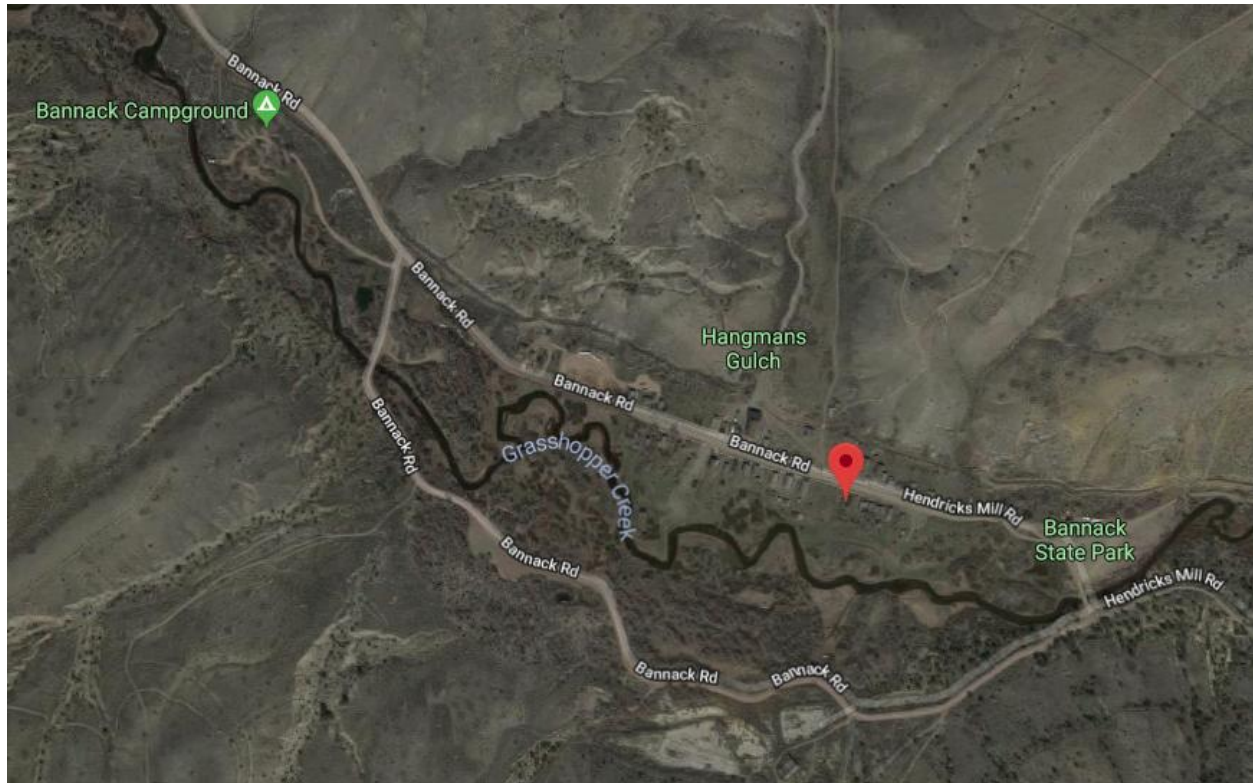


## “OICE” and the Continental Divide Route

It was late in the afternoon on August 1, 2008 when Steve Irby and I rode into Bannack, Montana, the first territorial capital of that state. He was aboard his 1150GS and I was riding my R12GS. We were 9 days into a 2-week journey on the Continental Divide Route that runs off-road from Mexico to Canada. We were hot, we were tired, and we were thirsty. We’d been drinking water all day to keep up with the heat, but we needed something stronger, something to lift our spirits and ease our pain.



