

Riding to the Montana Plains

July 2009 – Randy Washburne

In July, 2009 I made a circuitous 2,500-mile loop to central Montana from the Olympic Peninsula on my XT-250 dualsport (equally at home on highways or off pavement) motorcycle. Most of it was on highways, mainly secondary ones, but with some major off-pavement excursions that included sections that were barely roads at all.

Shown below is me in full riding garb at left and during a break at right. I wear a motocross-style helmet with goggles, and a mesh riding suit that ventilates well in hot weather and is easy to adjust by wearing more under it or rain gear over it if wet or a bit cold. I always wear the reflective vest too. It gets smirks from other riders, attesting to either my sissyness or lack of skill, or both. I don't care. So far I've never had any trouble with cars that apparently didn't see me. I'll probably never know if it really made the difference, but I'll keep wearing it.

My little bike has to carry camping gear and clothes, tools, extra gas, and me. It does it surprisingly well. Actually it's the same stuff I used to carry for bicycle touring either in panniers or on my one-wheel BOB trailer, with the addition of more tools and the gas. Most of my equipment is recycled bicycle gear. That draws a lot of biker smirks too.

At the rear is a Kolpin 1.25 gallon gas tank adding another 80 miles of range in addition to the 2.5 gallons in the tank. Since I get 65-70 mpg, my best range is about 250 miles, but where possible I top off about every 100 miles with about a gallon and a half. Most of the time the extra tank stays empty unless there appears to be need for it.

Ahead of that is a cheap plastic toolbox bolted to my rear rack, holding things that I want to get at during the day. Below on the right is one of my old bike panniers mounted on a plywood frame, holding stove fuel, rain gear and clothes I may put on or take off during the day. On the other side is a completely different shaped pannier, making my bike look quite lopsided from the rear as other views below will show (and likely more grounds for contempt from other riders.) This is an elongated bag on a special plywood frame I made to hold my tent, spare inner tube, and a variety of tools, chain lube, etc. It gets the weight down low and cuts the wind profile.

Just behind me on the seat is the yellow waterproof bag from my old BOB trailer. It holds my clothing and personal items duffel, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, kitchen kit, and sandals. It makes a great back support.

At front are some old saddlebag-style bicycle panniers draped over the gas tank and secured under it. These hold my cook set on the left and a water hydration bag and tube on the right. The latter is necessary in order to drink without removing my helmet. On top of the tank is an old bicycle rear rack bag holding my GPS, cellphone, binoculars and other valuable items, which I take with me when I go into a store, etc.



July 8. Port Angeles to central Washington. A long but uneventful day, via the Kingston-Edmonds ferry, Highway 2 over Stevens Pass to Wenatchee, and then minor highways to Quincy, Moses Lake, and Othello. Continued south to Scootene Lake Reservoir campground, a Bureau of Reclamation site which is one of the best kept secrets around since it doesn't appear in the Benchmark Washington Atlas and isn't easy to find on the web either. Being Federal it also gave me half-price camping with my Golden Age pass.

On this trip I was carrying a SPOT Messenger, which works via GPS and satellite phone system to send either an "I'm OK" message or a call for help. The internal GPS sends your exact position. More about the SPOT can be found at www.findmespot.com. Each evening I sent an OK message, which sent Gunvor and others on my distribution list an email with a link showing my location via Google Maps. Here's the

one for Scootene campground. When you switch to the Satellite button and zoom in, the green arrow even shows which campsite I was in: <http://maps.google.com/maps?f=q&hl=en&geocode=&q=46.7069,-119.0244&ll=46.7069,-119.0244&ie=UTF8&z=12&om=1>

July 9. Continued southeast to Clarkston, Washington where I joined the Snake River. My plan was now to follow the Snake River up to the confluence with the Grande Ronde River. This road soon became gravel but was well used. Even though it was Thursday, there were plenty of partiers on boats or sunbathing on every sandbar along the road. Several big jetboats went by carrying tourists upstream to the Hells Canyon area.

At the Grande Ronde the Snake enters Hells Canyon and there is no more road upstream. Instead I went up the Grande Ronde a few miles and crossed on this cement bridge. After that the road became much smaller and rougher, passing several ranches as it climbed. I was heading up into the traditional Nez Perce summer hunting grounds, following Joseph Creek, named for Chief Joseph. I could see why this had been so dear to them.

