

I Got a Mule and Her Name is Sal

(...Three hundred eighty-two miles on the Erie Canal)

We had been anticipating our bike trip along the Erie Canal for almost a year. In fact, as soon as we returned from last year's bike trek, which had originated from our homes in Cleveland and went to Niagara Falls, we started planning the Erie Canal journey. The enthusiasm and excitement kept building throughout the year, and now it was already August – just a month before we were scheduled to head for Buffalo on September first – and our enthusiasm and anticipation were approaching childlike proportions. It was nice to know that even at age sixty-one, I could still act – and feel – like a kid. Jim and I would talk almost daily about the particulars of the journey and pump each other up with every conversation – not that, individually, we needed much to pump us up. As the month of August came to an end, there was just one problem lurking in both our minds. Although we barely mentioned it, we both thought it could dampen our spirits and even stop the trip in its tracks before it even started: Hurricane Ernesto would soon begin to pound Cuba, and its predicted path could take it to the East Coast of Florida and then straight up through the eastern half of the U.S.

Even before Ernesto hit Cuba, while it was still incubating in the Atlantic off the coast of Africa, not yet even a tropical storm, the mere mention of it on the news dampened my spirits. And then it hit Cuba, lessened in intensity, and struck eastern Florida as a rain-swollen tropical storm. It moved slowly up the eastern seaboard; its outer-edge counter-clockwise rotational winds and rain pounding the southeast as it slowly moved its way north.

We left for Buffalo on a Friday, September first, and although we were driving in my car and hauling our bicycles, we followed the same bike path from Cleveland to Buffalo we had navigated the year before. Reports on the weather were not encouraging: winds and rain were predicted to hit directly over upstate New York, precisely where our bike path across the state would take us. The weather on that Friday was sunny but cool, and it took almost six hours to get to Buffalo following the exact same route we had taken on

our bikes the year before. Had we taken Interstate 90, we could have arrived at the Adam's Mark in downtown Buffalo in less than four hours. It was my dumb-ass idea to drive the bike route we had taken last year. It was slow and cumbersome and wasn't as exciting or nostalgic as I thought it would be when I conjured up the idea before we left. ("Hey Jim, let's follow the roads we took last year on the bike!") But we arrived at the Adam's Mark before five, and the day was still quite pleasant; we hopefully thought, as we unloaded our bicycles, that maybe we had dodged the bad weather Ernesto was portended to bring.

After settling into our rooms and eating dinner at the hotel restaurant, we decided to look for a bike store close by. I hadn't really brought anything warm for the journey and decided to purchase a long sleeve bike shirt. So we located a bike store a few miles from the hotel and drove up Elmwood Avenue where the store was located. Downtown Buffalo was deserted Friday evening at six o'clock, but the Elmwood Avenue area near Buffalo State University was swinging. Lots of people were milling about on the sidewalks – lots of traffic, lots of up-scale stores and boutiques and restaurants. Unfortunately, the bike store was already closed, so we worked our way back to the hotel via some side streets and through a lovely upscale, expensive residential neighborhood – just a few miles from downtown Buffalo.

We retired early to our respective rooms. Getting a restful sleep that evening seemed to be a remote possibility – the adrenaline was already pumping.

Saturday, September 2nd

I was up at five; maybe I got four hours of sleep. I quickly turned on the TV to get the weather. Remnants of Ernesto were supposed to have already hit Buffalo earlier that morning, but it was dry on the streets outside the hotel – overcast and cloudy but still dry. "Maybe the forecast was wrong," I thought to myself as I hurried down to the lobby ready to go outside and check the weather and temperature firsthand before I met Jim for breakfast. It was just before six and the outside temperature was a rather moderate sixty

degrees, and best of all, there was barely a trace of wind. It was ideal biking weather. Jim was already sitting at a table when I got into the restaurant. A hearty breakfast before heading off on a 400-mile bike journey (we planned on covering sixty miles that day) was a must for serious bikers, and we ate appropriately.

The night before, when we returned from our search for a bike store, and just before we got back to the hotel, we had decided to see if we could find the asphalt-paved bike path which followed the Niagara River and should have passed just a few blocks from the hotel. The official starting point for our journey was the beginning of the bike path. And, according to the 136-page spiral bound brochure (which was very much like an AAA Trip-Tick) that we had obtained from Parks & Trails New York months before we began the journey, the bike path started in a downtown Buffalo park near the Niagara River about a mile from the hotel. But we decided just to pick up the path from the point closest to the hotel rather than back track the mile or so. We did indeed find the bike path, which was no more than a half-mile from the hotel parking lot. So by seven that morning, we were already on the path, headed towards Tonawanda about fourteen miles north of the hotel and where the Niagara River enters the Erie Canal and begins its 400-mile “downhill” journey to Albany. (From Lake Erie to the Hudson River, there is a total drop in elevation of about 500 feet.)

The paved bike path hugged the Niagara River at several points, but was closed down at others, and detour signs led us back to Niagara Street. There was almost no traffic at that time of the morning on Saturday, but we still had a difficult time trying to follow the bike path. The brochure, published by Parks & Trails New York, was an invaluable publication for the majority of the trip, as it contains not only detailed maps of the route but also includes points of interest, hotels, B&Bs, and bike stores located along the entire 400-mile route. In addition, it offers alternate routes if you find the crushed limestone part of the journey not to your liking. But it was least effective along the fourteen miles from downtown Buffalo to Tonawanda. The rain held off and temperatures stayed comfortable for most of the ride to the entrance of the Erie Canal in Tonawanda – although it drizzled occasionally, there wasn’t enough precipitation to worry about or

even get us uncomfortably wet. We both remarked that we would gladly settle for the present weather conditions and intermittent light rain all the way to Albion, where we had reservations at a B&B. Unfortunately, Mother Nature wouldn't keep her end of the bargain.

The entrance to the Erie Canal from the Niagara River in North Tonawanda, New York is rather dramatic and prominently marked with a large wooden signpost welcoming the biker to "The historic Erie Canal." I experienced an immediate sense of excitement and adventure and history when the large wooden sign came into view. This was really the "official" start of the trip. Lots of boats of all types, shapes and sizes are docked in this large inlet – almost bay-like area. But very soon, within a mile or so, the expansive waterway narrows to canal-like proportions, and the asphalt-paved bike path closely follows along the canal's banks. Occasionally the bike path ends and you're directed onto a narrow two-lane Macadam road paralleling the canal and then the bike-path appears again and you're directed back right alongside the canal. The bike path was flat; the road had occasional gentle rolling hills, but the pedaling between path and road was effortless, and we easily maintained a speed of 12 mph. The predicted torrential rains and wind continued to hold off. The bargain with Mother Nature appeared to be holding.

We had been on the bikes for almost two hours, way past Jim's requirement for a second coffee stop. Jim has several cups of coffee for breakfast and then after an hour or so on the road, he requires another cup. So we were on the lookout for possible coffee stops. The rain seemed to pick up in intensity, but nothing gave us pause. We were on Creekside Drive, following the path set by the brochure, and we came upon a commercial area just at the eastern end of North Tonawanda. I spotted a Tim Horton's doughnut shop – the Canadian version of our Krispy Kreme, and we stopped for Jim's coffee and a chance to get some more energy in the form of doughnuts. The rain was now pretty steady and I was starting to "feel" wet although my rain gear was keeping my upper torso dry.

