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Western Pilgrimage

by Jeff Rasley
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My intention was to participate in the great biker hajj to Sturgis, South Dakota, for Bike Week with several biker friends. "Sturgis" was about the only motorcycle experience I lacked. I bought a Honda Super Bee for $90 from a guy who was traveling cross-country and broke down in my hometown of Goshen, Indiana, when I was fifteen. I rode all over the Midwestern U.S. on that old Honda. When I was nineteen I did a 7,000 mile trip from Indiana down through Mexico on my next bike, a Suzuki 500. But after I wrecked my Harley and nearly killed myself, I vowed I was done with motorcycles. I’m a middle-aged attorney with wife and kids for Gods sake! That was my third serious bike wreck, and I feared three was all fate may have allotted me. But old biker friends were going to Sturgis, and that last adventure on a bike beckoned.

How could I experience Sturgis without breaking my vow? A rental Harley seemed like a good solution, so I rented a Road King in July and did a weekend ride with three friends. But fear had a hold on me. When my front tire skidded on gravel on a curve on State Road 135 in Southern Indiana, I had flashbacks to the last wreck. In that one I was thrown over the handlebars between a tree and a truck-size boulder as my out-of-control bike went over a creek bank and into the water. My front brake locked and I was thrown over the handlebars on a country road when I was
sixteen and was hit broad-side by a car at nineteen. I recovered and rode again. No problem. But my last wreck, maybe because I’m older with family responsibilities, imprinted a fear I’d not felt before. I decided the vow covered rental bikes too. But I was determined to experience Sturgis. I decided to drive my new Sebring convertible to Sturgis and hook up with my biker buddies out there. But Sturgis, I found, was not what I sought. I discovered what I was really seeking in small towns across the Midwest and in a spontaneous pilgrimage to Wounded Knee.

On a hot cloudless day in August with the convertible top down I left Indianapolis and drove State roads across Western Indiana, Illinois and Eastern Iowa. When the Sun was setting I stopped in a little town, Allison, off State Road 3 to gas up and find a place to eat. A young woman pulled up beside me in the parking lot of Casey's Market, and we struck up a conversation about her two little redhead kids in the back seat. When I asked her advice about a place to eat, she said there weren’t any places she could recommend, but she was on her way to a friend's for pizza and I was welcome to join them. So I spent the evening with two unwed mothers, Candace and Jen, and their four little kids eating pizza, drinking Pepsi and playing with sparklers.

Jen's brother, Brian, had committed suicide just a few weeks prior and Jen told me that Brian had always wanted to go to Tibet and see the Himalayas. His ashes are interred in his mother's garden. I told Jen that I would put her in touch with my fiend KP in Nepal, who runs a Himalayan guiding company and he could arrange for some of Brian's ashes to be scattered in the Himalayas. She was very grateful for the offer, and Jen and Candace declared that I must be an angel sent by God to answer a prayer. (I would have thought that an angel deserved better than sleeping in his vehicle at a rest area on I-90 just west of Albert Lee, MN, but I was too tired
to find a campsite and set up my tent by the time I stopped to sleep after leaving Jen’s house past midnight.)

The next day in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, I met my friend Bernadette. We became acquainted the previous fall on a dive trip to Palau. She had invited me to participate in a Sioux Indian powwow through her brother Lantz's contacts, but Lantz's wife decided to have a baby instead. Bernadette explained that without Lantz, we would not be welcome as the powwow was not open to outsiders. It was ferociously hot, so instead, we went to Palisades State Park, which has “the old swimming hole” for locals. It’s where a creek balloons into what looks like a quarry to Hoosier eyes, but water can cut sheer walls in granite over tens of thousands of years just like the cutters did in a few decades to make the limestone quarries around Bedford and Bloomington, Indiana. We sat on a boulder dangling our feet in the water and reminisced about diving in Palau. Just down-stream three teenage boys in cut-off jeans repeatedly jumped off a 20-foot wall hooting and bellowing like crazy men.

A surprise thundershower sent us briskly on our way to dinner at Crabby Bills -- a seafood restaurant in Corson, S.D.! (Probably borrowed the name of a well-known restaurant on the west side of Tampa Bay.) After dinner I returned Bernadette to her new-born niece's side and found myself again driving late at night and too tired to look for a campsite. I slept in my car at another rest area on I-90 (near Mitchell, S.D., famed for its Corn Palace). I thanked God and Lee Iacoca's successors for the comfort of my Sebring's reclining seats as the South Dakotan version of Crabby Bill's shrimp and I settled in for the night.

Throughout the night of August 3d and the following morning rain was a constant companion. I passed thousands of bikers as I closed in on Sturgis. Maybe it was the rain, but they seemed like lemmings determined to reach their fated destination. The rain ceased, and heat and humidity returned by early afternoon the next day, a Sunday. Creeping through Sturgis behind a seemingly endless line of Harleys, I finally made it to the Full Throttle Saloon, where I was supposed to meet John, Randy and Mark. I looked throughout the grounds, booths, pavilion, bars and port-o-pots of the Full Throttle, but didn't find my Indianapolis biker buddies. I crossed the street to the Glenco Campground, where they were supposed to have a campsite. They had checked in, as had 8,000 other campers who had paid the $100 fee, which Glenco charges whether you stay one night or all month. I snuck past security and hiked all over the sprawling grounds looking for my friends, but gave up after a couple hours of fruitless searching. No answer to my cell phone calls.

