

The Ride:

January 20, 2004, 97-mile ride from Smyrna, Ga., to Anniston, Al., via the Silver Comet Trail and the Chief Ladiga Trail

By Bobby Rone

It sounded like a great idea. We would start at mile zero of the Silver Comet Trail - a paved trail built on the old railbed of the Seaboard Coasline's Silver Comet train - and ride to the Alabama/Georgia line, pick up the Chief Ladiga trail - another rail trail - and ride to its terminus near Anniston, Alabama. So, after a lot of talk and a little break in the weather, I decided to do it. Knowing that some of the Chief Ladiga was unpaved we decided to do the ride on mountain bikes rather than road bikes.

It all started well enough last Friday, January 16. My wife and I drove to the Chief Ladiga trailhead in Anniston, about a 2-hour drive. There, we met up with Larry Pierson of Tuscaloosa, Al. Larry and I parked our cars at the trailhead parking lot. We transferred Larry's bike to the bike rack on my wife's car. Before heading back to Atlanta for the night, we had a great seafood dinner at the Top of the River Restaurant in Anniston. So far, so good.

The next morning were up and at 'em at 0600. My wife drove us to the Silver Comet trailhead where we met my younger brother David. David hasn't been on a bicycle since the 2002 BRAG, but he said he had been working out a lot on his Bowflex machine. Whatever. Anyway, we started riding at precisely 0800. The first 38 miles is beautiful paved bike trail. There are old train tunnels to go through and old trestles to cross, and lots of woods all around. The weather was slightly misty, but not rainy, and in the high 40's. In just a few hours, we had reached the end of the Silver Comet Trail in a lovely park along a picturesque stream in downtown Rockmart.

At Rockmart, we had gone 38 miles and were feelin' good! It was at this point that my brother David decided he had gone far enough on his Bowflex conditioning, so he decided to turn around and head back. But me and old Larry were not wimps! Not us! We were going to the end of this ride!

From Rockmart we took a backroad 17 miles to Cedartown, Ga. At Cedartown we had a good meal of fried chicken, coleslaw, pinto beans, cornbread, and several gallons of sweet iced tea at Tom's Family Restaurant (notice how I always talk about the food whenever I describe a bike ride). About a mile out of Cedartown, the Silver Comet Trail starts up again and makes a rather scenic 8.5-mile run to the Alabama state line. Before getting on the trail, we met up with a man in the trailhead parking lot there at Cedartown. He asked us how far we were going. When we said

Anniston, he sort of smiled (more like a laughing kind of smile of a man who knew something we didn't know about what lay ahead). He described the trail, beginning at the state line, as being unpaved but "pasable" (I believe he said passable?? Could have said impassable but I wasn't paying attention). He said there were three bridges. The first one, he said, was "passable" (I am sure he said that) but was a little "tricky". That is when he asked us if we had any rope? When Larry said no, he said we would PROBABLY be ok without any rope.

So, we got back on the Silver Comet at Cedartown and made it to the state line at about mile 63. Sure enough the pavement ended at that point. So did all signs of civilization. The road was not just rough, it was covered with rocks. I thought my brain was going to jar loose (maybe it already has and that is why I do these things?). Despite the fact there was a paved county road adjacent to the trail Larry insisted that we be purists and stay on the trail. Well, he insisted that until we came to a mud "puddle" that was larger than most farm ponds. After going on the county roads for a mile or so around the "puddle", we got back on the trail. At this point, the trail went deep into the forest where there were no adjacent roads nor any sign of recent human activity.

Then we came to the first the bridge. It was an old railroad bridge, about 75 or 80 feet above a pretty good size river. The bridge was constructed of steel with crossties laid across two, 10-inch wide steel beams. We had to get off the bikes and walk across the crossties, most of which were fairly rotten. In addition, there was a gap between each crosstie so that we got a wonderful view of the river below as we walked across. Right dead in the middle of the bridge, there was a gap of about 8 feet where several crossties were missing. Now, the only way across was to walk on the 10-inch wide steel beams. The surface of the steel beams was not flat but was covered with large round rivets. To make it worse, the mist had made the steel as slippery as ice.

Larry and I studied the situation for a minute. I figured that the man we had talked to in Cedartown must have used rope to secure the bikes or something. I am not real sure. Anyway, after a little study, Larry decided he would walk across. So, like a veteran high steel worker that is what he did. Once he was on the the other side, I carefully balanced his bike (I did his bike first in case it didn't work and the bike fell into the river) on the steel beam. As I stood on one side holding the rear tire, Larry reached out and grabbed the front tire and wrestled the bike over to his side. Then we did my bike.

Now it was my turn to cross. Uh oh! I am already afraid of heights as it is. To make matters worse, when I tried to step on the steel beam, my foot slipped like it was on ice. That was when I started looking for

material to build a raft. Unable to locate suitable raft-building material, I resigned myself to fact that I was gonna get wet. I couldn't walk across that beam! That beam was now only 4 inches wide now, and was shrinking as I looked at it !!!!! Finally, I decided that if am gonna get wet, I may as well do it falling off the bridge. I got down on my stomach and slithered across that steel beam like an old rat snake.

With that hurdle crossed, we continued the ride. The unpaved and extremely rough section of the Chief Ladiga trail continued for over 10 miles. At last we picked up the pavement about 4 miles north of Piedmont, Alabama. From here it was 33 miles of paved trail to Anniston. Just before Anniston, the trail goes through the middle of Jacksonville State University campus. It was somewhere between Piedmont and Jacksonville that I realized every part of my body was hurting. My hands and arms and shoulders were hurting from the incessant pounding on the rocky road. My legs were sore from riding hours without toe clips or clipless pedals. It was around mile 86 that I came to the conclusion that a regular mountain bike was not nearly as easy to ride on a long distance tour as my 21 pound road bike is (I am a quick study and pick up on these things quite readily). Well, anyway, we made it to the end and it was sort of fun in a sadistic sort of way.

I learned two new things by doing this ride:

1. Riding a century on a mountain bike is not recommended
2. Never ever continue a bike ride after a person describing the trail ahead asks if you have any rope with you.