

**Into the Wind ...  
California to Maine by Bicycle**

Christopher R Bennett

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*For my wife Lis whose love and support makes the impossible possible*



## Prologue ...

My wife Lis said that “it is a male thing” wanting to cycle across America. I know as a fact that this is not the case since there are many females as enchanted with cycle touring as there are males. If you doubt this, just read one of Josie Dew’s books like ‘A Ride in the Neon Sun’ where she describes her bicycle as “the Light of my Life”.

Josie encapsulates what cycle touring is all about (pg. 588):

“It gives rise to love and hell, hope and pain, fear and joy. It causes one to suffer, plunging thy spirits into the murky depths of despair before catapulting them to inexplicable heights of sheer heaven. It provides a means for seeing and appreciating this wonderfully topsy-turvy world that we live in—slowly, quietly and efficiently.”

Lis’ comment was perhaps more in the context of my propensity to work hard and, when holidays come, to play hard.

To celebrate my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday I wanted to do something physically and mentally demanding. Something that would mark my reaching such a significant stage in life. Long fascinated with mountain climbing, and never having tried it in spite of three treks to the Himalayas, I decided that I would take up the sport and do a climb.

These plans were interrupted by a black dog on a wet corner which contributed to my MX5 sports car abseiling off an embankment into some trees. The car was a write off but God was watching over me and I walked away with “only” concussion and whiplash. This put paid to any climbing lessons since it was several months before I recovered. I therefore decided to go cycle touring since that required less training.

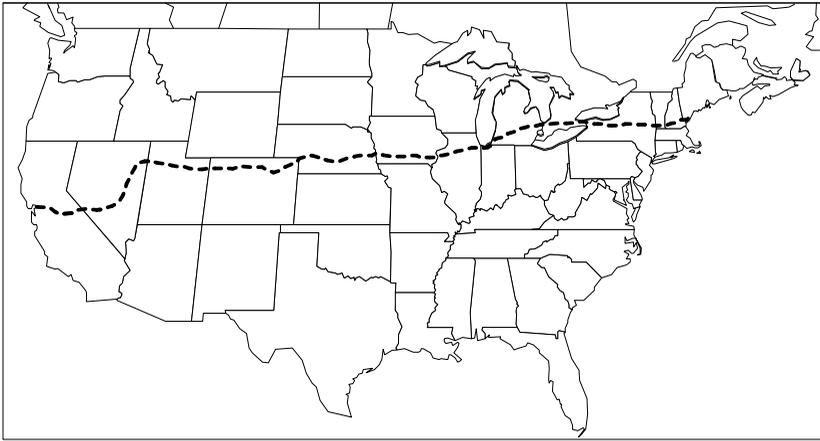
I should qualify that comment. It is always great if one trains for any physically demanding venture, be it cycle touring, trekking, or kayaking. However, the problem is that in our day-to-day lives we simply cannot find the time to train sufficiently for any of these endeavours. Snatching a few hours here and there for a ride does not prepare one for eight hours a day in the saddle, 6 days a week. Similarly, going on short (or even moderate) hikes doesn't prepare one for the exertion of the mountains.

Instead, one resigns oneself to pain for (hopefully) the first few days and then as the body responds to the demands, the fitness comes. The beauty of cycle touring is that you choose the pace so the first days can be as easy or as masochistic as one chooses.

Having decided to go cycle touring the next decision was where. Since my available time would be during the Northern Hemisphere's summer, that narrowed choices significantly. I craved a significant amount of miles, and as a child growing up in Canada I had dreamed of cycling across America, so that was another good reason to do it.

In terms of route planning, there was none. While I had researched cycling options across America, there was a dearth of information on cycling from San Francisco which was my preferred start point. I planned on visiting friends in California and Michigan but between those two points the options were open. So I decided not to have a route but to just go where the fancy took me. This is one of the greatest delights about cycle touring; to be able to explore new roads and go where one likes.

The map below shows the route the I ended up following. I traversed 13 states with a side trip to Ontario to see my parents.



To keep Lis informed of my progress, I carried a digital camera and a palmtop computer. I wrote up my journal and posted it to a web site during my travels. This book is based on that journal.

To ensure that I was suitably equipped I treated myself to a new bicycle—my previous one having reached the end of its long distance life after several tours in Europe. It had been 13 years since I bought my previous bicycle and I was amazed how technology had changed. Due to the amount of gear that I would be carrying, I opted for a mountain bike which, although heavier, is more robust than street bicycles. With the long distances I wanted a chrome-moly frame instead of aluminium, the latter providing a stiffer and less comfortable ride. Unfortunately, there wasn't a wide selection in New Zealand, but I settled on a great Marin 'Elridge Grade'. I was tickled to find when I started my trip that it was named after a mountain bike trail north of San Francisco from where I started my trip.

With the bicycle I purchased a number of other accessories—it is amazingly easy to spend lots of money in cycle shops if you are a gadget guy—and then broke it in for 100 km. It rode really well and

with 27 gears I felt ready for the mountains. I would use them all, and sometimes wish for more!

The following photo shows my trusty bike, fully laden for the trip. It's amazing how little one needs to live on, even when it entails camping and travelling in conditions ranging from snow to deserts.



My bike and I flew out of Auckland on 28 May 2000. It was an overnight flight which suited me fine as I had been putting in long days (and hence short nights) trying to get everything done before I left. Once on board I took a sleeping pill, put in my ear plugs, put on my eye mask and remembered nothing until an hour out of Los Angeles. Just in time to retrieve my breakfast, a delightful fruit platter.

I was reunited with my bike after some confusion and plenty of waiting, catching my flight to Oakland where I was met by David and Katherine Brown. David is a New Zealander and they met when he and I did the Mt. Everest base camp trek in 1996. As Kat loves to remind me, I was responsible for introducing them as she had injured her elbow in a fall and I said that my mate David was an ambulance

officer who wouldn't mind helping with the dressing. They married the following year and moved to San Francisco, Kat's home town.

They lived in Fairfax which is a lovely hilly area about 30 minutes north of San Francisco. Monday was a public holiday, so David and I were able to spend some time together. We went for a brief walk up the hill to survey the land. Quite beautiful and unspoiled despite being so close to the city. Prices for houses were ludicrous since there were a lot of software companies in the area as well as Lucas Studios of Star Wars fame. David read from the paper that the price of a 3 bedroom, 1 bathroom house was \$US 1 million! I reminded him of the time a few years ago that the first house in New Zealand to sell for \$NZ 1 million (now \$USD 450,000) made the front page of the newspaper.

We had a late night catching up and sleep was difficult both due to the jet lag and the anticipation of starting my trip. It was wonderful having close friends to see me off on my adventure.

## **Day 1 - San Francisco to Corral Hollow: 86 km**

Kat dropped me off at the northern end of the Golden Gate bridge. All the gear was loaded onto my bike and away I went. Boy did it handle differently with 15 kg of camping gear, clothes and a little food squirreled away compared to when it was unloaded.

For my surprise 40th birthday party Lis gave me a T-shirt to be worn for the occasion. Since I'm a kid masquerading in an adult's body, I decided to continue wearing it for special occasions such as this.



I cycled downhill to the observation platform before the bridge and admired the structure. A very impressive bit of engineering, especially when you think it was built 70 years ago. There were busloads of tourists taking photos and my bike attracted much attention. I refrained from telling people that I had only cycled 1200 metres downhill, preferring to focus on my goal of cycling across America.

After crossing the bridge, I cycled along the waterfront to San Francisco. It was wonderful to finally have wind in my face, and

wheels spinning under me. The problems of work were (hopefully) behind me; I was free with no plans to speak of for the next 10 weeks; and it was a sunny day with a tail wind. I wore a huge smile on my face.

I wound my way past Fisherman's Wharf and other famous landmarks. Seeing several men walking hand in hand reminded me of San Francisco's reputation as the homosexual capital of America. I passed galleries and fancy shops, but not being a city person, I couldn't wait to escape to the country.

I needed to cross the bay again so headed for the BART underground. I discovered this was not a good idea if one is on a bike. Firstly, I had to find my way down to the station via a well hidden lift. Then I needed to buy a ticket which required small bills, none of which I had. The woman at the desk was most helpful telling me to "go upstairs to get change", ignoring the fully laden bike. After jamming the machine by putting in too much money (exact change meant just that) I managed to get a ticket. The trip only lasted 30 minutes and it was then down some long stairs to the lower platform where I caught the train to Union City.

From Union City I cycled out into the country through the town of Niles. A quaint place groaning with antique shops and Charlie Chaplin images. Up the Niles Canyon road I was finally free of the urban sprawl. The road was ideal for cyclists with wide shoulders, mild grades and a river bounded by trees. Good to be alive.

My idyllic road ended abruptly at the Interstate, forcing me to turn back and follow a side route. Called 'Foothill Road' it was well named. Steep grades in places, yet delightful with plenty of trees and a meandering stream beside the road. Huge houses sprang out at me around some corners. Talk about urban sprawl. When I reached Pleasanton I found a park with a fountain and an inviting lawn. I

collapsed in the shade and read my book. Cycle touring can be so self indulgent.

Once on my bike again, I entered a grape growing area and the landscape was resplendent with vines. Due to my late start I decided to alter my route. I passed through Livermore, home of the famous Lawrence Livermore laboratories that developed the atom bomb, and from there headed up a road marked with three chevrons on my cycling map to indicate steep grades.

Alas, the map was correct but at least there was little traffic. I grunted and groaned all the way up (well, not really but it sounds good) and whizzed back down at 65 km/h. Not far from the bottom was the 'Carnegie Off Road Motorcycle Park' which was a recreation area for trail bike riders. A friendly ranger showed me the camp site and let me stay for free. There were only a few others so it was quiet except for the occasional car on the road.

This was my first night in my new one-man tent and it required a bit of fiddling to get erected correctly. It may not be the most luxurious accommodation but is very adequate considering I have to carry it like a snail dragging its house everywhere. Unfortunately there were no showers to clean away the days detritus but I did the best I could. Good thing my wife Lis wasn't here to complain about the dirt.

## **Day 2 - Corral Hollow - Lake McSwain: 140 km**

I awoke to a cool morning and was pleasantly surprised to feel no aches and pains after yesterday's ride. Even my bum wasn't too sore.

After a light breakfast I was on the road again with a downhill run which is always a great way to start the day. As a cyclist, momentum is your friend and gravity your enemy (an adaptation of a saying by Kat who described gravity more graphically). The countryside was

desolate with barren, empty hills, and a profusion of 'No Trespassing' signs. I wondered who in their right mind would be out here in the middle of nowhere with intent to trespass, and then I passed a centre associated with Lawrence Livermore. That explained the signs.

The shoulder disappeared and I envisaged myself as road kill under the wheels of the interminable convoys of trucks. Fortunately, a canal came to my rescue and I happily followed the path running parallel to the canal. I found it completely unlike the English canals with their trees and curved bridges. This canal was open to the elements with a gravel track. After about 5 km I passed an intersecting road with a gate and a fisherman who looked at me strangely and asked "why aren't you using the other side of the canal where the road is paved?". I had assumed both sides were the same. Needless to say I changed sides and continued on the nice paved route. Except for having to haul my heavy bike over gates it was great and I made good time.

The San Joaquin valley I was cycling through is renowned as one of the most fertile places in the world. Although the right side of the canal appeared to be dry desert, the land to the left was full of orchards and fields of crops. It is apparently an old lake bed which explains the fertility. I enjoyed seeing the farmers ploughing and attending to the trees. On a bike one becomes much more aware of ones environs than when ensconced in a vehicle.

After 50 km I had worked up a mighty appetite. This is yet another great thing about cycle touring, one eats with such a clear conscience. I was fantasising about a submarine sandwich, and what do I find when leaving the canal but a truck stop with Subway submarines.

After gorging myself, I cycled into Paterson and noticed a sign which read 'Apricot Capital of the World'. Since my wife Lis has absolutely

no control when it comes to Apricots I gave thanks she wasn't along or I may have been stranded here permanently. Particularly since the annual Apricot festival was in 3 days time. It was a pleasant small town except for a few "hoons" in immaculate 1960's Ford Mustangs. Were it not for the testosterone laden driving habits of their owners I would have enjoyed admiring their cars a bit closer.

The road from Paterson to Turlock was called 'Las Pinas' and for many kilometres it was lined with the tallest palm trees I've ever seen, all evenly spaced. What amazed me was the unbroken line for such a long distance. I would have thought that some hoon (driving a Mustang?) would have taken a few out over the many years they have been growing.

Turlock was a big town with too much traffic. I stopped in a park to fill my water bottles and ask directions. The fellow was particularly perceptive: "are you cycle touring"? I wanted to say "No, I always ride to the park with a fully laden bike and my funny accent asking directions out of town", but managed to be polite. Like many people he didn't appreciate that cyclists want a direct route and he was going to take me way out of my way. I smiled and thanked him appreciatively before riding off in the other direction. I hoped he didn't notice.

The road I found myself on was very quiet with about one vehicle every 10 minutes. Very convenient when nature calls as there are not a lot of places to be discrete in the flat, treeless farming land. All one does is wait for a car to pass and then one is sure that there is enough time to answer nature's call without embarrassment (to the motorists).

Continuing on to Snelling, I managed to find an egg salad sandwich for dinner. Food is the great problem for me since vegetarianism is not common in outback America (or outback anywhere except India).

To add to my problem is the fact that I don't want slatherings of sugar in everything. For example, I decided to buy some baked beans as 'emergency' food. The shop boasted 20 different brands (being America one is spoiled for choice in all things). However, they all included either pork, bacon, sausages, chilli, brown sugar, or molasses.

Another aspect to food in America is the way in which everything is labelled with the calorie content. The fact that a sizeable portion of the population ignore this (pun intended) does not diminish the importance of the information. However, manufacturer's still go to great lengths to put their products forward in the best possible light. Take my egg salad sandwich for example. Like most sandwiches of its type it was a square piece of bread cut into two triangular halves in a plastic container. I was surprised to find that it had only 250 calories—impressive given the size of the sandwich. However, upon closer inspection this applied to half a sandwich. I wonder if they could have said 125 calories for 1/4 sandwich; or 50 calories for 1/10 sandwich. This opens up endless possibilities. As you can see, one has a lot of time for deep thinking when cycling.

After refuelling on egg salad sandwiches, it was on to Lake McSwain reservoir and the camp site. I thought it was overpriced at \$14, but at least it boasted a warm shower. I also found that I could plug my palmtop into one of the sites for RV vehicles which was a good thing as I had forgotten that a colleague was expecting part of a conference paper from me by that day. So I worked in the dark, after a well needed shower and shave, as the mosquitoes buzzed hungrily around. It was a lovely place, and I had the campground to myself.

### **Day 3 - Lake McSwain - Oakhurst: 93 km**

Today I discovered there is a definite correlation between my average speed and the degree of difficulty. Although Day 2 was 140 km, I was

able to average 21 km/h since a lot of it was flat. This was the day I reached the foothills of the Sierra and my speed reflected it. It took over seven hours of cycling to reach Oakhurst.

Throughout the day I was reminded of Nietzsche's saying 'that which does not kill you will make you stronger'.

The road immediately started climbing. I was shortly joined by Jim, a veterinarian from Turlock who was out for a 100 km cycle. He was much lighter laden than I was, but condescended to chug along at my speed while we chatted. That is one of the great things about cycling in the USA, everyone is so friendly.

The road went up and up and eventually Jim zoomed off. After ascending about 300 metres I was depressed to discover that I was about to descend the same amount. This was followed by more ups and downs. I would love to have had a topographic map to work out the vertical distance I covered since this pattern repeated itself ALL DAY.

I followed the 'Old Toll Road' which was what Jim recommended. The surface was a shocking quilt work of patches, many of them badly done. This road also went up and up and since there was little traffic I removed my helmet to cope with the heat. After about an hour of going uphill I reached the crest, and descended the same distance into another valley. How soul destroying.

I whizzed around a corner into the valley and found someone standing in the middle of a bridge pointing a gun at me. Great! I thought, I'll be put out of my misery. But alas, it was a woman surveyor using a Laser Atlanta electronic distance instrument—the same one I use as an engineer. I stopped to ask what she was doing and she said they were replacing the bridge. "Why, when there is no traffic?" I asked. "Oh, there are lots of trucks" she said, "haven't you

noticed “? One thing cyclists notice are trucks of any shape and size. I’d estimate this road carried about 100 vehicles a day, so obviously economics doesn’t play much of a role here in deciding what needs to be done.

I had a long ride up the hill to Mt Bullion which was at 712 metres. It was then more up and down to Mariposa where I filled my water bottles at the tourist information centre before heading downtown to find some food. Eventually decided on a pizza parlour. I ordered a mini pizza, which turned out to be enough for 2 (the small was the size of a New Zealand large and the large could feed 10) and an all you can eat salad. This was excellent and it quickly filled the hole.

If the morning’s cycle was hard work, the afternoon was worse. It reminded me of nightmares where one is running away but never getting anywhere. The hills seemed to rise up for an eternity, like the 3.5 km 8% grade out of Mariposa. On the map it was deceiving since the next town, Bootjack, was only 35 metres higher than Mariposa, but to get there one ascended this killer grade, descended a similar length, up another, down another, etc. ‘That which does not kill you makes you stronger’ ... right.

When I reached Bootjack I stumbled off my bike and called my friends the Muirs who were expecting me that night to alert them to the fact that I might not make it. As we were talking I noticed a thermometer which showed 28 degrees C (why it wasn’t in Fahrenheit I don’t know) in the shade. Hmmm. Perhaps that was the reason I was finding it extra tough going. I bought some Gatorade to replenish my electrolytes as I was concerned about the distinct white salt rings on my clothes. More ups and downs, with the best saved for last. As I ascended one hill I saw a grade going off into the distance as far as I could see. Real character building stuff. I measured the distance and it was 4.5 km long and about 8-9%. Took me 45 minutes to climb it. Coming on top of having already travelled

70 km it was not what I needed. Screaming down the other side was exhilarating and I noticed that the valley was widening out. Yippee.

A van passed me and honked before pulling over. I stopped and out popped Pastor Wellesley Muir. He had come to see how I was doing and to offer me help if needed. After ascertaining that it was only 15 km more to his home, I decided to soldier on. There were still plenty of grades, but only about 500 metres maximum in length which was bearable. Not to mention the fact that seeing Wellesley had given me my second wind.

Following his excellent directions I made my way through Oakhurst and onto the road leading to their place. Of course it was—uphill. After 1 km I was getting in a bad mood and at around 2 km I was ready to dive into the ditch and surrender to the gods of grades. Fortunately the next road led to their house and I finally arrived after pushing my bike UP their incredibly steep driveway. I looked a sight but they were most welcoming and we had a great meal of fruit and toast before I hit the shower and bed.

I'd completed my first few days of cycling and although I had travelled about 320 km in three days I felt pretty good about things--despite the last day. The photo below shows something of what the terrain was like, and I felt like I had crossed every one of those hills.



## Day 4 - Yosemite National Park

I had an early wake up call at 5 a.m. but I didn't mind, having been refreshed by sleeping in a nice bed instead of my tiny tent. After a delightful breakfast it was into the car and off to Yosemite National Park. When I was planning the trip, most of the cycle routes I'd looked at went north-east through Sacramento but because I wanted to visit the Muirs I instead chose to come through Yosemite. It was a decision I didn't regret, even though the cycling was a killer.

Wellesley took me on a walk from Glacier Point along the Muir trail. John Muir was a Scottish immigrant who wrote extensively in the mid-1800's about Yosemite and was instrumental in it achieving national park status. He also shared the same great-grandfather with Wellesley. Wellesley had been coming here since childhood, and he knew everything by name and shared plenty of anecdotes.

As we started down the trail we happened upon two nonchalant deer. We continued through the silent forest and descended to a river. The trail climbed up again before descending to a waterfall

where we stopped for lunch. It was just spectacular with magnificent views regularly.

We hardly met another human being. I have found this to be typical of North America. People seem to be uncomfortable cutting the umbilical chord to their vehicles, and tend to stay within a short distance of the car park.

We found a lot more people at the waterfall as we enjoyed our lunch sitting on the rocks. From there it was down to the valley floor. One characteristic I love about Americans is the way they are so open. A fellow stopped us and asked Wellesley, "How old are you"? When he replied "73", the guy was most impressed. Other nationalities would have been more circumspect in phrasing such a question. We would have started with the weather, how long have you been coming here, *etc.* but not the Americans; straight to the point.

Our wonderful day ended with a shuttle bus ride back to the car park where Evelyn was waiting. After a visit to the post office and the visitor centre it was back to base for a phone call from Lis.

What a fantastic park! I would recommend Yosemite to anyone who appreciates nature. Wellesley commented that it is ranked the Number One tourist attraction in America, even ahead of Disneyland, and I can see why.

## **Day 5 - Yosemite National Park**

On Saturday the Muirs and I attended the local Seventh-day Adventist church. In his younger years Wellesley had helped build the church and showed me the school and other elements that had been added.

We had a good Bible study and sermon which was followed by a shared lunch. I broke an unwritten commandment by making an absolute glutton of myself—it was so nice. There was even that great delicacy pumpkin pie. Yum. Except for the efforts of my wife, I never get pies except when in North America.

After lunch we drove back to Yosemite and changed into our walking clothes by the side of the road. We then went and looked at the giant trees. And giant they were. The Redwoods towered above us and made us seem so insignificant. They really are spectacular. The sign by one of the trees described how the tannin in the bark gave it the red colour. This tannin is used to make fire-retardant and anti-termite chemicals. Made me wonder if it is the same tannin found in tea. Having a cup of fire-retardant sounds much less enticing than having a cup of tea.

We wandered along the trails, again deserted, and came to a lodge with some displays. One of them contained the type of statement which makes Americans the laughing stock of the world. It proclaimed that National Parks were a “fundamentally American concept which has been exported throughout the world”. It is ironic that a Scottish immigrant helped create this American concept and I would love to know whether or not this was the first national park on earth as the sign indicated. I suspect not, but even if it was, they could be a bit less patronising to foreigners.

The display also showed a photo of a tree felled for one of the world fairs in the 1800s. It was surrounded by miniature woodsmen and there were at least 20 of them. When the tree trunk was sent east to show something from California nobody believed it could be from a tree—it was too large.

We walked up to where the famous tree that the road passed through once stood. It fell in a storm over 30 years ago and is now lying

fractured by the side of the road. Pity, as I recall seeing movies of traffic passing through. The sort of thing traffic and highway engineers enjoy looking at.

## **Day 6 - Oakhurst CA - Yosemite Park - 91 km**

Yet another dawn rising . I did some final packing and wrote a few e-mails. Breakfast was scrumptious and (typically) I overindulged in the fresh strawberries.

By the time I organised everything it was after 8 a.m. and I headed down the driveway after some pictures with the Muirs. It had been a much needed break and although I was stiff and sore from our hikes I was raring to go. Their road didn't seem as steep as it had Thursday night, obviously a reflection of how stonkered I was. This is me full of vim and vigour.



The upgrade which tortured me on Thursday was now a downhill run. It's always a pleasure starting a morning at the top of a hill with a death defying, freewheeling descent. In fact it's advisable when cycle touring to make the extra effort at the end of the day so that you

can start the next day at the top of the hill. Gives your legs a bit longer before they have to work.

From Oakhurst, it was uphill into the Sierra. When I say uphill I mean uphill. As near as I can estimate I cycled 50 km uphill; 15 km downhill and 26 km on flat. It's a bit of an enigma to me why uphills ALWAYS seem to outnumber downhills, but I can console myself that it is probably due to my heading into the mountains. I know that by the time I hit the Atlantic ocean I will have had an equal number of up and downhills, but it sure doesn't feel that way.

Oakhurst is at 835 metres and I cycled up to the entrance of Yosemite at 2000 metres. That took me about 4.5 hours but was nowhere near as bad as last Thursday. Instead of having brutal uphill followed by descents of similar magnitude, it was basically a steady, if long, uphill ride. The grades were quite moderate, about 6%, and there were often flat short sections to break them. Perhaps I had become stronger, but there were other factors such as having rested and the temperature—it was quite pleasant in the low 20's for most of the morning.

Traffic was heavier than desired, but there were no heavy trucks (not allowed through Yosemite) and few Recreation Vehicles (RV). If I do end up as road kill it will be courtesy of one of these vehicles since they are generally driven by geriatrics (wearing hats) who spend one month a year on the road and as such have no appreciation of how wide they are. I passed a spot today where an RV had lost its mirror on a traffic sign. Glad it wasn't a cyclist.

Cycling from 833-2000 metres, one travels through a range of different ecosystems. It's amazing how imperceptibly one moves to an elevation where there are quite different species of trees and birds. There were long breaks between traffic when I was able to listen to the bird life but the lasting memory is of the smells. The forest had

such an earthy smell and the scent of pine needles was invigorating. The trees towered above me, the sun was shining, and once again it was good to be alive.

I stopped at Fish Pond and bought a muffin as well as something like Gatorade. I marvel at the taste (or lack thereof) of these concoctions. Given the general lack of exercise in the population, people must buy them for the taste—or to appear to be sporty. Must be the latter since I can't imagine people actually liking the taste.

At the park entrance I waited while the Ranger tried to fix her cash register, with a queue of cars behind me. They wear Stetson hats which takes me back to my days as a scout. They look particularly good on attractive young women!

I was advised that it was an easy downhill run of 6.5 km to Wanasee where I planned to have lunch. I had a grin from ear to ear all the way. It was a real hoot to descend 660 metres at 50 km/h with little traffic. Freewheeling on an almost empty road is just such fun ... the highlight of cycle touring. It was sad when the run was over, but I'm sure that the drivers in the other direction must have wondered about this mad smiling cyclist.

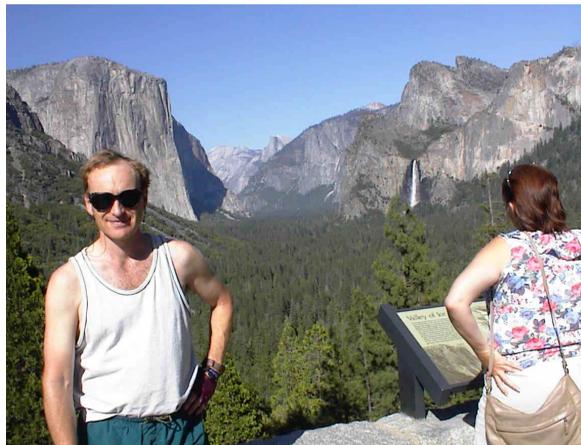
I bought some bagels and ate lunch under a tree reading my book. It's another great aspect to cycle touring, this ability to find nice picnic spots. At the table next to me were some British tourists which made me think back to Lis' and my last cycle trip through Devon and Cornwall. Those places are flat compared with the Sierra.

After lunch I enjoyed a run along the river valley and then began climbing again. I climbed to over 2000 metres and once again really enjoyed the nature and the bird life. Had a great rest stop under the trees and read for a while. Exercise, nature, reading. My favourite pastimes.

After six hours of uphill slog I reached the summit. The mountains stretched away to the horizon and it was a rewarding sight. Makes me marvel at God and His creativity. I really am a mountain man. It must come from growing up in a flat place like Toronto.

As I began the descent it was a repeat of earlier in the day but there was one drawback: THE TUNNEL. About 1 km in length, I opted to travel in the middle of the lane at 50 km/h with my flashing light (what Lis calls my 'Disco Light') at the rear. I waited to enter until the road was clear and I got 2/3 of the way before any traffic banked up behind me. I've always found tunnels terrifying and this was no exception. In the absence of a dedicated cycle lane one just says a prayer and hopes for the best.

At the exit to the tunnel was a lookout. The view was stunning and the picture of me mimicking my neighbour below doesn't do it justice. When on a bike people always talk to you and I had a couple from Oregon chat to me about how impressed they were when they saw me going uphill.



From there it was down to the Yosemite valley. In the late afternoon the sun was casting amazing shadows over the valley. I stopped frequently to admire the huge peaks towering above me. And to think people climb them ... This photo gives a taste of Yosemite, but it really has to be seen to be believed.



I chatted with David and Melanie from San Francisco. They were amazed that I had 10 weeks holiday, but I pointed out there has to be some benefit when one is the boss! It is interesting contrasting New Zealand vs. US holiday practices. Most people in New Zealand have four weeks plus per year as well as 11 statutory holidays. Two weeks is the norm here. Glad I live in New Zealand.

I cycled to the backpackers campground by the river. As soon as I dismounted I was inundated with mosquitoes. Seldom have I experienced such enthusiasm! I put on my long trousers and T shirt and then some suntan lotion with repellent. However, it only slowed the onslaught slightly.

After pitching my tent I deposited my food in the steel bear locker. There are lots of brown bears in the park who scavenge, and lockers

are required to protect your food (and bags). I then went to the village store where to my dismay they didn't have any mosquito spray. I treated myself to an ice cream and then cycled over to 'Camp Currie' where the paper said that there was a nature talk at 8:30 p.m. Alas, it was cancelled so I wrote up my diary instead. No mosquitoes so a nice place to sit. It was then time to go back to the camp and crash. The stars were close and bright in the pitch black sky, with the pines towering around me. What a great place.

## **Day 7 - Yosemite Park to Wolf Camp - 58 km**

Today started off so nice but ended up absolutely brutal. But more about that later ...

It was a beautiful morning, cool but not cold. I broke camp and was on my bike by 8:30. There are eight miles of bike trails in Yosemite valley, and I decided to explore a bit before moving on.

I cycled up to Mirror Lake which lay towards the head of the valley. The bike path was comfortable and wide enough to drive a vehicle on. As I rode up the valley there as a sign 'Rented Bikes Allowed No Further Due to Steep Grade'. Must be pretty bad I thought ... but of course it wasn't. I guess they are just trying to limit the people to flat riding.

At the top of the grade there was a sign prohibiting bicycles any further so I parked my bike and walked along the trail. It was stunning. The following photo gives some idea of the grandeur.



You can see some of the reflection of the mountains in the lake - hence the name 'Mirror Lake'. I enjoyed the delightful bush walk around the lake and read history plaques. I was intrigued to note that shortly after Yosemite was discovered (by soldiers chasing Indians who had attacked miners) the tourist industry was up and running. They showed a photo of a turnstile on a bridge and walkers had to pay to walk around the lake.

When I returned to my bike I was joined by several families who had biked up as well. They were very friendly and one of the men had cycled through Wyoming and advised me that it was a good place to miss; lots of 10-15% grades. I didn't need any more convincing for this trip, however, in 2002 I headed that way on a trip to cycle the length of the Rocky Mountains from Canada to Mexico, but that is another story.

I decided to return to Camp Currie to post some cards as well as work on my diary. It was very peaceful until several families arrived. My palmtop computer was a magnet to the kids and the parents were more worried than I was. Hey, I'm on holiday. Stress? What's that! I chuckled when the parents told the kids not to touch this; get away

from that; etc. Reminded me of travels with my parents. Probably a universal trait of parents with children.

The accommodation centre told me that the campground I was aiming for was currently closed due to an Indian celebration so I was in trouble. This meant there was nowhere to stay until I exited the park. They suggested I go by the Wilderness Centre and get a permit for camping on one of the trails. They were very helpful and gave me a permit for Porcupine Flat. It was chosen because there was a place to store my food away from the bears.

I cycled down the valley and had one last look back . I must say that in all my travels I have NEVER seen anything as spectacular as Yosemite. It is the sort of place that defies description. It is without a doubt one of the most beautiful places on earth, if not the most beautiful.

It was a nice downhill run to the end of the valley and then I started climbing. The road was narrow with steep cliffs on one side and a granite wall on the other. It was about 1:00 p.m. when I started climbing and the heat radiating from the wall was intense.

My map showed tunnels and, sure enough, there they were . Using my approach from the previous day, I turned my disco light on and waited for traffic to pass. This was better, but still a bit scary. There were two short tunnels and one VERY long tunnel. For that one I walked my bicycle along the sidewalk. Still scary but at least I wouldn't get wiped out along with my bike.



The road continued upwards for what seemed forever. I estimate it was about 40 km of uphill with hardly a break. I ascended from below 1350 metres to Crane Flat at 2300 metres. It was tough going ... the only redeeming feature the wild flowers and the occasional view.

At Crane Flat I filled up with water and bought some 'New York Style' bagels. They were white and fluffy, not my style. After a (too short) break it was on to route 120. Three words come to mind: hills, hills and hills. The grades were long and steep and never ending. As I ascended higher and higher I had to work harder due to the altitude. When I cracked 2650 metres I was struggling for every metre. Except for the occasional alpine meadow, it was very hilly and inhospitable.

I decided to stop just past the turnoff to White Wolf Camp. It lay 1.5 km off the main road but in my state 30 metres was about all I could manage. I found a great campsite on soft soil under the pine trees. It was cold, as evidenced by the snow on the ground.

There were no bear lockers about so I had to hang my food in a tree. The problem was that I did not have any rope with me so I made one out of a number of bungees and tried tossing it over a tree. It never

ceases to amaze me how bungees have the ability to catch on the first available obstruction ... So, after about 30 minutes of unsuccessful attempts I went to plan B. I removed the guy wires to my tent and attached a peg to the end of the rope. This was more effective, but the tree proved not to be up to the weight of the bag. I adjusted its contents and managed to manoeuvre it into the tree. Felt much safer.

It was a very cold night. I wore my polartec jacket and trousers inside the sleeping bag and was still cold.

### **Day 8: White Wolf CA to Lee Vining CA - 74 km**

Woke up at 5:30 a.m. and was it ever cold! I put on my polypropyl top under my polartec jacket and snuggled down into my sleeping bag. Wearing my long cycling gloves I was at least not cold any longer. I fished out my short wave radio and tuned to National Public Radio. A nice way to pass the time until the sun warmed things up.

I eventually emerged around 7:00 a.m. but it wasn't much above 0 C. Not nice for a tropical blooded fellow like me! As I did as a child, I relieved myself by writing my name in the snow. I still have problems dotting the 'i'. Had breakfast with VERY cold water and by 8:00 a.m. was on my way. Uphill of course. There was no traffic and it was very cold cycling, in spite of all the layers.

It proved to be 13 km to Porcupine Flat and there is absolutely no way that I could have cycled there last night. It was a good move stopping and camping out. Particularly since I didn't become bear food.

The altitude was having its effect on me and I took frequent stops. As the day progressed the traffic increased, but thankfully there were few trucks. It seems as though Sports Utility Vehicles (SUV) are de

rigueur in this part of the world. A number were loaded with kayaks and mountain bikes.

Eventually I reached Tuolumne Meadow. This is the largest meadow in the Sierra and lies at an elevation of 2860 metres. It has its own unique, fragile ecosystem. I visited the information centre and they kindly let me plug in and download my photos from my digital camera to my computer. There were some brilliant posters of the area but they wouldn't survive on my bike. Ho hum. Will have to buy them next time.

I enjoyed a vegetarian hamburger at the 'Grill'. Yum. First hot food since I left the Muirs. It was very sunny and I enjoyed eating on a bench and watching the tourists. There was a very obese couple from Arkansas who literally waddled by. In fact, except for a couple of youngish hikers everyone could have stood to lose 20 – 100 kg.

I refilled my water bottles in the Grill and one of the women came out to look over my bike. It's pretty heavy (particularly with 8 litres of water) and she was impressed that I had come this far with it. She advised that the ride ahead wasn't bad and the grade was very bearable. Since she was also a cyclist I took her at her word—and she was right.

I cycled out the valley with a mountain stream burbling next to me. Glorious! I cycled upwards and upwards towards the Tioga Pass. Rising above the tree line, I almost felt as if I was above the mountains. I finally reached the top of the Sierra. Tioga Pass lies at an elevation of 3313 metres (9950 feet). The guard at the park exit told me it was 20 km of downhill. I was sorry to leave the park, but glad that the mountains were behind me.

As I headed down the mountain there was a lovely lake on the right and then it was an 8% grade—down for a change! It was an amazing

ride. There was no traffic so I was able to ride in the centre of the lane. Good thing too. I reached 78 km/h before I chickened out and slowed down. It was difficult to keep it below 60 km/h. Wheeeeee! From the bottom I looked back up to the mountains. Goodbye to the Sierra and hello to the desert. I went to Lee Vining and checked into a hotel room. Time to check the e-mail and have a bit of comfort. The photo below shows what the road was like.



### **Day 9: Lea Vining CA – middle of nowhere Nevada: 133 km**

I awoke at dawn (5:18 a.m.) again. It is a maddening habit that I've suffered from all my life. Unless I am in a room that is hermetically sealed from sunlight I usually wake up at dawn, no matter what time I crashed the night before. In one respect it was a good thing as I was able to proof read a proposal for a project in Samoa which had arrived the night before via cyberspace along with a slew of other messages! As a footnote, I finished this manuscript in Samoa two years later as the project finished and I was on my way to cycle the Rocky Mountains.

I packed up the bike and was out the door by 8:00 a.m. I had decided to indulge myself in a hot breakfast so went up the road to 'Smileys', the local eatery. Those who have not experienced the pleasure of choosing breakfast in the USA have no idea how spoiled for choice one is. Three different types of pancakes (Buttermilk, Oat and Bran). Eggs that are scrambled, poached, sunny side up. Bacon, ham, steak, beans. And combinations of all of the above. Included is a bottomless cup of coffee. All up, the menu measured about the size of an A3 page and was very full. As a vegetarian I was in for pancakes and scrambled eggs. I also ordered a small orange juice. Like most things here, size matters and the large size must have been pushing a litre.

Another aspect of these sorts of restaurants are booths. They don't seem to be popular elsewhere as they are in the USA which is a pity as they are such a pleasure. You can spread out along the bench and take up as much space as you like. Also good for being friendly with the girls, my misspent youth showing itself.

I enjoy people watching and the restaurant quickly filled up. The waitress carried five plates on two arms which was as impressive a display of balance as I've ever seen. She said that in the summer the staff increases by a factor of five over winter and I can see why. The place was booming. I ate quickly and left a tip before heading on my way. Tipping is a necessary element of any dining experience here due to the poor wages staff are paid. Shame they aren't given a living wage like in New Zealand.

It was then over to the shop to stock up on food for the trip. Bought some vegetarian beans as well as raisins, dates, figs and some granola bars. Also some more suntan lotion which was twice the price of San Francisco. Well, we are in the desert, where it is a sellers market.

It was then southwards along Route 395 where I would turn east on Route 120. It was an experience to say the least, and not a pleasant

one. In order of priority the things that both cyclists the most are traffic, hills, headwinds and rain.

Having just come from the mountains to the foothills I was now faced with the first three: traffic, hills and wind. Not just any wind mind you, but probably the strongest wind I have ever experienced cycling. It reminded me of the time that Lis and I were atop Mt. Ruapehu in New Zealand and were able to lean over and be supported from falling by the wind. I was on a slight downgrade (3%) and was using the same cycle gear as to ASCEND an 8% grade, peddling like mad and only averaging 8 km/h! I consoled myself with the fact that it was at least sunny and not raining. After battling for almost an hour I covered the 8 km and turned onto Route 120.



The road followed the south end of Mono Lake. This is an important stopover for migratory birds but unfortunately, in 1942 Los Angeles (335 miles away) decided that it was an ideal source for water so they diverted four of the six streams feeding the lake. As a result the lake has dropped precariously. Recently, environmentalists won a court battle and the lake has been raised by 5.5 metres. It reminded me of the Caspian Sea where the water has dropped so much that the

original ports are now in the middle of the desert. These desert areas have very fragile ecosystems and man easily wrecks them.

The road alternated between pine forests and desert scrub. It amazed me that anything could grow in such sandy soil and it is a testament to the robustness of pines that there were forests at all. In some places a single tree struggled surrounded by sand. In an earlier age the forests were much denser and I cycled past a historical marker where a mill used to cut timber for the railways and fuel. It ceased operations 80 years ago and this explained the absence of large trees in the forest.

I found the cycling quite draining which surprised me. I had expected my fitness by now to have been such that I could overcome the headwinds and the elevation. However, I eventually found the reason for my poor performance. I had ascended again to over 2660 metres from the 2115 metres at Lee Vining. Made me feel a bit less of a wuss.

From the summit it was a downhill run of the type which (almost) made up for the morning's efforts. There was hardly any traffic (20 cars/h – I counted) so I didn't need to worry about being hit. The only disconcerting thing was the view in the distance. More mountains!

Although I was through the Sierra I still had more mountains to cross. What a drag. Until then it was downhill with another of these wheeeeeee runs and grin from ear to ear. The road was in good condition (except for lots of temperature induced transverse cracking which road engineers notice but I won't bore you with) and the absence of traffic made it such fun.

I entered a valley area with huge red rocks on either side. I stopped for lunch by the side of the road and put on more suntan lotion. I

decided to cycle sans helmet as there was no traffic and it was quite hot. From there the road wound uphill (again!) with the never-ending headwind. It was literally grit ones teeth and push on, at the marvellous speed of 12 km/h—if I was lucky. Very hot and dry so went through a lot of water.

Along the road I came upon a historical marker which had the tolls they charged in the 1850s for use of the road. \$1 for a cart with 2 horses. What I can't believe is that someone would sit in such a forsaken place to collect a toll. Life was very hard for the pioneers and we are such weaklings compared to them.

The road became even more unpleasant with hills and dips. The latter were never long enough to gain momentum for the next hill so it was down into the lowest gear. It was at the top of one of these hills that I met Charlie—a hiker. He left the Colorado/New Mexico border in March and had made it this far. He was on his way North to the ghost town of Billings. I was impressed. He said he walked between water holes and I was incredulous that water could be found in this place, but sure enough, it was marked on his map. I offered him some of mine just in case but he declined. I think he is writing a book since he took my photo as I approached and said I would be in there as the 'mad cyclist'. He was one to talk.

He was quite the character, bedecked in his khaki bush coat with this huge pack. On one knee he had an elastic bandage which was connected to an pedometer. He told me I had 4 miles to go until I found some hot springs and it proved to be a very accurate estimate. He was very dark from the sun and quite dirty, not that I was one to point fingers!

Shortly after meeting Charlie I pushed up the final grade and from there down 500 metres to Benton Hot Springs and Benton. I had been toying with the idea of stopping at the hot springs but decided to

press on which turned out to be a good idea. The wind was still strong but had transformed itself to a side wind instead. It was hard staying upright and I was thankful that there was little traffic. If I fell over the damage would mainly be to my pride instead of being squashed by some vehicle.

There was a café in Benton which I stopped at. The (very fat) proprietor informed me that all they sold were hamburgers and fries with doughnuts for dessert. That probably explained his size. I told him no problems. I would have a cheeseburger without the meat. He looked slightly confused but happily acquiesced when I said that I would pay the regular price. It was quite tasty so I ordered a second one and they were washed down with some of the excellent orange juice available in America.

An elderly woman ordered a real cheeseburger and we chatted. She informed me the town I was planning on getting water at in Nevada no longer existed so I would have to fill up at the pass where there was a café, hotel and casino-all in one. Two Indian woman came in (twins?) and were quite friendly. They asked one of those profound questions one often gets: "isn't it hard cycling with all that gear?" That question was beat later that day by a cowboy who, seeing me cycle up asked "Are you cycling?". They breed them bright in the desert.

Feeling refuelled I headed north towards Nevada. I had been looking forward to the head wind becoming a tail wind, but of course that was too much to expect. Instead it died out.

Highway 6 had lots of traffic, at least compared to 120, but the shoulders were wide and the surface smooth so it was a pleasure to cycle. I passed the California inspection station and then it was into Nevada.

It was a 24 km ride from Benton to the top of Montgomery Pass and I ascended by about 500 metres. Had I not already travelled 85 km under hard conditions to Benton I mightn't have found it so difficult. But it was. I huffed and puffed my way up. Stopping regularly to check the sites, catch my breath, and have some water.

When I reached Montgomery Pass, I went to the café and gorged on blueberry pie while chatting with some truck drivers taking computer monitors from Mexico to Oregon. They were travelling in a convoy of three and had seen me on the hill. They were quite pleased when I commented about how much more comfortable I am with trucks than RVs and they concurred. They were also afraid of RVs. I mentioned all the RV mirrors I saw along the roadside in Yosemite and they had a chuckle. They also informed me that their rigs are worth \$US100,000 and get 6 miles/gallon. Trivia yes, but interesting to know (for me).

There was an interesting couple at the next table. Bedecked in cowboy gear, he looked like someone from the 19<sup>th</sup> century with an unkempt, long flowing beard. I was surprised to see him sitting with a bottled blonde type but when I saw her from the front I realised that she was 60 going on 20 (or trying to be). It was quite sad. She had an old woman's face but had it painted beyond description. Her eye brows were nothing but a thin painted line and she had these huge round ear rings, almost big enough to do the Chinese magic ring trick. Quite a sight.

I asked the waiter where I could camp and after conferring with a woman he suggested the rest stop down the hill. "That's where the bordello [he employed a more graphic term] used to be. Gone but definitely not forgotten". Along with gambling, prostitution is legal in Nevada. I cycled by it and didn't stop as I was having one of those wheeeeeee runs. I was finally getting my own back on all those uphill sections. Over 15 km without a pedal at speeds of 40 km/h. It was

great. By now it was past 7:00 p.m. but the temperature was warm so I just continued on.

