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Cool Motorcyclists Tour the Sierras

We worked blister-rust-control on contracts for the Forest Service in the Sierras in summer. Every summer was notable for several reasons, usually having to do with the wildlife in the forests where we worked. That summer was most notable because we had the largest crew of any of the summers.

We had to scurry to get enough contracts to keep everyone working.

Brother Gerrit and I left the rest of the crew camped in the forest, working toward completion of 240 acres of blister-rust control, and we climbed on his motorcycle. He took the front position and handled the controls of the machine. I rode behind and handled the passenger's position. We rode the graveled logging road to the highway and rumbled 650 cubic centimeters of internal combustion engine over mountain highways toward the next group of lots advertised for bid, north of us about 200 miles.

Summer heated up northern California's Sierra Mountains' west-facing slope, above the Sacramento Valley. Mountain roads curved and twisted enough to provide satisfaction for two young men leaning cooperatively toward the pavement left in every left turn and right in every right turn, the way a motorcycle cruises mountain roads with sunshine and shadows of trees alternating on rapidly-falling-behind pavement.

The wind created by our speed along the slope of the mountain didn't cool us much. We felt as hot as the hot day. We had played in the American River when we worked on earlier

lots, swimming and browning in summer sun so much that seriousness about working hard and earning money had descended on us as strongly as summer heat descended on the mountains we rode along, rumbling motorcycle sound reflecting from sudden rock bluffs and trees.

Two on a motorcycle leaves little room to carry any luggage. We had no sleeping bags, no supplies with us. Closer to the Oregon border, we tired, worn down by heat, by leaning, by our restricted positions, vibrations of the machine, by the constant roar of the two cylinder, lightly-muffled motor.

We pulled off the pavement and conferred at the edge of a small mountain town. Gerrit said, "We could make it all the way to the lots before dark, but then we'd be out there, and all available beds would be in here."

"Let's get a room and look at lots in the morning. I like roughing it, but sleeping on the ground with no cover at all doesn't appeal to me."

We rented a motel room, an almost alien luxury during our summers of work in the woods, when we camped out where we worked and cooked over a campfire or on a campstove when the woods heated too dry. Late afternoon sun dropped behind high mountain peaks.

Hot. Sweaty. I would really like to have some clean clothes, free of perspiration, dust, and road grime from 200 miles of motorcycle travel. I leave my boots by one of the beds in the small motel room and step into the shower otherwise fully clothed. Once over lightly with soap as the hot water flows, and a rinse. Then I undress, repeat the shower, shut off the water, wring out my clothes.

Gerrit says, "Looks like that would work," and he does the same thing.

We hang our clothes around the room and sleep as soundly as tired motorcycle riders until early sun begins to heat the morning. We quickly breakfast in the closest restaurant, then rumble off the highway, up a logging road.

We stop several times and refer to a map, looking for flagged areas in the forest. Our damp clothes keep us cool and wide awake in the wind of our travel. Mountain sunshine dries our clothing by the time we park the machine and walk through the forest, trying to understand how long it would take us to do blister-rust-control work here. We sit on steep green slope beneath pine trees, watching birds of the mountain and talking about what prices we should bid on the areas we've just looked at.

On our journey south, back to camp, we stop and jump in the river. The work part of our travel is finished, and we have time. Hot afternoon shines on the glimmering asphalt road.

We swim, rinse our clothes and wring them out. Climb back on the machine. By then, we understand the price for personal air-conditioning is only the time it takes to dunk and wring out our clothes. We ride cool part of that afternoon, leaning toward the pavement in turns, rumbling back across the west-facing slope of the Sierras.