

GOING DOWN IN TEXAS

By W Grant Norman

The Kawasaki Concours 1400 rose quietly up the small Texas hill, the asphalt Farm to Market Road 4927 passing lazily under the large sport tourer's tires. At 60 mph the big ZX14 motor was hardly working. The quiet auto-like exhaust gently broke the early morning fog of the Texas summer day. A little twist of the throttle, and the torquey silver machine gulped down another hill so matter-of-fact that it might as well have been level ground.

FM 4927 from Boleria to Amigo is not known to many. Just 16 miles from Interstate 10 it is lucky to have a single car travel it each week. It's a mystery the road still exists at all; both towns have long been just a few deserted buildings, trash, weeds and broken fences, a combined population of zero. Yet, FM 4927 sweeps 22 miles through the rugged Texas hill country southwest of San Antonio. Asphalt baked in the hot sun and shouldered by a mix of rocks, brush, and wild flowers, it is an empty road going from nowhere to what used to be.

US 23 runs south from I10 passing the outer remnants of Boleria. The Petersons had a Texaco station at the intersection for several years, but it closed 5 years ago. The closest gas now was down another 18 miles to Gadton, a small town of about 2,000. From Gadton, US 23 heads 142 miles to the Texas southern border.

At the Amigo end of FM 4927, another highway, FM 4393, heads southeast from I10. Although a little more traveled than FM 4927, FM 4393 runs along the base of the hills bordered on both sides by the enormous Wilder ranch.

FM 4927 is a one-person road. The kind of empty highway that allows the mind to think, wonder, decide new routes to lean into a life. Of course, it could be made a buddy road, with two or three quick footed sport bikes, hop-scotching, leap-frogging, revving along, but deep down, it is a one-person road. A road for the lone rider, a rider with plenty of torque, looking to discover not only the banks and turns through twisted hills, but also oneself.

I rode FM 4927 for such discovery this summer Tuesday. With each mile, both myself and the C14 stretched the tension from our bodies, felt the release of weeks of city scurrying, deadline meeting, relationship dealing. We blew out bags of old exhaust, cleared the resins, opened wide, and breathed. Air swooshed through the new filter, swirling down the ZX14 throats, as I gulped the cool fog and felt every cell tingle. We lumbered along, at peace, two machines working together, with just a simple goal of riding on.

Carrump! I was going down. What happened? In a slow-mo shot from an action movie, I saw the asphalt coming. The big C14 was down ahead of me, already sliding, sparking on metal parts and exhaust. Then kathump! Concrete! My hip cracked. A lightning bolt blasted up my back and down my right leg. Arms now tucked, I rolled over and over following the path of the sliding bike, heading for the edge of the road. Each time I flipped over, I felt another tear in my riding jacket, my jeans ripping down to the flesh. "How was this even happening?" I thought. I wanted to try and get up but knew I couldn't because the rolling hadn't stopped. Then the C14's tires slammed into a clump of rocks, pushing the bike almost upright again, as I rolled toward it. Then...

I woke from the throbbing of my hip. The tears in my jeans were bloodied and my right arm and shoulder ached. I laid back and looked up at what was the beginning of a

July Texas day. I lifted my head then let it fall back to the ground. The helmet clunked against the rocks.

After a few minutes, I began to remember what happened. My first thought was I've got to get the bike up and get it started again. I got to get out of here and back to where someone can help. I tried to push myself up. Pain blasted through my hip. I couldn't move my leg. Not only was my hip probably broken, but the big C14 was laying across my leg, my foot trapped in the gap between the front tire and the radiator. The handle bars were twisted across my side, the right grip resting on rocks, propping the weight of the bike above me. There was no weight on my leg, we were just tangled in such a way that with an injured hip, there was no way I could free my right leg. I reached with my left hand and turned off the ignition, then laughed to myself, "At least the battery won't go dead!"

I closed my eyes. I tried to take deep breaths and relax, but the more I tried, the more I tensed up. I wasn't worried about the injuries as much as being trapped, pinned by almost 700 pounds of plastic and steel. Without even being able to crawl, I knew it would be hard to get someone's attention.

Twisting my head and looking back, I could barely see the edge of the highway about 20 feet behind me. I was just off the shoulder and below the road. I tried to imagine the view from the road, wondering how easy I'd be to spot. Surely, the first car Or bike that goes by will see me. They'll call an ambulance and I'll be out of here before lunch.

A regularly traveled road, maybe, but it was very common on this road to ride the full 22 miles without seeing anyone. Especially a weekday, even the sport bike riders would be few, if at all. I realized this could be a no survivor accident.

