

Cycle Tour 1999 Ride Report

May 28 – 31, 1999

It amazes me how impressionable I am. My friend Tom Cole and I were sitting around talking about cycle touring, something I had never done. Tom wanted to ride Historic Route 66 from Chicago all the way out to California on his bicycle. I don't remember asking Tom why he was thinking such thoughts, but then again, why not.

While riding Route 66 would be an adventure, I knew I didn't have the time to train for a ride of this magnitude nor did I have the time to do the actual ride, which would take weeks. We began talking about what we could accomplish. We decided that we could probably convince our wives (one each) to give us a long weekend to go for a ride.

We began the quest by looking for books that would cover our intended route. We located a book titled "Antique Roads of America, Bicycle Guide for Route 66" which is a paperback book written in 1992. It provided a lot of good information. As both money and time were limited we came to the conclusion that it would be cheaper to camp along the way in state parks. As it turned out, Illinois state parks and Route 66 didn't match up the way we had hoped. Back to the drawing board.

Using several computer mapping programs, we found we could ride portions of Route 66 and veer off to the state parks for the night. It became more of a "How many times can we cross Route 66" ride.

After weeks of route planning we researched what supplies we had and what was needed. I had an aluminum Cannondale R500 touring bicycle, a couple of water bottles and clothing appropriate for cycling, but not much else. I was about to spend several hundred dollars on handlebar bags, panniers, tent, sleeping bag, extra water bottles and rain gear. Tom had an older Trek touring bike along with some camping supplies like a mini camp stove, fuel, and a tent. His tent would sleep an entire family in comfort but weighed a lot. The dome tent I purchased said it was a four person tent, but as anyone who has ever used a tent knows, you can sleep four people in it if they don't have anything with them in the tent and never plan on rolling over. It would house Tom and I comfortably and hold our gear when off the bike as well. Besides, my new tent only weighed around eight pounds, not exactly a lightweight tent, but not too bad either.

It became evident that St. Louis to Chicago was a bit too long for a four day ride, so we scaled it back a little more and decided we could comfortably ride St. Louis to Bloomington IL and take Amtrak back to St. Louis. Amtrak is pretty cool about bicycles. For an additional \$10 we could just roll our bicycles on the train and not have to unload the panniers and box it all up.

During all the planning our personality differences became evident. I'm very anal-retentive about details like maps, and directions. Tom is more laid back and willing to point the bike north and begin riding. I really don't like the idea of getting out on my bicycle and getting lost, so I had practically memorized each day's route.

Another minor matter crept up during planning. A simple thing like riding across a bridge is not so simple in St. Louis. Bicycles are not allowed on the bridges that cross over into Illinois except for a few. The old Chain of Rocks Bridge is an historic site and the bridge is open for foot and bicycle traffic on weekends. We called the Trailnet group that operated the bridge and told them about our ride along Historic Route 66 and wanted to include the Chain of Rocks Bridge in our crossing. As we were leaving on a Friday morning, we were told they wouldn't open the bridge for us. Our other option was a bridge up near Alton Illinois, but it would involve a lot of city riding during morning rush hour.

Thursday night, my wife Rose Ann drove me over to Tom's house. After fully loading my bicycle for the first time with 40 pounds of gear, I lifted my bicycle which now weighed around 60 pounds. Tom saw the panic in my eyes and told me "pick your bike up one more time." I did. "Now" he said "you only have to roll it the rest of the way. It helped relax me a bit.

At O-Dark 30 Friday morning, Tom's wife Debbie drove us across the river to O'Fallon IL and dropped us off at the Hardee's restaurant where our ride would begin. After eating breakfast, and a bathroom break, we headed east along US-50. We may have ridden two miles before Tom lost one of his panniers after hitting a large pothole. After retrieving the pannier from the side of the road and securing it once more to the bicycle, we headed off. US-50 is a two lane highway that has a narrow shoulder and crosses wetlands (swamps), so we had to keep moving. Luckily most of the traffic was heading west towards St. Louis at this hour of the morning.

