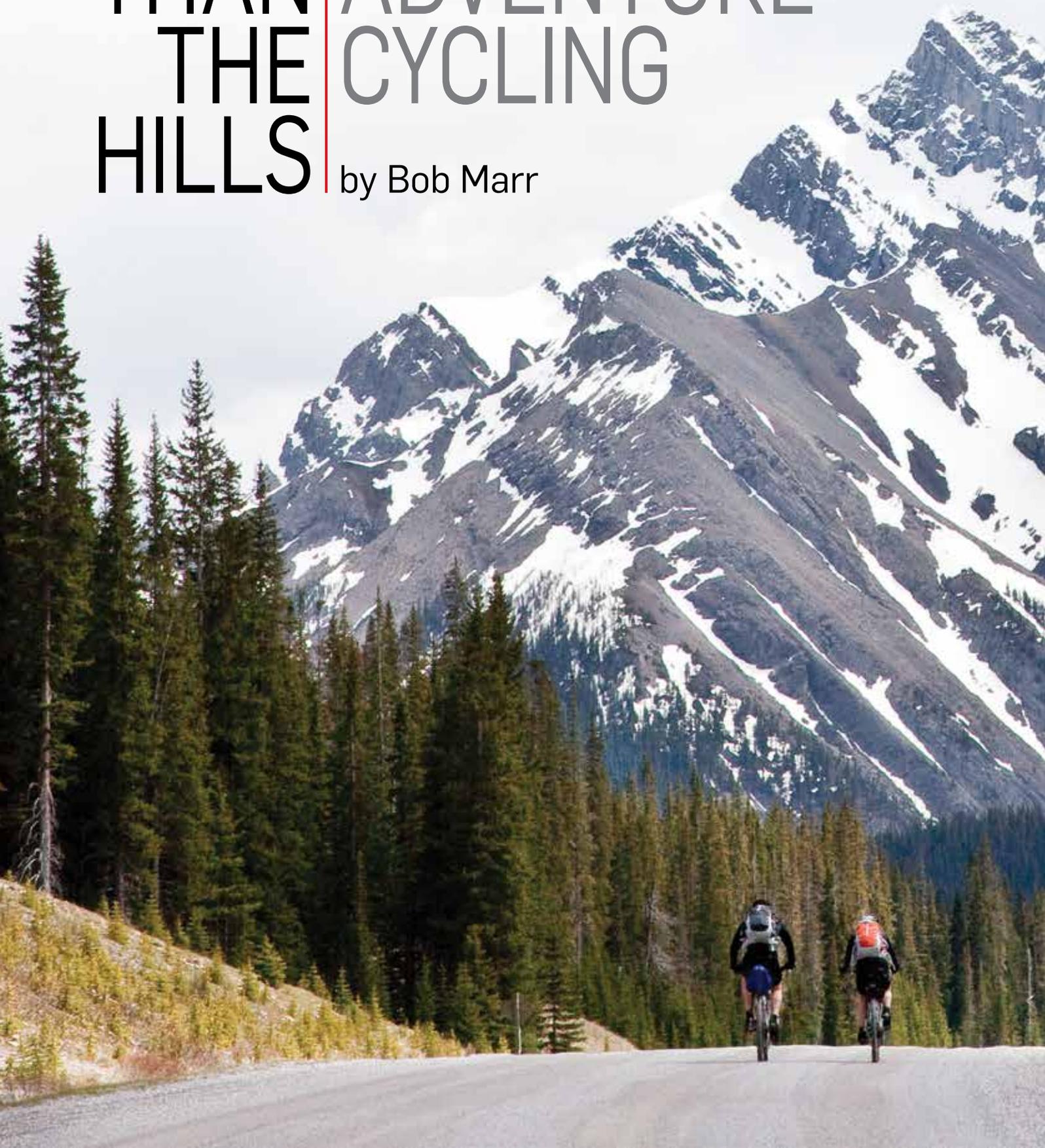
