

Part II
1981 Double Transcontinental Record
by Lon Haldeman

My first cross country ride was in June of 1981. To get ready I wasn't just preparing for a coast to coast ride, but for a 6,000 mile adventure from New York City to Los Angeles and back to New York. The record was 36 days set by Victor Vincente in 1974. I was hoping to do it in 28 days. I was naive about what it took to cross the country. Being naive was probably a good thing. I would not have attempted the Double Transcontinental Record had I known what I was getting into. This was my Kon Tiki event of similar to getting on a small raft and crossing the Pacific Ocean. I knew where I was heading, but I didn't have any idea of what I would encounter along the way. My enthusiasm made up for my lack of knowledge.

I grew up in rural northern Illinois just five miles from Wisconsin. I had been to Colorado, but not any further west than the Rocky Mountains and not any further east than Ohio. I visualized riding the mountains of Pennsylvania by training on the 50 foot high rolling hills near my home. Most of them could be climbed in 20 pedal strokes. I didn't have any idea of what it took to climb a mountain for miles at with a 9 percent grade.

At the riding pace I would need to maintain, physiologists calculated the effort being equivalent to doing a full Ironman Triathlon everyday. In simpler terms it would be similar to climbing 102 flights of stairs to the top of the Empire State Building 40 times per day (that's about 4,000 flights per day in Fit-Bit terms). My riding would not be totally mindless plodding for mile after mile. Together with my crew we would need to deal with the changeable weather, road conditions, navigation and other logistical challenges. This record attempt effort was similar to a marathon runner climbing a slippery mountain slope nonstop for a month. Since I had never done an Ironman Triathlon, run a marathon or been to the Empire State building I didn't know what I was getting myself into. Like I said before, being naive was a good thing.

I had been thinking about trying to break the transcontinental record since I was a teenager in the mid 1970's. When I was 12 years old I started taking longer and longer rides out into the farm fields that surrounded my hometown of Harvard, Illinois. It was the perfect place to ride a bike and explore the grid work of roads laid out in neat one mile squares. I had a bike with coaster brake and wide tires. I expect 10 mph was a good cruising pace for me. The closest town of Chemung was three and a half miles away. It was another four miles to the town of Capron and another four miles north to the village of Sharon and then eleven miles back home. By taking a variety of routes between these towns I could make a nice 25 mile loop. As a twelve year old I thought I had ridden around the world. Every few weeks I would explore a little further from home. Each time I conquered a new distance of 30 miles, 40 miles or 50 miles I thought I had set a new record (which I had for me).

One time I saw a group of other riders in my hometown. They didn't look like the other boys I usually rode with. These were adult riders with fancy bikes that had multiple gears and skinny tires. They had ridden to Harvard from the distant city of Rockford located 30 miles away. I had been to Rockford in a car with my parents but I considered it too far to ride to by bike. I talked to the alien riders and asked them about their bikes and equipment. "Why did they wear black shorts? Why did they have straps on their pedals? Why did they have metal slots nailed to the bottom of their shoes?" "Why did their shoes have stiff soles". The riders were patient with me and helpful as they explained the advantages of their equipment. I was excited to learn so much about cycling in just a few minutes.

I knew I had to learn more and improve my equipment. I went home and cut off my black dress pants I wore to Sunday School. Now I had black cycling shorts. Then I traced the soles of my feet on a piece of thin aluminum and cut out the pattern to make stiffer insoles for my tennis shoes. My grandfather had found an old Hercules (Raleigh) "English Racer" bike in a dumpster and gave it to me. It was missing shift cables and brake shoes. I

made new brake shoes out of wood. I shifted the rear derailleur by stopping and putting different size sticks in the pivots of the rear derailleur. The shifting process slow, but it was positive. The Hercules bike was better than my coaster brake model. I didn't have much money so I started to upgrade my equipment a little at a time with lawn mowing wages. Now I had to get myself in shape.

