

Pedaling history

Colorado bicycle trekkers have early role models to follow

By BOB SILBERNAGEL

On June 12, 1916, two friends from Colorado Springs mounted their single-speed bicycles and headed for New York, travelling mostly on the rutted Lincoln Highway.

Joe Bruce and Lester Atkinson reached New York in August, then turned around and headed home. They traveled 4,284 miles, newspapers reported.

Others have followed parts of the route traveled by Atkinson and Bruce, including Chris Brown, owner of Brown Cycles in Grand Junction, who made a similar trek when he was a teenager.

This month, Brown will join Fruita resident Mike Perry and several others as Perry completes his multi-year, cross-country trip to raise money for the Eureka! McConnell Science Museum. This final leg of Perry's expedition will follow part of the route that Bruce and Atkinson traversed.

Unlike the 1916 riders, Perry, Brown and friends will make their trip on lightweight, multi-gear bikes and will have family members driving support vehicles. It's far different than what Bruce and Atkinson did.

"I was in awe of those guys," Perry said. "Riding those heavy bikes on roads that weren't very good."

Bruce and Atkinson weren't the first people to bicycle across the United States. The first was Englishman Thomas Stevens, who rode from San Francisco to Boston in 1884 on a high-wheeled bicycle. It took him 103 days, and he had to walk more than a third of the way.

Other two-wheeled trekkers followed. Still, when Bruce and Atkinson hit the road in 1916, cross-country bicycle journeys were uncommon.

Also, the two were not self-promoters, so there were only brief newspaper articles about their trip. When they returned to Colorado Springs in September, several papers carried a one-para-



CHRIS BROWN/Special to the Sentinel

Chris Brown, now the owner of Brown Cycles in Grand Junction, when he was 17 and about to embark on his bike trip from Colorado to Syracuse, N.Y.

graph story that said, in part, "The trip was made entirely by bicycle and the boys averaged about 100 miles every day they traveled."

That last part is unlikely. Few modern cyclists average 100 miles a day. It's not clear how much time Bruce and Atkinson rode, but they were gone nearly 100 days. If they rode 80 of those, they averaged about 53 miles a day.

Their story was little known until 2021, when Colorado author R.L. Greene published a novel about their journey called, "4,284 miles." The book gives a good description of the route they traveled, the condition of roads and the state of the country in 1916.

Greene became fascinated with Atkinson and Lester after reading

a brief article marking the 100th anniversary of their ride in a Colorado Springs newspaper. "I wish I could have located a journal," he said. But because no written record of the journey exists, Greene was forced to speculate about their trip and their motives.

Greene did find information about Bruce's high-school years and about the two men later in life. But even descendants of the two men, who were tracked down by Greene and Chris Brown, knew almost nothing about the 1916 trip.

Lester Atkinson had just turned 20 when they set off on their journey. Joe Bruce turned 17 on the road.

The Lincoln Highway, the nation's first trans-continental automobile route, was only a year old in 1916. Although sections of the 3,300-mile route had gravel or rock surfaces, more than half of the Lincoln Highway was just a dirt wagon road that turned to quagmire in bad weather.

Despite bad roads, by mid-July of 1916, Atkinson and Bruce had reached Galesburg, Ill. They arrived in the Big Apple on Aug. 10, roughly 60 days after leaving Colorado Springs.

How long they remained in New York is not known. Based on contemporary newspaper articles, they were back in Colorado Springs by September 30. They traveled much faster on the return trip.

Brown knew nothing about Atkinson and Bruce when he departed on his own bike trek in 1984, following his junior year in high school in Colorado Springs. Nor did he know that another Colorado Springs man, Mike Esch, made a similar trip when he was a teenager in 1968.

Brown and his friends often made long bike trips to Denver and elsewhere. So, a cross-country trip was a natural progression. Also, he once promised his grandmother in Syracuse, N.Y. he would



MIKE PERRY AND EUREKA! MCCONNELL SCIENCE MUSEUM/Special to the Sentinel

Mike Perry and daughter Allyson Willoughby on 2021 ride.

ride his bike to visit her. So, that summer Brown and a companion set off for Syracuse, following part of the Lincoln Highway.

"It took me 40 days," he said. "I took a bus home," to make sure he was back for the start of school.

"The best part of the adventure was the people we met along the way," he recalled. There was a group who invited them to join a family reunion picnic in Nebraska and Amish families they met in Pennsylvania. "It enriches you in ways you don't expect," he added.

Mike Perry, who has been completing legs of his cross-country trip each summer, agreed that meeting new people along the way is one of the highlights of cross-country bicycling.

He began his trek while living and working in Oregon, and crossed most of that state from west to east, one weekend at a time.

A few years later, after he and his wife Sandy had moved back to the Grand Valley, Perry took up the journey once more. Riding part of the way with his daughter, Adrian, and with Sandy driving a support vehicle, he made it to Kremling.

Then, family issues stalled his bike journey until a few years ago. By then, he was retired and volunteering with the Eureka Museum.

The plan to make the rest of his journey a fundraiser for Eureka arose during conversations with Eureka's Executive Director Jenn Moore and Development Director Phaedra Howe.

The first year of the "Mike on a Bike" trip for Eureka, crossing Nebraska, Perry hoped to raise \$2,000. "We made \$10,000," he said. Subsequent legs of the trip raised more than \$25,000 each.

This year, starting near Buffalo, N.Y., he will ride 563 miles on the Erie Canal road, which is now a hiking/biking trail, and on the Empire State trail. He'll end the trip in New York City, "where I can put my front wheel into the Atlantic Ocean," he said. He hopes to ride 50 to 70 miles a day.

The route shadows the path Bruce and Atkinson took when they rode into New York in 1916, although Perry didn't know that when he planned his trip.

Like Chris Brown, he was unaware of Atkinson and Bruce until he read

Greene's book.

Perry and Brown got to know each other over history, and began to ride together occasionally. So, it was natural for Brown to join Perry on the final leg of his journey.

Once the two men and their companions reach the Atlantic, they will climb into cars and return home, unlike Bruce and Atkinson. "I can't even fathom that after riding all that way, they turned around and rode home again," Perry said.

Sources: "4,284 miles," by R.L. Greene; author interviews with Chris Brown and Mike Perry; historic newspapers at www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.com; "The Bicycling World," through Google Book Search; "The Lincoln Highway," by Richard F. Weingroff, www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/lincoln.cfm.

To learn more about Mike on a Bike or to donate to his trip, visit <https://eurekascience-museum.org/mike-bikes-the-anchor-leg/>.

The book "4,284 miles" is available at Amazon.com or through RogerL-Greene.com.

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JOHN LOSS/Special to the Sentinel

Lester Atkinson's step-grandson, Lester Atkinson, with his wife, Maime, later in his life.