THE HILL SLUG CHRONICLES
A Year of Bicycling Misadventures
By Laura Lynch
For Sean and Dale,
who wanted me to keep them informed.
In late March 2007, Sean and Dale came from California to stay with us for a few days. I first met them through Jack and his academic eighteenth-century literature crowd. While I can usually hold my own in Jack’s literary circles, Dale and I connected when she was a visiting scholar at Princeton for a summer. She found out that, like herself and Sean, I’m an avid road cyclist, so I pulled out a map and showed her all the good roads. I later gave her a driving tour, and when she and Sean found themselves on the east coast again, I showed them both some more of the best cycling roads central New Jersey has to offer. Since then we’ve been planning to ride together, which has happened once, for two days outside of Las Vegas.

Dale soon found herself swamped by far too many adjunct teaching obligations, and Sean was recovering from a few injuries that had nothing to do with a bicycle. With a new biking season about to begin in earnest, Dale ordered me to tell her everything that happened to me out on the road.

The stories began as a series of short emails, first to Dale and Sean, and then to an ever-expanding group of cycling buddies who were the cast of my adventures. Although I’ve edited out most of the obvious email evidence, a few references to Sean, Dale, the eighteenth-century literature crowd, and California remain.

I owe the creation of the Hill Slug Chronicles to Sean and Dale, and to the people I led, or followed, through the scenic country roads of New Jersey: Cheryl McDonald (for getting me into this whole biking thing in the first place); Mike Berman (for encouraging me to go far and sticking with me when I did); Chris Cook (for teaching me how to fall on ice and for telling me where the real hills are); John Smolenyak (for the ingenious gearing idea); Mike Moorman (for loyally following me wherever I stupidly chose to go); Irene Hilem and Henry Klos (for their loyalty and sense of humor); Barb Clancey (for introducing me to the term “hill slug”); Tom Hammell (for writing his book, taking those pictures, and leading us all over); John Danek (for being patient in the woods and the hills, and for his one-liners); Joe McBride (for his unparalleled sarcasm); and to everyone else in the Princeton Freewheelers who knows me as Our Lady of Perpetual Headwinds. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Dustin Farnum, who makes planning memorable routes possible through njbikemap.com.

Finally, I owe Jack a huge apology because he patiently and calmly puts up with my bicycling addiction.
Allamuchy Hacklebarney Rockaway Piscataway
Ho-Ho-Kus Secaucus Lower Squankum Fairplay
Wanamassa Sucasunna Manumuskin Plumsoc
Bivalve Buckshutem Turkey Foot Mackinapa
Jugtown Feeletown Nummystown Rahway

Wickatunk Manunkachunk Mantua Mizpah
Manasquan Raritan Matawan Totowa
Whippany Parsippany Pennypot Hackensack
Batsto Nesco Metedeconk Peapack
Lock Harbor Egg Harbor Swinesburg Caviar

Cheesequake Boyscout Lake Moonachie Tenafly
Netcong Watchung Pluckemin Mount Misery
Bardonia Ironia Colonia Weehawken
Manahawkin Mantoloking Mahalala Pennsauken
Ducktown Ironbound Freelinghuysen Lodi

Hardscrabble Double Trouble Picatinny Montague
Nuckshaponda Kanagong Espanong Ocean View
Navesink Shabakunk Ong’s Hat Jumbo
Wharton Magawanawick Jubo Ringoes
Matchaponix Delawana Waywayanda Timbuktu

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Approximate lyrics to Garden State Stomp, by Dave Van Ronk, on “Going Back to Brooklyn”
“Snow bike!” shouts the email from Chris Cook. I’m still covered in bruises from the last time we went out. Our mountain biking season started early, back in October, when we canceled our traditional Halloween ride because of high winds and wound up in Clayton Park instead. I didn’t fall that day, and it was the only day that I didn’t. Since then there’s been ice on the ground nearly every time we’ve gone out.

Mercer County Park is a great place to get thrown around. If you’re not skidding over frozen tire tracks in the mud, you’re hopping logs, dodging branches, sloshing through puddles, or slamming into saplings around 90-degree turns.

This is my second mountain biking season and I’m almost certain that I’m actually getting worse at it. Chris and the two Johns don’t bother to ride behind me and give me hints anymore. Now they get so far ahead of me that I can’t even see how they’ve cleared the logs and ice puddles. I take my best guess and wind up on the ground. If the little stuffed Grover Muppet I have on my handlebars were real, he’d tell me to give up and go back to the gym.

Still, though, Mercer County Park in the snow, with the sun shining through the trees and the deer looking us over as we pass, is worth the contusions. They say there’s an albino deer in here. I hope to see it someday. When he sees a herd, Chris likes to call out, “Hello, ladies!”

Sometimes in the park we come upon some weird stuff. The old bike frame is a landmark, but we once found a set of sub-woofer speakers, a yellow tow truck light, and a freshly painted, red fire hydrant on a trail near an access road. There’s also a shrine of sorts, church-like, with logs for pews and rows of stuffed animals facing an altar.
John Danek has a new bike, a Raleigh with 29-inch wheels. He looks like a little kid on a too-big frame, but he can make that machine go over everything. Everything but the Hall of Mirrors, the serpentine “tight stuff” his handlebars are too wide to get through. This is my favorite section, even though I spend half my time with one foot off the pedals, trying to stay upright through the 90-degree turns among the young trees.

By February I’m no longer having fun. There’s snow on top of ice on top of snow on top of frozen mud. I can’t get my feet into the toe cages in time to get enough momentum to get up a hill, and when I slide my feet out, my worn-out and treadless sneakers are no help. I can’t even walk up some of the icy hills. Someone has to pull me. When it comes to riding downhill, I take to dismounting, laying the bike on the ice in front of me, and sliding down the hill on my rump. I figure I’ll wind up this way anyhow, so why not be comfortable?

Once Chris catches me in the act of preparing to sled. “Just ride it! It’s easier!” I hesitate at the top, then go for it. Much to my surprise, I remain upright. I’m not so lucky the next time I try. My front wheel wedges in the snow and I hurl forward. I’m halfway to disentangling myself when a woman walking her two dogs arrives behind me. Chris has to haul me out of the ditch; I lend a hand to the woman. The dogs have no problem.
We take a trip to Philadelphia’s Pennypack Park. It, too, is coated in ice. The guys zoom down a hill that I’m too chicken to try. It’s a mixture of ice and hard dirt. I walk with Grover by my left side, looking for a good spot to climb back on. My feet slide out from under me and my left shoulder snaps backwards. I land on my butt and my dignity. A stranger on the bike path below me asks if I’m okay. I roll my shoulder in its socket till I feel something pop. “Yeah,” I tell him. I won’t be lifting weights with this shoulder for a while. The guys are around the corner. They didn’t see me fall.

We go under a bridge that feels like a two-story tunnel. The Johns whoop into the echo chamber. Behind them, I yelp. Behind me, Chris blows his nose.

By March, even the guys have had enough. We know it’s our last ride; we can feel spring coming on. The snow is starting to melt. I push through the last stretch, a long straightaway that feels like wet sand, reminding myself that this is good training. I’m black and blue from the knees down and my shoulder will take six months to really heal, but screw that, I’m going to be better on the hills this year.
The Thing of Beauty
(painted winter 2007; written January 7, 2008)

I notice that Kermit, my prize road bike, is heavily scratched along the right seat stay, probably from all the times he fell over when I’d leaned him against something unsteady. I root through a box of miscellaneous bike stuff and dig out the touch-up paint. It’s as hard as a rock.

I’ll have to call Waterford to get some more. I poke around their web pages for a phone number, taking a detour on their paint style page. Kermit’s British Racing Green never really appealed to me. Looking at all these colors, I begin to wonder if, since Kermit is now 10 years old, I should send him back to Wisconsin for a new paint job.

It doesn’t take much to convince me. By the time I’m off the phone, I’ve chosen a custom design called “Colorphoria,” a multi-color, psychedelic, comet-tail metallic piece of eye candy. There goes my Christmas money plus a whole lot more.

I bring Kermit to Ross’s bike shop for him to dismantle and mail, but I won’t even tell Ross what color I’ve chosen. I won’t tell anyone who rides with me. I tell only four people: Jack (of course), Janell (who helped talk me into it by telling me that it fits my artsy side), and Dale and Sean, who live in California. Every Freewheeler who knows what I’m doing with Kermit is trying to worm the truth out of me, but I won’t tell. Not even Cheryl. Not even Bob and Norene.
Blurry picture of what Kermit Used to Look Like, Even Before the Carbon Cranks, c. 2002
Kermit’s Colorphoria Drying at the Waterford Factory, February 2007; photo by Jon Huser
I Had Another One of Those Biking Dreams
(sent March 3, 2007)

I grease his chain, change his computer batteries, spin his wheels, and put a winter-dressed Kermit puppet on the saddle bag.

I leave the house early. Today is the first good riding day we’ve had since the beginning of January, and I’m leading. I get to the parking lot with plenty of time, and there are already a dozen people there, raring to go. There are my regulars, there are people I haven’t ridden with in years, people I’ve never seen, and a racer out to chill before the hammerhead madness kicks in.

I get everything else ready before I pull Kermit out of the car. Oohs and aahs and wows and things ensue. I notice Kermit is in a high gear, so I get on to pedal around the lot.

Clipi-png in with my right leg, I reach for the left and catch the edge of the pedal. OK, it’s been a month; I’m rusty. I reach again and catch my bike pump instead. After fixing that, I get back on again. This time my foot catches nothing but air. The left pedal is dangling.

“Anybody got a wrench?”

Chris, one of my regulars, fetches one from his truck, but the bolt won’t budge.

“You guys go on ahead. I have another bike at home. There’s a ride leaving from the high school at 10:30. I’ll catch that.” I hand the sign-in sheet to Cheryl, one of my other regulars. She suggests that I go home and get my other bike and she and the crew will wait for me at the rest stop. I figure that would be impossible; it would take at least 20 minutes to go home and come back.

Then I hear, “We’ll wait.” “Yeah, we’ll wait here.” A small crowd has gathered to wait for me to come back with Gonzo.

Cheryl takes the people who have to be somewhere in the afternoon, and I take off, setting land speed records to get home and make the switch.

I dream frequently about biking. Something always goes wrong. Once my wheels were square. Another time the pedals refused to move. I’ve had to bike up an endless flight of stairs, or through a house. My legs won’t spin fast enough. I can never catch the group. Sometimes I wake up convinced that the roads in my dream are real, and it takes looking at a map to convince myself that no such place exists. My most recent dream had me on Kermit, but the handlebars were at eyeball level. Why am I not waking up out of this one? Surely, dangling pedals fit right into what passes for humor in my subconscious.

It takes me ten minutes to drive home. In under five minutes I take Kermit’s wheels off, make room for him in the trunk, put him in gently (so as to not scratch the new paint), lay
the wheels down on top of a blanket on top of the bike, run inside, explain what’s going on to Jack, pump up Gonzo’s tires, and take off again. Ten minutes later I’m back at the Hopewell YMCA parking lot.

Five people are waiting patiently. I pull a $20 bill out of my wallet, wave it in the air, and say, “I’m buying all of you coffee, no arguments.” I can’t thank them enough for waiting.

We never do catch up with the other half of my crew, not that it would have been possible. But we have a great time. Three of us—Chris, John, and I—are survivors of this winter’s mountain biking carnage, so we regale the rest with tales of encounters with tree branches, mud, ice, stuck gears, and all sorts of other things that make the pain seem so glamorous now that the bruises and pulls and funny twinges are healing.

Everyone is so jazzed to be back on the road that when I use the pull-the-Band-Aid-off-all-at-once technique by sending them up Goat Hill, nobody complains.

We stop in Lambertville at Rojo’s, where they roast their own coffee beans. As we fill our blood with caffeine, Henry, John, and Chris do their best to convince me that Kermit’s crank is toast. Something snapped inside, they tell me. I know I’m a bit heavy and I put a lot of torque on the pedals as I grind up hills, but geez! This is an expensive, carbon-fiber crank, and it’s only three years old!

By the time we get back to the parking lot, it is well after 1 pm, so Chris, John, and I go to Vito’s, the pizza joint in the center of Pennington. The Freewheelers keep these guys in business. We should have our own table by now. After lunch, Chris and I go over to see Ross. I think Chris wants to witness shredded metal falling out of my bottom bracket. I’m holding out hope that, in his haste to get the bike together and back to me, Ross missed a turn or two with the wrench.

Ross is a really good mechanic, and when he sees me, he must see dollar signs. I carry Kermit in, wheel-less, and hold him up for Ross to see. It only takes him a second to notice the two pedals dangling together, and his jaw drops.

Boy, does he feel bad about this. He and Chuck, his number-one understudy, take the whole crank apart, peer at it, and make sure that absolutely nothing is wrong. Chris looks on as they assure him that these top-of-the-line carbon cranks don’t just go snap. Ross says it’s his fault, that he didn’t line up the spline fully. It’s done by feel, and it’s easy to get wrong, but he is apologetic nonetheless. I tell him that I’d rather have him make a mistake than have an expensive bike part crumble.

I tell him about my biking dreams, too. “Now it happened for real,” he says. You’ll never dream it again.”
We put the wheels on, and I take Kermit out behind the shop to put him through his paces. I switch into the highest gear and push as hard as I can to get the bike moving. Everything holds.

Kermit and I are good to go for tomorrow.

The moral of this story: Always have a spare bike. Maybe keep it in the trunk. And pay for your friends’ drinks when they wait half an hour for you in a parking lot.
Random Answers to Questions from Dale
(sent April 22, 2007)

It’s mostly in my head, but if it’s windy and I’m pulling a group, I might sing out loud, when nobody can hear me. A few weeks ago, I recited “Garden State Stomp” out loud, very loud, because John likes the song (I copied the CD for him). Even today, he was growling some of the words.

There’s a stretch of about seven miles on the way home from the Cranbury rides that people call the “macho mile.” Everyone knows where they’re going, and they just take off. The first time I went on that ride, I was following Tom, the leader, clueless about where I was. He turned left and I followed him. He said, “Don’t follow me; I’m going home.” So I had to hook onto a stranger’s wheel and try to keep up with him till we got home. For a long time, I knew him as “Scott with the blue tires.”

Yesterday was about 40 miles; the Cranbury rides are usually 40-50. We do pace lines in the wind and on long stretches. We’re unruly and all over the place on the country roads. On my hill rides, it’s every Hill Slug for himself going up and flying down. Bathrooms are a must at rest stops, but once in a while we have to find a port-a-pot somewhere else. I’m still learning how to peel open an energy bar without losing control of the wheel. Teeth are often involved. Mostly I wait till we stop at a corner. I tend not to eat at all between the start and the rest stop; and since I always feel so fat and don’t eat enough at the rest stop, I might need to dig into my pocket for the rest of what I didn’t eat before. Kinda dumb.

Today I had jellybeans in my pocket and I broke my no-eating rule. It seems to have helped.

Cheryl is nuts. She rode 49 hilly miles yesterday, popped some Aleve, took a nap, got up this morning, popped some more Aleve, met me at a corner a few miles from my house, and we rode up to my ride together. She was in front on the hills the whole time, rode back home with me, and is talking about going out again tomorrow evening. I like to tell people that I can only ride with her when she’s tired. She’s the one who got me into this club, so I owe her a lot. The Freewheelers make up a huge part of my social life.
Music, Map Geekery, and Nicknames  
(January 30, 2008)

Every new year means a new collection of music to listen to in the car on the way to and from a ride. Each mix is at least an hour and a half long. By mid-spring I know some of the songs well enough for them to get me up a big hill or through a long pull. By mid-summer I have most of the music mostly memorized, just in time for my first century, where I’ll need the whole soundtrack.

Some of the tunes are rock, a few are folk, and a lot are techno (which is crap unless you happen to be moving). All have a driving beat that can get me through the tough stuff.

A lot of bikers listen to music before a ride. Maybe I’m unusual in making a mix every year, but it works. It’s better than listening to myself panting up a hill. Sometimes the right song hits the right road at the right time and I just take off. A handful of roads now have their own soundtrack. I can’t go through Mercer County Park from the west without hearing Santana’s “Migra.” The Macho Mile needs Afro-Celt Sound System’s “Whirly 3,” or Trey Anastasio’s “Last Tube” or “Push on Til the Day.”

I’m also a map geek. Three county maps take up two walls of our second-floor hallway. A third map, pasted together from Dustin Farnum’s New Jersey Bikemap, fills the hallway door. Every road I’ve ridden gets highlighted. Every one I haven’t stares back at me as I stand in front of them brushing my teeth or combing my hair at night. I look at silly road names, ponder routes, and try to remember what the bad hills were like.

