

Rain on an Old Tin Roof

Text: Bill Drago
Photography: Susan Drago

Thunder roared in the distance as I ducked under the rusty, corrugated sheet-iron structure. I was a lone 16-year-old boy wearing a faded Levi's jacket, tight, high-water 501s, and a white T-shirt. Three hundred miles into the day's journey, my 4 a.m. departure was taking its toll. It was my longest day yet on a motorcycle. I was tired, feared getting wet, and the sun was low, somewhere among the western clouds. I laid my new 1972 Honda Motorsport on its side in the pasture and dragged it in behind me. The roof hung low, its walls succumbing to gravity. A stack of hay bales was all that held it off the ground. The shelter was enough. The unmistakable smell of new rain hit my nostrils first. Then began the noisy dance on the tin as I lay back on the loose straw, drops and then streams of water making their way through tiny holes. I drifted off, thinking of the long ride back and of my girlfriend ... I hoped she was waiting.

Happy accidents like this would become my quest as the miles rolled over on my odometer and more opportunities presented themselves along the way. Man has always sought shelter in a storm and motorcyclists are especially vulnerable to the elements.

A year later I was in the Texas Panhandle east of Dalhart when, again, dark clouds loomed on the horizon. A stately house with cracked and peeling white paint and porch pillars rising to the second-floor balcony stood a quarter mile off the high-

way, clearly abandoned. The front door was missing, as were most of the windows. Thankfully, like with the old barn, there were no signs deterring wayward visitors in need of shelter. My friend and I ducked our bikes under the porch and camped overnight in the living room. It was an eerie place, with high ceilings, ragged drapes, and lightning flashing erratically like malfunctioning strobes as storms rolled across the prairie. We reveled in the experience.

Now that I am older, ghost towns and lonely buildings still draw me in like a moth to a flame. Treasures in the form of a loose, hanging door or part of a decades-old appliance must be inspected and photographed. These days, my wife and I travel slowly down dusty backroads, watching for the odd remnant without a posting to warn us away. Curious explorers frequent many of these abandoned spots, especially the old mining buildings out West. The architecture used a century or more ago is changing. Building methods and materials have been improved and become mundane. An Art Deco service station built from pre-fabricated steel, coated in white and green enamel, may be missed among the elm trees growing through cracked pavement, an old pump rusting out front. A giant owl takes up residence in a stone schoolhouse built by the WPA in the '30s and swoops by, warning that this is his home now.

In the mining camps of Colorado, massive timbers, hand-fit and bolted, give way to the

weight of 100 winter snows, slowly burying an old steam engine and other symbols of a brief and bygone era. Their stories resound as our own engines sit outside, exhausts tinkling while we pause for a drink, a snack, and to snap a few photos before moving on. Each year they fade, gravity relentlessly doing its work, rust, rot, wind, and rain returning them to the dust from which they came. Iron parts cast in foundries in the east, brought west by locomotives and hauled over mountain passes by ox, horse, and mule, now sit in fields or peek out from the rubble, resting in their natural settings, outdoor museums for adventurers to see and to wonder at before moving on.

Did their builders know we would find them so intriguing generations later? Would they have cared or were they too busy with the hard lives they must have known back then? For a time these are destinations for the motorcyclist willing to venture off the beaten path, but we should know these treasures are urgent in their passing. We can make a point of seeking them out while they still exist and take an extra moment while there for our souls to clink a glass with the ghosts of our ancestors.

I wonder as I ride my modern motorcycle down backroads if any remnant of that old barn from my youth still exists. I hope it does—even a nail or a hinge—something for the next traveler to find. And I hope, when they do, that it's raining. **RR**