

Guest Columnist

Recycling!
May, 1981
pp. 141-142

Finishing

Ted Conover

Ross and I rolled off the highway, brakes squeaking, and into the parking lot. That Dairy Queen looked awfully good. It looked better for the knowledge that it would probably be our last stop: we were only 15 miles from the ocean. Ross had said he could smell it already, and I imagined that I could, too. We leaned our baggage-laden bicycles against the front of the Dairy Queen. Ross walked over to the front door, glanced at it, and nodded at me. I knew exactly what he meant, because this had become ritual. We needed shirts. "No shoes, no shirts, no service" read the signs on the front doors of probably nine out of ten restaurants across the country. Even with the chances so slim that any one restaurant would let us in without shirts, we persisted in checking to make sure — the feeling of a dry T-shirt over a hot, wet torso is that uncomfortable.

Walking into the Dairy Queen, however, made up for that feeling. It was like walking into a refrigerator, and it felt great. The August days had been hot; we had stopped four times for water already this day. The coolness took a moment to get used to. I closed my eyes and wiped the sweat from my forehead. Ross wasted no time. "Banana split, everything on it," he said to the person behind the counter. "Oh yeah, and a vanilla shake, too."

"A what?"

"A vanilla sha— . . . oh yeah, I mean a vanilla *frappe*," said Ross. "Almost forgot," he added, turning to me. Though we had approached the Atlantic slowly — about 90 miles a day was what we could muster on the bikes — the cultural changes had happened quickly. There were more people, everywhere; busier roads, faster talkers, different words. We were still getting used to it all. I ordered a large "soda" (not a "pop"), and we leaned against the counter.

A moment passed and a man in a white shirt and tie approached the counter. The manager, I thought to myself.

"Where you fellows from?" he asked. He had noticed we looked strange. Everybody did. Ross and I had once made a list of the unusual aspects of our appearance: funny cycling pants (black wool, long); dead gnats on our front teeth, sometimes in our ears and the corners of our eyelids; and a tiny rearview mirror attached with wire to Ross's glasses

(instrumental in heavy traffic and in fast food lines where Ross, without even turning, could give me a report on the people behind us who were gesticulating at our appearance). Also, the metal cleats on our cycling shoes made a very conspicuous, sometimes embarrassing "tap-tap-tap" on hard floors.

"Seattle," said Ross. This was an agreed-upon lie. Really we were from Denver, but that answer always prompted the additional, tiresome questions: "You rode from Denver?" (no, we rode from Seattle), and "Then how did you get up to Seattle from Denver?" (we flew).

The man gasped: "What? You rode from *there*? To *here*?"

Ross nodded at the man. "Yup, and we're almost done."

"You're kidding! Wow! How far was it?"

Ross and I looked at each other. We had figured this out in the tent last night while contemplating how wonderful it was going to be to finish our trip. It had been a long haul. More than once we had been sick of each other, sick of pedaling, but we had stuck it out. Adding up our accrued mileage occasionally had been a stimulus to our wills. Last night we had done it for what was to be the last time. Thirty-six hundred miles was the answer, give or take a hundred. Ross told him so, and I nodded.

The man was nearly speechless. Ross was questioned more, and then the food was ready. As he passed it over the counter, we took out our wallets.

"Oh no," the manager said, "this one's on the house. You guys deserve it."

We beamed. We had encountered generosity frequently on our trip, but outright gifts were more rare. "New Jersey's an okay place, huh?" Ross would say to me later.

We remounted our bicycles, energized by the food, by the man's kindness, and by imagining the end. The manager had told us what our destination, the town of Sea Bright, looked like. "Real pretty beach," he'd said. "It's just a little resort town — got a boardwalk, saltwater taffy, sometimes (if you're lucky) pretty girls in bikinis. You can see New York City across the way if it's clear." Neither Ross nor I had ever seen New York City. "You picked a good spot."

