

August 1

It's a start.

Saturday morning. 7:00 a.m. Tammy and Sheila took pictures and video in front of the new shelter, Chuck Scriptor gave me a big hug and I was off into a beautiful morning just as the Farmer's market was setting up and a slew of triathletes were gathering at Cody pool.

North Platte to Wallace was hills and a headwind, but I was fresh and excited. Rolling fields of healthy corn, a table full of friends from Wallace Methodist church to greet me and a salad later, I was humming toward Hays Center so fast that I got there half an hour early. So fast, in fact, that when Tammy stopped to hand me a drink just before H.C., I got off the bike and held on to her for a few long seconds while I tried to keep from fainting. "Are you okay?" she asked. I was as soon as I came back to the real world.

Sjeklochas met us with welcome signs in Hays Center, where we ate in Bull's Café. He's famous for the bull burger, which is an enormous five-napkin hamburger. Juice ran down my arms and I loved it, but let me tell you, it's not very high on the list of recommended foods for long distance bicycle riders. I carried that burger for a couple of hours like I was pregnant.

Most dreaded part of the whole trip? The dirt road from Hays Center to Curtis. I kept reassuring myself that at least it would be over the first day. I needn't have wasted all of the worries. Beautifully remote countryside dropping and climbing the steep canyons of Tammy's growing up days. Okay, so it was pretty tiring and yes, I really can ride at 4 miles per hour without falling over.

Curtis Cattle Company had a salad bar and soup. Freshly made black bean soup, to be exact. It was like plunging into the life-giving river of heaven itself. Gorged on salads, soup and peaches and then found an idyllic place to park the R.V. "Free for first 3 nights." Love it. Knew that the worst was behind me now. What a silly thing to think on the first day.

102 miles.

August 2.

Lay in bed not wanting to move for three days. Decided that since the first day had gone so well, I mean apart from that fainting spell and those steep, steep hills, I'd lay in bed an extra 15 minutes. Go up ready for an easy day with a tail wind and flat terrain. Boy was that a departure from reality.

Got on the bike. Flat tire from a torn valve stem. I swapped with Tammy's bike. In the exchange, I forgot to take my breakfast with me. Rode through Curtis and saw a sign that said "Elwood, 41 miles." 41? What? I'd calculated 31. Ten extra miles with a late start and no breakfast wasn't exactly what I'd been planning on. Rode out of Curtis into long steep hills. Hills? Hills! And more hills. And more hills. I was riding fast to make up time, unless you count the uphills when I wasn't riding fast at all.

On the way down one hill, going 27 miles an hour, a catastrophe. My hat blew off. This is like going on a 500 mile vacation and remembering about 250 miles into the trip that you forgot the baby. Screech to a halt, walk back up the hill, retrieve the hat, demoralized for the rest of the day. All because of a hat. It's the little things that get you.

By thrashing myself like someone abusing a horse, made up all but 30 minutes to get to West Drive-in for Sunday lunch. Eventually joined by a cluster of senior citizens coming for post-fellowship fellowship. We felt like a couple of specimens that had escaped from the zoo, so at one point I actually stood up and announced that I wanted to tell them all why we were there. What an interesting collection of people—easy to see that this had been a gathering spot for a long, long time. The drive-in started as a livery stable, then reincarnated into a filling station, then a café with a house attached to the back. What's next? Cyber café? Probably not.

Wind shifting, heat building, body weakening. Kept pushing hard to Holdrege Country Club for almost on-time arrival. Oh my. Oh my. Oh my. Wherever you are traveling, make sure your route takes you here at some point. Immaculate grounds, of course, dining room with picture perfect views. To our amazement, the restaurant wasn't open, but the young owners (everyone who can cook a meal looks young after you've been in the sun long enough!) came in especially just to fix us a late lunch, even though they both work full time at a manufacturing plant and this was their day off.

Since the chef was off for the day, Todd prepared and Diane served what has to be the most elegant meal I've ever eaten in Nebraska. I mean apart from Tammy's meals. It was a command performance complete with enough lemonade to rehydrate s sponge. I swelled as I drank.

And then the grind. 41 miles still to go. Because of the math problem adding up mileages, and then a glitch in the pickup schedule at the end of the day, it was 7:45 p.m. when stopped. My whole body looked like someone had rolled me in white sand at the beach—there was that much salt residue from sweating so much. 2 ½ gallons of drinks during the day, and still dying of thirst. I crashed into the RV and slumped on the floor while Tammy got us to a bed and breakfast for the night in Minden.

Instant resurrection. Amazing how a friendly couple with fresh corn on the cob and fresh zucchini salad and bacon-wrapped hamburgers and ice cold raspberry tea can bring you back to life. They don't serve suppers at the B&B, but were kind enough to invite us into their late supper and I was too tired to graciously refuse, even though I was brought up better than that. We sat outside at a picnic table and refreshed.

So let me just say that if you ever want a place to stay in the Minden area, choose Elisabeth Grace's B & B. The whole place has the look of an old farmstead. Nothing fancy or frilly about the outside of anything. But step into the cottage, which is separate from the house, and it's a beautiful, refurbished and refurnished oasis with lightning fast internet access and full kitchen. This is surely what it's like to die and wake up in a better place.

111 miles.

August 3.

High hopes for a better life. It was to be a shorter day because of yesterday's longer day, but somehow we just couldn't get going. Pretty level road for the first half, but a headwind steadily freshened into a mind-numbing grind into the heat. Times like this I think of people whose lives are pretty much lived this way. They cheer up or put on a good face when they interact with us, but by and large they face a very long, mind-numbing life of just trying to survive. And why can't NPR play something besides classical music on weekdays? Violins and pianos and oboes just aren't very motivating. Makes you want to pull over, lay down, and wait for the angels to carry you home.

I have to say that if you want some very cool atmosphere, the Minden Coffee House has it. Took an old building, shined it up and it's a great place to sit and contemplate the mysteries of the universe. Same for Blue Moon Café in Hastings, where if you go into the restroom you can tell that many others before you have also contemplated the mysteries of the universe. There are pictures and quotes all over the walls, some deep and some not quite so deep.

Leota at The American Legion Club in Sutton was kind enough to come in fix lunch just for us, even though the club wasn't open. In minutes she'd put together a spinach salad with all kinds of vegetables that would save the world. Okay, so if the salad wouldn't save the world, the peach kuchen would. "Peace through peach." It should be a movement. This club is one of the few in the country that serve meals to the public.

Ron and Leota were asked to run the club for a couple weeks until someone from York could get there. That was 18 years ago, and I think they've given up on the guy from York. Maybe he went north instead of south and is circumnavigating the globe by bicycle on his way. We had a long, interesting conversation about American culture and the work ethic and other things related to running a small business in a small town. Sutton is a beautiful town.

So then it was 3:00 and I had only gone 40-some miles. Not even halfway, but talk about a deadbeat. I started mumbling things to Tammy about maybe cutting the day short and making it up the next day, which goes against all my principles and just makes things worse and worse, but still...

The world was an oven by then. Noel and Debra surprised us by showing up with an ice cold root beer, which I drank and then licked the can. Tammy went ahead to Geneva Java and chatted with James, who she said was a very nice man and who invited me to stop in on my way through town. Then we'd go a ways farther, drive back for supper, and continue on. I stopped in. Got a smoothie that could only have been better if he'd made a bathtub full of it and let me just wallow. Rode another hour and that's when I crashed. Trying to tie the bike onto the rack, my head spun, my stomach revolted and the world went gray. I sat down and let cool air blow over me on the way back to Geneva Java, wondering how I'd eat anything or, for that matter, go any further once I had.

While James and Debi fixed what were the best Santa Fe chicken and Monterrey turkey sandwiches and potato salad we've ever eaten, they told us their story. It's got to be the best story we can't tell, but someday we'll turn it into a novel and change the names. I can say that it includes a candle shop a

couple of doors down and their cute little café is expanding and theirs might be the only café in the country with a massive Safety Deposit vault right in the café.

I can also say that after we heard their story, I asked, “Have you ever heard of that song, ‘God Blessed the Rocky Road that Led Me Straight to You’?” They had. And as we talked a whole group of chattering people came in, including a family that raises alpacas. The name of their alpaca business? “Rocky Road Alpacas.” Turns out that they have a story too—one that has been rocked by heartbreak and resurrected by grace. That stop at Geneva Java will linger in our minds as a life treasure, and the donations that came from there for the new shelter brought tears to our eyes.

When we left at 6:15 I was a new person. Forty-some miles to go, air cooling, wind dying. As the moon rose, I strengthened. Put lights on the bike about 8:45 and sped along, walled in by dark cornfields on a nearly deserted 2-lane road in the middle of vastness. Arrived at my goal of Wilber in blackness at 9:30, feeling sore and good. Tammy reported that it was too late for them to “turn on the RV park,” which still makes us wonder what sort of RV park it is, and that the hotel was closed for a week following the Czech festival, which made us pretty certain what sort of festival it was. Like maybe they’re putting glass back in the windows.

So we drove 11 miles to Crete and checked into a hotel. In the middle of the night we woke up to blasting wind (later reported to be about 60 mph), thunder, lightning and horizontal rain. As much as we like the RV, the hotel room was pretty comforting. And this morning the RV is a lot cleaner.

94.7 miles.

August 4,5

Great day off in Crete yesterday, but it went fast. Tammy went for a walk and found Kava Kafe, so we had lunch there. Really cute place with a good menu that we couldn’t get enough of, so we went back for supper. This wasn’t on our “list” of restaurants for the ride, but will be for future stops. Owners have helped set up some of the other little cafes we’ve visited, which explains the similar “feel” to them. Someone should write a guide to off beat café’s in Nebraska. I mean someone besides me.

So Wednesday. Refreshed and renewed and looking forward to “turning the corner” at Aurora and heading briefly south before turning back west. Interesting that with just one more “o” that’d be “turning the coroner.” Had early breakfast of pancakes and eggs at Whistle Stop, which has an unexpectedly chipper owner/cook at that hour of the morning before she goes off to her real job. Lots of model trains all over the place.

Outside, a slight sprinkle as we ate. Of course by the time I was on the bike, it had become rain, and then a hard rain with a blasting headwind for an hour. Slogged slowly, knowing that the wind would be a help once I got turned. Hard work most of the day. Finally got headed south, which helped a bit, then west, which helped even more. But by then my knees were really wobbly and my legs tired.

Rejuvenated at Cedar Creek Steak House. They’d done some publicity and opened especially for us. Others came in to chat, so it was a nice visit, but a long one. Got out late after great spaghetti. Evening

had cooled, roads were mellow. Rode until dark to make up a bit of lost time, ending in Table Rock. Stayed in a really nice RV park in Humboldt by a little lake. A couple of train horns in the night, but not so loud they knocked us out of bed. Full moon over the lake.

96 miles.

August 6

Tammy had to feed the geese and ducks before we left. Kept getting attacked by a gander with illusions of grandeur. I thought it would taste good, but she just kept it at bay using her flip flop as a sort of shield.

Pawnee County was one of the only counties where Debra and Beth couldn't find a place to eat along my route. For the sake of completeness, I decided to check out Lewiston, a village of about 63 people, just before I exited the county.

Rode my bike into "town" and bumped across a grassy lawn to where two elderly gentlemen, Jim Kinghorn and Dave Miles, were standing in front of a garden.

"I'm in some real trouble here," I told them, "and I'm wondering if you can help me."

"What's the problem?" they asked.

"Well," I explained, "I'm on this fundraising ride, visiting all 93 counties and eating at one place in each county. But we couldn't find an eating place along my route in Pawnee County, so I'm wondering if there's a place here where I could buy a candy bar, just so I can say I ate something in this county."

"No," they said, "you're about three weeks too early. Hear that pounding over there? That lady is remodeling her house so she can serve guests." Jim paused a few moments, then told me he had a couple of old Snickers bars at his house. If I'd just wait a few minutes, he'd run and get one. He left in his pickup truck, and while he was gone Dave ambled over to his garden and picked an ear of sweet corn.

"Not much left," he said. "I've trapped 34 coons this year, but I'm about to take down the electric fence and just let them have it. There are more coons here than there are people." He tore the husk off and I bit into it raw, as sweet and juicy and perfect an ear of corn as I've ever eaten.

About the time Jim got back Jean Tegtmeier came by on her morning walk. When she heard what was going on, she offered that she had some home baked rolls at her house, and if I'd just follow her home she'd warm one up for me. I did, she did, and I sat at her kitchen table thinking that if those rolls were any indication, her new café was going to be a success. Check back in three weeks.

