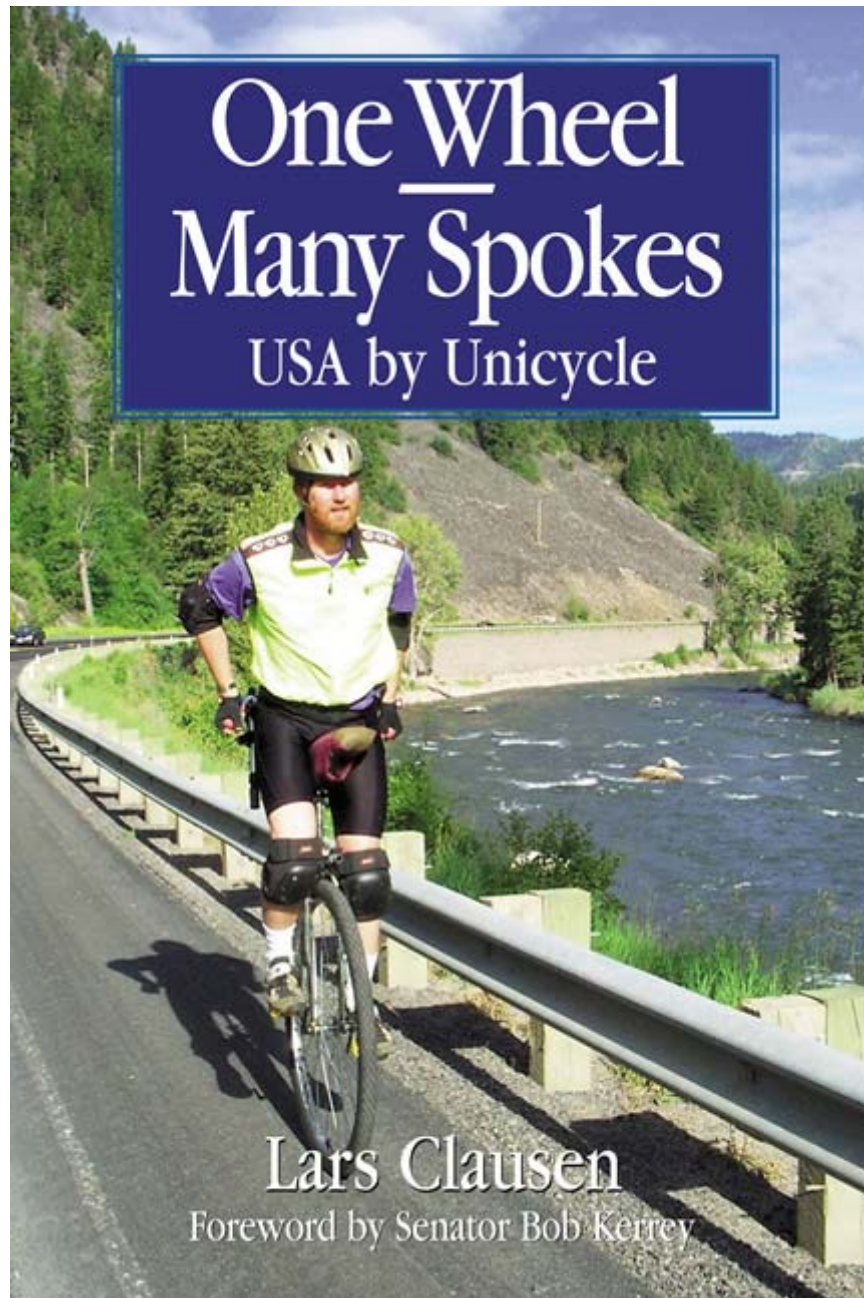


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**One Wheel — Many Spokes:
USA by Unicycle**

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Chapter 1

Flahs

When we remember we are all mad, the mysteries of life disappear
and life stands explained.