We left Horton's and followed a street behind the main road, which was heavy with traffic. The Parks and Trails brochure is just excellent for leading the biker onto roads that are "bike friendly"; i.e., those with less traffic and/or a bike lane. We were back on a country road that again led to paved paths alongside the canal. We were only about fifteen miles from Lockport and making good time. Our average speed was over 12 mph, so we figured we'd be in Lockport well before noon and ready for lunch. We crossed back and forth over the Erie Canal several times on the roads leading to Lockport. The canal was fairly wide and we saw several boats – some fairly large – but we were told that the season for major boat traffic through the canal was already over for the most part. Several large yellow metal signs posted on both sides of the canal warned boaters not to drag any anchors, as there are several gas lines that run under the canal.

In actuality, when you leave North Tonawanda, the Erie Canal heads almost due north to Lockport before it turns east and begins its journey towards Albany. We arrived in Lockport just before eleven. Lockport is your typical small canal town – just one major street where all the businesses are located. We found a diner on the main street and settled in from the rain and wind – both of which were picking up in intensity. We got a few stares from the patrons while we were leaning our bikes against the large glass floor-to-ceiling storefront window.

Lockport is the first town on the canal that has locks when you head out from Buffalo. In fact, Lockport has two locks in series to allow the boater to descend seventy feet from the Niagara Escarpment – a plateau around the upper Great Lakes that extends all the way to lakes Huron and Michigan. We asked directions at the restaurant where we could get a good view of the two locks in series. It was raining hard when we took off down the main road following the directions we had been given.

Leaving Lockport was the beginning of a crushed limestone bike path that would have taken us along the canal all the way to our final destination for the day, Albion. But it was raining so hard that we didn't think the crushed limestone path would be suitable for biking. Jim and I had been on similar surfaces biking the canal path between Akron and

Cleveland, and we knew that a crushed limestone path was not navigable in the rain, especially with our thinner tires. So we opted to follow the alternative road suggested by the Parks and Trails brochure, NY Route 31, as soon as we saw the locks.

We followed the suggested route offered at the diner but didn't get a very good view of the two locks. We traveled about a mile and decided to take a feeder road to Route 31. This required biking out of the valley. And the hill out of the valley was fairly steep, and about a mile long. I got a little ahead of Jim, and when I got to the intersection of Route 31 and was ready to turn left and head towards Medina, I looked back but didn't see Jim. Then I saw him walking with his bike, then leaning it on a post in a cemetery, and he signaled me to get my ass back there. His front tire was flat. Now it was pouring, and the wind was starting to pick up. The temperature was in the mid-fifties and dropping. We had temperature indicators on the new German-made speedometers we had recently bought for the trip. (The speedometers also recorded the slope of the road and the altitude and amount of climbing we did every day, along with other assorted statistics bike riders become obsessed with – average speed, maximum speed, time on the bike, etc.)

Jim fixed the flat. I helped by holding up the frame, and in fifteen minutes we were back on the road, riding the bike lane on NY Route 31. The traffic was quite heavy, and the big tractor-trailers, creating their own weather front, made the stormy weather even worse every time they passed us. We soon realized we were in the middle of what had been predicted by the weather forecasters – the remnants of Ernesto were blasting us. The wind was blowing directly into us from the east, and the rain was hitting us at a similar angle, damn near horizontally.

We made it to the town of Glasport about seven miles down Route 31 – following a trail of green beans left by an open-bed truck with a load of the beans that had passed us a while back. We stopped at a small restaurant in Glasport to get some nourishment and try to keep dry. The temperature was dropping into the low fifties. I had a bowl of chicken soup and a piece of homemade blueberry pie. I wasn't looking forward to getting back

on Route 31. It wasn't the bad weather that I was apprehensive about as much as the incessant truck and auto traffic. Combined with the horrible weather, it just made matters more nerve wracking. So I convinced Jim we should try to get back on the isolated crushed limestone path that paralleled the canal. I reasoned that at least the path wouldn't be burdened with the incessant traffic. If the condition of the path was impossible to navigate, we could always get back on Route 31.

We left the restaurant and drove into "downtown" Glasport then turned left on the main street, and in less than a mile we crossed the bridge over the canal and headed down to the limestone path. It was remarkably navigable, even with all the rain, and because we were temporarily sheltered by some forest and in a slight valley I made the second stupid comment of the day. (The first, remember, was when I said I would gladly take the slight rain and clouds back in Buffalo!) After several minutes on the path I immediately commented to Jim that: "The towpath seems to be better protected from the weather because it is in a valley and protected by trees." I then predicted the ride to Albion would be much easier on the path. Less than 100 yards down the path, we made a sharp turn out of the forested area into a wide open area, and the blast of wind and torrential rain damn near stopped our forward motion completely, or as Jim remarked: "We're approaching wobble speed."

How the weather could have taken a turn for the worse is beyond me – but it did. Let me state it another way: There were actually whitecaps on the Erie Canal. Whitecaps! When you can detect whitecaps on the Erie Canal, you have a serious weather problem! Medina was about ten to twelve miles down the towpath, and the last five miles took almost an hour. We had to remind ourselves to stop and take a drink of water. Our thirst mechanism didn't require it, but our leg muscles did. I remember my knees aching every time I pedaled. This is something I had never noticed before during the 3,400 miles I had trained for this trip since April. Maybe it was just the cold rain and wind beating against my knees and legs. Each time we stopped, I began to shake and shiver, but once we began pedaling again, I stopped shaking.

We got to a bridge that had a sign on it stating we were in Medina. And Jim pronounced that this was it and we would stay in Medina that evening rather than venture twelve miles down the path to Albion, where I had made guaranteed reservations a few weeks before. There was no need for a vote or discussion. Jim was adamant. We biked up out of the canal towpath and headed toward downtown Medina. Less than a mile up the road, we entered the small town and spotted Rudy's restaurant, where we parked our bikes and went inside and began calling some of the B&Bs and the two hotels listed in the Parks and Trails brochure. (God Bless that beautiful brochure!) We soon found that every available room in Medina was booked for a wedding. I thought we would have to head towards Albion, but Jim was adamant about ending the day right here at Rudy's and was about to inquire if we could sleep there if we had to. (We were both still shivering even after a half hour in Rudy's.) A young couple sitting in the booth behind us heard our attempt to get lodging. Coincidentally, they were also getting married the next day. They were not the same couple whose friends and relatives occupied all the rooms for rent in Medina. They gave us their cell phone number, and told us if we couldn't find a place to stay in Medina and were going to be stranded at Rudy's, they would find us a ride to Albion. A decent and kind gesture to perfect strangers, and we thanked them profusely.

I decided to call the B&B in Albion where we had reservations and told them of our predicament. The proprietors of the B&B, Marilyn Baker and her husband Tom, had a large truck, and Tom said he would come and pick us up, but we would have to wait about an hour as they had another chore to do.

I shook all the way to Albion in the truck. I simply couldn't get warm. The rain was pounding the windshield of the truck; the wind was blowing fiercely. As Jim commented later that evening at the B&B, we never would have made the twelve miles to Albion in that weather without one or both of us coming down with hypothermia – which we were both showing signs of back at Rudy's.

