

Cookie Lady Completes Journey



by Dan D'Ambrosio

Peggy Rennolds was sick as a dog the night before she met June Curry on June 6, 1976. Rennolds was riding with a group of 12 cyclists traveling the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail from east to west to celebrate America's 200th birthday, the event that launched today's Adventure Cycling Association.

The group carried one frying pan, two stainless steel buckets, and one wooden spoon.

"That's what we had to cook with," Rennolds remembers.

Dinner on the evening of June 5 was eggplant parmesan — in theory. Rennolds said it was more like pureed

eggplant in a bucket.

"It was really awful," she said. "We called our group 'The Vultures'" because we would eat anything that wasn't moving. But this time, Rennolds paid a price. She was up all night with stomach problems.

"I told the group the next morning to go on without me," she said. "I know where you're going."

Rennolds wanted to be able to "scoot into a cornfield" if she needed to and not feel like she was holding anyone up. Ahead of her loomed Virginia's Afton Mountain, the first big climb in the Blue Ridge Mountains at 1,900 feet. By the time she got halfway up the mountain, Rennolds and

her toy poodle, Poo, the first dog to travel the TransAmerica Trail, were out of water.

"I drank the dog's water and I drank my water," Rennolds said.

Rennolds thought she had reached the top of the mountain when she saw a collection of brick houses and a railroad bridge in a relatively flat area. In truth, she was only about halfway, but she didn't know that yet. She called out to a woman in her yard, watering her flowers.

"Can I get a drink of water from your hose?" Rennolds asked.

"I'll do better than that," the woman answered, running up to the house and coming back with a glass of ice water for



First guests. Peggy Rennolds and her toy poodle Poo were the first to visit.

Rennolds and a bowl filled with water for Poo.

The woman asked Rennolds what was going on. Where was she going? What was she doing? Rennolds explained that an organization called Bikecentennial had orchestrated a bicycle ride across the country to celebrate the nation's 200th birthday by following some of the same routes the people who had settled the country had used. She was riding to Oregon.

"She just couldn't believe it," Rennolds remembered. "I explained that each day, Bikecentennial was sending groups from west and east at the same time and that we'd meet in the middle. Before long, people would be coming down the mountain instead of going up."

The woman was "totally fascinated," Rennolds said. She gave Rennolds her name and address, and asked her to send a postcard, which she did when she and Poo made it to Oregon.

"The woman was June Curry," Rennolds said. "That's all I knew. A nice lady on Afton Mountain."

This chance meeting, deep in the mountain backcountry of Virginia, on a trail that could have easily bypassed June Curry entirely if Bikecentennial's researchers had chosen another way over the mountain, launched a relationship that lasted more than 35 years and brought an estimated 14,000 bicyclists to Curry's humble door for her cookies, conversation, and perhaps an overnight stay in the Bike House, the former residence of her Uncle Benny, who died in April 1977.

When June Curry died on July 16 at the age of 91, one of the most remarkable features of the TransAmerica Trail died with her. She was The Cookie Lady of Afton

Mountain, whose hospitality toward riders became legendary. Adventure Cycling recognized Curry by naming an award after her for "Trail Angels," people who go above and beyond the call of duty, extending themselves for riders on the organization's national network of bicycle trails.

As Adventure Cycling Executive Director Jim Sayer wrote in a July 17 blog post: "For more than three decades, June hosted thousands of cyclists from all over the planet. Her generosity was so great that we named our first formal bike-travel award in her honor — the June Curry Trail Angel Award — recognizing an individual or group that goes the extra mile (or 10) to help traveling cyclists."

In the same blog, Sayer recalled meeting Curry in 2009: "Three years ago, I had the pleasure of riding from Charlottesville, Virginia, to Afton for the purpose of visiting June and thanking her in person for all that she had done. When I arrived, she gave me another gift — her warm spirit and her many memories of visiting cyclists. The beautiful thing about June and her recollections is that they weren't about her — they were about all that the cyclists meant to her, how much joy and energy she got from serving them as they traveled under their own power across America. A trail angel, indeed — we will miss her greatly."

