

Appalachia

Volume 68
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2017: Stories from the
Albums*

Article 3

2017

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Recommended Citation

Carlson, Francis (2017) "The Great Bicycle Expedition of 1936: Three Teens, 600 Miles, and \$15," *Appalachia*: Vol. 68: No. 2, Article 3.
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The Great Bicycle Expedition of 1936

Three teens, 600 miles, and \$15

Francis Carlson



SOMETIME BEFORE THE END OF MY SECOND YEAR IN HIGH SCHOOL, in 1936, my friends Peter Scully and Charlie Bacon and I decided that summer would be a great time to take a bicycle trip through New England. Two weeks seemed to be long enough to do this. We reviewed automobile maps for specific routes and more or less decided that a circuit of about 600 miles passing through western Massachusetts, central Vermont, up the west side of Lake Champlain, back across Vermont, and through the White Mountains would make a nice trip. We did not have much bicycle travel experience, and there was no one to offer us any advice, but it seemed to us that 60 miles a day for a couple of weeks would be fine. We could sleep along the road in a pup tent and cook our meals as we saw fit. Rain? It never entered our minds, nor did all the other possible calamities, such as injuries, sickness, accidents, hunger, thirst, insects, clothes, or equipment failure. After all, we were Boy Scouts, and we had gone to camps and been on several hikes and overnights.

For equipment, I had an old U.S. Army pup tent, or two shelter halves as the military calls them, and a rubberized ground cloth so we could have the protection of a tent at night. Each of us had a blanket. We also had small haversacks mounted on the handlebars to carry our clothes and equipment, and we each had a canteen of water. We carried some kind of rudimentary cooking equipment, possibly a GI meat can and a small cooking pot. It turned out that cooking was no trouble; we simply did not cook, and we ate food that did not require heating. Each day was a learning process, and we overcame the many problems of cooking by avoiding complicated meals.

Clothing was simple. None of us owned or were even aware of clothing designed specifically for outdoors, and we simply took cotton trousers and shirts, a sweater and a raincoat, and wore sneakers and cotton socks. Raincoats were the only garments we wore that had been designed for outdoors. They were bulky, heavy, and stiff, and we used them only once. We planned on summer weather, so what we wore was not of great concern.¹

1. Of course, adventure gear and preparedness have both expanded since the 1930s. We would be remiss if we did not note that even summer weather in this area can be cold, wet, and hazardous. See *AMC's Mountain Skills Manual* by Christian Bisson and Jamie Hannon (Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2017). —Editor.

Francis Carlson, left, and Bill Ashbrooke sit on the porch of the former hut at Pinkham Notch in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, reading alarming headlines about World War II in the summer of 1940, a few years after the events of this story. COURTESY

OF FRANCIS CARLSON

So we started off on day 1 a little late, about 10 A.M., and Peter made the comment that we should leave earlier if we were going to do 60 miles a day. But the first day was quite successful and went according to our best intentions. We left Winchester, Massachusetts, and passed through Lexington, on to Concord, Littleton Common—at that time way out in the country—and on to Shirley, Ayer, Fitchburg, and Ashburnham, all places new to us. Finally, at Winchendon, we decided to spend the night. We located a private campground on a lake and set up camp right on the water. Our meal was the first of many on the trip that was sort of a joint effort, not completely planned but in the whole satisfying. After we cleaned up, the owner of the camp came by to inspect us. I am sure he had some reservations and questions about these kids, with no apparent adults in sight, and their trip. We just told him the facts, and he seemed satisfied and left us to spend a quiet night, the first time all day that we had rested. We had covered about 60 miles, as we had expected, and we were tired. But we were pleased with ourselves and slept well.

Breaking camp after breakfast took longer than we expected. But we managed to leave Winchendon by midmorning. We headed west toward Bellows Falls, Vermont, passing over the west end of the Monadnocks at Fitzwilliam and Troy and reaching Keene, New Hampshire, by noon. It occurred to us at that time that we should have a camera with us. In Keene, I purchased the cheapest thing available, a Kodak box camera, for one dollar. As it turned out, it was a waste of money because I found it a nuisance to stop for pictures, and the prints were too small to see, and I lost them almost as soon as they were printed. One of the mistakes of this trip.

