ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGHWAY

By John Sawatsky

You must be crazy," my friends exclaimed. "Why would anybody want to cross the Rocky Mountains on a bicycle?"

At this point I usually refrain from explaining that my bicycle and I would not slice through the Rockies east-west, the short way, but ride along them south to north, crossing the Continental Divide as often as roadways, from Missoula, Montana, to Jasper would permit. In three weeks I wanted to crack as many mountain passes as possible.

Arriving in Missoula, I knew I couldn't be too crazy because nine other cyclists were joining me. We were part of a bicyclists tour and not by any means the first. Hundreds or groups of groups had ridden the preceding weeks out on the same route.

Within four days, at the entrance to Glacier National Park, we realized the importance of planning. Inside the park, we would confront Logan Pass which at 2,000 meters stood at the summit of the "Going-To-The-Sun" Road. Logan Pass was the biggest of our hillclimb and so many cyclists and riders would take us to the eastern side of the Continental Divide.

Climbing Logan Pass itself wasn't the biggest obstacle: it had been open for years and a zest for climbing. The problem was getting off the foot of the pass early enough. It was no place to remain.

Riding had /arrived at 11 a.m. and set into a campsite. Charlie came on a few hours later and we met up again at the ripe of the pass. We had to get to the top by 11 a.m. or face the ignominy of being pulled off the road by a ranger and driven up to the summit. Suddenly a start was critical. Sprague Creek, about 15 kilometers from the foot, was the only conveniently camped spot and the road to it was also curvyed and the campground would fill up hours before the road would reopen. The next closest campground lay another 16 kilometers back and would add another hour to a long ride.

We felt important to get into Sprague Creek, but how? Charlie proposed our group leader, came to a meeting place. At dawn the morning without eating breakfast or disembarking his tent. Charlie jogged onto his bike and sped off. He felt he could beat the current and be the only one in our group to take the time. The strategy worked but the rest of us didn't know how successful he had been until we pitched our tents at Sprague Creek that evening.

"That Charlie McIntosh must be pretty lucky," smiled John Christiansen of Mission, a Sprague Creek regular. "I've tried to get this site for four years and never succeeded."

Rudy had arrived at 6 a.m. and set into a campsite. Charlie came in a couple of hours later when best of the spot in the campground opened up. That night we slept atop a small cliff overlooking Lake McDonald.

Rudy flung out the 2,850-meter highway from Bariloche to Jasper was the most beautiful route in the world. Two weeks later, when seeing the stretch for myself, I agreed.

Rudy had no sooner wandered off when a woman identified as Louise dropped by. Louise said she lived in California and was cycling alone from Vancouver to Wisconsin. She was small and probably in her 50s, full of grey hair and wore her pillion skirt inside out and backwards so that the garment bag hung out in the front like a necklace. Her bicycle carried no water bottle; she drank directly from streams.

"She also had no tent, what do you think it rains?" I asked.

Louise arrived on the site hunting. She had already climbed halfway up Logan Pass and decided to overtake in the middle of nowhere when a ranger came by and drove her back down. Between outbursts at the Park Service, Louise was enquiring whether she could sleep on our site. That night we had a guest.

We were physically ready for Logan Pass but that evening we prepared ourselves mentally. In high school we called it getting "psyched up." The next morning at 4:30 a.m. and 45 minutes later, with the sky alight but the sun two hours below the towering mountain tops, we set out. An hour later my bike became sluggish and I knew the climb had started.

It didn't take me long to realize why the "Going-To-The-Sun" and the "Sunrise" road re-creates an engineering feat 51 years after construction. I had climbed steep and rugged roads and more mountainously beautiful ones but never one quite so grand. Wending its way up the Garden Wall, Going-To-The-Sun was one huge switchback climb into a mountain wall in the shape of a crumpled hairpin surrounded by towers of rock. As you climbed higher the road in the middle widened and deepened. A glance down to the road below made you feel good about having climbed so far. A glance up humbled you with the realization of how low you still were.

The gradient never varied. There were no downhill—no even a momentary flat stretch—for relief. As my bike crawled up, the scenery passed by in slow motion. The mountain had time on its side. An hour was okay; two hours challenging; the third hour just plain tough.

Logan Pass, off in the distance, seemed like a mirage. I kept pedaling but it never drew much nearer until, finally, after three hours of climbing, I rounded a corner and encountered the long-sailed sign: "Logan Pass, Continental Divide, Elevation 2033 M."

