

Part 21

The middle 1,000 miles of the United States is beyond the excitement of the start and too far from the anticipation of the finish. Reaching the middle third of the country is always a good time to philosophize about "why am I doin' this?" I rode the first 1,000 miles in a little under four days. The final 1,000 miles wouldn't begin until the Mississippi River.

In future years moods of depression would be typical for RAAM racers riding across the middle third. Not only was the middle third located 1,000 miles from the start or finish, there was nothing else to look forward to in the middle 1,000 miles. The short term goal of crossing the desert and climbing the western mountains was over. The goal of the middle third was just another grain mill tower eleven miles straight ahead.

I was having the same thoughts as when I had ridden the opposite direction more than eight days earlier. The only difference now is that I knew what waited ahead in each town. The winds were favorable but not as strong as the headwinds when I was heading west. Last week the winds were rocking the motor home and blowing the hats off crew members. Now the tailwinds were barely bending the long grass that lined the road.

I had plenty of time to think about why I was out riding my bike eighteen hours per day. While I was riding down the road at 17-20 miles per hour I bet there were thousands of better cyclists capable of going faster. The only thing that made me unique is that I was here doing it.

As I continued riding I thought about all the training and logistics it took to get this record attempt together. I thought about my parents taking out a loan to get the extra \$10,000 we needed to start the trip. I thought about the six crew members who were donating 35 days of their time including travel to the start and finish. I had been training 20,000 miles per year for the past three years. All I had been thinking about for three years was doing this record attempt. Now I was doing it. Now I was out here in the middle of the New Mexico prairie heading toward Texas.

As I kept riding I thought about this opportunity and why I better not waste everything that made this ride possible. I had a new focus to keep going and make the most of a special chance to ride back and forth across America.

Today would include four states. We would depart New Mexico and clip the corner of the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles before entering the southern region of Kansas. We would be on Route 54 for almost 1,000 miles to Jacksonville, IL. The past 17 days were taking their toll on my hands and feet.

My feet would swell in the afternoon and my shoes were too tight.

Sometimes I rode without socks and poured ice water on my shoes. The main problem was that the nerves under the base of my toes were inflamed. The symptom is known as "hotfoot" and the feet become super sensitive instead of numb. The feeling is similar to the burning sensation of thawing frozen toes after several hours of freezing conditions. A rider's feet become so tender that even removing their shoes and massaging their feet is painful until after waiting 15 minutes for the blood to recirculate.

The flat terrain offered few times to coast and rest on the downhills. The steady cadence of 80 revolutions per minute and 300 strokes per mile gave my feet little time to recover. My seat was hurting and various types of saddle sores had come and gone during the trip. Pressure sores are caused by bruising in specific areas. Sometimes changing saddles or standing will relieve the pain for a few minutes. When a rider starts getting tired the less power that is applied to the pedals and the more weight is supported by the saddle. A rider pedaling full force is basically straddling their saddles with very little weight on the seat. After several hours of riding the pedaling force continues to decline and the weight on the saddle increases. After several days pedaling force is even less and ratio of weight on the saddle is supporting more of the rider's weight. After 17 days of riding I was in survival mode and doing my best to propel my bike with as much leg strength as I had left. Unfortunately my rear end was feeling most of the force. I could stand up for a few minutes but then my feet would get sore. My hands were also tender from hanging onto the handlebars 18 hours per day. Such is the dilemma of riding a bike across the country. The only way to get comfortable was to get this ride over as fast as possible and get off this bike.

Thinking about the discomfort made it worse. Looking ahead to the grain silo was my focus for the next hour. My brain tried to focus and tell me the obvious..."You got to make progress and get there. Don't think about how far you had gone or how far yet to go. Live in the moment. Make every pedal stroke count. Don't think about burning feet or a stinging butt. Make the most of daylight riding. The night will come and your feet will feel better. The sandman of sleep will come and visit. Six more hours till dark. Got to ride another 100 miles in daylight". My mind races through random thoughts.

