

Trip Report

2014 MERA "5 & Dime" Rally

July 1 – 6, 2014

I. Prologue

My long-distance riding "career," such as it is, began when a co-worker alerted me to the running of the 2013 Iron Butt Rally. I'd heard of the IBR previously, but it had never captured my imagination the way it did after I'd started reading Bob Higdon's dispatches during the 2013 running of the "World's Toughest Motorcycle Rally." On July 20 – eight days after the conclusion of the 2013 IBR – I was riding my first (and to date, only) SaddleSore 1000 to gain membership in the Iron Butt Association.

One thing leads to another. Shipped along with my SaddleSore certificate was a flyer indicating that 1995 Iron Butt Rallymaster Steve Chalmers could make a beautiful and colorful, laser-engraved aluminum plaque from my certificate. That seemed like a good idea; I could frame and hang the original at work, and have the framed plaque hanging at home. I ordered one.

With my plaque – which was and is beautiful and colorful – came an invitation. "If you're looking for a ride you should consider riding my 10n10 rally next June," Steve said. "In addition to the 10 day version, I also have a 5 day rally at the same time." I knew I would have been out of my mind to try a 10-day rally, but five days... I could think about that. I didn't think for long. On September 24 – eight days after receiving my plaque – Steve notified me that he had received my application for the five-day rally.

I spent October, 2013 through June, 2014 preparing for the rally (which was officially renamed the "5 & Dime" rally "in honor" of the rider who told Steve his rally was like a five-and-dime store, whereas the IBR was like Neiman Marcus). I purchased and had installed an electronic MCCruise cruise control; I adapted my wife's automotive GPS to work on the bike; I bought a tankring-mount tankbag; I added LED tail- and brake-lights to my Givi side cases; I bought an armored, waterproof yet breathable riding jacket and pants, an electrically-heated bib and Gore-Tex boots. I bought a one-gallon insulated plastic jug and fabricated aluminum brackets to keep it positioned atop the right-side passenger footpeg. I drilled a hole in the lid to accept a drinking tube that would clip to my tankbag. An aluminum "storage clipboard" would be my desk while I was on the road. Electronic "flares" would be deployed in the event of a nighttime breakdown. A Stebel horn would scare the piss out of heedless motorists infringing my personal roadspace. My wife Caron bought me a Fenix tactical LED flashlight and, for Christmas, a SPOT satellite tracking device – something that was worth a very substantial 55,500 points during the rally, and which would allow both Caron and the rallymaster to follow my progress as I rode. It would also allow me to summon help in an emergency regardless of cell-phone coverage. I purchased a spare camera, LDComfort long underwear and an 8-day MedJet Assist medical repatriation policy. (If I were hospitalized more than 150 miles from home, they would arrange an air ambulance to transport me home – and arrange for the return of my bike.) I bought a copy of Microsoft Streets & Trips. I started learning about the "EZBake" rally routing spreadsheet, and how to make it work with Streets & Trips and my GPS.

Along with my MERA membership came access to the MERA mailing list. I got to "know" several of the other members, and it was a great resource when questions arose. (Which hydration solution should I

pursue? Should I spend the big bucks for a Roadcrafter?) One of the members, Peter Perrin, went so far as to develop a 36-hour pseudo-rally for me to ride on Memorial Day weekend, allowing me to practice my routing and rallying skills in preparation for the five-day event.

On May 25, the 67-page bonus listing arrived in my inbox, and I started working on my routing. As a result of the 36-hour pseudo-rally over Memorial Day weekend, I knew that my dreams of a podium finish and a 5,000-miles-in-five-days SaddleSore 5000 certificate were out of reach. I knew I could ride *one* 1,000-mile day. Five in succession were beyond me. There ain't that much ibuprofen in the world. And I just don't do well on much less than eight hours of sleep. So I planned my mileage around seven-hour rest stops, figuring I'd get six hours of sleep. Analyzing the bonus locations and values, I put together a 4,147-mile route that should have me on the bike for just under 82 hours of the 120 available, and should earn me a total of just under 319,000 points. Probably not a podium finish, but, I thought, certainly respectable. It would be, after all, a competition against myself.

Finally, the months became weeks, then the weeks, days. I took Monday, June 30 off from work to make my final preparations. A little help from my pharmacist ensured that I got a good night's sleep the night before the rally.