18 miles into the ride, we reached the city of Lebanon and reached the smaller farm roads that would lead us north. Route 4 would have been a nice choice to get us where we were going, unfortunately, it has a narrow shoulder and has a good bit of traffic. Our choice was to ride the farm roads a mile or so east or west of this major thoroughfare. This would add more miles, but it would hopefully keep us from becoming road kill. We turned north off of US-50 onto Emerald Mound Rd, then jogged east to Summerfield Rd which I had ridden before.

The township of St. Jacob was 30 mile into our adventure. This park has hosted many organized group bicycle rides over the years. Knowing it had good clean restrooms made it the obvious place to take our first break. As we had all day to cover the 77 miles we took our time.

Crossing US-40 we continued north through Marine, Alhambra and into Livingston at the 48 mile mark. It was here that we decided to send my wife Rose Ann and Tom's wife Debbie a postcard to tell them we made it this far. I'm sure the folks in Livingston don't see lycra clad cyclists with loaded bicycles too often, so I'm sure we looked "unique".

Ever since gas stations expanded into the mini-mart world, it has made cycling a whole lot easier. You can always find food and drink at one of these little roadside sanctuaries. I had two water bottles on my bicycle and another two bottles loaded into the sleeves of my handlebar bag. I kept them constantly full of ice water and Gatorade.

The weather so far was being very cooperative. The wind, if there was one, was at our back, or at least not in our face, and the temperatures were in the upper 70's and climbing.

Our lunch stop was in Staunton IL around mile 53. We found another Hardee's and sat down for some sustenance. Being very hungry, I ordered the three piece fried chicken platter, complete with cole slaw, mashed potatoes and beverage. Tom was smarter and ate a bit lighter. I managed to finish two pieces of chicken, the coleslaw and a drink, but couldn't manage to force anything more down. My lunch wanted to revisit the fresh air for the next hour or so, but I managed to keep it down. Note to self: Don't eat heavy foods then jump on a fully loaded bicycle.

Being the town oddity along the way sparked a lot of conversations, usually starting with "where are you boys from" followed by "where are you headed" and finished with "are you crazy?" It was actually a lot of fun to see their expression and their interest. Once or twice we would hear someone relate a story from a ride they did years ago.

Heading north out of Staunton, the wonderful little farm roads dried up and we were forced onto Route 4 through the towns of Sawyerville, Benald and Gillespie. Tom's grandparent's lived in Gillespie at some point years ago. Tom wanted to ride around the town and see if he could find their old home. We took pictures by the town sign and began our search. Tom stopped and talked with someone in the neighborhood where his grandparents lived for a few minutes. We headed west out of town along Route 16.

It was rather unfortunate that my stomach was still so full as we passed a Dairy Queen. The temperatures had climbed into the low 80's, and a cold ice cream treat sounded good, but we just kept pedaling. Another note to self: Stop at Dairy Queen!

Near Royal Lake, Route 16 takes a jog to the south and a small road, Plainview Blacktop Road, to be exact, comes in straight ahead. Due to the temperatures and the brightness of the sun, Plainview Blacktop Road had turned into a black, sticky, liquid tar. After passing through Plainview, all three blocks of it, we were on our final leg of the day, Alton Road which took us into Beaver Dam State Park.

Being the anal-retentive guy that I am, I had called each of the state parks at which we planned to stay about making reservations. As it turned out, Memorial Day weekend is prime camping time and all three camp grounds were full. I explained that we were on a multi-day bicycle ride and would be staying just one night. The park ranger at Beaver Dam State Park, was very helpful. He told us where we would be able to find him when we arrived. He would find a spot for us for the night.

After climbing a rather steep hill into the park, we found the Ranger Station. Good to his word, we found him and he told us where we could pitch camp for the night. It was perfect, about 50 yards from the main camping area, and the noise, and near a covered pavilion. Did I say it was perfect? Just checking.

Never having been to a state park for camping, I was impressed to learn that this park not only had showers, but they had ... are you ready ... hot showers. After 77 miles of loaded riding, a hot shower felt so good! I don't think there was any hot water left in the area by the time Tom and I washed ourselves, our socks, shorts, jerseys and gloves. Back at the tent we strung a rope from the top of the tent to the pavilion and hung our riding clothes out to dry in the afternoon sun.

