

FreeWheel '05 fades into fond memories

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CALDWELL, Kan. -- Oklahoma FreeWheelers reached the finish line of their weeklong ride Saturday.

Although participants achieved goals and lived out dreams of bicycling across Oklahoma, they said most of their FreeWheel memories were of lounging around the campgrounds every night and chatting with newfound friends.

Many found that it is not the grueling ride, but the cozy towns, friendly faces and campsite camaraderie that draw them back year after year.

Judy Jone of Cherryvale, Kan., said the evenings at camp were her favorite part of FreeWheel.

Each year, Jone joins with other FreeWheelers to form a bluegrass band.

"We only get together once a year, during FreeWheel, and we just sit around and jam, and a lot of people just come and listen," she said.

Some of the towns where the traveling bicyclists camp also offer live entertainment.



From left, John Chimahusky of Oklahoma City; Ed Chimahusky of Fremont, Ohio; Loma Messex of Wilburton; Bob Pinnick of Bartlesville; Rick Logan of Pratt, Kan.; Frank Tomecek of Tulsa; Jimmy Lee of Pratt, Kan.; and Katie Tomecek of Tulsa gather for a photo under a "Welcome to Kansas" sign Saturday on the last leg of Oklahoma FreeWheel 2005.

SHERRY BROWN / Tulsa World

"We can't wait to find out what each town has in store," said Barbara O'Reilly, a bicyclist from Tulsa.

"Everyone looks forward to the food the town will have and sitting around and listening to music and talking with friends."

Like many veteran FreeWheelers, O'Reilly enjoys talking with friends she hasn't seen in at least a year, she said.

"It's like its own community," she said. "We come back every year and look for the people from the years before and also make new friends."

She described how the friendships feel age-old, even though she has known some of the other riders for only a week.

The riders began this year's trip in Paris, Texas and made overnight stops in Antlers, Talihina, McAlester, Wetumka, Drumright and Ponca City before rolling into Caldwell, for a total distance of about 423 miles. The distance of each day's route varied from 48 to 78 miles.



FreeWheel is sponsored by Central Tech Truck Driver Training, the Tulsa World, Mapco Plaza Building, the Bartlesville Pedalers bicycle club, the Oklahoma Bicycle Society, the Stillwater Red Dirt Pedalers and the Tulsa Bicycle Club.

Susan Doss of Tulsa said camping was the fun part of the trip because participants form relationships and it's not like any other summer vacation.

"You get to the next town and everyone hangs out and eats and gets to know each other, but it's probably the cheapest vacation and bike ride," she said.

At the campsites, there are always people ready to lead the weary travelers to cool showers, restrooms, food and water.

FreeWheelers agreed that the host towns were generous and hospitable to the hundreds of riders.

"The people in the towns are always so nice and friendly, offering us food and entertainment, not to mention a place to sleep," O'Reilly said.

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