



“Clausen’s unsinkable good nature and sunny outlook jumps out at readers from practically every line of his book.”

Publishers Weekly

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**One Wheel — Many Spokes:
USA by Unicycle**

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Published by:

Soulscapers
P.O. Box 152,
Greenbank, WA 98253
www.onewheel.org

Order Information:

Book Trade and IPG Accounts:

Independent Publishers Group; Order Department;
814 North Franklin Street; Chicago, IL 60610.
(800) 888-4741; Fax: (312) 337-5985; www.ipgbook.com

All Others:

Soulscapers; 888-281-5170; www.onewheel.org;

Cover by Karen Ross: karoons@yahoo.com

Interior layout by Michele DeFilippo: michele@1106design.com

Publisher's Cataloguing-in-Publication

Clausen, Lars, 1961-

One wheel—many spokes : USA by unicycle / by Lars

Clausen.

p. cm.

LCCN 2003093814

ISBN 0-9719415-9-9

- 1. United States—Description and travel.**
- 2. Clausen, Lars, 1961—Travel—United States.**
- 3. Unicycles—United States. I. Title.**

E169.04.C53 2003 917.304'931

QBI03-200520

Chapter 3

Shakedown

Custom is petrification; nothing but dynamite
can dislodge it for a century.

Mark Twain

The buzzards give up at the top of the grade. Highway 101 continues to climb over rocky capes and descend to follow sandy beaches. The coastal forest is dark and rich with hemlock and fir. Halfway to Seaside my right pedal crank starts clicking. The bolt holding it on is working loose. My dad is ten miles ahead in Seaside, getting lunch ready. He has the tools, so I pedal on, the click growing more pronounced.

The unicycle I'm riding is called "The Big One," a thirty-six-inch wheel the Coker Company has provided for this ride. The wheel is a foot larger than the Schwinn I've ridden for the past thirty years. Since this model was backordered for over two months, arriving five weeks before the ride, I am still getting used to its high perch and long stride.

Three of the past five training weeks were lost to a fractured elbow from a fall, the only broken bone I've ever sustained. A fellow unicyclist who is also a professional clown had told me of his success with using clipless cleats to lock his feet onto the pedals. After the broken arm, I decided I'm no clown and clipless pedals aren't for me. I was out of the sling only a week before my ride's start date.

Now, on this first day of touring, the arm feels fine, and we've managed to start on schedule. I still feel like a giant on this three-foot wheel, with the top of my head gliding almost eight feet above the ground. The euphoria of new beginnings makes up for every challenge. Clicking loudly, I make Seaside at noon. Forty-eight miles!

Dad has lunch waiting at the side of the road. After tuna sandwiches and fruit, we retighten the crank. We've got a spare Coker along and all the extra parts I anticipate needing. Another manufacturer, Semcycle, has provided me a twenty-eight-inch unicycle in case I need it for the Rockies: The smaller wheel diameter will make hill climbing easier.

When it's time to go, Dad watches my three blundering attempts to mount. The axle is eighteen inches above the ground. To mount, I jump a foot and a half into the air, get my feet positioned on the pedals and try to start moving forward before falling off in any of the four compass directions. Adding to the challenge are the short pedal cranks. Because a unicycle has no gears, the only way to get either higher speed or more torque is to change wheel sizes or crank lengths. I've switched the standard six-inch cranks to short four-and-a-half-inch cranks to get more speed, but they make getting started a real trick. At last I wobble into the right direction and begin riding the last miles of the day to Astoria. Anyone watching this process would wonder at my prospects.

The morning drizzle turns to bright sunshine, a rarity for the rain-laden Pacific Northwest coast. Traffic picks up in the afternoon. The highway flattens out and becomes four-lane. People are waving out their windows and honking their horns. A man stops ahead and gets out of his car to video my passing.

"New York," I shout back to him when he asks my destination. His face shows surprise.

The biggest challenge of this first day awaits just before Astoria. A half-mile bridge separates me from the city. The shoulder could be two feet wider for safety, especially with the strong side gusts that make me weave. I study the bridge and then, after four attempts I get mounted on the unicycle and head onto the bridge's tight shoulder. Thousands of miles of challenges lie ahead, but this is the one for right now. Traffic passes close, and on the other side of the guardrail the drop to the river is abrupt. I keep one eye glued to my rear-view mirror, watching for semis and the windblast they carry with them—ready to jump off and walk if necessary. While I cross, I count eight trucks driving on the far side of the road. Amazingly, thankfully, none pass in my direction until I'm across the bridge.