During the summer I fall asleep memorizing the next day’s route. During the winter I devise unrealistic plans to conquer unknown territory. This year I want to get north of Round Valley. Chris says, “The real hills start north of Route 78.” Now that I have mountain bike gearing, I aim to find out what he means.

When I first started leading rides, I was too inexperienced to put a cold temperature cut-off in the ride book. As a result, I found myself with two other riders on a ridiculously cold day in October. The temperature was something like 26 degrees with a steady 15-mph wind. Preben, Mark, and I got eight miles into the ride before realizing that we were being idiots. The quickest way home was straight into the wind, but that’s what we did.

The following weekend, as I arrived at the parking lot to lead a ride, I was greeted by Mark with, “It’s Our Lady of Perpetual Headwinds!” I liked that so much that I made sure the nickname stuck. As time went on and I led enough rides to earn a ride leader jersey with my name on it, I chose “OLPH” instead. Now I get blamed for every headwind we encounter. I don’t mind. I’m better in the wind than I am on hills.

Which is how “Hill Slug” came about. Barb was the first one I heard use it, but not on me. Nevertheless, I decided that I needed those words on a jersey. Fortunately, Hill Slug jerseys are out there, so I got one, and a pair of socks to match. I’m strong, but I’m built like a well-padded tank with boobs. I can’t zoom up hills, and I no longer even try.
Instead, I’ve been cultivating a following of people who were out for long, hilly, scenic rides with an emphasis not on speed but on good views, long distances, and (as Mike M. put it) on “quality rest stops.” That translates to good coffee, big muffins, good seats, friendly owners, and clean bathrooms.
Some Good Names and a Bit of History  
(sent April 22, 2007)

The weather is perfect again: high 60s, clear sky, little wind, no humidity.

I choose a route based on one I put together last year. I was looking at a map and found some great road names all near each other. I decided I had to ride them all.

This year, there are two bridges out at key points along my usual path. They’re supposed to be open soon, but for now the two ways I go home after a long trek through the hills have been cut off. It also means going around on the way out. Our rides are tougher this year because of it. The Stony Brook bridges are on roads that lead to the gentle way up and back from the Sourlands. With the detours sending us up steep hills right away, everything else seems easy.

Stony Brook Road is one of the prettiest routes up the Sourland Mountain in any season. To the left is the river, which gets farther away as the road climbs out of a ravine. It crosses Route 518 and continues more steeply uphill on the other side. There’s a spot where I know everyone will stop talking. The steepness is made easier by the river and wildflowers that grow on a berm on the opposite side. At the top the trees close in. Going left or right takes us across the ridge. Straight ahead the road continues, but it’s dirt and few people will put up with going that way. But that’s all academic until the bridge at the bottom is open again. Nobody wants to ride on 518.

The Sourland Mountain stretches from the Delaware River, at Lambertville, northeast to East Amwell. It’s an outlier. There aren’t any other real mountains nearby. The region is the beginning of New Jersey’s Piedmont area. I live just south of it, at the border of the Piedmont and the Inner Coastal Plain.

To go anywhere north of Pennington (the next real town southwest of Princeton, next to Hopewell), you have to go over the Sourland Mountain.

So, up we go. Remember Greenwood, that hill in Hopewell I drove you over? The one with the cemetery one third of the way up? Well, that’s where we’re headed today. I tell everyone, “We’re going up and over all at once.” The up part takes a while, but the over is fun, with a great view of everything on the way down.

North of the Sourlands, the terrain is, well, wrinkly. It’s all rollers for miles till the real hills kick in. We were on the wrinkles today. We went north on VanLieuxs Road (not much of a cool name, but it’s very rural) to Larsen to Manners. I’ve taken to calling the road “Bad Manners,” because it has an annoying uphill no matter which way you approach it.

We cross Amwell Road and turn onto Barley Sheaf. Now we’re getting into some good names. Barley Sheaf intersects with Route 202, which might as well be a raging river,
but you can ride on it for a few yards and turn onto Dory Dilts. Poor gal. Who wants to go around with a name like that? Her street is a good one, though. Still mostly rural.

From there we turn onto Old York. Now, there are three Old York roads in central NJ. They all stretch for miles, but they don’t connect. Legend (a.k.a. Chris Cook, who knows all this stuff) has it that they all led to New York City. If they had connected in the past, then those who made the path had no idea how to get to New York.

We cross over the South Branch of the Raritan River. Princeton’s Stony Brook also feeds the Raritan.

Anyway, we turn off of that onto Summer and stop at a Wawa (a name that always elicits chuckles from those who didn’t grow up near Wawa, Pennsylvania, where the chain of convenience stores originated). Summer intersects with 202, but we don’t go across (where we could have gone onto Lazy Brook, but that’s another ride).

We backtrack (me full of iced coffee) and then make a right onto Higginsville, crossing back over the South Branch again. Chris points out all the debris hung up in the trees from last week’s Nor’easter. He figures out that the bridge must’ve been closed too, judging from the height of the mess in the branches. I should point out that we were probably 20 feet above the water, and the mess was maybe five feet below that.

We turn onto Three Bridges Road. I’m not sure which three bridges the name refers to, but the Raritan is right there. The whole area is known as Three Bridges, and it all looks so rural and peaceful.

Then we turn onto a great road name: Hockenbury, where I am introduced to a hill I’ve never met before. This is the one road on today’s route that I haven’t yet been on, but it means I get to highlight another road on the wall maps.

At the end of the road, some people are convinced we’ve already been here today. I guess if you’ve see one rural church, you’ve seen ’em all. I have to pull out my map to show them that we really do want to turn right, and that the other church is something like two miles to the west.

The road I am looking to turn onto is called Rainbow Hill.

Last year, when four of us were up this way for the first time, I said I wanted to go on Rainbow Hill because I liked the name. As we pedaled along towards it, I said I envisioned Rainbow Hill to be a children’s TV show, with little Owsley Stanley teddy bears doing a Teletubbies impersonation. So we turned onto Rainbow Hill to find ourselves going down a slope, with a clear view of hills in front of us and farms on either side. At the bottom, we turned into a stretch with tall trees and a high bridge over a stream. A couple of guys were fishing off of the bridge. Idyllic. Then, bang! We were looking at an asphalt wall of a hill. Whoops. “Sorry, guys!” I shouted. We huffed ourselves over it and down a steep drop at the other end.
“OK,” I said. “I did the hill. Where’s my fucking rainbow?”

Chris said, “It’s called ‘Rainbow Hill’ because the hill looks like a rainbow!” I felt so stupid.

Well, this year I’m prepared, and warn everyone who hasn’t been here before that we have a short, sharp shock coming. They’re game, and everyone makes it up and over just fine.

But there is still the matter of getting back over the Sourlands. I pick Lindbergh. At the top somewhere (nobody seems to know where exactly) is the old Charles Lindbergh estate. The kidnapped baby’s body is supposed to have been found in the woods up near the top somewhere, too. We go most of the way up but cut off on Ridge, which runs across the top of the mountain for a mile or so. The trees are tall there, and they arch over the road in a Gothic sort of way. So I call the ridge roads “The Cathedral.”

“Climbing Lindbergh”  photo by Tom Hammell. This mailbox marks where the hill goes from merely annoying to truly nasty.
After that, we plummet down Greenwood again, going over the 25-mph speed limit by the railroad bridge into Hopewell. It’s back home the same old way from there, past the golf course and the huge organic co-op, into Pennington.

Three of us ride home from there. I’m aiming to get 62 miles in, but I only get to 56. That will have to do. Hours later my legs still feel a bit zingy.

So that’s the report for today. We’re going to put Burnaby in his harness and sit on the deck out back for a while.

Next Saturday is the Freewheelers’ Spring Fling. Due to an editorial foul-up, I’m listed to lead my usual Pennington ride at 8:30 a.m., and one of the all-paces rides from the Fling at 1 p.m. My peeps want to go at 8:30, so we’re doing that. At least we’ll be able to shower before the party starts.
The First Century of the Season  
(sent May 20, 2007)

The weather was iffy yesterday, so we did the century today. I’m currently eating everything in sight. It’s my birthday, and Jack got me chocolate malt balls, so it’s working out quite well.

There were four of us: Larry, Mark, and Neil, training for the “Longest Day” ride across NJ lengthwise (206 miles) and me, and I’m not training for anything more than a century.

We rode a big triangle, starting out in Cranbury (Exit 8A, for those of you keeping score at home), which is northeast of Princeton. We went southwest to Bordentown, which is on the Delaware River, then across the state to Sea Girt (on the Atlantic Ocean), then back to Cranbury.

*The Edge of Bordentown, looking over Crosswicks Creek, past I-295 to the Delaware River and PA*
The wind was out of the east. We had nasty crosswinds on the way to Bordentown (but not as bad as last year, when it was a steady 20 mph with 35-mph gusts), then got pushed across the state for 48 miles. Unfortunately, we had 40 miles of headwinds on the way home, as the winds were shifting to the northeast.

Nothing two cups of coffee (at 20 and 83 miles) can’t solve.

The guys were working on me to join them on the Longest Day this year. Nothing doing. I’m still figuring out how to get my head around a century. I want it to be as easy-peasy as a metric. I still hit that 70-mile wall, which today took about 10 miles to get over. I’ve only done eight centuries in my life; that’s not enough to even contemplate doubling the distance. Any hints, Sean? (Three cups of coffee?)

**Postscript:** We pedaled through the heart of Ong’s Hat. One more for the lyric list.
Riding with a Scratched Cornea  
(injured June 3, 2007; written January 6, 2008)

On a Sunday afternoon, while ridding the house of pollen and using cleanser, I open a 21-year-old scratch in the cornea of my right eye. The eye doctors see me every day until it heals. They say I have “recurrent corneal abrasion,” that my allergy-swollen eyelids are pulling at my cornea at night, and that this will happen again. For a week I’m light-sensitive and can’t see out of my right eye. I’m given antibiotics, which aren’t quite out of my system when I attempt a hilly ride just across the Delaware in Pennsylvania with Blake, Mike B. the New Guy, and Cheryl.

The antibiotic is making me tired as I try to follow the double white line on the side of the road. I can’t keep up with Blake as he leads us through the hills of Pennsylvania. I’m not even hungry at the Carversville Deli on Fleecydale Road. I fall over trying to clip out on a gravel driveway. I keep myself between the ground and my bike. A pretty miserable ride, but at least the frame isn’t scratched.
The Windmill, Then and Now
(ridden June 16, 2007; written February 3, 2008)

John is leading a ride from Frenchtown to the Volendam windmill, a replica of a working Dutch windmill. Built in 1965 by a landowner with a windmill fascination, it sits on top of a hill in western Hunterdon County, functioning as a grist mill, until recently.

I’ve been to see it twice before, so I know what I’m in for. When I arrive in Frenchtown, I park behind the café, where I’ve parked every time before. I don’t see anyone else. I wonder if John decided to cancel.

Then I see him pull into the lot. I wave, but he doesn’t see me. He turns around and drives away. I try to run after him but it doesn’t work. I call his cell phone but get voicemail in a voice that isn’t his. Rats. Driving out of the parking lot, I try to figure out if I can pull together a bike ride for later this morning. I’m about 20 minutes south of Frenchtown when my phone rings. I pull to the side of the road to answer. It’s Jane. She and John are in Frenchtown wondering where I am.

There are two parking lots at the café: one in front, one in back. They’re in front. Jane tells me to turn around, so I do. When I get back, I’m ready in two minutes, apologetic, and grateful.

In addition to John and Jane, there is a guy I’ve never met who looks strong. I know I’ll spend the entire ride well behind these people. And I do. I try not to let it get to me. Once they’re out of sight on the hills, I realize that I’m more relaxed: I’m too far behind even to try to catch up.

Out here I can forget what century I’m in. We can go for miles without seeing a car. Tall trees arch over narrow roads. Open farm fields stretch out of sight. In the distance is a mysterious gap in the trees, as if a road or river made two parallel cuts, but there is no road, and there is no river. We never get close enough to figure it out.

Trees close in again as we make the final ascent to the windmill. I’m last, but I’m not the most out of breath. I dismount and look to the left. The windmill is in tatters. One arm is bent, two others half missing.
On the way home we stop in Pittstown at an Italian deli. Next door is a building with curious instructions painted on one side: “Do not enter. This is not an exit.” As we eat at a picnic table next to the parking lot, I check my vision. It’s not quite back to normal in my right eye.

As we climb towards Sky Manor airport, the guy I don’t know slows to match my crawl. “I feel sorry for you, all by yourself back here,” he says.

“It’s okay, really. I don’t need sympathy. Go on, go as fast as you want.” In his attempt to be kind, he’s pissed me off and made me feel worse.

The last road into Frenchtown is the most beautiful: engulfed by trees, a steep hill rises on the left and creek runs in a ravine to the right. Blacktop turns to dirt and stones, so I have to look down to avoid a blowout. Again I fall behind, this time because my slightly blurry right eye makes focusing on the rocks through dark lenses a difficult task. Over a particularly stony patch I even have to walk.
In the parking lot I thank everyone for waiting for me all day long. When I get home I look on the map for the creek. Van Ronk would’ve loved this one: Nishisakawick.

A few days later, John thanks us for going along on his ride.

John writes that, as I approached the windmill, I “came in at a good time.” He’d been checking time differences as we arrived. “Not to judge but to praise,” he adds. So, of course, I take offense, not at him, but at my body in general.

I write back, “I’m in a really bad headspace about hills right now. After riding with Blake (and being way behind), then you last weekend (ditto), and then going on Cheryl’s ride last night (more of same), I’m ready to stop riding with fast hill climbers altogether. Yeah, going with you guys probably makes me faster in the long run, but when is ‘good enough’ good enough? I’m tired of being the one everyone is relieved to see because I’m slower; I’m tired of being the one everyone has to wait for. And knowing you were timing me, even with the best intentions, doesn’t help. :(

In the next email, John sends a picture of the windmill as it was in 2005.
I write back, “Keep me in the loop with your exploratory rides. If I ever get my head out of my ass, I’ll tag along.”
Some Memories of Early Summer, in No Particular Order
(written January 8 and 17, 2007)

There’s a new Freewheeler in the neighborhood. Mike B. has joined our crew. He’s much faster on the hills than I am, but he holds back and rides with me if I’m the only one he knows. He moved here from north Jersey because he heard that the biking is so good down here. He’s in search of two things: 1) long bike rides and 2) a girlfriend who likes long bike rides.

I take a group to Sergeantsville on Mother’s Day. I really don’t feel like climbing the big hill up to Sandy Ridge, so I take a detour I haven’t been on in years. It turns out to be worse than what I’m trying to avoid. All morning long, Cheryl and I have been chanting, “Waah waah WAAH waah waaah!” whenever one of us starts to complain. We’ve made it today’s mantra. At the Sergeantsville General Store, Jane stretches out in her chair in the sun. She calls home and asks her son to put some chicken in the oven; she’s too comfortable here to hurry home. She closes her eyes and grins.

We go to Sandy Hook from Monmouth Battlefield on a cloudy day. We skip the beach and ride around the old houses at Fort Monmouth instead. The prickly pear cacti are blooming. Tom zooms ahead of us to get pictures as we pass. We stop near Little Silver for pizza. Cheryl and I find coffee and muffins across the street instead. She lends me a quarter so I can buy an oversized rubber ball for fifty cents for Burnaby. It’s big for a cat, but he plays with anything. Outside of the pizza parlor is a pale blue cruiser, the essence of summer riding. I make sure Tom gets a picture.
Tom leads us on a ride from Bordentown to Fort Dix and back. The forecast is for thunderstorms, and when I get to Bordentown, everyone’s there but Tom. He arrives in his street clothes, without his bike, having figured we’d be rained out. We tell him to go home and get changed. We’ll wait. Chris takes us on a short, historic tour of Bordentown while Tom hurries home. When he gets back, we head south. On New Lisbon Road, I call out, “Flashbacks! Doom ahead!” while graduate school memories threaten as we pedal in the direction of the Rutgers University Pinelands Field Station. Overhead a thundercloud announces itself. Tom calls out, “Right turn,” and we avoid the rain and the memories both. Three more times we dodge storm cells and make it back to the parking lot before the rain sets in.

Cheryl’s Tuesday night rides are getting faster, hillier, and more difficult. I’m more and more nervous at the start of each successive ride. Theresa, Dyane, and I cower in the back. If we’re lucky, at least two of us will show up. If we’re lucky, the fast people will jump off the front early and leave us and Cheryl in peace. By the end of June I decide I’m not coming back.

