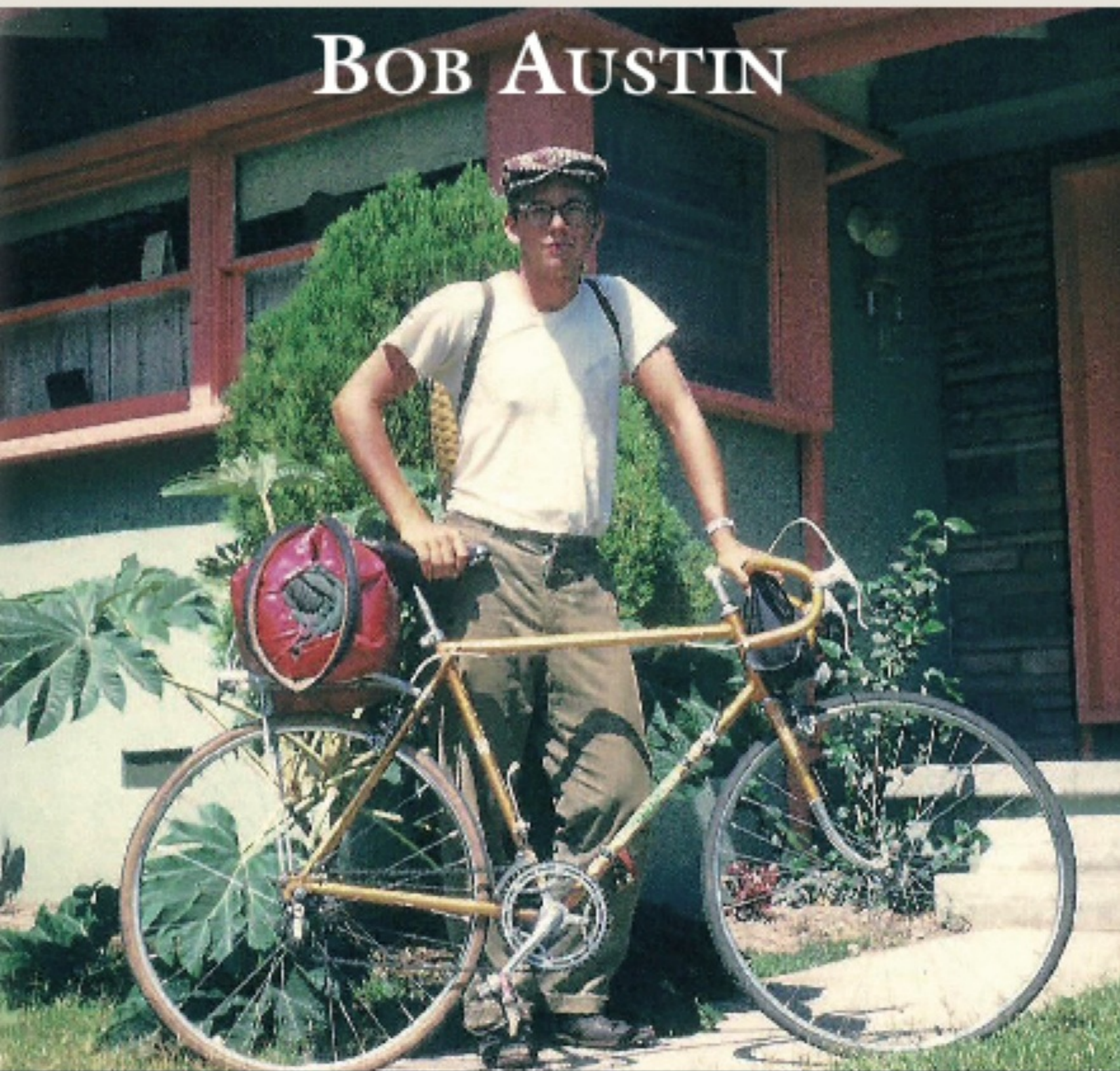


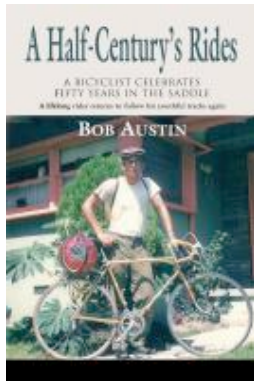
# A Half-Century's Rides

A BICYCLIST CELEBRATES  
FIFTY YEARS IN THE SADDLE

A lifelong rider returns to follow his youthful tracks again

**BOB AUSTIN**





*In the summer of 1961, the author, aged 16, bicycled alone down the West Coast. In the summer of 2011, at the age of 66, he did the same ride again. Based on the original manuscript journal of the 1961 ride and the blog account of the 2011 one, this book tells the story of the two rides and the author's many other rides in the half-century that separated them.*

## **A Half-Century's Rides**

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# **A HALF-CENTURY'S RIDES**

**A Bicyclist Celebrates  
Fifty Years in the Saddle**

**Bob Austin**

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## **Day 1 - July 3, 1961; June 20, 2011**

