

**The Pickle Factory at Midnight**

By Kenn Hartmann

I was at a pickle factory at midnight last Saturday night in the country outside of Wautoma not far from Red Granite. Years ago I scuba dived in the quarry at Red Granite and last Sunday about 7 AM, had a cup of coffee at B.R. Diner about a block or two from the very quarry of said scuba adventure. So there's two things you must remember when reading this story, or at least be aware of, and that's the pickle factory at midnight and the quarry.

Let's begin with the pickle factory at midnight, under the starlit sky with flashlights on dark wooden docks, like being with John Steinbeck on weathered waterfront docks in Cannery Row, Monterey, or rather like being with the oceanographer that Steinbeck pal'd around with, the Doc, the marine biologist, only I'm with Nate and Liz and they're giving me a tour of the pickle factory at midnight, seeing the giant fermentation barrels, a hundred of them, each ten-feet tall with wooden staves and hoops and filled with cucumbers and pickle brine. You see, earlier in the evening Nate and Liz were gathered around the campfire with Preacher, his family and friends, celebrating the Annual Bash at Free Riders Press headquarters, sipping a few suds, enjoying the night air avant-garde cinema being projected onto a white tarp draped over the fence with a superb sound system echoing like a drive-in movie. Jim Scott, a writer and photographer for FRP, was eating popcorn and sipping cinnamon flavored whiskey. An artist named Jimbo prepared to set up his sculptures, at least I thought he was. I searched to get my bearings from the stars, the summer triangle one third obscured by pine trees and the Swan and Lyre bursting with stars instead of sparse pinpoints of light visible in the city. Once I saw the triangle constellations (the Hawk was above the pine) and recognized the Big Dipper (I even briefly glanced at Polaris) and felt all right, I can get comfortable now. You know, there's always that dreaded fear of getting waylaid and waking up in another hemisphere.

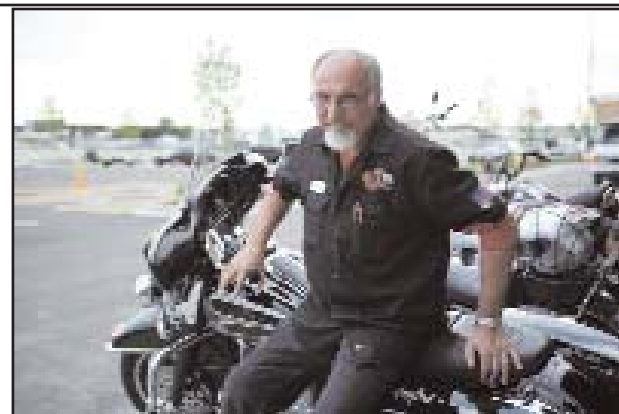
Jim mentioned riding motorcycles in the rain and I mentioned I got wet riding between Coloma and Wautoma and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. I got hit with a blast of water intended to irrigate a field. I worried it might have been insecticide with the possibility of staining the paint on my sickle and perhaps even burning my skin. Jim said, "don't worry; be thankful it wasn't fertilizer." It was a giant irrigation contraption spewing bursts of water in long range blasts that I tried to dodge doing 60 and that's when Nate, with full encouragement from Liz, started talking about his work at the welding shop, on the other side the fence, where they make tractor booms that allow a machine to lay a precision swath one hundred and twenty feet wide on each pass through a planted field.

To look at Nate it might be easy to think, why here's a laid back laconic young fellow who'd rather hum an old fashioned tune and not feel obliged to put a word in edgewise, that is until he starts talking about tractors and booms, then you might as well just sit down on a hollow stump and take notes. I had already filled my notebook earlier in the Sally Beauchamp Writer's Workshop, in which she discussed possible plot twists and character development in her novel. As a reward for our participation, she let us sample some interesting vodka and encouraged us to become disciplined writers; actually I was the only one who needed discipline.

In the Jim Scott Biker Blues Seminar, gathered around his Victory motorcycle, my notebooks got stained with beer and mustard from barbecued brats. Jim professed a rather unique insight into the enthusiast's lifestyle. Unfortunately, when the "Queens of the Fire Pit" needed kindling and tinder, somehow my paper notes got ignited and I sat empty handed on the hollow stump listening to Nate spin his tale of machine shops, welders, fabrication and a pickle factory "that's right over the fence where the movie is playing" juxtaposed images of Blue Man Group and Batman.

"If anybody wants to see it," said Nate, "I'd take 'em on a tour right now." Of course, I was the only one who hadn't seen it. I asked TJ and he said he works at the pickle factory and was busy making "smores." So I said, "I once took some high school chums into a midnight farm field to see wrecked ice cream trucks." Nate didn't know anything about that, and saw no relevance to his situation and off we gallivanted on an impromptu tour of the pickle factory at midnight.

In the morning, way too early, barely the first whimper of light, a whip-poor-will woke me to the stiffness in my bones and a heavy cloud hanging over my head. I rustled around the pup tent that little Riley helped me set up last night. I peeked out the flap at my dew-covered sickle. After a few shots with a Daisy B-B gun at a row of empty cans on a stump (the shooting range presented by young Ryland) and after a sumptuous breakfast of baked eggs and sausage prepared by Tammie, and after taking a quick spin on Preacher's 79 Shovelhead down Cree Road and back, I hopped on my own bike and rode up to Red Granite and nursed a coffee at B.R. Diner. It was on the road headed to Wautoma, twisting the grip and letting it rip, taking it up to 60, 70, watching for deer and cops and whatever implements may appear roadside, I took it up to 80, 90 and the trees began to blur, that any lingering ailments faded away doing a hundred on Sunday morning past a church, and I wondered who's getting spiritual, who's seeing the light?



Nate & Liz

What quarry are we chasing? On the road back to Chicago, I took a route my brother Charlie might like, through Neshkoro and Montello. Or one that Pablo (from Pork and Malort Ride) might enjoy through Kansasville and Bristol. I rode my motorcycle like it was meant to be. Free.

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