

## Cycling: Biking down memory lane, along the Great Allegheny Passage

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By Larry Walsh

The do-you-remember, laughter-inducing stories began when the Hinchberger brothers reached the third floor of The Confluence House, a bed and breakfast in Confluence in Somerset County.

"It reminded us of our childhood home in Butler," said Bill, 70, of Mechanicsburg, the oldest of the quartet. "The B&B had a double bed, a single bed and two rollaway cots. It was the first time we had slept in the same room in 52 years."

The older brothers said the idea of a bike ride from Confluence to Leesburg, Va., along the Great Allegheny Passage and the C&O Canal Towpath came from Don, 65, of Oceanside, Calif., the youngest sibling. Don, in turn, said the trip was "perfectly planned and executed" by Dave, 67, of West Chester, Pa.

"I just went along for the ride," laughed Jim, 69, of Hamilton, Ohio, the "vertically- challenged" sibling. "People look at our group photos and always want to know who the shrimp is."

The brothers were raised on a farm outside Butler, were on the track team at Butler High School and have remained trim and active since. Bill and Don were on the track team at Pitt, lived at Pitt Stadium above the home-team dressing room and worked as night watchmen and ground-crew members for "Horse" Czarnecki.

I met the animated, joshing quartet June 22 at the Confluence Cyclery, a full-service bike shop in the center of town. The owners, Brad and Maureen Smith, already had told the brothers about some upcoming trail highlights, including the Salisbury and Keystone viaducts and the Big Savage and Borden tunnels.

When the brothers returned to Confluence last Sunday to pick up their cars, they verbally elbowed one another to be the first to tell stories about their 216-mile, rain-free ride, the "great" time they had and the "wonderful" people they met along the way.

Don, a retired rehabilitation counselor, talked about the steps he took to replace his rear tire in Rockwood, also in Somerset County. When he found the local bike shop closed because the owner, Lynn Sanner, was baling hay on his farm, Don asked a woman who lives near the shop to try to find him.

The woman called Sanner's mother, who asked a neighbor to fetch her son from the field.

"Lynn was very helpful," Don said. "He got me right back on the trail."

Bill, who kept a journal, described the "panoramic vistas" of western Maryland, the "impressive" Paw Paw Tunnel in West Virginia and the colorful characters that Don first met and then introduced them to at the Backyard Tavern in Paw Paw. They discovered that plus-sized tattooed ladies know how to play pool.

Dave, whose most recent long-distance trip was a 450-mile ride from Buffalo to Albany, N.Y., wanted to warn other bicyclists about a thick-as-your-wrist steel cable he hit as he approached the ferry that crosses the Potomac River to Leesburg. "It was hidden by thick grass along the road, and I took a nasty fall," he said. "Fortunately, I didn't get banged up too bad."

Jim recalled the numerous "small-world" encounters of the trip. They included meeting the McCandless family of Butler County who live near a farm once owned by the maternal grandparents of the Hinchberger brothers, a 39-year-old quadriplegic named Craig who sells water from his motorized wheelchair near Harper's Ferry and a man in Leesburg whose sister worked at the same health clinic as Jim's former sister-in-law.

Jim laughed as he recalled a conversation last Sunday between his brother Dave and Confluence resident Bill Metzger. It turned out Metzger, a native of Mechanicsburg, knew Dave's wife Margie "when she was sweet 16 and I was a mere lad of 12. I had such a crush on that girl."

Dave decided it would be fun if they got reacquainted. He called his wife, told her a longtime admirer wanted to say hello and handed the phone to Metzger.

It was the beginning of another do-you-remember story.