Peaks, Pines and Prairies
A Bicycle Tour
July 22 – 29, 2006

by Robert A. Beezer
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Preface

This is an account of an eight day bicycle tour through the northeast corner of Oregon, the ninth edition of an annual charity ride organized by Tom Betterbed and Louise Pettie to support Mary Bridge Children’s Hospital.

By request, I have documented the 2003 and 2005 editions of the ride and am back to do the same for 2006. I have tried to capture the memorable moments, the nature of the tour, and the joys of traveling and living with a group sharing a common goal. Necessarily, much of what is written here has been influenced by my own ride, but other riders have been generous in sharing anecdotes and impressions, so I have tried hard to make this an account that will be memorable for all involved. Photographs are by Jim Harrington, John Hornby, Lunette Birrencott, Vicki Betterbed, David Beezer and Rob Beezer.

We rode 428 miles and climbed around 24,211 vertical feet (about four and a half miles) over six days. Most riders rode some extra miles on the two rest days. There were no serious injuries or sickness, nor were there any serious mechanical problems that caused any delays. The weather was clear, dry, and incredibly hot.

I hope you find this description of our ride accurate, interesting, entertaining, and evocative.

Robert A. Beezer
Gig Harbor, Washington
August, 2006
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The People

**Rob and David Beezer**  Rob is a three-time rider, maintainer of the Crankers email list. Group historian. 47 years old, mathematics professor at University of Puget Sound. David is part of the support crew: taking photographs, keeping the soda pop coolers stocked and iced, raising and lowering tents, and any other duties as assigned. He rode most days in the truck, but also rode his bike on a few stretches of the route.

**Vicki, Tom, Tommy, Claire Betterbed**  Tom (51), Vicki (49), Tommy (19), Claire (15) form the Betterbed family together with sister Elizabeth who has begun college at West Point this summer. Tom is a ten-time rider (the only one!), Tommy is doing the ride for the fourth time, and this is Claire's first time. Tommy has been along on every ride, first as support, then riding segments, then doing the entire ride. Vicki is an integral part of the support team — on the road and in camp, she rode with Louise most days in the motor home. Tom is group leader *über alles*. Vicki is a mathematics teacher at Gig Harbor High School, while Tom works in the Clover Park School District as Supervisor of Special Education. Tom has ridden across America, "Coast-to Coast" (Seattle to Asbury Park, New Jersey, 3436 miles).

**Lunette Birrencott**  First-time rider, 50 years old. A physical therapist in the Clover Park School District.

**Mike Blondin**  Six-time rider, 51 years old, marketing coordinator for Metro Transit King County. Youth soccer coach.

**Rick Creatura**  Second-time rider. Rick (53) is a lawyer in Tacoma.

**Mimi, Ken and Huckleberry Fielding**  Mimi (57) and Ken (58) helped Krista drive the route back in October, so are accessories to the route planning. Mimi is a first-time rider, while Ken volunteered at the last minute to come along as truck driver, on the condition his dog, Huckleberry, could accompany him.

**Pat and Jim Harrington**  Pat has ridden nine years and Jim has ridden eight. Pat is a psychiatric nurse who occasionally facilitates business training and team retreats, while Jim is a retired Northwest Airlines pilot.
John Hornby  Six-time rider. Involved in route planning for three of the rides. 61 years old, IT management consultant.

Evonne Howard, Bruce Pyrah  Bruce (55) is a first-time rider and a commercial real estate appraiser, while Evonne (58) is a key sag wagon driver who is a 5th grade teacher in real life.

Mike and Joan McLean  Mike is driving support this year, Joan is riding. Seventh year for both. Mike is a retired pilot for United Airlines, Joan is a part-time (one day a month) dental hygienist. Joan just turned 63, Mike is 64.

Dave Mumper  Age 63, retired Weyerhaeuser executive. Many-time rider.

Krista Pearson  Third-time rider, and responsible for this year’s route. Lawyer on an extended sabbatical. Responsible for all riders’ snacks. 49 years old.

Louise Pettie  Louise is the center of the support team. She prepares for many weeks in advance, keeps the food organized, arranges the campsites each day and directs the meals. Besides Tom and Tommy, the only other person to be on all ten trips.

Fred Root  Fred is the group mechanic, in real life he evaluates repairs on Navy turbine engines. Fred is an nine-time rider. Rides to stay in shape for the ski season.

Steve and Gayl Skibbs  Steve is a nine-time rider, 57 years old, owner-broker Windermere Real Estate. The one year he missed the ride, he was riding across America (southern route). Gayl is along for the first time, serving as a key sag wagon driver.

Chris Staehli  Third-time rider, tri-athlete. 58 years old, mechanical engineer for marine vessels. Riding a new bike this year.

