

Len's 1st Cross-Country Record Attempt in 1980

Len Vreeland in early 1980 set out to fulfill a dream of crossing the United States on a bicycle. He and his brother, Al shared the dream of making a Trans-Am crossing on bicycles since 1962. They had discussed it on several occasions but until now neither had made the commitment. Len made the decision to attempt the feat when in February of 1980, he met John Marino at a bike show in New York City. Marino had set the record in August 1978 riding from California (his home state) to New York City in 13 days, 1 hour and 30 minutes. He had made a second attempt in 1979 to better his time but grew tired once he crossed into Pennsylvania and gave up the attempt just east of Phillipsburg, New Jersey. In New York in February he had informed Vreeland that he intended to make a third attempt in June of that year. Upon his return from New York, Len began to formulate his plans to challenge Marino and the record. He felt that if he left New York and traveled west at the same time that Marino was leaving California to make his west to east attempt that it would give him more incentive and make it more interesting.

Many skeptics told Len that an east to west crossing was not advisable as he would be going against the prevailing winds. But Len felt that he should leave from the east coast. Said Vreeland, "I wouldn't take the easier of the two routes." Len would face other challenges other than the wind. John Marino's effort was fully sponsored and supported by Peugeot. Len's only sponsor was Fuji Bicycle Company, which provided three bicycles and necessary spare parts. Len's friends and supporters sold T' shirts and raffled off 12 speed bicycles in an effort to raise funds. His Support Team would have to cover their own expenses. Also, one must acknowledge that Len Vreeland was 50 years old while Marino was twenty years his junior.

The plan called for Len to depart from New York City on Sunday, June 15, 1980 at 4 a.m. traveling west over a route that had been laid out in advance. He planned to meet Marion in Kansas. He and his support team were scheduled to arrive in Santa Monica on day 12, June 26, 1980. To accomplish this feat of endurance, Len would have to ride 18 to 20 hours out of every 24 and cover an average distance of 250 miles per day.

The eight member Support Team would be traveling in a motor home. The motor home had five bunks, bathroom facilities and a kitchen. When meals were served, all nine members of the team would have to crowd into the motor home. The Broken Spoke Bicycle shop's box van which was used in the business had been equipped with two additional bunks. The van would also carry the bikes that would be used, twenty-five spare tires and all the spare bicycle parts that the team could anticipate that they would need on the journey.

The eight member Support Team consisted of Randy Bernhard, a bike racer who would drive one of the support vehicles; Ed Kay, navigator, and a Lehigh University Psychology Professor; Curt Kichline, mechanic; Marshall Kaiser, support vehicle driver; Rick Passan; support vehicle driver; Carol Vreeland, wife, cook and food procurer; Al Vreeland, Len's brother who would be the Crew Chief and who would provide moral support and pass food to Len via one of the bicycles ; Marie Vreeland, Len's sister who would keep the detailed logs and assist with cooking chores. Another individual that would ride with Len for awhile at the start and at the finish was James McCullagh, Editor of Bicycling Magazine. For the most part, the Support Team would live and sleep in the support vehicles during the trip across the country.

Despite the short-comings, the prevailing winds, etc., Len maintained that he would not make excuses if he failed in his attempt to set a new record. He vowed to give it his all and if the attempt did not meet with success, he would accept it and move on.

Len Vreeland departed New York City on schedule on Sunday, June 15, 1980 riding out of New York with a police escort through the Holland tunnel and into the New Jersey countryside. A short distance outside of New York, Len was joined by Pat Hendrick, a Morning Call reporter that rode along side Len all the way to Allentown, a distance of about 70 miles. The first stop was at Pete's Place on N. Sherman Street, in Allentown, a neighborhood bar where Len's friends and supporters were planning to meet him and give him a grand send off. Len was supposed to arrive at Pete's Place with a police escort between 10 and 10:30 a.m., but arrived early (9:15 a.m.). He arrived without benefit of the police escort and left 45 minutes later, before many of the well-wishers arrived. The photographers and press reporters also missed Len during his stop in Allentown.

Chuck McCullagh, (Editor, Bicycle Magazine) rode with Len from Allentown to Hamburg. The team ran into rain, a heavy downpour about 15 miles east of Harrisburg. Len rode through Harrisburg directly behind the motor home while the van follows closely on his wheel. The first flat of the trip occurred at 5:43 p.m. At 8:19 p.m. the team encountered a heavy downpour but Len was back on the bike 16 minutes later but continued heavy rain caused the team to call it a day a few miles north of Chambersburg. The plan had called for Len to ride a distance of 289 miles on the first day, a longer distance than any other day. The distance actually covered was 222 miles.

Day two began at 4 a.m. and would end at 10:40 p.m. covering a distance of 171 miles. The team had reached a point 5 miles west of Washington, PA. The goal was 261 miles. The team had encountered several summits (Tuscarora Summit 2123 ft. and Laurel Summit, elevation 2728 ft.) which slowed their progress.

The goal for day three was 258 miles with the team in Illinois. The mileage covered by day's end was 189 miles. The stop for the night was Springfield, Ohio. The team had been greeted in the early morning hours by heavy fog. They passed through West Virginia on this day and had to improvise their navigation when route 40 petered out and joined Interstate 70 in Ohio. Team followed I-70 for 1½ miles and then exited onto route 800 until it turned north, then they followed route 40A and eventually found themselves traveling on country roads, some dirt and some gravel. At several points, Len was forced to walk. Finally at Middleboro, OH they picked up route 40 and were once again on good road surface. The team checked into a motel in Springfield at 11:30 p.m. where Len soaked his sore backside in a tub. After his bath Len indicated that the team collectively was doing so much for him that it embarrassed him and he said he doesn't know how he'll be able to go back to the way it was. Carol responded, "You mean with just me waiting on you?"

