

getaways

It's a gasp,
gasp,

Pushing pedals
and making
friends along
the historic
Qu'Appelle Valley

by Darrell Noakes

gasp



(left) St. Nicholas Anglican Church, near Craven in the Qu'Appelle Valley; (below) 2008 tour route designer Dale Cochrane leads the way south of Mission Lake.



Colleen and I are driving around in circles in the Fort Qu'Appelle campground. It's a summer Friday night and the place is packed. "Look for the bikes," I say seconds before Colleen exclaims, "Over there!" In our headlight beams, I can make out bicycles hanging from the backs of cars and leaning against trees. As we pull into a parking space, a handful of people step out of the darkness. "Hey, you made it!" calls out a voice, laughing. I squint into the rapidly fading daylight and see that it's Ron Keall from the Wascana Freewheelers bicycle-touring club. "We didn't know who you were," he says. He points toward the back of our car. "But then we saw the bikes." • Colleen and I have signed up for the Saskatchewan Cycling Association's 2008 Great Annual Saskatchewan Pedal, or GASP for short. Launched in 2005 to commemorate the Saskatchewan centennial, GASP has evolved from a border-to-border ride into a circle tour. As such, we'll be spending the next eight days riding through the Qu'Appelle Valley and nearby towns. There are 15 of us, including Ron, our driver. Another cyclist will join us next weekend for the last two days of the tour. We've gathered from every corner of the province. • In a departure from previous GASP tours, we intend to leave the pavement behind and travel the back roads and dirt trails. Traditionally, bicycle touring takes

Gordon E. Walker/Tourism Saskatchewan, (top right) Darrell Noakes

place on paved roads. Services are located along highways, and paved surfaces make it easier to travel longer distances with less exertion. About 2,000 cyclists explore Saskatchewan like this every summer. Some travel in organized groups, but mostly you'll find cyclists riding solo, with a partner or among small groups of friends. (A few, like North Carolina computer science professor Mark Boyd, turn it into an annual adventure. For example, in just 59 days in 2001, he traversed the continental United States and returned via a Canadian leg that included Saskatoon.)

The GASP trip is a supported tour, organized by volunteers. We have a van and driver to carry our gear, help with roadside repairs and give a lift to a tired, last-gasp (pun unavoidable and intended) cyclist. "I've lived in and around the Qu'Appelle Valley all my life and have travelled bits and pieces of it by vehicle, horseback and bicycle," says Melville veterinarian Dale Cochrane, who designed the 2008 tour route. "I've always dreamed of travelling and exploring the whole valley, so when the opportunity came to help organize this tour, I jumped at it. I'm a novice bike tourer, but the chance to complete my dream ride with van support and fellow cyclists is incredible."



Day one, and the cyclists are up shortly after dawn. The morning ritual is pretty much the same every day. Rise early, eat breakfast, then load the van and hit the road before the day gets hot and the winds rise. Everyone lingers on this first morning, however. We take our time in the restaurant catching up with friends we haven't seen in some time. The bikes get one last check and we depart by about 9 a.m.

The cloudless morning air is hot as we wind our way out of the valley towards the pasture where Dale and his brother Kirk keep their cattle. The Saskatoon berries are ripe and plump. Dale guides us to a huge patch

on a bluff overlooking Lebret on the opposite side of Mission Lake. It's when we turn to walk back to our bikes that we see the towering dark clouds to the south. But the storm track is moving east, and we calculate it will pass south of our route.

The gravel road that leads us around the lake meanders through the valley, and we're still on the exposed prairie when the first raindrops splat. They're cold and absolutely enormous. The road instantly turns to snot. Steering through the slick mud takes almost all my concentration. There are bright flashes and loud cracks of thunder all around us. We press urgently on our pedals and pick

**SYC& #1
1/2H PG 20**



(from left) The calm before the storm; Saskatoon berry break; Cooper's General Store, originally built as a house in 1915, in Neudorf; "rainbow bridge" over the Qu'Appelle River.

(both pages) Darrell Noakes

up the pace, even though it's slippery.

Suddenly, a jagged thread of blue-white light jerks along the underside of the cloud base overhead. Before I can brace for the thunder, a tingling sensation ripples through my fingertips. "Who!" I yell in astonishment. My ears are still ringing from the thunder when Marion, riding a few bike lengths behind me, shouts that blue sparks flew from the ends of her handlebars. In more than four decades of cycling, I've only been caught out in a storm once before. Avoiding storms on a bike is like stealing second base in a ball game. You need to be able to read the pitcher or, in this case, the

sky. You get good at it before long, and I'm surprised I misread this storm.

The thundercloud moves on and we continue in a gentle rain that diminishes and clears as we reach the south end of the lake. More storm clouds appear to be gathering, so we don't delay pushing the final few kilometres to Katepwa Beach. A heavy downpour hits just after we roll into camp. We're staying at the golf course, where the owners have set aside a sheltered area for us. Our first stop is the pro shop to register, dry out and linger over a cup of coffee. We're feeling happy after an exhilarating ride and excited about the rest of the week ahead, but we

undoubtedly look bedraggled.

