

# IRON BUTT PROFILE

## VONI GLAVES



**TEXT BY TOM LOFTUS • PHOTOS BY PAUL GLAVES**

*Voni Glaves is a giant in the IBA world. She is an Iron Butt Rally finisher, has won the Women's Division of the BMW Motorcycles Owners of America (MOA) annual mileage contest seven times and the overall mileage contest in 1999. She has ridden in all 50 states, 13 Canadian Provinces, Mexico, as well as seven other countries, and she has amassed over one million documented miles on BMW motorcycles. She was awarded the Friend of the Marque from BMW AG and was recognized for Ambassador status in the BMW MOA. But, as with many long-distance riders, these remarkable accomplishments don't define her.*

## THE EARLY YEARS

**B**efore Voni started riding her own bike, she enjoyed being a pillion on husband Paul's bike when they took short trips around the neighborhood. In 1975, she tried riding a 185cc Suzuki dirt bike in an alfalfa field because it looked soft and wouldn't break anything. Until then her excuse not to ride was that "Paul's Yamaha RD250 was simply too big." By her own estimation, she rode over 100 miles before even leaving the yard on their rented country farm. Her decision to ride was necessary since taking family vacations by motorcycle with their two kids — 8 and 10 at the time — required an additional driver. She was 29 years old at the time and in the next seven years she managed to ride eleven thousand miles, mostly around the gravel roads near their house, on family vacations, or to work where she taught elementary school students with learning disabilities in Lone Tree, Iowa.



rallies. Like Voni, they had to get back home for work on Monday and, therefore, had to be home by Sunday night. The appeal for Voni was to get to her destination, but also to see how far she could safely push herself. Like many Iron Butt riders, she enjoyed challenging herself for the excitement that comes after successfully finishing bigger and longer rides.



Voni rode Paul's bike until she was able to get a 1974 Yamaha RD250 and on Mother's Day in 1977, Paul bought her a black BMW R60/5 "Toaster Tank." She's been riding Beemers ever since. No one, least of all Voni, could have predicted that 24 years later she would have ridden more than one million BMW miles.

## INTRO TO LD RIDING

Nine years later Voni learned about riding long distances when Paul joined an unconventional group in Lawrence, Kansas. These riders thought riding a thousand miles in a day was fun. She thought Paul was nuts because at the end of the ride he always ended up back home. Voni thought, "If I'm going to ride that far, it should at least be to someplace new."

What really sparked her interest in long-distance riding, though, were the friends who attended weekend motorcycle

For her first sixteen years of riding, Voni had a huge advantage that other riders can only dream about — traveling with her chief mechanic, who also happens to be her husband. She didn't ever have to worry about where they were going or how far. Her first solo long-distance ride was in 1991, but it didn't start out that way. The plan was to ride with several of her friends to the first ever BMW Lunatic Fringe Rally in Canada. As the time for departure neared, her friends dropped out one by one leaving her with the choice to either not attend the rally or go it alone.

Voni had taken a lot of long day rides on her own, but never anything requiring an overnight stay away from home. Her main concern was that if she had a mechanical issue she might be stranded. When she told Paul she wasn't comfortable riding alone so far from home, he said, "You should still go. Did you think one of the other women who were planning to ride with you would be able to fix your bike if it broke down?"

Although she found it intimidating, with Paul's gentle encouragement Voni set out on her own and by the end of that first day she was 600 miles from home. She knew how to gas and she knew how to go, but she didn't know how to stop. By the third day she was confidently choosing her campsites, setting up her tent and planning the next day's ride. At the rally, she was greeted by like-minded people and immediately felt at home. After the rally and a safe return home, Voni's confidence in herself had grown to the point where she no longer felt so

# VONI GLAVES

apprehensive about taking solo overnight sojourns. She still says, "If I quit being afraid, I'll quit riding. Some fear is good. Terror, not so much."

## FIVE KEY INFLUENCES

Like many long-distance riders, Voni's first IBA challenge began out of necessity. She was taking summer classes for her master's degree and had a test mid-afternoon in Kansas, but wanted to attend a seminar Paul was hosting at the BMW rally in Morganton, North Carolina the next afternoon. She left not really sure she could make it all the way, but she decided to try. Voni stopped overnight at a motel for a short rest and still made it with minutes to spare! When she got to Morganton, she found that she had overcome her two biggest challenges: fear and the need for sleep. This was her first unofficial Iron Butt ride and soon thereafter she met a Heartland Riders Club Challenge to make it official.

It was also at this first BMW rally that she met the women who became her early influences and inspiration: Fran Crane, Karol Patzer, Ardy's Kellerman, Phyllis Lang, and Mary Sue Johnson (Suzy Q).

"At first, these wonder women seemed invincible; they were doing unobtainable rides. But little by little, each of them shared their very real human side and like women of the Iron Butt Association continue to do, they encouraged and advised. I

learned that my own limits were mostly in my mind. Most of all I learned that what the world told me was impossible to do could be done safely and sanely and that the rewards were immeasurable. But the most important lesson I learned from them was to dare."

