

THE FIVE BORO CHALLENGE
as experienced by
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On Sunday, June 12, 1977, history was made. At the Unisphere in Flushing Meadow Park over 200 bicyclists started on the first Annual Five Boro Challenge. The goal was to ride through five boroughs in one day. Doesn't sound like a big feat, but for New York City, this was a challenge.

We left the Unisphere at 7:30 AM, accompanied by 2 police cars, 4 bicycle patrols (what a fantastic volunteer group), an American Red Cross Car, and 2 "Sag" Wagons. The planning of this ride was done by the American Youth Hostel.

We were told at the onset that we were to observe all traffic regulations. After 10 minutes into Queens, a decision was made by the police to stop traffic and we no longer had to stop for full stop signs and red lights. We had been spreading out too much and it was more of a chore to keep us together. At no time were there any hassles from the motorists. In fact, they were so surprised to see 200 cyclists, they just stared at us in amazement. The people along the streets were dumbfounded. The kids yelled, "Is this a race?" When people asked who we were, we told them we were cycling the five boroughs. They looked at us in complete disbelief. Some others on bicycles joined us part of the way.

We rode through Queens with no problems--the police were blocking the intersections with the additional expert help of the bicycle patrol and AYH Leaders. We passed big apartment houses in Queens and also neat little homes. The route was not chosen because of its scenic value, but rather because of its directness. We arrived in Brooklyn using all the back roads normally used by trucks or commercial vehicles. However, we finally entered civilization. Passed Churches, housing projects, little homes--no matter where we passed the people were staring at us with their mouths opened. I would have loved to be able to stop to take pictures of their expressions. I think I have their faces etched in my mind because I had never seen anything like this. In Brooklyn we also passed stores with the wonderful aroma of freshly-baked bagels. We kept asking for a bagel break, but none of the leaders paid any attention to us. Getting into Fort Hamilton (Brooklyn) the houses were enormous, but even there the people were coming out on their porches in their nightgowns to look at us. And then the Verrazano Bridge appeared to our left. We had arrived early and we had to wait for the scheduled time. Looking directly at the Bridge I couldn't believe I was going to cross it on a bicycle. Soon the Bridge and Tunnel Authority had cleared the lower roadway for us and on we went. I was a little to the rear so I could see the cyclists already on the bridge; WHAT A THRILL! The bridge is beautiful. Its majestic power and graceful splendor is really a great statement to man's achievement. The sight from the bridge was equally wonderful. With Brooklyn behind us, Staten Island ahead, and Manhattan over my right shoulder, I was very impressed. The work crew on the bridge put down boards because the expansion joints on the bridge were dangerous for bicyclists. Each crew stood by and cheered us as we went by!

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Arriving in Staten Island I got a different feeling about the area. It was more of a home town feeling. As we headed for the Staten Island Ferry, there were more cobblestone roads there than in any of the other boroughs. Incidentally, everything was timed with the various government authorities. We arrived at the ferry too early and we got a chance to rest near the entrance. When the scheduled time arrived (11:30), they loaded us and all our various vehicles. The treatment we got through this whole ride was first class and the Port Authority was equally up to the great spirit which permeated everyone who had to escort us around. On the Ferry some of us ate, adjusted bikes, or just stood to enjoy the sea air and the beauty of the surrounding scenery of Manhattan, Statue of Liberty, etc.

Once the voyage was over, we landed in Manhattan. Again, not having to wait for traffic signals with this large group really kept us moving. At one point I almost felt as if I were in a race. In Manhattan we passed South Street Seaport with its four masted schooners in port, the Fulton Fish Market with its unforgettable aromas, Chinatown, some bowery personalities, the beautiful brownstones, and of course, always in the background, the tall buildings. We were travelling along First Avenue. At first there were many apartment houses and then we went into older sections with lots of stores selling everything you could think of. There were apartments over these stores and people were looking out at us. It was the attitude of these people which made the ride a delight to me. If the boroughs were different, the people were the same. They were hanging out of windows, coming out of stores to line the streets. Some were cheering, some were staring. The kids were dancing up and down and running alongside of us. Those who had bikes rode with us for a while. To see people smiling and cheering really made us feel fantastic. We knew we were doing something special, but the attitude of the people just enforced it more.

The gathering point was the United Nations Building with the East River on our right. We kept telling each other that we had already done 4 boroughs. Everything was going so smoothly we were almost afraid to brag. Continuing on through Upper Manhattan and then onto the Bronx. We always took up one lane of the road and the police were worried that a car would get mixed in with us, but this never happened. None of the motorists complained and if any honked their horns, it was to send a greeting rather than a warning. Further along in the Bronx we were rather isolated from the people because we were under a highway and near commercial property. But there was a group of Senior Citizens who burst into applause for us. We acknowledged it with graciousness and humbleness that becomes Super Stars. Finally, after coming off Bruckner Boulevard, we were allowed to stop and have lunch. It was now 12:30. I had plenty of food with me but it felt good to get off the bike and sit in a restaurant. When we finally had time to relax, we suddenly realized we had been going back and forth in the hands of different government authorities all day and at no time were any of us aware of it, it had gone so smoothly.

The next big event coming up was crossing the Throgs Neck Bridge. Again we were early so we had to wait. The waiting was not boring; we got a chance to talk to one another and to talk to the police who were our escorts and also to the bike patrols. If I were to write a book about this ride there would be a chapter for each of these groups and one for the Red Cross. They were such beautiful people doing such a

great job. We were having all the fun and they were doing all the work, but their whole attitude was one of having fun also. We were bunched up at the garage at the Throgs Neck Bridge waiting for the Bridge and Tunnel Authority's work crew to clear a lane on the bridge for us. They decided they wanted the police to lead the way and they asked us to clear a path so that the police cars could get ahead of us. As the police proceeded through the opening with bicyclists lined up on both side of them, we all just spontaneously started to cheer and applaud them. The police were sort of embarrassed but loved every minute of it. They grinned from ear to ear and put up the sign for VICTORY.

This whole ride was done very seriously and as each authority handled us we had to follow their instructions. Putting us on the Throgs Neck Bridge they insisted that we go two-by-two with no passing. If any breakdown occurred, there would be no time for repair and a sag wagon would pick up the bicyclist. Again, to see this long line of cyclists along the bridge was a beautiful sight. Once more we had inconvenienced the motorists but at no time did any of them act annoyed at this marvel.

Finally we arrived at the end. If I had any complaint, it would be to say our bite of the Big Apple went by too fast. But we had been cycling since 7:30 until 4:30, a total of 9 hours and a total of 55 to 60 miles. I guess it's true--time passes fast when you're having fun. Hey AHY, I want to do it again!