

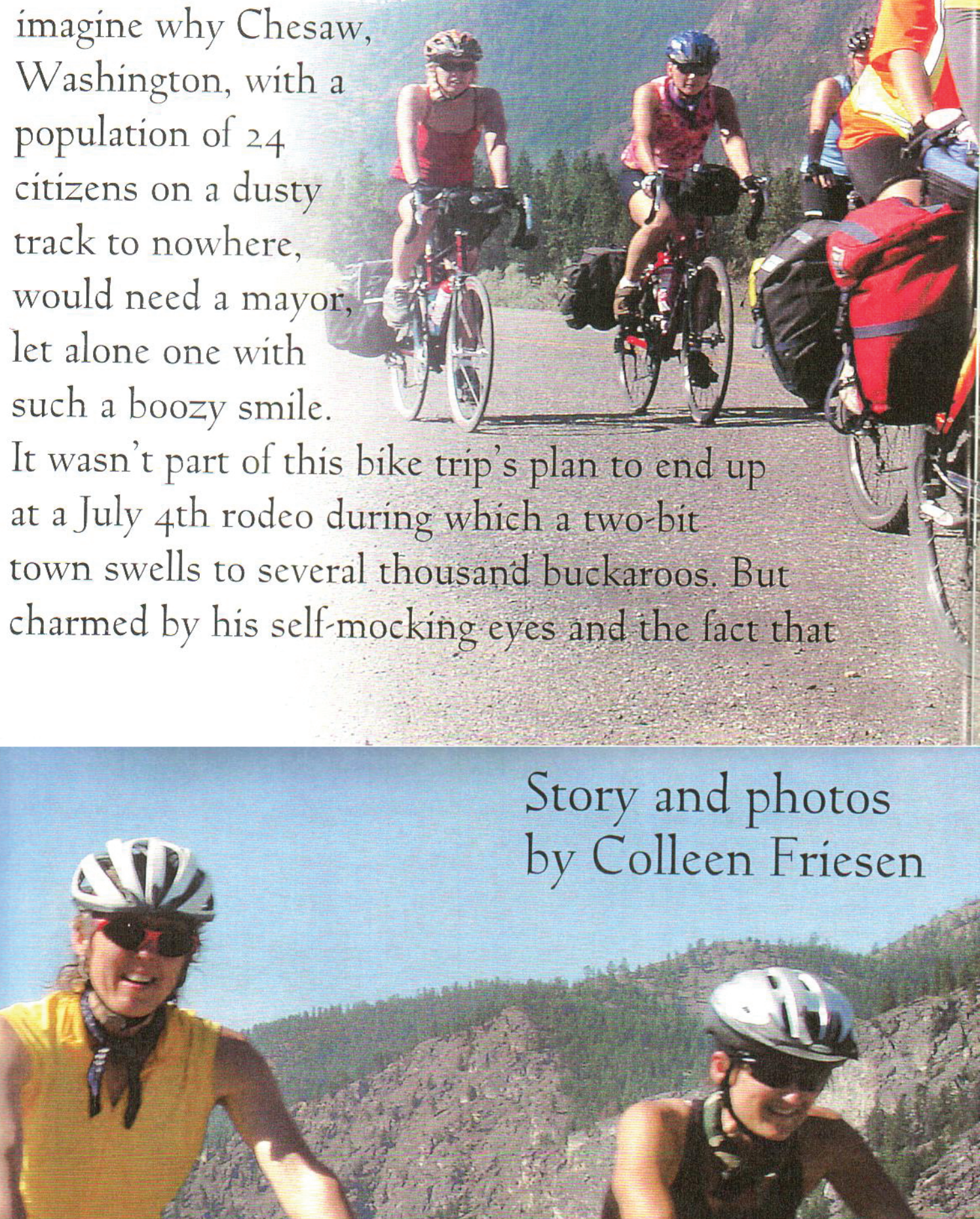
# Twenty Years of Shifting Gears

July 4th, 1997

“Gather round, angels. I want to tell you what it’s like being mayor of this here town.”

I’m finding it hard to imagine why Chesaw, Washington, with a population of 24 citizens on a dusty track to nowhere, would need a mayor, let alone one with such a boozy smile.

It wasn’t part of this bike trip’s plan to end up at a July 4th rodeo during which a two-bit town swells to several thousand buckaroos. But charmed by his self-mocking eyes and the fact that



## Story and photos by Colleen Friesen

his belt buckle is the size of my greasy burger, I drag my barstool closer, like the seven other newly dubbed “angels.”

