

A Summer To Remember

There are summers

and there are summers. For more than 4000 cyclists (and nearly that many Bikecentennial staff members) 1976 was *the* summer. It was the summer they celebrated the 200th year of our nation's existence by riding, or helping others to ride, across the country—better than going to camp, or visiting your grandparent's farm, or even playing Little League baseball.

Other than Bikecentennial, no major bicentennial event that we know of gave celebrants the opportunity to actually *do* something in honor of America's birthday. The tall sailing ships made a fine display in New York's harbor, but required nothing from you. You had only to watch, a passive participant. Bikecentennial was anything but passive. Many cyclists who took part in 1976 (and those who take TransAmerica trips today) say essentially the same thing about the experience: "I learned more about this country in 90 days than most people learn in a lifetime."

The hint of arrogance can be excused—TransAm riders usually make such pronouncements soon after completing their trips, when the richness of their experience is still fresh in their minds. Today, 10 years later, the 1976 TransAm riders might temper their statements with the perspective that passing years allow—saying something like, "I learned more about certain aspects of this country in 90 days than most people learn in a lifetime."

And in that, they would be absolutely correct. They learned more about the geographic expanse, historic diversity and individual generosity of this nation than most people learn in a lifetime. They also met more citizens of America's small towns and farms than most of us are likely to meet in a lifetime. None of those citizens would be mistaken for celebrities (except perhaps in Bikecentennial's offices): June Curry of Afton, Virginia, Cy Higgins of Tribune, Kansas, the Parkers of Hebron, Colorado, and countless others whose names never trickled back to Bikecentennial headquarters. They gave the Bikecentennial riders those things that money can't buy: a glimpse of the local way of life, a sincere concern for the rider's well-being, and friendship.

It's difficult today to convey how ambitious the Bikecentennial summer of 1976 was in the bicycling world. No one had ever pulled off anything like it. Thousands of people riding 4,450 miles in 90 days? It was unprecedented. And it was done without the benefit of experience, by a Bikecentennial staff whose greatest asset was enthusiasm.

Most of what the staff did that summer of '76 were "firsts"—scouring the nation for high school gyms, church auditoriums and other small-town facilities, dubbed Bike Inns, where the

TransAm cyclists could stay indoors overnight, every night; manning the telephone in the "War Room" at the Missoula headquarters 24 hours a day, seven days a week to receive the calls of riders with problems ranging from emotional to medical to cartographical; defying impossible publishing deadlines to invent a system of mapping especially for cyclists and create a series of guidebooks to complement those maps.

Let's we make the staff sound too heroic, however, let's give some credit to the riders themselves. Despite the best efforts of the staff, some of those "firsts" did occasionally fall short of the mark. Bike Inns weren't always ready for the first groups passing through. Bike Inns that were ready weren't always completely satisfying. Finding 80 or so places for a bunch of cyclists to spend the night in 80 or so of America's smallest towns is not the definition of choice. Bikecentennial's field teams sometimes took what they could get, even if it didn't have indoor plumbing. The maps weren't perfect either. Occasionally, phantom grocery stores stalked their panels, and right turns inexplicably went to the left out on the road.

Bear in mind too, that most of the TransAm riders were strangers to each other, thrown together for the biggest challenge of their lives. In addition, 10 percent of the 4000 or so riders who took part in the ride were from overseas (200 from Holland alone), where they were accustomed to hostels with fully stocked kitchens, bunk beds and other amenities. But the great majority of Bikecentennial riders, Europeans included, ignored the minor inconveniences. They didn't dwell on the lack of a kitchen (and bunks) at last night's Moose Lodge. Strangers became friends. They kept their eyes on the big picture—riding across America.

And just how big was the picture in 1976? The December, 1976 *BikeReport* ran a short article called "The Numbers," in which it was reported that "In 1976, Bikecentennial operated 300 trips servicing 4,100 men and women. All fifty states and several foreign nations were represented. Just over 2,000 bicyclists rode the entire length of the trail."

Not bad for one summer. But the *BikeReport* staff wasn't finished with "The Numbers." The article reported further: "Those who rode a TransAm trip in an average gear of 70 inches turned their cranks 1,239,550 times. At 10 miles per hour, Bikecentennial riders spent 1.1 million hours in the saddle, during 550,000 riders days, covering 11 million rider miles."