One of the joys Steve and I like to experience at the end of every day’s ride is a cup of medicinal spirits, preferably blended Canadian whiskey, always straight, and on ice. As we sit around the campfire and discuss the ride, we sip our drinks as the evening eases down around us. It’s a sophisticated highbrow experience, where we discuss life’s important issues like chain lube, tire pressure, riding style, oil levels, gloves, boots, and other things. We cook dinner as we sip our drinks, and thanks to that medicine we’ve been known to ignore the occasional bug or pine needle that drops onto our plate.



Usually we plan ahead so we have ice in our saddlebags. We stop at the last town we're passing though, fuel up, pick up something for dinner and some fruit for breakfast, then we put in the last 100 miles on the trail before we pitch camp. But today was different; we didn't have any ice. Our journey had taken us through some pretty remote country without any stores, and the travel was rough, to say the least. We were dodging thunderstorms that would've made our passage impossible, so we kept pushing ourselves until we got to "civilization". We finally made Bannock and settled into the nearly empty campground. A bit of paperwork to document the day's ride, then the chores began.

Bannack is not what you'd call civilization. It's a well preserved ghost town that hails back to 1862, when gold was first discovered on Grasshopper Creek. A mining center sprung up overnight, and within year the town boasted 3,000 people, a post office, several saloons, and the usual businesses needed to support a frontier town. Some were good, many weren't. Most are still standing in remarkably preserved condition. A ride to visit Bannock is well worth your time. Plan to spend most of the day climbing around inside the buildings.



Henry Skinner owned Skinner's Saloon. He did double-duty as the Sheriff of the area, supposedly bringing law breakers to justice, but he also had other plans. His saloon which was the most notorious establishment in town, known for fist fights, knife fights, and gun fights. Even today you can go inside the saloon and see those bullet holes in the walls.

Steve and I counted at least 6 large caliber holes testifying to the mayhem that went on inside the busiest building in town. The saloon served whiskey and beer, but mostly whiskey, and it's pretty certain the quality of their spirits was well below what Steve and I enjoy. According to the brochures that describe the town, most saloon shootings didn't result in many people being hit by gunfire, because they were too intoxicated to hit their target. And while the gunfire played out, the piano player didn't stop playing and he barber didn't stop cutting hair or beards as a patron sat in the saloon's barber chair.

Ever heard of Wild West Vigilantes? The town of Bannock invented that term. It seems the area had a reputation for the gang of highwaymen who would rob (and usually kill) miners who were traveling the area with their hard-earned gold diggings in their saddlebags. The gang was headed by none other than

Sheriff Henry Plummer. During one 8-month period Henry and his “Gang of Innocents” (as they called themselves) murdered more than 102 poor souls.



Sheriff-road agent Henry Plummer's scaffold. He had it built for a horse thief, but swung from it himself on a cold, snowy January night in 1864. (Historical Society of Montana, Helena)

Because the Sheriff was the leader of the Gang of Innocents, justice was somewhere else to be found in that territory, so the citizens of Bannock had to take matters into their own hands. On December 21, 1863 a Vigilance Committee was formed with the charter of bringing down the Sheriff and his henchmen. Henry and two others were soon captured, and on January 10, 1864 they were hanged on the hill above town. Henry watched from his own jailhouse as the gallows were made ready, and when he was standing above the trap door his last words were, “Please give me a good drop.” They did.

This is the jail house where Henry spent the last days, and the other photo shows the iron rings in the floor where prisoners were chained lest they try to escape. Steve and I had hoped that the State Park Visitor's Center would be open when we arrived that evening, but it had closed hours ago. There was no ice to be found, and our maps showed the closest source was 45 miles away in Wisdom. We didn't have the energy to ride that far, so it looked like we were going to have to drink our whiskey “neat” without the benefit of cooling ice. Neither of us looked forward to that ignominious experience.



We seemed to be alone in the campground even though it was a Friday night in the middle of summer. Not a soul to be seen. But across the far side of the campground I saw a bit of white between the trees – it was a small motor home. I'm an RV'er when I'm not riding motorcycles, and I knew that RV's had freezers, and freezers make ice, and ice is what we so desperately needed. Time for action!

