

MINNESOTA'S BICYCLE-FRIENDLY FARMER DONN OLSON HAS TAKEN IT UPON HIMSELF TO CREATE A BICYCLISTS' HAVEN ON THE NORTHERN TIER ROUTE

by Dan D'Ambrosio



(Right) Donn Olson. (Above) A visiting cyclist enjoying the benefits of the Bicycle Bunk House.

In his YouTube video uploaded on July 25, 2011, Louie (no last name given) gives us a tour of Donn Olson's bunkhouse for touring bicyclists on Route 47 near Dalbo, Minnesota, along Adventure Cycling's Northern Tier Bicycle Route.

With close-cropped red hair, a full beard, and glasses, and wearing an orange cycling top, Louie, fresh-faced and refreshed, looks into the camera, probably an iPhone, and says, "Today, we ended up at a bicyclist's paradise."

Behind him a collection of steel farm outbuildings and a grain silo, meticulously maintained, bask in summer sunshine as Louie begins by talking about the "intense heat" he and his riding partner have been enduring for several days. The heat index, Louie said, was 123 degrees the day before.

"After the heat we've been enduring, this is very welcome," he says.

This is Donn Olson's family farm, Louie informs us, and it has been in Olson's family "forever, I think." (In fact,

Olson said it's been about 100 years.)

Starting with the outhouse and outdoor shower, Louie enthuses that this is probably the best and cleanest outhouse he has ever seen, swinging open the door to reveal the toilet seat recessed in a wooden plank. Olson has cut the traditional quarter moon into the outhouse door for the classic outhouse look.

"Can't beat that," Louie says.

Next, Louie marvels at the solar-heated shower with a metal stock tank rigged on top of the wooden shower enclosure to provide the hot water.

"It's a-mazing," Louie says. "I wouldn't expect anything less from a farmer. They can do anything with their hands."

Then Louie takes us into the bunkhouse itself, warm and inviting with its rough lumber, cut by Olson with his portable saw mill. There's a TV, Louie points out, air conditioning, a microwave, and a pizza oven.

"There's a fully stocked fridge, we're not messing around here," Louie says, pointing out that the honor system

prices probably don't cover the cost of the items in the fridge and makeshift pantry.

"He told me they used to milk cows in here," Louie says of the bunkhouse.

Showing us the three private rooms in the bunkhouse, Louie makes it clear how he feels about Donn Olson's Dalbo bunkhouse for bicyclists.

"When you've been sleeping in a tent with a six-foot, four-inch grown man for the past month, this is heaven," he intones as he pans the room he and his riding partner will be sharing out of the heat and out of passing storms.

Rough nights

Donn Olson, who appears in a video shot by another adoring bicycling fan,

has the flat-top crew cut and square jaw you would expect in a former Army helicopter pilot who served 20 months in Vietnam, entering the service in March, 1968. Olson's grandfather immigrated from Sweden to work in a lumber camp in Wisconsin before homesteading the farm in Minnesota where Olson now lives, retired, although he's still working for the army from home as a contractor.

"Bicyclists spend some rough nights on the road. I just want to make it a little easier for them," Olson says in the video.

Not a cyclist himself, Olson's extraordinary efforts and hospitality for cyclists along the Northern Tier route — converting an unused farm building into the bunkhouse — come solely from a good heart. He didn't even know he was on the Northern Tier until 2005 when the state had Highway 47 ripped up for repairs and some hot and tired cyclists showed up at his farmhouse door having pushed their bikes through sand for some distance because of the construction. They were hoping for a place to camp for the night.

"That's when I found out there was a bike route," Olson said when we spoke on the phone. "We talked a lot and so forth. I got the number for Adventure Cycling Association and called them up. I said, 'I'm a bicycle-friendly farmer. It's hard to find camping spots around here. They can camp in my yard any time they want.'"

A neat story

Jennifer Milyko, an Adventure Cycling's senior cartographer, remembers the call.

"I wasn't certain the bunkhouse would last so it probably didn't register as anything more than a neat story," she said.

