

## The Books I Carried

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“Hardship sells,” Pete remarked, his comment in response to my announcement that I was going to bicycle from Fairbanks to Valdez, Alaska, and at the midway portion of my trip, horseback ride over Hatcher Pass. Implied, my 22-day, 600-mile trek would, upon completion, make a good story. I, now 64, completed my last solo tour in 2002, bicycling the Great Divide Route from northern Montana to southern New Mexico. I took up long-distance horse trekking shortly thereafter. I was a fit horseback rider and a not-so-fit bicycle tourist.

I postponed last-minute trip preparations until June 10, 2020. Pete tuned up my mountain bike, and I pulled my panniers and bicycle trailer out of our gear cabin. I then gathered together essential and non-essential items. Essentials consisted of a toiletry bag, a bearproof food container, a repair kit, and cooking paraphernalia. Non-essentials consisted of two cardboard boxes containing hardcover and paperback books.

I stashed the heavier gear in my B.O.B. trailer and the lighter gear in my front panniers. The latter included a journal and a copy of Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. The title and first few pages were a readerly hook.

O’Brien writes about the objects that he and his Vietnam war buddies carried into battle, the essentials being a function of rank, mission, and field specialties, and the non-essentials being a function of personal wants, needs, and compulsions. For instance, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters and a photos of his girlfriend, Martha; Kiowa carried a

New Testament, a hatchet from his grandfather, and a pair of moccasins; Dave Jenson carried night vitamins high in carotene; Lee Strunk carried a slingshot; Rat Kiley carried brandy and M&M candies; Ted Lavender carried tranquilizers and pot; and Henry Dobbins carried his girlfriend's panty hose wrapped around his neck. A comparison came to mind. Alys Culhane was carrying 20 plus pounds of books.

Friends dropped me off on the outskirts of Fairbanks. There I set up basecamp in a cabin owned by Suzi Lozo. Suzi was the remaining member of what, thirty years previously, was a quasi-communal community. Her porch was enshrouded in mosquito netting, thus giving the mist-enshrouded surroundings an ethereal feeling. We sat in wicker chairs which were surrounded by geraniums and together, traipsed down memory lane.

Suzi was a homebody who hoarded furniture, clothing, bicycles, and vehicles. I was a traveler who eschewed possessions. Our one commonality was books. We perused thrift stores and returned home with boxes of books which we read, swapped, and further discussed.

Suzi's interest was piqued when I told her about my latest venture. I was currently salvaging books at the local recycling center and making them available to the general public. The paperbacks were to be shredded and the hardbacks were to be sent to the mill. Palmer, Alaska residents took up house cleaning when the Covid quarantine went into effect. Bags and boxes of books then began appearing in the VCRS entryway. By March 2020, the supply exceeded the demand. Come April, I decided to do an in-state bicycle tour, and distribute books. This way, I'd further promote the Bright Lights Book Project.

I was, I said, reading *The Things I Carried*, adding that like O'Brien's counterparts I too was on a mission. The American soldiers were were taking on the Communists and I was combatting illiteracy.

I set out at 11 a.m. the next morning. I alternated slapping at mosquitoes and wiping the rain off my glasses with my index finger. I cursed, for I'd erred in not having taken my overloaded bicycle for a test ride. A distinct front-end wobble was exacerbated by numerous potholes.

I coasted the mile downhill stretch to the Parks Highway and turned right. A mile or so later I turned right, onto the Old Nenana Highway. My destination, Old Ridge Trail Road, was seven miles distant. I walked the uphill and rode the downhill stretches, my jaw set, my shoulders rigid.

Old Ridge Trail Road was, to put it mildly, a quagmire. I slid sideways into a muddy rut and toppled over. I considered backtracking and borrowing one of Suzi's junkers. However, traveling by car would be akin to retreating from the front lines. I'd set out to pedal my wares by bicycle, and this was what I was going to do.

Sarah and Fran Bundtzen met me at the base of their driveway. The homesteader/artists reside in Ester in the summer and in the Goldstream Valley in the winter. Our friendship spanned twenty years; our commonality being northern bred ponies.

