

100 Nights ~ A Crossing of America

This book is dedicated to two individuals who taught me the secret to life is to live each day to it's fullest:

Ken Krumal ~ 1959 – 1992

William Briscoe ~ 1927 – 1994

This book is also a tribute to those I met along the road who showed me the rich tapestry of life in America one day at a time.

“Learning to ride a bike is something you never forget. The thrill of coasting faster than you could ever possibly run.”

The training wheels came off the bike and with a push from my dad, I was on my way. All of about 15 feet until my first crash. After I got the balance & pedaling issues resolved, “stay on the block” led to “look both ways” which progressed to “when will you be home?” It was while exploring the neighborhood on that ancient red Schwinn that the seed for long distance touring was planted. I simply never wanted to come home. Drifting asleep to the sounds of AM radio on those hot summer nights, I’d envision far off destinations with only my trusty red “steed” to get me there. My “local” rides quickly progressed to clandestine trips to the surrounding “burbs” of Chicago as that “touring seed” took firm root.

Throughout my remaining years in school I continued to cycle, but mainly as a way to get from point A to B. The dream of cycling across vast stretches of unknown pavement having been folded away neatly and stored along with other childhood mementos. My fascination with “pedal power” definitely lasted longer for me than my peers, as I didn’t bother to get a drivers license until I was 23, but that had more to do with paying my own insurance than anything.

Following college, cycling became my escape from a floundering career. My trusty red “steed” was replaced by an 18-speed touring machine as cycling became more serious. Saturday rides began taking me further and further away from the sprawl of Chicago and my wanderlust was rekindled. 1988 brought me to Yellowstone for my first “cycling” vacation, no rental car, just a bike, tent and some bike-bag luggage. As luck would have it, Mother Nature was waiting for me and after struggling to get to the gates of the park, I was turned away by the epic forest fires that raged thru the park that year. Two years later and I was back in the saddle, this time to ride past glaciers on the Icefields Parkway in western Canada. I finally made it back to Yellowstone the following year and I was truly captivated by the wonderful “out there” feel of the park. Nightly campfires being the only fires in sight this time.

These riding vacations allowed me to pedal away from the pressures back home and concentrate solely on getting my rolling apartment to the next town, but I always felt these trips ended too soon. It took me about four days to get into the “groove” of touring and by then it was almost time to start thinking about getting back. Just like when I was a kid, the very moment you’re having the most fun, a voice chimes in that it’s time to go home.

As I became more disillusioned with how my adult life was turning out, I found myself regressing back to childhood when riding that big red Schwinn around town seemed to hold all the answers. Rummaging around a box of old keepsakes, I found that childhood dream of a cross-country bike ride right where I left it. Dusting off layers of doubt, this childhood dream began to take on a more concrete form.

At first I used the mere thought of such an expedition as merely a mental diversion. Too many obligations, too many bills to pay. But over the last few years the obligations have been met, the debt overcome and all that’s left is the dream and desire to see America at a slower pace. I don’t know if riding across the country will provide any of the answers I seek, but at this point it’s worth a try just to see if the answers are out there.

On May 1st, 1994 I take off my training wheels a second time. My dad's not around for that final push, so I'm counting on you, my friends, for that. I can't stay on the block anymore, but I promise to look both ways"

This letter was sent to the friends and family I hoped to reconnect with along my journey. Preparation for this trip began in earnest during the early months of 1994. Planning the trip of a lifetime was no small task. By the time of my departure I was moonlighting at REI sporting goods as a bike technician and squirreling away every dime, like a good bohock. Since I was giving up all the security I'd ever known, I wanted to plan a truly unique route, eventually creating on a rather circuitous route which not only brought me through a good number of National Parks, but all my friends and family along the way.

Somewhere in mid-February I started to get cold feet and wondering if theorizing about the trip would be saner than actually riding it, but my roommate Jim convinced me otherwise, 'If you don't go now, you'll hate yourself forever.'" I took his advice, but it wasn't until I bought that one-way ticket to California that the reality of this adventure sank in.

Outfitting a bike to cross the country took a good deal of time as well. Had I only planned to stay on the pavement between the culverts of America my gear would have been simpler to account for, but as my route changed, my equipment needed to change as well. National Parks meant hiking, which meant boots, which necessitated a backpack. Weather was also a factor since the warmth of California skies would fade as I headed east and north thru the Rockies. Of course a trip of this magnitude also required a decent camera and no paltry "instamatic" would do, there were bodies, lenses, filters and a tripod.

Loading up my bike for the first of the "loaded" tests by late March, I didn't even have enough room for a spare roll of Lifesavers candy, but I had what I needed. Two weeks later I submitted my resignation at the thankless bank that employed me for the past 5 years and I was now fully committed. The resignation was met with shock and disbelief, as many of my coworkers never knew about my cycling passion. My resignation from REI was a totally different affair. There my leaving was viewed as a "right of passage" into their select group of adventurers and a necessity if I was going to truly be "out there".

I was by no means convinced that what I was doing was in my long-term best interests, but somehow I felt compelled to see where this dream would take me...

Day 1, May 1st 1994
66 Miles

As the sun rose on this first day I dipped my front wheel into the Pacific and thought of what lay ahead of me. It's going to take an entire summer to see an expanse of water like the Pacific again, so I took in a big gulp of salty air, enjoyed the roar of the surf and cool breezes and then turned the bike east.

I couldn't have asked for a better opening day for this journey, bright and sunny with a slight tailwind showing me the way. As I began my trek, the words of my friend and western "host" Rich were still ringing in my ears, "This is nuts, but if anyone can pull it off, you can."

The train ride to California was my first *real* trip west. I'd been out to Montana and western Canada several times, but traveling my train gives you a much better perspective on the distances involved than a plane flight. As the Desert Wind rolled westward out of Chicago, farmlands gradually transformed into mountains as we wound around the sides of the snow covered Rockies. Once past the Continental Divide the terrain flattened out substantially again with sagebrush dominating the remaining miles to Los Angeles.

Gazing out the window during the last few hours, I was struck by how different the western architecture out west. In Chicago the industrial revolution spawned enclaves of brick bungalows with seemingly requisite oak and elm trees lining the streets. Spanish influences were hard to miss as the train rumbled through southern California; pastel shaded stucco instead of brick, palms replacing oaks. The brightness and the lightness of the surrounding landscape seeming to be the perfect compliment.

After only ten minutes of riding, my front tire was barely dry from its dip in the ocean when I met another cyclist out for a Sunday ride. John and I conversed over several miles of mostly deserted suburban roads, both of us contemplating the road that lay ahead of me. While both of us bantered about how "tough" this route might become, it struck me that only one of us would *truly* know how long and tough the road would really be. I detected a rather envious tone coming from John as we continued to ride next to each other, so I tried to talk him into riding east with me, but he mentioned something about a family and a lawn that needed mowing. This was supposed to be a solo ride anyway.

As John and I parted ways, I stopped to take a drink and ensure the mother lode strapped over the rear wheel was stable. Reassured that the load was still road-worthy, I rode about another 10 feet before feeling the familiar "shimmy" from the back wheel; my first flat. I knew today would be a day of firsts, but this one I could have done without. I had hoped to go more than 10 miles before my first flat, but this would be just the first unexpected surprise of a long summer. I propped the bike up against the wall and got the great notion to try and remove the wheel without taking the load off the back of the bike. This sounded like such a good idea when I started, but the 90lb bike proved to be quite the unruly child, the front end oscillating around like a gyroscope while the rear remained almost immovable due to the weight. I finally managed to remount the repaired wheel without giving myself a hernia, but I was a sweaty, frustrated mess.

Where the bike is concerned, you'll pay for every shortcut.

The rest of the morning was spent becoming accustomed to the "ride" of the loaded bike. Just as my summer jobs weren't enough preparation for what working a full time job was going to be like, my weekend rides back home weren't enough to prepare me for my new career as a full time cyclist. But by my estimation, I had 99 more days to get things right.

The bike continued to adjust under the load as well. The significance of each creak and groan emanating from the bike were magnified in my mind, leading to several impromptu stops along the way just to ease my aching mind. I guess both the bike and I needed to get over our first day jitters, but fixing that initial flat and all the gear-checks seemed to dull the excitement of the first day on the road.

Physically I was beginning to have my problems as well. The rolling hills had me searching out lower and lower gears in hopes of finding relief for even the most minor of hills. I didn't want to push myself too hard this early on, but I became more concerned as the huffing and puffing picked right up. This was the price I paid for not doing more training before I left. My arms were also getting a vigorous workout as well, just keeping the rig heading straight down the road, was also somewhat unexpected. Making it all the way to Delaware would obviously be a "total body" workout and these were just the first pains of the trip. Cyclists often talk of their legs "remembering" the strains of climbing and miles in the saddle, but unfortunately my legs seemed to have developed amnesia. During past vacations I had pedaled over countless miles of terrain much steeper than these little bumps but you couldn't tell that by watching me ride. Mentally I tried to focus more on the wonders that lay ahead, instead of the physical and mechanical struggles I was currently enduring and this seemed to help. My mind was definitely spinning faster than my legs as I struggled to find a peaceful coexistence between the two.

I took my first break after 30 miles, resting under a palm tree and answering my first round of questions from a pack of curious kids. Riding up on their BMX bikes they seemed to view my heavily loaded beast as a dinosaur. Going over the gear, my cycling computer seemed to hold their fascination. A transmitter in the fork sends a signal to the tiny monitor on the handlebars to record speed and mileage. Nothing out of the ordinary for touring cyclists, but to these kids it was ultra high-tech. When I began to speak of Delaware, it must have sounded like riding to Mars, judging from the looks they gave me. I agreed that it was a long way to go, but assured them that with the proper motivation, anything was possible.

Following my short respite the terrain flattened out, allowing me to concentrate more on my surroundings. Riding through the urban sprawl of southern California, my attention was drawn to the diverse names the towns had out there; Monrovia, Azusa, Glendora, San Dumas and finally the most mysterious of them all Rancho Cucamonga. Nearing the outskirts of San Bernardino by late afternoon I began to look around for a campground. The foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains were off to my left and seemed to hold the most promise. A passing cyclist gave me directions to a campground, a scant 6 miles away. Eventually I came upon the access road, my thoughts were more on getting this day over with, rather than the effects of the fading sun on the passing lands. The road, the bike, and especially the sun had all taken their toll today and all I wanted was a patch of ground to rest my weary bones. Following the access road I was surprised how quickly my remaining energy left me, fading faster than the sun.

Stopping at a roadside fruit stand for a rest and some bananas, I was a bit taken aback when the owner said, in halting English, that I looked like one of his strawberries. Looking down, I saw his point. All exposed flesh was charred pretty well, like a slab of raw beef. May in Chicago and you didn't think sunburn. With all of the first day excitement, I had forgotten to use sunscreen and *again* paid a price for the oversight. I obviously wasn't drinking enough water, which also contributed, to my current sad state, so I finished off the water I was toting in a valiant attempt to revive my tired legs. As I rolled towards the foothills I kept a constant watch on my mileage, hoping for signs of a downhill stretch or that campground around every corner. The only signs of civilization to greet me during the last half-hour of riding turned out to be a Shell station. I staggered inside searching for either a miracle elixir or at least something made of chocolate. Chocolate was easier to find. A pint of chocolate milk and a few Baby Ruth candy bars brought me back around to full consciousness as I tried to figure out exactly where that campground would be. Seeking advice I adjourned to the local attached diner where I learned that the campground was still another 5 miles away, *if* they were opened for the season.

Ordinarily another five miles would have been a minor inconvenience, but at this point in a very trying day, I was ready to drop and my bucket was pretty worn out; five miles sounded more like fifty. The legs were on the verge of cramping with every step, so I knew that whatever my next move was; this would also have to be my last move of the day. Time to improvise.

Leaning against the bike, I surveyed the surroundings. The gas station was the only structure dotting the immediate landscape, but what caught my eye was a row of trees running along the back of the property. I wasn't exactly thrilled with the prospect of camping so close to the bustle of the gas station, but at this point I didn't have much choice. Waiting until the parking lot emptied out, I pushed the rig through knee-high grass and nestled behind two particularly stout-looking trees. I set up the tent as quietly as

possible and crawled inside as the last glimmers of daylight faded from the sky. The high grass provided a decent padding beneath me, but by this point I was almost too numb to notice. Being horizontal was all that mattered as I ate several bananas to stave off the emerging leg cramps as I officially called it a day.

The first day of my previous trips always seemed to be the toughest, and today was no exception, or so I had hoped. Hopefully tomorrow will be easier. Overcoming obstacles is what this trip will be about. Tomorrow I'll drink more and definitely find some sunscreen.

Day 2
92 Miles

I had "free camped" several times before but the hectic "roll and go" that comes with the first rays of the day always takes a little getting used to. I had a rather restless night, awakening several times to massage cramping calves, but at least the first stop of the morning was close; about 100 feet back to the diner attached to the Shell station. Over runny scrambled eggs and coffee, I plotted out my day; San Bernardino to Banning, then points east. The waitress took notice of my plotting and offered advice along with the much-needed refill on the java. Coffee definitely got me spinning a little faster, but of course it led to more frequent "watering" stops along the way. As I went to pay for my meal I was surprised to find the waitress only rang up the coffee, forgetting the rest of the meal with a wink. I returned the wink and with a gracious thank you, I set out on my second day.

Rolling out by 8am I passed the campground I never made the yesterday and then took the waitress' advice and stayed to the outskirts of San Bernardino proper. Apparently there are some rougher sections of town and it's easier to avoid the town entirely than to try and weave in and out of the good sections of town, at least according to the waitress. Outside of town I wandered from the route a bit and soon found myself amongst the famed California orange groves. I didn't see any Sunkist signs on my maps, so I kept the bike heading east and hoped for the best. The road followed the hilly foothills as I got to practice my climbing skills a bit. I stopped to reapply the recently purchased sunscreen and tried to find any recognizable signs of life, but I was firmly buried in the oranges for most of an hour. Each side road seemed to lead to nowhere and I was seriously thinking of backtracking when I finally came upon an intersection that appeared on my map. Up and over a final hill brought me to the town of Yucaipa, with a much-needed 7-11 just waiting for me. I really wasn't up for all this climbing so early in the trip and eagerly sought a flatter route to Banning. The giddy girls behind the counter didn't know how to get to Banning by any other route besides the highway, which left me no better than lost at this point. Resigned to spending the afternoon climbing out of the orange groves, I found a nearby fruit stand and picked a nice selection for lunch. Over oranges and more bananas I met a couple that knew of a back road through a nearby canyon that promised to be much flatter than my current route. While trying to give me detailed directions, the husband kept getting stymied by the lack of road signs in the area, so his wife suggested that they drive to the entrance to the canyon and I could follow so as to not get too lost before I even began. Thanking them profusely for this unexpected guidance, we formed a slow caravan to the canyon entrance. They'd speed ahead and then stop by every turn and wait for me to ride up. I was pushing the bike as fast as my lungs would allow, not wanting to delay these kind folks any longer than necessary, but I guess they had the time to burn. As I made the final turn into Tomato Canyon, I waved an emphatic good-bye to my guides as we parted ways.

Thankfully I had reloaded all my water bottles back at the 7-11 in preparation for a long afternoon. The sun was at its highest point as I began to pedal thru the barren canyon. The map indicated that it was another 20 miles to Banning from the canyon entrance with only sagebrush and roadside bramble to keep me company. I divided the ride to Banning into 4, 5-mile sections and treated myself to a bottle of water upon the completion of each leg. Here it was the second day of my adventure and already I was playing mental games to make the tough miles more palatable. It's going to be a long summer. The road made a long swooping arc before paralleling a set of railroad tracks. I tried to concentrate on keeping a smooth pace while thinking cool thoughts to counter the baking effects of the sun. The first ten miles passed fairly

uneventfully but the lack of shade in the valley kept me in the saddle more than I would have liked. It's one thing to pass up rest stops when you're riding well, but to *have* to keep riding when there are no rest stops takes a much higher toll both mentally and physically. By the time I neared Banning my pedal strokes had gotten pretty ragged, but the thoughts of a milk shake (for some reason) kept me going.

Banning was a welcome sight indeed. I had my choice of fast food options on "the strip" and finally got the shake I had so richly earned. By this point I had put in 60 miles to this point and after a short rest, felt confident enough to move on. The maps said that Morongo Valley was the next viable town, but to get there would require riding on a real interstate, I-10, for about 20 miles. This would be a fun ride.

Pushing the bike around the cloverleaf I took a deep breath and prepared for the fast pace on the interstate. The wind was at my back and the route sloped gradually downward, allowing me to keep an incredibly fast 28mph pace for most of the interstate journey. I liken riding a bicycle on the interstate to playing a video game. There's action all around you and you're constantly moving at the same time, dodging objects and obstacles in the road. In my case the obstacles were potholes, bolts and the occasional shredded semi tire. Normally I've got enough time to avoid everything my way, but the accelerated pace of this ride didn't give me that luxury. While this dodging game kept me pretty tense for most of the ride, the fast pace was incredibly exciting. If only all my bicycle rides could reach 30mph. Finally pulling off at the junction with Route 62, I was reminded that each tail wind winded downhill had a corresponding headwind uphill section as soon as my direction changed from east to north. I was immediately returned to my normal 10mph pace and faced with my first true headwind. The map showed that Morongo Valley to be only 9 miles away so I again tried to concentrate on keeping the legs pumping smoothly as the road began its slow climb.

I had assumed that when a town had "valley" in its name, there would be a low lying area, but judging from the long arduous climb awaiting me, this valley was nested among some smaller peaks. It was around 5pm and my rear-end was ready to call it a day; some parts take longer to break in than others. I was reduced to climbing for 15 minutes, resting for 10 by the end of the climb, but I eventually made the summit. Seeing the crest up ahead, I prepared for what I hoped would be a correspondingly grand downhill counterpart, but instead found myself on a plateau with the only payoff being the glowing lights of Morongo Valley ahead of me. Pooling my remaining energies, I spun into town determined to stop at the first signs of food, be it gas station burger joint or 5-star cuisine. The first three blocks of town seemed more like an industrial park than a main street and this had me worried. I had had a cheap pasta meal that I could cook in an emergency but after 90 miles, I thought I deserved better. Three more blocks of "closed" signs greeted my arrival and I was beginning to think about firing up the stove when I came upon an Italian restaurant which was actually open, the only place in town. Resting the "red steed" against the building, I headed in.

For the "only place in town" the ristorante had a decidedly Sicilian décor, large murals and soft music wafting in from a back room. Taking the nearest seat, the waitress soon approached and asked if I wanted a drink before dinner. She seemed surprised when I only asked for water, lots and lots of water. Eyeing my bicycle outside, she questioned how I could be out riding on a day like today. I thought she was referring to my final destination, and I began to fill her in on the "whys" when she cut me off and said, "No, the weather, it's over 100 today!" No wonder I was losing it out there. After downing 3 carafes of ice water and a mountain of pasta, my thoughts again turned to where I was going to camp. My first thought was to ride out of town and just pitch my tent in the brush, but there had to be a better option. When the waitress returned with my check she asked where I'd be staying tonight, leading me to believe that a more comfortable option might be forthcoming. But alas the best option I got was directions to a local park with few prying eyes. Counting my blessings along with the change, I made my way to the park. The daylight was fading fast as I pitched my tent near some trees set far back from the road. Some local kids were eyeing me from afar, but no general alarm was sounded, so I climbed inside the tent and called it a day.

As I took stock of my second day's accomplishments, I thought back to what I've been thru so far, flattening early, being cooked in the California sun, camping behind a gas station, getting lost amongst the oranges, the isolation of Timoteo Canyon, the highway riding and then climbing to Morongo Valley. The stars were bright outside as I drifted off, 150 miles along on my way.

Day 3
68 Miles

It was an early morning today; I was up before the dawn. I decided today would be an “off” day; 35 miles to the town of 29 Palms and then call it a day. I’d call my friend Rich in Los Angeles and extend our Grand Canyon rendezvous out another day. I’d severely underestimated the draining aspects of the hot sun and road out there and really needed a day to collect my thoughts (and strength).

The first stop of the day was a mere ten miles up the road. Shangri La it wasn’t, but the weather-beaten gas station & general store had enough for a breakfast of champions; chocolate milk, juice, a Hostess fruit pie and a few candy bars were enough to keep things going. Several kids poured into the store to wait for the school bus, their attention drawn to a small fish bowl near the cash register up front. Inside the bowl, struggling desperately to remain hidden was a small black and white banded lizard. The kids made several offers to buy the creature, holding out combinations of change and wadded up bills, but there was no sale made. This desert environment would take some getting used to. From the front of the general store I could see the road climbing off into the distance. Not exactly the way I preferred to start the day, but that’s how it was going at the moment, slow and upward. I took a few more moments to gather my energies for the climbing ahead and then set out. I thought the climbing would get easier with all the repetition, but as of yet, this wasn’t the case. The bike rocked gently from side to side in response to the slow lumbering rhythm of my spinning. As least the temperature was still in the low 70’s. A cold snap indeed. Chicago was probably still in the 50’s at this time of the year.

After cresting that first climb, I reached another plateau, which made the remaining miles to the next town fairly flat and nondescript. Sand and scrub dominated the foreseeable future; making the lush areas around the town of 29 Palms seem like an oasis. Rolling into town by 11am, I treated myself to a McDonalds breakfast and set out to write out my first set of postcards. It was only the 3rd day but the challenges faced and overcome were worthy of noting to my friends.

The next town up the road was Joshua Tree, named after the biblical shrub. Since I planned on calling it a day when I hit town, I made tentative plans to visit the Joshua Tree National Park and then find a suitable campsite nearby. Wanting to keep fully hydrated, I pulled into a Del Taco just inside the edge of Joshua Tree for a few tacos, and the cyclists best friend; free refills on soft drinks. Pulling into the restaurant was one of the wisest decisions I’ve made so far. While finishing off a few tacos I was pouring over my maps when the sight of my “rig” drew a small crowd of onlookers. Discussing my trip and the next days destination, I learned that my proposed route to the next town of Amboy included two major climbs, and more importantly, no water. It seems that Amboy officially “closed” over two years ago. My local tour guides suggested that I follow Route 62 east to Vidal Junction, a distance of about 100 miles. *A hundred miles!* I countered this bit of bad news by showing these folks my maps distinctly showing three little “period” towns on the way to Vidal Junction. My points were met with laughter and the news that these three “dots” had long since dried up along with the sagebrush. Great.

Over numerous refills I frantically worked to come up with a revised game plan. The thought of riding through the desert wasn’t sitting all too well with me at the time, but I didn’t see any easier way to go. After a few more discussions with my new friends I came upon a workable solution. Since it was still only noon, I’d find some shade and rest until around 4pm before heading out into the unknown desert. I’d load up the bike with as much water as possible and try to get as far as I could before nightfall. Departing the Del Taco after almost 2hrs, I found shade behind a mini-mart and relaxed as best I could. Visions of what lay ahead kept me from actually sleeping, but I still treasured every moment out of the saddle.

Reconfiguring the bike to become a “rolling oasis” of sorts, would take some doing. A tier of 50oz. water bottles would displace my tent and sleeping bag that had previously filled most of my backpack. But how many? The four water bottles I usually carried held a total of about 100oz., which would normally last me about three hours, or 30 miles. Doing some quick math I decided that I could carry another 4 bottles, probably be enough; but just for drinking. I figured that I would need another bottle for cooking dinner, bringing my total to 5 large bottles of water. Ducking into the Quickie-Mart I bought what I needed, not really thinking about how I would carry all of this or even if the bike could even *handle* the

additional weight. Moving things around and using some bungee cords I somehow stabilized the load that would ride on the back of the bike. All that water would add another 10lbs of stress to both the bike and rider, but both were getting used to it by now. After testing out the reconfigured bicycle by doing a few donuts in the parking lot, I was off. The locals said Route 62 was flatter than a breadboard heading east, and they were right. Passing thru the outskirts of town, I pushed by several abandoned homesteads, a stark testament to the road I was about to tackle. While I can't say I was thrilled at the prospect of riding out into the desert, the police call boxes situated every few miles offered some comfort. So much of my first "off" day, but at least I didn't have to ride through the head of the day.

After twenty miles of diminishing civilization, I noticed a glow off into the distance up ahead. As I spun closer I was surprised to find the soft glow emanating from a neon Budweiser sign outside of a low lying tavern. Resting the trusty steed next to two Harley bikes before ambling in. About ten locals spun on their barstools and looked me up and down before swiveling back around to enjoy their beers. Within about thirty seconds everyone in the place knew where I had come from and where I was going. While the thought of a nice cold beer was sorely tempting, I kept with my tea totaling ways and opted for an ice-cold Coke. The menu in the bar was limited to hotdogs, but the mere fact that a bar could exist out here was enough for me. Over the next half hour I learned that there were about ten such taverns scattered about the desert and that there was a weekly pool traveling pool tournament to determine the "King of the Desert". One of the locals kept me spellbound with his tales of living out in the desert, "away from the uptight city assholes." A retired machinist, Joe now spends his days doing personal geological surveys of the area and oil painting. He pointed with great pride to several of his pieces hanging about the place. While the thought of calling it a night right here and now had crossed my mind, every mile I rode today was one less I had to ride tomorrow. Bidding my "bar friends" a fond farewell, I remounted the bike and continued east.

After about another 15 miles as the last rays of the day began to fade, I propped the bike up against a police call box and began to set up the night's camp. It was a wonderfully cool and clear night, so the tent stayed packed on the bike, as I opted to lay out on just the ground cloth with my sleeping bag instead. Dinner tonight would be a freeze-dried turkey tetrazzini dinner that I'd been carrying around with me on various trips since 1991. Freeze drying must give these meals a half-life of at least fifty years., but I was happy it had only tasted half that old. With my candle lantern providing the only discernable light, I finished my dinner and settled down for a few cups of tea while gazing up at the endless stars above. The silence of the desert was something I wasn't really prepared for. Besides a swarm of slowly moving "hummers" who investigated my camp before moving on, there were no sounds at all. The two cars that passed in the night could be heard full five minutes before they finally approached my location. I'd never been around this type of quiet and found it pretty unsettling. Lying out under the stars I took note of satellites and falling stars. It seemed strange not to hear the roar of passing planes, but I was a bit out of the flight path here. Just before nodding off I thought back to this morning and the "light cycling" day I had planned. Now out here in the desert, I've decided to try harder to take each day as it comes and not plan so much. Had I stayed in 29 Palms earlier, I'd definitely be better rested tomorrow, but right now I wouldn't trade this view for anything.

Day 4
87 Miles

I felt almost naked waking up without a tent around me. Another crystal-clear California sunrise was there to greet me as I got going by 5:30am. Checking my water supply, I thought I had more than enough to finish off the remaining 60 miles between my camp and the next spot of civilization.

After a nice twenty-mile warm-up I rode through one of the pseudo “real” towns on my map, Rice California. Those locals sure had the straight dope on this town. Nothing could be deader than this town. From a distance the various structures looked inviting, but as with many things out in the desert, the first impressions can be deceiving. Close inspection revealed a burnt out gas station, an abandoned storage facility and a boarded up house previously occupied by the townsfolk. Both of them. Local legend has it that the elder statesman of the town died many years ago and the son simply moved on, effectively closing the town down. My question was, “How could anyone stay?” The proximity to the railroad tracks running parallel on the left-hand side assured local freight traffic heading in and out of L.A., but the advent of the interstate spelled the end for smaller rail towns like Rice. Entering the town proper I was greeted by a large sign denoting “Town of Rice for Sale” Some passing graffiti artist had inserted “Fried” after the “of” with humorous results. As I enjoyed the shade thrown by the abandoned service station awning, an RV towing a boat pulled up and I got to answer the usual litany of questions. A father and son team heading for the Arizona border and some leisurely boating along the Colorado. They offering cold soda and a few bananas, relief for both my throat and lungs. We shared thoughts on what remained of Rice, agreeing that this place must have been something more substantial at an earlier point, but unfortunately what was left would probably continue to deteriorate from this time forward. As isolated as Rice was, I couldn’t imagine someone walking up and saying, “For sale? I’ll take it!”

Back on the road by about 10am the heat of the day was already more than oppressive. To combat the drying effects of the desert, I drank like a fish, distributing the “rolling load” from bike to body. Several roadside potty breaks attested to my satiety, so at least I knew I wouldn’t dehydrate. Still didn’t know what shape I’d be in when I finally made it to Vidal Junction, but at least I wasn’t thirsty.

As the desert continued to roll towards me, I saw yet another curious sight heading towards me. Convinced myself that it was nothing more than a large brown bag of garbage at first, I was startled to find that the “bag” came equipped with two pumping legs and a red bandana; just another crazy touring cyclist out for a casual spin in the desert. As we pulled up next to each other, I was initially too dumbstruck to speak. Jim was riding from El Paso Texas to Chico California for reasons unstated. At the point of our meeting he had 1,400 miles under his wheels. My 250 miles seemed paltry by comparison. Those 1,400 miles made him the reigning “king of the road” at the moment so I asked all the questions, like a nosy kid. His Raleigh bike had held up well, tire liners preventing any flats and a collapsible water jug was securely bungeed to the back of the ride was his version of the “rolling oasis”. It seemed to me that Jim had done more than his share of desert riding, but perhaps too much. Constantly changing the topic of conversation, reminding me of a phrase used by a friend of mine to describe his daughter’s behavior, “Short Attention-Span Theatre”. Where was the popcorn! I felt like I was in the middle of the feature presentation. We spoke of Texas, touring, California, sand, sheet metal and goats all in the same conversation stream. Like channel surfing through an encyclopedia.

Parting ways, we exchanged praise for each other’s effort. My praise for what he had accomplished and his for what I was about to. Jim said Vidal Junction was only another 20 miles up the road, so I set out again with renewed vigor. In preparation for the trip I wanted as much versatility as possible with regard to all the gear I was going to carry. While I didn’t anticipate having to carry all this water, it was comforting to know that with a little work on my part, this bike could hold just about anything. I had overestimated on the water for my first desert romp, but now I knew what was possible.

As the sprawling metropolis of Vidal Junction, all five buildings of it, appeared on the horizon I felt a strange pang of regret as my isolating trip into the desert was drawing to a close. From here all the way east there would be towns about every 20 miles at the most. The isolation and heat of the California

desert proved an interesting diversion so early in my trip, but having conquered it, I was even more confident that I would be making it through all future obstacles as well.

Peeling my lycra-clad buns from the saddle after “parking” the bike beside a telephone pole outside the town’s lone diner, I strode into the café like an old cowhand, with plenty of swagger from the cramping sunburned thighs. Collapsing into a booth my exposed flesh clung to the vinyl seat like glue. Any attempt to move into a more comfortable position produced that wonderful farting sound that so amused the kids. I admit to enjoying the sound myself. I guess riding 65 miles before lunch entitles you to these little pleasures.

Melanie, my 16-year-old waitress seemed a bit put off that I might actually want service, and her impression of me wasn’t improved by my audacious request for a glass of water. I thought that a glass of water with your meal was a staple all across America, but apparently that didn’t include Vidal Junction. Haute cuisine in this part of the country seemed to be centered around one particular dish that caught my eye; more for the image it’s name created in my head than for anything else. The “Desert Rat” was basically a Reuben sandwich with roast beef replacing the corned beef. I’m making it a point to try different dishes and this was certainly going to qualify. Maybe it was my hunger, but it was actually pretty good, for a rat.

I pushed off a little after 3pm, probably a little earlier than I had planned, but my thoughts were again centered on getting to the end of the day and a hot shower in Parker Arizona. It had been four days since my last dunking and I was really looking forward to scraping off the funk. Crossing the Colorado River would be the first of several border crossings I’d be making along this trip. Spanning the metal suspension bridge provided an interesting perspective of the famous Colorado River. At this point the river was about 150 feet wide and moving south. I’d be getting a chance to see this river’s work further north at the Grand Canyon soon. Parker Arizona is known for pleasure boating and resort living. The London Bridge is located just off the main road, having been purchased from England by an eccentric millionaire. Riding through town the traffic and congestion kept me a bit on edge as I tried to locate the campground Jim told me about. The main drag in Parker was crowded with fast food and family entertainment, and all the hustle and bustle had me longing for last night’s isolation. This last observation gave me pause to laugh. I’d never be satisfied, in L.A. I couldn’t wait to escape all the crowds and get out into the desert, out in the desert I longed for signs of civilization and now that I’ve found civilization, I’m looking for the isolation again.

As I neared the end of the strip, the front tire went squishy. A thorn flat, yet another souvenir from the desert. Pulling up next to a hardware store I made a quick change of the tire and then spied a KFC promoting what touring cyclists refer to as “a grazing” aka and All-You-Can-Eat extravaganza. The “Desert Rat” of a few hours ago was still kind of sitting there, but an AYCE wouldn’t come along every day. Over a sumptuous feast, I poured over my maps trying to plan out the next few days. Two local truckers provided their keen insights, saying the route north to Kingman was fairly hilly but from there to Flagstaff it was fairly flat as long as I stayed close to Route 66.

Pulling into the municipal campground along the shores of the Colorado, I found it mostly deserted. The few campers I saw were set up in the sandy soil and appeared to be boaters. Finding a spot under a willowy tree, I busied myself with setup of the tent and then hustled off to get that needed shower. It’s amazing the amount of road grit the body can accumulate over four days of cycling. Feeling a full five pounds lighter, I made it back to camp and then took a leisurely stroll along the gravelly shores of the Colorado. The cold waters brought relief to my tired feed, but soon the relief turned to discomfort as the frigid waters began to numb my toes.

As the sun began to set I lit my tiny candle lantern and reflected back on the last four days. Cycling across the country is going to provide a lifetime of challenges to overcome, heat, cold, flats, mountains and all, but I guess the thrill for me is going to be riding into the unknown on a daily basis. I didn’t know that I’d end up at a campground in Parker Arizona when I woke up and a summer of those “unknowns” was what was awaiting me.

Day 5
45 Miles

I got a relatively early start again today but my first mile was spent heading south, back to the Quickie Mart for a tube of Flexall 454. Both of my shoulders were stiff and painful this morning and I figured that if Flexall 454 was good enough for Joe Namath, it was good enough for me.

Finally turning things north I rode 4 miles before yet another rear flat delayed my progress further. Pumping ahead for another 90 minutes brought me to the base of a large hill bordering the river town of Lake Havasu City. After grunting my way up to the crest of the summit, I loosened my grip on the brake levers and slowly began what I hoped would be a carefree descent into town, but my roller coaster ride came to an abrupt halt. Speeding downhill at a bit over 30mph, I tried my best to avoid all of the roadside junk scattered across the pavement, but again it wasn't what you missed that mattered, it was what you managed to hit. And I hit something dead on. Whatever I missed with the front wheel, I seemed to hit square on with the rear. The back end of the bike was airborne for a brief moment before landing with a thud. Bringing the bike to an emergency stop was a tough order, but the force of the impact had already disrupted my momentum. Coming to a halt on the shoulder of the road, I took a deep breath and dismounted. Time to assess the damage.

Rolling the rear wheel around I found that a rather large sheet metal screw had flipped up and impaled the tire and tube. A pretty severe problem, but nothing I was particularly concerned with since I had replacements for both, but as I began walking the bike off towards the first exit, I heard a metallic "clang" still emanating from the rear wheel. Checking things a bit further I found that in addition to shredding through the tire and tube, the force of the impact had also put a crack in the side of the rim, causing the wheel to warp out of shape, making the wheel strike the frame with every revolution. Now *this* was a problem.

After the immediate panic subsided a bit, I saw that I was about 100ft from a gas station so my first move was to get the bike off the road and look for help. I checked the local yellow pages and found that Lake Havasu City had a bike shop, a minor miracle. I knew that a touring wheel would be tough to replace out here, but after finding the bike shop, I just naturally thought I'd have a few options available, which was sadly not the case. While the shop had plenty of road and mountain wheels available, the concept of a touring wheel with 40 spokes no less, was a foreign notion here. If I was just taking a spin around town, just about any wheel would do, but with all this weight over the rear wheel I had to have something pretty substantial beneath me. A series of harried phone calls to Chicago offered little relief; the earliest my bike builder could send out a wheel was three days, time I really didn't have if I was to meet my friend Rich at the Grand Canyon on Monday. After almost 2hrs of negotiations with all parties, speculation and debate, I ended up plunking down \$125 for the sturdiest wheel the local shop had. I just hoped the wheel would last until I got to the Grand Canyon. The burning sun was high overhead when I finally rode out of the shop and over to a hamburger shop for some lunch. Behind schedule and over budget already, things seemed to be getting more and more difficult with the passing miles.

By 4pm I was ready to head out of town again. Leaving the campground this morning I had hoped to make Kingman by nightfall, but now my sights were set on just making the next town up the road. Yucca was a long 25 miles away and ordinarily I could have made that distance in about two hours, but this new wheel had yet to earn my trust, so I struggled to make even 10mph. I was riding so gingerly because I didn't want to put too much lateral stress on this new rim. Every creak and groan on the bike had me dismounting, checking the wheel tension and then moving on, slowly. What a miserable way to go. I kept praying that things would hold together just a few more days until I met Rich near Flagstaff.

After a long 20-miles stretch at a low 2% climb, I ground my way into Yucca only to find things even more deserted than in Morongo Valley had been two days ago. The only signs of life (and light) came from a small cantina. A sputtering neon sign advertised "Cervesa Frias", cold beer, so I knew I was among friends. Resting the bike gently near the side door I sauntered inside, hoping to catch a spot of dinner before nightfall. The bar was equally deserted, but soon the slow moving bar matron entered from the kitchen and took my order. "Mexican Chicken Fingers" sounded good at this time of day and while I was sorely

tempted to chase it with a Cervesa, I opted for yet another diet Coke. After a bit a few locals wandered in from the nearby auto testing plant and the place came to life. One gent in particular kept asking me questions about cycling which helped to pass about an hour. I had originally hoped to spend about thirty minutes there before pushing off again and looking for a campground, but by the time I could make it outside, it was too dark to ride very far. Thinking quickly I pushed the bike around the corner from the bar and rested it up against an adjoining fence. Unloading the ground cloth, sleeping pad and bag, I laid out within 15 feet of the fence, amongst the scrub of the desert. Gazing up at the stars I summed up the day's events as being fairly miserable. I couldn't believe the hassles I had encountered during this first week on the road, but then I had come to expect the unexpected.

Day 6
70 miles

Spending yet another night sprawled out on a plastic sheet made me feel a bit like a landed fish, but at least the price was right. Stowing my gear, I pedaled down to a small store for an early morning Hostess fruit pie and a Baby Ruth, breakfast of champions. Leaving town before 7am, I was on the road a grand total of 5 minutes before a Ford Bronco passed me. I didn't pay it much attention until a sharp "BOOM" resonated across the plateau. Looking up ahead I saw the Bronco spinning off into the desert creating a huge cloud of dust off to my right. Watching the car careen out of control over the bramble, I saw something fly up and out of the cloud just before the car fully disappeared from view.

I had taken a first aid course before leaving on this trip, but I don't recall them covering a car spinning off into the desert during class. I was stunned at the suddenness of the accident, as time seemed to be suspended while I watched all this unfold in front of me. Setting the bike down in the culvert I followed the path carved by the spinning car and reached what I had at first thought was a hefty bag, until it moved. The "bag" turned out to be a little girl in a green dress. She was laying quietly in the fetal position but when I got nearer she stood up, both of us still too stunned to speak, but she seemed fine, but too scared to cry. Needless to say we were both relieved to find no broken bones. Taking her hand, I led her over to the ravine where the Bronco had finally come to rest. The front of the Bronco was totally pushed in, the result of hitting a small rise head on, but the main body of the vehicle still intact. By the time we approached, all of the occupants were out of the vehicle and milling around in various stages of disbelief.

By this time another car had arrived on the scene adding two more helping hands to the effort. Almost everyone seemed to be OK up our initial inspection, but the father was another story. He was wailing in Spanglish about how he had killed his daughter. I kept trying to verify if he was talking about the girl I had with me or yet another daughter, but his grief was all consuming. After about five minutes trying to persuade him that his little daughter was alive, I could see that he was drifting into shock as the blood quickly drained from his face. I finally coaxed him into lying down where the other couple had brought blankets to cover the victims. While he was lying there he kept sobbing about his daughter but gradually came to realize that she was sitting right beside him. The other couple returned to their car and called for help before returning to help me out.

I wasn't totally convinced that the father George, hadn't injured himself more seriously since he kept rubbing his neck as he lied there, so I moved in behind him and trying to stabilize his head while we waited for the ambulance. Trying to take his mind off the accident, I asked George what he did for a living, but surprisingly this got him even more agitated. Seems he worked for California Electric and had told his boss that he had contracted Scarlet Fever and needed a weekend off to "get over it". Hearing this, I started to chuckle, commenting that I was fairly sure that George really didn't have Scarlet Fever.

The ambulance arrived soon afterwards and the first medic on the scene was relieved to find there were no serious injuries and set about checking each passenger more thoroughly. This freed me up to return to my bike and continue on up the road.

Making my way to Kingman, I pulled into an enormous truck stop for a filling breakfast. The \$7 tab was well worth it, but I really needed a few hours to get over the mornings activity. The desert sun was

beginning to scorch again as I toured greater Kingman, birthplace of Andy Devine cowboy movie star. Locating a bike shop in town, I bought some spare tubes and told the mechanic about my broken rim back in Lake Havasu. They didn't have a better built wheel to offer me and to be honest I really wasn't looking to replace this one just yet. Finding a local park, I took the next few hours off, waiting for the cooler afternoon skies. I visited another bike shop and after checking their inventory of bike wheels, they gave me the number of a wheel builder in Flagstaff where I might have better luck. I took the card and hoped I wouldn't need it.

Leaving town about 3pm I found a stiff tailwind that helped push me north. I was clipping along at close to 25mph for the first three miles before having to turn east, where I found an equally strong headwind to slow me down. Such is luck. The map showed a few towns along this stretch of rolling hills, but the barren stretches of treeless land didn't seem to bear this out. Valentine seemed to be the nighttime stop today, but all I came across when I hit "town" was a dumpy looking watering hole, but it would have to do. Walking inside I found the place almost deserted, but the few local citizens inside more than made up for that. Tom and Nancy lived close by and filled the next hour with tales of living amongst the bramble north of Kingman, how to dig a posthole and how to eat a burro. This last part I thought was a local joke until they had the bartender fry up some burro steaks out back. All their talk of its tenderness was borne out with the first bite. Once you get past the fact that your eating a burro, it was pretty tasty. Hanging around for a while longer, I was ready to call it a day and began asking around for a campsite. My dinner hosts suggested a deserted building located about 10 miles up the road. It wasn't much, located close to a railroad, but the price was right.

Thanking them profusely for the burro and conversation, I remounted the bike and after a few more rolling hills, found the building they were talking about. Setting up camp and firing up the stove, tonight's dinner was going to be pasta, the perfect compliment to burro. Finishing off the pot of noodles while watching the sun set on the distant canyon walls, I had time to reflect on the events of this busy day. Thankfully it looked like everyone was going to be OK after the accident, but every time I thought of what had transpired I got another rush of adrenaline.

Day 7
8 Miles

The high canyon walls kept the morning light from reaching the road until much later in the morning than I was used to. The shadows made for a chilly start to the day, but I was on my way. Since it was still taking me a solid ten miles to officially "warm up" each morning, I was prepared for a slow start today, but not as slow as it turned out.

Leaving the canyon I rolled onto yet another plateau and had just started settling into a good cycling rhythm when I heard a chime-like "ping" from the rear wheel. Somehow I thought this was just the spokes readjusting again, but deep down I knew better. I had broken a spoke. Dismounting and surveying the damage I found that the broken spoke had weakened the rim, causing it to resemble a "Pringle" potato chip, totally ruined. There would be no roadside repair this time, no bike shop around the next corner. There weren't even any corners out here, only sagebrush. Laying the bike down in the culvert beside the road, I swapped my bike shoes for hiking boots and loaded up as many of my "valuables" as the backpack would hold before heading out up the road on foot. It's tough to find the exact words to describe my demeanor at this point, but I was more interested in finding a solution than sitting down for a good cry.

After walking about the length of a football field a car pulled over and offered me a lift. I readily accepted the offer, joining four Native Americans on their way to Truxton to do laundry. The distance we covered by car would have taken me a few hours to hike, and my day was starting to look up. Pulling into the gas station I got out and thanked my ride and immediately set out to get things righted. The pleasant couple running the gas station were kind enough to help me retrieve my bike and to offer the use of their tools as I set out to somehow true up the wheel,

I had replacement spokes with me, but the “Pringle” effect is tough to reverse without some pretty specific tools. After about thirty minutes of effort, I through in the towel. Time for a second opinion. Jogging across the street I entered the Route 66 Café and made a beeline for the pay phone. I didn’t know what the ultimate solution was going to be, but my friend Rich in California always seemed to have a quick reply. Again the fates must have been looking out for me. Rich had recently called the Grand Canyon reservation office and found that we could get camping permits for the Phantom Ranch at the bottom a few days in advance by waiting in line. He had the car packed and was just heading out the door when I called. Had I phoned 10 minutes later I would have missed him entirely and been truly stranded here in Truxton. After confirming plans, I told Rich to swing thru Truxton on his way to the Grand Canyon and pick me up. To accomplish this, Rich would leave a little later in the day so he would make Truxton at daybreak instead of 3am. Hanging up it took me a few minutes for this quirky streak of luck to finally sink in, but I was pretty happy at how things had worked out. Even with a mangled wheel I’d still end up at the Grand Canyon ahead of schedule. We’d drive to the Canyon and get a camping spot, then drive down to Flagstaff and get the wheel rebuilt.

Having my problem solved and the rest of the day off, I set about trying to find something to keep me occupied while I waited out the heat of the day. Camping out at the Route 66 Café, I spent the rest of the morning writing postcards and catching up on my journal writing. Nothing too stimulating to report there, but at least it passed the time. After lunch I loaded up the backpack and went for an hour-long hike to break in my boots and back. It’s been a long time since I’d been on a long hike and I doubt if my upcoming descent into the Grand Canyon would compare to the five-mile expeditions I did back home. Into the late afternoon I had done most everything on my “short” list; laundry, postcards and hiking, so I returned to the gas station and talked up the proprietors. They seemed to view my lucky break as a clear and definite sign from God and continued to expound upon other such worldly miracles they’ve witnessed out in the desert. Some of their “miracles” seemed a bit light, but it passed the time.

By evening the gas station was closing and I began looking for a place to set up the tent and wait for Rich to appear when the gas station owners offered to let me stay in the gas station to wait. As long as I locked the door behind me when I left in the morning. It was a deal. Settling down for a quiet evening I had no problem nodding off. I woke several times to check on various things in my gear and finally woke for good about 5am. Rich was due to arrive around 6am, so I started moving my gear outside as Rich pulled up. We finished loading his car quickly and quietly and then, after making sure to lock the door, I left the gas station in Truxton I left a not for my hosts, thanking them profusely for their kindness and as the car pulled away I kept thanking the gods for my continued good karma.

Day 8
Did Not Ride

Rich had been awake for some twenty straight hours by the time he picked me up, so for the next few hours my job centered around keeping him steering between the culverts. The miles between Truxton and the Grand Canyon passed in silence. On the one hand, by being picked up in Truxton I was back on schedule and looking forward to hiking the Grand Canyon, yet there was a part of me that felt that taking a ride was somehow “cheating” since I was bound and determined to make this crossing using only my own effort.

We arrived at the Grand Canyon park office and cued up in line with the other hiking hopefuls. We were fairly optimistic about our chances for a back country permit since we weren’t leaving until tomorrow, but listening to some of the conversations while waiting, it seems that everyone had the same thought, applying for a later date. Standing in line for an hour, you start looking for anything to keep your mind occupied, and soon I started focusing on the posters and leaflets lining the walls. Covering almost all the exposed wall space were various warnings, maps and information to make even the most ardent

naturalist take notice. But it was one poster in particular that drew my attention. The photo showed a hiker taking a healthy swig of water from a jug down at the bottom of the Canyon. The sobering warning printed below said that this hiker was found dead just an hour after the photo was taken. Death from dehydration can happen *that* quickly down there. I was starting to get worried.

Rich had done a fair amount of hiking while earning his Eagle Scout designation, but I was purely a cyclist. My previous hiking excursions had been limited to climbing up to rock climbing spots at Devil's Lake Wisconsin and a few trips to the store, but I guess this would be just another obstacle to overcome. Finally making the front of the line we outlined our plans for a two day down and up hike to the ranger on duty and all seemed well. He softly asked if we'd like a camping permit for the Phantom Ranch, which struck both Rich and I as strange. Of course we'd like a permit. Turning around to grab the last permit from the board, the ranger took our fee and just like that, we were set. Five seconds later and we'd have missed out on that permit. Again the fates intercede on our behalf.

Rich finally relinquished the keys to the car and cranked the passenger side seat back and dozed while I drove back out of the park and into Flagstaff. Securing lodging, we spent the rest of the afternoon sleeping, packing and planning. I sprung for a carbo-loaded dinner of pasta while we both postulated on what tomorrow's hike would really be like. We were so naïve.

Day 9
The Hike to the River
Did Not Ride

Waking early, we loaded the backpacks into the car and placed my crippled bike on top of it all like a paperweight. The first stop was the bike shop recommended me back in Kingman. This was definitely the place to get a bike wheel built. While I negotiated the rebuilding process, Rich unloaded the rest of my bike and brought things to the back of the store. This place would even store my bike and gear while we were hiking. Such a great place, the Broken Spoke – Flagstaff, AZ.

After leaving Flagstaff it was another two-hour drive back to the South Rim. Along the way the road climbed slowly towards the Snow Bowl ski area where it promptly began to snow. The large wet flakes began to accumulate quickly, over an inch deep in some sections. The snows stopped just as quickly as they had begun, probably owing to the fact that we were descending the other side of Snow Bird.

Entering Grand Canyon National Park, we took the fork towards the South Kaibab trailhead and began to unload our gear. Liberally applying sunscreen we filled our water bottles and pre-hydrated at the lone faucet. It would be the last water we'd see before reaching the Colorado about 4 miles away. After a short photo-taking session, we were off. The South Kaibab trail was definitely the steeper, shorter way to go, and that was just fine for me. My toes spent most of the afternoon crammed into the front of my boots, but I had more pressing problems as my right shoulder began aching with the first step down the path. Convincing Rich that we needed to take things nice and slow, we made liberal use of the rest-stop vistas, taking in the grand sights and any sporadic shade we found along the way. I was a bit panicked over the pain in my shoulder, which has progressed from a slight twinge to a numbness that made taking the backpack off almost unbearable. Luckily I had packed the Flexall 454 and after a liberal application during a stop, the shoulder began to loosen up. The shoulder discomfort served as a nice diversion from the wear and tear the hike was taking on the rest of my body.

The skies were a mottled mix of clouds and intense sunlight, making for difficult photo opportunities and tough hiking. Somewhere near the halfway point it began to drizzle, but as soon as we stopped to put on the rain gear, the skies cleared again, the heat returning with a vengeance. Having all this rock around us made the canyon feel like a kiln, slowly firing us up like a pair of terra cotta pots. The varied geographical strata we passed on our descent bore testament to the erosion process that gets drummed into every visitor who comes here.

The intense shoulder pains began to subside with the passage of time, thankfully but then it was Rich's turn for trouble. It seems that he didn't pre-hydrate enough and was starting to dry out. Leaving the trailhead we both vowed to drink often, but since Rich's pack could hold more gear, he carried a larger load and thus should have been drinking more, or so we figured out at this point. Near the bottom we had to rest more often and noticed Rich's quads scissor with cramps. To reach the canyon floor on the South Kaibab requires traversing a steel span bridge, which was just slightly unsettling since you could see the river rushing beneath it. Reaching the shores of the Colorado, Rich suggested I go in for a ceremonial dip, which I eagerly accepted, wading into the 40 degree water. The first few minutes were absolutely glorious, but then my legs started going numb, so regretfully I put my socks and boots back on and we continued onto the campground.

Being at the bottom of the Grand Canyon is an awe-inspiring feeling, since absolutely everything is up from there. The bright afternoon skies continued to heat the oven we were walking thru, but surprisingly the campground was fairly shady, shielded by numerous trees and shrubs. Doffing our packs we set up camp quickly and then adjourned to the Phantom Ranch building for a few sodas and candy bars. Returning to camp about an hour later we made a couple of freeze-dried meals and traded superlatives about our surroundings. It had been a long day and a long hike, but we were finally here.

Day 10 The Hike Out

Last night we took in the local entertainment, a ranger-led production recounting the exploits of the first recorded trip down the mighty Colorado. It was hard to imagine riding the local waters without knowing what lay around the next bend, but somehow these hearty souls made it through. Somehow they made it out, and somehow Rich and I would make the South Rim tomorrow. Rich had opted to sleep under the stars while I brought along my meager tent. Rain wasn't expected and I really wondered why I had chosen the extra weight while tromping our way down the trail, but I'm sure it made sense at the time I packed.

Rich woke me up a bit after 6am with a hushed call of "check this out!" Sticking my head out of the tent I found that a few deer had wandered into our campsite and were busily sniffing up the remains of last night's dinner. Not that pasta and oriental stir fry would be totally unknown to our guests, but after 10 minutes of quiet inspection, our guests moved on, preferring to munch on the sagebrush shoots.

Rich and I had planned on an 8am departure that would deposit us at the Indian Gardens watering point around 11am. The physical pains of the previous days descent were never far from our minds as we began the day's journey with a few tentative steps. We left a little early, hoping to somehow find a miracle elixir for our legs at the Phantom Ranch lodge, elixir or breakfast, whichever got served first.

Heading away from Phantom Ranch after a less-than-filling meal, we were slightly behind schedule but were feeling no rush to make up time. Somehow the "easy" part of our three-hour hike to Indian Gardens was already proving more difficult than either of us had planned on. Rich took the lead and I readily followed as the trail wound slowly upward from the canyon floor. We caught up with and passed several other hiking groups who had left before us, giving us a false sense of confidence as the canyon began to heat up. Sure we were both hurting, but at least we were moving faster than THOSE guys. Having most of our "moving parts" thoroughly broken in by now was surely a mixed blessing. The good news was that we were better prepared both physically and mentally for what lay ahead, the searing heat and relentless nature of the path ahead; the bad news was that the aching quads stressed during the descent were now matched by a set of aching calves early on in the hike. The price we paid to make it down in relatively descent fashion was now doubled, as the ascent was proving twice as difficult.

The slow meandering uphill grade and the compactness of the lower trail seemed to travel up my spine, making me a bit lightheaded along the way. I considered calling for a break, but chose instead to "hike through it" and hopefully work out this latest physical torture. Finally passing the sign signifying our

arrival at Indian Gardens, both Rich and I were glad to have made the first 4.5-mile while still upright. While resting beneath a tree while liberally dousing ourselves with the available water, I admitted that there was about a mile of the first leg that I didn't remember too well. He joked that he had experienced the same sensation. It was a little after 11am and the canyon was really heating up. Rich and I were draped over a shady picnic bench for the better part of 30 minutes, trying desperately to regroup for the final assault at the rim. We must have both drank about a gallon of water during our respite, but there never seemed to be enough water. By this point I was fully sweating out so I doubted that the current satiety I felt would last more than 15 feet down the trail.

We finally left the shade of Indian Gardens, with the knowledge that the trail would get steeper and hotter from this point forward, but hoping that within a few hours we'd be gazing down at this point from the rail that ran along the rim. Again Rich took the lead as we began to inch our way up and out of the canyon. The section north of Indian Gardens was noticeably more crowded with everything; hikers, burros, packhorses and the droppings left (hopefully) by the latter two. The heat seemed to intensify the overall stench of the droppings left along the trail, making their presence incredibly well advertised. Rich and I constantly tried to find the humor in our predicament, but we both conceded that we had entered this canyon on our own accord and getting out would be up to us as well. The ever-present baking effect of the sun kept the water bottles and energy bars close at hand. Whatever it took to keep us moving along the sandy trail.

Some of the folks we passed also provided a nice diversion from the self-imposed torture of hiking today. People hiking down in beach flip-flops, carrying Styrofoam cups of water as they ambled down to Indian Gardens. Ill-conditioned tourists almost running downhill with not much more than a camera around their necks, hoping to make it down to the Colorado and back up in the same day. Each one we stopped to talk to seemed very sincere in their effort, yet a little unrealistic in their preparation. By 2pm our water, Powerbars and patience had all worn out simultaneously, but then again the increased tourist traffic heading south was a comfort to us. Pressing on we finally found a hand railing which was a definite sign that the "end was near".

Unloading our packs beneath a tree, I regrouped enough to queue up for sodas and a few candy bars while Rich watched our gear. After our brief snack, Rich and I flipped a coin to see who'd hike the 4 miles back to retrieve our car from the Kaibab trailhead. Somehow I guessed correctly and settled in for a long rest while Rich headed off down the road. Watching Rich depart, I quickly zonked out in the shade for the next half-hour. What had initially sounded like the better "bet", lying around under a tree also came with a hefty price. Lying around for so long had all but cemented my legs, making even standing up to look for Rich an almost unbearable prospect. Bracing myself up against a tree, I finally stayed vertical, but it took several failed attempts before I was finally able to get moving forward. Trying to both soften my leaden legs and pass time constructively, I pulled out the camera and took a few pictures of the grand panorama before me. Walking around was still incredibly painful and I was really starting to wonder how I was supposed to return to cycling tomorrow.

Rich's return with the car confirmed that he was sharing my discomfort as well, but thankfully our cabin was reserved in advance and very close by. Dragging ourselves into the Havasupai Lodge we piled our essentials inside the door and then took long showers to try to revive our aching bones. Even Flexall 454 was of little use with my atrophied legs. Deciding that it was better to eat earlier than later, Rich and I pressed on, adjourning to the restaurant attached to the lodge. A long dinner of steaks and ribs refueled our bodies as both of us kept laughing at the physical difficulties our legs having atrophied to the point that leaving the table without assistance was almost impossible. Sensing our plight, several busboys lent a hand and moved the table away from us so our staggering wouldn't upset the remains of our dinner. No wonder only 1% of the tourists who visit this area ever venture down and out. Those other 99% seemed to know better than us at this point.

Day 11
27 Miles

Night came early for the two of us last night, but with the first rays of life we were back on the road to Flagstaff. Retrieving my bike, gear and newly rebuilt rear wheel, we stopped in town for an early lunch before returning to the Grand Canyon Village. Walking today was still a bit rough on us, but with each step we were closer to a full recovery. Reassembling my bike in the parking lot in front of the camp store, I was struck by the thought that after this point, my first real “goodbye” was at hand. For all Rich had done to aid my trip at this point, I’d be eternally grateful; the meals and preparation in California, the rescue in Truxton and the last three days of adventure here at the Grand Canyon. Acts of kindness like this stay with you a lifetime.