The descent was through open country on either side of the road. I wanted to camp somewhere secluded so that any crazies wouldn't find me. I began to get worried as I approached the valley floor since it would be even more difficult to be inconspicuous there.

I eventually found a wadi which was ideal for my purpose. Although right next to the road, it was deep enough that traffic wouldn't see me. The soil was very dusty and the tent pegs didn't grip too well so I loaded them down with rocks just to be safe. That proved to be a good idea as the wind gusts during the night would have taken the tent down. These gusts precluded my having a good sleep but at least I was cosy in my little tent and sleeping bag.



### **Day 10: Middle of Nowhere NV to Warm Springs NV - 171 km**

I awoke at 4:30 a.m. as the sky started to lighten. After yesterday's efforts I needed a better sleep-in so I dozed for another hour. The night had been cool, but not cold, and the winds of yesterday had vanished.

I broke camp and packed the bags. Had a great downhill run for about 6 km. Stopped and enjoyed breakfast of dates, figs and an energy bar. The peace and solitude were beyond description. There were no cars, the sun peeping above the mountains, and total silence. Good to be alive.

The road stretched forever ahead of me across the flat expanse towards the distant hills. There were salt flats off to one side and the place was just so desolate. It was disconcerting to find a headwind again, which was a portent of what was to come.

The first town marked on my map was Coaldale, which I had originally planned as my stop the previous night. Glad that I didn't since it consisted of an abandoned, wind swept and decrepit petrol station. Two other towns marked on my map also proved to no longer exist. More about that later. A fellow was there with an RV towing a heavily loaded car. Must have been moving house judging by the load he was carrying. He had a very friendly dog who chased after me. I didn't mind since it wasn't barking viscusly.

Just up the hill was a stop/go sign operator named Julie. They were doing major rehabilitation and reconstruction of the road and the traffic was stopped waiting for the pilot vehicle to guide us through the work zone. I chatted with a couple from Oregon who were in the process of moving to Tucson Arizona. Talk about contrasts: from the cold, wet north-west to the hot desert.

I commented that when in Scottsdale Arizona last year for a conference I found it disconcerting to see the water being used for golf courses etc. when it was obviously so scarce. They agreed and indicated that there was litigation under way everywhere over water rights. Los Angeles apparently swallows much of the Colorado River under an agreement from 50 years ago when Arizona was relatively empty. With population shifts Arizona was trying to win back more water, but LA was fighting it. It seems to me that development should be limited by water availability, but I'm just a simple engineer

...

The pilot vehicle came to guide us, and I cycled along 1 km of soft earth which was difficult until I made it past the worker site. The pilot vehicle passed me with a long string of traffic behind it, and then bliss. I had the road all to myself. No construction traffic, and no other vehicles either. Eventually I was passed by the pilot vehicle travelling in the opposite direction with a very long line of traffic behind it including plenty of trucks. I was glad to have had so much time to myself. I estimate the work zone was about 15 km long.

At the end of the work zone I found a historical plaque which I stopped to read. After all, someone had gone to great trouble and expense to put these plaques in place. It told of the large silver mining community which was here 100 years ago before the silver ran out.

A few people were milling about waiting their turn with the pilot vehicle. One of them came up and spoke with me. His name was Chad and he was a retired musician from Alabama. Now, if you have never heard a deep south accent you wouldn't appreciate his, but it was really something. Chad was taking two months on his way to visit his daughter in Seattle and was just heading where the fancy took him. He said that he had always wanted to do what I'm doing but never got the courage to give it a try. Pity. I asked him if Clinton was from Alabama or Arkansas since I always got those two states confused. He emphatically said Arkansas (probably a Republican). I then asked if it was George Wallace who came from Alabama and he sheepishly acknowledged that. For those too young to remember the civil rights movement, George was a great segregationist who fought against integration. Don't know which is worse; an adulterer for governor or a racist.

I moved on and then the headwind started. In planning my trip I chose west to east since all the material assured me that the prevailing winds were from the west. Pity nobody told the winds

that. It was very difficult going but all I could do was put my head down and pedal.

Eventually I saw my lunchtime destination Tonopah perched on top of the next hill. The only disconcerting thing was that it was 12 km up the hill to get there. That was typical for Nevada. There were constant grades ascending and descending hills, but whereas in California they would be 8% or higher, in Nevada they were about 3-4%. Still difficult going, but not as hard on the body as the really steep ones. They just got a bit tedious after a while, particularly with a head wind.

It took me forever to get to the top, and once there was I disappointed! If I had to think of a more desolate place than Tonopah it would difficult to come up with one. It was windswept and dusty, with virtually no trees. It was a mining area with the pit heads visible around the town and an air of decrepitness and poverty about the place. Many buildings were abandoned and several motels had boards covering the windows and doors.

The centrepiece of town was the Mizpah Hotel and Casino with a pawn shop across the street for the unlucky gamblers. Although it looked to have a nice restaurant I have this aversion to patronising any business that supports gambling, so I stopped at a Mexican restaurant instead. The owners were very friendly and let me park my bike inside the door. I asked if they could make me a vegetarian meal which they did while I stocked up on corn chips. I was famished having come 88 km, much of it uphill with a headwind.

Then it was out into the cold to continue. Yes, it was cold all right. The sign in town said 53 degrees F which is about 11 C. And this in summer. What a place to choose to live ... although some don't. As I passed out of town and onto the road again I saw a sign that Tonopah was home to the US Airforce's Stealth fighters. Pity the

crews and their families. As it transpired, much of Nevada was used by the US military for testing.

In the cowboy movies they used to have these tumbleweeds blowing about, and they actually exist in real life! A number crossed my path as I travelled up the next hill. The wind was so strong that when I turned the corner I had to lean my bike over to stay upright.

Towards the top of the hill I saw the following sign. Notice what is wrong with the photo? There are no trees in the forest! Call me pedantic but the term forest evokes images of trees and fertility (e.g. the Black Forest), not scrub which is barely holding onto the soil. Perhaps it is a bit of false advertising in an attempt to lure the unsuspecting tourist to the tourist mecca of Tonopah? Who knows, but in the next hour of cycling I didn't see one self respecting tree.



As I cycled along the valley floor I came across a herd of six wild horses. They ran along next to the road and stopped to look at me quizzically. The male then proceeded to herd the others, at least there is no other way of describing it. He would run them along and then

put his head low to the ground and turn them as a group. He did this many times until they were no longer in sight.

On the map there was a rest area marked so I decided to try and go in to see if there was any water available. Water was my big concern on this trip as in Nevada there are very long distances between towns. Talk about uninviting. It was in the valley and the wind was howling through. That it was windswept would be an understatement, and the designers had obviously taken this into consideration: it was the only place I saw where the tables were made from wire mesh (which lets the wind pass through) instead of wood. They had recently re-gravelled the area with small stones that my bike sunk into so I had to push it to the table. There were a few scraggly trees and no water. After about 30 seconds (that long?) I decided this was not worth staying at so I pushed on, up the next hill.

After another long climb (8 km) I was at the top when a couple from Fresno stopped and chatted. She was a keen cyclist and they kindly wanted to know if I needed any water. They had passed me in the other direction. They told me about the hot springs up ahead and recommended that I pay them a visit. They said that there was a hole in the fence to climb though and the 'town' was deserted so I shouldn't have any problems. I thanked them for their advice and friendliness and started down the hill.

The town was called 'Warm Springs' and was so named because of a stream of very warm water flowing down from the mountain. It consisted of an abandoned bar/café and several houses. The hot springs were a small pool about the size of two king size beds with a fence around it. The water was inviting but the wind was howling. I was tired, having cycled about 170 km and unsure of what to do. I took the panniers off my bike and locked it to the fence and sat inside the shed that had once been the change rooms and had dinner; a tin of vegetarian chilli and some pistachio nuts. It was great to be out of

the wind and I was tempted to unroll my mat and crash on the floor, but I was also uncomfortable about staying in this deserted town.

I prayed that God would help me decide and a few minutes later a couple of cowboys (the kind that are called Billy-Bob or Jimmy-Joe) drove up in their pickup and snooped around the area. I took that as a sign to move on so put my kit back on the bike and headed down the road. I was quite tired and it was almost dark so I prayed again that I would soon find a suitable place to camp. After about 1 km I came to a road works borrow pit which was perfect! I bunkered down in a secluded corner where nobody could see me from the road and pitched my tent with some difficulty as it was so windy. It wasn't straight, the corners were held down by rocks, but I didn't care. I was out of the wind and warm. I listened to the BBC on my radio before falling asleep.

### **Day 11: Warm Springs NV to Ely NV – 185 km**

It was a beautiful morning with scarcely a breath of wind. Today was a long and hard day as I was going to try and make it to Ely—a distance of about 115 miles or just under 185 km. And this was on top of a 171 km cycle the previous day. I had decided to have a rest day on Saturday and to attend the Seventh-day Adventist church in Ely, although as it transpired there was no church. This would give me two nights in a motel with time to do laundry and catch up on my journal.

After leaving my borrow pit I soon entered a wonderful valley. The temperature was cool enough that I was wearing my long gloves, but the sun was shining, and the air fresh. The valley was dry and desolate with a few cattle trying to eke out a living. The road ahead of me stretched forever, indeed, that is one of the most difficult aspects to cycling through the desert: you can see so far that you lose

your perspective when it comes to distances. It may look to be 2-3 km but is actually 5-10 km.

I came across three animals trying to cross the road. One of them made it across but the other two turned and ran back to a hole about 10 metres off the road from where they watched me. They were beautiful and I wish I knew what they were. They moved like minks with a long, low body but they had black and white stripes on their heads. Throughout my travels through the desert I saw relatively few animals or birds, perhaps a testimony to the harshness of the land.

What I did see was an unusual bit of road kill: the entire leg of a cow and its stomach! Nothing else, just those two. One wonders what happened to the rest of it. As a cyclist one notices road kill and other flotsam and jetsam. I have been surprised at how much it has varied. During the first two days of my trip there were lots of road kill. Squirrels, rabbits, snakes, even a rare desert fox (the ranger I asked what I had seen was upset since they are an endangered species). I even saw a live snake trying to find its way over the kerb. By the time I reached Yosemite the road kill had dropped off, possibly because of the birds of prey or mountain lions? It was replaced with broken mirrors from the RV drivers who mis-judged the width of their vehicles and hit posts or the roadside cliffs (hopefully not cyclists). In the desert there was nothing. But I digress.

In the distance I spied some large fenced areas. I wondered why they would be fenced and then I saw that they included irrigation as well. Grass was being grown and there were bales of it ready for storage or perhaps sale. The contrast of these green fields to the desert around was startling.

I came to a military base at the turnoff to Tybo. There was also a historical plaque which I dutifully read. It told of how in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the mining town of Tybo had ethnic conflicts between the

Cornish, Irish and Central Europeans which only stopped when they all teamed up against a group of Chinese woodcutters! I would like to know if this place once had trees and the current desolation is actually man made. Then again, perhaps it is better not to know.

I stopped at a rest area and enjoyed a drink and refilled my water bottles. Wellesley Muir had advised me to be careful with my water through Nevada and I was rationing myself to 1 Litre/h. Fortunately, the previous day had been cold so I had not perspired much and I was still well supplied. Then it was up another long (9 km) hill out of the valley. At the top there were some lovely rocks, a sample of which is shown below.



I passed by a place called 'Lunar Crater' which is an old volcanic field. The soil was rich and black. Eventually I reached 'Black Rock Summit' and from there it was downhill to the valley. It was another of those wheeeeeee rides which Nevada has been so resplendent with—10 km downhill with no traffic. As I was descending I spied a number of trees so I thought there might be a farm. Even better, it was a store which held out the promise of sustenance and, more importantly, water.



The store was run by a friendly old fellow and consisted of a gas pump, junk food, and a pay phone. No fresh fruit and vegetables here I'm afraid, although all the candy one could ever want. I indulged myself with some brownies and bought some chocolate for later in the day if I needed the oomph.

I noticed that there were buffalo in the pen beside the store so I went and had a look. The coat was quite mangy but that could be because it was summer and was shedding. A family from Idaho drove up in their van and hopped out. They had a baby poodle who made a bee-line for the buffalo corral but was fortunately stopped before it became lunch. Like I'd seen too often, the entire family was obese from the teenage son to the grandmother.

I cycled across the valley and was it ever desolate. In the distance I saw some buildings which turned out to be an oil refinery with several oil wells, so obviously there is something of value below the ground.

I turned the corner into another construction zone. The stop/go sign person (Steve) said that I would not be permitted to cycle through

and that they would put my bike on the pilot car. No matter how much I protested he refused so I accepted grudgingly.

Steve was from Oregon and every summer he came to Nevada and worked on road construction. He was normally a 'raker' who handles the asphalt but the woman who operates the stop/go sign got ill so he was standing in. That is one of the dangers of being out here—you are a long way from anywhere. He said it took over an hour for the helicopter to come from Ely to collect her. He didn't think it was a snake bite, although he commented that where their construction camp was "rattlers were thick on the ground". Delightful.

The pilot truck came and I sat in the back with my bike amongst the coke cans and other paraphernalia of road contractors. He dropped me at the other side and I chatted with an entomologist who was waiting to go through. He looked to be about 70 and was missing all his front teeth. He needed a bath and told me that he lived full time in the cab on the back of his pickup truck. What surprised me was that he was doing research into the DNA of sand dune insects trying to ascertain what degree of cross-migration there was between areas. He had been on the road for 4 months collecting data over several states and was heading to California on his way 'home'. I asked about a strange insect I had seen near Mono Lake. It was grey and had a body like a bee, but had a long snout on the front of it like a hummingbird. I saw several of them. He was perplexed and said that he would look for them as he was going to Mono Lake to check out the nearby dunes.

I carried on to Currant which was another abandoned town. I stopped outside what was once the restaurant and sat in the shade and ate lunch. The road crew had piled their signs against the windows but inside it looked like someone had just decided one day not to come in again. There were glasses sitting upside down on the walls and crockery neatly stacked. Strange.

I had come 88 km and after a break decided it was time to move on since I had 100 km to go. It was then that it happened! I passed through a sea of thorns which punctured my tires. I always carry one spare tube but they got both my front and rear which meant that it was necessary to patch them. So back it was to the shade where I removed the panniers and started the repair job. I scrounged an old tin and put some water into it to locate the holes. They were so small that even when I found them I would lose them again. Eventually I patched four holes in the front and two in the rear and put all the gear back on. Of course I found that I had missed one so off came the front wheel and I replaced the tube with my spare and prayed that my rear wheel would be OK. That prayer was answered.

The whole exercise took 1.5 hours which meant it was almost 3 p.m. by the time I was ready to move on. It was unlikely I would make it to Ely by sunset at 8:15 p.m. but I had to give it a go. One benefit of the extended rest was that I felt refreshed and attacked the ride with gusto. I eventually reached Currant summit which was almost 2330 metres. From here it was downhill to another valley which spread out before me. It was a great run with the road straight and smooth. I measured it to be 13 km without having to peddle. What I didn't appreciate was that there would be a similar length of upgrade at the other end (I'm a slow learner).

The valley was beautiful with mountains on either side and greener than many of the other ones that I had been through. The road was good and there was even a cycle path of sorts along the side. The pavement had been milled out to provide a 'rumble strip' and there was sufficient space on the other side for the cyclist. Neat. Anyone heading towards the cyclist would be warned by the noise of the tyres on the rumble strip. What a great idea!

I cycled as fast as I could but after 140 km I was not exactly full of vim and vigour. The sun was going down and I was still some distance from Ely, so I clipped my disco light on the back and strapped my head lamp to my handlebar bag.

The uphill run was very long and took me to over 2400 metres again. What goes down must go up... Boy was I tired. But that was the last hill and then a wild 10 km downhill run to Ely. It was dark, cold and although I was wearing my long gloves my fingers were numb. By the time I got to Ely I was almost hypothermic and couldn't wait to find a motel. I asked at the fire station where they were shining the engine and they pointed me in the right direction. I opted for a motel off the main drag where I quickly found myself in a nice hot bath. Ahhhhh. The thermometer outside read 12 degrees C, but with the wind-chill it was a lot colder. Had a pizza and then crashed.

## **Day 12: Rest Day - Ely NV**

Being the Sabbath I had been looking forward to going to church. However, in spite of being told that there was a Seventh-day Adventist church in Ely the phone book told me otherwise. Blast. I later found through the Internet that there was a small group that met there, but that was when I was much further east.

Ely was a pleasant enough town, particularly considering it was located in the desert, but there was not much to see or do. I cycled up the streets and it didn't take long to see most of the town.

I wandered around before returning to my hotel to snooze, read and catch up on my journal. A very lazy rest day.

## **Day 13: Ely NV to Wendover NV - 198 km**

What a great day! In all my years of cycling I've never had a day like this. It was one of those unique times when everything came together: my fitness was up, I was rested, the road was good, the temperature right, and there was no headwind. Ahhhhh. Wish it were always like this.

The day began inauspiciously. I had trouble falling asleep the night before and was woken at 6 a.m. by noisy neighbours. Checked my e-mail and responded to a few calamities at work and then packed. I had done some laundry the night before so it was nice to replace my grotty clothes with something clean. As I did my laundry I recalled the comments made by a friend of mine, when she moved to the USA. She was astounded at the size of all the appliances; everything seemed to be at least 1/3 larger than in New Zealand. As I surveyed the nearly empty washing machine after depositing my measly offering of clothes, it did seem to be excessively large, at least for my needs.

I packed up my gear and took my bike down to the bike shop as I had noticed the rear tyre slightly flat. Thank goodness it hadn't burst when I was racing to get into town Friday night.

Ernie, the local bike mechanic, was very helpful. He had some tyre liners in stock so we removed the tyres (I helped) to install them. I commented that the bike vibrated after my fixing the tyres so he checked the new inner tube and found it was too large. He kindly swapped it for one of the correct size. It might seem strange but after 1000 km on a bike you know its every sound and movement. I bought two spare inner tubes as well as replacing the rear one I patched. At \$2.50 per tube it seemed a good investment.

Ernie made a few minor adjustments to the bike. We were both surprised that after travelling so far with such a load the spokes didn't need retensioning and that the wheels were still true. A testament to the quality of the bike. After lubricating the chain and gears to remove a frustrating squeak, I got some spare parts and was ready to go. The total cost was \$20 which was much less than I anticipated. Money well spent.

I cycled back to the hotel to collect my gear and once I had loaded the bike found that the front tyre was flat! I pumped it up but it wouldn't hold the air – at least with my gear on the bike – for more than 20 metres. Ho hum. I wheeled the bike back to the bike shop (about 1 km), while taking as much of the load as I could on my arms. Very tiresome work. I parked it inside the doors for safety and took off the front wheel which is the one Ernie had done. He was very surprised when I handed it to him. There was a queue of parents with kids bikes to be fixed so I knew it would take a while.

I wandered up the road to a restaurant where I sat in a commodious booth. Not having eaten since lunch yesterday I was hungry so I ordered blueberry pancakes with strawberries on top, scrambled eggs and orange juice. I didn't appreciate that this restaurant gave HUGE servings, even by American standards, so I was overwhelmed when presented with a large dinner plate containing about 50 mm thick pancakes which covered the entire size of the plate. The eggs were also quite large. I ate the eggs and slowly worked my way through the pancakes while reading the newspaper. Even though I was hungry I only managed about half of them. I wonder if others leave as much food on their plates? Probably not ...

Ernie had finished the tyre when I returned and sheepishly admitted that he had pinched the tube in two places when he put the wheel back together. It's easy to do but I was glad it was his wheel and not

mine! I stopped off at the local grocery store to buy some fruit, again nothing fresh so bought a tin, and then it was on my way north.

One of the great aspects to cycle touring is that you can go wherever the fancy takes you. To that end I changed my plans from going east to the Great Basin park, and instead decided to head north to Wendover. From Wendover I would head east to Salt Lake City. This would let me see the Great Salt Lake.

An advantage of this route was that it took me between two sets of hills instead of my normal pattern of cycling across the hills going west to east. To further enhance my life, there was a tail wind and a very slight downgrade as I travelled north along the Steptoe Valley. With light traffic (it was Sunday) and a wide shoulder what more could one ask for?

I headed towards McGill which was the first town north of Ely. Once a prosperous mining town, it was now in decline with abandoned houses, wrecked cars and a general air of neglect. That seems to be the story for a number of towns in Nevada; boom and bust. I stopped at a museum which was once the local drug store—or chemist to most of the rest of the world.

It was opened at the beginning of the century and run by a few people until the 1980's when the elderly woman owner decided to close it. What she did was basically lock the door and walk away, leaving all the stock inside. The family bequeathed it as a museum to the county and it is now run as such. It was fascinating to see shaving cream, vitamins and other products that I once used—and to check the old prices! Also interesting to see products which once were common but no longer exist, alongside timeless staples.

The manager was very friendly and explained the history. He said that they have medicine bottles unopened dating back to the 1920s

along with prescriptions, banking records, etc. There was even a soda fountain – the sort of thing that was popular during the first half of the century. The fellow indicated that it was still working and he made Coke and Root Beer sodas.

As a company town, McGill was essentially owned by the now defunct copper mining company. To that end they owned all the housing and the staff paid only a few dollars rental per month. The company provided all the materials for the school and there were some amazing band uniforms on display in the drug store. They even owned the local shop which supplied the town. There was a level of control which people would find unacceptable today. For example, if a kid got in trouble with the police the first question the police asked was for the father's company number. The father was called in to the company managers and told to sort his kid out or he would lose his job, and thus their house and everything else. Needless to say the kids were usually sorted out quite quickly. Harmony was also maintained by providing housing along ethnically separated areas.

From McGill I continued north. I was able to travel along at a good rate of knots, often up to 40 km/h. My map indicated there were no towns for another 80 km after Ely so I was pleased when I came upon a shop which marked the location of the Pony Express trail. At the rest stop across the road I found a plaque which commemorated the Pony Express as well as giving a bit of the history which I found fascinating.



The Pony Express is quite famous in North America, and yet it lasted for only 14 months. It was founded to move mail from St. Joseph, Missouri to Sacramento, California and was operated using horses which were placed at set distances along the route. Mail was carried at a cost of \$5 per ounce and the riders rode flat out and travelled very lightly, with only a revolver for protection. It was dangerous as the country was still occupied by marauding Indians who attacked the riders and the staging posts where the horses were held. The riders covered the distance in only 10 days. They were often young boys, with several only aged 15. One of the riders was named William Cody who later became famous as Buffalo Bill. He set a record by riding 320 miles in 23 hours exhausting 10 horses. And that was when he was 15! Today's video game kids would be hard pressed to match that.

Across the road was a bar and gas [petrol] station which I visited to fill my water bottles and have a break. Even though it was the middle of nowhere, the place was packed with people filling out forms. I sat at the bar and asked for a fruit juice. No. Mineral water. No. In the end they offered me a Mountain Dew which I used to enjoy as a kid

so I tried that. Big mistake! I have no idea how people can drink these concoctions regularly. Too sweet and caffeine laden for me.

Jane and her husband Bob explained that every year there is a Pony Express get together where riding enthusiasts ride along the original trails. I asked them what it was like and Bob pulled out a photo of Jane on a horse going up a steep, rocky grade. Wow. She commented that the trails are worse in some places. I'll stay on my bike.

We chatted about my travels and I tried to explain the problem I had with distances seeming to be much further than I expected. They said that it was a common problem in the desert as did several others there. Bob said that he was in the artillery and when training in the desert they could load an 8" howitzer with a maximum charge, fire it, and see where it hit in the distance. Probably 20 miles. I'd believe it ...

I went and admired the horses. They were almost all white. I asked a woman with only one hand why, and she explained with great enthusiasm that rides like these require almost exclusively Arab horses as opposed to other breeds. Arabs have great stamina due to a preponderance of slow-twitch muscles as opposed to thoroughbred race horses which have fast twitch muscles. This gives them great endurance for riding days on end. This ride would be 10-20 miles daily for five days through the mountains so endurance was critical.



It was all very interesting and the proprietor bade me farewell and good cycling. They had only bought the place 10 days ago and I wished them well in their new venture. It was then down the road for another 50 km to the day's destination – Legas Station.

This was a contrast to the Pony Express station insofar as the proprietors were the least friendly people I had encountered so far on my trip. I ate a sandwich and an orange juice sitting in the shop. It was fascinating to look at the breadth of items on display. This was the only shop for 80-100 km in any direction so they sold everything from tools to wiper blades to medications. I bought a good but dated map of Utah.

As I was leaving, a car drove up towing the wreck in the following photo.



Driven by two fireman from Arizona, and a friend from Ely, they were returning from Idaho where they had bought the wreck from a farmer who had it parked in his field. A 1936 three window Ford, they asked me what I thought the value of the wreck was. I fell over when they said that once complete it would be valued at \$50-100,000! What surprised me was that they were not planning to restore it to its original state but rather make it into a hot rod. In fact, cars that were in their original state are now being transformed to hot rods. This is not only to fulfil the fantasies of the baby boomer generation, but because unlike the originals, it results in vehicles which start every time, can turn corners, and can stop. Each hot rod is unique and reflects the ideas of the owner's dream machine.

They told me of a camping spot at a watering hole where wild mustangs visited, and as I entered the hills I saw several Mustangs near the road. There was no traffic and no people. So tranquil. I found the water hole and took stock of the situation. I felt really good and having only travelled 100 km felt like riding on. This would mean crossing a 2000 metre pass around dark and then having the final run to Wendover, but given the almost total absence of traffic I

wasn't concerned. There was also a 3/4 moon so I knew there would be adequate light. I decided to press on and it was the right decision.

As dusk settled over the desert it brought a tranquillity that is impossible to describe. The cicadas filled the air with their chirping, almost drowning out bird calls. In the distance Mustangs roamed free. With about five vehicles per hour there was little to detract from the moment. As I ascended the mountains I passed through a valley with golden grass swaying in the setting sun.

I crossed the White Horse Pass just after dark and the scene changed again. If you've never been away from city lights, you can't appreciate just how much light the moon gives. I turned off my headlight (leaving on my rear light) and followed my moon shadow down the road. The old Cat Stevens song 'I'm being followed by my moon shadow' ran through my mind.

Eventually I wound my way out of the mountains and on to the plains. I aimed towards the lights of Wendover through the dark countryside. The town has a number of casinos and the neon lights were quite impressive. I was very hungry but since it was 11 p.m. on Sunday most eateries were closed. I eventually found an Arby's restaurant and loaded up on carbohydrates.

I entered the first hotel across the road but it was resplendent with slot machines and gamblers! There was no vacancy so I tried next door (without a casino) and found a room. I called New Zealand to sort out some things and after midnight crashed. It was a long, but good day.

## **Day 14: Wendover NV to Tooele Junction UT - 164 km**

I spent the first part of the morning dealing with business. When I checked out I found I was not 10 minutes late in leaving, but one hour and ten minutes late! It turned out that part of Nevada is on

Mountain time instead of Pacific time. Very confusing ... but they didn't make a deal of it.

The route to Salt Lake City entails cycling along the shoulder of the interstate, there is no other route. However, when I got to the interstate on-ramp, it said no bicycles! I cycled back to Wendover and found a policeman who kindly called the Utah highway patrol and confirmed it was OK for me to cycle on the highway. It seems that I had to go along through Wendover and then join the highway where town ends.

The policeman was standing near a monument to the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The crew trained in this area due to its isolation.

I recalled the debate in 1995 over whether it was really necessary to drop the bomb. I had read quite extensively on the subject and couldn't believe that many people viewed it as an unnecessary act of barbarism, claiming that the Japanese were about to surrender. They didn't seem to appreciate that it was only after a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki that they surrendered. The Americans expected to have to mount a sea assault and were planning on huge casualties. From their experience in the Pacific they had concluded that they needed a 3:1 numerical advantage to win a battle; for Japan it would be 1:1 so there was a probability (not possibility) of failure. That this assault was rendered unnecessary justified to them the use of the atom bomb.

This was made all the more personal in 1998 when I visited Corregador Island in Manila and spoke with an American tourist. His father had been slated to be in the first assault troops to invade Japan and still had the special patch they were given with a lightning bolt headed for Japan. He said his dad was under no delusions that he

probably wouldn't have survived an invasion and was therefore completely behind dropping the bombs. But I digress yet again ...

As I cycled out of town, I passed rows of casinos, and pawn shops that would take anything, even cars. The photo below is a typical example of one of the casinos.



I hunkered down for a long cycle. 114 miles to Salt Lake City according to the road sign. First I had to pass through the Bonneville Salt Flats. What a strange sight met my eyes! In the distance shimmered a white surface like snow, yet it was too hot to be snow. After an hour I stopped to investigate the flats more closely. It was like walking on a crusty surface of snow; my feet sank in and left a impression. Boy was it ever desolate!

My map showed several towns but when I reached the first, Knolls, it was devoid of services. This concerned me in case the other towns had the same problem. However, after about 80 km I came across a rest stop with a fountain so I replenished my dwindling water supply. The place was very windy, but it was a tailwind so I didn't mind.



I pressed on and sometime later a vehicle pulled over and the driver got out to chat. Her name was Wanda and some years ago she had cycled Oregon to New Jersey in three months—when she was 55. She just loved it and of course I could relate. She was on her way to Colorado for the summer from Nevada where she lived. Her bike was in the back of her utility so she was still at it. We discussed cycling before she headed into the white haze. One of the best aspects to cycle touring is the way one meets so many interesting people.

The next town on my map was abandoned, but a good place to stop and consume a soggy submarine bought in Wendover for just such a situation.

By now I had travelled 150 km and felt I was making good time when suddenly I was hit from the side by a cold blast of wind. It almost threw me off the road and down the embankment. I had never experienced anything like it before or since. I tried leaning the bike over by 10 degrees towards the wind but it shifted to a slight headwind and I was down to my lowest gear as I struggled to make progress. To make life even more challenging, I entered a construction site, wobbling all over the road due to the wind.

Fortunately I was able to cycle on the new, and deserted section of road out of harms way. It was getting late and the sun was going down over the hills in the distance.

I averaged about 8 km/h for the last 5 km due to the fierce head wind. Tooele Junction boasted one motel which was all I needed, and I checked in, totally exhausted. I listened to the weather report on the news. Winds gusting to 75 km/h so I was glad to be indoors and not cycling or camping.

### **Day 15: Tooele Junction UT to Salt Lake City UT - 50 km**

The last two days had taken their toll so I indulged in a bit of a sleep in for a change. When I went outside in the morning I was met by a headwind, but nothing compared to yesterday.

I headed next door to the truck stop with a 'Country Buffet' restaurant. Too late for breakfast, their lunch looked worthwhile, with a nice salad bar, lots of vegetables, and mashed potatoes. I was famished and I certainly ate my money's worth! In fact, looking at the quantity of food I and some of my fellow patrons consumed, I don't see how they can turn a profit.

It was probably 1:30 p.m. when I hit the road and I was back on the Interstate. The 'Great Salt Lake' lay massively to my left. Apparently it is the largest salt lake in the Northern Hemisphere, and is a maximum of only 11 metres deep. There were a number of sail boats about and it felt as if I was by the ocean with the salty smell and water to the horizon.

I followed the highway almost to the airport when suddenly cyclists were no longer allowed. I veered off at the exit and the new road soon became what could best be described as a track. The surface was broken and potholed and then unsurfaced. I found myself at the Salt

Lake City land fill site with a long queue of trucks waiting to go in or just leaving. The road was wet, muddy and bumpy. My bike and I were sprayed with muck so I was not in the best of moods, or very presentable. Welcome to Salt Lake City. This detour added about 10 km to my ride but eventually after plenty of dead reckoning I found myself in the centre of town at 'Temple Square'.

Salt Lake City is the home of the Mormon church, with the centre of town comprised of a 10 acre block housing their temple. I had seen photos of it at night and I wanted to see it in real life. I was reading some inscriptions from the Bible and their founders when a young student missionary from Mongolia invited me to join an organised tour.

When the Mormons first settled here they had travelled from Missouri pushing carts. There were about 145 men, 3 women and 5 children. They laid out the city and immediately planted crops, but almost starved the first winter and the following year as their vital crop was inundated with a plague of grasshoppers. They fought the grasshoppers with fire, smoke, and even blankets but nothing would keep them away. When all seemed lost, a flock of 3000 seagulls arrived and gorged themselves on the bugs and saved the crops. There is a monument (probably the only one in the world) dedicated to seagulls, and the seagull is the state bird of Utah.

The temple is an impressive structure to say the least. It reaches into the sky with many spires and is beautifully symmetrical. The 2500 kg granite blocks were brought 20 miles by ox cart. With the left-over stones they built the meeting house. I enjoyed listening to a piano competition with a 14 year old Korean girl who left me breathless with her talent and abilities at such a young age.

The third building created by the founders is the tabernacle, home of the famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir. It was not much to look at

outside but acoustically it was incredibly well designed. They claimed that you can hear someone tearing paper at the front if you are sitting in the back row. When they built it they wanted it to look like oak on the inside so they manually painted grains in all the wood! The original seats are still there and they claim in some places you can see finger prints.



The tabernacle has the 12<sup>th</sup> largest pipe organ in the world and someone was practising hymns. Magic. The choir performs every Sunday and the tabernacle, which can hold 6500, is usually full. Members are selected for a five year term and can have a maximum of 4 terms before enforced retirement. There is a long waiting list to join the choir.

The final stop on the tour was a visitors centre. There were some very well executed paintings of Bible scenes, from the Old and New Testaments, and as one ascended a circular ramp there was a large statue of Jesus and some of his sayings which were being played in different languages. At the end of the tour they shared a verse from the book of Mormon and asked if any of us were interested in further

information. None were but I stayed behind to talk with the two tour guides.

I was interested to find out that they only used the King James version of the Bible, but they really couldn't explain why. I was intrigued since I have an interest in Bible history and translations. It was all very friendly and they didn't mind sharing their faith. In fact, I found it humbling to see so many young people in their 20's quite willingly serving their church as volunteers and being so friendly and helpful to the visitors. Makes one think of ones own spiritual life.

Across the road I bought a sandwich and a smoothie. The latter was very nice but, like most servings in America, HUGE. It was an effort to finish it. I then collected my bike from in front of the bus station. I asked a taxi driver where I could find a motel and he directed me to one near by. I went and got the last room and then cycled back into town to wander around. I later returned to the room, and crashed. Salt Lake City was interesting, but I couldn't wait to head into the country again. I'm definitely not a city person.

### **Day 16: Salt Lake City UT to near Heber City - 55 km**

I had a late start once again—seems to be a pattern whenever I stay in motels. I usually make some phone calls and work on the web site that I uploaded my journal to, which seems to take up a lot of time.

I cycled south of the city and enjoyed a cycle lane for part of the way. I was aiming for a cycle shop which was quite easy to find since the city is laid out in a grid pattern. Many roads are very wide, based on the turning radius of an ox-cart, and on one section I counted 8 lanes plus a turning lane. Needless to say it was a bit scary at times!

The bike shop had what I was looking for, namely a new seat. Even though my bags were already full, I managed to squeeze the old seat

in just in case the new one wasn't comfortable enough. The new one isn't as nice to sit on as my old one, but it does reduce numbness in certain important areas so I resolved to stay with it.

As I headed south, I was again approaching the mountains. Unlike other places I've visited, there are no foothills between the plain and the sudden mountains rearing up. I had been advised to travel 'Big Cottonwood Canyon' over the mountain. This decision was based on the fact that the northern route was a motorway, so no bikes, and the other option was further south. The canyon entrance suddenly loomed in front of me and it did not look auspicious.

As I cycled into the canyon massive rock walls towered high above me. The road was very steep in places, over 10% grades. How do I describe the day? Three words come to mind, up/up/up. At a rest stop I was told that the pass was over 3000 metres. Salt Lake city lies at 1500 metres. Now that may not sound like much, but given the distance covered it works out at an average grade of 5% which took me 5 hours to climb. That's a hard day.



What surprised me was the number of expensive houses along the road. They appeared to be holiday cottages or ski chalets and few were occupied, being summer.

I found myself heading far into the mountains. The road appeared to end in a circle of mountains with ski-fields nearby. As I approached what I thought was the top I spied another road going up to the left which went over the pass. As I huffed and puffed ever upwards, I came across a number of parked cars. A popular pass time is to cycle down hill only by using two drivers and two cars. Leaving one car at the bottom they drive to the top and then hoon downhill, driving to the top with the car at the bottom to collect the one at the top. Sure beats doing it my way! It was a long way down...



The paved road ended and it was very hard cycling. All I could do was keep on going at the lightening pace of 5 km/h knowing that eventually it would end. And end it did. I ascended to a parking area and found myself at the summit. Exhausted but exhilarated at the views.

The downhill run was without the usual wheeeee factor. It was unsealed and very rough with large stones. I bounced my way down until I got a puncture of my front tyre which was OK since it gave me an excuse to call it a day. I camped in a meadow amongst birch trees. Lots of mosquitoes but otherwise an ideal place. And so ended a rather hard day! I snuggled down in my sleeping bag wearing my polartec trousers and jacket since it was quite cold. I was still over 3000 metres.

## **Day 17: Near Heber City to Duchesne UT - 141 km**

I awoke with the sun shining on my tent and after replacing my punctured inner tube, continued down to Heber City.

The road was still unsealed sporting strategically placed sharp stones the size of one's fist. It was difficult to keep control in some places while avoiding the potentially damaging stones. By the time I got to the bottom my hands were aching from 45 minutes of holding the brakes.

I continued down and down and finally reached a sealed portion of road which meant wheeee time. Now this was life!. All too soon I found myself on the valley floor which was about 2000 metres below the pass I crossed.

Compared to California and Nevada, Utah has a pathetic dearth of signs. In the other states as I ascended the mountains there were regular signs every 300 metres keeping me posted of my progress. The signs also indicated when you crossed a peak and what its elevation was. It didn't matter if I was out back of beyond; there were always signs telling me the way. Not in Utah. When I reached the valley floor I had to dead reckon it to Heber City and only after asking two people did I find my way.

I had been informed the previous day Heber City was a non-event, and nearby Park City was the place to be. Apparently Park City is more upmarket than Vail or Aspen which, if you've ever been to those places, seems absolutely incomprehensible. I was told that there was an abundance of multi-million dollar houses and it was a very chic and trendy place. Well, Park City must be something else since I found Heber City to be quite an attractive area. There were many fancy housing estates under way with houses which must be in the million dollar plus range. I even saw a mock castle. I found it gauche, but someone obviously liked it.

There was a delightful sports field in Heber City which I stopped at and refilled my water bottles. I watched several kids on the jungle gym having a whale of a time, chaperoned by their happily chatting mothers. It kind of sounds strange, but this is the image of 'middle America' which is quite heart warming.

From there it was down Highway 40 and back into the mountains. I enjoyed a tailwind for much of the way, although it occasionally gusted from the sides and the grade wasn't too long.

Besides having the most pathetic sign postings, Utah also boasts the worst roads as can be seen in the following photo. Anyone for patching? I wonder at which point the pavement reaches the stage where it can no longer be patched. This reminded me of some of the characters who seem to populate Nevada's patching gangs. In more than one instance I saw their initials in the road or the 'Kilroy Was Here' sign. The latter is a nose, top part of a head and fingers looking over a fence and dates back to World War II where instead of saying 'Inspected by Kilroy' the inspector drew the sign. But I digress ...



The road continued up the valley. There was a stream on one side and several camping sites. The grade wasn't too bad, basically a constant 4% which lasted for about 25 km.

I came across a broken down vehicle with a body under it so I stopped and offered to help. We worked on it for about 30 minutes and proved that there was a problem with the fuel getting into the carburettor. The vehicle had two fuel tanks so I left him switching the fuel lines over to get fuel into the primary tank. From there it was onwards and upwards until I reached the summit at Daniel's Pass which was 2660 metres. Compared with yesterday it had been a fairly pain free climb of 630 metres. Amazing what a difference a moderate to steep grade makes. At the top nestled some very nice rustic shops with carved bears for trim.

I still had about 80 km to Dushesne and it was a lot of up and down. I passed a shining blue reservoir offset against the green of the alpine meadows. The road snaked along the northern side of the lake. This was followed by a great downhill run through the brilliantly red canyons towards Fruitland. The stream to the right was dammed in places by beavers and I could see their lodges. When I stopped for a

rest at the roadside several chipmunks came up begging for food (I didn't share).

I continued on to Fruitland with high hopes of finding some orchard amongst the barren desert land around me. When I arrived I was reminded of the false advertising done in naming that other barren wasteland of Greenland. Fruit? Ha! There weren't even any trees ... just desert scrub as far as I could see. However, there was a phone booth, so I caught up with some things to do with a project in New Zealand before moving on.

As I approached Dushesne I saw a magical turquoise lake which when set against the browns of the desert was just incredible. I was tempted to go for a swim, but it was late. After buying some provisions I found a room at a motel since there was nowhere to camp and settled in for the night

## **Day 18: Dushesne UT to Vernal UT - 96 km**

How I hate headwinds. And today was the day of headwinds ...

During my travels American supermarkets proved to be a continuing source of amazement. There is a huge array of food—or what passes for food—much of which I marvel that anyone would buy. You are presented with a plethora of choices with every item seeming to have innumerable brands. The problem is that very little of it is even remotely healthy for you. What about the health food sections you ask? Yes, they are an option, but only if they exist and then there are slim pickings. In one market which had about 15 aisles, each at least 30 metres long, there was about two shelves covering a length of 2 metres for health food; and this was devoted in a large measure to speciality jams. The situation was better in California and on the east coast, but not much in between.

While I was at the supermarket, a female UPS driver came over and commented how impressed she was with cross-country cyclists like myself, although sometimes she said she wanted to throw us a tow line to give us a hand. I said that was cheating, but must admit the thought has entered my mind more than once, and later that day it would enter it continually. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The proprietor of the motel had told me the day before that it was "up and down" to Vernal and he was to be proved correct. Having conquered so many mountains I wasn't overly worried, although when I hit the road I had reason to rue my confidence. There was a strong 10-20 km/h wind from the NE which just so happened to be the direction I was travelling in. Thus, my 'easy' 100 km ride turned into an absolute nightmare since I was to have a strong headwind for the entire way. Ho hum.

The terrain was rolling, and to the left I could see the mountains which are the Indian reservation. The valley was well irrigated and presented a verdant green contrast to the dry, dusty hills.

After 30 km I reached the thriving metropolis of Myton. I followed a sign proclaiming 'town centre' in the hope of finding a sheltered café where I could escape from the wind for a while. No such luck. I came upon a Post Office, a Mormon Church, and nothing else. A young boy rode up and asked if I had come from another state by bicycle. He was impressed when I said San Francisco but then asked a profound question: 'what are you doing in Myton?'. By that stage I wondered the same. I returned to the highway, cycled a few km and had my break sitting on a guard rail by the side of the road. Not exactly sheltered but I felt better after having my banana and energy bar. From there it was along Highway over a couple of hills and into Roosevelt. The wind by this stage was at the %\$&\$% level.

There is nothing more disheartening than being on a 4% downgrade peddling like mad and only doing 10 km/h. It is just not fair. Roosevelt reminded me of that other wind swept and bereft place, Tonopah NV in that there were few trees and a dry, barren look. Of course my judgement was probably being affected by the wind. I cycled into town and found a Pizza Hut. They lost money on me with their all you can eat salad bar. I've been surprised how few restaurants have salad bars but when I find one do I ever enjoy it.

As I sat in the restaurant watching the trees sway in the wind, it took a great deal of determination to head back outside. I had a further 50 km to go and it was not going to be easy. But when the going gets tough, the stupid get going, so I strapped on my helmet, put on my jacket and peddled into the wind.

The road wound through a fascinating geological area: the Unitah Basin. This is a depression between a long E-W mountain chain and more mountains to the south. Much of the land is an Indian reservation, although it appeared what little good land there was belonged to others. It was depressing to pass by the failed commercial enterprises along the road side and see the 'Indian Police' (who looked to be Europeans) racing about in their cars with sirens blaring. One aspect of the Unitah Basin is that it is rich in petroleum products. They produce over 1 million barrels of oil per year and are the sole source of the mineral 'Gilsonite'.

Gilsonite is a black 'rock' which has a very high oil content. It looks like black marble and is very brittle. They use it for an array of purposes including as an additive to asphalt; coating of engine moulds; as a type of pitch; etc. It is really quite versatile and a valuable commodity. I chatted with a fellow who worked as a miner. He explained there was a vein running at a 45 degree angle and small 0.75 metre jackhammers are used to loosen it. A large suction pipe at the floor level sucks in all the rock and funnels it down to the silo for

storage. Because it is so brittle, by the time it reaches the silo the largest size is that of a fist.

Some areas were irrigated and the farmers were bailing hay. I watched a fellow loading these bales on the back of a truck. He must have been incredibly strong as he just picked them up and threw them on the bed of the truck where two boys in their early teens stacked them. It took both of them to manoeuvre the bail into place!

