INTRODUCTION

Bicycling across America is no less, and no greater, of an accomplishment today than it was in 1976.

May 2, 1974: Nancy and the future co-editor of this book begin their ride to Wisconsin at Nancy's parents' home in Bellevue, Washington.

FOR READERS OF A BOOK, the introduction typically comes first, but for the writer, it more often comes last, or nearly so, for it isn't until everything else is in place that the author knows exactly what he or she is introducing.

So here it is, December 2015, and we're putting the finishing touches on this special volume designed to celebrate bicycling across the United States and the organization built on the foundation of that idea.

It was 40 years ago, early December 1975, that my future wife and I ducked out of a heavy snowfall to climb the creaky staircase leading up to the Bikecentennial headquarters space on the second floor of the run-down Belmont building, a former railroad hotel in downtown Missoula, Montana. I was as scruffy as the Belmont, shaggily bearded. Some of our newly introduced fellow staffers may have suspected I'd kidnapped Nancy because she appeared to be about 16 years old, even though she was all of 21.

Nancy and I had learned about the fledgling Bikecentennial organization in May of 1974 from a local cyclist while rolling through Deer Lodge, Montana, on our own Seattle-to-Wisconsin bicycle tour. We scribbled down the address he gave us; then, during an odd-job layover in Belle Fourche, South Dakota, we wrote a letter of introduction and interest to the organizers. This led to a visit by Jim and Linda Richardson—you'll read about them later—that winter to a guest ranch Nancy and I were caretaking outside Pinedale, Wyoming. They were impressed to learn we obtained our drinking and cooking water from frozen-over Halfmoon Lake, by means of keeping a hole augered open in the thick ice and lowering a small container-on-a-rope through the hole into the lake. (The lodge had a gravity-fed spring water system that worked in the summer, but elk had eaten off the insulating layer of hay, allowing the line to freeze.) Jim and Linda, who hailed from Southern California, had never seen anything like this. I suppose they thought if we were tough enough to live the way we were living we were thick-skinned enough to work for $100 a month each (okay, plus living expenses), armed with the mission of convincing skeptical business owners, school principals, and other small-town folk in Idaho and Oregon to agree to putting up and feeding the several thousand cyclists soon to be spinning through their communities—hungrier than a plague of locusts, but also a lot friendlier, we would promise.

We were hired for the job.

I expected, at most, our gig with Bikecentennial would be a yearlong break before I launched a career in archaeology, which my University of Wyoming professors would have liked, or with the Park Service or Forest Service, which my parents would have preferred. Who would have guessed 40 years later I would be sitting here about to call it a wrap on a book, and a career, based around the TransAmerica Trail and bicycle travel? In other words, it was all an unplanned and very happy accident … although I do not discount the possibility that a degree of destiny was involved.

Conversely, I believe my primary co-conspirator in this book endeavor, Greg Siple, was born to do what he does and has done. Greg was "commuting" by bike as an 11 year old in 1957 and riding long distances by the early 1960s, a time when the general populace in America had little idea what a 10-speed was. Intrigued and inspired by stories his father told of the legendary six-day bicycle races of the 1930s and of a two-wheeler he'd smuggled aboard the *USS Augusta* during World War II, Greg understood early on that the bicycle could be far more than just a child's toy. He became a cycling addict early on, an addiction confirmed for life when his father came out of "retirement" in 1962 and suggested a weekend ride in Ohio from their home in Columbus to Portsmouth and back—200 miles in two days. His father, by then an out-of-shape smoker, found the ride to be more than challenging, but Greg ate up the miles like a hungry Labrador that has just discovered canned dog food. The Tour of the Scioto River Valley, the Mighty TOSRV, was born, and it was Greg's first step toward accomplishing a great deal more in the world of bicycling. Take his love of cycling, couple it with an innate knack for drawing and, later, a degree from the Columbus College of Art and Design, and presto—Greg was on a path leading to both his career and his preferred avocation.

You will learn more in this book about the journey Greg set out upon and how it helped lead to the birth of Bikecentennial and the creation of the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail.

WHICH BRINGS US to the question: is it fair and accurate to lend the word "trail" to a network of paved roads linking the East Coast and West Coast by way of the heartland and the mountains of the West? We think it is. Nowhere does Merriam-Webster limit the meaning of "trail" to a dirt path; the definition that comes closest in that regard is "a marked or established path or route especially through a forest or mountainous region." The TransAm certainly is that. So are Route 66 and the Appalachian Trail,

which were to pioneer motorists and foot travelers, respectively, what the TransAm Trail was to bicycle travelers in 1976—and what it continues to be 40 years henceforth. Regardless of the mode of traveler accommodated, all three "trails" are sirens singing that song of the open road to those longing in spirit to trace the tracks of explorers and travelers like Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Mark Twain, Annie Londonderry, Jack Kerouac, Charles Kuralt … the list goes on.

