

# WITH THIS WING, I THEE WED

By Jo Sternberg • GWRRA #177622-01 • Tremont, Illinois

Some years are more eventful than others. For Dick & me, 2005 was definitely eventful. In March, I retired after 34 years of registered nursing. The next month, I married Dick (already a retired general contractor).

For our honeymoon, at the ripe old ages of 62 and 66, respectively, we took our first motorcycle trip together, *my* first trip ever, on a 3-week honeymoon to Florida and its Keys. And, by the end of June, we were on the trip of a lifetime—a journey that would take us 8 weeks, and over 10,000 miles, to several western states and Canada.

Dick's 2004 candy apple red Honda Gold Wing, affectionately named Boris, and its color-matched trailer named Natasha, would be our constant companions. Boris, fully rigged with a 6-disc CD player, radio, CB, headphone speaker helmets, and cup holders (aahh), pro-

vides a ride smoother than most cars.

For a trip of that magnitude, we carefully mapped out every step of the way. This consisted of one of us saying, "Hey, let's go to such-and-such a place," followed by the other one saying, "Okay, sounds good."

So bright and early (actually *semi-early*, we're not talking 4 a.m. here) on the morning of June 23, we left our home state of Illinois in search of the hills and curves bikers crave (and which, among the vast acres of corn and soybean fields that help feed the nation's belly but not the biker's soul, are not abundant there).

Dick, a California boy by transplant, could not wait to get out of town, and I was right behind him—literally and figuratively.

**June 23 (Day 1)** Across the mighty Mississippi River at Hannibal, Missouri. South on SR 79, a gently curving, hilly ride along the west banks of the Mississippi.

*At an overlook, we stop to take pictures of the meandering river.*

*It is here that I first encounter other travelers who are fascinated with the Gold Wing and our planned trip. (Dick is used to this, having ridden Gold Wings for more than 30 years.) In this case, it's an elderly couple. The husband, of course, wants specs—engine size, tongue weight, gadgets (all the bells and whistles)—all asked with a look of "I wish I were you" in his eyes. The wife's questions and comments are far less technical: "Aren't you afraid?" (no) "Is that seat comfortable?" (very) "Do you get a lot of wind?" (yes, if I'm answering; no, if Dick is replying) "It looks like fun" (it is). And almost every-one wishes us a safe trip.*

**July 2 (Day 10)** South on I-25 from Pueblo to SR 165 northwest to the beautiful San Isabel National Forest.

*San Isabel campground's elevation is high—well over 7,000 feet—which computes to COLD at night. After purchasing light roll-up fleece bags and extra warm underwear for me, we are more comfortable, but I still balk at moving from the semi-warmth of the tent to the maxi-chill of the morning air. "Wienie" becomes my permanent nickname.*



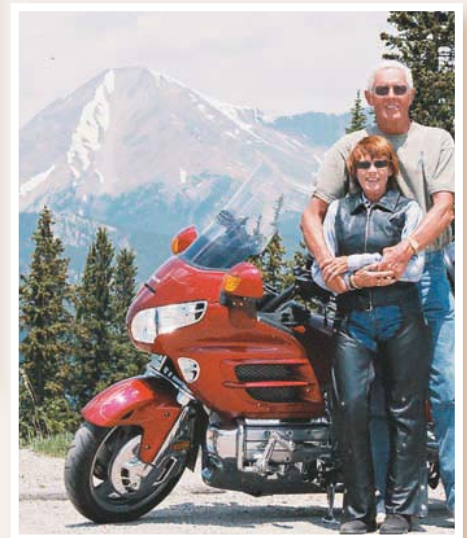
We fell in love with San Isabel and made good use of our time there, taking day trips without the trailer and exploring the heavily forested mountains, interspersed with magnificent western valleys. Here we selected a convenient "walk-in" site where the bike and trailer were visible and we set up camp for the next four days.

North on SR 165 to 96 west, through beautiful curving mountains, and on to the picturesque town of Westcliffe, nestled in a deep valley between the Rocky Mountains on the east and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the west. North on 69 to US 50, a coast-to-coast highway many bikers are familiar with.

West on US 50 to Monarch Pass.

*The stop is peppered with bikers. There*

*are trikes, Gold Wings, Harleys—all outfitted with the stamp of individuality of each biker, like stuffed animals, Sturgis stickers, club stickers, and chrome, chrome, chrome and more chrome. Like butterflies to flowers, they all drift together to compare bikes, routes, rides.*



Our first big pass—the Monarch Pass—at 11,312 feet and situated at the Continental Divide.

