

TOSRV: How a 1962 Father-and-Son Outing Became an American Bicycling Phenomenon

By Greg Siple, Missoula, Montana, USA

Shoulder to shoulder, Dad and I rode down our driveway in Columbus, Ohio on July 7, 1962, intent on cycling to Portsmouth, Ohio 105 miles to the south. We didn't know a single soul who would want to ride a bicycle 210 miles in two days or be capable of it. In the U.S. the bicycle was considered a toy for children, so adults simply didn't ride bicycles. What we were doing was inconceivable to the average person. Why would anyone consider doing that? When we returned home on July 8, we took each other's photo on the driveway and I recorded the trip in my journal. [Figure 1]. Our ride went unnoticed except for Mom and my two younger brothers, Bruce and Doug, who were just happy that we returned safely.

Yet this quiet beginning became a spark. As the years rolled by, more cyclists emerged to take on the TOSRV challenge. These riders were not athletes, but every day people—men



and women, young and old. What had been unbelievable became a sought-after experience. The Tour of the Scioto River Valley [TOSRV] grew steadily: from two in 1962 to four in 1963, six riders in 1964, 45 in 1966, 400 in 1968, 1,000 in 1970, 2,200 in 1972, 3,000 in 1975, 3,500 in 1980, and 4,600 in 1986. In the 1990s the ride drew 6,000 cyclists from 30 different states [Figures 3 & 4] [See TOSRV by the Numbers, Page 101]. TOSRV received a lot of attention from newspapers, including a story with two photos in the *New York Times*. The May, 1973 issue of *National Geographic* published a full-page photo of TOSRV. *Sports Illustrated* ran a photo. Riders carried the TOSRV concept home and created their own versions of mass rides. And the ride endures. TOSRV celebrated its 61st run in 2022.

These years of rapid growth preceded the era of computers and the internet. People learned about TOSRV through newspapers, bicycle magazines, and bike club newsletters from an emerg-



Figure 2. Charles Siple. circa 1938, after having discovered serious cycling.

ing national bicycle community— part of the 1970s bike boom in the U.S. TOSRV also benefited from the revival of the League of American Wheelman and its *National L.A.W. Bulletin*, as well as *American Cycling* magazine and its successor *Bicycling!* magazine (late in 1968). Also, pivotal publicity came from National American Youth Hostels' council newsletters across the U.S., in particular *The Buckeye Hosteler* in Columbus, Ohio.

But TOSRV was not just a revelation to Americans. J. B. Wadley, a seasoned British cycling journalist, covered the Tour de France 21 times (starting in the 1930s) during his career, and visited North America in 1972. During his three week visit he rode a variety of events including TOSRV. In his article in the July 15, 1972 issue of *Cycling*, a British magazine, he had this to say:

So there I was at the start of this TOSRV I had heard so much about, and I was looking for Mike Barry, who had come down from Canada to take part again. 'You should try this one,' he told me on his Christmas trip home [to England] last year. 'There's nothing like it anywhere else in the world.' I couldn't find Mike, which wasn't surprising since the entry for TOSRV72 was 2,250.

During the last few years I've been thinking about how our father-and-

☞ My thanks to Paul Rubenson who presented my paper at the Indianapolis conference when I was unable to attend and to June J. Siple who provided a thorough and essential editing of the paper. -GS



Figures 1. Greg and Charles Siple, July 8, 1962, in the driveway of their Columbus, Ohio, home, where they took each others picture at the end of the first TOSRV.

son outing evolved into an American bicycle institution. Looking back over the past six decades I can see now that it had been a mix of good timing, the right people stepping up at the right time, and serendipity. The stars aligned. Had any one of half a dozen elements been missing, TOSRV might never have come to be. And as it happened, TOSRV itself turned out to be simultaneously the result of, and a contributor to the bike boom.

DAD'S DISCOVERY OF THE BICYCLE

My father Charles Siple, the third of five children, was born into a middle class Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, family in 1918. In the 1930s the family acquired their first bicycle.