Over the next several years I rode further and further from home. I was racking up the miles by riding a few hundred miles per week. During my high school years I was considered a little bit odd by spending so much time on my bike. When I was able to get a drivers license I didn't go to the DMV to get my license until months afterward. I finally took the test because I was told I was going to have to take drivers education again if my paperwork expired.

During my teenage years I had three different bikes. My first 10 speed was a white AMF "Scorcher" I bought from the local hardware store for \$69 that came unassembled in a box. When I had worn out the bearings several times in two years, I then bought a yellow "Azuki" for \$189. That was my first bike with aluminum rims and cotterless cranks. I rode that bike on my first Century ride when I was 15 years old. When I graduated from high school my parents said they would help me buy a better bike. I wanted to get a silver Schwinn "Voyager" for \$369. My parents thought that was a lot of money for a bike but I convinced them it would be worth it if I saved on gas by riding 50 miles round trip to the junior college for the next two years. I didn't learn much at college those years but I was riding over 600 miles per week including a double century on the weekend. It was perfect training for the longer events to come.

During those years I began riding longer rides that lasted into the night. There were not any organized long distance events in my part of the country. I had to make up long weekend rides and planned my own events. I started riding a fixed gear bike with a 42 x 15 gear to help my spinning. That was

the bike I used on my longer events that summer. For my first triple century, I started riding at 3:00 AM by going out and back on a desolate ten mile section of highway near my house. When the sun came up I did 50 mile loops and came back to my house to refill waterbottles and grab a snack for my pocket. By sundown I had ridden 300 miles in a little under 18 hours. My first 400 mile ride in under 24 hours was ridden in a similar way. At night I rode on the farm roads with a "Wonder Lite" which would barely shine a yellow beam of light on the road fifteen feet ahead.

My longest event of the summer was a 407 mile route from northern Wisconsin starting at Lake Superior and going south across the state to Illinois. The whole experience of riding point to point and dealing with the logistics of being on the road was fascinating for me. A friend was going to support me along the way with his van. When we drove north to the start his van over heated several times and we would need to wait for over an hour before we could drive for another hour. We didn't arrive at the starting town until after midnight. There were no motels so I slept on the ground in a state park and my friend slept in his van with his dog. I was awake most of the night because of excitement and mosquitos. At 5:00 AM I was ready to go. At sunrise we went down to the boat dock on Lake Superior and took a farewell photo of me at the pier and a photo of my bike cyclometer. I got on my one speed bike and settled into my steady 18 mph pace. I was using a 42 x 14 gear (82 inches) with the hope that the headwinds would not be too strong today. In the summer the winds usually blew from the southwest and I would have a quartering headwind most of the day.

My friend stayed behind because he wanted to go fishing for a few hours in Lake Superior. I was basically riding on my own with two water bottles and pocket full of granola bars. After 75 miles my friend caught up to me and I refilled my bottles and pockets with supplies. I was making good time and maintaining my 18 mph average. I met my friend a few more times during the day for more supplies. My parents had agreed to meet us at sundown and drive behind me at night with their Ford station wagon. It was good to see

them and this was their first time driving support at night and the first time for me riding with the car headlights which were 100 times better than my Wonder Lite. The winds died down and it was nice to ride in the coolness of the night. We continued on smaller farm roads until sunrise. I arrived at the Illinois state line in the little town of Big Foot having ridden 407 miles in 23 hours and 7 minutes on my one speed bike. I was happy with the experience of riding all night and going somewhere. I knew I wanted to try more long distance rides.

I was becoming more and more fascinated with attempting the United States Transcontinental Record. I collected all the articles I could find in Velo-News, Bike World, and BICYCLING magazines. In the mid 1970's what caught my interest were the Kvale brothers from Minnesota who had ridden together across the country in 14 days averaging a little over 200 miles per day. They were good nationally known racers who had fun on their cross country record by sprinting each other to city limit signs. They slept all night and ate in restaurants. It sounded like something I could do.

End Part II