

Tour de Niagara Falls (At 10 mph)

This past April I turned 60 years old. It was a difficult birthday to celebrate and perhaps even harder to contemplate. I had been thinking (obsessing) about turning 60 since just after my 59th birthday. Some people make a big deal when turning 40. As if turning 40 is some sort of a passage into “old age” or at least an “official” loss of your youth. They make the same big deal when turning 50. A passage into adulthood, as it were. I never felt that way about either of those birthdays. You can easily convince yourself that being 40 or 50 years of age isn’t really that old. But I don’t think that con is possible when you hit 60. Sixty **is** getting old – period! And so, anticipating my 60th birthday I had two objectives, two goals, I’m sure, subconsciously trying to see if I could hold off father time. (An obviously impossible, futile task!) One was to drive my Honda 250cc Reflex motor scooter to New York City, driving the back roads across Pennsylvania. (Actually I drove on U.S. Route 6, Chardon Road, most of the way.) The second goal was a bit more ambitious. I wanted to ride my bike, my bicycle, to Niagara Falls.

I had been riding a bike for about the last seven years – nothing intensive, but maybe two or three times a week, maybe 50 to 75 miles a week. The last two years I did almost no biking due to some physical and medical problems. The trip to Niagara Falls would require some intensive preparation and training. I knew that. I started by mapping out some state highways that followed Lake Erie through Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York as well as Ontario, Canada. Then I called a friend of long standing who was a biking enthusiast and much more experienced than I at this sort of endeavor, Jim Pankow. Jim and I have known each other since the early 70s, when we both worked as chemical engineers at the H.K. Ferguson Company.

Jim was working in Michigan. He had recently purchased a very expensive custom-made bike and had taken several long trips: some with organized tours and several by himself. He was a devotee of the sport, and when he came back to Cleveland on several occasions, we would take some bike trips locally. Once we took the Cuyahoga National Park Ohio Canal towpath to Akron and back. Jim was a stickler for paying attention to all the

details fanatical bike riders pay attention to: proper diet both on and off the bike, riding safely and stopping at street lights and obeying all road signs. And intensive training all year round. He had already pedaled 2000 miles this winter on his stationary bike. When I broached the subject of biking to Niagara Falls, he was all for it, but he warned me I would have to get in shape, and if I went with him, I would have to pay attention to safety, i.e. no crashing red lights, etc. Agreeing to Jim's first dictum was easy enough, his safety admonishment was accepted, but not with the proper enthusiasm, and Jim made me repeat the pledge that I would follow all road signs as if I were driving an automobile.

Mapping a route to Niagara Falls, trying to navigate on roads that "were less traveled by," was a task that required some careful thought and evaluation. Jim was adamant about avoiding long stretches of highways with four lanes and 55 mile-per-hour speed limits. He also requested that the roads had some type of bike lanes, knowing it would be impossible to meet that requirement all the way to the Falls. The Internet was an invaluable source for planning, but eventually, I actually drove on some of the planned roads on my Honda.

The basic route started on Johnny Cake Road, State Route (SR) 84 and headed east through Madison, Ohio to SR 534. We would turn north on SR 534 to Geneva-on-the-Lake. Here, SR 534 turns into SR 531, which we would take through Ashtabula Harbor to SR 7, then head north to Conneaut and travel briefly on U.S. Route 20 (Euclid Avenue). Route 20 would take us into Pennsylvania where we would then take Pa 5 through Erie all the way to the New York border where Pa 5 turns into NY Route 5. We could take NY 5 all the way into Buffalo, NY. We planned to cross into Canada in Buffalo at the Peace Bridge. Once in Canada, we would follow the Niagara River on the Niagara River Parkway, which, according to the Internet, was not really a Parkway at all but a narrow, two-lane macadam/asphalt road, which led directly to Niagara Falls. Very few tourists took this route into Niagara Falls because it was limited to 60 Kilometers per hour, which for those of us with a metric phobia, translates to about 35 MPH. Most tourists crossing at the Peace Bride took the Queen Elizabeth Highway - Canada's Interstate system. The total distance from Cleveland Heights to the Falls, according to Map Quest, was 227 miles. It seemed like a simple and fairly direct route – for someone

on a bike wanting to avoid busy, main highways. The route was set, now all I had to do was get in shape for the trip.

Jim set the departure for Niagara Falls on September 3. This was the only time he could get off from his job. This was the Labor Day weekend, so we anticipated some heavy traffic, which never materialized, helped perhaps by the increase in gasoline prices and the planned route, but we never really found much traffic until we got near the larger cities like Erie and Buffalo. The September date gave me 4 or 5 months to get in shape. I started biking in April, when the weather permitted, but didn't get many miles in during the month of April. The first few weeks I could only do 20 or 30 miles a week, with a day of rest in between short rides. This was far short of what Jim said I would have to do before he thought I could make the 50 miles a day for the five days he figured it would take to get there.

I began to show some signs of progress in June. While I still needed a day of rest between my 32-mile rides, I was riding 90 to 100 miles a week. In July I started to force myself to ride on consecutive days, regardless of the sore muscles in my thighs. By the end of July I could ride three consecutive days of 32 miles each day. With a day of rest I was up to 150 miles a week. In August I could do 4 consecutive days and I increased the mileage to 40 miles on one of the days. The first three weeks in August I did 180, 190, and 195 miles each week. I still hadn't done 50 miles in a single day, but I was confident that when the day of reckoning came, the adrenaline rush would carry me through. I was made skeptical of this assurance by Jim and several other more accomplished cyclists. Four days before our September 3rd departure, I only did 20 miles on the bike – resting my legs for the journey to Niagara Falls.

