

Beware of a 48-Year Age Handicap

Our eldest grandson, Dan, now 18, watched from the sidelines as his mother and then his younger sister stoked for me on consecutive Bike Virginia rallies in 2005 and 2006. Soon to be a high school graduate, Dan asked me last winter if we could go on a long cycle touring trip this summer before he began college. Of course there's only one response a grandfather can give: "As long as your grandmother will give me my liberty card, right on!" Naturally OWHN couldn't turn down a grandchild's request. Let the planning begin.

Generous mom and pop outfitted Dan with a Novara Randonee touring bike from REI along with the requisite panniers and camping equipment. I went to work planning possible routes. Initially we didn't know how long Dan could commit to the trip so I assembled a clockwise route of about 1,500 miles that would take us west then north over the top of Lake Michigan and south again to Mint Hill. Hot dog – a vagabond summer on the road! Not so fast Bros, once mom and pop told Dan that college spending money was his responsibility his summer camp counselor job took on significantly increased importance. We'd have to make major adjustment in our route plans. Bike Virginia was out because Dan wanted to do a completely self-supported tour and we wanted it to be a challenge. How about riding from Front Royal to Cherokee on Skyline Drive and the Blue ridge Parkway? That seemed like a tour we could handle.

Training rides were a bit hard to schedule because of Dan's school and extracurricular activities but we got in several rides together but none with all our gear aboard. I logged a lot of miles solo hoping to be in semi-decent shape when we launched, despite the fact that there aren't any challenging multiple-mile hills locally. I got in one short fully loaded ride to check the balance of my front panniers and had it spot on. One thing we were going to have to face was the potential for reduced availability of nutritious food along the route. That necessitated carrying more food than I would normally but it proved to be a wise decision. Thanks to the advantages of youth and enthusiasm we were able to get Dan's pannier setup on and tested the day before we left. The only major thing we had to do on his bike was to swap saddles because the Fizik Rondine that came on the bike is a poor selection for touring as it's not suitable for more upright riding. Dan found an old Avocet Touring II from my stash a very comfortable solution.



Jay & Dan hit the road 18 June

We're Off!

Daughter Erin agreed to handle the driving to position my van for drop off and pickup, and we drove to Front Royal on June 17th for our start the following day. With the usual pre-tour pasta dinner the night before and hearty tourist breakfast the following morning under our belts we were off. I've ridden the long climb up Skyline Drive to Hogback numerous times both on a single and on our tandem, but memories and reality proved vastly different, especially hauling 50+ pounds of gear. Dan was off at a measured, reasonable pace and it wasn't long before he experienced his first of three episodes that day of a city slicker in the wild when he rounded a switchback to find a black bear in the middle of the road not too far in front of him. Two more bear sightings plus several deer

encounters that day made for good start. It was my foregone conclusion that Dan would arrive ahead of me at every planned stop, and when you're spotting a teenager 48 years there's no sense in trying keep up with him at the risk of destroying yourself. By the time we reached our first campsite, Big Meadows at 51 miles, it was probably a toss up who was more tuckered. I figured it might take Dan two or three days to get used to the

routine. How about an overnight! Other than a bit of sore tail the next morning he was not at all fazed by his previous day's effort. Ah, youth! The southern half of Skyline Drive can probably be described as the second most easily rolling portion of the whole Blue Ridge experience, a reasonable 56 miles to Afton where we spent the night in June Curry's Bike House. Stopping at June's was one of the primary reasons I wanted to ride the Parkway because I wanted Dan to meet the famous "Cookie Lady." Unfortunately, she is suffering some health issues that preclude her keeping the Bike House open all the time, but with adequate prior inquiry she can arrange to have it open for overnight cyclists. Her collection of 35 years of visiting cyclist memorabilia is truly amazing.

While relaxing at June Curry's we looked at our route several days ahead and opted to make Day 3 a longer day, 63 miles to Otter Creek Campground instead of the planned 27 miles to Tye River Gap Campground in order to shorten Day 4 to 26 miles when we would have the very long climb, 13 miles, to Apple Orchard Mountain. The wisdom of this change proved itself early on as I realized that I had done myself dirty almost eight months before the trip. Before my hip replacement surgery in October 2006 I set a goal of weighing 180 pounds during my rehab. I became quite comfortable at that weight and decided to maintain it. That decision bit me on our trip because at the lighter weight I did not have adequate reserves for the continual daily climbing. Since I maintained the lighter weight through food intake control my stomach grew accustomed to smaller portions I couldn't cram large quantities down the old gullet right away but had to work on increasing consumption at each meal. Failing to bulk up before the trip was a mistake that translated to lower average speed each day. Won't make that mistake again; it was a painful one and made for long days in the saddle.

