

HISTORY OF THE

IRON BUTT RALLY

*** Part 5 ***

The Imagination Man

By Bob Higdon

E

lsewhere in the magazine, Jerry White writes that as a kid Jan Cutler kept motorcycle magazines under his bed, not wrinkled issues of *Playboy*. Maybe you did too. But here's the difference: if Jerry and I interview you for an article on your part in the evolution of the cult of long-distance motorcycle riding, you won't say something like "Existence is solely a matter of cognition and thus begins the expansion of experience, knowledge, and basic Hegelian progression." Nobody would say something like that. Well, not unless you're Jan Cutler.

He's getting a good bit of ink in this issue not merely because he's an iconic character. No, we have lots of iconic characters in our bizarre game. What Professor Cutler did during a few critical years was to straddle two eras of endurance riding like the Colossus of Reno and in so doing breathe life back into a sport that lay in a vegetative coma. He's that big. And that important.

After Barry Norman had wiped out the field in the 1987 Iron Butt Rally, rallymaster George Egloff made the usual promises of the "Wait 'till next year" variety. He meant it, but it wasn't going to happen. When the rally's principal sponsor, Montgomeryville Cycle Center, sent out invitations for the 1988 running of the IBR to the usual suspects, few accepted. The event was cancelled for lack of interest.

Mike Kneebone picked up the broken spear and tried to move forward, but all he had in his ammunition box were some names of previous IBR entrants that Dick and Faye Hoffman sent him the previous year. It wasn't much. Mike occasionally would send out what he called the Iron Butt Association Newsletter to the faithful few with whom he remained in contact.

PHOTO BY BOB HIGDON

Beyond that, motorcycle rallies were few and very far between, and they all lay west of the Rockies — the Three Flags, the Cal 24, and the Nevada 1100. In terms of pure inventiveness, however, nothing could touch the 1100.

Although, like Jan, I'd spent years competing in all sorts of time-speed-distance sports car events, I knew almost nothing of competitive motorcycle rallies. But in the early spring of 1989 I was developing a scheme to enter a sidecar rig in Brock Yates' One Lap of America. That's how Mike Kneebone and I met: I was looking for a co-driver. I knew that he and Fran Crane had the year before made mincemeat of my 48-state solo record, so I figured he was at least as good a rider as I was. I'll give you a moment to absorb the delusional arrogance of that statement.

Our plan never materialized, but Mike did talk me into entering the Nevada 1100 that year. Jan knew of me through some articles I'd written for the BMW MOA club magazine. I told him I'd be doing an article about his rally for *Rider* magazine. Though Jan was normally pretty careful about who he let into his rides — the Reno BMW dealership that he and Steve Losofsky co-owned was at risk — he couldn't resist scribblers. World-class hot shoe and media star Nick Ienatsch rode in the first 1100. Later he brought in *Cycle World's* John Burns, then and now the finest motorcycle writer in the cosmos. Brian Halton, the editor of San Francisco's *City Bike*, routinely sent one of his stringers to Jan's events. Jan didn't care if I had a learner's permit; he knew that *Rider* had 200,000 readers. Saddle up, Higdon!

I'll be brief: I was so far out of my comfort zone on that endless day that I still twitch when I remember it. There were

some real animals running around Nevada that weekend, people like Kneebone, Ross Copas, Frank Kujawa, Alex Jomarron, Ken Hatton, Dave McQueeney, Ray Roy, Robert Gerberich, and a Canadian kid no one had ever heard of and soon no one would ever forget, Peter Hoogeveen. In my life I'd never seen so much highway disappear behind me so briefly. It was my second thousand-mile day. I hadn't enjoyed it any better than my first one. Still, I had to admit that the bonus location at the whorehouse had been pretty cool.

I started letting Jan have it before I was even off the bike. "You lost one-third of the field last night with that crappy instruction near the dam. I'm guessing some of those poor bastards are still circling Lake Mead."

He didn't blink. "One-third, you say? So that means two-thirds of them did it right, huh?"

"Thirteen hundred and fifty miles in 22 hours, and I'm sitting here talking to an idiot," I mumbled angrily.

Jan laughed. Whiners like me meant nothing to him. He and Losofsky wanted to be sure the event was, in Jan's words, "characterized correctly" so that riders knew this wasn't your usual poker run. "No Mama's Boys, No Snivelers" it warned in red ink on the rally application's front page.

The record will show that Copas won that year in a walk, his protégé Kujawa finished second, and I was eighth, five places ahead of Kneebone. Since Mike and I had ridden 85% of the rally together, and since he was the only one of us who cared about answering bonus questions, I can tell you with some assurance that it is not possible to derive my finishing position in any known scoring or numbering system. Still, as I said, Jan



PHOTO BY BOB HIGDON

A typical Cutler bonus: the Cherry Patch Ranch, south of Beatty, Nevada.



PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

(L-R) The author, indicating his laughable 8th place finish, with the real winners, Ross Copas and his protégé, Frank Kujawa.

really took care of his writers. And I did submit a great story to *Rider*, just as Jan knew I would.

The next year, and the final one for the 1100, he and Steve had so many applications that they made it invitation-only, watched with smiles as the riders circled the Silver State one last time, gave the first place award to Copas again — he was absolutely unbeatable in those days — and then shut the Nevada 1100 down for good. To this day Jan says the last 1100 was the best event in the series, but he's nothing if not a showman, and a good showman knows how to go out on top.

He and his staff had had a busy year. They'd begun with the inaugural White Stag, running out of Death Valley, back in January. Losofsky was always eager to design new winter apparel. I think Jan just wanted to see how long it would take for riders to freeze themselves to their saddles. By the end of 1989 the entire

IRON BUTT RALLY

Reno BMW crew needed a rest. For Jan it would be a brief one.

The following year the BMW MOA's international rally was in Rapid City, South Dakota. Mike was there to pick up a first-place award in the club's mileage contest; I was there because I like riding in that corner of the state; and Jan was there to make a proposition to Mike.

The three of us met at a restaurant on Friday morning, July 27. It was cold, wet, and nasty, but I was excited. I knew what was coming, and I wanted to be a fly on the wall. Jan was going to propose a plan to revive the Iron Butt Rally. This was real history in the making. I knew I'd never forget it. And if you ask Jan and Mike about it now, they'll tell you that for them the entire day is a complete blank. How odd is that?

With the experience Jan and his team had gained with five years of the Nevada 1100 and the two years of White

Stag, he felt that they were ready to produce an Iron Butt Rally that would rise Phoenix-like from the ashes. Starting at Jan's BMW shop in Reno, the riders would circle out and around to the historic checkpoints of yesteryear, eventually returning to Reno. They'd eliminate prize money, one of the things that had irritated Mike in the two rallies he'd run, and fix some other problems. Jan would provide a free entry to John Burns because...well, you know about Jan and

writers. They had a good list of other possible entrants. Jan knew what he was doing, expressed confidence in the outcome, and stuck out his hand. Mike shook it. He'd been waiting for this day for more than two years. They'd wrapped up the main issues inside half an hour.

The rally deserves a story of its own, but we have no room for it in this issue, I'm afraid. Without giving anything away, I can say the 1991 resurrection produced the closest finish in the rally's history, before or since, and gave rise to a myth that would outlive Dracula. And if that weren't enough, we still have ten more years of events organized by the imaginative professor to review, each one more outrageous and politically incorrect than the last. Beyond that there's the emergence of Dale Wilson and the utterly uncontrolled Cognoscente Group. It got so bad that at one point I stopped talking to Jan and Dale altogether and began preparing for the final showdown. It wasn't a happy time. Even today we don't make sudden moves in each other's presence.

But that's for next time. —

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IRON BUTT PROFILE

JAN CUTLER



Jan Cutler is pictured prior to the start of the 1988 Nevada 1100 in the parking lot of what was then the Burro Inn in Beatty, Nevada.

BY JERRY WHITE

Once upon a time, way back in the early 1980's, biker-philosopher Jan Cutler spotted an ad in the BMW Motorcycle Owners of America magazine for the Forest City 1000. The idea was just as simple as today's IBA SaddleSore 1000. Ride 1000 in less than 24 hours, document it, and for your efforts earn a nifty sticker and bragging rights for life. Jan and a friend executed a route from the

South Rim of the Grand Canyon to Salmon, Idaho. No slab out-and-back route, this ride had plenty of opportunity for twisty scenery. They were hooked. From those seeds, and others sown along the way, sprouted the inspiration to host the series of Nevada 1100 rallies that have become legend in Iron Butt history. This is the story of Jan's involvement in those events.

Jan Cutler was a motorcycling adventurer long before he owned a motorcycle. It was his destiny. As a youth, motorcycle magazines took the place of *Playboy* under his bed. The stimulating graphic

images and salacious tales of speed and adventure fueled in him a powerful urge to ride. "I believe people are attracted to riding for often illogical and irrational reasons. It could be the sound, the allure of movement, it could be social, it could be image," says Cutler. There is no logic in love. There is no rational explanation for obsession. "If you have always enjoyed the sight of a motorcycle, the sound as it goes by, then obtaining one and learning the dance borders on obsessional." Young Cutler obtained a bike and taught himself to dance.

