

Fixed Gear on the Southern Tier

**By
Chris “Cleanshave” Miller**



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This book describes the author's experiences while traveling and reflect his opinion relating to those experiences. Some names, trail names, and identifying details of individuals mentioned in the book have been changed to protect their privacy. Many of the characters have been combined from a variety people to simplify the overall narrative.

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The Pulp Travel Series is to Travel Literature what Pulp Magazines were to Literary Fiction. The series is loosely based on the now long forgotten zine format. A small circulation, self published collection of writing where profit is not the primary intent of publication. Each addition to the series will focus on one part of the low budget traveling lifestyle from a personal perspective. Either a short adventure that begins by thumbing a ride to an unknown city, being dropped off at a trailhead for a long hike or riding a cheap bicycle down forgotten roads.

Although zines were mostly photocopied, this series of short travel related adventures is an evolution of that model of creation and distribution as demanded by the logistical limitations of being homeless and without an income while living on the road.

As such the Pulp Travel Series often involves the use of foul language, adult situations, imaginative use of sentence structure and has a general lack of copy editing. Please do not buy this book/zine if that is going to be a problem for your personal enjoyment.

Read the Kindle sample, it's free.

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Planning the Fixed Gear Coast to Coast Bike Tour

Some people spend a year or more planning their coast to coast bike tour. I've never been who does a lot in the way of planning. The fact is that besides the Southern Tier going from Florida to San Diego I didn't know a whole hell of a lot about it. I just figured it's late in the year and that's about as far south as you can go without a passport.

Planning, for me anyway, meant becoming a member of Adventure Cycling and purchasing the entire map set of the Southern Tier. They arrive in the mail a few days before I am scheduled to fly out to Jacksonville.

Planning done?

Maybe I hit Google to find a place to stay, try to figure out how exactly one gets from JAX to St. Augustine without renting a car. A public bus runs from JAX airport, (CT3?), to the Greyhound terminal for \$1.50, the bus from there to St. Augustine is another \$15. Not Bad, from there I can walk to the Pirate Haus.

As long as I can get to the starting point of the Southern Tier the rest will work itself out.

Only a bike tour needs one other thing besides a route to follow. It needs a bike.

Sure I had a bike. For two years I had neglected the cheap mountain bike, leaving it locked up outside to fend for itself in snow drifts and rain storms. It creaked a little when I tried to ride it, after replacing the flat inner tubes, and took it on a test run. Four nights bike camping around Narragansett, Rhode Island.

It could work...

... only 5 days of cycling made me realize two things, #1 – it wasn't going to be worth it to fix and ship this bike the way it was, and #2 – though I was a strong long distance hiker, cycling used an all together different set of muscles. Not to mention my sore ass.

Why not start from scratch? Without spending a lot of money would that be possible? Fly into JAX without a bike and pick one up there?

That sounds like fun, it sounded borderline stupid. So of course that's the plan. Throw the maps, tent and sleeping bag in my backpack and hop in the plane to fly to JAX. Once there pick up a cheap bike for under \$100 and pedal west.

Keep it simple.

What could go wrong?

Getting There

In retrospect the timing between travel connections shouldn't have caused as much stress as it did. I had purchased the cheapest airline ticket I could find to Jacksonville (JAX). This was out of Boston's Logan Airport (BOS) instead of the closer Providence Airport (PVD). The problem was that the flight was early in the morning, too early to reliably take public transportation and make it on time. And since I don't own a car, and would never ask someone to be up that early to give me a ride, that meant that I would have to go into Boston the night before.

No big deal.

I commuted up, and in what has become a pre-adventure last meal, stopped at Tasty Burger for dinner. At least if I died in the flight down I would have had a decent burger.

The timing as far as weather was ideal, I had missed the little bit of Hurricane Sandy in Florida and now was flying out ahead of it making landfall here in the north.

By about 11pm I decided to take the shuttle out to my terminal and settle in for a night of reading and maybe sleeping in a hard steel chair before my flight. My only immediate worries were getting my backpack through security. What kind of camping gear is allowed and not allowed? I had already shipped my bike tools and tent ahead to the Prate Haus Hostel, but were they going to say something about the long handled spoon, my water filter, the lion claw hanging off the side of my pack?

Nope, I went right through and quickly boarded the plane after spending only 7 hours in Logan. Turbulance was a bit much as we passed by the western edges of Hurricane Sandy but otherwise it was an uneventful flight, I slept most of the way.

Arriving at JAX I was worried about the bus connection. The CT3 ran from the airport into downtown Jacksonville, however it ran infrequently and I had only two chances to catch it before I would miss my Greyhound bus to St. Augustine.

The bus stop was remarkably easy to locate and despite the driver eating a hot dog and driving at the same time I got off at the Rosa Parks Transit Center. Had I known that the very next stop on the CT3 was the Greyhound terminal I would have stayed on instead of walking the 8 or so blocks, even then I was almost 2 hours early for my bus.

By the time I was supposed to have been in St. Augustine we still hadn't boarded the bus in Jacksonville. The original bus couldn't be started and they had to locate and switch everyone out to a new bus. At least I had a reservation at the hostel.

Once I was dropped in St. Augustine I walked to the hostel. On my info/direction sheet I had printed up at home I had three different routes to walk to the hostel. It was overkill, the hostel isn't as far as I had thought and a quick walk down the very touristy St. George Street got me there in no time.

Now, with a place to stay, I just had to get a bike.

The Fixed Gear Bike

I have no idea why I decided to do this ride on a fixed gear bike. Something about the simplicity, and maybe because towards the end of my last tour I was forced to hold the gear shifter in place if I wanted anything but the lowest gear. That bike was a mess though having barely survived South Carolina's roads and being hit by an SUV in Key Largo.

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So I didn't want to spend a lot of money on the bike, esp. since I wasn't sure what was happening once I got to San Diego. It would almost be Christmas, was I flying home? Riding south through Baja, Mexico? Hopping on the Sunset Limited or the Southwest Chief? Who knew?

So for \$99 Walmart had a fixed gear bike that looked decent and I had it shipped to the store in St. Augustine.

They were even nice enough to assemble it for me and they did a great job. I cruised out of the parking lot and up Route 1. As I mentioned I forgot to ship my bike lock, and had to pick up a bottle cage and rear rack as well.

At first I was surprised by the gear ratio, it was a little higher than I had anticipated and it was looking like this trip would be a huge workout. Hiking and Cycling use entirely different sets of muscles.

I only put on about ten miles the first day, over 20 the second day where I rode across the Bridge of Lions trying to guess where on the coast the Southern Tier began. Only later when I actually looked at the map did I realize that the beginning of the route is right around the corner from the Pirate Haus, at the base of the Bridge of Lions and where I had been watching the sunset from every night that I had been in St. Augustine.

I should probably look at the maps a little before I leave.

The problem was that my backpack wasn't quite as stable on the rear rack as I would have liked. After my last bike tour, which was also my first, I had sworn I would never again bungee cord a backpack to the rear rack. I swore I would invest in panniers.

Only I hadn't, it hadn't even occurred to me in the week or so before I left that I could have bought some online and had them shipped here. Oh well, time to Mickey Mouse something.

Time was growing short and there weren't a hell of a lot of options in St. Augustine so I ended up going with a couple of side baskets for the rear rack. It isn't pretty, it's kind of heavy, and I have no idea how exactly everything is getting packed.

But time is up, it's time to be hitting the road.

Southern Tier Day 1 – St. Augustine to Florahome

I wasn't sure how the day was going to go, esp. after the bike fell over while I was trying to take a picture at the Bridge of Lions and one of the rear baskets broke open. Still, what was there to do but put it back together and ride. As much as I wanted to it's not like I could live in the Pirate Haus forever.

Out King St. and across Route 1, or what they call Highway 1 if your from around here, and out 214 with doubts bouncing around in my head. The gear is too high, you're not strong enough, there's too much weight on the back tire, why don't you go home to that that girl who didn't want you to leave in the first place?

Be happy, get a job.

Then the farther I got into the Southern Tier route the less cars there were and the quieter my mind grew. Pretty soon I was just pedaling in the sun without a care in the world. Everything would work out.

Just pedal.

Before I knew it I was struggling to get the bike over the St. Johns River bridge. One foot at a time, push, breathe, swear. The road, like those around most populated areas was strewn with cast off debris from automobiles. Screws, bolts, and shredded tires. You had to watch the ground close trying to avoid flat tires.

Route 17 splits off the route and at the awkward left hand turn following 100 I met a couple on a pair of recumbant bikes. They had done a portion of the Atlantic coast and now were doing the Southern Tier as far as New Orleans, after that it would be too cold for them.

"You're doing this on a fixie?" The husband asked, "Wow, you're brave."

They mention something about my light gear load, meanwhile I'm still thinking that it's probably more stupid than brave and I have to get rid of something soon, all while admiring (coveting) their panniers.

They slowly slipped away from me over the next few miles, which made me feel like at least I was making some progress. Without a speedometer or odometer I had no way of knowing how fast or how far I had gone. The baskets had blown the budget as it was.

By the time I limped into Etonia State Forest Primitive Campsites I was ready to be done. Only there was no one around. Further up 100 to the turn off to the office and it was still another 2.3 miles up a sandy road before I could find a park ranger.

Forget that.

I cruised up the Palatka – Butler State Trail and found a place to discretely pitch a tent for the night.

Southern Tier Day 2 – Florahome to O’Leno State Park

Woke up in the middle of the night to a light so bright outside my tent that I thought I had accidentally stealth camped next to a baseball field. A discrete peak outside the door of my tent and I found that the light was simply a big bright moon just beyond the tree tops on a very clear night.

By morning it had fogged over, so much that I didn’t really notice sunrise. I packed and rode out the Palatka – Butler State Trail instead of riding down the side of the road. Which was good because no sooner than I started than I passed the Florahome Post Office, something was getting shipped ahead

After very little deliberation I sent forward my sleeping bag and sweater. Bulky items but not really heavy. Saved me maybe 3 pounds on the rear rack. Now just about everything fits in my backpack if I have to leave my bike somewhere, everything except the food which’ll be slimmed down as I eat it.

Today was a day of hills and roadkill. Cats, deer, raccoons, armadillos galore and a dog outside a veterinarian clinic. The hills were intimidating, a few I had to slowly huff and puff my way up and over, which is funny because these are Florida hills. Nothing compared to what I’ll have to deal with later.

Better get your ass in shape now buddy.

Somewhere north of Gainesville I stopped at a McDonald’s for internet access and some cheap food like double cheeseburgers. Which gives rise to the second rule of the ride: Only 1 double cheeseburger at a time.

The ride out of Gainesville wasn’t strenuous but the burgers and soda were all I could feel sitting in my stomach. My thighs burning is one thing, but the bulge in my gut was another.

I kept looking for stealth camping sites and thinking it was way too early, 3pm is not a great time to set up your tent and remain hidden even if it does get dark by 7pm. So I rolled into O’Leno State Park and took the first site available.

What the hell at least I could wash some of the salt crust off of me and and wash my socks and shirt and hang them out to dry.

And whoever left the site this morning had left enough hot coals that I had a self starting fire at dusk.

Southern Tier Day 3 – O'Leno State Park to Lee's Country Campground

Woke up to the sound of rain at 5am. It's foggy out and I reluctantly pull on my sneakers to go out and grab my cycling shirt and socks off the bungee cord clothes line where they were hanging to dry. So much for that.

Before I know it it is 8am, still the sound of rain outside. I roll over and a second later it's 9am. Check out isn't until 1pm and I was thinking about sleeping in, taking along shower and making breakfast. Maybe do a short day, my legs could use the rest.

