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In tandem

Two men on a journey between the temporal and the divine

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“It is by riding a bicycle that you learn the contours of a country best, since you have to sweat up the hills and coast down them.”

— Ernest Hemingway

“This feels like a thin place,” thought Tony Gehres.



It was late April 2016, and Gehres and Bob McCoy had just finished the hard climb on their bicycles from the Mimbres River crossing to Emory Pass, New Mexico, elevation 8,820 feet. They had started the day in Silver City, 41 miles west. From Silver City down to the bridge over the Mimbres was 24 miles, during which they gave up 200 feet in elevation. From the Mimbres to Emory Pass was an 18-mile climb, gaining 2,700 feet. The final 900 feet were in the last quarter mile.

The switchbacks were so steep that when Gehres looked back to see how McCoy was doing, he was actually looking down at the top of McCoy's head. They were pulling on what felt like their last reserves of strength when they topped the pass.

The quest for thin places is one of the reasons why Tulsans Gehres, 59, and McCoy, 74, decided to ride bicycles from San Diego, California, to St. Augustine, Florida. A thin place, Gehres said, is any place where you can shed all but the final, thin layer between your temporal world and the divine. Cycling is a way to get there— alone in thought, pedaling against that membrane, stretching it thin.

Besides finding the thin places, one of the pleasures of their undertaking has been the satisfaction of executing the adventure. McCoy and Gehres collaborate for months ahead of a trip to plan the route, dates, rest stops, meals, and accommodations, aiming for a fluid balance between carefully arranged details and flexibility for weather contingencies and other unpredictable events. So far, things have gone pretty much as planned.

The duo will complete their coast-to-coast ride in three legs. In April 2016, they rode 774 miles, from San Diego to El Paso. Their first leg was self-contained, meaning they had no support driver to carry supplies or scout ahead for meals and accommodations. On the first day of that ride, with all their supplies loaded into their panniers and on their backs, they climbed from sea level to 5,500 feet to get over the coast range. Although they were in excellent physical condition and filled with the optimism that comes from months of preparation, it was a sobering experience.

At the top of the Emory Pass in New Mexico, they pedaled past a group of 20somethings all decked out in spandex finery, milling around their support vans, guzzling energy drinks, and taking selfies. The group had

been shuttled up to the pass so they could ride their \$10,000 bikes back downhill. As Gehres remembers it, the young people were abashed when these two old geezers on older, heavier bikes pedaled up to the pass that they had ridden up to in a van.

“They wouldn’t even make eye contact with us,” Gehres said with a satisfied chuckle.

The next 35 miles were essentially downhill, out of the high-country pines of the Gila National Forest and down to the Rio Grande crossing in the desert at Caballo. All that McCoy and Gehres had to do was exercise judicious use of the brakes and enjoy the spectacular vistas.

McCoy, a lifelong athlete, was a devoted runner until the stress of it began to wear on his joints. He took up cycling as an alternative and discovered that he really enjoyed the relatively low-impact sport. He and his wife Judy, now deceased, convinced Tony and his wife Shawna to join them in Oklahoma Freewheel, an annual multiday cycling event that charts a different course every year, but usually winds north through Oklahoma from the Texas state line to Kansas.

After several years of participating in Freewheel, the four of them undertook the Underground Railroad Bicycle Route. This route starts in Mobile, Alabama, and follows the old pre-Civil War network of clandestine routes for slaves escaping to the Northern U.S. and Canada.

Over three summers, 2010–2012, the McCoy’s and Gehres’es made their way, in three sections, from Mobile to Niagara Falls. By the time they’d completed the final leg, they were already talking about undertaking a coast-to-coast ride.

The Underground Railroad Bicycle Route and the Southern Tier tour—which McCoy and Gehres are currently following coast-to-coast on their three-leg trip—are part of a network of over 45,000 miles of bicycle routes throughout the U.S. that have been pieced together by the Adventure Cycling Association.

There are three major transcontinental routes that the ACA has mapped. The Northern Tier runs 4,240 miles from Anacortes, Washington, to Bar Harbor, Maine. The TransAmerica Trail runs 4,228 miles from Astoria,

Oregon, to Yorktown, Virginia. The Southern Tier runs 3,053 miles from San Diego, California, to St. Augustine, Florida.

McCoy and Gehres have encountered numerous adventurers along the way. One involved a Siberian-American resting alongside the two-lane road at the Pecos River Bridge in Texas. Out of road-warrior courtesy, McCoy and Gehres stopped to check on him. Their support vehicle driver, Marcia Maxwell (who they enlisted for the second leg of the trip), was parked a little ways past the bridge, waiting.

It happened to be March 8, 2017, International Women’s Day. The man told them about a Siberian tradition of giving bouquets to women on International Women’s Day. Within five minutes of meeting them, he was in the ditch gathering flowers to give to Ms. Maxwell.

When McCoy asked him where he was bound, he told them he was riding his bike from Florida to Oregon. “How much time have you allotted?” McCoy asked. “One to five years,” he replied, which struck Gehres as a remarkably free-spirited answer.

In Brawley, Texas, McCoy and Gehres stopped into a McDonald’s for breakfast, where they struck up a conversation with a group of retirees gathered in a booth for their daily coffee and conversation. When

Gehres told them what he and McCoy were doing, the retirees pointed to another old guy sitting across the room and said: “You boys need to go over and talk to him.”

And so they did. “Well, the reason they sent you to me is because I once ran all the way across the United States.” “You ran across the United States?” McCoy asked, taking the bait. After a carefully calibrated pause, the man added, “Backwards.” He enjoyed their astonished silence for a few moments.

“Well, let me explain. See, I was a Sergeant Major in the Army, and when I retired, I wanted to do something for veterans, so I decided to run across the United States, for the publicity, to raise awareness for veterans’ issues. So, I rigged up this camper, see, and I’d drive it up the road a good ways, park it, and then run back to the last place I’d parked, and then walk back to the camper and move it on down the line and do it again. All the way across the country. I say backwards. So to speak.”

The second leg of their ride, from El Paso to the Mississippi River crossing, north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, took three weeks and covered 1,080 miles. They reached the river on March 22, 2017.

Now, back in Tulsa, McCoy and Gehres are arranging their final 850-mile leg of the journey, from the Mississippi River to St. Augustine, Florida. Because they will be riding along the Gulf Coast, they are planning for late fall, after hurricane season. The biggest obstacles they anticipate for the densely populated low-country route are bridges and heavy traffic. Having to fight traffic for the right-of-way on long, narrow bayou bridges is something Gehres dreads. McCoy is more blasé about the bridges, though he doesn’t look forward to the traffic.

“You just plan around what believe you are capable of,” McCoy said.

Though in his mid 70s, McCoy has remarkably few age-related health issues. Some achy joints, an irregular heartbeat.

“I want to be just like Bob when I grow up,” Gehres said.

McCoy also commented that his window of opportunity is closing a little every year—which sounds like another way of saying that sometimes you find that thin place between the temporal and the divine, and sometimes it finds you.