The rest of the day was a blur, but the pancakes at Aunt Mary's in Beatrice are a distinct memory. Huge! And such a gracious man. He once did a special meal for 120 veterans in 40 minutes on motorcycles, which can't have been easy to pull off. It's a truck plaza with character—not at all like you'd imagine a truck plaza looking. They actually put some thought into making it homey—a place to come back to. That breakfast got me through the day.

Since I was again behind, I didn't do justice to the other stops. I stopped, but didn't linger, letting Tammy do some research for her write-ups. I will say that the banana-pineapple malt at Pla-Mor in Fairbury was lifesaving, and Grandpa's Crossing made me a dinner to go that I ate at the end of the day's ride in Oxford—broasted chicken, baked potato and salad. I fell asleep in the dressing.

It was a push, push, push all day in increasing rising heat. Tail wind, but not enough.

At the end of the day in Ruskin, Tammy asked a mechanic about an RV facility, but the normal facility was inhabited by a couple of RV's buried in weeds and using the only two working electrical outlets. So he took her to a ball park, where if you negotiated your way through the barriers designed to keep it from being used as an RV park you could back right up to the cinderblock restrooms and plug into an outlet over the sink. Handiest RV hookup we've ever had. It was isolated, quiet and pretty, and the water in our holding tank has gotten hot enough to feel like a hot shower.

114 miles.

August 7th

Red Willow was a fun stop at a little bookstore, Cather and Co. It's the home of Willa Cather and the owner is an energetic, enjoyable young woman who has lived in Hay-on-Wye in Wales, which is a "village of books." She went there to get out of small town America for a while, but came back to spit and polish an old building until it glows with warmth and literature. The cartoons in the restrooms are all favorable to Obama. "Closet Democrat?" I asked. "Nothing closet about it," she answered with a chuckle.

A couple of restaurants had worked together to host us, providing cookies, coffee, breakfast for Tammy and me. Sadly there was another big event in town so the turnout wasn't what they hoped for, but their kindness was certainly an encouragement.

Hot day, but the wind was sort of favorable. I promised Tammy I'd quit at a reasonable hour instead of trying to catch up all of the miles I'm behind. That worked out pretty well for staying in Oxford, 16 miles short of my goal for the day. Got there at about 8:30. Theoretically a chance to do some writing, but my brain just wouldn't do it. Ate leftovers and crashed.

111 miles.

August 8

Still starting off way behind schedule. Should have been in Arapahoe for the night, but another math error left me 16 miles short. Tammy and I having discussions about how to make up for these miscalculated mileages, since she thinks they are going to kill me. Oh well. Off into a headwind on a level road that followed the railroad tracks.

Beat my way to Cunningham's Feed in Arapahoe. Was a feed store for 50 or so years before this guy bought it for a bakery and café. Basically took it apart, refinished the materials and rebuilt it. Has a

glowing yellow pine look to it and the pastries are unbelievable and not just because I was hungry.* He'd kept back some long johns that had maple frosting and pieces of bacon on top of them. I'd just been listening to an NPR story about bacon on rolls and had been wondering how that would taste. My assessment? In any other circumstances I could have eaten a dozen of them and died a happy man. Wow. He'd actually saved some of them in the kitchen for Tammy and me because he said if he'd put them out, they'd have been the first thing to go.

So now to make up for lost time and miles on the way to McCook. Pushing hard, but it wasn't to be. Headwind for hours and all I could do was shift down and spin along at 8-9 miles per hour. Rising temps didn't help. Only relief was from NPR's Car Talk and Wait Wait Don't Tell Me. At least they had something to laugh about.

It didn't help physically, but some psychological relief from trees along the road. I'd been hallucinating previous days about planting trees all along Nebraska's highways, and in this section someone already had. Nice change of scenery, but since I was basically going due west and the sun was shining straight down the highway, no shade from the trees.

Got to McCook two hours late and pedaled up two blocks of hill to Sehnert's Bakery to the surprise of cheering and yelling. I tried to keep from passing out (literally) while putting on a happy face and being greeted by a gang from North Platte—Debra, Noel, Beth, Pastor Tom & Linda Wiles, Donna Puckett.

They'd come down to give moral support and had been waiting for two hours, but weren't complaining. Sehnerts spread out a royal welcome for the gang while waiting for me. A huge platter of sandwiches and pastries and candies that left them thinking they'd like to come and encourage me again sometime. It was a fun, fun visit and we all think Sehnert's should be nominated for sainthood, especially when one of the waitresses handed us a big bottle of cash and told us that the waitresses had decided to give us their tips as a contribution to the shelter. There was even talk of Pastor Tom using cream horns for communion wafers, which we thought would increase attendance considerably on those Sundays.

Left McCook at almost 3:00 with 51 miles to go and not 51 miles worth of energy. Was supposed to stop at one little town for a snack but Tammy hadn't been able to reach them by phone and when I rolled past I saw that the town was down a long hill from the highway so I just passed by. Tammy stopped in a bit later and found it to be crowded with Saturday afternoon drinkers, so I was just as happy to have given it a miss. Instead Tammy shared half of an apple planter sandwich she'd brought from Sehnert's: apple, turkey, provolone, honey mustard, mayo and bacon on foccoccia bread. Everyone in the United States should immediately go have one of those, along with that Santa Fe chicken one in Geneva.

Wind had shifted to help me out a bit, but the low point of the day was a long section of newly asphalted road. On one long climb I was so hot sweat was standing in droplets on my skin—no wait, those weren't droplets, they were small water blisters all over my shoulders and arms. I didn't keep track, but I'm guessing it was a 3-gallon day, which I hope is a record for the trip. Not a good sign to drink 3 gallons of fluids and still not have to pee.

Got to Zeke's steakhouse in Benkelman at 8:30. Dragged myself in for a most enjoyable conversation with two older couples who have been sort of centered in Benkelman all their lives. Except that one of the men was career Air Force and has been all over the world. Cheerful, encouraging, inquisitive and the steak sandwich was dripping with tenderness and juices and an hour and a half later we'd been having so much fun that I couldn't get out of my chair. I'm getting too old to sit still that long after a hard bike ride.

Decided to stay in the town's only hotel for a long shower and wireless. I can't remember if I fell asleep before or after getting out of the shower. Day off tomorrow.

111 miles. Total for the first week, 731.

It tastes fantastic? Really?

There are those who will say, "He's just saying it tasted out of this world because he's been riding a bicycle up and down hills all day in blasting winds and withering heat." After all, a bowl of sawdust and syrup would taste good to a starving man. But let me assure you, my stomach is almost always a little off and the eating can be harder than the riding. Lots and lots of things don't sound or taste good and it sometimes takes discipline to force myself to eat just to keep up the amount of calories I need. Therefore when I rave about how good something is, you can be assured that you should drop everything and go try it for yourself! And there are a LOT of things that we've discovered in that category.

BLOG ABOUT MAY I BREAK THE WIND FOR YOU, BY PAUL

August 9.

Day off. Love those days, except that Tammy returned to work.

We stayed at a little hotel Saturday night, but not easily. Tammy went to check in and there was no one there. Knocked, buzzed, rang, called. Nothing. The dog was clearly home, but no receptionist. While at Zeke's talking to those extra friendly folks, Tammy wondered out loud how one would get checked in. The lady we were talking to said, "Oh, I know where Betty is. She went over to ??????'s house for dinner. I'll give her a call." And she did, and when we went back to the hotel to check in, there was Betty.

So then Sunday I couldn't get connected to the internet. Betty didn't know how to help me, and they are on a private phone/internet system, and this went on for quite a while. I was getting desperate, so went back to ask Betty if there were ANY way she could get me some help. She made a phone call and pretty soon there was a knock on the door.

A nice man introduced himself. "We're a Mom and Pop phone company," he said. "I'm Pop." He tried to connect me and couldn't, so ended up giving me a little connection thingy ("from the competition") to

just plug into my USB port. "Just leave it with Betty at the desk when you go," he said cheerfully. And off he went to Sunday dinner.

Small towns are fun like that. As Jody said about raising kids in Benkelman, "They are just as bad as kids in any other town. But we hear about it sooner."

Tandy arrived from the shelter to drive for a couple of weeks while Tammy is gone. It's bewildering trying to learn about the RV, the restaurant gigs, the schedule, the everything, but he's game.

August 10

It stormed in the night, and left a residual rain and headwind to start my day. I nevertheless headed happily north into beautiful canyons and sandhills. After 30 or 40 minutes, the wind died and resurrected itself as a strong tail wind, and I started flying. When I called my mom for her daily verses and prayer, my sister Melody was there. Together they sang "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up on wings as eagles..." I felt like one, soaring up and down the hills, tearing it up to Enders Reservoir and on to Imperial, where Paul met me to ride with me for the day (see previous blog to get background on Paul).

We had breakfast at 12 St. Café, a gorgeous café decorated in natural wood and hunter green. The owners got the table tops and counters in bad condition somewhere for a bargain price and sanded them off with a big floor sander, turning them into beautiful furnishings. Leroy also rebuilds antique cars and photos of his and other cars are scattered around the dining room. This was all after he and his wife toured the U.S. for two years in a motor home, then came back to settle down in Imperial and their café.

Chatted with Paul along a mostly level, railroad grade highway with mild tail winds most of the day. Stopped briefly at DJ's Bar & Grill in Grant for a quick bite. John had pictures of his place from 1944, showing the same barstools that are still there today. The rail under the stools where you rest your feet have worn into waves in wood from 65 years of cowboy boots. It was packed for lunch, but cleared out quickly. John says 85% of his business is meals rather than drinks, and the smoking ban has actually helped his business.

From Grant, it was a fast ride to Ogallala, where we arrived an hour early. Mary had arranged a very special buffet sampler at The Lampstand Café, including a motorcycle escort into town. Since we were early, we rode a bit through town, then went back out for wait for the three motorcyclists. The entrance into Ogallala from the south is a very long, gradual hill, making it a fun ride. Beth, Debra and Brenda were there to say hi, and The Lampstand was stuffed with salad bar, mini-sandwiches and awesome desserts. Mary had been selling tickets for three shifts and was thinking she'd come close to \$1,000.00 for a donation. She had tears in her eyes talking about the privilege of helping the shelter. It was hard to leave.

Hit Big Springs by 7:00 for our earliest stop yet, leaving a chance to just sit and catch our breath. Paul had farmer friends with an RV campground for harvesters in back of the farm house. So a private and peaceful place to spend the night. Matt Naughtin stopped in briefly to say hi and let me know that after

following our walk, and then helping rescue me from Lake McConaghey during my boat trip, his family was taking a personal interest in helping me survive this one. They contributed bananas, grapes and Snickers bars as evidence.

114 miles for the day got me caught up on my schedule.

August 11

Latest start yet. Woke up a bit late, but then couldn't get moving. By the time we were ready, and had stopped at the truck stop for ice, gas, etc. it was nearly 8:30.

A slight headwind wasn't hard, but also not helpful. We followed another highway of RR grade tracks. Breakfast was in Chappell at the Cowboy Corner, named for Chad, who left a life of training race and ranch horses on the national circuit to enable his wife's dream of settling down in a small town and running a café. "He left it all so I could follow my dream," she said with clear appreciation. "And his first year, his ribs took first prize in the county fair." I assumed she meant his barbecued ribs.

He said he was tired of all the traveling, and down the road there will be plenty of opportunities to do horse training around Chappell if he wants. The café is brightly decorated in yellow check table cloths and has plenty of cowboy pictures and paraphernalia. They'd just bought a huge hog at the fair and said if we came back in a couple of weeks we could sample it. They talked about how special it is to see kids getting college money from their 4-H projects. They cater meals all over and clearly love what they're doing.

The next stretch was more against the wind. It was nice to have Paul breaking the wind sometimes. In the heat, a couple of times he dumped cold water on my head and down my back. Drinking a lot, too. He told stories of his dad, who in some ways is a lot like my own: adventuresome, always ready to go hiking, climbing and exploring, spiritually deep. His dad wrote a note for him at age twelve so he could take off by himself on an 8-day bicycle tour around Colorado. His brother decided to go with him and that got him hooked.

Lunch was at It's Chow Time in Sidney. They'd recently moved from a different location, so it's shiny white. Haven't even decorated yet. They recommended "Sinful Sidney stuffed potatoes" that are covered in butter and sour cream and topped with BBQ meat of your choice. Sinful indeed. We all thought that the next time we were through Sidney, we'd stop again.

Dale and Kathy used to serve food to auto auctions in Colorado before moving to Sidney. The largest group they ever served was 6,000 people at an auto auctioneers competition. I was sort of smiling to myself wondering what an auctioneers competition would sound like, and wondering if they practiced their skills while ordering their food and trying to get a lower price. Dale says he's set up for all kinds of catering including seafood gumbo, lobsters, barbecued meats and more. "We can do most everything," he said as he showed me his grill, "but we're about to outgrow our rig."