The two field botanists watched as I wheeled my bicycle and B.O.B into their bug shelter and wiped the mud off my face. I regained my composure and then rummaged through my trailer. "Here, these are for you two," I said, handing Fran two lavishly illustrated bird carving books, and Sarah three digital photography books. Fran's eyes grew wide when I added that I'd

recently salvaged a copy of *The Alaska Flora and Fauna*. This, she said, is THE guide for field Alaskan botanists.

I spent June 21, the summer solstice in Fran and Sarah's refurbished camper. Rain beat down on the metal roof as I resumed reading *The Things I Carried*. The next morning, Fran asked me why I was doing this trip. I told her what I'd told Suzi, that I was on a mission. When she asked of what sort, I said "Book promotion."

I said no more, for this would weaken my already shaky resolve. I also kept mum about drawing parallels between O'Brien's situation and my own since Fran hadn't read the book. However, the similarities were there. O'Brien, a reluctant Vietnam draftee, confesses that he's caught up in a "moral split." If he goes to Vietnam he'll support a morally reprehensible endeavor. But if he flees to Canada, he'll risk being labelled a "turncoat."

Like O'Brien, I feared having to shoulder emotional baggage. I'd left Pete to tend to my animals. Conversely, quitting now would indicate to family members and friends that I was a long-distance bicycle touring has-been.

The Bundtzens dropped me off on the Old Nenana Highway at midmorning. It was a short distance to the Parks Highway, the main thoroughfare between Fairbanks and Palmer. I'd rebalanced my load and left my heavy bicycle lock behind. However, the wobble was still present. I progressed, by walking up and riding down the roller coaster grade.

Skinny Dick's Halfway Inn is located halfway between Fairbanks and Nenana, a distance of 54 miles. I'd envisioned passing a handful of Westerns on to bar patrons. The Louis L'Amour books that I'd placed in the post office kiosk were gone the following day.

I slipped the straps of my N-95 mask behind my ears and entered the single-story dwelling. The dozen-or-so patrons glanced up at me and resumed talking. I told the bartender about the book project as he filled my water bottle. He returned my container, stood tall, and proclaimed, “lady, the customers here don’t come here to read. They come here to drink!” I backed out the door as the patrons nodded in agreement.

A passage from O’Brien’s came to mind as I later walked up yet another hill. O’Brien defined a “leg” or “grunt” as someone who is “humping it. In his words, “to carry something is to hump it, as when Lieutenant Jimmy Cross humped his love for Martha up the hills and through the swamps. In its intransitive form, to hump (means) to walk, or to march, but (this) implies burdens far beyond the transitive.” I, now chilled and humping books qualified for meta-transitive status.

I arrived in Nenana at 7 p.m. and made a beeline for the town campground. I paid my fee, showered, then perused the laundry room book selection. It was what we book trade experts call “thin. Several Jehovah Witness tracts and a handful of bodice-ripping romance novels were piled high on the windowsill. I left a copy of Madeleine L’Engle’s, *A Wrinkle in Time* and a dozen Bright Lights fliers beside a well-worn, 2005 edition of the *Alaska Milepost*.

The previous two day’s downpour continued. The out-of-state tourists were staying home. However, in-state travelers and truckers were taking advantage of the lull. I resumed the previous two days’ grind and maintained it for two more. I pedaled into the wind, stayed to the left of the rumble strip, and twisted my head to the right so as to avoid the drenching spray of passing semis. At night, I set up camp in deserted campgrounds.

Book distribution was a no-go for most establishments were either closed or boarded up. Even the Denali Park Lodge had a Closed due to Covid sign on the front door. My spirits lifted as the rain stopped and the sun appeared as I passed through what I dubbed “Denali-Land.”

Carlo Creek Cabins, located 13 miles beyond the Denali Park Road turnoff, was open. I grabbed a handful of fliers and entered the main office. If Martha Stewart became an Alaskan lodge owner, this is where she’d reside. Her middle-aged doppelganger wore a freshly pressed blouse and pants. I took in the smells of fresh coffee, baked goods, and clean laundry, then stepped back in order to spare her the combined smells of sweat and road grime. I was informed that the tent site fee was \$50.00 but that the shower facility was available to campers. “Too pricey,” I said.