Jim came into town from his Michigan job Friday, September 2nd. He stayed with his sister in North Olmsted and was scheduled to arrive in my Cleveland Heights parking lot at 6:30 in the morning on Saturday. I didn't get much sleep Friday, anticipating the adventure and still not sure I had trained enough to make it all the way to Niagara Falls.

Jim Arrived at 6:25 and proceeded to unload his custom-built \$2500 titanium bicycle. My \$450 dollar Raleigh, with front shocks and a seat shock and an oversized seat was parked in front of my condominium door. The shocks and the over-sized seat were a requirement for the medical problems I had acquired two years ago and which had kept

me off my bike for those two years. I made 10 pieces of French Toast, which we easily consumed; we double checked our check-list, had the obligatory photo taken by a neighbor, and took off for Mayfield Road. The adventure had officially begun at exactly 7:30. Our destination for that first night was The Lodge and Conference Center at Geneva State Park, located in Geneva-on-the-Lake, just about 50 miles away.

We headed east on Mayfield and turned left onto Monticello. A few miles later we turned left onto Tribisky. From Tribisky we turned right on Highland and headed towards SOM Center Road, SR 91. But first we stopped at the Arabica Coffee Shop at Bishop and Highland. Jim requires copious amounts of coffee in the morning, and I didn't have any for the French toast. I had a cheese Danish; Jim had his coffee and a Danish and we took off for SOM Center.

The weather was absolutely perfect, with a cloudless, azure blue sky and temperatures in the mid 50s requiring just a light windbreaker. There was only a whisper of a wind, although it was from the east, directly into our path. The pace was relaxed, barely 11 mph. We had decided, mostly for my benefit as Jim could have easily stepped up the pace, to forget about average speed. Our only objective was to arrive safely at our predetermined destination. Whether it took 3 or 5 or 8 hours of riding that day was of no concern. The objective was just to get there.

We pedaled past I-90 and turned right onto Johnny Cake Road. Now the trip officially began for me. It was 14 miles from my condominium to the corner of SR 84 and SR 91, which was exactly what Map Quest predicted.

SR 84 passed through the suburbs of Willoughby and Mentor and through the cities of Concord and Painesville. The road, for the most part, was in excellent condition, several sections being recently paved. The bike lane was wide and comfortable. Most bikers wouldn't consider Johnny Cake Road technically challenging. It was relatively flat except for the valleys carved out by the Chagrin and Grand Rivers. I took any inclines in a gear that kept the strain off my thighs and to hell with speed. As the morning progressed, the temperature increased along with the head wind. The jackets were shed within a couple hours – the adrenaline and blood circulation making it seem warmer than it really was. After several stops for sweets, Gatorade (for Jim, I hated the stuff) and the calls of nature, we arrived in Madison Ohio about 12 noon. We headed down SR 84 a

couple more miles to Uniontown, where we decided to eat lunch at a charming old tavern, named in fact, The Old Tavern. It turned out to be the best meal of the entire trip.

The Old Tavern, known to the locals, I'm sure, but not to most of Cleveland's east-side residents, is a real jewel and a real find. I hesitate to promote this fine establishment too much, because it may become too popular, but it would be a disservice if I didn't. The food is not only excellent, it is so very moderately priced you feel like you have pulled one over on the owners – compared to similar quality food in Cleveland proper. In addition to the excellent quality of the food and service, the Old Tavern has an incredible history.

It was established in 1798 and served as a break from the front line for the soldiers of the War of 1812. During the abolitionist movement it was a strategic location for the Underground Railroad. Harriet Beecher Stowe stayed there and researched the Underground Railroad while working on “A way to Uncle Tom's Cabin”. And Henry Ford made this tavern a regular stop on his way from Detroit. Here is a place you would never discover on your way to Niagara Falls via Interstate 90, but on a bicycle, at 11 mph, on SR 84 – it would be almost impossible to avoid.

We ate a leisurely hour lunch at The Old Tavern. One of Jim's rules for biking is to eat within an hour after you've finished for the day and we only had another hour of cycling till we reached the Inn in Geneva-on-the-Lake. Like all cyclists in training, we ate carbohydrates, mostly in the form of pasta. So I had Blackened Chicken Breast on Linguini with an Alfredo sauce, Jim had chicken parmigiana over linguini. I also had a delicious, creamed, mussel soup. I won't tell you the price, just go there!

Our destination that first night was Geneva-on-the-Lake. From Unionville, which is right on the county line between Lake and Ashtabula counties, we were only 10 miles from our destination. We cycled about two miles east on SR 84 to SR 534 and headed north to Geneva and then Geneva-on-the Lake. It took less than an hour and we arrived around 2 in the afternoon. The winds had picked up appreciably, and they were directly into our face the entire day. The distance we traveled that first day was 51 miles. For you cyclists who are obsessed with metrics and numbers and statistics, our average speed was 10.8 mph.

Our arrival to the Inn at Geneva State Park was a rather dramatic and humorous one. The entrance to the hotel had two sets of automatic sliding double glass doors. So as we approached the doors with our bicycles, they opened automatically and we just drove the bikes right into the lobby right up to the reception desk. Several people in the lobby were a bit startled, several laughed. We were assigned our rooms. I had a lake view, Jim got a parking lot view. The rooms were bright, clean, and attractive. We brought the bikes into the rooms for safe-keeping. No one objected.

The Inn at Geneva State Park is really quite lovely. An expansive wooden (it may have been sided) facility, it sits right on the lake. It has a glassed-in pool area with a hot tub. The hot tub was just what the doctor ordered for my sore thighs. I let the pulsating jets of hot water beat the hell out of my tired limbs for a good 30 minutes. Jim stayed in his room and went through his post-cycling routine, which usually started with elevating his legs for 20 minutes. Eventually he came down to the hot tub.

