Former pension fund trustee hits the open road

By Barry B. Burr

Jonathan Barry Forman reflects the image of a modern-day cowboy, but riding a motorcycle instead of a horse, as he travels on a 6,000-mile cross-country trip to attend a couple of conferences, camp out and sightsee along the way.

With as much daring as easy riders Dennis Hopper, Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson, Mr. Forman, who set out May 31 from Norman, Okla., carries considerably more professional credentials, including serving as the Alfred P. Murrah professor of law at the University of Oklahoma College of Law and former vice chairman of the $8.3 billion Oklahoma Public Employees Retirement System, Oklahoma City, and author of the book “Making America Work,” which includes ideas for improving the pension system.

“I will camp about half of the 30 nights and stay in conference hotels and with family the rest,” Mr. Forman said in an e-mail from Roanoke, Va., 2,200 miles into his trip. He carries all of his things on his motorcycle, including one suit as well as rain gear, and food like freeze-dried packets of beef stew, and high-end camping equipment, including a butane-fueled stove that folds to about the size of a cigarette package, a sleeping bag that stuffs down into the size of a litter bottle and a tent “the smallest you can get.”

While on the road, he stops at diners along the way to eat his main meal of the day. “I have driven most of the Natchez Trace and Blue Ridge parkways, and I have camped in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and in many beautiful state parks,” said Mr. Forman, who also rode up to Cleveland to visit family. “Along the way, I have seen wildflowers, wild turkeys, hawks, bear, and deer; and, so far, I have visited the highest points in Louisiana (Driskill Mountain, 535 feet), Mississippi (Woodall Mountain, 806 feet), and Tennessee (Clingmans Dome, 6,643 feet),” as well as to Spruce Knob, at 4,863 feet the highest point in West Virginia.

“My 2007 Suzuki Boulevard C50 (800 cc’s) is performing great,” Mr. Forman said in the e-mail on his way to New York to attend the invitation-only TIAA Institute conference — Enhancing Retirement Security: Ideas and Initiatives to Improve Participant Outcomes — on June 24. Mr. Forman is a fellow of the institute.

On the first major stop of his trip, he spoke June 3 on “Removing the Legal Impediments to Offering Lifetime Annuities in Pension Plans” at a Law and Society Association conference in New Orleans.

After the TIAA Institute conference, his final stop, Mr. Forman plans to take a more direct route back to Oklahoma, hoping to be home by the end of June.

Such a trip “really just helps clear your head and get out into the country,” Mr. Forman said in an interview. “It’s the 100th anniversary of the (National Park Service). There is a lot to see. People I meet (on the road) are regular people, not the intelligentsia we usually hang out with. Everyone has been nice to me.”

While traveling, Mr. Forman said, “I rarely use a cell phone. … The whole point of going camping is being out of touch.” However, “you really have to be very organized to take a trip like this,” he said. “It demonstrates my organizational abilities.”

Anyway, Mr. Forman said, “Please watch out for motorcycles! It might be me.”

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