After noting Keene's wide main street, we were off to Vermont. On the road in Walpole, Charlie called out that something was wrong with his bike. His chain had broken, and we needed a new link to repair it. This did not bother us; we knew we could fix it if we could find the part. We all knew how to deal with these problems. Three years before, when I had received my new Columbia, the first thing I'd done was take it apart, down to the New Departure coaster brake, to see how it worked. Everything on a bicycle was nuts and bolts and easily repairable if one had the right-sized wrench. At that time, each bicycle came with a kit of tools.

Walking and coasting whenever possible, Charlie came along until we reached Bellows Falls, Vermont, where the hardware store carried a link. We soon repaired the chain. This was the only problem we had with our bikes. Even the tires stood up well.

BELLOWS FALLS IN 1936 WAS A POOR-LOOKING TOWN JUST RECOVERING from the severe flooding of that spring. We passed through and started on the road to Rutland. We spent the night sleeping behind a roadside stand—with the owner's permission—and lay awake to the sound of trucks climbing and descending the steep road leading over the Green Mountains. We had paid 25 cents each to stay, and the owner of the stand insisted that breakfast was included. We ate bacon and eggs, potatoes, and big pieces of pie. We left in a happy mood.

But it was a slow ride over the hills to Rutland; we arrived at about 5 P.M. We stayed at a campground on the west side of the city and cooked some sort of a meal. In the evening, another camper, a retired Army colonel, visited us. He inspected our camp and advised us to always pitch our tent with the closed end toward the north, advice I have always remembered.

From Rutland, we headed toward Ticonderoga, New York, passing through Brandon and then heading west on a dirt road to Orwell and Chipman's Landing for the ferry across the southern end of Lake Champlain. Just short of the ferry, the dirt road narrowed and appeared sunken. At 4 o'clock, cows crowded onto it, heading toward a barn for the evening milking. We could find no way around them, and we talked with the herder, who seemed quite proud that more cows than people lived in Vermont, that the milk was the best, and that the farms were the best. Finally, we reached the shore of the lake and waved to the ferryman across the water. But he, seeing no cars, just three kids with bikes, refused to come across for us. After about a half-hour, a man came by in a large rowboat. He took us across for a dollar a person. This was probably a bonanza for him, but we had just spent our daily budget.

IT WAS DARK WHEN WE FINALLY LOCATED A SMALL, PARKLIKE SETTING on a hill outside Ticonderoga and made camp. Here we would stay two nights. We considered that we had done quite well so far, covering almost 200 miles without mishap.

The fifth day, being Saturday, was more or less a day of rest. We slept late and, after a cold breakfast, rode our bicycles out to Fort Ticonderoga. It was then being restored. The weather was foggy with some rain and drizzle; the road to the fort, through evergreens and over the remnants of Revolutionary War earthworks, was fairly dismal. The sight of the unfinished fort did not impress us. We tried to get in for free, stating we were Boy Scouts from Massachusetts on a tour of New England, and we were let in at reduced rates.

We were already concerned about having enough money to finish the trip. We knew that we would take a ferry at Port Kent, which could really cost some money. We spent the rest of the forenoon and much of the afternoon in and around the fort. The weather cleared somewhat. Even without any military sense or training, we could see that this fort commanded the passage down the lake into New York and the Hudson Valley.

Sunday continued cold and damp. Peter went to church, and Charlie and I spent the time closing up camp and packing for what promised to be a difficult day traveling up the west side of Lake Champlain in the rain and wind. We covered about 60 miles with the wind in our faces and a cold view of the lake on the right (east). We rested several times but always cut those stops short, thinking of the ferry trip across the lake. Passing Ausable Chasm on a bridge with a rather spectacular view into the river, we knew we had reached the end of the difficult part of the trip. We coasted down to Port Kent.

The ferry arrived. We paid our fare and boarded, feeling that satisfied comfort that comes after a rugged and tiring exercise. Charlie thought the water on the ferry was the best he had ever tasted. It was good, but only because we were so thirsty.

