

Biographical Statement of Daniel Jay Liska and Arlene Block Liska in Support of a Joint Application for Admission to the American Motorcyclist Association's Hall of Fame

Ride to any of the wild places in the world today — the windswept steppes of Central Asia, the breathless Altiplano of South America, the frozen tundra of the Arctic — and you're likely to be following tire tracks laid down by adventurers like yourself. Follow them onward and they could lead you to any of the four points of the compass. But trace them back to their source and you'll end up in Niobrara, Nebraska, birthplace of Danny Liska, who with his wife Arlene laid the foundations for adventure touring, inspiring not only generations of two-wheeled world travelers but also the dual-sport motorcycle design pioneered by BMW in 1981. These two nominees to the AMA's Hall of Fame set motorcycling and the motorcycle industry on a new course.

At the age of 12 Danny found a Standard Oil map of the Pan-American Highway. "When nobody was watching," he wrote years later, "I would pull it out from beneath my bed, and over and over again plan my life of adventure along the longest road in the world — from the northernmost wastes of Alaska to the southern tip of South America."

On his 16th birthday he bought his first motorcycle, a 1936 Harley-Davidson. Three years later he met Arlene Block, like Danny born into a family of Nebraska farmers. They were married on May 12, 1951.

In 1958 he bought a BMW R60. In late July of the following year he set out for Alaska. Over seven weeks he spent a total of \$200; dipped the front wheel of the bike into the Yukon River at Circle City, Alaska; obtained an Alaskan title and license plate for the motorcycle; and returned to Niobrara via a bike gathering in Dodge City, Kansas, where he won an award for the longest distance traveled. If there is an earlier instance of a rider from the continental U.S. reaching this far north on two wheels, we are unaware of it.

Press reaction to Liska's trip was immediate. It was reported in newspapers and magazines, including the December issue of *American Motorcycling* (the official publication of the then-named American Motorcycle Association). He was invited to write a weekly column called *Fancy Free* in the newspaper in Plainview, Nebraska. In his first column he expressed a longing to return to the road with his bike.

In the spring of 1960 he did just that, packing the R60 again and heading south along the red line on the Standard Oil map to the bottom of South America, a trip he'd been dreaming of for almost 20 years. In late October Arlene flew to

San Jose, Costa Rica, to ride with her husband to the end of the highway in Panama. It was the rainy season, the Pan-American Highway was under active construction, and 39 rivers — few of which had a bridge — stood in their way. It took them a month to ride just 530 miles, but they made it. Arlene flew back to Nebraska to tend to the farm while Danny continued south to face his next challenge in the Darien Gap, 70 miles of nearly impenetrable jungle south of the Panama Canal to the northern border of Colombia.

He sent his bike to Medellín, Colombia, by air freight and prepared to walk through an area that few non-indigenous natives had seen since Balboa's crossing of the isthmus nearly 450 years earlier. The hike took more than two weeks, and was of such epic difficulty that when he wrote a history of his ride years later, *Two Wheels to Adventure*, the Darien section occupied nearly one-quarter of the 755-page book.

At the customs office in Turbo, Colombia, where he arrived five days before Christmas in 1960, he was asked whether he had come from Panama by air or sea. When he said he had walked, they didn't believe him. Two days of paperwork and telephone calls later, he rode on top of a bus to Medellín to retrieve his motorcycle, where he discovered the R60's final drive was shot.

Butler & Smith, the importer of BMW motorcycles in North America, had heard of Danny's odyssey and sensed an advertising opportunity. They shipped the needed parts to Medellín, asking only to be repaid at the journey's end.

Fewer than 6,000 miles lay between Medellín and Ushuaia at the southernmost tip of South America. An experienced endurance rider today can make that ride in two weeks; it took Danny eight months. He faced mere dirt tracks where today there are paved highways, and he was a self-confessed slave to riding regardless of the conditions. He reached Ushuaia in the middle of the southern hemisphere's winter on August 23, 1961, but he had done what no one had before him had accomplished, riding from where the road stopped in the north of the western hemisphere to where it stopped in the south.

He took a freighter to Punta Arenas where he left the BMW buried in a casket of international paperwork. He then hitchhiked to Buenos Aires, hoping to find money from Arlene at a postal general delivery. There was nothing.

