

Alaska

From Behind Handlebars

By Dorothy Lawrence Minkler '47

As nations marched toward World War II, Dorothy Lawrence Minkler '47 pedaled her way through Europe in 1939, Mexico in 1940 and Alaska in 1941. "Seeing Alaska from behind bicycle handlebars was the most difficult and the most interesting," she says. Minkler, who now lives in San Diego with her husband Bill, shared her photographs and the diary of her journey with us which we have excerpted here. She and her friend, Elsie Smith, traveled by train and then by the steamship "Alaska" to Valdez where their bicycle journey began.

It was 1:30 a.m. on a rainy summer night in 1941 when the ship Alaska docked at Valdez. Elsie and I were very excited. From now on we were traveling under our own power. We planned to cycle 371 miles north to Fairbanks, across the Arctic Circle, visit Fort Yukon, then come south by bicycle and rail to Anchorage and the Kenai Peninsula. With a camera over the handlebars and the extra pack on the back of the bicycle, we each had about 25 pounds of equipment and ourselves to get over the mountainous country through which we expected to pedal.

But first we faced a dilemma: we had made no reservations for the night. The fact that we would leave the boat in the middle of the night had never entered our heads. Worse yet, it had to be raining.

As we were strapping our equipment on our bicycles, we were approached by Rev. F. G. Phillips of Valdez, who had come down to meet the boat. He smiled at our predicament and, because he knew there was no available space at the hotel, invited us to the parsonage.



The next morning, Mrs. Phillips and the four young Phillips made the breakfast of sourdough pancakes a lively affair. The children called us "Cheechocos" because we were newcomers to Alaska. They were very interested in our plans and did everything they could for their "Cheechoco" visitors. Rev. Phillips took us to the local post office for mail and then to the store for supplies.

We said goodbye to the Phillips and started north to Fairbanks on the Richardson Highway. There was no other road to take, so we couldn't possibly get lost. It was still pouring rain. There is the standing joke about the tourist who asked the Indian if it always rains here. The Indian said, "No, sometime she snows."

Valdez is surrounded by beautiful, snowcapped mountains. We were thrilled by the rugged

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Between her 1934 teaching certificate and 1947 bachelor's degree, Dorothy Lawrence Minkler made three long-distance bicycle excursions.

beauty of the country and the feeling of strength that was characteristic of the high, jagged mountain peaks and the powerful waterfalls along the highway.

To a person who has lived in southern New Jersey, a highway is usually a long white ribbon, carefully laid across the countryside. Sometimes it may be black but it is always smooth with a surface like a clean-swept floor, and traffic rolls along in the plainly marked lanes. This highway was gravel, and at times it was too narrow for two cars to pass. There were large rocks and little sunken troughs and gullies that were now being filled with rain. As the road wound around the mountain peaks it seemed less definite and even more rocky.

We stopped and had dinner at Tonsina, a roadhouse where travelers may stop to eat or sleep. We found these log cabin lodges anywhere from 25 to 50 miles apart on the highway. Dinner was a dollar and well worth it. It was all good home-cooking—homemade bread and pies. After dinner we rode on to Gulkana and decided to stay the night at the roadhouse there, again for the price of a dollar. In our room was an old-fashioned potbellied stove, an old iron bed, and the usual basin and pitcher that served for any washing that had to be

done.

Back on our bikes the next day, we pedaled north. The mosquitoes were many and vicious. We stopped several times to get them out of our eyes and finally donned black glasses as a protection against them. Conversation was impossible because as soon as we would try to say anything the mosquitoes choked us. Try riding a bicycle for 40 miles sometime with your lips tightly closed.

After a day in Richardson visiting some old timers who had come during the gold rush, we arrived in Fairbanks. It is a small town with a business section just one block long. It was a typical downtown, one store after another, but Elsie and I cycled up and down that square several times. The secret of our interest was the paved road that stretched before us for one whole square. It felt like a carpet of velvet to us after the dirt and gravel roads.

After four days in Fairbanks where we toured the university, the high school and a dairy, we were ready to resume our bicycle trip toward the Arctic Circle. It was 162 miles to Circle City over the Steese Highway. In the first day we made Chatanika, 30 miles from Fairbanks, with rain dripping from us, our saddle bags and sleeping bags.

Helen Patton greeted us in the general store and said we would have to stay that night with her because the mining town had no accommodations for travelers. We rested, dried out, and then had dinner. While we were waiting, we heard the news commentator on the radio tell about two girls seeing Alaska by bicycle. Everyone had been very hospitable, pleasant and helpful, but from now on they were looking for us to come and they made us feel more than welcome.

