

KIT KAT ESSAY

February 16, 2010

Good evening fellow Kit Katters. I am excited to have the opportunity this evening to present my second essay to the Club. The title of my remarks is “*EFI*” *OR COAST TO COAST BY BICYCLE IN 50 DAYS*. My topic is a little off the beaten path, so to speak, at least as far as Kit Kat essays go, and I hope you will enjoy it. I’ll explain the meaning of EFI in a few minutes.

To begin, let me remind you that “life is a journey, not a destination.” This familiar nugget of philosophical wisdom has been around for a long time. Its origins seem to be lost to history. Jonathan Raban, a contemporary British writer of travel guides and novels, refers to it as the “most ancient of all metaphors.” But regardless of its age or its origin, the concept remains relevant and, as you will discover shortly, especially meaningful to me.

Sir Oliver Goldsmith, another British author, elaborated on this ancient metaphor with a touch of humor when he observed that “Life is a journey that must be traveled *no matter how bad the roads and accommodations.*” What an astute observation, and again, as you will soon see, relevant to my topic!

Still another British author (by the way, why does it always seem to be British authors who are responsible for the most memorable quotes?), Sir William Golding once wrote “Consider a man riding a bicycle. Whoever he is, we can say three things about him. We know he got on the bicycle and started to move. We know that at some point he will stop and get off. Most important of all, we know that if at any point between the

beginning and the end of his journey he stops moving and does not get off the bicycle he will fall off it. That is a metaphor for the journey through life of any living thing, and I think of any society of living things.” What else is there to say? I think Golding’s words pretty much cover everything there is to know about the journey of life!

And so with that quotation I can finally get around to my subject, which deals with both bicycles and journeys. Tonight I would like to describe a bicycle journey that I took in 2007. Along the way, I hope to convey to you a sense of what I experienced and what I learned from that experience.

It all began very early one morning in the spring of 2005, while I was doing my daily workout at the Columbus Athletic Club. I encountered my slightly younger and much taller friend Ralph Antolino, who was also lifting weights before breakfast. I knew that Ralph was a cyclist and I knew that he liked physical challenges. So I walked over to him, skipped the usual small talk and preliminaries, and asked him out of the blue if he would like to bicycle across the United States in 2007. I told him that 2007 would be the year of both my 60th birthday and my 35th anniversary at Bricker & Eckler and I wanted to commemorate those important milestones with a big adventure. Now, you must understand that my friend Ralph is a very decisive guy. He looked me square in the eye, pondered the question carefully, for approximately one nano-second, and said with no hesitation, *absolutely!*

So, with that impulsive start we began to plan for what was to become the adventure of a lifetime. In the weeks that followed, Ralph and I got together a few times for lunch and told each other what a wonderful idea it was and how easy it would be to

recruit ten or fifteen other guys to join us on the ride across America. We mentioned it to several of our friends and they all agreed that it certainly was a great idea. We should very definitely include them on the planning list. So we did. And we began to do our homework, trying to think through all the logistical details. We researched a number of websites and studied a bunch of maps. At first we thought that we should make all the arrangements ourselves and hire my college student son Chad to drive a support vehicle and document the trip with a video camera. He was, after all, studying for a degree in filmmaking and planning some day to be a wealthy filmmaker in Hollywood. But that idea quickly faded when he, my fiscally responsible son, advised us that not only would he expect to be paid well for his services but he would need a co-pilot to help drive the van and the co-pilot also would need to be paid. Not only that, but my dear wife, his mother, thought Chad's summer hours would be better spent working at a real job. So the prospect of a self-organized tour began to fade. Nevertheless, Ralph and I continued to fantasize about the trip. Through our research on the internet we learned that there are several professional bicycle tour groups that conduct long distance rides every year. The more we learned about their services, the more it seemed to make sense to sign up with an experienced group rather than try to make all the arrangements ourselves. They had worked out all the organizational details and it would be much easier to take advantage of their experience!

Unfortunately, but quite predictably, one-by-one our various friends who had seemed so interested in joining the tour group began to drop out. Each of them had some legitimate reason, the kinds of justifications you might expect: the press of work, family

commitments, injuries, budgetary constraints and so forth. Before long it was back to being just Ralph and me. But the two of us remained steadfast. Each of us called the other regularly to make sure the trip was still a “go”. We both sent in our deposit checks to the tour organizer and we both got our official information packets. We trained hard (or sort of hard) during the summer and fall of 2006, and we tried to do some time on the indoor, stationary bikes during the winter of 2006-2007 to stay in shape. We convinced our wives that we were really going to do it! We even convinced ourselves!

