

The (Almost) Wild Bunch (Explore Magazine March/April 2001)

As churches go, the Church of the Chainring is a pretty lame excuse.

It worships no deity, collects no money, has no dress code, has no hymnal or prayer book and no confessional. In fact, it has no building at all. Religion occasionally comes up for discussion, but usually in a passing way that often leads to long, awkward silences. Two of the founding members are atheists. And even the pastor is a little casual when it comes to religious matters.

All this might be a problem if the Church of the Chainring were a real church. But it isn't. Far from it. It's the somewhat irreverent name of a group of middle-aged guys who were brought together about 10 years ago by fate – and the fact that we choose to live in a small Alberta town, where avoiding kindred spirits is nigh impossible. At the time, all of us were relatively active in the outdoors: hiking, backpacking, fly-fishing and skiing, both alpine and cross-country. But we'd all finally come to the realization that our activity level was not keeping pace with our food intake. With the added burden of ill-performing metabolisms, our bodies were beginning to show the obvious signs of sloth. The Grim Reaper tends to drop in on the inactive, and members of the Church of the Chainring (CCR for short) understandably weren't eager to make his early acquaintance. So a conversion of sorts occurred. Not in any strict spiritual sense; it was more of a collective attitudinal adjustment. And thus, the CCR was born, without ceremony or fanfare. Its sole mission was to motivate members to ride their bicycles for long distances, as often as possible, but regularly on Sunday mornings – hence the name. This tribe-like male bonding did not come naturally to us. The CCR's founding members are solid individualists to a man. Few of us had ever played team sports, and most of us labor in jobs where success or failure hinges on individual, not team, effort.

We are an eclectic (read weird) lot, now ranging in age from 45 to 52. Bert spends his days looking at unborn babies and worrisome abdominal growths through a specialized instrument that requires the application of a gooey substance to the patient's gut. Andy is mired in a world of actuaries, mortgage rates, mutual funds and other complex matters I've never even pretended to understand. Fred got into real estate after growing weary of being summoned in the middle of the night to unclog strangers' pipes plugged full of digested food and delicate items of a sanitary nature. Sam, the most mature (translation: oldest), is a lawyer in a one-lawyer office, who dashes about defending bad people in court, closing house deals and writing offending relatives out of the wills of senile senior citizens. Louis works in the complex world of oil and gas regulations, ensuring that resource companies do things the right way so that future generations of people and other creatures living near well sites aren't born with, say, three eyes, or an extra head. The sixth founding member of the CCR is yours truly, who writes instead of holding down a real job.

For the first little while, the Church actually consisted only of Andy and me. Andy assumed the pastor's role by early mutual consent. He was more motivated, fitter and was the only one who knew how to change a flat tire.

Most people who decide to lead a more active life kick things off slowly. Not us. Pastor Andy selected a 30-kilometre circuit south of town, almost half of it on the shoulder of a busy four-lane highway.

“Thirty clicks!” I exclaimed in a voice that came out a little shriller than I would have liked. “I can’t even do three clicks. It’ll kill me.”

“No it won’t,” Andy replied: “But if it does, can I have your bike?”

As we cycled out of town, my legs started screaming and my lungs began burning. Andy became a tiny dot in the distance as I struggled not just to keep up, but also to keep upright.

I aced the first major hill. Well, at least the downhill portion – I coasted the whole way. But then I accidentally switched to a higher gear at the bottom, causing an embarrassing wobbly delay while I tried to downshift and pedal at the same time. When I finally got the gears working right, my legs were pumping so fast I thought the chain was broken. My heart was pounding, yet it felt like I was standing still. Through my sweat-blurred eyes, it appeared the handlebar-mounted speedometer was registering a negative reading. A semi-trailer hauling hogs sped by, barely missing my left ear. I swear I heard a friendly oink.

I didn’t see Andy again until we stopped for a slug of water at the turn. He was waiting, looking disgustingly fresh. No wonder. He ‘d been resting 15 minutes.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“I’m dying,” I said, aware my weak smile was more of a pained grimace.

“Well, have a nice day,” he said, then hopped on his bike and took off.

Obviously, I didn’t die that trip, or on the dozens more we made. But I felt like it man times. And it was during those early rides that my wife started encouraging me regularly to prepare my will “just in case.”

Before too long, word of our joyful bike trips spread through our little community. Bert surprised everybody when he expressed interest in joining.

“I’ve never done anything like that,” he told us. “I haven’t even been on a bike since I was a kid, and I’ve spent years abusing my body in various ways. Do you think I could do it?”