The Friendship Manor B&B in Albion was positively charming, and so were the Bakers. The home itself was well over 100 years old. Our rooms were immaculate and clean. And

the best part – it had one of those old, huge, deep bathtubs where I proceeded to run the bath until the level – almost three feet – almost overran the sides. I had never seen a bathtub this deep. When I got in and lay back in the tub, I almost started to float. Getting out of that deep tub too fast one could conceivably have gotten the bends! But in that tub I stayed for at least an hour – replenishing the heat with additional hot water as necessary. Jim let me go first. I was shivering more than he, and then he took his bath. We gave the Bakers our wet clothes and asked if they would dry them in their dryer, which they graciously did. And then we rested in our respective rooms, wrapped in layers of blankets until our ravenous hunger got the better of us. It was about six in the evening when we realized everyone else had left the B&B and we had no transportation into town unless we wanted to ride our bikes. It was still raining quite heavily although the wind had lessened appreciably. So we put on our raingear and walked into town, about three quarters of a mile from the B&B. I was still cold because I didn't have any type of long-sleeved apparel. So when we passed an Eckerd drugstore, I purchased a gold-colored, XXL, Albion Eagles sweatshirt. I put it on right in the drugstore and started to feel warmer immediately. We walked a few doors down the street to a Mexican restaurant, El Tapatio, and proceeded to gorge ourselves on chicken fajitas and enchiladas. They were actually quite good, but of course, by then, we could have eaten boiled tennis shoes and been satisfied. We walked back through the rain to the B&B and went right to sleep.

I awoke about five the next morning hoping the rain had stopped, but it hadn't. I could hear the raindrops pinging off the bedroom window. The sky didn't lighten up till after six; it was still cloud-covered, but it was only drizzling now and the wind was almost nonexistent. I knew we wouldn't hesitate to take off for Palmyra with the present weather conditions. Jim was still asleep when I went outside before breakfast and hosed down our bikes. The wet limestone from the path had built up cake-like on the bikes – almost like stalactites and stalagmites. Breakfast was served at eight, and all the borders came down to feast on an incredibly delicious breakfast – highlighted by the proprietors' own backyard-grown, incredibly sweet, fresh cantaloupe slices and freshly baked blueberry muffins. Buttermilk pancakes smothered in butter and fresh maple syrup completed the breakfast. Jim and I entertained the other guests with our tales of the trip

from Buffalo, and then we were back on the limestone towpath alongside the less turbulent Erie Canal by eighty-thirty heading east towards Rochester. There was just a slight drizzle, with temperatures in the mid-fifties and a slight wind at our backs. With my newly purchased, gold-colored Albion Eagles XXL sweatshirt on under my raingear, I felt as snug as a bug in the proverbial rug.

Sunday, September 3rd

The slight drizzle was really no problem for us, considering the gale-force winds and blinding rain we had pedaled through less than twenty-four hours ago. The drizzle was intermittent for the first hour and then the rain stopped completely. The cloud cover kept the temperatures a little cool, but after an hour of cycling I had to remove the Albion Eagles sweatshirt. I had no bungee cords so I tried to squeeze it, rolled into a ball, between my seat and back carrier. It held that position for about ten minutes and fell out onto the path, where Jim picked it up and said he would carry it till I could purchase some bungee cords.

Jim Pankow, a friend and co-worker for over thirty years, was by far the stronger cyclist. He could have easily set a much faster pace than I could have followed. (I am also four years older than Jim, and I reminded him of this age discrepancy whenever it was necessary or convenient.) He said he could follow me at the slower pace, but he couldn't lead at the slower pace. Consequently, I was usually in the lead position. Jim's coffee craving was starting to attack, and luckily, we were coming to the village of Holley. So we exited the canal path, crossed a metal-grated drawbridge over the canal, passed through a tiny residential area – neat as a pin – and entered the quaint town square of Holley, New York.

All along the Erie Canal, towns of similar size pop up every ten or fifteen miles. Charming would be the appropriate word to describe these small towns. The town square consists of a small central park-like area, a red church, several stores and a restaurant. We leaned our bikes against the restaurant window and took an empty booth near the

back. Jim got his coffee and two bagels – one bagel to go. I had a cup of hot chocolate and cinnamon toast. I hesitate to say this – getting close my sixty-second birthday – but the majority of the folks in the restaurant appeared to be old, or at least older than Jim and me. We spent maybe thirty minutes in Holley, and we were back on the limestone canal path heading east towards our destination for that evening, Palmyra.

The cycling that morning was almost serene. Once we left the proximity of the small towns or villages, there wasn't a soul around. Far from any human existence, surrounded by farmers' fields or large forested areas, the Erie Canal, placid and calm with all its aquatic life – occasional fish jumping or herons swooping – was our only companion. It was oftentimes eerily quiet. The crushed wet limestone showed signs of the previous day's inclement weather. Jim was having more trouble than me getting comfortable with the surface. He had thinner tires and had two large saddle bags draped over the rear tire, making his bike a little more unstable on the surface. In addition, the unevenness of the surface, coupled with the greater resistance of the surface, had an accumulative effect that was noticeable as soon as the limestone changed to asphalt, which it did occasionally when we passed under a bridge. In only that few feet of paved path, you immediately noticed less strain on your legs. After thirty or forty miles on the limestone, the strain was even more noticeable as soon as you hit the paved section. The advantage of the limestone canal path was that there were obviously no hills as long as the path stayed even with the canal, and of course, there was no traffic to be concerned about. If you left the canal path for an alternate route that followed a state road, then you would have more of the rolling hills, and obviously you would do much more climbing, as indicated by our newly purchased speedometers that could measure altitude changes. Later in the trip we elected to avoid crushed limestone canal towpaths and chose the alternate state highways. Our butts and palms of our hands took more punishment on the limestone than our legs did with the climbing we had to do on the roads.

As lunchtime approached, we came to the town of Spencerport. We pedaled up towards the bridge and turned left in the direction of a bike store that was indicated in the brochure. Jim was low on both CO2 cartridges and inner tubes, and he wanted a new pair

of gloves. We found the bike shop in a little shopping area, and it said it opened at noon on Sunday, so we went to a Greek restaurant and ate with the Sunday church crowd. We both had fancy omelets of some sort, and then it was after noon so we figured the bike shop would be open. Unfortunately, we hadn't seen the sign on the storefront window that said the shop would be closed all Labor Day weekend. As soon as I started to get on my bike I realized I had a flat back tire. (Shit!) I was determined to fix it myself and got everything set except I took an inordinate amount of time getting the final edge of the tire back into the rim. Jim finally came to the rescue, but it took almost forty-five minutes. We now had only two spare inner tubes between us, and we had had two flats in two days. Tomorrow was Labor Day, so we could safely assume all bike stores listed in the brochure would be closed. The eastern suburbs of Rochester were only about six miles away, and the brochure listed several bike stores near our path. In addition, the maps indicated that the limestone towpath was paved all the way from the eastern to the western suburbs of Rochester and for several miles beyond.

The city of Rochester is extremely bike-friendly. We navigated the entire city from east to west on the paved path. Unfortunately, when we called the bike stores listed in the brochure, they were all closed. About six miles into the paved section of the towpath we came upon a rather dramatic scene. The Erie Canal, the paved towpath, and the Genesee River all converged and crossed at one single point. The canal crossed the wide, rain-swollen, muddy, angry Genesee via an aqueduct built right over the river. The paved bike path was built as a separate bridge over the river – at least a quarter mile long, if not longer, and the confluence of all these “paths” – the Genesee River, the Erie Canal aqueduct, and the bike path bridge, made for a very dramatic scene. Unfortunately, it started to rain again – strong enough for us to don our raingear. But it only lasted thirty minutes or so. We finally made it to the eastern edge of the city and came upon a tourist trendy spot on the canal called Pittsford. The area along the canal in Pittsford is called Schoen Place, and it is loaded with trendy shops and restaurants and offers boat tours on the canal. Signs politely ask bikers to “Please Walk Your Bikes.” We stopped at a restaurant and ordered some food. I had not too spicy Buffalo wings. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when we left Pittsford, and not four miles later Jim had another

flat – in his rear tire this time. (Shit!) He was now on his last spare tube and CO2 cartridge. I had one spare and two cartridges left. We still had another twenty miles or so till we got to our B&B in Palmyra. We both felt uneasy with only one spare between us going into Labor Day. We looked in the brochure and realized the brochure listed a bike store back in Schoen Place in Pittsford. I called the number on my cell phone, and they would be open till five. It was almost four and I didn't remember how far back Schoen Place was, so I explained our situation and pleaded with them to wait till I got back there to replenish our supply of tubes and CO2 cartridges. It was only four miles back, so I made it to the bike shop with time to spare. Jim waited and fixed his rear flat.