Cheryl, Mike B., and I are getting into the habit of carpooling to rides. Mike has figured out how to stuff three bikes and three people into his Ford Escape. When I lead from
Pennington or we’re heading to Mercer County Park, we meet at a corner and ride over together. I’m always late.

I’m getting some regular riders: Cheryl, Mike B., Mike M., Chris, Henry and Irene, and Tom. I’m getting some regular destinations, too. We’re fond of the Stanton General Store, with muffins the size of small chain rings. Beyond Stanton is the Round Valley Reservoir. Half a century or so ago, farms on top of a big hill were bought out, the land was bermed, and water collected for the reservoir. Now people boat and camp there. We have to climb a long, steep hill to get to the top, but when we do, the view is worth every out-of-breath. This is Mike B.’s first time up here. He stands out of the saddle and screams to the boaters, “This is beautiful! This is beautiful! I’m in the world! This is beautiful!” I’m laughing into my handlebars. Theme song: “Hoover Dam” by Sugar.
“Stanton General Store,” photo by Tom Hammell
Climbing Stanton-Lebanon Road up to Round Valley Reservoir. That’s me grimacing, followed by Frank and Mary. Tom Hammell took this picture. He likes this one because it shows my suffering and the crest of the hill.
This cell phone photo doesn’t do Round Valley Reservoir justice. We need Tom to get a picture.
The Tuesday night fastboys know who I am now and are starting to show up on my weekend rides. They’re pushing the pace. My regulars stop coming to my rides. I decide not to lead for a couple of months. Instead, I’ll email the people I want to ride with. I’ll go exploring, no pressure.
I’ve discovered an online mapping tool that gives distances and elevations. Combined with Dustin’s njbikemap.com, I’m becoming a complete map geek. I spend hours planning routes. I can’t seem to come up with any under 70 miles, but that’s okay. I still have a few centuries left to do this summer.

One of my last official rides before taking a break from official leading is listed as a 65-mile ride from Montgomery to Lebanon and back. I call it “Manic in Neshanic,” a name Ira gave the first metric I did in this area when we co-led it years ago.

A big group shows up. John Smolenyak meets us in Raritan, at the first rest stop. He doesn’t have a car, he bikes everywhere, and a hilly double metric is nothing to him. The route north is rolling, scenic, and loaded with outsized farms. We’re almost 40 miles into the ride when John offers, “I can get you to a 1.9-mile downhill where you can see Round Valley.” He says we’ll have to climb a little, but to see the reservoir from the top will be worth it.

We cross Route 78, where Chris has told me “the real hills start.” We’re deep into a wooded road when the asphalt walls show up. I’m in the middle of the pack. Next to me, Deb says, “This is so psychologically demoralizing.” I say, “I see a stop sign! That has to be good.” As each rider reaches the top, he turns to face the hill, gasping for air. Larry has his jersey unzipped to the navel. Frank wasn’t expecting this. We’re all looking for John. I call out, “Smolenyak! This is your fault!” People echo me. He’s one of the last people up the hill, and he’s grinning. He laughs as we spew invective in his direction. He’s right, though. The view of Round Valley from way up here is so worth it. It’s another 30 miles home from the rest stop; I’ve screwed up the distance again. Frank gets bad cramps. Aaron has never gone this far before.

The next day Frank and I go on Joe and Joe’s metric to Belmar. In two days, Frank and I have seen countless rivers, a reservoir, and now an ocean. I try to call Jack in England from the coast. There’s no answer. Frank and I are at complete body burnout. I’m leaving for England this evening, for two weeks of no exercise beyond walking through London, Paris, and Montpellier. Frank says, “Go easy on the desserts.” His words echo in my head for the first week but get lost by the time I get to the south of France.
Kermit’s Paint Problems  
(sent July 30, 2007)

I found yet another chip in Kermit’s paint on Sunday. This time I know nothing got near the frame, not even in transit. This is the third chunk of paint that’s gone missing since June.

So I took a close-up picture with my super-duper digital SLR camera with a macro lens and sent it off to Waterford with a long email explaining the chronic shedding of paint chunks. Since I’ve had such a good working relationship with the folks at Waterford, and since their old paint job lasted 10 years, I was very easy-going and polite about it all. (I’m not used to that; I’m usually too snarky for my own good.) I sent the email off Sunday afternoon.

Right Down to the Steel

And when I got to work this morning, there was a message in my inbox from Waterford, and he thinks there’s something wrong and wants me to send the bike back to the Waterford factory for inspection. He could tell from the detail of the close-up that what
might have caused the chunk to fall off wasn’t my fault. His paint guy (who I worked
with back in February) is going to get in touch with me tomorrow.

I guess I’m going to have to ask Ross to move my fancy gearing over to Gonzo while
Kermit is in the hospital. Either that, or I’m in for some real slow-poking for the next
couple of months. Without those extra teeth, I’m gonna really be dragging on the hills.
Shoot, I might as well ask Ross to order a whole new set of MTB gears for Gonzo. And
some new pedals (that infernal squeaking!). Bleah.

This sucks. The worst-case scenario is that Waterford says it’s my fault and charges me
for a new paint job. (Can I take out a second mortgage for bike paint?) The best case is
that it gets fixed for free. Either way, I’m out a few hundred smackers for dismantling,
mailing, and rebuilding.

Oh well. As I’ve been saying since I got Gonzo, always have a spare bike. Gonzo might
look like shit, but he rides OK.
They’re Dropping like Flies and the Skin off my Ass
(ridden August 4, 2007; sent August 23, 2007)

I told you I’d tell you about the Princeton Freewheelers Annual Event century way back on August 4.

Well, a chunk of the Pinelands caught fire the night before. Although the wind was blowing to the east, the smoke rose and settled up where I live and even north of that. The forecast was officially calling for “hot as blazes,” so everything fit.

For two weeks, my boss had been showing interest in the Event and the century. I even gave him directions and my cell phone number so he could ride with us. But our group of ten waited around for him, and when I called his cell phone and got a disconnected number, we gave up.

We were headed straight towards Tabernacle, where one end of the fire was. We weren’t even sure we’d make it all the way, considering we could already see the air we were breathing. But as we got farther south, the air cleared. I don’t even remember much of the first 32 miles to the first rest stop. The next chunk went pretty smoothly, too. By the time we got to the second rest stop, at the southern end, the heat was rising. Neil, who does centuries nearly every weekend, knew of a deli near the rest stop, so he went and got
us some sandwiches. Not to say that the rest stop food wasn’t good; I just like my peanut butter on bread, not bagels (which are like lead weights). Theresa’s feet started to swell. Mike B. massaged them while we waited for our sandwiches.

The route was pretty, and mostly flat. I knew where I was most of the time, having painted the road arrows with Mike B. and Cheryl for 40 miles of it the week before.

The trek back to the first rest stop (for our third stop) was into the wind, but there wasn’t much wind (it’s all relative, of course, and I’ve centuried into much worse). By this point, we were turning the hose used to fill the water jugs onto our heads and helmets. The mercury was poking at 90 degrees. A Philly 90, mind you, not a California 90. This is a wet 90. Our clothes were welded to ourselves.

The last 24 miles was littered with riders by the side of the road, resting under trees, talking on their cell phones, lying down, whatever. We stopped even asking, “Are you OK?” There were too many of them. Like plastic bags in a shopping center parking lot. I was almost one of them when my legs started to cramp around mile 90. I’ve never had that happen before. I jumped off my bike before it got past starting to happen. Theresa gave me a salt tablet (I now carry them). It healed me up right away (I was paranoid for about half an hour afterwards). We made it back to the start in eight hours (riding and resting both). The total mileage was 107; the club never gets the distance right.

Back at the registration area, my buddies manning the sag were running ragged trying to fetch all the riders who pooped out. They were mostly 50-milers who had no idea how to ride in the heat, it turns out.

So I came out OK, except for a chamois-shaped rash on my ass (for the better part of a week). I’ve never had that happen before. It was pretty funny. That evening we went out to dinner with Kevin and Rebecca, who were visiting from Ohio and Jersey City. I went out riding the next day (plenty of Vaseline, lemme tell ya). That salt pill must’ve worked wonders; I’ve never felt that good after a century before.

That was century number nine for me over the past four years. I want to get one more in this year so I can get to an even 10. And no, I still haven’t figured out how to get around the 10-mile doldrums that hit me at mile 70, even when I’m not looking at my mileage. My body just knows.

Postscript: The mystery of my missing boss at the Event has been solved.
(sent August 6, 2007)

I found out what happened on Saturday when my boss never showed up to ride with us:

Somehow, we managed to be at the registration area at the same time and never saw each other. The phone number I had for him wasn’t any good because he’d lost his phone a
few months ago and had to change his number. Why he didn’t bother to call me is another question. My guess is that he really didn’t want to ride with me; otherwise he would have called. It’s probably better that way. I don’t think a boss should see his staff in Spandex, and vice-versa.

Anyway, he and his friend hooked up with two people he’d done the Team in Training Lake Tahoe century with. They were aiming to do the century but somehow missed a turn, missed the Pinelands rest stop all together, and wound up back at the college with 60 miles. They got lunch then headed out again because his friend had never done a century before and was determined to do it that day. They figured they’d go the 20 miles to the Walnford rest stop and turn around again. By the time they got there, the rest stop was closed. They stretched out in the grass for a while. Then they passed the Happy Apple Inn in Imlaystown. “Hey, a bar!” they said, and went in for drinks while waiting for the air outside to cool down. By the time they got back to the college it was nearly 7 p.m.

Two grad students (one from our lab) in our department also went up for the Event. They went on the 35 mile route, missed a turn, and wound up in Allentown. They finished with 40 miles.

None of these people—not my boss, his friends, nor the grad students—bothered to look at their cue sheets. Scientists. Sheesh.
High Point Hijinx
(ridden mid-August, 2007; written January 6, 2008)

One of Tom’s routes for his book is up at High Point State Park in the northwest corner of New Jersey. He’s warned us that it’ll make the hills down here seem like nothing. The subject of his email to us was “High Point High Challenge.”

The night before the ride I dreamed about it:

*Jack and I showed up at the ride start; the plan was that Jack would wait for me here while I rode with Tom and the other Freewheelers. Tom was riding a recumbent. He was wearing a top hat and a jersey that looked like a tuxedo, lined with fur that stuck out from the jersey. It seemed to suit him. He had a large group. Naturally, I was at the back when the ride started. The first thing we did was climb a big hill, on a sidewalk, through the park. I could barely get my legs moving. By the time I got to the top, where the sidewalk disappeared into a dirt path, Tom and the group were gone. All that were left were the few people who were stuck behind me. They soon disappeared as I rode downhill on the dirt path to the edge of a lake, where Jack was waiting. We spent the night in a hotel there. The next morning I saw Tom. I asked him how the ride went. He said it was a disaster: the ride split apart and he didn’t know where anyone was.*

I wake up from the dream somewhat rattled. Besides being slower than nearly everyone on the hills, the only realistic part of the dream was Tom’s jersey. Larry has one just like it, minus the fur.

I’m feeling guilty for leaving Jack home for the day yet again as I embark on another day-long mission. That much is clear from the dream. As for suffering on the hills and getting dropped, that’s a constant fear when the ride isn’t my own.

Tom, Michael Heffler (who only rides in the hills), Mike B., Theresa, and I meet in Pennington to carpool. Tom can fit three bikes and two people in his truck. Mike can fit three people and two bikes in his SUV. I give Kermit to Tom and climb into the back seat of Mike’s car.

It takes a few hours to get to Dingman’s Ferry, just over the Delaware River from the NJ side of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. On the way up we stop at a deli. It’s too early for me to have a snack, but I buy some cookies for later. Everyone else eats something. I get some coffee.

We cross a narrow bridge in to Pennsylvania. In the middle is a man collecting 75 cents from cars on either side. He owns the bridge, Tom tells us. We unload in a parking lot just off the bridge.

Tom shows no mercy. After crossing back over the bridge we start to climb. Already he and Michael are ahead of us. I know Mike would be, too, but he’s staying back with me
and Theresa because that’s what he does when she’s around. I already feel like shit and we haven’t even really started. I’m nervous.

Tom says we have 1800 feet to climb. He’s keeping a running tab of our progress. It’s not making me feel any better to know we’re halfway when we’re faced with the biggest climb of the day, a mountain of a roller within High Point State Park. At least it’s straight and I can see the top. I drop into my biggest rear cog, that good ol’ 34-tooth Frisbee, and do my best to spin. I’m going about 5 mph. At least I can admire the roadside flora. Mike and Theresa are a short distance behind me. Tom is ahead, stopping near the top to digitally capture my agony, again. If I were faster, I wouldn’t be in so many of his pictures. Michael is a speck on the horizon, already working his way up the next roller. When we finally catch up to him, he doesn’t even seem tired.

We pass a spot with a wooden bridge over a stream. Tom wants a picture. Mike poses on the bridge. We pass a lake; Tom gets some more shots. Across the water is the High Point monument. That’s where we’re headed.
Tom tells us that the monument is at the top of a very steep hill and that we have to get up there. I’m resigned to more pain. The ascent is on a narrow road lined with trees, just after a short downhill, which I get to first. I glare at the hill, downshift, and do my best to get to work. It’s all leg and brain jumble until my mental stereo settles on James Brown:
“Static! (No static!)/Static! (No static!)/Don’t gimme no static! (No static!)/Don’t start none, won’t be none!”

By the time I round the final corner and see the monument, I’m standing, pushing past a crowd of people walking down towards me. I’m grinning, they’re grinning, and I get to the top ahead of everyone else.

The monument stands at the center of a wide patio. At the monument’s base is a ledge wide enough to sit on. I lean my bike against a fence and head for the base. “We should all lie down here and Tom should take a picture,” I suggest. I lie down on the base, on my back, and close my eyes.

A violent gust of wind kicks up. It takes my breath away and I feel dizzy lying down. I try to sit up, but the world is still spinning. I grip the edge of the base, trying to keep my balance. Michael is sitting next to me. Tom is in front of us, taking a picture. The wind is whipping around us.

Theresa shrieks, “My money!” We look to our right in time to see her grabbing wildly at two bills zipping in circles in front of us. Michael and I make feeble attempts at grabbing them, but I can hardly get my bearings as it is. Helpless, we watch the two bills whip past us, circle up, and spiral over our heads and out of sight. We’re all laughing too hard.
to speak. Theresa has just lost $40 to the heavens. “Maybe we’ll find them on the way
down,” I offer.

Mike B., Theresa, me, Michael H., and Tom at the High Point Monument
We go into the monument. A set of spiral stairs leads upwards. I’m too dizzy to try. Outside, I take some pictures of Tom overlooking the Water Gap. We peer over all the edges. We’re at the highest point in New Jersey.

There’s a snack bar in the parking lot by the monument, but there’s no real food there. We get some water. I tease Theresa by showing her how to take money out of a pouch without losing it.

I’m still dizzy as we descend. Tom has promised us no more hills. Theresa and I don’t believe him, and we’re proven right as we wind our way through a narrow, tree-lined state park road. All the hills here are tiny, but we’re still counting them. We’re up past six when Tom stops to check his map. To our right is what looks like a driveway, blocked off, with what might be a ranger’s station beyond it. Tom is looking for a road that should be here, but we all agree this isn’t it. We move on, and it isn’t until a mile or so later that Tom figures we’ve missed our turn after all. No matter, he says, this road will take us back out to the main road we came in on.

The one with the big rollers. More hills. The way back seems as beastly as the way up, even more so because we’re hungry. But we get a good downhill reward at the end.
We stop for food in Montague. I’m especially happy because I can add another place to the list of Garden State Stomp lyrics I’ve visited. I get a peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwich. It’s the best jam I’ve ever tasted. Big chunks of real strawberries.

The rest of the ride has more downhills than up. We coast back to the bridge.

“Riding Across the Bridge,” crossing the Delaware River at Dingman’s Ferry. Photo by Tom Hammell

It’s late. Feeling guilty, I want to get back home, but Mike and Theresa want to drive a few miles inland into Pennsylvania to see Dingman’s Falls. Tom and Michael are heading straight home. I have to choose between cramming myself into a truck that won’t quite hold me or being an obvious third wheel on the MikeAndTheresa machine, but I do want to see the waterfall. Mike is, as ever, persuasive, and manages to cram me and Kermit both into his SUV. He promises we won’t be more than half an hour total.

