A Bike Adventure by Rebecca Regeth

In the spring of 2017 I went for a walk on the Montour trail. I walk this trail frequently and often glance at this sign. This time I spent a few minutes really looking at this sign. 336 miles to Washington DC sounds like an amazing journey. Fortunately, when I talked to my family about my dream of riding to DC, they were on board and everyone was excited.

I started to make plans. A lot of plans. I stopped by the West Newton Trail station for advice and maps. They were very helpful. I posted my idea on Facebook and a couple of friends who had made the journey gave me advice. Then I mentioned it at my son’s Boy Scout meeting. A couple of the families were also thinking about making a trip, so it was decided. We would make it a Boy Scout trip, starting in late July.

One family offered to drive the sag wagon with our gear, shop for food, and even do the cooking and clean up. It was an amazing offer and we were so happy to have their help. We planned to bike about 50 miles a day and to stay at campgrounds along the way. There would be six boys and three adults riding bikes and two adults driving the car. It would take a week and my family (husband, son and me) would ride the Amtrak home (a bike ride AND a train adventure!) The others would go home by car.

Day 1: Finally, the day arrived and my family rode our bikes from our house to the Montour trail near McMurray, PA. The ride was only about two miles on streets to get to the trail in McMurray. We then rode the Montour trail to the town of Library, PA (just a few more miles) where we could ride the subway (called the “T”) to Pittsburgh. You can ride the Montour trail to the Great Allegheny Passage Trail but we wanted to ride the GAP from end to end.
We don’t usually ride the T so we bumbled around for a bit, trying to figure out how to buy tickets. When the train arrived, we bumbled around a bit more, trying to figure out how to put our bikes on the train. It wasn’t hard, but we made it look that way.

We met up with the rest of the group at the fountain at Point State Park. This is the official start of the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) trail.

The first day we rode about 40 miles to Cedar Creek Park near Belle Vernon, PA. The trail starts out on city streets in Pittsburgh and passes many historic steel mill sites. It is paved most of the way and then it changes to crushed limestone. We had lunch at Costco in Homestead (about 10 miles from the start) and arrived at Cedar Creek Park for dinner. Bike riders may camp there for free. There are pit toilets and water at the camp sites and flush toilets with electric outlets a short walk or ride away. Cedar Creek Park is located along the Youghiogheny river.
Day 2 on the Great Allegheny passage: It rained hard all night and the river flooded. Our campsite did not flood, but the grass became a sloppy mess. The rain stopped by the morning and we packed up and hit the trail.
As we were riding, my son, Ethan, and I heard a loud noise. We heard creaking and the sound of wood splitting. It was very loud and we knew it was a large tree that was about to fall. We panicked and peddled fast as it fell behind us. It didn't hit the trail but fell to the side. It was a close call. The rain had loosened the roots and we found the trail was blocked by quite a few trees along the way. There are many volunteers that take care of the GAP trail. I noticed they were out cutting trees and grading the trail soon after the storm. Many thanks to all the volunteers. They were amazing.

We had a fawn come up to us a little later in the day. It was adorable. It followed us for a little way and then jumped into the woods. We rode about 50 miles and stopped for the night in Confluence. We stayed at the Outflow Campground. We had sites with electricity and water and there was a shower house nearby. The shower was very welcome as we were very muddy and wet from all the rain the day before.
Day 3 on the Great Allegheny Passage. We rode from Confluence, PA to Cumberland, MD this day. The stretch from Confluence to Deal PA is slightly uphill. The whole trail is only a 1.5% grade, so it is very flat but we did notice that this section required more peddling. The scenery was fantastic. The area is very rural and mountainous. We passed a few small towns along the way. The Boy Scouts continued to outpace me and Ethan. It bothered me a little at first and then I decided that I was doing very well for a middle-aged woman. Ethan was slow, too, so we happily rode along together. It gave us a lot of time to bond and we enjoyed each other's company.

This section of the trail was very interesting in that we crossed many bridges and went through a couple of tunnels. At Deal, PA we reached the Eastern Continental Divide. This is the highest point on the trail. Here we finally caught up with the boy scouts. They were waiting for us. They found a vole in tunnel and were having some fun jumping aside it as it scampered about.

