



Two riders cycling from Chicago to Iowa City

Part 1: First what – Then how

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The heat of the day, 92 degrees, didn't feel too bad thanks to the shade of the tree canopy over the Illinois Michigan Canal rail trail. My grown son and I had been riding on our bicycles for over 3 hours, pausing from time to time for a restroom break and rehydration. It was humid but not too buggy. The surface beneath us had been a mix of packed limestone, gravel, and sometimes patchy asphalt, allowing us to make good time. With the canal on our right and trees surrounding us, it was a pleasant ride, but we had a purpose and that purpose kept us moving. Unlike a short bicycle ride near home, this was a journey of unknowns, and the farther we traveled, the fewer safe exits we had and the greater our commitment to the overall enterprise. Somewhere around 55 miles from our starting point – slightly farther than any of our training rides – was the town of Morris, our first major decision point. There, we could take a break and more importantly, we would assess ourselves and our bikes to see whether it would take us 4 days or 5 days minimum in our effort to bicycle from Chicago to Iowa City. At this point, we still didn't know which it would be, anymore than we did when we first started planning our cycling adventure.

My grown son, Noah, first suggested this adventure to me several months earlier. He'd been doing some reading and learned that Illinois had some excellent rail trails across the state. My recollection was that we had the following loaded exchange in the Fall of 2024:

Noah: What do you think about cycling from Chicago to Iowa City?

Dad: Are you asking me to develop and assess plans where someone might make such a trip, or are you asking me if I want to join you on such a trip?

Noah: Well... both.

There's a lot to unpack in this bit of father/son dialog. First, Noah lives in Chicago, his adopted home since graduating from college two years ago. Iowa City is not a random location: Rather, my in-laws live on a beloved hobby farm just outside of Iowa City, making it a worthy objective. One of the great things about Noah having taken a job in Chicago is that he gets to visit his grandparents semi-regularly. This venture was never envisioned as a "race" from one side to the other. Nor was it an organized ride like RAGBRAI or the Amish Country Bike Tour. We were traveling from two places that have special meaning to us. Second, I was thrilled that he was

keen on cycling. I bike to work year round, routinely putting thousands of miles on my bike every year. From an early age, we used to cycle together, sometimes enjoying long organized day rides, including the Amish Country Bike Tour, but early in his adolescence, he found he was interested in other things. So that was that. After finishing college and taking a job in Chicago, it was great to learn that he was rediscovering cycling, and moreover, he thought cycling with me would be fun. I can't resist sharing a picture of us riding together from when he was just a kid. (You will see later that I'm still wearing the same jersey, almost 20 years later.) Third, this was going to be an adventure that required significant planning and physical effort, and while we had never done anything other than day rides together, we like these kinds of adventures. Among other things, Noah and I have scuba dived together, hiked the Alps together, sailed up and down the Chesapeake together and circumnavigated the Delmarva peninsula in my sailboat together. Stacked against all that, cycling to Iowa City from Chicago made sense for us. It would be a journey of discovery, seeing and experiencing new things along the way, and also testing ourselves and our bicycles.

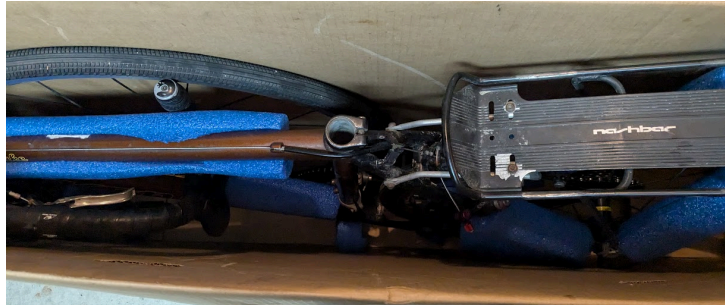


The ride to Morris was a proof-of-concept for our plans for the entire trip. My bicycle had traveled with me on the flight from PHL to ORD intact. To make that happen, I needed to partially disassemble it, pack it tight. After arriving in Chicago, I'd need to reassemble it and make sure all the adjustments were sound. Easy to state, a little harder to do. You can buy hard cases and soft cases for bicycles that are designed to transport bikes safely, easily on planes. But, this was likely the first and only time I'd be doing it, so that seemed excessive. A quick visit to my local bike shop confirmed what I had read: Bike shops will give you a cardboard bicycle box for free because every new bike shipped to them comes in one. The shops end up recycling them anyway. Another pleasant surprise was that most airlines treat bicycles and many other sports items, as a regular checked bag, despite its larger dimensions, as long as its weight is under the 50 lb maximum. To get a bike to fit back in the box, all you need to do is remove the wheels, the handlebars, the seatpost and the pedals. The pedals are crucial because they protrude out beyond the depth dimension of bicycle shipping boxes, and this is where I had my greatest challenge. The vast majority of the time I spent packing my bike was spent trying to remove the pedals.

My bike is about 20 years old, and I installed my SPD clipless pedals into my cranks about 20 years ago. Twenty years. Eighty seasons. Tens of thousands of miles in all conditions imaginable. Dozens of downpours. A few snowstorms. I tried all my tricks for putting mechanical leverage on them, and they would not come off. I watched many Youtube videos featuring professional bicycle repair techs with big forearms showing how to free up seized pedals using all these tricks, and I believed I could do it. My forearms are not small. I used new wrenches, breaker bars, wood blocks, gravity, penetrating oil, a heat gun and time. Nothing worked. I was not too proud to call a bike shop, and I offered to pay them to do what I could not. They gamely said they would do it at no charge while I waited. When the pedals would not break loose for them with me standing there, it became a matter of pride (for them, not me). They sent me off

for half an hour while they took it back for “special treatment”. I had hope. When I returned, they admitted defeat. However, one of the techs suggested to me removing the entire non-drive-side crank including the pedal which is much easier and that would reduce the depth of the bicycle by nearly the same amount.

So, everything was ready for disassembly. I put swimming noodles on the frame tubes to cushion everything, especially the front forks and any protrusions, like the drive-side pedal. Just as importantly, the noodles created a little tension to make everything fit tight. I found that removing the water bottle cages



created a large void in the frame for the handlebars, my panniers, a few tools, my helmet and other gear. This saves space, so that I was able to leave the rear wheel on to protect the derailleur. I snapped pictures of this aluminum and plastic origami as I went so that I could repeat the process to get home. I used a little extra packing material to make sure the box was absolutely tight when I rocked it in all possible directions. Nothing was loose or rattling.

The airline agent was very nice about accepting the box, but I was a bit nervous about what might happen after I dropped it off. The TSA agents must have been satisfied as well. When Noah met me at ORD to help with the bike box, I could see that the TSA had done an inspection and then packed it up tight again. Back at his apartment, we were able to assemble it with no problems, so we were ready for our adventure.

End part 1.

