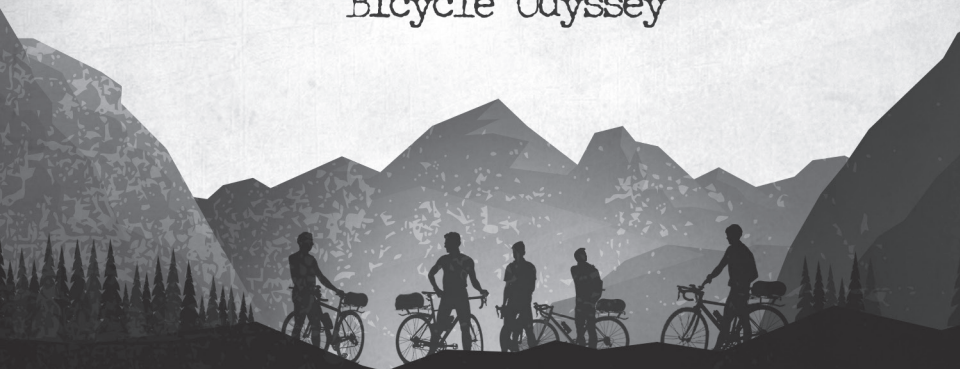


THE ROAD TAKEN

The Remarkable Story
of a Transcontinental
Bicycle Odyssey



**BRYAN SIMMONS, STIG REGLI,
AND BILL JACKSON**

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*I dedicate this book to my mother,
who encouraged me to take the bicycle
trip, paid for it, accepted my weekly
“collect” phone calls, and saved every
single postcard from the trip that
I sent her.*

BRYAN

*To my wife Melanie and daughters
Kirsten and Jocelyn.*

STIG

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Note for the reader: most of the book is a first-person narrative by two separate authors, Bryan Simmons and Stig Regli. At that point they alternate as authors with each chapter.

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I want to thank my wife Barbara, my good friend Paul Matthews, and John Jones, for their encouragement to expand my preliminary draft into a book.

BRYAN

I am forever grateful to my mother who instilled a sense of wonder and adventure in life. I am grateful to the many people that helped me during this trip. I am grateful to Aarne Vesilind, Donald Wright, and Dennis Warner who mentored me at Duke before and after my bicycling travels to elucidate a career path forward.

STIG

We are also grateful to Stephen, Jennie, and John Jones for their editing and good work in bringing the manuscript to publication.

THE AUTHORS

FOREWORD

BY MICHAEL COX

*Former Environmental Protection Agency Climate
Change Advisor and local climate activist*

In 1972, five students from Duke University embarked on an odyssey. Four of them completed a bicycle journey across the United States and the other biker completed a very impressive 1000-mile trip. Their journey was powered by a desire for adventure, an interest to connect with people, and a need to test their physical abilities. They actually referred to the trip as an “Odyssey” for several reasons (see if you can find the references to Homer’s *The Odyssey* in the book).

Their trip reminds me of my own bike trip after I graduated from college in 1981. I took a 2-month bike trip through Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and British Columbia with two friends. Many of the stories from the book resonated with me and brought a smile to my face and, at times, a grimace at the painful reminder of some of the harder times. Their 100 mile per day average for an entire month, with all the challenges they encountered, is particularly impressive. I am sure others have done similar adventures and the book

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will bring back the mostly fond memories of their own journeys.

In 1972, the issue of climate change was not front-page news, but scientists were starting to recognize its importance. In the years following the bicycle odyssey across America, this issue certainly has driven the life of both author Stig Regli and myself. Driven by a combination of factors including the need for exercise, the desire to avoid contributing to pollution from cars, and as a small part of our own roles in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, both Stig and I rode our bikes to work for over 25 years.

We find ourselves now in a climate crisis of our own making, to which we must respond. The urgent need to substantially reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and make our communities more resilient against climate change requires that we take significant action now. Waiting puts our communities, economies, and our children's futures in peril.

