

The Crucible Tour; Excerpts

What follows are a series of entries from my journal as I biked from Portland, Oregon to near the Missouri Illinois border in the Fall of 2004. I covered 2776 miles in just over 80 days on a modified, unsuspended mountain bike pulling a one wheeled trailer, a B.O.B. Yak. The B.O.B. stands for beast of burden and is both the name of the company that makes the trailers and a good indication of what the trailer does. Of course, the real beast of burden is the bicycle rider who supplies the engine, his legs, to move the burden: the rider; the bike; the trailer; and the load on the trailer.

The journal consists of 82 pages and lots of pictures which can be found at srtraveler.crazyguyonabike.com in its entirety. These are just a few pages I chose that may entertain you for a few minutes and give you an idea of the experience I had on this event of a lifetime. I shit you not. To begin:

Sisters to Ochoco Pass

Saturday August 14, 2004, 76 miles (122 km) - Total so far: 368 miles (592 km)

Posted via email Mon Aug 16 15:35:54 2004 CDT

It rained last evening, in Sisters, about 5 and I put my rain fly on the tent. Then, silly me, I walked to a nearby covered bridge to enjoy the rain, watching it fall, watching the pattern it made on the stream running under the bridge, the music of rainfall. When it slowed to a drizzle, I went back to the tent to find I hadn't quite put the fly on right so I had about a quart of water in the tent with all my things that I had thrown into the tent to get them out of the rain. It could have been a lot worse. My sleeping bag and pillow were dry.

Earlier, while I had been at siesta--the heat woke me up, 100 in the shade--a nifty tarpaulin tent had appeared near me. As I was wringing out my towel for the fifth time, the owner of the tent returned to the park, walked up and introduced himself. We traded starting points, destinations and web addresses. Check him out by logging onto trailjournals.com and go to Radar's page. He left the Mexico/California border in April and will finish the Pacific Crest trail in October. Last year he walked the Appalachian Trail. He said he was considering the Continental Divide for next year. But there are problems. Oh yes, that would make him a triple crown long distance

hiker. The problems are: not all of the continental divide trail is marked; much of it is really remote and besides needing to carry as much as 10 days of food, provisioning points can be 50 miles from the trail.

I mentioned needing a day off after having climbed McKenzie Pass. Radar said that hiker lore is that it takes 6 weeks to get one's legs and lungs. By that he meant walking uphill is no more taxing than walking on flat ground and the pack is unnoticeable. It's all about walking comfortably, he said.

I've been told biker lore that says 2 weeks on the road gets the biker to a similar level of fitness. Not so sure. I am stronger today, by lots, than I was when I started 8/3. But I'll say about 4 weeks on the bike until 75+ mile days are routine and do not completely deplete. Completely deplete means I am so tired that every action after getting into camp requires conscious intention. So far, after ten days, this is often the case with me.

5:11 a.m. 8/15/04 Some tiny forest denizen--or I could just say a rat--woke me chewing on one of my shoes. They are outside the tent but under the canopy so just a few inches from my head. I fired off 2 rounds from my Glock 9mm at the noise and it

stopped but I couldn't go back to sleep. Just kidding. I slapped my hand on the tent bottom. The rest is true.

Yesterday started overcast, a blessing. There was about a 10 mile stretch of new highway (construction still going on at the west end of it) that started at O'Neil. Look that up on the map. It's between Redmond and Prineville. I had been looking for O'Neil, thinking of breakfast and coffee.

The flagman, Steve, and I chatted for a few minutes while we--cars, trucks, hay hauler, biker--waited for an escort through the zone. "Is O'Neil anywhere close to here?"

"See that tree over there by the road. Far as I know, that's it."

Soon after leaving Sisters the ecological zone changed from sub Alpine to high desert with chamisa, sage brush and scrub cedar, lots of volcanic rock, lots of yellow, black, red and brown. It could have been New Mexico.

This was the longest day of the tour. I camped at the top of Ochoco Pass after rejecting several camping places because of people, or too many tissue

flowers, or it just didn't smell right. A good choice but realistically, too long a day.

It's raining! New Meadows, ID to White Bird, ID

Thursday August 26, 2004, 64 miles (103 km) - Total so far: 771 miles (1,241 km)

Posted via email Fri Aug 27 14:43:39 2004 CDT

One of the, if not the, best days of the tour. I was so ready to get out of New Meadows. The motel was marginal but that wasn't it. The 13" TV didn't help, though there was a channel with 4 hours of Law and Order each night. But I wanted to be riding and not tomorrow.

I walked to breakfast in the dark. There was heavy cloud cover and everything was wet. What else was new? Whether I would be riding in the rain or not I would ride.

The situation called for a rain jacket, leggings, and long fingered gloves. It also was the coldest morning of the crucible tour. Packed and on the road

in record time, I was whooping with joy after the first few minutes.

Right outside of New Meadows I came to a sign by the road: 45th Parallel--Halfway between the Equator and the North Pole. I stopped and took a picture of the sign. This seemed like an important juncture.

