

# RETURN FROM THE END OF THE WORLD

BY DAN D'AMBROSIO



**GREG AND JUNE SIPLE FINISHED THEIR RIDE FROM ALASKA TO ARGENTINA AFTER NEARLY THREE YEARS, JUST IN TIME TO JOIN BIKECENTENNIAL**

**O**n February 25, 1975, June and Greg Siple rolled into Ushuaia, the capital of Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost city in the world, the end of the road before reaching Antarctica, and — after two years, eight months, and nine days — the endpoint of Hemistour, their ride from Alaska to Argentina.

“In my mind, it was just right, just long enough,” Greg said of their epic journey.

Hemistour, of course, gave birth to Bikecentennial, the ride across America in 1976 to celebrate the nation’s 200th birthday, which led to today’s Adventure Cycling Association.

For Lys and Dan Burden — the Siples’ companions on Hemistour — the journey ended before the second year of cycling was under way. Late in the summer of 1973, Dan was sidelined by a life-threatening bout with hepatitis. Needing to recover and recalibrate,

the Burdens made their way back to Missoula, Montana, and continued work on Bikecentennial.

As June and Greg rested near the sign welcoming them to Ushuaia, a couple drove by them in a car, did a double take, then circled back to introduce themselves.

“It turned out they were tourists from Amarillo, Texas,” June remembered.

The couple offered to take photos of Greg and June using the Siples’ camera and then continued on their way. It was

a chance meeting and a photograph that froze in time a seminal moment in the Siples’ lives.

## **Winter coming on**

Soon Greg and June were busy working on mailing postcards to the people who had helped support them on Hemistour, many giving as little as \$10.

“We had to find a typewriter and cut paper into the shapes of postcards,” June said. “It was our last big [Hemistour] mailing.”

Memories from 41 years ago are imperfect and incomplete. Greg said he remembers little else about that remarkable day in Argentina, except those Texans who took their photo in front of the Ushuaia welcome sign. But then more memories began to surface.

“Winter was coming on, so the air was kind of cool,” Greg said. “Somehow we ended up in the city hall. It had this





Photos from the road: Greg Siple in Ecuador (1974) and June Siple in Alaska (1972).

big book people would sign. I drew a picture of some kind.”

That will come as no surprise to anyone who knows Greg, Adventure Cycling’s art director and a limitless source of sketches and illustrations. Greg remembered a boat in the harbor at this gateway to the Southern Ocean, not a luxury liner but a “scientific exploration boat.”

“Somehow we made contact with them and had a meal on the ship,” Greg said. “It was pleasant to be eating in the galley and talking to the crew in luxury and comfort.”

June remembered a different ship in the harbor, a gigantic white cruise ship bound for Antarctica, which became the source of her only regret from Hemistour — there was no chance to take advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit the ice-bound bottom of the earth.

“By the end of Hemistour, all of our equipment was worn out,” June said. “You could see through the sleeping

bags. Our tent was not shedding rain anymore so we had to have a tarp over it to keep dry. We were pretty much strapped for cash all the time.”

“We couldn’t afford to go to Antarctica, no way,” she added.

### The end of a quest

Before leaving Ushuaia, Greg and June rode about 20 kilometers beyond town with Angel Martinez, a stranger but for the common bond of bicycle adventure. Martinez had been riding around Argentina for seven years.

“The three of us rode to the end of the world, overlooking the Beagle Channel,” June said. “That was a moment.”

The Beagle Channel, an east-to-west cut of water, defines the southern end of Tierra del Fuego. The northern end of Ushuaia is bound by the snow-capped peaks of the Martial Mountains, a far-away place that made a fitting end for Hemistour.

“I remember a feeling of fulfillment

that we really had made it,” Greg said. “It had taken so long to get there, not just the time on the road but the time before, anticipating we were doing this thing. I often described it as a quest.”

### The lights of Miami

June and Greg now had to return to the United States and ultimately to Missoula, where the planning for Bikecentennial was well under way.

June had found a relatively cheap flight to Miami from Santiago, Chile’s capital, some 1,500 miles to the north. It took another 31 days to reach Santiago, including 566 miles of riding on gravel and pavement, before they caught a March 29 flight.

“That was something remarkable,” Greg said. “That flight was at night. We could look down and see the lights of cities like Lima, Peru. A year’s worth of travel, all wiped out in a few hours.”

Back in the U.S., Greg and June began 12 weeks of traveling and presenting slide shows of Hemistour and the upcoming Bikecentennial adventure at venues that Dan and Lys had arranged ahead of time.

Eventually the couple made their way back to Missoula, but not before Greg traveled to Europe to lead a trip for American Youth Hostels (AYH), the organization that had stoked both couples’ fires for bicycle touring.

Greg’s tour encompassed Central Europe, including Germany, France, Austria, Holland, and England, and lasted about six weeks.

“I had momentum, and I felt this confidence,” Greg said of his decision to lead the trip. “I had led an AYH trip before and I knew how wonderful it was. It was neat to lead a trip to Europe.”

