

CENT COLS ON THE PARPAILLON



Contents

Revue no. 2, 1974

[Brevet Cyclo des Hautes Altitudes](#) Robert del Medico

Revue no. 10, 1982

[My failures on the Parpaillon](#) Francisque Ferlay

Revue no. 11, 1983

[Twists and turns in the Ubaye](#) Jacques Bordenave and Jean-Jacques Labadie

Revue no. 15, 1987

[The Pastis of the Parpaillon](#) Raymond Cros

[Fear on the Parpaillon](#) Freddy Anceschi

Revue no. 17, 1989

[There was... LA Parpaillon](#) Jonathon

Revue no. 21, 1993

[Parpaillon... ages](#) Robert Luce

[A short bath in the Parpaillon tunnel](#) Henri Gravezat

Revue no. 22, 1994

[Parpaillon 78](#) Abel Lequien

Revue no. 24, 1996

[The little Genies of the Parpaillon](#) Martial Garcia

Revue no. 25, 1997

[Le Parpaillon has its Stamp](#) Michel Lerouge

Revue no. 26, 1998

[Parpaillon! Helmet obligatory](#) Noël Mathelet

[The Parpaillon so coveted](#) Patrick Baisset

Revue no. 29, 2001

[Mythic Parpaillon](#) Michel Nau

Revue no. 30, 2002

[Storming the Parpaillon](#) Michel et Cathia Descombe

[The Parpaillon... a dream?](#) Christian Gerard

Revue no. 40, 2012

[For or against the Parpaillon](#) Gilles Aubert

Revue no. 41, 2013

[My Parpaillons](#) Georges Golse

[The tunnel](#) Alfeo Lotto

[The Col du Parpaillon, Cape Horn of cycletouring ...](#) Jean-Pierre Cance

Revue no. 42, 2014

[My Parpaillon](#) Jean Dejean

Revue no. 45, 2017

[A legendary col, the Parpaillon](#) Bernard Weulersse

[My Parpaillon \(altitude 2640 m\)](#) Michel Ménard

Revue no. 47, 2019

[For me, my Parpaillon](#) Noël Nominée

Revue no. 50, 2022

[Memories of the Parpaillon](#) Alain Collongues

[Cycloclimbing memories](#) Henri Bosc

Brevet Cyclo des Hautes Altitudes

by Roberto DEL MEDICO, of Chambéry

It was an article in "Le Dauphiné" and the handsome medal, that persuaded me to sign up for B.C.H.A. (Brevet Cyclo des Hautes Altitudes) organised by the Compagnons du Pignon Fixe.

It's 1st July that with some energetic pedalling, I arrive in the Barcelonnette area by a very up and down route and on a torridly hot day.

That evening, I sleep in a shed belonging to the mayor of a small village not far from Barcelonnette : Les Thuiles.

2 July : early in the morning, I get on the bike and take the direction of the Col d'Allos. On this road that I have taken time and time again, a crowd of memories come into my mind ; hardly a year ago, it was the second stage of my "Tour de France Randonneur". I was certainly happy but concerned above all, doubting that I could finish this fantastic ride alone. Today I am not in a hurry, I can look at the scenery at my leisure and that will be worth the effort.

You will think it ridiculous, but I cannot be indifferent before these mountain landscapes, even though I've seen them a dozen times. On each climb I discover some detail that I have never noticed before, sometimes insignificant but all the same able to move me, and I am as joyful as if it was "the first time".

It's true, I love the mountains, I love them perhaps too much, I love them with all my being.

Later, it's the feed at the village of Allos. I conscientiously fill my musette as I am going to cross the Col de la Petite Cayolle, a rough-stuff col joining the Col de la Cayolle road.

I climb a narrow and very steep road (according to the Michelin map "at 15 %"), cradled by the chill and invigorating air of a dense forest of firs, as far as the splendid Lac d'Allos. There, I leave the still rideable track and the refuge where I can get my "control stamp" to start on a twisting mountain footpath. This last passes through a forest to begin, then broad pastures, to finish at last on a mountainside completely devoid of vegetation.

Imagine my wonder and amazement to see there, between great stones turned white by a burning sun, delicate, wonderful little flowers, unknown to me. How could they grow here? No one planted them or watered them. Despite that, they were marvels of colour and delicacy, so fragile, so perfumed, so..... There was one of the thousands of things that make me love the mountains.

I go carefully, placing my foot to avoid crushing them. The path inches its way this time through stones and immense snowdrifts that I cross with extreme caution, the bike on my shoulder even though it is heavily laden.

Suddenly, after crossing a ridge, I see with stupefaction a marvellous little lake, the Lac de la Petite Cayolle; the snow caresses the shores of the extremely limpid and transparent, mirror-like water. The summit of the col is just above, about 500m away.

I can't resist the desire to take some photos. Once the top is reached, I see below the last hairpins of the Col de la Cayolle road, and in the distance almost facing me, I spot the cime de la Bonette that I recognise by the windscreens of the cars that shine in the sun, and many other marvellous things as well. I hurry down with long strides through the stones and then, the slope that will take me to the road. Some motorists see me arrive, to their amazement, with the bike on my right shoulder, wondering where I have come from. They question me excitedly, they want to know everything and in the smallest detail, some even photograph me like a film celebrity.

Irritated, not liking this kind of thing, I cover up for the descent and flee this crowd of sightseers.

A little later, in Valberg, I am treated to a terrific hailstorm. Great hailstones, hitting the tarmac, explode into little balls that hit me painfully. I go on climbing, imperturbably. At the top of the col, hurting all over, I look for a hotel in great haste.

The next day, putting yesterday's emotions behind me, I start out again.

It's not until 11.30, after the Cols de Sainte-Anne and de la Couillole, that I am at Saint-Etienne de Tinée; already in the distance I can see the great Bonette. It will take me nearly three hours to beat this giant of the Alpes Maritimes.

After a "pilgrimage" to the cime de la Bonette, I launch myself into a particularly twisting and dangerous descent at a crazy speed, only just braking in time for an interminable procession of sheep. Another transhumance that climbs up there, towards the rich pastures of the Restefond.

Sometime later, I arrive in la Contamine-Châtelard, at the foot of the Parpaillon (a near rough-stuff col). I ask some villagers if there is any accommodation on the way to the col.

I learn that there is a hotel at Sainte-Anne, and after..... nothing. A farmer appears at that moment and tells me that half-way up there is the Grand Parpaillon shepherd's refuge. He doesn't know if the shepherd is there.

I try all the same to get there.

As far as Sainte-Anne, the road is surfaced, but extremely steep. I spot the hotel that the good people of the village told me about but I don't stop because I have already decided to continue. A few more metres then, after the chapelle de Sainte-Anne, I leave the civilised world and the surfaced road for a winding and stony track. I cross one or two wooden bridges, then suddenly, having crossed the "Parpaillon" torrent, I fall; blocked by the mud caused by the overflowing of the stream after the recent rains, I can't stay upright and find myself sitting in sticky mud.

I get up swearing.

I calm down and get back on "Marguerite" (the name of my bicycle). I am worried... Will I find the shepherd ? Will I have to camp under the stars? The nights are already that much colder at nearly 2000 metres of altitude.

Suddenly I spot some sheep droppings!.....

I breath again. A few minutes later, I hear the happy tinkling of bells. Leaving the forest, I spot at last, perched on top of a hillock, the refuge. How welcoming it seems!

The shepherd is there. I go towards him and without waiting I ask him if he can put me up for the night. He seems unsure. He explains that he lives alone and that the interior of his house isn't too tidy. And yet, he admits he would be very happy to have company. Nevertheless, he refuses to let me in before he's done a bit of tidying up.

While I wait, I admire the extraordinary landscape that surrounds me.

Imagine : a silent stream descending a gentle slope, an astonishing and deep valley made still more beautiful by the multitude of colours only seen at this hour of the day, at either side, two gigantic walls of rock forming a V, so high they seem to touch the sky and disappear into the horizon.

To complete the picture, a silence. A silence so deep that it is almost frightening.

From time to time, I can hear a distant bleating or the faint tinkling of bells.

I am interrupted in my contemplation by the strong deep voice of the shepherd. His housework finished, he asks me to come in. He welcomes me into his home with a big glass of vin du pays. In the evening, around the table, we get to know each other over a great dish of hot soup.

At dawn, the shepherd is up. After having gathered his flock, scattered during the night, he rejoins me. Between times, I've made the coffee (we have become like friends now).

When I see the sun above the mountains, I leave my great friend with a strong handshake, full of gratitude and also a little regret at not being able to stay.

An hour later I am at the entry to the tunnel of the Col du Parpaillon.

I pass through it with difficulty as it is partly obstructed by a collapse.

On the other side, the marmots' cries surprise me. There's one that passes, a second, a third... I try to take their photos..... too late, they've already disappeared. After many difficulties, I finally arrive at Crévoux, the last control of the ride.

The patronne of the auberge, while I quench my thirst, suggests that I look at the livre d'or where are written the names of cyclists who have passed by. Interested, I accept.

The patronne of the bar disappears into an adjoining room and returns immediately with a voluminous and dusty book.

After leafing through a hundred pages, I see, on the 8 August 1968, a short note signed by Jean-Claude Chaberty and de Pageon, two cyclists from Chambéry that I know well. What a nice surprise! I must, in my turn, write my impressions.

At 12.30 I am at Chorges ; I must be at Chambéry that evening. There isn't enough time to ride there.

So I decide to take the train to Grenoble.

At 18.50 I reach the station of the capital of the Dauphiné.

At 21.00 at last, I arrive home, tired but extremely happy.

Where will my next tour take me?

In what new adventure will it lead me?

Robert DEL MEDICO

Revue no. 2, 1974

NOTA

Seven or eight years ago, I discovered in the back of a garage, this young mechanic who, shyly, asked me some questions concerning cyclotouring.

Today, you have just read his passion, and I have just officially presented to him, on behalf of the F.F.C.T., the federal diploma of merit that amply rewards the services rendered by this young man in the cause that we all know.

You see how the work of a director is sometimes pleasant.

Second pretext : Robert DEL MEDICO, last autumn, crossing with a young girl a rough-stuff col in Savoie, fell several dozen metres, taking her and the bikes with him ; she was seriously injured and an acrobatic expedition had to be made to recover the two badly damaged bicycles.

I hope that this parenthesis will make you remember how necessary it is to take these difficult paths with extreme care and take all necessary precautions.

Jean PERDOUX

My failures on the Parpaillon

If the Parpaillon is indeed there amongst my career's cols, I don't have any pleasant memories of it. I can only imagine its scenery via the articles, published here and there by those who, more favoured by atmospheric conditions, were able to admire its character of grandeur, wildness and other laudatory terms.

My passage goes back to 1929, at the end of a cycletouring journey decided unexpectedly on the Journée Vélocio with a friend from Lyon that I met and who was free like me for the coming week. Without any decided end, in a haphazard way from day to day, we wandered from the Vercors to the Dévoluy, from the Bérarde to the Briançonnais. The evening before the day of our return to Lyon, finding ourselves in the Ubaye valley, near Jausiers, the proximity of the Parpaillon gave us the idea of crossing this col the next day and continuing to Embrun to take the last train to Lyon to make a fine finish to our tour before returning to our separate occupations.

Alas, the next morning was completely overcast, it was even raining a little. Only the hotel owner showed an unflinching optimism, claiming the sky would soon clear and that a fine day could be counted on. The rain, light to begin, became heavier, and after Sainte Anne, turned into a deluge, mixed with snow as we progressed. We should have given up but, having started on our adventure, it would have been just as painful, and as long, to go back. So, pushing the bikes more often than riding them, under leaking capes and our feet in water, soaked, numb with cold... and starving (we had no more than a light snack), we passed through Crévoux in the late afternoon without taking the time to stop at the Auberge Faure, worried about our train, without having seen any sights but the peaks shrouded in clouds behind a curtain of rain and the ground under our feet. In our carriage, we philosophically agreed that the beauties (?) of the Parpaillon would have to be for another time.

That time could have been offered to me, in 1931, but in a completely different way and had nothing to do with cycletouring. Summoned as a reservist to the 14th motor company for a period of 21 days, I learnt on arriving at the barracks that the company, including reservists, was taking part in the alpine manoeuvres of the 14th corps. Lorries, pick-up trucks, men and horses were transported by the P.L.M. and dropped at a small station in the Durance valley to drive to Embrun. It was at this stop that the lieutenant of the group I belonged to ordered me to drive a pick-up taking a dozen or so reservists to ... the Col du Parpaillon, that he thought he should show me on his map. Rather taken aback by this absurd order, I asked him if it was serious because the way wasn't, to my knowledge suitable for going there, by a path only accessible to the mules of the chasseurs alpins, I didn't think a truck or even a car could get much further than Crévoux. It was nevertheless this col that was mentioned in his instructions. I could only tell him that I did not feel capable of such a mission and, not being used to driving such a vehicle on such terrain, I did not want to risk a serious accident for my comrades ... and for myself. He was a reserve officer and understanding, and did not insist : "All right, I'll find another driver and as for you, you will control the traffic on the Col de Vars with some other reservists that I'll assign, during and up to the end of the manoeuvres. As I don't have a vehicle available, you will drive the truck to Guillestre, then walk to Ste Marie de Vars, staying in a farm building that will be requisitioned. Food will be brought to you each day".

And that's how I declined the attempt on the Parpaillon by pick-up truck! I had the privilege with 5 or 6 companions, of a holiday in the mountains which, if we didn't have the comfort of 2 or 3 stars, we passed a few happy days, without duties and without marches, the occupation of our traffic control on the Vars road not being very demanding and limited to when a few military convoys were passing. At that time,

we knew nothing of jeeps, halftracks and other all-terrain vehicles. At the end of the manoeuvres, I learnt that no truck or any other vehicle had climbed to the Parpaillon.

Several years passed without the chance of another go at the Parpaillon. My cycling holidays were spent away from the Alps : Tyrol, Dolomites, Switzerland, Corsica, Pyrénées, Spain, etc... then came the years 39/45 hardly suitable to venture on a strategic route. Other years, other journeys, and it was only in 1970, on the occasion of the Semaine Fédérale at Gap that included the Rallye du Parpaillon that I could think of settling my account with this col. Without what was a question of engaging in a test that I thought too hard for me, I thought of easing things by driving to Savines or Embrun and, having crossed the col, to find at la Condamine or at Jausiers, a friend's car to take me or, if not that, to hire a taxi or other vehicle at Barcelonnette to get back to mine at the parking area.

Man proposes... but my project was not to be realised. Monday 3 August, while climbing to the Giobernay in the Valgaudemar with a few friends, a heart attack stopped me at Rif du Sap. Already some "free advice" had obliged me to get off during the Journée Vélocio a few weeks before and the day before, the 2, on the Col de la Sentinelle, I found it much harder than usual. I would have to be concerned about these warnings.

But enough... I escaped a serious accident but the bike was forbidden for several months before being permitted, and then under such conditions that now, having seven times the "age of reason", I have as well, a good reason to think I will never climb the Col du Parpaillon again...

Francisque FERLAY

CHARBONNIERES (69), member of CT LYON since 1925 (57 years in one club, who can top that?).

Revue no. 10, 1982

Twists and turns in the Ubaye

He shook with his whole body when he spoke of it, with a look of concern in his eyes, my friend Jacques, for the subject was important for a Cent Cols who had set up his base camp not far from a col named PARPAILLON.

