

CUSTOM TOUR: Saturday-Sunday, May 17-18, 2014

THE RIDERS:

Rob Roth, Pennsylvania
Steve Fillweber, New Jersey
Jed Taff, Nebraska
Mike Kenny, New York
Chuck Gould, Massachusetts
Kyle Grendell, Massachusetts
Joel Samick, Pennsylvania

THE BIKES:

1970 TRIUMPH BONNEVILLE T120R
1971 MOTO GUZZI AMBASSADOR 750
1973 YAMAHA TX750
1974 BMW R90/6
1976 YAMAHA RD400C
1977 HARLEY DAVIDSON XLCR1000
1979 MOTO GUZZI V50

The idea behind a ‘Custom Tour’ is to ask the participants where their interests lie then design a ride to suit. Several of the riders who signed up expressed an interest in visiting the little Honda museum in Williamsport, PA. RetroTours had been there a few times in years past and the area is perfect for vintage touring with low traffic density and lots of interesting roads crisscrossing the mountainous topography: home to the headwaters of the Susquehanna River. The museum itself is adjacent to a dealership, Bob Logue’s Honda, and includes about 75 motorcycles as well as a rare Honda prototype snow machine known as the White Fox, outboard motors, generators and a micro-car or two. Mr. Logue is a great guy and a true enthusiast. The smallish shop has been there forever and admission to the museum is free other than a voluntary contribution.

I was planning final details a few days before departure and called the museum to check open hours only to find that the entire collection had been sold off and sent to England. Rumor has it that Dave Silver, proprietor of a well known vintage Honda parts business is the new curator. If true, the collection is in good hands indeed. Bob Logue’s Honda is still in business under a new name and ownership, but what of Bob? A very friendly and agreeable sort, he had spoken to me in the recent past about contemplating retirement, so I can only hope that he is in good health and enjoying life at his farm. There was a mechanic who worked for Bob *forever*. I believe his name was Myron. We met him on previous visits and he had to have been in his 80’s; still riding of course. In addition to our respect for his vast experience we always enjoyed showing our old bikes to someone who remembered and really appreciated each and every model. Bob, Myron and the museum will all be sorely missed.

Meanwhile, RetroTours needed an alternative destination in the area. Some web research into Williamsport turned up a few tacky tourist attractions but the most interesting was a paddle wheel river boat. This looked like fun; it was ‘old school’ so it fit right into the RetroTours concept. I checked the schedule and it seemed to work so I plotted a route to the dock as riders began to arrive from out of town.



As in years past people began arriving the afternoon or night before departure and stayed over. This gave us a chance to get to know each other a bit and made it easier to leave early in the morning. Kickstands up at 7AM! Only Steve came in early Saturday from New Jersey, on time for a hearty breakfast. Unlike years past the departure point is now three miles away so we took one bike from the home garage 'two-up' while five of us piled into Lynn's Honda Fit with all our gear on and carrying packed tank bags. We ferried over to the commercial garage where the rest of our machines awaited. We clipped the bags into place, took 10 minutes to locate controls and get a quick explanation of the starting procedures and quirks for each bike and shoved off at a reasonably early hour, our departure timed to the river boat schedule.



We arise with the sun to make the early boat ride.



Somehow five of us fit into the Fit.



Bikes are loaded and checked out just prior to our early AM departure



These are excellent riders! We make steady progress in a northerly direction, following route 82 which works its way over hill and dale through Chester County horse country: very lovely indeed. We cut west on route 23 then pick up 10 north into Morgantown; another scenic stretch of road but open enough to allow decent progress. I am nervous about making it to the boat on time; Williamsport is a long ways from Kennett Square by back roads and past experience tells me that our 2 o'clock arrival at the boat dock is possible but only just. Next we work our way through a maze of very small country roads. Our route incorporates many turns as we avoid the congestion of Reading, PA. We're doing well and take time for a quick break, some fuel and to swap bikes. Ahhh.....the sun feels good when we stop. The chilly morning is yielding to the brilliant sunlight and it promises to be a glorious day! We are grateful for the warmth and for the bike swap: riding positions, pressure points and vibration characteristics will change which is most welcomed. So will some of the controls locations which keeps everyone on their toes.

We still have a good distance to cover.



It didn't look like much from the outside;
I nearly went right past it but then I saw the sign.

Frequently on a RetroTour we find something excellent that is unplanned and the Turbotville Museum is just such a find. Inside there are 75 fully restored classic cars as well as signs, models and memorabilia from another time: the perfect early afternoon rest stop for our group. Serendipity!

