



Greg and June Siple start a gravel-road descent on the Robert Campbell Highway.

DAN BURDEN



Hemistour Expedition, 1972

Sweating the Yukon

A pestering squadron of mosquitoes, black flies, and deer flies easily matched our pace as we trudged up a steep grade toward the Yukon border. They buzzed around exposed arms, legs, and faces to attack any unguarded skin. My rear derailleur cable had slipped, forcing me to walk to avoid more insult to my strained knee. To keep me company, Dan hiked along more than a mile, and we swatted at insects with little effect. With every hour closer to noon, we lost bug repellent in the sweat caused by the mounting heat and

by June J. Siple

our progress was hampered, and a lack of roadside creek water made quick, cooling face rinses impossible. We could have emptied our bottles on ourselves to cool off, but that would have wasted scarce drinking water.

With no low gears to battle the ascent to 4,515 feet, higher by 429 feet than our tallest pass in Alaska, I'd been killing time on foot and pushing my bike until Greg, my husband and bearer of the group tool kit, could catch up. I tried riding again once the slope softened and I found it easier on the lesser grade. Lys passed me, perspiring and red-faced like the rest of us, but gamely pushing on, and Dan dropped in behind her. Once Greg arrived, he and I tightened the cable with the bike lying in loose gravel just off the dusty road. Ahead of the pack as usual, our fifth rider, John Likins, was at the quasi-town of Boundary, Alaska, already enjoying a breeze with his tundra view above the tree line, and writing a letter to his girlfriend.

Having already ridden nearly 700 miles in Alaska, we would do the same in the Yukon in 16 to 17 days, logging 50 to 60 miles per day on all-gravel roads. But our main preoccupation, besides riding and eating, bothered us in camp. The potential for bear attacks lay on our minds. Although we hoisted food stores up into the trees at night, Yukon spruce seemed to be shorter and more slender than trees in Alaska campsites. Under our food burden, they sometimes bent over to almost touch the



Remote burial. Yukon Order of Pioneers wooden tombstone near Dawson City.

Hemistour

Hemistour, the first bicycle expedition to travel the Western Hemisphere from north to south, logged 18,272 miles from Anchorage, Alaska, to Ushuaia, Argentina. Between June 16, 1972, and February 25, 1975, 29 cyclists rode varying distances. The core group of riders consisted of Dan and Lys Burden (8,628 miles to Salina Cruz, Mexico) and Greg and June Siple (18,272 miles to Ushuaia). Originated in 1966 as "Project 66" by Dan and dubbed "Hemistour" by Greg in 1968, the ride garnered financial support from sponsors, cyclists, family, and friends to promote American Youth Hostels, Inc. and bicycle touring. To read more about Hemistour, check out *National Geographic*, May 1973, and *National Geographic World*, February 1976.

CASEY GREENE

ground, making our food stores even more enticing to bears. During the day, air horns hung on our handlebar bags so we could warn each other or summon aid. Many folks, especially Alaskans, were surprised at our lack of a handgun arsenal for protection. Not yet invented, bear spray, wouldn't be on the shelves for another 14 years.

But we were also concerned about moose. Often we had to kick moose scat out of the way to make room for our tents. Unpredictably large animals six to seven feet tall at the shoulder, with males weighing 800 to 1,500 pounds, they might have stepped on our 3.75-pound nylon tent as we slept. My logbook writing often kept me up until everyone else had nodded off, and as the lightest sleeper to boot, I would awaken at least once a "night," with the midnight sun providing night-long twilight. I listened carefully to every sound on my last tentative visit to the edge of the woods, including soothing bird murmurings from the nest, but moose also call to each other, one chirp at a time, like sonar.

