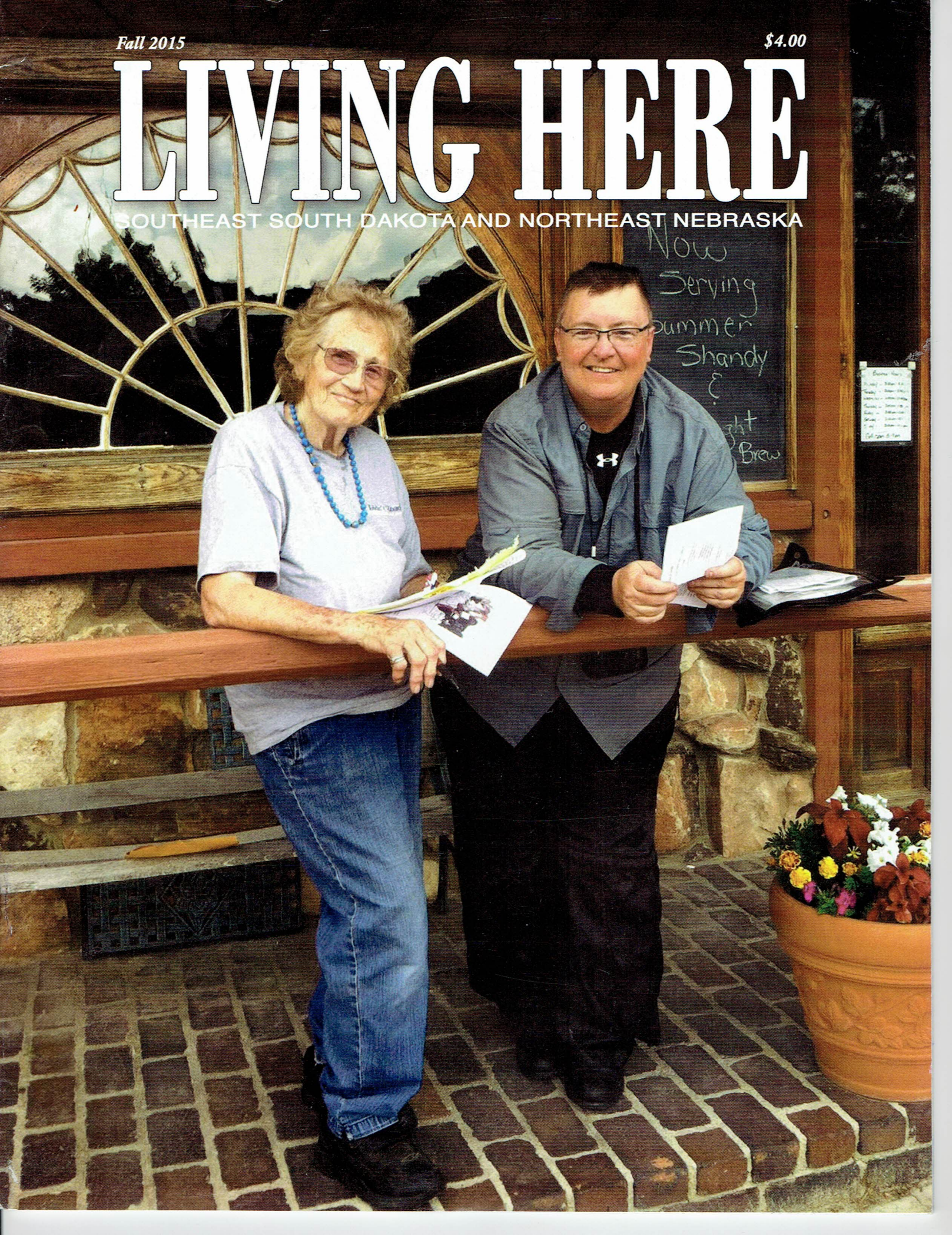


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Danny Dossman, a Team Strange rider, takes advice from Arlene Liska. (Photo by Greg Anderson).

*Motorcycle Legend*

# ARLENE LISKA

Who needs four wheels when you've got a spirit of adventure that will carry you to four continents and more than 60 countries.

BY MARITA PLACEK

**T**hey sold their 125 head of cattle and left their Niobrara, Nebraska ranch on a BMW motorcycle. With confidence and a lot of faith, Arlene Liska and her then-husband, Danny, rode to the very tip of South America – some 40,000 miles away.