I exited the lodge, slipped the fliers back into my pannier, and picked up my bicycle and trailer. The door behind me opened.

“Wait!” Martha yelled.

I turned in her direction.

“I won’t charge you tonight.”

I followed the well-coiffed lodge owner back into the lodge, slapped \$15.00 on the counter and remarked that this was the going rate for long-distance bicyclist tourists. She uncapped a Sharpie, circled the tent site area, and slid the campground map across the counter top. I grabbed it and hustled out the door.

I located the camping area, hung my moldy socks on the shelter railing, and sauntered back to the main office.

“This is for you and your customers,” I said, handing her a copy of *The Alaska Bicycle Touring Guide*.

“You write this?” she asked.

“Yes. I co-authored it with my husband, Pete.”

Martha thumbed through the book. I explained that this, the second edition, was thirty-plus years old so most of the contact information was out-dated.

“We’ll do a revision next year,” I said.

Martha handed me a business card and a towel, adding that I was welcome to use the lodge shower. I bounced down the lodge steps, for I’d raised her estimation of this bicycle tourist yet another notch. Perhaps my strategy would bode well for those following in my tire tracks.

It was 4 p.m., still pretty early. I decided to give Pete a call. Summarized: our animals were doing well. My attention wavered as he next provided me with a garden status report, for pulling weeds is not my forte.

I told him I’d set up camp at the Carlo Creek campground which was under new management. This place held fond memories for us both. We met in Denali Park in July, 1987 and attended the weekend-long Carlo Creek Music festival. I then spared no details in explaining to Pete that it was now a tourist trap. I hung up feeling unsettled, for I wasn’t sure if I’d gotten the facts correct. This was important; otherwise Pete might continue thinking that Carlo Creek had remained a community gathering place.

The importance of detail was on my mind, as I later read the chapter O’Brien’s book entitled “How to Tell a True War Story.” The writer, after considerable self-reflection

determines that “what seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way.” O’Brien’s definitional criteria seemed to me to be applicable to narratives in which the story teller is attempting to convey a specific feeling, emotion, point of view. Altering details allows the writer to convey certain truths. This was my intent. A second call, in which Pete empathized with me about the motives of the new ownership affirmed that I’d gotten my point across.

The wind abated as, at noon the next day, I veered left in order to check out the defunct Igloo Motel. I sat on the rickety steps of the Igloo Filling Station and there gnawed on a carrot. I was down to the orange nub when, moments later, a motorist parked his van next to a concrete barrier, disembarked, and ambled across the gravel parking lot. He was wearing a beige shirt, pants, and canvas hat. A bulky beige camera bag pulled his weight to the left, giving him a lopsided appearance.

I felt giddy, this being a combination of my having eaten a light lunch and being in such an surreal setting. This was why I asked the man if he was on safari. The fellow, refusing to be taken aback, said no.

“Where are you from and what are you doing here?” I asked.

“I’m from England. I’m a photographer. And you?”

“I’m doing a property assessment. I’m planning on purchasing the Igloo and turning it into a bookstore.”

“Great idea,” the photographer said, taking several steps backwards.

I circled behind him, this way making his retreat more difficult. I told him about the Bright Lights Book Project, and added that the recycling center warehouse currently contained



thousands of used books on all subjects, including photography. I then pulled a flier out of my pocket and thrust it into his hands.

“ I’ll check out this place on my way to Anchorage,” he said, inching back in the direction of his vehicle. I left the Igloo feeling energized for I’d further promoted the book project.

My afternoon ride brought to mind what I most enjoyed about bicycle touring. The sun shone brightly, and a tailwind pushed me southward. I gazed in awe at Alaska Range and made note as the small spindly spruce gave way to thicker stands of birch. A fox darted across the road and in the sky above, two hawks played on the updrafts.

A succession of orange road signs came into view. The flag person grew larger as I approached Parks Highway DMZ. When finally, we were six-feet apart, I was told that I’d be transported to the far end of the site in the bed of the pilot car.

I asked her if she had any water. She walked over to her truckbed, and returned with a plastic bottle. I consumed the contents in record time.

