

Day 8 Update

September 16, 2007
Trinidad, CO to Dodge City, KS

When the Alumni Bike Race team congregated in their hotel's restaurant for breakfast in Trinidad, Colorado they were sore but excited to reap the rewards of their climb through the Rockies--a downhill slope all the way to the Mississippi River. The Penn group of Mike, Bruce, Nir, and Pat decided to ride the first half of the day's 180-mile trip to Montezuma, KS, while the Bucknell group of Frank, Walt, Jay, and Kyle took on the second leg beginning in Springfield, Colorado. Before long both groups realized that the roads through eastern Colorado and Kansas would not be the leisurely coast that they had envisioned.

The Bucknell van drove through the tiny farm towns of Pritchett and Kim, CO; towns so small that by the time the group members could point out the church, the school, and the cemetery on the main street, they were already beyond the "city's" limits. In Kim, hand-painted signs lined the street reading, "Not for Sale to the Army", a declaration of opposition against the recent proposal to expand the Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site, a 250,000 acre section of land used for military training to a massive 2.5 million acres, essentially the entire southeast corner of Colorado.

Between the towns stood only vast stretches of grassland, home only to wandering horses and cattle. While views were far less monumental than they had been in the Rocky Mountains, there was no shortage of wildlife. Along the road the Bucknell group met a rogue cow standing nonchalantly, chewing the green grass lining the pavement. A few miles later the group spotted a rattlesnake sunning itself, fortunately on the opposite shoulder than the one the riders were using. Flies, moths, beetles, and grasshoppers of extraordinary size all seemed to launch themselves at the riders from both groups throughout the day. One could barely ride a quarter-mile without feeling the thwack of an insect hitting his sunglasses.

The Penn group cycled with their usual format of three simultaneous riders and one driver, with Pat taking on an extensive part of the mileage. The van experienced the first encounter with rain of the entire trip, catching only the head of a thunderstorm cloud that flashed bolts of lightning before the group packed up and drove a few miles ahead to safety.

The Bucknell team rode across Route 160, past giant mounds of corn and vast fields of wheat and sunflowers, and into Kansas, the fifth state of the trip. The Sunflower State took little time in revealing one of its most prominent and foreboding features: fierce winds. Blowing perpendicular to the highway, riders were driven in from the road's shoulder by gusts that reached up to 35 miles per hour. Frank used the opportunity to teach the younger less experienced riders, Kyle and Jay drafting techniques for deflecting the wind for fellow riders, but the relentless gusts made riding slow and nerve-rackingly unstable for much of the 90 mile second leg of the trip. Despite descending from 6,000 to 2,900 feet of elevation, much of the afternoon felt like an uphill climb against the powerful winds. Outside Montezuma the Bucknell team stopped amongst sprawling amber fields of sorghum, a crop usually raised for animal consumption, to admire rows of towering 295-foot electricity-generating wind turbines. The team members couldn't help but laugh at the realization that they had spent the late afternoon riding through an area used as a wind farm in the third most productive

state in the US for wind energy. With the core group of senior alumni riders back at full strength (Bruce recovered significantly from his cold) they recorded strong numbers. Frank and Walt each put in 50 and 55 miles and Mike and Bruce contributed 62 and 54 miles.

After finishing their mileage despite losing an hour from crossing into the Central Time Zone, both groups drove from Montezuma, KS to Dodge City, the closest town with a hotel. Worn out by the wind and surprisingly hot sun (over 100 degrees by midday), the riders relaxed and prepared for 2 more days crossing Kansas's often desolate yet strangely beautiful terrain.