Leelee, Marsden, Emily, Colter and Gracie Stewart  Leelee (43), Marsden (47), Emily (14), Colter (12), and Gracie (5) form the Stewart family. Every day some combination rides some portion of the course, while the remainder ride in the car. But for Huckleberry, Gracie would be the group mascot in camp. Leelee is an internist and Marsden is an anesthesiologist. Six-time riders.

Cheryl and Al Truscott  Al and Cheryl are riding their tandem in this year’s tour. Al is a doctor with Group Health, and an active Ironman competitor.

Wally Tweden  Many-time rider. Retired United Airlines pilot.
The People

Joan McLean
Mike McLean
Dave Mumper
Krista Pearson
Bruce Pyrah
Louise Pettie
Fred Root
Steve Skibbs
Chris Staehli
Al Truscott
Cheryl Truscott
Wally Tweden
Betterbeds: Vicki, Tom, Tommy, Claire

Stewarts: Emily, Marsden, Grace (w/ Louise), Leelee, Colter
The Ride

Pendleton to Elgin
Saturday, July 22: 65 miles, 4870 feet elevation gain

We met up at the Super 8 Motel in Pendleton on Friday night. There was a late-night congress in the parking lot to debate the merits of an early start. The whole northwest corner of the country was at the start of heat wave, with temperatures forecast to be 105 degrees in northeast Oregon. So a 9 AM start seemed inadvisable. It was decided we would start breakfast at 6 AM in back of the motel.

Most riders were up early, eating a light breakfast shortly after it was put out. We lost 200 feet immediately as we hooked up on Highway 11 out of Pendleton to the northeast, but quickly gained a rough road with almost no traffic. That lead us to Adams were we hopped back on Highway 11 up to Athena. The temperature at 8 or 9 AM was about 85 degrees, but the shoulder was good and we made good time. From Adams we headed down into the delightful town of Weston, with stops at the well-shaded city park and its water fountain. It was the last bit of cool for the day.

From Weston (at 2000 feet elevation), we got on State Route 104, the road for the remainder of the day. It quickly headed uphill, and continued at about 6% for 4 miles. At each turn, the next turn up the road would look like a summit, but around that turn there was always another ramp kicking up. There was little shade, and eventually Mimi succumbed, getting goofy for a few moments and nearly passing out. Mike McLean was on the scene within moments, and some shade (a protective wall of riders), and some water quickly brought Mimi around. But she opted for the car from there. After about a total 1000 foot of gain, the grade eased some and the terrain in the high country was more varied, though we still headed upwards.

As we moved up the temperature eased with elevation. But as the day wore on the temperature increased. It was about 98 degrees for most of the climb. Mumper ran out of gas, and later cramped up in the car, pinning Mike by the side of the road as he iced Mumper's legs and helped get him right. Several others took advantage of the cars to make it up the hill. The middle 1000 feet gave way to the final 1000 feet of elevation, which rose steadily again and included several gravel sections where the road was being rebuilt.

Lunch was at a Sno-Park a couple miles past the small community of Tollgate. Louise provided a nice spread featuring meat sandwiches. Only Wally was missing, since he drove into Pendleton in the morning anticipating a 9 AM start. Without water and support on the final climb, he succumbed to the heat as well, but fortunately Mike was headed back to check on him anyway. (Photo [9])
The Ride

Out of lunch the road went up and down for a while, eventually crossing the summit of the Blue Mountains at a bit over 5000 feet. A mile or two later, the descent began. And what a descent. Five or six percent grades, easy turns and very little traffic. Much of it was 40 miles an hour, rarely under 20 miles an hour. So the final 20 miles of the ride went quickly, but the price we paid was a rise in temperature. Into the town of Elgin, as we passed a large lumber mill, the temperature had risen to 105 degrees.

Our campground is a municipal operation. There’s a creek along one boundary that nobody seems to want to swim in. The facilities, according to Mumper, “are the best we’ve ever had on these trips.” Dinner was the traditional turkey, gravy, mashed potatoes, stuffing, cranberry sauce and berry cobbler, preceded by the traditional prayer and followed by the traditional route meeting. As most were preparing to turn in for the night, the Stewart family arrived in camp. (Photo [2][9])

Ride Notes: Rick lost a molar while eating a chocolate chip cookie. John had two flats from riding the gravel, as did Fred.

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Elgin to Wallowa Lake

Sunday, July 23: 59 miles, 4400 feet elevation gain

Breakfast was scheduled for a 6 AM serving, so riders began stirring shortly after 5 AM. Hot breakfast featured sausage, pancakes and oatmeal. Knowing the day began with a climb, riders began departing around 6:45 AM while the temperature was a very pleasant 73 degrees. Up the first climb, the Oregon State Police had a car pulled over. As we approached we saw the freshly killed deer and as we passed the patrol car, we looked back at the late model Honda, whose right front quarter was demolished.