With that thought, a shiver ran through my body. "I need to get out of here!" I said out loud. I struggled against the mass of motorcycle across my leg. The bike started to twist and move a little. I realized the right handgrip was keeping the weight off my leg. If I moved the bike too much, the grip would slip and drop the full weight of the bike down on my leg and stomach.

Great, even if I could get this beast to move, it'd would crush me." My head, wrapped in my full-faced helmet, fell back against the rocks. I closed my eyes, let out a deep sigh. The pain in my leg and hip eased as I drifted somewhere between sleep and semi-consciousness.

Cheaply paneled walls, blond 50's furniture, horrid green-flowered heavy muslin drapes, I was in The Trout Motel - Benton, Arkansas. The \$17.00 a night motel of the 90's. The wash basin stood on two chromed legs, filled with the iron red dirt from the crystal mines.

We had spent the day digging for quartz crystals at a mine north of Hot Springs. For \$10.00 you could dig all day. About every 30 minutes, a large bucket tractor would come up the long road from the bottom of the mine and dump a fresh load of red earth. Most of the 20-30 people digging in the mounds would mill over to the new mound to be "first" to sift through the pile.

After about an hour and a dozen or so "finds," I moved to the covered office porch. Inside the office, there were "cleaned" crystals ready for purchase, a few snacks, and some pictures of the largest finds thumb-tacked to the walls. The porch had an old swing, several old chairs, and an old dog that made friends with everyone. A water spigot was marked with a sign "Do not wash crystals here!"

My brother and I had ridden up to Hot Springs area to meet our mother passing through on a trip from California to West Virginia. We'd left Houston in 24 degree weather he on his Kawasaki CBX, me on my Honda CX650 Custom. No fairing, no electric suits - just plenty of layers of long underwear, jog pants and Levi's.

It's about a 6-hour trip out of Texas from Houston to Texarkana - the first five we spent shivering. Now, the fall sun warmed the Arkansas hills to a pleasant breeze that fluttered across the porch. It was one of those times to sit back, relax and just feel the quiet air and sunlight, watch as the children ran from mound to mound, crystal excitement in their eyes.

The pain in my hip slapped me out of the dream. The clock on the Concours showed 9:12. I'd been dreaming for about half an hour. Again, I tried to move a little. My leg and hip throbbed, and I couldn't even see how my foot was tangled on the other side of the front wheel. Like in some cheap western I saw a hawk circling above - I laughed to myself and said "That's enough of this crap!" I pushed myself against the tank of the bike. After struggling a few minutes for maybe an inch, I again let my head fall back and felt the clunk of the helmet against the rocks.

"What's this damn thing on for?" I said realizing I still had my helmet on. I released the chin strap and slid the black RF200 off my head. Gasping the fresh air, I felt the simple freedom of breathing easily again. I let my head gently lay back and found a clump of jagged rocks as a pillow. "This is not going to work!" I looked around for something to put under my head - nothing was within reach. "Great, I'm going to have to put that helmet back on or try to rest on a rock pillow!"

I started to reach for the helmet when I looked at my right saddlebag. "What's got into me - there's all kinds of stuff in that bag!" Taking the key from the ignition, I

stretched, twisting almost backwards to reach the bag. A little struggle and I finally got the key into the lock, turned it and when unlocked, I put the key back in the ignition.

Since the bike was not fully down on its side, the bag was able to open just enough so I could start pulling some things out. Rain suit, spare pants, maps, and magazines, I grabbed everything I could reach in the bag. I made a nice pillow with the rain suit and a couple tee shirts, then reached as far as I could into the bag and pulled out a plastic quart of Ozarka water. There was another quart in the other bag. I hoped I wouldn't need it - it'd be a real struggle to reach it.

After a few sips of the water and a few more deep breaths, I let my head rest on the makeshift pillow. The bike's clock - 9:50. I'd been there almost an hour and a half and I hadn't heard a single car go by. I closed my eyes and sighed. "I just don't believe this.

We were moving at a quick pace, following a couple BMW's along the Blue Ridge Parkway. My 9-year-old son, Wesley, clung to me — much like a baby crab hanging on to his mother's back. The road twisted left, then right, dipped down and up over a crest of the Craggie Mountains - nothing could match the beauty of the Parkway.

It was our third time down the Parkway - our first attempt to ride the full length from the start of it in Virginia to the end in the Smokies. We met a couple from Jersey on BMWs at a scenic overview and decided to keep pace with them for a while. Even at the speed limit of 45 mph, the Parkway was a fun ride - and though we occasionally pushed it beyond that, there was a tranquility in riding the road at its posted speed.

