

LAST RIDE OF THE SEASON



Today, a weekday, in October no less, I am heading up into the mountains. Rain and snow be damned. I am heading up to the eye of the needle at Rollins Pass. A place I have ridden near many times, but have never veered off-pavement and ridden up. Before I tell that story, I must admit something. I am approaching the twentieth year since transplanting myself to the great state of Colorado. This tale should be embarrassing; but with age comes a separation from when one believes they have to keep secrets and realizes that sharing the truth is often more humorous and rewarding. I can now wear my mistakes and follies like a badge of honor. The mistakes of broken bones, roads, trails, dead-ends and U-turns that I proudly call my life.

When I moved to Colorado in 1996 I literally thought the streets of Denver would be unpaved dirt. Now before, any would be editors suspect that I might be all Anti-goglin and



meant to say "figuratively," just hold your American Quarter Horses. Prior to moving to Denver I was an East Coaster. First a New Englander, and eventually a transplant into New York City attempting to mask my accent by learning to say soda instead of "Soder." Secretly thinking Elton John was a better piano player than Billy Joel, but never daring to say it out loud; because you never admit that on the Island of Manhattan. Singing New York State of Mind, a little too loudly, with a reverence usually held for Ave Maria; believing the sun rose and set on Stephen Sondheim and the neon lights of Broadway. I had a pretty lopsided view of life outside of New York. Oh yeah, and now that I live west of the Mississippi I know that Anti-goglin means lopsided. See, I am adaptable.

In my defense, there was not much Internet at the time and most of our phones were tethered to the walls, so information was not quite as easy to come by as it is today. People were still getting used to a band called the Foo Fighters courtesy of Nirvana's little know drummer, soon to be Mega Star Dave Grohl. George Lucas had not yet begun to destroy the original Star Wars trilogy by introducing the world to Jar Jar Binks and 911 was just a number you dialed to report an emergency not a National Day of mourning.

The first time I landed at Denver International Airport I thought someone had played a trick on me. From my window seat, all I could see were amber waves of Grain. Where were the Purple Mountains Majesty I thought almost out loud? Perhaps the Jack and Coke, my personal Ativan-substitute at the time, had taken its toll. But as it turned out, my seat





faced East towards Kansas. A slight turn to the west revealed the place I would fall in love with over and over again. I had gone to Denver to see a girl, but it was those mountains that captured my heart for the long haul.

Moving to Colorado has been filled with some of the best mistakes of my life and almost getting married was one of them. It was a beautiful mistake that I wouldn't change for anything because I wouldn't be where I am today. It's a great story for another time, but just so I don't leave anyone hanging, she didn't have an Adam's Apple or anything like that, it just didn't work out.

Soon after I found myself single in Colorado the calls came in from the East Coast asking when I was moving back. I knew Colorado was where I was meant to be, so I responded by buying a house and a motorcycle. I never did move into the house. It also didn't have an Adam's Apple; it just didn't work out. I didn't want to be tied down. The motorcycle on the other hand reawakened a lifelong passion.

In my youth, I always heard of people heading west to Park City, Sierra Nevada, Aspen, Vail, etc. to ski. I wasn't much of a skier so I didn't see the point of heading west. But that was before discovering the west held something else more

appealing than snow Sunshine!

Even though Colorado's mythical three hundred days a year of sunshine has long since been debunked. Proving to be nothing more than a publicity stunt for the railroads over 100 years ago, it is still a pretty glorious place to live and ride. For years, I defended the state to friends back east, who believe I lived in the tundra. They were still calling soda, soder, so I sympathized. I insisted that the weather was beautiful year round. They didn't buy it and I could swear I could hear them turn up Billy Joel's "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant" in the background as a way to try and tempt me back home. But Colorado was now my home. Besides I could get a bottle of red and bottle of white--depending on my appetite and mood, directly from the Front Range anytime I wanted. I even tried to tell them that his amazing 1976 Album Turnstiles heralding in Billy's return to NYC from California was actually overdubbed and mixed in Netherland, CO at the Caribou Ranch, but it was of no use.

As I turn off pavement and onto the muddy road up the approximately 11,676 feet in elevation that is the trail up Rollins Pass, my Bluetooth speakers deliver that album to my helmet. Coincidentally, as the second to last track, "I've



Loved These Days" beings to play, the road gets increasingly difficult and turns from dirt to some pretty serious rock climbing and narrow passages after a few miles. The smile on my face and my trusty Beemer, floating me over the tougher more stomach emptying sections; like so many mountain pass roads Rollins Pass was once part of the railroad line. In this case, the Denver and Salt Lake Railway.

The last mile or so requires unsaddling and hiking to get to the summit and the eye. Multiple, substantial, barriers discourage vehicles of any size from even getting near the tunnel. Even on foot, you can no longer go through the eyes, ever since a fire fighter lost his leg due to falling rocks from the passageway in 1990. The only option is to hike over the top of the tunnel, on foot, if you want to descend into the Winter Park side. I opt for only a peek over before beginning my descent back down to my bike.

As I walk down the hill, I feel a sense that the riding season might be ending. There is a light snow falling, which I know will turn to rain before I reach the bottom. Far below, at a small lake, I see fishermen. I have no idea if there are actual fish to catch, or if they too are just playing hooky on such a crisp October day. I suit up and continue my descent. If I hadn't lived here so long, I might actually believe it was the end of my season. But as I once again turn onto pavement my phone rings through to my helmet. *Take that tethered wall phone!* These are the times I love technology! It is my good friend Bill, a fellow rider, inviting me to ride up to the summit of Mount Evans the following day. So much for the Last Ride of Season.

Epilogue

The next day Bill and I meet to head up the 14,240 paved feet of Mount Evans Road. We begin our journey at the Echo Lake Lodge over catfish and eggs. Echo Lake reflects the evergreens as the sun shines bright. Not needing any more caffeine, but knowing it will be in the single digits at the top we fortify ourselves with extra coffee. As expected, the summit does not disappoint. It is cold, windy, snowy and best of all sunny. A perfect Colorado day. The heavily bundled up ranger informs us that the road will close tomorrow. The sky blackens, the clouds move fast up here, passing by us on each turn and carrying within their blackness the first big storm of the year. However, today, as I descend I am not thinking about winterizing the bike. The skiers can ski. I am going to continue to ride! In Colorado there is no such thing as the last ride of the season . . . only the next one!

