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Great memories of a grandfather go pedaling past

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I was thinking about my bicycle. It was red. When I rode it, down a thousand dirt roads with no names and even five miles to Raymond Lake, I was the wind. Or at least a large Greyhound bus.



A couple of things prompted such thoughts. One is that bicycling has become an adult thing now. Grown people pedal by my house on a regular basis. They have bicycles that appear to be very expensive. They also wear helmets and tightfitting cyclists' outfits. A uniform wasn't necessary during my bicycle period.

And then there's the Tour de France, the world's most important bicycle race. It's in progress now. Every morning, I pick up my newspaper and it informs me who is leading. According to the newspaper, the participants are heading toward the Pyrenees. The only good thing about pedaling a bicycle up a mountain, I suppose, is you can look forward to coasting down the other side.

I got my red bicycle when I was 9, thanks to my grandfather, Bun Word. My grandfather was a janitor at my elementary school. A kid today probably would be embarrassed if his grandfather was the janitor at his school. I wasn't. My grandfather was in his 60s when I was 9 and in the fourth grade. But he was still a tall, muscular man that dogs followed.

He told silly jokes to my classmates and passed out an occasional stick of gum with the warning, "Don't chew it until school's out." Some heeded the warning; most didn't. My grandfather also farmed 12 acres and helped out over at the Atlanta and West Point railroad depot, and his days were full, up to an April afternoon 30 years ago when we found him slumped behind his tractor, holding his chest. He died a week later.

My grandfather got up at 5 each morning and walked in the cold and dark to school. Each room was heated by a coal-burning stove. He would go down in the coal bin under the school and haul up the coal for the fires in a wheelbarrow. When we arrived three hours later, our rooms would be toasty and comfortable. In the afternoon, he would return to the school and clean the wooden floors and throw out the trash. That's how I got my bicycle. We all used Blue Horse paper and notebooks. Each Blue Horse product had a label with a point value on it. The more expensive the product, the more points the label was worth.

You could save Blue Horse labels and when you got enough points you could send them in and Blue Horse would send you back a prize. If you saved 25,000 points, you got the grand prize, a bicycle. Most of my classmates didn't save Blue Horse points. They threw their labels into the trash and my grandfather would go through each wastebasket and pick out the labels.

He started saving Blue Horse points when I was 7. Two years later, he counted one day, and he had 25,000 points. We bundled the labels together with rubber bands and mailed them to Atlanta. Two weeks later my red bicycle came. My grandfather held on to the back of the bicycle until I learned to ride it without adult assistance. It was a big day in my life. I rode my bicycle until I was 14. Then it wasn't cool to ride a bicycle anymore, so one day I climbed down off it for good and started counting the days until I could get my driver's license.

It is very unlikely I will take up adult cycling. But as they pedal by my house and the racers head towards the Pyrenees, the memory of a precious old man comes back and touches me at midlife when I find myself looking back more often than I look ahead.