The skies darkened a bit as I made my final preparations before beginning the departure process. From here Rich would drive the 11 hours back to L.A. in time for work tomorrow. For me it was to continue east around the Canyon and then begin winding my way north. Watching his car leave the parking lot, I was now truly alone. No rescue plans were available now, so hopefully I wouldn’t experience the “Truxton Breakdown” again.

I didn’t get out of the parking lot before the rain began to fall. Having a slight schedule to keep, I threw on a rain jacket and pressed on. From the Canyon Village east, the road climbed skyward another 2,000 feet before reaching the Desert View campground at 7,500 feet. Resting up a bit to revive my strained legs, I stocked up on dinner provisions in the hope for making it past the park boundaries by nightfall. Taking in the majestic sights at the nearby overlook, I prepared to say my final “goodbyes” to the Canyon itself before setting out again. On my way out of Desert View, I passed the campground and although the signs said “full”, I decided to take a quick spin through the grounds to see if I could find someone to share their site. No need to rush out so fast.

Slowly circling the sites like a cheetah preparing to strike, I set my “sights” on a couple sitting beside an SUV with mountain bikes mounted on top. A quick conversation later and I was unpacking the bike again. Quickly setting up my “camp” in a far corner of their site, I made small talk with my new friends, who hailed from Denver, out on a weeklong vacation. Sharing the exploits of my first week on the road, we passed the remaining hours of daylight quizzing each other on the ins and outs of my expedition. Finally calling it a night, I began to read Stephen King’s “The Stand” by the light thrown from my tiny candle lantern. The perfect end to a shorter than normal day.

Day 12
72 Miles

After a restful night of nearly comatose slumber and a minimum of leg cramping, I carbo-loaded a quick breakfast of bagels and Powerbars before exchanging another set of goodbyes to my hosts and heading out by 9am. Since Desert View sat at 7,400 feet I saw that the next town was seated at 4,600 feet, so I was more than ready for a nice slow descent. Pulling out of the campground, I made sure the load situated over the rear wheel was securely fastened one last time before I began rolling downhill. As my descent began to pick up speed, a wave and a shout was all I could offer 5 beleaguered cyclists heading uphill in the other lane.

Three miles outside of Desert View the National Park officially ended and the roadside jewelry stands began. Operated by creatively named Native American’s such as “Navajo Joe’s” and “Standing Bull, each professing to offer the best pieces at the lowest prices, guaranteed. After passing the first dozen of these, ad-hoc establishments, I finally pulled over to see what all the excitement was about. Earrings, necklaces, bracelets and something called a “spirit catcher” made of silver, turquoise and beads Like a used car lot, the sticker price was used as a starting point; the final price a far cry from what the little sticker

said. Seeing nothing to make me part with my “wallet” jewelry, the funny green bills, so I moved on. Stopping at the next stand, I was “shocked” to find identical merchandise at identical prices. The fixed seemed to definitely be in here.

Pulling into Cameron, the sun was beating down like a hammer, pounding the spring right out of my legs. Made up of a few scattered buildings, Cameron seemed to cater to those either heading in or out of the Grand Canyon, the first (or last) non-park stop along the way. A motel across the street offered more “authentic” Indian fare and the tour busses littering the parking lot bore testament to its popularity.

Taking in all the commotion while having an apple, Coke and a Snickers bar, I planned out my afternoon of cycling. I’d be heading north, but had no idea how far I’d be able to pedal before nightfall. The ride to Cameron had been one glorious downhill segment, but I usually pay for this somewhere down the road and sooner rather than later. The wind picked up as well, but my biggest challenge seemed to again be my exposure, or overexposure to the sun. The temperature still hovered in the 90’s and the lack of humidity had the water bottles almost permanently attached to my right hand as I rode away from town. The highlight of my first two hours of riding seemed to be the junction to Route 160, the turnoff for Tuba City. Being a tubist myself, I considered taking a side trip into town to pick up some “Tuba City” paraphernalia, but the 10 miles it would add to my day were somehow too many for me. Named not for the musical instrument but rather for a Yuba Indian chief whose tribe had mistakenly been labeled “Tuba” instead of “Yuba”.

Grinding out the remaining miles toward the next aptly named town called “The Gap”, I somehow forgot to keep drinking as my focus was squarely on maintaining a smoothing cycling pace. I knew it was hot out, but somehow my deep thoughts took over and dehydration set in. The first thing I noticed was how irritated I got at the passing cars. A quick glance down at my cycling shorts confirmed my fears – the chalky outline left by the evaporating sweat bore witness to me problem. I was “bonking” fast and needed a break. Cursing my stupidity rather loudly across the vacant desert to the barren bluffs ahead, I drank as much as I could and hoped to be revived when I reached town.

“The Gap” population 100, seemed to be deserted as I entered town, but all the activity centered on the grocery/laundry/banking/public aid and bait shop. It was still only 2:30 as I dismounted and leaned the bike against the store’s wall, I was determined to wait out the remaining heat of the day and then continue on during sunset. I had a decent rest, drinking as much water as I could hold from a communal pump, all the while trying to figure out what would keep people living in such a desolate location. The answer came from an elderly gentleman who seemed to have more fingers than teeth. He said that most of this area was situated on the Navajo reservation and the low population in The Gap proper was bolstered by several hundred inhabitants who lived in small enclaves set back from the road, beyond the immediate horizon. A school bus pulled up and proved his point as almost all the passengers were truly native to the area. The few “white faces” who departed the bus, though deeply tanned, still stood in sharp contrast to the Native American majority.

Continuing my recovery with a short nap, I was jolted awake by the fervent greetings of a fellow “Anglo” who pulled up in a weathered Ford hatchback. Lynn Berner was eager to talk, relating how he had previously seen me laboring along the road apiece, before asking what was becoming known as “the usual”. When my synopsis reached the point of the Grand Canyon descent, Lynn interjected that he had just gotten out of an 11 day “stay in the hole”; the last 8 of which were spent in total isolation. How he had MY admiration. Our “adventure exchange” began almost immediately. Lynn wanted to know all about cycle touring and I wanted to know where his hiking boots had taken him. Lynn was from Klamath California, basically southern Oregon, and after retiring, he started filling his days exploring and experiencing the geographical wonders found east of Klamath. This month was dedicated to exploring the Grand Canyon. After his 11-day odyssey at the south rim, he’d hole up near Marble Canyon and wait out the opening of the north rim on the 14th, and then promptly disappear for another week. His scraggly white hair and matching beard offset his deeply tanned hide. Exposure and age have a way of doing this, he needlessly explained. Soon we were besieged by a band of miscreant children on the prowl for mischief. Sharing an appreciation for solitude, Lynn and I did our best to fend off these little marauders so as to continue our story exchange unimpeded. After awhile as new topics were dwindling, Lynn bid me adieu and continued driving north.

We were both heading in the same direction but at markedly different paces. Watching the dust curl up the pavement behind the hatchback, I realized that Lynn was just another adventurer I'd be meeting this summer. Too bad these meetings are so brief and far between.

I began to make last minute preparations for my own departure, stocking up on overpriced bottled water and other sundries. Water was now considered a sundry item. While repacking my purchases, the swarm of kids returned and peppered me with a wall of questions. Two Brazilians came to my defense this time and soon I began another round of discussions. Jose and Angela were both in their late 40's, touring the area on a pair of Harley's... the only way to travel according to them. After exchanging stories we were all about to pull out of town when the explosive sounds of a car crash ripped through the desert silence.

A red Mustang had been violently rear-ended by a Taurus (a bull charging thru a horse?) right in the middle of town. All conversations stopped with the first impact, and a second impact made everyone jump. The collision was pretty forceful, as if the driver of the Taurus never slowed down approaching town. The driver of the Mustang, a young Indian girl, was able to keep her car running and guided the limping ride to the side of the road, but the occupants of the Taurus weren't so fortunate.

After the dust settled, and by instinct, I dropped my helmet and headed out to the Taurus. The folks in what had once been a stylish silver car, a young Asian couple, seemed dazed as they weakly struggled to get the doors of the car open. I gave the driver's side door a few hard yanks before it finally creaked open. The woman driver was clearly crying her arms wrapped tightly across her chest. The force of the impact had launched her forward, where the seatbelt did its job but not without severely compressing her chest in the process, before finally breaking. At least she didn't kiss the windshield. Checking her out for possible neck and back injuries, I was relieved to find no discomfort; only shock. By this time a mechanic from the gas station joined me across the street, bearing a crowbar to help force the passenger side door open. The force of the impact did a good job of jamming this door as well, but with liberal use of the crowbar and a little swearing, the two of us got this door opened as well.

My "patient" in the passenger side also complained of chest pains and a stiff neck. My limited training said that the neck pains could be whiplash or something more serious. The mechanic was all for pulling the poor guy out of the car and I almost had to use the crowbar to fend off his efforts towards this result. Finally I convinced him to leave the guy in the car for now as we told everyone to stay where they were at as we pushed the car out of the middle of the road, pulling up beside the Mustang. Once I was sure that the male Asian wouldn't be moved by any other well-meaning onlookers, I headed inside to see what else needed doing. The two drivers had been moved inside and were moaning lowly as I came in the door. I asked (rather loudly) if anyone had ANY medical training. I got only blank stares in return. Great. Thankfully I had a bit of training and that application back in Yucca.

Taking charge as best I could, I examined the oriental driver a bit closer and told the shopkeeper to call for an ambulance. Breaking through the seat belt had left her with a nasty looking "sash" abrasion running across her chest. In halted English she said that her chest hurt when she took deep breaths, but she didn't think that she had any broken ribs. I wasn't so sure, but I figured keeping her immobilized was the best course of action. The Indian girl seemed none the worse for wear yet her sobs relating to her recently totaled Mustang drew my sympathy. I convinced one of the little urchins to keep an eye on these two as I headed outside to revisit the passenger in the Taurus. I told another kid to climb into the back seat of the car and to hold the guy's head steadily against the headrest. The kid was clearly excited to have a more involved "role" in this little drama and honestly did a pretty good job of immobilizing the man's neck. Returning inside, I asked the storekeeper how far the ambulance had to drive to get here, wondering why it hadn't appeared yet. She looked a bit puzzled and asked if I thought she should call them. So much for help. I politely told her, "Yes, I'd like you to PLEASE call the ambulance after all," and then turned my attention to the Taurus driver, Sara. She asked me to retrieve her insurance papers from the glove compartment as well as her glasses from the drink-holder in the front door. I sent another youngster to retrieve these items and he returned with only the insurance papers. Sara scanned them quickly, holding them close to her face. I went back outside to retrieve her glasses and after finding them on the floor of the front seat, was relieved to find the ambulance pulling up. After handing Sara her glasses, she immediately

put them on and continued reading the papers. She seemed deeply relieved that more substantial help was now on the scene. I was also relieved to go from “frontier doctor” to “guy on a bike” again.

Preparing to leave again, something about those glasses bothered me. I asked one of the policemen now on the scene if I should fill out some sort of paperwork regarding what I had witnessed. Handing over a clipboard I set out to regurgitate the events of the past hour, when the impact of the “glasses” thing finally clicked into place. She might have been nearsighted and without glasses might never have seen the Mustang until it was too late. This would explain why she didn’t even seem to slow down. I noted all this on the report and hoped I was wrong. I hated to add to her woes, but I really didn’t need people with vision problems riding up behind me out here. I doubt if I’d be as lucky as the Mustang driver was.

Finally leaving The Gap at close to 6pm I continued to fight the wind for another 10 miles or so before calling it a night as the sun’s last light. I had spent the better part of the day climbing back to an elevation of 6,500 feet and after the events back in The Gap; I really wasn’t mentally prepared to go much farther. I hear tell that the route to Marble Canyon is mostly downhill, which sounds like a nice way to end the day. Scanning the horizon for a suitable place to call “home” for the night, I came upon yet another jewelry stand, but this one was nicely deserted. Pulling off the road I quickly assessed the feasibility of this area as a potential camping site. There was an Indian settlement about a half-mile from the road, and although technically still on the “res” I didn’t think there’d really be anyone around to mind my presence. Leaning the bike against the wooden display stanchion, I set about making another pot of pasta and resting my weary bones. I’ve been in Arizona only 9 days and already “involved” in two car accidents. Amazing. I don’t think I was as upset with the circumstances surrounding the first one as I was with the second. With the first there weren’t that many people around, but least some of them knew what to do. With the second, the opposite was true. People were everywhere, but they couldn’t find a first aid kit, let alone use it.

Finishing the last of my pasta, I watched yet another sun fade over the distant buttes and wondered what tomorrow would bring. This trip has certainly delivered the unexpected. Finishing my cleanup by the light of my paltry candle lantern, I took a last look around before immersing myself into a sea of total darkness with a single puff on the wick.

Day 13
65 Miles

An early start had me cruisin’ downhill in no time. My guide’s words were never truer as I spun into a large valley, which brought me alongside the mighty Colorado once more before flattening out on the other side of the river, and into the town of Marble Canyon. Whatever your sporting passion was, it seemed to begin here. Whitewater rafting, biking, hiking, hunting and fishing all drew their share of enthusiasts to this remote outpost. Pulling into the local “inn” for a bike of breakfast, the Rancho Nuevo omelet caught my fancy and I spent the time between ordering and eating conversing with the waitress about the road ahead and the climes that awaited me; sadly it seemed that it was all uphill from here. Resigned to my days labor, I picked up a fork and was about to start in on the omelet when a hearty slap on the back almost knocked the wind out of me.

A booming “Howdy” had me spinning around in my chair to at least face my “attacker”. Shock turned to joy as Lynne Berner, the gent I met back at The Gap Arizona stood before me. The next hour passed rapidly as I filled Lynne in on all the excitement he missed by departing when he did yesterday. For his part he was staying in town for a few nights waiting for the northern entrance to the Grand Canyon to open up tomorrow the 14th of May. Lynne was a bit St. Louis Cardinals fan so we spent a short while trading barbs from the Cubs/Cards rivalry before it was time to part once more. Marble Canyon was a mere 5,500 feet above sea level and Jacob Lake crested at a lofty 7,800 feet so there was a bit of vertical work ahead of me and delaying the inevitable never worked for me.

Leaving Lynne, I began my assault around 1pm. I had a little over 30 miles in which to climb 2,200 feet with more than enough time to take it slow if I had to. An altimeter would be a useful tool to

have out here, but the expense didn't warrant the purchase. Up was up, down was down and knowing how far you had left to climb didn't really ease the psyche. As the road began to undulate skyward outside of Marble Canyon a stiff head wind began to build up, bringing with it a dust cloud reminiscent of the Wizard of Oz. Not wanting to get swept away, I sought out suitable shelter. The map noted the community of Cliff Dwellers should be just around the next bend, but would require a test of wills to make it around that bend. Shifting into lower gears allowed me to pick up the pace a bit and I was able to round that bend without too much of a struggle. Cliff Dwellers was literally a one-horse town, but the horse was nowhere to be found. A singular building hugging the road begged for my entrance and I ducked under the awning just before the worst of the windstorm hit the bend I just rode. The few trees dotting the landscape were really whipping around as swirling winds and intermittent rains battered the sparse landscape. Waiting out the storm for the better part of an hour sure put a dent into my day, but I still held hopes of making Jacob Lake by nightfall.

After the storm continued on up the road towards Utah I remounted and continued my slow pace up to the next plateau. Putting another 10 miles behind me, I was greeted by another oncoming storm, the black wall of clouds looking even more ominous than the first storm. This time there would be no place to ride to, no place to hide. Pulling into a roadside "point of interest" I had to make a shelter form what was at hand. Although there wasn't even a pole to lean the bike against, I found a low wall that ran around the perimeter of the parking area. The wall was just high enough to support the weight of the bike and allow me to get the bike cover over most of my possessions (and me as well). I got the things covered just as first pregnant drops of rain began splattering the pavement around me. As the shower intensified I was feeling pretty clever having come up with this "coverage" idea on the fly, but in my haste to pull everything together I had overlooked one key area, my shoes. There just wasn't enough of the cover to extend down to the ground and my feet were getting wet quickly. Having wet shoes really bothered me for some reason and had them off fairly quickly but they were already waterlogged.

Another hour wasted and I was back on the road. The storms seemed to have run their course and I was back climbing under sunnier skies. Over the preceding 12 miles the climbing had gone pretty well. My notion of taking 30 miles to elevate 2,200 had me calculating all these averages and figuring out what the official "grade" of the climb would be. That all went out the window as the road really began to elevate from here. Approaching the mass of mountains ahead I passed an ominous sign for cyclists: "Trucks Use Low Gears." Great. I shifted into the lowest of the low gears and gritted my teeth. This is where the *real* climbing would begin.

The first few miles were the steepest as I struggled to maintain some sort of rhythm at such slow speeds as I twisted the bike through several high-banked switchbacks, reminding me of the banked tracks of NASCAR. To find motivation as the day passed into dusk, I thought of what the day had involved. The 55 miles to Jacob Lake seemed easy enough. Breakfast with Lynne, two storms and this last bit of vertical work sure filled the day. My compromise was to make it as close to Jacob Lake as my legs would allow. The question of where to camp is easier when you're on the flatland, but here climbing I scanned the sloping terrain it seemed highly unlikely that I would find another abandoned jewelry stand up this way. The road had been cut out from sheer rock around it, so any off road traversing would have to be done on foot since due to the lack of any access roads. I finally found a flattish stretch and rolled the bike into the culvert beside the road. The first move would be to get all the bags off the bike to lighten the load, and then move things to higher ground. I carried the bike up thru the culvert and laid *her* down besides a bush that offered at least some protection from the unpredictable winds in these parts. The rest of the gear was assembled on the cliff after 3 more trips and I set out to make my nightly pasta dinner and revel in the cooler weather brought on by both the storms and higher altitude.

What I had initially thought of as a flat spot in otherwise hilly terrain actually turned out to be just as slanted as the rest. I just hoped that there would be no nightly rain in these parts since everything could and probably would get washed downhill, with me along for the ride. Trying to get a little reading in proved tough as well so I decided to just lay back and count stars as the hills darkened slowly around me. The traffic passing slowed with the onset of night and it wasn't long before I was again alone with my thoughts. Another long day was entered in the journal as the candle lantern fluttered out.

Day 14
50 Miles

Usually I try to write something witty to sum up the day's events, but last night I was more concerned about getting some sleep. Beginning your day on a steep incline wasn't particularly enjoyable but with a last groaning push, I slowly began the grinding my way towards breakfast. The slow cadence of the climb was broken up nicely by the surrounding environs. As I rolled through deep lush forest, it dawned on me that these were the first stands I've seen since the palm trees back in southern California. The desert browns had their charms but the trees were more to my liking.

After about two hours of winding thru the high forest, I topped out the climb at the entrance to Jacob Lake, elevation 7,800 feet, a welcome sight indeed. There were cars and tourists everywhere since today was the opening day of the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Pulling into the filling station/restaurant I picked up a richly deserved breakfast and settled in to write some postcards. There was sure plenty to write about.

After lounging until almost 11am I decided to head down the other side of the mountain, bid adieu to the state of Arizona and roll into Utah. The high arching trees form an exit procession for my ride out of the Jacob Lake. I was expecting an immediate descent since the climb up to Jacob Lake was pretty sudden, but I had to ride a few miles of surprisingly flat road. Passing a sign denoting "check brakes" sign I knew the fun was about to begin. The road slowly began to dip in a graceful downward arch, the climbs of this morning matched by the glorious descent. Even after the road began to flatten out I was able to push big gears and keep a fast pace as the border approached. The border town of Fredonia lay ahead and I looked forward to celebrating my second border-crossing with some ice cream.

As I approached Fredonia, the town seemed almost abandoned. The lone restaurant was closed so I kept spinning towards the border. I still keep thinking that every dot on the map represents sodas & ice cream but I'm often disappointed by what actually rolls by me. At the state line there was a rather large liquor store that seemed to be the local hot-spot. Most of the traffic seemed to be coming from the Utah side and since the Book of Mormon forbade alcohol, my guess is that these souls were non-believers.

The day ended as soon as I saw it. "Kanab, Utah – A Nice Place to Stay", so I did. There was a local Good Samaritan campground off to my right on the main drag and at first the \$14 tab seemed a bit steep, but I couldn't pass up the location. Fast food and a shopping center all within walking distance.

The campground was relatively new and spotlessly maintained but what caught my immediate attention was the crystal-clear blue water of the pool. Rapidly setting up my tent I got a load of laundry into the washer and dove in. Having most of the afternoon to work the kinks out was just what I needed. Arizona, in its entirety, proved to be almost more than I could handle. From the broken wheel to the car wrecks and the Grand Canyon hike, I've had just about all my possessions broken in during my 9 days there.

Kicking back awhile to do some reading, I tried to figure out while it felt so good to be out of the scrub of Arizona I again concluded it must be all the green vegetation. Near Jacob Lake I noted how long it's been since I saw a stand of trees and now I was noticing the grass. Utah had grass, whereas Arizona had scrub. You really don't miss it until it's not around anymore.

After wasting the afternoon by the pool I went out to find dinner. There was a subway shop and a hot-dog stand nearby and since I couldn't decide, I hit them both. It had been so long since I had such choices like this, it was better to make no choice at all. I must have gotten a few thousand calories out of dinner and lumbered my way back to camp. The campground was celebrating its first anniversary with a small party out by the pool. Punch and cookies were the perfect dessert before turning in. I became the tourist *de jour* with the attendees as they learned of my ride, but it was a family from Salt Lake that held my attention. The Mormon doctrines look up the number 15 favorably. This family was within two children of that magical number. There were kids everywhere. Thankfully (at least I think so) there were a few sets of twins in the mix. I struck up a conversation with the mother of this brood and the best way to describe her

was “weary”. Kids were constantly asking her to “see” things and to “come here” but she remained planted in the lawn chair for the duration. I may get tired riding the bike, but I can always stop riding. This amazing woman would always be the mother of 13. A truly amazing woman.

Before long I decided to call it a night. I had gotten about 50 miles in today, but I think getting away from the desert that made this a great day. Tomorrow I’ll be heading to Zion Canyon and get some hiking in, then it’s onto Bryce and then up to Salt Lake to visit my cousin and family.

Day 15
45 Miles

It took a bit longer than usual to get rolling today. Maybe it was having such a nice place to camp last night or the thought of all the climbing ahead, but in either case I put off the first pedal strokes for as long as I could. Rolling thru the rest of Kanab I was surprised at how “touristee” things got towards the north end of town, budget motels offering everything but the kitchen sink to get you to spend the night. This town even came with a short row of souvenir stands offset against the low lying hills behind.

While last night’s dinner should have been more than enough nourishment to get me spinning in high gear today, I found myself succumbing to the “diner suck”, that strange magnificent effect that causes the bike to guide itself towards almost every little diner I pass. “Paul’s Diner” provided a warming order of biscuits and gravy which added just a little more ballast to my morning burden.

This morning’s agenda had me spinning into Mt. Carmel Junction and then hanging a left towards Zion. Getting into “the Junction” required a bit of climbing which had me reflecting back to Jacobs Lake, but the early climbing was amazingly pain-free. Maybe all the torture I endured in Arizona wasn’t wasted after all, but I’d prefer to think that the biscuits and gravy had something to do with it as well.

Mt. Carmel Junction came up soon enough. The road curling left led towards Zion National Park, to the right, Bryce. Bryce would have to wait a day or so while I spent a day taking in the wonders of the second National Park on my tour. The twenty odd miles to the park gate took me past various farms and assorted livestock doing their thing among the surrounding foothills. Things were definitely greener and steeper in these parts. Approaching the gate, a crude hand-painted sign promoted a privately owned campground, a new venture being operated just beyond the park’s eastern edge. Additional signs claimed that the campgrounds inside the park were filled and that this would be my “last chance” to camp. In all my preparation for this trip, I didn’t spend too much time worrying about exactly *where* I’d stay once I got out to the parks, I just *assumed*....

Pulling into the deserted campground I entered the only building to find it just as silent. I hung around the only structure in the area for a few minutes and was just about ready to take my chances camping inside the park when the door opened and I met the owner of the campground. Seven dollars later I had rented a coffin-sized plot of ground for the night. Being the only one at the campground afforded me a pretty large spot indeed. What really clinched the deal for me was having a grocery store just across the street loudly proclaiming their home-made ice cream. Never pass on the ice cream. The campground was located deep in a crotch between two mountain ridges which seemed to channel the stiff winds directly thru the campground. Needless to say this made setting up the tent more of an adventure than usual.

After stripping the bags off the bike, it was time to venture into Zion. The park was undergoing major road renovation that left the route nothing more than a gravelly path. Thankfully I didn’t have all the gear with me as I struggled to keep control of the bike as I fishtailed my way down the road with just a backpack, boots and a camera weighing me down. Had I done some homework I would have realized that the lodge and the hiking trails begin at the bottom of this park and not at the top. The thirteen mile descent would be easy enough to accomplish, but it was the thirteen mile ascent I was worried about. The steep winding road to the bottom kept tempting the bike to exceed my ability to slow the bike down, so what could have been a joyful ride in any other locale was anything but.

Park regulations dictated that all bikes *not* ride through either of the two tunnels on the way to the bottom, leaving me waiting for a ride outside the first tunnel. Now at this point I was thinking more about the climb out than any of the wonders which might await me at the bottom, so I broke out the hiking boots and began hoofing along a short trail promising a scenic overlook. The view more than compensated for the sweat. The end of the path opened onto a broad plateau that faced the sprawling canyon below. Setting up the tripod I shot most of a roll of film capturing “The Three Wise Men” formation from different angles. These jagged peaks have been dated as the oldest formation in the area and make for quite an impressive sight. Gazing down affirmed that the remaining five miles of road mimicked the first eight; steep and full of gravel.

While I caught up on my writing and took a deserved breather, I decided that Zion would have to wait for another day. My legs were definitely the strongest they’ve been so far, but I didn’t want to strain things with another thirteen mile ascent just to get back to my campground.

Returning to my bike along the roadside, I repacked my gear and began winding my way back out of the canyon. By this time it was 3pm and the sun had warmed the surrounding rock making the canyon feel more like a kiln, dry-roasting my skin along the way.

The eight mile climb took me a bit over an hour but the thought of ice cream at the end kept the legs pumping throughout. There’s something about cycling that accentuates the flavor of ice cream. Cycling purists would tell you that eating anything dairy products slows digestion and is a big no-no, but I didn’t see any purists on the way through the door so I think I’m OK.

Dinner became another pot of pasta with a few grocery goodies thrown in. Dessert would be a bag of Dorito’s garnished with a few more pages of Steven King’s “The Stand”.

While the pasta was coming to a boil, another car pulled in, making a total of two campsites occupied tonight. A guy and his little daughter along with a rambunctious dog would be my companions tonight. While they set up camp, I busied myself by amassing a sizable pile of wood scraps left over from all the construction around the campground. There would be a big fire tonight for sure.

After dinner I crawled into the tent just far enough to get my upper torso out of the wind. Delving further into the book (and Dorito’s) the aforementioned dog came over and introduced himself by licking at my exposed legs. That must have been like a salt-lick to the dog, but it was a nice way to get introduced to my camp-mates. I then met Nicole a curly-haired third-grader who was visiting a bunch of National Parks this summer with her dad George & Smoky the dog. After the introductions, these wonderful folks offered to cook the rest of their food if I’d help them eat it. Eat when there’s food, sleep when there’s dark.

We stayed up until almost midnight burning wood, trading stories and listening to Bob Seeger tapes in the car stereo. Smoky kept busy fetching whatever we didn’t burn as we all enjoyed the star-filled sky.

Dav 16
65 Miles

The next morning my fellow campers and I were both busy packing early in the morning. George, Nicole and Smoky had 3 days to return to Virginia and I decided to keep rolling towards Bryce instead of trying to make it to Zion again. After hurried good-byes we both got on the road. The return to Mt. Carmel Junction was an uneventful retracing of yesterday’s miles. It had taken me 16 days to get into some sort of riding shape and I was eager to see how a really long day of cycling felt. Today I’d get my change

Following “the Junction”, Orderville Utah was the next town heading north. Rolling thru town I was surprised to find a tiny enclave of “rock shops” each with a competing pile of rock for sale. Why would Orderville become the lapidary hotspot of Utah? Stopping at the biggest of them to start, I sooned

learned the reason for all the interest – Septarian. A spectacular geode which is found in only one place on this earth, Orderville Utah. Septarian has a base grey color with vibrant yellow infusions and is quite noticeable once highly polished.

After spending a good while perusing the rock shop, I decided that I couldn't leave town without adding a little more weight to the bike, so I picked out a pair of unfinished pieces of Septarian and headed out again. Glendale was just far enough down the road to qualify for my noon-time stop. After a brief respite it was a steady uphill grind against a strong headwind that brought me to the thriving metropolis of Long Valley Junction. The only structure of note was a gas station/general store that provided shelter from the constant wind. A few Snickers bars, a Coke and conversation with the owner provided just the break I needed before pushing on.

I had hoped things would flatten out a bit after Long Valley, but instead of getting "level" I was amply rewarded with a long gradual descent into a broad open valley. The wind was still kicking up quite a bit of dust, but the direction of the breeze shifted a bit and as a cross wind I was actually propelled a bit down the road. The next stop was the town of Hatch, 15 miles away, but I had really no reason to stop. The sugar fix I had back up the road gave me more than enough boost to keep pedaling. By this point in the day I had put in the better part of 60 miles and was starting to look forward to making the turnoff for Bryce Canyon and camping somewhere near Ruby's Inn, the local landmark.

Cruising into Bryce, the sun was just beginning to set on another long, but productive day. A strip mall town-let at the main intersection offered camping, but it was geared towards the mobile-home crowd and my two-wheels would seem a little out of place. Towering spires of reddish sandstone marked the entrance to Red Canyon, gateway to Bryce National Park. A pair of road-workers directed me towards the campground but didn't know if it was even open yet, since it was still so early in the season. I guess I didn't anticipate that National Parks had "seasons". This could be a problem.

By this point in the day I wasn't feeling particularly creative when it came to finding camping. The last two nights had been spent in "official" campgrounds and while it would be nice to keep that streak alive, sooner or later I'll run out of viable options and have to return to roughing it. Approaching the camp entrance I was disheartened to find a length of chain blocking my path. Signs promoted the opening of the Red Canyon campground at the end of the month, but by that time I'd be a long way away. Checking for innocent bystanders, I cautiously lifted the bike over the chain and made my way inside. What I was doing was technically illegal, but it was the best option available. As I spun quickly but silently thru the deserted park I sought out a remote spot to pitch my tent. I wasn't worried about leaving many signs of my presence since I usually leave only footprints when I go, yet I'll admit to being fairly scared of being discovered while I slept.

To make for a quick exit in the morning I left almost everything on the bike as I made camp. Laying out the drop cloth, I used only the mattress pad and sleeping bag. Pasta was made and eaten in silence with the only sounds coming from yet another bag of Dorito's for dessert. Another few pages read by candle light before I closed out another day staring up thru the framework of tree branches at another starry sky. It didn't get much better than this.

Day 17
30 Miles

Being a few days removed from the desert and at a decidedly higher elevation makes for some down-right chilly mornings. I had plenty of time to ponder such things as I lay shivering through my daily repacking ritual in the early morning, rolling out before the dawn. Beginning the day with a long climb out of the valley and onto a higher plain warmed me up a bit, but I was still stiff from the long pulls I did yesterday. Thankfully I was equipped for just such a condition and tested out my winter gloves and windproof jacket. Trying to "tough it out" by not wearing the long windproof pants that I brought along only served to keep me semi-frozen as my legs began to go numb. I promised myself that if I could make it to the summit of the day's first climb with any sort of composure, I'd pull over and get the pants on.

Cresting the rise, I noticed a restaurant up ahead on the right which touted a large breakfast menu. Just the place to warm my frozen feet. The \$8 spent on breakfast was more than I usually spent on a morning meal, but this place actually came with china instead of the Styrofoam cups of all those gas stations.

After the better part of an hour taking in hot coffee and an enormous meal, I was ready to resume riding. Returning to the road, I was thankful that the sun made an appearance and as such, things were beginning to warm up all around me. Rainbow Point, the end of the road in Bryce, tops out at a lofty 9,000ft and I guessed that by this point I had to be riding at around 8,000 when I left the restaurant. Stopping briefly at the entrance to the park for a photo opportunity, I was amazed at the lack of traffic in front of me. I guess it doesn't get crowded until the family's on summer vacation.

Showing my Golden Eagle pass (acquired back at the Grand Canyon) at the gate had me rolling into the campground right on schedule. Finding a decent spot to call "home" wasn't too terribly hard since the place was all but abandoned. After setting up the tent and stripping the bags off the bike, I packed my hiking boots and camera equipment into the backpack and rode to the main lodge to see what hikes were available.

I was hiking within the hour on the "Fairy Trail" which took me deep into the sandstone canyon below. What a spectacular sight, the great variety of colors and odd formations made you almost run around each bend trying to take it all in. Thankfully I had thought to bring along plenty of film as the various spires reminded me of creamicles from my youth. The sandstone bluffs and "hoodoo's" that clung to the canyon walls were an amazing testament to both wind and water erosion. Unlike the Grand Canyon hike where you were definitely either going up or down, the "Fairy" loop was much more varied as the trail wound around the various monuments. There were plenty of dehydration warnings posted and I made sure to drink between photo shoots. Hiking today's trail took the better part of the afternoon, bringing me back to the lodge in time to send off a few postcards before the store closed for the night.

Riding back to the campground to unload my equipment, I siphoned thru my change to find enough quarters for a hot shower and a laundry stop. After a richly deserved shower I got to shop for dinner provisions while my clothes took a spin. Here I had a chance to make something new and different for dinner, but in the end I was left staring at yet another pot of pasta. Adding a package of taco seasoning pretty much overdid things, as the resulting meal was almost too spiced to eat.

There were four other campers nearby that were about my age and within an hour of dinner we all seemed to be drawn into a tight knit community. Names seemed a bit meaningless since there were so few of us, so the two girls became "Blonde and Aussie", and the two guys were "Swiss #1 & #2". The girls were driving a dilapidated Ford around the parks of the west. The roof of their car had a world map painted on it with the prophetic words, "Bien there, done that." Swiss #1 was just over from Europe to ride his bike from Flagstaff Arizona to Chicago. His friend (Swiss #2) was here studying Eastern philosophy. It wasn't #1's bike that held my fascination as much as his trailer. Instead of weighing down the rear wheel with piles of gear (as I had chosen to do), he brought along a hand-built trailer. The trailer, upon closer inspection was a work of fine craftsmanship. Seems the builder is an auto mechanic back home and built this rig in his spare time. Shaped like a small coffin, this trailer seemed like the more efficient way to go; definitely easier on the rear wheel. Lifting the lid of this "coffin" I was amazed at what he was carrying around. Apparently quality bike tools are quite expensive in Switzerland, so he brought along a set of regular mechanics tools that had to weigh about 30lbs. Considering my entire gear weighed about 60lbs this was quite a difference. Along with this he brought along some cast iron cookware and a complete set of baking utensils. So much for weight savings. Leaving Flagstaff on May 1st, he was staying at the National Parks for prolonged visits before heading east. He had stopped at the Grand Canyon for two weeks and had been at Bryce almost as long. The two Swiss guys were just hanging out on the trails and making campfire bread every night. The bread making process kept us "onlookers" spell-bound for quite awhile, but to the Swiss making pastry this way was just normal. The taste of the fresh-baked bread out in this wilderness was wonderful. While we chatted away the night, the temperature cooled off considerably to the point of snowing lightly. It doesn't really rain at this elevation. After helping the Swiss finish off one of their two loaves of bread, we unilaterally called it an evening and headed back to our tents.

From the frozen beginnings of the day to the wonderful hiking, shower, laundry and fresh-baked bread, this had truly been quite a day. Tomorrow would hopefully be another day like today except that there'd be no riding. Tomorrow would be my second official "off" day for cycling and I couldn't wait.

Day 18
Did Not Ride

Awakening with the first rays of light, it was a lot colder than I had expected, so my early walk to the water pump was more of a jog. The early morning hike I had planned last night could wait another hour until things warmed up a bit. My hiking/camping compatriots must have felt the same way as the camp lie silent until just after 8am. The girls would only have time for one hike today so I suggested they take the Fairy Loop that I had trekked the day before. I headed off in the opposite direction in search of the seldom hiked Navajo Loop, Peekaboo and Indian Gardens Trail system. My recommendation had come from the guy manning the general store in the park and I figured he'd have a pretty good idea of which path to follow. Finding the entrance, I once again descended into the wonders of Bryce canyon. Today's hiking came a bit easier initially as I took fewer pictures and concentrated on absorbing more of the landscape than previously. I must have been "absorbing" when I should have been looking at directional signs. The trail was supposed to take only about 90 minutes to hike but after the second hour came and went, I began to get a bit concerned about being lost. I didn't see anyone else out and about and several times the trail appeared to reach an end. I could have turned around and retraced my journey, but I wanted to continue moving forward. Scanning the canyon walls for some kind of familiar landmark, I realized that all this cream-colored sandstone was starting to look the same. After another 30 minutes of tentative hiking, I came across another sign which told me that although I was now on a different trail, it was only another 4 miles to the lodge.

Continuing my self-imposed "death march" thru the canyon, I was pleased to find the trail beginning to climb up and out of the canyon and even more pleased that the trail seemed to skirt the rim, thus taking me past the campground, and my tent. It was time for a break, so I was glad to get the boots off for awhile. While today's hike can't compare with the struggle Rich and I had back at the Grand Canyon, it's safe to say that these two parks share a lot of the same challenges. If I had a car, I'd consider a third day of hiking, but I'm getting the feeling that I've done all I can do here and it's time to get moving towards Salt Lake and the reunion with my cousin's family.

The immense satisfaction I felt by the end of today was dampened severely by some news I got from home. Bill Briscoe, teacher, naturalist and ultimate outdoorsman (and even part time actor) died yesterday. He'll be buried back in Kentucky with the rest of his kin. This will definitely put a different mood on my travel to Montana.

Day 19
98 Miles

Tonight I'm writing again from another clandestine spot, this time a horse pen outside of Richfield Utah. Pedaled a wind-aided 98 miles and am now firmly on track to reach Salt Lake City ahead of schedule.

I got started about 8am and retraced my way back to the State 89 intersection shortly thereafter. Breakfast was in scenic Panguitch at 10, a hearty fare of biscuits and gravy, eggs and coffee. Always coffee. The rest of the morning ride took me to Circleville and by lunch I had 46 miles in and was feeling pretty confident in my riding technique. After a quick malt I pedaled on to the next dot on the map, Marysville for a soda.

Dinner came relatively early in a town called Sevier. Moving thru a deep valley between the Fishlake and Dixie National Forests, the road edged along a fast moving stream for a few miles before

beginning to climb upwards just as I began to hit town. As the yawed off to the right, I saw several signs promoting a large antique store in Sevier. This lifted my spirits somewhat since the notion of taking time off the bike to peruse old things sounded the perfect compliment to the day in the saddle. Sadly when I rolled up to the store, it was closed, but then again that was to be expected since it was almost 6pm at this point. Seeing more activity up ahead I rode off in hopes of finding good conversation and a decent meal. Something called "KC's Diner" looked to provide both.

Upon entering, I found a unique culinary oasis out in the scrub. "KC" the chef and Kyle the maitre'd run an immaculate restaurant and serve a great variety of entrees. I opted to try the garlic hamburger and was truly surprised at what came on the plate. Kyle explained that they take the term "hamburger" pretty literally out there. A garlic seasoned burger was topped with a slice of Virginia ham. Different to say the least, but wonderful all the same. After conversing with the proprietor, I got the grand tour and met the man behind the apron, the affable "KC". Thru our discussion, I also learned that this pair runs another restaurant a bit farther up north in the town of Salina called "KC's Cantina". With a promise to stop there for breakfast tomorrow, I was on my way again. Finishing up the day with a few more miles, the essence of that garlic burger worked its magic and I pulled into Richfield just as the sun was setting.

Following a gravel road off of Route 89 I turned off at the sight of the horse pen. A lonely looking nag munched lazily at some scrub and paid me little heed as I hopped the fence and set up a makeshift camp. Looking up to find clear skies, I opted to leave the tent and most gear on the bike and go with just the bedroll and sleeping bag. It was another long day, but at least I made up some serious miles and enjoyed the cool night air.

Day 20
103 Miles

Somewhere in the night that lone horse negotiated his way into the pen where I was laying and liked my hair like it was a salt lick. I've been awakened by the cramps, sweats and nightmares on this trip, but nothing compares to the texture of a horse tongue "hello" at 3am. After rationalizing that the horse meant no harm, I had to chuckle at what this must have looked like to someone else. I'm trying to coax this animal NOT to stomp on me in pitch darkness while trying to get him to stop the licking.

It was a rather bland 20 mile ride to KC's Cantina, but it was worth it as the Rancho Nuevo's were just the thing I needed this morning. After breakfast in Salina I rode through a string of smaller towns as route 90 wound its way north, Axtell, Centerfield, Gunnison and Sterling came and went before I finally pulled into Manti and got out of the saddle.

The Mormon temple in Manti is the main draw to this locale. Constructed atop a prominent rise on the northern edge of town, this alabaster monument took on a shimmering glow in the midday sun. After a quick stop for a malted, I continued riding towards the larger town of Ephraim to catch a late lunch. Being a bigger town, Ephraim offered such cultural highlights as a movie theatre, art league and bike shop. I passed on the movies, but took in the latter two options as I took about an hour out of my busy day to catch my breath. While I would have preferred a longer rest, there really wasn't much more in town to hold my interest, so I ended up riding thru the heat of the day yet again. To entice the legs into completing another long day of riding, I stopped at the last two towns for ice cream. At least I was keeping my fat count up.

Whereas yesterdays miles came relatively easily, today's miles were a definite struggle. It's easy to get down on yourself when things don't go right out here, but I just try to think of something, anything, to keep my mind off the slow pace while I'm climbing. Today's route definitely had more ups than downs and I got to see lots of Utah at around 6mph. In planning this trip, my route through Utah was more of a necessity than careful planning, but it's turned out pretty well. West of the Rockies the terrain seems to follow a series of plateau's. There'll be a fairly steep climb and then several miles, or even days of fairly flat riding before the next climb. With all this weight on the bike, this gradual ascent is working out just fine as I'm still trying to "discover" my climbing legs.

After Ephraim the long miles began to take a toll and I began to focus more on setting up the tent than pushing my pedals. Passing the next town, Mt. Pleasant, the goal for the day shifted to reaching the final town of the day, Fairview. I noticed that it was taking considerably more effort to push the pedals over the last few miles and instead of pushing things farther today I decided to play it safe. Since the town of Ephraim the ride was more uphill than not and I just frankly didn't have the gas at this point. Fairview was about 6,000ft above sealevel and to be honest I was looking forward to some kind of dinner stop, but nothing passed before me.

As I passed my 85th mile, I was looking forward to calling it a day. After Fairview there didn't seem to be any more towns of note on my map, so I kept myself occupied by trying to find a small stand of trees to camp beside. About two miles out of town the road crested into a glorious descent which gave me the motivation to push on to get another "century" ride under my belt. The pastures on either side of the road were neatly fenced off to keep the livestock in. Good for the cattle, bad for a guy looking to rest his weary bones. As I rolled on, assessing my options, I noticed occasional "driveways" jutting out across the culvert on the side of the road, leading to a reinforced gates in the fencing. I figured the gates would provide enough strength to lean the bike up against and the flatness of the driveway offered just enough space to stretch my legs.

Riding just long enough to record back-to-back centuries, I pulled into the first driveway I saw and officially called it a day. After dismounting I checked out my surroundings and was surprised to find an old couch hidden in amongst the brush. Apparently I wasn't the first to think of sleeping in this spot. I opted to "take the couch" instead of setting up the tent and busied myself with the nightly pasta. While waiting for a boil, further exploration of my hideaway revealed a complete deer skeleton about ten feet into the brush. From the size I guessed that the deer was fairly young when it met its maker. Looking for a keepsake, I at first thought to take a tooth or hoof, but in the end I strapped on the entire sun-bleached skull to the back of the rig. What's a little more weight when you're carrying so much?

The best thing about sleeping on the couch was that it let me stretch out my legs a bit more than the tent did. The clear skies promised another dry, cool night and I didn't linger long before sleep set in.

Day 21
85 Miles

Awakening early, the first sensation I had was that of being wet. As a precaution against a nightly rainfall, I had draped the ground cloth over my sleeping bag and couch. Rain wasn't the issue, it was frost. Being at higher elevations there isn't dew in the morning, it's a thin layer of ice. I don't know if my body heat added to the issue or not, but I felt like a giant popsicle as I tried to get repacked and on up the road. The first miles weren't particularly pleasant after such a long few days, but at least the road continued rolling downhill. Technically the town of Birdseye was on the map, but you couldn't tell that by riding thru it. The road began a slow bend to the right but never stopped rising. As it leveled off a bit the rumble of a freight train broke the silence I was very accustomed to. As I approached the crossing I had plenty of time to ponder the days upcoming travails as I counted over 60 freight cars passing before me. Two days ago I was more than 200 miles to the south hoping to make Salt Lake City by Monday and here it was Saturday and I was only 75 miles away.

As the caboose passed by I continued climbing until I ran into the junction with route 6. Looking down at my mileage computer I was surprised to see that I was within two miles of turning 1,000 miles on this trip. There would be big fanfare as it spun back around to 0000, since there would be about another 5,500 miles to go after that, but it was an important landmark for me none the less. Taking a left on route 6 brought me back into the valley I just spent the last hour climbing out of. Rounding another big turn in the road allowed me to look over the broad valley encompassing Provo and Salt Lake. The brown cloud that hung over Provo appeared to come from a huge fire or something, but then I realized that what I was seeing was pollution. I hadn't been to an area this densely populated since L.A. and almost forgot that more people invariably means more pollution. Springville, a satellite city of Provo was the first stop as I tried to get accustomed to being around so many people again. Provo, home of Brigham Young University and

overwhelmingly Mormon, offered amenities I hadn't really since L.A. either, like 7-11's. Pulling over at the first Quicky Mart I saw, I took the time to scan the yellow pages while polishing off a big orange drink.

I would spend the better part of three hours taking in various sites around this vibrant city. It really felt good to have some people around me again, but I can't say that riding in all that traffic was something I missed. A bit after 2pm I began to think about where I'd be spending the night. The thought of camping out again wasn't really abhorrant, but being so close to Salt Lake and a soft bed/couch was just too tempting. Pulling into the first pay phone I came across I called my cousin in Salt Lake to check their schedule to see if they could handle an early arrival. My cousin Karen was away so I discussed my arrival with her husband Jim. They hadn't been expecting me until Monday at the earliest, but it didn't really seem to matter. The family had tickets to a baseball game tonight, but would be home fairly early. Jim estimated that I was still a good 5hrs away from their place in Salt Lake and chances were good they'd be back from the game by then. Confirming my directions, I hung up and got moving.

My rough calculations showed the distance between Provo and Salt Lake to be 35 miles, so Jim's guesstimate seemed a bit of an overshot, but I figured I had at least a few hours to think it over. Orem, Pleasant Grove, American Fork and Sandy passed by and before long I realized that Jim was right on target. The late afternoon sun was reflecting off the pavement pretty badly, scalding the back of my legs and arms as I finally turned off into the outskirts of Salt Lake. A check of my location showed me to be around 177th street. Since my route to my cousin's house had me taking a right on 8th street, I had plenty of side streets to go. Somewhere along the line I got the idea to bring my cousin flowers so I kept an eye out for a shop and found one just before it closed. As if I didn't have enough of a load with the rocks from Orderville and the deer skull from that roadside stop, now I had to balance a bouquet of flowers as well. Riding a few days without all this stuff wouldn't be nearly as much fun.

Closing in on 8th street, I began to look to the east and was pretty disheartened to find that the road took an almost vertical bend up the canyon wall. Wimping out, I continued north in hopes that there would be an easier way up the mountain but there was no relief in sight. Jim and Karen had mentioned that the road to their house was *kinda steep* but from where I was sitting, it was beyond steep. It was like climbing up a wall. The directions said to continue east past the zoo on my way up Emigration Canyon. As the story goes, Brigham Young lead his followers down this very canyon in search of their new settlement. Upon reaching this location, he stretched out his arms and proclaimed, "This is the place!" As I passed the monument commemorating this, I thought the phrase worked heading in the other direction as well. This is the place for some real climbing to begin.

Shifting into the lowest of gears, I began to slowly crawl up and out of the valley. Sure the climbing would have been easier without having to hang onto the flowers, but I've grown accustomed to taking the harder road out here. A check of mileage had me nearing 80 for the day as I continued skyward so I would come close to averaging a hundred miles a day for three consecutive days, pretty impressive for me. Somehow my tired legs found a pace they could live with as I settled into a robust 5mph pace. After about 45 minutes of this I was startled to see a car swerve in my direction and a woman yell out the window, "Hey baby, how's it going?" I looked over without breaking my stride to see my cousin Karen beaming back at me. Timing is everything. After unloading the flowers and a short chat, they left me to complete the climb to their home. At this point it seemed easy to push the bike the rest of the way than to start walking it. After about another mile or so I noticed another cyclist zooming the other way. As we passed each other, he hit the breaks and pulled up along side me. I began to introduce myself when he shoots back, "I know, it's me, Jim!" Karen's husband had come down to ride along side me. Together we finished the "ride home" and it took almost 5miles to get there. The last few days of cycling had delivered me to Salt Lake two days ahead of schedule and now it was time to get off the bike and relax a bit.

Day 22
Did Not Ride

Waking up in a bed with a roof overhead was a nice change of pace. No early morning repacking, no 10 mile ride to breakfast, just climb the stairs. The Nichols clan were early risers so after a magnificently healthy breakfast I was ready to face the rest of the day.

After running a few errands, we took the kids to the Snowbird ski area where die-hard skiers were still trying to schuss the remaining late-season snow. Returning by 2pm, Karen and I decided to try out a little local mountain biking.

I had never really ridden off-road before, but that wasn't enough of a deterrent. We rode the pavement to the crest of Emigration canyon without much problem, but once we headed onto the gravel, things got noticeably tougher. Riding a touring bike takes relatively little technique since you basically pedal and go. On a mountain bike, doing the "sit and spin" isn't enough since you also have to balance and force the bike up the mountain. After forgetting this technique and having the front tire shooting at my noggin a few times, I finally got the hang of it. Of course then the route got steeper and over the 1,100 miles it had taken to get here I had never had to dismount to make a summit, until now. Karen brought up the rear, but after hearing her laugh at my total ineptitude I conceded my shortcomings and kept rolling.

Speaking of falling, after a short time recuperating at the top, it was time to descend. Again technique was required and I was sorely lacking. Riding the breaks, I struggled almost as hard as when I was climbing up the other side. After negotiating my way to the midpoint in the descent, I locked up the front wheel against a log and found myself airborne. Landing somewhat ungraciously in some bramble, all I could think to do was laugh. I hadn't dumped off a bike in almost seven years and it was just as painful as I remembered it.

Finally we made it back onto pavement again. I was a dirty, sweaty mess, but at least I was back on familiar ground, literally. I raced Karen back to the Nicols estate and found Jim's brother and fiancé lounging on the deck out back. They saw my disheveled state and asked how the riding went, having a pretty good idea of what the answer would be. More laughter. I accepted the ribbing since the technique required for this sort of riding was just something I didn't have right now.

After another wonderful dinner and a nighttime of conversation, I called it a night. While browsing a book on local trails and found today's route listed as "extreme", so I guess I didn't do so badly after all.

Day 23
Did Not Ride

Monday was a work & school day for my hosts, but they graciously provided me with the keys to an older station wagon that got me out and around town. The plans for today were to do a little sight-seeing and basically enjoy being off the bike. Spending the rest of the day "down canyon", I visited all sorts of stores and shops around Salt Lake. I had hoped to make it out the Great Salt Lake, but tomorrow was another day. Over dinner the topic of conversation came around to my upcoming departure from Salk Lake and the route I would be taking. At first I didn't think it mattered much *which* route I chose to take, but I soon found that the route was sort of important.

Jim, my cousin's husband was an accomplished tri-athlete and my appearance at his doorstep and mode of transport had inspired him to join me for a few days of cycling. The upcoming Memorial Day weekend provided the perfect opportunity for this. The plan we sketched out was for me to leave on Wednesday and ride as far north into Idaho as I could. On Thursday night I'd call back to Karen and let them know where they can meet me. Jim, Karen and the kids would leave early on Friday morning and drive to where I was at. Jim and I would then ride from that point to the log cabin the family had rented in Moose, Wyoming for a larger family reunion. An ambitious plan, but definitely doable.

Day 24
Did Not Ride

My last day off before pushing north, so I chose to do basically nothing. I visited the Mormon Temple and spent a few hours out by the harbor of the Great Salt Lake. I stopped by the REI store to pick up my bike wheels which had undergone a "health" check. Returning up the canyon I began repacking all my gear for the trip ahead. I had mailed off the rock and deer skulls trying to make my ride as light as possible. Jim returned home a bit later and we finalized plans for the upcoming ride. Dinner tonight was a vegetarian pizza followed by a full night of packing and planning. Knowing that we'd be reuniting in a few days made good-byes a little easier to bear. Salt Lake had been a great respite from the open road but now it was time to get back out there.

Day 25
107 Miles

Yet another long-than-expected day in the saddle, but not totally so. Everyone left the house at the same time, Jim to work, Karen to drop the kids off and then work and me to head north. Jim estimated the mileage to be about 85 miles to Logan and I mentally kept him to that promise, but after passing the 100 mile mark, I realized that the estimate might have been a little low.

Getting a relatively early start left me just enough time to pull into a bagel joint to stock up. I didn't know how far the "bagel mystique" had spread out west and I wanted to be prepared. Taking route 68 I found almost more solitude than I wanted. I was used to riding thru the middle of these small town which usually provided plenty of dining options, but today's route ran around the backside of the towns I passed and was definitely more industrial.

Today was going to be a hot one no matter what. The cool mountain breeze I enjoyed in the 7am hour was soon burned off, replaced by a slow simmering broiler. By 1pm I was looking for a nice lunch stop, but for the first time in a long time, none could be found. Added to this, the traffic on this "back" road was mostly heavy construction trucks and equipment, making the ride anything but joyous. I passed a few Quickie Marts along the way, but I kept rationalizing that there had to be something more substantial around the next curve. By the time I rode thru South Ogden I was ready to leave the desolate I-68 in favor of the more populated I-89 so I could find a decent meal. At the last minute I came across a small general store that seemed to offer what I really needed by this point, ice cream. Ducking under the shade of the large awning, I ordered a sundae, shake and an order of fries, for an opener. I had pedaled 45 miles by this point and had begun the battle with both the wind and yet another slow uphill climb. I had hoped to find more shade options out here, maybe a nice elm tree, to while away a few hours while the sun passed towards setting, but looking at the maps, it seemed like I wasn't making any progress at all so regrettably I kept riding thru the heat of the day instead.

After lunch in Ogden I loaded up the water bottles and tried using SPF 15 to combat the harsh sun. According to the label I'll get a "deeper, darker tan" out of this day's effort. Having another bagel did little to boost my enthusiasm, but it did dry my mouth out something fierce. By Brigham City I had put in a respectable 60 miles, but the "schedule" I now found myself on required me to be in Logan by nightfall, so I pressed on. Passing thru town I must have been in a stupor of sorts, since I passed up on several eating and drinking opportunities as I piled on the miles.

As the urban sprawl began to taper off I realized that I was down to my last few swigs of water and still had many miles to go. Scanning the immediate vicinity I found nothing but trailer parks and closed industrial buildings. I really didn't panic much but when I saw a little hamlet up the road with kids playing in the street I knew I was in good shape. I asked one of the little kids where I could get some water and he joyfully replied, "MY house!". His mom looked a little shocked at my appearance but a quick trip to the hose out back and I was back on my way.

From Brigham City the road began to climb steadily towards Logan. Maps told me that I had a bit over thirty miles to go yet, but it was getting tougher to find motivation as the day wore on. The late afternoon sun did nothing but add to my general discomfort as my legs, arms and lungs all seemed to give out simultaneously. My sunscreen had long since given up trying to protect me and once again I was too dazed to do much about it. All in all I was pretty sad sight those last few miles into Logan. Nearing the top of the last rise, I was again hoping for a more than decent descent into town, but I guess just having the road be flatter was a blessing in itself.

Passing the sign promoting Logan, I dismounted at the first signs of civilization I saw, a 24-hour truck stop. Today's heavy sweating had given me a fairly substantial backside rash which made walking a bit tough. Trying my best to "cowboy up" I must have resembled a true cowboy sauntering into the bunkhouse after a long day in the saddle. Settling down with a 44oz. Mountain Dew I spent the first 20 minutes just trying to mentally get over the strain of the last 30 miles. While recuperating, I browsed through some trucker-related magazines strewn about the dining area and noticed an ad for sleeper cabs. Now I really hadn't thought much about truckers and where they slept on the road, but I guess I just assumed that you either bought a cab that had a sleeping compartment, or you bought one that didn't. After reading the magazines I now knew differently, you could buy a basic cab and add a sleeping compartment later. Looking down I noticed what looked like a coating of sand on my left arm. I tried to remember driving thru a sandstorm today and came up blank. Getting few grains on my finger, I gave them a lick and was surprised to find that this "sand" was actually salt. Never had that happen before.

As the sun began its final performance, I began to look for the night's lodging. I figured to find a deserted spot at the rear of the truck stop to set up the tent and that would be it. Rain seemed to be threatening, so there was a real sense of urgency to my search tonight, but at least I wasn't still out on the road at this point. While looking for a flat plot of ground I came across about 10 of the sleeping compartments I'd seen in those magazines, all stacked up behind a utility shed. Had I not read that article, I wouldn't have known what they were. Leaning the bike against one, I continued to look around on foot. Around the next corner I found one of the units set upright with a plastic sheet stapled across the "open" end. Cautiously pulling back the sheet I was relieved to find the cab empty. The inside looked exactly as it appeared in those ads; a plywood deck, a few shelves and just enough space to call it a night. The cab was in a rather isolated spot in the yard, unseen from both the road and the other trucks in the lot, so I wasn't expecting any late-night visitors. I brought in only what I needed from the bike and "made camp" and dinner. It felt good just to get off my feet a bit. All the riding on the hot asphalt had really heated up the soles of my shoes today. The pasta was drab, but filling. Just after dinner some serious rains blew thru as I read my book by candle light, thankful to have a more substantial roof over my head tonight.

I was reminded yet again about the importance of paying attention to little things while on this trip. I've been able to save myself a whole lot of aggravation on this trip by picking up on the culture, sights and sounds from the road. It's given me some unique experiences for sure. As the rain continued to splatter the outside of my "camper" I thought again about how much difference a day can make.