For dinner, we had brought some of that freeze dried camping food that you just add hot water and let sit. Tom fired up the little stove and heated the water. After following the directions and waiting the appropriate time, we dug into our heavily salted pasta like substance. I'm glad that I went ahead and ordered the larger "two serving" size dinners. One of these each just about filled us up. We topped it off with freeze dried cheese cake. Just add cold water, let sit and congeal then eat. Under normal circumstances, I'm sure it was nasty, but being hungry, it was tasty.

The sun was down, and it was time for rest.

Day two, Saturday May 29th, started with the rising of the sun. A tent actually holds body heat pretty well. I came to this realization the minute I climbed out into the cool morning air and damp grass. First things first, a bathroom break. At this hour the

campground was still quite and no lines had formed for the morning ritual. Next on the agenda, breakfast. Breakfast is simple for freeze dried stuff. You've got granola with dried fruit and powered milk. Just add cold water. We were already packing the tent, loading the bicycles and filling water bottles as the first few people were peaking out of their tents.

Today's route would take us east 54 miles to Sangchris State Park, south east of Springfield. The temperatures climbed pretty quickly and made hydration very important. While Tom and I had planned on eating the freeze dried foods for breakfast and dinner, we had to purchase lunch and drinks along the way. I had packed several zip locked bags of Fig Newton's in my handlebar bag. However, these more or less disintegrated into bags of crumbs, but still edible. Today I would purchase a lot of Gatorade along the way.

I was thankful for an easier day mileage wise as my legs were tired. Also being a short day we took our time. We rode further up Alton Road, which was hilly by Illinois standards, through Carlinville and north toward Girard where we turned east on some country roads. At some point, an older man in a truck pulled up next to us at a stop sign and told us to be careful as there was going to be a lot of traffic heading to the lake today. We thanked him and rode on.

On one of our Route 66 stretches, we passed a farm and were chased by a farm dog. It wasn't the first farm dog we encountered, just one of note. Normally Tom and I would see the farm house ahead, and begin to pick our pace up a few miles per hour as we approached, then when the dog gave chase, we would pick our pace up enough to out-sprint the little critter. On this occasion, we spotted the farm house and I began to pick up my pace. Having been chased several times already, Tom decided to turn the tables and slowed down. The dog was probably 50 yard back and still chasing. Tom turned his bike around and chased after the dog, barking at the dumb thing the whole time. The dog ran off and I was left on the side of the road laughing.

On another patch of Route 66, we came around a bend in the road near another farm and were being watchful for dogs. Sure enough, one popped up along the right side of the road. It was just ahead of us and barking up a storm. It wasn't too bad until we heard more barking to the left. We had been out flanked and had a pack of five or six more dogs coming from that direction. This time, speed was the answer. No one would be able to sneak up on this farmer's property!

Without getting into the scientific stuff, cyclists travel on their stomachs. It was hot, humid and time to eat and drink. Farmerville was on the route and as we were coming into town, we stopped and asked if there was somewhere to eat. The answer was pleasing. There was a Subway Sandwich shop inside the local truck stop by the highway. We parked our bicycles along side the store and went in. Again, dressed in cycling shorts, jerseys and funky shoes, we stood out. We smelled and we were hungry, who cared about the looks.

The nice thing about most fast food places we encountered was they didn't mind if we filled up our water bottles with ice and water before we headed out. We asked first, but no one minded. The bad thing was the ice water didn't stay cold for more than 30 minutes or so.

From Farmersville we followed the outer road along Interstate 55 north towards Divernon. We had ridden the previous day on pretty quiet roads, but riding along the outer road of the interstate was noisy. Also the outer road was in pretty bad shape with broken and patched concrete. At Pawnee we headed east again toward the state park.

I mention again that I called each state park before leaving St. Louis to make camping reservations. Well the gentleman at Sangchris State Park informed us that not only were they full, but they would not find us a spot. They had rules and rules are rules. So today we prayed for space.