After my hot tub massage, I went back to my room and laid in a hot bath for another 30 minutes, then washed my shorts, socks and shirt and hung them outside to dry. I took only two changes of clothing, which consisted of shorts a shirt and socks. I had a wind-breaker for the cool mornings, but that was the extent of all the clothing I brought. I figured if the weather changed and necessitated a change of apparel, I would just buy whatever was required.

Later that evening we went into the restaurant. The food was good but a bit pricey compared to The Old Tavern. After dinner we went back to our rooms. Jim was ready to call it a day. I watched the sun set over Lake Erie and snapped several pictures. I was sound asleep before nine.

Day 2 (Sunday, September 4th)

I was awake before 5 the next morning, the excitement and adrenaline still flowing. It was a little strange to awake and see your form of transportation for that day parked at the foot of your bed. Breakfast was served in the dining room at 6:30. Jim and I were there at 6:25. Jim had French toast I had a Belgian waffle with sausage. We were on our bikes by 7 heading into Geneva-on-the-Lake. The “Strip” as it was known when I was in

college and frequenting Geneva-on-the-Lake, was only a mile from the hotel. We were determined to stop at the famous donut haunt, Madsens to bulk up on more carbs. Those baby boomers that also ventured to Geneva-on-the-Lake back in the 60s will be happy to know that the “Strip” looks exactly like it did back then. Absolutely nothing seemed to have changed. And the donut shop, which opened at 7, had mostly fresh donuts although some were from the night before. The glazed were from the night before, but they were fantastic. Just like donuts are supposed to taste, not like the new designer donuts that Krispy Cream concocted. Madsens’ donuts are the old-fashioned donuts that are addictive, taste great, and sink to the bottom of your stomach as soon as they are chewed and swallowed. I had two and bought three, Jim had two and did the same. We were now officially traveling SR 531. Just a few miles from the “Strip” the road hugs the shore of Lake Erie and provides a wide panorama of the Lake Erie coast to the east. The weather again was picture perfect, but the breeze was again in our faces. Cyclists are very sensitive to wind direction. (Sometimes a headwind is more psychologically restrictive than physically restrictive.) It was barely a whisper of a wind in the morning, but it would stiffen and freshen as the day progressed. The road was flat except when a creek dumped its waters into the lake. But as this valley was so close to the creek’s mouth, it was modest by any biker’s standards.

In Ashtabula, about an hour’s ride down SR 531, I began to have some intestinal difficulties. This necessitated a walk into the woods. The worst ailment a cyclist can have is intestinal problems. First it just saps all your strength, and second it accelerates the dehydration process. But thanks to Jim and the modern miracle of over-the-counter drugs, i.e. Imodium A D, the problem did eventually resolve. Eventually is the operative word. When we got into Conneaut we stopped at the State Street Diner, right on the corner of U.S. 20 and SR7. I was still feeling a bit shaky, and Jim confessed later that day, after we arrived in Erie, that he thought the trip might be over – I was looking pretty ill sitting at the counter in the State Street Diner in Conneaut. Somehow Jim managed to eat French toast again. By my count, that was three portions of French toast in two days. I forced down a hamburger. We forged ahead on Route 20 and crossed over into Pennsylvania in about two miles. Another mile or so down the road and we turned left onto PA Route 5. This was another benchmark for me, knowing that this same road

would eventually lead all the way to Buffalo – if I could make it. I was regaining some of my strength and started to drink Gatorade, which I refused to drink the first day. The combination of the medicine and the Gatorade had me feeling just about back to normal.

The ride into Erie on SR 5 was quite ordinary. There were a couple of pretty good valleys we had to pedal out of. Route 5 at this point was several miles from the lake, as opposed to our ride along the lake in Ohio. One valley I distinctly remember was carved out by Elk Creek. It might not have been so bad had we encountered it earlier in the day, but after 40 miles of cycling, it was not a welcome sight. Jim was getting annoyed by the clinking sounds my bike was making – him being the perfectionist about his cycle and his cycling. These occasional noises were detected long before the journey, but my bike mechanic couldn't locate the problem. He assured me, however, it wouldn't cause any serious problems. I was getting used to the sounds. Jim thought I had a bad bearing in the pedal assembly. The clinking sounds were more annoying at the end of the day.

PA Route 5 was attracting more traffic as we approached the western suburbs of Erie, actually starting near Fairview. Alternate Route 5 shot off to the left soon after Fairview near the airport so we took Alt 5 through the city neighborhoods. This was infinitely more interesting than the Route 5 we had been traversing. We went through a predominately Italian neighborhood, not unlike our own Little Italy. Soon we came into the downtown Erie area. Here we found a fascinating neighborhood literally situated in downtown Erie. Some of the century-old homes were converted into small business establishments – Morgan Stanley had their offices in one of the homes. Two of the homes advertised themselves as bed and breakfasts retreats –the rest of the houses looked to be occupied by families just living downtown. The neighborhood was neat and well kept.

We were on 6th Street, which was Alt 5 and we turned right on Peach Street, which happened to be a one-way street in the opposite direction from that which we were going. It was Sunday afternoon about 2:30 when we got downtown and there didn't appear to be any traffic whatsoever, but Jim insisted we obey the traffic signs and find a street going in our direction, which we did. We got to 12th Street and Peach. Here a friend from Erie recommended we stay at the Avalon Hotel. We didn't drive through the automatic

double doors this time, but rather just walked our bikes up to the counter and got two rooms – non-smoking, each with a king-size bed. The hotel was virtually deserted.