Turns out the sound of rain was all it was, most of it was stopped by the canopy of leaves above my tent. I have a pounding headache and hesitate to make breakfast with the sulfur tasting tap water. There'll be something down the road...

The bike feels heavier than usual, harder to pedal.

At the general store near Ichetucknee Springs I stop for a half gallon of whole milk and a tray of glazed cinnamon pastries. It's too much and I know I'll regret it as soon as I start riding but I couldn't help myself.

A guy pulls in with a smashed up jeep, dented and full of leaves. The windshield is smashed in several places. "Damn kids!" he is yelling as he goes into the store to call 911. "Some 16 year old kid on a 4 wheeler ran me off the road," he is saying into the phone. That sucks I'm thinking, checking the air in my rear tire. It seems a little low but I ride away anyway. But I keep looking at it while I ride, is it lower than it was yesterday or am I just being paranoid?

Finally I decide to pull over and add some air, only there is no where to lean the bike. All of the street signs and telephone poles are 10 to 15 feet off the side of the road. So I walk my bike over to one and add some air.

That was my mistake. It turns out that there are these things in this part of Florida called Sand Spurs, and they will go right through your tire.

Within a mile I was flat. Only I still didn't know about the Sand Spurs so I pulled the bike off the road at the corner of 137 to replace the tube. When I get everything unpacked and the tube off I can't find the leak and it seems to be holding air just fine.

Hell, let's just put it back in and keep riding on it if it's just a slow leak. I know I'll probably regret it but what the hell?

Then back on the road I realize the Sand Spurs are everywhere, in the seat, my socks, the tires, and they hurt like a mf'er when they pierce your skin and stick to you. The tire holds up, and I can't tell if it's the same pressure as yesterday or not, I'm way over thinking it.

It's not until just outside of Wellborn when I stop for my first taste of water for the day that I have to add some air to the tire. About 20 miles from where I tried to find the leak. A slow 20 miles that seemed to take forever. There was no headwind or hills to blame, I'm just plain tired. My legs don't seem to have the strength today that they did yesterday. The whole bike feels heavier.

Maybe it's just the tire.

I decide to call it quits for the day just on the other side of Wellborn, at the junction of 137 and 136 where there are tons of stealth camping opportunities. Instead I head up towards Interstate 75 and Lee's Country Campground. I don't know why. I pass a decent amount of other camping spots, several closed gas stations and abandoned properties with plenty of hiding spaces, and I still end up heading to the campground to pay for a piece of ground to put my tent.

Oh, and pump up my tire one more time before I hit the campground.

Southern Tier Day 4 and 5 – Lee's Country Campground to Madison

I woke up on Day 4 and knew I wasn't going anywhere. I had to get my head straight if I was going to keep riding. No more thinking about San Diego, the end, Christmas, going back to work for the holidays to make money, or going back to Rhode Island because people wanted me to.

The slow leaking rear tire hadn't lost a bit of air since I pulled the Sand Spur from it and I rode into McDonald's to get online. Sad to say but I would never eat there, except they have wifi. Besides the McDonald's and a couple of gas stations the area around Interstate 75 the area looked abandoned. Plenty of empty and forgotten buildings surrounded the area, and a cluster of glaring cats snuck in and out of the woods periodically checking the local garbage.

I rented a DVD and basically sat around all day. But in a good way.

The morning of the 5th day the tire still hadn't leaked, maybe that slime was doing its job since I pulled out that Sand Spur. So I packed and rode away.

Even leaving late, having checked Facebook one last time like a good citizen, I put in the 25 miles to Suwannee River State Park by noon. I had originally planned on staying, taking another low mileage day and chilling out. But noon? Nah, I better keep riding.

After that it took me an hour and a half to do two miles.

The tire went flat and I pumped it up. Go up and over the railroad tracks and the tire looks flat again. I try to get off the bike and catch my foot on the side basket and rip it apart, everything spills out into the road. Pick everything up and rebuild the basket and add some more air to the tire. Make it as far as the peanut plant a few miles outside Lee and the tire is more than flat, it's dead.

Unpack the bike, flip it over and remove the tire to replace the inner tube with a new one. No problem, except my bike tool decides to disintegrate in my hands, the individual pieces falling to the ground. The bolt that held it together no where to be found. Deal with that later.

I go to pump up the new inner tube, now inside the tire and the air pump falls apart in my hands as well. You have to be kidding me. I put it back together and pump up the tire, repack the bike and my hand feels wet, only not wet. Cold like... oh shit, my stove fuel is leaking. Seriously?!

I pull that out of the bag and stand it up on its own and ride into Lee where the new inner tube is now flat. Of course there is no shade and I work on the bike to the side of the local convenience store when the Sheriff's department car pulls up. He sits in his car looking at me, looking at the screen on the computer in his car, then the gunshots could be heard in the distance and he pulled out and drove away with his lights on.

A couple of guys pull up in a beaten up pickup truck to buy a few cases of beer and chat with the store clerk. They say something about some local guy shooting up his own house. Even though you can still hear the occasional shot I'm more worried about this flat thing. Turns out there is a small piece of wire from a steel belted radial tire on the inside of the tire that couldn't be felt from the outside.

I decide that maybe this is what caused the slow leaking tube with the slime in it to leak faster. Besides which, at this point I have noticed that I originally bought the wrong sized inner tubes anyway, 700 x 32 instead of 700 x 38.

Only once the switch has been made my air pump no longer works. Luckily they have a compressed air hose on the side of the store. Hopefully that will hold.

Of course it doesn't, only now my air pump seems to be working and I only have to add air twice on the 8 miles to Madison. Stop for a cold slushie and the tire seems fine. Looks like I'm just going to ride until I have to stealth camp. Then I pass a Sheriff's department building and having heard that cyclists can occasionally tent behind them I decide to stop and ask.

The Sheriff doesn't seem too excited by the idea but tells me to camp down in the park next door as he is driving away. Only in the park is a big sign that says no camping, and there is no where to tent out of easy view.

Forget it, I'll keep riding.

Only now the tire is low again. Add some air and keep riding.

Then it's dead. I can see the cracks in the side wall from riding on it so low.

Again?! Why?!

I pull over and try to put some more air in but it doesn't hold. When I finally unpack the bike and remove the tube it's apparent that the valve stem has been pulled away from the rest of the tube. No way that's getting repaired.

My last tube and my air pump decides not to work again. I try and try and curse and try again.

Maybe I could stealth here somewhere... then what?

Southern Tier Day 6 – Greenville to Tallahassee

So how I woke up in Greenville is that after all those flats and being ready to call it quits for the day I walked into a large EMS dispatch station on the edge of Madison and asked to tent in a back corner for the night. My tire was still flat even though it had the last tube in it and my air pump was refusing to work. What did I have to lose?

“You can’t stay here... but let me call my pastor and see if we can find you some place to go,” the ambulance driver told me. Ten minutes later I had permission to camp behind the Methodist Church in Greenville, and the EMS driver was not only going to give me a ride but take me to fill up the new tube to make sure it holds.

“I believe we were put on earth to help each other,” she said simply later on the drive.

Dropped behind the church I quickly put up my tent in the darkest back corner, surprisingly out of view from anyone passing by. Besides the dogs barking most of the night I was awakened only by the sound of cheering, at first I couldn’t figure out what kind of party it was, then I realized they must have just announced the winner of the presidential election.

Listening to the cheering I wondered who the people in this area would have voted for, and thus who the winner was. I’d find out someday, after all it wasn’t really that important, and I rolled over to go back to sleep.

It got damn cold, close to the lower limit sleeping in my long johns with only the silk cocoon sleeping bag liner would handle. The maintenance guy showed up at 6am and hit me briefly with the outside lights before shutting them down. I felt guilty about being there and was up before my alarm set for 7am.

15 minutes later I was packed and on the road, walking the bike. After yesterdays mess I was afraid to sit on the bike for fear that the last inner tube would give out. I had to get to Tallahassee today, there was no other option. So if the tire blew out I’d be walking the bike the rest of the way.

Luckily it didn’t

I decided to deviate from the Southern Tier route and rode directly up 90 to cut off 10 or so miles to get into Tallahassee stopping only at Lake Miccosukkee for a snack break. After that the break down lane disappeared and I was riding in the traffic with no shoulder. No wonder why the Southern Tier doesn't go this way.

Plus the hills sucked, and they got worse the closer I got to Tallahassee, a city which surprisingly doesn't have a hostel. Having already decided to hotel it I wanted to get there as early as possible, to eat, to relax, to watch cable tv and just veg out.

45 miles for the day and I ride over to Walmart looking for a pair of shorts to replace the ones I'm wearing, the ones that as of today no longer have a crotch. Only Walmart here doesn't carry shorts this time of year. They do however carry inner tubes in my size and a replacement bike tool. But no slime.

I was going to hit Joe's Bike Shop today but a rotisserie chicken and a 2 liter bottle of Coke said to go back to the hotel room and watch cable.

Southern Tier Day 7 – Tallahassee to Sneads

It's always hard to leave a hotel room knowing that the night to come will not be anywhere near as comfortable. But a bike tour is a bike tour because we ride, not because we sit in hotel rooms eating entire chickens and Facebook'ing people after we have had a few cocktails.

I had the replacement tubes but I wanted Slime to coat the inside and prevent slow leaks. Thinking about those damn Sand Spurs.

"I hate that stuff and I don't carry it," the bike shop owner said looking up from the lawn chair in front of his store when I asked.

"I didn't think you would," I said having heard that "real" cyclists deplore the stuff, though I have no idea why. "I just had a few flats yesterday from Sand Spurs and..."

"You shouldn't ride in the grass," the younger guy in the plastic lawn chair next to him says with a hint of chuckle in his voice.

"Are you touring?" the owner asked looking over at my bike. When I told him I was and started to tell him about my ride he interrupted, "Traveling kinda light," he pointed out.

"Actually I'd love to get rid of some stuff but heard New Mexico can be pretty cold this time of year," I said trying to make light of freezing to death.

"You'll hit ice storms by the time you get to Kansas," the younger guy in the chair next to him says without looking up from the all important business on his smart phone.

"The baskets were a bad idea," the owner points out.

I laugh because nothing positive has been said the entire conversation. "Unless you've got some used panniers..."

"Nope, nuthin used," the owner replied.

Then nothing. A long silence followed, interrupted only by the snickering of the younger guy typing something into his phone. A long silence that could have been filled with what he does have, maybe another option. Forget it.

“Well, thanks anyways guys,” I say grabbing my bike and walking away.

The ride to Chattahoochee was uneventful, which I like. No flats, no drama. Just riding.

Called all of the campgrounds but not a single one answered the phone. It's getting late, and with the sun setting early I had to find a place to stay. Why I was fixated on finding a campground as opposed to stealth camping is beyond me.

I pushed on to Sneads, across the Apalachicola River, and into the Central Time Zone. One hour behind. Sunset is now at 5pm. That's a little too early for normal.

No one answers again but I ride into the Seminole Lodge Campground and Marina anyway. No one is around, “Just tent in the trees,” my brain keeps telling me. Only it feels like stealing. So I ride around, looking for the owner, for someone awake and moving around.

I see an older guy sitting outside his trailer and staring into a fire.

“Do you know where I could find someone who works here?”

“The owners' right over there in that that trailer,” he says nodding his head in the direction of a cluster of trailers.

“Which one?”

“That one,” he says still not pointing or adding a description, just nodding his head. So I walk in that general direction when he starts yelling at what I imagine is the top of his lungs, “Hey! Monte! You got a guy out here!”

