

**Travels with George
July 2002
Minneapolis to Chicago**

German Traveler Becomes Unwitting Accomplice

In keeping with a tradition my wife and I started on our trip to Glacier National Park three years ago, George and I began our trip to Minneapolis by executing a fully-loaded bike ride-through of Chicago's Union Station. The automatic sliding doors at the lower level entrance make this quite easy. After riding past the baggage claim area, we took the next left into the Great Hall, also conveniently bike-accessible by sliding doors. Our next task was to locate a suitable passenger to document the incursion with my digital camera. (If you've never been in the Great Hall, the lighting is beautiful, filtering down through skylights three floors above--great for photographs.) After two circles around the Hall, we invited a young, honest-looking German youth to be our photographer. He was glad to oblige us and we took a couple more trips around the Hall. I made sure he got us waving beneath the huge American flag, and then he snapped a few of us circling the clock/departure/arrival kiosk in the middle of the Hall. It was when I was thanking him and we were reviewing the pictures that I saw the badge.

It looked real enough and I noticed that the German accomplice immediately returned to his bench and assumed the waiting passenger position. The undercover bearer of the badge was curious as to what arrangements we had made for this bike photo shoot in the Great Hall. "In general," he said, "riding bicycles in Union Station is not allowed." As we had already accomplished our goal, judging by the quality of the pictures, we saw no need to press the issue. "We're so excited that Amtrak lets us take our bikes on board that we wanted to show our friends..." I said. The agent had apparently decided we didn't pose a danger to the smooth functioning of the USA RAIL system, so we parted amicably and walked our bikes in a non-threatening manner back through the sliding doors to the ticket area and queued up correctly in the purchase line.

Cal's and Beyond

I must admit I'm having trouble coming up with profound thoughts so far on this trip. Even worse, I have promised a lot of people that I would be posting interesting, scintillating reports from my ride from Minneapolis to Chicago. So far, I have sent only one, and it was embarrassingly lacking in carriage returns, which caused all the text to read like a Faulknerian stream of consciousness, unfortunately without Faulkner's mastery of the form.

As you can see, I have corrected this faux pas, but the lack of inspiration remains. So until the travel muse returns to me, you will have to be content with a dry record of facts.

To take up where I left off yesterday, after the encounter with Amtrak security, George and I had an hour to kill before the train left, so we rode our bikes over to Cal's Bar, on Van Buren and Wells, a few blocks from Union Station.

I wanted George to meet Mike, the bartender, who just returned from a trip to Brazil. He was doing research with the idea of starting a bicycle touring operation there. I figured George would be a good resource in this endeavor, given the fact that George has taken at least one 1,000 mile bike trip per year for the last 25 years.

George is in his third decade as a Chicago bike messenger. He works three to six months, and spends the rest of the year traveling. A short list of places he has biked includes every country in Central America except Nicaragua; every country in South America except Uruguay, Venezuela and the Guianas; India, Nepal, Morocco, and Australia. He had biked across three continents and one subcontinent.

His last trip was to Bolivia. He would occasionally send out e-mails describing his adventures, and I was on his mailing list. I was quite impressed, not only with the sheer gutsiness of a 51-year old pedaling alone through the Andes with all his camping gear, but his elaborately detailed reports as well. I would print them out and read them to my wife and daughter at the dinner table.

I have had inclinations along these lines myself, so as I was planning the current trip, George naturally came to mind as a traveling companion. It was not without some apprehension that I considered this idea. As you probably know, traveling companions are not to be lightly-considered. I have witnessed relationships disintegrate between good friends, even lovers, under the stress of traveling together, and I myself have experienced this phenomenon.

I hardly knew George, except through his emails. As part of the Critical Mass-inspired Chicago cycling community, we had a number of mutual friends, but his actual temperament was unknown to me. But I did know he was an independent spirit with a zest for adventure, and knew how to write about it. I figured I had much to learn from him. Which is what has brought us to Cal's Bar this Tuesday afternoon where I'm having one last decent beer before being faced with the impoverished offerings of the Amtrak snack bar.

By the time I had finished my Three Floyds, George and Mike had swapped a few travel stories and it was only 45 minutes 'til departure time, and we still had to get our bikes boxed up. So off we went toward Union Station in somewhat of a rush. Watching George weave through Chicago Loop traffic humbled me, and I understood how he could make enough money as a bike messenger in three months to travel the rest of the year.

These events occurred two days ago, but I swear it seems like a month.

I'm writing this in Merrick State Park, 140 miles south of Minneapolis, while George builds a fire to cook the food given to us by our gracious campground hosts, Ken and Carol Johnson. They also just brought us leftovers--a special bacon-lettuce-tomato-pasta salad--from a campground staff picnic. Life is good this evening on the Upper Mississippi.