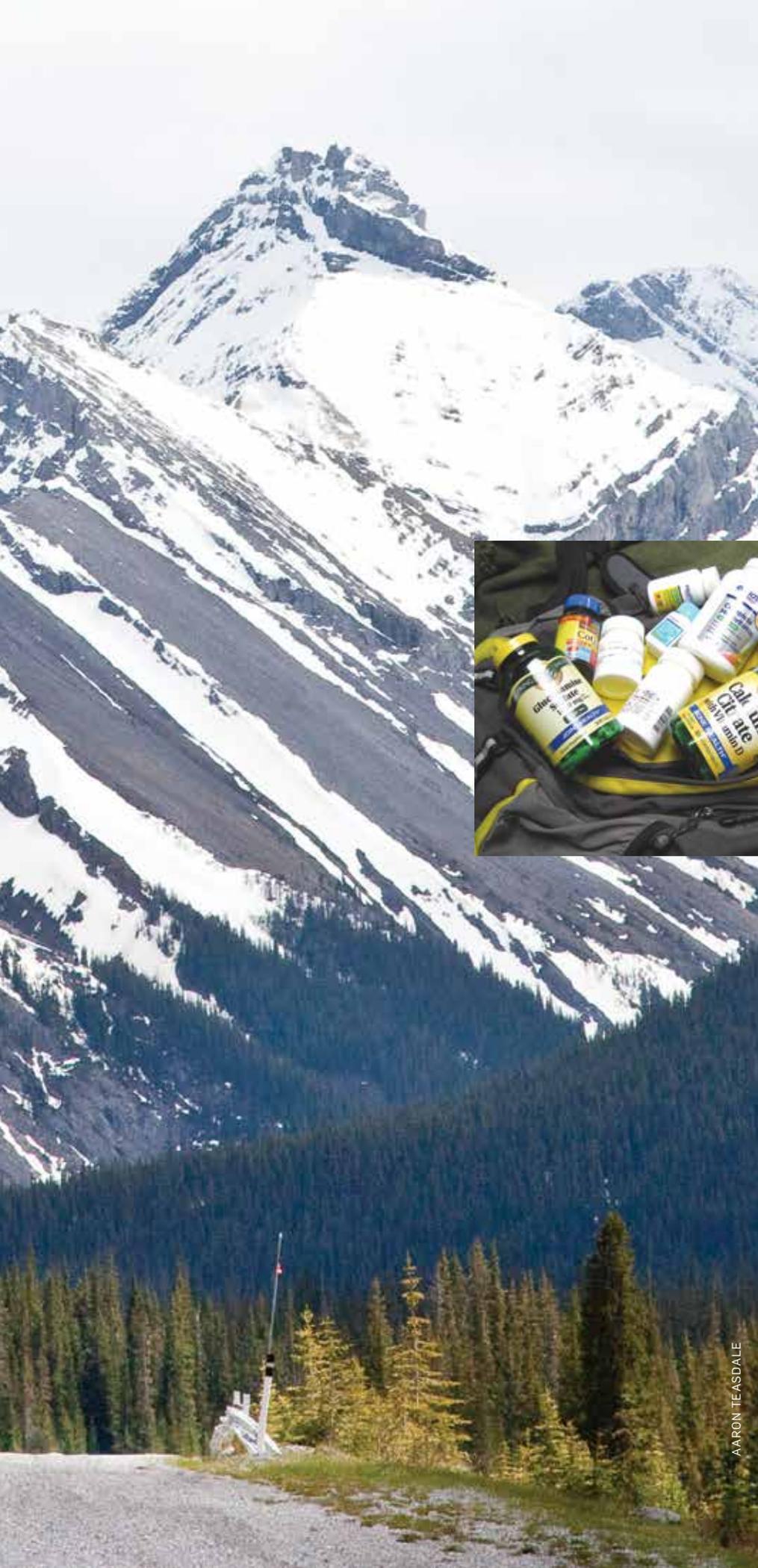