Everything hurts when I think about it. I can't think about it. I tell myself..“Concentrate, concentrate, concentrate on getting down the road”.

Part 22

I rolled into Greensburg, Kansas at 10:00 PM, completing 278 miles today. The warm summer night was filled with the chirp of crickets. We were leaving the west behind and my skin felt the dampness from the midwest humidity. I went into the motorhome and my mom had a full dinner waiting on the foldout table. I tried to eat some boiled potatoes and vegetables. My Mom had the challenging job of trying to cook in a motorhome that was starting and stopping every half hour. She did a great job of making real meals for the crew and me. Tonight I was hungry but too tired to eat much. After 18 hours on the bike it was hard to get off and start eating. I talked with my dad and brother Ken about the plan for tomorrow. We would start riding at sunrise at about 5:00 AM. I could get a full seven hours of rest. Now I only wanted to lay down and sleep. I peeled off my sweat soaked jersey and took a quick sponge bath. I crawled into the lower bunk in the bed in the rear of the motor home. Within moments I was asleep.

Route 54 across Kansas was a cement slab highway in 1981. The grass grew right up to the edge of the road because there wasn't any gravel shoulder. The support car that was following me tried to yield as much of the lane as possible when a truck approached from the rear and drive the car most of the way onto the grass. Sometimes as two trucks would come from the front and the rear we could tell they would meet at the same time they passed us. The support car and me with my bike would bail out completely on the grass. I would need to stop and lift my bike back on the cement roadway to restart

riding. Staying safe was my biggest concern about riding across the country. I am sure we lost a bunch of time by getting off the road and waiting for traffic to pass. The good thing is we were safe and most motorist gave us a friendly honk and wave as the passed.

It had been almost two weeks since we had passed through Wichita on our way east. As we got closer to the city Susan contacted the police department and asked if we could get another police escort across town. The good thing about dealing with the police on our return trip is that they remembered us and it was easier for them to understand what we were requesting. Today the Wichita police were waiting for me on the west side of town with two motorcycles patrolmen. As I rode into the city the motorcycles leapfrogged through each intersection with one patrolman stopping cross traffic while the other patrolman sped ahead to the next traffic light. I was making good time and holding a steady 22 mph pace. I rolled out the east side of town and into the rural farm country again. It had been another good day and I was now halfway across the country.

Eastern Kansas is not as flat as the western half of the state. Route 54 started a series of rolling hills that descended into shallow valleys that crossed small creeks. The variety of terrain was a welcome change because the towns were hidden from view until I approached the final mile toward Main Street.

As I pedaled through Iola, Kansas I noticed the well kept houses with neatly mowed lawns. Our motorhome was parked along the curb and my dad was

standing by the back bumper. As I approached he waved me over and said the boy who lived in the house where he had parked was wondering what we were doing. When my dad explained about the record attempt the boy had offered the crew to use his house to take showers. My dad said they had a shower waiting for me. It was mid day and about 90 degrees and didn't think taking a shower would do me any good with 125 miles yet to ride today. My dad said it would do me good since I hadn't had a real shower in five days since leaving California.

I went inside the two story Victorian house and the boy showed be the way upstairs to the bathroom. It was an original style clawfoot bathtub with a hand held shower sprayer. It wasn't my idea of a shower because I had to squat on on my knees and try not to spray water all over the floor. My knees and ankles hadn't been bent so sharply in weeks. My legs could only go in circles. I tried not to tip over as I used the sprayer. I was able to get enough water on my head and back to wash my hair with shampoo. I changed into a clean jersey and shorts and walked back down stairs. My bike was waiting for me near the motorhome. I got on it and rode away while confirming with the crew that they would chase me down in about a half hour. My whole shower stop had taken about 15 minutes. Even though I was sweating again by the time I left town, I did feel better and the distraction of getting off the bike made me feel like I could keep riding into the night.

Spoiler alert...