Day 26
68 Miles

As the first rays of light shone thru the tarp covering the cab, I stuck my head out tentatively hoping things had dried out enough from last night's storms. Though the ground was a bit wet, the skies promised another dry day on the road ahead.

Trying to work the kinks out of my weary legs I rolled into downtown Logan in search of some sort of substantial meal. Spying a local diner off the main drag I hobbled in and grabbed a seat at the counter. A friendly waitress with a warming smile asked if I could do with a "spot" of coffee and I told her a few spots would be nice, but a full cup was really needed at this point.

The two farmers next to me noticed my Lycra togs and correctly surmised that I "wasn't from 'round here." I gave them the condensed version of how I got here, ending with my ride from Salt Lake

yesterday. My travails had them shaking their heads and emitting low whistles as I rattled off the daily mileage. The waitress made another pass and took my order before asking exactly why I would willingly put myself through all of this. “For the fun of it” seemed a bit of an awkward response considering my current discomfort level, but overall, it was still the honest truth.

Washing down the last of my standard biscuits and gravy with the end of my second cup of coffee, I slowly got myself back on the bike to begin the day. The farmer's advice as I hit the door was to “keep ‘er straight” which sounded easier than it was. The bike actually seemed to move like a tractor today as the smooth pedaling cadence I had developed on the way to Salt Lake had abandoned me here at the Idaho border.

Pulling into Preston Idaho the sun resumed baking thru the SPF15. Riding beneath the shade of an Arctic Burger I rather unceremoniously “dumped” my ride towards the side of the building. Adding an hour of “restful” recline did little to brighten my prospects (or disposition). The total lack of energy today was pretty unusual, given that I had just had 3 days off and should have been better rested. The 107 miles I put in yesterday were tough, but by this point in the ride I should be recovering quicker. Ducking into the Arctic Burger in search of a miracle “elixir”, I didn't exactly see it listed on the menu. At least they had an ample supply of ice cream.

Surveying the maps, the first 25 miles that brought me here seemed pretty inconsequential compared to the 40 that lie ahead. My cash situation also needed attention as I signed away the last of my travelers cheques. I've made it 1,200 miles on about \$300, or more directly – 25 cents a mile. Of course this doesn't include the “\$250-screw” I picked up back in Arizona. THAT I paid for with credit – out of sight, out of mind – for now. I'm about a quarter of the way thru my trip and still fairly within my budget. As long as I can keep the wheels out of the culverts, I should be OK. Stopping for a drink before I headed outside again, I was ready to face the road ahead.

After getting broasted back in Arizona I made a promise to myself to try and not ride thru the mid-day sun if I could help it, but lately I just can't seem to avoid it. I was disappointed in the morning's ride, having covered only 25 miles by noon. I was definitely not having one of my better days but it what you accomplish on these “off” days that can determine your mettle. The legs and back are sore (or I just notice it more today) and today's goal of Soda Springs is still miles away. Mother Nature was having a say as well today, the piercing sun was a given, but today she added a head-wind and elevation gain to make things interesting. And it WOULD get interesting.

About 10 miles out of Preston I was nearing the end of a particularly long “rolling hill” when I noticed a blue pickup truck parked off on the shoulder to my right. Cresting the hill brought me near the truck when the driver's door flung open and a guy shot out into my path, waving a beer in his hand. I was rolling slow enough to stop before I ran him over. I was expecting the usual litany of questions, but all I was asked was a simple, “Why?”

“Why what?” I thought to myself. Tilting his head to the right and squinting, his eyes against the glaring sun, my interrogator looked as if he were giving a speech, and the sermon continued. “Now *why* in God's name would anyone want to ride a bike like this out here in this God forsaken country?” Seems the people out here wanted me to freely admin my insanity. Shrugging my shoulders I countered, “Well it's better than working for a living.” Taking a long pull from his Busch he let out a belch and retorted, “You've got *that* right.” Shaking hands we took turns introducing ourselves. Killing the last of his beer, he reached into the truck bed and opened a cooler full of replacements. Offering me on as well, he seemed a tad put off when I refused. More small talk followed, and my new friend Mike didn't seem in a particular hurry but I was really baking out in the sun. This bike didn't do so well pedaling itself, so I was soon off again.

Bidding Mike a fond farewell, I kept rolling. 10 minutes later I was jolted by the sound of a truck's horn blaring as it passed. It was Mike alerting me to his passing presence and I gave him a wave – you meet all kinds on the roads of America.

Approaching the next hill I dropped gears and began my next assault. Nearing the top, a feeling of *deja vue* came over me again as the same blue pickup was again idling off to my right. There was Mike, reclining behind the wheel and I slowed to a stop just outside his window. Mike stuck another cold Busch out the window towards me and asked, "Is it beer time for you yet?" Normally I'd have caved like a house of cards at such a request, but I've been trying to stay away from alcohol on this trip. Especially with the heat. I'm sure one beer would have had me resting in a culvert. The conversation was short and sweet as I had my sites set on reaching Soda Springs and calling it a day. Just as before, the sounds of Mike's horn gave me another start, but I was getting used to it already.

This scenario repeated itself twice more with that beer offer looking better each time, but the last time I finally got up my courage and asked Mike what was in all of this for me. I mean *he* was getting an afternoon's worth of entertainment watching me climb the hills of southern Idaho while all I got was sore legs and tired lungs. Mike chuckled and pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket, jotting down his name and number on the beer receipt before handing over. He lived up the road in Grace Idaho and when I pulled into town I should give him a call and we'd do dinner. Finally something for my efforts.

After the final parting, I was prepared for the inevitable horn blast and got a final laugh out of this latest meeting. Thatcher Idaho marked the 55-mile point in my day and more importantly, the last stop before Grace. The lone gas station in town carried what all cyclists crave, cold soda, ice cream and candy bars. As the sun finally began to make its final fade, I remounted my steel carriage and began to count down the final miles to Grace and my reunion with Mike. Nitre, a small outcropping of homes came and went beneath my wheels as I stayed focused on that upcoming meal.

An enclave of 1,200 inhabitants called Grace home, definitely a ranching community. Only bankers and shopkeepers seemed to drive sedans, the rest opting for pickups of all sizes and configurations. Stopping at the first pay phone I came across I dialed the number on the receipt. No answer. I was hoping that he hadn't run his truck into a culvert on his way home. He seemed fairly "Busch-impaired" when last we met, but I really didn't think this was anything new for him. Stopping at "Stan's Market" for a soda and some bananas, I asked if anyone there knew Mike Richardson. Some professed ignorance, but one kindly woman said his ranch was back up the road near Nitre. Finishing off my snack I stretched my legs a bit by walking back over to the phone booth a few times to keep trying then umber. Just as I was about to give up and push on towards Soda Springs, Mike answered the phone. He'd swing by in a few minutes to pick me up.

Waiting outside the grocery store, I wondered what I was getting myself into. My goal today was to get as close to Soda Springs as possible. Had I not met up with Mike (several times) I'd have probably made it there by now, but I guess there's a part of me that wants to take some risks along the way to actually meet some of the people that I pass every day. This is definitely part of the adventure. I called my cousin's family back in Salt Lake city and made arrangements to meet them at the grocery store tomorrow and settled down to wait for Mike.

A white panel van pulled into the parking lot and honked its horn. I was looking for a blue pickup, so it hardly drew my attention until Mike came from behind the wheel. Apparently he had stopped at the ranch to exchange vehicles. Mike opened up the back of the van and we poured all my gear inside. The home cooked meal promised during the late afternoon was negotiated into a meal at a local restaurant, but I wasn't complaining. Our first stop was the Grace Café, offering nothing but coffee and drinks this time of night. We didn't learn this until after being seated, but decided that coffee would be a good start to the evening. From my perspective I thought the coffee would do Mike more good than myself, since I wasn't drinking beers all afternoon. Apparently service at the Café dropped off substantially at this time of day, since we were forced to serve ourselves. The conversation picked up right where we left off earlier in the day, Mike and I exchanging stories and questions about our experiences. My only exposure to ranchers prior to this was Ben, Hoss and Little Joe out at the Cartright Ranch on Bonanza. Mike clued me in that it was all big business now; water rights, free range issues and futures contracts. Mike apparently hadn't met too many cyclists out here on the range and we had a great time exchanging stories.

Following two rounds of coffee the next stop on our tour of southern Idaho was a small diner located outside of Soda Springs. Here we were finally able to get something besides coffee. Mike did the

ordering and carried on an animated conversation with the waitress whom he seemed to know on a more than casual basis. As the last bites of dinner were going down, Mike asked for my evening plans. I guess the shrug of my shoulders was all the go ahead Mike needed for what followed. Over the next 3 hours we visited several watering holes in the area. Maintaining my sobriety pledge was tough, but Mike got “watered” enough for both of us and I figured that I might be the driver before long. Just when I thought he was going over the “edge” of sobriety (which for him was several beers) he decided enough was enough and we made for the truck.

The clear sky shown brightly over the various structures back out on the ranch as we pulled into the driveway. Mike showed me a nice couch that I could call my own as he headed into the bedroom. Another incredible day ending up far differently than it began.

Day 27
80 Miles

Waking up on a strange couch, it took me a few moments to get my bearings. Dressing hurriedly I made my way outside to take in more of my surroundings. The early sunrise out on Mike's ranch left a memorable glow on the landscape that I didn't see when camped on the roadside. Beside the house there was a decent sized barn complete with a mare and her colt munching lazily on some scrub. I found Mike leaning against the fence and together we took a more substantial tour of his holdings. In addition to the horses there were small sheep, a goat a pig and four chickens. Quite the menagerie.

After the tour we settled down for a cup of coffee before returning to town. My cousin and family were due back at the grocery store within the hour so there was little time for more than a quick cup before heading back. I dug out my camera and busied myself with some last minute picture taking before we driving back. The five miles back to Grace were filled with silence. Mike seemed to be nursing a hangover and I was just in awe of the morning sun glistening off the dewy landscape. Pulling into the grocery store parking lot we unloaded all my gear and started our good-byes. Somewhere in between the “nice to meet ya's” and “I'll write's”, Mike reaches behind his neck, unfastens the necklace he was wearing and placed it in my hand. After that he looked down and muttered softly, “Take care now, you've got a long way ahead of you...” As the truck circled one last time before hitting the main road, I looked down at the pendant on the chain, a turquoise stallion. Fastening it around my own neck I vowed to wear it for the rest of my journey as a reminder of Grace Idaho and the kindness of a cowboy named Mike.

A bit after 10am my cousin pulled up in the SUV and Jim and I got busy reloading for our two-day “Wyoming Ramble”. Within 15 minutes Karen and the girls were heading off towards Moose, Wyoming, leaving Jim and I to follow at a slower pace.

The first miles were spent conversing as I brought Jim up to speed on my last two days. I had to get used to riding with someone for a change. This was Jim's first attempt at touring, but from the looks of things, this wouldn't be that much of a challenge for him. At least there was now someone to help break the headwind for me.

Pulling into Soda Springs we stopped at the small park in the center of town to get our bearings. To make Moose by tomorrow would take 150 miles of cycling from this point. After a brief respite, we pushed on and continued our way northeast. Today the destination would be a small town with a scenic name, Alpine Junction. The route there would wind thru the Caribou Forest. Jim and I kept a fairly brisk pace early on, pulling into the town of Henry for a soda and a few candy bars. As with many towns I've ridden thru, Henry was little more than just a general store and a gas station. Not much for the locals, but all the tourist needed.

Following Henry, the road took us onto the Blackfoot Indian Reservation where we unilaterally agreed to slacken off the pace and converse more. Having met and married Karen 8 years ago, the newlyweds soon relocated permanently to Salt Lake and began a family. My contact with them after the wedding was limited to their occasional visits back to Chicago, so Jim and I had no shortage of subjects to

cover and plenty of miles to do so. As we entered a densely vegetated valley, the skies darkened and shortly thereafter officially “opened up” on us. Jim and I bravely rode thru the storms for awhile, but eventually found a condemned house to take shelter in. The blown out building was little more than a shell, no windows, doors, just walls and a floor. As the heavy rains fell outside, Jim and I waited it out amidst the rubble inside, thankful the roofing was holding.

Twenty minutes passed and the rains finally abated. Jim and I tromped out to our bikes and continued riding to the ghost town of Wayan and then hit the Wyoming border town of Freedom. Stopping at another general store, we noshed on ice cream and soda’s, falling onto a bench to “rest and ingest”. While watching the skies clear around us, Jim took off his show and massaged his aching hoof. He opined that perhaps his shoes weren’t meant for all-day comfort, either that or he was just getting old, but in either case, his feet were sore. He was finally breaking into the joys of cyclo-tourism.

The bench we rested on was perched strategically at the junction of routes 34 and 89. Where we were sitting was on the Idaho side of the street, but across the street was Wyoming. Eventually we got rolling into Wyoming. Jim had driven this route before in a car and kept motivating our tired legs by proclaiming that Alpine Junction was “just around the next corner”, or the next, or the next. The slight uphill grade and unexpected headwinds added to the late day “excitement” as we kept pushing a healthy pace. Nearing Alpine Junction we were joined by a cyclist from Germany who was spending his summer riding around North America. Jim and I alternated questioning our new guest as together the 3 of us took on the stronger headwinds. Looking over his rig, something just didn’t look right. It took me a bit to figure it out, but it finally came to me. For a cyclist riding around America, this guy was carrying precious little gear. Besides a thin sleeping bag, he carried none of the more cumbersome items I was strapped with. Asking him about it, he related that each night instead of looking for an inviting plot of ground, he looked for an inviting doorway. Ringing the doorbell, he would negotiate his way into strangers homes where, in exchange for lodging and a possible meal, he would fill the evening with tales from his life on the road. While I found this a rather unique (if not downright intrusive) way to travel, I personally preferred my way, where you’d meet people when you could, but didn’t rely on their kindness quite so much. Meeting people like Cowboy Mike in Idaho was great, but I’d hate to have to rely on that sort of encounter to survive.

As the three of us continued on, the skies began to darken again and while Jim and I continued to press on to Alpine Junction, our new found friend began to slow down, sizing up the small cluster of homes off to our right. Eyeing what looked like a promising prospect, he bid us farewell and turned into a long driveway.

Eventually Alpine Junction was “just around the corner” and we were both thankful to make the downtown section before the rains came. Surveying the landscape we found a campground along a gravel road that seemed like our best option. We decided that the long day of riding merited a restaurant stop for dinner instead of the pasta meal we had planned earlier. Finding a local pizza place in town we ducked inside. Since meeting up with my cousin’s family, I’ve been amazed at how healthy the whole family ate. No chips, soda or candy was to be found; only healthy food, fruit and vegetables. I’ve been eating pretty healthy as well, but I also don’t deny my cravings for ice cream and Dorito’s either. We opted for a large stuffed pizza and I thought to myself that I’d be forced to eat most of this myself, but Jim surprised me by holding his own on this monster pie. I guess an 80-mile day on the bike can change a guy’s diet.

As we left the restaurant the clouds stopped threatening and finally started delivering, pouring rain on top of us as we struggled to get a proper camp set up. Jim had heard of a pristine campground beside the river in town that would have suited our needs nicely. Having a mountain bike, Jim took the lead, plowing over loose gravel and dirt in search of the elusive campground. As the rains intensified from a moderate drizzle to just a flat out rain, we opted to cut the search short and rode down the next trail we came across. The load on my read tire soon had me securely mired in the muck as I yelled ahead for Jim to find something flat. Jim replied that he found a fairly flat piece of sod and I spent the next few minutes in a frantic shuttle of bike and gear to our final destination. Jim had found a good spot indeed as some large trees shielded us from the worst of the rainfall as we completed our camp setup.

Jim didn't bring along a tent, opting to substitute a large blue tarp in its place. Tonight he would need it. Setting up my tent beside him, we pondered the odds of both of us fitting inside my paltry tent. Not good. The tarp was the better option. Jim laid the tarp out like an envelope and climbed inside. I folded it over him and placed rocks along the outside to keep the wet out and everything inside reasonably dry. Jim and I conversed for a short while until we were both suitably convinced that this option would work for him and then silence dominated the night.

Day 28
65 Miles

Rising early, the first order of the day was to check the skies which were thankfully a deep clear cobalt blue. Packing our soggy belongings, Jim and I began the long muddy trek back onto the pavement. Jim said his night in the "plastic bag" wasn't too bad, all things considered, but I was still grateful to have a tent over me last night.

Returning to the main road, the plan called for a nice leisurely 60 mile day and a reunion with the family Nichol's. Jim's brother and his fiancé were also joining us for the weekend stay at the log cabin. Just as we were about to depart, Jim noticed that the resort hotel in Alpine Junction offered an All-You-Can-Eat breakfast. Pointing towards the sign, an executive decision was made to delay our departure just long enough to partake until a decent meal was had. The café was fairly deserted at 7am, which was fine by us. The trek out from our makeshift campground had been a fairly messy affair and our mud-spattered shoes definitely showed the signs of the struggle. After we sat down, both of us noticed the tracks we were leaving on the carpeted floor, but it was a little too late to do anything about it now.

Leaving Alpine Junction about 40 minutes later we both began pedaling pretty slowly on the day. It took a few miles to rid our bikes of the mud accumulations but eventually we returned to pushing a fairly brisk pace. The road began to twist it's way up and around the Caribou Forest, closely hugging the Snake River for a good portion of the morning. Yesterday's miles had prepared us for some pretty substantial climbing today, but we both were surprised at how easily the miles passed beneath our wheels. Jim and Karen had rafted on the Snake river before, so he had a fairly good idea of what lie ahead for both of us.

The few towns we rode past weren't anything worth stopping at, both of us eager to get on to Jackson Hole and then Moose this morning. The post-storm fresh air and clear skies made cycling a joy today. Just on the outskirts of Jackson, I began to lose traction on the rear wheel, signaling yet another flat. After taking things apart I discovered that it was the tire-liner itself that had worn thru the tube this time. I had installed tire-liners back in Arizona to combat the thorny slivers that littered the road back there.

Riding into Jackson, more commonly known by the name of the ski resort, Jackson Hole, was like riding into a major city. Tourists oozed out of every side street and the cars circled looking for the ever-elusive parking space. Jim again led the way, skillfully avoiding the congestion of the main routes in favor of the deserted side streets. Together we had made good time getting here and earned a respite in town. I was now "down a spare" so I wanted to look for a bike shop to replace it before heading into Yellowstone at the end of the weekend. After securing a few new tubes, we adjourned to a small café for bagels and ice tea.

Known primarily for it's world-class ski runs, Jackson had evolved into a world-class tourist trap along the way, with upscale shopping opportunities filled every street. This being Memorial Day weekend, the place was even more congested than usual with an Indian festival coursing it's way thru town. As we finished our snack, the urge to get to Moose got us back out onto the road north.

Spinning away from the madness of Jackson, the road began another slow ascent and the wind picked up again but Jim and I hardly noticed as our attention was drawn to the Grand Teton Range that dominated the view off to our left. Jim and I traded time providing wind breaks for each other as we continued to take in the sight of the three majestic peaks so nearby. The mountain range is unique in that

there are almost no foothills surrounding them, just three eruptions springing up out of the road. We pulled into a road-side "scenic view" so I could snap a few pictures before continuing on.

Pulling into the parking lot of the lodge in Moose, we were met by Karen and the others who were just heading out for a bike ride of their own. After quickly unloading our gear, Jim joined his family while I opted to find a couch and catch up on some writing and a quick nap. Taking a short walk to take in the amenities Moose, Wyoming, I found that this enclave had just about everything a tourist could need; campstore, restaurant, gift shop and even a bike shop thrown in. After an hour spent writing and another spent sleeping, the gang returned and together we turned our attention to dinner. Karen and I drove back into Jackson to stock up on foodstuffs while Jim stayed back at the cabin with the girls. Christine, the fiancé, was a chef with the Marriott hotel chain, so I was expecting nothing less than a five-star dinner.

After a sumptuous meal and lively conversation, the clock struck 11pm, a time for all good vacationers to hit the sack. While the families split up the available rooms, I was left to warm the couch, which was more than fine by me. Anything was better than another night on the ground. Tomorrow would be another "off" day for cycling, but another "on" day for hiking. Before turning in, I rearranged my gear to accommodate tomorrow's hiking and did a little reading. Another memorable day spent out in the west.

Day 29 Did Not Ride

I awoke with a start and looked at my watch, surprised to find that it was 7am already, way late by my standards. The others were still sleeping as I made my way outside, hoping to catch the first sunlight hitting the Tetons. While I was out roaming yesterday I had plotted out several shots, and my first minutes of the day were spent lugging my equipment to these locations to see if they would yield any workable shots. Being in the shade of the mountain kept things nice and chilly this early in the morning, so I had a bit of trouble getting my fingers to twist knobs and focus the lens. After running through the better part of a roll of film, I checked my watch a second time to find that it was now 6:15, no wonder everyone was sleeping, it was still WAY too early. At least I got to see my sunrise.

Within an hour I was back inside as the rest of my cabin-mates awoke. The Nichol's clan was heading into Yellowstone park for a driving tour, while my plans were to hike around Jenny Lake at the base of the Tetons. Parting company a little before 9am, I took my unloaded bike down the road to the southern entrance to the park. From the cabin to the main lodge was only 8miles, just enough to get my lungs working in overdrive this morning. Locking the bike for one of the few times since leaving California, I slipped into my backpack and headed off down the trail. My maps showed the trail around the lake was only 7 miles which fit nicely into my plans to take it easy today.

For the first half-mile the trail seemed wedged between the lake and the park road but eventually the road broke off to the right, leaving me in splendid isolation. As I hiked along, I was surprised at just how alone I really was. The trails of the Grand Canyon and Bryce were desolate due to their strenuous nature, but here in the Tetons the trail didn't seem all that challenging. Maybe it was just early in the season. Continuing to hug the lake, the trail took me past towering pines and a variety of wildlife, birds, squirrels and even a few stray deer. It just felt so good to be off the bike and yet still exploring. Somewhere along the way the euphoria of hiking must have led me astray as I missed a fork in the road apparently. I soon found myself hiking the adjoining Leigh Lake. Sure I could have turned back and discovered the error of my hiking ways, but I forged ahead and see what the long route held. This was definitely more hiking than I had planned.

After two hours of hiking, I returned to Jenny Lake's western shores and more civilization. Apparently most tourists travel in the other direction (probably so they wouldn't get lost like me). Passing several groups everyone offered general greetings until I passed a group of seniors resting on a fallen tree trunk. They warned that there was a bear cub up ahead and to be careful. Taking their warning lightly I

brazenly continued onward, confident that if there was a bear ahead, he couldn't be hungrier than I was at this point. Coming around a tight bend in the trail I almost walked right up the back of the little cub, who was munching on grass off the side of the trail. Luckily I had the right lens on the camera and got some nice shots before the bear got bored and headed further into the woods, away from the trail. This cub was so young that it's mother HAD to be in the immediate area so I kept a close lookout as the little guy headed out.

As I prepared to shove off again, two German tourists came onto the scene and began following the cub off the trail. I grabbed one of them and slowly explained my theory about the presence of the mother. They begrudgingly accepted my point but decided that only one guy needed to follow the bear while the other stood guard. I decided that I didn't need to stick around and see a potential mauling, so I kept hiking towards the lodge. I was probably about 100ft away when I heard some yelling in English and German, seeming to indicate that the mother bear had indeed let her presence be known. Then the two Germans bolted past me on their escape.

The last mil of the hike was decidedly anti-climactic after that and before too long I was back at the lodge, enjoying sodas and ice cream with the rest of the tourists. Riding back to the cabin I went shopping for dinner. I didn't expect the others to be home for awhile, so it was time to get creative. I picked up some freeze dried meals for my upcoming tour through Yellowstone and an assortment of decadent goodies for more immediate gratification. I did some more reading, writing and sleeping when I finally got back to the cabin and even made a quick dinner. No sooner had I picked up my first forkful than the rest of the gang came piling thru the door. Soon a more substantial meal was prepared as we took turns exchanging stories of the days travels and travails. Following dinner Karen and I returned to Jackson for some first class window shopping before calling it an evening. Tomorrow held the promise of returning to some familiar ground for the first time on this trip and I could hardly wait. I just hoped the weather held.

Day 30
60 Miles

Got another late start this morning as everyone was busy packing and eating breakfast at the same time. I had packed up a bit last night, but left all the larger items for this morning. By 10am I was ready to start spinning again, so it was time for a final round of "goodbyes". Leaving my friend Rich back at the Grand Canyon wasn't tough at all, but for some reason I was taking these Wyoming farewells a little harder as I said goodbye to Maggie, Melissa, Karen and Jim. Maybe it was the thought of truly being on my own again. Whatever the reason, I gave a hasty wave of the hand before pushing off again. Within the first miles the emotions passed and I resumed my "crossing America" demeanor.

Another glorious clear day welcomed me back to solo touring. The first stop of the day was the town of Moran, a scant 20 miles up the road. I was between plateaus again which meant climbing. Nothing steep mind you, but definitely "up". Pulling into town a bit before noon, I found the shade of a large awning to shield me from the glaring Wyoming sun. Waiting until the peak rays of the day had passed overhead, I bought some film and wrote a few postcards while slugging down soda and chips. I phoned my mom back in Chicago and had her ship some much needed bike supplies up ahead to Billings, my next stop.

Returning to the road by 1:30pm I wound my way north through yet another man-made tourist trap; the entire town of Colter Bay. The constant uphill grade was beginning to wear on me within just a few hours. By 3:30 I had made it to the southern entrance to Yellowstone and took the time to talk to the ranger on duty about my camping options for the night. He said that since it was still so early in the season only a few campsites were open at this point. I was particularly disheartened to find that my intended target, Grant Village, was still shuttered for the winter. The only option available this late in the day was the seldom used Lewis Campground, a scant 14 miles away. Although this made for only a 60 mile day for me, it was the only feasible choice.

The ranger warned that the road leaving the entrance gate was a bit steep, but I didn't realize just *how* steep until I began to slog my way forward. From the ranger station the road climbed a bit over 1,000ft over the next nine miles, most of this within the first four, at a steep grade of between 6 & 7%. Searching through the lower gears to find one I could live with, my goal quickly changed to trying to find an even cadence to my pedal strokes. Taking a few days off the bike was a nice rest, but we were definitely back to business here. Some days are flatter than others, so what better way to end a day of climbing than with a nice steep ascent to the Continental Divide. The last major climbing I had done prior to today was the pull up to Jacob Lake back in Arizona. That was two weeks ago, but it felt like last year.

Maintaining a steady rhythm while climbing was becoming easier to do the farther I went, so although this climb was still somewhat painful, I didn't seem to suffer as much as I had when I left the ranger station. Cresting the Divide I was able to look out over the expansive canyon below, still blackened by the fires back in 1988. Technically I had never ridden this stretch of road, but just being within the park boundaries gave me a sense of security; of being "home". Maybe it's the sheer size of this park or the fact that I've invested 4 weeks of my precious vacation trying to explore all areas of this place, but Yellowstone truly holds a special place in my heart.

Pulling into the all but deserted Lewis Campground a little before 6pm, I was surprised to find sporadic clumps of snowpack lingering beside most objects. Finding an available site wasn't a problem at all, so I could afford to be a bit choosy, finding one with enough downed wood around to start a nice fire. I got the stove fired up quickly and began dinner before setting up the tent and that much-needed fire. The end of May wasn't exactly the height of forest-fire season, so the few other campers who shared the grounds had similar notions as well. For dinner tonight I tried one of the freeze-dried meals I picked up back in Moose, something called "bean surprise". I chose it more for it's name than my person affinity for legumes, but was pleasantly surprised at how filling it actually was.

Following dinner I kicked back and enjoyed the isolated camping and the crackle of the roaring fire while re-tracing all the activity of the last week....

Day 31
20 Miles

I allowed myself a bit more sleep today as I tried to plan out a day around the unknown limits of this park. During my last visit back in 1992 I did some hiking just up the road from here, so my initial thought was to spend the day with the backpack on. Stripping the bike down to the bare necessities I rode off in search of the trail head. Leaving Lewis Campground, the road was definitely flatter than on the way in yesterday and within 30 minutes I was pulling into the trailhead.

I was greeted by a large sawhorse spanning the entrance, a large sign declared the trail systems in the area were off limits due to late bear migration. Having my only plans for the day cancelled was a bit of a downer, but then again I was in no particular hurry to run into a bear during migration. On the way back to Lewis, I decided to pack up and continue north to Grant Village, the next "stop", for lunch. From there I'd push on to Fishing Village and set up camp for the night.

Pulling up stakes was getting easier to do with each passing day and I found myself in Grant Village a bit before noon. The ranger was correct about everything being shut down there save for the restaurant and gift shop. Entering the diner I found they were offering an all-you-can-eat salad bar. This would get sorely abused. The nearby nature center provided another hour of diversion before I felt the obligation to push on. The skies had just begun to darken and I didn't want to get caught in any downpours if I could help it.

Between Grant Village and Fishing Bridge lies the famous Mud Pot thermal springs. I remembered that there was a short hiking trail there that might be a good place to dust off the hiking boots and take some pictures. Pulling into the lot, it seemed like a fair number of people had the same idea,

judging from the number of cars present. Getting into the hiking boots and rearranging my backpack yet again, I was soon ready to hike when a young couple approached, asking “the usual”. After filling them in on how to ride from California to Wyoming, I asked them a few questions and found they had a story to rival mine.

Wolfgang and Suzanne had also dreamed of riding their bikes across America this summer and after several years of saving money, they too sought to make their dreams a reality. They arrived in Boston in early March to begin their trip with more money in pocket than gear. A few days of sight seeing and outfitting followed before they set off on March 20th. Seems they didn’t investigate the weather patterns for March in the northeast and soon they learned an important lesson; it still snows in Massachusetts. Although their progress was slow, they kept their spirits high with thoughts of warmer days ahead. By the time they made it to eastern Ohio the snows had indeed stopped but they now faced headwinds the likes of which they hadn’t experienced back in Germany. After struggling against this latest obstacle for four days they finally abandoned the effort near Columbus.

Somewhere in their staccato recitation of events, I lost track of how they got from Ohio to Hammond, Indiana, but once there they were taken in by some kind strangers for a week, allowing them to rest and plan their next move. From Hammond they shuttled thru Chicago before ending up in Milwaukee. From here they decided to take a bus to Rapid City and resume their cycling.

In surveying maps of South Dakota they had become enchanted with the idea of riding thru the Black Hills down to Mt. Rushmore before continuing west. After arriving in the west and reassembling their bikes, they learned another painful lesson about riding in America; things look a lot flatter on the map than they are out on the road. While the formations south of Rapid City were indeed darkly tinted from the rich minerals, they were more than the “hills” implied in the name. After taking four days to visit Mt. Rushmore and the Crazy Horse monuments, they returned to Rapid City and promptly “re-retired” from cycling a second time. Their next move was to rent a van for two weeks of highway touring which brought them to Yellowstone and their encounter with me.

After a few more minutes of conversation, I wished them well on their journey and got back to my own adventure. I was able to hike about 300 yards before the skies officially opened up on me. Weighing my options, I decided it was better to stay close to the bike if things got nasty so I made a hasty retreat and moved my gear under the only shelter I found, a large overhang on a utility shed. Wolfgang and Suzanne were still around as well, taking cover in their van. After waiting out the rains for about an hour, the rain subsided enough for Wolfgang to leave the van and continue our conversation. During the discussion I learned that they were also planning on camping at Fishing Bridge, so I persuaded them to drive ahead and set up camp and I’d ride up shortly to join them. They seemed relieved to have someone around for the translations and I was grateful to save half the camping fee. (ok, and a little company wouldn’t hurt either.

After parting ways a second time, I returned to the open road for the 15 mile spin to Fishing Bridge, along the way riding through another small rain squall which ended almost before it began. Pulling into the campground my friends weren’t hard to spot with all their gear strewn about the outside of the van as they busied themselves setting up camp. Setting up our tents we started comparing just about all our gear, what worked better, why we had so much.... I learned that bicycle gear was very expensive in Germany so these two brought just the bare basics and planned on buying most of their equipment in Boston. While they’re stuff was definitely newer, they agreed that a lot of what they bought turned out to be ill-suited for the particular journey, broken spokes and supposed waterproof gear that wasn’t.

Preparing dinner separately they were amazed at how quickly I got my pasta prepared when compared to their more elaborate (and time intensive) feasts. I countered that their food just HAD to taste better since they actually took some time to think about it. Suzanne seemed to warm up from the compliment and soon I was enjoying a bowl of their rice and chicken. Following dinner the temperature began to really drop so we busied ourselves trying to locate some dry wood laying about to build a fire, but the days’ rains had dampened almost everything to the point of not burning. Eventually we located a pile of branches that would burn, but never enough to dry out any of our clothing. Turning in for the night we made tentative plans to spend the following day together, weather permitting. My thought was to keep

riding if the weather held, but either way I was still ahead of schedule so another day off the bike wouldn't hurt.

Day 32
Did Not Ride

Somewhere around midnight the rains returned and I was caught with my groundcloth outside the tent instead of inside which made for a damp morning. Finally sticking my head outside, I looked up to see another blustery day ahead, 45 degrees with a stiff wind. Breakfast today consisted of a box of fig newtons and an apple. Being so close to Montana had me thinking of the great ice cream there, Wilcoxson's, but it was a bit tough to think of eating ice cream when there's still so much snow on the ground here.

As the second month of my journey begins, I can see that this month will be totally different than the first. May took a lot of energy, both mental and physical, along with a fair amount of patience. Getting the body into a decent riding shape for the daily pounding, overcoming technical difficulties, hiking the Grand Canyon and Bryce and coordinating several schedules made this trip more of a job than I had initially thought.

In Stephen King's "The Stand" there's a critical point in the story where the 4 protagonists are sent off into the desert with nothing, calling it a "life enema". I sometimes feel that's the real purpose for me being out here as well. I've given up all that I THOUGHT mattered in my life, my job, my friends and family, in search of a truer meaning. I think I've found out a lot about myself out here, and hopefully something more substantial to hang my hat on in the future – the notion that I have to keep determining what's truly important in my life and to point all my energies towards attaining that end. Any effort spent elsewhere is just wasted motion. Like a sculptor who begins with a block of marble and chips away anything that's NOT part of the finished product, I'm striving to trim away anything that ultimately won't be attached to my "finished" life. I'm surrounded by people chasing objects without not really knowing what they'll do with these things once they're attained. Without a clear vision of what the finished product is supposed to look like, they don't trim away too much, fearful that if they do, they'll lose something important, but what really happens in the end is that when it's time to evaluate the final product, there's too much clutter around to determine what the end result actually is.

By 8:30am the campground came to life, Suzanne, Wolf and I made breakfast and talked over the day's itinerary. The cloudy skies had me a bit leery of continuing, so I felt content to take another day off and catch up on the laundry, if nothing else. My German guests were equally uninspired by the gray skies and offered to take me along on their driving tour of the park. Offer accepted, the laundry could wait.

Jumping into their van we drove through the only part of the park I hadn't seen on my previous visits, the bison-filled Hayden Valley. The few bison actually milling about in the valley were still in the process of shedding their winter coats and seemed unaffected by the intermittent rain, which made me slightly envious, seems I'll go to almost any lengths to keep dry and maybe shouldn't try so hard.

Touring the Upper and Lower Falls of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone for most of the morning, we adjourned to Tower Falls for a light lunch. On our way to Tower, I got to preview tomorrow's ride up and over the Dunraven Pass and Mt. Washburn, the highest peak in the park system. Through the rainy haze I estimated that there was still a good three feet of snow off to the side of the road which should make for an interesting spin tomorrow.

Over lunch I noticed several people feeding the ground squirrels in clear violation of the park ban on such behavior. Being the man who fears no evil, I decided to have a few words about this with the offenders. Sure they were only squirrels, but it was the principle of the thing that bothered me. Walking up to the family, I offered the standard, "You aren't feeding those animals are you?" which invariably leads to the retort, "Mind your own business"

Me “But this IS my business”

Them “Do you work for the park or something? Look pal, I’m a tax-payer so I can do what I want...”

Me “Not so fast! These animals will die when they can’t find you to feed them this winter. Hope you brought warm clothes, it gets cold here in December...”

But this time the guy had a unique response, “The park ranger said it was OK.” Sure he did. They finally got tired of my diatribe and took off, only to be replaced by two women who thought it would be cute to bait the squirrels with candy bars. Repeating the spiel was all it took to get them to desist. Following this, the three of us hiked down to the base of Tower Falls for some rest and a few photos before heading back to Fishing Bridge for dinner and the aforementioned laundry. The German’s offered to cook dinner again and I was more than willing to let them do so: potatoes with sour cream, shrimp and tuna fish all mixed together. Quite the spread.

While the potatoes were boiling three other cyclists rolled up. Out for a five-day tour from Cody Wyoming, they were just the guys to guarantee a wild evening. We built a decent fire with the dries material around, which happened to be Bison flop. A bit disgusting to handle, but once dried, they were like gray Frisbees. Many a “Frisbee” were launched to keep the fire going. The story exchange and laughter went well into the night and I finally turned in around midnight. A great end to a rather dismal day.

Day 33
45 Miles

Breakfast this morning was a hurried affair with the three cyclists from Denver scurrying about like ants preparing for *their* daily ride to the eastern entrance at Cody, while the Germans and I took things a little slower since we had a shorter distance to go. Watching those guy spin away made me a bit envious of the camaraderie they shared. I’ve been a lot of places and seen a lot of things, but unfortunately I’ve always been alone.

Wolfgang and Suzanne were going to continue west to Old Faithful and beyond today while I had my sights set on heading north to Tower Junction. Yesterdays tour provided me with a nice preview of the miles today but somehow the “car” miles never seemed as steep as when you’re in the saddle.

Seems like my greatest motivation out here comes from the thought of being with friends again, but for the next few days I’m looking forward to a reunion with an old friend of sorts, a mountain pass. This is no ordinary pass, this is the Beartooth highway.

On my second attempt at riding thru Yellowstone back in 1992 I flew my gear out to Billings Montana and met up with some family friends for one last night of rest and relaxation before my tour began. Discussing my route, they seemed a bit apprehensive when I mentioned cresting the Rockies at Beartooth pass on my way to Cooke City. Bill Briscoe, in his understated manner, opined that this was “the tougher way to go” but I assured him that it wouldn’t be that bad. Waving good-byes to Bill and his wife Joan, I remembered thinking that nothing could be worse than the 12 mile ascent of the famed “Going to the Sun” road in Glacier Park, but I’d soon be taught the difference.

The first day of that tour was spend “breaking in the legs” and getting used to riding with a full load of gear around me. Camping next to a stream outside of Red Lodge Montana, I remember having a rather peaceful nights sleep under the stars which turned out to be the calm before the climb. I continued west through a deep tree-lined valley, looking for this imposing “tougher way to go.” I noticed the road seemed to blend into the surrounding forest ahead as my gaze turned skyward. High atop the ridgeline to the left I could see cars struggling along the crest, the morning light reflecting off the windshields, making them look like tiny moving stars twinkling along. My simplistic view of things made me sure that these cars must be riding on a different road, but within the next mile I began to realize the awful truth, and Bill was right when he talked about this being the tougher way.

Sure the road seemed to blend into the surrounding landscape, because the route took an almost immediate 180-degree turn and a steep bend upward. Switchbacks. Those insidiously simple feats of engineering that allowed great altitude gains in relatively short distances. Charles Kurault, the poorman's Thoreau, proclaimed the Beartooth the "most scenic highway in America" years ago and from the looks of my vantage point, he sure had more than enough time to come up with that moniker.

I believe there were between 27 and 30 switchbacks to conquer that day with no water fountain nearby, and forget about shade. After 8hrs of climbing and over 32 miles beneath my wheels, I too crested the summit, like those little twinkling stars, a ride I'd never forget.

Even thinking about that long day of climbing made my legs quiver today, but for some reason I was looking forward to taking the pass from the other direction, but first I had another two days of cycling to get to that point.

After exchanging addresses and promises of continues correspondence, it was time to part ways with my friends a final time. Their plan was to resume their drive west, and once in Seattle, start pedaling, but I think they may just stay on four wheels a little longer. Once you start finding shortcuts, it's hard to stop.

Having taking most of my pictures yesterday, my goals were simple; ride to the town of Canyon, lunch, ride over the Dunraven Pass, hike and ride to Tower Junction, dinner and then some sleep. Simple. Riding through the Hayden Valley, I was able to take some really nice shots of the bison as they lunched in the open plain. From there it was all downhill to Canyon Junction. Since a fair majority of the park was still closed for the winter, those roads that were open were jammed with tourists. I wasn't able to procure a table for lunch, settling instead for a stool at the counter. Treating myself to a thick chocolate shake, I took the time to write some postcards and call my mom. Resting beneath a shady tree I tried to wait out the peak rays which really seemed to take it out of me today.

I got spinning again about 2pm, immediately climbing my way to Dunraven Pass and Mt. Washburn. Arriving at the pass and the promised trail-head after an hour of agony, I was a bit winded but enthusiastic about hiking out to the observation tower. Once in the boots and backpack, I spent a few minutes trying to memorize the meandering trail as shown on the posted sign. I didn't expect there'd be a lot of people to ask once I left the road. There were several cars in the lot which was a bit surprising, but then again this was one of the few trails not closed due to bear migrations. Beginning my assault, there was still a fair amount of snow lining the trail, but then again I was up over 8,500ft in early July. The trail was a bit sloppy in parts, but since it had a substantial gravel base, there weren't the all-out bogs I was accustomed to back home. Within the first 1,000ft I met several people heading back down, apparently realizing that a 3-mile vertical climb was more than a Sunday stroll. The wore nice white sneakers for the most part and carried no water with them, so turning back seemed the logical move. For my part, I kept a fairly brisk pace which soon had me catching up to the other hikers from the cars. As the trail coiled around the sides of the three peaks in this small range, the snows beside the trail continued to deepen and crowd in on the narrowing trail. About half-way up, the hikeable portion of the trail was reduced to a single groove trampled down by my predecessors. June in Chicago has little to do with snowpack, so we were in fairly uncharted territory here.

After an hour of slogging, I finally made the observation tower. No red carpet came rolling my way, no marching band, just a non-descript door leading to a stairwell (goodie more climbing) and a glass enclosed room equipped with various telescopes and charts. After assaulting the lone water fountain, I took a few minutes to catch my breath before heading down. Those few minutes turned into more like an hour as I felt more like sleeping than looking out the windows. Munching on assorted goodies, I was joined by a rapidly changing group of hikers, seemingly rotating every 10 minutes or so.

After finishing my nap, I took a quick tour of the telescopes and began making my way back to the bicycle. To keep my interest piqued I decided to count the steps to took to hike back to the road. Such passes for entertainment to the solo hiker. The route was a little bit less challenging on the return trip and after about an hour and 3.650 steps I was back to the bike. I reloaded the bike and descended my way back

to Tower Junction. Back in 1992 I remember the road being a little rough in this stretch and things hadn't gotten a whole lot better in the intervening period. My hands got quite a workout pumping the brakes but this was sure better than legging out another long climb. The store at Tower Junction was closed when I got back there, but I had thought ahead and planned on dining my way through another freeze-dried meal, No ice-cream tonight, but maybe tomorrow.

The hiker/biker site was deserted as I pushed my way up the steep incline up to the campground. I recalled being here in 1992 and finding this place packed with vacationers, so this was a nice change of pace. Two other cyclists joined me soon and mentioned that the hiker/biker sites never close. Not that they needed to since the sites were basically a bald knob of ground we all claimed as our own.

Fixing dinner in silence, I thought of how truly wonderful this park is, provided you're at least somewhat interested in geothermal activity. There's hot water everywhere. Last time thru I was staying at the Madison campground and some fellow cyclists and I found a small thermal spring beside the Yellowstone River and we used it as our own natural hot tub.

I spent about an hour gathering a substantial pile of firewood which was soon ablaze near the tent. The night's still got pretty cool which made the warmth of the fire all the more pleasant. I caught up on my journal by the fireside light and soon the howls of coyotes (or were they wolves) signaled the end to another perfect day. The Beartooth Highway was now only a day away and I could hardly wait.

Day 34
45 Miles

Finally left Tower Junction around 11am after taking a good hour or so to photograph Tower Falls in greater detail. By getting up and rolling early, I beat all the other tourists to the falls and watched the sunrise create a memorable rainbow. After clicking away almost a full roll of film, I returned to the camp store and indulged in a last pint of Wilcoxson's icecream before moving on.

The twenty miles to the northeast entrance/exit of the park went fairly well. Despite the constant uphill grade, I still averaged a little over 10mph. I rolled thru the town of Cooke City, just beyond the park border proper and settled in for a bit of lunch and relaxation. Spying a rather boisterous crowd also lounging at a roadside patio, I took a seat near them and quickly learned they were high school students from the Midwest out on a geological survey of the park. Their fresh outlook was quite entertaining as I whittled down a reuben sandwich and a cup of soup. The soup was particularly welcome as the temps stayed in the high 60's for most of the days climbing. Knowing a big climb still awaited me, I chose to linger in town a bit longer than I usually would have, filling the time with some mindless wandering thru gift shops and a prudent dinner search. Pasta was getting a little old, but my limited culinary options left few other choices at this point.

Plotting the rest of day got tricky as well. I was content to call it a day here in town, but the local campground seemed like an option that was too easy to take. The local wait staff recommended the Crazy Creek campground about 15 miles up the road, and I do mean up. This would put me in good position to summit the Beartooth in the morning.

I left Cooke City by 4pm and enjoyed the cool mountain breezes as I pulled myself up a series of climbs. My trusty guide warned that if I went the full 15 miles, then I had gone too far, so I kept eying my cycling computer to figure out where I was, and where I would ultimately be by days end. As my countdown neared zero miles, a quick scan of the horizon showed nothing but dense forest around me. At this point all I could determine was that I was still definitely below the tree line at 10,000ft. So much for following roadside advice. Spinning on, I began looking for any flat piece of real-estate to call as mine for the night when I spied the familiar green National Forest sign. Turns out Crazy Creek was 17 miles from Cooke City and not 15. Rounding error, I guess.

As I left the paved road on my way to the campground I paused at the gate and read up on the standard litany of warnings about bears, falling rocks, no swimming and food. I then happened upon a hand-written note taped to the fee box. Seems the volunteers overseeing the campground had proclaimed this a “free” weekend. My good luck continues.

Setting up camp I quickly got the pasta cooking and threw in a potato for extra texture. Hiking across the street I found the camp's namesake creek which lived up to its moniker. The creek cascaded over a steep bouldered hill causing streams to splinter in unpredictable patterns, hence the name. While finishing dinner I met an elderly gentleman in a tattered shirt and his scruffy dog. We made a bit of small talk before cutting to the nitty-gritty. Seems his dog had a bit of a foot fetish which made almost any unattended shoe or sock fair game. The next thing I knew he was handing over a damp sock and an apology. All I could do was laugh and scratch the four-legged offender behind the ear. At this point if the dog wanted to munch on my fetid socks, who was I to stop him.

There was plenty of firewood around and soon after dinner I had a great fire going. I tried to write a few lines of meaningful prose in my journal, but my thoughts were too much on tomorrow and too little on the day just passed. At this point I was about 15 miles from the “Top of the World” store and 25 from the summit of the Beartooth neither of which would be easy to get to. Calling it an early evening was the only thing I could think of to make tomorrow easier. I doused the flames and hit the sack before 9pm. Anything to save energy for tomorrow.

Day 35
65 Miles

“Jive the jive, but ride the ride”

It was hard to tell if the extra rest did me any good or not. Sure it was nice to be off my feet a few hours earlier than normal, but it took longer than usual to nod off as visions of what lay before me kept running thru my head. Hard to tell if having the experience of climbing this pass did me more harm than good. The camp was so quiet last night that the sound of my heartbeat seemed to add an audio track to the visions of climbing.

I was used to rolling and going early, but today I felt the need to cook up an extra pot of pasta to “top off the tank” I got rolling early enough I suppose, and almost immediately began to climb. “Find ‘em and Grind ‘em” seems to be a fitting motto for today as I set a 6mph pace and tried to think of more pleasant things. The cool morning air got even cooler as the climbing brought me above 9,000ft for the first time in this journey.

The pain experienced while climbing with a full load has been described a few ways, rib splitting, intense and searing to name a few, but the one I think captures the true essence of it all is “exquisite”. As in, “Gee the pain was exquisite.”

Trying to keep my spirits up and my mind on anything else. I kept scanning the roadside for interesting sights as the road undulated beneath my wheels. The snows were deeper and closer to the road the higher I climbed, the tall snow-covered pines making it all look like Christmas. As the road continued its path skyward I felt like an ant trying to climb up and out of the sugar bowl. Only the top of the heap keeps changing locations the closer I got. After about two hours of “exquisite” I finally reached some familiar turf, the home stretch towards the “Top of the World” store, the only outpost between Cooke City and Red Lodge Montana. Here the roadside snows really began to deepen with the parking lot being surrounded by three feet of the white stuff. Pulling into the store, memories harkened back to 1992 and my first visit here heading the other direction. Cresting the pass with this Dutch couple back then, making it this far was a BIG deal then, since the 8hr climb was not over. Inside the store you could find hot coffee, soup, supplies and the best stocked candy stand this side of Billings. This visit was no different, just a little

bit colder outside. Settling down for some vegetable soup and conversation with the owners, I was just glad to know there were only 10 more miles of climbing left to do.

“Top of the World”, as I learned, was much more than just a roadside store. Within the complex lies a resort (of sorts) consisting of four cabins, and a fully functional trading post. Every nook and cranny is filled with a myriad of items, pelts, skulls, jewelry, food and of course plastic souvenirs. This store had it all. Learning of my ultimate destination, the proprietor related stories of cycling expeditions that had come before me. Most not as enjoyable as mine has been (so far). Tales of cyclists ill-prepared for what the Beartooth asks of you, of negligent tour guides and of sudden inclement weather. Over the next hour I heard all the stories, or maybe just the ones they were prepared to share. They said I seemed better prepared than most, but I assured them that this was due in large part to mistakes I made the first time through. After a last can of Coke, I got back on the bike and headed out and up. Time to get this over with.

The remaining 10 miles of climbing were no different than the preceding 15, but overall I expected things the work to be much harder than it actually was. The fear of the unknown is often worse than the reality of it. While the grade I was climbing was basically unchanged, the snow definitely got deeper the higher I went. Scanning the open plateau in front of me, a chilling wind began cutting through my thermals, which added more to my overall “joy” at the moment. Donny my rain suit in hopes of cutting the wind and staying warmer, I began looking for any signs of cover, but all I could see was the snow, the drifts reaching well over six feet in sections. As the road continued to undulate skyward, the crest of the south summit seemed to be only about a mile away but my memories of the last time thru reminded me that there was something nasty up ahead. The memory proved true and the nastiness took the form of a tight series of switchbacks. Just another setback on the road to enlightenment.

Guidebooks describe the northern extremes of the Beartooth Absooka’s as “rugged, barren terrain” which just about covers it. There were large pools of water of water off both sides of the road which attracted a few fishermen who plied the shores, but these exposed pools were a sometimes thing, totally dependent on the melting runoff from the drifts. It had been warmer over the past few weeks, bringing out the shore fishermen, two weeks of cold and it’s ice-fisherman who show up. Either was I was amazed that anyone would choose these rather inhospitable environs to drop a line, but my puzzled glances were met by theirs as we both tried to figure what the other one was doing out there.

As my cycling computer continued to mark my lumbering progress in 100ths of a mile, that ‘short 10 mile sprint’ was turning into more of a case of survival of the fittest. I was definitely in better shape than when I was out in the California desert, but the chilling wind frosting my face had my willing to trade some conditioning for a 20 degrees in temperature gain. But you can’t make deals like that with Mother Nature, it’s basically a one-sided affair, she does what she wants and you have to deal with it. Some romance.

After passing the icefield, the road “organized” itself again into yet another set of switchbacks which must have looked like a jumbled garden hose from above, but riding them was certainly no treat. The signs along the route can be a bit misleading if taken at face value. From the south, once you finish coiling your way thru the switchbacks you’ll see a sign proclaiming you’re at the top of the Western Summit. This gets you all excited, the sense of accomplishment and the knowledge that it’s finally time for the long descent. That is, until you round the next corner and find the next bit of climbing to the North Summit which is another mile and 500 ft higher.

As I finished the last of my switchbacks, I met up with 3 young cyclists out for a day of climbing. As we reached the West Summit we all took a break from the saddle to have a snack. My younger compatriots proceeded to finish off their food and water, comfortable that they’d made the top. I hated to do it, but I then informed them that I’d like to take off and finish the rest of the climb. This seemed to catch the others tragically off guard. While they were busy filling their water bottles with snow, I headed away alone. There a seasonal ski lift near the summit and several skiers were busy “cutting grooves” down the few snowy runs left.

By about noon I reached the true summit and stopped to batten down the hatches before the descent. There was a major road resurfacing project going on, but fortunately today was Saturday and the work had stopped for the weekend. After a final quiet moment in the alpine air, I pushed off on the way to Red Lodge. The first mile was still fairly rough, but after that it was 27 miles of the sweetest, smoothest blacktop I had ever seen. The only trouble was keeping my hands from cramping as I had a fair death-grip on the brakes to keep the speed in check. There hadn't been any major descents so far on my journey and neither Jacob Lake, Zion or Mt. Washburn could match this ebony runway in length or condition. Heaven on two wheels.

After almost two solid hours of coasting, I rolled into Red Lodge. Over the last two years this area had slowly converted itself from a charming little hamlet nestled in the mountains to a true tourist Mecca, full of trendy shops and espresso bars. This "Yuppification" has spread across southern Montana like a brush fire in recent years, following the popularity of films such as "A River Runs Through It". Californians eager to escape the insanity of the Golden State, have flocked to Montana and gobbled up thousands of acres in the open range and turned Red Lodge and Bozeman upside down in the process. It seems the prevailing sentiment in this region is, "find something spectacular, buy it, build on it and make a buck."

I couldn't remember the last time I had so many choices when it came to getting a meal, but when all else fails, go with what you know, and what you could afford. This brought me to Bogarts. I had stopped here back in 1992 and remember choosing this place more for the name on the door than anything else. After enjoying a rare sit-down meal I spent the next hour or so taking a leisurely tour of the town, remembering what it's like to be around so many people. After a bit of poking around I decided to try something new (at least to me) an espresso bar. After enjoying an iced coffee while going over my maps to route my way back up to Billings, it was time to figure out my next move. It was a little after 4pm and the sun was a long way from setting in these parts. On any other day I would have mounted the bike and put in another 20 or 30 miles, but I wasn't expected into Billings until Monday and I had almost two days to kill. I decided to scout out the surrounding area in search of an inconspicuous place to camp, and kill some time in the process. On my way into town I noticed a municipal picnic area that might be suitable. Pulling into the deserted area the first thing I noticed were the numerous "no camping" signs basically nailed to anything vertical. I'm sure they were meant to discourage the very act I had in mind, but I tried not to think about it. For the last month I've been getting pretty "creative" when it came to finding a spot to lay my bones and tonight would be no different. Settling down to write some postcards by a fast moving stream, I was sure that no one would really mind my presence.

After another few hours of idling, I fired up the camp stove and cooked the last of my freeze dried meals and anxiously awaited the coming dusk. Some locals and tourists came and went over the final hours of daylight, but finally the sun began to fall below the mountains and this spurred me into action again. Pushing the bike through some brush, I took out the tent and sleeping bag as I kept a watchful eye for any signs of the local authorities. Within 15 minutes I was asleep, visions of Billings and a real bed dancing in my head.

Day 36
47 Miles

Morning came early as they often do out here and I quickly got my act together and rolling into town for a warming plate of biscuits and gravy in the older section of town. Following this and a short trip to another café for yet another cup of coffee and a bagel, I guess I proved you can never have too much of a good thing.

Today's destination would be Laurel Montana, a scant 45 miles to the north. Here I'd again like to take most of the day off and remain "hovering" in a holding pattern just outside of Billings proper, comfortable that I can spin into town tomorrow with renewed energy. I've earned a few easier days of riding, but the thoughts of having actual days away from the bike were suddenly pretty appealing.

From Red Lodge to Laurel the road provided a slow gradual descent, letting me test just how fit I really was. Instead of enjoying the coasting, I decided to turn this into a time-trial and attempt to get to Laurel as fast as possible. Twenty miles-per-hour was fairly easy to attain with this grade, but the real joy was in maintaining it. Pulling into Laurel a bit after noon, I had pushed out the 45 miles in a little over two hours. Not too shabby.

Looking for a suitable reward for arriving so far ahead of schedule, I coasted into an A&W restaurant in search of curly-cue fries for some reason. Well of course I'd like a frosty mug of root-beer, thanks for asking. Gazing out the window at the sparse Sunday traffic, I tried to come up with some sort of itinerary for the rest of the day. With cycling being the beginning, middle and end of my day, having only one "saddle-session" left me with a few options. Eyeing a Piggly Wiggly grocery store across the street, I decided to shop for a decent dinner entrée. I had passed a municipal campground just south of town which could provide a nice base-camp close to town. As I pulled into the parking lot and tried to find a vertical surface to lean the bike against, a guy sitting in a van nearby started asking my "the usual" litany of questions. After getting the proper 'lean' to my things, I spun around and engaged my newest fan. My inquisitor turned out to be a 40-something free spirit. Since I was getting pretty good at coming up with new twists to the way I answered the questions, I decided to turn the tables and ask him some questions. Turns out my new "friend" Jeff had ridden across America a few years ago along with 3 others, on a pair of tandem bicycles. This bit of information opened up into an hour-long conversation as we compared the various "do's and don'ts" of this form of sight-seeing. Eventually the chatter subsided and I sensed it might be a time to be on my way towards dinner, when Jeff gazed down at my size 13 shoes and asked, "So how are your feet?" I admitted that I hadn't thought much about them, but that was a good thing from my perspective. My shoes were purchased new for this trip and outside of the occasional soreness while hiking around off the bike, things there were fine. I guess "OK" wasn't a good enough answer for Jeff as he asked me to take off the shoes so he could see the insoles. Doffing my shoes as instructed, in the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly seemed a bit odd but if Jeff wanted to see insoles, who was I to stop him? Turns out that my fears were unfounded. Instead of the foot-freak I had anticipated, Jeff worked for a sporting-goods company called SuperFeet, makers of shoe insoles.

