

My First Cross Country Cycling Tour

By Mark Brenner

May 12. Sunday

The idea for this cycling road trip began as Scott Sanford, a friend that I met a number of years ago, was telling me of his desire to ride from Pittsburgh to Washington DC. I told him to count me in and we roughly planned for a mid May ride in 2013. I had exactly one week carved out of my schedule sandwiched between a trip to Harrisburg and a trip to Orlando where I was promoting Miracle Mountain Ranch at home school conferences. The cycling trip would be about 500 miles in 7 days.



Scott came to pick me up at my house at 3:00 am. We were hoping to leave his house by 3:30 am and get to the trailhead by 6:00am for a full day's ride. We fastened my bike to the Yakima roof rack on Scott's Ford Explorer and made our way back to Scott's house to get his things. When we got to Scott's house, his wife Patty cooked us a breakfast of eggs and toast. Our Sherpa Stacey, Scotts' brother-in-law, arrived at Scott's house shortly after we did. He was going to travel to Pittsburgh with us to drop us off at the trailhead, and then he was to drive the Explorer home. Stacey was also scheduled to pick us up in Virginia when the biking trip was finished. Scott drove to Coraopolis, a city on the west side of Pittsburgh, and talked to Stacey in the front of the Explorer, while I drifted in and out of consciousness with my pillow in hand in the back seat.

At the trailhead we laid out our gear on a picnic table and began to put it all on the bikes. Having hiked Mt. Whitney a few years back, I remembered how convinced I had become concerning the virtue of traveling lightly. On that trip I had lugged a 54lb pack for 3 days over 20 miles. Etched in my memory was the lighthearted look on the faces of day hikers, jogging by me carrying only a water bottle. I had thought to myself, "Now that looks like more fun!"

For this bike trip, I took two riding outfits, a first aid kit, toiletries, a rain jacket, lightweight sleeping bag, a lightweight air mattress and a pair of flip flops. The cold temps prompted me to add a windbreaker, a pair of wind pants, and two sweatshirts at the last minute. Unlike the Mt. Whitney hike, food and water were readily available, making it unnecessary to carry more than the two standard water bottles and a few Kashi granola bars for emergencies.

All my things fit neatly into two red bags, called panniers, which hung on the sides of a rack behind my seat, forming a sandwich with the top of my rear tire in the middle. On top of my rear rack, I fastened down a bag containing our tent poles, and a foldable spare tire. Scott was carrying panniers on the front and back of his bike. He hauled the tent and some tools for emergency repairs. Our bikes, tires, and tubes were identical making it possible for us to only have to carry emergency repairs for one size of tire. Altogether, the extra weight on my bike was about 28lbs and Scott was carrying an extra 35lbs.



We left Coraopolis, PA, at 7:00am on the Montour Trail. The Montour circles around the west side of Pittsburgh, then eastward to McKeesport. It was about 34 degrees. We settled into a pretty good rhythm at about 13mph. The trail was mostly compacted limestone and fairly smooth. It was not as fast and smooth as asphalt, but it would do. The scenery was beautiful and for the most part very rural. It surprised me that we were traveling counterclockwise around the city of Pittsburgh but did not see much evidence of the big city at all. It was evident that someone had put a lot of money into this trail. Much of the trail seemed to be converted railroad grades. The grade seemed to mostly rise, but very gently. Once in a while the peddling got easier, helping us discern that the grade had

flattened or was heading imperceptibly down hill. Some of the railroad trestles now converted to bike path bridges were long, high, and spectacular.

About 11:00am we stopped at a Subway and fueled up. I got my favorite Spicy Italian sub. We were the first customers of the day. We had already travelled over 30 miles and the meal was well earned. Meals always taste better when they are accompanied by hard physical laboring. We checked our maps and found that we were about 10 miles from McKeesport. There we took city streets that were marked as the "Steel City Trail" and tried to find the connection point to the GAP (Great Allegheny Passage). It was somewhat tricky finding the not-so-well marked trail, especially toward the end.

Standing there holding our bikes up in a grassy area next to a major intersection, we tried to make sense of our map and the surrounding landmarks. A young man pulled up to the corner and rolled his window down. He asked us if we were looking for the Steel City Trail connection to the Great Allegheny Passage, which we were, and then pointed us in the right direction. He was a cyclist and knew exactly what we were up to. I found that traveling across the country this way made you part of a fraternity of sorts, with many members looking out for you and wanting to help.

Soon we found ourselves traveling southeast on the Great Allegheny Passage following the southern contour of the Youghiogheny River toward its beginning at Yough River Lake, 70 miles upstream. For supper we stopped at the Trailside Restaurant in West Newton, a town about 20 miles from McKeesport. There we met a UPS pilot and his wife from Nashville. They sat with us for supper and were great company. They were cycling only part of the trail, starting in Cumberland and ending in Pittsburgh. I had the opportunity to tell them about the Ranch and we shared trail experiences.

Leaving West Newton, we soon passed the Dravo Cemetery and looked around there some. This cemetery was on the trail but not very close to any town. It appeared to be very old, but well cared for. It looked to me as if the only way to get to the cemetery was by the GAP. Many young people, 14-16 years old, were buried there. I wondered what took their life at such a young age.

We cycled on and camped at Cedar Creek Campground in a three-sided shelter. It was nice not to have to set up a tent! Neither of us had gotten

much sleep the night before, so as soon as we set up camp, about 8:30pm, we cuddled into our sleeping bags and went to sleep. It was very cool that night, below freezing. I pulled the sleeping bag over my head to conserve all the heat possible. Even then, it was cold for me. The lightweight Columbia Reactor sleeping bag was rated for 35 degrees and I was pushing the limits!