After having such a bad day I thought that things couldn't get much worse. I was wrong. After about 80 km I hit a grade. It was about 5% but with the headwind felt like a lot more. In my lowest gear I began to ascend. And ascend. And ascend. After 7 km it was no longer a joke. After 10 km I lost my temper. By now it was 8 p.m. and I was tired of this unrelenting wind. However, it was either going to be me or the wind who would win out and I intended that it would be me so with my head down and teeth gritted I pushed on over the summit and down to Vernal.

I was so tired that I decided to treat myself to a motel. At \$55 I changed my mind and settled on the KOA campground which was still expensive at \$17 but at least had very hot showers. I collapsed into my tent just as it started to rain very lightly. My knees were sore but I had made it ... And tomorrow was a rest day.

## **Day 19: Vernal UT - Rest Day 22 km**

I awoke after a 10 hour sleep which was obviously needed. The only legacy of yesterday's travails was slightly sore knees—it was the first time on my trip that I had really felt them acting up. Given that I have had four operations on my right knee I didn't think I was doing too badly. Also a testimony to my good bike (and Dr. Bull from Canada!).

It was a lovely sunny morning with scarcely a breath of wind. After another long hot shower I dressed and tossed my bags into the tent before locking the zipper. No, it wouldn't keep a thief away, but would deter inquisitive young children of which there were plenty.

I had called the local Seventh-Day Adventist church from Dushesne and found out where it was and what times they had services from their answer phone. I cycled into town and found the church but nobody was about. I returned 10 minutes before it was due to start and it was still closed. Inauspicious. I called the number on the sign—one of the few churches I've found openly advertising their times and giving contact numbers—and spoke with someone who informed me there was a camp meeting in Colorado so church was closed today. Ho hum. I was quite disappointed but such is life when travelling on a bike.

I decided to explore the 'Field Museum' and look at the natural history of the area. Vernal is the jumping off point for Dinosaur park which is an area of an abundance of dinosaur bones and fossils. The museum displayed a large number of bones and fossils as well as describing in great detail the history of the exploration.

The area was first explored by Europeans in the mid-1800's, and a number of travellers noted the presence of fossils. This brought in palaeontologists who excavated fossils and bones, something which continues to this day. I loved the story of one of these fellows who was captured by a Sioux raiding party. When they examined his possessions and found all he had was a hammer and bags of stones and bones they decided that he was crazy and let him go. Working in a temperature range from -40 degrees C in winter to +40 in summer, I would agree with the Indians diagnosis.

The museum had a small park with life sized models of the dinosaurs. I was interested to learn how they were created. The

sculptor visited a number of museums and took photos and measurements of the skeletons. He then formed a 1/12<sup>th</sup> scale model which was true to the bones and in the position that he wanted it. This model was then 'sliced' into pieces, each representing a cross-section of the model and projected onto plywood by a factor of 12 so that they were life-sized. The plywood was then cut and assembled to make the full sized model. Quite a feat and the results were impressive.

From there I visited the 'Daughters of Utah Pioneers' museum which had an array of artefacts from the early pioneers. Boy were they tough. Two elderly ladies ran the place and we engaged in a long chat about the Mormon religion. The museum was located across from a Mormon Temple and Vernal was once almost entirely Mormon, although now they are barely a majority. They have some fascinating beliefs.

I returned to the campground and read for a while and enjoyed a nice quiet afternoon. Just what I needed before tomorrows run into Colorado. This next week would make or break the trip: I need to cross the Rocky Mountains at over 4000 metres.

## **18 June - Day 20: Vernal UT to Craig CO - 207 km**

The day started with a sunny sky and no wind. I needed to do my laundry and since they didn't open until 8 a.m. I knew it wouldn't be an early start. I used the opportunity to repack my bags, shifting the load between some of the panniers. I was also able to wash off some of the encased mud I picked up on my way to Salt Lake City.

Once again I marvelled at the size of the washing machine and my meagre offering. While the laundry was on I saw the weather forecast: not good. A storm was blowing in from the NW. I was fascinated to realise that the channel was dedicated entirely to

weather. The 'Weather Channel' gave a very detailed description of what I should expect in the next few days. Most useful but definitely only appropriate in a huge country like the USA.

I chatted with the owner of the KOA campground who turned out to be an ex-computer boffin who parachuted out of corporate America. He told how he worked for Sperry which was then taken over by Burroughs and then Lockheed Defence and then... He claimed he worked for 10 companies without ever changing desks. In the end he decided the stress and pressure wasn't worth it and took early retirement and hasn't regretted it. I could relate to the need to escape from the stress of work—hence my cycle trip.

I cycled east on Highway 40 past 'Dinosaur National Monument'. This has been made a national park due to all the dinosaur fossils. The area is a desert with towns about 50 km apart, which corresponds to a day's ride on horseback.

I came to the town of Jensen which was founded by Danes. I found a historical marker that referred to a ferry crossing the river for about 40 years. It described the busiest day in 1909 when the ferry made 86 trips ferrying Ute Indians fleeing towards the Dakotas. The bareness of the country meant many would probably have died during the trip.

I passed some lovely coloured gullies and as I approached I startled five deer. Later on I saw them descending into the gully. I wondered where they found water in such a harsh environment.

Instead of calling this road Highway 40 it should really be called 'Dead Deer Drive'. Every 5-10 km there would be a dead deer by the side of the road in varying degrees of decay. Sometimes there would be the white, bleached bones; other times they were so fresh that the

strong smell of death still lingered. They are beautiful animals, such a waste.

As I approached the eastern border of Utah I followed a lovely mountain range on my left. I stopped to read a historical marker. It described a visit to the area by Spaniards in 1776. For those historically challenged, that is when the 13 colonies on the Atlantic coast were trying to form themselves into a country. The Spaniards came north from New Mexico trying to find a route to their colonies in California. They rode through the desert and reached Provo Utah before deciding to head back again as it was too late in the year to continue on to California. They called this area 'Musket Shot' since they found two pools of sweet drinking water a musket shot distance apart. How did they find them? They were following a 'well worn' Indian trail! It is a pity that the Indians haven't been given more credit for their explorations.



As I left Utah I took the following photo under the sign. There was no welcome sign to Utah when I entered so this had to suffice. My lasting memory of Utah will be the winds and these had a final farewell for me; a gust blew my bike over just after this photo was taken!



In one sense it was auspicious. I had a very mild headwind most of the way but it now turned into a tailwind. So I entered Colorado with a tailwind.

The sign which welcomed me to Colorado read "Colourful Colorado". Yeah right. Only if you consider the desert to be colourful. Don't get me wrong, the desert is beautiful but western Colorado is pretty bleak.

I stopped at the Visitor's Centre in Dinosaur which was about 15 km from the State Line. It offered great amenities with friendly and helpful staff. I asked for advice on the road to take but they were unable to give me any detailed comments. I enjoyed lunch on the picnic table and read a sports paper on climbing in Yosemite. Wow.

Talk about brave (crazy) people. After a check in call with my parents—my mum must have been tired as she wasn't sleeping with worry – I headed east.

There was a storm catching up with me and the skies were dark and foreboding. I used the tail wind to keep up my speed. Eventually I stopped to don my rain gear as I was certain I wouldn't escape a soaking. I ended up needing my rain gear because of being sand blasted. Let me explain. There were sand dunes on the sides of a cutting I passed through and the strong winds were picking up the sand and blowing it along the road in sheets.

I came to a long straight road and helped by the tail wind reached 87 km/h on the downhill section. My goal was to make it to Maybell and I reached there about 19:00 after travelling 150 km. I found a gas station which was also the local shop. I scoffed some chocolate to recharge my energy and chatted with the proprietor. It was interesting to see the range of goods available in these small country shops and how they cater for everyone. She said that a Japanese cyclist passed through the previous month cycling around the world! From his broken English it seemed he estimated 11 months. Wow.

The proprietor told me that the road to Craig was about 55 km further on. Even though it was late in the day I decided to go for it. My reasoning was that when one has a tail wind one makes the most of it! I also felt good even though I had cycled over 150 km. So onwards I went along the valley.

I saw a number of rivers and many farms. There must be good white water rafting in the area as most of the traffic about 8 p.m. were vehicles towing rafts. Not that there was much traffic! That is one of the nice aspects to taking these secondary roads, once one is away from towns there is hardly any traffic.

Eventually, the sun set and gave me a lovely display. I cycled a further 20 km in the dark which was fine except when the oncoming drivers would not dip their beams.

I made it to Craig at about 21:40 and cycled into town and found a submarine sandwich. Having travelled 207 km I was very hungry. I treated myself to a motel room to enjoy a hot bath and a comfortable bed. The proprietor was Polish and she told how the previous week one of her customers was walking across the USA and showed me the newspaper article. The fellow was 62 and walking 25 miles per day with his son. His wife drove a van and provided regular water. She said that she was impressed with both of us since we are following our dreams. When she was a child her dream was to learn English and to ride a horse. She has done the first and last year tried skiing as an alternative to the horse. I said she should go ride a horse! We should always try and fill our dreams.

So ended the day ... the next few days would be extra hard as I cross the Continental Divide, but I was ready for it!

### **19 June - Day 21: Craig CO to Steamboat Springs CO - 73 km**

I had a fantastic sleep and woke up at 9 a.m. refreshed, but not invigorated. These very long days take a lot out of me but fortunately today was to be a short day of about 75 km.

I finally got on the road just after 11 a.m. Then it was along highway 40 towards Steamboat Springs. This part of Colorado is much more scenic than further east because of all the water and rivers and rolling farmland.

I must comment on a unique (?) form of American advertising: the repeating billboard. For approximately 100 miles, every 2-3 miles, I had seen billboards from the same firm. Most were slightly different.

I knew that they sold boots for cowboys (and cowgirls), Levi's (shirts, overalls and pants), Stetsons (from \$4.99) etc. The advertising is quite effective since with not a lot else around one reflects upon what they are like and the range of their products. It reminded me of the trips I made as a child to Florida with my parents and we would see all these signs for places like the Lost Sea in Tennessee. The advertising would be on billboards, roofs, walls, anywhere. We kids would then bug our parents until they took us there. Highly effective.

I reached a milestone in the town of Hayden: 2000 km from the start. That is my record for cycle touring, my previous was just over 1500 km. I took the following photo and you can see that in spite of the distance I'm still smiling.



Between Hayden and Milner I stopped at yet another roadside historical marker. It commemorated the location of what was once two thriving coal mining communities. Today it is just a quiet river bend. It is hard to imagine how these towns were once the centre of people's lives. Now there is nothing to mark the spot except a small plaque. Shows how transitory things can be.

The road followed the Yampa River so the grades were not too steep. At one section there were cliffs on one side and only a narrow shoulder on the other, (but there was a guard-rail) so I peddled like mad to make it through.

As I approached Milner it began to rain heavily. I donned my rain gear and kept on peddling but became concerned when I saw lightening in the distance. I had planned that under such circumstances I would take shelter and it was a good plan, except there was nowhere to shelter! I hit the peddles and prayed that I would find a suitable spot and shortly after I came to a defile by the road. I parked my bike and sat against the bank and watched the show. Plenty of lightening which seemed to be quite close, but that was probably a figment of my imagination. The lightning show went on for a very long time but eventually the sky lightened. As I was getting cold, I decided to make a run for Milner which wasn't too far away.

I took shelter by the post boxes and a woman offered me an empty house in town but I declined as I wanted to reach Steamboat Springs. She told me that the storms usually blow over quickly and she also gave me the good news that it was largely downhill to Steamboat Springs – that was a nice change!

Sure enough the rain lightened so I got back in the saddle. It took me about an hour to get to Steamboat Springs and was I ever cold (and wet). It's a lovely town nestled at the bottom of a valley. I turned into the first Motel and within minutes was in a hot bath getting my core temperature up. Today was memorable in two ways. Not only did I pass the 2000 km mark, but it was also the first time I had rain.

## **20 June - Day 22: Steamboat Springs CO to Lake Granby CO - 143 km**

I'm glad that I stayed in the motel last night since I was awoken about 3 a.m. by very loud hail hitting the roof! Not a good night to be out in a small tent. The paper indicated that it was -2 degrees as well which would have been a bit on the cool side, although the same was forecast for this evening.

I think that this portion of the trip should be named 'Masochism and Extreme Masochism'. Let me explain...

Steamboat Springs is in the foothills of the final chain of the Rocky Mountains. At about 2200 metres, there is a 934 metre rise to the first pass over the Rocky Mountains, which also corresponds to the Continental Divide. At this point the water flows towards the Pacific Ocean in the west, or the Mississippi in the east. After this pass one has two options. There is a route north on 14 which is basically flat (or at least flat for the Rockies) or one can continue on 40 and then take 34 up to Estes Park. This alternative route entails a second minor crossing of the Continental Divide at 2924 metres, then a third crossing at 3254 m. However, this is not the final hurrah, as the road peaks at 3685 m, making it the highest road in the USA.

So given an easy or brutal route it is obvious which one I chose ... the brutal, what else? I got an early start and was out of the motel before 8. I was advised to go to 'Stakes' restaurant for breakfast and I was not miss-directed. I downed a delightful stack of hotcakes and some scrambled eggs which fuelled me for what was ahead. Steamboat was obviously geared towards the ski season. With the ski slopes ending practically in town it must be fantastic in winter.

As I cycled south from town I was presented with the mountains to the left and the road skirting them keeping to the flat as much as

possible. At about 9:30 a.m. I started ascending into the mountains. I soon found myself in a road construction zone which was great. I once again cycled in the closed lane which I really appreciated as there was a surfeit of trucks and RVs. Looking back to the valley was incredible. This really is a lovely part of the country.



The grade was long and steady, not too steep, so I was able to pedal at about 8 km/h upwards. A moderate wind from the west (where it is supposed to come from!) kept me company and for most of the time it was a tail or side wind which was infinitely preferable to a headwind.

It took me about 3.5 hours but I eventually reached the Continental Divide! 3 weeks and 2 hours after leaving San Francisco. The following photo is proof of this ...



Called 'Rabbit Ears Pass'—and don't ask me why since it didn't remind me of rabbit ears nor did I see any rabbits—it was at an elevation of 2850 metres. The wind howled from behind me (thank goodness!).

The area both before and after the Continental Divide was resplendent with alpine meadows. There were pine trees and the rich scent of pine everywhere. There is a tranquillity in these meadows that neither words or photos can convey. In places snow still lay and this added a lovely extra dimension to the colours. With the sun shining it really was beautiful.

I was soon on my downhill wheeeeeee run, but I tempered it by stopping frequently to admire the countryside. The mountains in the distance had a light sprinkling of snow and the whole area looked peaceful and it was just inspiring. I was so fortunate to be there and to be part of it on my bicycle; not passing through in a closed vehicle like all the others.

The second crossing of the Continental Divide at Muddy Pass was anti-climatic as it was at the end of a long downhill run and up a relatively short hill. I could see a long way into the distance to the final set of peaks that I would have to cross. Eventually the road bottomed out in a lovely valley with a river running along the valley floor. The abundance of water was evidenced by the mosquitoes who attacked me with great fervour when I halted to take a photo. Within seconds I had at least 6 of them on me so I was as quick as I could be. The farms did not have the barren look of their relatives in Eastern Colorado, although further along I noticed the hills were suffering from desertification.

Eventually I reached the town of Kremmling which was much larger than I expected. As with many of the towns in the area there appeared to be a surfeit of vacant shops, as well as much activity and people about so it apparently wasn't dying. I was feeling indulgent so I bought an ice cream. A friendly young woman chatted to me and was interested to hear that I was from New Zealand. She came from Chicago and was working on a nearby ranch but was very keen to go to New Zealand. She had gone as far as getting a book listing the organic farms in New Zealand so she could try and get a job! I lamented about the problems of being a vegetarian in the USA and she assured me that once I reached the East it would be much better. The West was still a meat eater's paradise—particularly if you've killed it yourself.

I decided to cycle on to Hot Sulphur Springs and found myself following the Colorado River. In fact, this was classified as a 'Scenic Drive' to the headwaters of the river.



Just before Hot Sulphur Springs, the river cut through an amazing gorge. A long train passed me as I entered the gorge and snaked its way along the other side of the river, far below the road. I noted that wire netting was suspended on a cantilever system on top of telephone poles to prevent rocks from falling on the track. It was the first train that I had seen and it would have pulled at least 30 cars with three locomotives. Very noisy, but trains are one of those things that I like to listen to as they always evoke an image of travelling.

Hot Sulphur Springs appeared to be the county seat and was quite a bustling little town. It boasted a tidy museum which was unfortunately closed. I stopped to get my water bottles filled and the woman at the shop was not at all helpful. I then checked out the restaurant and they offered a vegetarian stir fry which sounded nice. It was awful. The chef used several times too much soy sauce so that was the dominant flavour. Ho hum. I told him to ease off next time. At least they willingly filled my bottles which was a good thing as I needed lots of water after that meal!

By the time I finished dinner there was still over an hour to sunset so I decided to try to reach the campground at Lake Granby. It was

about 40 km so I would arrive after dark, but hopefully not too late. The road was fairly flat as it followed the river and I made good time. I thought I saw plenty of potential camping sites except for the regular notices to the effect 'Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted to the Full Extent of the Law'. Friendly folks in these parts. I learned later the notices were for fishing ... not tired cycle tourists. I passed a fellow changing a tyre who (thankfully) declined my offer of assistance as that would have made me extra late. Still, one must always offer.

At Granby I left Highway 40 and turned onto 34. This would take me up through Rocky Mountain Park. The sunset was absolutely magnificent. The chain of mountains ahead of me were bathed in red light. I gave up any hope of camping by the road when I saw that the fields were all waterlogged. Whether or not this was due to the heavy storm of the previous day I'm not sure, but there was standing water all along the side of the road. I was beginning to tire when I came across a sign for a camp site. It was Lake Granby. After cycling 1.5 km along the road, which included crossing the top of a dam, I came upon a very pleasant site. The 'Hosts' welcomed me and took my \$15 and we chatted a bit before I pitched my tent and collapsed into bed. A long but good day. Tomorrow was officially the first day of summer and the day I would conquer the Rockies.

## **21 June - Day 23: Lake Granby CO to Estes Park CO - 107 km**

Boy was I tired this morning. I just couldn't get up even though I had nine plus hours sleep. Yesterday's ride had obviously taken a lot more out of me than I anticipated. When I finally emerged blurry eyed from my tent I had trouble focusing my eyes. Not an auspicious day for an ascent to over 3800 metres ...

I munched a leisurely breakfast and watched fly fishing on Lake Granby. It appears to be a popular spot since the campground was

half-full even before the advent of summer. The camp warden came by and gave me some pineapple chunks to see me on my way “you’ll be needing all the energy you can get today” she said—and she was right! After breaking camp I retraced my steps across the dam and cycled back to Route 34. The area was relatively developed with plenty of cottages, shops and restaurants. This is obviously a popular tourist place. I had a chuckle at one restaurant that deserves an award for truth in advertising.

Let me explain. I’ve stayed at ‘Budget’ motels that have charged 50% more than was reasonable; ‘Quiet’ campgrounds where the noise of traffic keeps one awake; and come across a myriad of other situations where the truth was stretched to its limits. Well, this place advertised “Warm beer and lousy food”. Finally someone who is either honest or else is aiming at a clientele who want to prove them wrong.

Shortly after this I met another cyclist, Brent, who was just out for a day trip. He joined me and I enjoyed his company for most of the day. He was a Canadian working at a Christian youth camp near Fraser, south of here. He initially moved to Colorado as a teenager when his father, who was in the Canadian Air Force, was posted to Colorado Springs from Northern Alberta.

Now for those of you who don’t know that part of Canada the best way of describing it is six months of winter and six months of bad skiing. His dad apparently decided that having +10 degrees in the middle of winter at Colorado Springs was infinitely preferable to -40 degrees in Alberta so he stayed on and retired there. I can relate. Canada would be the best country in the world were it not for its terrible winters. That is one of the reasons that I originally went to New Zealand. Brent and I related stories of standing at the bus stop in winter banging our feet to try and keep warm and agreed that the temperate climates are much more to our liking.

We cycled up to Grand Lake and from there towards Rocky Mountain National Park. This is a large park in northern Colorado which is home to stunning scenery and many mountains. My mission today was to cross this range and from there enter the Great Plains.

For about the first 20 km of travelling that day it was flat to rolling. I was definitely lacking my usual oomph but it was great having Brent along and I did my best to keep up a respectable pace, although it was a lot slower than he would have gone on his own.

We met JJ coming downhill. Unlike many of the 'serious' cyclists, she stopped to have a chat and also to shed some of the layers of clothes she was wearing. She came up to the park with some visiting friends who dropped her off to cycle down. She sported a very fancy titanium bicycle which came apart into two and could be easily shipped on a plane. I was impressed but it probably cost a packet.



I have been fascinated by just how many things there are to spend your money on when it comes to sports in America, and cycling seems to particularly suffer from this. Brent was riding a bike with 25 year old components and wasn't wearing any of the fancy gear, yet

he was still able to enjoy the sport. He didn't even wear the skin tight lycra shorts that are so popular amongst cyclists – due to his having an extra hard posterior according to his wife.

As we cycled we discussed a radio interview we had heard that morning. Apparently, a member of Congress wanted to issue an official apology for slavery. I don't mean the modern slavery that still happens in places like the Sudan or south Asia, but for the slavery that was abolished after the American Civil War. During the interview it was mentioned that this has been termed 'America's Original Sin' and it is necessary to make an apology to African Americans for this. Without the apology there will never be reconciliation and racial harmony.

Now I know that I have sometimes been accused of being to the right of Genghis Khan when it comes to political matters, but I found this to be absolutely incomprehensible. If these politicians want to see America's original sin I suggest that they cycle through the wastelands that are the reservations of the Ute Indians like I did just a few days ago. Brent agreed and said that as part of his history degree he had to read newspapers from the 1880's and it was shocking to realise that Indians were viewed as "vermin" who needed to be eradicated. Explains a lot.

I was also appalled at the lack of understanding of American history amongst the politicians. Many seemed to be unaware that Abraham Lincoln, instead of being the great supporter of freedom for the slaves, voted in favour of slavery legislation before he became president and that the proclamation of emancipation came not at the start of the war, but well into it. They also seemed to be unaware of aspects of the Civil Rights Movement (in the interview the politician couldn't even get the name right), and both its achievements and failures.

Anyway, with politicians like these espousing their solution to racism in America in the form of an apology for something that happened over 130 years ago, one can forget about anything meaningful happening. End of diatribe—except for one final fact. Most people don't appreciate that one of the primary forces which reduced slavery was the British Royal Navy. Their concerted actions during the first half of the 19th century after its abolition in the UK shut down many of the west African slave ports, much to the chagrin of the American slave traders.

Eventually we reached the hilly part which comprised a series of switchbacks winding ever upwards. The pine trees along the slopes pervaded the air with their sweet scent. This was offset to a certain degree by the smell of burning brake pads from vehicles descending the hills. The drivers in our direction were very patient and seemed to accept that these two slow cyclists deserved to have a bit of space. They often waited for several minutes while we negotiated a curve before passing us. There were no trucks, since they are not allowed through the park, and very few RVs. Brent said that they discourage them because of the winding road. Great for cyclists!

We stopped for refreshments several times by the side of the road. It was hard work and the sustenance was needed. The following photo is an example of the scenery as we ascended.



Brent and I discussed his work. It was an inter-denominational camp which was supported by donors. The organisation had been in existence for almost 60 years and relied on a combination of donations and fees from the campers. He said that he was amazed at how generous some people were; one person recently donated \$US 1.25 million towards the construction of their new camp. There are a lot of wealthy benefactors here, but that may be due to this insidious tax called an estate tax where the US Government can get a sizeable chunk of your estate when you die.

The objective of the camp was to reach un-churched teenagers and give them an exciting experience in nature. To that end they did all sorts of outdoor adventure activities as well as having a spiritual dimension to the camp. At the end of the camp they are channelled back into their local churches, be they Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, or whatever, since they need to be supported by the local church once they go home. Sounded like a great programme.

Brent also explained to me the fascinating issue of water rights. When you buy a property in the western USA there are two elements to the

purchase; the land rights and the water rights. The latter allows you to draw so many acre-feet of water from the property. The problem that arises is that there are more acre-feet of water rights owned than there are acre-feet of water available so this leads to one of the favourite American pastimes: litigation. There are attorneys who only deal with water rights. It also creates an interesting situation in that one can sell the water rights while keeping the property. Thus, a city like Los Angeles may own the water rights to local properties. The problem is particularly acute on the east side of the Rockies with cities like Denver and the high demand for water.

At Millner Pass I crossed the Continental Divide for the last time at 3254 m. The photo below shows me and my bicycle in front of the sign. I was really pleased to reach this mark, although I still had to ascend to 3685 metres to the high point of my trip.



By now we were above the tree line, with snow lying in patches. I flopped into the snow and found it cold but refreshing. The altitude was really getting to me and I found it hard going. I've never been very good at altitude. It's even worse when I am sleeping since I am a very shallow breather. I often wake up gasping for air. In Nepal I

actually stopped breathing which was frightening. I'd wake up gasping for air as if someone had put a bag over my head. But that's another story.

Brent 'raced' ahead to the look-out, and I eventually joined him. There were quite a few people at the lookout and our bicycles attracted them to find out why on earth we would do something like this. At least I have a goal, crossing the USA, while Brent was just out for a ride. There are two common observations from people (a) "there is no way that I could do it" and (b) "how on earth do you get 10 weeks holiday?" With regard to (a), it is surprising what one can do when one tries. I would say that this trip is about 70% psychological and 30% physical. The psychological tells you to keep on going when you are hungry and tired; the physical consists of the stamina. Brent told the story of a fellow he met when he cycled to Yellowstone Park. He was in his 70's when he started cycle touring! With regard to (b), as I mentioned before, that is one of the few advantages to being the boss. You just have to have the commitment to block out the time (and to have a very indulgent wife).

We cycled up to the Visitor's Centre and I pointed out the trail which Lis and I were on last year when a family were hit by lightning. The volunteer ranger I met earlier recalled that incident and commented that there were two fatalities last year due to lightning.

To give you an idea of how high we had ascended, the following photo looks back down the valley – and not to the bottom. We had climbed for about 40 km and it had taken about 7 hours including rest stops.



The road to the top was very narrow and without much of a shoulder. Fortunately, it was a still day and the traffic gave us a wide berth. I had a chuckle the next day when I overheard someone complaining about being scared when driving that road. I said that she should try it on a bicycle!

I finally saw the top of the road which is to the left where you see the rocks in the following photo. This is the highest point on my trip at 3685 m. I would also say that this was by far the hardest day since the combination of the mountains and the reduced oxygen in the air made it very hard going.



On the descent I stopped regularly to admire the view. I chatted with four women at one spot and when I told them what I was doing they were amazed. One was from Lincoln Nebraska and was pleased when I mentioned that I was passing through there next week. She said it was a pity it wasn't October as she would have taken me to a 'Huskers' game. When I enquired what a husker was she looked at me incredulously and said 'Only the best college football team in America'. They were typical of most Americans I have met; friendly and very open.

It was another one of those wheeeeeee rides down, but I kept my speed to 55 km/h which was the speed limit. I joined a long queue of vehicles travelling at that speed and positioned myself in the middle of the road and enjoyed the ride. Eventually I made it to the bottom and exited the park. Trail Ridge Road. It was a memorable ride.

I cycled into Estes Park and recognised a number of shops we had visited the previous year when attending Lis' high school reunion nearby. Lis went to a missionary kids school in Singapore and they have bi-annual reunions at different places in the USA. The Pizza Hut

we had walked out of due to poor service was now closed, but everything else was still there. It is a delightful tourist town recommended if you are in the area.

The Visitors Information Centre was open and I got a site at the KOA campground. It was overpriced but then tourist season had started so everything is expensive.

I went into town following a cycle path next to the lake to get some dinner and celebrate. It was a lovely ride with the mountains in the distance. I couldn't find anywhere to eat so had to settle for Pizza. I returned to KOA by the same route and there was a deer on the bike path! After dusk they wander about town and I had seem them crossing the highway and impatient motorists honking them. Such idiots. I worked on my journal, had a shower, and collapsed for a good long sleep.

## **22 June - Day 24: Estes Park CO to Pawnee Grasslands Park CO - 137 km**

I had another of those deep sleeps which accompanies hard work and except for a little pain and stiffness in my right knee, you wouldn't know that I had just finished crossing the Rockies. After packing all my gear and loading the bike I went to the laundry room where I plugged in my computer and worked on getting my journal up to date.

I spent over an hour writing in the laundry and met a steady parade of women doing the laundry. I commented on the absence of men in this particular section of the campground and this elicited a strong response, particularly from a lady from Tennessee. She said that her husband's idea of sharing responsibilities was that he drove their RV and she did everything else. Sounded pretty good to me ... as a man! She was quite a character and was incredulous that I had cycled

across from San Francisco. What blew my mind was that she complained about not having grandchildren yet, and she was in her early 40's! To each their own. At 40 I hadn't even had children, so grandchildren was beyond my comprehension.

The route out from Estes Park followed the 'Big Thompson River'. It was nothing short of spectacular and quite an exciting ride with dramatic views of the cliffs. I learned afterwards that on July 31st, 1976, the canyon was the site of a horrendous killer flood in which the water from a freak heavy rainstorm at the top of the canyon could not be absorbed by the steep rock walls of the down sloping canyon. I could see how this could have happened.

Eventually the gorge spread out and I was into the rolling hills at the foot of the mountains. It appeared much more arid, even though there was a river nearby, and the red soil seemed to lend everything a red tinge. I passed the turnoff to Masonville and soon found myself in the outskirts of Loveland. I stopped at Wendy's Restaurant and had a vegetarian sandwich and baked potato for lunch.

While eating lunch I read a free local paper with several interesting articles. One of them was about Mr. Stanley, who invented the Stanley Steamer (among other things). This was an early steam powered motor car. When he was in his mid-40's the doctors gave him a year to live so he decided to move to Colorado where the dry climate would be healthier. It was the right decision since he lived to his 90's. He built a grand hotel in Estes Park. Today it is still called the Stanley and is still grand. He also drove from Loveland up to Estes Park in one of his steamers, following the horse trail. Nobody thought it was possible and so certain were they of this that he couldn't get anyone to go with him, even to draw water from the river! He made it in just over three hours which shows the calibre of his vehicles.

The other article was on a Seventh-Day Adventist institution called Eden Valley. Near Masonville, it offered lifestyle education and natural treatments as well as having a small college. Lis and I met some of the people from there last year when we attended church in Estes Park but we were not sure where it was located. The article was gracious in its praise; I suspect the author had been a patient, and if we are ever here again I would like to pay them a visit.

Loveland seemed like a nice town except that whenever I enter a town it seems as though there is a surplus of traffic which makes cycling very unpleasant. I can't wait until I'm back on the quiet roads. I stopped at the tourist information centre to recharge my water bottles. I spoke to the ladies about routes east and where I could camp for the night. I was advised to head more NE towards Stirling along Highway 14 rather than my original plan of heading towards Fort Morgan. She said there was a campground there and when I checked it was marked on my map so I had a new route to follow. That's one of the nice things about no set itinerary. I can go where the fancy (and peoples advice) takes me.

The road was quite busy as it crossed the Interstate Highway. Although it was a divided highway with wide shoulders, I still found the traffic levels unnerving. Rather than enter Greeley I decided to take an earlier route up through Windsor which would get me back onto rural roads. So at the first opportunity I turned off and headed north. Although a back road it was still very busy and the reason soon became apparent: this area is under rapid development with housing sub-divisions serving what must be the growing areas of Loveland and Greeley.

This part of Colorado was obviously settled by expatriate British since the towns have names like Windsor, Buckingham and Hereford. When I saw the Hereford sign I started thinking of that scene from the film 'My Fair Lady' where Eliza tries to say

'Hurricanes hardly ever happen in Hereford and Hampshire'. It comes out as 'urricanes arldly ever appen in ereford and ampshire' due to her dropping of the H. A delightful film I sang some of its songs as a wound my way along the road.

Windsor was a nice small town with a really neat Bed & Breakfast. Had Lis been with me we would have stopped there irrespective of when we passed it since it had 'cutesy wootsy' written all over it. It was a Victorian mansion with lots of curly-cues and painted in a really sweet way. The town also seemed to have some character to it with a number of antique and other speciality shops. With the Rockies not too far in the distance it seemed like a good place to live.

I continued north and was passed by a couple training on a tandem bicycle. I don't know why it is but whenever I see a tandem the woman is always at the rear. Without fail. Must be a male thing about having to steer ...

This area was under intense cultivation and the water usage from irrigation was so high that it felt very humid. It was quite a strange sensation since I cycled through a dry, arid region and then suddenly hit this wall of humidity. Later I would leave it as suddenly as I had entered it. The area was irrigated in two ways. One was to have huge rigs with wheels on them which traversed the field in a semi-circular pattern, with the water coming from the centre of the circle where there was a permanent connection. Accordingly, the corn was planted in circular rows instead of straight lines. The second was through irrigation channels which bordered the property. The water was then taken out into the ground between the crops. Given the humidity in the air, the processes cannot have been that efficient.

I reached Highway 14 and turned east towards Ault. This was another small town with a few grain silos and it appeared to exist to service the local farming community. I found only one market in

town which I reached just after closing at 6 p.m. so I went over to the mini-mart at the Texaco petrol station.

I know I've mentioned this before, but it never ceases to amaze me what passes for food. There were about 8 aisles stocked with all the junk food and rubbish that one can think of. I was keen on some bread and they offered plenty of this, but it was the famous 'Wonder Bread'. For those unfamiliar with Wonder Bread, it is the height of modern technology. White as snow it is engineered to the point where you can squash it down small and voila! It will miraculously expand again to its original size (they used to have an advert showing that phenomena on TV when I was a kid). But since it is fortified with 8 essential vitamins and minerals (due to the manufacturing process removing any traces of goodness) it must be healthy for you. Spare me. In the end all I got was filled water bottles and I went out otherwise empty handed.

Ault in an attempt to market itself had signs up saying it was A Unique Little Town, but unless I missed something (which I don't think I did) it was quite forgettable. There was, however, one memorable aspect to it: a statue in the park honouring a local who was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honour for bravery in World War II. He was the first Mexican-American to receive the award and he earned it while fighting the Japanese.

The road continued east and the place gradually became more arid. There were a number of farms which had cattle and sheep pens, some of them massive. Behind me were the mountains and although I had only come about 100 km from Estes Park, it was amazing the transition. The land was relatively flat and I found it hard to believe that only yesterday I had been climbing the Rockies. I was heading towards the 'Pawnee National Grasslands' park which is an area preserving the grasslands that once covered the 'Great Plains'.

This area was once home to great herds of Buffalo that were hunted by nomadic Indian tribes like the Pawnee, Sioux and Cheyenne. When gold was discovered in Colorado the white men flooded in and scared away many of the wild herds that the Indians depended on. The buffalo were hunted towards extinction by 1876 to feed the new arrivals and for their hides. This of course destroyed the Indian's way of life and there were numerous fights between them and the new settlers. The last battle in Colorado was at Summit Springs in 1869 and by 1871 Indians were no longer a threat to the whites.

There were two 'waves' of settlement. The first were called 'Cattle Barons'. They were astute enough to realise that the miners would need to eat and that the grasslands were suited to cattle. Starting about 1861 they ran open range cattle and made huge fortunes. The Cattle Barons were wiped out in the 1880's when heavy blizzards killed off most of their livestock. The second wave were comprised of those settlers keen to farm the area. After completion of the Colorado & Wyoming railroad in 1888 they needed customers and marked all this land free for the taking to any settlers. Apparently their brochures reached as far as Europe. This brought the people in and they started to eke a living out of the soil by establishing farms throughout the area.

Houses were made from sod—since there are no trees in the area—and life was hard. This part of Colorado receives an average of 10 inches of rain per year and the farmers needed to adapt to what is called 'dry farming'. Sugar beets were a popular crop and a number of immigrant Germans from the Volga in Russia attempted to settle here. Hardworking, they managed to establish farms but many failed within a few years due to their ignorance of the unique and harsh conditions. The following is an excerpt from the first expedition into the area in 1822: the land "... is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and is of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon

agriculture for subsistence". How right they were. The region's unpredictable weather resulted in feasts and famines.

The worst drought hit in 1931 and came to be known as the 'Dust Bowl'. The locals described it as an unimaginable horror which has fortunately never been repeated. One man in his 80's described to me these phenomenally strong winds which blew the soil away. The winds buried farm equipment so that it could not be found. In the houses people wet sheets and hung them in front of all the windows and doors to try and keep the dust from suffocating them. Many women were trapped inside for days on end and went insane. After this many of the marginal farms went bankrupt and were ultimately taken over by the U.S. Government and turned back into grasslands. It was in this area that I found myself as the day was ending. The grasses extended off to the sides of me as far as I could see. Except for the occasional deer and cattle I was alone.

The traffic dropped to about one vehicle every 5 minutes. My camping ground, as marked on the map, did not exist and I cycled on hoping to find a suitable place to camp. There really wasn't anywhere and I was presented with mile after mile of barbed wire fence. Finally I came to a place where the wire was down lower at an entrance so I decided to camp just off the road. I lifted my bike over the wire and wheeled it 100 metres off the road. Part way I noticed that there were tiny cactus, but fortunately they did not completely pierce my tyres with their thorns. That would have just been a great way to end the day.

I found a flat spot (without cactus) and pitched my tent. Had dinner out of a tin and watched the sunset over the Rockies. It was so peaceful and still out there in the desert with only the sounds of the distant cattle, occasional bird, and some crickets. Leaving most of my panniers on my bike I crashed in my tent, leaving the fly open so I could see the stars. What an amazing place.

## **23 June - Day 25: Pawnee Grasslands Park CO to Sterling CO - 112 km**

In spite of my peaceful surroundings, I experienced a very bad night. Strong winds buffeted my tent and since it only has a single pole it made lots of noise when flapping in the breeze, which happened even when it was properly staked. I thought this was inauspicious and sure enough the morning dawned with—surprise, surprise—a very strong headwind for me. Ho hum.

I decided to have an early start and so after a light breakfast of dried fruit I packed up and carefully wheeled my bike through the cactus, hoisted it over the fence, and was on the road by 7 a.m. Even though the terrain was relatively flat, I could only manage an average speed of 14 km/h with the headwind.

On my map was marked a number of communities and I hoped to find a petrol station or café where I would be able to get something to eat. No such luck and so I cycled through Briggsdale and Buckingham. I reached the town of New Raynor about 10:30 where there was a Café, but it was closed. I had a break on their front lawn and finished off my last tin of vegetarian 'meat'. I had managed to come 50 km in 3.5 hours and the hard work was making me quite hungry. I began to get a bit concerned about water since I was down to two litres of water with 50 km to go; but the only option was a soda machine next to the road and I decided to go thirsty rather than resort to those chemical concoctions. My drink of Mountain Dew two weeks ago in Nevada was still fresh on my mind ...

The area was extremely dry with most of it in grassland. I passed the occasional farm growing wheat and/or corn, but they were the exception rather than the rule. I observed that with the wheat they would have strips of about 100 metres of crop and then 100 metres

of soil followed by crops, etc. I later learned that this was standard 'dry farming' technique where you can only get one crop every 2 years from the soil. It also serves to reduce the amount of topsoil loss due to the wind, such as was experienced in the Dust Bowl of 1931. There was no irrigation anywhere, except the occasional windmill which was providing water for stock, although there were oil pumps every now and then.

At times like these when there is not much to observe one's mind tends to wander. I mentally worked on some business plans as well as running through a range of songs to sing. It's amazing how few songs I know all the words to. Not that it matters when you are in the middle of nowhere and there is nobody to hear you!

Near Stoneham I found a café where I stopped for a cold drink. It was wonderful. The temperature outside was in the low 30's with not a cloud in the sky but I didn't realise how hot it was until I left the café to continue my trip. While having my drink I looked at a very detailed map book of the USA and 'planned' my forward travels. After Lincoln I'll head due east through southern Iowa into Illinois. I'll then follow the Illinois River NE into Michigan. Then again, I may not ...

Refreshed, I continued my ride east. The wind was running at a lower level now and I made much better progress. As throughout Colorado, and most of the USA, the road was smooth with a wide shoulder which, coupled with the low traffic levels, made cycling a pleasure. It was slightly up and down, but after the Rockies I have a new perspective on what a grade is!

Passing over the Pawnee Creek, which was completely dry, I noticed a marker at the side of the road to two Colorado Department of Highways staff who were killed while reconstructing the bridge. It reminded me of something one of the Stop/Go sign people in

Nevada had told me. Over 800 people are killed each year in the USA working on road construction, and most of these are due to drivers (often drunk) hitting them. That is one of the reasons why on entering a construction zone there are signs saying 'Fines Doubled In Construction Zone'. He told me how someone once passed a pilot vehicle to get through the zone quicker. They were given a fine of \$USD 2500. Ouch.

As I approached the town of Sterling irrigation became more common and eventually the road widened to a divided highway. I passed by the Country Club and saw women out golfing. It is one of many courses that I have seen in my travels and there is one common thread: everyone to date has been driving about in an electric golf cart. Why is exercise such an anathema in this country? I mean the professional golfers walk the courses so surely that should be an example? End of diatribe.

On the outskirts of Sterling I was confronted with a Wal-Mart which advertised it was open 24 hours per day, seven days a week. For those unfamiliar with Wal-Mart it is a huge chain of stores which offers everything imaginable at very low prices (due to its buying power). I would say that the most common trucks that I have seen on my travels have been those emblazoned with the Wal-Mart logo. They aren't always popular, particularly with local retailers who cannot compete on price, and in many places they have gutted the existing business districts. Some years ago I was told that the state of Vermont had legislation which effectively precluded Wal-Mart from opening in the state, and many cities are now passing ordinances restricting the development of such mega-stores.

My first impression of Sterling was that this town likes to eat out. Coming in on Highway 14 I passed, and not in this order, McDonalds, Burger King, Dairy Queen, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Arby's, Subway Submarine, Taco Bell, Taco John, Wendy's, Pizza

Hut, Domino's Pizza, plus countless other less famous eateries. Nothing for vegetarians though ...

The town didn't seem to have a central business district and I cycled around looking for a tourist information centre, or at least a map so I could get oriented. Nothing except some confusing one-way streets. There was a nice old courthouse and some impressive buildings but by and large the city seemed soulless. Since it was Friday night I had decided to stay in a Motel for my rest day, but I couldn't find one!

Seeing a sign for the Interstate I decided that if there were to be motels they would be out that way. Sure enough a few km out of town I saw some signs indicating motels ahead. I stopped at a gas station and called a few but they were all fully booked or else only had smoking rooms. No thanks. In the end I found an overpriced room at the Day's Inn and after a visit to the Tourist Centre across from the gas station I cycled to the motel and checked in.

Although it was only late afternoon I was quite tired from the riding so after a shower to remove the grit and grime I lazed about the room and worked on my journal and read. It was also laundry time but they had no soap powder for sale. Not to worry; shampoo makes a suitable alternative, although the whites don't come out as white.

For dinner I cycled up the road to the 'Country Kitchen' in the (forlorn) hope that they would have something vegetarian. Their 10 page menu was a carnivore's delight, and so I had to explain my predicament to the waitress. She had this horrified look (which I have seen too often) and I suggested she ask the chef what they could make with no meat, chicken or fish. After what seemed to be an eternity she said they could do me a spaghetti with tomato sauce and a salad. Hooray! Not pizza for a change. By normal standards it was forgettable, but I was hungry and pleased to have something a little different. Oh, I must mention something I learned about salads.

When one orders a salad here there are a wide array of dressings that one can have. I have learned never to ask them for dressing on the salad, even if you say 'only a little' since their definition of a little is invariably quite different to mine. This was a case in point. I asked her to bring me a little salad dressing in a side dish which she did, but it would have lasted me for about 10 salads. At least I am learning ...

## **24 June - Day 26: Stirling CO - Rest Day**

Saturday was my rest day and I enjoyed a really good night's sleep which put me in a good frame of mind for the day. I started the day with pancakes in the hotel restaurant. The poor waitresses were run off their feet and I felt quite sorry for them. The hotel seemed to have a policy of minimising the staff levels and forcing them to make do. I think that is absolutely reprehensible but in areas with high unemployment the employer is in a position of power.

Unusually, the local Seventh-day Adventist church had an advertisement in the hotel—most churches appear to keep their location and times a secret—so I knew where and when to go. It was a beautiful morning with a clear sky and no wind and I enjoyed my ride into Sterling to find the church. Without panniers my bicycle feels like a sports car instead of a truck.

I came upon it sooner than expected since the town followed the quaint American practice of incrementing the numbers by 100 per block. Thus, 708 was the seventh block. It was located amongst private houses and was a small church, very well kept. The members were very friendly, but mostly elderly. There were two people my age; and none under the age of 20. The sign of a church with little future ...

