

A Rose for Nils G Thompson

(An unintended mission to Arlington National Cemetery)



By Benjamin A. Horwitz

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It began as a simple bike adventure. Jim Pankow and myself have been biking together for over ten years. The last three years included trips to Niagara Falls, Canada; a trip along the Erie Canal from Buffalo to Albany, New York; and our most recent trip which began in the city of McKeesport, Pennsylvania and ended in Washington D.C. The last trip to Washington D.C. would turn into something more than an enjoyable, leisurely ride up and over the Allegheny Mountains into our nation's capitol. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

We arrived in McKeesport, Pa around 12 noon. We left the Pennsylvania Turnpike at the Monroeville exit and turned south on PA 48 towards McKeesport. It was a picture perfect day – sun shining brightly and not a cloud in the sky. Like two children let loose in a toy store, we were straining at the leash to get on our bikes and attack the ATA bike trail, which begins in McKeesport. (Jim's 58, I'm 62) We pulled into the municipal garage just after 12. Jim had sent in a money order to the city of McKeesport for a one week parking permit allowing us to park in their garage on 6th street, one block from city hall. The charge was \$4.50 per day. Unfortunately the woman in charge had to have an emergency operation and she forgot to send Jim the permit. But Jim finally got in touch with her the day before we left Cleveland and she said to park in a certain area of the garage and she would place the permit on Jim's car after we left. It was Saturday August 25th.

The garage was practically deserted, like the impoverished city of McKeesport - a city that bustled with activity back in the 60s when I was attending The University of Pittsburgh and their huge J&L steel mill was booming. The mill had closed many years ago and appeared to have taken the city of McKeesport with it. Few lonely, lost souls were walking the streets of downtown McKeesport when Jim and I peddled out of the garage onto Walnut Street, PA 148, towards the 15th street bridge, which crossed the Youghiogheny River. (Pronounced: Yock (as in jock)-a- gay-knee; but referred to by the locals affectionately as just the, "Yock" or Yough.)

It was about a mile to the bridge and just after crossing the Yough we turned left on River Road. We followed River Road along the river. Most of the businesses along the riverbank – ancillaries to the once burgeoning local steel mill - looked to be closed down like many of the boarded-up stores along Walnut Street. It was a bit depressing.

We rode about a mile down River Road. The road just abruptly dead-ended into a dirt road with deep tire tracks that led back out of the valley. It certainly couldn't have been the bike path. Where the hell was the bike path that was the official beginning to the ATA bike trail? Did we miss the turn off? It seemed impossible to miss the turn off as the ATA map showed the start of the trail right at the end of River Road. But no damn path! Jim noticed a little opening in the bushes about 100 yards before River Road just abruptly ended. We rode our backs back, and sure enough there was an asphalt bike path leading out of the Yough River valley. It surely had to be the start of the trail, but it sure as hell wasn't marked very prominently – hell, it wasn't marked at all. No sign indicating it was the ATA trail. The Great Allegheny Passage, as it is known. No sign even indicating it was a bike trail. We peddled up the steep incline and soon began to follow the river from up on a bluff. It was the appropriate bike trail. We soon passed the town of Versailles and then we quickly entered the town of Boston. Both were listed on the ATA trail map.

We only planned to bike 20 miles that Saturday. We set a leisurely pace with several stops for ice-cream sandwiches. The bike path was made of crushed limestone. It was still quite firm, but offered a good deal more resistance than an asphalt or Macadam surface. Jim figured the crushed limestone was 20 to 25 percent more resistance than an asphalt surface. This was based on how fast we could travel on asphalt compared to the crushed limestone with the same basic effort – not exactly as rigorous a scientific, analytical, methodology as the Morely Mickleson experiment of the early 1900s confirming some of Einstein's theories of relativity. But I would concur with Jim's assessment. In any event we kept the pace around 11 mph.

The ATA trail from McKeesport to the Mason Dixon Line, (130 miles), followed an old abandon rail line, which basically followed the Youghiogeny and Cassleman river valleys. From McKeesport we passed through the small towns of Industry, Blythedale, Smithdale, and finally arrived in West Newton, our destination for the evening. It was about 3 in the afternoon and it got pretty steamy outside. Jim's speedometer (now referred to as a computer) had a temperature indicator, which read 93 degrees.

The Bright Morning B&B was located right off the bike path. Jim had called in a reservation the prior week before we left. The owners – The Rendulic's – told us we

would have the entire house to ourselves. Mary Lou called me the day before to let me know she wouldn't be meeting us as she had another engagement that day, but her husband would let us in and give us a key. He was waiting on the front porch as we drove our bikes up to the front steps of the house.

Introductions were made and Mr. Rendulic left. Jim and I had separate rooms and separate bathrooms and we both washed the path's limestone dust off both our bodies and then went downstairs and washed down our bikes.

The walk into town was less than half a mile. We walked across the bridge over the Yough and found a pizza house right in town advertising "New York style pizza". It was fantastic pizza and after scarfing down a large pie, Jim took off for the B&B and I got directions to a Giant Eagle grocery store about a mile from the bridge. I bought some lemons to make lemonade for tomorrow's voyage to Confluence, Pa, and got Jim some microwave popcorn. We both hit the sack before 10.

It began raining hard around midnight. Then it just began to pour. I got up and looked out the window at the bike path. It was completely flooded with an inch or more of water. It looked like tomorrow's 60-mile journey to Confluence might be a bit more than 25% resistive. I thought to myself "Oh crap!" and went back to bed.

I don't know exactly when the rain stopped, but I was up before 7 and immediately looked out the front window. The path looked to be damp, but no water or even any puddles. That was a good sign. We went downstairs to make breakfast. The Rendulic's left some bananas and a couple of sweet rolls - not nearly substantial enough to begin a 60-mile trek up into the Allegheny Mountains. So we drove our bikes into town and waited for a local café to open. Here we ate something more substantial. Jim had eggs, sausage, and grits; I had pancakes. We were on the limestone path by 8:30, but first we stopped at a local bike shop just off the path to put some air in our tires and shoot the crap with some other local bikers.