"SuperFeet are scientifically designed insoles which help to stabilize and support the foot and ankle bones leading to an increase in power transmitted to the pedal due to reduced lateral movement." Breath. While overloading me with all this information, Jeff augmented his presentation with a plastic model of the foot and ankle bones, again in the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly. I thought this would be interesting inside a shoe store, but out here this must have appeared a touch strange. After removing my "substandard" insoles, Jeff started whittling down a stock pair of SuperFeet to fit into the shells. The deal was that I'd use them for the remaining 4,000 miles of the trip and give them an honest product appraisal up my return to civilization. From "non shoe related" conversation I learned that he was fascinated with General Custer and that his next stop on the "shoe tour" was to the Bighorn Battlefield to see things first hand. I told him what I remembered from my last trip out there in 1992, confident that if this was his chosen interest, I could think of no place he should be.

Standing out in the middle of that parking lot gazing down at my feet, I was struck by how fate had again provided me with another unexpected gift. I was just going to the store for some dinner rations and somehow ended up with a pair of custom fit insoles. Finally getting around to dinner I quickly chose some fruit and a small package of sausages, returning to my bike and finally back to that campground.

For \$6 I got a plot of ground and a hot shower. There was an archery competition being held towards the rear of the field adjoining the campground and this kept my attention for a bit. Returning to the campground I performed a bit of field maintenance, cleaning the stove's fuel jet and tightening up the various nuts and bolts on the bike and tent.

Dinner wasn't all that spectacular, but augmenting with a bag of Dorito's, almost anything tastes better. Another cyclist rode up and we conversed for a bit before he returned to his training ride, leaving me the only one in the entire campground. Catching up on some reading, I spent most of the next few hours napping before officially retiring.

Day 37
46 Miles

Sometime late last night a car was driving through the campground in an erratic manner. At first I noticed the headlights flashing thru the nylon of the tent and thought it odd for what was probably 3am. Lying there in my tent it never dawned on me to get out of the tent. Only after the car squealed thru the gravel and made it back to the road and a hasty retreat did I manage to extricate myself for a look. Being sealed up in a nylon cocoon is definitely not where you want to be when these types of things happen, I figured out. Rising early to check things out, I saw just how close my late night visitor had come to my humble abode; about 10 feet. I made a promise to myself that the next time an unruly auto comes careening thru my campsite, I'll at least make an attempt to get my fanny out of the tent.

Pulling into town for some half-hearted shopping, I revisited a rock shop I had found back in 1992 and picked up some "geologic antiquities" to make the last miles to Billings even more of a challenge. The route to Billings paralleled the highway, giving me an update on current events in town via the billboards I passed. Pulling into Billings proper I stopped at a florist to pick up an arrangement for Joan, my host for this leg of the journey. Her husband Bill had passed away while I was still slogging my way thru Utah, three states and two weeks ago. I was expecting a somber mood and hoped my floral offering might brighten things a bit.

The door at Joans opened slowly and my hostess emerged with a half-hearted smile that gilded over her obvious grief. Words were hard to find for both of us, as this scene was reminiscent of my own fathers passing back in 1990. There were thousands of words spoken then, but all I can remember of those times were the silence I felt all around me. It was like the world was moving in slow motion. Every motion a choreographed step devoid of emotion. We sat in the kitchen for about an hour as I tried my best to keep her mind off the present by filling the space with tales of the journey to date. Eventually even these stories faded and we returned to silence and I let it stand. Stripping down the bike, I spent the afternoon touring around Billings as my thoughts turned to how to cut thru the silence, but from my own experience, only time could cure this ennui...

Returning a little after 4pm, Joan set out to cook a meal, her first since Bill's passing. I already felt like I was a terrible imposition on her and this meal did nothing to assuage that. I tried to help out where I could, but it was obvious to me that Joan needed to work things out at her own pace, so I did my best to stay out of her way. The simple meal was one of the best I had had since I started pedaling. Home cooking has a way of lingering in your mind longer than grub handed out over a counter.

After putting a load of dingy clothes into the wash, it was time to call it an early night. Tomorrow was another day to explore the area and hopefully restock some items on the bike.

Day 38
Did Not Ride

In the morning Joan was invited by a family friend to breakfast. She explained what I was doing there and the invitation was extended my way as well. Their spacious home was located in a newer subdivision towards the outskirts of Billings. An elegantly prepared meal awaited us as our lovely hosts filled me in on their lives before ever asking a thing about mine. This too was a lovely change of pace. Simple farmers whose holdings had been in the family for two generations, they had sublet their land and moved to more urban surroundings after an amicable settlement. Their relationship with the Briscoes had been forged when Bill and Joan had moved out to this area and owned some property near them. Over the years the friendship had endured a few moves and family additions, bringing it up to the present where they too were grieving the passing of Bill.

Joan and I finished brunch about 11am and ran some small errands on our way back into town. From there I again went exploring, finding a new bagel shop where I loaded up a dozen bagels for the next stretch of open road. Dinner this night was another simple affair and shortly after dinner I received a box of supplies from Chicago which meant that I was technically ready to get rolling again. After watching some

TV, Joan offered to take me out for icecream, a wonderful little spot that she and Bill used to frequent. I couldn't imagine what it must be like to lose such a close partner. Joan, originally from Chicago, had experienced everything Montana had to offer with Bill at her side. Now she was left alone to continue the voyage. All the places they visited together were still there, but they must look a little different a little paler when viewed through a solitary set of eyes. Sitting in her car softly moving my way thru our cones, we both silently gazed out at the dim lights of Billings and at the limitless view of the stars so prevalent tonight.

Day 39
95 Miles

Time to get moving again. Thankfully my bike supplies arrived last night after a few calls placed to Chicago and UPS here in Montana. Last night was spent rearranging my gear and trying to map out the next weeks mileage. This morning Joan had some errands to run, so she dropped me off at the local grocery store before heading out. I had run low on most of my staples by this point (pasta and candybars) and thought I'd better stock up before hitting the plains. While traversing the aisles in search of something different, I thought split peas and lentils would give my pasta a bit of a boost. I also picked up some apples as well and hoped I'd remember to eat them before the jostling ride turned them into applesauce in my bags. The walk back to Joan's home was only four blocks but it had begun to drizzle, causing me to pick up the pace. Drizzle turned to rain just as I hit the front door, but thankfully it didn't last.

While waiting for Joan to return I made sure everything on the bike was properly "plasticated" and afterwards I felt content to watch the rain fall. Joan showed up a bit later and together we began the process of goodbyes. This visit hadn't been an easy one for either of us. I had met her husband Bill only once, but his presence was still very much felt everywhere I went in Billings. I felt like I was 18 and leaving for college again, Joan loading me up with random fruit and a one-pound Hershey bar that she had developed an allergy to. Once is never enough as far as good-byes are concerned so I got about five in and with a final look back and a left-footed push, I was off and riding again.

Following state and county roads I was soon back out in the farmland. The lack of road signs or proper civilization had me a bit rattled as I just kept hoping I was always on the right road. The numerous twists and turns my route took weren't on my maps and my internal compass told me I was heading more south than east at the present, which did nothing but increase my apprehension about continuing down this route. I felt like turning back with almost every pedal stroke, but I was finally making good time on the bike and it would be a shame to reverse that. With a light mist falling and a somewhat dubious direction, the wind was at my back and I was moving at close to 15mph, about three miles faster than my norm. As the road flowed around numerous hills and low lying buttes I seemed to find myself in a large valley with a gentle downward slope. I wasn't really sure where I was heading, but I was getting there pretty fast. Popping over a small rise, I saw signs of civilization ahead and a rare road sign confirmed that I was indeed "on course". The temperature was hovering in the low 60's which was perfect for cycling. Pulling through the town of Hardin, I stopped at a small café for a sandwich and bowl of soup. The next town of Busby was today's destination and as long as the winds stayed at my back, it seemed very attainable. In three hours I had covered almost 45 miles and at this pace, I'd pull into Hardin in time for dinner.

After Hardin the route paralleled the highway heading east gradually turning south and thru the town of Crowe Agency. With the change in direction came an end to my tailwinds and I slowed accordingly. A sign denoted that I was now on the Crowe Indian Reservation which brought back memories of a day spent here with Bill Briscoe. I had just finished my ride through Yellowstone and was relaxing for a day or so before heading back to Chicago. Bill was an avid hunter and had convinced me to try my aim with a pistol. Bill drove me to the outskirts of Billings and loaded two handguns. For the better part of an hour we took turns blowing holes into the sides of a few cardboard boxes and tin cans. My performance brought a smile to Bill's face, not so much for my uncanny accuracy (or lack thereof) but more so for the effort I put into it. Coming from Kentucky, Bill had grown up around firearms and felt completely at ease having them around. Growing up in Chicago, I never had much exposure to handguns besides watching TV. Pumping off rounds into those cardboard boxes, I was struck by the destructive

power I held in my hands. It was such an easy procedure to pull that trigger, but it was perhaps that very easiness that made me feel so UN-easy. To me, I had just as much fun picking up the brass shells as I did emptying them in the first place.

Later that day we drove to Crowe Agency for their “Crowe Days” festival. Indians of all local tribes gather on the Crowe Agency land to celebrate and promote the ways of the “Lakota”. The first sight greeting us was the sea of teepees used by the participants. It was a strange sight to see all those teepees juxtaposed with new pickup trucks beside them. Old and new ways coinciding. The main event of the day centered around a large rodeo ring where each tribe presented their traditional dance in full regalia. The spectators were primarily fellow Indians divided by tribe, with a few of us “palefaces” thrown in for color. In between dances the elders took turns promoting the ways of the Lakota, stressing the respect for nature and all its creatures. The dancer’s outfits were wildly varied with the requisite beads and feathers predominantly. With all the different gyrations of their dancing, those feathers must have been fairly securely attached. During one of the dances, an eagle feather disengaged from a costume and fell softly to the earth. Following the dance, the reaction of the crowd was similar to when we see the American flag on the ground. The remorseful owner of the feather brought the plume before the counsel of elders and loudly begged the spirits for forgiveness. After a short speech reemphasizing the respect for nature, forgiveness was granted and the presentation resumed.

After taking in this dancing for an hour or so, Bill and I left the grounds and ventured out to the best-known site in the area; Bighorn Battlefield. Formally known as Custer Battlefield, the name was recently changed after the local tribal counsel correctly pointed out that battlefields are usually named to honor the victor, not the other way around. Taking a quick tour, we were treated to stirring recitation of the penultimate defeat of Custer by a park service employee. Following this, we took the scenic loop over the rolling hills found inside the park boundaries.

Two years later, the activities of that day came flooding back in an instant as I turned towards the entrance to Bighorn Battlefield. The park remained just as I remembered it. Custer was right where I had left him, but without the same local guide, this visit rang a little more hollow. I spent time at the adjoining veteran cemetery there, taking pictures of the hill blanketed in white marble tombstones. By this point it was time for dinner and I sampled some local bison on a bun.

The sight of my bike brought the usual lines of questions and responses, but it was one of the waitresses who asked the question of the day. “But are you having fun?” This caught me fairly off guard, I thought for a moment before responding that despite the long days and mechanical breakdowns, I was having the time of my life.

I got rolling on my after-dinner ride by 6:30pm. Busby was fairly impossible to reach today after I lost those tailwinds, but I was pretty rested and fed, so I planned to ride as far as I could and see where I ended up. As the sun set on another long day, this would be a day spent in retrospect. Reminiscing of friends and experiences that stay with you a lifetime.

Camping beside the road just outside Busby, I was a bit worried about the unofficial “campground” I had chosen. Technically all this land is on the reservation and camping here made me feel somewhat like an interloper. But I didn’t have the legs to push on any farther, so here I came to an uneasy rest.

Day 40
98 Miles

Thankfully I didn’t rely on Busby for breakfast. Another early morning departure had me blowing thru town only to find it fairly deserted. When riding thru these plateaus, the road is incredibly flat, but when changing elevations, the climbs can really ruin your day. Today was going to be such a day. And it was going to get hot.

Following the reservation town of Busby, the next dot on the map corresponded to the town of Lame Deer, which I immediately renamed "Lame Time" after my brief visit there. A major road resurfacing returned the only major lane in town to its earthen past. Pulling the bike into a grocery store I bought breakfast courtesy of the fine folks at Hostess who provided a fruit pie and some Ding Dongs. Settling down beneath some trees to enjoy a rare spot of shade on the plains, I watched the store proprietor come out to dust off the construction from the sidewalk and chatted me up for a bit. Being another "reservation town" there were plenty of Indians around for a weekday. Apparently work was hard to come by here so most of the unemployed simply roam the streets to pass time. While munching an apple from Billings, I checked the tread on my rear tire and found several bald patches. Good thing I picked up a foldable spare while I was back in Billings. Pulling the bike over in a deserted baseball park I stripped the bags off the bike and set about replacing the rear tire. I could immediately feel the difference once I got back out on the pavement.

Following Lame Deer I set my sights on Ashland, hopefully my lunch stop. I was secretly hoping that it would have more of the trappings of a bigger town. The heat was really starting to intensify after 10am but I was trying to push past this. Lathering on sunscreen I had my hands full cresting the smaller hills, bringing literally to a "higher plain." My mom sent me a mini-tape recorder and I tried to record some appropriately deep thoughts while climbing, but when I stopped for lunch all I could hear when I played it back was my deep breathing. The town of Ashland wasn't all that much different than Lame Deer, but I did happen upon another cyclist fixing a flat on the shoulder. He motioned me over for some technical advice. Bob was riding an expensive racing bicycle but quickly found that the rough roads and terrain might have made a mountain bike a better choice. His immediate problem seemed to be centered on getting the rear tire reseated on the rim. With four hands involved, he was back in business before too long. I looked around for signs of a diner but didn't find anything that seemed to match that. Bob said to keep riding to a road-side café just outside of town. He was originally from Iowa, teaching grade school here on the reservation. While he found the work stimulating, he longed to return to "civilization" as he called it. I told him that I wasn't sure how "civilized" things were back in Iowa, but at least there'd be more people around to help him fix a flat.

The diner was just where he said it would be and I got a decent burger which seemed to sooth my



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tiring legs. I would have preferred to spend the rest of the afternoon here, but I "needed" to make Broadus by nightfall and the bike didn't seem inclined to pedal itself. After Ashland, the road got hotter and steeper, with 35 miles taking me almost 5hrs to complete, but eventually I pulled into Broadus where a Dairy Queen awaited my arrival.

Taking time out to properly recuperate, I visited a fantastic local museum which was loaded with original settlers gear. Everything from wagon wheels to dinnerware from the 1950's, each given equal importance. I spoke with the curator who seemed quite a bit older than most of the items in the cases. After a quick stop at the small grocery store to reload my bags, I pushed on, stopping after hitting the 98 mile mark for the day. Tonight's residence would be a construction turn-around point. There was something about seeing several fallen trees that enticed me to call it a night here. The big fallen trees gave me somewhere to rest the bike. Cooking another solitary dinner, I watched the sun set and thought of all the wonderful sites I'd seen so far and all the magnificent road-side campgrounds.

Day 41
95 Miles

Leaving my roadside haven early enough to watch the sun gild the mountains to my left, the first goal was to locate food of course, but things didn't look too promising. Alzada, Montana appeared to be a suitable lunch stop, but there were plenty of miles in between with not much hope of a proper meal. Scrounging around in my handlebar bag I came up with an not-so gracefully aging candy and a week old

half-eaten bag of Fig Newtons left over from Yellowstone. Not the best tasting snack, since they tasted more like the bottom of the handlebar bag than anything else, but I've had worse. Yet another Montana morning greeted me as I searched the vista for signs of shade as the road ran off into the distance.

Rolling into Boyes, I was able to find some grub in the only building in town. The one structure served as a gas station, bank, post office and grocery store. I settled for two oranges, a Baby Ruth and a few cups of coffee. The back room was set up as a make-shift meeting hall for the few locals to congregate in. Complete with couches and Lazy-Boys this was definitely the place to be in Boyes. I struck up a conversation with several locals while trying to find the days motivation. Looking around the place, my first thoughts were about all the deer heads mounted on the wall. The deer were nice, but it was the two-headed calf that sort of stuck out. At first I thought this was the result of a bored taxidermist, but the locals assured me it was the real deal. Apparently these bovine abnormalities aren't all that uncommon. The proprietor has been offered more than a few bucks for this particular mount, but she's content to leave it where it's at, overlooking the candy rack.

Looking over my maps, Alzada was still a few inches away on the map, so I wrote out a few post cards and mailed them off before heading out again. The town of Hammond was next, but as I left Boyes, they warned me that it was a "small town", smaller than Boyes apparently.

When describing Alzada, Montana, I doubt if picturesque or breathtaking rush to mind. A handful of buildings nestled into a crook in the road reached out to greet me as I pulled in a bit before noon. Sizing up my options for lunch, it appeared as though I had only one, the charmingly weathered bar on the south "side" of town. The total lack of any motion in this place made it look like a real ghost town, but with newer cars. I studied the exterior of the bar for awhile, trying to determine if it was worth turning the doorknob to the place, but the distant murmur of a television held the promise of civilization, which worked for me. Throwing caution to the door, I turned that knob and make my way in.

The darkened room was lit only by the light filtering in thru thick shades and the glow of the wall-mounted television. Taking a seat near the end of the bar, I spun around on my stool, trying to capture the ambiance of the place. Nailed to every available space on the walls and ceiling, a fabulous collection of old things filled the void. Baby strollers interspersed with rusted license plates, pitchforks amongst milk pails. After a few moments, the owner walked in from the back room to take my order. A thirty-something woman with bleached white hair, excessively long fingernails and an interesting assortment of body ornamentation, partially veiled by her fishnet top. Fascinating. Ordering a burger and a few sodas to refuel for the afternoon, when she departed I resumed my tour of the objects de' Montana. Apparently being the only watering hole in the area brings in a fair amount of traffic, and with it, these objects. Looking for a bathroom, I suppose I expected it to be devoid of this "rural redecoration" but I was wrong again. The toilet was retrofitted with a rather large substantial seat-belt, keeping the occupant "safe and in position." Facing the toile was a large road sign warning of an 8-ton limit. All trips to the head should be this entertaining.

The burger arrived without fanfare and I ate quietly, my attention now drawn to the various relics that covered every open inch of the back bar. The usual rude signs and impolite sayings were there of course, but one in particular caught my eye, "Tattoo artist on Premises." It struck me funny at first, but considering that there wasn't much that this place wasn't used for, it only seemed appropriate.

A biker soon made his way through the door. From the looks of his attire, his bike took unleaded. Calling out to Carrie, the server, they conversed for a few minutes before she went into the back and retrieved a black bag. My companion took up a stool and draped his right hand across the bar towards Carrie. For her part, Carrie opened the bag and began rummaging through the contents, pulling out her "tools of the trade". For the next few minutes she checked and adjusted her equipment while continuing to converse with her living canvas. Carrie's mother (at least that's the connection I mad) came out from the back and I settled up my tab while watching the proceedings in rapt amazement. So much for privacy, not to mention sterility.

Leaving the bar in Alzada, I set my sights on finishing my Montana miles this afternoon, briefly cutting a corner of Wyoming and then making my way to South Dakota. The skies still shone a bright light,

so I got out the SPF15 sunscreen and pushed off. By 2pm I was officially in South Dakota, my 6th state, with only 13 more to go by my count. Belle Fourche claimed to be the geographical center of these United States, but I couldn't find out if that included Alaska and Hawaii or not. Stopping to walk a few antique stores and enjoy some rare shade, I decided to push on to Spearfish where the locals here told of having a nice municipal campground. The last 16 miles of the day passed beneath my wheels, just as had the previous 70.

Following some fairly inconsistent signs, I pulled into the campground to find it packed with fellow vacationers. Luckily I didn't need a pull-through spot. Shelling out \$8 for a shaded spot next to a babbling brook. Having more than a few hours before sunset was a relatively rare occasion recently, so I busied myself repairing my cycling gloves with some leather scraps I picked up back in Billings.

I can't say that I've ever really had a knack for sewing, but I do recall an art project back in 3rd grade. Each week we'd get to devote a few hours to arts and crafts projects. Mrs. Matz, our teacher had us design pillow covers with our names written in cursive. Most kids had relatively short last names, so they knocked out this project in about a day or so, but my best friend Dave and I were in for the long haul. He with "Kostelancik" and I with "Chalabala".

While struggling to put the needle through the leather and not my hand, a guy walked up and introduced himself. Jim couldn't help but ask the usual questions after seeing my unloaded gear spread across the campsite. He was a professor from Lehigh University who was leading 60 geology students through the west in search of interesting rock formations to chip away at with their little hammers. The throng of students across from my campsite bore this out. After another spell of small talk, he invited me to join their "industrial" dinner. To cook for 60 each night required firing up a large propane burner beneath a 55-gallon drum of water for the nightly stew. Tossing in fish, meat, potatoes and seemingly anything that wasn't nailed down or rotting, the dinner came together. While we ate, I exchanged stories of my travels with a variety of students who seemed to think this bearded cyclist was, "pretty cool."

I asked the ring-leader where they were heading after breaking camp tomorrow. Jim said they were heading towards Yellowstone and then a little place I probably had never heard of, Mack's Inn. I laughed and proceeded to tell them all about the place. During my first spinning vacation, I got kicked out of Yellowstone several times due to the fires there back in 1988. I ventured into Idaho for a few days now really knowing where I was going. Just over the Continental Divide I found the mountain settlements of Island Park and Mack's Inn. For the next few days, these would serve as my "home base" as I explored the area on foot and cycle, discovering several fairly remote scenic locations. I told the kids of this magnificent restaurant in Mack's Inn that served this wonderful prime rib dinner. After relating my tales, Jim confirmed not only that the restaurant still exists, but he seconded my opinion on the prime rib. This coincidence confirmed my status as a "real adventurer" with the student body and eased any doubts that existed.

After about an hour of small talk, I made my way back to my pitiful "camp" and did some more sewing before taking a shower and calling it a day. The head hung over the camp like a unwanted blanket, probably the first of many such muggy nights to follow.

Day 42
80 Miles

The morning found the camp alive with active campers, each breaking down tents simultaneously. I rolled out around 7am, in search of what else, breakfast. Today I found it in a casino in Spearfish, promoting cheap eats as a way to drag you towards their video poker machines that lined all the walls. Not much of a meal, but then again it was had for under \$2 so I didn't complain.

Today the itinerary called for a nice day of climbing in and around the Black Hills on my way to Mount Rushmore. The four heads of stone there appeared to be about 90 miles from Spearfish, but it's tough to gauge mileage with all the squiggly lines on the map. I always started the days with such high ambitions.

As I pedaled to the southern edge of town, a pickup pulled along side me, asking for and receiving “the usual”. He mentioned that if I had the time, he’d like to buy me a bagel. I’d been offered several things on this trip so far, but a bagel was something new. How could I have known that I’d come to worship those little round hockey-pucks, I’ll never know. Following him back through town I soon found out why. He was part-owner of the only bagel place in Spearfish. True to his word, I was treated to a wide assortment of bagels and muffins to fill my handlebar bags.

Finally leaving town close to 11 am, I knew I was going to pay for this little detour with every pedal stroke. Hills. My mental picture of the Black Hills showed a series of steep rolling elevations combining to form “hills”, but I was wrong again. Maybe it was all the bagels back up the road, or too much sleep last night, but I could climb worth a damn. My lunch-time destination of Lead seemed days away at the paltry pace I was setting, stomping the lowest gear while looking for any signs of shade from the blistering sun. Struggling for the better part of an hour, I finally made the Black Hills gift shop, a weak 8 miles down the road. In all the hubbub this morning, I neglected to prehydrate back at the bagel shop and this only added to my misery. I assured myself that energy-wise I was fine, but needed to get my act together to conquer these hills. After a bathroom break and a light leg massage, I was back at it. I now understood why Suzanne and Wolfgang had opted for a van instead of days riding through this terrain.

My archaic maps of the region proved totally misleading, so I resorted to using the word of tourists to describe the road conditions ahead. By all accounts it sounded steep. Making the next restaurant by about 1pm I was ready to throw in the towel on this after only 2hrs of cycling. I may quit, but not until I have a little lunch. Enjoying a large sandwich, soup and plenty of icewater I was surprised at how quickly those morning bagels left me. I felt confident that Lead *had* to be around the next corner. The proprietor mentioned that it was “real steep” for the next few miles before cresting at Lead. Laughing through my misery, I once again returned to the uphill grind. The owner had been right about the steepness leaving his place, but thankfully not the distance. After only another mile of this, I reached the summit and began a joyous descent into the mountain-side mining community of Lead. There was plenty of road construction going on, totally paralyzing the town’s main road, but at least the climbing had stopped.

The heyday for Lead was during the turn-of-the-century, as lead miners explored every slope in the Black Hills. Gold was discovered here which led to an almost fanatical obsession with blowing up the mountains to see what lay beneath. If I could use only one word to describe Lead S. D. it would be “steep”. I was fairly non-attentive during geometry back in high school and I must have misplaced my protractor back in Arizona some place, but if I had to guess at the grade of the main drag here, it was probably somewhere between 7-8%. Instead of blasting out a flatter spot to build this town, the homes and businesses were simply anchored into the mountain face. Heaven help the kid who dropped his ball “uptown”, it might roll all the way to Deadwood before finding a flat spot.

After pulling into the only grocery store I saw in the “down” town section, I picked up a simple bag of chips while pondering my next move. I really didn’t know how many miles I had left in the legs at this pace, but I’d never know while sitting idle. The road out of town was so steep that I considered walking my bike down the slope but my arms got the workout pumping the brakes. After about another half mile, the road forked, to the left lied Deadwood with its recent gambling revival, to the right was Keystone, gateway to Mt. Rushmore. While Deadwood would have definitely been closer, the plan for the day was to get to Keystone, so off I went. After an all too short stretch of level ground, a quaint sign informed me that Strawberry Hill would be just around the next bend. The days previous experiences with “hills” told me to expect the worst.

Wrapping itself tightly around a small cluster of high bluffs, the ride up Strawberry Hill was nothing short of excruciating, coming on the heels of all the other climbing this day. Had this been the first climb of the day I would have taken things with a few more grains of salt, but right now I was fresh out of salt. Cursing all the way, I crested the “hill” in just about 30 minutes of work. Resting in some shade I truly began to ponder calling it a day right here. In front of me, I could envision just the next set of serpentine climbs without the benefit of a town at the top. I knew what lay behind me and neither option seemed to bring any relief. What finally got me moving again was the thought of retracing my path back up and over Strawberry Hill should I choose to return to Lead for the night.

Spinning through lush green valleys did little to improve my outlook today since each valley came with yet another climb back out. Another 10 miles of slow progress and I was actively seeking out a campground or even a relatively desolate spot of ground to call it a night. That's when I saw a cyclist coming my way while I was resting in a shady spot on the side of the road.

Brent Sutton was just out for a training ride when he spotted my rolling entourage heading towards him. He had always dreamed of making a long distance tour as well and pumped me for as much information as I was willing to give him. His questions were mostly about my bike, what was working for me, what wasn't. My questions to him were solely about the road ahead, was it flat? His "are those panniers big enough?" was matched by my, "exactly how many more hills do I have to climb?" This banter made for an interesting exchange between two cyclists. Brent eventually picked up on my distressed state and offered me a place to crash for the night, provided I could get myself to Rapid City by nightfall. I checked my maps to make sure that I wasn't heading in the wrong direction, although anything to get me out of these hills was the way I was willing to go. Brent assured me that it was all downhill from here, so I followed his lead.

Riding with someone else for the first time out here was a great diversion. The aches and pains of the day spent climbing faded into the background as our conversations continued. Brent had gone without a shirt today and his lean physique was a bit imposing, but by this point I was no physical slouch either. True to his word, the road graciously unfurled downward from the point we met, taking us past several fishing/camping options on our way out of "the hills". Just before we entered Rapid City proper, a station wagon veered towards me (and Brent) eventually coming to rest on the shoulder up ahead of us. The late afternoon sunset made it difficult to see the couple standing on the shoulder motioning us over to their car. Brent didn't quite know what to make of all this, but I assured him that this sort of thing happens to me almost daily when folks see all the gear on my bike and me pedaling along. I promised to make this short, so we could get into town and catch a decent dinner. At least that was my plan.

Bob and June were already spewing "the usual" line of questions before our bikes came to rest, but I did my best to answer them. From their slurred speech and exaggerated arm movements, Brent and I both deduced that our new guests had spent at least the afternoon tipping a few. Conversing with these folks could be interesting, I remember thinking. While Bob was more interested in WHY I would undertake such an adventure, June was just afraid that the two of us would be hit by a passing car while we were standing there talking. You could have put a wick in their mouths and used them for an alcohol lamp. Both Brent and I were just trying to be polite in answering their questions, both of us trying our hardest to move this along at the same time. Bob's line of questions then switched to his home. He kept wanting to show us, "the most beautiful spot in America". OK fine. While his wife rambled on about passing cars, Bob kept up with this "most beautiful spot" comments. Finally, in an attempt to bring our meeting to a close, I demanded to see this "most beautiful spot" which finally ended our conversation. Either put up or shut up. "Well alright then, let's go!" Bob and June got back in their car motioning us to follow them as they straddled the shoulder at low speed. Brent and I followed, both a little apprehensive about his latest "adventure". I felt that these folks were basically harmless, but if things got too weird, we could always take off since we had the advantage of not being presently loaded. This seemed to pacify Brent and together we followed our tour guides along a short gravel road to their estate.

Abutting the Black Hills National Forest, Bob and his wife own 90 acres of pristine wilderness overlooking a deep valley, graced by a rushing stream some two hundred feet below, a wonderful place indeed. After a quick tour of his house and the deck overlooking the valley, Brent and I began to thank our hosts and be off when a slurring Bob blurted out, "This ain't SHIT. The good stuff's up the road!" Staggering out to a four-by-four, Bob got behind the wheel and motioned for us to get in. "The spot's a bit of a drive from here, so hang on!" Brent and I looked at each other for a moment, but we'd come this far, so no sense turning back yet. Bob must be able to drive in his sleep since he was just about out of it while he dodged the clear cut fields, cows and downed logs that littered the "road" to nowhere. We must have climbed about another hundred feet during this ride before arriving at our final destination. Bob threw the emergency brake on and we were almost launched out of the car. We were here, The Most Beautiful Spot in the World.

For once, a place finally lived up to its advanced billing. Leaving the four-by-four, we walked out onto an exposed promontory jutting out over a deep valley below. From here, according to Bob, we had a 270-degree view of the Greater Black Hills area. Struggling through my camera gear to find the right lens to capture this for posterity, I found this exercise only took away time better spent soaking in this rarified air. Bob estimates that he's brought a few hundred people to this point during his 30-years of ownership. Brent and I were probably the least prepared for this as we just stood and stared. Bob had carved some exposed stumps into makeshift chairs and for the next half-hour we all just sat in silence watching the sun set over this perfect spot.

Stopping back at the house for a quick soda as Bob and June refreshed their cocktails, we ended up back out on the deck which ran the entire length of the house. The deck also overlooked the valley below and we again were silenced by the setting sun. But this time, Brent and I were both too anxious to get back on the road before it got too dark. Bob was rambling on about the high eaves on his place and what a hassle it was to find any hearty souls to get up there to stain them. He apparently had some "Swedes" to do the work, but they had recent visa problems. Brent cocks his head and says, "I knew I've seen this place before." Turns out he goes rock-climbing in the valley below and his friends would comment about Bob's place each time, wondering what it was like to live amongst all this beauty. Brent mentions that he'd be willing to rappel down off the roof to get the job done, and is promptly given a business card for the good doctor.

Our impromptu visit to the doctor's estate was really something, but eventually we were able to get in our last good-byes and the two of us continued downhill to Rapid City. I'm sure glad Brent knew his way around town, since I didn't have a clue as to where we were and with the fading sunlight, this would have not been the place to be when lost. We alternated between pavement, gravel-road and trail for about 3 miles in town before reaching a little outcropping of houses near a college. Parking our bikes inside a miniscule apartment, Brent warned me to watch my step as we make our way inside. I was figuring to see the usual clothes piles and such, but the warning was really meant to keep me from falling into the hole in the kitchen floor! Just to my left there was about a three-foot wide hold in the floor, exposing the ground beneath.

Brent's apartment was what optimistic realtors would phrase as a, "fixer upper", but in actuality, it was vertical blight. There were buckets beneath the sinks to catch the water since the traps were missing on all plumbing. Not clogged, missing. The aforementioned holes in the floor added a certain amount to the musty/moldy smell about the place. Brent's sparse possessions were strewn about the floor since he really didn't have any furniture to speak of. I was quite surprised to find that he actually had to pay rent on a place like this. The better move would be to level it and start over.

After unloading our gear, we walked over to a grocery store and picked up some provisions for dinner. Since I had my camp stove we could actually cook a warm meal, a rarity for Brent since he didn't bother to have the gas hooked up on his estate. We ended up making pasta on the kitchen floor, similar to camping out indoors. After discussing bikes, destinations and the days adventures, we eventually turned in. Looking this place over before hitting the lights, I remembered back to the couch I found on the side of the mountain in Utah and how that was probably going to provide a better nights sleep than his floor here in South Dakota.

Day 43
95 Miles

The first rays of light take on an eerie glow when you've been up most of the night and still aren't sure where you are. Such was the case waking up in Brent Sutton's apartment. Sleeping on the floor was almost worse than sleeping outside; at least the ground has some give. I was still "one" with Mother Nature, given the holes in the floor and the gaping windows. Gathering the few possessions I had removed from the bike last night and getting things packed up, I was soon joined by Brent who suggested getting a final bit of "togetherness" by riding back into town for a bagel and some coffee. I don't mind roughing it

while camping, but I just assumed that having a roof over my head would be a marked improvement, and in this case it wasn't.

Weaving our way back through greater Rapid City, Brent and I picked up most of our conversations from the previous day. He was still dreaming of chasing butterflies down in Argentina (among other things) despite my logistical warnings. Frankly before trashing my wheel back in Arizona, I wouldn't have thought his voyage so imposing, but after being fairly stranded, I guess I know first-hand about what can go wrong out on the road.

The bagel place was everything I had hoped for. Brent was apparently friends with the counter staff which came in handy when it was time to settle up. As the two of us made short work of a few bagels and a slice of rhubarb pie, Brent motioned to one of his friends to come join us in the discussion of where I've been. While blabbering on, I suggested that if Brent wanted to have a taste of what it was like, he could spend the day riding with me to Mt. Rushmore. I promised to have him back before dark, but I honestly didn't see him joining in. His current occupation was making jewelry that was sold at a local market near the train station. He said he had several pieces to get done before Tuesday so I thought the prudent move would be to stay back and get working. He pondered his options for a moment before agreeing to joining me. Seems he'd been out in South Dakota for almost 4 months and had only seen the monument by car once.

The two of us were soon heading south. Leaving the route to my local "guide" I was just hoping for a few miles of flat terrain to get my legs warmed up from all the climbing I did yesterday, but no such luck. The only way to escape the Rapid City sprawl was to climb most of a mile to Route 16, which literally took my breath away. The only consolation came in the fact that I wasn't suffering alone. Brent looked as if he needed CPR as well and he wasn't even pulling any gear. The remaining 19 miles to the monument were basically more of the same; steep and steeper. Each climb had Brent and I questioning the exact moment that all this climbing would lead to a healthy descent, but it never seemed to come. By mid-morning we were almost to Keystone, entrance to the park. In all that climbing we never did reach a point where we could enjoy a noticeable coast and I was fed up. It's funny how quickly my humor leaves me during these spells. Brent wasn't fairsing much better, but at least having a riding partner gave each of us an audience for our complaints. Just north of Keystone we saw yellow signs warning of a steep descent. We were both looking forward to coasting until we realized how steep this was going to be. I started braking when I reached 37mph and Brent was ahead of me. What a ride. After all that climbing, we couldn't enjoy the lone descent entirely. Too much speed and fears of crashing took the joy out.

Blowing through the town of Keystone, a quick scan of this tourist Mecca gave us little reason to slow down. For three straight blocks the streets were lined with various enterprises, Indian crafts, souvenirs and other tacky money-making ventures engineers to separate you from your cash. Pulling into the last café we saw, Brent and I resigned ourselves to helping out the local economy by picking up a decent meal. I soon learned that Brent was 99% vegetarian; that lone 1% reserved for bison burgers. We(he) was in luck. Bison is pretty lean, so I guess he's still 99% pure.

Following lunch we remounted and climbed the remaining three miles to the park entrance. Arriving at Mt. Rushmore was more of a testament to our endurance than anything else. Surely the climb just inside the southern entrance to Yellowstone was rough, but it wasn't 16 miles long. The view from the park entrance was definitely earned. Taking in the one "generic" view of the presidents, it wasn't long before both of us were trying to find a reason to stay. The crowd was unusually thick today as they were dedicating a new building, more of our tax dollars at work. Browsing through the gift shop just long enough to get a souvenir patch and some postcards, we were soon on our way back to Keystone and then Rapid City. While today would definitely be considered a "long one", our spirits were buoyed by the thought of all those downhill miles we had accrued on our way up. Even reversing the stiff descent into Keystone didn't seem all that bad right now.

Pushing the bike at close to 18mph for the remainder of our return trip was pretty exhilarating. Brent and I kept playing "follow the leader" while enjoying the rapidly approaching scenery we had crawled past just a few hours before. By the time we reached the southern entrance to Rapid City we knew

there was still one more major descent ahead and took the opportunity to rest a bit and enjoy the clear skies ahead and the city below. Rapid City lies in the valley below and with our return, my time with Brent would come to an end. I really hadn't expected Brent to follow me up and around all the hills today and I'm sure my pace would have been much slower without him, and for that I was grateful.

Spinning back through town I offered to pick up the tab for another round of coffee and dessert if Brent picked the place. Ducking into a tiny little place called the "Cosmic Café", we took seats at the counter beside a pair of young "regulars". The place seemed to be the local hangout slightly on the seedier side of town, chess games and alternative music blaring while coffee and philosophical pearls of wisdom are being dispensed along with the bagels. The two seated next to us seemed an unlikely pair. Jeff and Tom were high school friends; Tom a half-breed Indian and Jeff, of the full-blooded American breed. Oddly it was Jeff who freely gave out his "Indian name" to those who did (or didn't) care; The One Who Waits. While I didn't necessarily agree with a lot of his viewpoints about emigration and life out on the plains, I had to concede that was a great name. Soon the subject of conversation turned to music and Jeff espoused that all his favorite musicians were either dead or dying off. Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison etc.. When I mentioned that I had been to Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris to see Jim Morrison's grave, Jeff finally gave me my due. Jeff and Tom claimed to have been "on the wagon" for some time now, but it was hard to tell since they both spoke with heavily slurred speech. Perhaps this was chemically induced, it was hard to say. Over the ramblings of Jeff, Tom fought to get in an opinion edge-wise. He was sputtering about how all his heroes were from the Bonanza television show; Hoss, Little Joe, Miss Kitty.. Brent and I were having a great time playing straight men to these two. Jeff stands up abruptly and starts taking his shirt off to show me a series of tattoos on his back. To my amazement, he had the likenesses of Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison tattooed across his shoulder blades, along with a wolf and two other faces of American Indians. This was too good an opportunity NOT to photograph, so within a minute the entire entourage was outside in the late afternoon light as I was trying to get my moving target into focus.

After the furor of 60's music and television had died down, it was time for final good-bye outside the café as Brent and I parted ways for a final time. Watching him ride away in the opposite direction, I thought back to yesterday about this same time, when I first came upon him riding towards me back in the Black Hills. I was a tired frustrated mess, riding aimlessly south and searching out any place flat to rest my weary bones. Together we met the good drunk doctor, "the most beautiful spot in the world", cooking "out" on the floor of his kitchen, the climb to Mt. Rushmore and finally discussing the finer points of Bonanza as a cultural icon. I don't know what Brent was thinking as he rode off, but this will surely be a day I'll remember.

Finding my way back to Route 44, my thought was to put a few miles in before absolute darkness. The earlier climbs had taken their toll on my legs and the sun was just started to set on this memorable day and I looked forward to the return to isolation. Stopping in a Quickie mart for a soda, I met two other cyclists who were also riding across America, but in an entirely different manner. Riding for Cancer Research, these two were part of a fully supported group of 30. By raising a certain level of donations and kicking in a little of their own, they got to experience the wonders of a "crossing" without having to carry any of the luggage I was toting around. These two were riding older 12-speed bicycles weighted down by only their handlebar bags. The group could ride 60 miles a day, any way they preferred, alone or in pairs, but no more than 60 miles. Their itinerary provided cheap motels to stay at and by dishing out tax-writeoff vouchers at restaurants and businesses they came upon, they were basically riding for free. While I admire the effort they were putting in, the "tax free" angle isn't one I had encountered before, and it struck me as sort of a scam. Ah Well.

Route 44 opened up onto a broad plain which was a joy to ride with the wind and sun to my back. I exceeded my original plan of a loose "few" miles and put in close to 40 before calling it a day just outside of Scenic, South Dakota. The name almost seemed a parody; the place was actually anything *but* scenic. Bedding down beside a barb-wire fence, I didn't bother putting the poles through the tent, merely using it as a cover for my sleeping bag. The nights still got a bit cool out here in the first weeks of June and while I could have easily gone without a tent, I still liked the protection it provided.

Munching cookies and gazing at the remains of the day fade into darkness, I kept flashing back to all the coincidences and opportunities that have presented themselves to me out here after I gave up all that I used to think was important.

Day 44
35 Miles

Awaking to a wet camp is never good. Rain wasn't a problem here, but dew was. Packing quickly and quietly I rolled thru the scenic downtown of Scenic before 8am. The three structures in town held little promise of a homecooked meal, but I tried to find one none-the-less.

I was officially in "Badlands Territory" or so the signs told me. Badlands seemed synonymous with the phrase "deserted". Literally a "no man's land". The Longhorn saloon seemed a likely spot for an evenings entertainment, it's exterior covered with steer skulls and an ominous warning to "free drinking" Indians. The craft store next door seemed to have been abandoned years ago judging from the condition of the exterior, but then again most things seem to age quicker out here in the sun. The remaining building seemed to show the only signs of life. A stripped down version of the famed "Quickie Mart" of towns past greeted the straggler with open arms. Offering gas, fishing supplies, canned goods and a fairly well-stocked candy display. Pouring myself a cup of coffee I spent the better part of the next hour learning the lay of the land around these parts from the proprietor, a crusty old gent with a decided opinion on those who lived on the nearby reservation, or "res" idents as he called them. He spoke quite openly of a shooting outside the Longhorn a few years back involving two tribe members. His "stuff happens" attitude seemed a bit cavalier considering that a death occurred there, but I guess he's seen his fair share around in these parts.

Pulling out of Scenic, the next dot on the map was another unusually named town, "Interior". The road was flat, but I could tell early on that headwinds would be enough to ruin my day. I had specifically designed my route to follow the prevailing wind patterns and up until now I had done things pretty well, so a day of headwinds was probably long overdue. Searching through my lower gears to find some relief, I was ready to try anything to make the miles roll by faster. Pulling my arms inward and ducking down helped to reduce my "profile". After about 10 seconds of this, I sat upright and laughed at myself. Somehow riding with 60lbs of gear strapped around you makes things anything but aerodynamic, so my profile being high or low probably didn't matter all that much, so I resigned myself to a slow grind today.

Arriving right "on schedule" in Interior, my first order of business was to find lunch. Braving the winds out on the plains sure worked up an appetite. The only café in town lay just off Route 44 to my right and soon I was munching my way thru a taco salad and drinking both a Coke and a shake simultaneously. Watching the sun continue to beat down on all things exposed, I rode thru the remainder of town, finding a small grocery store where I picked up dinner and some postcards and stamps. Reclining outside the store for a bit, I pondered my options and wondered just how far I could expect to go today. Maybe it was all the stressful climbing of the past few days, or the combined effects of a stiff wind and bright sunlight, but I just wasn't riding well. This would be an "off" day no matter what I did to improve my lot.

After taking a short nap and dashing off a few postcards, I decided to get back out there and try out my luck with the headwinds. Within the first 5 miles I found the solution to my problems.

Rounding a wide arc in the road I came upon a KOA campground amidst a small grove of trees. Pulling in to catch a Coke, I asked about the rates, sure that I'd be back pedaling down the road shortly. The \$15 rate for cyclists seemed a bit stiff, so I made it all the way back to the road before rethinking my position. I had been pushing myself pretty hard of late and was due for some time off the bike. Turning the Great Arc around, I negotiated the rate down to \$13 before finding a suitable site next to the biggest tree I could find. There was a pool there as well, all the better to complete my afternoon of "hooky" away from the bike. I hadn't splashed in a pool since Kanab, Utah back in May.

The rest of the afternoon was spent sewing my gloves and reading my new book "Clear and Present Danger" while munching Dorito's from the store. An afternoon well spent. Several other tourists

pulled in throughout the afternoon, providing some background noise to the otherwise quite locale. The only excitement of the day occurred when I was trying to get some reading done by the pool. While flipping the pages of Clancy's book, I was trying to ignore the noisy kids splashing in the pool when I noticed something moving out of the corner of my eye. That something turned out to be the raised head of a large snake. This was no ordinary garden variety snake, in fact it probably spent most of its time eating ordinary garden variety snakes. Slowly lowering my book I watched this head make its way towards the pool of screaming kids. It was a good four-feet in length. Being from Illinois, I had seen a few snakes in my time, but nothing the size of this one. Scanning through what little I remembered about snakes, once I saw there was no diamond on the back of her, I was at a loss for other indicators. What panicked me was that this guy was heading right for the pool. At the time there were several women sitting around in lawn chairs facing their kids in the pool, oblivious to what was slithering their way. I was now faced with a dilemma. If I yell "SNAKE!", a panic will ensue. Sure everyone's alerted, but the kids probably wouldn't have a chance to exit before the snake entered. Then there was the issue of the mothers, no telling how they'd take the news. Weighing his options carefully, our hero decides to take a bold step, he'd try to catch the snake behind the head, ala Crocodile Dundee. I swear I don't know where this act of bravado came from, but the next thing I knew I was tracking the moving fire-hose looking for a quick, clear shot at the head. Just as the snake reached the edge of the concrete border surrounding the pool, I was all set to take this heroic lunge when the big guy suddenly takes a sharp right and slithers into a large drainage pipe running right beneath the feet of the oblivious mothers! Watching the tail disappear down that pipe, the women's conversation lulled a bit as the mother closest to me offers a greeting. I was a little dumbfounded and awkwardly returned the greeting and decided then to let the women stay oblivious to what might be slithering in the drain beneath their feet. Walking to the office, I quietly informed the management of the local sighting, complete with an arm-spreading estimate of hit overall length. Luckily most snakes won't take on a cross-country cyclist, or so I told myself.

Needless to say the rest of the day and night was less exciting. It sure felt good to be off my feet for such a long stretch. If only everyday could end beside a pool. I sure haven't had many of those 50 mile days I had originally planned for back home in the coffee shop.

Day 45
135 Miles

"For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction"

After a somewhat more restful night, my first act of the day was to stare at the roof of the tent and listen. Today would be a hot one, that was a given, but it was the stillness of the air that held my attention, no wind. After meeting and succumbing to my gusty demons yesterday the calmness greeting me this morning was definitely a call to action for me. Loading as quickly as possible I rolled past the other campers who were just starting to stir.

Spinning out onto the road by 5:30am the idea was to pound out some serious miles before the wind had a chance to pick up again. The miles today were relatively easy to come by. Like a jockey trying to eke out every ounce of performance from his steed, I was coaxing my beast of burden as best I could. Concentrating my efforts on making the first town of the day by 8am, I was actually 10 minutes ahead of schedule when I rolled into Wanblee. Good thing I had a decent dinner last night as there wasn't much to this town at all. Officially I was on another Indian reservation, but this down appeared to be "sleeping in" since there wasn't a soul to be found at this point in the morning. In search of water I made two passes through town trying to find even one building open. The clinic is a part-time operation and I seemed to catch it on an "off" day. The next town on my route was White River, a mere 45 miles away. I've pulled off some pretty amazing mileage feats out here and have found the secret is to know when to push it and when to lay back. Yesterday I chose to lay back, so today I decided to push it.

An old Dodge pickup came rumbling up behind me, turning into the only other building I passed along my way, the local Co-Op. Pulling in behind him, my presence at first seemed to unnerve the driver as he proceeded to the door, but after flicking on the lights, he stuck his head out the door and motioned me inside. I explained my need for water and he pointed to a sink where I pre-hydrated and filled my bottles.

Stopping to converse with Jerry, the owner, I learned that he had once gone to Chicago with a shaman from the reservation to perform burial rights on an eagle feather found dead there. I asked what he remembered of his experiences there, hoping to learn more of the burial rights performed, but instead he shrugged and stated simply, "Water Tower Place, we went shopping." Only in America.

Wanting to keep things rolling, I bid good-bye to my Indian oasis and started pedaling again. Just outside of Wanblee I noticed my rear wheel had a bit of a wobble and coasted to the shoulder to check it out. Rolling the wheel around to the spot of the wobble, I had expected to find loose or even broken spokes, but not this; another cracked rim. The realization sent a shiver down my spine and an acidic taste of bile in the back of my throat. My initial thought was to put the bike in the ditch and start hoofing, but luckily I chose to count to ten first before taking ANY action. By 8am I was already having to assess my options. Plan A: return to Wanblee and Jerry at the Co-Op, hoping for a solution to come walking thru the door there. There's usually a Plan B, but I couldn't really focus on one that made sense. Riding back to Rapid City was probably not the way to go either. I had seen what was behind me and it didn't leave me with a lot of prospects.

Kneeling down for a second opinion on the wheel, the nausea seemed to pass quicker than back in Arizona. The rim was still cracked, but it was a small crack. Rationalizing that I was screwed if I stayed right here or 5 feet down the road, I decided to keep riding and see how far I got before the rim entirely collapsed on me. I cautiously remounted and with a few tentative pushes from my right foot, I was on my way again. It's a wonder that I didn't run straight into the culvert that first mile as I watched that rim more than the road ahead. I'm not a very religious person, but I'll admit to asking for something akin to divine intervention from whomever might be listening. There were some unnerving "pings" and "twings" as the other 35 spokes became accustomed to the lack of support from spoke 36, but all in all, for now the ship was holding together. After the first miles I began to look ahead and remembered to keep breathing. My back was covered with sweat as I guided my listing ship towards White River, still over 40 miles away.

Once I convinced myself that the wheel would hold under normal strain, I concentrated on removing all additional strain as well. At first I tried to eliminate riding on the rougher shoulder, but this soon evolved into a grand sweeping movements to avoid all cracks in the pavement as my paranoia grew. Even with all this added stress, I was still making pretty good time. Before embarking on my perilous journey, I marked both ends of the crack with my pen so I could monitor the cracks progress around the rim. Frequent stops showed that the rim was at least not visibly worse off than before, which boosted my spirits. "The Crack; Causes, Cures and Coping." Sounds like an exclusive for the 10 o'clock news. Causes? Your guess is as good as mine. With the first broken rim outside of Lake Havasu 40 days ago I could point to that sheet metal screw I rolled over and say, "This caused it". But this time there didn't seem to be any overt cause. No crash, not even a bad bump. It can't be the weight, since I've been reducing the load almost since I left California. The barren terrain I was riding past gave me plenty of time to continue the speculation.

Finally pulling into White River, I let out a huge sigh of relief as I pulled off the main highway and onto the towns "main drag". The chances of finding a total solution to my problems were slim but just being around other people again increased my odds dramatically. Pulling into the diner in town I ordered up an open-faced turkey and closed my eyes in a futile attempt to relax. The bike is like my child out here and no caring parent can rest when the "baby" is sick.

My first move to recover was to call the bike guys back in Chicago. They were as incredulous as I was about another broken rim but with a markedly different perspective. They were surrounded with viable solutions in the shop, but I was stuck in White River South Dakota carrying all I owned in 6 bags. They could build up another rim and mail it out, but it was the same issue as back in Arizona, this solution could take up to 5 days to get to me. I thanked them and told them I'd have to mull over my options some more.

While awaiting my food, a tall drink of a girl sauntered up to my booth and introduced herself. Gail ran a cattle ranch with her husband just outside of town. Both were originally from Iowa and had ridden in RAGBRAI, the annual cross-state ride held there. Noticing my rig outside, she correctly surmised

that I “wasn’t from around here” and wanted the lowdown. I gave her the Cliff-note version, ending with my current situation with the rim. She surprised me by offering more than her sympathies. If I could make it out to her ranch, she’d put me up there until the new wheel arrived from Chicago. I knew I’d find solutions in this sleepy little town and here I had one before the main course was delivered. I took town directions and let her get on her way. She said it was an open invitation, so whatever I decided to do was OK with her. My first thoughts were not unlike those of a spoiled kid; I wanted a new wheel and I wanted it NOW. I did sort of fancy the idea of staying at a working cattle ranch though.

My mind was spinning through my options so fast that I don’t remember much of lunch except that the fries were smothered in gravy. But I finally decided that my next move would be forward; instead of waiting a few days for the new wheel to arrive, I’d roll the dice again and hope my luck, and the rim, both held. I made a last call to Chicago to talk over things one last time and their thinking was similar to mine. If the wheel had held up for 50 miles without collapsing, it was probably going to be good for a few more. I just hoped that it held until I got to the next bigger town, winner, some miles away.

The waitress told me that Winner might not be large enough to support a bike shop, but it was a “big” city for these parts and there’d be people heading to the “real big” cities from there, so my chances of getting a ride to civilization were better in Winner than in White River. The use of the words “big” and “close” all become relative here, so I got my map out to see what qualified as “big” in South Dakota. Apparently that number was 5,000 inhabitants. When a crossroad attracted 5,000 Dakotans, it was termed “big”, usually by folks in towns with less than this number. The maps said it would be another 55 miles to Winner, but unfortunately my maps didn’t cover the topology, which was still including rolling hills from Rapid City. No one hill was particularly steep, but just enough to get me to change gears near the top, and once crested, change them back. Mentally conquering these rollers was becoming more of a challenge than the physical aspect of riding them. I hadn’t ridden a century since the days back in Utah, but this terrain was totally different. Back then it was accomplished just to see what it would feel like to log back-to-back 100 mile days. This time I *had* to get it done to save my skin.

Trying to put my day into perspective, I had a *hell* of a morning ride, putting in 75 before lunch. On any other day I’d be satisfied to sit out the heat of the day, but today would be different. As the sun continued to bear down, I took comfort in passing mileage markers, knowing that each one would bring me closer to my intended target; to get off the bike and get it fixed. As mid-day turned into mid-afternoon I was still cranking away. My early morning pace had slowed almost imperceptively and for awhile I thought my computer had fried in the sun, but the computer was right, I just wasn’t riding as smoothly as before. Passing a small grove of trees near the road, I pulled over for a breather. Checking the rim I was a bit shocked to find that the crack on the top of the rim near the eyelet had expanded to the point that a quarter sized hold was now exposed near the spoke. I thought my number was finally up at that point, but actually the riding seemed about the same, so there wasn’t an immediate effect. Even though broken, this was one strong rim.

The approaching dusk found me nearing my destination. At this point all I wanted was to get off the bike and that rim. I had been riding since sun-up this morning and after 13 hours and almost 130 miles from that KOA, it was time to call it a day. Cresting what would be the last rolling hill of the day, I saw the distant lights of Winner ahead. Straining the last few strokes out of my weary legs I pulled into town just as the sun made it’s last descent of the day. Passing a truck stop on the outskirts of town, I knew there’d be a place to pitch my tent in the area, so I continued into town for a much deserved meal.

For a big town, Winner seemed to roll up its streets early. The only place still opened was a Chinese restaurant with a cavernous dining area with only me as a customer. Ordering a few egg-rolls and mushu pork, I gazed out the window as the skies darkened from the west. I thought this was odd since the sun was setting from that direction, but didn’t think much of it. My thoughts were squarely on getting the tent set up somewhere and laying down, it was a very long day. Finishing my meal I headed back to the truck stop and set up camp behind a row of rigs. Just as I got the last of the bags inside the tent, the skies opened up and a thunderous storm came down. The rolling thunder did its best to keep me awake, but something about riding 135 miles in a day had me dozing in short order.

Day 46
Did Not Ride

Just as I had planned it while riding yesterday, the truck-stop had all the answers. I awoke to a stiff back and stiffer legs, but I hobbled into the café for a spot of breakfast and some information. There were plenty of young truckers around, but I sought out the table of “old timers” which seem to be a standard feature at all the truck-stops I’ve visited. These guys may not drive the open roads anymore, but they still keep a thumb on the pulse of small town America. Within 5 minutes I learned that a local businessman was heading to Sioux Falls tomorrow morning and probably wouldn’t mind a little company. By their watches, he was due to arrive in about ten minutes, so I would have the opportunity to ask him personally.

Like clockwork, ten minutes pass and in walked a burley guy with a blue jacket and matching cap. Bellowing hello’s to the old gang seemed to defy his given name, Chuck Doom. His loud roars sure did sound literally like the “voice of Doom”. I left my meal and walked over. Offering a tentative hello of my own, I asked and received permission to accompany him to “the Falls” in the morning. I then returned to the table and what was left of breakfast. Chuck suggested that I stop by the local insurance office this morning and we could work out the details. Turns out Chuck dealt in insurance and after assuring him I had coverage out here we were set. I’d take in the local culture for a day and then head to Sioux Falls and get that wheel fixed. It really couldn’t get much simpler.

Having my bike problem resolved before 8am afforded me a rare opportunity to relax with almost no obligations, save for finding a better place to camp tonight. My first order of the day was to find a Laundromat to get my gear dried out from the storms of last night. While my duds were taking a spin, I consulted the locals on where an enterprising guy could find excitement in town and was surprised to find that Winner, South Dakota, for a bigger town, did provide more entertainment than I was expecting. The movie theatre in town didn’t open until nightfall, but the library and historical museum helped to pass a few hours in the mean time. I made it back to the insurance office of Chuck Doom. I thought we were just going to discuss the drive, but this evolved into a full interview with the local reporter. A rather dignified photo session followed with me and my bike, broken rim and all. While the tales of how I had ridden from California to South Dakota were thrilling, I was more impressed with the stretch I just rode from Wanblee to Winner. Now *there* was a piece of determined riding.

Visiting one of the fast food places for some Mexican, I soon ran out of cultural high-points to visit. Finding a large shade tree by some baseball fields, I pulled out my camping pad and filled the next four hours reading, sewing up my crumbling gloves and sporadic sleep. An afternoon well spent.

By dinner time I made my way over to the grocery store and stocked up on essentials, pasta, sauce and a bag of Doritos. The chips wouldn’t make it long, but they were on sale. Now to find a place to camp. Towards the western edge of town I found a somewhat deserted grove of trees abutting a feed storage operation. Sauntering inside, I spoke with the manager and gained his permission to pitch my tent on his property. Bill the manager wanted to hear of my exploits as well and offered up the use of the company washroom as repayment, complete with shower. Such a deal. By nightfall I had polished off the pasta and most of the Doritos and while I was sorely tempted to catch a movie, I ended up calling it an early night so I could make it across the road to the truckstop and my ride to Sioux Falls in the morning. In pitching the tent I was careful to get the groundcloth inside the tent this time and make sure the bags on the bike were adequately covered. I didn’t want to wake up in a soggy mess again.

