

# When Donna Met John

## An Office Romance Askance

story by JUNE J. SIPLE    photos by GREG SIPLE

By the time “Bikecentennial76” became a 501c3 corporation on March 15, 1974, many volunteers had already assisted cofounders Dan and Lys Burden without pay as the couple crafted plans for the summer of ’76 (cofounders Greg and June Siple were en route to Argentina on Hemistour, see the May 2016 issue). Their first hire, when enough funding finally became available, came a year later in March of 1975.

By 1976, more than 40 employees — cyclists and non-cyclists alike — climbed the stairs to the second floor at 430 North Higgins in Missoula. They worked at desks made from recycled doors, and on an initial salary of \$250 per month.

These pioneer employees were idealistic, resilient, bright, brave, and enterprising. They also shared the ability to adapt plus a deep desire to create a bicycling adventure for thousands of cyclists. But only a handful of staff members had the experience and training that actually applied to their job assignments, most learning on the job as well as creating their own work systems. With job descriptions virtually nonexistent, the pay scale was initially equal for all, including the founders.

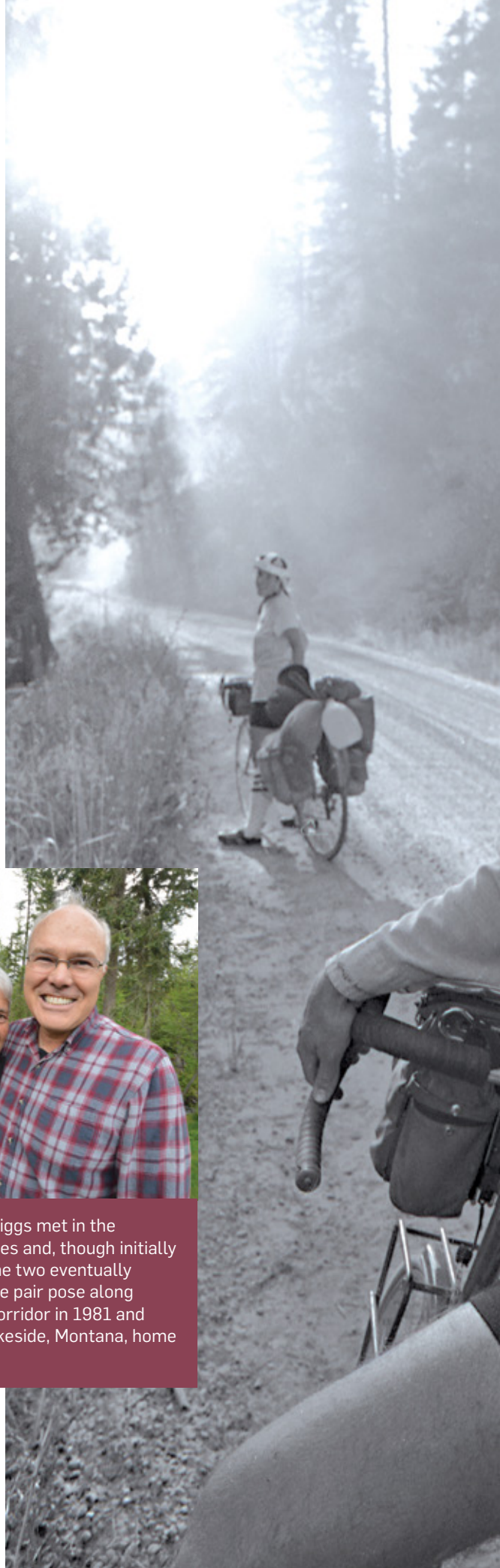
Media Director John Briggs, a broad-shouldered hire with a big smile who did have the background to match his job offer, started as a volunteer in the fall of 1974 and went on salary during the spring of 1975. He had already produced several slide/tape shows of his own, featuring conservation and environmental subjects. By attracting John to Bikecentennial, the Burdens would land a slide/tape show producer as well as a photographer.