The woman was petite, blonde, and quick moving. My reflection materialized in her white-rimmed sunglasses. My sun-sensitive lower lip was blistered and my glasses were askew. “Helmet hair,” I said, tapping my orange bicycling helmet. “Helmet hair,” she said, tapping her white hardhat.

We’d crossed paths five years previously. Haley spent several months working on the a road construction project in my neighborhood. We picked up conversationally where we’d left off; the woof, woof, woof of her barking dogs and the eep, eep, eep, eep of road machinery being incidental distractions.

The pilot car pulled over to the left side of the road. Haley held my bicycle. I rummaged through a cardboard box then handed her a copy of W. Bruce Cameron's *A Dog's Purpose*. Together, we hoisted my bicycle and B.O.B. into the truck bed. Then, with a wave of my arm, I let the driver know that I was situated. Haley, increasingly at the distance, grew smaller and smaller.

I arrived at the Hatcher Pass turnoff, turned left, and twenty miles distant, set up camp. Scottish poet Robert Burns' adage "The best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry" came to mind the following morning. I awoke to the sound of a rain/hail combo pummeling my tent fly. I peered out the tent door and groaned, for Hatcher Pass was enshrouded in a low-lying cloud cover. It was snowing on the summit, so bicycling over the pass was now a no-go.

Pete met me at the intersection of the Parks Highway and the Hatcher Pass turnoff. I returned home on June 28, seven days after leaving Fairbanks, and followed through with my original plan, which was to horseback ride the sixteen miles over the pass on June 30<sup>th</sup>.

I prepared for part two of my bicycle trek in a more judicious fashion. I jettisoned one of two inner tubes, several packages of dehydrated beans (circa 2011) and an additional fuel cartridge. This left ample room for an additional dozen paperbacks, *The Things They Carried* included. My itinerary again included post offices, libraries, roadhouses, and campgrounds.

I did a test ride beforehand. I rationalized my still-heavy load by telling myself that I didn't have far to go. The distance from Palmer to Glennallen on the Glenn Highway is 136 miles, the distance from Glennallen to Valdez on the Richardson Highway is 120 miles.

I left home on Saturday, July 11 after the day's rain abated. I'd clandestine camp on the far side of Sutton which is 20 miles from home. I was a few miles beyond Sutton when a tall

man pushing a small wheelbarrow appeared on the left-hand side of the road. The Ichabod Crane lookalike was my friend Bill Schmidtkunz. He was spreading manure that I'd given him on a strip of land adjoining the Glenn Highway. His ongoing gardening efforts were paying off: wildflowers were in abundance.

I stayed for dinner and crashed on Bill's couch. We talked about our recent collaborative endeavor as he prepared dinner. I'd dubbed him Bright Lights Book Project Volunteer Co-Cordinator the previous December. The poet/carpenter/handy-man's home resembled mine in that poetry, art, and literature books covered all flat surfaces. Bill's job description included distribution; his target audience was Anchorage homeless shelters and rescue mission residents. Covid put a damper on his efforts. We agreed that it was time to get the books back into circulation.

Bill cooked up brown rice and made a garden salad. I pitched in some of my rations, a can of tuna, sundried tomatoes, a chocolate bar, and trail mix included.

A look of mock surprise crossed Bill's face when I mentioned that I was rereading *The Things They Carried*. We both knew that this book was a literary powder keg. In 2010, I taught a community-based writing/reading course entitled Memory, Memoir, and Memorabilia. The evening we were to discuss O'Brien's book, Bill Long, Bill Schmidtkunz's father-in-law, swept the book off the table with his gnarled hand, raised his boney 6"6 frame to its full height, and sputtered "this book is full of lies." Schmidtkunz then reminded me that I switched gears by talking with the other students about the role of the narrator.

"Yes. I agreed with O'Brien that the Vietnam War was unjust and immoral. But I didn't want this to be the sole focus of our discussion."

Schmidtkunz, taken aback by my outburst, fell back in his chair, then after recovering his balance, leaned forward and shoved the pot of chamomile tea in my direction.

“Drink this, it’s calming,” he said.

“Wait,” I replied. I yanked my copy of *The Things we Carried* out of my pannier and opened the book to the chapter entitled “Notes.” Schmidtkunz listened, as I again noted that O’Brien’s point of reference is a former war buddy. Norman Bowker writes him a 17-page letter in which he suggests that O’Brien write about being a civilian.

