



**TEAM STRANGE**  
**RETURN TO NIOBRARA**

2004 Return to Niobrara

(or how to get rewarded for being only slightly less lazy than your friends)

### Introduction

The fine folks at Team Strange, who bring you the Minnesota 1000, decided to organize a rally/gathering in Niobrara, NE the last weekend of July. Niobrara is the home of Arlene Liska, who along with her late husband Danny, traveled the world by motorcycle in the 1950's and 60's. Team Strange ran the MN 1000 out of there several years ago (before I was into this craziness), and it was so much fun they decided to go back for a less formal rally.

This spring before the MN1000, I was asked to design the logo for this event, so of course I really wanted to be there to see it in place as well as just to ride and hang out with all the cool people that these things attract. Uh oh - it was the last weekend in July - that's my anniversary weekend! That always happens! Fortunately, Lisa was understanding, and we celebrated the weekend before with a trip to Boston, as well as spending our actual anniversary at the Anoka county fair watching Whiplash the cowboy monkey (don't ask!).

I left early Friday morning, as fellow Team Newbie (do we have a new name yet?) members Ron and Carrie Hanson were delayed by a test Carrie had to take that morning. I took my time getting there, visiting my aunt and uncle in the sprawling metropolis of Odin, MN (pop. 124), and rolling into Niobrara around 4:30 or so. I checked into the motel and went to the Two Rivers Saloon to check in for the rally information.

Our reputation precedes us, because noted Team Strange volunteer John Pedrow came out and asked "where's the rest of your group?" since we're usually seen riding together. I explained they were about two hours behind me, and at that point they rolled in, along with friends Paul Ptak, and Kerry "P" Person. John was confused as to how they could be two hours behind me if they were sitting right there. I'd forgotten about the hour in Odin, and the time at the motel (and that I generally ride slowly if I'm not in a big hurry). They were staying in a room at the saloon, so they just checked in there.

### The Two Rivers

The plan was to have a big dinner that evening followed by a presentation from the aforementioned Arlene Liska on her travels over the years. One of the things that the Two Rivers Saloon had been noted for, was that

they had Fat Tire beer on tap, and it was as good as advertised. Dinner was excellent - the TS crew really knows how to find good food, and Arlene's presentation was really cool, and she had a lot of her artifacts, and two motorcycles on display. I can't imagine riding through the situations they did, and living to tell about it!

We then went back to the bar. One of the events for the weekend was the poker run. Unlike real poker runs, this one just involved getting stamps or receipts from local businesses whenever you purchased something. Get five stamps, and you could turn in your card to draw tickets. The highest total wins, and you could fill as many cards as you wanted. We quickly learned that you could get a stamp for every single beer you purchased at the bar, so it only gave us more incentive to drink more, as well as to buy rounds (hey, let me buy you a beer! - and steal your stamp!). We put down an amount of beer that would make the whole state of Wisconsin jealous (I filled out two poker cards that night alone). Everyone was telling all kinds of great stories of other rides, and other experiences, and just having a good time. I don't think the bar was prepared though, because we drank them out of Fat Tire by about 11:00. Ron mentioned that we should get up and do the observation ride the next morning at six, so we could be back for the softball game at noon (another big event that was planned). He wanted to be in bed by midnight.

Now if you know us, there are a lot of parties held between the Hanson house and the Berg house (we live next door to each other). Also if you know us, you know that I'm nearly always one of the last people still up and drinking at these parties - often until 3-4 am if there's still people around. Around 11:30, Ron disappeared, and I assumed he went to bed, which would make sense. P, Paul and Carrie were still sitting in the bar at the time, and around midnight, I decided to wander back to the motel, since it was going to be an early morning, so I said I'd see them at six for the check in for the ride. P then called me a girlie-man for going to bed early! Ouch - there's an ego shot! - but I was tired and wanted to make it over in the morning.

I'm not much of a morning person...

I packed up my stuff for the next day, took a shower, and went to bed around 12:30. I woke up at about 5:20, clutching my alarm clock just about ready to throw it through a window. Now we're talking about a person who can't even get up on time to make it to work by 8, and here I am up before sunrise. This ride better be fun! I rode over to the Saloon around six (with John Pedrow following me in a truck to get there to check people in). There were only 3-4 people there at the time, including Team Strange founder Eddie James (who like Mr. Burns to Homer never remembers my name), who was checking people in with Pedrow, Steffan Fay, who I figured would be going for a long ride, and two other guys.