In the tundra environment on Top of the World Highway, we rode steadily the next day to get to Dawson City. The flir-

tatious road continued to toss in a little downhill, then slam in an offsetting climb. We expected to find John waiting for lunch, but he had gone ahead, tempted by the unseen proximity of Dawson City. Descending sharply for nine to 10 miles on freshly graded, loose gravel, I braked lightly and often on the precipitous slope to avoid losing control. A spill would have inflicted abrasions taking a week or two to heal, not worth the thrill of a headlong descent. My hands started going numb and ached from keeping a tight grip on the drop bars to maintain control plus the near-constant braking to slow my speed. Greg and I stopped several times to let the rims cool and so I could shake out my hands to relieve the tingling and pain. Lys and I had already been struck by stinging wheel-flung gravel that day from Clinton Creek Asbestos trucks, so we pulled over for each rushing knot of traffic disgorged from the ferry below. Finally we reached the Yukon River, flowing fast toward the Bering Sea in Alaska, and we could see Dawson, population 700, just across the roiling water.

Lys's great grandfather, Fred W. Dewey, a 26-year-old printer by trade in Jamestown,

DAN BURDEN

New York, traveled to the Yukon in 1898 among thousands of other gold-hungry hopefuls. He and his claim partner were discouraged by constant setbacks, including harsh conditions and the washout of the entire winter's worth of digging. After a year of sluice mining in the Dawson City area, he abandoned his claim without realizing any success. Strapped for money but back home, the six-foot, five-inch red-haired Dewey repaid friends who grubstaked him with adventurous stories. Wilks, his former partner, then struck gold.

With the gold rush on her mind, Lys cycled out of town with me for a bracing bath in the icy cold Klondike River. We found a spot out of sight alongside gold rush tailings that hemmed in the river. Perhaps her great-grandfather had sluiced for gold in that very spot, shivering and hungry for a square meal. Had he reached his 100th birthday, he could have received postcards from his 25-year-old raven-haired bicycling descendant, who arrived in Dawson City 74 years after Dewey left the Yukon.

Around 10:00 PM, rested, repacked, and ready after our last evening in Dawson, we headed south 13 miles to camp. With only 14,000 residents in 1972 — but larger than California in square miles — Yukon Territory presented a scattering of settlements that were tiny fractions of their gold rush era size, along the North Klondike Highway. We came across these little towns a day or two apart in bicycle-travel time. The Dempster Highway, a new road under construction near Dawson City, would extend north to Inuvik in the Northwest Territories. But it wouldn't open for another five years, and most bridges were just blueprint drawings — otherwise we might have been tempted to ride to the Arctic Circle.

Hot mid-day temperatures of 80 to 90 degrees soon forced us into mid-day siestas, with more riding in cooler evening hours,



Rough and tumble. June cranks up a grade on the Robert Campbell Highway.

as we pedaled along the relatively dry, heat-singed land between the MacKenzie Mountains to the northeast and Pacific Coast Ranges to the southwest. Although we did get rained on from time to time, who would think we would ride into such gritty summer heat so far north? Life in the Yukon progressed to a devil-may-care, laid-back lifestyle, and we jumped into frigid lakes or streams at will to bathe on hot Yukon afternoons. Dan, our most fearless open-air bather, recklessly took the plunge time after time.

As Greg and I gained strength, my bum

knee hurt less, and we were able to stay together more while maintaining a good pace. 50 pounds lighter than Dan and nine inches shorter, Greg's physique and level of stamina came much closer to mine, and his quirky sense of humor made him an ideal riding companion. Talking constantly on the road, we made conversations last for days. A subject could be thoroughly explored without the least boredom, especially with a tailwind, when a day's travel turned to delight in our cycling lifestyle. On headwind days, the chitchat made the miles fly much faster than they did with a

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Northern exposure. *Lys Burden books it on the North Klondike Highway.*

head-down grind. I sang Girl Scout camp songs to lighten the way on long downhills or when riding solo.

While I carried the beefy first-aid kit, Greg hauled the heavy, well-stocked tool kit advised by Braxton Bike Shop in Missoula, Montana, our home base. Unless someone rode off-route, practically impossible in this north country where route

changes might occur once a week, we could “sweep up” a broken-down bike or injured rider and patch things up, barring major breakdowns like a pretzeled rim or broken bones. Motorists might be a source of help in a pinch, but we had to be as self-sufficient as possible and not rely on passersby. No bike shops existed along our route in the Yukon, and there would be no

emergency room until Watson Lake near the boundary with British Columbia.