OLDER THAN THE HILLS

SENIOR ADVENTURE CYCLING

by Bob Marr





It's the afternoon of June 10, 2012, and I'm starting to wonder what I've gotten myself into. I've been pushing my bike for five miles through last winter's leftover snow on Flathead Pass in the Canadian Rockies. I'm now sitting on the side of a

snow-covered bridge in the middle of nowhere talking strategy with 60-year-old Donald McCready who came all the way from England for this. At 57, I also qualify as a senior cyclist, as does Jim Stansbury, who is about five minutes ahead of us. At the moment, though, we are just two guys for whom the math isn't working out. We have to travel about another 24 miles through the wilderness to get to a Forest Service cabin where we can spend the night away from the

Not just for older riders. Many will need some sort of help to keep the wheels turning.

not-so-cuddly bears, but at our present rate of two miles per hour this is going to take until around four in the morning. There's a primitive campground between here and there, but bivying out on a cold night in the "Serengeti of the North" is not an appealing thought.

I started riding along the Adventure Cycling Association's Great Divide Mountain Bike Route (GDMBR) on June 7 with the goal of getting to the Mexican border in around a month or so. I'm riding in the Tour Divide, a loosely organized underground grand tour of this amazing route whose "official" start was at 8:00 AM on the morning of June 8, but I wanted to get a bit of a head start to beat the crowd.

Around 100 people of all ages and genders (well, at least two genders) had thrown their helmets into the ring and committed to seeing whether they had what it takes to travel the length of the Continental Divide on a bike in as self-sufficient a manner as possible. For some this was a race with records and placement on the virtual leader board at stake, but for many others it was strictly a personal challenge. For those of us over 50, the senior cyclists, this was a prime opportunity to answer the question, "Am I over the hill, or can I still go out and challenge myself physically and mentally?"

Fortunately for Donald and me, the snow trailed off over the next mile or so, and after some relatively easy riding through the incredible Canadian Flathead, I arrived at Butts Cabin at 8:30 PM, joining 11 other riders who were spending the night there. Clearly I was up to the challenge so far.

Among the seniors starting June 8 were Bruce Giroux (57), Jim Stansbury (57), and James Hodges (61). The oldest, at 71 years of age, was Larry Hipskind. The unofficial sign-up spreadsheet included at least 17 folks over the age of 50, which was fully one-fourth of those who had chosen to submit their information.

Of course the Tour Divide is not the only place to find senior cyclists. Besides these sorts of events, many seniors engage in long-distance cycling on their own, many of them taking full advantage of the Adventure Cycling Route Network. Perhaps the most senior of adventure cyclists — and one we wanted to emulate — was military veteran James Rappe, age 85, who left Marinette, Wisconsin, around July 12, 1899 on a bike trip to Philadelphia, a trip of about 1,200 miles mostly over dirt roads. When he reached Oshkosh, Wisconsin, he was asked how he was feeling. In response, he jumped up and kicked his heels together. I don't recall doing that at any time during my ride.

Leaving Butts Cabin the next morning at 7:00 AM, I strategically placed myself in the second-to-last place in the group, having opted to sleep in a bit. The only person leaving later than me was a fellow whose name and age I didn't get, but I believe he may have been one of us seniors. He was towing



Bob Marr takes a moment to pause for a breather and a quick photo.

a trailer and mentioned that he used to race bikes in his younger days, but he was now more into enjoying the challenge of a long ride through beautiful country and meeting interesting

people. He was certainly in the right place for that. On the way up to the top of the next pass, Cabin Pass, he passed me, trailer and all. The views heading up the pass were spectacular, and the reward for the climb was a long and glorious 15-mile descent down to the Wigwam River.

So what does it mean to be a senior cyclist as opposed to a young rider? Many of us had, I think, James Hodges' perspective on age: "I still don't think of myself as a senior. I think it's a mindset." When asked about his ride, octogenarian James Rappe commented that after his Philadelphia trip he had also ridden to Chicago and back, a round trip of about 600 miles, "but, shucks, that's nothing." For me, although I am aware of some of the effects of age, I don't think of myself as a senior, although I will take the discount. Kent Peterson, another 50-plus rider with thousands of miles under his shorts, admits to having to calculate his age when asked.

Yet the effects of aging are real. Old bones, old ligaments, and generally well-worn bodies are more difficult to

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Kent Peterson, aka "The Mountain Turtle," is a master of plodding progress.

train and maintain. Sleeping mats may need to be a bit thicker. One of the reasons I brought a daypack was so I would have a place to carry my prescriptions

and supplements. *Old age and treachery will overcome youth and skill.* This proverb is meant to give hope to old folks in competition with youngsters, but does this maxim have any value when the challenge is within oneself? Perhaps being old and adaptable (if not treacherous) could be an advantage over our former youth. Long experience can provide riders with an understanding of their limitations that allows them to compensate for age-related shortcomings. Once you're on the road, the considerations of age are just something that you deal with. My fitness was not as sharp as it could have been, and it had not been as easy to get into shape as it had been years ago. I also had to contend with a heart condition that requires me to take two different heart-rate control drugs. These drugs make it impossible for me to accelerate quickly so I need to start each day off slowly and build my pace steadily. Jim Stansbury has written in his blog about his concern over his bad knees, an issue

he resolved with "cortisone, Aleve, walking up hills, and no standing on pedals to grind up hills." Bruce Giroux has a simple formula for success: "Start slow and [do] not burn the matches at the start." Kent Peterson's philosophy is even more to the point: "I start out slow, and then I back off." They don't call Kent the Mountain Turtle for nothing.

