

View from the Bunker
by Bob Higdon
Part 129: Giants and Ghosts

Twenty motorcycles were already parked in front of the Two Rivers Saloon and Hotel in Niobrara, Nebraska when I arrived. Another twenty would appear before the cold, wet day ended. We had gathered in this tiny town in the middle of the Great Plains to meet the past and the legends who inhabited it.

Geographers know Niobrara as both one of Nebraska's oldest towns — Lewis and Clark camped in the area at the confluence of the Missouri and Niobrara rivers — and its newest, having twice been relocated to higher ground following flooding by the Missouri. Motorcyclists know it as the ancestral home of Danny Liska, who, as a result of some truly remarkable globe-trotting rides, was featured in ad campaigns for BMW bikes in the 1960s.

His story was, as he knew it would be, Hollywood drama at its finest: In 1959 a young Nebraska farmer leaves his wife, Arlene, behind to take care of the cattle, buys a BMW street bike, and heads off to Alaska, more than 3,200 miles away. Sticking the front wheel in the Yukon river, he then points the battered machine toward Ushuaia at the very bottom of South America. Along the way he hikes through the Darien jungle between Panama and Colombia and works as a stand-in for Yul Brynner during the filming of the movie *Taras Bulba* in Argentina.

Home again in Niobrara after 95,000 miles, he could have rested, knowing that few men in motorcycling had ever accomplished as much. But rest was the last thing on his mind. He negotiated the purchase of a new R60 through Butler & Smith, then the importers of bikes to the U.S., and took delivery of it in Germany from Schorsch Meier, another hero of the BMW marque. Between September 1963 and November 1964, Liska paralleled his earlier ride, this time from the top of Norway to the bottom of Africa.

Years later he recounted the first half of the odyssey in a self-published book, *Two Wheels to Adventure: Alaska to Argentina by Motorcycle*, almost 800 photo-laden pages of a writing style that mirrored his riding style: Straight ahead with blunt force. His world, like his photos, was black and white. If there is even one example of subtlety or nuance in the entire book, I cannot recall it. Still, you put it down with almost palpable relief and a sense that Liska has left nothing on the table.

But he had, and the truth was that in a couple of significant ways, his travels had been vastly different from what he had described.

In the first place, the rides had not been straight-shots from one pole to the other but in fact were frequently interrupted by Danny's having to return home for money, supplies, and energy. He was not a rich man — not many small-scale cattle farmers are — and even modest support from the few sponsors he was able to attract was still years in the future.

Even stranger was the complete absence of Arlene's name in the book. There are a thousand photos, mostly of Danny and spectacular landscapes, but not a single one of her. And yet, except for some brief intervals, she had been

riding two-up with Danny on both expeditions almost every mile of the way. What in the world had happened?

Enter the other woman, this one an eerie Colombian mystic with the improbable name of Regina 11. Danny, always a sucker for the supernatural, had met her on one of his passages through the country. Eventually he divorced Arlene, moved to Colombia, married the seer, wrote his book, and in the process eviscerated his former wife's part and presence in their travels.

It was a repudiation of almost Soviet-like coldness, where in the 1930s disfavored party officials found their names removed from history books and their images cut from group photos and replaced by bookcases and lamps. Indeed, the back cover photo of *Two Wheels to Adventure* shows Danny on the bike with an enormous parrot. But the bird is a superimposition. If you look carefully, you can just make out the edges of a second rider. It is, or was before the purge, Arlene.

Now 79, but neither looking nor acting her age, Arlene still resides in Niobrara, though the Bigfoot farm where she and Danny lived in happier days was sold out from under her years ago. In the hotel that night, May 12, she did a slide show of her travels in Africa with Danny.

"We picked up the motorcycle in Germany. It didn't run right. When we brought it back to Munich, Mr. Meier said that Danny wasn't operating it properly." A BMW rider in the back of the room said to laughter and cheers, "Some things never change."

Arlene clicks through the slides. They are of uniformly poor quality — Danny and Regina took all the good ones to South America — but there are some of a young, smiling, auburn-haired woman who sits on a motorcycle in the Transvaal on a summer's day. A few years in the future her life will come crashing down around her, but tonight she looks at the fading Kodachrome with a trace of a smile. She loved that man. You can feel it. She loves him still.

Eddie James, the American Motorcyclist Association's director of road riding and one of the usual suspects on the Iron Butt Rally, has dedicated himself to ensuring that Danny and Arlene receive the recognition they deserve for their incredible accomplishments. He might be the son they never had. Though he has seen Arlene's presentation before, he still concentrates on her intently as she speaks, perhaps assisting her with some kind of telepathy that Danny would have appreciated.

She shows us part of a zebra skin and some pelts from long-haired monkeys, handling them tenderly because they and a few other objects are all that she has left and they are literally disintegrating with age. Then, for the first time, her voice catches.

"I told Eddie this might be a difficult night for me," she says softly. "Today is the anniversary of the day that Danny and I were married. And this is the tenth anniversary of the day that he died."

He was a large man, and it would take something equally large to kill him. Leukemia did it. He wanted to be sent off like a Viking, incinerated on a pyre. Regina saw that it was done. It broke Arlene's heart.

But five years before his death I had had a chance to meet Danny for just a moment and to tell him how thoroughly I had enjoyed his book. A huge grin appeared on his face and I was instantly enveloped in a bear-hug. That was Danny, either suffocating or erasing you. Now, in a small town in the Plains, I had met the other side of an historic coin, a smaller but just as passionate and just as determined Liska. Together they had circled the globe; I felt a circle close as well.

Genesis 6:4 begins, "There were giants in the earth in those days." *There sure were*, I thought as I rolled past what once was the Bigfoot farm the next morning on my way to Omaha. *There sure were*.