

Solstice Run

Three-thirty comes early to a city boy working nine to five. That was the meet time to join a group of riders trying for a Saddlesore 2000, an entry level jaunt for joining the Iron Butt Association. The ride was to begin at 4 AM on the Summer Solstice and cover over two thousand miles in less than forty-eight hours. Beverly Ruffin of the Houston BMW club organized it during the Spring of 2003, and I figured if I was ever going to do anything official on a motorcycle, it would be because somebody else had set it up.

I left the house around 3:00 AM, just as my kids were coming in for the night. I said I was glad they were home safely and they wished me luck on the ride. I knew they'd be sleeping the next 8 or 10 hours and they knew I'd be out on a motorcycle somewhere in West Texas when they woke up. It was an odd moment for all of us.

The meeting place was a filling station on I-10 at mile marker 761. I rolled in shortly after 3:30, the last one to arrive. Six others were there, having already gassed up and gotten receipts. After a round of murmured hellos at my arrival, each went back to quietly poking around his or her bike. Three-thirty was early for chatter.

The other bikes included a thirty-year-old BMW slash-5, a cruiser with ape-hanger handlebars, two Honda Gold Wings, a BMW GS, a basic BMW R bike, and me on a K1200LT, so smooth and comfortable it's like cheating.

I paid with cash and the hermetically-sealed attendant gave me a receipt which showed only the cash amount on it. Since I was making an official attempt at a distance ride with a time limit, I needed a receipt with the name and address of the gas station printed on it, and the time and date of the transaction. The amount of the purchase is irrelevant. The attendant didn't accept there was a practical difference in what he gave me and what I wanted, but he reluctantly humored me and after a couple of attempts, produced a suitable document. A side benefit was that the effort at tactful negotiation had helped wake me up.



Beverly noted down my mileage on her clipboard, and we waited until a few minutes after four to be sure no one else was going to join us before heading out. I realized that I had forgotten my camelback water carrier so I peeled off from the group and headed back home. I had pre-packed the bike the night before, to keep from having to think too sharply at that time of morning, but I had put the camelback's container in the freezer, out of sight and out of mind. I only thought for a second about blowing it off, knowing the forecast for the deserts west of Ft. Stockton was for temps over 100. I had a mental image of the arid land out there and knew I was going to need that water.

After momentarily stirring up the house again, I got back onto I-10 and headed east, mentally checking off the landmarks out of Houston – the big highway fork into Baytown, the olefin plant at Cedar Bayou and its astonishing smell, the San Jacinto River Bridge with the monument lit up off to the right, and then the high bridge over the Trinity. For me, the bridge across the Trinity makes the real demarcation line that separates Houston from not-Houston. Now I was really on my way. I felt pretty confident about making the first thousand-mile day. It was the second one I wasn't sure about.

I clipped along at a pretty good pace and kept expecting I'd come up on the other riders. I had added less than ten miles with my detour, but I didn't catch up with them until I pulled into the last gas station before Louisiana, over 120 miles away. They had already finished refueling and were heading over to the golden arches next door for breakfast. I thought to myself, well it's clear I'm the rookie here, being late to everything. The seventy-ish fellow on the thirty-year-old motorcycle wasn't having any trouble keeping up.

We pulled into the Tex-DOT Visitor Center at mile marker 880 a little after six. The Visitor's Center sits by the Sabine River, the border between Texas and Louisiana, and for over ten years the Houston Solstice Run has started here at 6:14, the Official Crack of Dawn. The goal is to ride across Texas to New Mexico before sunset, eight hundred and eighty miles if you stay on the 10.

The Run is always held on the Saturday closest to the Solstice, and with sixteen-some odd hours of daylight, you only need to average a little over 60 miles an hour to be having supper when the sun goes down. But that includes stopping time. Like most long distance events, the Run is more about having quick stops and as few of them as possible than it is about going extremely fast down the highway. It's about staying in the saddle and riding. As an endurance event, the competition is really with yourself more than with others.

