

1973 ARTICLE HELPED LAUNCH BIKECENTENNIAL

National Geographic's Hemistour story brought bicycle travel to the masses

STORY BY JUNE J. SIPLE

→ WHEN 8.5 MILLION *National Geographic* magazine devotees tore the brown paper wrapper off the May 1973 issue, they discovered 26 pages about bicycling. One article featured the bicycle boom, and the other focused on long-distance bicycle touring. Many readers probably knew about bicycling's recreational rebirth in the U.S., but few would have been aware of international, extended bicycle touring. "Bikepacking Across Alaska and Canada" focused on Hemistour, an expedition that promoted bicycle touring and hosteling along a 15-country route through the Western Hemisphere. Stretching over two years, eight months, and nine days, the 18,272-mile trip — with 30 participants riding varying distances — was the first bicycle ride from Alaska to Argentina. A potent publicity machine for bicycle touring, Hemistour generated hundreds of column inches in the press. Numerous radio and TV interviews found audiences throughout the hemisphere from 1972 to 1975.

By far the most significant of these media was *National Geographic*, with its dedication to fact and photo — what they published, people believed. Luckily for

the expedition, riders Dan Burden and Greg Siple possessed photographic skills to match *National Geographic* standards, and the two would share the enormous thrill of seeing their photos published in one of America's preeminent publications. One of the magazine's staff writers, Noel Grove, crafted the lead bicycle piece, "Bikes Are Back — and Booming." "Peter Benchley was assigned to write the [bike boom] article," Grove recalled, "but he turned it down. So I went to NG's central files and saw that he had been offered the story, but he was [too busy] writing a book about a shark (that book was *Jaws*)." Grove was also given the assignment to work with Dan on the Hemistour

manuscript. A rising star at the magazine, Grove cycled 145 miles with the group from Prineville to Eugene, Oregon, as part of his research. He also coined the term "bikepacking" with its initial use in the Hemistour article.

Only four other bicycle touring articles had appeared in *National Geographic* prior to the Hemistour story, all focused on Europe (1938, 1939, 1940, and 1955). But the May 1973 issue was the first to feature bicycling in North America. Such respectable publicity, a dream come true for the core group of Hemistour newlyweds Dan and Lys Burden, and Greg and June Siple, would be crucial for the cycling quartet's next project —



Dan Burden's iconic photograph of his wife Lys (center), with Greg and June Siple (right) trudging through deep mud in British Columbia became a touchstone for would-be bicycle travelers who were introduced to Hemistour in the May 1973 issue of *National Geographic*.

Bikecentennial. The credibility generated helped coax sponsors to lend support and inspired a generation of touring cyclists. When Myrna Koffler (Rafalovich) first read the Hemistour article, she recalled thinking “I didn’t believe it could be done — I was just stunned — and women were doing it! All of a sudden, a long-distance bicycling effort became feasible, and it was not about some crazy extremists.” Myrna signed up for Bikecentennial’s leadership course and would lead a group across the TransAmerica Trail in 1976.

How did we, the Hemistour riders, convince *National Geographic* to publish the story after a nearly two-decade gap in bicycling coverage? In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Greg and I lived closer to the magazine’s Washington, DC, offices than Dan and Lys, who had moved from Ohio to Montana. So we agreed to visit *National Geographic* in 1971, following the month-long Atlantic Seafarer cycle touring trip that we co-led for the National American Youth Hostels (now Hostelling International USA). We carried a prized letter on the trip to DC — confirmation of our appointment with the head of photography. Our hopes rose as we came into the front entrance of the majestic gallery-like offices. Gigantic stunning photos lined every hallway and filled every spare wall space. It was a photographer’s nirvana.

