

Free-wheeling in America

Imagine taking a family on a six month cycle camping trip across the U S of A. Now imagine only being able to take one two man tent, bulky hollow fibre sleeping bags and four terry towelling nappies for a fifteen month old. This month marks the 30th anniversary of the return by the Green family doing just such trip. To us, ardent cycle campers and CTC members for over six years, it was the most natural thing to do but everyone we met was amazed at how we packed everything and now, as I find packing for a weekend YHA tour fills a rear pannier, I begin to wonder.

We travelled on two bikes. John had the Le Jeune tandem with Elaine on kiddie cranks and Annie on the kiddie seat that John had adapted. He had included a head rest and fixed handle bars all round the seat to prevent her falling out if she napped. Fixed to the back of the seat was a string bag for food and the front panniers carried our cooking equipment. John and Elaine had access to water bottles and a third bottle cage housed a bottle for fuel. I was on my Holdsworth with four sleeping bags and toiletries, and three terry towelling nappies, in the rear panniers, the Good Companions two man tent on the rear pannier rack and clothes for four in the front panniers. I carried two water bottles. With such limited space we were limited to one change of clothes that would suffice on the bike, if we could not get cycle gear dry, and we all used the toiletries suitable for Annie, which I have continued to use and is probably why my skin is still like a babies what not (tee hee). Our stove was fuelled by petrol, we ate out of the cooking equipment, carried one knife and fork for preparing food, but had the luxury of our own spoons.

It had been a condition of absence, from Scarcroft School that Elaine did some maths work each day and so we carried her text book, exercise book and writing materials. Annie required extra clothing, for the mountains, a soft toy and comforter, so John and I had room for one luxury. We both chose cameras. Mine a basic instamatic, John's a very complex Pentax, that he had bought especially for the trip, a journal and pens. As he completed each journal we would parcel it up with leaflets, and photos and send onto John's mum, so that she could keep up with our travels.

A brief paragraph for you technophobic's. Memory (what's that) informs me that we both had two front and five rear rings, with gears suitable for the Yorkshire Wolds. My Holdsworth Mistral was 531 tubing, and the Le Jeune had a narrow wheel base and handled like a solo. Both bikes were fitted with 700c tyres and all cables, bearings, and other bits were checked, by John before departure. Spares were basic tool kit, including puncture repair, one spare tube and one pump. John carried the tools so it was important that I did not lose him.

Apart from a short tour of Ireland this was our first trip abroad with the bikes so we checked out with CTC travel department re bikes on planes. This proved

incredibly useful, not only because we were made aware of the extra time needed to adjust the bikes at the airport but also enabled us to bring the bikes back when San Francisco airport personnel tried to tell us that we hadn't booked their return.

We travelled out on 1st Apr 1979, and found that our initial problem was convincing immigration at Kennedy airport, that we did have enough money to live on, for six months, and we were not going to disappear and become dependant on a State for money. Then, suffering from jet lag, our first task was to obtain a map which, we were reliably informed, were free from petrol stations. However, when I asked for one the cashier asked "Where do you want to go to lady?" replying that I didn't know until I had studied a map as travelling by bike I needed to avoid main roads totally confused him and he replied "You find out where you want to go, lady, and I'll sell you a map" I left empty handed, and tried later, more successfully, at a different petrol station. We chose a route south over the Appalachians, picking up North and South Carolina before heading west north west via Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado. Here we headed north, via Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon and Washington and then south to San Francisco.

The weather was mixed. We were above the clouds, most days, on the Appalachians but thankful of their sophisticated camp sites and quickly developed a routine. Elaine, then seven years old would take Annie to the toilet block to keep warm under the hot air hand dryers, I would pitch the tent and John would prepare a hot stew. To keep dry during the day John devised a water proof cover over the kiddie seat but after dropping off the mountains to Tennessee this was adapted into a sun shade. Here we were invited to a 'shower party,' Americas way of welcoming a new baby, and I was able to exchange Annie's winter clothes for more suitable summer outfits including diaper's, as most of the nappies had taken a hammering being laundered in the cold. Washing now became easier, and drying a doddle.

Due to the refusal of most Americans to eat yesterday's bread or any banana with a brown patch on the skin, some food was incredibly cheap, so we quickly adapted to a banana sandwich lunch. In Tennessee we camped by a Baptist Church the evening they were holding a feast. Elaine made friends with the minister's daughter so was invited to spend the night in a proper bed. She returned having had a bath and wearing a dress which we managed to pack. In Arkansas we met the local chief of police who also owned the only restaurant and insisted we have a meal with him. I guess he was pretty astonished how we tucked away a three course lunch and he said he'd never seen children eat so much. The next day the locals bought so much food to take with us that we had to stop within a few miles and eat another breakfast. Camping by the Missouri a fisherman invited us to sample fresh salmon, which he cooked in foil over an open fire and in Colorado we met a family on a fishing holiday and were invited to sample their catch of dogfish. America, we learned was the country of large

meals and big eaters. We were introduced to 'all you can eat' deals and pie eating contests, which John won.

We never felt safety was a problem. We hid our food in the trees, in the Appalachians, away from the bears, and were often met at State crossings by local police who would advise on free camp areas. In Arkansas the police actually road along side us on a main road, as there was no alternative, more suitable road. We were a little perturbed when joined by a cyclist who asked us "What do you carry for protection?" Being a married woman I thought him a bit forward until I realised he meant protection from bandits. He showed us his hand gun, explaining how he never had any trouble because he left the handle showing out of his handle bar bag. Later, whilst staying with a family the father began teaching Elaine how to shoot. She later recalled how half way through the lesson he explained that she was using live ammunition.

The hospitality we found was amazing and after the national press started to cover our route it seemed that everyone wanted to entertain us at their humble abode. Some happily allowed us to camp in their garden, others insisted that we stay awhile with them. One memorable family were in Oregon and owned a bike shop. They told us of winters when they could ski off their own roof. Oregon was, I decided, the state that I could easily settle in as it had mountains, water, and weather. Our final host was Laura in San Francisco. She was a cyclist who had recently moved from New York and we were soon reminiscing about cycling in the Bronx. Laura introduced us to brunch and arranged a lift to the airport, via the free-way, for our flight home.

Once home we kept in touch with many of our new friends and a couple even managed to visit us in York. As I look back on that tour now I am still amazed at what we did. The Holdsworth came to a sticky end on High Cup Nick and the Le Jeune is a garden sculpture but the girls are still cycling and often remind me how they learned so many things during that trip, and of course it was character building.

Jacqueline