

## 2012

### Bike Nielsen 2012

Eugene, Oregon to Missoula, Montana

#### Day One

Hello friends and relatives, well, mostly relatives. We're back with more summer spam. This is the summer bike trip of 2012. We are taking the train to Eugene, Oregon and riding bikes to Missoula, Montana. This is an approximation of our route:

About an hour before we planned to drive to the train station, we had a celebratory moment when we had crossed all of our tasks off the To Do List and there was still time. John grabbed his Biketrip Checklist one more time. He noted that he hadn't packed a current auto insurance card. He went to his laptop to print one. "Bad time for the email to be down," he mentioned casually. Berta checked another email account from the same provider and it was up. She checked [www.dogdander.com](http://www.dogdander.com) and it was down. She logged in to the account manager and noted that the credit card they had on file had expired this month. So she grabbed the new card and typed in the info. Check email, no luck. Check website, no luck. Wait five minutes. Repeat, no luck. Call the help desk. "Your wait time will be more than fifteen minutes." This was a Saturday morning. Berta put the phone on speaker and kept going with loading the car and last minute checks. The call passed twenty minutes (all Vivaldi, all the time). Berta checked email and it worked. The website was also up. She hung up on Vivaldi. Last minute random freakout, check. Off to the train station.

We saw the famous Horseshoe Bend near San Luis Obispo on the Amtrak Coast Starlight three times today. The first time we passed the Horseshoe Bend, we were headed back to our room when we stopped because there was a man who looked like Sigmund Freud in the corridor. He was standing (but hunched over) to see out the low window. Our part of the train was in the middle of a large bend where we could see the engines and cabooses on either side of us. Do they still call it the caboose? He explained the name of the curve. This first pass through the bend was full of discovery and wonder. There were deer crossing the faded grass field in the middle. We had a moment with Dr. Freud and his woman friend with the deer and the horseshoe and the curviness of it all. Then the train stopped.

Just after the Horseshoe Bend is the Cuesta Grade. One of the train's engines stopped working and we had insufficient horsepower to summit this significant grade. The conductor explained that we were about 5000 horsepower short. We sat on the tracks for at least thirty minutes during which the power shut off about five times. Each time, the air conditioner fans and music went dead and there was this low groan all around when people calculated how many minutes it would take for them to be really uncomfortable in a tin can sitting in the full sun on a hot day. In just a minute, the power came back on each time. Clearly, tech support was on the other end of the line asking "have you tried rebooting?" After trying to fix the engine on the tracks, to no avail, we returned to SLO in search of more horsepower. The second, southbound pass through the bend was more about concern for the delay. Our dinner companion, Arcelia ("people call me Sally because my real name is hard to say") was anxious for getting home at a reasonable hour (she will not) (unless we have more delays, in which case she will arrive in the daytime, just not on the day she planned). We waited in SLO for two hours for two Union Pacific engines that were there when we arrived to move around to the front of our train. Finally, after feeling a big thump when the engines connected, we started for the bend again. This third time through the bend was darkness

and acceptance of our fate. By the morning, Amtrak time was Real Time minus six hours. Not too much trouble for people on vacation.

Train travel enforces mandatory sociability. Corridors are narrow and require plenty of excuse me and pardon me requests. It is way too close for strangers but all seem to be gracious and most seem to be physically capable of fitting through the space. The dining room staff require couples to sit on the same side and join another couple at the table, forcing conversation with the unknown. So far today we have met a father and son looking for colleges. They are from the big island Hawaii and are worrying about out of state tuition. We met a retired insane asylum worker who liked to chat, a Nigerian psychiatrist with a pacemaker who had a stroke and was paralyzed on his left side for three months before making a full recovery, and a retired train worker who has a wealth of train knowledge. We talked for the longest time with a science journalist whose husband is a mathematician who studies neurology. Her husband was somewhere else in the train with their two small girls. She joined us at the wine tasting in the parlor car while she sat next to a canvas tote with two baby dolls peeking out the top. She reported that both dolls were named Emily and that little girls sometimes treat dolls with extreme care, like you would a real infant, and other times they launch the toys into the air like the hammer throw. The Emilys sat, staring blankly at our peppercorn cheddar cheese and Sauvignon Blanc, while we enjoyed a conversation with somebody whose job it is to make science understandable and interesting. We talked with a couple where the guy had a voice like Curly from the Three Stooges and the wife cannot take cruises because of debilitating sea sickness. Curly had a well-exercised sense of humor and his wife was pleasant when she could sneak in a comment amongst his wisecracks. It is amazing what can be gleaned in a five minute conversation.

The parlor car has big wide swivel chairs and magnificent views. We learned from the retired train worker that the parlor car was made in 1956 and given to Amtrak by a railroad company when Amtrak was established in 1971.

Animals for the day: deer, wild turkeys (females and chicks on one side of the train, males on the other), hawks, and one seal on the beach. Water fowl at Klamath Lake.

Tuesday, August 14, 2012

Day Two, Eugene to Mckenzie Bridge, Oregon

Today's mileage: 62

Total bike mileage so far: 62 miles

Local Gas Prices: \$3.99

Weather: High nineties in the sun with a tailwind

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 0

Animals for the day: Momma turkey with five chicks, a chipmunk, the osprey nest, 350,000 baby salmon in a hatchery

Oregon has excellent bicycle infrastructure. We pedaled out of town on paths and nice bike lanes. We waited for a stoplight at the very start of our trip. That is when John realized that walk buttons talk in Eugene. "Beep!" he pressed the button. "Wait!... wait!... wait!" it replied until it decided we had waited long enough. Then it insisted, "Cross Club Drive!" explaining,

"The walk signal is green!" This was an enthusiastic traffic regulator just hoping to serve a blind person. What it got instead was Mister Repetition, who mimicked its every word. John tried to say "Wait!... wait!... wait!" at the same cadence. The button wanted to say "Stop mimicking me!" but he only had a handful of words and shut up wasn't on the list. We stopped at about five of these signals and also passed one while we were riding so we got the "waaaaaiit!" Doppler effect from a frantic signal. Berta is glad we don't have talking walk signals at home. But we do have a signal in the university at home that tweet tweets and we both try to mimic that one.

We heard some noises along the route and looked up to see a huge birds nest. In it were two birds squawking to get attention from an adult who was circling overhead. They looked like osprey-- white chests and dark backs. The nest was atop a power pole in the middle of a field.

The McKenzie River is North of Eugene and runs East into Idaho. We followed it upstream for most of the ride today. The drivers in Oregon are remarkably polite. They give us room even when the bike lane is only the white stripe. When there is no oncoming traffic, some drivers pull way over into the opposite lane. The roads here are generally well maintained, especially considering we must be well into snow areas. The grade is mostly imperceptible as we are staying very close to this wide river. The river itself seems a little too fast to use for tubing. We didn't see any tubes or canoes, but we were passed several times by an adventure van towing a trailer with two large rafts. There were several beautiful rapids and only a few big curves where it looked like the water slowed down. There are power plants on this river that supply Eugene. One was situated such that it dammed the main river and created a little lake that had four fishing boats out on this day.

We stopped to inspect a salmon hatchery. Some of the salmon are allowed to spawn naturally and some are diverted to the hatchery where the eggs are harvested, fertilized, allowed to grow, and then returned to the river. There were long shallow canals containing hundreds of thousands of salmon "fry" (a pretty cruel name for little fish) swimming in schools and exhibiting the skittish tendencies of wild fish. They looked less than three inches long. Some of them leapt out of the water and created little splashes. Biologists said that the fry have a twenty-two percent success rate of becoming adult spawning salmon, yet it is still considered beneficial to salmon populations to continue with hatcheries.

We were excited to see a sign for an Oregon Visitor Center. In some places, visitor centers are huge over-cooled buildings with water fountains and bathrooms. This was not one of those visitor centers. There was a bulletin board and a trash can. On the bulletin board was a notice admonishing in advance anyone who would post a notice without approval. The visitor center at the Grand Canyon was a lot better.

The town of Vida can be surveyed in one glance. No stop sign, just a gas station, a cafe, and a few other businesses that probably all sell bait and tackle. We tied up the bikes in front of the Vida Cafe as two carloads of people pulled up and piled out in front of us into the cafe. The server was a sturdy woman who had a damp towel rolled up and wrapped around her neck to keep her cooler. She was busy and about to get busier. She was a no-nonsense person who blurted out questions and told you what she thought about your choices. "Oh, that'll be good," she said about the special that came with peach cobbler. It was good. The BBQ beef sandwich was served on the same bun that they use for their ten-ounce Monster Burger, so that was bigger than your head. It is hard to imagine people try to

eat that BBQ beef sandwich with their hands. We already look like aliens with our bright clothing, so we thought "We are not from here!" and used our forks. The cole slaw and potato salad were good and the peach cobbler a la mode was a nice finish. The whole time we ate, the server dashed around, attending to about seventeen people who all walked in about the same time.

