A SECOND CHANCE

Pulling Bikecentennial back from the brink

story by **DAVID F. PROUTY**

➜AS MISSOULA FADED from the rear-view mirror, I wondered again about the wisdom of driving Bikecentennial's Ford van 400-plus miles to Banff, Alberta. It was late fall 1977, snow had already fallen, the roads were icy, and the van had 120,000 miles on the odometer, not much heat inside, and balding Firestones underneath. We had put the vehicle up for sale with everything else. There had been no takers.

But I owned no vehicle, and we couldn't afford airfare. There was enough cash in the till for two more payrolls, membership had declined from 8,000 to 3,000, the number of staff had contracted from 23 to four, and rumors of our imminent demise were flying, both in Missoula and across the cycling universe. Relegating Bikecentennial to nothing more than a novel one-off during the nation's bicentennial celebration was a sad possibility.

Somehow, on short notice, we had found out about a direct mail seminar that was going to be held in Banff. It would be taught by a gentleman who had previously headed up the direct mail campaigns for *Reader's Digest*, and we hoped it might shine some light on the way ahead.

We needed some light after the chaos of March 1977, when our accountant had revealed that we were within two weeks of dipping into the food and overnight money for the upcoming summer's tours. We'd cut staffing levels to the bone.

Later that summer, every time I opened the mail or answered the phone some vendor was claiming that Bikecentennial owed it money. They were usually right.

But toward the end of the summer, the worm began to turn in hard-to-notice ways. I retained Ernie Franceschi — owner of Missoula's Birchwood Hostel, and, as I would learn, a first-class mercantile mind — to sell every typewriter, table, lamp, set of shelves, desk, chair, file cabinet, first-aid kit, and bicycle part to anyone who had the cash. The staff soon learned to leave "Do Not Sell" notes on their furniture when they visited the restroom. Ernie earned a commission on each sale; his efforts got us from one payroll to the next.

And then in September, we sold a fairly new Chevy van that had been converted into a rustic camper by the staff for field research in 1975 for $5,000. That small event guaranteed salaries until the mailing of the first membership renewal notices later in the year. The sale of that van was, to me, the first sign that we were no longer stagnating but moving forward. More importantly, we had bought ourselves time to think about *why* we were trying to survive in the first place.

Bikecentennial had been an officially sanctioned project of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, and its mission had been clear: to celebrate the activity of bicycle touring by riding part or all of the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail.

I was not part of that. During the run-up to the summer of 1976, I was living in Richmond, Virginia, working part time, and taking a few graduate courses in business. After a failed attempt to walk across the country, the next winter my new wife and I decided to ride across with the intent to find a new home in the West. Neither of us had ridden a bike since we were kids, and the longest ride we took prior to our departure was about 25 miles. "We'll get in shape on the trip," we always rationalized. That we did, but it hurt.

During our preparations, we read about Bikecentennial in *Parade* magazine. We were tempted, but we thought we could do it cheaper on our own (probably not true) and preserve our flexibility in case we had to or wanted to alter our route (true).

Our trip covered 2,965 miles over 65 days, with 10 rest days including two in Missoula, where we were struck by the scenery, the friendliness of the residents, and the fact that it was large enough for there to be a couple of jobs.

We returned to Missoula in the fall of 1976 and my wife immediately found a job in a bank, which meant we could make it through the winter. It was another six weeks before I got an idea that might appeal to Bikecentennial and that included a job for me. When I arrived at the Bikecentennial offices in the old Belmont Hotel on Higgins Avenue, the lethargy was palpable. After the incredible expenditure of energy it had taken to pull off the summer of '76, the place and its inhabitants appeared to have crashed. But I was able to secure a meeting with Executive Director Dan Burden the following week.

Dan later told me that he hired me because I had once "run something." That it had been an adult correctional facility in Virginia didn't seem to bother him, something for which I've always been grateful. I had worked for the Virginia Department of Corrections for five years as a teacher, counselor, and superintendent of a small institution that sent 200 felons into the community each day, half to college and half to civilian jobs.

I was hired as the director of programs at Bikecentennial, responsible for the trips program the following summer and with creating the same rider capacity as in '76 — 4,000 cyclists. I was the 23rd

GREG SIPLE

David Prouty at his desk in 1977 after taking the helm of Bikecentennial. Prouty's direct mail program is credited with saving the organization.

and last person hired or kept over from 1976 and was somewhat surprised to learn that the issue of whether or not the organization should be kept going was mostly, but not entirely, resolved.

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What happened to Bikecentennial that winter of 1976 that nearly caused its demise? In hindsight — always perfect, of course — there were a number of reasons.

One of the more interesting was a survey of trip participants that the organization had conducted earlier that fall that included this question: "Would you take another Bikecentennial trip?" Some 90 percent of the riders said they would. Was it true or just post-celebration euphoria? Would that 90 percent do it again the following year? Or the next? We gave the survey its most optimistic interpretation but ended up with only 1,500 riders in 1977, which was far short of the expected 4,000 and made for a considerable budgetary shortfall.

Second, even though salaries were small, the size of the staff was a huge financial drain. There was a communal environment and a loyalty to the staff who had given so much, but the reality was most of them weren't involved in work that produced income for the organization.

GREG SIPLE

Plenty of parking out front of Bikcentennial's office in the Belmont Hotel building in 1976.

Third, the pricing structure, while rational for a one-season celebration, was grossly inadequate for long-term survival. Revenue from memberships, trip prices, maps and guidebooks, and sponsors was not sufficient to carry the organization through the winter.