After the last ranch the road became very narrow and rocky, such that I did a lot of riding standing on the footpegs for better stability and a better viewpoint for finding a good line to follow through the rocks. This was now a Forest Service road, but there were no markers to be seen yet. Most disconcerting, my GPS showed the road going into a parallel drainage than I was in. Was this some side dead-end I was following? I hadn't seen any alternative branches. It would be a very long way to backtrack and being late in the day, I just continued on up, mostly standing up and in second gear, and soon crossed into Oregon.

After about ten miles and climbing several thousand feet, the road leveled out a bit and began to come out on top of the mesas at about 5000 feet. To my relief, the GPS showed me back on the Forest Service road again. This was really lovely country now, with extensive grassy meadows interspersed with stands of conifers. Slopes dropped off steeply to Joseph Creek to the west and the Imnaha River valley to the east. I passed several groups of cattle grazing.

I came to a 4WD pickup truck with a man changing a tire, watched by four very tired-looking Border Collies. I stopped to see if he needed any help. This was Mark, a local cow herder who lives near Enterprise, Oregon. I won't call him a cowboy, since in addition to using horses, he works the cattle primarily from the pickup assisted by his dogs. He grazes about 80 cows on the high mesas under a Forest Service grazing permit. He and his wife sell the beef via the internet exclusively to individuals in the Puget Sound area, where they deliver it in the Fall. These are strictly grass fed and hormone-free. For more about them, their business, and their remote lifestyle, see www.mountain-beef.com.

Mark's first question was if I had read about this route in some Enduro (off-road motorcycle) magazine. Apparently there were about a thousand bikes that came up that way last summer based on some write-up. I guess he was concerned about whether this was going to be another such year, but I assured him I'd just found it on a map. He said I was the only one he'd seen carrying camping gear.

I was heading for a Forest Service campground farther down the ridge. Mark wasn't sure there would be water there, and invited me to follow him back to his camp, which had a spring with the best water around. We descended a mile or so on a side road and came to his small trailer where he stays while tending the cows up there. Several more herding dogs were chained up here too. He and all the dogs were going to head back to Enterprise tonight, primarily to get the tire fixed, and invited me to stay in the trailer, but I'm as happy in my tent and wanted to press on, so I collected a gallon or so in my water bag, thanked him, and continued.





There were some beautiful views continuing down the ridge. The one above is looking east. The first valley is the lower Imnaha River. Hell's Canyon of the Snake is beyond the ridge, with Idaho's mountains in the distance, including the Seven Devils. It's apparent that these slopes would be difficult horseback herding, but that's what Mark does.

After about another ten miles beyond Mark's camp I came to Buckhorn campground. It was apparently mostly used during hunting season and hardly at all yet this year. The water source was a plastic tube down in a boggy meadow that was not flowing. It probably came from a clogged up spring box. Luckily I didn't need water.

July 10. Continued south on gravel toward the towns of Enterprise and Joseph. The road got wider and straighter, but deep loose gravel often made for slow riding – the part shown is some of the best. It was about thirty miles until I hit pavement again.



I pulled into Joseph in time for a late breakfast. This used to be a small ranch town, but it has been discovered by all sorts of crafts people (especially fiber arts), and hoards of tourists. Including motorcycles. While I sat having breakfast, a dozen high-end quiet big bikes (BMW's and Hondas) came parading by, ridden primarily by late-middle-age men (like me, in age at least). Soon, here they came cruising back again, and followed each other into a parking lot. One of them documented it all with a video camera while riding. (Somebody gets inflicted with seriously extensive entertainment when he gets home!) Several came strolling up the street, stopping to shake their heads at my bike.

This caused me some reflection while forking up my hash browns. A friend once observed that I lacked the Flocking Gene. That's the one that would make me want to ride motorcycles in big groups, and to avoid equipment that might stand out from anybody else's. But given that deficiency, both my solo-ness and rag-tag ugly-duckling bike gear cause most motorcyclists keep

their distance at gas stations, etc. I think I'm invisible to most Harley riders.

I continued on toward the Imnaha valley and the paved Forest Service road down to the Snake above Hell's Canyon – a beautiful ride through high alpine country before descending thousands of feet and into the high nineties at the river. Then on down along the reservoir cross into Idaho at Brownlee Dam.