Little did we know how my path would cross with the boy from Iola again the following year when the first Great American Bike Race (Race Across Across AMerica) would ride though Iola.

Part 23 Across Missouri

I had my last sleep break in Kansas just before entering Missouri. I woke up to a cool morning that was damp from the evening dew. I needed to wear a jacket at sunrise but I knew the mid summer heat would be waiting again in a few hours. Rolling through the border town of Nevada, Missouri the terrain became noticeably hillier. The grades on Rt. 54 were much steeper than in Kansas. I had ridden this same road two weeks earlier and hadn't been bothered by how steep the grades were. Now I was getting more tired and using 2 or 3 lower hill climbing gears than the last time I was here.

At the small cross roads town of Mack's Creek there is a little gas station and a roadside picnic area. It was early afternoon and getting hot. I was feeling very sleepy and just wanted to close my eyes for half an hour. The motorhome was waiting in the picnic area. Instead of going into the RV the crew rolled out the foam mat I had last used during my long night heading to Albuquerque in New Mexico. I laid down on the mat in the shade and fell asleep right away. After 30 minutes the crew shook me awake and I was back on the bike.

The upcoming section of Rt. 54 crossed the Lake of the Ozark's region. This is one of my favorite areas because of the activities along the roadside. The billboards still promoted "Walnut Bowls and Factory Seconds". The Elvis Chapel was offering weddings in thirty minutes. Stores advertised Bait, Beer and Ammo. The area is like a mini Las Vegas organized by hillbillies. The best part for me were the distractions and interesting things to see. The miles past quickly and soon I was heading toward the state capitol in Jefferson City.

It was getting near sundown and my crew was starting to think about where we would spend the night. I still felt I could get in another 60 miles in the next four hours. The hills were getting more shallow and the winds were favorable out of the southwest. Now was a good time to stay on the bike as long as possible. As I crossed interstate 70 the route becomes very flat. I received a great surprise when my friends from St. Louis were waiting for me. The road was quiet and we were able to ride and talk the next 20 miles riding into Mexico, Missouri. Just to be able to talk to somebody was a real treat on a warm, humid, quite night. By midnight I reached the far side of town. The motorhome was waiting. I bid goodbye to my friends who were going to drive back to St. Louis tonight. This had been my longest riding day of the record attempt so far. I covered 293 miles in about 18 hours. Not a bad day considering the Ozark hills. Tomorrow would be much flatter heading into Illinois.

Part 24 Across Illinois

The final miles through the Mississippi River bottomland are very flat. The road was a concrete slab without a shoulder. Fortunately the traffic was light when I reached the river bridge at the town of Louisiana. The old narrow silver metal bridge was wide enough for one truck to cross at a time. I sprinted across the bridge into Illinois. It was nice to be back in my home state.

During the whole Double Transcontinentatl Record the crew had been rationing the funds to buy gas and food. Before the ride I had only needed to worry about training and getting the bike equipment ready. Although I had tried to

get sponsorship for the record attempt I didn't have a good estimate on how much crossing the country would cost. A week before the ride started, during one of our final crew meetings, my friend Jerry Powers asked about our budget. He did a quick calculation and estimated we had about one third of the budget we needed. I was totally naive about the finances and figured we would just start riding and see what happened. Jerry was much more concerned about raising more money and he started contacting his friends and businesses around the Harvard, Illinois area. During the coming weeks he would raise several thousand dollars that the crew could use for gas and food. Reflecting back on all the things that could have gone wrong during this Double Transcontinental Record Attempt I realized years later how lucky we were to have made it this far. The logistics of putting the whole ride together could have been overwhelming. Our route was just a magic marker line on an AAA State Map. Our only communication between vehicles were just quick notes passed from the side of the road. We didn't know what we didn't know. We only knew we needed to keep moving and hopefully travel at least 250 miles per day.

