

BIKECENTENNIAL

THE SUMMER OF 1976 USHERED IN THE BIGGEST CYCLING CELEBRATION IN AMERICA'S HISTORY

"... get up and do it again. Amen."

—Jackson Browne, "The Pretender"

HAD THE ALBUM IT WAS ON been released in May instead of November 1976, Browne's song might well have been rattling around in the heads of a lot of TransAm riders as they made their way across this big country of ours. That's what they did, day after day, week after week: they got up and did it again, reaping a lifetime's worth of memories in the process.

And they clearly weren't pretenders. This was for real; a lot of monotony, an embarrassment of rewards, and a bounty of challenges. Getting bug bit in Buchanan. Wind whipped in Wyoming. Soaked by rain in the Coast Range. Hot weather, flat tires, peanut butter, frigid fingers, friendly townsfolk, cold beer, oppressive humidity, spirit-busting climbs, honking drivers, stolen kisses, broken spokes, broken hearts, stinking stockyards, chirping crickets, snow and hail, more peanut butter, silky smooth pavement, ice cream headaches, mosquito bites, dangerous downhills, fierce headwinds, good food, unrideable pea gravel, blessed tailwinds, bad food, annoying side winds, saddle sores, sunburns, and thunder and lightning way too close.

The 4,100 men and women who registered with Bikecentennial came from 50 states and 17 countries. Nearly half of them rode the entire TransAm Trail. That's almost 2,000 trans-continental riders, a phenomenal quantity that's probably more than the total number of cyclists who pedaled across the country in the hundred years preceding 1976. Bikecentennial was the biggest cycling event in U.S. history.

Those who didn't sign up to tackle the entire trail participated in one or more shorter trips. Thirteen were offered, ranging in duration from 12 days (e.g., the Coast-Cascades on the West Coast and Colonial Virginia on the East Coast) to 45 days, which was the length of the two "half TransAm rides," known as the Golden Spokes East and Golden Spokes West. Eight of the shorter trips were available in three different formats: Camping, Bike Inn, and Full Service, which meant staying at Bike Inns and having gear shuttled each day in one of the six Lil' Hustler pickup trucks donated by Datsun to Bikecentennial for the summer.

Most groups set out with 10 to 12 participants, along with a leader at least 21 years of age, and, in the case of TransAm rides, a co-leader, who could be under 21. They met up at one of 13 trailheads, each managed by one or two trailhead coordinators. Among other duties, these individuals served as the vital link between the cyclists, the roving regional coordinators, and the home office in Missoula, Montana.

For most, luck of the draw determined one's fellow group members. As stated in the 1976 trip application: "Groups will be assembled on the basis of trip preference, and not necessarily on the basis of homogeneity. As such, there will be a mix of men and women

of varying ages, and possibly of different nationalities. It is anticipated that elementary democracy within a group will resolve such problems as special diet restrictions and preferences, the sharing of chores, and any other problems that might arise."

Leaders applied the group structure and trip procedures they'd learned in their Leadership Training Courses, a format originally designed for youth (see page 170). It was too rigid for some adults to abide by. And sometimes "elementary democracy" worked and other times it didn't. Many groups fractured. Quite a few independent riders ended up joining groups en route, somewhat making up for the renegades. Others developed such strong bonds they are still having the occasional reunion to this day.

If they hit the road early enough, eastbound riders squinted into the sunrise while those westbound watched the long shadows they cast shrink as the morning wore on. Passing one another, they would wave, give the thumbs-up, or stop and chat. Hence the trail was a telegraph line, the pulses of information passing both east to west and west to east. Bill

Samsøe, leader of TAWK615 (see page 58), had a sister who was also leading a TransAm trip. He wrote: "We had general-delivery mail pickups scheduled every 10 days. My sister's group was two weeks ahead of me,

so Marge would send me letters about what to expect on the trip. I remember she wrote to warn me about a black and white dog in a particular spot that was attacking cyclists. Sure enough, we saw the dog come running out when we got there."

Locals, dubious when they first heard rumors that hundreds of cyclists would be rolling through their communities, were amazed and awestruck to see it happening.

Stuart Crook, who would later become the Bikecentennial tours coordinator and leadership director, had wanted to lead a TransAm trip in 1976. Instead, he ended up working as a regional coordinator, responsible, with his then-wife Polly, for the 750-mile section of the trail between Berea, Kentucky, and Yorktown, Virginia. Earlier, as they worked to secure Bike Inns, Stuart remembers telling those in charge at churches, schools, and VFW halls, "There's gonna be 10,000 people coming through here on bicycles this summer. Can they stay in your building?"

Their reaction tended not toward skepticism, Stuart said, but total incredulity. "To many of the locals, the idea of an adult riding a bicycle across the country was about as comprehensible as they themselves flying to the moon."