Heat was building with 53 miles still to go, so on, on, on. Went right through Kimball, turning the corner to head north for another 13 miles or so, then stopped right on 100 miles for the day. Tandy and I went back to The Corner Pool Hall for huge hamburgers. "People come from all over to eat our hamburgers," Sue told us. The building was built of stone, including the full basement, quarried from somewhere nearby. Two of the pool tables are over 100 years old, as is an electric lift chair that has carried people and their stuff up the stairs to the second floor hotel throughout the decades.

When Sue started working in the pool hall, women weren't welcome inside. She remembers families sitting in their cars outside for hours, often late into the night, waiting for the men to finish and come back out. That was back in the days when Kimball was a lot bigger and rowdier.

We met Rod, the president of the chamber, who is pretty new in his position. He'd gone to Sidney to work at Cabellas, got laid off, went to Kimball, volunteered at Chamber, and was hired as the director.

We spent an hour on goose chases trying to find an RV park. I was, by then, dead tired and crabby. When we found it, we paid \$20.00 for an electric hookup and showers. I was asleep before Tandy even got back from shower. It was nice, and we slept soundly, but we missed the homespun atmosphere of the little parks that so many small Nebraska towns have.

100 miles

August 12, 2009 Sheila's birthday.

It was a crisp morning starting out, about 14 miles north of Kimball. With a gentle breeze from the side, we got to the Hilltop Café quickly. It's well named, with a beautiful view of the valleys around and the bluffs ahead. It was easy to see the next couple hours of challenges from the parking lot.

Chuck & Pat Palm were there to say hi. They'd read my story in the paper and came over from Wyoming to say hi. Loy asked me how big I wanted my pancakes, making circles with her thumbs and fingers, but didn't say they'd be too thick to finish. She'd been collecting money for the new shelter, but said most of the money in the jar was her own tips. The owner of the café bought it a few years ago, got a bum deal and disappeared into the west. Now she does her best to keep it going while waiting to see what becomes of him. She hasn't seen him for 2 ½ months.

The great thing about a hilltop café is it's all downhill from there. I soared into the valley, scrambled across it and then started climbing the bluffs south of Scott's bluff. It was a very long climb, and slow, but gorgeous through evergreens and cliffs. At times I felt like I was in Colorado. Tandy was taking more pics than we'll ever use.

By the time I reached the summit, I'd earned several miles of coasting into the North Platte River valley and Scotts Bluff, where we had an early lunch at Emporium Coffeehouse and Café. It was startlingly cute, like we'd just descended into a European café complete with a large deck where you could eat under white umbrellas. The inside is brightly decorated with local photographer's photos, plus local

artist's paintings (for sale). The cheerful manager and waitress showed us a long menu of exotic salads and sandwiches. Overwhelmed by the variety, I asked them to "surprise me" and they brought out a fantastic spinach salad full of unusual goodies. For dinners they dress the dining area up further with white table cloths and offer 130 kinds of wine. If you're ever in Scotts Bluff...okay, even if you didn't plan to stop in Scotts Bluff, you should.

After a very hot ride to Mitchell, I turned north again for a climb into the hills. And more hills, higher and higher. Wind from the West mostly, but sometimes a bit south. These are remote high plains with few cars and cows that don't speak English. At least they never responded to mine. Sweeping views at the top of most hills included the whole valley behind me. In fact, I could still see the bluffs south of Scotts Bluff at 3:30 in the afternoon, 35 miles away. Hawks screeched at me. My cell phone gasped its last as the signal faded and I was left to my unconnected self.

It must be one of the most beautiful bike rides in NE, but it was a slow day, steadily plodding ever higher. Tandy did a great job of keeping drinks and cold grapes within reach.

As the sun dropped in the sky, the vast plains shimmered. Arrived at Harrison and the Longhorn Bar & Grille around 7:00, where Syd the manager grilled steaks that filled a whole plate, forcing her to put baked potato and salad on another plate. She'd moved up here from Colorado and never looked back. Loves the small town with just 270 residents, where everyone knows everyone else's business. There are just three kids in her daughter's class at school. As she said, "One day my daughter was riding her bike out by the highway and her dad came by on the 4-wheeler. She wanted to go for a ride with him, so she just parked her bike by the side of the road. Within 30 minutes, 7 people had called to tell me that her bike was out there."

Harrison has an RV park in town that is quiet and private and very dark. The first night is free and there are clean, nice bathrooms. Great night's sleep.

98 miles

August 13

Another chilly start in the high 50's. Crisp view of the high plains, slowly regaining cell phone service on the hilltops. After about an hour, there a scenic overlook that is breathtaking. The ride down from it was even more breathtaking, forcing me to use the breaks as I flew into the valley past cliffs and bluffs at over 30 miles per hour wondering how it would feel to bounce on the pavement at that speed, and then easily pedaling fast past Fort Robinson. Wow! Undoubtedly the fastest 25 miles of the trip thus far, so I was hoping for a quick day and an early finish. Boy was that anything but prescient.

In Crawford, Mike was waiting with his pickup to take us out to High Plains Drifter Cook Shack. It's about 20 miles northwest of town on mostly dirt road, and it's worth every minute and mile it takes to get there. Twelve years ago Mike sold his three substance abuse centers up in Wisconsin and he and his dad decided to buy a parcel of empty land and recreate an authentic little western town. They've been buying up homestead buildings and rebuilding them, so now they have the cook shack, a jail, a one-

room schoolhouse, a saloon, a shop, a livery and a hotel all decorated with antique fixtures and equipment. There is a buffalo in the corral, one of several that Mike bought at auction last year and butchers/processes/serves through the May-November season.

People come from all over the world to stay there, or just to eat. On Friday and Saturday nights, up to 55 pre-reserved guests show up for whatever Linda is serving that night, since there is no menu to choose from. Breads and pies are all homemade, as was our French toast for breakfast. Sometimes the first ones to make reservations get to pick the menu.

The landscape is prehistoric, there is almost zero light pollution at night, it's just 3 miles from Toadstool State Park and Mike says the people who are most surprised by it all are Nebraskans themselves, who never dreamed their state included this setting.

People have come from all over the world, drawn mostly by internet and word of mouth. Each hotel room has a theme and is appropriately decorated. Since the electricity goes off a lot, there are plenty of lamps and standby water. Most unique place we've seen so far. Had French toast made from homemade bread with homemade blueberry jam, eggs and sausage.

By the time we got back to Crawford 2.5 hours later, there was a strong, hot wind from the south. I was in dismay. One thing about coasting into a deep valley is that you have to get back out of it somehow. That meant a long, long climb back out of valley, pushed back by the winds. I went several miles at just 4-5 mph, drinking heavily. Water and fruit juices, I mean. Exhausted and depleted, I caught a break when I and the wind changed direction after I'd already climbed over two summits. For 12 miles, heading east, I was pushed by a furious tail wind. It was glorious and short-lived. Heading south again to Alliance, battered from the side and the sun, I bonked when a sheer wind whammed me from the south ahead of a storm. Trees flattened, dust swirled and I worked furiously hard to go 5 mph on the level. At Alliance, I plopped into the RV and hoped I'd have a massive heart attack combined with a stroke and liver failure.

Martin's family restaurant was curative. I was having trouble walking, but Matt's effusive enthusiasm restored me. Having served Mexican food there for 36 years, he knows all his regular customers by name and introduced me to all of them individually, telling them what I was doing. I made every effort to be polite and cheerful while trying to keep from falling face down into their food.

Matt's dad got a little money after serving in WWII, so started a restaurant in Kansas, but it didn't work out. Moved into northern NE to farm, but that was tough with weather and soils. Finally bought a place across the street that used to be a gas station. Grew and grew. Now in a larger building that used to be a saloon and clothing store. Some of the recipes are his grandmother's—he showed us a picture of her, fuzzy and faded, sitting in what could have been a Mexican or southwestern village. She was part Navajo, but spoke perfect Spanish.

His dad's big garden out back supplies some of the vegetables sometimes. Matt is an authorized Philips Service center, just to keep his hands in a lot of things. Parts of a TV were arranged in the back room. You've got to have a lot of things going, he told me. And, he said, there are two things you have to include in your blog:

First, I have the best customers in the world. Sometimes we get the order wrong, or the wrong level of hot sauce, and they keep coming back.

Second, I have the best help in the world. He introduced us to all of them, walking us through the dining areas and kitchens.

Salad bar and fideos (Spanish for fine noodles) were a perfect supper for me, so I even got an order of fideos to take for later. But it was tough getting out of there. Still a wind from the south and now 7:30 with 14 or so miles to go. Darkish by 8:30 and Tandy was suggesting I stop, but I didn't want to leave extra for tomorrow. Put lights on the bike. Cooler air, good shoulder on road. Kept going until 9:30.

At one point State patrol pulled up behind me with flashing lights. I "pulled over," so to speak. "I'm supposed to give you a ticket," the officer said. "For being so stubborn." He'd talked to Tandy back down the road. He was very kind, just checking to make sure I wasn't going to get myself killed. Said we had about 5 miles to go to a nice rest/picnic area. I thanked him, and on we went.

Nice rest area indeed. No hookups, but with the generator I got a shower. We were sandwiched between the highway and the railroad, but neither bothered—I was just too tired. Did rouse slightly to high wind and rain sometime in night. Cool air, warm blankets, and right back to sleep.

98 miles

August 14

Ever the optimist, started at 7:00 on the nose knowing that this would be the perfect day. Within half an hour I was plunging down the hill into North Platte River Valley overlooking the Oregon Trail, wind streaming through my hair, tears streaming back into my ears. Dad loved this stretch of history during our walk—I passed several places where we'd taken pictures together.

Breakfast at Meadowlark Inn in Bridgeport, the same restaurant Tammy and I stayed at on our walk and again on my boat trip. It's the only 3-way overlap in the whole state. Paul has suggested far more calories per day, so I went for omelet, hash browns, two glasses of orange juice. We didn't stay long since the owners weren't there.

Overcast skies for first time. It's generally downhill following Platte River Valley, so gentle grades. All great except for persistent headwind almost all day. Not feeling all that great gastrointestinally. Much slower going than I had hoped. When I arrived in Oshkosh, it took a few minutes to "come around" so I could be interested and sociable. Generally feeling very fatigued and just holding out for next day off.

Chili and salad lunch at SNS Café with very friendly, energetic, entrepreneurial owners who brought me back to life. A few years back they took every cent had and everything they could borrow to buy the café. Bought \$2,500.00 worth of groceries, took them to their kitchen, and spent a long day wondering if they'd be able to pay for them when the bill came the next week.

"The first day we had thirty customers," said Denise. With lots of remodeling and a lot of hard work, they now own the liquor store next door on one side and the hotel on the other side, and they still have dreams.

About 20 miles from the end, approaching Lake McConahey, storms threatened. Caught some drops, but nothing worth putting on a rain suit. My salvation for the day was a wind blasting in from the west, pushing me hard. At one point, racing along at about 20 mph on the flat, a wind-driven puff ball/seed thingy lightly blew past me, making me smile. I needed it, and stumbled into Sand's Edge Bar & Grill east of Lemoyne just in time. They were hopping busy with Friday night customers coming to the lake for the weekend, so we didn't talk much. Just watched families and couples and friends socialize while I ate a 6" stack of huge onion rings and fish and sweet potato fries. Then to a State Park for the night. \$17.00 and a cold shower. But good sleep.

Rain and northwest wind in the forecast for Saturday. Paul coming to join me again with a friend.

98 miles. One more day until a break. I now live for breaks.

August 15

After last night's rain, a shiny new morning. Riding north into the hills, a trillion sunflowers sparkled in the morning's glow. Incredible beauty on a 2-lane road with mostly smiling, waving drivers. If you own a 10-speed, pack a peanut butter sandwich and put this on your bucket list for when the flowers are at their peak.

Paul joined me in an hour or so for the ride into Arthur. He came with Jeremy, a Navy helicopter pilot now veterinary school friend who took the car on up to Hyannis and would ride south to meet us later, do a U-turn and ride with us back to Hyannis. Got to Arthur early and loved that ride in from the south. Some beautiful buildings including a log building for the market. Our designated restaurant, The Bunkhouse, wasn't open for another couple of hours, so we snacked at the market, did an interview with KNOP TV out of North Platte, and moved on. It's such a beautiful stretch of road we'll be glad to get back that way and revisit Arthur's restaurant another time.

This time, Paul was on a mission. He's been talking to all the right people and finding out how to keep me nourished for the remainder of the trip. "If you don't eat better," he threatened, "your body will eat itself and you won't like the results." I'm paraphrasing, but I'm close.