From here were enjoyed a slight downhill for a couple of miles and then we reached the Mason-Dixon line.

After that it was a fabulous downhill all the way into Cumberland Maryland. It was about 22 miles of only slight peddling. After climbing all the way from Pittsburgh, the last 22 miles were joyous.
Day 4, Mile zero on the GAP and first day on the C & O Towpath. Last night we stayed at the Cumberland YMCA. You can pitch a tent in the shelter across the street and they give you complete access to the YMCA. For Boy Scouts, the cost is only $7. They boys pitched tents and we enjoyed a nice pizza dinner. The sag wagon parents provided the food for us each day. They were so helpful and always made sure we had plenty of food and Gatorade. They boys enjoyed the use of the pool. There was another scout troop staying there that night. They were from Wisconsin. All the boys were age 16 or older. The leaders said it was the biggest trip they had every taken. I found that at almost every place we stopped, we met up with boy scouts.
This day we went 44 miles. This day was supposed to include the somewhat creepy Paw Paw tunnel. However, the tunnel was closed for repair so we had to take a hiking trail around the tunnel. I should say "over" the tunnel. It was extremely steep on both sides. When each person reached the top, the boys would cheer. It did feel like a huge accomplishment. The way down was just as steep. I walked my bike a lot of the way because I am a chicken. The boys rode down and one cut up his hand as he went over the handlebars. He was able to continue on the ride with the help of lots of band aids. We found that C & O in this section was very muddy. It was difficult to avoid the puddles so most of us just rode right through the middle of them. If you went to the side, you might tip, so the middle was easier. Again, the boys were fast and Ethan and I were slow. He really slowed down in this section.

About 5 miles from the campground he popped a tire. We had a spare and a pump, but no levers to remove it. Eventually other riders came by and helped. Ethan was a pro at changing the tire and we were on our way. We camped at the Little Orleans campground. It was up a huge hill and a bit farther from the trail than we had planned.
Day 5, Second day on the C & O Towpath. Today when Ethan got on his bike he noticed that his newly replaced tire tube was flat. We had used a tube with about 6 patches so he replaced it with a new tube. After about 5 feet of riding he popped it too. At this point he said, "I'm done!" He asked the car drivers to let him ride in the car that day. My day was very good. I started out earlier than the boys so I could get a head start. Today's ride continued on the muddy towpath for about 5 miles until we transferred over to a PAVED path alongside this section of the towpath. It was called the Western Maryland Rail Trail. It was 20 miles of blissful pavement. There were also a number of geocaches along the path. No geocaches can be placed along the C & O because it is part of a National Park. The paved trail is not, so it has a lot of geocaches on it. I did take a couple of minutes to find a geocache which made me very happy.

We all met up at the C & O bike shop where Ethan got new tires and others got seat posts, misc. repairs, shirts, snacks, etc. I showed them a neat geocache at the bike shop and they seemed to enjoy how it was hidden in a clever way. After leaving the paved trail we were back to the mud of the towpath. This section did seem less muddy and we enjoyed peddling along the tunnel of trees. Along the way we saw many turtles and herons. Occasionally we would pass a lock and lock house and I would imagine how this road used to be years ago. The C & O as constructed around the 1820s and used until 1924. The day ended with us finding a hiker/biker campground along the trail. We did over 60 miles that day.

Day 6 on the C & O Towpath. We rode about 60 miles the day before. This day was only 25 miles to reach a real campground. It started to rain today while we were on the trail. The rain got harder and harder until we were completely soaked.