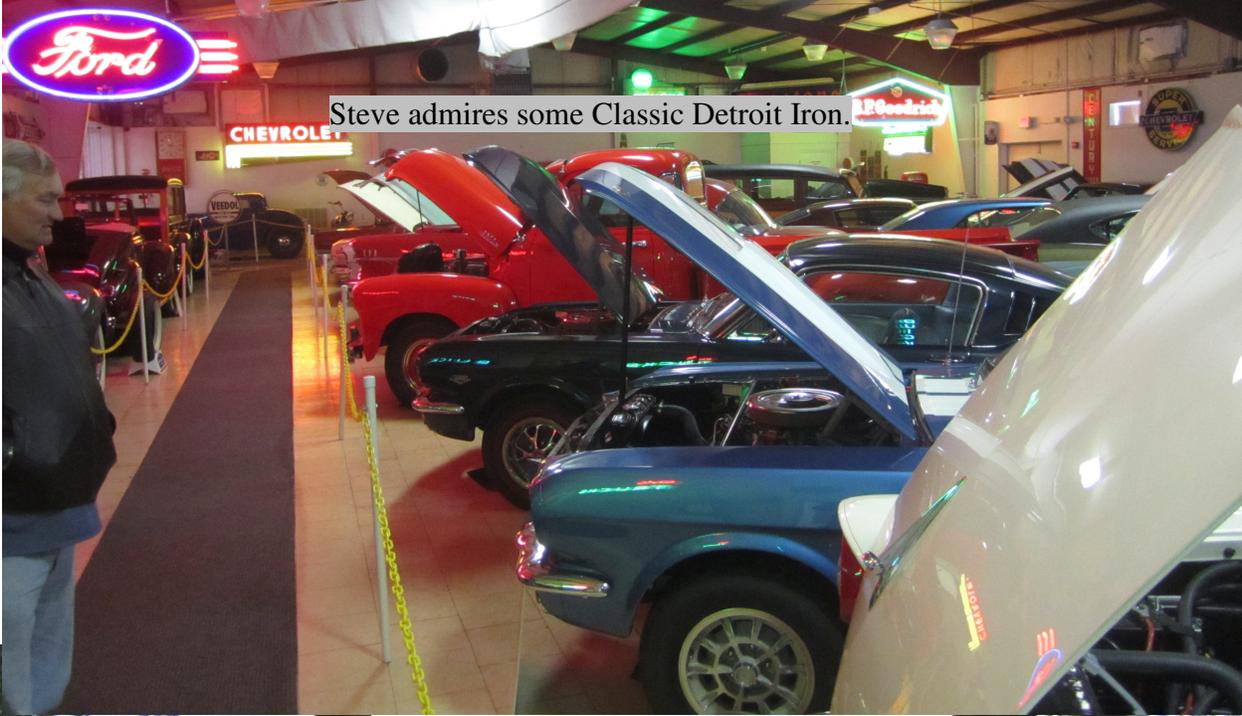
Soon we pass through Cressona and pick up route 54. This is a faster road which beelines northwest towards Williamsport. We're in the mountainous coal mining region of north central PA, riding past dormant strip mines and coal piles, we are treated to views of the Endless Mountains covered in lush green foliage and marching towards the horizon. I breathe a little easier as we actually get a bit ahead of schedule. After 50 miles I am searching for a good spot to pull over for a break when I spot what looks like an automobile museum.



There is also a tractor or two and some interesting models, old signs and other memorabilia, all very Retro.

We're not far from Williamsport now and after a whirlwind tour of the museum we remount and continue northwest. It's nearly 2 o'clock, the last boat ride is 2:30 and we haven't eaten anything but granola bars since 7 AM so I'm hoping that there is food at the dock or on board the paddlewheel boat.