We passed many homes for sale, most of them boasting "Riverfront!" because that is pretty much all you get in a narrow river valley. There were also many cabins for sale or rent. Our destination was McKenzie Bridge, where we ended up staying in a "lodge" which was just like a cabin. Our cabin had wireless internet but no TV. We could have cooked if we wanted, but we opted to get a discount if the innkeeper didn't need to clean the kitchen. The bed in this cabin has a blanket and two comforters on it. We had a fireplace, too. None of these saw any use, though, because it was 98 degrees outside and we had no air conditioning. The deck overlooking the river was really pleasant. We sat there for about ten minutes until we reached our self-imposed limit of four mosquito bites. Two of them happened on Berta's forehead. Upon reclining for the night it became immediately obvious that we were not the only living creatures in the bed. John flopped around and gave us both the itchies. The magic was over.

Wednesday, August 15, 2012

Day Three: Mackenzie Bridge to Sisters

Today's mileage: 42

Total bike mileage so far: 104 miles

Local Gas Prices: \$3.99

Weather: Most of the morning was shady in the sixties. Then it got very hot.

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 1

Animals for the day: Llamas at the motel, mosquitos, a very big squawky bird, huge chipmunks

Piggy is our plastic pig who is accompanying us on this trip. Piggy is having a great time. He is a curious pig who always wants to know why, read the directions, or see special sights. Piggy rides in Berta's pocket and puts up a fuss if he is kept in the pocket too long. The other day Piggy was miffed about staying in the pocket so he let in some mosquitos to teach Berta a lesson. Piggy the pernicious pig.

We spent the whole morning climbing the Western slope of the cascades. It was about ten miles of the main hill, but Berta could stay seated most of the way. That's the threshold for a hard hill-- when Berta has to stand up, she is out of gears and out of breath. No standing today. The best part of this hill was that it was mostly in shade.

A breeze sometimes signals the top of a mountain pass. We started to feel this breeze when the trees thinned out and the grade lessened. The forest was thinner and the mountain tops around us were not so pronounced. Click, click, we selected bigger gears. We cooled off even in the warmer air because we were actually moving now. We rounded a bend and BAM! a lava field. We knew there was a lava field up here, but we were gobsmacked nonetheless. The lava field stretched for miles up to Mount Washington, a cathedral of rock four miles away. It was black clumps of course volcanic rock as far as you could see. We went from a color scene to one in black and white. Portions of the road were cut into lava flows and we wondered how they did that. Can you set charges into lava and

sheer off rock? Probably not. They likely used up a lot of blades carving that road. There were plants and trees in the lava rock, too, but not many of them. We noted a lovely flowering plant, and a smattering of evergreen trees that must have struggled to reach the twenty feet height they did.

The thermometer on the bike computer started at 58 today and climbed to about 72 until we got above the tree line. Then it shot up to 90. By the time we made the AWESOME descent, it was mid-nineties, but when you are going 30 mph on a bike, heat isn't so bad. We flew down 17 miles of road to a town named Sisters.

In September of 1865, Camp Polk was established to protect local settlers. It was manned by forty volunteers and never engaged in battle with the Indians. The camp was abandoned and in 1870 was homesteaded by Samuel M. Hindman who subsequently operated a store and post office. In 1888 the post office was relocated and the proposed name of the post office Three Sisters was shortened by the postal service to Sisters. Sisters was formally established in 1901 and incorporated in 1946. Sisters at times was a supply station for sheep men (not actually men with sheep bodies, but shepherds), the lumber industry and now a tourist town. Downtown, all of the store fronts are 1880's style. They have a big annual quilt show, so there are many quilt shops. There are a multitude of clothing shops, one for Australian wear, one for Russian wear and many for leather goods. Every third door has antiques and gifts. The restaurants are weighted heavily toward the BBQ style, but we opted for Mexican food. It was good.

On the way back from dinner, we headed for the Thrift Shop in search of a cap for John. We also needed a magnet for John's bike. He swapped out a front wheel at the last minute before we left and didn't transfer the magnet for his bicycle computer. We thought we might find a small magnet to use for the time being. We went into the dollar store first, where we didn't buy a magnet, but we were given one. After we had looked around for a couple of minutes, we explained to the cashier what we were looking for. Hearing we needed a small magnet about the size of a pencil eraser, she asked, "Like this one?" and handed John a little plastic seashell refrigerator magnet that looked like it would work great. She refused any payment and asked if we wanted the green seashell instead of the purple. We went next door to the thrift shop for a cap. There were two. One had a fishing saying on it and a strange clasp. The other was some woolen fitted sports team cap. Berta told the cashier we were looking for a mens cap. She reached under the counter and asked, "like this one?" and offered a good cap with a good clasp that said "New Mexico" on it. It was one dollar. John asked about a magnet. The woman found a Killer Whale that had a pretty good magnet on it. There was a origami fish thing with a better magnet on it. It was free with the one-dollar cap. None of the magnets turned out to work, they weren't strong enough, but the people who gave them to us were the best.

We stopped at the "observatory" at McKenzie Pass, where there is a tower made out of lava rocks. You can climb the spiral path to get to a room at the top that highlights all of the mountain peaks within view. There are sight holes cut out of the rock, pointing to each peak. Next to the holes are very worn rock signs indicating how far the peaks are. It worked, but just like the visitor center we saw yesterday, we were expecting water, air-conditioning, video displays, taxidermy, and a snack bar. Instead, we realized that there is a serious health threat in the Cascades that needs attention: Chipmunk Obesity. We saw a chipmunk so large it would have scared our cats. It must have been twelve ounces of chipmunk, and it

became clear right away what the problem was. Every car that stopped contained people and snacks. Many people who had snacks dropped a smidgeon for the Chipster. He came within a few feet of us, hoping we would lose grip on just one chip. Then he scampered off to find more generous tourists, which he found.

Thursday, August 16, 2012

Day Four: Sisters to Prineville, Oregon

Today's mileage: 42

Total bike mileage so far: 146 miles

Local Gas Prices: \$3.95

Weather: 72 to begin, 93 at the end at 12:30

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 0

Animals for the day: More llamas, and sheep with sheep dogs

The land west of the Cascades is dry and flat. In the mountains, the grass is golden beneath sparse evergreen trees. In the high prairie, there are huge fields of hay that looks mature this time of year. Hay bales in this region are the small rectangular kind, not the big rolls. Every few miles, there are irrigation canals that cross under the road, gushing with deep fast, clear water. We expect the land to get drier as we head east, but water still seems plentiful here. There are plenty of horses and cows and llamas.

The road out of Sisters is downhill for twenty miles, then flat for twenty miles. There are few paved roads that intersect it, and most of them point to buttes in the distance. It is so hard to mention buttes without making some sophomoric play on the word. It is a little better if you try to sound like the fish kids in Finding Nemo, but we don't tire of saying "That sure is a big butt!". We were surrounded by big butts all day.

The halfway point today was Redmond. We stopped in at a Subway and fueled up. The workers there were friendly, interested in our trip, and not very busy at 10:30. Berta asked about the bike shop that is listed on our maps. The girl pointed and said it was just a few doors down. In the next building, but right there. What good luck! We rolled over and secured a new magnet for John's bike computer. We chatted with the proprietor for a bit. He explained that he gets some customers from Washington, even this far South, because Oregon doesn't have sales tax. We saw some bike lights that have rechargeable batteries that charge through a USB port on the computer. He says many light manufacturers are making rechargeable lights, but these are the first we have seen.

Yesterday, at the top of the McKenzie Pass where all the lava is, we talked to a guy named Leroy. He and his wife live in Missoula and were traveling with their daughter and her kids. In the course of the conversation, Berta asked whether there was water down near the restroom building. Leroy thought not, then offered to give us some water. John offered to pay, but Leroy would not have it. We tried to convey how important water is for us on a trip like this, but we don't think he knows. We know.

We continued along the road today today, headed for Prineville. It is the oldest town in Eastern Oregon. The biggest uphill happened when we dropped into a river valley and then had to climb out of it. We entered Prineville and rode through the town center with its historical museum and city buildings towards the Best Western on the eastern end of town. It was still early, so after cleaning up we watched most of Titanic in the motel room. They sure spent a lot of time on the actual sinking. It was just about real time, right, because they said it would take an hour for the ship to sink. Then we just had to wait to find out where the

big blue diamond was. Finally, with that part of the story resolved, we headed out for food. There were two possibilities in the shopping center next door since we didn't consider national or regional fast food chains. We grabbed a few items at the drugstore first and then went into The Apple Peddler restaurant. It was your basic Dennys/Carrows/Bob Evans type restaurant offering breakfast all day and American favorites. We couldn't help but notice that there were four women two booths down who might as well have been at Comedy Night during Happy Hour. There was not thirty seconds of silence between each burst of hearty laughter. They were cracking up and it didn't stop the whole time we were there. We got to laughing just hearing them. The waitress was a coconspirator, too. She would walk over and say something and encourage another paroxysm of laughter. It was good for the soul.

Later, we went to the grocery store to stock up for the morning. We knew we expected a day without food stops, so we headed to the deli counter and ordered two sandwiches. Berta said "We are traveling by bike and taking these with us tomorrow, so whatever you could do to avoid sogginess would be good." The woman acknowledged the request and went about her task. When she brought the sandwiches to us, she showed us that she put the Italian dressing in a little covered condiment cup and the tomatoes in a separate container. She included four packets of mayonnaise and put all of these thoughtful gestures in a resealable baggie to keep them from spilling in our bags. We've said it before. We'll say it again: people are good.