Jim suggested we see if their dining room was open and that after his ritual après cycling routine, we eat. The dining room was open, so we met for dinner at about 4. The food was terrible, but we ate it all. Can't be picky after bicycling 53 miles – 104 in two consecutive days. Which was a record for me. Remember, even while I was training I never put back-to-back 50-mile days together, and both these days were against a wind, which that afternoon, I would estimate, picked up to 10 mph. I was tired and my legs felt pretty sore. But for the first time, I actually believed I could make another day or two of 50 miles. Again for you metric/statistic-addicted cyclist, our average speed for both days fell from 10.8 to 10.5 mph. The Avalon had no pool, no hot tub. I was asleep before 8.

Day 3 (Monday, Labor Day: September 5th)

We learned the previous night that the dining room at the hotel wouldn't open for breakfast until 8 in the morning. This was way too late for our adrenaline-ridden bodies. We liked to be on the road by 7 or 7:30. Jim learned from the desk clerk that there was a 24-hour restaurant just a few blocks from the hotel. We were on our bikes and there before 7, but unfortunately the restaurant was closed for Labor Day. We hadn't really thought through the possible problems Labor Day would present with our eating schedules. It turned out to be much more difficult than we had anticipated the night before.

We were fortunate in that a donut shop near the 24-hour restaurant was open and at least we could carb-up with donuts and Jim could get his coffee. We bought a few extra donuts to pack along on our next leg of the journey, which was scheduled to stop in Dunkirk, New York that afternoon. The donut shop was located in a rather unsavory section of town and even at 7 in the morning on Labor Day, several derelicts were roaming the streets making some unintelligible comments in our direction. Jim and I both thought it best to get the hell out of there and so we headed back towards 6th Street, PA route Alt 5, and headed east towards the New York state line, about 25 miles away.

The morning was a carbon copy of the two other mornings. Temperatures in the mid-50s, clear blue cloudless sky, and just a whisper of wind – again directly into us. Jim was

intent on finding a proper eating establishment so we could eat a proper breakfast. Jim was a bit irritable until he had that substantial breakfast inside his belly, and so was I. A big breakfast is an important meal for a cyclist intent on covering 250 miles in 5 days. But as we traveled east through Erie, not a single restaurant appeared open. In addition to the western section of Erie being closed up for Labor Day, there were very few towns between Erie and Dunkirk. It was pretty much just wine and farm country till we got to Dunkirk proper. What towns there were between the two cities were situated on U.S. Route 20, not PA 5. PA 5 ran along the Lake Erie coast, U.S. Route 20 ran parallel to PA 5, but several miles south, making any round trip to one of those towns a 5 to 10-mile detour from our planned route. This did not bode well, and I'm sure we both silently realized we hadn't thought this through, but we forged ahead through Erie.

There was no traffic on the roads at 7 in the morning, and when we came to our first red light, I implored Jim to just go through it. Reluctantly he did, but warned me it was the last time we would "crash" a red light. In an hour we were on the eastern fringes of the city, passing the massive General Electric locomotive facility. Erie is a much larger city than I had ever realized. From its eastern to its western fringes it must be 15 to 20 miles across. (I would later find out, that after Philly and Pittsburgh, it is the third largest city in Pennsylvania.)

Somewhere near the eastern fringe of the city we came upon a gas station with a food mart and thought it wise to stop here and bulk up on whatever food we could find, finally giving up on finding an "appropriate" restaurant serving an "appropriate" breakfast. I ate the donuts I purchased in downtown Erie that morning and Jim forced down something that resembled an Egg McMuffin. The operative word here is "forced". I was looking at the pre-packaged breakfast sandwich, but after watching Jim eat the damn thing, I opted for a couple of Reeses Peanut Butter Cups. We both bought some Gatorade and headed east into some of the most incredibly beautiful wine country you'll ever see.

About ten miles east of the food mart we started to bike through some serious vineyards. Not just little plots like we had seen sporadically in both Ohio and Western Pennsylvania, but acres and acres of grapevines on both sides of the road. The grapes were almost ready to be picked, and you could actually smell them. It was like driving through a Welch's grape juice factory. I'm disappointed we never picked a few to taste.

I doubt anyone would have missed a few grapes. The farther east we cycled, the more incredible the views. To our right the vineyards appeared to stretch all the way to the hills of the Allegheny escarpment. To the left the vineyards looked to reach out and touch the shores of Lake Erie, which was bluer than the sky, if that was possible. There was little traffic. At times we appeared to be the only traffic on PA 5. It was cool. It was bright and sunny. It was deathly quiet except for a bird or two and the sounds of two bikes quietly pedaling through the countryside. It was almost dream-like. Surrealistic. The proper breakfast was no longer of any concern. Jim finally pulled up behind me and broke the dream-like silence. He told me that I could take a hundred more bicycle trips and probably never find a day like today – the combination of scenery, weather and the perfume of the vineyards was unique. We climbed up a modest hill, which afforded an even more spectacular view of the lake and surrounding vineyards. We rested here for a few minutes taking it all in and taking several pictures.

A few miles down the road, near the city of Northeast, we spotted, almost mirage-like, what appeared to be a fruit stand. As we approached, Jim commented it was probably closed. But then we heard voices holler out, “No we’re open, c’mon in.” We rode up closer to the barn-like structure and there were rows and rows of fresh peaches and tomatoes and corn. It was like a dream come true. We gorged on the incredibly sweet peaches recently plucked from their orchard. I ate three in less than two minutes. Jim did too. We must have appeared like two parched nomads wandering in the Sahara desert who luck upon an oasis. The proprietors of the fruit stand couldn’t have been more pleased seeing us devour, with such relish, the products of their toil and labor. We chatted for 15 minutes with them. It was a joyous moment. The owner came back from a donut run to the city of Northeast and offered us some fresh donuts, but we had had enough donuts that day. They told us that they had a cyclist stop by their stand several years ago, just about as ravenous as us. He stayed there overnight and camped right outside the barn. He was a young Chinese doctor cycling to the West Coast. Made our little venture to Niagara Falls seem insignificant by comparison. We thanked the owners profusely and took a group picture before we left. They informed us that in Barcelona, New York we would find a restaurant open for business. Barcelona was about 15 miles up the road. The New York State line was only a few miles up the road.