So every 20 minutes or so Paul handed me another thing to eat or drink, trying to help me get a picture of what it takes to consume about 5,000 calories a day. I bulged and burped and everything except my stomach felt so much better all day. My stomach wasn't pleased with the changes. Paul assured me that it would adjust, so here, eat some more cantaloupe. And some more grapes. And drink another half a bottle of high carb drink, And try this gel bar. And let's add up the calories. 1,780. Not near enough. Have another bottle of carbs. Try this trail mix. I think I ended the day having stuffed myself disappointingly short of the goal by about 500 calories, and considered eating nothing but fat and sugar for three weeks.

Still and all, we rode against a headwind for a few hours with Jeremy sometimes riding alongside, sometimes in front as a team so I could slipstream, which makes far more difference than I'd imagined it would. Jeremy is training for a Hotter Than Hell 100 in Texas. His ride of over 30 miles south down from Hyannis was fuel injected by the same wind that was attacking Paul's and my faces as we rode north, so he was grinning from ear to ear and he approached us. "That was the most fantastic ride I can ever remember," he glowed. The beauty of the countryside, the hills, the strong tail wind, speeds of over 50 miles an hour. And now he would ride with me, which started cutting into his average speed pretty drastically.

In Hyannis our restaurant wasn't open yet, so we stopped at another and then Paul and I headed on to do the last 29 miles west to Ellsworth while Jeremy drove on back to North Platte. Alerts were starting to show up about a severe storm moving into the area, and as we rode the wind freshened out of the east to flatten the grasses and flowers along the road. Indeed, we could see the front building out west, directly in our path.

Often if a strong storm is moving in, the wind will actually build moving toward it and then just as the storm hits the wind shifts direction 180 degrees and crashes against you. And so we rode fast. Then faster, Then faster yet. It was a race between us and the clouds, both heading for Ellsworth at lightning speed. I've got to say, it was glorious--the all-out gamble that throws caution to the wind (no pun intended) and flies in the face of reason. If we made it with the tail wind, all would be well. If we didn't quite make it, the wind would turn on us savagely and I'd have nothing left to fight it. Paul was smiling, I was beaming, and we were runaway kites on wheels. We started seeing lightning, started seeing the wall of rain, started feeling the first few pesky droplets as we counted down the miles. 3...2...1... a quick picture or two, my bike on the rack, Paul's inside the RV, a fast u-turn and we were off just as the wind turned and the rain hit. That cell hammered Ellsworth a few moments later and they recorded 75 mph winds in the area. But we were gone.

As it turned out, the map I used to calculate my mileages for the day was actually wrong by 10 miles, so it was a short and early end to a well-fed day. We decided to head back to North Platte for Sunday so we could take Paul home, catch up on laundry and maintenance and blogs, sleep in real beds and be ready for week three. We did, we have, we are.

89 miles. What a ride!

August 17

Indonesia's Independence Day. May they find Peace throughout the land!

Right after we made camp in a tiny city park in Ellsworth last night, a storm blasted in with rain. Between the storm, the coal trains and the highway it was an interesting if not particularly restful night. Morning dawned chilly and clear with little wind. Something like 50 degrees. In AUGUST! If I wanted 50 degrees in August, I'd move to the Northern Territories.

Off I went at 6:45, early for the first time, with tank top, long-sleeved shirt and rain jacket. What a beautiful section of the trip--it was marked as a scenic highway, and was. Everyone should walk or bike it--cars won't do it justice. Lots of little lakes, some clusters of evergreens, ducks and bucks (digitally shot two with nice big racks), scenic overlooks and deep valleys.

At one point a lady was pulling out of her long driveway (think miles long) onto the highway but waited for me to go past. I shouted, "Go ahead and pull out--I'll just hang onto your rearview mirror for a while." She just stared at me like I was a chimpanzee on a unicycle. I rode past.

A few moments later she passed me slowly, the passenger side window down, still staring. "It's a bicycle," I wanted to shout. "You should try one. They're a lot of fun." At least they used to be. Another mile down the road she had stopped. I rode up to where she sat in her truck.

"You need to watch out for rattlesnakes," she said. "They're all over this year. We've had 'em come up to the house this big around." She make a 3-inch circle with her thumbs and forefingers. I really really wanted to tell her that the snakes where I grew up would consider that spaghetti, but I thought if I got off on the Peru Amazon thing I might be there for a while trying to explain that Peru is a country, and the Amazon is a river, and anacondas are...oh, never mind.

So now in addition to worrying about freezing to death in August and getting blown off the road by a semi and starving to death from overexertion, I have to keep a watchful eye lest a rattlesnake charge out onto the highway and attack me as I speed past. You just can't ever relax on trips like this.

Lunch was in Gordon after 55 miles. Western Cafe. Compete with a cutout silhouette of a cowboy and cowgirl. Located outside of town, looking very western. Imagine my surprise when the waitress handed me the menu and it was all Chinese. Turns out that it was purchased by a Chinese lady a few years back, so now they have both Chinese buffet and "western." I think the name should be Eastern & Western Cafe.

The owner's mom and dad were there. They'd come from Beijing to join their daughter and work at the cafe every day of the week. I used my two words of Chinese on her and she immediately proclaimed to anyone who would listen that "He speaks Chinese!" I tried to explain how I came to speak a couple words of Chinese, but it was lost on her.

"English is very hard to learn," she said, although she didn't say it quite like that. I considered quipping, "Oh yeah? You should try to learn Chinese!" But since she already had, I thought she might not get it. Such fun, hardworking people. I was proud of them.

I turned another corner, heading due east with a strong west wind behind me. Hallelujah and glory be! Flew for five hours, logging in an extra 8 to end at Cody, which has a tiny RV park with a hot shower. Let's hear it for Cody! That shower was awful hard to get out of. We had supper at Husker Hub Bar and Grill, which wasn't on our list of restaurants but was a great stop. The owner used to live in North Platte but doesn't ever want to live in the big city again, she said. She absolutely loves Cody. Her husband ranches ("You can't make money ranching these days, but it gets into your blood") and she runs the bar but hates it that people call it a bar. She always

cringed when her little kids would say, "I'm going over to the bar." I agreed that that could be problematic without context.

Cold night in the forecast.

August 18

It got cold last night. Forties, they said. Hard to get out of bed in the dark with the time change and all. So I stayed tucked in while blogging. On the road at 7:30 with extra clothes and jacket on.

It was an unremarkable 55-mile morning, which I'll prove by not remarking. Got word just before Valentine that Paul had come up to join me for the day. Met him just before we stopped at an unmentionable restaurant, which I'm not naming because the food wasn't great and the service matched it. I think our waitress had been either a librarian or a junior high school teacher for too many years. Said all the right things, but without a flicker of interest and in fact with a bit of a glare. They weren't on our itinerary of selected restaurants. As I told Paul, "Well, at least I don't have to think of any good things to say about them."

Afternoon was a little bland with a hard "cross tail wind" as Paul called it. For you sailors, that's a broad reach. Whenever we had to go south, we regretted it. Fortunately it was mostly east, east, east until Springview, where we turned south for the last 10 miles. About 5 miles south of town we got a spectacular view of the Niobrara River valley full of trees. We roared into the valley and loved it, then up and over a treed ridge and down into another valley where we stopped for the day. Definitely a come-back-and-do-it-again section. But coasting down a hill into a beautiful valley is like buying something on a credit card. Sooner or later, you pay.

Tandy took me back to Mob County Saloon for supper and he took Paul back to Valentine. So I got a chance to visit with Toni and Steve Arends.

Toni and Steve were living outside of Denver doing construction and got tired of that life. Steve wanted to move to Alaska to homestead, Toni to Nevada to sunbathe. Ended up in Springview because her parents were here. Steve works for the Village in maintenance. Their son Nathan came from CO as well with his two sons, and is the bartender.

Toni worked for the school in Ainsworth in food services for a while, then got interested in owning a café or something, but none for sale. When the saloon came open, she bit. Added food cooked on a grill under a tarp, hoping to serve maybe five meals a day with Toni's mom as the waitress. Then one of the other cafes burned down (she says they had nothing to do with it) and the owner of the other one died (she says they didn't have anything to do with that either). Now they serve up to 55 meals a day and they're the only game in town.

They added a modern, clean cook shack on the back to replace the tarp. Then they expanded the menu to include chicken and pork. "Shouldn't be chicken and pork in here," they were told. "This is beef country." But the chicken and pork fly off the shelves and the BBQ pork sandwich I had was a real treat.

Every big anniversary of the town someone rides a horse through the saloon. This year is one of those, so they're hoping the health inspector isn't here when the horse gallops into the building. It's got a 75-year old back bar and the building could be 100 years old. "Mob" county because so many outlaws used to hide out and camp down by the river.

They love living in a small town and can't see ever going back to a big one. It's a bit of an adjustment for the grandsons being in a place where every kid in the school plays football or you don't have a team. They all came in for dinner together around a round table—grandparents, son, grandsons. "This is how you have to eat when you own a saloon," they said. Steve said he hadn't had a home-cooked meal in two years.

Tandy picked me up for the ride to Keller Park State Recreation Area. Quiet, lots of trees. Fell asleep to a blasting thunder and lightning storm with lots of rain. Loved every minute of it, at least the one I was awake for.

100 miles

August 19

Woke up startled to find it was 7:10 already. That was some night's sleep. I did the minimum and jumped on the bike to get going, rousing Tandy to meet me down the road. The first half mile out of the park was soggy gravel road so wet that I felt like I was riding with flat tires. Then up a short hill and a few miles later hit Ainsworth for breakfast at B&D Café.

Kelly was full of chat. When they took our order, I asked for pancakes. "Small, medium or large?" the waitress asked. I told them that was the first time in my life I've been offered a choice of sizes in pancakes, and wondered what the difference was. Well, large is huge, they said, and medium fills a dinner plate, and small is big. Okay, I'll take medium, I said. Connie said once a guy ordered three of the large and she told him if he ate them all he wouldn't have to pay. He had to pay, including for the half he didn't finish.

She was born in Ainsworth and spent a few years there, but ended up as a psych nurse in Sacramento, CA. Was getting fed up with some of the stuff going on there, including the number of murder victims whose bodies were dumped in the yard of their facility. Came home to a family reunion and her cousin asked if she'd like to buy the café.

Her dad had told her that if she could find a job, he'd buy her a house. A couple of weeks later, she was back in Ainsworth and wouldn't be anywhere else. She's doubled the revenue at the café, done a ton of remodeling (there's an apartment upstairs where the first owners raised 10 children), and loves the work most of the time. Says it would be easier to walk out and pull a needle from a haystack than to find a reliable grill cook.

When I asked why it was so hard to find a cook, she said because it's hard work. They make all of their food from scratch—cinnamon rolls, breads, French fries, hashbrowns (they go through 250 pounds of potatoes a week). Everything is hand peeled and chopped and fixed. 80% of her customers she knows by name.

Oh...and I couldn't finish my pancakes.

We left into a blasting tail wind that sent me flying around 18 miles an hour toward Newport. Rode into Sunny's Café an hour early for lunch, which made it brunch. Met by a couple of ladies on their way to a funeral, one of whom wanted info for the paper in Bassett. That gave us a nice visit until Connie, the owner, could get there.

I ordered a well-rounded meal of tater tots, cottage cheese and strawberry milkshake. But since this was the day for broasted chicken, when Connie came they talked me into a piece of that and I must say it would've been a mistake to pass it up. Connie explained to me that "broasted" means marinated and then cooked in a sort of pressure cooker so it gets really moist and tender.

Connie and her husband Dick Munk are local ranchers. So why did a woman with an already full schedule decide to buy a café? Well, the previous owner was getting out and a group of five people wanted to keep it in the community so they went together and bought it. One has since gotten out to focus more on missions work in Africa, one got out because of a divorce, so Connie owns more and more of it.

They don't specialize in food so much as service, maybe because it's been a gas station and convenience store longer than it's been a café. "We see ourselves as a big extension of a family," she said. "If someone walks in with grease or cow shit from head to toe, they are as welcome as anyone else, because those are the kind of people who are working around us here." Her husband sort of proved the point, having just been working cattle to separate out some that had been quarantined to prevent the spread of T.B. He reluctantly let us take his picture, but protested that he didn't look his Sunday best.

If someone breaks down, Connie and company loan them vehicles. If UPS or FedEx needs directions, they provide them. If anyone has a problem, they help sort it out. She has helpers, Joey and Bonnie Belmont, who have a ranch nearby and come in to help run things, fix her equipment and appliances when they break down, and cook. My impression is that Joey does it just to help out rather than for pay. "It's selfish," he said. "If this place closes down, I have to go a long ways for fuel and food."