It turns out that if we had just turned left instead of right when we exited the restaurant we would have easily seen the bike store, not more than one hundred feet from the restaurant entrance. We were back on the towpath – back to crushed limestone – and headed towards Palmyra, New York supplied with four more spare tubes and enough CO2 cartridges to blow up the Goodyear Blimp – if necessary.

We pedaled into Fairport, another up-scale yuppie-type development on the canal, even fancier than Pittsford. But from Fairport to Palmyra it was a desolate and seemingly endless stretch of limestone towpath – bumpy and uneven and at least fifteen miles in length.

By the time we finally got into Palmyra, it was almost six-thirty. Jim's butt was sore and the palms of my hands were sore. Jim seemed to be in more discomfort than me and every time I looked back in my rear view mirror to see where he was, he had a grimace on his face that said it all. I actually had to slow down the pace for Jim. Jim's speedometer indicated he had traveled sixty-four miles that day, and I had covered seventy-two miles. (The eight extra miles were to and from the bike shop in Pittsford.) We were on the road for over ten hours, on the bike seats for six hours, and the B&B where I had made a reservation a week in advance had only one room with two beds available.

Palmyra, New York is another small canal town noted for being the birthplace of Joseph Smith and the Mormon religion and the site of Hill Cumorah, where Mormons congregate for a yearly pageant. After we located the B&B, we took our bikes right to a local pizza shop located near the corner of the street and stuffed ourselves with bread sticks and a large pizza. Then we went back to the B&B and settled in. The proprietors said they would not be home till later that evening and left a key under the mailbox so we could get in the house. I headed straight for the bathtub. We were dead tired and I had broken a new two-day record for distance. I traveled 122 miles in two days, which beat my old two-day record by almost ten miles. And this two-day record included navigating through gale-force winds and a blinding rain. But the best news for me was that the terrible pain I had in my knees at the end of the first day never reoccurred.

When I awoke every morning on the trip, my first order of business was to check each map-page of the brochure and plan the destination for that day. Then I would tear out each page and fold the pages together. This way I could easily check our progress without taking out the entire 136-page brochure. During the day, as we progressed on our journey and reached the end of a respective map-page, I would tear up the page and throw it away. A meaningless ceremonial gesture, but one I looked forward to as an indication that we were, indeed, achieving our goal of reaching the Hudson River.

Monday, September 4th

Monday morning was no different. I tore out the appropriate pages from the Parks & Trails New York brochure and folded them together and put them in the clear plastic leaf attached to the bag attached to my handle bar for easy reference. The destination for Labor Day was Weedsport, about forty-five miles from Palmyra. The B&B in Palmyra, along with the breakfast, fell far short of the accommodations and breakfast at the B&B in Albion. But breakfast is an important meal for the biker, so I ate the French toast, sans the crust, which I cut away. She packed us a lunch for our trip, which was considerate of her. But the lunch turned out to be PB&J (not that bad) and some bad, stale, pretzels. We started out that day heading east on Route 31. The limestone towpath had ended for the

time being and the recommended path was to follow Route 31 east. It was another cool, cloudy day. And best of all – we had an incredible tail wind pushing us along at 12 to 14 mph. (We deserved it after that miserable first day!)

We were still following the Erie Canal, but Route 31 had some hills and valleys we hadn't experienced along the towpath. But with the strong tailwind, we hardly noticed the elevation changes. We came into the town of Newark about ten miles from Palmyra and stopped for some coffee. Leaving the eastern end of Newark we came upon a Wal-Mart and stopped so I could get some bungee cords. We also bought some engine degreaser and tooth brushes so we could clean our bikes and chains when we got to Weedsport.

This part of the journey was all state roads. We crossed back and forth across the Erie Canal, once in the town of Lyons and then back across the canal in Clyde, where we ate the PB&J sandwiches in a convenience food mart parking lot. Rather than taking the suggested route out of Clyde down towards the Montezuma Marsh, we cut across the Marsh area and stayed on Route 31 cutting a few miles off the trip. We also left out the suggested side journey to Seneca Falls, considered the birthplace of the suffragette movement. It had absolutely nothing to do with being chauvinist pigs. It would have added an extra fifteen or twenty miles to the day's journey, and we wanted to get into Weedsport early and rest up. We considered the forty-five miles to Weedsport an "easy" day. And with the present tail wind, it was an easy day. We made a couple more rest stops and still got into Weedsport a little after one in the afternoon. We were on the bikes for only three and a half hours and averaged almost 13 mph. We stayed at a Day's Inn just a good walk from the main section of town. On the way into town, we passed a Laundromat and a self-serve car wash. After settling into the hotel and washing our clothes in the bathtub, we took our bikes and wet clothes over to the Laundromat. (I have no idea why we didn't just wash the damn clothes in the Laundromat!) The car wash was right next door to the Laundromat, so we put our clothes in the dryer and went over to clean the bikes. We spent about an hour at the location and went back to the Day's Inn. Jim went to his room and I iced down my legs with ice from the hotel and two Zip-lock

bags I had brought with me for this explicit purpose. It was indeed a restful day all the way around. And we both needed and deserved it!

It was Labor Day and since our trip last year to Niagara Falls, we were concerned that we could get caught short on Labor Day finding places to refuel. Food is to the biker as gasoline is to the automobile. And last year on Labor Day, from Erie, Pennsylvania, all the way to Dunkirk, New York, we had lots of trouble finding places that were open to get some food. This wasn't the case today, especially for dinner.

Weedsport is a town just north of the popular Finger Lakes region in New York State, and the restaurants in town were all open. One in particular, The Old Erie restaurant, where we ate that evening, was a fine dining establishment. It would have been considered a fine eatery in New York City or New Orleans or Paris, France. We got there at five and it was already full. The owners, a married couple, had both graduated from the well-known, well-respected, Culinary Institute of America. Their diplomas were both prominently displayed on the wall as you entered the restaurant. It was surely the best food we ate all seven days of the trip. Everything was made fresh and on the premises – the breads and rolls and pies and pasta.

Jim had a breaded veal cutlet with homemade spaetzel. The spaetzel was browned in a butter sauce. I had chicken marsala served over some type of thin pasta. For dessert I had coconut cream pie. (Absolutely to die for!) The food was just fantastic and I was in a quandary when I first ordered, because the pan-fried, southern fried chicken sounded awfully good. So, thinking a day ahead, near the end of the meal, I ordered the fried chicken to go so I would have a good meal for lunch the next day. Each of our rooms had a refrigerator. Jim had some veal and spaetzel left over so he had it packed for tomorrow's lunch too. Yes, food is of great importance to the serious biker. And good food is of great importance to the serious, wacko biker willing to think ahead, take advantage of a good restaurant, and even schlep the extra weight on the bike! The Old Erie restaurant is definitely worth a fifty or even a hundred mile drive out of your way if you're ever in the region!