The first climb was about 1000 feet gain over nine miles. We crested at about 3600 feet elevation and began a fantastic four mile descent giving it all back on smooth asphalt with sweeping turns and picturesque vistas to the south through the canyons. We passed a dead rattlesnake on the road, and learned later that it had been run over the night before by Butch, a former county sheriff. He hates rattlesnakes so much he looped back and ran over it again. “It sounded like a .22 going off when I first hit it,” he said.

The climb finished along the Minam River, about a quarter mile before its confluence with the Wallowa River. A highway bridge took us directly over the juncture. From here we traveled about ten miles in a narrow canyon, alongside the Wallowa River, passing fishermen as we gained elevation calmly on a 1% grade. When the valley widened, the road continued to slowly rise, to where we eventually matched our high point prior to the long descent. The valley contained some picture-postcard ranches, and wide swathes of green wheat, all with the 9,000 foot Wallowa Mountains for a backdrop. In Pendleton the wheat was brown, dry and ready for harvest, but here, at elevation, the stems are still green, and only the ear has turned golden. (Photo [3][10])

There was a mass smoothie and espresso stop in Wallowa. As David shot photos of the riders, Rick christened the stretch of highway “Champs Wallowa,” partly in honor of Floyd Landis’ Tour de France victory this morning in Paris on the Champs-Elysses.

Lunch was to be in Lostine, but with the early start it seemed too early to produce a full meal at mile 35, so instead a selection of snacks was brought out of the truck. While
Photo 1  Blue Mountain Summit Lunch

Photo 2  Elgin Camp
Photo 3 Wallowa Valley Ranches

Photo 4 Wallowa Valley Road
Photo 5  Tent Duty

Photo 6  Louise's Kitchen

Photo 7  Serious Tailgate
lounging in the shade, the maintenance man rolled up in his ATV for some conversation. He inquired about our route, and for Tuesday’s leg, Ken began a description. The maintenance man seemed to understand and said, “I dough no all dem road names, but you go up Sheep Crik, then drop down Pine Crik, then back up Gum Crik, and down Pine Crik.” Or something like that. Ken agreed enthusiastically, having spent some time studying tomorrow’s route with his GPS. The conversation then turned to road kill, and this morning’s incident, to which the maintenance man countered with the story of the dead doe who was very soon running (oozing) across the road. “It can happen awful quick in this heat,” he reminded us.

There was an inflatable air-bed replacement in Enterprise and refreshments in Joseph. Also, in Joseph there was a gathering of local Indians and other residents. Several attended the ceremony, which featured a sermon from the shaman, with the principal tenets being (1) do not be afraid, (2) religion is not worth fighting over, (3) the color of your skin does not matter, and (4) do not forget your culture.

The Little Store in Enterprise featured an impressive collection of deer trophies on the walls. And it was noted that there were no signs about selling tobacco or alcohol to minors, but there was a sign saying “Persons under 18 may not buy ammo.” In Joseph, there was a sign on the main drag saying “Our little town is heaven to us, please don’t drive like hell thru it!”

A short climb out of Joseph brought us up over the terminal moraine of an ancient glacier, past the grave of Chief Joseph and alongside Wallowa Lake. The five mile long lake lies between the lateral moraines of the glacier, with the state park campground at the southern end. We have a group site that at first looked a bit substandard, but seemed to work out well in the end. We did lack power, so the generator was used to power the refrigerator and freezer. For the evening, the truck was moved into Louise’s individual site which did have hookups. (Photo 8 [13])

Dinner was ravioli and spinach salad, with brownies for dessert. With a rest day following, the nightly meeting required more discussion than usual.

Ride Notes: David had a personal best 24 miles and a flat. The junior Stewarts did the first 25 miles or so.

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**Rest Day at Wallowa Lake**

**Monday, July 24**

Today was one of two planned rest days on this year’s tour. As such there was a wide variety of activities planned for the day. First the cycling.

Fred hung out for the 8:30 AM breakfast, then went long to the Oregon-Washington border. He clocked just over 100 miles round trip, carefully rationing his water due the isolated country. At one point he had to disconnect a sprinkler at an unattended highway maintenance shed to refresh his supply.

Rick, Wally, Bruce, Chris and John headed east and north very early, attempting to do something shorter while the temperatures stayed reasonable. Mike drove some of them out partway to shorten up the mileage. The elusive Inmahah viewpoint never materialized, but a cafe with a great breakfast did. Chris had a close encounter with a deer just as he began
Photo 8  Wallowa Camp

Photo 9  Wallowa Camp, Vacated
Photo 10  Wallowa Lake

Photo 11  Mt. Howard Tram

Photo 12  Camp Visitor

Photo 13  Tired in Wallowa
Photo 14  T-Shirt Dinner

Photo 15  Bleacher Dinner
his ride. Wally and Chris ran short of water on their return, but Mike was there to refuel them. There were a few other shorter rides taken during the day.