We watched a video sermon which was OK, but consisted mainly of a story which, while thought provoking, went on a bit long. Afterwards they shared a pot luck lunch which I thoroughly enjoyed. It was great to have a selection of vegetarian food, which was not pizza! For desert we had a watermelon which was absolutely delicious. I haven't had any this trip and since it was cold it was extra refreshing.

Only the 'oldies' stayed for lunch and I enjoyed talking with them. I reflected how names have changed—there was an Otis, a Gertrude and a Bertha. I don't think very many people have these names today but at one stage they were fairly common. I learned a lot about local history and what it was like living through the depression. Very thought provoking and I'm thankful that I wasn't around then.

As I left one of the ladies gave me a newsletter with a poem in it which she said was quite pertinent given what I was doing with this challenging cycle trip. This is what it said:

**It Couldn't Be Done**

Somebody said it couldn't be done  
But he with a chuckle replied  
That "maybe it couldn't," but he would be one  
Who wouldn't say so until he'd tried  
So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin  
On his face. If he worried he hid it.  
He started to sing as he tackled the thing  
That couldn't be done, and he did it.

Somebody scoffed: "Oh, you'll never do that;  
At least no one ever has done it"  
But he took off his coat and took off his hat,  
And the first thing we knew he'd begun it.  
With a lift of his chin and a bit of a grin,

Without any doubting or quiddit,  
He started to sing as he tackled the thing  
That couldn't be done and he did it.

There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done,  
There are thousands to prophesy failure;  
There are thousands to point out to you, one by one,  
The dangers that wait to assail you,  
But just buckle in with a bit of a grin,  
Just take off your coat and go to it;  
Just start to sing as you tackle the thing  
That "cannot be done" and you'll do it.

Edgar A. Guest

After lunch I cycled back to the hotel. On the way I stopped at the 'Overland Museum' which was absolutely fantastic. Seldom have I been to a museum that I have enjoyed as much. It was dedicated to the pioneers who followed the overland route towards the west. The main building was in the style of a fort and there was a series of outer buildings.

There were lots of photographs both of the town of Sterling over time but also of people, which I found very interesting. Most poignant were the photos of the sod houses that the early settlers lived in. When you consider that many of them had come from the eastern states and were what we would call 'middle class', I don't know how they could have coped with such primitive conditions. The curator told me that the locals have an abundance of artefacts and are quite generous in leaving them to the museum; their main problem is having room to display them.

In addition to the main building they had moved a number of buildings onto the site. There was a Lutheran church; a rural school; a

local grocery shop as well as a blacksmith's shop. Each of them provided valuable insight into the life in eastern Colorado in the last century. The school was the most memorable since it told how there were 9 grades and the teacher had to do 63 lessons per day! This was on top of cutting the wood for the heater and keeping the building clean.

In the blacksmith's shop were displayed a series of branding irons that were used with cattle. In fact, it is the world's largest collection. It was fascinating seeing the different designs and patterns used. There was also a barbed wire display which showed the different types of barbed wire in use since it was patented in the 1870's. I counted about 75 different types of all shapes, sizes and designs. I recalled learning in school that it was a combination of barbed wire and the machine gun which contributed towards the slaughter in the trenches of World War I.

## **25 June - Day 27: Stirling CO to Ogallala NE - 154 km**

My goal was to be on the road as early as possible and I was out the door before 8 a.m. I had hoped for a day like yesterday, hot with no wind, but was definitely out of luck. I was met by an overcast sky and a strong headwind.

Soon I was out into the countryside and surrounded by farms. The South Platt River meandered off to the right marked by a row of trees. These were the only trees in the area. Even though the fields were well irrigated, at least near the river, the locals seemed to be morally opposed to planting trees. When there were trees, they were only around houses and nowhere else. I contrast this with places like India where trees were planted along the roads to provide shade and shelter. Boy, could I have used shelter from the wind ...

The road went to the NE and ran parallel with the railway line. The farms were growing corn and wheat but in the distance I could see dry hills so there is a fairly narrow band of irrigation and the rest is desert. The route I was following was along the old wagon trail which had been a popular road both because of its access to water and it's relative flatness.

The first town I came to was Iliff which was named after one of the first cattle barons. This was typical of all the towns I was to pass through: dead or dying. The homes were either old and run down houses or mobile homes. There were abandoned petrol stations, closed shops, and little or no commercial activity. This is a consequence of the replacement of horses by cars: the towns are all placed about 15-20 miles apart which is what you could ride in a day. However, with good roads and cars one can travel less than an hour to larger cities like Sterling so why shop locally? Unfortunately, this leads to the demise of the town, but that is the price of progress.

It was hard going with the headwind and I had trouble managing 20 km/h. Normally I would be going about 30 km/h on flat roads like these. By the time I reached Crook (what a great name!) I was 75 km along the way and was getting tired so I stopped for a rest in a very nice park. It was then on towards Julesburg which marked the border with Nebraska.

I continued on to Ovid which at one stage was a large producer of sugar beets. During World War II a lot of German prisoners were sent to the area where they worked on the farms. However, the local factory was shut down in 1985 after it's owners, the Hunt brothers, lost their fortune in the silver market. Today it is an abandoned shell with lots of broken windows and not much else. This of course was a terrible blow to the local community as it was the dominant employer. With its closure the economy was devastated and most shops closed down. I phoned Lis and some teenagers came by and

said 'welcome to hell'. Obviously they were not impressed with their home.

From there it was on to Julesburg. The town was named after Jules Beni, a Metis (French Canadian/Indian) who was a manager of the local Pony Express station. He developed a feud with another manager, Jack Slade, and so shot Slade. Unfortunately for Beni, Slade recovered and returned to kill Beni. He followed this up by cutting off Beni's ears. One was nailed to a fence post as a warning to those who would hamper the express company's operations. The other? He made a watch fob out of it and used to put it on the local bar when someone got aggressive with him.

The first Julesburg was destroyed by the Indians in 1865. A year later a second one was built, mainly as a stage station but it was abandoned after only 2 years. A third one was built where the railway ended and was known as the meanest place in the West, with over 5000 inhabitants and dozens of brothels, casinos and bars. The final, and present one, was built in 1881 at the Union Pacific Denver Junction. This shows the transitory nature of development in the west where many places were started and once they outlived their usefulness abandoned.

Another example of this is Fort Sedgwick which was the local army base. It gained fame in the film 'Dances with the Wolves'. Established in 1864 to protect the Transcontinental Telegraph and travellers on the Overland Route from hostile Indians, it was described as a hard place to live "...the quarters, if any, were considered unliveable, the food was terrible, pleasures were few and the nearest bath was the South Platte River". It was in use from 1864-1871 after which, with the demise of the Indians, it was abandoned and the area reclaimed by the prairie.

I visited the museum in Julesburg housed in the old railway station. Full of all sorts of interesting material ranging from the Pony Express through items used for living on the frontier. I think it's great the way the locals appreciate their history and are continually donating to the local museums. It is just a pity that more people don't visit – the guest books are seldom full. The elderly woman curator was very chatty and she explained the history of the area. I mentioned that I had seen lots of old farming machinery, for example the abandoned dairy factory in Ovid had rows of machinery parked in front of it. She pointed to a huge shed across the railway tracks which she said was full of machinery.

My next visit was to the Fort Sedgwick museum which was a disappointment, although the young curator was very friendly and we had a long chat about things before I headed out onto the road again. I had hoped that during the course of my visit the winds would have abated, but this was not to be—if anything it was stronger! I had cycled 100 km but still had some way to go to my destination.

I crossed into Nebraska and the road narrowed without a shoulder. This was not a problem insofar as there was virtually no traffic. The going was tough and I was down to 10-12 km/h. I took a rest stop under the motorway bridge and continued on towards Big Springs. I had a chuckle at the sign for Nebraska which called it originator of 'Arbor Day', for there were no trees. As I approached Big Springs I passed a huge combine harvester which had been harvesting grain. I felt tiny next to it and it was unfortunate that I hadn't seen it in action.

There was nothing open in Big Springs so I sat on the steps of a local church and ate some fruit and took a well deserved rest. I expected a further 35 km to Ogallala and about 2.5 hours of daylight. Under normal circumstances it would not be a problem but the wind was strong so these were not normal circumstances! However, I decided to go for it anyway. I was warned about a bad hill outside of town, but I guess this is because when you live in the plains any hill is large. Were it not for the head wind I would hardly have noticed it. The countryside was rolling grassland without access to irrigation. The farms were mainly grazing cattle.

I reached Ogallala around 8:30 p.m. My map showed a camp site at a nearby lake but the road sign proclaimed it to be 20 km away directly into the wind so I decided to grab a motel. A fellow stopped his car to chat and suggested I try the Sunset Motel. Very basic but only \$22 which was what I had paid at Estes Park to camp. I went to the petrol station next door and got a sandwich and burrito for dinner before crashing. Watched a history documentary on the Korean War, which started 50 years ago today, before calling it a day.

## **26 June - Day 28: Ogallala NE to Gothenburg NE - 154 km**

I had a quiet start to the morning working on my journal while watching the History Channel on TV. They had an interesting documentary on the life of General Custer who was killed at Little Big Horn. It was quite pertinent to my travels since he had roamed in this area. I have come across his name a number of times. It was very well done and they even interviewed the descendants of the victorious Indians to get a better overall picture.

My food stocks were low so I cycled into town and found a large supermarket. I'm definitely in a meat eating paradise and their idea of a health food section was an area with energy bars and rice cakes.

Fortunately they had a good fruit and vegetable section and I bought some delightful cherries and apricots.

As I exited and was loading my bicycle a woman in her late 50's came by and chatted. She was considering a cycle trip to Holland and wondered if I had any experience there. Did I ever! Her concern was that there may be strong winds and I said that was well founded. I recounted Lis' and my experience a few years ago where we had winds, quite strong in places, wherever we went. I suspect that it is a characteristic of any flat country, like Nebraska or Holland. There is just not enough shelter to attenuate the wind.

I headed out of town towards the East and, for a change, I had a headwind. Curses. Fortunately, it wasn't directly head on, otherwise I would have been heading back into Colorado, and the terrain was flat which made it a bit bearable. There were farms along the road which followed the Platt River, but within a few hundred metres of the road you could see the parched hills indicating desert area. Indeed, this was to be typical of the next hundred plus kilometres.

Trains passed me regularly to the right of the road. However, they soon stopped which was perplexing. I eventually came upon line after line of parked trains and later upon a track maintenance crew which was the cause of the delays. As I passed one train a fellow sitting between the trains called out and asked if I could spare a cigarette. Obviously getting a free ride.

The towns east of Ogallala were run down with lots of abandoned cars and empty buildings. This was surprising to a degree since all the land was heavily farmed with corn and occasional wheat. There were even a few cattle farms, although these looked to be more holding pens for animals which must be run in the desert areas away from the road.

I stopped in a small town and had lunch at the baseball diamond. It was a very well kept park and obviously the locals take their baseball very seriously. I was surprised not to see a football field, but I am sure that one existed. The locals are also passionate about football, particularly since Nebraska has that famous college football team I was told about in Colorado.

The next stop was in North Platte and as I entered the town there was a large sign to the 'Buffalo Bill Ranch' which I duly followed. On the north of the town, it was a large show ground where they obviously held rodeos and the like. Being mid-week it was deserted but across from it was the local museum which I stopped and visited.

Compared to the others that I have visited it was huge with an abundance of artefacts. Many were similar to those found in the other museums I had visited, just more extensive. The curators were retired woman, two of whom had been on a visit to New Zealand, which they loved. A portion of the museum was dedicated to the 'North Platte Canteen' and one of them kindly explained the story to me.

Due to its location, North Platte is a major crossing point for trains travelling across America. During World War II there were often troop trains travelling to the coast from whence the men were shipped overseas. One Christmas the locals expected that the Nebraska troops would be passing through the town so the parents, friends and relatives of the young soldiers made them food and brought them presents. However, they found that the Army in its wisdom had routed the Kansas men through Nebraska and the Nebraska men through Kansas. The locals decided to give the food and presents to the men anyway and it was so well received that they decided to form the Canteen.

From 1942-46 a canteen was set up staffed entirely by local volunteers. Each community agreed that they would serve on a

particular day and the people made food—at their own expense—which they gave to the soldiers in the passing trains. Birthday cakes were baked for those who were travelling on their birthday. It was very famous and they still get visitors passing through who tell how much it meant to them to have this food during their travels.

There was one photo of a group of soldiers running from the canteen to make their train and the curator said that the first fellow in the photo came in a few years ago and told how most of the others in the photo had been killed in battle. Another came in and sheepishly confessed that he got a birthday cake when it wasn't his birthday. The curator told him several hundred others had probably received the same. I think it is a delightful testimony to the spirit of the locals that they gave such service to so many strangers. There is a generosity in Americans which put most other countries to shame. Unfortunately, foreigners focus mostly on the negative aspects of America's behaviour.

After touring the outer buildings of the museum I cycled into town. It was a bit run down, although there was a very nice train in a park. They had connected the headlamp to electricity so as the sun was setting it was lit up. The park was immaculate, a contrast with a number of the buildings I saw in town.

From North Platte I cycled to Gothenburg which, not surprisingly given the name, was settled in the last century by Swedes. There were many trains, hauling coal to the East and empty hoppers to the west, and I passed my time counting cars. The record of 121 I counted in Colorado was not broken. However, there seemed to be a correlation between the number of cars and the number of locomotives: about 30 cars per locomotive. I spoke later with an ex-railway engineer and he was confused. He said that the GE locomotive has 5000 HP and two of them are capable of towing 100 fully loaded coal cars through Wyoming and Nebraska. Once they hit

Iowa, where the terrain is more rolling, they add a third locomotive. He postulated that they must have been using older GM locomotives which only (!) have 3500 HP. Either way I think it is very impressive what these machines can do.

I arrived just after dark in Gothenburg and wondered whether I should camp by the road when I saw a sign advertising a campground in town. There were no further signs directing me to it so I did a very un-male thing: I asked for directions. I was pointed down over the Interstate where I found a KOA campground which, even though it was 10 p.m., still had the office open. After paying my fee I headed towards the camp area and a lady from Ohio chatted with me on the way. She was complaining how cold it was although it was better than Wyoming where they had recently had snow. Glad I didn't go that far north. As I pitched my tent my neighbour loaned me their Coleman Lantern—I wish I understood the principle by which they work—which made it a lot easier.

After having a shower I chatted with Barry McDermott who was the campground owner and had just finished stocking the ever popular soft drink machine. From Manchester UK, he moved to the USA five years ago and bought the campground. He loved life in the USA and wouldn't go back for anything. They had almost gone to Canada but that was more difficult for them from an immigration perspective so Nebraska it was.

He was quite a character and we compared notes on Americans. I commented on his Scottish heritage and he told the story how many Americans are more up on their Scottish backgrounds than the true Scottish are. They even have 'Clan Gatherings' where they get together and wear kilts. As a McDermott they don't understand why he isn't interested, but he says that when you grow up a few hours from Scotland it is not such a big deal. He recounted the story how he used to be a track and field runner and ran a race in Edinburgh. As

he came around for home leading his heat and the announcer said that Barry McDermott was leading the crowd roared with support. Since he is English he found it quite ironic ...

One of his most poignant observations was on the work ethic of the locals, or to be more precise, the lack thereof. America has this tradition of the 'Protestant Work Ethic' wherein people work hard. However, he observed that these days they consider sitting around having cups of coffee to be the same as working and they have had a real problem finding people willing to actually work. I told him that the solution was to hire new immigrants as they are always keen to prove themselves—at least that has been my experience.

We could have continued for hours but by then it was approaching midnight so I called it an evening and walked back to the campsite. After banging my shin on a strategically placed tent site number post I stumbled (literally) into my tent for a well earned rest.

## **27 June - Day 29: Gothenburg NE to Wood River NE - 150 km**

Sometime after leaving Ogallala I crossed from the Mountain time zone to the Central time zone. There were no signs and I only clicked when I saw the third clock out by one hour. Thus, even though my watch said I woke up at 7 a.m. it was actually 8 a.m. A bit of a trick for young players these time zone changes ... I packed up my gear and headed back into town where I planned on grabbing breakfast before heading east on Highway 30.

Just past the Interstate highway was the 'Sod House Museum' which I stopped at. There were two components to the museum, a barn with lots of photos and artefacts and a replica sod house built exactly as the first settlers would have built them.

The photographs were fascinating and showed the full range of sod houses constructed. There was even a two story house built by a rich Belgian settler! They showed the evolution of the sod houses over the years—they really didn't change that much—and even had one of the last known houses; it was lived in until the late 1960s.

In addition to the sod house photographs there was a lot of paraphernalia on Indians and buffalo hunting, including two buffalo skin jackets. They looked very warm but so heavy I wondered how comfortable they would have been to wear. The displays also chronicled the demise of the buffalo. Around 1850 it was estimated there were 100-150 million buffalo, but by the time the hunters were through with them by 1880 they were on the brink of extinction. One estimate put the entire population at 4000 in 1910.

It told how over 1 million buffalo skins were shipped to St. Louis in just one year, and a good buffalo hunter would kill an average of 100 per day. That would keep his team of 4 skinners busy full time. They used to set up their heavy rifle in a 'tripod' made from two pieces of wood in an 'X' pattern and start firing. It was only after about 30-50 animals had been dropped that the herd would realise something was going on and begin to scatter. Not too bright these buffalo. One claim at the museum, the credence of which I don't know, was that the USA government tacitly approved of the extermination of the buffalo as a way of subjugating the Indians. It definitely worked since the Indian economy was based on the buffalo.

As a memorial to the buffalo there was a life size model of one behind the museum. It was made from 4.5 miles of old barbed wire. Personally, I can think of easier ways to build such a model—the barbed wire was of a very heavy gauge and must have been difficult to work with—but they breed them tough in this part of the world.

The replica sod house was very interesting. The only wood used was in the door, windows and roof: with no trees in Nebraska wood had to be brought in by train and was expensive. The sod was cut in blocks about 36" x 18" x 6" and laid the same day to make the house. With the walls 36" thick it was great insulation, keeping the house cool in summer and warm in winter. The outside was left natural while the inside was sealed with a mixture of clay and sand which was given 4-5 coats of lime whitewash. This served to keep the bugs out, although snakes had a bad habit of burrowing up through the floor which was levelled with sand. Muslin was hung for the ceiling as this kept the dirt from falling on the occupants. It was very small inside and yet photos showed that up to 9 lived in these one room buildings. Must have made for some interesting family dynamics.

From the museum I went and had my breakfast staple of pancakes. For a change they had raspberry syrup instead of maple syrup. I was pleasantly surprised at how much I liked it. After breakfast I went to the local market and bought some supplies. As I was packing my bicycle two old ladies chatted to me about my trip. For them a trip to the next state was a major undertaking, let alone across the country by bicycle.

As I cycled down Highway 30 I was presented with, you guessed it, another headwind. I adopted the usual position (head down, teeth gritted) and peddled on to the next major town of Cozad. This was a special place in two ways. Firstly, in 1866 the railway tracks reached this point and it was celebrated with the first passenger train west of the Missouri river. The reason they chose Cozad and not somewhere else was because the 100th meridian of longitude passes through the town. Thus, it represented a psychological milestone.

I found a plaque marking the meridian, and the event, as well as a railway caboose. I noted an interesting scientific observation about the 100th meridian. It seems that east of the 100th meridian the

rainfall is influenced by climatic conditions in the Gulf of Mexico, and thus the Mississippi river. By contrast, west of the 100th meridian it is the Pacific ocean which is the dominant influence. Due to the distance from the Pacific and the Rocky mountains there is insufficient moisture which leads to the desert conditions I had observed. At first I thought this was hogwash but sure enough after Cozad the hills became greener and the air wetter. Fancy that. Perhaps I've been too hard on these western Nebraskans for their lack of trees?

From Cozad the intermediate towns were more prosperous without the air of desolation I had seen in western Nebraska and eastern Colorado. They were also more frequent and larger as well. I ate lunch in Lexington and read a plaque commemorating an Indian raid on the railway. After derailing the train and killing its crew they looted the goods and were seen riding off with calico tied to the tails of their ponies. There were a number of incidents like this in the area as this was the main route west for settlers. Until the Indians were completely subjugated the settlers experienced regular attacks.

After lunch in Lexington I battled on towards Kearney. Just as I was approaching Kearney there was a plaque commemorating '1733 Farm'. It was so named because it was 1733 miles to Boston and 1733 miles to San Francisco. This warranted a photo since I was technically at my half-way point (if one ignores my side trip to Canada). The plaque told how they tested a wide range of crops in the area, effectively running an experimental farm.

Kearney was a pleasant town. There is a branch of the University of Nebraska in town and I cycled past the buildings—very impressive. I had dinner at a Mexican restaurant and eavesdropped on two high school girls discussing loudly boy problems. Things haven't changed in 25 years! A fellow came by and asked me about my travels. He took my photo with a Polaroid camera, he said he was an artist.

Given that I looked like something the cat had dragged home I shudder to think what the picture turned out like.

Even though it was 7 p.m., I had only done 100 km so decided to continue. For the first time in days I had a (minor) tailwind and this allowed me to motor along at 28 km/h. The historical markers became much more common, particularly those pertaining to the Mormon exodus. The town of Sheldon was a major stop for the Mormons and many of the founders were involved with supplying and supporting their fellow church member's journeys.

I reached the town of Wood River on dark and decided that this was a suitable place to stop. I found a park on the edge of town with the police station right next to it. I asked the Sheriff if it was OK for me to camp there. He said he couldn't see why not as "it is a friendly town". I said that since he would be the one coming to arrest me for camping I'd take that as getting permission and he promised to tell his deputies not to bother me.

As I set up my tent there were fire flies all about. It was really neat to see them moving through the air with their white/blue colour magically floating here there and everywhere. The evening was hot and I was very tired and sticky. This is one time when I could particularly have used a shower, but since Lis wasn't around to complain I wasn't about to do anything about it. After killing a couple of huge mosquitoes it was into the tent and off to sleep—or tried to. The park was close to the railway tracks and the sounds of trains were a continuous bother.

## **28 June - Day 30: Wood River NE to Lincoln NE - 182 km**

In some respects I should have bitten the bullet and cycled the extra 7 km last night to the camping area near the Interstate instead of crashing in the park at Wood River. This is because it seems to be the

policy of the Union Pacific Railway for them to blow the horn on the train whenever they cross a railway crossing. This, coupled with regular trains all night long equals disturbed sleep. I'm amazed that the locals can live like this...I sure couldn't.

I had a leisurely breakfast of fruit and hit the road about 9 a.m. Just for a change I had a headwind as I cycled NE towards Grand Island. These winds were definitely sapping my enthusiasm, however, I consoled myself that when I turned east towards Lincoln the wind would be less severe.

I circumvented the town and at the Stuhr Museum turned east onto Highway 34. This is a huge pioneer's museum covering about 250 acres with over 100 buildings. I decided to give it a miss since I'd already visited a number of smaller museums and I didn't think that there would be much new to see.

One of the advantages of the route I selected was that it paralleled the Interstate highway. Most of the truck traffic takes the Interstate, as do many of the cars. I had taken for granted in many respects this absence of truck traffic so it was a bit of a shock to the system to be on Highway 34 which seemed to be a truck bypass for Grand Island. Still, like all unpleasant things in life I was soon out of town again and the trucks disappeared.

Three four letter words came to mind as I rode east: wind, flat and corn. First the wind. It was from the north so was fortunately not a pure headwind, but it still made the going hard. After about 8 hours of this even the most optimistic or hard headed cyclist begins to get a bit fed up. At least as a compensation the land was flat. In this part of Nebraska you can see towns 5-10 km away because of their water towers so at least it gives you something to aim for. Finally the corn. The crops are corn, corn and then for a change, corn. Corn to the left of me. Corn to the right of me. Corn ahead of me and corn behind

me. It was quite tranquil in some respects to see these fields of corn swaying in the breeze, occasionally with a train passing in the distance.

I ate lunch at Aurora and chose Pizza Hut where I enjoyed the salad bar. Pizza again ... but my other option was McDonalds which for obvious reasons was less desirable. After lunch it was on to York where I had a nap in the sun beside the road for 20 minutes. Refreshed, I continued towards Seward.

I experienced a sudden dramatic change in the terrain just before Seward. Until I entered the town I had nothing but flat terrain. I entered Seward as I climbed a small hill. After dinner I discovered that from then on I was in hills. These served to reduce the impact of the wind and were a pleasant change from the last few days.

Seward was a small town of about 5000 people but was marked as the '4th of July City' for Nebraska. This is because for over 100 years the city has hosted special celebrations and it has reached the stage where it is seen as the place to be. There was a list of activities which ran two A3 pages so they sure aren't over marketing themselves. Pity that I was a week early, then again, it may be a good thing as I don't particularly like crowds.

From Seward I headed on to Lincoln and, as mentioned above, it was rolling countryside. Quite a pleasant cycle. Early evening is my favourite time to cycle. The wind was down and although there were a lot of hills, they weren't too bad. The countryside was lovely with well kept farms and lots of pretty churches (mostly Lutheran). Eventually I reached Lincoln and a motel to check into. A hot bath relieved my knee pain and a comfortable bed was very refreshing.

## **29 June - Day 31: Lincoln NE to Waubense State Park IA - 114 km**

As I was heading out the door this morning, Dwayne from Colorado approached me. A typically open and enthusiastic American he was fascinated by my trip. He was in Lincoln on business and proudly showed me his racing bicycle which was on the rack on the back of his Ford Explorer. "I take it with me on all my trips and go for at least 10 miles on it at the end of the day" he proudly said. I thought good on you ... too many of us while away our times on business trips eating, drinking or being too idle. He was impressed with how far I've travelled and marvelled that I had a wife who was so supportive. "Not mine" he emphatically stated. Pity I thought.

Cycling out of town I passed through some lovely wooded areas with nice houses. After the plains it was great to see trees again. There were also lots of shops, some of which pointed to the fact that Lincoln is quite different to the rest of Nebraska that I've been through. Let me explain.

From the time I left Estes Park Colorado until I reached Lincoln, Nebraska I would have cycled over 750 km. During that time I only saw Caucasian people except for about 10 Indians. I therefore had the impression that Nebraska was a Caucasian state. However, in Lincoln I saw several Blacks and Orientals and passed shops with names like "Mohammed's Barber Shop" or "Nguyen Oriental Market". Definitely a break with the rest of Nebraska.

The route was similar to much of what I've had recently, the only difference being the up and down nature of the terrain. I'm not sure why but I was very 'flat' and lacked my usual enthusiasm. After 67 km I came to Syracuse and decided to have a break at the roadside shop. I got a cold grape juice which was great—it was over 30 C outside—and then found they had small tables with telephones. I tried my Net2Phone and found it worked so called New Zealand to

sort out some business issues and talk with Lis. After procrastinating as much as possible I started off again at 6 p.m.

I skirted around Nebraska City and found myself at the Missouri River. This is another milestone, although no T shirt, since for many years the Missouri marked the end of 'civilisation' and the start of the frontier wilderness. It was a big river and I was surprised at how quickly it was flowing—particularly given the limited rain we have had recently. In fact, this is being called the 'Drought of 2000' in Nebraska and many are really suffering.

Across the Missouri river I entered the famous state of Iowa. Not many know what Iowa stands for. Some locals explained to me that it is an acronym for Idiots Out Wandering Around. Now you know...and to think I always assumed it was an Indian word.

There was a dramatic change in the road condition on the Iowa side of the river, and it was not for the better. The road was very rough but even more disconcerting was the gravel shoulder. For the last 3200 km I've enjoyed paved shoulders, but not here. Fortunately traffic was light and they all went into the other lane, but Iowa has me worried ...

I stopped at a Conoco store near the Interstate junction and had a bean burrito for dinner. One of the ladies working there had used two 100 mm tape holders as decorations in her hair. Strange people these locals, but friendly. The fellow behind the counter directed me up the road 10 km to the Waubonse State Park where I could camp.

When I entered the hills I enjoyed the fact that there were so many mature trees. The smell was very 'earthy' and it was wonderful to be in woods again. I found the Waubonse park and cycled in. I got a site with a power cord so I could use my computer and pitched my tent. A very friendly ranger came by and we chatted. He indicated that this weekend, being the 4th of July, it would be completely packed. I asked whether or not there were any problems with Lyme's Disease due to the deer in the area. He said not to worry, although they had regular ticks. Racoons were the biggest 'threat' since they come searching for food scraps.

I was invited to join the campfire of the group next door and found it very interesting talking with them. They were volunteers, part of a programme called 'Americorp' offering public service to the state. Although I've been appreciating all the trees since I arrived in Iowa they were adamant that they are not native to the area and that when Lewis and Clark explored here in the early 1800s it was just prairie. Today only 0.1% of the land area in Iowa are prairie, and these are limited to parts of the state which were totally inaccessible or inappropriate for farming—such as this park. They were working on clearing trees and fostering growth of the prairie grass in the park.

It is a fascinating geological feature in that the park is built on a ridge which is made entirely of loess. Only in China is another one of these ridges found. Loess are sediments of silt, clay and very fine clays. Carried by the winds, they were deposited on the east slope of the valley wall. There are no rocks—it was nice and easy to peg my tent—and the soil has unusual properties. Because of its fine texture, deep, steep-sided and very narrow ridge tops have been eroded in the hills. Small, step-like terraces called 'cat steps' resulting from repeated slipping of the soil can be seen on many west-facing slopes. Since the soil drains rapidly, nearly vertical cuts can be made in the soil without erosion.

It was getting late and I retired and worked on my journal for a while before having a good night's sleep.

### **30 June - Day 32: Waubonse State Park IA to Mount Ayr IA - 142 km**

It was a beautiful sunny morning and I awoke to the sound of birds. During the night I had even heard an owl nearby, its deep call was soothing. Once again I indulged myself with a bit of a sleep in and then I spread out my sleeping bag, pillow and mat in the sun to take advantage of the heat. It was going to be a very hot day as it was in the high 20's even though it was not yet 9 a.m. Indeed, at 3 p.m. I passed a place indicating it was 35 degrees.

I finally pushed off about 11 a.m. and headed up to the lookout. The Americorp volunteers were there cutting in stairs to help people up the final 30 metres to the top. I commented facetiously that the stairs would stop people from driving all the way to the crest and told them of my experiences in Yosemite at Mirror Lake. They laughed and said that before they put in a concrete barrier someone had tried just that!

While they were working they were listening to a police chase on their walkie-talkie radio. This was real-life action and every so often a voice would come on with the sound of sirens in the background updating where they were, or where they were going to head this miscreant off. I enquired (seriously) if any of the action was taking place on Highway 2 as all I needed was to become a hood ornament on some pickup truck driven by Billie-Bob who is trying to outrun the local police. Fortunately it was some distance away.

The view from the lookout was magnificent. You could see west into Nebraska across the Missouri river and I would estimate the visibility

at in excess of 50 km. It was a peaceful setting (except for the car chase) and I can see why the first explorers were so taken with the area. There was a quote from Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition that he came upon this spot while hunting for elk and was so taken with the view of the vast prairies that he forgot about the elk. I'd believe it. The quote also mentioned the complete absence of any trees, which is the opposite to today. I must admit that I like the trees.

After filling my water bottles at the fountain I headed down the road to Highway 2. Let me try and describe what it was like. Whereas Nebraska was largely flat and devoid of trees, except for the areas before and after Lincoln, southern Iowa has a much more rolling terrain. There is also an abundance of water and this, combined with the terrain, seems to have allowed them to cultivate far more trees than I have seen since I left the Rockies. It was very beautiful to look over these green, rolling hills which were covered in corn and have the vistas broken by irregular lines and clumps of trees. It also made the cycling more pleasant as there was the musty smells that accompany trees and lots to look at by the side of the road.

Even though it was the Friday before the 4th of July holiday weekend, traffic was not that heavy. Perhaps that is also a reflection of the small population size of Iowa: about 3 million for the entire state. Notwithstanding this, the absence of a rideable shoulder made the cycling uncomfortable—I guess that I've been spoiled by the other states I've been through to date. At least there is usually no traffic in the oncoming lane so passing traffic often gives me a wide berth.

I came to the town of Clarinda after about 60 km and was feeling the need for a cold drink so I headed into the centre of town. It was nestled in a valley and was what one envisages a typical small American town to be. Well kept houses and gardens with people sitting on their porches, some of them in swing chairs. There was a

tidiness about the place which made it especially attractive; it did not look wealthy, just proud. On the outskirts of town was an imposing building complex which was the local community college. Its architecture that of the late 1800's with lots of Victorian era brick buildings.

The centre of town was a square with the local court house. I cycled around it and admired the building. There obviously is some money in this area. Unlike a number of other towns I have been in, all the shops in the centre of town were occupied, the sign of a healthy economy. I passed a statue of a Civil War soldier with the inscription 'In memory of those who fell in defence of the Union'. It was in pristine condition so the locals seem to also take pride in their history.

I stopped for refreshment at a local shop, and an elderly man came by and chatted. He told me of an old railway line running North to South outside the town of Shenandoah which has been turned into a cycle path. About 20 miles long, it receives a lot of visitors from both Iowa and Missouri. The ultimate intention is to tie it in with a similar cycle path in Missouri, although local farmers have not been too keen on the idea, with some bulldozing away parts of the path across their land. Having cycled on former railway lines in the UK I can attest that they are a pleasure to ride, with gentle grades, no traffic, and usually a good surface. There is a group in the UK called Sustrans who are working towards setting up a network of cycle paths on disused railway lines and this has proved a boon to tourism. I later learned of a similar organisation in the USA called 'Rails to Trails'.

One endearing aspect of small towns in America is the way in which they go to almost any extreme to find a claim to fame. Clarinda was no exception as it was the birthplace of the 'Big Band' musician Glenn Miller. Entering town there was a sign directing you to his birthplace (I didn't go) and as I cycled through town I passed the 'Glenn Miller

Armoury'. A few days ago in North Platte, Nebraska I had seen a special section in the museum dedicated to Glenn Miller—he had lived there as a child—and there is the Glenn Miller Highway in Nebraska. In Denver they have the Glenn Miller centre at the University of Colorado where he studied. As you can see, almost any association is important.

Other towns are even more limited with their options. I passed one sign that the town was the home of an 'All American' athlete, from 1965. Others were more recent, such as their local high school football team winning the championship 8 years ago. There is also the quaint title of an 'All American City' and even if it has been 30 years since they won, cities still have signs up as you enter that they once won this award.

I had only gone 100 km and decided to cycle on and see how far I could get. The terrain was also changing, with the regular short hills giving way to longer hills with flat sections between. It was delightful riding and I thoroughly enjoyed it, a marked change to much of the day when it had been tedious to say the least.

At one point I saw an object by the side of the road which looked like a turtle. Sure enough it was and I turned back to see if it was still alive which it was. It was over 30 cm long and the fellow looked very old. When I went to pick it up it pulled its head into the shell just like they do in the movies. I was surprised at how heavy it was—about the weight of one to two bricks. I moved it off the shoulder to the embankment and pointed it downhill towards the nearby pond which must have been its home. Lis, who always rescues hedgehogs, would have been proud of me.

I reflected on the wildlife that I have seen this trip, and how it has changed. Last Sunday while cycling through the desert outside of Sterling, Colorado I saw a wild coyote cross the road and watch me

from a distance. It was similar to a fox but yet different. I have seen lots of sheep and admired them as they have gracefully bounded across the road and jumped fences as if they were not there. I have seen a wide array of bird life and now a turtle. God has created such an incredible array of wildlife.

To this should be added the road kill that I have passed. This has markedly changed in recent days. In the desert there were deer but since Lincoln there have been a lot of racoons, skunks and bullfrogs. I must say that racoons seem to make the biggest mess when hit as they are often spread over 30-50 metres of road, quite an achievement for such a small animal. The ranger commented to me that the fact that I see so many racoons by the side of the road is a sign of the low price for skins. When prices are high—\$20/skin—people pick them up for skinning but current prices are about \$5/skin so they can't be bothered.

I reached Mount Ayr as the sun set behind the hills. As I entered town I passed a baseball game under lights to the left of the road. There was also a public pool full of kids, given the shouts of joy and laughter emanating from it. I had decided to stay in a motel and get a good nights rest and was pleased to find one—many of the smaller towns don't have them. I had a wonderful shower—my SPF30 sunscreen leaves a waxy feeling if its been a hot day. After trying unsuccessfully to connect to the Internet (digital phone system) I collapsed to a deep sleep, satisfied with my progress. I had made 40+ km in the last few hours with much less effort than earlier in the day. Let's hear it for these late afternoon runs.

## **1 July - Day 33: Mount Ayr to Centerville IA – 126.5 km**

After an excellent sleep I awoke to a very foggy morning. I wanted an early start so packed up and was on the way by 8:30. In my befuddled state last night I had left the key in the door. Since there

was no chain on the inside a lot of good it did locking the door before I went to sleep!

The manager directed me to a restaurant in town where I could get breakfast. I have come to the realisation that there is a standard layout for towns in Iowa which consist of a central square where the county courthouse or county buildings are located. Around this square the town's businesses developed. It seems that every town of any substance I've been to in this state has this or a variation of this as the basis for the town square. They also use the term 'plat' to describe the establishment of the town. They say, for example, that Centerville was platted in 1852. To surveyors the term plat means to accurately map a parcel of land showing distances and bearings. It may come from the old Cornish mining term for a flat area.

The fog had lifted slightly when I left the restaurant but the air was very humid. As I bumped along the cobblestones around the pavement I decided that it was Gore-Tex weather so I put on my jacket. However, before too long the fog was burned off and it became a brilliant day with blue sky and temperatures in the 30's.

I continued east along Highway 2 and the road crossed more rolling hills. The wind wasn't too bad until about 11:30 when suddenly it came up and started blowing fairly hard. Naturally it blew against my direction of travel ...

By the time I reached the Interstate at Duschene I was ready for a break so I stopped at a petrol station and had a glass of ice and an apple juice. I sat outside on a chair and ever so slowly savoured the sweet coldness of the drink. I was entering Amish country and I passed a young couple parked by the side of the road in a buggy selling home baked goods. I found the picture slightly confusing as she was drinking from one of these enclosed thermoses that are used

to hold several pints of drink and yet enable them to be drunk without spilling. The 17th and the 21st centuries meet.

I fell into conversation with the attendant and commented on the changing terrain and the fact that the corn farms seemed to be giving way to cattle and horses. He told me that the farming varies across Iowa with the central part that he comes from having lots of corn, soy beans, and hogs. Here, where the land is not as good, the size of the corn farms were much smaller; also limited by the terrain.

He made an interesting observation on the Amish. He told me that when they purchase a farm they remove any modern conveniences like plumbing or telephones. However, they don't have a problem visiting a (non-Amish) neighbour and using their phone. I mentioned the drink container I saw and he said that they regularly visit him and purchase soda pop etc. It must be so difficult to tread a fine line between your beliefs and the modern world.

It was a further 50 km to Centerville and, as seems to always be the case, as the afternoon progressed the wind abated and my energy increased. I made it there by about 7 p.m. and found a pay telephone near the courthouse. Now this was an achievement since there have been few, if any, payphones to date in Iowa. I called Lis and had a long chat with her while keeping an eye on the goings on around me.

The local pastime seemed to be to drive around the courthouse square. I observed a number of people in cars going around and around and around. Occasionally several would park together in the centre of the town before continuing the circuit. After getting off the phone I decided to ask a local policeman where to camp. I mentioned about the revolving traffic I observed and he said that this was indeed a local custom. He said that people from all over the county come and cruise around the square to meet friends, or to make new ones. I commented that he seemed to interrupt their festivities as I

had seen him pulling over a couple of people. He laughed and said that the locals sometimes needed a gentle, or not so gentle, reminder that there are some limitations.

I was directed towards the local reservoir and I found a spot in the campground. Given it was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend I was surprised that there was space but even had it been full my little tent could easily fit in anywhere quite unobtrusively. The local ranger Mark was collecting camp fees and we had a chat. He picked up my bike and was amazed how heavy it was ... I guess that I just take it for granted except when I drop it and have to lift it.

As dusk settled out came the fireworks and it was quite an impressive display by the locals. I suspect it will get better and better as we approach the 4<sup>th</sup> of July itself. There was a surfeit of alcohol flowing with some campers, but Mark had warned me about this. One very drunk fisherman had cut his finger to the bone and his sister-in-law had just successfully lifted the car keys from him to take him to the hospital. I was in for an interesting night ...

## **2 July - Day 34: Centerville IA to Burlington IA - 188.0 km**

In spite of my premonitions that I would have a bad night, it passed by uneventfully, although I did wake up before 6 a.m. It was one of the most humid days I have ever experienced; like a blanket enveloping everything. I had to wipe down my bicycle it was so wet. The campground was at peace—probably everyone sleeping off last night's efforts—as I cycled out I even saw a couple of people sleeping on and under a picnic table.

The terrain was relatively flat and I made good time. It is like much of what I've cycled through recently; farms and cornfields. There is not much else to see in this part of Iowa! I stopped in the town of Bloomfield and found the temperature was already in the high 20's. The town square boasted one of the most ornate court houses I have

yet seen and was full of people enjoying a pancake breakfast run by the Rotary Club. It was an annual 4th July affair which was held early due to there being a reunion in town.

I decided to follow J40 which continued due East. This proved to be a good choice as there was little traffic. It was also called a 'Scenic Route', and this it was ... if one considers more cornfields and farms to be scenic (which I do).

As I cycled along I saw several Amish travelling in their horse-drawn carriages. The carriages were uniformly black and the occupants wore what best could be described as old fashioned clothes. The elderly men had long, white beards which reminded me of photos I have seen of the early pioneers. The only modern convenience I saw were bright safety triangles placed in the back of the vehicle and battery operated lights. Some carriages had sliding doors which meant that they would be fully enclosed in winter; probably a good thing. I motored by one of them going in the same direction so I can say that I am faster than a one-horsepower, fully loaded Amish carriage. It was packed to the gunnels with the family; father, mother and four young children.

I had been told to visit Lacey State Park and it was good advice. The park was resplendent with lots of trees and it was a pleasure to cycle through the greenery. It reminded me a lot of the parks in Toronto, but much denser. The road led me to a large river which proved to be the Des Moines river. The place had a historical marker that this point was known as Ely Ford and was where the Mormons crossed the river during their trek west. The river was about 200 metres wide here and it must have been some feat crossing it with all the people, handcarts and wagons.

From there the road took me through the historic towns of Bentonsport and Bonaparte. The latter was especially interesting as it

was another crossing point for the Mormons. One hundred and fifty years ago this was a busy town with several mills, but today it is, like many others, barely hanging on. There was a café and after another cold drink and taking advantage of their air conditioning I travelled onwards.

One aspect of cycle touring is that it is much like war: there are long periods of boredom interspersed with some excitement and this described the afternoon. It was hot, humid and sunny. At time I felt as if I had been swimming. I stopped in West Point and sat in the petrol station, had a drink and cooled down. Then it was back out to the oven—it was over 35 degrees—to continue my battle.

It was up and down and the miles passed by. Soon I had joined the main highway near the Mississippi and was on my final leg to Burlington. I was feeling somewhat stuffed, so halted by the road and ate an energy bar. A policeman stopped to see if I needed help and we had a good chat. His name was Tobias and he was, like most people I've met, very friendly. He asked a probing question: 'are you doing this for fun?'. Good question. The second question was 'how do you get more than 2 weeks off work?' I've heard that one before! He had some New Zealand friends in college and was excited to meet me. He gave me his card and said if I had any problems to give him a call.

From there it was up to Burlington. I found a Super 8 Motel and checked in. After doing my laundry and answering e-mail collapsed yet again. It was a long, hot day. A bad storm broke just after dark with plenty of rain and pyrotechnics. I was very thankful to be in a cosy motel rather than my tent.

### **3 July - Day 35: Burlington IA to Galesburg IL - 84 km**

When chronicling my trip through Iowa I forgot to include an observation on the Iowa drivers. A disconcertingly high number of them were reading as they drove along! I had pictures of myself ending up as a hood ornament on a pickup truck driven by a guy called Clem Kiddlehopper who wore a John Deere tractor baseball cap, was chewing on a wheat husk while checking the prices of hog bellies in the paper as he drove along when he collided with this cyclist ... Fortunately it didn't eventuate (at least until Vermont), but it made for interesting pictures as I travelled along.

I had a late start to the day, and decided to explore Burlington. It was a very hilly city. Since I was in the new part of town, built on the bluffs over the Mississippi, it was a great downhill run into the 'old' town. I passed many old warehouses and buildings which were a testimony to the position that the city once played as a gateway to the West. Many emigrants crossed the Mississippi here on their way to a new life. In the distance I saw the famous river and the bridge to Illinois.

I came to the bottom of the road called 'Snake Alley' which was built in 1894. As the town expanded the flat land by the Mississippi was used up so the town planners had to go inland where it was quite hilly. They built an experimental switchback design between two of the neighbourhoods which was designed and constructed by some German immigrant engineers who had seen similar roads in the Ruhr. They constantly changed the camber from one curve to the next, keeping the high grade on the outside. The result was very impressive and the original brick pavement is still in use. There are 5 half-curves and two quarter-curves rising 58 feet over a distance of 275 feet.



