

Adventures 2006

Biking Baltimore-Detroit and more!



above photo courtesy of Bill Smith - photosmith86@msn.com
(<http://www.photosmithonline.com/>)

21 April 5:00 p.m. - Hard to believe another bike tour is upon me. Hard to believe so many last-minute tasks crop up right before leaving. I guess they too will pass, and it will soon be just me and the road ... and a riding buddy, for the first time. My friend Tim and I had always talked of taking an adventure together, and he found himself available this year...

The trip begins!

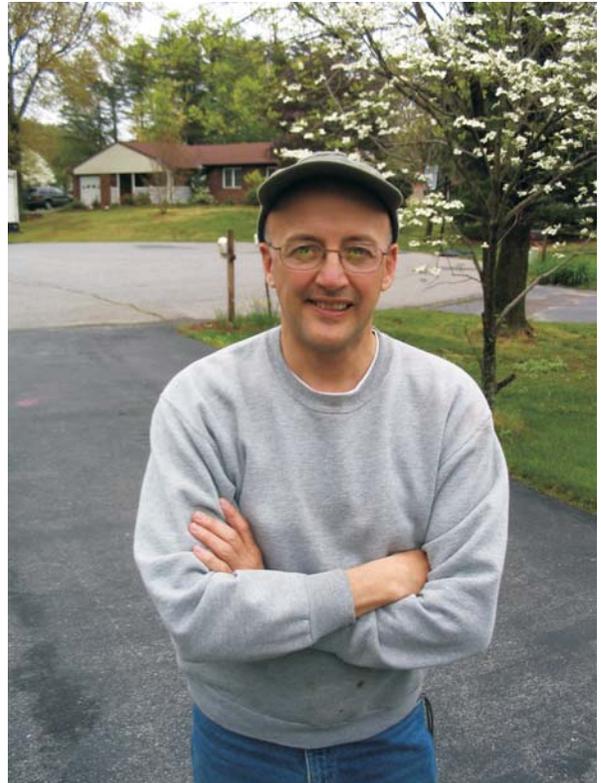
22 April - Severn MD

I'd like to believe in omens. So can I now relax after a trying planning phase, and look forward to a trip full of generosity?

At times during planning, I wondered if the world had turned against me. After near-unanimous rejections from schools I called, I shifted my focus to speaking at libraries, and found myself with too little time left to get many. Then delays in getting my new bike books printed forced me into extra work to cover that.

But that's all in the past now. As I boarded my Minneapolis-Baltimore flight, I handed the flight attendants the last of my roses. They quickly asked my name and my seat assignment, and moments later they changed my seat to first class. What a nice bit of pampering before hitting the road!

Of course the hospitality continued in Baltimore. Bob Zurn, an old friend from California, hosted Tim and I. We psyched ourselves for the ride — or maybe 'steeled ourselves' would be more appropriate, as the rain did not let up all evening.





Welcoming the good weather

23 April - Severn MD to Dahlgren MD: overcast, 50s → sunny, low 70s; 9:30-5:50, 69.5 mi.

As we ordered our sandwiches at the C-Store, I noticed a group of motorcyclists standing next to our bikes, looking at them. I boldly walked outside and said, “You know, when I walked inside, they HAD an engine. I don’t what happened to them!” They then blamed us for bringing the rain that had just started. That gave me the right to take credit five minutes later when the sun burst out.

The day was spectacular - cool and overcast in the morning, followed by a heavy mist that drove us to lunch, and eventually clear skies. We followed US301 south much of the day, a serviceable road: 4-lane divided with heavy traffic, but a wide shoulder often shaded by trees. The challenge came at the end: a toll bridge over the Potomac that I wouldn’t have liked to bike even if I’d been allowed. We had to back-track a quarter-mile and stick our thumbs out, and within five minutes a local stopped to ferry us over.



Ahhh, what a life...

24 April - Dahlgren to Tappahannock VA: foggy → sunny, 70s; 8:30-5:10; 55.6 miles

The day's worst three miles served as bookends on the day. We started by fighting heavy traffic for two miles on foggy US301, which lost its shoulder at the Potomac; crossing the Rappahannock River with heavy traffic on a narrow US360 bridge took us to Tappahannock to end the day.



In between we reveled in a magnificent day. Our state highway bobbed and weaved through Potomac forests and past Tidewater farms. In Colonial Beach we picked up lunch fixings, and had a picnic overlooking the water in George Washington Birthplace National Monument. Later we stopped at a roadside fruit stand, snacking on fresh strawberries while the owner served us ice water.



George Washington Birthplace

From bike tourists to tourists with bikes

25 April - Tappahannock-Williamsburg; sunny, near 80. 8:00-3:50, 64.5 miles (+9.8 mile w/o panniers)

One more hot day before tomorrow's predicted cooldown. The morning found us rolling down a relentlessly rural stretch of US17, over twenty miles with nothing but farm houses and forests. The traffic was blessedly light - at one point I could see for over a half-mile of the 4-lane road, with nothing on it but Tim.

This evening we switched gears into tourism mode. After getting our motel, we dropped our panniers and cycled to Colonial



town, then had dinner at an (expensive) outdoor restaurant while a cute violinist wandered about, serenading the patrons.



Williamsburg

. This area, restored to its appearance when the city hosted the colonial government, is quite a tourist draw with shops, old buildings, horse-drawn carriages, and people in period dress. We wandered through

As we begin heading west...

26 April - Williamsburg-Chester VA: cloudy, around 60; 8:30-7:10, 74.5 miles

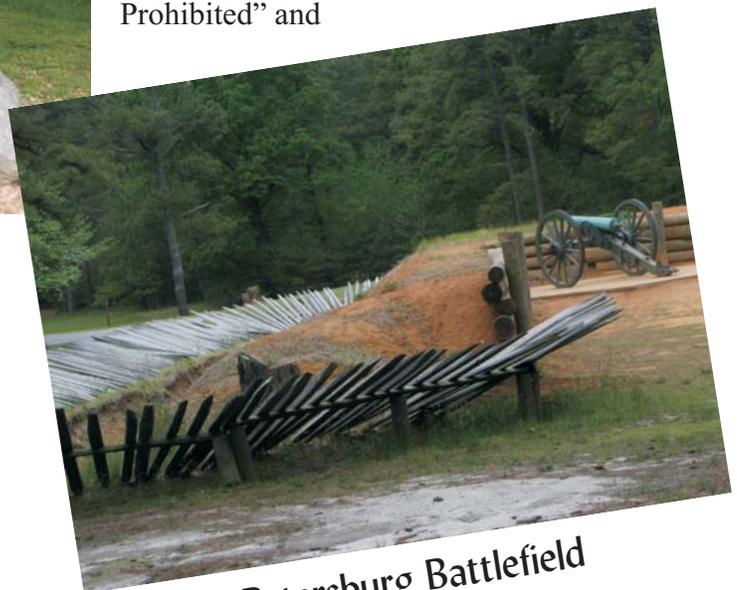
'Twas a fine day, sampling Virginia friendliness. Every time we stopped, people asked about our trip, wishing us a safe journey. They cheerfully gave us directions, at one point cluing us into a shortcut along a quiet country backroad to approach Petersburg. (That worked far better than our route out of town, six miles of sprawl along US1.)



