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THE 555 TO FREEDOM

All you need to hit the road is desire, a little displacement and even less money. But it doesn't hurt to have a vast spiritual budget of mutual support and shared expertise. Beer and fireworks help, too...

BY BECKY OHLSEN

IN MYTHS AND OLD MOVIES, BIKER gangs were scary. If they came to your town, women and children would scatter and men would get nervous. This was not the experience of the "555" ride. Our ragged herd was too weird to inspire fear in strangers. When we rolled into a town or a gas station, right away people wanted to help us.

And we needed it. The premise for the ride made ingenuity and some help along the way mandatory: Bikes had to be 500cc or smaller, 1975 model or older, and bought and restored (resuscitated?) for \$500 or less. Hence, the 555.

The rules were dreamed up two years ago by seven friends from Knoxville, Tennessee, because one of them, Cody McMahon, had acquired a 1969 Honda CB450 and wanted to show it to his brother, who lived in Portland, Oregon. When McMahon told his pals he was riding an old, cheap, underpowered motorcycle across the country, it sounded like such a bad idea that they had to go along.

The Knoxville 555ers made it to Portland, although it took them nearly a month and some of them had to be fetched in trucks on the last day. Portland's Sang-Froid Riding Club—no strangers to riding and racing cheap old bikes—threw them a party on arrival and immediately started planning to make the trip in reverse.

"We've spent years doing stupid stuff as fast as possible," said SFRC member Zac Christensen. "But the Knoxville



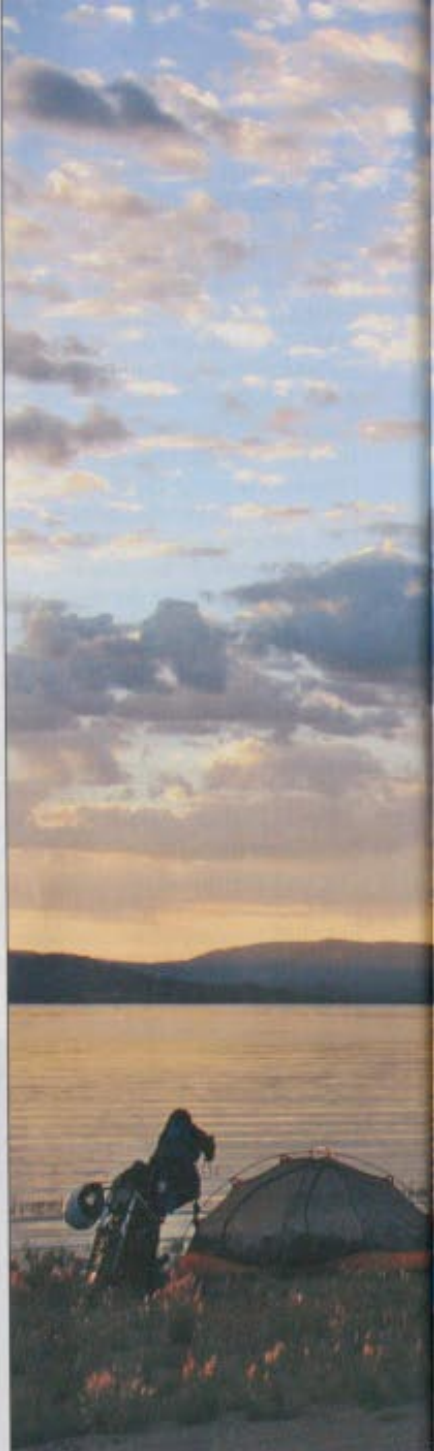
PHOTO BY NATHAN DICLAUDIO

guys turned that whole concept upside down by showing us that stupid stuff can be done much, much slower and be equally as fun."

The root of "freedom" is "free." And while our return Portland-Knoxville 555 wasn't free, there aren't many cheaper ways to ride from Portland to Knoxville than how the 12 of us did it this past summer.

I went along as the "embedded journalist," riding a 1971 Honda SL175 Twin purchased from Christensen for \$450. Christensen, meanwhile, rode the most ludicrous machine on the trip: a 1973 Honda CB350F chopper with a fuel tank that featured a conspicuously mannish lady's silhouette reclining on a dreamscape.

Rounding out the dirty dozen were Patrick Leyschock (1970 Yamaha DT1), Thor Drake and Eric "Chopper" Boyd (on Yamaha RD350s), Travis Gardner (RD400), Jon Munns



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PHOTO BY NATHAN DOLLAUDIO



PHOTO BY ZAC CHRISTENSEN

28 miles to Austin Junction, where Shinn diagnosed an electrical problem. He found a fried connector, scraped off the blackened goo, reconnected it and electrical-taped the whole mess together. This cured the SL for about 30 minutes. A few towns later, Shinn found that one of my floats was now taking on fuel. We decided to fix it later; the faster guys were far ahead and waiting for us. When we finally reached them,

they'd been sitting in a truck-stop parking lot for three hours. We headed for a bar in Nampa, Idaho, to recharge.

This stop was in some respects the defining moment of the 555. We had arrangements to camp at the home of Mike Watanabe of the Idaho Vintage Motorcycle Club. We set up camp in Watanabe's back yard, invaded his well-equipped garage and a full-scale wrench party began. Shinn burned the extra fluid out of my leaky float and soldered it. He's a handy guy to know. Meanwhile, Kenyon, who had started the ride on a '79 XL500 in clear violation of the rules, lost his cheater bike on the first day of the ride thanks to a piston seizure. The reasonable thing to do when your bike implodes on Day One of a two-week motorcycle trip is to give up and go home. Instead, Kenyon doubled up with Nicholson on the CB500 and hoped we'd come across a 555-ready bike some-

where along the way. So, in Camp Nampa, everyone who wasn't wrenching was using their phones to search craigslist for a replacement bike.

Finally, garage-host Watanabe offered, "You know, I do have this old CL200 in the barn, if you want to look at that." We go look. It was under some boards, covered in barn dust. The chain was wadded up and rusty. It was missing carbs, among several other things. The boys wheeled it into the garage and dusted it off. It was turquoise, and the seat had a zipper down the middle, lengthwise, so the bike was dubbed "Sharky." They pillaged carbs off another bike that Watanabe has been fixing up for someone else, soaked the rust off the chain, plugged the leaky petcock, did some voodoo magic, burned a little sage, turned around three times counterclockwise and fired it up. It ran perfectly the rest of the trip, even if all the others didn't...

In fact, bikes broke down daily, and there were no chase trucks. This ride, in other words, wasn't so much about riding. It was about solving problems and making things work, meeting strangers and seeing the country from an angle and at a pace none of us had experienced before.

The eventful string of breakdowns and other challenges, of course, were not unexpected. That's why greasy-philosopher Leyshock's pre-departure speech quoted from book five of Homer's "Odyssey": *I wish you well, however you do it, but if you only knew in your heart how many hardships you were fated to undergo before getting back to your own country...*

Munns, meanwhile, said repeatedly that this was the best motorcycle trip he'd ever taken. "I was looking forward to the breakdowns, the not knowing where you'd end up," said Munns, who works for Fox Racing. "My whole life is planning, directing."

Our next garage oasis came a few days later in Vernal, Utah. I coasted in on one cylinder, but others were in worse shape. Munns lay on the floor of the garage, adjusting his bike with a, uh, hatchet. "The good thing about this," he says of his lat-