It was now seriously hot. I manage to find a pull-off that didn't have too many people parked or camped there, and went back into the bushes to change into my swim trunks. The river was a pleasant temperature, but one look at the color of it, and consideration of the hundreds of upstream miles along which various sorts of agricultural and other pollutants are dumped into it before its pristine headwaters at Jackson Hole, made me resolve to avoid putting my head in it.

But others did. A ski boat went by pulling a water skier who demonstrated that the sport has attained new heights since I last tried it forty years ago. He had some sort of sub-surface pogo stick that allowed him to bound upward five feet or so. But soon he fell in, and hope he kept his mouth closed.

Drying off (which took two seconds), I repacked and continued into the Idaho mountains to a campground for the night.

July 11. Packed up and rode into Cambridge for breakfast. After sitting down in the restaurant, I noticed an older woman a few tables away looking at me and speaking furtively to her husband, with a nasty grin that said "take a look at the weirdo over there". He eased around for a peek, discovered that I was looking right at them, and nearly dislocated his neck. What, me - weird? I'm just a little old guy in dusty motorcycle pants held up by red Loggers World suspenders over a scruffy brown tee shirt and wearing hot-pink earplugs on a yellow cord looped around my neck like a little bow tie. I thought, I should give them a big friendly toothy wave, go over there and enquire how their breakfast was, and loudly proclaim that thanks, it was real nice talking to you too. That would have caused a stir, and maybe even some juicy gossip for Cambridge about how that catty Mabel got her comeuppance from some ol' biker in front of everybody. Or maybe I'd get tarred and feathered. But as always, I took the safer if less satisfying course, kept my head down, ate my breakfast, and left quietly.

Getting east-west in central Idaho is not easy, due to several substantial north-south ranges. So I had to turn south on busy US 95 almost all the way to Boise, before turning east again at Payette.

Being in Idaho, the land of individual freedom laws, most people forego motorcycle helmets, as in Montana too. Almost all of the Harley riders do – not even those little lids that look and function like yarmulkes. While stopped at a park, a pregnant woman rode in on a Harley wearing jeans and a short-sleeve top. The only concession for future baby's well-being was fingerless riding gloves.

I turned north again along the Payette River, heading up the winding highway toward Stanley. This being Saturday, rafts and kayaks were thick on the river, and outfitter buses towing piles of rafts filled the road. But the farther up the river I went and the farther from Boise, the more the crowds diminished. After crossing over the 7000-foot Banner Summit, I made it into Stanley by early evening, stopped for some provisions, and was lucky to acquire one of the last sites in a nearby Forest Service campground.

July 12. I woke up to ominous thunderheads advancing from the west. I packed up and headed east and downhill toward Challis as fast as I could. I stayed dry that far, but as I turned north toward Salmon the advancing front of black clouds predicted that would change. I made it about thirty miles, seeing sheets of rain across the canyons in my mirrors, until it got me. So I pulled under a big Ponderosa and got out my poncho, which I put on with some difficulty because of the sudden wind. But after I got it on and stood next to my bike spreading the poncho over my gear, everything stayed reasonably dry and the rain soon moved on.

I continued dry down to the town of Salmon, gassed up again, and then turned south into a different valley. My next destination was Lemhi Pass, the continental divide and major landmark for the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1805. They thought this would be an easy way to get goods over the mountains from the headwaters of the Missouri and on down to the Pacific. Such hopes were soon dashed by the terrain that challenged them before arriving at the Snake River at present day Lewiston, Idaho. But they did declare a little spring here to be the headwaters of the Missouri. There seems no basis for that compared to countless other tributaries, but this one originates so close to the divide that it might as well have flowed west to the Pacific at Astoria, Oregon rather than east to the Gulf of Mexico at New Orleans.



Lemhi Pass, looking west



The Source of the Missouri River?

The climb up to Lemhi Pass was a bit steep and dusty, and not recommended for trailers or RV's for good reason. The Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service have built nice interpretive facilities at the pass and at the nearby Sacagawea Memorial Park, which includes the Missouri spring. The road down the Montana side was much better, still unpaved, but good enough that tour buses were only advised to have a pilot car.

