Challenges presented in bicycle touring normally relate to climbing to the top of the next hill or finding a nice place to spend the night. Our tour of the Northwest this summer offered an entirely different set of challenges in addition to the normally expected events.

Our trip began with boarding the Amtrak train which was fifteen minutes late, at the depot in San Luis Obispo. It was about 4:00 p.m. Monday. We had a sleeper room, which is a cubical that is about six by seven feet. The narrow lower bed is formed by laying down the two bench seats that face each other, and the upper bunk drops down from the wall, and has a cargo net to keep the upper passenger from falling off while sleeping. Sleeper car passengers get all meals included in the price of their ticket.

Not long after we boarded, it was announced that the train was being delayed due to a derailed freight train a few miles north of Paso Robles. Janie and I enjoyed a steak dinner while we looked out of the diner car window at the scenic San Luis Obispo depot. Our daughter came over to the depot around 8:30 with her dog and visited us for about an hour while we waited to depart.

Around 11:00 p.m. the train departed. This is very exciting for rail fans. We looked out the window and saw familiar sights, such as the Men’s Colony and the beginning of the long climb up Cuesta Grade. Soon afterward we went to sleep.

We woke up early in the morning. The sun was just coming up. The sign of the depot that we were passing informed us that we were passing through Paso Robles! We had traveled less than 30 miles. Apparently Union Pacific managed to drop the derailed train car back on the tracks which did additional damage and it took all night to fix it.

Just north of King City the train was once again halted. This time it was for a bomb threat in a tunnel about a mile ahead. We enjoyed the grand views of the scenic Salinas Valley area for an additional three hours while the tunnel was searched.

Our train ride was pleasant and uneventful for the next 700 miles. We met some very interesting people with interesting and often difficult lives. We are thankful that our lives are much simpler. In Eugene, Oregon, we detrained and were piled into busses. The train was already twenty hours late, and by turning the train around in Eugene, and using busses, it could get back on schedule. Besides, the train had run out of food. As an aside, it takes six sets of trains to keep the Coast Starlight train running with the schedule it keeps, which is one northbound train and one southbound train each day.

In Seattle, we assembled our tandem bicycle and had an easy time getting to our motel (excluding a few wrong turns). Downtown Seattle is rather hilly and challenging for a loaded tandem bicycle.

On Thursday, we got together with a friend from our local bicycle club. Theresa now lives in Seattle and is a manager for Trader Joe’s. She has a degree in chemistry but did not like working in a lab, and really enjoys the people interactions that she gets in her current job. She led us on a bicycle tour of the northwestern parts of Seattle. This included “browsing” at a few of the many wild blackberry bushes, a visit to some locks, and a quaint outdoors lunch. Dinner that night was with Thera’s fiancé, Rich, at a Chinese restaurant in the International District. We were the only non-Asians, so we knew it would be a great dinner.

Friday we mounted our bicycle and headed toward Tacoma. Adversity continued to plague us, and I feared my “ability” to provide a dry bicycle ride had vanished. It rained lightly on us most of the day. The rain came down very hard three times during the day. Once while we were eating lunch, and the second time while we were checking into our motel in Tacoma, and the third time while we were cycling to see the famous Tacoma Narrows Bridge. We had missed a turn on our way to Tacoma and stopped to ask directions. Maps made for automobiles don’t have enough detail for cyclists. The kind gentleman told us to follow a road (he pointed) until we got to Fife, and I kept saying we did not want (I) 5. He was right. We got additional directions in Fife from the fine staff in the local Chamber of Commerce.

This bridge is the second bridge over the Tacoma Narrows. The first bridge was called Galloping Gertie, and collapsed a few months after it opened, in 1940. The replacement bridge, completed around 1950, used the same towers as the original bridge, but has a re-engineered deck. A third bridge is under construction. Currently several hour delays are common due to huge amounts of traffic, so another
4 lanes for the heavy traffic is needed.