Half a dozen riders were waiting there for us, including a couple of newish Gold Wing 1800s from Dallas and a fellow on a naked Harley who had ridden down from Ft. Worth.

Beverly went over a few last minute instructions and handed out a sheet of paper with the printed instructions for those of us trying for the Saddlesore. We would take a detour in Van Horn that would add almost forty miles to the last leg, and with the miles we had already ridden that morning, we would log one thousand and thirty four miles, give or take.



As I stuffed the pages in my tank bag, Beverly looked down at her watch, declared it 6:14 and said “go.”

The two new Wings were the first ones out, followed by the guy on the Harley. I was a little peeved at myself for not being ready to mount on the instant, but shortly got my helmet and gloves on and headed out.

Normally riding at dawn makes me feel in synch with the coming day. To prepare for this ride I had been riding during the early morning hours for the last week or so, each day getting up half an hour earlier than the day before. On the last day I rode almost four hundred miles before I rolled in to work at 9:15.

Each morning I had been in a different place as the sun rose, out in the rural areas south and west of Houston. For many of us city folk, any apparent relationship between our jobs and the rising and falling of the sun is coincidental. It is exotic for me to be starting off the day with all the things that pay attention to the sun – the birds, the livestock, the country folks. That last morning, as I rounded a big sweeping turn, a flight of roseate spoonbills coasted over the treetops, blazing pink in the rising sun. We locked into one of those perfect coincidences of time and place as my curving line of travel intersected their flight line like a dance.

However, the sense of dawn-as-a-new-beginning disappeared when I merged into the traffic on I-10. None of the magic of the earlier mornings infused the atmosphere on the Interstate. It was business-as-usual, get out of my way Charlie and devil take the hindmost. At least the pace was brisk, I thought. I couldn't stop the hope from popping into my brain that traffic might keep this pace all day and maybe I could make good time. And if I made good time today, would I have anything left for tomorrow?

Patches of fog hung low over the highway in the woods between Orange and Beaumont, and I passed the Harley in a clearing between patches. The fog evaporated on the approach into Beaumont and when the highway turned south in the middle of town, the sun was already pushing on my left shoulder. This was maybe 6:45 AM, and the bike thermometer read 81. The air was tangibly humid and felt warm even in a mesh jacket. This was going to be a real summer day. I had a few sips from the camelback to test the system. The frozen block inside was melting and the ice water was perfect.

The stretch between Beaumont and the Trinity River is flat coastal prairie and rice fields marked by distant groves of trees. It is not very interesting countryside and there is little temptation to take your attention off the road. I tried to relax into the groove of the ride.

My brother Peter first told me about the Iron Butt Association and their eleven-day, 11,000-mile Rally that circles the continental U.S. Do the math, he told me. No one can average 100 miles an hour for 10 straight hours. You know those are eleven long days. Moreover, one doesn't ride from one corner of the US straight to another. Oh no, that would be too easy. Instead one needs to ride into Nova Scotia or Alaska or something extremely out of the way in order to rack up sufficient bonus points to even place, much less win.

People who hear the exploits of the Iron Butt riders for the first time often shake their heads in wonderment. "Why would anyone want to do that?" One of the highest complements one Iron Butt rider pays to another is, "You're nuts."

Besides the Rally, the Iron Butt sanctions escapades like the Ten Forty-eight Plus One, where you ride to all forty-eight lower states and then to Alaska in under 10 days; and the 100 CCC where you ride from one side of the US to the other in under 50 hours, and then turn around and ride back in another 50. Not long after I rode the Saddlesore Solstice, a couple from California rode two-up from Mexico to Canada and back, over 3000 miles, in under 48 hours. They set the records for the first two-up BunBurner Gold 3000, and the first-ever border-to-border-to-border in under 48 hours. They also earned a laudatory, "You're nuts."

Not just anyone can enter these events, though. You have to already be a member of the Iron Butt Association to officially attempt one of the big jaunts, and to become a member you have to make one of several entry-level rides like the Saddlesore.

