

BILL NELSON: MR. HOSTELING

The roots of Adventure Cycling Association run deep

by June J. Siple

Unsung heroes make up the DNA of every organization, and Adventure Cycling Association, under its original Bikecentennial76 moniker, is no exception. Bill Nelson, long-time travel director and national training director for American Youth Hostels, Inc. (AYH), educated thousands at his Leadership Training Courses (LTCs) during his career, including three of four Adventure Cycling co-founders: Greg and June Siple and Lys Burden. More importantly, he also mentored summer of '76 leadership training program co-directors Bonnie Hoffmann and Tim Leifer, making him perhaps the most influential of the unsung. Without Bill's training and guidance, his protégé Bonnie says, "No way!" could Bikecentennial's 1976 summer tours have been pulled off.

Greg agrees, "If it hadn't been for Bill, I don't think there would have been a Bikecentennial. When I had this idea of bicycling across the country to celebrate America's bicentennial, I figured anyone who wanted to come would meet at 9:00 AM at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, and we would just take off." But various advisors convinced the Burdens and Siples that the event had to be more structured for it to succeed.

"So we decided we'd need a route and maps, and instantly realized we would base it on Bill Nelson's philosophy of long-distance bicycle travel in small groups," Greg said. "He developed it over many years, and there it was — all ready to adopt, and we made use of it. We took it for granted: 'Oh yeah, we'll just do it like AYH.'"

"We consulted with Bill Nelson ...," the Leifers wrote in their staff report, "and received the go-ahead to design our courses patterned after AYH training courses so that leaders trained by both organizations could lead trips sponsored

by either organization." How much of the Bikecentennial76 leadership program was based on Bill's course? "About 90 to 95 percent is all," Bonnie said. "We used mostly AYH advisors, and even used Bill's jokes (with his permission)." The first



Bill delivers a lecture at a 1978 Bushkill, Pennsylvania, leadership training course.

LTC course entirely organized by Tim and Bonnie took place in Pennsylvania's Amish country in November of 1975, and few know that Bill Nelson was their Bowmansville course director. "It was magic," Bonnie said. "The perfect start of our (own) program."

Bonnie and Tim's initial challenge had been daunting: to find 10 locations nationwide, recruit course directors and 40 advisors, and schedule 63 courses to train 1,760 leaders in less than a year. They had shouldered a nearly impossible task: to train and recruit leaders for the 20,000 cyclists originally projected by Bikecentennial Director Dan Burden. By the beginning of 1976, however, expectations dropped to about 12,000 riders. Even more realistic numbers took shape in March, when 6,500 or fewer riders were projected based on signups. By April the Leifers knew, to their relief, that

no more than 5,000 signups would occur, and downgraded the training goal to 600 leaders. Ultimately, 350 leaders received trip assignments to serve the final 3,000 cyclists who signed up for Bikecentennial76 guided trips. Another 1,100 independent riders would boost the total number on the trail that summer to 4,100.

Nine years before the summer of '76, Greg attended an LTC at Friedenswald Youth Hostel in Michigan, where he met Bill Nelson. "I remember his jokes," says Greg, "his easy-going nature, dry wit, and exotic stories of cycling ... about the first AYH trip (in Europe) in 1934."

Bill hailed from rural Kansas and was only 17 years old in 1934. His group rode from hostel to hostel, about 30 to 40 miles apart. But this was no ordinary hosteling trip. The young traveler found himself pedaling with Richard Schirrmann, a 60-year-old German and father of the International Hosteling Movement. AYH's co-founders, Monroe and Isabel Smith, happened to be leading Bill's group through Europe at a time when the Nazis were gaining power. Quick decisions had to be made when Nazi headquarters complained about a young black man in their group, turning bicycle touring euphoria to despair. Some cyclists headed into France out of harm's way, while the rest continued as planned. Fortunately the Nazis were unaware of the group's three Jewish cyclists.