I headed down into Montana as the thunderheads began to mount up again, out of the mountains and into a broad, treeless valley. Soon the wind picked up and it was apparent I'd lost the race with the rain again. There was a group of harvester tractors parked along the highway, so I pulled into their lee and got out the poncho just as the rain started to fall in heavy sheets. As before, it was over in a few minutes, and I continued on.

more thunderstorms were likely, I was delighted to see that there were three sided picnic shelters available, along with a water pump. Best of all, it was free! There were only two motor homes in the campground, so I had my pick and parked the motorcycle under the front. I slid the picnic table to one side and had room to put up the tent under cover, which would be useful since there were mosquitos and biting flies. Soon another storm came through and I was glad to sit it out at my table protected from the wind and rain.

July 13. No thunderstorms in the morning at least. It was only a mile to Interstate 15, where I turned north toward the town of Dillon. For part of the way I road frontage roads, but finally had to get onto the freeway. Traffic was very light so it was easy, going along at fifty while the occasional cars and trucks zipped by in the left lane. Soon I exited into Dillon and took Montana 41 north to Twin Bridges. There I turned east again, passing through Sheridan and climbing toward the old mining towns of Nevada and Virginia City.





Traffic on the highway was fairly heavy. Cars coming the other way began to blink their lights at us, and soon I encountered a pickup moving slowly, with the driver waving a red flag out of the window. It was a uniquely Montanan traffic jam – cows being herded down the highway, completely blocking it. Periodically the cowboys would create a lane for one or two cars to squeeze through the complaining cattle.



Derelict rail cars at Nevada City

Once again the thunderheads advanced, coming from my right, and it was a race to see if I could get by the front of it without getting too wet. At one point hailstones were bouncing off my windscreen and helmet, but I managed to avoid the heavy rain. Soon I came into Nevada City, where I stopped for coffee and a cinnamon roll and then a look at the collection of old rail cars there. Then on a few miles to the major tourist magnet of Virginia City, but plowed on through since cars and motorcycles occupied all of the parking. Now the road climbed seriously toward a 7000-foot pass. I passed a slow moving pickup pulling a big fifth-wheel trailer. Apparently the elevation and effort was too much for my engine and it began to miss. It was ok when I backed off the throttle, and it never happened again.

The highway dropped down into Ennis, and I went north and west toward Bozeman, once again chased by storms which failed to catch me this time. Going down the Gallatin River, I stopped at a launching ramp to use the restroom and saw a strange sight. Four Moslem Arab women in headscarves, robes, and gold sandals were standing around while rafts were being assembled. What were they doing here? Their garb didn't seem suitable for river rafting, especially with rain probable. Perhaps they lived in Bozeman.

Bozeman was the largest city I'd encountered since Seattle, and the traffic was intense. I was glad to get across Interstate 90 and head up Highway 86 into the Bridger Range. It was very pretty country, in and out of the sun as the thunderheads continued to threaten. I came to a pass and Battle Ridge Campground, which appeared to be my only opportunity to camp for some distance ahead. It was built on a side hill and I had to look hard to find a level tent site. The pit toilets were full of spider webs, and thousands of squishy caterpillars dropped out of the pines onto everything.

I erected the tent just in time for the rain to commence again. This time it continued all night, to the extent that I decided to forego dinner and eat snacks in the tent. My old tent was showing its age, and things were soon soggy. During the night the ground became so saturated that my motorcycle's side stand gradually sank into the ground until it fell over. I'm glad I didn't hear it happen so that I didn't have to deal with picking it up in the rain and dark. Everything was fine, if muddy, and only a little gas leaked out of the tank.

July 14. The rain stopped somewhat in the morning, though I was in the clouds at the pass. After righting the bike I packed up quickly and descended into the next valley to look for breakfast, wearing my rain gear and just about all my clothes. I pulled into the hamlet of Wilsall, and headed for a building with several cars parked outside, a good sign. Perhaps due to all the rain overnight, a man in a county vehicle was filling potholes and driving over them again and again to smooth them out. I dodged past him and went into what was billed as a deli, but turned out to be this little town's epicenter.

It was a cavernous place, filled with tables and booths that were mostly occupied. At a big table eight men (more baseball caps than Stetsons) were playing a noisy, friendly game involving dice (dominoes?), to the extent that they didn't notice the entry of a stranger like myself. At a booth four men about my age gave me a pleasant but wary nod as I slid into the next booth. The very friendly waitress promptly brought me a good and very reasonably priced breakfast. While I ate I imagined this place in winter, steamy and loud, while outside the wind chill hovers at 50 below and snow drifts build among the parked pickups. Pictures on the wall showed men and women on horses, and a row of men in camo sitting on the successors to the saddle horse - rancher-style quads. At the counter two eighteen-somethings, obviously brothers, were digging into their breakfasts. A middle-age man with a long biker-style ponytail came up between them and gave their shoulders an affectionate shake while they sheepishly grinned at their plates. Behind me the game continued. Thump. Whap! "There ya go!"