“See? Here,” I said, citing the passage in question. “Bowker’s letter “hits (O’Brien) hard” because he mistakenly thought he’d made “the shift from war to peace.” After, he attempts to make sense of what happened by writing about it. Schmidtkunz affirmed what I was pointing out, which is that O’Brien’s use of metanarration affirms that past memories are an integral component of memoir.

Schmidtkunz then reminded me of something that I’d forgot. The following week Long came to class with an excerpt of a memoir-in-progress, one in which he’d written about Antarctica’s Mt Vinson. And yes, his overview contained meta-narration.

I bid Schmidtkunz goodnight and crawled into my sleeping bag. Our discussion brought to light a truism. Book talk is intellectual fodder. And readers, deprived of this form of sustenance, remain hungry.

I was roused at 7 a.m. by the squabbling of ravens. I dressed, ate an apple, rolled my bicycle and trailer out of the nearby greenhouse, and repacked my gear. The most dangerous portion of my trek, the 35-mile stretch to Hicks Creek lay ahead. It was winding, narrow, shoulderless, and later in the day, heavily trafficked.

I stopped often, gazing in awe at the swiftly flowing Matanuska River. At 10 a.m., the traffic markedly increased. The surge coincided with the return of the wobble. I deliberated about calling it quits but dismissed this idea; a slight shimmy wasn't going to deter me from finishing my trek.

The next few days summarized: sunny skies, slight headwinds, and innumerable ups and downs. I humped it, well aware that that Hicks Creek was 92 miles from the Richardson Highway turnoff. I alternated riding and walking the Puritan Creek, Caribou Creek, and Sheep Mountain passes. And yes, I yelled Eureka! upon arriving at the aptly named summit.

I struck literary paydirt on the outskirts of Glennallen twenty-four hours later. I bounded up the stairs of the Copper Valley Community Library then made note of a "CLOSED" sign on the door. I tossed a handful of fliers in the book drop. Dismay turned to elation upon discovering the Free Books shelf. The selection included copies of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, and Walter M. Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. I knew that the subject matter in these books centers around the adverse consequences of book banning. I was cheered, for these writers affirmed what I knew to be true, that book banning is a precursor of societal collapse.

An hour later I turned onto the Richardson Highway. I was now 120 miles from Valdez. I sang Beatles tunes as a tailwind pushed me up and over the undulating hills.

My euphoria lasted until noon the following day. I was moving at a good clip when my bicycle bucked several times, then lurched to a stop. I dropped both feet to the ground, dismounted, and pinched my rear tire. I'd have to fix the flat. But where? The shoulder was

narrow, the traffic fast, and the shrubbery dense. I scanned the Richardson Highway portion of my *Milepost* pages. The Grizzly Lodge was two miles distant.

I walked in seemingly slow motion. The midday heat, the roar of passing motorcycles, the thump, thump, thump of my tire, and the goddam wobble were all conspiring against me. I pushed my bicycle up the steep driveway, and at the top looked around. There were two junkers in the driveway and a CLOSED sign in the grimy window. A feral cat scooted across my path. The place gave me the willies. I leaned my bicycle against the edge of a rickety picnic table and sighed.

My repair bag contained a patch kit, a set of Allen keys, a Presta valve convertor, and a four-way bolt remover. Pete had assembled my kit, going minimalist in response to my insistence that I travel light. My having parted company with three tire irons added to my angst. I'd used them to open lid of my bearproof container and inadvertently left them behind.

I disconnected my trailer, removed my front panniers, flipped the bicycle over, unscrewed the rear axle, and pried the tire off the rim, using two pieces of scrap metal that I found on the table. I replaced the tube with the one I had on hand. The rear axle of my B.O.B. was bent; perhaps this was the cause of the wobble.

The hair on my neck stood on end. I glimpsed a shadow out of the corner of my eye. The shadow's owner was large, very large. The fellow seemed to be looking two ways simultaneously. He hauled himself down the creaky porch steps, lumbered down the driveway, checked the roadside mailbox, turned around, and lumbered back up the driveway. He then reentered the lodge and closed the door. I skittered down the driveway, pushing my bicycle before me.

