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The end is near!

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The Next Page: A Question of Grit -- Five Days on the Pittsburgh-to-Washington Bike Trail

In which a mild-mannered professor pushes himself beyond the limit, and discovers new aspects of America, the natural world, pain, fear and triumph

Sunday, June 29, 2008
By Franklin Toker

"Gentlemen, remember to pack a copy of 'Deliverance' in your saddlebags when we meet tomorrow."

Weird how an adventure into the wild demands so many e-mails. This one, from my friend and trip leader Zarky Rudavsky, came on Monday, May 14 -- the eve of our bicycle journey to Washington, D.C.

We were six middle-aged guys, and James Dickey's novel was of four city men on the cusp of middle age who took a trip into nature. Not a happy tale: they all nearly drowned, one got sodomized, another killed. I normally appreciate Zarky's humor. But facing the Pittsburgh to Washington trail and towpath was scary enough.

The trip would be the hardest, and most heroic, thing I have done in my 64 years.

It was crazy to think I could cover the 328 trail miles to Washington. My companions Zarky, Ed Moravitz and Paul Munro had biked 300 miles in Israel's Negev desert in 2006. Ed's son-in-law Andrew Tomasi was another experienced cyclist, and Zarky's Baltimore friend Paul Goldberg biked 20 miles a day just on principle.

Besides confirming the distance of 328 miles, the organizing meeting on April 8 held more bad news. The outlook for mid-May was rain. (And indeed, we got so much that on May 21 Pennsylvania declared its six-year drought over.)

I could handle conjectural dangers like snakes, cramps, sunburn, bites, stings, cuts and geese nipping at my legs -- the gods always try scare tactics like those, from Ulysses down to Lewis and Clark. Two dangers, however, were certain, not conjectural: the 200 culverts we had to cross on the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath and the half-mile Paw Paw Tunnel, pitch-dark and perhaps fatal to anyone falling into the canal waters.

And I am no biker. The farthest I'd ever biked was 16 miles from South Side to North Side and back -- peanuts to a real biker.

Still, the time and place suited me. I work on my books every summer from May through August, and I need some dramatic break between teaching and writing. So replicating in reverse George Washington's 1753 hike from Virginia

to Pittsburgh fitted the time nicely, and so did the place.

To prepare, I trained on the new stationary bicycles at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill and made four day trips along the Great Allegheny Passage bike trail. The crew at Pittsburgh Pro Bicycles spiffed up my old bike and sold me a bevy of necessary equipment.

It is the ultimate measure of a country to walk or bike it. Now I had the chance.

DAY ONE: 67 miles, 9 hours riding

May 15 we were off, from Boston, outside McKeesport, to the town of Confluence. The crushed-limestone trail was the former right-of-way of the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad to Connellsville and then the old Western Maryland Railway, the one financier George Gould cut through the Alleghenies in 1911 to capture the freight traffic moving between Pittsburgh and Baltimore.

At Ohiopyle, I was thrilled to hear the waters at the falls on the Youghiogheny River roar as never I had heard before. The falls were the despair of George Washington, who had proposed to raft troops from Confluence ("Turkey-Foot," he called it) down to what is now Pittsburgh.

Eleven more miles, and at Confluence we were glad to get into a small house we had reserved. We walked to supper at the Lucky Dog Cafe, then burrowed into bed.

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DAY TWO: 47 (uphill) miles, eight hours riding

All rain. We biked up to Rockwood, but had to detour 1.5 miles around the Pinkerton Tunnel. At 849 feet, this Western Maryland Railway tunnel is fairly short, but it remains closed until $4 million makes it a safe biking environment. We were hours behind when we got to Rockwood: the fare was undistinguished pizza in a cafe I best remember for having heat.

The next town up, Meyersdale, has recycled its railroad station into a welcome center but we were too early in the season, and received no welcome beyond a Porta-John. Extraordinarily for Western Pennsylvania, with its fanatic municipal balkanization, the boroughs of West Newton, Connellsville, Ohiopyle, Confluence, Rockwood, and Meyersdale understand the economics of the bike trail, and have banded together as Trail Towns to coordinate signage, facilities, and events.