II. The Ride

Shortly before 10:00 AM on July 1, I took a photo of my bike's odometer -- 8,262 miles -- then turned on my SPOT tracker and fired up the bike. At exactly 10:00:00, I waved to Caron, and pulled out of my driveway with five days of riding in front of me. In my GPS were waypoints for each of the bonus locations I planned on visiting; in my map case was a 16-page, turn-by-turn "script." According to my plan, I would arrive in Salt Lake City around 11:18 PM on July 5. The deadline was 10:00 AM the following morning, so I had a "cushion" of almost 11 hours should problems arise.

My first bonus would be #16 -- the "smiling law enforcement officer" bonus. Conveniently, I had met Lakewood Police Sgt. George Hinkle at the Colorado MERA Ride-To-Eat in Salida I had organized in May, and he agreed to meet me at the mutually-convenient location of Chatfield and Wadsworth in Littleton at 10:14. When I pulled up, he was already there. He held my rally towel while I took his picture; after some encouraging words from him and thanks from me, I was off again, with 5,337 points in the bag.

Next was bonus #82 -- the Danny Dietz Memorial at the intersection of South King Street and West Berry Avenue in Littleton, just under five miles away. As with most of the bonus locations, I had an odd sense of *déjà vu* when I arrived, as I had "visited" most of them using Google Earth during my planning. I quickly located the memorial, placed my rally towel at the base, snapped the picture and was on my way again, with another 2,101 points to my credit.

From Littleton, I headed for downtown Denver and its Union Station, where a photo was worth 5,500 points. I found a less-than-legal spot to park the bike while I grabbed the photo, then I was off again, this time for a little more distance. I stopped nearby to open the vents on my jacket, then headed for Arriba, CO, 113 miles to the east, where I would take a picture of the post office. (Spelling "MERA" with the first letter of names of cities and towns *in four different states* would be worth a substantial 11,111 points, and Arriba would give me the "A" I needed. I had researched the alternatives, and knew Arriba had a post office, which is one of the more reliable ways to document a visit.)

Thirty miles further east, I stopped in Vona for fuel. They had no mid-grade, but the very mature woman there told me I'd find some eight miles further on, in Stratton. I thanked her and continued on.

After getting gas in Stratton, I headed for Burlington, CO, where I planned to grab a quick lunch at the McDonalds. While McDining, I pulled out my phone and pulled up the 5 & Dime SpotWalla page, and to my horror, discovered that it showed me to be still at home in Morrison! Sure that my 55,500 points were in jeopardy, I sent a frantic e-mail to the MERA list (and Steve in particular):

Steve:

I'm in Burlington, CO. 5 & Dime page shows I haven't left home. Have been tracking since I left at 1000. Wtf? Jason? What now?

When I'd received no response by the time I'd finished my hamburger, I called Steve. He'd thought I'd forgotten to turn on the device; when I told him that I'd been receiving my "OK" messages at each bonus location via text, he told me he'd ask Jason Jonas (SpotWalla mastermind) to look into it, and to "keep going!"

So I kept going, but was preoccupied with what might be causing the issue. I stopped about 30 miles further east, in Goodland, KS to see if I could resolve the problem, and found an e-mail from Jason:

Mark,

Due to inactivity, your device was being polled every 8 hours. It will be polled every 10 minutes now and your messages should be flowing into SpotWalla within the next 15-20 minutes.

Have a good ride.

Jason

Much relieved, I headed for my next fuel stop, in WaKeeney, KS, then another in Salina. It had been a long stretch with no bonus points since leaving downtown Denver – over 430 miles – but I was closing in on 7,501 points near Concordia, KS. After fueling in Salina, I headed north on US-81, glad to be off the slab for a while.

A little over 40 miles later, I turned east onto Key Road, and began the 3.3 miles of gravel to bonus #43 – the memorial erected in the 50s by the Boy Scouts to Thomas "Boston" Corbett, the man who shot John Wilkes Booth (and subsequently lived in a hole in the ground he excavated near Concordia – and castrated himself with a pair of scissors to avoid the temptation of prostitutes). Before I started my rally, one of the 10-day riders, John O. Cooper, had reported abandoning his quest for this bonus due to a road closure in the area, and his reluctance to detour over a dozen more miles of gravel. I subsequently called the local Sheriff's office, then the county road department, and was told that there were no closures on Key Road, so I took that route rather than the route both Streets & Trips and my GPS wanted me to take (Iron Road to Road 791 to Key Road).

The memorial was right where it was supposed to be. I took a couple of photos, shared some brief and not very complimentary words with "Boston," then headed back west to US-81, and south toward Salina. I stopped at a rest area shortly before reaching I-70 and took my sunset photo (bonus #37) for 5,131 points.