Day 47
20 Miles

All that precaution came in handy last night as the skies opened up for a second consecutive night. After the first hour of nervous panic about keeping things dried, I finally nodded off. The “Chuck Doom Shuttle to Sioux Falls” was leaving a bit after 5am and I needed to get some shut-eye. By 4am I was up and disheartened to find a light drizzle still falling. Quickly breaking camp using the light cast by a large nk

My rendezvous with Chuck was still almost an hour away, giving me enough time to dry off properly before loading in all into his truck. All these early morning starts have given me a great insight on how America starts each day. A few blurry-eyed farmers aiming their pickups through deserted streets in search of that first coffee of the day; then there's the paperboys on BMX bikes and then the gas station attendants hitting the switches, gas pumps springing to life as the walls of fluorescent lights flicker their welcome to the day. By 8am another day would be in full swing, but presently, at 4:30am in Winner, South Dakota, not even the trees were stirring.

A few passing pickups signaled the start of another daily cycles here and soon the waitress appeared and I promptly immersed myself into my first cup of coffee when Chuck sidled up. After greetings and another cup of coffee, we were off.

For the next three hours as we headed to "the Falls", I learned about Chuck's life; property appraiser, pheasant hunter, father, veteran and avid bass fisherman. With all these topics fair game, the conversation never lagged. For my part, I was a "retired" banker riding across America, pretty boring in retrospect, but I was still pretty young and hadn't accumulated much history. Just as the morning sun was started to bake the hood of the truck, we were pulling into Sioux Falls. Chuck had a 9am meeting in town, so I had him drop me off at a large sporting goods store, where I figured to start my search for a wheel builder. A hearty handshake and a tip of his cap confirmed that the good guys often don't wear capes; sometimes they drive Ford's and smoke Camels.

While my bike needs exceeded the abilities of the staff at the sporting goods shop, they were kind enough to direct me towards the heart of town where I was able to learn in short order that in Sioux Falls, there was an active "bike war" going on. Pulling into another sporting goods store in search of advice, I was directed to seek out "Pauls" even though there was a larger shop just across the street. The kid behind the counter nodded towards that shop and whispered, "they crank their spokes too tight."

Having to replace yet another rim, I was a bit worried since I didn't have a proximate cause for the break yet. The destruction of the first rim was an obvious result of hitting a screw at high speed, but since then I was pretty careful about what I chose to roll over. This "Paul" fellow seemed to be the "wheel guru" for this part of the state. Entering the store I explained my presence and was hoping he could build a wheel for me. I didn't add that I'd like it built in a few hours if possible, but he must have seen that in my eyes. He was used to building rims for European racers and carried a wide variety of pasta-thin rims, but my wider, heavier rim posed a bit of a problem. Paul suggested that I ride to the other shops and procure the rim myself (a Mavic MA-40) and he'd build it up. Backtracking to the larger bike shop, I found a suitable rim and withstood a barrage of questions about exactly *who* would be rebuilding a wheel using this rim, if it wasn't going to be them. I finally convinced them that I was going to ride 60 miles with rim in tow and have someone in Vermillion build it there.

Returning to Paul's, I was supplied with a loaner mountain bike and told to come back around 3pm or so. I was beyond ecstatic. I would be back on route by the evening and have the rest of the day to explore Sioux Falls on something more than my shoes. Over the next hours I found a few antique stores, a museum and a wonderful pizza parlor with an "all you can eat" option.

Heading back to Paul's at the prescribed time, the wheel was built and I chose to let him clean my chain and gears, the first time that's happened since Salt Lake. Stopping at yet another Laundromat to dry my things off again from last night's rainstorms, I finally made my way out of "the Falls" by about 5pm.

It seemed that within a handful of blocks I was returned to the isolation of South Dakota and I couldn't be happier. Once again I had a set of strong wheels beneath me and I was heading towards the Mississippi.

The end of the day came around 20 miles later by the side of a crumbling barn. My tour of South Dakota had been a crazy 3 days that brought me here, but after plunking down about \$100 and some aggravation, I was again back on the road.

A Friend is a Friend

*When eyes meet in silence,
A pact can be made.
A lifelong alliance,
That won't be betrayed.
Be friendly, befriend me now*

Pete Townshend

Munich 1990 – Today I learned an important lesson about the value of friendship. My best friend Dave was arriving from Ankara, Turkey to join me and my friends here in Munich for a few days of fun. I was staying about 30 miles outside of Munich and to get to the airport to pick him up required catching two trains and a bus. As I left for the first train, it started to rain and I slowed down my walking pace. Arriving at the station by 10:30am to check the posted schedule, I was horrified to find that my train had left 5 minutes ago. German efficiency. A cold shiver ran down my spine as I contemplated my next move. Waiting for the next train would delay this sequence to the point that I'd be two hours late in reaching Dave at the Hofbanhof.

I was pissed at myself for carelessly leaving later than I had originally planned. Taking action, I decided to hoof it the 4km to the next station and the next town, more so to walk off the aggravation than to get closer to Munich. Marching along in a light drizzle cleared my head somewhat and I decided that somehow this next town would hold the answer to my current problem. The next train was still 50 minutes away as I took a long tour of this short town. I passed a taxi company in my wanderings and inquired about the fee to cart my sorry bones to the airport. "\$60 American" was the reply. Thanking the girl and exiting, I resolved to wait out the next train. "\$60 is too much to spend, Dave will understand." I tried to convince myself that this was the case. Dave's been through tougher obstacles than a missed appointment. He's a diplomat for God's sake.

The more I walked around the town of Bad Aibling, the more I began to think about the lives Dave and I have shared. Few people have been fortunate enough to have a friendship like ours....

*A friend is a friend,
Nothing can change that.
Arguments, squabbles,
Can't break the contract,
That each of you makes,
To the death, to the end,
Deliver your future,
Into the hands of your friend....*

Born almost two months apart back in '64 we've known each other since we were two. Dave, the scholastic carnivore, myself the social beast; the perfect compliment. Through 12 years of schooling we were inseparable for the most part, save for a spell in high school where I preferred to float at the bottom of a bottle. It was during that time that I viewed Dave as too square, too nerdy, but I'd soon learn the error of my ways. During the college years and afterwards, we again solidified our bonds of friendship...

Outsiders, relatives and others often marvel at our ability to interact, jointly recalling events 10 and 20 years later with crystal clarity, but what they don't get is that Dave and I are a pretty formidable pair.

The longer I walked and thought about it, the more I realized that \$60 wasn't too much to spend after all, so I hired out the last cab in Bad Aibling and began the 45 minute trip to the airport. As I rode, the conversation with the cabbie was non-existent which gave me an opportunity to ponder the phrase, "the value of friendship."

People often evaluate their friendships in monetary terms. I think dollar signs are too often attached for the wrong reasons. Someone can become an instant “friend” if they provide a service, a job, a good price or some free tickets to the show, but these feelings fads with time and focus. “Friend” is bantered around all too frequently these days. The guy next to you is a ‘friend’ if he buys the next round.

During my first trip to Europe I was surprised to learn that many Europeans have only five or six friends their entire lives, compared to American’s who can make friends on the way thru the check-out lines. I think the Europeans are one up on us here and get a kick out of folks who claim to have several “best” friends that they share. I’m lucky to have one, and if nurtured well, one is all you need.

Friends don’t need to have their value proven over time. The fact that they’ve remained your friends over time is enough. The relationship can’t be part of some bigger deal, it’s unique. Just knowing your friends are out there lets you sleep a little easier on those bumpy nights.

*A promise is a promise,
A handshake will seal it.
No amount of discussion
Can ever repeal it.
Commitment forever,
To borrow or lend,
Deliver your future,
Into the hands of your friend...*

I thought about these lyrics and friendship on that ride to the airport. For a brief moment I considered the value of the friendship to be less than the \$60 in my pocket. If married life for either of us could be as fulfilling as our friendship has been, we’ll be truly lucky indeed.

Day 48
92 Miles

Riding into the first town on today’s route, Worthing, I found the only store in town would be the only one I’d need. Coffee and plenty of it. Throw in a few cookies and a Hostess fruit pie and I was good to go. I planned to ride south to Vermillion today, where South Dakota State housed a large musical instrument museum. What better way to spend an afternoon.

The rolling hills heading south did nothing to deter me from my intended goal. Arriving in Vermillion just before noon, I found that the museum didn’t even open until 1pm so I took a short pedaling tour of the campus and fell into a charming diner for lunch. Schell’s served both brats and beer in large quantities, although I was able to get them to squeeze out a few Coke’s upon request.

By 1pm I was pounding on the door of the museum. I expected to be dazzled and amazed at the variety of instruments there, but to be honest, the displays left me a little disappointed. With a layout similar to the Smithsonian, the Shrine to Music Museum attempted to paint the general classes of musical instruments with a broad brush. Since I was pretty heavily involved with the development of low brass instruments, I was left wanting for more detail and examples. To see the massive holdings in the research center would require an “ok” from the curator, who was currently in Elkhart, Indiana. Within 45 minutes I was back outside looking for a reason to hang around town but couldn’t find one.

I stopped for ice cream and mailed some postcards out, but by 2pm I was itching for the open road. Heading south towards the peninsula of Sioux City, I probably road for a good hour in front of strong tail wind before pulling into a bar in Burbank for yet another soft drink. The dimly lit bar didn’t offer a whole lot in the way of ambiance, but they did have the TV tuned to the opening match of the World Cup,

soccer's month-long Superbowl. The few patrons knew that this was some sort of major event in these United States but they were a little vague on the rules. Over the next hour or so I explained how the game was played and tried to impart my love of it to them, with mixed results.

Pulling back onto the road a little after 4pm I was thankful for the tailwind and made some pretty good time rolling through the few remaining towns on my way to Iowa. I was really feeling the effects of the sun today for some reason, which I chalked up to my recent one day "vacation" from the open road. Pulling off for another Coke, the guy at the Quicky Mart asked why I'd be riding out on a day like today. I replied, "for the fun of it". He responded that I must be a glutton for punishment since it was over 100 degrees out there today. No wonder it felt so hot.

Spinning into Sioux City, I found the town divided into three main sections, Sioux City South Dakota on the left, Sioux City Nebraska below that and Sioux City, Iowa straight ahead. Following a haphazard route through the side streets, I think I got lost in each of the three cities before finally making my way towards the waters of the Missouri and finally into Iowa.

Pulling into a HiVee food store to restock the panniers, I was soon rolling through my evening ride. Passing a fire house, I asked one of the guys inside if I was anywhere near my goal of seeing Route 20 today. Mentioning my recent stop at the HiVee, the firemen asked how thick my lock was. I thought this was a bit odd and when I mentioned that I generally don't even bother to lock my bike up, they stared in disbelief. Apparently this section of town is considered the poorer section of town and currently suffers from an unbelievably high crime rate. I guess I'm just lucky to have had it stolen. Either that or a 25lb bike with 45lbs of gear is just too much to consider stealing.

I made it to the far eastern edge of town just as I felt the barometer drop suddenly as a huge wall of black clouds rumbled towards me from the north. Pulling off the road in an open pasture behind an International Harvester store, I pitched a taut tent and properly "plasticated" all my gear for the impending monsoon. Once all the gear was somewhat safely stowed, I settled in a bit and got dinner going. I was hoping to have dinner finished and the gear cleaned up before the first drops hit, but it wasn't to be. I got the meal cooked in time, but just after the last forkful, the storm raged through. The rains lasted about 4 hours behind winds that blew water thru the tent walls as well as the roof. I was bailing the tent as fast as I could, but in the end I just gave up and hoped the mattress pad would float as advertised.

Day 49
70 Miles

The morning after a rainstorm hasn't been a pretty sight so far. Any gear I had in the tent was in various stages of damp, whereas anything left on the bike was remarkably dry, go figure. First stop today was another Quick Mark where I tried to take the edge off the morning with a few cups of coffee and sugar. I tried calling my friends in Chicago and Galesburg to tell them I was still on schedule for our upcoming meeting next week but no one answered either call. The farmers I sat with were all commenting on the ferocity of last night's storms which dumped an amazing six inches of rain in the area, but were even more amazed to learn that I had weathered that storm in a nylon tent.

Next stop on today's agenda was the town of Merville where I pulled into a Laundromat and gave almost all my gear a few spins in an industrial dryer while I attempted the "Bunkhouse breakfast" at the attached diner. I knew today's riding was going to be painful early one. The rolling hills of South Dakota abated as I moved towards the Missouri River, but there were still a fair amount of small rollers to overcome as I headed east. The next town was also my next stop, Correctionville. Bribing my legs with a rich ice cream sundae and another hour spent out of the intense sunlight, I was hoping for an early end to today's torture. None of the diversionary tactics I had picked up over the preceding seven weeks of this were working today, I was just sore and tired of being on the bike.

Another hour brought me to the thriving metropolis of Holstein. A definite “cow town” if ever there was one. The town was in the midst of a festival with traveling carnival rides that seemed to draw more flies than people. Another milkshake did little to improve my outlook, but sure tasted good.

The next twenty miles of the day were some of the most isolated and boring, staring out at rolling fields of corn and soybeans. I was truly riding through America’s breadbasket. Finally turning a bit south, the town of Early came in a bit late for me today but thankfully I didn’t need much, which was good because Early was a small town with little to offer me. I began to see signs for the Black Hawk Lake State Park and only *then* did I actually begin to feel like riding. I had put in a slow, grinding 70 miles today and hated every one. Maybe it was the heat or the scenery or just a lack of sleep from last night’s storms, but I could do no better today than to get off the road and lay down as quickly as possible.

The campground was a bit crowded, but I quickly found a segregated grove for “non-car camping” that suited me fine. I pitched the tent while the pasta was boiling and entertained some passing kids with tales of the open road until dusk. Non sense staying up late tonight since I was still hurting from last night.

Day 50
83 Miles

Waking up amidst all this humanity was a little unsettling, but then again just being in a campsite and not in an open field somewhere was also strange. At 6am the only other people stirring were fishermen who were up and out already. Last night had been a fairly restful one all things considered, and it was cooler than most nights recently.

A brisk 25 mile eye-opener battling cross-winds brought me to the town of Carroll, a county seat that enjoyed more amenities than most little towns out here. On the fringes of town I found a nice Greek restaurant offering a nice “all-you-can-eat” affair, but I opted to find something better down the road. After a twenty minute search yielded nothing more than more hunger, I made it back to the Greek place and enjoyed my carbo loading. The intense heat of recent days took a break for today, Fathers Day, so I was really adding the calories in hopes of having a big day in the saddle.

The HiVee supplied more candy bars and Gatorade on my way out of town. The heat wasn’t too bad, but the stiffening headwinds foretold of more storms coming as I rolled up and over the rumbling terrain in my way. Another 23 miles brought me to Jefferson, another county seat. Patronizing the first Casey’s General Store I encountered I thought another 44oz drink would revive my sagging legs but I was still looking for other options, just like back in South Dakota. I really could benefit from a day off since the winds were battering me around pretty good today. I resolved to take the afternoon off and do some laundry. The ominous dark clouds I saw up ahead did nothing but seal the deal on that.

Jefferson is known for more than just the courthouse in town. The Mahanay Memorial carillon probably gets noticed by anyone not looking directly on the ground. Rising some forty to fifty feet above the cornfields, this wonderful structure puts out the most resonant music I’ve heard in quite some time. While my duds went for a spin in the rinse cycle, I walked around this charming farm town and took in the rural sights. Friendly dogs scouting the town, happily lapping from dribbling faucets, kids begging mom for ice cream money and always the waves from strangers reinforced the Iowan hospitality.

Just as I got my clothes folded and stowed a light drizzle began to fall. Taking a few tentative pedal strokes forward, I was hoping to outrun the storms a bit. I was lucky to make it back to the Laundromat before the full deluge struck. Pulling all my gear inside to keep it dry, I spent the better part of the next hour watching an auto race on a grainy television screen. By 3pm I got rolling towards the ice cream parlor and heard a last carillon performance announcing my exit.

Finally leaving town by late afternoon, I was now following the storm east. The rain had dramatically reduced the heat and humidity making it a whole lot easier to pedal, but alas even this was not without a downside. I was riding through the cool air with such ease that I actually rode up on the backside

of the slower moving storm that had just passed me. Again I was about to get wet. Just as I felt things were really going to open up above me, I found the lovely little “train town” of Beaver, Iowa.

Seems most activity in this small enclave was centered around the train station whose greater days have long since passed. The only structure showing any signs of life as I entered town was a small bar which faced the tracks. A family walked through the door while I was outside putting the plastic bags over the panniers. Pushing the door open, the folks inside seemed a bit shocked to see me standing there. It wasn't that they hadn't seen any cyclists before, but not when the bar was supposed to be closed. I soon learned that the bar was a family affair and that the group had just returned from a long day out in the country, and not technically open for business. I offered to leave, but they decided it wouldn't hurt to open the bar up a little early.

Over the next hour while the rains pelted the bike and everything outside, I learned just how long their day had been. Car problems, bugs, rain and general overindulgence in alcohol had combined to make their overall experience pretty miserable. I tried to commiserate with their issues, but it was obvious that today's troubles weren't an isolated incident. Ken the owner related in great detail, a trip they had all taken out to California a few years back. A broken axle, followed by a three-day wait for a repair job from a “lazy fat ass” and finally Ken's determination to “punch that guy right in the mush.” This was a man who took his automobiles seriously. Finally making my way to the door my hosts told me to ride on towards the shopping hub of Boone, Iowa and look for campground signs.

Following their advice I continued east, over a few more rolling hills before finding Boone sprawled out in front of my wheel. I considered taking in yet another fast food meal, but energy didn't seem in short supply today after resting most of the afternoon. I turned south, resigning myself to another tent-side meal. The campground was supposed to be just down the road, but after another five miles of spinning I realized that I must have missed a sign somewhere. Entering the town of Luther, I sought out the first Quicky Mart for some assistance. Over another hour of conversation I learned all there was to learn about Luther, the Iowa Hawkeyes, Chevy trucks and soft pretzels, courtesy of the chatty proprietor. As he closed up for the night, he suggested I camp in the municipal park just behind the store. A covered picnic area would keep me off the damp ground and give me a solid place to fire up my campstove. We agreed to meet the next morning for some coffee and conversation.

The park was truly just behind the store and I wasted no time settling in for another night of pasta and a fitful night of sleep on a picnic table. Another 80+ mile day had brought me to the center of Iowa and the halfway point of my trip. At this juncture I think I deserve a day off the bike and hopefully tomorrow will be it. I just hope the rain holds..

Day 51
70 Miles

Waking up early, it was a very short trip to that first cup of coffee. I was rarin' to get into Des Moines for a leisurely day of shopping, so I didn't linger long in Luther.

Riding straight down Route 17, I passed through Madrid and then the town with the best name in Iowa; Zook Spur. Who was this Zook and what did the “spur” refer to? These questions would remain unanswered as the town passed quickly beneath my wheels today as I moved towards Saylorville Reservoir. I soon found a back way into greater Des Moines which avoided a ton of local traffic and I found yet another Quicky Mart where I stopped to plan my “off day”. The antique stores in Des Moines seemed to be clustered within a four block area called West Des Moines, so I headed off in that direction, intent on spending the afternoon doing something other than riding.

For a town with “West” in it's name, this down sure seemed to be located south of town. I parked the bike in the center of town and for the next few hours did nothing but hoof around. Stopping at a Hivee for lunch, I splurged on some major fixings, intent on making myself a proper lunch under the shade trees outside. Waiting out the heat of the day was top priority but the skies clouded up a bit after lunch and I set out again hoping to get in some miles while the sun was behind the clouds.

Taking a back route suggested by an elderly walker, I soon learned that shorter can mean steeper as I struggled up several short steep hills filling the south of town. Cresting what looked to be the last of the climbs, the skies turned ominous again and soon lightening could be seen in the distance. Playing it safe, I laid up in yet another Quicky Mart to wait out the impending storm. If I ever go out on another journey, I should get one of these Quicky Mart's to sponsor me. It seems my days are filled just linking these together anyway, might as well get some free drinks along the way. Pulling the rig under a large overhang, I quickly got most parts of the bike covered before grabbing the handlebar bag and walking inside. Just as I got the front door open, the storms hit, large drops hitting the steamy asphalt with a "splat". Over the next hour and two cups of coffee later, I watched things turn from humid to liquid as I caught up on my journal writing and a few postcards. For the second day in a row I was fortunate enough to have a roof overhead when the skies cut loose.

Before I left Chicago a friend asked if I'd mind sending postcards to her niece and nephew along the route. The kids are being home schooled in Kokomo, Indiana and would make a summer project of plotting out where I was riding with these postcards. Free U.S. geography class. During the first month on the road there was plenty of exciting things to include on those postcards; four National Parks, bears, bison and even the occasional road-runner. But now, riding through American's bread-basket, I was a little strapped for events worthy of inclusion. I could always tell them that South Dakota is hillier than you'd think, but it's pretty hard to describe what riding all those hills was really like. Here in the center of Iowa it was much of the same. How many different ways can you describe heat, corn and soybeans. Regardless, these kids are hearing all of it, the good the bad and the ugly.

By 4pm the rain was pretty much gone and I continued my way eastward. The road soon spread into a major thoroughfare and with it came a lot more traffic. I was soon in the midst of rush hour traffic just trying to find my way to Route 6 heading east. Pulling into an A&W for a cold mug of root beer I was ready to try almost any route that would get me out of town and away from the congestion. My stress level was really climbing as I saw none of the landmarks that showed on my map. Several roads lead to dead-ends but eventually I found "my" Route 6 and with it, the road away from this rush-hour insanity.

By 7pm I was east of Des Moines hoping to put the hassles of all those cars behind me. All told I had put in about fifty miles today but the last 10 were the toughest since the Black Hills. Blowing past the towns of Mitchelville and Colfax the road soon returned to the isolated splendor of Iowa farmland. Newton, Iowa seemed like the perfect spot to call it a night, so I bypassed a few more Casey's stores in favor of what lie ahead in Newton.

Newton had everything I was looking for, a HiVee, stores and even a bicycle shop. I stopped in at the bike shop just before they closed, but the staff didn't seem to mind. I was looking to get the newly built rear wheel retensioned if possible. The counter guys said I could bring the bike by first thing in the morning for an overall checkup. They also suggested a nice little public park about four blocks from the shop that could probably accommodate a traveler like me. Thanking them for all the advice, I sped over to the park and set up camp on yet another picnic table. Tonight the entrée was another pot of gruel, beans and pasta, under another clear night.

Day 52
84 Miles

Leaving the park I cleaned up last night's dinner and headed out by 6:30am. Retracing the route back to the town square, I cautiously knocked on the back door of the bike shop and was ushered in by the "shop rat". He said it would take about an hour to check things out, so I hoofed it around the shopping district in search of a proper breakfast. Locals seemed to be gravitating towards a small diner just off the square, a place called the "Snook Inn". Settling down with some grub, I was soon included in the morning round table discussion of local and world events, chaired by the locals. One of the participants, a 50-ish townie suggested they call the local paper and have me properly interviewed. I was all for it, but soon learned the paper was under deadline rush and couldn't spare a reporter. Oh well.

Returning to the bike shop, I talked things over with the staff for a bit before loading things up and heading out. Today would take me close to Iowa City if all went well and I was starting to get anxious about getting out of Iowa. Arizona was definitely hotter, but there wasn't all this humidity to deal with. Grinnell was the first substantial town along my route. They had a bike shop too and I thought about buying some new cycling gloves, but the place was pretty crowded so I just made a quick stop at the HiVee and kept going. Stopping in Brooklyn, more so to escape the days heat, I spent an hour window shopping while trying to cool off with some ice cream. I was riding pretty poorly today, probably due to the heat and humidity, I'm sure. Brooklyn had a bustling flag-making operation and several stores in this "Community of Flags" served as outlets to consumers.

Pedaling on, I passed Victor, Ladora and Marengo without much fanfare. The folks in Victor were all too happy to explain what having the annual RAGBRAI bicycle tour can mean to small town Iowa. After Marengo, the Amana colonies were comprised of four smaller communities clustered together along the highway, each separated by the direction you were coming from, East Amana, West, North or South. I parked the bike and took a late afternoon stroll through a few historic buildings before indulging yet again in some ice cream. Iowa City was now only about twenty miles away and I was starting to ride better. Leaving Amana I made my way south to the town of Tiffin and began searching for a place to call it a day. The last four days in the sun had done a pretty good job of sapping my strength, but I was nearing the Mississippi River so things *had* to get better from here on out.

I found a small municipal park towards the center of town, but the nearby train kept rumbling past making any sort of fitful sleep impossible. In college I lived right besides the tracks for a few years, but we had a concrete wall between us and the train that helped to deaden the sound. Needless to say the thin walls of my tent wouldn't be near enough soundproofing. Pushing further north, I found a spot with a little more exposure but a lot more silence. By this point there was about another fifteen minutes of daylight left, so I passed on a formally cooked dinner and went with some fruit I picked up along the way and a few candy bars. With the setting sun, the temperatures really dropped off and I actually had to use the sleeping bag for the first time in almost two weeks.

Day 53
70 Miles

I've found Iowa to be a state of constants; corn, soybeans, Casey's General Stores and HiVee Food marts. Crossing this state I've been left to wonder if the towns were somehow built around the stores or if it was the other way around. "Small Towns" out here translate to those without a Casey's or a HiVee.

Somewhere during the night a cold-front moved in, laying a glistening sheen of dew over everything. My sleeping bag and tent got the worst of it, both were sopping wet with chilly dew. I didn't use the poles last night to maintain a lower profile, but I don't think it would have made a difference if I had. Reloading the bike was a quick process since the tent and sleeping bag were just about all I removed last night. I was rolling down the road before 6am and hoped to find some civilization within the first miles as my legs were really fighting me this morning. The peacefulness of these early morning rides was somehow lost on me today; it was just too darned early.

The cool front also brought with it a thick layer of fog that rolled across the incredibly flat terrain. I felt almost adrift in it and had to listen closely for approaching traffic since I surely couldn't see it coming. There was a faint light about a mile up ahead and to the left, but it was still too far to tell what it was. Coming over a small rise the glow of the sign cut through the fog like a beacon calling out to all machines on the road. The traffic out this early seemed to heed the call and began turning towards it. I could make out almost all the letters of the sign and could have sworn it spelled "Heaven". At least that would explain the traffic. Coming within a few hundred feet I finally got the spelling correct; HiVee. Not exactly heaven, but out here, that was close enough.

Pulling into a rapidly filling parking lot I found a wall to lean the bike against and headed in. The cafeteria didn't open for a few minutes as I joined a crowd of farmers mulling over the day's forecast. They were predicting more of the same hot and sticky conditions I'd been riding thru for the past three weeks, so what else was new.

The meal I got in line had a tinge of Styrofoam to it, but at least it was breakfast. The conversations at this time of the day were centered on business, agriculture and machinery. Who's reaper was breaking down and how the overseas market was going to react to corn pricing in Iowa. Fairly interesting stuff actually.

Iowa City was just around the bend, so I had plenty of time to take in the sights, but perhaps too much time. Riding thru the heart of town, home to the Hawkeyes, I found a pay phone with a phone directory intact and browsed thru what this town had to offer. Jotting down a few places of note, a quick check of the time told me I was still another three hours away from the first store opening. I found a Laundromat and again dried off my duds while I killed time writing out a few more postcards. One my kit was dried off yet again, I found a park where I nodded off for another hour or so.

The campus of the University of Iowa seemed more congested than most. Locking the bike for only the fifth time, I took a leisurely stroll though town, seeking some postcards to continue my correspondence with the kids in Kokomo. A call to Chicago got me the latest updates. Hannah & Luke, the kids from Kokomo had called my mom unexpectedly. I guess I had forgotten to mention the updates I'd been sending the kids, so when they called to say they've been receiving all my postcards, my mom didn't know what they were talking about. Once she got the story straight, all was right again.

After a few hours of hitting the stores (after they opened), I grabbed lunch and kept rolling. I'd only put in about five miles to this point and the thought of seeing my friends again on the other side of the Mississippi over-rode any concerns about riding thru the noon-time sun.

Stopping by a bike shop on the outskirts of town, I finally broke down and bought a new pair of gloves. The pair I started with in California had served me well for the first thousand miles, but after that they were in steady decline. With all the humidity out here the leather on the gloves got wet and never really dried out. They were getting pretty soggy and started to tear somewhere past Montana. I tried sewing them together but it was a lost cause. The last few days I tried riding without gloves which wasn't one of the best ideas I've had out here since my palms started looking about as funky as the gloves had.

While checking out the shop's gear I was approached by a youngster (anyone younger than me is just a kid) who noticed my T-shirt promoting the U.S. Cycling Criterium, an event back home that I had helped to support. Tom related that he had ridden in the junior race last year and had it not been for the wet conditions that day, he'd have won. During the race he had gotten off the front of the pack and put the better part of a lap between himself and the competition. As he was nearing the finish line, his thoughts turned more towards the upcoming celebration than the upcoming turn and he wiped out into the many barriers I had helped to set up the day before. The thought of his body hurtling towards something I had erected gave us a bizarre common ground. Following the crash a few cyclists sped by before he could right himself and finish fourth. "I had that race won if it wasn't for that crash!", he pleaded, but I pointed out that closeness only counts in horseshoes and hand-grenades. His quizzical look let me know he didn't quite get my point.

While reloading things and checking my maps, the shop mechanic came out for a break and he offered his opinion as to why I was breaking wheels out here. He theorized road grit was getting on the brake pads and then carving into the sides of the rim when braking. He pointed to shallow grooves worn into my rims presently as proof of his point. I logged his thoughts as the "Iowa Solution" and kept moving. The guys pointed me towards a shortcut to Muscatine and the Mississippi and I soon found myself back out into the farmland on lesser traveled back roads.

Spinning into the first substantive miles of the day I thought of how fate again had brought me into contact with helpful people. Of the three shirts I have with me, only one promotes anything worthy of

the conversation we just had. I just happen to be wearing that one while I'm shopping in Iowa City where someone who actually had ridden in the race happened to work.

The meandering road soon changed from pavement to freshly oiled gravel as I now cured those bike-shop guys for leading me in this direction. My tires soon picked up an extra layer of "tread" gravel held to the rubber by the heavy oil used to reduce dust. Rocks were now freely ping-pong off the frame like popcorn. After a mile or so of this aggravating progress, the gravel once again gave way to pavement and my troubles passed as the gravel fell off.

Rolling onto the first signs of civilization, Nichols, Iowa a bustling community of 350 souls found themselves situated midway between Iowa City and the "big muddy". Nichols, Iowa had my mind thinking back to my cousin's family also named Nichols who put me up, or put up with me, for almost a week back in Salt Lake. It seems like a year since I was out there mountain biking and sucking in that clean mountain air, but a check of my journal shows that it was only last month.

Pulling into the post office in Nichols, I dashed off a quick postcard to Salt Lake and set out in search of a snack. It wasn't getting any cooler out here, but the road was beginning to tilt towards the river and the riding was getting a little easier. A Coke and a candy bar later and I was once again heading towards Muscatine with somewhat renewed vigor as I tried to focus on getting to the river, keeping my head down.

Muscatine Iowa may not be a bit older than some of the towns I've pedaled through, but it's proximity to the river gave the town an eternal quality. Located where the waters take a sharp left on their journey to New Orleans, most of the business district lies on high ground perched some forty feet above the water. North and south streets paralleling the river are relatively flat, but the road really drops off heading towards the wet stuff. I tried to take in as much of this town as I could yet still keep up with the bustling traffic. The dinner bell went off in my mind and I decided to find out what the Iowa phenomenon of a "Ready Made" burger was all about.

During the summer of 1925 an enterprising Iowan came up with the idea of a sandwich made of seasoned beef and just enough gravy "goo" to keep it from crumbing out the sides. An institution in and of itself, "Ready Mades" seem right up there with apple pie and Chevrolet in this part of the country. Taking a stool at the winding counter, I ordered up a couple of "Ready Mades" and a Green River soda. Gazing around I thought of all the restaurants back in Chicago that tried to capture the old diner atmosphere by covering the walls with old signs and souvenirs. Ready Made doesn't have to "try" to create this atmosphere, they just live in it. The décor here hasn't changed since the 1930's and it's all original. Doing a quick scan of the place on my rotating stool, the ambiance reminded me of another landmark place closer to home; White Castle.

Taking my first bite of a Ready Made, it struck me like a "sloppy joe" without the slop; a simple "Joe" if you will. "Gimme 5 Ready Made's" sounds better than, "5 Joes" I suppose, so I could see why they didn't change the name. Finishing off my dinner, I stretched out my legs for a bit before starting to cross the bridge into Illinois.

Following the access road to the bridge, I was struck by a parking sign that pointed towards the east side of the river proclaiming the existence of Illinois and warning of No Parking at any time. Ahhh Iowa. Taking a right, crossing the Mississippi took about ten minutes. I stopped for photos a few times but the skies had begun to cloud up, and the scenery wasn't all that scenic; barges and other large craft belching an acrid fog over the water.

The welcome I received in my home state was a familiar one; potholes. Over the preceding 2,100 miles there were some rough stretches of road, but nothing resembling the bomb craters of the Land of Lincoln. Avoiding about 80% of these translated into hitting 20% and I chuckled after each one. Some welcome I was receiving. Following the river north and east, the first town I encountered was Illinois City. Like numerous towns before it, this was a one-stop town and you stopped at the Quicky Mart. This all-in-one facility also held town meetings and other municipal functions, when it was open. I dug around in my

handlebar bag for enough change to pick up a soda and a Snickers bar. The proprietor, after hearing my tales, wanted to know what I thought of the different states, having seen them at 10mph. I tried to be as objective as possible, but my biases show easy enough. Watching the big hand on the clock signal 6pm, I rolled on. The skies were beginning to darken and I needed to find some shelter.

Another five miles brought me to Andelusia where trucks, boat hitches and the unmistakable funk of standing water signaled this river community. Pulling into the last Quicky Mart I saw, I stocked up on dinner supplies. Beans, peas and pasta if the rain holds. The skies were a bit more threatening as I kept heading east. The big turn south happened after Milan, so I wanted to camp somewhere close to this junction so I could ensure a decent breakfast closeby. Scanning my options as they rolled towards me, I finally hung a sharp left and camped next to an access road under a broad oak. I set up camp as inconspicuously as possible and got down to dinner. For a day that began in the fog of pre-dawn Iowa City, making it back to Illinois meant a long day in the saddle. Just as the water began to boil, the rains came.

Ducking inside the tent, I relocated everything inside closer to the opening and stretched out inside. The rains picked up as I finished the last of the “gruel”. I set the dishes out in the rain to soak and made sure my gear was as “plasticated” as possible before calling it a night.

Day 54
45 Miles

The storms never seem to let up last night and a quick peek out the tent confirmed that there would be no clearing skies to greet me this morn. Packing a damp camp was miserable enough, but doing so before the dawn wasn't quite what I had envisioned last night. Again I sought out the first Quicky Mart to ponder the day ahead with a few cups of coffee. My friends Matt and Heidi Johnson were a scant 45 miles away in Galesburg, but it'd be a wet road to travel today to get there.

Finding my way to Illinois 150, I began picking up speed and the drizzle also picked up intensity to match my efforts. Bailing out in scenic Coal Valley, I came across another Ready Made shop, but went for breakfast instead of burgers this time. My body was telling me in no uncertain terms that it was time for a break from the road. Galesburg held this promise but I had to get there first. Abandoning hopes of drying out completely before getting back on the bike, I was soon back at it turning south.

The bike had been running smoothly since Sioux Falls, so the creaks and groans I was hearing weren't mechanical, those were my joints. While the rain had cooled things off a bit, the temperature was still hovering around 75 degrees. My waterproof jacket does a great job of keeping the wet out, but a lousy job of ventilating the heat away from me, so I was just as wet from sweating as I would be in the rain. Each stroke of the pedals was an ordeal today. I tried not to focus on the rain, but instead keep my head down and think of nicer things. Then a passing car would send a wall of water my way and the mindset would be ruined. Passing thru the towns of Orion and Lynn Center without so much as a big tree to hide under, I finally found refuge in the thriving metropolis of Alpha, population 815. What they may have lacked in size, they made up for in amenities, having a Quicky Mart that served Green Rivers. Alphanians didn't see that many tourists coming through and the general consensus here was that I should “wait it out” like the farmers. My take was that when you're soaking wet, you can't get any wetter, so why get all dried out if you were just going to get soaked again. Finishing my Green River, I bid my hosts a farewell and continued south. Galesburg was only another 16 miles, so I should be arriving shortly.

Galesburg, birthplace of laureate Carl Sandburg and the site of one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates is probably best known currently for their annual “Railroad Days” honoring the town's history as a train hub for several railroads. My college roommate Matt grew up a scant 17 miles away from here in Monmouth, birthplace of Wyatt Earp. During my first visit to Monmouth I noticed the Wyatt Earp ice cream parlor and made the mistake of questioning his birthplace. Matt's dad Wilbur stayed up half the

night scouring reference books trying to find the key passage and when I woke the next morning, he had all the references laid out for me. Another rule out here never doubt the local lore.

Matt and Heidi are both teachers. Matt teaches music at the consolidated high school and Heidi teaching kindergarten at the grade school. The consolidated high school is ROWVA, an acronym for five neighboring communities, Rio, Oneida, Wataga, Victoria and Altona; combined population 2,000. Since busses leave the school promptly at 2:30pm, he has to drive to a different town every day to give lessons and he's racked up some serious frequent-driver miles during his tenure there.

Arriving into greater Galesburg, I rode past a seemingly endless string of strip-malls and new housing developments. In this respect Galesburg is really no different than many towns I pass thru. Small town America meets Sam Walton. Pulling into their driveway, I was pretty relieved to put this day behind me. I've had "off" days cycling, but probably not one where I really needed to be off the bike so bad. My friends were there to greet what was left of me and I left my soggy shoes at the door. It really felt so good to be inside somewhere for an extended period. I'd been camping out since back in Billings and was really looking for a change of bedding.

Day 55

Did Not Ride

Having a few days off without much going on came as a welcome relief. Last night, after I got in a decent nap and a lot of eating, the three of us adjourned to a local watering hole to hear a jazz band performance featuring a friend of our, Tom Romer. Calling it a night around midnight, it really felt good to not have to enter a tent.

I was up with the first rays of the dawn as usual. Unloading the bike I sorted out my gear, deciding what should stay with me the rest of the journey and what could be shipped home. Another set of our college friends would be driving down from Chicago on Saturday and could take back anything I didn't need to carry. A bright sunny day greeted me as I took a walk around the block to get my joints moving again. My friends were in the process of buying their first home, so they had plenty of banking/loan questions for this retired financial analyst. I answered them as best I could, but to be honest, that part of my life seemed like years ago and at the moment they knew as much about it as I ever did.

Galesburg was preparing for their annual "Railroad Days" festival so the streets were abuzz with activity early on. Pedaling silently thru town, I did some antiquing and window shopping while Matt and Heidi met with their banker. Joining up again by mid-afternoon we drove into town and caught a late lunch before returning home to lounge some more.

The evening activity was centered around rental movies and snack food. We thought about venturing downtown for a few soda's but staying in sounded pretty good to me.

Day 56

Did Not Ride

Matt and I took a quick trip to Monmouth in the morning and ended up holding down a stool in a donut shop for about an hour. Matt's mother wanted to know all about my journeys to date which pretty much filled another hour, even with me giving the condensed version of things.

Returning to Galesburg by about noon my friends from Chicago arrived and within the hour we had all headed out to find lunch and enjoy Railroad Days. My friends Anne and Dave had a little daughter Sara who was content to ride out most of the festivities in a stroller as one-year-olds are apt to do. The festival was a congested place and a little overwhelming for me since I was used to being alone on the plains. Adjourning back to the house a few hours later, we fired up the grill and made a pile of burgers before Anne, Dave and Sara had to return to Chicago. Another quiet evening spent watching TV was again just fine by me.

Day 57
50 Miles

Leaving Matt and Heidi's today I was a lot better rested than when I arrived. Today I'd begin heading south towards the Mississippi. Just prior to departing I gave a call to my musician friend Tom who we had seen perform two nights before. He was finishing up his master's degree at Western Illinois University out in Macomb and I thought that this would make a great destination. Not too close, not too far and another night with a roof over my head.

Pedaling out of Galesburg with renewed vigor, I looked forward to catching up with Tom tonight. He was playing another festival in town, Macomb's Heritage Days and afterwards we'd have time to catch up. Riding Route 34 west, my first stop was Monmouth. Although I wasn't really hungry, I stopped for a burger anyway. Better to be stuffed than sorry. From there it was a straight shot south on Route 67 to Macomb, home of the "fighting leathernecks". My sources tell me that a leatherneck is/was a pilot who flew a plane with an open cockpit. The wind whipped on the exposed flesh of their necks accounting for the descriptive moniker.

Arriving in Macomb by mid-afternoon I rode up to Tom's apartment only to find him out practicing somewhere. His roommate was a bit shaken when he answered the door. Initially I thought that I had interrupted a moment between him and his girlfriend, but actually he had been reading a book about a killer who knocks on the door before entering to do his work. With time to kill, I stopped at a grocery store to pack up for the next week of pedaling. Returning in about an hour, I found Tom waiting for me.

Tom and I caught a quick meal before he had to perform with the Western Illinois Big Band. Tom's uncle Si was at his side as they played a solid two-hour set. Following the tear-down afterwards, we retired to a local watering hole for a few hours of conversation and libation. Stretching out on the couch a little after midnight I tried to look forward to my return to splendid isolation, but I couldn't deny it was nice to be around so many friendly and familiar faces.

Day 58
93 Miles

Morning came pretty early for both Tom and I. I was just tired but Tom was definitely the worse for wear. After groggy goodbyes I was on my own again. A leisurely 27 mile pre-breakfast cruise brought me to Rushville Illinois, the town where Tom began his teaching career. The donut shop seemed to be the local hub of activity this early in the morning, so I pulled in for a few apple-fritters and some advice. After bringing the locals up to speed on my past travels, the talk turned to my immediate direction. The original plan had me heading west until I met up with the Mississippi and then take a left down to Memphis. The locals contended that if I followed the Illinois river instead, the road would be much flatter and save me some serious saddle time.

Out of Rushville it was a short twelve miles to Beardstown, the sight of the famed "Almanac Trial" where a young attorney, one Abraham Lincoln, defended a local citizen accused of murder. The courthouse from that trial still stands exactly as it was during that time; apparently the last such courthouse still standing. It felt a little weird walking the same floors as Lincoln, but in the end it was just another wooden floor. A quick stop at the local Chamber of Commerce became a photo opportunity followed by an interview for the local paper; I was only too happy to oblige.

Following I-67 south past endless farmland took me to Bluffs, Oxford, Florence, Detroit and finally to the small enclave of Pearl. Bordering the Illinois River, Pearl could only offer a run down Quicky Mart and even this seemed closer to the town of Milton than to Pearl. By this point in the day I was just looking for a flat plot of ground to set up my tent, but the boggy culverts didn't seem too promising. Riding on another mile I came across an abandoned shed which seemed to have my name on it. I'm sure the structure was technically on someone's property but it's run down condition had me believing that it was severely neglected. In just under a hundred miles I had gone from Tom's couch in Macomb to the

beginning of what is termed “southern Illinois”. In Chicago, anything outside of the suburbs is considered “downstate”. When I went to school in centrally located Bloomington-Normal, anything south of Springfield was considered “northern Kentucky”. Now I was south of Springfield and it really was feeling like I was in another state. The heat and humidity continue to make my days a strain and make my nights like this sticky and miserable. The cool nights of Utah are looking pretty good from here.

Day 59
97 Miles

Waking up in an abandoned building was sure different as it took just a bit to remember how I had gotten there. The sweltering heat had kept me from getting more than an hour of continuous sleep all night, but I suppose I should get used to this rather than complain about it. It's been this way since I left Sioux City and it was getting a little old. To combat the heat I stripped down to my bathing suit when I got inside the tent last night. This morning I stepped out of the tent to check for signs of rain and was wondering why the morning breeze felt even better than it usually does.

Today's riding would hopefully take me south of St. Louis. My early miles weren't anything to write about and lately that too has been the course. When you don't sleep much at night, the first spin on the pedals is nothing great. The lushness of the Illinois River Valley continued to deepen the further south I got. The greenery even encroached on the paved roadway forming a shady arbor to ride through, my first shade in several days. The slow moving river to my right was diverting into several little road-side ponds. Had the water been fresher or the climate a little cooler, I'm sure that would have been nice. As it was today the ponds were stagnant and the algae-choked ponds created quite an aroma as I rolled past.

You could easily see why this low-lying area was easily reclaimed by the river in periods of flooding. Ironically it was just last year that this area suffered catastrophic flooding which left a high-water mark on surrounding structures and also added to the funk in the air.

Finally reaching the small town of Kampsville I was able to find what I needed so desperately, another Quicky Mart where I could fuel up on donuts, orange juice and chocolate milk. The milk was an interesting choice but I really had a taste for it today.

Kampsville's pride and joy was a ferry that shuttled cars and passengers across the Illinois River. My original goal for yesterday would have brought me a lot closer to this, but I just didn't have those last miles in my legs last night. I took the time to ride the free ferry both ways to see what it was like to float for the first time on this trip. The pilot just shook his head when I pushed the bike aboard on the return trip, locking the gate behind me. Apparently lots of folks do the exact same thing which can fill up the better part of 20 minutes, a major event in this part of town.

Signs promoted a local excavation for Indian remains nearby and a small museum housed the findings so far, but it wasn't opened at 8am and I really didn't want to wait around for two more hours for the lock to be opened, so I pushed on. Continuing south, I rolled past several flood damaged houses, cars and even whole towns. The sweltering heat beat down on the roadway which had me basically attached to my water-bottles for a second straight day. This struck me as ironic since last summer this area was beneath about ten to fifteen feet of water and today I could have used a long drink. Stopping by the next roadside mart I came across, I took the time to chat up some locals about the status of the recovery efforts in these parts. Stepping outside the store, June showed me the ominous high-water marks that appeared on every structure, a white chalky line that in it's silence spoke volumes. Here in the tiny hamlet of Michael, it was hard to fathom so much water arriving in town when the Illinois crested. There were plenty of photos around as well, showing the general destruction of these historic towns, but just standing on firm ground once again really drove the point home. These deep lush valleys I was riding thru today were turned into lakes and boats became the best mode of transportation. Pedaling thru a few smaller towns, I finally pulled in for lunch at the scenic river town of Grafton. There were water marks here as well, but this was a town farther along in the mending process.

The intense heat and humidity today drove me inside quickly and the thought of a prolonged afternoon ride wasn't improving my disposition. It had to be over ninety degrees out there with humidity close to that. This place came with ice cream which was helping a bit, but honestly today I could have ridden a moped better. While the lunch helped my energy levels, just spending an hour out of the sun probably helped me more. From here my next stop would be Alton, Illinois where I had been told there were antique stores, so I looked forward to my next trip inside. My friend Dan has confirmed that he'll be joining me in Memphis on the 8th of July, but he'd better be prepared for riding in the sauna.

Returning to the road at 12:30 I was again riding through the heat of the day, but there was really no choice. Resting in any one of these charming little river towns wouldn't get me to St. Louis any quicker and that's where I really wanted to be. After Grafton, the road continued to be relatively flat which came as a welcome relief from all the rolling hills back in South Dakota and Iowa. I picked up a paved cycling path that paralleled the road for a few miles, but eventually this diverted to parts unknown and I didn't want to put in any extra miles trying to get back to where I started. Riding a trail ensures there won't be any car traffic to deal with, but I'd really have to cut down on my pace as it followed a curvy route and judging by the sweat pouring off me today, I didn't have much more to lose.

Entering Alton the heavy traffic in town had me on edge mentally almost immediately. Large-scale road construction reduced town traffic to a single lane and really congested the area. To pass me, the cars had to swerve momentarily into the oncoming traffic which upset us all. I took the first exit I could and struggled up some pretty steep hills on my way to the shopping district. I was just glad to lean the bike against something and take a break. Today wasn't one of my stronger riding efforts and when you add in all the traffic and the sun was really taking a chunk out of my good nature. Browsing through several antique stores I found a large photo I just had to have, so I spent the next half hour trying to figure out a way to get it home. I stopped by the local post office and was able to get the supplies I need and by mid-afternoon I was out riding again.

I was going to try and find a shady tree for a few hours of shut eye before continuing, but with all the congestion around Alton, I just kept riding until things cooled off. East of Alton as the river road turned to follow the big curve in the Mississippi I found a steady stream of fast food outlets which offered the best kind of shade; shade with air conditioning. For the next ninety minutes I cowered in a Taco Bell, writing postcards, writing in my journal and slowly bringing my body temperature down. From here the road would continue through Granite City, East St. Louis and Belleville before returning to the isolating splendor of the open road.

Heading out again about five o'clock I tried to take advantage of the setting sun to pound out some decent miles before calling it a day. After an hour I was pretty wiped out and ducked behind a utility shed in a ball field to catch a nap. After another hour I was riding towards Belleville hoping to find an open field at the end of today's miles that would offer me a decent rest. I found another Taco Bell and found a fellow who was training to hike the Appalachian Trail. While physically strong, his plan needed a little more work, too many things that could keep him from his lofty mileage goals, rain, food and sore feet. We chatted until it was dark and I remounted for a last few spins.

Not having a headlight meant that I had to find somewhere fast. Just south of the Taco bell was some sort of a laboratory that had a beautifully manicured lawn. Pushing the bike next to a fence, I just laid out my ground cloth and called it a night. So much for formality.

Day 60
91 Miles

Waking up in my little patch of heaven I got moving early to avoid detection. My late dinner last night provided me with enough energy early on so that I somehow missed the "first stroke agony" of days past. Today I'd be heading towards Carbondale and hopefully a few days off in the near future. I've only been riding for two days since leaving Tommy's place in Macomb, but they've been two of the longest.

Riding Route 3 south, the first town of any substance was Waterloo. An orange juice and a bran muffin later I was spinning merrily on my way. I was still making some pretty good time on the flattish land near the Mississippi River as a cool morning breeze passed over the endless farmland surrounding me. The next town of note was Red Bud. I couldn't imagine what or who this town was named for, but the community proper was so small I didn't even see anyone around to ask. A steady stream of towns soon followed in succession, each about three to five miles apart. Approaching and departing each town gave me a mental break from the monotony of another broiler of a day. I was actually getting tired of sweating. Lunch and a noon-time break was spent today in the town of Chester, Illinois.

Chester bills itself as the birthplace of Popeye. Popeye's creator, Elzie Crisler (E.C.) Segar hailed from tiny Chester and taking a short tour of the storefronts it wasn't hard to find the official museum. I learned that several of the comic strip characters were based on real-life characters in town. After a short respite from the heat, I got directions to the "new" business district and headed off in search of air-conditioning.

Towards the east end of town newer housing developments covered the rolling hills and provided me a new shopping center with more than one eating option. Stopping for chicken, I began looking for a shady area to conk out for a bit until the prime tanning (or burning) hours were past. The waitress spoke of a nice covered bridge just down the road which had plenty of shade. Thanking her, I headed off not really sure how far "just down the road" would turn out to be.

Eventually I ran across the bridge and it lived up to its advanced billing, nice and shady. While scouting out the area I passed a van crammed full of cycling gear; tubes, tires, wheels and clothing. Looking around for the occupants I was surprised to find a mother and daughter team cooling off by the stream. Seems they were the official "saggers" for the father and son team who were riding a tandem bicycle across America. After a short time comparing notes, they had to leave to meet up with their quarry, leaving me to nap under a shady elm.

Spending a few hours laying down did me good. I made my way back thru town eventually and tried to find the official Popeye statue the town had recently dedicated, but the roads were way too steep for a block by block grid search. Chester is built on a high peak, so anything not technically in the geographic center of town was definitely "down" town. Reminded me a lot of Lead South Dakota. After a few half-hearted attempts, I resolved to move on, but not before another short rest.

The road out of Chester was a long steady descent along the Mississippi River past several noted fishing holes, wheat fields and then the town of Grimsby the official turn-off for Carbondale. By now it was almost 6pm. And time to end another day. Searching for some sort of campground, Lake Murphysboro held the promise of a nice peaceful night spent in a campground, a rarity of late. I left the main road and the distance to the campground was full of gravel and very steep. Reaching the gate to the campground, I found there were sites available but it wasn't closeby. Another two miles of strenuous climbing I finally made it to the campground and found a couple of guys willing to share their site with me. I set off looking for water, but found the only potentially drinkable water would come from the lake tonight. To gain access to the official "potable" water spigot, I'd have to return to the main gate, and then re-climb those last two miles again. Stripping the bike down, I made my way back to the gate and somehow pushed my way up those last two miles again but tonight I was going to have pasta. I was so wiped out that after dinner I left all my cooking gear sprawled out on the picnic table near my tent, intending to clean it up in the morning.

Somewhere in the night I heard a rustling near my tent and heard my aluminum pots being shuffled around. Sounded like the possums liked my cooking as well.

Day 61
35 Miles

The first rays of light bounced off the lake and directly onto the side of my tent, providing a surprisingly bright welcome to the day. I took some photos of the mist coming off the lake for the first hour or so and then got going. Here's hoping that all these photos look something like what I remembered when I took them. It would be sad to think that all I'd have to show for this trip was a long beard and a well-worn journal. Riding thru Murphysboro I was determined to spend the days in a "holding pattern" since I now had to time my riding to coincide with my friend Dan's Arrival down in Memphis on the 8th. Having a few days off down here isn't the best since it's so hot, but I'd rather have to find a place to stay cool than put in more hundred-mile days.

Stopping at a National Forest information booth I picked up a detailed map of the area which was a bit more than I needed, but it was all they had. Friends who had come down here to rock climb on the bluffs told me to expect fairly hilly terrain but after surviving the Black Hills, I was ready for anything. Spinning another handful of miles brought me to the college town of Carbondale, home of Southern Illinois University. I also came across a bike shop in the center of town. I recounted all my wheel problems so far and the technician just nodded with understanding. He disappeared into the back room and came out with three rims all cracked just like mine. These wheels all imploded without the large load I was carrying. His opinion is that they just don't make rims like they used to.

Lunch was spent inside a HiVee store stocking up on fruit and other staples for my visit. Carrying fruit along with me was a rarity since things get jostled pretty good in the handlebar bag. More bagels, more pasta, hotdogs and even some Gatorade. Carting all this stuff around was getting tougher too since most of my bags were pretty full most of the time. Leaving the store pretty close to noon, I made my way south, finally entering the Shawnee National Forest. While conquering the many hills in the area wasn't a whole lot of fun, it wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be.

Winding my way along a tree-lined corridor I stopped at the first campground offering shade and more importantly, showers. Breaking down the bike near the bath house I swapped out the tires and gave the bike a general "tune and lube" to clear out the accumulated gunk crossing the plains had built up. The \$11 fee seemed a bit stiff considering there were no other amenities nearby, so I spent the next few hours resting and trying to decide my next move. By late afternoon I had decided to move on. Marion was only about another hour away, so I killed the rest of the afternoon "pausing" in the shade. Several of the other campsites were filling up and I'm sure I could have shared a spot (and the fee) with them if I was so inclined, but I really just had the sense to keep moving. Having all this time on my hands was proving to be harder than I had anticipated.

Finally leaving my shade at around 6:30pm I headed out of the forest and back into the rolling hills of southern Illinois. Luckily I had fueled up before I left since the Quicky Marts were getting harder to find out here. As the last ray of the day passed overhead, I pulled into Marion and started looking around for a pasture to call home for the night. Everything close to the road was either fenced off or on a steep incline so there'd be nowhere to rest the bike even if I did get off the road. Finally coming upon the Episcopal Church of Marion and it's adjoining cemetery, I threw caution to the wind and rested the bike on the fence surrounding the property. Taking care to sleep outside the cemetery boundaries, I stretched out beneath a broad maple and called it a day. Munching on a few cookies left over from lunch and pondered the itinerary for tomorrow. Garden of the Gods looked like a good place to lace up the hiking boots for a bit, but I was hoping there'd be enough to do off the bike so I could stay put for a bit.

Day 62
30 Miles

The cemetery was probably the quietest place I've camped so far. I don't even recall a single car driving by in the night. Continuing east I ran into heavy road construction that closed off access to the road. Having to double back past the church, I found the detour to take me back north. Within a half-mile I realized that this was indeed the road less traveled since I was the only one taking this particular detour that brought me to the gates of the Marion Federal Penitentiary. I brazenly began riding up to the guard station to ask for directions when the fun began. I didn't even get within fifty feet of the guard box before a guard

came charging out, sidearm drawn. Once some harried conversation convinced him I was just a wayward cyclist and not intent on freeing any of the inmates, I was allowed to approach and get directions out of town. Jerry the guard then bent my ear for a bit talking about the famous “guests” they’re entertaining. John Gatti was the only name I can remember now. Continuing east past the construction signs I ended up pushing my bike through some muddy sections before rejoining the macadam on the other side. Within twenty minutes I was in Marion proper and having breakfast. Sunny Delight orange drink was on sale but I had to buy a gallon so I spent the next half hour trying to drink as much as I could, then fill my water bottles with the rest. With another hot day on tap, I wanted to keep nicely hydrated. After this prolonged stop I continued on to Harrisburg, the turn-off for Garden of the Gods.

The best directions I could get had me heading south from Harrisburg, past Pankyville and then taking the turn past Mitchellville for Herod. The climbing definitely picked up along with the heat and I just about ground to a halt several times this morning. Finally reaching Herod, I ducked into a small diner for a spot of lunch and a Coke to try and revive myself. I was riding like I was punch-drunk, really battling to keep the bike headed in a straight line while going so slow. I was still loaded with provisions for a few days of camping but I was once again sensing the need to get off the bike for awhile.

Leaving Herod there were a series of three still climbs, and of course the last was the hardest pull at almost 8% grade by my estimation. It took almost all my energy to keep the bike upright and moving but eventually I crested the top and was quite relieved to find the campground off to my right. Finding the first shady spot, I quickly pulled in, set up camp and found the water supply to rehydrate. Just knowing I didn’t have to load the bike up for a few days greatly lifted my spirits as I set out to find a spot to do some reading. My day was done

I spent the rest of the day just trying to stay cool, but it was tough. The high humidity made almost any movement sweat-inducing and I passed most of the afternoon alternating between reading and sleeping. By 7m I was ready to officially call it a day (or was it night?). I was beat, but there were too many hours of daylight left to make turning in a valid option, so I just sat and sweated until nightfall.

