

# the covington reincarnated

by Peg Brickley

Whether it's just getting to work without dropping a half day's pay at the gas pump, training for a triathlon or catching up on the week's gossip, where there's a crowd of cyclists, there's a mission.

So it was for decades when Project Adventure ran the Covington Century ride as a way to make a difference in the lives of teens from troubled backgrounds, and so it will be in August, when the Southern Bicycle League sets the wheels to spinning for a cause once again.

Greenway pioneer Newton Trails, Hometown Animal Rescue and Pound Puppies 'N Kittens are the beneficiaries of the revived ride, which is slated to take off August 4 from Covington, a small town where the square is still the major gathering place.

That's a sign of the changing times for cycling, said Brent Buice, executive director of Georgia Bikes! Once the province of large urban areas, group recreational cycling is booming in the state's small towns, he said.

In Buice's town of Athens, for example, regular community rides run an hour or two. The point is to feed the growing popularity of cycling, to make newcomers to the sport comfortable they can be safe in the streets.

"The pace is very, very leisurely," Buice said. "Aside from the temperature, if you're breaking a sweat, you're doing it wrong."

The revived Covington Century is a something-for-everyone kind of Southern back roads event, holding the promise of beer and ice cream, art and architecture in the small towns along the way, along with bike mechanics, guides and the other essentials of a well-run group ride.

Maurice Carter of Covington, who has been involved in the event for years, says cycling

just makes it that much easier to be friendly. "You can talk to people. You can wave," said Carter, who's with Newton Trails. "When I started, I used to worry about my speed. Now it's smiles per hour, not miles per hour."

While the small towns on the route are loaded with charm and history, they're also packed with people trying to get by in the reality of a long national struggle out of recession. For many, cycling is not just a way to take a stand in favor of energy independence, clean air and health. In small town America, in the year 2012, a car payment is one bill too many for lots of people.

"If there is no public transit, biking may be your only option," said Buice.

Gardner is counting on the success of the event to make it easier to sell the town's business community on that idea that being cycling-friendly place pays off in the form of hotel rooms booked, restaurant meals sold. "It proves cycling can be a draw, an economic benefit," he said.



*Jeff Townsend celebrates the Covington C  
photo by Charlotte Kuehn*

Cycling in the Covington Century has always meant riding for a cause. Under the auspices of Project Adventure, the cause was to aid kids who had spent much of their lives in foster care, riding in group vans. Many had never been on a bicycle.

For the first 19 years of the event, the kids

could only direct riders in the parking areas and staff the rest stops, handing out water to the riders. 2008 saw a change, with a team of 30 riders, Project Adventure staff and kids, leading the cyclists for the first time. More than 1,100 participants pitched in that year, to make the 20th Annual Covington Century an event to remember.

But in 2010, there was no Covington Century. Tough economic times forced the closing of the doors of the youth group home in Covington. The announcement there would be no ride that year noted it was never just about the cycling, or even the fundraising.

"It was about spreading awareness to the community about group home kids," Project Adventure said. "It was an opportunity for the riders to see that these were not "bad kids" but merely kids who needed a second chance."

This year's causes are no less important to the ride's organizers from the Southern Bicycle League. Newtown County Trail-Path Foundation Inc. is devoted to developing a network that will make alternative transportation - walking and rowing, along with cycling - a viable and attractive option.

Hometown Animal Rescue of Conyers will use the money it gets to fund low-cost shot clinics and save stray and neglected dogs. Pound Puppies 'N Kittens, for all the cuteness in its name, does the deadly serious job of getting cats and dogs out of overcrowded public shelters and into safe foster homes in counties east of Atlanta.

An advocate for bike-friendly rules and practices, Buice said the "safety in numbers" concept that caused riders to band together often is the start of a cycling community, one open enough to include everyone from people trying to get to the Olympics to people trying to get by.

"Anyone who pedals is a real cyclist," Buice said.