Friday, August 17, 2012

Day Five: Prineville to Mitchell, Oregon

Today's mileage: 49

Total bike mileage so far: 195 miles

Local Gas Prices: The gas station across the street has above-ground tanks and no prices posted. Afraid to get closer and accidentally throw up a spark with our bike cleats.

Weather: 58 to begin, 78 in the mountains, 100 at the end at 12:00

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 0

Animals for the day: A hopping deer

Prineville is in a long valley along the Ochoco River. The river is dammed a few miles up the valley to make the long skinny Ochoco Lake. It was only 58 degrees when we got an early 7:10 a.m. start to the day. The weather forecasters said we have two more days of heat before it breaks. It turned out to be a mostly temperate day, under eighty degrees for almost all of the route. We climbed for a couple of hours at a gentle grade until we reached a saddle near the summit of the pass. There was one car at the rest stop when we pulled in. A couple announced it was hot as if they hadn't just emerged from an air-conditioned car and we weren't standing at 4400 feet and twenty miles from any town with only bicycles to explain our existence. Actually, we were thrilled with eighty degrees. That is really comfortable cycling weather, especially when the humidity is moderate. John asked if there was water to be had between here and Mitchell. They said they didn't think so and offered some bottles of icy water. John offered to pay, but they wouldn't have it. The water gave us the security we needed for the rest of the day. We pulled out a sandwich and the segregated soggy items along with the BBQ chips that came with any purchase of \$4.99 or more. An excellent choice, BBQ chips. Food on bicycling trips is like food on camping trips but better if you can believe it. This probably would have been a mediocre sandwich under different circumstances, but today it was perfect!

Before we left the rest area, a large truck pulled up that had a big front-end loader on its trailer. A guy in the parking lot asked how much it weighed. The truck driver reported it was something like 45,000 pounds. As we rolled past the guy who asked the weight question, Berta offered that she is carrying about twenty pounds. He laughed and suggested that was plenty.

The actual summit of Ochoco is about 4700 feet and just beyond the summit sign is a sign with a truck pointed downhill with the words "7 miles". That measurement was only the steep part that would worry a truck, not the complete descent. The whole downhill was easily ten miles. The pavement was good, there were gentle curves, and we went for miles at a stretch before cars would catch us. We saw the cars in our mirrors, slowed down and stayed close to the shoulder until they passed, then we let go of the brakes and were immediately back up to 30 miles per hour. It was an Epic Descent. Yes, we said yesterday's descent was awesome, but that was old news. Today's descent was up there with the best descents we have made: into the Snake River Valley for the sheer length of it and into the Missouri River Valley for the spectacular view. It was also stunning for the change of climate. The thermometer climbed steadily as we descended. It started around 80 and by the time we actually needed to pedal, it was 96 degrees. The final answer: 101 degrees on a small climb into Mitchell.

Highway 26 runs alongside Mitchell, population 170. The Business Loop is three blocks long. The western access to the town, which we approached first, is closed for a bridge replacement project. "Oh, that's perfect!" Berta exclaimed. We found out later that this long-term project will be finished before the big parade in two weeks. Instead of an easy exit, we pedaled 500 feet uphill to the upper end of town. En route, we saw option number one for lodging, the Sky Hook Motel. This looked better than the Bates Motel only if you got rewards points. We started to fret. Right turn, return to town. We put all our cards down on The Oregon Hotel. We stepped into the front room and immediately noticed the nice wood floor. We got a room with satellite TV and internet access. It was just fine and a lot better than we expected. The clawfoot tub was pretty, but let's be honest, we would take a shower over a bath any day of a bike trip. There was a bookshelf with historical novels about the Oregon Trail and a book by Fannie Flagg. Most of the artwork on the walls in room depicted John Wayne. We locked our bikes outside. The hotel also houses several workers from the bridge project. They poured in after quitting time, walked in covered with dust, emerged all cleaned up, and headed next door to the bar that closes at 7:30.

There was a cafe next door run by people who seemed to be related to the hotel people. We both ordered the basic burger with a garden salad. We were expecting iceberg lettuce cut into squares with maybe a little veg on the side. What came was a fabulous salad. Fresh dark green lettuce mix with red onions, tomato slices, Italian squash slices, fresh parmesan cheese, and beautiful croutons. Not the kind of croutons that make you reach up and check whether you cracked a tooth, but crisp and nicely seasoned little additions to every bite. The Thousand Island dressing was homemade. We told the chef what a nice salad it was, and she smiled. She is clearly someone who takes pride in her work. The burgers were very good, too.

We spent the evening on the porch of our accommodations. Around 5:30, a pair of bicycle tourists rolled down the street. Berta lept out of her chair exclaiming, "We are on bikes too!" She caught the attention of Eric, who is traveling with his son Will. Berta told them the price of the hotel and that the rooms were fine. They have fully loaded bicycles,

weighing about ninety pounds counting the bikes. We carry well less than half the gear that they do because we generally stay in hotels and they usually camp. Will is 13 years old, and considering that he has been cycling an average of fifty miles per day for two months, he is remarkably fresh-faced. They are from Colorado and flew to Virginia to start their cross-country route. One of our last conversations was with Benjamin, the one-year old daschund who has run of the place. His name comes from the fact that he cost \$100. He had velvety ears and a very regal face.

While we were sitting on the front porch a pump truck pulled to the curb to pump the hotel's septic tank. Septic tank man waved and John waved back. John became curious where septic tank man dumped his tank. "I have my own septic system," he replied. Considering septic tank man is a local, has a pet bear that he feeds by hand and is 6'4" and about 300 pounds, John asked no more questions. But he was thinking them.

Sunday, August 19, 2012

Day Six: Mitchell to Dayville, Oregon

Today's mileage: 39

Total bike mileage so far: 235 miles

Local Gas Prices:

Weather: 76 to begin, like a solar corona on the long hill, 102 in the afternoon

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 0

Animals for the day: Black beauty and a Brahma bull, not in the same area

We had breakfast at the same cafe where we had the great salad and burger last night. Breakfast was good, too, but the potatoes needed some more time in the oven. Crunch, crunch. The server in the cafe was the Waitress of Doom. She talked of bicycle accidents and the difficulty of the ascent we were about to undertake. We insisted that the hill is not the worst we have seen on this trip, much less ever. We have profiles of the terrain, after all, and her hill is half the elevation gain of the Cascades Western slope. "No," she said, "I live at the base of the hill," as if driving up the hill in her diesel dualy truck was a good estimation of it. We split before she could start worrying us about a polio epidemic.

We got a late start after the undercooked potatoes, so we hit the hill after nine. For about a mile, Berta threatened to go back down the hill and 'splain it to her what a wimpy hill she had. Then Berta stopped flapping her lips. That was one serious hill. True, it was half the elevation gain of the Cascades, but it was a hot grade with no letup, and six miles long; it took us a little more than an hour. Berta stayed seated, though, so it wasn't so bad. We got to the top and were standing at the summit sign so John could get a photo of Berta. A sheriff pulled up and asked us if we were okay. Of course we were okay! It was all down hill from here. Our maps told us to expect a "glorious 1500 foot descent into Picture Gorge." It was a spectacular vista with a twisty two-lane highway flowing into the bottom of the gorge. Imagine Utah with more pine trees and more creeks. It turned out that we wouldn't actually reach Picture Gorge for miles. Eventually, the road flattened out into a canyon about a mile long. The canyon walls were very steep and at the bottom there was a chalky river with blue-green water.

The outlet from the gorge unveiled a prairie. One of the first sights was a large billboard that proclaimed: "Like these open spaces? Thank your agricultural community!" We have pedaled a hundred miles without seeing a hundred houses. Evidently, someone thinks this

area is overpopulated. The terrain became more and more sparse. The thermometer went up and up. We stopped when the shade was good and munched on a sandwich and a Hostess cherry pie on the side of the road. We drank a lot of water.

Our bicycle maps indicate lodging and camping locations along the route. The town of Dayville is listed to have 138 people in it, and one option for lodging: The Fishhouse Inn and RV Park. We approached at about 1:15 to see a sign that said Mike would return at 4:30 with a phone number to call. John called the number and we heard the phone ringing inside the office. Clearly, Mike was not going to get our message. John went next door to the gas station and got some cold drinks. We sat on the porch for a while and cooled down to about 102 degrees. We unfurled a space blanket from the playing-cards sized item it was to a six by six foot cool resting area that will never return to its original package size. We rolled up some clothes to use as pillows and laid down in the shade on some putting-green perfect grass on our silver mylar blanket. There was a sprinkler going nearby that offered the illusion of cool.