It was listed in Ripley's 'Believe it or Not' as the "Crookedest Street in the World", something also claimed by San Francisco's Lombard Street. I had wanted to see the latter in San Francisco due to that memorable chase scene with Steve McQueen in the film 'Bullet', but didn't get around to it. Next visit.

Although successful from an engineering perspective, it was very difficult for horse carriages to navigate. By 1909 it was popular with auto traffic. A local history notes "In the early days, car dealers used Snake Alley for their test drives, with prospective buyers clinging to their seats while drivers accelerated up the curves. Today, many students in their driver's education courses are put through the unique test". I cycled down it and found it to be an interesting experience. The combination of the brick pavement and the tight

curves required great concentration but it was also quite neat. If it had not been such a long way up I would have done it a second time.

From there I cycled down to the river. I found the visitor's information centre near the bridge along with a public auditorium and parked between them.

The film 'Field of Dreams' is the story of a fellow crossing Iowa on a lawn mower. This fellow is happily pottering along at 5 mph when he is passed by a continuous stream of cyclists. This is the RAGBRI: the Recorder Annual Bike Ride Iowa (the Recorder being a newspaper)—or something like that. Nobody could tell me definitively what the acronym stood for but that was the one which was mentioned the most often. Each year they start with dipping their wheels in the Missouri river in the west and then spend a week cycling to the Mississippi river. A different route is taken each year and it draws 10-20,000 cyclists. This year it was ending in Burlington and a regular comment was that it was a pity I wasn't there in a few more weeks to participate. No thanks. I prefer to have a quiet cycle.

I visited the museum and found a small display on steamboats and their impact on the economy and settlement when they were introduced in the early 1800's. They opened up whole parts of the mid-West to commerce since they allowed barges to be towed as well as travelling upstream on rivers that previously were only marginally navigable. A few years ago I read of the excavation of a sunken riverboat and the array of wares that they found. What surprised them was the level of comforts that immigrants and settlers both brought with them and had sent in; I guess that was one advantage to settling along the river insofar as the steamboat could bring in a few luxuries. Today they run a steamboat between Burlington and Fort Madison as a casino; it spends six months of the year in each city.

There was a photo display of the town history showing such milestones as the first paving of the main street (concrete) and a lot of the old mansions that were blown out when they put through the highway.

Burlington's 'Heritage Hill' is on the National Register of Historic Places. Its hillside setting with nineteenth century architecture and materials make it a very interesting place to wander around. There were brick sidewalks, cobblestones, outside cellar entrances, and an array of other features. Apparently, the high elevation of the hill was socially attractive during the latter part of the nineteenth century. It also had obvious advantages with regard to flood protection, drainage, and being removed from the industry and commercial activities below. There were an amazing number of churches, both here and below, which spoke of a strong faith. Apparently there were three German language district churches all within a block of each other.

The information centre was quite close to the river and I wondered about flooding. Sure enough they had some photos of the great flood of 1993 when the river flooded the lowest lying areas of the town, including the information centre. It was fascinating to see photos of the water half way up the walls, submerging many of the display cabinets but the "funniest" photo was the rescue boat floating in the lobby.

After a short trip around town I headed for the bridge and over to Illinois. The Mississippi really is huge and it is also very dirty. Indeed, some call it the Big Muddy and that is quite appropriate.

Once across the bridge and I was in Illinois. This is the land of Abraham Lincoln, and you are not allowed to forget it. That is emblazoned on licence plates and they have the 'Lincoln Trail' which is a scenic route through the state.

Monmouth was a delightful town and very tidy and well kept. As I entered the town it had a sign saying it was the birthplace of Wyatt Earp. Now here was someone I had heard of! The famous Marshall from Tombstone Arizona who participated in the gunfight at the OK Corral. There were signs directing us to his birthplace, but I resisted temptation and kept going.

The next day was the 4th of July, when America celebrates its Declaration of Independence in 1776. I had seen flags everywhere and Monmouth was no exception. Some houses were particularly patriotic, such as the one in the photo below. One tradition is to put American flags on graves but in some cemeteries there were reports of the flags being looted. After an intensive investigation they found the culprits—squirrels. Apparently the flags make ideal nesting materials. No suspects had yet been apprehended.



There was a lovely college in town with stately brick buildings and classical colonnades. It is such a pity that we now build them out of concrete since they just don't have the same air of elegance and dignity.

As I cycled through town I found the college sports fields and stopped for a rest. I don't know why but they have made the bleachers so uncomfortable that I couldn't sit in them for 10 minutes, let alone a whole baseball game. Perhaps the teams need the fans to stay awake? I read the paper and had some dried fruit and water. I was quite perky afterwards and continued on towards Galesburg.

One major difference between Iowa and Illinois compared with Nebraska and Eastern Colorado was the absence of junked cars parked outside of the houses. Whereas farmers further west seemed to view parts of their properties as junk yards, this is not the same here. I didn't see a single wreck in either state. There is also an air of prosperity here, and that is perhaps why one doesn't see things like these.

Eventually I reached Galesburg, home town of Carl Sandburg. They were quite proud of him as the signs announced that he was born here; there was the Carl Sandburg shopping centre; the Carl Sandburg homestead; and the Carl Sandburg park. If, like me, you had never heard of this man it only shows our ignorance; he was apparently a great poet.

I was feeling a bit under the weather so treated myself to a motel. After parking my bike I walked into town to see if I could get something to eat but everything was closed in anticipation of the holiday tomorrow. I found some pizza and a fruit juice at a petrol station and retired to my room for an early night.

#### **4 July - Day 36: Galesburg IL to Hennepin Canal IL - 103 km**

I started the day with the 'Weather Channel' and they forecast winds from the South. Of course when I exited the hotel they were coming from the East; it seems as though an inability to accurately forecast weather is a universal trait. They should be more accurate in the

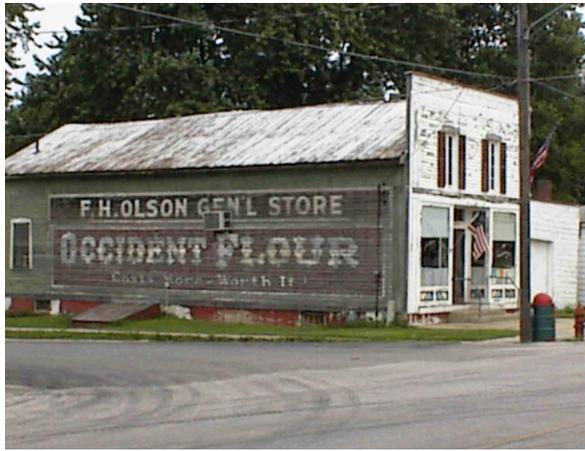
middle of a continent such as this, that was seldom to be. They forecast a 40% probability of rain and this was definitely an underestimate judging by the humidity in the air.

The motel was close to the centre of town and there was a beautiful red sandstone church on the main circle. It was built in 1898 with the stone imported all the way from Michigan. There were several magnificent stained glass windows including a huge round one.

My plan was to head East and then North along the Illinois river. However, due to the wind I changed my plans and headed NE along Highway 34. This served to make the wind on an angle, but it was preferable to having a pure headwind.

The road ran parallel to the railway line and although it was largely flat, it was slow going due to the wind. It is really quite ironic that in all my research I read that the dominant wind was from the West but since leaving the Rockies it had been every direction except the west. This was also a bad year for forest fires and I suspect that there were some climate changes at play.

I passed through a number of small communities. Since it was 4th July they were essentially deserted. The only thing open was the petrol stations; these seem to never close. In one community there was a delightful old village shop which had an advertisement on the side as shown below. At one stage this form of advertising was quite common and I saw everything advertised from coal to caskets. I often wondered what happened to the companies that made these products. Whether they just shut down or were the forerunners of what we have today.



Illinois had more historical plaques than Iowa, but less than I saw in Colorado and Utah. I saw one on a stone that was overgrown so I went over and had a look. It commemorated a raid made on local Indians in 1780 using a collection of French, Spanish and Americans in retaliation for raids by the Indians. I found it fascinating that over 200 years ago the Spanish were operating this far north. This was before the Louisiana purchase, when the USA bought the Mississippi region from France in the early 1800's, so I was surprised that the Americans were involved.

I came across another plaque near 'Bishop's Hill'. This commemorated a Swedish religious community that was established in the area in the 1840s. After starting to farm 16000 acres the leader was murdered. Later on there was dissension and the community split after about 15 years. I found it ironic since it is a pattern which has been repeated so often. There are strong leaders who dominate through their strength of personality. Once they are no longer in charge things fall apart. We seem to want to be followers ...

I entered the town of Galva which proudly announced that it was settled by Swedes who originally called it Galve after their home in

Sweden, but it became anglicised to Galva. There were quite a few Scandinavians who settled in this area, and there was a monument to the Norwegian settlers. I read that the railway stations were polyglots of languages with everything from Chinese to Irish to Italian to ???

I was stopped by a policeman—Officer T. Bennett, no relation—and advised that the road was closed due to the town parade. I was in for that, parked my bike, and enjoyed the next hour. Let me explain ...

In movies they have these quaint parades which reflect the full cross-section of the community. I always thought, yeah, right, but that is what I saw. It was amazing. The whole community seemed to be out, sitting on the sidewalk in their garden chairs. They were the audience for an array of parade participants which can best be described as anything that could move and wanted to participate. Probably the rest of the town's population.

I saw everything from fire engines to lawn mowers to tractors. There were vintage cars and modern cars. There were 'Shriners' on their motorcycles, there were politicians, kids on the back of trucks, a band in a sled, and the high school cheer leaders on the back of a truck. What was missing was the high school marching band—winners of the 1999 Illinois championship (announced by the sign as I entered the town).

The participants in the parade threw out candies to the spectators and there were three young girls who had plastic bags and scrambled for everything they could get—which was quite a lot. I tried a 'Tootsie Roll' as I had enjoyed these as a teenager. My taste buds have matured with age and I found them absolutely unpalatable.

I chatted with a local policeman who showed the knowledge of geography that I have found so disconcerting during my travels.

After saying that I was from New Zealand he said that there was someone from my part of the world in the parade: a Swede. Seriously! Then again, that was bettered the next day by the 14 year old girl who asked me where Boston was. She had heard of it but didn't know where it was. I apologise to my American friends, but there is a real education gap in America when it comes to geography (and history).

An elderly gentleman came over and spoke with me. His name was Marty Looney (yes, that's right) and he was 85 years old. He had spent his whole life in town and had seen every parade except when he was overseas at war. He was in the 82nd Airborne Division and was wounded four times. I said that I thought that if you were wounded once you were sent home. Not so he said, even if you were badly injured they still tried to keep you on. He said that he was part of the glider borne troops and 'crashed' nine times. I said wouldn't it be better to use a parachute than to be in those wooden gliders and he replied that at least in a glider if you survived the landing you weren't alone; with parachutes you could land anywhere and find yourself in deep trouble. Made sense to me.

He said that he had received four 'Purple Heart Medals' for being wounded. I asked him if he knew why the highway in Nebraska was called the 'Purple Heart Highway', but unfortunately he hadn't heard of this. It is a quaint American practice to give highways names. I had been on the 'Henry Fonda Highway'; 'Corn Husker Highway', 'Purple Heart Highway'—and these were all the same road—along with others in different states. One popular name was the 'Grand Army of the Republic Highway' as I encountered this in two or three different states on totally different roads.

While I was talking with Marty, the American Legion members marched by. These were former soldiers and, although the youngest would have been 75'ish, they sure knew how to march. When they

got to the curve where I was positioned the innermost went to a 1/3 step as they wheeled around. All the time they were in step with their old rifles held proudly on their shoulders. I was impressed. I contrasted this with the New Zealand army troops Lis and I saw at the Auckland Cenotaph on ANZAC day who couldn't even keep in step in a straight line. But the best are the U.S. Marines who have a real crack drill squad. It's something I've always appreciated since I was an Air Cadet as a child and we tried (unsuccessfully) to have a good drill team.

Eventually the parade ended and I cycled on to Kewanee where I had my standard fare for lunch: a vegetarian sub at Subway. While there it started raining very heavily so I was thankful to be indoors. After the rain passed the sky was still dark but I decided to head across the street to the market where I bought some fruit.

As I cycled away from the market it started to rain again so found the Boomerang Cafe to wait in and it was quite a wait as I was there for about four hours! The proprietor's name was Eve Przybyla and, as you can probably guess, she was from Poland instead of Australia which is what I expected with a name like the Boomerang. When Eve heard that I was from New Zealand she got all excited as New Zealand (and Australia) were places she had always wanted to go. Indeed, one of her first questions was 'Are there any Polacks there?'. I was taken aback since the term Polack was a somewhat derisory term for Poles that we tended to avoid in Canada, but I guess it is acceptable in this part of America. I said that I only knew of one but that I'm sure that there would be more in Australia.

I cannot begin to describe how friendly everyone was towards me. Her husband and a friend were installing an ice cream machine. Her children were there as was one of the friends, and her mother, who was visiting from Poland and didn't speak English, was also there. Our conversation ranged over a wide area, from my observations on

America to life in New Zealand. It was particularly interesting talking with their friend who was a full-time farmer as he was able to answer some questions which had been bothering me for a while.

One of the local practices is to put signs up for the seeds that are in the fields. One will pass fields with 'Pioneer 35175' etc. A sign which caught my particular attention was 'Roundup Ready' and I asked the farmer what this meant. Apparently, soy beans are a somewhat sensitive crop and susceptible to weed problems. They developed a genetically modified crop which is immune to the poison 'Roundup'. This makes it possible to spray the soy bean fields with Roundup which kills everything, except the soy crop. He explained that they also have special corn which is corn borer resistant and that most crops are genetically modified in some fashion.

I commented that it would seem from an economic perspective much wiser to use organic growing techniques but he said that even though the retail price for organic produce is very high, that is not passed onto growers so it is not worth their while. It seems that last year a bushel of soy beans was worth \$5 and if you didn't use genetically modified crops you got \$5.05—a 1% difference. He said that given the extra effort and hassles of not using Roundup it is a better idea to use the genetically modified seed stock.

I was surprised at his comment that the farms are not financially viable given the huge farms that I had been passing. He said that their main competition is from Argentina and Chile where they have even bigger farms, and lower labour costs. The U.S. government has adopted a policy of minimum price supports which are paid to farmers to ensure that they have an adequate income. We used to have these in New Zealand but they were done away with 15+ years ago and our farmers now compete openly and fairly on the world market. It is a pity that the Americans don't do this as free trade

would ultimately benefit the consumers. But given how political things are here, I don't think that would ever happen.

The rain eventually stopped and as I readied myself to go I took the photo below of the gang at the Boomerang. I cycled off and stopped at a chemist to call New Zealand when Eve's husband returned a couple of my (sodden) maps that had fallen out of my bag as I cycled off.



From there I eventually found Highway 35 and headed NE. The road followed the railway line and it was hard work as there was still a headwind. For the first time I noticed passenger trains—mainly empty—but there was little other traffic, particularly on the road. One who passed me in a car was a cyclist and he stopped offering to let me crash at his place as it was still a fairly stormy afternoon. Thoroughly tempted I declined as I wanted to try and put some distance down before sunset. He said that every Tuesday he cycled to work in Peoria, a distance of 60 miles, and was very impressed with the idea of a trans-America trip.

My goal for that evening was the town of Princeton (not the university town by the same name) but when I got close to it there was a sign that the bridge was out and the road closed. A few days earlier I had been reading in the newspaper how 35% of the nation's bridges are sub-standard and many are being closed since there are no funds for maintenance. Checking my map, which only had major roads, there were not many choices open to me which didn't involve a long cycle. However, there was a Visitor's Centre a few miles away at the Hennepin Canal so I resolved to cycle over there and see if I could get some advice. I was also hoping that the canal towpath would be suitable for cycling.

The centre was closed and the canal towpath was an impenetrable mud bath so I decided to try and get around the bridge somehow. As I was leaving a ranger drove up so I asked his advice. Yes, there was a route around the bridge which didn't involve too much of a bypass. He suggested that I go a couple of miles up to the highway and check into a motel which I decided was a good idea given that the weather was still unsettled. Good call—it started to rain just as I arrived to check in.

It was a Day's Inn and was more upmarket than the other hotels I had stayed in, but I didn't care. Surprisingly, the manager was an Australian who had married a mid-Westerner and now found himself in this part of the world. He wasn't too happy with the winters and they were planning on moving to Arizona where he was going to start a camel touring company. Apparently he had a lot of experience doing this in the Northern Territory and his idea was to offer an Aussie camel safari without having to leave the USA. I think it's brilliant. He also planned on doing a camel trek to Vermont in the autumn. Imagine looking at all those leaves from 3 metres off the ground. However, it wouldn't be paradise as I recalled the time in India where a colleague's partner wrote a short story called 'Three Days Downwind from a Farting Camel'. Apparently, camels (at least

Indian ones) have a major problem with flatulence. When I asked the Aussie about this he shrugged and said “it’s just part of the experience”.

## **5 July - Day 37: Hennepin Canal IL to Channahon IL - 154 km**

My plan of action was to head to Princeton and see if I could find a way around the bridge or to take the alternative route which, supposedly, wasn’t too much of a diversion. I was a tad sceptical since motorists have a different perspective on distance (and grades) to cyclists.

The road took me over the Hennepin canal and I was able to see the towpath in the light of day. It was a mess of fallen trees and mud. I found out later that they will in the next 1-2 years be putting down a proper cycle/walking path. It’s a great idea since it is such a pleasure to walk/cycle by a canal. But more about that later ...

The road I followed cut across the canal and at one point they had restored a lock and one of the bridges so I went and had a look. The Hennepin canal was unusual in that it was completed around the turn of the century, quite late by canal standards. To that end, it has some relatively modern construction techniques, one being the use of concrete for the locks. In all the other canals that I have seen the locks were masonry. They also had photos of the canal being built and showed the use of early steam-powered diggers; quite the contrast to the man and mule power used to dig the earlier canals. The photo below shows one of the concrete locks. It was noted that the construction techniques honed on this canal were used to build the Panama Canal a short time later.



At the end of the lock was a bridge providing access to the local farmer's fields. It was able to be raised as there were a set of counterweights in each of the four columns at the corner of the bridge. The barge operator (or farmer) only needed to turn a handle in the middle of the bridge for it to be raised or lowered. I was intrigued to see how much effort it would take but they had (wisely?) set it up so that it couldn't be played with by inquisitive engineers such as myself (or kids).

I decided to try my way over the bridge that was closed—after all, cyclists can go to places where cars fear to tread. The road to the bridge was muddy and sodden after yesterday's rain. They were just laying the reinforcing steel so I couldn't get across, but the workers directed me back up the road and to the alternative route to Princeton. It took me along some heavily wooded lanes and across a relatively small bridge before I emerged once again into the interminable fields of corn and soy. I passed by an old age care facility and I felt quite sorry for the residents as there was literally nothing to watch in the area except the corn growing.

It was in this area that I reached another milestone for the trip—4000 km.

One cannot describe what it is like to cycle hour after hour through the fields. The monotony was finally broken when I reached a golf course and was able to watch some of the golfers. Uncharacteristically—at least compared to the other courses I have passed—a number of the golfers were walking and carrying their bags or pulling them in a trolley. One woman had scaled the fence and was looking through the rough by the side of the road for her ball. I'd be surprised if she ever found it as the grass was several feet deep; but good on her for trying!

The golf course was on a back road that I was trying as an alternative to the road that I had been on. I had intersected with an Interstate and there were too many trucks for my liking. This proved to be a great choice as not only was there no traffic, but it was one of these great runs through winding country lanes shaded by trees. It eventually took me past two cemeteries which were meticulously maintained, and then back to the main road which I followed to the town of Peru.

I found a bagel restaurant in Peru and stopped for lunch. I then continued on through the town of La Salle, which seemed to be just a continuation of Peru, and there saw my first African-American for some time.

It is one of the great enigmas to me that you do not tend to see any non-Caucasians in the smaller towns with the possible exceptions of East Indians (e.g. Pakistanis) who are running the 24 hr convenience stores or petrol stations. Otherwise, rural America is a Caucasian domain. One hears of the unemployment problems amongst urban blacks and I countered this with the need for manpower in the rural parts of America. It would seem that there is some impediment to

them moving to the rural areas to take up work, but I have not found anyone who can explain what it is. I'm sure that racism plays a part of it, but it must be more than that; I was told Lincoln Nebraska took in a large number of Iraqi refugees which helped to counter its depopulation problem.

I noticed on the map that a lot of the names in this area were French or familiar to those from Canada, such as the towns of Ottawa, Marseilles, Iroquois County, Sudbury, and more. The reason for this lies back in the early exploration of this area by the French in the 17th century. In 1673 the first Europeans to reach the area were Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette. The French viewed the Great Lakes area as offering valuable resources and their influence spanned far and wide. At the same time they endeavoured to convert the local Indians to Catholicism which they did with some success.

Jolliet and Marquette's expedition is quite famous (at least to Canadians) as they were the first to explore the Mississippi. They had been charged by Governor Frontenac to establish whether the river flowed south as was believed, or west as was rumoured. They travelled far enough south on the Mississippi to prove that it flowed to the Gulf of Mexico and took the Illinois river on their northward leg, having been informed by the Indians that it was an easier route than the Mississippi. They followed the Illinois and Des Plaines rivers and discovered that there was an easy portage over a low divide to Lake Michigan. Indeed, the watershed between the two waterway systems was only 13 feet high and Jolliet called for a canal to be dug which would connect the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. This idea was subsequently rejected by the French explorer La Salle who noted that the harbour on Lake Michigan tended to silt up and was not suitable for navigation. It was used as a portage and is today the site of the city of Chicago.

The French established a series of forts throughout the area at places like St. Louis, Peoria, and Chicago, but they were never successful at establishing secure settlements or trading routes due to continuous problems with the Iroquois Indians. The area declined and it was only in the late 1700's that interest was aroused in the area as the Americans wanted to cut off British trade with the Indians. To this end they established Fort Dearborn at what is now Chicago and in 1810 it was suggested that a canal be built. The Indians ceded ten miles of land either side of the river—although within 20 years all Indians would have been 'expelled' from the territory—and this was used as the basis for developing the I & M Canal.

The importance of the canal to the development of the USA cannot be underestimated. It took 25 years to build, due to funding problems as opposed to engineering problems, but once opened was a major artery for commerce. In 1848 a cargo of sugar and other goods from New Orleans reached Buffalo and this heralded what was soon to become a continuous flow of goods and people between east and west. The Midwest's hub became Chicago and the city's population increased by 600% in the decade after the opening of the canal. The development of cities and communities along the canal altered the development of Illinois with immigrants pouring into the northern part of the state.

The canal was soon under threat from railways which offered faster travel so it became relegated to carrying bulk commodities but found a new role in carrying the sanitary waste from Chicago. In 1933 it was too small for the modern barges and was replaced by the Illinois Waterway.

So why this digression into canals—besides the fact that they obviously interest me? It is because the I&M Canal has been resurrected as a recreational trail and I was fortunate enough to find it in Seneca and follow it all the way to the end in Channahon. I had

gone to Seneca in search of some water and decided to explore the town when I saw a historical marker and a trail. This was half way along the canal and I could have started in Peru had they bothered to put in signs (grumble, grumble). I immediately changed my plans and headed east along the canal towpath.

Now this was cycling as it was meant to be. The towpath was a crushed gravel surface which was good for riding and for much of the way it was sheltered by trees. There were frequent markers explaining the history and operation of the canal so I regularly stopped at these. The canal operated in a similar manner to the canals in the UK, although they used mules to pull the boats instead of horses. They apparently preferred female mules since they were considered smarter than the male mules. I'm sure that my female readers will say that comes as no surprise.

The only drawback to the cycle was the number of mosquitoes which swarmed around me whenever I stopped to read the markers, but they were soon under control thanks to my can of repellent. The cycling was flat, easy and an absolute pleasure. I was surrounded by trees and nature with no traffic to bother me. I stopped in the town of Morris and bought a smoothie. It was wonderfully cold. Even though it was 4:30 p.m., it was still 35 degrees outside (according to their thermometer) and I appreciated the respite. The canal opened up a bit after Morris, although there were still tree enclosed areas.



I met a couple who were also cycling. From Pennsylvania, they were out in their RV visiting the west and cycled for a few hours each day. They told me that there are a large number of former canals and railway lines in Pennsylvania which have been turned into cycle paths, and one path goes all the way to Washington D.C. Tempting.

Occasionally I would catch glimpses of the Illinois river through the trees, but otherwise I was in a world all my own. Near Channahon I met two young women aged about 14 on bicycles and asked them if there was a camping ground near by. Intrigued by my gear they asked where I was from and when I told them one said 'you rode all the way from New Zealand'. No, I replied, there is an ocean in the way. Another point for American geography teachers.

### **6 July – Day 38 – Channahon IN to Park IN – 148 km**

I find that mornings are always a bit slow for me, and this was no exception. I had a leisurely breakfast and packed up while listening to National Public Radio. Just after 8 a ranger came by and collected my camping fee. Hearing I was from New Zealand she asked me to come by and sign her visitor's book.

Toni was a typically friendly and outgoing American. Originally from Vermont, she had been in Illinois for many years but still considered herself to be a Vermonter at heart. People from Vermont are quite different to other Americans in many respects, and they are proud of it. For example they have state funded health care for the poor, have passed zoning laws to prohibit megastores like Wal-Mart, and have recently even allowed same sex marriages.

As I left the campground I took the photo below of the lock keepers house. Compared to some of the tiny cottages we saw in England, it was really quite substantial and today is lived in by one of the rangers working at the park. Note the masonry locks which contrast with the ones yesterday at the Hennepin Canal which were of concrete.



I followed the trail north towards the city of Joliet (which should be Jolliet given that is the correct spelling of his name) and, like yesterday, it was a pleasant ride. As I neared the end I asked an elderly man I met about the route ahead and he advised me to follow

him and he would point me in the correct direction since the end of the canal was upon us.

Jerry proudly told me that he was a member of the "Zipper Club". When I asked what that was he lifted his shirt and showed me a huge scar from his open heart surgery. He was interested to hear that my wife Lis was a cardiac rehab nurse and told me how he had totally changed his lifestyle since his operation. Whereas once he said he would have 17 pieces of salami with a little bread, he now was fastidious about his diet. Three days a week he went for 2 hr walks on the canal and 3 days a week he went to a gym where they had a special cardiac rehab programme. He was the kind of patient who takes the extra chance he has been given and makes the most of it and spoke disparagingly of many of his fellow patients who were still what he called "couch potatoes".

When we reached the end of the trail he gave me excellent directions and donning my helmet I ventured into the south of Joliet. I travelled along the Illinois river and then crossed over on one of the four lift bridges in town. All had different designs but they serve the same purpose: they are raised to allow high barges to pass underneath them. They looked like larger scale models of the bridge I had seen the previous day on the Hennepin canal.

I had managed to avoid cities as much as possible throughout this trip, but on this day my luck ran out. Joliet was the first of several areas that I was to pass through which reminded me of the great contrasts that exist between the urban and rural areas. All were suffering different degrees of urban decay, and all got worse as the day progressed. But I get ahead of myself...

There were signs of urban renewal underway and in a number of places I saw painted murals and it looked like many of the buildings had recently been tidied up. Apparently one of the largest 'industries'

is the state penitentiary which explains why I saw several people in orange jump suits cutting the grass outside of the sheriff's office. The route I was following, Highway 6, formed part of the old and famous 'Route 66'. There are signs along the way and they even have a tourist guide, but it seems to me that they are just clutching at anything they can to get people to visit the town.

I headed East on Highway 30 and the road was a continuous series of car sales yards, malls, gas stations and fast food restaurants. The road was also under construction in places which made it less than pleasant to cycle along and I noticed a definite increase in driver aggressiveness. In fact, by the end of the day I had been honked at a total of five times; quite an achievement when you think that I had made it 4000+ km with only three people honking at me.

The route I had chosen avoided the city of Chicago but took me through Chicago Heights which was depressing. There were lots of African Americans milling about, and I heard people yelling and shouting a number of times. There was an air of desperation about the place which was only partially offset by the large number of churches that I passed; all of them local and unaffiliated to any larger denomination. I 'motored' through at 30 km/h and was very pleased when it was behind me. Soon I was in Dyer, Indiana, which was announced by a marked improvement in the quality of the roads.

Throughout my travels I have seen signs announcing 'Adopt A Highway' programmes. Each state has their own signs but the basic principle is the same. A group of individuals or an organisation agrees to collect the rubbish by the side of the road for so many miles. The distances vary from 0.2 miles (the shortest I've seen—in a town) to 10 miles (Nevada—where else?). Churches seem to be particularly active in this programme, although I've only seen two Seventh-Day Adventist Churches mentioned (one in Oakhurst CA and the second in Colorado). I thought that given the expense and effort to get signs

made up that there would be a major commitment, but this is not the case. I was told that they go out once in the spring and a second time in the autumn and pick up the trash. Hardly seems worth the effort...

I have been amazed at what one finds by the side of the road in America. Not only is there the normal rubbish of cans, bottles, etc. but I saw everything including toothbrushes, shoes (always just one—where is the other?), diapers, hats, you name it. There were enough bungee cords which, if tied together, would easily span a kilometre. In Indiana I also saw hypodermic needles and other drug paraphernalia. One interesting thing (at least when you don't have much else to think about or look at) is the transition in products. Let me explain. One of the most common commodities one finds are beer cans and bottles. In Colorado it was almost exclusively 'Coors' beer. However, by the time I got to Iowa 'Budwiser' and 'Bud Light' had taken over. Similarly, even though McDonalds is the most prevalent restaurant, one sees a disproportionate amount of rubbish from Wendy's and Dairy Queen. Different clientele? Who knows.

The road I was travelling on was famous (from an engineering perspective) since it was home to the 'Ideal Section'. An experiment from the early 1920s, it was designed and constructed to be the best road in the world. It had 100 foot right of way, good pavements, proper illumination, *etc.* They marked it with both a historical sign and a special plaque. I think that we often take for granted the quality of the roads that we have today and fail to recall that even 50 years ago most of the roads were unsealed.



This road was called the 'Lincoln Highway' and it was too busy for my liking so I left it in Schererville and took a secondary road that paralleled it. This too became very busy and just as my nerves were getting frazzled an unspoken prayer was answered in the form of a bicycle path which headed roughly north. It skirted farmer's fields before travelling along a power right of way and provided a welcome relief to the traffic.

I met up with Jennifer who was also cycling and we chatted for a while. She was my age but already had a grandchild—I was taken aback, but then at 40 I am getting on. She told me how she suffered from a rare heart disease where her heart muscle turns to fat and so she was waiting for a heart transplant. In spite of the difficulties, she still tried to maintain a regular exercise programme and I really respected her for that. Many of us who are healthy don't do this and here is someone who could literally drop dead at any moment out every day.

She told me how she had a defibrillator installed and it cost \$USD 30,000 of which she only paid \$1 to cover the phone calls from her room. The rest was paid for by medical insurance. I can see why

medical insurance rates are so high here since one only needs a few operations like these to blow out any budget. Her heart transplant would cost several times that. We parted ways near Hammond and Jennifer advised me to avoid Gary. Since she was the second person that day to tell me that, I thought that there must be some credence to the advice so I tried skirting the city to the south, only to get hopelessly lost in a maze of residential streets. I ended up back on the main road and headed North, stopping at the Indiana Visitor's Centre for some advice.

It was an extremely nice centre, the best I had seen, and they were well stocked with information. I got a number of brochures on what to see and admired an old race car that was used in the Indianapolis 500 race. Some trivia: apparently the first time a rear view mirror was used in a car was in one of these races. It was employed to make sure that nobody passed the guy with the mirror and he was so successful they looked at banning them. Instead, they became standard fare on all vehicles.

I asked for advice on how to travel through Gary and they suggested a route. It was the sort of route that every cyclist has nightmares about. Not only were the roads busy, but it took me through central Gary which really must be one of the most destitute places I've ever seen. Abandoned buildings, people milling about, and a general air of desperation to the place. I passed by a building that had once been a library; it now had no roof or windows and looked like it had just been abandoned to the elements since trees were growing through the openings. I wondered what would have caused such a thing to happen, and what hope there was for the future. I went through town as fast as I could and was pleased when I left the built up areas. I stopped at a gas station to buy a map and a motorist asked which way I was going. Upon hearing I was heading east he said "be careful, it's rough there" and I replied "It can't be any worse than it is

to the west", to which he agreed. Soon I was off onto Highway 12 which took me northwards along the south side of Lake Michigan.

I found myself on another historical road called the 'Dunes' highway. This apparently was part of the shortest route across the USA (in the 1920s). The road followed the 'Calumet Beach Trail' which linked Forts Dearborn and Wayne in the 19th century: today's Chicago and Detroit.

The area is known as the 'Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore' and is a series of beaches, marshes, oak and maple forests, and towering sand dunes. It is also the home of a number of large industries, particularly steel mills, whose development was fortunately forestalled by creating a park in 1966.

It was great cycling with forests about me and the sun cast beautiful evening shadows over the road. I stopped at a railway station and called New Zealand before going on to the campground at the state park. It was a very nice campground and surprisingly full given that it was a Thursday evening. I found a site and read the paper over dinner from my store of tinned food. The mosquitoes were out in force due to all the rain and I suffered after I had my shower since I didn't want to spray myself again. So it was into my tent to listen to the radio and get to sleep. As I was tired, sleep came very quickly and painlessly.

## **7 July - Day 39: Indiana Dunes IN to Berrien Springs MI - 92 km**

I was up early having had a good night's sleep. I anticipated a relatively short day cycle-wise. The plan was to head up to Berrien Springs where I would stay with a friend and have a rest day on Saturday. It was only about 100 km at the most so I decided to go exploring. I cycled down to the lake at Beverly and admired the beach. It stretched as far as I could see up and down the coast,

although the southern view was marred by major steel mills. I hadn't appreciated how nice the beaches were on Lake Michigan and given the proximity to Chicago they must have some good pollution control measures in place.

I cycled along 'Lake Front Drive' and admired the houses. They were almost without exception huge; what we would call mansions in New Zealand. There was a definite air of money in the area, and they also had very expensive imported cars. I saw a road sign proclaiming "SLOW CAT XING", which was a first for me, obviously the owner had it custom made as it is not in any catalogue of traffic signs that I have ever seen.

As I had come to expect, there were lots of trees about and the houses not facing the lake were nestled in these beautiful tree-lined settings. I saw a deer with two young ones cross the road ahead of me so there must be a wonderful range of wildlife in the area. I thoroughly enjoyed my exploring but eventually I had to move on, so joined Highway 12 and cycled towards Michigan City.

Just on the outskirts of Michigan City I came to Mt. Baldy. This is a massive sand dune which is 'live' in that the marram grass and cottonwood trees cannot hold it in place. Each year it moves and will eventually inundate the nearby forest. There were once other dunes adjacent to it, but they were mined away early in the century. I had heard about the size of the dune, but didn't appreciate just how big it was until I parked my bike and walked towards it through the forest. Suddenly I was confronted with this absolutely massive pile of sand towering above the tops of the trees. I climbed it of course before continuing on to Michigan City which turned out to be nothing special. Rather than continue on Highway 12, I followed the lakeshore drive. This consisted of a virtual continuum of houses and beach cottages all the way into Michigan. I passed people sunning

themselves, walking, cycling going to/from the beach. It had an air of a summer community on holiday.

One aspect to my travels around the USA has been the wide range of mailboxes that I've observed. While many seem to accept the run-of-the-mill, there are others who are quite creative with their mailboxes. The following are photos of a few of these, but I saw many more. They ranged from tractors and bulldozers to aeroplanes and animals. Football fans displayed them in the shape of helmets with their local teams logos on them.



I passed an elderly gentleman out for a run. He must have been 70 and ran really stiffly, but I was impressed he was out there. He was wearing a 'Fletcher Marathon' T-shirt so I asked if he was from New Zealand since Fletcher Challenge is one our largest companies. He was American but had been down there a number of times and run

in a variety of races. Small world. Later on, while having a break, an elderly woman came up and gave me directions as she said that the road ended up ahead. She too was running, but she didn't have the physique of the earlier gentleman and I suspect that it was a relatively recent undertaking. Perhaps the scar that ran all the way up her front had something to do with it. Another member of the 'Zipper Club'.

There was no sign welcoming me to Michigan but I knew I had arrived by the sudden change in pavement quality which has accompanied every transition between states. Following the jogger's suggestion, I headed inland and then followed a road parallel to the railway line. It had an excellent surface and no traffic so it was a pleasure to ride, although I could have done without the headwind that seemed to be following me everywhere.

The road eventually ended and I found myself back on Highway 12. I had lunch in New Buffalo, which was another seaside resort, and then continued following the lake as best I could towards the north. I had varying degrees of success but in the end I gave up and went on the main road which ran parallel to the Interstate. This part of Michigan is almost bereft of signs so I had to ask directions frequently, and hope they were correct.

I came to Warren Dunes park and went in to have a look at the dunes. They were so massive that people hang-glide off them and were very popular. There were many people sliding down the dunes, much as one slides down slopes in winter.

From there I continued north to Bridgman where I turned east towards Berrien Springs. On the way the road was full of antique shops so this must be a very popular place for buyers. It was up and down with a headwind so I didn't enjoy the ride and was quite tired when I arrived in Berrien Springs. So much so that I fell off my bike

in the centre of town when I crossed a lane where they had milled the pavement. My own fault as I was just not paying attention. Fortunately the only problem was a scratch, a couple of sore muscles, and a big dent in my pride.

Berrien Springs is home to Andrews University which is owned by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I had a fleeting visit once before about 12 years ago with Lis when we visited some friends at the seminary. However, I didn't remember the town at all.

I called Joan Standish and she gave me excellent directions to her house which, in my tired state, I got muddled so I cycled right by and up the road about a kilometre. One more dent to my pride. Needless to say I was pleased when I finally arrived. Her husband Tim went to high school in Singapore with my wife Lis, but he was holidaying in Australia with their daughter so Joan was on her own. I enjoyed a shower and then we headed into town to a Chinese restaurant where we consumed lots of food. Tim did his PhD in Nebraska so Joan was familiar with many of the places I had been and I enjoyed finding out more about some aspects of Nebraska and what I had seen. It was then home for a well deserved rest.

## **8 July - Day 40: Berrien Springs MI - Rest Day**

I had a great sleep and woke up very refreshed, though a little sore from falling off my bike yesterday.

We enjoyed a delightful breakfast of blueberries and cereal. I put it in that order since I am addicted to blueberries and Michigan was home to some of the nicest I've tasted. I bought a box of them on the way to Joan's the day before and made short work of a good portion of it. Joan was raving about 'Rusk' cereal which it transpired was

Sanitarium Weetbix. We know it well in the antipodes. I enjoyed trying some different American cereals as I've been living on Grape Nuts for the whole trip.

Joan attended the 'Pioneer Memorial Church' on the Andrews University campus so we headed there for services. The halls were a polyglot of people of all nationalities reflecting the multi-cultural nature of our church and the diversity of the students at the university. Many were in their native garb and I saw west Africans wearing their wraps that look like togas as well as Indian women in saris. I thought as I passed through this mass of people that it was unfortunate that they were all centred here and not in the surrounding areas. From the time I left the Rockies until here I had found only three Seventh-day Adventist churches; there may have been more, but they were well hidden.

Before the service started Joan pointed out to me a statue that had recently been made of the founder, J.N. Andrews. It showed him with his son and daughter looking out towards an ocean. He was the first of the great Adventist missionaries and he helped start the work in Europe as well as contributing a great deal towards developing the Seventh-day Adventist theology. Joan told how the students had covered it in Vaseline and toilet paper as a prank and how hard it was to remove the Vaseline. Another time someone erected a small shrine at the foot of the statue and offered vegetarian meat on it. Students will be students!

The church is by far the largest Adventist church I had ever been in. I was told that it is normally completely full but since our church was having its 'General Conference' session—business meetings held every 5 years—many were away attending the meetings. Even so, the church was half full with a range of nationalities.

The singing was superb. There were four women up front and it was better than many professionals that I have heard. Even the audience did well, but the churches in the Philippines still have the best singers (followed by Tonga). The service was taken by a young black minister who spoke on one of my favourite passages in the Bible; Elijah on Mt. Carmel. I usually make a habit of attending black churches when I am in America (at least without Lis) since I enjoy their 'enthusiastic' preaching style. This fellow was obviously still developing his style, but he had the basics and I enjoyed it. I like the way that black preachers alter the tone of their voice; emphasise certain words and use dramatic body language. I wonder how/where they cultivate the style since it is present in almost every black preacher I have seen.

After the service it was raining quite heavily so I was pleased not to be on the road. We went home and collected some food before going to a 'South Pacific Club' pot-luck lunch. When I say South Pacific I actually mean Australian as Joan and I were the only non-Aussies there. Since her husband Tim is an Aussie Joan qualifies, in fact she is the president since the charter says the president must be a student. For the record, it is probably more accurate to call Tim an Aussie Missionary Kid since he grew up in Penang and Bangkok, high school in Singapore, and did his university studies in America. These third culture kids are always different to those in their 'home' countries and really are a unique culture all unto themselves. I should know, I'm married to one!

Our hosts were Keith and Ngaire. They were Aussies who had moved to Canada in the early 1980s to work at the Adventist college in Alberta before moving down to Andrews University. He was involved with the library and she worked with external accredited programmes. They were extremely friendly, as were all of the other Aussies there. Keith was very interested in my trip as he had done something similar when he was 41. In a series of trips he walked

around the watershed in the Hunter Valley and wrote a book on it. I had worked in the Hunter valley in 1981 so it was neat to see his book and recall some of the places.

We had a delightful meal and I made an absolute guts of myself. They even had nutmeat which is something I really like the taste of and had been missing. It was all so yummy and I ate so much that I kind of rolled out to the car afterwards.

Joan and I returned home and I worked on my journal and then in the evening updated my web site and packed. It was a great rest day with good spiritual food, good physical food, and great company. I felt rejuvenated and ready to hit the road again.

## **9 July - Day 41: Berrien Springs MI to Battle Creek MI - 145 km**

After a good nights sleep and an excellent breakfast I said goodbye to Joan and headed eastwards towards Battle Creek. There is nothing like a hot shower and a proper bed to put the hardships of living in a one-person tent into perspective.

I decided to stop by a supermarket in town and stock up on food. I could tell that this was a Mecca for Seventh-day Adventists since the market had the best health food section I had yet seen and oodles of different meat substitutes and other vegetarian goodies. It's a lot easier to be a vegetarian and to eat healthy here than in Nebraska!

As I was packing my bike a man came over and chatted with me. Israel was from Mexico and he worked in Michigan picking grapes. Apparently this is a good region for growing grapes and there are quite a few vineyards. I had seen one or two as I was cycling but I didn't appreciate the extent of the industry. He said that he managed a gang of labourers who were all Mexicans except for two blacks from Mozambique. However, the Africans found it too cold here and

were heading for warmer climes like Texas. That didn't surprise me. The labourers were not that well paid—at only \$7/h—but he said that it is a fortune compared to what they earned in Mexico—less than \$1 per day—and the farmers treat them well as well as supplying their housing. There is no shortage of people willing to work and he said that this was a very good part of America populated by good people. I was pleased to hear that I was not the only one with such positive experiences. Israel couldn't figure out where New Zealand was and asked if there were any elephants or tigers there.

I'm sure he would have been pleased to talk all day but I had to be on my way. Joan had given me good directions for a back road route to Dowagiac so I headed out of town and found the quiet roads. What surprised me was how winding and hilly they were—Tim Standish had told me that this part of Michigan was flat. Having lived in Bangkok I would have thought he had a good idea of what flat was. However, at the same time it was nothing short of a beautiful ride with lots of forests and farms.

This part of the USA differed from the other areas I had been through insofar as the land was not a continuum of huge farms. The large farms were interspersed with acres and acres of woodlands. Many houses were set back from the road in a small clearing surrounded by towering trees. It really was quite lovely. One of the common features of farms in this area were barns. They were usually painted red, unlike their western cousins who used almost any colour, and come in all shapes and sizes. Many were very old, some so old that they had largely fallen down.

I reached Dowagiac which was a much larger town than Berrien Springs. I wanted to continue on the back roads and so stopped at a gas station and asked a local for directions towards Marcellus. He said that I wanted to take the Marcellus Highway and gave me very

specific instructions on how to find it. He was out for a cruise with his son and daughter in an early 1950's Chevrolet Impala which was quite the machine. At that time they associated futuristic style with lots of chrome and flared body panels, and this car sported more chrome than any I had ever seen. I admired the spare tyre in the centre of the rear boot lid and this was one huge gleaming sphere of chrome. Very impressive, but I would hate to have to polish it all! Perhaps that is what children are for.