With light fading from the sky, I rode the 25 or so miles east to Abilene, KS, then the couple of miles south to the Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum (bonus #70) and took a photo of the sign there for 3,279 points. Everything was going according to plan. I headed for my next fuel stop, 25 miles to the east in Junction City.

After fueling, I continued on, riding through the darkness, headed for bonus #190 (the Mars candy plant about 65 miles to the east, in Topeka). A photo of the plant (ideally with its glowing green M&M sign) was worth a sweet 7,991 points. I pulled up, and chatted briefly with a gal who appeared to be waiting for a ride after the end of her shift. As I arranged my rally towel and took the photo, I asked her if she'd seen many motorcycles at the plant. She said she hadn't. I told her she might.

I rode back to I-70 and headed for Kansas City and its Union Station, where I took the 5,500-point photo without incident. With about 720 miles for the day so far, I headed for the next bonus: one of the original Woolworth buildings, less than three miles away. I pulled up there, pointed the bike's headlight at the now-vacant, one-story brick building, clipped my rally towel to the windshield and took the photo for another 7,046 points.

My next stop was my hotel for the night, the Quality Inn in Blue Springs, MO. I got there around 12:30 AM MDT (1:30 AM CDT) and took a photo of the sign before checking in to secure the 5,000-point rest bonus. Then I hauled my gear to my room. It was unremarkable, but appeared adequate.

When I could not promptly get to sleep, I took a couple Benadryl and waited for them to take effect. And waited. My whole body was buzzing; I was still fighting the turbulent air behind each semi along I-70. This was not good. I kept looking at the clock; when it said 7:30, I got up and turned off the cell phone alarm that would have wakened me 30 minutes later. I don't think I got more than an hour or maybe two of sleep.

I had brought my water jug into the room, and now discovered a swarm of tiny ants all over it. Oh, joy. I took it into the shower and washed all the ants (and most of the dead bugs) off it, then started getting ready to depart. Soon, I would discover that a smaller contingent of ants had found my helmet sitting on the floor, with its Bluetooth headset charging. Wondering how many had found their way inside (and would probably emerge to torment me as I crossed Missouri) I killed as many of them as I could while I packed up the rest of my gear. I departed as quickly as possible.

Around 8:15 AM CDT, after a fuel stop at a nearby Shell station, I was once again headed east on I-70. The day's first bonus was #176 – a giant strawberry along US-41 near Decker, IN worth 4,098 points – and more than 400 miles away. I made fuel stops in Columbia, MO and Fairview Heights, IL, grabbed lunch at a McDonalds in Mount Vernon, IL, refueled again near Patoka, IN, and around 4:25 PM EDT, blew past the strawberry. I made a u-turn, came back, grabbed the photo, and continued north on US-41.

My next bonus was the headstone of Erwin "Cannonball" Baker, pioneering early 20th-century long-distance motorcyclist, at the Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis. I had a note that his gravesite should be accessible until 8:00 PM, but when I arrived at around 7:15 PM EDT, the gates were closed and the office locked. I had lost my first bonus (a healthy 8,999 points).

I refueled in Fishers, IN, then rode the 11 or 12 miles to Fortville, and bonus #11 – the martini-sipping pink elephant in front of Elite Beverages that was worth 5,109 points. With the sun nearing the western horizon and the photo taken, I headed for the last bonus of the day, a statue of Annie Oakley a little over an hour away in Greenville, OH, and worth 5,019 points.

It was dark when I arrived in Greenville, and due to a construction detour, I came into town from an unplanned direction. The GPS said “we’re here!” but I didn’t recognize the intersection until I’d made a u-turn. Suddenly everything snapped into place, and I knew where the statue was. I parked the bike, grabbed my camera, flashlight and rally towel, and walked over to the statue. After a few tries with different lighting techniques, I got a good shot, and repacked the gear.

Bonus #2 promised 1,500 points for each state in which a purchase was documented. I had fuel purchases planned in each state I would pass through – except for Ohio. So I would need to be sure to make some kind of purchase before crossing into Michigan. I found a gas station nearby, made a purchase and got a receipt.

I rode north now on US-127, heading for a fuel stop in Fort Wayne, IN, then my hotel in Coldwater, MI, where I arrived at 11:00 PM MDT (1:00 AM EDT). I checked into the Red Roof Inn, hauled my gear to the room, took a quick shower, and tried again to get some sleep. Once again, my body was buzzing, and sleep would not come. I took Benadryl without any evident benefit. Once again, I got up the following morning before the alarm had a chance to wake me.