While we were waiting, a very fat Irish Setter who had aspirations to be a Hound of the Baskervilles woke up. He brayed for a minute or two before walking over to approach us. Berta heard John give a word of welcome followed by an "Oh, no, don't take that!" noise. Berta opened her eyes to see Fatty lumbering by with one of John's bicycle gloves in his mouth. What ensued was a survey of animal discipline gaffes. The pendulum swung from "There you go, nice boy!" to "DROP IT! DROP IT!", pretending to have some sort of control over this animal. Berta had ahold of the glove for a minute, but let go worrying the dog would get into some sort of slow motion tug of war with a critical part of John's bicycling wardrobe. John got up and followed this unfit dog whilst Berta fumbled for the video function on her phone hoping to get some major hits on YouTube. John corralled the dog and pried his mouth open to retrieve his glove. The dog didn't seem to mind. Mike appeared well before 4:30 and before we knew it, we were showered and cooled down by a window AC unit which belonged on the flight line of the local airport for its decibel output.

Just so you know, it costs about \$15 to camp anywhere around here, sometimes less when you are on a bike. We haven't had to camp yet, but we have a tent with us just in case. When you camp, you often need to pay extra for a shower to the tune of a few dollars. We learned these tidbits from other cyclists we meet. The cabin we rented had AC, Cable, Internet, basic dishes, and a large bathroom with shower. It was clean and comfortable. That cost \$76. If we did laundry at the RV building next door, it was ten dollars for wash and dry. We decided it wasn't worth ten dollars, we will wear our backup bicycling clothes.

There used to be a cafe in Dayville, just like there used to be a big antiques shop. The cafe has well-kept flower baskets outside, like it was open just last week. We found out about the antiques shop from a couple who rented the cabin next to us. They were on an antiques trip. With no cafe in town, dinner and breakfast were going to emanate from the convenience store at the gas station or the Mercantile down the road. We headed for the Mercantile. It was a complex process, but we walked out \$35 poorer and holding these items: baby carrots, sour cream and onion soup mix for dip, three Hungry Man frozen dinners, a tall bottle of beer, Raisin Bran, a quart of milk, and two bananas. We walked back to the cabin and fired up the microwave. It had hot and cold spots and no turntable, so you had to note which orientation the dinner was placed in the microwave. Basically, even with serious intervention, half of the dinner was molten and the other half was kind of lukewarm.

Berta made some yummy onion dip for the carrots. We were lucky to find a place that had air conditioning, internet and a shower. The adventure continues.

Day Seven: Dayville to Prairie City, Oregon

Today's mileage: 47 miles with no hills

Total bike mileage so far: 282 miles

Local Gas Prices: 3.99

Weather: cooling down a tad: low nineties, thundershowers in the distance

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 0

Animals for the day: Great blue herons, kingfishers, hawks, chipmunks

The hawks in this region are big and smart. We saw one hawk sitting in the spray of a huge agricultural sprinkler. Others stand on fenceposts or power poles, surveying the menu. We were cruising along and saw four touring cyclists coming towards us. They let out with a huge cheer and we cheered back. One guy in particular who had many packs threw his hands over his head and did an Olympic salute. We seldom see other bike tourists--maybe ten so far this trip-- and nobody else has had this much energy. We talked to a couple today who have been on the road for three and a half months. They started on the East Coast and it sounds like they have visited all of the natural wonders they could as they zig-zagged across the country.

As we rode up a valley, we crossed back and forth over the John Day River for most of the day. Every few miles, we startle a great blue heron or a kingfisher. They flew away, probably annoyed that we upset their breakfast plans, for the moment. Twice during the ride we spotted a sign for a Geological Marker. The first marker was only a rock where the sign used to be. At the second site, there was a marker and lots of fun. The marker explained how the road cut in front of it showed the geologic constitution of the area. The cut exposed some fossil-rich rocks. We sifted through the rocks for about fifteen minutes and left with three little fossils. One was a tiny fern, one was a leaf, and another looked like a shell. It was a bonus that the rock, which was described as "waterlaid volcanic ash", was almost as light as styrofoam.

Since it was Saturday night in small-town America, we had called ahead to the Hotel Prairie in Prairie City to be sure we had a room. We arrived around 1:00 and checked into this newly-renovated hotel that was built in 1904. There were photos and a few items from the early days of the hotel. The old register they had on display was from July 4th, 1913, the day John's mother was born.

Berta announced it was time to do laundry. We gathered all our sweaty stuff and put on our less sweaty stuff, whether it matched or not. Off to the Wishing Well Laundromat and there was nobody there. Our good luck. The soap vending machine had not been operational for a while, like not since the Raiders had a winning season. No soap. There was a trash can from which we drained enough liquid soap from the empties to wash our stuff. This is an example of how standards change when a person is tired and hungry. There was a market a block away where we could have purchased detergent, but the price would have been exorbitant and we would have used only a small portion of it. So we dug in the trash. Berta left John in charge of the wash. When it came time to dry the wash, John stood at five dryers with four quarters. Ten minutes of drying cost twenty-five cents. Load clothes in dryer

number one, insert quarter number one, nothing happened. Load clothes in dryer number two, insert quarter number two and heating happened but no drum rotation. Load clothes into dryer number three, insert quarter number three and eureka! we had a rotating, heating dryer. Berta returned and asked how things were going. John said, "Fine."

We ate dinner in a building built in 1902. Currently, it is a combination bar and restaurant, but it started out a bar during the gold rush here. From our table we noted a dip in the wooden floor that was four inches deep and three feet wide. It was right next to the wood stove. That'll teach people not to drink too much in this bar! Dead fish and mammals hung on the wall, some of them looking directly at us. Judging from their plaques, some met their demise more than 90 years ago and ever since have been watching the comings and goings in Prairie City. There are semi-naked wooden women adorning the mirror behind the bar. They were carved in Italy in 1879, three years after the battle of the Little Bighorn. The carvings were transported by ship across the ocean and up the Mississippi where the rest of the bar was built in St. Louis. The completed bar was sent around Cape Horn, then up the Columbia River on a sternwheeler, then by train to Baker City, and then by horse-drawn wagons to Prairie City. Seems like a lot of effort, but the gold miners must have appreciated it. Despite all the wildlife and "twin virgins" staring at us, we had a super meal of Chicken caesar salad with dessert of homemade carrot and pineapple cake with cream cheese frosting.

Labels: Piggy is very interested in Paleontology, the John Day rivers

Monday, August 20, 2012  
Current Images

Tuesday, August 21, 2012

Day Eight: Prairie City to Sumpter, Oregon

Today's mileage: 45 miles with three big hills

Total bike mileage so far: 327 miles

Local Gas Prices: 3.99 still

Weather: Under 80 for the first big climb, then hotter, with rain showers after we stopped

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 1

Animals for the day: Many hawks, chipmunks, black squirrels, and adamant cows

We had breakfast at a cute little place with a waitress who was the antithesis of yesterday's Waitress of Doom. Whereas this town also is perched on the base of a large hill, our waitress underplayed it. "We are expecting some hills between here and Baker City," John commented. She answered with "Yes, a little." Fresh blood, meaning strangers, is always appreciated in the small-town cafe. Maybe we would say something entertaining for the locals. We chatted with some of the other customers. One old guy walked in and asked "What's happenin?" to which the answer was "Nothin much." "Good," he said, "I didn't miss anything!" A younger man came in, grabbed a cup of coffee, bragged about beating people in the 13-mile bike leg of the triathlon yesterday even though he hadn't trained, then was off to check the heifers before "Joe found him". A couple walked in, the woman holding a large plastic bag with the table runners she made. She showed the table runners to the waitress, who said they were very nice, while the woman's husband joked that this must be pretty important to delay him getting his coffee.

John asked the guys about the local economy and local wastewater treatment, two of his favorite topics. This town of 1080 has sewers and a wastewater treatment facility. There used to be two sawmills in the area. One closed a while ago, and the other will close in two months. This latest closure will affect about 100 jobs they said. For the good news, the downtown area looked vibrant. There were several antique shops and a really cute store that sold decorations, espresso, and homemade goodies. They also had a new area in the back for do-it-yourself bicycle repairs. We used the floor pump to inflate our tires and, since we are not going to tote a bauble, we bought a cinnamon roll to take with us.

We are spending a lot of our trip in rural America. As such, we are becoming experts in determining whether our accommodations are on a septic system or municipal sewer. The indicator is toilet paper quality. If the tissue is ethereal (aka rice paper), then the motel/hotel is on a septic system. If the tissue is thick and soft, then the motel/hotel is on a municipal sewer. Another dead giveaway is if the facial tissue box has a post-it with the words "not septic safe."

We were crossing some high meadow today when we saw a crowd of cattle trotting from the left and a truck with a horse trailer entering the roadway from the right. It seemed the cattle wanted the truck to stop and drop off some hay. They mooed at the truck with vigor. The truck left and they continued mooing. We were a mile away and still there was mooing. The cows were adamant in their disappointment. Cows are loud.