Tom and I arrived mid day at the park and obviously avoided the park ranger, as he already told us he would not help. We found the "campground hosts" in their motor home. We told them we had been riding for two days from St. Louis and were looking for a place to pitch the tent for one night. They were very polite but told us they were full. We asked them if there were sure there was nowhere we could pitch a tent and park two little bicycles. Again they told us they had driven around the park just a few hours ago and all spaces were full. We asked if they knew of any other options, they didn't. However, the host felt so bad for us he said he would drive around again.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, he arrived back at his motor home. "I don't believe it." He tells us. "There is one spot at the far end of the circle that is open. I thought it was one large spot, but it is really two. I can let you have it." He was sorry there was no parking, but we didn't need parking, we had bicycles. Our neighbors on the other portion of the spot were out. We pitched our tent, and headed for the showers to wash our bodies and our clothes. The showers weren't nearby, we had to ride our bikes down the road a couple of miles to the shower house and ride back. Tom and I also stopped at the little bait store by the lake and purchased bottles of Gatorade.

Later in the evening after the sun had set, our neighbors came home and saw our tent pitched. They were complaining that we were on their spot. Through the tent wall I explained this was really two spots. They wanted to start a fire in the pit and wanted us to move our bikes. We told them there was another pit on the other side of their camper, which was their pit. Conversation over, no confrontation. Time to rest.

Day 3, Sunday May 30th. Morning came and the routine began again. Trudge through the dew laden grass to the outhouse. Trudged back to the tent, eat a big bowl of granola, break camp, load the bikes, fill water bottles and head out. Tom and I were gone before the neighbors even sleep it off.

Today we would ride around 63 miles to Weldon Springs State Park near Clinton. The clouds were more prevalent today than the two previous days and it threatened rain off and on.

We headed east to Edinberg and up the little back roads to Mount Alburn another little town of a few streets. We then continued north across Highway 72 at Illiopolis where we took a break for food and drink. Again the weather began threatening and the winds were picking up. I think they were from the south-west. This wasn't too bad until we turned, you guessed it, west along the railroad tracks and Old Route 36. This was just a two mile section, but the wind had our speed down to around 10 miles per hour.

Finally we turned north on Route 19 and got a nice cross tail wind thing going. I pulled over briefly to put rain covers on the panniers as it would sprinkle, and look like it was going to pour, but it sprinkled a bit then slowed.

This ten mile section was almost due north, straight as an arrow and flat. With the wind mostly at our backs, our speed picked back up and made easy riding. Interesting, every mile or so you would see a huge smoke stack piercing the sky. There were probably seven or eight of these smoke stacks along this section of road. I could not figure out what they were for. I couldn't see any roads leading to the stacks, nor could I see any buildings around.

Church had let out in Mount Pulaski by the time we arrived. It had a nice town square and friendly people walking around in their Sunday best. We pulled over and asked a family if there was anywhere we could buy lunch in town. We were told that there was a restaurant right on the square a block down. We asked if there were any fast food places as we weren't exactly dressed for eating in a restaurant. We were told "nonsense, they will take good care of you."

We were hungry and the rain started again. We parked and locked our bicycles up on the porch of the Town House Eatery and went inside. The restaurant was filled with folks in their Sunday best. Talk about standing out in the crowd! We were greeted and after a few minutes we were led to a table. People smiled. The waitress brought us a menu and was surprised at how inexpensive the meals were. We placed a large order then headed to the bathroom to wash up a little.

Of course we were asked where we were going and where we started. This sparked a lot of conversation with the folks around us. We were told about a group from Germany that came over a few years back and were bicycle touring central Illinois and visiting the huge grain mills along the way. The waitress asked if we wanted our bottles refilled before we left. Such hospitality, it was great. I'm not generally a great tipper, but with such friendliness and hospitality, Tom and I left at least a 30 % - 40% tip. If you're ever in Mount Pulaski, you must stop at this restaurant and have a great tasting home cooked meal served by friendly folks at reasonable prices.

Finally before we left, the staff provided excellent directions on getting back to Route 54 heading north-east through little towns of Chestnut and Kenny and finally into Clinton. Not really hungry, but ready for a break, we stopped at the Dairy Queen in Clinton for a cold treat and some water before heading south to Weldon Springs State Park.