I spent the rest of the day and evening trying to enjoy the Fellini-esque parade of bikers and "bitches" in their costumes of leather, blue jeans or buckskins with accessories of doo rags, ear rings, tattoos and pony tails or shaved heads. But I found myself alienated from the great congregation of tricked out bikers. I felt like a Christian in Mecca during Ramadan or a Cathar-heretic during the Inquisition. While I could talk the talk and walk the walk, I just couldn't get into the performance art of it. I left my biker leathers at home, and was walking around in sandals, trekking shorts and a t-shirt bearing the logo of a climbing-gear company. Although leather-clad bikers like to think of themselves as rebels, their politics and cultural values tend to
be extremely right-wing (except with respect to nudity, pornography, drugs and hard rock ‘n roll). Looking like a tree-hugger, I worried that I might be suspected of opposing global warming or advocating gun control.

To escape the Sodom & Gomorrah of Sturgis, I drove out to Devils Tower, Wyoming, in the early evening and stopped in Sundance on the way. The county fair rodeo was going on just outside of Sundance, and it was a joy to see the clean cut enthusiasm of the kids in their roping and riding contests. At a restaurant in Spearfish I chatted with Biker-for-Christ Don, who'd brought his 16-year old son to Sturgis to help witness to the godless hordes. They were dressed in typical biker uniform and Dad had the tattoos and accoutrements of the serious biker. I didn't despair of their ministry because bikers are drawn to expressive affinity groups, but I suggested they time their services to be late enough that hangovers had passed but earlier than when the serious substance abuse of the evening would commence.

Refreshed by a break from Sturgis, I made another attempt to locate my friends at the Full Throttle. Alone and forlorn I stood on a table, while Joan Jette and her band belted out hard but good-time rock and roll. While scanning the crowd for my wayward friends, I was forced to endure the view of an amazingly sculpted stripper who slowly rotated about on the mechanical bull in the middle of the grounds, while surrounded by chest-thumping and hooting bikers. After midnight I headed back to a rest area on I-90, just east of Sturgis, and fell asleep once again in my car.

The following day I drove up to Mt. Rushmore and spent an hour or so hiking around the grounds and not seeing the presidents because of fog. I pitied and feared for the hundreds of bikers that rode through the fog to see more fog at the end of their ride to the Park, but thankfully I saw no wrecks.

During a late breakfast at the 1880 Keystone House Family Restaurant in Keystone, while studying my maps, I had an epiphany. Sturgis was no different than Daytona’s Bike Week without a beach; it was largely a larger version of other biker gatherings I’d experienced – macho exhibitionism, sex, drugs and rock & roll. I no longer fit. For me, it was a bridge to nowhere. To make this adventure meaningful, it would become a pilgrimage. I would go to Wounded Knee.

An ancestor of mine was the only cavalryman killed in the "action" at Wounded Knee. My journalist Mother wrote a story for our hometown newspaper, The Goshen News, in 1977, about our ancestor, Lt. James DeFreese Mann, because she attended, as a representative of the family, his "Last Roll Call" -- the 100th anniversary of his graduation from West Point. I had recently re-read her article while perusing the family scrapbook during a visit with Mom.

I find it both intriguing and perverse that I have an ancestor who managed to get shot, possibly by friendly fire, since the Sioux weren't doing much shooting, in one of the most notorious events in the sad history of the conquest of the Plains Indians by the U.S. Army. (Another ancestor is Cotton Mather of the Salem witch hangings infamy, but at least he had the
compensating distinction of being a famed scholar, preacher and educator.) I don't pretend to
know a lot about the Indian Wars generally or the Wounded Knee massacre specifically, but my
Mom's article quoted from contemporary reports about the events of Dec 29, 1890, and Lt. Mann
was even interviewed by reporters while he was dying from his wound. He claimed that the
"Bucks" shot first and then the soldiers "poured it into them." Whoever shot first, the result was
that the federal soldiers killed 300 Oglala Sioux, mostly women and children. As far as I know,
no one from my family has made a pilgrimage to the place where our ancestor was shot while
participating in the massacre. Perhaps a pilgrimage to Wounded Knee by Lt. Mann’s ancestor
would qualify as some sort of atonement.

Traveling through the Badlands National Park and the reservations of the Lakota, Oglala and
Rosebud Sioux, one must be struck by the inhumane and cruel-joke of the government to have
"reserved" this land for the Sioux people. While there is a stark beauty to some eyes, The
Badlands are one of the most inhospitable areas in North America to human existence. The
landscape is harsh, grim and the heat oppressive. And the cruel joke continues. State Road 40 is a
rough but decently paved and maintained road angling southeast from Keystone toward the Pine
Ridge Reservation. When it becomes a BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) road, it ceases to be
paved. My poor Sebring endured 40 miles of gravel across Pine Ridge before reaching the
Badlands National Park Visitors Center and pavement again.