A 2018 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change¹ stated that to keep global temperatures below a 1.5°C increase compared to pre-industrial levels will require net zero global carbon emis-

¹ IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers. In: Global warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

sions by approximately 2050. This conclusion is also supported by the 4th National Climate Assessment.²

Nationally, the U.S. transportation sector contributes almost 30 percent of our country's total greenhouse gas emissions. Locally, the contribution can be much higher. For example, in Washington State, where I live, the transportation sector contributes over 45 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions in the State.

In order to meet our national and state goals for reducing greenhouse gases we need to transform our transportation systems. Experience in other communities and countries shows that safe, convenient, and attractive networks of cycling and walking pathways for all ages and abilities — well-linked from residential areas to employment, school, and shopping — are required to significantly increase participation in biking and walking. Such networks *must* include separated or protected bike lanes. While some communities are making progress, others are lagging behind in creating such networks.

An example of a successful project is the Burke-Gilman Trail in the Seattle area. It is a 27-mile off-road multi-use trail that connects communities throughout the region to downtown Seattle. The trail has become a major transportation corridor that serves thousands

² Fourth National Climate Assessment. Volume 11: Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States. 2018. <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/>

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of commuter and recreational cyclists each day. The Burke-Gilman Trail demonstrates that when the proper facilities are provided, many people will choose healthy, pollution-free, non-motorized modes of travel.

In addition, in order to make this necessary transition, it will be important to promote mixed-use development and multi-family housing in core areas in order to enable greater use of non-motorized transportation options and prioritize new transit-oriented development.

Because of COVID-19, many people have decided that they are not comfortable taking public transportation anytime soon. One silver lining in this trend is a 60% surge in national bike sales, including a large increase in electric bikes, since March 2020.

But, in order for people to actually use bikes as their primary or secondary mode of transportation, there must be a safe network of routes for people to utilize. The main reason people do not use their bikes as a primary or secondary mode of transportation is that they do not feel safe.

Of course, getting people out of their cars and onto their bikes will reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. However, it will also provide health benefits to the riders, reduce undesirable health impacts to people from air pollution caused by cars and trucks, and provide jobs for people at bike shops and for the outdoor recreational business.

Foreword by Michael Cox

We also have an obligation to our children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and neighbors to leave this place we call home a better place than what we inherited. That means we need to not only advocate for change, but we must also model beneficial behaviors that our children will see and emulate.

We cannot all complete a cross-country bike adventure to show our support for addressing climate change. We can, however, take advantage of the surge of interest in biking to advocate nationally, and in our own communities, to create the biking and walking networks needed to get people out of their cars and onto their bikes.

I encourage you to read this excellent travel adventure of five intrepid Duke students to provide you with encouragement to start riding your bike to both help address climate change, and for your own wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

I was one of five students at Duke University in Durham, NC, wanting upon graduation, in May 1972, to do something physically memorable, and perhaps transformative for the rest of our lives. We all recognized that once we were on a career path, the opportunities for alternative adventures and discoveries could shrink drastically, and before we knew it, we might be old men not capable of such pursuits. Furthermore, the prospect of doing something together and having each other's support was particularly appealing. Our aspirations for travel in 1972 may have been unconsciously reinforced by major events in the US: President Nixon ordering the development of the space shuttle program (January 5); *Mariner 9* sending its first pictures from Mars (February 4); and the Pioneer 10 spacecraft being launched from Cape Kennedy, the first man-made satellite to leave the solar system (March 2). However, we were more interested in exploring the vast unknowns of our own country rather than that of the universe.