After this pleasant interlude, I went back out to overcast skies and headed north, still in rain gear. That was a good decision, as it poured most of the way to White Sulphur Springs. From there I climbed into the Little Belt Mountains and over Kings Hill Pass at 7393 feet. There is nothing small about the Little Belts. That night there was a TV report about a lost hiker rescued by Air Force helicopter in the Little Belt backcountry. I wish the weather had been more conducive to photography, as the cliffs in the canyon descending the north side of the pass were quite beautiful.

My next objective on this trip was a bit unusual. There are about 200 missile silos scattered in remote locations over hundreds of square miles east of Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls. These are a legacy of the Cold War, dispersed under the premise that they'll never get them all, at least not before we've launched enough of ours to pulverize the Soviet Union. Some of these Minuteman III sites had been deactivated, others not. I had seen stories on the web about people sneaking into defunct ones (though perhaps in North Dakota or Wyoming), and descending into dark dank corridors and rooms far below. The new Benchmark Montana atlas showed the location of all of them, so I just wanted to see one.

I stopped in the Forest Service Ranger Station in Neihart, mainly because I had planned to cut east across the Little Belts on unpaved roads, passing several of the most remote silo sites up there. I was advised that road would be very muddy now. Instead they told me about a silo just a few miles down the highway. I asked a few questions about how defunct these silos were, and no one seemed too sure. Anyone is welcome to drive right up to the fence. One woman joked, "Just hop over the fence, they won't mind!" That brought a good laugh.

Shown below is silo Alpha Six. The fence enclosed about a couple of acres, which I did indeed drive right up to, but the sign suggested that going further would be unwise. "Use of deadly force authorized." I walked up to the back of the fenced area and took a picture of the silo itself, with its sliding lid, which extends ninety feet below. There was a white obelisk thing which must be an antenna, and that's about it. Somebody's home was about two hundred yards away. I wondered what it would be like to live next to such a thing, having a ringside seat to Doomsday from your front deck. Otherwise it must have been good for the local economy. Or a gigantic rat hole down which unimaginable quantities of taxpayers' money disappeared, all for something no sane person could want to use.

A friend later suggested I should have tossed some rocks over the back fence to see the effect, perhaps clanging a big one off the missile's lid. Klaxons blaring? Black-clad troopers materializing from the forest while the sky fills with the thunder of helicopters? A visit to Guantanamo, sure to be less idyllic than my last one in 1950? As will be demonstrated, I may lack the Prudence gene, but I'm also aware of the Darwin Awards.



I passed at least four more silos as I skirted around the north end of the Little Belts, through open grassland and turned east on US 87 toward Stanford. This would be my only accommodation opportunity, so I checked into an extremely reasonable and totally adequate little motel room. Did some laundry and hung it, along with my still wet tent, on the clothes line out back. Soon the thunderstorms caught up though, and there were several heavy deluges during the evening. Made do on dinner improvising with the microwave while the rain poured outside.

July 15. Stanford was my access point to the plains west of the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument, which had been the focus of my route to central Montana. So now I

headed north on Montana 80 across open, rolling grassland. A major landmark was Square Butte Natural Area, an increasingly interesting height of land as I approached. Through the binoculars I could see that there were huge fins of rock along the sides with forests in between, and layers of white rock toward the top, which was also thickly forested. It looked like a fabulous place to explore. But I couldn't find any roads that approached it, in spite of trying one that dead-ended in a ranch-stead. I resolved to make this a major agenda in a return trip to this area.

Passing Square Butte, I came to the settlement of Geraldine, where I was to leave the pavement. From this point onward I would be depending on my GPS to guide me along gravel roads towards Hole-In-The-Wall, where a road was shown as descending to the Missouri.



I had about thirty miles to go, during which I didn't pass a single vehicle. The roads were straight and heavily graveled. In some stretches the gravel had been pushed aside by tires and I was able to go as fast as 40. But in others it was thicker, making the front tire wander so that I wasn't comfortable over 25 or so, and for some distance I stood up for more stability.