**July 8 (Day 16)** Onward to Rocky Mountain National Park and a loop of grandeur unrivaled by most national parks. Pine trees reach to the sky, all in dense forests that fade into the starkness of timberline areas, rocky and inhospitable except for the bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and bears that own the slopes.

At Fall River Pass (11,296 feet), we stop at the scenic overlook. As we stand chatting with other bikers, four or five Japanese tourists emerge from a van and immediately begin excitedly talking to each other and motioning to Boris and Natasha. All have cameras and begin posing with Boris. Dick grabs his helmet and pantomimes for one of the guys to put it on, then motions him to the seat. Delighted, the new "biker" poses happily, helmet and all. To me, the novice, this is such a cool example of communication among Honda lovers. No language barrier here—Boris becomes our interpreter.



There was nothing boring on the Million Dollar Highway. The view of Ouray, Colorado, as you climb behind it to the south, is as beautiful as a mountain village in Europe.

Next, US 550 south from Montrose to the Million Dollar Highway. The San Juan Mountains and the Uncompahgre Forest offer spine-tingling, heart-stopping hair-pin curves, no guard rails, steep climbs, tunnels, and mind-numbing heights, accompanied by the white water rushing of the Animas River.

Then, on to Utah.

The ride so far has been grand. But while traveling through Utah and its extreme heat, it finally occurs to me that nothing is occurring to me. I can't think, I feel nauseous, and I've stopped sweating—heat exhaustion. Like a fool, (and not wanting to be a "wienie" again), I delay mentioning to Dick my rather alarming progression from "I'm hanging in there, Honey," to "I'm going to be sick right over the side of this bike, and I don't want to puke on Boris." At a gas station on the outskirts of Moab, the thermometer on the bike reads 109 degrees F.

Dick grabs me off the bike and half-

carries me into the air-conditioned station. The guy behind the counter glances up and, without missing a beat, points to the rear area. "Take her into the beer cooler," he orders. The beer cooler? Little do I know that, while in Illinois beer cooler are glass-fronted, refrigerated shelves, in the West they're like big, cold, walk-in closets. Aah, relief.

I learn a valuable lesson as a newly-wed: Always tell your husband if you have heat stroke. We spend the night in a hotel in Moab.

US 50, especially through western Utah and Nevada, is termed "The Loneliest Road in the U.S.," and with good reason. On and on you ride, occasionally meeting a lone truck, car, or motorcycle, but no towns or gas stations. Infrequently, some dusty gravel crossroad leads to who-knows-where.

Then, the jewel that is Lake Tahoe, Nevada. Paradise at 78 degrees F and shaded.



The entire Lake Tahoe area was great for riding. Hiking paths abound, many of them leading near the beautiful green waters of Emerald Bay.

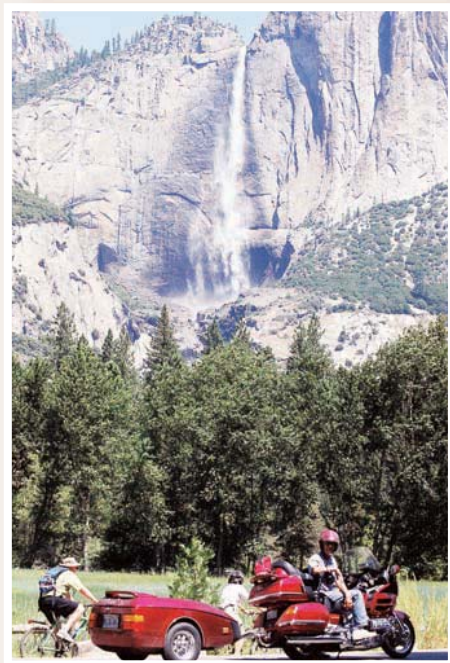
**July 21 (Day 29)** Next, Yosemite National Park. Although Dick is Nebraska-born and raised, he was also a California transplant for over 30 years and spent most of his free time cruising on various Gold Wings and camping throughout the state. Yosemite Valley became a favorite spot.

We are in the habit of reading in the tent after supper before our "last walk" each night to the restroom.

One night, we return in the nearly pitch dark down the pathway I had "memorized." Dick thinks we should go one direction, while I say I know the "right way" is past the "big stone." Ten minutes

later, we are completely, irrevocably lost. It is so dark that all the flashlight points out is more darkness. Isn't Yosemite kind of well-known for its BEARS? I think to myself.