Eventually, almost before we knew it, the big day actually arrived. It became too late to back out and we found ourselves facing the reality of this undertaking. We made all the necessary business arrangements at our offices, packed our duffel bags, disassembled our bikes, and carefully placed them into airplane carrier boxes. Sue and Cindy, our more-or-less supportive wives, flew with us on the long flight to Portland, Oregon, to wish us bon voyage. The four of us stayed a couple of nights with old friends who live in the Portland area and accepted their kind invitation to chauffeur us over to the Pacific coast, one hundred miles to the west. And finally, on a cool and drizzly Sunday morning, June 17, 2007, just about two years after our initial conversation at the Athletic Club, in the quaint seaside town of Astoria, Oregon, at the mouth of the Columbia River (which, you history buffs will remember, is where Lewis and Clark reached the Pacific Ocean two hundred years ago), Ralph and I ceremoniously dipped our rear tires in the ocean, officially marking the commencement of our journey. Exactly fifty days later, on an equally cool and wet Monday, August 6, accompanied by a police car escort with lights flashing, we rode into the parking lot of Wallis Sands State Beach in Portsmouth,

New Hampshire, carried our well-worn bicycles over the sand to the water's edge, and completed the journey by dipping our front tires into the Atlantic.

In between those memorable starting and finishing points, we rode some 3700 miles across the northern United States. Averaging over 80 miles a day, we pedaled entirely across Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, took a four-hour cruise on a ferry boat across Lake Michigan, climbed back onto our bikes and continued across the lower peninsula of Michigan into Ontario, Canada, returned to the USA at Niagara Falls, traveled along the Erie Canal across New York State, through Vermont and New Hampshire to the Atlantic coast.

We passed over and through pine forests, barren deserts, lush irrigated farmlands, small villages, big cities, abandoned ghost towns, places you never heard of, the Cascade Mountains, the Teton Mountains, the Black Hills of South Dakota, the Green Mountains of Vermont, vast prairies, pastures, parks, orchards, endless Midwestern cornfields, several tunnels, lots of bridges, a few swamps, and, among other things, a herd of buffalo. We crossed ten states (plus the province of Ontario), four time zones, and one entire continent.

We rode on busy highways, lonely country back-roads, gravel bicycle trails, and, for fifty or sixty very exciting miles, on the shoulder of Interstate 80 with massive triple-semis blasting by at 70 mph three feet away from us. Did you know, by the way, that it is possible to “surf” the shock wave produced by these big trucks and get a boost as you ride along down the road? Takes a while to adjust but eventually not bad!

We slept in forty-five different motels, not too many of which you would want to take your family to. But we didn't care that the carpet was worn out and there was no chocolate mint on the pillow, because we fell asleep early every night and we left each morning at the crack of dawn.

We ate at more than one hundred different restaurants, mostly of the Hometown Buffet and Denny's variety. And we ate constantly in between meals as well, two or three times a day, at official rest stops. We stuffed ourselves with bananas, apples, granola bars, cookies, peanuts, Fritos, brownies, and junk food of every variety. We drank Gatorade by the bucket. Then we ate still more junk food and we washed it down with large milkshakes from the nearest Dairy Queen. We ate about 6,000 to 8,000 calories a day and most of us lost weight. I lost four pounds myself and I was not carrying a lot of extra weight to begin with.

We quickly learned what kinds of creams and ointments are most soothing for a rear end that feels like it has been systematically and methodically beaten with a baseball bat. The *best* cream, you may be interested in knowing, is "Bag Balm", originally developed to soothe the chapped hands of dairy maids who milked cows all day!

We took care of blisters on our hands, numb fingers, sore necks, aching knees, and perpetually tired legs. We slathered sunscreen on our arms and legs and faces five times a day. We rinsed our sweaty biking clothes in the motel sink every night and we argued over who got first dibs on the motel washing machines.

We gave our bicycles pet names and we took extra good care of them, washing the dust off and lubricating the drive trains almost every day. Incidentally, the biker term for

that routine maintenance process is “flossing your cogs”. We changed lots of flat tires (or at least most of the riders did; by some miracle I did not have a single flat!). Some riders had dozens.

We learned good biker etiquette: how to shout “stopping!” when you are in a group of riders and you want to slow down in the middle of a bridge to take a picture; how to signal that everything is ok when you hop off your bike near a cornfield to take a “nature break”; how to say “no thanks” when some very energetic rider wants to pick up the pace after seventy-five miles of slogging through gusty headwinds.