A text message to my doctor resulted in the suggestion that I supply her with the phone number for a pharmacy. If I would promise to devote a full eight hours to sleep on the third night, she would prescribe something to help me achieve that. I sent a text to Caron, asking her to locate a pharmacy in Milwaukee and supply me with the address, and supply my doctor with the phone number. Then I prepared to get underway once again.

The trailing edge of a storm was moving through the area, but by the time I was ready to repack the bike, the rain had stopped. I took a photo of the hotel’s sign for the rest bonus points, and got underway around 6:30 AM MDT (8:30 AM EDT). The first bonus for the day was less than 10 miles away; a photo of the Capri drive-in theater’s sign was worth 9,025 points. The photo was quickly secured, and I headed for nearby Mendon, MI. (Remember the goal to spell “MERA” with the names of towns in different states? Now I had “A” from Arriba, CO, and “M” from Mendon, MI.)

Twenty-five miles of two-lane Michigan back roads later, I was in Portage for bonus #186, the Air Zoo. A photo of the sign out front of this air museum was worth 4,099 points – and was easily and quickly obtained. Two miles away, I stopped at a Tim Horton’s (one of a regional chain of fast-food bakery/restaurants) for a purchase, good for 1,500 points. It had been a cool ride from Coldwater, so I ordered a cup of hot chocolate. It was good – and hot; I burned my tongue on it. After getting maybe a third of it down, I was on my way again.

I was now done with the two-lane back roads I’d ridden for the last 270 miles or so, and back on the slab (I-94) and now consistently westbound for the first time. Greenville, OH had been the easternmost point in my route, or nearly so.

After a fuel stop in Bridgman, MI, I headed for downtown Chicago, and two bonuses. The Union Station building there, like its brethren in Denver and Kansas City, was worth 5,500 points, but a photo from the

observation deck of the John Hancock tower, 1,000 feet above Lake Michigan was worth a whopping 12,097 points, and I had a \$35 "FastPass" express, front-of-the-line ticket, purchased online, three weeks in advance. I battled my way through three toll stations, paying increasingly hefty tolls, only to arrive in gridlocked downtown Chicago. As I pulled up to the John Hancock tower's parking garage, the nattily-dressed attendant stepped in front of the gate, crossed his arms and shook his head: NO. I continued my approach, stopping before him. "No motorcycles." "You're kidding." "Company policy. No motorcycles." "But I have a ticket!" "Sorry."

The lack of sleep, the impenetrable downtown traffic, the unfairness of this ridiculous policy... I reached a breaking point. I was done with Chicago. I couldn't leave quickly enough, 17,597 bonus points be damned. The traffic would ensure that my departure was as painful as possible.

I finally found my way to I-94 and headed for Milwaukee. At a fuel stop, I found a text from Caron with the pharmacy address, and keyed it into the GPS. I'd picked up some time by leaving Chicago ahead of schedule; perhaps this would help me get those eight hours of sleep that I needed.

Arriving in Milwaukee, I discovered yet more gridlocked traffic, but I eventually found the pharmacy. They had no prescription for me. A few more text messages, and my prescription was being filled. It took about 30 minutes, but I was finally on my way again, with the precious pharmaceuticals in my top case.

I knew I was close to bonus #25, where a photo of a statue of Gambrinus, the "King of Beers," would be worth a fat 19,093 points, so I snagged that before leaving Milwaukee. But I skipped the 5,151 points at the Hyatt Regency, where a plaque commemorating the non-fatal October 4, 1912 shooting of Teddy Roosevelt was located.

The ride from Milwaukee west to Madison was a horrible, stop-and-go nightmare. I watched the time I'd gained in Chicago slip away. By the time I'd reached Madison, I knew what I had to do. There was a second "giant strawberry" bonus in Strawberry Point, IA that was worth 12,961 points, but I wouldn't be going there. Just outside of Madison, with the late afternoon sun before me, I instructed the GPS to guide me to the night's hotel in Monticello, MN, about 300 miles northwest. In addition to losing the 12,961 points in Strawberry Point, I would also lose the 1,500 points associated with making a purchase in Iowa. There was nothing else to be done. After two almost-perfectly-executed days but very little sleep, day three was going down the toilet.

I took I-94 through Eau Claire and St. Paul, and arrived at the Super 8 in Monticello at 10:15 PM MDT (11:15 PM CDT). And I slept. Finally. Deeply. (This was the nicest room I stayed in, by the way.)

