



ADVENTURE CYCLIST

SEPT/OCT 2023



Our Once and Present Timeline

by CAROLYNE WHELAN



ime is a Möbius strip. This used to baffle me as a kid — we are all a part of history, the present, and the future in every moment we are alive, in every choice we make. And not just from a “those who don’t learn from the past are doomed to repeat it” viewpoint, either. The pavement I ride on my commute to work is the result of many people’s efforts in the past to build a bike path, to pave it, to invent pavement, to conceive of the bicycle. The wear of my tires is one small part of the inevitable wear on the path that will cause it to crack. The traffic I’m part of will be referenced in town hall meetings when it comes time to repave the path, as an argument to widen it and create lanes. And then, when there is a well-used, wide bike path along the river, someone will stop for a *plein air* painting session, trying to envision a world that isn’t so cluttered and covered in concrete, when one can hear nothing but the river and the birds. And just like a baffled child, I find myself relearning the same lessons, acting in ignorance of things I thought I’d figured out. In one direction, I learn; in another, I forget.

In this issue, we focus on moments when people chose their time to truly partake in history, whether the past or present. We revisit the historic 1966 California Farmworker March, this time by bicycle (page 18); we take a look at bikes during wartime (page 42) and through moments of political resistance, including the Easter Rising in 1916 Ireland (page 34);

we follow along with a young man on his perhaps Quixotic quest to spread the word of Socialism with a Human Face during a brief moment of freedom for his people (page 24); and we look at how a community equips adaptive cyclists with accessible trails, making efforts now for future shredders to take their adaptive bikes on local trails without getting their wheels stuck or breaking the flow (page 48). Perhaps all the best moments in history are some version of fighting windmills, having enough delusion in our potential impact to actually cause change. May we all be so lucky as to have such aspirations!

During the week we sent this magazine to the printer, I celebrated my Nana’s 100th birthday with her. Age, I think, is a perfect metaphor for time’s *non sequitur*. My grandmother was born in 1923, and the history she’s experienced unfold is mind-blowing to me. Sure those events happened in the past, but they live on in the present — in her memories, in the person they’ve sculpted her to be, and who I’ve become through her influence.

As you read through this issue, I invite you to consider your own impressive life, the moments that have had ripple effects. The person who built the stone wall I rode alongside in Ireland, for example, is just as much a part of history as the person whose historic route I was re-creating. And as you roll out on your summer tours, I hope you will take a moment to appreciate the people in history who made this present moment what it is, from planting trees that offer you shade to creating the route you’re riding. 🚲



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History Issue

The bicycle as a tool for resistance

18

Friction Shifting

Cycling in the footsteps of the 1966 California Farmworker March

BY J. NATHAN MATIAS

24

A Curtain Parts

In a brief moment between Czechoslovakia occupations, a young cyclist finds freedom

BY RON HERSHEY

34

Erin go Bragh

Retracing the route of Peter Paul Galligan, the Irish Paul Revere

BY CAROLYNE WHELAN

42

Cavalry on Wheels

A short history of the bicycle in warfare

BY DAVID V. HERLIHY

48

Adapt and Overcome ▶

How a small nonprofit built Vermont's first adaptive trail network

BY BERNE BROUDY



DEPARTMENTS



Workbench + Parts Bin 06



Reader Letters 07



Waypoints 08



Road Test
Carver Ti Conestoga 56
Fairlight Faran 2.5 58



Geared Up 64



Companions Wanted 74



Open Road Gallery 75

COLUMNS



Editor's Letter 03



Be Here Now 10



Camp Kitchen 12



Good Fit 15



Traveling Ernestly 16



Mechanical Advantage 62



Saddle Up 63

PROFILE

Life's a Circus 54

Agile Rascal Bike Theatre is a rolling dervish of theatrics and politics
BY DAN D'AMBROSIO

CONTRIBUTORS

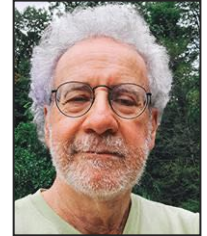
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On the Cover

"My riding partner Ilja was holding my bike as I was taking photos of the bears around us in Yellowstone Park. I was so excited that I didn't think about the dangers, and a nearby visitor shouted to warn me that another bear was reaching for my leg. I retracted it as I heard the bear's jaw snap!"

