



KNOCK, KNOCK

BY WILLIE WEIR

It was the end of the very first day of our bike journey across the U. S., and all was not well.

After ceremonially dipping our rear tires in the Pacific Ocean at Seaside, Oregon, my buddy Thomas and I pedaled down the Oregon Coast.

We were not seasoned travelers. Our bikes were brand new, but our travel budget was slim. I had sold my car (a Pontiac Tempest) for \$400. That was all the money I had to get across America. The plan depended on us staying in the cheapest of campgrounds every night, but we had made a huge error: we hadn't considered the 4th of July weekend. Every campground was overflowing. As complete novices, we didn't even think about wandering through a campground and asking if we could share a site.

Thomas suggested we might need to get a hotel.

"A hotel," I stammered. "I've got \$400 dollars to get across the country. If we stay in hotels, we won't get beyond Oregon."

I was sunburned. My butt ached after one long day in the saddle.

"That's it!" I said. "Done. We didn't train. We don't have enough money. This was a bad idea. We might as well take a bus back home." I slumped down next to my Univega Gran Turismo touring bike.

Then came the thought of returning to Sacramento where every one of my friends and acquaintances would ask, "How was that bike trip?" And I'd have to admit that I'd given up after one day. This thought propelled me into action. I stood up and announced, "We're going to ask."

"Ask what?" Thomas humored me.

"We are going to go up to a house, knock on the door, and ask if we can camp."

"Oh," Thomas rolled his eyes. "That's a brilliant idea. Okay. See that street? Third house down. The blue one."

"Yeah," I said.

"How do you know an ax murderer doesn't live there?"

I had to admit he had a point. We argued about the situation for a couple of minutes and came up with what we thought was a pretty good plan.

We agreed that if people liked plants, they'd like people too. I mean, what were the odds that someone with an award-winning rose garden was going to prune our heads off in the middle of the night?

Armed with that logic, we found a nearby house with a nice garden, and I slowly walked up to the door. I knocked timidly. Deep down inside, I hoped no one would answer.

A man in his mid-40s opened the door.

"Hello, sir," I said. "My name is Willie, and that's my friend Thomas. We are cycling across the country. Actually, we've only pedaled one day."

I pleaded our case — our limited budgets, the lack of campsites due to the holiday — and ended by saying, "If you wouldn't mind, could we pitch our tent on that flat part of your lawn? We promise to be gone really early in the morning."

Without pause he said, "Hell, no!"

Our trip was over. Then I noticed that his stoic face had broken out into a grin.

"Did my neighbors talk to you?" he asked.

"No, sir," I said.

He pulled out a garage-door opener, and the wide wooden door slowly swung open. He pointed inside.

"My wife and I recently bought a brand-new, queen-size, hide-a-bed sofa. The thing's so damn big, we can't get it



through the door. My neighbors have been teasing me about it," he said.

"Tell you what," he continued. "It's yours for the night. Cause you know what? When I was your age, I always wanted to do something like what you two are doing and I never got around to it."

We thanked him a dozen times and wheeled our bikes into the garage.

We wrote in our journals and were just about to collapse when the door from the house opened up.

"Hey, I head off to work really early so I'm going to say goodbye now."

He handed me the garage-door opener.

"Have a great trip!" he said.

The garage didn't have any windows, and when we turned off the lights, it was pitch black. Sleep came immediately.

When my watch alarm went off, I sat straight up in the dark, and for a moment, I had no idea where on earth I was.

I fumbled around and found the garage-door opener and hit the button. The loud motor slowly raised the door. As dawn light filled the garage, two best friends realized that nothing had gone as planned ... and that was great!

We didn't need to get to a campground each night. There were backyards, churches, porches, and couches. We learned just how kind strangers could be.

By the time we found ourselves in the little town of Cadott, Wisconsin, we were veterans of the road. And we were lost. We couldn't even find Cadott on the map. There were hail warnings for that evening, and our \$90 tent would be no match for the weather. We didn't even say a word to each other. We just looked down a street, found a house with a respectable garden, and knocked on the door.

The man who answered reminded me of Fred Flintstone. We asked if we could pitch our tent under his carport.

"Hey, Millie," he called out. "Do you want to take in a couple of bearded transients?"

This was Buster and Millie Heinle.

They invited us in. We never even unpacked our tent; we were given rooms in the house instead. Millie said she was just fixing some supper. Buster's 93-year-old mom was visiting. After supper and the *Tonight Show*, we played Name That Tune around the organ (with Buster's mom at the keyboard) until 2:00 AM.

We slept hard and woke up to discover that Millie had broken into our packs ... and washed all our clothes. My laundry was stacked on my rear rack, making August 9, 1981, the last time my underwear was folded.

We let Buster and Mille know that we had a lot of ground to cover and that we needed to be on the road by 8:00 AM. We didn't leave their place until after 4:00 PM. After breakfast, we had to meet the neighbors, all of them. Then we had to stay for lunch because Millie had baked a pie. Finally, there were hugs and kisses goodbye. It was like leaving family, and we'd known them for less than 24 hours.

Three weeks later, we dipped our front tires in the Atlantic. So important when we began, that event no longer mattered much. A journey of distance had transformed into a journey of discovery.

We stayed in touch with Buster and Millie. Two years after knocking on their door, Buster's Marine unit had a reunion in our city of Sacramento. The last time I saw them was in 1988, when they came to see a play I was in at the Madison Repertory Theater. Then we exchanged annual Christmas cards.

Millie passed away in 2002, and I lost touch with Buster. I wondered if he was still alive.

Last month, after many fruitless hours of searching, I found an article about a Veteran's Day celebration in 2013, and there in the background was Buster. I called the veteran's home listed in the article. No luck. The woman on the phone said he must have been visiting. I had pretty much given up when an email arrived with the subject "I found him!"

The phone number had a Florida area code, and the voice that answered took me back 35 years.

We talked for over an hour. Buster is happily remarried, splitting time between Florida and Wisconsin. At 96 years old, he could remember more about our visit than I did.

"That was an important day in our lives too," he replied.

With the 40th anniversary of Bikecentennial approaching, I can only imagine how many memories are flooding back, how many lost friends are being rediscovered, and how many stories of adventures are being retold.

I'd like to reconnect with one other person from that cross-country trip, but I don't even know his name. It's the man whose door we knocked on in Oregon — a kind stranger who offered a bed to two ill-prepared travelers.

To this day, when life throws obstacles my way and things are looking bleak, I hold out my hand and press the button of an imaginary garage-door opener, and I know that everything's going to be all right. 

Willie Weir has been writing for Adventure Cyclist magazine for two decades. He's looking forward to hearing stories from Bikecentennial riders at the 40th anniversary gathering this July in Missoula.