We observed, up close and personal, every variety of North American road-kill known to science. By this I mean white tail deer, of course, but also pronghorn antelope, porcupine, coyote, weasel, dog, cat, raccoon, possum, groundhog, jack-rabbit, regular rabbit, squirrel, mole, mouse, bird (at least a hundred species of birds), snakes, including rattlesnakes of every type and degree of freshness, turtles, toads, frogs, and butterflies, just to mention a few of the most common.

When you are watching the pavement six or seven hours a day you see a lot of things that car passengers miss. Especially the smaller animals lying on the berm. And bungee cords. It is truly amazing how many bungee cords pop off vehicles and come to rest along the shoulders of American highways. If I saw one bungee cord I saw a thousand, quite literally.

We rode as part of a professionally organized group called “America by Bicycle” under the leadership of a retired air force lieutenant colonel named Mike Munk. Mike is an extremely fit, disciplined, and organized guy. He and his company have conducted

this tour many times and have worked out all the logistical issues: a big truck to carry duffel bags, a mechanic to fix broken bikes, spare parts, extra tubes and tires, reasonably convenient motel and restaurant reservations, a couple of Econoline vans to carry water, snacks, and tired riders, very strict safety rules, and expert advice on how to deal with long days in the saddle. Mike had a staff of five very experienced riders assisting him, two men and three women, one of whom was Mike's wife Barbara. They rotated duties each day, with three people driving the vehicles and three riding bikes. One staff member was always assigned to ride "sweep", following along behind the slowest rider to make sure no one got left behind.

Mike ruled with an iron hand. He preached safety constantly at our daily "route rap" meetings, where we received detailed information on the next day's ride. His goal was to get the entire group across the continent with no injuries and he very nearly made it. Unfortunately, one rider was struck by a motorcycle four days from the end of the tour. But his injuries were not too serious and he was present on the beach in New Hampshire for the tire-dipping festivities.

Mike taught us to ride defensively, never to lose concentration on surrounding traffic conditions, avoid obscene gestures when responding to jerks who tried to run us off the road (fortunately this was a rare occurrence), never lean your bike against the van, and always wash your hands before reaching for a cookie at the "sag" stop. We had to sign in before starting out on the road in the morning, sign in at each of the sag stops, and sign in upon reaching the motel in the afternoon. If somebody got lost, the staff wanted to know about it fast!

At the beginning, our group consisted of about sixty-five coast-to-coast riders, plus another half dozen who joined us at various points along the way for one or two segments of the tour. We came from all over the USA. Thirty-five states and three foreign countries were represented. The average age was 57, believe it or not, and about sixty of the riders made it all the way, although perhaps only about forty of us did “EFI”, which, I will now tell you, stands for “every *flipping* inch” or something very close to that. For Ralph and me, and many others as well, EFI was important, as a point of pride. We would not consider riding in the van, no matter how tired we were. The rest of the bikers spent at least part of the trip riding in the van, ranging from as little as a day or two, to as much as perhaps a third of the total distance.

We were an eclectic group: retired military officers, Wall Street money men, college professors, school teachers, several physicians, two lawyers (Ralph and I), a few married couples, including two couples who rode tandem bikes, and one family of three who rode a triple, a very unusual bicycle.

Their eight-year-old daughter rode in the third position, staring all day at her mother’s rather large backside, and somehow she managed to survive the experience. From my point of view it looked like child abuse and she spent a large part of the trip riding in the van, but at least she finished!

We had a few easy days, sixty or seventy miles of flat terrain with a steady tailwind. And we had *many* very hard days, so-called “century rides” of one hundred miles or more, with lots of climbing, heat, and miserable headwinds. Headwinds, by the way, are the worst, as far as I’m concerned. They beat you up mentally; make you feel

like you are dragging an anchor. On the other hand, we had no rain until the very last mile -- fifty straight days of dry weather! What are the odds of that?

Some people have asked me which was my favorite day. There were many amazing days, of course, and several stand out in my mind, but Ralph and I agree on one in particular: it was the day we rode from Hot Springs, South Dakota, up through Wind Cave National Park, north into the Black Hills, past the mountain on which they are carving the colossal Crazy Horse memorial (which will take another 50 years of carving to finish), up to Mount Rushmore, down to the tourist town of Keystone, and then over the hills into Rapid City, South Dakota. The weather was perfect: cool and sunny. The scenery was spectacular and constantly changing. Wind Cave itself is a little known national park, well off the beaten path. It is very beautiful. There we saw rolling grasslands and ponderosa pine groves. We had to pick our way slowly through a herd of buffaloes walking across the road, and we encountered virtually no car traffic.