Day 63 Did Not Ride

It was nice to have the day off, but with all this heat and humidity, I wouldn’t have minded riding if I had to. I woke at my usual 5:30am but then had to convince myself to roll over and keep dozing. The campground came to life a bit after 8am with several campers beginning breakfast while other drove around the campground looking for other open sites.

I got up too and had an orange while doing more reading. I was really fortunate to have the book with me to help kill time. You can only read so many brochures and pamphlets. I was hoping for a nice overcast day for my hiking, but it was already in the mid-eighties by the time I finished that orange.

I laced up the boots and loaded the backpack with camera equipment before heading out by 9am. If I was a better cartographer I could have mapped out a more challenging route, but with the added discomfort of the stifling humidity even walking to the water pump was enough to cover me in sweat. The trail head was relatively easy to find and I soon found myself submerged in a deep lush forest. Seems I always find the path less traveled as I trounced my way through the dense overhang. After walking headfirst through a series of thick cobwebs I finally got smart and started leading with my hands in front of my head.

Within the first hour of the hike it became apparent that I was walking in a big loop so I didn’t need to be so worried about retracing my steps. The trail took me past some algae filled marshland that added a strong stench of rot and decay to the heat. It just didn’t seem like it could get much hotter out here. I paused by one of the many stagnant pools to have an apple while watching some turtles sun themselves. The amount of wildlife that appears when you approach softly is amazing. From the road-runners in

California, to the bison and bear in Wyoming, I've really learned to appreciate walking softly and keeping your eyes open.

By noon I had my recommended daily allotment of hiking. I was probably closer to heat stroke at some points since I had to keep stopping and laying down in the shade, but eventually I made it back to the tent in time to crap out again. I'm really getting old out here. By midafternoon I had recovered enough to have an apple and tried to put in some more reading, but it was tough to keep awake in all this heat. I put in a few shorter hikes down to the water pump to keep hydrated but overall I was too drained to do much else. It was really hard to have an "official" day off and only muster a hike and sleep, but I guess that's what I really needed.

Dinner tonight was more of the same, pasta and red beans, a dried out bagel and another orange. I was anxious to get back out on the road if only to further diversify my meal plan.

Day 64
73 Miles

Leaving the Garden of the Gods early my thoughts were solely on breakfast. The first 15 miles or so continued to be rather hilly but as I neared the Wabash River things began to level out again, but even this came at a price. Just when I started to notice the road flattening out, I also noted the darkening of the skies. Soon the first drops of rain began to fall. I kidded myself into thinking this would only be a short sprinkle but within a minute or two I was in a full out swale that tended to correct my earlier optimism. It was raining so bad that the road began to flood over just as I rolled into Golconda. Through the downpour I couldn't even make out the town name and thought it read "Gondola" which I thought appropriate.

Pulling into the first store that showed signs of life, I spent the better part of the next two hours trying to dry off out of the rain. The plan for the day was just to cross the border into Kentucky but that was starting to look iffy as the storm raged on.

Calling my friends back in Chicago they were all gathered for the 4th of July party, I learned that it's nice and hot there as well, but no rain. While on the phone the local storms subsided a bit and I was off again. The only place to cross the Wabash was town in the town of Brookport which seemed to be days away at this point. The Hardin Forest continued to put hills and small valleys in my way along with the heat. The biggest setback to the storms was that it slowed me down enough so that I'd have to ride thru the day during peak sun which could really drain a guy.

I made the town of Metropolis by late afternoon. I opted not to ride the three miles into downtown, supposedly the home of Superman, but instead ducked into a small diner for a spot of late lunch.

After the break I approached the bridge to Kentucky only to find that it was a steel structure bridge; providing another nerve-racking experience. It was like riding almost a mile across speed bumps, but eventually I made it onto Kentucky soil and hopefully some flatter terrain. Greater Paducah seemed to offer much; shopping, dining, laundry as I took advantage of all three. I hadn't washed my duds since back in Galesburg, so needless to say Kentucky could have smelled me coming. Having my duds in the wash freed me up to make another call to Chicago in an attempt to track down my friend Dan who was now only four days from meeting me in Memphis. He didn't make the party, but I did get to talk to some friends which greatly boosted my spirits.

After the laundry was done, I made it to a diner for a big dinner before heading east on my "nightly ride". The hectic morning and tiring afternoon had taken their toll to be sure, so instead of pounding out miles to bring me closer to the Land Between the Lakes, I found a nice secluded spot amongst some trees and called it a night.

Day 65
30 Miles

Another sleepless night. I swear I got up at least eight times to “walk the dog” and a few times just to shoo critters that saw me as a late night snack. Today was going to be a long one from the looks of things early on. Riding my first miles of the day brought me to a Quicky Mart that I called home for at least an hour in the air-conditioned splendor. The counter guy didn’t seem to mind as I spent the time writing in my journal and checking my eyelids for cracks. I really miss having a bed some times and the ability to get in out of the weather a little easier.

Today was the 4th; Independence Day. A day to celebrate our freedom from English oppression. I guess I should be thankful to our forefathers for giving me the freedom to ride this bike wherever I want today, but somehow that sentiment gets lost in all the hoopla and fireworks. I followed Route 62 all the way to Lake City, Kentucky. Entering a McDonalds for a shake and some fries I was a bit discouraged by all the car traffic streaming by me like ribbons of steel towards our common destination, the Land Between the Lakes. I just wish I could continue riding and put some real distance between here and parts south, but I needed to wait for Dan. I’ve been in a holding pattern of sorts for three days now and all this slow progress is killing me.

Entering the Land Between the Lakes junction I merged with some even more substantial traffic on the main road, called “The Trace”. Within a mile or so I came upon the first visitor center and spent the next hour planning out my path through this wooded wonderland. There were several campgrounds available, but the heavy vacation traffic made finding an open spot tough. I was hoping this area was segregated like the National parks, with designated hiker/biker sites, but that would mean reduced income for the concessionaires and that wasn’t going to happen. I was looking for solitude and the endless lines of cars passing me indicated that this would be in short supply here. I looked over the map of the area and found a few sites that might offer the solitude since they only offered “primitive” camping. On the way there I stopped off at one of the bigger camping spots for a \$2 shower, money well spent. It had been a few days since I had an official shower and now my hide was as clean as my clothes.

Finally arriving at the mostly deserted “fee” campground I learned the true meaning of remote. There was really nothing to the site at all, no fire pits, no showers, no sites really. A tight band of trailers clustered around three expansive trees hogged the only shade in the entire area. Resting the bike against one of only two open picnic tables, I spent the next two hours ungraciously flopped across the table in a futile attempt to catch up on sleep lost, but without shade this was a joke. My Thermarest was soon awash in sweat as I tried my hardest to drift off, and for while I thought it had worked. Following my nap I tried to make some sort of lunch, but the thought of yet another pasta meal just added to my frustration.

By late afternoon I was really starting to lose it out here. One of the trailerites approached and introduced herself. Sue and her family actually lived in nearby Paducah and used this remote spot as a sort of summer retreat. This struck me as nuts, but to each their own. During their “vacations” here, they return home for showers, mail and cheaper beer about every other day. This meant that while they were vacationing, they never really left town.

Having some folks to talk to made the rest of the day a lot more enjoyable. I played horseshoes, traded stories of life on the road for dinner and generally enjoyed the Kentucky hospitality. Making camp later on, I enjoyed their impromptu fireworks display shot out over the lake, before finally turning in around 10pm. It was another hot sticky night, my only comfort coming from the fact that I wasn’t suffering alone.

Day 66
80 Miles

I broke camp early to try and outrun the heat, but this was just another futile effort to avoid reality. My plan was to head to Cadiz, Kentucky, do a little antiquing and stay indoors as much as possible. I think

there's an illness called "sun sickness" and I've surely got a case of it. Too much exposure to the sun and the heat. The heat was oppressive by 8am and stayed that way throughout the day. Continuing on "the Trace" until I reached the Golden Pond junction, I thought about ducking inside the observatory there to catch the presentation, but it didn't start until 11am and I was getting tired of waiting for things to happen out here.

The road to Cadiz was filled with several large rolling hills which took a fairly concentrated effort to overcome, but by midmorning I was in Cadiz and off the bike, ready to shop. To this point most of the antiquing didn't amount to much but I kept hoping to find some truly unusual stuff to ship back home, reminding me of my summer on a bicycle.

The shopping in Cadiz kept me occupied for the next few hours but by then it was only noon and much too early to get back on the road. Finding a nice diner for lunch, I hung out with several locals who were also covering from the heat over lemonade and ice cream. By 1:30pm I traded the diner for a shaded picnic site where I spent the afternoon trying to sleep to little success. It wasn't just hot anymore, it was getting dangerously hot for me. I actually was starting to feel ill out here. Lathering on SPF 15 at every opportunity I became almost obsessed with staying out of the sun. Tough to do when you're riding across America. By late afternoon I couldn't wait around Cadiz any longer.

Getting back on the road, I made my way back to the Golden Pond junction and continued on Route 80 to the town of Aurora. Filled with golf and boating resorts, I pulled into a small general store for dinner and some more indoor moments. Downing almost two litres of soda over the next hour or so, I passed the time conversing with a shapely cashier, answering her questions about life on a bike.

Continuing on a little after 7pm I was content with the days mileage and was looking forward to a relatively peaceful night asleep somewhere, anywhere. About eight miles down the road I came upon another Quicky Mart and tried to call my friend Dan back home. Memphis was only three days away and I wanted to make double-sure we were still on schedule. I was ready for some companionship out here, if only to have someone else to suffer with. To know what riding through this broiler was really like. The plan called for Dan to rent a car in Chicago and meet me at the Holiday Inn-Graceland this coming Friday.

After my call, I stepped inside the store and poured another litre of soda into the system while waiting for the inevitable sweats to subside. While resting on a bench inside, a local came strolling in and struck up a conversation. The talk centered on "the usual" but with an interesting closure. After summing things up, he asked, "But are you havin' fun?" and after all the long day, the heat, the sleepless nights, the rain, the hills and the lonely distant miles I had put in to this point, the answer was still an instant, "yeah." I was still having the time of my life out here and that made everyone smile.

While I was adjusting things before yet another departure, the owner of the store came outside and asked where I was planning on camping tonight. I gave him a shrug and pointed up the road and said, "out there." Extending his hand I thought he wanted to shake, but instead he dropped a key into my palm. He motioned over to some trailers situated across the road. "Them's mine, the key'll get you into #5. Showers air and everything." I couldn't believe my luck. Thanking my new best friend, I rode across the street and was soon dragging my belongings inside, anxious to get the water running over my hide and sitting in the air-conditioning. Sadly the water pressure was non-existent, so a shower was out, but I did fill the tub with water and basically sat in a pool of it.

Taking a tour of the place got me nothing but depressed. This place was really a mess, but at least for a night, it was home. Almost every window was broken, carpets stained with humanity and all exposed surfaces covered with some sort of filth. It was truly hard to imagine anyone eager to rent and live in a place like this. The promise of air-conditioning also went unfulfilled when I plugged in the window unit and nothing happened. In a lot of ways staying in this trailer was just like camping out, with more room and a nastier smell than I'm accustomed to. Laying on my Thermarest for some padding, I again spent the first hour sweating. Another sleepless night ahead.

Day 67
99 Miles

The first stop of the morning was back to the QuickMart to return the keys and offer my thanks. The store didn't open until 7am and I didn't feel like waiting around, so I wrote a nice thank-you note and slipped the key under the door. From Murray it was a short little sprint to the border town of Hazel. Along the way I passed thru another great "name" town; Tobacco. Gee I wonder where that name came from.

Hazel was promoted as an "antique town", enough of a draw to get me off the bike for a bit. The heat and humidity were definitely up there, but the cloudy skies foretold of rain. Making it into town a little after 8am I spent an hour lounging on a park bench waiting for the stores to open. While browsing, the skies did in fact open up. Thankfully I had put the plastic covers on the bike so things should stay relatively dry.

I browsed around town until about 11am contemplating where I could get to by nightfall. Today's pace would be slower for sure, but there weren't that many miles to go before Memphis anymore. The passing rain storm cleared out a lot of the humidity and electrified the air just as it had back in Iowa. Finally getting riding again I spun some decent miles to make the next "antique town" of Paris, Tennessee by noon. The shops there were a little more spread out and with the resurgence of the threatening skies I sought out a Wendy's for a leisurely lunch. Over the next hour or so the rains pelted everything pretty hard, but today's storms didn't seem to linger in any one spot for too long. Reloading the bike at 2pm I headed south towards Memphis, my legs stiffening, but I kept pedaling hoping things would work themselves out over the intervening miles. By the time I reached the next major town, McKenzie, I had logged almost 45 miles and with generally flat terrain ahead of me, my speed was increasing with every pedal stroke.

I was tempted to stop at several of the small towns that passed before me, but my goal was to reach a Dairy Queen in the town of Milan, which had thought enough of their product to advertise on the billboards I kept passing. Milan would mark the 70-mile point in my day, and hopefully the end to the riding. As long as the road continued to be this flat, I could really start to make up some mileage. The DQ in Milan was just the thing for me. The counter girl looked me sort of funny when I ordered a pint of ice cream and a spoon. She said that the ice cream might melt before I got it home, but I assured her that I was "home right now" and eating in.

Leaving Milan, I continued to spin south, past Gibson, Humbolt and Gadsden. I stopped briefly in Fruitvale to buy some provisions for dinner before calling an official end to the day just outside of Bells, Tennessee. I thought about hitting a restaurant in town for a more formal dinner, but for some reason, the pasta sounded like a good option tonight.

Tonight's camp was a small stand of trees abutting a field. I had plenty of water to make dinner, clean up afterwards and to drink. The computer on the bike said I had logged almost another century. Had I made it into Bells I would have the 100-mile mark, but then I'd have to pedal backwards to catch breakfast. You always have to think of breakfast.

The stars were dimmed a bit by the street lights of Bells, but I didn't gaze for too long. It had been another long day in the saddle and I fell asleep with my water bottle still in hand.

Day 68
73 Miles

Bells for breakfast sounded better than it turned out to be. The only signs of life came from yet another Quick Mart so that's where I landed, ordering a cup of coffee, donuts and orange juice. Bells was primarily a farming community and the early morning traffic had a definite "International Harvester" feel about it. Asking about the lay of the road ahead, I learned that there would be much in the way of scenery between here and Memphis, which was a little tough to hear.

Making my way to Brownsville by 8am I wasn't that surprised to find the temps climbing again, up to 87 by the time I passed the sign at the bank. A grocery store provided a bit more fuel and I was really hoping to put off the inevitable miles just a bit longer.

The guys back in Bells were right about the terrain; regrettably. There was absolutely nothing to the small towns I passed on my way to Memphis. I had two days to ride the remaining miles, but it was clear early on that I'd be in Memphis by nightfall. There wasn't even any shade to hide beneath during the first 40 miles today. The heat and humidity were getting so bad in fact that I considered sleeping outside a closed gas station just because they had an awning out front. Rationing my water got me as far as Galloway where I ran into the only shopping district in the last fifty miles; a Pamida grocery store. Trekking inside my first thought was to buy provisions for lunch and save a few bucks by not eating out, but the cafeteria had some pretty inviting entrees, so I broke down and spent a whopping \$6 on lunch. The dining area was crowded with several regulars, workers from the nearby plants and small children who, like me, just wanted to stay out of the sun and drown themselves in soft drinks. Here too I tried to lounge as much as possible, but then I figured that today was going to be miserable anyway I took it, so it was probably better to get it over with.

Riding into Bartlett I stopped at a camera shop and had my panoramic camera looked at. The film had torn while rewinding a roll and although I held out hopes of salvaging the roll, it looked pretty bleak. From the photo shop I continued onto the outskirts of Memphis, stopping at a shopping mall to again escape the heat. I was really getting tired of the relentless sun and it was surprising the lengths I'd go to stay out of the sun.

After a short stop I continued to Memphis and got creative again. Arriving at the first park I came across, I spent the next two hours lounging in the shade of the heavily wooded area. From there I rode over to a nearby store and bought provisions for yet another dinner. While waiting out the last of the day, I passed the time by reading my book and beginning to plan out the next weeks riding with Dan.

As dusk fell, I pushed the bike into a dense stand of trees and set up my tent. It was a bit of a risk setting up camp amidst a city park, but this point I was past caring. All this riding had made me a pretty bold dude. The heat began to dissipate some with nightfall and for once I actually got a somewhat decent sleep.

Day 69

Rode a lot, didn't go anywhere

Awoke to darkened skies and quickly got my things loaded and moved to a park bench by Audebon Lake. Just like a normal visitor now and not a resident. I managed to get about three pages read before the storms came. Taking shelter beneath my bike tarp I actually managed to catch another hour's shut eye like this while the rains fell around me.

By 9am I managed to pedal over to a nearby gas station to again wait out the squalls with a cup of coffee this time. Scanning the yellow pages I tried to plan a day's worth of activities with or without clear skies. Another hour and the rains had passed, but my gear was already soaked. I filled the next few hours antiquing before finding my way over to the Holiday Inn-Graceland where I was supposed to meet my friend Dan in mid-afternoon. I patiently waited for him in the lobby until almost 4pm before a panic set in. I wasn't going to get a room only to be stood up, I was way too cheap for that. A call to Chicago cleared everything up. Dan had been delayed leaving town, so our meeting was likewise delayed. Seems he was having a pair of bike wheels built up for the trip and they weren't done yet. I was to go ahead and get the room and he'd meet me later. At this point all I wanted was a bed to lie on. The last mattress I felt was back in Galesburg.

Over the next few hours I broke down the bike in the room, did a load of laundry and had a lovely junk-food dinner while waiting for Dan to arrive, a truly non-remarkable day...

Day 70
50 Miles

Having someone else to ride with would definitely take some getting used to. A second opinion is something I had almost learned to live without. Now, for better or worse there was someone else to consider. Dan arrived late last night after a harried departure from Chicago. The wheels that were originally built for this trip were built wrong, really screwing up the itinerary. He had hoped to leave about 6am, getting to Memphis by 3pm, but the rebuilt wheels weren't ready to roll until 11am delaying things after that five hours. Thankfully I didn't wait in the lobby much past 4pm.

After his late arrival we went out to Pizza Hut for a late dinner, returned the car and repacked for our journey south. We probably hit the sack about midnight and the planned departure would come early indeed.

The first rays of light never really appeared, but we were up early anyway. This would be Dan's first prolonged tour, and although I was anxious to get back out on the road, having someone along for the ride would increase my responsibilities as well. I had been riding for over 3,700 miles to this point and both bike and rider were thoroughly broken in. Dan didn't appear to be broken in at all, but there was time to change that.

Leaving the Holiday Inn, the dark cloudy skies did little to lift our combined spirits, but at least we were on our way. First stop was Graceland. Dan had been here before and done the official tour which did nothing but save us time since I was content to tour the gift shop and call it good. The pall of all those roadside tourist traps served to only cheapen my view of the whole area, but I guess they wouldn't exist if they didn't make money. We stopped at the Elvis mall and spent some cash on tacky reminders of The King and away we went.

Following route 61 south we soon crossed the border into Mississippi, my 11th state. Just as we saw the "Welcome to Mississippi" sign, the skies gradually opened up on us. A light drizzle had Dan and I scrambling for our wet gear at first, but the high humidity made actually wearing the jackets unfeasible. My map showed several small towns on the way to the casino town of Tunica, but as the lowlands unfurled before us, we saw no signs of shelter anywhere close to the road. The light rains grew into a torrential downpour as Dan and I took turns passing each other, pushing an insanely fast pace to outrace the raindrops. We didn't know where the next shelter was going to be, but we wanted to get there as soon as possible. Shouted conversations echoed the movie "Caddy Shack" where Bill Murray, in similar circumstances uttered, "I don't think the heavy stuff will be coming down for quite some time!" Riding in the rain is terrible for the first twenty minutes or so, but after that, once you're soaking wet, you can't get any wetter and it starts to be fun. At least it was cooler. I was having a good laugh about all of this, but Dan's attention seemed to be focused on the lightening strikes off to our right, towards the Mississippi River. Riding in the rain was OK but when the lightening started to get closer, Dan and I decided that it was time to get off the road. Almost on command, the vague outline of a large structure appeared off to the right and Dan and I picked up the pace and headed towards it. We ended up under the awning of a car dealership, but that awning was about twenty feet wide allowing us to get all of our gear off the bike and drying while we waited out the storm. All of our gear was soaked, but luckily we had double bagged our clothing back in Memphis just in case, so that was still all dry. Since we weren't generating any heat from cycling, it got cool pretty quick and we were forced to put on our jackets just to trap body heat while we waited.

The intense storms finally abated enough for us to push on towards Tunica. We figured the town had to be around the next corner, so we decided to risk a return to the open road. Back out in the slop, the heavy traffic towards the riverside casinos did a wonderful job of keeping us soaking wet with sporadic tidal waves sent in our direction. Finally making our way to Tunica we again ducked into the first available shelter we saw, the Blue and White restaurant. Sloshing inside, Dan and I felt a little conspicuous as every eye in the place turned in our direction. Apparently they don't get too many soggy cyclists down here. Taking a seat towards the back of the place, we both ordered quickly, coffee, chicken & dumplings and a wonderful salad. We lounged around as long as we could, but after an hour we ventured out long enough to

procure a decent state map of Mississippi at the adjoining gas station. Our planned departure was delayed again as a second wall of storms returned and we again sought out the comforts of the Blue and White. Ordering more coffee, we eventually made our way to the lounge area where the World Cup match was being watched by a group of ardent European tourists. Brazil versus Holland filled the rest of the afternoon as Dan and I kept pouring in the coffee.

By late afternoon the storms had run their course but the damage to our first day of cycling had been done. We had initially hoped to make it down to Cleveland, Mississippi today, a 75-mile pull, but instead we settled on Clarksdale and a somewhat lighter 50 mile effort. But leaving the restaurant still meant we had to ride almost 25 miles. The storms had washed away the stifling humidity and this combined with the incredibly flat terrain of the delta region let us make some pretty good time late in the day. Arriving in Clarksdale just before dusk, we pulled into a Taco Bell for a snack and some directions.

Dan asked a question that had become almost unthinkable for me, "Where's the nearest campground?" I laughed and explained that tonight we'd have to improvise. Spying some younger guys huddled around the soda dispenser, I ambled over and struck up a conversation. They wanted to know all about the trip while I wanted to know about Clarksdale, so we both got what we needed. They related that there was a ball field on the outskirts of town that was pretty much deserted, but a little tricky to get to. Gathering Dan, we headed out and received an auto escort from our young friends with apparently nothing better to do on a Saturday night.

The park was indeed deserted, as Dan and I plotted strategy. Setting up tents might draw unwanted attention to us and definitely get things wet. The mosquitoes seemed to be laying in wait for our arrival, so camping without cover was out as well. My solution was to use the tent as a lightweight bivvy sack and climb inside. The mesh door made for a nice ventilation hole and kept the mosquitoes at bay somewhat. Dan mimicked me, but seemed to be a little more uncomfortable with the arrangement. He had an arm draped over his forehead to keep the mesh off his face, but the biters feasted on his arm through the mesh. The heat and humidity soon returned and it took me at least two hours to finally nod off. I don't know if Dan ever slept from our conversation the next morning. Welcome to bike touring in the delta region.

Day 71
60 Miles

Waking early, I promised Dan a decent breakfast before heading back out into the delta. Since nothing really opened in town until after 8am, we were a little strapped for options. Pulling into a Quicky Mart we picked up some candy bars and Gatorade, breakfast of champions. Yesterday's rains were a thing of the past as today looked to be another scorcher even before the sun fully rose.

From Clarksdale we jogged a bit south and found the Great River Road (Route 1) in hopes of finding more flat roads and a little more civilization. The swampy bayous and dense foliage did nothing to help this breezeless day except add about 20% to the discomfort level. The stifling heat made each pedal stroke an ordeal, so early on we agreed not to focus too much on the mileage as Dan was trying to acclimate to both the heat and life on the road.

Pulling into our midday stop of Rosedale, we found no restaurants, so we shopped a grocery store and spent the next hour trying to cool off under the shops large awning. Lingered in town didn't seem like such a feasible option either as we both got the sense that our presence was drawing attention. Pulling out again about noon, we rode only another mile before seeing signs for the Great River State Park. Looking only for a little shade from the days high temperature, we both readily paid the fifty cent admission and sought out some trees. The guard mentioned a club house down at the end of the road which sounded perfect so we followed the meandering road in that general direction. After about three miles of riding we were beginning to doubt this clubhouse existed, but then around the last curve, a glorious two story structure appeared, wonderfully airconditioned. Needless to say this would be our afternoon stop.

The lounge had a grainy TV, pool table, some video games and a little snack bar, we couldn't have asked for more. Over the next three hours we did it all, and nothing; writing postcards, watching the World Cup, shooting pool and even downed a few hotdogs. The thermometer outside was reading close to 100 degrees as Dan and I tried to calculate what two sub-par days of cycling would do to our itinerary. We still had five days to make it to New Orleans, but no matter what, tomorrow we'd really have to put some miles in.

Finally leaving our hideout around 4pm, we continued down Route 1, past Beulah, Benoit, Scott and Lamont before finally spinning into Greenville. Although we were both suffering in the heat, Dan really seemed to be struggling. I was in bad shape, but physically I had become accustomed to the sweating and was in peak cycling shape. Dan was still trying to get things broken in. Nearing the outskirts of Greenville Dan offered to pick up the tab for a hotel room after dinner instead of an evening ride. I was fairly indifferent, although a soft bed should never be turned down. After we noshed at an all-you-could-eat place, we simply rode next door to the Fairfield Inn and within ten minutes we were heading towards the hot tub so soak away the tough miles ridden today.

It's not that this area exacts a heavy toll physically since most roads have been pretty flat, but it's the mental strain of having each turn in the road lead past more of the same flat swampland. The boggy rotten smells didn't help either. The hot-tub was sub par to say the least; the water was brown. Firing up the jets, we soaked a bit but eventually we made our way back to the room and called it a night. Two days out of Memphis and we've only covered 110 miles. We'll really need to pick up the pace tomorrow.

Day 72
90 Miles

The room came with a continental breakfast which I partook in more so than Dan. I've noticed that my riding partner doesn't seem to eat any fruit or vegetables. This could make for an interesting week. After making total slobes of ourselves at the food bar, we couldn't put off the road any longer and were rolling by 8:30am. Today should take us down close to Vicksburg, famed civil war site, but there would be some fairly major miles in between. We decided to abandon Route 1 in favor of the more heavily traveled Route 61, figuring more cars should translate into more food stops and civilization. All the isolation I enjoyed back in Iowa was now completely inverted by the isolation of the south. Being alone out here didn't leave you with a warm-fuzzy feeling. You could almost hear the banjoes being played.

The five towns we passed this morning didn't add up to a hill of beans, but by 11am we were pulling into Rolling Fork for lunch. Another day, another grocery store and eating lunch under an awning. We wrote and mailed some postcards and took a quick tour of the town square in search of anything exciting. There wasn't much "excitement" in town, and before long we were back out rolling miles. I was hoping to avoid riding through the heat of the day yet again, but strangely it seemed cooler out there after lunch. Maybe I was getting fried like that riding I came across out in the California Desert.

Bordering the Delta National Forest, Route 61 made a slow arching curve out to the left. The oppressive heat soon returned and like a fool I continued to think that the towns on the map would be more than they appeared. By mid-afternoon we were both pretty exhausted, rolling into Redwood in search of shade and water, coming up "0 for 2" on that account. Dismounting near a stream, we were both fairly indignant towards Mother Nature for all the humidity. At least last Saturday's rains cut the humidity for awhile, but lately it's been like riding a bike in a sauna. Munching the last of our lunch-time ration of chocolate chip cookies and apples, we scanned the area for signs of potable water somewhere. There was a school house nearby, but the drinking faucets had been shut off for the summer leaving us nothing to do but move on. Vicksburg was close by and we decided to keep on "keepin' on."

Another mile down the road we came upon another road-side mart that solved our fluid issues. Pushing into the air-conditioning, we spent the next half hour conversing with local truckers who, like us, were playing hookey from the heat. There was a jack-knifed semi up ahead that was causing quite a backup and for the truckers at least it was better to be stopped than be slowed. The thermostat was turned down so

low in this place that it began to feel a little too cold for our sakes, so we decided to keep pedaling and bring this long-hot day to a close.

The afternoon climbs had brought us to a long descent into Vicksburg where our first stop was the local information center. We flopped inside and peppered the volunteer with questions about lodging, food and entertainment. She did her best and soon we were pulling into a campground only two blocks from the booth. The day's riding had taken such a toll that we decided to spend tomorrow morning in town looking into local history instead of riding out; anything to stay off the bike.

The campground got pretty high marks from Dan and I. Being so close to town, we feared it would be a mobile home community, but actually there was a lot of seclusion offered to the campers here. A small grocery store would have sufficed for dinner, but I volunteered to ride into town for more substantial provisions since it wasn't even 5pm yet. Dan set out to do laundry as I pulled out to shop.

Pedaling through rush-hour traffic was rough, but since I had stripped down the bike the several rolling hills posed no real challenges for me since I was riding pretty good after 4,000 miles out here. After a few miles of fruitless searching I found a large grocery store and was busy locking up the bike when a bearded guy walked up posing an unusual question

“Weren't you back in Greenville this morning?”

“Yeah, we stayed at the Fairfield Inn last night.”

“Man that's a lot of riding! We seen you and your buddy this morning, then went to work, and then drove down here to see a friend.”

“Well, we worked pretty hard too, I figure it's about a 70 mile day.”

Nodding in agreement we waved farewells as I entered the store, leaving the guy to shake his head in amazement.

Tonight we'd be dining on hotdogs, pasta, candy bars and soda. Dan works for Pepsi back home, so I took care to select only Pepsi products. Returning to the campground I related my discussion to Dan and he added, “Damn right it's hard work! We've earned every mile.” I couldn't agree more.

After dinner I gog my duds into the wash and took a shower. The campground was located against a steep canyon that provided shelter from the brutal sun after about 7pm. Dan and I wrote some postcards, read and finished our laundry while continuing to plot out the rest of the week. I was convinced that we could make New Orleans by Thursday but it would require another few days of serious riding. Today pretty much made up for Saturday's cycling washout, but we were still about 20 miles behind. Dan was still riding strong, so I suggested pushing things a bit tomorrow even with a late start; I thought we could still put in about 70 miles if we tried; depending on the heat-index.

Setting down for another night, I finally finished the book I started back in Montana, “Clear and Present Danger” by Tom Clancey, and donated it to the laudromat literary society. Today's miles didn't seem that steep, but looks can be deceiving. I could really use some cooler temperatures, but heading south in July didn't seem the way to achieve that.

Day 73
60 Miles

Morning came and we both slept in a bit. First order of the day was to ride to the Vicksburg National Battle site and spend some time taking in the grand tour. The slide show told the basics of the siege here, but actually riding amongst the sites integral to the siege helped to show the larger impact of this battle. Just as we were leaving, the volunteers were preparing to fire off one of the canons, so we hung around and got our ears blown out with the massive retort. I can't imagine what it must have sounded like with hundreds of these black monsters firing simultaneously.

Thankfully the skies were cloudy today as Dan and I chased antique stores for an hour in downtown Vicksburg. Seeking out the last store brought us to the far south-side of town, and just as we were pulling out, it began to sprinkle. Being extremely brave we pulled into the fabulous diner, Mr. C's. A smorgasbord of epic proportions, the working class clientele didn't seem to mind a pair of lycra clad cyclists holding down a table in the back.

Just as we settled in, a large boom matching the retort of that civil war canon, announced the arrival of a tremendous storm. Running outside, Dan and I grabbed a few more essentials and battened down the hatches. Over the next hour the heavy rains made thoughts of cycling vanish, but if we were going to hole up somewhere, this was the place. Dan and I were still undecided on which way to go from here. Staying close to the Mississippi river would have us climbing some fairly substantial hills towards Natchez which had Dan concerned. His left knee had some sort of a problem which seemed to limit his ability to climb hills, so we opted to head back towards I-55. This meant we'd be spending the rest of the afternoon climbing, but then we were told the road should be flatter than a breadboard heading south.

By 1pm the storms had left the area which was fine by us; we really couldn't have eaten any more if we tried. Heading back towards town, we soon found our way close to the dock to view the "Mighty Miss". Unfortunately it was a radical uphill grade from there. I was the first to see this coming so I dropped into my "granny" gear and began spinning like a fool to keep my speed up. The grade was at least 8% and taking a quick look back, I saw that Dan was having a lot more problems climbing than I was. His bike didn't have any tiny gears to spin, and with his existing knee issues, he made about two pedal strokes before dismounting and pushing the bike the rest of the way. I admit to thinking about doing the same, but I didn't know how I'd be able to push the bike any better than I was riding it, so I chose to suffer in the saddle. Finally reaching the main road out of town, we both took a moment to recuperate. That was one tough climb.

Getting rolling again, we stayed on Route 18 as it curled away from Vicksburg and brought us back to the splendid isolation of rural Mississippi. Indeed, the road did begin to undulate beneath us, but nothing serious as the rollers of South Dakota and Iowa. When touring it's essential to ride and climb at *your* own pace. Going faster or slower would do more harm than good. I quickly learned that I was better prepared for the hilly stuff than Dan, so I promised to stop at the next junction and wait for him as I passed him going into the first climb. This same procedure repeated itself a few more times before we finally found a Quicky Mart that met our stringent standards; the store had to be open. After a few more miles of climbing hills we made it to Utica and another soda/Gatorade stop.

By about 6pm we made it back to I-55 and the junction town of Gatesville. We were both pretty frazzled at this point, and we hoped that the wonders of Gatorade would somehow revive us. These long and hot days were really getting to both of us. Even today's rains didn't wash away any of the humidity as I had further north. Rain seemed to be just the next level of humidity. Five percent less humidity and it would have been just another day, this was the pits.

After a short respite, we rode on to Crystal Springs and prepared to call it a night. Shopping for provisions we both inquired as to camping possibilities but the list was short; there were none. Dan and I were really beat by this point in the day, so it was time to get creative again. We were directed towards a lakeside picnic area and cautiously entered. The area was supposed to close after dark, which happened to coincide with our arrival. Finding a somewhat secluded shelter, Dan and I busied ourselves with dinner as we sized up our situation. A maintenance guy came by soon afterwards and from the start, I got the sense he knew exactly what our intentions were. We intimated that we would get moving soon after dinner, but the guy offered to let us stay, as long as we didn't trash the place; that, after all, would mean more work for our inquisitor. Thanking him profusely, we finished dinner in silence, reflecting back on another long day. New Orleans was now only two days away, a straight shot south from here. The climbing was done. It was time to coast.

Day 74
95 Miles

Dan and I each sprawled out on a picnic table last night and probably got a combined six hours of sleep. The rains of yesterday made camping on the grass a marshy affair, so again we thought it best to stay above it all. Considering that I barely slept at all, maybe next time I'll set up the tent anyway. Things can get dried off, but I can't seem to make up for lost sleep.

This stretch of I-51 had a steady stream of small towns running the length, each about five miles apart. Dan, having the faster bike, had no problems staying ahead of me today, but waited at the inevitable Quicky Marts in town for a bit of banter before we headed out again. As the road started to climb a bit, our roles were reversed and I got to wait for Dan's arrival in each town. We continued this two-wheeled game of tag for the rest of the morning, finally arriving in Brookhaven for lunch right around noon.

Brookhaven was wonderfully congested by this time of day and since the two of us were totally clueless as to where to go, we spent about twenty minutes riding around just to find a restaurant. The rapidly darkening skies finally made us abandon our hopes for local cuisine in favor of yet another air-conditioned McDonalds. Another noon-time meal, another rainstorm. The fifth day out and the third that included a substantial rain storm. The irony is that the two days that it didn't rain were so hot, we were actually begging for rain to cool things off. But we're also learning about life here on the delta and the storms move by fairly quickly and within the hour we were back out there.

Leaving Brookhaven it was back out into the hills and heat. Neither of us was riding particularly well, but the Louisiana border was now within reach, so we sucked it up and kept going. By late afternoon we reached McComb, Mississippi. Time for some television. I had begun following the World Cup back in South Dakota, paying particular attention to the play of Brazil, one of the favorites. Throughout Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee and now Mississippi, I tried to pull over and watch as much of the Brazil play as possible. Kickoff was scheduled for 4pm, so Dan and I found a corner bar and strolled in.

The deserted bar was divided down the middle into two "sub-establishments", each sharing different sections of the same long bar rail. Through our entrance, we came into a typical southern bar with lots of country music playing. Had we entered through the door around the corner, we'd be in a totally different place, a dance bar. Apparently desegregation didn't work too well down here, so they simply put up a wall in the middle and catered to two different crowds using the same bar; unique to say the least. Taking up two stools, the bartender let us bring our bicycles inside so we wouldn't be "thieved". Handing over the remote, I found the Brazil game quickly and for the next few hours we cooled our heels and sucked down ample Cokes. Several gratis beers headed our way as well and I made sure Dan drank every drop as I maintained my self-imposed tea-totting ways.

Leaving the bar and our new-found friends, Dan and I headed out again, hoping to make the border in the cooler late-afternoon air, but not without some excitement. Pedaling south we noticed a rather sizeable blackness forming in the skies ahead and we started to plan a course of action quickly. A sign ahead held the promise of a campground which seemed to be the place to be right about now. Dan asked for my opinion, and I replied, "let's check it out." Though all the background noise, Dan thought I had said, "let's keep going" and did just that, sprinting ahead. I couldn't understand why we didn't stop, so I had to give chase. Since we missed a prime opportunity to camp out and the storms were still looming, I started scanning the surrounding area for some flat ground to set up camp. Dan and I had provisions for a few days so we didn't really even need to restock.

Pulling into several road-side areas, I finally found a nice place to camp, but the problem became trying to catch Dan. The earlier rule of thumb still seemed to be in effect where you rode until you reached the next town and waited. It wasn't that Dan was that far ahead of me, probably only about a half mile, but he was out of ear-shot and didn't seem to notice I wasn't with him anymore. The approaching storm seemed more threatening by the minute and I really wondered where Dan planned on camping. Finally I decided to force the issue by pulling over at a small pizza joint. I negotiated with the owner to let us pitch our tents behind the store for the night. By my internal barometer, I figured there was about 15 minutes to

go before the skies opened up. I returned to the road and could see Dan stopped way up ahead. I tried to frantically wave to him to return, but no luck. He just remounted and pedaled off into the approaching darkness.

At this point I was faced with a tough decision. If I followed after him, we'd pass up another opportunity to camp and than likely have a repeat of Saturday's ride thru the squall. If I stayed, at least one of us would be dry. Since I was the one holding the food, I decided to stay put, leaving my bike beside the building so Dan would see it when he turned back. I was upset by the lack of communication and I'm sure Dan was upset as well, but I wasn't the one pedaling towards an impending storm. I had negotiated for this spot, so I decided to take it. Just as I got the last tent stake in the ground, the rains came. Not as heavily as usual, but steady. After about 45 minutes the rains lessened and soon afterwards Dan returned. Miffed to say the least, he started setting up his tent while I explained my actions. We then agreed to communicate better going forward; a key dynamic when riding with a group. But at the end of the day we had made it into Louisiana and were back on schedule to make New Orleans by tomorrow afternoon. Over the last two days we had made up the missing miles from earlier in the week. Almost 100 miles today.

Day 75
65 Miles

By morning things were still a bit soggy, but we were soon pulling into Hammond after a nice 15-mile daily warmup ride. We found a Shoney's and spent the next hour planning our arrival into New Orleans. Dan and I seemed to drink more coffee in the mornings in an attempt to wake up aching joints.

Armadillos; little armor-plated rats. I've seen my fair share of road kill along the route, but now here in the south the road shoulder was littered with armadillo carcasses. Silly me, I always figured these were native to Texas and more desert-type conditions, but several conversations later, the locals taught me different. These little scroungers do the best in low lying vegetation, which is found in abundance here from what I've seen.

Leaving Hammond and the adjoining Ponchatoula, we continued on I-51 into St. Johns Parish along a swampy desolate stretch of land that reminded me of the smell of armpit. Stopping to refuel I noticed another shimmy in the rear wheel. I knew what this probably meant but kept hoping it was just a weak spoke. Another cracked rim. Having ridden over 100 miles the last time this happened, I wasn't too worried. New Orleans was only about forty miles away at this point but it *did* mean that some of our time in the Crescent City would be spent dealing with wheel builders again. The added stress of more wheel problems and the funk of the passing scenery had me drinking a lot more water than Dan and our seemingly slowed progress didn't help much either. I was down to my last water-bottle and in pretty short order, looking for more. Maps showed a good twenty miles of isolation ahead, but I was hoping for a misprint as the heat and humidity were really bringing me to the snapping point. Again there wasn't shade at any price so all we could do was keep riding. Finally, after 26 miles of rolling hell, we made it to the town of LaPlace and again flopped into a McDonalds. This place was more like a Louisiana tourism office. Here you could buy coffee mugs, hats, shirts and bumper stickers promoting New Orleans, the Saints or just about anything else to remind you of your visit in the south. To Dan and me, being in LaPlace just meant that our week's ride was almost at an end. It was time to have some fun.

LaPlace was located at the outskirts of the traffic strip, so for the rest of the afternoon Dan and I braved traffic and urban congestion on our way into New Orleans proper. Passing the airport, Dan stopped inside to confirm his return flight and the availability of bike boxes to shop his gear home. Following this, the next item on our agenda was crossing the "Mighty Miss". Spying a bridge that seemed to do the trick I took the lead and began to climb.

The passing cars seemed a bit upset with us for taking up part of the road, but then again it was our right. Climbing the Huey Long Bridge turned out to be a bigger deal than either of us expected. It took us a good ten minutes to crest the apex, but it was what awaited us on the other side that got our attention. Squad cars, must have been five of them. At first I thought there was an accident ahead, but then the reality

had sunk in. These fine officers formed a welcoming committee for Dan and me. Coasting down the other side, the police officers motioned us over to a small turn-off to the right. I quietly mentioned to Dan that we might get a close-up view of the pokey from the looks of things. This gave us both a chuckle in what was quickly becoming a tense situation.

The officers who interrogated us were stern but understanding as they explained a few things to us “northerners”:

- #1 All Bridges are off limits to cyclists, no matter their journey.
- #2 Our faux pas had created a 5-mile backup in rush hour traffic trying to cross the bridge
- #3 Re-Read #1 above.

After a serious warning, we were given directions to a side street that would keep us out of the traffic-jam we had just created. Waving good-bye, Dan and I found fast gears to high-tail it out of there quickly, lest someone reconsider. What a shame, I was really looking forward to checking out the pokey.

Bay Signet was our intended base camp for the upcoming expedition and after another half hour of riding we pulled up to the gate and paid for three days worth of camping. Our run-in with the local authorities had us a bit on edge to say the least, but then again we weren't in Kansas anymore. New Orleans was a BIG CITY. Finally settling down after putting up the tents, it was Dan's turn to hunt down dinner provisions while I took a shower and relaxed. Tomorrow we'd go into the city somehow (no bridges now) and somehow get the bike fixed. There seemed to be several reputable shops in the area, so while they were building me a wheel, we'd explore the French Quarter on foot.

In less than six days we had traveled from Memphis to New Orleans; over 400 miles. Sure there were a whole lot of missed and mis-communications, rain and heat along the way, but we made it here in one piece. Now it was time to soak up some local flavor as best we could in our remaining time together.

Day 76

Rode a lot, Didn't Go Anywhere

Rising early, our plan was to find a way into the French Quarter and get my bike wheel fixed while taking in the sights of the area. But nothing is ever that simple. Leaving the campground we headed further east of Business Route 90, looking for an indiscreet way back across the Mississippi. About three miles into our journey, I flatted and found that in stripping my bike down for the trip, I left without a spare. I tried patching the hole, but the high humidity and my own ineptitude kept the patch from holding. The only option we had was for me to ride Dan's bike back to the campground to get the spare. Great. That little maneuver cost us about a half hour, but we were still on schedule to arrive at the bike shop by 10am.

Continuing on, the road suddenly dipped into a tunnel. Learning from our experience yesterday with bridges, we looked for signs and found a small one indicating that cyclists were banned from tunnels as well. Riding slowly, we tried to find another way around this, but in the end, we resolved to carrying our bicycles down the pedestrian ramp and then pushing them thru the darkness and then back up the stairway on the other side. The day was only getting better. Finally riding at a normal pace again, the route got wider and a lot more congested as I-90 turned towards the river. Far from a small bridge, we hoped to cross here as well only to find that now we needed tokens to cross. Following signs to the tollbooth administration building we stood in line for ten minutes before learning that we couldn't cross here either. Exasperated to say the least, we rode up to the official Toll Authority building where we were given a phone number to call and subsequently learned that the only way for cyclists to reach the northern side of New Orleans was by passenger ferry in Algiers, another thirty minutes ride away. By this time it was almost 10am and we were both ready to scream.

Sucking up what was left of our dignity we continued on, the quest for New Orleans really seemed to be getting farther away rather than closer. Ziggling and zagging through side streets, we simply tried to

follow the river and hoped to see signs for the ferry. Finally reaching Algiers we actually overshot our destination and had to backtrack a mile or so to find our ferry. The only saving grace for us at this point was that the ferry was free. Piling the bikes onto the ferry, Dan and I flopped into a couple of chairs, frustrated, sweaty and fairly despondent. It had taken us almost three and a half hours to negotiate a way across the river right in front of our campground. Needless to say we didn't have a very positive impression of New Orleans by bike.

The twenty minute ferry ride deposited us right into the center of the French Quarter and it took just a bit for us to find our bearings but eventually we found the bike shop. The owner had been waiting for us since 10am but after hearing our story took pity on us and put down the bike he was working on to take up my cause. While he calculated the spoke length for the wheel to be built, I negotiated with his partner for the loan of mountain bike for the day so our exploration could continue as planned.

Finally free to explore the area, Dan and I slowly pedaled the area looking for an interesting place for lunch. Finally choosing a place called "Papa Joe's" we ducked inside just in time to avoid the daily noontime shower. This restaurant was chosen more for it's name than anything. While we were in high school there was a band director we affectionately called "Papa Joe." The hoagies we ordered filled the void and soon we were back on the quest of excitement. We visited the French Market, Café du Monde, the Jax Brewery mall and several small shops on the tourist route.

Returning to the bike shop around 4pm, we learned that the wheel wasn't going to be ready until tomorrow, so I got to keep the loaner bike overnight and Dan and I began the long trip back to the campground. The return trip was a lot shorter since we were well versed on all the ways we couldn't go to get back. In the first hour we tackled the ferry, the tunnel and the congested traffic and were just about as frustrated as we were this morning. By 7pm we were back at camp staring at another pot of pasta in the sweltering heat. Tomorrow would be another day of the same, so we called it an early night.

Day 77

Less Riding, Same Destination

Awaking early again we trekked the 90 minutes to the ferry in silence. Whatever route we took to the ferry yesterday was forgotten by today so we got to add in about 15 more minutes of aimless spinning until we finally found the Mississippi and with it, the ferry. I still couldn't get over the effort it took just to arrive in New Orleans proper if you didn't have a car, but then again this is all part of the game. Today we sought a decent place for coffee besides the famed Café du Monde. We located "our spot" just down the road, a pleasant corner shop made out of a converted warehouse with grand arching ceilings and a rough-hewn wooden floor. Over flavored coffees and a decadent pain du chocolate we plotted out the day's destinations. Our first stop was the bike shop to check on the status of my wheel, but after that anything was fair game.

Checking on the bike around 10am we found the builder hard at work and still a few hours from completion. Dan and I locked up the bikes and hopped on a streetcar heading to the northern side of town for some antiquing and picture taking. The heat and humidity were still incredibly oppressive down here, but the locals seemed to deal with it a whole lot better than Dan and I did. I've been out in this stuff since the middle of South Dakota and it was really starting to take it's toll on me. Dan has only been out in this soup for a week and even he was ready to head back to the cooler air of Chicago. The two hours we spent antiquing were a nice diversion from the congestion of the French Quarter, but eventually we made our way back into the fray and took lunch at Jimmy Buffet's Carribean Grill. We both opted for "Cheeseburgers in Paradise" and another few hours taking in the open-air markets to fill out our afternoon. I called home and learned that my friend Dave would be leaving for his new position in Moscow a few weeks early, so if I wanted to see him before he left, I'd have to be in Washington D.C. in the middle of August. I finally had a deadline of sorts. It had been so long before I really had to be somewhere, this took a little time to sink in. Not that making the east coast over the next month would be any more difficult, but it was strange to have a restriction placed on my adventure. The last time I needed to be somewhere was back in Arizona and I came close to missing that appointment.

After retrieving the bike and forking over \$85 for the new wheel, I was again atop my trusty steed. I decided to put some new rubber on the wheel as well, hoping to spin out the remaining 2,000 miles without further incident. We spent another hour or so visiting shops as Dan tried to find souvenirs of our visit. By 4pm it was time to make some decisions. The French Quarter was a vibrant place by day, but it was the night-life that made it a legend. Somehow camping 15 miles away this aspect of the city wasn't conveyed too well. We both knew it would be another two hour ride to get back to camp so we started discussing how we could spend the night on this side of the river.

Since I was used to sleeping just about anywhere, I left the final decision up to Dan and was relieved to find that he preferred to stay in town as well. Hotel rooms seemed to run about \$100 for the most part, but by this point on a Saturday, all the rooms were booked. I remembered passing a YMCA while we were antiquing up north, so we headed up there for a look see. The lobby was a bit run down but about what you'd expect for a YMCA in a major city. \$48 later Dan and I were hefting the bikes and gear up a few flights of stairs and into a flop of a room furnished in early-American garage sale, reeking of cigarette smoke. After taking a shower in the communal "hose down" room complete with bare spigots lining the walls, Dan and I tried to relax a bit before heading back down to the French Quarter for dinner and some entertainment.

The walk back to "the Quarter" gave Dan and me time to reflect on what had been quite the adventurous week out on the road. Dinner options were plentiful and varied, but what caught my eye was an AYCE shrimp offer made by a rather buxom lass. For \$13 we spent the next two hours pounding down gulf shrimp in gastronomic ecstasy. From there we made our way over to Preservation Hall for a two-hour stint listening to the genesis of the Jazz Era, performed by some of the areas greatest, if not oldest, musicians. The audience, a majority of whom hailed from foreign lands, sat on rickety chairs and cushions thrown on the floor. Sweat seemed to be the valve-oil for both the musicians and the audience as the sweltering delta did its best to keep us all moving. That was New Orleans.

Following the music, Dan and I roamed the streets for a bit and watched some guys and girls do lewd and lascivious things for mere beads. This too was New Orleans. Walking back to the YMCA around 11:30 both Dan and I knew we'd have a busy day ahead.

Day 78
25 Miles

In the morning we packed quietly and got rolling thru the streets of the French Quarter, strangely quiet compared to the revelry of a few hours ago. Saying a fond good-bye to the area, Dan and I boarded the ferry one last time and retraced the familiar route back to the campground. We budgeted enough time in the schedule to get some laundry done when we got back, primarily so Dan wouldn't stink up the plane too much on his flight back in a few hours. Comparing our work rate, Dan was definitely working harder than I was at this point. From our campground Dan would have to make it back over the bridge to the airport, (hiring a cab I believe), then fly back to Chicago where his parents would meet him with a change of clothes. They'd also take his bicycle home and trade his lycra for a few business suits. From Chicago he'd then fly to Muncie Indiana. A day that began at a seedy YMCA in the French Quarter on the gulf would end up in the corn fields of Muncie. Much busier than a guy pedaling down the road in a generally eastern direction.

Back at the campground by 8am we did the laundry, loaded the bikes for our different destinations. Today seemed like another scorcher and it was a little crazy to put on clean clothes only to be dripping wet withing minutes. While going thru our gear, the guy at the next spot over walked up and introduced himself. Pierre was from Montreal and had driven down here on a last fling before returning to school next week. An avid cyclist he had actually design and built his own touring machine which now proudly sat atop his Saab. We broke of the small talk after a while so Dan could get going towards the airport, but soon Pierre and I resumed the small talk. An interesting fellow to say the least, but I had more self-serving interests in mind. By agreeing to accompany him back to the French Quarter to watch the

World Cup final, I secured passage to the other side of the river without having to resort to the longer “ferry system”.

For the next two hours I tried to get some sleep in what passed for shade around the campsite. Pierre and I met some other Europeans camping nearby so in the end we had plenty of company along for the trip back into the Quarter. By noon we were all packed (at least my stuff was) into the Saab and heading over the bridge into town. I graciously paid for parking, considering it more of a personal “toll” than anything else. The next 6hrs were spent hovering around a large screen TV in Pat O’Briens watching the game, won in a shoot-out by my guy’s the Brazillians.

Following the game it was back to the open road for me. I had hoped to get a start a lot earlier than this, but the final of the World Cup only comes around every 4 years, so what’s the rush. Pedaling the streets of New Orleans around dinner time on a Sunday proved a bit more challenging than I expected as the route wound thru some of the poorer areas of town before a 2-mile bridge brought me up and over another stretch of water before dropping me back into more tranquil surroundings out on the coast.

I hadn’t done much serious cycling in the last 4 days but I got back into the groove pretty easily. The weather cooled off nicely as my speed picked up as I neared the Mississippi border. I was wishing the haze I drove thru was morning mist rather than evening dusk. Long roads branched from the main road, leading to a steady stream of beach houses with names like “Dick’s Holiday Haven”, “Betty’s Mistake” and the “Washed Out Lounge” Finally calling it a night after putting in almost 25 miles I ducked behind an abandoned beach house and set up the tent. The cool breeze coming off the gulf was a welcome change of pace from the “hot stickies” of the last month.

Day 79
87 Miles

Waking early again I spun quietly into Pearlington where I found a nice (albeit the only) spot for breakfast. Grits were the specialty of the day so I pasted a batch to the wall of my stomach before heading out for the day. Passing Bay St. Louis and Pass Christian, I was making some serious miles today. I put in close to 20 miles before breakfast and by lunch I had made it all the way to Biloxi, 75 miles total. Wendy’s provided today’s entrée which I ate with no particular hurry. The gray rolling clouds foretold of an afternoon storm, so I didn’t see the rush to get soaked. By 1pm I took a short spin through the shopping mall in town and found a small bike shop eager for customers. Walking inside I really didn’t have a whole lot of gear to pickup, but with some time on my hands, decided that today might be a good time to degrease the drive chain. I probably could have had his done back in New Orleans since the bike was in the shop for 2 days, but it didn’t dawn on me. Thinking back, I hadn’t done this since back in Sioux Falls so there was lot of America built up between the plates of that chain. Finding a tree to prop the bike against, I set about getting things cleaned up before the storm hit. It was really amazing to see the amount of funk that had built up over the last 1,000 miles of riding. Sand, grit and even stray vegetation came flowing off the chain after applying the solvent. I had the bike just about reassembled when the first drops splattered the pavement around me. Pushing the bike under the malls awning, I spent the next half hour waiting out the storm and writing a few postcards. From there I progressed to the larger mall where I met another cyclist Tom heading in the same direction. He was a college student from Iowa who spent his summers hawking home-learning aids to the local residents, door-to-door. When I asked here he was from, he repeated, “Iowa”. I pressed further and got, “A small town you’ve never heard of, Newton.” Needless to say I shot back that not only had I heard of Newton, but proceeded to tell him of my visit there, the interview with the local paper and even the great diner in the town square, the Snook Inn. Turns out his dad is a regular there and had mentioned running into a cross-country cyclist last month. Over the next hour or so we traded stories of the Midwest and the travels that had brought us to coastal Mississippi. By 4pm the rains had abated and I was eager to get back out there to hammer some late-day miles, so we parted ways. Coincidences are an almost daily occurrence recently.

Pedaling on, Ocean Springs was the next town down the line, finding provisions for dinner at a grocery store just off Route 90. While I was inside the store, the rains returned so my dinner was taken under the awning of the grocery waiting for the calm to return to the area. Finally moving on again close to 7pm, I spun only a few more miles to Gautier before calling it a day along an access road leading to an electrical transformer. Here, hidden from the passing cars and congestion of the coastal highway, I pitched my tent and even turned few pages in a book before updating my journal and sacking out. My first full day back on the open road had been a return to the daily grind, hot, wet, tiring and yet fulfilling. From here on out I'd begin heading north along my last 1,000 mile stretch to reach the Deleware coast.

Day 80
102 Miles

Today's wake up call was rather rude. Slowly opening my eyes my first focused vision was of fire ants pouring thru a small hole in the tent wall. Exiting quickly my first thought was to shake the tent out, but since the bottom of the tent was soggy with the morning dew, I didn't think that would get rid of all of my unwanted guests. I had only myself to blame again, having burned a hole in the tent a few weeks back with the candle lantern. Carefully bagging up the tent I rode on hoping to find a Laundromat where I could give these firey little fellows a watery exit.

Entering Pascagoula I was beset by the strangest craving for donuts. I've had plenty of cravings before but usually for more decadent treats like ice cream, cheeseburgers and such, but never donuts. As if by request I rounded a big curve in the road coming into town and found a donut shop off to my right. I spent the better part of the next hour discussing politics, weather and fire ants with the locals as we shared various crullers and coffee. The locals directed me towards the laudromat on my way out o town, making it my next stop.

Pressing on my goal was to make Mobile by mid-morning and then spend a few hours taking in the sights. SR 90 paralleled Interstate 10 down here but was definitely the more scenic way to get to Mobile. Passing thru miles of tree lined streets shading ante-bellum homes, my pace slowed considerably as I struggled to take in the explosion of new and appealing sights.

Entering Mobile proper, I pulled in at the local Chamber of Commerce where I learned of a wonderful museum right next door where I could spend some quality time. Over the next two hours I saw as much of Mobile as possible and then headed towards a nicely shaded park determined to wait out the heat of the day before continuing my way north. I had just about dozed off when I was approached by a park urchin in search of spare change. While not particularly threatening (at least to me), the encounter had me a little wary of just nodding off right here. I wouldn't have fallen asleep in a park in Chicago, so maybe sleeping here wasn't such a great idea either. So I again pushed off sooner than expected and within a few miles found myself beset by another problem, getting out of town.

Gazing at my map of the area, I thought I'd just follow the main highway over Mobile Bay and then continue on my merry way. But nothing could be that simple. Large trucks and cyclists were channeled towards a more obscure route ultimately adding almost 10 miles to the daily total. First I had to ride north shoulder to fender with some of the worst smelling rigs imaginable. Almost reaching the town of Prichard, I finally began climbing an impressive concrete bridge which gracefully deposited me on the other side of the bay. Thinking I was officially "over the bay" revealed that I had spanned only one small finger of the coastal community. Then I had to retrace my ride 3 miles back to I90. The crossing of Moblie Bay proper could now begin and what a ride *that* was. Over the next 15 miles I was subjected to a long deserted section of pavement totally devoid of landmarks, my view broken only by the occasional deserted crab shack, strip joint or fragrantly pungent marshland. Not even a place to ditch the rig for a soda. The high temps tried their best to cook me, but by this point I was past caring.