Four of us (Bill Jackson, Hal Hemme, Vaughn Lamb and me, Bryan Simmons) were close friends living in the same dormitory. We had toyed with hiking the Appalachian Trail, which can take a year to cover a significant distance, but we decided to do a cross-county

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bike trip due to Vaughn's commitment to start a job at Duke's Marine Lab on June 19th. We envisioned that biking cross-country would offer broad opportunities, socially and geographically, to discover much of our country that we knew little about. Little did we know at that time that we would be confronted with so many unexpected events and challenges. These included overwhelming winds, torrential rains, extreme heat, life threatening gunshots from strangers, sleeping in jails, bicycle accidents, and the separation of our group that changed the dynamics of the whole adventure. Also, serendipitous meetings with remarkable people at critical junctures uplifted us in times of greatest need.

Stig Regli, who did not know us initially, had been contemplating a possible around the world bicycle trip in search of meaning for his life. He had not found any willing partners and did not have the courage to do this alone. When he learned about our plans for doing a cross-county trip he became interested in joining us. Stig had to be back in Durham during the last week in June for a friend's wedding, so the timing fit well with our plans.

I had a mediocre history of athletic accomplishments up until the bike trip. I walked 25 miles at age 12 in response to President Kennedy's clarion call for increased physical fitness. After the walk, my back went into painful spasms that confined me to bed for almost a week. I was an average runner on my high school

Introduction

cross-country running team. Together with Bill and Hal, I jogged frequently at Duke University covering two miles back and forth between Duke's two campuses sometimes several times per week. Hal came in 21st in the one-mile inter-campus Cake Run contest; the cheerleaders gave the first 20 finishers a cake (no piece of cake for Hal). Bill, Hal, and I were very active on the Windsor dormitory intramural sports team, and our dorm won the school intramural championship three years in a row, retiring the trophy. Dormitories at Duke acted as local fraternities at the time and competed in intramural sports against all other dormitories, including the dormitories of national fraternities. None of us were avid bikers.

Stig had a bicycle that he sometimes used to commute to his classes on campus from where he lived off campus. He also played intramural tennis and basketball and played golf with some members of Duke's golf team. In an indication of what was to come, Stig had a penchant for physical extremes. He once played 144 holes of golf in one day in Denmark with four of his close friends. During his junior year at Duke, Stig had a bet with one of Duke's fabled beer drinkers that Stig could walk or run more miles than John could drink beers, each in one day. Stig covered 68 miles in 16 hours but the bet was annulled when John threatened to induce self-vomiting to increase his beer drinking capacity.