Sunday August 26

We considered this day to be our official start of the bike venture. Yesterday's 20-miles was a mere warm-up. Today we planned on doing 60 miles up into the mountains. It

was about 27 miles to Connellsville. From Connellsville to Ohio Pile it was another 17 miles. Maps warned the biker that the 17 miles to Ohio Pile were virtually without any services. So we planned to eat well in Connellsville and stock up on important food-stuffs. From Connellsville we planned to travel another 14 miles to just outside Confluence, Pa in the town of Harnedsville, where Jim had made a reservation at the Hanna House B&B.

It was a little after nine in the morning when we headed out from West Newton on the bike trail. The scenery got more and more spectacular as we headed towards Connellsville. We passed through small towns and villages that the railroad probably serviced back in the early 1900s and late 1800s. Towns with names like Cedar Creek and Smithton and Whitsett and Perryopolis. Most of these small towns had country stores where we purchased drinks or snacks. We always left in the morning with two water bottles, but it was very hot and humid and we heeded the biker's mantras: "Drink before you're thirsty; eat before you're hungry."

We got into Connellsville around one in the afternoon. Connellsville was one of the "bigger" small towns we had been passing through. In Connellsville the trail was directed through a local park. But the trail was closed in the park due to some local activities. The bypass through some city streets was easy to follow and we came to an intersection with a local restaurant advertising ribs – which were appealing to both myself and Jim. Placing my front tire in the bike rack in front of the restaurant, I turned around and my bike tilted over due to the weight in a bag I had on the handlebars. The front tire rim was bent and the tire rubbed against the brakes when I spun it. As luck would have it, a bike store was directly across the street and the owner adjusted the spokes in less than 5 minutes. He charged two bucks. We spent about twenty minutes talking with the owner, who had a familiarity not only with the ATA bike trail in Pennsylvania, but also the C&O canal bike trail in Maryland from Cumberland to Washington D.C. He warned us that the C&O was pretty ruff and to take at least three spare inner tubes. He also directed us to another restaurant about a mile down the road, which he said was better than the one across the street, and offered home-style cooking. The name escapes me (Valley Dairy Restaurant?), but it was indeed good. We left the

restaurant and got back on the ATA bike trail. It was about 2:30 in the afternoon. Now we had 17 miles to bike – with no services – to Ohio Pile.

The afternoon temperature was hot and getting hotter as we continued down the bike path towards Ohio Pile. The scenery kept getting more spectacular as we climbed higher into the Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania. The Yough kept cutting narrower and narrower canyons in the mountains. Canoes and kayaks and large inflatable rafts began to appear on the river. The higher mountains could be seen through the river valley. As described in the ATA web site and literature – it was indeed “Drop dead gorgeous”.

The bike trail from Connellsville to Ohio Pile was the most crowded we had seen it. Ohio Pile was a very popular destination – not only for bikers but especially for those folks interested in shooting the popular and at times very dangerous rapids of the lower Youghiogheny. We got into the town about 4, had some ice cream at a local Hershey’s ice cream store and watched the crowds of boaters and kayakers and rafters enter the Yough for their adventure downstream. We were back on the path by 4:30 biking even higher into the mountains entering enchanting forests with the sun getting lower in the sky. The scenery was becoming even more spectacular – if that was even possible.

We got into Confluence, Pennsylvania crossing over a bridge into the town itself. I’m not sure if we crossed the Yough or the Cassleman rivers, they both meet in Confluence – hence the name of the town. It was a couple more miles before we got to the Hanna House B&B located in Harnedsville on PA 523.

The B&B was actually an old –150 year old - farm house, partially converted into a B&B and set back 50 yards or so from the highway. We drove our bikes up the gravel path to the front of the porch. I walked up onto the porch and knocked on the screen door. No response. I heard people talking and laughing in the back of the house. It sounded like they were eating. I knocked again on the screen door, this time a bit louder. Still no response. I opened the door and walked back into the house and announced to the folks sitting around the dinner table, that we had arrived.

Frances Thompson introduced herself her daughter and her husband, Nils. She said she thought we were going to show up at one in the afternoon, so she assumed we decided to stay somewhere else or just didn’t make the trip. She showed us our rooms upstairs. We had the entire upstairs to ourselves. Jim took a shower first. The shower in

the bathroom and the bathtub were rather unique. The shower sat out in the middle of the floor with a circular plastic shower curtain you drew around the base of the circular shower, maybe all of three feet in diameter. The bathtub was a copper kettle, about three feet deep. I was going to take a bath, but decided on a shower and took one as soon as Jim was finished. We dressed and went downstairs where Frances offered us some of their dinner, which was fried chicken, but we opted to go into town to eat. Frances drove us into Confluence, which took all of five minutes. We ate at another B&B, which had a rather fashionable restaurant. It was quite good. We lingered over dinner then coffee for over an hour. The waitress called Frances to pick us up. It was almost 8:30 when we got back to the Hanna House B&B. I went upstairs to bed. Jim stayed and chatted with the Thompson's. Breakfast would be served at 7 the next morning.

I got a great night's sleep at the Hanna House B&B and woke about 6. Frances Thompson was in the kitchen cooking by 6:30 and I went down stairs at that time. She said good morning, asked what I wanted for breakfast and I walked around downstairs examining the 150-year-old farmhouse as Frances and I carried on a conversation of idle chitchat.

Frances and her husband came to buy the farmhouse in Confluence, Pa in 2000. They were both from Staten Island, NY, and you could cut Frances New York accent with the proverbial knife. Her husband didn't talk much to detect any accent. He came down stairs, said a brief good morning, filled up his coffee cup, lit a cigarette and went out on the screened-in porch. In New York, Nils, Frances' husband worked on tugboats – one week on, one week off. They decided that wasn't the life they wanted to lead and discovered the farm and 300 acres in Confluence, Pa. They purchased the farmhouse and accompanying acreage, and moved the family there – a son, 14 and their younger daughter - in 2000.