To be honest I didn't catch the name part and I had to ask again, “M O N T E, Monte, that's me,” he says shaking my hand. “Been here 15 years...” he says and is surprisingly friendly and easy going. In fact he is super informative about the area and I'm tempted to ask how much it is to stay the week. Except I have to get to my sleeping bag, it has been kinda cold at night, and I have to keep moving.

“Stop thinking about relaxing,” my brain says.

So I pick a spot at the edge of the lake to tent, the sun has already set and my cell phone is charging on an outlet at a nearby telephone pole. The cold moves in fast and I wished I had found a Home Depot to make a tent ground sheet out of Tyvek instead of using the all weather blanket, because tonight I might need it.

Southern Tier Day 8 – Sneads to Chipley

Soon after the sun set the cold moved in. I put on my long johns and with the time change it got dark early so I squeezed into my tent and tried to read by headlamp. Try because the phone, which I had charged on the telephone pole near where I tented, kept going off with text message after text message.

After sunset the cold moved in.

Soon my hands were too cold to hold the book I was reading by headlamp and I had to dig out my winter hat and gloves. If I needed those now how bad was it going to get over night? I slipped into the cocoon sleeping bag liner and tried not to worry about it. What else could I do? Put on my rain jacket, maybe pull the all weather blanket from underneath the tent and actually use it for what I got it for and not as a ground sheet.

I ignored the phone for a while and fell asleep. A little after 10pm I was awake again, the cold had seeped in, it must have been below 40 already. I reluctantly got out of the tent and slipped the all weather blanket out from under it, gave it a shake to try and get rid of any dirt or moisture it had picked up and slipped it into the tent.

It was awkward but soon it was positioned over me. Not really like a blanket but at least the reflective part was facing my body, it actually felt like it was working. I went back to sleep for a few hours.

Pre-dawn sunlight and I was shivering, wrapped in the blanket as much as possible it wasn't really helping. Besides which it seemed to have been catching every exhale, the condensation covered its surface and soaked parts of the sleeping bag liner.

I pulled it away from around my head and noticed for the first time how bright it was, oh yeah, time change. My clock says 7 but its actually 8 just across the river.

Up, cold and shivering, pack the bike and check the tire. Still good, that's a good sign, I wanted to push a little farther today than usual, so even though I could have slept in I decided to be up and out early. I figure as long as I'm on the road by 8am that'll give me four hours to push at least 40 miles by noon. Then only another 20 ??? or so to push to Ponce De Leon. That way I could hit Argyle early in the morning to pick up my sleeping bag. If the post office is even open on Saturday.

Noticed the bulges and split seam in Marianna. Thought about how I kept looking at those tires in the Walmart in Tallahassee. Thinking about how rough the slow leak was on the tire itself, and how it looked that night in Madison. Why didn't I buy a spare then? Because I kept thinking about buying a quality one online and having it shipped to me, with the Amazon gift certificate I had.

Thump, thump, thump. The sound the tire made before the loud crack of the tube exploding out the sidewall.

Walking into Chipley, still in the long johns, sweating. Thinking about how maybe Chipley was big enough to have a walmart. Too bad they don't put up billboards like mcdonalds. And just then I looked up and there was a billboard for verizon store, next to walmart. I laughed out loud, I didn't know if they would have the tire I needed but id take it as a sign. Besides which the walmart was to the south, towards the falling waters state park and the only place to camp in the area. Maybe today would work out.

Walk out to walmart seems to take forever. Unpack the bike and try to get everything in the backpack. Throw that in a carriage, around here they call them buggies. Luckily they have a tire in my size. I debate about the slime, but I dont want to spend the extra \$9 and it turns out you cant put it in presta valves anyway.

Outside it took me a few minutes to figure out how to use my pump to inflate the presta valve, id never used one before, that and the pump didnt seem to want to work again. It didnt help that every tool in my bag was coated with fruit punch gatorade crystals. A packet I had in the handle bar bag broke.

I had never put on a new tire before either so this was all something new to attempt in some shade in the front of the walmart. The pump fails and fails again. Take it apart and rebuild it, it seems to work, though I'm not sure what I did.

Lock up the bike again after a test spin, feels good, and go in to change, get out of the long johns and put on the new dollar store shorts I bought for \$2. finally to be able to ride in a pair of shorts with a crotch in them.

When I come back out to the bike an older lady smoking a cigarette approaches me, tells me she used to be homeless and can spot someone who is a mile away. She has a large silver cross hanging from her neck and is skinny like an ex junkie.

She used to pack everything she owned on her bike when she was in california, a long time ago.

She tells me to get food stamps and a government sponsored tracfone.

Luckily her mom comes out of walmart and they go off to their car together.

I ride down to the state park, plenty of time to set up and relax. It's already getting cool. I'm sorry hun, there are no more spots, were all full up.

And that's that. I'm left there at the gate with no where to go. I try to explain the flats hoping for something, a spot in the corner here by the check in gate. Anything. But no. I look at my map, try to think of anyplace I might have passed that would be decent. Fuck its going to be cold tonight. I ride back into Chipley looking a little more intently at the area. Maybe here, maybe there. I'll go to mcdonalds and kill some time online, until dark and just slip in somewhere.

Southern Tier Day 9 – Chipley to DeFuniak Springs

I killed sometime in the McDonald's back up the road in Chipley. Drinking way too much soda and checking the weather online well after dark, which isn't hard when it gets dark at 5pm.

I put on my long johns in the bathroom, I hate walking around with my 'tights' on, but it's too cold and I don't have pants. Without rear reflectors or blinking lights on my bike I said I would never ride after dark, and yet here I was, in the dark, dressed in grey, looking for a place to sleep.

Hobo.

Luckily I had spotted a decent area just off the on ramp to Interstate 10, flat where I could pitch my tent, and shielded by trees so I wouldn't be spotted. Unfortunately as I pulled up to the location the police had beat me to the punch. They had pulled over a trucker within 100 yards of where I had planned on staying. Really, right now?

Not wanting to linger, and not really having an excuse for being in the area if I was questioned I moved down the road, looking for another spot, or at least a place to kill some time until I could go back to the original plan.

In a small parking area down the road I ducked into the trees when there were no passing cars and was quickly obscured into the darkness. Beyond the light, beyond view from any who would look. Seemingly as if to prove this point a pickup truck pulled up within 20 feet of where I was trying to prepare for the night. The driver got out of the truck, belched loudly then through a beer bottle into the woods to the left of where I was kneeling. He unzipped his pants and peed into the tree line.

"If he sees me now he is going to think I'm some kind of pervert," I thought.

Then he got back into his truck and sat there. "Great, he's the pervert. What is this some kind of sex cruising area? Is this what I have to look forward to all night?"

And because a part of me hates stealth camping here so close to 'civilization' my brain kept running different nighttime scenarios, each worse than the last. By the time the pickup drove away my brain had enough stories to keep me going all night.

“This is your ‘Adventure’?” My brain asked.

“You’re 40 years old and hiding out in the woods next to the highway to sleep because you have no where else to go?”

“That’s adventure?”

I fell asleep wrapped in my all weather blanket with my hat and gloves on watching the night sky, shooting stars and listening to far away dogs barking.

In the morning I carry my bike back to the pavement, afraid of the slightest puncture.

After that I pedal. Pedal and pedal. There’s nothing else to do. I try not to think about how over budget I am, or how I lost my sunglasses while camping on the side of the highway. I try not to worry about being cold, maybe I’ll push hard and try to make it to the post office to pick up my sleeping bag before they close.

I pass the first cyclist heading the other direction and loaded down with gear. “Southern Tier?” I shout

“Yeah! You?” She asks. “Yep!” And we’re separated. Would have been nice to chat but I’m just trying to make it into Argyle for my sleeping bag. Focused on the miles and the time. It’s Saturday, their online hours say they close at 11am.

Then a SAG vehicle goes by, I think that’s what it’s called, which strikes me as funny since she had so much gear hanging from her bike. Then two other cyclists. Must be a group ride. I pass three more and hear one of the cyclists yell to another, “Look, a fixie!”

Outside a diner are 5 or 6 more and I want to go in to eat, to chat, but I don’t have the money to eat and I so want to sleep warm for once. Post office. I can do it.

Then a few more cyclists and I’m torn, waking up this morning I had decided to have faith in where this trip was taking me. I said I would sit back and let it happen, without expectations or desires. Whatever happened happened. If that meant not getting the sleeping bag then so be it. No big deal.

Instead I pedaled harder, pushing on, cruising through Ponce De Leon realizing that I am going to make it. I killed those miles. I must have wanted that sleeping bag more than I realized.

Then the hills start. A little longer, a little steeper. I can still do this. I push until my legs burn. I see the small town of Argyle sign and start to wonder how I am going to find the post office in the limited amount of time I have left. If it's off a side street I'm in trouble.

Only Argyle is a small, small town. The post office is on the right hand side of the main road as soon as I cross the town limits. Just one car in the parking lot, Saturdays must be a slow day, probably just the postmasters.

Except the Saturday hours have been scratched off the glass door. No...

Please... with a sigh of relief the door opens, only it's the post office box room. No services on Saturday, and I made it with half an hour to spare according to their hours online. Now I'd have to wait until Monday to call and...

Monday is Veterans Day. No services then either. So Tuesday I'll have to call to have the sleeping bag shipped ahead, add another 4 days or so to get where I should be by then... That's another week without the sleeping bag.

No hurry now.

I ride slow in DeFuniak Springs, talking to myself, "Putting the Fun back in DeFuniak," over and over again until I realize that I'm stopped at an intersection and the girls in the car with their windows rolled down wont look in my direction.

Mainiac? No... DeFuniak!

I need to get out of the sun.

The manager of Kings Lake RV park is visibly upset when I tell here I was turned away at Falling Waters State Park the night before, "I never turn away cyclists no matter how full we are, we'll always find room for you."

The tent is an easy setup and I kick myself for not picking up a blanket at any of the dollar stores Florida seems to be made of. I go to look at my pictures from the day and realize that the video camera has been on in my pocket, recording for over an hour.

Great.

Southern Tier Day 10 – DeFuniak Springs to Blackwater River State Park

I order a Whopper with cheese, no pickles and the girl gives me a blank stare from behind glitter covered eyes. She looks down at the screen then back at me.

“You want a Whopper...” she presses a button, “did you want cheese?” She stops and looks at me, waiting. Really?

“Yes please,” I say and am surprised when she says, “And you said NO pickles right?” Emphasizing the NO to make sure I new the difference. “Right,” I say smiling, only she smiles back for the longest time.

“I didn’t even know it was lunch,” she says in a whisper that suggests it’s a secret then breaks eye contact and finishes the order. Not even lunch yet? What the hell time is it? 10:30am on the dot.

90 was so smooth out of DeFuniak Springs once you got past the construction that I was flying, but less than an hour and a half to do the 30 miles into Crestview? And why is that fast food restaurants and Walmart never have bike racks outside? I look around at the few customers and I can hazard a guess. Not many of them coming in under their own power.

Fast food and cheap imported goods. The theme of this bike ride? The reason for the apocalypse?

I’m wearing cotton for the first time that I can remember. Picked up a shirt someone left behind in the laundry room of the RV park. Out of the lost and found bin. It has what I assume is a sports logo on it and even worse a Pepsi logo on the shoulder. But to look less like a hobo I throw my \$45 synthetic hiking shirt away in exchange for this... cotton... advertisement.

Plus I shaved today, so definitely looking less like a homeless person.

Looking at the other customers flooding in for lunch I find it amusing that they probably slept pretty good in their bed with blankets and climate controlled air conditioning. Meanwhile I had to zip up my rain jacket and use it like a sleeping bag over my feet and

calves to stop the creeping cold that was working its way up my toes and numbing my feet.

