



Painting skills aren't a Bike Aid requirement, but they come in handy for Victoria Hackett and Shelley Preston (on ladder in foreground). The group helped a disabled Minnesota farmer who needed to paint his house in order to sell it.

of them have never pedaled a bike farther than the neighborhood mall. And forget that old adage, as 21-year-old Siobhan O'Brien, a senior in journalism and photography at Loyola College (Baltimore), learns, you *can* forget how to ride a bike.

Traveling through the West, the riders find that sometimes the route itself is the attraction: the small rustic towns with names like Three Forks and Big Timber and the vast stretches of pristine nothingness between. Mostly, though, it's the people who make the trip worthwhile, like the Native American teenagers at the Crow Agency reservation in Montana who lead the weary bikers to a cool swimming hole, and the people of Hysham, Montana, who invite the cyclists to ride their bikes in the Fourth of July parade.

In Richardson, North Dakota, the bikers spend the night at the Assumption Abbey, the guests of 35 Benedictine monks. Their stay includes a vespers

service, a tour of the wine cellar, and serenity. "The overwhelming sense is peace," 23-year-old Marcia Miquelon, a 1988 University of Virginia graduate, says of the abbey. "At times it gets so hectic on the road, trying to keep up this relentless pace. And suddenly here's this oasis, this quiet abbey in the middle of nowhere."

Their stay isn't totally silent, though. Miquelon gets into a discussion with a young monk named John about commercialism in American society. "He was really interested in what we'd seen," she says, describing their talk later. Before the bikers leave, Brother John tells her he'd like to join the group next year and ride part of the route.

As they ride on, the bikers meet the press and make presentations to community organizations. They discuss their travels and perform a skit they've written about the shortage of clean drinking water in third-world countries.

Some of their encounters are less formal. Take one early Sunday morning, as Hackett and Diane Swartz, a recent Duke graduate, pull into a town called New England, North Dakota, looking for a place to eat. They settle on Arrowhead Lanes, a combination bowling alley/cafe. Their entrance provokes some neck-raising; apparently, few of the denizens of New England go bowling in pink T-shirts and Lycra biking shorts.

After Hackett and Swartz enjoy the huge 99-cent breakfast special, they talk the owner, a grizzled guy named Ron, into opening a lane. He volunteers to keep score. Soon, the sporting contest turns into a seminar about the ODN. Ron's initial reaction seems to be nothing more than polite curiosity, but on Bike-Aid you learn how to exploit people's curiosity.

Swartz turns out to be an expert exploiter. "There's this great project in Zimbabwe," she begins at a break in the game. Other customers wander over to snigger at the women's bowling skills (or lack thereof), and they end up listening to her spiel.

After the game, as the two women get ready to leave, they mention one of Bike-Aid's dollar campaigns that raises money a dollar at a time for a homeless shelter in Washington, D.C. Many of the patrons reach into their purses or wallets and pull out singles. But the taciturn Ron—after having made Swartz and Hackett fork over \$2.98 to bowl—comes back from the cash register with a \$10 bill. "Keep riding," he says, handing them the donation, "and keep up the good work."

The trip to Arrowhead Lanes gives birth to a new group-within-the-group: the Cafe Crawlers. I decide to ride with these folks for two important reasons—they ride slowly and they stop often to eat. Cafe crawling serves many essential functions; the three Crawlers tell me over lunch at the bustling Coffee Cup Cafe in Mazeppa, Minnesota. It pro-