There we were and the name was spoken, the target circled, the access finely marked on the 1/50000 map but first, he had to be persuaded that it wasn't an insurmountable obstacle, for the weight of history made itself felt.

When we know all the stories about it, that surround it, that magnify it, and describe it as an obstacle that we must respect, there grows in us a little concern that is only eased by our experience of endless roads already begun. And then with good deeds of friendship coloured with a certain complicity, that suggests that solidarity is not an empty word, your objective becomes familiar. You imagine it as a beautiful mountain, at first hidden by trees, then as you advance, it shows you some of its secrets, one by one its beauties, as a woman might show you her most precious things.

Like lovers who can only resolve love by force, we approach it with a twinge of sorrow, a restraint imposed by the steep gradients and the end of a tormented night full of restless dreams.

The PARPAILLON at daybreak, is a feast of odours in which serpolet and wild thyme blend harmoniously, like the strings of a symphony orchestra supporting the brief impression of being on another planet, so much do these olfactory and visual shocks cheerfully titillate all the cells of your body. It is Italy! it's wine! I'd like to say it's love! But I don't know if that's suitable, maybe? For these moments here were of such intensity that I persist and chatter at the risk of hearing one day that my states of mind are somewhat beyond reason.

Yet before the Chapelle Ste Anne, we were surprised by a morning like we had dreamt of, a clear sky, a light breeze that cooled the brow's sweat, and the feeling that before us was an unforgettable day in our lives.

We entered the BOUSQUETON forest of Cembro pines of a majesty that made you feel humble before so much grace and natural equilibrium. The early light penetrating between the trees patterns our route with a "screen-print" to the best effect.

Reaching the BERARD bridge, a first stop and some photos to record the impressions that we already feel strongly. Alongside the PARPAILLON cabin, we see our first still drowsy flock gathered by an old dog not far off; the first marmots as well, at first proud, saluting us with a short strident whistle, and as we climb, becoming less timid, just standing erect, giving our bikes and us carefree looks. After all, aren't we also bipeds attached to funny machines and with the pretention to heave ourselves onto the roof of their home?

On the regular hairpins, we rise at a pace nothing like on the road as we must work within the parameters of rough-stuff cycling that are : progress and the constant search for equilibrium as the ground is so irregular. But what a good school it would be for all those road cyclists who suffer the worst difficulties in mastering their machines on much easier terrain !

Then comes the sun, a gift, a Christmas with the snow, the clogs, a fire, the calissons, the spice cake, the oranges, a joy without words, we are besides only a few hundred metres away, but of one accord, like two boys, we lean our bikes against each other, we are here, facing the sun before this marvel, our eyes can't do more than feast on images of peace and simple happiness.

We've got almost nothing more to say, but in the eyes of Jacques, is something like a gleam of happiness, of shared friendship, and in the distance, the first light of a complicity that is being born.

Sacré PARPAILLON ! Only a col, you may say, I only object by saying this : ride it, it will astonish me if it leaves you with a worthless memory, or worse a vague impression.

Before the tunnel, we again take photographs, but as Jacques is a purist, we climb above the tunnel to get to the col. There, readers, blasé cyclists of all kinds, all federations, all parties, all confessions, I hope that you can live one day like we did at this barren place bathed in the light of the high UBAYE.

The most prestigious adjectives will not suffice here, I far prefer to make an invitation that will lead you to the tracks of this ground, where the day we spent will stay forever in our memories.

Jacques BORDENAVE and Jean-Jacques LABADIE

Revue no. 11, 1983

The Pastis of the Parpaillon

This morning, with my friend Jean Claude, we are going to climb a col, the sixth 2000m + since yesterday, but the one I think it is the most beautiful. I've heard people talk of it like a God, read articles about it, listened to the advice of those who have already done it (and there aren't many in G.C. Nîmes who have : so much the worse for them). What is certain, is that it attracts the cycletourist.

So this morning, alarm at 5 o'clock; the folded tent and all the rest put in the front pannier ; it's 6 o'clock when we leave the camp site. The road descends to La Condamine, but not for long, one kilometre, enough time to warm up.

At the entry to the village, we turn right, in the direction of Ste-Anne; I'm almost in my lowest gear. It's not that it's really hard, but we have in our bags, our tent, our change of clothes and our lunch : as you see, everything you need for cycle-camping. Jean Claude, in addition, has all his photo equipment. A journalist who follows a great sports event wouldn't carry as much.

We continue at a regular, slow pace. I check my counter : 5 pedal strokes to go 10 metres! that's spinning a little gear! This col must not be forced, you must do it gently, like one caresses a nice wife, or like one tastes a good wine with little sips. You must do it gently, but it's not for that that it will give you gifts.

The road is still surfaced, but in what a state! A pull on the bars to the right, another to the left to avoid all the holes and bumps on the way to Ste-Anne. Here it is, here the tarmac disappears to make way for a rough-stuff track. A short pause is required at the chapel, where we fill up at the fountain. Jean Claude takes some photos of the scenery. Some clouds begin to cover the sky.

We come to the heart of the matter; the back wheel slips a bit, I take my lowest gear and my cruising speed drops to 5 km/h. It's 7 o'clock in the morning. One eye on the state of the track to put the front wheel in the best place, the other on the forest looking for a marmot. But, for the moment, nothing. Before I've spotted them, they've already seen me and warned their colleagues with a great whistle. I've seen them from afar, and even from very close, but in two or three jumps, they disappear into their holes.

Clearly, this col isn't going to give us any presents, but as we climb gently, it starts to show us its hidden treasures. The forest makes way for pastures with many flowers whose names I don't know, all as beautiful as the others. Far off a marmot whistles, we've been noticed. At the end of a stream, I spot one, that with a bound, jumps in its hole.

After crossing a wooden bridge, a brook has found no place better to run than in the track that we are taking so comfortably; so we are obliged to ride in it. We pass a cabin, according to the route map, we've only got 6 kilometres to do. We are at 2000m of altitude.

The way becomes much more gravelly ; the stones spray under our wheels, but we still go at the same speed. The same caress. Misery! we are now entitled to a nice shower that obliges to put on our ponchos. I give Jean Claude a rather worried look. " Do we go on, or do we turn back? ". No one wants to give up so close to our target: we have done 13 km and there's hardly 4 left to do. The clouds are still high above, so let's go on, the rain will hardly continue.

A few pedal strokes further, a marmot appears from a hidden nook in the road, crosses, and loses itself in the grass. I get my camera out, put the strap around my neck ready to use and keep my eyes peeled. I don't have time to move when another emerges a few metres from my front wheel, stops before its hole and looks at me. I get off as gently as possible, without losing it from my view, then I snap it twice. Jean Claude comes up, and I sign to him to not make a sound. At last! he'll be able to photograph it, his marmot.

He gets all his gear out, focuses and takes it from several angles. He even changes the film. It lasts about ten minutes. We've found a marmot-starlet. Higher up, I spot another that hides behind a small flowering bush. At that moment, my friend discovers ten metres from us, a litter of two of that year's young. They are playing in front of their hole. Surprise! both of them look at us, then by instinct, they take refuge in their hole. But already they poke their heads out, watch us closely, and, seeming to understand that we mean no harm, begin to play again, without losing us from their view. Prudent these "pitchounes"!

I can't describe the pleasure my colleague took in photographing them. He even took the time to get out his tripod. Far off, a great whistle made us look round. Yet another! There on a rock, sat on its rear paws, it looked at us as well. We've never seen so many.

It is time to get moving and finish the Parpaillon. The way is as rocky as ever and I feel that the top isn't far. At the turn of a bend, I see that the track follows the mountain and that there is a steep section at the end. From what I've been told by others, I'm close to the summit. Two more hairpins to pass, a last effort on a last "wall" of 10%, a final turn and to my joy; there in front of me, 200 or 300 metres away, a great wide open mouth seems to say to me : "come on, you've finished your climb". A ray of sunlight passes over the mountain and in my heart; I spot a marmot that flees at my approach and I salute it. I am before the tunnel of the Parpaillon! 2643 metres.

I lean the bike against a stone and climb to the top of the tunnel entrance to wait for Jean Claude who soon arrives. I take pleasure in throwing a snowball at him to celebrate his entry into the Club des Cent Cols. What's more, to have the Col du Parpaillon in his collection, is excellent.

The good southerner that I am, an idea comes to me : I'll fill my bottle with snow from the top of the tunnel, and this evening, in the train, we'll drink a Pastis with melted snow, I'll say no more than that! Believe me, it was good! And then, I don't know when I will drink another, with mountain water. As tradition will have it, we went through the tunnel, and I had to put my right foot in a deep puddle.

Finally, the Parpaillon isn't as rough as we think, it's enough to take it steadily, and it will show you all its flora, its fauna and the beauties of its scenery. The same day that two Nimois were at the top of the most prestigious rough stuff col in France, the Tour de France arrived in Nîmes. I believe all the same that we two were the happiest that day.

Raymond Cros, Nîmes

Revue no. 15, 1987

Fear on the Parpaillon

20 July 85. The alarm goes off. A glance at the window makes us believe we'll have a fine summer's day. It's the gentle fever of starting, in the chill of the early morning ...

Pierre and myself were well prepared for this business. He decided at last to put on a third chainring (32x26) and, last night, in our gîte at St Sauveur, I changed our sprockets for a 24 and put a cross tyre on my rear wheel! The 10 km of unsurfaced track concerned us a little and we left with two spare tubulars each! There are some cols that have earned their reputation!

What a joy to ride in the cool of a beautiful day that is about to be born. We climb the first kilometres in the shade of the valley occupied by the forest of Méale. Leaving Praveyral we catch up with a shepherd who is driving his flock towards the mountain. We start a conversation... and a snack for soon in the gravel, we'll need all our strength. We leave Crévoux on the right. It will make more sense to sign the livre d'or when we come back... A bridge crosses the stream. Tarmac gives way to stones. Here we are! Derailleurs on the biggest sprocket, hands on the hoods, we start carefully, standing on the pedals. Altitude 1660 m - Slope 12 % - Target 2645 m.

Sat down, the back wheel grips better, but how can we balance on these stones? Doesn't the tightrope walker stand up?

It is getting hot, and that, combined with our efforts, we climb stripped to the waist. We smile to think of the spectacle that we offer to passers by... if there are any : black bib shorts and white torsos matching our caps! Pierre springs like a lamb to get his front wheel out of a rut. Clusters of butterflies take off as we pass.

To escape these stones, I try riding across the pastures. Alas, my thin rims dig into the soft grass and slow me down even more. A few stray sheep graze silently. Higher up, we again meet the shepherd, his flock and his black dogs. "We'll get them on the way down this evening" he tells us, not worried to let them wander a few hundred metres.

Towards 2300 m, the pastures are replaced by rocks. The nippy air makes put our jerseys on again. We follow the stream of Crévoux. A marmot runs on the other side. We surprise another crossing the stream. Gentians appear. We think the tunnel is close, and at each turn, we believe we are going to see it.

There it is at last! It's over. The Parpaillon is beaten. The bikes leant against the névé at the tunnel entry, we contemplate the panorama.

Pierre suggests going through the tunnel to admire the other side. It is cold in the dark. And the exit, a little circle of light, dazzles us. Our feet splash through the freezing water. I give up and turn around.

What does the panorama on the other side matter, we have done what we set out to do... Pierre persists and arrives at the other end of the tunnel. But what's he doing ? Why does he shut the heavy doors? Now I'm completely in the dark! And what's he shouting? Help me? What the devil! Not another practical joke, I say to myself as I walk towards the sun. But doubt is revived by the persistence of his cries. I turn around again towards the obstructed exit , and shout to him : " Open the door! I can't see anything! " But

in response, he continues to call for help. In the end I run, pushing the bike through the cold puddles, and it's a wonder I don't fall.

" My arm's trapped between the two doors! Get me out! " he shouts. I pull, I push, neither works, the doors don't want to open ! Pierre is suffering, his watch is broken, his wrist swollen. " Do something! " he exclaims!

I try vainly to force a stone between the two leaves! "Use the bike frame to lever it, but do something" he cries.

With heavy kicks, I force his front wheel in the gap between the two leaves, relieving his imprisoned wrist. But I can't free him, his hand is still on the other side. It's cold now. We are alone in the dark. What can we do ?

All at once we spot the service door within the main door. I open it and pass onto the other side of the mountain, bathed in sun. I run about looking for a solution. This big flat stone will do it. Too heavy to pick up, I drag it to the tunnel, jam it between the doors and try to lever it with all my strength. The door moves a millimetre or two and, before Pierre can get his hand out, the stone breaks, and the door moves back... and there is a cry of pain. A few more tries and... deliverance!

We move into the sun, his wrist is covered in blood. It was just in time, Pierre was about to faint. We go back through the tunnel using the service door. Pierre's wheel is hardly bent ! With one hand, he descends slowly, while I go ahead to look for help. Lower down, a camping-car climbs slowly. He agrees to go and look for him and bring him down to the surfaced road.

A few days later, Pierre has a broken radius, his arm is in plaster and he returns to the hospital to be re-examined. He meets the Belgian camper who fetched him down and say's "what are you doing here?" and our Belgian replies : "While I was with you, my daughter cut her knee while she was waiting for me!

Sacré Parpaillon! Once you grip us...

Freddy Anceschi
Cyclos de Moirans

Revue no. 15, 1987

There was... LA Parpaillon

Woman is one half of heaven. (Contemporary Chinese proverb).

At the waiting dawn of this summer morning, between the wolf's howl and the first calls of the shepherds; at this precise moment of the greatest silence, when the mountain is clothed in dew, a desire for the day that is coming and which never ceases to lighten the sky. They found themselves, by chance, on the road, leaving Jausiers.

He, all slim and handsome, the Sunday cycling jersey, the chromed racing beast newly equipped, a little "ostentatious" - it's not every day that he rides such a celebrated route - his cycling heart excited - breathing in the last scents of night, and the first breezes of the dawning day.

She, slender but determined, the sweater against the chill of the morning, a little shiver on her bare legs passing the torrents and their icy breaths; the discreet and efficient tourer, short cranks, small brake handles, small gears. Her cycling heart - decided but a little apprehensive - she doesn't often tackle such a *monstre sacré*.

So they started off together that morning, by hazard or by chance. And, although his own physical abilities allowed him, if he had wanted to, to distance her quickly, he preferred to start the ascent in her company. He had been riding alone for so long. And then, it must be admitted, she pleased him, her face rosy from the first effort, lit from the side by this light which now flooded the valley.

They turned off at La Condamine, on the little road that climbs up the side. A few steep hairpins. She took off her big sweater, folded it and put it carefully in her bag. He waited for her. Why leave her now? There was no hurry. In fact, they both had a whole day ahead of them. He discovered that it's such a harmony to climb like this together, the legs moving almost at the same rhythm, he more in strength, she all in regularity, gaining meter after meter without apparent effort, but in reality animated by a quiet and powerful inner energy.

He found himself admiring her, so much as not to show the slightest trace of suffering. Just an imperceptible mist, which his skin exhaled, warmed by the continuous work of his muscles. And the acceleration of his heart, which made his eyes brighter, like a slight fever.

He was suddenly afraid that he might not please her, that he would annoy her, with his banal chatter about his previous climbs in the region - it was very steep here, you know, but what a view up there! - There, I switched to 36x22, I was in great form - and do you know such a route?

He was desperately looking for more interesting, more amusing, out-of-the-ordinary anecdotes; everything he found to say seemed to him today very bland. Still, she listened to him, kept the conversation going, and, little by little, they got to know each other.