*Left Chips's at 3:00. Caught ferries just right. Had heck of a time finding Kenneth's. Finally got in at 10:00.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Chips was my best friend in Oak Harbor from 5<sup>th</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I reconnected with him in 2006 while he was still managing the oldest grocery store in town, an independent, and had a pleasant visit. We exchanged Christmas cards through 2010 and I wrote him in early June '11 saying I was coming back to Oak Harbor and would like to have him see me off again (a modern-day Luddite, he refuses to own a computer). He did not answer my letter and I got a "no longer in service" message when I called on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June. When we got to Oak Harbor this morning, we found that the town had been Walmarted and Walgreened since my last visit and that Chips's old store was now a Dollar General. An era has ended.*

*Kenneth was my father's kid brother. At about a quarter to ten, I finally got up the nerve to knock on a rural door, and the helpful occupant not only knew Uncle Kenneth – Kenneth was their mail carrier – but drove me and my rig to his house.*

### **June 20, 2011 – Oak Harbor, WA to Poulsbo, WA.**

Bike - Specialized Roubaix

Miles ridden – 51

Total elapsed mileage – 51

Time in saddle – N/A

Average speed – N/A

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Maximum speed – N/A

Dipped my wheel in Oak Harbor's chilly water at 10:40 AM and began the ride. Got to the ferry landing at 12:00. Bob caught up a quarter hour later and we got in line for the 1:30 sailing to Port Townsend. We had a smooth crossing to the pleasant, historic and classic boat-oriented town (my kinda place!) but tarried not at all before heading south.

Bob and I rendezvoused again a little before 4:00 at the west end of the Hood Canal bridge and linked up for the last time in Poulsbo at around 5:00. Found suitable and comfortable lodging and Bob relaxed and phoned home while I paid a call on first cousin Brian (Kenneth's son - Kenneth died in the early 2000s) and his wife Gerrie. Brian is recovering from draconian but – so far – successful treatment for T-cell lymphoma and Gerrie is coping as best she can with partial hemiplegia resulting from a gastric operation gone bad some years ago. We had a good one-hour visit, catching up on our respective situations and those of our families, then I returned to our motel to make my evening call (East coast time evening, that is) to Lynda and go with Bob for dinner at an informal, but good, seafood place on the waterfront.

Poulsbo has grown from a muddy backwater oyster-catching and packing port of 3,000 souls to a bustling car- and boat-tourist destination of 9,000 in the last 50 years. Taking advantage of its Norwegian heritage and its day-cruising proximity to Bremerton and Seattle, it has made itself into a great place to visit and a great place to live. Just ask Brian and Gerry!

*A Bicyclist Celebrates Fifty Years in the Saddle*

My 1961 bike:

Make and model: Schwinn Continental, ten-speed

Weight: circa 36 pounds, stripped

Gear: on rear rack: about eight pounds, plus canteen of water;

on my back, in woven hickory Ojibwa-style pack basket: about 25 pounds; in handlebar bag: about two pounds

Seat: leather, Brooks-type, ridden wet and thus molded into a rear-end fitting ridge

New price: \$100

Condition: Not good. Wrecked the previous winter and indifferently repaired (more on this later)

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Dipping the wheel, Oak Harbor, Washington. I would later learn that you dip the rear wheel at the beginning of a voyage, the front at the end.

\*\*\*\*\*

Why did I do it? Why did I, at the age of 16 and in a time long before long-distance recreational cycling became part – even if a still small one – of the American experience, decide to devote a chunk of my high school junior-senior summer to a solo ride of more than 1,200 miles? A question I've reflected on a lot over the years, my answers to it are still tentative.

My mother loved to travel and passed on some of that love to me, but it was my father's love of adventure that likely



played a far greater role in influencing and inspiring and, if you will, driving me. However, as a Navy enlisted man with the modest income that career choice signified, and responsible for raising four children, my father could only live others' adventures vicariously. One of his heroes, whose name I still recall from various accounts shared by my father with my brother and me, was American adventurer and adventure writer Richard Halliburton, who famously swam the length of the Panama Canal, paying a \$.36 toll, and who disappeared in 1939 while attempting to sail a Chinese junk from Hong Kong to San Francisco. That my father was likely stationed in the Panama Canal Zone on his first overseas naval assignment at the time of Halliburton's swim probably further strengthened his recollection of, and admiration for, him. That, and the fact that although my father was no athlete, neither having played nor followed any team sports, he was a good swimmer, a skill he passed on to his children.

At the same time, my father, of English-Norwegian stock and raised during the Great Depression on a farm in southeastern North Dakota, was as emotionally guarded as he was with his and the family's money. He was also intellectually demanding and an often-critical perfectionist.

I thus suspect that I was not only hoping to win my father's approval but that, on an even more subconscious level, I was going to live out one of his impossible-to-achieve dreams of adventure for him.

