

Mother's Day on Virginia's Capital Trail



Story and Photos by Anne Poarch

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The ginkgo trees were shining like spun gold, leaves spinning in the filtered light of a crisp November morning, cascading to earth like flaxen hair or so many drops of honey. My mother bid me stop the car, and bathed in the beauty of the golden trees, we reflected and commented on the striking scene. Strange you might think, here on May 12, for my first post as founder of Basket & Bike, a small business offering handcrafted bicycle excursions, to be written under the fading leaves of a November day. Six months ago, as days were shortening, the Virginia soil was preparing for her winter's sleep, preparing rest for the bright green and happy growing

things that we are watching pop all over the Commonwealth right now. Really Anne, the fall? Shouldn't we talk about the beauty of spring? Well, like the steady rhythm of two bicycle wheels on an endless flat road, at Basket & Bike we like the natural order of life, a slower pace, the progression of nature as she unfolds then turns to rest, only to unfold again.

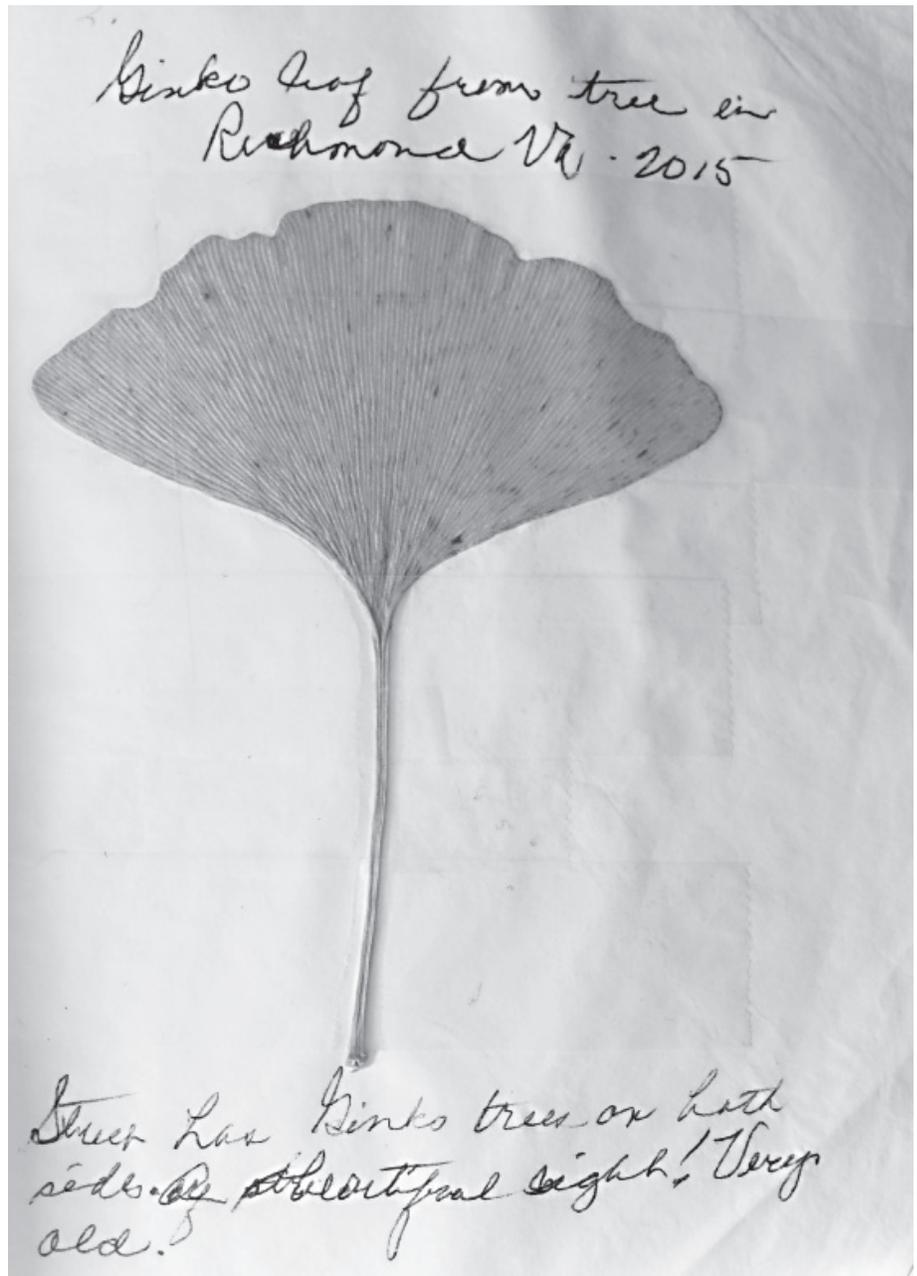
I don't recall where we had been or where we were going the day we stopped under the canopy of ginkgo trees, but I do recall that timeless moment and stepping out of the car to find a leaf for my mother. A leaf that, unbeknownst to me, she would press and tape into the back pages of her bible, along with the following notation: "Ginko leaf from tree in Richmond, VA • 2015 - Street has Ginko trees on both sides.

A beautiful sight! Very old.”