Day 4 was for me the hardest one of the trip. The climb to Apple Orchard Mountain was unlike the 13 miles to Hogback because the grade, although it changes at points, is nothing but up, up, up! This was where the lack of reserves really hurt since there were no flat portions or dips and no resting in the saddle. Yes, I admit it, I had to walk and push for a considerable distance. The fact that Dan said it was the hardest physical thing he'd ever done and the look of satisfaction on his face when I met him at the summit were worth all the effort I expended.

The downhill to Peaks of Otter Campground sure was a welcome end to the day. The following day's leg to Roanoke Mountain Campground was also a welcome 38 miles of gentle climbing and a multi-mile downhill in the middle of the leg. We made our first foray off the parkway for victuals to beautiful downtown Vinton, VA where we pigged out at a Taco Bell/Pizza Hut for lunch. Hot and greasy wins in the pinch! We also found that Vinton is perhaps the home of the largest number of foul running pickup trucks as we were passed by more fume and smoke belching junkers than I've ever seen in one day.

Forty-nine mile Day 6 was a strenuous climb to get up to Adney Gap where the terrain became rolling up until the last five miles or so where the Parkway then extracted the day's final punishment to arrive at Rocky Knob Campground. The work was worth it though as Rocky Knob turned out to be the nicest Park Service campground on the trip. Why? Unlike the other campgrounds where we had to pitch our tents on a prepared pad, at the Knob we could spread out a bit and enjoy a comfortable, natural floor of vegetation. Just as we were beginning our evening meal preparation of chicken jambalaya a gentleman from two campsites away invited us



Dan conquers Apple Orchard Mountain

for a hot dog roast. You can't imagine how tasty chili dog and slaw hors d'oeuvres can be when washed down with a cold Sprite. Oh, we also killed the jambalaya for four; my appetite was back! Our experience with the Sexton family was the second time in my cycle touring experience that I've been invited to share a meal by non-bicycling total strangers.

A gastronomic highlight of the tour and one of the advantages of camping at Rocky Knob was breakfast at Mabry Mill for buckwheat pancakes en route to the Blue Ridge Mountains Hosteling International Hostel on Day 7. While the nine-mile ride to the mill had a climb at the beginning we were rewarded with a long swoop down to the restaurant for a big stack of pancakes and sides. At the risk of sounding like a pancake snob, once you've had good buckwheat cakes, all the rest are only marginally acceptable substitutes.

Less than two miles past Mabry Mill we dropped off the Parkway to buy provisions at the Meadows of Dan Food Market, a quaint but well stocked store just a stone's throw off the route. From there it was an easy, rolling stretch to Fancy Gap for midday ice cream and Gatorade and another 14 miles to the hostel. The last three to four miles were pretty soggy as we had to ride through a steady rain that ended just as we arrived. We were soaking wet with two days of dirty riding gear so the hostel host, Alex Koji, was gracious enough to run our duds through a laundry cycle. Examining the remainder of our route to Cherokee we came to the inescapable conclusion that we had more miles than days to ride and still be picked up by Erin and



Bellies full of buckwheat pancakes at Mabry Mill

OWHN with adequate margin to get Dan home to his job. We decided to end our trip in Asheville, thus lopping off two long, hard days of riding but still giving us a good, 500+ mile tour. A fully equipped hostel kitchen was a leg up on the small pots and a camp stove for our spaghetti dinner, as were the hot showers that we hadn't had since Big Meadows.

Day 8 saw us cross into North Carolina and make the long climb to the Doughton Park Restaurant for a big lunch and butt break. From there it was mostly downhill to the Raccoon Holler Campground but, like the previous day, we had to ride through a half hour's worth of steady rain. Raccoon Holler is an excellently maintained private facility with a well-stocked camp store, great showers and a laundry. Wow! High class living two days in a row. We were joined for the evening by a group of nine cyclists from Ohio traveling big South to North daily miles with their own sag wagon system that was as sophisticated as anything a tour company could put together. Although we had finished our supper when they arrived we were invited to join them for chicken fajitas, sides items and soft drinks and/or adult beverages. This group of riders was much like the U Turn Tandem Club in that they made an annual event of cycling in a different part of the country each summer.

