



Battling the elements for the man in black

By Geoff Stevenson
First of three parts

*You're doing fine, Oklahoma,
Oklahoma, O.K.
- Oscar Hammerstein II*

We doubt Richard Rogers and Hammerstein were thinking of a couple of grey-haired bikers from Canada when they wrote the hit musical Oklahoma! in 1955– but I just had to hum a few bars from the song when Ernie Lalonde and I rode into Shawnee, OK., the other day.

It was our fifth day on the road from Victoria. We'd covered almost 4,000 km and had been rained on

in Oregon, frozen in Colorado, and blown around in New Mexico. (Later, there'd be snow, too – more on that in a bit).

But here we were, checking into a Motel 6 in Shawnee. It was dry, the wind was just a zephyr, the sun was out and the thermometer was climbing into the high 20s. Oklahoma WAS okay.

We're both life-long admirers of the music of Johnny Cash, a.k.a. the Man in Black. So we thought we'd ride to Memphis, TN., stroll along Beale St., and enjoy the sounds. On the way home, we'd spend a week or so in Arkansas, a state that has devoted lots of time and

money to attracting visitors riding motorbikes.

I'd hoped that leaving in late April would get us through the mountains without being snowed on and, by the time we were in eastern Utah or western New Mexico, the weatherman would have us cruising along under blue skies and temperatures at least in the high teens.

Boy, was I wrong.

Our first day took us to Pendleton, OR. This is a good day's ride (almost 700km), after the 0700 ferry to Tsawwassen. I've done it several times before with no bad

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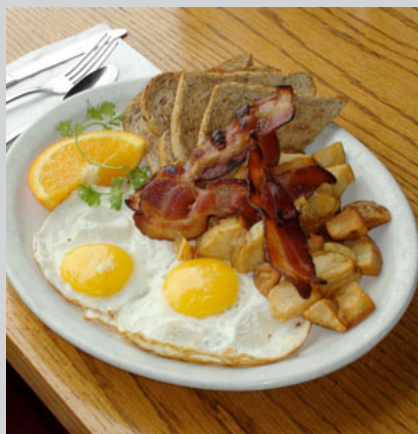
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Next Breakfast/Brunch

Saturday, July 2



WHERE:

Salt Spring Inn
132 Lower Ganges Road
Salt Spring Island

MEETING PLACE

WHEN & WHERE:

8:10 am Swartz Bay
for 8:30 Ferry

8:25 am Crofton
for 8:45 Ferry



Rain or cold don't hamper adventurers



Eureka, a once-thriving mining town in deepest Nevada, has a lovingly-restored opera house. Too bad it wasn't open for us early in the morning.

memories; this time it started blowing hard west of Ellensburg, so we fought a crosswind for close to three hours.

Next day, we headed for Ogden, UT., a northern suburb of Salt Lake City. This is 856km., according to the odometer on my 2014 Suzuki V Strom 1000. (Ernie was aboard a 2015 Triumph Tiger XCX). It blew some more, and rained steadily for several hours; we got to Ogden feeling exhausted.

The good news: We both wear KLIM two-piece suits. They're guaranteed to be waterproof – and they are. With waterproof boots (mine are Sidi; Ernie wears BMW boots) and waterproof overgloves (we both use products from Aerostitch) we never got wet – but for much of this ride (11,548.3km, in all) we were rarely comfortably warm.

South of Salt Lake, we'd hoped to head southeast over Soldier Summit

(U.S #6). But the forecast was now for snow, so we rode farther south on I15 (fortunately with an HOV lane that might be 80km long; in the morning rush hour, we covered 100km in an hour through the Utah capital) and eventually east on I70 to Green River, UT.

Although this route goes up to almost 8,000 feet, there was no snow and, on our third night, we were bedded down in Cortez., CO. So far, so good – or so we thought.



Music a treat to visitors in Memphis



This GE wind turbine blade was made of carbon fibre at a plant in western Kansas. We paced it off at 120 feet.

Next morning we prepared to ride south into New Mexico. We scraped frost off our seats in the dark and I checked my bike thermometer. It read zero. It felt even colder.

The sun was soon out. Alas, so was the wind. We bucked it for 637km, but called it quits mid-afternoon in Santa Rosa, NM. Again we were tired. Somehow, this sort of riding seemed a lot easier 40-odd years ago. Could we be getting older? Would this weather ever improve?

Not much, as it turned out.

Finally, after enjoying that heat in

Oklahoma, we rode into a Rodeway Inn in suburban Memphis on the sixth day and precisely 4,398.4km from my garage in Brentwood Bay.

Now to track down some good country music, with a generous helping of you know how.

The Memphis Music Festival is held the first weekend in May. The locals joke that it always rains that weekend; 2016, it seemed, was no exception. Worse, tickets were expensive – if available at all – and the program suggested the music was aimed at people a lot younger

than two 70-somethings from Canada.

So we climbed on a city bus for a 35-minute ride downtown and walked to Beale St.

A number of bars had live music and there didn't seem to be a cover charge – although most places passed around a large plastic bucket for tips during each set.

We were enjoying lunch in Alfred's when we learned that Gary Hardy (you can hear him on YouTube) was singing some of Johnny's music later that night.



Concerts, baseball, museums and food

He was terrific. He played with a band for 90 minutes without a break and even though we tipped generously, we paid far less to hear him than we'd have spent at the music festival.

Later, we found a band in another bar featuring the frenetic piano playing of Jerry Lee Lewis. This was even cheaper: We listened from the sidewalk and paid nothing.