Our only flat tire occurred on our ride to the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, and we had left our patch kit in our hotel room. A large radial tire patch purchased at an auto supply fixed us up.

It turns out that our day of mostly light rain was nothing. Seattle had significant flooding and some local damage. In retrospect, we had it easy. It was also the only rain day we had on our trip, so I feel my “rain shield” is still in place!

In the morning, we cycled to see the world’s tallest totem pole and the Tacoma glass museum, then we headed out of town, up a very steep hill. Two events worthy of mentioning as we left Tacoma were the lady driver that made a right turn directly in front of us much in the same way as illustrated on many automobile commercials, the ones with the caption “professional driver on a closed course” on the bottom. Good that our brakes work well. The second was finding a wallet full of money. Well, in truth, it had about $20 and identification in it. We dropped the wallet and money at a motorcycle shop for them to return to the owner.

We had hoped to cycle to Tenino to spend the night. The auto club map indicated there was a motel there. Wrong! An additional 15 miles and some meds for sore knees brought us to Centralia. By this time, we were on the route used a few weeks before for the Seattle to Portland ride. 8000 riders participated in that ride, some doing the 200 miles in one day and others in two days. Theresa had done the 2 day version and told us about some of the sights. We took 4 days, including a side trip to Tacoma. We still hadn’t seen Mt. Rainier due to overcast and mountains blocking our view. When we left Centralia, we did see Mt. Rainier. That mountain is quite spectacular! What is very different about the series of volcanos in Washington and Oregon, and what we see in southern California, is that these active volcanos rise much above the surrounding mountains, towering over everything else. Mt. Rainier is almost as high as Mt. Whitney and rises thousands of feet above all the surrounding mountains. Mt. Whitney is the slightly higher peak among lots of other adjacent high peaks.

Our plan was to cycle to Kelso the next day and get a motel. We had gotten there earlier than expected and found a very nice Ramada Inn with hot tub and more. Instead of staying there, we found that there was a lesser motel in Rainier, Oregon. We called ahead, and ventured over the Lewis and Clark Bridge on Sunday afternoon to avoid the Monday rush. This bridge crosses the Colombia River. This older motel offered us a suite with a new bed, refrigerator, and stove.

From Rainier to Portland, and my cousins’ home, was about 50 easy miles if you don’t mind cycling in 100 degree temperatures. We were fine as long as we were moving. We stayed in Portland for five days, and while there we rested, visited, and took car trips to Mt. St. Helens, to the local zoo to visit other relatives, and to Silver Falls State Park. Mt. St. Helens was very interesting and beautiful, but I would not want to live with an active volcano in my back yard!

We left Portland, heading south through the flat and fertile Willamette Valley where we spent one night in Salem and another in Corvallis. In Corvallis, we visited one of the 57 covered bridges that can be found in that area.

Our tour was to end in Eugene, spending a few days relaxing and seeing the city. It was Monday. Our first stop was at the Bike Friday factory, the source of our take-apart tandem. We spent several hours there. Our next stop was at the train station to arrange for a box for our faithful bicycle.

Janie’s mouth hung open for minutes after being informed that the train wasn’t going to run and would not be running for at least a week because of a wildfire in a tunnel that was ablaze. There was even more distress when informed that Amtrak wasn’t offering alternative transportation!

There were options. We could cycle home. That would take about 2 weeks, but Janie’s bottom was sore, as were her sunburnt lips. We could fly. Next available flight was Wednesday and would cost $1200. There was the Greyhound. Neither of us wanted to spend that much time on the bus. We could rent a car! Hertz had no cars available. More depression! Enterprise does not do one way rentals. Even more depression! Avis had a car! Joy in our hearts! We cancelled our motel room reservations and cycled 8 miles back to the airport we had passed earlier and rented a car. Fortunately we were riding our take-apart tandem, which fit easily into the trunk when disassembled.

The car trip was uneventful and perhaps even boring. In this case, “boring is good.” Days later we were still unpacking, and the tandem was still in pieces.