Today we again dipped into history. For our first stop, we visited the site of the Jamestown settlement, England's first permanent settlement in North America. We followed that with an afternoon visit to Petersburg National Battlefield, the site of Robert E. Lee's last-ditch attempt to save the Confederacy.

INTERESTING SIGN: in the battlefield park, signs stated "Alcoholic Beverages Prohibited" and

"Vehicle Maintenance Prohibited". The first sign I understand. But did they have problems with people driving to the battlefield to change their oil or something?



Petersburg Battlefield

City vs. Country

27 April - Chester-Farmville VA: hazy clouds, 55-70?, 8:45-8:00, 91.4 miles

Today was a tale of two rides: one with a focus on city tourism at the expense of biking; and eventually a lovely jaunt down a premier Virginia biking road.

The morning took us to National Park sites commemorating the end of the Civil War and its aftermath in and around Richmond. We followed our old friend US301 (also US1) north into the capital, a 4-lane boulevard through urban sprawl. Leaving town found us again on US360, going first past interminable strip malls, then changing into a super-highway with no shoulder.

Ride 2 started at almost 4:00 - with 45 miles under our tires. We stopped at the store in Skinquarter and asked for an alternate route to Farmville. They diverted us onto 603, which took us to 604 and then 616 - which was also signposted VA Bike Route 1. We reveled in the bucolic scenery on the lightly traveled roads, weaving through the forests and farms, climbing the rolling hills, waving at the passing cars, shooing away the occasional dog. At one point I stopped to take a photo, laying my bike down. The next car by promptly stopped, and the female driver asked, "Do you need help? I thought you might have crashed!"



Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond

After 36 idyllic miles, we turned onto a more-trafficked road, with a couple of massive hills. For the first time this trip, I shifted down into my middle chain ring in front.



By the time we rolled into Farmville, the sun had set, and my odometer had passed 90 miles - making this arguably my longest day of bike touring. (Sure, I did 100 miles one day in Oregon and Idaho, but that was downhill with a tail wind!) My only comparable day was 16 years ago in New Zealand, also around 90 miles while climbing two passes.

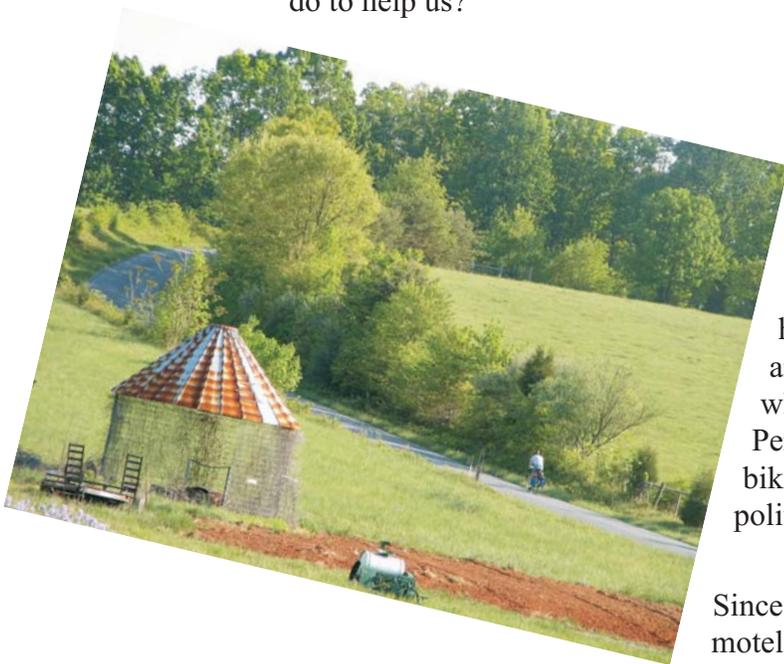
Virginia hospitality redux

28 April - Farmville-Alta Vista VA:
sunny and bright, ~50-low 70s, 9:00-7:00,
74.3 miles

Virginia is finally making its bid to enter the pantheon of friendliest states. Everywhere we turned, people asked about our trip or offered help. Several people in or around Appomattox took an interest in how far we'd come. At Concord, one man biding time before an appointment chatted with us, mentioning he'd considered bike touring this summer - and was there anything he could do to help us?



historic road to Appomattox Courthouse



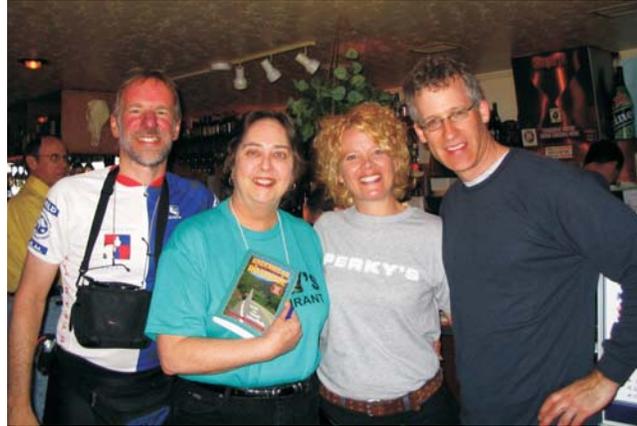
Late in the day, as I climbed one of our last hills, an elderly black woman sitting on her porch called out, "How you doin'?" I stopped to jawbone with her while I waited for Tim, asking her and her neighbor how far into town and where to eat. Her neighbor recommended Perky's, then offered to take us and our bikes up the last big hill into town. We politely declined.

Since Perky's appeared a mile before the motels, we stopped to eat, accepting a twilight ride for our last mile. The staff were all smiles as we came in, and our waitress

Janet asked all about our trek. "I love my new road bike, but no way I could handle a ride like yours!" Moments after taking our order, she came back to inform us the owner had comped our meals. Then she delivered our food, every bit as good as we'd been told. When we finished we had a patron take our picture with Janet and Gaye, and gave them a copy of my book.

Luckily we found a room in town. Both hotels were fully booked, but Karen - the harried but cheerful clerk/receptionist/gal Friday - squeezed us in. As she found us a roll-away cot, she amused us with tales of her pet ducks Ducky, Doodles, Aflac, and Buffy (or Buffarino when she eats too much).

Beyond the people, the region also impressed us. For our tourism stop, we hit Appomattox Court House, 'where our nation reunited' - the site of Lee's surrender to Grant, effectively ending the Civil War. The village is well-restored, imbuing the area with a feeling that history truly happened here.



our Perky's friends

For the biking: we followed a 4-lane superroad again for 40+ miles, but low traffic and a workable shoulder made it fine. By the time we found our awesome side roads, we had definitely entered the Appalachian foothills. We regularly hurtled down from the heights to cross a creek, then grinded our way up the other side. Occasionally we could see higher peaks looming in the distance, promising harder climbs to come.