Camping here wasn't supposed to be a problem, but we couldn't find the park ranger, so we tracked down the camp host. All the tent camping spaces were full. However, they had an RV spot with full hook up service available for around \$10 so we took it. The space had a large gravel pad where you would park your RV, and a small grassy area on one side by trees where we pitched our tent for the night.

Unfortunately, this spot also had a large population of mosquitoes, we moved the tent to another grassy area. Posted signs alerted us not to drink the water unless it was boiled as it was contaminated. It also had a high sulfur content which made it taste bad, very bad.

After another long hot shower, we came across a nice grill restaurant on the park which had the largest burgers I had ever seen. They were around one pound burgers plus all the fixings. The heck with freeze dried dinners! Grill me up a burger, a helping of fries and a milk shake. It's okay, we rode the calories off! With full stomachs, we walked around the lake and headed back to the tent.

We only had 30 miles left to ride to get up to Bloomington in the morning and our Amtrak reservation was for an early afternoon train. After talking with someone at the campground we found that there was an earlier train around 10:00 if we could make it. We called Amtrak from a pay phone and they had space for us and our bikes. If we wanted it, we just had to show up and exchange our tickets. A new plan, make it 30 miles to Bloomington and enjoy an earlier air conditioned train ride home.

Day four, Monday May 31st. We rose early enough to talk again about the ride up to Bloomington. We had a few challenges. First we had to eat, break camp, and load the bikes. Water was going to be a problem as even after going through a water filter, it tasted too nasty to drink. We would have to stop in Clinton on the way to get drinkable water. Another problem, or so it appeared was it

was looking like rain again, plus the wind was already blowing. Tom and I decided to get going before it started raining.

As it turned out, the rain held off, but the wind was blowing pretty strong, from the south. After making a brief stop in Clinton, we headed north on highway 51, a four lane divided road with a nice wide shoulder. With fully loaded bikes, we rode 21 miles from Clinton to Interstate 74 in Bloomington in just over one hour. We actually had to slow down once inside Bloomington as the speed limit on the street we were riding was posted at 20 to 25 mph. I thought it would be funny should we get a speeding ticket.

We found the Amtrak station, changed our tickets and went into the bathroom to clean up and change out of our riding gear. After reloading the bikes, we took off looking for another breakfast. What we found was a health food restaurant, where I ordered buckwheat pancakes. I've had buckwheat pancakes before, these weren't very good. Tom was thinking about riding a mile or so down to the road to a coin laundry and run a load of bike clothes before heading back to St. Louis. I didn't want to take the time to do this. I wanted to wait and do the laundry when we got home, and I sure didn't want to miss our train.

Back at the train station, Tom and I were ushered out onto the platform with our bikes and told where to wheel them. We would park them between the front most passenger car and the engine. We found seats on the train and sat down to relax. This was my first Amtrak ride and I found it enjoyable. I ended up sitting next to a kid with headphones who never looked up.

After a few hours and several stops in towns along the way, we were coming to the east side of St. Louis. I've never seen such industrial ugliness. Amtrak must go by every oil refinery, burned out building and dump along the way. It doesn't exactly say "Welcome to St. Louis".

After reaching the downtown St. Louis terminal we had an hour wait until the train departed for Kirkwood Station where my wife Rose Ann would meet us. Yes, I remembered to call her and tell her we were on an earlier train. As we neared Kirkwood, we were told how and when to get our bikes and gear off the train. As schedules had to be maintained, they wanted us to unload quickly. We jumped into position at the designated time. We had already gathered our bags from the storage areas. Tom was first off the train and I tossed down all the bags. I then handed down the bikes and finally, the passengers, who were waiting patiently, were able to get off.

We loaded everything into my wife's car and drove Tom home. We each had some left over freeze dried food, and that's ok, as a good burger beats freeze dried any day of the week. About the only thing I was running low on at the end of the trip was money. I managed to spend a small fortune on Gatorade along the way.

We covered around 225 miles, were chased by countless dogs and met nice people in small towns along the way. Our goals were simple. Ride at whatever pace we could and enjoy the time in the saddle. I wish I could come up something philosophic to end with, but I'll keep it simple. I had a great time.