I can picture good old Boris somehow starting himself (like Herbie the Lovebug) and cruising around the campground in search of his idiot owners. Finally, we see a campfire and some teens playing cards. We realize our campsite is right next to theirs!



Yosemite is home to several rather stupendous waterfalls, but the real kicker was Yosemite Falls, fifth tallest falls in the world. It drops in a series of three falls for 2,425 feet, spraying rainbow mists for hundreds of feet. It's no wonder that Ansel Adams, world famous photographer, spent so much time here.

From Yosemite, south on 41 to Fresno then on toward King's Canyon and Sequoia National Park. The road is a fantastic circus ride of curves upon curves.

It's Dick's favorite ride, and I can see why. Boris takes the turns and reverses in stride; he and Dick love the far leans, so close to the pavement you can hear it whisper, and I just relax and roll with them. It's great.

Next, California Highway 1, the wild coastal road with the mighty Pacific thrashing the shore beside it. Santa Barbara is Dick's choice for our starting point on the California coast. Our first glimpse of the Pacific.

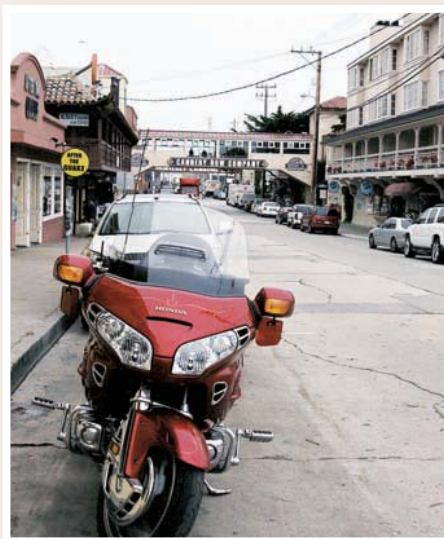
As we come sailing over the last bit of hills into Pismo Beach, Dick yells into the headset, "Here we go, Babe! The beach is just down this hill!" And, then, amazingly,

*we come full speed into—fog! The fog is so dense, we can only peer in the direction of where the coast should be. Oh—and the cold! The kind of wet cold that seeps instantly into your bones and just sits there. Of course, there is an immediate stop for Wienie Woman to exchange her shorts and tank top for anything warm. “Yes,” Dick nods knowingly, “this is just the morning fog. It lifts in the afternoon.” That seems reasonable—I mean he is a California boy, after all. Just one small note, though: It is now 2 p.m., and there doesn’t appear to be much “lift” time left.*

Santa Barbara has less dense fog and hundreds of pleasure boats bobbing gently in the marina waters that line the seawall. You can just smell the money. Ah yes, and, unfortunately, if it’s not a particularly breezy day, you can also smell the fish.

**July 25 (Day 33)** Days on the entire California coast are foggy, with occasional weak bursts of sunlight along Highway 1 north. But there are still lookout stops to be made, elephant seals to watch, and sea lions to photograph.

Further up the coast, Big Sur and Carmel and Monterey proudly display the scenery of which dreams are made (along with a lot of movies). There, the Monterey pines cling tenaciously to their stony cliff homes, blown into bending submission by the Pacific winds as they pay misshapen homage to the power that molds them. Their scrubby branches are eerily beautiful, like large bonsai trees coaxed into twisted shapes by a master gardener.



Cannery Row, of John Steinbeck fame, in Monterey, California, was still a vital scene of hard-working fishermen and cannery workers who make their livings converting “chicken of the sea” to edible portions for our tuna salad sandwiches.

Highway 1 and 101 reunite at Leggett, and Richardson Grove is about 10 miles north.

At the campground gate, the attendant promptly directs us to the tent area. We quickly realize, to our dismay, that while the road to the trailer areas leads back into a beautiful stand of redwoods, the tent area is across a roughly planked bridge and onto a loose gravel road which leads to another planked bridge. Dick, “Mr. Schmooser Extraordinaire,” turns on his baby blues and pleads our case—we get reassigned to a glorious campsite right in the middle of the redwoods.

**August 1 (Day 40)** Humboldt Redwoods, a short distance north, and Avenue of the Giants on the way. Magnificent redwoods, so tall they block enough sunlight that only the hardiest survive to attain the age and height of each towering neighbor. At ground level, ferns the size of small trees flourish in the damp, dark quiet of their redwood protectors.