This theme of slowing down and pacing oneself is a recurring one for older riders. I certainly enjoyed some of the hills and passes more by walking them than I would have if I had stood on the pedals and ground my way up. It helps to remember that travel, whether by bike or otherwise, is about the journey, not the destination. "Listen to your body" is good advice for riders of any age, but it's imperative for senior cyclists.

On the other hand, being overly cautious means not having these experiences at all. There's a saying that goes, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop

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playing.” I think this is true. I also think it applies to challenging oneself as well as playing. When asked why he didn’t use any type of motorized transport at any time on his long ride, James Rappe replied, “I wanted to see what I could do and didn’t want to cheat myself.” Seeing what we could do was on the minds of all riders on the Tour Divide, but it was perhaps more of an imperative for senior riders. We really did want to test ourselves and see whether age was a significant factor in our ability to accomplish physical and mental goals.

I think we also had a feeling of urgency that the younger riders didn’t have. When you’re 25, there’s always next year, and you know you can come back stronger. As Jim Stansbury says, “If you’re in your 50s, you will *not* be stronger and the Tour Divide will *not* be easier next year.” Jim was as good as his word. After being laid up near Yellowstone Park with pneumonia for five days — definitely a good enough reason to head back to the comforts of home — he continued on down the route. These sorts of adventures are the

kind of personal challenges that might not occur at all if we don’t take them on now, and that is especially true for those of us over 50.

Speaking of challenges, after that very fun descent from Cabin Pass and a scenic ride above the Wigwam River, I arrived at the infamous “singletrack connector,” a trail that provides a primitive link between two forest roads and allows an escape from the wilderness via Galton Pass. Although it’s only about a mile in length, this connecting section has an evil reputation, mostly because of a short, almost vertical section near the end. The Adventure Cycling route cues advise anyone towing a trailer to uncouple it from the bike and haul it up separately. I cannot imagine getting a loaded trailer up that slope at all. I made it up by laboriously pushing the bike with my extended arms over my head, grabbing the brake levers, and then repositioning my feet a few feet farther up the slope. By repeating this process several times, I finally made it up the worst of the climb. My riding partner for the afternoon was yet

another senior, Jo Ann Burtard, who solved the climbing problem by putting her cross bike on her shoulder and walking up the slope. It was a bit disheartening to watch, given the effort I was having to exert, but it was definitely way more efficient. I was now only a muck pit and a clearcut away from the last gravel road of the day.

My biggest challenge — Galton Pass — awaited me later that afternoon and evening. I knew it would be a steep climb, but I hadn’t realized just how difficult it would be to maintain forward (upward) momentum after a long, hard day. The icing (pun intended) on the cake was the snow. Not just any snow, but a couple feet of old, leftover winter snow with the top eight inches or so composed of slippery, energy-sucking slush. To make matters worse, the snow covered everything and extended for at least a couple of miles, maybe more. There was no place to stop and rest, other than leaning on the bike. Every time I felt like stopping, which was often, I was stymied by the complete lack of anywhere to do so. The top of that

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pass seemed to be infinitely distant, but I was left with no choice except to press on. I learned a lot about my own reserve capacity that evening, eventually topping out at around 8:00 PM. Following that I had the unique experience of eight miles of uninterrupted braking down a slope that looked to me like a 45-degree angle. An anchor would have come in handy.

That last day, I proved to myself that I did have the capacity to undertake a grand adventure, regardless of my age. Could I still do the same at 85? Who knows? The answer, of course, is that you can't know unless you try. When asked why he would undertake such an arduous trip at his advanced age, Rappe replied that he just wanted to show young America that there is "good stuff in the old fellows yet."