These were depression years and my parents couldn't spend freely on unneeded items. In my part of town most first bikes were purchased secondhand. My used bike was not only my first, but also the first in our family. My older brother Bill never had a bike. And a girl's bike was extremely rare. Girls just didn't ride. That first bike belonged to a boy about a year older than me. It was summertime when my parents paid \$5.00 for it.

I had that bike about a year before it was stolen off the back porch. My second bike was an Elgin, a name used by Sears. I bought it new and paid for it myself. It cost nineteen dollars and some pennies. A hell of a lot of money. The money came from my paper route.



Figure 3. March 29, 1964. With only six riders, the fourth annual TOSRV was run over Easter weekend. It is the only TOSRV to include a snow storm. There was a collision with a dog, two blow outs, and a high temperature of 42 degrees on Sunday. Only two of the six riders managed to go the distance. (Photo by Charles Siple)

In September of 1934, when I was sixteen, I heard about an upcoming 6-day bike race and decided to see it. I was thrilled to see the racing, and marveled at the bike handling as the riders put on a show. I went back the next day and twice more after. I saw part of every subsequent 6-day held in Pittsburgh in the 1930s.

By chance he met Chic Milstine, member of the Pittsburgh Wheelman, a small group of local racing cyclists. Dad joined and graduated from being a spectator to a real cyclist. [Figure 2] On

a new bike he began to put in serious miles, racing and touring with the group. He also ventured out of Pittsburgh, riding to Cleveland on one occasion and to Washington D.C. on another.

But these happy times on the bike came to an abrupt end on December 8, 1941, when Dad enlisted in the US Navy. He served until the end of the war in 1945 aboard the heavy cruiser USS Augusta as a signalman.

I was born just after the war and Dad had no time for cycling as he began family life. He moved us from Pittsburgh to Columbus, Ohio, when he

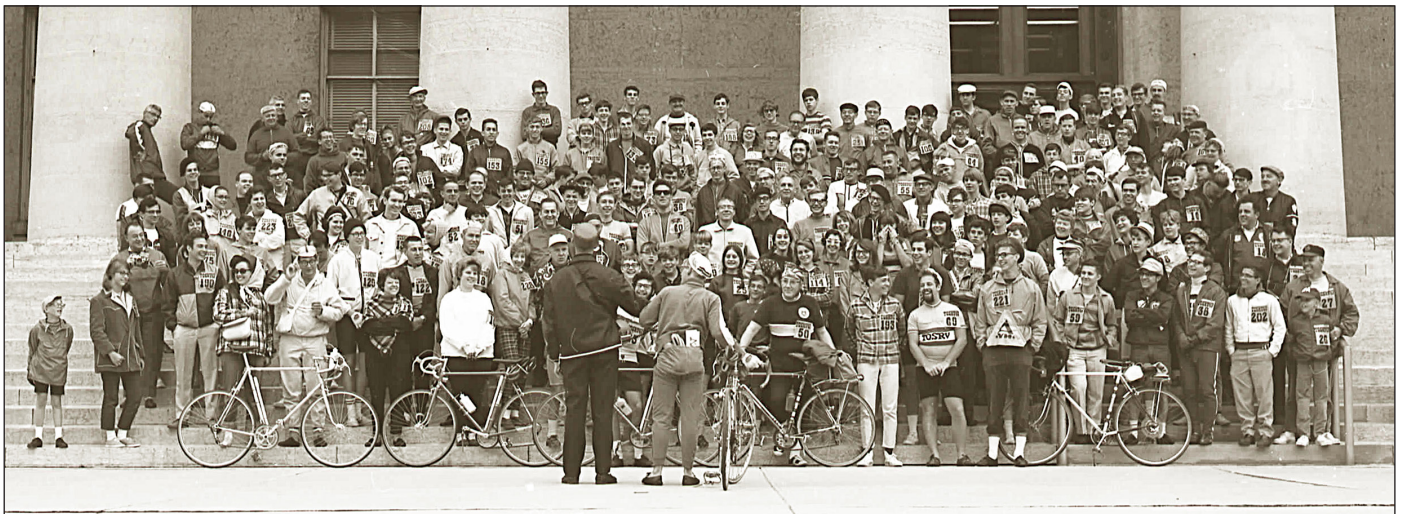
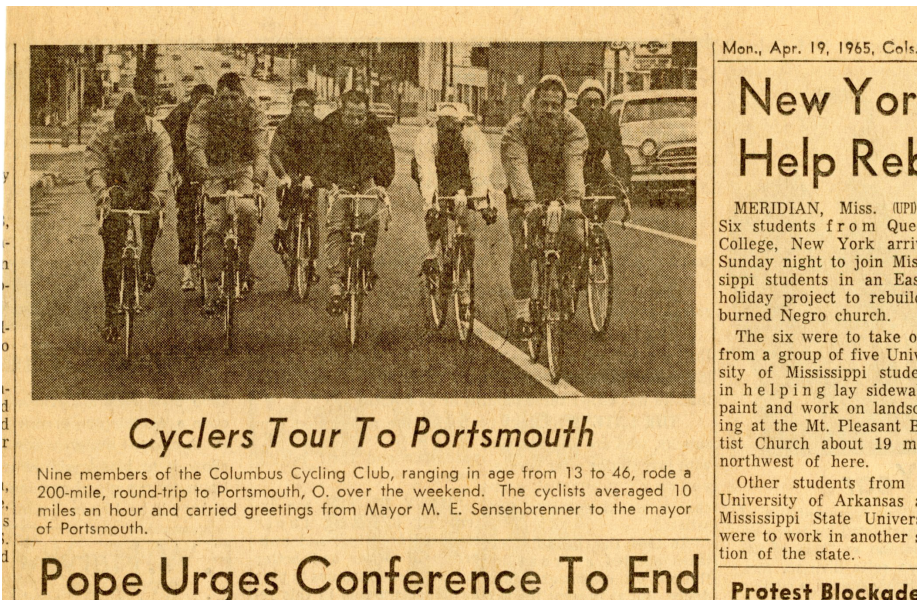


