

SETTING THE STAGE

A TRAIL IS MAPPED AND TEST-RIDDEN; AN ARMY OF STAFFERS RECRUITED

WHEN THE HEMISTOUR RIDERS reached Salina Cruz, Mexico, in July 1973, they decided to take a brief break. June Siple went ahead by bus to Guatemala to attend Spanish-language school for a month, while Greg Siple and the Burdens went north to the United States to consult with *National Geographic* about the anticipated second Hemistour article, visit with family, and replace equipment.

“But things went south instead,” Greg recalled. “*National Geographic* seemed to have lost interest in doing a second article.” Compounding matters, Dan Burden de-

veloped a serious case of hepatitis, probably contracted in Mexico, forcing him and Lys to abandon the expedition altogether.

Almost overnight, Dan had gone from enjoying the freedom of the open road on his dream adventure to being bedridden. Thankfully, a symbiosis was in play. The very idea of Bikecentennial sustained Dan even as he built on the vision. “You heal faster when you’ve got passion and a sense of purpose,” he said. “You can do some remarkable things, even when hepatitis keeps your energy low for months.”

Had the Burdens lacked that passion and sense of purpose during this pivotal period, the concept of Bikecentennial could easily have slipped away into nothing but a vague memory of what might have been.

Greg and June finally got back on the road after their “brief break,” which had extended to five months as they worked to earn and save the traveling money they required. “June came up from Guatemala and we met in Houston, Texas, where her parents lived,” Greg said. “We found a free place to stay and got jobs. I worked at Daniel Boone Cycles—which, by the way, is still operational—and June performed day labor that eventually led to a clerical position with Exxon. We lived very frugally in order to convert as much of our earnings as possible to travelers checks.”

Dan returned to Missoula, where he and Lys had moved in June of 1970 so Dan could attend the University of Montana. They had even bought a house there. “He still had to stay flat on his back for

a while, but he could talk on the phone,” Lys said. “So that’s what he started doing, drumming up interest in Bikecentennial.”

IN A SCENARIO SOME MAY consider ironic, Budweiser beer indirectly helped support the mapping of the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail.

Back in Ohio, prior to the move to Montana, Dan was recuperating at his parents’ home in the Columbus suburb of Westerville. To raise money, Lys landed a job at the local Anheuser-Busch plant. The work was not glamorous—among other duties, she was tasked with de-jamming the palletizer when six-packs got backed up—but the pay was marvelous. In a month’s time, by working plenty of extra shifts, overtime, and even triple time over the Labor Day weekend, Lys amassed a sizable nest egg. “It was enough to start researching the Bikecentennial route,” she said.

Lys found lessons learned on Hemistour proved invaluable. “Your fate changes day by day, your challenges change hour by hour, you live in the moment—but you have this vast goal,” she said. “Dan had to recover. We had maps. I had money. The plan was I would work on the route.”

Enter Bill Bisbee, a friend from the American Youth Hostels (AYH) scene in Columbus who worked seasonally for the National Park Service. The owner of a Volkswagen Microbus, Bill was at loose ends in the autumn of 1973, and he agreed to offer himself and his vehicle to the Bikecentennial cause.

Bill and Lys would set out in the van in October to map a cross-country bicycle route, using the money she had earned at Anheuser-Busch along with some of the funds from the first grant given to

Bikecentennial in July 1973. It was a check for \$1,000 from the Wally Byam Foundation, a charity set up by the founder of the Airstream trailer company to enhance international understanding and good will. “The check came from their program called Open House USA, which was aimed at encouraging foreign tourists to come to America,” said June. “That’s why Bikecentennial was an attractive recipient.”

Originally, the plan was for both Burdens to accompany Bill, but Dan was still too sick to make the trip. So Lys and Bill took aim at Virginia at about the same time Dan traveled to Missoula.