We headed east and in a few miles we crossed the state line into New York. Another milestone. We took a picture of the green sign welcoming travelers to New York State. The ride to this point was glorious. The road was recently paved with a bike-lane big enough for a Volkswagen and just as smooth as it could be. Another condition cyclist appreciate. All along our route that morning we got occasional glimpses of either U.S. Route 20 or Interstate 90, which paralleled our route just to the south. The cars and trucks were buzzing by at their usual 65 to 70 mph. We couldn't hear them, we were much too far away. But we could see them. They were totally oblivious to the vineyards, smell of fresh Concord grapes, and the fruit stand offering succulent, ripe, juicy peaches. Riding a bicycle along Route 5 that day offered positive reinforcement to the philosophy: "It's not the destination, but rather a way of traveling."

Just like we were advised at the fruit stand, Barcelona, New York was about an hour and 30 minutes further down the road. We were in no rush to get there. The scenery was beautiful and we each had three more peaches to finish that we packed before we left the fruit stand.

Barcelona is the quintessential, picturesque, New England, seaside village, even though it may be located in upstate New York. You simply could not find a more charming little coastal village. The tiny harbor was crowded with sailboats and power boats, and the little restaurant was indeed open, and believe it or not, Mr. Pankow ordered French toast again! I had a hamburger and fries. The burger was ground from fresh meat and the fries were recently sliced from fresh potatoes. Both our meals were delicious. Small towns and village restaurants don't always buy processed foods. Thank God!

Dunkirk was about 15 miles east down Route 5. The road moved inland enough so that Lake Erie was seldom visible, but when it was visible, it offered incredible shoreline views of the lake and the white sandy colored precipitous cliffs. It was around 2 in the afternoon when we got to the outskirts of Dunkirk. We stopped at a gas station/food mart. I topped off my tires with air and we headed into the city proper, where we stayed right on the water at a Ramada Inn. It was in slight disrepair, but we were tired and Jim developed a sore butt that required the purchase of some aloe. Somehow a bolt in his seat had worked loose and his seat was wobbly, although he didn't notice the loose seat until we got to the Ramada. He said he didn't feel like searching for a drug store and

immediately went to his room to begin his après-bike routine. I volunteered to find a drug store and purchase the aloe. A Walgreens was about a mile from the hotel. I returned to the Ramada, gave Jim his aloe, and headed for the indoor pool and hot tub.

We tried to find a restaurant that was open, but it was just as difficult a task as it was that morning searching for breakfast. Across the street from the hotel was a restaurant called, “Walleye Willies”. The good news was that it was indeed open for business. The bad news was: they served neither Walleye nor any other food. Jim had a beer. I had an iced tea. We went back to the hotel and found out they served food out by the outdoor pool. It wasn’t very good, but again it was food and we ate every morsel.

Ok all you metric-statistic-minded cyclists: We had traveled 154 miles and our average speed dropped to 10.3 mph. This was again a record distance for me in three days of cycling, and now I was quite sure I could make it to Niagara Falls, only 75 miles or so away. That realization alone got the adrenaline pumping. And even though I was dead tired and my legs were the sorest they had been on the trip, I didn’t get much sleep that night, realizing that our next destination would be Buffalo, only 25 miles from Niagara Falls.

Day 4 (Tuesday, September 6th)

The Ramada Inn dining room opened for breakfast at 6:30. Jim and I were sitting in a booth at 6:25. No one else was in the dining room. By the time we brought our bicycles down from our rooms, it was about 7:15. We were straining to begin biking towards Buffalo. The morning was just another carbon copy of the previous three mornings, and of course we were fighting the slight breeze blowing from the east. We were used to the wind in our faces by now. It was barely an annoyance. We immediately began our assault on Buffalo heading east on NY 5. The road was good but the scenery was ordinary. The vineyards had disappeared before we reached Dunkirk. And Route 5 was heading inland from the Lake Erie shore. The traffic was light and the road surface was acceptable and the bike lane was more than adequate. We both knew that once we made it to Buffalo, Niagara Falls was no more than a couple hours’ ride away. A few miles down the road we saw a sign that said Buffalo was only 36 miles away. We were both a

little giddy and counting our chickens, so to speak, having figured that Buffalo was 50 miles from Dunkirk, not 40. The sign would turn out to be wrong, but we believed it at the time and started talking about the possibility of pushing straight through to the Falls. Like I said, we were counting the proverbial chickens.

In an hour's time we were already descending into the valley of Silver Creek, a quaint little village about 12 miles from Dunkirk. Jim was in desperate need of his coffee fix, and almost immediately we found a little coffee shop just before we entered the village-square. Jim got his coffee and I had a chocolate chip cookie then took off for the drugstore and bought some sun tan lotion. I should have started using it days before, but I was getting pretty burnt up and figured it couldn't hurt to start now. I came back to the coffee shop and we started a conversation with a few locals chatting at an outside table just in front of the shop.

Looking at our maps that morning, it appeared that NY 5 would soon move well inland from the lake, but another road slicing off from NY 5 looked to head right along the lake. On the Map Quest map it was delineated as Route 111, but the locals around the table never heard of any Route 111. I showed one of the guys my map and he remarked that that road must be Old Lake Shore Road, and the others concurred. We were told we could pick up Old Lake Shore Road about five miles east on NY 5. "Be on the lookout for the J&R gas station on the left, and the Seneca Indian Poker Hall on the right." We had been getting lousy directions on the trip up till then. "How much farther to Silver Creek?" The answer to such an inquiry would always be given in an increment of time as though we had a car. When we explained we were on bicycles, most people had a hell of a time giving a correct distance. They were usually off by a factor of 100%. So we just stopped asking. The Silver Creek crowd was right on the mark. Five miles up the road the J&R station was on the left and the Seneca gambling casino was on the right. We turned off to the left, heading back in the direction we had just come from. We stopped to ask at the gas station if Old Lake Shore Road was down the road and we were assured it was. A mile further down we ran right into Old Lake Shore Road. We still thought we were less than 40 miles from Buffalo.