Figure 4. May 13, 1967. TOSRV riders receive some last minute instructions before hitting the road to Portsmouth, 105 miles to the south. Two hundred riders signed up for what was the sixth year for the event. (Photo by Warren Walker)



This photo that appeared in April 19, 1965, edition of the Columbus Citizen-Journal was typical of the newspaper coverage of TOSRV.

found work as a draftsman at the North American Aviation plant. His bike was put aside and his cycling scrapbooks languished on the shelf.

When I entered my early teens I began to notice his scrapbooks and enjoyed hearing his stories about cycling. To me it was all exotic and mysterious. I developed no interest in cars, the passion of most of my peers. My interest in cycling rekindled his own. His bike came out of the basement. He bought a Sears Austrian-made 8-speed bike with drop bars for me, and began subscribing to foreign bicycle magazines. Finally, he suggested that we tackle the 200-mile weekend ride to Portsmouth.

THE BABY BOOM

In the early 1960s the first of the American baby boom generation entered their teen years—a generation ready to rebel against convention. The boomers developed interests in the environment, health, and outdoor recreation. They were also on the lookout for novel experiences. Born into the affluence of Postwar America, they enjoyed more options than their depression-era parents.

THE BICYCLE BOOM

During the mid-1960s the American bicycle market experienced a big change with the introduction of lightweight, multi-speed bicycles with drop bars. The “10-speed,” far more efficient and lighter than the traditional

single-speed American balloon-tire bicycle, along with the previously introduced British 3-speed, opened new possibilities. The Schwinn Varsity and Continental are examples of these new types of bicycles, along with imported European lightweights.

The boomers who bought these bikes began to explore their potential. The idea of bicycling back-to-back hundred-mile days became an attractive proposition. And along came TOSRV, a big carrot of a bike ride.

THE ROUTE

By pure chance, the route my father picked for our Portsmouth ride [Figure 5] could eventually accommodate hundreds, then thousands of cyclists as if designed for a mass-participation bicycling weekend in mind. Why did this route work so well?