We passed by vast prairie dog colonies with hundreds of prairie dogs standing up in their burrows watching us go by. And the Black Hills are gorgeous: lots of pine trees and bare granite outcroppings. I was expecting Mount Rushmore itself to be rather cheesy, but in fact it is very impressive and the visitor center is exceptionally well done. It was crowded with tourists from all over the world and had a cosmopolitan atmosphere. That day was, for me and for many of the other riders, one of the most memorable of the entire trip.

On most days we had little time and not much energy for visiting tourist spots other than what we could see from the seat of our bikes, but we did have a couple of

unique opportunities. We spent one balmy night in the town of Wall, South Dakota, population about 800. This of course is the location of world-famous (according to the countless billboards we saw along the highway) Wall Drug Store, a tourist trap worthy of the name. If you happen to pass by that way, I actually do recommend seeing Wall Drug, but more importantly, you really *must* see the badlands, which are only 15 miles south of town. Ralph and I both wanted to see the badlands, but after riding 100 miles that day, neither of us wanted to bicycle another 30 or 40 miles to tour the Badlands National Park. So we looked for a car rental place. Unfortunately, there is no car rental agency in Wall, South Dakota. The nearest Hertz or Avis was 100 miles behind us in Rapid City. I would have given up, but not Ralph. He wandered around the town looking for a car of some sort and eventually poked his head into the local garage. A guy in overalls was working under the hood of a pick-up when Ralph asked him where he could rent a car. “Not here” the gentleman replied. “You can get a car in Rapid City”.

“But that’s a hundred miles back”, said Ralph. “Sorry”, said the mechanic. “Well, how about that car?” suggested Ralph, pointing to a ten-year-old Lincoln parked at the side of the garage. “Sorry”, said the man, “That’s my car”. “Well, how about renting it?” said Ralph. “Not for rent!” said the man with a “what are you talking about?” kind of look on his face. “Well how about for a hundred bucks?” said Ralph, undeterred. And then, after a pause, and with a fresh smile on his face, our new best friend said “You’ve got a deal!” So we handed him a couple of fifties and toured the badlands in style! And the badlands are unique, a fascinating, surreal, out-of-this-world

place, unlike anyplace else on earth that I have ever seen. This was another highlight of our trip.

On most days, our group was pretty spread out, sometimes over as much as twenty or thirty miles. This is because most of us preferred to ride at our own pace rather than ride in a group and have to go at the speed of the group, either a little faster or a little slower than is completely comfortable. Ralph, for example, is a very strong rider who rode with three or four other very strong riders. Generally they were among the first to reach the motel at the end of each day. I, on the other hand, was content to ride farther back in the pack, stopping frequently to smell the roses along the way.

On the subject of smells, some of the most powerful memories I will have from this experience will be of the smells we encountered: the clean scent of pine forests in Oregon, fragrant fields of potato blossoms in Idaho, sage brush on the high plains of Wyoming, the overpowering stench of cattle feed lots in South Dakota, freshly mown hay fields in Minnesota, and salt air in New Hampshire. You experience some very vivid smells from the seat of a bike!

When you are riding along the highway in the climate-controlled cabin of your car, you see the scenery flash by your window and you get an impressionistic view of the world. But when you are riding a bicycle at fifteen or twenty mph with the sun and the wind swirling around you, the experience is entirely different. It affects all of your senses. You absorb the smells, you feel the heat and the breeze (and the bugs that occasionally smack into your face), you hear the birds and the prairie dogs chirping (who knew that they chirp?), you see the world in crystal clear detail, and I am convinced you

can even taste it. The American author and poet Diane Ackerman writes “When I go biking, I repeat a mantra of the day's sensations: bright sun, blue sky, warm breeze, blue jay's call, ice melting and so on. This helps me transcend the traffic, ignore the clamorings of work, leave all the mind theaters behind and focus on nature instead. I still must abide by the rules of the road, of biking, of gravity. But I am mentally far away from civilization. The world is breaking someone else's heart.” And Ernest Hemingway put it like this: “It is by riding a bicycle that you learn the contours of a country best, since you have to sweat up the hills and can coast down them.... Thus you remember them as they actually are, while in a motorcar only a high hill impresses you and you have no such accurate remembrance of country you have driven through as you gain by riding a bicycle.” I can tell you for a fact there is simply no better way to experience America!