The Blue Mountains in eastern Oregon are about 5000 feet tall. We summited three of those mountains today. Where is the suggestion box? We needed a sky bridge for certain. But no, we climbed up for an hour, descended for fifteen minutes, repeat, and repeat. There was no town to stop in for brunch, so we had the cinnamon roll (should have purchased two), BBQ chips, Lil Debby moon pies, and Power bars for lunch. We finally stopped in Sumpter, a gold rush town. They have a spectacular gold dredge on display. It was a working dredge until the 1950s and now sits in a pond with a visitor center and a ranger who gives tours kind of on the hour. It is a huge three-story house boat with a string of huge metal buckets that could rip a trench down Main Street in a matter of minutes. This dredge traipsed around the area for a few decades, creating its own pond as it tapped the groundwater, and finding all the gold it could. In its wake, there are people who come back year after year to try to find what the dredge left behind.

The Italian restaurant in Sumpter opens at three with dinner served in the bar where the Keno numbers come up every few minutes. Berta wanted a beer and the choices on tap were Coors Light and Pyramid Hefeweizen. Let's see. She chose the Pyramid. It turned out the Pyramid keg has been suffering for a few days. It continued to sputter, trying to deliver a glass for Berta. The bartender/waitress appeared to be having a bad day and Berta's beer order seemed to push her over that proverbial edge. She cursed and hollered at the cook and messed with the keg until the CO2 line popped off and started to hiss out all of the pressure for the bar. She cursed some more. A customer offered to help with the hissing. Berta got her beer (for free because it wasn't completely full), and we ordered spaghetti. What came was one of those pasta plates where you think Holy Moses, who could eat this? Then we ate it. All of it. Truth be told John missed all the drama of the CO2 line but did pick up on the waitress' bad humor.

Sumpter has an honest to goodness steam engine on narrow gage tracks. The five-car train is in beautiful repair with shiny new paint. In its heyday there were 80 miles of track that stretched from Prairie City to Sumpter (since we got here in 45 miles, they must have taken the gentler, longer route). We saw it pull into the station and it reminded us of the rich history of gold mining that continues today. Gold fever is alive and well in this area.

Wednesday, August 22, 2012

Day Nine: Sumpter to Baker City, Oregon

Today's mileage: 32 miles with three big hills

Total bike mileage so far: 359 miles

Local Gas Prices: 3.77 all of a sudden

Weather: Pleasant in the morning when we finished

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 0

Animals for the day: Lots of taxidermy in the two museums we visited

It was a short day today. Besides the short mileage, much of the route was downhill. We rode alongside the spectacular Powder River for miles and miles. This river is about 30 feet wide and it moves right along. In spots, it slows down and looks like a good fly fishing river, according to someone who hasn't fished twice in thirty years. Many houses sit along its banks, clearly at danger of flooding in big storms. In the curves, the grassy areas are enjoyed by some very lucky cows. There were some stretches of rapids. It is a lush winding beautiful river.

We entered Baker City before noon, and we get attitude when we try to check in that early, so when we spotted a museum we were all over it. You just never know what you will get in a small town museum, and on this day we were in for a treat. The Baker Heritage Museum is in the old community dance hall/natorium (swim center). There are so many highlights we will have to gush over it. They had a 1928 Whippet (it is a car from the same company that made Willys jeeps) that had a custom modification: the owner's wife didn't like his chewing tobacco habit, so they installed a long funnel that ran through to a hole in the floorboard. They had a big threshing rig, a huge stamp mill that crushed rock for gold extraction, and a collection of printing presses. There was a fearsome taxidermy display of a mountain lion attacking a deer. We thought about posting a picture of that to Facebook, but we didn't want to shock people with it. Baker City has a long history of ethnic diversity, so there was a display of clothing and articles from a local Chinese family whose relatives worked in the gold rush. Norwegians, Basque, Dutch and Irish also helped settle the area. There was a spectacular set of silver that belonged to a successful businessman who was a benefactor to so many local causes that he became known as "Mr. Baker". His real name was Leo Adler and he made his fortune by being the first and largest magazine distributor in the region. There was a room dedicated to the man who started the Airstream Company who was born in Baker City. One wall had blueprints for the trailer, and other walls depicted Airstream trailers crossing Egypt and South America.

The man at the front desk of the museum claimed that the rock display was worth the price of admission. There were thousands of rocks and huge clumps of crystals. There were fossils and geodes and shiny translucent slices of fire obsidian. We entered the black light room and shut off the lights. The rocks lit up and we both said "COOOL!".

We talked to a docent on the way out and told him that we love going to museums on our trips. This clearly one of the best we have seen. Small-town museums can be really lame. We went to one somewhere in the Dakotas where they had a display of current Canadian coins. This docent explained that all of the displays were donated by locals. True enough, but these were no leftovers. It was a very nice collection. And besides that, a local artist had worked to paint really nice backdrops to the exhibit. There were plain old doors that she had painted to look like old barn doors. There was a gold sluice she painted on the wall that lined up with a physical sluice coming out of the wall that was nicely realistic.

The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center (OTIC) is nearby so we took the motel shuttle to check it out. The OTIC is located on a hill overlooking a valley with the Oregon Trail running through it. To think, just 180 years ago nearly 1000 souls completed the initial trips from Independence Missouri. Eventually, the trail was used by almost 400,000 emigrants who endured incredible hardships in search of a better life. One in ten died on the trail. Wagons were circled not for protection from indian attacks, but to corral livestock. They didn't have mosquito repellent, sun screen, or light weight clothing. What they did have was a desire to improve their life and they risked their lives for it. We stood on the Oregon Trail today and it was a powerful experience. To share the same space with those incredibly tough people was humbling. The trail itself is wide and not just two ruts because the animals that pulled the wagons prevented a crown from developing on the trail. The ground was covered by a fine powdery dust that must have created clouds at the slightest disturbance. We are crossing some tough country but the folks who traveled on the Oregon Trail were a lot tougher than us.

We had lunch in a restaurant that had a model train running around the periphery of the restaurant. It was pulling a load of 2x12 lumber, it was about a foot long, and it made one loop of the restaurant in three and a half minutes. We could see the train approaching from across the room, then it spiraled down five loops and came past our table. We leant over close enough to the glass enclosure so that it sounded pretty realistic. Our food was overpriced and plain, but the train was really fun. The next morning we had planned to eat at the same restaurant, but there was a sign on the door that said, "Closed due to equipment failure." We hope they get the train fixed soon.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 22, 2012

Berta on the Oregon Trail

It is unbelievable the hardship these people endured on the Oregon Trail. Standing on the trail was a moving experience for us.

It was a long day.

We are in Cambridge, Idaho. We pedaled through "Hells Canyon" today. It wasn't hard in the canyon, but it was very hard getting out of it. See you tomorrow. Cooler weather expected soon.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 23, 2012

The glowing rocks in the museum

Pedal powered scroll saw

This was in the Baker City Museum.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 25, 2012

The Salmon River

Look! Picture of John!

Don't tell him I posted this.

Day Ten: Baker City to Halfway, Oregon

Today's mileage: 54 miles with a big hill at the beginning and a big hill at the end

Total bike mileage so far: 413 miles

Local Gas Prices: 3.78

Weather: In the 80s mostly. Excellent!

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 1

Animals for the day: Hogs, deer, coyote, blue herons, goats, cattle, and horses

There were a couple of options in the small town of Halfway for dinner, and we casually chose the restaurant that looked less likely to have smoking in it. We both ordered the 6 ounce Prime Rib (medium) with salad and potato. The first sign that something might be amiss was the server emerging from the back with a vacuum-packed frozen slab of meat that went into the microwave. Berta saw this over John's shoulder and decided to keep quiet in case, well, who knows why. Our plates appeared a little while later and we were stunned. Atop a leaf of lettuce (?), there was a 3/16 inch thick slice of well-charred meat. It looked like Prime Rib, you know, because it was the right shape and had fat on the periphery, but other than that it was a something cruel between a flank steak and shoe leather. Berta thought about posting a picture of the meat to Facebook, but she saw the image in the camera and thought, now that is why people are vegetarians. The green beans were cooked to canned-texture and tasted like they were prepared like greens with bacon in them. Not a bad flavor, but to say the texture was bad would be suggesting that there was texture.

Halfway is listed to have a population of 337. They have two grocery stores, right across the street from each other, two hardware stores, a cellular service store, and several art galleries. One of the galleries was called "Halfway Whimsical". The grocery store we visited had a really good produce section and all of the specialty grains from Red Mill. What they didn't have was diet caffeine-free soda of any kind. A nice girl walked back to the refrigerated section like Berta hadn't just spent five minutes trying to find something. The girl laughed and said they were getting more soda in tomorrow. Her laugh said, Too Bad, So Sad.

We have had shockingly good luck with lodging on this trip. Who would think a town with fewer than 400 people would have an acceptable motel? And internet connectivity has been excellent. When we started these trips in 2000, most nights we heard that long faded sound of the modem. On this trip, we have had wireless internet every night, even if it was a weak signal in our room in a couple of places. Another thing we notice is that receptionists at motels don't get all in our face about early check-in anymore. It used to make us crazy to have a person pretend like they didn't have one room made up by noon.