On day 4 Len took advantage of the motel facilities and soaked in the tub again before departing. He has an open sore on his backside that is giving him difficulty in the saddle. The team is underway by 6 a.m. When the local police noted the activity at the motel, they stopped to see what was going on and provided an escort out of town. Perhaps not the first or last time that Len was escorted out of some town or another. The team missed the turn to route 36 and had to find an alternate route around Indianapolis. Van had to back track to locate the motor home while Len and Curt continued on. The motor home had also missed the turn and they were soon reunited. The team stopped at 12:22 a.m. in Montezuma, Indiana having covered 187 miles.

Team departed at 4:15 a.m. on day 5 and thirty-five minutes later crossed the Illinois border. Len groggy from lack of sleep. Al rides with him to keep him awake. Spirits low due to 10-15 mile an hour head winds. Record already in jeopardy. Only making 6 mph against strong head winds. Len stops and goes to bed. Five hours later, Len on bike and finally at 6:40 p.m. winds shift to a tail wind and Len motoring at 22-23 mph. At Winchester, Illinois at 1:26 a.m. team ends their day having covered a distance of 178 miles.

Day 6 begins at 7:35 a.m. with trailing winds. At 11:45 a.m. the group crosses the Mississippi river and into the state of Missouri. Spirits are high with tail winds of 10-15 mph and possibility of making it in less than 13 days still alive. Day 6 ends at 10:30 p.m. in Carrollton, MO, - 170 miles covered.

Day 7 starts at 6:22 a.m. and by noon the team reaches Kansas City. Three flats in less than an hour. At 11:50 p.m. team reaches Emporia, Kansas, pulls into KOA camp for sleep. Distance covered - 186 miles.

It is June 22nd, day 8 begins at 6:08 a.m. with weather windy with showers. Len puts on his Sunday best shorts and jersey for this is the day that contact is likely with John Marino on his eastward jaunt. At 8:43 a.m. Len and Marino meet. They shake hands exchange mementoes and wish each other well. The meet took place 1

mile from Florence, Kansas. At this point, Len had covered a distance of 1,391 miles, about half way to the ultimate destination. Marino, who had departed Santa Monica, California on June 16th was about one day ahead of his previous pace. Len is almost a day behind schedule. After only 11 minutes together, the two riders depart in opposite directions.

On this day, in the middle of nowhere with the Kansas sky above, it appears that Marino will better his record by some 12 hours while Len, on the other hand, is hoping to finish by day 14, having conceded that his record breaking attempt will not succeed. The team stopped for the night at Greensburg, Kansas having covered 190 miles.

On day 9 the team is on the road by 6:05 a.m. Later in the day they cross over into Oklahoma. Hampered all day by cross winds. Temperatures reach 98°. Late in the evening, the entourage crosses into Texas. Len takes a nap at Stratford, Texas at 1:28 a.m. and is on the bike again at 3:03 a.m. Temps are cooler riding at night. Day 9 ends at Dalhart, Texas at 5:25 a.m., having covered a distance of 213 miles. Chuck McCullagh is planning on joining the group in New Mexico.

At 8:25 a.m. Len is back on the bike and riding strong. At 1:20 p.m. a sign welcomes them to New Mexico. At 3:49 p.m. it is noted that the Tucumcari Mountain rises like a big breast 29 miles away but plainly visible. It is hot and dry with temps of 100°. At 6 p.m. Chuck McCullagh joins group in Logan, New Mexico. Len rides until 2:06 a.m., bucking strong head winds. At that time, 1 mile west of Tucumcari, New Mexico, Len decides that with the strong winds and mountains yet to conquer, that it is impossible to break the record and pointless to go on. He states that it would be selfish of him to continue.

Day 10, June 25 at 2:06 a.m. the 10th day of the quest to break the Trans-Am record, the effort ends at Tucumcari, New Mexico. Len rode 100 miles this day. Total miles to this point - 1,805.

The next day the caravan proceeds west with all members riding in the transport vehicles. At breakfast, Rick asked Len if he would like to try again next year in a recumbent. Len looked out the window to see where Carol was and said "Yes, but don't say it so loud."

The group reached Redondo Beach, California in the early morning hours of June 27th. The group departed California on the morning of June 28th and headed home, arriving in Allentown on the afternoon of July 1st.

John Marino had arrived in New York on Saturday, June 28. He completed the trip in 12 days, three hours and 31 minutes, a new record. He had traveled a distance of 2,853 miles.

An article in the Globe Times Newspaper, Bethlehem, PA. carried the banner, "TWO WINNERS". The article recounted Marino's record breaking effort and Vreeland's failed attempt and ended thusly:

"There could be in this another instance of the strange way in which we view sport in this country. The 76'ers finish second in the NBA finals and boos fill the arena. Beth Heiden, the Olympic skater, wins only a bronze medal and the headlines say she failed. Ray Leonard goes 15 rounds with one of boxing's most brutal competitors and is branded a loser."

"Well, in no way do we consider Len Vreeland's ride a failure. At age 50, he rode farther and faster than 99 percent of the rest of us could do, including those younger than he. The demonstration of courage he gave ought to compensate for any disappointment of goals that were missed."

"So raise a toast to John Marino and Len Vreeland. One is the holder of the record and all the fame. The other is a genuine hometown hero, and has our complete admiration."

A few weeks after the attempt to cross the country in record breaking time Len was quoted as saying: "I was humbled, but I gave it a hell of a try." If I had gone on, it would have been just ego...I guess some people have trouble being humble. Well, I've had so many chances to be humble that I'm good at it."