

TRANSAMERICA: SECTION NINE

A member discovers the Trail, at home

By Bob Soetebier

The Bikecentennial TransAmerica Bicycle Trail traverses the U.S. over state and county roads from Oregon to Virginia (or vice versa). Every year, since 1976, a few thousand bicyclists travel all or part of this 4,250-mile route in organized groups or on their own. My wife, Dawn, and I, decided to ride the portion of the route that passes through our home state of Missouri. Our week-long 350-mile tour took us through the extremely hilly, but rewardingly beautiful Missouri Ozarks.

Day 1: Marshfield, MO; 30 miles. We began our tour at the Webster County seat just 20 miles northeast of Springfield, Missouri. At 1,500 feet, it is the highest county seat in the state. Shortly thereafter we crossed the marshy headwaters of the Osage and Niangua rivers.

Outside of the town of High Prairie on the Ozark Plateau, we were greeted by scores of rare wildflowers blooming in vivid reds, brilliant blues, golden yellows, and deep purples. This continuously painted countryside brought us to the "Lazy Louie Bike Camp." During the past eight years, Louie Schultz has provided his services and facilities free to more than 10,000 cross-country bicycle campers. On his bulletin board, he proudly displays the cards and letters of appreciation from around the U.S. and the world.

Day 2: Hartville, MO; 40 miles. After finishing a large stack of breakfast hotcakes and signing the ever-expanding bicyclists' guest register at Swain's Cafe, we crossed the lily-pad-laden headwaters of the Gasconade River. Beyond the town of Fairview, we climbed the many steps of the Houston fire tower for a spectacular view. Afterwards—a refreshing swim at Dog Bluff on the Big Piney River outside of Houston, Missouri.

Day 3: Houston, MO; 35 miles. Just beyond this town, which is the Texas County seat (largest county in Missouri), we came within 50 feet of a deer standing in the middle of the road in the early morning mist.

Later, in the heat of the day, the combination store/post office in the small town of Yukon provided refreshing relief in the form of ice-cold air conditioning and water. After enjoying a panoramic view of the river valley and an exhilarating downhill run, we swam in the crystal clear waters of the Jack's Fork River.

Day 4: Alley Springs, MO; 30 miles. Before leaving, we investigated the deep blue waters of Alley Spring which, with a flow of 81 million gallons per day, is Missouri's fourth largest spring and supplies power to the adjacent Old Red Mill, open free to the public.

Accompanying us on the extended steep climbs out of the river valleys was a 61-year-old Englishman named Eric Jackson who had already ridden more than 3,000 miles from the west coast with 60 pounds of gear on his bicycle. His tires had less tread than there was hair on his slightly balding head. After a long downhill run, we stopped at Owls Bend for a refreshing dip in the swift high waters of the Current River before climbing the next mountain wall out of the river's valley.

Day 5: Ellington, MO; 45 miles. This day began with climbing

another of the mile-plus-long hills that are the hallmark of the Ozarks. After entering Reynolds County, we were rewarded with a view of Taum Sauk Mountain, which at 1,772 feet, is the highest point in the state. Taum Sauk Mountain is part of the St. Francois Mountain Range, the oldest mountains in the U.S.

Later we stopped at Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park (where anyone who rides in on a bicycle camps for free) through which the clear water of the Black River flows. It was here that we discovered some fine specimens of prickly pear cactus that grow wild throughout the Missouri Ozarks.

Another point of interest was Elephant Rocks State Park with its huge free-standing granite boulders and weather-worn mazelike passageways. This area is known as the "top-of-the-world" as it was never inundated by the ancient oceans that once covered the entire Midwest.

Day 6: Pilot Knob, MO; 55 miles. The Battle of Pilot Knob at Fort Davidson was the turning point of the Civil War. This one-day battle over access to the Iron Mountain Railroad was fought between 1,000 defending Union troops and 12,000 Confederates. Had the Union forces not successfully delayed the Rebels, the South would have taken the rails to St. Louis, captured the Union arsenal at Jefferson Barracks, and quite probably have won the war.

Day 7: Ste. Genevieve, MO (foot tour). Ste. Genevieve, the oldest continually inhabited town west of the Mississippi River, has many fine examples of early French Colonial homes from the fur-trading era. Among these are the 1770 Amoureux House and the 1770 Bolduc House with its high stockade fence originally erected for protection from Indian raids and later, cattle drives. Also the 1784 Guibourd-Valle House, topped by an unusual Norman-truss roof, is chock full of Henry VIII furniture with intricate wood inlay.

The 1790 Green Tree Tavern contains an unusual triangular fireplace with three separate room openings. This unique triple-hearth fireplace also contains a secret compartment that allowed one hearth and mantel to swing out—two young children could hide inside during Indian attacks.

We wound up our visit to Ste. Genevieve with dinner at the Old Brick House Restaurant, the oldest brick building west of the Mississippi River.

Day 8: Waterloo, IL; 70 miles. In Mississippi River bottomland opposite the bluffs south of Ste. Genevieve, a few Indian mounds remain. These mounds are indicative of the extensive Indian culture that once thrived along the entire Mississippi River Valley.

We crossed the Mississippi River over the bridge at Chester, Illinois, and were greeted at Segar Memorial Park by a statue of "Popeye." Chester is the home town of the creator of this famous cartoon character.

As we rode north along the river, we came upon the restored 1802 Pierre Minard home (open free to the public) just below Fort Kakaskia State Park. The extensive herb garden behind this home provided us with a lingering idea of the way many of the French dishes were flavored. This was the home of Jean Baptiste Menard, Illinois's first lieutenant governor. His business was in fur trading, and his resulting wealth is exhibited in the fine construction and furnishings of this large home overlooking the Mississippi River.

Upriver, farther north along the Illinois bluffs, is the Modoc Rock Shelter. Indians came here regularly for more than 6,000 years dating as far back as 8,000 B.C.

A little farther north, west of Prairie du Rocher are the remains of Fort de Chartres—built in 1720 and rebuilt after flooding in the 1750s. This fort's walls were 3½ feet thick and 18 feet high and its powder magazine is the oldest standing building in Illinois.

Day 9: St. Louis; 45 miles. After leaving Waterloo, Illinois, and the Peterstown House Museum with its many intriguing antiques, we rode the rolling hills atop the Illinois bluffs. After dropping down to the river valley and its levee, we crossed the Mississippi River into St. Louis on the Jefferson Barracks Bridge, just south of JB Park. Our trip across Missouri on the TransAmerica Trail was over. Our consideration of other trips on other trails had just begun. ☞