Coming up in the next installment: camping in the Minneapolis State Fairgrounds parking field, a conversation with the city manager of Prescott, Wis. and the Diamond Bluff Methodist Church ice cream social

**In Search of the Mighty Mississippi
July 28, 2002**

This is supposed to be a Mississippi River bike ride, but as I look at my large scale DeLorme map the river is hard to find.

George and I have stopped at a quick-mart kind of place somewhere on the southeast side of Minneapolis for our respective breakfast preferences (George, two microwave burritos and me, the more traditional coffee, sweet roll and Pall Mall). This is the first open food place we've found since breaking camp 30 minutes ago behind a clump of trees on the southern boundary of a twenty acre barren field which serves, once a year, as the parking lot for the Minnesota State Fair.

We have reason to believe we are heading in the desired direction toward "The River," somewhere to the south and/or east, based on a combination of various navigational aides at our disposal, including the sun, my trusty GPS, a small, confusing map of the city and anecdotal evidence from the occasional helpful citizen.

But, as I said, "The River is surprisingly hard to find, given its alleged size.

So we head due east, and eventually do find a river but it's not the right one. It's the St. Croix, certainly a respectable river, but we are not satisfied. So we head south toward Prescott, Wis. (Where the Great River Road, our planned route, begins). Here we expect to cross, and view, for the first time on our trip, the magnificence of The River, that great divider of the continent, fed by a thousand tributaries and who knows how many sprAWL*TM Mart parking lots, draining half a continent. The river you have seen in movies and read about. The river of Mark Twain, of course, and paddlewheel steamboats, the granddaddy of them all, nurturing commerce, literature, myth and romance for 300 years ever since its discovery by Marquette and LaSalle.

Our expectations are perhaps a bit too high.

We do, in fact, cross a bridge into Prescott, but it ain't the Mighty One. It's just our old friend the St. Croix. But we suspect we're close, so we hang out in Prescott for a while. After a barbecue sandwich at a riverside cafe, we go in search of the public library.

I know what you're thinking. Diligent and dedicated biker-writers that we are, we're looking to do some original research on the River, browsing the archives for historical factoids to write about. Wrong! In case you've forgotten my previous e-mails, this enterprise is not necessarily about facts. But that fact does not imply it's not about truth.

The real reason for the library search is that George is not blessed with his own Pocketmail Composer, so he must keep in contact with the workaday world using whatever internet facilities he can find. And in many miles of travel he has found public libraries to be free and accessible. Specifically, now he's following closely Lance Armstrong's progress in the Tour de France.

Like many small towns along the Mississippi, and along other rivers as well, one building suffices for multiple civic functions, including in this case the Mayor, City Manager, Police and George's particular interest, the library.

As luck would have it, while we were waiting outside for his turn at the computer, who should approach us but the City Manager himself. And moreover, seeing our fully-loaded bikes, he wants to engage us in conversation.

Even though he is a city manager, he, like most people we meet, misinterpret our mission. No, neither of us has yet been mistaken for Lance making a wrong turn at the Tour. The most common misconception is that we are somehow refugees from the Minneapolis to Chicago Aids Ride, even though we are nowhere near the route. On my trip to Des Moines last month, I was surely a wayward rider from RAGBRAI, never mind I was a month or so early.

The city manager of Prescott had a different impression of us. We must be advance scouts for the approaching Missouri MS Ride, which was heading north along the River and would soon establish a rest stop in his town. Once more we had to patiently explain that it is actually possible to ride your bicycle from town to town without benefit of support vehicles and the companionship of several thousand other riders. He revealed that he, too, had a bike and rode it on occasion, though judging by his girth, he could benefit from more frequent use.

Now one thing I have discovered about George is that he is by nature inquisitive. A "Curious George," as it were. So as you might expect, he had a few questions for his hired honorship. Uppermost on his mind that afternoon, aside from the approaching invasion of the MSers, was the recent loss of a number of key members of his staff, as well as a few policemen. Probing deeper, we discovered that the root cause of this was, surprisingly, political. And what was the divisive issue here in Prescott, a town of 15,000? "Those damn no-growthers have taken over the city council," he ranted in a most undignified tone. At which point the conversation deteriorated, especially after I asked why the Civic Building we were standing in was located two miles from the actual town and surrounded by a parking lot worthy of Wal*TM Mart.

At this point his demi-honor remembered an important meeting, and George logged on to get the scoop on Lance. Shortly thereafter we pedaled out of Prescott, heading for Diamond Bluff, where we hoped to get our first glimpse of the elusive Mighty One.

Jim & George Find Religion July 26, 2002

It happened just a few miles north of Diamond Bluff, as we were climbing a steep hill.