I figured it out today. Why I like long distance bike rides and hiking. It's a prolonged separation from the senses. Kind of like an enforced meditation. I let my body do the pedaling and my mind goes elsewhere. My body pedals, watches for glass and discarded rusted auto parts while listening for approaching cars. I'm somewhere else.

And for a brief amount of time I'm off 90 and there are no other cars and the day is glorious.

Too soon I'm at Blackwater River State Park. Only registration doesn't open until 3pm. It's 2pm and a holiday weekend. What are the chances they'll still have a spot? I ride through the campground and see only two open locations. Two chances to get in the park if they haven't already been reserved online.

At least the ranger is punctual.

If only pounding the tent stakes into the gravel camping spot was as easy as checking in. I wasn't even sure it could be done and had to borrow a log from a neighbors campfire just to be able to get a half inch of purchase on the bottom of the stake.

Note to self: Do not shake tent.

And if it collapses on you in the middle of the night remember, "You are not being attacked!"

At least I remembered to pick up a blanket from the dollar store. A small blanket. Just as I'm thinking everything is fine the smell starts. First it's lighter fluid soaked charcoal briquettes, but that slowly fades away. That would have been fine, except it's followed by the smell of burgers and steaks.

I have another NutriGrain bar and try not to think about raiding neighboring campsites. I'm not even hungry I try to tell myself. But that smell...

Southern Tier Day 11 – Blackwater River State Park to Milton

I'm lazy.

And broke.

And the more I think about how broke I am the more it makes me want to be lazy and spend all the rest of my money. Then at least there'll be nothing left to worry about and I can get on with riding.

I finish brushing my teeth and shaving in the parks bathrooms and pass a girl who earlier refused to even make eye contact. I figured it was because she had just woken up and was self conscious about the way she looked. Now cleaned, primed and doused in what must have been a bottle and a half of perfume she didn't look any happier.

"Good morning," I said cheerfully.

Not even a nod in acknowledgement.

I try to imagine her forced to do real hiking without nearby running water and heated bathrooms, you know, to cheer myself up. Instead it just makes me sad.

It's overcast and the ride is cool temperature wise, and after a while I don't even have to deal with traffic, I'm on the offroad Blackwater Trail. There are only a few people out, an older lady jogging who suspiciously looks over her shoulder in case she needs help, a guy sitting wearing an oxygen mask out walking his dog who looks at me like he wishes he could be young again.

It's Veterans Day and the police have the side roads blocked off for an upcoming parade. People are starting to waddle into downtown Milton, looking for someplace to sit and watch the spectacle. I want to keep riding, forget about how little money there is left in the bank, but for some reason lose any will to keep pedaling once I reach 90 again. It's all there, the trash and broken glass on the side of the road, the auto traffic rushing by, less than a block away from the parade route and there isn't a single person outside their car. The drive thru lanes at the fast food restaurants are all backed up.

17 miles maybe. I'm done and I know it.

The hotel gives me a \$5 discount for being a cyclist. I'm registered early and have to wait for a room to be ready. The lady at the front desk hands me my set of towels to walk to my room and I do the first thing everyone does when they go into a hotel room. Turn on the TV. Weather channel says there is a thunder and lightning storm headed this way. Maybe that's why I decided to stay. Maybe.

I look up 'Milton Florida Liquor Store' in Google and the nearest one is 2 ½ miles away. I unpack the bike and notice that in the very next parking lot is a liquor store. It's their first day open and they are still packing stuff on to the shelves. I'm their first customer.

Lucky me.

Southern Tier Day 12 – Milton to Big Lagoon State Park

Maybe it's because my legs feel so much stronger but I'm super optimistic by the time I pedal out of Milton. Maybe it was the cocktails and the downtime, maybe it was because I finally made some headway on a project that could bring in a little money down the road....

Whatever it is even a car crash happening 20 feet in front of me, in the bike lane, doesn't get me down.

Now might be a good time to mention the helmet thing.

As many of you have already noticed, I do not wear a bicycle helmet. Never have.

I know it's stupid and such a small price to pay for saving my life from what could be a fatal accident, and yet I still don't wear one.

I think everyone should, definitely, even me. Except I can't convince myself to wear one. A couple years ago when I did the fundraising ride on the East Coast Greenway for Meals on Wheels I bought one to wear, then hung it on my handle bars where it rode from Providence, Rhode Island to Key West, Florida never having been worn.

It was then left in the hostel lost and found, unused.

It's not because I don't expect to be in an accident on the bike. I have been hit by at least a half dozen cars and pickup trucks while riding my bicycle and know it can happen when you least suspect it and there is almost nothing you can do to prevent it from happening.

Pensacola felt like nothing, I floated through it except for the occasional wind burst that hits you head on and makes it feel like you've come to a complete stop. I could laugh it off because I was cruising along. Out the Gulf Beach Highway and things are looking a little sparse. No internet tonight and I'll probably have to make due with what's in my food bag. No problem, nothing can get my mood down today.

I'm running so much ahead of schedule that I think about pushing an extra 19 miles and crossing the Alabama border. When I call the park to make sure they have an open site they try to give me the reservation phone number.

"I don't want a reservation, I just want to know if you have any sites open."

"Maybe," the ranger says hedging her bets, "I think so but I can't be sure."

She gives me the phone number again, it's one of those clever 800 number marketing things like 800-CampAla or something. When she hangs up I realize I have no way of calling that number even if I wanted to, my phone has a qwerty keyboard and the old style dtmf coding of a regular phone won't work for me.

That marketing idea is outdated.

Eh. What the hell? I'm here, may as well stay.

The park ranger is all smiles and genuinely friendly.

"Well come on around and let me set you up with a site," he says through big teeth.

He picks out a good tent site, "Something that will keep you out of the wind," and seems very concerned when I half mention the mixup with my sleeping bag. I had been calling every hour since 8:30am since today was the first day that they would be open where I could have my sleeping bag shipped ahead. Only no one ever answered. Frustrated I called the post office in DeFuniak Springs and he tells me the real number, the one I got online was wrong, just like the business hours.

After that the phone was answered on the second ring, "Yes, we have your package right here. We just need your drivers license..."

I tell him to forget it. I'm too far away now and to go ahead and bounce it to Poplarville. He has me spell it and read back the zip code twice. At least he is thorough I think hanging up the phone. Only later do I realize that he never asked me what state, but surely as a postal officer he must know... right?

Even that little nagging thought doesn't get me down. I can't help but to think how amazing my life is, here I am, somewhere on the Gulf Coast, awesome blue sky, perfect riding weather and not a care in the world.

I cut out of traffic thinking how lucky I am and roll over a broken beer bottle. The large glass shard breaks under the weight of my tire and I wait for the hiss of escaping air, the tire going soft, as I cruise onto the bike lane.

I look at it and realize that nothing is happening. Not even broken glass under my tires is going to bring me down today, no flats!

Riding back into the park just before sunset with some snacks from the Winn Dixie the ranger leans out the window to say hello, "I took the liberty of leaving a sleeping bag on the picnic table at your site."

"Really? You didn't have to do that," I say still not comprehending that he has just given me a sleeping bag.

"No, it was no problem, can't have you getting cold out there," he says with a smile.

"Should I just bring it back here in the morning or..."

"If you don't want it sure, but it's for you," he says wishing me a good night.

"I don't know what to say?"

"Just be safe in your travels."

Sure enough the sleeping bag was there wrapped in plastic. It wasn't a top of the line sleeping bag and it was bulky as fuck, but it would be warm and it's the thought that counts. Even if I keep it I'll only have to carry it for a day or two.

I sit back at the tent site and watch the last few minutes of the sunset and squirrels scurrying around through the brush. Saw Palmetto? I should really start to learn some of this stuff.

I can't see the Gulf but the view is still amazing.

I am one lucky motherfucker.

Southern Tier Day 13 – Big Lagoon State Park to Dauphin Island

It's an easy day I kept telling myself. Sleep in a little.

By the time I get up I realize that I had left the rest of my pepperoni, cream cheese and crackers out on the table the night before. The two bags they were wrapped in are still there, with dirty claw marks and a hole where the food used to be. No sign of where the food may have disappeared to.

Damn, that's not a good start to the day.

After returning the sleeping bag to the rangers office, because lets face it, it was a bulky cheap sleeping bag and with the bike baskets I already looked like too much of a homeless person, I was ready to take on the short 40 mile day.

It seems that while I had slept the winds decided to change direction. Now I was pedaling into a decent headwind all day long. Out 292 which changed into 182 as soon as I crossed the Alabama border. My first state line crossing and down along Perdido Beach, and always that wind.

Dixie Graves Parkway felt never ending, maybe because the wind had tired me out. All day had seemed like a power cycling contest. My thighs burned and I felt like I was running out of energy. It didn't help that it had a bike lane at the beginning. Yay, I can get off the road! Only it swerves in and out too much and has too much debris and cracks and bumps to make the ride enjoyable. I just want to put in some miles.

By the time I reached Fort Morgan I just wanted to rest. It didn't help that I had barely missed the ferry and when I leaned my bike against the fence I saw the Sand Spurs stuck in my tire. The entire Fort Morgan area was covered with them.

An hour and a half wait and I could have done something productive, journal, read so I could ditch at least one of the two books I was carrying. Instead I just sat there and stared off into space, sometimes watching the dolphins, mostly just blanking out.

People start to show up for the ferry and a retired guy asks me if I was at the game. Game? Then I realize he is talking about the shirt I got out of the lost and found, sports logo.

“Wife and I had tickets,” he says snapping a picture of the oil rig off the shore, “such a shame the way they threw that trash out onto the field.”

“Well...” I say wanting to add something.

“I know, it’s the damn umpires fault. What else could the people have done to show their frustration?”

“Umpires,” I say, “...look more dolphins.” And he turns away to take a picture.

Atlanta Braves. That solves that mystery.

I’m charged the \$5 pedestrian fee on the ferry. “That’s good for a return trip,” the guy says handing me my ticket, “though I’m guessing you’re only going one way.”

The campground is almost across the street from where we dock. They have no other tents and instead of tenting out back where it’s more secluded and picturesque I opt for the tent space closest to the wifi signal. Priorities.

I crawl into bed by 9pm and have to use the rain jacket again over my feet and my journals underneath so the ground doesn’t suck all the heat out of my feet. I sleep a little better, though rolling over is an art form. The dollar store blanket is so small that the slightest bit of a wrong turn can have a cold knife of air running up and down your spine.

“A couple more nights,” I tell myself, “then you’ll have you’re sleeping bag.”

Southern Tier Day 14 – Dauphin Island to Vancleave

Why does it always seem like there is the perfect stealth spot just after the campground where I stop for the night? This one was in Cadillac Square on Dauphin Island, just behind the bathrooms there was the perfect little space for my tent.

Maybe God just hates me.

If so he was making it plainly obvious with the battering headwind he served up that morning. My legs and knees hurt from the headwinds the day before, more than they have on this entire bike ride, and now, if I stop pedaling for the briefest amount of time the bike would roll backwards.

It's cold too but at least the fog is burning off fast. The bridge out to Alabama Port is a brutal climb, the roadside littered with debris. Broken bottles and small car parts have to be dodged. The climb is so steep, and because my legs hurt and the headwind keeps my speed so low that I don't make it without walking the bike. Even riding down the otherside requires me to keep pedaling, it's the kind of headwind where you have to pedal to go downhill.

It takes over an hour to make it the 10 miles into Alabama Port where I'm hoping that the trees on the side of the road will act as interference for some of the wind. Then a change of direction, a new road, and the wind hits me from the right side until I get to Bayou La Batre, then it's back into the wind again.

