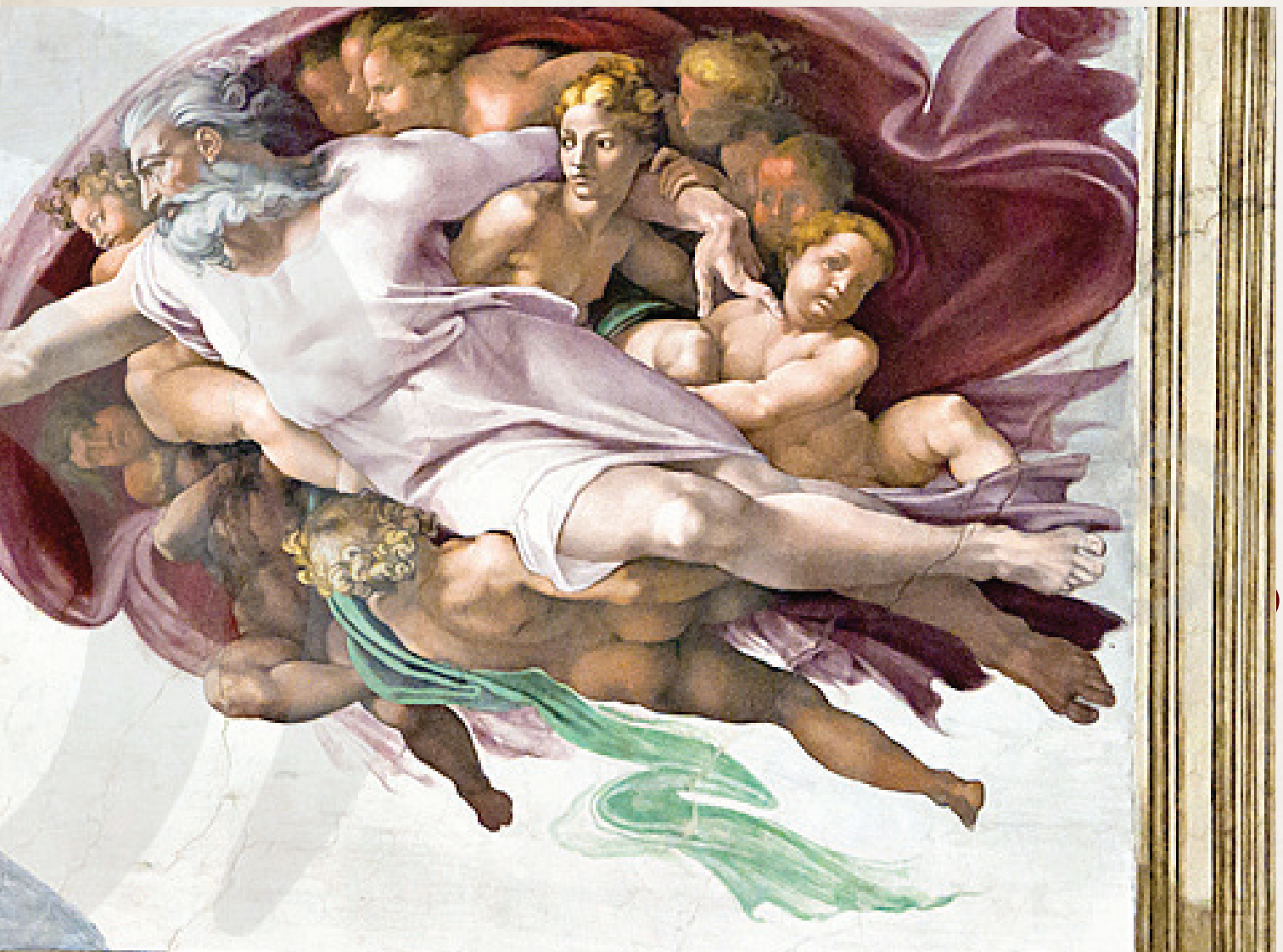


the history of the  
**Iron Butt Rally**

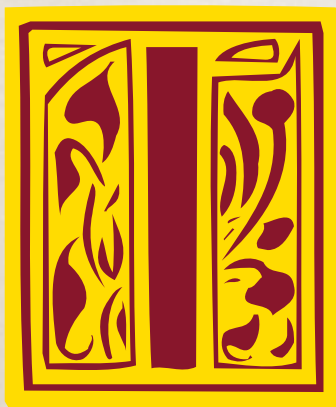
part one

By Bob Higdon



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## In the Beginning...