This would be my mom’s last trip to Richmond. My beautiful mother, Peggy Sander Gibson, endowed with the grace, patience and civility of her time, died this past May 2 at the age of ninety-two. I would find the ginkgo leaf in her bible, while reading to her in her Georgia home this past April.

I led a Mother’s Day Bicycle Excursion along the Virginia Capital Trail this past Sunday. Not an easy task considering the loss of my mother, but made beautiful by the kindness of fellow adventurers, the glorious softness that accompanied the spring day, and the knowledge that she would want me doing exactly this, a reminder of our first mother-daughter trip to Shirley Plantation in 1992 when I was new to Richmond. The group rode comfortable white and navy Priority Bicycles following our Signature Ride, “The River Where America Began”. Our excursion began by Upper Shirley Vineyard in the unfiltered light of a May Sunday, pedaling past grape vines that are helping turn Charles City County into something of a wine and food destination. After our fourteen-mile ride, we would return to the vineyard for lunch and wine, taking in the wonderful food and impressive views of the James River, along with so many other Virginians, coming here for Mother’s Day from Richmond, Williamsburg, Hopewell, Chesterfield, Chester and Petersburg. In a lovely gesture, Upper Shirley welcomed each mother with a long-stemmed tulip.

As our group wheeled along the dedicated bike path, we made little stops to speak about the James River and her land, her shores. We talked about the people, the plants, and the animals that have lived in this part of Virginia for thousands of years. Land that still hums to the cycle of the seasons, the



waxing and waning of the moon, even if her people have turned away and lost their connection to nature’s watch. Heading east we stopped in front of VCU Rice Rivers Center, a leading authority on river research focused on expanding environmental knowledge and preserving the health of our natural resources. It was here that one of the mothers, a healing touch practitioner, led us in some basic chi poses to open us to the energy of the day, opening us to the freedom that comes from riding

a bicycle in the open air.

Our group paused in the cemetery of historic Westover Episcopal Church, reflecting on Virginia’s past mothers. These shores have been home to so many mothers. From Mother Earth and her animal mothers, busy bunnies or birds building nests and keeping babies safe, to native mothers, forming hand-built bowls out of that ground to give to daughters in time-honored rituals. African mothers teaching daughters to blend spices, or to just blend in, so

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their secret reading lessons would go unnoticed; to English mothers, recording thoughts, keeping poise and decorum in public, while aiding a rebel cause behind closed doors. Strong-willed women, all Virginia women, all essential parts of the land where America began. I thought of my childhood and could see the tender hands of my own mom, gently nursing knees scraped from bicycle falls and teaching my small hands how to properly form biscuit dough with a fork and roll it out using her own mother's rolling pin.

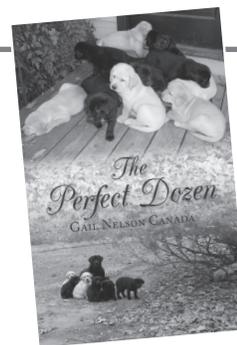
It was in the spirit of this reflection that we biked past the emerald fields of Evelynton plantation to a sweet little nursery, Root 5 Family Farms. We strolled through the greenhouse showcasing flowers and herbs for the garden, peeking at local jams and honey and ceramics by Fleet Creations. Artist Lesa Fleet crafts ceramic sculptures of leaves from Virginia plants like nasturtium, maple—and could it be—the ginkgo? Staring up at me from the table, a chartreuse ginkgo leaf, showcasing the verdant green of spring. Full circle, or halfway there, could this leaf signal for me the return of life. Though I will miss her physical presence and the touch of her hands so terribly, I feel my mother now pervading the very air around me, living in Virginia with me, in each new day.

Our leisurely pace allowed members of the group to hunt for the

perfect remembrance to nestle into bike baskets for the return ride to Upper Shirley Vineyard along the trail. The ginkgo leaf rode home with me, in my basket, connecting a then to a now, and beyond.

I do not know whether my mom found a deeper symbol in the ginkgo leaf she chose to bind in her bible. A bit of research uncovered that the ginkgo biloba tree, or Maidenhair tree, is considered a living fossil and may be the oldest tree on our planet. It has been known to live for 2,000 years, and in the East, it is considered a symbol of longevity, hope, friendship, resilience and peace. Perhaps other mothers have pressed ginkgo leaves into their family bibles, into service as a medicinal cure, or onto the sides of an earthenware bowl for decoration. In 1815, Goethe wrote a poem titled "Gingko Biloba" and sent it to his friend, Marianne von Willemer, wondering if the divided leaf was one creature becoming two, or two deciding they should become one. Perhaps it's the undeniable connection of a mother to her daughter, that once one body, eventually facing the realities of separation and so needing the lessons of hope, friendship and resilience. Maybe it is a reminder that spring does not exist without the fall and ensuing rest of winter. That life is lived, and if one is lucky, long-lived, until it lives and breathes again in other forms. Whatever the message, I'll be looking to take a ride under those yellow ginkgo trees this fall, remembering my mother

and letting bicycle wheels hum a steady rhythm under falling gold fans, to stop and practice chi in the filtered light of fall. *pl*



The Perfect Dozen

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