We continued to chat as I walked around the 150-year old home and discovered on a mantel in the living area a picture of a young soldier in a beret. A small American flag sat next to the portrait size photo. Not far from the photo was a coffee-table size picture book with pictures of the Iraq conflict. The book was open to a page with a picture of a gravestone in Arlington National Cemetery. The picture was small. Maybe one inch by one inch; but large enough to clearly read the name on the stone: Nils G Thompson. Next

to the picture was a Purple Heart. I hadn't noticed that our idle chitchat had stopped as I became consumed with the picture and medals on the mantle.

I turned back towards the kitchen where Frances was still cooking breakfast. The smell of smoked bacon frying filled the large room. Frances turned away from the old large cast iron stove where she was cooking and just began talking about her son. How he had loved the farm and helped her husband mend the fences and fix up the old farmhouse. How he felt the need to join the army right after high school, but how he couldn't wait to return to the farm.

Nils G Thompson never returned to the farm that he grew to love. He was killed in action on August 4th of 2005. Frances began to cry. I was speechless, and quite truthfully didn't know quite what to say or do. I felt awkward as this young woman poured out her heart to a perfect stranger she had met only hours before. She continued to tell me how Nils was now with God in heaven and soon I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. All this time Frances' husband, Nils, sat out on the screened in porch smoking a cigarette, sipping his coffee and staring out into the early morning fog.

Frances Thompson turned back to the cast iron stove and continued cooking breakfast for her boarders. Jim came downstairs and another couple staying at the B&B showed up and we all ate a hardy breakfast of Bacon and Eggs and fresh fruit.

Monday August 27th

We finished breakfast said our good-byes to everyone. And thanked Frances for a terrific breakfast. Jim and I got our bikes from the back shed, where we had stored them for the night and continued on PA 523 about half a mile back to the ATA bike trail. I immediately informed Jim of the tragic death of the Thompson's son, but Jim had learned of the death the night before while talking with the Thompson's. He promised them that when we got to Washington D.C. we would lay a single red rose by Nils' gravesite. From this point on, our biking adventure to Washington D.C. took on a completely different temperament. We didn't know it then. We still had over 200 miles to bike.

We had left most of the bike traffic behind in Ohio. We passed no other bikers, nor did any bikers pass us from Harnedsville all the way to the Mason-Dixon Line.

The ride to the Maryland border – also the official demarcation of the Mason Dixon Line - was almost serene. The scenery was pastoral, the weather almost perfect – it was a bit warm – and there were no other bikers or any human forms on the path between towns. We virtually had the limestone trail all to ourselves.

We climbed ever higher in the Allegheny's. The slope on Jim's computer averaged a 1% incline, occasionally 2%, as we climbed inexorably towards the Eastern Continental Divide - the geographical boundary between the watersheds of the Atlantic Ocean (Chesapeake Bay) and the Mississippi River.

We passed many small towns on our trek towards Maryland. We stopped in Rockwood and found a charming little store selling homemade pastries and knickknacks, also serving as a restaurant. It had hardwood floors and a rustic wooden interior resembling a log cabin. The food was terrific and we stored up on pastries and hoagie sandwiches for the ride into Maryland. (The peanut butter cookies were to die for!) We left Rockwood and continued higher up into the mountains. We passed several very small towns not even listed on some of the maps we carried. One was a rather impoverished settlement of ramshackle structures – broken down trailers, makeshift homes constructed of various materials – rather drafty looking. It appeared that the residents of the town were predominantly African Americans. It seemed a strange location for a settlement of African Americans, isolated from any large metropolitan area, located high up in the Allegheny Mountains. If we had more time, it looked like a location that may have had some underlying historical significance. It begged the question: How did a group of African Americans settle on this location and how long had they and their ancestors been living there?

We got to Meyersdale about one in the afternoon. The heat had begun to take its toll along with the continuous climb higher into the mountains. Jim was hungry so we headed down a steep hill into the town and found a small local restaurant bustling with activity. Our intention was to bike into Maryland and stay the night in Frostburg. Frostburg was only 20 miles from Meyersdale. It would be any easy ride once we got to Dale. Dale was a mile from the Eastern Continental Divide, and we weren't much more

than 3 or 4 miles from Dale. So most of the ride to Frostburg would be downhill. We took our time in the little diner in Meyersville and ate a leisurely 2nd breakfast of the day. Jim had an annoying hangnail that had been driving him crazy almost since the biking began back in West Newton so we stopped at a local drugstore near the restaurant then headed back up the steep incline back to the bike path. We walked with our bikes, up the street to the drugstore only a few hundred feet from the restaurant. Jim purchased a nail clipper to relieve his nagging pain – clipped off the appropriate nail on his big toe - and we continued to walk our bikes back up the steep incline towards the bike path.

Back on the limestone path, not even 30 minutes later we were in Deal, Pa, another nondescript, small, enclave of ramshackle dwellings. A mile later we were at the sign informing us we were sitting right on top of the Eastern Continental Divide – 2392 feet above sea level. It was all down hill from here. It was over 90 degrees according to Jim’s computer, and the idea of spending the rest of the day coasting into Frostburg, Maryland was a welcome thought, indeed.

And we did indeed begin coasting towards the Maryland boarder immediately upon crossing over on the eastern side of the continental divide. Two miles or so after leaving the divide we came upon the longest tunnel on the bike path – The Big Savage Tunnel. It was over 3200 feet in length. It was well lit and you could barely see “The light at the end of the tunnel.” But you could indeed make out the tiny spec of sunshine at the tunnel’s southern end. But the best part of the Big Savage Tunnel, was that it was cool, almost like it was air-conditioned. The tunnel cut right through a mountain – The Big Savage Mountain, no doubt.

Once we came out the southern end of The Big Savage Tunnel the entire valley created by the northern branch of the Potomac River opened up right before our very eyes. It was both a dramatic and breathtaking scene. The drop-off from the bike trail immediately to our left was rather precipitous all the way down to the Potomac. The vista seemed almost infinite. And the best part – it was all down hill, 25 miles of downhill coasting all the way to Cumberland Maryland. We planned to stop in Frostburg, which was about 15 miles from Cumberland, but when we got to Frostburg with such ease, and found out it was even a sharper downhill coast to Cumberland, we just continued effortlessly coasting right into downtown Cumberland, Maryland.