Misfortunes — opportunities in disguise

29 April - Alta Vista-middle of nowhere (Bedford County): 50s-low 60s, sunny; 8:30-12:00, 25.9 miles

Another awesome road this morning - at times running beside the creek beneath a canopy of trees, then climbing for a magnificent ride along the ridgelines, with farms carved from the forested hills. Being Saturday morning, the road was virtually traffic-free.



Unfortunately, we didn't plan on a leisurely ride to Roanoke - we wanted to speed there quicker than bikes could take us so we could get the visit to the emergency room over. When I awoke this morning, my mouth told me there was something wrong. A quick glance in the mirror revealed something resembling a bloodblister on my gums stretching to my front teeth.

I elected for caution, wanting someone to tell me to tough it out (or to make out my will). Alta Vista had no emergency room, and the EMS people could do no more than offer to take me by ambulance for \$300. Instead we tried hitch-biking - riding along and sticking our thumbs out when we heard a vehicle approach from behind. Of course people thought we were commenting on the wonderful day, some even returning our ‘thumbs up’.

At noon we stopped for a break, reasoning we could hitchhike while eating our snacks. Before I could finish my PowerBar, Charles (Ron) McElheney stopped to ask about our trip. Moments later he had our bikes in the back of his truck, and after a stop at his home, we were gone to Roanoke.

We quickly found that Ron shared our interests: he and his wife Laura had toured on a tandem in years past; they owned flat-water kayaks like Sue and I; they enjoyed the simplicity of camping. For 45 minutes we traded war stories in the ER waiting room, while I waited for my exam.

When the nurse took me upstairs at 2:20, I figured our time here was nearly done. By 3:30, though, no one had said “Boo” to me in my ER room. When I tired of standing in the doorway glaring at the nurse ignoring me, I decided to be productive. There was a computer on the shelf, turned on but unused, so I connected to the internet and spent 20 minutes checking our planned bike route for tomorrow.



The doctor finally came in at nearly 4:00, chatting amiably and apologizing for the wait. He grabbed a new hand-held microscope and looked into my mouth, commenting, “Man, that looks cool!” Admitting that it was full of blood, he said it wasn’t infected — just monitor it and let it heal.

Ron now took us back to his home, where we showered and changed. He then took us to Smith Mt. Lake, where we joined he, Laura, and several of their friends for a cookout. More wonderful, friendly people. (Really. Who woulda guessed?) Before dinner, we helped step off the boundaries of a new home the owners planned to build on the lot, admiring the views of the lake and mountains. During dinner, the conversation segued into a hysterical riff filled with metaphors and double entendres that had me laughing until I cried. I’ll never think of water pumps and head pressure in the same way again!

A different brand of friendly folk

30 April - Sinking Creek-Pearisburg: mostly- to partly-cloudy, lo-mid 60s; 2:20-6:00, 36.3 miles

Here I am, sitting on top of a hill, watching dusk settle over the adjacent mountains and valleys, surrounded by people called Corunna Miel, Bullwinkle, and Happy Feet...

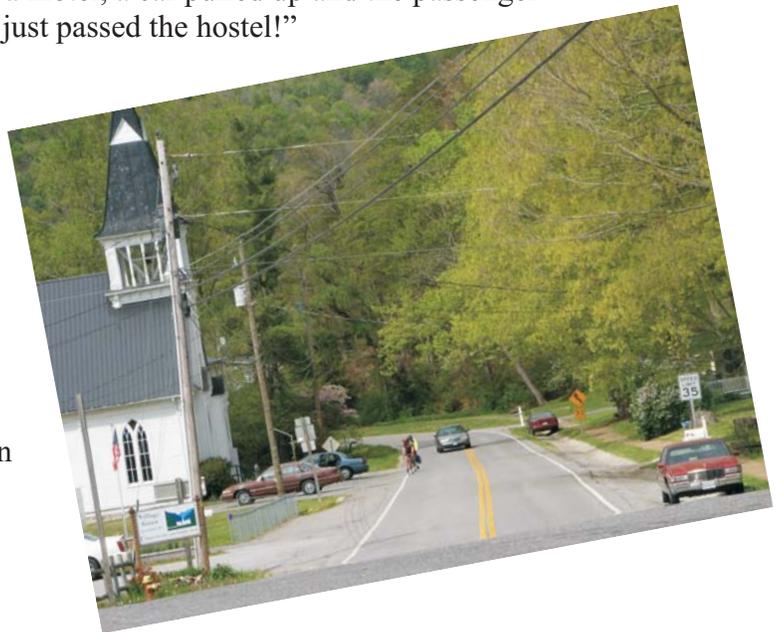
After we treated our wonderful hosts to breakfast, they took us back to their house. Ron and Tim then spent a couple hours tweaking Tim's bike, correcting problems that had slowed him down. They then drove us past Roanoke and over the Great Eastern Divide, sparing us the worst climbs out of Virginia. We can't thank them enough...



We finally got on our bikes in Sinking Creek, perhaps the most awesome of the wonderful back roads we've taken. For 17 miles we rode by a succession of scenes that could only be described as eye candy.

The rest of the trip was again on four-lane US460 - no shoulders, but acceptably light traffic. As we cycled through Pearisburg looking for a motel, a car pulled up and the passenger yelled, "Looking for a place to stay? You just passed the hostel!"

We turned around, and after stopping four times for additional directions, we finally found it - a two-story wood shack hidden in the trees behind the Catholic church. No owners present (it must belong to the church), the sign asks only for a donation to keep it running. With electric lights, a small kitchen and bathroom, and bean-bag mattresses for beds, it reminded me of an upscale version of the shelter huts along the Appalachian Trail.





Of course, it WAS an upscale shelter hut along the Appalachian Trail (AT). The hut sits only two miles from the AT, and thru-hikers consider it prime lodging. Most such folks go by trail handles, so I resurrected my name from the walk and introduced myself as Mr. Litter. Tim decided he needed his own moniker, so he chose Gasper, since he was always gasping trying to keep up with me.

The Appalachians have hills!

1 May - Pearisburg VA to Beckley WV: partly cloudy, 50s to 70s; 8:30-4:10, 67.9 miles

Last night I chatted with Corunna Miel and Jetwash about AT memories. Thinking back to the segments I'd done in 1993, I said, "I remember one thru-hiker I met and spent two days with in New York. He called himself 'Purple Pilgrim'."

Corunna perked up at that name. "I know a Purple Pilgrim!" she said. "I met him in... it was 1992 and 1993. He helped me when I left the trail!" We quickly verified we were talking of the same man. After 13 years — what a small world!

Yesterday I felt like I'd cheated by skipping the 'hardest miles of the trip' crossing the Great Eastern Divide. Not anymore. I'll never know what we may have hit without the McElheney's help, but it couldn't have been more difficult than crossing the mountain coming out of Hinton. A 3½ mile grueling climb, a quick 1½ mile downhill, followed by another gut-busting 2½ mile inching our way up, a 1 mile coast, and another ½ mile ascent. I haven't had a climb like that since crossing Rabbit Ears pass in Colorado in 2002, with my old bike. This was the first time I've used the lowest gear on this bike. (In fact, I shifted into low-low seven times during the climbs.)



