

ARTICLE FOR WYOMING TRIBUNE EAGLE

(For 8/3/08 publication)

[Editor's note: On July 24 Cheyenne author Mark Junge began his San Francisco-Mexican border bicycle ride. Junge, who is oxygen-dependent, is using an oxygen concentrator manufactured by his sponsor, Sequal Technologies. This is the second in a series of journal articles.

Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going.

Jim Rohn, motivational speaker

Standing behind a podium atop one of San Francisco's many peninsular hills, during the middle of my motivational speech to a small group of people at Seton Medical Center, the obstreperous Trek bicycle parked in front of me tips over in a gust of Pacific wind, landing on its side and breaking its new rearview mirror. Is this an omen for the trip? I ask the audience, but receive only deadpan looks. Maybe they doubt that an oxygen-powered, 600-mile bicycle trip from San Francisco to the Mexican border is really possible.

The oxygen concentrator I will depend upon for the next 600 miles – for me the most important bicycle accessory -- still seems to work when I straddle the bike and take off for Highway One, the Cabrillo Highway, or the

Great Coastal Highway as it is also named, that snakes along the Pacific Ocean in central California.

Emerging from the hospital neighborhood, I follow Highway One until it becomes a freeway. I arrive at an intersection where a sign forbids any further travel by bicyclists or pedestrians. Stranded on a stoplight island in traffic, I glance behind me. Across the street is a guy on a bike. He might be able to help. I wave at him and he dodges traffic, riding over to ask me what my problem is.

Mike is his name. He's a hipster approaching senior citizen status. With his short cut, Dracula haircut swept back by a sea breeze, wearing multi-colored skateboarding pants, he is confrontational. Before I can complete my frantic questions on how to find and stay close to the sea, Mike takes control. "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Slow down. This isn't the East Coast. This is California. Where are you from?"

"Wyoming" I reply.

"Then you should know better. This is the West Coast. Slow down. Now, where do you want to go?"

Slowly and deliberately I explain again, whereupon Mike begins giving precise directions. He can tell by the look in my eyes that I am only half-following everything, so he exclaims, "Aw, hell, forget it. Follow me."

We break a path backwards against the traffic, in front of an uphill-chugging semi whose driver says something I have no time to decipher, then weave behind some cars, in front of others, and begin a downhill ride toward the Pacific. Mike warns: “It’s steep so be careful.”

He seems to relish flying down a series of steep neighborhood streets at 30 mph, angling one direction, then another, testing my mettle. So much for slowing down! When we get to the bottom of the hill Mike glides over to a curb and asks: “Are you still with me?” He grins and adds, “You did well”, then iterates a new set of instructions. He tells me to have a safe journey before turning around and leaving me to continue my Odyssean quest south along the sea.

Bicycling through a series of pintsized towns snuggled along the shoreline, I pass the “What It Is” car body repair and paint shop in Pacifica, and stop at the psychedelic-colored MT Tattoo Parlor where I photograph Beth, Zuey, John and Jonn four tattoo artists who strike a pose like a narcissistic rock band.

Rob Artigo of San Francisco’s KGO Radio pulls up in front of the tattoo parlor to do a scheduled sidewalk interview about what has been dubbed “Mark’s Breathe Easy Tour”. Afterward Beth almost convinces me to stay for a bicycle tattoo. She’ll charge the minimum \$80 to inscribe it on my posterior but I decline. There are many miles to go before finishing today’s 28-mile ride at Half Moon Bay.

“Big Sur is the California that men dreamed of years ago, this is the Pacific that Balboa looked at from the Peak of Darien, this is the face of the earth as the Creator intended it to look.

Henry Miller, author

California’s Pacific Coast Highway is a gash across ocean headlands that clutch the sea like cat claws. Blasted through some of the most beautiful shoreline in the world, it has been designated an “All-American Road.” Like a knife through wedding cake it slices through the geological strata pushed up by the Pacific and North American plates. Figuratively, it cuts through layers of history dating back to conquistador Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo who explored California west coast in 1542, three hundred and fifty years before Wyoming became a state.

For the bicyclist riding south from San Francisco the landscape along this highway changes every day. Small coastal towns rest in coves, alternating with hilly areas like the Devils Slide. Beyond the steep hills are rolling fields with row upon row of artichokes, lettuce, cabbage, brusselsprouts and strawberries.