Armed with a set of 250,000-to-1 scale topographic maps donated by a Montana congressman intrigued by the project, they began at Virginia’s Historic Triangle, which Lys had chosen as the eastern terminus for the route. They then proceeded to plot a trail across the Tidewater, over the Appalachians, through the Ozarks, across the Great Plains, and over the spine of the Rockies all the way to Missoula. From that point on, west to Astoria, Oregon, the route had been blazed earlier by the Hemistour riders.

“I was well suited to the task,” Lys said. “I could read roads. I could pick out the least traveled ones. I would actually draw



Lys and Dan Burden in the Bikecentennial office in the old Belmont Hotel building.



tiny apartment,” said Greg. “For a year or more, everything was on their shoulders. It was heroic.”

What kept them going? After all, they had just returned from a wonderful travel adventure. They could just as well have gone looking for jobs or started a family. Anything but pursue a fanciful dream of sending thousands of people across the country by bicycle.

“We were primed for Bikecentennial,” Lys said. “It was the interest, the enthusiasm resulting from that original poster. It was amazing. Also, we loved organizing bicycle tours. We had already started the Tour of the Swan River Valley (TOSRV West) in Montana by 1971. We loved the kind of excitement and change the tours bring. We were advocates and activists for the bicycle.”

But their home was no longer their office. By fall of 1974, they had set up Bikecentennial headquarters on the second floor of the Belmont building, a former railroad hotel on North Higgins Avenue in downtown Missoula.

For Dan Bikecentennial also served as a class project, earning him credits for creating and running an organization. Joel Meier was a professor of recreation management at the University of Montana and Dan was one of his students. “I had known that Dan had done this incredible bicycle trip with his wife, and Greg and June Siple, and that they had an idea to design a cross-continent bicycle trip for America’s bicentennial,” Joel recalls. “Dan came into my office one day and asked if he could do Bikecentennial as a [class] project. I wanted to be a good-hearted professor and said, ‘Oh Dan, that’s a wonderful idea!’ But I was thinking, ‘This guy is a dreamer.’”

As it turned out, Joel did give Dan the go-ahead to design Bikecentennial as his project and he also accepted Dan’s invitation to be on the Bikecentennial Board of Directors. “The organization didn’t have a dime,” Joel remembers, “and Dan and Lys didn’t have a credit card nor could they get credit from a bank. Finally, they realized they needed money. My wife Patti and I went to the bank with Dan and used our house as collateral for a loan to fund

Bikecentennial.” It was a risk, but they felt confident this idea Dan had would be epic. “Dan inspired so many people to be part of the grassroots movement.”

“Another student and friend, Mike Gauthier, was studying accounting. He decided to apply for Bikecentennial’s 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status as part of a class project,” Dan said. “The big point we made to the IRS was that we were an educational organization. The guidebooks, and how much people would discover about their country, became important.”

WITH A COAST-TO-COAST

route plotted and a \$5,000 grant from the Bicycle Institute of America in hand, the Burdens had the need and the means to dispatch some test riders.

A middle-aged couple named Jim and Es Kehew, who knew Greg through their participation in TOSRV, had written to the organizers in 1973, offering to help out with the Bikecentennial effort by riding the trail in the summer of 1974. Dan was now able to give them the go-ahead and offer some help with expenses.

On June 16, 1974, the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, *Sunday Patriot-News* reported, *An adventurous Camp Hill couple will set out tomorrow from Astoria, Oregon, on a bicycle trip across the United States. Fifty-seven-year-old James G. Kehew and his wife, Esther, 53, are making the once-in-a-lifetime trip not only to fulfill personal dreams, but more specifically to explore and evaluate the trans-American bicycle trail in preparation for Bikecentennial 76, a nonprofit corporation established to “launch a new era of educational bicycle recreation.”*

Initially, Jim and Es had intended to pedal the main route mapped by Lys, gathering data on such things as road conditions. But it was not to be.