Back in the States, most people following the news of our ride probably thought we were masochists to ride on gravel. Why suffer needlessly? It just wasn't done — few cyclists in 1972 would consider riding gravel for even 10 minutes, let alone 1,500 miles. In Ohio, where Greg and I met in 1965 through the Columbus Council of the American Youth Hostels (AYH), we rode on recreational day trips, rallies, and local weekend group events, all increasingly common by the late 1960s. The popularity of races preceded recreational rides, but all were on pavement with the exception of cyclo-cross events. Even so, cyclo-cross riders competed on road bikes. Extended tours of a week or more, always on paved roads, were rare in our area. Lightweight road-bike wheels of that era (27 x 1.25 inches) were simply not up to the wear and tear of extended back-road travel.

So we had wheels custom-built for Hemistour by the Braxton Bike Shop, specifically to avoid problems on gravel roads. Fred DeLong, our technical advisor in Pennsylvania, suggested using the same size rims as three-speed bicycle wheels. He pointed out that world-wide distribution of three-speed bikes exported for decades



Slurry bombing. *Hot and dry Yukon summers make fighting forest fires a way of life.*

GREG SIPPLE

from England would ensure a supply of tires in any country. Sam Braxton added Campagnolo Nuovo Tipo high-flange hubs to reduce wheel flexion, and with sons Bart and Dalt strung them with Robergel 280-millimeter spokes. Sam personally rode the prototype wheels on Montana gravel roads until he was satisfied with the reliability of the design. Virtually trouble-free, those wheels proved their worth daily.

We five had little experience on gravel beforehand, but as we became more fit, we came to prefer gravel in many respects. Like canoeists navigating a river, we learned to read a road, and to work out our course. Such skills became second nature, and biking was itself more interesting than cruising along on trouble-free, smooth pavement. Motor vehicles came past us more slowly on gravel, making it safer, in that respect, than pavement. We could even hear a bike rider coming from behind by the progressively louder crunch of gravel, and freshly pumped-up bicycle tires might pop a piece of gravel 15 feet away with a tight “pong” sound.

At mail stops every seven to 10 days, we hungrily scooped up food boxes we had shipped to ourselves from Montana. After repacking my Touring Cyclist pannier with a new batch of food, I typically hauled a full



Ready to roll. A librarian by trade, John Likins rode with Hemistour from Anchorage, Alaska, to Jasper, Alberta.



For the kettle. Experimenting with edible wild plants to supplement dehydrated foods at dinner time, Lys gathers a fistful of “strawberry spinach.”

load of 22 pounds of edibles in one pannier, 12 pounds in the opposing clothing pannier, nine pounds for the handlebar bag, and eight pounds worth of two sleeping bags with built-in foam pads. On a full-load day, I would carry about 50 pounds on my 35-pound Peugeot PX-10 (including its racks, flag, and full water bottle). When adding a one-gallon water cube to my load in dry sections or on short stints to camp, I carried as much as 60 pounds. So I pedaled 65 to 95 pounds of bike and baggage down the road every day. Weight distribution was gender neutral, with close-to-equal loads for all. And, if you had a flat, you fixed it yourself — equality of the open road.

We regulated our day primarily by mileage, stopping to camp when we’d logged a predetermined number of miles so we wouldn’t overdo it. The midnight sun could trick us into riding too far and getting overtired, because 7:00 PM looked just like 10:00 PM. I crawled out of the tent one night but quickly retreated in surprise. It was *dark* out there, and it startled me! I named the place “Too Dark Camp” in my journal. Nighttime hours would increase as we continued cycling south and as summer days shortened.

Initially I caught flak in Alaska for being too slow. Because of my bad knee and sub-par fitness level, I was constantly

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and painfully riding solo behind everyone, including Greg. By the Yukon, however, the tables had turned, and John turned into the object of biker gossip for being in front all the time. A librarian from Massachusetts who started with us in Anchorage, John had legs like a Clydesdale. He took the lead at will, occasionally riding with Dan for short stints, but easily churning forward again, kicking up a mini-dust rooster tail. We all stood in awe of his strength, although most of our future companions would also outride us. He packed his bike neatly, British style, set off by black socks and full fenders — his “kit” all perched precisely on rear and front carriers with scarcely a wrinkle. As we requested of all our companions, John had prepared carefully, paying the Braxton shop to custom-build Hemistour’s 26 x 1 and 3/8 inch (650B) gravel-hardy wheels, and taking our other suggestions to heart.