1. **DISTANCE:** Riding the 105 miles from Columbus to Portsmouth proved that you were an accomplished cyclist. Since cycling's beginnings, a 100-mile ride in a day, or ‘century,’ has been an ultimate goal. Many people can ride a century if prepared and determined. Had the distance between Columbus and Portsmouth been 72 miles, or 88 miles, it wouldn't have been such a recognizable achievement. Likewise, if the Columbus to Portsmouth distance had been 124 miles or 137 miles, it would have put the challenge beyond the average person's ability and desire.

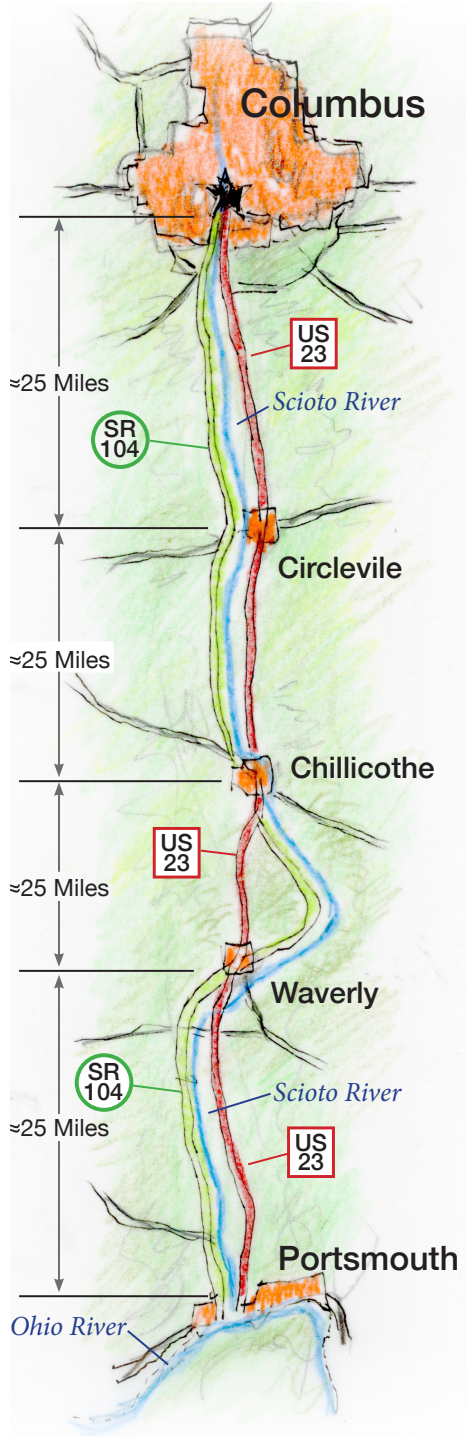


Figure 5. By chance, the route that Dad picked for us was ideal for accommodating the big groups of cyclists that would ride it in the future: 1. A one-way distance of just over 100-miles. 2. Parallel to a river for a generally flat terrain. 3. A four-lane federal highway to carry all the heavy traffic between Columbus and Portsmouth and a two-lane state highway for the cyclists. 4. Small towns spaced at 25-mile intervals for rest/food stops. 5. A large city for the start/finish with quick access to the countryside. 6. An overnight town large enough to accommodate thousands of riders in motels and gymnasium floors.



Figure 6. 1970. The Ohio Statehouse in the center of Columbus made for a great start/finish point for TOSRV, with plenty of room for the riders and wellwishers to gather. The Statehouse underground parking garage was available for those who drove to the start.



After the group photo was taken on the Statehouse steps, the 700 riders of the 1969 TOSRV began their ride to Portsmouth.

2. PROFILE: Because the route mostly followed the Scioto River between Columbus and Portsmouth it was primarily flat. With Columbus at 781 feet above sea level and Portsmouth at 535, the 246-foot elevation change was not enough to discourage riders from taking on the 105-mile challenge. Rolling hills on portions of the route spiced up the ride.