"Where did you come from?" asks a woman in an accent that suggests an upbringing in Scotland. She looks disappointed upon hearing that we've only begun the trip, as if expecting us to say that we're midway through an epic journey. She tries a different tack: "Who are you raising money for?" I explain that we're not raising money; it's a vacation. "Not a fundraising event?" she repeats.

"No, we're just a group of cyclists going on a tour."

"Well, then, you're just nuts!" she exclaims.

The summer of 2008 has been uncharac-

**STARWOOD
HOTELS & RESORTS
1/2H PG 21**

DUTCH ELM DISEASE 1/6 H

CAA WESTWORLD TOURS 2/3V

teristically wet. It rains on four of our eight days on tour. Most of the storms come late in the day, so we usually complete our rides under hot, clear skies. But the land doesn't have time to dry out. Once or twice, mud slows our progress to less than a walk. Fortunately, the tour's organizers had planned for such a contingency and we can adjust our route.

On any bike tour, cycling is only part of the day. The slow, two-wheeled pace makes it easier to appreciate the sights. There's hardly a patch of Saskatoon berries that we pass by without stopping, not a bridge that doesn't provide an excuse to linger and watch the water's leisurely flow underneath. Truth be told, we spend more time in towns, visiting museums and lounging in camp than on our bikes.

Each evening we set up camp in a new town: Neudorf, Bird's Point, Tantallon, Esterhazy, Melville, Abernethy. At Neudorf, Mayor Murray Hanowski has been waiting for us. I've arrived before the rest of the group, having taken a detour out of the valley to avoid mud around Ellisboro. The mayor hands me an envelope of souvenirs for the cyclists, and we sit and talk about cycling, small towns and the weather.

That same day, I enjoy a Denver sandwich and fries under a canopy of trees that shade the outdoor patio of Cooper's General Store from a sweltering sun. Though the building used to be a house, built in 1915, it has an authentic "general store" atmosphere about it. And it's also a restaurant. Owner Lisa Ross says the place is named after her grandfather, Glen Bender, who earned the nickname "Cooper" thanks to the copper pennies ("coopers" in the parlance of the day) that he and his cronies used in poker games. She tells me that Neudorf has become a popular way station for cyclists. Another group, travelling across the country, had passed through three weeks earlier.

Further down the road, the settlement of Hyde never really had much of a chance. G.A.E. Hyde, a wealthy Englishman, had dreams of establishing an artists' colony along the Qu'Appelle River. He ran out of money, and the project died for good when the CPR chose a route through Neudorf. A steep hill cut into the valley nearby preserves the name; the vista that opens before us as we round a corner at the top of Hyde Hill is awesome. We stop for a group photograph, then coast down the hill past a construction crew and into the valley. A few of us leave the route briefly to view what's left of the former

settlement from the vantage point of a well-travelled bridge.

Tantallon is our halfway point. We meet a dozen Metis trail riders, who are completing a two-week trek from St. Lazare, Manitoba, to Lebret. They're travelling by Red River cart, wagon and horseback, progressing an average of 25 km per day, about half our pace.

Tantallon is also where we discover our fellow rider Dale Cochrane's talent for cowboy poetry. That night, some of us are playing cards and pegging out points in honour of the village's claim as the cribbage capital of Canada. As the darkness closes in, the game is put away and our resident vet recites cowboy poetry as more cyclists gather round to hear.

We're in the home stretch of the tour upon arriving at Abernethy. The town is celebrating the centenary of its annual fair, and our last night on the road is marked by fireworks under a sky so clear we can almost touch the stars. As explosions echo above, there's a relaxed stillness among the cyclists.



Metis trail riders, travelling by Red River cart, stop in Tantallon – the 2008 GASP halfway point.

Abernethy now. He leans his bicycle against the picnic table and asks about our trip. Stéphane tells me that he once spent his time riding in the Eastern Townships, Vermont and New Hampshire, travelling light with a tent, sleeping bag and cooking supplies. He had seen us in camp yesterday but did not get a chance to come by to chat. Personally, I'm glad for whatever providence has caused me to stay

All of us know we'll be loading the van for the last time at daybreak.

The next day, while everyone else trundles off to the Co-Op Café for breakfast, I stay behind in camp and brew up my own strong espresso. I'm relaxing with a steaming cup, rerunning the week's adventure in my head, when a voice calls out in a French accent, "Helloooo, cyclists!"

Montreal native Stéphane Locas lives in

in camp this morning. For it's exactly the kind of friendly encounter I had with Monsieur Locas that makes bike touring so memorable. No wonder our happy crew spent most of its final hours together talking about where the 2009 GASP will take us next. **W** Celebrating its fifth year, the 2009 Great Annual Saskatchewan Pedal runs July 18-25.

i 306-780-9299; saskcycling.ca/GASP/gasp.html

CALAWAY PARK 1/2H