

Halfway Home without a Hitch

From Toronto to St. John's on a 1956 Norton ES2

John E. Pepper, September 2010

Part One – Toronto to Nova Scotia

Well, the old girl made it, 3,455 miles across great country, nearly 5,600 km without a hitch. The big old single burbling along at its own pace, mile after great mile. Maybe going homewards had something to do with it. The Norton and I are Irish. The bike belonged to my Dad. He passed away a few years ago, and due to the swiftness of his illness I never actually got to say a proper goodbye. He was a true motorcyclist – exploring Ireland as an independent teenager; commuting between Dublin and Belfast during World War II, whatever the weather; taking my mother on a great trip around Europe a few years before I cramped their style; competing in grasstrack and trials; and instilling in me an interest in machines and enthusiasm for the open road. He was even prepared to let me loose on quiet country roads around our Wicklow cottage before I could get my license... "Just be home by seven, the local sergeant never gets up before then!"

A couple of years ago an idea started to take shape in my mind – one that would allow me to indulge my motorcycling penchant, take some time off work, and say a proper goodbye to my dad. The Norton and I would get as close to Ireland as we could – to Cape Spear, Newfoundland, the most easterly point of land in North America.



Mile Zero – Starting Off

After a great Irish breakfast of back bacon, eggs and potato cakes the Norton and I headed eastwards on Labour Day Sunday. Angela said she could hear the healthy exhaust note for several blocks. After the never-ending sprawl east of the city, the real trip finally started on that lovely little lakeside road from Bond Head into Port Hope. From there it was a nice ride along Highway 2, then into Prince Edward County. Ferries add adventure to a bike trip, and the free Glenora ferry back to the mainland was the first of quite a few.

After a lovely detour along Hay Bay in the late afternoon sun we pulled into Kingston for the first night's stop, and a feed of the best calamari in the country at Greco's. Day one was done, and the journey had truly started.



Day two began with another ferry to Wolfe Island. Leaving the pretty village of Marysville I was suddenly aware of the great big windmills everywhere. They're much bigger than you expect when up close, contrasting with the old faded barns and pastoral countryside. Then ferry number three to Cape Vincent and the US border. The antique boat museum in nearby Clayton was an impressive surprise. I had allowed a couple of hours – but I should have allowed twice as much. It was a fantastic place – all kinds of antique boats from beautiful delicate guideboats to elegant steam launches and mahogany runabouts; from rustic sailing skiffs to record-holding speedboats. I could have wandered for hours, admiring the designs, craftsmanship and innovative engineering. Even by 1939 boats were breaking the 100 mph barrier. The current water speed record is nearly 311 mph set by Spirit of Australia in 1978. If you're ever in the Kingston area or near Cape Vincent, drop in on the museum for half a day, it's well worth the time.

Day three started at the familiar Sunset Park Motel in Tupper Lake, a favourite stopping point on many previous motorcycle trips. I woke early to solid rain outside, but checking the weather it looked as if it might blow over. Sure enough, after a quick shower and a coffee, the sun came out and we were on our way, on wet roads but dodging the rain. The weather cleared gradually, becoming a beautiful afternoon, with very pleasant riding through the Adirondacks and into Vermont. At one point I could see range after range of mountains eastwards ahead of me. Knowing it was going

to take two days to ride over them made me feel like an ant, slowly crossing this huge landscape.

The Champlain Bridge was blown up last year (deliberately) and the new bridge is under construction. A temporary free ferry (number four) took us across to Vermont. The Norton made it to the top of the Lincoln Gap at 2,248 feet without complaint, but the extent to which I had to use brakes on the way down (engine braking produced some pretty big backfires!) made me leery of attempting Mount Washington as I had planned. The day's high point was Essex County Route 4, from North Hudson to Moriah – a fantastic little road, full of smooth twisties perfect for the Norton's speed & handling.



House for Sale, Apply Within!