The ATA path ended at a spot where the C&O (Chesapeake and Ohio) canal and towpath began – right in downtown Cumberland – a quaint and attractive town surrounded by the Allegheny Mountains. We inquired as to where we could find a hotel or B&B and we were directed to a Holiday Inn about a mile from the canal located right next to the rail station. We had peddled another 60 miles that day; although the last 25 were down hill, the first 35 were all uphill. It was 6:30 in the evening when we peddled into the Holiday Inn lobby. We were tired and hungry and pretty wasted from the 90-plus degree temperatures. Jim didn't feel like searching for a restaurant so we got to our rooms, showered and met for dinner in the Holiday Inn restaurant. Nothing special, but I did have the states' best-known food – Maryland Crab Cakes. I've actually had better tasting crab cakes in Ohio. After dinner we both quickly retired to our respective rooms. I hit the sack immediately and woke up about 5 the next morning ready to finish the last 185 miles to Washington D.C. on the C&O canal towpath.

Tuesday, August 28th

We ate breakfast at the Holiday Inn and took off for the towpath, just a mile down the road. We stopped at a local bakery for some fresh doughnuts and packed them away for some nourishment later that day.

The first miles of the canal towpath looked to be of the same surface we had just peddled on through Pennsylvania - a crushed limestone surface that was well manicured and cared for. It lasted only one mile. After that, the towpath was nothing but two deep tire ruts, separated by a bumpy rocky root-strewn surface good possibly for mountain biking. And as we continued down this crapy path it only got worse. "Christ" I was thinking to myself as we slowed the pace to 10 miles per hour – and even that was uncomfortably too fast for this surface – "We got 185 miles and four days on this lousy path." I wasn't sure that either our bodies, or our bikes, could make it for four days – but we continued southeast on the bumpy towpath towards Hancock, Maryland – hopefully our destination for the evening.

Looking at the map we got from the tourist office back in Cumberland, there weren't very many options. We pretty much had to go 60 miles over this path to Hancock, before we came to a city with either a motel or a B&B.

Soon after leaving Cumberland on the towpath, we left all the hikers and bikers behind, and we would soon understand why. No one would bike or even do much hiking on this trail. It was neither very scenic, nor conducive to biking. Most of the towpath was shrouded in trees, blocking almost any scenery. In addition it obviously followed the old canal, which in most spots was either a smelly, stagnate, pool of slimy, green, algae-covered water – or simply a dry ditch. The scenic Potomac was always nearby but seldom visible through all the foliage. Neither Jim nor I made any comments at this point but our complete silence spoke volumes. We were both thinking the exact same thing. “No way would we or could we keep this up for 4 days and 185 miles, all the way to Washington D.C.” But we persevered the 60 miles and 8 hours on our bikes all the way to Hancock.

I was more fortunate than Jim. One week before the bike trip my Jamis Coda Comp bike was stolen right out of my condominium garage, right in front of me, in the middle of the afternoon, so I was forced to take my other bike on the trip. This bike was a Trek with shocks and weighed 13 pounds more than the Jamis. I was obviously not a happy camper when I was forced to take the much heavier bike, but the shocks turned out to be a blessing in disguise on the C&O towpath, and probably the bike I should have taken on this trip, anyhow! In addition, like on most extended bike trips, something unusual out of the ordinary happens that makes these trips memorable. About five miles down the towpath from Cumberland we passed an elderly, gentlemen doing about 6 or 7 miles per hour. He was obviously in no rush and his bike was loaded down. He had panniers on both sides of both tires and they were bulging at the seams. In addition, he had a bicycle pump – not a small hand held pump, but a FULL SIZE bike pump and two spare tires attached to the top of his back carrier. He was carrying all kinds of cooking utensils and camping-gear. He had to have an additional 50 or 60 pounds on that bike. We just caught a glimpse of him as we peddled by. He was older than us. He looked old. He looked weathered. He was old. He was the only other person we saw biking the towpath that day. And he looked like he had been traveling on this path before.

We passed the old guy, said a quick, “good morning”, and continued on towards Hancock. We were maybe 15 miles from Cumberland when we stopped and looked at the map. There weren’t many places on the map before Hancock that looked like good stops for some nourishment so when we came to Spring Gap we left the towpath and headed down Route 51 where some road signs indicated we could get some food. Not even a half-mile up the road we saw a bunch of parked cars in front of a brick building that was once an elementary school. We walked into the restaurant and Jim ordered a second breakfast this time with a huge helping of grits. I ordered the Maryland Fried Chicken with white gravy. It was nothing short of fantastic. Jim couldn’t resist asking for a taste, which I reluctantly gave him. He agreed that it was incredibly good. We spent about 30 minutes in the restaurant. Just as we got up to leave, sure enough the old gent we passed on the towpath earlier that morning came into the restaurant. I couldn’t resist asking him a few questions, which he graciously answered. One was how old he was – 80. The second: Where are you headed? He had already peddled from Annapolis – over two hundred miles, and was headed back to Annapolis. The old guy was peddling 400 miles and camping and cooking for himself every evening. I thanked him and as I got up from his table about to leave the restaurant he said to me: “Just remember, just keep on peddling – you’ll never die if you just keep peddling on your bike.” He seemed to be his own best case in point. Jim and I decided not to complain about the towpath surface anymore till we got to Hancock.

It was already after 6 when we finally peddled into Hancock, Maryland – almost 60 miles exactly from Cumberland, 63 to be exact. The last ten miles we peddled on an asphalt-paved bike path that we were directed to at another pit stop by a knowledgeable biker from the area out for a 20-mile spin. Compared to the rock-strewn C&O towpath it was a welcomed relief – almost a godsend. We came off the bike path right into Hancock, next to a bike shop and proceeded to top off our tires. The cordial owner gave us directions to a Days Inn motel about a mile from the path.

We drove through town and found the Days Inn near the exit of either Interstate 70 or Interstate 68. They both crossed in Hancock, Maryland. It was a rather run down establishment, but we didn’t much care, having been beaten to hell by the C&O towpath and the 92-degree temperatures.