We had traveled 46 miles on the Montour Trail and 75.5 miles altogether that day. My Garmin GPS wristwatch estimated that we had burned about 7000 calories that day. I figured the fact that we were carrying extra weight, pedaling through gravel, and going mostly up hill, probably added a lot more actual calories burned to the Garmin estimate.

May 13. Monday

The campsite was free and we were the only ones there. Located 50 feet from the edge of the Youghiogheny River, the campsite was beautiful. On the other side of the river there were at least two sets of train tracks that ran parallel to the river.

Trains had run all night and our shelter had trembled often from the train weight less than a quarter mile away. The three-sided shelters not only kept the frost off us while we slept, but they were perfectly positioned to capture the rumble of the trains and the horns of the locomotives as well! I am not sure how many times I was awakened, only that I had been

awakened by the trains at least a few times.



We awoke for good about 7:30am at Cedar Creek campground and packed our bikes for a full day's ride on the GAP. Temperatures were in the mid-thirties and the sky was bright and sunny. I was a

little sore and stiff, but ready for the ride, and even more ready for

breakfast. There were a couple little towns coming up and we were hopeful to find a restaurant or diner. After meeting several people on the trail we quickly got the picture that these little towns did not have places to eat. Everybody kept saying, "Connellsville is the place you are looking for."

We were about 25 miles from the nearest breakfast at Connellsville. Several people had recommended that we eat at the Valley Dairy Restaurant. By the time we got there hunger had really set in. I had pancakes with peanut butter and eggs. I estimated that we had burned over 8000 calories the day before and already over 2800 calories that morning. Once again the food tasted so good!

After our late breakfast, we stopped at Martin's Supermarket to load up on Kashi granola bars and ibuprofen. I forgot two things when packing: my extra contacts and ibuprofen. The contacts were definitely a problem. The constant wind from riding was drying out my eyes and I had to put wetting drops in every few miles. The sunglasses helped, but even then I was not able to keep my eyes from getting very red and irritated. The grade was noticeable now and climbing with every mile. The only downhill grade was a 1/4 mile drop into Connellsville that day.



Our next stop was 20 miles further up the Youghiogheny River, a town called Ohiopyle. The trail between Connellsville and Ohiopyle was absolutely beautiful. The river was never too far away and we could see and hear the rapids. The trees were tall and green, forming a canopy of shade. There were side streams and waterfalls crossing under our trail to find their end in the Youghiogheny. The trains on the other side of the river were our constant companions as they rumbled and horns sounded the approach of every intersection.

We ate lunch at the Falls Market on the corner of the main intersection in Ohiopyle. Great food and great service, but there were no bathrooms in the restaurant. We had to go back to the Ohiopyle visitor center for those. We met Linda and Jose from Australia while we were eating lunch then walked across the street to check out the waterfalls before continuing toward the town of Rockwood.

Linda and Jose had just come from an afternoon visit to Falling Water, the house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Kauffman family. Jose had been cycling since March 1st, starting in Los Angeles. He had been to see the Grand Canyon and then on to New Orleans where Linda flew from Australia to join him. From New Orleans they traveled north to Chicago then east along the Great Lakes through Cleveland, Erie, Buffalo, Niagara Falls, south to Pittsburgh, and then were concluding their trip by following the same trail we were cycling to Washington DC. I was impressed!



Jose and Linda at the Falls Market in Ohio.

We continued the climb to Rockwood, passing through the town of Confluence about 15 miles later. At Confluence we parted with the Youghiogheny River and joined the Casselman River. It seemed to be a little smaller, but it still had the train tracks hugging the opposite bank. Very beautiful country scenery greeted us at every turn. We ended up meeting the Aussies on the trail and riding near them from time to time. We came upon the closed Pinkerton tunnel, and took the 4 mile detour around the top of a mountain. We had already passed through several interesting tunnels but this one was not passable.

The trip to Rockwood was all up hill. We traveled a total of about 71.5 miles on the GAP that day. I have never peddled up a seventy-mile hill before and we were maintaining speeds of over 12 mph the whole time. Normal riding would have at least the opportunity for short breaks in peddling while coasting down hills. There was zero coasting on that day; to stop peddling meant to stop moving.

I was whipped by the time we got to Rockwood. We bought some snacks at a gas station just as it was closing. I tried to send my family a text to tell them where I was. I managed to get one out but the service for Verizon was very spotty.

We spent the night at the Husky Haven Campground while the Aussies went looking for a hostel. We did laundry and showered for the first time since we left, at the campground showers. Setting up camp was pretty easy. Scott is very methodical and organized and we had a system for setting up and breaking down camp established within a couple of days.



Ice on the speedometer and headlight!

Once again we were the only ones at the campsite. It was to get below freezing again that night. The tent provided a little more warmth than the three-sided shelter, but it was still cold enough to keep my head completely inside the sleeping bag. The trains continued their regular passing and signature salutes of caution as they approached the main intersection in town. We had hoped for supper in Rockwood, but the snacks and

warm showers were very refreshing and I was ready for sleep. Scott, on a hunch, walked around the block and found a place that served breakfast for the following morning, perfect!