Another group ascended Mt. Howard on the tramway, taking advantage of clear skies and looking for cooler temperatures. The vistas from 8,000 feet were tremendous, and the geology lessons on the valley floor were made clearer. There were many tame chipmunks and squirrels, and Krista counseled the public on the dangers of feeding the wildlife. Some German tourists agreed, but said “she is right, but here, it is probably too late,” and since the restaurant sells squirrel food, the German won that round. While hiking the two miles of trails, the group came across a hang glider being assembled for a flight. Fourty-five minutes later, the pilot strapped in, waited several minutes for a steady breeze and ran down a short steep ramp to the edge of a cliff and he was off. A minute into his flight he began circling skyward in the updrafts, attracting the close inspection of a golden eagle. Soon, he was far above us, gaining altitude towards a menacing cloud that was getting ever blacker. It was possible that he could climb as high as 16,000 feet and then land in Halfway (Tuesday’s destination) or Wallowa. Lunch at the Summit House featured a brief rain shower from the aforementioned cloud, and a single, deafening thunderclap that alarmed Mimi and threatened to shutdown the tram. (Photo 10 [14] (Photo 11 [14])

Much of the day was spent regrouping, resting and recuperating. There were trips into Joseph, some laundry, some bike repair and other preparations for the next few days of the tour. Swimming, playing cards, naps, phone calls, riding go-karts and reading rounded out the day for some.

Dinner was beef stroganoff, and the subsequent meeting included Al’s medical analysis of the bonks of the previous days (at Mumper’s request). With only three turns on the entire route tomorrow, there was much discussion of the second turn, which comes early on a long downhill.

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**Wallowa Lake to Halfway**

**Tuesday, July 25: 89 miles, 4430 feet elevation gain**

With a long day planned, many departed quickly after the 6:30 AM breakfast. Six miles of backtracking took us north along the lake into Joseph, were the first turn regained our main loop in the eastward direction. Another six miles later and we dropped into a canyon, but quickly gave up the descent and turned south on Forest Road 39, aka Wallowa Mountain Road. With a deer perilously close to the side of the road on the descent, Rob and Rick formulated a new road-hazard hand signal — a peace-sign reminiscent of horns.

The road rose steadily along Salt Creek, gaining two thousand feet in ten miles. Partway up we took a rest break with two cycle tourists that were fully loaded. They marveled at our support crew, though we never told them the truck was carrying refrigeration. They also appreciated the cookies we offered them. They had holed up at Wallowa Lake for five days to wait out the heat, claiming their eight-day tour was going to stretch into three weeks.

To our right on the ascent was a sparse silver forest of burned lodgepole pine. There was a dense undergrowth of new trees, about 10 feet tall. Dave explained later how lodgepole pine was a classic example of a species that relies on fire to propogate, and the lesson was obvious in the seeing.
Photo 16  Forest Fire from Road 39
Photo 17  Forest Fire from Halfway Camp

Photo 18  Firefighters’ Command Post
We crested at about 6,000 feet, then wandered up and down a bit until we began a thrilling 2,000 foot descent of tight turns and long straightaways along Lick Creek. Some labeled it a “Top 10” descent. We stopped for lunch at about the 49-mile-mark, along the Inmaha River. The support crew suggested the smiles induced by the descent were a marked contrast to the arrivals at the summit-top lunch from the first day. A few took advantage of the river for a quick dip to return their core temperatures to ideal operating conditions.

Leaving lunch, we quickly began a 4 mile, 1,000 foot hill. At the 3-mile-mark a turnoff led to the Hell’s Canyon Overlook. Some rode up and back (this mileage is included in the day’s total), some skipped the diversion and others took a ride from the support crew. The overlook was a bit disappointing as the canyon was filled with hazy smoke due to some forest fires in the vicinity.

Back to the main road, a mile later the summit marked the start of a 2,500 descent over 20 miles, running along Steep Creek. While the topography was very similar, this descent did not rate as highly as the morning’s. Rocks in the roadway, the heat, and the exhaustion all worked against the concentration needed to line up for the curves and work the brakes accurately.

Descending, the temperature started to heat up again, eventually showing temperatures of 110 degrees on the pavement. Lower down, we could then look over the ridge immediately to the east and see large billowing clouds of smoke from a forest fire. At its worst, large plumes would bubble up, deep orange at their base, brown centrally and ringed in blue smoke. Later, the top of the smoke clouds produced their own fluffy snow-white clouds. Nobody felt threatened by the proximity of the flames, but nobody dilly-dallied on the way down either. Soon, airplanes were dropping fire-retardant along the ridgetop.  

Forest Road 39 ended its run at SR 86, which was closed to the east at this junction due to the fire. We turned west for the final ten miles to Halfway. Mid-afternoon, with a headwind and 75 miles in our legs, the 1%–2% grade proved challenging for most. In the distance we could see another forest fire to the south, and slightly east of our location. As usual, support on the road was excellent all day, given that we had been in wilderness areas for the entire 59 mile length of the forest road, and the last commercial establishment had been at Joseph. Even the cars had to be careful about conserving their supplies of water for us.