The Iron Butt folks require very meticulous record generation and maintenance – receipts and sometimes photographs are needed to prove that you were physically in a certain place at a certain time. For the beginnings and endings of rides, you need witnesses to certify your mileage in writing. This all becomes part of the physical record of your trip, to show that you actually achieved the ride. The Association also wants an active member involved in these entry-level rides, just to keep things honest.

Most of the IBA members I've met would never dream of faking a ride – the actual ride is the whole point of the exercise. Enduring the rather extreme demands of sanctioned rides gives the rider a sense of internal satisfaction that may be buoyed by the recognition of other riders, but not replaced. The recognition only counts if you really did the deed.

More than once I've heard, "Do you know how crazy all that sounds?" Most of the folks in our little group were hobbyists, like me. Our ride was the equivalent of Iron

Butt baby steps, climbing a little hill, and even at that I had some questions about how I'd do on the second half – the thousand-mile ride back home. That kind of endurance takes a mental toughness that I wondered if I had.

I came again to the Trinity River. Fingers of the river penetrate the woods all over, beautiful in that morning light to a swamp rat like me. A heron coasted lazily over the water and I slowed to savor the view across the Old and Lost Rivers and their many baylets and islands.

The reverie ended abruptly at the end of the causeway as I plunged back into the greater Houston metro area and the universe of the world's petroleum capital. Suddenly tanker trucks were everywhere.

James McMurtry wrote a line in one of his songs, "walk between the raindrops, dry as a bone," and that's how I tried to run the Houston traffic. Since it's my hometown I believe I have a sense of its pulse and rhythm, and I'll probably find out the hard way that that's blooey. I made it through fine, though, and was past the Brazos River a little after 8 AM. So that's good, I thought, starting to do the math and smacking myself for trying to jinx things.

I focused on the road, the bulk of my attention on getting through traffic safely, on achieving the horizon.

With the stock tank, my bike will travel two hundred miles, more or less, before it needs gas. I visualized each stop as the end of a tunnel. I didn't watch the scenery go by so much as mark the steps of land between me and the next place my feet were going to touch the ground.

My first stop was in Columbus, about 190 miles from the Sabine, and that tank took me out of the coastal plain across rolling hills to San Antonio and the Balcones Escarpment. I got in and out of these stops in under ten minutes, twice as long, I'm told, as the big dogs. Still, they were no-frills drills, all business.

West of San Antonio, I-10 climbs the Escarpment onto the Edwards Plateau and dives into the Texas Hill Country. This is one of the prettiest stretches of I-10 in the state, so I dug the camera out of the tank bag and tried taking a few photos in the more curving and plunging sections of highway. My results from shooting off the bike are mixed at best. I occasionally get something that captures the view and the scale, and every so often get one that captures the feeling as well, but I'm not sure I did any of that on that day.



Somewhere around Junction I realized the magic wasn't going to come and rode heads down across the rest of the Edwards Plateau to Sonora. It was about a quarter to one, and I decided I was hungry enough to eat a gas-station cheeseburger. It's a good thing humans can belch.

After lunch, I unpacked a water-cooling vest and one of those crystal-filled neckerchief thingies and soaked them in the bathroom sink. The camelback was still at least half full and half frozen but the hottest and driest part of the trip was coming up so I bought another bottle of water and the attendant let me get ice from the soft drink fountain.

The bike's clock said 1:30 and the thermometer showed 92 degrees when I pulled out of the station. I had taken nearly forty-five minutes on that stop, longer than I'd intended. Still, I'd ridden nearly six-hundred miles since four that morning, and back out on the highway I felt rested and strong. I decided to regard the time as well-spent spilt milk.

West of Sonora the hills drop away and flat-topped plateaus rise up, with tens of miles of flatland separating the bluffs. Where the Hill Country is semi-arid, out here the semi-part has evaporated. I had to go back to the photos I took to be sure something grew out there – my memory is of a barren brown land stretching from horizon-to-horizon, where nothing lives but the wind.

