

Our Road

Galvanized rubber met gravel as we turned off the main highway. Gliding towards us, a Quikstop gas station marked the only structure in sight. Like a battered gravestone, it stuck out against rural Montana, a lone sentinel in a world otherwise dominated by emptiness. An emptiness we hadn't been able to out-pedal, despite a month of trying.

"Want anything?" Paul remarked as our wheels coasted to a stop. At this stage of our journey, the question was mainly rhetorical. Our answers were always the same.

"Sure, I'll take a look," I volunteered.

Muscles protested as I unhooked from the pedals, disturbing their rhythmic cycle of lift, low resistance, and push, high resistance, for mile after mile as the emptiness swallowed us. My stomach gurgled and the thought of dinner, as well as camp lingered on my mind. Our road had been a long one today.

I leaned my bicycle against an ancient ice machine, and proceeded to lengthen my posture back to the way perfected by my *Australopithecus* ancestors that trekked out of East Africa. Perhaps in a high plains environment not entirely unlike this one..

"How's the patch holding?" Paul asked.

I tested the worn rubber with a thumb. Firm. 40 miles or so ago, just as we entered the Fort Peck reservation, I nicked a piece of the wreckage littering our road. Must have been sharp, since a second later I was riding on rim. With Paul's help, I had negotiated an iron under the tire wall, eased it off, and within a few minutes spied the puncture and applied the composite of spit, tire cement and patch that was my salvation.

"Seems okay." I replied, "But we're out of patches."

Paul considered his handlebars, and gazed down at the transparent film separating him from our Adventure Bicycling Association-approved maps.

"Should be another shop up the road. Only a couple days' ride from here."

He raised his head, and stared East, contemplating the horizon. Alert eyes scanning the late afternoon sky for any sign of storm clouds. At middle age, Paul confounded the gods of physical decline and like the machine he rode in on, possessed only cosmetic clues revealing his 50 years. He had a compact, athletic build, sculpted by our daily riding, and graying whiskers poked through from under his black helmet strap.

"You go in, I'll watch the bikes," he said.

The pattern by now was set. Unsupported bicycle touring requires a caloric intake not unlike that of a small army. Along with three square meals a day, Paul and I found ourselves scarfing down every snack or morsel we came across and frequented most convenience store we passed for Gatorade, Cliff Bars and other electrolyte-enhanced refreshment. As June turned to July, the cool drinks offered respite from triple-digit degree days.

I scanned the aisles inside. It was the same as the last.

I pulled Paul's cash from my shirt pocket, and paid the American Indian clerk.

Following us like a shadow that afternoon was the question of where we would stay that night. For the proceeding five weeks, we'd spent the night mostly in the two-person tent we carried, broken up intermittently by motels which promised hot showers and a crusty room. Our custom maps indicated whether and where we could find hassle-free camping areas and what general services were found the next town over, useful info given our nomadic lifestyle.

"Stealth camp tonight?" I asked Paul, returning to the storefront. I handed him a Powerade. Condensation glistened on the slippery bottle.

"We may have to. It's another 40 miles to the next town." Paul glanced at his watch. "And it's getting late."

Montana summers lasted long but despite the promise of a couple more daylight hours, the sun cast long shadows across the gravel indicating the approach of evening. We normally had our destination decided by now.

Stealth camping included its share of adrenaline. You never knew whether your rest would be interrupted by an inquiry from a local farmer, wondering why you were trespassing on their land. Hopefully a gentle one, but no guarantees. I looked at Paul for reassurance as a pickup buzzed by on the highway.

"Well, I don't mind." I ventured, "I'm sure we could pull out somewhere and camp behind some trees?" It was a half-hearted suggestion. Paul was the navigator and knew what did, or didn't, lay in our path.

He didn't look as convinced. Another pickup rolled past and disappeared around a bend in the fading light.

"Let's see what we find," he eventually replied. "It looks like there's another community not too far. Maybe with a town hall like we passed in Wolf Point."

As he said this, a station wagon pulled into the Quikstop kicking up dust and a dark haired man emerged. Every seat in the car was occupied. He greeted the clerk as he walked into the air-conditioned interior.

Moments later, he returned and noticed the two haggard-looking cyclists. He started walking to his car, paused, and turned to us.

“You headed to the pow wow?” he asked.

A second passed before we realized he was talking to us.

“We’re going East.” Paul replied. “We left Glasgow this morning.”

The man looked at us and proceeded to ask more questions about our journey. Paul responded amiably, but careful not to share any details about our destination that night, or lack thereof.

Eventually, the casual conversation returned to its source. “What’s a pow wow?” Paul asked. The man seemed to have never heard the question before.

“A pow wow is a pow wow” was his abrupt reply. Not unfriendly, but not forthcoming either. Apparently, whatever it was, it was nearby. He shared some directions, a side road here, a turn there, and then he was gone. Gravel crunched as the weathered station wagon pulled once more onto the highway and continued. Dust drifted over the untamed grass at our road’s edge.

Paul looked at me.