Earlier, scores of letters had poured into Bikecentennial headquarters, urging the organizers to follow a more northerly track. This persuaded Lys to rough out an alternative to the primary route, and the Kehews were asked to leave the main route in Wyoming to ride through South Dakota,



HARLEY HETTICK

In 1974, Jim Richardson and Linda Thorpe became the first cyclists to ride the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail. They married in the Jamestown Festival Park at the end of their trek, dressed in period garb (opposite page).

Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Maryland.

It was Iowans who had made the loudest noise. The *Des Moines Register* reported on August 12, 1974, *Several hundred letters sent by Iowans to the Bikecentennial headquarters in Missoula, Mont., helped prompt the group to consider a route including Iowa.* That year, RAGBRAI, the Register’s Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa, had seen an amazing 1,700 cyclists take part in its second running. The Kehews followed the Sioux City-to-Davenport route used in 1973 for the inaugural RAGBRAI, and they fully enjoyed it. Jim and Es also found Iowans in general to be the most hospitable people they met on their tour.

As it turned out, only the Kehews cycled the “TransAm Trail North.” On what became the official TransAmerica Bicycle Trail, the “friendliest state” honors ultimately went to Kansas.

Dan also heard from Jim Richardson and Linda Thorpe, a young California couple who had read about Bikecentennial in *Bike World* magazine. They informed Dan they

intended to ride across the country on a tandem in 1974, with the promise of some sponsorship from Weight Watchers. They wondered, did Bikecentennial have any suggestions for a route?

Absolutely. And suddenly, the Burdens had two route-testing teams on their hands.

While the Kehews enjoyed smooth sailing with not so much as a flat tire, Jim and Linda had dozens of them. They also garnered more press as their ride was covered by three wire services, whose articles were picked up by numerous newspapers across the country.

“It took us a while to work the bugs out on the tandem,” Jim said. “We’d blown 80 spokes by the time we got to Kansas, and had spent a lot of time fixing the wheel. They were just popping like pretzels. Then a shop in Pittsburg [Kansas] built up a new wheel for us and we didn’t break another spoke the rest of the way to the East Coast.

“The bike was originally donated by Gitane,” Jim added. “Bud’s Bike Shop in Southern California helped us set it up. That’s the shop that evolved into Santana



THOMAS WILLIAMS

Cycles,” referring to one of the leading manufacturers of tandems today.

Conducting research on the trail as they pedaled from Oregon to Virginia, Jim and Linda became the first cyclists to complete the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail—even though formal maps of the route wouldn’t be available for two more years. Lys had provided them with marked-up state road maps. “You’d be surprised by how many of the minor roads are shown on these, even in the East,” she said.

Though they had done most of the ride with different last names, the couple became Jim and Linda Richardson at trip’s end when they were married in Jamestown, Virginia, suitably in period Colonial dress. “In fact,” Jim said, “the final 10 miles of the trip were on our wedding day, September 7, through

the Jamestown Festival Park.” The Richardsons donated their tandem to Adventure Cycling, and it is now on display at the organization’s headquarters.

SOME OF BIKECENTENNIAL’S important early press coverage resulted from a ride made by a pair of newspapermen from Rochester, New York. On May 5, 1975, Dick Dougherty and Herman Auch set out—again, with marked-up road maps provided by Lys—from Williamsburg to ride the TransAm Trail to Astoria. Dick, assistant managing editor for features of the *Times-Union*, and Herman, graphic arts director of the *Times-Union* and its sister paper, the *Democrat and Chronicle*, wrote dispatches, took photos, and made sketches that appeared as Gannett News Service special reports in several dozen newspapers around the country, from Florida to Washington state. It was a year before the first Bikecentennial groups would hit the trail. Herman, incidentally, lacked a left hand.

After finishing the bicycle trip they wrote: *It is the experience of a lifetime. It is educational. It sharpens the perceptions and can’t help but restore faith in the vigor and worth of America.*

But this is not only a great country, it is also one very big country and getting across it, and up and down it, is rewarding in a sophisticated sense—in the same sense that climbing a mountain or breaking a horse is fun and rewarding—because it hurts a little.