We are camped at the school, in a nice triangular grove of about ten shade trees. The high school gymnasium provides showers, while a power cord from the elementary school is running the kitchen, motor home, refrigerator and freezer. Halfway is so named since it is on the 45th Parallel, placing it equidistant from the Equator and North Pole. Ken says they have renamed the town Half.com, in return for some largesse from the Internet shopping site, but there’s been no evidence of this anywhere on highway signs or in town.

Rumors swirled through camp that the smoke-jumpers would be based here on the abundant school grounds and/or that the town of Oxbow would be evacuated to the school. So we all rushed to get our showers before the tide of humanity arrived. Oxbow is a town about twenty miles east of here along SR 86 mainly containing utility workers to staff the Snake River Dam. While the Red Cross was prepared to house the evacuees, only a handful
Photo 19  Group Photo, Wallowa Lake
of residents ever materialized. The command post for the firefighters was located at the fairgrounds, so they did not join us either.

Another consequence of the fire and road closure was our plans to take a jet-boat ride on the Snake River into Hell’s Canyon during tomorrow’s rest day. Counselor Fielding phoned the tour company (office in Oxbow) and eventually won the argument that the probable road closure, the smoke filling the canyon, and/or the possibility of being trapped behind a road closure all amounted to allowing us to cancel with full refunds, despite the seven-day cancellation policy. But it took thirty minutes of oral arguments to get there.

Dinner was spaghetti with meat sauce, salad and garlic bread. The post-dinner meeting began with rumor control on the fire, and dissolved into the myriad possibilities for riding and recreating on the off-day, especially given the suddenly blank schedule for those who had planned to tour the canyon on the river. Krista, Ken and others had sought local information at the bar at Wild Bill’s to mostly learn that every road out of town degenerated into gravel at precisely six miles out, excepting the highway. There were possibilities for swimming in mountain lakes and streams, though some were foreclosed by road closures or other effects of the fire.

Ride Notes: Mike had a flat due to aging rim tape. Chris had a couple of low-speed tip-overs, one on a U-turn and the other while crossing on wooden planks on a temporary bridge. Rick lost the services of his big chainring when his barrel adjuster snapped off in its braze-on.

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**Rest Day at Halfway**

**Wednesday, July 26**

Second rest day of the tour, which was welcome after yesterday’s effort. What does the postman do on his day off? Take a walk, of course. Likewise, almost every rider went out for a short spin in the morning coolness to exercise the legs. Colter gained the fifteen miles needed for a portion of his Boy Scout cycling merit badge.

The forest fire appears to be a serious incident. We saw numerous pieces of equipment arrive in Halfway from the Portland metropolitan area, as well as Hood River and Yakima. Contractors brought in vans full of firefighters, many who appeared to be Hispanic or Native Americans. A field next to the fairgrounds held fifty to a hundred tents. A line of eighteen-wheelers formed up on the highway outside of town to convoy in supplies to the fire zone. Of course, the road into Hell’s Canyon remained closed. We talked to a bulldozer operator who said he had been working until midnight the night before with his equipment. Later in the morning, firefighters began arriving to use the school’s showers. Residents told us the fire had grown to 5,000 acres. The businesses in Halfway have geared up in an attempt to meet the demand, but Louise was fortunate to be in the store just as the ice delivery was made. (Photo 18 [17])

Rick got his broken barrel adjuster drilled out of his braze-on at a local machine shop, between repairs on fire-fighting equipment. The service was performed by His Honor, the Mayor of Halfway. They learned that the Half.com designation was not an official name change, and the source of much controversy. The previous mayor had been in charge, and allegedly came into a new pickup truck at the same time the designation was being
Rest Day at Halfway

Photo 20  Bowling in Halfway

Photo 21  Jim at Jimtown

Photo 22  Halfway Camp
Photo 23  Firefighters in Halfway

Photo 24  Joan Recovers
Rest Day at Halfway

Photo 25  Cycle Tourists

Photo 26  Mayor's Card

Photo 27  AmeriCorp Riders
negotiated. Rick also learned that Halfway was a name given by the Postmaster since it was halfway between Carson and Pine Eagle, correcting earlier speculation about the 45th Parallel. Carson is now just a few houses along the Cornucopia Highway five miles north, and nobody knows where Pine Eagle went (or was). (Photo 26 23)

Mid-day found many folks congregated at the self-service laundry, followed by lunch at Mimi’s next door. Mimi is a refugee from Seattle, and her daughter, Mini-Mimi, enthusiastically runs the front room, while mom does the cooking. The mayor dropped in later, planting a kiss on Mini from a seat at the counter. Small town.

With his background in forestry, Dave has engaged every firefighter he sees in conversation. At the gas station he approached a young man, tired and black with soot, who was filling up. Soon, the firefighter asked about our trip, and learned that we had crossed over from Joseph in one day. Impressed, he exclaimed “Wow!” Dave corrected him and said it was the firefighters who deserved our admiration for the hard, hot work they do.

