

*On August 3, 1976, Dan Burden shot this iconic Bikecentennial photograph of Scott Fischer and Myrna Koeffler as they led their groups to a ceremonial finish of their Oregon to Virginia TransAm rides.*

# MYRNA KOFFLER AND THE SPROCKET ROCKETS

by June J. Siple

Rippling with excitement and continually changing shape, the 50-person peloton blocked traffic, taking over an entire lane east of Charles City, Virginia in 1976. But this was no race — in its midst, teens and retirees shifting touring gears in unison, former neophytes now fit as athletes, men and women alike eager for the finish. Riders from all over the world mixed with a down-to-earth core of cyclists who had found a new and surprising love of country in the rural heart of America — all moving along at their usual 12 to 15 miles per hour.

Burning with pride as leaders, with four groups lined up behind them, Myrna Koffler of Nevada and Scott Fischer of Montana broke through the crepe-paper finish line at their last overnight, Boy Scout Camp Chickahominy near Williamsburg. Cakes inscribed with the greetings “Congratulations Scott and Bikecentennial Group” and “Welcome Trans-American Trail Riders; 4,246.8 miles” whetted appetites barely satisfied for nearly three months. Feeling like trailblazers, the first to depart the West Coast in Oregon, Scott and Myrna, and their cyclist charges, were not the first to finish on the Virginia coast. They had been passed by a “Fast TransAm” group that did the trip in 55 days instead of 82, that had arrived more than three weeks earlier. But the first “slow” groups, as Fast TransAms called them, no doubt had the biggest party. From co-leader Chris Wiscavage’s journal: “The finish was incredible, hugging, dancing, general mayhem. Dan Burden had a birthday party arranged for Scott, compliments of his parents.”

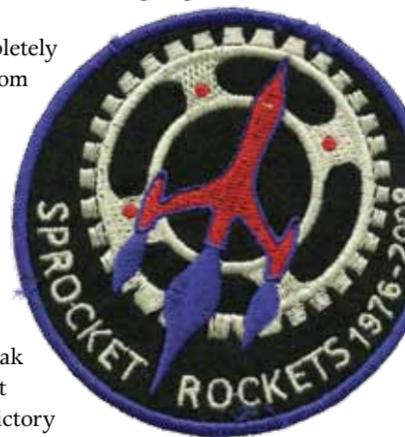
Director of Bikecentennial, the new non-profit behind the summer’s rides, Burden orchestrated the celebration and shot roll after roll of film with his ever-present Nikon F camera. He had motored across the trail from coast to coast during a two-week mid-

summer period to photograph cyclists along the Trans-America Bicycle Trail. Dan had timed his arrival at the eastern trailhead to coincide with the finish of both Scott’s group and Myrna’s. Two other bicycling crews, including the vehicle-supported Golden Spoke (East) that started in Colorado, plus a second east-bound TransAmerica camping group led by Doug Young, had picked up speed to finish with the throng of eager cyclists.

With satisfaction and release, Myrna watched Dan take photos, believing that the visit was his way of saying “no hard feelings” and of showing respect for her cross-country leadership. There had been harsh words between Dan and Myrna not three weeks into the journey back in Missoula, Montana, as her group limped into town. But she had managed to finish with all 14 group members, an unusual feat for that summer. Many groups lost one or two discouraged riders who headed home early, and some teams came apart completely on the trail, going separate ways.

Having completely lost her voice from so much yelling and talking at the party, Myrna could not deliver the speech she had concocted in her head and could only squeak her good-byes at the Yorktown Victory Monument the next day.

Tears came with nearly every embrace. Even her “problem tripper” — a retiree who repeatedly tempted two other riders into using motels and pedaling shorter, more trafficked routes — offered hugs and praise to



the oft-beleaguered leader. But the group had come together in ways that would last decades.

Her crew, the self-proclaimed “Sprocket Rockets,” or “Rocketeers” not only had a group name, but also their own bicycling graphic artist, Mike Paul, who had designed a logo, patch, T-shirt, and pennant, and even wrote poems about the summer. Richard “Zak” Szubeczak adopted a stray white kitten that kept trying to follow him down the road near Hazard, Kentucky. “Keats” contentedly rode as group mascot in a handlebar bag cage built with spare spokes from other riders. Bob “Hash” Brown (named for hash browns) wrote trip lyrics for the gang based on the Melanie tune “Brand New Key.”