We quickly took off for our respective rooms, showered and met in the parking lot to find a suitable restaurant. We decided to walk and headed down the hill to the main street that ran through the center of Hancock. It was during our walk into town that we realized just how beat up our bodies felt from the biking that day. We were so sore from head to toe we doubted we could even ride the next morning. It was a complete struggle just walking through town. One thing we both decided upon. There was no way in hell we were going back on that goddamn C&O canal towpath. We'd have to find an alternative route using local and county and state roads. That was our mission as soon as we finished dinner and walked the mile back to the Days Inn. (Jim was not looking forward to going back to his room, which he said, smelled like dried cat pee as soon as he turned on the air conditioner. Jim had two cats back at his home in Kalamazoo and assured me he knew what dried cat pee smelled like!)

Wednesday August 29th

It was 7 in the morning when we met in the parking lot of the Days Inn. The objective for the morning was to find a decent establishment for breakfast. Last night's dinner at a local restaurant left a lot to be desired. Jim sent back his half-frozen, half-cooked raw steak, I just ate mine like a ravenous convict waiting to be sent to the electric chair. It was already pretty warm outside, so we anticipated another 90 degree plus day, and we already knew we'd be peddling on some unfamiliar roads and since we were approaching the Blue Ridge mountains- we anticipated lots of climbing and hilly terrain. We would leave the flatness of the C&O canal towpath for the hills and valleys of Maryland.

Gladly!

We peddled over a mile down the main drag of Hancock and found a local breakfast establishment that appeared quite crowded and we rightfully figured we could get a substantial meal there, which we did. Leaving the maps and relative safety of the towpath behind, we had no idea what the lay of the land would be like, so we ate an especially large breakfast.

After breakfast we headed back towards town and quickly found an entrance to the asphalt-paved bike path we entered the town on the day before. We followed the paved

path till it ended, about 10 miles outside of town. We followed a local road that paralleled Interstate 70 then we wound our way by various state and county roads up into the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was really quite beautiful. We took a wrong turn on one of the county roads and found ourselves in the town of Clear Spring. We stopped for coffee, and a Danish at a McDonald's. By lunchtime we arrived in Williamsport and found a terrific local Pizza restaurant. We met a Park Ranger there who worked at the Antietam National Battlefield. He suggested a route that would take us right pass the battlefield. It was about 15 miles from the restaurant and we arrived there about 2 in the afternoon. It was a fairly arduous pedal – with all the hills and the 90-degree temperatures.

We turned off the highway into the Antietam Battlefield and spent about 30 minutes wandering around the museum. The battlefield itself was immense so we stayed in the main building viewing civil war pictures taken by Mathew Brady of the carnage left by the weeks of fighting. Antietam was the bloodiest battle in terms of deaths and casualties of any war America has ever fought in.

We biked into the town of Sharpsburg, Maryland just a mile or so from the park entrance, found a quaint little restaurant opened by a young woman, ex stockbroker who had had it with the rate race of Baltimore and Washington D.C. and had a well earned meal. It was a difficult day of biking what with the extreme heat (Jim's thermometer on his computer sitting on his bike registered 114 after we left the restaurant.) and the climbing. (We climbed over 2000 feet that day.) But at least we didn't get the crap pummeled out of us by the towpath. All in all it was a good biking day. Our confidence was restored. We knew we could make it to Washington D.C. with or without the C&O Canal towpath. Now we felt the need to find a decent place to stay. As good fortune would have it, the owner of the restaurant in Sharpsburg told us of a resort-type hotel just across the Potomac River in West Virginia in the town of Shepherdstown. It was about five miles down the road.

One of the real joys of taking bicycle trips like the one Jim and I were on is crossing a river in some nondescript area of the country like the Maryland, West Virginia border – beautiful as it may be – and coming upon the Bavarian Inn. Here was a rather large enclave of Bavarian/Tudor looking structures resting on a bluff above the picturesque

Potomac River surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains. The setting seemed surreal or maybe we were just so daffy from all the biking and climbing and 90 degree plus temperatures we had encountered that day. But the site of this rather extravagant looking edifice in this setting seemed incongruous to say the least. To say we were overjoyed at the sight of this complex would be putting it mildly. We were just hoping to find a decent clean motel with a decent restaurant nearby. Finding the Bavarian Inn Resort, resting on a bluff above the picturesque Potomac, was just the ultimate definition of serendipity. And in our exhausted somewhat daffy state of mind – well we were more than overjoyed, we were ecstatic.

We peddled our bikes up a rather steep incline to the entrance of the resort and found our way to the reception building where we inquired as to the availability of two rooms. The parking area didn't seem very crowded so we weren't too concerned that we might get shut out. Two, young, twenty-something, blond, blue-eyed, attractive creatures waited on us. The ambiance of the entire lobby, the entire building exuded a strong Germanic influence. Combine this with the two Nordic looking Aryan creatures who could have represented Hitler Youth in another period of time, just gave this whole setting an eerie, creepy, and somewhat humorous feel to it. (Being Jewish didn't help much)

It took ten minutes to sign in and get our rooms, which were in another building. Jim and I got back on our bikes and rode across the parking lot to our building, Jim quickly picking up on the Germanic setting began to speak to me in a thick affected German accent – this of course completely broke us up – what with our daffy and exhausted disposition.

Later, after we were in our respective rooms – Jim was only one room away – I heard a knock on my door. I opened my door and there was Jim dressed only in a white, terrycloth, bathrobe supplied compliments of the Bavarian Inn and Resort. “Zee Doctor will see you in ten minutes,” Jim uttered again in his best German accent and quickly walked back to his room. This started a laughing jag that lasted all the way through dinner that evening - which wasn't all that I expected. The ambiance was far better than the food.

Thursday August 30th

We were up early ready for a hearty German breakfast. We walked over to the main building where the restaurants were located. I had French Toast and Canadian bacon, Jim had his usual breakfast of eggs sausage toast and grits. We told the waiter of our plans to bike into Washington D.C. either that day or the next. He was also a biker and peddled from the D.C. area many times. He informed us that the condition of the towpath was greatly improved from Shepherdstown all the way into Washington and we would find it smooth by comparison from the rest of the towpath back to Cumberland. He convinced us to stay on the towpath. So after breakfast we headed back across the Potomac and down to the towpath. It was indeed a smoother surface, by comparison, but by no means “smooth”. One advantage to the towpath, besides being relatively flat compared to the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains, was that it was shielded from the sun by all the trees that formed a canopy of shade over the trail. This made a difference of at least 10 degrees in the temperature.