3. LOW TRAFFIC: Two highways link Columbus with Portsmouth, both closely paralleling the Scioto River. Federal Route 23 is a four-lane highway that carries most of the through traffic between cities. State Route 104, the TOSRV route, is a two-lane highway that carries a much lower volume of traffic, making it suitable for cycling.

4. REST STOPS: Spaced about 25 miles apart along the route are the small towns of Circleville, Chillicothe and Waverly. A ten-hour ride from Columbus to Portsmouth meant that every two to three hours riders could pause, refresh and eat.

5. LACK OF URBAN GROWTH: As Columbus grew, numerous suburbs began spreading across farm land surrounding the city. But remarkably, this growth was seen primarily on the east, west and north sides of Columbus and not in the south. TOSRV riders stream-

ing out of the center of Columbus southward quickly found themselves in a rural countryside.

6. HOST CITY: Portsmouth, the Saturday overnight town, was large enough to accommodate thousands of cyclists. Every motel room, school gymnasium, and other public spaces were flooded with bicyclists, including many who had simple sleeping-bag-on-the-floor arrangements. In addition, the city of Portsmouth welcomed TOSRV riders warmly.

THE CAPITOL BUILDING

In the center of Columbus and filling an entire block, sits the grand Greek Revival style Ohio Statehouse. [Figure 6] As the perfect starting and finishing point for TOSRV, and easy for out-of-town riders to find, it offered a large underground parking garage—empty on weekends. The grounds were large enough to accommodate well-wishers and throngs of cyclists as they loaded gear onto baggage trucks. Broad steps at the front entrance became the perfect venue for shooting group photos before riders headed out.



Figure 7 Women riders on the 1970 TOSRV.

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY RIDE

In the 1960s, high school athletics and sports focused on competitive boy's team sports - football and basketball. These sports favored big guys and tall guys. Little attention came to girls' athletics until June of 1972, when Title IX Legislation passed in Congress to ban discrimination in physical education on the basis of sex. The Boston Marathon, a venerable running event that began in 1897, did not allow women runners until after the first woman broke that barrier in 1966.

A most welcome TOSRV addition, TOSRV's first female riders signed up in 1966 without restrictions or special accommodations of any kind. Ten of the 45 riders were women— all but one under 20 years old. All ten completed TOSRV, except for one rider who missed about 25 miles after a collision with a cow and a visit to a local hospital. [Figure 7] But a few of the male riders did drop out that year.

Since then, female riders have made up a quarter to a third of all riders and could be found in the thick of things— mixing it up in the big packs. On TOSRV, a 200-pound high school football star might be dropped by a 120-pound young woman from a chess club.

IT'S NOT WIN OR LOSE

High school athletics in the 1960s, besides being male-oriented and competitive, were all about winning or losing. TOSRV offered a new way to look at sports. It didn't matter who arrived first in Portsmouth. Instead, as a test against terrain and weather— just to finish was to win. Your winning didn't mean that someone else lost. TOSRV

AMERICA'S BICYCLE TOURING CLASSIC

TOSRV2007

TOSRV2007

TOSRV2007



THE TOUR OF THE SCIOTO RIVER VALLEY

Figure 10. 2007 TOSRV poster/t-shirt design.



In 1968, TOSRV began to distribute embroidered patches to the riders. This custom was picked up by many TOSRV spin-offs.

riders cooperate, taking turns at the front of packs, helping each other with repairs along the way, perhaps sharing water or an energy bar with a complete stranger who is faltering.

WEATHER

The dates for TOSRV, traditionally on Mother's Day weekend in early May, meant that the weather was unpredictable. Rain was almost a given. [Figure 9] Cold Ohio rains might dog riders for 50 mile stretches or more. Another factor: wind. Some riders would give up, find shelter and call home for a rescue. But most 'toughed it out', pushing ahead while a rooster tail of

water sprayed up from the rear wheel of the rider in front of them. And yet more and more riders kept coming back every year.