It ended up not being 10,000, of course, which is a good thing. When things got rolling, the regional coordinator/trouble-shooting teams—from east to west, Stuart and Polly, Pam Parrott and Don Leuchs, Ernie Franceschi and Granger Brown, and Mike McCoy and Nancy McCullough—were out cruising the route, bouncing around from



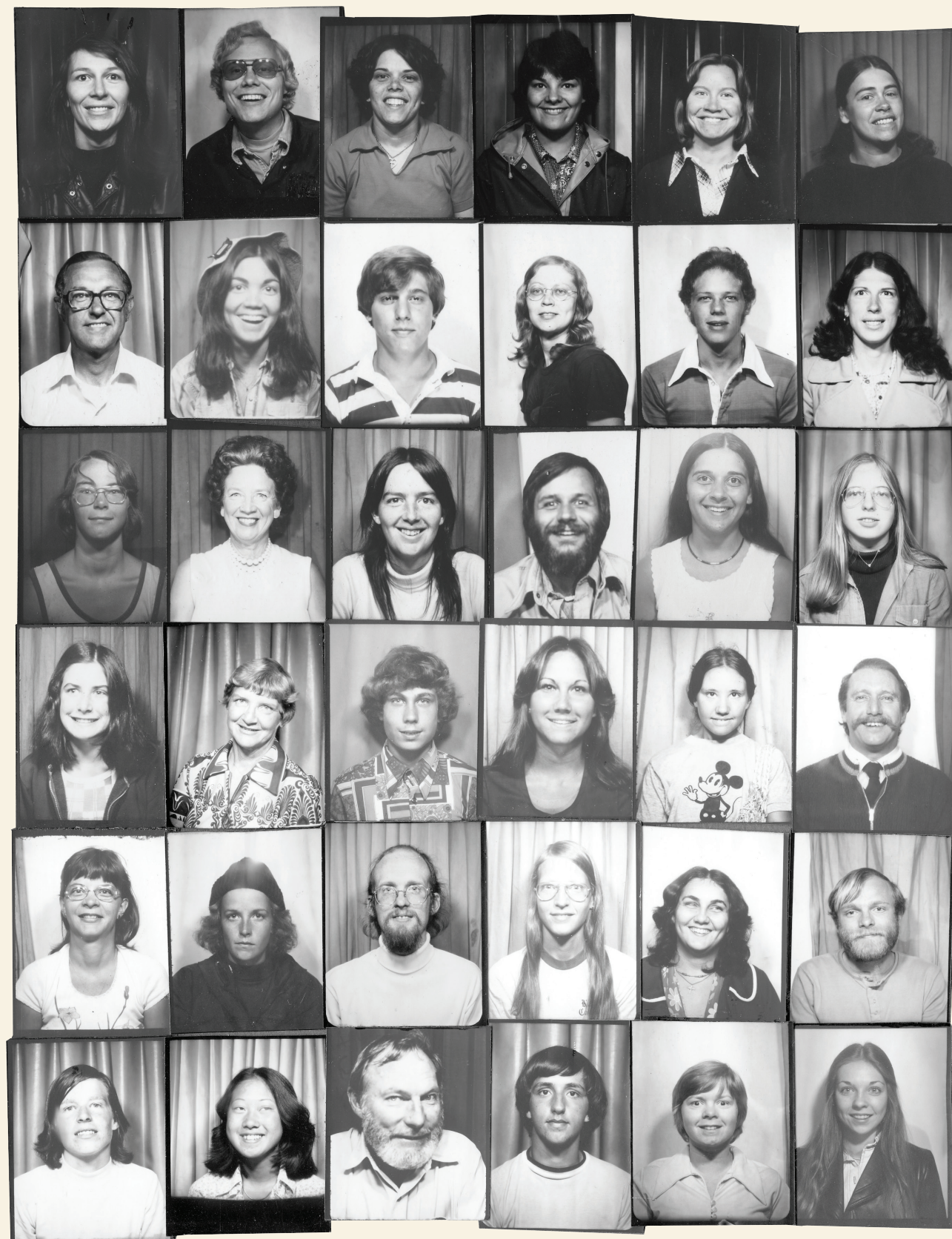
trailhead to trailhead, and visiting with both Bike Inn and camping groups as they traveled. Back in Missoula, a “war room” was set up in the office and staffed to receive phone calls 24/7.

Camping group members planned, shopped for, and prepared their own meals, and they also shared in the carrying of group equipment and cleaning up after meals. With campground listings in hand, they chose campsites just like traveling cyclists do today: a lot of Forest Service campgrounds in the west, town parks in the middle of the country (many with blissful swimming pools!), and a sprinkling of both commercial and state park campgrounds throughout. Bike Inn and Full Service groups ate in restaurants for the most part. Regardless of the trip format, the leader rode sweep, dealing with broken bikes and battered bicyclists as they came across them.

Here were hundreds of people, most of them young, far outside their normal routines and comfort zones, setting out on a physically and psychologically challenging journey with a gaggle of strangers. People were soon doing things they’d never dreamed of, riding long distances and surmounting high mountain passes. Some had never camped or lived in a group situation. It was an eye opener, a confidence-building summer of discovery almost like a Dale Carnegie course on two wheels. Communication skills were honed, as was the art of conflict resolution.

The numbers, impressive as they are, don’t reveal the full story or the most important aspect of the summer of 1976. This statement, or some variation of it, made by hundreds of Bikecentennial riders (and hundreds more since) tells the real story: “I learned more about this country in three months than most people learn in a lifetime.”

The following pages offer more than a few glimpses into the makeup, the magic, and the occasional mayhem of that magnificent summer. •



A selection of “photo booth” portraits sent to Bikecentennial by tour applicants for their ID cards.

PHOTOS FROM THE SINGULAR SUMMER OF '76

Dan Burden left Bikecentennial's Missoula office and captured these scenes while driving the length of the TransAm Trail from Oregon to Virginia



