

Drowned Rat Dave
By David Kagan

Bicycling through rain. Through a downpour. Through a torrent. Through a deluge!

The day? Thursday, July 23, 2009. The forecast that morning? Cloudy, with a 40% chance of a late afternoon shower.

At about 1 p.m., I left my Torbert Village home, heading north up the Pine Creek Rail Trail. I thought that maybe I'd be lucky and not hit any rain at all during my intended 57-mile roundtrip ride up to Cedar Run and back.

Indeed, arriving at the Cedar Run General Store at about 3:30 p.m., after a very pleasurable, pedal-pushing peregrination, I and my bicycle were bone dry. And, boy oh boy, did that cup of Perry's chocolate chip ice cream taste good!

At 4:00 p.m. the storm suddenly blew in. Parking my bike up under the porch roof of the general store, I sought refuge across the street on a Cedar Run Inn porch chair.

One bolt of lightning struck close—boom! boom! The second blast an echo from across the creek. The lights flickered at both the inn and the general store, but remained on then.

Steady, heavy rain with occasional flashes of lightning—but none as close as that first strike. 4:30, 5:00, 5:30. No let up.

By 6:00 p.m., no more lightning at least. But the heavy rainfall continued.

With 28-and-a-half miles to go back down the trail to my home, and with darkness coming in about three hours, I decided to mount my bicycle and brave the monsoon. The pelting rain drenched me almost immediately.

Without fenders, my bicycle became a water, stone and mud-spitting machine from hell. Sunglasses and a baseball cap saved my head from total obliteration.

At the Hilborn Field's comfort station about three miles south of Cedar Run, I just had to stop and get out of the maelstrom for a while.

Do you want to know what it's like to squeeze a soaking wet bicycle and a man into that small, boxlike, bathroom booth and then spend 15-20 minutes standing there, listening to the rain laughing at you outside, and enduring the buzzing and biting mosquitoes and the far (very, very far) from fragrant odors trying to befriend you in that close, claustrophobic space? No, I don't think you do.

Well, when I couldn't stand it any longer, I made myself believe that the rain had abated somewhat. So I squeezed back out, said goodbye to the comfort station that I had become far too intimate with, and splashed resignedly down towards Slate Run.

The typhoon continued to pummel me relentlessly. It was actually worse passing under trees than out in the open, as the canopy of leaves apparently gathered the rain and directed it in cold streams down onto my head, shoulders and back.

A black bear crossed the trail ahead of me. I was so miserable that I didn't feel too excited by the event. He didn't seem interested in me at all either, possibly not fully believing he had even seen a human being out in that awful weather on a bicycle. At least not a normal human being.

I wonder what he told his mate back in the den afterwards? "Honey bear, you won't believe what I think I just saw. A man on a bicycle, covered in mud, splashing pell-mell down the rail trail. That species is even more insane than we thought!"

By Slate Run, the weather teasingly relented just a little, so I didn't stop at the porch of the closed general store for temporary sanctuary. I just kept pedaling south along the Pine Creek Water Park Rail Trail.

Not far along, Mother Nature rained cats and dogs onto me once again. When I neared Black Walnut Bottom Campground a couple miles below Slate Run, a deer splashed across the path just in front of me. I think that I startled it much more than it did me. "Was that some nutty human out in this?" it may have pondered in its venison brain.

With buckets of water pouring out of my sneakers and out of my shorts, and with dirt-caked sunglasses, I just had to stop again to regroup. So into one of the Black Walnut Bottom comfort stations I squeezed, somewhat experienced in the proper procedure now.

Pungent beyond words! I retreated and tried the other men's room in the adjacent building—just as bad.

Then it dawned on me and I began laughing, perhaps somewhat hysterically—"Hey, you idiot, there's no other moron out on the trail now! You can go into the women's rest room to seek shelter! It may be more tolerable."

Well, it wasn't. Nor was the second women's room in the other building. But I did realize finally that I could stay out of the downpour standing with my bicycle outside under the southeast corner women's rest room eaves. So, bikers, remember this location if you're ever caught in your own hurricane near there.

By about 7:30 p.m., the rain really did let up somewhat. In fact, for the remaining 20 or so miserable, long miles to my home, I only had to endure a steady, moderate rainfall.

My remaining concerns were two-fold: potential hypothermia and darkness.

Fortunately, however, although I was thoroughly soaked (I certainly "looked like a drowned rat," as the old saying goes), I never became chilled to the point of starting to shiver. And I arrived home by 9:30 p.m., with just enough light to maneuver safely around that last gate at the Torbert Lane crossing.

My wife casually said "Hi" to me when I entered the house. Not that she didn't care, but this wasn't the first time that I'd arrived back in the dark from a bike ride. She has come to expect my occasional, lengthy lunatic treks, in all types of weather, and has learned not to worry.

After peeling off my offensive, water-and-dirt plastered shirt, shorts, shoes and socks, I savored a hot shower, some food, and then my DRY bed. A memorable day on my beloved Pine Creek Rail Trail.

Note: Three to three-and-a-half inches of rain were recorded in Pine Creek Valley during the late afternoon through early evening hours of July 23. "40% chance of showers" indeed!