The cycle tourists from yesterday, Mary and Rick, surfaced in town and found us. They had survived their evening in the Imnaha River canyon, in close proximity to the fire. Their destination today was Richland, twelve miles further — mostly uphill. So they were saving the climb for the evening. They discussed bike tours with our experienced world travelers, napped a bit in our complex and Louise made sandwiches for them. Later we had a group of AmeriCorps graduates request camping space. They are on their way to Maine, from a start on the coast in Florence, Oregon. (Photo 25 23) (Photo 27 23)

A crew headed out in search of a swimming hole for the afternoon, finding the one suggested by the secondary waitress at Mimi’s, Robin. It featured a 60 foot, natural, slip-and-slide into a deep pool. Steve had Halfway Bowl open up an hour early for us at 3 PM for bowling, billiards, ESPN, ping-pong and air-conditioning, an activity that attracted a small following of about a dozen. In bowling news, Lunette won the women’s division and Tom won the men’s. The remainder ran errands in town, read and napped. Steve’s final organizational coup was to contract with a massage therapist to make a house call. Within seconds he had sold out six half-hour sessions to eager cyclists at $25 each. (Photo 24 22) (Photo 20 21)

The fire continues unabated, sending up huge plumes of smoke in the eastern sky. One fire company is based in a stand of trees on the other side of the parking lot from us, and their role has been saving the structures in Oxbow by clearing the surroundings and setting backfires. So far they have had a 100% success rate. We hear the fire has jumped the river and is now really two fires. There is a rumor that our beloved Forest Road 39 from yesterday is closed. After dinner we could walk to one end of the parking lot and see the red hot spots of two different fires as darkness fell.

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### Halfway to North Powder

**Thursday, July 27:** 76 miles, 4300 feet elevation gain

The Oxbow Fire provided our camp with a very light sprinkling of ash overnight, and the vague smell of smoke as we rose. Steve awoke the AmeriCorps crowd so they could catch the very tail end of breakfast. Doubtful they’ll have it so good too many times between now and Maine. They were hoping to convince some firefighters to drive them through
Photo 28  Climbing out of Halfway

Photo 29  Descending to Pendleton
the fire zone so they could continue on their way. We’ll keep track of their progress at www.active.com/donate/ridetorebuild. We all said goodbye to the Stewarts, who needed to return home due to other engagements.

Upon departure, Louise discovered the power steering was not working on the motorhome, a problem she thought had been fixed recently. An inquiry to the AmeriCorp group produced a mechanic! And the slipped belt was quickly placed back in its proper position. However, David was nearly left behind by the support convoy as he tried to sneak in a morning shower after taking down four tents.

A few miles out of town and we started uphill to the south. An even one thousand feet later, after about four miles of climbing, we reached the summit at 3600 feet. Looking back we could see Pine Valley filled with smoke, and the charred remains of a smaller fire just over the hill. The descent was everything Rick promised, steep ramps, good pavement and just a few tight turns. 1400 feet later and we were deposited in Richland and the road repair on the main street. Every other car headed to Halfway seemed to be Forest Service or fire-related, including several news crews. Trucks leaving the valley seemed to be pulling horse trailers as often as not.

We wandered up and down for a bit, then at about the 20-mile-mark we entered a tight canyon and we coursed slightly uphill along the Powder River for ten miles. The next twenty miles were open scrubland, culminating in a seemingly never-ending climb as the heat of the day took hold. Directly ahead to the west is a new mountain range (the Elkhorn Mountains) while the Wallowas, and their smoke, sits on our right to the north. Along the way, we stopped to chat with the cycle tourist couple, who had overnighted in Richland and departed at 4:30 AM. Relief came at mile 49 where we had lunch at the base of the 200-foot, 2 mile climb up the spur road to the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. Several folks made the climb, including David, who then figured that doing that twenty times a day, for six days, did qualify us as crazy. The cycle tourists caught up with us just as we started to put away lunch, so we paused and let them load up before we left them behind, most likely for the last time.

Downhill from lunch and we crossed Interstate 84 and skirted the town of Baker City. Your author had swapped places with Ken Fielding and so drove the truck into town as Louise restocked on produce at Safeway. It was an extreme contrast between the marketing hype of the interior of a grocery store and the wilderness of the past few days.

Pocohontas Road was the alternative to US-30 and it went past irrigated ranchlands and industrial vegetable farms. Eventually we reached the town of Hines. Rick was the first to venture into the bar to ask about water. He asked the one customer, an old-timer at the bar, “Lived here all your life?” His reply, “Not yet.”