Though I had sore muscles I was really feeling fine in most respects. The main rub point, when riding a bicycle, is the seat. It is probably the thing that keeps most people from long distance cycling who would otherwise be willing to give it a try. The longest I had ridden until this trip was 40 miles, and I had never ridden on successive days that far. On rides like 40 milers, your seat gets uncomfortable but will eventually go numb to a large degree. That type of discomfort is acceptable and part of pushing through the pain to reap the benefits of cycling. The padded biking shorts are an amazing invention too. What you don't want to do is develop a painful rash from the rubbing on your rear end; numb is ok, rash is not ok! The potential for this uncomfortable condition is especially a problem when you are unable to keep that area dry because of sweat or rainy conditions. I am a sweating person, unfortunately. The good news was the low temps kept me pretty dry for the first two days. I also did a preemptive strike by liberally applying baby oil to my seat area. So far so good!

May 14 Tuesday

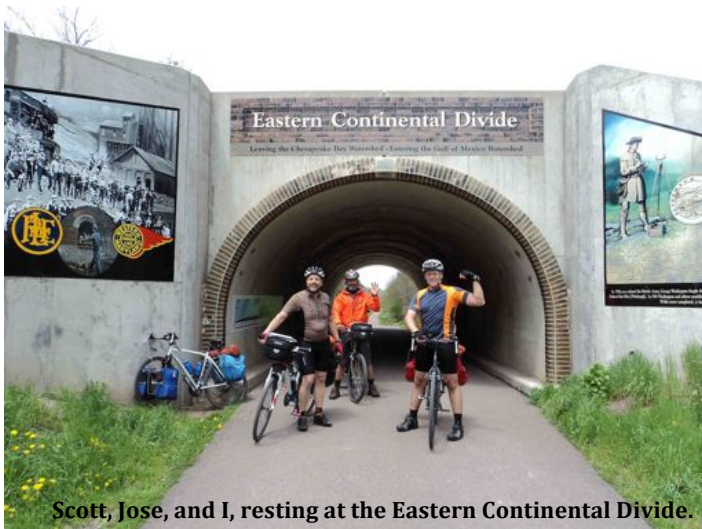
It was very cold that night. I had pulled the sleeping bag over my head to conserve all possible heat and put on an additional sweatshirt. The cold made it hard to get up in the morning. Breakfast at the Rockwood Mill

Shoppes consisted of French toast and 2 breakfast sandwiches apiece. The place was bustling with all the local men chatting about the news and drinking coffee. The owner was a man in his 60's and came over to pour our coffee and talk with us. I would say from the chatter, the town was pretty conservative and did not care much for our current president or his policies. We asked if the Aussies had been to breakfast already and found out that they had not been to the Mill Shoppes. They had, however, stayed at the hostel also owned by the same man who owned the Mill Shoppes Restaurant. We figured the Aussies had probably gotten a much earlier start and were on their way to Cumberland already.

We left the Husky Haven Campground in Rockwood for the towns of Meyersdale and then Deal. We were still steadily climbing, but getting close to the Eastern Continental Divide. At the Meyersdale Visitors Center, after meeting up with the Aussies again on the trail, we left our pin in the visitors center map. It was a map of the world and all visitors were directed to place a pin to mark where they called home. There were pins from all over the world and I marveled how popular the GAP must be to attract international attention.

I felt pretty strong peddling up the grade to the Eastern Continental Divide. I noticed that there were times when I felt like I was Superman with power to spare and legs of steel. There were other times when I felt like there was Kryptonite in my pocket. Mostly these times paralleled having recently eaten and needing to find food. The energy bars could help in a pinch, but they were no substitute for a real meal. 8000 calories a day meant we were always looking for our next restaurant stop.

As we approached the Eastern Continental Divide (ECD), we could see the blaze orange coats of the Aussies in the arch waiting to celebrate with us! Imagine peddling up hill for two days and finally making it to the top! There was a short tunnel arch over the trail and historical placards to mark the spot. We took pictures of the Aussies and they took a few of us in front of the arch.



Scott, Jose, and I, resting at the Eastern Continental Divide.

We spent a few minutes talking and I found out they had taken refuge from a storm at French Camp while traveling through Mississippi! We traded

contact info and I told them more about MMR. They invited us to stay with them if we were ever in Australia and I likewise invited them to MMR. I found out they had toured across China, Germany and much of Europe, as well as Malaysia! There is definitely an element of character and spirit that bonds long distance cyclists together. It is kind of like a fraternity of sorts. They look out for one another and form quick and deep friendships.

I asked the Aussies where their favorite cycling tour was and they said besides the US, it would have to be Germany. They said there was a bike trail everywhere they wanted to go in Germany, very beautiful and bicycle friendly. Their report made me want to start planning a long distance cycle tour of Germany. Adding to the draw is the fact that my ancestors hail from Germany and Dani Glatz, a former student and close friend lives in Germany as well.

We started downhill for the 24-mile ride to Cumberland, MD, with the Aussies. All the elevation we had gained in the last two days we were going to lose in the next 24 miles! We went through the Big Savage Tunnel and took some more pictures with the Aussies. It was finally starting to warm up a bit, maybe 50's. We used our lights in the tunnel and were careful. Apparently a short time before, a man had lost control of his bike in the slippery tunnel, had run into the wall, and had broken his wrist. Inside the tunnel it was dark, the floor was damp, and it was much colder than outside. It seemed most riders did not have bike headlights like we did.

Coming out the other side of the tunnel, the view of the valley below was spectacular! There were long distance views of blanketing forests and mountains. We stopped for more pictures then rolled on down the GAP toward Cumberland. Our speed increased to an 18 mph average from 12mph the day before because of the downhill grade.



Jose and I are entering the Big Savage Tunnel and enjoying the view of Maryland coming out the other side. Named after John Savage, a surveyor who narrowly escaped cannibalism in 1736. Tunnel length is 3294ft.