As the day warms up the wind seems to lighten up a little. I never do find a place to pull over and change out of my long johns, by the time it's warm enough I decide to put in a few more miles. Be done with the day.

Just outside of Vancleave I'm climbing a hill after crossing the Pascagoula River and want to just get off the bike and walk it, only that's too embarrassing, even out here, all by myself. I have no energy left, I know that but the cars that might pass don't. Just then, coming in the opposite direction are two girls on fully loaded bikes who want to stop and chat.

South Africa and the Netherlands.

“We are plus 3,” Netherlands says to me and I’m not sure if she is telling me they are traveling with more people because I make her nervous or just as a way of introduction to their group. They have been out 7 weeks and are doing the Southern Tier from west to east.

“Wow, you are traveling light,” South Africa says and I tell them that I am without a sleeping bag because of the mail mishap and so maybe it just looks light.

“So, you sleep in a tent without a sleeping bag?”

“Yeah.”

“You need more gears. How old are you?” South Africa asks.

“Well we can’t just chalk it up to youthful indiscretions,” she adds when I tell her how old I am. “Are you trying to make it harder for yourself?” She asks.

“Sort of,” I say from across the road as another SUV goes by.

At White Sands Campground they tell me to tent anywhere near the storage room, which isn’t anywhere near the tent sites.

“On the deck, under the deck, in the storage room if you want,” the campground manager tells me.

Maybe I wont even have to unpack my tent. Only the storage room is crowded with vending machines and the deck already feels cold before the sun has even set.

Maybe if I had my sleeping bag...

Southern Tier Day 15 and 16 – Vancleave to Poplarville

\$10 for a place on the grass.

“Anywhere,” the guy says after he ran my card three times and couldn’t figure out how to make the credit card machine work. I had pushed the extra 18 miles into Poplarville to get my general delivery packages a day early. Figured if they still hadn’t shown I could wait overnight for Saturdays mail delivery and not spend any extra money.

The hills in Mississippi are worse than anywhere else on the trip so far. All day I think about getting a smaller gear to climb hills and sacrifice some of the speed on flats. Don’t know where that money is going to come from, as it is I have to stealth camp a minimum of five times before the end of the month just to have enough cash to keep going.

And that’s just a rough guess. Truth is that it could be worse, the ATM machine down here won’t let you do a balance inquiry and there is no cash back transactions at the local supermarkets. So I ate the rest of my cream cheese and crackers on the side of the road and made some Gatorade with the last of my water instead of stopping somewhere and spending money on lunch.

Just keep riding. 78 miles, longest day yet.

I’m so excited about picking up the panniers that I forgot about having to send my backpack home. That’s money I don’t have. Looks like the baskets are just going to get left behind somewhere. Too bad.

The panniers are about half the size I thought they’d be from the description. That’s when I notice one website says 20 liters and the other says 20 liters each side. That means cutting down and not having extra room like I had planned. If I strap the dry sack with the laptop and sleeping bag in it to the top it might work. As it is the laptop is too big to fit in the bags.

I start to worry about the panniers not being waterproof, then realize that the baskets weren’t really waterproof either.

I knew it before going to bed in my tent on the grass. Zero.

The post office opens at 9am and I ship 3 ½ pounds home, mostly the backpack and water filter. Walking out of the post office it feels strange to be without the backpack, without a way to just walk away from everything. I guess that's what the backpack means for me, a reminder that I can always walk away. It is always there with everything I need to get by, anywhere.

I had planned on killing time in the library, where else can you sit for long periods of time without spending any money and get free electricity and internet? Turns out Poplarville only opens their library for a few hours twice a week. Any other time forget it. So I end up at the only place with wifi in town, a fast food restaurant, drinking too much soda and hogging a booth near one of only two outlets in the dining room.

It's funny but I'm not the only one there for more than 3 hours.

After that it turns out that Poplarville is in a dry county. Just saying.

That didn't stop the people in the RV park from being smashed most of the day.

Southern Tier Day 17 – Poplarville to Franklinton

In the morning the condensation drips down through the bug netting on my tent and on top of the dollar store blanket thrown over my sleeping bag for extra warmth. I pull everything out and reluctantly roll the tent up wet again.

I had wanted to drop the baskets at the Salvation Army or a thrift store or something but wasn't sure where to find one. Truth was I was starting to hate them and just wanted them gone but still felt guilty about just throwing them away. So I dropped them, with the red dollar store fleece blanket next to the trash bins by the office of the campground. Someone would see them, maybe they could use them.

I ride out of town, frustrated by the lack of street signs and I miss North St., pedaling $\frac{1}{4}$ mile in the wrong direction. I turn back and frustrated more at having to hold the map and cycle for all the little direction changes I say, "Fuck it!"

"I'll just take 26 all the way out to Bogalusa. It has a shoulder..."

So I do, and the shoulder disappears shortly outside the edge of town.

In Mississippi more than any other state it seems that the people in cars can't pass you as a cyclist unless they are completely in the opposite lane of traffic. They will go 15mph behind you waiting for cars in the oncoming lane to pass before circling wide around you, even though you may be completely inside the white line and not in their lane in the slightest.

Whats worse is being on the white line, to the right of the road as far as you could possibly go, and a car coming in the other direction, on the complete opposite side of the road, will swing wide and ride the rumble strip on their side of the road just to let you pass. Because one whole lane of seperation might not be enough, maybe you need one and a half lanes.

Cross the Pearl River and suddenly I'm in Louisiana. Bogalusa looks like it's trying to upgrade from run down southern town to run down southern city. All the roads are under construction but everywhere is deserted. Maybe everything just closes on a Sunday. I ride through without taking a single picture, out of town before I realized that I was in it.

The shoulder of the road stays non-existent but there aren't many cars on 1072. For a little while it feels like maybe I'm the only person on the planet. This is what I wanted, this was a taste of what I hoped the western half of the United States was going to be like. No cars, no people, no towns. Just that faraway feeling, like you could head in any direction for days and not run into a single person, or even evidence of civilization.

I ride into Franklinton to the campground behind the Fair Grounds. There is no one else there and the night's stay is free. It's a bit of relief after finally looking at my bank account balance.

Southern Tier Day 18 – Franklinton to Easleyville

There was something I was supposed to be doing but for the life of me I couldn't quite remember what it was. There was a loud disgusted huff from an elderly lady who had just walked up to the table next to me and I knew there was some sort of problem. Looking at her I guessed there was always a problem.

"The table is disgusting," she complained to one of the fast food employees. He quickly apologized and wiped it down, her nose turned up at his handiwork she went hard to work scrubbing it herself with the bible sized stack of napkins she already had in her hand.

Harder and harder, it just didn't want to come clean. I watched the jowles of skin hanging off her face swaying with the motion of her effort, lost in the hypnotically rhythmic movement while her plump little granddaughter obviously sat down putting her breakfast in the way of her grandmothers efforts.

Now I say plump not to be mean, the kid was overweight, but more to point out the fact that her breakfast consisted of two apple pies and a milk shake. Instead of listening to their conversation, which mostly involved the grandmother digging for information on what the little girls mother was up to, I tried to remember what it was I was supposed to be doing while the pictures uploaded to Facebook.

Because there is a part of our culture that insists that if we do not share our adventure then it is no longer valid. For my coast to coast bike ride to be worthy of conversation I had to submit not just pictures and videos, but stories that could be passed along, around the break room or water coolers if any of my friends still had jobs at which they did that sort of thing.

If I was lucky, or deemed worthy enough, I might get a few likes, a few thumbs up and maybe a comment or two. Maybe someone would think enough to share a picture with their friends, I hoped, because in the end what mattered was hit counts. How many people saw what I was putting up? How many people cared enough to look at what I was doing and find out more?

And so with time running low I shut down the laptop, pack it back on the bike and pedal out of town. Nothing productive having been accomplished. The noise, the flurry of

activity of keeping everyone updated through my adventure quickly drowning out what it meant to be riding across country on a bicycle.

Then away from town, somewhere Louisiana, there are no cars again. Just me, and it feels like home.

Until I feel the cell phone vibrate in my pocket from the incoming text message.

I ignore it and try to ride, until another, and another come in, one right after the next. Is anything really so important? And why did I leave the phone on vibrate? Why not just shut the little fucker off?

Or skip across a lake?

The air temperature goes from cold to hot like the flip of a switch. One minute I'm shivering despite wearing the long johns, the next I'm pulling up the sleeves and looking for a place to pull over and strip before I soak them with my sweat.

Always too late, it isn't always easy to find a place to drop your pants, even in the middle of nowhere Louisiana. So I hide behind a church that looks empty while cows moo at me from across a barb wire fence. I sit there on the lawn, ignoring the text messages, and have some crackers and cream cheese.

And I notice that it doesn't sound anything like New England. Not Rhode Island at least. It's that quiet again. Always there in the background, waiting to be discovered. Maybe there is just less noise here to cover it up, maybe I'm just less self involved enough to hear it.

I pull into the campground, unsure if I have the right location. There are two trailers, each of which has someone working on an automobile in front of them, and no one else around. What I take as the bandstand is filled with discarded items like a Salvation Army drop off location. A younger woman in pajamas comes out to tell me it'll be \$15 to tent.

Too much, I should keep riding, instead I set up my tent to dry out while the sun is still up and ride up the road to get cash to pay them. It's 2012 and they still don't take credit cards? Cash is so 1980.

By the time I return I'm on the phone with a hostel for the next night, "Whatever you do don't stay there," they tell me, "go up the road, the owner of the store lets you tent there for free."

So, 'free' sounding much better I pack my tent, make my apologies and ride back up the road. Only the store no longer allows cyclists to tent there, some incident with a cyclist they didn't want to talk about, "but no you can't stay here under any circumstance. Have you tried down the road?"

I ride back to the campground and hand over my cash, done, and I'm in for the night trying not to think about what the ATM said my balance was when I withdrew the cash to pay for the stay.

Southern Tier Day 19 – Easleyville to Perry's Bike Hostel

Perry had suggested on the phone to take SR-10 out to their place instead of the official Southern Tier route. That would cut off some mileage making it a much easier day and swing me through a decent sized town where I might be able to get online instead of being out in the sticks all day where the towns were so small there was no population number listed next to their names.

Someone had decided it was time to do maintenance on their three wheeler 25 feet away from my tent the night before, revving the engine at 1am and banging tools around. Even so I was up early and it warmed up fast. I was sweating early and my clothes were already ringed with salt stains. Lost in my head I'm supposed to be paying attention to the road, looking for the turn off to head down to SR-10, instead I'm just floating along enjoying the ride. It isn't until I come to a road crossing and realize that my body somehow automatically rode me to 10 long before 'I' knew what was going on, I had been off the ACA route for more than 2 miles.

Autopilot for real.

That's when the shoulder disappeared on the road and I started to get worried. Traffic was fast and becoming more frequent the later it got. Only a few miles down the road, just outside Clinton, the shoulder widened up, really widened up, like car width wide.

I stopped into the gas station in Clinton and felt stupid asking, "Is there a McDonald's in town?" What was the population requirements for a McDonald's or a Walmart anyway? Sadly it's another McDonald's without an outlet or I would have stayed and wasted more of my time online and inside when I should have been outside riding.

Perry's was only another 13 miles away and it wasn't even noon.

Perry's was one of those 'Do Not Miss' suggestions of stops on the Southern Tier, and I'm glad I did. For far more than the hot outdoor shower or the ability to do laundry or even the fact that she cooked dinner for both myself and another touring cyclist that showed up that night. Perry is a great person and meeting people like her always makes me think that maybe we aren't living in the apocalypse, that maybe the world isn't doomed to a long downward spiral of...