We stop at the visitor’s center and I buy Jack a stuffed skunk because I’m such a stinker. Burnaby will probably play with it for a few minutes and then ignore it. Cleio will go straight to ignoring it.

We walk the recycled plastic boardwalk path to the falls, take pictures, climb (owwww!) stairs to the top of the falls, take more pictures, and get down again in half an hour.
By the time I get home, most of the afternoon is gone. I have to stop this before Jack gets angry with me. So far he hasn’t, and that’s making me nervous.
The Winged Creatures of Oyster Creek
(written January 28, 2008)

Tom is taking us on another scouting mission for his book. This time we’re starting at Batsto (one more from the Garden State Stomp). Mike B. and I carpool down together and meet Mike M., Chris, and Tom there. I haven’t been down here since I was in grad school looking for a particular endangered aquatic plant to study. I finally found the plant in Batsto Lake but changed my thesis topic within a month.

The terrain is wooded and flat. We cross the Mullica River. Tom darts ahead for pictures. We pedal slowly so he can get a good shot.

A yellow moth lands on Mike M.’s red jersey and settles in for a nap. We all admire it and agree that it should stay there as long as it likes.
At the end of a long, lonely road we come upon a marina. We’re at Oyster Creek.
We peer into the water to look at the fish. I give them a little ecology lesson and in a flash remember too much for comfort of those lost years in grad school. Tom takes a picture of us so I’ll never forget that I remembered what I thought I’d forgotten.
We head back the way we came, but this time we have company. A swarm of greenhead flies is in hot pursuit, plaguing Chris and Tom especially. We high-tail it out of the salt marsh, but for a mile the flies match our pace. When we finally hit the upland, the flies give up the chase.

A branch in the road sends Tom sideways. He’s only slightly scraped up, but it freaks Mike B. out a little. He keeps telling us how much worse it could have been.

At the corner of Leipzig and Liebig, Tom sneaks another photo.
“Where the Hell Are We?” From the left are Mike M., Chris, and Mike B. One good thing about being in the middle of nowhere is that we can take up the whole road with impunity. Photo by Tom Hammell

To get back to Batsto, we pass through Nesco. That’s one more for the Garden State Stomp. When we arrive at the parking lot, Mike M. wakes his moth and sends it off. The critter has been with us for 25 miles.
How Not to See a Reservoir, Parts I and II
(sent August 28th, 2007)

Here’s the thing:

Last year I pedaled to Round Valley Reservoir for the first time. This year, I noticed that Spruce Run Reservoir, to the northwest of Round Valley, really isn’t that far away. So I’ve pored over the maps, devised a plan to get to both, and emailed a few friends who don’t mind farting around and getting lost.

Mike B., Mike M., Tom, Henry, Irene, and I leave from Montgomery. The plan is to see Spruce Run first. Not knowing there is an official entrance and an employees-only one, we wind up at the latter. It’s Sunday, but the chain-link rolling fence is open. In we go.
Spruce Run Reservoir, From the Employees Only Side. Mike M. douses his head with water, then tries to skip a stone across the surface. Mike B. says the scenery is better from the official entrance.

Two of our five (Irene and Henry) cut out after the reservoir. Mike B. wants to go to the official entrance, but it’s too far out of the way. “Next time,” I tell him.
The three of us— the two Mikes and I—find ourselves passing the Hilltop Deli in High Bridge. Then we go up, and up, and up. We’re on Cokesbury Mountain. It’s the bridge over a stream and then a sharp bend in the road that triggers my memory of having been here once before, years ago, on one of John Smolnyak’s long journeys. At the top, I grab a few dry grass flowers from the side of the road and stuff them behind the stuffed Kermit on my saddlebag. Mike M. says that the “Hilltop Deli” sign was false advertising.

We reach the 1.9-mile downhill that Smolnyak showed us. We get the good view of Round Valley on the way down. We land in Lebanon, just north of Round Valley, where I’d gone before to the luncheonette there (a real, old Dolly Madison ice cream sign and everything). It’s closed! It’s Sunday! Mike M. sees a woman working in her yard and goes over to ask for water. From where Mike B. and I are standing, all we see is her approaching him with a hammer.

Turns out she’s harmless and helpful: she brings us pitchers of cold water and we chat about Oxford, England, and the dollar-to-pound ratio. She tells us of a few spots up on Route 22 that might be open. Off we go in search of food, but all we find is an Exxon Tiger Mart/Dunkin Donuts. Apparently everyone in Lebanon hangs out there on Sundays. We sit in the grass on the side of the state highway next to a jumbo propane tank, giddy from lack of sugar. Mike M. is slurping down Flavor-Ice and Mike B. is working his way through a frighteningly pink frosted donut. I have a bagel with cream cheese. We all call home with the same message: “I’m gonna be a little late.” Giddiness mixes with guilt and sugar.

Then it’s up to Round Valley Reservoir. Let me say right now that I’ve been going up there entirely the wrong way for two years. That monster hill we always have to climb? Dude, that’s meant for going down. It’s the best descent I’ve done, like, ever. It’s wide, it swoops, it’s scenic, and just long enough and gentle enough not to need the brakes.

The way back from there takes far too long. We clock in at 78 miles, about 6 more than I’d expected and 12 more than is reasonable. In the parking lot we are greeted by Irene and Henry, who had come in 20 minutes before after stopping en route for chicken sandwiches in Stanton and filling up on trans fats back here at the Burger King.

Back home, peering at my maps on the wall, I realize that the reservoirs are much closer to Frenchtown (a blink-and-you-miss-it, slightly tourist-trappy, quaint-of-course town along the Delaware River) than Montgomery. And Frenchtown is a mere 45-minute drive from home. So I get to work devising a way to get from there to there and back again. I come up with a scenic route, not too hilly (but hilly enough; it can’t be avoided), with a multi-mile downhill finish. It looks to be 70 miles. So much for shorter. I email the route to a few road-savvy friends who make some suggestions. I pare it down to a meager 57 miles.

Out go the emails, in come the replies. Like last time it’s going to be me, the Mikes, Irene, and Henry, plus Tom, with his camera.
Now, I know I told you about the weather on the day of the Princeton Event, where the mercury hit the low 90s and the humidity was high. Well, today the National Weather Service is issuing heat advisories, heat warnings, and pronouncements of doom. The high is predicted to be in the mid 90s with so much humidity that the heat index will top 100 degrees. Irene and Henry sanely back out. The rest of us decide to go anyway.

We leave Frenchtown around 8 a.m. The fog is so thick it’s like rain. The roads are wet, and so are we. But it’s cool, and that’s what counts. As we reach the ridge above Frenchtown, we pass open fields that we can only assume are beautiful; in this fog, we can barely see each other.

We get to Spruce Run around 10 a.m. Mike B. insists on paying the $2 per bike entrance fee for all of us so that he can show us his favorite view of the reservoir.

It’s a view of fog.
Mike B.’s Magnificent View of Spruce Run, in the Fog. Photo by Tom Hammell
It’s so humid that there’s dew on a spider web at 10 in the morning. Photo by Tom Hammell
We circle around at the reservoir for a while, Mike leading us all sorts of places he knows about. There’s a beach, cookouts galore, a place people pitch tents, a bath house with showers, a boat launch, a nature center, and a marina. I decide that my taking two months off from leading in the summer to fart around instead has been a good idea. They agree. By the time we leave, around 10:30, the fog is starting to lift.

We get to High Bridge soon after for our first rest stop; this time we stop at the Hilltop Deli. We’re wet, but I think it’s still from the fog. I almost get locked in the bathroom. From here we take the short route to Round Valley, avoiding the big hills (just barely). In doing so we find ourselves on one of the prettiest roads of the summer, Buffalo Hollow. We turn off before it turns into a wall.
We come up to the reservoir from the access road on Route 22, which is farther east than the Lebanon luncheonette (probably open today, now that we don’t plan to be there) and doesn’t go around the reservoir. So we make a left at the top and enter at the boat launch. We get some good views from here; I’ve never been in this section before. We don’t really feel the heat on the downhill out of Round Valley either.
It isn’t until I take them south, paralleling Route 31, then west up Cherryville Hollow, that we start to get hot. It’s what I think would be the easiest way back up to the ridge between Round Valley and Frenchtown. From the maps it looks to be the gentlest climb, never very steep, but it turns out that the road dips and climbs, dips and climbs, and takes forever. I watch Mike B. ahead of me. Whenever he stands to stretch, so do I. We’re very spread out, with Tom in the lead, then Mike B., then me, and Mike M. close behind me asking if this road ever ends. Eventually it does. We pull over under a tree to catch our breath and figure out how much more of this there is.

We stop in a Pittstown deli, next to a building with a puzzling sign that reads, “DO NOT ENTER. THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.” When I see the sign I realize I’ve been here before, on John’s windmill ride. Just from looking at the maps, I had no idea that I’d been here before.
I ask Tom to take a picture of Kermit. Here he is in Pittstown.

I ask for a PB&J sandwich. The guy behind the counter says, “We’re Italian here; we don’t do that.” I have a lovely little biscuit instead. Tom suggests that we abandon my cue sheet and take the most direct road back to Frenchtown. Seeing as we worship him as a Route God, we take his advice. He says, “It’s all downhill from here,” but it’s not. We’re faced with roller after roller, each one hinting it may be the last until another pops up behind it. We’re in full sun now. We roll for about five miles before dropping precipitously (here’s that downhill) into Frenchtown. Tom says, “Everittstown Road sucks.”

Mike M. disappears into the Frenchtown cafe and emerges with a huge bowl of sorbet and three spoons. Mmmmmmmmm....

Nothing we did today was especially steep, or even especially difficult. It was more that we spent most of our time going up while breathing air that would have made a suitable habitat for an adventurous fish.

But anyway, the route is doable at 61 miles. On the way home, Mike B. said, “61 miles isn’t that long.” That’s the last straw. I have to stop leading these epic rides. We’re losing our perspective.
This Week’s Tale: Eyeball
(sent September 3, 2007)

Last Wednesday evening I re-injured my cornea. It was expected, since the diagnosis in June was “recurrent corneal abrasion” and it hadn’t yet recurred. This time I could feel things weren’t quite right, and then I whacked myself in the face with a branch in the back yard. Most people would not have scratched a cornea from this, but my eye is vulnerable. It’s sunglasses during yard work for me from now on.

As with last time, it hurt like a sonofabitch. At least this time I had all the meds on hand and was able to start treatment before I went straight to Scheie Eye Institute at Penn the next morning. A few more visits and they’re going to have to dedicate a waiting room seat in my honor.

The doctors at Scheie were aggressive in treatment this time: they had me in an eye patch for a day to speed up the healing. I was lucky in that a cornea specialist was on hand on Friday. He put me at ease by describing a patient he saw recently who had put a chicken bone through his eye. The doctor removed the bone and the patient recovered. I may be a klutz, but at least I’m a vegetarian. Tofu doesn’t pack the same punch as a chicken bone.

The patch was on from Friday morning till Saturday morning. One of our friends drove me and Jack to a dinner get-together on Friday night. I was pretty out of it, but I brought along a stuffed bird (not a parrot, but it was all I had) for my shoulder and said “Avast ye mateys! Arrrr!” a lot. People asked what happened, so I told them I caught a glimpse of Fox News, or that I was trying to get out of a hilly 65-miler. I wasn’t very good company. The eye strain and light sensitivity were too much.

By Saturday night, my vision started to clear. Yesterday I was able to read and drive. Today I was able to get back on my bike and ride 65 miles in bright sunlight (yes, I always wear sunglasses). I just followed the double white line on the side of the road.

My vision isn’t perfect yet; it won’t be until long after I stop using the antibiotic ointment and drops. But I no longer look like Jack slugged me in the face. I have no trouble wasting my afternoon in front of the computer screen either.

I go back to Scheie tomorrow. Once this is completely healed, we will discuss “procedures” to prevent this from happening again. Something about multiple needle pricks into the membrane to create scar tissue. They say it won’t hurt. Yeah, right.

Postscript: The doctors decided to leave well enough alone for now.
My Seeing-Eye Bike; Mike B. took a picture of this, too, but he still uses film.
Fall Picnic Disaster Ride  
(ridden September 8, 2007; sent September 10, 2007)

Every September, the Princeton Freewheelers hold an all-paces ride and picnic in Rosedale Park, about five miles from my house. I’ve been leading rides for the event for a few years, so I volunteered this year, too. What follows are snippets of my day:

I turn on my cell phone to find voicemail from Ben H., who is a postdoc in the lab. He’s on his way up. I call him back just to make sure he knows where he’s going.

I ride over to the park, meeting Cheryl and Mike B. on the way. We get to the park very early by my standards. “I could have had an extra fifteen minutes of sleep,” I whine.

The lack of B ride leaders is apparent, as a mob starts to gather around me. Ben arrives. All 24 slots of the sign-in sheet are filled. Ira fetches a new one. “Let’s get out of here before more people sign up,” I suggest. “I’ll sweep,” Ira offers. When the chaos ebbs, I call out, “Hill Slugs!” and we’re on our way. I think I have 26 people. Barb and Tom J. jump on, too late to sign in. I can’t count past 12 and pedal at the same time anyway, so what’s two more?

The mob snakes its way up Pennington-Rocky Hill Road. I’m in front. I look through my rear-view mirror at the ribbon of Freewheelers. Way cool.

I choose the prettiest roads I can find to show Ben the best of the local best. We get to Woosamonsa, one of my favorites. The road climbs and descends in the woods at the beginning and looks like the English countryside towards the end. I explain to Ben how Hopewell paves its roads: oil, then gravel, then let the cars do the rest. The cows are in the English pasture.

On Valley Road, Frank gets a flat, but he fixes it in no time and we’re off again, up Goat Hill Road. I warn Ben that it has three false tops. He’s up and over so fast that I chide him at the top: “Keep kicking my ass like that and I’ll spit in your cell cultures.” To keep the karma even, he gets a flat a mile later.

Mike B., Ben, and I work on it. Every time we get the tire to a halfway decent pressure, it lifts off the rim. Three times. Cheryl is getting antsy, and some of the others want their hotdogs, so I send Cheryl off with the impatient people. Henry gets swept up in the leaving crowd, but we don’t notice for a while.

I finally hit on removing the Tuffy liner Ben has between the tire and the tube. He’d only put it in there because he was tired of having to call his girlfriend from the side of the road with yet another flat. As we fill the tire for the final time, Ira (who has been riding for eons and has worked in a bike shop just for fun) asks him why he put the liner there.

“To keep from getting flats.”
Ira grins. “How’s that working for you?”

“Good up till now.”

Michael T. makes a crack about being thankful that I didn’t lead us up Glass Hill.

I find Irene. “Where’s Henry?” We ponder the distinct possibility of him being left by the side of the road somewhere en route to Lambertville, but we’re not really worried about him.

We fly down the hill on Harbourton-Mount Airy Road. Halfway down, on the left, at the edge of a driveway, a boulder is painted to look like a *Tyrannosaurus rex* face. From this direction it’s tough to see because we’re going too fast.

We climb up the other side of Dinosaur Hill and zoom down the swooping hill by South Hunterdon High School. We go up the little ass-burner by Mount Airy Church, then down again, past the natural gas substation. The wind is away from us so we don’t smell anything today.

We turn down Alexauken Creek Road, one of my favorites. The horses are out. The creek on the other side of the road is hidden by the trees.

And we’re in Lambertville. Irene says we were delayed half an hour by Ben’s tire; the first group has long since departed, taking Henry with them. Since Rojo’s roasts its own beans, South Jersey Larry ponders taking a bag back home with him.

Caffeinated, we tackle Rocktown Road. The only way out of Lambertville is up. This is the prettiest way, and the easiest.

Ira and Michael T. are behind me and Ben, yakking away. I hear, “Salman Rushdie,” and “Mother Theresa, Whore of Calcutta.” It’s not easy to giggle and pedal uphill at the same time. I ask for an explanation: Rushdie’s next book. (Later, I learn that there are two, the other being “Buddha, You Fat Bastard.”) I explain to Ben that Ira and Michael make a dangerous combination. It gets us over the steepest part of the hill anyway. Ben keeps asking if we’re at the top yet. I say, “one of the tops,” and we go up some more.

Finally at the real top, we’re going to ride over the Sourland Mountain ridge for a bit before heading back to Hopewell. It’s flat, open farmland.