Photo by Jaroslav Jung





story by **J. Nathan Matias**

*Trees and oil wells line
the California roads from
Kern County toward the
rivers of Sacramento over
300 miles north.*

photos by **Ivan Sigal**

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cycling in the
footsteps of
the 1966
California
Farmworker
March

I finally left the map behind the day I met Gloria Gonzales, while sitting in an office chair with a paper plate of lo mein at a business park in Fresno, California.

Most of us around the table were covered in gypsum, soil, and sweat after a dozen hours in 95°F heat. I had climbed thousands of feet on my bicycle through sequoia forests, orange groves, and oil fields to reach this community meeting. Gonzales and her fellow farmworkers had picked thousands of grape leaves, cherries, and apricots in an ultra-endurance summer challenge to feed their families. Now over dinner in Fresno, they were discussing how to protect workers from the sun when employers illegally denied them shade and water.

When our hosts asked why my friend Ivan and I were riding through California's Central Valley, we told them about our journey in the

footsteps of César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and Larry Itliong. In 1966, they led a Latinx and Filipino farmworker movement that marched hundreds of miles from Delano to Sacramento for labor rights in the field. This legendary *peregrinación*, or pilgrimage, grew to thousands of people over 24 days before celebrating their first union contract on the steps of the California State Capitol. As a Guatemalan American, I wanted to understand more about this part of Latinx heritage in the U.S. Now that Congress is considering a national park to memorialize the farmworker movement, Ivan and I were retracing the famous march.

Then Gonzales said something that forced me to face the deeper meaning of our journey: "I walked the route last summer."

Last year, Gonzales joined a United Farm Workers march that helped convince Governor Newsom to expand farmworker rights in California in September 2022. Gonzales rose early each morning, drove up to 180 miles to the spot she ended the previous day, and continued the walk to Sacramento. That summer, gas prices hovered around \$5.50 and for a while in June even exceeded six dollars per gallon. If farmers actually paid her the 2022 California minimum wage of \$15.50 per hour, Gonzales would have to pick fruit for more than four hours just to cover the fuel costs of her stage race for equal dignity and basic rights.

By telling us her story, Gonzales was posing the central riddle of our ride: what does it mean to memorialize a historic event that, like the Palisade Glacier above us in the Sierra Nevada, was still on the move?

A growing number of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) cyclists are using the bicycle to reckon with our place in history and take up our place on the roads. Since 2009, groups of Cherokee young people have cycled annually for 950 miles along the route of the nineteenth century Removal. This ride memorializes their ancestors' journey from Georgia to Oklahoma during an ethnic cleansing and forced displacement by the U.S. government of 16,000 Cherokees, alongside tens of thousands from other Native nations. Similarly, many American descendants of slavery have followed nineteenth century freedom-seeker self-liberation routes stretching from Alabama into Canada — including a route published by Adventure Cycling.

I thought of the Beat poets and Allen Ginsberg's poem, "Howl." In Central California, the past is not something just to recover through facts and memories — it is alive and kicking you in the eyeball. We first felt this jolt of living history after checking into Bakersfield's Vagabond Inn the evening before our ride. A few miles south, we watched the sunset illuminate a grid of orchards, vines, and irrigation pipes that stretched beyond the horizon into the Tehachapi Mountains.

We were at Arvin Farm Labor Center #26, which John Steinbeck immortalized as "Weedpatch Camp" in his 1939 novel

The Grapes of Wrath. To the north, a historically preserved library, post office, and community hall reminded us that the surrounding land was engineered generations ago to rely on the cheapest possible labor. Turning to the south, we saw rows of recent apartments in a similar style — Kern County has continuously used Weedpatch Camp to house migrant workers since the Great Depression.

History is also something you breathe in Bakersfield, a lesson I learned behind my N-99 mask on a 10 percent grade up to Panorama Park on our first day. The park offers a dramatic view of the Kern River Oil Field from high bluffs along newer housing developments. This oil field, discovered in 1899, is now scattered with over 11,000 oil derricks across 16 square miles. At the top, we met with Cesar Aguirre, a community scientist who studies air pollution. Aguirre pointed at the oilfields, highways, and farms to explain why the American Lung Association ranks Bakersfield as having the worst air pollution in America.