As I rode toward central Illinois I had to cross the Illinois River again near the small town of Detroit. That is where our crew got lost three weeks earlier when we were heading west and took me on a 20 mile detour around the bridge. Today I was told to ride through the bridge construction "no matter what" and the support car behind me would take the long detour going around. The plan was for the other motorhome crew to drive ahead and be waiting on the other side of the bridge. I would ride across the bridge and meet them on the other side. When I got to the bridge the signs said BRIDGE CLOSED. There were several workers on the road and they said I could walk

across. I bid farewell to my support car and I walked the 100 meters over the bridge. When I got to the other side I didn't see my motorhome so I started riding again. Those were the days before cell phones or good walkie talkie radios so I didn't have any idea where my crew was. I figured the vehicles must have been delayed driving the long loop on the detour route.

After about an hour later I had ridden 15 miles from the bridge and my support car drove up beside me. They hadn't seen the motorhome either. They were not sure if I was ahead or behind. They had asked the workers on the bridge if they had seen a bike rider and they said the only person who had crossed the bridge was a "black guy". I had a really dark tan so I could have easily been considered a black guy. We had a good chuckle about the misunderstanding. Years later I had a black friend who wanted to be the first black guy to race across the United States. I took him that he could be the first Afro American but that I was the first "black guy".

My midday I was heading through Jacksonville toward the state capitol in Springfield, Illinois. My mom had been in contact with friends at home in Harvard, Illinois. They had made arrangements with the mayor of Harvard and several other businessmen in town to meet us near Springfield. The group was taking a private plane and flying south. They were bringing a collection of cash donations to support our remaining days across the country. The timing was perfect because the crew was almost out of money to buy gas and food. My mom met them at the airport and received the donations. We are forever grateful to Jerry Powers for the work he did collecting donations for the record attempt.

The local bank in my hometown of Harvard, Illinois had a map of the United States with stick pins charting my progress across the country. The bank had a collection box for donations to keep the ride going. It was a community effort I didn't realize until after the trip had ended. There were so many things that could have gone wrong during the record ride and this was another example of how everyone pulled together to keep it on schedule.

I would keep riding until 9:30 PM to Crisman, Illinois near the Indiana border. I had ridden 228 miles without much help from the wind today. Tomorrow would be another state to cross without many hills. I was still on schedule to break 12 days across the country but I didn't have much time to spare.

Part 25

We began riding at 4:45 AM. The faint glow of sunrise gave me enough light to ride without lights. I crossed into Indiana on Rt. 36 heading toward Indianapolis. A police escort would be waiting to take me across the city. There were over 50 traffic lights downtown and not having to wait for at least half of them would save almost an hour.

On the west side of the city two police cars were waiting for me and our support car. One of the police cars would drive ahead with lights flashing and wait in the intersections until I passed. The police car behind me would then leapfrog ahead to the next traffic light. The process would be repeated 50 times across the city. Our crew had several escorts already across the country so we were familiar with how to stay close to the police escort. As the police cars took us across the city they probably felt that 25 mph was a slow pace to maintain. For me on the bike I felt that I was sprinting to make

it through each intersection and not delay the escort. At this point in the ride my legs could maintain 18 mph for hours but the slightest increase in effort caused me to have to stand on the pedals to pick up the pace. Finally we reached the east side of town and the police escort returned to their regular duties. I could relax into my 18 mph plodding speed.

We were now on Old Rt. 40 heading toward Ohio. This was part of the first highways in America from the mid 1800's. It was suppose to go across the United States but only went as far as St. Louis before the railroads were developed and took away the need for a cross country wagon road. The interstate system took away most of the eastern traffic in the 1960's. Now Old Rt. 40 was a wide 4-lane without much traffic. It was one of my favorite sections of highway to ride.

Entering Ohio near Richmond, Indiana we started getting more traffic as we rode toward the Dayton, Ohio area. It was now late afternoon. I wanted to get in a good long day and put some miles in the bank before we got into the mountains again. I kept riding until almost 11:00 PM before we stopped near Mount Sterling, Ohio. It had been a good day and we covered 248 miles for the day.