These uphill provide ample opportunity to scan the shoulder for discarded items, most, presumably enhancements to the landscape from passing motorists. In fact, wherever cross-country bikers are gathered together, the subject of found roadside treasures is bound to come up. For example, Andrew Morton, who rides all over the place and maintains a great website of his travels, seems to find an unusual number of bottles of discarded urine, and is particularly distressed with the frequency of mutilated American flags apparently blown from patriotic SUV drivers. I myself have never once encountered either of these artifacts. My traveling companion, George, is drawn to bandanas, and can tell you how many of each color he has found in his 75,000 miles of roadside scanning. In fact, just yesterday he found a perfectly good red one which I am now wearing around my neck.

Riders have found a lot of things along the road, but as far as I know no one has found religion.

It came, actually, in the form of a copy of the New Testament, perhaps thrown from the car of someone who was not currently being blessed by our Lord. Soggy, with a red leather-look-alike cover, it was open to the book of Galatians. Even George was awe-struck by this holy roadside find. Bikers on long, lonely trips are prone to attribute mystical properties to the most mundane roadside items. So what would they think about a copy of the New Testament? After I digitized it "in situ" as it were, George picked it up, reverently, of course, and we began reading it for some symbolic message to guide us on the rest of our journey. Paul was speaking, I think, and he was apparently spreading the Word of some significant event to the citizens of Galatia. George and I interpreted this to mean that we likewise must spread the Word, urging the multitudes to give up their oil-burning Chariots of Satan and embrace the Holy Bike henceforth.

Thus inspired, we ascended the hill effortlessly and enjoyed a God-given freewheel down to the town of Diamond Bluff, where, I kid you not, the first thing we saw was a homemade sign on poster paper that said, "Ice Cream social today," out front of the Diamond Bluff Methodist Church.

Now, I think I can speak for George as well when I say a church ice cream social, under ordinary circumstances, would not attract our attention. But in this case, given our state of mind from our recent find, it seemed fore-ordained, even predestined, that we would stop.

We were welcomed warmly at the door of the small church by a member of the congregation whose name we later found out was Dallas. The room was full of friendly church folks enjoying not only ice cream, we were surprised to discover, but an array of homemade pies, cakes, cookies, and assorted sandwiches. I chose the double-dip apple pie a-la-mode for \$1.50 and George selected a sloppy joe at \$2.00, and we made our way to a table beneath a picture of Our Lord, presumably just before his ascension, with a table of his closest associates.

We found another table, next to a woman who also had ordered a sloppy joe. Our strangerhood attracted her attention, and she made a point of welcoming us. Then Dallas came to our table and welcomed us again. In fact, I can't remember being welcomed so many times in one place. Dallas told us this was an annual event, and we were lucky to come along the right day. We didn't tell him it all seemed divinely prearranged. He ended up by inviting us to spend the night in the church, if we so desired. We graciously declined.

It turns out the lady with the sloppy joe lived in Red Wing, across the river, and her husband worked at the nuclear power plant ("It's just a small one," she apologized), plainly visible from the church window. She said he was a nuclear engineer, and was the "only environmentalist working there." This led to an animated conversation with this Methodist lady, as you might imagine. On a side note, her husband had in the past been stationed on a nuclear submarine in Charleston, S.C., as was I myself. We talked about this, too, while her sloppy joe got cold and my ice cream melted.

I suppose the climax to this whole story was when I again directed my gaze to the picture of Jesus and friends on the wall. What I had previously assumed was a halo around His head, and His eyes backlit with an eerie glow in anticipation of His eminent ascension, took on a whole new meaning in view of the nuclear plant plainly visible in the adjacent window.

Holy Nuclear Power, Batman!

Jim

Cecil's Landing on the Great River Road somewhere between Stoddard and Prairie du Chien

The Scale of Things July 22, 2002

George and I are getting caffeinated and fueling up at the Yellowstone Lake campground restaurant which overlooks the lake. We're examining each other's maps planning our route to our first destination of the day, Argyle, some six miles to the southeast.

Why, you may ask, do we have separate maps? Aren't you going to the same place?

This is a good question and deserves an answer. My preference in maps, as you may remember from my Des Moines trip, is the DeLorme series of Gazeteers, one for each state. I carry the appropriate Gazeteer bungeed cross the top of my Bob bag in a waterproof, transparent bag. Admittedly unwieldy for bike touring, my wife asks me why I just don't xerox the pages I will need. She misses the point of the maps. For one thing, suppose I find myself somewhere I hadn't anticipated? If I don't do this at least once on a trip, I figure I've over-planned. And Xerox copies are ugly. All the beautiful and subtle colors are reduced to grainy line art. These maps invite me to explore places I wouldn't find if I used a AAA map like George.

He says my maps are overkill. So when it comes time to make a route decision, we take out our respective maps. If there has been any tension between us these last five days, it has revolved around our differing interpretation of the landscape based on the view presented by the scale of our maps. His shows the big picture, the most direct roads deemed worthy of the automobile. Mine shows the detail, the little-used country roads, the twists and turns. Due to its large scale, it has the added benefit of portraying our progress, inch-wise, in a much more favorable light. He says my maps offer a confusion of roads--too many choices. I say his are made for people in cars needing to "get somewhere." Goal-oriented versus process-oriented.

