



## Bicycle Ride Across Tennessee Spells BRAT: A Look at the Ride

By Brenda Apple and David Irvine



*"Nothing compares to the simple pleasure of a bike ride;"*  
-John F. Kennedy

Why ride 375 miles on a bicycle in seven days? Ask each of the 300 participants in the 2004 Bicycle Ride Across Tennessee, known as the BRAT, and you are likely to get that many answers.

Riders from college-age to 80-something came from 30 states and Canada for this event, with the common goal of visiting Middle Tennessee and having a memorable bicycling experience.

The BRAT is an annual event that debut in 1987. It is sponsored by several agencies of the State of Tennessee and is coordinated by Tennessee State Parks employees. "The ride has always been very successful" according to Park Ranger Danny McCullough, director of the BRAT 2004. "Almost every state in the U.S. now has a ride like the BRAT but the BRAT was at the forefront of week-long bike rides and was initially one of the biggest in the southeast."

Nowadays, when some rides in other states have thousands of riders, a few hundred bicyclists may seem small. However, by limiting the number of riders to less than 600, McCullough and many of his coworkers are able to carry on a long tradition of accommodating the riders with overnight stays at some of Tennessee's finest state parks located along the routes. This is considered a special treat by many riders, like Lisa Carol from Memphis, who enjoys being off the beaten path. Carol has ridden in several other state rides but loves "her home state's ride because it has some of the best parks and scenery."

The BRAT 2004 highlighted the beautiful scenery and rural areas of eastern Middle Tennessee. The riders met Sunday morning, September 19 at Gallatin's Civic Center where many had arrived from out of town the night before to register and be entertained by Guerry and Doc McConnell with the Tennessee Storytellers Association.

The first day's destination was Murfreesboro where the riders spent the night in Cannonsburgh Pioneer Village located near the square and along the Stones River Greenway. Many of the local craftsmen were on hand to provide demonstrations for the riders including music, utilizing traditional instruments, metal forging and sheep shearing.

The second day's destination was Rock Island State Park near McMinnville where the riders spent an extra day and night, some in on-site cabins, and had the option of resting, riding locally, or participating in other activities like hiking or sightseeing in the park. There was also the option of biking

a 100-mile ride to Fall Creek Falls State Park in Pikeville. Park Interpretive Specialist Gregg Garrison entertained everyone during dinner by showing off a splendid Red-tailed Hawk that was rescued with a wing injury.

From Rock Island, it was on to Cookeville to spend the night at the fairgrounds. Standing Stone State Park in Hilham hosted the riders on the fifth night where, once again, the cabins were in high demand. State Naturalist Mack Prichard provided the evening entertainment by presenting a slide show highlighting some of Tennessee's splendid flora and fauna.

Riders biked to Red Boiling Springs the sixth day and enjoyed the buffets and rooms at three well-known bed and breakfast inns. From there, the riders completed the loop by returning to Gallatin on the last day of the ride.

One reason the BRAT is so popular among bicyclers is the level of support along the routes provided by the Tennessee State Parks employees. "Constantly seeing the rangers along the route on their motorcycles and in their marked vehicles is very reassuring," said one rider. Tennessee State Parks employees also provide and staff regular rest stops along the way offering light snacks, beverages, and bathroom facilities.

The fact that there is never a shortage of Tennessee State Parks staff to volunteer for the long hours of the BRAT is a testament to their commitment to making the ride a success. From new trainees to park managers, everyone helps out. Rock Island State Park Manager Joe Moore pitched in by following the last rider each night in order to take down the day's road signs and markers and then post the coming day's route before most riders were even out of bed. This was a relentless job that afforded Moore "only a few hours sleep for the whole week" but he enjoyed it just the same.

Tennessee's Department of Transportation was an integral sponsor of BRAT 2004 and worked closely with the Governor's Council on Health and Fitness to help bring an important educational component to the ride. Students at three participating elementary schools along the route received 750 helmets from TDOT. Because the schools were also designated as regular rest stops for the riders, the children were able to meet riders and learn first hand about things like cycling as a hobby, bike safety, and the health benefits of cycling.

TDOT assisted in other areas also, such as printing and mailing brochures to 800 bike stores across the U.S. Considering the majority of riders were from out-of-state and the BRAT had been cancelled the previous three years, spreading the word that "the BRAT was back" was critical. Word spread quickly through the bicycling community and there were many riders like Dick Hensley, from Atlantic, Iowa, who participated in the first seven or eight BRAT rides and "just wanted to come back and do it again." David Utley, TDOT's bicycling coordinator, personally helped out every day of the ride by speaking with the students and handing out helmets, shuttling supplies and equipment in trucks provided by TDOT, and providing rider support along the routes. According to Director McCullough, TDOT's partnership in the BRAT 2004 helped to assure its success and "the BRAT is great for both TDOT and TDEC."

The logistics of organizing a ride like the BRAT could seem overwhelming when things like food, accommodations, route planning, registration and transportation of everyone's gear is considered. When asked what the hardest part of coordinating the BRAT was, Director McCullough did not hesitate with his answer of the food. "Feeding 300 hungry riders and keeping them happy was the hardest." But, if rider comments are any indication, McCullough and his staff were a resounding success in every way including food.

Rick Simon plans to bike in every state with the BRAT 2004 making number eight. He echoes many riders' sentiment when he says he loves the fact that "the hills are tough and the food is great" and would certainly "recommend this ride to others."