Century-old oil wells with no written record can be the most dangerous. Aguirre explained how community scientists found leaking wells beneath office buildings, in housing developments, and next to schools. In 2020, Latinx community leaders in the nearby town of Arvin passed California's first law requiring a buffer zone between oil wells and homes, inspiring state leaders to extend those protections across the state with similar bills.

I adjusted my mask and double-checked my framebag for the inhalers that have saved my life more than once. Cycling is usually safe in Kern County, but as I felt those statistics in my lungs, I could understand why César Chávez took up the cause of air quality late in his life. As we set out for Delano, the reward for these precautions was a stunning view of a pin-cushion landscape of pipes and towering pumpjacks.

Farther north, grids of orchards replaced the controlled jumble of Kern's oilfields. Rows of almonds, pistachios, and orange trees stretched endlessly into the distance, interrupted only by the occasional irrigation system, porta-potty, or pollinator beehive. In 2020, California farms grew almonds on 1.25 million acres, producing most of the world's almonds — an estimated 2.8 billion pounds that year. Our ride through the fields filled me with a sense of awe at the ambition and control required to grow food at this scale. Growers have reshaped the surface of the earth for hundreds of miles to supply the world with nuts, fruit, and vegetables.

How can such a uniform view be so compelling? People are scarce along the

flat working roads of the Central Valley in early June. As dawn moves to daylight, aging pickup trucks, cars, and 18-wheelers regularly speed past. Occasional clusters of vehicles and portable toilets indicate parties of farmworkers. On farmland where water is directly piped into tree roots, wildlife is also rare. The color palette is genetically designed to maximize crop yield: sandy soil, deep green leaves, and a hazy-blue cloudless sky. The majesty of Central Valley farmland, I realized, is in the wonder of infrastructure — the realization that you're riding inside an economic machine with roots in the soil and branches that reach across the country's highways onto our grocery shelves.

In the spring of 1966, when Filipino and Latin American farmworkers advocated for the chance to bargain with growers, it might have felt like trying to talk with a machine. When growers refused to negotiate, union organizers took inspiration from Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery and Gandhi's 1930 Salt March to the sea. At each town, from Delano in the south to the state capitol of Sacramento 280 miles to the north, they held public demonstrations, concerts, and theater performances to create media attention and enlist public support.

If Congress memorializes the farmworker movement like it has the Selma civil rights march, the starting point will be the Forty Acres in Delano. Although the farmworkers actually started at the Filipino

Community Hall downtown, community volunteers built this brick union office and service station with funds they raised through the march. Arriving at this now-empty building surrounded by tall palm trees feels like visiting an oasis after hours along dusty orchards in the hot sun.

What makes a place more than bricks, windows, and a roof? As Ivan and I rested under the portico of the Forty Acres, a group of young Latina women in academic robes drove up, stepped out, and arranged their caps. With high school behind and college ahead, these women took graduation photos next to this site of struggle and hope. Built to support workers and fund the union, the Forty Acres hosted the world's media in 1968 when U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy convinced César Chávez to end a 25-day hunger strike. In our time, national politicians still visit the site to make announcements affecting Latin Americans.

No safe bicycle route can follow the path along Routes 65 and 99 that farmworkers walk between fields and freight lines. Route 99, which currently reaches a peak of over 13,000 vehicles an hour, is now closed to bicycles. At rush hour on Route 65, a car, truck, or tractor passes roughly every two seconds. Cyclists attempting to trace the farmworker march choose checkpoints of interest and thread them onto a string of side roads.

The most essential routes cannot be traveled with wheels at all. Water is California's most precious resource, and

AS I rode along the path they walked,
I imagined how they must have felt, a
crowd of thousands emerging from dry
environments into a fertile promised land.



Panorama Park in Bakersfield overlooks the Kern River Oil Field. Until 2019, this oil field funded San Francisco's Golden Gate Park.