I was underway on Friday by 7:00 AM MDT (8:00 AM CDT). An hour west on I-94 then 20 miles north on US-71 brought me to Long Prairie, MN, and bonus #55: the Mount Suribachi (Iwo Jima) memorial there, worth 7,103 points. I got the photo, then received a handy pocket calendar with bible verses from a pleasant enough fellow with a Scottish accent while refueling at the Casey's around the corner.

My next bonus was at the Whitestone Battlefield State Park near Merricourt, ND, about 240 miles to the west. I refueled in Milnor, ND, but forgot to earn the 2,500-point call-in bonus while there. So I stopped in Oakes, ND, called the rallymaster and told him where I was. To substantiate that, I bought a Mountain Dew and got a receipt. Then I was headed for the battlefield.

Along the way, I noticed I was approaching tiny Ellendale, ND. "There's my E!" I grabbed a photo of the sign. Now I had the "M," the "E" and the "A." Only the "R" was left.

From the rally pack:

BONUS NUMBER 27

IN 1862, A BAND OF SANTEE SIOUX WARRIORS LEFT NORTH DAKOTA AND TRAVELED INTO MINNESOTA WHERE THEY KILLED HUNDREDS OF WHITE SETTLERS. THE FOLLOWING YEAR, GENERAL ALFRED SULLY LED THE CAVALARY INTO NORTH DAKOTA SEARCHING FOR THE WARRIORS. HE WAS UNABLE TO LOCATE THEM, BUT ON HIS WAY BACK TO MINNESOTA HE ENCOUNTERED A HUNTING PARTY. NONE OF THE INDIANS IN THE HUNTING PARTY WERE INVOLVED IN THE EARLIER TRANSGRESSION, BUT GENERAL SULLY TOOK THIS OPPORTUNITY TO RIGHT THE WRONG. OVER THE NEXT TWO DAYS, 20 WHITE SOLDIERS, AND BETWEEN 150 AND 300 NATIVE AMERICANS WERE KILLED THERE AT THE WHITESTONE BATTLEFIELD. THERE ARE ACTUALLY THREE MONUMENTS FOR THIS MASSACRE LOCATED WITHIN THE STATE PARK. THE OLDEST AND BIGGEST, ON THE HILL TOP, MOURNS THE WHITES AND IGNORES THE INDIANS. TWO OTHERS -- MERE BRONZE PLAQUES -- ARE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HILL. THEY WERE ERECTED MUCH LATER. ONE MOURNS THE INDIANS AND THE OTHER TRIES TO EXPLAIN BOTH SIDES OF THE STORY. VISITORS CAN CHOOSE WHICH MONUMENT SUITS THEM, ALTHOUGH THE WHITES CLEARLY HAVE WON THE PHOTO OPPORTUNITY BATTLE. A PHOTO OF ANY OF THE THREE MARKERS WILL EARN YOU 5,501 POINTS.

For the first time during the rally, I was becoming concerned about the weather as I headed for the battlefield. I would clearly be riding into something, and that something involved lightning. I would have to be vigilant as I continued, and maybe get out of the way if something severe threatened. Unbeknownst to me, I would wind up riding several miles of gravel roads to reach the battlefield – in the rain. Yuck.

As I arrived at the battlefield around 1:20 PM MDT (2:20 PM CDT), the rain began to diminish, but a gusty wind from the south continued. I parked the bike, then parked it so the wind wouldn't blow it over. Thankfully, there was a primitive restroom there. (Remember that Mountain Dew in Oakes?) The easiest of the monuments to get to was the one that "mourns the Indians," so I draped my rally towel over the top of it, and grabbed the photo.

Departing the battlefield, I started following the turn-by-turn directions I'd generated in Streets & Trips. The gravel roads were very narrow and disused, and I noticed that my GPS was panicking, urging me to make a u-turn. Not knowing which software to trust, I went with my gut and returned to the battlefield, then followed the GPS's advice. After a few miles, I was back on pavement and headed north.

It soon became apparent that the different route north to I-94 would bring me out west of where I (and Streets & Trips) had originally planned. I would not be going through Jamestown – my next planned fuel stop – so I stopped for fuel in tiny Kulm. I continued on, following the GPS toward my next bonus in Steele, ND. As I approached Gackle, ND (pop. 296) the local constabulary waved me off the main road. It looked as though their July 4th parade was about to get underway. So I detoured a block to the east, then headed north again, paralleling the main road. The problem was, I didn't know how far to continue the detour. After a few blocks, I turned west and returned to the main road, which was lined with spectators. But no parade was yet in evidence, so I turned north again, and became the first vehicle in their parade!