At the Bérard stream, she took off her gloves, and the water in their bottles seemed cool compared to the mildness of this summer morning. The route had for a while been of earth, but quite rideable. The day was establishing itself in splendour, as they climbed side by side.

He progressed effortlessly, watching her. He told himself that she was beautiful, the full sun this time bringing out her tanned skin, forming the shadows, the dimples, around her smile. The clear face of the rocks trapped the rays of light, and, when they passed against it, it was almost like being near to a piece of molten steel, or the hot breath of a wild beast of the mountains, lurking there, close to them.

He thought he might have chosen too thick a jersey; just now, he would suffer if the temperature rose much more. He was warm for her, who still had a snug sweatshirt on, and thought she ought to take it off, expose her skin to the sun. Her bare skin. Suddenly he realised how much she troubled him.

Her presence was so natural, she was one with the landscape, she slipped into it without creating any disorder, any disharmony. His own imagination, as if under the influence of a slight intoxication, became lyrical.

The curve of the mountain on the horizon reminded him of another, even more slender... The tonsure of the forests returned him to another, even thicker...the smell of the mown hay, warm and bitter reminded him of another, gentler odour...the drops of water in the meadow, threads of silver clearly shining in the sun, shook him deeply...

He wished he was this light wind, that would allow him, as a poet said, his hand under her clothes.

They passed the last trees; now the mountain could have been austere and silent, on the contrary it was all vibrating, with light and tiny lives. Look at this flower, she said - and she stopped and knelt before a curious Jupiter's Beard. He stopped too, and the wild bees could be heard buzzing. And look at the flight of this bird, like an accent in the sky. Then she turned to him, smiled at him. And it was as if the whole mountain, after the timidity of the morning, offered itself, expressed the magnificence of this summer day, the mad desire that it was noon; he read it all in that smile.

The road rose above the Parpaillon stream, more rocky, but still rolling. It was good to go at her slower pace, even if he had to force himself to slow down a bit, waiting for her. She took off her sweatshirt, and was only dressed in her shorts and a sleeveless top. They both tasted the sun, which caressed their skin, already ablaze from the inside with the physical effort. A little more time, and the same rays would become scorching as they approached the zenith. With her, thanks to her, he was in the process of learning the pure pleasure of an ascent, when the heart beats a little at the temples but does not panic completely, when one always remains well below the threshold of pain, to savour every minute, every turn of the wheel, every detour in the road that offers discovery. In addition, today, he learned that pleasure can be totally shared.

However, from the great curve that presages the last hairpins directly below the col, it seemed to her that she was gradually accelerating. He tells her of his admiration, for having kept her energy in this way, to throw herself entirely into this last embrace with the mountain.

Yes, he was sure of it now, she had changed her pace, and was now displaying her power. He was impressed. Then, the wind that announces the proximity of a col began to blow, making her hair fly, and her more tense smile made her look a little wild.

They were nearing their goal, already guessing the dark presence of the tunnel, like a rip in the night, above them.

He had always dreamed of it and was afraid at the same time, of this dark gallery, somewhat mysterious, like a rite of passage. It was the culmination of many rides; he had saved it for the best of summer, before the August storms, before the grass in the high pastures had already begun to turn to autumn colours.

And suddenly, at the turn of a last bend, they saw it, its mouth clearly in view on the side of the mountain, darker than the night itself, more tempting than ever. Around them, the sun was so high that no clear shadow caught the eye. But alone, the opening of this tunnel was fascinating, the promise of a haven of peace, a return to a life before the splash of light at birth, a black hole of space sucking them in, spiraling invisible, and wanting to reincorporate them into its nothingness.

They entered, slowly, on foot, holding their bicycles, to let their eyes adjust to the darkness. The coolness surprised them, contrasting with the outside temperature. Quiet humidity. From the vault very thin streams of water bead and fell, which they felt as they passed by, running down their cheeks, down their bare arms, without seeing them. They advanced, a small round eye of clarity guiding them, there, so far that the distance to be crossed seemed immeasurable to them.

Finally, there he was, deep in the heart of the mountain, he thought. His impatience had calmed for a moment, all his senses tense to the extreme, the time to learn to love this place, so strange and so different, but then this same impatience was reborn, more and more violent: why were they still advancing, without the goal approaching sooner?

They progressed side by side, without seeing each other: he detected her presence very close to him, in the slight movement of the air, in the subtle perfume of her body like that of an orchid in the rain forest, in the rhythmic sound of her breath. She was there, infinitely close, for between them there was no longer the obstacle of light, nor that of the wind, nor that of the fleeting but repeated rustling of the grass traversed by the summer insects. They were united as ever.

Then, the opening widened, the slit became a space, wide open to the sky, shrouded in rays like God in his Glory; their common tension became extreme, they began to run towards this long-awaited, hoped-for outcome, desired with all their soul; the last mad race, without restraint... and, suddenly, emerged in the dazzle of noon. Blinded, summer jumped in their faces, once again took hold of their bodies, released them from all their desires, from their secret anxieties, in its gentle warmth. Happiness transfigured them. The world at their feet belonged to them.

Here they are lying a little lower in the pasture, he, so happy, she, inhaling very deeply, communing with the universe, and sweet, so sweet, these moments of rest.

They took their time, all their time. Detailed each fold of each petal of each snow anemone. Gave names to each summit, to the slightest thalweg, and to the blue distances. The sun once again became a caress, tenderness. And the torrent, even lower, whispered. As the shadow of the rocks grew again, on the other side of the day, they began the descent. The speed refreshed them. They dropped, dropped endlessly, gradually engulfed by the landscape; they found the cabins again, then the meadows, then the summer pasture hamlets, regions more and more inhabited by living and sentient beings like themselves.

And, all of a sudden, in a flash of memory from before the ages, he knew who she was: - Hello, Eve. - Hello, Adam.

They quite naturally made their way together, dropped into the declining day, and climbed another small col or two, above the Serre-Ponçon dam, before finishing.

There was one evening. There was a morning. The second morning of the human world.

The next day, seventh day, they knew they found this world very beautiful. And they rested.

Extract from the Book of the Prophet

Jonathan (1), first cycle

(1) Translator's note: as everyone knows, wanting to imitate Jonah and his whale, the prophet Jonathan sought wisdom in the depths of the tunnel cols, where a tamed pelican came to feed him. This unpublished text was found during recent work on the road above the Galibier tunnel.

Revue no. 17, 1989

Parpaillon... ages

Thursday 13 August... The sun rises at the bottom of the valley and showers us with its rays, the blackbird awakes. Gargantuan breakfast. It gives us reserves, as a rough day awaits us. Alain looks at the Michelin map for the umpteenth time, we're going to discover the grand Parpaillon: in what state will the route be, will the percentages be as bad as l'Atlas Altigraph announces? So many questions that have done nothing but increase his anxiety. I understand for, he has to hoist his 85 kilos to the top of this giant. Despite that the very good forecast will aid our expedition and we soon forget our cares. Especially as two days ago, we "ate" the Izoard and to follow reached the top of the Col Agnel 2744m, without too many problems. 2400 metres of climbing wasn't bad for a first outing . We decide not to ride in the Durance valley. The car will be more comfortable!... Eyglies, final adjustments to our road bikes, we take the minimum in the rucksacks : a sandwich, a fruit, ricecake and a windproof in case the temperature drops... We start. The route nationale is already busy in this early morning. Fortunately we are only taking it for four kilometres, in the direction of Siguret by the N94B. Not many vehicles, but oh, surprise! We meet a great number of cyclists, whose speed is very different to ours. It's true that in two days the Embrun triathlon will take to the roads of the Briançonnais, but we don't have the same objectives, to each their pains! Saint-André d'Embrun, we fill our bottles and we pursue the D39, that leads us without great difficulty to La Chalp. It's midday and we take the chance to eat something on the terrace of an auberge. The chill in the air, due to a sky veiled by cirro-cumulus, makes us put on our windproofs. Soon we resume our ride and leaving La Chalp the winding road attacks the first slopes of the Parpaillon range. The road is still surfaced, but a kilometre further on we are quickly disillusioned, as stones replace the tarmac!... Nobody speaks, the gradient isn't steep, but you have got to look for the best line, which isn't always very clear. Two kilometres further it changes to dirt and makes things easier; some cars pass and cover us with dust... then the route becomes calm again amongst the pastures. The sun warms us again. After a few tight hairpins we are at a promontory where the view over the Crevoux valley is splendid. Scattered herds of cattle make a tinkling of bells. We get the camera out. These moments of pleasure are worth recording... Now we are in our "element", we forget the state of the road and enjoy to the utmost the vision of the dark peaks against the azur sky. Three kilometres from the top, a quick stop at the stream to refresh ourselves and nibble a few biscuits. We climb at a tourist's pace despite the steepening of the route. At last, at the turn of a bend we spot the tunnel; a few more pedal strokes and we reach our goal; our tee-shirts are soaked with sweat. A couple of locals arrive by car to see this majestic route, we exchange a few words, and the lady photographs us before the tunnel, despite a trembling of her hands that suggests her advanced age. They let us go first into the tunnel, preferring to wait before entering into this black hole... We grope our way along, in the distance, shines a mousehole... Happily, there are no puddles. We emerge at the other end and, face an extraordinarily clear view from an altitude of 2650m. The summits stand out on the horizon, towards the Bonette and the Parc National du Mercantour. We eat something again, we talk with some walkers who have arrived by car, they tell us it is a 9km descent in stones. Our decision is taken without words. A look is enough to agree to continue our trip and see the other side, to La Condamine via Sainte-Anne and then the Col de Vars. Hard! Until the Cabane du Grand Parpaillon what we were told is exactly right. Nothing but stones and trepidation, our hands are numb. On the terrace of the auberge, the clientele look at us with surprise!... "from up there" with our road bikes. A cold drink to quench our thirst, we resume, the stones change into a white dirt that turns our bikes the same colour. Rapid drop to La Condamine, finally tarmac returns. The Ubaye

valley welcomes us with its fortified escarpments. Saint-Paul, we take the road to the Col de Vars and after eight kilometres of sustained effort we arrive at the top. Souvenir photo... The worst is over, only 22 km of descent to close our circuit. The arrival at Eyglies is marked by my rear rim! Having ridden 25 km of tracks strewn with pitfalls it had to be a puncture on the tarmac! The counter showed 101 km and the average speed "11,3 km/h"... We were really at the pace of a cycletourist. Rendezvous to follow... here, for the climb from Chapelle Sainte-Anne is worthy of a remake. We will take action for the future, especially since the side from Embrun on the forest route from Saluces, coming back by the Col de Vars seems more suitable for an MTB.

Robert LUCE N°2926
CTG La Calmette (Gard)

Revue no. 21, 1993.

A short bath in the Parpaillon tunnel

A 8 July 1991, we drove to Crévoux, with André Sorbière and François Grandclaudon. On the menu : 4 cols at more than 2000m with as hors-d'œuvre the Parpaillon at 2632 m.

This legendary col had been on my mind for a long time. D day arriving, the forecast was good, we at last set off to meet the colossus, that waits for us about 13km away.

To begin, a picturesque little village, the road is still surfaced for nearly 2km, then a little bridge where a sign indicates 'dangerous route'. It's the domain of stones! The route winds, through the forest of pines and larches, with a slope that seriously steepens, and obliges us to walk.

It's hard, very hard, but the view is superb on all sides. We rise gently, the forest opens out, giving way to lovely pastures where whistle the marmots that hide themselves as we approach.

We reach the refuge 2400m. Some horsemen are eating and we soon imitate them, in the shelter of a huge rock, by the torrent. The wind howls, we ride on snow, it's cold. Higher up, we meet tourists who descend on foot. The route is really bad and we have to avoid big blocks of stone. Looking up, we see the Parpaillon ridge which looks like it is teasing us. It's true, we are tiny in the face of these great white capped rocks, it's magnificent !

There it is! It is there-ere-ere ! That's the shout of André, who is in front, hidden by the last bend of the route. What joy! It's true, the tunnel is there, behind the névé that guards it, it opens its arms to us, the huge doors are open. Imitating Georges Gaillot in 1928 I write a short message, I put it in an aspirin tube that I wedge in a joint under the panel on the left hand side. This summer, I had a call from a film maker who had made a film on the Parpaillon, who had found and read the message. He told me he had put it back in the same place. Cycling friends who pass by have a look at it and call me !

Crossing the névé, we enter the dark. It is impressive. We ride in water, towards a little white gleam, that is our "end of the tunnel". The light, despite our torch, is insufficient. We avoid a big stalagmite that is taller than us. Bats flit around us. Not very reassuring. And we are cold as well. We advance carefully. Suddenly, without warning, my bike's two wheels hit the wall, and the bike disappears in the water. As for me it's the carpet of frozen soil that welcomes me. Not much hurt, I can rapidly recuperate the bike and leave the skating rink. It was unforeseen, but that's how my bike and me took a bath, on a floor of ice, in the dark tunnel of the Parpaillon, at 2632m d'altitude.

After this bit of excitement, we continued our tour, with the Cols de Vars, (2108) Chérine (2270) Valbelle (2372) and the charming forest of Saluces, which, by the Col de la Coche (1791) led us by St-André at Crévoux. We found at the hotel, a shower, a dinner and above all a bed! Rewarded for our efforts by some unforgettable images. The day after, we signed the livre d'or at the auberge de La Ratelle.

And it was thus, thanks to the recent virus "chauvocolmania", that I found a new friend : "the Parpaillon".

Many thanks to all of your team.

Henri GRAVEZAT N°3414.
Villeneuve les Avignon (Gard).

Revue no. 21, 1993.

Parpaillon 78

The Parpaillon is well-known amongst cycloclimbers, it's a col of exceptional difficulty and its name is closely related to the history of cycletouring. It links the valleys of the Ubaye and of the Durance, connecting Embrun and Barcelonnette. Climbed from Embrun, that's to say by the west and north-west side, the col rises 1 775m in 27 km (6,55% average) whilst the south, south-east side has a climb of 1340m in 17 km (average: 7,9%). But at several points the gradient exceeds 10 and even 13%.

(extract from cahiers du cycle, LES COLS DURS). The route and the tunnel of the Parpaillon, altitude 2650m was completed in 1901. Paul de Vivie (VELOCIO) climbed it in 1903 and returned in 1909. From 1930 the Groupe Montagnard Parisien started a "campagne du Parpaillon" that bore fruit, seeing that 29 cycletourists went to discover this col in 1930, and 54 in 1931. It's from this time that dates "the legend of the Parpaillon"... But it was only in 1970 that an Auxilois had the curiosity to see this magnificent col for himself!

I've had the luck to be able to climb the Parpaillon five times since 1970 : three times from the Ubaye side, starting from la Condamine-Chatelard, and twice from the Crévoux side. My preference is for the climb from the Ubaye side.

At the start, the narrow, surfaced road climbs steeply towards the hamlet of Ste Anne, the last inhabited place before Crévoux, between the two villages are 25km of which 20 are full of stones where it is sometimes difficult to ride. But the spectacle is there: first of all a delightful forest of larches, crossed by streams that we cross on wooden bridges, then immense pastures populated by flocks of sheep (and also by marmots) then at last towards 2000 m the surroundings become arid, barren, in a rocky domain, then we reach the long dark tunnel that we must pass through, most often on foot to avoid damaging a wheel in one of the many potholes ...

