

A Winter Sojourn: Setting Off for the Gulf of Mexico on a Bike in the Dead of Winter

Doug Keil

Doug Keil took a road trip on a bike to the Gulf of Mexico. He planned to take two months to arrive and one month to get back to Northern Iowa. He slept on the ground for seventy-five to eighty nights and slept in motels for another ten to fifteen nights. He burned forty-six and one half candles on the road for heat that winter, January-March. Looking back, this trek gave him a much deeper knowledge of our culture and the people who inhabit this North American Continent.¹

Late in December I left, starting late in the day. I had all in order. Slowly, the bloated overloaded bike coasted down the farm place hill, south. Temps between 20s and 30s, calm winds, roads totally ice-covered. Could barely ride at all, heavy folds of fabric strapped on my back, cardboard tube across my upper shoulders, coils of knotted nylon rope crisscrossing my chest over the duck feather coat. Heavy insulated boots sluggishly turning silver cranks. Large amber-colored mittens clutched the handlebars that held a rather ominous looking two-foot-long bolted stick wrapped with leather lace so as to secure a razor-edged machete. How slowly those boots, legs, and cranks turned—the pistons and rods of this strange looking beast.

I must have looked a sight, an animal, a soldier off to war. I was leaping into a cold, dark abyss alone. I was hungry for the gem, the shining jewel of the mystical snowy northlands. In preparation I had conditioned myself to accept the cold, wet, and dark. At one point I did my wash in the dead of night, poured cold water on my clothes, wrung them out, put them back on, crawled into a blanket and tried to sleep. I figured I had best learn to face this now, cause later I would surely meet such hellish conditions on the road with no warm place to escape. I wanted deeper knowledge of nature, life, or something. It was there, I thought, finally within reach.

Dusk a mere two miles down the road found me by a corn bin and a slough. A mittened hand quickly yanked out the wooden peg of my winter travel kit. Out of the red bag came the blue tarp and blanket spread on cold ice-capped snow cover, with my large tent flung nearby, unassembled on snow. Sitting there cross-legged, the cornstalks mere skeletons poking through the snow, I could sense the frozen dirt underneath it all. Being dark at five o'clock, the thought of sleeping about fifteen long hours scared me. What if the wind came up with the temps falling to below zero? Could I really make it? It

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dawned on me, the life of summer was truly gone. All living things were either dead, gone, or they had crawled inside of themselves, leaving more phantoms floating around. Inside, I panicked. I gave up, just stashed the stuff in an old shed, and quickly pedaled home in utter defeat.

It wasn't until late morning, New Year's Day that I tried again. Somehow from the confines of a warm, friendly building, talking to a friend, I finally found the courage to do it! I just blanked out my mind and turned off my feelings. I silently slithered off on this brave or stupid thing. Calm winds, temps between 20 and 30 degrees, about a foot of snow cover capped with ice. With all my clothes, I felt like a bloated soldier. Progress was so very, very slow on these ice-covered roads. Two miles from home I passed the spot where earlier I had failed, only now I was unthinking, unfeeling, a mere mass of flesh.

That bike—I was married to it. How I loved that tiny machine. We had been from Jersey to California as one, in a perfect union. Now it was simply time for something at a deeper level.

Meeting people on the road, it just didn't register. Surely, they were thinking: *Why would anyone be riding a bicycle in the dead of winter?* But I was thinking: Surely, they were trapped in their warm, metal, cocoons. It's what the prison of winter does to individuals. Cuts them off from everything.

I quickly assembled my tarp and crammed the blanket and two black bags inside. Got candles burning in the stick-holder as I sat cross-legged under the blanket, turned into an igloo. Those two tiny candle flames at my feet got me warm. Warm, do you hear? Warm and relaxed without working at it or shivering. I was an Eskimo! Such a powerful feeling traveling this simple way in the frozen land.

I camped concealed from the road by piles of crushed rock near naked tree stems. Very pretty that blue tarp, as it glowed from flickering candlelight against a backdrop of white snow, timeless, wild.

1. In memory of the author's parents, Palmer and Margaret Jane Keil.

Years ago, working at a factory, living in a house, my winter bike ride to work had revealed the snow as beautiful. After a blizzard, it was eye-popping virgin splendor. The colors of a rainbow revealed by prismatic ice crystals, snowflakes whipped up and sculpted by Arctic winds into bizarre forms to rival, even outdo, human architecture. It was beautiful here, too, but when I woke in the early morning with the ever-present cold dampness underneath me, I wondered what I had gotten myself into, the snow simply becoming white, cold, wet crud.

With daylight came one more cloudy, dreary day. I sat up cross-legged, pulled the blanket over me, got flames burning, and just sucked up all the heat I could for half an hour, trying to get the courage to roll up and tie gear on the bike at the worst time of day, exposing myself, losing body heat.

I never got tired of breathing cold, crisp, clean air, so pure it was as stimulating as a drug. Sitting in the blue tarp at night, I was cramped, only had three workable positions to spend fifteen hours in damp conditions, yet I was warm. I was a king, do you see it? To the outside world, I was a homeless bum, but I was surviving the awesome dark season with little or nothing. No permanent dwelling with foundation. No furnace. No camper or even a car. For each thing shed, I was freed at another level. I was tranquil in the eye of a tornado, watching people around me fight the dark winds of the season. So free, simple, and easy this was.

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Here in this open prairie, everything was held in the iron jaws of cold. Nothing was exempt. All things had crawled inside themselves; even the cries of the birds were muffled. The crippling silence made people seem more spirit than flesh. They were as spirits of the mystic north. Things had a hollow ominous sound—the buzz of a chainsaw, the lonely sound of a metal ring banging the top of a flagpole in the frigid air. Even the turning of those cranks, and the tiny “tinkle, tinkle” of little metallic bells on my gray coat, banging on the frame of the bike in time with pumping legs. Winter is a prison. No one exempt. But I was traveling through it all—a timeless human being inching his way through it all. I was a king.