Wanting to arrive in Beckley no later than 4:00 so I could prepare for my library talk, I left Tim to climb the hills at his own pace. I did make it on time (barely), while Tim straggled in before 6:00. The evening was wonderful - they held a potluck at the library before my talk, where I met the staff and volunteers.

After my talk, one couple came forward to ask if I could speak at their schools tomorrow – luckily my schedule allowed one speech. Afterwards, my contact Gail McCray (who had allowed me to shower beforehand at her place) arranged for us to stay with Danny McMillion. Those wonderful ladies reminded me why I had named West Virginia one of the friendliest states on the walk.

CHARACTER SIGHTING: After finishing breakfast at Hardees in Pearisburg, we readied our bikes as an elderly gent came by to wash the windows. “How you doin’?” he asked.

“Fantastic!” I replied. “How about you?”

“Not as good as you, I guess!”

“That’s because you’re not biking!”

“Oh, lordy, don’t get me near no bike! I’d crash and burn. I went out with my grandson the other day, and he kicked my butt. I kept looking for nails to run over - maybe if I got a flat, he’d take pity on me.”

When our chuckles died down, he continued, “Besides, I’m a low-tech guy. When we were cycling, I told him we were lost. He pulled out a hand-held GPS and told me, ‘We’re not lost! The highway’s right over there.’ GPS! Heck, I’m still listening to 8-tracks!”



me, with Gail McCray (r) and Danny McMillion (l)

Many miles, little progress

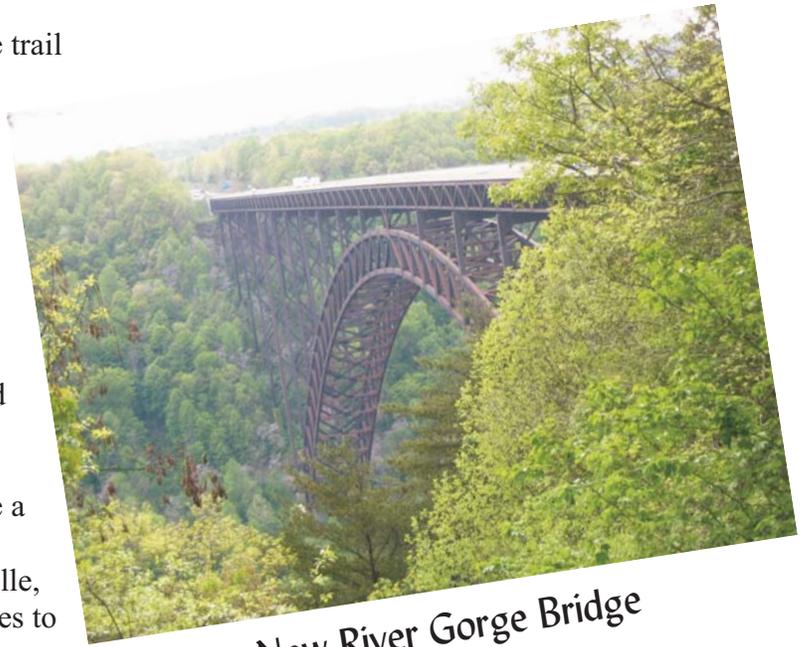
2 May - Beckley-Fayetteville: high 60s, partly cloudy; 11:40-3:40, 39.3 miles

The day had a different feel to it, a disjointed rhythm. Danny fixed us a wonderful breakfast, then I went alone to speak at the high school. The talk went fine – as usual with the older kids, they were reticent to ask questions. After the kids took pictures of me with the teacher (Ben Alston) I’d met last night, and with the principal, I returned to Danny’s.



After repacking, we followed the bike trail (the only flat terrain in Beckley) to the bike store so Tim could change tires and pedals. Rob at Ride-n-Slide proved very helpful, giving Tim free tires, and throwing in a pedal strap to replace one I'd broken.

We then returned on the bike path and rode past the high school en route to Oak Hill. Once there, we had to back-track a mile so we could arrange a car rental to explore the area later on. We then pedaled forward to Fayetteville, and had to backtrack another four miles to stay at the motel we'd already passed. Then, as we drove to the New River Gorge, we discovered that our route for of yesterday for bridge replacement. We route. (At least the rental car was a pickup truck, so we could drop the bikes there when we returned it.)



New River Gorge Bridge

tomorrow had closed down as would have to return to Oak Hill for an alternate

Easy day to the capital

3 May - Oak Hill-Charleston: 50s, cloudy -> ~70, partly cloudy; 9:45-3:40, 50.0 miles

Maybe yesterday was my typical 9th day funk, coming a day late. As usual, I bounced back strongly with a great day.

From Oak Hill we headed north on Hwy 61. Again we chose well, and the road traveled through a narrow forested canyon - with only one climb of note, a mile-long hill requiring nothing near the lowest gear. As we approached Charleston, the road ran through urban sprawl, but the flat route served us well.



Bob Wilson and I

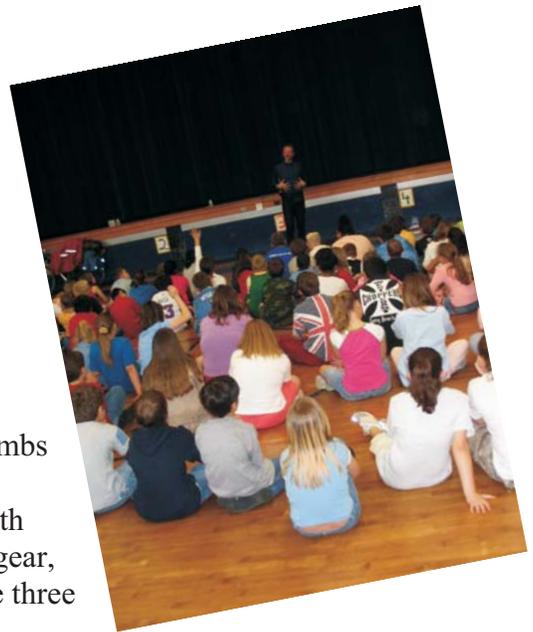
In Charleston we stayed with Bob and Brenda Wilson, a couple that Valerie Strege had connected me with. Bob whipped us up a wonderful vegetarian dinner, then whisked me off to a Toastmasters meeting. There I met Valerie, whom I had conversed with via email after finding her name on the Toastmasters website. Her group welcomed me, and enjoyed the speech I'd prepared. Valerie then returned me to the Wilsons' home, where we had a stimulating discussion on Affluenza and sustainable lifestyles, and Bob reminisced about his days in the '60s living in a commune.

A day of disasters...

