

Breakdown on the Pony Express Highway

Doug Raymond 6/20/2010, rev 6/25

I had ridden out from Philadelphia to the Rocky Mountain National Park to enjoy a reunion with old friends.



1 Arrival in Estes Park, CO



2 Doug in Rocky Mt Natl Park

As I left Estes Park for the return ride I was looking on the map for some alternative to the mind-numbing Interstates, I-80 and I-70. There, directly between them was US Route 36. Though it looked like a secondary road, it made a straight line from Denver to Indianapolis, so I gave it a try.



3 Shortcut around Denver, NOT Route 36

It was a great choice. The road was narrow but it was easy to pass on the straightaways, miles in length. You could see ten miles from the top of any rise, over the endless hay and corn fields and empty range,

surprisingly green due to recent rains. I discovered this road is called the Pony Express Highway in Kansas and Missouri, adding more flavor to the route.

In the evening it was one of those great motorcycle moments. It was hot and clear, the low sun behind me lit up the rolling hills for miles in every direction, and there was not a car, a person, or any building in all that landscape but me and my motorcycle speeding down the bluff. I had 500 miles behind me today, and I was looking to enjoy the remaining 1300 miles ahead.

That's when the engine died. I hate when that happens.

As the bike slowed I jerked the throttle around and found that holding it wide open let the engine sputter enough to keep moving at an ever lower speed. We limped along for 5 miles into the tiny town of Washington, KS, where I coasted to a small parking area at the lone gas station, Conoco 66. The engine died completely and didn't even cough when I cranked it.

As I pulled out my tools and started the drill of diagnosing the problem, a friendly local guy came up to watch, smiling broadly. He knew there was no BMW dealer for many miles, but he said another local guy had a BMW and we should call him. No thanks, I said. But he hailed a lady watching us from a nearby porch and told her to call 'the BMW guy'. Meanwhile, I checked for spark on left cylinder (good), checked for fuel pump buzz at key-on (good), removed the right side fairing and checked fuel disconnect fittings (OK, but troublesome). Finally I pulled a fuel injector out and verified a good strong spritz of gas when I cranked. Hmm, with fuel and spark it ought to run, so this was not going to be simple. The lady yelled back, "Couldn't reach him".

My new friend, who introduced himself as Dale, had watched all this with interest and made some good comments, and also offered to get me any tools I might need. He ambled off and said he would be back in a while to check my progress. I checked my BMW Anon book, but found no entries for Washington, KS.

A while later a classic old Honda Goldwing came riding up and parked next to my bike. A tall lanky man got off. "Dale?", I said. It didn't look like Dale. "Yes", he said, taking his helmet off, "different Dale". This turned out to be 'the BMW guy'. He never got the phone call but just happened to ride by and notice my sick-looking BMW coming apart in the parking lot. It's a small town. Dale #2 also watched quietly as I diagnosed, and laughed sympathetically as I cursed things like those miserable quick-disconnects. He seemed to know a lot, but said little. Eventually he said, "It's getting dark and there's no lighting here. How would you like to do this work in my air-conditioned motorcycle shop, on a bike lift?"

"No, thanks very much, I'll just slug it out here. I don't want to put anyone to any trouble". Only my best friends will forgive me for being so stupid. Dale #2 said "Here's my grandson Michael, he's a certified Honda mechanic, he can help". Michael, about 21, had just driven up in his truck. He started lending a hand too, with some good points on troubleshooting. Then Dale #1 returned, with his girlfriend. My bike problem was getting a lot of good attention.

On a hunch, I removed the small access cover at the right-side cam shaft. Immediately the problem was obvious: the cam sprocket and chain had fallen off the cam shaft! I knew also from the shop manual that missing parts like screw and washer were likely to fall down the chain gallery into the crankcase, in which case you have to remove and split the engine apart to retrieve them. This bike was not going to

get fixed in that parking lot, I thought, as darkness fell. Also I felt considerable chagrin, since I was the one who had mis-tightened that cam screw during a recent repair job.

Dale #2 said, "Now would you like to come to my shop?" I said, "I would be crazy not to accept your very generous offer. Yes, thank you".

While Dale #2 went for a trailer, Michael and I removed the right valve cover. To my amazement, the missing screw and washer were sitting there loose, and the screw thread was only slightly bugged from the slipping sprocket. Now there was a glimmer of hope for the bike. We finished buttoning up the bike parts as Dale #2 rolled in with an enormous trailer, containing some 8 bikes already. He and Michael quickly pushed my bike up the ramp and we were ready to go.



4 Dale and Michael load my bike

Then to my surprise, Dale and Michael motioned me into a different truck, and we drove away leaving the trailer behind. "There's something I want to show you first", said Dale mysteriously. Shortly we arrived at a modern metal barn at the end of a long windy driveway. When he switched on the light, I saw the largest, most dazzling collection of motorcycles I had ever imagined. Dozens of spotless, priceless restored motorcycles of all makes, neatly lined up on a perfect clean floor, each with historical data and photos on the wall behind it. Multiple models each of MV Augusta, Ducati, including a V-4 DesmoduediciRR, BMW, Indian, Velocette, BSA, Matchless, Munch, Honda CBX and others, LaVerda, Moto Guzzi, Bimota, and many Vincents including two Black Shadows and an Egli-Vincent. Each was gleaming in better-than-new factory condition, perfect in every detail. The only sign of disorder was a row of boxes full of rusty unrecognizable junk in the middle of the floor. "That's another Vincent Black Shadow", said Dale, "they all look like that when they get here". It turns out that all the restoration work, including painting, is done by Dale, with help from Michael and another mechanic named Tracy Tice.