Let's fast forward a bit. Marriage

JAN CUTLER

marked the end of motorcycle ownership for Jan. A few years later, the end of said marriage marked a new beginning of motorcycle ownership for him with a Kawasaki Z1. There is no mention of the make and model of the ex-wife. While he ended up totaling the Z1, Jan parlayed the insurance settlement into a 1975 R90S and a membership in the MOA, which ultimately sparked his interest in long-distance riding.

During these years he also participated in the Starlite auto rally — 12 hours from Santa Barbara to Las Vegas. This “Time-Speed-Distance” event, with compass navigation, introduced Cutler to some elements that would appear later in his rallies.

Perhaps most important of all, Cutler was aware of the Cannonball Baker Sea To Shining Sea Memorial Run, and its successor event, the U.S. Express, featuring an insane motorcyclist named George Egloff who would go on to win the Iron Butt Rally. The motor press’ coverage of these events, and Egloff’s participation, continued to feed his appreciation of extreme endurance events. As Jan says, “Wow! Coast to coast, WFO, or so it was characterized.”

His time in Arizona drew to a close and Cutler moved to Nevada. He became a customer (and later co-owner) of Reno BMW and a friend of Steve Losofsky (AKA LotsOfSky.) “There were newer horizons that began to open. Because we talked about this at Reno BMW, and because Steve had some experience with the Cal 24 and the Three Flags of the time, the possibilities of creating something unique and exciting was compelling. Steve was a truly natural rider who relished elevated two-wheel travel in the great Basins and Ranges and was a bottomless source of ideas.”

Thus the idea was born in 1986 to host the Nevada 1100. One constant was their desire to see the personal envelope of endurance explored and expanded. “At the heart of this was the simple joy of the long ride and the driven desire to introduce other riders to an event where they could maximize their own joy.” The Reno BMW committee of Losofsky, Cutler, Ed Hackett, and Monte Forbes figured out a format that would be a

minimum of 1,100 miles in 24 hours. The first event was based out of the dealership in Reno. They printed brochures for distribution to local dealerships as well as the moto press. *Motorcyclist* magazine writer Nick Ienatsch took the bait and showed up on a battered Concours to ride in the rally.

Here is Cutler’s recollection of the first event: “What a mixture showed up that first year. Some 23 stalwart riders signed up on a cloudy and chilly Saturday. BMWs, of course, as expected, but two local Harley boys showed up as well. Scott Bergman on his panhead hardtail was memorable. He rode with Joe Todaro on another but later model Harley, one with suspension. I was sure they wouldn’t make it back to the finish line. And there was Fran Crane! A friend of Steve’s from the Cal 24, she showed up in her full leathers, auxiliary fuel tank and, of course, a pristine BMW. I got to meet this legend and was deeply impressed. She was the epitome of our best participants, always helping others and always with an air of self-confidence.

“We had checkpoints and vehicles along the route to keep track. Checkpoint workers would take their bikes to the farthest reaches of the state and sit and wait for the Gang of 23 to come along. The weather turned wet and about half the event was ridden in light to heavy rain. But, at the return line there were Scott and Joe on their Harleys, having hit all checkpoints and back on time and shivering badly. The lesson learned that would repeat itself with almost every event was to be a bit more tolerant of the machines and look to the

riders to decide their fate. The symbiosis of man and machine became an essential ingredient.” As we still say to this day, it’s not the bike, it’s the rider.

The 1986 rally was a success. The rally committee met their goal of enabling the riders to expand their own capabilities. “The riders, whether finishing high or low in the rankings, all had a common ‘high’ at the end of the event that transcended form and united us in function. Smiles. Lots of smiles.”

The one thing Cutler didn’t anticipate was that many were drawn to the rallies to be with other like-minded riders and to enjoy an event that posed few restrictions on them. The social aspect of the long-distance riding crowd was as important to many as the riding. It took awhile for Cutler and his team to realize and appreciate this and to format future events with that aspect in mind and that is one reason they moved their start/finish from Reno to remote locations. “We used Beatty beginning in 1988, Austin and Ely other years — smaller towns where we stood out and became identified as a team. Absent a home to go to for the night, absent a “pit crew” to encourage us, we found that in small towns together we have a shift in identification and, as a result, in behavior.” This shift in identification was a critical development that helped shape the rally landscape. Rather than being a professional event with sponsorship, prize money and paid crew, amateur rallying developed a strong camaraderie among the players.

