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Fresh stretch for able traveler

By Mark Junge
Special to the Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Editor's note: On July 24, Cheyenne author Mark Junge began his fourth long-distance bicycle ride. Junge, who is oxygen-dependent, is using an oxygen concentrator manufactured by SeQual Technologies.

“There are moments when history passes you so close you can smell its breath, you can reach your hand out and touch it on its flank.” n “The Change,” a poem by Tony Hoagland.

The same sense of the historical moment that Tony Hoagland experienced must flash through the brains of cowboys and cowgirls just before the timing clock starts.

Change is about to occur -- and they know it.

For residents of Laramie County, the Cheyenne Frontier Days also signals historical change, although an expected one with benign, regular rhythms.

For merchants it is a large happy face on the calendar. For students, it's a flag indicating school isn't far away. And hunters are reminded to sight in their guns. It's the dog days of summer.

We sense a historical moment with the recent fuel price hikes. It makes us pause. We think differently. And we can smell the breath of change in the air.

Are Wyomingites headed for a downward slide in the repetitive roller coaster ride in the boom-and-bust syndrome that defines their state's history?

First it was beaver pelts for hats, then grass for cattle, then wood and coal for train tracks and boilers, then land for homesteads, then coal, oil, uranium, more coal, natural gas, methane and now solar, wind and geothermal?

On a national scale, we sense a change in America's position vis-a-vis the world. We sense other people do not like us, but are we actually losing our place at the head of the world's table of nations?

We even wonder if air breathed by the planet's inhabitants is limited. We can ignore Al Gore, but global warming presses in on us nevertheless.

Change is also in the air for an oxygen-dependent bicyclist and his faithful partner, Ardath. We are about to ride out on another oxygen-powered adventure -- this one somewhat less ambitious than the last few wobbles across North America.

In 2004, with my lungs powered by supplementary, portable, liquid oxygen, I rode 3,500 miles from San Francisco to New York City. In 2006, the route was 1,785 miles from New York City to Cape Spear, Newfoundland. Last year we followed the northwest coast 1,200 miles from San Francisco to Vancouver, B.C.

This year we will begin once again in San Francisco, heading south toward Mexico. At the end of the next three weeks, our mileage total will be 7,000 miles, more than one-quarter around the globe.

Relatively speaking, that distance is minimal. The septuagenarian Cheyenne resident Dick Krahenbuhl figures he has ridden bikes about 250,000 miles, roughly the distance between the Earth and moon.

But distance is not the issue this summer.

Another historical moment approaches. When I finish my pancakes here at Orphan Andy's cafe in San Francisco, Ardath and I will drive south to Daly City to take part in the grand sendoff of this year's oxygen-supported ride.

From Seton Medical Center, I will head out. It will be the shortest distance I've biked so far: about 600 miles, depending on the detours one encounters along the contours of the California coastline.

One detour may be the result of the recent fires. We know California is burning up. We saw the haze coming into this great City by the Bay.

But what we cannot see are the shifts in tectonic plates below. If the Pacific and North American plates collide, we may be surfing instead of riding toward Baja California.

Barring such an event, Ardath will be driving our support van along coastal U.S. Highway One, and I will be riding my Trek with a portable concentrator strapped to its rear rack.

The maker of that concentrator, SeQual, has dubbed my ride, "Mark's Breathe Easy Tour." Business cards have been printed, and my biking jersey and pants are printed with SeQual's name and Web site.

The company's partners in this quest -- the American Lung Association of California and Seton Medical Center -- await our arrival this morning.

The purpose of the bicycle ride is to raise awareness of chronic obstructive lung disease and to encourage oxygen-dependent people to live fuller lives by using portable oxygen.

Some 12 million people have been diagnosed with chronic obstructive lung disease, and 10 million others have undiagnosed problems breathing.

Together they constitute an "underclass" whose problems are largely ignored by Congress and the current administration.

They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself. --
Andy Warhol

In Daly City is Seton Medical. In front of the building's main entrance stands an audience of about 20 awaiting the formal kickoff of the tour.

I stand at a podium facing three other oxygen-dependent people who are rehab patients at the hospital. Sitting quietly on a bench before me, each uses a different oxygen device.

It is time to strike a hammer blow for the freedom and mobility of oxygen-dependent people.

At this time in my life, all of my built-in reticence to speak is gone. I'm on a mission, and I want Americans to know that although I don't speak for all oxygen-dependent people and their health-care providers, I am here to ride for them.

I love to ride anyway, but the purpose of this trip is to call attention to others who suffer. I am in what poet Robert Bly calls the black stage in the red, white and black stages of life.

The red stage is the first, the heady and headstrong days of youth when red corpuscles and hormones surge through the veins.

The white stage then is characterized by social responsibility. A person assumes his role in society and exercises the values that have been inculcated.

The third, or black, stage is the period in late life when a person begins to pull back from the struggles of daily existence and comes to realize that life is what it is. It's time to reflect, to forgive and to forget. It's not a time to control. It's time to observe, comment and exercise judgment based upon life's lessons.

My own life bounces between the red, white and black stages of life.

The red is in my love for bicycles and touring. The white encourages me to strike a blow for other oxygen-dependent people. The black in me refuses to judge people for their lung problems, whether smoking causes them or not. I am an observer and a helper, not a

judge.

After the speech has been made and group photographs taken, Sister William Eileen Dunn of the medical center gives Ardath a small silver medal to assure our safekeeping.

I straddle my bike, attach a canula from the Sequal Eclipse II concentrator to my nose and pedal away.

Weaving back and forth through the streets, I aim for Highway One and the Pacific Coast. There are places to see, things to do, people to meet.

I am now a missionary on a bicycle, preaching the gospel of oxygen portability.