

Blues Highways



MIKE GRAGG

I've written before about "blues highways," those back roads chronicled in William Least Heat Moon's 1982 book of the same name but I was in a different mood for this ride. I decided to ride both Mississippi State Highway 1 and US Highway 61, each claiming to be "The Blues Highway."

As a young man working on a cotton plantation near Rosedale, Mississippi, Robert Johnson had a burning desire to be a great blues musician. Legend has it that one midnight he went to a nearby deserted crossroads to make a deal with the devil. In order to become the greatest blues guitarist ever, he would sell his soul to the devil. Nearly every "top ten greatest guitarists" list ever compiled includes Johnson, so maybe it's true. The story has been immortalized in Johnson's song "Crossroads Blues", the 1986 Ralph Macchio movie "Crossroads" and Eric Clapton's grammy-winning cover of Johnson's song called simply "**Crossroads**." Although there are multiple theories of the exact location where Johnson

sold his soul to the devil, two different intersections are the most likely: the intersection of Mississippi highways 1 and 8 in Rosedale, mentioned in Clapton's version, and the **intersection of US highways 49 and 61 in Clarksdale**, the most widely accepted location. Naturally I had to visit both.



The Rosedale intersection has a roadside Mississippi Blues Trail marker but I found nothing else related to crossroads or blues music. Rosedale once had a number of juke joints, cafes and dance halls where blues music was heard and where Johnson surely played but little evidence remains.

The crossroads in Clarksdale and its famous marker sign was my next destination but only after a quick detour to Dockery Plantation National Historic District, officially recognized as the birthplace of the Delta Blues and where blues legends such as Robert

Johnson, "Pops" Staples, Honeyboy Edwards, Willie Brown, Son House and Howlin' Wolf Burnett learned from and influenced each other. It's a must stop for any blues music fan.

Dockery Plantation may be the official birthplace of the delta blues, but if there is an unofficial capital of the delta blues it is definitely Clarksdale, Mississippi. Clarksdale's "crossroads" is the intersection of US Highways 49 and 61 and is marked by what has become a world famous signpost. Clarksdale also boasts the Delta Blues Museum, **Morgan Freeman's Ground Zero Blues Club** (voted best blues club in the

nation), and my destination for the night, the **Shack Up Inn**, on the grounds of the historic Hopson Plantation, where the world's first cotton crop was produced fully by machine - from planting to baling.

The Shack Up Inn is definitely not for everyone but I had a great time there. The name comes from the collection of sort-of restored sharecropper shacks scattered around the grounds which are available for nightly rental. There are also rental units in sort-of restored grain bins as well as a dozen motel-like rooms in the not-very restored main building. I'd call the decor "aggressively rustic." There is a full bar (which also features a nice assortment of craft beers) providing live music each night (I listened to a very talented couple from Quebec playing a folksy style of blues). There is, however, no food available at the **Shack Up Inn**, something I discovered only after my third beer - so no saddling



back up and riding into Clarksdale to try Ground Zero's famous cheeseburger.

The next morning dawned bright and sunny and the **2017 Barber Vintage Festival** was calling. I left Clarksville early in order to arrive in Birmingham before rush hour and rode an assortment of back roads to arrive at my motel in time to relax and clean up before a quiet dinner.

Friday was the opening day of the three-day Vintage Festival and I arrived at the gate about 30 minutes after it opened. There was little traffic going in and I was able to park in the museum parking lot. The free shuttles provided transportation to the various areas of the six square mile park and I

made good use of them. This was only my second trip to the BVF but it seemed much less crowded than last year. Perhaps it was the weather forecast. Hurricane Nate seemed to have drawn a bull's eye on Birmingham for early Sunday morning although Friday was hot and clear. I spent time at the swap meet where there was every kind of motorcycle-related item for sale or trade. KTM and BMW were offering demo rides. Royal Enfield displayed their entire line, including the new Himalayan adventure bike which is now in production and coming to the US late this year - though no sign of their upcoming 750cc bikes. The carnival and



the trick riders were going strong and the racers were on the track practicing. At noon I was in the Paddock Club eating lunch when it was announced that there would be a moment of sound (instead of a moment of silence) **honoring John Surtees** who passed away earlier this year. The sound was made by the actual MV Agusta John rode to a world championship, the actual Ferrari John drove to a world championship and a replica of the Can-Am car John drove to a world championship as they made parade laps of the track to cheers and high-fives (and many photographs). All three vehicles are in the Barber collection.

Friday afternoon was devoted to the museum, which contains what Guinness has certified as the largest and most valuable motorcycle collection in the world. The museum's new wing is open and the staff have managed to fill the additional space with a variety of interesting and significant motorcycles restored and displayed just as magnificently as the rest of the collection. The Barber Motorcycle Museum is truly a gem, worthy of a special trip to Birmingham any time.