I hear commotion behind me. “Chain!” I double back. Artie is by the side of the road. Big, tough, with a deep, gravelly voice, Artie has been sidelined with foot problems for the better part of a year. His chain, apparently, hasn’t been changed, nor cleaned, since the Carter administration. People call out for a chain tool. Ira gets one from Richard. Ira is the master of clean bikes. He wipes his down thoroughly after each ride. So the encounter with Artie’s chain is nothing shy of spectacular. Ira holds the chain up and away from himself as if he’s handling a rotting snake. “Look at this! It’s filthy! When’s
“the last time you cleaned this?” Even Artie is repulsed by the amount of black goo oozing from the dangling beast. Ira gets to work. His hands are black.

I move my bike towards him as he sits in the grass so he can see how to thread the chain around the rear derailleur. I can’t quite see what he’s doing. He fastens the two ends together. Then laughs.

“Look what I did.” He’s threaded it wrong: the chain is in front of the chainstay instead of behind it. He sets about breaking the chain apart again.

At this point, I say that I really should get the rest of the group home. They’re chatting under a tree a few yards away. I give Ira, Michael T., Artie, and Ben P. directions home: take Route 31; it’s the quickest.

The rest of us push off again. I explain to Ben H. that this is far from typical, but that I’ve pretty much seen it all. I tell him about one rider who blew both tires falling into a ditch. That’s a classic nobody seems to tire of hearing about. We’re still all in good spirits. I treat them to the Stony Brook Road downhill.

We get back to the picnic at 1 p.m, an hour after the first group. As we pull in, I hear, “We were going to send a search party.” At the food: “I hear you went to the moon.” From Cheryl: “We were worried about you.” The veggie burgers are long gone. No cheese either. I inhale some pasta.

I’m yakking with everybody: Howie, Cheryl, Barb, Norene, Marty, Hilda, John, Irene, Henry, both Larrys.

Ben P. returns. I ask him, “Where’s everyone else?”

“They turned off of 31 on 518. I went straight.” Uh-oh. Ira has taken Artie and his weak link back into the hills. “I don’t know why they went that way,” he says.

It must be nearly half an hour later when I see Ira arrive.

He’s grinning. I ask, “Where’s Artie?”

“Carrying his bike to his car. He ripped off the rear derailleur at the entrance to the park.”
Soak Cycle, Perfect Karma, Bleach Water, and Halting to a Grind

(sent October 6, 2007)

OK, looks like I owe you two a few short stories. Let’s start with late September.

1) Soak Cycle

It was one of those cloudy Saturdays with no rain in the forecast. I figured that since I was going to lead the next day, I’d take it easy and head on over to Cranbury for the usual flat chaos. It was listed in the books as being led by “Don Sprague or volunteer.” I knew that Tom Hammell was leading an 80-mile trek to Belmar, but I couldn’t do that because Jack’s brother was getting married that evening. When I got to Cranbury, nobody was sure who was going to lead the ride because Don had decided to go with Tom.

I keep a pile of cue sheets in my backpack, so I pulled one out and volunteered. There is only one route I have any confidence in leading out there: Turkey Swamp. It’s a big state park, a Pine Barrens outlier in Monmouth County, with a rest stop at a deli that’s closed on Sundays (ask me how I found that out). There’s been some construction between Cranbury and there over the past few years. Some roads have been realigned, others closed off. I asked Chris, who knows every road in central NJ except for the ones he doesn’t, to guide me out of the McMansioned mess. Off we went with 16 people. I made a few wrong turns, the sort that I figured out immediately, but for the most part I didn’t screw up.

We were on our way back, 10 miles from home, when the rain gods decided to mess with every forecaster in New Jersey. The heavens opened up, and there we were, saying, “This wasn’t supposed to happen.” By the time we got back to the parking lot, we were thoroughly soaked. The rain hadn’t let up by the time we got back, but it didn’t keep Ed Post, who can’t resist a minor adjustment to someone else’s bike, from fixing someone’s handle bars in the parking lot, in the pouring rain. “Why not?” he said. “I’m already wet.” Good point.

Someone told us to stuff newspaper in our shoes to dry them out. It took all night and three loads, but it worked.

2) Perfect Karma

My shoes were dry, but my saddle sure wasn’t. That’s a good way to learn that the vinyl coating is ripped. No matter, I had a ride to lead out of Montgomery, a 60-miler into new turf. Given my record, a wet butt would be the least of my worries. Two of my stalwart companions had begged out: Cheryl was having a party for all of us that afternoon and needed to get home early to set up; Mike had a cancerous chunk of skin on his back removed on Monday but went the 80 miles to Belmar on Saturday with five-day-old stitches that were talking to him on Sunday. Cheryl said not to worry. I’d get a big turnout because everyone likes leaving from Montgomery.
There were three people waiting for me when I got to the parking lot. Only one was a veteran of my epic Hill Slug adventures: Frank. As our season is winding down, he’s hitting his peak. The second guy there was Blake, who is so much faster than me that I couldn’t fathom why he was there. Turns out he hadn’t been riding much recently. Then there was Fred, the New Guy. That’s it. Apart from Frank, there were no Hill Slugs.

The plan was to meet John Smolenyak outside of Readington. Smolenyak is to the roads north of Route 78 as Chris Cook is to anything south of there; I’d been sending him my routes for vetting. In 2004, he was my century sherpa, guiding me through my first 100-mile ride, which he’d called “flat.” I begged to differ. He’s also the one who ingeniously put mountain bike gearing on his road bike and suggested I do the same. By now I’ve figured out that it hasn’t made me faster, just more comfortable. Chris said that “the engine finally found the right gear.” Once a masher, always a masher, I guess.

The past two times we’d planned to pick up Smolenyak along the way he was a no-show with a cell phone that wouldn’t receive calls. I’d come home to email explaining that he’d had two flats before he even got anywhere near us, exhausted his spare tubes, and had to call his girlfriend for a ride. This time, he wrote, he was packing four tubes and a new cell phone.

This time, we did meet him on the road. He had a new addition to the large, stuffed frog adorning his Camelbak and Easter-found stuffed rabbit on his frame: a soft figurine of a girl that, when pressed, said, “That’s OK, you can leave the toilet seat up,” and, “Go ahead, drink right out of the carton.” He explained. “It’s the perfect woman.”

Off we went.

Oldwick is another one of those blink-and-you-miss-it towns in Somerset County. There is some serious money up there. Yards so big that the grass in the back will have grown back by the time the front is finished being mowed. Houses so big they have their own hills to sit on. The general store is an old house, now historic. Inside is a place to sit and eat, a deli counter, a pastry counter, bathrooms around the corner, and an old pantry given over to cleaning equipment. Outside are circles of benches dotting the yard, and a wooden bike rack. They have our number. The place was packed, inside and out.

Stuffed with stuff, we headed back home. Along one relatively flat road we came upon a curious bit of spray paint on the shoulder. “Got legs?” it read. Around the corner was a hill. Ha, ha.

We took a water break in Neshanic because the old steel bridge across the river was finally open again after two years. The space that was a general store (a grill where you could get scrambled eggs; shelves of soup cans; cases of cold drinks; fresh brownies; ceramic cows; and postcards) is now the lamest excuse for a gourmet pizzeria I’ve ever seen. When the general store closed, I had to scrap half of my cue sheets. I give the pizzeria six months.
We returned home on time, without incident. Frank got a cramp as he was getting off his bike in the parking lot, but we all said that didn’t count since we’d stopped already.

A perfect ride. Finally. And Cheryl’s party was good, too.

3) Bleach Water

Every fall, the Staten Island Bicycling Association comes down our way to host the Pumpkin Patch Pedal. It starts and ends in Thompson park in Jamesburg, by a lake. The rest stop volunteers really get into the spirit of things by dressing in costumes, hanging ghosts and spiders from the trees, and, at the final rest stop, serving pumpkin pie and apple pie. If you sign up in time, you get a rockin’ long-sleeve T-shirt and a screw-cap water bottle. Each year the shirt is different. My favorite has a pace line of ghouls racing down the front.

A handful of us, including both Joes, Mike, and Theresa, went for the century this year. I usually do the metric, but this would be my 10th lifetime century, so, well, I had to go. The weather was perfect: sunny, cool, low humidity, and almost no wind. We started at 7 a.m., just after sunrise.

There’s not much to write about, really, because, again, everything went so smoothly. The only dent in the karma was at the 50-mile rest stop. The coolers of water and Gatorade having just run dry, the rest stop volunteers (no spooky costumes) were scrambling. One went to a nearby CVS to buy gallons of water. Another went into the Burger King (we were in their lot) to fill the coolers. There was less food available than at the other rest stops, which made no sense at all. Fortunately I’d packed a PB&J, which I wolfed down. When the coolers came back, we filled our bottles and drank. And gagged. It tasted like bleach.

Being in familiar territory, we slid off to a Wawa a couple of miles away for real food and drinks. By then we’d picked up some extra riders who were confused when we stopped at the store. A few of them stayed with us. Half of the gang peed in the woods next door.

We got home in good time with only one mechanical (my flat) and a bleachy aftertaste.

4) Halting to a Grind

RIDE LEADER’S REPORT OF INCIDENT To be completed by the ride leader (or person in charge) after ANY incident involving injury, loss, or damage, during a PFW sponsored event regardless of the apparent seriousness of the incident.

Date: 10/6/07
Time: ~ 10 a.m.
Place of Incident: Rock Road, West Amwell
I was a doofus. I ran myself off the road, but I landed on my boobs. It was my first road crash and my first road rash ever. I’m fine. Really.

I don’t know how it happened. I was doodling along with the 13 others who had signed into my ride, when all of a sudden I was heading over the edge of the road, down two feet into gravel. “I’ll just ride the gravel and stop,” I thought, forgetting for the moment that I was, in fact, not on a mountain bike. The moment was fleeting as I lost my balance and careened into the asphalt with my funbags. As I careened, I was thinking, “Protect the paint.”

As I kissed the blacktop, Mike shouted, “Don’t move! Don’t move!”

“I’m fine! I’m fine.” I got up. My left leg was oozing road rash. I squirted it with my water bottle. Somebody offered me a dime-sized Band-Aid. No need; I always carry a bandana. Today’s was red. Perfect. My right thumb was sore. I must’ve slammed it into the brake when I hit the pavement. It felt like one of the many body-part wrenchings I’d given myself on my mountain bike over the past two winters. “The thumb is the one that’s gonna take a while,” I said, wiggling it. I had full range of motion, so I figured I’d just have to lay off the hand weights at the gym for a few weeks.

Mike was going over my bike inch by inch. There was not a scratch on the frame from the fall. I lost the left bar end, shredded the bar tape on the left, and scraped the front shifter (which is dying anyhow). The biggest expense will be the rear shifter, which, of course, I just replaced this spring. The top popped off in such a way that the inner workings will be exposed.

Everyone was more freaked out by my spill than I was. I guess that’s because I didn’t see it. I tried to explain to anyone who would listen that I spend my winters falling off my bike in the woods. I’m good at it now. I was completely relaxed as I went down. I just rolled with it.

People were insisting that I go home, but I would have none of it. We were closer to our rest stop than home anyway. I got back on Kermit and we headed for Sergeantsville. When we got there, the owner of the general store, Sun, a PhD engineer in a previous life, greeted me. “Look what I did,” I said, proudly. Before I even finished lifting my leg into his view, he was handing me a bottle of peroxide he keeps on the counter. Now that’s a biker-friendly store.

Have I ever told you about Sergeantsville? It’s a true Alice’s Restaurant sort of town: one blinking light, one school, a fire station, a radio station (!), a bank, and the Sergeantsville General Store. Built into a hill, it’s part deli, part Chinese restaurant, and part boarding house. The bathroom is upstairs, which, when seen from the bathroom...
window, is on the ground floor. The place is the only food store for miles around. A sign hangs on the outside: “Bikers welcome.”

On the way home, two people had flats. While the first one was being fixed, Cheryl pointed to Kermit’s Zaro’s eyes and said, “Blame it on the eyes for not seeing the edge of the road. They weren’t doing their job.” Henry later said, “It’s not the eyes. If your bike had a mouth, what would it say? ‘Hey, that’s the edge of the road there. OK, this is not good.’ ”

Henry helped fix the second flat. When he was done, he wiped himself down with a towelette. “Hey,” I said, “Stop gussying up and let’s get moving.” Henry and his wife, Irene, usually have me in stitches. He didn’t fail me here. He turned slowly towards me and said, with a bit of a lisp, “I have to look good.”

I said, “You look fabulous.”

He said, “Do you think looking good,” gesturing to himself, “just happens?”

It’s not easy to start pedaling up a hill when you’re giggling.

Mike insisted on riding all the way home with me even though he lives a mile closer to Pennington than I do. When we got home, Jack came out. “Look what I did!”

“That’s pretty,” he said.

The next day I joined the Joes, Cheryl, and Mike B. for a flat ride to Bellmar. I’d duct-taped the brake closed and duct-taped the scraped bar tape, too. I rode to Cheryl’s house to carpool, dodging suicidal squirrels on the way. This was not the morning for that; I needed to have a smooth ride without even any near-misses.

When we got to Etra Park to meet the Joes, I proudly showed off my road rash.

None of us except Mike really wanted to go all the way to Bellmar, so we went as far as Farmingdale and turned around.

At work the following day, I showed off my road rash some more. It felt like an accomplishment, this first spill. Ben said, “It’ll really hurt when it starts to dry out.” By that time it was the next weekend, and I was in Boston, visiting friends and going to a bead show.
**The Last of the Summer Slugs**  
(sent October 21, 2007)

It’s too warm for October 21. I shouldn’t be going out without a jacket this late in the year. The weather has been like this for weeks: near 80 and dry. The rain we’ve had has been too little for months. Yellow leaves are dropping from the trees, but there’s no splash of fall color this year. Things go from green to brown, maybe yellow on occasion. But for the pumpkins decorating doorways, it really doesn’t look like fall.

I’m on Gonzo today. Kermit is somewhere between here and Wisconsin, off to be re-re-painted. So I’m on Gonzo, the $250 eBay LeMond Zurich steel frame, Shimano shifters and Campy brakes (not-so-quick-release), cast-off cranks and pedals, too-small handlebars, the ugliest stem on the planet, scratched paint, a Gonzo puppet on the saddle bag (with a scrap rag scarf; I couldn’t resist) and new mountain bike gearing. But the computer seems to be working today. That’s a plus.

After eight months on Kermit, Gonzo takes some getting used to. I don’t usually bring him out until after Thanksgiving, when there’s snow, ice, or other crud on the road.

I feel as if I’m six feet off the ground. It makes no sense. Kermit and Gonzo are the same size. My left wrist is tight and sore, a late-onset result of the crash from two weeks ago. My right thumb is healing, but it doesn’t seem perfectly happy on the brake hoods. I’ve got new gloves, since I shredded the last pair on the asphalt. Maybe it’s the gloves.

I’m thinking all this as I ride up to the Hopewell YMCA by myself. Cheryl is hiking today. These days Mike B. only rides with us when her Theresa isn’t around. I’m glad Route 206 is finally paved. Gonzo is so heavy. I wonder how I’m going to do on the hills. It doesn’t matter. It’s fall now. All that gotta-get-stronger stuff is out of the picture. Now we’re just out here because it’s not raining. Every day we ride is a bonus, as Cheryl is fond of saying.

Today is the last ride I’m officially leading for the year. I’m making an effort to be more flexible on weekends by not committing to leading rides, but I don’t know how long I can go without leading, even unofficially. I really like coming up with routes. Plus, if I lead, I know where I’m going at all times. That does a lot to calm my nerves on the hills. I’ll lead again in the spring, just maybe not as much.

I pull into the parking lot and am greeted by my most loyal Hill Slugs: Irene and Henry are there, and next to them are Tom, and Chris, and Mike M. A guy pulls up that I don’t recognize, but Tom knows him. His name is Howard, but I’ll probably forget that.

We’re headed to Lambertville the long way. I’m shaking out my wrists as they seem to be going numb. My left wrist really hurts now, and I wonder if I should pop an Ibuprofen. But I don’t have to: the first big hill takes care of everything.
We’re climbing Province Line Road, the remnants of a line that divided New Jersey into east and west, land to be shared by two brothers. If you take a straight edge to a map of central New Jersey, you can still connect the remaining pieces.

The first stretch is a thrill-ride roller-coaster, made better by new (finally!) blacktop. There’s a crop of something sort of wheaty undulating up the hill on our right.

We跨 518 and the fun begins. On the other side of the open fields, the trees stand green and green and maybe yellow and maybe brown. I’m used to going up here in the winter, when the turkey vultures perch on the trees above the road at the edge of the woods, as if to catch any of us who might be going a bit to slowly up this longest climb in Mercer County. There are no vultures today; that’s a comfort. Tom is taking pictures again. His book of NJ bike rides is almost finished. He figures it’ll be ready in November. If I end up in any of his pictures, it will the first of Gonzo.