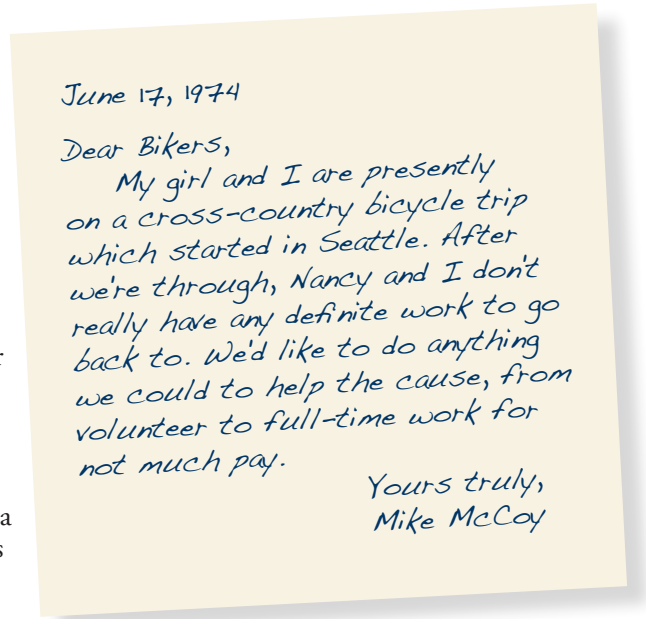
Still, some might argue the Appalachian Trail (AT) is a pure trail, while the TransAm Trail—we'll call it the TA for these purposes—is figuratively a trail. The two are similar in that they lead the self-propelled explorer from point A to point B by way of some magnificent country. Yet they also exhibit great differences in both history and character. The AT was painstakingly and specifically developed into what it is, much of it purpose-built trail; the TA evolved relatively quickly from a planned event into a route utilizing existing roadways. The AT's surfaces are mostly natural, while the TA's are manmade, although its course is steeped in natural settings. The AT was put together piece by piece over the span of 14 years, from 1923 to 1937; the TA was conceived of, researched, and mapped in a very short period of time, mostly in 1974.

Yet Lys Burden and the others involved in designing the TA were certainly dreaming and acting in the spirit, and no doubt inspired by the actions, of Benton MacKaye, the forester-conservationist who conceived the AT and also co-founded the Wilderness Society. In fact, Lys and June Siple, another Bikecentennial co-founder, had snowshoed pieces of the AT together as members of American Youth Hostels groups in the late 1960s. Perhaps this is where and when they contracted the bug of desire to create something equally as enduring.

It's important to keep in mind that the theme of this book is not just the TransAm Trail, but bicycling across America. It's a nation ideally suited to the pursuit of cross-country cycling. There is no other place in the world where you can ride from ocean to ocean in such a clean, dramatic way. A crossing of the United States of America can fit perfectly into a summer; the distance of 3,000 to 5,000 miles is substantial, but not excessive. One country, one language, one summer. The geography is diverse. You can choose from dozens of potential beginning and ending points on both coasts, with a vast network of secondary roads to choose from inland, particularly in the eastern half of the country. The breadth and character of the country is uniquely sized and proportioned, with towns spaced apart such that the rider can usually end each day in one of them.

Think about it. European countries are too small and are not embraced by a pair of oceans. Africa is too wide and dry in the north and too narrow in the south; moreover, wherever you tried crossing it, you would encounter numerous countries along with social and political barriers. Panama? Far too narrow, and so is Mexico. South America contains too much impenetrable jungle, and you'd have to ride through at least two countries to visit two oceans. Canada comes the next closest to offering a satisfying ocean-to-ocean ride, but the lack of roads

MIKE MCCOY



in the north means sticking to a southerly route on relatively major roads, especially in the west. Also, the distance is greater than across the United States, and there are few well-defined coastlines because of the big islands blocking the way.

An attempt at traversing Africa or South America by bicycle falls into the category of expedition, manageable only by the bravest and strongest. Riding across America, in contrast, can be considered an "every person" sort of challenge, steady in its risks and rewards.

Bicycling across America is no less, and no greater, of an accomplishment today than it was in 1976. It is still less about athleticism and more about spirit and perseverance, the capacity to roll with the bumps along the way. Having successfully done it says something about a person's character; the accomplishment makes for a strong bullet point on a resumé. It's also a great leveler. A 22-year-old male and 70-year-old grandmother face the same challenges. Sure, it may be easier physically for the younger person, but perhaps harder psychologically—more trying of the 20-something's patience and flexibility—than for the older person. And for anyone who does it, regardless of age or gender or nationality, it's still about transformation, fulfillment, and achievement. Technology makes it no easier—as long as the rider doesn't opt for an electric bike, as some are today.

