

LAING'S JOURNEY

A SIX-WEEKS PERAMBULATION
ON TWO WHEELS.

BY TREVOR MARC HUGHES



HAMILTON MACK LAING'S WAY WAS RUTTED.

Clay mud lined with the tracks made by car and wagon wheels had dried, hindering the passage of his Harley-Davidson. “We rode the combs till we fell into the ruts,” he wrote, “and when we got wedged there we heaved out and started again.” He had found his nemesis on Nebraska roads. The mud he encountered either consisted of dried ruts where “the machine stuck fast on the combs and the engine raced helplessly” which meant pushing out by hand, or of a “soupy liquid” where “the wheels would not grip; each wheel insisted on picking its own route.”

Left: Laing gazes across a salt field on the ancient bed of the Great Salt Lake, Utah.





A travel companion, Smith Johnson, negotiating the dry landscape of Utah.



Laing in 1917, riding east from Princeton, British Columbia, on his third Harley.

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Canadian writer and naturalist Hamilton Mack Laing was not an average two-wheeled traveler. Although George Wyman had become the first to cross the U.S. on a motorcycle back in 1903, Laing was an early adopter of the motorcycle as the ideal way to connect with the places he traveled through, and he specifically enjoyed how it could immerse him in the natural world he loved so much. He was midway across the United States on his new 1915 Harley-Davidson 11F when he encountered those poor road conditions. He had begun his adventure at St. James Place, Brooklyn, and pointed his handlebar at the World's Fair in San Francisco.

Negotiating dried mud would be a low point in the road conditions during Laing's 1915 adventure, which he described in his written account as "a six-weeks perambulation on two wheels." His motorcycle was an air-cooled, four-stroke, 11-horsepower, 988cc V-twin-engined steed with a top speed of about 65 mph. He named her Barking Betsy, and he would test her to the full.

Laing's journey west took him through 12 states. He insisted on giving cities a wide berth, for which he apologized: "It is not that I love them less but rather that I love the country more." What Laing called "the joy of the road" he believed was not found in the major centers, but on secondary roads, small

Crane hunting in Ebor, Saskatchewan, in 1914, Laing stands on his first Harley-Davidson motorcycle, a 10F.



Laing and Smith Johnson enjoy a shave, shampoo and personal maintenance by a puddle at Sulphur Hot Springs, Nevada.



towns and in nature. Laing called himself a “motorcycle-naturalist.” When he switched off his engine after crossing into Pennsylvania, “there were meadowlarks in the field piping jubilantly and two or three vesper sparrows that even now at noontide were singing as though in competition.” Laing was a gypsy gentleman.

But he was also a pioneer of motorcycle travel, choosing to camp whenever possible. “The first meal in camp,” he quipped, “or the first on a gipsying (sic) expedition is doubly pleasing.” He believed getting out into nature on two wheels was good for the constitution: “It is a good thing for a man’s soul to feel that way once in a year at least.”

In the suburbs of Cleveland he was overtaken by two other motorcyclists riding Harley-Davidsons. They offered their help thinking he might have lost his way. It was the first bit of camaraderie of the road he experienced with other motorcycle travelers. “Fraternalism of the right sort truly,” he wrote, indicating that the connection between two-wheeled travelers was alive even in those early days of “transcontinental.” They guided him on the right road to Elyria.

Later on he slept in the hayloft of an obliging farmer and once again noted the bird life around him. “Bob-white was calling from a grain-field and a meadowlark was in tune.”

Today’s motorcycle traveler might be surprised to discover what Laing put in his panniers. Somehow, packed away in the heavy canvas satchels, was “an eating kit, a sleeping kit, a tarpaulin and ground sheet.” He also had to

shoehorn in “a mending kit and shaving kit as well as the necessities in the way of extras for the machine and a big Kodak and its accessories.” He wore a cap, an army shirt and “riding trousers and leggings,” stressing that the “shirt and trousers ought to be made of wool.”

Even with all his preparedness, many tried to discourage Laing before departure, saying, “that if I traveled alone and slept out of doors ‘just anywhere’ rattle-snakes (sic) would bite me and I would be held up and robbed, also that I would lose my way.” As well intentioned as these harbingers of doom might have been, Laing was having none of it. “As to losing my way,” Laing quipped, “I had a road map, also a tongue in my head that was at least half Scotch.”

In the hills of Pennsylvania, Laing encountered a rattle-snake, but not in the way he anticipated. He found a dead rattler on the road, one that had been recently run over and, always the naturalist, was curious about it. He decided to dissect it and see what it had eaten recently. What he found inside impressed him to no end as “the wretch had swallowed a full grown grey squirrel!”

Any other fears he might have had about pressing on in search of adventure and glory he tempered with philosophy. “How similar to a road is our entire spin through life,” Laing waxed. “We may see the path clearly enough to the turn, but beyond it, the future must reveal.”

“But the lure of the unending road,” he emphasized, “is a call that will not be denied.” So he and Betsy pushed on. As an early moto-traveler Laing was quick to discover the advantages of riding a motorcycle over driving a car. “We

take to the Road for experiences and we get them," he wrote. "Riders on two wheels get more of them I think, and get them in shorter compass than drivers of four wheels do."

Laing had many other new experiences along his route. He used wooden planks to cross rails in Ohio, rode over mud "as untrustworthy as a greased pig" and, in Iowa, Barking Betsy sputtered to a standstill on a hillside. Laing then set to work pretending to know something of motorcycle mechanics. "I tried to look as wise as 40 long-eared owls," he confessed. Luckily for Laing the foreman of a nearby construction site was more mechanically inclined than he and not only gave Laing sound advice (he had taken in bad fuel) and assistance, Laing also got a bed and breakfast out of the bargain. To this Laing professed of the benevolence to be found while traveling. "Blessed indeed is the man who shows genuine kindness to a stranger, to one he has never seen nor will ever see again."

In Nebraska he met up and rode with his brother Jim, who had ridden south from his home province of Manitoba. "Frat," as Laing called him, traveled with him into California. He also met other Harley riders, found a brotherhood amongst them when he needed company and rode with them for some of his journey.

In Omaha he ate at a lunch counter and marveled at the simple pleasures of chatting with locals where he found "life is considerably simplified; there is a fraternity of Dirt...a better democracy."

He doffed his cap at many an impressive vista, from the slow power of the Mississippi to the heights of Berthoud Pass. But all through it, the highs of meeting people, rumbling along pleasant country roads and stopping to witness beautiful landscapes, and the lows of mud roads and waiting out a rainstorm under a tarp, there was the love and respect for nature and the open road. Even in Nebraska, when a meal consisted of some bread begged from a farmhouse, Laing chose to see things on the bright side. "The most pleasant thing I can recall of that meal and the place," he wrote, "was that an Arkansas kingbird had a nest in the upper frame of the wind-mill."

From Colorado on, the roads would dry and battling road conditions would fade into the distance. As Laing put it, "to sit up loose and easy and open the throttle a little meant quite a new joy of the road."

On August 8th, 1915, Laing rumbled into San Francisco after riding 3,842 miles, but not before having to fight through alkali poisoning picked up from drinking well water and a seemingly endless series of tire punctures. In retrospect he would term his transcontinental journey as "a mighty film, a four-thousand mile reel of wonderland, the like of which may never be seen within four walls."

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Laing and his brother Jim ride a dry lake bed in Nevada with throttles wide open.



Laing in 1914 beside his first Harley-Davidson motorcycle.