

THANKSGIVING

A solitary cyclist's reflections.

by Cyril Thomas Manning

Last Thanksgiving I began the day in yellow rubber dishwashing gloves. Three pairs, actually, layered on top of my own worn-out cycling mitts. It was the best I could do as I pedaled away from Sierra Blanca, Texas, with the mercury just shy of 18 degrees. In the back of my mind, I think I expected to find myself in more hospitable circumstances on this Thanksgiving Day. Like many bicycle tourists, I've grown accustomed to stumbling across all

forms of human kindness, and I suppose I secretly imagined being invited to join a generous family's turkey dinner, or maybe to drink some beer and watch football with a pack of newfound truck driver friends.

Instead, I settled into the saddle for a slow and chilly 100-mile trek to El Paso, comforting myself by recalling all the good folks I'd met in my three-week journey across Texas. In the tiny town of Thicket, for example, I had followed the smell of barbecue to a church fundraiser, where I was told not to pay for my enormous meal, was forced to eat huge helpings of impossibly delicious pie, was implored to stay for some good ol' fashioned gospel music, was put up in the pastor's RV, was fed eggs and cinnamon rolls and fried bologna for breakfast, and was nearly married to a very pretty local girl by noon the next day.

At the Nueces River, a vacationing cattle farmer had loaded me down with fresh, homemade beef jerky from his own cattle. (A late start and heavy beef diet are not the ideal way to tackle the nasty climbs of Texas Hill Country.) And in the middle-of-nowhere oasis of Alpine, my neighbors at a local trailer park



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rising up ahead of me and the Davis Mountains, from which I'd descended days earlier, still visible behind me.

Not far to my right, paralleling the narrow farm road I traveled, I could see the interstate and its never-ending train of diesel 18-wheelers. (Father Alfred, the priest at whose church I'd slept in Sierra Blanca, had said the number of trucks had more than

brought me along to a family dinner party where the shared stories were almost as rich as the shared meal. All this was just a small sample of the kindness that carried me to this frozen Thanksgiving morning.

By the time I took my first break, it had only warmed to 35 degrees, and more than anything, I wanted to cradle a scalding cup of coffee in my numb fingers. I got my wish at a truck stop within Tigua Native American lands, where a large digital sign tried to lure cars off the highway with the promise of seeing a live tiger, who inhabited a pathetic cage amidst a bunch of ancient, gutted cars.

The reality of the reservation cliché was heartbreaking: scrappy kids loitered outside; tired-looking waitresses chain-smoked in the lobby; a gift shop pedaled tacky souvenirs. It sure wasn't a surprise that there was no holiday hubbub here, no cartoon cutouts of happy little Indians sharing their food with happy little Pilgrims

Before leaving, I called home. With the familiar holiday commotion of my boisterous family in the background, my sisters took turns telling how the turkey was too heavy for the rotisserie and they had to use the oven instead.

With images of my own family and of that truck stop battling for space in my head, I spent the next hours cycling along the Río Grande, amazed by the lushness of the cotton and other crops out in the middle of the desert. I was surrounded by green farmlands, the Franklin Mountains

doubled in the last few years, since NAFTA.) And to my left, just across the great green river, Mexico. It seemed so close, but so far: I could picture the *maquiladora* factories on the other side of the river, stretching east from the periphery of Ciudad Juarez.

Always in my consciousness on this leg of the journey — but especially on Thanksgiving — was the Border Patrol, in hulking SUVs adorned with sirens, spotlights and loudspeakers. The agents were friendly; they left lots of room when passing and sometimes even offered me granola bars and water. But still their presence was ominous, like tanks in a war zone.

Cycling the border on Thanksgiving makes you think about what it means to be an American, what it means to have what you need, and why it is we often want so much more. It made me think about the life I'd left behind when I began my journey — the shiny Honda Civic with its MiniDisc player, the matching Picasso prints and the Japanese tea set.

Sometimes hours of solitary pedaling can make you think too much, and there is only so much thinking you can do in 100 miles before you need some human company. So I stopped for a mid-day Snickers bar at a tiny roadside store near San Elizario, where there was a little grill and some barstools positioned at the counter.

The room was buzzing with Spanish conversation and packed with what looked

like one sprawling family, everyone cooking or eating and watching football and drinking soda or beer. I tried to keep a low profile in the candy aisle. I felt bad enough to be an uninvited guest, but crashing a party in sweat-stained spandex seemed supremely inappropriate.

When I approached the counter, a grandmotherly lady gestured to the menu and asked if I wanted anything. Before I could make up my mind, someone somewhere said something about a "gringo" that I couldn't understand, and since I know my name when I hear it, I took a seat and soon someone brought me an enchilada and a plate of Waldorf salad. The turkey wasn't done yet, she apologized, but would I like some stuffing? I ate quite a meal, but when I went to pay, the *abuela* shoved back my bills as if I had offered a ridiculous gift. I said *muchas gracias* and a few people turned and said have a safe trip and be careful in El Paso.

I came out of the restaurant to find a few people gathered around my bike. They wanted to know about my trip, my BOB trailer, and my funny biking shoes. Where did I sleep? What did I eat? How much weight could I haul? A man who'd kept to himself the whole time nudged his buddy, pointing at my sparse belongings, and said, "And we think we need so much stuff!"

On Thanksgiving, I knew that everything I needed, I had with me. A few tangible essentials (warm clothes, a tent to sleep

in, food and water) and a few essential intangibles, such as faith in myself and the fantastic support of my family and friends.

When I began my journey, I wasn't worried by the miles ahead or the unknown challenges that awaited me, but I was concerned about being alone for such a long time. That fear almost convinced me to cancel my solo tour. But if I learned anything on my little adventure, it was that you are never really alone. In day-to-day life, the people all around us somehow become invisible.

They are just other bodies in the grocery line, stupid drivers on the freeway, anonymous faces that bring your coffee. You never really see them. Who has the time? Who has the room in their busy life? Only in my bicycle travels did I learn to truly see other people. I heard countless ordinary but amazing histories, and witnessed overwhelming goodness and generosity.

The truth is, I was never alone on my solo trek across the Southern Tier route. I shared stories and meals and music and wine and shelter with strangers who, under other circumstances, would've remained invisible to me. And I to them. For that, I am thankful. **AC**

Cyril Manning is a freelance writer living in Boston.

ANITA DUFALLA