

HANDS ACROSS AMERICA

A chance encounter of the inspirational kind
by Frosty Wooldridge

On my first summer bicycle tour, I pedaled through heavy traffic for the beginning of my coast-to-coast adventure. The Los Angeles smog choked me for 100 miles into the Mojave Desert. After crossing the Colorado River, I breathed easier when the brown cloud flowed south toward Phoenix and I pedaled into the clean air of the mountains. Climbing steep grades took hours while coasting down took only minutes.

In New Mexico, I crossed the Continental Divide and descended into the desert on Route 380. With a blazing sun overhead, I struggled along the two-lane pavement, sweat dripping from my face and arms. Every breath crowded my mouth with what felt like dry, hot cotton balls. Heat waves rippled over the pavement as I descended further into the barren landscape. Boulders and cacti stood like indolent sentries guarding the land from intruders. The thermometer hit 103 degrees by the time I pedaled to the outskirts of Roswell.

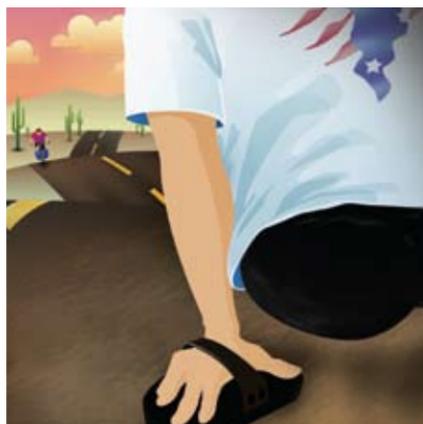
Ahead, a lone figure walked along the left side of the road. I found it difficult imagining anyone walking down the highway in that torrid temperature.

"I wonder what that guy's doing walking in this heat?" I muttered to myself. "Looks like he's got a dog with him, too."

A minute later I realized with a gasp that it wasn't a dog. I doubted my eyes and strained harder to make out what I saw.

It was another man walking on his hands. Within a few seconds, I found out why — his legs were missing.

Less than 40 yards away, the taller figure walked and read a book while the



other man walked on his hands. A camper van was parked on the road shoulder a half mile ahead. I rode up even with them and something inside made me stop and drop my bike in the gravel.

I couldn't help crossing the road, knowing that whoever this man was, he possessed inconceivable courage. What was he doing out here walking on his hands in the desert? He saw me, stopped, and lowered his body to the ground, resting it on a leather pad that covered his two severed legs just below the groin. His Paul Bunyan-esque upper arms led down to his hands, which grasped two rubber pads. Sweat soaked his T-shirt. His dark hair framed a tanned, round face punctu-

ated by a pair of clear brown eyes. He flashed a beautiful smile.

"Hi, how ya' doin'?" I said, approaching with my hand extended. "My name is Frosty."

"Glad to meet you," he said, shaking my hand. "I'm Bob Wieland."

"Pleasure to meet you," I said. "I gotta tell you Bob, I'm more than a bit curious seeing you out here in the desert."

"The same could be said about you," he said. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm riding my bicycle across America."

"That makes two of us," Bob added. "I'm walking across. I'd bike but my legs are too short for the pedals."

I laughed. His humor was natural and we bantered a few minutes about the weather. Bob gave me a short history of his journey. He started in San Francisco and climbed up to Yosemite National Park. He crossed over many 6,000 to 8,000 foot passes. His friend fixed meals, but often people asked them into their homes for the night. If no one offered a night's lodging, both men slept in the back of the camper pickup. His friend drove the vehicle ahead and came back to walk with him, reading a book while guiding him down the left side of the highway. Bob lost his legs in combat. I asked him when he had started.

"I've been out 19 months and have completed 980 miles," he said. "At my speed, I can finish this adventure in three more years, maybe less."

"Why are you doing it?" I asked.

"There's a lot of adventure out here on the road. I suppose I could sit back and get fat watching television for the next 50 years, but I want to do something

with my life. I want to make a difference. I have to make do with what I have left. You know the saying, you only go around once."

"You have my greatest admiration," I said, shaking his hand again.

It was one of those moments where you don't quite know what to do or say. Here, looking up at me from the pavement, was the most courageous man I'd met in my entire life. He was a man, but he stood only three feet high. His hands had become his feet. A gray leather pad belted to his bottom like a baby diaper. Those rubber pads on his hands gave him wheel tread for his arduous journey. I gasped inside myself at the enormity of his quest.

"Guess I better get moving," I said reluctantly.

"Take care," Bob said. "Have a good ride. I'll get there one of these days."

"There's no doubt that you will reach the Atlantic Ocean," I said.

While turning away from that amazing human being, tears filled my eyes. I started crying half way across the road. What he was attempting staggered my imagination. My friends thought I was nuts taking a transcontinental bicycle trip, but they had no understanding of how easy I had it compared to Bob Wieland.

After crossing the highway, I pulled my bike out of the dirt. I took a swig

of water and stepped onto the pedals. I pressed my iron steed eastward into the hot morning sun. I cried for miles at the senselessness of war. I cried for Bob and I cried for humanity. Miles and years down the road, that moment colors my mind as vividly as the day it happened.

Most human beings possess handicaps in one way or the other — physical or psychological. Most importantly, it's how they handle their limitations. He concentrated on what he could do, not on what he couldn't do. Instead of giving up, Bob pushed forward into the unknown not only determined to succeed, but expecting to succeed.

George Bernard Shaw celebrated people like Wieland when he wrote, "This is the true joy of living, spending your years for a purpose recognized by yourself as a right one ... to be used up when they throw you on the scrap heap of life. To have been a force of nature instead of a selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

Bob Wieland pushed himself through 3,400 miles of hardship that few people could comprehend. He gutted his way up mountains, sweated his way across deserts, and fought through raging storms. Every labored breath drew him closer to his goal.

Two years later, I was listening to public radio while eating breakfast one

morning. They announced that Bob Wieland had reached the Atlantic Ocean, thus succeeding in his quest to walk on his hands coast to coast across America. It took him three years, eight months, and six days. In the ensuing years, he would go on to complete a 6,200-mile bicycle circuit, using his hands, twice across America. In 1994, *People* magazine named him one of the six "Most Amazing Americans" in the past 20 years. He's the only double amputee to complete the Ironman Triathlon in Kona, Hawaii without a wheelchair. He completed the New York, Los Angeles, and Marine marathons. The list continues to grow.

I sat at the breakfast table crying like a baby because that man gave me the courage to face my own struggles from that one meeting in the New Mexico desert. I'm sure he touched thousands more on his remarkable journey across America. Here's to you, Bob Wieland, to your courage, your humor, your passion, and your life. **AC**

Frosty Wooldridge has bicycled six times across the U.S., and more than 100,000 miles across six continents from the Arctic Ocean to Antarctica. He is the author of Handbook for Touring Bicyclists, Bicycling Around the World and Bicycling the Continental Divide: A Taste of Heaven, Slice of Hell.

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