The Lindbergh estate is up here somewhere, but we always miss it. The sign isn’t obvious anyway. I always forget to look for it. I’m too busy trying to breathe. Talk always turns to Charles Lindbergh or the baby or the guy who killed the baby or his son who is trying to clear his father’s name. Today Mike M. tells us that his dad fought alongside Lindbergh in World War II. Six degrees of separation and all that; now we’re all two people away from Charles Lindbergh.

We’re riding in the woods across the Sourland Mountain ridge, but I want to look for turning trees, so we go down the north side of the mountain for a while and turn left onto
Saddle Shop halfway down. Henry cracks jokes about leather, which fit in with his calling me a dominatrix (a “mistress,” he says) for sending us up so many hills at once. We’re going up, but sideways, so we can see down the mountain into the valley, and up the next ridge. More green, green, brown, yellow, and some red thrown in. Pretty, all right, but not as impressive as I know central New Jersey autumns can be. Still, I’m filled with that ecstasy one can only get on the open road. “I biked here from home,” I think. It’s something that Jack will never understand. It’s what makes me come out here. It’s what makes me not mind the long train ride to work.

Left on Runyon Mill, right on Orchard, past the herd of cows that used to block traffic but who have been hanging out higher up the mountain lately. More scenery to the right. Left again back to the top of the mountain, right across the ridge some more, a few more hills, some more facetious grumbling from Henry: “Where do you find these?”

I promise to skip a hill in return for the extras that I just threw in, but I miss the turn. At the edge of the ridge, I ask, “Coffee in two miles or five?” The majority votes for five, so it’s down the mountain and up the ass-burner hill I’d been trying to avoid. It’s worth it. At the bottom, as we cross a stream, the trees are a brilliant yellow.

As we cross the final stretch before the turn into Lambertville, the smell of natural gas is from the processing station is strong.

We turn left onto Alexauken Creek Road, which is covered in dead leaves. I try to go around them. Chris happily crunches right on through, a foreshadowing of the mountain biking I’ll be doing in a few months.

Finally we get to Rojo’s. I go to rest my helmet on the handlebars, as I usually do, but it slides off. I’ve forgotten that I don’t have Kermit: I don’t have the Mavic computer or the Zaro’s eyes to hold the helmet up. At home, a pair of red eyes dangles from my beading lamp, where Dale and Sean sneakily left them. I’ll have to attach them to Gonzo one of these days.

Inside Rojo’s, we munch muffins and scones, caffeinate ourselves, and talk nonsense. Chris and I regale the crowd with tales of my multitude of mountain bike tumbles. Tom tells tales of Big Hills I’m Glad I’ve Never Seen.

On the way out, we run into a rider who’d been on my crash ride two weeks ago. He’s a disaster waiting to happen. He takes wide turns, rides far out into the road, and pisses leaders off. But somehow it was I, not he, who wound up horizontal. Go figure. Fortunately, he only rides as far as the edge of town with us. We go up Rocktown Road, my usual route. I regale Henry with tales of my father’s injuries (his night-time bike crash, his evening tumble into a ditch while jogging, my mother’s moratorium on exercise in the dark, his four-toe-snapping incident with the landscaping railroad tie) that explain my boneheadedness as genetic. It gets us up the hill.
I’m tired of climbing, so I take my special I’m-too-tired-to-climb-anymore route off the mountain. But the traffic on 579 is heavier than I have patience for, so we turn off onto Woosamonsa Road to get back into the country setting. The road is one of a few that I attach a song to:

(Nothing But) Flowers, by the Talking Heads

Here we stand
Like an Adam and an Eve
Waterfalls
The Garden of Eden
Two fools in love
So beautiful and strong
The birds in the trees
Are smiling upon them
From the age of the dinosaurs
Cars have run on gasoline
Where, where have they gone?
Now, it’s nothing but flowers

There was a factory
Now there are mountains and rivers
you got it, you got it

We caught a rattlesnake
Now we got something for dinner
we got it, we got it

There was a shopping mall
Now it’s all covered with flowers
you’ve got it, you’ve got it

If this is paradise
I wish I had a lawnmower
you’ve got it, you’ve got it

Years ago
I was an angry young man
I’d pretend
That I was a billboard
Standing tall
By the side of the road
I fell in love
With a beautiful highway
This used to be real estate
Now it’s only fields and trees
Where, where is the town
Now, it’s nothing but flowers
The highways and cars
Were sacrificed for agriculture
I thought that we’d start over
But I guess I was wrong

Once there were parking lots
Now it’s a peaceful oasis
you got it, you got it

This was a Pizza Hut
Now it’s all covered with daisies
you got it, you got it

I miss the honky tonks,
Dairy Queens, and 7-Elevens
you got it, you got it

And as things fell apart
Nobody paid much attention
you got it, you got it

I dream of cherry pies,
Candy bars, and chocolate chip cookies
you got it, you got it

We used to microwave
Now we just eat nuts and berries
you got it, you got it

This was a discount store,
Now it’s turned into a cornfield
you got it, you got it

Don’t leave me stranded here
I can’t get used to this lifestyle

Mike is going so fast down the hill that he nearly misses the turn onto Burd Road. Tom is taking his picture. “I think it’s a blur,” he says. Chris has figured out a new way across Route 31 now that yet another new strip mall has opened. We go around the back, where we can still see the hills and trees. Not a bad way ’round, and it’s different. We come into Pennington from the north for a change.
Chris offers me a ride home, figuring that there have been no incidents yet, so why tempt fate. I decline. We stay in the parking lot, talking more nonsense (mostly about cross-dressing for Halloween) until a crew of line painters has finished everything but where we’re standing.

I push off, with the Talking Heads still on the mental stereo. On the way home I contemplate the narrative for Dale and Sean. As I round the corner into my driveway, I wonder what I should have for lunch: a salad with pasta, or candy corn?
Hallowimp
(ridden October 28, 2007; sent October 30, 2007)

It doesn’t help any that I got home after midnight last night, but the ten hours of sleep from the day before should take the edge off. I pour the remains of week-old iced coffee into a travel mug, zip up my jacket, and head outside.

The air finally feels like fall. We had rain for two days. It stripped a lot of leaves away and took the humidity, too. Now the sky is that crystal blue you can’t get in the summer.

Bull’s Island isn’t close to home. It’s on the Delaware River just north of Stockton. John, Barb, and I worked on the route a few weeks ago. This is the fourth annual “All Hallows Eve, All Terrain, All Ghoulish Chocolate Eyeball Ride.” Last year got canceled because of high winds. Two years ago I missed it because I was in Annapolis with Jack and Dale and Sean and Kevin and Rebecca and Nora and Sharon and Brycchan. I heard the ride was kind of a mess, though. People got separated and computers stopped working. The first year was a little better, but half the people got tired of waiting for the other half and took off before we got to the best creepy places. The first year, though, Hilda handed out plastic skeleton key chains for us to hang off our saddlebags. My tradition is to dress the stuffed Kermit Muppet on my saddle bag in a ghost costume.

This year we’re starting so far away so we can get away from a copycat ride from a copycat leader who bugs the hell out of us without even trying. But we’ll hit the best spots. With a lot of climbing.

As I drive up the road by the river, I’m thinking that I really don’t want to climb up Lindbergh again. I’m so sick of it. It never gets easier. And it’s so damn long. I’m too miserable to enjoy the scenery when I’m forced up that road. But what can I do—John and Barb are skinny little mountain goats and I’m a big-assed Hill Slug. I take my first sip of coffee as I drive through Stockton.

We’d listed the ride in the book with “Start location is a mystery, must call John Danek for clues!” But I sent ’round an email to my favorite Hill Slugs a few days ago so they’d know where to meet us.

Good thing, too, because only the Hill Slug regulars show up. There’s Cheryl, MikeAndTheresa, Mike M., Irene, Henry, and Tom. Herb is here, too. I don’t see him much these days. Then there’s Barb and John, and Ralph the New Guy, someone Barb invited along.

Tom says that he wasn’t sure if he should bring his triple, but then he heard I’d be there, so he wouldn’t need it. He mentions a rider I haven’t seen in ages, who I know can’t keep up with me, who said, “I can do one of Laura’s rides.” I drop the F-bomb. It’s one thing to be slow and quite another to be known for it. I tell him it’s nice to know I’m his reassurance that he won’t be dropped. Taking pot shots at each other is part of the whole
experience. I feel like a cheap whore: popular and easy. Tom later tells me it’s not the speed that makes my rides non-threatening. It’s the fact that I stay away from the steepest hills. I cop to that.

Damn, it’s cold. My fingers are barely working as I attempt to attach the Velcro straps of a small fabric carrier to my top tube at the stem. This has been my little snack box since the summer. The Slugs expect handouts of Swedish fish and jellybeans. They help me keep it well stocked. Today I’m filling it with chocolate eyeballs, which are tumbling to the ground as I load them in. “Every time I hit a bump I’m going to lose an eye,” I say to nobody in particular. I cram it as full as I can get it, hoping that the sheer mass of eyeballs will keep things in place.

Henry comes up and offers me a cap, in a strange accent that has me giggling. I pull out my own eventually. I find some long-fingered gloves in the caverns of my backpack. I take another swig of coffee. Cheryl reaches out for the mug. I hand it to her, she takes a sip, and she makes a face. “I thought this was hot!” she says.

“Sorry.” This isn’t helping her warm up. I apologize for the week-old brew, too. The good beans are in the freezer.
I almost lock my keys in the car.

Howard comes up, having arrived too early for the 9:30 ride. He has a flat, though, so he tells us to go along without him. Had he come with us we would have numbered 13.

We don’t have much of a warm-up before the first hill, Federal Twist. This is one of those Most Feared Hills. I’ve been down this hill, but up only part of the way. Barb climbs it routinely. I assure everyone that, even though John and Barb wanted to go all the way up, I vetoed it. Tom charges ahead so he can get pictures of our suffering.

Climbing the Easy Part of Federal Twist; photo by Tom Hammell. Herb is in the front, followed by Cheryl. On the left is Henry, then Mike M. I’m next to him, and behind me is Mike B.

We stop at the first side street, before the hill gets really bad. Henry offers an explanation for the name Federal Twist: “There once was a ride leader who insisted on climbing this hill. They twisted his head off.” For that, he gets a chocolate eyeball.

John has the historic explanation: “During the Revolutionary War, Hessian soldiers were hanged by the government up here.”

“And ‘Twist’?” I ask.
“Twisting in the wind,” he says.

We turn onto Raven Rock-Rosemont Road. I give an eyeball to Barb, who links ravens with Poe and “Nevermore.”

Nobody gets the other acceptable answer, from the Simpsons: “Eat my shorts.”

Mike M. quizzes me on the name of the lost love. I pull “Lenore” from the part of my brain that stores these useless things. He says I can have an eyeball.

After Raven Rock, we climb some more and stop at the Wiley Nursery.

The Brenda Wiley Story:

This is true. Barb knew Brenda and her mom because Brenda went to school with Barb’s daughter. Brenda was a tall, lanky, beautiful gymnast. Her mom was a 300-pound mass. Brenda started hanging around some unsavory people and dating a guy her mom didn’t like. They fought about it till one Saturday, when Brenda’s mother was out of the house. Her little brother was lying on the couch, watching TV. To get him out of the way, she stabbed him to death. When her mother came home, she stabbed her, too, over and over, until she, too, was dead. She fled into Rosemont by car, but the police caught up with her. She’s now serving jail time up north. She’ll get out in her mid-forties.

I look around. The house stands alone amid farmland on both sides of the road. Who would have heard the stabbing? Barb shrugs. “It was a Saturday,” she says. “It made a lot of noise.”

Tom is sitting in the grass by the side of the road, trying not to vomit. It’s not from the story; he pushed himself too hard up Federal Twist. After a few minutes, he’s good to go, and we head east towards Sergeantsville.

A bridge on Dunkard Church is out. “Drunkard Church?” someone asks. John goes ahead to see if it’s passable. He motions us to follow. We lift our bikes onto our shoulders and cross through stones and mud. I learned my lesson last time I tried this, so I put my cleat covers on. One of Barb’s covers gets sucked into the mud. We stand on the other side of the bridge, wiping shoes in the grass, picking mud out of cleats, and, somehow, talking about the theme song from Deliverance. Now it’s going through my head, but I only know the first few bars. Henry goes back into his flame character, disgusted at his muddy cleat covers. Ralph the New Guy has wrested Barb’s cleat from the mud. He gets an eyeball for his efforts.
As we turn into Ringoes, we pass John Ringo Road. Herb asks, “Who was John Ringo?”

I answer, “The love child of two Beatles.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Hey, if we can’t do this now, when can we do it?”

Cheryl says something I don’t catch.

I add, “They recorded ‘Federal Twist and Shout’ before ‘Twist and Shout’.”

“Ba-dum-BUM,” Herb replies. “It’s the oxygen deprivation.”

“I’m always this stupid.”

We stop in Ringoes so Barb can clean her cleats some more. Henry and Irene decide to go home from here, explaining that Irene has a blister from walking around New York City the day before, and it’s killing her. She limps as she turns her bike around. John and I decide we don’t want to go up Lindbergh. Neither does Tom. We inform Barb of
our decision. She’s disappointed. I know another way up the mountain and across the ridge. We’ll go down Lindbergh instead. It means more miles before the rest stop, but we won’t have to climb that blasted hill.

We start up the mountain in a way that lets us pass another murder house.

The Murdered Security Guard Story:

Barb’s son went to high school with a super-athlete football player-wrestler who, into drugs and with friends, robbed and killed a 70-something-year-old security guard. They made off with less than $100 for their efforts. The boys stayed quiet and went off to college. But a year later one of the friends let the story slip. Police came and carted away the killer, who was in the middle of a wrestling match at the time. Barb tells us he’s still in prison up in north Jersey. It seems that he and Brenda Wiley will get out around the same time. I ask, “Do you think there will be a love connection?”

I lead us up the Sourlands the easiest way. As we near the top, Tom tells me that he and Herb have to turn back. Herb promised his wife he’d be home by a certain time. Last time Herb made that promise and rode with Tom, he blew it by a large margin. Tom says, “Herb’s wife hates me. He says not to call the house for a while.” So Tom, who drove up with Herb, turns right when we turn left. Mike M. goes with them. We’re down to seven people. We ride across the ridge. I finally manage to chase Deliverance out of my head. John and I talk about mountain biking.

We turn right on Lindbergh. Starting up that road from here means we only have to get over one nasty hump. Before I got my mountain bike gearing, I had to stand. Now I can spin all the way up.

John wonders if these roads were even paved back in Lindbergh’s day. Even now, this place is as remote as it gets for central New Jersey.

On our right is a clearing in the woods, where a little, jet-black goat is grazing. John names it “Lucifer.”

The Lindbergh estate is up here somewhere. Cheryl takes the lead, since she knows where the place is. It’s on the southern side of the mountain, a bit farther downhill than I’d hoped: we’ll have to climb back up to get to our planned rest stop. We gather at the entrance. Somebody suggests that we try going up the driveway. Why not, we figure, and head on in.

The wooded drive goes for a mile or so. John muses that whoever it was who kidnapped the Lindbergh baby really had to know this place was here.
The house is a lot smaller and shabbier than I’d expected it to be. It was only their summer place, after all. Barb, John, and Cheryl each know different parts of the kidnapping history: the second-story window, the dropped baby, the disposal of the body.
in the woods, the housemaid who killed herself rather than divulge information, the refusal of the baby’s mother to leave the house, the re-enactment of the trial in Flemington every year, the son who is still trying to clear his convicted dead father’s name. After the Lindberghs left, the house became a home for boys with behavioral problems. Now it’s a tourist attraction.

We haul ourselves back up the mountain and down the other side. It’s much better in this direction.

We pass the clearing in the woods again. The goat is gone. But there’s no barn in sight. John and I decide to be creeped out by this.

I’m not used to riding Gonzo yet this season; I don’t remember how he handles on big downhills. The wind has picked up and we’re headed straight into it, which helps to slow me down, since my brakes aren’t really doing much more than making noise.

As Mike B. passes, I say, “God, I wish my brakes worked.”

The trees end, and I’m facing the undulating ridges of north central Jersey. I’m looking straight at last summer. The downhill steepens and summer drops out of sight.

Peacock’s is at the bottom of the hill. As we lean our bikes against the fence, Mike asks, “You were joking about the brakes, right?”