Day four started with a pleasant Vermont back-road ride to the Rock of Ages quarry in Graniteville, for a look at how they quarry the high-quality granite in huge blocks, then cut it up to be used mostly for gravestones & mausoleums. After lunch at the funky Truants' Tavern in North Woodstock, it was across the spectacular Kancamagus Highway over the White Mountains to Conway, dodging rainclouds the whole way. I stopped to say hi to the guys and girls at Whitehorse Gear, and picked up a few small items (I couldn't leave empty-handed). In Gorham I stayed the night at the wonderfully-decorated Libby House, dripping in Tiffany lamps and old wood panelling. I'd planned to stay two days and take the Mount Washington Auto Road to the summit, but was worried about burning the brakes out. I'd make a decision in the morning.

Day five dawned wet and stayed that way, with low cloud. That made up my mind about Mount Washington, despite having decided the night before to ride to the summit. The rain cleared up by the afternoon and I had a pleasant ride through south western Maine as far as Bath and the Maritime Museum, then on to Belfast passing through the expensive tourist towns of Wiscasset, Rockport and Camden. At the motel that evening I heard a knock at the door, and was greeted by a distinguished Norwegian gentleman with a big white beard, a combination of a Viking and Santa Claus. Sivert was a true explorer, and over a couple of glasses of whiskey he regaled me with tales of sailing a replica Viking ship across the Atlantic and reaching the North Pole. He had ridden Nortons as a dispatch rider during the war, and wanted to hear my Nortons running to bring back the memories.



Maritime Chairs in Annapolis Royal

The next few days took me through the backwoods of Maine into New Brunswick, and ferry number five to Digby, Nova Scotia and Annapolis Royal. In Wolfville I stopped in to say hello to the folks at British Cycle Supply, where they were delighted to see some of the parts they had shipped actually doing what they were supposed to. Then it was on to Halifax to visit with friends George and Jane for a few days, before heading eastwards again. The loop around by Peggy's Cove and Prospect is beautiful, and well worth the detour. Lunch consisted of the best sausage roll I've ever tasted at Delish on Route 333 near Tantallon. If you're passing drop in and say hi to Dennis. After leaving Prospect the numerous threatening rainclouds magically moved away, and the rest of the afternoon was glorious. The only hiccup was the awful traffic crossing the bridge from Halifax to Dartmouth, but by a little after five I was well on my way out of the metropolis. Going through the village of Preston and surrounding area I thought I had strayed onto the wrong continent – almost every face was black. I knew Nova Scotia had a large black population with a very long history in the area, but it was the first time I saw any physical evidence of it. The same young boys goofing around, the same old guys in pickup trucks, the same women gardening – just darker.

I had planned to make it as far as Liscomb Mills, but with my late start I only made it as far as Sheet Harbour. I pulled into the only motel I could see and asked for a room. But they were fully booked. It was dusk, so I didn't want to go much further. Ralph, the manager, helped me find a room at another motel half an hour away. The remaining light faded fast, and I had no choice but to face the road with 6v Lucas lighting! Actually, it was better than I expected, even the tail light was quite bright so I made it safely to my next stop. Almost without incident... After checking in I got back on the bike to ride over to the row of rooms. I set the timing, tickled the carb, got the engine over the compression stroke, and kicked. But my foot slipped, the bike kicked back, and over we went, tank bag rolling in the gravel. But thank the motorcycling gods – no-one saw what happened! I picked myself up, hauled the bike to a vertical position, retrieved the tank bag, went through the process again, the bike started, and off we went...