* * *

Almost by instinct, a son can generally tell when his judgment is useful or discarded. The question at hand is less important than whether his youthful judgment is considered at all. And at 16 years, I didn’t have a lot of experience lending my opinion on family matters.

Nevertheless, as we departed the ramshackle convenience store it dawned on me that I had an opportunity. Paul hadn’t asked the question outright but much like everything we did on this father-son trip, we eased into the conversation.

I checked my helmet mirror for rearview traffic and pedaled up alongside him. “What’s a pow wow?” I repeated.

“Well we don’t have a lot of options,” came the reply. “When I was working near the Arctic Circle, some of the Inuit would gather after work. It’s kind of like a party.”

His response meant little to me. I had heard of dad’s young adventures with his brothers working up in Alaska, mostly anecdotes and distant memories but had little personal experience to hang it on.

“It can be a lot of fun, but sometimes you know, alcohol is involved.” Our breathing came at an even pace as we returned to our familiar cycling rhythm. “What do *you* think?” came the question after a pause.

I was caught a bit off guard. For the most part, I was a passive participant on our journey. Contributing only to whether we opt for a deli sandwich or fast food when we rolled into a town at lunchtime.

But food was on my mind, as was getting off this damn machine after nearly 12 hours of time in the saddle. Western comparisons to cowboy life came easy that summer. Perhaps it was our location in Northeastern Montana, or perhaps it was just our life on the road.

“Sounds good to me.” I said, hoping my response sounded confident. “Let’s do it.” I pedaled ahead and took the lead, searching for some indication of what a “pow wow” was from the plains and alfalfa fields around us.

To our South lay the Missouri river, snaking its way parallel to our route. As the longest river in the United States, this water course has been our companion for about 180 miles. Compared to the dry brown and yellows of the surrounding hills, a line of oak marked the presence of this legendary waterway, the very same that guided Lewis and Clark in the opposite direction.

Clouds that had shaded us earlier now hung in the distance, backlit by the setting sun and etched in pinks and reds. A cooling breeze tickled the edge of the road and caused the slender shafts of the weeds to wave as we passed.

We pedaled further until a junction and took off along a frontage road leading toward the river. The pavement changed and my high-pressure tires sent every crack and bump rattling up the frame of my bike, offending the already fatigued muscles on my wrists and lower back.

Paul and I usually rode in the lane of traffic as the likelihood of road debris was less there. We rode side by side for a while, watching the light fade. The little mirror clipped to my helmet revealed an approaching car, than another. We moved into single file and into the narrow shoulder of the road.

Whoosh, the cars sped past, and I adjusted my handlebar grip, accounting for the gust that usually followed. I prepared to return to the middle of the road before spying another. We had grown accustomed to the volume of traffic across Eastern Washington, Idaho and now Montana, but this was different.

“Seems to be picking up.” Dad shouted above the passing cars which were loaded up with bags and boxes, lawn chairs and every seat was filled. A dangling Garfield cat smiled at us through the rear window. They turned at the next intersection and we followed.

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The man at the Quikstop had told us our destination lay only a few miles away and sure enough, we soon saw in the distance an outlet. Cars were

now passing more frequently, and we watched as they turned off the pavement, through a gate and into an open field.

The smell of freshly cut grass and idling engines met my nose. A line of cars waited to turn onto an unpaved path running between the fields with uniformed men stopping each before admitting them through the gate and into the center of the mown area. Dad seemed to relax at the sight of the guards.

“This must be it.” he remarked as our pace slowed. Curious faces turned as we passed, windows down, enjoying the serenity of the golden hour. These were the days they write songs about.

We turned along the path. A guard left the fence post he was leaning against and ambled over. A homemade sign pinned on the barbed wire fence indicated we had arrived at the Fort Kipp Pow Wow grounds.

“Do you guys have any vehicles?”

“You’re looking at them.” Dad responded.

“Okay, you can head in here and the camping area is over to your right.” The guard’s uniform read tribal police.

He regarded our gear skeptically. “You’ll want to keep an eye on your belongings.”

“And we can camp anywhere?” Dad asked.

“Sure,” came the reply, “Wherever you can find a spot.”

RVs, trucks and cars were scattered across the open field, their owners unpacking or already settled. Some tents were pitched and kids played as parents chatted. An unleashed dog nosed at an empty cereal box.

Dad unclipped from his pedals and I followed. He gestured that I take his bike, and I walked both through a gap in the fence towards the edge of the expanding camp area. I struggled with balancing two bikes, each loaded with our saddle bags, tent and other gear, and did my best to avoid the dirt clods and holes of this uneven terrain.

He remained behind, discussing something with the guard. Adjacent to the open field, a large, wall-less roof seemed to be humming with activity, surrounded by a ring of pickups and trailers that obscured what lay beneath. The air was thick with the sounds of arriving vehicles, drivers shouting instructions and the scent of something frying. My stomach gurgled again.

“Hey!” dad said approaching past a newly arrived Toyota. “Let’s get setup.”