Mary’s eyes crinkle as she grins. Considering that we’re all in our 30s or early 40s, we’re pretty sure we don’t meet the angel criteria, but we appreciate the generosity in his interpretation. I look around the beer-laden table at my seven cyclist-turned-cowgirl friends. I see Susan using her newly purchased five-dollar straw

### After 20 years, it’s clear what this trip is really about: It’s the physical challenge of sharing the experience of surmounting something together.

cowboy hat to hide her smile. She is a long way from the Vancouver dental practice she manages with her husband. We are smack dab in another one of those strange moments that happen rather frequently on these annual escapades.

Other moments from other trips stand out as well. In fact with 2008 being our 20th-annual nine-day trip, there are actually boxes and bags of recollections. Compared to other memories that can clutter up a life, you’d never call these remembrances baggage.

In July 1989, I had just turned 29 years old and my mother had been dead for six months. I had not yet associated my constantly upset stomach with grief, but I’m not always that quick at making body-mind connections.

I’m good at making others though, and when my new friend Mary suggested a nine-day bike trip, and Kathleen, a friend

I’ve known since I was 11 years old, said she’d love a break from university, I got busy connecting the dots of B&Bs on the Gulf Islands of British Columbia.

I pictured serene rural roads running at sea level around the perimeter of quaint islands. We would stop for picnics on the beach and pluck flowers in meadows to garnish our bikes. We’d float through fields, looking like those women on TV who wear nothing but white while extol-

ling the virtues of pads with wings. We’d bring along a little dress in our panniers for night dinnings. We’d sleep in charming seaside cottages.

Or not.

None of us really knew much about bicycles. We sure as hell didn’t know about shifting gears before the steepest part of the endless jackrabbit hills. Consequently, we spent ridiculous amounts of time pulling our junked chains back onto the gears. There wasn’t a flat piece of road to be found. Nothing seemed to actually be at sea level except the ferry dock.

Did I mention I wasn’t really much of an exerciser? In fact, I was there because something was wrong with my bike. Why else would my butt hurt so much? And by the time we stuffed the requisite rain gear, cold-weather clothes, and trail mix into our brand-new panniers, there wasn’t much room for frocks. Besides, by the end

of each day, our collective strained and pained calves were covered in chain grease, and it was all we could do to pour cold beer down our throats and flop into bed.

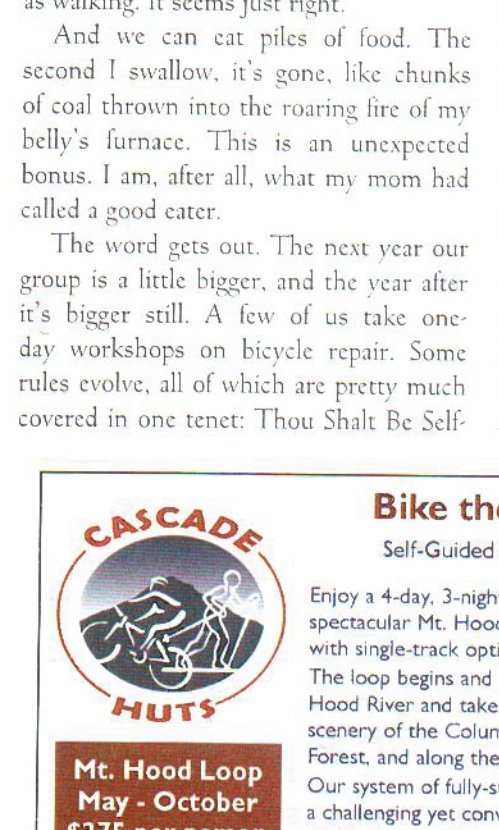
“Canada ‘bleeping’ rules!” The drunken teens directly beneath our second-floor window are showcasing their intelligence by screaming this three-word sentence over and over in celebration of Canada’s July 1st founding.

“Rules at what?” we wonder as we lie sweating in the less-than-quiet inn while mosquitoes make their tiny dentist-drill sounds. The inn has a certain charm, I suppose, if you think it’s cool to have to wear shoes to use the cold shower in the bathroom down the hall. And I guess the little melly-brown cigarette burn holes add a certain barroom chic to the carpet.

In the morning, as we stuff our panniers, it feels as if we’ve just accomplished something. Maybe it’s just that we’re finding this horrible hotel quite Monty Python-esque. And maybe, just maybe, the hills look a little less steep?