Tuesday, September 5th

One thing is always reassuring on a bike trip of this nature. Regardless of what transpired the previous day, regardless of the weather conditions the previous day, regardless of how exhausted you may have felt the previous day, a good meal and a good night's rest and by early the next morning you're up at five and already excited and anticipating the new day's journey and adventures. Your mode of transportation is right there in your hotel room leaning against the TV. And you can already hear your riding partner fussing with his bike outside your room, ready to go. I had a note on my bike seat to be sure I didn't forget the fried chicken in the refrigerator and had to remind Jim to get his veal and spaetzel. We were on the road by seven heading back into town to eat breakfast at the local diner.

We would cover over fifty miles today and pass through the halfway point of the trip somewhere near Syracuse. I had all the appropriate maps torn out of the brochure. I was ready to lead the way. Our destination was Canastota, New York. Another small town right on the Erie Canal. ***“Low bridge, everybody down. Low bridge cause we're coming to a town. And you'll always know your neighbor and you'll always know your pal. If you've ever navigated on the Erie Canal...”***

The western suburbs of Syracuse were about twenty miles east of Weedsport. There were virtually no towns or cities on Route 31 leading into the town of Jordan. Then in Jordan we left Route 31 and took local county roads into the western suburbs of Syracuse. Still no towns or villages, which is the reason we had stopped in Weedsport the previous day rather than bike another twenty-plus miles to find a place to stay. The weather was warming up a bit compared to the last few days, and I had to remove the Albion Eagles sweatshirt a few miles after we left the diner. It was still overcast and we had a little breeze at our backs. So it was again another ideal day, this time for cycling to Canastota, New York.

The Erie Canal appeared nowhere in sight. It took a northern turn miles west near the Montezuma Marsh, but the scenery was pleasant and the route was, for the most part, fairly flat with only a few hills to climb. (We would climb, according to our newly purchased German speedometers, 818 feet that day, about twice the climbing we did the first few days.) We stopped in Jordan, New York maybe ten miles from Weedsport for Jim's coffee break. But then in less than two hours we were entering the western suburbs of Syracuse.

Now, for the better part of this trip, I was in the lead position. One reason for this was already mentioned – my slower pace – but another was the fact that I had the maps for that day's route torn out of my brochure and placed conveniently in my clear plastic flap sitting on my handlebars where I could easily read them. Jim left his brochure intact and in one of his saddlebags, but the lead position would change when we entered a large metropolitan area like Syracuse. There is a legitimate reason for this change, and although I am somewhat reluctant to explain the reason, fairness and honesty require me to do so.

It really all began last year on our bike journey to Niagara Falls. When we finally got to the outskirts of Buffalo – I was in the lead position again – I got, shall we say, a bit flustered trying to find the right streets to take to get to downtown Buffalo. I would try one street, then stop, look about, try another, and sometimes double back. At one point Jim was getting a bit frustrated with my obvious confusion and just parked his bike at a corner and watched in amusement as I began my “dance,” my attempt to discern the correct route, riding around one busy intersection in Lackawanna in circles, like a whirling dervish. I suppose one could say I was totally flummoxed, bewildered, confused – even possibly “fermished” or “ferklempt.” (Yiddish words perhaps best express my confused and somewhat panic-stricken state of mind.) Jim would describe my behavior whenever we got to a larger metropolitan area as being like one of those confused cartoon characters – you know – when their head starts spinning around their shoulders 360 degrees.

Okay, back to the eastern suburbs of Syracuse. I was doing pretty well for a while, but then as the streets and traffic become more involved, I started going into my “dance” and “ferklempt” state of mind. Jim evidently saw the confused state beginning to erupt into the full-blown “whirling dervish” mode and quickly put a stop to it. He came up beside me, told me to put the damn map away and just follow him. He said he would instinctually find our way through the city to the towpath, which began again on the eastern side of town. I have to admit, I was a little more than pissed, but I reluctantly followed Jim right into downtown Syracuse. We were looking for Erie Boulevard, so I stopped a young man and asked how we could get on Erie Boulevard. As the man came closer you could see in his eyes he was on some kind of drugs. I could see Jim was not happy when I asked the guy. I gave the stranger the map of downtown Syracuse, which he immediately proceeded to turn upside down and attempt to read – a sure sign Jim was right again. He blabbered something about turning right, left, right, gave back the map and I just followed Jim who had paid absolutely no attention to this guy whatsoever, and merely went his instinctual way, and of course in a few minutes we were right on Erie Boulevard heading east.

(So Jim earned the right to immediately take the lead when we got to a city of proper size – and he performed miraculously – he never ever referred to the maps! He guided us later in the trip through Utica, and was positively masterful and Vasco da Gama-like in finding our way through Schenectady!)

We made it through Syracuse and stopped at a Bike Store off Erie Boulevard. I had my tires topped off and we bought some 16g CO2 cartridges. To get to the bike store we had to go up a steep incline that I wasn't quite ready for, so I didn't down shift and tried to make it up the twelve-percent incline in the gear I was in. Then I felt a sharp pain and twinge in my right thigh, which I had had some trouble with while I was training in the summer. I didn't mention anything to Jim and just prayed it would pass when we started back up. But the traffic on Erie Boulevard picked up. It wasn't a very bike-friendly route. We had just a few miles to go to get to the canal towpath, so Jim suggested we find an alternate route and head up the incline to the right and find a parallel road. “I

ain't goin' up that fuckin' hill," was the delicate way I believe I put it to Vasco da Gama. And I explained about my thigh. Jim reluctantly followed me on the sidewalk until we eventually got to the crushed limestone towpath, which followed a section of the old Erie Canal. By this time Jim had had it with crushed limestone, but there weren't any alternate routes suggested by the Parks & Trails brochure. It was twenty-two miles on the crushed limestone path to the town of Canastota, New York. This old section of the canal was thick with underbrush along its banks. There were no boats on the old canal. Long stretches of the limestone towpath were shaded with old hardwood trees. The sun was intermittently peering through the clouds for the very first time on the trip. It was a welcome sight, indeed. Shafts of sunlight would break through the arch of trees and spotlight sections of the trail. It was tranquil and peaceful and a rather uneventful journey devoid of any other human presence. It was a rather reflective, almost introspective, ride. It was biking at its existential best. We arrived in Canastota before three in the afternoon. We had traveled fifty-three miles from Weedsport.

Canastota, New York is another typical, small canal town. It actually sits on the old Erie Canal, so there isn't any pleasure boat traffic to draw anyone through Canastota. It does have an exit on Interstate 90 and that's where we stayed, just off the Interstate, about a mile from the towpath at the Graziano Motor Lodge. The motor lodge had large pictures of Rocky Graziano in a typical fighting pose hanging in the small lobby. I just assumed there was some type of family relation and there was – a distant cousin we were told. Canastota had a Boxing Hall of Fame, which we were told housed memorabilia mostly of Canastota's favorite boxing son, Carmen Basilio. I remember watching Basilio box in the early 50s on the Gillette Friday Night fights with my Uncle Pete.

The trip from Weedsport wasn't that tiring, but I took advantage of the motel's ice machine and iced my legs down. Then I took a hot bath. The restaurant directly across from the motel's parking lot was open, so we had an early dinner of pasta – nothing special – and retired early. (We got a 10% discount in the restaurant because we were staying at the motel.) I was asleep before eight and up before five the next morning.