We were so spoiled by the incredible scenery of the wine country that Old Lake Shore Road didn't seem very inspiring. It was close to the lake, but the lake was mostly hidden

by the foliage. We would get occasional glimpses of the lake, but like I said we were spoiled by the scenery the day before. There were some state parks and beaches along the lake, but they were closed after Labor Day, along with any restaurants that depended on the open parks for their customers. After an hour of pedaling we found a restaurant open for breakfast and Jim ordered his usual French toast. I had a couple of eggs and some sausage. The owner of the restaurant told us that about 10 miles further on Old Lake Shore Road we'd run back into NY 5. We left the restaurant and the road started heading slightly north. The neighborhood began to change and suddenly huge homes with tennis courts and swimming pools and stone fences began to appear. These were magnificent estates and soon not only did Lake Erie appear but so did the Canadian shoreline. Now we knew we were getting closer to our destination. The terrain turned a bit hilly. We climbed a slight incline and soon the entire Canadian coastline appeared with an incredible view of the Buffalo skyline. My pulse increased. We guessed we were about 15 or 20 miles from Buffalo.

Soon we were again on NY 5 as Old Lake Shore Road merged with NY 5. We were now on the outskirts of Buffalo, near Hamburg, New York. Route 5 was now 4 lanes and the traffic was picking up in intensity. We were still on what is known as the Circle Tour – a bike path that actually circles Lake Erie. The green and white signs were all along our route, starting back in Ohio on Johnny Cake Road. They were still appearing on NY 5 near Hamburg. We stopped for lunch at a restaurant in Hamburg, right on the Lake – the white Canadian cliffs now close enough to almost reach out and touch with the Buffalo skyline looming larger than life right in our path. From that first pedal in Cleveland Heights till lunch in a lovely seaside Hamburg restaurant, everything was happening like we had drawn it up. We hit every destination on the very day we had planned. The weather every day was just incredible. The slight head winds were now just a minor annoyance and as we turned north to head towards Buffalo we began to pick up a southerly wind. The wind was finally at our back. It was all to perfect. We couldn't have scripted a better trip. But it would all change within the hour.

We had been given directions how we could get off Route 5 and head into Buffalo on some safer, less traveled, less hectic city streets. But of all the lousy directions we had

received on the trip so far, these were by far the worst. Why the hell, after so many cockamamie directions we embraced these ones, is still a mystery to both me and Jim.

During lunch at the seaside restaurant in Hamburg a mother and her son were sitting adjacent to our table. We were eating outside on the deck absorbing the incredible view of the Canadian coast. We asked them how we could avoid Route 5 and they offered us the following advice. They seemed pleasant and knowledgeable, but I could tell, Jim was suspect. We (I) eagerly accepted their directions and headed towards Buffalo on Route 5. We were heading north and we had a substantial tail wind – finally! We were looking for Ridge Road, which we were told would flow directly into Ohio Street, which we could take right into downtown Buffalo.

Within a few miles, NY 5 turned into a super highway with a 55-mph speed limit. The bike lane turned into just a narrow berm. The traffic was whizzing past us. It was very uncomfortable and getting downright scary, not to mention unsafe. Just ahead the road narrowed to a bridge overpass and the berm disappeared completely. We would have to merge with the traffic over the overpass. I just stopped my bike several hundred yards short of the bridge, looked back at Jim then lifted my bike over the railing and onto the nearby sidewalk. Jim eagerly followed. We were in Lackawanna now just opposite the steel plant that was once Bethlehem but now had the ISG logo on the fence. The sidewalk was covered with a sandy substance like ground up cinders from the plant. Jim readily agreed we had to get off Route 5. We figured we were about a mile or two from the Ridge Road intersection, but had no idea how to get there. I proceeded to get back on my bike and with that first pedal, we heard a loud sharp crack. It sounded like a cable snapping. I immediately got off the bike. All the cables seemed intact, but when I checked the spokes on the back wheel, one had broken. We both knew a broken spoke is an ominous sign. It weakens the wheel and can easily lead to a domino effect causing other spokes to give way, and then the entire wheel just collapses.

It was hot that day. Easily the hottest day of the trip, somewhere in the middle 80s. We were lost, somewhere in Lackawanna, with a map of Buffalo that didn't quite reach to the Lackawanna streets, maybe only 10 to 12 miles from the city proper. We decided to press on slowly and find our way to the Adam's Mark hotel in downtown Buffalo,

which we were told by the mother and son was close to the Peace Bridge we would be taking the next morning over to Canada.

We biked down a road to one of the gates to the steel mill to ask directions to Ridge Road, but by this time Jim just wanted to head north and disregard any directions from anyone. Things were getting a little testy when I asked a trucker at the steel gate if he knew where Ridge Road was. He had no idea. Jim just started taking a road north from the plant and I reluctantly followed. I was still babying the bike, going no more than 7 or 8 mph, making sure I didn't hit any bumps or cracks in the road surface. We were lucky as the road Jim picked somehow ran right into Ridge Road, but Ohio Street was nowhere in sight. Nor did anyone we asked ever hear of it. Jim was adamant about just finding our own way after that, but I kept asking directions. I stopped in a small diner and the lady there said we could take Ridge down a mile or so till we got to South Park Blvd. We could then follow South Park Blvd. all the way into downtown Buffalo. Jim was suspect, but we followed Ridge to South Park and then headed north on South Park. Unfortunately, a mile or two north on South Park the road was closed – a bridge was out. More bad instructions and after a few twists and turns we wound up on Seneca which did indeed take us right to downtown Buffalo.