“I spent most of my time in the late 1950s and early 60s traveling the world, perched on the narrow seat of a BMW motorcycle with my feet resting on very small foot pegs,” says Arlene. The bike had a large windshield and they wore helmets that covered their heads with a short sun bill, straps with open ears and a chin or neck strap to hold the helmets on. Two over-sized leather saddlebags hung on the sides, with a suitcase strapped on the back carrier that held a pop-up-tent, a couple changes of clothes, a parachute silk for sleeping bags, a primus stove, maps, passports, and canned food. They never carried a gun.

Arlene, who “wears the crown” for long distance motorcycle riding, spent a great deal of time traveling from continent to continent. “There were many interesting and exciting experiences,” says Arlene. “I was nearly shot and escaped from being thrown in jail.



*Steven Kirk, shows cycling pioneer Arlene Liska, his motorcycle and gear. (Photo courtesy of Jason Wessendorf, The Verdigre Eagle).*

“I was chased by an angry, four-ton rhinoceros while on a ride in Central Africa. He was close to our speeding motorcycle so I desperately swatted his horns with my helmet while Danny was doing his best to get away from him.”

When traveling through Panama’s mosquito infested jungle, Arlene was tired and hungry, so she sat on a log to rest. When it started to move, she realized she was sitting on a 20-foot anaconda.

“We descended down inside the famous smoldering Irazu Volcano in Costa Rica,” Arlene shares. “It was very hot in there. We heard later that the volcano had erupted – just before President Kennedy was scheduled to visit.”

When at the United Fruit Company’s banana plantation she had a run-in with

an insect that caused her much grief. She felt an insect bite her knee, so she swatted it. That was the wrong thing to do. In just that short time, the insect – whose name eludes her – implanted eggs under her skin.

“I spent two weeks at the Panama City Medical Clinic (the United States still owned the Canal Zone) and my knee kept getting bigger and bigger. Finally they flew me to Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha. It took two more weeks of emitting eggs before they were able to treat the wound so I could go back and continue traveling. I still have a hole in my knee from the ordeal.”

Another time, she was sleeping on the sand dunes of the African Sahara on a piece of a silk parachute used as a mattress. “These cute little ‘three-tracked things’ were running around. Later we found out that an 11-year-old boy was seriously ill after being stung by one of them, and that they were scorpions. The

boy survived after a three month battle,” says Arlene.

The Pan American Highway was in the beginning stages of construction when 24 inches of rain fell in one day in Costa Rica, causing dangerous flooding. With no bridge, there was no way for them to cross the Volcán River. They were trying to decide what to do when a highway maintainer came along and offered to take them and the motorcycle across the river. The bottom of the rivers there are rock, so it was possible for heavy equipment to cross. “The same maintainer operator took us over six more streams so we could safely reach Buenos Aires,” said Arlene.

Suffering from malaria and doing laundry in a river were discouraging times. “You got sick, hungry, tired, you were broke, and there wasn’t a direct bus home,” says Arlene.

But there were joyful and fun times, too. Arlene made many friends among

the native people of countries she visited, and eventually learned eleven languages. "We traveled to learn from the people, but we had to be on guard because we were Americans and were judged by them. They had no idea where America was or how far it was."

Arlene wanted to buy some bananas when they were at the banana plantation in Costa Rica. "The natives laughed at me and said, 'One does not buy bananas here, you just take what you need and use what you take'. They even made a poultice out of them and the leaves to take the soreness out of my legs from riding, and told me lemons would help the chafing from the leather motorcycle pants. They both did wonders."

