



MOTO MOUTH MOSHE

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"Bless Your Heart!"

This is a BMW club magazine, so I have to ask: Have any of you ever ridden an old-school Harley-Davidson Sportster over very long distances? Not the modern, cushy Sportsters with rubber mounted engines - the older models, with the booming, shaking V-twins rigidly mounted to the frames, leading to vibration levels that can only be measured on the Richter scale.

My first new bike was just such a Sportster - a 1998 1200 cc Custom, to be exact. This was the type of bike that grew hair on your chest and forced you to become intimately familiar with well-worn hand tools, oceans of Loctite, and colorful curse words.

That Harley beat me up, but I didn't notice. I just wanted to travel farther and explore more. As a newbie rider in the late 1990s, I was already planning a solo ride through the South, from New Jersey all the way down to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, then over to New Orleans, Louisiana, and back. Until that trip, I had never ventured farther south than Delaware, but I was about to learn some valuable life lessons from my new friends in Dixie.

Impaled by a spike

Because of woefully limited vacation

time, I had to slab it on the interstate from Jersey to Georgia on day one. I departed at 3 a.m. and somehow made it across the border into Dalton, Georgia by late afternoon. Suffice it to say that after sitting on that violent jackhammer of a motorcycle for almost 800 miles straight, I was in an absolute stupor. My backside felt like it had been impaled on a spike, my hands were completely numb, my arms were sore and lifeless, and my aching back was permanently locked into a stoop. I rumbled into a convenience store parking lot near my destination, dismounted, and stumbled inside to hunt for food.

After gathering up some snacks and water, I staggered toward the entrance, where a weathered old woman ran the cash register. Her white hair was pulled back in a severe bun, and her piercing blue eyes conveyed gentle wisdom coupled with a firm demeanor. She had deep laugh lines around her eyes, but even deeper frown marks around the corners of her lips, indicating a life of experience. She wore a simple yellow summer dress unadorned by any jewelry, but her posture was proud and strong. And I didn't actually observe any of that, because I never even bothered to look at her.

I threw my goods on the counter and started fumbling around for my wallet, as she attempted to start a polite conversation. "Hi, I'm Aida! How are you? Will that be all today?"

In typical New Jersey fashion, I

mumbled, "Yeah, yeah, yeah..." not acknowledging her at all. She bagged the items, and as I left the store, she called out "Bless your heart, young man!"

I'll never forget that phrase, or the way she said it, tinged with acid. I knew I had done something wrong but was frankly too tired to care. I fired up the Sportster, found a motel, and passed out cold (while still wearing my riding gear!) The next morning, I began to ruminate on the transaction at the convenience store. "Bless your heart" sounds so friendly! As a northerner, I had never heard that expression before, and was intrigued by how such a pleasant phrase could be expressed with such displeasure. There is only one way to clear this up. I cruised back to the store. As I entered the parking lot, Aida was sitting alone on the crumbling brick steps in front of the building, slowly smoking a cigarette. She wasn't exactly thrilled to see me again.

Southern Hospitality 101

I approached her and asked if we could talk, to which she agreed. As I explained where I was from and what I was doing, she realized that I had not been rude on purpose. She glanced at my Sportster and reminisced about how she had also ridden motorcycles when she was young. After a short silence, she brought out some iced tea, took one final drag on her cigarette, and offered to teach me the virtues of Southern

Hospitality 101. She spoke uninterrupted, for hours! I listened intently, determined not to repeat my mistakes.

Throughout the rest of the trip, I practiced southern manners as Aida had taught me: paying very mindful attention to the etiquette, courteousness, respect, and especially the speed with which I spoke to others. It was extremely challenging for me because, generally speaking, the New Jersian mindset does not place great emphasis on traditional manners, politeness, or small talk.

For example, in the South, "How are you doing today?" is a serious query that demands a granularly detailed, comprehensive response. In New Jersey, answering that same question with anything over two words would probably get you punched for violating

the few nanoseconds customarily reserved for conversations between strangers. Indeed, interacting with folks the "Aida way" was completely foreign to me - but I persevered at restaurants, gas stations, and hotels across the southland, continuously honing my newfound social skills.

After about a week of diligent training, I felt a definite shift inside myself. As a café waitress somewhere in Tennessee was painstakingly detailing how her day was going so far, I ceased feeling my instinctual anxiety during idle chitchat. I stopped daydreaming about ways to escape, and I began connecting instead. Before long, I

wasn't merely pretending to care, but I was actually interested in the goings on of perfect strangers. It was a revelation!

Unfortunately, just as I was getting the hang of it, the ride was over, and I was sentenced back to life in New Jersey again. New Jersey... where manners go to die.

Somehow, 24 years have flown by since that trip, when Aida the cashier first introduced me to Southern hospitality. I have been thinking about her often lately, because as I get older, I have come to see the prudence in her Southern culture. Much like motorcycling itself, there is infinitely more delight in slowing down and truly absorbing the local attractions than in flying down the dull grey highway at warp speed.

Thank you, Aida, wherever you are, for the valuable lessons - I haven't heard a "bless your heart" since!



Photo by Moshe Levy