**Bike Inns?** Teepees outside Syringa, Idaho, pass for indoor accommodations in Region 2.

Of the 4,100 riders on the trail in the summer of 1976, numerous other groups were either shepherded by a trained leader and co-leader while crossing the U.S., or guided on trips as short as 12 days on rural back roads. Independent riders also signed up, and bought Bikecentennial maps to travel on the same trail with no formal tie

*Brian Blair wrote in his journal about Santiam Pass: “Rain, blizzard, and cold with lots of snow around. Thought I might get frostbite when my socks froze.”*

to an official trip. Young people nationwide, politically and socially jaded by the aftereffects of the Vietnam War, had signed up in droves for the official bicentennial event, many of them non-cyclists.

With the spirit of exploring the country inch by inch like pioneers, Myrna’s



**Santiam Pass.** Only four days into the ride, the group was discouraged by the blizzard-like conditions on 4,817-foot Santiam Pass.

TransAm cyclists absorbed the gritty realities of the road. Carrying sleeping bags, cooking equipment, bike tools, and clothing, they hauled themselves up snowy passes in the West, pushed across windy Kansas plains, and battled determined dogs and looming coal trucks in Kentucky — in what turned out to be not only a grand adventure, but also an act of compelling patriotism.

Originally, the Rocketeers felt honored to be the first 82-day Bike Inn group to leave Reedsport on May 16, along with their sister camping group led by Scott Fischer. But both groups soon realized that their mid-spring departure was more handicap than honor as they battled chilling passes above 4,500 feet on the way to Montana. With knee pain plaguing some riders and sore bottoms a problem for all, they gamely kept up with the daily schedule, even though their riding skills were still evolving. Muscle soreness from lack of fitness, difficulties with sub-par personal equipment, and too frequently a lack of

sleep plagued the TransAmers. Another bone of contention — the new maps were often confusing and hard to read.

On six of their first 17 days, the group was tortured by snowstorms and ice on passes, interspersed with cold, rainy days, and spells of unfavorable, chilly winds.

Hot weather between the passes kept them going, but then sunburn added to their woes. Brian Blair, 17 and just out of high school, wrote in his journal about 4,817-foot Santiam Pass: “Rain, blizzard, and cold with lots of snow around. Thought I might get frostbite when my socks froze.” Mike, on his birthday that day, scribbled in his diary: “...constant climbing ... freezing fingers and toes, falling bikes ... 19.5 miles of downhill with baggies on our feet ... This day turns out badly.” A much-anticipated grocery store near the top of the pass had burnt into a pile of blackened wood and ashes between the date the maps were printed and the afternoon the Sprocket Rockets arrived.

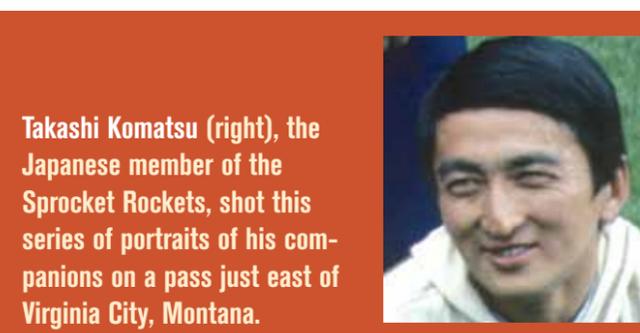
Takashi Komatsu, their Japanese rider who rode on lightweight racing rims and tires called “sew-ups,” at first carried his equipment in a backpack, including a movie camera. And he soon showed progress in his spoken English by cursing quite clearly and lustily at the summit. In spite of the comic relief, hunger gnawed at them mercilessly on the shiver-provoking descent.

Bike Inns, simple overnight facilities described as “low-cost shelters” in the October 1975 trips application, were to be their nightly destinations and rest day havens. Bike Inn groups paid extra for the luxury of indoor overnights, so they didn’t have to carry tents and they slept on the floor. “They were community halls, school gyms, churches, dormitories, at least one house trailer, teepees, anything that could be found for the riders — a hodge-podge collection of places to stay,” said co-founder Greg Siple. Golden Spoke (East) trip leader Gayl Teichert recalled other unique Bike Inns, one at a residence for the developmentally disabled, plus an overnight in Missouri National Guard tents. Reportedly, at a condemned house Bike Inn, her group drew water from the well out front to flush the toilet.