“No sweat,” I lied.

Soon, Bert was joining us on our regular circuits. Louis, Fred and Sam then came into the fold. The Church of the Chainring was complete.

On Sam’s first cycling trip, he was surprised to encounter two rather deep coulees. By the time he finished struggling up a long hill out of the second one, his legs feeling like rubber and helmet slightly askew, he was a little upset. At the rest stop, he lashed out at Pastor Andy.

“You told me there were no hills,” he sputtered.

“I didn’t say there were no hills,” the pastor replied. “I said there was no *net elevation gain*.”

Andy always was a stickler for details. Sam didn’t seem to appreciate the distinction.

The CCR became a force to be reckoned with. Before we instituted a fan-out telephone system, Andy single-handedly took on the duties of making the Saturday night calls to arrange the next morning’s service. The calls were brief. “Hey, we’re riding tomorrow. Louis’s house 8 a.m. South loop. And then, while I was desperately trying to think of a reason I couldn’t make it, the phone would go dead. The next morning, we would congregate, some looking a little rough around the edges. If the wind was blowing

from the south, we rode in that direction. We believed that middle-aged cyclists should always have the wind at their backs on the homestretch.

So we would hit the road, a motley collection of oddly-garbed and helmeted men aboard an assortment of mountain bikes, 10-speeds and hybrids. Sam never carried a water bottle. His frame-mounted bottle carrier always contained a travel mug of coffee he'd picked up at the local convenience store. Passing drivers took delight in honking their horns as they raced past this geriatric bike gang, a Mild Bunch if ever there was one.

The south loop was our favorite, but it was also the most hazardous. The route took us right past a farmhouse inconveniently located at the intersection of two busy paved roads. Unfortunately, a stop sign required us to halt, or at least slow down, before crossing a two-lane highway.

The farmhouse was guarded, very efficiently I might add, by a rather speedy dog that appeared to be at least part blue heeler, a breed useful for herding cattle. But this one had an entertaining sideline: attacking cyclists. The dog was a master of concealment, hiding in the hedge, behind the barn, indeed anywhere and everywhere. Then, just as we were passing by, thinking that maybe we were in the clear, this raving Cujo-wannabe would come for us.

For those CCR members who were in good shape, it was no problem. They simply switched to a faster gear, accelerated easily and sped through the stop sign without even slowing down, leaving the dog to choose its victim from among the stragglers. Those of us bringing up the rear became impressively proficient in the art of instant dismount, and holding our bicycles like shields to ward off the dog. We also learned how to quickly detach our air pumps and wield them like clubs. A short-range squirt from a water bottle also proved effective in keeping the beast at bay. That got me thinking that pepper-based bear spray would work even better. Problem was, whenever we were loaded for bear, the dog wouldn't be there. The next time we'd ride, I'd forget the spray, which would usually result in my riding away from the farmhouse with a snarling, barking, ball of fanged fury dragging from my ankle.

After several months, the Church of the Chainring soon faced a milestone. To date, our rides had been relatively tame little adventures, mainly limited to pavement but with some light off-highway travel thrown in for variety. Unfortunately, Bert was about to turn 40, and felt he had to prove something to himself. Nothing wrong with that, except he insisted on doing it with friends.

So, a few members of the CCR got roped into an adventure that became alternately known as *The Bike Ride in Hell* or *Denying Middle-age Follies*. The plan was to beg a spousal ride to the mountains, then head off-road on our bicycles. We'd travel on old dirt logging trails all day, past scenic mountain lakes, through creeks, over hill and dale, dodging grizzly bears and other pesky wildlife, finally arriving victorious -- like brave knights returning from battle -- in a campground, where our proud, smiling families would be waiting, happily sipping champagne and roasting wieners over a bonfire.

It was a wonderful plan; a perfect way to prove that being 40 didn't have to mean you were incapable of great feats and raw adventure. But we hadn't counted on the weather, which of course is something one always needs to do when planning any adventure.

When I arose that morning, I peered at the Rocky Mountains to the west. They were shrouded in heavy black clouds. If it wasn't raining out there, I thought, it will be snowing. Ah well, I assumed, that's it for this trip. Privately, I cheered.

But the phone remained silent.

That's one thing about a group of guys: nobody wants to be the first to cave, even when it's blatantly obvious that's the only reasonable course of action. I waited, and I waited, casually getting my lunch and bike ready but smugly knowing I wouldn't be needing either that day. Only a fool would ride a bike in the mountains in that kind of weather.