Dale turns out to be Dale Keesecker, well known in vintage motorcycle displays around the country, such as Mid-Ohio. I've been to some of these, but I don't know many of the people involved. And I was just barely aware of some of the rare treasures in front of me.

My head was spinning as we left, I hoped I could remember a small part of the gorgeous bikes there. Then Dale revealed that actually he is a fulltime independent farmer. He plants 4000 acres, using the latest no-till method. Much of that crop goes to feed the hogs, of which he has 40,000 at any one time. He declares that the hogs have better nutrition and healthcare than most people. All work is done with maximum efficiency so that his 20-30 employees can manage all the hogs. I heard many fascinating details, and wished that I had all night just to hear about this kind of farming. Dale was modest but obviously sure of himself and proud of using the latest and most environmentally friendly techniques. All the hog waste goes back into fertilizing his own acreage.

Now we returned to the gas station, and Dale drove me and the huge trailer down dirt roads in a different direction, to the large motorcycle shop in the midst of his farm buildings. Michael followed. Then Tracy the mechanic showed up out of nowhere. He had been watching his son in a baseball game when Dale called, and he left as soon as the game ended to come help me. Dale said I was welcome either to sleep in the shop, or he would loan me a pickup truck to drive back to the one motel in town. I was overwhelmed and said I had never heard of such generosity and helpfulness. Dale just smiled and said, "This is Kansas."

We pushed the bike onto the bikelift in the shop. After the 90 degree heat outside, the coolness in there was wonderful. Michael and Tracy cleaned up the threads on the buggered screw while I removed the right valve cover again and secured the loose cam chain and sprocket against falling down into the engine. First we had to check the cam chain for kinks or breaks. After Michael reminded me to loosen the cam chain tensioner, we were able to temporarily install the chain and sprocket, loosely. With the bike in 6th gear, Tracy turned the rear wheel carefully while Michael and I examined each successive link with a bright shop light. The chain was good.

Now it was a question of timing the crankshaft to the cam shaft, which basically means getting exactly the right chain link into the right sprocket tooth. Tracy was a top-notch mechanic and knew the principles but had never worked on BMWs. I had done this timing job myself in the previous year, but the memory was a little fuzzy and I was feeling punchy-tired by now too. A mis-timed cam chain would prevent running and damage the engine. At this point we released young Michael, who also had a big next day planned.

Skip this paragraph unless you like motorcycle mechanics. We carefully set the engine to TDC firing position for the LEFT side, by Tracy turning the back wheel while I watched for the TDC flywheel mark through the little access hole on the right side. We double-checked by removing the LEFT valve cover and verifying clearance at all rocker arms, so the valves were closed. Then we advanced the crankshaft one full turn to the next flywheel TDC mark, so we are now at TDC firing position for the RIGHT side, as desired. Using a big screwdriver, we nudged the slot in the camshaft to the exactly DOWN position, and as expected we now had clearance at all the rocker arms on this side, so the valves were certainly closed. Now correct alignment calls for the arrow stamped on the cam sprocket to point exactly to 9:00, but it was pointing to more like 10:30. So while I held a wire hooked to the slack chain and sprocket to prevent them from falling in, Michael carefully looped each link of the chain forward by one tooth at a time, using a dental pick tool. After 3 'teeth' the alignment looked exact, and I tightened up the sprocket screw with a torque wrench. (Note1: the screw began to yield at 70 ft-lbs so I quit there.

Note2: I had accepted Tracy's strong advice to use blue Loctite on this thread, though the manual does not call for this).

We bolted back on the chain tensioner and other engine parts. Tracy and I looked at each other as I held my breath and pressed the starter. The engine ran like new!!

It was 1:30AM and Tracy expected I would go to a motel, but I was determined to continue the ride. I had a fair amount of cash on hand for emergencies and I presented it to Tracy, hoping it would partially repay his lost post-game family evening at home. He said it was more than enough, but I expect to do some followup here.



5 Tracy and I complete repairs

I zigzagged down the 2 miles of dirt road back to Route 36 in town, and continued the ride with great pleasure, engine running fine.

A few hours later I saw the blue-red lights flashing behind me, and pulled over. A pleasant young officer asked, "In a hurry, are you? I got you at 81 in a 65." I said, "No, just enjoying the ride." He laughed, checked all my papers and handed them back to me. "No ticket?" I asked, and he replied, "Are you crazy? Look, it's 3:30 in the morning and only you and I are on this road. Just slow it down for me, OK?"

Then he was gone. The darkness was so complete that I could hardly find my gloves on the seat. Within a minute the brightest thing around was now the Milky Way sweeping directly overhead and I watched it growing brighter for a while. I think I love Kansas.

I rode home to Ambler PA without further incident. But the realization grew on me during the ride that I was glad that I had this breakdown on the Pony Express Highway.