

THE BUFFALO CHIP CAMPGROUND

CHIP HAPPENS!

Rally returns to its roots

by eddieboy

STURGIS, AUGUST 4–11—Like a thermometer stuck in a roasting Thanksgiving turkey, so the Buffalo Chip Campground reflects the temperature of the surrounding Sturgis Bike Week.

The “Chip” was founded better than a quarter century ago for party-seeking dyed-in-the-leather bikers seeking refuge from authoritative traditional redneck Western values that had defined the Black Hills Rally and Races since their inception in 1938. Ironically, the chopper-riding biker reinvigorated the rally with his bad-boy image and loose morals (never mind Harley-Davidson motorcycle popularity itself), causing ever-larger crowds to come sample Sturgis and its party atmosphere in the bargain—that is, until recently. This year the Buffalo Chip reflected the changing mood in Sturgis.

Unlike the relatively thin crowds on Main and Lazelle streets in downtown Sturgis, the Chip saw big attendance in

a full complement of weeklong campers—the trend from tents to RVs continues to grow—and again, unlike the sparsely attended concerts at Glencoe and other venues, the Chip’s amphitheater was brimming most evenings.

Most telling, though, was the nature of the crowd, and in this the Buffalo Chip “read” the changing temperature of the overall rally.

Crushed straw cowboy hats vs. do-rags

Fat Boys and cowboys mingled easily alongside motorcycle mamas and rodeo queens respectively. Free-ranging single older gents roamed with ever-present cameras in hand, as bands as diverse as Poison, Rat, Foreigner, Grand Funk Railroad, and ZZ Top took the main stage. On Monday, it was Toby Keith who took the stage—and the cake—and stormed Sturgis, drawing well over 35,000 fans from as far afield as Buffalo, Wyoming, to Mitchell, South Dakota, as well as the leather-garbed biker rally attendee.

Sturgis appears to be slowly returning to the roots from whence it came: good, solid Midwest stock coupled with first-time rallygoers on first-time motorcycles hauled in at least in some cases by a sea of Ford and Ram pickups. The week was dominated by a tide of fashionable crushed straw cowboy hats; greasy do-rags were at times very much in the minority—and God bless ’em all, and God bless the U.S.A.

Robbie Knievel

Chip does happen, as Robbie Knievel’s big Sturgis-promoted motorcycle jump over tank and cannon, and about 150 feet of open air space (and five flame-throwers)

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was delayed Tuesday at midnight at the last possible moment, due to a “brewing storm” of one kind or another, it was announced. The disappointed crowd almost seemed to understand. This unfortunately cut the main compound at the campground in half for a good portion of the week, as barricades, ramps and props cut a wide swath down the middle.

At 12:25 a.m. Thursday morning the high-revving sound of a Honda dirt bike announced the presence of white-suited Captain Robbie Knievel in the main arena, and not a moment too soon for the impatient crowds that found themselves stuck behind metal cattle fences that not only protected them from an errant jump, but prevented half the crowd that attended the earlier Velvet Revolver concert from being able to depart the grounds. Scattered boos could be discerned above the general din.

A couple of practice runs back and forth alongside the ramps sent spotlighted dust up on the red, white and blue bunting decorating the sides, before Robbie turned and in a flash of flame and smoke,

careened through the air and nearly overshot the landing ramp, making his jump closer to 200 unplanned-feet as I measured it. If you blinked, you missed it. And he stuck it perfectly, avoiding all hay bales, and aside from a sore ankle came out in better shape than the paved road he nearly landed on.

You see, finally and to their credit, the Woodruff family, who run the Buffalo Chip and have made steady improvements to amenities of all kinds through the years, responded to suggestions to pave the main thoroughfare for the benefit of their guests, who otherwise must deal with slick-as-shit clay gumbo when it rains. And it looked beautiful this year, the road, all new with shiny black asphalt; that is, until the old Soviet-era army tank procured as a prop for Robbie’s jump managed to chew it up under tread while it maneuvered about. The multi-ton contraption broke down finally and found itself unable to muster past the wrought-iron front gate in time for the delayed event, darn it.

The bottom line in all this—similar to talking about the weather—is that all things are bound to change... like it or not. And like I said earlier, chip happens. ▶