But in a blog post from 2010, Milyko wrote about the exciting news that not only had Donn Olson's hospitality lasted, it had morphed into a bunkhouse that was now expanding its services.

"I love Donn's response when asked why he does this for cyclists: "My answer is that when we visit with our guests we can live our dreams through them, and besides, it makes us feel good to help others,'" Milyko wrote.

Not surprisingly, Olson was the recipient of the 2011 June Curry Trail Angel Award, named after the famous

"Cookie Lady" of Afton, Virginia, who helped cyclists on the TransAmerica Trail from the inaugural cross-country ride in 1976 nearly until her death last July at the age of 91.

Olson, who will turn 65 in June, hosted 136 cyclists in 2012, the number having grown steadily from 95 the year before that, and 64 the year before that.

"It's been steadily growing by word of mouth, or maybe YouTube is part of it," he said.

There's also the bicycle trail telegraph with riders riding east and west telling others they meet on the road about the bicycle bunkhouse.

Olson's wife Sherry enjoys helping the visiting cyclists as much as he does.

"We'll go out, sit down, have a beer, and visit with them," Olson said. "Real interesting people come through here. We have fun visiting."

Olson and his wife give as much as they receive. Cyclists have an experience they wouldn't likely have had any other way as a result of stopping at the bunkhouse. A couple from England accompanied Olson to a John Deere shindig as a result of Donn's purchase of a new tractor from the local dealer.

"It was a typical country affair with sloppy joes, hot dogs, potato salad, all that stuff," Olson said.

Gleaming new John Deere tractors were sprinkled about the venue for farmers to get "touchy feely" with, Olson said, and the couple from England got to be right there with them, talking tractors and combines.

"They really enjoyed it," he said.

Other lucky cyclists got to ride in a combine owned and operated by Olson's cousin, riding high above the wheat fields in the air-conditioned, GPS-enabled cab of the multi-thousand-dollar machine.

"My cousin is the one who farms big around here," Olson said. "He's got these great big combines. A couple of times around wheat harvest, bicyclists were here and we ran them out to let them ride around with the guy operating the combine. It's pretty cool to see things from that cab."

What makes them tick?

Olson still wonders sometimes, "What makes those guys tick to go across the country on a bicycle." But

he's getting into it himself in a limited way. He has suggested changes to the Northern Tier Route in his neck of the woods. Adventure Cycling is incorporating the changes into its updates, rerouting onto "fantastic, paved rail trails" Olson has suggested, according to Milyko, including the Central Lakes, Lake Wobegon, and Soo Line trails.

"He took it upon himself to learn about cycling in Minnesota and discovered some great rail trails that cross the region and had maps on hand to share with those passing through," Milyko wrote in an email.

Not only that, Olson has ridden a 16-mile stretch of those trails with his daughter and intends to ride more.

"That first 16 miles, my butt was pretty sore," Olson said. "I'll do whatever I'm capable of doing. It's enjoyable to go on those bike trails. You go through the middle of the country, right through farmers' fields."

Some of those surrounding farmers find it hard to understand what Olson and his wife are doing with the bicycle bunkhouse. They can't understand how the couple could invite so many strangers into their home and lives in these troubled times. Never mind inviting them to use the facilities, even when they aren't home. But Olson said he and Sherry don't ever worry.

"I've never met a single bad cyclist," he said. "They're all good people."

Olson isn't sure how long he'll continue to operate the bicycle bunkhouse, but he is home to stay after 30 years in the military, having lived in Hawaii, Alaska, Korea, and "other locations across the world." After he retired, Olson asked Sherry where she wanted to go.

"I told her it's up to her," Olson said. "She's been following me for 30 years. If she wanted to go someplace else, that's fine. But we came back here."

That's lucky for cyclists crossing the country on the Northern Tier.

"Everybody has their hobby, and this is mine," Olson said. **AG**

Dan D'Ambrosio once let a cross-country cyclist who worked for the International Herald Tribune in Paris use his home in Missoula in exchange for the use of the cyclist's apartment in Paris.