In the fall of 1997 I wrote an article for *Twistgrip*, a short-lived moto-rag edited by John Gardner, about the exploits of Ardys Kellerman, a grandmotherly lady who had a most ungrandmotherly manner about aiming her motorcycle around the country in an extreme, unladylike fashion. In passing I mentioned Ardys' participation the Iron Butt Rally. Readers

may not understand what the rally is about, Gardner replied. Perhaps a sidebar is in order, explaining to our readers what this Iron Butt Rally is.

So I did what any good reporter does when he doesn't know

what the actual story is: I made it up. As to the origin of the IBR, I wrote: "When the definitive history of human civilization is written, it will be seen that most of the world's great ideas began with a few guys sitting in a bar drinking beer. That's how the Iron Butt Rally started."

This canard — a "canard" is a French word for utter and unrelieved bullshit that has not now, nor has ever had, a single atom of truth in fact or logic associated with it — must have come about as a result of some story that Mike Kneebone told me. That's my excuse, because there was no way in 1997 that I would have known anything otherwise. But if we're in search of some semblance of an historical record, some way to set the record finally straight in an authentic Holy Testament, then the least we can do is dump the excuses and try for just a moment to figure out what really happened.

And what happened was this: At first there was darkness. Then there was Mike Rose. And then all hell broke loose. »



# The Book of Genesis

In the ceiling of the Sistine chapel in Rome you will see a painting of God, a fellow with a white beard, almost touching the outstretched finger of what we presume to be Adam. Scholars who know these things say that God is imparting knowledge to Adam. If you believe in God and Adam and knowledge, this explanation may appeal to you.

I, however, am of the belief that this may actually be a portent of Brock Yates giving the finger to Mike Rose. Yates, who in the early '80s was the editor of *Car and Driver* magazine, was the inspiration for first the Cannonball Rally, memorialized in a series of truly awful movies, and later the One Lap of America. If you're going to give credit for the spiritual cornerstone of the Iron Butt Rally, you're going to have to acknowledge Brock Yates. There's no getting around that.

Back in the day Mike Rose was just a guy. He'll tell you that in those very words even today. "I'm just a guy. I'm not special. But I used to be. I used to be *very* special." And indeed that is so. An ordinary guy was he, but a guy with a big, big idea. Rose was fascinated by the idea of a One Lap of America, but to do it not in a car with a few teammates but to do it solo on a motorcycle. Ah, as Shakespeare might have said, there's the rub. To do it by motorcycle. Alone. A hell of a rub.

If you were to pick a single person in the early 1980s who was uniquely qualified to put together what would amount to a scavenger hunt through the four corners of the continental U.S. by moto power, Mike Rose of Harrington Park, New Jersey would be the man you'd turn to. As a former traveling salesman for Bates Leathers and later the developer of his own line of Roadman boots and products, Rose knew just about everyone worth knowing in the industry, from the managers of bike distributorships to the movers and shakers in manufacturing to the editors and publishers of bike magazines.



**Mike Rose holding a motorcycle.**

And so Rose began to do what traveling salesman do best: He started selling his idea: ride a motorcycle 16 hours a day for ten days, starting and finishing on the east coast, and hit checkpoints at bike shops in Boston, Seattle, San Diego, and Daytona Beach. Ties would be broken by a "complex bonus system," which meant that riders might try to hit a dozen or more places that weren't quite along the straight-line path from checkpoint to checkpoint. Inspired in part by television's popular Iron Man Triathlon, Rose named his dream "The Ironbutt."

*We take the GPS for granted today; in 1984 you carried a cubic foot of paper maps for a circumnavigation of the United States, and God help you if they got wet or wind-blown.*

It would not be an easy sale. Despite the obvious romantic allure of a road trip of almost unimaginable intensity and endurance, no one was really sure if such a ride could actually be pulled off. The base route — 16 hours/day @ 50 mph x 10 days = 8,000 miles — would be beset with obstacles that riders today give small thought to: a national 55 mph speed limit, unreliable motorcycles and tires, and few accessories or clothes designed for long-distance riding. We take the GPS for granted today; in 1984 you carried a cubic foot of paper maps for a circumnavigation of the United States, and God help you if they got wet or wind-blown.

