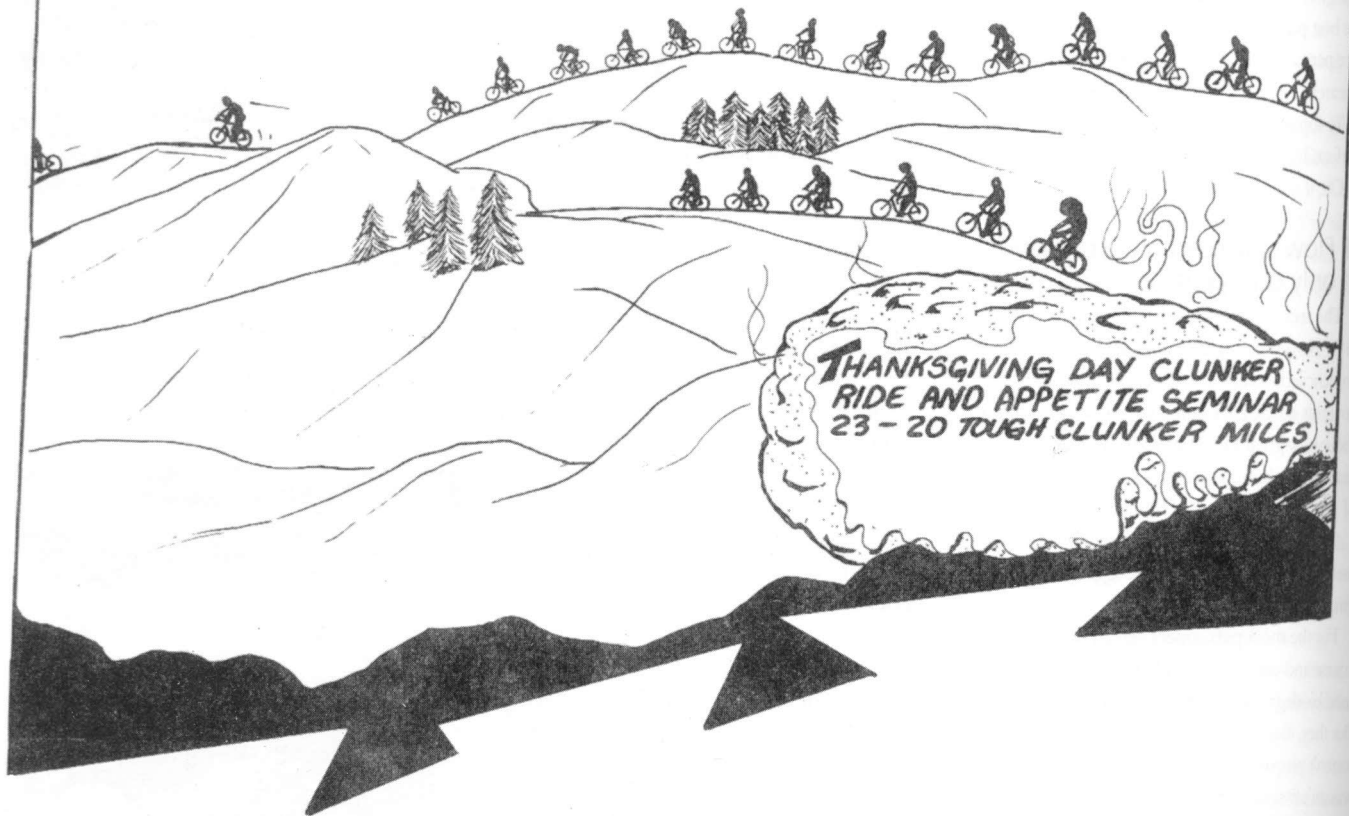


The Appetite Seminar

Well-Oiled Anarchy By Charlie Kelly



The Thanksgiving Day Appetite Seminar went leaderless sometime in the early eighties; in retrospect, a great day for mountain biking in Fairfax, California. It had grown from a half-dozen friends taking a tough ride on Thanksgiving Day in 1975 to an organized promotion attracting upward of fifty riders. From 1978 on, I had been actively pushing it with posters in the bike shops and calls to the list of competitors from my main promotion, the Repack downhill races. The riders traveled as a group and I led it.

Now, many in the crowd of balloon tire anarchists swirling around the center of the one-intersection town, banking off retaining walls, riding wheelies down the center stripe and bouncing down pedestrian stairs were strangers to me. And everyone was waiting for me to start the ride.

A few minutes before my regular launch time of 10:00 a.m., a police car pulled up. A puzzled officer got out and surveyed a scene

without precedent in his law enforcement experience. He fell back on a cliché. "Say, who's in charge here?"

Instantly, the warm egotism of being the "leader" of a big but uncontrollable event chilled. Me? In charge of THESE people? Not for any police purposes. I mentally handed in my resignation to myself and looked for the exit. I circled toward the back of the Fairfax Theater parking lot, just another member of the crowd moving aimlessly... Under the circumstances someone was sure to finger me, but before that could happen, I reached the alley behind the theater. I gave an eye-roll to a couple of my friends, locals who knew we could cut through a footpath and down a back street and be on our way unnoticed while the cops interviewed people we didn't know.