After a good trip across the lake, it was inevitable that we would get lost in the big city of Burlington. We took the wrong road and went north toward Essex rather than east to Montpelier. When we realized our mistake, we had gone 8 or 10 miles out of our way. It was too late to turn around—we'd covered 60 miles that day—so we found a quiet grove of pines near the highway, put up our tent, and passed a quiet night.

IT RAINED OVERNIGHT. WE STARTED OUR SECOND WEEK IN CLEARING weather but with wet tents and wet blankets. We slowly gathered ourselves together and ate a cold breakfast, put our gear away, and retraced our route until we found the right road to Montpelier. As I remember, we had more or less given up on group cooking by this point, planning our own meals of mostly bread, milk, and canned fruit. We held a contest to see who could live the longest on canned Franco-American spaghetti (heated or cold); the winner lasted four meals. We traveled east along the Winooski River, passing through Bolton Notch with Camel's Hump to the south. We camped somewhere east of Montpelier, having covered about 50 miles of uneventful roads.

The next day, day 8, we continued east along the Winooski, reaching Danville about noon. Here we spent one of the trip's memorable lunch stops. We each purchased a quart of milk for 10 cents at the local store, along with



The boys bicycled through the picturesque countryside around Danville, Vermont, shown here as it looked at that time. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

bread and canned fruit. We sat on the beautiful common, looking east across the Connecticut River Valley. The milk was unpasteurized, rich, and cold. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, it was warm, and the beautiful river valley spread before us.

Our next stop was Saint Johnsbury. We visited the Cary maple sugar factory. Being thrifty Vermonters, they were not generous with their samples, but they did take us through some of the plant so that we could see how the sugar was made. Before we left, we parted with some money for sugar to help the company in those hard times. We bicycled on in the hot afternoon to Bethlehem, New Hampshire, where we spent the night.

From Bethlehem, we passed through Twin Mountain and headed north to Jefferson, finally down the big hill into Gorham for lunch. Then we had a hard ride south into Pinkham Notch in the afternoon. This was a long day. The country seemed different than Vermont. No more green hills and pastures; now we were into more rugged terrain and forests. We pushed and rode hard up Route 16 to the Glen House. We were allowed to camp in the field at the base of the carriage road (now the Mount Washington Auto Road) for no charge.

WE SET ASIDE DAY 10 FOR A CLIMB UP MOUNT WASHINGTON, ABOUT which we knew very little. A climb seemed to be the thing to do on a beautiful

summer day. We hitchhiked to the Appalachian Mountain Club's Pinkham Notch Camp (as it was then called) and got directions to the peak. Up the old Tuckerman Ravine Trail, past Hermit Lake Shelters, and up the headwall and cone to the summit. The weather was fine and clear, and we amused ourselves on the way up trying to name all the states in alphabetical order (Charlie was the only one who could do it). We found out we were not supposed to get into the Tip-Top House without paying a dollar, but we managed to get in and buy something to eat. Then we walked down the carriage road. We were stopped at the Halfway House, where we had to pay 16 cents (2 cents a mile). We could see no other way, so we paid. We got back to the base at about 4:30 P.M., very tired.

The next day, we planned to go to Franconia via Crawford Notch. We had to push our bicycles back up to Pinkham Notch, but from there, the ride to Jackson was all downhill and fast. Turning at Glen to go up to Crawford Notch, the road started climbing again, and the going was slow. By the afternoon, the weather had turned cold and cloudy. By the time we reached the Willey House, it was raining and dark. The rain soon turned into a downpour. We were soaked, tired, cold, and exhausted. It was apparent that we were also homeless. Peter, who was not only good-looking but very socially adept, located the officer in charge of a local Civilian Conservation Corps camp. He said he would put us up for the night. We bunked in the barracks with the men; it being July 3, many of the CCC men were on leave and lots of beds were empty. We had our first hot meal in ten days and soft beds. We slept like the dead, only awakened a couple of times by voices asking, "Who's that?" and talking about the Fourth of July dance they'd just returned from. We paid no attention. God bless FDR² and the CCC.