## The Garden of Eden

Rose needed an anchor for the rally, a place to start, finish, and coordinate the infinite details involved in a multi-day road contest. Enter Gary Patterson, the general manager of Montgomeryville Cycle Center, a large Japanese bike dealership on the outskirts of Philadelphia. While Rose might have been in the business of making his dream come true, Patterson was in the business of making money. He sensed a commercial opportunity through the publicity that being the hub of a large-scale motorcycle rally might provide.



**On the left, Montgomeryville Cycle Center GM, Garry Patterson, and Mike Rose.**

In the spring of 1984 Rose and Patterson finalized details and an advertisement promoting the event began appearing in bike magazines and shops around the country in short order.

Note the word "scheduled" in reference to the prize money. The truth was that Rose never had anything close to \$40,000, a point that would cause grave contention on the eve of the event. Contingency funds were available and all riders began the ride with new helmets, tires, and rain suits from the various sponsors.



# "THE IRONBUTT"

World's toughest motorcycle competition



\$40,000  
scheduled prize money



Starting August 28, 1984 at Montgomeryville Cycle Center, in Montgomery, Pennsylvania, the "Ironbutt" leaves on a 10 day, 8,000 mile lap of the U.S.A.

There are major contingency funds supplied by:

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This is a timed endurance event which conforms with all traffic regulations. The only restriction on the motorcycles is that the fuel carrying system must be in stock condition. Time at all checkpoints is determined by the local telephone company. One set of tires is expected to run the full lap - bonus points will be deducted for tire change. A \$500.00 entry fee is required per motorcycle. Professional racers, journalists, and motorcycle factory employees will be competing as amateurs, and will be eligible for prize money. The winner is determined by the most accurate check-in at 5 pre-determined points. Any ties will be broken by a complex bonus system. One rider per motorcycle.



The 1984 IBR riders: Standing (L-R): Aughinbaugh, Swetland, Davis, Thompson, Eastwood, Egloff, Sommers. Kneeling: Mallet, Pease. (Not present: Jim Newbery)



Rose added some wrinkles that would seem odd to today's riders. Fuel was restricted to stock tanks. Official time was determined by the telephone company (just dial TI4-2525, one of the free fee services ever offered by the monopolistic ghouls at AT&T). You were expected to run the entire route on one set of tires. If you failed to do so, you would lose bonus points.

Restricting fuel capacity was one thing, but why not encourage the riders to change tires as necessary? That was easy: Rose and Patterson didn't want the contestants steaming across the country at Mach 3 speeds, potentially causing liability problems wherever they went. Forcing them to finish on one set of tires would slow them down. And it did, at least in some cases. In one other case it just meant that a rider would have to stop and wrap duct tape around his wheels. He would not be the only rider to cross the finish with cords showing.

As the summer wore on, Rose and Patterson finally had their assembled field. If the Iron Butt Association had an art museum to hold its memories, the photograph of nine of the ten riders (Jim Newbery is missing) ready at the start would be its Mona Lisa. There is a belief that the field, composed of three factory riders and a motorcycle journalist, was selected primarily by invitation. Mike Rose has admitted that the selection process was somewhat more relaxed. "If you had \$500 and could breathe, you got an invitation."

Rose's industry contacts had provided factory riders from

**I**t thus came to be that on the morning that the first Iron Butt Rally was scheduled to make history, it was about to be history.

Honda (Jim Newbery), Yamaha (Kim Davis), and BMW (Alan Pease, who was asked to represent the marque by Rob Mitchell, the company's director of communications). David Mallet was a moto scribe from *Cycle Guide* on a Harley Softail.

The other six riders were privateers. George Egloff, a three-time finisher of the Cannonball Run, was on a '75 Suzuki rotary. Chuck Aughinbaugh (Gold Wing) had his own bike shop west of Philadelphia. Ed Thompson (R80G/S), another area local, was a professional racer. Roy Eastwood (BMW R100) of Toronto was perhaps Canada's best known long-distance tourer and a friend of the parents of Peter Hoogeveen, one day to become one of the world's pre-eminent LD riders. George Swetland, a Californian who had never been east of the Rockies, would ride a one-liter Laverda cafe racer he'd never sat on prior to flying into La Guardia the day before the rally started.