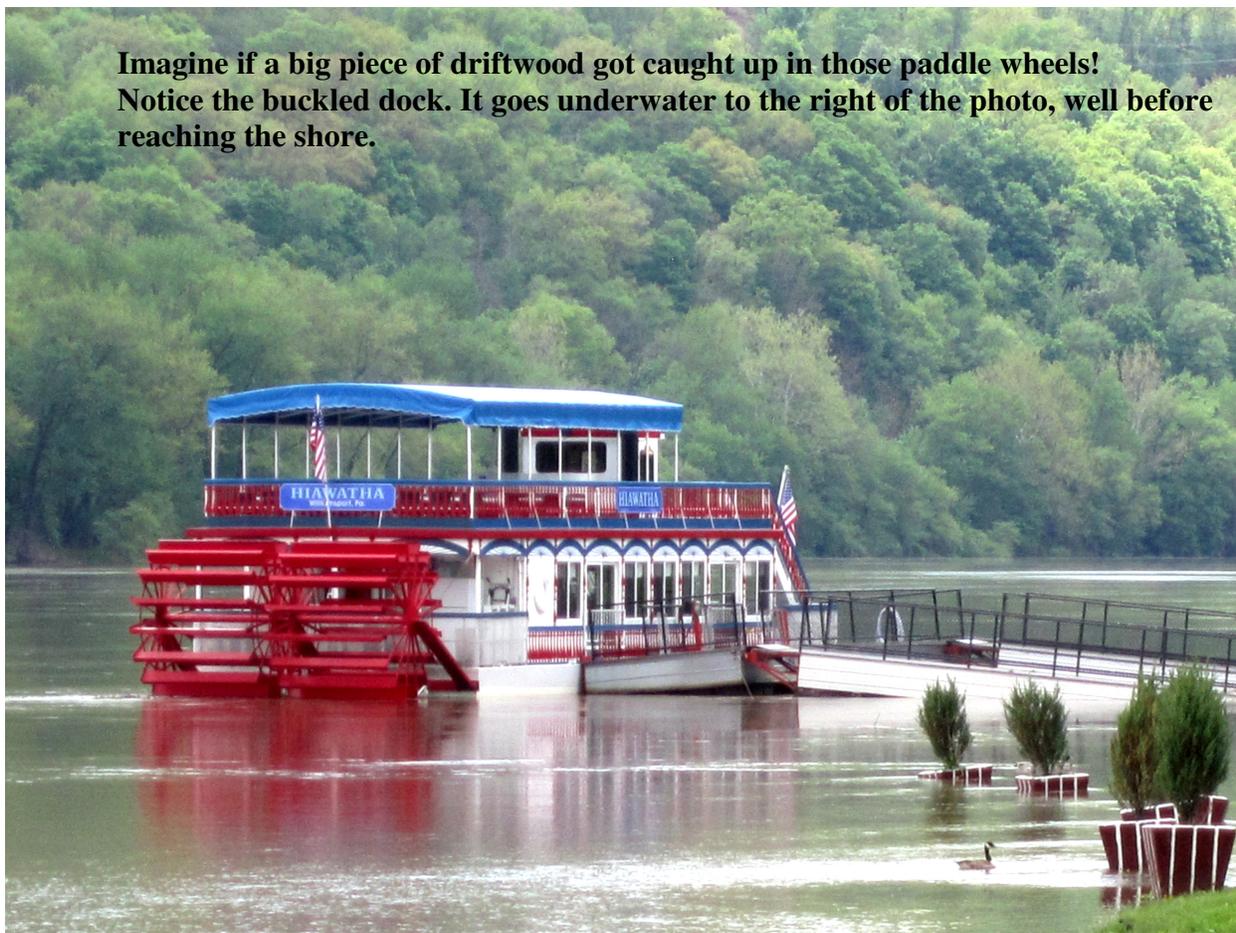
Steve admires some Classic Detroit Iron.



I can't believe our luck: first the Honda Museum and now this!

Really though, I think we all love the element of the unknown that is experienced on every RetroTour. We have to chuckle: we rode hard and long to make it on time only to be stopped by Mother Nature. There is no choice but to roll with it.

Imagine if a big piece of driftwood got caught up in those paddle wheels!
Notice the buckled dock. It goes underwater to the right of the photo, well before reaching the shore.



Stomachs are really growling now. A well fed group is a happy group; clearly we need to revise our plans and get some food into our bellies. People are checking their smart phones looking for nearby restaurants. Someone discovers and I remember The Crippled Bear Inn. It's not far, coincidentally just next to where the Honda museum isn't. I have eaten there on previous tours; it has great food and a wonderful biker friendly atmosphere. We head there directly.



I am beginning to fear that the weak economy has put the Crippled Bear out of commission. That would after all be par for today's course of events. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see signs of life. The bear is still hobbling along!

I think the sign is supposed to say "Bear Bait Fish"..... or..... something???? The clams seem like a real bargain: \$00?

But we really don't care what the sign says; we *are* as hungry as crippled bears. The rain showers that have been threatening seem about to materialize. We have just covered a bit more than 200 miles in 7 hours. We park up and head inside. The waitress recognizes the bikes from two years ago; what are the odds?



FOOD! FINALLY! NOW *THAT'S* WHAT I'M TALKIN' ABOUT!