Instead of a deterrent, the weather became part of the challenge. It wasn't just riding the 200 miles—it was also punching through rain, cold and wind. But a chance of perfect weather could also happen and TOSRV riders anxiously watched the weather forecasts the week beforehand.

ART SCHOOL

In 1963, the second year of TOSRV, I enrolled at the Columbus College of Art and Design for a four-year art education



Figures 9. TOSRV, 1994. The local children give a high five boost to the cyclists while riders at the Chillicothe lunch stop try to dry their gloves over a barbecue pit at the Chillicothe food stop. (Photos by Jeff Hiles)



Figure 10. TOSRV Director Charlie Pace worked all year on TOSRV. As soon as one tour ended, he started work on the next. He juggled TOSRV tasks while continuing to work full-time at Huntington National Bank — TOSRV’s biggest sponsor.

majoring in advertising design. From 1965 to 2011, I turned out an endless stream of TOSRV materials— posters, entry forms, embroidered patches, instruction sheets, meal tickets, T-shirts, jerseys, etc. [Figure 10] TOSRV had its own one-man advertising agency.

CHARLIE PACE

All these factors made for fertile



Figure 11. A food stop crew pauses for a photo. (Photo by Greg Siple)

ground for TOSRV to grow, but it would have eventually come to nothing—if not for one man: Charlie Pace. [Figure 10] Columbus Council of the American Youth Hostels (CAYH), an outdoor club, became TOSRV’s official organizer in 1966. Charlie, an investment banker, and active member of CAYH, was primarily a canoeist and kayaking leader. But he gave TOSRV a try in 1965. He started with the group, but only made it a few blocks before a spill and some dislocated fingers ended his ride. In 1966 when CAYH took over the organizing of TOSRV, he gave it another try and rode the full distance. Charlie could see the potential for growth and improvement and volunteered as director for the 1967 tour.

With Charlie at the helm the tour grew exponentially. Cyclists from all over the U.S. flocked to Columbus in May for this cycling annual rite of spring. It worked on a large scale because of Charlie’s organizational skill and innovations. He oversaw the printing and mailing of thousands of entry forms, developed systems to feed riders at food stops [See 12 Gallons of May-

onnaise, Page 101], found overnight accommodations in Portsmouth, rented the trucks to deliver sleeping bags to overnight locations, arranged for Red Cross first-aid stations, an emergency radio network, and coordinated with the Ohio Highway Patrol and other public officials.

His easy-going nature and genuine warmth drew hundreds of volunteers [Figure 11] to stuff envelopes, hand out apples and sandwiches at food stops, drive rental baggage trucks, patrol the route in radio cars, repair bikes, and check in returning riders. Volunteers returned year after year to work a particular food stop or help prepare registration packets.

Charlie worked year-round on TOSRV: as soon as one tour ended, he started work on the next. Never paid for TOSRV work, Charlie’s status as a volunteer remained unchanged. He juggled TOSRV tasks while continuing to work full-time at Huntington National Bank — TOSRV’s biggest sponsor. He subsequently directed the Tour for 44 years, retiring in 2012 after the 50th edition of the ride.

MYSTIQUE AND MAGNETISM

All elements contributing to the creation of an annual re-creation of TOSRV morphed into a kind of magic. Tony Pranses, a life-long cyclist who began riding in the 1930s, described the allure of TOSRV for the introduction of *The Mighty TOSRV* book in 1986 when 'The Tour' was still growing:

At exactly what point a habit becomes a tradition is difficult to establish; and what point a tradition has outlived its justification for existence and should be terminated is equally uncertain. Without being precise, yet without much fear of contradiction, I think it can be safely stated that TOSRV is a

habit to many, a tradition to an even larger number, but has not yet reached the threshold of its declining years. Why the event enjoys its popularity is elusive. It is easier to pinpoint what TOSRV is not than what it is. For example—the weather usually ranges from unpleasant to outrageous. It is too early in the season for such a long ride. The scenery is largely ho-hum. The food is barely adequate and shows no imagination. Yet, year after year, a hard core of several hundred devotees come back, while thousands of newcomers apply and many of these must be denied because the quota fills so early. Apparently there is a mystique about this thing. How often have we seen a woman of enormous beauty, personality and charm attracted to a man of gruff appearance and marginal manners? It can only be concluded that she sees a quality in him—a mystique—which others do not see. And it is so with TOSRV. Those of us who ride it, year after year, feel its mystique and magnetism without being able to define it. The newcomers pound on the entry door because they want in on the action although they know not what the action is going to be. It is a creature thriving on its own momentum.