Wednesday, September 6th

We were on the road headed down Main Street before seven. It was still cloudy and gray overhead, but it was a warmer morning than any of the others because I distinctly remember it was the first morning after Albion that I didn't require my Albion Eagles sweatshirt. We found the only restaurant in town, just across the old canal-bridge, open and ready for business. We seemed to be their first customers. After breakfast I found my stomach a bit unsettled so I pedaled back to the motel and used the bathroom facilities in my room. I had kept the key card for this express possibility. Jim walked across the street to the town's doughnut shop and loaded up on some sweets for the next leg of the journey. I came back from the motel and we met at the canal towpath to begin the next leg of the journey – Utica, New York.

The Parks & Trails brochure showed the limestone towpath as their recommended route, offering no alternate state route, even though Canal Road, New York Route 46, ran right next to the towpath and seemed to even have a narrow bike path delineated by a white line. By this time, Jim and I both had equal disdain for riding anymore crushed limestone paths. And in fairness to the excellent Parks & Trails brochure, they highly recommended a bicycle with the wider hybrid tire for the entire journey – and shocks. And they were right on the mark. It would have been exceedingly more comfortable riding those limestone towpaths with that recommended type of bike.

We were determined to get on Route 46 as soon as possible, but the towpath was perched about twelve feet above the road up on a mound, and we had to wait several miles before we could get off the towpath and access Canal Road. We followed Route 46 to Lock Road, but instead of taking the recommended Lock Road, which took the rider to Lock 21 on the real Erie Canal, we continued to the junction of Route 46 and London Road. Here is where the old Erie Canal and “New” Erie Canal rejoined. We got a little confused at the intersection, and for the first time took a wrong turn and headed down a path for about a mile thinking we had found a new route to the Orient before we decided to head back towards the towpath. We got on Heelpath Road, which again paralleled the

towpath right into the outskirts of Rome, New York. Without the Parks & Trails brochure, we never could have navigated our way into Rome without using the limestone towpath.

We had been on the trail for two hours or so and Jim was warning me to be on the lookout for a possible coffee break. I stopped for a drink of water and Jim pulled up alongside to remind me again to stop at the first possible place where we might get some coffee. Before getting back on the bike I put my hand on my back zippered pocket and got that feeling one gets when they expect to feel the bulge of their wallet – but no bulge! “Shit, I think I lost my wallet, Jim.” He suggested I look through my front and rear bags, but I knew I didn’t put my wallet in either of those bags. Now I was pissed and began swearing at myself under my breath for losing the wallet, which contained two hundred bucks in cash, my credit card, my driver’s license and my ATM card. I wasn’t really that concerned with the loss of the cash and cards. I was more upset with myself. What was so disconcerting was that before the trip I had actually said to myself: “DON’T put your wallet in your back zippered pocket because you might forget to zip the pocket and the wallet could fall out. PUT the wallet in the front bag, which you always zip closed before you begin to bike.” But I didn’t follow my own advice. The back pocket was unzipped. I assumed the wallet fell out somewhere between Canastota and Rome. The trip wasn’t over. I’d just have to keep track of what Jim spent on the trip for me.

By the time we got to West Liberty Street - the route delineated by the Parks & Trails brochure - which paralleled the busy Erie Boulevard right into town, I had forgotten about the loss of my wallet and my stupidity (aging?). We found a local bakery/coffee shop near the center of town and Jim suggested we call the restaurant in Canastota where we had breakfast, and the Graziano Motel, just in case they had found my wallet. It was a long shot, but what the hell did I have to lose? Jim called the restaurant. I called the motel. Jim struck out. But the motel did indeed find my wallet!

As luck would have it, there was an Enterprise Rental Car agency just three blocks back on Erie Boulevard. Jim rented a car, drove back to the Graziano Motel and returned with

my wallet. It took just less than an hour. We ate lunch at a small hole-in-the-wall restaurant right next door to the car rental agency. (Fantastic homemade potato salad!) And we were back on the bikes before one in the afternoon.

Rome wasn't a large enough metropolis to warrant Jim's internal GPS system, and I led the way through downtown Rome and around Fort Stanwix - a reconstructed fort used during both the French and Indian Wars and the Revolutionary War. It was run by the National Park Service. Rather than follow the towpath from the proximity of the fort, we elected to take the alternative - Route 69, Rome/Orinsky Road. We followed NY Route 69 all the way into the outskirts of Utica. Utica was declared a "big" city by Jim. And he promptly took over the lead till we got downtown and found the Radisson Hotel. It was a little pricey, \$135 per night – with NY state taxes over \$150 – but after a little thought we took it. It was still early in the day, not yet three o'clock. We had biked forty-two miles. We'd climbed six hundred feet in elevation. All in all, another relatively easy day, and for me, a new biking record in distance and continuous days on the road. For dinner that evening, I celebrated with a filet mignon steak dinner with all the trimmings. After dinner, we took advantage of the laundry room. That night, before I went to sleep, I put my wallet in my handlebar bag and zipped it shut.

Thursday, September 7th

Up early Thursday morning, I began my ritual of immediately planning the route and where we'd stop that evening. It was apparent that we were rapidly approaching the end of the trip. According to the Parks & Trails brochure, we officially had 111 miles till we reached the shores of the Hudson River and downtown Albany, New York. Before beginning this bike trek, I had always had reservations about whether I could even make the almost four-hundred-mile trip, but also if I'd need at least one day to rest my sixty-one-year old legs. Jim wanted to get home before Monday. So I figured we could take three days to complete the 111 miles left on the journey. This would bring us back to Cleveland late Sunday afternoon, which would still leave Jim a five-hour drive back to Kalamazoo, Michigan, where he lived.

Jim would have liked to get back on Saturday, but that meant covering 111 miles in only two days. I didn't think I could do that although my legs and general physical conditioning felt quite strong. In addition, it was difficult to break the trip up into only two days because of the places we could stop for the night and get suitable lodging. And there was one more point of concern – for me. The Parks & Trails brochure talked about several four-hundred-foot climbs between Buffalo and Albany. So far, we hadn't seen anything resembling a four-hundred-foot climb. So I assumed the climbs the brochure referenced were still to come. The brochure never mentions where these climbs appear on the journey. (It would be nice if they did!) I had trained diligently for the prospective climbs this summer by planning my bike route through the Chagrin River valley not fifteen miles from my condo in Cleveland Heights. It was just about a four-hundred-foot climb out of the river valley. By the end of the summer I could bike six successive days out of that valley. And, in fact, my forty-mile training route had almost 1,200 feet of climbing. So I felt confident I could get through the four-hundred-foot climbs on the Erie Canal route. But I was still apprehensive about the climbs and wondered when the hell we would be confronted with them. Obviously they would be appearing somewhere in the next 111 miles. So, tentatively at breakfast we decided to make Canjoharie our next planned stop and called the only B&B there and made a reservation for two rooms. It was about forty-five miles from Utica, so we would be there sometime in the afternoon. After Canjoharie we tentatively planned to stop in Schenectady – forty miles from Canjoharie – the next day. Then we'd leave early Sunday morning and complete the final thirty miles to Albany.

Breakfast at the Radisson opened at six and we were on the road headed east on Bleecker Street before seven. Several miles outside of town we connected with old route 5S and cycled to the town of Frankfort for our first coffee stop. Jim was feeling especially perky that morning, and always having a soft spot in his heart for redheads, asked our young attractive redheaded waitress to dance. He was rebuffed – with “extreme prejudice” – but that didn't seem to dampen his spirits in the least. We headed a few more miles east on 5S to the town of Ilion, home of the Remington Firearms Plant, built in 1828 and still

operating today. We passed the massive plant on our right and headed towards Herkimer, New York. We decided to bypass the recommended route into Herkimer and stayed on Route 5S. Nothing in the topography or scenery even remotely suggested a four-hundred-foot climb, unless of course we were directed to climb out of the Mohawk River Valley.

