

Part 8

Crossing Kansas

As I left the rolling state of Missouri I was looking forward to some flatter roads in Kansas. I didn't really know what to expect as I traveled further west everyday. Kansas does have some good rolling hills and lots of trees in the eastern half of the state. The area is really quite scenic and I was enjoying my riding toward Wichita. As we neared the middle of the state I even got back on my six speed bike with one 52 tooth front chainring that I hadn't ridden since the first day leaving New York City. I remember I picked up a rare east tailwind for about three hours one morning and cruised at over 25 mph for the first time since the start of the trip.

I had been following Route 54 since entering Missouri. I would stay on it for the next 400 miles across Kansas. Our route card said the next turn was three states away in Tucumcari, New Mexico. Route 54 was just a cement slab barely wide enough for two semi trucks to pass. It wasn't a great road for cycling and we spent lots of time pulling off the road as trucks approached our support vehicle from the rear. For comparison most of Rt. 54 has been resurfaced and widened in 1995 and now has a good six foot shoulder.

As we neared Wichita a police escort met me at the city limits. I was ready for a similar police reception I had received crossing Indianapolis. The Wichita Police whisked me along at 23 mph again. The mid day temperatures neared 98 degrees. By the time I reached the western side of town I was pooped and hot. I wanted to stop and rest but I had a deadline for another teleconferencing call at the next available pay phone 20 miles up the road and only an hour to get there. I continued to time trial until I arrived at the pay phone inside a small gas station. Susan had the interview in progress when I arrived. I was dripping wet with sweat and panting hard when she handed me the phone. I talked for about 10 minutes and gave a report of where I was today and how I was feeling. After the interview I went back outside and got on my bike. The afternoon sun was still hot and a westerly wind was starting to blow in my face. The terrain was changing with fewer trees and long flat roads. The next two days would be some of the longest and most brutal of the whole record attempt.

The afternoon wind continued to gain force as I pedaled toward Pratt, Kansas. Cattle truck were more common now. The wind was from the front left and occasionally a passing semi truck full of nervous steers would spray me with a mist of bovine piss. As I rode toward the western sunset the wind seemed to gain strength. I was used to the wind dying down at night. Not tonight. The flags in front of the local post office flutter straight out of the southwest.

Each of the towns were spaced a consistent eleven miles apart. A 200 foot tall grain elevator tower was the most prominent landmark on the horizon. A flashing red light on the top of the tower was my guiding beacon. Each hour I pedaled eleven miles to a new town. Each town was four blocks across. Then I rode out the other side of town and had 59 minutes to concentrate on the next grain tower eleven miles away.

I was starting to ride longer into the night hoping to miss some of the west headwind. After one week on the road I had arrived in Meade, Kansas having traveled 1,692 miles. Our crew had stopped in the vacant parking lot of the closed Pizza Hut. We all decided to stop and sleep a few hours. We set up the small tent on a patch of vacant lawn. The wind fluttered the nylon tent like it was being pitched on the side of Mt. Everest. I went in the motor home and crawled into the bottom bunk bed. The wind rocked the motor home as I dozed off for a few hours sleep.

We decided to try riding again at 3:00 AM. I got back on the bike while Susan and Dean Dettman followed me in the Dodge Omni support car. We rolled out of town in the pitch black of the night. The rest of the crew would sleep until sunrise and then meet us 50 miles up the road. The wind was still blowing but the road was quiet with only a few trucks per hour passing us in the night. The support car behind me cast eerie shadows on the tufts of grass that grew between the cracks on the road shoulder. I slalomed down the chip seal shoulder dodging the clumps of grass and looking for the best pavement. I was tired now and looking forward to sunrise. I had ridden 250 miles yesterday. It would be difficult to ride that far today if the wind didn't change.

End Part 8