In about an hour we were already at a bridge, which crossed the Potomac over to the fabled town of Harpers Ferry. We parked our bikes at the base of the bridge where they had several bike racks and locked them together. We walked up a metal circular stairway to the top of the bridge. The bridge was basically a rail trestle with a walkway for pedestrians. It looked like it was still a functioning bridge for train traffic. The view from the bridge was quite spectacular and loaded with historical significance – which added to the drama of the scene. Harper’s Ferry, located in West Virginia, was the scene of many Civil War battles - the city of Harpers Ferry changing hands several times during the course of the war. Of course the infamous John Brown spent some precarious and troublesome times in the city. Then the city sits at the confluence of two historic and beautiful rivers that cut their way right through the Blue Ridge Mountains affording those travelers early in our country’s history the ability to: “Go West Young Man”. Those two rivers are the Potomac and the lyrical Shenandoah. It was an impressive scene and the weather was perfect – azure blue sky with one or two high cumulous clouds floating through the mountain passes. The temperature was climbing though. Jim’s computer was showing it was already 89 degrees.

We walked through the historic town that had cobblestone streets and early American red brick buildings. I couldn't quite tell if it was a real functioning town, or just a recreated historical scene like Williamsburgh, Virginia. In any event it had an appeal and a historical charm to it. We grabbed a quick meal, spent about a half-hour wandering the narrow cobble stone streets and headed back across the railroad trestle and back down to the towpath. We talked about the possibility of heading all the way to Washington D.C. that day – about 74 miles, but soon we realized that it would have been a bit too much as the temperatures began to exceed 90 degrees.

We stayed on the towpath, shielded from the strong rays of the sun by the arching canopy of trees. It was indeed a good ten degrees cooler on the path, cause when we ventured off the path into the town of Brunswick, Maryland for lunch, Jim's computer immediately registered a temperature of 93.

We found a great local pizza place run by a retired no nonsense Italian matriarch from New York City with an accompanying New Yawk accent as thick as they come. But the pizza was great. About two hours later we again pulled off the towpath and headed for a small gas station/convenience store in Point of Rocks. When Jim looked for his wallet, which he called his "man purse", which he attached with a Velcro strap to his back carrier, it was nowhere to be found. He got that sinking feeling that everyone gets when they reach for their wallet or car keys and find that "emptiness" where they expect those possessions to be.

After searching every nook and cranny of his panniers we determined that the man purse had to have either fallen off somewhere on the towpath between Brunswick and Point of Rocks, or he left the wallet at the pizza joint. He called the pizza place – no wallet. Jim thought he may have left the wallet on a newsstand he stopped at to rearrange things on his bike.

We headed back towards Brunswick on the towpath at a very slow pace – 6 to 7 miles per hour, Jim scoured one side of the path I took the other. We passed absolutely no one on the path. Five miles back on the towpath on a small wooden bridge, there was Jim's "man purse" lying right in the middle of that bridge. The irony of this entire situation is that last year on our bike journey on the Erie Canal, I lost my wallet between Canastota

and Rome, New York. Luckily the wallet fell out in my room at the motel in Canastota and the maid found it and left it at the front desk.

It took over an hour to backtrack on the towpath; so trying to reach Washington D.C. that evening was probably out of the question. Looking at the park map, we decided to spend the night in Leesburg, Virginia.

We reached White's Ferry late in the afternoon around 4:30. White's Ferry was a point on the Potomac River where you could cross by auto ferry. Once across the river it was about 5 miles into Leesburg. There were several cars backed up on the Maryland side of the river waiting for the ferryboat to return from the Virginia side. We waited for the boat in a little convenience store a hundred yards from the ferry dock and ate some junk food. I had an apple juice. We were both pretty drained from the heat. Our speedometers registered 45 miles for the day. The owner of the convenience store told us that several hotels in Leesburg would pick up bikers once they got to the Virginia side of the Potomac. This was most welcome information especially after the owner of the store also told us the motels/hotels did this because of the dangerous traffic patterns coming into Leesburg and several serious bike accidents. She called a Best Western motel and got us both a reservation for two rooms and a pick up once we got to the other side of the river.

It was 6 before we checked into our rooms at the Best Western. The traffic was horrendous driving into Leesburg. I guess the evening Washington traffic backed up all the way to Leesburg, which is 35 or 40 miles from D.C. We waited almost 40 minutes for the van from the Best Western to pick us up once we got to the Virginia side of the river. We both got to bed early that night anticipating our final biking day and our arrival into Washington D.C. and Arlington National Cemetery.

Friday August 31st

There were two options the following morning. We could go back to the ferry landing cross the river and follow the bumpy towpath all the way into Georgetown. Or we could take an asphalt-paved path all the way into Washington D.C. We found out from a couple of bikers back in Harper's Ferry about the asphalt bike route from Leesburg all the way

into Washington D.C. As far as we were concerned, there was really only one option and we took it. The asphalt-paved path. Luckily the path was less than a half mile from the Best Western hotel. The receptionist told us how we could get on the path. It ran just behind an apartment complex near the complex's tennis courts. We were on the path in ten minutes headed towards Washington. After more than 90 miles on the rock-strewn, root-strewn, tire-rutted C&O towpath, the asphalt surface was a blessing. The map indicated we were about 35 to 40 miles from our destination – Arlington National Cemetery. We weren't sure if we would check into the Holiday Inn in Georgetown first, unload most of our gear and then head out for Arlington. We would make that decision once we got into the Washington metropolitan area.

The Leesburg-Washington bike path seemed to closely follow Virginia Route 7. It crossed through, over, and under lots of roads. Parts of the path passed through somewhat pastoral and picturesque country, but it appeared that from Leesburg to Washington there were lots of small and medium size bedroom communities. The bike path terrain had a lot more hills than we expected. But it was an asphalt path. That smooth surface more than made up for the hilly contour as compared to the level, but bumpy, C&O towpath. So we weren't complaining.

