

Pedalers From the Past

By John W. Kautz

As a 6-year-old living in Chicago in 1926, I was happy to receive an invitation to drive with my aunt and uncle to their cottage in northern Wisconsin. After the all-day trip, we would spend a week at the cottage, where I could chase imaginary Indians in the woods to my heart's delight.

I made the trip with Aunt and Uncle in an old-time Hupmobile; I remember flower vases suspended from the narrow panels between the front and back doors.

A few years later, as a Boy Scout in 1934, I wanted to earn enough merit badges to achieve the rank of Eagle Scout. Approaching my uncle, I asked to use the cottage for a week if several of us Scouts were successful in riding our bicycles there—a distance of roughly 350 miles. He dangled the key in front of me and said, “If you can manage such a trip, I can manage to loan you the key.”

Two other Scouts from Troop 115 agreed to make the trip with me, and our preparations began. Richard Bagger and Melvin Frank got their bikes in good running order, and we took off.

We spent our first night in a small Wisconsin town that had a water tower. We climbed the ladder to the first level and spent the first night of the journey there. We planned to sleep in a farmer's field the rest of the way.

After pumping our bikes for two more days, we finally wound up at the cottage. During the next several days, we went into the town of Three Lakes, some 20 miles south of Eagle River, where we met a truck driver and engaged him in conversation. We learned he was going to Milwaukee in a day or two, and yes, he could carry our bikes and us.

But when we met him at the place and time appointed, he had second thoughts and could not take us. So we pedaled south to Antigo where we went to the train station, as the weather was threatening rain. We slept under the indoor benches that evening, and we left again at daylight.



Three Boy Scouts (left to right), John Kautz (author), Melvin Frank and Richard Bagger, made the long bike trip. The fourth rider, Donald Nash (far right), joined them along the route from Delavan, Wis., to Chicago. This photo was printed in the Chicago Daily News in 1937.

Somewhere along our southern route home, we encountered a young rider who joined us until we reached our destination in Chicago. All four of us made the trip in good shape, and we were surprised that we had not had one flat tire during our entire trip of approximately 700 miles!

Mel, Dick and I received our cycling merit badges, but we would have hesitated recommending such a trip to anyone else. Dick was to become my best man at my wedding in 1943, and we maintain contact to this day. ❖