Our last campground in California was Del Norte Coast Redwoods State Park. Although the Park is close to the coast, it’s hidden protectively against a tall, tree-thick hillside, and the entrance to it winds so far downhill we began to think we’d misread the signs.

**August 6 (Day 45)** On to Oregon and Coos Bay and—sun! The marvelous Oregon coast is the stuff of calendars and paintings and photographs. Great gray rock boulders stick out of the foaming waves as if tossed there by a sea god. Pines skew at every angle, growing anywhere a seedling could grab a foothold, sending tenacious roots far back into the rocks for support.

Our whole ride up the Oregon coast remains pretty chilly (57-60 degrees F), but the sun hypes our spirits considerably, and chaps keep me warm. Boris and Dick have high fun leaning from one curve to the next, each time both of them wanting to keep testing the limit of lean. I just whoop for joy and lean right along with them. Dick is not a daredevil; it’s just that he and Boris are like a wrangler and his cow pony—they work as one. I swear I can literally sense the gleam in the eyes of the

man and the bright glimmer on the lights of the bike as the three of us take those switchback curves, Natasha following silently and competently behind.

Next morning, on to Victoria, British Columbia, and Vancouver Island.

At the ferry, Dick moseys off to chat with some other bikers. There is a Gold Winger from Minneapolis and two Harley riders from California. Like good friends apart for awhile, these guys step into conversation as though they’ve never left it. It all revolves (and always does) around the trips, the roads, and the bikes. It’s never boring to them, and to me—the new kid on the block—it is equally exciting.

Closer to Victoria, it’s sunnier and warmer, in the high 70’s. Victoria is a colorful old port city that still richly displays its Victorian roots. Sailboats rock gently in the lapping waters of the calm harbor, and renovated buildings radiate the grandeur of the town, named for England’s favorite queen.

Next morning, Nanaimo. Along the way, giant colorful totems, designed and constructed by First Nation’s people, Canada’s Native Americans, smile a welcome to their lands.

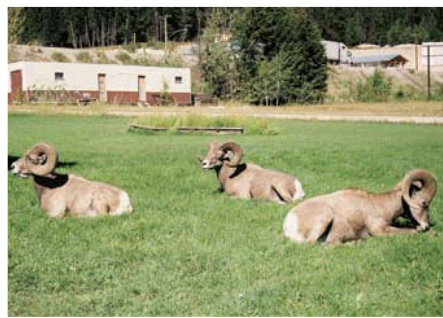
Then a ferry to Vancouver, the beauty and size of which is awesome. Beyond the city’s skyline, the shadowy outlines of the magnificent Canadian Rockies paint an inspiring backdrop.

**August 11 (Day 50)** Whistler to Kamloops and—stupendous scenery! The Coast Mountains, though their peaks are not as high as the big ones in the Colorado Rockies or the West Coast Cascades, are almost all covered with snow.

A distinct advantage of being a passenger is the luxury of looking around. Unless we stop for pictures, Dick understandably misses a lot while keeping to the business of driving. My one regret is that I can’t relieve him now and then. But Dick, Boris, and I have already agreed that I’m never going anywhere near the controls of that powerful machine.

Canada 1 into Kamloops. Sprinkled all along the valley floor are immaculate ranches and hay and ginseng farms—lots of them. Leaving the valley, around a timberline curve, lies Kamloops Lake, a gigantic piece of sparkling glass placed in a life-sized diorama. Hawks are frozen in flight over the water, trees and runabout boats decorate the lake, and, here and there, a cabin or a boat dock seems placed just for effect.

Near Glacier National Park, we spot a likely campground—Whispering Spruce—on a bluff overlooking the Kicking Horse River. An access road veers off the highway, past a motel, and on to the campground. As we turn the corner at the rear of the motel, we drive past what we think are five or six statues of bighorn sheep placed around the motel lawn. That is, until one of the statues lifts its head!



As we stopped to get a picture of the bighorn sheep, a pickup driver pulled over and called out, "You want to stay back from them, they'll charge and butt... Rutting season is the worst." Wow, who knew? They looked so cute!

Yoho National Park into Alberta and Banff National Park (weather, at times, only 39 degrees F). On to Lake Louise, where the temperature is 60.



Lake Louise was a mesmerizing teal gem, tinted by glaciers and free from the haze of pollution. Clark's Nutcrackers and Black-Billed Magpies, strikingly beautiful birds of the region, twitter and hop along the footpaths, skittishly flying off if a tourist ventures too close.

