

**"this is an excerpt from a book to be published next spring."
Sturgis 1975**

I almost made it to Sturgis '75; got close – I went to the party unaware of a town called Sturgis. I had just turned 23, living in Denver, a marginal subsistence, wearing out my welcome. A couple fellows at the plasma bank who exchanged blood for gas money told me about a biker bash in the Dakotas. I had just purchased a small untitled Honda from an amigo in the rollicking Tejano enclave off Alameda, where a few garages wired with Christmas tree lights became cantinas at night. The bike wasn't old but had been through hell, impossibly dented and beat. Despite a bad battery, bad tires and a weird yaw that made it feel like riding cockeyed sideways over rough terrain, it ran, sputtered, smoked, but ran. That was all that mattered.

I mounted that rattletrap and headed out with the two bikers from the blood bank. They were younger than me, perhaps late teens but bold beyond their years. Oddly, I still remember their names. It's been thirty years since our brief encounter so why bother to create an alias? The sins of youth have been long since washed clean with age. Squire was as greasy as the chopped Sporty he rode, his dark skin grime-caked and as gloriously illustrated as a sullen carny Tilt-O-Whirl operator. Squire had a lanky, scraggly, hollow look treasured by quintessential biker photographers of the era. He swaggered about, brimming with braggadocio. His eyes shone like the sun's reflection in the oil puddle beneath his bike. I liked him immediately. Quick, on the other hand, may have been an alias, although I think his real name was Quick Pony or Quick Horse, something like that, but he came from Pine Ridge Reservation and quick to point out his full-blooded Sioux heritage. Yeah, Quick. At a glance, he had the cold look of a quick-hitter; that general bad-ass demeanor ex-cons have tattooed all over their soul. His work-house muscles rippled through a torn t-shirt, comfortably quick witted, humorous and gentle. And like a true tough guy, he spoke softly, showed patience and let nothing rile him. Quick carried a pistol which he gently caressed, grinned like the Cheshire cat and said "if I get hungry." He rode a chopped Bonneville with a raked front end, bobbed fender. We mounted our 20th century steeds and skirted the edge of the mythical Wild West, a faded lore even in the 70's, the last decade where the vestiges of the old ways either died off or were outright outlawed. All across America, the transformation took place, and only a fortunate young few caught a glimpse of the tragic demise.

The first leg of the journey brought us to Logan County just west of Sterling. We were woefully light on gear. I carried a jacket, an Indian blanket and a block of cheese in a brown paper sack tethered to the passenger seat. Squire had a piece of weathered canvas wrapped around two jugs of Mad Dog 20/20 tied to his fender. Quick's tattered jacket rolled neatly around a bottle of Jack mounted on the handlebars and that was that. Quick said as he patted the bottle, "if I get cold."

We spent the night near the confluence of the Pawnee and South Platte rivers. The water riffled over rocky shallows - a haunting, melancholy sound. I swathed the blanket around me like a shawl. "That rattletrap freaks you, eh?" asked Quick, who walked over and offered a swig. "Gets you warm."

Squire had a little more gear than appeared. He rolled a fat one and kicked back on the dry earth and stared into the heavenly abyss. We shared the cheese and I saved the paper sack for kindling a fire. As night deepened, the traffic thinned, first the cars, soon the trucks, even the coyote howls subsided. Finally only lonesome freight trains rumbled through the still expanse, shattering the eerie quiet. I shivered in the cool breeze that descended off mountains and grassland plateau. I reached up to gather any remnant of heat off my engine but found only condensation. I prayed the sun would soon rise.

