

FLOOD RUN

By Molly McGuire

Floods on the Upper Mississippi River are difficult to predict, with one exception: on the third Saturday of April thousands of motorcyclists flood rivertowns from Prescott, Wis., to Winona, Minn. The roar of motorcycles echos off the bluffs and along streets lined with motorcycles. Spectacular views of the river, steep bluffs, Lake Pepin and small towns make the journey more important than the destination.

April 17 will mark the 45th spring Flood Run, an event that began during the big Mississippi flood of 1965, when a few young motorcyclists rode from the Twin Cities to Winona to help fill sandbags. A September run was added in 1984, because the spring run was so much fun, according to Brian Denny, Flood Run organizer since 2000. The Flood Run is now trademarked, and businesses on both sides of the river sell food, beverages and Flood Run merchandise to the pilgrims.

The Flood Run differs from some other large motorcycle events — such as the Sturgis Rally in South Dakota and the Sturgis Mississippi River Motorcycle Rally in Davenport, Iowa — in that the ride and stops along the way are the main event. Some riders continue downriver to La Crosse or Prairie du Chien, Wis., while others loop around and return home the same day.

Riders choose their own routes and places to stop. They are encouraged to buy a \$10 wristband, with most proceeds donated to the Gillette Chil-



Bikes line Highway 35 in Maiden Rock, Wis. (Harald Nendza, West Bank Motorcycle Club)

dren's Hospital in St. Paul. A portion of the proceeds were donated to Minnesota City and Stockton, Minn., after those communities suffered flood damage in 2007. Motorcyclists rallied to help clean up Nelson, Wis., after a tornado in September 1990.

Starting out at Lake St. Croix Beach, Minn., on the St. Croix River, riders head downstream to its confluence with the Mississippi. Some turn west to follow Highway 61 to Hastings and down the Minnesota side. Others turn east to Prescott, Wis., and continue down the Wisconsin

side on Highway 35. Some riders cross the river at Red Wing, Minn., Wabasha, Minn., or Winona. Organizers call Highway 61 the "nostalgia route," because it was the route of the original riders in 1965.

Riders hit the roads from all directions until their numbers swell into the thousands. A few years ago the Pierce County, Wis., sheriff estimated that 35,000 bikes rumbled down Highway 35. Bars, restaurants and other businesses in small towns along the way put out the welcome mat, selling food and beverages, and providing music and porta potties for the crowds. Some businesses offer discounts for those with wristbands, and some of the retail sales proceeds go to Gillette's as well. Riders from as far away as Texas, Kansas, and Illinois join the fun.

Riders enjoy the camaraderie, scenery, friendly folks along the way and the opportunity for some fun riding, especially on the "alphabet roads" in the hills of Wisconsin, which offer an escape from the crowd, plenty of scenery and twisty turns. Many businesses in the towns along the way make out pretty well, especially those that sell food and refreshments. What happens when a couple on the Flood Run finds that perfect antique or painting? Joan Schimbeno from the Chickadee Cottage in Lake City, Minn., feels that many participants return later in the season to visit.

A bunch of motorcycles riding into a small town can create problems. Prescott residents complained



to Police Chief Mike Bondarenko about crowded streets and the lack of parking. Working with motorcycle groups, the city came up with "Project Respect" in 2009, where the city provided overflow parking for motorcycles and asked bikers to ride "safe and sober, park legally, refrain from loud, unnecessary acceleration and obey traffic laws." Bondarenko feels that this cooperative approach helps maintain peace during the couple of hours that the bikes are in Prescott.

In the village of Maiden Rock, Wis., (pop. 130) Highway 35 is lined with parked bikes, and sometimes riders are backed up for two to three miles on the highway, according to Flood Run organizer Denny. Neil Gulbranson, the chief deputy of Pierce County,

claims that they have not had serious problems, because bikers are "99 percent respectful." He feels that since this is the first trip of the season for many, their driving may be a little rusty. There have been accidents

The spring Flood Run is the only event where duty is mandatory for all 20 deputies.

related to the heavy traffic, but not "drunk and disorderly" tickets.

Winona County Chief Deputy Ron Ganrude feels that preparation and a number of visible officers has helped when bikers reach a popular gathering spot in Minneiska on Highway 61 in the afternoon. The spring Flood Run is the only event where duty is mandatory for all 20 deputies. Lately there have not been many major problems.

Ganrude feels that many bikers are very conscientious about drinking and driving, and will only have "a drink here and there." Deputies park their squad cars out front on the

Left: A group enters Maiden Rock from the north. (floodrun.org)

Right: All ages and an occasional semi share the road. (Harald Nendza, West Bank Motorcycle Club)

grass in Minneiska and take a hands-on approach, meeting people and mingling with the crowd. He remembers the time recently when deputies approached a "stumbling guy" on his way to his motorcycle and stopped him from getting on. He feels that for the number of people, it's actually a good event.

Probably the Flood Run incident that got the most press recently was the September 2004 ticketing of Sam Tilley, 20, after police clocked him at 205 mph on a Honda RC51 on Highway 61 in Wabasha County, Minn. Was he really going that fast? Probably not, but he pled guilty, thus avoiding a trial with all those pesky details.

Is there a difference between riding in Minnesota and Wisconsin? Let's just say that Wisconsin has a reputation for being a little more welcoming and Minnesota for being a little more careful. 🍷 🏍️

Molly McGuire is managing editor of Big River.



Flood Run participants relax on the shores of Lake Pepin. (Harald Nendza, West Bank Motorcycle Club)