But I cannot discount the opinion of someone who has pedaled 75,000 miles over a period of 25 years. I have learned that every detail of his bicycle and touring equipment, from his rear hub to the precise arrangement of his panniers, is the result of a long trial and error selection process. Presumably, his choice of maps evolved similarly. So I pay attention when he talks about maps and routes.

But not once on this trip has George given me any unsolicited "advice" on how to do things, despite the vast experience gap between us. Even on the road, he lets me set the pace, and not once has my somewhat lesser speed capability become an issue. Last Thursday morning, as we were leaving our second campground, adjacent to the Mr. Sippi bar on a backwater of the River, I consulted my DeLorme and discovered a shortcut to highway 35. George was skeptical, but went along with me anyway. It turned out to be a dead end, but George took it in good humor.

But now, here at the Yellowstone Lake restaurant, he's taking a more serious look at my DeLorme because according to his map, we have to backtrack five miles to the park entrance to get on Highway G toward Argyle. My map shows an alternate exit to the east following Lake Road to Highway N, which connects to G, then highway 81 right into Argyle, saving more than five miles. We took the back route and encountered one of the most beautiful roads so far on our trip. We're having smoothies and savoring the morning's ride on the town square in Monroe, having already put in 25 of the 75 we plan to do today.

So the truth is that both maps serve a purpose. The secret is on knowing which to use when.

There must be a lesson in that, somewhere.

Jim

Sitting with George in Monroe, Wis. on what may have once been a large green town square but has been reduced to a pathetic remnant surrounded by four concentric layers of parking which I am sure pleases the merchants, which is what counts.

Roosters, Darkness and Drizzle at River's Edge Campground July 28, 2002

I'm in my tent at the River's Edge Campground in Stoddard, Wis., seven miles south of LaCrosse. I've been awake, off and on, since the rooster started crowing probably an hour-and-a-half ago. Last night, we were happy to be camping twenty feet from a chicken coop, since we wanted to get an early start and expected the

rooster to help us in that regard.

The rooster did his job, but we haven't done ours. Soon after he crowed, rain began pelting my tent, which lulled me back into a half-sleep dozing state. Perhaps because of the rooster, or the bizarre circumstances of being in this little tent in the rain down by the river in a strange little town for who-knows-what reason, or the pressure I'm beginning to feel to make the 300 miles back by Tuesday, or quite possibly it's the pain from four of my ten toes rubbed raw by the relentless pedaling, or the 49-cent hot dog I created for myself at the local Kwik Mart last night, or maybe it was the noise of last night at the Thirsty Turtle Bar across the tracks with too many small-town drunks on a Friday night invading my personal space with pointless conversation and loud '70s music while I was trying to write.

I had to get out of there and I came back to take a shower, but the cramped bathroom/shower facilities (his labeled "bullheads," hers labeled "catfish") at this dumpy little campground for recreational fishermen was foul-smelling and dirty. Perhaps because of all this, during my periods of sleep interrupted by the occasional cock crow and rain specks dotting the top of my tent, I had the darkest dream you can imagine which kept its continuity from doze to doze in the drizzle. I won't burden you with the actual imagery of the dream, but suffice it to say it was heavily loaded with guilt symbolism and twisted lines of communication relating to my parents, both buried down in Alabama. I swear, I couldn't stop the dreams until I sat bolt upright, at which time I reached for the Pocketmail Composer and started tapping it out.

Well, the drop-sounds on my tent are lighter now, and I think I hear George unzipping his tent flap, so we will be on our way south toward Prairie du Chien, 80 miles away.

In Search of the Mighty Mississippi, Part 2

"Mississippi rises, swells and bursts like a bloated bubble, and the bayou feels the pulse of a beat in the heartland.

"Mississippi rises, gathers range to range, flows down from the highlands, grows high in the lowlands as the water sheds its power, lays its burden dam to dam St. Paul to the Delta plain.

"Mississippi rises, a rogue tide beneath an aberrant moon, rouses from its bed like a nocturnal beast and stirs the prairie for a trace of its ancient path.

"Rise Mississippi, raise your crest above the braided hats and levees of the army corps, breach their gates and go for the coast, for the freedom of the gulf stream waters.

"Rise, Mississippi, rise!"

This poem, which I wrote in 1993, was inspired by the big flood of that year. Its relevance to the story at hand is a certain "pro-river" stance against the Army Corps of Engineers, and their efforts to control the river.

I have been intrigued by the relationship between the River and Corps ever since I read John McPhee's piece in "The Control of Nature," about the Corps' construction of a massive system of levees and other structures near Baton Rouge to prevent the Mississippi from exercising its natural tendency and "going for the coast" by the way of the Atchafalaya River, thus bypassing New Orleans entirely.