Cesar Aguirre, oil and gas director at the Central California Environmental Justice Network, explains how community scientists are working to improve air quality across California.

its flows are fate-makers for survival in the valley. North of Delano, we visited the freedom colony of Allensworth, established by African Americans in 1908. Designed as a self-governing, self-sustaining community, Allensworth grew into a town with hundreds of people by the 1920s. When surrounding landowners redirected the flow of water and local companies refused to dig wells, the original town dwindled. Sixty-five years after its founding and with most residents gone, Allensworth was made a state historic park. It is now a memorial to the ongoing history of Black autonomy in California.

“You can’t understand the Central Valley unless you understand water,” said Randy Villegas, a college professor in Visalia who met us for coffee after our visit to Allensworth. Over the next four days, we climbed thousands of feet to glimpse

the snowcap at the top of the Sierra Nevada near Sequoia National Park. We visited the Friant Dam outside Fresno, which captures melting snow and delivers it hundreds of miles to farms throughout the valley. We rode through unincorporated communities, with irrigation canals through the middle of town, whose residents had to fight for running water in their homes. And one evening in Fresno, we had dinner with Gonzales and her fellow farmworkers, who couldn’t always rely on growers for water and shade in the fields.

Our route north also took us beneath the surface of the earth. Farmers draw billions of gallons from groundwater wells, making the ground subside as much as six inches per year in places, according to usgs.gov. To track subsidence, geologists sink poles deep into the ground and mark the level as it shrinks — like parents marking the height

of a child. As we rode beneath the feet of the 1966 farmworker movement, I imagined the landscape as a kind of underworld.

Talk to a grower in the Central Valley, and you will be given the formula that water equals agriculture equals food. As a Latino based in upstate New York, I came looking for food I can’t easily get in the Northeast. In Bakersfield, I enjoyed a cup of Birria Ramen, the Basque lamb, Latin American chiles, and Asian noodles combining in an homage to a century of immigration. We drank fresh mandarin juice at the California Fruit Depot, a small orchard, packing plant, and gift shop. On a hot day in Merced, we watched the *aguas* lady serve us slices of mango, watermelon, jicama, pineapple, and cucumber from her cart beneath a rainbow umbrella.

As we approached Sacramento on our fifth day, we saw more farm stores, dairies, and wineries. In Modesto, we tasted pickle-flavored almonds at the offices of Blue Diamond Growers, which grew 2.6 billion pounds of almonds last year. We indulged with fresh fruit popsicles and *mangonadas* at local chain La Michoacana Plus, enjoying the classic drink of mangos covered in *chamoy*, a condiment made from chili powder, salt, and lime.

The landscape’s two-tone palette opened up like a fan of color swatches on our sunset ride into Sacramento. Passing through the Cosumnes River Preserve, we saw sandy soil and dark green orchards replaced with wetland diversity. Egrets soared above lily ponds in sky-blue reflections on the still water. Riding along the curves of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, I remembered “*De Colores*,” a song that farmworkers sang on the road in 1966. One English translation reads,

*In colors, in colors
Are the thousand gleams the sun treasures.
From people laughing, and shaking hands.
All the colors, colors
From people who know freedom.*



ADDITIONAL READING: Ganz, Marshall. (2009) *Why David Sometimes Wins*. Harvard University Press; Allen Ginsberg, "Howl" from *Collected Poems, 1947–1980*. Copyright © 1984 by Allen Ginsberg. Ganz, M. (2011). "Public Narrative, Collective Action, and Power." *Accountability Through Public Opinion: From Inertia to Public Action*, 273–289.

For more information on the Forty Acres, go to: nps.gov/nr/travel/american_latino_heritage/the_forty_acres.html

For information on the Great Central Valley Bicycle Route, check out: ridewithgps.com/ambassador_routes/2086-great-central-valley-bicycle-route

To help fund the Dolores Huerta Peace and Justice Cultural Center, visit: doloreshuerta.org

The Central California Environmental Justice Network hosted the conversation with farmworkers. They are a recipient of the fundraiser we organized for our social media followers. ccejn.org

California Bicycle Coalition is an advocacy organization that coordinates local and state efforts around safe and enjoyable bicycling. CalBike maintains a list of bicycle coalitions across the state, including eight groups along the Central Valley. Local bike coalitions were very helpful points of contact when I had questions about riding through a given area. calbike.org