On the Crévoux side we find similar landscapes, all the same less attractive in my opinion, and of course in the reverse order. This brief description of the Parpaillon done, I would now like to tell you of the adventure that we experienced in 1978, whilst we were making a trip from Albertville to Gap by crossing a few "monuments" of the Alps. Imagine it: Cormet de Roselend, Iseran, Télégraphe, Galibier, Route de la Bérarde, Lautaret, Izoard, Vars and.. Parpaillon.

That year, there had been late snowfalls and the great cols had been opened only a few days before our arrival at the start of July. Iseran, Roselend and Galibier were crossed between imposing walls of snow and the spectacle was a continual delight. When at la Condamine we start the climb of the Col du Parpaillon we don't know if the col is open or closed, but as it is of no interest to ordinary tourists due to the state of the road, there is reason to think that the second option is the good one (if we can put it that way).

But our enthusiasm is unlimited: keep climbing, we will see!... Crossing the Parpaillon that I am showing for the first time to my three companions will be the high point of this tour and great will be our disappointment if we have to turn back.

At Ste Anne we catch up with a very well-equipped walker, who is going to the col as well, we don't suspect at this moment that a few hours later his help would be the determining factor in

us passing through the tunnel... Here is the fountain, in hot summers the last water supply before Crévoux, but in this year of 1978 with these recent snowfalls and the delay in melting there is water everywhere. Our progress is slow, but until leaving the forest bathed in warm sunshine we can still ride. Higher up, amongst the stones, we become walkers, the way is full of potholes, collapsed sections, great blocks of stone obstruct our passage. In the grandiose surroundings of the Parpaillon mountains we feel tiny, alone in an absolute calm broken from time to time by the sound of a waterfall, the call of a bird or the whistle of a marmot.

Starting from about 2000m snow occupies a section of the track, and it's from now that we are going to experience an extraordinary adventure, an epic that counts for something in the life of a cycletourist... A few snowy sections passed without trouble, we find ourselves in front of a section that we cross somehow with cycling shoes that continually want to slip and bikes loaded with luggage each weighing 25 kgs. After an hour of pushing or carrying our machines we meet a snow slope about 150m long, very steep and scattered with rocks, discouragement comes over us, what can we do, return and again cross what we have had so much difficulty coming over, or continue and take the risk that our tour ends in tragedy. It is then that the providential walker that we met at Ste Anne appears. Our adventure makes him smile, he kindly offers to make the widest way through that he can with the help of his heavy boots that he digs in at each step. After many efforts and what seems an interminable time our "guide" tells us he sees the tunnel, or rather the top of the tunnel for it is almost completely covered in snow. Another moment of anguish. Have we done all this for nothing, must we turn back? We approach the tunnel to confirm that the doors are closed but find that we can enter by a service door. We will have to lower the bikes with the help of a rope belonging to our devoted walker. No sooner said than done... And we take the same route. We set off in this black hole faintly lit by one of our torches. We progress carefully on the ice that soon gives way under our weight with a sinister cracking and we wade in 30 or 40 cm of freezing water with our cycling shoes and white ankle socks that in this situation seem ridiculous, subject to the shock of thick blocks of ice against our painfully bloodied calves and ankles.

As we progress slowly, with great difficulty, an awful doubt comes over us: if the other service door can't be opened, if continuation becomes impossible, we will have to turn back, we will have suffered all this for nothing? The length of the tunnel must be from 5 to 600 metres, making 15 to 20 minutes to get to the other end.

At last we are there, and it's time, for an anguish close to panic was beginning to grip us in that dark and icy gallery. A gleam of light gives us hope, the service door is partly open but not enough to get the bikes through. The pick of our friend manages to free the door blocked by the ice, while one of us, braces himself against the wall and pushes as hard as he can with his feet. Then we hoist our bikes to the top of the wall of snow and ice and definitively and without regret leave this tunnel. So, in the immense white mountain, under the sun's warmth, our nerves relax and the comedy of the situation comes to the fore... Some walkers spot us from afar, no doubt astounded to see people, and above all cyclists emerge suddenly in the middle of a snowfield... From where they are looking the tunnel is invisible!

What remains of this adventure transforms partly into a laugh, sometimes letting ourselves slide down the snowy slopes, leaning on our bikes, sometimes riding with the wheels in 10 cm of snow, an exercise in which some showed themselves particularly adept.

We soon find again the track that leads us to Crévoux where this mad adventure is entered in the "livre d'or" of the Parpaillon. We owe this outcome mainly to the kind walker that chance put in our way and to whom we give great thanks.

The photos and the film of this marvellous tour have taken a special place in our archives as cycletourists. In the years that have followed, I've had the occasion to climb the Parpaillon twice more but in "normal" conditions, that's to say on a dry track leading to an open tunnel that was perfectly clear.

All the same, the beauty of the scenery in its great wildness does not succeed in captivating me as much as my first ascent. My spirit is elsewhere, lost in the snows of 1978.

Last March, the television channel ARTE showed a film on the climb of the Parpaillon by a group of cyclists.

More comedians than cycletourists, the "actors" had a tremendous time in a succession of jokes and comical scenes.

But above all, the images of the route to the col and the country around it from Embrun to the tunnel brought back some great memories.

Abel LEQUIEN
de Willencourt (Pas-de-Calais)

Revue no. 22, 1994

The little Genies of the Parpaillon

Once upon a time, there was a cyclist who dreamt of the legendary Parpaillon. So, he decided to go to Jausiers. He got up early, got on his bike, put his rucksack on his back, he went towards Condamine...

Arriving at the village, he bought some bread and took the direction of Saint-Anne. At the end of a few kilo-metres of climbing, he arrived at the chapelle Saint-Anne. He took some photos, and ate : "climbing makes you hungry" !

He filled his bottles with cold water at the fountain. He knew that the climb would be hard under a blazing sun and that water would be hard to find. After having gone through a forest of larches, he arrived at the bridge of Bérard. Then crossing another wooden bridge, he saw just above it, on its own a cabin.

It was the cabin of the Parpaillon. It was there that the real track commenced. After a few hundred metres, a strident whistling rang out! Surprised, he turned his head and saw one of these little genies, standing like an i, who made a face at him. What the devil! thought the cyclist, he doesn't like me going by. On the contrary, the little genie made him understand, if we whistle it's to encourage you to climb all the way to the tunnel. And during all the climb the whistles encouraged the cyclist.

Dodging here and there, the little Genies were, as you can imagine, only some beautiful marmots, who accompanied him all the way to the tunnel. That tunnel so dark, so damp but oh so coveted. After going through it and its good footbath of freezing water, he descended towards Embrun, then towards the magnificent lac de Serre Ponçon.

He arrived that evening at Jausiers, tired, but proud and very happy.

The Parpaillon, now, he knows !

Martial GARCIA N°3525
PERPIGNAN (Pyrénées Orientales)

Revue no. 24, 1996

The Parpaillon has its stamp

The Parpaillon haunts my nights, sometimes it makes me dream... Each article about it fascinates me, but a mysterious halo still fogs its image, hides its truth. So I imagined that one day that I would venture it and the chance came when a cyclist friend decided to spend his holidays in Barcelonnette. Given that circumstance, I thought it would be a good idea to immortalise this magical instant of the passage of the Parpaillon by the making of a stamp to print on our route map in the course of a cycling tour (or other). That's how I originated the concept of this stamp : original, hand made certainly, but unique of its kind. So, for all those who have made the climb of the Parpaillon and would like this stamp printed on their road map, I am able to stamp your document and return it immediately. And for those who still hesitate, you can do it ; it's true that the passage of the tunnel is distressing, but it is not the hardest part... Cycling friends, you must do this col, it is a giant.

Michel LEROUGE
45200 MONTARGIS

Revue no. 25, 1997

Parpaillon ! Helmet obligatory

We are starting from Saint André d'Embrun. We put a bottle of water to chill for when we get back in the basin of the fountain in the pleasantly shady square, in front of the church.

After a few kilometres of climbing, an exceptionally panoramic view over the Lac de Serre Poncon opens for us. Later, turning a hairpin bend, a tall 'demoiselle coiffée' honours us with a stony look.

A few bites taken at the side of a stream and here in the real Parpaillon. Keeping all its promises, the Parpaillon has instilled all its sensations in us.

They are : to follow its infinite route, and to harmoniously dispose of its stones, its holes, its jerks, its bumps. In such a way that avoiding one trap sends us inexorably on to the next one. It has thrown its flies into the attack, not nastily, not to stop us, but to test our ability to avoid everything that the track throws at us, letting go of the bars to slap and wave them away. It has invited for the occasion its cattle to form a placid guard of honour for us. It has programmed the blooming of the flowers of its pastures so that their colours and their evanescent perfumes will be, today, at their maximum.

And at last, when it has seen at who it has thrown all that, when it has judged that we are worthy of it, after several hours of a bitter struggle, of an unending fight, it has ordered its marmots, its last sentinels, to escort us with their admiring whistles. Then finally, it has offered us in a box its mineral world, studded with the white patches of its névés.

So, we knew that we had arrived. We've been lucky today! The Parpaillon was willing but we knew that it still had in reserve a powerful arsenal of deterrence that it had not used. Why? Because we knew how to approach it humbly, admiringly, gradually. In addition, it's true that today, there were not many cars to make our task harder. The Parpaillon doesn't like cars!

To reward us, it knew how to be magnanimous. Nevertheless, I must admit that during the last three kilometres, to help me, a necessary detail in this idyllic context, I counted my pedal strokes. At 2600 m, seeing the tunnel, I stopped counting.

Arriving at the entry to the tunnel, I was welcomed by my three companions on the climb and by a little black sheepdog. The air is chilly at 2645 m! We put on pullovers and eat something, watched by our new four-legged friend.

It was time to enter the tunnel! Tunnel that some "Cent Colistes" have described as : "the promise of a peaceful harbour... return to a former life...the blaze of light of birth... black hole in space..."

Denise never having seen a place as damp, dark and cold, at first declined the invitation. We had to show some diplomacy, telling her that it was the natural conclusion to climbing the col, that everybody went through the tunnel, and that it would be a shame not to see the landscape of the other valley on the other side, that the tunnel was not long, and there was a point of light in

the darkness, ie. the end. Convinced by our arguments, she agreed to try it. Her bike having lights, ladies first, she entered.

And, in single file, accompanied by "doggie", we disappeared into the darkness, swallowed by this gaping maw. The first drops that fell from the ceiling didn't scare us. After a few dozen metres, our "lady with the lamp" stopped, concerned : What's that ahead, she said? Ouch! We had omitted...intentionally, to tell her about the puddles. Um..! Perhaps water! but at this time of year the puddles shouldn't be too deep. We go on a few metres : "But it's deep she says, and we're sinking in! I'm going back!"

In fact, it was deep and when we put a foot down, it disappeared into the black mud. She turned around...We heard arriving behind us, on foot, a group : father, mother and two children. They stopped a few metres from us blocked by the water. Amplified by the tunnel's echo, made worse by its distressing atmosphere, a great crash, of blocks of shale detaching from the ceiling, falling on the group behind and provoking immediately the terrified screams and tears of the children. Everyone stood petrified, when a second fall, in the same place, hit them again. The crying of the children redoubled, and everyone, running or riding, made for the exit. The children were grazed and inconsolable. The mother had taken the worst of it. In fact, it was her who had received the biggest pieces on her head, shoulder and upper arm. She had big haematomas and we disinfected the wounds with our first aid kits.

We had no desire to go back in there. We decided then to climb on foot to the geographic col. A quarter of a hours walk through the scree and avoiding treading on the little flowers on the rocks, then the austere valley of the Ubaye was in our view.

Coming back to the tunnel, the little dog was still there. On the descent, he followed us. He obviously knew the route, cutting the hairpin bends, taking short cuts across the pastures, trotting alongside us in the difficult overgrown passages. He waited for us when we stopped for a rest. At the end of the track, after a last pause, the dog wasn't there. Had we lost him ? On the descent to the bridge at Crévoux, we rode fast ! For sure, we had lost him.

At the basin at La Chalp, while we cool down and fill our bottles, he arrives calmly, not panting, he wags his tail, happy with his descent of more than 1000 metres. Two feet on the edge of the basin, he laps a few well-earned mouthfuls of water. He worries us! He's deaf to our advice. We don't want to lose him on the road to Saint André. Has he adopted us ? Who knows what goes on in the mind of a dog ? In desperation, a loud "Be off!" made him see reason. He trots off with his head down. So long companion, will you climb back up the Parpaillon tomorrow to make friends with other cyclists ?

The square in Saint André d'Embrun is calm and warm, the bottle is still in the basin, nice and cold. It is welcome.

Noël MATHELET N°1211
of BOZEL (Savoie)

Revue no. 26, 1998

The Parpaillon so coveted

On holiday in Embrun, tourist routes are not lacking for a cyclist used to the countryside of the Beauce.

Today, there are two options : a mountain ride with two BPFs (Izoard and St Véran) or climbing the Col du Parpaillon. So, which to choose? Have I made a decision? I forget the two BPFs and I'm going to see the slopes of the Parpaillon. For me, this Parpaillon is a little mythic like Paris-Brest-Paris, the diagonals, the Tour de France ride. All the articles on it that I have been able to read have always given me a great wish to do it.

And for you, the Parpaillon, what is it? A col of the Alps? Is that so? 2637m! Oh, but, isn't it high! Rough-stuff as well! It's for that reason that I've never heard of it!

Wait, a bit of history for "young" cyclists : At the end of the last century, the army cut a tunnel in the Parpaillon. This 'road' becomes the highest in Europe. Always in search of extremes, cyclists started to cross it. Despite the bad surface, they continued to come. In 1930, G Grillet had the idea of a pennant and a register. The Col du Parpaillon thus became famous and remained prized by cyclists.

To begin, I take the road that climbs to the ski station of Orres. Almost from the start, the little chainring is used. The gradient justifies it, and the legs are not yet warmed up. I rise little by little, the view over the lac de Serre-Poncon gets better as I go along the hairpin bends. I am in the shade, but the sun is for the moment masked by the high mountains. The first photos are necessary. Soon I reach the locality of St Sauveur, a high mountain village blessed with a remarkable viewpoint. Crossing the pastures, the road is easy and even finishes by descending on the village of Vabres. Afterwards, it is uninterrupted climbing. The road is quite wide above the Crévoux stream flowing in the background. The little chainring is required, and soon the club jersey is removed. The sun is shining and the blue sky promises a fine afternoon.

The village of Praveyral consists of several houses, with stores of firewood in good order suggesting that they are occupied all year. Leaving Crévoux, I also leave the tarmac behind. The particularly steep track is made of large stones; not really easy to progress in these conditions. Should I leave my toe-clips engaged? One or two situations, almost losing my balance, make me hesitate to unclip. Finally, I leave my feet held in the pedals and escape from a balancing act by the force of my thighs.

Happily, after a kilometre, the route turns into a forest track that is much more rideable and less steep. Very pleasant. The pace is a bit more normal. A little further, I even find the surfaced road that goes through La Chalp. Through the forest and the flowered verges, it leads me to Pont de Réal, about 1.5 km higher, where starts a new route, full of stones that don't make progress easy. It's just after 10 h, and the temperature is already high.

