

Sad start to a tough day



It was the same phone call we got maybe half a year ago, just as Kevin and I were getting ready to ride this morning. Your cat has been found dead, hit by a car, about a quarter mile from home. Probably within a hundred feet or so from where our other cat had been run over. This was a cat we'd inherited about 6 months ago from someone who'd moved to a place that didn't allow pets. For a few weeks we might have re-named her "razor" for the way she struck out at anyone trying to be friendly, but she soon turned into a wonderful, playful and well-mannered addition to the family. So I began the ride already a bit sore after having to shovel a place for her in our side yard, an area which, over the past 28 years, has become the final resting place for quite a number of pets, including rabbits, chickens & cats. In fact, it's tough to find an area that hasn't already been used, and this morning, yes, I came across a few rabbit bones.

It was 10:40 by the time we finally got out on the road, quite late for a longer ride, but the days are still long enough it's not much of an issue. From Redwood City all the way to Mount Umunhum, and part of the way back. The ride to the base isn't terribly exciting; I greatly prefer having a "real" climb much earlier in a ride than mile 40. We had lunch in Los Gatos on the way, quite a bit "heavier" lunch than what we'd normally have if we did the Pescadero loop (Kevin and I each had a "plate" of Mexican food, his a Torta, mine a pair of Tamales) and it took a bit before we felt like we had our legs back.

Just about the time where I started to feel OK again, I felt awful again. That mile 40 hill. The steep section of Hicks. I do mean STEEP. I have no recollection of it having been THAT steep any time I've ridden it in the past. It felt Redwood Gulch steep! A full tenderizing treatment before even getting to the main event, Mount Umunhum.

I've ridden Mount Umunhum twice in the past. First time was probably 1973 with a good riding friend of mine at the time. I think the attraction was visual; seeing that huge radar dish in action, from many miles away, was very impressive. Things were different then; you didn't have the internet so research on the status of a road could be tough. For navigation, you had a combination of the AAA "Bay & River" map, along with USGS topographic maps. We discovered the road was "closed" with signs saying it was an air force base and trespassers could be met with violent force. And yet, as we rode up, there were real estate signs for properties along the way!

My next ride up was in 2009 with my son. Again the road was "closed" although its status was much friendlier, as it had been purchased by one of the regional parks and was undergoing renovation. It was open to hikers but not cyclists? We rode anyway, looking out for park rangers as we tried to weave our way through on the remnants of pavement that existed.

Today? The road is not only open to all, but beautifully paved and, of course, it's still almost-impossibly steep in sections. Kevin was definitely doing better than I, as he managed to stay out of his lowest gear almost the entire way up. Me? I was thinking, at least a couple times, that a 32 in the back would have been nice. I mentioned to Kevin that, the first time I rode up it, I probably had a 42 in the front, 26 in back. Hard to imagine it can be climbed in a gear like that.

There should have been a fantastic view at the top, but the valley was shrouded in heavy haze. Too bad; you can see in all directions from up on top. The site itself is a bit barren, almost sterile. Just a huge concrete box that looks like the prototype for the Borg Cube. I should also mention that there's no water anyplace on the climb, so make sure you've got two full bottles before you start up.

The descent? It's so stupid-steep it's really not much fun at all. One of those few roads where you find yourself thinking a bike with much wider tires and disc brakes might be nice, allowing you to not worry so much about gravel in the corners or your rims heating up so much that your tires blow off. We did stop once on the way down, to check how hot the rims had gotten, and were quite surprised to find they didn't burn your fingers. The combination of Bontrager carbon rims with Bontrager cork-style brake pads works very well indeed!

For the return we stuck to the original plan and met my wife at our Los Altos store, where we checked out the status of "deconstruction", before being driven home the rest of the way. 75 miles instead of 95, but that was enough for today.