Mark Twain

The Alabama afternoon pushes the limits of heat and humidity for unicycling. I drink three quarts of iced tea from the deli where I am resting. Outside, as I walk across the dusty gravel lot to the road, a police cruiser spots me and slows. Pulling over on the grass shoulder the car stops. Two officers peer from inside. The one riding shotgun motions me to his window.

“Are you riding that?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer, beginning my journey’s third encounter with police. The driving officer takes over in the slow pattern that southern speech can so easily assume.

“You’re riding that on this road?”

“Yes.”

“On this road. You’re riding that?”

“Well, yes, by the side of the road.”

“By the side of this road?”

“On the white line.”

“On the white line on this road?”

“Well, next to it. Alongside of it.”

Shotgun finally breaks in and asks if I have my ID.

I hand him my card.

“You don’t have ID?” he asks.

“Sorry,” I answer, taking back my VISA card and handing him my Washington driver’s license.

The driving officer starts an ID check on me.

“This your name?”

“Yes, Lars Clausen.”

“What do you call that thing?”

“A unicycle.”

He begins reporting my name over the radio, “Clowz’n. C. Charlie. L. Lima...”

“This is a dangerous road,” Shotgun tells me over the backdrop of the alphabetic recitation.

“Logging trucks. Trucks from all over the country drive on this road. You shouldn’t ride this road.”

“I’ve been unicycling all the way across the country,” I answer.

Are they going to ban me from this road? I am already racing dark. My wife Anne and the kids are camping near Eufaula, twenty-five miles ahead. Shotgun continues with his warning.

“Where are you going?”

“Florida.”

“There’s gonn’a be a lot of flahs.”

“Flahs?”

“Yeah, you want to see the windshield of my truck? Lots of flahs as soon as you get south of Eufaula.”

“Right. The flies. Another man just warned me about those.”

“We’re recording all your information,” the driving officer tells me, “so if you get killed on this road we can tell people you were warned not to ride it.”

A woman’s voice comes back on radio while he’s talking, “We’ve got everything except that first name. Can you repeat that please.”

“Lohs,” he repeats. “L, Lima...”

“Do you have a job?” he asks when he’s done.

“I’m a pastor. A preacher.”

“So is he,” the driver points to Shotgun.

There are long pauses between all of these exchanges. My quick return to the road is gone, but after 6,300 miles this tour is paying off. I’ve learned patience.

“What denomination are you?” asks Shotgun, restarting the conversation.

“Lutheran. How about you?”

“AME. Church is just over that hill. See that corner up there?” He points a hundred yards ahead, “A man got killed there by a car.”

“Maybe then you can escort me down this road?”

“We don’t have those kinds of resources,” the driving officer replies immediately. Death warnings free; protection unavailable. This seems like a bad time to ask about pedestrian and cyclist rights.

By the time we’re done, the sun is noticeably lower in the sky. I get my ID back.

Shotgun Preacher gives me his benediction. “I prefer my preachers in the pulpit, not in the grave. You be careful.”

Free. I jump on the unicycle, heading south on Alabama 165, racing darkness now, pedaling ever farther into this journey.

An hour farther on, I reach the forested hill leading down to Cottonton. A lone old gas station is the only building here. A dozen folks who passed me on the road are waiting to see me pedal in. I go inside for a twenty-ounce Pepsi and a Snickers bar. Then I walk back outside to stand and share their welcome kindness.

The attendant comes out of the store. “Were you laying down back there beside the road?”

“No.”

“The police just called and said they had a report that you were hit and were down on the side of the road.”

“Whatever,” I reply. “I’m just trying to ride.”

Shotgun must have been really worried about me dying. He has no way to know that spurring this whole venture is the mid-life recognition that I will not live forever, no matter what I do. Although the unicycle is an unusual vehicle, the journey is a common one. “We never really and genuinely become our entire and honest selves,” said Mark Twain, “until we are dead—and not then until we have been dead years and years.” He recommended that, “People ought to start dead and then they would be honest so much sooner.”

What I’d like Shotgun to know is that this ride is reviving my life. Spoke by spoke, I am adding experiences to the wheel of my life.



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