The Michelin map shows two arrows. They are certainly there, the devils ! The speedo oscillates between 4 and 6 km/h! Being alone lets me choose where I want to place my tyres. The extreme beauty of the surroundings incites me to climb. Between the larches with green spines, at the feet of which many flowers grow, stands out the Parpaillon mountain with, at the summit,

a few white patches of snow, perfectly contrasting with the azur of the sky. And perfect silence, or nearly! 4 or 5 vehicles pass me during the climb. It's not much, compared to a classic col, in this period of late July . But, it's a lot, in a place where you don't expect it. Troubled each time, with the dust, the motor's heat, the noise, the exhaust fumes, and the risk of flying stones, even though the drivers climb at more or less the same speed as the cyclist.

The amount of sweat running down my forehead compels me to stop several times to wipe it off before it goes in my eyes. The camera is often got out as well to record the memories ; the views are better and better. I only have two eyes to memorise the extreme beauty of the landscape. My hands and arms are getting used to the uneven surface, even if some hairpins require careful attention. The surroundings change. Around 2000 metres, the trees disappear to give way to pastures. A classic change in vegetation at this altitude. Sprinkled with flowers of many colours, crossed by a several streams, the green covering is remarkable as well. A few cattle graze tranquilly.

I come across another cyclist, like me using supposedly fragile 700c wheels. We talk for a few minutes, that lets him rest his hurting hands and wrists. I continue to climb and find myself coming up to a couple of hikers, with big backpacks. We exchange a little hello then continue, each at their own pace, not much different.

A little higher, I find the drivers again, sitting in the grass, their coolbox full of food. A not very exhausting picnic ! The pastures make way for the rocks and to "mountains" of stones. At a hairpin, a ford obliges me to go on foot. Never mind, a few more photos make the stop worthwhile. All the more reason to search for the summit during my climb, I can't find anything.

All the same, I arrive there not long after. This col is decidedly different to those I've already done. The summit is in fact the entry to the tunnel, provided with metal double doors and several hundred metres in length, dug through the mountain, and full of stones and snow. Because of the altitude, the view over the surrounding mountains is magnificent. Provide with a torch that I took care to put in my bag, I enter, pushing the bike, in this tunnel. Drops of water start to fall from the vault, and soon, I feel my shoes and my cleats sinking into the mud. I prefer to turn round without seeing the other side of the Parpaillon range, which must give a view over the valley and the mountains of the Franco-Italian border and probably the high peaks of the Mercantour. Never mind!

It is midday. For those interested in numbers, my counter shows a distance of 30 km from the start, an average of 8,7 km/h and an altitude of 2640 m, the sign at the tunnel says 2637 m. Just the descent now. My bottles are empty, but that will have to do. I put my club jersey on. Given the speed, no need to put a newspaper under it. The descent is fatiguing ; being always on the brakes, and almost out of the saddle. It's not the time to puncture or to break a spoke, even though I am equipped for both eventualities. It soon becomes tiring. The least easing of the brakes brings too much speed which could quickly lead to a fall. The choice of line is at least as important as on the climb.

Normally, I don't like going there and back. Here, it's different. The magnificent views make it worthwhile.

Arriving at Crévoux, I stop at the only bar/hotel in the village. A Logis de France named "Hôtel du Parpaillon". In answer to my question, they tell me of a register where cyclists write their comments. It is the third "Livre d'Or" since the opening of the famous climb of the Parpaillon,

and the first name in it was R. Sauvaget on 1 August 1983. I looked through it and wrote a few lines. Each year, a few cyclists had wrote their thoughts. But, surely there must have been many more who climbed the col?

All that was left was to descend to Saint André d'Embrun. It was strange to be on tarmac again. A dream realised, I hope you have the desire to ride in the mountains and even better, to climb the slopes of the Col du Parpaillon.

Patrick BAISET
N°2219, of CHARTRES (Eure et Loire).

Revue no. 26, 1998.

Mythic Parpaillon

We were four friends, Pierrot Guitard, Roger Dureisseix, Gérard Broweys and myself Michel Nau, who dreamt daily of this Parpaillon that was described to us, over and over again, in specialised cycling magazines; never satisfied by this reading, our desire to climb this col on MTBs, took shape with the passing years, even though to bring us together, if only for the time necessary to expedite the project, didn't seem so easy!

First intended for 1998, then 1999, it's finally 22 July 2000, that we set course for Embrun with a curious stay at the Hotel du Lion d'Or from where we scrutinise the summits with apprehension, as the weather is uncertain and the storms frequent and violent; the locals don't fail to warn us of the perils by stressing the risks of high paths being cut and, as well from that, the everyday dangers of the mountains. Sure, to come all this way for nothing bothers us, but we need to know as well that we have something to fall back on and, after all, to come back later is completely possible, all the more as we certainly intend to enjoy, as much as possible, the spectacle of the mountains!

25 July 2000 turns out to be the day; the weather is fine when we get up, and as the locals say there is no time to lose if we are going to enjoy it to the full and get back before the late afternoon storms; it's with excitement that we breakfast and prepare the bikes and fill the rucksacks ; we must not skimp on the quality of equipment and be prepared for all changes in the weather, as well as taking enough food, all factors on which the success of the day depends.

The start is at once reassuring and concerning, because we have to descend 2km to the bridge over the Durance, altitude 799m, while from altitude 850m, our objective is at 2650m! But this first stretch is surfaced and it's the same after the bridge climbing all the way to Crévoux ; the gradients, very irregular, are sometimes steep, but nothing is impossible when you are enjoying it, especially on a comfortable surface , with a back drop of marvellous mountains, of pretty little villages, and for background noise, the nearby stream ; it's fabulous!

The village of Crévoux, at 1585m, constitutes a turning point in the climb; first, it's the end of the tarmac and the start of serious matters with steep slopes (12 % average) amongst stones, on a track deformed by numerous ruts, the result of recent downpours. We meet a few walkers but the marks of civilisation are more and more rare.

A note in passing, at the pause in the square at Crévoux; we like the fountain, that lets us fill our bottles, and take a breath before tackling the 12.5 km with 1065m of climbing, that separates us from the Parpaillon tunnel.

Now, it's a real adventure, on a track full of potholes sometimes, but we never have to put a foot to the floor! It seems our form is good enough for the gradients are often significant and the distance is interminable. First it's a forest with all its charms then we come to pastures that extend as far as we can see; it's magical. A Swiss mountainbiker, passes us 3 or 4 kilometres from the top, he climbs very easily, as do we: if rather slower!

We leave the pastures about 2km from the top, then we pass the last high altitude farm, it is now bare rock and the stones part under our tyres ; we progress steadily, hoping, at each turn, to see the black hole of the Parpaillon tunnel ; this vision is so long overdue that we almost

despair as fatigue now begins to make itself felt... It is 13.00 and more than time to eat something and take some well-earned rest! ... and then suddenly, we arrive on the final platform with the tunnel that burrows under the mountain in the middle; for us it is the apotheosis! The dream becomes reality...

This reality is also seen in the temperature difference. No question of picnicking without putting on some warmer clothes. We sweated a lot during the climb, but here, in front of the ventilation duct that is the tunnel, we must wrap up. We are happy to have thought of it, even if, on a climb like this, we want to carry as little as possible.

We don't recommend doing this climb, without going to the other end of the tunnel, even though it is made hazardous by the absence of lighting and the presence of gaping holes ; we use makeshift lights to go and see the other side that descends to La Condamine-Châtelard ; the scenery is as splendid, but we don't have time to linger because of the cold. We go back through the tunnel, getting soaked by the splashing from having to ride through the puddles and the water dripping from the roof; it's with relief that we reach daylight and start a rapid descent towards Crévoux and Embrun.

We make a brief stop at La Chalp to savour a beer, exchange our first impressions and take off our warm clothes; we are euphoric, to the point of doing a few stretches on the return journey, notably on the last climb between the bridge over the Durance and the town of Embrun; a hard day for sure, but how fantastic!... with to finish, a much appreciated dinner at the hôtel du Lion d'Or, in the warm, while it rains again outside...

In the end, I would say that the Parpaillon is a good as we imagined it; above all it must not change. The first part is well surfaced, and because of that easily rideable; we like that the slopes there are steep and warm up our legs. Don't change anything either, of the untamed nature of the second part ; it would be a shame to surface a route that brings so much happiness to cycloclimbers and to hikers.

As well we must not change the nature of the Parpaillon tunnel; its surprising and mythic character alone makes the climb worthwhile.

Michel NAU
N°2825 of COUZEIX (Haute Vienne)

Revue no. 29, 2001.

Storming the Parpaillon

End of August, last day of our holiday in the Alps. Nearly three weeks away have seen us ride a thousand kilometres and cross more than 40 cols, first in the Vercors in the way of acclimatisation for the mountains, then in the Queyras with more serious climbing. That left a single objective : the mythic Col du Parpaillon (2637m) and its last nine kilometres of rough-stuff.

After several days of fine weather, a storm during the night overcasts the sky with clouds that cling to the mountainsides. But the forecast is for fine weather again in the region; so, no hesitation, it's time to go. Once the bikes are fixed on the rack, we head for Saint André d'Embrun, a quiet little village that we noticed the day before while climbing the Col de la Coche. The car parked in the church square, under the shade of a superb lime tree, the bikes made ready and the bottles filled at the fountain close by, it is just before 10.00 that we mount our machines for an ascent of nearly 25km with 1700m of climbing. "We won't be at the top before midday, that's for sure!"

Only a few hundred metres ridden and we change to the smallest chainring : there would be hardly any occasion to shift to the 42, the gradient offering little respite. A first short pause to admire the view over Embrun and the valley of the Durance, and we start again. The hamlet of Villard passed, a slight descent gives us some relief before crossing the Crévoux torrent. We stop to remove a jersey, the Michelin map shows a steeper percentage coming, and, make no mistake, the speed drops and the sweat increases, all the more when the sun starts to break through the cloud cover that hides the surrounding peaks from us. After Praveyral, we recover from our efforts so far while continuing towards the village of Crévoux, where where we eat a little by the fountain. At the top of the village a little supermarket gives us the chance to buy some more provisions and postcards. But we must leave, and rather than redescend to La Chalpe, we take the MTB route that rejoins the D39 via a stony track that gives us the opportunity to practice that other activity well known to rough stuff cyclists : walking! On foot, we take the first photos of the day, snapping the slopes of the Saint André and Chabrières peaks.

The return to tarmac is welcome, the narrow road rises in a forest and the climb becomes more severe. We get past that in our smallest gear, then we arrive at the tricky bit : the off-road track. From there, our progress slows yet more, as we move to avoid rocks, stones, streaks of sand, and ruts caused by the rain, having to often take an edge of the track, switching from one side to the other to find the smoothest line. In this sometimes acrobatic exercise at least we are not troubled by traffic; we have the climb to ourselves, motor vehicles seldom pass and we don't complain. The forest of conifers opens out, and, at the turning of a hairpin bend, we see the panorama of the Parpaillon mountains before us, reaching to 3000m. On the left, a grassy plateau welcomes us for a well-earned rest where we can admire the torrent that shimmers in the depths of the gully, as the sun gets stronger and stronger.

To follow, alternating pedalling and pushing, we continue to climb between pastures where herds of cows graze. Soon resound the first whistles of those spectators intrigued by our strange presence and we surprise many of these marmots who run across the grass, shoot across the track, or keep watch, immobile. For us, it's the chance to make several stops to observe these

pleasant rodents with our binoculars and take photos of the splendid scenery offered to us, who live in the plains far from the mountains. Slowly our goal approaches and at last we reach the foot of the great hairpins where it's better to ride on the outside and slalom between the stones scattered on the ground. We spot the tunnel entry only a few hundred metres ahead and with a last effort, this hard climb ends on a wide platform where a freezing wind blows. We get our cameras out to capture the moment, put on our Gore-Texes quickly, and write, on one of the many stickers on the tunnel doors, our names, our club, and our membership of the Club des Cent Cols !

Now, we just need to find some shelter to picnic in, as we are feeling hungry; we descend slowly, sometimes on foot, down to the shepherd's cabin where, sheltered from the sun and the wind, we can at last eat the food in our bar bags. The peace and quiet is interrupted by the passage of six 4x4s making their way up and leaving a cloud of dust in their wake. After this prolonged stop, we look once more at the savage beauty of this mineral landscape, where there are still a few patches of snow. We remount and continue carefully, braking hard, to descend. Every so often, we walk for a few hundred metres to rest our hands and wrists.

Once more on tarmac, we speed up, but vigilance is still necessary, as the surface is narrow, battered and steep : "not surprising given that this morning we knew that this way was difficult". From La Chalp, the road widens, the surface gets better and the visibility is perfect, now we are out of the forest. A few more stops, to impregnate our minds with the rock faces and ridges around us, then we freewheel down, the better to negotiate the last few bends.

We find ourselves again in Saint André, still as calm on this late afternoon in summer. After a snack and a well-earned drink, the bikes back on the rack, we return to our campsite at Guillestre, tired, but satisfied with this latest mountain tour, and looking forward to next year with more adventures above 2000m.

Michel and Cathia DESCOMBE
N°1412 and 4999
d'ARVERT (Charente-Maritime)

Revue no. 30, 2002

The Parpaillon... a dream ?

My best tours (RVA of Carcassonne, RDL of Narbonne, tour of the three gorges 3 Gorges of IBM Montpellier) ... it was with Sylvie that I did them but we were amongst several hundred cyclists. The great number of participants, the perfect organisation, the ambience, the conviviality and the marvellous landscapes made of these trips the best moments in these cyclists' lives.

It was again with Sylvie that I did the Parpaillon. But there, we were alone and it was as well, as this famous col isn't, to my eyes, made for crowds.

In the mind of a cyclist there are always some objectives, and amongst them one more important that could be called a dream. My dream for three years had been the Parpaillon. Why? Because the Parpaillon is not a col like others. Those who have done it, when they speak of it, have a certain gleam in their eyes. We can well understand that in their memory this col has a place apart. Besides, when they speak of it between themselves they lower their voices when "someone who hasn't done it" approaches; silly really, at least to be impolite which no cyclist should know how to be - they continue and what we can overhear only increases the mystery... and the desire to realise my dream.

The little that I've heard and what I have read (for much has been written about the Parpaillon) convinced me to use my MTB, a necessary provision... to save my shoes. Then I needed to find three free days. In July and August, impossible for Sylvie. What I did, was to spend four days at Barcelonnette to reconnoitre the terrain, after a fashion, by doing the Cayolle, the Allos and the Bonnette where, on 31 July, I met a snowstorm as violent as it was unexpected. My decision was made; to do the Parpaillon before that winter. An opening appeared: the first weekend of October. The forecast for three days was clear and precise : Friday, fine weather; Saturday, a fine morning worsening quickly during the afternoon; Sunday, very poor. So, it was time. Leave Alès Friday afternoon. Friday evening, an excellent meal prepared by Jeannine at the hotel in Jausiers. An animated evening where the talk was more of the chase than cycling as there was a group of hunters preparing an outing for tomorrow.

Saturday morning : splendid weather. Start 8h30. Warming up on the road to La Condamine, the cyclist strips off and the rucksack fills out. It was really quite warm and the gradient was steep to reach Sainte-Anne. The road is still surfaced and we made the mistake of wanting to climb on the 38 ring and keep the 28 for the off-road section that starts at the Chapelle Sainte Anne. We filled our bottles at the fountain here (two bottles each is the minimum). There are 11 km left; 5 in a splendid forest with a moderate slope. We are completely alone; from time to time, in the distance, a gunshot... maybe our mouflon hunters? Emerging from the forest, a little bridge and there is the Grand Parpaillon cabin. It's time to eat a little and attack the last six kilometres. We can clearly see the track which climbs the mountainside but we cannot locate the col. The slope steepens, but with the 28 ring it's no harder than the climb to Sainte-Anne.