About an hour later, three fools – Bert, Pastor Andy and myself – were unloading their bikes from the van in the parking lot at the trailhead. Rain pelted down. The mountains surrounding us looked ominously white. Bert and I exchanged nervous glances.

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea," I ventured, somewhat tentatively.

"This is a fine time to say that," replied Pastor Andy, a distinctly unpastor-like edge to his voice.

"I didn't think it was a good idea before leaving town this morning," I offered.

"Why didn't you say something?" Bert asked.

"I thought one of you would call it off," I responded.

"I would have cancelled out if one of you had suggested it first," said Bert.

"It's too late now," Andy grumbled. "We're here now so let's get going and stop being so wimpy."

With that, the van pulled away and the three of us were left standing there, our bike seats flecked with fresh precipitation. The rain had turned into big fluffy snowflakes during the discussion.

The initial steep climb to the lake normally takes about 45 minutes on foot. On bicycles or, more accurately, walking and pushing our bikes up the slippery trail, it took more than an hour. When we arrived at the lake, we were taken aback, not by its beauty but by the fact a heavy snowfall was obscuring the view.

We pedaled along a level stretch of trail bordering the lake, carefully maneuvering through a nasty minefield of frozen horse turds. The snow had developed into a character-building combination of frozen sleet and flurries when we reached our first major obstacle: a creek crossing.

Now, we knew it was a good idea to dismount and carry our bikes across flowing water. On an earlier outing, Bert had learned this the hard way. He'd attempted to ride across a shallow stream. The bike tires became lodged in the rocky streambed when he was halfway across. With his feet securely locked in toe-clips, a fast, smooth dismount was not an option. Bert had a look of embarrassed resignation as he realized he was about to topple into the creek – in perfect slow motion -- and there was nothing he could do about it.

Unwilling to repeat his former error in judgment, Bert opted to follow Andy and me by carrying his bike across. Problem was, Bert chose a deeper crossing point upstream from where we'd crossed. Thick willows choked both banks. Bert fought his way through the bushes, holding his bike high, then waded through knee-deep water and crashed through the willows on the other side. Suddenly, branches jammed between his

spokes, trapping Bert until we took pity and rescued him. The words he uttered were decidedly un-churchlike.

By now, all three of us were soaked to the skin – not a propitious start. (This was prior to our Gore-tex days.) The wind picked up from the north, the temperature dived and the snowfall became heavier. Several inches carpeted the trail. Visibility was so bad that we didn't see the two figures approaching us until we almost ran into them. They were bowhunters, weighed down with camping gear and deer meat. They'd been camped nearby for the past few days, but were cutting their hunt short.

"This weather's getting too rotten," said one, his face almost obliterated by snow.

"It wouldn't be very smart to stay out here," said the other, hunched over by a giant pack that weighed almost as much as he did. "If we were smart, we wouldn't be doing this trip," I replied, earning another sharp look from Pastor Andy.

We continued on. The snow became deeper and wetter, the hills steeper. My bike had a flat tire, we walked almost as much as we rode and the sun didn't shine until we were in the homestretch. One bright spot: Andy, in a rare lapse of judgment, tried to ride across a creek. He didn't make it. Bert and I laughed until it hurt.

Finally -- mud-caked, soaked, dead-tired and two hours late -- we rode into the waiting arms of our families. We resembled whipped dogs more than returning knights. A few days later, Bert successfully turned 40, as did Andy and I not long after.

From those early bike rides came the sense of awareness that there's plenty to discover out there – including yourself -- if only you take time to seek it. Middle age, we realized, is not a barrier to life, but a catalyst to get out and do things because we have less than half a lifetime – and that's if we're lucky -- to do them in. *Carpe Diem* – seize the day – became our mission statement.

In the past several years, our members have made up for lost time in their quest for purification of soul and simplification of life. Since he began worshipping in the Church of the Chaining, Sam started climbing mountains, and was chased up a tree by a grizzly. Fred gamely overcame bad knees to cycle and hike long distances, often in rugged terrain. Louis ran his first marathon at age 45, and plans to do more. Andy and Bert rode their bicycles 2,304 kilometres north to Whitehorse to celebrate the new millennium. Sam and Fred started sea kayaking and taking ambitious multi-day canoe trips in deep wilderness. At the end of their days, while owls hoot in the moonlight and waves lap gently at the shoreline, they sit around campfires reading aloud from books of Robert Service poems.

Last summer, Fred, Sam and several non-CCR members went on a wilderness canoe trip in northern Saskatchewan. I was invited, but begged off. Fred wanted to know why.

