

Getting ready for FreeWheel

By Moira K. Wiley
Staff Writer

Bicyclists around the country and points beyond are gearing up for the Oklahoma FreeWheel Cross State Bicycle Tour 2002.



Participating riders will be traveling nearly 400 miles on a trek that runs across the state with 50-75 miles covered each day of the seven day trip. The route starts in the southwestern Oklahoma community of Snyder and ends in South Haven, Kan. A total of 488 riders have registered for the ride, thus far, with 362 from the state of Oklahoma and 22 other states represented with a total of 111 riders. Plus, this year's event has attracted three riders from other countries, one each from Australia, Canada and France.

Marking his 14th year to participate in the event is 76-year-old Stillwater resident Bill Burke.

Burke, who is also a member of the local riding club, the Red Dirt Pedalers, began riding after he suffered from a slight heart attack at age 62. At the time, he weighed about 200 pounds and his doctor suggested that he start riding or walking to get in shape. He chose riding and said he "just got hooked on it." He's been riding ever since with an average of 4,000-5,000 miles traveled each year on his bicycle.

The FreeWheel pro suggests that anyone interested in participating in the event start training before they tackle the big trip.

"They should ride daily," Burke said. "Even if they only ride five or 10 miles a day, it's important to ride every day and try to build up how many miles they can cover in a day."

"Once a person has decided to do FreeWheel, it's important that they take their bike into a good bicycle shop, like Cooper's, and have the bike thoroughly gone over. A lot of things can happen out on the road and they need to know their equipment is in good working order."

"Also, it's important to have proper clothing," he said. "Bike shorts is the most important part of your attire. You'll be sitting on your bike five to six hours a day, so you have to have comfortable shorts. I buy a new pair just for FreeWheel every year and this year, I bought three pairs."

Burke and several other riders will also be participating in a "PreWheel" ride, which leaves Wednesday at 7 a.m. This group will ride 80 miles to Okarche on Wednesday, 80 miles to Elgin on Thursday, 60 miles to Snyder on Friday and 30 miles to Texas on Saturday, adding an extra three day trek prior to their beginning the FreeWheel tour on Sunday.

The annual FreeWheel affair usually draws around 1,500 people, including the cyclists, family and friends who follow in cars or RVs and support personnel. Having all of these people come through a town can be a big asset, especially for those cities and towns that are designated for overnight stays. The FreeWheel organization has to find host cities to provide accommodations, such as overnight lodging or camp grounds, meals and entertainment each night.

One of these layovers will be in the City of Perkins, who will be day four's stop. Perkins' citizens have rallied to ensure that the FreeWheelers' stay will be a memorable one.

This is the first year that the FreeWheel tour has chosen Perkins for one of their stops and Perkins' FreeWheel Coordinator Kendra Stanek hopes it won't be the last.

"A lot of preparations have been made to provide the FreeWheel riders with a pleasant experience in our city," Stanek said. "It's been a lot of fun. The work we've done this year lays a foundation to peak their interest, so that they may want to come back someday either with their families or on another FreeWheel tour."

Making arrangements for the horde of people that will flood their city started with a core planning group, who began by discussing if Perkins could handle the influx of so many people at once. This group consisted of City Manager Jack Rosson, School Superintendent Jim Hyder, Chamber of Commerce President Stephanie Hyder, Chamber of Commerce Ex-officio Dan Johnson, Main Street President Harland Wells and Stanek, who got "elected" to coordinate the event because she had a little bit of previous experience with the FreeWheel venture.

"We met, looked over what the FreeWheel group would need and discussed whether or not we could provide everything," Stanek said.

The initial planners eventually decided that with a little work, they could meet all the requirements of the group and they really wanted the FreeWheelers to come to their town.

"Our biggest concern was a campsite," she said. "Libby Stalter [one of the state organizers of the FreeWheel tour] suggested we use the school. Using the high school/middle school campus wound up being a great suggestion, because so many of the other needs of the group could be met there, as well."

"For those needing indoor accommodations [some of the riders don't like to camp outdoors], the middle school gym is air conditioned. Showers can be provided in the locker room and field house. They can use the computers at the school to check email and we set up the band room for games. Plus, it's close to downtown where we'll be holding other events."

"Our next concern was food. Although we have about 10 restaurants, we were worried that we wouldn't be able to accommodate such a great number of people at once. So, the Chamber of Commerce decided to host an all-you-can-eat dinner the evening of their arrival. The menu includes chicken and noodles, along with a salad and baked potato bar with all the fixings and desserts. The next morning, a catering company called Chris Cakes will be serving hotcakes, sausage and drinks. Plus, hot and cold cereal will also be provided."

The entertainment committee has scheduled various performers, including music and Iowa tribal dancers, who will be set up on the north side of the Perkins Food Center. Perkins will also be offering a unique form of entertainment for the riders at sundown via an outdoor movie sponsored by the Main Street organization. "Private Eyes" starring Don Knotts will be projected on the north wall of the Food Center with plenty of snacks, like popcorn, available.

"The outdoor movie is one of the community's favorite events," Stanek said. "So, we thought we'd combine it with FreeWheel. It kind of makes us unique and we hope it will give the riders a good impression of our town."

It's not too late to register for the 2002 FreeWheel tour for those interested in giving it a try. More information about the event, including a registration form, can be found on their web site.

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