I unhooked our bags and set them in a pile, trying to stake out our camping area. At least this was familiar. Unload, stake the tent, change clothes, cook...by now the routine was set.

The night before we had done laundry, and I took a moment to appreciate the faint smell of detergent on my t-shirt as dad pumped our

single burner stove and lit it. No tables tonight to cook on, but our minds were elsewhere.

“The guard said we could leave our bikes with them for the night,” dad said as the pasta bubbled away on our stove. I shrugged and he left with our unloaded bikes. Security for us consisted of a single cable lock and maintaining vigilance as to our surroundings. No doubt, our success so far owed much to a combination of dumb luck, common sense and the appetite for mischief among the locals. Our precarious existence this summer depended on a favorable mixture of these ingredients.

The sun was gone as we ate our overcooked dinner. Cars still pulled off the highway but with less frequency and the activity near the enclosure grew as lights flickered on. Somewhere a generator roared to life.

“I’ve never been to a pow wow.” I said, peering about. “It’s cool. Different from what I expected. It reminds me of a Justin football game.” Justin-Siena was my high school where I was about to start my third year. Seemed like a distant memory from the big sky and small towns of Montana.

Dad smiled. “Yeah, this is definitely different. I’m just glad we got some food in you.” he chuckled, changing the subject. “You’ve been putting it away on this trip.”

“Is this like what you saw in Alaska?” I persisted.

“Your uncle Dave and I worked with a few natives while we were up there. Those pow wows were smaller and usually didn’t include families.” He didn’t elaborate.

My attention was lost anyways as somewhere a drum sounded.

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With bellies full, a normal night on this tour concluded with maybe a walk or immediate sleep, depending on the day’s difficulty. But tonight was different. We cleaned what little dishes were used, slipped on our alternate shoes and set off in search of the drummers.

As we headed towards the roofed enclosure, we joined others who were leaving their campsites and making their way towards the growing sound. By now, the drumming had been joined by shouts and cries, high-pitched and following a rhythm more akin to a chant than a song. Or maybe a heartbeat.

Through the bleachers, I spied flashes of color: turquoises, whites, reds. The colors flashed to the rhythm of the drums.

We rounded a food truck and were met by the sight of a full house. Bleachers overflowed onto seated spectators on lawn chairs. Under the roof

lay an arena of packed dirt, illuminated brightly by overhead lights. In the center, a lone dancer moved and stepped. Draped over her, bright beads flashed and she held aloft a shawl of patterned blue, tassels sailing off the ends. Each color was brilliant.

She stepped as if testing the ice on a frozen pond. Soft step, then firm. Soft step, then firm, with the cries and drums giving life to each movement.

I tried to summon something more profound, but “Wow” was all that escaped my lips. Dad and I moved through a crowd towards the bleachers. A family scooted sideways and we sat on the worn boards.

In front of us lay the music’s source. Surrounded by a dozen men, the large drum sounded with each collective strike by the seated drummers. The men closed their eyes and sang words I didn’t understand. I leaned against the seat behind me, struggling to comprehend.

I looked up at dad. He too seemed hypnotized by the scene. Perhaps that was a clue to the mysterious events of that summer, the leveling of the playing field between father and son that would never disappear entirely but was softened and flattened by shared experience and shared wonder. A rite of passage as unpredictable as the weather yet as enduring as the great plains we rode through.

A voice rang out through the PA system. “And thank you number seventy-three, number seventy-three everybody!” Scattered applause broke out amongst the audience as the drumming ceased.

So there was a competition involved. I looked around the edges of the enclosure and sure enough, spotted other brightly dressed dancers waiting their turn.

Dad stuck an elbow in my side. “Follow me” he murmured.

We struck out along one side of the fence separating the packed dirt with the bleachers and emerged from under the roof into a carnival-esque atmosphere. Temporary booths, food trucks and even a repurposed school bus advertised tasty treats and families passed carrying ice cream, sodas and what appeared to be a flattened doughnut.

I tried not to stare as two girls left a converted camper van, carrying their sugary quarry. A sign read, *Frybread* \$2.99.

“Can I have some cash?” I asked my companion.

“Good idea,” he replied.

We stood in line, and the smell of cooking dough tortured us. Finally, our time came and we stood to the side of a horse trailer, alternating between breathing, chewing and trying to swallow the piping hot goodness that is frybread. I scanned the crowds, looking for some sign of our friend from the Quikstop station but seeing nothing familiar.

I craned my neck back and did a tea kettle impression, breathing

sugary steam into the cooling night. “So this is a pow wow...” I said, mostly to myself.

A smile crept across my father’s face.

It was almost 11:30 pm by the time we returned to our tent. We had watched as other dancers, with colorful and unique dress, stamped the earth flat with each footfall as drums kept time.

We left the warm glow of the dancing arena, and stars reappeared overhead. Most of the sounds of the pow wow had faded by the time we returned to our tent. But as we zipped up the fly and crawled into our sleeping bags one remained.

Much as it did centuries ago, the chanting and drumming carried, and carried me off to fitful slumber with it.