Another eight miles of relatively flat roads and we converged again on I-84 and the small town of North Powder. We are camped in the school’s front lawn, hoping the three-story building will be a buffer tonight between us and the trucks on the interstate. The school was built in 1916. Group showers, with their single master control valve, are located next door in the athletic building. Ken fashioned an ‘M’ and a ‘W’ from duct tape to designate the men’s and women’s locker room. The McLeans left us before dinner, returning home for weekend engagements, and Carolyn Mumper has joined us in camp. The fire now consumes 16,000 acres and is 0% contained. It has been renamed as two fires have merged. (Photo 30 [27])
Photo 30  North Powder Finish

Photo 31  Camp Circle
Dinner was predominately leftovers, spaghetti, Caesar salad, watermelon and messy frosting on graham crackers for dessert. At the meeting, Pat entertained us all with a favorite brain teaser:

Four women are on one side of a bridge and all four want to get to the other side. However it is the evening, so it is dark and the group has only one flashlight. In order to cross the bridge, the women must carry the flashlight and can only travel alone or as a pair. A group of two women must walk together at the speed of the slower woman. The time it takes each woman to cross the bridge is as follows:

- Woman 1: one minute
- Woman 2: two minutes
- Woman 3: five minutes
- Woman 4: ten minutes

Determine how to get all four women to the other side together, taking just seventeen minutes or less. (There are two solutions and neither relies on twisted interpretations of the words in the problem, or inventing new ways to cross the bridge.)

Chris had seen this problem before, so helped Pat refute all our objections. With no solutions forthcoming from the collection of advanced degree holders (much to Pat’s obvious delight), the meeting proceeded. Rob, Mike, Ken and David attacked the problem after the meeting concluded. David eventually bypassed the illegitimate additional assumption all the adults had imposed on the problem and found the key to solving the puzzle. This, of course, thrilled Pat even more.

North Powder to Lehman Hot Springs

Friday, July 21: 72 miles, 3300 feet elevation gain

Most seemed to sleep OK with the interstate in our backyard, but not everyone. We left town headed north, into a solid headwind, which made us fear for a whole day of wind. We passed by small ranches, many with the stores of hay bales bigger than houses, numbering thousands of bales. After a few miles of wide open country, we descended into a tight canyon, as the rail line chose to stay level and cut into the fast disappearing hillside. In and out of the shadows we followed the turns into the ever tighter and steeper canyon. Suddenly, we came out into a broad level valley, which we soon discovered held the town of Union.

Union appeared to have a long history, given the architecture of the school, the hotel and the numerous churches. After about a half mile on the quiet main street we were once again into the broad flat valley. The long straight sections of road with broad shoulders were perfect for pacelining. At the 30-mile-mark, we entered the metropolis of LaGrande, and were forced to take up with Interstate 84. Just before getting on the circular freeway
Photo 32  The Mumpers

Photo 33  Lehman Hot Springs Camp

Photo 34  Lehman Hot Springs
on-ramp, Rob, Rick and Mimi passed a younger man as he rode his bicycle up onto the sidewalk. He saw our bikes and garb, and hailed us with “You must have elevated levels of testosterone!” a reference to Floyd Landis having failed a drug test from the Tour de France. Rob pointed to Mimi and said, “Yes, especially her!”

Riding the interstates is never fun. I-84 had fairly wide shoulders, and the configuration was never too awkward. But the shoulders were littered with the usual debris — gravel, stones, tie-downs, and shredded tires, along with the not-so-usual, such as rebar and a multitude of plumbing supplies. Pat had a sudden blow-out that pushed her tire off the rim. Tom had to stop to fix a flat, only to discover when he finished that his other tire was flat as well and several spectators could just as well have been fixing it simultaneously. Each of us was glad to finish this nine mile stretch, especially since a snack/lunch stop awaited us close to the off-ramp at Hildegard State Park. Wally took over truck-driving duties at this point to give Ken another opportunity to ride, while David (wisely) decided to stay with the truck as well.

From mile 40 we left civilization behind and went upstream along the Grande Ronde River towards the town of Starkey. It was one of the many beautiful stretches of wilderness on the route. By mile 55 we began to climb in earnest, after we passed Camp Elknehah. The grade was considerable and the heat of the day was again sending our cycle computers thermometers rocketing over 100 degrees. The support crew was kept very busy meeting the demand for water. Each turn would look like it might be hiding the summit, only to really be hiding another ascending ramp. Carolyn Mumper, her car almost out of fuel, was a welcome sight at the summit.

From here the road turned gently downward, though Fred kept Dave very busy drafting by really cranking up the pace. A dead deer on this stretch attracted vultures and a wolf. After about six miles, a road to the left led past a sewage lagoon and up to Lehman Hot Springs. Chris turned around at this point, and back-tracked to the summit so as to gain a few more climbing miles.

Our “campsite” has little level ground and is equal parts knee-high grass and bare, dry dirt ejected from gopher holes. No power, no water, one porta-potty and a quarter-mile walk to the showers. When riders discovered we were paying several hundred dollars for this, there was some grousing, but a trip to the hot springs seemed to ameliorate everyone’s concerns. There are two main pools, one very warm and one very hot. We were counseled to not enter the very, very hot one. (Photo 33)

Gayl Skibbs needed to return home after the sudden death of a friend, so Steve decided to pack it in as well. Fred and Chris both had weekend obligations, so they too departed with the Skibbs for a run back to Pendleton to retrieve a second car. Our group had begun to unravel.