I found the road without any problems and headed up towards Marcellus. The day was very humid with the feel of rain. In fact, almost every day since I had crossed the Mississippi had felt like this, but in Michigan there was a grey haze of humidity which enveloped me to the extent that it was hard to know whether or not it was a portent of an upcoming storm. Joan had told me that they were not forecasting rain, but when I heard thunder in the distance I knew that once again the American weather service was of similar accuracy to those in New Zealand.

I had seen a sign advertising some fast food in the distance and so when the rain started to fall I motored as best I could to the place and parked my bike next to the wall just as the skies opened. It was quite the downpour and lasted at good 30 minutes. I was thankful I was inside although my bike was a bit more exposed than I would have liked it to be. I bought a fruit juice and a 'Little Debby' treat since they were offering me shelter from the storm. Lis' mum once worked at Little Debby while her dad was studying in Tennessee so I think of them when I come across Little Debby products for sale.

I had recently passed a State Park with a large picnic in progress. A couple on a Harley Davidson motorcycle were also sheltering in the store and it transpired that they were from this group who were having a family reunion. He was bedecked in what seems to be the standard 'uniform' for Harley drivers: black T-shirt with a fairly grim

logo on the front, black leather trousers, black boots. He even had a black Harley leather bandanna around his head. I was amazed at the number of Harley's in the mid-West. On the 4th of July weekend I often saw groups of 10-20 riding their Harley's and there was an interesting gender hierarchy that I also noted. Let me explain... there are three combinations that I observed riding Harley motorcycles; men only, women only, or men with women passengers. During the entire trip I never saw a woman driving a Harley with a man as the passenger. I guess no self-respecting Harley man would be driven by a woman.

It eventually stopped raining and I continued on my way. Marcellus was forgettable and I continued east. There were many side roads but none had signs indicating where the road went to. I would either ask directions if I met someone by the side of the road or, as was usually the case, I would turn into a road which I suspected was the one I wanted to be on and then wait for a vehicle to stop in the road for a turn. I did this several times with success and soon found myself on the road to Schoolcraft.

This area took me through wetlands and I was pleased to see that they hadn't been drained and turned into farmland. Indeed, overall I think that Michigan has the most 'natural' beauty of any state that I had yet been through. I use the term with some reservation since I'm certain that most of the woods I see are not original growth but regeneration of forest on land that was once cleared. That's the case in a number of places, particularly states like Vermont which were settled early on and later depopulated when the people went west in search of larger, more economically viable farms.

Onwards I went and reached the village of Fulton where I planned to turn north towards Battle Creek. They had an original way of encouraging drivers entering town to slow down, as evidenced by the photo below.



There were a series of large colour photographs of the different town children over the distance of about 100 m, each with a message between the photo saying that the town liked its children and asked drivers to slow down. I found it very effective, but I wonder what the impact would have been were I travelling at 100 km/h.

I suddenly heard a loud bang from my rear wheel so I stopped to inspect the damage and found I had broken three spokes. I still don't know exactly how I did it but I suspect that I hit a pothole or portion of damaged pavement in such a way that an excessive force was transmitted to the wheel. I lightened the rear by dumping all my spare water and then proceeded north at a slower pace to preserve my wheel. Fortunately, the road wasn't too bad, at least by Michigan standards, and the traffic was light so I was able to choose the most comfortable path.

Eventually I reached the outskirts of Battle Creek and was advised by the petrol station attendant to go to the campground by Fort Custer. The latter is a modern military base and has nothing to do with the

famous General George Armstrong Custer beyond being named after him.

It seemed an awfully long way to the campground and after 10 km I stopped and asked at another petrol station if I had been mis-directed (signs being an option here in Michigan). No they said, it was a further five miles or so up the road but to the west away from town ... and into a headwind. I was not impressed. I bought a paper to read once I arrived and then battled towards the campground. On the way I passed a large Veteran's hospital as well as a national cemetery.

Recently, I had read how the ageing of the World War II veterans is causing a real problem for the national cemeteries. A good number are dying of old age and they are allowed to be interred in military cemeteries if they choose to be, which about 1/3 of them do. The problem is that they are fast filling up and many cemeteries are no longer taking new internments. With the foresight for which governments around the world are famous for, this has only relatively recently been recognised as a problem and the government is scrambling to establish more space.

The campground was in a State Park which was down a long, wooded drive about three km long. When I got to the park entrance the bright spark ranger asked me to pay a vehicle fee. I've been wised up about this and I responded "but I don't have a vehicle" which was factually correct as the regulations do not envisage cycle tourists coming to camp. He (literally) had a good look at my bike before deciding that there was no motor power beyond my legs and then let me through.

I was given a very nice site by the lake. My neighbours had a roaring fire going and invited me to join them. John and Joe were keen mountain bikers and they were there with Tracy, John's wife. Joe was

from Kalamazoo, while the others were from Battle Creek. It transpired that this park had one of the best mountain biking courses in Michigan and it regularly attracted riders from as far away as Chicago. Joe was a real techno guy. He waxed eloquently about his derailleurs, aluminium and titanium bikes, all the gadgets etc. At 56 he was still keeping up with the younger riders, but I think he had been seduced by the technology. He showed me a magazine with a carbon-fibre bicycle he has ordered; it cost \$USD 3700 just for the frame.

It was great chatting with them around the fire and they told me lots of mountain biking stories. The one I liked most was a prank played the previous week when one of the bike mechanics filled a racers tyres with water! It acted like a gyroscope and the guy kept on falling over in curves. Finally after eight miles he heard something sloshing around and worked out what had happened, but he was quite exhausted by then. I can imagine he would be as two tyres full of water probably weigh in excess of five kg, and that is a lot of inertia to overcome.

## **10 July - Day 42: Battle Creek MI to Lansing MI - 113 km**

The campground was very quiet when I awoke. It was incredibly humid and my tent and sleeping bag were enveloped in moisture. I couldn't see the sky but it looked and felt like rain.

After breaking camp and loading my bike I cycled into town. I found a cycle path along the road which I followed but it proved to be quite rough so fearing further damage to my wheel I took to the road. The traffic was light so I really didn't bother them and before too long I found myself in the outskirts of the city itself. After dead reckoning it to the area where I thought the centre of town was I got to the bicycle shop just after 9 a.m. and discovered it didn't open until 10. They had a sheltered entrance off the road and I parked my bike by the front

door and worked on my journal. I'm glad about my early start since about 9:20 it started raining, and didn't stop for the next 4 hours. The rain was quite heavy with strong winds so sometimes I got wet even though I was well sheltered. Welcome to the land of the Michigan Monsoon.

At 10 a.m. the owner Mike opened the door and seeing me said he'd send out his bike mechanic. Dan arrived a few minutes later as I'd finished packing my computer. I followed him inside and after taking off my panniers took my bike downstairs to the workshop. They had four bike mechanics so obviously cycling is big business in this part of Michigan.

Dan spent the next hour on my bike and did his best to fix the rear wheel. After we had finished it was still pouring with rain so I chatted to the staff. The owner Mike was very friendly and had trekked part of the Annapurna circuit in Nepal so we reminisced about that beautiful country. He had been to Perth Australia but was very keen on coming to New Zealand so I told him how much nicer it is than Australia and gave him my card to look me up should he ever make it there. Like most shops I've been in they had an amazing array of gadgets and things to relieve you of money and some of the most expensive bikes I've ever seen. Very nice but I really wonder why anyone needs to spend several thousand dollars on a bike.

By the time I had read all their magazines, and gawked at all the gear and gadgets, the rain had let up from a heavy roar to a light drizzle so I decided to venture out to 'Kellogg's Cereal City'. I was told that this was a museum portraying the history of cereal as well as showing the engineering processes by which it was made. As someone who is keen on both history and engineering (not to mention cereal) it sounded like a must for me so donning my rain gear I headed off the few blocks to the museum. It was interesting,

but I was unprepared for the rampant commercialism of the place, I know I should have been but ...

After paying my fee I went into a cinema where they told the history of cereal, with particular emphasis on Kellogg's [by the way, Kellogg's is so well known that it is in the dictionary for Microsoft® Word!]. I'm going to cover this in some detail since by now you know that I belong to the Seventh-day Adventist church, but you may not know that Kellogg's started from our church work.

Our church had its origins in the early 1800's, mainly in New England and New York state. In 1853 one of our pioneers, Joseph Bates, came to Battle Creek to start the church work in this city. Not knowing anyone, he went to the postmaster and asked who the most honest person in town was since he thought that such a person would be receptive to the Bible message of our church. David Hewitt, a pots and pan peddler, was suggested to be the most honest man in town since he was known to walk several miles to return a few cents had a mistake been made. Bates visited Mr and Mrs. Hewitt and after studying with them all day and into the night they accepted the message. Thus began the church in Battle Creek.

Over the next few years the administration and institutions of the church moved to Michigan and a general call went out for church members to help the work develop in the mid-West by moving to Michigan. Our church organisation was promulgated and established in Battle Creek by the 1860's and the work grew fairly rapidly.

At the same time one of our leaders, Ellen White, received a vision from God concerning health. She was shown that many of the methods then in use to treat diseases were as dangerous as the disease they were supposed to cure. These were treatments such as blood letting, arsenic and mercury, and other toxic substances. She was shown that what was needed was a whole-person concept of

health and this developed into the eight principles of health which we as a church identify using the term NEW START: **N**utrition—have a healthy, preferably vegetarian, diet; **E**xercise—exercise regularly; **W**ater—drink at least eight glasses of water a day and use it for treatments as well; **S**unlight—get some sunlight on your skin; **T**emperance—don't overeat, overwork or overdo it in anything; **A**ir—get lots of fresh air; **R**est—get sufficient sleep; **T**rust in God. We believe that if one follows these principles one will have a healthy and productive life as God meant us to be able to live.

When I present these principles almost everyone agrees with them as common sense, except perhaps the Trust in God. But they were really radical 150 years ago. Then it was thought, for example, that tomatoes were poison. The story is told of the crowd who gathered to watch someone in New York eat three tomatoes thinking he was committing suicide. They thought that fresh air was bad for you and that the night air brought disease. Consequently, they lived in closed rooms.

Our church decided to found a special health centre where people would receive the best scientific treatment then available, but also where they would learn how to prevent disease by lifestyle changes through nutrition, exercise and sanitation. The centre would be a place where each person was valued as a creation of God and where caregivers helped create a positive healing environment by providing special patient care. In 1866 they founded the 'Health Reform Institute' which was later renamed by its medical superintendent Dr. John Harvey Kellogg the 'Battle Creek Sanitarium'.

Dr. Kellogg was an incredible individual. Not only did he run the Sanitarium, but he regularly operated on patients; authored many books; invented an array of equipment to promote exercise and healing; and also worked on ways of developing nutritious foods for his patients with the help of his wife and brother Bill Kellogg who

also worked at the Sanitarium. It is said that he was inspired to develop an easier to chew breakfast cereal because one of his patients gave him a bill for \$10 to cover the cost of the teeth she broke on his existing fare.

After a great deal of experiments, and some blind luck, they worked out how to make cereal flakes which still contained the goodness of the grains they were based on, but were easy to chew. Thus were invented corn flakes. They were not marketed outside of the Sanitarium until one of their patients, Charles Post, saw the commercial potential and established Post Cereals. Today, Post still make Grape Nuts which was based on what he learned at the Sanitarium.

Eventually, Bill Kellogg left the Sanitarium to develop and market what became Kellogg's Corn Flakes, having fallen out with brother John over the commercialisation of their invention. John continued to run the Sanitarium until it was closed in the late 1930's and sold to the US Government.

Battle Creek became the home for cereals and at one time there was about 30 companies making different products there. It is still the home of Kellogg's and is where they make their flaked cereals such as Corn Flakes.

This, in a cornhusk, is the history of cereal which was shown in the film at Kellogg's. I had read a lot on it before and so was familiar with it and the film was quite true to history, covering the role of people like Ellen White, Charles Post, Bill and John Kellogg with their high and low points. What I was not aware of was the role that advertising played and how Kellogg's blazed the way throughout the 20th century with its advertising campaigns. They showed how the advertisements developed over time and increased in sophistication.

It was quite something to compare the original 'Snap Crackle and Pop' from the 1930's to the ads of today.

After the film I wandered around the building. It was really aimed at kids (OK, young kids, not overgrown ones like me) but they still had a number of good and thought provoking exhibits. One of the best was where they showed the different 'national' breakfasts from around the world and contrasted the nutritional content of a cereal breakfast with, say, bacon and eggs. Glad I'm a cereal man. I visited the small area where they showed how corn flakes were made. Suffice to say that the process is fascinating and they can churn out (if I recall correctly) over 200,000 boxes per day. At the end of the process they had some bins where we could taste the product, still warm. Very nice. Which reminds me, one of the reasons why Bill and John Kellogg fell out was that Bill added flavouring to the corn flakes to make them tastier and sell better. Having no nutritional value John was opposed to this on principle.

By the time I emerged the rain was definitely on the way out so I went over to the Dr. J.H. Kellogg 'Discovery Centre' which was nearby. Run by our church, this is dedicated to showing some of the health treatments and equipment developed by Dr. Kellogg. It was fascinating as he invented and patented the first mechanical horse which was used both in the White House and on the ill-fated Titanic for exercise. He even created a mechanical camel which simulated the camel's gait. He had vibro-therapy machines which were much like the foot massagers we see today, and he even developed a chair which had a curved back to enforce proper posture. That felt strange to sit in, but served its purpose. There was another good film on Dr. Kellogg's life which had some things in common with my earlier film at Cereal City, but was focused on Dr. Kellogg and the Sanitarium.

From there I went over to the 'Historic Adventist Village' which was still under development and had just opened the week before. It is an

attempt to bring together a number of buildings associated with people who founded our church onto one large site in the city and to restore the buildings to their condition in the second half of the 19th century. It is an ambitious project but, once finished, will give a good flavour of the history and events associated with our pioneers. I had mixed feelings about this but we will see how it develops. I found it interesting and they had university students volunteering for the summer dressed in 19th century clothes explaining about the buildings and the history.

It was by now well into the afternoon but the skies were finally clearing so I set out along Highway 66 north and then on 78 towards Lansing. I cycled past the old Sanitarium—now the Federal Building—and was amazed at how massive it was. They had a lot of demand until the depression then they couldn't meet operating expenses so sold it to the government and downsized. An object lesson for all businesses. All there is now is a historical plaque telling of Dr. Kellogg's and the Sanitarium's histories.

The route I followed ran parallel to Interstate 69 and passed through beautiful country with lots of forests. The sky was blue but as I approached Charlotte it began to darken. It felt like rain so I went on as fast as I could and just on the outskirts of town it began to pour. Fortunately, there was a school so I shot up under the canopy in front of the doors and dried off. I was very fortunate because the rain became very, very heavy and I was really only damp. I unpacked my computer and worked for over an hour and then waited longer for the rain to go down to a light drizzle. This was not a good day for cycling!

I eventually got under way again and headed into town. As I entered Lansing I noticed a delightful river next to the road with houses along it. The rivers and trees in this part of the country were very nice to see. Lansing is the capital of Michigan and I'd love to know

how this came about, but nobody has been able to advise me. The capital buildings in Lansing are impressive, as you can see from the photo below.



General Motors operates a large plant here and I suspect that it is where Oldsmobiles are made since I went past 'Olds Road'. It was quite late when I arrived in town and I was advised that the nearest camp site was at Ruby Lake, NE of town, so I made my way there.

A woman in a pickup truck stopped to chat. Sue was a very keen cycle tourist and had passed me and driven probably about five miles back to see if I was OK. I told her my plans and we chatted about cycling. She was amazing and has not only toured New Zealand but also quite a few tours in the USA. I ended up accepting an offer to stay at her place for the night—she promised her husband wouldn't mind (or be surprised)—so it was into the back of her pickup with my bike and I sat there as she drove back where I had come from to her place by Park Lake. I found it so strange to be travelling at such a high speed, although it was probably only about 70 km/h, since I had been pottering along at 15-25 km/h for so long.

We put my bike in the shed and I met her husband Curtis Remington. Curtis is an artist and he showed me some of the incredible things that he had been doing on computer with Adobe PhotoShop. After he described it to me I am now convinced that we definitely can no longer believe our eyes. At least not when they have some hotshot like Curtis around. Their house was on the lake and was very nice. I was given a futon in the basement.

They had the most amazing poster on the stairs going down. For those who have not experienced what I would call avant-garde art in Europe it would probably be lost on you but I'll try and describe it. They had bought it in Amsterdam where they had been struck by how vivid and eye catching it was. The poster had a black background and a fellow who had a white shirt, white hair and white makeup on. His eyelids and nose were painted red and yellow and he had a tulip in his mouth. I know it sounds bizarre—it looked bizarre—but it really was the most eye catching picture I have ever seen. Lis wouldn't let it in the house, but you have to admire the artist who executed the idea.

I enjoyed a long talk with Sue sharing cycling experiences—Curtis didn't cycle—and then chatted quite late with Curtis. Sue had mentioned that he was a Chicago Cubs baseball fan and that they were going to Minnesota to watch a game. I noticed a photo of Curtis as a baseball catcher and that was when I learned just how passionate a Chicago Cubs fan he was.

It is important at this point to explain about the unusual passion that some American baseball teams evoke. Unlike New Zealanders, who only seem to like a winner, that is not always an issue when it comes to following baseball teams. If I recall correctly the Cubs have not made it to a World Series final since just after World War II, and last won the pennant in 1908. They did get close once in the 1980's, but they are basically an 'also ran' team. The Chicago White Sox are

much more up with a winning formula, but I have not met any White Sox followers whereas I have met several Cubs followers in my travels.

One of the things that the Cubs do for their (wealthier?) fans is run what is called a 'Fantasy' baseball camp. Or at least that is how Curtis described it. After paying a (large—according to Sue) fee, the fans are taken to the camp where the Cubs do their spring training, are given a real uniform and treated like real players, and play ball for a week or so. They have a number of teams (10?) and the highlight is at the end of the camp when they play retired Cubs players in a real game.

It was obvious from Curtis how much he enjoyed it and they even gave them baseball cards with their pictures on them, which is what I had seen in the kitchen along with an enlargement. They are treated really well and in spite of the pain, view it as a very positive experience. What pain? Well, imagine a whole horde of enthusiastic fans with different levels of fitness (or lack thereof) trying to play baseball every day for a week. Sue described how she went out to dinner with them and they pleaded not to go into a restaurant with stairs since their knees couldn't take it. I chuckled at her description of the fellow with the black eye where he misjudged a catch. I guess it's a male thing since I thought it was wonderful how these guys could live out their fantasies, and apparently some go back year after year. I reflected on how it would go down in New Zealand but I can't see cricket or rugby (definitely not rugby) being able to achieve this the way that baseball has.

By then it was extremely late and we were all tired. I had a wonderful shower and fell into bed exhausted. It had been a long day, interrupted by frequent rain, but I had still managed a reasonable distance and the kindness extended by Sue and Curtis meant that I had a comfortable bed for a night and great company.

## **11 July - Day 43: Lansing MI to Sarnia ON - 223 km**

One of Curtis' artistic talents extended to T-shirt design and when Sue goes on a cycle trip he makes her a custom silk screen shirt. Their New Zealand design was particularly popular when they were in the South Island since he made the mainland much larger than the North Island. They continually received comments that it was good to see a map with things showing the right perspective. Their tours were named 'Cycle Paths' which sounds similar to psychopath. That's a good way of describing some hard core cycle tourists and so I feel honoured that they gave me one of their old shirts.

I headed out about 8:30. I cycled north to the town of Bath where I found a restaurant that was serving breakfast. I had my staple of hotcakes and orange juice. As I was leaving the cook and waitress came outside to have a cigarette and we talked about how beautiful this part of Michigan was. Like most Americans, they were very friendly and open.

I received directions from them and set out to the east. I had an abominable head wind from the east again. Like most of Michigan, I was again treated to beautiful countryside with a slightly rolling road going through tree-lined lanes.

My map could at best have been described as inadequate, at worst absolutely useless. I eventually passed Interstate 69 and found 'Lansing Road' which headed NE towards Flint. It ran parallel to the Interstate but was much quieter with very little traffic. Except for the wind, it was a lovely day and I enjoyed cycling past fields of golden wheat, a nice change from the corn.

I cycled as far as Durand and then headed east, south of Flint. I found the standard collection of fast food restaurants in Durand, with a few more than the usual number due to the presence of an Interstate off-

ramp, and I stopped in the parking lot of one to check my map. A fellow came up wearing a bike T-shirt and chatted with me. He told me there were lots of cyclists in the area and they regularly organised group rides. We had a nice talk before I headed on into the headwind.

Due to the excellent sign posting typical of Michigan, I became lost and after cycling a few km it felt as though I was going too far north. I saw an elderly man cutting his lawn and stopped to ask directions. Usually, ride on mowers are employed for this task in America, which is not surprising given the size of the lawns many people have to cut; they are often huge by overseas standards. Fortunately, he had a small push mower and didn't mind my interrupting him. I found that I was indeed on the wrong road and received directions back to the correct road. I stopped further on and had a break for some food and a bit of a rest.

A van stopped at the intersection and Jack hopped out to have a chat. He was a very keen cyclist interested in finding out about my travels. When I say keen, I mean very keen. He didn't carry a picture of his wife or family but of his bicycle! He told me that there is a large 'Rails to Trails' programme in Michigan and many old railway lines have been converted to cycle paths. I had searched the Internet for information like this and he told me that there are books around, but you need to know where to look. At least I now know what it is called so next time I go cycling in the USA I'll have a better chance of finding the correct information.

South of Flint I stopped and noticed that my rear tyre was shredding in the side wall. This was very bad news as my tyre patch kit would not handle this sort of failure and it was unlikely to make it all the way to Canada.

I was near Grand Blanc and received directions at a gas station to a cycle shop in town. I found that it was a very upmarket and professional cycle shop. There were four bike mechanics and they were most helpful. We took off my wheel and the lead mechanic Aaron spent the next 30+ minutes working on the wheel. He was very skilled and managed to eliminate most of the out of roundness in the wheel while keeping it true. I was very impressed. We replaced the tyre and after making a few more adjustments I was ready to go on.

I had lost a lot of time through this diversion—I had to travel slowly due to the bad tyre as well as the time fixing the bicycle—but I was now confident that there would be no more problems and the bicycle rode so much better now that Aaron had fixed the wheel. Aaron gave me good directions and I went back the way I had come and turned east onto Parry road which took me towards Canada. I knew that I was getting close when I saw a Canadian National train heading towards the east. It made me feel good to be so close to Canada which, in spite of my life as an expatriate for the last 17+ years, is a place that will always be home for me.

Michigan has regular small shops on its roads called 'Party Shops'. I was always reticent about visiting one since they sounded a bit dodgy but by 6 p.m. I was in need of something to eat so I stopped and bought a sandwich and fruit juice. It was nice to sit in the sun and relax for a bit since I still hoped to travel further that evening.

The cycling through this area was much the same as the other parts of Michigan, lots of farms interspersed with trees. Near the village of Metamora I passed a school which carried a sign denoting it as a 'Weapon Free School Zone'. Now we are talking of a town with one traffic light, in a beautiful rural area. If they have to post these signs, one wonders what it is like in the inner cities. I have heard that they have metal detectors and security guards, but the fact that signs and

efforts like this exist are an indictment on the American gun culture. I have often been asked if I am not afraid of cycling in America. The only thing that frightens me is the fact that while all countries have crazies, in America they have ready access to guns. However, I've been fortunate so far ...



I was entertained as I travelled by an array of election signs. Unlike most countries, America has many positions that are elected and in this county it definitely was election season. There were signs for the Sheriff, 'Elect Joe Bloggs for a safer community' and other positions such as 'Probate Judge'. While such democracy is good in principle, one wonders whether judges let their sentencing reflect the fact that they need to be re-elected. I envisaged seeing signs 'Elect Hanging Judge Jones' or the like.

The road I was on ended at Highway 53, south of Imlay City. I refilled my water bottles at a Mobil petrol station. If I continued due east I would come to Canada, but unfortunately, there were no roads in that direction on my map. Not that this meant too much, given that I had already cycled well over 100 km on roads that didn't exist, so I asked directions hoping that there would be some back road to

Canada. Unfortunately, for once the map was correct so I faced a 15 km ride north before heading east.

I reached Imlay City at 9 p.m. and went in search of a phone to tell my parents in Toronto my plans. I found several that were broken and then the one that worked required more money than I had with me so I had to resort to a collect call. I guess parents are used to such actions, even when their kids are in their 40's since they accepted the charges. I told them that I was still about 75 km from Canada and I would try to make it there even though some of the travel would be in the dark.

In the outskirts of Port Huron I stopped at a gas station and had a break. It is amazing how chocolate can re-energise one when tired from exercise. I received directions to the bridge to Canada (one must cross the St. Clair river) and headed off in that direction. I found the road to the bridge as described, but was disconcerted to see that it was pointing to an Interstate and that there were signs saying no cyclists allowed. I decided to head into town further and get some directions which proved difficult since it was after 11 p.m. and everything was closed. Eventually, I found a 7-Eleven open and learned that it was possible to reach the bridge through the centre of town, although the directions they gave me were useless.

I dead reckoned myself to the centre of town and found a canal/river heading towards the east. I turned north since this would take me parallel to the river and towards where the bridge would be. I was surprised at how nice the central part of Port Huron was; it did not have the urban decay that I had seen in other American cities. I passed a carnival and decided that it would be best to head east towards the river. There was a fellow riding a children's bike and I asked him directions. Doug said that he had nothing to do so he would ride with me.

We passed many stately old homes and other buildings, all of which appeared to be in good condition. Doug said that Port Huron had an illustrious history and that Thomas Edison hailed from there. It seemed like a delightful town and it was a pity I couldn't stay longer, but I had set my heart on Canada.

I reached the bridge area and bid farewell to Doug. As I went to cross the bridge I saw the signs again that there were no bicycles allowed on the bridge. I ignored them and cycled up to the toll booth and parked my bike to talk to one of the toll collectors. I said that it appeared that I am not permitted to cycle across the bridge so what were my options. He indicated that there were three options open to me. (a) I could take the ferry across. That's great, where is it I asked. '30 miles south' he said. OK ...what's my next option? (b) I could take the tunnel across. While I don't like tunnels that was acceptable so where is it I asked. '70 miles south in Detroit'. Hmmm. What is option (c)? Call a taxi and have them take you and your bike across. Obviously Tom the toll collector was a bit of a comedian, but then it probably helps when spending eight hours a day collecting money in a toll booth.

I decided that (c) was the only option since I couldn't prevail on Tom to let me cycle across the bridge. I asked for a phone number for a taxi and he searched for it in his booth but was unable to find it. After trying unsuccessfully to find it in a second booth he was a bit frustrated. He commented that they used to drop cyclists off on the Canadian side but Canadian immigration wouldn't always let them in so they were then called to come back and pick them up again. I said that there was not much chance of that happening with me since I was Canadian and I showed him my passport. He decided to call his boss and asked if he could drop me off and was given permission. Before he had a chance to change his mind I put my bike in the back of the bridge inspection pickup truck and was chauffeured across to

the Canadian side. He dropped me off just before the customs booth and went back to the American side.

For the record, this mindless hassle is not due to the Americans but the Canadians (hard as that may be to believe). It seems that even though the bridge has a sidewalk on it, the Canadians have decided that it is too difficult to cater for bicycles and pedestrians at their side and so have banned them from the bridge. Pretty pathetic.

What I hadn't told Tom when I showed him my Canadian passport was that it had expired a few weeks before. I know I should have, but I was confident that I would be able to prevail on Canadian immigration to let me in. It was 00:50 when I reached the immigration booth and there was a woman in her 20's studying pH balances in between servicing people crossing the border. She had a cursory look at my passport and said 'given that you are on a bicycle it is unlikely you are bringing anything into Canada'. I concurred so she waved me through and I was in.

I had an important meeting that evening in Toronto that I could now attend so I decided to break my trip in Sarnia, Ontario and take a train to Toronto. I asked the immigration officer where the station was and she gave me somewhat confusing directions but added an important bit of information: the train left at 05:25 a.m. Since it was after 1 a.m. by now I decided that I would head down to the train station and crash there for the few hours until the train left. I found the station deserted so I decided to have a sleep in front of the door. That way, if I was asleep when the station opened I would be woken up by passengers having to step around me. I rolled out my mat and made myself as comfortable as I could.

I was not overly successful at sleeping, in spite of having cycled almost 225 km. First, the mosquitoes attacked me so it was time to search through my bags and get the spray. Then the light from the

nearby lamps kept me awake so I had to find my sleeping mask. Then there was the noise of the trains so time for ear plugs. Finally, I got quite cold so I dug out my Polartec jacket. Yes, with a bit of planning I could have foreseen all of these but hey, it had been a long day. I found out later that there is a train tunnel under the river and where I tried sleeping was the shunting yard so it was no wonder that I didn't get much rest!

Finally about 4 a.m. I decided that this was a waste of time so I headed off in search of some sustenance. I enjoyed a nice cup of hot chocolate and a toasted bagel at an all night Tim Horton's donut shop. It was great to warm up and I was quite impressed with how much more sophisticated these shops were than they used to be. About 4:40 I started back to the train station, and I will finish my description of the journey tomorrow.

## **12 July - Day 44: Sarnia ON to Toronto ON - 17 km**

It is important to acknowledge that Sarnia is about 300 km from Toronto but since I caught the train to Toronto and then cycled to my parents house the distance recorded is only 17 km.

After leaving Tim Horton's donut shop I arrived at the train station just before 5 a.m. It was open and there was a single passenger along with the ticket agent. I requested a ticket and a box for my bicycle and he said that the latter was a problem since the train didn't have a baggage car so bicycles were not allowed! Fortunately, I had called at 1:30 a.m. and been told that I could take the bike and he said that was usually the case, except from Sarnia. However, he promised to talk to the train manager to see if it would be

OK so I bought a ticket and removed all my panniers from the bike and tied them together with bungee cords. He was successful at persuading the train manager to let my bike on board so I put it on and tied it to the side of the luggage area. The only condition was that I not try and come back by train, which I readily agreed to!

I then collapsed into a seat and tried to sleep, again, without much success. I had the misfortune to be in front of some very chatty people. I moved to the back and exchanged the talkers for the snorers! Through my dozing was pleased to see that the countryside was flat since once finished in Toronto I planned to head back to Sarnia to continue my travels. As we approached Hamilton I began recognising places as I had gone to university nearby. Eventually, we reached Toronto where I was the last to disembark from the train at Union station.

I emerged on to Front Street and headed east towards the Don River. A cycle path follows the river and I planned to use this to reach my parent's house. It was a fine day and once I had cleared the maze of construction in downtown Toronto and was on the bike path I was a happy trouper. The route was delightful with the sun shining and the summer flowers in bloom.

The cycle path passes under a major bridge called the 'Bloor Street Viaduct'. It was built just after the turn of the century and spans a very wide river valley along the main east-west route in Toronto. About 50 years later they were constructing an underground railway for the city and were presented with the problem of how to span this valley. When they dug out the original plans for the bridge they discovered that the engineers had considered such a possibility and designed it to carry a railway under the main deck. Only minor modifications were required to make it suitable for the underground. Was it economic at the time to include such features? Probably not, but if they hadn't, the cost later would have been astronomical.

Eventually I found my way to the house where I grew up and Mum took the photo below with dad. Just under 5,000 km of cycling in 44 days of travel, with five rest days. I was looking forward to a week off.



## **20 July - Day 45: Toronto ON to Sarnia ON to London ON - 111 km**

My brief respite in Toronto was over all too soon. I enjoyed being lazy and catching up on sleeping and eating, but it was now time to continue my journey. Since I had broken my trip in Sarnia to come to Toronto, the plan was to head back to Sarnia and then cycle down through southern Ontario to Niagara Falls from where I would re-enter the USA to finish my trip. My parents kindly offered to drive me to Sarnia so early in the morning we started our trip. The first stop was the passport office where I collected my new Canadian passport: that would hopefully make entering the USA a bit easier.

We reached Sarnia without any problems and I navigated us back to the railway station. We had a picnic lunch at the station before saying

our good-byes. I was then on my bike and heading east on Route 25. Since the train station was on the extremities of the town it didn't take me long before I was out in the country. Not surprisingly, the land is much like Michigan but this part of Ontario is very flat and featureless with few trees.

The farms were very well maintained with plenty of red barns. The local practice appears to be to put the name of the owner on the barn so you know who lives at the farm. Where the area differed from Michigan was in the absence of mobile homes. These were very common throughout the USA but here I only saw one or two. The farms seemed prosperous and many had substantial honey-coloured brick houses which looked as though they dated back to the Victorian times.

I stopped in the town of Watford and called Lis. When I told her where I was she said that she didn't realise I had gone to England since that is the name of an English city. Ha ha. In fact, the entire area is named after English places, reflecting the origins of its first settlers. I was in Middlesex County. There was Stratford on the Avon River (not surprisingly, home to the Canadian Shakespearean festival). The largest city is London and it is in Oxford county on the Thames River.

Eventually I reached Highway 2, a major road heading into London. It was a lovely afternoon and I stopped by the side of the road at an intersection for a short break. Three farmers in a pickup truck stopped and chatted to me. When I told them I had come through Iowa they asked what the corn was like and I told them there was a lot of it and it was much bigger than in Canada. They said that Iowa produces more corn than the whole of Canada, which was believable given what I saw.

The farmers here follow the practice of their American cousins by creating very interesting mailboxes. The one below took the award

for the most interesting to date. It was built out of an old scale complete with fresh flowers!



While this area was initially settled by the English, there appeared to be a large community of Greeks who had moved here. I found a Greek restaurant in a trailer next to the road and enjoyed a very nice vegetarian pita sandwich.

My map given to me by my father was somewhat old. It showed Highway 2 as passing north of London. Well, the city has definitely expanded as the road now passed through areas of housing developments and major shopping plazas. This seemed to be the pattern throughout southern Ontario with development everywhere. London seemed to be particularly civilised as there was an excellent cycle path next to the very busy road.

My target was the Fanshaw Conservation Area and eventually I came to signs directing me south from Highway 2. I saw two cyclists next to the road so stopped to ask directions. They had been mountain biking on trails and we chatted for a bit. There was an interesting

contrast between them; she was slim and hardly breathing, he was about 40 kg overweight and could hardly talk. In fact, he looked so stonkered I thought he was going to collapse. Not surprising given that they had been biking in the river valley which looked pretty hard. They told me the campground was just ahead and since a storm was closing I was soon heading that way.

The campground lay down a long drive across a dam on the Thames river. There were fisherman both on the dam and down in the river and I could see a number of canoes and boats out on the lake above the dam. This surprised me since by now the sky was pitch black and it was starting to rain. Perhaps I'm just a bit of a wuss. I paid the exorbitant fee of \$19 at the office. The woman behind the counter also worked as a police woman in London, and in her job she cycled throwing down her bike to arrest people. She was most friendly and I could have chatted for a while but the rain was starting so I headed off and quickly pitched my tent amongst the many other campers.

I stayed in my tent reading and trying to keep my gear dry until the rains abated. I had bought this very interesting book called 'the Science of God' which was written by a Physicist. He uses quantum mechanics to show that one can reconcile the Biblical account of creation in six days with the fossil record. Good to have something heavy like this to challenge one; I've always found quantum mechanics hard to fathom, even more so when tied to theology.

Eventually the rains abated and I tried to sleep but this was unsuccessful for two reasons. Firstly, there were lots of young people talking loudly and secondly I was the subject of attention by a number of racoons scavenging for food.

Those who have not experienced racoons may not appreciate the fact that they have this black 'mask' on their face which makes them look like bandits. This is quite appropriate since that is their chosen career!

They are very talented and intelligent animals and capable of a surprising level of reasoning. I remember a few years ago seeing a film in which a racoon worked out how to open a garage door by pushing the button on the wall.

Well, they showed their intelligence with me all right. I had failed to completely close my pannier zipper and they managed to open the zipper and extract a bag of muesli from the pannier. I heard this strange sound outside my tent and when I shone my light to see what it was I saw a large racoon enjoying my muesli while a couple of others looked on and a skunk ran off. The racoons were quite fearless and only moved off when I emerged to toss the muesli bag elsewhere so they could feast in private. I moved my food bags into my tent but for the rest of the night I was bumped by animals looking for a meal. I was careful not to over-react since I occasionally sensed the pungent smell of skunks and they are not to be messed with!

## **20 July - Day 46: London ON to Dundas ON - 116 km**

The overnight antics of my furry friends gave me a bad night and as I listened to the radio I was told that more rain was forecast. Ho hum.

After packing up I hit the road without breakfast; the animals last night having enjoyed what I planned on eating. I cycled out of the park and stopped at the main gate to ask directions. The road was called Dundas street which was auspicious as I was heading towards the town of Dundas. Later, I saw a sign stating that it was Highway 2 which was the exact one I wanted to be on.

Highway 2 was a multi-lane highway with heavy traffic, particularly trucks. To compound things there was not much of a shoulder, consisting mainly of about 150 mm of pavement to the right of a painted white line. There was a packed gravel shoulder beyond that, but it was not suitable for cycling. This is one area where the

Americans have it hands down over the Canadians (at least in Ontario); I'd say over 75% of the distances I travelled in the USA were on roads with shoulders suitable for cyclists.

The countryside was very similar to what I travelled through the day before. The county seat for Oxford County was a delightful town with some amazing old buildings. They used a red sandstone which was also common in Toronto and lent itself to grandeur and dignity. The town looked quite prosperous with a lot of commercial activity; always a good sign compared to many of the towns on the decline which I had passed through elsewhere.

I continued east through more rolling countryside. At Paris the road descended sharply to the river valley. There were lots of lovely Victorian era houses in the town. I had been there before to visit Roadware, a company which manufactures road measurement equipment, and mulled over paying them a visit, but I decided not to bother. Since I was getting close to my final destination I phoned my friend Milena and received some (good) directions to her place. When I reached her area I cycled past the road as I had misunderstood the spelling of the name. I stopped and read a plaque by the side of the road which told how Dundas street was built in the early 1800's by the Queen's Rangers through virgin forest to connect London with Dundas. It was quite an achievement given that it was all done by hand through what was probably very dense forest. At least the land was flat. I called Milena and found my way back up the road. She met me on the next street and we went home together.

It was delightful to see her again. We had last seen each other in May in New Zealand under difficult circumstances and she was looking much better. She told me how she had gone to Europe with her brother and then home to Yugoslavia where she went to his country home and just relaxed and read, totally cut off from the world. That

is the sort of rejuvenation which is second only to doing the same thing while exercising.

She had already prepared a huge amount of food for church the following day. There was a pot-luck luncheon at church and then an evening meeting to welcome a new pastor. Her daughter Helen did not arrive home until late and her other daughter Lilian breezed in and out for a few minutes. Son-in-law Milan was out with his twin children making deliveries so I had Milena all to myself. We enjoyed a long chat and then ate before continuing. When the children came home we opened Sabbath and then talked well into the night. They are like family and it was great to be with them again.

## **21 July - Day 47: Dundas ON - Rest Day**

I was up early but felt quite refreshed. No matter how long I spend on my sleeping mat camping I never get as good a sleep as when I'm in a real bed, and the one I had last night was very comfortable. I read a bit from my book 'The Science of God' before rising and having a breakfast of fruit and cereal. That is always my favourite meal of the day, and Milena had a delightful range of cereals for me to try. I refrained from eating any of their New Zealand Hubbard's cereals since I knew how precious they were in Canada and I would be having some again in just a few weeks.

Since it was Saturday we were off to church. Helen and I were the first out the door as the others had to organise the children which always takes time. Their church is in the town of Puslinch which is about 30 minutes from Dundas, or 20 minutes if you drove like Helen did. The church we attended was called the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Reform Movement church. In many respects it is similar to the SDA church that I attend, but has some key doctrinal differences. The best way of describing it is as a very conservative SDA church which says a lot, since my SDA church is one of the more conservative Christian churches.

The Reform Movement began in Germany during World War I over the issue of conscription. The SDA church had always held an official position of conscientious objection to war, although it is up to the individual how they choose to follow their conviction. In countries with conscription this created problems since there were not always avenues for them not to serve. For example, in the 1980's Milena's son-in-law Milan spent some time in prison on Yugoslavia for refusing to be conscripted. The most common practice has been to take a non-combatant's role, for example as an ambulance driver or as a medic. During World War II one SDA medic in the American forces was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery.

In Germany the issue came to a head during World War I when some church members believed that if they served in any capacity in the army, even as non-combatants, they would be compromising their beliefs. The rationale was that this would free up others to go and fight at the front, so they shouldn't be involved in any manner with the military. The SDA church leadership in Germany, concerned about how this would be received by the German government, removed from church membership those who refused to serve. The ex-members went on to form the SDA Reform Movement. It is interesting to note that in New Zealand the SDA church did the opposite; they fully supported the right of those not to serve in any capacity.

A rapprochement was attempted after the war, but this was unsuccessful and the Reform Movement grew, mainly in Germany and Eastern Europe. As a result, even today most of its members seem to be from Yugoslavia and Romania, or the offspring of immigrants from that area. The Puslinch church reflected this, with translations of the sermon being made into Serbian or some other Slavic dialect.

After church was an all vegetarian potluck lunch, a luxury for me given my usual sparse fare. I then sat outside in the sun reading while Milena and Helen caught up with friends. The church was in the country and one of its members, Larry, told me I should have a look at his garden. The path took me through a field of wild flowers and the scent was sweet and delicious. Summer is one of those times when it is great to be out in the country taking in the smells, sights and sounds. It was so good to be alive.

Milena and Helen decided to go and see a church member's new baby so I agreed to come along. Since Helen was exhausted from work I was the designated driver and we headed off to the highway following another car. If being a passenger was uncomfortable at 80-100 km/h, being a driver following this woman at 100-130 km/h was even worse. Spending hour after hour at the speed of 18 km/h on my bike really alters one's comfort zone when suddenly transported to driving a car!

I was reminded of a scene from an old movie 'Gumball Rally'. One of the characters, an Italian driving a Ferrari says "Now for the first rule of Italian driving ... what is behind you is of no importance." Not only did she zoom off without giving any consideration to whether I could follow, but she also viewed indicators as a superfluous accessory. To compound things, she wasn't sure of the directions herself—even though we were going to her daughter's house. In the end I just adopted a comfortable speed on the highway, keeping my eye on her in the distance and she eventually got the message.

One of the things which has amazed me is the way in which Toronto has grown. Change is inevitable, but the city now is one huge megalopolis which extends way into areas that were country when I left 18 years before. Most of the growth seems to have happened in the last 5 years or so. We went to an area which was once farmland and is now mile upon mile of suburbia. There is a boring

homogeneity to all the designs. By comparison, all the houses in the area where my parents live were built around the same time but they have marked differences while maintaining a similar character. The builders were from Devon and Cornwall so there is a strong English flavour (with street names like Dawlish, St. Leonards, Cheltenham, St. Ives). The kindest way of describing the flavour of the modern subdivisions is bland.

We had a nice visit and many others also dropped in. The conversation was often in Yugoslavian so I happily ensconced myself in a corner with my book. Later on when some young people arrived I became more sociable, but I didn't feel left out and the others didn't feel slighted by my reading, so it didn't seem rude to be there with a nose in my book.

There was an evening social at their church in Toronto so Helen and I drove to the church. It was another fast run as Helen wasn't as uncomfortable at high speeds as I was. On the way we discussed work and lifestyle issues. Helen is a solicitor and very busy at work, to the detriment of many other important elements to life. It is a situation which most of us find ourselves in at one stage or another and I shared with her some of the ways that I have dealt with it.

Most recently, my wife Lis sent me on a programme which was designed to help busy people get their lives in control and this has helped immensely with focusing me. The biggest challenge is to accept that there is a problem and something needs to be done about it. Once you have taken this first step you are on your way to victory. Often, we know there is a problem but we don't really believe that something should be done about it, or we say that there is nothing that can be done. The latter is wrong. Something can always be done. It just costs ...

We arrived in time for dinner. This consisted of 50% healthy food like fruit and 50% deserts. A typical SDA (or Reform Movement) church meal. We often fool ourselves that just because meat isn't being served we are being healthy. Health is far more than an absence of meat, tobacco and alcohol. It is a holistic concept which encompasses exercise, proper eating, and a balanced life.

A welcome party for their new minister was held after dinner. I was sorry to hear that their existing minister Walter was leaving as I've always enjoyed his company. Walter and I were able to go into his office and catch up for a while before Milena came in looking for me. Since it was quite late we had to leave and the drive home was a long one since we were all tired. However, it had been a wonderful Sabbath with good friends and good company and I felt rejuvenated.

### **23 July - Day 48: Dundas ON to Niagara Falls ON – 104 km**

My plan was to cycle to Hamilton and visit McMaster University where I had studied for my Engineering degree from 1978-83. The alumni magazine had piqued my curiosity as it mentioned a number of changes.