White Point, Cape Breton

"When going through hell, keep going..." was one of Winston Churchill's famous quotes. That's what I had to remind myself on the very wet cold and windy trip up the west coast of Cape Breton Island. The rain was stinging my face, making it difficult to see, trucks would throw up masses of dirty spray, and I was getting wetter and wetter. It rained pretty much steadily from Port Hawkesbury, and after a couple of hours my 15-year old Kilimanjaro jacket started to let in the rain. My 'high-tech, multi-layer, waterproof' gloves are useless after an hour in the rain. They may be theoretically waterproof, but the lining gets wet at the cuff, then wicks the water in. My waterproof socks work just fine though, even if my boots squished with water when I walk. For the most part the scenery was awesome, with dark green wooded hills poking above the mist. It reminded me very much of parts of Scotland or Ireland. I passed a few scenic lookout points, but it just seemed like too much trouble to get the camera out, keep it dry, then try to get wet hands back into my gloves, just to photograph some misty, rainy bay. I did stop, however, at the Glen Breton Distillery in Glenora, as I knew they'd give samples of their product if you took a tour. It's a pretty little place set by a brook that supplies pure highland water for the process. Glen Breton is North America's only single malt whisky distillery, and it's done very much in the Scottish (read Scotch) tradition. It's surprisingly good, and a 'wee dram' helped keep out the cold and rain until I reached my next stop.



A Few Old Friends on the Cabot Trail

The next morning, after a great ceilidh night at the Normaway Inn I stopped to make an adjustment to something, when about twenty motorbikes passed me, then a dozen more, then more still.... It turned out I had inadvertently joined the Ride for the Cure around the Cabot Trail, in which almost 1000 bikes took part. What a sight

and sound! At one point I could see the road a couple of kilometers ahead, going over a bridge, a solid line of bikes. All along the trail there were bikes, on the road, passing me, at every stopping point – Harleys, sport bikes, tourers, three-wheelers, you name it, even a few RCMP officers in their bright yellow jackets. There were groups of kids and families cheering from the side of the road – I felt guilty waving back as if I was part of the parade, but what the heck, I couldn't ignore people, so I waved back and imagined they were cheering me on my way.

When stopped for gas at Cape North I got chatting with Jack Patrick, who showed me a lovely little detour to White Point. It was worth the extra time, with great views of the ocean and headlands. The scenery all around the Cabot Trail is spectacular, and on the east side the sun was shining the whole time. Dark trees, sparkling water and rocks, in every combination and scale, is truly breathtaking. And the curves again allowed me to put some wear on the sides of the tyres.



Ride 4 the Cure (by Derek Gallant, the Winning Shot)

I had a free day before taking the night ferry from North Sydney, so I decided to head to Glace Bay to see the mining museum. As far back as the early 1700s, coal was needed for construction of the French fortress in nearby Louisbourg. Until the 1820s coal deposits were mined on a small scale, but by the late 1800s more than 30 coal mines in the area were producing up to 700,000 tonnes annually. In the last decades of the 1800s miners were paid from 80 cents to a \$1.50 a day and boys were paid 65 cents. In order to qualify for a company house, at least one member of each family had to work the mines. Glace Bay had 12 coal mines employing up to 12,000 miners. Working conditions were terrible, with little or no safety gear or injury compensation. Many families were drowned in debt from the company store, making almost no wages after deductions for tools, equipment and clothing. Miners even had to pay for their attendance at church (a church that in the early days was more interested in supporting the mining companies than protecting the rights of workers and their families). Up until the 1940s working conditions were abysmal, and there was a lot of violent struggle between fledgling unions and the companies (backed by the government, police and army). Pit ponies often spent their entire lives underground, never seeing daylight or grass. The last mine in Cape Breton closed in 2004.

The museum has a small section of mine open to the public to portray mining conditions in the early part of the 20th century. Our tour guide, Sheldon, was a retired mine worker, having worked underground for 29 years. He was one of 11 children, living in a tiny four-room company house. Often miners had to travel up to 2 hours underground, without pay, to get to the face they were working on (some of the mine faces were 6 miles out under the sea). We took

fifteen minutes to negotiate the initial slope, then walk crouched in dark dripping conditions to the coal face, where sometimes men would have to load coal either kneeling or lying down... I could go on and on about the conditions, the dangers, the low wages, the cruel use of young boys and pit ponies, canaries (to detect explosive methane gas), and rats (who could predict collapses). Sheldon considered it a good life, though, the hard work and the conditions offset by the camaraderie and support of fellow workers.