The Union of Concerned Scientists (ucsusa.org) has a bilingual (English/Spanish) California/West team that develops strategies for vulnerable sectors and populations in California. UCS senior climate scientists J. Pablo Ortiz-Partida and Ángel S. Fernández-Bou gave me valuable advice on route mapping and interviews; they also do work on farmworker rights. blog.ucsusa.org/johanna-chao-kreilick/we-must-do-right-by-farmworkers-slaughterhouse-workers-and-food-service-employees

When 10,000 farmworkers and their supporters walked into Sacramento the day before Easter in April 1966, they called their journey a peregrinación. Alongside signs bearing labor slogans, they carried banners of the Virgin of Guadalupe, an image of Latin American indigenous Christianity. One man walked barefoot carrying a cross.

As I rode along the path they walked, I imagined how they must have felt, a crowd of thousands emerging from dry environments into a fertile promised land. In later years, farmworker organizer Dolores Huerta would develop the slogan "*Sí Se Puede*," Yes We Can. After five days on the bicycle and 460 miles, a story that started with enduring challenges had become a story of enduring hope.

The farmworker movement crossed a bridge into Sacramento on Easter morning after 24 days of walking. They held mass at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe and then celebrated their first union contract with a press conference on the steps of the state capitol. By then, the march had become more than a union campaign; it was now a symbol of Latinx identity and potential in the U.S. Decades later, Harvard professor and former United Farm Workers organizer Marshall Ganz would call this "the power of public narrative:" the chance to find your own purpose in a shared story of actions you take with others.

Last year, U.S. Senator Alex Padilla and Congressman Raul Ruiz introduced a federal bill that would give even more people the chance to experience the story of the farmworker movement. The bill would establish a César Chávez and Farmworker Movement National Historical Park, based on detailed historical research by the National Park Service. If the bill is passed, the Park Service will preserve sites like the Forty Acres and investigate a possible national historical trail like the one between Selma and Montgomery.

In many parts of the U.S., the farmworker march has become a stand-in for Latinx heritage, a way for institutions to acknowledge that we too are Americans. It's a story as old as St. Patrick's Day parades, which helped establish the Irish as Americans a century ago. As Senator Padilla explained in his announcement, a new park would "preserve the full culture and diverse legacy of all Americans." With each street sign, school name, and national park, Latinx culture gains more recognition in a country that isn't always convinced that we belong.

You don't need to wait for an act of Congress to bicycle through the Central Valley. But should you? I posed that question to Tom Hothem, who leads education

outreach at the Merced Bicycle Coalition. Hothem is one of over a dozen maintainers of the Great Central Valley Bicycle Route, a thousand-mile collaboration of local cyclists and historians across the length of California. The route prioritizes safety and serendipity, according to Hothem. It bypasses larger towns, offers spur extensions to historical sites, and takes 640 miles to reach Sacramento from Bakersfield. As a white cyclist, Hothem said he feels perfectly safe changing a tire or asking for water near farms and homes along the way. He agreed that cyclists of color might have more peace of mind in groups of two or more.

While some routes are best traveled only by the group they memorialize, the Central Valley connects everyone who shops at the supermarket or has ever relied on oil. To understand how people can visit the region with respect, I spoke with Camilla Chavez, executive director of the Dolores Huerta Foundation. Next year, the foundation will break ground for the Dolores Huerta Peace and Justice Cultural Center, an upcoming visitor center and community organizing hub in downtown Bakersfield. Camilla says the best way to honor the ongoing legacy of farmworker organizers is to recognize today's leaders. That's why the center combines an art gallery and coffee shop with community services and an organizing space. "People who come to visit will be called to take action," she said.

In any pilgrimage, the traveler takes a personal journey to the future through the footsteps of the past. In the twentieth century, climate refugees from Oklahoma and striking farmworkers from Delano traveled the same roads to build a future for their families. Gloria Gonzales, the farmworker and organizer from Parlier, walked the route in 2022 to secure labor rights for her community. Tom Hothem, the bicycle educator from Merced, rides the area to learn about his adoptive home and create paths for others.