So, back to the original question, why do people make the effort to join other bicyclers on a multi-day ride, sometimes coming from across the country or even from another country? In some cases the

answer is as simple as "to bike" whether for training, exercise, or just the pure enjoyment of biking no matter the location. And, if they live in or near Tennessee, "convenience" of the Tennessee Bike Ride, as it is commonly called, quickly follows in response. One rider added enough mileage each day so he could get in 100 miles for a total of 700-miles for the week. If not for training, certainly, as Bruce Eley of St. Louis, Missouri, put it, the reason's can be simple: "the scenery, provided by Mother Nature and the road surfaces which are manmade."

Bob and Jenny Sailor also cited the beauty of Tennessee as a reason for "not only a great place to ride but to come back and visit. We have been across the United States twice and Tennessee is as pretty as anywhere we've been." The Sailors are part of a group of six friends and coworkers from southwest Michigan who rode tandem bicycles (built for two) and go by the biking moniker, or nickname, of "The Whiners" as noted on their colorful, matching jerseys.

Shirley Buffa resides in a nearby state but went to school here and loves Tennessee. "If you're a bicyclist, this is a must do ride. Every ride has its own personality and the hills, the scenery and even the smells are just great." Buffa has been bicycling since 1980 and completed her first of two cross-country rides in 1987. She has also spent two weeks bicycling in both France and Holland and, at age 73, is just one of a fairly large group of 70 and 80-something riders in the BRAT.

Bryan Berry and Gerri Muckelbauer live near the Catskills Mountains in New York and were searching for a challenging ride. They saw an advertisement in a bicycling magazine and decided the BRAT fit the bill. They were so impressed with Tennessee's beautiful scenery, they "want to come back to see Chattanooga next year." The Muckelbauers take their biking seriously; they were married behind the Woodstock Bike Shop at 5:55 p.m. so they wouldn't miss their Thursday night ride that started at 6 p.m.

Dr. Will Frey from Nashville rides a recumbent bicycle "because of the comfort." Recumbents place the rider low to the ground and allow them to ride with their feet out in front in a more relaxed position and they sometimes even have two rear wheels "that increase stability." Frey was joined in the BRAT by a group called the RAT Riders, Recumbents Across Texas, who even brought their own support vehicle and trailer for transportation and take turns daily either biking or supporting each other.

In some cases the reasons for riding are not quite so tangible. Donald Luze had an especially personal reason to ride the BRAT 2004. Luze, a widower, had made a pact with himself after his wife's recent death, "to ride in all 50 states in homage to her memory." The BRAT was number 42 for Luze and he was headed to Arkansas the next week for number 43. Anyone who talked with him about his personal story would be left with little doubt that he would achieve his goal in the not-so-distant future.

Getting reacquainted with old friends who might only be seen on certain bicycle rides is a fairly common theme among the cyclists when asked why they wanted to do such a ride.

Kim Myers from St. Paul, Minnesota, always wanted to do the BRAT "because of its reputation among cyclists as being a challenging ride with the many hills." But "meeting up with friends" was also at the top of her list for reasons to bike.

There is also a fairly large group of elder riders. John Jackson from Virginia is in this elite group. He has "ridden across the U.S. four times" and has lost count of the number of state rides he has done but guesses "somewhere around 50 or 60." Although he likes the scenery, it doesn't have much to do with why he rides; he loves to bike for one reason, "to see all the people I know" which, in the case of the BRAT 2004, numbered about 30.

While the average age for the BRAT 2004 was 40-something, this group of 70 and 80-somethings was a force to be reckoned with. They were some of the first out of bed, the first to camp, the best prepared and, usually, the most modest. They had the most miles and some of the funniest stories.

Finally, bringing the BRAT back to the cycling community was very gratifying for Tennessee State Parks' employees because, as McCullough says, "it represents so many good things about

Tennessee and it is also a way to demonstrate that the state of Tennessee cares about people and their safety."

TDEC and/or state of Tennessee employees wish to dedicate a few words to the memory of Charles Donohoo of Chattanooga. Donohoo was 82 years young and had ridden in every BRAT since its inception in 1987 and had ridden across the United States several times and in Europe. He was known as a fine fellow and a great cycling companion. He suffered a fatal heart attack while bicycling with his friends on the first day of the BRAT 2004. When asked to comment on their friend who had passed, one companion would only say: "He was lucky. He died doing what he loved!" God-speed Charles, we admire and applaud your spirit and example; your friends and extended family will miss you; we'll catch up with you down the road.

Remember: "The bicycle is the noblest invention of mankind." – William Saroyan

**(Brenda Apple and David Irvine are two of many bicycling TDEC employees working at the Nashville Environmental Field Office.)**

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### **BRAT 2005 to Follow Cumberland Trail**

The 2005 Bicycle Ride Across Tennessee, known as the "BRAT," is set for Sept. 17-24.

In its 16th edition, the ride starts at Harrison Bay State Park in Chattanooga and follows along the Cumberland Trail.

This year's ride will overnight in four Tennessee State Parks (Fall Creek Falls, Harrison Bay, Cumberland Mountain and Frozen Head) and two rural towns (Dayton and Dunlap). Riders can expect lots of great scenery as they ride in and out of the Sequatchie Valley while following the Cumberland Trail.

Sponsors for the 2005 BRAT are Tennessee State Parks, the Tennessee Department of Transportation and the Cumberland Trail Conference. Part of the proceeds from the ride this year are earmarked for the Cumberland Trail Conference, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the creation and preservation of the Cumberland Trail State Park.

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