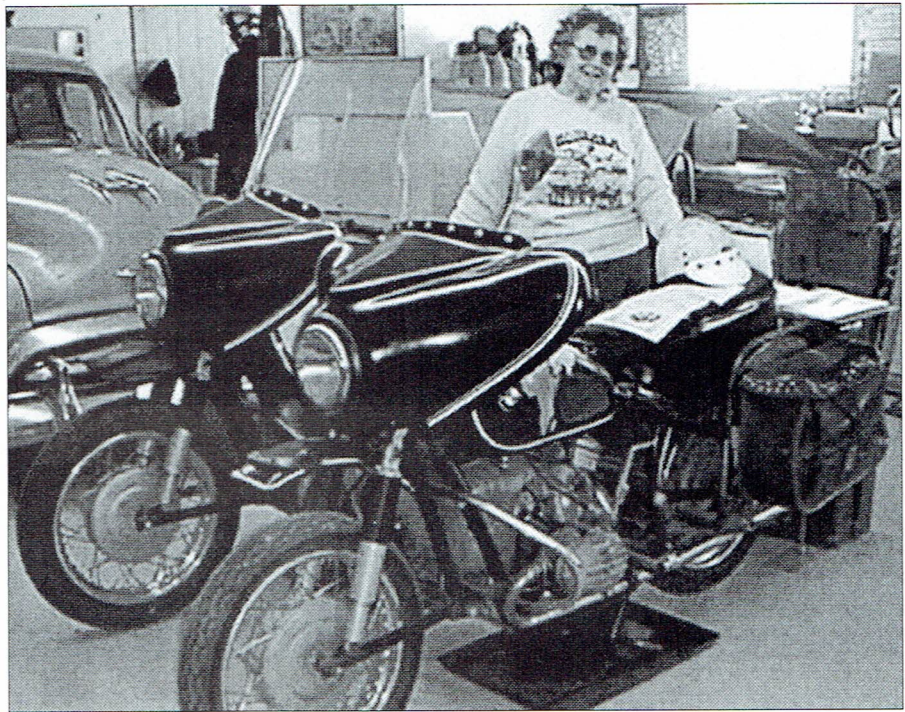
At border crossings they had to have a valid passport, several photo identifications, plus health and vaccination certificates, and police certificates verifying that they were honorable and not wanted by police. The Aduaneros' usually kept a copy after critically checking each passport stamp.

"I loved running my hands through a bushel of diamonds while in Africa," says Arlene. Ostriches peck the shiny diamonds that lay on top of the ground. They are then harvested from the gizzards of older ostriches that are no longer used for plumes."

"The African people admired my blonde hair and would come up and ask if they could feel it," says Arlene. "Spending the night on top of the pyramids to watch the morning sunrise was spectacular."

With a big grin, Arlene recalls the time she drove a train, switchback style, high up in the Altiplano range of the Andes Mountains of Ecuador. "We were talking to the engineer as we were coming into the station. He pulled me into the cab of the train and told the people 'We now have a woman train driver!' The people waiting to board the train were horrified to see a woman driving. But the cowboys of the country – wearing sheepskin chaps, exhibiting red faces, and exposing their bare feet – were waving and cheering."

"Undertaking the trip without any type of communication, such as cell phones or GPS systems, had to have been daunting. And there were no roads



*Arlene poses with the motorcycles she rode in more than 60 countries. The motorcycles are BMWs, and the one in the foreground was ridden through Europe and Africa. (Photo courtesy of North Central Public Power District).*

in certain parts of the country then," says Steven Kirk, a Scotsman from Australia, who recently stopped in Niobrara to visit with Arlene. "I have a tracker system, and all I have to do is push a button if I get into trouble, and a helicopter will arrive on the scene."

"She was a trendsetter," says Kirk. "Everybody and their dog are making these sort of trips now, but she was the original. She is an inspiration to us all."

Motorcyclists, adventurers, and motorcycle clubs from all over the world stop in Niobrara to meet "the queen of endurance riding," seek her advice, listen to her adventure stories and gain inspiration.

Arlene was the guest speaker at the 2006 BMW Shop Open House in Holland, Michigan, and the Gilmore Museum of Antique Cars and Motorcycles annual show where she shared her stories about traveling in 60 different countries on a BMW motorcycle.

One of her biggest thrills was appearing on the television show, "To Tell the Truth" with Bill Cullen, Orson Bean,

and Kitty Carlisle. When the question, "Will the real world traveler from Niobrara, Nebraska, please stand up," Arlene stood up and put Niobrara in the national spotlight. "Having my story broadcast on national television was very special," says Arlene.

In her presentations and visits with bikers from all over the world, Arlene offers advice and words of caution concerning motorcycles and wild animals. Unlike a car, the motorcycle offers little protection to its riders other than the ability to "get away." Elephants really don't forget and, if mistreated, will remember you the next time they see you. Rhinos don't run in a straight line when they are chasing you – it's more of a zigzag pattern.