A local entertainment newspaper told us that a plaque to Johnny Cash was to be unveiled in suburban Memphis and this seemed like a plan for the Sunday.

By now becoming frustrated with the limited service of the city bus service (on the weekend, the last bus back to our motel was around 1800), we decided to ride to Galloway Hall (thank goodness for a GPS).

The plaque marks Johnny's first public concert at the hall (then a church) in December, 1954. His band, Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Two, included guitarist Luther Perkins and bassist Marshall Grant, both auto mechanics at the time. (Later, drummer W.S. "Fluke" Holland joined them).

Holland and Roy Cash, Johnny's older brother (who wrote the hit I Still Miss Someone), pulled the strings to reveal the plaque, and a two-hour concert after the formalities, featured some terrific music (heck, my \$5 ticket even



The iceberg is still around. But the Titanic appears to be floating safely in Branson, MO.

included a small draft beer).

In between times, we toured the Gibson Guitar factory, and took in an AAA game at Autozone Park, a state-of-the-art baseball diamond

occupying an entire city block just a foul ball away from Beale Street.

We also walked to the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968. The motel



Memphis still recovering economically

closed soon after the shooting, but a floral wreath still hangs outside room #306, where Dr. King had been staying. (The motel building is now part of the National Civil Rights Museum next door).

And then there was the Bass Pro store in downtown Memphis. It's a former sports arena, acquired in a controversial deal with the city, and offers 22 million cubic feet of business space (including a hotel) on two floors. Is this place big or what?

We walked around for a while, waiting for yet more rain to end, admiring a 20-gauge Beretta shotgun priced at \$82,229 (well over \$100,000 Canadian – before taxes), other shotguns, rifle and handguns, fishing boats and motors, racks and racks of clothing and other equipment supposedly essential for the modern outdoorsman.

Oh, yes, the store included four bowling lanes, a good restaurant, a bar and

Memphis, like so many other American cities, is still recovering from the recession of 2008. Numerous downtown buildings (including lots on the main street) were boarded up. There were plenty of people on the weekend (many of them tourists there for the musical festival, I guessed), but when Ernie and I walked the main street on the Monday and Tuesday, we were usually the only pedestrians.



A cautionary sign in a store window in Eureka, NV. Are they serious? Probably.

The contrast between downtown Memphis and, say, downtown Seattle, was striking.

After five nights in Memphis, we were ready to head home. But first, we'd spend a week in Arkansas and then three nights in Branson, MO., hoping, of course, to hear more of those Johnny Cash tunes.

Between Memphis and Arkansas, however, was some serious food.

Memphis BBQ, located in Horn Lake, MS., (really a southern

suburb of Memphis), proclaimed itself to have the best BBQ food in the world (and claimed to have the trophies to prove it). The doors opened at 1100. We were the first customers that Tuesday morning. The restaurant seats about 200; by 1135 every table was occupied.

Better still, the food was as good as advertised. The sampler plate included a half rack of ribs, your choice of two of chicken, brisket or pulled pork, cornbread and



Helena, Arkansas was the next stop

choice of two vegetables (I ordered turnip greens – for the first time in perhaps 50 years – and coleslaw and both were excellent). This was good value for \$23.99. We somehow ate the whole thing, paid our bills, staggered away from the table, remounted – and vowed to have light lunches only for the rest of the ride.

We'd been on the Interstate much of the way to Memphis and were now looking forward to some back roads.

With our bulging bellies jiggling away (or so it seemed), we rode south, parallel to the Mighty

Mississippi and crossed the great river on a bridge that took us to Helena, AR.

Who knew? Helena was the site of a major Civil War battle – but because it was the same week (in July, 1863) as Gettysburg, most everyone has forgotten it. (The Union forces won and it was a turning point in the struggle).

An excellent museum in a former railroad station let us learn more about the fighting, plus a good deal about the area's economy: First cotton country and now the centre of Arkansas' huge rice-growing business. Helena's main street

had been a handsome promenade during the 1930s. But now the elegant brick and red sandstone buildings were mostly abandoned (and the few remaining businesses looked anything but healthy).

This was a pattern to be repeated almost everywhere we went in the state, one of the poorest in the union by most measurements: Frightening numbers of doors were locked and the only success story in most small communities seemed to be the dollar store (sometimes two) in a new building on the outskirts of town.

To be continued.

Club 2016 Event Schedule

Date	Event	Location
Saturday, July 2, 2016	Monthly Gathering	Saltspring Island
July 8 to 10, 2016	Rocky Bow Lunatic Fringe Rally	Cochrane, Alberta
Sunday, July 17, 2016	Ride to Brunch	BW Prestige Oceanfront, Sooke
July 14 to 16, 2016	BMWMOA National Rally	Hamburg, NY
July 28 to 30, 2016 TBC	Cascade Country Rendezvous	Republic, Washington
Saturday, August 6, 2016	Monthly Gathering	Pioneer House, Duncan
Sunday, August 7, 2016	Victoria Vintage Motorcycle Show	Western Speedway
August 11 to 14, 2016	43rd Stanley Stomp Rally	Grandjean, ID
August 18 to 21, 2016	Hotsprings Rally	Nakusp, BC
Sunday, August 28, 2016	Club BBQ	Chez Conrad
Saturday, Sept 3, 2016	Monthly Gathering	Oak & Carriage, Duncan
Sunday, Sept 18, 2016	Monthly Ride	Port Renfrew / Cowichan Loop
October, 2016	BMW RA National Rally	
Sunday, October 4, 2016	Monthly Gathering	The Crooked Goose
Saturday, October 22, 2016	Annual Meeting	TBD