They asked again "where's the rest of your group?" I said "they'll be out in a minute."

Twenty minutes later, no sign of them, and I didn't see a light in their room. Hmm. I went and lightly knocked on the door for a few minutes. No sign of life there. That's unlike them. Finally Paul came to the door. I said "You guys aren't riding this morning?" Paul said that they had closed down the bar the night before and that everyone was too hungover to ride. This was a definite first, me not being the one to close the party down, and actually being the one who wanted to get up early to ride!

He went back to bed, and I had to make a decision. I could either go back to bed (tempting) or go for a ride. I decided to ride, since I was up already. I chose to do the 14 hour ride (not really intending on riding for 14 hours, or anything close to it). I was in expert class for this ride, since I had my extra fuel tank attached, so I sat down on the curb to look at my route sheets. Hmm, being at the softball game from 12-2 was a HUGE bonus. That means I have to find somewhere to go between 7 and 12 so I could be back.

Ride - part one.

I really wanted to pick up the two bonuses in Lincoln, NE, mainly because one of them was the Kawasaki Factory where my bike was built. I thought it'd be cool to have a picture of the bike in front of its birthplace. Unfortunately, that was too far to go and get back in time for the game. I picked two places to go - Bow Valley, which was about 30 miles away, and Monterey, which was about 75 miles away. No problem there, or so I thought... On my way to Bow Valley, I had a first as a rider - I hit a bird. The thing smacked the top of my helmet at about 70 mph - ouch - that was like ringing a bell. No sign of the poor bird - it must have just exploded on impact. Not too much of a mess either. I got to Bow Valley and filled in the info at the church (a bunch of Latin stuff), and it was on to Monterey.

Monterey wasn't on my GPS (which is never a good sign) but it was on my map, so I routed to the nearest large town, West Point and followed the map from there. I reached the road...NUTS - it's gravel. I hate riding on gravel (see the 2003 Buffalo Run ride report for more info on this) Since I went that far, I may as well ride down to the bonus, about a mile away. It was another church, (the name was the bonus - St. Bonifacius). The road wasn't that bad, and I made it out unscathed. I had lots of time to make it back to Niobrara at this point - at least an hour to spare, so I wasn't riding too fast, just enjoying the back roads.

Around 10 am, I came to Norfolk, which is a larger town. I didn't think anything of it until I saw a sign "Sonic - 2 miles." Sonic if you don't know, is a drive in restaurant that we don't have here in MN. It's REALLY good, and their breakfast is just awesome! I HAD to stop. It was busy, but I walked up to the box to order. "What can I bring and eat on the bike?" I thought. Pancake on a stick! This is a breakfast sausage prepared like a corn dog, only the batter is pancake batter. I ordered two and waited...and waited...and waited... It took 20 minutes to get my food - which took a big chunk out of my time cushion. I hopped back on the bike and left for Niobrara, enjoying my Sonic food, and thinking how jealous they'll be that I got to eat there while they slept in...I made it back with about 20 minutes to spare, and signed in at the game. By this time it was about 95 degrees out, and miserable.

Play Ball!

A big part of the advance publicity for the rally involved a softball game. It seemed Eddie had decided to challenge the locals to a game, with all kinds of trash talking etc. There were signs all over town "Strange Softball Game - Noon Saturday." They weren't kidding.

The local team ranged in age from about 14 to 80, and we played on a little league field with a

snowfence in the outfield. I started in left field, and the first two hits went over the fence above me. Uh oh. They later changed to rule to allow only two balls per team to go over, after that it was an out, since they couldn't move the fences. The sun was directly overhead, and people were dropping balls all over. I missed two easy fly balls and on what would have been a cool diving catch, the ball squirted out of my glove. Oh well, nobody else was an all star either. I did get a hit, and thankfully Eddie substituted John Coons (the man at the Catsup Bottle) for me so I could go sit in the shade and swill Gatorade with Ron and Carrie, who had shown up. The game was a blast though, featuring water fights with local kids, pitchers throwing water balloons and grapefruit, Arlene Liska as the umpire, and Victor Wanchena taking a pitch to the head with his motorcycle helmet on. Lots of fun, and some locals cooked us some burgers and brats as a fundraiser for a band trip - excellent! Team Strange lost 16-8 but somehow won the second game (I heard there was some cheating...), which we weren't around for. That, and somehow, the local kids mistook me for Tim Conway (should I be insulted?), who had been engaged in a water fight with them, and decided to make me their target!