Back in 1969 he performed his first slide show, “Simply Seeing,” for his high school English class, then presented it extensively in the San Francisco Bay area, including at Sierra Club regional meetings. At the tender age of 16, John had been devastated by the early death of his father, G.M. “Bud” Briggs, Jr. The loss had intensified his passion for the beauty of nature and had inspired him to create the show.

“My photography originally came out of grief ... and was an emotional outlet for me,” John said. “The technology and photography was self-taught,” he pointed out. At 18 he graduated from high school, and with both parents gone, he enrolled at the University of Montana in the fall of 1971. He was attracted to UM by its program, the “Round River Experiment in Environmental Education.”



Donna and John Briggs met in the Bikecentennial offices and, though initially like oil and water, the two eventually married. At right, the pair pose along Idaho's Magruder Corridor in 1981 and above near their Lakeside, Montana, home earlier this year.





The Burdens first courted him to volunteer after introductions by a mutual friend in January of 1974. But John and friend Roger Rosentreter had already planned a full summer of canoeing. “The only problem was, I had never set foot in a canoe,” John remembered, smiling sheepishly. As Roger was a veteran paddler, John took only a one-day canoe trip on the Bitterroot River south of Missoula to train for the wilds of Canada. They paddled some 2,000 miles for two-and-a-half months from north of Fort McMurray, Alberta, to Baker Lake, on Hudson Bay, in the Northwest Territories (Nunavut province since 1999).

Back in Missoula by the fall, John began volunteering for the Burdens at their apartment, which would serve as the Bikecentennial office until December. He was student teaching to graduate with a B.A. in Education, plus a B.S. in Resource Conservation from UM. But John spent an equal number of hours volunteering for Bikecentennial. As he recalled “Lys wanted me to help with slides and mailing parties. I enjoyed a sweet fellowship of friends there, and it was a wonderfully innocent time ... Dan and Lys made it fun and served ice cream and hot fudge.”

“Dan and I worked on press kits together and wrote a proposal to Shimano in the fall of 1974,” John said. A significant step forward for the budding organization, the kit made it easier to respond to the growing number of media inquiries. It would generate thousands of blurbs and feature-length articles in newspapers and magazines.

On the payroll by the spring of 1975, John built an enormous editing lightboard at the office to display and sort the 600+ slides for the production of the Hemistour Bicycling Expedition slide/tape show. Dan had selected the Alaska to Mexico slides, and Greg completed the show, adding slides from Salina Cruz, Mexico, to Tierra del Fuego. John picked out music, synchronized it with the slides using a stopwatch, and edited and refined the show. The Hemistour reel-to-reel stereo soundtrack consisted of music only, to be coordinated with live commentary.

More importantly, John is the little-known producer of the legendary Bikecentennial slide/tape show, “Bike Back Into America.” With two slide projectors, a dissolve unit, and a reel-to-reel stereo tape deck, he again synchronized the slides with a stopwatch to music he selected, revised Dan’s rough script to fit the show, and set up the soundtrack to auto-advance the slides. Voiceovers were by John and Lys. With critical lobbying help from the Forest Service and much chasing of leads, he managed to secure permission to use John Denver’s song, “Sweet Surrender.” Duplicated and widely used in leadership training courses, the show was also used by bike clubs, and shown to many government agencies and to communities along the trail. John presented it himself in quite a few states.

John then set out on his first bike ride since the age of 16, and on the first Braxton-built touring bicycle (frame serial number 0001 is on display at Adventure Cycling’s headquarters) to ride and photograph the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail’s western and eastern sections. Along with new hires Gary MacFadden, the writer/editor of the five guidebooks, and Don Lovett, the botany artist who created plant drawings for the guidebooks, John would use his photos to update the slide

show upon his return. The three used a motorhome lent to Bikecentennial by Coachman Industries of Middlebury, Indiana. Although its original purpose was to shuttle equipment for slide show presentations, it was mostly used for trail work and support of the field teams. Coachman also lent two vans to the nonprofit. Not yet a cyclist, John learned to love bicycle touring on that assignment. In 1976 he completed sections of the trail missed in 1975, in part while leading a Bikecentennial trip.

