but what have we got to lose? Incredibly, the KZ750 key opens the door, and we continue to the top to view the inclined plane (vertical railway) which is unfortunately non-operational due to Covid and ongoing repairs and restoration. Even so, the view is amazing, and we also check out the open gift shop and museum.





From our perch atop Johnstown, it's only 30 easy miles to the Flight 93 Memorial. We stop along the way at an auto parts store for an updated fuse assembly for the GL. The first thing to greet us as we enter the Memorial Park is a wind chime tower with 40 chimes to honor the 40 passengers who died when they brought down the aircraft before it could be used to attack Washington, DC.

Unfortunately, there is not enough wind today to make the tower sing, but it is imposing nonetheless. When its time to move on to the main section of the memorial, several of us decide that it would be wise to don rain gear since some *very* ominous clouds are moving in rapidly. But a few of us gamble: its just a mile down the drive, and it's just beginning to drizzle a wee bit. *WRONG!* We get about ½ mile when the sky opens up and we are immediately drenched to the bone. Luckily the air temperature is warm enough that we are not also chilled, and we laugh it off, then stand in the brilliant sun to dry as soon as the brief cloudburst passes.

The Memorial Hall and surrounding area is sobering and inspirational, especially the recordings of passengers' final cell phone conversations with loved ones.



Mostly dry, we next ride off into the back country, trying to navigate a route back to our farmhouse which is only 10 miles away as the crow flies. However, we are not crows and are swallowed up by the back roads as we explore the environs a bit more thoroughly than intended before popping back out pretty much where we began. For round two, we use main, numbered roadways, stopping at a really good hamburger restaurant for lunch and a Subway for carry out dinner before finally reaching our house for the night.

The ride home on Sunday is another good one. The weather is decent as we ride a really nice section of Old Route 30, AKA The Lincoln Highway, which takes us up and over several small mountains in between Bedford, Everett, Breezewood, and McConnellsburg. Impounding Dam Road is one of my favorite routes for bypassing busy Hanover, and on Route 851, we stop at a tavern that has several motorcycles parked out front to grab some lunch. On a pleasant dining deck, we are entertained by an apparently inebriated gentleman (despite the early hour!) who takes off his pants to show us his authentic high school gym shorts. Well worth the price of admission. Thank-you Jim.

***He was the star of the high school basketball team, or so he claims.
He certainly looks tall enough.***

BELOW: Richard has that look in his eyes: "Can you believe this guy?"



Everyone rode beautifully. The bikes performed flawlessly (almost). Fred fell in love with the GS550. Right after he got home he found one and bought it.

We arrive home just as daylight is failing. It has been a weekend to remember.



From the left: Don, Joel, Robb, Fred, Richard.