



One Behind the Other – A Story of Cycle Tourism

By Mina Thorgeson

The forecast was bleak. It was Monday, April 13, and the Inaugural Ridgeland One Behind the Other Tandem Rally was only five days away. The seven-day weather forecast held an 80 percent to 100 percent chance of rain every day for the next seven days. But by 1:00 p.m. on that Monday afternoon with a 100 percent chance of rain, not spitting a drop of precipitation had fallen.

Would seven months of planning a new event to bring more awareness of cycle touring to a small-town destination end in a deluge of rain?

The city of Ridgeland is known to be one of the best cycling destinations in Mississippi.

The city has an avid cyclist, Gene McGee, as mayor and is a League of American Cyclist's Bronze Bike Friendly City. Ridgeland is home to 17 miles of multi-use trails and is in the process of adding many more.

Ridgeland is also smack-dab in the middle of the most beautiful portion of the Natchez Trace, a 444-mile National Park that travels between Natchez, Mississippi, and Nashville, Tennessee.

It is for this reason that Ashton and Rene Page, local tandem cyclists, approached Mayor McGee and the Ridgeland Tourism Commission about becoming the destination for a tandem rally. The couple had traveled all

over the United States and abroad to attend rallies. But why travel when you have the banks of the Ross Barnett Reservoir and the Natchez Trace Parkway – and great tourism amenities – in your backyard?

Mayor McGee was all in from Day 1! After an initial meeting, including Mayor McGee, Ashton Page, the Ridgeland Tourism Commission and Crooked Letter Cycling, the Ridgeland One Behind the Other Tandem Rally was born. Quickly, the rally became known as simply the OBO.

But when should an event like this be held? Mississippi becomes uncomfortably hot by May, and October seemed so far away



A tandem team makes their way along the Natchez Trace Parkway.



Ridgeville's Mayor Gene McGee, an avid cycling fan, and Alyssia Silberman on the left with team Page's on the right make their way during the OBO Rally.



Recumbent Tandem teams were part of the mix, along with lots of traditional tandems.

A group photo with teams from 14 states represented.



for such a good idea. Fortunately, Ridgeland Tourism hosts the Ridgeland Fine Arts Festival and Sante' South Wine Festival in April each year – not only could our tandem couples' cycle our beautiful countryside and the Natchez Trace, but they could also enjoy the Arts and Wine festivals. The date was set, a logo developed, a website launched, and marketing begun. The vision of attracting cycling tourists from all over the country to Ridgeland, Mississippi, was rolling.

Marketing of the OBO was focused on social media and email campaigns. An early-sign-up promotion ending on New Years Day netted one tandem team – who won free lodging for the weekend.

The skies were blue, and the sun was shining on Ridgeland Tourism and Crooked Letter Cycling as the OBO rally neared. His-and-hers technical T-shirts were ordered. Margaritas and Munchies, the Friday night social at Sombra, a restaurant within walking distance of the host hotel, was planned. The seven routes for the weekend were mapped out.

Soon the ride had 29 registered tandem teams from 14 states – Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas and Tennessee.

However, on Thursday, April 16, we were staring at the dismal forecast of 100 percent chance of rain for the entire weekend. As extra precaution, the Backup OBO plan, or BOBO, was created to provide a great visitor experience regardless of the weather.

Friday morning dawned gray. For the tandem couples arriving early, the Pages were leading routes of 20, 30 or 40 miles at 9 a.m.

or 2 p.m. Six couples daring Mother Nature took off at 9 a.m. to usher in the unofficial start to the rally. Only those riding the 40-mile route were rained on briefly as they were pedaling toward the hotel.

The 2 p.m. group dared Mother Nature, too. Less than five miles after pedaling out, the bottom fell out of the sky, drenching the poor souls. The rain lasted a mere five minutes, though, and everyone was dry by the time they finished the ride 15 miles later. Their downpour would be the last rain we would see throughout the rest of the OBO rally.

The clouds cleared, and the sun and Mother Nature were smiling down on the couples as they gathered on the outside patio for the Margaritas and Munchies social and to discover the local amenities of the area.

Another reason to visit Ridgeland for cycling is the cycling meteorologist – he is a ride leader himself, and he nailed the weekend forecast. Once again, we woke up to a 100 percent chance of rain, but our meteorologist

predicted that we would be able to get our morning ride – and he was right!



The Natchez Trace Parkway provided some great tandem riding during the inaugural OBO Tandem Rally.

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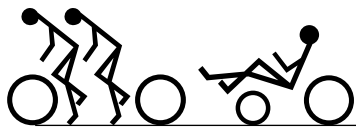
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Mayor McGee and his tandem partner for the day, Alyssia Silberman, led the couples out to the Natchez Trace for an out-and-back ride of 20, 40 or 60 miles. Snack stops with goodies galore were available along the route.

Even though the day was overcast, the temperatures were warm and pleasant, accompanied by a slight breeze. Tandem riders enjoyed views of the Ross Barnett Reservoir and took in great blue herons, Canada geese and even a pair of belted kingfishers along the shoreline. Cycling north on the Natchez Trace, into the more wooded areas, couples enjoyed the beauty of a few dogwood trees with lingering blooms.

The route returned the tandem couples to the OBO tent at the Ridgeland Fine Arts Festival at the Renaissance, the area's high-end shopping venue, where personalized sandwiches or salads were waiting. After lunch, the couples could stroll through the many tents on the grounds of the festival, where concierge service was available for those making purchases.

Later that evening, long after the bikes had been retired and while the couples were enjoying the Sante' South Wine Festival or eating at local restaurants, the rain finally fell through the night.

Sunday's forecast rain – originally a 100 percent chance – never materialized. It was a beautiful spring day, just right for a last bike ride, with not a cloud in the sky.


Fourteen couples took advantage of the final day's ride around the Reservoir. A brisk tailwind pushed the couples quickly through the first 20 miles of Sunday's ride where



Above: Lunch under the OBO tent at the Ridgeland Fine Arts Festival.

Moonpies (a Mississippi staple for those with a sweet tooth) and other local, favorite snacks were waiting for them at the rest stop. The highlight of the causeway crossing was the sighting of a young alligator sunning himself among the water lilies. The second 20 miles of the loop was a tad slower but still enjoyable, as the couples rode across the smooth asphalt bike lane over the spillway.

Despite the weather forecast, the Ridgeland OBO Tandem Rally was a success. It showcased excellent cycling, an outstanding tourism destination and a community that "gets" cycling tourism and the impact it makes on the local economy.

Next year's event will be held April 1-3, 2016. To get on the mailing list for registration information, please email michelle@crookedlettercycling.com. 



Above: Pre-ride chatter with teams dressed for the weather.

Below: The Ridgeland Fine Arts Festival was part of the draw for OBO Rally participants to enjoy in Ridgeland, Mississippi, after a day's riding.



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