But we had arrived a month late! Our appointment with Robert E. Gilka had been in July — not August. We unfolded the letter and sure enough, July had been the appointed month. Crushed by disappointment, we felt tremendously foolish as well. Gilka had to attend a meeting, but Assistant Director of Photography Joseph J. Scherschel generously declared he would see us instead. A jovial man, but professional and direct, he sat us down close to his desk. He sorted slides as we chatted informally about Hemistour, pitching them, one at a time (after close scrutiny), into one of two large metal wastebaskets, his “circular file” — both nearly full to the brim with discarded slides. It was fascinating and sobering. But we were there to take notes about creating a proposal, and he generously gave us a how-to.

Two comments surprised us — first, *National Geographic* was not at all concerned about our abilities with a

camera because they had more than a dozen staff photographers who could be flown anywhere in the world to shoot a story. So a well-crafted story proposal would be key. Second, Scherschel revealed to us their interest in a bicycling story! Further, he relayed a great deal of optimism about the task at hand, and we departed filled with confidence that we would succeed. After all, on the inside cover a statement for would-be contributors read: “Articles and photographs of travel, natural history, and expeditions to far places are desired.”

Back in Pittsburgh, at the peak of summer heat and humidity, we hauled our bikes up to our third-floor apartment high above the hustle of Murray Avenue. Greg quickly set to work and wrote a long letter to Dan about what needed to be in the proposal. We assumed he would write

Three months slipped through our fingers without a response. Disheartened, Greg and I assumed Hemistour would not be the subject an article in *National Geographic* at all. But Dan refused to give in, and on January 21, 1972 (with only about five months to go before our departure in Alaska), he phoned Gilka, who said our proposal had died for lack of support. No one could pull it off, the old guard had said. Surprisingly, he suggested that Dan call him again about a month before departure and fill him in on our plans; he might be willing to supply film and processing. With just over five weeks to go before our departure to Alaska, Dan made the final call to Gilka on April 28. Not long after Greg and I arrived in Missoula, Montana, on May 6, after hitchhiking from Ohio, a glorious yellow-orange *National Geographic* box with 60



The author patches up a scrape on National Geographic staff writer Noel Grove’s knee. Grove joined the Alaska-to-Argentina Hemistour expedition for 145 miles through part of Oregon in 1972 while researching the Hemistour story for the magazine.

it, but the task would need to be done quickly and be very specific and grounded with details. Dan sent us his proposal to review two months later, but it omitted key details. Based on what we had learned from Scherschel, we knew it would miss the mark. Greg immediately wrote his own proposal and mailed it to *National Geographic* on November 2, 1971, with an itinerary and maps provided by Dan and Lys for the first few months of travel. We had just seven months before our departure for Alaska.

rolls of Kodachrome film arrived. During that final month of endless preparations, just the sight of the box renewed our energy.

But what made them change their minds about our expedition? We knew a bicycling article was in the works. *National Geographic* had called Greg at work in Pittsburgh to consult with him about shooting the Tour of the Scioto River Valley (TOSRV), which he had founded with his father, Charles R. Siple, in 1962. They asked, “Should we

send a helicopter?" Without hesitation Greg said, "Yes!" What we didn't know was that the magazine only wanted one photo of TOSRV, and only one from Hemistour for a bicycle boom article they were developing. One photo out of the 60 rolls of film Dan and Greg would shoot on a "first look privilege" basis for *National Geographic*. But Dan and Greg's photography would reflect a strong work ethic and the ability to capture vivid

from a construction camp where we had overnights, hauling his bike and gear along, and skipped 26 miles of riding to get to our third mail stop faster, off route in Stewart, British Columbia. Dan, normally a man of unwrinkled mood, was in a fret about the complete lack of feedback. By our next mail stop 408 miles later, in Prince George, he was practically foaming at the mouth for news. At last! We had a telegram

the sky was clear enough to see flashing green northern lights, the best I'd ever seen. It drew all the hostelers outside to lay their sleeping bags on the lawn and gaze skyward, sighing and cheering with delight at the astounding neon display.