As you may know, the work of the Corps along the Mississippi is not limited to that levee down in Louisiana. In case you haven't heard, keep reading.

We left Prescott in the early afternoon, heading south on highway 35, a smooth two-lane blacktop with ample shoulder. It teases the river bank for 130 miles, where the once-mighty upper Mississippi ebbs and flows to the rhythm of 26 dams from the once beautiful St. Anthony Falls to St. Louis.

After riding for five miles along what the maps show as the river bank, we still haven't seen the river. Thirty-five soon cuts inland through marshes and doesn't return to the river path until Diamond Bluff, where we saw a body of water we thought was finally the River. "Nope," said Dallas, the greeter, you may remember, at the Methodist Church ice cream social across from the nuclear plant, "That's Sturgeon Lake, there." And the other Methodists present nodded in agreement.

After leaving the social, under guidance from the church folks, we turned right on US 63 at Hager City, six miles to the south, which crosses a bridge into Red Wing, Minn. Just before the bridge, we spotted the small campground they had referred to, nestled down along what we thought was surely the river. With its grubby little tent site between two RV's and the constant traffic noise from Highway 63, the only thing this campground had going for it was the Mr. Sippi Bar, within stumbling distance of our tent site. This was enough for us.

That evening, after we showered, we decided to partake of the local ambience of the Mr. Sippi. During a conversation with one of the patrons we learned that the Mr. Sippi Bar was not on the Mississippi at all, but something called the Wisconsin Slough, which, by the way, according to him, "flows backwards." I told him I was from Chicago, so it didn't seem so unusual to me.

Disappointed once more, the next morning we resumed our search for the elusive River, only to find ourselves pedaling upstream against a river of colorful MS riders heading north on the fifth day of that annual event. You may remember from a previous e-journal entry that this is the group the City Manager of Prescott was anticipating, having mistaken George and me for advance scouts.

For at least an hour we passed them and their various motorized support vehicles. There were many expensive recumbents, tandems and otherwise. Many shouted, "Hey, you're going the wrong way." This was funny at first but got old fast, so we just started ignoring them.

Stopping at a Kwik Stop or whatever, we struck up a conversation with one of the more eccentric riders, with a handle-bar mounted squirt gun and a bubble machine on his rack. In our brief conversation, we learned that this was really the Minnesota MS ride, and they were just on the Wisconsin side for a diversion. He was an interesting fellow. He had biked to Alaska, something George has also done, so he and George chatted a while. I took their picture together, then we headed up the 250 foot "Bay City Hill" just south of town. Freewheeling down the 1.5 mile descent on the other side, we noticed there was plenty of sag wagon activity among the MS'ers.

South of Bay City the more "scenic" part of the road began in a gentle but persistent rain, the road curving up 100 foot bluffs to reveal striking views of...the River? Guess again. It's...Lake Pepin! a 22-mile long natural lake that somewhat resembles the River as we think we know it.

Lake Pepin, according to the various brochures and historical markers, is a "natural," perhaps THE natural, part of the great Mississippi waterway. It was formed by too much silting at the mouth of some tributary, presumably the Pepin River, although I can't find any evidence of it on my map, and it would surely not be shown on George's. I suppose this silting explanation may satisfy your average tourist, but it's not enough for me and "Curious George." Why should this one river silt up and not the hundreds of others we see on the map?

Whatever the root cause of his glacial age phenomenon, it poses somewhat of an inconvenience for George and me in the here and now. As you may have heard, or even seen for yourself, the eastern shore of the "River" is lined with bluffs, maybe as high as 500 feet. Most of the time the River Road runs comfortably between them and the waterway, allowing us to appreciate them at a distance, which is the best way to appreciate bluffs on a bicycle.

Up river of Bay City, before Lake Pepin kicked in, we had glided easily along, looking up at the outcroppings, musing on the mysteries of geologic time and the power of flowing water. We also speculated, in our idle time, on whether or not there are rattlesnakes living up in those rocks. That's what the wife of the nuclear engineer cum amateur environmentalist and ecologist told us at the Methodist ice cream social. Something about "microclimates," she said, but wasn't sure what that meant.

But downriver of Bay City, the terrain took a turn for the worse. The "Bay City Hill," which, as you may remember, was requiring heavy sag wagon support among the MS riders, was just the first of a number of inconveniences caused by Lake Pepin, despite its beauty from afar. Having apparently clogged itself with its own silt, it became bloated to the point where it overflowed its bed, flooding the plain to the foot of the bluffs, forcing us, several millenia later, to pedal over them.

