

Pit Stop: Southwest Wisconsin Bars

I pulled out of Sweet Home with Canned Heat's "Going up the Country" rolling through my brain, by the time I hit westbound 20 outside of Rockford, my cranium echoed the baleful moan of my thumping British Trumpet's engine drone. The day's temp began at 33, now 70 – evidenced by the sudden kaleidoscopic splatter of insect innards against the windshield. This is spirituality.

I plan to run about 400 miles today for Preacher, FRP's editor to satisfy his insatiable demand for brilliant pit stop stories. My first chance encounter is the only bar in Nora, IL. Don't bother looking at a map, you may not find it. It's on the old stagecoach line between Waddam's Grove and Warren, just a few miles south of the Wisconsin border in Jo Davies county, about 20 miles NW of Freeport.

The Nora bar is run by Christy and Roger Grenoble and Scott and Judy Kubat. It's open until 4 AM and populated by the boisterous after midnight crowd on weekends. I barreled through what little town there is, not planning to stop, but the weather-worn façade with hitching posts drew me in like a Louis Lamour novel about old west cowboys. There's plenty of hospitality and pool tables and more importantly, it's the exact place I'd love to hunker down at the end of the bar with quill and faded parchment scroll and write the great American biker novel.

From Nora I head north to Wisconsin but out here there are no signs designating state lines. The roads snake through cornfields and oak clusters, over creeks and up elevated mounds, navigating natural chicanes and rollercoaster moraines. The 120 MPH asphalt straightaway evaporates quickly into a 90 degree gravel strewn turn. Of course, the telltale blood red starburst pattern on the pavement where a large mammal exploded upon impact tempers the throttle and warns any rider to be wary.

My destination is New Diggings, WI. The whole town is located at the corner of county roads I and W, just 20 miles east of Dubuque, IA and 15 miles north of Galena, IL. As they say at the General Store, it's miles from the real world, a heartland version of Brigadoon. There are two bars in town, one's a biker bar and the other's biker friendly – whatever the hell that means. My recommendation is to park your bike at either place and have a beer in both joints (they're across the street from each other).

Listen, when pop music was fragmenting into a thousand different scenes, Billy Joel sang, "it's all rock and roll to me!" The same can be said of taverns. Whether filled with suits and ties, dress skirts or whatever hoopla, when I breeze in like the night wind, wrapped in leather and chains like I just stumbled out of a Hieronymus Bosch Inferno, and I smell like gasoline, wood smoke and patchouli oil and they serve me a beer, that's all I friggin' care.

Let me elucidate; there's two bars in New Diggings – Anton's Saloon and the General Store. Both serve beer, both are so old timey you'd think a horseless carriage was new fangled. Both serve food – Anton's has a macho burger and chips, the General Store has Robin's kick-ass BBQ pork sandwich. Both places attract a large contingency of clientele from Iowa. Both joints have upright pianos so if you happen to be Long John Baldry with itchy fingers, I'm sure nobody would complain if you laid some boogie-woogie on the King of Rock and Roll.

Anton's Tavern is owned by Bob and Donna Anton. Many impromptu jam sessions occur in the bar and occasionally Bob records local musicians and has been known to improvise a few riffs himself. If you happen to "chaw tobacco" you'll find the spittoon a welcome sight.

Robin Arnold owns the General Store and Inn, while Dave Keillor serves as co-host. Music is scheduled on weekends with bands like Betty & the Headlights, Chainsaw Curtis & the Creepers and Mississippi Man. (Given the proximity to the Almighty Father of Waters, this last band seems appropriate). Rooms are available above the General Store and reservations are suggested.

On the ride home, I stopped to catch a few smallies in the Apple River just before sunset. I silenced the owl's hoots with



Owners of Anton's, Bob & Donna



Owners of the Nora Bar, Christy & Roger



Dave, Tom, Charly from Iowa



Johnny Rakow

the crackle and pop from my straight pipes. As Frost said, "the woods are lovely, dark and deep but I have miles to go before I sleep."

As the temp plummeted, I moved swift into the elements, vigilantly tuned to the unfolding vista. I had 120 miles to go. If only the highway was straight and clear, I'd feel somewhat near. But destiny had other schemes, the October moon, a mirage shimmered like dreams. The phantom shadows faded in the gaze of my headlight, my sweet Trumpet raged into the darkest heart of night.

Kenn Hartmann
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