I smile. “Nope.”

John says he feels like he’d been pulled up the hill the whole way down. He couldn’t get his speed up.

Cheryl tells me there are no muffins (oh no!), but there are huge chunks of banana bread. She buys one for us to share. I head for the coffee. I fill half a tall cup with double French roast and look around for the decaf. There is none, so I fill the rest with house blend and tell myself not to drink the whole thing.

The bathroom is in the basement. There’s a line to get in. John and I amuse ourselves by looking at an old candy vending shelf with late-1970s Trident and Chiclets logos. There’s a forlorn bike frame, stripped, dusty, and upside-down, chained to a pole. John points to it and says, “That’s the last biker who didn’t flush.” He’s earned himself an eyeball.
Back upstairs, I join the crowd at a table on the porch. After all the chatter, I realize I’ve drunk all my coffee. This afternoon is going to feel interesting.
I lead us back up the mountain sideways, which is fine with everyone. We’re all far more tired than we have reason to be. At this point our cue sheet might as well be read backwards. We’re hitting all the same roads, just in the wrong order. The cows on Orchard Road are have come down off the hill, but they’re not blocking the road. As we travel across the ridge, I suggest skipping one more hill. We take the alternate route off the mountain, the one I’d aimed for and missed last week.

We follow a frontage road that I thought would give us a tailwind, but we get a strong crosswind instead. Still, it’s flat. A pond comes into view on the right. I’d been on this road half a dozen times before I’d noticed it. Others are seeing it for the first time. Mike B. says, “It’s Lake Picasnotty.”

“What are we, in kindergarten?” I ask. I mention a Muppet movie character, Chief Boomshakalakalaka. Nobody gets it. Theresa and Mike ask for eyeballs. Mike wants to know where the Swedish fish are. I tell him it’s too cold to chew on those things, and anyway, they’re back in my car.

We start climbing again, up to Sandy Ridge, where a graveyard awaits us. When we were planning the route, John, Barb, and I found a web site that listed all the names in the Sandy Ridge graveyard. We saw at least a dozen local street and place names buried there, plus a family with a long run of dead infants. I offer an eyeball to anyone who goes in and finds a street name, but we’re all too pooped to bother. As we swing around the corner, Barb spots one. “Rittenhouse! I get an eyeball!”

She suggests a shortcut home. By now the cue sheet is homeopathic: a mere suggestion, an infinitely small portion of what we’re doing out here. The shortcut is down a short, steep road. I find that when it comes to it, my brakes do, indeed, work. The rest of the way is straight and flat, along the Delaware River to Bull’s Island.

Back in the parking lot, we exchange handshakes, hugs, and chocolate eyeballs.
Hiya, Hill Slugs et al.

Anybody into leaf peeping at Round Valley on Saturday? I’m thinking of leaving from the Woodfern School so we won’t have to deal with the Sourlands. It’s November and I’m too damn lazy.

If there’s enough interest, I’ll put a route together where we’ll head north to Lebanon and swing up to the reservoir from the north. That will give us the Best Downhill on Earth on our way to Stanton.

I’ll try to keep the miles down to something reasonable for this time of year.

The pace will be in the “eh, whatever” neighborhood.

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Temperature: low 50s
Sky Cover: cloudy
Wind: from the north at 15 mph
Chance of Rain: 10%

Mike B. and I meet at Cheryl’s house. Mike is driving. I didn’t give us enough time to get to the start, so 9 a.m. hits when we’re on Long Hill Road, still about five minutes away from the parking lot.

The shortest route is also the most rural. Finally the leaves are changing. The canopy above us is the best I’ve seen so far. At last we’re getting some yellows and reds.

When we get to the Woodfern School, we’re the only ones there. Barb was only a maybe anyway. As soon as we step out of the car, drizzle begins. By the time Mike gets dressed—and it takes him a while—it’s raining for real. Cheryl and I climb back inside and discuss waiting it out versus bagging the whole thing. We both feel less and less like riding.

Mike, who now looks like Nanook of the North (and it’s only November) says the rain has stopped. I get out. It has. Cheryl gets out. It starts again, stronger. “Forget it,” I say. “My brakes don’t work.” I’m not about to try them in the rain, even though that’s what I supposedly bought this bike for. I’m getting wet and I haven’t even gone anywhere.
From the opening in his hood, the only visible sliver of Mike’s face registers disappointment. By the time he crawls out from his cocoon, the rain is coming down harder.

Cheryl and I decide we should go to Stanton for muffins and coffee anyway, and we can drive around the reservoir when we get up there. Mike doesn’t argue the point. The rain comes down most of the way to Stanton.

By the time we get there, I’m cold. Cheryl and I get coffee. I buy two muffins to eat later. We get a table in the back. I’m facing a window, so I can see the hill beyond a field across the street. Orange, yellow, red, green, and brown. Finally.

Cheryl decides we should all go to the gym and spin. The spin room empties out at 10:30, she says. It’s 10 a.m. now. Cheryl gets up to look at a table covered with those sorts of over-cute, fake-crafty, what-would-I-do-with-this gifts for sale. Little cards with frogs dressed for a fancy ball, some sort of rabbit thing, soaps that cost way too much.

“All cafffeinated and nowhere to go, “ I say to Mike, gesturing towards Cheryl.

She picks up a box made of glass and metal and brings it over. “This would be great for Theresa to put her jewelry in,” she tells Mike. It looks too mass-produced to be hand-made. Inside is a card that goes on and on about the artist and her artisan grandfather. Maybe it’s for real. I flip the card over. “Made in China,” it says. Disgusted, Cheryl puts the box back.

Back in the car, I say that it feels weird not biking here. Cheryl says we should come out here for breakfast one of these days. I’m in.

We climb to the reservoir. The hill is prettier than the top because the dull sky turns the water a dull gray. We drive down the other side, passing through Lebanon. The luncheonette is open. We decide to give them some business because the owners are so pleasant. I buy another muffin to add to the pile. Cheryl gets more coffee. I make a note that the store has a jar full of Swedish fish. On the counter is a basket of tiny bottles of bubbles, for free. I grab a purple bottle and pry the wrapper off. I blow bubbles in the car.

We decide to drive up Cokesbury Road to show Mike the view of Round Valley from above.
The View of Round Valley from Cokesbury Road on a Foul Day. It’s much better from a bike in the sunlight.
Heading home, we detour on a side street at the top of the reservoir. I want to see if it leads anywhere useful. It doesn’t. It ends at Route 31, which is a divided highway here. We go to the nearest light and turn around, towards home.

As we get out of the Hunterdon County hills and back into suburban hell, the trees get dingy, even though we’re heading south, and downhill. So much for the theory that northern trees go first. Around here, higher property taxes seem to mean better fall foliage.

I get dropped off at home. Jack is furiously indexing the latest Age of Johnson. I eat a handful of yogurt raisins, play with Burnaby, change into gym clothes, and Cheryl picks me up.

We use the first of my two 2007 biking mix CDs. Cheryl lets me lead the class. Mike has only spun a few times before, and not for a while. Cheryl sets him up. We go for the whole CD, minus one song.

Mike says to me, “Now I know why you kick my ass up Lindbergh. You guys do this all the time.” Geez. I caught up to him once on that hill. Once. I realize something: I’m the Yardstick of Slowness.

We cool down and do sit-ups. Mike is reduced to mooing. Cheryl and I wonder if he’ll make it to tomorrow’s Cranbury ride. He’d better. He’s driving.
Thanksgiving, Global Warming Style
(sent November 23, 2007)

When it’s over 60 degrees on Thanksgiving in Central New Jersey, you know the climate is truly fucked. But it makes good biking weather.

That’s what Joe M. (as tall as Sean and twice as sarcastic), Cheryl, and I are riding in today.

Since I last wrote, fall has finally happened, and in a big way. A month late, the trees burst into color to make one of the best autumn displays in a while. The maples were the last to get the word, so they’re doing what they can by carpeting the ground in yellow.

I’m biking to Cheryl’s house, and halfway I realize I’m far too overdressed. I’m wearing one of the two DeRosa jerseys that Joe sold me. He’d ordered them, they’d been too small, he’d returned them, and they’d sent bigger ones. Those didn’t fit either, so he gave up and sold them to me one day last summer in the parking lot in Cranbury. The short sleeves nearly reach my elbows, so they’re perfect for a fall day. When he sees me in his jersey, he’s elated. He’s wearing a DeRosa jersey, too.

Joe has to be back home in a couple of hours, so my plan to get as close to horse country as we can from here are scuttled. Where to go, then?

Joe announces, “The Quakerbridge Mall.” When else, he reasons, would we be able to ride around the parking lot? Or even bike to it, for that matter?


I turn it into a strip mall by shedding my leggings and arm warmers. Since I avoid the mall as a rule, I rarely see it. But an empty parking lot is an empty parking lot, and we know what this place will look like tomorrow. So we ride a circle around the suburban eyesore.

Joe ditches his leggings a few miles later. We’re heading down a road we’d never be on during a normal weekend. We’re heading into suburban hell, which really is the only place you can logically wind up after circumnavigating a massive shopping center.

In front of us, Joe launches into what sounds like an acceptance speech. Cheryl and I are baffled until he explains: “I just reached 5000 miles” for the year. Then he continues with his speech, thanking everyone he can think of. I wonder how many miles I’ve gone this year. I don’t keep track. Cheryl and I figure that the two of us are probably more or less the same. For every two of her weekday rides that I chickened out of, she missed one of my long-distance muck-abouts.

Every house looks the same. Every road is lined with yellow maple trees. We pass one school after another. I don’t even know what street we’re on anymore.
On our way back, we cut through Mercer County Park. I point out entrances to the mountain bike trails. Tomorrow will be cold. I know that my winter in the park is only a few days away. I’ll soon be back to falling five times in a weekend. I just got SPD pedals and shoes. Maybe I’ll do better this year.

The park, as always, is windy. Back in 2000, when I first joined the Freewheelers, I noticed that the air can be dead calm until we entered the park. We named it the Vortex and decided that there must be a critical mass of rubber and steel that sets it off.

The Vortex is on full-blast now, and it follows us out onto the main roads, all the way to the Hamilton train station. We cut back through Lawrence Township towards Ewing. Joe is on a mission to get home. He leads us through side streets that turn corners and have stupid names like “Misty Morn.” Sounds like a porn star.

We come across a spin instructor from our gym, out for a run. “Avoiding the gym this morning, too?” I ask. “Too crowded,” she answers, as she jogs by.

We hang out in Joe’s driveway for a while. Cheryl takes a picture of me and Joe in our matching jerseys. Everything in his yard—his roof, his deck, his driveway—is a carpet of bright yellow. His wife comes out for a few minutes and tells us that the gym was overcrowded this morning. We’re glad, for the umpteenth time today, that we stayed away.
We leave Joe’s house, and I’m completely fugawied.* I’m lost in my own backyard.
We finally reach familiar turf. Talk turns deep, about friends, relationships, and
Thanksgiving dinner.

As I turn onto my street, I smell mashed potatoes.

The cold front moves in around 4 p.m. By Black Friday, the air is 30 degrees colder.

With temperatures in the 30s and wind gusting at 20 miles per hour, we’ve chosen a romp
in the woods. Cheryl, Jack, and I drive to the Oldwick General Store for breakfast, then
head north to Hacklebarney State Park. We stomp around for a while, then drive to
Schooley’s Mountain, which I’ve promised to tackle next summer. Now that I’m
here, I’m not so sure I’d want to see a cyclist in my path on this winding road. Killer
downhill, though, but I need to do my best not to make that literal. Good thing I have
half a year to figure it out.

(* “Fugawied” is the past tense of “fugawi,” from “Where the fug are we?”)
Hacklebarney (it’s in the song)
Clayton Park : The Hill Slug Goes Mountain Biking Again
(sent November 24, 2007)

Clayton Park, Imlaystown, New Jersey.

The Roller Coaster.

The Gym.

Out of control on the way down, out of breath on the way up.

I nearly tossed my cookies the first time I tried it, two winters ago, my second time out on my new Cannondale, with toe cages and sneakers. I did better the next few times, but then we went last winter in the ice. I spent most of my time walking or falling down.

At the end of last season, I promised the guys I’d get SPD pedals and shoes. Until three days ago, I hadn’t made good on the promise. Now I’m all set, with tiny new pedals and clunky new shoes. None of that stiff-bottomed-sole stuff for me. I have flexible treads ‘cause I know I’ll be off the bike walking. And laces. So uncool. And I’m nervous.

By the time I dig all my MTB gear out of the closet—the Camelbak, the GoreTex socks, the extra balaclava, the old leggings, the fleece vest, the beat-up gloves, the toe warmers, the old helmet with duct tape over the vents—I’m running late. Hauling Grover into the car is an ordeal, too. He’s heavy and unwieldy. As I get close to the park, I fast-forward on my iPod looking for some bad techno to get me in the right mood. I settle for “Electrobank,” which just starts as I pull into the parking lot. So much for that.

I’m ten minutes late, but neither John nor Chris is ready anyway. By the time I finish my coffee (necessary for this place) and get my shit together, it’s 9:20.

We set off through the field first, to warm up on the coldest part of the trail. I try to remember how the gears work. Chris and John dive down a steep trail into the woods.

Clayton Park is mostly wooded, with Doctor’s Creek running through a ravine in the center. The trails are wide and clear, for the most part. Mountain bikers have set up giant log obstacles, but have been kind enough to make trails around them. Technically, there’s not much to Clayton Park. What there is much of is steep hills. The park is small, but a biker can ride the handful of trails in endless forward-and-backward-loops for hours. What we go down one minute we might be climbing ten minutes later.

So it’s only a minute before the first uphill. And I’m amazed that I make it all the way up without sliding off my pedals. What a difference! But there’s still the downhill thing. I walk down the steep ones. I ride the brakes down the others. I’m the world’s biggest chicken.
We pass handfuls of other mountain bikers. I’m so slow that not only do Chris and John have to keep waiting for me, but I also let everyone pass me in either direction before I get started again. As I pass a woman cyclist, she calls out that she’s happy to see another woman. I call back, “I’m the biggest chicken out here!” I can’t hear her reply over the crunch of the leaves under my tires.

It takes a good half-hour or so before I start to feel more confident. I let up on the brakes a bit going downhill. I rattle over roots. I even jump a few tiny logs. But mostly I look forward to the hills.

Wait. What? At the top of one, I say to John, “This is fucked. I’m dreading the downhills and looking forward to the climbs.” He laughs. I add, “It’s opposite day.” Why, might you ask, would I want to climb? Two words: Schooley’s Mountain. I never should have driven up it yesterday.

Gad. I haven’t been this anaerobic since Tom hauled us up to High Point. I’m getting tired. John says, “I’d rather be on a road bike going up Lindbergh.” I think about this for half a second and decide that this is better than Lindbergh. Almost anything is.

As we roller-coaster along, I consider replacing the stuffed Grover with a stuffed chicken. Or maybe keeping Grover and pinning the chicken to the saddlebag. That way, people behind me will know what I’m like. Preferably one of those dead chickens. I’ll have to look on eBay.

I didn’t fall.
Rubber Chicken Mojo
(sent December 16, 2007)

December 15, 2007, 9:00 a.m.

Mercer County Park is 1500 acres of ball fields, a golf course, tennis courts, a boat house, a skating rink, paved bike paths, manicured lawns, and a sizable chunk of woods riddled with mountain bike trails. The terrain is mostly flat, but John says that it’s very technical. There are big log jumps, bare roots everywhere, patches of dense trees, muddy spots, narrow bridges over streams, and even a few short, steep drops. It’s never the same experience twice: every time the weather changes, so do the conditions on the ground.

Today it’s just me, Chris, and John. Chris is running late and scrambling unnecessarily to get ready. John and I don’t mind; it’s rare that either of us is on time for a mountain bike outing. John has just swapped out his long handlebars for some shorter ones so that he can maneuver through the section of narrow trees we call the Hall of Mirrors, where the trails spaghetti through the woods in turns so tight they reverse direction, where the trees are so close to each other that one can barely fit through, where one can pedal for five minutes and wind up mere feet from where one started.
One of the Halls of Mirrors; sunlight is on the trail, which is about as wide as my handlebars.

I make sure to let the guys know that I pulled a muscle in my back at the gym and won’t be trying anything daring today. It’s a convenient excuse, but also true.
We’re halfway to the “tight stuff,” as Chris calls it, when he realizes he’s forgotten his helmet. He takes a paved path back to the parking lot while John and I wait and chat. Directly in front of us is a 10-foot, sandy drop. Last time I tried that I nearly wiped out. I’m nervous. John tells me to relax, don’t grip the handlebars, and let the bike just roll through it. Chris comes back and we’re off. I make it down the drop and up the other side, piece of cake. I start to relax a little.