Off again...

It was 94 in the shade when we were eating, and a lot of people decided not to ride much more, if any. Ron said that P left that morning but they didn't know where he was going, but it wasn't far and that they thought Paul was going for a seriously long ride. I didn't envy them at all in that heat. It was miserable. Ron said they were going for a short ride with Bob "498" Johnson. I signed out a little after 2:00 and decided to pick up two more bonuses on about an 80 mile loop. It must have been over 100 degrees, and it was the only time I've ever ridden any distance without long sleeves or a jacket - just my riding pants, boots and helmet.

I stopped at the second one (a receipt from the town of O'neill) for a Diet Coke, and the locals thought I was nuts (must be the MN plates). A number of them mentioned that I was a bit far from home... The ride down to O'neill was nice, but I took an awful road back. It was some flat, 2-lane county road through a field in 100 degree heat - ugh. Who then should I see coming the other way, but Shannon "Lunatic" Bruns with his wife and daughter in the famous Metallic Waste sidecar rig! He was heading to O'neill and we both later commented that we shouldn't have taken that awful road.

I was done riding for the day, and I stopped to take a shower and then check in around 5:30, 11 hours or so after my start time. I'd done 384 miles, which isn't much in a bonus points rally, but this wasn't a normal rally either.

S-A-T-U-R-D-A-Y night!

I finished up with the check in, and grabbed a beer, and soon after, Ron and Carrie showed up after a ride with Bob "498" Johnson through the countryside. P showed up around the same time, and we sat down to a big dinner of prime rib. It's amazing how good the food is at some of these small town bars. They were still out of Fat Tire, so we had to settle for whatever was left, while the local ten year olds played Playboy concentration at the bar. Hey - it builds memory skills!

Paul still wasn't back, and so we rode out to the campground for the sunset over the river and a small bonfire with the people camping out there as well as some others. There was a fair amount of Jagermeister consumed (mainly by Kevin Kocur) and we're still not sure where all of John Coons' Dos Equis disappeared to (must have been a ghost!). After a few hours, we headed back to town. Paul STILL wasn't back yet, and it was approaching midnight - the cutoff time to sign in for the day.

Sure enough, about 11:45, he rolled into town. Turns out he did 900 miles, visiting Lusk, Wyoming and the Mother Featherlegs monument (Mother Featherlegs was a hooker in the 1800's). That's some serious riding - good job Paul!

We sat around talking until last call, and then headed for bed. We still had to ride home the next day! Wood! (I said wood - heh heh heh heh) The rest of the crew got up early for breakfast and to ride out to Fort Randall Dam. I opted to sleep in and have pizza from the Texaco in town (it is the breakfast of champions...) The others didn't get back until close to noon, when the awards started.

The usual ribbing was done of certain riders by Eddie and Adam, and lots of wood was given out. There were awards for the poker run, observation run, sportsmans, open, GPS, expert and two-up classes. In addition there was Arlene's choice award, given to Greg "meatball" Anderson for his sportsmanship in the softball game, and some friends of the rally awards, given to people who helped with the rally. I got one of these for doing the logo (unless Lucasfilm calls, in which case I know NOTHING about it...).

Paul took second in GPS class for his amazing ride, barely missing first, and I took third in expert class. It's always cool to win things, but I can't brag too much because 2/3 of my points came from hanging around a softball field, and the highlight of my ride was eating at Sonic! Still, it's something to hang on the motorcycle wall in the garage.

It was a long hot ride home but we all agreed that the Return to Niobrara was one of the most fun weekends ever. Everyone in town and all the organizers did a top notch job with this one - it couldn't have been better (okay, 15 degrees cooler would have been nice, but I'll forgive them that!). Thanks to everyone who made this possible - I hope we can do it again as it was a blast!