We rode now with a heightened sense

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that with every push of the pedals we were bringing ourselves closer to the ocean. This sense, a sense of progress, was precious because we knew what it was like to travel without it. Back in America's heartland there had been days when strong headwinds, coupled with thoughts of the immensity of our undertaking, had left us sapped of motivation, undesirous of anything but a nap. The naps we had taken, though, and somehow survived. With time we had also overcome the physiological challenges of long-distance cycling (numb fingers, stultifying depletion of blood sugar, simple fatigue) and had become increasingly adept at avoiding the hazards of our environment (snarling dogs, mammoth semi-trailer rigs, broken bottles on the road).

We were 53-day veterans of long-distance bicycle touring, and had the medals to prove it: powerful legs, tanned faces, and tough butts.

As the sun was setting behind us we felt its heat on our bare lower backs and saw our shadows stretch out before us on the road. We knew we must be getting very close. We entered the town of Rumson, perhaps a centimeter away from Sea Bright on the map encased in plastic on my handlebars. It was a beautiful neighborhood. We followed a winding, tree-lined parkway past large houses and larger lawns, emerging finally in a grassy park which appeared to have as its far border a narrow body of water. "Maybe it's a river, or an inlet," I said softly to myself. Ross must have heard me, and he looked back at me from his position on the road in front. I knew he recognized the significance of the words by his smile.

"Yeah, I think you're right!" he said quickly. My excitement seemed to double.

The road rose on a grade as we approached the water, and I could see we were coming to a bridge. We climbed up the grade, up and up, until we were on the bridge proper. It was a drawbridge. I noticed as we neared the crest and then crossed the seam. Riding a bicycle over such a bridge is difficult, but this difficulty is compensated for by the view afforded the cyclist, who can look *through* the bridge. I did so and could see the dark water underneath, maybe 60 feet below. My eyes followed the water, looking down its length to see if it really was an inlet, to see, I suppose, if it was connected to an ocean!

"Hey, Ross! Look! It's the Atlantic!"

But Ross had already looked. He had, in fact, looked, seen, and commenced to tear away down the back side of the bridge at a high rate of speed, the uncharacteristic bobbing of his head betraying a tremendous state of . . . of what? Excitation, I supposed. I knew, I raced to catch up with him.

We arrived at the beach almost simultaneously. I don't even remember the "Welcome to Sea Bright" sign. Dismounting, we lay the bikes down on the boardwalk and stepped into the sand, eyes fixed straight ahead. The horizon was like no other we had seen in the past two months: perfectly horizontal. Above it rose a sky which turned lighter and lighter as our gazes turned upward; beneath it lay the dark, dark sea. At the foot of the sea was the beautiful sand. "Wow," said one of us. Then Ross, almost bubbling over with excitement, said, "Shall we do it?" I knew exactly what he meant, because we had discussed it one afternoon back in Montana. The beach was then a dream. Two cyclists we had passed along the way, however, had given us an idea about what to do when it was real.

We returned to our bicycles, picked them up, firmly grasped our respective handlebars, and bikes at our sides, raced out across the sand, struggling to keep our bicycles (and ourselves) upright on the yielding surface. The sand began to get firmer, then wet, gravelly, and sloping downward. Full-speed we raced our bikes down the incline, meeting the force of the first breaker. "WHOO-HA!" shouted the drenched Ross, up to his knees in foam and as exuberant as I was. "We did it!"

It wasn't until after we had left our bikes, crossed the street, bought champagne, and returned to the beach to watch the waves and view New York City from afar that our sentences changed from three to four word exclamations to more philosophical remarks.

"You know," I said to Ross as we sat watching the waves roll in, "I always knew we'd make it."

"Yeah," he answered, probably knowing this to be as patently false as I did, "guess I knew it too. But boy, there were times I wondered. Remember the storm in Karlstad?"

I leaped back and nodded, remembering the vicious midday thunderstorm which had caught us several miles from tiny Karlstad, Minnesota, bringing down our hastily erected tent (with us in it), forcing us into an outhouse and later, when that flooded, beneath a wet and windy highway bridge. We had had to stay there most of the night.

"Sho't, yes — I didn't know if we'd ever make it out of that."

"Unh-uh," came the response.

We sat and sat some more. It began to get dark.

"But it was *really* something, huh? We did it ourselves, Ted, our own legs. I mean, *really* something," said Ross.

"Yep," I replied, looking out to sea. "It sure was." ○

The authors, who made this journey when they were 18, plan to repeat it when they are 40.