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550 bike canal, gather friends

By Ameerah Cetawayo

SCOTIA — Eleanor Morris-Benedict, 5, and her sister Claire, 8, decorated a 24-speed Bianchi hybrid bike with turkey feathers and green leaves they gathered Saturday as their 400-mile bike journey ended.

The sisters from Durham, N.C., were in a group of more than 550 bicyclists who began a tour along the Erie Canal from Buffalo that stopped in Scotia's Collins Park Saturday for camping, food and entertainment; it was part of the Eleventh Annual Parks and Trails New York Cycling the Erie Canal trip.

The group at Collins Park was a reflection of the connections and memories forged along the way.

"Can I go piggy-back?" Claire Morris-Benedict giddily asked a 20-something dressed in a red fitted tank top and zebra-print leggings who helped arrange leaves on the bike. They called it "The Pocahontas" after touring the Native American Keepers of the Circle Pow Wow that took place just West of Scotia Saturday on Route 5.

The sisters, riding with their parents, made a new friend in those 400 miles that made their trip memorable — Mary Modica, 24 of Queens, the lady in red who came on the trip alone after receiving a bike for her birthday in December.

In between making headdresses out of construction material and feathers for the girls, Modica explained how she adopted the sisters as her own after meeting them.

"I just wanted to get out of the city and do something nature-oriented," Modica said.

Modica will leave for London next month to begin her studies in international business.

Learning more about where she came from was a driving factor behind her decision to bike the Erie Canal.

"It was active. I'm tired of being a lazy, fat American. I wanted to do something that I could be proud of as an accomplishment at the end of the day. It was important that I see my state."

Shirl Kenney, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has cycled for decades all over the United States and abroad.

Kenney said she wanted to try the Erie Canal ride for the first time this year because of the options to tour nearby towns, as well as the ease and freedom to explore while enjoying the scenery.

"I love the people. The food has been good and the support has been fabulous," Kenney said. "It's well run."

Tour Director Al Hastings said "We have 39 different states represented here. People from all over the country." Some were from Canada and as far away as Germany.

Hastings has overseen such tours for the last 14 years — nine of which were involved with the Erie Canal ride. The satisfaction comes as the groups who plan and operate the trip come together from different backgrounds, interact for the first time and eventually become friends, Hastings said.

"It's fun to watch that process."

"The weather for the whole week has been incredible," Hastings said. "We missed all the storms that came through the area."

More than 50 volunteers helped out during the week.

Volunteers from Auburn like Chad Hayden, Michael Ferro and Amy Laurencelle were there helping transport bicyclists' luggage to hotels and other accommodations.

Their efforts supported a good cause: the Auburn Rotary Club. Michael Ferro of Auburn heads the fundraising efforts for the organization.

"It's a specific need that we fill," Ferro said. "It generates revenue for the club so we can do the things we do."

The club contributes to Auburn's Boys and Girls Club, as well as several international projects like supporting water wells in Africa and Argentina that help rural communities.

Amy Laurencelle was in the area visiting family and friends, but was invited to spend a few hours to volunteer on behalf of the club as well.

Laurencelle considered it a privilege to be involved. "This is such a tremendous thing that they do for the community."

The Eric Canal tour ends today with a view of Cohoes Falls, Peebles Island State Park, and a ride along the Hudson River in a 34-mile bike ride from Scotia to Albany.