At Circle City, we had expected to take the riverboat, better known in Alaska as the sternwheeler, to Fort Yukon. We rode into the deserted-looking village and went to the general store for information. We were greatly deflated when Fred Powers, the man who managed the store, told us the riverboat would sail in a week. Circle City did not look like a place where we wanted to stay for a week. There were only 75 people, and food prices were very high.

To help us out, Mr. Powers offered to lend us his rowboat and assured us we could row the 85 miles to Fort Yukon in 14 to 16 hours. Without a second thought, Elsie and I said we would do it. We immediately bought a day's supply of food, and Mr. Powers put the rowboat in the river for us. We left our bicy-



Dorothy smiles outdoors after spending the night in the fetid air of the Eklutna skinroom—the unheated garage where animal skins dry before being fashioned into garments.

cles to be shipped back to Fairbanks.

We were all ready to leave at 6 in the morning. All the guests at the roadhouse came down to see us off. We found the river to be very wide, anywhere from seven to 20 miles wide, and full of small islands and sandbars. We were going with the current, so when it became difficult to find the channel we would pull in the oars and drift in whatever direction the stream carried us. Finding our way down the river was like going through a maze.

We rowed steadily all morning in a drizzling rain. The weather had been most disappointing now for several weeks. It took one of us to row while the other one bailed out the water that swished around our feet. At noon we were glad to see a huge woodpile near which was a small cabin. We pulled into shore and spent a few minutes talking to Tom Lewis, the woodchopper. He kept a supply of wood for the riverboat, which used it for fuel.

Once we got caught on a sandbar, and Elsie had to get out and push us off. At other times we were successful in rocking ourselves off. We rowed out of the main channel to avoid a whirlpool that was formed by the water flowing around an island in the middle of the stream.

It began to get late, and we ached in various places. We didn't worry about darkness coming on because the sun was below the horizon for just half an hour at this time of the year. Feeling like real pioneers, we arrived at Fort Yukon at 11 o'clock that evening. Our hands were so blistered we couldn't tie up the boat. The Indians did it for us as we staggered up the bank to find the roadhouse.

A man greeted us with, "So there you are. That was good time." He was Dr. La Rue, the flying dentist, who flies from point to point to fix teeth. He had been in Circle City earlier in the day, and Mr. Powers told him about the girls who were rowing to Fort Yukon. He told us he was going to fly out and look for us if we didn't get in by midnight. All day Elsie and I had thought if we got lost no one would miss us for days.

We were now above the Arctic Circle, sipping coffee to overcome the chills we were experiencing in our damp clothes. I almost choked on one swallow when Dr. La Rue asked us if we planned to attend the local dance. When I was able to speak, I said, "How could anyone, after 17 hours of rowing, think of dancing, and besides, it's now midnight and the dance would be about over." His response was that the dance had just begun.

Elsie was exhausted and went right to bed. I was feeling tired, but accepted Dr. La Rue's invitation to the dance because I knew I would never rest now that I knew there was something more to be seen. With the top layer of mud scraped off my saddle oxfords, and in rain-washed slacks, I danced until 2 in the morning to the music of a violin and a banjo. Then I enjoyed some homemade ice cream with a few fur trappers and decided I was more than ready for bed.

Although Elsie and I were in Fort Yukon but one full day and two nights

we hated to leave our new friends. We almost had tears in our eyes when the boat pulled away from the bank of the river. We waved and waved until we couldn't see them or Fort Yukon. It was a beautiful day, so we sat on the deck and appreciated the comfort of the warm sun and our dry clothes.

We spent an hour in the pilot house. The pilot said he wanted us to see the river from a fairly high point, and he congratulated us on being able to find our way down such a waterway. He also showed us an aerial map of the Yukon. We were glad we hadn't seen it before we started on our rowing expedition or we never would have attempted it.

From Circle City we took the stage back to Fairbanks, where the people we had met earlier in the summer made us feel like successful explorers returning home. We washed our clothes, wore dresses, ate sundaes and went to the movies.

Again we felt as though we were leaving many friends as we boarded the train for Mt. McKinley Park. We spent three rain-soaked days at the park, then traveled to Anchorage and on toward Seward, the coastal town where we would get the boat home. On our final day of riding, Elsie and I sang a peppy tune and pedaled to its rhythm.

Everything was so beautiful. The mountains were high and austere. We seemed so small, but we felt so good that all this greatness was at our command.

By the time we returned home, we had covered 12,000 miles by bike, train, truck and ship in two months and six days. I still say that if you want some fun, many unusual experiences and excitement, do your sightseeing by bicycle. Shall I add by rowboat, too? ■

A version of this article first appeared in the July 1995 issue of Alaska magazine.



Aboard the S.S. Columbia, Dorothy, left, and Elsie were finally clean and dry as they began the trip home.