

FALLING IN LOVE TO THE SOUND OF CRUNCHING GRASSHOPPERS

IN 1975, BARBARA BRUSHE WAS 23 years old and working as a nurse in Hawaii. “I had moved to Honolulu from Oregon after taking a nine-week trip in Europe with friends,” she said. “When I came back from Europe I wanted to do something different.”

One day Barb was on a bike ride with a co-worker who asked her if she had heard about the upcoming bicycle tour across America. Until then she had not, but she was immediately intrigued. She decided she’d like to give it a shot, so she bought a Fuji S10-S bike and quit her job.

“I stopped working and went home to Oregon six weeks before the trip to train,” Barb said. “I was really excited about it.”

Bill Samsøe, meanwhile, was working at a ski area in northern Wisconsin at the time—“kind of a ski bum,” he said. “A high-school friend had told me about American Youth Hostels. I got involved with them and ended up leading a trip for them.” That’s where Bill met Bonnie and Tim Leifer, the couple who would be in charge of leadership training for Bikecentennial.

“The following winter I lived with my older sister in Walla Walla, Washington,” Bill said. “I always looked up to her. She had found out about Bikecentennial

and was going to lead a trip. I was still in touch with Bonnie and Tim, who encouraged me to come to Missoula to help them out. I did, and slept on their floor near downtown Missoula and worked in the office doing whatever was needed. I made almost all of the IDs for the people doing trips that summer. I also helped put together the tool kits and first-aid kits.”

One thing led to another, and Bill was assigned to lead a cross-country camping trip, leaving Reedsport, Oregon, on June 15, 1976. The stage was set for Bill and Barb to meet, as she was scheduled to leave Reedsport on the same day with a Bike Inn group.

“I remember seeing him,” Barb recalled, “a neat-looking guy and interesting, too, a real athlete and a nice guy. But I was dating a guy in Honolulu and wasn’t interested in developing a relationship with anybody.”

That would change, as Bill’s camping group and the Bike Inn group Barb was in would follow a similar schedule as they bicycled across the country. A little past the halfway point, near Cassoday, Kansas—the “Prairie Chicken Capital of the World”—Bill, Barb, and another rider spent the day together.

“I remember it being so hot,” said Barb. “It was one of those days Bill wanted to be away from his group. The three of us rode together.

There were grasshoppers all over—in your mouth, your ears, everywhere. That’s when I thought, ‘He’s a really great guy. Oh, he is just really, really neat.’”

“There were so many grasshoppers on the road that we were crunch-

ing them with our tires,” added Bill, whose feelings for Barb were also intensifying.

“One day in Kentucky, I was stopped at a small country store with some other guys in my group and Barb rode by with her friend Leslie,” Bill said. “I said to them, ‘I think I’m in love’ when Barb passed by. ‘So am I,’ the other guys said. But I had made an agreement with myself that I wouldn’t get involved with anyone on the trip so I could be a good leader.”

At trip’s end the two groups gathered together at a steakhouse for a celebratory meal and a little moving and shaking. “Barb coaxed me out onto floor, and we had a dance together,” Bill said.

“After Bikecentennial, I moved to Dallas and became a flight attendant for Braniff Airways,” Bill said, adding that later in the year he sent Christmas cards to everyone in his group and some of the people in the Bike Inn group, including Barb.

“Mom forwarded it to me from my home in Oregon,” said Barb, who had returned to nursing in Honolulu. “I still remember sitting in the public library near Kapiolani Park and reading the letter. There had been this kind of vacuum after the trip. Anyone I dated just couldn’t understand the enormity of the adventure. There was something missing. Reading Bill’s letter, I felt a door had been opened to me.”

Barb and Bill started exchanging letters. Bill said,

Braniff flew to Hawaii once a day. So that spring we planned to meet there during one of my layovers. Less than a year had gone by since the Bikecentennial ride, and it was a huge experience in my life. At that time, it wasn’t just about seeing Barb. To be able to share the Bikecentennial



memories with anyone who also experienced it was a big deal.

My layover in Hawaii was only two hours. When I got off the plane, Barb wasn’t there. I went to a pay phone to call her, but there was no answer at her apartment. So, I went to get a drink with some of the other flight attendants. When I got back, Barb was there. We only had 15 minutes together, but it was the start of something fantastic.

After that, the two started calling one another. A month later Bill flew to Hawaii again, this time with the luxury of a 26-hour layover. Eventually, Barb moved to Dallas to be with Bill. He soon proposed, and he and Barb were married in 1978. They’ve raised a son and a daughter, Erik and Kelly, and live near the TransAm Trail outside Florence, Montana.

“Even though 40 years have passed, the TransAm trip is the most defining experience of my life,” Barb said. “The ride filled a void in my life that I hadn’t realized had been there, and Bill’s life and mine would not have intersected had it not been for Bikecentennial. Simply by accomplishing that trip we knew things about each other, really good things, that no one else would ever know.”

“I’m incredibly fortunate to have met Bill,” she added. •