But as the first east-bound Bike Inn group to hit every facility, the Rocketeers found a third of the Bike Inns from Reedsport to Missoula dirty, unprepared, and in one case, not even open. At Cambridge, Idaho, both groups unknowingly pedaled into the black hole of the trail, Region 2. Extending nearly 900 miles from Cambridge, Idaho, to Sinclair, Wyoming, with Missoula a third of the way into the region from the west, it had been researched and Bike Inns established. Regional Coordinators (field teams) hired for the other four regions of the trail had



Myrna Koffler



Takashi Komatsu (right), the Japanese member of the Sprocket Rockets, shot this series of portraits of his companions on a pass just east of Virginia City, Montana.



Bob Brown



Howard Smith



Bill Harrington



Michael Paul



Sandra Shirley



Frank Dow



Esther Paul



Mary Lou Loeschner



Brian Blair



Richard Szubeczak



Chris Wiscavage



Bob Butnik

also worked over Region 2 in part and in parcel. But no field team was on the ground yet to supervise its Bike Inns and campgrounds or promote the event with residents along the trail. In the worst scenario, Region 2 had no one looking after it. Locals, not used to bicycle tourists coming through their towns, generally regarded them as the crazy kin of motorcyclists and panhandlers. When Myrna’s group was refused service at an Oregon restaurant, Howard Smith intervened. At age 67, their oldest rider and retired Hollywood

movie technician, he convinced the employees to seat their new nylon-clad patrons. As the Sprocket Rockets swept along — sometimes wiping out local food supplies with the help of their sister camping group — cafés, gas stations, and store owners in their wake began to realize they could make money from the insatiable, unquenchable bike tourists.

The worst of Region 2’s neglect showed up in its lack of Bike Inn cleanliness and preparation. Myrna’s notes for Cambridge, Idaho, record her frustration: “May 27

... the bike innkeeper was nowhere to be found ... I went to a gas station to use a phone ... a deputy sheriff stopped in to see what was going on with the bikers ... I told him who I was looking for; he replied that he had passed the guy going out of town. ‘He’s probably over in the next town visiting his mother. Do you want me to pick him up and bring him in for you?’ ... I did get ahold of him, and he was extremely rude and said that he didn’t have anything lined up because he didn’t believe that thousands of bikers would be riding out of Hell’s Canyon. Then he hung up on me.” The sheriff and gas station owner “got busy, put their heads together, and arranged for us to get into the fairgrounds ... We literally had to shovel shit out of the livestock barn we were staying in ... With the wind rattling the building all night ... none of us got much sleep.” From the same day, Mike Paul’s journal reads: “cross into Idaho... a killer 6.9-mile climb. Bug city all the way into Cambridge. We stay at fairgrounds in a livestock show room. Wind on metal a constant roar. Ice cold shower and plugged up bathroom ... Mailed T-shirt design ...”

On days with bad weather and awful Bike Inns, Myrna endured non-stop criticism from at least a fourth of her trippers. Along with bike mechanic co-leader Chris Wiscavage, she tried to keep group spirits up, but with almost nightly cleaning duties to ready Bike Inns for themselves and future groups, the troops were losing heart.

At Syringa, Idaho, just two nights before arriving in Missoula, they found themselves billeted outside in teepees — their Bike Inn for the night. From Myrna’s personal journal: “The teepees might have been all right if the cots had arrived in time ... we had to sleep on the ground ... since this is a Bike Inn group, there is much grumbling ... I have no control over these things and I seem to be talking to a deaf ear in Missoula ... it rained all night, and since the teepees were not on level ground, the water was running through them like little rivers. Several of us were out with spoons and sticks and whatever else we could find to dig moats around them to divert the water. Plus it is very cold; icicles on everything in the morning.” At the next Bike Inn near Lolo Pass, they were locked into a loft overnight, a dangerous oversight of the Bike Inn keepers.

Before their group commenced travel in Oregon, a complex and unworkable trips meal program had folded. The \$5

per-day food allotment was dependent on pre-arranged discount meals through local cafés, churches, and other entities, but the field teams found little local interest. The cyclists needed at least \$1 to \$2 more per person to get enough calories for their grueling regimen and had to dip into personal funds to make up the difference. Chris, on an extremely tight budget, often ate with their sister camping group, where his cooking skills were most welcome. He helped prepare economical meals for



DAN BURDEN

**The 15th Sprocket Rocket.** On July 24, Richard Szubeczak rescued a stray kitten from the side of the road near Booneville, Kentucky, and carried it to the finish. "Keats" went home with Richard and lived for nine years.

them in which he could share rock-bottom expenses. Meanwhile, his Bike Inn group mostly ate out.