There were portions of this trail where we were flying. The trail was still bumpy gravel and it took concentration to make sure there were no spills. We met many laboring cyclists coming up the hill, traveling the other way to Pittsburgh. Soon we crossed a stone path that angled its way across our trail. I found out from the Aussies at our next break that it was the Mason Dixon Line, also the PA and MD border.

We stopped for a break at Frostburg, MD, and I was ready for some fuel. For the first time on the trip, I started feeling a little dehydrated. We each had a couple Kashi granola bars and some water. I put on my light windbreaker for though it was a bit warmer, we were traveling faster and I was still cool. This was the last stop where we saw the Aussies. They were rolling slowly compared to us. I hoped we would see them when we got to Cumberland, but that was not meant to be. They were not going any further than Cumberland that day and we had our sights set on the C&O Canal towpath.

In Cumberland we had lunch at the Crabby Pig. They had very good pork, crabs, and service. Cell service was another story though! There was no Verizon cell service in Cumberland to let the family know what I was up to. I thought it was odd because Cumberland was a decent sized city, but I was pretty sure I would find cell service down the trail somewhere.

We found the entrance to the C&O Canal easy enough and met up with two brothers traveling the same way, Brian from Boston, and Steve from Utica, NY, both in their 50's. Brian described his brother as the jock and himself as the desk jockey. Brian was riding a rescued bike from hurricane Sandy and he and Scott were like peas in a pod when it came to bikes. Brian and Steve were both pulling bobs behind their bikes, which made

them slower on the towpath. We passed them and did not see much of them the rest of the day.



Left: Brian, Steve, and I near the start of the C&O Canal.

The C&O Canal was a man made canal that originally was supposed to make barge travel possible between Washington DC and the Ohio River. The C&O followed the Potomac River, which was not navigable by ship or barge due to rapids and waterfalls. Next to the canal was a towpath where the mule teams walked as they towed barges. The canal only made it 180 miles from DC to Cumberland before the development of railroads caused it to be abandoned. Trains were much more economical. All that remains today, for most of the canal, is the towpath and the ruins of the 75 locks that enabled barges to change elevation levels every several miles. The towpath was turned into a path for stubborn creatures of another kind: cyclists!



A replica of the barges that once traveled the C&O Canal.

The towpath was fairly level except when we came to one of the locks. Silver maple trees, that lined both sides of the towpath, formed a canopy of shade over our heads and the silver maple seeds covered the ground, even dampening the sound of our bikes on the gravel. It was beautiful rural farm country. We stopped at the first set of locks and looked them over, trying to figure out how they worked. The locks were made of cut stone and the ends of the locks were made of heavy wooden gates. The gates allowed water inside the lock to be at the appropriate level. Several of the 75 locks were still very much intact. Most were stripped of wood and water, leaving only some of the stone. Parts of the canal were dry, other parts swampy, and some parts were full of water and looked like they did in the times of George Washington.

We pressed on toward the town of Paw Paw where we intended to get supper. The trail was not as good as the GAP. There were mud holes and places where the crushed limestone was bigger than the limestone fines on the GAP. This made for a rougher ride over all but there were stretches of smooth dirt to give the body a break from the jarring. Scott and I were both running Specialized Tri Cross bikes that were made for this type of trail variety. The constant jarring takes its toll on the seat for sure, but also causes the arms and hands to go numb. When this happens you have to ride one handed for a little bit and shake your free arm to get the feeling back. After a couple miles of riding on the C&O towpath, I needed to

repeat this procedure every 10 minutes or so. It was also necessary to readjust the way I was sitting periodically to retain some comfort level on the seat, comfort being a very relative term.

Toward evening I was starting to get hungry and thinking about supper at Paw Paw. We came to the Paw Paw tunnel and I spied a little trail leading up to a road. Passing by the trail, we proceeded to walk our bikes through the Paw Paw tunnel. It was deceptively long at 3118 ft. The tunnel contained the canal and a very rough towpath.



I am standing on the top of the Paw Paw Tunnel Exit. Deceptively long at 3118ft.

There were no artificial lights in the tunnel. It was perfectly straight and you could see from one end to the other. As I said, it was deceptively long. It seemed like we walked for a long time, but we were not seeming to get through the tunnel as fast as I thought we should by guessing how far it was to the light at the end. I kept turning around and checking the size of the opening behind me and comparing it to the opening in front of me. Eventually the openings were the same size and I deducted we were close to the middle of the tunnel. Another quarter of a mile and the opening in front began to get much larger than the one behind. It took about ten minutes to walk our bikes through the tunnel, but the uneven and slippery surface made riding through too risky. At the far end, once on the outside, I climbed over top of the tunnel entrance for a picture.

It was at this point that we came to the realization that we had passed the access road to Paw Paw a while back. It was the path I had noticed off to the right before we started into the tunnel. We had missed our chance for supper! There was no place to eat for miles ahead, and we did not want to backtrack, so we rode on looking for a campsite. It was evening and I was just hitting a good stride. We hit it hard for another hour averaging over 15mph till we came to Stickpile Hill Campsite. We quickly set up camp and were soon asleep. There was no one else at Stickpile Hill that night.

May 15th Wednesday

It was much warmer than the first two nights. The sleeping was intermittent with shuffling to get comfortable and the trains coming through regularly. Stickpile Hill campsite was on the point of a deep bend in the river. The railroad tracks were on the other side of the Potomac and as the trains passed they wrapped around three sides of the campsite giving you true surround sound! The air mattress was indispensable but it was just narrow enough to make stretching out difficult.