If you pick up a box of strawberries at the grocery store, chances are they came from Watsonville, the center of the nation’s strawberry-producing region. As I ride through the fields one quiet evening they send out faint hints of a

strawberry milk shake. With no traffic or farmhouses or traffic in sight, I meander across the shoulder of the road and pick a few of luscious fruits.

As I stood in that strawberry field along the highway, in the lush ocean humidity of dusk, with no one around, I realized that God created those strawberries for people to eat. But it is the Devil that causes wayfarers like me to eat the fruits of someone else's labor without paying. I confess. I ate them. But the Devil made me do it. Father, forgive me for I have sinned.

Santa Cruz, a day's bike ride south of San Francisco is two days for me. The indented bay is a surfing, windsurfing and windsailing Valhalla. It is Saturday and beach after white sandy beach is sprinkled with people who use them for swimming, volleyball, sunbathing or riding curling waves. It takes me half a day to negotiate the contours of the waterfront along Santa Cruz and its sister communities, following paths marked sporadically "Pacific Coast Bike Path". From the beaches of Santa Cruz, enroute to Monterey, I pass through Marina. With its brown, barren hills and low vegetation it reminds me of Wyoming.

Monterey, Pebble Beach and Carmel are seaside communities connected by a 17-mile loop that provides a brief look at an exclusive seaside neighborhood where only the wealthy can afford to live. Pebble Beach appears to be littered with sea-washed boulders rather than small cobbles. I stop at an intersection where a tall, middle-aged man stands near the

green on one of five golf courses along the peninsula's perimeter drive.

“How are you?” he asks.

“Fine,” I reply. “Can you tell me what the green fees are here?”

“I don't know. I'm not a member. I'm a guest. I couldn't afford to pay the green fees. A membership in this club costs \$250,000.”

My mouth drops. As I turn back to continue my ride through the plush, Monterey Cypress and Eucalyptus-lined residential area, I think to myself: “Ardath and I could sell our house to pay for a membership in the golfing association and have enough left to buy a couple set of clubs and pay our green fees.” Unfortunately, Sotheby's International Realty, which sells homes along this central California coastline, probably wouldn't be interested in our Cheyenne home.

Riding past Monterey and Carmel Highlands toward Big Sur I see signs of the recent California fires. Highway 1 through Big Sur was closed for two weeks while the fire jumped the road from headland forests to seaside trees and vegetation. Here and there along the road are signs expressing appreciation for the firefighters. Stopping along a pullout I talk to a California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) employee who says that the Bixby Creek fire near where we are standing was only one of several hundred fires.

Her job is to evaluate the fire's effect upon future landslides caused by the loss of vegetation. Even without fire

to accelerate the movement of land, riprap and retaining walls are necessary in order to keep sloughing hills from blocking the road. I express to the Caltrans employee that someday it would be nice to have a coastal bikepath. She says it's in the works.

After slogging uphill along the long ridges that plunge into the sea along Big Sur, I am able to get a good downhill coast going. Some are less than a mile, but still the bicyclist can enjoy the ride next to the ocean. The sea breeze is in my face, the surf breaks over the dark rocks and kelp far below, and I can hear the barks of basking seals.

On one downhill sprint a car gets caught behind me and cannot pass because of oncoming traffic. He must wait out my glide. I'm going as fast as a bicyclist wants to go but not fast enough for a driver who has a deadline to meet somewhere down this winding road. Glancing in my rearview mirror, I know he's back there, waiting. He wants to pass. I can negotiate the curves faster than he can but he catches me on the straightaway. I would like to give him room to pass but the shoulder is unpredictable and I can't see far enough ahead to gauge if it is stable. I decide that I earned the right to stay in the middle of our lane.

On the next steep uphill swing the Trek slows dramatically, the driver passes without a honk or a hand signal. We both realize that this is a coastal, two-lane road, not the interstate. Share the road is the byword.

All this is preface, by way of saying that California seems to be anything anybody ever wanted it be. The state's reputation for being a land of milk and honey if you've got the money, aggressively ahead of the curve and laid back at the same time, is intact.

...More anon.