So this is generally an upbeat story, full of hope and a touch of sentimentality. It is simply the story of the discovery of America by two men who weren’t sure it was really out there. It is.

Dick and Herman also posed some questions for themselves to answer under the heading “Why did we do it?” Some of them reveal certain things have not changed much in the past four decades, such as:

Q: Has disillusion with America penetrated to its remote communities?

A: No. Not disillusion with the country. Just with its leadership.

Q: Can two middle aged men (one 39, the other 55) survive a 4,100-mile trip on



Jim and Es Kehew.

bicycles and find happiness out there away from their desk jobs?

A: You bet they can, even if one of them falls off his bike 50 miles from the Pacific and fractures his arm as Dick did, also pretzeling his wheel and rendering him unable to finish the ride.

The pair ultimately compiled their articles and illustrations into a booklet titled *U.S. 76 Journal. Across America by Bicycle.*

HEADLINING A FLYER MAILED in June 1973 from Mexico by the four Hemistour riders to their bicycle contacts across the United States were these words: “Bikecentennial 76 ... Two Wheels, Two Centuries.” It began:

A project in planning which has the potential to become the biggest bicycle touring event in world history.

It’s awesome. A Trans-America bike tour planned for 2,000 to 5,000 riders along the nation’s backroads—Pacific to Atlantic—with organized tour services of daily equipment shuttle, prepared foods, detailed maps, camps, and a mobile bike shop for complete parts and repairs.

Sound colossal? It is. And if organizers can

pull together the necessary help and resources, the 3,500-mile, 70-day event will include community celebrations, entertainment, medical services, broad press coverage, and a spirit of ’76 that will rival any event in the country.

In the months leading up to what was officially known as the American Revolution Bicentennial of 1976, the press was hungry for news about the approaching celebrations. Bikecentennial, with its clever name and ambitious—some might even say audacious—plans, was something new and intriguing that made good copy. As a result, the press package put together and sent out by Media Director John Briggs was snapped up and published or broadcast in many places.

“There was no need to buy ad space,” said Greg. “Even huge-circulation magazines picked up on it. There was also the slide presentation developed by John that a lot of people saw, and it was very effective.” As the organization’s first media director, Briggs extensively promoted Bikecentennial to the public, the press, and the Forest Service (an agency that became a key partner).

Blurbs and articles about Bikecentennial ran in newspapers ranging from small ones

like the *Sheridan Press* in Wyoming to mega-papers like the *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor*. Dozens of national magazines ran stories, too, including *TIME*, *Playboy*, and *Seventeen*.

One of the biggest press coups of all came about in an odd way: from a skeptic's suspicion the organization was a rip-off. "The father of one young lady who worked for Bikecentennial was a writer for *Sports Illustrated*," said Dan. "He thought Bikecentennial was a scam, so he flew to Missoula and spent a full day with us. By the end of the day he realized it wasn't a scam, and he wrote a beautiful article."

Press begot even more press. The *Sports Illustrated* article caught the eye of an editor at the Sunday newspaper supplement *Parade* magazine, which did a big piece on the planned event and attracted a lot more attention. "Everyone wanted this dream to be real," Dan said. "People wanted something much better than what was going on in the world. This [1974] was the summer of Watergate."

Few keen cyclists in the United States could have remained unaware of the upcoming cross-country ride after the March 1976 edition of *Bicycling!* magazine appeared in mailboxes and on newsstands. It included a 44-page section touted on the cover as the "Bikecentennial Issue: A Guide to the Trans-American Trail, from Oregon to Virginia." The supplement, which even included a trip application, was edited by Bikecentennial Publications Director Ed Volk, who traveled to the *Bicycling!* offices in San Francisco to help the magazine's staff produce the issue. At 100 pages and with a press run of 132,000 copies, it was the largest issue of *Bicycling!* published to date.