A photographer from the Bassett paper came in and looked familiar. She said I looked familiar. We looked familiarly at each other until we realized that she had met Tammy and me on our walk outside of Bassett and took pictures of us coming into town. "What next?" she wondered. "I'm done," I said. But no one believed it.

With the café filling up for the lunch of broasted chicken crowd, I sailed east in a blur, arriving 30 miles later at O'Neil an hour and a half early. So a dilemma. Do we stop and eat? Or do we go on and drive

back for supper? With 30 miles left to go in the day, all straight north now into the teeth of that same blasting wind, we went on.

Ughhh. Talk about an instant bummer. Thirty mile an hour head wind, loose gravel that semi's flung into my face, hills, light rain. I remembered one of my training rides a lifetime ago when I decided to ride 27 miles to Stapleton against a strong headwind and rain. I remembered thinking at that time, as my legs turned to jelly and my feet went numb from cold and I shivered head to toe, that it was a good thing to do because it would prepare me for that sort of thing on my trip. So now I could be thankful for that preparation, except that it didn't feel like it had done much good. Mostly I stared at my speedometer, tapped on it to see if it was still working, listened to NPR and thought to myself that at least I was moving faster than health care reform is.

Some people have wondered what I think about at times like this. Actually, I think profound, creative, insightful thoughts. But here's the thing: when your whole mental focus is on moving forward, you quickly forget everything else. So you can have a fantastic insight and it's gone in minutes. That leaves you free to come up with the same insight many times during the day, and you end the day feeling brilliant but not quite sure why. Clearly, to anyone reading this blog, the insights don't survive until the end of the day's ride.

At 6:30, to my complete surprise, I had gone right at 98 miles. Tandy picked me up and we drove back to The Blarney Stone for supper. I must say, driving is faster, but you don't get to see nearly as much gravel.

Ron Anderson, at the Blarney Stone, suggested blackened chicken fettuccine alfredo, which didn't sound terribly Irish but was nevertheless magical. Wow was that good! The two waitresses were so friendly and nice that I thought life would be good if you always had one experienced waitress and another in training. The whole staff, in fact, were standouts. The Blarney Stone has a café side and a steak house side, so we were in the elegant steak house side. So elegant Tandy and I both combed our hair, which might have been a first.

We didn't get a chance to talk to Ron because he was serving a party of 50 in the café, but we did have a great visit with Sally, whom Tammy and I met during our walk. Sally and Dick had invited us over for meals at their home in O'Neil. At that time my dad was busily trying to figure out how he was related to everyone in town, because of some small thread of Irish ancestry he claimed. Dick was doing missions trips to Russia annually and in fact was just coming back from Moscow as we ate supper. Sally has been a school teacher for lots of years and is now tutoring kids who are struggling with math and reading. "In our school," she said, 40% of our kids exit 6th grade without being able to read at the 6th grade level. It's a real problem." And this isn't because they have all kinds of immigrants. They're struggling to figure out how to improve the situation in a time when kids are watching too much TV, parents aren't finding time to read to the kids, etc.

We drove back up to Spencer's city RV park for the night, where the hot shower was almost impossible to get out of. Northwest winds in the forecast.

100 miles

August 20, 2009

Woke to a very grey, blustery day, with a few spatters of rain. As long as the wind is in my favor, I love these miserable days. But August? People tell me I could not have had a cooler, wetter, more beautiful August in their lifetime. These are people who have had long lifetimes.

We popped into Ironman Café, which seemed appropriate. Actually, says owner Cindy, the name came from bigger than life figures of iron men that her welder father-in-law makes. "We don't have anything to do with athletics," she said. Over way too big a "small stack" and a bowl of hot oatmeal, we found out that Cindy has had the café for 11 years. Before that, she worked for a windsock company here in town. I remembered passing the place a few minutes before and wondering how a company that sells windsocks for airports could stay in business in Spencer. I mean, how many windsocks does Spencer 's airport need. But apparently they sell top quality windsocks all over the world. I told her I thought Spencer would be an ideal place to test them.

The café is the only place to eat right on this east-west highway 12 between Newcastle and Valentine, so they not only get local business, but also travelers. During hunting season, guests have returned year after year for a decade. Business is good, and it's been a good business for Cindy's family. With four kids, she's had a built-in workforce while they were growing up. All of them have earned college money working at the café. Now that they are all out of the house, finding help is getting more challenging. "I used to know all the high school kids because they were my kids' friends. Now I don't know who is who so it's a lot harder to pick good workers."

It used to be open longer into the evening, but without enough kids to make up ball teams, after-game eaters dwindled and Cindy started closing at 8:00. The hamburgers are hand formed, the potatoes hand mashed, the cooking home-style. "It's a lot of work," she says, "but it's sure got its fun parts."

While eating, I carried on a cross-the-room conversation with the father-in-law of Mel McNea (who works with Tammy at Great Plains Regional Medical Center). He has been all over, but is now building a house in Bristow, a few miles down the road from Spencer. "Why Bristow?" I asked. "Well," he answered, "I heard that there's nothing happening over there." He's tired of being on this committee and that board and all kinds of other things, so a place where nothing is happening suits him just fine. It was sort of a choice between Bristow and a remote, rocky island in the Mediterranean that he once visited.

Cindy said that although she opens at 6:00 a.m., most mornings there is a coffee group that comes in at 5:00. One of them has a key to the place, so they just come in, turn on the coffee pot and help themselves until Cindy comes in.

We hung around long enough to get a phone interview with a radio station in Wayne, then left about 9:40 with a blasting northwest win at our backs.

That section between Spencer and Vertigre is now an all time favorite. Following the Ponca Creek valley, the road winds between long groves of trees—yes, this is still Nebraska—and the hills are mild, with just enough rise to repeatedly offer gorgeous views of the valley. At one stop we could see clearly for tens of miles under heavily overcast skies. It reminded me of Pennsylvania.

I'd been watching for the town sign with the smallest posted population on my route. The winner thus far is Monowe, population 2. Tandy had missed it, so I asked him to go back and get a photo. A lady saw him taking the picture and told him that the sign is wrong. She has called the state to please come and correct the sign, because her husband passed away a short time ago. Now it's 1.

Due to another miscalculation and a route change, the required mileage for the day was only 70, so it all felt more relaxed, except for the cold. Whenever I stopped to take pictures or for anything else, the wind nearly knocked me off my feet and indeed there were times when I struggled to keep the bike from going right off of the shoulder. But my oh my, those views! At over 30 miles an hour I blasted into the Niobrara River valley again just before the town of Niobrara, complete with a vast marshland that has to be great for duck hunting. I mean great for the hunters, if not the ducks. Hint to ducks: If you just stay in the tall grass, they'll never see you--that business of getting all startled and taking flight is not a good strategy.

I'm nominating Vertigre for the most unique city entrance. The highway says you're there and points you to the business district, but then you leave the highway, ride down to and across a bridge and through the woods, turn left for a bit and finally start to see the town. It bills itself as the Kolache Capital of the World and has a welcome sign in Czech. At least I think it's Czech. I'll have to Czech.

Cozy Corner Café is in a Quonset hut. Owner Beth's great uncle built it on a 3 foot foundation right after WWII so it would survive floods. It's been a café ever since, always belonging to one family member or another. Beth has owned it for 7 years and is pure Czech and was born and raised there. So was her husband, now a farmer, so they've known and loved each other since they were kids. They've only left long enough to go to college and then run a dairy farm near Norfolk for a few years before returning to raise their family of four kids who are now 11, 10, 9 and 5, and run a café and a hotel and farm. Beth says she doesn't like being bored.

So the café is a family project, with the kids all learning to serve and cook there. Beth keeps warning them that the only reason they get such big tips is that they are so cute, and it won't last. She's open every day and three evenings a week. On Wednesday night they have hamburgers for \$1.00 and on a typical Wednesday they sell 275-300 burgers. I was stunned. I mean, do the math. Isn't that about 3 burgers per person in town?

No, she says people come from all over the area because ranchers and farmers are bargain hunters. Okay, so do the math again. You drive a pickup truck 50 miles to save, say, \$2.00? But it isn't just about the money. It's a sort of weekly fellowship time. The other big festival is Kolache Days in June, when the whole town bakes and sells kolaches to the whole town and area. Beth says even she can't believe you could sell that many kolaches in Vertigre. She served us absolutely delicious roasted pork, mashed potatoes and sauerkraut plus kolaches she'd made just so we'd know what they were. I loved them—

about like a doughnut but with fruit filling in the middle instead of a hole. She says she thinks the sign on the highway should say, “Self-proclaimed kolache capital of the world.” I told her not to worry about it—we’ve seen lots of towns making rather immodest claims along the way.

Getting out of Vertigre north/east is not for faint of heart bikers. You go up this hill, and then you go up this hill, and then you go up this hill, and then you go up this hill, all the time lugging pork roast and kolaches like a fanny pack on your stomach. The view on top is spectacular, but by now you’re ready to go back down for more kolaches and it’s easier to see how they sell so many.

Hills are the word of the day, in fact, for the next 30 miles. Thankfully, with the wind still blowing hard on our backs, I cruised into Bloomfield early and decided to go another 25 miles or so before stopping for the night, even though we were still being teased by dark clouds and sheets of rain in the distance. Finished at 7:30 or so, grabbed a quick sandwich and headed back to Bloomfield for the night, since we have to be there for breakfast in the morning.

96 miles.

August 21

Well, that was a shock. We pulled up to JB’s right about 7:30 and saw people running around in florescent green t-shirts. During a very warm, enthusiastic welcome we learned that the owner, Beth Harrold, had made up the t-shirts to sell as a fund raiser. She had also ensured that we were on the front page of the paper and was ready with a number of people who came for breakfast and to talk with us, including the pastors of two churches.

BJ’s is the only restaurant in town, but they don’t take that for granted. “Friendliness” is their main ingredient, they say, and they’ve proved it for six years, seven days a week. The enthusiasm is contagious, as are the daily specials. It’s open 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., but Beth often comes in early to take care of farmers who want coffee before they hit the fields. It was just a convenience store when Beth bought it, and her work experience was in a factory for 20 years and then route sales for a break company, but the café fit her personality. Breakfasts, lunches and dinners sort of evolved along the way.

Over pancakes, eggs, bacon and hot chocolate, I answered dozens of questions about the trip, about the shelter, the homeless situation in Nebraska, and Peru. In fact, I’d have to say that these folks, living a long, long ways from North Platte, asked some of the best questions of anyone we’ve met. Eventually Tandy had to tap on his wrist to get me shut up and out of there.

We drove back to Hartington and then, due to a wrinkle in the schedule, I just rode about 8 miles to another snack at Lonnie’s Bar and Grill. The bar has been there for 70 years, and Lonnie for 17. Before taking over the grill, he ran a farm store and some other businesses. He calls his place a coffee house in the morning, a café at noon and a bar/steakhouse/ grill in the evenings. They serve the best steaks in the country, he says, with their own special marinade. And when they do tenderloin tips every six weeks or so, they get 120-240 customers in for dinner. I don’t know where they put them! When I asked him

his last name, he immediately spelled it for me instead of saying it: S-a-c-k-s-c-h-e-w-s-k-y. He said that when his ancestors came over from Poland, it was 27 letters long, but they changed it.

When we arrived there was a ring of women around one table and a rectangle of men around another. I asked if they'd solved the health care reform problems, and they said yes. Someone was having a birthday, so I sang to them in Indonesian and Spanish. Pam, who has worked for Lonnie the whole 17 years he's owned the place, said that about the time these two groups left, another group would come and sit exactly where they have always sat. Same table, same positions at the table.

I asked what would happen if I sat in one of their chairs. She got a big smile and Lonnie, listening from back in the kitchen, gave me a thumbs up. So Tandy and I moved to "their" table and waited to see what would happen. Sure enough, we caused a cultural crisis that left them out of kilter. When I explained that we just came to town to cause trouble, one said we were off to a good start.

Now we were ahead of schedule again. Just before Wayne we stopped in a parking lot to do a little writing, then rode into Tacos and More right on time. A local pastor stopped me in front of the store to ask if I had any thoughts about how to help someone he knew, a severe schizophrenic who couldn't follow through on the paperwork he needed to get assistance with social security benefits and more. There are some very hard situations "out there."

Sandra was ready for us as were some folks from the radio station and newspaper. Over a fun sampler of chimichanga, super burrito and fried chicken, she told us that she sort of fell into this 12 years ago. She had a cake decorating business in the same mall and the lady who ran the restaurant talked her into buying the place around January 31st. She opened February 1st with a lot of customers and no idea how to prepare the food.

