

The Chairman's Big Chill



How do you say goodbye to the life of the party? It may seem like a cliché, but I think you're supposed to have a party. And in the course of that party, while there are bound to be moments of reflection and perhaps even sorrow, you have failed if you do not have the best time you possibly can and thereby both reaffirm the life we all cherish and honor the man who would be king if he were available to attend.

As it is spoken, so was it done. We have done it all now. We were all shocked through a week of urgent email hospital updates at the passing of one of our motorcycling brothers. Walt was our Chairman in the truest sense of the word. He was our soul and our conscience. He told us to value "High Mileage and Low Expectations" and that "The Ride was All". Some of us attended a wake to remember his life and console his widow

and family. I personally felt cheated by the weather in not being able to ride to his memorial. So then we named our favorite ride through the canyons of Utah The Chairman's Run, as much for the respect of his wonder of nature's western grandeur as to honor the man himself. We told Walt stories, wore the t-shirts, pasted the stickers on our bikes, signed a memorial picture book and we even made a commemorative patch with a shimmering reminder of him to guide us through our personal twists and turns of life as we ride into the horizon.

But still it is not enough. We are haunted by Walt's effervescent energy. We see him in the clouds that drift over the Vermillion Cliffs. He is on the porch at the North Rim Lodge staring in awe at the mother of all canyons. He is inside our visors as we plow through the rain, sleet, snow and hail, reminding us to drive safely. He is sitting on the hearth by the fire at the Lodge at Red River Ranch discussing the merits of adding a Screamin' Eagle kit to someone's Road King. In point of fact, Walt is a permanent part of AFMC. He set a high bar for us all. If the Greeks asked of a man's life, "did he have passion?", AFMC members will ask of future fallen brethren whether they lived up to the level of passion and compassion that Walt showed us all.

But more than anything, Walt would have wanted me to get on with this story and stop fussing over the past. So, about this Big Chill.....while I am not above being overly maudlin, this bears no resemblance to the movie of the same name from 1983. That chill was brought on by suicide, which was anything but painless and about confused thirty-somethings straightening out their lives. We are closer to being at least 50/60-somethings that can mostly claim to have been there and done that.....and we were gathered to celebrate life in the fast lane, not mourn death. But damn, it was cold for Southern Utah in May. So that quickly became the theme of the ride. We've had windy rides and hot rides and rainy rides and even sand-storm rides, but this was the coldest ride we can recall.

Most of our riders started in Las Vegas. The journey in was a story unto itself. For the Northeastern crowd of Lee, Rob, Urch and David, this involved drop shipping their bikes with a friendly trucker. He was so friendly that he got sidelined in Colorado Springs with truck repairs that he could not pay, requiring Lee to urgently wire a ransom to a third-party correspondent bank of unknown origin and even less-known credit quality. While I was tempted to suggest that anyone with BMW as collateral is Too Well-Equipped To Fail, Lee just wired the money in a desperate maneuver to avoid having to rent a Las Vegas Harley. The good news is that it worked and the bikes arrived in good order.

Gator Bob, Capistrano Bob and TourMaster Rich wheeled in on Beemers and a windshieldless Road King from Southern California through the Mojave. The Stevie Twins were chaperoned by Arthur from Phoenix aboard a flotilla of heavy Harley and GoldenWing metal. Arthur showed up with a fat lip from falling down a rock pile. If we've told him once, we've told him a thousand times that hiking without kevlar is WAY too dangerous. IndianFireMaiden and Chief Frank, along with Andy the Annihilator chose to rent equally heavy metal compliments of Capistrano Bob's Eagle Rider. Mark,

John Wellhausen and Kevin did a Mary Poppins and blew in (and later out) from and to points unknown.

We all gathered at The Green Valley Ranch for an opening dinner, at which The Legend of Russ Gerson appeared for a brief shining moment before falling asleep in his soup for lack of sleep and declaring his inability to join the ride after all. We toasted Frank and Walt's birthday and Deb, Mardie, Sarah, Karen and Kim gave the group an air of respectability, but we knew that wouldn't last. Kevin had requested a rooming assignment with Andy, but had to settle for a dinner seating next to the great man and a goodnight peck on the cheek.