Being a Sunday in July, the university was not exactly a hub of activity. I was therefore able to cycle around exploring without the fear of dodging pedestrians or being hassled by Mac-5-O as we used to call the campus security officers. My first stop was the engineering school. I found one of the doors unlocked and entered the lobby. It had changed quite a lot--there was even a coffee bar to get food! We used to have to across campus which was a hassle in winter. I found a staff directory with quite a few familiar names. Apparently academia changes very slowly.

There was at least one new building and the campus had definitely been spruced up. Eventually it was time to move on and I cycled past

the various mansions adjacent to the university and on into Hamilton. Hamilton is an industrial town, home to Canada's steel industry. Try as it might the place cannot shake off that legacy and although great efforts had been made to spruce the place up, much of it still lacked character. I cycled to the centre of town and then turned inland up the 'mountain'. The Hamilton mountain is part of the Niagara escarpment which runs from New York state into Ontario. The main part of Hamilton is wedged on the flat land between the mountain and Lake Ontario while the newer suburbs are sprawled on top of the escarpment heading inland from the lake. The ride was steep but not too difficult and I admired the many old, grand houses which were built on the banks of the escarpment.

Once on the top I cycled inland until I managed to find Highway 53. Milena's son-in-law Milan had told me this was the most scenic route to Niagara Falls as well as one of the most direct. In the (to be forlorn) hope that it would be a marked improvement in beauty over my last two days of cycling in Ontario I decided this was the route for me. It also had the advantage of passing by their business so I was invited to visit their factory and have lunch before continuing on.

Milan and his wife Lilian run M&L Gourmet Enterprises Inc. They carry a range of products and I found it fascinating to wander through their warehouse. The shelves were lined with nuts, chocolates and candies which they bought in bulk and packaged into clear, plastic containers. These are then supplied to merchants to sell. Lilian's late father Mile used to sell hot cashew nuts in New Zealand where he had designed and fabricated his own nut warmers for the shops. Milan proudly showed me his version which was very well thought out and an improvement on the old design. After the factory we had lunch at a nearby restaurant and were able to catch up further.

It was mid-afternoon before I was on my way again, enjoying the usual wicked headwind of about 10-20 km/h so it was difficult to make progress, even though the land was very flat. I was planning on staying the night with a friend in Niagara Falls and needed to make good time. The scenery was nothing special and made me wonder about the other routes since this was supposed to be the most scenic. My one bit of excitement was seeing the Welland canal.

There are five great lakes; Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie and Ontario. Lake Ontario is the eastern-most and lies at a much lower elevation than Lake Erie. Niagara Falls is one manifestation of this elevation difference; there are also rapids downstream from the falls.

The Welland canal was built in the mid-1800's to provide a route from the upper lakes through Canada, removing the reliance on the Erie canal which passed through the USA. Although strategically quite important to Canada, it was financed entirely by private individuals and became quite successful. It was later enlarged to the current large barge canal.

The reason for the concern about reliance on the USA for any transport links was due to the War of 1812. The origins of the war are complex, but it is one of only two wars (the other being Vietnam) which the Americans did not win. While American text books apparently maintain that they did win the war this is simply untrue. Had America won this war, Canada would have ceased to be under British rule. Britain did stop some of its more unsavoury practices, such as taking American seamen from their ships to involuntarily join the Royal Navy, but America's expansionist ambitions in Canada came to nought.

There were several fields of battle in this war, but the Niagara peninsula between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario experienced the most intense fighting. As was so often the case, the British were under-

manned, but unlike during the American Revolutionary War after 1776, they were blessed with brilliant leaders who helped them carry the day.

General Brock was one of them, and he defeated the first major American invasion of Canada at Queenstown, where he was killed. Later, General Drummond won the war's most decisive, and bloody battle, at Lundy's Lane. In between there were many smaller battles with each side having its share of victories and defeats. One question Canadians like to ask Americans is why the White House is white. When the British burned Washington D.C. the Americans had to use whitewash to cover the char marks. This was in retaliation for the Americans burning Toronto (then York).

In light of the importance of this part of the country to Canadian history, I was saddened to see in many respects the war had ultimately been lost. I say this because as I travelled into Niagara Falls along Lundy's Lane the strip development rivalled anything seen in the USA. Line after line of motels, restaurants, pubs, girlie bars ("100 girls every night" one advertised), all with garish lights. In all my previous visits to Niagara Falls I had managed to avoid this area and it came as quite a shock. Near the falls there was a slew of tourist 'attractions' such as the wax museum, Ripley's Believe it or Not, theatres, and more. The photo below gives you some idea of what it is like.



I dodged the tourists and made my way along the promenade near Niagara Falls to a telephone and called my friend Susan. She gave me excellent instructions and using a tourist map which a local tout gave me I was able to navigate to her house without any problems. Susan and I had worked together on a project in Thailand for a Montreal based company Dessau-Sophran. She had since left the firm and joined another engineering company Acres, based in Niagara Falls.

An environmentalist, Susan was building up their international work in this area and was off to Laos in about 10 days. I was delighted to see her again as I've always enjoyed her company. Her house didn't let her down; it was built around 1805, full of nooks and crannies and oozed character. She told me that the British troops mustered in front of her house to battle the Americans and there was a plaque on the wall identifying it as a historical house. The inside was painted in pastels with walls adorned with modern art.

Over a delightful dinner we discussed the life of an expatriate, projects, colleagues, history and a myriad of other topics. Finally around midnight we called it an evening and I collapsed into bed, Susan having gracefully given me her room and taking the couch. I

couldn't prevail upon her to let me do the gentlemanly thing so at least I slept very well.

## **24 July - Day 49: Niagara Falls ON to Lockport NY - 107 km**

Susan and I enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and continued our discussions from the previous night. After she went to work I answered a flurry of e-mails and then cycled into town. It never ceases to amaze me how a trip which takes an eternity the first time one travels to a new place is so short on the way back. There was also a lot less traffic than the previous night which made things much more pleasant.

My first stop was the museum in Lundy's Lane. Although quite small, it was very well laid out. They gave me a booklet which served as my guide as I walked through the museum. It opened with a display on the Indians who were the first in the area. There was also a painting of the great Mohawk chief who took the name Joseph Brant. He fought with the British in the American Revolutionary war and after the war was lost his tribe moved to the Niagara area where they were given large tracks of land around the present day Brantford. Ironically, had they not done so the British would probably have lost the War of 1812 and Canada would have been part of the USA. The Mohawks made the difference in many important battles.

The museum display progressed through settlement by Europeans to the areas most significant event: the War of 1812. As mentioned earlier, the most decisive battles were in the Niagara peninsula and this was where the war was won by the British. The museum was located on the site of Lundy's Lane battle which ended once and for all the hopes of conquest by the Americans. It was interesting to read the story of Laura Secord who was a heroine on the Canadian side for travelling through forests to warn the British of an impending attack.

The small force of British troops and Mohawk Indians surprised the Americans and 50 of them captured over 500 troops.

I continued on to the display of daredevils. It described those crazy people who crossed Niagara falls on tightropes. They crossed on foot, on bicycle, and with people on their back. One woman even put baskets on her feet! Their folly was only surpassed by those who went over the falls in barrels. Some survived; some died; many were injured. Eventually I finished my museum tour and headed down to the falls.

There was a wide sidewalk along the riverbank with so many people I was forced to walk my bike. I listened to a polyglot of languages, many of which I didn't recognise. This really is a popular tourist destination. After seeing enough of the falls I headed east along the riverbank. There were a number of places to stop and view the river, although for much of the length it was obscured by trees. I was impressed by the fact that a steamboat sailed down the river once. Although damaged in the rapids and whirlpools, it made it to Lake Ontario. They were crazy in those days ...



In an attempt to avoid towns I had decided to enter the USA at Queenstown. This is the easternmost bridge on the river and lies at the site of the battle where General Brock was killed. I saw a monument to General Brock, the original of which was blown up in the 1850's by Irish rebels. In fact, there was an invasion of Canada by a predecessor of the IRA around 1860 which was defeated by the British and militias. The soldiers were Irish who had fought in the American Civil War, and after being repulsed they received a slap on the wrist by the American government who didn't want to alienate the powerful Irish vote.

There were no immigration formalities on the Canadian side so I cycled across the bridge. It was under renovation so one of the lanes was closed to traffic—but not to bicycles! It was great to have the lane all to myself and it was possible to stop and admire the power plants on the river. The first one on the Canadian side was opened in the 1920's. At the time it was one of the largest hydro power plants in the world, but today only provides sufficient power for a small/medium sized city.

Once across the bridge, I found a large immigration processing area with lots of bays for vehicles, but no signs for bicycles. I decided to follow the pedestrian entry since it also meant I didn't have to cross the lanes of traffic. I cycled around the trucks and was heading towards the main office when an immigration office came out and asked what I was doing. After explaining that I was pretending I was a pedestrian he said that I should have gone through the vehicle bay. He was surprised that I was going to Boston, and amazed that I had come from San Francisco. "Do you do this often" he asked. "And for fun?". After a cursory look at my passport he bade me farewell.

I was now in New York and had decided to take Route 104 to Lockport where I would pick up the Erie canal. It was a busy road but not too bad once I was past the Lewiston area where there was

the usual array of interchanges to negotiate. The area was lovely with plenty of trees, interspersed with farms. I could see across to the Canadian side and was ashamed to admit that it was nicer on the American side since there were more trees.

At Wrights Corner I found a supermarket and bought some provisions. A fellow approached me in the checkout line and asked if that was my bicycle outside. He was very interested in my experiences in America and pleased by my favourable response. It really had been a great trip and I had met such wonderful people.

I then followed Route 78 south to Lockport. I visited the Tourist Centre and they plied me with lots of brochures and maps. They also advised me that the canal museum was open for a further 30 minutes so I rushed down to pay a visit. I had reached the Erie canal! During the planning of my trip this was one of the few 'must see' places since Lis and I are canalaholics and really enjoyed our walks and cycling along the canals in the UK.



The construction of the Erie canal was begun in 1817 with the intent of connecting the Hudson River with Lake Erie. By doing so, it would

serve to not only provide a cheap and safe way to transport produce from the west of the state to market, but it would also open up the west to settlers. The main proponent of the canal was New York Governor DeWitt Clinton, who was a former mayor of New York City. Called "Clinton's Folly" and later "Clinton's Big Ditch", at over \$6 million it was the largest civil engineering project proposed for the USA to that date. President Thomas Jefferson was totally opposed to it. It went ahead anyway and they dug a canal 4 feet deep and 40 feet wide spanning about 340 miles. From the time it opened on October 26, 1825 it was a success and it earned tolls of over \$42 million before tolls were abolished in 1882. More importantly, it led to the development of industry and communities along the breadth of NY, as well as opening the US mid-west to settlement. Its importance cannot be overstated.

Lockport was a critical junction on the Erie canal. It was here that the canal had to ascend the Niagara escarpment and this was achieved through a flight of five locks. In order to prevent a traffic build up they built two sets of locks; one in each direction. When the canal was upgraded early this century they replaced the locks with two large lift locks and turned one set into a spillway.

Although I was planning to cycle along the Erie canal, this was technically incorrect. The original canal was so successful that within 20 years it was straightened and enlarged. Early this century the Barge canal was built. This used portions of the enlarged Erie canal, but employing modern engineering they were also able to harness the lakes and rivers to a much greater extent. As a result of this, much of the original Erie canal was abandoned and in some places built over. For example, it went through the centre of many cities (or to be more precise, the cities developed outwards from the canal) and when the canal was no longer needed the land was turned to roads.

In recent years the state of NY has been developing a canal trail along the route of the current Barge canal and the old Erie canal. It is not complete, but offered a great way to see this part of the country, relatively free of traffic. About 1/3 of the route were bike paths or multi-purpose trails. Eventually, it will be complete and what a resource the trails will be. Although the trail continued west of here towards Buffalo, I had decided to start in Lockport since urban areas are always difficult to negotiate trails through—particularly when they have built roads over the canals!

I hadn't cycled far when I heard that terrible metallic 'twaaaang' which signified a broken spoke. I stopped and found that there were two broken spokes, one of which was on the freewheel side which meant that it could not be easily fixed. I was in the process of removing the panniers when two teenagers cycled by and stopped to chat. Aaron and Ian were locals and intrigued by my trip. Aaron commented that he planned on cycling to Alaska but I responded that I wouldn't be too keen on that because of bears. In fact, just recently a Canadian athlete was killed by a bear in Quebec while training for the Olympics. One doesn't mess with bears ...

After I replaced the spoke I continued on my way. The trail was in good condition. Flat with a solid surface. It ran along the north side of the canal which was the original towpath. I was soon out in nature with few developments. There were farms in the area and small towns about every 10-15 km. The path was very well patronised by joggers, fisherman and cyclists. As I was having a drink a very overweight woman of about 55 on a bicycle stopped. She was interested in some advice on long-distance touring. She was planning on a 150 mile trip and wondered what she should take. I advised mainly water since that is always the hardest to find when touring. She said that last year she had cycled 2000 miles and this year she was only up to 750 so was planning on some long trips. I thought it was an excellent effort. Shortly afterwards I was stopped by two men

who were riding in the opposite direction. They were interested in what I was doing and we had one of my typical conversations explaining that cycle touring isn't that difficult once you start.

As dusk settled I decided to camp next to the Canal just past the bridge at Eagle Harbor. It was a great spot, sheltered by the bush on the side of the canal with a good, flat area for a tent. An excellent end to an excellent day. It was great to finally be on the Erie canal.



## **25 July - Day 50: Eagle Harbor NY to Port Gibson NY – 123 km**

I awoke to a beautiful sunny day and had breakfast in the sun while sitting on my bed mat. It was wonderful and relaxing with the canal in front of me, trees behind and birds singing. My breakfast consisted of muesli, cherries and blueberries. Very tasty– particularly the cherries. I have a real weakness for them and it was a luxury to have as many as I could eat.

Eventually it was time to begin the day, so I cycled east. I still had a headwind. Bother. As I travelled along the cycle path I came across a large barrier. I had passed several similar barriers yesterday and was

to find many more further along the canal. Their function was to stop the flow from the canal in the event of a breach of the embankments. I read how in 1974 contractors were putting a culvert under the canal when they caused the embankment to fail. The barriers were lowered but not before millions of gallons of water flooded the nearby houses, destroying or damaging 45. There were many years of litigation before the case was settled.



When I reached the town of Albion I decided to go exploring. There were a number of beautiful buildings made from red sandstone. This was indigenous and at one stage over 1200 people were employed in the area cutting stone. They claim the stone was used as far away as Buckingham Palace, but I was sceptical given that Buckingham is, at least on the outside, a grey, ugly building lacking the warmth and character that this sort of stone evokes. The stone must have been used inside.

There were quite a few bridges along the canal, many of them low bridges which must be raised to let the boats pass. In Holley I stopped and chatted with the bridge keeper who was busy painting the bridge, “the only thing holding it together”. He told me that there

were 18 of these bridges and they dated from 1915-1920 when the canal was widened.



The engineering of these bridges was impressive. The draw bridge I saw on the Hennepin canal in Illinois was also a lift bridge but the counterweights were in four large towers at each corner of the bridge. Here there were no visible counterweights. This was because they were suspended in a 30 foot deep pit at each end of the bridge. The weights are 5% lighter than the bridge so that the bridge won't bounce when it is lowered. The entire system is operated by a 25 hp electric motor. Very impressive when you consider that the bridge weighs 60 tons! At each end of the bridge there were stairs which made it possible for pedestrians to cross the bridge when it was raised. This reflected the fact that when the bridges were built more people walked than drove.

Each bridge had a bridge keepers building at one end. I asked how many boats per day passed and was told that typically the bridge was raised 15-30 times a day.

I continued east to Brockport where I found a cycle shop to repair the broken spokes in my rear wheel. I left the bike and went to a restaurant where I had a nice lunch next to the canal. There was a noticeable increase in the canal traffic as the day progressed and the bridge in town was raised accompanied by a clanging of bells several times over the course of my meal.

Brockport was very pleasant with lots of cafes with people sitting outside enjoying the sunshine. I retrieved my bike and, for the first time on the trip, was charged for the repairs. It didn't bother me as they did an excellent job and the bike rode very well. It was great not to have to worry about the strength of the wheel any longer.

There were a number of small towns which were once hubs of commerce. One of these was Adams Basin and at an information sign I saw a photo of hundreds of barrels of apples being loaded at the wharves. There was also a photo of a building from 1825 just after the canal opened and this is still in use today as a Bed & Breakfast. They said that it had been used continuously as a tavern and hotel/accommodation since then.

Just outside of Gates I came upon an old, overgrown canal spur heading off to the left. I also found remnants of the canal lock gates in the overgrown weeds. The sign nearby indicated this was a short-term canal used for only a couple of years early this century when the Erie was upgraded. They showed how the canal went through three stages. Initially, it was 40 feet wide. This was then increased to 70 feet and the canal deepened after about 30 years as the demand increased. The canal was also straightened at the time. The major upgrade happened early this century when it was further widened and deepened to take large barge traffic. The number of locks was also decreased since instead of lifting about 6 feet they lifted 12 – 20 feet.

As I entered the suburbs around Rochester the canal was cut through deep rock. I surmised this must have been done during the most recent upgrade as I can't see it having happened with the original canal. I subsequently read that the original canal went through what is now downtown Rochester and is now covered by the city's streets. The canal intersected the Genesee River and created a massive area of water. There were large parks with lots of people walking and cycling. In fact, the canal trail had become quite busy with a continuous stream of traffic. There were many bridges along the canal and due to some poor directions I went over several successive ones, crossing the canal three times! I met a couple of women who were also lost but together we found the correct trail.

There were no locks between Lockport and Rochester but east of Rochester the locks began again. When I reached Lock 33 I stopped and chatted with the lock keeper who was very keen on showing myself and two female cyclists the lock. He told us how there was an annual competition between the lock keepers for the best lock in the system. When he took charge of the lock three years ago it was ranked 45th out of 49. Last year it was 5th and this year he was aiming to win. If he didn't I'd love to have seen who did since the lock was in incredible condition.

We started our tour at the lock gates. He explained that the design of the gates wherein they come together at an angle was invented by Leonardo DaVinci. Really quite smart since it is more efficient than having the gates vertical insofar as it uses the weight of the water to hold them in place. The electronics dated back to the 1940's and they were a work of art. The switchboard was a combination of copper and brass, all of which were polished to a sheen. The lock was controlled by only a few levers. The canal basin had a series of horizontal nozzles with gravity valves. When opened it was filled by about 15 million litres of water to raise the boat in a very short time.

The canal trail from Rochester East was very well developed. There were places like Pitsford and Fairport which had cafes and boats offering tours of the canal. For the first time I found myself among a throng of tourists, but I was soon on my own again.

All good things come to an end and eventually the trail petered out near Palmyra. Not that I let it stop me, after all, what are mountain bikes for? I followed the trail into town until I could go no further. It was early evening so I stopped for a meal after calling my office in New Zealand. I found a local pizza parlour and had a folded pizza which was baked. Most delicious. My batteries recharged, I cycled east to Port Gibson and stopped at a boat landing point with the intent of camping. However, there was a strange fellow there so I decided to head back to the town and try to find somewhere else to stay.

The local grocery store was open and advised me to ask at the fire station if I could stay in their park. The station was empty but I saw someone walking down the road in heavy boots so cycled over and asked if he was a fireman which he was. Steve was very helpful and used his cell phone to call the park. His colleagues were still there tidying up after the evenings activities. They had been pushing a large ball with their hoses. A combination of training and fun (mostly fun) which they apparently compete against other firemen with. Steve was an ex-Marine who had travelled the world before returning to quiet Port Gibson where he was a building contractor. Scott and Dave were still at the park and we chatted before they left. I pitched my tent and sat at a picnic table working on my journal until the computer's battery was discharged, listening to National Public Radio. The stars were out and it was a lovely evening, mosquitoes notwithstanding.

## **26 July – Day 51: Port Gibson NY to Canastota NY – 163 km**

I woke up shortly after dawn to a beautiful morning. It was nice to have picnic tables and I ate a leisurely breakfast. There was a cemetery across the road and I wandered through in the early morning sunshine. Port Gibson is a very old town and there were many tombstones now illegible. Made me reflect on the transitory nature of life. People who in their day may have been quite famous no longer even had their graves properly marked. We really must do what we can while we can.

I was on the road by 8 a.m. My goal was to find the old farm of Hiram Edson which was in the area. This was an important historical site since he was one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church. In the early 1800's throughout the world there was a 'Great Awakening' in the form of many religious revivals. Although the common belief at the time was that the world would enter a period of peace and prosperity, a number believed that instead Jesus would return to earth—they were called Adventists since they believed in the second Advent.

Their premise was based on a clear reading of the Bible—today virtually all churches accept the doctrine of Jesus' second Advent—and in particular a biblical text in Daniel which said "unto 2300 days and the sanctuary would be cleansed". Using the exegetical principle of a year for a day they worked forward from when the decree was issued to restore and rebuild Jerusalem and arrived at the period around 1843. Later, they put the date at 22 October 1844.

These people sincerely believed that Jesus would come again that day. Why they missed the texts that 'nobody knows the hour' is an enigma to me; but miss it they did. They travelled all over America preaching that the sanctuary, which they thought was the earth, would be cleansed. A kind of 'the world will end' message. They

were so busy trying to get the message out that farmers didn't harvest their fields, but in the end we know that Jesus did not return and nor was the world cleansed.

One of the Adventists, Hiram Edson, lived near Port Gibson and the day after October 22, 1844 he realised they had misunderstood the nature of the cleansing of the Sanctuary. Instead of the earth being the sanctuary and it being cleansed, it signified a change in Jesus' ministry in heaven. This revelation came to him as he walked through his corn field. Later, he met with Joseph Bates and learned of the Sabbath message. They became founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church; the name reflecting these two important doctrines.

I had a poor map which I obtained from the Adventist historical society and so I set off in search of the farm. I was sure it would be sign posted. Ha. Was I ever wrong. I cycled 15 km up and down the roads and I knew it was nearby, but to no avail. It really wasn't that important, I just thought it would have been neat to visit the place since I was in the area. I was close... but then close only really counts when one is using hand grenades.

I cycled down the back roads and ended up on Route 31 again. I was east of Port Gibson but headed back west again across the canal to the north side in search of another important historical site: the home of the Fox sisters. They came from the same era as Hiram Edson but were very far removed from people like him who were committed Christians. They heard a knocking in their cottage and got in touch with the spirits of the deceased. They are credited with the founding of the spiritualist movement. I had no more success with this than with the Edson farm, although I did see some wild deer which ran off into the dense forest on my approach.

I accepted failure and crossed the canal again towards the next main town, Newark. I was definitely out of the flat areas as there were

some relatively substantial hills. I stopped at a petrol station and had a fruit juice and refilled my water bottle. As I was sitting on the sidewalk in front of the station I saw three cycle tourists travelling east along Route 31 (which is also NY Cycle Route 5). They were travelling at quite a pace and were bedecked in very serious cycling clothes—the kind emblazoned with the names of the different equipment manufacturers. I was happy with my T shirt and L.L. Bean shorts. I reflected that over this entire trip I had probably seen less than 10 cycle tourists. It was particularly surprising given that I've been to some impressive tourist places like Yosemite and Niagara Falls. Then again, America is a very large country.

The next town was Lyons and I stopped to have a look at the lock as well as the town since it appeared quite interesting. I was fortunate to have a canal boat arrive at the lock while I was there. The boat was very similar to the one that my wife Lis and I rented a few years ago in England. In England the locks are quite small but here they are designed to handle commercial barges so the boats are dwarfed. They have ropes descending vertically along the walls of the lock and the boaters hold onto these when the lock is flooded. I was told by one lockkeeper that they always flood the opposite side to the boat otherwise the water would toss the small boats around the lock.

After admiring the lock I cycled into town. There were a number of old buildings which obviously dated back to the first half of the 19th century. The court house had an impressive cupola but I was more intrigued by the lookout towers atop several of the houses. I saw these relatively frequently in towns near the canal and surmised they were there for a commercial reason. Probably similar to the way that ship's chandlers had people watching for boats coming into harbour so that they could be the first to offer them services.

From Lyons the road took me on a northerly route to Clyde. Perhaps because it is off the beaten track, Clyde looked much more down at

the heels than other towns I had been through. There were still a number of lovely old houses and a church built from the red sandstone found near Medina.

On the way out of town I passed a wooden blockhouse of the type used to protect against Indian attacks. The sign indicated that it dated from the 18th century, but I was sceptical that untreated wood would have lasted for over 200 years. However, it did serve as a reminder of what life must have been like here on the frontier for that is what this area was until the Erie canal was built. Those who have read the book 'Last of the Mohicans' by James Fennimore Cooper will be familiar with his descriptions of the dense, virgin forests and the conflict between the European settlers and the Indians. It was a difficult place to survive.

The road was delightful to cycle along as there was little, if any traffic. It took me through rolling hills interspersed with swamps. Eventually the road joined Highway 89 and took me south again. It was very hilly and I enjoyed the view from up high looking over the river valleys below with hills rolling off into the distance. I descended to a huge flood plain which was intensively farmed. The rich, brown soil was obviously ideal for farming but I wondered how frequently they were affected by floods. The river proved to be the Seneca river which connected with the 'Finger Lakes' and Lake Ontario via the Oswego canal. They were called the Finger Lakes since they are long and thin and on a map look like someone put their hand in the soil, or scratched it leaving a depression. Indeed, the Indians believed that they were made by the hand of God.

On the north end of the bridge there was a sign that this area was called the place of the mosquitoes and I could vouch for the appropriateness of the name. Seldom in my travels had I encountered mosquitoes as viscous as I did in this area. They were not large like the ones in Nebraska, but the itching they caused was all out of

proportion to their size. I even had them attach themselves to me when cycling at 20 km/h which is quite a feat.

The town of Port Byron was the next stop and I had a lunch break there in a pizza parlour. Although the USA is the land of the hamburger, pizza must rival it as the nation's most popular meal. I went across the street to the bakery and had an apple fritter for desert and asked directions to the canal trail. The woman behind the counter thought it started in the local park since her son referred to it as the canal trail park so I set off in search of it. This was definitely the place as there was the old Erie canal, overgrown but still holding water.



But where was the trail? There were paths to the left and the right of the canal and I selected the left. Good choice as this proved to be correct. However, there was not much of a trail to speak of as it was more of a footpath. Fortunately, I was on a mountain bike and so on I went over roots and bouncing along the trail.

After about four km the trail ended at an old aqueduct, the foundations of which were still visible. There were children playing

in the water and it reminded me of when I was young and played in the Don River in Toronto. I was blissfully unaware of the implications of pollution and so life at that age was much less complicated.

I cut out onto the road and continued east. Near Jordan I found an old, abandoned lock. It was interesting to admire the stonework. The quality of the stonework was impressive with the large blocks carefully dressed and fitting together with little mortar. They were real craftsman in those days. To give you an idea of the size of the locks I parked my bike inside and took the photo below.



The bicycle route followed the south shore of Oneida Lake. I wanted to cycle through the Erie Canal State Park which was south-east of Syracuse so I decided to try and find another route. I enquired of a man painting his house and was told that there was a back road to Highway 5 which was what I was looking for. Jordan was a very quiet town. They had turned one of the locks into a sunken garden with lots of flowers and other plantings. It was quite attractive. There were many old houses and buildings in town, many sporting ornate towers .

Syracuse was a bustling city and I wonder what the basis is for its economy. There was a range of building styles and I was taken with the 1930's art-deco style of the local power company. Lots of chrome and flared metal work. Alongside the modern sky scrapers, the city had quite a few older buildings that were in excellent condition (and some that were not so excellent). It seemed to offer a contrast of modern and old.

I found the canal museum and although it was 15 minutes before closing time they had gone home for the day! Such is the life of the cycle tourist. It was housed in two buildings that were used during the heyday of the canal. One of them was a weigh bridge for the boats and it was used to establish the appropriate tolls. There was a small lock and the boats entered the lock. The water was drained and the boats came to rest on wooden frames. This gave them the total weight of the boat. Since the empty weight was recorded when the boat was registered, the difference gave them the toll. The same principle we use today with trucks. Apparently this was a common practice around the world but this is the only place where the original building is still standing.

It was quite time consuming travelling through the town but eventually I reached the eastern side of it, having passed many miles of shops. I also passed a cyclist limping with a very bent front wheel on his bike and a motorist apologising profusely. One really had to have ones radar on at all times in urban areas, anticipating the actions of these oblivious motorists. This was to prove to be true for me in only a few days, but I must not get ahead of myself...

At Fayetteville I headed north and found the Erie Canal State Park. It was sheer bliss to be away from the traffic and on an excellent and peaceful bike trail once again. The trail followed the north of the canal for about 60 km so I had a nice long ride ahead of me. It was well patronised with many walkers, joggers and cyclists.

I cycled for about 10 km and then stopped to have a bite to eat. My picnic table was a 150 year old spillway embankment and, except for a single cyclist, I had the entire area to myself. There were birds in the trees and lovely water in front of me. It was wonderful.

Eventually I reached Canastota and having travelled over 160 km I decided to call it a night. I found a grocery store that was still open and bought a drink. While sitting on the sidewalk a fellow in his 30's came out of a house across the road and started playing with a radio controlled truck. I was amazed at the speed at which it moved and how it bounced over all the obstacles. He drove it across the street, around and under parked cars, and obviously really enjoyed his hobby. I guess we guys never really grow up.

I indulged myself with a motel room but was told that I couldn't park my bike inside. I was assured that it was safe locked outside the main door so I took them at their word. After a great shower, my first in three days, I downloaded 58 e-mails and responded to the most critical ones. This led to a late night, but I didn't mind. I was in high spirits after having such a good day.

## **27 July - Day 52: Canastota NY to Canajoharie NY – 137 km**

When I left the hotel in the morning I was met with light drizzle. So I donned my rain gear and headed back to the canal. The path meandered through open fields and woods and was a lovely ride.

At one stage I passed a crew maintaining the trail. There were four of them standing around having a chat—a typical road crew. They were a friendly bunch and I complimented them on the state of the trail. I was told that the trail would end shortly and I had two options to reach the city of Rome. They suggested I head over to the lock instead of taking the road (I quipped that 'all roads lead to Rome'). I did this but the bridge across the canal was out. Fortunately, the

lockkeeper suggested I wheel my bike across the lock gate which I did.

The trail followed the old canal which was largely overgrown. There were trees planted on the side of the embankment and it was a delightful ride. The rain was now just a fine mist and as I cycled under the forest canopy I hardly noticed it. I passed two cyclists travelling in the other direction and a tractor maintaining the trail, but otherwise the 10 km was all to myself.



The trail ended just before Erie Canal Village which was on the edge of Rome. Since the Syracuse museum was closed yesterday, I decided to indulge myself with a visit. The village consisted of a number of 19th century buildings showing life during the period when the canal was at its peak. Rome was located at a critical point between the Mohawk River, which flowed to the Atlantic, and Wood Creek which flowed to Lake Ontario. The two mile portage between the rivers was well known to the Indians and during the French/British wars and the Revolutionary War this was a strategic area fought over. It was also the location of the first canal which connected the two and which was a precursor to the much larger Erie canal.

I saw a replica 'packet boat' which was used to carry passengers on the canal. It was hauled along the tow path by a horse-drawn team so it accurately reflected the experience of the time. Time didn't allow me to go for a ride but it was quite well patronised.

There was a museum which covered the history of the building of the canal. I found the displays on the construction very fascinating. They had to cut a ditch 40 feet wide and 4 feet deep through virgin forest. I had pondered how they would have removed all the stumps and I found the answer here—quite impressive. They built a contraption with two 16 foot diameter wheels on the outside and a 14 foot wheel in the middle. The outer wheels were put on a base so that it could be turned in place. Two oxen were connected to the centre wheel and as they pulled the wheel a chain attached to the axle lifted the stump.

They had an impressive selection of photographs and other displays. The canal failures were very interesting as were the bridges that had collapsed or been damaged by stray boats. I chatted with a fellow who had lived near the canal failure that I read about a few days before at Medina. He commented that 10 years before the contractors worked on the section that failed he had been approached by another contractor who wanted to work near him. He warned the contractor that the embankment was not stable so the work did not proceed—and guess where someone else chose to work 10 years later bringing about embankment failure.

My next visit was to the museum of cheese which was housed in a former cheese factory. At one time the cheese industry was massive in NY. The museum boasted all the paraphernalia associated with the production of cheese over the years; from the early 1800's to modern times. The photos were particularly interesting of farmers bringing a multitude of milk cans to the factory. I enjoyed reading how cheese making was as much an art as a science. They noted that female

cheese makers were employed at the same wages as men which was quite uncommon at the time.

I had never appreciated just how intricate the process of cheese making was. A series of photos showed all stages of the production from the milk arriving in the factory to the cheese being cured for months in a temperature controlled room. One wonders how such a complicated process was discovered, let alone refined. Perhaps the most impressive display was the mould used to make the world's largest cheese. One could stand in the mould so it was about 6 feet in diameter and a further 6-8 feet high. The total weight of the cheese was reported at over 600 kg. That is quite a cheese! It was eaten at a presidential inauguration early this century.

The road lead me to Utica and I found a lock at the start of the canal trail. This was a short section but it ran through the city so I wanted to follow it. Unfortunately, it was on the south side of the canal so I needed to cross over. The canal keeper wouldn't let me cross the gate so I cycled 1 km down and crossed at a bridge. The trail was quite rough but there was no traffic so it was a pleasure to be back in quiet nature again. All too soon I was forced to rejoin the road which now followed along the Mohawk river valley. There were more hills than I had experienced for a while. It was a divided road with lots of (fast) traffic, but fortunately there was a wide shoulder.

From the Mohawk valley I continued across the river to Herkimer. As I cycled out of town I noticed an abandoned railway bridge by the side of the road. This reminded me that it was not only canals whose time has passed.



The road wound up into the Mohawk hills but I didn't find the cycling too difficult. Actually, throughout the trip I have found that as the day wears on the cycling becomes easier for me. Perhaps it was the realisation that I still had a way to go to make my destination which energised me.

My gears were acting up so once I had reached the top of the hills I stopped regularly on the downhill section and tried different adjustments. I must have stopped upwards of 20 times before getting a definite improvement. I was planning on staying in Little Falls and soon reached the town. It was nestled protectively in the hills and was very well sheltered. This was once a major port town and they have turned some of the old buildings into a canal centre. There were a number of boutiques and restaurants—most of which were closed since it was so late in the day. There were still many abandoned buildings, some of which were built so close to the river that I'm surprised they hadn't fallen in.

I cycled over to Lock 17. This was impressive to say the least as it had a fall of 40.5 feet! That may not sound like a lot but when viewed from the top it is phenomenal, at least to someone like myself who

doesn't like hights. Most of the other locks I had seen had about 12 foot falls. I couldn't even get a photo which covered the full distance to the water. With 24 million litres in the tank, it was one massive engineering feat.

The lockmaster Mark was painting but he was keen for a break so we went and sat in his office and he told me about the lock and showed me photos of its construction. As an engineer I find it humbling when I see what was achieved 100 years ago with basic machinery and strong backs. The volume of fill used in building the lock was just phenomenal.

Mark told me that the canals used to be under the highway department and they were always starved for funds. He told me how if they dropped a tool in the water—an occupational hazard—they would often just buy their own new one since it would take years to replace the tools through the system. They were only allocated 2 gallons of paint a year. This doesn't go far when the gates are about 60 feet high. Now they were under the NY Thoroughway Authority who have bags of money. Their budget was \$50 million a year which meant they could keep things up to standard. Since the canal system is considered to be a historical relic it is good that they are spending funds on it. However, I was surprised when Mark said that boats were not the main purpose of the canal: it was flood control. While some 2,000 boats passed through each year, most of the benefits came from preventing flooding in nearby areas. He told me how this year at Lock 12 the water was 3 feet higher than the top of the gates so he was not joking when he said flooding is a problem.

Although it was getting late I felt keen to move on so I decided to cycle to Fort Plain, about 20 km away. Mark gave me directions which, to my dismay, I followed. These took me south of the canal and up into the hills over the Mohawk. It was lovely looking down, particularly as dusk settled, and one could see the lights shining from

the houses. I was surprised how far I went uphill and was rewarded with a great downhill run into town.

Fort Plain wasn't plain. In fact it looked quite interesting with many nice old buildings. I stopped at a petrol station for a drink and chatted with a young couple. They said that there was nowhere to stay in town and suggested that I try the motel in the next town. Since there was a cycle path I decided to continue on and was rewarded with a delightful ride along a wide, smooth path. I looked for places to camp and while there were several I decided that the proximity to the Interstate would not give me a very good night's sleep so I pushed on to Canajoharie.

Canajoharie was much quieter than Fort Plain and I asked at the police station where I could stay. He suggested the local motel which I duly found. Run by a Gujarati from Surat he wanted what I thought was too high a price. He had been away from India too long and wouldn't negotiate a lower price so I gave in and got a nice room for the night.

## **28 July - Day 53: Canajoharie NY to Waterford NY– 114 km**

The manager of the hotel came out to bid me farewell and safe travels as I was packing my bike. It transpired that I had stayed in the village of Palatine Bridge which is completely separate to Canajoharie. I wonder what the historical origins of these differences are since it is so common to have small towns next to each other but with their own councils and even police forces. I cycled down the hill and across the canal to Canajoharie. A small town, it has several claims to fame. It has an art gallery which is regarded as one of the finest small galleries in America. There is an excellent 46 foot high waterfall. The Beech-Nut company produced the first commercial peanut butter here, and still has a factory. Paper bags were also invented here during the Civil War due to the shortage of cotton which was mainly

sourced from the Confederates. However, all of these milestones paled in comparison to what I really wanted to see: the traffic signal.

A traffic signal? Yes, Canajoharie is famous for having one of the few remaining 'dummy policeman' to be found anywhere. These are traffic signals which were placed in the centre of intersections early this century to replace police officers who had been doing point duty. The signal in Canajoharie dated from around 1923, although it has been replaced several times over the years due to negligent drivers hitting it. The photo below shows this relic.



It sits at the intersection of two major roads; Highway 10 which runs to the north and Highway 5S which is an east-west route. I had by and large been following the latter. With the NY State Thruway having an exit in town, the demand at the intersection was quite high and this was on a Friday morning around 11 a.m. I wondered what it would be like in the peak hour. Some vehicles clearly had problems manoeuvring around the signal and the parking was not properly laid out on the opposite corner in front of the town bank which served to reduce the turning radius. However, those issues

notwithstanding, I was looking at a very rare bit of traffic engineering history.

When I went over to the Visitor's Bureau on the opposite corner I was greeted by Barbara and the local Sheriff. It transpired that they were discussing the traffic signal and, having seen me taking photos, they invited me to join the conversation. It seems that the village was in the process of discussing what to do with the intersection. The mayor wanted to eliminate the signal and turn the management of all the roads to the Department of Transport (DOT). It was proposed to replace the signal with a mini-roundabout or to string signals through the air. I ventured the opinion that in a historical town like Canajoharie it would be a travesty to remove something as rare as that traffic signal. On principle I've always been opposed to lights strung out along the horizon and even more so when there are many old buildings around. Visual pollution such as that is anything but progress.

Barbara had been fighting a campaign against these proposals for some time and she was most interested in getting the views of a traffic engineer on the matter. I was horrified at what she was saying since it seemed that the mayor's concept was that trucks travelling through the town have an inalienable right to use any of the towns streets and that the town should widen its roads by taking out buildings or reducing frontages to facilitate traffic flow. They had no concept that streets are also for people and that it is much wiser to re-route the heavy traffic around the town or limit it to truck routes. North America could learn a lot from the traffic calming philosophies adopted in Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

After the policeman left, Tom the town treasurer came by and the conversation continued. He agreed that the proposals fell short of what was best for the town and the DOT traffic engineers had even acknowledged that the roundabout would make it difficult for

pedestrians to use the intersection. The fact that the town's only bank is on one corner did not seem to have been taken into consideration. Pity that decisions in the USA seem to be so heavily influenced by politicians. I'm thankful that we live in New Zealand where there is a more rational decision making process.

By now it was lunchtime and I asked Barbara where I should go to eat. Without hesitation she told me to go to the local deli and I was not disappointed. I had a fantastic sandwich with some excellent salads. It had started raining lightly while I was at the information booth so I took my time over lunch and by the time I left the rain had stopped. My luck was holding--I had been very, very fortunate at avoiding rain throughout my trip. The time for procrastinating was past so it was on my bike and east on Highway 5S which was still Bike Route 5.

The route east followed the Mohawk River. This was once the home of the Six Nations Iroquois Indian Confederacy. The river is named after one of the tribes and it was a main trading route for hundreds of years, first with other Indians and then with the European trading posts. The Dutch settlers arrived in the area in the 1600's and made themselves valuable to the Indians by helping with blacksmithing, interpreting and building fortifications. Unfortunately, the arrival of the Europeans brought diseases such as smallpox which devastated the Indians and I am sure that alcohol also caused its share of suffering.

The Mohawks joined the British in fighting the French and when the American Revolutionary War started they stayed loyal to the British, respecting their treaty obligations. Having backed the losing side they were forced from their lands after the war so the British awarded them large tracks of land in southern Ontario. Their chief Thayendanegea, who adopted the name Joseph Brant, moved them there and the city of Brantford now stands in their land. Historical

footnote: as I mentioned a few days ago in Niagara Falls, they got their own back on the Americans a generation later since the Indians were instrumental in helping the British repel the American invaders from the Niagara peninsula during the War of 1812.

The road followed the river and it was obvious why this was such an important trade route. It is the only place where there is a break in the Appalachian mountains and I from a great distance I could see the line of mountains with only this single gap. This corridor now contains a road and railway north of the river, an Interstate and a road south of the river; and the remnants of the Erie canal were also to the south of the river.

Since the road followed the river plain, it was fairly easy riding with only a few minor hills to cycle. The rain didn't materialise and as it warmed up I shed my rain gear. Just past Fultonville I came across the 'National Shrine of North American Martyrs' on the side of a hill next to the road. This was the site of the Mohawk Indian village Ossernenon and the location where two Jesuit priests were killed by the Indians in 1644. The site consisted of some statues and a wall but was in a state of disrepair. However, I was still able to read the brass plaques at one of the monuments which gave an overview of what had happened. I later filled in the gaps by talking with others.

It seems that one of the priests arrived in 1642 with the intent of proselytising the Indians. He was not favourably received and was tortured by them. A Dutch protestant minister managed to arrange for his freedom and he was taken to France, eventually returning to Canada. He still felt that he had a calling to the Mohawk and returned in October 1644. He was hit on the head with a tomahawk almost on arrival and killed. It seems that during the intervening period the Mohawk's crops had failed or been eaten by insects and they blamed him or his holy paraphernalia which had been left behind. This story made me think about the history of the Iroquois

that I had read as a child, and famous books like 'Drums Along the Mohawk'. They were a powerful, warlike people who were greatly feared by their enemies. I resolved to read up some more on their history to refresh my memory.

Not very far from the shrine I came to the Schoharie Crossing. This was a very important point for the canal since it was here that the canal crossed Schoharie Creek. When the canal was first built they put in a dam (replaced a number of times) which served to create a pool of water that the boats could be towed through. Unfortunately, the creek was subject to flooding and it was not uncommon for boats to go over the edge or for the dam to fail. This meant that there were often major delays during the flood season as boats waited for the waters to subside. To circumvent this problem they decided to build an aqueduct over the creek when the canal was enlarged in the 1840's. When completed in 1842 it was over 600 feet long with fourteen arches. It fell into disuse when the barge canal was completed in the early 1900's and in the 1930's some of the arches collapsed. Even partially collapsed it was still an impressive structure, as the photo below hopefully shows.



I saw a visitor's centre on the other side of the creek so cycled over. It was adjacent to an overgrown section of the original canal with remnants of the locks visible. The displays were nothing special but they did have some books and I bought one describing the social impacts of the canal on development. The site contained several other locks and I cycled by "Yankee Hill" Lock which was Number 28 on the enlarged canal. It was quite substantial with two locks adjacent to each other, one for traffic travelling in each direction.

Adjacent to the locks was "Putman's Lock Stand". This building dated from around 1850 and served as a general store to the canal patrons. There was a display describing how businesses developed to supply provisions and other needs to the canal travellers. It sounded much like the businesses of today that crowd around highway interchanges. Land on the tow path side always had a premium as it meant that the canal boaters could be served without having to unhitch their towing animals.

I found an excellent bike path all the way to Amsterdam. It followed the route of an old road with the occasional original milestone in the scrub, overgrown with weeds. The path followed the Mohawk river which was quite large at this stage. The photo below is of one of the locks on the river and the adjacent spill way. It can be seen that the river was very substantial.