About 28 more miles of two-lane roads brought me back to I-94, where I headed west for bonus #87, the world's largest sandhill crane, in Steele, ND. The crosswinds I'd been fighting since heading west from Fergus Falls, MN now became relentless. I went down the highway with the bike leaning to the left, bracing for each gust. Around 3:40 PM MDT (4:40 PM CDT) I arrived in Steele. I got the photo of the crane, then refueled, uncertain about my ability to reach my next fuel stop while fighting what would soon become headwinds.

About 20 miles west of Steele, I headed south on US-83. I had bagged all the bonus points I'd planned for the day, and was headed for my hotel in Rapid City, SD. Shortly after crossing into South Dakota, I refueled in Herreid (pop. 422). Then, somewhere near Gettysburg, a South Dakota State Trooper decided he needed a word with me.

As we closed, I saw him slow, and knew we'd be having a chat before he pulled the inevitable u-turn. I pulled to the shoulder without him needing to light me up. I flipped up my chinbar, and waited for him to approach me. We exchanged greetings, then he noted I had been travelling somewhat in excess of the posted 65 MPH limit. "Seven over?" I asked. He nodded, and informed me he would be writing me a warning. When he inquired where I was headed, I briefly outlined my five-day endeavor for him. He was duly impressed, and suggested maybe I'd like to get off the bike and stretch while he prepared my warning. I took him up on his offer.

When he had finished, he called me back to his car for my paperwork, and let me know there would be few dining options until I reached Pierre, if I was hungry. I told him I'd been hungry all day, and thanked him. He headed back northbound as I prepared to resume my southward journey.

I had a languorously-prepared Subway sandwich in Pierre, then followed US-14 west to pick up I-90 into Rapid City. It was fun to watch the assortment of fireworks here and there from each rise on US-14, and correlate them with the towns on the GPS.

I got to the America's Best Value Inn in Rapid City around 10:40 PM MDT, and checked in. Other than the room smelling like a fish market, the accommodations were adequate. I took the other half of the pharma-magic tablet I'd taken the night before, and was soon sleeping soundly. Unlike day three, day four had gone according to plan.

I was underway the next morning at 6:50 AM MDT. I fueled up, then headed into downtown Rapid City for the first of the day's bonuses: a picture of one of the statues of the American Presidents which grace every corner on Main Street and St. Joseph Street, between 4th and 9th Streets. Downtown Rapid City on a Saturday morning was empty, so I easily found a parking spot near the statue of Bill Clinton. I hung my rally towel around ol' Bill's neck and snapped the photo for 4,007 points, then I started looking for a post office, police vehicle or anything that would document I was in Rapid City to complete the spelling of "MERA." I found the post office, but it was in a huge, forbidding Federal Government building, and there was no exterior signage. I rode around looking for a city vehicle, but found none. Finally, I decided one of the "Downtown Rapid City" signs on each corner would suffice. Then I was off to the next bonus, a scant seven miles away.

Originally, bonus #185 required the rider to take a picture of the tic-tac-toe-playing chicken at Reptile Gardens. When it was discovered prior to the rally start that the (electronic) chicken was no longer playing tic-tac-toe, the bonus was modified to require only a photo of the building or sign. I pulled into

the parking lot, parked in a shady spot and took a photo of the building. Then I was off to the next bonus.

Twenty miles away, bonus #20 waited for me. From the rally pack:

BONUS NUMBER 20

MOUNT RUSHMORE IS ANOTHER ONE OF THOSE PLACES THAT I THINK EVERYONE SHOULD SEE. AND IF YOU'RE GOING TO GO THERE, YOU SHOULD GET A PHOTO OF THIS INCREDIBLE SIGHT THAT IS SUITABLE FOR FRAMING. YOU CAN TAKE THE PHOTO FROM ANY LOCATION TO EARN THE POINTS, BUT THE PRIME LOCATION WOULD BE FROM INSIDE THE TUNNEL. THE ACTUAL GPS COORDINATES OF WHERE YOU WANT TO TAKE THIS PHOTO ARE N43° 51' 34.95" & W103° 25' 50.61". YOU'LL EARN 4,399 POINTS FOR THIS PHOTO THAT WILL NO DOUBT MAKE IT TO YOUR WALL WHEN YOU GET HOME.

The road to this point – US-16A – was incredible. Tight and slow, it included multiple spots where the road corkscrewed, looping above itself. The view of Mount Rushmore from this spot really demanded a serious telephoto lens, but I took the shot using what I had, and prepared to head for the next bonus, 424 long miles west in Dubois, WY.