The plan was to head out towards Lake Mead and follow the Northshore Road until we got to Valley of the Fire. After the usual AFMC snappy start, with a blocked driveway warning, a lost key false alarm by Barbara and a late check-out by Andy (it takes time to argue the desk staff out of putting the film names on your credit card), we made it out of Henderson to a wonderful road and the three or so pods all pretty much convened (sans Dilly, whose Harley was getting it's diaper changed at the shop.) at Valley of the Fire. Sixteen bikes in the starting line-up is an impressive beginning to any ride. Then it was on to Mesquite, where we amazingly all met up at a local sports grill for our usual Lo-cal lunch of burgers and fries. Up through the sweepers of The Virgin Valley Gorge, through Hurricane and into Springdale. We were early enough at the Desert Pearl to crack open our emergency travel vintage and enjoy a plastic cup beside the raging Virgin River. We all got a bit too much of a glimpse of Arthur's derrière as he wallowed on the massage table on the riverside patio. I used to think those sightings were accidental, but now I'm not so sure. Dinner was at Parallel 88, a not-so-short walk from the Inn. The mountain air and chill went to Kevin's head and he got a case of the "shreks" and played bike cover fairy with Steve Larsen's prize bikini cover. More on that later, but note that we were joined that night in Springdale by Woo and Cliff, who hightailed it from LA in a day while Sharon flew in to Vegas to join us. And then we were 18 bikes and the thermometer began to drop.

In the half light of the morning, Zion Canyon is perhaps as spiritual a place as exists in the world. It is Machu Pichu, El Capitan, Victoria Falls, the entrance to Petra and Franconia Notch all rolled into one. After jump-starting Steve P's Harley, we wandered out the East Entrance and down through Kanab to Jacob Lake. Mark Dilly showed his Chicago tough by demanding payment from three bikers who tagged along with his group through the toll booth. It was there that the precipitous chill was literally in the air and the layering began in earnest. The 45 miles to The North Rim was it's own episode of Ice Road Truckers with everyone's gloves showing their thinness and the Kaibab Forrest laughing it's "early spring" laugh at us (the North Rim had only opened for tourists the day before). While it was certainly worth the trip and the chill, we used the time warp common to northern Arizona and The National Park System to shop for winter clothing at the trinket store. If only a commercial operation ran the concession, the cost of North Rim jackets would have seen a dramatic escalation that morning as the market was very price elastic. We forced our way into the dining room early to get

window seats overhanging the greatest show on earth. When it was time to leave we were fortified with extra gear, full bellies and a few more degrees of sunshine.

The warmth and lower altitude of Vermillion Cliffs and the Cantina at Marble Canyon made for a great rest stop. In addition to the Arrogant Bastard beer, the jalapeño poppers and a relaxing porch seat in the sun, we got to watch why this was indeed no country for old men as a suspicious helicopter landed and dropped off a rather casual looking local worker. We were sure they were trading in something more interesting than rattlesnake skins. From there we headed up-mesa to Page and the Courtyard Marriott, with it's excellent hot tub.

While we awaited word of Bruce Rauner and BoJo, we headed off to the Rainbow Room at Lake Powell where we were regaled by Deb on the benefits of a Lake Powell houseboat vacation in our futures. Every guy in the room was wondering if Pamela Anderson would be on board.....but then they recalled the famous Tommy Lee video and wondered whether their belly stretch marks would be as sexy as his **Mayhem** tattoo.....probably not.

Wednesday morning we had scheduled a group tour of the famous slot canyon called Antelope Canyon. We found Bo, but without Cousin Bruce, who was busy on the phone he was all No-Go Bo. But we piled into two truck troop carriers, looking like good little do-bees on the way to Sunday School.....except with an abundance of leather and Kevlar. After a sandy riverbed, that body armor came in handy, but we arrived at the Canyon no worse for wear. Antelope Canyon was only discovered in 1930 and only opened for tours in 1997, but it has to be one of nature's finest pieces of delicate sculpture. It is perfect sized for an hour walking tour and the photo opportunities were nothing short of special. After a bouncy race back to base between the two trucks, we arrived to start our ride.....just as the silver-grey clouds started forming to the West.

Somewhere north of Kanab on Rt. 89 our weather luck ran out and in addition to the chill, the heavens opened up and threw down first rain, then sleet, then driving snow and finally pellet-sized hail. Was this Southern Utah in May? Not for 18 years had we seen the like. Maybe the Apocalypse was coming this week after all and God was just getting us ready. Never has Ruby's Inn at the Bryce Canyon gate looked so inviting for a lunch break and a warming stop. The lunch discussion (bounded by Germans to our back and Frenchmen to either side) was all about which way to go to Torrey with the least weather-related damage. The safe group opted to go north on Rt. 22 while the Wild Ones headed up the Staircase on Rt. 12. The warm dry road through Escalante and into Boulder was a delight on many levels....but the Wicked Witch of Boulder Mountain laughed down on us with her crown of snow. As we headed up and the temperature dropped with the rise in altitude (to 9,600 ft.), our BMW on-board computers began flashing a snowflake signal warning....a feature I had not known even existed before today. With snow on both roadsides at the summit, the heavens opened up on us and threw down half-inch hailstones that blanketed the highway. It was right about there that we came upon Bruce, Bo and a few others trudging through the weather. After watching Bruce use the full width of the road on one slippery turn, we