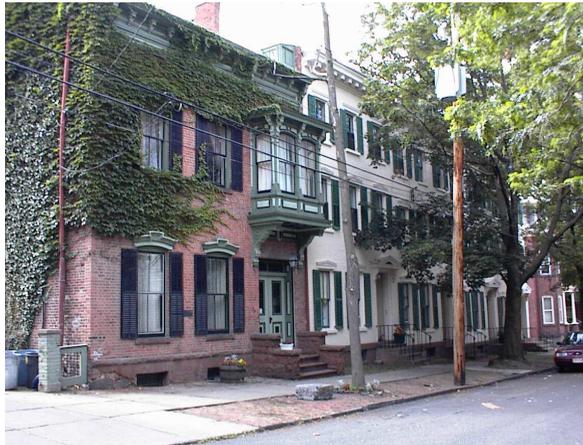
There is an interesting footnote to this photo. About six months later I was working in Samoa and saw on television a show on various accidents in America. One of them was a boat that got too close to the spillway and led to the occupants being dumped in the river. I thought that it looked familiar and sure enough it was the spillway shown above. Apparently, there is good fishing near where the water comes over the spillway, but the trick is not to get too close.

The photo also gives some idea why it was necessary to build a canal adjacent to the river: in the early 19th century there wasn't the technology to build structures to control the river. Thus, travel was at the vagaries of the seasonal river flows. However, the modern barge canal was able to avail itself of advances in steel fabrication and construction machinery so it was able to follow the rivers and lakes. One could say that modern engineers have been able to largely tame mother nature.

Amsterdam, on the north bank of the Mohawk, was a big city with lots of industry. There were many factories lining the river and they looked to still be in operation. This was in contrast to upstream in the

smaller towns where the factory buildings were often abandoned. The bike path ended just east of the city and I was back on the road again. However, I soon noticed a trail off the side of the road and doubled back to enter it. There were no signs but I saw the overgrown old canal to my right so I knew I was on the right path. It was a delightful ride with lots of shelter from trees and a brand new surface. Although it ended in town—or to be more precise I lost the trail—I found it again and it took me all the way to Schenectady.

Schenectady was founded by the Dutch was a major trading post in the 17th century. I had been advised to visit the 'Stockade Area', so named because it was the site of the original stockade which protected the city. It was 100 foot square with block towers at the corner and could hold 300 troops. Around it developed the commercial centre of the old city, although it was burned down by the French during the French-Indian war. The area is full of old buildings, many of which sport plaques giving the date of construction. The architecture was very European and it was a pleasure to cycle through the (relatively) traffic free streets admiring the buildings.



I found a square at the site of the original stockade which had a statue of a Mohawk Indian reflecting the good relationship with the Dutch. There was a grocery store on one corner entering the roundabout which had been in operation since 1796. I bought a frozen yoghurt and sat outside enjoying the ambience of the area. After calling Lis it was time to continue and I got quite lost trying to find my way east. Well, lost is a relative term insofar as I dead reckoned it as best I could east, following roads which ran parallel with the river.

Fortunately, I came across some cyclists having a rest so I stopped and asked directions. They told me that the trail had been re-routed around an old nuclear facility so my trusty canal map was once again wrong. The route was an excellent bike path that ran adjacent to the river. It was very well patronised with walkers, joggers, cyclists and rollerbladers. I even passed a fellow in a wheelchair walking his two dogs! I think that it is great the way disabled people have access to so many facilities. My water supply was low so I pulled into a baseball stadium in Colonie Town Park.

There was a woman's baseball tournament in progress with lots of spectators about cheering the teams. I parked at the concessionaire's stand and the fellows running the barbecue and selling T-shirts immediately engaged me in conversation. We chatted about my trip and impressions of America. They offered me bottled water but I said it was like throwing pearls to swine given the quality (or lack thereof) of much of what I have had over the trip so I filled up at the fountain. I also declined the hamburger and a free T-shirt but accepted their help in finding accommodation. They got the Yellow Pages and identified a motel in Waterford which was the only option open to me. I continued on to the town of Cohoes and stopped at the 'Cohoes Falls Overlook' which was on the north end of town, over the Mohawk river. It was quite disappointing. Where once there would have been a great, wide waterfall the water had long been diverted

for power generation to the extent that it was now nothing more than a mere trickle.

The town of Cohoes sits at the junction of the Mohawk and Hudson rivers, and represents the end of the Erie canal. As would be expected, when the canal was at its peak it, along with the other towns in the area, were bustling, vibrant communities. It was for a time the main textile manufacturing centre as well as manufacturing steel and other commodities. There were many large factories, some of which were still in use, but the decline of the area was obvious and there were many abandoned, ruined buildings.

I crossed the Mohawk river and headed north towards the locks that marked the end of the Erie canal. I found a sign pointing me to the Canal trail so rejoined it and cycled through the town of Waterford on the canal. The rise in elevation from the Hudson was quite substantial and was achieved through a flight of 6 locks. They still existed and the water rushed down at a great rate of knots. At one time there must have been a lot of traffic jams here since it would not have been a fast process raising the vessels. I donned my commemorative T-shirt and got the obligatory photo.

To finish I cycled down to the Hudson river as the sun was setting. So ended my trip along the Erie canal. It had been a wonderful exploration into history, with the added benefit of having some fascinating technology added. From here it was a few days to the east coast and the end of my trip, but this was definitely one of the highlights of my travels.

To celebrate reaching the Hudson River I opted for a rest day. I had by now cycled exactly 5894 km.

## **29 July - Day 56: Waterford NY**

The motel was run by yet another Gujarati, this time from near Ahmedabad. I had jokingly been told that if one goes to a motel in the USA one just needs to ask for a Mr. Patel since that is likely the proprietor. In Gujarat Patel is as common a name as Jones is in Wales.

My neighbour was a very friendly black American fellow. I say friendly but that was only after I had broken the ice and sat down to talk with him. He was amazed that I had been 'brave' enough to cycle across America. Sadly, he said that he would probably be killed if he tried because a lot of whites dislike blacks.

I must have been fortunate in my travels since in my many discussions with Americans I never heard them utter racist comments. That is not to say that racism isn't a problem; quite the opposite. It is a dead-weight around the neck of this great country and to many people who you are is defined by what you are.

Since it was Sabbath I cycled to the local church which was very large and modern. There was a somewhat rambling service taken by a local member but that was offset by the hospitality and friendliness I was shown by the church members. I was taken home for a delightful lunch and then also attended an afternoon meeting before returning to my motel where I worked late into the evening getting my journal updated and loaded to the web.

## **30 July - Day 55: Waterford NY to Wilmington VT – 107 km**

After last night's efforts I was pleased that I managed to sleep in until 9 a.m. I turned on the Weather Channel and saw that the forecast was for showers. Opening the door to the room, I was enveloped with a blanket of humidity and saw the grey, overcast skies. For once it looked like the forecasters may actually be right!

After answering a few e-mails, breakfasting and showering I packed the bike up and prepared to leave. The proprietor wanted to chat about Gujarat where I had recently worked. It transpired that when he was young he had been a member of the Hindu party which had assassinated Gandhi. He told me that when it came out there were political motives behind what they thought was a religious movement most people left the party, including him. I asked him for his view of the BJP party, which has been at the root of a lot of the current sectarian violence in India. Not surprisingly he was in favour of it and we had an interesting discussion on some of the paradoxes that one finds in India. I'm always pleased to discuss India since it is a country which I love but which, in spite of living there for almost two years, I don't understand.

I managed to extricate myself from the motel about 10:30 and headed into town to buy a map. I had only the vaguest plan of a route through New England and had been hampered by my failure to find maps of the area. Fortunately, since Waterford is on the boundary they had a good selection and I was able to purchase an excellent map. As I was doing this the skies opened and there was a very heavy rain so I told the station attendant that I would hang around until the rain let up.

There were two options open to me. One was to follow Route 2 to Massachusetts and then cut north once I was in the east. The other was to take Route 7 to Vermont and then travel east to New Hampshire on Route 9. I could then head north-east towards Maine. I had decided that I wanted to try and make it to Maine since that would mean that I had cycled between the two most geographically distant states on the continental USA: California to Maine. I would then head south along the Atlantic coast to Boston and pick up my flight. But then again I might do something else. That is the beauty of cycle touring with no firm plans.

I asked one of the patrons of the gas station which of the two options he would recommend and he said Vermont would not only be an easier cycle but also more picturesque. Others had also suggested Route 7 so I decided to follow his advice. The rain soon let up and I was on my way.

Waterford is on the Hudson river and I needed to cross the river and then head east. The bridge site was also historical as it was the site of the first bridge across the Hudson. Built in 1805, the Union Bridge was a privately funded toll bridge. It was destroyed by fire in the early 1900's so they must have got a pretty good return with a 100 year concession!

The eastern bank of the Hudson was quite hilly and heavily forested. Even within the city limits of Troy there were lots of tree clad hills. This was once the home of Arrow shirts and I had been told that since the closure of the factory the town was down at the heels. Fortunately, my route was through the northern end of town so I avoided any unpleasantness. I chose Route 142 which eventually joined with Highway 7 in the countryside east of Troy.

There were many mountains in the distance and the route was quite hilly in places. I passed a lovely reservoir and at Hoosick stopped for a break from the rain which was getting heavier. From there it was a short hop to Vermont, one of my favourite states. A company in Bristol, Vermont manufacture electronics for our business so I had been here a few times on business trips. It is a delightful state with lots of history and interesting towns. The people are also different; they like to do things their own way. For example they have a state health system for poor people which is quite radical in the USA where most people have medical insurance—if they can afford it. They are also the first state to legalise gay marriages, although this is quite controversial and I saw a number of signs criticising the governor for doing so.

The town of Bennington was only about 10 km from the border with NY and as I approached the town I saw a number of lovely 18th century buildings, many of which were art galleries or craft shops. The town was chartered in 1749 and settled in 1761, one of the earliest in the region. It is also famous for the Battle of Bennington from the Revolutionary War which was fought near the town (actually, across the border in NY) and was of strategic importance to the Americans defeating the English at Saratoga which effectively sealed the fate of the British.

The British were short of supplies and headed towards Bennington to seize the arsenal. The Americans headed them off and defeated them. However, while returning to Bennington General Stark was surprised by a second contingent of British and was in the process of being defeated when the day was saved by the arrival of more troops, thanks to his wife Molly. A courier had arrived at her farm asking her to send all the available men which she did before riding off on horseback and alerting 200 more men who went to her husband's aid. After the battle General Stark returned to his farm and the route is now called the "Molly Stark Trail", or Route 9 which I was taking through Vermont.

My first stop was the Congregationalist Church which dated from the early 1800's. It was an impressive structure, both outside and inside. I was surprised to see that the church had a plaque on the outside noting that it was the first church in Vermont to confirm the separation of church and state. Before, the church also served as the town hall and meeting place where governmental decisions were made.

The inside of the church was very reverent. There were family 'boxes' on the ground floor which had the names of people on small plaques. One of them had the name Calvin Coolidge, a former president of the USA. When I enquired of the deacon if he was a member he said that

he had just visited once. The pulpit was quite impressive, and the columns which supported the balcony and ceiling were made from single pine trees, all the way from the floor to the ceiling.

I wandered through the old cemetery next to the church. A large number of American Revolution soldiers lie buried there. They each had a special circular metal disk next to the tombstone which identified them as such. The deacon had also mentioned that there were German soldiers who fought with the British buried there, but since they were from the losing side they didn't have special memorials.

From the cemetery I cycled past a battle monument and along country lanes to the Wallomsac river since there were some covered bridges that I wanted to see.

The covered bridges were not disappointing. They dated back to the turn of the century with lattice framework on the inside. They are also a reflection of how much snow this part of the country gets! At the second bridge I passed two people on the inside when I cycled through and on my return they were kissing and dancing. I was surprised to see that they were both women, but then this is Vermont, land of the legalised same-sex marriage.



I cycled over to the centre of town, passing a number of large factories that were shut down. One had been turned into an indoor sports centre which seemed like a good idea, but you only need so many of those in a town. In other places there were lovely old houses. I do like the architecture in Vermont.



After stopping for a meal I continued up into the Green Mountains. There was a lot of uphill and the going was slow, but after the

Rockies it wasn't anything special. I didn't see any wildlife in the area but there obviously was some, with signs warning of deer crossing. I did pass a muskrat by the river which ran next to the road, but with all the rain the wildlife had wisely taken shelter. Shame about the silly cyclist.

I passed through several towns that consisted mainly of houses. In fact, this was the least commercialised part of the USA that I had been through, with few shops or gas stations between towns. The town of Wilmington was very touristy, with lots of cute shops and inns. Being Sunday evening many were closed, but I resolved that this area is worth a visit again in the future.

By about 7:30 p.m. I was soaked to the skin and I realised that it would be impossible to reach Brattleboro as planned. I didn't mind cycling at night, but not when it is pouring rain in a misty mountain. A great way to end up as a hood ornament on a RV. Fortunately, I found a campground on the way so I stopped there for the night. The campground was in Molly Stark State Park and I was given a nice campsite, but unfortunately it had a gravel foundation. This not only made it hard to pitch the tent, but with all the water about the gravel and sand stuck to everything. I had a very enjoyable hot shower and on exiting met a fellow from New York City who was an expatriate Kiwi from Christchurch. However, after 25 years in the USA you wouldn't have known it from the way he spoke. It was then to my tent where I worked on the journal and listened to my radio before being lulled to sleep by the sound of the rain.

### **31 July - Day 56: Wilmington VT to Brattleboro VT - 23 km**

Today was the shortest day of my trip ... but it really started at about 3 a.m. when the skies opened. To say it was raining heavily would be an understatement. I thought I was back in India during the monsoon. It was hitting the ground with such force that a spray was

coming up under the fly of my tent and waking me up. There was a lot of water flowing down my campsite since the ground was so saturated. Of course that meant that it was soon flowing through my tent but at least I was on my thermarest mat so I was somewhat protected. For some reason one of my pegs came loose and I had to battle the elements to put it back in again. Not fun in the dark in the middle of the night! The storm was so loud I had trouble sleeping, in spite of my ear plugs and it was after 4 when I dozed off again.

In the morning it was still raining hard so I decided to try and wait it out. This is often the best course of action since the rain will either (a) stop, (b) lessen, (c) stay the same or (d) get worse. Well, you can guess what happened: (d). I read my book and dozed but by lunchtime I had decided that in spite of the rain I would take a run to Brattleboro which was about 25 km away.

My tent was soaked and dirty. My sleeping bag was wet. My sleeping mat was waterlogged. Finding somewhere to dry them out—as well as myself—was critical. I packed everything up and headed up the hill out of the park. Within minutes I was drenched, but at least it wasn't really cold as that would have made it unbearable.

The traffic was heavy so that contributed to my discomfort by splashing me as I cycled. It was not safe to go too far onto the shoulder as there were frequent edge breaks and potholes which were obscured by the water. It was a bit of a balancing act with my cocking an ear to the traffic and moving off to the side for as brief a period as possible. At the top of the mountain I found a restaurant which advertised "100 mile views". Not today. 100 metres was more like it. If they were lucky. In spite of the weather there were quite a few patrons which surprised me since the locals had told me that this was the worst summer in years, and probably the worst summer ever. In June it had rained 28 of the 30 days! I'd believe it.

The ride down hill was a bit scary and I did my best to keep my speed down. The traffic was relatively heavy with quite a few trucks and those dangerous RVs. I had visions of someone with misted windows and poor wipers hitting me. At Marlboro I saw a grocery store so I stopped and sloshed inside. The woman behind the counter commented on how wet I was since I left a puddle on the floor. "The joys of cycle touring" was my response. I had an excellent brunch of a pizza base with sun dried tomatoes and feta cheese. Yum. They had lots of Vermont items on display, and I was drawn to the maple syrup, but I managed to restrain myself.

Eventually, it was out into the storm again and on to Brattleboro. Fortunately, it was largely downhill since my gears were acting up yet again. The rain and grit seemed to have done something to them. When I finally arrived in town I was relieved to find a bicycle shop so I sloshed inside and asked if they could look at my bike and then took it into the mechanic. Tim was very good and showed me that my chain and cassette were shot. I had asked them at the last bike shop about this and they said it was OK. Tim said that everyone has a different definition of when something needs to be replaced and he was a proponent of preventative maintenance. Fortunately, he had the necessary parts so he replaced them and made the necessary adjustments. As elsewhere on this trip, I was so very fortunate that my problems arose when I was near a shop.

They advised me to stay in the Latchis hotel which was just down the road. It was built in the 1930's and in the art-deco style. So much more substantial than modern buildings, particularly the fittings with brass used where we tend to have plastics or light weight alloys. They had a room and after checking in I enjoyed a long, hot bath to warm up. Then it was time to dry my gear so my tent was washed in the tub and hung to dry over the rail. I made quite a mess but at least there was a surplus of towels for cleaning up.

I found the local laundry and dried my sleeping bag while also doing a load of laundry. While these were under way I wandered about the town. It was the ideal place to spend a rainy day as there were many bookshops and I'm a great one for idling away hours exploring their shelves. Eventually I returned to the laundry and chatted with the manager. She told me that this part of Vermont was full of crime and drugs due to its proximity to Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Pity, but that explained some of the dodgy people I saw hanging around. I commented that I was taken with north Vermont which I had visited a few times and she acknowledged that it was much different up there.

After dropping off my laundry at the hotel I had an excellent dinner at a Lebanese restaurant and then explored the town further—it had finally stopped raining—before returning to the hotel to make some calls, answer my e-mails, and update my journal.

## **1 August - Day 57: Brattleboro VT to Concord NH - 117 km**

Today was a very memorable day in my cycling career...

I was up early with the intent of making it as far as I could before the forecast afternoon thunderstorms materialised. Not that I believed 100% in the forecast, after all, they have not been that accurate, but I had lost a critical day due to rain and needed to make it up.

After packing I was out the door about 8:15. I picked up a bagel and a muffin for breakfast and then cycled up the road. It was then that every cyclist's nightmare happened: someone opened their car door and knocked me over.

For once my 'radar' had let me down. When in urban areas I am always on the lookout for cars that have recently parked. The one in question was parked on the road and there was nothing for the 300

metres as I cycled up to it to show me it was occupied. In any event when I was right next to it the driver opened his door into my lane and clipped my handle bars which sent me flying. I'm quite thankful that there was nobody driving by as it would have been much worse. I bounced off the door and the next thing I knew I was lying on my back in the road with the most intense pain in my shoulder as well as aches elsewhere.

It happened in front of the courthouse and a US Marshall was on duty so he ran out and stopped the traffic. I felt my shoulder and it had a huge swollen area the size of a golf ball. I was helped by two people, one of whom was a doctor. He examined my shoulder and said it was OK to move so I was helped off to the sidewalk where a woman introduced herself as a paramedic and had a look at me as well. Talk about good luck having such immediate medical attention. Puts paid to the idea that people won't help you in the USA for fear of being sued, at least in Vermont ...

I was impressed with the rapidity of the emergency services for the fireman and ambulance arrived within a few minutes of the accident. After an examination they dressed my shoulder and the consensus was that I had probably broken my collarbone. They offered me a ride in the ambulance to the hospital for an x-ray. I asked them what could be done about it and they said nothing so I decided not to bother. The ambulance guys were great. One of them was an avid cyclist from Keene New Hampshire so he commiserated with me about the hazards of cycling in town. They patch up a number of cyclists every month. Before they left I got them to pose for a photo—thanks guys!



The police had interviewed the driver and the witnesses and since the damage was less than \$1000 and there were no serious injuries it was not considered to be a 'reportable accident'. I just wanted to get on my way, although I felt like death warmed over. At least I didn't have a concussion—after my car crash in February I'm an expert on those—although I was slightly nauseous from the shock.

I cycled north out of town, a bit shaky, but glad to still be around and to put my accident behind me. God is good! As a footnote to the accident, about a month later I got a letter in New Zealand from the driver's insurance company asking if I was planning on suing. I told them no. Although he shouldn't have opened the door, I also should have been more alert so we were both at fault. An American lawyer friend of mine was dismayed by this decision, but we must accept responsibility for our own actions, as unpleasant as that might be at times.

I soon found myself crossing the Connecticut River which was lovely in the mist. Once across the bridge I was into New Hampshire and was welcomed by a sign to the local liquor store. Obviously they have different liquor hours or laws in New Hampshire to Vermont.

Due to my poor physical state, the ride into New Hampshire was somewhat of a blur. There were some lovely lakes and lots of forests and hills. It was raining but fortunately it was the light misting drizzle that was more refreshing than bothersome, but it did serve to keep me nice and wet.

Eventually the shock began to wear off and I felt very sore. At Spofford I went into the local shop and bought a bottle of extra strength Tylenol as well as a drink. Drugs are wonderful, particularly when one doubles the dose. I felt like the walking wounded limping about and fumbling about with only one arm. The lady running the place was most understanding. She opened the childproof bottle and even took the cotton out of the Tylenol for me. I haven't been incapacitated like this since my younger sporting days and had always taken my dexterity for granted.

After reaching Keene I headed north-east towards Concord. There was a lot of construction going on which suited me as I was able to ride in the construction zone away from the traffic. It was quite hilly and as I approached the top of one hill I saw two vehicles stopped, one of which had a big yellow sign 'Caution Cyclists'—where were they this morning! I was greeted by about 30 teenagers from a church group who were on a trip around New England. They were travelling much lighter than myself but I thought it was great that in spite of the atrocious weather they were out there doing it.

As the day wore on I felt a bit better and was able to slightly appreciate the lovely countryside I was cycling through. There were lots of trees and hills, with rivers often running next to the road. The road was marked on my map as a scenic route and I can see why. It would be spectacular to come back here in autumn when the leaves are changing.

I stopped at South Stoddaard for lunch and an escape from the rain. It was then that I realised that I was going to have a lot of problems because of this shoulder. With my broken collarbone I couldn't lift the bicycle with my right arm so parking was a real problem. I found a petrol station which had a small diner. Even though it was the middle of nowhere, the place was very busy with a continuing stream of people coming in for food. They made me a delightful vegetarian sandwich and asked me lots of questions about life in New Zealand. When I came out from lunch one of the teenage cyclists I passed earlier was coming in to use the toilet (oops ... that's a rude word in America—I mean restroom). I asked where the rest of the cyclists were and she said they were having a speed trial and were spread out along the road. Sure enough, when I commenced cycling I came across a number of them.

This area was settled in the late 18th century and early 19th century, although a lot of the farms were abandoned during the latter half of the 19th century in favour of the land that was opening up out west. The forest has reclaimed the land and as a result you can go wandering through dense forests and suddenly come across stone walls, seemingly built in the middle of nowhere.

I saw an example of this heritage in the form of a stone bridge that dated from the first half of the 18th century. The nearby historical plaque indicated that it was of a design unique to this area wherein it was built without any mortar.



The road passed other lakes and took me over lots of moderate hills. It was hard going for me as in spite of the Tylenol I was in a fair bit of pain. My shoulder precluded me standing up on the pedals when going up hills and my left knee was quite sore from the twist it received when I was thrown from my bike (the joy of toe clips). It was one of those days when it was head down, grit my teeth, and hum the theme song from the movie Rocky to inspire me not to give up.

Eventually I approached Concord which is on the Merrimack river. The land became much more rolling with short, steep grades. Again, I saw plenty of old houses dating back to the 18th century with the oldest dating back to 1764. I do enjoy being in places with such history. Finally I reached Concord and tried to find a hotel. I cycled up the main street and the only one that I saw was a Holiday Inn. I checked out the phone book and there were a couple more, but surprisingly little choice given that this is the state's capital. I called the Holiday Inn and, unusually, they asked why I wanted to stay there. When I told them it was because I was knocked off my bicycle they gave me a 20% discount which, while still being expensive, made it more bearable.

They were very understanding when my signature did not match my credit card. The bellboy helped me by putting my bike in the storage room and carrying my bags to my room. I normally eschew such services but with only one working arm I decided to be a wuss. It was then a hot bath, dinner and a lazy evening.

## **2 August - Day 58: Concord NH to Kittery ME - 102 km**

The human body is an amazing creation. Earlier in the year I took my Mazda MX-5 off a 10 metre bank and destroyed it. I suffered a concussion and minor whiplash but it hardly hurt ... until the day after. Lis explained to me that the body produces a huge amount of adrenaline which masks the pain. Well, today was the day after my bike crash and sure enough I was feeling a lot worse than I did yesterday.

I awoke shortly after 5 when I rolled over onto my hurt shoulder. Who needs an alarm clock? It really got my attention! I dozed for a while but then got up and had a hot bath to soothe the shoulder. There are advantages to not camping in terms of having a few more creature comforts. My shoulder looked a mess in the mirror, the whole top right of my body being different shades of green from the bruising and this huge lump where my AC joint was.

After packing my gear I made my way to the lobby. They had put my bike in the store room and the manager retrieved it for me. He was a keen cycling enthusiast and had done his first century (100 miles) recently. We discussed my trip and how he had always wanted to do something similar. Holiday Inn have a programme where after five years service employees receive a three month sabbatical so he said in three more years he was going to do a trans-American trip with his brother. In the interim, he was planning on going down to New York city where there was a century ride the following month. I said that I can't think of anything less desirable than cycling 100 miles around

New York city, but he said it would be fun to be with so many riders. To each their own ...

I made my way east and came across a large shopping centre where I found a supermarket and bought some provisions. While packing my bike Eric and Andy from Boston came over and chatted. They had also done trans-American trips and we compared notes. They agreed that drivers in New England are not the best; the day before Eric had almost been hit by someone who swerved out and stopped suddenly. Andy got even with the driver in that he slid into the back of the vehicle and left a dent. That is one way of doing it. I had images of New England drivers travelling about with small paintings of the cyclists on the side of their vehicle representing their 'kills'. When I was told out west that the worst drivers were in Massachusetts I was sceptical. However, I came to the conclusion that the disease covered all of New England. They really were shocking. I almost hit someone pulling out in Concord and over the next two days there were half a dozen other very close encounters. By far the worst drivers of my trip.

The ride east was very hard going. My body definitely didn't want to be on a bicycle. Fortunately, the road was slightly rolling and for a change there was no headwind, otherwise I wouldn't have made it. It was one of those times when you have to put your mind to the task at hand and push on. There was a misting rain which served to cool me down and keep me refreshed so I really didn't mind it. After about 20 km I stopped for a rest. I think there was something quite amiss with my left knee since it was acting up in spite of the anti-inflammatory pill I had taken. At least it wasn't my right knee which has had four operations and is much more fragile.

The countryside was much the same as I had passed through the day before. Rolling hills, with not too difficult grades, lots of forests, and old towns. There was a great degree of similarity in the architecture

between towns, with most of the buildings being white weather boards. Each town also had a dominant church which was large with a high steeple. They were usually Congregationalist which I think reflected the independent nature of the New Englanders. There were also lots of bookshops about; every town seemed to have at least two of them. My kind of place. There are few pleasures in life as nice as browsing in a bookshop.

As I approached Durham I smelled the ocean. It had been a long time since California and I found it exciting that I was so close to my goal. It was now afternoon and the realisation that I was going to make it, along with my circadian rhythm, were over-ruling my discomfort from the accident. I was actually feeling relatively perky.

I encountered a lot of construction on Highway 4 and at each work zone there was a traffic officer with the lights on their patrol car flashing. At the third work zone I asked the policeman if this was a common practice and he said that it was essentially required and that the motorists were much more obedient and careful when there was a policeman about. Just one further indictment of the local drivers methinks.

The traffic was getting quite heavy as I approached Portsmouth. I pulled into a petrol station and asked if there was a less busy road into the city. Unfortunately this was the only route so I steeled my nerves and continued on. The worst part was at the interchanges where I had to cut across the lane with fast moving traffic. I waited until there was a big gap and then, after a quick prayer, peddled like mad. Obviously I made it since I'm writing this, but it was not pleasant.

I was a bit frazzled by the time I reached the city so I stopped at a computer shop for a distraction. Like most things in America it was huge, with a phenomenal range of products. Of course I enjoyed it

immensely since I really am a gadget guy. Portsmouth was once a major shipyard for the US Navy, and they still have a large base in the city. As I approached the centre of the town I saw a submarine in a park next to the road which looked worthy of a visit.

The USS Albacore was launched in 1953 as a research submarine. It never carried a weapon or went to war. It was used for testing control systems, dive brakes, sonar equipment, escape mechanisms, and various innovative theories. It was the first submarine to have the streamlined hull shape of modern submarines.

There was a self-guided tour of the submarine which I went on. It was quite different to the movies! As I expected it was quite cramped, but I didn't appreciate just how little space there was for the crew quarters, or the total lack of privacy that most of the crew would have put up with. The smell of hydraulic oil was all pervasive. Obviously I was not cut out to be a submariner.

The locals are very environmentally considerate, as evidenced by the sign below. What I wondered was whether there was such a thing as a fast duck crossing?



Portsmouth was founded in 1623 and as a result the streets were quite narrow. There were lots of old buildings and it was very scenic to cycle through. However, being a town I was careful not to gawk too much, I wasn't up to another close encounter of the worst kind with a car door. As I approached the bridge to Maine a mountain biker cycled up and started chatting with me. He was very interested in my trip so we stopped by the side of the road and continued our conversation. Like so many other cyclists I had met he was hoping to do a similar trip himself. I told him not to wait and to do it since it is such a rewarding experience. Tom was fascinated with my bike, particularly how I fitted the panniers to my front forks (1 x muffler clamp and a 10 mm bolt tapped through above the axle) and what gear was required (as little as possible).

I had been advised that there were great views at Fort McCleary State Park so I cycled south along Route 103 to the coast. This took me past the large naval base, which obviously was still in use, and past many lovely old houses. These were substantial homes dating back well into the last century, or perhaps even earlier. With the large trees it was a beautiful ride. Eventually I reached the park which brought me to the Atlantic Ocean. I had completed my trans-continental trip. After 6243 km and 50 days of cycling (excluding rest days) I had made it.



I met two women with their children. Melissa and Lynne were from New Hampshire. Melissa was now living in Japan and asked what New Zealand was like for a holiday. I waxed eloquently about it and gave her my contacts in case she made it. They took photos of me with their kids and shared a delicious apricot before I went on my way. As a footnote to this, five months later Lis and I were walking at a tourist site on the South Island of New Zealand when a lady stopped me and said “would you mind taking a photo of me and my family”. I looked at her and asked “were you in Maine in August?” It was Melissa. Try and work out the probability of that!

I found a motel and decided to treat myself to a special dinner. After getting lost in a maze of roads I found my way back into Portsmouth and a nice Mexican restaurant where I ordered a vegetarian Fajita. That was the same dish I had the night before I started in San Francisco with David and Katherine Brown so I thought it was a fitting end to the trip. After returning to the hotel I had a hot bath to soothe my shoulder and then worked the phone to organise my trip home. My wonderful travel agent Michelle managed to route me out of Portland instead of Boston and even got my Qantas ticket moved forward.

### **3 August - Day 59: Kittery ME to Portland ME - 101 km**

The day started out very overcast and humid. Probably a legacy of the heavy fog that set in last night. My shoulder was definitely not in very good shape. Normally I heal quickly but if anything it was getting worse instead of better. The legacy of cycling 225 km immediately following my crash... Obviously rest was needed, and I needed to get home to have that.

I gingerly packed up the bike and had great fun in getting going. With all the gear on the bike it was ungainly at the best of times, and with my not being able to lift it with my right arm it was even more difficult. However, I got everything sorted out and headed off just after 9 a.m.

Kittery, Maine is famous for its factory outlets. The prices are usually much lower than the same products in shops, and they also often include end of line or slightly soiled items. They are like a magnet to shoppers and for many miles approaching Maine there were billboards advertising the outlet malls in Kittery. My route to Portland took me through the outlet area and there was over 100 shops (or so the signs said) to choose from. I popped into the Levi's outlet and bought some trousers and shorts for a fraction of what they would have cost at home. The only problem was where to put them but judicious repacking (or stuffing as Lis would call it) made it possible for me to fit everything in.

The route seemed to alternate between shops and countryside full of trees. Since the road took me inland away from the ocean there was no sign, or even smell, of the sea. It was only the occasional sign pointing to a town on the coast that told me it was nearby. Fortunately, the riding wasn't difficult as I was not feeling the best but at least the weather had cleared up by mid-morning and the sun

was out. Since this was one of my last days for cycling I was glad that the summer was here to see me off.

Melissa had suggested that I visit the town of Ogunquit as it was quite a popular place. That was an understatement. It was a continuum of motels, hotels, and resorts accompanied by every type of eatery and other commercial activity associated with tourism imaginable. In fact, it made Lundy's Lane outside of Niagara Falls look positively rustic by comparison. Which says a lot!

There were hordes of tourists about and traffic was abominable. My radar was working overtime as I travelled through the town—I had no intention of stopping for a visit—and sure enough some silly woman pulled out half way from her parking spot and stopped her vehicle, blocking my way. She also disrupted the traffic since the vehicles driving by also stopped expecting her to pull into the lane. By this time my patience had worn through with these drivers so I asked her if she was planning on just parking there blocking all the traffic or had something else in mind. I then noticed that there were still people getting into the vehicle!!!! These New England drivers (she was from Massachusetts) really are the absolutely worst I've found anywhere in my travels across the USA.

Eventually I made it out of town and headed towards the town of Kennebunk (ken.ne'bunk). This unusual name is an old Native American name meaning "long cut bank" and is believed to reference the 'Great Hill', a grassy promontory that drops sharply to ledges at the mouth of the Mousam River.

More famous is Kennebunkport which is where former US President George Bush has a summer home. I had expected it to be busier but then I realised that it was still the US Republican Party Convention in Philadelphia and that all the Secret Service agents who must usually buzz around here were probably enjoying life in Philadelphia.

The towns rolled along and I passed through Biddeford, Saco and Scarborough before reaching South Portland. There was really nothing spectacular about any of these places although I enjoyed the ride nonetheless. By now it was very sunny and hot which suited me just fine.

I had decided that it was best if I head over to the airport and sort out my ticket. I also had to get a box from somewhere for my bicycle but my main concern was ensuring that my ticket was changed and that I was still travelling out in two days time. As in most urban areas the sign posting was not the best, and I knew that I had missed the turn when I saw the harbour. I cycled back and asked a woman at a petrol station who gave me very vague (and wrong) directions before her colleague (a guy) told me "Turn left on this street. Turn right at the first light. Turn right at the third light. That is the road to the airport." Talk about dream directions ... and they were right! I found the airport without any problems.

Portland International Airport was not very large and, like most airports, had signs outside for the various airlines. The only problem was that there was no sign for American! Unperturbed, I parked my bike and walked the length of the terminal until I found their representative. Whew. It was all I needed if it transpired that a mistake had been made and I was to be travelling from Portland Oregon. Michelle wouldn't make such an error, but I wouldn't put it past some of the others who work for these airlines.

The woman who helped me, Trish, was great. She sorted out my tickets for me and because I was changing my routing because of my accident American Airlines had decided to waive the \$USD 75 fee. Very kind of them and most appreciated. Unfortunately, they didn't have any bicycle boxes but Delta Airlines, at the next counter, kindly sold me one for \$10 which was a fantastic deal. Trish wrote my name on the box and stored it out back for me which meant that all I had to

do was to cycle to the airport the morning of the flight and pack my bike. Great!

By this time it was late in the afternoon and time to find a hotel. There was a travel assistance desk and they pointed me to a board by the luggage carousel which contained advertisements for hotels and a phone to call them directly. I was dismayed to find that it was not possible to find a non-smoking room for two nights, at least that I could afford. After a visit to a phone booth and working through the Yellow Pages I decided to head out on my bike to visit some of the smaller motels I had cycled by when coming into town. I was fortunate to find that the first place I visited had a vacancy. The Anchor Motel was run by an extremely friendly woman and the kids were amazed at the amount of gear on my bicycle. I unpacked and then was on my bike again and headed over to the 'Mall of Maine' where I hoped to find something to eat and a bag to carry on the air plane.

I have come to the conclusion that they love to shop in Maine—perhaps because of the long winters?—since there is definitely an overabundance of shops given the population. The Mall of Maine was massive and boasted four large department stores as 'anchors' at each end of the mall. I was pleased to find a Borders Bookshop and so spent a fair bit of time (and money) there. Browsing bookshops is often lethal on my pocket book, especially at the end of a trip when I can now carry them home.

I was successful at finding a bag at Eddie Bauer's and then had a delightful dinner of stir-fried vegetables. After dinner the sun was setting so I cycled home after first stopping at a pharmacy to see if they had a triangular bandage for a sling. My shoulder was definitely getting worse and I needed to take some of the dead weight of my arm off it. I had no luck with that but bought some blueberries

(unfortunately the last for a while). It was then back to the motel to work on the journal and write some e-mails.

#### **4 August - Day 60: Portland Maine - 51 km**

The day started with muesli and blueberries. They are my favourite fruit and today was the last day that I would be having any until the season starts at home—around six months from now. I was not feeling that good as my shoulder was in a fair bit of pain; this had also meant that I didn't sleep that well. However, it was a sunny day outside so I resolved to make the most of it.

My plan was to cycle to the Portland Harbor Museum which was on the south bank of Portland harbour. It wasn't too far from where I was staying and it had the added attraction of a lighthouse at the site. Without all my panniers on the bike it was like driving a sports car compared to a truck, and I found myself at the museum before too long. It overlooked a fort in the harbour which was built in the 1850's. Unfortunately, the fort was rendered obsolete as soon as it was finished since it was built from granite and with the advent of rifled barrels for canon the granite would shatter like shrapnel so it was never manned. The museum displayed exhibits related to local maritime history. It comprised two sections; one on the Clipper ship 'Snow Squall' and 'the rest'. As I was the only person there, the volunteer guide took me around and we had a great chat.

Clipper ships are famous but I had always wondered what was so special about them. They were designed with a narrow hull and a sharp, hollow bell and used an enormous amount of sail. They were developed in the 1840's for trade with China and flourished during the California Gold Rush of 1849 which sent freight rates to the Pacific soaring. Though seldom achieved, their goal was to run from New York to San Francisco in about 100 days via Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America. Sometimes inclement weather meant

that it took 150 or more days for the trip. They sailed from California to China to collect tea before returning to the USA. There was a great deal of profit to be made if you were among the first with that season's tea and many fortunes were made. However, their economic life was limited and by the mid-1850's the boom was over and the clipper ships, expensive to build and operate, died out.

The display showed how clipper ships were built. The plans were a closely guarded secret and were usually destroyed once the ship was built to prevent copying. As a consequence, there was no record on the design or construction of clippers—until the 'Snow Squall' project. The Snow Squall was a clipper which ran aground near Cape Horn and managed to limp to Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands, leaking badly. She was run ashore in April 1864 and left to the elements. The locals used her wood and later a dock was built over the ship and other hulks, filling most of her hull with rocks. In 1979 she was rediscovered and it was realised that this was the only intact remains of an American Clipper ship. Just over 35 feet of her bow remained jutting out from the dock, half submerged. After a series of expeditions they recovered the bow and other parts of the vessel which were brought to the museum for conservation.

It was fascinating to look at this 150 year old ship and to follow through the exhibit on how it was formed from the timber, joined together with steel rods, and then caulked to make it water tight. The wood looked to be primary growth timber since the grains were very close together, and this must have been great 'fun' to work with and drill using only hand tools. It is an impressive feat to see what the workmen achieved with the simple tools they had on hand—and a complete lack of detailed technical drawings. They truly were craftsmen in those days.

The museum contained photographs and other records of life at sea. It was interesting to see how the captains were encouraged to take

their families on board with them. Not surprising given that trips could last several years. One of the displays was of a woman who went to sea with her husband within a week of getting married and didn't return to Portland for three years; and by then she had two children. A book has been published of her letters. They bred them tough in those days ...

Portland was a major shipbuilding port and built Liberty ships during World War II. These were ships which were designed to be quick to build to replace the heavy losses by the German submarines. What I didn't realise was that they were designed by the Royal Navy and the first ones were built under contract before the US entered the war. Once the US was in the war they changed the design so that they used oil instead of coal for power, and ramped up production. Over 2000 were built by the end of the war. My guide, realising my interest in history, took me back to the office and showed me some photos of the first boats being built.

Eventually I dragged myself from the museum and cycled over to the Spring Point Ledge Lighthouse. This was built in 1897 and is a caisson design with three levels to it. Originally it was set off from the shore but after a few ships were wrecked they built the causeway out of large granite blocks. It really was quite scenic with the harbour in the background and the boats sailing by.



I had been told that I should visit the Port Elizabeth light house so I headed south, dead reckoning my way along the shore. There were many stately homes lining the road with large yards and lots of mature trees. My kind of area. Eventually I found my way to the park and cycled up to the light house. Nestled on the rugged shore with the lighthouse keepers house next to it, I thought it was one of the most picturesque places I had ever seen. There were many tourists about and I spotted someone wearing a cycling shirt from Maryland. We chatted for a while and they told me that the park in northern Maine at Acadia was spectacular for cycling, with great trails through the forest and stunning sea views. They said it was the kind of place where you cycled and then stopped every five minutes to savour the views. Sounded great ... it is now on my list of places to visit.

There was still time to explore Portland proper so I headed into the city. The old commercial area near the port had been revitalised and gentrified with cafes and upmarket shops. I enjoyed wandering about looking at and visiting some of the shops. It was fun playing tourist for the day, particularly since it was sunny and warm. I knew that I would soon be back in winter in New Zealand so wanted to savour my last summer day.

I found a recreational path along the shore which I cycled along. With the ocean right next to the path it was beautiful. I followed around to where it entered a bay and at the top of the bay stopped at the parking lot to ask for directions from an elderly couple. From there I had lunch at an Italian restaurant. The portions were so huge that I said to the waitress that she must not eat there; she was too slim. I don't know how anyone can expect to eat so much on a regular basis.

It was getting late and time to head back to the hotel. About 3 km from the hotel I had a puncture ... and what a puncture! A nail went through the tire. Fortunately, the puncture was sealed by the nail so I was able to cycle home and patch it. What a way to end the trip...

I cleaned the bike and packed my bags before retiring. I had an early start with a 5:50 a.m. flight. I was very tired but I couldn't sleep, due in part to the noise of the traffic and the TV next door. I normally use ear plugs but didn't want to risk sleeping through my wakeup call or alarm watch. My 03:45 wakeup came too soon and I was on my bike on the way to the airport just after 4 a.m. There was hardly any traffic on the roads which was great, and I reached the airport in no time at all. I retrieved my box and began to take my bike apart. After wrapping up my bike in bubble wrap I put it in the box with most of my gear and taped it up well. My rear panniers were put into a separate box and checked in. Then it was on the plane on my way home to New Zealand.

And so ended a fantastic trip. My statistics for the trip were:

- I had cycled 6393 km (3975 miles) in 50 days.
- Average speed of 125 km per day.
- I went through 2 x tyres; 2 x tubes; 5 x spokes; 1 x chain; 1 x cassette; and
- 4 x bottles Coppertone SPF 30 sunscreen.

As I waited to board the aircraft I reflected on the wonderful experience that I had. Those of us living overseas often picture America through the image of the media: car chases, urban blight, drugs, violence. While there is no denying that those things exist, they are far less common than the positive aspects to America which are not reported: friendly, kind people, amazing nature, and places where one experiences absolute solitude.

The solitude was in many respects the best experience of the trip. My simple life of eating, cycling, exploring and sleeping was soon to end and I was about to rejoin the frenetic lifestyle that most of us seem to live these days. No longer would everything that I need fit into a few small bags to be carried by my bicycle. My travels had brought me a better understanding of myself and been good for me physically (broken collar bone notwithstanding!), emotionally and spiritually. It was now time to implement the ideas and plans that I had dreamed of during my many tranquil hours of peddling. It was also time to rejoin my wife who was the only thing that I missed throughout my trip.

## **Postscript**

The trip back was a long one: Portland to Boston to Dallas to Los Angeles to Auckland. Fortunately, I'm a member of the QANTAS Club so I was able to while away the hours between flights in the American Airlines lounges which are very comfortable. I arrived in New Zealand at 4:40 a.m. on 7 August 2000 and after a shower at the QANTAS Club went down to retrieve my baggage. My bike box was there, missing a corner, but my second box was nowhere to be found. I joined a queue of about 20 people who were missing their bags to report my missing bike box. Since I had camping gear and a bike, the Ministry of Agriculture wanted to have a close look at things. They took my tent for fumigation and had me remove my bike from the box to look at the tyres. I bundled my bike onto the trolley and

dragged the box outside since it was too much of a bother to get the bike into the box again.

After being met by Lis, we visited the doctor later that morning and an X-ray confirmed I had fractured my clavicle (i.e. collar bone) in my crash. Fortunately, it was a clean fracture and it would heal in about eight weeks. A real bother as Lis and I were going mountain biking on trails the next weekend in Rotorua and it put a halt to any kayaking. This at least explained why it wasn't getting any better!

Three weeks after arriving home Lis and I moved to our new home in the South Island. It was near Abel Tasman national park and gave us many opportunities to kayak, hike and cycle. At the end of the year I started on my life simplification programme by selling most of my company, and two years later cemented things with my second marathon biking trip through America—this time on the continental divide mountain biking route which ran from Canada to Mexico. Whereas my trip from San Francisco to Maine let me experience 'small town' America, the continental divide route was an amazing wilderness experience. But that is another story ...