Oh, by the way, I should clarify something. When I said that Rappe was a veteran, I failed to mention that he was actually a veteran of three wars: the Seminole War, the Mexican War, and the Civil War. He tried to enlist for the Spanish-American War, but at over 80 years of age they wouldn't accept him so he contented himself with attending the Grand Army of the Republic encampments that were held by Union veterans each year. In 1898, he made a trip from Marinette, Wisconsin, to Cincinnati, Ohio, on foot in 27 days and intended to do the same the following year for the encampment in Philadelphia, but some of his friends got together and bought him a bicycle to make the trip a bit easier. He took 10 days to learn to ride, and then he was off! Although he planned to ride 35 miles per day, he actually made better time and arrived early, completing the 1,200 miles in exactly 30 days over roads that would have seemed pretty primitive to modern cyclists. The only challenge he set for himself that he fell short on was to live to 100 years of age. He died at 99 in March 1915.

I fell a bit short of my intended goal as well, stopping in Eureka, Montana, after just 265 miles of riding. A number of others dropped out at various places along the way as well, but a good num-

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the unique idea. Oregon Department of Transportation was instrumental in developing the idea and the program. The 11-member bikeway committee combined their vast knowledge of cycling and tourism to design the program.

Having a great program is only part of the story. The other part is effective marketing. Travel Oregon does an amazing job of promoting the bikeways nationally and internationally.

Local volunteer groups gain support of their city and county officials and build business-owner awareness of the benefits of cycle tourism and advocate for improvements to each bikeway. They do all this because they believe that bicycle tourism is good for their communities.

Thank you for highlighting Oregon's cycling partnerships and everything Adventure Cycling does for cycling and cyclists.

Alex Phillips
Oregon Parks and Recreation Department
Bicycle Recreation Coordinator
Salem, Oregon

MAGIC SADDLE DEBUNKED

I enjoyed reading the December/January issue of *Adventure Cyclist* from cover to cover — as I always do. The write-up on the new Brooks Cambium saddle caught my eye, especially since this is the first I've ever heard of Brooks making saddles of anything other than leather. While reading the piece, I noticed a couple of bloopers. First, I've never owned a Brooks saddle, but even I know that they have been hand-made in Smethwick, England, since the 1860s (not Italy). Second, a 15 gram saddle *would* be the lightest on the market, but impossible, I'm afraid. The Brooks website lists the Cambium at 415 grams for the men's and 405 grams for the lady's.

John Wente | Yukon, Oklahoma

Editor reply: Yes, you are correct, if the Cambium weighed 15 grams, Brooks would be commissioned to produce many more important things than bicycle saddles. 415 grams is the correct weight, however, according to Brooks, the Cambium is handmade in Italy. Not leather. Not made in England. Two firsts.

EDITOR IS A JERK

I found it interesting that your response in the December/January issue to the issue of wearing earbuds was summed up by the phrase "To each their own." Are you unaware that the use of earbuds or any other headphone while cycling or driving is illegal in many states, including Illinois, where the writer was from? Is it good practice for you to blithely condone this? As Warren pointed out, it is not good common sense, either. When I ride on the roads, I want a keen awareness of everything going on around me.

David Lieb | Palatine, Illinois

Editor reply: My reply was in response to Mr. Fellingham's question, "And why does he need any sort of sound track while riding, when there is so much wonder to see and hear?"

Your letters are welcome. We may edit letters for length and clarity. If you do not want your comments to be printed in *Adventure Cyclist*, please state so clearly. Include your name and address with your correspondence. Email your comments, questions, or letters to editor@adventurecycling.org or mail to Editor, *Adventure Cyclist*, P.O. Box 8308, Missoula, MT 59807.

ber of senior riders fulfilled their dream of rolling up to the border station at Antelope Wells, New Mexico. Jim Stansbury, Bruce Giroux, Donald McCready, and James Hodges were among them. So what of that question I posed at the beginning of this article: "Am I over the hill, or can I still go out and challenge myself physically and mentally?" Well,

without a doubt, there are additional obstacles that the senior rider has to overcome. It may not be possible to match your 25 year old self when undertaking adventures later in life, but it is always possible to go out and have fun while having great adventures and striving toward your personal goals.

If he had lived, James Rappe would have been 197 years old in 2012, but from what I know of him, there's a good

chance he would have been there in Banff to try his hand at riding to Mexico. Some old guys are like that. **AC**

Bob Marr lives with his wife and cats in a cabin in the woods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He keeps busy in retirement by writing and doing leatherwork and is planning another try at the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route during Tour Divide 2014.



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