With an incline of 0.8 percent, we reached the Eastern Continental Divide at Deal in southern Somerset County. The Big Savage Tunnel was lit but disorienting to bike through. Right after, though, the track offers an almost dream-like vista into lush Maryland pastureland, and moments later we crossed the Mason-Dixon line into that state.

The upward grind was over, and we began a constant downhill glide of 5 miles to Frostburg, Md. I squealed with delight, and rode by myself because I did not want to share the thrill of going downhill mile after mile.

At the bed-and-breakfast in Frostburg, I got into a shower and for five minutes did nothing but hold my left foot up to the hot water; it had gone numb from the rain and cold.

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DAY THREE: 76 miles, nine hours riding

The next three days we pedaled the 185 miles of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath, from Cumberland, Md., to the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C.

The C&O was the most ambitious canal in the history of the world, long before Suez and Panama, at a projected length of 460 miles from Washington to Pittsburgh. Until cycling the route I had not realized that its track exactly replayed the route the Gen. Edward Braddock plowed through in 1755, to his defeat at Fort Duquesne.

The C&O Canal is about 90 percent full of water today, and preserves the 75 locks that barges needed to avoid the falls and rapids on the Potomac. We had to navigate the narrow earthen towpath that was made for surefooted mules, not humans. The towpath made the trail in Pennsylvania look like a superhighway: most of it had turned into puddles and mud -- the latter in stretches 50 to 100 feet long.

When I went through the mudfields, I felt like a cat, because my spine would stiffen with fear every time the back wheel swerved away from the front. Any number of times I came within inches of landing splat in the mud. Not more than a few hundred feet of the towpath had guiderails, and our chances of slipping into the canal or the Potomac were prime.

But what fine compensations to being in the wild! We heard frogs by the hundreds and saw turtles by the score, sunning themselves on tree trunks over the canal. We saw the Great Blue Heron half a dozen times in the Potomac, placidly eyeing the waters for fish.

The wildflowers were unforgettable, mainly phlox: pink and blue and white, waist high, by the thousands or hundreds of thousands, maybe the millions. We saw plenty of deer and a fair number of snakes. There were bears along the canal too. We became adept at analyzing poop: dogs, horses and deer were everywhere, but bear droppings are huge, like the beasts themselves.

Day three was memorable for the Paw Paw Tunnel. At 3,118 feet (over half a mile) it was astonishing in its engineering, but to we who had to shuffle through it, hardly less terrifying than in Zarky's vision back in April.

The tunnel is some 30 feet wide: 25 feet for the canal and 5 feet for the narrow ledge for the mules, higher up -- pitch dark. Supposedly the whole region here lacks electricity, but how can we conduct a techno-war in Iraq and not light the Paw Paw Tunnel through solar panels, if nothing else? The audio was worse than the visual: *drip drip drip drip drip drip* through the semicircular brick walls, some on us but mostly into the canal water. This was the spookiest experience of my life.

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DAY FOUR: 65 miles, nine hours riding

The fourth day was much like the third, only with rain. We began in Hancock, where we stood dully and dumbly under the gas-pump overhangs near our motel before pushing off into the rain.

The towpath was unrelentingly slow going. Its material composition changed at various points, but it was still mud with some cinders tossed in at washed-out spots. In the early afternoon we came to the Cushwa Basin, an overnight put-up place for canal boats.

Other bikers told us there was a town up the hill, and when we lifted up our eyes through the rain we could make out Williamsport.

Locals directed us to the Desert Rose Cafe, where we found ourselves in the company of Rose herself. Were I, like Homer or James Joyce, to turn this biking report into an "Odyssey," Desert Rose would be my Siren. Her cafe, only a few weeks old, was avant-garde in food choices like hummus. My companions did a little desultory flirting with Rose, who manifested some interest despite her knowing we were all married.

The afternoon had some incidents, too. We were obliged to detour where the towpath was flooded. It took seven miles of country road to equal what would have been only three on the towpath, but the Maryland horse country was pleasant.

This was also the day I nearly lost my life.

Just before the detour brought us back to the towpath there was a steep descent, with curves. The sign warned cyclists to walk their bicycles, but none of us did. At one point, the descent became so steep that I could not corner properly, and swung to the wrong side of the road. There was no car coming and nothing happened. But had there been a car I would not have seen it coming, nor would the driver have seen me.