Ironically, when '76 riders on the trail started asking Rennolds if she had met the Cookie Lady on Afton Mountain, she said



This must be the place. Weathered safety triangles served as beacons.

no. There was a nice lady who gave her and Poo water, but no cookies. The cookies came later. Rennolds was unaware that she had planted the seed for the legend, until 15 years later, she says, when she read about the Cookie Lady on Afton Mountain.

Married, and with a seven-year-old daughter, Rennolds decided she needed to meet this Cookie Lady for herself. She lived about three hours away, in Hustle, Virginia. As she and her daughter coasted-



A daunting climb for eastbound riders. June's residence at the top and the Bike House at the bottom are bookends to the auto service station that her father operated for many years.



20 year anniversary reunion. In 1996, many of June's supporters gathered at the Acorn Inn near Afton for a two-day reunion celebration.

down the mountain on their bikes — her husband drove the family car — Rennolds recognized the railroad bridge and flat spot with a collection of houses where she had gotten her water.

Rennolds knocked on June Curry's door. When Curry answered, Rennolds began by saying Curry didn't know her, but Curry cut her off.

"Yes I do," Curry said. "You're the first person who stopped here. You're the girl with the dog. It's your fault I'm the Cookie Lady."

For every year after that, from 1991 through October of last year, Rennolds would travel to Afton two or three times each year to help Curry with the Bike House.

"She was always welcoming," Rennolds said. "I spent the night four or five times at the Bike House if I was going to be down there painting and scrubbing."

For over 30 years, George Scott did his share of painting and scrubbing, along with roofing, carpentry, wiring, and more for Curry. Scott, a member of the Tidewater Bicycle Association in Virginia Beach, Virginia, first met Curry in 1982 when he and his 16-year-old son were finishing up their west-to-east ride along the TransAmerica Trail.

"Everybody in the bicycling community had heard of her because of Bikecentennial," Scott said. "She practically saved those riders' lives. There's not much in the little town of Afton. There's nothing there other than a little tiny post office."

In fact, the Bikecentennial maps in 1976 indicated there was a small store in Afton, which apparently had been there when the

trail was researched two years earlier, but had disappeared by the time riders began using the TransAmerica Trail. The first riders were unaware.

"When they got there, the store had closed," Scott said. "These people coming up the mountain were about to die. Having just left from the east, this was the first hard climb. They got halfway up and thought there would be a store."

When June Curry first began administering aid to starving, dehydrated TransAm cyclists, her father, Harold Haven, and Uncle Benny were still alive, and enjoyed the cyclists almost as much as she did. Once they got used to them.

"I can understand why people would have been leery," Scott said. "June and her father said, 'We'd never seen anybody riding bikes in these hills.' All that gear was foreign to them. They realized there was a problem when riders started asking 'Where's the store?'"

Scott and a Tidewater crew that began with eight or nine people, but dwindled to just one friend, Richard Armstrong, would travel to Afton every April and October, at the beginning and end of the biking season, to open and close the Bike House.

Scott installed the infamous cold shower, which still was better than nothing. He and

Armstrong, former president of Tidewater Bicycle Association, dealt with the myriad of problems that arise with structures more than 100 years old.

"We had job security because there was never a time there wasn't a problem," Scott said. "Electrical, plumbing, bushes to cut, everything imaginable. We worked on her house too. We did a lot of painting and we both worked on the roof. She had a screened porch that was constantly leaking between the bricks and the house. We sealed it every year."

It's worth noting too, that painting June Curry's house, or the Bike House, was different than painting any ordinary house. It required removing thousands of post cards from cyclists around the world and memorabilia ranging from punctured bike tubes to dirty socks from the walls and bannisters, and replacing them after the job was done.

"She loved people," Scott said. "Anybody she could talk to, particularly the cyclists. Through the years, a lot of cyclists came back with their families. They wanted to show them where they had been."