My phone and the motel room television were both telling me that I was going to ride home in the rain unless I left Birmingham early Saturday morning. Since I had ridden virtually every mile of the 300+ miles of my first day of this trip in the rain, I took heed. I had planned to visit the legendary Muscle Shoals Sound Studio in Sheffield, Alabama on my way home, which would have necessitated an overnight stay Saturday night. I canceled the motel room and made the 650 mile slog home - mostly by interstate. I arrived at 7:00 pm, tired and hungry but glad I had made the trip. I highly recommend both the Barber Vintage Festival (usually held the first weekend in October) and the Barber Motorcycle Museum (open all year) for anyone with an interest in motorcycles.

Sunday I loafed and listened to blues music, BB King, the Staple Singers and Muddy Waters keeping me mellow.

Go to Birmingham next year for the Vintage Festival. It's worth the effort! 🇺🇸

AN AIRHEAD RESTORATION TALE

When my friend Michael Crenshaw decided to pass the 1984 R80RT on to me, I was very excited. I had wanted to own another airhead RT because that model was my favorite back in the day. This example looked clean and complete and it was sporting a very low mileage odometer. Since finishing the airhead sidecar project last year I was eager to do another restoration.

Bringing an old airhead out of storage to road worthy condition usually involves new tubes, tires, and battery as well as many of the rubber bits like fuel lines, brake lines, and various oil seals which deteriorate over the years regardless of mileage. A full suite of regular service items will also be needed. I always proceed on a restoration by conducting an annual service which includes a thorough inspection of the entire machine to identify other issues which need to be addressed.

One of the things to determine is where the bike is in relation to the usual repair cycles. Airheads need certain things done at various mileages in addition to the standard 5K and 10K services in order to stay healthy and reliable. Around once every 25K miles the wheel bearings and chassis bearings need to be cleaned, inspected, and re-greased unless you routinely use the magic bearing greasing tool. The splines which transfer power from the clutch hub to the transmission input shaft need to be cleaned and greased, and the cylinder heads will need reconditioning every 50K miles. The clutch parts usually will



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last about 100K in normal use.

In this case, I also found a few things needing correction. First, I suspected that the odometer did not reflect the actual miles on the bike. This bike is 33 years old and it is a touring model, most of which have been used for many miles. While this one appeared to be in extraordinary condition, it was unlikely that it had only traveled 5K miles! My theory was confirmed by a close inspection of the brakes. In the early 1980's, BMW used front brakes with fixed rotors, fixed calipers, and semi-metallic metal pads which ground down the rotor discs. The discs on my bike had deep wear grooves and were worn down to the service limit even though the pads had little wear. The rear brake is a drum with brake shoe linings which typically last at least 50K miles. The lining thickness on these shoes were only one millimeter more than the service limit, indicating that the rider either over-used the rear brake, or that the bike had 40 to 50K miles on it. I was therefore pretty sure that the speedometer had been replaced on this bike. New speedometers have not been available for ten years so the bike had not been used much since the new clock was installed.

The need to replace the brake discs gave me a chance to try the new EBC floating rotors, a vast improvement over the originals. With new pads and new brake shoes and the new brake lines previously in-stalled by Michael, the brakes are now better than new!



I found that the last oil changes, (done by someone before Michael purchased the bike), were done by someone who did not know what they were doing. The crush washers on all of the drain plugs had been used multiple times and the threads had been stripped from the driveshaft drain. The cretin had jammed a brass plumbing plug wrapped with Teflon tape into the drain bore, damaging it even more. He or she had also installed the oil filter compartment O-ring directly on top of the canister with the steel washer out of place. This is the infamous \$5,000 O-ring failure mistake which can lead to a total loss of oil pressure with no external leaking followed instantly by the destruction of every bearing in the engine,

YIKES! Fortunately, the O-ring had not yet failed. The **rear drive** stripped threads were repaired with an oversized Heli-Coil and an Oilhead **drain plug** after the drive unit was removed.

I performed bearing maintenance on all of the **chassis bearings**. They were all in good condition but had old grease, and the wheel bearing seals were badly worn. The steering damper would not turn and it was while I was working on the fairing to access the damper mechanism that I found a “next service” reminder sticker hiding in a glove box which had 46,000 miles written on it; strong evidence that the bike has something over 45K miles on it, a figure which matches the brake and spline wear I found.



The steering damper operating shaft ends in a little **rack and pinion box** attached to the underside of the lower triple clamp, a place which is impossible to reach or even see on an RS or RT model without removal of the fairing or at least its' central panel. It is such a PIA to get to that it is very common to find the grease in the box is original and hard as rocks. That is why

so many of the operating knobs are broken; when you try to force the knob to turn when the rack is frozen up with old grease the plastic knob cracks.

