

Trip Report

Great Allegheny Passage – Cumberland to McKeesport, (almost) all downhill

John Cayton and Cheryl Conway

June 21-25, 2008

- *By John Cayton*

Equipment

I rode a 1995 Schwinn Tracker Express hybrid 21-speed bike with 700 x 38C tires and a wide gel seat. The tires had knobby edges with a smooth strip in the middle – perfect for the crushed limestone surface of most of this trail. Cheryl rode a Western Flyer hybrid 10-speed bicycle with 26 x 1.5 inch tires and a padded seat. Her tires had a bit more aggressive tread pattern, which wasn't quite as ideal for this trail. All tires were slimed before the trip. I had a frame pump attached to my bike. Each of us had everything we needed for five days/four nights packed in our handlebar bag or rear trunk pannier. In addition to clothes and toiletries packed in Ziploc bags, we carried an extra inner tube, a few tools, electrical cable ties, duct tape, energy bars, beef jerky, sunglasses, maps, two water bottles, rain gear, paperback book, pen, paper, digital camera, cell phone, bike lock, sunscreen, insect repellent, flashlight, disposable wipes, bungee cords and water shoes. We each rode with gloves and helmets. We stayed at motels along the trail.

June 21, 2008

We got an early start, leaving home about 6:30 a.m. for the drive to Boston, Pa. We arrived in Boston about 11:45 a.m. We had arranged to meet our shuttle service driver at 1:00 p.m., but we wanted to get in early. We certainly didn't want something like a flat tire along the way to keep us from starting our bicycle journey on schedule.

We ate a leisurely lunch of sandwiches and veggie strips that my wife had packed for us. About 12:25 p.m., we met David Tressler of Yough River Transport, who loaded up our bikes and gear for the trip to Frostburg, Md.

The reason we started in Frostburg was because we wanted to ride all 132 completed miles of the Great Allegheny Passage, but we didn't want to ride uphill more than necessary. To accomplish this, we had purchased tickets for the Western Maryland Scenic Railway for the next day – Sunday, June 22 (\$30 for adult with bicycle – book early to ensure a spot). We could ride downhill from Frostburg to Cumberland, take the train back up the mountain to Frostburg, and only have to ride 8 miles uphill to Deal. 132 miles with only 8 or so uphill was a great way to go!

The shuttle dropped us off in at the Frostburg train depot at about 2:45 p.m. The weather was perfect – low 70s with low humidity and a light breeze. We secured our gear on the bikes, checked our equipment, and were ready to roll. Then, we looked at the Trail Inn & Cafe across the road and decided that we should start our trip with a cool, refreshing beverage before riding down to Cumberland.

At about 3:15 p.m., we each finished our Yuengling lager and got onto the trail. We negotiated the switchbacks to the trailhead, and headed to Cumberland.

The view along the trail was very pretty, and it was great to ride over 15 miles with very little pedaling. One word of caution – walk your bikes through the tunnels in

Maryland. They are not lighted, are pitch black in the center, and are a lot longer than they look from the outside. This advice was ignored later in the trip, with harmful results.

The trail was a breeze into Cumberland, where we took a look at the train station and Canal Place area, then checked into the Holiday Inn. The staff at the Holiday Inn was very friendly, and the place is very accommodating for cyclists. We took our bikes on the elevator to our rooms, and relaxed a bit before heading out to dinner. We wandered the streets for a while before stopping at the Crabby Pig, right next to the train station, for a nice dinner.

June 22, 2008

Another beautiful day in the 70s with low humidity and a light breeze. We ate a leisurely breakfast at a coffee shop in downtown Cumberland, then rode around Cumberland a little before heading over to the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad station for our ride up the mountain to Frostburg.

Even if you are not a train buff, this trip is an excellent experience. There are few places where you can ride a train pulled by a working steam engine, and riding behind a steam engine working its way up a mountain grade is scenic railroading at its finest. Besides, it's a lot easier than pedaling up the mountain. The train folks were accommodating for our bicycles, although loading them meant lifting the bicycles head-high to get them onto the train.



Here comes our ride.

The train dropped us back off at the station in Frostburg. We watched the engine turn around on the turntable, then headed back to the Trail Inn for lunch. After a couple of chili dogs and Cokes, we were ready to tackle the uphill climb to the Eastern Continental Divide.