He heard about an American movie company looking for extras who could ride a horse for a movie called *Taras Bulba* in early production in Salta, Argentina. After shaving his head, he became Yul Brynner's stand-in and stunt double. The pay was only about \$600, and he had to sue United Artists to get it, but the publicity of the trip and concomitant celebrity had made him a star on his return to Niobrara in January 1962.

Butler & Smith again came to Danny's aid, convincing BMW to donate a bike for him to pick up in Europe and emulate the ride he had made in North and

South America. When Arlene, having been a functional widow for more than a year, heard of the proposal, she told a newspaper reporter, "If he's going to Europe, I'm going with him."

The pair spent the spring and summer of 1963 winding their way through Central and South America, arranging the repatriation of Danny's bike from Chile and supporting themselves by writing travel stories for local newspapers back in Nebraska. In late August of 1963 they flew to Germany for what would be the last great ride of their lives.

No solo rider, much less a couple, had ever documented a ride from the north cape of Norway to Cape Agulhus, the southernmost part of South Africa. After picking up their donated bike and outfitting it for the ride, they headed north, reaching Nordkapp in mid-September. There they turned around and headed south and west, finally taking a ferry from Spain across the Straits of Gibraltar to Morocco in January 1964.

During the spring they followed the Mediterranean coastline east to Cairo, then turned due south to track the Nile, part of the way on a paddle steamer, to Lake Victoria. They looped back north and east through Kenya to Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Yemen to the border of Saudi Arabia. There they retreated back across the Red Sea, trekked south through Somalia in the middle of summer, and caught a small boat back to Kenya.

In September they crossed present-day Tanzania to the border of northern Rhodesia, a country in the final stages of a civil war of independence and tribal massacres. They were held up for weeks at border crossings and spent somber days riding slowly through burned villages.

On October 28, 1964, the Omaha *World-Herald* reported on its front page that the Liskas had arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa. Shortly thereafter they rode down to Cape Agulhas, where the Indian and Atlantic oceans meet. Forty thousand miles and almost 15 months lay in their wake, but they had completed their quest.

When they landed in Chicago on December 8, snow made motorcycle travel back to Niobrara inadvisable. The globe-trotting farm couple who had ridden to the ends of the Earth in two hemispheres on a motorcycle designed for use on paved roads, returned home in a 1947 pickup truck.

The investment that BMW and Butler & Smith had made in the Liskas had been a good one. Beginning in January 1966 Danny and Arlene were featured in a series of full-page ads in national motorcycle magazines that ran for more than a year. Arguably the pinnacle of the Liska fairy tale arrived on March 10, 1966, when Arlene was a guest on the popular television program, *To Tell the Truth*. Not surprisingly she stumped three of the four panelists, who were looking for a

tough, road-hardened biker, not someone who might easily be mistaken for Beaver Cleaver's mom.

In 1968 Danny separated from Arlene, reclaimed the family farm as his own, and for the remainder of his life shuffled between Niobrara and Colombia, where he died in 1995 from leukemia. Arlene lives on, now 92, in Niobrara, her memories of days camped in a tent at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro only slightly dimmed.

Danny was inventive and unusually resourceful. When he recognized a problem with his R60, he fixed it, fabricating a bash plate, a reinforced sub-frame, raised front fender, and auxiliary fuel capacity. It would take BMW more than 15 years to deliver what he had needed, the 1981 R80G/S, the motorcycle that won four Paris-Dakar rallies. A considerable body of opinion today treats that machine as not only a lineal descendant of Danny Liska's ingenuity but a design that saved the motorcycle division of the company from financial ruin. For the first time a true adventure bike was available directly from a manufacturer, and with it the sport of motorcycle adventure touring was born.

Last month the motorcycle website Adventure Rider (www.advrider.com) had almost three million hits. Hundreds of the visitors to the site are on the road this very minute in as many different countries. Each of them has been inspired, directly or indirectly, by the mythic travels of a modest couple from northeast Nebraska. One of those riders, Ed Culberson, advised and assisted by Danny himself, rode his own R80G/S through the Darien Gap in 1986, the first vehicle of any kind to traverse what had been to that point an impenetrable jungle. That bike, *Amigo*, resided in the AMA museum in 1994-1995.

For their pioneering rides that defined what we now call adventure touring, and for their contributions to what is today one of the most robust market segments in all of motorcycling, Danny and Arlene Liska surely deserve joint admission into the American Motorcyclist Association's Hall of Fame.