

The Summer of '61 Adventure

Two Brothers Rode Bicycles from Frederick to San Francisco

Written by **Dan Whetzel**
Photography supplied by **Nils Olson**

In the summer of 1961 two brothers slowly pedaled their bicycles along the winding road toward Eckhart, Maryland, a small mining community located one mile east of Frostburg. The hill was steep and the pace slow. As they approached the intersection of Frog Hollow Road and US Route 40, they noticed a young boy seated on a bicycle listening to a transistor radio. In a friendly gesture of recognition, the brothers smiled and waved, as they continued their uphill trek to Frostburg. The bicycle encounter at Eckhart more than 50 years ago proved to be a memorable event in the life of Gary Duckworth, the boy seated at the end of Frog Hollow Road.

Riding bicycles was a popular pastime for kids growing up in the 1950s and 1960s and the Olson brothers were no exception; Nils and Eric enjoyed riding. But what Eric proposed to his brother Nils, in January of 1961, was not a typical bike ride because it involved a cross country journey from their home in Frederick, Maryland, to San Francisco, California.

Eric was 16 years of age, an Eagle Scout, and avid reader of *Boys Life* magazine. One issue of the publication featured a story about a 15 year old scout who bicycled alone from California to Connecticut, thereby providing inspiration for the Olsons' adventure. As Nils recalled, "It was my brother's idea. I was only 12 years old and would have rather been hanging around the swimming pool. My brother said he would be going off to college soon and this would be our last summer to make the trip. I agreed with him. Our mother wasn't so enthusiastic about the idea. We worked from January to May trying to convince her to let us go; she finally agreed. Mom thought that Eric was very responsible in many ways."



The trip started out with the purchase of new bicycles. "We went to the bike shop in Frederick and told the owner about our plans. We wanted 10 speed bikes but the owner convinced us that two speed Schwinn's would be sturdier. The bicycles were heavy. Then we went to a custom welding supply shop for installation of luggage racks. Each bicycle ended up weighing 58 pounds."

The journey began in Frederick on June 26, 1961, and continued for more than seven weeks along United States Route 40, today designated as Alternate 40. At the end of the first day the Olson brothers encountered Gary Duckworth in Eckhart.

As Gary recalled, "Local radio stations WTBO and WCUM were broadcasting that the Olsen brothers would be coming up Route 40 on their way west. Chazz Offutt, the local radio DJ on WCUM, said he would track their progress and encouraged local residents to give them a wave as they passed through the area."

"The morning the Olson's were expected to pass through, I attached my transistor radio to my belt and listened carefully, so I could see the heroic adventurers. I remember Chazz saying, 'They are in Flintstone... then Cumberland (where they were detained as possible run-aways)...then LaVale...then Red Hill...then Clarysville.' I decided it was time to ride my bicycle to the bottom of Frog Hollow Road. I remember watching them pedal toward me on Route 40 from Clarysville. As the brothers passed by, they gave me a wave and a big hello. What an exciting day that was for me."



Brothers Nils, 12 (left) and Eric, 16 on their 7 week journey to the West Coast. This photo was taken in Kansas.

The cross country trek nearly came to an end outside of Uniontown, Pennsylvania. The steep descent into Uniontown caused Eric's brakes to fail and only by dragging his shoes could the bicycle be stopped. After arrival in the town, handbrakes were installed to improve safety.

The Olsons were not discouraged by the mishap and continued their cross country quest on US Route 40, a major east-west corridor. On several occasions the boys ran short on funds and were assisted by police officers and friendly residents. Highlights included a night's lodging in the Kansas City jail, courtesy of a detective, and royal treatment at Harold's Club of Reno where the management provided new shoes, laundering of clothes, a first class meal, and 50 dollars in cash. Another point of interest was the new interstate highway system that was just getting underway; the brothers experienced rides on sections of the road in Kansas and Utah.

Life on the road proved to be worrisome for Mrs. Alice Olson. As Nils recalls, "Back then long distance phone calls were expensive, so we only checked in with Mom a couple of times each week. The local Frederick newspaper also printed weekly updates on our progress."

The heavy Schwinn bikes were not designed for climbing the Rocky Mountains, so a friendly shop owner in Denver gave the Olsons 60 dollars each as trade value on new 10 speed models that only weighed 26 pounds. Empowered by lighter bicycles, the Olsons challenged the Rockies and continued toward the setting sun.

After 2,800 miles of hard work and adventure the boys arrived safely in San Francisco on August 15th—mission accomplished. After a brief stay, the brothers returned by commercial aircraft. As Nils noted, "The return trip wasn't as meaningful. Staring out the window as we crossed the continent seemed to completely disconnect us from the country we experienced on the way out." The brothers annually celebrate the start of their journey by exchanging cards, messages, and appropriately, by continuing to ride bicycles throughout the year.

The Olsons believed their 51 day adventure had become a family story with little interest to anyone else—50 years is a long time. Enter Gary Duckworth in 2010. "Several months ago (June 2010) I had the opportunity to have dinner with Nils, and what to my surprise, I discovered that he was the adventurer that waved and spoke to me almost 50 years ago. The Olsons' adventure made an



impression on me and I never forgot them. I only had a few heroes, President Eisenhower, Matt Dillon of Gunsmoke, and the Olson brothers.”

The Olsons’ adventure and encounter with Gary Duckworth may illustrate a different era, simpler days when kids could freely search for a dream and make it happen—even if it was on the open road. Today, organized programs tend to draw imagination from youngsters and place it in the hands of adults. Maybe life has to be that way now, but it is fun to recall a time when the rules were different.

Nils Olson is a nationally known cosmetic and restorative dentist residing in Frederick, Maryland. His bother Eric is a clinical psychologist living in Frederick. Gary Duckworth is s a realtor for RE/Max Results and also resides in Frederick.



Gary Duckworth, RE/Max Results realtor. See his ad on page 26.



Top left: At the beginning of their journey, Eric and Nils are shown posing for the Frederick newspaper. The caption stated, “The boys say they plan to ride the Schwinn English bikes about 100 miles a day.”

Above: Eric and Nils were treated like royalty at the Harold’s Club of Reno where they were provided new shoes, a first class meal and 50 dollars in cash.



Nils (left), Eric’s son Stephan, who lives in Stockholm, and Eric. Stephan plans to return to the United States next summer when he plans to ride his bike across the country just like his father and uncle did 50 years ago.