These cumulative figures are less important as statistics than they are as indicators of a mood. In December of 1976 Bikecentennial's staff was obviously fascinated with the heights their event had reached. Whether those heights will be reached again in a single summer may be something none of us will ever know. After all, the tricentennial is still 90 years away.



Photos by Dan Burden

Text by Daniel D'Ambrosio

Two groups passing through Wisdom, Montana, together polished off eight whole pies. In Carbondale, Illinois, an unidentified group finished eight large pizzas and 15 pitchers of an effervescent beverage.

—Trans-America Trail News, July 16, 1976

Some of the group awoke at 4 a.m. They couldn't sleep, anticipation got the best of them. The cereal had been poured into bowls the night before, the instant milk needed a stir. Sandwiches and gorp were portioned out. Our haste was necessary if we were to commemorate the Bicentennial by cycling 200 miles in one day.

—"Fast Al" Karnatz, New Haven, VT



THE GROUPS

fittingly enough, were an experiment in representative democracy, and the basic unit of the summer of '76—the majority of the riders went across the TransAmerica Trail in groups. Every group, including the groups on this page, had a leader, and an assistant leader. Correctly identify those two people in each of the accompanying photos, and we'll think of a prize to send you—the point being that leaders didn't wear stars on their T-shirts or hand down orders across their handlebars. And they still don't. There were lasting friendships made, and marriages—many more than we know about, one suspects. But in a sense, what came after that summer matters little. The groups shared a grand adventure for one summer, and that in itself was more than enough to ask for.



After searching for nearly 20 hours, two bicyclists travelling the TransAm Trail through Virginia found their missing bicycle with teeth gash and claw marks. The bicycle had been stolen the previous night by a bear in search of food.

—BikeReport, June 16, 1976

DAILY LIFE

on the road was different for the cyclists of '76, but it was also familiar. There were still evenings to be passed, usually in Bike Inns, where a checkerboard could lend a touch of intimacy to the cavernous anonymity of a high school gym. Because they were temporarily homeless, many of the riders formed bonds that gave continuity to their daily lives—with a kitten for whom they constructed a spoked safety net, or with a faithful cooking pot that had perched atop one too many cookstoves in one too many campsites. Simple pleasures were real pleasures for the TransAmerica cyclists, who could devour a 10-dip ice-cream cone with impunity—the next 40 miles would burn off the calories; or turn a hose on their heads for an impromptu shower—the next five miles would leave them cracking dry. The best parts of daily life for cyclists on the TransAmerica Trail, however, were the special people with hearts of gold along the way, like June Curry of Afton, Virginia—the Cookie Lady. In a stroke of good fortune, the Trail was unwittingly routed past June Curry's doorstep. She took it on herself to provide water, cookies, and conversation, all free, to the passing bike riders. Today, with fewer TransAm cyclists passing her home, June Curry has of course taken it on herself to do more. Now she provides meals. Which only shows that gold does not necessarily tarnish over the years.