The trail uphill turned out to be much different than the glide down to Cumberland. Though not particularly steep, it was a long grade to the first tunnel of the day – Borden Tunnel. As we approached the tunnel, we noticed several riders riding out of the tunnel in the opposite direction. In addition, as there were no signs warning us to walk our bicycles, we decided to ride through the tunnel. This was not a good decision. The tunnels are a lot longer than they look when first entering, and it's not hard to become disoriented in the sooty darkness. Cheryl rode too close to the edge of the tunnel, hit the railroad ballast near the edge, and fell into the side of the tunnel. I was a short distance behind, and I had just hopped off the bike to walk it. I heard Cheryl yell, but could not see her in the darkness. I helped her up, got her bike rolling, and we walked on to the end of the tunnel to see the damage. The good news – her bicycle was fine. The bad news – she had some serious road rash on her arm and leg, complete with small stones and lots of soot. She also had the wind knocked out of her, but had recovered from that. She cleaned the wounds with water and antiseptic wipes we had, and rubbed on a little neosporin. Soon, another cyclist came by and stopped to offer assistance. She supplied Cheryl with a little Porter's Liniment Salve, which really eased her pain and covered the wounds.



Borden Tunnel – Walk your bikes through the unlighted tunnels in Maryland

We headed on up the mountain, a little slower due to Cheryl's injuries. We took the obligatory pictures at the Mason-Dixon line, and kept moving higher up the mountain.

At Mile 21.8, we stopped to take a rest break and get some pictures of the beautiful view across the valley to Cumberland and West Virginia. Then, we headed into Big Savage Tunnel. The cool air in the tunnel was refreshing, and the soft yellow lighting was effective in allowing us to find our way through. The work done by everyone in refurbishing this tunnel for trail use must be applauded.



View from Mile 21.8

A few miles beyond Big Savage Tunnel, we came to the Eastern Continental Divide. From here, it's all downhill to McKeesport – yeah! The trail flattened out, and we picked up our pace a little as we headed toward Meyersdale. We passed through Deal (just a couple of trailers and a parking area), and soon came to the Keystone Viaduct. The viaduct crosses a small creek and the two tracks of an active CSX (formerly B&O) railroad. From this point, we would parallel the B&O to McKeesport – usually across the river from the bike trail.

We soon crossed the new (well, new to this location – it was built in 1871) bridge over Scratch Road, and a passing cyclist warned us about skunks ahead on the trail. Sure enough, about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile ahead a litter of young skunks was frolicking on the edge of the trail. We rode by quickly, giving them plenty of room, and cruised into the Meyersdale station. We turned off the trail down Main Street, had some ice cream, and headed to Yoder's Motel. The owner of the motel was waiting on the large front porch, and she got

us our room keys. She showed us where we could store our bikes for the night, then we headed to our rooms for a shower and down time before dinner.

We ate dinner at the only open restaurant near the motel – Fox's Pizza Den, and went back to the motel to read, watch television, and rest.

June 23, 2008

Yet another beautiful day. Both the trail web site and the owner of Yoder's Motel recommended the G.I. Dayroom for breakfast. We found the place on Main Street, and were not disappointed. Be sure to sign the restaurant's guest book for cyclists riding the GAP.

After breakfast, we went to a drug store so Cheryl could buy some of the Porter's salve she had used the day before. She found what she was looking for, and while I waited out front I ran into a man who had been a member of the Navy's very first SEAL team.

We headed back up the steep hill to the restored railroad station, and onto the trail. In a few minutes, we were on the Salisbury Viaduct. The impressive viaduct crosses the Casselman River valley, a highway, the active B&O/CSX lines, and the river.

I was having some trouble with my handlebar. I had tightened it as much as possible, but it still twisted down aggravatingly whenever I put my weight on it. We stopped at the great trailside bike shop in Rockwood, where I got a new handlebar, and we each got needed adjustments. It took under an hour, and the price was very reasonable.

As we left Rockwood, we were awarded with beautiful river scenery all the way to Confluence. This portion of the trail is, in my opinion, the most scenic of any part of the Great Allegheny Passage.