Well, you get the idea.

She suggests I take a zero day, and hell, with her wifi and an outdoor outlet I could catch up on the blog and come damn close to finishing the rough draft of that other manuscript... So yeah, I'll stay.

That's when the other cyclist showed up from Michigan. He had started riding with another guy who had to get off because of knee problems and now was looking to celebrate Thanksgiving in New Orleans. Thanksgiving?

When is Thanksgiving?

Southern Tier Day 20 – LA Swift into New Orleans

A side trip sounded expensive. Even if the LA Swift bus was \$5 and bicycle friendly.

“Would you be willing to split a hotel room?” I asked the other cyclist I’d just met at Perry’s heading to New Orleans. He leapt at the idea.

The scales weighed heavily on my mind all night, tossing and turning in my tent. Save money and get work done here at Perry’s like I planned or spend money I don’t have to go to a city I’d probably never get a chance to see again and maybe bankrupt my trip?

“Thanksgiving would best be spent...” I asked myself trying to let the blank get filled in with what I really wanted. The answer was, “drunk at a soup kitchen in New Orleans standing in line for church handouts.”

Donated turkey and gravy from the can. Mashed potatoes from the box, just add water. Stand in line with people who really live on the streets, the whole time thinking that only a bicycle and a couple hundred dollars in the bank separate us.

That’s what I wanted.

Almost 100 people showed up for the last bus out of Baton Rouge before the holiday. We’re packed on the bus and I notice that the two of us are the only ones reading. Everyone else stares blankly ahead, stares blankly into the cell phone or listens to their headphones, while staring blankly ahead.

“I’m actually kind of excited to have this time to read,” the Dave other cyclist says burying his head in the post modern intellectual novel the size of a dictionary he brought along, giggling randomly during the drive at how smart and clever the author is. Meanwhile I’m back in the Philippines during World War 2 fighting a guerrilla campaign, trying to set up a radio network for MacArthur on Leyete.

The bus drops us near the French Quarter, where else would we go in New Orleans, and he calls the hotel for directions to the room he reserved. By the look on his face the hotel doesn’t seem to be downtown, probably not even close. “Drive out I-10...” I hear him saying, “I’m sorry we’re on bicycles...”

I don't hear the rest of the conversation, the part I do hear while looking around Canal St. is, "... ok, well then I'm going to have to cancel that reservation."

I exhale slowly. No buses run tomorrow. No place to stay tonight. I could have been writing.

Some of the worst people I have met on this trip work at the New Orleans visitors center. The couple of harpies perched there had told us that \$100 a night hotel room was our only option unless we wanted to become their prey. I told them they were wrong. After walking in, wondering why Dave, the other cyclist hadn't come out after 10 minutes to get simple directions to the LA Swift bus stop, they had quickly turned evil, "Well if that's what YOU want to do, WHO am I to tell you otherwise?" She almost hissed in my face and ripped a map from under the counter and started scribbling on it.

There was one last bus out and maybe we could catch it if we hurried. I had called Joe and Flo's Candlelight Hostel, the only place with a single bed left, and they had offered to put up the other one of us in a side room they used for overflow. But when we tried to bike out to the address I had for them Dave was worried about the neighborhood. (*I'm now sure the address I had was wrong which is too bad)

So waiting at the bus stop Dave decides to try a couple of the hostels that didn't answer earlier. Turns out that most of them don't have anyone in the office except to check people out in the morning and to check people in after 4 or 5pm at night. Marquette House has space and we ride over and check in, just in time for me to work on the Thanksgiving plan. You know, getting drunk and eating at a homeless shelter or church handout line.

Southern Tier Day 21 – Thanksgiving in New Orleans

“The hangover isn’t bad, I could have drank more,” I thought eating vanilla crème cookies and a half gallon of milk for breakfast at the Marquette House.

Thanksgiving.

My journal has a single entry from the night before, “A fish didn’t discover water.”

It must be important.

I ride, without panniers, through the city to see the sights, ride the Algiers Ferry and ride the bike/pedestrian path on the other side. Ride the ferry back and cruise through the French Quarter. SO easy and carefree, though the crank seems to be banging a little, but it isn’t bad. Nice to ride without all that weight.

Despite already carrying two books I find myself in a small alternative bookstore. I hate that word, alternative. Anyway I buy a book I have been looking for, \$6 I should spend on food but figure if I skip Thanksgiving dinner maybe I’ll be fine. Besides I was still hoping for Thanksgiving magic.

Instead I ended up reading the rest of the day. In the sun, on a bench, in the grass. Wherever I felt like stopping for a little while. The oppressive need to be a tourist and see everything wasn’t a nagging tug, and the book was so damn interesting.

So interesting in fact that I wont mention the free drinks later and that you shouldn’t do that on an empty stomach. And you shouldn’t be drinking on an empty stomach when you have no money because you come up with other ideas to get something to eat, and trash compactors don’t make dumpster diving possible.

So Happy Thanksgiving.

Southern Tier Day 22 – Back to Perry’s Bike Hostel

“It’s declined,” she said unceremoniously.

“What? You have to be kidding,” only she wasn’t. I had a dollar in my pocket and my bank account was empty. It had been hard enough just to get someones attention to order my food, they had all been standing around just staring at me, was I the only white guy in this part of Baton Rouge? I knew money was running short but this is ridiculous.

Does this whole trip really rely on that small piece of plastic?

I can’t even call anyone to find out whats going on with my bank account, I had forgotten to charge my phone at the hostel in New Orleans and now it was dead. There was nothing else to do but pedal on an empty stomach and hope I made it back to Perry’s Bike Hostel before sundown. At least there I had my food bag stored with my tent and could cook up some Ramen for dinner.

Only 35 miles or so and an hour and a half of daylight left. No problem.

Into the headwind, a slow agonizing pace that has me wondering if the two easy days in New Orleans had somehow dissolved my leg muscles and returned them to fat. That and my brain wouldn’t let go of the money thing.

“You knew it was going to happen sooner or later,” it kept saying, “what’s your plan now?”

Just pedal.

“What are you going to eat?”

Food bag has 2 or 3 days worth of food, I’ll just have to go without soda and stick to water.

“Where are you going to stay?”

I’ll just have to increase my stealth camping rate, from 5% to somewhere around... oh, say 100%.

At Perry's no one is home. Still she had assured me that it would be ok to stay and I plug in my cell phone to charge while I set up my tent and munch on crackers. Why didn't I pack peanut butter on this trip?

Perry and her husband Lep show up just before I start to prepare dinner and invite me to eat with them. Like I said before, extremely nice and genuine people. Turns out a deposit that should have been made hadn't, it'll be straightened out soon enough. Until then no money.

But the more I thought about it the more I realized that the bike tour shouldn't revolve around how much money I still have in the bank.

Maybe a declined credit card was just the wake up call I needed.

Southern Tier Day 23 – Jackson to Simmesport, LA

Soaking in the last bits of warm sunlight the question was do I set up the tent or cowboy camp.

I had called city hall to get permission to camp, knowing that they'd be closed, but I wanted to be able to say I tried if I was hassled by the police in the middle of the night. Only someone answered, "Simmesport Police Station."

"Um, hi. I was trying to reach city hall..."

"It's Saturday, they're closed."

"I'm bicycling across country and was wondering about... tenting (almost said camping which is all together different thing) until the morning in Yellow Bayou Civil War Park."

"Yep. That's allowed. You're all set."

So I sat on the banks of the river in the sun, reading. I wiped the spider webs off the outdoor outlets and charged my cell phone and camera and read some more. Something about tenting in public areas where the tent can be seen by regular people bothers me though and that's why I'm mulling over cowboy camping under one of the picnic structures.

Sitting in the sun now is storing warmth for later I try to tell myself.

Sitting there I remembered a book I'd read just before my Meals on Wheels ride. An older couple had decided to ride across the country on their bicycles. It was a credit card trip, meaning they carried almost no gear. The wife, deciding that this was a grand adventure shared her day by day journal as a book. Everyday was the same, "We rode X miles, from here to here. We saw this, here is a little about it I read from the plaque. America is beautiful."

Occasionally she would add a snippet of conversation to spice things up. The one I remember was when they met a self supporting cyclist out for almost a year. "We're doing the same thing," she thought and didn't understand why he didn't think so. I don't

know what happened after that, I'm sure they eventually made it, but I didn't care. I put the book down and returned it to the library soon after.

It's sad how many times I have thought about that lady. When I'm splashing stream water on my face to try and wash off some of the salt from a long days ride, when I'm cruising slow just before dark looking for a place to sleep or wondering if my gear will be safe outside the Piggly Wiggly while I run inside for a quick drink. Shivering at night because I'm sleeping outside and not in a warm bed with comforters I didn't have to carry across the entire country.

And I don't hate her for it, quite the contrary, I applaud the fact that her and her husband accomplished their ride. The problem was that there was no hardship. I lost interest in their story. Somehow suffering gives meaning to existence? Do all the best stories begin with, "This one time I almost died..."

Maybe it's a good thing I spent all of my money in New Orleans. No longer will I be able to just whip out the credit card to solve every little problem. No longer will that even be there in my mind as a safety net, a fall back plan.

Acorns fall around me and squirrels chirp, angry at my intrusion in their park, leaning against the large oak tree watching the the sky turn red as the sun sets. The hood of my sweatshirt is pulled up, as much for warmth as it is a helmet to soften the blow of an acorn hit. They plink and bang against the metal roof of the cemented picnic areas. I continue to read in the fading light well after the sun has set.

I cowboy camp wondering if morning dew is going to be a problem.

Southern Tier Day 24 – Simmesport, LA to Chicot State Park

Up early because I could no longer feel my toes. Something about sleeping in your sneakers makes your feet colder than if you'd just slept in your socks.

Toes and nose I was thinking trying to rub the feeling back into my nose. If you just keep those warm you'll do all right.

The sun was getting ready to flood over the horizon and I wished it would hurry up. The field was covered in frost and yet my sleeping bag had no morning dew or condensation. Maybe something as simple as being under the picnic pavilion had helped.

I eat a couple of frozen Little Debbie oatmeal crème pies for breakfast and hit the road early. The wind is so cold that tears stream down my cheeks and blind me as I try to dodge the glass and roadkill on this side of the white line and the early morning traffic on the other. Even through my gloves the cold penetrates into the bones of my fingers. I imagine that this is what it would feel like to hold a road flare in your hand.

I pedal because maybe it will warm me up. Starting this early maybe I can go farther, stealth somewhere again. I just keep pedaling. Steady. Hoping the headwind wont start after the sun comes up and warms the the empty fields and cracked asphalt. Through Moreauville to Cottonport. A population of 2,500 and you wouldn't know it to ride through the town.

Where do they hide everyone?

Through Evergreen and into Bunkie, maybe the last chance for a snack. McDonald's and wifi, it's only 10am. I sit and sip soda for 2 hours trying to write blog updates. The rest should be easy, into Chicot State Park, even if I am running a little later than I had anticipated. How is it I can lose so much time online?

Then the map is wrong. It was right, but it was wrong in that it had a different name and route number for the road I was supposed to turn off on. The signs clearly said 'Park Exit Only' and 'No Entry', but those were for cars... So maybe... But the street sign was wrong. I must have misjudged the distance I thought, keep pedaling.

A mile later I'm sure it was the right road but keep riding anyway, maybe just a little further. Up a couple of hills for the first time in 2 days and there is an intersection. Way farther than I thought, and that's because it's 3042, 2 miles past where I was supposed to turn off. Now it's another 4 miles to get to the other side of the park.

"Don't think about murder, don't think about killing drivers of diesel pickup trucks that clog your lungs with their exhaust. Don't think about dragging them from their trucks and bashing in their heads with a tire iron."