Returning to my mother, she was raised in a very small coal mining/farming town in Missouri by parents I remember more warmly than I do my paternal grandparents. Stoicism and self-

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reliance were the two principal tenets of the value system she was raised in. Her idea of empathy for the suffering of others was “show me blood.” I do not recall any of my family members ever using a prescription medicine or, for that matter, ever consulting a doctor for anything other than major physical injury or crippling or ultimately terminal medical complaints. During my childhood and youth, the contents of our medicine chest consisted of a bottle of Bayer Aspirin – likely the same one from beginning to end of my life at home – a bottle of mercurochrome, a jar of Vicks and a box of Band-Aids.

During an Easter-break 1961 solo, 300-mile-plus ride to the deserts of Southern California, tired and discouraged by a day of sandblasting headwinds, followed by another of slushy snow on the high desert, lonely, and questioning the purpose of what I was doing, I called my mother from 100 miles out and asked if she could come and get me in the family station wagon. Her first answer was along the lines of, “You got yourself there, so get yourself back.” It was only when I half-fibbed that I wasn’t sure my rear tire would last another 100 miles that she agreed to meet me halfway, at a town 50 miles from me and from home.

Further on this thread of needing to prove my ability and my own stoicism, Malcolm Gladwell would present solid-seeming evidence in his 2008 book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, that how well one performs in life can depend more than anyone realized on his or her relative age within a peer group, such as classmates or youth athletes playing in age groups – Canadian hockey players in his sample case.

As a mid-December-born child whose parents got around the local Alexandria, Virginia public school age-cutoff rules by enrolling him at age five in a private school, I began first grade

as the youngest member of my class and would for every subsequent school year be the youngest member of my class. As a corollary of Gladwell's demonstration through statistics that the older members of his cadres were far more likely to rise to stardom than the younger ones, I suspect I was conditioned from early childhood to compete, to show my stuff, to prove that I could keep up with, or even outperform, my older peers. As I, like my father, had no real talent for or interest in team sports, I became an endurance athlete (like Lance Armstrong once said when asked why he had chosen swimming and bicycle racing as his sports, "I was never much good at any sport involving a ball."), that is, a long-distance bicycle rider.

As for my confidence level in early July 1961, while I was aware that what I was planning would be the biggest physical challenge of my young life, I neither dwelled on that fact nor, for a minute, doubted that I would succeed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Further support for my hypothesis that my father was a frustrated adventurer comes from his selection of reading material. *True* magazine always seemed to be on the coffee table or in the magazine rack, and other sweat magazines, such as *Argosy* and the even less intellectual *Saga* seemed to be available (however, it is possible I saw the last only on drugstore magazine racks). Of course, I, too, was an avid reader of all of these, from my very early years (I was reading *Reader's Digest* before I began first grade) through adolescence. I also found the covers compelling, especially those, if memory serves me, of *Saga*. They seemed to be three in number, all paintings: hard-hat diver fighting giant octopus, with knife; man in jungle khakis

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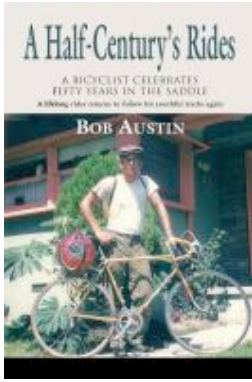
fighting giant constricting snake, with knife; and voluptuous woman, in dress, being tortured by Nazis or, as the Cold War grew colder, communists. A variation of this last theme was of a man being tortured by voluptuous Nazi women.

As I was working on the final draft of this book, *National Geographic* published its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary special issue, devoted to the theme of Why We Explore. In an article called "Restless Genes," the author discusses the still-debated possibility that a variant of a gene called *DRD4*, which helps control dopamine and which variant is carried by about 20 per cent of all humans, is tied to curiosity and restlessness. According to the article, "dozens of human studies" have found that the genetic variant, *7R*, makes people more likely to take risks, explore new places, new ideas, foods and relationships, and generally "embrace movement, change and adventure." The variant is also linked to ADHD. Not that it would prove that I carry *7R*, but I have suspected since the condition was first described and named that I have at least a touch of ADHD. I believe one reason I am drawn to long-distance bicycling is because it concentrates my energy on one thing: keeping the pedals turning. When I'm riding, I don't have to be doing something else.

Although I did not tarry in Port Townsend on the first day of my 2011 ride, I fondly recalled the five days I had spent there in the mid-1990s attending a class in hand-tool joinery at the prestigious Northwest School of Wooden Boatbuilding. I had already built a number of boats, but I had never tried to construct something from raw wood and to then achieve a furniture finish using only muscle-powered tools, which we

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were indeed taught to do, turning a few rough-sawn planks of seasoned mahogany into a kind of magazine-holding step- and footstool. Uncle Kenneth, a wood shop hobbyist in his own right and an eminently practical man, was not impressed, however. When I came back to my temporary lodgings at his home in Poulsbo and told him that I had paid more than thirty dollars to FedEx my handiwork back to Williamsburg, he observed that I could have picked up something quite like it at a garage sale for fifty cents following my arrival.



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