A HUNDRED YEARS OF TOSRV?

TOSRV keeps on going, but rider numbers are no longer so impressive [423 signed up to ride in 2021]. In 1990s the participant numbers began to decline in part because TOSRV became a victim of its own success. As cycling events throughout the U.S. increased in number, many inspired by the TOSRV model, riders found plenty of cycling events closer to home. Why travel Chicago to Columbus for a weekend ride when a TOSRV-like event might be close by? The average age of participants began to rise. While a 200-mile ride in the rain plus a night on a gym floor might be high adventure for a seventeen-year-old, for a 50-year-old not so much.

Meanwhile, an increase in the average age of bike club memberships nationwide has been noted, including our local Missoula Bicycle Club as well as the Adventure Cycling Association.

TOSRV has survived COVID. In 2020 TOSRV was almost cancelled, but two riders stepped up and mirrored the first TOSRV, riding the route unsupported. [Figure 12] They kept TOSRV alive, preserving it as the oldest annual cycling event in the U.S.

Although traditionally held in May since 1966, TOSRV has been rescheduled in September since 2021. This allows riders a full cycling season to put in the miles necessary to get in shape. Also, the Ohio Statehouse is no longer the start/finish point. Increased urban development and traffic volumes south of Columbus convinced organizers in 2016 to move the start/finish venue to Canal Winchester, a small town southeast of Columbus. This change required modification of the route, but TOSRV is still a one-hundred-mile ride to Portsmouth.

Although TOSRV may not attract the number of riders it once did, it will likely persevere. A core of loyal riders who have ridden 'Mother TOSRV' 20, 30 and even 40 times, keep coming back. Most notably, Scott Brewer who has ridden an amazing 52 consecutive TOSRVs—nearly 11,000 miles.

TOSRV may achieve its own century run if it keeps going through 2061. If it does, I hope that *Cycle History 70* will report it! ●

TOSRV Offspring

From *The Mighty TOSRV*, 1986.

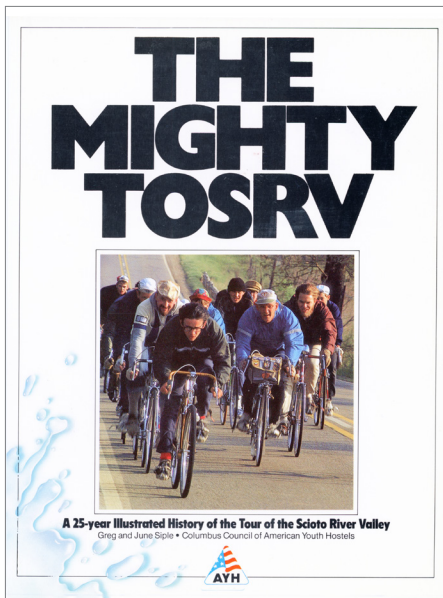
TOSRV has served as a springboard for like events, which are organized by cyclists who have attended TOSRV and decide to take the idea home. In this regard, TOSRV has become a model for events, so we often call it "Mother TOSRV" to differentiate it from the progeny. First came TOSRV West (Tour of the Swan River Valley out of Missoula, Montana), and then TOSRV East (Tour of Scenic Rural Vermont). Soon TOSRV Texas came along (the acronym doesn't stand for anything - it's just a TOSRV), and TOSRV North (Tour of the Schomberg River Valley, in Canada). More recent additions to the family are TOSRV California (Tour of the Sacramento River Valley), TOSRV Northwest (Tour of Scenic River Valleys, including the Snowhomish, Stillaguamish, Sauk, and Skagit rivers) and, finally, TOSRV South (Tour of Rural Springtime Vistas).