We went the movies to see *A Clockwork Orange*, read books, wrote letters, scribbled journal entries, and waxed our tents for better waterproofing. Always carrying a small pair of barber shears, I cut Dan's hair and beard, a good way to save trip funds. Greg and I launched each other down a 20-foot slick, grassy hill for fun and stayed up with Dan until 2:00 AM one night, talking in the hostel kitchen. My journal said, "Poor Dan didn't sleep much in anticipation of the NG call ... Do they or do they not like our photos?"

By the end of the Monday call, Dan was on a first-name basis with "Joe," who, my journal went on, "asked if we thought we'd make it to South America ... and that they're going to wire \$100 to us here plus comments from the

POOR DAN DIDN'T SLEEP MUCH IN ANTICIPATION OF THE NG CALL... DO THEY OR DO THEY NOT LIKE OUR PHOTOS?

images of our Hemistour story.

At our first two Hemistour mail stops in Alaska and the Yukon, we churned through our letters for something — anything — from the magazine. Dan was getting restless about the lack of feedback on photos already shipped to DC. He hitched a ride with workers

from Scherschel buried in the sheaf of mail we picked up on a Saturday: "DAN BURDEN HEMISTOUR, PLEASE CALL NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC COLLECT." Torture! Dan would have to wait until Monday.

We distracted ourselves until then. At the Prince George Hostel that night,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 73



SOMA FABRICATIONS

The SOMA WOLVERINE frame set is a super versatile trail explorer and off-road tourer.

- Belt-drive compatible
- Room for 700x45c knobby tires with fenders
- Sliding dropouts for traditional gears or Rohloff
- Tange Prestige heat treated CrMo tubing
- Will take a rear rack, front rack, even a mini front rack, but is also a blast to ride unloaded

Steel frames for commuting, centuries, singletrack and adventure.

www.somafab.com

TRAIL BICYCLE TOUR September 11-17, 2016 Following Lewis and Clark's route, this flat and totally traffic-free tour is on America's longest Rails to Trails. This fully supported tour, which includes daily route sheets and SAG stops, overnights in B&Bs and Historic Hotels. All breakfasts and dinners as well as lodging included. Tour starts just outside of St. Louis where you will be returned upon completion of the tour. You deserve to be PAMPERED! Details from BubbasPamperedPedalers.com or BikerBubba@aol.com.

WISCONSIN BACKROADS HOTEL TOURS Fully supported affordable 5-7 day bicycling vacations. \$625-\$745 includes HOTELS w/indoor pools-whirlpools, buffet dinners, food stops, & emergency support. Quiet, scenic, all paved back roads. NORTHWOODS, DOOR COUNTY, Spring Green, New Glarus, & more. Celebrating our 32nd year. www.pedalacrosswisconsin.com, 847-707-6888, 847-309-4740, drjpedal@sbcglobal.net.

PAC TOUR Riding Across America Fast since 1981. Cross country and regional tours for elite riders. Northern Transcontinental in July, Eastern Mountains in September, across Peru in October. Full support, hotels, training and coaching. www.pactour.com 262-736-2453.

CYCLE NORTH CAROLINA MOUNTAIN RIDE (August 13 & 14, 2016) Brevard, NC — Join us for the 3rd Annual CNC Mountain Ride and enjoy camping and cycling on scenic country roads in the North Carolina Mountains. Register for 1 or 2 days. Various loop rides of differing mileage. Additional lodging options are available. Fully supported with SAG support and rest stops. cyclenc@ncsports.org. www.ncsports.org.

LIFE AT BIKE SPEED — LIZARD HEAD CYCLING GUIDES Supported 4 to 14-day tours, car-free roads, live music, massage therapy, seamless mileage options and soul crushing climbs :) Our tours ride through some of the wildest, most spectacular and inaccessible areas of the American West. Featured in the NY Times. CHUBBY BIKES ARE HERE! In 2016 our MTB tours will include 3-inch tired 27.5 wheeled MTBs. See for yourself why these bikes are changing the sport of Mtn. Biking. 970.728.5891 www.LizardHeadCyclingGuides.com.

