

The Bar in the Middle of Nowhere

Kate Birdsall, July 9, 2024

It's funny how the memory of a place will stick with you. Perhaps it was what happened there. Or perhaps it was the place itself. But it could also have been your situation – your feelings at the time, or where you were on your life's journey. Perhaps you don't remember it well, but it stays with you, in your memory or in your heart.

One such place for me is a small bar/cafe in southwest Montana. I don't remember what it was called, and at this point I'm not even sure I know the name of the town. Still, it warms me to think of it. I have no idea why.

Polly and I were riding southwest from Bozeman, Montana, or perhaps from somewhere farther west. We had been on the road for about two months on this particular trip, following our noses to see what we could see. We'd ridden our motorcycle west from Maryland to Memphis and then on to Taos and Santa Fe. We had gradually worked our way north through the Colorado mountains and the vast open spaces of Wyoming onto the high plains of central Montana. We were staying on the two-lane roads as much as possible. After all, we were in no hurry. We had no destination and no time when we had to be anywhere. Each night we would check into a motel, unpack the bike, find something to eat, and decide which road to take the next day.

After working for more than 50 years, it was a gift to ourselves – an adventure we were grasping before the opportunity escaped us. When we were considering it before we retired, an acquaintance told us of his brother who had planned to tour the country by motorcycle but had broken a hip two months before retirement. He could no longer ride, so now he and his wife were touring in a motorhome. Appalled at the idea of being reduced to careening down the road in a huge box instead of slipping through the open air, exposed to the heat and cold, the wet and wind, the smells and the feel of the air – being part of it all rather than just peering out at it – we retired as soon as we could, packed up the bike, and headed out.

On this day in southwestern Montana, we had been riding through the forests and hills on roads that tourists and commercial traffic rarely used. We weren't on the roads marked in red on the map but on the ones in black, and maybe the thinner black lines at that. It was a beautiful June day, and at this altitude and latitude it was still late spring, with everything a rich green. There was little traffic and we could set our own pace, charging up the hills and sweeping around the curves. Most of the land was public forest, but there were also ranches and some small settlements. It is a beautiful part of the world.

In the afternoon, we came to a town and decided to stop. There was an acceptable motel next door to a rustic-looking bar/cafe. I always preferred to stay where we could walk to supper. We rode ATGATT – all the gear all the time – and while it was no problem during the day, it was a hassle to put it all on to ride to a restaurant a mile away. Also, I liked a beer with my supper. Operating a motorcycle requires greater focus and more alertness than does driving a car, and I never wanted to get on the bike after drinking a beer. Polly thought the place looked OK. She



had a knack for finding good and interesting places to eat. There had been some memorable misjudgments, but her average was exceptionally good.

We unpacked the bike and settled into our room. Then we walked next door to the cafe. Inside it was rustic, with bleached wood, evidently decorated by the owner rather than a designer. There were tables, a few high-tops, a bar, two dart boards, and in the back a pool table. It was a welcoming place. In this out-of-the-way town, it would rely more on local patrons than tourists or through traffic.

We sat at a high-top and ordered a couple of drinks – draft beer for me, wine for Polly – and pulled out our cribbage board and a deck of cards. It had become our habit to play a couple of games while we unwound before ordering our supper. We had found that the farther east we traveled the more eyebrows it would raise, but here in the mountain west no one ever thought anything of it.

After supper we went back to the room, and the next morning we packed up the bike and headed somewhere else. On that trip we had supper in 89 different places, but for some reason the feeling of this particular one stuck with me. Was it the ride through the countryside? The town? The place itself? How we were feeling that day? That the planets were aligned somehow? Was my warm memory of this place dependent on everything going on that day? Or was it the couple of hours we spent inside, relaxing, eating? Perhaps it was a bit of all of the above.

Some years later, after Polly had died, I found myself riding alone south from Missoula toward Salmon, Idaho. The road crosses Lost Trail Pass at the Montana-Idaho border, and a road that I'd never taken before heads east back into Montana from the pass. I turned east to see where it lead.

The road wound down and past Big Hole National Battlefield, where in 1877 the US Army massacred 90 Nez Perce men, women, and children as they slept. Nowadays Big hole is a beautiful, peaceful area of forest and grassland, ranches and some farming, at about 7,000 feet elevation.

(A hole is a large, flat valley among the mountains, as in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. That kind of land formation is called a park in Colorado, as in North Park and South Park. If there is a difference between what is called a hole and what is called a park, it eludes me.)

I rode on along more empty roads through more forest and ranches. Late in the day I dropped down off a ridge into the town with the bar next to the motel. Even though I had come from a different direction, I recognized it. I checked into the motel and walked next door.

The bar was pretty much as I remembered it – sun-bleached wood, dart boards, tables and high-tops and bar, and a pool table in the back. I sat down and ordered a draft beer. With no companion I couldn't play a game of cribbage, so I either read or wrote in my journal and watched the other patrons. It was a nice place – plain, relaxed, ordinary, welcoming – and it made me happy to be there. So it might have something to do with motorcycling through a beautiful part of the world on a fine day. It might have something to do with the remoteness. It might even have something to do with the alignment of the planets.

On this night, I ate my supper and went back to the motel. The next morning I left, riding to somewhere else, carrying the feeling of this place with me.