This preparation was hampered by the loss of a glove. It must have fallen off the seat while I was taking the photo. I looked under the bike. Nothing. I looked in the tight spaces between the side cases and the bike. Nothing. I looked in the top case. Nothing. I looked in the area of the triple tree. Nothing. I moved the bike forward several feet and looked again. Nothing. I moved the bike backward several feet. Nothing. I re-checked all the spots I'd checked before. Nothing. Just as I was starting to curse really enthusiastically (and reconcile myself to riding with one lightweight glove and one midweight glove) I glanced behind the bike one more time. And there it was, on the ground. How had I missed it? I'd read with amusement stories of IBR riders committing silly errors, and could not understand how they made these errors. By this point in the ride, I had a glimpse of how silly errors became possible.

From my location, getting into Wyoming, where I needed to go, required the traversal of Playhouse Road through Custer State Park. So said my script, and my GPS concurred. This required a \$10 fee. Rather than endure the dire warnings from the GPS, I paid the fee, attached the self-adhesive "license" sticker to the inside of my windscreen, and headed for Custer.

After a brief stop in Custer, I picked up SD-89 and headed for Lusk, WY. Shortly after crossing into Wyoming, the heat started to crank up. When it climbed into the mid-90s, per the LDComfort mantra, I soaked the sleeves of my top with water from a bottle in my top case, closed up my jacket vents, and used shots of air up my jacket sleeves to produce evaporative cooling. By the time I got to Douglas, I wanted something more. To the clear amusement of a 10- or 12-year-old girl nearby, I dumped most of an eight-pound bag of ice into my jacket. Then I headed for Casper.

By the time I'd reached Casper, the heat was whispering in my ears. "You don't really want to go all the way to Moran for 3,929 points," it said. I retorted, "Don't you mean 3,929 points plus the 3,666 in Dubois? And what about the other 3,828 points between Moran and Salt Lake City?" "You're toast," said the heat. "You don't have another 560 miles in you. Aren't your knees killing you? How about that allegedly "iron" butt of yours? And... it's pretty freakin' hot out, ain't it? Why don't you head for the barn and save yourself three hours of pain and suffering? You know you want to." And I could not lie. I wanted to. I used the GPS to confirm that I would have enough miles to be classified as a finisher (if

barely). Then, instead of heading for Dubois, Moran and the southeastern corner of Idaho, I headed for Rawlins, I-80 and Salt Lake City.

As the ice melted, it soaked my top and somehow wicked its way into my pants. Each time I stood on the pegs to briefly relieve the knee pain, I sat down again in a pool of cold water – which was quite pleasant and also slightly troubling.

In Rawlins, I lubed the chain with motor oil using a drinking straw as a pipette – I'd run out of aerosol-propelled chain lube the day before. Then I sent Caron (who had arrived at the Doubletree in Salt Lake) a text letting her know I would arrive two and one-half hours earlier than originally planned. I replaced the loose ice that remained inside my jacket with the better part of an eight-pound bag of the stuff and jumped onto I-80 for the 296-mile slog to Salt Lake City.

My plan had originally included stops at several In-n-Out burger joints while coming into Salt Lake on I-15. These points, too, were cast to the wind. Shortly before 9:00 PM MDT on Saturday, I pulled up to the Doubletree, with Caron waving hello and smiling broadly. The rally would not officially end for 13 more hours, but my rally had drawn to a close. I parked the bike, slowly unfolded myself off it, welcomed a hug and a kiss, and handed Caron my helmet and tankbag. I carried my top case and the toiletries bag from the left side case up to our room.

After a rather thorough shower, I put on some of the casual clothes Caron had brought for me to wear, and we went to see if Steve or any of the riders were in the bar. No Steve, but if I recall correctly we met and chatted with Nancy Lefcourt, John O. Cooper and several of the MERA folk who had not ridden the rally, but had shown up to congratulate those who had. After a while, we returned to our room and settled in for the night. I sorted my receipts into those I would need for bonus points and those I wouldn't, and I requested a wake-up call to make sure I'd be at scoring at 7:00 AM with my camera, my receipts and the bag of dark chocolate peanut M&Ms that were required for the Mars candy plant bonus (and which I had bought weeks earlier, and carried all the way from home).

III. The Wrap-Up

When I came downstairs the next morning, volunteers were in the lobby. One walked with me to my bike and verified my odometer reading, then gave me scoring instructions and a manila envelope for my paperwork. I read through the instructions, and headed for the scoring room.