Voni started competing in the BMW MOA annual six-month long mileage contest that runs from mid-April through mid-October. In her first year of solo riding, 1991, she won the women's division. If she's not winning, as she did again in 2010, she usually finishes in the top three and still competes every year.

Balancing professional life and personal life with LD riding can be difficult. By the time Voni got serious about riding long distances, her kids were grown, she had finished her master's degree, her parents were both doing well, Paul was successful in his job as a Community Development Director, and as a result, she had more free time during

accomplishment was to ride 500 miles a day for 72 consecutive days in the summer of 1999. That was part of a personal challenge to see how many miles she really could ride during the six month BMW MOA Mileage Contest. It turns out that number was 73,660 of what she calls sMiles. Needless to say, this kept her chief mechanic very busy for the better part of six months. And while Voni was not consciously training for the Iron Butt Rally, it was inevitable that she'd eventually participate in the foremost LD event of its kind in the world.



PHOTO BY TRICIA TAYLOR



Later, at a Texas barbecue hosted by noted LD rider Ron Ayres, Voni received encouragement to enter the Iron Butt Rally from the same women she considered the big dogs and pioneers of the sport. They encouraged her to believe that if they could do it, so could she. Fortuitously, Mike Kneebone was also at the barbecue. Voni approached him and asked shyly about the possibility of riding in the next IBR. In typical Kneebone fashion, he answered, "I thought you were going to ask me a hard question," adding it was Voni's 1999 72-day ride that earned her a spot in the 2003 Iron Butt Rally.

Voni rode the 2003 IBR with Paul, who had also ridden it four years earlier in 1999. Voni and Paul arrived at the finish in Missoula, Montana, eleven days after the start having achieved their main goals without any major mishaps. Interestingly, each of the BMWs they were riding had clocked over 300,000 miles.

The end was most memorable, however, when they were met in the dark with hugs and salutations from two people who happened to be early legends of the sport, Ron Smith and Connie Fitch, but

the summer. While attending another BMW National Rally in 1996, she went to a seminar presented by Karol Patzer. This is where she first heard about this thing called the Iron Butt Rally. Even though Voni thought she was crazy, Karol had planted the IBR seed.

## FUELING THE FIRE

Inspired by Karol and the rest of her role models, and fueled by her own passion for LD riding, Voni's next major





Voni didn't know that at the time. "Since then, I have made it to the start and/or the finish of every Iron Butt Rally to personally congratulate and hug the riders. I know how much it meant to Paul and me when we were greeted by Connie and Ron and I want every rider to know that someone recognizes they are doing a most amazing thing — they've crossed a line by doing something most riders can't even imagine."



*BMW Motorrad adventurers — but while many ride tens, or even hundreds of thousands of miles, two American women have racked up a record few could even contemplate. Ardys Kellerman and Voni Glaves are officially recognized as the first female BMW riders in North America to cover one million miles.*

"I accomplished this milestone on 15 different bikes, although more than a third of the miles were on my favorite, a 1994 R1100RS that I purchased new in 1993. Everyone calls this one *Big Red*, although her formal name is *Ruby B. Goin' Y'all*. I keep coming back to BMW because my mechanic-husband has learned so much about how they work that I'd

have a hard time changing brands! They've been amazingly reliable for us and I appreciate the technology — especially ABS brakes."

Voni argued with Paul over buying *Ruby B.* since she just knew it was too expensive to buy, insure, ride, and it was brand new and a sport bike at that! Now over 360,000 miles later, it's clear she lost that argument. Besides the 1994 R11RS, she currently has three

other bikes in the stable: a 1991 K75S, a 2007 F800S, and a Yamaha TW200 dirt bike, proving she doesn't only drink Kool-Aid from the BMW well.

## PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

One of the biggest challenges facing LD riders today, according to Voni, is an increase in traffic, which makes it more difficult to maneuver safely, and also that other drivers have so little regard for motorcycles. I think a lot of us who have been around awhile have observed the same thing.

Her advice to new riders of this sport is that when setting up the bike; make sure everything about it is as safe and comfortable as you can make it. Voni feels the GPS is the one device that has had the most impact on the long-distance riding community. She adds, "GPSs and computers haven't really leveled the playing field in rallies as much as they have changed the playing field in long-distance events." Voni currently uses a Nuvi 265 but (like a lot of us) would like to find another Garmin 2610.

Her current challenge is going for the second million miles or as she states on her Facebook page, "Occupation: Rider working on my second million sMiles." This time she gets to count all her miles — not just the BMW miles — as she'll be adding dirt bike riding in the mix. —



## ONE MILLION DOWN; ONE MILLION TO GO

On August 29, 2011, Voni met her close friend Ardys Kellerman at the Red Mountain Overlook in Colorado on US Highway 550 — also known as the Million Dollar Highway — where they rode the last eleven of their million miles on BMW motorcycles together. To put this in perspective, that's 40 trips around the world. But what really makes this milestone even more unusual is that she accomplished it accident free — something very few can claim with less than one trip around the world. "Tipovers don't count," she said with a smile.

BMW Motorrad USA and the BMW Motorcycle Owners of America recognized their remarkable achievement by presenting each with a unique award and certificate. From BMW Motorrad USA: *Travelling epic distances is nothing new to*