Part Two – Newfoundland

Getting on the night ferry to Port-aux-Basques felt like an adventure to another country, not just another province – and that feeling turned true as I got to know a little about the Republic of Newfoundland!



Big Sign, Long Way

On the morning of Day 16, the ferry pulled into Port-aux-Basques just as it was getting light, and no rain! After a terrible coffee on the ferry I hit the road northwards through some wonderful, super-sized scenery. Traffic was relatively light, and what there was (always faster than me) was made up of courteous and intelligent drivers. They know how to pass, and don't hang on your tail. At the right time they'll accelerate without fuss, passing smoothly, leaving me plenty of space. Nice.

The eastern and southern parts of Newfoundland were being hit hard by Hurricane Igor, with up to 200mm of rain on the Burin Peninsula, and at least one major washout closing the Trans Canada Highway. In Deer Lake I just felt the edge of the storm, so decided to head north into Gros Morne National Park. It's about 70km up to Rocky Harbour through some spectacular scenery. On advice from Gord, my B&B host, I turned off to Norris Harbour. From there you can take a boat ride up the coast to see some fjords, but because of the wind tours were cancelled for the day. The wind was something.... Coming over a couple of the low passes it was frightening, and I had to decide between going fast enough to remain stable and slow enough not to kill myself. Watch the treetops, and beware of open valleys or other landforms that can channel the wind, leave room to wobble.



Harry and his Ural Outfit

I fought the wind all the way, always heading towards a tempting blue sky to the northwest, better weather getting blown in? By the time I got to Norris Harbour there was a little bit of welcome sun poking through, adding a couple of degrees to a pretty cold day. On the way back it was eerie, with the wind directly behind me. At times the relative windspeed dropped to nearly zero, silent without the usual rush of air colliding with the bike and my helmet. I could hear the engine clearly, the thumping of the exhaust (especially when barking uphill), the sucking intake of air to the open-mouth carb, the swishing of a well-oiled chain, and a host of other mechanical noises that come from an old air-cooled engine. I could even smell heat from the engine, getting a little hotter than usual without cooling air passing over the fins.

On the way back to Deer Lake I saw a sign for mooseburgers. It was also an opportunity to warm up, as the temperature had dropped quite a bit. As I bit into the slab of ground up moosemeat (local, I was assured) I imagined it to be a talisman against a moose collision, a primal symbolic consumption of one's enemy. I hoped it would work, as there were moose warning signs everywhere, and it's the one road risk everyone warned about.



After a great lively fry-up breakfast at the Lucas House I left Deer Lake in bright sunshine and blue sky. The wind was still very strong, but was behind me the whole way. The landscape is enormous, and at some points you can see the road for miles ahead, and you think "that's going to take forever" – but soon enough, that distant pass or curve becomes the road you're on, and another great view opens up.

What do I think about? Not so much the great philosophical musings I thought I might have...., but often much more mundane. How many revolutions have the wheels done? How many meters

has the cylinder travelled? Or I sing some Neil Young, my voice carried away with the wind....

We've been through some things together
With trunks of memories still to come
We found things to do in stormy weather
Long may you run.

Long may you run. Long may you run.
Although these changes have come.
With your chrome heart shining in the sun
Long may you run.

At one point I was being chased by a huge raincloud, and could feel drops of rain driven by the wind, but managed to stay ahead of it! The wind was so strong that at times dust and leaves were being blown along at the same speed as I was riding. When riding into the wind it was a different story, my eyes streaming with tears, wishing for a full-face helmet.

In Springdale, when I checked on the Norton before going to bed there was a Ural sidecar outfit parked beside it. I met Harry, its owner, the next morning, and in exchange for a cup of Tim's coffee he lent me some tools (including a very useful jack) to adjust the steering head bearings. Harry was from west of Corner Brook, and also gave me some great advice about where to go, complete with a detailed map and guide book. Thanks Harry.



