

Adventures with Westco Battery and the Downeast Rally

When the BMW battery in my black 1982 R100T (original paint, and factory white and red classic pinstriping) left me busted flat at the Mobil Mini Mart in Gloucester two weekends before the Hermit Island Downeast Rally, my spirits sank. I had stopped at the MiniMart to fuel up on the theory that if the battery is low, let's at least have the tank full. The starter motor went "click click click" on several trys. The battery was DNR. Since I was not interested in pushing the bike six or so miles back to Manchester-by-the-Sea, I asked the Mini Mart clerk if they had a jump starter for the bike. She looked at me hopelessly but her 12-year old looking assistant said there was a "battery-thing" in the back. He helpfully dragged out a portable jump starter battery to the bike. This ended his expertise. I demonstrated how we could, after connecting the positive cable to the battery, connect the negative terminal to any exposed metal on the motor "since the chassis is negative" and he said "oh!" and disappeared into the self-service island to watch people pump their own gas.

I raced back to Manchester without letting the motor ever drop below 1,000 RPMs. Like most of us motorcycle compulsives, I need to fix everything within my ability immediately. A call to Auto Zone was futile. The Sears automotive said: "Take the battery out and bring it in, we'll see if we have something to match." He also said that they were open until 7:30 PM.

You may not have removed a battery from a 1982 R100. Thanks to fine German engineering, ("Hans, let's really show them how snugly we can fit these batteries"), it involves disassembling the bike to the bare chassis, stripping the paint off the chassis for a few extra microns of clearance, removing the motor, drive shaft, wheels etc and then splitting the chassis, so that you can pull a 5.9 by 7 inch battery up through a 5.8 by 6.9 inch hole. (Unless you later blow a fuse, it is unnecessary to remove the headlamp in order to reach the fuses. Should this occur, however, add another 6 hours of labor to reinstalling the headlamp onto the nacelle. Best to do it early in the day when you are fresh and with plenty of daylight.) Then you disconnect the wiring cable, remove the battery cables, removes two nuts at the back of the battery case so you tilt the case backward to the larger opening in the chassis, and then pry the battery up to remove it. Of course, best to stick a broom handle under the battery while removing it, in the event that you drop the battery back into the bike, pinning your fingers. I've thought "What if I got my fingers caught under the battery?" Eventually, Rosinate would call out from the back porch, while I'm in mortal pain, "You've played enough with that motorcycle – come in and paint the basement."

Sears on a Sunday night for a replacement battery was a fool's errand. The store had closed long before. The light bulb lit over my head. In the May 2002 BMW Owners News there was a short article (page 72) about the Westco Maintenance Free Battery. On their WEB site (www.westcobattery.com), Westco had a 30 amp replacement for my 25 amp BMW battery. I ordered the battery online, and it was on my doorstep two days later, shipped by UPS from Baltimore. (The Westco batteries can

be shipped fully charged – there is no electrolyte to spill since it is absorbed and retained in fiberglass mats, sandwiched between the lead plates.)

The Westco battery slipped right into the frame - the finger holds in the top of the battery case a thoughtful addition. ("Hans, why would we put a handle on this BMW battery - nobody will get it out once this bike leaves our factory.") While narrower than the BMW battery, the Westco was slightly taller, so I had to mount the battery clamp upside down in order to secure it with the knurled plastic nuts. The only leftover parts were the two battery terminal bolts from the BMW battery – the battery cables on the Westco are simply snugged down by a bolt flat to the positive and negative terminals.

To test it out, I rode over to Freeman's in Beverly, its final days as our long-standing North Shore BMW dealer, wanting to stock up on parts until I found a new dealer. Also, to find out where Rusty Gill would be in the future, one of the most amazing BMW parts guy around. I purchased the R100 new at Freeman's 20 years ago. Rusty was smiling (as usual) behind the antique wood and glass store counter. (Thanks Rusty for finding those SuperTrapp's for my R100. Now, if you can find an equally loud aftermarket exhaust for a new oilhead, I'll buy the exhaust and the oilhead too, and move into the 21st century.) In the counter were 3 Westco batteries. Rusty said that he had had good experience with them; in the few battery failures over the years, which are to be expected with any battery, the company replaced the battery without question. He also said that he would be at Max BMW in North Hampton, N.H. starting in a week (late May 2002). I loaded up on many quarts of oil and oil filters (in case it was several years before I found another BMW dealer), and noticed that I had neglected to reattach the saddlebags to the bike after I had installed the battery.

The following weekend was the Downeast Rally. By the time I arrived at the Kelp Shed at Hermit Island, it was a beautiful Friday afternoon with temperatures in the 60's. The hospitality of the BMW Riders of Southern Maine is so terrific, the club's chowder and four alarm chili so great, it's no wonder that they have a sold out Rally. (*Full* post-Enron disclosure – I recently joined the club.)

The spring peepers were so loud at my campsite for the night, I thought they would keep me awake but the fresh Maine sea air (and a nip of Jack Daniels?) knocked me out. I awoke to the gentle pitter-patter of rain on my tent, which turned into much more. Later, as Rally-goers watched the rain pour off the roof of the Kelp Shed, a hardy band (mostly Canadians?) left for a "group ride" to Andover, Maine to ride 100 miles and possibly back in the rain and cold to view a private BMW collection of 100 bikes. The word from this borderline hypothermic group was that when they got there to see Dave's bikes, the best exhibit was the wood stove.¹ (On my way home on Sunday, at a red light, I visited with one of the riders who became stranded in snow in Montpelier, Vermont on Saturday and had just returned from Hermit Island.) A BMWRSM club member, who was to lead the rained-out GS ride, showed me how to use my GPS III. Now I have Hermit Island and Exit 6A off Rt. 95 (Portland) as Waypoints (in addition to 14 other Waypoints in my back in front yard at home, in case I'm lost in my yard.)

¹ Credit for this line to Deborah Macchi.

Since I wanted to ride, even in the rain, I headed over to the Beale Street BBQ in Bath ("Not bad BBQ for Maine" – this is not their slogan, it's mine for them.) The Westco battery cranked over the bike just fine, even underwater (if you can believe this) in a six-foot puddle in front of the Kelp Shed. I asked the waitress at Beale Street for the second hottest BBQ sauce. It was so hot; I had to scrape it off. The waitress still confirmed that it was the "2nd hottest". I spent the rest of the afternoon at L.L. Bean's in Freeport. Warm and dry.

Saturday night, the BMWRSM lobsters were terrific as in the past, enlivened by a discussion of the right way to eat a Maine lobster to maximize the return of lobster meat (including a live demonstration of rolling a beer bottle like a rolling pin to squeeze lobster meat out of the tentacles.) Our President, Don Lockhart (not George Bush) spoke briefly and presented awards. Spirits ran high that the rain did not dampen, followed by a Birthday Cake to celebrate an 80th Birthday. (I know from listening to his Louisiana and Mississippi traveling stories in his wide Virginia drawl the evening before that the guy doesn't stop.)

Sunday dawned bright and beautiful, the birds on Hermit Island even louder than the peepers of Friday night. Leaving Hermit Island marked the passing of another great Downeast Maine Rally, even in the rain, with me dreaming of plans to return.

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