Finally reaching Spanish Fork, I felt more like a boat wreck survivor being thrown up upon a deserted shore. After a somewhat painful climb into town, I stopped at the firs Quicky Mart and collapsed into a chair inside for the next half hour or so. I had covered almost 25 miles over the last two hours

impressive when I consider what crossing that simple bay had entailed. While slugging down a large Mountain Dew I asked for a restaurant recommendation. I was directed towards a diner up the road that offered all-you-can-eat menu. That was about the only thing that could have gotten me back on the bike at that time.

Pulling into the parking lot of the diner, I was saddened to learn that the AYCE meals ended at 2pm. Compromising somewhat I settled for a pint of butter pecan ice cream instead. Some lunch. By the time I put foot to pedal, it was just a little before 5pm. The road out of town curved a bit to the left, taking me directly north and provided a stiff tail wind to hasten my exit. I rode on to Bay Minette for my first real shot at a meal all day. Sure McDonalds was a culinary let-down from an AYCE feast, but I had a taste for a shake and fries anyway. I spun out of there about 6pm, having put in an amazing 96 miles to this point. Just another day at the office.

I found another utility access road just outside of Atmore, Alabama and quickly set up camp, bedding down by 8pm.

Day 81
117 Miles

Another sleepless night spent in a never-ending cycle of drinking and “walking the dog”. I guess I finally nodded off for a total of three hours, but if you count the time spent *thinking* about sleeping, I probably put in closer to ten hours. Good thing the breakfast stop was close.

The deserted shops that greeted by arrival didn't hold a lot of promise for that breakfast, but eventually I came upon a small chicken-coop filled with life. Pushing thru the door I quickly found myself ankle-deep in both farmers and businessmen all after the same thing as I was, a decent meal to start the day. Coffee, eggs and a hearty serving of biscuits and gravy got my motor running and I soon found myself immersed in another “round table” discussion of current events. I hadn't thought all that much about farming before I left on this trip, but after all these “classroom sessions” I was getting a newfound respect for those who till the land. Crime and world events took a back seat to the weather and crop output in these parts. Downing my third cup of coffee I decided to push off under my own power rather than waiting to float out the door with a fourth cup of joe.

The next town was Brewton, the 35-mile mark in my day. The early morning heat foretold of another sticky day in the saddle, so I was just looking to get the suffering over with. I was still a little sore from yesterday's long miles, but I was probably more mentally fatigued than physically impaired. I simply wanted to spend the day out of the main heat as much as possible. Seems it's been weeks since I was able to stay out of the noon-time sun.

On the way to Brewton I passed within a whisker of entering Florida, near the town of Flomaton. I thought seriously about taking a detour, just so I could include Florida to my list of “ridden through” states, but something kept me aiming the bike in a direct line north. I don't know exactly what it is about Florida, but I've had no real motivation to venture to that area. The whole Disney experience is something I could do without. I remember the “Wonderful World of Disney” on Sunday nights and the various Disney movies over the years, but I was basically a Warner Brothers child. Bugs Bunny trumping Mickey mouse.

In Brewton I made some phone calls over a chocolate shake before continuing on. Entering the local McDonalds I caught my reflection in the glass of the door and almost didn't recognize the image there. The thick muscular legs I had back in California had been winnowed down to mere toothpicks as every part of my body was now strangely fat-free. I guess this is what you get from a summer of 12hr daily bike rides. There wasn't much to stop for in these towns, except for bathroom breaks, water or ice cream, so I just kept pushing on. Lunch today would be in the town of Evergreen if all went well, and so far, so good. It took almost 20 miles of riding to overcome the stiff legs and fatigue of yesterdays ride, but by mid-morning it became just another day between the wheels. Fourteen miles brought me to Castleberry where I ducked in for a soda and a few candybars. Adjourning to a chair beneath the well shaded awning of this gas

station, I spent a spell conversing with a fellow traveler. The usual conversation usually centers around me and the people and places I've come across, but even I'm getting tired of talking about the trip. Frankly I'm just getting tired.

Leaving the shade of the gas station, I got back onto the road in the prime heat again. I really felt the urge to be out of the sun today. Evergreen was only ten miles up the road, but when the hills started getting larger I kept moving thru the gears, that last distance seemed much farther. Along the way I passed an odd looking guy hiking on the shoulder wearing a nylon jogging suit and carrying a duffel bag in one hand and a gym bag in the other. I couldn't imagine wearing anything as stifling as a nylon running suit in this heat, but he seemed pretty much unaffected by this get up. Lucky guy.

By the time I rode into Evergreen, I'd put in about 2,000 feet of vertical climbing to do so and was feeling pretty frazzled. I had been told of a decent diner in town, but after a few lazy loops thru town, I couldn't find it, or anything else for that matter. I road towards the expressway confident that the approaching clover-leaf would have someplace to shelter me from the oppressive rays. I stopped at the first McDonalds I came across and spent about the next 90 minutes basically cowering in the air-conditioned splendor.

After a glorious rest, I got returned to the mid-afternoon rays, not necessarily looking forward to more climbing, but at least I was a little better rested for it. Just outside of town I ran into that nylon-clad hiker again, amazed that somehow he had actually gotten ahead of me...on foot!. This must be some kind of super hiker indeed. He seemed to have a serious head of steam working for him as I passed him a second time as his jogging suit was soaked. Two hours of hot hills and sparsely populated towns brought me to McKenzie, Alabama where I hurried into the only open grocery store just prior to closing. The nice cashier took one look at my bedraggled state and pointed in the direction of the soda cooler. Wanting to stock up on some munchies as well, I ended up buying a few bottles of soda and a large bag of chips as a "snack".

Laying out in a small grass knoll it felt great to get off the bike. I thought back to all the planning I had done back home at that coffee shop, calculating that I'd be riding for about 5hrs a day, leaving me plenty of time to meet both my America and my fellow Americans. Fifty miles a day, that was the plan. Now here it was, nearly the end of July and I'm still looking for those easy days. I can't even remember the last time I road for less than nine hours, let alone five. I could slack off the pace I suppose but now I was under the time constraint of being in DC by the first week in August to see my friend Dave before he left for Moscow. So I was pushing yet again. Thinking of Dave, I called him from a gas station in town and firmed up our plans for August. It was strange to think about all the miles I'd have to cover between now and then, but since the bike was riding so well, it all seemed possible.

After the phone call and refueling, I was out for my "evening ride". Just outside of town I saw flashing lights off to my left and rode up to find that the local law enforcement officer had stopped that nylon hiker I had been seeing all day and they were busy going thru his bags. Finally someone else was wondering what the deal was with that guy. Soon the squad car passed me with the hiker in the back seat. I watched the car drive up ahead of me and pull over at a Conoco station and let the guy out. This would explain how the "hiker" was always ahead of me. When the police saw him, they gave him a "courtesy escort" to the county line. Cross country travel made easy.

Approaching the Conoco station myself, the officer was still there leaning against the bumper of his squad, my wave eliciting a sort of "come hither" look from the officer. Pulling over, I was preparing for the usual litany of questions, but got much more. Slowly strolling towards me, the officer opened with the standard, "Mind if I ask you a few questions?" No, I had nothing to hide.

"Where were you two night ago?"

Now I thought he was trying to determine if I was staying at motels or camping illegally (as I had been), so I played it safe.

"I was down south, had a room."

“No, EXACTLY where were you two days ago.”

Pulling out my maps and rolling them back two days, I remembered being in Gautier Mississippi. “Down near Pascagoula, Mississippi, sir” was the reply.

Taking a step back and re-examining the rig, he pushes the brim of his hat up and off his forehead and replies, “Well *shoot* son, you’re too busy ridin’ this here bike to be of *killin’* people!”

“Killing someone?” was my startled reply (breaking out in even more sweat)

“Yup, we’ve had us a double home-I-cide here in town and as part of the investigation, they’ve got me out here questioning any drifters and odd folk I may encounter out here.”

Great, I had a choice, either I was classified as a “drifter” or an “odd folk”. But judging from my outward appearance and my current occupation, drifter sounded about right. No one likes being thought of as “odd”. Once initial tension was broken, the officer and I continued to chat a bit. He asked if I had a few minutes to spare, so who was I to say no. He lead me around the back of the squad and popped the trunk. Littering the bottom of the compartment were about 10 “Bicycling” magazines. As I was to soon learn, the officer’s better half had made some not so subtle hints that it was time for “Officer Friendly” to lose some weight. I gave him a few pointers and then stripped the bags off the bike so he could see what riding a touring bike was like.

Anyone else passing by right then might have wondered exactly what was going on. Here was one of Alabama’s finest with his patent leather shoes awkwardly stuffed into cycling toe clips spinning oddly concentric circles in a Conoco parking lot, with a “drifter” giving him advice.

Finally parting company I made it about another 20 miles or so before camping outside a deserted BP gas station just west of Greenville. The skies were threatening again, so I took the time to set a really taught tent, but in the end, the rains held off. Tomorrow would bring me into Montgomery for some antiquing hopefully. The episode with the officer kept replaying throughout dinner and had me a little more cautious about where to set up camp tonight.

Rarified Air

Becoming somewhat of a professional cyclist this summer, I’ve learned a thing or two about performance and what it takes to surpass the daily goals set. My original plan was to string together one hundred days, riding fifty miles a day, taking in America. What I didn’t consider is just how much of America there would be to cover.

By my second day I was already setting the tone for the remaining 98 days, pushing myself to the limit, not so much to meet some arbitrary point, but rather just to see what true performance was all about. On my weekend training rides, the return trip back home was always lurking in the back of my psyche, keeping me from really going all out. Out here there’s really no “return trip” to factor in. I’m going out all day everyday, just to see how far I can get, camp out and then do it all over again.

The 50-miles-a-day average has now been stretched to about 75 as I wind my way east, settling into some sort of abnormal, normality. The mornings are occupied mainly with trying to overcome the previous days riding and the nights lack of sleep. The sore quads, sunburned arms and “campers back” all contributing to my morning misery. If I can put in between 35 and 40 miles between breakfast and lunch, that’s pretty much “on schedule”. Afternoon riding is largely depending on the surroundings. If there’s shade to be had after 10am, I may linger in towns a little more, but lately I’ve been cruisin’ right thru the heat of the day in search of civilization. My goal is to have put in between 50 and 60 miles before dinner. Obviously some days this is easier to do than others. Somedays it’s a miracle to get just forty miles in before it’s time to hit the pillow.

Some day's I'll only ride another 5 miles or so and call it a day. If the opportunity for a decent camp spot presents itself, I'm all for calling it a day early. Usually if I can start my evening ride with eighty miles behind me, I'm going to push for another twenty to get that "century". I've logged a couple back-to-back century rides out here and I think I'm getting to the eighty mile marks is a lot harder than those last twenty. After eighty miles, I consider each pedal-stroke afterwards to be *rarified air*.

There's something almost mystical about riding close to 100 miles in a da. Lots of people can put in the occasional 70 mile day, but when you duck into an ice cream shop for a sundae and a guy slaps you on the back asking how far you've come today, uttering, "95 miles", gives you special status.

It's gotten so that I've come to seek out rarified air on a daily basis out here. Treating each day as an unknown adventure, not just a point on a map. I'd probably be less likely to feel this way if there were more reasons to stop, but this last week, just getting across these heated plateaus is a major goal, rarified or not.

Day 82
72 miles

Another night spent thinking about sleeping rather than doing it. Greenville was the breakfast stop, finding a spacious diner and a decent plate of grub was the first order of the day. My original plans had me continuing north towards Birmingham and then into Tennessee, but seeing how close I was to Georgia got me thinking about seeing my grandfather just outside of Atlanta. After Montgomery I would make my way directly east and be in Georgia by the weekend.

My mother's parents had died within a year of each other back in the early 1940's and she and her brother moved from their place in Omaha and went to live with their aunt Millie and uncle Bo in Berwyn, Illinois. Berwyn, known as "Prague-West" is home to the largest conglomeration of Czechs outside the mother country. Here my mom finished high-school, married and raised her family. In the late 1970's several of the old relatives decided that they had seen enough cold winters and "sold out" moving down to Acworth, Georgia. Within the first six months, my "grandma" Millie had died of a heart attack, leaving her husband Bo alone in this spacious house. There were other relatives nearby so he wasn't totally isolated, but obviously having a handful of states and 11 hours of driving between us, our contact with him became distant. Over the intervening years, all the other relatives have since past, leaving him all alone. Thinking back, it's been about 10 years since I last saw Bo, but easily 15 years since I've been down in these parts.

A few years ago Bo met a woman who was willing to help look after him in exchange for free room and board for her and her children. I had never met or spoken to this woman before, but after riding this bike for almost five thousand miles, I wouldn't let a little thing like that deter me from seeing my grandfather.

Calling Chicago, I got the address and the phone number and my route was set. The ride into Montgomery took me most of the morning, but eventually I found a Pizza Hut where their AYCE guarantee was sorely tested. I tried to avoid the congestion of the inner-city and managed to skirt the major tie-ups until I started heading east. The mid-day traffic was surprisingly heavy, but I kept up with the flow of traffic, motivated by what seemed to be an approaching storm. Along the way I found a rather sizeable bike shop and stopped in to restock on inner tubes and lubes.

Apparently not too many touring cyclists pass through these parts as I found almost instant stardom just by hitting the front door. After sharing some stories of the open road with the staffers, I offered to let the lead mechanic take my loaded monster for a spin around the parking lot. While he went a bit farther than expected, taking off around the block, I was confident that he really didn't want to ride too much farther. He returned a short time later shaking his head. The bike rode like a charm, he related, but man was it heavy. Rubbing his biceps after dismounting, he seemed relieved to be handing the bike back to its owner. With a solemn look on his face he declared me "the man" and continued shaking his head as he went back inside.

I waited around another half hour or so, hoping the storm would pass over and I could continue north. There appeared to be camping near the town of Watumpka and I was really anxious to be off the road by 4pm today. It was almost like having a day off. By the time I hit the campground, I'd have like 60 miles in, but staying in a real campground would be the treat. New Orleans seemed like so long ago.

On the way to Watumpka I stopped at a few antique shops that slowed my pace somewhat, but I still made it into camp a little after 4pm. Taking a quick tour of available sites, I found a decent spot under some sprawling trees that also had the benefit of being closest to the showers. Yes showers. I'd finally be able to scrape off a weeks worth of grime from my hide and enjoy a peaceful unhurried night of camping.

Dinner was an amalgamation of things, fruit, soda, Gatorade, pasta and hot dogs. It's amazing what I've been using for fuel lately. Following an early meal I was off to take that richly deserved shower. While scraping America off my back, I found a nice black tick firmly embedded to my right side, stuck in the fleshy part between my ribs and pelvis. My first reaction was pure terror, surprising me. Here I had been living like an animal all summer, once-a-week showers, fire ants, sleepless nights and all, and I was petrified by a tick. It would be just my luck to contract Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever from my little friend here. I carefully got a grip on the little bugger and yanked him off. I didn't see any parts remaining, so the immediate fear passed, but now I was worried about unseen ticks. I really didn't feel that tick, so there could very well be other "friends" hanging on as well. Towing off, I checked as much of my body as I could, but then sought out another opinion (or set of eyes).

There were other campers nearby, and after a somewhat awkward introduction, I explained my plight and asked them to "check me out." Taking off my shirt had my new friends laughing at my "farmers tan" but they found no more ticks. Settling down to pore over my maps, my new friends came over after a bit to ask questions and give routing advice. They were really nice folks, but I was really tired so after a few minutes of this, I begged off and hit the hay.

Day 83
93 Miles

The night was filled with more sporadic sleep, but by now I'm getting used to it, if that makes any sense. Acworth, Georgia was my next chance at indoor accommodations, and if I pushed things, I could make it there by the weekend.

The overcast skies foretold of a messy day, but I was becoming impervious to just about any weather condition already. Enough threats. I would follow Route 14 east as it wound around I-85 towards the Georgia border. I rode into Tallassee and stopped for a quick cup of coffee. Eager to get back riding under the cloud cover, I somehow missed my turnoff for 14 and eventually found myself crossing I-85. This didn't feel right and since my maps were pretty vague about these parts, I was forced to ring a few doorbells just to find out where I was actually at, let alone how to get back on track. Missing my turn back in Tallassee brought me to Shorter, Alabama, a sparse outcropping of slab homes amidst the crops. There wasn't any direct way back to I-14 short of retracing the last 10 miles, so I accepted my fate, and rolled forward. Finding the junction with route 80, it took me another hour to make Tuskegee. I was tired, but more frustrated than anything. This was the first time I had gotten seriously lost out here, but I guess these things happen.

I pulled into a Wendy's hoping to drown my sorrows in salad. Writing in my journal I was soon interrupted by table full of pilots anxious for "the usual". One gent in particular seemed interested in learning what was motivating me to continue on a daily basis, and the mental games I played to get the bike down all these lonely roads. I rambled on for the next 20 minutes or so, and avoided my salad. I was getting better at articulating my experiences but then again I've had many recitations to get the flavor just right.

After they took off I finished my meal and rode thru Auburn, Alabama. I calculated that my little morning mishap ha cost me roughly 20 miles, so what should have been a relatively light sixty mile day

Tallassee Forest got me climbing in short order, but I deserved this. The Blue Ridge Mountains were coming up and I'd need the training.

I made Auburn by about 3pm and stopped at a few antique shops in town before the threatening skies returned. Heading out of town, I pulled into a Burger King for a light snack. I was standing in line when the manager started talking about the White Sox and how Auburn players end up there. I looked down and found I was wearing my White Sox t-shirt. When you only have 5 shirts, you kinda think you're always wearing the same one. This guy was a real font of information and I was certainly getting anointed. While I ate, he took a break and joined me. He would soon be going home on vacation, home being coastal South Carolina. He was looking forward to "real" seafood, not the fried stuff served locally by the Doc's chain. Yup, real seafood, that's what he wanted and by God that's what he was going to get.

By 4:30pm I was rolling again, made it about 4 blocks from the Burger King when the skies opened up. My first thought was to return to "the King" but I got soaked so quickly, backtracking didn't make much sense. Of course the shoes were totally drenched so I just kept going. The deluge intensified and my mind was really spinning trying to decide where to hide. Past Auburn there really wasn't much humanity to speak of, but I continued almost blindly forward. Within the next mile, squinting through the rain, I saw a Quicky Mart off to my left and daringly crossed against the grain of traffic to get there. Ducking beneath the large awning, I quickly got out of my wet gear and sat down next to the bike to wait out the worst. Soon the door opened and an older gentleman ushered me inside, saying there were actual seats available inside, if I didn't mind "high-stakes dominoes" being played. I was right on his heels.

Toward the back of the store a square table with six chairs were set up for the daily "meeting of the minds". The top issues of the day were lobbed out like handgrenades, with eruptions of opinions to follow. The dominos played were definitely speedy and pricey, a penny a point. This was definitely a battle of the ages. The reigning champs were well past 60 and their challengers, mere pups in their late 30's. Throwing tiles and calling points with the cool precision of auctioneers, these four kept me spellbound, as I tried to pick up the subtle nuances of the game before me. I had briefly been introduced to the game as a kid, but like most, dominoes became objects to set up on end and toppled over. But this, it was almost like chess. And if it *was* chess, these were some fairly devoted practitioners. Treating the various coolers around the store as their personal refrigerators, these competitors simply accumulated their empties and wrappers and settled up at the end. No sense interrupting their rapid-fire play with financial formalities. As the storm continued to rage outside, the battles inside were no less fierce. It was only that the end that I learned of the stakes. After 15 games the net deficit anted by the losers was a staggering \$1.50, but it was clearly a matter of honor between these folks. The monikers "Kid" and "pops" were hurled across the tiles like poison-tipped spears, all but deflected with a quickly raised eyebrow.

By 7pm the storms had subsided, the domino wars had ended and it was time to ride. My new friends warned me to stay on the Alabama side of the Chattahoochee river tonight, as it could get rough on the east side of the river. Thanking them for letting me hang out for the last few hours, I pushed away from the store and back out into the rolling countryside. Pedaling down route 29 I kept checking the skies for signs of blue, but the grays seemed to linger even after the rains subsided.

Another hour got me closer to the border, as if it hadn't been for the warning of the "domino men" I would have pushed for the far shore, but instead, settled for something on the west side. Coming across a small ball field off to my right I noticed a small sheltered BBQ pit off to one side. Adjoining the nearby Baptist church, I thought this might not be a bad place to set up camp for the night. I could keep the bike underneath the shelter and pitch the tent right next to it. The bike and at least half the tent would be covered should the storms return, and it would get me off the bike and resting sooner than I was accustomed to.

Same old stuff for dinner as I called it an early night. Having things this damp wasn't the greatest, but at least the rains broke up the oppressive humidity for a change, allowing me to get into the tent without my usual hour of sweats....

Day 84
88 Miles

In the morning, just as I was packing up the last of my gear, the caretaker of the church right towards me and cautiously approached. He asked what I was doing on the church grounds. Thinking quickly, I spun a tale. I explained that I was riding across the country and had gotten caught out in last night's storms. When the storms had passed I began to look for a safe place to camp and of course, being a "Devout Baptist" I figured this would be the safest ground around. Hearing the term "Baptist", my inquisitor's expression changed from an accusatory scowl to a friendly smile. "Y'all say you're a Baptist? Well keep right on ridin' boy, God's with 'ya!" It pays to know who's land you're camping on.

Crossing the Chattahoochee at West Point, I was wondering just how bad things really were there. The answer came quickly as I had to negotiate through a pot-hole strewn stretch of road just to make the only traffic light in town. This was definitely the "other side of the bridge" to be sure. Riding through to the next town, LaGrange, I found a Laundromat and set about getting my gear washed. While my things were taking a spin, a small black girl walked up and softly asked, "Say Mister, whatya doin' here?" Looking up, I replied, "My laundry right now." Her reply startled me, "No *white* folks do their wash here mister." I then asked her if it would be OK if I were the first. "Yup, I say it's OK" was her reply, then she purposely made the rounds of the crowded Laundromat, informing them that SHE had allowed me to do my laundry here. This drew a little more attention to me than I was looking for, but before long everyone knew why I was standing there and the story cycle repeated itself.

After the laundry, I said good-bye to my little hostess and made my way back into the hot sun. Yesterday's storms did little to break today's humidity as I was soon struggling again. Of course the hilly terrain didn't help either. I took a 10am lunch break, a bit miffed at the prospects of having a ride through the heat of the day again.

Finally getting moving again I continued to crawl towards Acworth and the reunion with my grandfather. Small towns along the way helped to break the agony of today's ride. Trimble and Moreland had me thinking back to Utah, where a similar "off" day had me bribing my legs with a break at each town. I think I covered just about a hundred miles that day, but this was two months and half the continent away, and I frankly the bribes weren't working quite so well this time round. Newnan provided a soda break where I had to make a decision. The locals said that continuing on the back roads might be a shorter route to Acworth, but it was also definitely hillier. They suggested I stay on the main route, jogging a bit west, but still north, to Carrollton.

This would be the first westward movement I've made all summer, but anything to avoid the hills. By 4pm I had made Carrollton and promptly found a park bench to serve as an impromptu camp for the next hour. I could think of nothing more important than taking a nap at that point which sort of surprised me. Usually it was "Ride, Eat and Rest" but now I didn't even care about the food. There were plenty of flies to keep me from a fitful sleep, but after awhile you don't even notice the distraction, provided you're tired enough.

By 5pm I was upright again, heading towards a small tourist stand where I picked up directions to some fast food places up the road. I still didn't know how much riding I'd be able to put in, but I know I couldn't do much at this point without a meal. Hardee's was the food chain of choice today and I was surely in no hurry to depart. I'd put in a decent 78 mile day to this point, and all I wanted out of my evening ride was to get in a better position to ride to my grandfathers place.

The setting sun provided just enough relief to motivate me thru the evening ride. I pushed all the way to Clarksdale by dusk, another "century" ride for an "off" day. Ice cream for dessert before heading towards a deserted municipal park. I pushed the bike through a small gate that led to several adjoining baseball diamonds. Choosing the most secluded field, I set up the tent in the infield and spent the last moments of daylight gazing up at yet another star-filled sky. I didn't know how many opportunities I'd have to see a night like this. According to the "master plan" I'd be out on the road another two weeks so there'd be at least a dozen more skies to view, but maybe none this clear. Tomorrow I'd meet a relative I

hadn't seen in over 10 years. What do you say after so much time has passed? I'd figure that out in the morning.

Day 85
35 Miles

Morning came early as usual as I got back out in search of breakfast a bit before 7am. I found an "expressway community" towards I-75. I found some biscuits and gravy at a small trucker place and away I went.

I had estimated that it would take me about an hour to reach my grandfathers place, but nothing ever works out that way. My directions were sketchy at best, "turn at the Conoco station" was about as direct as the directions got, but which Conoco station? Reaching Acworth turned out to be the easy part. Pulling into a quicky mart, my only concern was whether I turn right or left at the junction with I-411. None of the employees here knew of any Conoco station which wasn't what I was looking to hear. Calling Chicago for a chance at some better directions didn't help much either. Non of my family had been down here in five years so this mythical "Conoco station" was the only landmark I had. Even knowing the street name wasn't much help since he was in a subdivision and each could have the same streets. He lived on Dewberry, just Dewberry and the directory listed two of those as well. I finally bit the bullet and chose the Dewberry to the east. There sure wasn't any Conoco station in sight, but I blindly followed my intuition and within minutes I was at my grandfathers front door. It had been a solid decade since I had seen the man, fifteen years since I stood at the doorway and I assumed that a lot of changes had happened to both of us in the intervening years, we've both changed quite a bit.

When ringing the bell didn't illicit a response, I tried twice more before cautiously trying the knob. I had ridden too far and gone thru too much getting here to be denied now. I called out loudly, "Hello" while stepping thru the door, hopefully avoiding an armed confrontation. Shamin, my grandfathers "housemate" soon strode into the room and was noticeably shocked at my presence. I didn't know what shocked her more, my being there or what I looked like. Either one could produce the same response at this point. Explaining who I was and what I was doing there changed the shock to acceptance and I was soon sitting down with my grandfather. "Bo" was much more fragile than I expected, but then again it *had* been a long time. After a somewhat tearful reunion, we sat down and caught up on the missing years. I couldn't remember ever having really discussed much with Bo in the past, but then again I was twenty at the time. His health seemed to be the common theme of all the conversations, where he hurt, what it was like to be almost 90 etc. This got to be a bit tedious after awhile, considering I was feeling so well by comparison, but then again when you start closing in on 90 years, your health probably is the one and only concern.

Bo eventually drifted away to take a nap and this gave me a chance to talk to Shamin. She's now a manager of a Burger King in Marietta and her 16 year-old daughter and a 21 year-old son living here as well. Bo's health concerned her as well, but at least his appetite was still good and he was definitely hanging in there. His smoking had led to emphysema, but even this hasn't gotten him to quit his smoking. But we all have to die sometime.

I spent the rest of the afternoon sleeping as well. Tonight I would sleep on the couch in the basement while Shamin entertained some business associates in the main areas of the house. I was looking for a little better accommodations than a couch, but at least I was inside, out of the heat. I took a short walk towards dusk and bought provisions for dinner. I'd cook out again, but this time I'd have a roof over my head. Ramen noodles, corn and hot dogs seemed to fit the bill. Tomorrow it was off towards the Tennessee border. Shamin's son came downstairs to visit after a few hours and I got to learn more about the arrangements here and what he had planned for his future. These folks didn't seem keen on answering a lot of questions but I was just really pleased to see how well they cared for my grandfather.

When his wife died, Bo was still among many relatives down here. But as the years went on, he slowly became the "last of the bohemians" in these parts. His daily routine eventually involved driving into Marietta for a fast food lunch. He started chatting up the cashier at a chicken place and soon this was

becoming a regular customer there. Shamin had emigrated from Iran with her two small children while her husband was in the military back home. Eventually she divorced her husband and mentioned to Bo that she was looking for a better place to live. Bo opened his house up to Shamin and her family and they basically adopted him. They provided daily interaction, cooking and cleaning in exchange for housing. A fair trade.

Day 86
98 Miles

Morning came early again. I repacked the bicycle and headed upstairs for some coffee and bakery with Bo and Shamin before leaving. The goodbyes were more emotional than I was prepared for, with both of us understanding that this would probably be the last time we'd have together.

Leaving town by about 10am it took a good ten miles to clear my head enough to focus back on cycling. I suppose seeing my grandfather was a good thing, everything considered, but it made me feel kind of guilty for not seeing him more or spending more time with him when I did. Bu he seemed content with things the way they were, so life goes on.

Reaching Cartersville, I pulled into a Taco Bell for lunch and then Walmart to reload on Snickers bars. The Smoky Mountains were the next obstacle to face and I didn't want to start the assault without the proper ammunitions. Continuing north on Route 411 the skies began to darken which kept my gears spinning but I was also benefiting from a strong tail-wind today.

By the time I reached the next town of Oakman the threatening skies opened up so I pulled into a small roadside store and threw the cover over the bike just as the mother of all storms hit the area. Grabbing my handlebar bag, I darted inside just ahead of the deluge. I didn't know how long I'd have to wait things out, but inside a Quicky Mart I could at least eat. Over the next hour I caught up on my writing and downed a few Cokes, candy bars and even an ice cream sandwich. Just like the "domino guys" back in Alabama, the folks let me eat away and settle up my wrappers later. I guess I was fitting around these parts better now.

After the storms subsided I rode north and crossed the Tennessee border. Pulling into a small store I downed another large soft drink and a few more candy bars as I tried to map out my route going forward. By this point I had logged close to eighty miles on the day and although I was riding well, I was starting to wear down. There had been plenty of long days before this one and I'm sure there'd be some longer ones in the mountains ahead, but the important thing to keep in mind was to take the hills one at a time and pace yourself.

Riding a bit past Ocoee, I found an antique store off to my right that offered a somewhat manicured spot for the evenings rest. I got the tent up and things secured just as the day switched to night. Tomorrow would be a short day-ride to Maryville and then camp and rest. The assault on the Smokies would be left for the following day, then the Blue Ridge Parkway beyond.

Day 87
93 Miles

The morning was a wet one. It had started raining early on (about 3am) and the storms were so fierce that I finally broke camp around 4:30 during a lull in the action and got things under the awning around the front of the store. For the next hour I waited out the dawn, just too tired to sleep again. As the first sliver of the day peered over the mountains I hit the road under a slight drizzle. I spun about 3 miles before the rain intensified and I found another Quicky Mart shelter. Coffee and donuts helped to pass the time until both the rain and the night more formally passed. Today would be a tough one. I could tell.

Making it to Etowah, I pulled into a Hardee's just as more rain came. A more traditional breakfast took even more of the edge off. I was soon joined by a guy in his mid 60's who was out for a five-day bicycle tour up from Georgia. He had a few questions for me, but the bulk of the conversation was directed his way. We spent the next half hour swapping stories and gear tips before the rain passed yet again and we parted ways. Too bad he wasn't heading my way.

The remaining miles to Maryville were pretty uneventful, but after Maryville is where the fun began. Rolling through town I couldn't believe the mid day traffic. The heat had returned to dry off my gear fairly well, so I rode off in search of a better place for lunch. Taco Bell to the rescue again. After lunch I stopped at the local tourist bureau and got final instructions for my journey in amongst the Smokies. Early season rains had damaged many of the roads in the area, but my main route was still opened to two-wheeled traffic.

Heading towards Townsend I found that to get there would require climbing the likes of which I hadn't experienced since the Beartooth Pass back in Montana. Just out of town it began raining again so I found the first mini-mart and waited again.

Leaving town after a short stop, the skies finally cleared a bit which brought back the heat, adding to the intense joy of the coming climb. Townsend was totally tourism-based, being so close to the Smoky Mountains. Hoofing my way into the visitor center I took a nice long rest before determining my next move. Just up the road lay Elkmont, where I hoped to pitch the tent, but alas it wasn't to be. The road to Elkmont was washed out, meaning I'd have to take the long way around, through Gatlinburg. Having my riding day extended by thirty miles wasn't really what I had in mind when I approached the counter of the visitor center. Checking my watch it was a little before 5pm and miles to go.

Pushing off, I knew these next thirty would be nasty since they required taking some non-descript side roads to return to Pigeon Forge I don't think my thesaurus had a word that adequately describes the six miles from Townsend on that route. Within the first half mile I was faced with a 7-8% grade climbs into a stifling wall of heat created by the overhanging foliage. I was sweating so fast and furious my fingertips were getting wrinkled from all the run-off down my arms. I was in a near panic. My lungs didn't seem to be able to deliver the air I needed, yet I couldn't stop because of the grade. Summoning the last of my secret energy I finally crested the top of this initial peak only to be faced with more, albeit also more gradual, climbing.

Reaching Pigeon Forge by dusk, I was a sweaty disheveled mess. I didn't care about traffic, life, death or the ability to pay ones taxes. I just wanted off the bike and the sooner the better. My seats, both on the bike and my own, were giving out simultaneously. But Pigeon Forge wasn't the place to find relief. Riding through town meant running a gauntlet of tourist shops packed so tightly together they seemed to squeeze out the light from the setting sun. Finally having some level land in front of me allowed me to pound some big gears and get out of the insanity in short order. The incessant traffic jams and hordes of tourists contained within were just too much. I was quickly becoming disgusted with this area. I'm sure that at one time this area was a great place to visit, but with the constant push to become everything to everyone, the natural beauty of the area was overridden with neon and vending machines.

At the end of the strip of stores, I found another Taco Bell and headed in, just looking for a couple of burritos to hold me over until morning. But I had to get thru the line first. That took almost thirty minutes. Normally I would have bailed on the whole process, but there didn't seem to be a ready alternative nearby to even grab a Coke. I struck up a conversation with the family in front of me and learned that they had been here for the better part of a week and had yet to make it to the Smoky Mountains, less than 10 miles away at this point. I shook my head in disbelief and tried to impart to the kids what they were missing, but to no avail. The small boy asked what the mountains *do*. I replied and they don't *do* anything, they just are. Natural wonders to be admired and explored. "What, you mean like *hike* or something?" Yeah, or *something*.

I finished my meal as quickly as possible and soon rode away from all this congestion, briefly returning to the seclusion of the tree cover. The road was cut deeply into the landscape, leaving me few

options to ditch the bike and camp. Finally I saw a sign for a trail head just as the rains started again, so I pushed the rig up and onto the trail and quickly set up the tent actually in the trailhead. With the approach of darkness and rain, I doubted if anyone would be coming through the rest of the night. Making sure everything was properly plasticated took another thirty minutes, but I was finally able to lay down and call it a night. Not exactly the “restful” day I had thought of this morning. Tomorrow I’d scale the Smokey’s but I was just praying for no rain.

Day 88
65 Miles

Can you really call it “waking up” when you’re fairly certain that you didn’t sleep? I pondered this a bit and came up with simple “I’m upright” as I lay in my nylon lined puddle. Looking down at my wrinkled hands quickly confirmed that last night was a damp reality and not just some rainy fantasy.

The rain showed no signs of lessening up this morning, so I loaded up my soggy gear and headed towards Gatlinburg in search of a Laundromat. Pedaling thru the slop towards town was no thrill to be sure, but just being on the road again made things seem a little better. Just wish the mountain was behind me and no still in front. The tent was in such a sorry state that it received a separate spin through the cycles. While running all my things thru the dryer, the skies seemed to lighten a bit and I was seriously wondering if it would turn into a golden day for cycling after all. Two Germans entered the Laundromat, their possessions in paper bags. I may have looked pathetic dragging my things in off the bike, but at least my things were in plastic bags.

Finishing things, I took extra care to properly reseal my clothes back into plastic in case the weather didn’t hold. I was finally rolling by mid morning, late for breakfast but to my relief I came across an Shoney’s that still had it’s morning menu intact. Over a few plates of food I could actually see the skies lightening and my spirits did as well.

Pedalling thru town, the blatant commercialization of the area still made it difficult to look at all the buildup in an otherwise lovely part of the country. Entering the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, I stopped at the visitor center to ascertain the easiest way to get up and over the peaks. Just as I found an awning for the bike, the rains returned and again I was forced to wait out the rains before continuing. The gift shop had the usual magnets, postcards and tee-shirts, but I was interested in a cheesy molded plastic contour map showing the elevation gains that awaited me. My finger traced over the thin blue road marker as it undulated skyward. I could “feel” the crest at Newfound Gap and then repeated the route a few times trying to memorize each bend, curve and dip the road ahead was to take. Groping the map seemed a bit silly in retrospect since I’d soon be “feeling” the features in real time, but it just seemed like the thing to do at the time. I really needed to get off the road for an extended break soon. The half-day spent with my grandfather back in Georgia didn’t really recharge my batteries at all and I was really showing signs of fatigue as the days got longer and my temper got shorter. I took an all-too-short nap beside the bike for a few scant minutes before mounting up and moving on.

By 1pm it was time to begin my assault. The rain was coming down fairly well as I pushed off. The stop at the visitor center gave me a temporary reprieve from that “totally soaked” feeling I’ve had all morning, but within that first mile, I was sopping wet again. The passing motorists did an admirable job of passing me slowly for the most part, but more than one saw fit to anoint me with tidal-quality deluge as they sped by. The falling water created a two-inch-deep layer of runoff flowing beneath me, covering my bike rim. Had I not had the sixty pounds of gear on the back I might have been lost with the flow, but as it was, gravity was stronger than water pressure. My jacket did a nice job keeping the rain out, just like back in Mississippi, but again trapped most of the heat I was generating, making me just as wet as if I didn’t have it on. Chucking all sense of reason, I went with just a tee-shirt, and tried to “tough it out” during the next two hours.

Taking a break along side the road at the half-way point of the climb, I checked my cargo for seepage over a few Snickers bars of encouragement. I calculated the climb to Newfound Gap to be about

fourteen miles and despite the rains, I was still making almost seven miles per hour. The scenic viewpoints I passed were all shrouded in clouds limiting my visibility, but what little I did catch looked truly fantastic.

Continuing on, I tried to focus on how good the break would feel once I hit the summit and not on how tough the route getting there was becoming. My spirits again lifted as it seemed that the cars were slowing down at the higher altitudes. Nearing the summit I saw that I had maintained that seven mile and hour pace for the duration. While the feat warranted an entry into my personal record book, I'm sure there have been many likewise loaded down cyclists that have done better. I also took note that it had gotten much cooler at 7,000ft as the trees receded, exposing me to healthy breeze these mountain gaps provided. Looking around for the promised shelter, I found it located some three miles off the road along the Appalachian Trail. Now wasn't the best time to break out the hiking boots, so I took refuge in the only structure around, the bathroom. I felt a little awkward sprawling out on the floor in there, but I really needed to lay down and recuperate a bit. Compromising, I sought out the comforts of the handicapped stall which was just wide enough for me to stretch out fully and catch even a brief nap. I kept listening for signs of other visitors but eventually drifted off

After twenty minutes of intermittent rest (call it sleep) I got my things together and headed back outside. The rain had let up, but without a warming sun, things were still fairly frosty at this level. I didn't dry off all that much during my rest and the chilling winds had me shivering pretty bad again. My hands began to stiffen as I faced two options: Start up the stove and make something to warm me up, or just start heading down the other side and hopefully things would warm up eventually. Although not fully recovered from the earlier climb, I chose to keep going and prayed the brakes would hold and my hands would be limber enough to apply them.

As I climbed the final stretch to the crest, I rechecked my gear, making sure everything was properly secured. Like a roller coaster nearing the big plunge, there's a moment when you're not climbing and not yet really falling, time suspended as you float towards the impending downward rush. Inhaling deeply and tightening your grip on the handlebars as gravity slowly pulls you over, you mutter a few soft expletives and then the rush begins. I kept pumping my brake levers trying to keep the surfaces, both on the brake shoes and the rim, relatively dry, but I never got the sense that my brakes along could bring my "coaster" to a full stop if I had to. The descent lasted a glorious thirty minutes as the road flattened out nicely in front of me.

I usually rate my descents since they seem to occur so infrequently out here. The big question always being "Was the thirty minute descent worth the two-hour climb that preceded it?" It probably was, but the whole experience would have been different if it wasn't so stinking cold and wet.

A quick tour of the visitor center on the back-side told me more about this wonderful park and the wonders contained within – it was dry that is. Finding a wooden bench, I did my best to remain upright as I caught a few more moments of rest.

The entrance to the Blue Ridge Parkway was a mile down the road, but the plan (as if I've been following one out here) was to find a campground in nearby Cherokee and call it a day. Cherokee was another garishly commercialized tourist trap. Souvenir stands and "attractions" competing for your focus just as Gatlinburg had been on the other side. Gatlinburg's theme was Cowboys and the west, Cherokee was clearly an Indian motif. Pumping steadily through town I pulled into a Laundromat to take the dampness out of my things yet again. The plastic did an admirable job of keeping most of the water from my clothes, but under the constant pounding of the rain, even the best protection fails. While my things were taking yet another spin thru the dry cycle, I struck up a conversation with a good looking co-ed. In addition to "the usual" we spoke of the spirit of adventure. Her dreams were to hike the Appalachian Trail from Maine down to Georgia, but the financing of such an adventure was somewhat of a problem. Karen knew how to live on the cheap, her current residence for the last few weeks being a tent. Knowing the lengths I went to keep things dry, I asked her how she was able to deal with all this wet. She had a quality tent, but even that took in water eventually, so during days like this she slept in her VW bug. I asked if she kept her ground cloth inside or outside the tent. The look I got in return told me she hadn't considered moving the plastic inside, which spawned a conversation with a few others standing nearby.

The ‘boy scout’ method, as I learned was to put the plastic on top of the tent thus preventing the rent from even getting wet. The ‘Georgian’ method involved plastic above and below the floor of the tent. Interesting ideas, but mine seemed to work the best for me. After repacking my ride, I rode to a Burger King for light nosh. Tourism towns equate to long lines at all eateries and I did my best to remain calm for the fifteen minutes it took to reach the counter. Mapping out my next moves brought a fair amount of gawkers in my direction. A young couple asked where I was headed with all this gear and the wittiest thing I could come up with was ‘Up the Mountain.’ Seeing all this commercial buildup made me think that camping in town might not be the best move for me right now, so my plans for the end of the day would include a bit more climbing as I would start knocking off miles on the Blue Ridge by nightfall. Pleasantries with the locals continued for a bit as I waited for some remaining drizzle to fade.

By 6:30pm I had to get moving again. Retracing my route past such tourist hot-spots as the ‘Three Live Bears’, ‘Injun Joes Moccasins’ and ‘Cherokee Taffee’ I turned onto the Blue Ridge Parkway and a return to solitude. My guide book told me that 470 miles of adventure awaited me, but for now the ‘adventure’ involved finding a flat spot for the tent and bike.

Through the hazy dusk, the tree-lined road seemed to hold all the promise the book had laid out. That guide to the Blue Ridge would become my constant reading partner now. The climb was fairly gradual, but long, as in fifteen miles long. At my present pace I’d crest in a little over three hours, but unfortunately there weren’t three hours of daylight left. Riding in total solitude, I began viewing each clump of roadside trees as a potential campground, sizing up each spot’s pro’s and con’s. Will the bike be protected? Is it flat enough? Hidden from the road? Stopping at the first scenic overlook, I started to recap the day in my head. From soggy beginning, the Laundromat, the climb to newfound gap, the descent into Cherokee, another Laundromat, Burger King conversations and the climb that brought me here. It had truly been a long day. Pulling under one of the expansive trees, I set up the tent and did up a pot of pasta in anticipation of tomorrow’s battle with altitude. Settling down, I kept an open ear for the rumbles of the next storm cloud, but none was forthcoming. Thankfully I was rewarded with a dry night of camping when I really needed one.

Day 89
65 Miles

How Steep is Steep?

Waking up on the side of the road, the first thing I did was stick my head out of the tent to check the weather. A light rain had fallen sporadically throughout the night, but thankfully things were wonderfully dry this morning. Starting your day on an incline really makes you pay with those first labored pedal strokes to get you going. The last time I camped on a mountainside like this was on the way to Jacob Lake in Arizona. That seems like such a long time ago. 74 days and 12 states back.

Mileage on the blue Ridge is measured quite accurately by short concrete posts off the left side of the road, heading north, leaving no distance to the imagination. The first post I passed last night was #470 and they click off from there. Hard to believe there’d be over 400 of those small monoliths to pass in the next days.

My guidebook suggested that my best (read only) chance for any kind of breakfast was in the town of Balsam, still a 4 mile climb away. The cool mountain air was such a change from the heavy funk I was used to hacking thru I didn’t seem to mind. Along with detailing the rest stops and towns, the book proved very helpful in identifying the stiff climbs. Sitting back in that Burger King in Cherokee last night I ready that today’s climb to the Mt. Pisgah Inn would require about 9,200 feet of vertical climbing. Thinking back on some previous climbs, I couldn’t remember any one daily total exceeding this amount.

Going to the Sun road – Glacier National Park (5,000ft)
Beartooth Highway – North to South Montana (7,000ft)
Beartooth Highway – South to North Montana (7,500ft)
Day one of the Blue Ridge – North Carolina (9,200ft)

To this point I've logged 5,200 miles preparing for the final stretch. Even back at the coffee shop planning this ride, I knew it would be a tough stretch, but for once the actual ride was tougher than predicted. A steady six-percent grade had me locked into 18th gear and wishing I had a 19th. You know it's bad when you're almost puking and it isn't even 7am yet.

Pulling into Balsam, thankfully the store was right where it was supposed to be. Taking refuge from the mountain for an hour, I talked at great length with the owner and his neighbor. Naturally the talk turned to what I had waiting for me up ahead, but there was some local news that held my attention as well. Apparently there was a car accident just up the road last night as a woman missed her turnoff and plunged off the parkway and into a deep ravine. The local rescue squad was made of local residents and the proprietor of this small place was the ring leader. Upon reaching the scene he recognized the woman as one who had just left his store moments earlier. He remembered selling her a sixer of beer, but said she didn't appear drunk. Over the next hour he detailed the intensive rescue efforts hampered by both the deep gorge and the steepness of the surrounding terrain. The crisp cool morning had me in an almost euphoric state and I was somehow anxious to return to the road, so I promised to head the shopkeepers warning to "stay between the culverts" and rejoin the open road.

The topographic map told me that to make the crest of Mt. Pisgah would require topping two passes to reach 6,053 feet, the highest point on The Parkway. The rest of the morning was spent ascending Pass #1 as I quickly burned thru my shrunk-wrapped breakfast of candy bars and cookies. Finally cresting a little before noon, I sought refuge at a visitor center strategically placed atop the mount. Since there didn't seem to be any fast food joints in sight, I fired up the stove and downed some pasta to keep my fires lit. It was surprisingly cool at the top, so I made a pot of tea as well. I tried to lay down and relax a bit, but the thought that I still had another climb ahead of me kept me from seriously nodding off.

I didn't really mind climbing, since I hadn't done it for so long, but the constant grade was really beginning to wear on me. The guide book mentioned somewhere that riding the entire range would have me climbing over 49,000 vertical feet. Right then I didn't know how many miles that added up to, but I sure would have the time to figure that out over the next week or so. Departing the rest area a little past noon, I batted down the gear for the much deserved descent. Unfortunately I would have to reascend every foot of the descent and more going forward. This was going to be another long day.

The all too brief descent lasted about fifteen minutes as I remembered it, but almost immediately returned to a 6% climbing grade. Welcome to the jungle. The high sun overhead could do little to add to my "cyclists tan", but did have me working the water bottle pretty good over the next hour or so. The roadside vistas provided a few short breaks, but all I could think of was cresting this next pass and having my day end among the clouds. The once clear skies began to cloud up midway through that second climb as a sporadic rain began to fall. It just doesn't get any better than this. Over the next three hours I struggled to keep a constant pace while awaiting the deluge that thankfully never came.

Eventually making the summit of Mt. Pisgah, I set the bike against the sign noting that this was indeed the highest point on the parkway and tried to steady myself enough to take a decent picture, but it was tough. I was shot. A trio of cyclists rode up and offered to take my picture which was greatly appreciated by this point. Talking with them, I learned that they were just out on a week-long training ride up and around The Parkway, making me feel like a wimp for having so much trouble climbing. But then again they were steering whisper-light bikes which leapt uphill like a gazelle as opposed to my red woolly mammoth.

Finally parting ways, my spirits were buoyed by the thought that the remaining miles had to be downhill from here, but eventually even then I didn't get to enjoy the descent fully. After an all-too-short descent, even the flats seemed to have an uphill slant to them, keeping me in the lower gears as a precaution. Two miles past the latest vista, I heard a thumping off the front end and quickly pulled over to the shoulder. The side-wall of my front tire had worn away somehow, exposing the tube. I tried walking the bike over to a guardrail for an easy repair, but within two steps I had a blowout and a much harder repair. Digging out the last of my foldable tires from back in Montana, I set about "retiring" the front wheel. There were a few tense moments, but finally I got things righted. Just as I reattached the last of my bags, the rains

came back. Plasticating everything, those last 16 miles were particularly unenjoyable, and I began to ponder why. It's not that I'm out of shape, quite to the contrary, but I think it's because today's climbing was so boring. A full day out of the saddle had brought me only sixty miles into the great unknown. By 5:30pm I finally made the fabled Pisgah Inn, closing out a 54 mile day, 35 of which were severely uphill. Exhausted, I pulled into the campground and paid for an available site. While setting up my tent I was pretty frustrated about my poor performance on this first day and was looking for options that would take me towards some flatter land. I hadn't ridden all these miles to get subjected to this brand of torture. Pulling out the stove I was just about to fire up yet another pot of pasta when I stopped in my tracks. I needed a real meal. Not something out of a can or small bag, A meal with a tablecloth, napkins, maybe a waiter, definitely a soup of the day. Throwing my gear into the tent, I put on my long pants and my cleanest shirt and headed off towards the resort.

An enormous complex built right amidst a forested area overlooking the valleys below, the Mt. Pisgah Inn was a welcome sight for these sore eyes. For once I wouldn't think about daily budgets or carbo loading. This was a meal a celebration, I had come almost 5,300 miles and finally crested 9,200ft of climbing in a single day and survived. Being seated close to the large panoramic windows facing the valley, I ordered the biggest steak they had, a 16oz. Prime rib, compliments of Mr. Visa Card. Over the next hour I enjoyed one of the greatest meals I've had all year. Dessert was a delicious rhubarb pie ala mode. Heaven on earth.

The dinner did almost more for my spirits than my stomach. Before dinner I was looking for a way off the mountain, but now I was prepared for the next week of climbing and actually looking forward to the challenge. Sitting down and objectively looking at what lay ahead, I saw that the next stop was Crabtree Meadows a scan 63 miles and 5,000vertical feet away. Of that 5,000 feet, only 4,100 were considered "Major Climbing" and warranted a mention on the "cheat" sheet handed out at Waterrock Knob. All gain equals pain out here.

Just being in the mountains signaled the beginning of the end to this wonderful trip. There aren't more than a thousand miles left to be ridden out here so I was determined to enjoy those that I had left.

Day 90
69 Miles

Rained a bit last night but nothing serious. Broke out the sleeping bag for the first time since Iowa as the mornings can be a little brisk up here.

Overcoming the "vertical challenge" can become an all-consuming task, today's total is supposed to be 6,300ft, but most of those were ridden in the afternoon. Tomorrow looks to be about 4,000 and Sunday I'll put in another 4,700. I just hope the rain holds off.

The morning fog kept me off the road for the first hour allowing me to dry out my things at the Laundromat in the compound. My maps showed the route to Ashville would contain no major climbing, but over the first 20 miles I'd still be gaining 850ft, so I was eager to see how that bit of road engineering would be accomplished.

I can't believe I'm already in the homestretch of this ride, but then again I've been out here for three months already and it's time to get home. The climbs here are tough, but when I think that the tent spinning on the dry cycle will only be set up ten more times. There's some melancholy.

Finally pushing off from Mt. Pisgah there were a series of small grades to be crested on the way to Ashville, where I found a decent bike shop where I stocked up on tubes and a new pair of gloves. I was riding without a spare tire at this point and decided that with my luck this might not last the day, so I also picked up a new front tire and repacked the folding one back into my gear. My credit card didn't work for some reason that had me slightly concerned since I hadn't expected using cash for anything but meals. While swapping tires I decided to replace the brake shoes as well, but this time the charge card worked

fine, so go figure. The powers that must be in play just wanted to stress me out. The tunnels on the Blue Ridge seemed to be getting longer and my small pen-flashlight was providing a sadly ineffective beam on the longer tunnels. The bike guys were all too eager to sell me a \$45 headlight, but my handlebar bag made mounting the stupid thing impossible. Getting creative I rode to the Walmart across the street and paid \$6 for a heavy duty flashlight, batteries included. For the remaining five tunnels this would be enough. After dumping almost \$60 in supplies, I was ready to finish out the ride.

Leaving town after a short Taco Bell visit I completed the day's climbing ration of 7,000ft without additional excitement. The rains held and I got to take in several of the fabled Blue Ridge overlooks for a change. This is a truly spectacular area of the country. The deep forests and rich blue skies made me glad I chose to end my riding on this side of the country instead of beginning here. I don't think I'd be appreciating these miles as much if they were my first. The guys at the bike shop mentioned that this was the first dry day in a month, so maybe things were starting to look up.

Entering Crabtree Meadows campground I met an elderly cyclist named Reginald Squires looking to share a site. I was only too happy to oblige and share my experiences with a fellow cyclist, so after reloading supplies at the general store, we rode off together in search of a suitable site. To reach the gate of the campground required pushing up a slight (by normal standards) hill. This is where I began to appreciate what Reginald had accomplished to be in this area. His 60-year old legs couldn't withstand the torture of climbing any longer, so he dismounted and walked his bike to every summit. Watching his slow approach to the gate, I thought to bestow the moniker "The Walking Man" to my new friend.

Over the remaining hours of daylight Reginald and I traded experiences and observations of this wonderful land. Reginald was truly an adventurer, riding from his home in Texas to Washington D.C. to have a word with his congressman about senior services. Riding a more traditional "adult" 10-speed with none of the comforts that my bigger rig provided, he's actually made decent progress to reach this point. His dress and camping style also differed drastically from my own, but we both shared the same heart for independence and exploration. Wearing a simple deck shoes and walking shorts, Reginald has spent the last week covering the same mileage I've crossed in the last two, walking every ascent definitely slowing him down. For dinner, Reginald was looking forward to a bag of chips and milk before I offered to teach him about the wonders of pasta and tea. The cool evening air made tea just the right choice as we continued to swap adventures.

Reginald had a slightly different view of my "Big World vs. Small World" philosophy, claiming we're all from some distant planet and when we die we'll go back to the home world and have to account for our time here. Obviously Reginald's goal is to hand in the longest report possible. He's driven down to see the Panama Canal (in a car) and is currently planning to head down to Guatemala for the winter months. He wanted to know all about my travels, but compared to his, my summer jaunt seemed pretty routine. Turning in for the night I found it hard to sleep as visions of being where Reginald's been kept spinning around my tent.

By rough estimate, I've climbed almost 17,000ft, a full third of the total. It would be interesting to spin with Reggie tomorrow, but his slower pace would probably drive me nuts within the first mile.

Day 91
45 Miles

Got rolling late today but who cares. Had coffee with Reginald as we continued to swap stories until almost 11am. Rolled fifteen miles into an aptly-named burg of "Little Switzerland" and had a wonderful lunch beside the Blue Ridge. While taking in this lovely hamlet, I spoke with an outdoor real estate agent running his operation from a shading picnic bench. No need for costly office space in a town this small. Since there were about four official structures in town, my tour was short indeed.

Lunch consisted of a tast tuna fish, apple and celery spread on pumpernickel, oranges, cantaloupe, cream of spinach soup and a great cinnamon iced tea. Sure it was costly but I was caring less about the price and more about the enjoyment lately anyway. Dessert was a heavenly chocolate chip banana cake. After lunch I took the time to write some postcards and mail them off before returning to the road and the Parkway above. Hannah and Luke back in Kokomo would learn of the past few days of adventure and the climbs I've endured.

Julian Price was today's final destination, making for a paltry 45 mile day, but them's the breaks. There were several attitude adjuster climbs just after Little Switzerland, but I was beginning to make my peace with the mountains already, I just had to. The Big Mountain store gave me a chance to stock up as I spun the last miles into camp. Pitching a tent, I was surprised how good my dinner actually tasted. Two packages of ramen noodles, corn and hotdogs, when combined, gave a lot of zip.

Plunking down \$9 for a site was a bit stiff, but there didn't seem to be anyone around to share with. Tomorrow's ride looks to be all downhill with one 500ft spike in the middle. Boone, North Carolina seems to be the town where I could restock the bike.

Only nine more days to D.C. and with the cooler temperatures, I've had no problem sleeping these last few nights. The locals said it rained for 16 consecutive days before these last two dry ones, but every day you should prepare for the worse up here. There's an artist colony about 30 miles up the road, so I thought this might be the spot for lunch tomorrow. There's a church nearby as well that boasts of painted frescos, so that'll be a photo stop for sure.

Day 92
50 Miles

Got out of camp by 8:30 after talking with a cycling dad who was towing his two young ones in a Burley bike trailer. His specialty was "brevet" riding, ultra long-distances with almost no breaks. I was interested in hearing what riding 200 miles in a day was really like. That 130 mile effort back in South Dakota showed me that with the proper motivation, anything was possible.

Rolling into Blowing Rock, I pulled into the Cosmic Café and enjoyed wonderful bagels, gourmet coffee and conversation with some locals. It's been too long since I had a decent bagel, so I ended up pounding down a couple there and took a few for the road.

A glorious cool clear morning made riding uphill a little more tolerable today. Sure this area gets it's fair share of rain and changing weather, but the brilliant blue skies on mornings like this more than make up for the sporadic showers. The *mount du jour* passed beneath me without much difficulty but my this, my third day on the BR, I was getting used to the climbing.

More rolling mountains brought me to milepost 259 and the famed Northwest Trading Post. A great general store stocked with homemade bakery and working craftsmen made this place a tourist magnet, sucking my bike right into the parking lot. After lounging a bit, I rode off the parkway two miles to Glendale Springs, site of those church frescos. I'd really like to roll like this more often, starting earlier and rest more often along the way. Of course if all the days could be this sunny...

Began riding again after 3pm after a leisurely lunch and a quick trip to the church to see those painting. The paintings were impressive but there were so many people in there praying I couldn't even get my picture. Rolling back to the Trading post, I hoped to procure more "Apple Jacks" from the store, but alas their supply of these doughy apple delicacies had run out. Serves me right.