We found the Adam's Mark Hotel and checked into the rooms, but first I asked the receptionist if she could locate a bike shop nearby and ask if they would fix a broken spoke. I went up to my room and within minutes the Bellhop called and had located a bike shop a few miles up Elmwood Ave. They would fix the spoke right away.

I went back down to the lobby with my bike. Jim was already into his after-biking routine. The Bellhop had called a taxi, which was ready and waiting. We took off the front wheel and packed the bike in the back of the station wagon. It was a ten-minute ride to the bike shop. The bike shop was located in what appeared to be a gentrified neighborhood near Buffalo State University. The bike shop was bustling with activity. It was a very small store. The owner immediately took my bike and went in the back of the store to fix the spoke. He already knew I had been biking from Cleveland, so he appeared eager and sympathetic to my plight. I was back on the road heading down Elmwood Avenue in half an hour. It was a two-mile, down-hill trek to the Hotel.

I brought the bike up to my room and immediately collapsed on the bed. I was exhausted. It was easily the most tiring day of the trip. It was also the longest, both in distance and time spent on the bike. And the aggravation and concern over a broken spoke didn't help. I called Jim and told him I didn't think I would be ready to reach much before 7; it was already 5:30 when I got the bike back to my room.

For dinner that evening I splurged. I started with a ten-dollar shrimp cocktail. Then I downed a 33-dollar medium rare filet mignon. Jim commented that the broken spoke couldn't have happened in a more opportune location or at a more opportune time. I could have broken it somewhere in the wine country, or it could have been Labor Day and all the bike shops would have been closed. He had a point, and by now the food, shower and rest had me calmed and back on track.

We covered 54 miles that day. (Remember the sign to Buffalo just 4 miles out from Dunkirk that said 36 miles?) I had 209 miles on my speedometer. Our average speed dropped below double digits. It fell to 9.9 mph, but that could be attributed to the broken spoke and the reduced speed into the city. Tomorrow we would cross the Peace Bridge into Canada. We would be at the Falls before noon. That thought alone got the pulse rate climbing.

Day 5 (September 7, Wednesday)

As exhausted as I was from the ride from Dunkirk, I had trouble sleeping that night. The excitement of crossing into Canada on a bike the next morning, then cycling on to Niagara Falls kept me tossing and turning. I was up at 4. Jim was knocking on my door at 5:45 and we were eating breakfast by 6. By 7 we were on our bikes and cycling towards the traffic circle up Elmwood Avenue. Here we followed Niagara Street for a mile or so till we came to Porter Avenue. Porter Avenue led directly to the Peace Bridge. You had to be careful with the Peace Bridge directional signs. Often times they were meant to lead you on the Interstate to the Peace Bridge, where bicycles weren't allowed. It was less than half an hour after we left the Adam's Mark Hotel that we were on the Peace Bridge trying to figure out if we should take the car route or the pedestrian route.

(We took the pedestrian route, but found out later when we returned on the Rainbow Bridge, bikers were supposed to follow the car route across the bridge.)

Riding a bike on the sidewalk across the Peace Bridge, gazing out over the Niagara River was an exhilarating experience. I don't want to sound too over the top, but looking out across the bridge in either direction was just an incredible view. You could either look straight down the Niagara River, or look back towards Lake Erie as the waters from 4 of the 5 Great Lakes rushed towards the narrow passage created between Canada and the U.S. The wind was howling from the south, north towards the Falls. The current was very swift here. Standing above the river on the bridge you could see the rapids and waves created by the bridge's concrete support structures.

We followed the directions for the pedestrians and found ourselves in the empty customs house with not a soul around. Eventually someone came, asked for identification (we had both brought our passports) and we were through the customs gate in minutes. From here all paths appeared to lead to the Queen Elizabeth Highway and the tollbooths. We had no intention of riding on the QE highway, but couldn't find the path to get on the Niagara River Parkway. There was a lot of construction near the customs house. We asked a customs agent how we could get to the Niagara River Parkway, and he patiently explained the way through the maze of the construction site. It was quite simple once it was explained and we were on the two-lane macadam/asphalt parkway in minutes. Jim was beginning to have a coffee fit, but nothing appeared open. We stopped at a park on the other side of the road and took some photos standing against a stone wall right next to the shores of the raging river. The Peace Bridge was in the background.

We headed north on the parkway. The stiff breeze was directly at our back. The road was perfectly flat and followed the river north. The pedaling was effortless. We could almost let the wind push us at 12 mph. The road was traffic-less. We just about had a two lane bike path all to ourselves. It was another glorious day for biking.

Jim was on the lookout for any establishment that might possibly sell coffee. But the Canadian side of the river was strictly residential with large homes facing the American Shore. The American side of the river looked to be mostly industrial and commercial. We were glad we chose to follow the river on the Canadian side.

As we progressed towards the falls, the raging current we saw under the Peace Bridge began to slow to a crawl. The river widened and it took on the appearance of a large calm lake. Many homes on the Canadian side had boats moored on the river across the Parkway. Soon we came upon Grand Island. We could see some opulent homes on the island. Slowly the river's pace began to increase again and as we rounded a bend in the river we could make out the skyline of Niagara Falls, Ontario. Jim noticed the faint plume of water in the distance created by the falls. It was barely discernable off in the distance, but became more identifiable with every mile we pedaled towards the city.