As we got closer and closer to the immediate suburbs of Washington we noticed the tremendous increase in bike and jogging traffic on the path. In some cases it reduced our speed considerably and prompted me to comment: "Don't these people work on Friday in Washington?" I think we were approaching the city of Vienna, or maybe it was Reston. In any event the real estate was starting to look pricey. We crossed one busy intersection and there was a Whole Foods market. Now I knew we were in some fancy area. I commented to Jim; "Looks like there's a lot of money around here." And Jim quickly quipped: "Yeah and most of its OURS!"

The temperature was already in the high 80s and it was just 11 in the morning. We decided to stop at the Whole Foods market and get something substantial to eat. We both got roast beef sandwiches and some chips. In addition we purchased a single red rose to place at the gravesite of the Thompsons' son, Nils. At first, the flower department salesperson said they didn't sell single roses. But after we told them why we only need one rose, and that we were on our bikes, they quickly changed their policy and brought

out a single rose. Attached to the end of the long stem was a small plastic vial filled with water. We took the sandwiches and the rose and went outside to an area where several wrought iron tables were set up. Jim gently lashed the rose across his handlebars and we ate our roast beef sandwiches under the welcomed shade of an umbrella attached to the table. A young attractive woman with two adorable blond children was sitting at an adjacent table. They too were bikers and so we easily struck up a conversation. Turns out she and her husband were originally from my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. They moved to the Washington area 10 years ago and loved it. She saw Jim attached the rose to his handlebars and instinctively knew we were going to set the rose against a grave stone at Arlington. We told her the story of our stay at a B&B in Confluence, Pa and our commitment to the owners to honor their son. It was difficult to even talk about without tearing up – we were now so close to our real destination for the trip. She told us we could get a bike path map from a bike store just up the road that would help to guide us right to Arlington National – there were lots of different bike spurs once we got into the Washington area she informed us. She left with her children on their bikes and we thanked her for the bike path info – but decided we made it all the way from McKeesport, we probably didn't need the maps from the bike store. It was a mistake we would regret once we got closer to the city and were quickly confused by the myriad of bike trails in and about the Washington D.C. metropolitan area.

It took almost two more hours to make it through to the end of the bike path. We were definitely in the Washington D.C. area, somewhere in Virginia, but we didn't have a clue as to exactly where we were or where Arlington National Cemetery was in proximity to our present location. The young woman at the Whole Foods market was exactly right about all the bike path options one could take in the D.C. area. And there were lots of bikers out that Friday. But somehow, continuing on the path we stayed on we just abruptly came to sign saying this was the end of the path and it left us at a very busy confluence of highways with traffic buzzing every which way. We straddled our bikes, looked at our map and didn't have a clue as to where we were or how to get to the cemetery. Luckily a young female biking enthusiast stopped near us and we inquired as to how we could get to Arlington National Cemetery. She was on a very expensive Trek bike. She inquired as to where we were coming from, and we made the mistake of telling

her we began this journey from McKeesport, Pennsylvania – which coincidentally, was where she was originally from. She told us to follow her and she would get us to the path we needed to get to Arlington. To impress us that she too was a dedicated biker, she took off like a bat out of hell and we followed her at 14 to 15 miles an hour through city streets dodging traffic over Interstates, under underpasses. She was slowly grinding both me and Jim into dust. Seven miles later, on a path just adjacent to Reagan National Airport, she left us and graciously left us her map of the area with all the bike trails.

We peddled right alongside the airport for a while, than cut back along the Potomac – upstream this time. The Potomac was a broad river at this point, probably over a mile in width, and as we slowly peddled along the path towards the cemetery, the Washington and Jefferson Monuments sharply came into view. It was both impressive and inspiring. Washington is really quite a beautiful city – at least from across the Potomac. I had only been to our nation’s capitol once, when I was only 5 years old. Seeing the city like this; on a bike, at ten miles per hour, from the eye level of the river was surely the way to come into our nation’s capitol.

It was another 15 minutes on the path before we saw the signs that led to Arlington National Cemetery. It was now brutally hot outside and the humidity was getting unbearable. The bike path led to several pedestrian crossings over very busy roads. The crosswalks had posted signs facing the traffic that said the traffic had to yield to the pedestrians, but the stream of traffic continued to disregard the warnings. It seemed we could have stood at the crosswalk for hours, nobody even made an attempt to slow their vehicle down and let us cross. Finally I just held up my arm like a school crossing guard, and slowly stepped into the lane of oncoming traffic. Several cars passed but finally a car stopped and then another in the adjacent lane and we crossed over into another park-like area which led directly to the road that entered the cemetery. It was the same road that crossed the Potomac River on the Memorial Bridge. We followed it in the other direction towards the cemetery. The main entrance was not even a quarter mile away.

The main entrance to Arlington National Cemetery, the one you’ll eventually come to if you just follow the road across the Memorial Bridge, is more than impressive. The massive black iron gates, anchored at their fixed ends by massive white marble masonry,

are swung open. As we were biking through the gates, a fleet of black limousines accompanied by a phalanx of motorcycle cops came speeding by. Obviously someone of importance came into the cemetery. It could have been the President or Vice President, but no one knew for sure. The motorcade didn't stop but kept on going somewhere into the cemetery grounds at what looked like an excessive speed, considering the tourist and pedestrian traffic in the area. We continued to bike onto the hallowed grounds and found a spot to park and lock up our bicycles. We walked over to the main administration building and found the information desk that could direct us to the gravesite of Nils G Thompson. The woman behind the desk was very helpful. She saw the rose Jim was carrying and knew exactly what our purpose was. She saw we had on biking apparel and told us we could get permission to ride our bikes to the gravesite, but we opted to walk. It was a little over a mile from the administration building.