George and I are on one right now, having stopped at a covered "scenic overlook" for a brief respite from the drizzle that has kept us moisturized all morning. I peel a banana and have a few Fig Newtons while putting my clothes and sleeping bag in a plastic bag. George pulls out his Ziplock bag of peanuts, which never seems to diminish, from his handlebar bag. While we wait for the rain to slacken, George tells me one of his many travel stories I came to enjoy on this trip. Perhaps Lake Pepin reminds him of some high Andean lake, Titicaca maybe, or it could be the rain. At any rate, he tells me about the time he was camping at the 13,000 foot level on the altiplano of Bolivia after biking 129 miles that day. A steady night-long drizzle threatened to inundate his tent, as it wasn't soaking into the hard ground. It was barely above freezing, and he feared hypothermia. He spent all night sitting in a corner of his tent on slightly higher ground than the rest, bailing water out of his tent with his socks. He tells me this in a soft, understated voice, like he is talking about going to the store for a loaf of bread.

The rain has lessened so we cinch up and head down from the bluff toward the town of Pepin, ten miles away.

Eat Your Heart Out, Lance!

July 30, 2002

YEEHAA! A glorious day of biking! The roads of Wisconsin are beautiful. It's as if the whole country road system is one big bike path.

We left Yellowstone Lake, near Mineral Point, this morning at nine, and just pulled into a campground near Belvidere, for a whopping 94 miles, including the 30-mile stretch from Monroe to Beloit in two hours! We were scorching at close to forty miles per hour down some of the hills.

After fueling up at Beloit with two Chicago style hot dogs and a chocolate malt, we mounted up again and crossed into Illinois, heading due east with the sun and wind at our backs, watching our shadows on the pavement ahead and the setting sun skimming across the cornfields as we rode fast and silent beneath canopies of huge oak and maple trees. We averaged almost 25 mph for one five-mile stretch.

This is biking to die for!

A Confession

July 31, 2002

Okay, folks. I can't fake it any longer. I am sitting writing in the air-conditioned comfort of my home. George and I got back to Chicago the day before yesterday after back-to-back 90 plus mile days.

But do not let this disturb you. Lest you are worrying you will no longer get those eagerly-anticipated little notices in your in-box, never fear. I've got a backlog of material from this trip that could keep me going for months. Just kidding.

So, everything should look the same to you, though there may be a confusion of time and space, which was already the case since one email may have been written in two or three different places at different times, which wreaks havoc with verb tenses.

So disabuse yourself of the romantic fantasy of Jim out there on the road tapping out his message to the world by the campfire on his little Pocketmail Composer. He's sitting in the middle of Chicago, trying to remember what happened when.

George and I savored the descent from the bluffs into the town of Pepin, and we agreed we were adequately repaid for the climbs. As inviting as Pepin was, with its little shops, cafes and such, we pressed southward in our search for the Mighty Mississippi. So far, we had seen lakes, tributaries and sloughs, but no River, and we were soon to have another wetland experience crossing the Tiffany State Wildlife Area, the first of several we would encounter.

I remember this dramatic change in the character of the landscape from bluffs to wetlands, after a long careening downhill, as one of the most invigorating moments of the entire trip. George indulged me, waiting as I stopped several times, once to get a picture of a snowy egret, a swath of pure white swooping skyward from the dark, shadowed greens into a cerulean sky. Back on our bikes, we began moving through the warmth and fecund odors of the lowland landscape surrounded by the garrumphing of frogs and the twittering of birds.

"Looks like a good place for duck hunting," said George as he pulled up alongside, shattering my contemplation. I was jolted by George's different view of this scene, expressing an opposing vision, though not necessarily his own, as he's neither hunter nor fisherman. He offered the regard that it wasn't a "scene," in the picture postcard sense of the word, but something to be used. This difference in interpretation of the landscape is probably related to our differences in map preferences, as I described in "the scale of things" a few days ago. And it's not, of course, an issue unique to me and George here in this Upper Mississippi lowland, but a national schizophrenia about nature dating back at least to John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt's time, if not earlier.

But I remembered that George has biked through nearly every possible geography on the face of the earth, so what's one more swamp to him? On the other hand, I know from his writings and conversations during our trip that he is extremely sensitive and just as aware of his surroundings as I am.

So there is something deeper going on. Perhaps it has to do with our circumstances. Throughout our trip, I have been humbled by George's frugality--his ingenuity in squeezing maximum benefit from minimum expense. How else could he travel so much on three month's bike messenger pay? And me? Let's face it: my income combined with my wife's over the past few years puts us embarrassingly smack dab in the middle class demographic. So while I am oohing and aahing over the

beauty of nature with ample cash in my pocket, George is scanning the roadside for Marlboro box coupons.

This confirms what I predicted in my first email, that I have a lot to learn from George Christensen.

Search for the Mighty Mississippi Ends. Dam Truth Revealed!
August 1, 2002

"Before 1886, the upper Mississippi still had much of its natural character. Trees filled and covered it. Hundreds of islands, some forming and others being cut away, divided it, dispersing its waters into innumerable side channels and wetlands. During high water, the river spread into vast floodplains, filling lakes and sloughs and covering low-lying prairies. Sandbars, hundreds in the main channel alone, divided the natural river. At low water, these bars were near to or broke the surface. It is not just folklore that people once waded across the river...