4 May - Charleston WV-Gallipolis OH: sunny, 60s to over 80?; 8:15/10:15-5:00, 67.4 miles

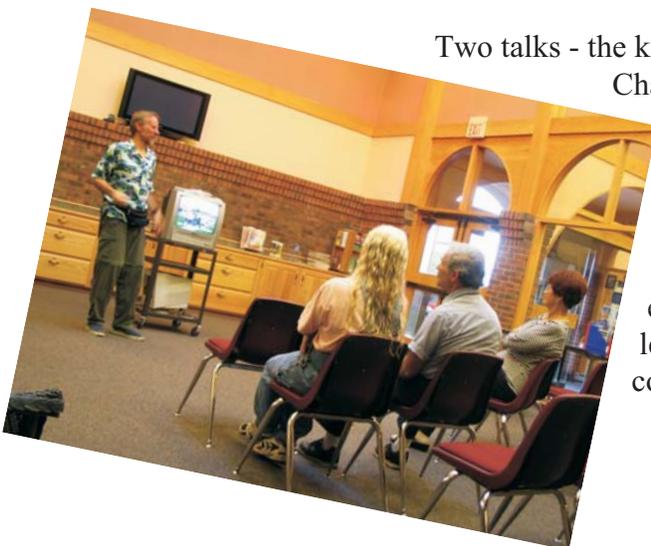
...thankfully not OUR disasters. The fire trucks and ambulances roared past us, sirens blaring, as we neared Nitro. Then we rounded the bend and saw the huge column of inky black smoke billowing from the tire storehouse, forcing officials to evacuate the town and close the school. Ten miles later, fire crews had closed a lane of traffic, and a cement truck sat in the grass just off the road, its driver-side front wheel and fender sheared off.

Though the temperatures must have hit 80 this afternoon, it was a good day. For the first fifty miles, our two biggest climbs were the bridges over the Kanawha River. We followed the Kanawha to the Ohio River, where we crossed into our fourth state. At one point I decided to see what I could hit in high gear, so I left Tim eating my dust and kept it at 21-23 mph for the three miles between towns.



Two talks - the kids at Bridgeview Elementary in South

Charleston enjoyed my visit there. Typically for the younger kids, they had endless questions, some I've heard before (like, "How old are you?") and some I haven't (one girl asked, "What kind of music do you like?"). This evening I talked at the library in Gallipolis to a small but enthusiastic crowd of three. The small audience let me transform it from a lecture into a conversation.



Now I look forward to tomorrow, when I get to ride the road where both the best and the worst moments of the walk occurred — in fact, where the walk almost came to an early end...

A trip down Memory Lane

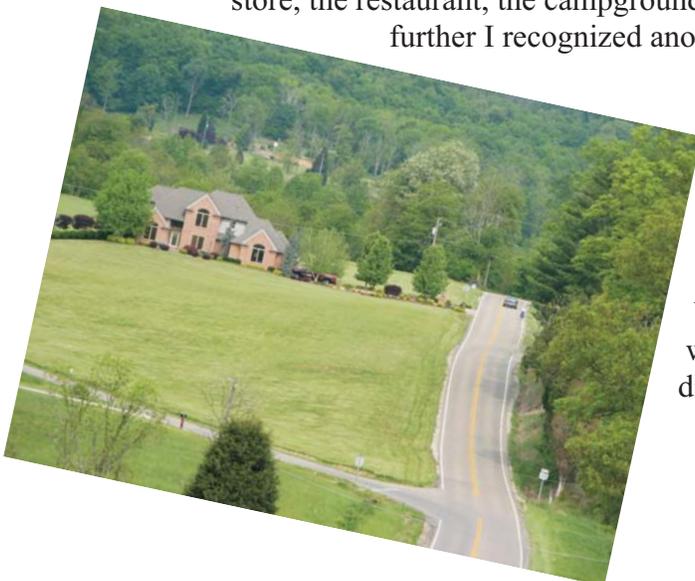
5 May - Gallipolis-Portsmouth OH: up to mid-70s, partly cloudy; 9:50-5:50, 64.5 miles

*Nine miles, and Sue felt every inch. Her left knee tightened up in the first hour, shooting needles through her legs which grew worse with every mile. To balance the pain, four new blisters bloomed on her right foot. By the time we reached Scioto County, only sheer willpower kept her going. — from **Underwear by the Roadside***

Today the memories flowed freely, bringing that critical week of the walk back to life. I re-read the Gallipolis-to-Portsmouth chapter of my book to remind myself of those years-ago events, but the view of those places unearthed even more recollections. It was, at times, very powerful.

I began the day as I had so many on the walk, giving an interview to the local paper. From Gallipolis we cycled a beautiful road to Rio Grande, the same highway a mother and daughter from Chillicothe had joined us in picking litter for

half-a-day. Today as I crossed a bridge, the view of Bob Evans Farms stopped me cold - the store, the restaurant, the campground were exactly as I remembered. A mile further I recognized another turn.



The memories - and emotions - grew more intense upon leaving Oak Hill. It was here that, thirteen years ago, we gave Tim the keys to Sue's car so he could store it for us in Detroit. Once again with a pack on her back, her broken leg fully healed, Sue set off with me to South Webster, twelve miles distant.

I recognized the highway rest stop where we pumped our own water, where Sue complained of a burning pain in her knee. The crumbling mansion we took a break at – where Charlie Horner had treated us to cold sodas – no longer stood, but the house Charlie had been painting still shone with another new coat of paint. I recalled the power substation where we took our final break, with Sue bravely enduring the pain.

As we walked, the heat crept higher, dragging the humidity with it. The weather and the blisters turned the green rolling hills into Sue's private torture chamber. She spoke less and less as her pain grew. By the time she dropped her litter stick and bag and walked away, she'd ceased speaking altogether.... "I can't do this anymore," she admitted, tears streaming down her face.
— from ***Underwear by the Roadside***

Of course I remembered South Webster, the town I soon dubbed 'the friendliest town in the country' – the town where the outpouring of generosity warmed our hearts as we struggled with Sue's injury. However, while the natural landscape stayed much the same, the human landscape had evolved with time. The parsonage where we camped for two nights (and where the pastor's wife cooked us dinner) still stood, though the pastor had long since been reassigned elsewhere. Their neighbors who had treated us to another dinner had moved on to Cincinnati; the parishioner who had paid for our hotel room the next night had passed away. A new library had replaced the cramped facility I remembered; the grocers and the café had both gone under.

The town still oozed friendliness. As we ate outside the new deli, three times people stopped to ask about our journey. As I prepared to donate two books to the library, a man struck up a conversation, telling me about his time spent on the AT. He ended with a farewell I grown quite fond of in these parts: "Is there anything I can get for you? Is there anything I can do to help?"

At the library I got phone numbers for Charlie Horner (moved to Portsmouth) and Trudy Bostick (who eventually drove us to Detroit – a six-hour trip – so we could reclaim Sue's car). Trudy was out-of-town, but tonight in Portsmouth I dropped in on Charlie. We chatted over tea for ninety minutes, talking about what was and what may be coming. It was a perfect ending to a day when the past loomed large.



Three adages illustrated

6 May - Portsmouth-Ripley OH: mostly sunny, around 70; 9:50-5:50, 57.8 miles

It's nice to get a hand up. The trip's third flat, coming only eight miles into the day's ride, almost undid me. I'd used my two new tubes days before, and the extra spare had its own hole. We discovered that after mounting it, so the tire came back off. We then tried patching two of the tubes I'd blown earlier, but they still leaked. As I grew increasingly frustrated, a car stopped to ask if we needed help, though they couldn't provide what we needed. Then the man whose home we had stopped in front of came out.