We took off for the gravesite. There were lots of those open-type tourist trolleys taking tourists to various sections of the cemetery. All the streets within the cemetery proper were named for generals from all the wars America had fought in. At least all the roads we passed were named for generals. We were walking on Eisenhower Boulevard towards the section where the Iraq War veterans were buried. The road was relatively flat but the surrounding terrain was hilly. We saw a sign that directed visitors to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. We saw another that directed visitors to President Kennedy's Gravesite. It is difficult if not impossible to walk in this setting, among the graves of tens of thousands of soldiers, with their perfectly aligned white marble headstones without feeling both a tremendous sense of pride and remorse. Those white marble headstones cutting those precise geometric angles we have seen so many times in movies and on news programs when our soldiers are honored. The lines and angles are so straight, so perfect; the headstones must be set with the precision of a surveyor. It was impossible not to feel a chill running through your body - regardless of the hot humid Washington summer weather. This is hallowed ground indeed. Maybe the most hallowed ground anywhere in our country. You can feel it. And if you visit our nation's capitol this is one site you shouldn't miss.

Mrs. Thompson told Jim that her son was buried near a Mulberry bush. We approached the section where Nils was buried from the back of the gravestones, so we

couldn't see any names till we turned around. Jim spotted the bush quickly and indeed we walked over by the bush, turned around and there was the gravesite we traveled almost 350 miles to find and lean a single red rose against the headstone.

I stood there looking at the headstone reading his name over and over. I had on sunglasses and tried not to let Jim see me cry, but the tears welled up and just ran down my cheek. I quickly wiped them away. The Iraq War was no longer just several paragraphs in the local newspaper or a five-minute blurb on the national news. All of a sudden the war became very personal. Jim carefully leaned the rose against the headstone. I kneeled down and held my camera at ground level and took several pictures. I couldn't see what the camera saw, because of the bright sun reflecting off the camera's viewfinder, so I just relied on my position to get the proper picture. After taking several photos of the headstone with the rose, I notice that the Thompson's had placed a picture of their son in his army uniform in the ground next to the grave. The wind had blown the picture to the side of the gravestone. I turned his picture towards the front of the headstone and took another photograph. I stepped back from the grave and stood up and then noticed the dates on the headstone, which I hadn't really paid any attention to. Nils G. Thompson was born August 3rd, 1986 and died August 4th 2005. A sniper took the life of Nils G. Thompson just one day after his nineteenth birthday.

There isn't really much to add to this story. We left the cemetery and headed back across the Memorial Bridge towards the Mall. We had something to eat and drink at a food stand on the Mall. Then I walked over to the black granite Vietnam War Memorial and searched the wall for a friend who died in 1968. Then we headed over to Georgetown and our hotel. There really wasn't much else we wanted to see, nor did we really feel like sightseeing. We were spent, both physically and emotionally. We left the next morning in a rented car - our bikes somewhat dismantled and lying in the back. We got to McKeesport where Jim's SUV was parked, drove both vehicles 50 miles to the airport and dropped the rental off at the Pittsburgh Airport and headed back to Cleveland. I felt a deep sense of accomplishment. Different from the other bike trips I had taken. Not because I biked 350 miles from McKeesport to Washington D.C., but because we made good on our commitment to honor the family and the grave of Nils G. Thompson with a single red rose.

EPILOGUE:

Several days after returning to Cleveland I made copies of the pictures I took at the gravesite of Nils G. Thompson. I sent the pictures to the Thompson's in Confluence, Pa., along with an attached note that appears below. I was never quite sure if sending those photos was appropriate without first inquiring of the Thompson's if they would indeed want such photographs of their son's gravesite. It certainly wasn't my intention to bring back those terrible memories or offend the Thompson's in any way. I asked several people back in Cleveland if they thought sending those photos was appropriate. They thought it was a decent gesture that the Thompson's would indeed appreciate. So I sent the photographs along with the following letter. I never heard back from the Thompson's and if the photographs or letter in any way hurt or offended them – I apologize.

September 1st, 2007

Dear Frances and Nils,

I hope you remember me and Jim Pankow. We recently stayed in your charming B&B while biking our way to Washington D.C. We got to your home late in the afternoon – around 5:30. You had given up hope that we were still coming, but we did indeed finally get to your lovely farm. Later that evening Jim came to learn about your son's tragic death in Iraq. I learned about it the next morning. It touched us both, deeply. We started in McKeesport on a simple bicycle journey to Washington D.C. but stopping at the Hanna House B&B gave our trip purpose and meaning.

Jim made the commitment to set a rose against your son's headstone at Arlington Cemetery after hearing about his death and as you can see from the enclosed pictures, we did indeed finally make it to Arlington and set that rose against his grave.

We weren't sure we'd make it to Washington D.C. After staying with you we headed for Cumberland, Maryland. After that we headed down the C&O Trailway but encountered conditions that proved almost impossible due to the surface of the towpath. Three days later we made it into Washington, but got there much later in the afternoon than we had planned. We took a few wrong paths, which led us well past Arlington National Cemetery. (We wound up five miles southeast of the cemetery.)

On the path towards Washington D.C. the last morning of the trip, in Vienna, Virginia, about 20 miles from Washington, Jim purchased a single red rose at a super market and delicately secured it across his handle bars so we could place it appropriately next to your son's headstone. It was extremely hot that day, so we hoped the four-hour bicycle ride wouldn't wilt or damage the rose. It didn't. We arrived at the cemetery around two in the afternoon and got directions to the plot where your son was buried. Your description to Jim, placing his grave near a mulberry bush, made it easy to identify the location of the gravesite and we hope we placed the rose appropriately. I took two pictures because the picture you placed by your son's headstone had blown to the side.

We do not really know how to begin to express our sorrow. Regardless of one's feelings towards the conflict your son sacrificed his life for – and your families ultimate sacrifice as well. One has to be forever grateful to you for your families' tragic loss. To us, like so many in this country, the war was just a few minutes each evening on the news or a paragraph or two or three or four in the newspaper. It never really touched home until we stopped at your B&B and saw the loving memorial you created for Nils and the way you talked so glowingly about Nils and expressed your grief and sorrow to me that morning before breakfast.

So we left your B&B the next morning with purpose and determination and a commitment we hadn't had before we came upon your peaceful farm; to set that single rose against your son's grave stone. We hope we did it appropriately and honored him and his family like he honored us and his country. I hope you find the peace and solace you deserve. In time, I'm sure you will. May God bless you and your family as he has surely blessed your son.

Ben Horwitz

Jim Pankow