Wind farms have sprung up in considerable numbers on the bluffs around Ozona and Iraan (Ira-Ann), testimony to the force and constancy of the winds in those bleak lands. I remembered my first motorcycle trip out there. Janice and I were on a fully loaded BMW K75 RT getting our first lesson in gyroscopic physics and inertia and how a two-wheeled vehicle counter-balances in strong winds. We were easily at a 45-degree

angle to the road, feeling it was our speed that kept us off the pavement and if we slowed down even a little, the wind would drop us like a hot brick.

The winds weren't blowing on the Solstice Run though. The hot air was still. The thermometer on the bike read 98, but the water vest and neck cooler kept things just about comfortable under the mesh jacket. The camelback was essential now, and I thought of myself earlier that morning looking ahead to that moment when I would thank myself for going back to get it.



I hadn't seen any other riders, and wondered where they all were. I passed Bakersfield and its singular geologic icon, Squaw Tit Mountain, and pulled into Ft. Stockton around 3:00 PM. At mile marker 260, I had come almost three-quarters of the first thousand miles.

The next stop was around 4:30 in Van Horn, mile marker 138. Because of the way the towns are spaced, both of the last stops had been only an hour and a half apart.

As I coasted into the station, one of the Gold Wing riders, Curt Summers, was getting ready to pull out. We exchanged howdys and he asked if I was going to stay on the 10 or take the Saddlesore route. I told him I was going for the Saddlesore, but thought I'd understood that it was actually shorter than staying on 10. In any case, I said, it went by the Guadalupe Mountains and was a much prettier route. Later I found out I had confused what Beverly had told us – the detour added some thirty-five miles. It IS a prettier route, though.

Curt climbed on his Wing and silently motored off, and I hustled through the gas drill as quickly as possible and rode after him.

One of my most bizarre motorcycling experiences occurred on highway 54 just north of Van Horn. Janice and I were headed to the Guadalupe Mountains one sunny

day, and in the distance I could see a huddle of turkey vultures picking at something on the left side of the road. They were unconcerned until we got pretty close.

They began to waddle off in different directions and one of them slowly launched himself into the air. He reminded me of that cartoon vulture when I was a kid who sang, "I'm bringin' home a baby bumble bee..." He had the whole sky to fly in, but he turned to cross the road right in the path of the bike. Even as I watched him I didn't believe he was going to do it, but evidently this is a slow reacting species and he couldn't help himself. Perhaps he was target-fixated. I had slowed but still the bike's wind fairing thumped him. It was a solid thump but nothing sounded like it cracked, and for a moment there I thought of just continuing on, no big deal. Then I realized something sufficiently odd had happened to warrant stopping and checking things out. Janice was wondering what took me so long.

I pulled to the outside of the shoulder and we got off to check out the damage. The hair on the back of my neck stood up under my helmet. The front of the bike was covered with long ropy strands of fresh meat, a rainbow of reds and pinks and white strips piled in layers that conformed to the curves of the fairing like some ghastly dreadlocks.

I couldn't imagine how the rounded, blunt fairing had torn apart something so thoroughly that those shreds of meat were all that was left. Maybe those little PIAA lights tucked in under the air intake had somehow torn up the bird...?

We rode back to the gas station in town and asked permission to use the hose. I said we'd just hit a vulture and the attendant grunted disinterestedly. I sprayed and sprayed and sprayed, and to this day I think there are tendrils back in the radiator fins. I stood up and asked Janice if I'd missed something and for the first time she saw the meat shreds plastered on the front of my helmet... It really was a memorable experience.

I eyed the place of our encounter as I passed it this time. I still can't believe the blunt fairing would have ripped him up like that. I think he must have disgorged the dinner he'd been pulling off in strips from whatever was there by the side of the road and sprayed that all over the bike. Vulture vomit. Yeah, buddy...