You're just a little out of the way, relax.

When I do get into Chicot the girl asks where I want to tent.

"The cheapest option you have," I say sweating for the first time that day.

"Well we have these sites here," she says smiling and leaning over the counter to point on the map, "they have electricity and you can just set up your tent. I only mention that because you look like you're done for the day."

"I am, but what's the other option?" I ask trying not to get lost in her twinkling blue eyes.

"Backpacker sites with no electricity for \$1."

"\$1?" I ask.

"Well, yeah, \$1 plus a processing fee, it'll be \$7 for one night."

"I'll take it."

"You'll have to bike a mile up this trail," she says pointing to the map again, "I'll put you in the closest site."

Sure enough the sign says bike friendly trail. A little way into it I'm thinking maybe for mountain bikes and dismount and walk the bike the rest of the way. I push the bike over roots and rocks and a thick layer of fallen leaves. Then the roots get bigger and the hills a little steeper. Down then up. The panniers are in my way pushing the bike uphill. They slide back and into the spokes locking up the rear tire and I have to pick the fully loaded bike up and carry it to the top. The stitching on the panniers is coming undone.

I laugh at that, and the hills. I get out my camera to capture the absurdity of it all, only it doesn't work again. I laugh, sweating more than I have in the last few days, my shirt is soaked through by the time I hit the first mile marker.

When the blue blazed trail to the campsite isn't there within the next quarter mile I leave the bike propped up against a tree and walk ahead trying to find out how much further this trail goes. That's when I see it, the little yellow sign that says Emergency Exit. It's a trail, a flat trail that goes right out to the paved road. And the side trail to the campsite is just beyond it.

"Are you kidding?" I say out loud to the trees.

It's almost another quarter mile down the side trail to the campsite by the fire ring. By that time I'm thinking, "Hell, throw a few more days on there at \$1 a day. I'll steal electricity down by the showers and maybe run into town in a few days when I run out of food."

The tent is up within minutes, flick off the dead crushed snails leftover from Jackson, LA and let it air out. What the hell, collect firewood, may as well be warm tonight. When I look up from bending over to pick up the stick on my third run for firewood he is standing only 10 feet away.

"Getting wood for a fire huh?"

"Yep," I say, thinking that I was supposed to be the only one out here.

He walks over towards the fire ring and my bike, hesitates for a second then turns down the trail to the waters edge and disappears over the hill. I know bo when I see it. Bo is short for hobo and I'm pretty sure this is his place, only his pack is a little small to have a sleeping bag or even a blanket.

That's when I here the sound of a beer can being opened.

I'm thinking about saying something, introducing myself at least, when he comes back up the trail. Must have chugged the beer.

"Have a good night," he says waving and walking back up towards the main trail.

And just like that I know I'm not staying those extra days. I wouldn't want to leave my tent and gear behind while I was down at the comfort stations writing. Especially not while I rode into town to resupply. So I build a small tinder fire pyramid and notice the smoke starting already. I shake my head and add more leaves and wood, every fire so far on this trip I haven't needed to use a lighter. People just seem to leave still hot coals in every fire ring.

Just before sunset the smoking pile bursts into flames and I think again about how lucky I am, and then I laugh.

Lucky to be sitting in the dirt, with no money, somewhere in the woods in Louisiana.

Southern Tier Day 25 – Chicot State Park to Deridder, LA

I woke up to the sound of gunfire.

Not here in the park but close enough, then I remember, hunting season.

So if I'm not staying in the park for the next week I may as well keep riding.

I pack up the bike and it rains. Rain jacket and I'm too hot. And I don't mean sexy. I need a shave and I skip the 'comfort station' on the way out of the park even though I also need to brush my teeth.

I'm in Ville Platte in no time but I miss my turn, again. Really? Invest in some street signs people. I turn towards where I think I should be headed and run smack dab into a Walmart and a McDonald's. The little bit of rain this morning had me wanting to check the weather and let's face it, I had plenty of time to kill.

Only it's one of those McDonald's with one outlet in the entire dining room.

I park my ass in front of it and no sooner do I type 'weather.com' than it starts pouring.

"Oh shit!"

My panniers are not waterproof and are now out in the torrential rain storm. I run out and undo them, only one of the hooks catches underneath the rear rack. My fingers can't quite...

The rain doubles in force and I look up into the sky shaking my head. It doubles again and the hook miraculously comes undone. When I get safely inside again the rain quickly slows to a drizzle and I squint my eyes at the universe, I know what you're up to.

Water drips off the outside of the panniers and noticing a look from an off duty McDonald's worker I laugh, telling her that I was wondering if it was going to rain today.

"You ridin that bike?" She asks motioning to my bike visible through the window.

“You got no luck!” she adds and laughs before going back to her cell phone on her 15 minute break from working in a fast food restaurant.

Sure enough they say thunder and lightning storms on and off all day and overnight.

Extreme conditions possible.

I eat two Sausage McMuffin's and consume untold amounts of soda refills watching the mumbling crack addict dressed all in black try and spare change customers. Someone hands him a sausage biscuit and he comes in for ketchup packets and the manager hands him a free small cup so he can get something to drink.

He then throws the wrapper on the ground when putting it in the trash seems to be too much work.

Bums and addicts. They'll give a hobo a bad rep every time.

Or am I now a tramp?

I always hated that word.

The rain slows and I ride. The sun comes out for a few brief seconds and the roads are still wet, this is nice I think to myself. Large open fields already harvested and cleared for the season and black clouds off on the horizon dropping sheets of rain, riding on the wind, blowing this way. Keep pedaling, there isn't much else to do. If it's going to hit me it is going to hit me.

The way the roads zig, zag and curve it feels like I'm dodging right in between the showers. First it's off to the left just in front of me, then my right, wait a minute, did the rain under that cloud just stop?

Then the sprinkle starts. Here and there. The sun was still out but the rain, that was a sucker punch. There wasn't time to stop and pull out the rain jacket. Rain fell and puddles formed almost instantaneously. Stepping off the bike I was in 2 inches of water on the side of the road shuffling through my bag for any rain protection. My new book exposed and on top.

The wind is head on and blows the hood of my rain jacket off no matter how hard I pull the strings. Off to the right and abandoned mobile home, the driveway long grown over, the door bashed in, the whole thing supported on crumbling concrete blocks.

I run my bike through waist high weeds and lean it as close to the house as possible and jump up and into the doorway. Out of the rain and into every lost in the country themed horror movie.

Trashed room, a pile of Drano bottles instead of the beer cans one expects, and one lone rusted chair in the middle of all the decay.

The rain hammered hard outside and the light dimmed as I worked my way back through the house. Making sure I was alone, or if I had company they knew that I knew they were there. Halfway back through the house I looked into a room that was too dark to see into, and down the hall just got darker.

Time to go back for my headlamp.

Back towards the light, the open door facing the storm and my bike, out there in it, the pounding rain, getting soaked. I didn't really want to climb down into the quickly forming mud and get even more wet just to get my headlamp then have to climb back up. So I sat there, in that one rusted chair and waited.

I hoped the rain would stop before whatever else was supposed to happen. Whatever happens to whoever sits in the on chair in the middle of the room and doesn't drink bleach.

The rain finally let up and I was back on the road. Water squirting from my sneakers with every step. Within minutes the sun was back out and I stripped off the rain jacket in an effort to dry out. There was no chance for my shoes.

In Oberlin a logging truck driver stops to chat while I'm avoiding a passing shower under a gas station awning.

"I saw you out on 104 earlier," he says kind of laughing at the idea, "you get around huh?"

"All the way from Florida," I say.

He is flabbergasted and has never heard of someone riding so far. He is even more amazed at the idea of riding to California.

“So what?” he asks, “You just woke up one day and decided to ride your bike? Kinda like Forrest Gump or something?”

“Something like that,” I say. Why does it always come back to Forrest Gump?

“So whatta ya do? Stay in a motel every night?”

“No, that would get expensive, I camp out as much as possible.”

“Well I’ll be... And that’s all you brought?” he asks pointing at my bike.

I ride out and the skies look clearer. I had wanted to reach a campground for the night, get down some of the story ideas I’d been working on that day. Pay for a place to tent. Weakness. The comfortable security of a paid for patch of grass smaller than most peoples mattresses.

Only the gates are closed and no one is around.

Maybe it’s one of those cyclist only things and I have to call to get permission.

“Yeah,” the guy says answering the phone.

“I’m trying to reach Omaha Beach* Campground,” I say.

“You a cyclist?”

“Yep. I’m riding from Florida to California and....”

“I keep telling them to take me off their maps, I’m getting tired of turning all you guys down,” he slurs into the phone, “I’m closed for the season, only open 6 months of the year.”

Looking at the empty yard and the chained but unlocked gate I start to ask, “Is there anyway...”

But he interrupts, “Good luck!”

Click.

The conversation is over.

He hung up before I could even ask. I could still.... nah.

Just keep riding.

I cross the river and the property next door has a drunk guy in a red flannel shirt, jeans and a baseball cap waving at me from in front of a trailer at the canoe launch. Smiling. Waving goodbye not hello. Probably the guy on the phone.

Jerk.

No plan now.

Put in some mileage.

Take some off the long day tomorrow. And every now and then a perfect spot pops up, but it's still too light out, the sun hasn't set. Then I pass a fire substation but the grass is a hill on every side of the building, and it's supposed to storm tonight and there is no cover. Then as the sun sets there is a log truck pulled over by a historical marker sign. He is probably sleeping in his cab. I pull off, through the driveway of the old school house and around the side.

No one around. No views from people's houses.

I slip behind the school and the roof has a slight overhang that's about a foot wide. Better than nothing. The bike goes in the corner where the overhang clearly protects the panniers from getting wet and I unroll the all weather blanket and use it as a ground cloth to strip off soaked shoes and wet socks.

Dry socks heavenly.

I hesitate to put them back in wet shoes and instead sit there eating cream cheese and crackers and making Gatorade with the last of the water waiting for pitch black.

I could set up the tent, especially now that it's dark, but the full moon is so bright and it is so warm, why bother. I probably dodged the late night thundershowers anyway. So I use the tent as a pillow still trying to sleep under the overhang.

Just in case.

**Not the real name*

Southern Tier Day 26 – Deridder, LA to Kirbyville, TX

The buzzing in my ear wakes me up first and I realize that my head is a swarm of mosquitoes and they have already bitten the tip of my nose. I swat them away amazed at their size. I hadn't had a single problem with mosquitoes on the whole trip and sent home my headnet and solar powered electric mosquito repellent. I figured it was too cold.

Only these mosquitoes are woolly mammoths compared to normal mosquitoes.

How many times can you slap yourself in the head before it drives you crazy?

Laying there I gave up any idea of sleep. Maybe I could just walk the bike down the road, anything to get away from here. I don't know how long it lasted, far too long even if it was only a couple of minutes, but it was easily an hour or two.

Then they stopped.

And I started to fall right back asleep instead of wondering why they stopped.

That's when the rain started. I had hoped I lucked out, that the weather had changed or I'd gone far enough past Mittie that maybe...

... but no.

It poured.

Rain dripped off the roof and I had to readjust the groundcloth, wrap it around my legs and sit up in the corner where there is a little more protection. Now I'm thinking about sleeping like this, sitting there, upright. Then the rain picks up more and water poured off the roof like someone opened up a fire hose. I watch it 4 feet in front of me, propelled by the massive force of the large volume of water.

Previous storms had carved a ditch in the ground and I watched it, more like heard it in the dark filling up quickly. Where is all that water going to go? Don't tell me that's why this school is up on blocks off the ground.