Quickly Jay called the nearest bike shop to verify they were open, then drove us back twenty miles so I could buy new tubes (and replace the tire tools I'd broken). Then it was back to Jay's place, where he gave us pizza for lunch before seeing us down the road. Thanks, Jay - you Ohioans are incredible!

It's nice to give a hand up. Ten miles later I saw a couple struggling to push their car back onto the road. I stopped and added some extra muscle, helping them accomplish their goal. I know it amounted to little, but they appreciated it. It felt good to be on the giving rather than the receiving side for once.

You can never go back to Rome. (or is it 'back home'? Well, they both rhyme.) Today's ride covered the territory we hit after reclaiming the car, when pulled ligaments in her knee meant Sue could do NO walking whatsoever. She would pull ahead and busy herself with needlepoint and crosswords, envying me as I trod through the hot, humid miles. We again had our trip enhanced when the tiny hamlet of Rome, OH (birthplace of the Rome apple) amazed us again with midwestern hospitality.

If anything, the visit to the burgh depressed me. The store with the soda fountain, where the owner regaled us with tales of his Indian chief ancestors, had closed shortly after our 1993 visit. The widow who cooked us dinner and breakfast had moved to Columbus. The post office that hooked us up with a camping spot – closed for the weekend. The whole town seemed but a shell of the place I fondly remembered.

Interesting sign for a specialized business - in Portsmouth we cycled past the Gallia Shoelace and Narrow Fabric Factory. Talk about finding a niche!



flood wall mural in Portsmouth

A day off...

7 May - Ripley OH: 0.0 miles

... with good friends Steve and Darcy Newman - no better way to spend a vacation day.

I should always schedule an off day on these trips - they heal the physical aches while recharging the soul. We began the day by attending a service at the Red Oak Church, then toured the adjoining cemetery where Aunt Jemima is buried. For the afternoon we went to the movies (*Mission Impossible 3*), amazed they only charged \$3 a ticket. (Try close to \$10 back home!) Steve then took us on a tour of Ripley's historic Underground Railroad sites. (In that era, the town was known as the Black Hole of Abolitionism.) Our hosts then treated us to a first-class dinner of grilled steaks and Zatarans rice.



Red Oak grave

Philosophies of bike touring

8 May - Ripley-Chillicothe: sunny, 70; 11:15-5:50, 59.6 miles

As we head (mostly) north, we enter a new variety of terrain. Now we hit land dominated by farms and gently rolling hills. Still scenic, though with more subtle beauty. (It's still much prettier than Kansas and eastern Colorado!)

I had two talks this morning. First I spoke to the sociology class Steve teaches at the community college. Talking to older students proved fascinating. We ran a contest, awarding a book to the person asking the most interesting question. The winner asked, "You mentioned how warmly you have been received. How do you think that reception would change if you were black, or Hispanic, or Arabic, or an old bald guy with a limp?"

Good thought! I had to admit that a segment of the populace would likely let prejudice color their reaction. Far more important, I suggested, was how you project yourself. If you treat people with suspicion (or even worse, fear), they will pick up on that and treat you accordingly — making it a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you don't give them the benefit of the doubt, why should they bother trying to change your mind? If you instead treat the



people you meet with respect - in effect, tell them, "I trust you until you give me reason not to" - you will get that back. Granted, at some point someone will betray that trust and take advantage of you - but you must remain focused on the hundred good experiences, letting them overwhelm the bad one. This I most firmly believe.

Darcy arranged a talk at her middle school starting a half-hour later. They showed the *To Tell The Truth* video before I strolled into the gym, getting a huge ovation. The kids enjoyed the talk, peppering me with questions. Afterwards we took pictures of Tim and I with our hosts before we rolled down the road.

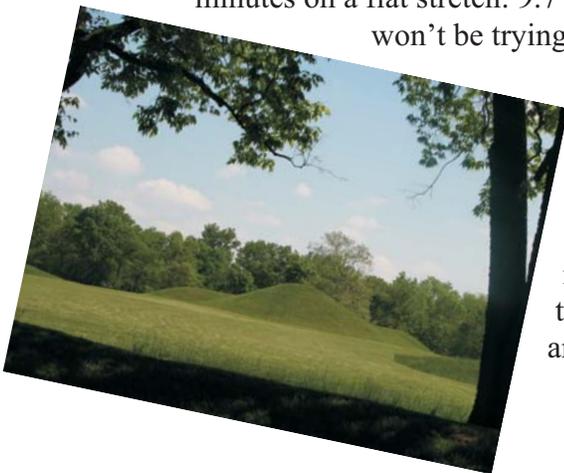
Silly biker games - When you see a line of traffic coming at you, wave at every car and see how many people wave back. Actually, the only silly part would be trying to count the return waves – often, glare on the windshields keeps me from telling whether they're waving back, but I wave anyway. I consider it my duty as an ambassador on a bike, showing motorists that bicyclists are nice people (sometimes) and deserve a share of the road. Perhaps they'll treat the next cyclist they see with respect, or ask about their trip. And as we learned on the walk, sometimes a person you waved at will seek you out later and make your day.

Riding at our own paces

9 May - Chillicothe-Marysville OH: sunny, low 70s; 12:00-7:15, 81.7 miles

Today's challenge came before we mounted our bikes: plotting our route around the perimeter of Columbus. We spent an hour at the library (with the eager help of the librarian) finding the best combination of farm and country roads to take us north.

I then stopped to visit Hopewell Culture National Historic Park while Tim got a jump on the day's long ride. By the time I left at noon, cycling conditions were perfect – high 60s, slight breeze to my back, flat roads. I started with a time trial, seeing how far I could pedal in 30 minutes on a flat stretch: 9.7 miles, an incredible 19.4 mph on a loaded bike. (I won't be trying out for the Tour de France anytime soon.)



The ride ran through land turning more agricultural. By the time I finally caught up to Tim in Dublin, where we'd planned to finish, he suggested making use of the wonderful weather and jam it another 16 miles to Marysville. Now we'll have a short day tomorrow to Kenton, where I have two speaking gigs arranged.

Library ladies

10 May - Marysville-Kenton OH: 60s, increasing clouds; 9:30-12:40, 35.0 miles

Good thing we had a short day today - we managed to finish before the predicted showers arrived. It looks like tomorrow will end our streak of dry biking days.

We had a delightful evening in Kenton. Sharon Moore (from the library board) and Janet Eibling (from the local Keep America Beautiful chapter) arranged for our motel room, then treated us to dinner in town. From there we proceeded to the library, where I gave a presentation to an audience of ten – including a young boy who was interested enough to purchase my books. After Sharon took us back to the room, she saved me from disaster by returning to the library to retrieve my video and DVD that I had left there. Thank you thank you thank you! Another fine day as we near the end of our trek.