Since then Sandra has expanded and added menu items, but she still prepares baked goods to the tune of 1,200 dozen (yes, that's 14,400) cookies each year at Christmas. Her husband helps cut out the cookies, since she says she can't cut a cookie to save her soul. Since there is a college in Wayne, she says her best employees are those who start as high schoolers and then continue on right through the college.

From Wayne it wasn't that far to Sidelines Bar and Grill in Wakefield, where over the past 3 years AJ & Diane Johnson have turned their sports bar into a model of hometown pride! A.J., who has ridden in the Bike Ride Across Nebraska, has been a truck driver all his working life and never imagined owning a bar and grill at 51 years of age. Once they got into it, they gave it some fun features that keep people coming in. There is a collection of personalized license plates from around the country and a mostly complete collection from Nebraska's counties (they are still looking for plates from Jefferson, Gosper, Pawnee, Wheeler, Saunders, Blaine, Valley, Johnson, Logan, Loup, McPherson and Kimball).

There's also an alumni board that got started when they opened. Since AJ couldn't be at the opening, they tried to figure out a way people could "sign in" and he could see it later. The board is now covered with signatures from high school alumni who graduated decades ago and is a source of town pride.

Open seven days a week, specialties include homemade pizza, broasted chicken and hamburgers, with daily specials and a buffet on Sundays. As much as I wanted to try the homemade pizza, I opted for a huge chef's salad instead—cooler and lighter for the ride ahead.

So now, heading more northeast, the wind wasn't all that helpful and neither were the long hills. AJ had warned me, and he was right—those hills are hard work. The good news is that a few miles before Dakota City they ended and I got a level highway with a sort of helpful wind for a while. In fact, since all was going fairly well, I went ahead and rode the 8 miles south to Homer, in part to “get ahead” a bit and in part because it just felt good to “turn another corner.” Dakota City marked the most extreme northeastern point of the ride. From here on in, everything would be somewhat closer to home.

We drove back to Dakota City for supper at Hungry's, owned and operated by Mike and Debbie Sears for the last 31 years! Wow. They specialize in hand cut steaks that are charbroiled on a custom grill that is sort of in the middle of the dining room where you can watch them cook, along with lamb chops, pork chops, barbecue ribs and on and on. Since I saw that they are proud of their hand battered onion rings, I ordered a small stack and got this sort of hill of onion rings. “I thought you said ‘small stack’, “ I told the waitress. “This is the small stack,” she said. “The large stack fills a steak plate.” I had no trouble finishing them and the steak that Tandy and I shared.

Mike's family has been involved in this and his other Hungry's restaurants through the years. His sister was our waitress and his dad and other siblings have been co-owners or partners or employees along the way. His dad decided when he was 70 that he'd like to go back to farming, so now Mike does that with him and they just have this one restaurant.

We spent the night in a lovely city park in Dakota City with hot showers. I get the feeling that some readers might think I'm being a little repetitive about the hot shower thing, but you need to understand that after 100 miles or more on a bicycle, a hot shower is a foretaste of heaven. The RV has water for showers, but since we don't use the hot water heater, the temperature depends on how long the water has been in the storage tank. And since we use the handheld shower on the outside of the RV rather than the rather compact shower inside the RV, the blasting cold wind can be less than cozy. An RV park with a hot shower is therefore something you highlight on your map and draw a big circle around when you're on this sort of venture even if, as in this case, you had to pull on a chain to keep the water running.

80 miles

August 22

In spite of our desire to get an early start, I overslept. So I was behind before I started. We drove down to Homer and discovered another mileage miscalculation, so not only was it a late start, now it was a late start for a longer day. And it was cold. 47 degrees or something like that. My toes and fingers were numb in the wind. “Why don't you put on some socks?” asked reasonable people. Well, I didn't bring any socks. It's August. In Nebraska. I thought it would be reasonable to not bring socks! So I put up with it until the sun starting doing its job.

Our first stop was a bust. The little town of Walthill, in the Omaha Indian Reservation, gives a distinct first impression of decay. Paint is peeling, buildings look abandoned, main street had one car parked in front of a shop. The café we were to stop at was solidly locked behind a steel grate and heavy padlock. Apparently it is still in business, but its hours had changed. Perhaps that was influenced by a casino across the street. We went to a grocery store nearby and bought bananas for our meal in Pender County, then continued south.

The next stop was the complete opposite. Oakland exudes community pride, with pretty buildings, mowed grass, bright trimmings. It positively glowed in the morning light, and Memories Café fit right in. Kelly Fujan was living in Omaha when her mom saw an ad for the restaurant. She'd had one 23 years before in Anchorage, and dreamed of owning another one, so as a single mom with 2 young girls she bought Peg's Diner, changed the name and made the move 2 years ago. It's the only restaurant in town and the community gathering place.

Okay, so the welcome was special ("Welcome Ron Snell" on several signs), the food is delicious, featuring homemade pastries and meals from scratch, and the atmosphere is cheerfully upbeat. But what really impressed us was Kelly's daughters, who have learned from their mom how to be friendly and bright and helpful. When Kaylee and Shanda, 13 and 10, aren't in school, they refill coffee mugs and wait tables and take money and give change and ask questions and win hearts. Kelly says the whole community has embraced them as part of the family, with several surrogate grandparents. They have no regrets about the move and have no interest in going back to a big city.

We visited with some folks who had come just to talk to us, then turned another corner and headed west for a couple of hours. Our third stop of the day didn't know we were coming. Or at least the person who was there didn't know. I ordered a pork sandwich and some tater tots to go, and went. Ate while I rode, which isn't that easy with tater tots and ketchup. But by now we were well back on schedule and even the long, long hills before Norfolk couldn't throw us off. Tammy caught up with us just outside Norfolk, so I bid a grateful farewell to Tandy and a grateful welcome to Tammy.

Norfolk to Pierce was a turn in the right direction. With a smooth, level road and a tailwind, I blasted the last 12 miles or so before we stopped to drive back to Norfolk and Bailey's Bistro, where the manager recommended Cajun jambalaya. It was perfect. Chris from Nebraska Life magazine and his daughter caught up with us there and we had a long and cheerful visit sharing stories and ideas. His daughter Azelan is a bundle of intelligent energy without a bashful bone in her whole 10 yr. old self. She says her dad will teach her to drive and fly as soon as she can reach the pedals, and she thinks that will come first in the airplane.

So I wrapped up the day with hope for the future, having met three girls with the bright inquisitiveness, happiness, social graces and energy to change their world, and ours.

106 miles, and a hotel for the night.

August 24

Technically, this was to be a second day off, but a couple told me I should get out and limber up a bit. Having ended up in Pierce Saturday afternoon, we'd looked at the map and decided to alter the route and avoid a section of dirt road from Pierce west, so for my limber up ride I went west from Norfolk to Neligh, helped by a light tailwind, about 34 miles on a flat, smooth road. That felt good and would reduce the next day's ride by nearly 15 miles. Then Tammy picked me up and we went to the Legion at Pierce for our Pierce county supper. We weren't feeling great by then and it would have been easier to just give it a miss, but for the sake of completeness....

When we got back we set up in a campground in Norfolk for the night.

34 miles.

August 25

Chris from Nebraska Life wanted some up close and personal pictures of our lives on the road. We'd told him 6:30 so we'd have a bit of time to gather our wits about us before he showed up, but then we overslept and startled ourselves awake just before he arrived with his enviable camera and some bagels and orange juice. So photos of me working on the computer, Tammy putting on eyeliner, filling water bottles, pumping up tires, lubricating my chain, checking this and that, etc. He's a very sharp and congenial person with a good eye and a fast camera. As we pulled out, he drove ahead for some road pics before we put the bike in the car and drove back to Neligh for breakfast.

My heart wasn't in this. I was tired and dead and wondering where the umph was going to come from for the day's ride. We walked into The Fountain Cafe, a sparkling place with an old timey soda fountain and hammered metal ceiling, and there were two people eating together at a table. They immediately introduced themselves and thanked us profusely for what we were doing. Both are recovering alcoholics and the lady had been homeless with her kids in California for a period of time. Now they both work with alcoholics.

I chatted with them for a while, and when I rejoined Tammy, Colleen, the owner of the café was wiping her eyes on her apron. They'd been talking about something that struck a chord. We had a long visit over a pancake and eggs and bacon, and that's where the umph came from for the day.

The day's ride was a stair step, some straight west and some straight south. So with a wind out of the north, I got some help on the south sections. It was chilly, threatening rain but never quite getting there.

Lunch was at Bibs and Boots in Bartlett, an equally fun café where Dorothy and Becky, a mother/daughter team, operate the place with the help of a "pie lady" and others. They are a loving, fun, happy group with a buffet of roast beef, mashed potatoes, green beans and salad bar. They said there used to be buses of people on gambling trips that would stop in for lunch, but a new manager decided they'd just all go to a fast food chain restaurant instead. Let me just say to that new manager, "You made a big, big mistake." If you go there, don't leave without a sweet roll and a piece of pie. They have guys who come in just for a piece of toast and homemade rhubarb jam.

Dorothy chuckled about one customer who got out of a van in a handicap scooter, on her way to gamble. While Dorothy let her in the back door she asked, "So how are you doing today?" Not so well, the lady said. "My husband died this morning." But she was still going gambling for the day. Maybe she thought her luck would change. Or maybe they didn't get along all that well and she figured as long as she was on a roll....

The afternoon was more of the same, ending up coasting down a beautiful section into the North Loup River valley just before Burwell. I was ready to just get to a campground and call it a day, very grateful that I'd made it shorter by riding some of it the day before. But we still had one restaurant to go, and it was about 12 miles out of town. I told Tammy if there were any way to skip it.... alas, we both knew we had to do it.

Well. Country Neighbor isn't a place you'd want to miss. It's the cutest restaurant, out in the middle of farmland and long ways from town, made initially from an old one-room schoolhouse that Marcia and her husband moved and completely rebuilt. That was 14 years ago and now they have added another dining area and a "porch" onto it, as well as a patio dining area out back that is lovely with a pond and flowers.

When I asked, "Who comes here?" Marcia said she not only gets regulars from around the area, but also a lot of traffic from Ft. Hartstuff. Last year, she said, she had just shy of 40,000 guests from all over the world. Holy guacamole! One big reason is the food, with great specials and salads and desserts, and one reason is the prices, which are way too reasonable, and one is people visiting the fort. Whatever, you should plan a trip around it and wander the gift shop while you're there. It felt like a really fun date.

To top it all off, Marcia was donating \$3.00 to the shelter from every dinner served. These people's kindness, so far from home, is an inspiration.

86 miles.

August 26

We started off late, again. Fortunately, the whole day followed river valleys, making for relatively level riding and some very nice views.

Breakfast was at a bar and cafe. (Notice that I'm not saying where.) There were signs posted outside the place saying in essence that smoking was no longer allowed because our elected representatives in the government had taken away that right and it was just one more thing the government has taken away and what will be next? (I have asked several other bar and saloon owners what the impact of the Nebraska smoking ban has been, and every one has been quite positive about it. More families come in. It's far easier to clean. Their customers have been cooperative. Until now.) It was dark inside and the owner was sitting in the beer garden smoking. I introduced myself and asked how she was. "I'm here," she said. "The cook's up there. She'll take care of you." That was the last we saw of her.

The whole place was plastered with the tirades against the government and other rants about uncontrolled children and the like, but the cook was very accomodating and fixed us a nice breakfast. As we ate, a few seniors walked in together. Then a man and his kids, a girl about 10 and a boy about 7. "School hasn't started yet for you guys?" I asked. They answered that they were home schooled. The kids showed some interest in our ride, so Tammy showed them maps and schedules.

The most mind boggling comment we overheard from the seniors' table came when one asked another, "So what are you going to do for the rest of the day." The answer? "I think I'll probably just go home and sit." All day. Someone suggested she could read, but she replied that she didn't like reading. I wanted to suggest several ways that she could brighten the lives of children, seniors, or others, but I just kept eating.

After I'd gone, Tammy had the idea of passing on a Scientific American magazine to the home schooled children. She took it in and handed it to them with an enthusiastic recommendation. The father's response? "Is it Christian based science?" Meaning, of course, "Does it ever use the word evolution?"

When Tammy told me this, I thought to myself, Okay, so here you are with your children in a bar at 9:00 in the morning, surrounded by negative signs and seniors who plan to sit all day, and you think your biggest problem is that Scientific American uses the word evolution? And that reminded me of a sign in front of a church earlier in the day that proclaimed our need to bring our nation back to God, and how that sign made me think for several miles about how much effort is being made by conservatives to bring the nation back to God but how the first problem conservatives face is bringing themselves back to God in ways that actually make others take note of what a profound impact it has on people when they follow Jesus instead of an ideology or a political party or a personal philosophy.