Arlene often shared her story about being chased by a rhino and how she swung at it with her helmet. "Monkeys will steal parts right off your bike, however, baboons are worse. In lion country, you stay on your bike because if you get off, you'll be at their level and could be their dinner," says Arlene.

In the summer of 2002, the Minnesota 1000 and the Team Strange Poker Run began "a love affair" by setting up headquarters in Niobrara for their "Two Wheels to Niobrara" rally just so they could get acquainted with the woman whom they felt "wears the crown" in long distance motorcycle rid-



Steven Kirk, from Australia, is one of dozens of younger riders who have journeyed to Niobrara to meet Arlene. (Photo courtesy of Valorie Zach, Niobrara Tribune).

ing. Arlene was admitted into its elite 13-member leadership council, filling a vacancy due to a death the year before. Members have been frequent visitors to Niobrara since.

“There is a difference in motorcycle groups,” Arlene says. “This group is

gracious, folksy and sincere. Every single one of them came up and shook my hand. They bent over backwards for me, they really did.”

2010 marked the 10th anniversary of the Team Strange Motorcycle Club’s move to Niobrara, home of the Liskas.

The organizers decided to mark the milestone with a grand event called the Minnesota 2000, where riders had to rack up 2,000 miles in two days. The bikers could ride anywhere in the United States or Canada, but had to be back in Minnesota in 48 hours.

Most bonus point locations were worth 25 to 200 points, depending on how difficult they were to get to, but if a rider stopped in Niobrara to say “hello” to Arlene, they received 1,000 bonus points. The checkpoint was only open from 1:30 to 3 p.m. on Friday afternoon, at the Two Rivers Saloon, where Arlene greeted riders. She gave each one a special purple ribbon made with her name on them. They in turn gave her a “Friend of the Rally” plaque.

Another way for riders to get bonus points was to attend Arlene’s presentation, which was worth 1,960 points. The bikers were mesmerized as she



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spoke, with no travel log, only her memories. She talked about a beautiful pink palace she'd seen between Uruguay and Paraguay, attending a camel auction, and not knowing which side of the road to drive on in some countries, only to find out the hard way when she had to take the ditch when meeting an oncoming bus.

Much to the men's disbelief, Arlene revealed that she wore culottes (divided skirt), while riding in the cities, as it was not proper for women to wear pants in those days. She wore slacks while riding in the country. Both outfits were topped off with a leather jacket, beads and a necklace. The beads were used mainly for bartering.

Arlene talked about being detained in Brazil because it was absolutely illegal to bring an American vehicle into their country. "We were already several miles on Brazilian soil when we were arrested by a portico (immigration officer) who had a big six-shooter on his hip, and we were told to report to Porto Alegre (a city in Southern Brazil)," she says. "The Consulate told

us there was another couple that had brought a vehicle into the northern part of Brazil. We asked, 'Well, what happened to them?' The consulate pondered with his hand cupping his chin, then poker faced said, 'I think we shot them!' We had to dismantle our bike for him to inspect. We couldn't go back, so we packed the motorcycle in a crate and found a Portuguese freighter to haul it to New York for us, leaving us to make our way through Brazil by any means possible, up the Amazon to Manaus and the mouth of the Amazon."

Among the souvenirs she displayed were tanned hides of a zebra and calamus monkey, Zulu bead work, a rhino horn, ebony statues, an African toothbrush, a goat skin water bag, a camel bell, maps, and an alpaca fur. When she held up her white motorcycle helmet, the bikers were enthralled because it was reminiscent of the times Arlene and Danny toured with just a windshield and two wheels.

"I didn't pay \$600 for this," she said. She wasn't exactly sure, but thought

she'd paid about \$15.

"Each country was different and had their own smell," she told the crowd. "The country folks, erupting mountains, thick musty jungle, arid dusty plains, steaming rains blending with the wild sounds of exotic birds and animals were all different. People were hospitable and one could always communicate, because everyone has basic needs. We used a lot of gestures to explain that we were sleepy, hungry or thirsty."

An unidentified biker was heard to say, "Niobrara is a kind of like a Mecca because it's where these people (Arlene and Danny) came from. They are my heroes, and I am working to get both of them into the Motorcycle Hall of Fame."

Arlene's encouraging words carried weight and were easily understood by the rally participants because they came from a vibrant woman who has become a legend in her own time: "You never get lost, you just change directions."

*Marita Placek lives on a farm near Lynch, Nebraska.*



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