"In 1823, the Virginia became the first steamboat to navigate the upper Mississippi from St. Louis to St. Paul. But to steamboat pilots, the natural river presented too many hazards, so...

...in 1866...Congress told the Corps to dig a four-foot channel in the river for steamboat pilots, which the Corps did.

In 1878...Congress told the Corps to dig deeper, to four-and-a-half feet, which the Corps did by building wing dams and closing off the side channels. As railroads began to carry more freight, shipping interests got nervous and...

...Congress told the Corps to dig deeper, which they did to six feet.

But by 1918, the river still was not deep enough. Business and shipping and navigation interests told Congress, and...

...and Congress told the Corps to dig more, to nine feet. But the Corps told Congress that they couldn't dig--now they needed dams.

So...Congress told the Corps to build dams, and they went off and built a few...

...then Congress told the Corps to build More, and they did that, too...

...and by 1940 there were 26 of them from Minneapolis to Alton, just before St. Louis, and the "River" had ceased to exist, except in myth and icon in our minds, and had become a series of "pools," each numbered according to the dam that created it."

George and I gleaned the above selected factoids from one of the ubiquitous information kiosks along the "River," normally reserved for marking historical events having to do with the destruction of Indian villages and so forth. This one, here in Alma, Wis., has maps and brochures explaining to tourists, in simple language, the fine work the Corps has done in making the river safe for navigation. Directly behind the kiosk is dam No. 4.

And here at Lock and Dam No. 4 is where I announce to George that I consider our search for the elusive "River" to have ended in failure, because "it just ain't here any more, and hasn't been for my lifetime or yours. We may as well be looking for the Holy Grail."

Each sequentially-numbered pool, to a greater or lesser degree, I suppose, retains some semblance of its pre-tampering state. The success of our failure to locate the river of the National Genetic Memory meandering somewhere among the backwaters, lakes, sloughs and wetlands we have seen, some artificial, some not, is in the revelation, the ability to see what is truly there rather than our preconceived notion of it. This is the challenge, and the reward, of travel.

We arrived at Alma just in time to witness probably the most action you'll ever see at a dam, except in times of flooding disasters--a barge being locked through. We had just finished the 15-mile ride from Pepin, after descending from the bluffs, which had been flat and lacking in novelty except for the stop we made at the Nelson Cheese Factory where we sat out front by the door sweating and chewing cheese curds, bread crumbs and various other edibles with unmatched utensils littering our bench site, providing a curious spectacle, no doubt, for the steady stream of Wisconsin citizenry, young and old, visiting the Factory Store in search of fine cheeses. I left with half a pound of Farmer's Cheese with Peppers, and five small rolls, for a future meal.

Riding from the Cheese Factory store to Alma we had passed through a mile or so of another spectacular (to me) wetland. Once more, I had marveled out loud to George that these patches of primeval nature could survive and thrive, coexisting with the Corps, working its evil so near. George did not appear impressed with the view or my marvelings. I was suspicious he knew more than me about the real "nature" of these swamps, since I have found him to be more prescient than me in these and other matters.

My suspicions were not unfounded, for among the other rah-rah-Corps brochures here at the Dam No. 4 information kiosk was one produced, no doubt, by its Eco-Arm labeled "Natural Resources on the River." From it we learned that the Corps had recently realized, in retrospect, that its activities the last 125 years or so may have had some effect on the natural environment along the river, and it was now attempting to "mimic nature to create thousands of acres of wetland plants in the navigation pools by lowering some pools two feet for thirty days during late spring or earlier summer."

With this revelation I realized that those wetlands over which I had waxed poetic and contemplative were in fact created for me! I had been duped by the Army Corps gone Green!

Well, what was I to make of this information? Corps good or Corps bad? Hard to call it "greenwashing" because the evidence of its success was right before my eyes. On the other hand, there's been a lot of water over the dams, so to speak, since that first one, and I could invoke my urban cynicism, which comes in handy when condemning something I know little about, and say these Green-Corps wetlands are tokenism, too little too late, created for PR purposes near heavily-traveled roads within gawking distance of tourists.

George didn't have the answer either, so let's leave it at that for now. But if anyone has any insight or opinions or even facts about this, email me at reddude42@yahoo.com and fill me in.

August 2, 2002
After the Epiphany of Alma ...

...everything changed.

Having little choice but to accept an updated version of the Mississippi River, complements of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, we were no longer haunted by

the ghosts of rivers past and with only a touch of nagging nostalgia we put Alma and the old river paradigm behind us and headed south once more.

Highway 35, appropriately enough, turned its back on the river south of Alma and headed inland. Out of sight of the river and out of mind, we spent the next 15 straight and level miles working out the details of our riding arrangements: how to accommodate our different styles over the long haul to come.