With Chris behind me, I ask what he thinks of my new dead-chicken mojo. “It’s hanging nicely,” he says, then adds, “But you have to remember, it’s not so much that you’re chicken. Think of the people you’re riding with.” He has a point. I feel a bit better.

I’m well behind the guys when a large deer crosses my path. I slow down to let it go, and look at its butt to see if I can tell if it’s a male or female. I don’t see anything swinging, but what do I know about sexing deer? Whatever. Now I’m even farther behind.

When we get to the Hall of Mirrors, I fall behind again. I’m determined to remain upright. Having SPD pedals helps; every time I lose my balance, I manage to get my feet on the ground before I tip over. I slam into a few trees and have to walk straddling my bike through some narrow turns. The coffee I drank in the parking lot is making me jangly, which doesn’t help. I’m going so slowly that my glasses are fogging up, which doesn’t help, especially when I face the sun. When I get moving more quickly, I can hear the wind whistling through my balaclava where my glasses poke out. I get to a spot where I can’t see the trail at all. Chris is a few yards to my right, watching me. I stand, puzzled, and pull off my glasses. “Ah. There it is.” I catch up with him.

He points to his head. “Where’s your helmet?”

“What?” I reach up and it’s gone. Just gone. “How bizarre! I didn’t even fall. I slammed into a few trees, but…” John is looking at me, too. “I guess we have to go back and look for it, huh?” I ask. John nods. No Freewheeler rides without a helmet. We wiggle our bikes around on the narrow trail. I send Chris and John ahead of me, figuring that they’re so much better at this than I am that if anyone sees my helmet on the ground, it’s going to be one of them. The trail gets close to the main road through the park. I tell Chris I’m going to head to my car, where I have a spare helmet. Chris says they’ll meet me there. I stomp through the woods and get onto the road.

At my car I rifle through my bag of spares in the trunk: a pair of shorts, a T-shirt, old road shoes, and my old road helmet. I put the helmet on and practice jumping curbs in the parking lot.

John shows up first, without my helmet. He shows me how to bunny hop. I watch him lift his rear wheel off the ground. I’m mystified. Even if my back weren’t injured, I’m not sure I could do it. “It’s like gymnastics,” I tell him. “I’ll know when I get it right, but I have no idea how to do it.” I can get my front wheel off the ground, no problem. I
watch him hop the curbs, lifting the front wheel, then the back. I’m baffled. It’s all in the legs, I can see that much, but I’m convinced that if I try it, I’ll throw myself over the handlebars. Good thing my back isn’t up to it.

Chris arrives without my helmet. “How bizarre,” I say again and again. We head back into the woods, this time in the opposite direction, where all the roots and puddles and big logs are. I don’t like this side as much. Chris is behind me. “Your chicken’s gone,” he says. In retribution for all the litter I’m leaving behind today, Chris suggests I pick up the soggy plastic bag at my feet. I do, gladly, and shove it in my saddle bag.

I muse, “I wonder what archaeologists are going to think when they dig up this place and find a rubber chicken.” Chris reasons that the archaeologists will know that this place was used for mountain biking, and that mountain bikers always have mojos.

“They all do? I thought it was just us.”

“Nope. They all do.”

We bump along the roots. My back is starting to hurt from all the jarring. When we get to the spot where we can choose a high path or a huge, steep, leafy drop down to the lake, John and Chris zip down the hill. I take one look at the descent, decide I can’t even walk it, and choose the high path. I soon come face to face with the park’s latest “improvement,” a giant indoor tennis court that looks like an inflatable warehouse. Chris and John meet me as they climb back up their trail.

“You missed the biggest climb in the park,” John says.

“I wasn’t going down that thing,” I answer. I’m bummed I didn’t get to try climbing, though. “Have you seen this thing?” I ask, gesturing towards the grounded blimp. Chris nods. “Its fugly!” I add.

We get to a spot the guys call Broadway because the path is so wide. Riding is easier here, and I let my mind wander. I picture a deer running around the woods wearing my helmet and carrying my rubber chicken.

Eventually my back starts to hurt enough that I tell John I need to head back. He’s cool with that; we’ve been out for two hours already anyway. We go through the woods some more, then take the paved bike path back to the parking lot.

I open my trunk again. “What the fuck?!?”

There, lying upside-down, in plain sight, is my helmet. I’d never put it on, and even when John and I were waiting for Chris to get his, neither of us had noticed that I didn’t have my helmet on. I hold it up for the guys to see. Chris accuses me of having a senior moment. “I’m 41!” But we’re all laughing.
As for the missing chicken, I hope I find it on my next trip to the woods. Meanwhile, I have a spare.

*****

December 15, 2007, 4:45 p.m.

Kermit is back in New Jersey. I stop off at the bike shop to see him. He’s not ready to come home yet; maybe by Wednesday.

*Kermit’s New Colorphoria*
Kermit’s New Fancy Lettering
Mercer County Park, 21 December 2007, with Apologies to Harper’s Index
(sent December 21, 2007)

Location: Mercer County Park

Weather: Drizzling

Riders: Laura and Mike M.

Number of Mojos on Laura’s Bike: 2
Mojos on Laura’s Bike: Grover and a Rubber Chicken
Number of Mojos on Mike’s Bike: 0

Number of Halls of Mirrors: 3
Number of Halls of Mirrors Ridden Today: 1
Relative Difficulty of Today’s Hall: Medium
Relative Length of Today’s Hall: Shortest
Percent of Hall Laura Rode with Both Feet in Pedals: < 20

Number of Times Laura and Mike Searched for More Halls of Mirrors: 3
Number of Trails Repeated in Search: 2
Number of Times Trails Repeated: 4

Number of Photographs Taken of Something that Looks Like Hall of Mirrors but Isn’t: 1
Approximate Number of Deer Crossing Path: 12
Approximate Number of Big Logs Laura Walked Over or Around: 12
Approximate Number of Those Logs that Mike Jumped: 12

Number of Dry Streams Crossed Without Using Bridge: 3
Number of Dry Streams Mike Fell Into: 1

Most Times Laura Fell in One Ride Last Season: 3
Number of Times Mike Fell Today:  3
Number of Times Laura Fell Last Week:  1
Number of Times Laura Almost Fell Today:  1
Number of Times Laura Fell Today: 0
Approximate Number of “Chicken Checks” Laura Performed While In Motion Today:  4
Number of Chickens Lost Last Week:  1
Number of Chickens Lost Today:  0
Number of Chickens Found Today:  0
A Well-Secured Chicken
Not the Hall of Mirrors
Winter Bird Blues  
(sent December 25, 2007)

Lyrics inspired by comments from Al Lowich during our traditional Christmas day ride, and written on the road, on the fly:

That big ol’ rooster  
He ain’t crowin’ round the bend  
That big ol’ rooster  
He ain’t crowin’ round the bend  
He said “It’s too cold outside  
My crowin’ days are at an end”

That red-tail hawk  
Sittin’ on a bale of hay  
I said that red-tail hawk  
Sittin’ on a bale of hay  
He said “I can’t catch me no vermin  
To chase my winter blues away”

That turkey vulture  
Pickin’ skunk up off the road  
I said that turkey vulture  
Pickin’ skunk up off the road  
He said “I can’t get me no venison  
Them deer done up and goed”

That winter sun  
It don’t shine on me no more  
I said that winter sun  
It don’t shine on me no more  
I’m gonna lock me up inside  
Till that spring come knockin’ on my door
Too Much Free Time, Not Enough Caffeine
(ridden December 28, 2007; written January 29, 2008)

We’re squeezing one more ride in; it’s John’s idea. I meet him and Mike M. at the usual Pennington spot. The air is cold, but not bone-snapping.

John takes us up Goat Hill Road. I haven’t been in the hills in a while. The three of us get spread out, with John so far ahead I can’t see him.

When we get to Rock Road, we look for my crash site. We’re not sure where it is. I just remember gravel, but the roadside ditch goes on for at least half a mile, and it’s covered in leaves now. I make sure to ride towards the middle of the road this time.

After the ditch, on our right, is the Hanover Shoe Farm. A wooden sign explains that champion race horses are bred here. “I love this place,” John says. “A shoe farm! There was a good crop of stilettos this year. The Sperry Topsides are on the back 40. It’s nice and wet.” A segue from shoe farms to pasta farms in Italy, leads him to announce, “There’s a special plot where the wind blows just right. Elbow macaroni!” Pencil-point pasta is cultivated by keeping the plants cut short.

All three of us are enjoying our week away from work between Christmas and New Year’s. John says, “I knew I had too much free time the other day when I actually considered starting a blog.”

“About what?” I ask.

“I have no idea. That’s how I knew I was bored.”

Our rest stop is Rojo’s, where John has never been. The owner is roasting coffee. I ask him a lot of questions about fair trade and shade-grown beans. I’m probably bugging him, but he doesn’t seem to mind. I guess he’s used to it.

John gets espresso, and he’s really digging it. He says he could spend all day here with his notebook computer and a cup of coffee. “Doing what?” I ask. “Working on my blog,” he answers.

John and I each buy packs of coffee beans and shove them into our jersey pockets. Mike M. watches us, amused. This is good training, carrying extra weight back up the hills towards home.

Our last big descent is Stony Brook. This time of year, with all the leaves gone, we can see all the way down the ravine into the creek. A few times over the years I’ve seen a great blue heron down there, so I always look for it.
And there it is, flying high over the water a few meters in front of me, almost at my level. We glide along together for maybe half a minute. I compose another verse of the “Winter Bird Blues:”

Saw a great blue heron  
Flyin’ by my side  
Saw a great blue heron  
Flyin’ by my side  
He said “I can’t catch me no fishes  
They all done found a place to hide.”
Last Official Ride of the Year: December 30, 2007
(written January 29, 2008)

This is the final B ride for the year that’s listed in the Princeton Freewheelers ride book. Larry is leading. He’s decided to go to New Egypt. From Cranbury, that’s a good 50 miles. He promises us that it’s downhill all the way there. Uh-huh. The terrain rolls pretty well a few miles south of Allentown.

I tell Larry that a few days ago the roofers made so much vibration that our entrance hallway light fixture shattered. I never liked it much anyway, but it’s going to look pretty crappy for our New Year’s Eve party. Larry tells me to get a new light that I like and he’ll install it at the party. I don’t want to put him through the trouble, especially at a party, but he says it’s easy.

We’re heading for a new deli that popped up recently. None of us can remember what it’s called. “That black-and-white place,” I offer. Chris says, “The Little Brooklyn Deli.” It’s a bit upscale for him. Three sides of it are glass. The outside façade is white, the inside tile black. What Cheryl and I remember most is that the coffee is abundant and halfway decent. Once I bought home white chocolate snowmen for Jack.

Just before we arrive, somebody remembers the name, “Taster’s Canvas.” The heat from the bakery steams the windows. We peel off our balaclavas, gloves, and jackets before we sit down. My muffin is gummy, Mike B’s pound cake stale, but it doesn’t stop us from wolfing everything down anyway. I have a small bucket of coffee.

By the time the caffeine hits, we’re well on our way back. I lead the paceline into the wind on Old York Road. Somewhere in Hightstown four of us up front realize that we’ve lost the rest of the group. We’ve been Spragged* on the last ride of the year.

We wait in the parking lot for the rest of the group to return. It turns out we weren’t technically Spragged; someone had a mechanical problem, and then Chris took a detour off the main road to avoid traffic. Nobody is upset, which is a relief.

Everyone is saying, “See you tomorrow,” New Year’s Eve.

(* To be “Spragged” is to be deliberately dropped off the front of the pack by the ride leader as punishment for going too fast. The term is attributed to Don Sprague, who is known to have perfected it. However, Chris Cook claims that he’s the rightful inventor, and that, when one is dropped off the front, one is properly “Cooked.”)
The Fourth Annual New Year’s Eve Party at the Lynches’
(written January 29, 2008)

Four years ago, Jack and I decided to throw a New Year’s Eve party. We invited a lot of people, mostly Freewheelers. Things went so well that, when the next December rolled around, Hilda asked if we were going to have the party again. “I haven’t thought about it,” I said. She replied, “You have to. You did it once. Now it’s a tradition.” So we did, and we have every year since.

We’re expecting around 35 people this year, with one overnight guest, Daniel, whom we’ve known since college. After years of being out of each other’s lives, Johanne called a few weeks ago, so I invited her, too. A handful of the local anti Wal-Mart activist crowd is coming. The rest are Freewheelers, and Freewheelers know how to have a party.

Things get rolling around 8 p.m.

I’m taking people upstairs to see Cleio and Burnaby, who are locked in the bedroom. Hilda and John have to see Burnaby, since we adopted him from Hilda’s pet rescue group. Phyllis arrives with catnip and toys. In one of my return visits, I see that Burnaby has torn into the catnip baggie I thought I’d put out of reach. Cleio has helped herself, too. At 18, catnip is the one thing that still makes her kittenish.

I’m standing in front of the road maps in the hallway. We’re talking about NJ history, terrain, routes, and funny road names. After about 10 minutes of this, Greg, one of the activists, is itching to get out on a bike and ride some of these roads.

People are bringing so much food that we’re running out of places to put it.

Larry installs the new light. He’s almost tall enough not to need a ladder.

Terry wants to see all the jewelry I’ve made. She picks up the Froggy necklace that I’ve had for sale since I put it together in Oxford nearly a year ago. “Gordon is going to have to buy this for me,” she says. I’m glad the froggy has found a good home.
There are plans to go biking tomorrow morning, but I’m staying home to hang out with Daniel. I wonder how far into 2008 I’ll be able to exercise such restraint. I wasn’t very good at it this year. Towards the end of the season, I dragged it out of Jack that he’s getting tired of our having to plan our weekends around my biking. I’m working on being less addicted, and I’ve been making an effort to do other things, but I don’t know how long I can resist the urge to find another unfamiliar path to an unexplored destination.

The whole mob squeezes into the lower level, where the TV is, to watch the ball drop at midnight in Times Square. Jack and I hover on the stairs. I’m looking at a couple dozen people who are almost my entire social life. Some of them I haven’t seen in years. Some of them I’ve known only in the battle against Wal-Mart, but not socially, until now. Some of them I used to ride with until I discovered the hills. Some of them I see almost every weekend. I look down in wonder that we all get along so well, that I’m part of this horde of truly cool people.

“After this, Jack and I are going to do a song for you,” I call out. They count down to “Happy New Year!” It takes a few minutes, but they start to trickle upstairs, where Jack is tuning his guitar to get ready for “Garden State Stomp.”

Everyone is crammed into the living room now. I’ve only done this song in front of a few people before, but I’m not nervous. Once I launch into it, the place names just tumble out of my mouth.
Most people leave by 2 a.m. Johanne, Hari and her husband Jack, and Daniel help me and Jack clean up. I haven’t eaten much tonight, so as the leftovers roll in, I sample a bit too much. The last three people leave at 2:30.

At 2:45, I send an email to everyone, thanking them for making me happy.

New Year’s morning is rainy.
## Appendix: The 2007 Soundtrack

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Artist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trip Like I Do</td>
<td>The Crystal Method</td>
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<tr>
<td>Machete</td>
<td>Moby</td>
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<td>Shake 'Em on Down</td>
<td>North Mississippi Allstars</td>
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<td>Taste</td>
<td>Phish</td>
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<td>Seed</td>
<td>Afro Celt Sound System</td>
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<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Widespread Panic</td>
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<td>Gangster Tripping</td>
<td>Fatboy Slim</td>
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<td>Underneath Days</td>
<td>Bob Mould</td>
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<td>E-Pro</td>
<td>Beck</td>
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<td>Static</td>
<td>James Brown</td>
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<td>Porch Song</td>
<td>Widespread Panic</td>
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<td>Ball And Biscuit</td>
<td>The White Stripes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pela Janela (Through the Window)</td>
<td>Thievery Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden State Stomp</td>
<td>Dave Van Ronk</td>
</tr>
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<td>Guided By Voices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mystery Title</td>
<td>Robert Plant</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Other Side</td>
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<td>Elektrobank</td>
<td>The Chemical Brothers</td>
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<td>Trey Anastasio</td>
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<td>Trey Anastasio</td>
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<td>The Sandwiches</td>
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<td>Muse</td>
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<td>Dhol Dogs</td>
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