Ten miles east of Herkimer, we stopped at an isolated outpost which appeared to be some type of a convenience store, but they were also processing empty beer bottles and cans. It had a unique odor, but we stopped for some candy bars and to use their facilities. We continued east for another mile then took the brochure's suggested route, 167, into the town of Little Falls. At this point it appeared that the Erie Canal and the Mohawk River were one and the same waterway. I'm not sure how far back the two had combined, but I suspect it was somewhere just east of Rome. We continued on past Little Falls – an enchanting town nestled in the river (canal) valley surrounded by some of the higher hills and peaks that we had seen on the trip. This is where I suspected we might find the first of the “several four-hundred-foot” climbs. We entered a section of path that looked to be cut right through some rock, with fifty-foot cliffs on both sides. Jim rightly guessed it was an old railroad track. It lasted maybe a mile and then we did, in fact, begin to climb out of the river valley. When we finally got to the top on the surrounding hills, we checked our speedometers and they did, in fact, confirm the four-hundred-foot climb the brochure had promised. We rested for several minutes at the top of the hill and took in the view of the surrounding valley.

No more than a few miles down the road we were directed onto Mindenville Drive, which abruptly took us right back down to the river. It was a narrow, steep and winding county road, and wisely, we didn't try anything foolish; not knowing what was around the next bend, we kept in single file. Halfway down the road, two yahoos in a pickup truck doing forty miles an hour up the hill made a wide turn right into our lane. Jim was leading and instantly thought about ditching off the side of the road, but there wasn't any place to ditch. I was far enough behind Jim to see what was coming and had time to adjust. The driver looked as shocked to see Jim as Jim did to see the truck. When the

truck passed me I yelled out an epithet that I thought was appropriate. They, in turn, yelled the same one back. They were probably both appropriate. And that was the extent of it. It could have been much worse, especially if Jim and I had been riding side by side.

We cycled across the Mohawk River/Erie Canal and entered the small town of St. Johnsville, where we ate lunch. We certainly weren't expecting much from the looks of the single restaurant, a rather run-down establishment with most of the stores on both sides boarded up or closed down. But that's what makes these kinds of trips so incredible because, next to the Old Erie restaurant in Weedsport, we had the best food on the trip in this joint. Jim had an omelet and forced me to try his browned, red skin potatoes (Unbelievable!). I had fried chicken and mashed potatoes and gravy. (Delicious!) The cook, a young woman probably not yet in her twenties, brought out our food.

According to the Parks & Trails brochure, we could catch a paved towpath just back across the river and take it all the way to Canjoharie. On the way, we passed through the town of Fort Plain and arrived in Canjoharie mid-afternoon. Even with the four-hundred-foot climb out of the river valley – 1,200 total feet of climbing that day – I felt surprisingly fresh.

We easily found the B&B (Window Box Guest House), which was the nicest one we stayed in to date. Jim's room was upstairs; mine was on the ground floor. The place was spotless, and in the bathroom, the porcelain sink was buffed to a high shine. I left Jim up in his room doing his après-biking routine – elevate the legs for twenty minutes, etc. – and I took off to walk around the town.

Anyone who has traveled the length of Interstate 90 will recognize the Beech Nut sign prominently displayed and easily viewed from the Interstate. Beech Nut foods originated in Canjoharie, and Beech Nut baby foods are still manufactured there although the original family and ownership has changed several times. You can still see the remnants of the old money in the section of town where our B&B was located. Large old Victorian mansions still dotted the hillside across from our Bed and Breakfast.

We ate at a small pizza restaurant in town and turned in early to watch a football game. I think it was Ohio State and Texas, or maybe it was an NFL game. I don't remember. Jim went upstairs to watch it in his room. I fell asleep well before the game ever started. Maybe the three-hundred-plus miles I had pedaled to date and today's 1,200-foot climb did me in more than I thought.

Friday, September 8th

We left the B&B after breakfast around eight-thirty. There was a crushed limestone path leaving Canjoharie, but we opted for Route 5S, which closely followed the towpath. Interstate 90 was just to our left almost the entire way to Amsterdam, New York. Several miles from Amsterdam, in Fort Hunter, we got back on the towpath, which was now paved. Jim started to have some intestinal problems, and luckily we were in a state park near an old historic lock which had a bathroom. Soon we were coming into Amsterdam, which, by the looks of the town, was in a state of some disrepair. Perhaps it had been a bustling town in the 1800s or early 1900s, but it was looking pretty shabby this day. The towpath passed south of the downtown area. It was about eleven, and we saw an Italian Restaurant, La Cucina, just off the towpath, so we stopped for an early lunch. Seems like we saw lots of businesses in all the canal towns we passed with Italian surnames. The restaurant was nothing special, so we took off for Schenectady, about another twenty miles east. This was our scheduled stop for the day, but I could tell we were both silently contemplating the possibility of going all the way to Albany.

We were still in the Mohawk River valley and just after lunch I wondered if we would have another four-hundred-foot climb on the trip; Jim offered the following: "Oh, I think we're good...I think that all the significant climbing is behind us." It turned out to be the third dumb-ass comment of the trip. We would wind up climbing out of the valley once more and would do more climbing today than any other day. In addition, we would find some eleven- and twelve-percent slopes, that even in the lowest of gears, caused great strain on my legs. It was by far the most difficult day on the trip. But I'll get to all that.

We came into the western end of Schenectady around one in the afternoon. We came in near a large General Electric manufacturing plant that was on our right just on the other side of Interstate 90. We drove through a semi-residential section of town and then all of a sudden we were right in the middle of downtown Schenectady. I went into my “fermished” state of mind; Jim took the lead and miraculously went down a few side streets, made a few turns and in just a couple of miles, we were across the downtown section and back on the paved towpath. I have no idea how this man’s internal GPS works, but it is really quite impressive.

A few miles east of town we entered a rather rural section, which may have actually been some type of a park. All I know is we started to climb and climb and climb some more. It started to drizzle, and the cool rain actually felt good. Soon we were confronted with a steep incline and I immediately down-shifted on both sides to the lowest gear combination. The incline was no more that a few hundred feet in length. But it was surely the steepest one I’ve ever attempted. The slope indicated on the speedometer went immediately to nine, then ten, then eleven, and finally twelve percent. When we finally got to the top I stopped and made mention of Jim’s brilliant comment earlier in the day. “No more significant fucking climbing...huh?!”

It was almost two in the afternoon already and we hadn’t eaten anything since the Italian restaurant in Amsterdam. That was eleven in the morning. We planned on stopping for the night in Schenectady, but neither of us said anything as we slowly left the city and suburbs of Schenectady behind us. We should have stopped to eat somewhere, but we figured there would be plenty of places to stop before we got to Albany. There weren’t. Any! Certainly nowhere near the towpath. We finally pedaled to the top of the hill and made the commitment to make it all the way to Albany.