Lunch was at Uncle Buck's Lodge, a really cool place on the edge of Brewster. A ranch couple had kids who wanted to stay in ranching and the ranch wouldn't support them all, so they decided to diversify. They built this big lodge and decorated it with all kinds of fun antiques, animal heads, cheery accessories and a deck looking out over the river. We had a great meal and an even greater conversation with the owner, Marilyn, who was interested and inquisitive about the shelter project and the homeless.

The last 25 miles were pretty fast, with an accomodating wind and a smooth road that followed the Middle Loup River past the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey and on past Thedford into Seneca. We got supper to go at Stub's in Thedford, where a cheery waitress who is a junior in high school told us that her sister had worked there until she needed maternity leave, then her brother worked there, and now she was working there until her maternity leave. Her fiancée is in the military and she's really excited about their upcoming baby and then wedding in June. Her enthusiasm was contagious, but her prospects seemed daunting to us. I had the shrimp pasta with alfredo sauce and it was about as perfect a supper as a bicyclist could ask.

We paid \$7.00 at a gas station next door for hot showers, then drove back to Seneca for the night, where we wondered more than once if the trains were going to run right over the top of us, or just continue to barely miss us.

103 miles.

August 27

Started off into a cold, foggy morning. Really cold for biking, but great for picture taking as the sun got fogged over, then broke through, then fogged over again. For the first time in my life I saw a "fogbow," which is what I call a rainbow that is caused by fog. It was a perfect arch in front of me but with no color--just a white arch.

Mullen welcomed us generously. A few people waited on a street corner, then more in the Sandhills Country Door, where Paul also caught up us after having ridden his bike up from Tryon. Two fun kids asked questions, handed me donations, and got autographs. This feels like home territory, in large part because groups in Mullen have been so supportive of the shelter both as donors and as volunteers. I got eggs, pancakes and bacon while Tammy ordered a scone that she let me have bites of. It was really good. In back of the cafe, Jennifer has a whole room dedicated to scrapbooking, which makes for a nice combination business.

With Paul along for conversation, the run to Tryon seemed quick and pretty easy. Debra and Beth caught up with us to hand me an ice cold root beer, then had lunch with us there at Aunt Bea's Café, where "Sandy," short for "Sanford," says he is the closest we'll get to Aunt Bea.

And then to Stapleton. About 13 miles out of town the sheriff pulled up to say that someone had requested that he escort me into town. He'd follow behind me with his lights flashing and then pull in front of me and sound his siren as we were arriving in town. It was a little embarrassing, so I sped up trying to get there as fast as I could, all the time imagining him bored behind the wheel. But he was so nice about it all.

In Stapleton I was met by numerous friends of the shelter and myself, including Phareses and Jay Engel from North Platte. I was wobbly/trembly after the push to keep the sheriff from getting bored, but recovered quickly as we gathered in the Main St. Market and Deli, where Tyler and Kellie had gone to the effort of making special barbecued pork for sandwiches, with potato salad. It was so good that Tammy got extras for supper later. That was a fun visit and a good reminder, after all those hours and days of isolation out on the road, of what this was all about.

We pushed on into the afternoon toward and past Arnold. Having been warned about the hills, I was worried and then relieved. By now, I have done enough hills that there really isn't anything left to fear. Everywhere I go, people tell me that the next section is going to be really hard because of the hills, but if you have enough gears, hills are a matter of time, rather than effort. As long as I don't get impatient and try to push too hard, there isn't a hill in Nebraska that I can't climb. So far.

The climb out of the valley on the far side of Arnold was quite long and well worth the effort. A colorful sunset was getting itself together on my left, casting shadows across the ruffled hills. Cows bellowed on my right, their voices carrying easily on the evening air as they stood in rich green cane so tall that all I could see was their necks and heads.

Eight miles past Arnold I finally caved in and we drove to Merna. With no campground there we went on to Broken Bow and camped in an RV campground that yet again left us feeling like every train coming by was going to run right over us. When I wasn't hearing them, I was dreaming about hearing them. Not the best night's sleep.

107 miles.

August 28

Remarkably, all things considered including that we had to drive about 25 miles before we even got started, Tammy got me back to my starting point by 7:20. Lots of early morning beauty with flowers, hills, shadows. At Merna, I turned south onto fairly level, smooth road with wind at my back and flew into Broken Bow.

We went to The Huckleberry Hideout, in an old Elk's building, for breakfast. Jeremy whipped up a concoction that was the most creative breakfast of the trip. Hash browns, bbq pulled pork, scrambled eggs, etc. all together. Really good. He and his partner lease this huge, huge building from the Elks. You know it's the Elks because there are elk heads all over the place. One big and unexpected source of revenue is their big wedding receptions in there. Jeremy started numerous Applebees restaurants for several years all over U.S. Then he and his wife settled near his parents so their kids are close to grandparents.

It was a long run after that with strong cross tail wind. Even going pretty fast, took four hours to get to our "lunch" stop. My right achilles tendon is very painful and my legs quite sore. I'm guessing it's because of the hard push to outrun the sheriff the day before. Still and all, there were lots of grand scenic views along the way, with high hills and expansive valleys. Some of the longest "straight road" views of trip. Can see where you're going for miles. Passed Bones and Dale from Simon Construction in Arcadia. They supervised the building of the new shelter shell and are now working on a bridge over the Middle Loup River.

Tammy went in to preview our lunch stop and advised me to just give it a miss. They didn't really get into the ride thing and she just encountered bad attitudes and profanity. Bad day? I ate leftovers and kept going, now into a shifting wind that came from the front. Pushing hard to finish 105 miles for the day, but my right Achilles tendon is getting quite cranky about the whole ride idea, as are my knees now and again. So it was a pretty hard push, just to get up the oomph to keep going. Sometimes nothing hurts and I breathe easy. Sometimes everything hurts and I wonder about next week. Just 700 miles to go now. I think I can, I think I can. All day was cool—in the seventies. No wonder I felt cold most of the day, sweating and chilling. But scorched my nose, again. It'll be gone by the time I get back.

Thinking a lot about Senator Kennedy today. Have always thought very little of him, but the common theme among those who remember him best is his concern for the down and out. The poor. Immigrants. Children. Etc. I keep thinking, "Isn't this exactly the sort of thing Jesus urged us to do?" So why have I always thought to little of him? A lot of the legislation that he has pushed, we all benefit from. Hmmmmmm.

Supper at T R Cricketts in Greeley, a bar and café where Tammy, the owner, made me a great hamburger and some fried appetizers to go. Her granddaughters Maria and Mariah were in there with her, as was her son who was cleaning the floors in preparation for Karaoke night at 9:00. His t-shirt wasn't something I'd want my granddaughters to be reading. Have I turned into a real prude, or what?

While Tammy waited for the food, I went on 10 more miles in late afternoon lighting and a grand view of the North Loup valley. Then we drove to Pibel Lake State Recreation Area for the night, where we had no hookups but a great site with a view of the lake out our back window. We ate our T R Cricketts supper while listening to the insects, and enjoyed the most mellow feeling for a campsite the whole trip. Gorgeous. Private. And we got here in time to actually relax a bit. No highway noise, no trains.

105 miles.

August 29

Started off cold, into a gorgeous sunrise. Along the way I was passed by three or four real bicyclists out for a morning ride, and felt old and depressed. I mean, they didn't puff and pant and slowly struggle to pass me. They just sort of whizzed past with a quick wave. I wanted to shout at the velcroed backsides: "Yeah, well, I've been doing this for a while and I still have 90 miles to go today." But of course if I'd shouted anything, I would have had to stop and catch my breath.

First stop at the Brewed Bean Coffee House & Café in Albion, which lifted my spirits considerably. Those velcroed backsides rode right past a most amazing place run by two cute sisters (even Tammy thought so) and their cute helpers surrounded by amazing sweets and treats that they lavished on us in plates and glasses that pretty much guaranteed a sugar rush to come. There was so much laughter and good spirits in there that it restored our faith in the whole world. If ever we are within 50 miles of Albion, we'll head back there like homing pigeons. We sort of did have to wonder why there was a Christmas tree up in August, decorated with toilet paper rolls. They said they enjoy life. Cool.

Off, then, to Columbus on a roads that rose and fell with high enough hills sometimes to offer very nice views. In Columbus we stopped at Gottberg Brew Pub, which is so loaded with atmosphere that you just want to wander around for a while. A huge curved mural of an old automobile, buffalo and a train graces the formal dining room, where every table was covered with a white tablecloth. In the bar, classy parts of the fronts of automobiles hang on the wall, which include corrugated metal roofing as decor, and elsewhere you can see all of the gleaming equipment they use to make their own home brewed beer. We ate in the bar, since it wasn't dinner time, and had what have to be in the top 3 reubens we've ever eaten anywhere in the world with off brand root beer. We could easily see why people drive there from all over the region to eat.

Ended the day at Gene's restaurant in Schuyler, where we met _____ and _____ but not Gene.

Apparently they kept the name so they wouldn't have to change the sign, and are working to slowly but surely improve the offerings and ambience. A specialty is broasted chicken, as witnessed by the huge chicken on the sign. They haven't owned it all that long and are working to make it as friendly as can be.

It's clear that they have some good friends who come in for food and jest. The town has lots of Spanish signs, and a number of what we guessed were Hispanics came in for supper. (Our guess was probably influenced by the fact that they spoke Spanish.) I asked the owners if they planned Mexican food in addition to their American fare, and they said not really, but their customers all like the broasted chicken. I did too.

Way too late we headed for a nice little RV campground.

105 miles.

August 30 Off.

August 31

Had to do a backwards start. Tammy drove me to Arlington and I rode back to North Bend because she wanted us there pretty close to 9:30, but we'd pre-ridden a lot of miles so it was all scrambled. The lady who served us breakfast at the "Corner Omelette" was so friendly. A newspaper reporter said it was the "best breakfast in Nebraska" so I had the mega omelette, which was so huge I didn't finish. She's also famous for her cinnamon rolls, but I had no room to try them. A couple tables of older gents were playing cards in one corner. I offered to tell what people had in their hand for a fee, but no takers. Penuckle was the game, whatever that is..

After breakfast we drove back to Arlington to go forward. Headed to Blair, where we were greeted by Woodhouse Ford's massive inventory on terraces. Tammy inquired about a donation and we had a fun chat with Jesse the salesman. We'll see. Then on to Fernando's, a lovely Mexican restaurant that's very fun to look around at. The queso fundido excellent as a foundation for burritos, chips, pico de gallo.

Blair to Omaha was a very pretty route with lots of trees and moderate hills. I didn't particularly appreciate the slight headwind, but at least it was slight. I'm getting tired. Anything makes me tired. I had dreaded Omaha the whole trip, wondering how I'd fare in a big city after all of the desolate roads. In the end, I entered Omaha from the north through a rather rundown section, but the ride was easy and the route straightforward. Just a couple of glitches because of 1-way streets, but no big deal and I never felt unsafe. For the first time on the trip I wore my helmet just in case, but there was no case.

The Bohemian Café has been there for a long, long time and is still run mostly by extended family members who are a fun lot. One of the owners, Terry, was very interested in my venture and helpfully informative about the food, culture, and community, so he kept us entertained throughout. They served us a sampler of meats and gravies that Terry guided us through, with kolaches to go.

On down through rest of Omaha and suddenly we were done with it. Oh joy of joys. It was, contrary to all expectations, a breeze. I rode into Bellevue and then right on down to Plattsmouth, where Tammy hunted for an RV park while I rode sideways to a gorgeously setting sun. Tammy caught up with me in time to take some of the most beautiful pics of the trip. We backtracked to Stella's for our final meal of the day. They were ready for us—a small little hamburger place full of people clapping and cheering as we entered. Fun little place. Cast iron grill that was the original. Stella's is in a book of the 100 best

hamburgers in America. Owner says it's because the grill retains all of the spices and flavor of the decades. She could get a new grill that's larger and more efficient, but doesn't want to lose those years of flavor.

RV park in Bellevue, with showers. Nice. Quiet. Dark. Great place to sleep.

85 miles

September 1

Woke up early, but not early enough. Got to Plattsmouth Chocolate Moose an hour late. Not good. Owner had gotten up very early just for us. Still, she made us a fantastic breakfast. Gourmet everything. Hot chocolate. Customers come from all over. Edible orchids. French toast. Crab cakes eggs benedict. She started off in genetic engineering and pre-med, but changed course. I told her the breakfast she fixed us did more therapeutic good than anything she could have done as a doctor.