Something is shifting, and it isn’t just our gears. By noon, as I’m flying down one of the endless hills, I remember the glory of being 10 years old. It’s hot. At the bottom of the slope, my wheels slow, the cedar shadows part, and I enter a sunny piece of pavement. I smell pine, dust, cedar gravel, and hot sap. If a summer day could be a pie, I am opening that oven door and breathing in a baked slice of heaven. I realize I’m happy.

I’m thinking I might be having an epiphany — not the Biblical kind — but maybe more of a dawning realization. There’s something hugely satisfying in



Roadside assistance. Basic bicycle-maintenance skills came quickly to members of the group.

self-propulsion. Cycling is Goldilocks-ish — it’s not so fast that you miss things like you do in a car and it’s not as boringly slow as walking. It seems just right.

And we can eat piles of food. The second I swallow, it’s gone, like chunks of coal thrown into the roaring fire of my belly’s furnace. This is an unexpected bonus. I am, after all, what my mom had called a good eater.

The word gets out. The next year our group is a little bigger, and the year after it’s bigger still. A few of us take other time involvements on bicycle repair. Some rules evolve, all of which are pretty much covered in one tenet: Thou Shalt Be Self-

Sufficient. This means carry your own pump, spare tube, and tools. Be prepared to handle any situation you encounter yourself. The rest of us will rally round and support you, but no one’s going to bail you out. Is there anything in life that isn’t a metaphor for something else?

I remember our 1991 trip on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia. We’re staying at a rustic motel on Texada Island. We’ve just knocked off 75 kilometers — up some pretty skookum hills — and now we’re sitting on the deck with a few chilled beverages. Judy is a new addition. She is eating Ibuprofen by the handful and is sitting with bags of ice on her screaming

knees. Her newly-purchased navy neoprene knee braces lie limp beside her. Meanwhile, Mary is using every inch of her five-foot body to push her fully-loaded bike up the brown peeling stairs. She makes those whimpering sounds women make in the hopes of getting help. The rest of us continue to sit, leaning against the rough siding, sharing bags of salt and vinegar chips and holding cold beers to our sweaty heads. No one moves, but we cheer her on.

We didn’t think Judy would show up the next year. What we didn’t know was that, after teaching at her high school, she came home and sat on the end of her kitchen butcher block with paint cans hanging from her feet, endlessly doing leg raises. That whole autumn, winter, and spring, Judy worked to get ready. Her long legs were unstoppable pistons. She stood there at the front of the pack and stayed there.

And then, one year, someone had to cancel after everything was already booked. Thinking we’d keep our coats down, we scrambled for a replacement. We were cycling on the coast of Washington that year. Like every year, it was a mixed bag of hellish hills, varied accommodations, broken-down bikes, and freakish weather, all of which we found endlessly amusing.

Monsoon weather? Bring it on! We’d get naked and watch our big green Hellys bags while we watched our sudden clothing store that screamed “Don’t touch,” we’d soon be giggling and misbehaving like we were back in fifth grade. We started calling



Fueling up. The group stops at a local general store and post office to gather some essentials.

ourselves “The Stupids” because, well, we acted like we were, and enjoyed it.

Except for the new woman who joined us that year. She shall remain unnamed. Nothing met her expectations. If it rained, she whined about the water sloshing in her shoes. If it was sunny, she moaned like she was the only one struggling. Her dinner wasn’t spiced right. Her chair was too hard. Life was one big fat negative and she was its victim.

At the end, she said, “I can’t wait ‘til next year!”

Unfortunately, we lost her phone number.

That woman was the inspiration for a new rule that we’ve never changed: There Shall Be No Replacements. Our whiny friend gave us a gift. We were pretty sure we had a good dynamic within our group. She confirmed it. From now on, we’d just suck the extra cost if one of us couldn’t make the trip.

Another change was in order. Our group of eight was rather unwieldy at some of the smaller restaurants, and B&Bs couldn’t always accommodate a large group with a pile of bicycles.

We would camp. We rented and stuffed a 15-passenger van with tents, chaise longues, two folding picnic tables,

shelters, propane tanks, burners, coolers for beer and wine, coolers for staples, and coolers for produce. Stacks of Rubbermaid bins held dishes for eight, potatoes, rice, pasta, pots, pans, sleeping bags, sleeping bags, hammers, burners, pillows, hiking boots, music, and of course, duct tape. We looked like Rubbermaid had sponsored a pennomenal circus. And when Karen led us in her best aerobics-instructor cool-downs and stretches, we managed to gather onlookers at every campsite.

We took turns driving, getting the groceries, ensuring appetizers awaited the group’s arrival at the next camping, whipping up dinner, and finally cleaning up.