The GPS roads, taken from Garmin's Topo 100K, were mostly accurate, and showed me when to turn, although the road names had little to do with the posted signs. As I got closer to the river, the roads were not quite as shown by the GPS, but I managed to guess which way to turn. But after the final turn the road seemed to end in a ranch-stead. I thought I might ask directions there, but it turned out to be abandoned. A grassy track headed off in the right direction so I followed it. Soon it turned into two ruts through the grass, but I kept going. After some twists and turns following fence lines I did indeed come



to the breaks of the Missouri – the point where the plains drop precipitously to the river.

The Missouri Breaks, with the river in the far distance

The change was sudden, with flat grassland falling off to slopes of soft rock and chalky soil. It didn't look like good terrain for holding a road for very long. My two tracks, faithfully following the GPS route, came to the edge and started down abruptly. At the verge I stopped to look at an old boat parked on a trailer. It was a home-built arrangement with a car motor, including radiator, installed near the front. It had been many, many years since it had functioned, and I wondered if it had ever been successfully transported down on the river.



Remounting, it was time to find out what kind of road this was. I expected to find a campground down there, and presumably another, better road back out, because it was certain no one had used this one in several seasons. A cow had started down, but soon changed its mind.

As I started the descent, the road quickly deteriorated and steepened, disappearing around a turn. I stopped. What if the road just slid away to nothing beyond that turn? I recall observing at that moment, that in addition to the Flocking Gene deficiency, I also lack the Prudence Gene, the one that makes people stop while still on level ground and walk down to see what's ahead. Or to perhaps unload their camping gear at the top and ride the bare bike to the bottom. But now here I was unable to turn around or even park the bike on the steep, soft grade so that I could reconnoiter. Too late now! Not much choice but to continue down and hope for the best. Luckily, road continued to exist, though steep and deeply eroded, but standing up I was able to ride a line that got me to the bottom, where the road started to level out as I approached the river.



In fact there was a campground down there. But mine was the first terrestrial vehicle to visit it in a long time. It was a boaters' campground, designed to serve floaters on the river. There was fencing around it and a locked gate to keep the likes of me out. That was ok with me. Had it been later in the day and had I not been concerned about what more thunderstorms would do to my access back out of there, I would have carried my gear in and stayed there. It was a pleasant place with two open-sided shelters and a vault toilet. A solar panel powered a pump from the river that irrigated the young poplars planted around the area. Two kayakers stopped in while I was there and told me the BLM serviced these facilities along the river with motorized canoes.

One of the major points of interest about this stretch of the river was that Lewis and Clark had ascended and returned via the Missouri, camping frequently along the way. Later, the river served as the major commercial route for the opening of the inland Pacific Northwest. Keelboats hauled freight upriver as far as Fort Benton, propelled by poles or pulled by ropes from ashore. Later steamboats paddled and winched themselves up the river. This connected with the Mullen Road which started at Fort Benton and went west over the Rockies to Walla Walla in Washington. With the coming of the railroads, all the traffic stopped, and now it is strictly recreational canoes and kayaks drifting downstream.

But I couldn't stay – I was too concerned with getting myself back up that steep road to the plains. I climbed up the gentler lower section to the base of the steep part. I thought that I'd give it a try, and if necessary, unload all the camping gear, get the bike up there, and then make multiple trips uphill with the gear – sure to be hot, exhausting work. But I used my newly found skills at standing on the pegs, leaning forward, and applying the principle of when in doubt, give it more gas. The bike and I bounded upward, managing to find a good line through the eroded ruts, and with considerable elation parked by the old boat again.

I followed most of my route back out, until turning north on a main gravel road heading toward the Vergelle ferry, where I would cross the river, some twenty miles ahead. The road continued with the same gravel surface, and I managed to average 30 most of the way.



About ten miles from Vergelle, I saw a house approaching my route from a side road. Yes, it was definitely moving, accompanied by several trucks. It got to the intersection first, and turned toward Vergelle. Not only was it a two-story house, it also had a large room attached to the left side, which as shown, projected out over the fields at the side of the road. It moved away slowly, emitting a large cloud of dust. Seemed like a good time for me to take a lunch break. After snacking I noticed that the house had stopped moving. Several utility trucks had their cherry-pickers extended next to some power poles, apparently adjusting wires to allow the house to pass. So I went on ahead and found that was indeed what was happening – they were easing wires over the roof as the house crept forward. I asked if it might be possible for me to go on ahead. They conferred, and gradually the house crept toward the left side of the road a little. I was able to duck down and scuttle ahead, under the right side of the house. Then it had to back up again in order to give me a gap to go around a truck parked ahead. In the meanwhile, I asked the guy who was apparently in charge of all this whether they were going down to the ferry. Nah, he said, they were just going to a farm ahead, as if he did this kind of thing every day. Perhaps he used to transport Minuteman missiles around here.