At the top of the hill, in the middle of nowhere, we saw the massive General Electric Global Research Center, a massive complex of buildings nestled amongst hills in a very pastoral setting. I’m sure several thousand people worked there. Jim stopped to talk to a

biker heading in the opposite direction, while I drove up the GE Visitor Center. I filled up both canteen bottles and asked where there was a place to get some food. The receptionist said there was nothing close by, so I asked if we could eat in their commissary. That wouldn't be possible, she responded. I left the Visitor Center and saw Jim coming up the path. The biker he spoke with, who had come up from Albany, confirmed our fears. There really wasn't any place to get something to eat till we got to Albany – twenty-five miles away. I told Jim he could load up on water at the Visitor Center. We then made the decision to head to Albany, but first we'd have to change our reservations for the rental car from Saturday to today and get a hotel reservation in Albany. We both started calling from our cell phones while stationed at a picnic table near the GE Visitor Center.

Jim changed the car rental reservation. I got two rooms at the Crown Plaza Albany hotel and we were on our way. Now it would be downhill all the way to the Hudson River – well, almost.

We met another biker coming up the path and he informed us it was pouring like hell about a mile down the road. We were sitting up high in the hills and could easily see the rain clouds dumping down below, but by the time we got down closer to the river, the rain had completely stopped and the sun was out. In fact, it was getting warm – probably the warmest it had been on the entire trip.

About an hour after we left the GE Research Center, I noticed Jim was lagging behind so I slowed the pace down. And then Jim came up beside me and announced we had to find a place to get some food. He said he was feeling like he was starting to “bonk” and cramp-up. “Bonking” is a bicycle term, which in its simplest definition means that you're out of energy, your body can't supply the nutrients to your muscles, and you start to cramp. A mile or so later, the path stopped at an intersection and we saw a biker and asked him where we could get some food. He indicated the closest place was a convenience store a mile or so away, but we would have to climb a steep hill to get there.

Jim needed some food immediately and I was pretty hungry myself, so we followed the biker's direction, and soon we were indeed climbing a rather steep hill. I got ahead of Jim and waited near the top around a corner. I waited for what seemed an inordinate amount of time and got a little worried and started walking back down the slope. A few minutes later I saw a sight I had never seen since I began biking with Jim over eight years ago. Jim was walking his bike up the hill. I had never seen Jim walk his bike up a hill. Jim doesn't ever walk his bike up a hill. Jim Pankow would pedal his bike up the side of the Empire State Building if that was were the path led. This was not good. This was not a good sign at all. My first inclination was to tell Jim to stay put and I would go to the convenience store and bring the food and beverages back. But he declined and got back on the bike and we rode another half mile or so to the convenience store. Jim was struggling. I asked a patron at the store how far downtown Albany was. Twelve to fifteen miles was the reply. I suggested we just get a taxi, pile the bikes in the trunk and officially declare this trip over. Jim would have none of that. We took the purchased snack food outside and began to devour everything like we were about to eat our last meal before being ushered off to the electric chair. It must have been quite an exhibition, because we were getting stares from people entering the store. (I gave Jim one of the doughnuts and he devoured it in three bites!) We got back on the bikes and headed back towards the paved towpath.

At first, Jim seemed to have regained some energy, but all too soon he began to lag behind again and I slowed the pace down. I would get glimpses of Jim in my rear view mirror and he was definitely struggling. We were mostly coasting a good part of the way and we entered the Hudson River Valley. We passed by the town of Cohoes, and the paved bike path soon ended and we followed the Erie Canal Path road signs back onto the streets of Watervliet. Eventually we were led right to the Hudson River. This was the landmark that signaled we had completed the journey as far as we were concerned. We high-fived each other and continued down the road following the Hudson River. After a few miles we were directed back to a paved bike path that ran through a park along the river's edge. I had slowed the pace to well under 10 mph, and Jim was still falling

behind. We had about six miles to go before we entered downtown Albany, and Jim was fading quickly.

Finally, about a half-mile from where the bike path officially terminated, Jim just stopped and placed his bike down and sat down on the grass, eventually just lying down. I came back and sat down with Jim till he was ready to finish the last miles or so. After fifteen minutes we were back on the bikes and in less than five minutes we were at the terminus of the Erie Canal Bike path. It was marked rather dramatically at the foot of the Hudson River with a circular concrete structure that allowed the biker to pedal up the grand circular incline from either side and pedal over Interstate 87 to a series of concrete steps that led down to Broadway. I was looking for a bike path near the steps but couldn't find one. Then a pedestrian walking up the steps informed us that there was an elevator – specially built for bicycles – that led down to the street level.

Once down on street level we immediately headed into town, which seemed to have been built on a hill. I knew the hotel was straight east of the Hudson, but we were getting a bit confused. We drove up a steep hill and came to an office complex called the Crown Plaza, so we rightly assumed it was either part of the hotel or the hotel was nearby. Jim started to carry his bike up a flight of concrete stairs and said he would see if we could enter the hotel lobby from this street and he quickly disappeared into the plaza above the steps before I could even follow him. I waited for several minutes – no Jim. I rode my bike up the street a few hundred feet and there was Jim carrying his bike up another concrete staircase. This staircase looked like it had 100 steps or more. It went straight up the side of a hill. My first thought was: “Where the fuck is he going?” He was too far away to hear me yell at him, and besides there were quite a few people leaving work. It was almost six-thirty when we finally got to the lobby of the Crown Plaza Albany Hotel. I met Jim at the top of the stairway by riding my bike up another steep hill that almost paralleled the steps. There was no reason to ask Jim what the hell he was doing. His confused expression spoke volumes. He looked like I must have looked like when I came into the downtown area of a large metropolitan area. In short, Jim was “ferklempt.” The staircase and the top of the hill met one hundred feet from the entrance to the Crown

Plaza Hotel. Jim walked his bike over. I drove my bike right through the automatic sliding glass doors into the lobby. Now the trip was surely over.

I stayed in my bathtub until the phone rang. Jim had reserved a hotel airport limo to take us to the airport and pick up the rental car at seven-thirty. I still had thirty minutes to soak. I was surprised how good I felt. This was the longest day on the bike. (Seven hours on the seat.) And the longest day overall (ten hours). We did the most climbing – 1,300 feet, with the steepest inclines – twelve percent.

Saturday, September 9th

We left the hotel in Albany at five-thirty in the morning. Driving back from Albany to Buffalo we saw all the exit signs for the cities we had visited on the bike path. For some reason it seemed like a longer trek in the car than it did on our bikes. We got back to the Adam's Mark in Buffalo around noon, got my car and returned the rental to the airport. We were back in Cleveland before four that afternoon. Jim returned to Kalamazoo the next day. The adventure seemed over much too fast, but that's usually way it feels after a thoroughly enjoyable experience – and biking the Erie Canal is about as enjoyable a biking experience as you could possibly have. Jim has a saying whenever we start a bike adventure. It has a zen-like quality to it like the Chinese proverb about a journey of 1000 miles beginning with that first step. "As soon as you take that first pedal the bike trip is already over."

A "thank you" to the Parks & Trails New York:

A person who attempts to ride a bike without head protection is foolish if not downright stupid. I think you could accurately make that same statement about anyone who attempts to bike the Erie Canal route without the Parks & Trails New York's invaluable 136-page brochure. Our trip surely wouldn't have been as enjoyable without it. In fact, our trip might have ended in the fury of Hurricane Ernesto without the brochure. This is book written by serious bikers for serious bikers. It's loaded with valuable information that makes the trip both safer and more productive and is chock full of interesting facts

about the canal. The brochure is loaded with valuable information about the locations of bike shops, hotels, B&Bs and interesting locations along the route. I really don't see how you could fully enjoy the trip without it. So to all those individuals who contributed mightily towards the publication and completion of that brochure: Thank You!