IN RETROSPECT, THE REST AT THE CCC CAMP WAS A GODSEND. WE HAD spent ten days rigorously cycling, eating poorly, and probably overdoing our trip. We did not really notice that we were tired, but we immediately felt the relief of sleeping comfortably and eating properly. The next day, we continued our uphill struggle, riding and pushing our bicycles up to Crawford Notch, past the railroad station and hotel. By noon, we had returned to Twin Mountain and passed on toward Franconia. More hard riding and pushing bicycles got us up Route 3 to Franconia Notch. It was the Fourth of July, and the then-two-lane road was crowded with plenty of tourist traffic. To amuse

2. President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

ourselves and to watch for cars on the narrow road, we counted the makes of automobiles that passed us. We finally had to agree with Charlie that at least one car in five was a Ford. We paused at Echo Lake for peanut butter and raisin bread and discussed where to stop for the night. We were completely undecided. So we just kept on going, probably pausing at Profile Lake to see the Old Man of the Mountain. We continued on Daniel Webster Highway (Route 3) and kept going.

We passed through Plymouth and Franklin, where finally, late in the afternoon, we stopped for a rest. We knew we had to stop riding for the day soon. Charlie remembered a friend who had moved to a farm in Tilton, so we turned east and arrived unannounced at the rather large, impressive farmhouse at about 7 in the evening. Charlie's friend was not there. His parents fed us a nice meal and bedded us down in the straw in the barn. Two nights in a row of comfortable sleeping—our trip was ending in great fashion.

On day 13, after a big breakfast, we left at about 7 A.M. and passed through Concord and Manchester, where we turned onto Route 28 through Derry and Windham, then into Massachusetts and through Lawrence, Andover, and Reading. At about 4 o'clock, we were pedaling for all we were worth, Peter ahead of me and Charlie about 100 yards back. Then we all knew we would reach Winchester that night. And we made it at about 5 o'clock. We covered 90 miles on the last day, after about 95 the day before. No wonder I am not impressed with new ten-speed bicycles when my old Columbia took me all that distance without a failure. I can remember standing in front of the old Economy Grocery Store in Winchester that evening, telling someone it was our last day. I told him about the 600 miles we had traveled, the Green and White mountains, climbing Mount Washington, and more. This someone was not impressed. Even the local paper, the *Winchester Star*, printed a four-line comment. My father asked only whether we had had a good time.

But, who cared? We had had an adventure. An exciting trip. We had survived in good health and spirits. A great experience for fifteen-year-olds, eh? And who else had parents confident and affluent enough in 1936 to let us go and provide the \$15 needed to finance two weeks of travel in Depression-torn New England? We surely were lucky kids.

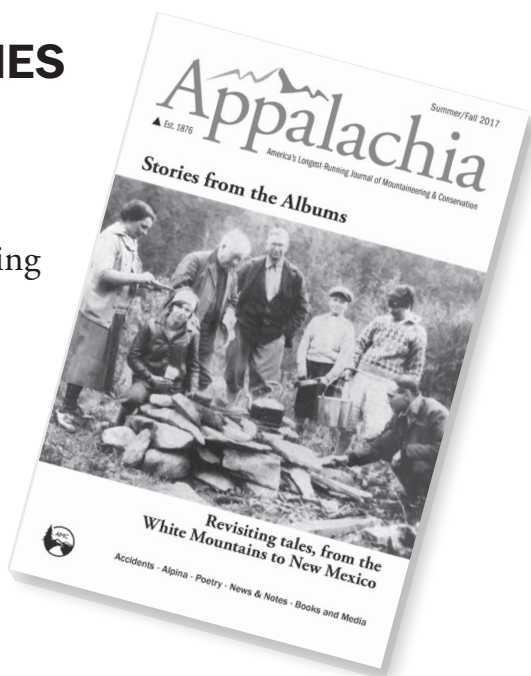
FRANCIS CARLSON lives in Hingham, Massachusetts. He first drafted this essay in 1994 and sent it to *Appalachia* last year. He joined the Appalachian Mountain Club in 1937. He worked on the croo at Lakes of the Clouds and Carter Notch huts in 1940 and 1941, before serving in the U.S. Army during World War II.

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