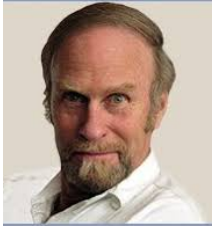


Walking Across America on His Hands



By Frosty Wooldridge

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"Courage is one thing. A sense of purpose another. When you put them together in one human being, the world can be changed." –John Brown

By the mid 1970's, Viet Nam's stranglehold had loosened its grip on America. Our crippled country was trying to heal itself as wounded veterans limped home. The more unfortunate were stuffed into hospitals. My Army military duty was spent working with amputees and burn patients.

Afterwards, I returned to teaching.

That summer of 1984, I pedaled through heavy traffic for the beginning of my coast to coast bicycle adventure. The Los Angeles smog choked me for 100 miles into the Mojave Desert. After crossing the Colorado River, I breathed easier when the brown cloud flowed south toward Phoenix. I pedaled into cleaner air in the mountains. Climbing steep grades took half the day while coasting down the backside took only 45 minutes.

In New Mexico, I crossed the continental divide and descended into the desert on Route 380. With a blazing sun overhead, I struggled along the two-lane pavement. Sweat dripped from my face and arms. Every breath crowded my mouth with air as dry and hot as cotton balls. Heat waves rippled over the pavement as I descended further into the barren landscape. The

thermometer hit 103 degrees by the time I was ten miles out of Roswell, New Mexico. With no aliens in sight, I kept going.

(Sandi and Frosty on the Columbia River Gorge of Lewis & Clark Trail)



Ahead, I noticed a lone figure walking along the left side of the road. It was hard imagining how anyone could be walking down the highway in that torrid heat.

"I wonder what that guy's doing walking in this heat?" I said to myself. "Looks like he's got a dog with him too."

"That isn't a dog," I gasped seconds later, doubting my eyes, and straining harder to make out what I saw.

It was another man walking on his hands. Within a few seconds, I found out why. His legs were missing.

Less than forty yards away, the lone figure was a man reading a book, walking beside another man walking on his hands. A camper van was parked on the shoulder a half mile ahead. I rode up even with them. Something inside just made me stop and lay my bike in the gravel.

I couldn't help crossing the road, knowing that whoever this

man was, he possessed inconceivable courage. What was he doing out here walking on his hands in the desert? He saw me and stopped. He lowered his body down to the ground, resting it on a leather pad that covered his two severed legs just below the groin. His Paul Bunyan upper arms led down to his hands, which grasped two rubber pads. Sweat soaked his T-shirt. His dark hair framed a tanned, round face punctuated by a pair of clear brown eyes.

"Hi, how ya' doin'?" I said, approaching with my hand extended. "My name is Frosty."

"Glad to meet you," he said shaking my hand. "I'm Bob Wieland."

"Pleasure to meet you," I said. "I have to say, Bob, I'm more than a bit curious seeing you out here in the desert."

"The same could be said about you," he said. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm riding my bicycles across America."

"That makes two of us," Bob added. "I'm walking across. I'd bike but my legs are too short for the pedals."

His humor was natural. We bantered a few minutes about the weather. Bob gave me a short history of his journey. His friend drove the car ahead and came back to walk with him. Bob lost his legs in a grenade explosion in Viet Nam. I asked him when he had started.

"I've been out 19 months and have completed 980 miles," he said. "At my speed, I can finish this adventure in three more years, maybe less."

"Why are you doing it?" I asked.

"I want Americans to know what wars do to people," he said. "Besides that, there's a lot of adventure out here on the

road. I suppose I could sit back and get fat watching TV for the next fifty years, but I want to do something with my life. I want to make a difference. I have to make do with what I have left. You know the saying, you only go around once."

"You have my greatest admiration," I said, shaking his hand again. "Guess I better get moving."

"Take care," Bob said. "Have a good ride. I'll get there one of these days."

Turning away from that amazing human being, tears filled my eyes. I started crying half way across the road. What he was attempting staggered my imagination. My friends thought I was nuts taking a transcontinental bicycle trip, but they had no understanding of how easy I had it compared to Bob Wieland. Miles and years down the road, that moment colors my mind as vividly as the day it happened.

Most human beings have handicaps in one way or the other—physical or psychological. What's important is how they handle their limitations. He concentrated on what he could do, not on what he couldn't do. Instead of giving up, Bob pushed forward into the unknown not only determined to succeed, but expecting to succeed.

George Bernard Shaw celebrated people like Wieland when he wrote, "This is the true joy of living, spending your years for a purpose recognized by yourself as a right one...to be used up when they throw you on the scrap heap of life. To have been a force of nature instead of a selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

Bob Wieland pushed himself through 3,500 miles of hardship that few people could comprehend. He gutted his way up mountains, sweated his way across deserts, and fought through raging storms. Every labored breath drew him closer to his goal. Along the way, he saw his share of sunrises and sunsets.

He breathed free the sweet and succulent breezes of life. With every human being he met, Bob Wieland inspired and transformed them with his quest. Along the way, he was shown the opposite of war—in human kindness.

After three years, eight months, and six days, Bob Wieland reached the Atlantic Ocean, succeeding in his quest to walk on his hands coast-to-coast across America. There may be no greater triumph over tragedy than Bob Wieland's will to live his life with purpose, power and meaning.

He is an inspiration to all of humanity.

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E-Mail Frosty: frostyw@juno.com