Clockwise from left: Mike, Kyle, Charles, Joel, Rob, and Steve. The empty chair belongs to Jed who is taking the picture. We take our time over lunch, getting warm and satiated. We eat good food, we drink hot liquids. The sky clears and all is well with the world. We're well fed & happy.
The bikes are running well.... Let's ride!

After lunch we immediately refuel and swap bikes again. We have cabins reserved just outside Shickshinny, PA which is about 65 miles direct BUT...there is an “adventure option” detailed on our route sheets and, being well fed, warm and dry, we are in the mood for some adventure. The sun is out! We ride the highway out of town: just two or three exits then follow progressively smaller back roads which lead to the huge undeveloped mountain ridge which borders Williamsport to the south. In a few miles the pavement ends and we are on primitive dirt forest roads. There are road signs marking the way as the route grinds through 5 hairpins up and down the ridge. We are strictly in first and second gear: it’s too bumpy and washed out to go much faster. It is important to preserve the machinery; we should make it as long as we don’t go too fast. The grade is quite steep and traction is iffy in spots. We stop midway for a break, to rest, and to enjoy the quiet of the forest. OK, I admit I also had to pee really badly.





**The trail, I mean the road, is somewhat washed out ahead.
There is no cell phone service.
It's F---in' perfect!**

Jed Taff from Nebraska. His smile tells all.





After just 7 miles of forest road, things level out and we regain the pavement. Now we have a thirty mile stretch on route 880: the “old” road. The “new” road is route 80 and that’s where all the traffic and road maintenance is. This old route parallels the new, actually crossing over and under the highway a half dozen times. Route 880 is mostly disused now and so maintenance has slipped: there are potholes, rough patches and a few stretches of gravel but it cuts through some very pretty state forest lands and as long as you keep a sharp eye out for deer you can boogie along; It’s easy to imagine it’s 1975 and you are riding the latest road burner. These bikes were made for this! The road ends at a little town named White Deer where we pause at the town park for a rest before crossing the mighty Susquehanna River.

A quick stretch, some beef jerky and a small cigar. Was there anything else you needed?

Actually it’s getting late in the day and we still have a long way to go. We spend some time on this break refreshing and gathering it up for the final push to the cabins. We are heading east now and paralleling the east branch of the Susquehanna through gorgeous rugged country, passing through Jerseytown and Rohrsburg. There are many quaint covered bridges here including the unique ‘twin bridges’ in Forks, PA but the air is cooling rapidly this far north and we would love to reach the cabins by nightfall. As it turns out, we don’t quite make it. We are very cold and it



is getting dark when we finally pop out of the back country and hit route 239 which will take us south about 15 miles into Shikshinny, PA. Besides the cold we’re low on gas. Fortunately it’s downhill all the way and we coast into the gas station practically on fumes. We fuel up, drink hot chocolate and coffee and inquire as to the exact location of our campgrounds.



NO VACANCY

And yes, we are starting to think about food again. Riding all day does that to a fellow. We decide to ride right by the Bodnarosa Campground and get to a restaurant several miles beyond so as to save one stop. We'll just eat then double back to the cabins for the night.

The restaurant is a very good choice: a steak house with motorcycle parking spots out front. Several Harleys are parked there and we line our bikes up and head in for a hearty chow down.

Hot soup and savory beef soon have everyone perked back up and we prepare to ride back through Berwick, PA to our cabins; just a few miles so the cold is of little concern now. Out front we discover that the Harley riders are all gone and our RD400 has a flat rear tire. It's late and cool and we are weary. It has been a very long day and it is now well past dark. Our luck this weekend could be better I suppose but at least it didn't happen in the middle of a fast curve in the dark and we are reasonably well prepared to deal with this sort of setback. Repairing the flat in the dark and cold when we are so tired does not have much appeal however so we discuss options. The last rider on the RD mentions that he did not notice anything amiss and we don't see any foreign objects in the tire carcass. There is a large well lit gas station visible just $\frac{1}{4}$ up the road so we decide to ride the RD there very slowly to air up the tire and see if it holds at all.

It takes air and there is no detectable leakage. Maybe the valve core was just loose? Someone suggests that the Harley riders may have done mischief on us, unappreciative perhaps of the diminutive Japanese two stroke. I think this sort of inter-biker style distrust is uncalled for. Just because we are tired and cannot understand why the tire went flat does not mean we should jump to the conclusion that the "others" i.e. Harley riders did a bad thing. We set out for the campground and the RD makes it without any issues. The tire seems to be holding air just fine when we park up at our respective cabins.