The toughest part of my trek, the ride to the top of 2,678-foot Thompson Pass, lay ahead. It was eight miles from the base to the summit. I pedaled a hundred yards, then after almost colliding with a guard rail, got off my bicycle and began walking, slowly placing one foot in front of the other. It was overcast, cold, and and windy. I occasionally did an about-face. The wind buffeted my back as I admired the alternate view.

Vehicles passed, the drivers oblivious to the small figure pushing a heavy load up a steep hill. The trucks included a Crowley Oil semi; it had passed me several times in the past few days. My snail's pace enabled me to take in the vast landscape, the most striking feature being the Cal Worthington Glacier. The harsh wind blowing off the icefield's north side took my breath away.

I took refuge in a roadside shelter at noon and devoured a package of dehydrated apricots. I yelled to a passing bicycle tourist, hoping that perhaps his bulk would serve as a wind block. Head down, he hammered up the steep incline.

Slow-moving clouds and the absence of trees affirmed that I was closing in on the pass. I resumed riding and passed a mile-long line of vehicles. I presumed that I'd follow the pilot car after cresting the summit. Bump, buck, bump, buck. I at first denied that I had a second flat tire. However, I accepted this as fact when I saw that the rear tire was wedged between the rear brakepads and the rim. I gritted my teeth and dragged my bicycle and gear over to where the flag person was standing. She informed me that that the Blueberry Lake Recreation Area turnoff was 50 yards away, then held the traffic line up so that I could safely make the turn. I focused my gaze on the distant lake and pushed my bicycle to my new day's end destination, the Blueberry Lake campground.

I rested my bicycle on far side of the shelter area and pitched my tent on the near side. I'd rationed my stove fuel but midway through dinner preparations, ran out of gas. Dinner subsequently consisted of half-cooked pasta and semi-hard dehydrated tomatoes. I chewed slowly and watch a mid-sized RV pull into an adjacent site. A leashed dog emerged from the vehicle, and was followed by a couple in their late sixties.

I met up with the pair at the water pump. Rather than ask the usual question, that is "when and for how long will you be running your generator?" I offered them some trail mix. I later realized that my interest in their dog prompted an attitudinal about-face. I asked, and was told that Kyra was not, as I presumed, a miniature husky, but rather a Sheba Inu, a Japanese breed. Kyra affirmed my observation that she was from hunting stock by fixating on a squirrel hole next to the pump.

We talked dogs for a bit, then introduced ourselves. Brian and Judy were Anchorage residents on vacation. He was tall, lanky, and talkative. She was short, compact, and reticent. Brian shifted from one leg to the other. Judy remained grounded.

Judy's fleece coat logo read "Alaska Humanities Forum" which meant that she too had academic leanings. And so, our conversation was one in which we both repeatedly asked, "do you know so and so?"

Brian inched his way toward my campsite, in hopes of checking out my gear. Judy remarked it was getting late and gravitated in the direction of the camping fee kiosk. I followed Brian. There I learned that the pair were, like me, outdoorsy. His aside, that he'd previously worked as a bicycle mechanic, further opened conversational floodgates. Words rushed out of my mouth as I focused on weather, terrain, and traffic-related issues.



Brian looked with interest at my bicycle and B.O.B. I picked my repair kit bag and shook the contents onto the picnic table.

“Got a flat?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“You have the tools to repair it?”

“Mostly. I lost my tire irons.”

“How are you going to get the tire off the rim?”

I showed Brian the scrap metal that I’d used in place of the irons. He picked up my pump. I picked up my tube. My thought, that he’d give me an assist, was short lived. A squirrel emerged from the water pump hole. Brian set the pump back on the table and ran to retrieve Kyra. I set the tube on the table. Kyra caught the squirrel and flipped it in the air, snapping its neck. Brian, Judy, and dog re-entered the RV.

I resumed eating. I’d have accepted Brian’s offer of an assist, for then the onerous task would be complete. But I would have been deprived of a sense of self-accomplishment had he intervened.