The more altitude we gain, the more the horizon opens out and the spectacle of the snow-capped mountains is magnificent. A few little clouds begin to appear. At last after the turn of a hairpin bend, after having met some marmots gathering their stores for the winter, we see less than a hundred metres away the entry to the tunnel. It's a great joy to have realised a dream, but also a joy to be there (it is midday) in the sun, in the snow, surrounded by a splendid

panorama. There is a total calm and solitude. Like the marmots, the mountains seem to be preparing to meet the winter that is perhaps coming tomorrow, as the clouds are gathering quickly. A quick trip through the tunnel to admire the scenery. There is much more snow at the northern entry. With the MTB, a comfortable descent, to the Grand Parpaillon cabin. A quick picnic. Clouds invade the sky. It's time to get down. The success of our endeavour makes the descent even more pleasurable. The weather forecast was perfect: in the night a deluge that continued into the next day. It snows above 2000 mètres. Are we perhaps the last ones to have done the Parpaillon in 91. It was time !

So, the Parpaillon... a dream ? No, a wonderful memory.

C. GERARD

G.M.C. ALES

Revue no. 30, 2002

For or against the Parpaillon

For a long time I've heard about the Parpaillon (FR-04-2637), this unique col in the southern Alps, a sort of fossil remain (according to some enthusiasts) of what a great Alpine col might have been like at the time the Tour de France began to tackle them. The articles I had read made me want to go and see for myself, and in this summer of 2011 I finally did it.

I hope that this article will make things clearer for cyclists who, like me, would like to know if it is really worth embarking on the adventure. Here are four good reasons to go and four good reasons to not go; then, it's up to you to decide!

Four good reasons to not climb the Parpaillon

1- It climbs steeply

A fan of "extreme" gradients for a long time (those who know the Grand Colombier, The Mont Chat or the Col Agnel will know what I mean), and a decent mountainbiker (after all, the Vosges are the home of the MTB : imagine, I who speaks to you, was even at school with Julien Absalon's aunt!), I thought I would make short work of this col whose percentages, though respectable, don't reach those of the ramps mentioned above. Equipped with a light, brand new MTB, I approached this col quite confidently, but look, between climbing a slope on a well surfaced road and climbing the same slope on a bad, stone-ridden track, there is as much difference as running on an athletics track and running on a pebble beach...

Which leads us to the second reason

2-It's not surfaced

Well, the way is only surfaced to 9km from the top! And again, if it was a good dirt track, but no : nothing but stones ! How are you going to climb it at a decent pace (or even climb it at all) in these conditions? And the descent, have they really thought of the descent? And what does the DDE(1) do about it?

3-It's not really a col

Why bother to climb a col, if it's not to see what's on the other side? Well, this track doesn't cross the col, it ends, a hundred metres below it, at a tunnel that my maps (Michelin and IGN) described as 'closed'... I started out then, logically, without a light. But arriving at the top, surprise : the tunnel is open! Of course, it isn't lit and looks very muddy, but the itch is too strong, especially as two mountainbikers have just emerged from it (like me, without lights) telling me 'no problem', so I don't hesitate to enter it.

A strange and rather distressing sensation to ride in almost total darkness, with mud coming up to the hubs, and only a tiny point of light straight ahead (the other end of the tunnel). And, of

course, you have to come back the same way once you've photographed the view on the other side! Is that living as a cyclist, even more one who is a little claustrophobic?

4-The place is deserted

As a cycletourist, I don't disdain to talk with others that I meet on the road. On the Galibier, Izoard or Alpe d'Huez, nothing could be easier, but here not much chance of that. There is no one. No cyclists, not even a car or a backfiring motorbike to silence those unbearable marmots, nothing! (OK, a herd of cows... but they are not very talkative).

And what about the absence of a cafe at the top to comfort the cyclist after so much effort....

A desert I tell you !

Four good reasons to climb the Parpaillon

1- It climbs steeply

Didn't I start by saying I liked 'extreme' climbs. Well, I was simply delighted...

2-It's not surfaced

Even better ! If not this col would be like the Galibier, the Izoard or the Bonnette : infested with cars, with motorbikes, and even with cyclists faster than you who make you feel ashamed when they pass you, effortlessly, on the steepest climbs ...

3-It's not really a col

Well, what of it? Once we've had the pleasure of doing it, and knowing it is listed in the Chauvot, who cares whether it is a col in the pure geographical sense of the word! And if we want a 'real' col, it is enough, a few kilometres from the top, to turn right onto a path (steep, but no stones !) that leads to the Col de Girabeau (FR-04-2488b) in less than a kilometre. That gives you the opportunity to do two 2000m cols in one climb, and to enjoy a beautiful view over the Orres valley.

4-The place is deserted

Did you really believe me about the marmots? I LOVE them, marmots ! And the photo of me nose to nose with one, taken on the descent, is the proof....

Let's be serious : do we come here for the crowds or for the solitude ? What a privilege, on the contrary, to have this exceptional place to oneself, or nearly!

As for the cafe, I can well do without that!

Conclusion : the Col du Parpaillon monumental col, that I am proud to have bagged as a hunter (of extreme climbs but also quite simply of cols). And if I can only give you one piece of advice : go for it (not all at the same time of course) you won't regret it.

This col must stay as it is, last witness of what were the great cols of the Alps at the start of the twentieth century. Steep, remote, and above all, unsurfaced.

Oh yes, I nearly forgot : if we could just make it a little bit more comfortable...the climb through the stones is one thing, but the descent!

Gilles AUBERT (CC no.5235)

Revue no. 40, 2012

(1) DDE is Direction Departmental de l'Equipement ie. public works including roads

My Parpaillons

From one end of the tunnel to the other...

Thirty-three years were necessary for me to discover both sides of the Parpaillon tunnel...

" You've done the Parpaillon? " Yes, already with Michel, 33 years ago during a stay at Vars, on a racing bike with tubulars. Why did we do it? For the legend no doubt... the famous livre d'or that we didn't see, the cigarette that we didn't find(1), the ice, the snow, the mud, the potholes, the puddles that I didn't see, because the tunnel, I went through it not on foot, groping my way, nor on the bike, but curled up on the back seat of a Renault 6.

All that remains, today, is the memory of a long ascent in the forest, making our way between stones, zig-zagging, labouring in too high a gear; an interminable climb that finished before the gaping black maw of the tunnel that breathes an icy air and in which, a long time ago, my fellow cyclists disappeared. Perhaps I've overstated the description of the tunnel... but I can't deny that I've got a holy horror of such black holes.

On this morning of September 2012, here we are starting on the other side, from La Condamine. The MTB that we've chosen for the ride is a bit out of place on the road that rises gently alongside the Ubaye and its gradually narrowing valley. Up there, on our left, a church is already sunlit. Fast groups of cyclists pass us, I'll be amazed if we see them again. Forts and barracks occupy strategic points, facing the nearby and menacing Italy of the nineteenth century. Made for the same strategic purpose, the Parpaillon road had to feed these forts with men, supplies and arms from the upper valley of the Durance. Skiers have replaced soldiers and a nice touristic road has been provided for them - and for us - towards the ski station at Sainte-Anne. Another time, another strategy. The surface is good, the slope a bit steep. Ahead, another cyclist. Ah, it's the Cent Cols that we met yesterday with his wife on the slopes of the Cayolle who we told of our project. He knew that he wouldn't be alone doing this col and its worthy neighbour, the Girabeau.

The tarmac ends. A tall tree gives a little shade to the Chapelle Sainte-Anne, all white, spruce, its one bell framed in a modest spire. The fountain and its pipe curved into a hollow trunk, the last bottles of cold water...

The Parpaillon, *it's now. Yes we can!* Campaign slogans, the promise of a fine day cycling in the mountains. The track is wide, stony but no worse, the mountains on our right, steep and bare, a few trees hang on desperately to the more hospitable slopes, the temperature begins to rise. In the background, the Parpaillon stream, a trickle at this end of summer, winds in the midst of its bed of stones. We cross one of its tributaries at the bridge of Bérard, a wooden bridge supported on solid trunks. A sign tells us that we are at 1841 m and at 9.995 km from the tunnel. So, to be less precise, we have 10km to do at an average gradient of 8%.

We ride in the shade of a forest of larches, a flock of sheep respond to their shepherd's call, encouraged by the barks of his dog, a peaceful pastoral scene. The track flirts with a contour, the last instants of respite. In the sunlight, a wooden bridge on a stone base, the torrent is dry... The shepherds' cabins remind us of human presence in the now bare surroundings, overlooked by the Grand Parpaillon peak. Ahead of us, a wide valley criss-crossed by footpaths and the ghost of the Parpaillon stream. Parpaillon, Parpaillon... it's the trademark around here! But be

warned, the picnic sitting in the soft grass, the bottle chilled in the tumbling water of the stream, the siesta in the shade, forget it! It will be a workman's sandwich, tepid water, rough rocks, a dusty track and a hot sun.

The pause will be short-lived, the serious matters haven't really started and yet, we've been on the road for some hours, the legend grows, the legend, not of centuries but of hours... I "pixelise" my companions who are going to look for an extra col and abandon me to the slope, to the stones, to the photos, to my thoughts... the loneliness of the long-distance runner and his doubtful wordplay.

With my eyes, I follow the ridge in search of the dip that indicates the geographical col ; it's somewhere up there, high up there, higher than the hairpin bends that slowly approach at the price of many turns of the pedals, many pulls on the bars, imperceptible or more violent and meant for staying upright ... rather than learning to ride a bike would we have been better going to circus school! Here, you must heave more energetically, pedal faster to cross a rut, to avoid an unstable stone. There, the slope steepens, 'wrestles' with the pedals as we say at home. And always this landscape without apparent life, the silence sometimes broken by a shepherd's vehicle or a parasite in a 4x4 who wants his own part of the Parpaillon, and why not Mont Blanc by helicopter? I think again of the dozens of riders in the Rallye du Parpaillon, having started from Gap on simple touring bikes, who arrived here after a long day of efforts... cycletouring has changed a lot.

Reflections, stones, pedal strokes, yes, but at the entry to the tunnel, full stop ! And yet, it's there, somewhere, behind a bend. The view opens out towards the east, high peaks appear, are they Italian, French? The track straightens out on the mountainside. Right at the end, a bend to the left, I sense the approach of my goal. And there is the platform at the extremity of which is the black hole of the tunnel entry. Not just a vulgar hole in the mountain, but a hole framed by an elegant freestone wall, a work of art... despite that, there is the gaping maw of the tunnel that breathes an icy air and in which, a long time ago, my fellow cyclists disappeared (see the beginning of this text!). Some panels secured to the wall recall the names of military figures who contributed to the making of the tunnel... I think of the workers, military and civil, who did the work with picks and shovels. A few ruined buildings, a work without purpose except to be borrowed by a few hard-hats, perched on their backfiring quad-bikes, an anachronistic eyesore. It's time to turn back, to return to earth. Near the chapel, the fountain still flows, its stream more or less strong filling non-stop the trough cut in a trunk.

We meet up again, next stop of course in front of another trough of 25 cl on the terrace of a cafe in Barcelonnette, where we get to know each other better. A few pages of the Chauvot keep our conversation going.

Thirty three years of cycletouring are still up there, at the entry to that tunnel that still earns my deep aversion to its gaping black maw that breathes an icy air.

Georges Golse
(CCno.124)

Revue no. 41, 2013

(1) read on this subject, by the pen of Raymond Henry, 'Une cigarette comme témoin !' (Cyclotourisme, revue de la FFCT, no 619, December 2012).

The tunnel

In the distance, daylight and freedom at last!

This legendary passage, this timeless col, that for more than a hundred years has drawn cyclist pilgrims of all kinds, has been a dream of mine ever since I joined the Club des Cent Cols. Jean Perret and I looked into and decided everything : the circuit, the month, the day, the hotel for one, the campsite for the other, the likelihood of fine weather, and, best of all, the wives gave their approval.

At last nearly everything : a week before, at Lescherraines, Jean broke his collarbone! At this stage of the project, it was too late for me to abandon it. Too bad for poor Jean, he'll have to wait for better days.

Friday 10 August 2012, my dream has finally become reality.

It's chilly : only 10 deg.C. The tarmac road starts steeply, but with my tyres fully inflated I climb quickly. The last hamlet, still asleep, is soon behind me. The early light of the rising sun, the pleasant hairpin bends amongst the larches, the meadows bordered by willowherbs, and all this silence... what a joy to be here!

At the Cabane des Espagnoles ⁽¹⁾ overhanging a little bridge, the tarmac stops, to give way to a track. The confrontation with the gradient now becomes a combat. In the furrowed sections, I have to zig-zag between rocks and ruts. Occasional birdsong intersperses the monotonous litany of my tyre studs biting into the dusty ground. Here and there, the sand retains the ephemeral footprints of men and animals, MTB tyres, 4x4s... how many have passed this way ?

The sound of a motor pulls me suddenly from my solitude... a vehicle descends slowly, the driver waves a hand. The forest that thins out lets the sun penetrate. No respite in the gradient, and still more hairpins, I prefer them to straight lines. The computer shows 5.2 km/h. I dismount and walk for a bit to relax, and my speed goes down to 4 km/h. I drink as I walk, the suffocating sensation lessens. On the left I spot the dizzying drop of the warefall whose low rushing I have heard for some time.

The sound of a motor... again ! One, then two khaki 4x4s pass me, the second with a Union Jack draped across the back. They leave behind them a cloud of grey dust, it's maddening... they'd have been better to stay on their island and watch the Olympics !

I stop abruptly, put my rucksack on the ground and sit on a low rock, while things settle down.

Ten minutes later, turning a hairpin, I see again the British who, having left their vehicles, are admiring the view. On this point I am in agreement with them, the marmots as well, it is sublime.

In the hollow of the grassy valley, the stream flows surreptitiously between islets whitened by fluffy linaigrettes. Perched above the track is a little refuge of old stones in this alpine garden.

But happiness is fleeting... vehicles approach... it's a motorway !

Stuffed with tourists, two 4x4s each pulling a trailer full of off-road scooters with big motorbike wheels pass me. I don't know if they're making fun of me or showing respect, but I ignore their salutations!

I do a short cul-de-sac on the right to collect a nearby col. At nearly 2500 metres, the 360 degree view is grandiose and from here I can see my goal !

Three hairpins above, photo stop, the preceding col is clearly visible. The tinkling of bells draws my eye to a tranquil herd of cows in a fold of the valley.

When I arrive at the tunnel, the tourists with their scooters take up the width of the track and all the entry platform. Without dismounting I ride through this gaudy, noisy, gesticulating crowd, vaguely hearing some calls, and stop before the gaping black mouth.

The tall metal doors, turned back against the tunnel walls, are covered with stickers and inscriptions of all kinds. A few photos to capture the moment are a must.

Taking in one hand the dynamo lamp, and in the other the bike, I force myself to enter despite my fear. A few steps further and I am plunged into a darkness blacker than night, my heart beats like the devil. To get a gleam of light a few turns of the pedals are required, but doing that while pushing the bike is awkward. Invisible pools of water force me to walk close to the wall, which my bar ends catch against, and it's raining from the roof: "what a sh... !"

I've an overwhelming desire to turn back and finish with this black hole.

