

An Endangered Species?

Thoughts on the next generation of adventure cyclists

By Willie Weir

I spent most of October touring the West Coast ... in a rented Ford Taurus. This would normally depress me, but I had the privilege of traveling and performing with a fellow cyclist and author, Joe Kurmaskie (*Metal Cowboy*), who writes for *Bicycling* magazine. We per-

formed stories from our adventures at libraries, bookstores and university campuses down the West Coast, from Seattle to San Diego.

Adventure Cycling helped sponsor our tour, so West Coast members received a post card announcing our schedule. We flew the Adventure Cycling banner at all of our

shows and gave out free copies of *Adventure Cyclist* magazine.

I had the opportunity to meet and chat with several hundred Adventure Cycling members on our tour — and you know what? — we're getting older. Not that this is a bad thing. I'm enjoying life more and more as my hair grays and I approach the big "four-oh." But when I asked to see

hands of Adventure Cycling members in the audience, it was rare to see someone under the age of 30.

Where is the next generation of adventure cyclists?

When people ask me how I got started on my bicycle touring career, I inevitably bring up my cross-country trip at the age of 19 with my buddy Thomas. After I gave that pat answer at a gathering at a bookstore, a woman raised her hand and asked, "Did you just wake up one morning when you were 19 and decide to bicycle across the U.S.?"

The longer I pondered that question, the more I realized how wrong my pat answer was. I didn't wake up one morning and decide to bicycle across the country. I began by commuting to school. When I was seven, so many kids rode their bikes to Thomas Kelley Primary School that you had to arrive 15 minutes early to ensure a place at one of the many bike racks. I once counted over 300 bicycles packed in the courtyard.

Before I began junior high school, my family moved across town to another school district. I was a lonely, picked-on kid, and the bicycle was my only way back to my old neighborhood and friends. Little did I know every time I pedaled that 12-mile round trip, I was training for my life's calling.

Then in 8th grade I signed up to take a bike trip with a church group. We traveled from Sacramento to Yosemite. I had an old yellow Vista Esquire ten-speed. After the first day of pedaling I thought I was going to die. The next morning, my butt hurt so much I stood and pedaled for the first ten miles. But six days later, I climbed up to 10,000 feet on Tioga Pass and then coasted down into the most beautiful valley on earth. That was it. I was overweight and had a face full of zits, but I had accomplished a physical feat far beyond what I thought was possible. The bicycle changed my life, and opened my eyes to the world.

After I graduated from high school, and the time came for a grand adventure, the bicycle seemed the only logical vehicle. But where to? And how? My buddy, Thomas, and I heard about two guys who graduated the year before us and rode their bikes across the United States. They followed something called "The Bikecentennial Trail." We ordered the first set of maps (that's all we could afford) and began mapping out our adventure. Twenty years later, I'm a columnist for that same organization.

The question remains, how do today's students get introduced to the bicycle as a vehicle of travel and discovery? Most are driven to school in SUVs until they reach the age where they can buy their own cars. The media is saturated with advertisements about adventure, nearly all of which are connected to sales of automobiles, jet skis and snowmobiles.

For the generation growing up today, the bicycle is something you put on top of your Ford Explorer until you reach a recreational trail. It is a toy, not a viable means of transportation. Just this past year, I revisited my primary school while classes were in session. I walked onto the very same courtyard once saturated with bikes. It contained one lonely bike rack occupied by a total of three bikes.

But kids and students can only get excited about what they've been exposed to. One of the most rewarding experi-

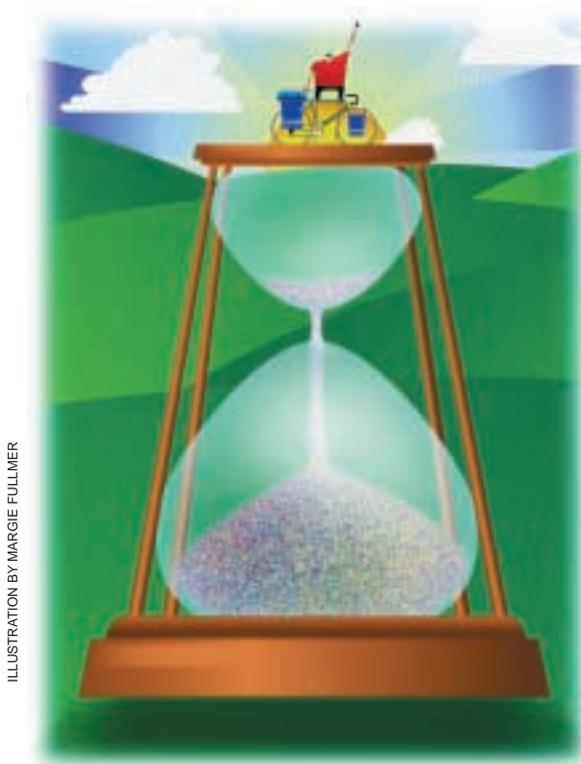


ILLUSTRATION BY MARGIE FULLMER

Is time running out for adventure cyclists? We hope not.

ences of my life came, not on a mountain pass in a faraway country, but with my relationship with a third grade class in San Francisco.

Before I left for India, I promised Jennifer, a teacher friend of mine, I'd visit her school. I have to admit I wasn't too excited about the experience. I figured that compared to video games, Power Rangers, and extreme sports, a guy on a bicycle was going to go over about as well as cold oatmeal.

I rode into her classroom with my bicycle fully loaded. To my surprised, her students were totally enthralled with my bike, the same type of vehicle most of them already owned. After I talked about my planned journey, dozens of hands shot up when I asked if they had any questions.

Throughout my five-month journey I sent letters to the students. When they received them, they had to locate the originating points of the letters on a giant map of India in their classroom captioned, "Where's Willie?"

Three months into my journey, I pulled into the city of Indore in central southern India. I had arranged to have my mail sent there. There were a couple of letters from family and friends, and one large packet. Enclosed was a bundle of letters ... every kid in Jennifer's class had written to me.

Upon my return to the States I visited Jennifer's class again. I had to break through a large "Welcome back" banner held across the doorway. I spent the day with 30 future travelers, answering questions about tigers, mountain passes and strange foods.

Then it was their turn. They all stood up and sang a song they had written for me, and presented me with a gift, a hand-painted T-shirt of a bicycle wheel with the caption, "The World for Willie." The back of the shirt was filled with pastel-colored signatures of the kids. I stood in that classroom, tears rolling down my face, relishing the moment that has become one of my fondest travel memories.

I hope one day to open up my mailbox and pull out a postcard from a foreign land. I won't recognize the name, but I'll smile and laugh. It will begin something like ...

"Dear Willie,

Do you remember talking to my class several years ago?"

Will there be a next generation of adventure cyclists? There won't be, unless those of us with a passion for bicycle travel find ways to share our passion with others. ●

Adventure Cycling member Willie Weir is a columnist for Adventure Cyclist magazine.

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