I find Dad in town, parked outside a travel agency. The owner fills out my Guinness World Record attempt slip. The current distance record for unicycling is 3,876.1 miles, set in 1985, by Hans Peter Beck for his tour across Australia. The distance is farther than a straight-line crossing of the United States, but not by much. After I learned of this record the dreams of my young childhood came back, those from the days spent poring through Guinness Books. Although a record is not the central purpose of this ride, it's going to be fun to try for it.

After signing my slip the travel agent suggests we might get permission to park overnight at Hauke's Market, just up the street.

"Sure," agrees the manager when we find the grocery store. "And if you want to come inside, we've got a deli right here where you can make yourself at home."

We park with a view of the Columbia River. After setting up the motor home, we come back inside Hauke's, laptop computer and cell phone in hand. The phone is brand new to us, purchased for this trip. Anne and I are banking on it to keep us connected on our travels. There will be places where we're out of cell range, but here in Astoria I can call home to Anne.

"We're missing you," Anne tells me. "KariAnna made a calendar today to check off the days until we meet you at Neah Bay."

There are now just five days to Neah Bay, the most northwest corner of the continental United States. We are calling it the official start of this ride across the country. If there is confusion about where we're actually starting this ride—in Alaska, or Oregon, or Washington—it is because just once this past winter, Anne put her foot down.

"Forget riding through all fifty states," she said. "Just focus on getting across the country from Neah Bay to the Statue of Liberty."

Anne was right, of course, but I'd just shown her an exciting addendum to my vision. Looking at a map of the United States, I had suddenly seen a route back to the West Coast that could let us cycle all forty-eight of the continental states. From the Statue of Liberty we could head down the Appalachian Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico, and pick up the eastern and southern states. From there we could angle back up to the corner of Missouri and Oklahoma. At that point it would be a straight shot west to get the last states.

"No way," she repeated.

Our one compromise is that if everything goes perfectly on the way across, we can talk about maybe, perhaps, possibly, riding on past the Statue of Liberty. Just in case, we've mapped our route to pass through all the northern states on our trip east. To our original starting point of Neah Bay, Washington, I added this shakedown week so we could include Oregon and make it our second state. Alaska was our first state. Two weeks earlier, when we'd been there for the Spring Conference, I took my unicycle along and rode five miles around Nome; I even rode out on the Bering Sea, covered over by six feet of ice. Now if anyone asks I can answer, "Yes, I ride on water!"

We are using this first week of riding as a shakedown; everything is flexible. The only goal is to get used to living on the unicycle tour. This is also shakedown time for our old RV. We've already fixed a fuel line leak and diagnosed a failing bearing on the smog pump. From Neah Bay onwards, we have a set ride schedule with presentations at churches all across the country. We even have our date set for arriving at the Statue of Liberty—August 10—if everything works out.

When I lie down on this first night, the feelings come flooding in. We're on the road—this trip is really happening! Before us is a whole summer of family adventure. Tonight it feels as if it is too much even to have dreamed.

I have not always jumped so easily into new adventures. Rather, I grew up a good boy trying hard to stay in the center lane. I was an Eagle Scout, an honor student, an appointee to the U.S. Air Force Academy. If I started anything, I would stick with it until the end.

The first time that I ever quit anything meaningful was the Academy. I didn't mind them hazing me and yelling at me the whole first year, but when it came my turn to create hell for the newcomers, I was filled with questions. Why should we make life so miserable for new students? What's the point? Eventually I spiraled towards the existential question—*why do anything?* After I decided to leave and explore my questions, officers pressured me to stay. One captain appealed to honor and idealism.

"If you stay here," he said, "you have to be prepared to give your life for your country."

The other officers all focused on the comfortable life I could enjoy in the Air Force: job security, free travel, cheap commissary prices, and a great retirement in just twenty years. Those weren't the perks I was looking for.

In retrospect, learning to quit is one of my better achievements, though I received little support for developing the skill. Instead, my companions have often been predisposed towards eliminating unknowns rather than stepping into them. Quitting means change. Change brings uncertainty.

Parting with the Academy was the beginning of my slow drift towards the shoulder of the road. I expected quitting once would be enough, but it was only the beginning. There was the engineering Ph.D. I left for my six-thousand-mile bike ride across the United States.

Later there was the six months that Anne and I left seminary while we honeymooned by tandem from Stockholm, Sweden to Gibraltar. We told everyone that if we could survive six months together, bound by two wheels and the steel frame, we could make it through anything. We have survived, and thrived, and come to a most unexpected place. Tonight, after a final look out the window and across the Columbia River, I fall asleep at last.



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