Scott, 82 years old, last saw June Curry in the spring of 2012, traveling the 350 miles from his home in South Carolina, picking up Richard Armstrong at his home

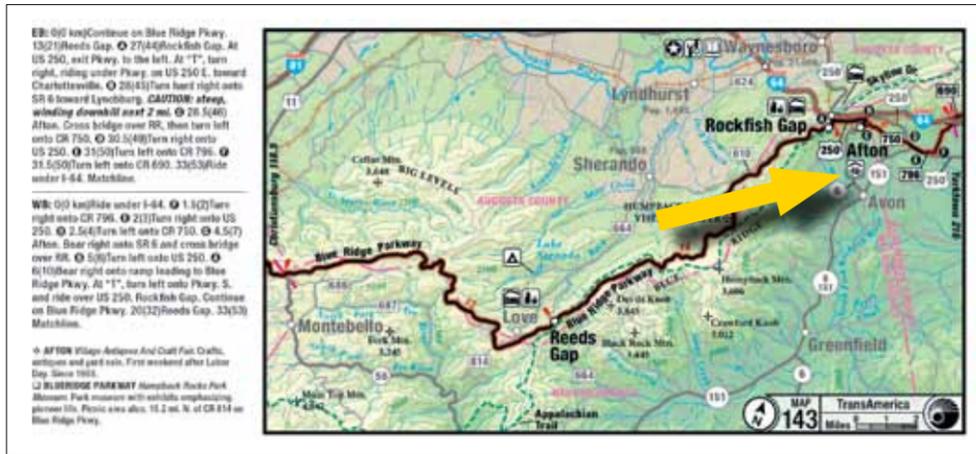
up to it. "Eventually we said our goodbyes to her, we didn't really know what to do."

But a lifetime of bringing sunshine into the lives of thousands of cyclists had not made Curry immune to sorrow.

As her cousin-in-law Bev Haven noted in a self-published book in 1996, Curry

desertion three years later."

The five and-one-half months June Curry spent with her husband in Vallejo, California, and in Illinois in connection with his service "were the only times during her entire life that she lived away from the brick house by the side of the road,"



216 miles west of Yorktown. It's a small service symbol on the TransAm map 143 that has represented the Cookie Lady's big hospitality.

had been briefly married to Floyd Curry in 1942. They had a daughter named Judy, born in 1944 while Floyd was in Burma during World War II.

"They resumed their married life when

Haven writes.

Even sadder, according to both Scott and Rennolds, Curry and her daughter, and her only child, were estranged from each other.

"She hadn't seen her daughter in something like 27 years," Rennolds said.

Curry had a family in the cyclists who passed briefly through her life and who loved her in their own ways. And through them, she vicariously traveled to the far corners of the globe.

Hope Wood bought the property adjoining Curry's on Afton Mountain in 2000, and quickly realized that something special was happening with her neighbor each year as the TransAm cyclists struggled up

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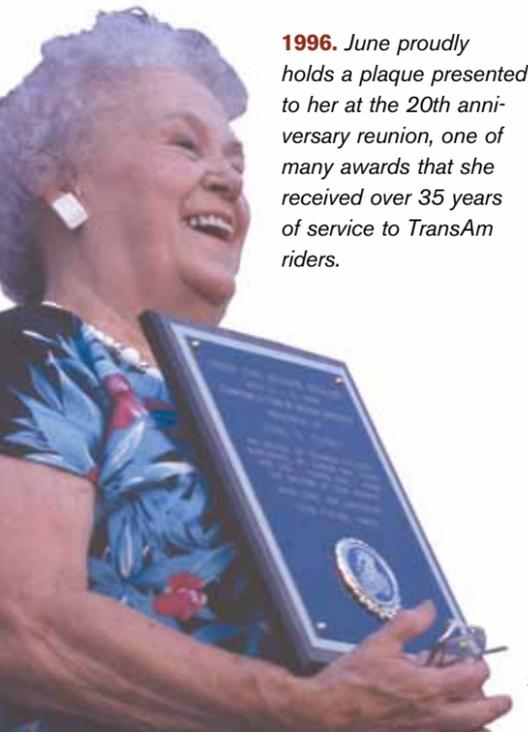
in Virginia, along the way.