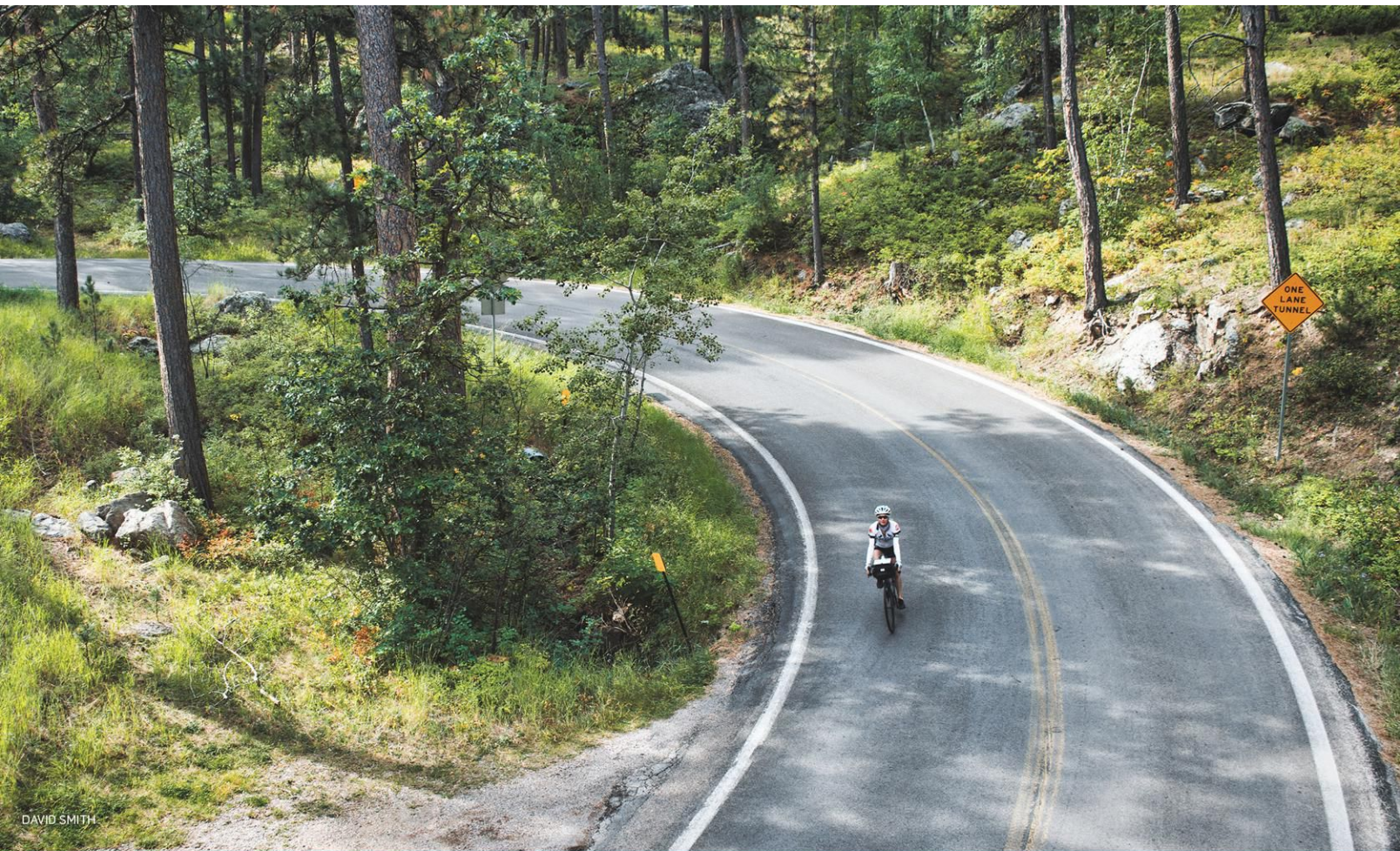
I traveled the route to make sense of an iconic moment in Latin American heritage and meet leaders who are shaping the future of the region. I also went in search of California eyeball kicks — wanting to be confronted by the realities of the region that fills my grocery bag from afar. Together, we each bring different stories to the same road we all share, like the colors of the farmworker movement song: *Colors from people laughing and shaking hands. Colors from people who know freedom.* 🇳🇵

J. Nathan Matias is a Guatemalan American randonneur, writer, and academic who journeys through landscapes, ideas, and histories on two wheels.



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