We saw a road sign that announced we were in Niagara Falls and took a picture, but it appeared premature since we could see that we were still several miles from the falls itself. Now the river was gaining momentum fast. Faster than we were pedaling our bikes. Soon the city's skyline appeared again. This time we could easily read the names on the skyscraper hotels – Embassy Suites, Sheraton. And now the plume created by the fury of the water misting as it fell over the 210-foot precipice was easily identifiable, including its rainbow. It was downright exciting. This was surely the way to sneak up on Niagara Falls: following the river as it races towards its tumultuous climax; coming in from behind the falls almost being one with the river. The river's quickening pace seemed to pull us downstream with it. As the river's pace and fury increased so did our spirits. I just can't think of a more dramatic and exciting way to discover Niagara Falls than by sneaking up from behind the falls, just like the Niagara River.

We came into the city of Chippewa, only a few miles from the Falls itself. We could have stopped for coffee here, but even Jim was eager to see the Falls. We came upon a bike path just outside Chippewa and two cyclists confirmed that the bike path would lead us right into the city right next to the Canadian Falls. We left the Niagara River Parkway and followed the bike path. Soon we were right next to the rapids just above the Falls. At times the path was only a few feet from the raging water. There were no fences, just a sign warning the biker or hiker to keep a safe distance from the embankment. One slip into the river and your next stop was the bottom of the Niagara River Gorge.

As we drew nearer to the falls we could hear the thunder and rumble of the water as it cascaded over the rocks in the rapids. We were just a few hundred yards away and could see the water tumbling over the Falls. Soon the bike path entered civilization and we

could see the throngs of tourists standing near the railing overlooking Horseshoe Falls. We were finally at the destination we had planned. Right there at the Falls. We immediately took pictures of each other with the Falls in the background. Jim went over to the concession stand and got his cup of coffee. I immediately called my sister and put the phone out over the railing so she could hear the sound and fury of Niagara Falls. We had been anticipating this moment for the entire ride along the Niagara River. Actually since we left Cleveland Heights. The excitement was building slowly like a Beethoven symphony. And just like a Beethoven symphony, the many false endings seemed to tease, building in anticipation. And then, it was suddenly over. We made it. We were here. There was the thundering raging river cascading over 210 feet of rock. Now what do we do? The adventure was suddenly and abruptly over. Just like the water from the 4 Great Lakes flowing into the Niagara River, and then disappearing into a mist, we felt kind of empty. What can we do for an encore? We talked about heading down river to Lake Ontario and Niagara on the Lake. We tried to see if we could build the excitement again. But in the end it was no use. The trip had ended. The adventure was over.

We rode our bikes a few miles down river then headed back towards the city searching for a Chinese restaurant, but wound up eating lunch at the old Sheraton Brock Rainbow Room located on the hotel's 10th floor. The famous Niagara Falls landmark, built in the 1920s, was now just called the Brock. Sheraton had built a multi-story high-rise hotel next door with a grand casino. Eating in the Rainbow room was a nostalgic experience for me. My parents had taken me and my sister there back in the 50s when we visited our Canadian cousins who lived in Toronto.

The Brock Hotel was directly across from the Rainbow Bridge, which is aptly named for the constant rainbows formed by the combination of sun and water misting from the Falls. There was a rainbow cascading over the gorge when we first came into the city that morning. There was one there when we crossed the bridge back into the U.S. I took some pictures from the middle of the bridge and then we crossed the bridge and passed through customs. The U.S. customs agents called us the "biker dudes", which seemed both humorous and appropriate.

We biked a short distance to the Holiday Inn Express in Niagara Falls, New York, a depressing run-down city that had the bad geographic misfortune of winding up on the

wrong side of the Falls, the Niagara River, and the Niagara River Gorge. I had reserved a car from Hertz for Friday, thinking, back during the trip's planning stages, I might need a day of rest to make the trip. But I surprised myself and called the Hertz agency to see if we could get a car that day, Wednesday. They had a Malibu available and Jim said we could easily fit both bikes in the Malibu. We taxied the 12 miles out to the agency, drove the Malibu back to the hotel and loaded my bike into the car. Jim didn't want to load his expensive bike in the car and leave it over night, so he kept his bike in his room.

Neither one of us felt much like eating any dinner that night. We decided to leave at 5 the next morning. I think we were both feeling a little tired, a little down – the adrenaline tank just about on zero.

Day 6, September 8th

Jim was up before five the next morning putting his bike in the Malibu. I overslept till 6. We were on our way back to Cleveland at 6:15. Jim drove. We stopped for breakfast on the New York Thruway, I don't remember if Jim had French toast or not. We got back in the Malibu and headed back to Cleveland Heights at 70 mph. We passed some of the trip's familiar landmarks: Hamburg, Dunkirk and Silver Springs. We didn't smell any grapes from the Concord vines. We didn't stop at any fruit stands and inhale succulent peaches. Been there. Done that. Besides it wouldn't have been the same. Never is. We wanted to get home. We wanted to get home fast. We knew it was over. There wasn't anyway to relive those moments, so we didn't try.

We got the rental squared away at Cleveland Hopkins airport, returned to my condo at Cleveland Heights and Jim Packed his \$2500 bike on his carrier and headed his Chevy Blazer back to his sister's house in North Olmsted. I unpacked the bags on my bike and headed up to my condo, turned on the computer and checked my email. I wandered over to a site to check some possible bike trips for next year. I'd be sixty-one next April and hopefully over the trauma of turning sixty. I did just cycle 239 miles in five days (and averaged 10 mph). I perused an interesting bike trip on the Internet site that intrigued me: a 350-mile journey from Albany to Buffalo, following the Erie Canal and the

towpath. The adrenaline started to pump again ever so slightly. A new goal, a new adventure. “Low bridge: every body down”