Steve welcomed me, took my camera card, and instructed me to "white out" any and all bonuses on my score sheet that I had not earned. Having copied the contents of my camera card, he returned it and tallied up my points. Of the almost 319,000 I had planned, I had earned 249,129. I had ridden 3,821 miles according to my odometer, or 3,767 actual miles – 17 more than the minimum required for five-day finisher status. At the banquet that afternoon, I would learn where those 249,129 placed me.

I spent the rest of the morning washing my LDComfort undergear for the ride home on Monday, and giving the bike a quick wash: nothing thorough, but enough to get home on. The big V-Strom had been utterly reliable during the rally, and she deserved at least that much from me.

At 1:30 that afternoon, the riders assembled for the banquet in the hotel ballroom that had served as the scoring room that morning. Steve made a number of comments before reading off the finishers' names, scores and ranking, among them noting that the rally saw the highest attrition rate of any MERA rally. Fifty-one riders/couples had started the rally the previous Tuesday; 27 had finished. There were six solo finishers and two couples in the 10-day rally, and 16 solo finishers and three couples in the five-day rally. Steve noted that six BMWs that started the rally had ended their riders' rallies prematurely due to mechanical issues.

As Caron and I finished our salmon and green beans, Steve read off the finishers' names by score, in ascending order. Each rider/couple received a round of applause. After the 10th-place solo, five-day finisher was announced, I knew I'd earned a top-10 finish. My name was read next: I'd made 9th place. My friend Peter Perrin, who had been dealing with some health issues during the rally, finished in 3rd place with 340,521 points. Fellow Coloradans Greg and Wini Farmer took 1st place in the couples class of the five-day rally with 326,512 points. The winner of the solo class of the five-day rally, Paul Tong, scored a whopping 478,266 points.

The 10-day solo class scores ranged from 244,196 for Troy Decker (6th place) to an incredible 759,308 for winner Erik Lipps. The top three finishers in each class received an engraved trophy. (The remaining finishers can look forward to receiving a laser-engraved aluminum plaque.)

A beautiful Henry deer rifle was raffled off next, and went to Troy Decker, who clearly appreciated it.

Finally, the riders adjourned to the bar for the evening's festivities. Caron and I hung out with Greg and Wini Farmer and we shared tales of our rides. They had ridden a more aggressive route than mine, but one with a generally similar shape; I had visited (or come near) many of the bonus locations they bagged.

After a while, Caron and I returned to our room to prepare for our departures the following morning (Caron's by jet; mine by motorcycle). Then we went back down to watch Steve and his assistants light off the fireworks that certain riders who shall remain nameless had brought to the finish. Finally chased off by hungry mosquitos, Caron and I returned to our room and settled in for the night.

I had planned an early start to beat the heat, but before turning in I decided to try to also beat rush-hour traffic. I requested a 5:30 wake up call; by 6:25 I was pulling away from the hotel for the 500-mile ride home.

Having ridden more slab than I really cared to during the rally, I spent as much time as possible on US-40, and enjoyed the ride over Rabbit Ears Pass, and – especially – Berthoud Pass. I got home just before 4:00 PM.

Looking back, days one, two and four went very well. Due partly to the lack of sleep on nights one and two, day three was a bit of a disaster. And rather than adjusting to the long days in the saddle as the rally progressed, my body began to suffer earlier each day. By day five, I no longer had sufficient desire to earn points and complete the route I'd planned. I'm satisfied with my 9th-place finish. As I write this, I'm not eager to try to better that result anytime soon, if ever. (Then again, upon returning from my SaddleSore 1000 last summer, I wanted nothing to do with the motorcycle for a week.)

Naturally, I enjoyed certain parts of my ride more than others. I enjoyed riding through bucolic, rural eastern Indiana during and following sunset. I enjoyed the tiny towns I rode through in North Dakota. And I enjoyed the Black Hills. I hadn't been there in probably 40 years.

While I would love to have one of those three-digit IBA numbers that IBR finishers receive, I no longer am inclined to think the 11-day price makes it worthwhile. Not for me. Not for my knees.

I learned a number of things during the rally – some of which I've probably already forgotten. One of them that I can recall is this: if you're going to ride for points, you have to ride the slab, and I'm just not that keen on the slab. I'd rather ride passes and canyons, and interesting back roads. Everyone who met the applicable mileage minimum (3,750 for 5-day riders; 7,500 for 10-day riders) and reached the finish by the deadline finished this rally. Some of the finishers eschewed the slab (and big points) and chose to ride passes and canyons, and interesting back roads. They may have been the smart ones.