I had quite a time mounting a new rear tire on the snowflake wheel. I had purchased a set of new model tires from Michelin which promised modern compounds in sizes to fit the old rims. The new tire refused to seat all the way on the wheel. I used all of my mounting tricks on it, including polishing the wheel rim, to no avail. After spending several hours on this, I finally gave up and ordered a new Metzler ME77 tire, a tire which has been made since back in the day to fit these wheels. Sure enough, the Metzler slipped right on with almost no effort! I think this was a rare instance of a defective tire.

With the installation of a new mighty Odyssey PC925L battery I was finally ready to adjust the carbs and check the compression of the engine. I took the bike for a little warm up ride around the neighborhood and parked on the lift stand again and noticed oil pouring out of the right valve cover. I removed the cover, pulled the studs, and hand lapped the sealing flange on my register plate with some 600 grit wet sandpaper, reassembled it with a new gasket and quit for the day. The next day I found two oil puddles, one under the right valve cover again and one under the end of the clutch arm. I had a better rocker cover in my parts stash but there was another set of delays while new-fangled silicone rubber valve cover gaskets and a new rubber boot for the throw-out bearing area were ordered. A restoration project is like building a house; it goes fast at the beginning but takes forever as you finish the last few details. After the leaks were all fixed, I noticed that the throttle felt too gritty right off idle while I was trying to synch the carbs. Another delay while I ordered a new twist grip and crown gear set. Patience Grasshopper, there are more winter days to come and the RT will be on the road by spring! **BZ**



Rush Hour

A bit more than an hour southeast of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, nestled between Rush and Clabber Creeks on the Buffalo River, lies **a true ghost town**. A true ghost town is defined as one with zero commercial or business activity and absolutely no residents. According to the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture, "Marion County lays claim to the only ghost town between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. The remains of the prosperous zinc-mining town of **Rush** attained this status almost fifty years ago. A true ghost town exhibits the physical existence of structures, including buildings, and a zero population." Rush certainly qualifies!



MIKE GRAGG



Somewhere between 1880 and 1882 a land speculator familiar with the persistent Indian legends of abandoned silver mines in the area commissioned a mineral assay report. He is rumored to have "requested" that it show silver ore in the area and it, in fact, did claim the presence of silver ore. The next few years saw the opening of

several mines, one of which, the Morning Star mine, discovered a silver-colored mineral. A small rock smelter was soon built and in 1886, its first run proved that the silver-colored ore was actually zinc. The disappointed prospectors, John Wolfer, Bob Setzer and J. H. McCabe tried unsuccessfully to sell their claims and smelter for \$2.50 worth of cove oysters. As other prospectors continued to dig tunnels with picks and shovels it became clear that the area was not loaded with silver but was actually rich with zinc. Within just a few years Rush, with its 15 productive mines, became the center of the North Arkansas Lead and Zinc District and boasted an estimated 2,000 to 5,000 residents. In 1893 the Morning Star mine extracted the largest piece of free zinc oxide ore that was ever mined. Named 'Jumbo' by the miners, it weighed 12,750 lbs, was exhibited at the 1893 Chicago Worlds Fair, where it won a gold medal and is still on exhibit at Chicago's Field Museum.

With the advent of World War I, the demand for zinc munitions products (bronze and brass shell casings) tripled the price of zinc and Rush became a true boom town. But by 1917, because of the high cost of locating, extracting and transporting the ore and because of the emergence of the Tri-State Mining District of KS, MO, and OK with its much more economical strip mining operations, Rush began a rapid decline. People left as quickly as they had come. The druggist is said to have simply walked off and left his store, complete with stock and a soft drink fountain (which the remaining children soon emptied). By 1919 Rush was nearly deserted.

Rush held on until the mid-1950s when the Post Office was officially closed and in 1972, included in the land acquired by the federal government for the establishment of the Buffalo River National Park System, Rush became an officially recognized ghost town. Today the Rush National Historic District is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is maintained and administered by the US National Park System.

To visit Rush, take AR14 South from Yellville about 4 miles, turning Left (East) on Marion County Rd 6035 and drive all the way to the end (approximately 10 miles). The road is quite nice with good pavement to within a mile or less of the **Rush Historic District**, where you can view a small number of abandoned buildings, the original rock smelter, and several rock retaining walls and foundations. There are rest rooms, park-ing spaces, informational signs and hiking trails - from easy to more difficult. The mines are officially closed due to the danger of past and potential cave-ins and the deteriorating



condition of the mines' supporting timbers and other structure. The road continues past the Historic District down to the Buffalo Scenic River Access just blocks away. There will likely be more people there than there will be in Rush.

Depending on your mapset, your GPS may be confused in this area but if you follow these directions you will have no trouble getting to Rush (which may be labeled Rush Historic District on some maps).

Rush is only about an hour or so from Eureka Springs, base camp for

the club's Annual Fall Color Tour, and only about an hour or so from Mountain View, the base for the club's Annual Thank God It's Spring ride. I'm quite certain that this Rush Hour ride will be far more enjoyable than the DFW five-o'clock rush hour. BZ