Stormy weather

11 May - Kenton-Pemberville OH: high 50s, cloudy, windy; 10:30-4:00, 60.6 miles

On some days, the ride is the highlight. Not today. After eighteen days of wonderful weather, a storm system and cold front moved through Ohio. The downpour started last night, drenching the town while I talked at the library, and continued through the night. As I biked the quarter-mile to the high school this morning, steady rain greeted me.

By the time I finished, the rain had paused, leaving a sky filled with angry clouds and the promise of more rain to come. Heading north on US68, I fought a steady wind from the west. When those gusts combined with the air turbulence from the passing trucks, handling the bike became difficult, and I feared being blown off the road.

However, our luck held. After reaching Findlay (a town with stately



homes and friendly people - I'll have to explore it on a future trip), we took a succession of off-the-beaten-track roads with NO trucks, through small towns such as Wayne, OH. Other than a dozen drops of rain, it stayed dry. The wind also shifted, providing at least a little boost from behind. We made Pemberville earlier than planned.

Perhaps to compensate for the chilly wind-blown ride, I had a great time at the school, talking first to seniors and juniors, then sophomores and freshmen - about 650 students in all. The older kids responded to my contest ("The best question wins a book!") with several thought-provoking queries like, "What is your main goal in life?" and "Did taking the walk strengthen your marriage?" I chose Tawne the winner for her question: "You mentioned the man who just walked across America to lose weight. What was your motivation?" After the assembly ended, a few students came forth to talk further, and one asked me to sign his tee shirt.

The Assistant Principal Mr. Davis warned me about the younger kids, an unruly bunch. "I just broke up a fight in the hallway, and twenty kids asked if they could back to the classroom and skip the talk. Good luck!" Despite his warning, the kids stayed attentive, and I gave the contest book to the student who asked, "Did you ever feel like quitting?" When I gave it to him, he confessed to dreaming about riding his bike cross-country when he finishes college. I may have inspired another adventurer!

Now we're ensconced for the night in Pemberville, experiencing another first — the only night I've ever spent in a fire station! I called up the fireman who had befriended me when I biked through here in 2004, and he said he'd find a place for us to spend the night. When we arrived, we found out the place was the volunteer fire department - the last shift left at 5:00, giving us the run of the place (as long as we didn't play with the sirens). Shower, kitchen, laundry, computer, TV - and a lot bigger than the hotel rooms we'd been squeezing into. Of course, if they get an emergency call tonight ... that would serve as a mega-alarm clock.



photo by Bill Smith - photosmith86@msn.com

Dodging raindrops

12 May - Pemberville OH-La Salle MI: 40s and wet; 8:40-12:20, 35.3 miles

The rain pounded down all night, continuing as we crossed the street to breakfast with my fireman friend Larry (who grabbed the check), and crossed back to the fire station. Ten minutes later, after Bill Smith (owner of PhotoSmith, a professional photographer - <http://www.photosmithonline.com/>) had taken our portraits in front of the fire trucks and we started down the road, the rain had paused. For thirteen miles we rolled north on wet roads through a semi-rural landscape.

Two miles later, the moment we entered a stretch of strip malls and chain stores outside Toledo, the rain started anew. For another ten miles we fought heavy traffic through the city, with spray from the passing vehicles mixing with the water from the sky to keep us plenty chilled. Finally we left the city and entered Michigan, the terrain returning to rural. We now endured intermittent rain and continuing cold up to La Salle, where Tim arranged for his sister-in-law Carol to pick us up. We had envisioned cycling directly to Tim's door, but the miserable conditions (and my freezing wet toes) convinced us that we didn't really need to cycle another forty miles.



photo by Bill Smith - photosmith86@msn.com

The rest of the day I relaxed at Tim's before his mother, his brother Tom, and sister-in-law Carol came over for a barbecue. Now I must psyche myself to re-enter the 'real world' tomorrow. After all, if your vision of America is colored by the 6:00 news, you probably never believed the America we discovered really exists. And that would be a shame...

Sequel ...

Sometimes, one adventure a year is not enough. When the corporation I worked for was bought by another, I fell under their rules — which included an annual company shutdown the first week of July, forcing me to use several days of vacation. I already had done my bicycling bit for the year, and hungered for something new. Knowing that Tim had not yet found a job, I quickly plotted another excursion, one where we could meet somewhere between the two of us... (As it turned out, Tim arranged an interview in Chicago to break up his drive out, and that turned into a job he accepted days later.)

... and so off we went to north-central Nebraska — not a place normally considered as Vacationland U.S.A.

2 July - Thunder slowly rumbles in the northwest, providing a voice to the clouds building overhead. Orange light from the setting sun sneaks beneath the clouds, adding a bloody hue to the trees on the hills across the river. Random rain drops dot the picnic table. This is how our first day on the river ends.

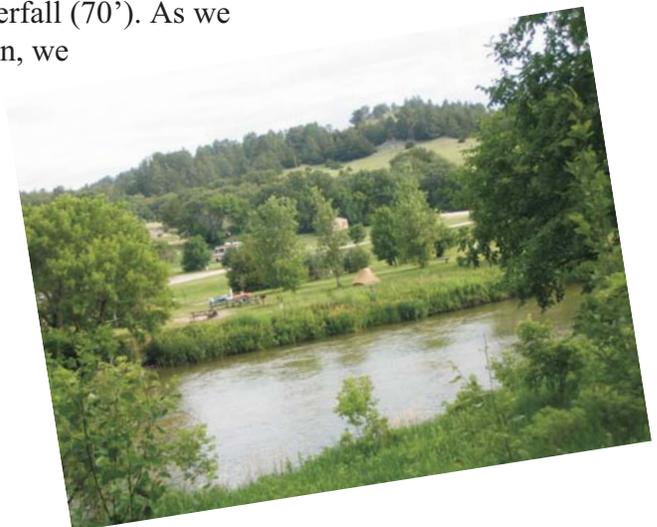
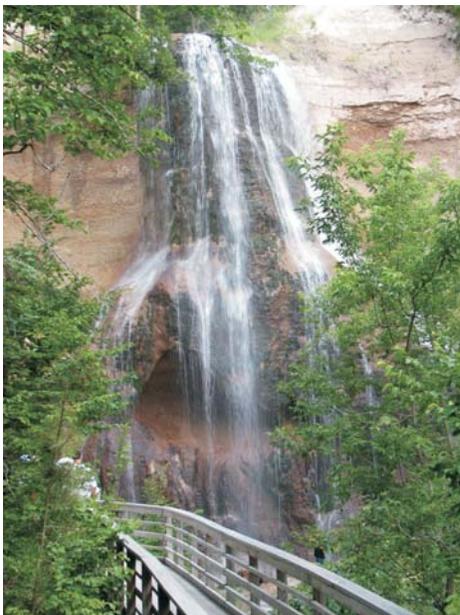
Floating the Niobrara River – a brand new adventure for me, yet reminiscent of trips taken (and nearly forgotten) fifteen to eighteen years ago. Never before have I kayaked for three days, going point-to-point unsupported by others. Will this be the impetus for another cross-country trip? That would be a stretch.