"We realized soon after we got there, there was no need to do any work," Scott said. He could see that June simply wasn't

he returned, but it was not long before Floyd did not want to be tied down with a wife and child, and left," Haven writes in her book. "June received a divorce on



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1996. June proudly holds a plaque presented to her at the 20th anniversary reunion, one of many awards that she received over 35 years of service to TransAm riders.



Welcome visitor. Marja Noorman is received by June Curry in her home early this summer.

the mountain.

"I was amazed at what she was doing for the bicycling community, a wonderful, loving thing to do," Wood said. "I thought it was the most exciting thing happening in Afton."

Not much happens in Afton, Wood explained, where, besides a post office, there is only a building where the failed grocery, the failed antique store, and the failed storefront church sat. Now the building has a "For Rent" sign yet again.

But Wood, 59, has a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains "to die for," and doesn't think she'll ever leave Afton. About a week after she told Curry what a wonderful thing she thought she was doing to help the bicyclists, Curry approached her about buying the Curry property.

"At the time, my husband was alive, and she asked would the two of us like to buy the property?" Wood remembers. "She thought I would be a good person to buy the Bike House. That's why she sold it to me, to keep it going."

Which is what Wood says she intends to do. Her daughter and husband are living in the bike house now, but will move to Curry's house once they're done renovating it. Then Wood would like to find a tenant to live upstairs in the Bike House.

"I would love it if some bicyclist or someone interested in the bike house would live there," Wood said.

The bike house has been averaging about one visitor per week since Curry's death, Wood said, most of whom have called a day ahead to let her know they were arriving,

A Last Visit

On June 8, Marja Noorman of the Netherlands was riding the TransAm Trail with her husband Henk Van Dorn and visited with June. Marja recalled what was perhaps one of the last opportunities that June had to greet the visiting cyclists that she loved so much.

"When she heard us knocking at her door, she came downstairs and she seemed pleased with our visit."

"She told me that many, many bicyclists from all over the world had visited her house and stayed at her place over the years. Afterwards, she would receive letters, postcards, and presents."

"On the table in the middle of the room, there is a scale model of Afton made by a bicyclist. June's house had a tiny bike leaning against the front. She kept saying that she was sorry she could not offer us something to drink, and repeatedly apologized for her appearance because she had gone back to bed to get warm."

"Since we did not want to wear her out, we left after about 15 minutes."

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HENK VAN DORN

or in the morning before they arrived. (The number is listed on TransAm map section 12.)

And what about the postcards and memorabilia Curry collected over the years festooning the bike house, from a cycling sock "burned in a brake accident," to a bicycle crafted out of a spoke?

"It's going to stay right where it is," Wood said. "Most of it is on the walls or ceilings. It can stay where it is."

Wood is trying to consolidate boards covered in yellowed newspaper articles Curry had sitting around into albums so she can discard the boards.

"I'm excited about it, it's really a fun thing to do," Wood says of continuing the operation of the Bike House. "June had many great adventures hearing about other people's adventures. She lived in Afton her entire life and never traveled much. This was her way of seeing the world."

In 1996, Adventure Cycling Co-Founder Greg Siple went to Virginia with his young son Zane for a Cookie Lady reunion where TransAmerica cyclists would show their appreciation for June Curry and raise money for the Bike House. For Siple, it would be the first time he would meet Curry, despite the fact that Bikecentennial was at the core of both of their lives.

"June was very quiet, very polite," Siple remembered of their first meeting. "In a way, because of all the pictures I'd seen, it was almost like I already knew her."

The reunion was at the Acorn Inn in Nellysford, Virginia, owned by Kathy and Martin Versluys, former TransAm riders. It included speechmaking, and Siple took his turn. He began by listing all of the ambitions the organizers of Bikecentennial had, including attracting 20,000 cyclists from around the world. Siple continued with the list of ambitions, ending with one to make Bikecentennial an event that showed the greatest hospitality cyclists had ever seen.

"We only had 4,000 cyclists, we failed," Siple remembered saying next. "I went down the list of failures. When I got to the hospitality part, I said, 'There we achieved our goal because of one person.'"

That one person, of course, was in the audience.

"She was just smiling the entire time, soaking it in," Siple said. **AC**

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