THE ROAD TAKEN

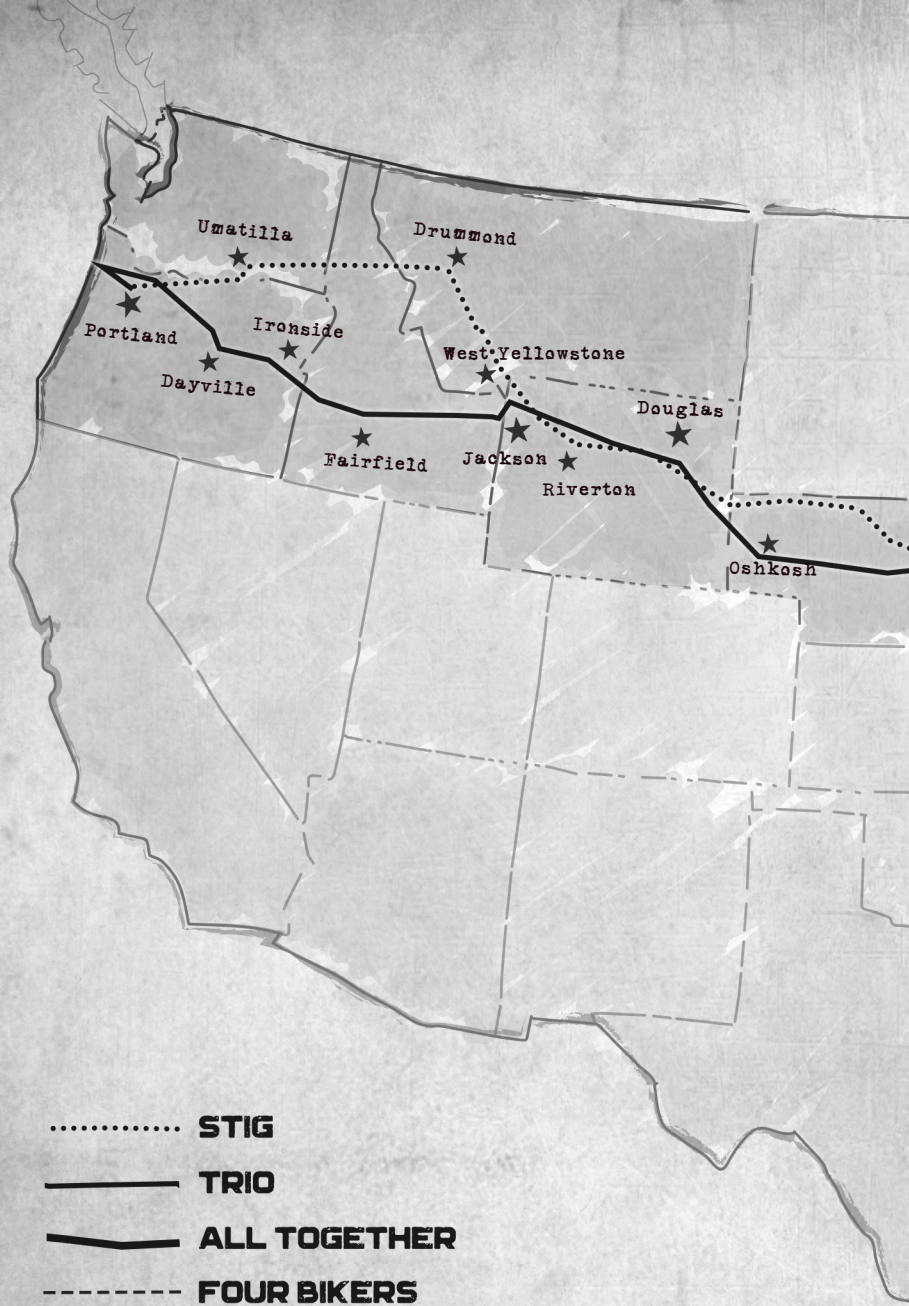
All five cyclists were good students at Duke. Bill had a double major in mathematics and economics. I majored in mathematics. Vaughn and Hal each had a major in chemistry. Stig majored in mechanical engineering but nearing graduation he thought environmental engineering might be a better career path which would eventually warrant graduate school. It is interesting to note that all five of us had technical/scientific majors rather than majors in the arts and humanities. Bill, Vaughn, Hal, and I were the four who planned the trip before meeting Stig. We each purchased a bike over the 1971 Christmas holiday and began long distance training rides around Durham, NC, with some trips covering 50 or more miles. These practice trips helped us develop endurance and learn basic lessons such as the importance of always carrying water, tools, and a candy bar. I became so weak from hunger on one training trip that I couldn't get up off the ground and had to be rescued by a candy bar. Thereafter I lived by the motto: don't go far without a bar (of candy). Hal and Vaughn biked an ambitious 180 miles from Durham to Duke's Marine Lab in Beaufort, NC, over Spring Break. The trip back to Durham was aborted when a freak snowstorm hit parts of North Carolina with three inches of snow on March 25-26 and they returned by bus. Hal too had a near paralysis on this trip from presumed hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) confirming the need to carry a candy bar with us for revival.

Introduction

Of note, Hal remembers the huge billboard, easily visible when biking into Smithfield, NC, which advertised the Ku Klux Klan. It displayed a hooded figure carrying a burning cross. It was torn down in 1977 after remaining for ten years and was well known in North Carolina. Jesse Helms was an openly anti-Civil-Rights five-term US senator from North Carolina; the Washington Post called him a “White Racist”. Much of the South in 1972 wasn’t welcoming for black persons or long-haired Duke graduates. The sculptures of Jefferson Davis, Robert E Lee, and Stonewall Jackson were completed at Stone Mountain, Georgia, in March 1972. In 1970 there had been a nation-wide student strike and shooting of students at Kent State University in which four students were killed. It seemed as though it wouldn’t take much for a bigoted person to push a biker off the road if the bicyclist fit the appearance of Liberal. However, Duke moved forward by establishing a department of African American Studies in the early 1970s.