I meet a couple on foot who ask me how I am, thank you, that's kind. In the distance, daylight and freedom at last!

The south side is even sunnier and here as well the doors are tagged. Four hikers talk and joke. From a little further, I see the way over the top of the tunnel : a vague footpath attacks the steep and rocky slope. A nasty scramble like that has no appeal for me, so much for the geographic col!

I turn back into the tunnel, not forgetting to charge my lamp first. In the dark, the trembling white eyes of two motorbikes make me jump. The only things missing are rats! The idea haunts me.

The other side is deserted, fantastic! Perfect for a pause. At the place I sit down I find on the ground a Petzl headlight in perfect working order. Why didn't I find it before?

Happy, and liberated, I savour a slow descent, I even catch up to the last off-road scooters, lost in the dust and the stones.

For a long time to come, that horrible Parpaillon tunnel will send a shiver down my spine.

Alfeo Lotto
(cc no. 5650)

Revue no. 41, 2013

(1) Between 27 January and 12 February 1939, about 500,000 Spanish, civilian and military, fleeing from the Franco regime, arrived in France. The refugees were put in camps. In the hamlet of La Chalp (the last one mentioned in this article) a Spanish camp was set up at the beginning of summer in 1939. They were sent there to work on the maintenance and upkeep of militarily important routes (including this col). The Cabane des Espagnols was a shelter for their tools and equipment. The inn and accommodation were sited at the bottom of the col, to profit from a better temperature and more space. These 'voluntary' workers, unable to leave, separated from their families, and under armed guard, were used for a series of works in the national interest.

Info : crevoux.eu/index.php/son-patrimoine/la-cabane-des-espagnols.html

Infos : crevoux.eu/index.php/son-patrimoine/la-cabane-des-espagnols.html

The Col du Parpaillon, Cape Horn of cycle touring...

'..that could have been a big Alpine col of the pre-automobile era...'

It's an historic site in French cycletouring, ignored for many years by some cyclists. Justifiably ignored given the racing machines sometimes wrongly used for touring, and that prohibit, or at least limit, access to off-road cols.

Nevertheless the tunnel's history is remarkable for the arrival of French cycletourists in 1901, just after its construction. In 1903 and 1908, Paul de Vivie aka Vélocio, the inventor of cycletouring, passed through the tunnel with his friends, giving his letters patent to a site which has become mythical for touring cyclists.

The Parpaillon tunnel was constructed between 1891 and 1898 to connect the valleys of the Ubaye and the Durance ... " It was opened by the Genie Militaire (military engineering corps), like many of the cols forming part of the great crossing of the Alps. The Parpaillon's luck was to be in competition with the Col de Vars which could link the same two valleys at an altitude 500m lower. When tarmac made its appearance it was only natural that it would be used on the Vars. The Col du Parpaillon is thus one of the last witnesses to an earlier age, and what could have been a great Alpine col before the era of the automobile.." (Source : René Poty CCno. 530).

Three cycletouring friends : Régis the youngest, Luc the least old et Jean-Pierre the oldest awaited the most favourable weather window to "attack" starting from Jausiers, on the south-east side, this giant that is the Col du Parpaillon and its legendary tunnel ...

The meteorological miracle appeared on Tuesday 29 July 2008. It was at 5 h 45, that we started out towards Condamine-Châtelard, from which to take the little road, then the track leading to the col. Being 17.2 km of distance, 7,87 % average gradient, 10 % maximum and 1355 m of climbing.

The gradient is hard for the first 6km from La Condamine before reaching the chapelle Sainte-Anne.

After the chapel, the surfaced route changes into an awful track of earth and above all stones, as it is much deformed by 4x4s, quadbikes and off-road motorbikes. We even saw the crankcase of an ordinary car .. such is the state of a route that, since 1898, was recognised as completely rideable for 'touring' bicycles, even carrying panniers, like ours... !

At the tourist office in Jausiers, we had found, without more concern, that this route was an MTB circuit classed 'black' ie. very difficult... and we, with our bikes and our panniers, loaded like mules, we were halfway up the climb... more often than not on foot, admittedly.

Coming to the tunnel, at 2637 m, Luc did not fail to say a few words, in spreading his Tibetan flag above the tunnel mouth, in support of an oppressed people...

After taking many photos, we started on the tunnel, with electric lamps, and with bin bags over our shoes, for the many deep puddles along its 468m length.

Halfway along, we had to press ourselves against the wall to let pass a huge American 4x4 with six blinding headlights driven by a 150kg cowboy...you can imagine our state of mind at that moment!

After the fairly easy passage of the tunnel, we climbed the "real" col (2783 m) above. Then we continued to the Col de Girabeau (2488 m) where, after lunch, we decided, on reflection, to return to Jausiers so passing through the tunnel a second time, the weather starting to change and the state of the track so deformed that we could imagine breaking something. Our trip, intended for two days with camping at the Col de la Coche, would have to be for another time...

All the same, we much regretted not descending to Crévoux to sign the Livre d'Or du Parpaillon. We preferred prudence to suffering... knowing when to stop in the mountains is evidence of a responsible intelligence... another time, perhaps!

But what a marvellous ride in wild surroundings inhabited only by marmots... No mechanical incidents to regret thanks to using the right equipment for touring!

Jean-Pierre Cance
(cc no. 4778)

Revue no.41, 2013

My Parpaillon

Member of the Club des Cent Cols, after having done the two magnificent off-road cols that are the Col Mitja (2367 m) in the Pyrénées-Orientales and the Port d'Aula (2260 m) in the Ariège, only one remained to be done, the mythic Tunnel du Parpaillon at 2632 m in the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence.

At 75 years old, this dream finally became reality and I owe it to our president Régis Paraz who arranged the outing for Wednesday 21 and Thursday 22 August 2013.

Arriving the day before at Guillestre to ride to the ski station of Risoul where we spent the night.

We started from Risoul at 8 h 30 on Wednesday to climb the Col de Chérine (2270 m), the Col de Valbelle (2372 m), the Col de Saluces (2444 m), the Col Sans Nom (2683 m), the Col de Jaffeuil (2503 m) and the Col de Vars (2108 m). In total for this Wednesday, 7 cols for 45 kilometres.

Then a ride of 15 kilometres down to the village of la Condamine and the Hotel du Midi where the owner and her daughter looked after us admirably.

Thursday 22 August, start at 8 h 30 after a super breakfast at the hotel, at 1300 m of altitude.

The route to this mythic col starts just outside the hotel, surfaced for about 8 kilometres, then the adventure commenced on a track that was very difficult for me. But these mountains are beautiful and to arrive at the summit at the entry to the tunnel that we spot at the last moment, at 2637 m, what a relief!

After some photos at the entry, the passage of the tunnel, 520 metres long, was for me laborious, I had forgotten my light ; after 50 metres, I had to dismount, I couldn't make out anything, and was going in all directions for all the length of the tunnel.

Photos as well on leaving the tunnel, before continuing to the Col de Girabeau (2488 m), two kilometres lower and after two pretty little ramps at 15 %, a very dangerous descent of 20 km (full of stones), then we rejoin the surfaced road and after 65 km, reach Crévoux and Guillestre via the corniche road above the Durance.

Many thanks to our President who permitted me to realise this dream, of doing the Parpaillon.

Also present were my friend Gérard Fillion-Robin from Grasse as well as two couples, Christine and Pierre Charnay and two future members of the Club des Cent Cols, specialists of walks on snowshoes in the high mountains, Joëlle and René Chautemps.

Thanks to all of you for your support, without you I believe that, at 75 years, I would not have managed it.

I've been a member of the Club des Cent Cols since the Revue no.9 of 1981, which makes it 32 years in the family, for a total, after these two days, of 1957 cols I have done including 193 at more than 2000m of altitude.

In friendship.

Jean Dejean
of Limoux, aka Kikou. (CC no. 1403).

Author's note :

To those Club members who would like to do this ride, I recommend the climb from the Barcelonnette side, and, of course, from the village of la Condamine.

In my opinion the descent of the other side to Crevoux is too dangerous.

And, above all, if you want to do it, don't wait till you are my age !

Revue no. 42, 2014.

A col of legend, the Parpaillon

" Among the Cent Cols members there are those who have done the Parpaillon and the rest". Reading this assertion, a lapidary sentence discovered on a blog, was like an electric shock. For an instant, my heart stopped, my throat tightened, and all my senses were shaken... Rubbish! I've never climbed this col and I don't feel any less of a centcolist. In anger I closed the page and turned off the computer. As I sat there I was thinking. In fact, I was cut to the quick. All through the winter that declaration insidiously spread its poison by sowing doubt in and undermining my self-esteem. I therefore surprised myself when I occasionally consulted websites treating this mythic col, examined an IGN map to locate it precisely, searched in books, read the blogs of cyclists who had climbed this alpine giant. For it is certainly a singular col , extraordinary, a *monstre sacré* of cycling. Some telling numbers : separating the Ubaye valley and that of the Durance, it tops out at 2637 m. An 18 km long climb, 1400 m of vertical gain from the south side, a track rising in impressive hairpin bends to the summit tunnel , 468 m in length, to be passed through in near total darkness, with eyes fixed on the point of light that is the exit at the other end. All of this in the grandiose surroundings of the high mountains. Thus I came to know it, to get to grips with it and, gradually, the thought of having it in my list of cols soon became an overwhelming desire ; followed by the imperative need to master it. The idea had made its way, I had been trapped, the Parpaillon had drawn me into its net. Now all I had to do was organise this challenge : my days of leave were counted, the col is in a far corner of France, not easily combined with a working trip! Convince my wife and children - who dreamt of nothing but the sea - to spend their holidays in the Ubaye (a little known valley, at first glance unenticing to summer holidaymakers) was no easy matter. A difficult task, I would have to play a tight game and use skilful tactics , machiavellian stratagems : first of all awaken the interest of my wife by negligently leaving on the computer open on pages showing the treasures of the this valley (the picturesque and sumptuous Mexican villas of Barcelonnette, the forts sited on rocks overlooking the valley...), mention from time to time the idea of Alpine holidays offering healthier physical activities for the children, praise the soothing qualities of the mountain climate, contrast the authenticity of rural locations compared with the surface glitter of the coast, point out the lower costs of accommodation... for six months. Six months of work. Six months of manipulation (or generous capitulation on the part of my wife). And, on a day in June 'fortune only favours the well-prepared', by a happy coincidence I click to confirm a reservation in Jausiers, a village shrine of cycling at the foot of the Parpaillon (and the Bonnette as well). I had won! The base camp thus established, all that remained was to create the plan of attack : reconnoitre the route on the IGN map, rent a mountain bike (I was only an unquestioning road centcolist), consult websites and blogs...

Every adventure, every voyage and, all the more, every conquest of a legendary col lives three times : before, ie. during the preparation, the day of the event, and afterwards for the rest of your life, an imperishable memory. The preparatory phase is a delectable moment during which we get a foretaste of the climb. During the months leading up to it : dream of your climb, consult the map, study the contours, the hairpin bends, the points of interest, the gradients and the total climb, ...and then on the eve: meticulously prepare the bike, choose your clothing, fill your bag with an invigorating picnic, get yourself the right ingredients for a magic brew to give you a boost when you need it... a climb like the Parpaillon must be prepared for as much mentally as physically. How many times did I climb it in my dreams : in bed before falling into the arms of Morpheus, driving to work on the depressing, always traffic-jammed ring road, even

coming up with a beatific smile during soporific meetings. To dream of climbing a col is already to have climbed it mentally. To return to a formula borrowed from Marek Halter "Certainly, the dream of a doughnut is not a doughnut. But the dream of a voyage, is already a voyage", a formula easily transposed to the bicycle as "a dream of a col is already a col".

From there imagine a list in the Tableau d'Honneur of all your cols climbed in dreams... the CA of the Cent Cols will know how to value that idea... I leave them the care of debating it at the next General Assembly.

16 August 06 h 30 : crack of dawn start from Jausiers. A few kilometres on the main road, empty at this hour ; at La Condamine, the village still peacefully asleep below the watchful eye of the Tournoux fort, I turn left in the direction of Sainte-Anne. The road rises gradually in a series of hairpin bends, in the midst of a silence that is only broken by the murmuring of the Parpaillon stream, the piercing cries of several early jays and the distant bells tolling 07.00. A little before Sainte-Anne, I take a little forest road, a bit of respite to recover myself in the smell of late season hay. At last the Chapelle Sainte-Anne. Time to swallow some cereal bars and to fill my bottle at the fountain, and the climb starts again snaking through the larches. suddenly as I approach the Cabane du Parpaillon, the panorama opens on a grandiose valley. The sunlight is already on the peaks, though the valley is still in shade. "There, all is nothing but order and beauty, luxurious, calm and voluptuous " (1). I am alone. It is in these sumptuous surroundings that serious matters commence, interminable hairpin bends spread themselves across the flank of this Parpaillon setting the tone for what follows. The climb proceeds peacefully, intoxicating me with this solitude, this silence that reigns, this odour of the breaking day, these peaks that I discover as I go along. All the senses awakening, I am alive! Some cycle to give a sense to their lives, others to give life to their senses. I rise, I reach the first rays of the sun that wrap me with a welcoming warmth, some marmots perched on rocks encourage me with their whistles before disappearing underground. A bird of prey wheels above, will he forgive my trespass? Then, all of a sudden : the apparition! The entry to the famous tunnel! A few more hundred metres and the Parpaillon is won. I salute in passing the genie... of the Génie Militaire that permitted us to climb this inaccessible col. I venture into the dark and damp tunnel. 468 m, a way ahead with the single point of light of the exit for focus, I pedal carefully, above all not to put a foot down when I sense mud or water beneath my wheels. On the other side, an equally breathtaking view, "life is not to breath, it is to be out of breath!" I doubt that it was the ascension of a col that prompted Hitchcock to say that, but it is appropriate. In the distance the snow-capped peaks of the Ecrins, I feast my eyes on these landscapes and store up the vital emotions for my laborious year at work. A rapid visit to the Col de Girabeau in order to enlarge my list of 2000ms and to enjoy the view over the Lac de Serre Poncon, then I return.

The bells of Saint-Nicolas-de-Myre welcome me with their twelve strikes of noon as I reach the home village of the Arnaud brothers. Just in time to make my bed (to salve my conscience), savour a "Sauvage" local beer brewed on the slopes of the Col de Vars, and promise my children a happy father for the rest of the day.

The Parpaillon, we have made a mountain of it, when finally it's only a col! But what a col!

Bernard Weulersse
(CC no.6304)

Revue no. 45, 2017

(1) *'L'Invitation au voyage'* by Charles Baudelaire.

My Parpaillon (altitude 2640 m)

August 1993 from Embrun, I had come to ride a difficult circuit with three cols including two off-road ones of more than 2000 m, Chèrine and Valbelle, on a racing bike ; then to descend to the ski station of Risoul. What a nightmare, what folly, but who isn't a bit 'crazy' sometimes in the cycling world? Before leaving this place for reasons of work, I had a last look at the mountains all around and my thoughts lost themselves in the clouds. The Parpaillon, there it is, the famous rough-stuff col, mythic, and here I am at the foot of it. One day, I told myself, you will be able to sign your name in the visitor's book to record your passage. I didn't think that so soon the dream would become real... partially. August 1994, I was on holiday, in the same area, for ten days or so, with three objectives including the principal one that you can guess.

A 'randonnée permanente' tour " La route de la Lavande" created by Daniel Guérin, a nice chap from Grasse, gone too soon at 58 following a long illness (1). From Castellane a beautiful radial tour with numerous cols. I recall it principally for the circuit of the grand canyon of the gorges du Verdon by the corniche road, a magnificent place, and my visit to Moustiers-Sainte-Marie classed among the 157 most beautiful villages of France; then a detour to the north of Castellane by the lac de Castillon, after a good little climb, to see from close up the Mandarom sect where there are many "illuminati" who believe in eternal life...

Operation Col de la Glacière that will give you chills, altitude 1069 m, located in the Var. A singular col sitting as it does in the midst of a military area where there are often exercises with live ammunition. Was I completely mad to tempt fate? Perhaps, but how could I have passed it up then, having read so many articles on it in the Club des Cent Cols revues (No. 8 / 13 / 16 / 21 / 23) in which their writers had climbed it! It was a success, if not I would not have been here to tell the tale, but God, how I sweated. During my passage, in a dead silence, I even had the pleasure to meet a doe.

At last my Parpaillon. I knew the col "mentally" in the smallest details as I had studied it by leafing through the revues of the FFCT and, above all, the Club des Cent Cols (2). It was by drawing inspiration from these stories that I was going to approach the col well-prepared, though not forgetting that unexpected events can add spice to any adventure. My goal : cross from the Durance valley to that of the Ubaye then return, collecting in passing two more cols of more than 2000m : the Pare and the Girabeau ; all in one day, a nice challenge.

The weather had been superb in the days leading up to it, but on the day it worsened and there was the threat of storms. There was no question of waiting, I had to be home by the day after tomorrow. The trip was done with the help of my partner Odile. Knowing that the first 18 km were on a comfortably surfaced minor road, I decided to start on my racing bike and to do the rest on a hired mountain bike; like that Odile could bring the MTB in her car to La Chalp and I could change bikes there.

I started from the town centre in the direction of Saint-André where, curiously, I had to descend to Pont-Neuf, altitude of 800 m, to cross the Durance and start the climb. The sky was slightly

overcast, and from time to time a faint sun appeared, so nothing to worry about for the moment. I felt fine and content, climbing comfortably on 42 x 25.

After a few kilomètres I spotted a couple of cyclists in the distance, who I soon caught up and with who I exchanged a few words. They told me they were at the end of their holiday and that they, like me, wanted to finish with the Col du Parpaillon. They only had a vague idea of the col, even though they seemed to be experienced riders. I climbed with the man (who had a good rhythm) up to the junction : la Chalp left, Crévoux right ; where he was going to wait for his wife who was a little behind. In between I changed to the 28 sprocket, as, the gradient, I'll admit, though regular, was steep. It was at this junction, that I left my companion, who I didn't see again. I turned left, where after passing La Chalp, I found Odile and, telling her of my concern for the rest of the venture, as the sky was becoming more and more threatening, I changed bikes for the remaining ten kilometres.

I had only done 2km when the rain started, very fine at first, then heavy. A quick stop to put my Gore-Tex on, then I continued. This time, no escape, the storm broke ; clear patches striped the sky, and it thundered, I was no longer calm and if I didn't control myself, I would turn round immediately, but that would be foolish after so much hope and after coming from so far. Rain was followed by hail, it was more and more worrying. The peaks seemed savage, one could well believe in Pellos' " man with the hammer" . Then I spotted the Ecuelles cabin : saved!

Surprise! Two English hikers were already there and, as I was putting on dry clothes, seeing as I was soaked despite my waterproof, I managed to catch a few words. They had started very early from Crevoux, they had climbed to the top then returned only to be surprised by the storm at the moment they were passing the cabin. Lucky for them as they had set out without any precautions, no change of clothes, no waterproofs, etc. What stupidity! After more than an hour the storm abated, the fine rain continued to fall ; and we went our separate ways.

A few hundred metres from the cabin, a muddy path on the right led me to the Col de Girabeau, 2488 m. It was easier to push the bike than to ride it. At last the Parpaillon itself appeared to me, though depressingly enveloped in mist. At the tunnel entry I searched for the aspirin tube (3) without success, and as it was still raining, I didn't wait.

Without lights, I performed the impossible... by going carefully, keeping upright, of riding the tunnel for its full 500 or 600 m without putting a foot to the floor, in almost total darkness with only the point of light at the exit to aim at ; all this on a wet, muddy and rutted floor ; and the same coming back.

The panorama of a great desolation, and with the weather being no better on the south side, it was with disappointment and bitterness that I abandoned my original plan to do both valleys as well as climbing the Col de la Pare (2655m). The descent to La Chalp was a formality, excepting one fall without consequence due to the furrows in the track.

Odile was waiting patiently for me, warmly smiling. The sun was shining : in reality the storm had passed by La Chalp and she had not imagined that it might not have been the same for me. At Crevoux, I had wanted to sign my name in the visitors' book, but, another disappointment, the inn was closed. A not unimportant point to finish. With a racing bike equipped with good tyres of a generous width, in dry weather of course, it would be quite possible to climb to the

top; but, all the same, so long as the tarmacking machines do not come to it, the Parpaillon will always be the Parpaillon.

Michel Ménard
(CC no. 2035)

Revue No. 45, 2017

(1) Taken over by Gérard who I had the pleasure to get to know in 2002 in the Dolomites.

Contact : gerard.fillion-robin@orang.fr. Tel : 04 93 70 60 31

(2) Revues CCC No 8 / 11 / 13 / 15 / 16 / 21 / 22 / 23 / 42. Revues FFCT of December 1994 and 2012. Revue Le Cycle of October 2011.

(3) A cyclist had left a message in a tube of aspirin, saying that after reading it one should put it back in its place. It was to wedged in a joint under a panel on the left side. See revue CCC No. 21 page 51.

(4) When I got home, I sent a postcard to the Auberge de Ratelle asking them to leave a space in the book for my signature - the next time.

For me, my Parpaillon.

The idea of climbing the Parpaillon had been running through my mind for several years, but the article in the last CCC Revue triggered this mad idea. We had to, Elisabeth and myself, drive our camping car to a site near to Embrun at the start of October. My mountain bike was already in the boot. The weather was milder at this time of the year, and on 8 October we were at Crévoux, 11km from the famous Parpaillon and at 1100m of climbing below its tunnel!

The next morning the weather was beautiful. The moment of starting for an special event is always exciting. I'd given myself three hours to arrive at the top, at 2637 m. In fact, two and a half sufficed. Two and a half hours for 11km may not seem impressive, but to be modest, my own performance for me is my challenge, not to beat a record. Rather than make a detailed description of the climb, - others have done that better than I know how to - I prefer to describe my own feelings.

The Spanish and the army

Having left Crévoux at 09.00, i am alone, absolutely alone in this mineral environment that even the marmots seem to have deserted for their winter quarters. No sound, not even a murmur of wind. Silence surrounds me. I can imagine hearing a breath of disapprobation that I have started alone in such inhospitable surroundings. The only witness to a previous human activity : this stony track, on which I sometimes ride, and sometimes push my MTB. Sometimes as well, I stop simply to absorb the surroundings and check the complete absence of a signal. Passing before the Cabane des Espagnols, I take the time to read the explanations given there : I imagine the refugees from Franco's regime who the French army requisitioned for the upkeep of this strategically important route.

After two hours I ask myself where can this tunnel be hidden. It was only in the last few hundred metres that it deigned to show itself to me, squeezed between the Grand Parpaillon peak to the north and the Petit Parpaillon to the south. Arriving there, like a child, I let out a cry of joy : I've done it !

But no echo returned. It was as if the Parpaillon had swallowed my voice. Of course, my Olympus immortalised the moment in front of the tunnel entry. The two doors were covered with stickers marking innumerable passages by here, but I found no Club des Cent Cols ones. Its unthinkable that there weren't any, but I didn't find them.

Despite the late morning sun, the extreme chill gripped me.

I did try to go the 500m length of the tunnel, but the clayey floor was full of pot-holes, all full of water and some blacker than others. My light could not indicate their depth. One moment, the puddles mirrored the far exit that I could see in the distance. Despite the dry weather of the last months, water continued to drip from the ceiling, making the floor even slippier. So much for the view over the Ubaye on the other side. Prudence insisted that I turn back.

Girabeau landscape

Full of the wild beauty of the site, I began to descend, but with the intention to collect the Col de Girabeau (05-2488b) that seemed to be close by and easy from the Parpaillon. In reality, with my modest means, it was more than nothing, and pushing was often required. But at the col, there was the reward, the view over the lac de Serre-Ponçon 1700 m below.

It was in returning that I found the path to the Col de Parpaillon, its miniscule tunnel lost in the midst of this mineral desert and blue sky. The epicurean in me savoured the grandiose and silent panorama offered to me and giving me a sense of unlimited power. I imagined the way to the col in high summer, invaded by hikers and mountain bikers making their assault on the Parpaillon. I also imagined this landscape in midwinter, immaculately draped in snow, perhaps only disturbed by a few walkers starting from Crevoux. I was astonished to not see any ski-lifts, haven't the ski station builders occupied this site yet ?

I descend, slowly, to enjoy for the longest time this "montagne qui est si belle" as sung by Ferrat. I dream of stopping the inexorable flight of time, so as to live more intensely these moments of happiness, to keep them, to recount them to Élisabeth on my return, but I know it will be impossible to find the right words to describe the intoxication of this climb.

Finally, I reach the cover of the forest, the tarmac, and a short time after... Élisabeth coming to meet me.

-Well ? she asks me.

-Mission accomplished !

Noël Nominé –
Cent Cols no.4681

Revue No. 47, 2019

Memories of the Parpaillon

(8 August 1970)

I was 20 and was discovering the Alps. Because my father was a Gascon and my mother from Lorraine, I had ridden a little in the Pyrénées and the Vosges, but never in the Alps. The Semaine Fédérale at Gap had been marvellous each day, then came the finish on the Saturday where the Rallye du Parpaillon was programmed.

After a few mistakes due to too high gearing and racing tubulars, I saved my earnings as a student to transform my Mercier racing bike into a tourer with a triple chainring that made the patron of Singer cycles laugh. It was better, but it still lacked something, not having a rack. Never mind, at 3.00 in the morning I was at the start, determined to catch Suzanne Motte, who was to become my girlfriend, and who had left at 2.00 with the ladies. I made a long sprint from Gap to Guillestre, at the foot of the Col de Vars, and at the top I caught her at last. Alongside us were some strong riders of that golden time : Jo Routens, Ernest Csuka, Jean Murat, Pierre Kraemer, Patrick Plaine, Roger Baumann and so many others. Where are they now?

There was a short pause at La Condamine for the last feed before the climb, and the final advice before it became every man for himself. We climbed easily to the village of Sainte Anne, then came easy rough-stuff, and on leaving the forest, 10 kilometres of very rough track faced us. I had done about half of it when my front wheel hit a big stone and I was sent flying. The real acrobats passed by laughing and never put a foot down. But I did. Walking for most of the remaining 5 kilometres, we came to the tunnel.

Blackly dark, cold, slippery, there was something to please everyone in this tunnel, but in the face of 500 cyclists, it yielded, and we passed through to the other side in the sun and descended with the least possible trouble. The Crévoux valley welcomed us and we made Embrun proud to have been 'up there'. The 40 kilometre ride to Gap was a promenade of recuperation. This marvellous day has never left my memory. Never have the Alps appeared so beautiful to me.

Alain Collongues
Cent Cols No.162

Revue No.50 2022

Cycloclimbing memories

Amongst the notable memories of my cycloclimbing adventures, I will recall two of them for this anniversary of the Club des Cent Cols.

The climb of the Parpaillon

Indeed, in the history of cycloclimbing, we can name a rough-stuff col that very soon in its history became mythic : the Parpaillon, that I had the chance to climb twice with my 650B tourer (the first being with my brother Paul, with a descent in the dark!)

Located on the border between the Alpes d'Haute Provence and the Hautes Alpes, the geographic col tops out at 2783m, on a ridge between the valleys of the Durance-Embrunnais and the Ubaye. The tunnel is 150m below the col.

This col was opened in 1901 by the troops of the military engineering corps, the Genie Militaire, like many other passes on the Grande Traversée des Alpes route between Thonon and Trieste. From its official opening, and even before, it was climbed by cycletourists, (including Velocio in 1903 and 1911) who from 1930 could write of their passage over the col in a 'livre d'or' provided at the Hotel du Parpaillon in Crévoux. Maurice Maitre, one of the founder members of the FFSC in 1923, also climbed it in 1930.

It is advisable to climb it from La Condamine-Chatelard (18km) and to descend to Embrun (25km) after having passed through the tunnel, which is very dark and muddy. Its better to climb alone or in a very small group, to best enjoy the near total silence, only punctuated by the whistles of the marmots that can sometimes be seen from close up.

It was then in 1964, with my brother Paul, after the Semaine Federale in Digne, that we started quite late with the intention of climbing this legendary col.

Above La Condamine, we filled our bottles with water from the fountain at the Chapelle Sainte-Anne, and we made the most of a fine sunny day to take many photographic souvenirs surrounded by the grandiose scenery. The silence was only troubled by the whistles of the marmots, some of which we saw fleetingly, and one captive by a sheepfold, from very close by.

When we propped our bikes against a rock, so that they would be in the foreground of our picture, they had disappeared when we returned with the camera. A gust of wind had flipped them over into a hollow, luckily with no damage done, but it was quite a fright!

Our progress, all on the bikes thanks to the 650/35s, except for certain very stony passages, was considerably delayed by the violent abdominal pains that Paul was subject to from time to time.

The result was that we arrived very late at the tunnel at 2637m, and it was nearly night when we emerged on the other side, having squelched through the mud and the darkness.

It was very mild, with intermittent moonlight, and we started to descend very carefully. Our dynamo lights were insufficient in these conditions, but the dirt road, even with large ruts, was better than the other side.

My brother, with much better night vision than me, managed to ride most of the descent, but after several minor falls, I decided to do most of it on foot. At a pause, we leant our bikes against what we thought were trees : they fell noisily, as the trees were nothing but shadows!

Misled by the village lights, we stopped at La Chalp, which we could have avoided to go directly to Crévoux where we were spending the night. At the auberge, the day after, we took the time to relate our adventure in the famous 'livre d'or' : I don't suppose the Parpaillon by night appears there very often!

I redid the Parpaillon in 1970, during the Rallye organised during the Semaine Fédérale in Gap, entirely in daylight this time, on a track very much better this time on both sides and rideable from one end to the other (at least on 650Bs). My brother came to join me at the tunnel entry on the Crévoux side, to see the view that we could not see the first time.

The climb to the Pico de Veleta

It is in the south of Spain, in Andalusia, in the Sierra Nevada, that we find the highest surfaced road in Europe.

Starting from Granada, you must climb for 43km to arrive at Pico Veleta, the third highest peak in the Iberian peninsular, with at the end, a short unsurfaced section allowing you to access the summit stone at 3398m, the highest altitude I have ever been on a bike. A very pleasant and long descent of the same side, as the road stops at the Pic, and there is only a footpath on the other side.

I was very happy to have succeeded in this climb, a dream close to my heart, well into my 74th year, with no breathing or heart problems, unlike some cyclists in our group, who turned back at 3000m. It was in 2009, during a second FFCT séjour in this area, that a first attempt during a previous holiday failed when we were blocked by a great amount of snow.

Henri Bosc

Cent Cols n° 110

Revue N°50 - 2022