And there was Rich Sommers, aka "Pharaoh," aboard a Harley custom with what appeared to be vestigial mufflers, a spectacularly large tank bag, and a plastic milk crate for a top box. Pharaoh's strategy for a podium finish was the essence of simplicity: raw speed. Every rider in the '84 rally has a story of being passed by Pharaoh at an ungodly hour in the morning, flames shooting out of his attenuated pipes. They could hear him gaining on them from a mile away. Science can't substantiate the claim that loud pipes actually save lives, but then science was



A mutiny erupted almost immediately after the riders had gathered at a dump of a motel across the street from the Cycle Center in Montgomeryville the night before the start. They had learned that there was nothing close to \$40,000 of advertised prize money; there was only \$5,000, that being the \$500 that each of the ten riders had kicked in. Most of them didn't understand what contingency money was or how to apply for it. Rose had put one of the bonuses in midtown Manhattan on the way to Boston. Six of the riders were from California or Arizona. They didn't want any part of Boston or Gotham. Promised press and TV coverage? Nothing. It thus came to be that on the morning that the first Iron Butt Rally was scheduled to make history, it was about to be history.

At 9:00 a.m. on Tuesday, August 28, the first Iron Butt Rider was not in the starting gate; he was on strike and locked down with his fellow competitors in a duel with Mike Rose and Gary Patterson that would last until the early afternoon. When the dust settled, Rose had refunded the entry fees, Patterson had kicked in five large ones from the dealership's slush fund to replace the entry fees, and the Boston checkpoint and NYC bonus were eliminated.

## Exodus

They headed west. Alan Pease said that when he looked at the men he'd be facing in that first contest, he knew that each had what it took to finish. He could see it in their eyes. He was right. They all made it to the end. But as it was in the beginning is now and always shall be: They would not finish equally, because those who were more equal than the others had ridden harder, smarter, and luckier.

One of the unlucky ones was Jim Newbery, who'd been stopped by a cop in Wisconsin. The patrolman had been trying to catch the flying Pharaoh but settled on issuing a ticket to Newbery instead. Poor Jim stopped in a diner to settle down, then decided that it had been simply a case of bad luck. He jumped back on his V65 Sabre and headed straight into the radar beam of the same cop who had ticketed him an hour earlier. The officer had moved 20 miles west while Jim was in the restaurant.

Life settled down into the monotonous drone of Iron Butt, which resembles in large part the medical practice of anesthesiology and which has not changed appreciably from the first day of the first rally through the last day of the last one: 99% bore-



dom and 1% panic. Pease caught a wasp between the eyes in northern California. By the time he reached the checkpoint in San Diego his face was so swollen and discolored that a few of his fellow riders dragged him to an emergency room. He kept going. Swetland and Thompson each broke a toe, one on a Botts dot, the other on an armadillo. The heat in west Texas was cruel, Old Testament cruel.

They all made it to the Daytona checkpoint where, of course, a hurricane was aiming for only the second time in the 20th century. Even worse, four riders were still tied for first. Mike Rose's "complex bonus system" to break ties hadn't worked nearly as well as he'd hoped. Two additional bonus locations along the Atlantic coast were added at the last minute, but this too was a case of too little too late: the top riders — Pease, Egloff, Thompson, and Davis — would manage to keep each other in sight on the last leg back to Montgomeryville. They tied for first. The Californian Swetland and the Canadian Eastwood, running together for much of the rally, tied for fifth. Honda's Newbery and privateer Aughinbaugh tied for seventh. The journalist Mallet, hobbled by a paint-shaker Softtail, and the notorious Pharaoh came in 9th and 10th.

The finish clearly improved upon the start. Rose and Patterson upgraded the motel accommodations from grotesque to regal. Jim Newbery and American Honda paid for the banquet. Pharaoh mooned the crowd to the delight of almost no one but to the memory of all. Still, they had finished, each and every rider, in an event where at the start the prospect of even a single finisher had been uncertain.

The 1984 Iron Butt Rally was the triumphal moment in Mike Rose's life. His dream — and the dreams of the ten riders he had sent on their odyssey — had come true. But no good deed goes unpunished. By the spring of 1985 the motorcycle market in the United States had collapsed, taking Rose's business with it. He moved to southern California, where he resides to this day. The administration of the rally would default to Montgomeryville Cycle's Gary Patterson, who also had a dream.

But in 1985 Patterson's dream of an Iron Butt Rally would more accurately have been described as a nightmare. To be continued... —



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