Not surprisingly, the applications and phone calls came pouring in.

IN THE FALL OF 1974, Gary MacFadden had just graduated from the University of Montana's journalism school. "I saw a notice posted that Bikecentennial was looking for a guidebook editor," Gary recalled. He applied and landed the job.



Mary Lindeman (left), a TransAm tour leader, and Bonnie Hoffman, who brought her AYH tour-group leadership experience and skills to Bikecentennial, in the Belmont Hotel office.

"The notion was that all these people Dan and Lys had identified were going to send information to Missoula for me to compile," he said. "The role I signed on for was that of editor of materials, not researcher."

As was the case for so many Bikecentennial staffers, however, positions and duties assigned were seat-of-the-pants affairs that could change daily based on

the needs and whims of the organizers. That's why in June of 1975, Gary set out for Oregon in the fancy motor home Dan had somehow acquired from Coachman Industries. ("Dan could sell refrigerators to Eskimos," Gary said.) With him were Media Director John Briggs and Don Lovett, who would go on to produce the pen-and-ink drawings for the guidebooks. Gary said,

The reason for the trip was to do research for the guidebooks and to give slide shows. We drove the Coachman to Astoria and parked it near the docks.

I had no long-distance cycling experience and had been tapped to write the guidebook series for a major cross-country cycling route, so it was decided that I should get some actual road miles under my belt. John, Don, and I started cycling in June, and I was on the road most of the time from then on through October, when I returned to Missoula. I didn't own a decent bike, so Dan lent me his expensive Raleigh with a brand-new Brooks Pro leather saddle on it so I could break it in for him. The saddle did the breaking ... and I learned what perch points are the hard way.

"People do this for fun?" I wondered. "They must be crazy." But by the time we hit McKenzie Pass, it finally started clicking. It really was fun. From there to Prineville—or maybe it was John Day—I had a great time.

In central Oregon, two days after the famous McKenzie Pass photo was taken (see page 167), I caught a bus and made my way back to Astoria to reclaim the Coachman.



June Siple and fellow staff member Sue Miners carry a banner in a Missoula parade in October 1975, while Greg Siple pilots a bicycle balloon float.

JOHN BRIGGS

I then slowly started working my way along the route, gathering information and images for the guidebook text and the illustrated maps that Bruce Burgess was preparing. I caught up with John and Don near Lolo Pass, and they accepted a ride on into Missoula.

“After reaching Missoula, we prepared to rejoin Gary driving to Carbondale, Illinois, in a hurry to capture enough of the trail in photographs and words by year’s end,” recalled John Briggs. “Gratefully, we cycled through Illinois, Kentucky, and Virginia prior to heading back to Missoula before time got too short to produce materials for the big event: 1976.”

After depositing the two cyclists in Carbondale, Gary went ahead to Williamsburg to resume his research work westbound. Gary said,

I wanted to be a “real” journalist, so I’d equipped the RV with an electric typewriter. I figured I would always have power available, and I would type up notes as I went. I probably did that about five nights of the entire trip.

I was also going to tape-record notes—that didn’t happen either. It was much better gathering printed materials and taking photos of interpretive signs along the route. Another great resource were the state guides of the Federal Writers’ Project from the Depression-era Works Progress Administration.

At campgrounds, here was this young, long-haired guy in a pretty fancy motor home. It wouldn’t take five minutes for some old guy to wander over to start kicking the tires and ask, ‘How’d you get that?’ I made up a lot of good stories.

Gary recalled only two bad experiences with the motor home. “The brakes were failing coming down Vesuvius Hill from the Blue Ridge Parkway,” he said. “They were smoking. I was ready to open the door and jump out. I counted myself lucky to get to the bottom.