We stayed atop the summit a few hours savouring the ascent. Knowing 15 minutes of downhill whisking would erase the altitude. Before leaving I spotted Louise filling up a Budweiser beer can at the water fountain. Somebody had given her a ride up and she had acquired a unique water bottle.

Six more climbs awaited us. British Columbia, my home province, seemed like a holiday as we returned to the western side of the Continental Divide over Crownnest Pass—the easiest of the climbs—and followed the Kootenay river north along the edge of the Rockies. Sinclair Pass in Kootenay National Park presented the next tough climb. There was talk of it being tougher than Logan Pass so we arranged an easy 60-kilometer ride (the shortest on our trip) the day before.

We had our usual picnic lunch on the shores of Wallowa Lake, knowing only 10 kilometers stood between us and the gate of Kootenay Park at Radium. Charlie encouraged us to relax and swim a few hours while he scouted ahead for a campground. For some reason nobody felt like loading and 20 minutes later we left early for Radium. We soon were thankful we had. Charlie was not waiting for us at the arranged meeting spot but half an hour later came cycling briskly with a tense look on his face. I had spent part of the previous summer cycling the Mississippi River with Charlie and pegged him as unflappable. Setbacks did not affect his demeanor. With his Southern drawl and North Carolina folklore he usually wrapped bad news in humour, his favourite introduction being: "Have you heard some good news and some bad news?" This time it was different.

"What time is it?" Charlie asked dismounting his still-moving bicycle into our midst. It was 3:30. "There are no campsites available in this town," Charlie explained. "Nothing."

Charlie had spent the last hour searching fruitlessly without success. This reversal left us three choices. We could turn around for 15 kilometers or we could ask a local church if it was okay to sleep in the basement or we could press forward over Sinclair Pass to the next campground about 25 kilometers away.

Charlie withdrew to get a soft drink while we decided. The church option was never seriously discussed and going back would have no appeal. Cyclists generally repeat their route as eagerly as kids run to the dentist. So one alternative remained: Sinclair Pass. That too was unappealing. The day was late (it was after 4 p.m. by the time we bought dinner and fresh (fast) groceries), rain was about to fall, we were not (re)an hour earlier on Highway 93 (it had uneventfully to keep pace in the draft of a semi-trailer) and none of us were "psyched up."

When the vote came I barely raised my hard to take on Sinclair Pass immediately. The vote was 80-1 with one abstention.

Our maps said the climb would last about 13 kilometers which was shorter but steeper than Logan Pass. I quickly psyched myself for the challenge. Then I realized I was seeing some of the most beautiful scenery including highland sheep, deer and the highway but, to my later regret, did not stop for pictures. I wanted no distractions.

Sinclair Pass actually looked pretty flat but mountain passes try tricks on the eyes. My legs told me it was steep. So
did the growl of overtaking trucks. I figured we were about two-thirds up when Catherine Cyphert, of Kansas, suddenly hollered: "We're at the top."

Expecting another long slope around the next corner, I refused to believe her.

"It can't be," I called back. "We've still got a way to go."

Catherine insisted and a minute later we were racing downward at breakneck speed into a light rain. I had over-psyched myself into thinking it was tougher than it was.

We had deliberately put ourselves ahead of schedule in order to have rest days in both Banff and Lake Louise and still ride the stunning Banff-Jasper route at a leisurely pace. The only thing not leisurely was finding campgrounds in these popular parks. The day we rode to Lake Louise, Catherine and Larry Hayward, of Houston, became the fast riders who left before breakfast. The 135-kilometer stretch between Mt. Cline and Jasper had no grocery stores. A leisurely pace of 50 kilometers a day was nice but forced us to carry nearly three days of food.

The scenery the last five days was as beautiful as Rudy Christiano had promised. The cycling was equally satisfying and one way or another we continued to find a place to park our bikes and ourselves each evening!

I finished the trip in Jasper with plenty of ride left so decided to cycle alone another 360 kilometers to Edmonton. Once in Jasper I was without a tent and figured I'd try sleeping under the stars like Louise. As I rolled into Edson, Alberta, on the first evening an unusually chilly air hung over the town (an Arctic front I later learned) and the campground was six kilometers off the main road. Meanwhile the Blackstrap Motor Inn advertised modern rooms for $20.

Comfortably ensconced in my room, I turned on the football game and lay back on the soft bed thinking about poor Louise sleeping beside a rock in Yellowstone.