After breaking camp we set out looking for breakfast hoping we could find something close by. There was nothing for another 25 miles till we reached Hancock. With having nothing but granola bars to eat since lunch at the Crabby Pig in Cumberland the day before, I felt for the first time on this trip, what it felt like to be out of energy. I don't mean tired like you feel on a normal day when you could use some rest. I mean it was sheer will power to keep moving. I was wondering if my body was starting to break down muscle for an energy supply. I was traveling slower and taking



Stopping to rest and admire the size of this oak tree! My wingspan is just over 6ft.

breaks every couple miles. It was pretty warm and I used up both bottles of water too. I melted in the heat, losing power and hydration through profuse sweating. Sweat was running down my glasses. The heat did not seem to affect Scott like it affected me, and

he noticeably had to slow down for me to stay with

him. Scott ended up sharing his water with me so that I could make it to Hancock. It was lunchtime before we crawled into Hancock and found a place to refuel. I was whooped! We had missed supper the night before and had no breakfast. That meant we had gone a full 24 hours without real food! That is kind of hard to do when cycling across the country! Scott and I both noticed a trend in our riding too. I was at peak strength in

the early morning and in the late evening. This was when it was coolest and was also the time of day when I had trained. In fact, I had done a lot of my training at dusk and after dark, making good use of the light fastened to my handlebars. Scott seemed to thrive in the heat of the day, the hotter, the better! He also required much less water than me.

We made it to a nice restaurant in Hancock called Park and Ride, with windows overlooking the MD rail trail, which paralleled the canal towpath for 10 miles. I had a voracious appetite and had a one-trip salad bar plus a pulled pork wrap. The waitress said the one-trip had no limit on the number of plates so I took her at her word. I carried back four plates before sitting down. Eating never felt so deserved as at that moment. I tried cell service again only to be disappointed again. No Verizon service in Hancock either!

We left Hancock on the Maryland Rail Trail that traveled parallel to the canal towpath. This was asphalt, which made it smooth and fast. It was a great break from the jarring crushed limestone towpath.

By early evening we made it to Williamsport and decided to get a supper there. We found a great little place called The Desert Rose Cafe and ordered a sandwich called the "biker special." We looked and probably smelled conspicuous which led to many conversations with folks wondering where we were traveling and how far we had come, etc. We discovered that the lady who waited on us was Rose, the owner of the Desert Rose cafe. We made quick friends with Rose, and decided after finding out there was a Laundromat a few blocks away, that we would camp at Williamsport and have breakfast at the Desert Rose Cafe in the morning before we left.

We set up camp about a mile back up the trail, and our friends Brian and Steve had arrived and were setting up camp there as well. We decided to walk the one and a half miles back to the Laundromat, to give biking a rest for the day. I unwisely decided to take off my biking shoes and do the walk in my flip-flops. About a half mile into the three mile round trip, I felt the blisters coming. I tried every walking configuration to keep the blisters at bay but it was no use. Eventually I took off the flip-flops and walked the streets of Williamsport in some dirty socks out of my laundry bag. I was hoping I was not making the bike trip much more difficult by blistering my feet. Laundry accomplished, we walked back to the campsite at dusk. I had very sore feet and they were letting me know it with every step. Scott walked ahead of me and brought me my bike shoes and bike to help the blistering feet.

It was muggy and high 70's as we tried to sleep. Not a great night of sleep. I found that it was much easier for me to sleep in the colder weather than hot and muggy. There were more trains and then a thunderstorm rolled through. It rained for a while, but it did not seem like too long.

May 16th Thursday

We awoke to sprinkling rain and got right to breaking camp. Brian and Steve were doing the same and decided to join us for breakfast at the Desert Rose Cafe. This time we rode into town with all of our gear instead of walking in flip-flops. I was pleased that my foot blisters seemed tolerable and it appeared that my biking shoes were not going to aggravate the issue. I was very sore and stiff when first getting up, but this also seemed normal for what I was doing. I reached down to pick up my air mattress and had one of those shock-type pains race through my lower back. "Oh man, this could be bad.", I was thinking. I have been put out of commission with pains that started like this one. I carefully finished packing by bending the knees and not my back! I also took ibuprofen to help the pains and took it easy on the one and a half mile ride to the Desert Rose Cafe for breakfast.

The Desert Rose Cafe was supposed to open at precisely 8:03am. Rose explained this was because Arnold, the man who opened for her, watched I Love Lucy every morning and it did not get over till 7:58am. That gave him five minutes to walk to the cafe to open. We were there and Arnold opened on time. We ordered two waffles each, and mine were loaded with peanut butter as usual. Brian and Steve showed up, and we were pleased to bring some referral business to our new friends Rose and Arnold.



Rose and Arnold at the Desert Rose Café in Williamsport, MD.

Much to my chagrin, there was still no cell service for Verizon in Williamsport. Arnold let me use the landline to call home. I figured I should try to let everyone know I was alive. I did get to talk to my son Michael for about two minutes before the house phone went dead.

Yes, I have a Verizon landline at home and it has been giving us trouble every time it gets damp out. Common denominator???

Before we left breakfast, Rose pulled up to the front door in an SUV loaded with groceries. She had told us the night before that if we came back in the morning we could help her unload groceries. Lots of groceries for the cafe were carried in. Other customers were shamed into helping as well, except by the time they got moving we had unloaded everything. My back seemed to loosen up and feel fine.