By the time the puddle has grown big deep and black I'm down to my last resort, stopping the rain with psychic powers. I will the rain water into the earth. Seep! Away with you puddle! The rain seems to slow some but I can feel the cold of water underfoot through the tarp.

Maybe it'll stop there.

Just a little cold, I can deal with that. Then a little more. Colder. Bigger. My legs are already asleep so getting up is a chore, leaning against the building trying to stay dry. I stand and shake the blood back into my legs. The rain slows a little more and I lay against the building, on my side is the only way to stay out of the rain. Splashes of water dripping from the roof hit me in the face, and yet I start to fall asleep again.

I realize I'm asleep when the buzzing sound starts in my ear again.

The rain had stopped and the mosquitoes were back. I rewrap myself in the tarp and pull my hood tighter and try not to roll into the puddles that have formed around me. I put some of the tarp over my face and fall asleep as the cold moves in.

Before sunrise the log truck starts up and drives off. It's pitch black, until I realize that I'm looking at the inside of the tarp. The sun still hasn't come up yet so pull the tarp back and sleep for another hour.

Up. It's cold but at least it's easy to pack. Ride into DeRidder in the cold overcast morning. Luckily it stays that way and doesn't progress into rain.

Cross the Sabine River and stop at the Texas shaped state line crossing sign for the obligatory pictures. Break out the last 2 Little Debbie snack cakes and read while Mack trucks roar past.

Today it feels like I could sleep anywhere. Even though I have a destination I have almost no desire to keep moving. Snacks are gone, end of a chapter, may as well get there early enough though.

Just outside of Kirbyville, TX I get a text to call a new number, plans have changed. Only the new number is disconnected and the person I'm supposed to contact is at work and unable to use their cell phone. Oh well, I keep riding anyway, something will turn up.

I sit outside the original address I have and try both numbers again. No luck. No big deal, I sit in the grass and read a little more, it'll work out.

"Saw you riding up when I was headed out," the guy says from a pickup truck that pulled up to me on the side of the road, "Figured you'd be somewhere by the time I got back."

It's the Warmshower's host I'm supposed to be staying with, the disconnected number had been given to me with a couple numbers transposed. This isn't where I'm staying but it's close.

Being unfamiliar with Warmshower's I'm not sure what the protocol is,"So should I tent or..."

"No, you can stay in the house. Just put your bike in the garage."

Inside? Blankets and a bed? Pinch me I might be dreaming.

Southern Tier Day 27 – Kirbyville to Liberty, TX

The tent was in the middle, realistically that's because that's where the grass is, but honestly it was because I could be seen. I was tired, had ridden a long way, and god damn it, I was camping where I wanted. I wasn't hurting anyone, wasn't infringing on anyone's rights. So let me have this piece of grass for the night. If anyone complains I'll be right here until morning and you can come tell me to move along.

We shouldn't be worried about stealth camping to hide from the authorities.

Anyway the spot of grass was in between the...

(The rest of this journal entry has been lost.)

Southern Tier Zero's

I walk out of the house and notice that my belt is longer than normal. In fact it seems to have been slowly growing for quite some time now. So the goal for the day, since I don't have to ride is to get fat and drunk. Well, maybe at least fat and tipsy, I'm still not sure about how I feel about drinking cocktails at McDonald's.

My friend tells me I can stay another day or two and I have to stop and think, did I really zero yesterday? I got a lot done that's for damn sure but wasn't I just on the bike... nope, I really have been here two nights. And Katy, Texas wants me to stay. I can't go anywhere in this town without seeing some place to live rent free. The roof of the Denny's, that hidden spot around the corner from the all you can eat chicken buffet place where I could set up my tent and never be seen or bothered, the huge abandoned building with not so boarded up windows and doors just a hop skip and a jump down the street from McDonald's.

Am I turning hobo?

As much fun as it would be to live here for a month and finish writing my novel I kind of want to get back on the road. Though I'm not making any plans until after I've eaten. And had a haircut. I can at least be a cleancut hobo.

Besides, \$6.99 for a haircut?

Unheard of where I was from and I was long overdue. Like clockwork I usually get my hair cut every two weeks. Three weeks and I start thinking I turned hippie. Here it was over a month since I'd had a decent cut, if you call the butcher job my elderly one eyed barber back home does decent. You just have to close your eyes when his hand shakes and he is holding the straight razor and pray that you don't feel blood.

But he's a retired police officer who lost the eye in the line of duty, so what's a shaky razor to the neck twice a month? He hasn't killed anyone yet, at least that we know about.

"Oh, you walk here? Where your car?" The girl asks motioning me to a chair. The barber is a skinny little Asian girl with huge boobs packed into a skimpy, tight little dress and her accent is thick. I kick myself for joking that this haircut has a happy ending.

Don't be a jerk.

"I rode here, I'm on a bicycle," I say and end up telling her that I'd ridden there from Florida because I hate making small talk and couldn't really think of anything else to say to her.

"You should be on new," she tells me and it takes a moment for me to realize that like a lot of people she has never heard of someone bicycling across the country and they seem to think that you should be on the news, featured as doing something miraculous or inspiring.

"No no, a lot of people do it," I try to tell her but it doesn't sink in, much like the fact that I wanted the sides shorter and the top finger length or a bit longer.

"Oh yeah yeah," she says and cuts the top shorter leaving the sides where she left them. By the time she is done the hair on my head is all roughly one even length all the way around. Whatever, it's cut, and I notice that the shirt I got out of the lost and found bin back in Florida hangs off of me.

"Too big, and you really need to even out that tan," my brain reminds me.

How many zero's in Katy did I take?

Then a day of riding for more zero's and shelling pecans and burning trash and writing. Thinking about being over budget. Suddenly I'm thinking about living there. Not exactly on the farm, where I ended up, that wouldn't really be possible, but somewhere. I'm amazingly content. The desire to be constantly on the move isn't there anymore. I no longer need to go anywhere.

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The destination is not the goal.

The Southern Tier is not the intention, it was to ride and be warm and be outside. Away from the cold New England winter.

To satisfy my need for movement and to learn about myself.

Somewhere, halfway across the country I was a different person.

I had arrived at a destination that wasn't a physical location. It was a state of mind.

I was content to be.

There was no destination to chase. No place to go just over the horizon. Everything, everywhere was the same as right here right now.

Carmine, Texas

Not exactly where I thought I would be calling an end to the trip.

Funds are low, and it's almost Christmas, which is a great excuse to fly back home and put in some holiday hours at the restaurant to replenish traveling money and see family and friends.

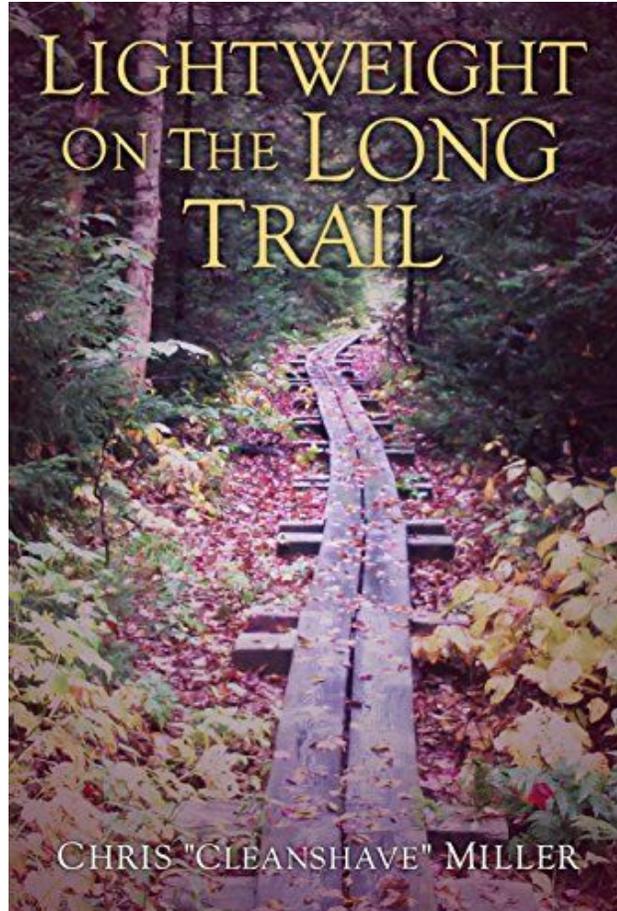
The story will be updated when I get more time. Already my old place of employment has me penciled in for seven 10 hour shifts back to back starting the day I arrive.

You'd think I'd be more depressed about interrupting the trip, about going back home to snow and cold and to sleep on someone's floor, but I feel amazing. I feel like I can do anything, go anywhere, and it will be an adventure.

So with holiday travel costs up a little higher than I can afford it will be after the New Year before I'm back on the bike.

But even then I'm not sure I'll be finishing the Southern Tier.

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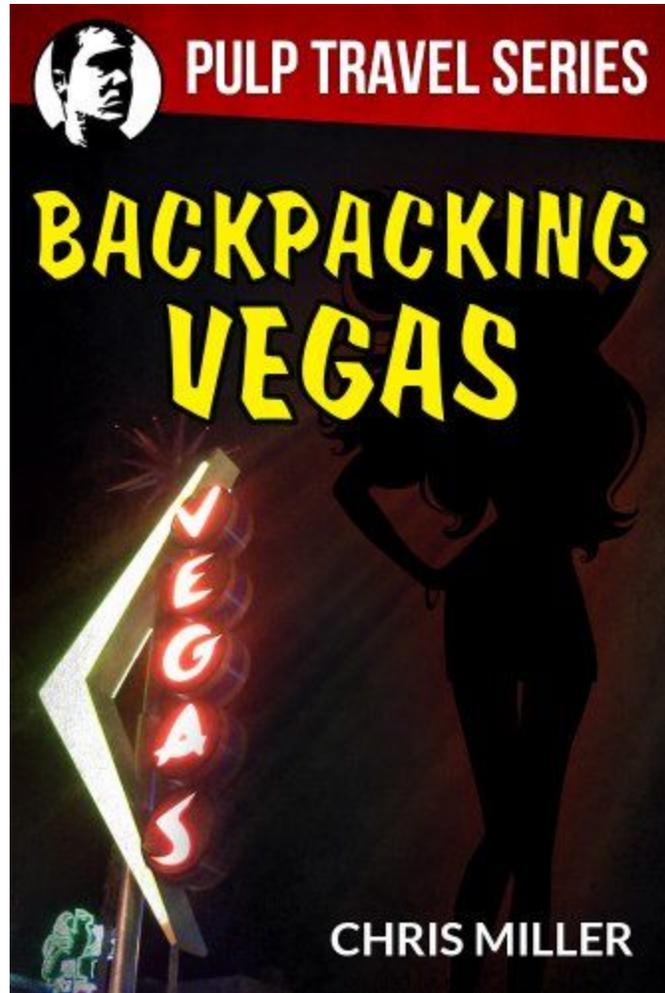


What would you do if you had just given up your apartment and donated all of your belongings to charity? For Chris "Cleanshave" Miller the answer was simple: *Go Hiking!*

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About the Author



Chris "Cleanshave" Miller is an avid hiker and low budget traveler. He has bicycle toured the East Coast Greenway to raise money for Meals on Wheels, jumped off the Stratosphere Hotel in Las Vegas, taken the Polar Bear Plunge in Newport, RI, hiked the Appalachian Trail, Vermont's Long Trail, and the Oregon Coast Trail among many others, and more recently cycled Adventure Cycling's Southern Tier on a fixed gear bicycle.

He is currently traveling the United States living out of his backpack.

Read the Blog: Cleanshave.org
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