The first question was who sets the pedaling pace. This is a touchy subject, as anyone who has toured with others knows--rarely do two matched riders find themselves together on the road. I'm in better shape, leg- and lung-wise (Yep, despite my Pall Mall habit--believe it) than most in my age group, at least the few I know. George and I have a similar build, but he is eight years younger and carries even less excess body weight than me. But beyond mere physiology, he and his bicycle form a highly evolved organism with no unnecessary appendages, while I'm still in the awkward pterodactyl stage, you might say, a work in progress, flailing away with incompatible parts, trying to figure out which ones I really need to fly.

And luckily for me, George's legendary road stamina is exceeded only by his patience, so he lets me set the pace even though I know he dislikes riding behind my B.O.B. trailer. For one thing, he can't draft me (as if he would need to). And surely that orange safety pennant constantly flailing in his face must make him feel like a greyhound on the race track. And then there's the metal "slow-moving vehicle" reflective triangle, wedged between the B.O.B. bag and the frame. He must stare at that so much he probably sees it on the ceiling of his tent at night.

And certainly, the whole idea of the B.O.B. trailer itself, with that redundant third wheel, must remind him of some vestigial feature he eliminated in the name of efficiency many generations ago.

But all this is mostly conjecture on my part, based on a handful of offhand comments: George would never actually complain to me about those things.

How often to stop is sometimes an issue on the road, I have found. If you have never cycled cross country, you may think it's easy to stop on a bike--just put your foot down and you're there, right? Well, it's not so simple. Stop too often and you tamper with the zen of cycling--when your body, your bike and your mind are one with the passing landscape and space and time seem to meet at the horizon. This is what some call the spiritual side, valued as a time for introspection and contemplation. And George and I agree that from these periods spring insights, more or less profound, we like to think, which eventually find their way into our writing.

Balanced with this somewhat mystical dimension of biking is the more basic physiological side. Consistent with my food philosophy (see next paragraph), I don't like to stop until my body tells me it's time. George, on the other hand, having the benefit of thousands of more biking miles than me, recommends a more moderate, self-sustaining approach: "Just like eating and drinking before you're hungry or thirsty, rest before you're tired."

All that said there were no disagreements about stops. We seemed to be on the same internal stopping-watch right off the bat, and in the rare out-of-sync situations, George deferred to me.

Somewhat related to stopping is the refueling schedule. Here we had a small philosophical point to resolve. Despite (or because of) my brief but undistinguished stint in high academia at the University of Chicago some years ago, I am more inclined to listen to my body than my intellect when their messages conflict. On a long bike trip, this means, to put it simply, I don't eat until I get hungry. George, on the other hand, relies on intellectual guess-work and strikes preemptively, as it were, before hunger. Hence, the seemingly bottomless bag of peanuts he keeps within reaching distance in his handlebar bag.

Later on in our trip, after we had seen enough dams, we turned eastward into southwest Wisconsin. We had been climbing 400-foot hills all morning in an unforgiving sun and I was in pain and couldn't climb any more, so we stopped in a patch of shade. "Looks like you've bonked," George said. And in a rare didactic lapse, actually suggested I should have had something more than a cup of coffee and a Pall Mall for breakfast. "But I'm not hungry yet," I can't believe I heard myself say.

But at least I learned a useful, if hopefully infrequently, used word from George that morning. "To bonk" is the biking equivalent of running out of gas, when your engine starts consuming itself, which in this case happens to be our body. You simply can't go any further. I also learned how to prevent it. You guessed it: eat before you're hungry. It has a corollary: drink before you're thirsty.

Given George's experience on the road, I had to rethink, then and there, in that oasis of noon shade, my long-held trust in the gnawing stomach as the prime motivator, in this and possibly other of life's endeavors.

There was one more thing we had to work out on that stretch of flat road between Alma and our next campsite in Merrick State Park: it has to do with the contemplative aspect of pedaling long hours on the road, which I talked about before. Biking alone, there is no question. You are pretty much always in that state. But with a friend, there is a natural tendency to break the silence with conversation. The trick is to agree on a balance between the two. Aside from the concern of not knowing George well, my other apprehension about riding together had to do with this. On my previous Des Moines trip, I was alone, so I had plenty of time to think things through. Since I don't think clearly when I'm writing, it has to be mulled over beforehand, and stored somewhere until it gets transmitted. My fear was that a too sociable companion, however interesting and perceptive his conversation, might interrupt my thoughts to the point that they were all jumbled.

And in fact, I did find that George liked to pedal alongside and talk about his worldwide adventures quite often. This was distracting at first, I admit, but I had to ask myself, why are my thoughts more important than his? I soon realized I had nothing to fear from losing the "purity" of my own train of thought. There was plenty of room for George's stories, and they enriched the trip and hopefully this narrative as well.