

Cycling at Work

In the US, Slovakia and Russia

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Initially, there was the annual problem of keeping pedalling whilst on busman's holidays with archaeological field teams in odd corners of the US, beginning with ranchland in southern Colorado. Here the problem was solved during a weekend's break in Denver and a trip to a local garage sale, where a couple's clear-out included two unused roadsters. By lunchtime, I'd pedalled one of these through Aspen, on the lowest of a hub gear, to altitudes of over 10 000 feet above sea level. The descent on the northern side was an adventure, as the rutted road was unmetalled due to the persistence of severe winter frosts.

On another occasion, we were based in a college precinct in Pella, Iowa, the home of the inventor of the baler which now produces great drums of straw. This was no coincidence as Pella was first called Strawtown, because there was no conventional building materials in this part of the Prairies when the first Dutch settlers arrived.



Cyclists gathering in Iowa

The deserted campus included bits and pieces of abandoned bikes which I cannibalized into a serviceable road bike. Incentives to get out for a ride in the evenings, amid the corn as high as the proverbial elephant's eye, was encouragement of a scattering of 'flag girls' still on traffic duty at road works. Where these were long stretches, a pilot pick-up would lead convoys in one direction before turning round for a return journey. One hot summer afternoon, I was halted in a queue with a bikini-clad flag girl much in demand to help motorists while away a few minutes with idle conversation. Eventually, a motorist near the back of the queue lost patience and roared forward, despite pleas to stop from the spurned flag girl, and disappeared over a low hill. Nothing happened for a while. Then more nothing happened, conversations petered out, and an eerie silence prevailed. Then, suddenly, over the hilltop, came a helter-skelter pilot pick-up, festooned with flag girls. When it stopped near the head of our queue, it was like a

Benny Hill show. There were flag girls jumping off and running there, there and everywhere, shouting "He's hit the equipment, he's hit the equipment". The steady drone of an approaching helicopter seemed to confirm that something serious had indeed happened.

Fold-up Adventures in Slovakia

The hassle of packing bikes for air transport and uncertainties of taking bikes on trains, prompted the impulse purchase of a Bickerton when I returned home, to be joined by a three-gear version and by a suitcase from Oxfam into which either would fit snugly and inconspicuously. Soon, three of us were airborne for Vienna - the Oxfam suitcase, the 3-gear Bickerton and myself - enroute for 6 weeks in the Slovak Republic. We were based, together with up to seven colleagues, in Levice, a small town on the River Hron, about 140km to the east of Bratislava.

It was mid-summer and the evenings were pleasantly warm and sunny, and I clocked up about 600 miles, mainly on memorable runs on the flat quiet roads along the Danube floodplain and terraces. It was exhilarating to bowl along the northern margin of the Danube plain, through vast fields of gleaming wheat, with quiet rural roads, all to oneself...

There were only a couple of less sunny aspects to these rides, the first being the sombre legacy of WWII. The Hron had been the last line of defence for the German



No photos of the Bickerton but I reckon this is the Danube floodplain with Slovak colleagues

army, retreating before the Russian advance, and many of the traditional villages still bore the scars of warfare. Secondly, there was Mrs Harmanova who was in command of the reception desk at the Hotel Atom where we were billeted. We were all fond of the devout Mrs H and admired her skill and sincere interest in improving her command of English. One evening, however, when we were down to a team of just three, we advanced towards the desk to check in - the Bickerton and I - with my two colleagues, Jim and Neil, on either side. I can't remember what I said, but Mrs H exploded. "Dr Pitty", she protested with exasperation, "why are you always *yoking*". In a flash, Jim and Neil dropped below the parapet of the desk. I still don't know whether they were diving for cover or were convulsed in laughter - probably both.

And in Russia

A couple of years later it was four us airborne for Moscow, a second Oxfam suitcase having joined the team. As the adventure was again an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of a Chernobyl-type NPP, the job of the second suitcase was to smuggle aboard a radiation monitor. Evening pedaling into the countryside around the industrial town where we were based was a delight. Although very flat and endless with trees on a broader scale, the view at short distances of the understory beneath the forest canopy was a mosaic of leaves of difference shapes and hues, sprinkled with the vivid colours of small blooms. There were cultural riches to explore, too, as Chekov's home was nearby and the relicts of *the* Cherry Orchard were visited. It was only feasible, however, to pedal short distances beyond the town until the first village was approached, where dogs would gather, jump up and down like string-puppets, and bark fiercely. They would even jump in front of cars that approached!

During the day, I'd strap the monitor into a rucksack and pedal off, visiting each of the automatic monitoring stations in turn. Whatever the problem to be addressed might be, I always collect data to gain some thinking time to work out what is going on in a particular place. Invariably, the transition time from bewilderment to adequate appreciation is unpredictable and very stressful. The data may or may not be useful. Fortunately, in this case, but with not too much help from the monitor, several key conclusions emerged with a couple of days to spare, so I packed up cheerfully for the return journey to Moscow.....



Scenery around Udomlya, Russia

For the next instalment, go to 'Russian Customs'

Many thanks to Oliver Dixon, editor of Quondam, the 'very occasional' journal of the Oxford University Cycling Club, for allowing me to reproduce excerpts of my father's contributions.