(Break in narrative: I wish I could reproduce the sound of the rain on my tent as I sit in it, on my camp chair--the folding kind with no legs--typing this on my Pocketmail composer. All my things are in here with me. I have food to fix for supper and a little vestibule on the tent to cook under. I'm in a rural campground with no unnatural sounds. Da dah, da dah, da dah, grinning.)

The entire day, save maybe 20 minutes, was some kind of downhill through a beautiful canyon, following the Little Salmon River, then The Salmon River, which was wide and slow, or tumbling, fast and white depending on the terrain.

More than once I could see showers in the mountains ahead or on either side. But it wasn't until I turned off the main road, with 1 mile to go, for the Hammer Creek BLM Recreation area that a shower

opened up right over me. It poured for 10 minutes. All of me under the rain parka was dry and all the rest was soaked. Still grinning.

I met 3 guys going west at one of the many crossings of The Little Salmon River, 16 miles from New Meadows. They had started in Missoula and were going to end in Baker City, OR--a tour of about 400 miles. They had had lots of rain but seemed happy and were enjoying themselves.

After whining about the rain and not making time, I commented that I would make up for it in Montana and Wyoming, in the long, flat, wide open spaces. They offered a maybe. They all had experience there. "Winds can be so strong that you have to lean into it and even steer into it to keep upright and make headway. Your panniers are like kites, the wind's so strong."

A vision of myself, an old gray male version of Mary Poppins, flying with her umbrella except it was me on my bike with my yak and bag ballooned out and pulling me away from the one I love, or where I was trying to go, or something. I hope I hear from those guys. I gave them each a card with my web address.

The next fellow I talked to was at a rest stop. I was reading the local info when he walked up to me and asked, would you believe it, how far are you going?

I cannot possibly do this man justice without a full sized keyboard and an hour but some highlights would illustrate. For instance, he almost seemed to be free associating and changed subjects without missing a beat. This is a technique I've noticed in some of the most boring and loneliest people I've ever met. "I got in the car and started driving and just as clear as you're talking to me (I couldn't get a word in.) the Lord said, you better slow down. So I took my foot off the gas. You see, at first I thought it was a mugger but when I looked no one was there. So I put my foot back on the gas. Then he said it again only this time he emphasized each word, (he pronounced each word in a deep voice, agonizingly slowly) 'I said, you better slow down.' I didn't look this time because I knew it was the Lord. I don't know if you believe in the Lord."

I have to skim his monologue and just mention a few other things this man told me in 15 minutes before I exercised my excellent interpersonal skills and interrupted him in mid sentence saying I had to get going.

He had a stroke and laid on the floor of his RV for 10 hours and was excited to see what would happen when he finally died because he liked to travel and he'd never been there. The doctors told him he might walk again in 6 months but he was walking in 2 days.

A week before he had the stroke he was surfing his cable TV and stopped on a program about rehabilitating yourself from a stroke. "Now what do you think the chances are that that was random?" Wink. He was hoping to get medical disability because since the stroke he can't tell the gas pedal from the brake (he was in a car). His best friend was going to report him to the government and tell them that he could do really hard work even if he couldn't remember which high tension wires he had already insulated and which ones he hadn't before turning on the juice, unless he agreed to support his friend for the rest of his life when he gets his disability.

And this may be the best--the friend had already told this man's wife that he had let a woman sleep on his couch while she waited for a check. The goal was to try and break up his marriage--so the friend could have more of this fellow's disability check--but his wife knew nothing had happened because, well, you

know what I mean. She knows nothing could happen. Wink.

Really. I'm not kidding. And that's barely a tenth of it. I told him I was sure he was disabled.

I'm writing, several hours later, no rain, belly full of noodles and chili, a couple several sites away have brought out 2 alpenhorns that appear to be about 12' long. The upturned portions sit on the ground on 2 small feet. They are playing a duet of simple but lovely tunes and their music echoes in this canyon as the light fades, the temperature drops, my eyes become heavy, and I am overwhelmed with joy in being here, now, on this trip, a never ending smorgasbord of things to see, sounds to hear.

Friday August 27, 2004, 48 miles (77 km) - Total so far: 819 miles (1,318 km) White Bird, ID to Kooskia, ID (Pronounced Kooskey)

Posted via email Sat Aug 28 09:13:51 2004 CDT

I ate eggs, hash browns and toast and a half order of biscuits and sausage gravy in White Bird before taking on the myth, the mountain, the man killer,

White Bird. In the diner, there was a sign over the coffee pots. Coffee 25 cents. Double if the waitress has to serve you. After watching several customers come in and get their own coffee, I did the same. Then the waitress/cook came to my table to take my order. Now I know why I gave up eating biscuits and gravy and I didn't even finish the half order.

Then the much bally hooded White Bird Pass was brought to its knees. OK, not exactly. I took the old road which was recommended by everyone I talked to that has biked this way. It is 4 miles longer but a much better choice for a biker or anyone not in a hurry. For most of the climb the new highway is visible. The traffic on it is heavy with lots of big trucks. The layout is a relentless, straight 6 mile cut into the side of a huge foot hill that gains about 2000' over the 6 miles. The old road is gentler, has almost no traffic, and uses lots of switchbacks to get to the top during its 10 miles.