Before we departed Denver, Quick had used a razor blade to swipe the current sticker off of a legal bike at the college, which he glued to my expired unregistered plate. Who knows what other nefarious deeds my traveling companions embraced? I suggested taking the back roads, but Squire thought that would only attract unwanted attention. "Let's stick with traffic, blend in, keep moving." However, traffic was light, we hardly blended in but kept moving beneath the big blue sky, my first gritty taste of freedom. We barreled through Nebraska and made South Dakota late afternoon with fresh sunburns, cracked lips and cotton mouths. We contemplated a stop at Pine Ridge but Quick said the FBI had invaded his homeland and thought we should continue to the Black Hills. My bike had been shaking miserably; at Mud Springs I discovered a disconcerting crack in the frame and at Box Butte I lost my high gear. I just wanted to get there, wherever there was.

Night had fallen by time we got there, a farm gate guarded by security. From that point on the road disappeared and our only direction guided by flashlights waved at distant intervals. Finally, the last guard pointed and said, "that way and don't run over any bodies." My headlight had burned out earlier, so I fell in behind Squire. Quick followed. We found a spot and made ourselves comfortable. I stayed up all night close to the bonfire and fell asleep the next morning, warmed by the sun. When I awoke and assessed the scene, I saw more bikers than I had ever seen in one place, maybe two or three hundred motorcycles scattered over the hills, next to pup tents, backpacks and bedrolls; someone even had a tipi. Instead of using the crumpled paper sack for a fire, I used it for basic toiletries. The party began in earnest with beer, stale pretzels and a little square of green blotter distributed by a homegrown Minneapolis hippie. Later, Squire suggested we make a run to pick up more booze; Quick had already departed for the Rez. We found a remote liquor store and stocked up. I mentioned to the clerk we were camped out about fifteen miles down the road. Squire shot me a glance to keep my mouth shut.

"What's your problem, man?" I asked, once outside. Squire didn't want anybody to know what we're doing, as if it mattered. "Dude, we just spent 100 bucks in this little rat-hole, I think he should appreciate our business." But that wasn't the point with Squire. Nobody should know our business. Some sort of biker ethic. About then the little green tab morphed into the incredible green monster. We left and I struggled to ride, my mind as shaky as the hapless Honda. Squire went ahead. So much for biker ethic. He was in a hurry to party – I never saw him again. I rode alone as darkness intensified; somewhere on the road, the back tire blew. By time I wobbled into the campground, the front tire went flat. I rode the rims to the small circle around the bonfire. Freshly broke, my lysergic nerves frazzled, I opened up the booze for everyone around the fire to share. The kaleidoscope of jiggling motorcycle lamps and campfire sparks swirled through my mind's eye and aroused a peculiar joy of temporal abandonment. We ran out of firewood, so in a moment's inspiration I rolled my Honda into the pit expecting a big laugh. Instead it ignited a fireball that caught me by surprise, damned near burned off my eyebrows. I barely had time to salvage my bedroll. The few derelicts let out a cheer which attracted more derelicts to gather and cheer which attracted more to gather and so on and so on. Briefly, my burning Honda lit the sky and created a ruckus. To my everlasting chagrin, I've heard of this stunt performed premeditated at various events over the years.

Some guy asked how I planned to travel. "Walk," I answered. He offered me twenty bucks. Some sort of biker ethic. I began my trek the next morning and hitched a ride from a Mexican migrant worker headed to Texas. Texas sounded nice, maybe hit Lubbock or make the town loop in Luckenbach. I daydreamed of tracking down Doug Sahn, Jerry Jeff Walker or Flaco Jimenez. The driver needed to detour through Denver; I had no interest in backtracking. I got out in Nebraska near the rail road yards on the South Platte. I spent ten bucks on a couple bottles of Twister and Slim Jims at the local liquor constabulary. I told the clerk I intended to hop a boxcar to Chicago. Which I did. About three months later while headed west on a freight, damned if it didn't stop in the same little town and I went into that same damn liquor constabulary with the same damn clerk. So I gathered a couple bottles of Twister and Slim Jims and placed them on the counter and told him I just hopped a boxcar out of Chicago. He said, "Some guy hopped a boxcar to Chicago through here a while back." He looked down at the Twister and the Slim Jims, looked at me and smiled. He charged me for the Twister but the Slim Jims were free.

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