The rain had started to come down pretty steadily by the time we said goodbye to the hospitable Desert Rose Cafe. I thought about the possibility of the rain and the warmer conditions making for a sore seat later on, so I continued my preemptive regimen of liberally applying baby oil to the appropriate regions. We set out for Harper's Ferry, about 40 miles away.

A few miles from Harpers Ferry, I was really looking forward to another meal. I heard a loud hiss coming from my back tire, and knew that I had acquired a flat tire. It was caused by a stone chip, which worked its way into the tread and punctured the tube. Scott had a spare tube, and in 20 minutes we were cycling again. It is nice to travel with a bicycle mechanic! The trip into Harpers Ferry meant getting to the other side of the Potomac River with our bikes. We accomplished the river crossing by climbing several flights of steel stairs to a pedestrian walkway and walking our bikes across a long steel bridge.



On the pedestrian side of a steel railroad bridge crossing the Potomac River from Harpers Ferry, WV back to the C&O Canal towpath in MD.

The town of Harpers Ferry was very quaint and inviting. The part we were in was full of historic old-town architecture and cobblestone streets, part of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. It looked and felt like we were transported into the past, hundreds of years ago.

We found a bike shop and I picked up another spare tube to replace the one we used to fix my flat tire. We met up with folks that were hiking the Appalachian Trail. The C&O Canal crosses the Appalachian Trail at Harpers Ferry. We looked around and found, nestled into the brick and cobblestone, a little pasta place serving lunch. In addition to pasta, we had smoothies and a special kind of soda. I was tired, but the food sure picked me up.

After crossing the steel bridge to get back to the towpath, we noticed that we had intermittent cell service. I tried making a call home but was not successful. I did manage to get a text to my family, letting them know I was still kicking. Shortly after leaving Harpers Ferry, I began to notice a pain in my left knee. This was not the “aches and pains” type of pain. It was a sharp pain under my kneecap every time I pushed off on the pedal for a downward stroke. I mentioned it to Scott, but there was not much to do except keep moving forward.

Up until this point in the trip, we had always stayed within sight of one another on the trail, often riding side-by-side where the trail would permit. Scott was feeling pretty good after the stop at Harpers Ferry and started picking up speed. Soon he was out of sight, ahead of me on the trail. My left knee pain was increasing, and pushing harder was making it worse. I decided to slow down a bit as I was unsure of what to do. I kept thinking I would catch up to Scott when he stopped for a break, which we had been taking every 10 miles or so, usually at a lock. That did not happen. Scott was feeling really good and it seemed like I rode for hours without seeing him ahead of me. I kept thinking he was probably going to wonder where I was and have to come back for me. I was also wondering if the knee pain was something serious that would prevent me from continuing the trip. Eventually I stopped and took several more ibuprofen. I slowed way down, to less than 10 miles per hour, hoping that less pressure would enable me to put more miles on the knee without damaging things further.

The heat of the day was almost past, and the many ibuprofen tablets were making a noticeable difference in the knee pain. I started picking up speed again as the pain lessened. Eventually I saw Scott on the trail ahead. He was feeling pretty good after his speedy ride ahead of me.

Together, we rode on to Whites Ferry, the total distance from Harpers Ferry to Whites Ferry was only 25 miles, but it seemed longer to me because of the knee. Fancy cars were lining up at the ferry to take workers from Washington DC to Virginia. It was rush hour, and we knew we were near DC. We were hungry again and looking for good food, but

they had just closed the little store and grill at Whites Ferry. We knocked on the door and the owner was in the store watching TV with his wife and daughter. They let us in and allowed us to buy some Gatorade and muffins. We were really starved though, and there was nothing substantial to eat in the store.

We decided to leave the C&O and take the roads to Poolesville, about 15 miles away from the towpath. We arrived in Poolesville about 8:30pm with just a little light left in the sky. We were sweaty, dirty, did not smell the best, had been rained on that morning, and had traveled over 80 miles. We pulled up outside a nice looking restaurant called the Basset Hound. Thinking the host might seat us in a back room or in a corner somewhere, we were wrong. He sat us right in the middle of all the highfalutin DC suburbanites. We were very sore, very tired and very hungry.

The food and air conditioning were wonderful and satisfying, though I noticed my seat was still hurting even after getting off the bike! Yikes! I was able to make a cell phone call home and talk to the family for the first time in what seemed like days, though I had actually talked to them from the Desert Rose Café, earlier that morning. It was as if several days were compressed into one.

After supper, around 9:30pm, we set off in the glow of Poolesville's streetlights to find the C&O towpath and a place to camp. Still riding the paved roads, once out of town, the sky was dark except for the stars. The rush hour traffic was all gone, only a car every 5 minutes or so. It was also very quiet, only the sound of the wind in our ears. We found ourselves riding by the light of our bike lights through Maryland country hills only 25 miles from Washington DC. It was cool, I was fueled up and feeling strong. I did not notice the knee pain too much anymore, but I am not sure if it was because it actually went away or if it was buried beneath another emerging pain. That would be the pain of my seat.

Damage had been done to my seat, (I am not referring to the bike seat.), from a full day of riding in the rain and sweat. My body puts out salts when I sweat. You can actually see the salt line crystallize on my clothes when they dry out from being sweaty. Well, just imagine pouring salt in your shorts and riding for 80 miles and you will get the picture. It was not good. Now I know what a baby feels like when they have a diaper rash. The pain is at its worst when you get on and off the bike, and it is bad. Thankfully there is a "relative" numbness that sets in after a few miles, but this was truly the toughest part of the trip. The numbness did not come close to taking the pain away, but it took the edge off after riding for a while.