Along the way, I saw white tail deer, coyotes, chuckars, quail, hawks and buzzards. I passed, and stopped several times to eat, dozens of wild plum trees both purple and yellow sagging with ripe and spoiling fruit. The view was always back down the valley to the town of White Bird with rolling foothills covered in grass and growing into mountains over

5K' high behind the town. On the pavement there were plops of coyote scat with dozens of plum pits in them. Near the top I saw a road kill rattle snake, maybe 18" long in life. I was surprised to see a snake at that altitude but someone told me that the White Bird area is called the banana belt because of its temperate climate. I would call it the plum belt.

As to bringing White Bird Pass to its knees, it took me 2.5 hrs of riding with an elapsed time of 4 hours. I didn't take that many pictures. I don't walk my bike and yak any more but there comes a point when I know that if I get off, stretch, walk back and forth for a bit, drink some water, I will be refreshed both mentally and physically. In other words, I will enjoy what I am doing and what became work is transformed back into play.

The rest of today's ride was almost all using stored energy from climbing White Bird. Despite that, I was ready to stop here in Kooskia.

I'm camped in the city park maybe 50' from the Clearwater River. Its babble is a perfect counter point to the metronomic chirp of crickets. Listen in your mind's ear and you'll know what I mean.

Cricket chirps are an interesting sound. Not a lot of people know that counting cricket chirps will give you an estimate of the temperature. The reason is that crickets are sensitive to changes in air temperature, and chirp at faster rates as the temperature rises.

The formula for this is to count the number of chirps in 15 seconds and add 39 to calculate the temperature (degrees Fahrenheit.) If there are 30 chirps in 15 seconds, the temperature should be about 69 degrees F. This formula is said to be accurate within one degree. A variation is to count the chirps in 13 seconds, and add 40. (Sources: "Cricket thermometers," *Field & Stream*, July 1993, Vol. 98 Issue 3, p21. "How to tell time by a cat's eye," *National Wildlife*, Oct/Nov 1991, Vol. 29 Issue 6, p.12.)

Let's see. I have two more good stories and one that might not make the cut. If I wasn't so sleep...

2 days off schedule and right on time : Bears in camp

Sunday August 29, 2004, 60 miles (97 km) - Total so far: 929 miles (1,495 km)

Posted via email Mon Aug 30 23:38:27 2004 CDT

Following the Lochsa all day. The canyon seems narrower than most of the rivers I've ridden along lately. Steep hills on both sides with dense conifer. No evidence of logging.

All day has been a gentle uphill with almost no time in my biggest front chain wheel. There has also been a headwind to blow away the self indulgence of wanting things to be different than they are, tangential reaction to circumstances. That's one of the things a crucible does, removes the dross, purifies.

I had breakfast/lunch at the Lochsa Lodge about 40 miles from last night's camp. The lodge is built from huge peeled and varnished logs, exposed and tenioned together. The view from the restaurant is down a hill to the river. The cheese cake with warm huckleberry sauce was not that bad.

The hot food refilled my tank and I made the Lolo Pass in good form. That means I stopped to rest 4 times and never felt 'this is too long and too steep.'

At the top is the ID/MT border and a return to Mountain time. I was soaked with sweat though the sun was lower than the mountain and it was quite

cool. I was racing time a bit to get to Lolo Hot Springs so I didn't take a picture. But it is state #3.

I chose the Lolo Hot Springs RV park and right after the old gentleman took my money he mumbled that there had been a bear in camp last night and I should be careful with my food. I told him all I had was trail mix and wasn't going to be cooking as I'd eaten late and a lot.

My tent pitched and bed made, I went to the shower house. As I rounded the corner of it, Yogi Bear was walking towards the garbage bins not 15' away. He was a full grown, corpulent cinnamon black bear. He turned and started back up the hill when I growled and ordered him away.

20 minutes later I was talking to the camper next to me and I heard a noise at my tent. I looked and there was just enough light to see this brazen bruin with his nose in my handlebar bag. He had dragged it from inside my tent and found an empty zip lock with some crumbs of trail mix in it. I walked towards him shouting and clapping my hands. He casually left. I retrieved my bag, now generously covered in bear slobber.

Within the next hour there were several shouts of, "There's the bear and 1 or more shots. I mean real loud firearms going off. This was repeated 3 more times. My interpretation was that the bear was not being discouraged from returning to camp for another course. They were not hitting it, on purpose or not, with the shots.

As you might imagine, I awoke about 20 times convinced I heard a large creature walking around my tent. It also was the coldest night by far of this trip and I ended the night with everything I had brought with me on. That's an exaggeration, I only had on 2 pairs of the 4 pairs of socks and almost everything else I had brought with me on. I found everything outside of the tent covered in frost when I got up.

The owner of the Lolo Hot Springs resort told me that this was a garbage bear (that's the term he used) that had been captured in Missoula and released up at Lolo Pass about 10 miles away. His man had been given some cartridges loaded with bird shot in an attempt to drive the creature away. "If it doesn't work then we'll just take care of it and relocate the carcass ourselves.