We did pick a good venue – in Nebraska’s Sand Hills region, partway between Tim and I. He had a longer drive, split up to accomodate an interview in Chicago, but I still had to go seven hours.



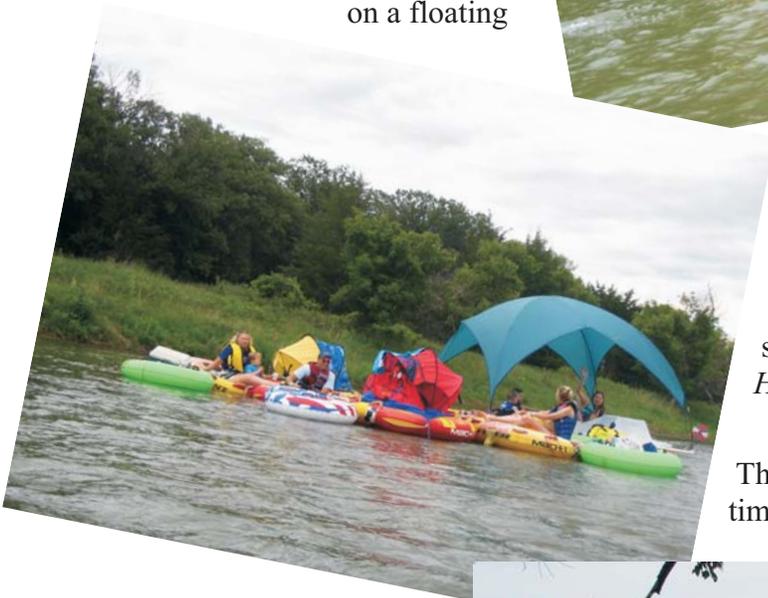
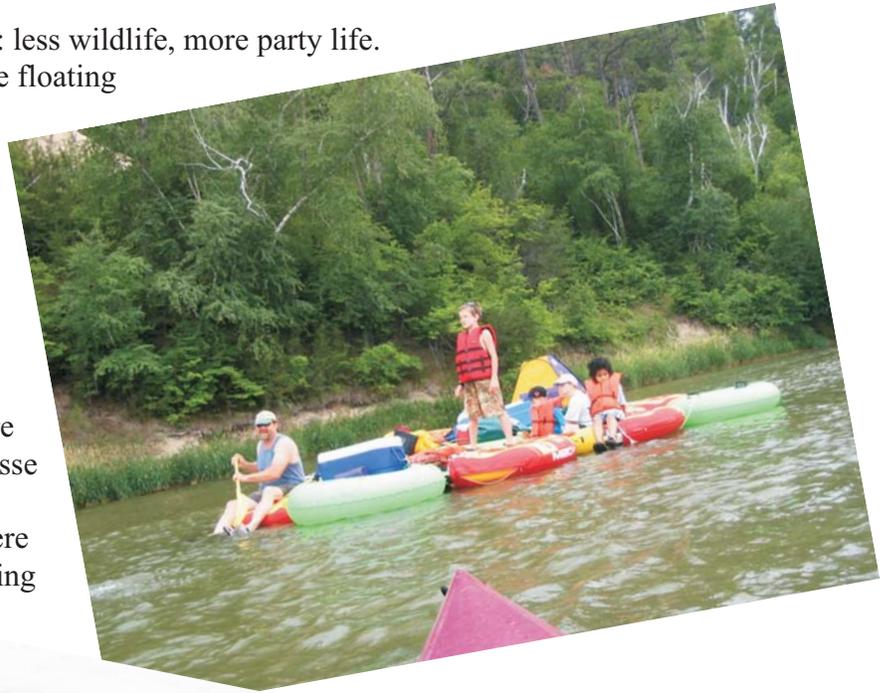
Tim at start

The Niobrara National Scenic River was a cinch to float – water was low but passable, and we also had a few class-one rapids to heed. We passed through a forested area with occasional tall bluffs of white and pinkish sandstone – one had the pale pink rock offset by dark red stone wet from water seeping out of the Ogallala Aquifer. We passed numerous small waterfalls splashing into the river, and are camped near the state’s highest waterfall (70’). As we floated down, we disturbed blue herons, and I noticed a racoon on one bank.



3 July - Today's major difference: less wildlife, more party life. Since we hit the river during prime floating time, we had plenty of company – mostly tubers. Now, I've done my share of inner-tubing down creeks and ditches in my youth, but I've never seen it quite like this.

We called the collections of floats 'tube cities'. Many had ten or more tubes tied together, floating en masse down the river, with kids walking across them like they were on a floating



platform. One group had a canvas cover attached to a floating frame to provide shade for several tubes; other tubes carried tents or tepees to shade young children. One of the cities serenaded Tim with a rousing chorus of *Happy Birthday*.

This time we hit the water at a reasonable time (10:20), giving us the chance to stop,

take hikes, and meander down river. As compared to yesterday, when we had to paddle only to avoid bottoming out, today we actually had a couple class-one rapids that forced us to navigate through them. It still was barely a challenge.



4 July - Our 'day' got an early start, when Tim awoke at 1:00 a.m. to the sound of racoons foraging on our picnic table. When he looked out, he saw the raiders dragging one of our dry bags into the woods. Luckily he got it back before they could gnaw into it.

Day 3 on the river differed markedly from the first two. After a mile or so to warm up, we faced our first portage, around class-three Rocky Ford Rapids. A few miles further, we passed on a second portage, choosing to shoot



me shooting Egglehof's - yee-ha!



class-two Egglehof's Rapids – what a rush! Next up was another nominal class-two, but at this low water level it barely qualified as class-one.

After our rapids, the river widened and got shallow. Now we had to learn the art of reading the river, locating the

deep channel to avoid running aground on the barely-hidden mud flats. The surrounding hills fell away, exposing a road swath of land. It really helped me imagine what Lewis and Clark must have seen and felt.



Following our river epic, we took my SUV (previously stowed at the

take-out) back to the put-in to reclaim Tim's car. We then drove

northwest to visit Badlands National Park, taking a hike before the setting sun put an end to the day. Leaving Tim to set up camp, I started the drive back to Nebraska, a long ride punctuated by numerous fireworks displays lighting the skies of the Indian reservations I passed through.



5 July - I knew I faced a long day driving from northern Nebraska home, but at least I routed my trip through two sites worth stopping at. The first, outside Alliance NE, rates as pure Americana - Carhenge! This site, squeezed amidst cropland northeast of town, is a collection of cars assembled as a scale model of



the Four'ed Seasons

masquerading as a Conestoga wagon, and four vehicles arranged as the 'Four'ed' Seasons.

England's famed Stonehenge. The cars have all been stripped and painted a chalky gray, to further emulate its sister site.

Besides the main attraction, they have subsidiary displays, such as an old station wagon



An hour's drive or so from there, I returned to Scottsbluff National Monument, a landmark along the old Oregon Trail that told travelers the first stage of their journey had ended. I took the time for a short hike atop the bluff, looking over the landscape that so challenged those early pioneers.