Dinner was pork loin, applesauce and mashed potatoes, with carrot cake for dessert. The evening meeting was fairly routine, with Krista warning us to ride single file on Highway 395 and to stay out of the middle of the road due to heavy truck traffic. Rick reported that with a new moon, at elevation and away from the city lights, the evening stars would be especially spectacular.
The Ride

Saturday, July 29: 67 miles, 2911 feet elevation gain

Lehman Hot Springs to Pendleton

Chilly in the high country when we awoke, and the day’s ride began in 42 degree weather. Dave and Carolyn had business in Kalispell, Montana, so Dave did not ride and they departed this morning. Louise again had trouble with her power steering belt, which gave Jim Harrington a bit of a fit until a mechanic came down from the hot springs to get the belt back on its tensioning pulley.

The road down from the springs was steep, making it very cold for the riders. Once onto the main road, it was still a descent but at a milder grade. Fifteen miles of mountain chill and solitude brought us to the outpost community of Ukiah where the road flattened out, and began a very gentle climb as we headed north. Another 10 miles later we hit our main climb of the day — 600 feet of elevation in three miles. The road improved remarkably, the temperature had increased, and we were soon atop Battle Mountain. After a dip and rise to a second summit, the fun began. 3200 feet of hard-won elevation to give up on the remaining thirty or so miles to Pendleton.

The first stretches looked like the stuff of car commercials. New, black asphalt, bright yellow and white lines, several consecutive sweeping turns in the foreground, all framed by tan grass and gentle hills as far as the eye could see. We consumed the whole road at the beginning, cutting the turns from one side of the road to the other and back again, heeding Krista’s admonition to stay out of the middle of the road. The scenery became a bit less fantastic as we descended, but was still beautiful. It seemed an invisible hand propelled us forward, and down, down, down at a near constant 20 mph. With little traffic early on a Saturday morning, it was even possible to daydream some as we swept down from the hills. (Photo 29)

Mile 50 brought us to Pilot Rock, where the city park and elementary school made a good resting spot. The next ten miles featured headwinds later in the day and an increase in traffic, but as we approached Pendleton, we got off the main road and onto some city streets. The main attraction was the penultimate mile, Marshall Avenue, a hill about three blocks long, signed as a 16% grade. Finally, we had returned to the Super 8 Motel. (Photo 39)

The truck was emptied, and we showered in two rooms that had been vacated but not yet made up. Cars were loaded, David copied photos off of camera memory cards, sodas and cookies were consumed, many goodbyes were made. And then, each small group departed, and returned to their lives of families, friends, and work, but always having shared a memorable challenge together.

Ride Notes: Rob broke a spoke four miles from the end, and about a mile later had a flat. He walked up the steep hill on Marshall Avenue and then rode in on the flat, conceding the day’s stage to Rick. Claire completed the ride, eclipsing her older brother’s mark as the youngest rider to ever finish. Krista bonked.
Photo 39  Pat & Lunette Finish

Photo 40  Lonely Huckleberry
Ten Years On

This was the tenth consecutive year for this ride. So it seems a good time to recap each of the rides.

1. Bridge to Bridge  (1997)
   Left from Tacoma Narrows Bridge southward by Highway 101 (California Coast Highway) to the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

2. Bikes Across The Border or Orca Run  (1998)
   Left Gig Harbor to Port Townsend, Bellingham, across to BC up the Sunshine Coast by way of ferries, to Victoria, back to Port Angeles and return to Gig Harbor.

   Left Orting, over White Pass to Yakima, Vantage, Chelan, Winthrop, over Washington Pass and ending at LaConner.

4. Bay To Baja  (2000)
   Left San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge south by California Highway 1 (Coast Highway) several stops, rest day at Santa Barbara Mission ending at border to Mexico.

5. Rockies O Canada  (2001)
   Met at Radium Hot Springs in BC, Canada, north to Banff, Lake Louise, Jasper and returned to Radium Hot Springs.

6. Point to Point  (2002)
   Left Point Defiance in Tacoma, north to Stevens Pass, Leavenworth, Chelan, Grand Coulee, Spokane and ended at Sandpoint, Idaho.

   Left Astoria, Oregon bridge and repeated the first trip to San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge.

   Left Gig Harbor north thru Mt Baker to Harrison Hot Springs, BC, west to Vancouver, ferried to Victoria, Port Angeles and returned to Gig Harbor.

   Left from Omak north to the Okanogan in Canada. Penticton, Castlegar, making a loop returning to Omak.

    Leave from Pendleton, in East Oregon, to Hells Canyon and returning to Pendleton.