“And heading up Hoosier Pass in Colorado, something was going on with the carburetor. It was choking along. The engine could be accessed between the driver’s seat and passenger seat. I took the cover off, and held my finger on the butterfly choke valve on the carburetor. I figured it needed more

air at that high elevation, and it worked!”

Once back in Missoula, Gary felt hazy, displaced, he said. “Traveling by myself for two months, waking up in different places ... I might be in three libraries in one day.” Plus, the Belmont offices were now buzzing with a host of staffers Gary had never met. Nevertheless, he sat down to begin a long string of days and nights in the office and the Missoula library to produce what ended up being five outstanding guidebooks covering the entire TransAmerica Bicycle Trail.

BY THE TIME JUNE AND GREG

returned to Missoula in the summer of 1975 after completing Hemistour, they found a Bikecentennial office bustling with employees. They jumped in and quickly became part of the staff. June worked on the sales program and set up a home-hostel program, while Greg settled in to work on the maps.

“Linda Thorpe and several others had been working on them, using data collected by various individuals and teams on the road,” Greg said. “With limited resources, not much time, and little experience, we had to produce maps that would guide riders across the country on a 4,000-mile route that in places, especially in the east, was quite complex.”

It was a crazy atmosphere, with mail coming in by the bagful, the clatter of electric typewriters, phones ringing, and endless debates about how to do things. Staffers were engaged in work they had little or no training for. There was the passion driving everyone, despite the grim interior of the Belmont with its single bathroom and the smoke and noise rising from Eddie’s Club bar below.

“It was essentially an old railroad hotel above Eddie’s,” Dan recalled. “Probably when it was a hotel there were 30 rooms, but the walls for many of the rooms were already taken down. Every time we hired someone we’d build another office. We had a full-time carpenter.”

The Bikecentennial staff crammed into the finite space grew to roughly 30 at its maximum, with about an equal number of interns from the University of Montana chipping in



In the winter of 1975-76 most of the core staff assembled on the roof of the Belmont Hotel building for this portrait.

to help. Many staffers were out in the field, and rarely, if ever, visited Missoula.

“We were not going to be stopped,” said Dan. “It got to a point where anyone who joined our organization got paid the same: \$300 a month. At the end of the day, we didn’t leave our work behind. We were still dreaming about it. We tended to take off Sundays to get outdoors, but we would easily work six long days a week. Work became our lives. If someone saw a problem evolve, someone would jump on that problem.”

Dan, who called himself “the custodian of the vision,” was the one who inspired, leaving the nitty-gritty of organizing to detail-oriented individuals better suited for the role.

“Dreamers can be unrealistic,” Dan acknowledged, adding that the organization didn’t really even have a budget. “That was brought to our attention by Jim Richardson,” the cross-country tandem rider who was now a staff member and whose background was in law and business. “Had we not made adjustments, the whole organization would have gone bottom up.” In fact, it was determined that initially not enough money had been charged for the trips, so they had to go back to those already signed up and give them a choice: a full refund or send in more money.

In this torrid, fast-paced environment, decisions often had to be made quickly and firmly. One such decision made by Lys involved the Independent Program. She still considers it a small victory and a big contribution to Bikecentennial. Lys said,

As inquiries were flowing in, it became apparent that some people wanted to ride independently [rather than in organized groups]. I saw this demand and had to go against staff who were afraid that by allowing people to go without proper leadership they wouldn’t know how to behave.

The group decided that only 10 percent of the cyclists could be independent riders. As sign-ups came in and we approached the limit, I knew I couldn’t cut it off. Bicyclists were self-policing; they took it upon themselves to make sure they behaved. They were going to ride along anyway, and would be mad if they weren’t officially recognized.

So the office staff was busy tying up loose ends. The maps and some sections of the guidebooks were back from the printers. The trailhead coordinators were at their posts, eagerly awaiting the cyclists who were buying last-minute equipment and booking flights. The leaders were anxiously studying their group lists.

But would the whole crazy scheme even work? •