Humbled by this glance into eternity, I cycled the last score of miles into Shepherdstown, W. Va., on the far side of the Potomac. There our band thinned out again: two riders chose not to subject themselves to 73 more miles of tedium to Washington.

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DAY FIVE: 73 miles, 12 hours riding

The last day began at 5:30 a.m. and a short run downhill to Betty's Cafe on Main Street -- the kind of architectural assemblage you expect in a rich or formerly rich town.

Before leaving Betty's, we contemplated taking the paved road on the south bank of the Potomac as far as Harpers Ferry, W.Va. Anything was better than our mudpath to D.C., but bikers cannot afford vague talk. So I broke into a conversation at the counter and asked two elderly men whether they would recommend the road. Hell no, they would not: too many hills and murderous traffic.

One of the two then got up from the counter, whipped out an iPhone and started scrolling all the roads on Mapquest, with his thumb. I was open-mouthed at the technical sophistication of this country gentleman with more high-tech in his pants pocket than in half the apartments in Manhattan. It taught me a good lesson -- that people are a lot brighter than they seem.

People are just not predictable by stereotypes. How could I not have recognized that to begin with? We mud-covered middle-aged Jewish bikers were fighting stereotypes ourselves.

Back on the towpath, we crossed Antietam Creek on a fine stone-arched aqueduct. On another occasion, with time not so microscopically doled out, we would have visited the nearby Antietam/Sharpsburg battlefield. We could feel the Civil War raging all around us: being so close to the ground, so tied to the rhythms of the earth even if only for five days, we catch the sense of battles and sharpshooters and dysentry so much more than tourists speeding through in a car.

The challenge of this last day is the unrelenting, unremitting, uneventfulness of the towpath. It offers us no incidents, no changes of track, neither ups nor downs: nothing but plugging on to Harpers Ferry.

We collectively reacquaint ourselves with the exploits of John Brown and his raid on the federal armory here. This is a blessed spot today, with multiple bridges at the conjunction of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, but we push on some 25 miles more to Whites Ferry, always hugging the Potomac shore.

Immanuel Kant declared that nature is dumb, yet all trip long I found myself seeking its lessons. Once, it was exhilarating to see that a dead tree floating in the canal had sprouted a hundred flowering branches. Here was life affirming itself anew. Thoreaus we were not, but we were traversing if not living in the wild, and we felt part of the natural environment.

We came across civilization at the Great Falls of the Potomac, milepost 14 on the canal, up from Washington. The towpath lost its puddles and mud now, and was cosmeticized into a casual outing spot for the nation's capital. What a let-down to see so many people after a five-day trip in which an hour could pass without our sighting a soul!

But there were two last pleasures here. One was the Great Falls Tavern, its glistening white walls making reflections in the canal in the slanting late-afternoon light. The other was the Great Falls of the Potomac themselves, far more wonderful than Niagara. It is the way the water falls that is so thrilling -- not in a sheet, like Niagara, but cutting through huge jagged teeth.

Now we were all four riders close together. We cycled into Georgetown at somewhat better than 10 mph, until we were joined by so many rollerbladers and cyclists that a painted line was needed to keep us from bumping into each other.

In this somewhat burlesque mode we entered Georgetown, and the beginning (for us, the ending) of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park. Here the canal waters mingled with those of Rock Creek, and the Potomac itself.

Our excellent adventure was over, and now I can hardly believe I did it.

The trail taught me manifold lessons. I reflected on how vital it is to be not only self-reliant but also interdependent. I depended on the wisdom of the rest of the group, and during training I appealed to them for help when it looked doubtful that I could last the whole trip.

Everyone on the trail must return with some sense that it was so live, and we who did it were living at a plane of excitement far above that of normal life.

I saw that what brought me through the ride was pure determination. Now that I know this about myself, to what shall I apply that determination for the rest of my life?

Franklin Toker (franklintoker.com) is a professor of the history of art and architecture at the

University of Pittsburgh. His books include "Fallingwater Rising" and the forthcoming "Pittsburgh: A New Portrait," from University of Pittsburgh Press.

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