### Return to Bikecentennial

Back in Missoula, Greg felt disoriented at first in Bikecentennial’s hodge-podge headquarters above Eddie’s Club on Higgins Avenue, even as he began working with the bustling staff of the organization.

“I remember when I first walked into the office I felt a complete disconnect,” Greg said. “It was very strange to walk into an office that was Bikecentennial,



June, Greg, Dan, and Lys on a plaza in Mexico in 1973.

Dan and Lys Burden and Greg and June Siple embarked on the adventure of a lifetime when they left Anchorage, Alaska, bound for Argentina in 1972. Born during that expedition,

Bikecentennial was nurtured from an idea to a landmark event to the thriving Adventure Cycling Association of today. But none of it would have happened without the dreams, hard work, and a little luck of two couples from Ohio. A profile of the Burdens ran in the March 2016 issue of *Adventure Cyclist*.

and these people had no idea who I was.”

Greg soon got his bearings, however, thanks to his training as a graphic artist. He quickly focused on the maps that



Above and beyond the long Bikecentennial work weeks: an extracurricular parade. June (left) and Sue Miners carry a banner while Greg (unseen) pilots the bicycle-powered balloon float.

would guide some 4,000 riders across the country.

“I could see they tried different things with the maps, but it wasn’t being done by people with a graphic design mentality,” Greg said. “I just started to take charge of making these maps, and I can’t say they were that successful. Those maps that first year weren’t very good.”

The maps may not have been very good, but the cause was great, and that made all the difference, according to Greg.

“I fell right into line,” Greg said.

“We’re going to do this, we have to do this, and it’s going to be great. Nobody was thinking about money. There was no time clock. I often use the word ‘electric.’ Big sacks of mail are coming in, the phone is ringing all the time, and all we have is typewriters and tele-phones.”

Greg went on to make Bikecentennial and Adventure Cycling his career, becoming synonymous with the organization even though he never aspired to a leadership position.

“All the successes in my life are collaborations,” Greg said. “I think of myself

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as a visionary. I get these great ideas, and I can't implement them by myself. I can have an idea for Adventure Cycling/ Bikecentennial but in the office I'm only comfortable with the most nitty-gritty things. I'm not interested in management. I want to be pasting the magazine together, taking portraits of riders, working on a flyer. It's a very odd thing with me."

June's experience working at Bikecentennial was quite different. She arrived in Missoula knowing exactly what she wanted to do. As a former leader with the Minnesota Outward Bound School (MOBS), June had worked one young woman with a troubled past who was helped by her MOBS experience. She wanted to raise funds and recruit similar trippers for Bikecentennial.

"I thought that would be a great model for Bikecentennial," June said, "to have a disadvantaged person in each trip."

But that's not the way things shook out, June said.

"Dan was in charge. Basically he had



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At journey's end, Greg and June pose for a photo in Ushuaia, Argentina, 18,272 miles from their starting point in Anchorage, Alaska.

certain needs that staff had to fill, which he didn't explain to me until I got there," she said. "I became sales manager."

June's first task involved catching up on the orders for T-shirts and water bottles that bicycle component giant Shimano had donated to Bikecentennial. Later she would coordinate with Shimano to receive a list of 15,000 names of bike shop dealers in exchange for Bikecentennial's list of 4,000 dealers.

"My job was to take the 15,000 addresses and collate them with our 4,000 addresses and make sure there were no duplications," June said.

June wrote two brochures, one for foreign riders and another for the home hostel system. She translated the Bikecentennial slide-show script into Spanish for the U.S. Information Agency to distribute throughout Latin America in their centers, providing a voice-over for the show.

"I just ended up being a jack-of-all-

trades there," she said. "You barely had time to think. I just threw my shoulder into the fray and did what I was asked to do."

On May 1, 1976, June left the staff of Bikecentennial and began working as a projectionist in a Missoula theater, a job she had begun training for in January that year. June still looks back at her experience at Bikecentennial with mixed feelings.

"Pure and simple it was a meat grinder, a horrible work experience for me," she said. "On the other hand, I have to say Dan Burden has such a talent for finding the right people for the right task. Even though I didn't fulfill my wishes, I was able to help the organization quite a bit in the things I did and I still have a great fondness for the staff."

Greg, now 70, will retire from Adventure Cycling next year after nearly 40 years as a full-time staffer.

"We're not looking toward a great retirement where we go to Bermuda or trek in Mongolia. More like, 'Let's go to Butte,'" Greg said with characteristic humor. "It's been a life of seeking fulfillment rather than material wealth."

The road to fulfillment has been long and filled with turns that neither June nor Greg anticipated, but the remarkable organization they helped bring into existence is a testament to what can be achieved by people who are on a mission in life.

"A lot of it is luck," Greg said. "I look at an organization like Adventure Cycling, and there were so many points when if some small thing hadn't happened, the whole thing wouldn't have happened. I'm amazed by it." **AC**

Dan D'Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.

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