A concern that was always a big topic among the Nevada 1100 rallymasters was liability. The Reno BMW people recognized the risks as well. Naturally all riders signed an “Acknowledgement of Risk” stating that they assumed responsibilities for their own actions and consequences. In an effort to try and further limit their liability, the rallies were not open to all comers. Unknown riders were screened and those who did not qualify were turned down. They experimented with sealed drivers licenses and local LEO speeches at the rider meeting. However, there was never any attempt to limit the riders’ individual behavior, including extra-legal speeds. “What most (riders) found out along the way is that high speed causes fuel and mechanical issues. The fastest way to ride and place well evolved into understanding that there



Fran Crane, long acknowledged as one of the greatest long-distance riders ever, was one of a select few to be invited to the inaugural Nevada 1100 in 1986.



The architects of the first Nevada 1100, Cutler, Steve Losofsky, Ed Hackett and Monte Forbes, created a format that remained unchanged for five Nevada 1100 rallies and attracted the best long-distance riders in the world.

are inherent limits, and that constant and conscious self-imposed speeds were important to finishing well.”

The earlier Nevada 1100 rallies had always designated a charity — thousands of dollars were raised for The Eagle Valley Children’s Home and the Beatty Library. Cutler remembers grade school kids who made posters for one of the Nevada 1100s. The posters were displayed in many business windows in Beatty and were prominent at the Awards Banquet. Eventually the charitable requirement was made optional, as it complicated the administration of the rally.

As the events became more popular, thanks in part to the *Motorcyclist* articles written by Ienatsch and another moto-journalist by the name of Robert Higdon, rider ego came into play. According to Cutler, “Returning riders that had placed well would take far too seriously their previous performances. Fame, even in this limited way, became an allure that some didn’t handle well.” The way Nevada 1100 organizers handled it was to discontinue numeric ranking of each finisher. Instead they switched to Gold, Silver, and Bronze Levels of Achievement. “It served a much better purpose of addressing the fame and ego issues. If we recognize a winner in an event, it suggests the rest are losers. Levels of Achievement moderated that and gave everyone recognition for their efforts.”

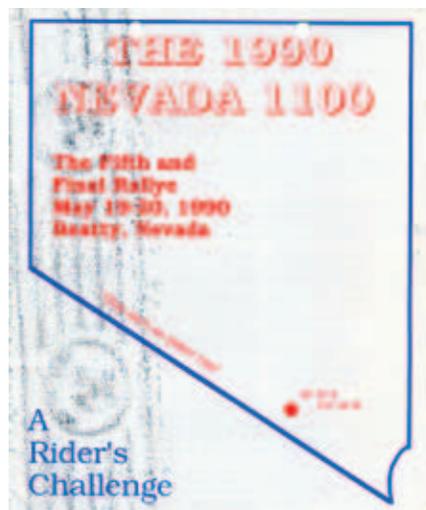
The Nevada 1100 ran for five years from 1985 to 1990. Most of the specifics of each event are lost to the sands of time, with one notable exception when they named the theme of the rally after Peter Heesch, the head of the Cal 24 rally. Peter Heesch never distinguished himself as a hard-core long-distance rider. He campaigned on a K75 and often-times never finished an event, which left the organizers wondering, “Where in the hell is Peter Heesch?” But he was a stalwart supporter and a good friend of Reno BMW so one rally was named in his honor and was called, what else, “Where In The Hell Is Peter Heesch?” Cutler recalls, “We plastered Nevada with Peter Heesch photos and stickers and the challenge of this event was simply to go out and find Peter Heesch. As many of them as possible. While all

1100s were memorable, this was one of my personal favorites.”

The Reno BMW crew was pleased with their innovative approach to the short format long-distance rally, including incorporating some auto rally components. “Some (ideas) weren’t well received, while others were modified along the way, including adding in-route checkpoints and non-riding related challenges.” However, the time arrived to call it quits. Members of the rally committee also wanted to participate in some of the events like those they helped create. A transition began to the capable hands of Dale Wilson. As Cutler says, “Here was a fresh and somewhat devious and twisted mind that rejuvenated the short term endurance class of events.” Exit Nevada 1100, enter the newly formed Cognoscente Group.

What is Cutler’s take on the current state of long-distance riding? It should come as no surprise to learn that he remains a compass-and-map kind of guy. “The advent of GPS, laptops and extreme farkling have come into play and while many of today’s riders view the aforementioned farkling as *de rigueur*, I wonder if that hasn’t inhibited some participation at the entry level.” Cutler believes less emphasis should be placed on electronic accessories and more on the rider’s skills.

Renaissance man. Entrepreneur. Rallymaster. Jan Cutler is one of the true pioneers of this sport. If not for his driving passion and support of long-distance riding, the rally landscape would likely not look as it does today. And for that, we all are in debt to Jan. 🍷



The 1990 flyer announcing the last Nevada 1100, held in Beatty from May 19-20.