In the cool dark night, I was feeling strong and fast, the pain in my keister not withstanding, but Scott was whipped. What a reversal of proportional energy from earlier that afternoon! Scott really hit a wall, he had no energy, and his back was giving him trouble too. It was 11:00pm when we returned to the canal towpath and we had to stop often to let him rest. It was pitch black under the canopy of trees that covered the towpath except for our bike headlights. There were no sounds but our wheels turning over dirt trails and some frogs in the canal. In the dark and quiet we arrived at Swains Lock campsite area at 11:30pm and set up our tent. We were less than 15 miles from Washington DC. It was after midnight when we finally went to sleep. We had traveled over 95 miles that day and it was the longest day of the trip. The next day, Scott mentioned that we should have gone for 5 more miles, just so we could say we passed the 100-mile barrier.

May 17th Friday

We woke up at Swains Lock to discover that we had pitched our tent outside the designated tenting area, but we were the only ones there so I did not feel too bad. We apparently missed some of the signs when we were setting up our tent just before midnight the night before. Geese were eating a breakfast of grass near our tent and we had to be careful to avoid collecting fertilizer on the bottom of our shoes. I was hungry again and sore too, but ready to see the sights in DC. We packed up, took a few ibuprofen tablets, and started toward DC in search of breakfast.

The last fifteen miles of the C&O Canal were full of interesting sights and were also the most painful of the entire trip. The towpath became increasingly rough and took on a cobblestone like texture, pounding my sore seat as my tires hopped over every stone. I tried standing and taking the shock with my legs. I tried every position adjustment possible but found little comfort. What my body needed was a hot shower to remove the sweat. I remember thinking, "This is what it feels like to have someone pound your backside with a meat tenderizer for hours." A person needs to have a certain amount of stubbornness to push on through pain and luckily I meet that qualification.

The only reprieve for the pain was when we stopped for sightseeing at the beautiful Great Falls of the Potomac National Park. From low-railed overlooks we watched kayaks bravely navigating between the rocks

protruding from the torrents of water. The tremendous volume of water powering over the falls and rapids struck me with awe. This was a different picture than the peaceful Potomac I had envisioned in my mind's eye, and I then understood why the canal was necessary to navigate barges inland.

Shortly after we left the Great Falls, a beautiful paved bike trail, the Capitol Crescent Trail, crossed the canal towpath and began running parallel between the towpath and the Potomac River. One of the things Scott and I wanted to do was to see the official start of the C&O, Lock #1 in Georgetown. We had to decide if we were going to be purists and stick with the increasingly rough cobblestone towpath or if we were going to be practical and comfortable and switch to the smooth pavement running parallel with us only twenty-five feet away. Scott wanted to stick to the towpath and I was willing to go along



The Great Falls of the Potomac above and a brave kayaker below.



with him. For a couple more miles the meat tenderizer, also known as the towpath, worked me over. I would look over and see other cyclists zipping past us on our way to the heart of the capitol, gliding smoothly and effortlessly at twice our speed on the pavement of the Capitol Crescent. Finally I broke. I saw a connection between the two trails and took it. I figured Scott and I could travel parallel to each other but I needed a break from the pain of the cobblestone. Ahh... the relief was wonderful! He

joined me soon afterward and we finished the last miles to DC on the smooth riding Capitol Crescent.

We found the start of the C&O Canal in Georgetown and got our picture next to Lock #1. Then we turned our attention to breakfast. We found a restaurant in Georgetown but it was not open yet so we decided to travel on to the Lincoln Memorial at the Mall. There was a snack shop across the park from the Lincoln Memorial and we parked there and ate breakfast. The food never felt so good and it was great to get off the bike for a while. I was very sore and took another dose of ibuprofen. We took pictures with our bikes in front of the Lincoln Memorial and decided we had better start our trip to Bull Run Regional Park campground in VA about 30 miles away.

Getting out of DC proved to be harder than we thought and the temps were rising as we neared midday. We thought we were going to be able to ride through Arlington National Cemetery and find a bike trail toward our destination. We got lost several times in the labyrinth of streets in the cemetery and at one point were told by authorities that we were not able to ride in the cemetery out of respect for the graves. An hour later and still within sight of the Lincoln Memorial we were getting a bit frustrated, walking our bikes in the cemetery. Our maps were not much help and we could not see a good way to get to the trail that would lead us to Bull Run. Pulling up to the main intersection leading into Arlington Cemetery we decided to do something a little foolish. The light turned green and we pulled into



Above: Scott posing in front of the Lincoln Memorial.
Below: I am posing with Scott's bike, camera facing away from the Lincoln Memorial.



regular traffic heading toward where we believed our bike trail to be. Within 30 seconds we discovered we were on the George Washington Memorial Parkway heading out of DC in six lanes of traffic with more lanes merging in from our right side. We were trying to stay in the right hand



It is easy to get lost in Arlington National Cemetery. It looks the same in every direction.

lane but the new lanes of traffic merging in kept us briefly in the middle lanes as we tried to weave through the sounding horns and animated greetings from the passing motorists. It was over in about 2 minutes as we were able to eventually get to the right lane and then off the road completely onto a small strip of grass.

The adrenaline rush temporarily made all pain fade away and we laughed as we walked our bikes along the highway. We could now see the bike trail we wanted, but we could not get to it. It was on the other side of a wall to our right, running parallel to the highway. As we walked further along the highway, the wall eventually got short enough that we could climb it and then lower our bikes onto the Custis bike trail.

