

Trip of A Lifetime Nearly Becomes Nightmare for Camptown Couple

— BY DAVID KEELER —

For Camptown residents Fred and Val Hill, a cycling tour of New Zealand seemed like the perfect vacation. They're avid cyclists and have logged thousands of miles on their tandem bicycle. Enjoying the scenic beauty and experiencing the customs and people of this far away land were the things Fred and Val expected would forge lifelong memories. But it was something they didn't expect that left them with perhaps the most lasting memory of their journey and, but for some incredibly good luck, it was a turn of events that could have ended their cycling tour before it started—a devastating 6.2 magnitude earthquake that hit Christchurch, New Zealand's second largest city on Feb. 22, 2011.

Fred and Val left home on Feb. 12 and set out from the Elmira airport on a journey that would span a month. "I can't tell you exactly how many hours it took to get there, but I can tell you that on the trip home, from the time we got in the cab at our hotel in Auckland, until I parked the truck in our driveway, it was 40 hours," Fred recalls. That journey involved flights from Auckland, to Sidney, and on to Los Angeles, Detroit and Elmira and then the drive home to Camptown.

On their way to New Zealand, Fred and Val extended their stay in California to enjoy the splendid views along the Coastal Highway, which they toured by car and left their bike at a hotel. "It was just awesome," Fred recalls. "We had a marvelous time." There's a 16-hour time difference between the east coast of the United States and New Zealand, and their stop in California also helped them gradually adjust to the time difference.

Their journey took them to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which Fred said was a bit of a disappointment compared to the Baltimore Aquarium, where he had visited many times. "It was okay, but I had heard people talk about it for years, and I expected more."

Fred and Val had arranged for a nine-day bike tour of New Zealand with a group of 35 other cyclists. They arrived in New Zealand a week before their tour was scheduled to begin, so they could adjust to the time change and do some touring on their own. "They had a pre-tour that we could have joined down in Queenstown, which is where The Lord of the Rings and several other movies were filmed, because of its breathtaking scenery, but we opted out," Fred said.



One lane bridges like this are a common sight in New Zealand. The wide area in the center is to provide room for approaching vehicles to pass one another.

Bike Fits In Suitcase

Their Santana Team Scandium tandem touring bicycle was disassembled and shipped in a special suitcase, measuring 27" x 33" x 14". The bike, which is made in California, weighed just 28 pounds out of the factory, but the Hills added heavier 48-spoke wheels, increasing the weight to about 38 pounds. The bike and suitcase weigh in at just under 70 pounds. It takes three hours to reassemble the bike. "You don't do it just casually," Fred says. The

company that built Fred and Val's bike also produces models to accommodate three, four and even five riders.

The bike has a wide range of 30 gear combinations, and Fred and Val can cruise at about 25 mph on level ground. When they're riding, Fred is up front in what's called the captain's position and Val's behind him in what's known as the stoker's seat.

"Tandems aren't the easiest thing to ride for the captain," Val explained. "I tried to captain once and you need a certain amount of strength for it."

"It takes a lot of skill," Fred agrees, "and it takes a lot of skill to be a stoker, too. A lot of people can't sit back there while someone else is determining their fate. They want to steer it."

"I'm there just for the pedal power," Val says. "There's no shifting and no braking."

Fred says Val does the navigation from the rear seat because up front he's got his hands full.

On the downhills, Fred says that sometimes his back gets sore from Val hitting him and telling him to slow down.

"When you're on a bicycle going downhill and somebody pulls out in front of you, you're pretty much done," Val says. "If there are curves or gravel and you hit that wrong, you're in trouble, so if I feel he's going too fast I've got my own brake."

Fred and Val's bike has caliper brakes on the front and back, which Fred controls with his hands, and a big drum brake that he can set and just leave it on when going down a steep decline. "I set it and I don't wear my hands out," Fred says. Caliper brakes can also build up so much heat on a steep decline that they blow a tire. "I've had that happen in races on a single bike," Fred says.