Each new TOSRV adds its own twist to the experience. TOSRV West adds miles, TOSRV California subtracts miles. TOSRV Northwest is a luxury tour, TOSRV Texas is fast-paced. Most TOSRVs limit the number of participants, but one spin-off event, the Five-Borough Bike Tour in New York City, had 20,000 participants in 1984. Many TOSRV clones do not use the TOSRV acronym, and each new TOSRV-like event is probably emulated in its own, area, so the process goes on and on ...

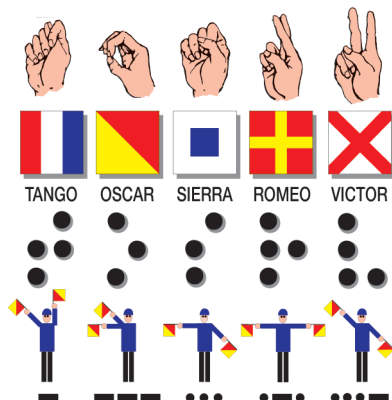
-June J. Siple



Figure 12. On September 12-13, 2020, Joe Kirk and Mark Gibson. Were the sole riders on the 59th TOSRV that had almost been cancelled due to COVID. This was the seventh TOSRV for Mark and the forty-first for Mark who rode TOSRV in 1969 at age 14.



In 1986, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of TOSRV, Columbus AYH published *The Mighty TOSRV-A 25-year Illustrated History of the Scioto River Valley*. [ISBN 0-9616175-0-0] The 128-page book features 190 photos and illustrations, and scores of first person accounts from TOSRV riders.



The 1996, 5,085-Rider, TOSRV by the Numbers

Riders came from 42 different states including:

- 3,789 from Ohio
- 309 from Michigan
- 250 from Pennsylvania
- 162 from Indiana
- 77 from Kentucky
- 68 from Illinois
- 51 from West Virginia
- 31 from Virginia
- 27 from Canada

- 77.5% of the riders were male.
- 22.5 % of the riders were female.

- 1,227 were riding their first TOSRV.
- 32 had ridden 25 or more.
- 198 had ridden 20 or more.
- 810 had ridden 10 or more.

- 674 were 50-59 years old.
- 184 were 60-69 years old.
- 38 were over 70 years old or older.

- The oldest male finisher was 77-year-old Jim Konski of Syracuse, New York, riding his 28th TOSRV.

- The oldest female finisher was 69-year-old Ruth Doerr of Millford, Michigan, riding her 21st TOSRV.

12 Gallons of Mayonnaise and Other Food

Keeping all the cyclists fed over TOSRV weekend is one of the most important and difficult jobs that the organizers face. Here is a list of the food purchased and distributed by the volunteer support staff at the three food stops on Saturday and Sunday in 1985 for 4,300 cyclists.

- 6,000 apples
- 5,000 oranges
- 2,670 pounds of bananas
- 2,908 dozen assorted cookies
- 1,000 danish rolls
- 400 loaves of white bread
- 800 loaves of whole wheat bread
- 400 pounds of bologna
- 500 pounds of ham
- 540 pounds of peanut butter
- 108 pounds of honey
- 8,800 boxes of raisins
- 8,800 granola bars
- 4,400 Bit-O-Honey bars
- 4,400 boxes of M&Ms
- 12 gallons of mayonnaise
- 6 gallons of ketchup
- 40 gallons of dill pickle chips
- 34 jars of strawberry jam,
- 24 jars of grape jelly
- 39 cases of hot chocolate mix (yield: 936 gallons)
- 143 cases of assorted drink mix (yield: 3432 gallons)
- 4,000 chicken dinners were also served in Portsmouth on Saturday evening.



TOSRV 1993. Riders relax at the Chillicothe food stop, the halfway point between Columbus and Portsmouth. (Photo by Greg Siple)