“By graduation [June 1975], the Forest Service had widely distributed my environmental shows and the Bikecentennial show,” he said in a recent interview. The Forest Service had adopted Bikecentennial as its official Bicentennial project, publicized the event, and educated its staff about Bikecentennial in the 25 national forests traversed by the trail. It lent out Woodsy the Owl and Smokey the Bear costumes for events, produced radio spots, and assigned an employee, Carl Rust, as its full-time liaison to Bikecentennial. Carl also served on the Bikecentennial board of directors.

That fall, one of his press releases announced “completion of 15-minute slide/tape film produced by John Briggs, and sponsored in part by the Environmental Protection Agency and Coachman Industries of Indiana.” The revamped slide show, titled “Bike Back Into America II,” had been converted to a 16mm film. Including (often inflated) audience estimates by TV stations, plus more exact audience numbers from on-the-ground showings, the film version alone would reach over 460,000 viewers.

In spite of the constant ASAP



*John and Donna Briggs may not have fallen fast, but the pair eventually fell hard. Here, they pedal and camp along*

pressures on John to produce materials, accommodate the media, and promote events, he stuck with Bikecentennial because of something he'd never had in his life: “a community of like-minded outdoor people striving for a nearly impossible goal,” he said. In Briggs's staff report from September, 1976, he wrote, “I found something I could believe in, and, that had a tremendous potential for growth in the national limelight — and, more important to me, Bikecentennial was an immediate outlet for my interests in promoting environmental awareness through a socially acceptable program.” He also wrote that “the pace of work was terrifically exciting.”

One of John's favorite memories is working with Greg and Gary on the

“TransAmerica Trail Datebook” in an all-night work session at 4B's 24-hour restaurant not far from the office. John explained “Greg is the reason my journey through Bikecentennial '76 was so much fun, and [because of] Gary MacFadden as well. We popcorned our ideas ... and laid it out on the back of a napkin. It was hilarious.”

By late fall 1976, however, the ties that bound John to Bikecentennial were shredding. The Burdens, intending to upgrade the original staff to a more professional group, began to replace many of the original staff members. In a wrenching decision he refers to as “the divorce,” John left the organization in protest. After working there for two years, he revived the multimedia marketing



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the Magruder Corridor, a single road through the Idaho wilderness, on a bikepacking trip with Greg and June Siple.

company he had started previously: Conservation Media Group.

Which leads to Donna Norris. An energetic and happy person of boundless cheer and ability, she bicycled into Missoula during the summer of 1974 with her sister Ruth, en route to the West Coast from St. Joseph, Missouri. "We knew nothing about cycling, and we looked like we were about 11 and 12, but people took good care of us," she recalled. While in Missoula, she saw something in the newspaper about Bikecentennial, but no contact information was given. She and Ruth continued west.

Post bike trip, and back at her parent's home in Fargo, North Dakota, she worked as a nurse's aid at one of Mayo Clinic's hospitals, rotating among the ER, Intensive

Care, and Neuro Intensive Care units. Then she happened across a mention of Bikecentennial again, and made contact with the Burdens. Next thing she knew they had hired her as a bookkeeper in September of 1975. The job required being bonded for a million dollars, although at the time she was living in a tent. "I was basically a 'Girl Friday,' and that evolved into tackling the trips department. Within a month, I became trips coordinator," Donna said. The trips department had no other employees and she had an Associate Degree of Nursing from the North Dakota School of Science. "I was a nurse. What does a nurse do in an office?" she asked herself. Fortunately her father had taught her some very useful business skills.

Donna's remarkable childhood had also

prepared her to work at Bikecentennial. After a near fatal childbirth, her mother had a strict extended bed rest order. Who would take care of the family now? Donna, age 10. "With the help of one of my favorite aunts," she said. "I took charge when needed ... By the time I was in seventh grade, I had a 20-hour weekly job taking care of a doctor's family after school from 3:00-8:00 PM. They had five kids including a baby, and I had to make their dinner and put them all to bed." Donna already had the makings of a trips department director.

When Donna first met John at Bikecentennial, she was not impressed. Although only two years apart in age, "John seemed so old," she said. He had a mature attitude beyond his years from suffering the loss of both parents. And John thought that Donna was very immature. "She seemed to be about 12 years old," he said.