The Vergelle ferry, which is free, was a barge with an engine that was guided by an upstream cable between its landing points. At my side of the river was a white box with instructions to push and hold a toggle switch until an attendant came down to the ferry on the other side, and within a few minutes, the ferry was on its way to get me. The operator was a friendly, stout young woman with feather earrings. I was soon on my way up the other side, and after a stop for snacks and a drink at the historic mercantile building a short distance beyond, I took the good gravel road up to meet US 87, which led me southwest to Fort Benton and Great Falls.

I had an early dinner along the waterfront in Fort Benton, which has a variety of monuments and interpretive displays about its history, and a recreation of a keelboat that was used in a movie about the river. I continued south along 87 to the edge of Great Falls, then west alongside Interstate 15 to Vaughn and on to Montana 200 which would take me southwest toward Missoula. It was a beautiful evening's ride, and I regret not taking some pictures along the way. With plenty of daylight to spare, I climbed over Rogers Pass and back down to a campground just outside of Lincoln. A lot of ground covered today.

July 16. An easy day down the Blackfoot River and into familiar ground at Missoula. After going to look at my old house in the Rattlesnake I went to look up my old friend David at the Forest Service and dropped off most of my gear at his house, before riding off to do errands around town. Very hot. David agreed it didn't get nearly so hot when we both lived there around 1980. Back then temperatures of 100 were very rare, now they are common.

July 17. Did an oil change in David's garage after he went off to work. Then on west along the Clark Fork, after negotiating the heaviest traffic yet – took ten minutes to find a slot to turn right on to Reserve Street! Finally, turned left on to the old Mullen Road route to Frenchtown and only occasional traffic. My idea was to take side roads up the Clark Fork to Saint Regis without using Interstate 90. Except for one stretch above Alberton, it worked, except that some of the roads were circuitous and one turned into a narrow rocky lane along steep canyon sides that was marked “high clearance only”. But I made Saint Regis by early afternoon, gassed up, and turned up the Little St Joe River on a Forest Service road that would take me over the mountains. It was a good road, but once again sometimes troublesome with deep gravel, enough to make me stand up for stretches. After sixteen miles it topped out at the pass and the Idaho state line, where the road became paved again. Then it was easy sailing down the main St Joe River to the first campground. A very nice spot with a tent site right on the verge of the river.



July 18. On down the St Joe for eighty miles of twisting canyons before emerging into wider river valley down toward St. Maries. Lots of dual-sport bikes on the road now, and learned that there was a large camp gathering from the Adventure Riders' internet group ahead. Stopped in for a few minutes, but soon rediscovered the general disdain for solo travelers and little bikes, as well as my preference for flocklessness.



Soon I was back in Washington again, following the GPS track I'd set up to take back roads as far as Moses Lake. Some were paved county roads, some gravel, and a few just tracks separated by grass. Near Rock Lakes I crossed a creek that connected several lakes via miles of very narrow winding channels. It was hot, and I stopped to watch some canoeists getting ready to paddle the creek.

As I stood on the bridge, a big black pickup stopped. A man with shaven head and Fu Manchu mustache got out and carefully lit a Marlboro. His tee shirt sported an eagle holding stars and stripes bunting, with a logo involving Freedom and God. I asked if you could paddle between both lakes on either side. His smile muscles had long since atrophied. Yup. Such and such own all this but they'll let you. They're friends of mine. That's quite a pile you got on that little motorbike. (Not motorcycle.) Yes I said, it's little but I can pick it up by myself. Aww, he said spitting into the creek, I figured out how to pick mine up easy. You just roll it up on the drop bars, then you use the momentum to roll it back up onto the wheels. Right - it's a big Harley with drop bars that make it almost as wide as long. I don't have drop bars I said. Another spit in the creek stood for Yup. Figures.



Going on, I passed this unique shelter for kids to wait for the school bus. Then on to Ephrata where I stayed in a city park. And on July 19, back over Stevens Pass and home.