In addition to tolerating Bikecentennial's early-season shortcomings herself, Myrna had developed knee problems and felt worn down physically and emotionally. Now in perpetual knee-warmer garb to ease her pain — wool socks with the toes cut out — she, along with all her riders, longed for a solid rest day and good weather in Missoula. As one of the bigger towns on the mostly rural trail, and "World Headquarters" of Bikecentennial, it offered amenities such as bike shops, outdoor stores, and movie theaters. All-you-can-eat restaurants were on tripper's "to do" lists, and three riders had severe enough knee pain to warrant trips to the doctor. Then the Missoula Bike Inn,

temporarily stationed at the fairgrounds, refused to let the cyclists be indoors during their rest day. That was the last straw. Mutiny was in the air. Myrna had to act. But she did not shy away from her responsibility to the Rocketeers.

Myrna had grown into adulthood as toughness personified. From third through seventh grades, she had to jockey for position daily with 200 other children at the Montana State Orphanage in Twin Bridges, Montana, where she was raised by her father, head electrician, and her mother, occasional cook in the institution's kitchen. The 29-year-old mother of sons aged 8 and 12, she had gone through a divorce four years earlier. As a self-supporting accountant before Bikecentennial, she had been in daily contact with New York Stock Exchange bosses in top management.

No reliable system had been set up to help leaders iron out problems on the road or provide support in an emergency. If Myrna called at night for advice, no one may have answered, or she might have talked to the carpenter who was still building desks and walls in the run-down office. During the day, a bookkeeper with no bicycling interest or experience, or likewise a secretary with no information about the route, would dutifully answer the phone and try to help. Or Myrna might have been lucky enough to call



**Big miles.** An early cyclometer keeps track of speed and distance.

when experienced cyclists, who made up at least half the staff, were on duty in the trips, graphics, or leadership departments. Groups leaving both coasts early in the



TAWB516 is the "trip code" for the Spocket Rockets group. TA is for Transam. W is for originating in the West. B is for Bike Inn. 516 designates the May 16 departure date.

summer suffered the most from this lack of support.

But at the head of Myrna's list were gripes about unprepared Bike Inns, and she painfully climbed the 25 steps to the office at 430 North Higgins above Eddie's Club bar. Unbeknownst to her, the previous evening Dan had invited a few disgruntled members of the group over to his house, not including Myrna. After the visit turned into a gripe-fest, Dan likely thought something had to be done to appease them and felt Myrna was to blame for the group's troubles. He was prepared to let her go.

Like a union boss, seated in Dan's office, she was ready to face management about better conditions for her crew. At four-foot, eleven-and-a-half-inches tall, and 95 pounds, Myrna jumped out of her chair, glare-to-glare with the six-foot, three-inch, 186-pound Dan Burden. "Dan was sick of my complaints about the Bike Inns. 'So do something about it,' I said." They went back and forth until, like careening bullets "You're fired!" rang out as "I quit!" ricocheted around Dan's bare-bones office. The weight of 17 days' worth of late spring bicycle touring hardship suddenly lifted from her

shoulders and she felt instant relief. But a sinking regret crept into her heart.

She didn't want it to end — she wanted it to be better. They stood back, at first stupefied by their mutual outburst.

"I was just stunned," Bonnie Hoffmann reflected, "thinking like, this is bad." Seated near Dan's desk with husband Tim Leifer, the two had a big stake in what seemed to be happening. Tim and Bonnie had created and co-directed Bikecentennial's leadership training program. They had been organizing for just over a year by late spring of 1976, having scoured the country for potential leaders, advisers and course directors. The final 350 leaders selected had been assigned and were already on the road or awaiting their departure dates.

According to Bonnie, "I remember being horrified. He's yelling at this leader who's struggling. I thought, 'Wait a minute. We are *not* going to lose one of our leaders.'" Myrna's group of 12, not including leader and co-leader, "were people who have paid money and have expectations and who are going to the leader for

answers. It's beyond the leader's ability to fix those things. She's trying to protect the organization while pacifying the trippers, and how are you going to do that? She's probably had three weeks of hell, and he's treating her like that. She wasn't backing down — I thought 'good, go for it.' She wasn't going to accept what he was saying — she wanted some guarantee of better conditions for her group," Bonnie recalled.