Further south, the valley floor becomes more rippled and hilly, like loosely laid carpet that has buckled.

Passing through Columbia Falls, Dick spots a car wash, so we detour to give Boris and Natasha a bath. Boris, coated with dust and grit from the mountain roads, fairly quivers with the excitement of a shampoo. The wash bays are full, crammed with other bikers with similar thoughts, and soon five or six gleaming,

wet bikes stand in the sunshine, impatiently holding still for their wipe downs. "Oh, don't you just look so pretty," I croon to Boris as I clean the bug remains from his eyeball headlights and windshield. I think Boris secretly likes my ministrations but has to stay quietly tough. I'm sure he snorts "Girls!" to the other bikes while they roll their "eyes" in snickering consensus.

**August 15 (Day 54)** Flathead Lake through Flathead, Lolo, and Helena National Forests—more of the same, beautiful mile-upon-forested-mile of dark green pines standing shoulder to shoulder, each crowding for a piece of life-giving sunlight.

Near Helena, the forests thin and the higher ridges and passes mellow down to rolling foothills, gradually leveling to wheat-filled valleys. Gigantic John Deere harvesters chug determinedly through the fields on a single mission—get the wheat in before the snow falls. Tomorrow is Yellowstone!

Livingston, and another beautiful 60-mile ride through Paradise Valley to Yellowstone's north entrance. Ranches are bordered in rustic-looking, but solidly built, fences, sleek saddle horses watch from their lush pastures, log cabins are tucked beside the swiftly churning Yellowstone River, ribbon roads trail up toward the Madison Range or the Absarokas—all like some cowboy cornucopia.

At Old Faithful, we settle Boris and Natasha into a spot near other bikes to let them all "chat" while we join about a million others to watch the astonishing spectacle of that giant scalding geyser that, for so many years, for so many people, has provided entertainment.

Down the road, Cody has a Honda dealer, so we delay travel the next morning for an overdue oil change. Sludge-free, Boris is feisty and ready to roll, and Dick lets him fly for a bit on the empty highway.

**August 18 (Day 57)** The 8-week threshold and the Black Hills.

"We could stay two nights," I tell Dick, "and we should be able to see everything." (I plot out a 48-mile detour along US 14 to see more sights.) "Mm," Dick frowns, "I don't want to go so far out of the way. Let's just go on to the Black Hills." Slyly, subtly, it has begun—the push to get home.

Have you ever ridden a spring horse?

It is fractious, not eager to leave the confines of the barn but willful and anxious to return home. Dick and Boris are like that—the two of them seem hell-bent on getting home. Sightseeing no longer matters—the barn is calling. All I can do now is hold on. Natasha rolls doggedly behind, determined to keep up. By the time we reach Mitchell and make a cursory tour of the Corn Palace (which is actually pretty incredible), I surrender to Dick and Boris and let them have the reins.

Full black thunderheads over the western side of the Black Hills, then pouring, blowing, lightning-cracking rain. Wind howls down into the canyons and up again into the hills. Off to the east is sun, down out of Rapid City and the Black Hills. To the west, the clouds stay black and the wind wails.

**August 20 (Day 59)** Omaha, Nebraska—Dick's hometown.

It is Dick's first time back since age 20. The visit is poignant—both in the memories revived for him and my gratitude for being able to share those memories and to create new ones.

Before I met Dick, I was only a car driver—ordinary, generic. But now, I, too, am a biker—privy to that exciting "other-world" that only bikers know. Even as a Co-Rider, I am near to intoxication when Dick leans us far over into a turn then leans the bike the other direction for an opposing turn. And there is also that "woo-hoo!" joy of the flat-out run on deserted straightaways. It is wonderful that, having met later in life, we can both have so much fun together.

Finally, Iowa—and miles and miles of corn and soybean fields once again.

At 7 p.m., after 59 days and 10,357 miles, we pulled into our drive. It was good to see the house waiting for us.

But I'll always remember the warm, snuggly feeling of resting in our camp chairs at dusk after a great day's ride—a chill in the air, hot coffee in our mugs, a comforting fire emitting a rosy glow that encompassed the burnished outline of our beautiful Boris and Natasha and, most importantly, the peaceful contentment of sitting beside the man I love so much.

For two people, newly-married, in their 60s, it was a monumental undertaking, but we did it. And for us, it was not the end of a wonderful trip; it was just the first chapter in a marvelous journey. ●