A woman walked up to our table at dinner and asked, "Do I know you?" John, being pretty certain she didn't, said, "No, ma'am, you don't" To which she explained that she had a stroke a while ago so she is a little scattered. She was born in this town and was a physical education/health teacher and sometimes her students come back after years and it is hard to recognize them. She had bandages on the tips of three fingers on her left hand. Not like she hurt herself, but like she had been out rowing on the river and wanted to keep the blisters down. Thinking that a PE teacher would appreciate our tour, we told her we were traveling by bicycle. "Oh, that is STRANGE!" she exclaimed as if we just told her we put salsa on our breakfast cereal. We chatted for a little while, thankful to have a distraction from our dinner, until she said she loves the four seasons up here. She said she could never live in some place like California, at which Berta raised her hand and professed that we do live in California. "Oh, that is STRANGE!" She said it again. Her interest in us waned and she wandered off. Fade to black.

Day Eleven: Halfway, Oregon to Cambridge, Idaho  
Today's mileage: 58 miles with a big hill near the end  
Total bike mileage so far: 471 miles  
Local Gas Prices: 3.74  
Weather: 90s  
Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 2, boy, that was a big hill  
Animals for the day: Deer, antelope, and cows

The land on this end of Oregon is dry and mountainous. Some days our route stays completely in a valley with mountains all around. We look ahead, knowing generally when we expect a big climb, wondering how the road will get through the terrain instead of up and over. When we know a hill is coming, we pedal on with concern for when the road will rise up to meet us. Berta, who suffers from a touch of extra exuberance, often mistakes some minor foothill for the actual big hill, and likes to tell herself "This hill is NUTHIN!" until she finds out it really is sumthin. Today, we crossed the Snake River into Idaho. We pedaled for a long time along the Oregon side of the Brownlee Reservoir, dammed at Oxbow, which was mirror-smooth when we met it and got choppy as we traversed its shores. That was just the first part of the reservoir. After a few miles, there was another dam that was huge. Berta thinks dams are creepy. John pretends they aren't creepy, but we approached this one at its base and climbed a big hill to get to the top of the dam. When we got to the top, John said "okay, now the dam can go." He thinks they are creepy, too.

The second dam created a much bigger, long, deep-looking lake. It had four turbines to generate power. Two of them were running. We saw people fishing from boats and swimming along the shore, but in general it was a whole lot of water with not many people.

We stopped at a picnic area and had lunch before we filled all of our water bottles with heavenly refrigerated water from a drinking fountain. We embarked then on a monster climb. The good news was that there was a lovely stream alongside the road that sounded cool and promised that we wouldn't shrivel into raisins. It was also a mercifully curved road so that Berta could not see the hill ahead, which is good for her morale. There was some very welcome shade, but overall it was like the surface of Venus. We chugged and chugged. Berta pleaded with the hill to be done. Finally, after seven miles, it was over and the summit didn't even have a NAME! The sign said only 4131 feet. What a letdown. All was forgotten with a mammoth descent, as bicycle touring is an in-the-moment exercise.

We use a highly scientific method for choosing places to eat on our bike trips. We ask the first person we see what the options are, then we go to the closest place they mention. Oh, and in case we ask you where to have dinner in town, it doesn't help to know that a restaurant just changed hands. That's what someone said about the site of the Prime Rib Debacle last night. Anyhow, we asked one person where to eat in town today. She wouldn't commit, so she listed all options. We picked the closest one. The special was not a hamburger, so we both ordered it. It came with "salad" if you call limp iceberg lettuce mix from a bag a salad. We both ordered Thousand Island dressing. It isn't clear why we start ordering the same meals on bike trips. Maybe we are usually really hungry and tired by the time we order, maybe it is just simpler. Keep the cook focused. We decided long ago that the special is what the cook wants to make, so we often order it, disregarding that old suggestion that the special is whatever was about to go bad. At least the special is usually fast, as it was tonight. It turned out to be fast because they skipped that pesky heating step. John ordered extra Thousand Island dressing, so he got a small soup bowl of something and Berta got a smaller condiment bowl of it. That's where it got confusing. The stuff in the bowls was approximately the pastel yellow color of Hollandaise with possibly flecks of dill in it. After the server left, John asked, "What is that?" Berta put a tine into the bowl and tasted. "Thousand Island, I think." It tasted more like French dressing than Thousand Island, but it clearly was supposed to be the dressing. It went on the sad salad and down the hatch. The baked chicken required the yellow thousand island to moisten it enough to swallow. Our waitress was more interested in texting and the crossword puzzle to pay much attention to us. We received our bill and then John decided to have a vanilla malt. It was an excellent malt. Suddenly, the angels sang and all was forgotten about the desiccant meal. Now off the the motel with the faulty door lock and the curtains that didn't quite close.

Sunday, August 26, 2012  
Small town America

We are expecting to be in the very small town of Lowell tonight, without Internet and maybe no cell phones. Tomorrow is the big ride over Lolo Pass. See ya!

Monday, August 27, 2012

We're in Montana

We made it over Lolo Pass today, which marks the border at Montana. We hit the base of the hill at about 74 miles and then eventually did 87 miles because that's the spacing for motels here. The weather was excellent for cycling and the wildfire smoke we had yesterday was all cleared out today. Going to sleep early tonight for sure!

Tuesday, August 28, 2012

Day Twelve: Cambridge to New Meadows, Idaho

Today's mileage: 48

Total bike mileage so far: 519 miles

Local Gas Prices: 3.80

Weather: Much cooler, in the 70s

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 1

Animals for the day: squirrels and sheep

Now that we are in Idaho, the pine trees are back. The air is definitely cooler. Everywhere we have traveled this year, people have commented about the smoke in the air from several forest fires in the Northwest. We have not been very close to a fire. One day, the light had the definite red tinge of smoke in the air, but so far the sky has been bright blue.

We stopped at the Hartland Inn in New Meadows before two. It was one of the two lodging options for this area listed on our Adventure Cycling maps. Berta favored this place because it had a toll-free number listed. Highly scientific, we know. The other place is right across the highway and for some reason we decided the Hartland Inn looked better. We walked inside and the woman at the desk was one of those receptionists who wants to tell us every choice available. When she mentioned a suite, we cautiously perked up. She offered us the key to go look at it. SOLD! It was a nice big room, better than some we have paid more for in more populated areas. The main house, which is a bed and breakfast, is a national historic place. They had a full bar and a "beer and wine pub". You just never know what a little town will offer.

We walked across the street to a cute little lunch place that had a big sign that said "We're Grillin' Burgers!" We are pretty tired of burgers by now, so we had other things and sat

down to eat. The couple next to us were itching to chat, and they started the conversation as soon as they could. They are from Bullhead City, Arizona and are on a little road trip. Next stop Utah to play golf. They like to golf (he more than she), so they are visiting golf courses along the way. Don is 76 years old, gets the little health care he needs from the VA. He says he works out a little at the gym in their gated community back home, but that he doesn't do too much for fear he might bulk up. He said several such things that cracked us up. It turns out that Don's wife was treated for cancer in Santa Barbara by doctors that Berta knows. Small world.

We're constantly on the lookout for water and stop to fill our bottles whenever possible. We pulled into a campground that had a pump a few hundred yards up a gravel road. John took the empty bottles to fill and when he returned, Berta had attracted another man. They were chatting about bike riding in Europe, which he said was really fun. John resisted the temptation to challenge the guy to an arm wrestle. We said farewell and pedaled off. Ten miles later, we were flagged down by two men at the side of the road and one of them was Mr. European fancy pants bike rider. Both men wanted to give us tips on the best route for the next day. They suggested an old highway that is already on our route. They decided to park where there was no shoulder so their SUV was partly in the traffic lane. We had semis, logging trucks and all manner of vehicles swerving into the oncoming traffic lane while we chatted about safety.

Wednesday, August 29, 2012

What does this mean?

We saw this sign several times on this trip, usually by lakes and the handicapped symbol on the bottom doesn't have anything to do with it. What does the arrow and the circle mean?

Day Thirteen: New Meadows to Riggins, Idaho

Today's mileage: 35

Total bike mileage so far: 554 miles

Local Gas Prices: \$3.87

Weather: 44 degrees when we woke up. BRRRrrrrr!

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 0.5

We had a short day today, and the profile of the route showed that it was almost all downhill. The profile couldn't show a sharp headwind, so we weren't expecting to pedal all the way downhill. And it was cold! After many days of blistering heat, we had to wear jackets for most of the day today. It was 56 to start, but even when the temperature shot up to 70, the air was cold. We stopped to talk to some Dutch bicycle tourists who came up the hill towards us. They crossed the road to stand on the larger shoulder we had. They started in Washington DC three months ago and need to return from their sabbaticals in another month. They were riding Stevens bicycles that they brought with them from home and he was pulling a one-wheel Bob trailer. He pulled a full-size camera out of his pack to take our photo because he said "That is what we do." We used a point-and-shoot camera to take their photo. We talked for about ten minutes while she stood in a sleeveless top in really cool air. They spoke perfect English and their names are Hank and Marja (MAH-re-uh). We were really happy to hear Hank pronounce the name of a tire we see: Schwalbe. We always wondered how to say it. We still can't say it right because it has a kind of foreign sound in it that we can't conjure. But we now know it is the German word for a swallow, the bird.