I rode into a headwind, then, for 20 miles into Nebraska City. It wasn't terrible, and I knew I'd turn soon. We got a very warm welcome for brunch at The Avenue Grill. The staff had name tags with "Welcome Ron " written on them, and a great breakfast buffet set out. There was another biker there who looked bewildered, like he'd just stumbled into heaven on his way from Florida to Alaska. He'd ridden into The Avenue Grill by chance and they made this big to-do about him, thinking briefly that he was me! Oddly, in talking to him I discovered that his route from Florida to Alaska is less than 2000 miles longer than my route all over Nebraska. He's traveling light and self contained and is athletic, fit, and intense. Like me, except for the athletic, fit and intense parts.

The long run to Lincoln was with the wind, so I actually caught up an hour to be on schedule en route, going fast and faster. At the Parthenon restaurant the owner was so quietly gracious, and waiter a joy. Met by Marcia Howlett, Tim Wilson, Mary Beth. Splendid salads and pizza, trying to keep it light. But also some baklava, which didn't exactly keep it light!

The remaining 30 miles up through Lincoln I mostly on sidewalks because of narrow streets and fast cars. Tammy had picked good route so we never did get into the commercial district and traffic, although I rode right over the tops of several sprawling goat head vines with nary a flat tire. Then 20-some miles on great road with a smooth shoulder and cross tail wind, so I ended up in Wahoo just as the darkness was falling. Supper of chili at 6th St. Garage Bar and Grill, which is huge, then a nice RV park at the fairgrounds with hot showers. I think I mention hot showers too much.

99 miles

September 2, 2009

We woke up late, thankfully, but still got off to a good start with a tail wind for the 20 mile run to David City, and arrived just a little late at Northside Cafe. That was a really fun stop, mostly because of the waitress, Donna, who provides non-stop entertainment. She's been there for 37 years and has pretty much seen it all, including a city father who many years ago got drunk in there and came out of the

restroom having forgotten to get himself tucked back in. He's dead now, but she still won't tell anyone the name. That was back when alcohol played a much bigger role in the restaurant—now it's more family oriented.

Our omelets arrived about the time we did. Huge, with homemade hashbrowns incorporated. While we worked our way through those and pitchers of hot chocolate we visited with other customers who were aware of our coming, and then the owner who spent her high school years wishing she could own a restaurant and then made the dream come true two years ago. I finished with a piece of pie that mimics cream puffs and was stupendous. When we commented on how fun Donna was, the owner said yeah, you either love her or hate her. She sometimes has to smooth ruffled feathers, mostly on outsiders who don't know how to take Donna. We'd come back just to spend another hour with her as our waitress.

The next 21 miles were against a harsh headwind, but I wasn't concerned, knowing that when I finished that section I'd turn a corner and get some help from the wind again. Besides, I'd caught a bad mileage calculation in my favor, making the required total for the day about 15 miles less than I'd planned.

Stopped at Seward and Café on the Square, which was a very fun memory. We'd stopped there on our 1,000 mile walk. Tammy had the same salad she'd had four years ago, and I ate the meatloaf lunch like my dad had done back then. Fun waitresses, totally delicious red/white/blue cake for desert.

And then, about ten miles past Seward, I caught a lucky break. I saw a huge piece of farm machinery slowly gaining on me from behind. It was wide and lumbering, so as it got close I decided to zip across to the other side of the 2-lane road and not obstruct it's progress. But then Paul's words of a couple weeks ago hit me: "If you can catch it, you'll get a fun ride!" I zipped back over to the right side of the road, pedaled furiously and tucked in right behind the machinery, so close I could almost touch it. I immediately discovered what Paul had been talking about, as I was sucked into the slipstream at 18 miles an hour with hardly any effort.

The road was flat and the shoulder wide, so I just stayed there several miles with a massive smile on my face. I was frantically calling Tammy to come up and get some pictures, and just as she caught up with us the front chain came off of my bike. It had been getting looser and looser and I hadn't tightened it since the start of my trip, but this was absolutely the WORST time for it to come off. I jumped off of the bike and put the chain back on, yelled to Tammy that I was going to try to catch up with the beast, and took off pedaling frantically, giving it everything I had to go 19 miles an hour. I was gaining, but much too slowly. My legs were screaming, I gave myself a splitting headache that made me wonder if I was going to have a stroke or brain hemorrhage and decided it was worth it. I was gasping for breath, I was gushing sweat and I just couldn't quite get close enough.

Since Tammy was right beside me, I yelled, "Let me grab your mirror," which thankfully stuck out a good bit. Much to my surprise, she pulled close enough so I could grab ahold, and I pedaled hard as I could while she speeded up, as if my pedaling would do any good. The thing was, I didn't want to just cheat and have her give me a free ride. "Faster," I gasped, which wasn't very smart, but she sped up to about 27 miles an hour. After a 10th of a mile or so she slingshotted me into the machine's wake again and I got another couple of miles before the machine turned off the road.

"I don't think that was recommended procedure," Tammy said, already using hindsight to re-evaluate the wisdom of what she'd just done. Probably not, I responded, but that was the best ride of my trip. And we got to York so early that I rode on another 18 miles toward the next day's ride. Spent the night in a Swedish town, Stromsburg, but had supper at . Chances R Restaurant and Lounge in York. That's an amazing place, filled with people from all over the area. Décor is vintage and bright, filled with mirrors and chandeliers. What a cool place and super menu. We talked with the owner for a while and wondered how he ever sleeps, keeping up with the restaurant and family and all.

September 3

We started off at CJ's Family restaurant in Osceola, with a shelf of homemade pies already full at breakfast time! The owner was so nice and friendly, but told us that she is getting ready to hang it up after a lot of years in the business. As we ate breakfast several old timers came in to eat and mostly drink coffee and talk. Some said they are already mourning the departure of the owner because they have no idea where they will hang out in the mornings. It was a poignant reminder of the "glue" that these little cafes provide in small towns, and the sense of belonging that they bring.

In a chilly drizzle I headed north, changing the route slightly to go up and catch Nance County and crossing the Loup River in the sort of dreary weather that makes rivers look mystical. We lunched at Double K's Café in Fullerton, where we're close enough to home that we ran into people who are familiar with the shelter and its work. Over chicken fried steak and peas and biscuits we talked and talked and wished we could just sit there in the warmth. No such luck.

Through headwind and weather we turned south again toward Aurora. Gloomy ride. Ready to be home. But Espressions in Aurora is a warm, cozy coffee shop with specialty coffees and deli sandwiches and more. Oh, and some fun cartoons in the bathrooms. One has a frame showing a 300 pound man with a 48 pound carryon. Next frame shows a 100 pound woman with a 54 pound carryone. Third frame: "Ask your airline which of these is going to pay overweight?"

By the time we exited, the drizzle was rain. For miles I blinked against the drops and hoped cars could see my bright yellow rain jacket in the gloom. Cold, yes, but sort of fun in an Amazon tropics sort of way. Made it to and through Grand Island, then drove up to Lincoln Manor Steak House for supper. Another of those grand old buildings that's been refurbished into a dining "experience."

September 4

We started off driving to Lee's Family Restaurant, where Mom and Sandy burst out of the front door to get hugs and greetings. Then inside to say hi to Terry and Brenda and the people in charge, who were in a bit of confusion because we got there earlier than planned and they had called the media for an hour later. In the midst of starting to sort that out, Mom told me to "look over there," and I saw this adorable little girl—my granddaughter Elisabeth!—who'd just been waiting for me to rush over and pick her up and squish her with hugs. Now THAT was a cool surprise! She wasn't quite sure what to do with a grandpa whose skin was brown as an Indian's and had a month's beard. "That's not the grandpa I remember," she told everyone else.

We made some media calls and pretty much figured out that they weren't coming anyway, so we settled in for good breakfast and visits. And then, wanting very much to make this day count for all it was worth, we drove up to the north side of Grand Island where I'd left off the day before.

Paul was waiting for me, making the time go faster as we caught up and chatted on the way north to St. Paul, where we had to stop and get a picture, of course, of Paul entering St. Paul. Those of us who'd been around him for any time at all thought of him that way anyway.

So in St. Paul we rode toward the restaurant and were slightly baffled as we passed right through the business district and headed into a nicely kept old residential neighborhood. But about the time we seemed to be going the completely wrong direction, there it was—House of Memories. We waited for Tammy and Mom to catch up in the RV, then went inside and found, to our amazement, an incredibly beautiful 100-year-old home that had been fixed up and turned into a restaurant downstairs and gift shop/antique showplace upstairs.

The owner spent many of her growing up years in the house, which had belonged to her mother before her. The foyer and dining room were both set up for dining, with elegant place settings surrounded by furnishings that you just wanted to keep getting up and looking at. The owners are engaging storytellers, so while we ate she kept us fascinated by the history of the house itself and some of the things inside it, including a coin collection that had been found tucked in behind the toilet paper dispenser in the bathroom, and more pragmatically told us about the 13 layers of wallpaper he'd torn off and the 9 ceilings he'd papered. A retired railroader who used to run the same route that Paul does, he has a top flight shop in back of the house and has made some of the beautiful furnishings in the house. We could have stayed a long time, and indeed the others stayed behind a while when Paul and I set off for Loup City.

With the wind behind us and only moderately rolling hills, Loup City was an easy ride, but I was starting to worry about my right leg. Not only was my Achilles tendon complaining, so was my knee, and I couldn't seem to find a position that alleviated the pain. As it was getting worse quickly, I was beginning to worry about what it would do the next day.

Still, we dropped into Loup City's wide valley in good time and searched until we found The Kozy Café, a tiny little place whose the only sign was small lettering on the mailbox. Inside we found big hearts, however, and a little kid who enjoyed hanging out the drive through window to talk to people coming in for food.

That afternoon was a long ride on a narrow road, and the worst messup of the trip in terms of scheduling. Having figured out that a slight change in our route would save miles and time the last and final day, and hurting quite a lot from leg pains, we dropped straight south instead of angling over to our next stop. Then we drove back up to Flashbacks Neighborhood Bar and Grill in Ravenna, arriving way too late. To our dismay we found out that they had gone to the effort of making a whole series of Burma Shave type road signs to welcome us to Ravenna, but had placed them on our original route instead of the one we took. I was so disappointed for them! And grateful for the welcome.

Although it was late and everyone was exhausted, we had a great time looking through the clever design. Each table is labeled with a different year and has collages of events clipped from papers and other things from that year. It's all a lot of fun and worth going out of your way to visit.

And then we drove back to Kearney, pulling in way too late again and crashing in a little hotel we happened to see as we entered town.

September 5.

Last day, and none too soon. Everything below the waist is wrung out. Tendons are tired, joints are aching.

We started off in dense fog at the French Café, where everyone should go at least a few times in their lives. They had advertised a special quiche to help with funds for the new shelter, and there were several people we knew in there plus the quiche, fruit salad, pastries of all sorts. It looked like artwork on a plate and we all oooohed and ahhhhed spontaneously before we dived in.

Drove back up to where I'd finished the day before and met up with Paul to head west in the fog. As the fog lifted, the wind came up behind us, pushing us faster and faster along a very familiar, very flat, very straight, very wide road. If all of that sounds good, it WAS! After nearly 3,000 miles of hills and headwinds and weather, the last day was perfect. Not only were we cruising, we were doing it effortlessly and roared into Lexington ahead of time. The restaurant we'd planned on was no longer in operation, so we just picked a little place that was painted bright purplish/pinkish and that was one of our funnest stops ever. Very typically Mexican in a legit sort of way, and our growing crowd of family and friends sort of overwhelmed it. But the owners, with whom we could actually speak Spanish, seemed glad to have us in a "Why did these people come here?" sort of a way.

We spent an hour or so, then sped on west going so fast that we would have arrived in North Platte too early. Debra warned us that we couldn't get home before 5:30, so Paul and I lingered in a couple of C-stores just to slow ourselves down. In Maxwell Patty and George Evans joined us for a drink and snack, then down the road Ann Milton as well, so it was a fun last leg.

There is this strange sensation of coming home, having it all look so familiar and yet so different. Patty had arranged a three-wheel bicycle for my mom to ride the last few blocks, which was fun but not so easy. She hadn't ridden a bicycle for a long, long time and this one's steering threw her off, so Tammy kind of walked along side and helped her steer. And that's how we arrived at our very own downtown Espresso Shoppe, where we were met by a very nice clapping crowd of friends and music and refreshments. The Espresso Shoppe is a one of a kind and has been there for years with an Irish flavor. It's the place to be in North Platte for lunch on St. Patrick's day, but any other day it's a fun gathering point for groups of regulars and others just dropping in. It was absolutely the right place to come home to.