It was awful. We hated missing a day’s ride. And instead of a holiday from housework, we had managed to increase the dishes and schlepping that we did back in our regular life by a multiple of eight. It sucked.

Irene is an elementary school teacher. She had joined us halfway through that ill-fated trip with the whiny woman. We kept Irene’s phone number.

She recalls that first camping trip: “I still didn’t really know you all that well, but I remember that first night. We pulled into that KOA near Sedro Woolley, Washington. We had been lost, cycled 110 kilometers, had three flats, and when we finally found our campsite, Mary was cooking chicken fajitas out of the back of the van, trying to stay out of the sheeting rain. We went up our tents and tarps. I was the last to sit down, and when I did, the entire table collapsed. All our food — and all of us — fell into the muck. I was just waiting for someone to start yelling, and

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instead no one stopped laughing. It was after 10 p.m. we were hysterical. It was fantastic.”

We tried it the next year using a team of two to try to make it less daunting. We wanted to make sure we really hated it. We did.

In 1996, we hired and hired Yvonne, a teacher’s aide and part-time caterer. For nine days, she became the camp chef. Yvonne did on a camp stove what others wouldn’t attempt in a TV kitchen. She whipped up huevos rancheros, eggs Benedict, or fruit plates and yogurt for breakfast. We’d ride into camp and there’d be roasted eggplant smothered in goat cheese and roasted pine nuts waiting for us. Dinners of Thai, Greek, or Italian origin, or stayed with garlicky peanut sauce were piled high on our plates. Our picnic lunches were feasts of Moroccan dried olives, local cheeses, curried bean salads, leftovers made into great cold casseroles, and crusty breads. This woman had been sent to us from foodie heaven. Yvonne was a keeper, not just because her cooking was inspired, but also because she was fun. We declared her an official “Stupid” and realized our good fortune at finding each other.

We tried a base-camp tour that year but deemed it a tad boring. It was too daunting conquering the same hill every morning, and in spite of Vi’s nursing mantra of, “When in doubt — overmedicate” and her lovely knock of handing out Ibuprofen from her Costco-sized pill bottle every four hours, we were all in pain. It’s better not to repeat a piece of road you’ve already traveled. It’s much more enjoyable if you don’t know what’s coming. Ignorance is often quite blissful, and it really isn’t necessarily a good thing to know what’s coming at you. We were about to confirm that belief with something other than cycling.

Yvonne started getting strange migraines, random leg pain, and horrible attacks that left her in pain and exhausted by the endless schlepping of heavy bins and coolers. We would talk when she wasn’t around, wondering what to do. Yvonne insisted she was fine. But we were paying her so we could have a holiday but we felt like jerks. She

had long ago morphed from hired helper to friend and clearly this work was killing her. She was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. Finally, at one of our now annual winter get-togethers, we decided that even if Yvonne couldn’t stop herself, we could no longer contribute to the problem.

Deb works at Vancouver’s Children’s Hospital with preemies and other problematic births, handling tough conversations. Deb agreed to speak for us all. We didn’t want to do it en masse, thinking it might feel like an attack. In the end, it didn’t matter how it was done, the result would be the same. Yvonne was devastated, and so were we.

We tried another chef in 2007 but it just wasn’t the same. We missed Yvonne’s creative flair, but not in her imaginative cooking, but in her enthusiasm in scouting campsites and her wild laugh.

So for 2008 — our 20th annual — the bicycle trip will come full circle. We will plan on cycling up Vancouver Island and down the Sunshine Coast in our home province. We’re back to trying B&Bs and motels with kitchens. No support van, no

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cook, and no bins. It’s the Stupid Trip — Unplugged.

After 20 years, it’s clear what this trip

is really about: It’s the physical challenge of sharing the experience of surmounting something together, it’s being accept-

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ed exactly for who you are at this very moment, it’s realizing the strength it takes to be vulnerable and the love that grows out of a shared commitment. And most important, it’s about laughing and laughing — and then laughing some more.

Whether we are struggling up the Cascade Mountains in Washington in 104-degree heat like we did in 2007 or huddling under straw-together tarps to escape the inevitable rainforest downpours, there is always this knowing, this common understanding, that having done these things together, we are better prepared to go back to our lives and survive those moments we must inevitably face on our own.

Collectively we have survived the suicides of family members, divorces, the deaths of many of our parents, and our own encounters with depression. Some of us have parented another’s child. Some have siblings that are addicts. No one’s life is easy, but for nine days every year, it can be on full tilt stupid.