But by the end of the long, dusty, grav-

in the midst of a great adventure, John was a lone bachelor who had to camp at night with two misfit married couples and longed for his girlfriend. It was not surprising that he wanted to create some distance during the day.

We were often at loggerheads with the Burdens. Married only two years, we found ourselves virtually and unwittingly wedded again — to Hemistour. Greg and I had lost most of our independence, power to make decisions, and influence over our life on the road, but the four of us were incapable of working out disagreements. As a result, our fractured core group never rode together except for photographs, and I began to lose hope that we could ever get along.

Along the Robert Campbell Highway where we headed east near Carmacks, we rode into an isolated world, which at first made the core group’s friction even more painful. But “the Campbell,” as we called it, had a calming, centering, almost soothing effect on morale. For 362 miles, we did not see a single permanent building. It was like being out to sea, no ports of comfort except our camp evenings in cozy Warmlite tents, reading *Klondike!* from our library on wheels. Mileposts became buoys, and quavery heat waves rose along the horizon like salt-water waves tossing easy-weather whitecaps. The wind could either fill our sails to push us along or punish us with a nor’easter. At lunch stops, our crew would reckon distant weather. Days of thinking and dreaming, riding and eating, blended one into the other.

The mere handful of vehicles passing us per day on the Campbell became objects of interest rather than dread. Socializing with locals often took place in the middle of the road where a pickup driver would stop and turn off the engine, elbow hanging out the window. Whether he handed out welcome snacks or drinks, or delivered a joke, his settling dust plume would drift off the road to add to already dusty vegetation just off the shoulder. Even big rigs found time to stop, which helped satisfy my hunger for human contact beyond our group.

Yukon roads consisted of a maddening variety of gravel surfaces, good and bad, and the Campbell, although it had been open to traffic only four years, was no exception. Road graders leveled gravel roads by scraping the bumps and ridges down into the potholes, causing hidden wells of deep gravel that can flounder a cyclist. To spot a grader working on the horizon meant misery ahead, with loose



Pure water. As Hemistour’s primary photographer through Mexico, Dan Burden took on daily, less glamorous chores as well.

eled Yukon “highways,” John’s curly dark hair had evolved from a neat Boston trim job to wild locks with the tips bleaching out. His packs had accumulated dust and, total neatness aside at last, an occasional display of freshly laundered drying underwear festooned his north-country rig. Probably just flying high from being



Luxury accommodations. At an old barbershop/gospel hall as guests of the Denning family.

gravel everywhere, and our daily goal of 50 to 60 miles took much longer to complete. But a neglected road, which we greatly preferred, had well-worn ruts we could follow, potholes we could weave around, and often had hard-packed smoother dirt strips to ride for short distances. Our bicycling pace

allowed choice and a precise path through the maze.

However, we disliked washboarding, the hard-packed series of wave-like gravel deposits from motorized use, and a feature of poorly maintained roads. Even so, they could be fun if the troughs between waves

happened to match the wheel base of our bicycles. In that case, we stood on our pedals and let the bikes roller-coaster along, like Kentucky Derby jockeys standing in their stirrups at the end of a race. Washboarding, which could rattle your amalgam fillings loose, occurred at points of motorized acceleration or braking, often on one side of the road at a time. With light traffic, we could sometimes switch sides to avoid them.

In our gravel-road reverie, we lived in the moment. Fit and more content, our troubles seemed less able to keep pace. But at Watson Lake we would have to start riding the dreaded gravel ALCAN Highway southeast. Realizing that we'd face a huge increase in traffic, and dust, billowing dust — hallmarks of the road — brought on a strong sense of loss and nostalgia for our little Yukon byways. Coming to the end of the Yukon at Watson Lake felt like the end of a world we would never know again. **AC**

June Siple was the first woman to bicycle from Alaska to Argentina (Hemistour Expedition, 1972-1975), and is one of four Adventure Cycling co-founders. Currently, she is working on energy-conservation projects at home to reduce the Siple carbon footprint.

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