Today included a ride to Harper's Ferry. It is the cutest little town with a lot of interesting history. To get to the town you must carry your bike up a spiral staircase and then walk it on a bridge over the river. It wasn't too bad. It was raining in Harper's Ferry so we decided to treat ourselves to lunch at a restaurant. I
had a delicious crab cake. It was so good. We tried to talk the boys into riding about a mile up hill to visit the headquarters of the Appalachian trail. They didn't want to go. We tried and tried, but they said no. Boy scout adventures are supposed to be "boy-led" so we eventually gave up and let them lead. The C & O and the Appalachian Trail actually share about 2 miles of path here. Later, at the campground, we managed it rent a pavilion for the night which meant that we got to stay under a shelter. They boys slept on the picnic tables. My husband and I put up the tent in the shelter, mostly so I could change clothes and sleep in privacy. The boys enjoyed playing games and we all had a nice time relaxing on a low mileage day. It rained hard all night long. I woke up in the middle of the night and found that all the grass had flooded around the shelter. I spent the rest of the night worrying about the condition of the trail the next day. I knew we had 53 miles to go to get to DC and imagined it would be as bad as the first day on the C & O with mud puddles and pot holes.
Day 7 on the C & O Towpath. Last day of our bike ride. We had 53 miles to go to get to Washington DC today. All that worry I had about the condition of the trail was for nothing. It was in great shape with only a few mud puddles. It was nothing like the first few miles of the C & O out of Cumberland. At first my husband, Daniel, stayed up front with the Boy Scouts. Eventually he held back and rode with me and Ethan at a slower rate. He decided he wanted to enjoy reading the informational signs and seeing the sights instead of peddling so fast. We rode most of the way together. We stopped to see a Ferry which was pretty interesting. Later, we stopped at a Lock house that was open as a display of waterways, nature, and the history of the canal. We spent a lot of time looking around and talking to the man in charge. He was fun to talk to and it was nice to learn about the history of the towpath. We saw many, many blue herons. They would stand on logs, very still, waiting for fish. There were also many turtles on the logs. We also stopped at the Great Falls visitor center. As we got closer and closer to DC the number of people on the trail increased. It was raining, though, or it would have been even more busy. When we arrived at the city we got out our map to find mile marker zero. It is well hidden among the modern buildings and roads. We did find it and took a few pictures. We asked to use the hose at the nearby boat house to wash off our bikes. They were filthy with a week's worth of mud. Finally, we were off to our hotel. It was only about 1/4 mile away. The hotel was great (Marriott, Residence Inn) and allowed our bikes to go into our rooms. We had a kitchen and bedroom and plenty of room for all our bikes and stuff. After a wonderful dinner, we fell asleep around 8pm.

Day 8 of our bike adventure. Today we enjoyed a delicious breakfast at our hotel and discussed our plans for the day. I wanted to find virtual geocaches and Ethan wanted to go to the Spy Museum. Daniel took him and I enjoyed biking around the city. The geocaches took me to many of the monuments so I really got a great tour of the mall. The city was crowded with tourists, though, so I spent a lot of time trying to stay upright on my bike while navigating around baby
strollers and tourists. We had a late check out of our room and then made our way to Union station to get on the Amtrak. The Capital Limited 29 now has a room for 8 bikes per day. Bikes are hooked on the wall in their own compartment. We had seats on the last car and found that we were sitting next to others who had just biked the trail. There were 3 people in their 20's and 2 guys in their 30's. We crossed paths with the people in their 20's many times during our ride but the others were a day behind us so we never met them on the trail.

The train route followed along the route we had taken by bike with just a couple of exceptions. Sometimes we could see the bike trail next to us and sometimes we were on the other side of the river from the trail. I recommend the train ride. It was amazing to see just how far we had travelled. It took 6 hours to get back to Connellsville (where there is free parking.) Connellsville is about 50 miles from Pittsburgh. We arrived back in Connellsville PA at 10pm. We hurried to get our bikes off the train. After putting them on the car, we were on our way home. An hour later we arrived and were greeted by our wonderful cats. They were so happy to see us. They did have a great babysitter but they love us more. It is great to be home. I'd do the ride over again any time. It was great experience. We did the trip in 7 days. Personally, I'd add one or two more days to keep the daily mileage low and be able to make more stops along the way. I would also stay in a couple of hotels and make time to do laundry. We spent most of the week being wet and it would have been nice to have dry clothes. Otherwise, it was GREAT and I look forward to going this trail or another one someday.