Like the other times, we rode on a weekday and avoided much of the traffic. I'd heard that some days during the summer months that the weekend drivers flooded the Parkway. We'd seen very little traffic and had most of the road to ourselves. The BMW's

started pulling away and I set back on the throttle and slowed to 45. "Enough playing tag."

I awoke to the sound of a train horn blasting. Sure enough, there was a set of tracks just a few hundred feet down FM 4927. I felt the rumble in the ground as train sped by. I knew I was out of their vision and besides, I figured they wouldn't be looking for someone on the side of the road. The rocks were also blocking my view of them so I couldn't even tell which way it was going - not that it really mattered - it just reminded me again of how I was pinned under the big Concours.

Even though I knew they couldn't see me, for a moment I'd felt like help was on the way. The rumble in the ground ebbed, replaced by complete stillness. Now it seemed even more hopeless — and I noticed for the first time the sun had heated up the day. It was too hot for my riding jacket and I dreaded trying to take it off.

Reaching over with my right hand, I grabbed the left cuff of the jacket. The pain in my shoulder jolted me for a moment. I struggled and pulled - a cramp shot through my neck - then I finally freed my left arm. Lifting my head, I reached back to the collar with my right hand and pulled the jacket all on to my right arm. I slipped my right arm out of the jacket and wadded it under my head as part of my makeshift pillow. A couple more sips of water and I laid back and rested.

The clock read 11:17. I thought again briefly of how cold it was on that October ride to Arkansas a few years ago. How the wind passed through just about every piece of clothing on me. What I would have given then for some of this heat.

Two more sips of water. I knew if I didn't somehow get covered from the sun that I'd probably die from heat stroke long before my other injuries did me in. The sun continued to blast its rays almost directly above me - and the cloudless sky offered no relief.

I opened the right-hand fairing pouch with the key and got my sunglasses. "At least my eyes won't be burned out!" I laughed to myself. I noticed I had a couple of large binder clips in the fairing pouch also. I chuckled over my wife asking me "Why do you have all that junk in there?" Now I could tell her, "For when I crash on the side of the road on a deserted Texas highway and I need something to help keep the sun off me!" She'd have to eat her words now!

I pulled my riding jacket out from under my head and stretched it out over me, then reached up and clipped the collar and left arm to the C14's windscreen. With the other clip I clipped the right sleeve and part of the back of the coat to my helmet visor. I set the helmet just behind my head and had instant shade.

The jacket hung too close to my face. I spent several minutes adjusting it. By moving the clips and enlisting the help of a couple of small sticks, my jacket lean-to soon kept all the sun off my face. A few more sips of water and I laid back and closed my eyes.

I floated over the road of small hills, over one, then another. The black plastic and vinyl seat below me, not a sound from the motor, no vibration, just the quiet of gentle wind passing over me. The sailplane whispered through the Arizona sky, along the foothills of the Sierra Estrellas. The variometer showed 100 foot per minute climb, a nice steady rate for ridge soaring at sunset.

I had to return to the sailport soon before the sun was gone - no landing lights or lift at night. But the ridge had captured me, my glider making lazy long figure eights in the rising air. I was part of the sky; I didn't want to leave.

I turned onto final and slowly pulled the dive brakes; air speed at 60 mph I watched the limp windsock hanging, silhouetted by the setting sun. More dive brake,

nose down, the S134 was perfectly lined up and heading down the runway. I flared out gently, then held the single wheel just inches above the asphalt. As I felt the gentle bump of runway below me, I pulled back on the dive brake with my left hand. As I pulled more firmly to slow the glider, the handle became the left grip of my ST. Instead of dive brake, I was squeezing clutch, shifting to 6th. The C14 eased along the Texas two-lane toward the sunset. I watched the speedometer slowly climbing to 70, then 80, then...

"Hey, man, wake up!" Someone shook my aching shoulder.

"Ow!" I squealed.

"Come on, wake up. You need to drink some water!"

Groggy, I looked up. The first thing I saw was a tattooed hand grasping my Ozarka bottle. He had a bandanna tied on his head and a leather vest. A manicured graying beard and gentle, deep blue eyes. "Come on buddy, you have to keep awake and drink some water. My partner rode on to the Interstate to get help! Come on, just hang on! We'll get you out of here."

The hawk continued circling in the summer thermal, twisting his wing tips ever so gently to keep himself in the rising air. I thought of the sailplane, the stick in my hand as I guided it gently along the Arizona mountain ridge. Peace spread through my body. I knew I was going to be okay. I knew I would survive after all and offered a grateful prayer of thanks. I smiled to myself, looked up and said, "Hey man, what ya' ridin?"