Newfoundland is full of character and interesting characters. Gus Young and his son Perry run the Harbour Lights Inn in Twillingate. A couple of years ago Gus decided to circumnavigate Newfoundland (and it's a big island) on a Seadoo. He did it. It took him two weeks and \$930 worth of gas... Oh, I miss Gus' stories and Perry's breakfasts.

The run from Twillingate to Gander was brutally cold (frost on the seat in the morning), so before checking out the air museum at the airport I buy a fleece and some long johns. Actually the air museum isn't at the airport at all, a fact I didn't discover until after I'd paid for an hour's parking, but they did have a few interesting displays of Charles Lindbergh, Alcock & Brown and Amelia Earhart, and some other information about early trans-Atlantic flying - and a men's room, as I'd had a few cups of coffee with breakfast...

The North Atlantic Aviation Museum is small but interesting, with the nose and tail of a DC-3 sticking out of it - you can get to the cockpit from inside the building. I loved the little RCAF Beech D18-S twin outside. It was built in 1952, so I let the Norton say hello to another machine of its vintage.



Two 1950s Silver Machines

Most of the drivers in Newfoundland were pretty good at passing me, but at one point a car was right on my tail, probably a rental with some big-city driver. She eventually passed after missing a few good opportunities, encouraged by some clear signaling from me to get the f---k past! A big red pickup truck, who had been hanging back and watching gave me a thumbs-up as he passed, then got right on this woman's tail, even though he easily could have passed her. I could see him for a couple of kilometres ahead, teaching her what it's like to have some big headlights right in your mirror - thanks mate! I hope she peed her pants!

I seemed to be thwarted in my attempts to get out to the tip of the Bonavista peninsula, with a lot of washed-out roads. At some points the original pavement was 8-10 feet above the temporary surface. A few times I had to turn back and try another route. The road down to Trinity was really bad, with one muddy, rocky steep portion. We made it though (spraying mud and gravel behind us on the way back up). More than one car refused to try.





Getting into Trinity was well worthwhile. It's a beautiful little town with a lot of character. But empty – like a ghost town. I came across two guys and asked if there was anywhere open to get lunch. They said everything was pretty well closed on account of the storm, but they'd find me something to eat if I was hungry. I said thanks but I could last a few more hours. I met a girl who was delighted when I told her I had got through from Port Blandford – “we're not stranded anymore!” The pretty Anglican church was open, but empty (even though it was Sunday). I went in and sat for a while in peace.

The last full day was sunny and fresh, leaving St. Mary's at the bottom of the 'Irish Loop' on the Avalon Peninsula, after a great breakfast at the Claddagh, a former Catholic convent. Unfortunately the Norton leaked oil on the nice new driveway. I got some absorbent from the local garage, and hope the owners weren't too upset. I made my last gas purchase in St. Mary's, and headed off



with mixed feelings. Excited to get to St. John's and to the ultimate destination of Cape Spear, but sad to finish a great trip and what had become a way of life for the past three weeks. The longest motorcycle trip I've yet made. The Norton and I have become connected like travel partners do, and I feel proud when she starts first kick with people watching, and then pulls away with a deep,

robust exhaust note that only a big single can produce. We've been through a lot together, from non-stop hours on the Trans Canada, to muddy, rocky detours around washed out roads, in sun and wind and rain, getting dirty, wet and cold together. Although she frustrated me twice by being difficult to start at awkward moments I never cursed her. I could feel when she was running smoothly and happily, and other times when things were 'just not right.' Anyway, she got me here and now deserves a rest, and a good overhaul when I get her back to Toronto.



I had intended to stop in Trepassey as it had sounded interesting. In 1928 Amelia Earhart took off from Trepassey Harbour in the Fokker F.VIIb *Friendship* as a passenger, becoming the first woman to fly across the Atlantic. She again took off over the Atlantic in 1932, this time from Harbour Grace piloting her own Lockheed Vega 5b, becoming the first female trans-Atlantic pilot. The 15-hour flight was supposed to be to Paris (a la Lindbergh) but she ended up landing near Derry in Northern Ireland. As it turned out Trepassey didn't look that interesting or lively so I passed it by, or maybe I just wanted to continue riding.