BRYAN SIMMONS

2021



Umatilla

Drummond

Portland

Ironside

West Yellowstone

Dayville

Douglas

Fairfield

Jackson

Riverton

Oshkosh



Moulton

Hiawatha

Pere Marquette
State Park

Belleville

Pinckneyville

Williamsburg

Durham

Whiteville

Cherry
Grove
Beach

CHAPTER ONE

HATCHING THE PLAN



BRYAN

Logistics

It was, in more ways than we knew, a mammoth goal: to ride our bicycles across the United States. In the spring leading up to the odyssey, Bill, Vaughn, Hal, and I engaged in a rigorous practice schedule.

We could not find books that described how to prepare for and complete such a journey, so we had to plan and learn on our own.

Bill, our navigator, did in-depth research on the best route to take across country. We knew that we wanted to visit four places in particular: Cumberland Gap National Historic Park at the intersection of Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky; Hannibal, Missouri; Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming; Portland, Oregon.

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This gave Bill the rough plan that he developed into a very comprehensive and detailed itinerary, including what specific roads we should take and how to establish our daily travel goals. Our travel plans were influenced by the need to sandwich the trip in between the end of school, on the one hand, and June 18 on the other, because Vaughn started work at Duke's Marine Lab the next day.

We planned to avoid big cities, unnecessary mountains, and interstate highways (where bicycles were prohibited). We needed to cross the Allegheny, Rocky, and Coastal Mountains, but there were plenty of local mountains in the West that we didn't yet know existed. One of our better ideas was to progress from the Southeast to the Northwest as we rode on into June, so we could try to avoid the high daily temperatures that the impending summer would surely bring. This was, of course, decades before we had GPS on our cellphones. Instead, Bill had an odometer fitted on his bike that was accurate when correlated with distances calculated from a map.

We decided not to carry our meals. Eating at restaurants or buying ready-to-eat foods as we went would decrease the weight we carried on our bicycles through avoiding carrying cooking equipment. We figured we would also save on food prep time so we could make better progress on our journey. My bicycle weighed 35 pounds, which is a little heavy for a

Hatching the Plan

touring bicycle — especially when compared to today's lightweight bicycle construction. We carried sleeping bags, but no tents, and only two sets of clothes. Even though that meant frequent visits to a laundromat, we expected the lightweight provisions would help us make good time.

We had no escort vehicle or back-up automobile. We were entirely on our own, with no one monitoring our progress by cellphone or email. We would touch base with infrequent pay-phone calls and through letters we sent by U.S. mail. We carried water, snacks, toiletries, ground cloths, tools, and bicycle/tire repair kits. Bill carried a film camera (no digital cameras yet!) and took about 50 photos that have since faded but nonetheless act as reminders of our journey. Except for a water bottle carried on the bicycle frame, our baggage was carried on the back of our bicycles, which increased the bicycle stability compared to carrying on the front. My load weighed 15 pounds on average, not including water.

An Unexpected Companion

As we were training that spring, Stig became aware of our plans serendipitously through a mutual friend six weeks before the trip was to begin. After sharing aspirations for the trip and becoming acquainted with each other, Stig asked to join our group. We all agreed

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with the proviso that we would leave Stig if he couldn't keep up with us.

Stig's mother had been against him embarking on a long solo bicycle trip, even though she herself had taken a tandem bicycle trip through Europe with a girlfriend when she was in her twenties. Bicycling with four other Duke graduates was a way of assuaging his mother's concerns. Stig was committed to joining the other four. However, he didn't have the benefit of the training we had been engaging in and would only later fully realize the obstacles that he would have to overcome.