Presently I came along side the Sierra Diablo, the Devil Mountains. Ahead of me I caught sight of Curt on his Gold Wing.

At some point he saw me in his mirrors and took off. The road was not particularly well surfaced and there were many little hillocks and diplets, but it ran straight for 10 miles at a stretch and we were the only two vehicles as far as the eye could see.

There is a natural competition between LTs and Gold Wings. They're both the biggest bikes on their team, both built for long distance touring with all the bells and whistles, both powered by amazing engines (though the Wing's engine is fifty percent bigger by displacement). We ran the ton for almost forty miles across those low hills and shallow dips, and probably didn't see five other vehicles.

I thought since I was on the last leg of the trip I could spare the energy needed to ride that fast, but as usual I discounted the reality. Moreover, after two successive hour-and-a-half legs, I wasn't mentally prepared for one that was going to take two and a half hours.



We approached the feet of El Capitan, the southern bastion of the Guadalupe Mountains, rising up red and majestic in the hazy westering light. Highway 54 T-ed into US 62, and we turned left and headed directly into the sun. The salt flats and cracked alkaline hills that flank the mountains feel like an ancient dune-land boundary between land and sea. We rode out onto an undulating surface that felt like the bottom of the ocean with all the water removed.

The mountains receded behind us and nothing rose up ahead to draw the eye and the mind forward. During that last hour the flat land expanded and it seemed like we were riding on a giant treadmill. The sun fell lower and lower and I couldn't believe it was taking so long to get to the rim of El Paso. To make things worse, traffic lights started showing up every few miles.

At one of the lights I pulled up next to Curt and nodded, and over the course of the next few stops we said howdy, complemented each other's bike, agreed it had been a hot ride, and were looking forward to mile marker zero and a cold beer. A shower would be good, too.

Finally we got to the loop around El Paso and turned north toward the Franklin Mountains. Although the air was quite hazy, I expected something called the Franklin Mountains to be real obvious at that point and was discouraged that I couldn't see anything resembling mountains. I was definitely smelling the hay in the stables.

We rode a few more miles, encountered more lights, more traffic. I started getting impatient. At one light I asked a fellow in the car next to me which way it was to I-10. He said the quickest way was go up two lights and turn left. Curt and I both thought we should be going straight rather than turning left. We puzzled over that for another light and then Curt asked the driver next to him which way it was to Anthony. "Oh, go straight," he said, "you'll come to the mountains. Drive right over the top and Anthony's on the other side."

That sounded right. I was so glad Curt had asked the right question. Clearly my brain was firing on even fewer cylinders than usual. I thought to myself that I was being pretty wussy. In the Iron Butt Rally you rode like a day like this for eleven days. What would I be like on day eight or nine, for example? More to the point, what would I be like in the morning? Would I be able to get my ass in the saddle by 4 AM again? Would I get sleepy on the thousand-mile ride back? The last time I'd ridden the Solstice, I'd gotten sleepy on the ride back and had had to pull over. The thought of nodding off on a bike scares me – you really don't want to lose your balance even for a second.

We stopped at a red light and suddenly the mountains were right there in front of us, backlit and shimmering in the thick haze. The stoplight changed and we crossed over onto the Woodrow Bean Transmountain Parkway and into the Franklin Mountain State Park. After all that flatland riding it was a kick to suddenly be rising up a curvy road to the top of a mountain, even if it was a little one. We crested the top and saw El Paso and Juarez spread out below us, the river curving through and separating the US from Mexico. We slowed to savor the view for a few moments, then headed down to I-10 at the bottom of the mountain. A few minutes later we were gassing up at a station at mile marker zero, and I collected my final receipt for the first leg, time stamped, location stamped, official. It was a little before 7:00 PM, Houston time, for a total ride time of just under fifteen hours.



The vice president of our club that year was Floyd Crow. He checked my mileage at the end point of the first leg, and then Curt and I had that beer. We wandered around the motel parking lot, trying to adjust to not riding, then chugged the bottom half of the beer and broke for our rooms. After phoning home I took a hot shower and lay down for a bit.