Finally, there was not yet a clear mission statement for the organization — there was no reason to go on living. That was regrettable but probably unavoidable, given the need for everyone to take a breather after the effort of the previous summer.

So the problem facing the organization was this: no matter whether you are a Fortune 500 company, a nonprofit, a baseball team, or a hospital, if your expenses exceed your income, you are headed for the exits, no matter how fervently you believe in your cause.

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"Didn't you run something once?" Joel Meier asked me in June 1977. Joel was the president of the Bikecentennial board of directors and a professor at the University of Montana.

"A prison."

There was a noticeable shifting among the other board members. They barely knew me, just as I barely knew them. At this particular meeting the board outnumbered staff six to four.

"Well, do you want to try to bring this thing back?" Joel asked.

There was a note of uncertainty in his voice — I wasn't sure whether the board thought that the organization was worth saving, whether they knew what needed to be done, or whether they had doubts about me.

Dan Burden had left a few weeks before to found a new bicycling organization in Washington, DC.

Eighteen other staff had left either voluntarily or been let go over the past few months.

"Yes," I said without hesitation, and meant it. I was angry. I had ridden a bicycle across the country to find a new place to live in the West and had found along with it a challenging job in a town where there weren't many to be had, and I wasn't in the mood to pack it in after less than a year.

Besides, I had grown to like the other staff — those who had been let go and those who were going to stay. I had enormous respect for what they had accomplished the previous year, and watching them gather their belongings for the last time had been terribly sad. I felt that someone owed them his best effort to see what could be done.

There was talent at Bikecentennial, not to mention the high-quality publications (particularly the maps and guidebooks) and the pre-digital–age slide show that could make a couch potato pine for the open road. I was eager to see whether I had what it took to turn it around.

I was named executive director. I don't remember much talk about mission statements or strategies, but we knew the immediate tasks: determine how bad things really were and raise cash.

What we needed to do to survive turned out to be right under our noses. While I may have been the one who voiced the idea, I'm sure that it was born out of loud frustration on the part of the staff. We were deluged with mail from cyclists asking where to ride, how to ride, where to find books and maps, what bicycles and equipment to buy, and, by the way, we need the information yesterday. This mail was taking enormous amounts of staff time, and we weren't making a dime from it. Bingo!

We went all-in to become the AAA of bicycling. The staff, in those years before ubiquitous computers and search engines, scoured the country for all kinds of printed material that could assist cyclists. As Ernie emptied the offices of furniture, box upon box of books, maps, and other resource material began to arrive. And, gradually, so did a feeling of optimism. We were helping cyclists again.

Unlike some bicycling organizations, Bikecentennial had no clubs around the country, no way to recruit new members locally. It became apparent that the best way for us to recruit new members was to enter the world of direct-mail marketing, something we knew nothing about beyond calling it "junk mail" as we walked it to the nearest trash can.

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I returned from Banff with the zeal of the newly converted, armed with the finer points of selecting and renting mailing lists, crafting appeals, designing packages, working with printers, calculating budgets and expected returns, and all the rest. We spent about two months designing an appeal and scraping together the estimated $25,000 it would take to print and mail. We all knew that if the mailing failed, we would be closing the doors by spring.

So on a cold winter day in early 1978, we dropped almost 100,000 pieces of

CONTINUED ON PAGE 50

CONTINUED FROM PAGE43
PROUTY: BIKECENTENNIAL

hand-stuffed mail off at the post office. We had rented the entire *Bicycling* magazine subscription list, and we had based our appeal to those readers on the commitment that Bikecentennial would exist to serve the bicycle-touring public with organized trips, the development of a nationwide bicycle route system, maps, and information about all facets of touring. Then we sat back and waited. And waited.

Success in direct mail is a bit like success in baseball. A batter who fails to get a hit seven out of 10 times at bat is considered a good hitter. In direct mail, failing to hear back from 97 out of 100 recipients of your appeal is considered good. We'd been told to expect between a one and three percent return.

What started as a trickle became a flood, and we eventually reaped a 3.2 percent return. After that first mailing, we never looked back. We rented list after list; some bombed and some succeeded beyond our expectations. We expanded the mail room and began to sell some gear along with hundreds of cycling publications. Former staff members were re-hired, including Gary MacFadden and Greg Siple. Over the next four years the membership increased from a low of 3,000 to nearly 18,000. New routes were developed and new maps produced. And something I took as a compliment began to occur: other groups contacted us requesting our money for their ideas.

I left Bikecentennial in the early summer of 1982 with an MBA in experience, but I was tired and in need of something new. Gary became executive director and began an incredibly accomplished 18-year run at the helm. He squarely faced and succeeded at three issues I had avoided: changing the name of the organization, moving the office, and bringing computers into the operation. If my staff and I revived the organization, then Gary and his staff matured it. Now at 40, the organization is still vibrant and going strong. There isn't a more rewarding legacy.

Nearly four decades later, I'm fuzzy as to the names of the other staff members because some of them stayed briefly and for varying lengths of time, some were around frequently helping out if not actually employed, and some are victims of my feeble memory. But Bill Harlan, Gayl Teichert, Laura Andersen, and Carla Melvin were there. Gary MacFadden, although no longer employed, published *BikeReport* on a contract basis, and I believe that cofounder Greg Siple assisted him whenever possible. Marlene Wiles eventually returned when I became overwhelmed by the bookkeeping. I was extremely fortunate to be able to take advantage of the institutional memory and of the talents of these folks. I still have fond memories of raucous arguments about everything under the sun, unfettered ideas as to how to survive, long, long hours, and much laughter. AC

David F. Prouty was the executive director of Bikecentennial from 1977 to 1982. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia.