INTRODUCTION: NARRATIVES OF FRED MCGRAW DONNER

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I hatched the plot when home on spring break; I guess I got the *wanderlust*. My grandfather had been a great traveler, so I thought I could be too… I would just put baskets on my bike and put tents and a sleeping bag in them.

In the summer of 1964, at the age of eighteen, Fred Donner set off alone on a bicycle trip from New Jersey to Wisconsin and back again. As he did so, he was unknowingly seeing middle America during a period of calm before the storm. This was an interim grace-period for America's politics and society, with President Lyndon B. Johnson serving out the rest of John F. Kennedy’s term, but not quite in control of the future himself. Kennedy’s New Frontier had not yet become Johnson’s Great Society. The Civil Rights Act was signed into law that July, but the Voting Rights Act, the Immigration Act, an all-out “War on Poverty”, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start, Work Study programs, widespread public broadcasting, and all that these imply were months and years in the future.

But there were hints of what was to come, even as Fred strapped his tent and sleeping-bag to his bike. In 1964, Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* was released in theatres; the Beatles gave their first tour of the US; Bob Dylan released *The Times They Are A-Changin’*; the PLO was formed in Jerusalem; Nelson Mandela was sentenced to prison; plans were announced for a sky-scraper complex in Manhattan called the World Trade Center; and Sandy Koufax and the Los Angeles Dodgers ruled the world. Fred’s cycling-tour summer was also Mississippi’s Freedom Summer, which saw white and black activists, many of them students, attempt to register tens of thousands of black voters, though with limited immediate success; in May, the first notable demonstrations, many led by students, against US involvement in Vietnam occurred; in August, Johnson passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, entrenching America ever deeper in war. In 1964, it

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1 I am especially grateful to Carel Bertram, Fred’s wife and partner in so many pursuits, for transcribing and relaying to me the *apophthegmata patrum* that I have used here to punctuate this portrait.
should be recalled, at the age of eighteen, Fred was still too young to vote. But it didn’t matter: everyone could tell change was in the air.

Fred’s hometown was not at the epicenter of those changes. Basking Ridge, New Jersey is an unincorporated area in Bernards Township that was literally named for the propensity of its fauna to doze blissfully in the sun. It is situated in the Somerset Hills, a green and rolling region made habitable by the rivers and brooks that cross it. Its historical toponymy suggests an American pastoral symphony: Millington Gorge, the Great Swamp, Second Watchung Mountain, Dead River. George Washington actually slept here—that is the sort of place Basking Ridge, New Jersey is, and was. Nowadays, it is home to the headquarters of telecom giant Verizon Wireless, but in 1964, the Donner Era, the area was home to a much more modest concern called AT&T. But even that small landmark was merely a twentieth-century excrescence on a landscape that had been more familiar with farmland and the country homes of Manhattan’s robber barons (or, rather, baronets). As America’s prosperity crested after World War II, in came the parks, the country clubs, and the lines and curves of subdivisions. Brush’s Hardware became Brush’s Deli but still dutifully passed through generations of Brushes; the Patriot’s Oak grew old and senescent. The leafy streets of the town were more or less quiet and well-heeled, and their residents were more or less quiet and well-heeled, too. Of the region’s college-bound men, more than a few would be condemned to wind up down the road at Princeton, and this indeed had been Fred’s fate. His freshman year was behind him, and now he was eager to see some of America on his own.

Such a venture was expected to be the sort of thing his father would disapprove of, but his mother supported it, and that’s what mattered. There was some precedent, after all: Fred’s grandfather and namesake, Fred McGraw, was renowned in family circles for his travels in the South Pacific and Central America back in the 1890s. When he was in his nineties, and the young Fred still in high school, he lived with the Donner family in Basking Ridge. It was then that the grandfather offered more than his name to his grandson and instilled in him a love of distant horizons. With this family history to inspire him, Fred set his sights on the Upper Midwest, where he could see the Great Lakes and visit a friend he had met while at college. Fred’s mother broke the story to her husband by covering it in excitement, “Fred’s got the wanderlust!” she said. Permission was granted. Maps were consulted. Tires were inflated. And away.

The journey lasted about eight weeks. It took him into the Delaware Water Gap, across the Poconos and into New York state. One week into