decided that passing was the better part of valor. Imagine Gator Bob clucking with disapproval at another rider's dalliance. The hail stopped after three miles, but there was still the north side to navigate down. Luckily, the downhill roads were clear and it was a warming trend down to the floor in Torrey, where we made haste to the Lodge at Red River Ranch. Rob and Urch had forsaken Antelope Canyon in favor of an early start and were the only ones in residence. That foreshadowed a less than good weather situation for the Rt. 22 riders, not to mention the lagging Boulder Mountain gang. We were soon joined by Seattle Bob and Willo, who had been trying to camp and hike the Escalante only to be equally thwarted by the midweek weather lows.

While Bruce opened half his vineyard on the porch and smoked Havana's finest, he was interviewing or being interviewed by cell phone so the rest of us headed over for our annual pilgrimage to Cafe Diablo and the land of the vertical food. We used the opportunity to get even more rowdy than usual, much to some other diners' chagrin. We ended the night with a grand tribute to Walt back at the Lodge. We told stories of hail and snow. We dedicated an Anasazi stone bowl, a wonderful memory book of Walt's laughter and, compliments of Capistrano Bob and Eagle Rider, we dedicated a special ride patch with a faint shimmering of Walt in the background to watch over our future rides.

We also announced new members Sharon & Woo, Lee, Capistrano Bob, Sarah and (based on his absence) No-Show Bo. After qualifying new riders for provisional membership, the Master At Arms and AFMC Historian noted that we had a first and most serious matter at hand. It seems that through unanimous and anonymous consent of all members, Kevin Ward has been placed on indefinite probation for "general misbehavior" and wanton disregard for member personal property. While this had all the earmarkings of an Andy-like inquisition, Kevin was unable to rally any support for annulment and was eventually escorted out by his new 12-step sponsor, Mark Dilly.

The AFMC diaspora spread to all corners of the map the next morning amidst intermittent misting and downright rain and sleet. We had peaked at 26 strong with 22 bikes. Lee headed south for warmth, Mark, his ward Kevin (pun intended) and John headed North as misguided as that may have seemed, and Bruce and Bo just left to parts unknown (presumably East and eventually the 12 inch snows of Vail Pass). Only Gator Bob, on his own quest for immortality headed out on the scheduled ride into the jaws of the beast to go to Bullfrog. The rest of the gang opted either for a short ride through Capital Reefs (a dryer ride than expected) or just stayed in the great room of the Lodge sipping mint tea and playing Parcheesi or Wist. For a break we all trucked over to Bicknell for some pickle pie. As strange as that seems, it was nothing compared to Rich dropping trou in the middle of the restaurant thanks to some loose pants and a heavy belt. Bicknell may never be the same again. It was otherwise a relaxing day for all that culminated with a pleasant dinner at the Lodge put on by Dave and Charlene with entertainment provided by the feisty buffalo heard in the front yard. We ended the evening with a group photo in the great room with everyone wearing their Walt commemorative T-shirts.

In the morning we saw a window of fair weather and hightailed it up Boulder Mountain only to face an inch of snow and ice on the road at the summit. Other than a few fishtails and some soiled underwear, there was no harm done and we dropped down into Escalante and clear weather most of the rest of the way back to Nevada. We retraced our steps past Valley of the Fire and back-doored it into Henderson and the Green Valley Ranch.

We arrived early enough to enjoy some mid-80's heat at the pool and watch the AFMC married men pretend not to notice the bikini-clad waitresses. Dinner was again at Terre Verde and we were joined by Maggie and Karen, who flew in from Phoenix and local celebrities including Carol and Dave Levin, Frank's pal Jack and Rich's Mama Mia and sister Barb. 95 year old Mama Mia Millie gave the benediction and exhorted the Flyers to "Grow up!" That seemed a fitting end to the first memorial Chairman's Run. Walt would have been proud.

Epilogue:

The gang of three (Capistrano Bob, Gator Bob and the TourMaster) headed off into the Mojave Desert on Saturday morning, where the TourMaster acquired Widowmaker status for hitting and presumably killing two snakes on the road. Justice was served in the Yucca Valley, where the Widowmaker's rear tire went to metal cord. While the Bob's carried on West, a new Bridgestone tire was sourced and replaced. The evening ride through the San Jacinto Range and the golden hills of Eastern San Diego County reminded the TourMaster that another Southern California ride would not be a waste of time or effort. Alls well that ends well.