The Gods Get Dan

We had big plans to be on the road early on Day 9 to arrive at Julian Price Campground, relax and firm up our plans to meet the ladies in Asheville. Everything went fine through breakfast and striking our campsites. That's when the mechanical gods reached out, grabbed Dan and shook him a few good ones. Now, you have to understand, Dan got short changed on mechanical aptitude, but he's always game to try something. His first strike from the gods came when he broke the valve when adding air to his rear tire. Ah, an excellent training opportunity! Using a hands-off approach I explained why he had broken the valve and talked him through everything he had to do to fix things. Everything was fine until he got to the final strokes of inflating a new tube when he broke another valve. To his credit he didn't turn the air dark blue as I would have in the same situation. At least he hadn't remounted the wheel. With a little more coaching he got things back together and we were on the road, albeit an hour later than planned. You have to learn the hard way some time. We ride no more than a half-mile down the road when Dan drops his chain onto the bottom bracket shell and some links get sucked into the derailleur. More talk and a little assist and he's back on the road to go another half mile and have it happen again. The cause: sloppy shifting as he had no problems before or after. Blame it on the gods who were not done with him, or us, yet. The remainder of our time on the road to Julian Price was just up and down, up and down until we began to hear the rolling thunder. Three days in a row? This time the gods did themselves proud as we rode into the worst thunderstorm I've ever encountered while awheel – no lightning thankfully, but high winds, driving rain, sharp temperature drop and poor visibility. Just like the previous day,



Crammed on a campsite pad at Julian Price Campground

in 30 minutes it was over but it was darn cold for a while. The speed with which the storm caught us left no thought time about whether or not to don the rain gear – it was just on us. The good side, it washed all the salt out of our jerseys and Camelbaks. Our campsite at JP was under tall canopy and there wasn't much sunlight getting through the cover the remainder of the day. We finalized our rendezvous plans with the ladies and were set for two more days of riding.

Day 10 saw us up, fed and on the road like real pros. We seemed to have appeased the gods as we returned to normal mechanical operations and the string of afternoon showers skipped us. Our noon meal was a pig out at Famous Louise's Rock House Restaurant that sits on the intersection of

Avery, Burke and McDowell counties. Where else can you order a meal in one county, have it cooked in another and delivered from a third? Looking at a profile of the Parkway from Linville Falls to Crabtree Meadows the stretch from Little Switzerland to the campground looks like it's up and down ending with a final climb. In reality, to both of us the entire stretch from Linville Falls felt like a total uphill slog. Nevertheless, we were rewarded with a snack bar for ride-end refreshment and the second best campsite of the trip and, with the skies slightly overcast, we were spared having to set up camp in late day heat.

Our final day on the road brought what was for me the normal reaction of hey, the trip is ending but, darn it, tomorrow I won't get to see what's over the next hill. Our final leg had a solid climb of about 1,700 feet past the Craggy Dome overlook and then a rewarding, high-speed descent to Craven Gap where we left the Parkway. Lest one think it was going to be a gravy run, the roadway on this downhill stretch had the worst surface conditions we experienced on the whole trip. It was difficult to maintain a good high-speed line on much of the descent. Once we left the Parkway we had another small climb of two miles followed by long, winding and exciting descent into Asheville. It didn't take long to meet the ladies, get checked in at the hotel and complete

the big scrub down. The evening meal consisted of consuming enormous quantities of salad, pizza and the cyclist's favorite desert – ice cream! The ladies had been, of course, in fry the plastic tourist mode.



Egad, Ole Papa sure looks rough!

Ridge on his first tour, I know that he experienced some real challenges over 515 miles which will stand him in better stead than if he began with a "cream puff" ride. On the downside, I think we tried to tackle too much distance for the time allotted. I guess my 40-year old brain lost touch with the 66-year old body. What we really missed was the opportunity to experience many of the attractions that exist all along the route. If we try it again going for distance and speed, we'll get sag support. Otherwise, we will shorten the daily distances, plan layover days and take much longer to make the trip. Will we do it again? Who knows!

Epilogue

What was our overall assessment of the trip? We both had a great time, despite the fact that I was behind the power curve strength-wise for a good part of it. As a grandfather it was a truly special experience to make the journey sharing all the experiences with a really great grandson. Dan has a tremendous sense of humor that always came out regardless of the circumstances of the moment. Most important, he left the trip totally hooked on cycle touring. I think he learned a lot about himself and the sport during the venture, and having tackled the Blue

Posted: Jul. 26, 2007

By: Jay Brosnan
[*jbrosnan@earthlink.net*](mailto:jbrosnan@earthlink.net)