Not to say technological advances haven't altered the experience in essential ways. Keeping in touch with friends and family, for instance. We've gone from picture postcards in 1976 to Pinterest and Twitter 40 years later. Public blogs and Facebook posts have superseded personal journals. For today's young cross-country rider, an abandoned phone booth (sans telephone so vital to the Bikecentennial rider) lining a quiet Kansas street is as much of an unexpected throwback to the past as a Ford Model A rusting in a field was to the rider during the summer of 1976.

THE BOOK OPENS with a discussion of the history of cycling across the United States, beginning with those true velo-pioneers of the late 1800s. This is followed by an exploration of the events and highlights leading up to the Bikecentennial summer of 1976, which is also visited in some detail.

Following the history portion of the book are six geographical "chapters," or sections. Each encompasses two of the 12 map sections covering the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail. After a brief introduction to each section, we describe the land and landscapes; highlight some favorite places; discuss some of the more important and/or interesting historical aspects; and add some field notes, which are bits on topics like natural history and geology. After that, we offer ideas about what riders can do, and have done, on layover days, both on- and off-route. "Towns Worth a Closer Look" are just that—communities along the TransAm Trail that perhaps hold some special treasures or magical qualities not immediately discernible to the first-time visitor.

Now for a few words about ecoregions, a term used to help describe the land in the geographical chapters. According to the Western Ecology Division of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency—with offices in the lovely TransAmerica Trail community of Corvallis, Oregon—ecological regions, or ecoregions, "denote areas within which ecosystems … are generally similar."

Ecoregions are identified and differentiated by their geology, physical geography (ground surface), climate, soils, flora, fauna, hydrology, and human land use. The continental United States is divided into four levels of ecoregions, from Level I, the most general classification, to the exceedingly detailed Level IV. Level III, which identifies 85 ecoregions partly or entirely within the Lower 48, appears to be the most commonly used and useful classification, and it is what we have employed for the purposes of this book.

The fact the TransAmerica Trail visits 25 of the 85 Level III Ecoregions in the continental United States suggests how truly diverse the route is in terms of landscape and environment. It also confirms the route planners were successful in their goal of showcasing as broad a range of geographic and cultural diversity as possible.

Toward the back of the book, we get into the ebbs and flows of the years after 1976, when Bikecentennial transformed into Adventure Cycling Association and thousands of additional miles of bicycle routes were researched and mapped by the organization, including two additional cross-country routes. Finally, before closing, we look at the state of cross-country and long-distance bicycle travel today. We visit trail networks elsewhere in the world and consider how equipment and demographics have changed alongside the public's attitude toward bicycle travel and tourism.

Throughout the book, you will find snippets from and snapshots of some of those who have ridden the trail, selections from Greg's National Bicycle Touring Portrait Collection (as at right, "The Dukes of Barnsesville"), examples of the illustrative maps artist Bruce Burgess created for the original trail guidebooks, and much, much more.

We sincerely hope you'll enjoy the read, and the ride. •

-Mike McCoy
December 2015

MIKE MCCOY

THE DUKES OF BARNESVILLE 1986

A FINE FAMILY ADVENTURE to say the least. My wife and I, three of our five children (the oldest two are married), and a family friend reinforced our family image by riding three tandems 4,518 miles from Portland, Oregon, to Yorktown, Virginia, on the TransAmerica Trail.

People all across America recognized us as a family, and were always cordial and open to us. The most common comment was not about our derring-do, but what a wonderful experience it was for the children. Indeed, my wife and I independently told several people that the high point of our trip was how beautifully the children did. The rigors of the trip seemed to answer some of those frightening questions of inadequacy that haunt the young—they all grew in size and confidence as the trip went along. As their parents, we had the rewarding experience of seeing our children deal with the rigors of the trip with a healthy reserve of resourceful good nature and determination.

-Charles Dukes, 51 years old, Barnesville, Georgia

DAD AND I CALLED OURSELVES THE TIGER TEAM. Sometimes, when he needed help going up mountains, I would stand up and pedal. Nobody could pass us then.

-Carolyn Dukes, eight years old

TO CYCLE FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA under your own power cultivates in an eight-year-old an unwavering sense of confidence and sense of self. This confidence and sense of self, fostered through my family and that TransAm tour, steered my younger years through leadership camps, state basketball championships, and piano festivals. More recently, these values have aided me to excel at seven years in the Air Force and at graduate school at Johns Hopkins University, earning my MBA and Government degrees.

Oh, and that eight-year-old's belief that no one can pass you when you give it your all going up a mountain? That perspective doesn't go away.

-Carolyn Dukes, 2006