

ON THE ROAD

DYKES AND BIKES— A LOT OF BIKES

The Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic is the biggest day of the year for a lesbian-owned RV park

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by Joyce Batten

On Saturday, June 22, the morning was cool and overcast, perfect for a bike ride. River Oaks RV Park, 60 miles north of Portland off I-5, was empty but for a few "permanents" and two families in for a softball tournament. The biggest business day of the year was beginning quietly near Vader, Wash.

In Seattle, 10,000 bicyclists were starting their annual two-day ride to Portland.

Millie Norton and Dar Osborne, owners of River Oaks, got up around 7 am and lingered over coffee. Then the cups went into the sink and the women went outside. They had work to do.

They were booked up for that night and had been for three months. Last year the Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic had taken them by surprise. Today they were going to be ready.

Clean liners went into emptied trash cans. The restrooms were cleaned and fully stocked. Full rolls of toilet paper replaced partial rolls. Paper towel dispensers were filled to capacity. Once the riders started arriving, the restrooms and showers would be in steady use for at least four hours.

Of course, they'd be able to check the women's bathroom. But for the men's, they'd have to send in a scout.

After they finished with the restrooms, Millie and Dar rearranged picnic tables, setting some out in the central lawns for the tenters. They went at it together and were ready for visitors in little more than an hour.

Millie and Dar have been going at everything together for 22 years. Ever since buying the RV park 18 months ago, they've shared a job as well as a home and all the other aspects of a life together. Congenial and courteous with each other and genuinely friendly, the pair has managed to turn their love of people and hospitality into a demanding job that may well qualify as a lifestyle.

Before they bought River Oaks, they used to cook.

"You can't," Millie said. "They interrupt you. The next thing you know, something's burned. We had to give it up."

They eat a lot of sandwiches.

This was Millie and Dar's second summer at River Oaks and their second Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic. Sponsored by the Cascade Bicycle Club of Seattle, the 17th annual race, known as the STP, put 10,000 riders on the road that Saturday morning beginning at 5 am at Seattle's Kingdome. The first of them would be coasting into River Oaks early in the afternoon.

But long before the riders come, their support people arrive. In RVs, station wagons or compact cars, these friends and families of the riders come early and set up camp. They pitch tents, set out clean clothes, start dinner. They stroll the park. They visit. They may even fish.

The first support vehicle hit River Oaks at about 8:30 in the morning.

It was an old gold station wagon with two teenage boys in it.

They were part of Millie and Dar's largest party: one water and electric hookup and 24 tents. After Dar showed them where to park, they started putting up tents. Then the wind picked up and it began to feel like rain.

The families and friends arrived from time to time all morning. They came in campers, trailers, RVs, trucks, cars, vans and one motor home. They parked, set up tents and made themselves comfortable.

By noon the wide lawn in front of Millie and Dar's house was full of recreation: badminton, soccer, Frisbee. The players were the kids in bike support groups and other kids there for the softball tournament in Toledo.

River Oaks RV Park is fronted by a weathered split-rail fence interrupted by the entrance and exit ends of a wide graveled drive that curves around a broad central lawn at the front of the park. This circular drive forks at the west and east



Millie Norton (left) and Dar Osborne

curves.

The west fork runs beside the fence line to Millie and Dar's home and office. The east fork parallels the west past a rented modular home, then runs past Millie and Dar's house, and on down a gradual hill to the campsites and the Cowlitz River.

Chuck and Marsha live in the modular home with their three small children, a dog, a mother cat and three kittens. By 1:30 pm, four-year-old Jessica and three-year-old Nick were out beside their driveway with their lemonade stand set up and ready for business. Dar was their first customer. Millie was their second.

A handsome navy blue Blazer with tan trim came in pulling a pop-up tent trailer. Dar showed the visitors to a shady campsite near the river. They were two women in their 40s, casual in T-

shirts and jeans, a taller blond and a shorter brunette. Soon they were knocking on the office door.

The trailer's pop-up top, designed to be raised as a unit by the turning of a crank, wouldn't go up, at least not in the back. Millie dialed the RV Rescue Service and handed the phone to the blond. It was her brother and sister-in-law's tent trailer.

Mrs. RV Rescue said the repair man was real busy but she'd have him call when he had time. They gave their cell phone number and went for a walk.

The clouds broke up and the sun began to shine around 3 pm, shortly after that the first bicycle rider arrived.

During the afternoon lull, Dar and Millie went down by the river to see how the couple with the

tent trailer were doing. Dar and Millie each lifted a back corner while the tall blond tried the crank one more time. No luck. The couple decided to have a glass of lemonade and wait for their bicyclists, who had packed a cell phone but weren't answering it.

The pace started getting hectic around 4:30 pm. The people who had reserved one water and electric hookup and space for 24 tents showed up with a boat. There would soon be no room for it anywhere near the hookups, so Dar looked around and found a spot between the pump house and the cow pasture.

Riders were coming in pretty steadily now. All of them were wet with sweat and quiet, soft-spoken and brief. They all had helmets strapped on top of their heads and numbers on their backs and handlebars. Most wore tight black cycling shorts and various kinds of special shirts and shoes. There was nothing casual about the look of them or of their bikes. Most of them coasted in and seemed to know where to find their families and friends.

The bicycle riders congregated outside the showers, towels and soap and clean clothes in hand. With one shower in each bathroom, there was a crowd in the afternoon and into the evening, waiting and visiting. No one seemed to be in a hurry. No one seemed annoyed.

As one rider explained, they took on a lot of calories all day and drank a lot of Gatorade and water, so they weren't depleted. And, after the vigorous workout, they were full of endorphins.

A masseuse set up a table under a tree on the wide lawn toward the front of the park sometime after 4 pm. A pretty, muscular woman in her mid-30s, she worked her way slowly through the party that had hired her. They lay like lolling seals on her table while she worked their shoulders, upper arms, backs and legs. Dar wanted a turn, too. By 8 pm the masseuse had finished her work and headed back to Portland.

About that time the navy blue Blazer with tan trim and bicycles on the roof came up the hill from the campground pulling the closed tent trailer. The blond driver paused long enough to tell Millie that the four of them had decided to just go home. Everyone was tired. She and her partner hoped to come back in a couple of weeks with their tent trailer and spend a night or two.

It was just about time to start collecting money. Millie and Dar charge by the space and the kind of space, by the tent and by the person if there are more than two per space or tent.

"We give discounts for AAA and British Columbia Automobile Association and Good Sam, the travel club. They rate us, and the discount to their members is part of the deal," Dar said. "If all else fails and I feel like it, I ask guests if they belong to Costco. They get real tickled about a discount like that, and it's only 10 percent."

As evening began to fade, Dar made rounds asking if everybody had gotten in safe and sound. If so, she'd say, "You folks want to settle up now?" Often, the guest brought it up first. This made for smooth, cordial transactions.

"You look people over and you size people up," Dar said. "If you like 'em, you cut 'em some slack. Like those people over by the patio. They were nice, young. They don't have the money some of these people have. So I cut 'em a break. And they'll be back. They'll tell their friends, too." Then she added, "Word of mouth, best advertising there is."

That night, River Oaks fell quiet before dark. The lemonade stand was deserted. Tired and clean and fed, the cyclists crawled into their bunks, their bags or their tents. Tables were cleared and fires left to die. Only Millie and Dar were out to meet the night. They restocked the restrooms and wiped them down. Then they emptied trash together. Their workday ended at the dumpster shortly after 10 pm.

Now for a sandwich and a kiss good night.



Jessica, Nick and baby brother Jerrad open up shop