But Bikecentennial intervened.

A pair of staff members would leave work each afternoon during the week to go grocery shopping and cook for the staff. At dinnertime, the hungry band of employees would gratefully head over to the appointed house or apartment, grab a plate, load up, and sit on the floor to enjoy a free meal. Most food-club teams were couples. But John and Donna were the only singles, and were forced together by default. "I didn't like the way John cooked, so he'd cook one week, and I'd cook the next. We still didn't like each other," Donna said.

After the Bicentennial summer, they rode through Baja with other Bikecentennial employees and shared

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SIPLE: DONNA AND JOHN BRIGGS

a tent. Donna recalled writing in her journal something like “I hope I never have to travel with *him* again.” Back in Montana, they hiked together almost every weekend and grew closer by increments.

They married on February 18, 1978, at the Sons of Norway lodge just south of Missoula. Many of the original staff

members were present. “Truly, love can be blind; we certainly were!” the groom recalled.

For the last 31 years, they have been working and living in a community of Christian missionaries called Youth With A Mission (YWAM), near Lakeside, Montana. “It’s amazing how similar my job is now, compared to what it was at Bikecentennial,” Donna recently pointed out. They are still “enjoying

the fellowship of community, and burning the candle at both ends to make impossible dreams come true,” John said. As former missionaries of the bicycle, they continue to hone their Bikecentennial skills. **AC**

*June J. Siple is a Bikecentennial cofounder, former staff member, former board member, and the first woman to bicycle from Alaska to Argentina.*

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HOLUB: WHEEL OF LIFE

Not wanting to spend any time in those sardine cans again, we shot off down the valley. It was Nepali Down, so there was a lot of climbing, and it became hot and humid as the terrain changed from sub-alpine to subtropical.

There was a long stretch in which I was alone on the road with my thoughts about the trip. It had been an epic, intense experience, in a place as remote as anywhere I’d been on the planet, in a land where I couldn’t hope to understand a word beyond *namaste*, and we were dealing with real-life risk. I was glad to be riding strong on the last day, but I was also ready to experience a little bit of comfort. Most times at the end of a bike tour, I wish I could just keep riding. This time, I would be glad to get home.

Our group was out of water and a number of us were out of juice so we stopped at the next roadside stand and had the most delicious Fanta of our lives. Just then, Blair rolled up in the jeep. We’d done about 23 kilometers in four hours, which was pretty good on that terrain, although three riders ahead

of us had made the 40 kilometers to Basisahar before the 4x4s.

After lunch, we piled into minibuses to head off to Pokhara. Arriving at sunset, we were surprised with a boat trip out to an island with a beautiful Hindu temple. There we ceremonially married Nicola and his fiancé Natascia, who had changed their original wedding date in order to go on this trip.

We had a full day to explore Pokhara, a scenic city on Phewa Lake. Chris and I went out for a trip to the World Peace Monument on a hill above the lake. Following our noses and getting help from locals, we found a troop of macaques as we climbed some trails through the jungle. Arriving at the peak, we sat in one of the nearby restaurants enjoying spectacular views of the city and lake.

The next day, we hopped a short flight to Kathmandu and visited Boudhanath, a Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage destination for 1,500 years. The winds blowing the prayer flags and fringes on the stupa made the site feel almost alive. At sunset, hundreds of people circumambulate the stupa,

always clockwise, and spin the prayer wheels, always with the right hand. Being there, I felt the power of the practice.

It was a fitting end to the trip, giving us a quiet moment to reflect on the practices of Buddhism and how they are woven into the fabric of Nepal.

*“Give, even if you only have a little.”*  
-Buddha

Only hours after our trip, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck Nepal, destroying buildings in and around Kathmandu and killing thousands. If you’ve come to appreciate the beauty of this place and its people, please consider contributing to the Nepal earthquake relief efforts, which in many places are only just beginning.

Namaste. **AC**

*Tom Holub continues to tour on two wheels despite his love of mountain unicycling. He lives in Oakland, California, and is currently a student at the University of California-Berkeley where he’s researching U.S. cycling culture.*



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