Floyd and his wife, Dessie, cooked hamburgers in a park near the motel, and around dark everyone assembled for an end-of-the-ride photo.

I slept like a dead vegetable that night and way too early the phone rang to wake me. For several minutes I grogged dizzily around the room trying to decide if I was going to do the second thousand miles, or get some more sleep and hope I could stay awake for the straight shot back home, only seven hundred and seventy miles. As I moved around I gained momentum, and finally got to where I wasn't running into things. What the hell, I thought, now that you can walk a straight line, go for it.

The other Saddlesore riders had assembled outside. Unlike twenty-four hours earlier, where everyone had been pretty quiet at the starting station, today we had a very chatty group. As the rest of the group gassed up, a fellow in a pickup pulling a trailered Harley drove in. It was a gleamy, creamy custom showpiece bike, with a long front end and high handlebars. I wondered where he was going at 3:45 in the morning, and wondered what he thought about our group in our long-distance motley.

We pulled out at four and headed west, across the border into New Mexico. Between Anthony and Las Cruces, I-10 passes miles of cattle feed lots and dairy farms. The smell is unforgettable and really intense in the dark.

The temperature started dropping. When it got under about 65 I pulled over to put on a heavier jacket. One of the other riders stopped to be sure I was OK, and waited with me. We caught up with the group, and shortly thereafter they all pulled into a gas station and traded up into heavier jackets. By now the temps were in the fifties.

We arrived in Lordsburg a little before six, about 20 miles from the Arizona border. This was our turnaround point – from here we'd head back east to Houston. We rode around looking for a place to eat, but nothing was open. We were swinging back out toward the Interstate when golden arches blinked on nearby, like on interstates all around the country.

The ride back to Houston was relatively uneventful. The high point proved to be sunrise, coming up behind the mountains outside Las Cruces. The air was clear and cold and the light very crisp. The temperature would increase fifty degrees as we rode back across the state, to a high of 102, and again the camel back and the water vest were the difference between sanity and wild craziness.

Like most return trips, much of ride was on auto-pilot – not so much visualizing the next gas stop as marking the time until I got there. I did get drowsy once, around 4 in the afternoon. We pulled into a gas station just outside Boerne, about 30 miles before my planned stop in San Antonio. This meant I would have to make one more stop than scheduled, but pulling off was a no-brainer. Even if I had to pull over every 30 minutes, I didn't want to drop off to sleep even for a second.

Jim Green rode with me, on a cruiser with ape-hanger bars. The controls on handlebars like that are at head level, and holding your hands up that high gets very tiring after a while. I appreciated the extra effort it took to make a ride of two thousand miles with your hands raised above your head.

We got back to the gas station at mile marker 761 a little after 9 PM. We had ridden over two thousand fifty miles in about forty-one hours, and we were pumped. And right then and there we were able to savor the fact that someone else knew what we'd just accomplished. I don't think there's a bigger answer than that to "why do you do that?" Just a private feeling of satisfaction, bolstered by knowing someone else knew what you'd done, and knew firsthand what the achievement really took to accomplish.

In some ways it's a big deal, and in other ways it's not a big deal. My IBA number is in the 15,000s. Over 15,000 folks joined up ahead of me, and there are uncounted others who are not in that particular "club," riders who have circumnavigated nations and continents and the globe itself.

I feel that riding the 2K initiated me into some very good company and I feel like a kindred spirit in some way. Two thousand miles might be baby steps, but riding the equivalent of halfway across the continent in two days seemed like a good way to spend a weekend. And it made me want to take bigger steps, go farther. Not necessarily in short periods of time, in Iron Butt fashion, but go long distances nevertheless – to the edges of the continent, criss-crossing from side-to-side and then some day, top to bottom. Of all the continents. In the meantime I feed my daydreams of Janice and me wandering the globe as a two-wheeled gypsies by taking a ride from here to there and finding some loop back around again.

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