THANK YOU, BILL AND BOB

Saying farewell to two leaders for bicycle travel and safety

During my brief tenure at Adventure Cycling, I have enjoyed an uninterrupted rush of good people, good feelings, and good news. But as so often happens in life, you get hit by a hard dose of reality – almost like stepping on the business end of a rake, such that the handle smacks you in the face. So it was in late June when I was driving through eastern Oregon on my way to Adventure Cycling’s extraordinary Columbia Gorge ride (more on that in my next column). With my daughter humming a song in the back seat, I got a call informing me that Bill Bliss had been hit by a car and killed in Colorado while riding with our TransAmerica tour group.

It’s bad news any time a cyclist is harmed, but this news was exceptionally tragic. Bill Bliss lived up to his name, especially when it came to cycling. He was a long-time bicycle adventurer and was one of the pioneers on the original Bikecentennial tour in 1976. Not only that, he built a special three-seater bike so that his young daughters, Shannon and Heather, could join him on that grand journey (along with his wife, Bonnie, who rode solo).

Bill’s cycling exploits are legendary. He rode the 366-day, 18,000-mile Odyssey Tour around the globe to welcome the new millennium. As he told us, he “didn’t get sick or crash hard. I was able to ride all the miles – one of five EFlers (Every ‘Flaming’ Inch).” He rode even further as a commuter. He started riding in 1972, and in 1973, he began logging his miles, which hit 250,000 in August 1999.

Bonnie Bliss told me that if Bill was going to leave this Earth, he’d almost certainly want to go out on a bicycle. I got the same feeling from his comrades on the TransAm Tour. I had the honor of riding with them from Missoula over Lolo Pass to the Lochsa River in Idaho as part of their epic trip. During the ride, and after dinner in the cool twilight, they expressed great fondness for Bill and real concern about the way he was hit by a car on an open highway in clear weather. If anyone was a stickler for bike safety, it was Bill. As Bonnie noted, Bill was the first cyclist named to a state recreation commission in California. He would travel – by bike – to the commission meetings from San Jose to San Diego partly on I-5 and State Highway 101, both incredibly busy routes. She said that “he would call Caltrans (the state transportation department) later to tell them about the safety troubles he had run into.”

We are working with Bonnie and many others to ensure that a thorough investigation is made into the circumstances of Bill’s final bike ride. His death is a stark reminder that bicycling is not a danger-free sport. It is also a reminder that cyclists and pedestrians get short shrift when it comes to transportation safety investments. Nationally (as of 2002), although 13.2 percent of all traffic fatalities were cyclists or pedestrians, 

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