I decided to fix the flat in the morning for I’d do a better job if I was rested. I had, before embarking on my 1980 cross-country tour, vowed to arrive at my final destination under my own power. There’d been no exceptions. Chaucer was right: the tongue returns to the aching tooth. This analogy came to mind as, that night, I repeatedly went over each and repair-related angle.

I crawled out of my tent at 4 a.m. and picked up where, in my near dream state, I’d left off. I donned my headlight, filled the two tubes with air and submersed them individually in the

nearby lake water. Two streams of tiny bubbles indicated that both tubes had valve leaks. I knew from previous experience that valve stem leaks are impossible to patch. No matter, I'd be the first to complete this task.

I calculated that my patch kit was twenty years old. It belonged to Pete who'd then worked as a bicycle mechanic at Fairbanks-based Beaver Sports. I squeezed the glue out of the tube, rolled it into a half-dozen tiny balls, and squished them around the base of valve stem number one. I pumped the tube to full capacity, correlating the rate of my breathing with the number of pump strokes. I held the leaky tube to my cheek, felt, then heard, escaping air hiss. "Nooooo," I wailed.

Brian and Kyra emerged from the RV at first light and zigzagged over to my shelter area. "I have two valve leaks," I said. Brian remarked that I must have had low air pressure, the inference being that I'd been lax in checking my tire pressure.

Kyra pulled his owner back in the direction of the squirrel hole. Brian pulled the the dog back in the direction of the RV. Moments later, he reappeared at my picnic table, this time minus dog. I announced that I was going to fill the tire with sand.

"We'll give you a lift to town," Brian said. A dark cloud rolled in and hung above my head when fifteen minutes later, Brian helped me load my bicycle, B.O.B. and front panniers into the RV. My mood brightened as the 1977 Chinook chugged down the far side of Thompson Pass, for I foresaw that bicycling down the narrow, winding, rain-slick road would have been foolhardy.

**To here** My mood brightened further as Judy and I talked. It so happened that her primary literary interest was also personal narrative. My words gushed forth as I elaborated on

the challenges inherent to promoting the Bright Lights Book Project while bicycle touring.

When finally, I'd had my say, Judy asked me if I was going to write about my adventure. I said no, I didn't think so, adding that "nothing out of the ordinary occurred." Judy and Brian both laughed, the inference being that I'd contradicted myself twice. I'd told him one version of my story, and her, another.

The couple accompanied me to Mr. Prospector's Sporting Goods Store where Brian assisted me in selecting a new tube. We then backtracked, the couple dropping me off at the the City of Valdez Campground. The locals, who were partying down, kept me awake. I finished *The Things they Carried* then flipped through the pages of my tomato sauce stained copy. I focused on the fate of the characters, that during the course of my journey, had endeared themselves to me. Ted Lavender was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe; Kiowa was hit by a mortar shell and died in a cesspool swamp; Lee Strunk stepped on a mortar round and had his leg blown off; and Rat Kiley was shipped off to Japan after being wounded; and Norman Bowker committed suicide.

I, like O'Brien, I'd lived to tell my story. I'd humped my essential and non-essential load six hundred-or-so miles, averaging fifty-miles a day. Admittedly, my story didn't compare to his in terms of the degree of hardship. However, there was a worthy parallel. The things O'Brien and his characters carried shaped their identities as soldiers. The gear I carried shaped my identity as a reader and bicyclist.

I bicycled the final five miles into Valdez the next day. I was pleased for I'd completed a somewhat challenging trip, mostly under my own power. Mostly. I could (and did) rationalize

the exception to my ironclad rule. My riding through construction zone would have been an iffy proposition. The Chinook then, was a pilot car of sorts.

I spent the afternoon looking for possible book distribution sites. The Keystone Motel was one of the few businesses that was open. I entered and rang the front desk bell. The clerk, a pencil thin fellow in his 20's, sauntered over to the counter. I told him about the book project, then suggested that he give the last of the books I was carrying on to motel customers.

This, he said was a good idea. I retrieved my cardboard box, placed *The Things They Carried* on top, and set it on the counter. "This is a good book. You should read it," I said, setting O'Brien's book off to the side. He thanked me, picked it up, and began reading. Affirmed once again, good reads connect people, sometimes in unexpected and surprising ways.