The ranger at the Visitors Center told me that I might be disappointed visiting Wounded Knee,
because "there's not much there." There is certainly truth in his statement, but then, there is not
much there throughout the Badlands.

On the east side of the road at the site of the massacre were a couple forlorn booths with
handcrafts for sale. An old man slept at one and a couple of kids played in the dirt by the other.
On the west side of the road is a white circular building containing mostly posters and
propaganda for AIM (American Indian Movement). There are testaments to Russell Means and
Leonard Peltier and the demonstrations, minor insurrections and violence perpetrated against and
by AIM. There was surprisingly little information about the history and events of the 1890
massacre. On two hills behind the building are two small cemeteries. I looked around both, but
didn't see any monument to the massacre. I asked, and a Sioux man pointed toward a fenced area
of about ten by six feet back in the closest cemetery to the AIM building. Within the fenced area
is a six-foot high granite monument with names of victims and a description of the massacre.
(Although my Mom's article said 300 of the 350 Sioux at Wounded Knee were killed, I counted
fewer than 40 names on the monument.) A few token offerings were scattered around the base of
the monument.

I placed two stones on top of a steer's skull at the base of the monument as my offering of
symbolic atonement. I had purchased the rocks for $1 each from a group of Oglala kids at the
intersection of two gravel roads on the reservation. Their Dad told me he wanted to "encourage
entrepreneurship" among his kids. I stood alone by the monument and looked back across the
road where the Sioux had camped under the leadership of Chief Big Foot, who was known as a
man of peace. I prayed for the souls of the Indians who were killed there; and for all the other Indians who were killed to allow the western expansion of the USA and for the sins our nation has committed against Red people and Black people in becoming the colossus it is and that we Americans today will live up to the great principles of individual freedom and equal opportunity we profess and for the soul of my ancestor, James DeFreese Mann, who spent 13 years of his life fighting in the Indian Wars for a cause in which he firmly believed and who left a young widow and child at Ft. Riley, Kansas, where he was temporarily buried before his remains were transported to Arlington Cemetery.

Back in the AIM building, I made conversation with the middle-aged woman sitting behind a counter. No other visitors entered the building while I was there. I overcame my hesitation and told her about my ancestor's participation in the massacre. She evinced no hostility and only mild interest. She didn't know that a cavalryman had died in the action, but thought she recalled reading the old newspaper accounts that quoted Lt. Mann. She said the way the Center got most of its materials was from "people like me giving them stuff." I told her I'd try to send a copy of my Mom's article. (Another broken promise by the white man.) I donated a few dollars after being pestered by her son for a contribution to a fund for his baseball team. I felt gouged but also paid $20 for an AIM T-shirt.

When I left the Center I started to drive into the town of Wounded Knee and was confronted by a hand-painted sign on poster board stuck on a rusted metal chair by the side of the road, "Drive Slow Stop Killing Our Children." The town had the depressingly ramshackle look of other Reservation settlements I'd seen. I made a slow U turn at the first drive and then headed south to pick up US Highway 18.

I drove old State highways most of the way home: US 18 across South Dakota, State Road 3 across Iowa, and US 150 across Illinois. And I finally got to use my tent and sleeping bag
camping on the banks of the Missouri River at Snake Creek Park in South Dakota, Beeze Lake in
Iowa, and Kickapoo State Park in Illinois. Ripping along the two-lane blacktop with the top
down and then performing the rituals of setting up and taking down a tent in the great outdoors
filtered the vestiges of alienation out of my system. I spent a delightful evening in Hampton,
Iowa, taking in a Dixieland concert by a local group on the town square across from the
courthouse. The easy grace, friendliness, and middle-American prosperity of the folks in
Hampton are Exhibit A to counter the pundits’ contention that small town America is dying.

I don’t claim that my little spontaneous pilgrimage was in any sense an act of redemption. My
ancestor thought he was fighting on the right side of a war. It is hard for me to see things from
his point of view, but I accept that he thought his side was in the right. But on the way back
home to Indiana, I found myself wondering whether America would try to understand “the other”
before we begin another war. We certainly didn’t in the invasion of Iraq. Do we have a deeper
understanding of the people we are fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan? I pray, futilely, I know,
that our descendants will not need to make pilgrimages to atone for more massacres.

What I sought in Sturgis was not there for me. I am no longer a biker and felt more like a voyeur
than part of that community. I was the other. But I found something else in my spontaneous
pilgrimage and drive across the Midwest. I found a bridge and crossed it back into the dark past
of my ancestors, who killed and herded the Natives of America into reservations. And I found
that I still feel connected to communities like the one in which I grew up: small Midwestern
towns and cities with folks friendly enough to invite a stranger in for pizza, where teenagers play
in the ole swimming hole, and a band plays in the town square on a Saturday evening. Despite
living in cities like London, Chicago and Indianapolis since I was nineteen, small-town middle-
America still welcomed me as one of its own. It was not what I sought, but it was what I found
on my way back home.