The road ran alongside the Little Salmon River today until we got to Riggins, where the Little Salmon meets the Big Salmon. We came upon a construction zone on the downhill. We went to the old standby joke for flagmen in remote construction zones. They hold up the "SLOW" sign and one of us says "That's the only speed I have!" They usually laugh. We always laugh because, let's be honest, if it's a good joke once, it's a good joke forever. The Little Salmon is about twenty feet wide and travels quickly as it drops a fair amount in these thirty miles. The river curved a lot, so sometimes the rapids would be pointed at us then the water would turn and head down the hill. The water is shallow, and rocks of all sizes poke out of the surface. We saw a large tour group of ducks in the river navigate a small rocky rapids by swim swim swimming RUN ACROSS THE ROCKS swim swim swimming.

We crossed the 45th parallel, marking the line that is halfway between the equator and the North Pole. There was a sign at the side of the road and an information kiosk that we didn't read. John took a picture of Berta by the sign. It was fun and exciting. Then Berta spent a few miles wondering why we should celebrate the halfway point between two arbitrary lines on the planet.

The motel in Riggins sits right on the banks of the river and has spectacular views of towering hills that rise steeply from the river. Instead of watching the sun go down, we watched the golden light of it travel up the hills, moving through this slender North-South deep canyon. The half-moon appeared over the thousand-foot ridge, then disappeared again behind the highest peak. We waited and it emerged on the other side of the peak. At eight o'clock, cookies were served. John gained three pounds.

Thursday, August 30, 2012

Day Fourteen: Riggins to Grangeville, Idaho

Today's mileage: 57

Total bike mileage so far: 611 miles

Local Gas Prices: \$3.78

Weather: 80s

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 2 (long day)

Animals of the day: Grasshoppers, Magpies, Cows, Horses and Swine.

Our day opened with a beautiful and quiet roll along the Salmon River. It is deep and slow in some spots where we figure a person would have to row to keep moving. While most of the shoreline, of the stretch we saw, is big boulders; the banks opened up a few times to slim sandy beaches. One of those beaches presented this morning with three deer for our viewing pleasure.

We stopped in White Bird for lunch just after we ignored two Road Closed signs on the Old Highway 95 alternate route. In retrospect, it might have been four Road Closed signs that we ignored. People on bikes can often walk through road closures, so when we see Road Closed signs, we think "how closed can it be?" Today, a small bridge was completely out. Fortunately, it is Saturday and no construction workers were there to ask us, "Can't you read?" John thought we still might be able to muscle the bikes down to the small river and across some planks that spanned it. That was before he almost fell into the water and thought better of the muscling plan. Bicycle shoes with metal cleats are not good for traipsing around on river rocks. We turned around and headed back to semi-land. It was a 4.5 mile oopsy-daisy in total. We retraced our route on the Old Road, got back on the main

highway, climbed a hill, and passed Hoots truckstop cafe before the steep descent into White Bird. A local told us Mac's would be open in thirty minutes or we could go back up the significant hill to Hoots (yah, right). So we waited in the shade and had a hardy lunch with really special home grown tomatoes before we set off for the big hill that we knew was coming. We have had several conversations with Idaho restauranteurs about using home grown produce. Apparently, growing vegetables for your restaurant is illegal (they're not inspected) unless you tell the consumer that you raised the produce yourself. We have had some tasty home grown produce on this trip. You just can't buy a tomato in a store that comes anywhere close to a fresh-picked home grown tomato.

It turned out the climb was ten miles long with many switchbacks that made for a quite manageable grade. The whole time, we could compare our progress with the newer highway that roared straight up the mountain about a half mile away. It was close enough that when a Harley rode up that hill we could hear it. We saw six vehicles on our road in two hours and those approached slowly and with plenty of warning. When the road switched, the front person would say "Switch," and the back person would say "Back." Simple pleasures.

For a while, we rolled through the Grasshopper Zone. There were grasshoppers all around, with barely a foot between them. It turns out that some grasshoppers can successfully leap into the air, pass through a moving bicycle wheel if it is going slowly enough, and live to hop another day. Sometimes, they make a quick noise like a playing card in the spokes. Those ones probably don't make it. The biblical event lasted for about five switchbacks before the locusts disappeared. The other notable on the climb was a war monument. We stopped at the weather-worn marker commemorating thirty five soldiers killed in the Battle at White Bird with the Nez Perce in 1877. There was no mention of how many Nez Perce were killed. Sound familiar?

Idaho is great for food growing on the side of the road, and Berta is the queen of spotting roadside fruit. We saw many wild cherry trees, some where the cherries were yellow on this August day. We didn't know if they were ripe yet, so we waited to pick some that were bright red. The red cherries had yellow flesh and were tasty, juicy, and tart. Later, Berta spotted black berries and apples that were attended only by God on property that had no deed. The sun has a diluted color today because of smoke in the air from the myriad forest fires burning in the region.

We struggle with motel towel etiquette. John likes to fold used towels and hang them up perfectly just in case the Admiral stops by our motel room and inspects the bathroom. Conversely, Berta flings used towels in random areas of the room. Berta maintains she is maintaining sanitary standards for some future occupant. What if the cleaning staff doesn't recognize that a towel was used because John folded it with precision and then they don't change it? Eew. So the used towel goes in a clump for the good of everyone involved.

Day Fifteen: Grangeville to Lowell, Idaho

Today's mileage: 54

Total bike mileage so far: 665 miles

Local Gas Prices: \$3.78

Weather: 54 to start, wore jackets most of the day

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 2

Animals of the day: a pen full of wiener dogs yapping at us

What do you do when you have a fly in your motel room? Do you realize that there are trillions of flies in the world and you are sharing just one? Do you accept its presence with equanimity? Or do you behave like us and become blood lust killers? That's right, after the fly walks across your face while you are trying to relax, all live and let live is lost. Berta, in particular, goes cracker dog with a fly in the room. Her go-to method for fly hunting is the Slappy Fit. When the fly comes close enough, she flails in its general direction, hoping that contact is made just once. If everything goes as planned, the fly is stunned and Berta can step on it. More often, it just looks like Berta is deranged. John is more measured, walking around like Elmer Fudd with a rolled up newspaper, waiting for the fly to land. This strategy culminates in one furious swing. When it works, the invader is no more. When it doesn't work, the loud whap! is followed by an exclamation and the stalking starts anew.

We crossed a small part of the Nez Perce reservation today and stopped in a grocery store for a snack. The young woman tending the store was pleasant and we chatted for a while. We had some nice homemade maple bar donuts, too. This store was about sixty percent larger than its stock required. There were feet of empty shelf space between one product and the next. The largest section was beans and rice. We talked about the smoke in the air from the fires. She had been camping last weekend and the smoke was thick then. As we had this conversation, the air outside was only faintly smokey, with good visibility still. That would change.

We had spent the morning pedaling downstream along the Clearwater River with no doubt how it got its name. It looked about a foot deep and if we stopped we could have counted all of the medium-sized round rocks on the river bottom. At the town of Kooskia, we made a right turn to go Eastward towards Lowell. For every mile we travelled, the smoke got thicker and thicker. The visibility at its worst was less than a mile.

By the time we reached Lowell, we had traveled 54 miles and had each consumed one half of a Hostess cherry pie, twelve ounces of orange juice, and a maple bar. We must have been too preoccupied with the smoke to eat enough. Civility was not in the air. It had been a cool enough day that we both had the potato soup with our sandwiches. After eating, civility returned and we began considering how we were going to pedal in the smoke tomorrow on a much harder cycling day. John tried to get us a ride to the top of Lolo pass, but there were no rides to be had. He got the impression that the gas station attendant thought our predicament was mildly humorous; after all, the motorcycle riders were not having any problems. Our motel room had satellite TV, or at least it had a satellite dish. The screen claimed that it was trying to acquire a signal for about thirty minutes. Berta indicated that at this point of a bike trip and without the Internet or TV, we don't have many new topics to talk about. John set off to get help for our signal. There are six motel rooms in Lowell and ours was the only one with no satellite signal. An employee suggested it might be the smoke that was evidently thicker over our room than it was twenty feet away. We agreed to change rooms and had begun moving our stuff when our TV regained its mind, so we moved back into our original room, grateful to hear the talking heads with breaking news about a hurricane that is four days from landfall.

Saturday, September 1, 2012

Day Sixteen: Lowell, Idaho to Lolo Hot Springs, Montana

Today's mileage: 87

Total bike mileage so far: 752 miles

Local Gas Prices: \$3.78

Weather: 54 to start, wore jackets most of the day

Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 5 did you see that mileage?

Animals for the day: A big bird of prey, gotta look it up, yes, it was an Osprey

Our route today was identical to a day we pedaled during Bike Nielsen 2000. We knew it would be a long day with a big climb at the end. Our serious concerns about air quality were eased when we saw it had misted overnight. We started out on damp pavement in clear cool air. During the day, we thought a few times that the smoke was increasing, but it never did. What a relief!