The remaining 12 miles of my day were pretty evenly split between up and down, so my the time I arrived at the Miller campground I was feeling relatively fresh. So far on my journey's through the Blue Ridge, this place has earned my highest marks. Included with the \$10 fee was a decent shower and laundry

room. While the general store was a bit lacking in food, the proprietor more than made up for that by offering to make me a turkey sandwich out of her refrigerator while we chatted.

Dinner last night was great, but tonight's was merely interesting. The sparsely stocked store could provide only tuna fish and beer sausages. Combined with the Ramen noodles, this gruel definitely had a unique taste. After dinner I treated myself to a pint of ice cream while cranking out more postcards. All in all a pleasurable day. The official "middle of the road" was still fifteen miles further north, but for all intensive purposes, Miller campground was it.

Day 93
50 Miles

My fourth month on the road begins today with a "roll and go" by 7:45. A great night's sleep, interrupted by some scurrying critters, but then again I **was** camping in a forest. Reading some old Time magazines last night had me longing for daily news, but I got past that feeling as soon as my tires hit the pavement. I've managed to make it three months without a TV, radio or newspapers and I can't say that I really miss them. Maybe the radio. I haven't had much trouble replaying songs in my head, but without added input, the same song will replay for hours.

A heavy fog hung close to the road this morning and any normal cyclist would have waited for the sun to burn it off a bit before continuing, but I've never been normal. From Miller's campground there was a fair amount of vertical work to be done early on, but at least I was well rested for once. This late in the ride my *dreams* have even changed. Whereas early on I dreamt the ride had been called off only to wake up inside a tent, I now dreamt that the trip was ending and I'd soon have to return to civilization. This dream would be real enough soon.

A week from today and I'll be spinning into Front Royal, the end of this park system and on into Fairfax for a reunion with college friends. Enough about the future, the present is what matters. After biscuits and gravy at a roadside diner, the fog melted into a steady drizzle. This really makes me appreciate mornings like yesterday. I took an exit at milepost 229 expecting to find a country store exactly 1.3 miles off the route, according to my trusty guidebook, but it seems to have closed two years back. Pedaling further I finally located a BP gas station which had everything I needed, fruit, Dorito's and cookies, the perfect fuel for the mountains.

Another two miles and I was pumping along on the parkway when I felt the rear of the rig shimmy again. Visions of yet another broken wheel raced through my head until I looked around to discover that the shimmy was man made. Two of the three guys I met back at Balsam Pass near Mt. Pisgah had caught up with my on their training rides. We spun on together, cracking jokes and generally catching up on the last three days of cycling. They had met and passed "The Walking Man" and were surprised to learn that I had actually spent the night with the guy. Comparing itineraries, we seemed to have had the same destination today, Fancy Gap. Excitedly we spun the rest of the day together at an accelerated pace. My guidebook showed a restaurant just off the road ahead, but we found this place closed as well. The skies started to darken which pushed the pace up a bit, but finally Rich and Joe decided it was time for a break. Pushing the rig up the embankment off the right of the road, we laid down in the grass and ate some fruit as the rains began to fall in earnest.

Rich and Joe met each other back in California and their friendship endured Rich's move back to coastal Maryland. Rich brought along the whole family on this trip and while we rode, they followed up in a van, taking in the tourist stops along the way. The rains began to pick up as we remounted, but just then Rich's family pulled up and offered to take my baggage up ahead to Fancy Gap. While tempting, I was determined to make it all the way toting every bag. The remaining miles to Fancy Gap passed beneath me pretty quickly now that I wasn't riding along. Without all those bags, Rich and Joe made better time on the climbs, but not that much better, I compensated pretty well with lower gearing and a bigger engine.

Settling into the campground early, I sprung for ice cream for the guys in return for letting me share their site. Throwing a load of laundry in, we made preparations for dinner. Rich Rau and family had a pop-up camper complete with stove, so a sumptuous feast was in order. Corn, sausage, fruit and gallons of Gatorade made available to this famished rider. Much better than the same old pasta and red sauce I was used to.

The first day of the fourth month ends like so many others; an early start, a few unexpected surprises and an evening spent with new friends. There aren't that many days left to my adventure, but nights like this could go on forever...

Day 94
86 Miles

It rained a bit last night but we all awoke to a beautifully clear morning. This place is pretty incredible, you always need to be prepared for inclement weather, but on a clear day the overlooks to the valleys below are breath-taking.

We three cyclists left Rich's family to repack their camper and rolled out about 9am. I knew I couldn't keep up with them for long since they had no load. They dusted me about mile 4 today but I had a more leisurely day planned anyway. I didn't have that many more days in the saddle and I wanted to make the most of what I had left.

Passing through the town of Mayberry I stopped by the ancient trading post where I watched the owner whittle a whistle while I simultaneously whittled down a pint of ice cream. While we were sitting there the whittler asked me "the usual" and then told me that when I got to the end of the Parkway, I should go see the "Cookie Lady". I tried to get him to cough up more details, but he didn't have much more to say other than she was like the "patron saint of bike riders" in these parts.

The next town was the Meadows of Dan, where I found lunch essentials and gave me time to plasticate things as the skies darkened once again. About 50 feet from where I re-entered the Parkway, the skies opened up and I got soaked. Yet again, once the shoes were trashed it was time to stop fighting, so I sloshed on to milepost 160 and took a break for my meal.

The hill climbing seemed somehow easier today, but maybe it's because I didn't think about the pain as much as I used to. These steep behemoths were here long before me and will undoubtedly be here for millenias, so it's best to make your peace with them and become "enlightened" to the undulation. I was a stubborn convert, but by this point I had fallen into line with the other converts.

There was supposed to be another store just off the parkway at milepost 136 but this too had burned down two years ago. This marked the third structure burned back in 1992. Must have been a fire year then. Pedaling downhill for another five miles I located another Quicky Mart for a quick snack. This was getting to be a long day and having wet feet didn't help. Taking the sage advice of the gas station attendant, I followed his sketchy directions for a "shortcut" back to the parkway. Anything to avoid another five mile climb back up to the main road. Somewhere in the back of my mind I remembered deciding something about taking unofficial "shortcuts" when this trip began back in California, but this was quickly forgotten in the sweat of the day.

Reaching the point he had mentioned, I learned that instead of pedaling back to the parkway, I'd have to portage my bike up an unbelievably steep trail. The total elevation gain was something like 40 feet at this point, but I swear it was straight up. I checked all around for an easier path, but in the end I resorted to carrying the bike a step at a time and praying to reach the top in one piece. After making it the first 15 feet or so, I encountered a huge dead tree blocking the path. There was no where to walk the bike around, so it was up and over this obstacle as well. It took me three tries to get all my gear over, but eventually I made it. Luckily the bags were tightly secured to the bike, but the afternoon rains made things a sloppy mess. Some shortcut. After what seemed like an hour of struggling I finally emerged from the bramble,

bike intact and rejoined the parkway. Again I was paying a high price for a shortcut. My only reward for this effort coming in the form of a lovely ten mile descent once I got rolling again.

My planned campground was at milepost 120 making for a 79 mile day, but the Bohemian in me said that since I was already wet, the \$9 campground could offer me little in the way of amenities since this was a “rustic” site, just flat ground and washrooms. I didn’t even know if they had water. Weighing all this I decided to press my luck once more and continue onward. Finally ditching things after an almost 90 mile day beneath a broad tree at one of the overlooks. I seemed to have entered unobserved and quickly set up camp in the fading daylight. Ducking inside I was just about out when the tent started shaking with help of a ranger. Yeah, I *did* know that camping here was a bit illegal, but I had decided to take the chance of getting caught and now I finally had. The ranger graciously offered to cart my fanny back to the last campground, but that would mean retracing the last climbs of the day, so I just thanked him, packed up my things, and continued on down the road taking the first exit off the parkway.

Finding a somewhat rotten spot under a tree in what was technically a culvert, I reset the tent and called it a night. All to save \$9.

Day 95
55 Miles

Waking up in Vinton I spun silently into town, propping myself up against a wall of a food mart and waiting for it to open. Yesterdays hard and wet miles capped off by the camping hassles had dampened my resolve for miles today as I was thinking more about sleep than cycling early on. Today should only be about 55 miles or so, so the early morning idea was to take it slow, affording me time to wait out a store opening. Just having the rig dry again should add a few miles to my hourly pace.

Today’s *ascent du jour* is a small 1,400ft monster that should attack before lunch which should leave me a matching 1,400ft descent for afternoon dessert. My computer reset last night for some reason after recording 5,491 miles. I probably bumped the buttons during my rousing last night.

Breakfast ended up being donuts and OJ while watching the sun rise above the lofty peaks of the Blue Ridge. Most of the route to the Peaks of Otter wound uphill and since I extended my riding yesterday my heart wasn’t really into cycling today. About five miles from the top, the route turned sharply upward with potholes and large gaps in the pavement. Arriving at the Peaks of Otter complex, I spent the next hour gorging myself on a large lunch. Another cyclist pulled up on his daily ride and we traded the usual travel banter. He said he really needed to push on, but that he’d be thinking of me and my travels the rest of the day. Imagine that.

The trip to the “Top of the Mountain” was only another seven miles away, but didn’t seem quite that long. I don’t know if it was the grade, the fact that I was now slathering my quads daily with menthol or that I desperately wanted an end to today’s climbing, but I was actually starting to enjoy the slow leisurely climbing this range provided. Resting at the true summit, I took in more of the “rarified air” and prepared for the coming descent.

My first true descent in a long while, and well earned: 12 miles of uninterrupted spinning bliss. I smoked up the breaks pretty well trying to keep my speed in check, but I did enjoy every second. This descent was so steep that I felt about a 20 degree shift in temperatures by the time I reached the bottom and pulled over for my daily supply stop. It was now almost 90 degrees out, by far the hottest day on the Parkway.

I was now at the lowest point on the Parkway, some 650 feet above sea level, along the St. James River. Pulling into the campground I found a great spot some forty feet from the river itself, which at this point was like a fast moving brook. There was no store here but this was more than compensated for by a nice little lunch counter offering a shake and fries to temp my palate. As I was finishing up my snack, the waitress asked me which way I was heading. When I told her I was heading east, she said to make sure I

stopped and saw the “Cookie Lady of Afton”. She too didn’t have much to add, but mentioned that most cyclists coming thru talked about her.

Calling it a day so early left time for a short hike before dinner. I found a nice footpath running along the stream and spent the next hour trying to capture that illusive “perfect” photo. Usually all it takes to get one right is to shoot about 23 wrong, so I shot enough bad ones to ensure I could lay claim to 2 decent shots.

The Ramen corn and hotdog dinner combination again filled the pot and more importantly filled the void. Washington D.C. is rapidly approaching as the mile markers tick down to 0. Soon I’ll have to deal again with bills, work and other hard “facts of life” but for now I’m content to watch the river stream by my tent door and reflect on the peaceful summer spent on the road...

Day 96
40 Miles

The initial ten miles of climbing today weren’t all that bad. Representing the last of the nasty uphills, today I accepted the pain willingly. Resting at Whetstone Ridge, an idyllic resort hideaway for the well heeled, I pondered my next move over a simple hotdog and fries. Spinning to the state park would make for an early enough day, 16 miles to the exit and then another 6.5 miles to the park, but those last miles were described as “hellaciously steep” by a local rider who stopped for a candy bar. The descent would be fun today, but leave me a rude climb first thing in the morning. The next option was to stop at the Montebello campground, a mere 2.5 miles away and only three miles off the route. Leaving the Blue Ridge, I followed signs that soon had me immersed in a dense backwoods where road signs seemed an unwanted expense. Just when I was about to turn around and get back to where I started, I crested a small hill and found the campground sprawled out on both sides of the road.

Montebello Virginia is basically a campground community and I was their newest resident. After taking stock of what the camp store had to offer, I pitched my tent and headed down to the river to write some postcards. The cloudy skies soon turned ugly, forcing me inside the tent just as a storm hit the area. Taking refuge there for about an hour, I was just thankful that I had decided to call it a day a bit early and wasn’t on the road somewhere. The shoes stayed pretty dry inside the tent. After the storm passed I returned to the store and bought provisions for dinner along with another pint of ice cream for dessert. Another laundry stop was in order and while things were spinning, I began to mess with my beard and moustache. I had buried a comb somewhere in my handlebar bag for most of the summer, but finally dug it out and began to get creative. The look that seemed to be the most “me” was a standard “Viking” look, a handlebar moustache and a combed out full beard. Impressive to say the least. Letting things go all summer finally generated a facial mop to be proud of.

Today’s light riding day would mean a few more pedal strokes tomorrow, but for now I was content with that. I really needed more days like this. The batteries recharged better when I was laying about. Nothing too strenuous and plenty of free time. But too many days like this and I would have never made it this far this fast. Sleep came easy again as I struggled to stay up long enough to get my journal updated.

Day 97
26 Miles

Because you never know where the day will take you...

Having an official “paid for” campsite makes for a more casual morning. There’s no need to get rolling with the dawn when everyone knows you there. The tent and sleeping bag were still damp from yesterday’s storm, so while they took a spin in the dryer, I headed to the general store in search of breakfast, along the way passing the trout pond crowded with early morning hopefuls also looking for a ‘bite’ of a different kind. The well stocked store offered almost too many choices but I finally settled on a peach, two bananas and a pint of chocolate milk, breakfast of champions. Psyching myself up for the last

day of Riding on the Blue Ridge, I was pleased to see that the showers they were predicting for the area were holding off for now. Weather here in the Appalachians is fairly unpredictable, but I've been getting two sunny mornings for each one of rain and according to my schedule today was to be a day of sun.

Hitting the road a little after 8am, the first order of the day was to return to the Parkway. Yesterday's speedy descent into Montebello earned me a slow arduous climb today, just the thing my legs needed first thing in the morning. Shifting into low gear allowed me to climb grades up to 6% without too much distress, but I quickly found the road leading out was closer to 9% than 6. In school a 3% change in grade didn't mean much unless you were close between a "B" and an "A" but out here that could mean the difference between riding and walking. Purists would say that walking would be "cheating" and since none of the previous climbs on this trip had forced me to use shoe power, I could use that as motivation, but the fact of the matter was that it would be more strenuous to push the bike up these hills than to pedal them, so my butt stayed right where it was and I moved on slowly. Seeing the entrance to the Parkway ahead, the thrill I usually experience at the end of a climb was tempered somewhat by the dark clouds up the road.

The approaching storm provided all the motivation I needed to spin the last miles of the Parkway. Riding "the Ridge" from south to north has "enlightened" me as to the ethereal pleasures of climbing this areas peaks, so this last bit of vertical work offered time to reflect on this magnificent road. After spending the last ten days alternating between dam and dry, you'd think I'd become "enlightened" about riding in the rain as well, but that still hasn't occurred. Just as I pulled into the visitor center I felt the barometer drop and got the bike under an awning as the skies opened up. I felt like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. Many people had spoken of her but nailing down who she was and what was going on there was difficult. Entering the visitor center, the mere mention of the "Cookie Lady" seemed to brighten then attendant's day. Betty, the volunteer running the place not only knew of whom I spoke, but had actually gone to school with her. In our short conversation together, just like in the movie, it was obvious that the Cookie Lady's deeds and influence had spread far and wide. Giving me directions, with several references to trees I'd pass along the way, she agreed with "Bike Shop Peter" back in Asheville, the "Cookie Lady" was someone I had to meet.

Walking out the weather, I propped myself against the stone wall of the visitor center and reflected on what I've experienced over the past 97 days. Like a movie, when taken frame by frame, I can recall a day, a town or an event with great clarity, but run at normal speed everything begins to blur a bit. The nights spent camping secretly on the side of the road, behind all those buildings and out in pastures. The meals, pasta, gruel and even more pasta. Snickers bars to numerous to count, Dorito's, ice cream and all those Quickie-Marts. The heat, present and overpowering from Mt. Rushmore to the Smokies, 90-degree days with 90% humidity making it seem like I was cycling in a sauna. Trying to think "cool thoughts" before entering a tent on all those muggy nights. The places, Grand Canyon, Bryce, the Tetons, Yellowstone, the Black Hills, New Orleans. But what will stick with me the most are the people I've met out here. From the folks at that gas station back in Truxton Arizona, the Rennolds in Zion, Mike in Idaho, Brent and Chuck in South Dakota, the Snook Inn irregulars in Newton Iowa and Reginald Squires "the walking man" and finally Joe and the Rau's here on the Parkway. The kindness and generosity of these folks will leave it's mark.

Back in the suburbs of Chicago I enjoyed riding just after a rainstorm. The air seemed "alive" after having it's pollutants washed away by the falling rain, providing an hour or so of pretty pristine riding before all the impurities return. In Virginia it seems to work the same, although the air here is quite a bit cleaner to start with. As the rain tapered off, I cautiously left the shelter of the visitor center and rode the last two miles of the Parkway. Although the Blue Ridge proved to be the most difficult stretch of road I've encountered so far, it was with a bit of sadness that I passed the last of the 470 mile markers. Looking back up the road one last time, I felt a deep sense of accomplishment at having reached this point.

Taking a deep breath, I left the Parkway and set out in search of Afton Virginia and this "Cookie Lady". The soundtrack to "The Wizard of Oz" began playing between my ears. To the strains of "Follow the Yellow Brick Road" I found the Afton exit and felt an adrenaline rush as I neared my destination. All during the trip I've tried to view each day as a journey, not just a destination, but today I got both, the destination was the journey.

Afton Virginia, nestled between the Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge Parkway, was best known (if you can call it that) as the town you rode through to get to nearby Walton mountain. Just like back in Lead South Dakota and several other “mountain towns” I had ridden thru, everything in Afton had a defined “slant” to it, “uptown” and “downtown” taking on logical meanings here. While heading “downtown” I was told to be on the lookout for a beat-up touring bike next to a water pump, this is where the “Cycling Shrine” can be found. Rolling thru this quiet town I think I was expecting a “Walton-like” welcome with townsfolk pouring out of the surrounding houses with heartfelt greetings (or at least donuts), but none was forthcoming. In fact, had it not been for a dispassionate glance from a passing dog, my arrival would have gone completely unnoticed and had I not picked up the sounds of a distant lawnmower, I would have sworn the whole town went fishing. Spying the bike and water pump, I pulled up onto the sidewalk and continued to look for signs of life in this version of “Oz”. Two brick houses and a large garage completed the “Emerald City”. Leaning the bike against the stone façade of the garage, I cautiously approached the nearest house, obeyed the hand-lettered sign on the door and helped myself to some cookies and lemonade inside. The porch was papered with cycling related articles and travel tips that I took the time to read through. I must have been deep in thought to have missed the sounds of approaching footsteps.

The “whoosh” of the screen door accompanied with a boisterous “Hello!” startled me to the point of recoil. Turning around I faced a woman dressed simply in slacks and a sweatshirt, curlers and a bandana. Stammering a return greeting, my mind raced for the “right” thing to say when facing an almost mythical presence, but all I could get out was, “I’m looking for the Cookie Lady.” “Oh that’s me, I’m June Haven” she replied simply, “Well I’ve ridden 5,800 miles across America and recently the local folks say you’re someone I need to meet.” Not exactly poetry, but what is. In the Virginian-ese I’ve grown accustomed to, she replied “Well come on in and tell me all about it!”

The porch door opened into a kitchen and to be honest, none of the lore alluded to prior to this could have prepared me for what awaited inside. The main floor was divided into four rooms. Every exposed surface was covered with cycling memorabilia. The dining room served as an “artifact room” wherein previous visitors have left more concrete reminders of their stay; old gloves, hats, shirts and waterbottles, all autographed by their donors. The remaining rooms were lined with newspaper clippings and photographs. Postcards; throughout the house hundreds of postcards from all previous visitors hung on strings draped on every wall like bunting. Gazing out the window we both commented on the falling rain. June asked how I liked riding thru the rain and I let her know how thankful I was to be inside. After June led me around in a highly energetic tour I got her to take a break and tell me how this all came to be.

Back in 1976 Afton was pretty much the sleepy town I rode thru earlier. About two weeks before America’s Bicentennial, a pair of cyclists came rolling off the Skyline Drive in search of a general store showing on their maps. Coasting thru town they garnered more than the occasional glance from the locals out that day. These folks had seen cyclists before for sure, but none like these; totally packed down with bags and moving slow, no, these were touring cyclists. Informed that the Afton General Store had burned down in 1974, the two looked despondent as they slowly turned their rigs around to begin the return to the main route. Along the way they passed an auto shop off to the right which had gone unnoticed on the descent. Approaching cautiously, they asked the proprietor about local eateries hoping for a local solution, but again heard about the “fire of ‘74”. They filled their water bottles at a hand pump operated by George Haven, the owner. Eying their heavy burden, he asked where they were headed. Upon hearing “Oregon”, he summoned his only daughter, June to come and meet these two adventurers. After a pleasant conversation it was time for the cyclists to get back spinning. Waving good-byes, the Havens were convinced that these cyclists were only kidding about Oregon. But then the next day, a few more cyclists rolled thru town, some in pairs, some in large groups, some on high-falutin’ machines, others on basic 3-speed clunkers. Young and old it didn’t matter, what mattered is that they kept coming. After about the tenth visitor to the old pump outside the Haven Garage, the full story was revealed.

To celebrate America’s Bicentennial, a transcontinental bicycle route had been established and these hearty souls thought it was their patriotic duty to be among the first to follow the prescribed path across America. The detailed maps they had been using (current as of 1974 apparently) showed tiny afton

Virginia as having a General Store worthy of a stop. That summer of 1976 was a hot one in Virginia and as the cyclists continued to stream into town, June and her father began offering a more substantial offering to their visitors; PB&J sandwiches, lemonade and the renowned home-baked cookies made by June. The Haven's fascination with these adventurous travelers grew as their numbers increased. June began taking instamatic prints of these two-wheeled pioneers and had them sign in and list where they came from and where they were heading. June estimated that about 700 cyclists came thru Afton that year before the autumn leaves brought an end to the visits. Winter gave the Haven's time to reflect on the summer just past. They wondered how many of the fresh-faced cyclists that they met had actually gotten to romp in the surf at the Oregon coast. Then the postcards started to arrive.

At first the Haven's were stunned that anyone had remembered their meeting after a summer in the saddle, but gradually they realized that their kindness had spawned something special in the cyclists that had passed thru. Over the next months the cards and letters kept coming and June meticulously saved each one, trying to match the names with the photos she had taken over the summer. Most were simply addressed "Haven's, Afton Virginia". The place was that small that few were misrouted.

With the first warm gusts of spring June and her father wondered if the summer would bring any cyclists since by now the maps would have been updated to remove the General Store reference for their hamlet. They soon realized that they had nothing to fear as twice as many cyclists came thru that year – from both directions. Most followed their maps from the previous year, but surprisingly a few came thru saying that they didn't come for the burned out store, but rather to meet June and her father. June's face warmed when relating that part.

After the first two years, BikeCentennial, the map makers had finally gotten around to changing their maps and the store in Afton was removed. However, purely by word-of-mouth, cyclists continued to seek out Afton and the Haven's. The postcards and letters continued to fill their mailbox. Somewhere around 1980 an unidentified cyclist bestowed the title "Cookie Lady" upon June and her father became "Dad Haven" to the cycling community. As the years passed, the annual cycle continued uninterrupted. The legend of "The Cookie Lady of Afton" grew to almost mythical proportions and soon Afton reappeared on the BikeCentennial maps, not for any new business venture (because there wasn't one) but as a very special place worthy of a stop, a tribute to the kindness and cookies provided by these two. A few years ago June's uncle passed away and left her this house, which became the "Cyclists Shelter". Her father "Dad Haven" has passed on as well, but his kindness and good-natured spirit continue to rub off on all who visit.

Although she must have related this story to every cyclist that stops by, her face glowed and eyes misted at the mention of all the postcards and letters she's received over the previous 19 years. June estimated that she'd serve cookies and lemonade to her 10,000 cyclist this summer and although the cookies aren't home-made anymore, the kindness by which they are offered still exists.

Originally I had planned to spend an hour or so visiting and then be back on my way, but after hearing "The Cookie Lady's" story and catching a brief glimpse of the lore behind this place, I had to spend the night. June seemed relieved to hear that I had chosen to stay which gave us more time to visit later. She soon departed to take care of other matters and I began to explore this amazing cycling shrine.

The Haven home was only a block away and again the silence of this town was almost deafening. I changed into some warmer clothes and stared out the window awhile before picking up one of the many photo albums from that inaugural summer of '76 and concentrated on the cyclists who preceded me here. Looking thru those early photos what struck me first was how seemingly ill-prepared these pioneers seemed compared to what I was toting around. Flipping through the yellowed pages, almost none of the cyclists had any special clothing, just walking shorts, t-shirts and gym shoes, but it was the bikes, all the different bikes, that held my attention. In preparing for my ride, I had taken the better part of a year refining my machine, selecting gear that would withstand what the road had to dish out, but back in '76 it seemed that as long as it rolled, it was good enough. Touring bikes have come a long way baby. What these folks lacked in equipment (and ultimate comfort) they more than made up for in sheer determination. Their suntanned (burned) legs, arms and faces attested to their will to endure what the road dished out. In the silence of June's living room I felt the bond with these trailblazers, a shared sense of adventure. Although

we had taken different routes to get here, we had everything in common, the bikes, the road, and most importantly, the Cookie Lady of Afton.

I read thru the remaining books and all the articles until almost 2am. Taking advantage of the stove and canned goods, I threw together some macaroni and cheese with Ravioli-O's. While trying to absorb all the stories these walls literally told, I think it was the letters and postcards that hit me the hardest and I could clearly see why June got so emotional with their mention. The letters and cards didn't contain mere "Hi's" and "I made it" messages, but rather, "I love you June" and "You're the greatest!" I was beginning to think the same. A few lines almost moved me to tears, the heartfelt sentiments of the writers ringing thru the paper they were written on.

About 1:30am the full impact of the place landed on me like a ton of bricks. Ever since California, the response to the "usual" line of questioning has been, "Well good luck to you" and "hang in there." No sense of commonality. The people I'd meet couldn't understand why someone would put themselves thru something like this and I couldn't understand why more people didn't. But after this visit with the Cookie Lady, and reading thru all this material, I've finally found my peer group. No longer were my dreams isolated and unspoken. The books, cards and walls here oozed a common message. My message. Words like "too far", "Can't" and "Impossible" don't exist here. Here was a written record of those who made it that far, can do it and found it wasn't impossible. Doers making their dreams come true. The isolation of the road disappeared as I now met others for whom the open road was a challenge to be met, not avoided. Reaching for the last volume of photos from 1994, I came across a photo of the Miller clan. I had met the mother and daughter support crew back in Chester Illinois, following the father and son riding a tandem from Virginia to their home in Portland. Seeing their faces again brought back that sunny day in the birth place of Popeye. Back then I thought it was so neat to actually meet some folks doing the same thing this summer, and now a month later we meet again through the wonder of the Cookie Lady.

Stretching out on one of the longer couches I found it hard to sleep as thoughts of my incredible day swirled thru my head. Reaching the end of the Blue Ridge, meeting June and the "other" cyclists here. Quite a busy day indeed. Riding day in and day out is hard work, but seeing places like this make it all worth it.

"Because you never know where the day will take you"

Day 98
105 Miles

The first rays of light were muted coming thru the window and I feared another rainy day but the "clouds" began at ground level and were really fog. Taking one last tour of this wonderful bicycle archive I packed my things and readied myself for the final push to the coast. Pausing briefly in front of all the "riding remnants" covering the kitchen wall, I scrounged my bags for a suitable relic to leave. Settling on a hideous green cycling cap I bought back in Paris in 1986. Together we had climbed the mountains of three countries and survived the challenges this country had to offer. I carefully detailed the highlights (and lowlights) of my trip on the brim:

"August 6, 1994. Following my own route, Left Santa Monica Pier May 1st, rode to the Grand Canyon, hiked to the bottom and out, rode to and thru Zion, Bryce, Tetons, Yellowstone, Black Hills, Badlands, across Iowa in 5 days, down the Mississippi, Shawnee Forest, Land Between the Lakes, Elvis sighting in Memphis, New Orleans, Smokies, Blue Ridge and finally here 5,800 miles and man is my butt sore!"

Mark "The Mountain Slayer" Chalabala

Seems like a lot for a brim, but I can write really small when I've got something to say. The moniker "Mountain Slayer" was given to me back in Alton Illinois by a cyclist who seemed enthralled to hear of my riding across the Continental Divide back in Montana.

As I was moving my gear outside, June came bustling down from her house. She had overslept and thought I might have taken off already. Fat chance. For a change, I took *her* picture and gave her \$20 to help defray costs around the place. She handled the twenty nervously and asked if I was sure that I could afford to give that much. My assurances did little to soothe her, so I told her to take \$10 for the house and I'd buy a "Cookie Lady" t-shirt with the rest. This she could accept. Glancing back through the porch door one last time I saw that hideous green hat tacked prominently on the far wall and felt confident that those who came after me would notice it.

Saying good-bye to the Cookie Lady was a lot harder than I thought. Reading all those articles and seeing the pictures last night I saw 19 years of activity around this small spot on the map. Pulling away I felt like I was 18 again and pulling away from the comforts of home. I promised June that this would not be the last she'd hear from me and I got rolling before things got any tougher for me. I hadn't felt that choked up since leaving my grandfather back in Georgia, and this was a woman I had just met less than a day ago, again attesting to the powers of the Cookie Lady of Afton.

Climbing back up to the highway the fog lifted to a glorious morning sky. More than glorious, spectacular. The weather was in the 70's with a slight tail breeze and sunny. I seemed to have answered the "why" question back in Afton, so now I was feeling ten pounds lighter because of it. Continuing north east I entered the Shenandoah National Forest and the Skyline Drive. The guard at the entrance took a look at my rig and weather-beaten National Park Pass and asked where I'd been. Being a bit of a smart-ass I asked with fake innocence, "Today or this summer?" which elicited a chuckle from him. He mentioned that the campground, Matthews Arm was closed which would make camping a little more difficult. I was soon to realize exactly what he meant by difficult, but at the moment I just wanted to keep spinning though the morning air.

My guide book explained that unlike the Blue Ridge with its numerous climbs and descents, the Skyline Drive was basically one big hill. For the first forty miles it was all uphill but the payoff was a 65 mile downhill ride into the flatlands of eastern Virginia. The steep ascending grades found on the Blue Ridge didn't apply here either. I could change gears easily and with renewed energy from my light day yesterday and my exhilarating visit with June as inspiration, my bike leapt the climbs.

Pulling into the first visitor center, Loft Mountain, my first order of business was to secure a campspot, then see about a meal. Calls to the surrounding campgrounds led nowhere. Apparently I had chosen to ride through the park on "Hoover Day Weekend". Herbert H. Hoover, 26th president of these United States was particularly fond of this area of the country and had a compound built here for official and unofficial business during his term. During the years since this facility had remained a popular spot for elected officials due to its proximity to Washington and its inherent beauty. While off limits to the working stiffs and mere mortals for 363 days a year, the powers that be graciously open the hallowed gates for one weekend in early August. This weekend. Again timing is everything.

Kicking back over a milk shake and fries, I pondered my options from this point. Matthew's Arm campground had been closed back in 1990 due to budgetary cutbacks under the Reagan/Bush administration, but it wouldn't be the first time I opened a campground out of season, although still 65 miles away. Another cyclist rode up and I had hopes that he was already set up somewhere and I could bum a spot off of him, but sadly he was in the same boat as I was. Offering him a few fries for his opinion, he mentioned Big Meadows campground. It was larger and closer but sadly only accepted reservations, something neither of us had thought to get. One option we kicked around was to make reservations for tomorrow night and retrace our way back to the entrance, finding a spot outside the park. After twenty minutes on hold with Ticketron just to determine tomorrow's availability at Big Meadows brought us nothing but more frustration. The thought of turning back was something I didn't really take seriously, but the thought of riding the entire Skyline Drive in one day and finding camping at Front Royal got my adrenaline rushing to such a point I almost forgot my compatriot. I excitedly told him of my plan and offered him the copilot seat on the road forward, but he seemed hesitant. He was only out for a few days of riding from Richmond and although his rig was lighter, his engine wasn't as revved up as mine so he opted to head back south.

Checking my watch a final time, It was almost noon when I headed out. I had PB&J sandwiches and cookies that June had packed for me, Gatorade filled bottles and a few Snickers bars. I'd treat this just like a time-trial. I had about 85 miles to cover in about 8hrs. There'd be two stops along the way to refuel if I needed, Big Meadows and Panorama. Making sure the bags were bungied securely, I headed north.

The past two weeks of mountain climbing had transformed me from a flat-land plodder into a greyhound, all legs and lungs. The climbing here on the Skyline was more gradual as I wound my way towards the apex at Stoney Man. I rewarded myself with candy bars and cookies every ten miles or so to keep the energy levels up. Nearing Big Meadows I soon understood why reservations were necessary as the campground resembled a small city. Cars were parked everywhere as polo shirts and top-siders ruled the day. Stopping in for a soda, candybars and postcards, waiting in a long line for credit cards to be run wasn't my idea of how to spend my time. After all, I was on a mission.

Rehydrating with three bottles of water I couldn't wait to leave these maddening crowds and return to the serene beauty of The Drive. While the overlooks were crowded, the views offered were quite different than those on The Parkway. There vistas were unsettled wilderness, civilization barely coming into view, but here subdivisions and industrial buildup were more prominent in the landscape. A few conversations were struck up as I stopped to take in the sights but the visitors here were the weekend get-away types, more interested in "getting" somewhere than enjoying the route along the way.

While there were some segments that demanded more strenuous output on my part, the thought of reaching that final peak and having twenty or thirty miles of downhill was powerful motivation. By 4pm I had conquered the last rise at 4,000ft and took a last stop to check the view.

From here it was all downhill to the Atlantic coast, literally and figuratively, no more climbs, no more meal planning and no more "when I get to the coast" dreaming. I was here. The "When" was upon me. Taking in the sprawling flatlands this descent would also signify my return to civilization. Millions of people lived between here and the coast and those days of seeing only a handful of cars all day were definitely over now.

The new brake shoes I put on back in Asheville got quite a workout as the scenery zoomed past at increasing speeds. Without a doubt this was the longest stretch of "down" I'd encountered on the whole trip, but after 5,800 miles not only did I deserve a coasting, but a day like this as well. Zooming around numerous curves and switch-backs, I soon found myself at the last visitor stop on The Drive, Panorama.

Leaning the bike against a wall, I had ten minutes to shop before the store closed. Timing. Two more Snickers bars were all I needed as I enjoyed knowing that the remaining 25 miles were all downhill. Resting for a bit next to the bike, I thought back to the riding I had done out this way last year. I had an inkling that this trip may become a reality so instead of flying out west to slay mountains, I opted for a driving vacation to Virginia to see some college friends. I took the bike along and had planned to ride this C&O towpath from D.C. to Cumberland Maryland and back. As usual, the best laid plans went awry as the path out of D.C. proved too rocky to navigate with my loaded touring bike. I soon found myself spinning through the surrounding country roads with no map or destination. Over this "lost" weekend I visited Harper's Ferry, Bunker Hill and made my way to Front Royal, today's destination. I learned there was a KOA in Front Royal and although tired from three days of strenuous hill climbing, I headed south along the Skyline Drive to find it. I must have climbed five miles or so before seeing the KOA sign off to my left. Figuring it was near the road I relaxed a bit as I left The Drive. The campground turned out to be another half-mile up a windy gravel road. Reaching the office I was breathless and what breath I had soon left as the clerk told me the price for a coffin-sized lot: \$26. I forked it over begrudgingly and called it a night. You live and learn.

Knowing that I wouldn't be staying at the KOA in Front Royal, I began to contemplate other locations. I had ridden from Front Royal to Fairfax before and although I hadn't formulated an hard and fast rules about re-riding miles, I usually opted for the "road not ridden before". Taking a sharp right outside of Panorama seemed to be heading towards Fairfax. Consulting the gift shop manager as he left for the day confirmed my suspicions and I was soon on my way.

Had I continued on The Drive to Front Royal it would have been a steady plummet down to 500ft above sea level. It seems the exit at Panorama got me to level ground in a hurry. Spinning thru the mile-long descent I tried to keep my speed around 35mph but near the end this didn't seem as much of a problem for some reason. The bike began handling a bit sluggishly and I felt more road vibrations traveling up my arms. A front flat. Pulling the bike over to the side of the road I chuckled at my misfortune, but the change was a swift one and soon I was completing my miles back to civilization.

After the strenuous climbing of the past two weeks, the road flattened before me like a mirage. Several times on the Blue Ridge I had tried unsuccessfully to convince myself that the road had finally leveled out only to find yet another small climb lurking around the next curve. East of the Appalachians things were definitely sloped towards the coast. The bike put up squeaky resistance to my first shifts, but soon both bike and rider became reacquainted with the "flats".

Blowing past Sperryville and Amissville I pulled into a Quicky-Mart for an end-of-the-day pint of ice cream while I sought out a suitable camping spot. About 2 miles from the mart I found what I was looking for, an overgrown driveway leading to an open field. In the fading light I set up my tent. The legs were pretty stiff from the long miles, but a real bed was only a day away so I didn't put too much time into pre-sleep stretching. Gazing up at the star-filled sky, the day ended like most before it, mentally recapping the day and looking forward to tomorrow.

Day 99
50 Miles

Waking up in what could be the last of the clandestine campgrounds I've found across America was a bit emotional, but like all those before, the most important thing was to get rolling early and worry about the details later. This morning was down-right chilly. A thick dew had fallen over all the gear and then temperatures dropped, turning the dew into ice. I dug furiously through my gear trying to find my long-fingerless gloves, but to no avail.

Pushing off once again I hoped that just moving would warm me up somewhat, but no such luck, the headwinds only added to the chill. Pulling over at the first Quicky Mart I saw, I poured a large coffee and waited out the sun for next hour. My friends in Fairfax were no more that fifty miles away and it wasn't even 7am yet.

When the sun warmed the air enough to melt off the frost, I rode to Warrenton where I again sought refuge, this time in a Burger King. Things were warming up a bit, but I just didn't feel like riding into town too fast. Conversing with some locals I found that these folks had spent the summer crossing America by motorcycle several years ago. While there were many commonalities between our journey's, they couldn't imagine what it would be like to camp out every night. Yup, that definitely adds to the adventure.

Just out of town I called my friends up the road to make sure they were home. They were just in the process of breakfast and weren't really expecting me for a few days yet, but I was welcome none the less, that's what friends are for. Just hearing familiar voices again motivated me to push off once again, but I guess I pushed off in the wrong direction. The route I chose continued to get narrower and steeper but I was convinced I was heading east until the sun began to hit my back. Stopping a passing squad car, I found that I had missed a turnoff just after the Burger King. Another lost hour I wouldn't be getting back.

Finally finding the "right path" I was at my friends back door by 11am. It felt *so* good to finally be somewhere familiar again. Acworth Georgia seems so far away, but it was only two weeks (and about 700 miles) ago. Dave and Sara couldn't get over my appearance. The preceding three months on the road had definitely taken their toll, 43 lost pounds, a three-inch beard and moustache blending into a mop-full of hair and a deeply tanned/burned hide. I still likened my appearance to that of a "cycling troll", and my friends couldn't argue the point. Their two children Alex and Maddie seemed a bit frightened by my appearance, but then again it always takes people a while to get used to me.

The rest of the day was spent around music. Dave had both an afternoon and an evening concert that I was all too eager to hear. It had been so long since I had heard real music and not just the songs running thru my head.

Day 100
Did Not Ride

After a leisurely wake up call, I phoned my best friend Dave in Arlington Virginia and made arrangements to meet him for dinner later in the day, leaving me enough time to get reacquainted with my friends the Zerkels.

Sara and I had tried dating back in college, but in the end we decided that we were probably better friends and anything else. Dave was a fellow tuba playing grad assistant at Illinois State and they started dating right after that, making it "for better or worse" shortly after graduation. Dave got a playing job with the Army band and they migrated out here to Fairfax. In the intervening years I've tried to see them at least once a year which had given me a place to go when I find myself crossing America. Now, 8 years and two children later it was time for reunion.

Day 101
Did Not Ride

Having all this time off and nowhere to go took some getting used to. The plan was to depart on Friday morning, giving me three more days to make it to the Delaware coast before returning to Fairfax and a shuttle to Chicago.

I filled the time visiting with my friends Dave Kostelancik and his wife Trish before they left for Moscow, and my friends Dave and Sara who weren't going quite so far. I hadn't been off the bike for longer than three days during the entire summer, so by Wednesday I was getting really itchy for the open road again.

Day 102
75 Miles

Zerkel and I loaded up his Trooper and drove out the "Beltway" towards Annapolis and the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Missing were the usual "good to see you again" salutations since I'd be meeting up with them on Monday morning, so we passed the time with talk of work.

Work? What is this work? The end of my two-wheeled adventure meant that soon I'd be returned to the wild jungle of seven-million tax payers better known as Chicago.

Once on the Chesapeake Bridge I could see why it was closed to cyclists, there wasn't any shoulder and the speeds were still hovering around 40mph. I told Dave about the "Great Bridge Debacle" back in New Orleans and had another laugh over the whole matter. It's been some journey. Dumping me off at a gas station complex, I wasn't exactly sure where it was, but I knew I'd have to return here by noon on Monday. Waving Dave a good-bye, I took a deep breath and headed east. I was definitely in the home stretch here, attested to by the faint smell of salty air.

My last miles were actually a bit harried at the start since I had to ride the expressway for the first five miles or so until I took the first turn-off and spun into coastal Maryland farming communities. Queenstown seemed to be mostly outlet malls that drew their share of traffic, but I was soon returned to the lush greenery these lowlands provided. Things were just like in Iowa only flatter and with less corn.

Mentally this day's riding was something else. It seems I couldn't concentrate on anything for too long. Visions of all the previous miles I've traveled this summer spun thru my head at a dizzying pace. I'd shift gears and spend the next twenty minutes thinking about all the shifts I've done to reach this point.

Looking down at my fingers I'd see them peeled from the thousands of shifts performed and tears would start to well up. Stopping for a roadside relief, I'd think about all this times I've accomplished this feat as well, but it's tough to get sentimental over urination. So it went with today's miles. Another hot day, I followed the same routine that had gotten me over the preceding 5,900 miles and drank and ate when I really didn't need to. I'm really going to miss being able to eat whenever and whatever I want.

Stopping in Denton I sought lunch from a decent restaurant, hoping to splurge a bit, but in the end I was back at a Quickie-Mart having a sandwich. Somethings with always remain the same. Over lunch I decided to try a short cut to the coast and branched off Route 404 and try Route 16 which seemed to be the local "road less traveled". Hopefully it would remain as flat as 404 had been. A bit past Andersontown I found a turnoff and took it, although for the first five miles I wasn't really sure where I was going, but at least I crossed off my 19th and final state line into Delaware. Finally pulling into Greenwood confirmed that I was on track and battling another hot day. You'd think I could finally take the afternoon off on my last full day of riding, but why break from tradition. Stopping at a Quicky Mart there I thought to load up on a few dinner items, but a quick inventory of the rig told me I had just enough for a last night on the range.

By the time I found a turnoff to bring me back to Route 404 I had put in almost 45 miles at a decent clip. Gotta love these flatlands. Milton Delaware provided a wonderful ice cream diversion with King's Homemade Ice Cream. I wish I had a cooler on the back to keep stocked with the stuff. More farmlands greeted my return to Route 404, although there seemed to be a storm brewing off to my left out at sea. Riding into a storm didn't seem that appealing, so instead of stopping at the few towns I passed on my way to the coast, I dropped gears and began to really hammer the miles.

By 5pm I had reached the junction town of Belltown, the end of my ride was almost in sight, but then again so were the storm clouds. I pulled into a Quicky Mart to wait things out for a minute and gave a call into Chicago to let my mom know that things were almost at an end. My mom of course had taken the day off, so I spoke with her coworker Karen who I remember as having the prettiest eyes. Excitedly I told her where I was and somehow got into a discussion of seafood.

After about fifteen minutes of waiting around, I decided to press my luck and continue the remaining miles to the coast. Two miles brought me to Lewes, one of the oldest cities on the coast. The first settlers definitely left their impression on this small community, the church seemed to reflect a Dutch influence. Pedaling with abandon now, I soon reached the Cape Henlopen campground only to find a sign saying they were full. Great. I come all the way across the country and they can't leave the light on. I began eyeing the surrounding sandy turf for a decent place to camp, but decided to try a diplomatic approach first and rolled up to the attendant. She regretted telling me that they were indeed full, but eyeing my displeasure, she added that they did however have two spots reserved for "emergency cases". Asking sweetly if I considered my condition an "emergency", I thought for a second before responding that "yes" my situation was an emergency. "OK then, here a spot for you" and handed over a map of the campground. My emergency was not over.

Pitching a tent in sand took a bit of practice since my tent stakes kept pulling out until I got smart and started angling them into the flotsam that was all around. The campground was really like a small city with well over 100 sites filled with a variety of campers and a variety of gear. Being a cyclist seemed to put me in the distinct minority here as I pedaled around trying to find any other cyclists to bond with. I was prepared to go without dinner as the darkening skies and sporadic lightening strikes out to sea kept me weary, but after about an hour of waiting out the worst, I decided to fire up the stove and prepare a last Ramen noodle meal. This would be the last "outbound" meal I'd be preparing. After touching the coast in the morning, it would all be "inbound" from here on out.

While waiting for the pot to boil I guess I was surprised that I didn't feel more nostalgic at the thought of my trip being over. The preceding 99 days on the road had been tough and long indeed, but now that the end was only a matter of feet in front of me, I found the sense of accomplishment strangely lacking. I'm sure that in the future years I'll look back on this trip as being a significant turning point for me, but staring at that tired aluminum pot heating up one more time, all I could focus on was getting a roof over my head and wearing clothes no made of lycra.

The hoopla at the campground was in full gear until almost 9pm, my bed time, so I nodded off to the wistful tunes of Jimmy Buffet while a couple of teens did a comparative anatomy study in the next site. The first night of my trip was spent behind a Shell gas station and now the last would be spent on the sandy, ant-filled shores of the Atlantic. But oh what a summer in between.

Day 105

40 Miles

The morning rays filtered through the sides of the tent as I reloaded my gear and spun past the guard station and back onto the main route. The turn off for Cape Henlopen Beach was the first sign to greet my arrival this morn and after taking a deep breath I followed the arrows to the water. The first three turnoffs were most acclimated to four-wheeled vehicles since the abundance of sand made powering along on a bike a bit of a struggle. Finally finding the main beach house I slowly pulled in only to find access to the beach blocked by a rather flimsy looking barricade. Deciding to obey the law, I waited around for half an hour before several other "waiters" decided it was time to open the beach for the day by hopping over the barricade. Since I had to take the bike with me to the shore, I wasn't able to "hop" too well, but rather I did "clean and jerk" of the bike before continuing down the walkway to the beach. This was it, Cibola. The acme, the apex. This is it, shine the lights, this is it, you're high of highs.

The deserted beach afforded me an unobstructed view of the approaching Atlantic surf. Over the past 100 days and 6,000 miles I had plenty of time to dream about what this experience would be like., and like so many other times on this trip the reality never really seemed to live up to my expectations. Sure I had spent a lot of saddle time to connect the Pacific with the Atlantic, but looking out over the crashing surf I was left with the feeling "is that it? Where to now?" I found a couple willing to take some pictures and I did splash around a bit in the surf, but by 10am I was back on the road looking for the next adventure.

Pulling away from the beach I continued down Route 1 and found a Taco Bell attached to a Wawa Minimart and pulled in, hoping a few chicken burritos would improve my outlook. The food helped but I still felt like a kid on Christmas day who didn't get the gift he was looking forward to.

Continuing south, the traffic began to pick up as I passed several beach communities filled with eastern vacationers out for a good time. Rehoboth, Dewey, Indian, Bethany, Middlesex and South Bethany all lined up like shops in a mall. If I'd been riding with someone I could have had fun walking down the crowded boardwalks and taking in the tourist traps, but right now it was tough enough keeping the bike upright and moving without worrying about stopping.

Near Ocean View, I pulled in for a chocolate shake, still trying to get motivating as it was nearly new. After blowing another half-hour I went out to ride only to find that my rear wheel had flatted. Changing the tube was no problem, but when I went to re-inflate the tire, the pump cracked in half at the plunger. I had the ability to improvise or do without several things on my bike, but next to the 3 rims I've cracked, this was the only other thing I couldn't fabricate out here. Pressure is a rare thing indeed.

Route 1 was pretty popular with cyclists, so after the initial shock wore off, I simply flagged down the next cyclist who was riding by and he was more than happy to lend me his pump. He mentioned that there was a cycle shop just up the road so that was my next stop. \$16 later and I was heading on my way.

I really didn't know where I would end up today, but while waiting to buy that pump, it struck me that I was heading near Bishopville Maryland, home of the Rau family I had met back on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Sure, they said I should stop by if I was in the area, but I still felt a little odd dialing the number. Rich took no time at all remembering who I was and then thankfully gave me directions to the homestead. He and his nephew would be heading out to meet me along the way to ensure I wouldn't get lost. Things were definitely beginning to look up. With renewed spirits I spun across the border and back into Maryland. At least I'd have a roof over my head tonight.

My hosts met me about 3 miles from their home and we spent the time catching up on the preceding two weeks of activity. My spare tube seemed to be a slow leaker as I had to stop several times to

put more air in, ironically with my new pump. At the end of a long gradual arc in the road we entered a gravel road leading to the Rau estate, a sprawling country farmhouse complete with an impressive backyard pool. Dismounting the three of us made it as far as the back porch before settling down for a few hours of restful conversation. Rich had some relatives visiting so most of the talk centered around my travels and observations when in reality I was much more interested in them and theirs.

Dinner was another communal affair, hotdogs, mac and cheese and Gatorade. Home cooking is definitely something I've missed this summer. After another hour, Rich's wife left for work as the night shift nurse at the local hospital, leaving Rich and me to shoot the breeze into the night.

Checking out my punctured tube I found that a thin filament wire had made it's way thru the tire and even worked thru the thick plastic tire-liner to produce that slow leak. Hopefully this would be the last flat out here.

Day 106
50 Miles

Waking up and having the ride technically "over" was an eerie feeling. Today's riding would take me close to the Chesapeake Bay Bridge where Zerkel would pick me up on Monday. Dressing quickly and repacking the bike, I ate a somewhat hurried breakfast with Rich and the kids before taking off again. The cool coastal air was a welcome change from the sticky heat I was accustomed to. Yesterdays rash of flat tires had me checking tire pressure every few miles, but for the first hour, everything seemed to be holding together. Then I flatted again. Yet another thin wire was to blame and I really wondered what such a fine wire would have been used for. The little bugger was about as thick as a human hair, yet had no trouble working its way thru my balding tires. Putting on the last of my "new" tubes I crossed my fingers and continued.

By 10am I was starting to look for another decent breakfast. Having only about 35 more miles to cover today I figured I could spare the time and money on a plate of something decent, but where? Another hour of riding and I still hadn't passed anything worthy of a stop, as most of this area seemed to take Sunday's off.

Finding another Taco Bell, I decided that this would pass for "fancy enough". While updating my journal over several Pepsi's, I drew a small crowd of inquiring minds. Hearing that I put in almost 6,000 miles to reach this cultural landmark, one of the onlookers offered me his business card and said he'd like to interview me on the air once I returned to civilization, where ever that was.

By mid afternoon I had made the campground in Denton, after antiquing a bit and eating and drinking my way thru the remaining 35 miles. The campground I found had been severely damaged in an ice storm in the winter, so there was plenty of downed firewood to burn later. Whole trees had been felled and sectioned off with chainsaws, so after throwing together an early dinner I busied myself with preparing a huge bonfire. There were only a few other campers sharing the grounds, and each of us had about the same idea and by nightfall there were some pretty impressive fires going.

Crossing America has taken me from the deserts of California thru the mountains of the west, the farmlands of the Midwest, the rich delta of the south and up and over the eastern mountains, spilling me out on this flat coastal land. While I chose to camp in some pretty interesting places, this spot tonight was what I was really looking for every night, an early camp in the greenery with wood to burn.

Just after dusk it began to rain a bit so I got the plastic over the bike one last time. Having a bed to sleep in with a roof over my head was looking pretty good about now. I thought to write something profound about the summer just past, but opted instead to listen to the rain bounce off the tent like marbles off a bass drum.

Day 107
20 Miles

By morning things had dried out pretty well. I got rolling into a crystal clear sunrise, trying to find a way to fill the next five hours. Since the bridge was only twenty miles west, I could fill the time riding, but there wasn't really anywhere to go beside the outlet malls near the bridge exit. It was way too tempting to ride 20mph for an hour and get it all over with. I remembered there being several shopping areas along the way so set my sights on stopping at each one to pass the morning.

I spent the rest of hours browsing windows and trying out some clothes. I had lost so much weight this summer I'd need some new clothes pretty soon. My friend in Chicago would be bringing out a suitcase of clothes for me and I doubt if any of the pants would fit at this point. Very baggy I would assume. Reaching my pickup point a little early, I found my friend Dave waiting for me. After a handshake and a silent loading of the bike, we were on our way over the bridge and my adventure was over. No reporters to greet me, no marching bands, just another good friend and his Isuzu Trooper.

I'm sure I'll be asked how this trip has changed me, and Lord knows I've had plenty of time to think about it. I don't know if all this saddle time has really changed me, but maybe this trip has allowed me to see what I'm capable of. I don't know how I'll get motivated to ride *less* than 75 miles fully loaded, but riding might be on the downside after a trip like this. I'll no longer have to wonder what riding across South Dakota would be like, or Alabama for that matter. I'll also know about being tired, wet sore and the myriad of other feelings and emotions a trip like this evokes on a daily basis. So if I *know* anything, it's that I know myself pretty well. Maybe that's what this trip was really all about anyway.

TAILWINDS

Often during my journey I was asked why I chose to travel west to east. Somewhere in my planning I realized that when I was out riding in the burbs of Chicago, I'd face a headwind going west and a tailwind coming back east. But what really sealed the deal was the weather. May in California is a little more predictable than May in Delaware. When people would ask for my technique for dealing with head winds, I'd tell them that thankfully there weren't all that many to speak of. When you did face a head wind it usually meant a storm was approaching. Almanacs and weatherman could probably prove or disprove the winds but I'd like to think that I've always had a pretty strong tailwind behind me to negotiate any turbulence, and this tailwind is human powered. Some folks I knew before I left and a lot more came into my life along those summer miles. It might have been a ten minute conversation or just a friendly nod towards my effort in all those Quicky Marts dotting America's roadsides, but the support I've received all along the way has made this ride truly my trip of a lifetime. It lightened my load on down days and was the sprinkles on top of my best days.

I'd like to recognize some of the folks that took the time to chat me up, dust me off or take me under their wings for a spell. Without you folks my trip would have definitely been longer than 6,000 miles.

- California - Rich Hosek; a roadside rescue, a hike in the Grand Canyon, a steak and confidence
- Arizona - The folks at the Truxton Gas Station; kind words and a floor to sleep on
Lynn Berner; camaraderie, commiseration and Cardinal baseball
- Utah - Mike, Nicole and Smokey Rennolds; an all-you-can-eat cookout under the stars
The Nichols Family; 4 nights lodging, a car, a cabin, a riding partner, a pressure gauge and patience
- Idaho - Mike Richardson; a night, a dinner, a tour and a necklace

- Montana - Jeff "Mr. SoleSource"; a pair of insoles for some weary feet
Joan Briscoe; two nights, food and friendship when I know she had more important things going on than putting up with me
- South Dakota - Lehigh University Geology Department; a meal and some refreshing "college conversation" bringing back fond memories
Brent Sutton; a night, cooking out indoors, a riding partner for a day. I hope you get to have your adventure sometime
The Good Doctor and his Wife; a Coke and a private tour of "The Most Beautiful Place on Earth"
Chuck Doom; Heroes don't always wear capes, sometimes they drive trucks and smoke Marlboro's
- Illinois - Matt and Heidi Johnson; 3 nights of food and friendship. My purpose might not always be clear, but thanks for letting a wet dog lie low for a few
The Vari's; that "Chicago Shuttle" really came in handy
Tom "WhiteSpike" Romer; a night, dinner and jazz. Occasionally you just have to bop
- Kentucky - BP owner; a night even in a hot sticky trailer was better than that tent
- Tennessee to Louisiana – Dan Vitous; companionship, a welcome partner in cross-state cycling, 1 near arrest and a witness to my on-road personae
- Georgia - My grampa Bo Hlavacek and Shamim; you're family but it's been too long between reunions
- North Carolina/Virginia - The Rau Family and Joe; riding partners, motivational conversation, a meal and a cheap night of camping came at the exact moment I needed it, even if I didn't realize it
- Virginia - The Cookie Lady of Afton; June, you're the best. A night and food, thanks again for reminding me that I was never really alone out there
The Zerkel family; 3 nights, food and friendship. I ask so much of you and it's always delivered. Thanks for the Chesapeake Hop"
Dave Kostelancid and Trish Crowely; 2 nights, food and friendship. Thanks for fitting me into your Moscow countdown

Without all these people provide a still tailwind "breeze" any winds in my face were no problem. Thank you one and all again for your efforts on my behalf. Your deeds will never be forgotten.

Epilogue

Once back in familiar territory it took me a few days to get used to being off the bike, of having a bed and a roof and more than a handful of clothes. I took a few weeks off to collect my thoughts and begin composing my adventure into literary form, but eventually I needed to make some money, so I begrudgingly reentered the workforce. Choosing my first temporary agency in the book, I sat in front of my computer for the first time in five months and hacked away at their aptitude test. Some things must never fade away as I was assigned my first job within 45 minutes of walking in the door.

Six months and two assignments later I accepted a job working for a home builder close to home. I've been there a little over six months without taking a day off. I've been a little hesitant to take a full fledged vacation, fearing that I were to get between the wheels again I might be too tempted to just keep going again.

I put together a slide show and a few presentations have been pretty well received. Most people find it amazing that I crammed so many wonderful sights into the same trip, but then again the idea was to do it right the first time. Some nights as I watch the sun fade on another long day, I'm transported back onto the bike and mentally I'm trying to put in a few more miles before I rest. In that instant I'm back on the bike, wondering where I was going to pitch the tent, going over the day's events and wondering what tomorrow will bring, so I can't say the trip is really over as this adventure continues to pay dividends.

Sometimes it takes a thoughtful ride
To loosen up a life with knots,
Then looking at yourself with pride
You realize there's nothing lost.
To see the world with open eyes
Is what everybody needs
To concentrate on inner peace
In a time of thoughtless greed.
So when those knots come back again
And life is tugging on each end,
Remember that you've got your friends
To help make escape and reality blend

Steven Yurek
A Cyclist Turns 30

BienThere.com Travelogue