As casually as I could, I rode down the alley and turned onto the footpath. Escaping the chaos, I put the hammer down to get some quick distance between myself and the police car. I could hear riders behind me, but I rode at least a block before I eased up and looked



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back to see which of my friends had joined me. What I saw was...everybody, a peloton filling the narrow street. Once the out-of-towners saw the constabulary arriving and the locals drifting out, they did the simple math and my "drift" turned into a stampede. From the police officer's point of view, as soon as he asked his question, the entire unruly crowd had vanished as though sucked into a wormhole.

From that year on, I still went on the ride, but I left with a few friends from unannounced locations. My resignation by default turned out to be the catalyst for what it became. With no one deciding on a starting time and place, riders made up their own, some starting after others had finished. Instead of a single group led by one rider and swept by another, people chose their own pace and rode in smaller groups of friends. Now the "peloton" stretched from start to finish.

The route is always the same: the Pine Mountain Loop. You can't get lost if you follow the other riders or even their tracks. Now that we have GPS to tell us, it's just short of 20 miles depending on where you start, and you climb and drop about 3700 feet over that distance. There are well-known stopping spots, the most famous of which is for some reason called "Smoker's Knoll." The finish is a rip down Repack, our locally famous downhill course, 1300 feet of elevation lost in less than two miles. The route includes the back side

of Pine Mountain, another great downhill which you earn retroactively with the following tough climb up a hill some call Scorcher and some call The Furnace, although by late November it no longer bakes you the way it did in July.

After my abdication, the ride continued to grow into the multiple hundreds of riders. It was no longer a secret to local law enforcement, and now they knew what to watch for. Beyond controlling the bike traffic in town, there was not a lot the Fairfax Police could do to prevent it. At first, rangers and deputies tried to control the event by monitoring the gate where the fire road starts. Anarchy made it impossible for them to enforce the rules about the number of people conducting organized events on public land, since, individually, everyone was just out for a ride on a legal trail with a few friends and there was nothing organized about it.

That was then. This is now.

In the 21st Century, Fairfax is crowded with cyclists of all stripes. Road bikes pile up around several coffee vendors. A former Photomat next to an empty supermarket has been reinvented as a drive-up espresso bar called the Java Hut, and incongruously surrounded by acres of parked cars all sporting bike racks, the tiny coffee kiosk is



Ground Zero for swarms of mountain bikers arriving to ride private singletrack in Tamarancho or the fire roads on Mount Tam and Pine Mountain. Apres ride is at the Iron Springs Brewery, next door to one of the two big bike shops serving a town of 8,000 souls.

With an economy subsidized by non-resident cyclists, Fairfax loves the Appetite Seminar. It brings a thousand riders to town, and the sponsors appear without being asked. The Java Hut gives away coffee and pastry before the ride, and afterward the Broken Drum Brewery provides the beer. At the top of Scorcher, Cliff Bar products are distributed to primed and appreciative riders, and the Friends of Tamarancho hand out applications for singletrack membership.

Although a few scoffers have told me that they "wouldn't care to mountain bike in a crowd of a thousand," far more participants have told me that they won't miss it until they can no longer ride a bike. The riders stretch out over twenty miles and three or four hours, and only collect in a few places for ceremonial reasons, more a continuous parade than a crowd. Visitors can be certain that they will run into local legends on a casual and approachable basis. Fixtures include Jacquie Phelan playing "Cripple Creek" on her banjo atop Smoker's Knoll, Gary Fisher displaying next year's (and beyond!) cycling fashion, Joe Breeze in his 1974 Velo-Club Tamalpais jersey, Scot Nicol AKA Chuck Ibis, WTB's Mark Slate, Marin Bikes owner Bob Buckley, as well as a host and hostess of others less well known.

As I turned from asphalt onto the dirt road on this year's ride, I saw a dozen deputies and rangers holding a meeting near the trailhead. Despite the looming presence, the official attitude is fully reversed from the first contact 25 years ago. They couldn't lick us, so they joined us. Now they are there to keep us off the tempting but illegal singletrack that goes completely unwatched every other day of

the year, and to provide first aid, since on a few occasions riders have dinged themselves a long way from town. Ranger Jim, whose sister is a professional mountain bike racer, walked over to say hello. He said he had printed the page from my website about the ride, and was handing it out as background for the other officers!

I mentioned that I was uncomfortable with the idea of a casual event being protected at taxpayer expense. Ranger Jim told me that the rangers were on regularly scheduled shifts, and that the Sheriff's deputies had volunteered their time. While I appreciate the assistance even though I have never needed any, for the second time in three years I saw one of their vehicles drive over the wheel of a bike "parked" on the road. Note to self: don't lay the bike across the rut.

For twenty-odd years the Appetite Seminar attracted riders from all over Northern California before the tradition caught on elsewhere, but now there are a half dozen big Thanksgiving Day rides in the Bay Area and any number of small groups starting their own traditions. The explosion of events didn't shrink the number of riders in Fairfax so much as it capped the crowd at about a thousand who have been spoiled for any other venue.

Never having attended any of the other Thanksgiving rides, I don't know whether they are as unstructured as the world's oldest annual mountain bike event has become, but it seems unlikely. The Appetite Seminar is totally organic, continuing for over 25 years with no impetus. The riders move like a self-organizing, leaderless flock of birds, and even the sponsorship is spontaneous. There is no advertising, no entry fee, no form to fill out, no liability to waive, and no t-shirt. Everyone has fun except the people who leave bikes lying on the road when the deputy drives by, and it all happens without anyone being told what to do. ☺