

Maryland Supertech: All Airheads all the time

By Wes Fleming #87301

“YOU’RE GOING TO SUPERTECH, right?” Dale said one afternoon, less a question and more a statement of fact.

“Uh...sure?” was all I could manage to say. I was much more focused on keeping the rear wheel of a Slash 5 pulled toward the back of the bike so he could wiggle the transmission out. There was cursing and a little blood involved, but we finally managed to get the gearbox out without having to dismantle the bike.

Supertech. It wasn’t the first time I’d heard of such an event. My friend and occasional coworker Dale had

mentioned it before, likening it to a week-end of pure airhead technical bacchanalia, something that had to be experienced to be believed. Dale’s penchant for hyperbole aside, he ended up not being far off in his description.

“Yeah,” I finally said. “I’ll go to Supertech.”

Due to my hectic schedule (hey, the gig economy is ruthless!) and limited budget, I couldn’t go for the entire extravaganza, which started after lunch on Friday and didn’t break up until the coveted Dung Beetle Award found its way to greedy fingers at Sunday’s lunch. Instead, I committed to

getting up early on Saturday, driving the three hours to Easton, Maryland, and spending the day there. I promised my wife I’d be home for dinner, but that if she decided not to wait, I wouldn’t be offended.

I regret missing out on the social aspects of the Friday portion of the program; I suspect that’s when the networking got done. Saturday was business, when the knowledge transfers took place and the information flowed.

As I arrived, Kat and Paul Connell were getting ready to talk about the development of their LED instrument panel replacement cluster for airheads, something brought



about by sheer ingenuity and the desire to find a good solution for dim lights that fail. Instead of hanging out in the main building and listening to their whole presentation, though, I headed over to the Machine Shop to take in Bill Lambert's discussion of ethanol and the effect it has on these classic motorcycles.

Bill is a young guy—for an airhead rider, anyway—and beneath that full head of hair lies an inquisitive mind. He gathered a number of fuel additives that all claim to counteract the effects of ethanol in our gasoline and put them through a series of tests. We've been told that ethanol is destroying our motorcycles, even at the 10 percent saturation level, but Bill's demonstration showed that it might—MIGHT—not be as bad as we all think it is. He made no claims about E15 gas, though. Look for a future article breaking down Bill's findings.

For the second session of the morning, I headed over to the Rural Life Museum to listen to Tom Cutter's question-and-answer session. Tom is one of those guys who has forgotten more about airheads than most of us will ever know, and he's seldom (if ever) stumped by a question. His gift is his ability to zoom instantly from the big picture straight down into the weeds and get at the core of a rider's problem. His knowledge on tap is dizzying, and it reminded me that as the longer-toothed airhead experts retire and, unfortunately, pass away, a lot of knowledge is being lost.

Now, I'm not trying to say that Tom is nearing his journey to the Great Beyond, because he's not that old, but I am trying to say that events like the Maryland Supertech are absolutely, incalculably important in keeping our classic and vintage BMW motorcycles on the road where they belong.

Did you know, for example, that an R 65 LS from the early 1980s needs to have hardened valve seats installed or you're looking at major problems someday? Neither did I until I mentioned that I am looking at one of those being sold by an acquaintance as a bike for my kid and I to work on and for her to ride when she's old (and trained) enough. As a matter of fact, if I hadn't mentioned it at Supertech, it's quite likely I'd have never known it until it was too late.

Supertech organizer Mark Lipschitz took

care of lunch, providing two delicious soups for us all. I opted for the Thai-inspired one without meat, but there were a lot of grunting, smiling faces getting the meat-based soup shoveled into them. I even learned that what I thought was some exotic (and tough) nut in my bowl was actually a root, meant as a flavoring agent and not something you actually eat. Mark assured me it wouldn't hurt me, and I had no choice but to believe him and wait.

After lunch, I took in Todd Mullican's lecture and demonstration of his hand-made wiring harnesses. It's fascinating how simple and yet how critical the wiring harness on a motorcycle is. In the age of CANbus bikes (and post-CANbus bikes, even), we kind of take the wiring harness for granted, but on an airhead, you simply can't do that. When (not if) you have a wiring problem on one of these old bikes, it'll take patience and more to track it down, and the end result is that you may find yourself stripping the bike far enough to replace the entire harness. With the care and attention Todd and his wife put into these harnesses, there's a source out there that you know has put in the attention to detail needed to craft a quality item.

Wandering out of Todd's demo, I saw a group of guys watching somebody roll around in the gravel. The guy rolling around in the gravel wasn't actually rolling around, but he was struggling mightily to change the rear tire on a venerable snowflake wheel. Will Andalora is his name, and he's the Airmarshal for Maryland. I was lucky enough to witness his ascension to that role at another tech day last summer. For the Airheads Beemer Club, the Airmarshal is the lead organizer for a state, and every state has at least one. It's not unlike an appointment to the Supreme Court, better known for its life sentence nature rather than some more reasonable term of service.

Will got the tire changed, and used the air puffing out his R 80's left cylinder spark plug socket to inflate it. The gathered crowd murmured their approval (there may have been a golf clap as well) as Will pattered around on the bike to make sure the bead was properly set. Most of us headed back over to the main building to

listen to Brook Reams talk about his amazingly organized method for cleaning, machining and cataloging airhead parts, but I was drawn into a conversation and ended up missing Brook's entire talk.

On the three-hour drive home, I had an epiphany of sorts. It went beyond realizing that the legacy of the airhead era of BMW motorcycles was driven deeply into my 2005 R 1200 GS by BMW's engineers and design staff, but it's something I didn't appreciate when I owned an R 90/6. The guys that ride airheads aren't just a bunch of seemingly cranky guys complaining about how things were better back in the good old days (though there are a handful of those). Rather, they are the source of knowledge that bridges the gap between the way BMW Motorrad used to do things and the way things will be done in the future. They hold the institutional knowledge of the motorcycles that connects the first single-cylinder R bike to the latest whiz-bang K bike.

There's a reason why BMW's radical electric motorcycle has what looks like horizontally-opposed cylinders on its twenty-third century engine. BMW understands what these airhead riders live, sleep, eat and breathe: that taking care of a marque's history is as important as guiding its future. It may be European emissions standards that force BMW to continually improve the boxer-engined platform so many of us know and love, but it's also clear that these older motorcycles are still ridden and loved deeply by those who own them.

Maryland Supertech is an annual expression of that love and an important way for the next generation of airhead riders to keep their bikes on the road for many years to come. One thing is for certain, next year I'm going to try a lot harder to come early, stay late, and as a result, soak up more knowledge from this motley band of airheads.

For more information about the Airheads Beemer Club, MOA Chartered Club #214, find them on the web at airheads.org. You can also find them camped in a clump at the MOA's annual rally, proudly flying the flags that sport their motto, "SIMPLE BY CHOICE." ☺