"I don't know if I can paddle that far with the arthritis and rotator-cuff tendinitis in my right shoulder," I responding, adding, almost as an afterthought, "Besides, I don't even like canoeing that much."

"What's that got to do with it?" he fired back. "You don't think this is about canoeing, do you?"

I knew what he meant. One of the benefits of belonging to a church is fellowship, and over time even our congregation began to experience the same feeling. We spent more and more time together, but of course without ever saying that we liked each other's company. That would be sacrilege.

Last September, five of the members of the CCR managed to free themselves up for a church outing to the Kettle Valley Railway. This abandoned railway bed winds for 600 kilometres through the rugged gorge-pocked and forested terrain of south-central British Columbia. Trains hauling gold, silver, copper and coal (and sometimes passengers, too) used it in the early-to-mid-1900's. The reclaimed railway right-of-way has since become a mecca for mountain bikers, hikers, backpackers and horseback riders.

Three of the CCR members who made the trip had tackled various stretches of the railway before. Bert and I were the novices. (The missing member was Fred, who informed us rather sheepishly that he had to stay home to play in a company golf tournament).

Our route followed along the east side of Okanagan Lake, south of Kelowna, from McCulloch Lake to Naramata, a distance of 82 kilometres. No problem. A nice ride for a weekend. Beforehand, I was told that the route itself wasn't particularly daunting. It was designed with plenty of switchbacks to avoid steep climbs; the railway bed has a grade of less than 3 per cent. There'd be no rigorous, heart-testing hills, just gradual *net elevation gains*.

Then came the corker.

"How are you with heights?" Andy asked me.

"Horrible," I said. "I hate heights."

That's when he explained about the trestles -- the 18 wood-frame structures, some several hundred feet above terra firma, that we'd be crossing on our first day out. Immediately, I had visions of myself on my hands and knees, eyes closed tight, bicycle bungeed to my back, crawling across these structures as if I were on a tightrope while my sleeping bag, panniers and various other pieces of equipment slipped through the ties and crashed to earth far below.

"Hardly anybody ever falls off these things," Andy assured me, rather too casually for my liking.

As it turned out, the trestles were a piece of cake. All had solid wooden railings, and charming wooden ramps running down the middle of them. It was virtually impossible to fall through the ties, or over the side, unless you jumped off, something I wasn't eager to do.

After our first day's ride of 58 kilometres, we pulled into Chute Lake, a scenic little spot with a lake stocked with rainbow trout and a resort that caters to cyclists, hunters and anglers. We'd booked one of the rustic cabins, which came complete with wood stove, a small table, two double beds and a much-coveted sofa bed (one of us would get to sleep by himself). It didn't take long to unload our stuff in the cabin and decide that I'd be the lucky one who'd get the sofa bed (it helps to be the largest guy with a snore that, I'm told, sounds like an idling chain saw). Then we wandered into the main lodge's dining room and ordered identical platters of cholesterol on a bun.

There's a certain expectation when a bunch of middle-aged men engage in outdoor pursuits distant from their spouses that their ulterior motive is to drink heartily, chase women and otherwise carry on like sailors on shore leave. I can't speak for all men, but I'm here to say the CCR members verge on sainthood -- or are the very definition of boring.

Apart from being bound by such considerations as wedding vows and consciences, middle-aged men – our group, at least – don't seem to have much jam for getting into trouble after a full day of fresh air and physical activity.

Having said that, being men, we each had a cold beer, followed closely by another. Afterwards, we retired to our cabin, where a fire in the woodstove soon made everything quite toasty. Then the serious drinking started. Two modest flasks of whisky materialized out of panniers. It was barely enough for the five of us to make a hearty toast to ourselves. After what seemed like just a few minutes, the whisky was gone, and the conversation had deteriorated to a few random grunts. Obviously, it was time for bed. Before turning out the light, I checked my watch: 8:15 p.m. What a bunch of hell raisers, I thought. The snoring started within seconds. Or so I was told next morning.

We arrived in Naramata, our destination, around noon the next day, after cycling past vineyards, apple orchards and rattlesnake warnings. A friendly local agreed to shuttle our bikes and us back to McCulloch Lake. As the vehicle bounced along a dusty logging road, with a fiddle band blaring from the tape deck, we began discussing the possibility of a return trip. But next time, we'd want to ride a longer stretch, something that would provide a bit more of a challenge.

Maybe we'll even do it in a snowstorm, with a few creek crossings and a couple of dozen more trestles thrown in for good measure. Heck, maybe we'll just do the whole thing – all 600 kilometres. In cycling, as in life, it's best to keep on rolling.