Where the road goes inland the Avalon scenery is again wonderful. This time a huge grassy moor. The landscape is dotted with small lakes and hunting cabins, and every turnoff seemed to have a pickup parked. Hunting season for caribou. Which reminded me, I want my money back – after all the warnings and promises I didn't see a single moose, or anything four-footed larger than a chipmunk!

St. John's. Almost there! I could have headed straight for my final destination at Cape Spear, but just couldn't bring the trip to an end just yet. So I went into the city centre and found a nice brewpub to have a late, and very welcome, lunch. The pub was the Yellowbelly, referring to the nickname for people in County Wexford in Ireland. John Deacon, a friend of my dad's who lives in Wexford, rebuilt and restored the Norton before selling it to my dad. I hoisted a pint of Wexford Wheat Ale for him. Other than an annoying oil leak from the primary chaincase in the last couple of days the 54-year-old bike ran perfectly for almost 3,400 miles (nearly 5,500 km), more than the direct distance from Toronto to Ireland. Well done John!

Aviators John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown took off from St. John's in June 1919 in a modified Vickers Vimy twin-engined bi-plane, ignominiously landing in a bog on the west coast of Ireland sixteen hours later. This was the first non-stop air crossing of the Atlantic. It must have been quite the flight, with Brown having to frequently climb out on the wings to clear the air intakes of ice. My dad always sounded like he was witness to the event, but since he was only born in August 1919 that might be stretching it!



Not Afraid of Colour in St. John's

Cape Spear is traditionally considered the easternmost location in North America. The Portuguese named this location "Cabo da Esperança" which means "cape of hope", which became "Cap d'Espoir" in French and finally "Cape Spear". Toronto is about 3,100 miles from the western-most tip of Ireland. My trip was 3,455 miles – so even though I didn't get here in a straight line, by the numbers the Norton and I travelled more than half way home.



I had intended getting to Cape Spear at dawn to watch the sun come up over the Atlantic from the direction of Ireland, but that didn't happen... After breakfast I found myself fiddling around doing nothing really important, and realized I was putting off the end of the trip. However by 9:00 I was on the road for the last time. The cloudy damp day cleared up as I rode the last ten miles from St. John's. By the time I got there it was a beautiful, warm day. I walked up to the old lighthouse, then down to the rocky tip that is the eastern-most tip of North America. The last part was a pedestrian path, but I saw no harm in riding the Norton out as far as we could go.

I sat there for a while, thinking about my Dad, and all the motorcycling opportunities he gave me, and all the things he taught me about looking after them and keeping them going. I called Angela to let her know I was there (she would be getting on a flight in a couple of hours to join me), and then called my mum and sister. The conversation with my dad was over a different kind of communication medium.

I enjoyed the trip immensely. The riding experience with an old bike,

the friendly, helpful and interesting people I met along the way, the great things I've seen, the sights and the scenery. The pace of travel gave a different flavour to the trip than previous motorcycle tours, whether with Angela touring Nova Scotia or New Zealand where each day's destination was a goal, or with my buddy Alan where the day's riding is the prime focus. The relaxed pace of an old motorcycle gave me time and opportunity to look at what I was traveling through. I could look at the bays and mountains in the distance, or the trees, rocks and lakes beside me, or just appreciate the feeling of slowly making my way through a big country. I could stop to look at or take photos of interesting or unusual things, although a small camera can't convey the scale of a big landscape. I loved Newfoundlanders, their friendliness, their sense of humour, their pride in their province.



It was a great trip, and made up for too many summers where I've been too busy to do what I love. I'll savour this for quite a while, but I'm sure before long another trip will start planning itself in my head. Go far, and safe riding all ye true motorcyclists who read this!

We Made It! – Half Way Home