We came to the Pinkerton Low Bridge, the detour around Pinkerton Horn and the closed Pinkerton Tunnel. The detour was recently re-graded and an easy ride. The view from the next bridge, the Pinkerton High Bridge, is very nice.

A short while later, we rolled into Confluence. We tried to stop at the River's Edge for a light lunch and a cool beverage at a table overlooking the river, but unfortunately the place is closed on Monday. We went on into downtown Confluence for a beer at a place with a lot of local character. Refreshed, we headed back to the trail for the ride into Ohiopyle, stopping only to consume beef jerky for lunch.

I recommend that, when you get to the SR 281 crossing in Confluence, proceed across SR 281 onto Robert Brown Road for a shortcut into town, instead of following the tight trail loop off the SR 281 Yough River bridge and under the bridge. A bike/pedestrian bridge leads from the east side of the Yough River back onto the trail.

We rolled into Ohiopyle and checked into the Yough Plaza Motel, which is about $\frac{1}{2}$ block from the trailhead. We ate dinner at the highly-recommended Falls City Restaurant and Brew Pub. The food is great, the servings are large, there are many beers on tap and in bottles to choose from, and the staff is very friendly.

June 24, 2008

We still had great weather. On Tuesday, we took a day off from cycling to kayak on the Youghiogheny River, hike around Ferncliff Peninsula, take a look at the falls, wash some clothes, and just hang out in Ohiopyle. We ended our day as we had the day before, enjoying the good food and libations at the Falls City Restaurant and Brew Pub.

June 25, 2008

One more day with great weather – high 70s, low humidity, and light breeze. We got an early start for the final 56 miles to Boston. We couldn't find any restaurants open in Ohiopyle, so we decided to have a late breakfast/early lunch in Connellsville, 17 miles north. We hit the trail shortly after 8:00 a.m.

The scenery between Ohiopyle and Connellsville is beautiful. We traveled over the nice arch bridge in Ohiopyle, across Ferncliff Peninsula, over the Ohiopyle High Bridge, and on toward Connellsville, taking in the great views along the Youghiogheny River.



Morning mist over the Youghiogheny in this view from Ohiopyle High Bridge

Before we knew it, we were in Connellsville, where we stopped at the nice downtown trailside bike shop for a check of our tire pressure. The bike shop folks recommended a couple places for lunch, and we chose to head across the US 119 bridge to the Hometown Diner. The US 119 bridge has a wide sidewalk for bikes and

pedestrians. The Hometown Diner is at the north end of the bridge, on the right (east), at the south end of a nondescript strip mall. The lighted sign over the door reads simply "Diner". The bike shop folks were right – this is a very good restaurant. While Cheryl had a light breakfast of corned beef hash, eggs and toast, I went with a meal called the homestead something or other – two eggs, two big pancakes, hash browns, bacon, sausage, ham and toast – all for a very good price. Well fed, we headed back across the bridge, and back on the trail north.

From Connellsville north, the trail leaves the Western Maryland railway roadbed and follows the former Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad bed. The scenery is very different from what we had been riding through. We passed several small mining sites and small towns along the Youghiogheny. One thing nice about this stretch of trail is that there are plenty of trailside stores along the way to pick up drinks and snacks. At one point, we saw three large turkeys and over a dozen chicks along the trail.

We pounded out the miles past Whitsett, under I-70, through Cedar Creek Park, and before we knew it we were in West Newton. We stopped for a much needed rest break at the restored depot, and picked up a few things at the drugstore.

Over the next few miles, we passed through town after town – places like Smithdale, Blythedale, Industry and Buena Vista. We also went by the creepy yet cool campground next to Dravo Cemetery. Along the way, we also passed a red waterfall and a white waterfall, which I assume had something to do with mining runoff.

Finally, we rounded a bend in the river and saw the Boston Bridge ahead. The trip was over. We loaded our gear into the car, and got out the rack to load our bikes for the trip home. But I decided I wanted to ride the entire finished trail, so I headed off toward McKeesport. I rode through Dead Man's Hollow, up and around a railyard full of large pipe, down a hill, and ended up on a city street in Port Vue, still on the west side of the Youghiogheny. After over 130 miles of off-road cycling, I didn't want to ride on city streets. I turned around, and rode back to my car for the trip home.

The trip was a great time. We saw spectacular scenery, met a lot of nice people, and had an experience to remember for years to come.