It was 88 degrees and our energy levels were normal for that temp. Scott was feeling good and strong and I was sweating profusely and melting. The heat just saps the power right out of me. I was soon out of water and looking for a place to refill my bottles. The adrenaline from the ride in six lanes of highway traffic was gone and the pain of my seat and was returning in full force, though the trail was fairly smooth. We missed a turn onto a trail that would have saved us some miles and that dampened our spirits a bit. It was time for supper and we were in desperate need of the energy. We pulled into a little strip mall on the outskirts of Reston, VA and were looking for anywhere that served food.

A lady saw us and pulled up next to us in the parking lot to ask us where we were from and if there was anything she could help us with. Scott spotted the bike rack on the top of her car and we knew she was part of the fraternity. We told her that we were looking for food and trying to get to

Bull Run campground. She told us where find Piero's Ristorante Italiano and said she would meet us there in a few minutes after she picked up a few things. 10 minutes later we were eating pasta, and feeling pretty good. The lady did show up and gave us directions from her smart phone to Bull Run. She and her husband were touring cyclists and she said that she was always looking to help fellow cyclists. She offered to take us to the campground by car as it was getting late, and even offered to take us by her house for a shower if we would like. We declined her offer, but we were thankful for the directions. She made us promise to send her a text when we made it safely to the campground and to call if we ran into any trouble. After she left, an employee of the restaurant that was manning a wine tasting stand near our table came over and said, "I think you were speaking with an angel." We agreed that she was our angel that evening for sure!

It was evening, cooler, and I was feeling good except for the seat. We followed our angel's directions and took streets in the straightest line possible to Bull Run campground it was about 10 miles from the restaurant. Bull Run Regional Park and Campground was a beautiful little park and we pulled in just as the last light of day was disappearing on the horizon. We set up camp with our flashlights and then I set out to look for the showers while sending a text to our angel as she requested. I probably stood under the hot water for 30 minutes or more. The shower and clean



feeling were a bit of heaven at that moment. Ahh...What a great feeling. It is amazing how things you take for granted most of your life can take on such great importance in certain circumstances! Then I was off for a nice deep sleep with no trains to keep us company!

[Our campsite at Bull Run Regional Park.](#)

May 18th Saturday

We packed our things on the bikes and started for Culpepper, VA, and the home of Scott's son and family. Leaving the campground we circled a gun club that was shooting clay pigeons. I remember wondering how far shot

could travel as they were aiming our direction! Out on the road again we soon ran into rain. We stopped at a gas station and put on our rain gear then kept riding. I was amazed at how much better my seat was doing since the hot shower. I made a silent vow to myself that when I toured cross-country again, and I would tour again, I would put a daily shower at the top of my priority list. As much as this trip had become about the condition of my seat, with proper planning, I knew the seat damage could have been avoided.

The traffic was nonstop and there were some motorists that did not respect cyclists at all. I was following Scott by about 50 feet and looked up to see a passing truck come within an inch of Scott's head with his passenger side mirror. Most state laws require cyclists to stay on the right edge of the road and passing automobiles to pass at a minimum of 3-4 feet to the left of the bicycle. Being on the bicycle side of these interactions has made me more generous and courteous as an auto driver. Until you ride the roads for a while you don't know what those close passes feel like. We also had a few motorists roll down their window to curse at us and salute us with the middle finger. All this because they were forced to slow down a little bit to safely pass us. Besides our pull out into six lanes of DC traffic, this was the only negative attention we attracted on the entire trip.

We stopped for lunch in a town called Remington, VA, and ate at the Corner Deli. The diner had a nice small town feel with some of the locals interested in talking to us about our travels. The food was great and we were feeling pretty good. The rain had stopped and the temperature was moderate. Soon after eating we were back on the road for the last 15 miles of the trip.



Scott sitting on the porch of his son's house moments after completing a 500 mile cycling trip.

We arrived at Scott's son's house in Culpepper, VA, in the afternoon. It was so good to pull into the driveway. I had a feeling of major accomplishment mixed with relief. There was also the overwhelming feeling of nostalgia toward the whole experience. It seemed like we had packed in several weeks of memories into less than

one week. Reflection brought a genuine smile to my face, as I knew I would

be doing something like this trip again. It was the most I have ever pushed myself physically, even more than climbing Mt. Whitney, three days for 22miles with a 54lb pack. What made this trip challenging was the high mileage every day without any rest days. We had traveled about 500 miles in seven days averaging about 71miles/day. Scott and I decided we would like to do that trip again but spread out over more days so we could see more of the country as we traveled. Maybe 50 miles/day with a rest day mixed in there too would make it even more enjoyable.

I was fortunate to be able to complete the trip with the left knee pain that had started back at Harper's Ferry. Ibuprofen, and the greater pain that developed in my seat helped keep my mind off the knee. Researching the knee pain after getting home revealed that it was a common cycling injury for long distance cyclists. The most common reason for the injury is a poor fit between the rider and the bike. Scott spent some time with me in the weeks following the trip repositioning my seat, handlebars, and the cleats on my shoes. I have also changed my cadence from about 65rpm to about 80rpm. This means less straining pressure on the knees, as I changed to typically using one gear lower than I had been and pedaling a little faster. Since then I have not had any recurring knee pain. The second most common cause for that type of knee pain is not enough training time. All of the above causes were likely to have contributed to my situation.

We unpacked the bikes for the final time and put all our gear and bikes safely in the garage. Next it was time for a hot shower. With soreness, I climbed the stairs to my assigned bedroom and then down the hall to the bathroom and shower. Ahh....until next time!