I grabbed a bowl and headed in the direction of that motor home. Steve asked me where I was going, and I told him I was on an Ice Hunt. He tried to talk me out of bothering the folks in the RV, but my mind was set and nothing could keep me from my quest. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

As I got closer to the RV I could hear the sound of an air conditioner, a good sign that someone was

home. I rapped on the door with my knuckles. Nothing. I rapped again, much louder. I heard noises inside and suddenly the door flung open, barely missing me as it swung on the hinges.

A wild-eyed man stood in the doorway, dressed in his underwear, his hair messed, and his eyes bleary, a clear sign that he'd been sleeping. I realized in an instant that I'd woken him by banging on the door.

"What do you want" he growled. Perhaps it was more of a shout but I'm not really certain, because my "fight or flight" instincts were on high alert and ready to engage. A person's sense of hearing dims under those life-or-death moments.



I held up the bowl with two hands and in my best Oliver Twist schoolboy British accent I said, "Please, Sir, can I have some OICE?" "What?" he snarled. Again, I said, "Please Sir, can I have some OICE". The second time I said it I smiled sweetly, and hopefully very innocently.

The man grabbed the bowl out of my hands and slammed the door in my face. I stood there

rather stunned, pondering the situation. Did I just lose my favorite bowl, the one I use for water and breakfast and dinner and the occasional oil change? Was the wild-eyed man getting his gun, bent on revenge for waking him from his afternoon nap? Was Bannock about to see Murder #103?

I looked over at Steve who was wisely hiding behind a tree. He held up his hands as if to ask "what's going on?" I raised mine in a sign of "I don't know". I waited, poised on the balls of my feet, ready to take flight at the sound of a cocking revolver.

From inside the RV I heard banging and pounding and swearing. I was just about to run for the motorcycle and beat a hasty retreat to the safety of the nearest town and an honest Sheriff, when the door flew open again. The man was holding my bowl filled to the brim with glistening ice. He pushed it at me and before I could thank him he slammed the door in my face.

Nonplussed I walked back to camp. Actually I think it was more of a John Wayne Swagger. I felt pretty good about myself – I'd stared Death in the face, and won. I had my precious ice, enough for several cups of whiskey for both me and Steve. Pouring the amber fluid over those ice cubes was one of the highlights of our 2-week journey. As we sipped our treasure we cooked and ate our freeze dried meals. Slowly the sun set on our peaceful camp which was made complete by a crackling campfire. All was well in the world.

Suddenly out of the shadows a figure appeared! It was the man from the RV, holding a HUGE bowl of ice. He apologized for his earlier behavior and offered us more frozen delights. We shared our whiskey

with him and as we talked we learned that he was an avid motorcycle rider. He had many stories to tell about his time on two wheels in his earlier years. He didn't ride anymore but he knew the things that only motorcyclists know. He could talk the talk because he'd walked the walk. We learned that he owned a ranch in New Mexico that we'd travelled through a few days earlier. He was eager to learn about our journey and said our meeting made him think about getting back on two wheels again. That was a good thing to hear.



The next morning the RV guy (I've forgotten his name) came over with coffee for me and Steve. He watched us break camp and pack the bikes. As we rode away he wished us safe passage on our journey. Over the years I've had many unexpected meetings when I was on 2 wheels. This one was the best. Even today Steve and I still refer to ice as "OICE" and we say that word with a strong British accent. Then we giggle like schoolboys.

On several occasions since that journey we've found ourselves in other campgrounds, without any OICE for our whiskey, but being ever so bold as I was during that episode ten years ago, we haven't had to drink it neat (yet).

David Petersen,  
aka Mr. BestRestWith Steve Irby

For a look at more photos from our Continental Divide Adventure go to:  
<https://sirby.smugmug.com/Motorcycles/My-trips/Steve-and-Davids-Continental/>