These are 4 star cabins! They are very clean and modern with comfortable beds, good heaters and air conditioners, full kitchens and bathrooms with hot showers. Did I mention the flat screen TV's? We are 2 or 3 to a cabin and after the challenge of finding the poorly marked cabins in the dark we are happy to crank up the heat, settle onto the beds and watch a little TV before passing out. I check the RD and the rear tire still seems to be holding air. Maybe it *was* those "Harley guys". The thing is, we have a Harley too so why all the suspicion? It has always bothered me that we motorcyclists tend to be such a divided group. The riders with high bars laugh at the riders with low bars. Harley riders look down their noses and often won't even acknowledge the owners of Japanese bikes with a wave. Adventure Tourers disdain Gold Wing riders and they both have severe superiority complexes second only to BMW owners. Everyone hates ATVs and of course those darn dirt bike riders just ruin it for everyone. Feet forward, feet back, cruiser, crotch rocket, mini-bike, or scooter; still, we have more in common than differences.



Of course in the morning, the RD rear tire was completely flat. The Harley guys had nothing to do with it. I woke up early to check and deal with it. I parked it up on a big boulder which served as my lift, pulled the wheel and 'had at it' in the cabin. We do carry tire pumps, tire irons, sufficient tools and spare inner tubes to deal with flats which are fortunately rare occurrences. I had the new inner tube installed with help from my roommate. We may not have beaten flat rate time but we were ready to roll at the appointed hour.

This small staple barely punctured the tube, causing a slow leak.



And roll we did: about 10 miles to a very busy local restaurant specializing in Sunday morning breakfast. The diner is just a few miles short of Bill's Old Bike Barn which was our destination for 10 AM. I had arranged with Bill and Judy to open just for us at 10. Normal opening time is noon on Sundays. This would give us unfettered private access to all the displays for 2 full hours. I am very grateful to Bill and Judy for accommodating us in this manner. They are the best! Breakfast was great but Bill's Old Bike Barn is just amazing. If you have not been, join us for the trip or get there any way you can. It is truly a jewel of a destination, and I have the pictures to prove it:





We use the full 2 hours inside the museum. There is really no amount of time that is enough as the place is packed with eye candy every where you look but the road beckons us. The weather is brilliant and we have miles to go. We re-cross the Susquehanna and pick up bucolic route 339 which is 35 miles of curves through peaceful farmland, over hills and across valleys. Past an array of windmills whoop-whooping in the wind and we reach Mahanoy City, a dying town that was significant back when coal was king. Here we pick up a bit of route 54, repeating a small section in the opposite direction from yesterday. This takes us to Ashland where the Pioneer Coal Mine once fed the energy needs of the industrial northeastern US. The mine is still in operation, but only for guided tours. We switch to route 61 through Centralia. The mine here caught fire underground back in the 60's. It is still burning and the noxious fumes have caused the town to be evacuated. Now it resembles a post apocalyptic movie set. We ride past Mount Carmel to Shamokin where we are to switch to one of Pennsylvania's best roads: route 125.



First though we need a rest stop and fuel. Stopping at a gas station with a variety store means we can enjoy a cup of coffee, use the toilets and have a snack. After refueling we park the bikes to one side. We snack and enjoy some small talk then when it's time to shove off I can't find my helmet. More bad luck! I left it by the pump and it is definitely gone. This was a \$700 Arai helmet and \$200 gloves. I beg the store clerk to let us look at the security camera footage but he has no access and the manager is off until the next day. I call the police but get a recording and have to leave a message. It's still 80 miles to home and while it would be legal in Pennsylvania, I am not willing to ride without a helmet so we ride 7 miles to the nearest Walmart where I pick up a cheap open face helmet and a pair of goggles for about \$65. It didn't quite fit and looked rather odd I think you will agree but it was better than nothing.

We follow rollercoaster route 125 for about 30 miles, making our way south and cutting against the grain of the Appalachian ridge which brings us up and over numerous small mountains. It is very entertaining on a motorcycle but tedious in a 4 wheeler which is perfect as all the car drivers are using more practical routes. Leaving coal country and nearing home again we pass through Amish country and late in the afternoon on Sunday we see many families returning home for the night in their horse drawn buggies. One final stop for fuel and we have made it, well before dark this time. Back at the house we enjoy a hot home cooked meal prepared by my wife Lynn. We reminisce about the weekend. The Honda Museum was sold off, the Paddle wheel boat ride was cancelled, we got a flat tire and my helmet got stolen but no one was complaining. We enjoyed a true adventure and made new friends. It was a great weekend!



PS: The local police did return my call and with some help from the manager and the clerk I got my helmet and gloves back 2 weeks later.

