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Local 18-Year-Old Completes Solo Biking Trip from Canada to Mexico

By Clare Varellas



Riggins on his bike at the Mexican border. Photo courtesy Matthew Riggins

For most college freshmen, the summer after their first year away is a nice time to reconnect with friends and family, take part in a low-key job or internship nearby, and enjoy being back at home.

This is certainly not the case for 2012 Miramonte graduate and current Northern Arizona University student Matthew Riggins. The 18-year-old forestry major only recently returned from a solo bicycling trip that started in Vancouver, Canada, and ended in Tijuana, Mexico. In total, Riggins covered about 2,000 miles in 37 days, covering all expenses with \$1,200.

Riggins, who had minimal experience biking prior to the trip, had originally planned a biking trip with his girlfriend from Flagstaff, Ariz., where he attends school, to the Pacific Northwest to see Washington and Oregon.

"The only experience I had [biking] was from riding to school in the morning," said Riggins. "I wanted to see where I wanted to work and I wanted to see that part of the country. I knew I wanted to work somewhere up there; I just wasn't sure where."

However, a twist of fate four days prior to the couple's planned departure date brought their breakup, along with the cancellation of the entire trip.

Riggins scrambled for a plane ticket home to San Francisco, but he wouldn't be home for long.

Riggins, who had spent his first semester of college studying abroad in Mexico, had recalled encountering bikers traveling from Canada to Panama, and was inspired to try a similar trip from Vancouver to San Francisco. So after purchasing biking shorts and a plane ticket to Canada, as well as attaching supply-filled bike bags onto his mountain bike, he was off.

"Without really knowing what I was doing or really having any experience at all I just kind of got on this plane to Vancouver," said Riggins. "I built my bike in the airport, was riding away from the airport, and the front tire of my bike literally exploded. I was like, 'What did I get myself into?'"

After a temporary patching job on his bike, Riggins rode what he refers to as the longest 30 miles of his life to a friend's house in Vancouver, where he stayed for several days and had his tire fixed before continuing to explore the Northwest. Among his stopping points were Nanaimo, Victoria, and Sydney in Canada, then San Juan Island, Anacortes, Cape Disappointment, and Port Townsend in Washington. Riggins rode along the

Hood Canal to Aberdeen, Wash., then continued to ride along the Pacific coast.

While Riggins said he did not see many other cyclists in Washington, in Oregon he encountered a large number of people biking the same route and continuing on to Mexico. After some persuasion from them, Riggins decided that he, too, was going to keep biking all the way to Tijuana. Unfortunately, he did not enjoy the southern half of the ride from San Francisco to Mexico nearly as much as he did the northern half, but he tried to embrace all parts of the experience.

"It was an incredible ride from Canada to San Francisco, but from San Francisco down [it was] super hot, there were just extraordinarily dangerous roads the entire way, no trees, and bad drivers," said Riggins. "It was a disappointment from what I thought it would be. But that's beside the point. I was doing it because I said I was going to do it. It was a challenge."

Riggins spent most of his money on food, as lodging proved to be extremely inexpensive. Thanks to two forums called couchsurfing.com and warmshowers.org, he was able to bathe and crash in houses of complete strangers. Riggins stayed in a hotel once or twice, but spent most of his nights camped in state parks.

Now back home in Orinda, Riggins says the most wonderful part of his trip was the generosity exhibited toward him by complete strangers, especially those that offered him food or lodging when they didn't have much themselves.

"Money gives people this image that they're better than [other] people, and people that had nothing were so incredibly generous to me," said Riggins. "When I was in Santa Monica, or Malibu, or nice places in Carmel, nobody talked to me. But when I was in small towns in rural areas, everybody wanted to know what I was doing, and that's when people bought me meals or let me sleep in their houses."

Having now become an avid biker, Riggins plans on biking 4,000 miles from Washington to Maine next summer.

"I'll probably plan a little bit, but not nearly as much as most people do," said Riggins. "I didn't really plan much before and it worked out beautifully for me."

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An Afternoon with the Archivist

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"Those are blank pieces of marble coming out of the Columbia quarry," says tombstone expert Mary-ellen Jones of the nearly 4-inch thick gravemarkers pictured here. Abnormally large, they are also unusual in that they were signed by their carvers. Jones believes that both were created by Hugh Coyle, her favorite artisan and that A. Taylor completed work on the stone at right, following Coyle's death.

Jones and Hammond met and talked about photography, California history and tombstones. "Two weeks later I started work at Bancroft."

Her first assignment was to read the 1870s-era works of the library's namesake, Hubert L. Bancroft. "Then, I was given the job of cataloging some material called, 'Bancroft's Dictations.'" Written in ink on letter-sized paper, these were handwritten interviews of the pioneer settlers still alive in Bancroft's day.

"The printed version doesn't do it," she says of the experience of holding history in one's hands. "I

never got over the sheer joy of looking at original manuscripts."

About five years in, she organized the papers of Charles Fayette McGlasham, the newspaperman who wrote the first account of the Donner Party tragedy. Prior to his approach, no survivor had been willing to talk because of the cannibalism, says Jones. "He actually interviewed survivors. ... He got them to talk." His book, "History of the Donner Party," was very well received.

"The thing that really takes you to your knees is to look at the Breen Diary." Kept by Patrick Breen while he and his family were trapped in the Sierra, it conveys their ordeal in sparse, but riveting detail.

Jones became a living authority on the Donner Party and, when it came time for PBS documentarians to retell the story, she was in the loop. Working as a consultant after retiring from The Bancroft, she was one of the few still trusted to handle McGlasham's collection and was recommended to filmmaker Ric Burns, brother of famed Civil War documentarian Ken Burns.

"He needed to see the Breen Diary," among other items. Using very small magnets, Jones carefully, temporarily affixed fragile materials from the collection on to a magnetic board, which was then seated on an easel for Burns to film. Afterward, he thanked Jones in the film's credits.

Today, she keeps busy as the editor of the nationally respected magazine, "The California Historian," and still gives presentations to groups around the state. Her photos have also been exhibited at galleries across California.

But her heart still clearly belongs to The Bancroft. Not long ago, while on her way home from an evening reception, she was struck once again by the building's beauty. Its lights burning brightly, the library was both a lantern illuminating the past — and a beacon beckoning future scholars and artists. "I was allowed to spend 50 years in that place," says Jones. "God, how lucky can you be?"

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