But the camaraderie and spirit of hosteling left its mark on Bill. He found himself drawn repeatedly into volunteering and soon after gained a job at AYH national headquarters in Northfield, Massachusetts, instead of becoming a doctor like his father. During his 72-year association with AYH in hostel development, field work, travel, and leadership, Bill traveled all over the U.S., training wet-behind-the-ears leaders with and without potential. Those who passed his courses were rewarded with

trips throughout North America, Europe, and Latin America, most expenses paid. Bill's LTCs provided a steady supply of prepared leaders.

After serving the U.S. Army from 1943 to 1947, primarily in post-war Japan, Bill was training AYH leaders by 1947, and directed his last leadership courses in 1983. Even in 1975, when Bikecentennial started LTCs, AYH still dominated outdoor leadership training and travel programs in the U.S. Hostelling International USA, or HI-USA, (AYH's current name), scheduled youth-oriented trips from 1934 to 1996, and now specializes in hostel development. 58 official HI-USA hostels are currently listed online, with thousands in other countries.

During his six-day AYH course, Bill lectured the first three days about one technique after another. Leadership was not about knowing how to repair bikes and cook meals, but "how you divide up the work, how to handle the money, and how to draw people together," Greg remembers. Covering group dynamics, hostel customs, first aid, problem participants, cooking, medical emergencies, public relations, bike repair, how and what to pack — Bill was tireless in his encouragement. In the final three days of bicycle touring, a cohesive group would often start to form. Leadership styles emerged, and trainees learned more about life on the road and how to keep cyclists safe and content.

Addressing leadership newbies about hardships of the road, Bill often leaned on his touring bike: "At times you'll find no shower and no bathtub at a hostel, so what do you do to keep clean?" From a pannier pocket he whipped out a flat blue rubber disk — a drain stopper. Leadership hopefuls leaned forward to listen and dutifully take notes. "Put in the stopper, fill up the sink, and wash as far down as possible. Then, wash up as far as possible. Finally, wash possible."

As Greg remembers, "Bill would ask 'Why do people sign up for trips?' Then he'd go around the room and have people come up with reasons. They'd rarely guess the most important — to have fun." But Bill cautioned that a leader is on call 24 hours a day. "If things don't go right, hang loose," he instructed, and "lead from behind" to sweep up injured, tired, or lost riders, and to help take care

of mechanical mishaps. He also advised leaders to always carry extra snacks for the discouraged.

With a military flair, he kept everything organized and on time in a mostly light-hearted atmosphere. "Bill really knew what was important. He was laying a very solid foundation while getting his points across," Greg said. "But there was a very serious side to the training and Bill was also very effective in relaying it."

To avoid resentment, leaders were to show no favoritism, and flirting with participants was not allowed. "Trip leaders are neuter!" he declared. Back in the 1960s, his LTCs were rare places of male/female equality, which meant that passing or failing the course was based on leadership merit alone.

"Sadly," Greg pointed out, "National AYH dropped its trip program as well as leadership training [in 1997]. But Adventure Cycling has continued to run LTCs, and ... 35 years later, it's still based on the foundation that Bill laid down."

Bill was born August 16, 1916, in the little Kansas town of Phillipsburg, 90 miles due north of what would become the Trans-America Bicycle Trail 60 years later. He married Ruth Kimball in 1945. The Nelsons established The Bantam Lake Youth Hostel in Connecticut in 1955, and Ruth managed it for 15 years until 1970.

As "head honcho" of the leadership program as early as 1947, Bill published *The Talking Hat: a Newsletter for AYH Leaders*, from February 1980 through December 2009, and he often referred fondly to "The Fellowship of The Hat" that comprised all his former trainees. Nelson served on the National AYH Board of Directors, resigning in November 1991, but continued to do volunteer work.

William A. "Bill" Nelson died on May 6, 2010, in Litchfield, Connecticut, at the age of 93. Ruth died only four days later at the age of 88. They were married 55 years, had four daughters, and enjoyed countless friends and acquaintances. **AC**

June Siple was the first woman to bicycle from Alaska to Argentina (Hemistour Expedition, 1972-5), and is one of four Adventure Cycling co-founders. Currently she is in training to ride the 50th Tour of the Scioto River Valley in Ohio.

For more information about Adventure Cycling's Leadership Training Courses, visit adventurecycling.org/tours and click on EDUCATION.

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