How can you prepare for a trip like this? It is physically demanding, certainly, but it is more about persistence than hard-core physical strength. The trip organizers recommend that you train by riding at least 2000 miles during the six months immediately preceding the tour. That amounts to only a little over 10 miles per day and could be accomplished in less than one hour a day if you are disciplined in your habits. Unfortunately I was not disciplined enough. I probably rode only about 1000 miles outdoors on my bike, although I did attend 45-minute indoor spinning classes two or three times a week over the last few months preceding the trip.

As a result, my legs were in pretty good shape and my cardiovascular fitness was ok, but my backside was not sufficiently toughened up and my hands were soft. It took

me about three weeks on the road, enduring considerable discomfort, before I reached the level of fitness I should have attained before starting. Of course, I was not alone in this discomfort. Misery loves company and I had plenty of company!

Incidentally, you may be thinking that a wide, soft, fleece-covered saddle is just the thing for a long bike ride. Well, if that is what you are thinking, you would be wrong. If your plan is to ride around the neighborhood for a few miles on the occasional summer evening, a seat like that would be quite comfortable. But for an extended tour involving, day after day, many hours on the bike and a variety of road conditions, the traditional narrow saddle used by all the professional riders on the Tour de France is essential. Anything else will produce painful chafing and saddle sores. Narrow saddles take some getting used to, but in time they become as comfortable as your favorite easy chair.

My bicycle is a 2006 Trek Madone model 5.5. It has a carbon-fiber frame, light-weight racing wheels, and fancy Shimano “Dura-ace” components. It weighs about 17 pounds. This is a high-end road bike, the kind with very skinny tires. I bought it off the shelf from a dealer on Sawmill Road after checking out virtually every variety of bikes on the planet. It is possible to order a custom-fitted bike and spend much more than I spent and it is also possible to spend considerably less for a stock bicycle. My bike worked great, but if I had it to do over again I would spend about half as much money and get one without the exotic, super-light-weight gears, cranks, brakes, and wheels. The few ounces of weight they save are meaningless for a rider of my skill level.

Over the last few years I have become something of a bicycle connoisseur. I have an appreciation for the finely-made machine. Elizabeth West, a British dancer,

apparently had the same feelings. She wrote, “When man invented the bicycle he reached the peak of his attainments. Here was a machine of precision and balance for the convenience of man. And (unlike subsequent inventions for man's convenience) the more he used it, the fitter his body became. Here, for once, was a product of man's brain that was entirely beneficial to those who used it, and of no harm or irritation to others. Progress should have stopped when man invented the bicycle.” Well, that may be something of an overstatement, but it contains at least a nugget of truth!

So what did this whole cross-country experience teach me? On a superficial level, it gave me a unique understanding of the physical reality of the United States. This is a very big country we live in. And it is staggeringly diverse, in terms of geology, flora, fauna, history, and humanity. It is also breathtakingly beautiful and, in many parts, incredibly empty. Those of us who live in cities, fighting traffic congestion every day and deploring urban sprawl, tend to forget that there are vast stretches of America that are devoid of people! A couple of hundred miles along the desolate back roads of eastern Wyoming will convince you of the truth of that observation!

On a deeper level, this journey gave me an opportunity to reflect on the importance of some fundamental ideas -- like seizing the day and living in the moment.

If I may return to the initial premise of this essay, I will quote from Greg Anderson, who writes, “Focus on the journey, not the destination. Joy is found not in finishing an activity but in doing it.” Like you, I think I have heard that advice in one form or another since I was in high school, but it has taken me most of my life for the meaning to sink in. On the bicycle trip I spent many hours out in the middle of nowhere,

blissfully cranking along, all alone, absorbing the scenery, pondering the experience, perfectly content. The destination didn't matter. It was *doing it* that mattered!

According to Bill Emerson, "A bicycle does get you there and more.... And there is always the thin edge of danger to keep you alert and comfortably apprehensive. Dogs become dogs again and snap at your raincoat; potholes become personal. And getting there is all the fun." Isn't it a shame that it takes most of us so long to get to the point in our lives where we can appreciate the wisdom of this concept?

I know that I am very lucky to have been able to undertake this ride. It was physically and mentally challenging and my absence was hard on my family. I will always be deeply grateful for their tolerance and for the support of my colleagues at Bricker & Eckler. It was truly an amazing adventure. Not many people will have the opportunity to undertake such a journey. I would not trade the experience for anything; but I am glad it is behind me and I have no plans to do it again!

One last quote, this time from Albert Einstein: "Life is like riding a bicycle - in order to keep your balance, you must keep moving."

Thank you.