Wrong Chain Turns Lucky

It was an unexpected turn of events in Christchurch that likely saved Fred and Val from getting caught in the earthquake that killed 150 people in the city. When Fred and a man named Norm Drexel, who was one of the tour organizers, were reassembling Fred and Val's bike on Saturday, Feb. 19, three days before the quake hit, they discovered that a new chain Fred had purchased before leaving the United States was the wrong size. This delayed the reassembly and resulted in Fred leaving the bike in the bike shop where they had been working on it. "The fortunate thing was that we didn't get the new chain on before noon when the shop closed and had to leave the bike there," Fred says. "Had we gotten it on, we would have ridden the bike back to our hotel and it would still be there because after the quake hit nobody was allowed inside that building and won't be for at least a year. Fred explained that the multi-floor All Seasons Cashel Hotel where they were staying prior to the earthquake suffered just minor damage, however, the Hotel Grand Chancellor, which is right next to it and, at 26 stories is the tallest building in Christchurch, sustained so much damage that it will have to be demolished floor by floor. This could take the better part of a year to do and keep the Cashel Hotel off limits until it is completed.

Val said it was really fortunate that they checked out of the Cashel when they did. "We had been right in the part of the city where the quake hit," Val recalls. We took walks there. If we had decided to stay it would not have been pretty."

On Monday, with their bike still in the bike shop, Fred and Val checked out of the Cashel, moved all of their clothing to a rented car and dropped off their cycling gear at the Hotel Novotel Christchurch Cathedral Square, where the bike tour was expected to start. Fortunate for them, Norm had taken the bike suitcase with him so it wasn't trapped in Christchurch and, when the bike was freed from the bike shop, he could pack it and send it back to them.



Fred and Val with their Santana tandem bike.



Humans number four million in New Zealand where there are 40 million sheep. Scenes like the one above are common.

When the earthquake hit on Tuesday, Fred and Val were driving in their rented car and never felt it. And when they stopped for the night there was no TV reception so they didn't find out about the earthquake until Wednesday.

While Fred and Val narrowly missed being caught in the earthquake, not all of the news was good. Their bike was still inside the shop and no one was allowed inside that building because of damage. They also had to replace all of their cycling gear that was trapped in the Novotel by the earthquake.

Tour Begins On Borrowed Bike

But as fate would have it, their new friend, Norm Drexel, came to the rescue and offered to loan Fred and Val one of two tandem bikes he owned. "I got to choose which bike I wanted and I picked the one that had a rear drum brake," Fred says. "Unfortunately, I didn't notice that the rear cog was completely screwed up and that the front shifter didn't work." The bike's problems made their journey difficult. One day the chain came off eight times. "We were due to ride in the rain the next day and I said it's bad enough to ride in the rain without having to replace the chain all the time," Val said, "so we didn't ride that day."

While Fred and Val never did get to ride their own bike in New Zealand, it has since been returned to them free of charge and was undamaged in the quake.

The quake changed everything concerning the bike tour. It was supposed to start in Christchurch but had to be moved to Queenstown. "They had some major reorganizing to do," Fred says.

The 35 cyclists came from all over the U.S. plus a couple from Denmark. All but two of the cyclists rode tandem bikes. The group covered between 40 and 60 miles per day and, in many cases the course involved what Fred described as "significant elevation changes." He said the tour routes focused on spectacular scenery.

In addition to the bike treks, the group was to travel by train, boat and airplane, however, the quake changed this and a train trip from Christchurch across the Southern Alps was cancelled. Their tour did include two scenic flights and a boat trip. When they were cycling, Fred and Val's luggage was transported by truck and what's called a SAG (supplies and gear) wagon was nearby in case repairs were needed.

Tour Resumes Despite Quake

Undaunted by their close encounter with a New Zealand earthquake, Fred and Val maintained an active itinerary. Here's an abbreviated listing of some of the places they visited:

SOUTH ISLAND

— They rode the Queenstown Gondola to the top of a mountain where they watched hang gliders, mountain bikes and wheeled luges fly down the steep incline.

— Hiked the trails at Fox Glacier.

— Cycled from Hokitika Village to Punakiki. The ride from Hokitika to Greymouth was flat and fast. "We were feeling our oats," Fred says. From Greymouth to Hokitika they experienced incredible climbs and viewed the Tasman Sea where they saw limestone monoliths.

— Cycled from Punakiki to Westport. Fred described the journey as: "One extremely difficult climb that was probably a 12 percent grade. There was a 'Penguin Crossing' sign but we didn't see any."