The last time we tackled this day, we had really lame food for the day (warm chocolate pudding, soggy jam on hot dog buns, and Oreo cookies). This time, we were better prepared. We carried dry salami, bread, mayo packets, a much-appreciated tarter sauce packet we saved from last night's fish dinner, chips, Hostess cherry pies, and some off-brand strawberry newtons that John accidentally selected in a desperate moment a week or more ago. We both like fig newtons. We both dislike "strawberry flavoring". He saw a long skinny package of rectangular cookies and didn't consider they weren't filled with figgy pudding. These "newtons" went down with a large amount of water and many derogatory comments on a rest stop this morning. In contrast, the lunch took place on a beautiful wooden footbridge at one of the many trailheads along the Lochsa River.

Last night we stayed in Lowell and today we approached Powell; John wanted to remember that in 2000 we found lodging in Powell. Berta wished it were true too, but no. After some sixty miles of riding, we pulled over at the Lochsa Lodge again this year. John went in to inquire about renting a cabin. Berta waited outside and chatted with a guy whose wife was on a retreat at the lodge. He predicted accurately that we would not find a room today. We filled our water bottles, downed some juice, and got back on the road. While the summit at Lolo Pass is over 5200 feet, the climb starts at a high elevation and really isn't too bad compared to earlier climbs on this trip. As is usual, the temperature skyrocketed on the hill; however, there was a nice breeze that came up sometimes. It seemed the road has been improved in the last decade. There were passing lanes on the uphill side that gave us some separation from the traffic for much of the climb. There was a construction zone at the base of the hill so the traffic that did happen came in clumps (that's a good thing). We reached the visitor center at the summit and again were disappointed that there isn't a summit sign for Berta to pose next to for a photo. A citizen at the visitor center said "Good job" as he was climbing back into his SUV.

On the descent, we stopped to talk to a couple from Vermont who were riding a tandem bicycle. He stood astride the bicycle while she stayed balanced on the bicycle, sitting on her saddle. She had a large tattoo on her calf of a highwheeler bicycle. They had been on the road for two months and were anxious to reach the Pacific. We are not as tough as these people who camp on bicycle trips, but we sure look fresher than they do.

The Lolo Hot Springs Resort was not a surprise this year, but it suffered in comparison to our recollections. In 2000, we noted that it was a good deal. Berta remembers that a room was under seventy dollars back then. We got the same room this time and paid \$122 because of "the time of year". We suspect the receptionist could smell our desperation because during our whole visit there were never more than ten cars and one Harley in the parking lot. We remembered last time having a nice steak dinner in a modest dining room. This time, the dining room was not open on this Monday night. The bartender, with baggy pants, a cock-eyed cap, and an easy personality, assured us that the dinner menu was the same in the bar. When Berta asked about the selection of beer on tap, he sat down on an empty chair at our table to discuss. Berta likes trying local beers, and the lager she had was good. We both ordered the Taco Salad. To save the bartender a trip, Berta caught him on the way over to the kitchen and requested extra salsa. He laughed and said they have been serving many extra meals to the fire fighters this week, so they are out of salsa. We felt this could have been announced at the time we ordered a taco salad. He felt that offering us extra sour cream and a tiny bottle of Tabasco after the fact was adequate. To our surprise, the salads that arrived were really nice. They would have been better with salsa, but they were good, and let's face it, almost everything is better with salsa (except breakfast cereal, that would be STRANGE!). The room, as we did recall, had weaker lighting inside than the lighting outside on the porch. So we could hardly see what we were doing at the sink, but at night the room was lit well enough to read large print if you had to. We had no TV, no Internet, and no cell phone service, so we checked out a free DVD at the front desk, "Must Love Dogs". It was a sappy funny movie, which, if a movie can't have explosions and car chases, is just our speed. It must have been okay considering we stayed awake for the ending. As tired as we were, we had trouble falling asleep. Maybe the movie had us going.

Cool wooden bridge to a trailhead  
Monday, September 3, 2012  
Day Seventeen: Lolo Hot Springs to Missoula, Montana  
Today's mileage: 38

Total bike mileage so far: 790 miles  
Local Gas Prices: \$3.57, that is not a typo  
Weather: 50 to start, wore jackets most of the day  
Saddle Sore-o-meter reading: 2  
Animals for the day: cows but no buffalo

We had a lazy morning but still reached Missoula around noon. A bike shop appeared on our right where we made arrangements to have our bikes boxed for the flight home. We continued to the Adventure Cycling Association headquarters that marked the end of our trip. The main doors to their building were opposing drop handlebars. They have an official greeter who talks to bike tourists about their trips and offers information about the area. We had our picture taken for their bulletin board and found the pictures of several of the folks that we met along the way. We ate free ice cream and enjoyed the ambiance of an organization that we love.

Missoula is a bicycle Mecca. There are bicycles parked everywhere and cyclists seem to be well accepted by motor vehicles. The high school had more bicycles parked outside than

cars. When John was in high school, bicycles were shunned in favor of the automobile. It seems that the coming generation is going to change how we commute. You could not look in any direction without seeing a bicycle either parked or moving. The numerous bicycle racks (six per one side of a block downtown) they have in Missoula are actually easy to use. There were single speed bikes that are great to look at, and fancy road bikes that are great to ride. Our motel room overlooked the river and there was a constant stream of bicycles traveling on the bike path. Missoula is an officially designated Bicycle Friendly Community. We have never seen a city with so many bicycles.

It came time to pick up our boxed bikes and they didn't fit into our rental car. A few years ago we got two boxed bikes into a Chevy sedan, so we figured the much bigger looking Chrysler 300 would be no problem. John pushed and cursed but they wouldn't fit. Berta was sure that if we just got the second box in the right orientation, we could do it. But both boxes would not fit. We drove the four blocks to the hotel with the fancy trunk lid bobbing open. We parked in the Holiday Inn lot in the shade and put on our thinking caps. Berta, thinking "outside the box", suggested we take her bike out of its box, collapse the box and see how that worked. Suddenly, everything fit. Thank God for thinkers. Had Berta not come up with the idea we would still be in the lot with John cursing and pushing. We blithely headed back to the motel with everything buttoned into the car. Even the guy in the pickup truck, who had been watching from the beginning, had a smile on his face. "You didn't think we could do it, did you?" we asked. "Nope," he answered.

We headed for the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula. This was the site of the 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps, staffed by black soldiers, around the year 1896. It was an experiment to see if new-fangled bicycles would be an effective mode of transportation for troops. We didn't get to see any artifacts from the bicycle corps, but the movie we watched said the guys spent a lot of time pushing their bikes over bad roads and train tracks. Nightmare! Their longest trip was 1900 miles from Missoula to St. Louis. It took 41 days, traveling 56 miles per day at just over 6 miles per hour. Sounds like ten-hour days in the saddle. The museum had a fascinating large collection of World War II posters asking Americans to "do their part" by planting victory gardens, buying war bonds, rationing critical items, and avoiding loose lips. One poster showed two playing children with a huge shadow of a swastika on the grass near them. The caption warned people to contribute to the war effort so the shadow wouldn't touch the children.

When we talked to the greeter at Adventure Cycling, she asked us what kind of restaurant we wanted. "INDIAN" we said in unison. If there is something we have lacked while bike touring in Oregon and Idaho, it is spice. Our definition of a good meal is one that makes us sweat. Long time, no sweat. The greeter said they didn't have an Indian restaurant anymore (this in a town of 67,000 people), but they did have a great Thai place. When we did get to that Thai place, we ordered medium spice. Our rule is NEVER order very spicy at a Thai place, they take it as a challenge. This was not very spicy, must rewrite rules for ordering very spicy at Thai place.

Tuesday, September 4, 2012  
Epilogue

So this is it. Our trip is over and it is time to go back to work, fortunately. What was the highlight of the trip? We were well treated by the drivers in Oregon, Idaho and Montana;

they gave us room when they passed. The majestic scenery of the west with its open raw land and pristine noisy rivers was inspiring. A real highlight came from our Bovine friends. We passed thousands of cows that stopped chewing and raised their heads to watch us pass by. It was a slo-mo cow wave, where one cow after another looks up as we pass then looks back at the scrumptious grass it was enjoying before being interrupted by such unnatural colors. This happened day after day with any cows that were within yards of the road.

It sprinkled twice on this trip. That was good for us, but the whole area needed rain and we really wouldn't have minded too much getting wet. Even so, the rivers that we followed almost every day were robust. That one smokey day? The next two days were our last cycling days, and the air cleared up. The afternoon we arrived in Missoula, a new fire started in Montana and the smoke came in very thick. What fabulous luck to mostly avoid smoke from the numerous wildfires in the Northwest on this trip. As a cycling trip, this was beautiful terrain with several serious mountain ranges and pretty good spacing of places to stay and eat. We had only one puncture.

We didn't see any buffalo on this trip. We didn't see many mosquitos, but the ones that saw us were well fed. There were so many hawks! We were hoping to see a black bear across some wide river, but were satisfied to see deer and some elk on the other shore. We saw a sign in a cafe that said "Unattended children will be given espresso and a free puppy." We ate some really good food and some not-so-good food. We drank some Hawaiian Punch and ate many Hostess cherry pies. Most importantly, we talked to many nice people.

It is good to be home. See you somewhere on down the road.