"But they both did sit down again, and we started talking in a more controlled manner, and Dan let us have a presence in the conversation," she went on.

Dan had been lecturing Myrna about the necessity of making the best of every situation, maintaining a positive attitude and having sympathy for the overworked staff — and the chat had boiled over into argument. But Myrna was tired of excuses and, under the pressure of Dan's scolding, felt her allegiance shift from Bikecentennial to her long-suffering group. Earlier, Dan had pulled another leader, Doug Young, into the meeting from the hallway, saying, "You need to hear this, too." But Doug, one of the best



**Tally ho!** For the big finish, group member Michael Paul fashioned a huge pennant from a bath towel. The three-foot-long banner was flown atop a wand at the head of the group by Chris Wiscavage. Recently it was donated to Adventure Cycling by Richard Szubeczak for display in the Missoula headquarters.

leaders on the trail that summer, according to Bonnie, stood quietly listening, and later told Myrna out on the sidewalk, "He thinks we're trouble-causers." Myrna cried on his shoulder, "Me, a trouble-causer? I'm a friggin' Pollyanna!" she protested.

Conceived in 1973 by co-founder Greg Siple as a mass ride to start at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, Bikecentennial had instead fortunately morphed into a summer-long series of departures. Group rides across America had been done before, but never on the scale of hundreds at a time, let alone thousands. Two of the four co-founders, Dan and Lys Burden — with Dan as director — had shouldered the project and anticipated 30,000 sign-ups,



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BRIAN BLAIR



DAN BURDEN (6)

having assembled a staff of 40 by the spring of 1976.

During a period of three years, but with most work done during the 18-month period leading up to the summer, they established the route; raised donations; started a membership drive; pursued every avenue for free publicity; advertised; coaxed federal, state, and local agencies to get involved and lend support; organized as a non-profit; and located a dilapidated second-floor space to remodel and equip. They hired a determined crew to research trail facilities; run the trips department; create maps; write and edit guidebooks, newsletters, and how-to guides; and added a program to train and hire leaders. Aided by other staff, they recruited four of five field teams needed to get the trail up to speed and troubleshoot during the summer, plus tried to manage the office and deal with the growing pains of the mushrooming operation.

The proverbial "tall order," it was nearly impossible to accomplish so much with so little time, and so few resources. By the time the first eastbound groups arrived in Missoula, office morale had crumbled under the unrelenting weight of work. Fissures appeared in friendships as the staff gritted their teeth to "hang in there" through the summer. Seven-day, 60- to 80-hour work weeks for a \$300 monthly salary had worn out and frustrated the staff. Interdepartmental communications were almost nil. Office tempers frayed, but the staff hung on in survival mode.

But Myrna had, in fact, just successfully negotiated changes that immediately benefited all leaders. A husband-wife team, Jim Richardson and Linda Thorpe, quickly packed up to temporarily abandon their Bikecentennial management jobs to take on needed trail work for Region 2. Once on the road, they motored past the

two groups to better prepare Bike Inns, campgrounds, and the communities ahead. And the War Room, a 24-hour office with a red phone and cot for the night shift, was quickly set up by Ron Mittino, a new employee brought in from California. An experienced leadership course advisor



**The grand finale.** *TransAmers celebrate and leader Scott Fischer makes the first cut in his birthday cake.*

with a sunny disposition, Ron answered desperate leaders' questions and handled tricky situations deftly, plus trained staff to cover other shifts.

For the Sprocket Rockets and the remainder of their journey, things never seemed as bad as the days before Missoula, and they rode steadily eastward, "We did it! Sea to shining sea," Myrna wrote on the last day in Virginia. Their joyful triumph at Chickahominy comes back to life with every reunion, and their finish photos still grace the wall to this day at Adventure Cycling's "World Headquarters." **AC**

*June J. Siple, a Bikecentennial co-founder, has lived in Missoula, Montana, since 1975 with Greg Siple, Adventure Cycling's decades-long art director. Myrna (Koffler) Rafalovich has retired from Rogue River Outfitting and lives with her husband Bob, shoots clay pigeons, and competes in agility with her dog "Will" in Oregon. The Sprocket Rockets are planning a 40th anniversary ride in 2016.*

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