FLORIDA KEYS The ultimate Bicycle Vacation. Bike the entire key system, down and back. Fully-supported including breakfasts and most dinners. Beautiful sunsets. Swim with the dolphins. Snorkel. Dive. The Seven Mile Bridge just might be the most beautiful seven miles you will ever bike. November 5th-12th 2016. Details from BubbasPamperedPedalers.com or BikerBubba@aol.com.

KATY TRAIL "EPICUREAN" More than spinning the pedals! Immerse yourself in history and quaint towns in this intimate tour along the nation's longest continuous rail-trail. Lodging includes historic hotels/B&B's. Wineries, microbreweries & unique attractions. September/October departures. Info@katytrailbiketour.com or katy5487@gmail.com or 573.380.7875.

SEPTEMBER ESCAPE™ TRIRI® – SEPTEMBER 11-16, 2016 Scenic, historic tour of south central Indiana overnights Indiana State Park Inns. Three parks, two layover days, and one week of beautiful cycling. Contact: 812-333-8176; triri@triri.org; or www.triri.org.

FLORIDA KEYS HOTEL TRIP Fully supported, outstanding hotel accommodations, DoubleTree by Hilton, Holiday Inn Express, Hampton Inn. 6-day trip December 5-10, 2016. Key Largo to Key West & back. Stunning beach scenery, great meals, 2 layover days in Key West. Only \$1,025.00. www.floridakeysbikeride.com, 847-309-4740, kennethjgoldman@yahoo.com.

25TH ANNUAL OATBRAN One Awesome Tour Bike Ride Across Nevada. Silver Celebration of Crossing the Silver State. Sept. 25-Oct. 1, 2016. Fully Supported Motel style tour across US Hwy 50: "The Loneliest Road in America" For more info and to register: www.bikethewest.com.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 64
SIPLE: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

photography department," and "we celebrated with something of a victory breakfast." The next day, we had the money and comments: "GETTING GOOD SCENIC AND INDIVIDUAL BIKING PHOTOS STOP YOU NEED MORE INVOLVEMENT SHOTS OF ENCOUNTERS ALONG WAY STOP MONEY EN ROUTE STOP, CHARLENE MURPHY." Dan had just shipped film from Prince George featuring plenty of encounter shots. "We are really optimistic at this point," my journal noted.

At mile 3,103, we rode into Missoula on September 7, after pedaling 102 miles the previous day, our record for the first stage of Hemistour. Group friction had worsened toward the end of the trip, and we had arrived practically penniless. We had about \$100 left among us and figured we'd have to stop and work for the winter.

Back home and anxious for mail, Dan dug into our pile of letters and was not disappointed. We had another telegram. Yelling, "Wheee!" Lys and I grabbed each other and jumped for joy after hearing that the magazine would fly Dan and Greg to DC.

Meanwhile, Dan ran outside and played with the neighbor's dog, cavorting in the front yard. "And what do you think about that?!" he teased. "The boys," as the magazine often referred to them, would be wined and dined like rock stars in DC as they met various staff members and reviewed the initial Hemistour article slide selects. The Hemistour article proposal had, amazingly, been approved unanimously, based on the photographic skills of Dan Burden and his protégé, Greg Siple. Out of four issues — a total of about 24 articles — the piece was fourth in popularity, according to then-Editor Gilbert M. Grosvenor.

Undoubtedly setting the stage for promotion of Bikecentennial, while also boosting numbers of recreational riders nationwide, *National Geographic's* bicycling-rich issue lent credibility to the Bikecentennial concept. A rather wild idea compared to more sedate celebrations of the bicentennial year, Bikecentennial benefited greatly from the tremendous publicity that both stories generated. And more than four decades later, a few Adventure Cycling Association visitors still tell stories of how the Hemistour story in *National Geographic* had been the genesis of their path to bicycle touring. **AG**

June J. Siple is a Bikecentennial cofounder, former staff member, former board member, and the first woman to bicycle from Alaska to Argentina. June and Greg recently donated their 528-pound National Geographic collection to Darby High School in Montana.