Photo by Trish Collins

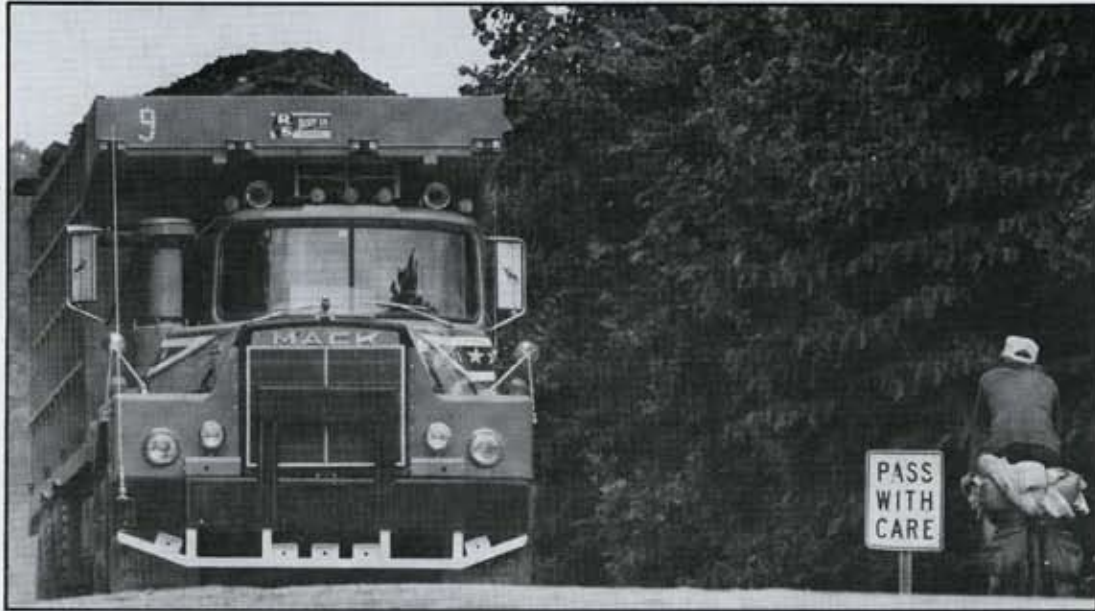


At this point in the summer the organizers of Bikecentennial are confident the Trans-America Trail will continue to win popular acceptance, and become a lasting and well-used trail for years to come.

—BikeReport, June 16, 1976

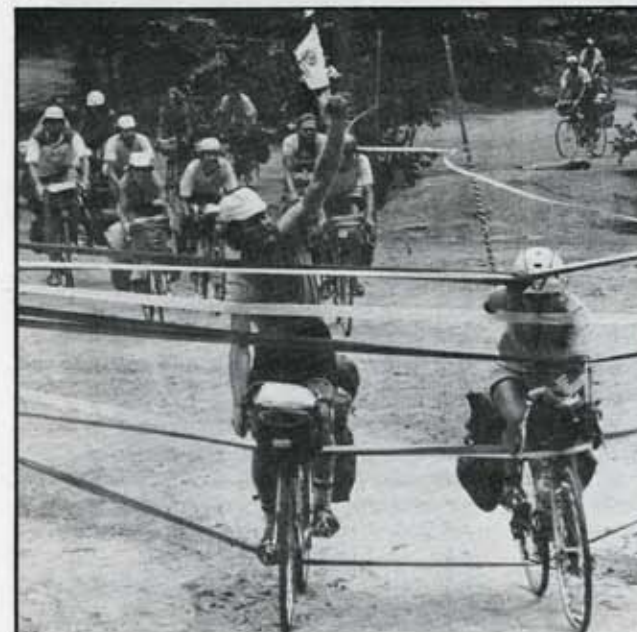
Every afternoon there were bikers from all over the world under our big maple tree. And what a delight these people were. There were students, teachers, doctors, a carpenter from Sweden, a musician from Mexico City, bike teams from Holland, and families.

—Terry and Betty Noble, Corvallis, MT



THE TRAIL

must have had hundreds of cyclists humming the melody of Woody Guthrie's unofficial national anthem. You know the song — the one that 4th graders sing (off-key but with sincerity) for the six o'clock news on Veteran's Day. Like Guthrie's song, the TransAmerica Trail captures the length and breadth of the land. It has the soaring mountains and the windblown coasts, but it also has the Great Kansas Wheat Desert, where cyclists learned that unconditional hospitality and small-town grocery stores can make you forget all about scenery. Some of the notable sights along the Trail were man-made — like the coal trucks of Kentucky. Perhaps cyclists would have a similar fascination with a saber-toothed dog. These trucks were big, looked mean, and the drivers, paid by the load, drove fast. In the end, though, no one was hurt by the trucks. And everyone had the time of his, or her, life.



I spent the last night of the trip as I'd spent several others, listening to the rain fall on the tent and wondering if my bags were left open, too lazy and dry to go out and check.

—Linda Robbins, BikeReport, December 1976

Even after ten years there is not a day that I don't momentarily drift back to the memories of the summer of '76.

—David Drown, Laurel, MD

THE FINISH

probably had more outright drama than any other aspect of the Bikecentennial summer of '76. The groups did things like riding the last few miles in proud formation; breaking through finish-line ribbons with fists upraised; cutting cakes with congratulatory messages scribbled in colored icing; clasp hands with a style and vigor worthy of ABC's thrill of victory; and, in the quietest of the dramas, bidding a fond and sincere farewell. It must have been odd, after all they had shared, for many of the Trans-Am cyclists to realize that they would never see each other again. It is likely that some of them were profoundly sorry that the summer was over. But after time dissipated their momentary feelings of loss, the Trans-America cyclists were left with a rich legacy of unique memories. Every one of us should, some day, have an experience like the Bikecentennial summer of 1976.