— Boarded a plane in Westport where there was no security and no luggage check because the flight was totally in New Zealand and the plane didn't have the range to fly elsewhere. Fred said the



Bungee jumping originated in New Zealand. Fred and Val Hill watched, but didn't participate.

flight offered a view of the clear-cut logging in the Southern Alps.

— Cycled from Picton to Havelock through wine country where they saw the shoe fence along the highway where travelers hung their hiking shoes. There are hundreds of pairs of shoes and the fence stretches for at least a couple miles. Overnight they were awakened by a mag 4 earthquake off the coast.

— Enjoyed a catamaran ride up Ship's Cove, which was frequented by British explorer Captain James Cook in the 18th Century.

NORTH ISLAND

— Visited the hot springs at Rotorua, which emit large amounts of foul-smelling hydrogen sulfide.

— Visited the buried village of Te Wairoa, established in 1848 as a Christian missionary as a model village. It survived for fewer than 40 years before it was obliterated by the eruption of Mt. Tarawera on June 10, 1886.

— At the Novotel in Rotorua at the Matariki Maori Restaurant, Fred became Chief of the Santana Tribe in an elaborate ceremony.

— Toured one of the richest gold and silver mining areas in the world at Puka Park with a fabulous guide named Doug Johansen, the Kiwi Dundee of New Zealand.

Would They Do it Again?

So would Val and Fred make a second visit to New Zealand? Fred puts it like this: "In a heartbeat." He says he and Val would prefer to tour the island by themselves next time rather than take part in a group tour. "The tour was great, but there was too much 'be there on time or we'll leave you' stuff."

Editors Note: Fred and Val moved to the Wyalusing area eight years ago when Fred retired from teaching at Bloomsburg University.

Fred is a Ph.D. Biologist, having taught at Bloomsburg University for 28 years in the Biology Department. He was born in Illinois and has lived in several states over the past six decades.

Val is a retired Hospice nurse with a BSN degree. She is originally from Texas. She now operates Val's Quilting, a business that sees her selling Gammill Longarm Quilting Machines, designing and executing competition art quilts, and quilting for others. She also teaches longarm quilting.

Fred started Fred's Creative Woodworking to coordinate with Val's quilting business. He now makes a number of interesting items for quilters. He also creates numerous unique wooden items, principally with his lathe, and teaches woodturning.

They reside on Herrickville Road just a quarter mile up above Camptown. They are both members of the Greater Wyalusing Chamber of Commerce.

NEW ZEALAND FACTS

— COMPILED BY FRED HILL —

- √ No litter along roadsides as in U.S.
- √ Recycling centers are everywhere.
- √ Cars are small, gas costs \$8 per gallon.
- √ Traffic circles instead of stop signs. Keeps traffic moving and saves gas.
- √ Keyholes are upside down compared to those in U.S.
- √ 220 volt electric service everywhere in motel rooms.
- √ NZ experiences 15,000 to 21,000 earthquakes per year, although most are not felt.
- √ Bungee jumping originated in New Zealand.
- √ One NZ dollar equals 0.83 U.S. dollar.
- √ There are four million people and 40 million sheep. One million people live on the South Island. More crime on the North Island.
- √ Other than bats, NZ has no native mammals, although many have been introduced.
- √ Fields are incredibly well cared for and not over grazed. They plant turnips for animals to graze on during winter.
- √ Introduced salmon have displaced many native fish.
- √ Fallow deer from Europe, introduced in the 1800's, have become pests and are now regulated to the point where New Zealand has over half of all domesticated deer in the world.
- √ There are no native snakes but severe concern about introduced snakes.
- √ Introduced pine trees are becoming dominant in the forests and are being poisoned.
- √ Many of the bridges are one-lane and on the very long ones there is a wide space in the middle where you can pull over and let approaching cars pass. Trains and cars share the same bridges.
- √ You can travel from subtropical to glaciers in a matter of minutes.
- √ The Maori people, the native New Zealanders, arrived around 1000 AD, although there is much debate about this. They are believed to be of Polynesian origin, although this is debated too. The Maori culture and language are celebrated. Schools teach the language.

