



Two riders cycling from Chicago to Iowa City

Part 2: Proof of concept

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Our first morning began very much like the subsequent ones. After breakfast, we suited up, covered ourselves with sunscreen, and filled our water bottles with water and ice. We put an additional liter of Gatorade and often an extra bottle of water in our panniers. It was better to carry a little extra weight than to be caught dehydrating in the Midwestern heat without liquids. We visually inspected our bikes, especially the tire pressure, attached our panniers and headed out to the train station.

We found our way from the Western Springs train station to the Centennial trailhead without wasting any time. It was our first trip with loaded panniers and cycling didn't feel very different from our training rides. Still, we knew it would be 55 miles of dirt and gravel on the Michigan-Illinois Rail Trail, very different from the training rides we had been doing on pavement. Once we settled into our saddles on the trail, and started going, we had a quick conversation about how we were going to ride together. Since we did not know how the day was going to go, we decided we would take it easy and set a slower pace than our training rides. Our mantra became, "Take our time. Don't overdo it. Enjoy the sights." While this sounds like an easy decision, my gut instinct, which I ignored, was the opposite. First, almost all of my cycling is alone, and I like to push myself. It's natural for me to carry a cruising pace of about 85 RPM with an average speed in the mid-teens on a level surface. Second, I am susceptible to "summit fever" or "get-there-itis". The sooner we got to Morris, the better our chances of taking a rest and moving on to Ottawa and being on pace for a 4 day trip. Experience told me to ignore my gut. If we were successful in achieving our 4 day plan, it would be the longest ride I had ever done, and I would be doing it in 90-degree humid weather in the Midwest. Burning out mid-day was a real possibility if we did something foolish. Also, this was not a race, and we had plenty of daylight. Arriving in Morris later in the day meant a cooler run to Ottawa if we were up for continuing our ride.



My cycling computer changed the way I ride and really helped on this trip. It's not a particularly fancy one, but in addition to an odometer and speedometer, I have sensors so that it reports my heart rate and cadence. Noah was similarly equipped so that we could talk to each other about our pace and how we were feeling. Very quickly, we figured out the relationship between our riding styles so that we settled into a comfortable pace for both of us. We could regularly call out

and check heart rates to make sure our pace was right where we wanted it to be for a sustained ride. We also made a point of stopping at least once an hour to rehydrate. Cycling for hours on end would be a new experience, and we wanted to go the distance.

For the first half of the day, we saw cyclists and pedestrians on the trail fairly regularly. In the urban and suburban setting, people were out for a pleasant stroll or day ride close to home. The trail was wide, mostly packed limestone or even partially paved, so we could often ride side-by-side. It was lined by forest preserves and fields, so made for a pleasant ride. As we pedaled farther away from Chicago and suburbs, we started to see fewer people and more wildlife. In addition to the ubiquitous squirrels and rabbits, we surprised a number of deer. Where the forest was dense, the canopy offered us shade along some stretches. However, it can come with a price when large roots form bumps and shocks in the trail.



Toward the edge of the suburbs, we encountered the ruins of the Joliet Iron Works. The trail works its way through the Iron Works which have a large footprint. Near one of the larger sets of structures there was a little shelter that provided some shade from the sun that had been beating



down on us, so for the first time since we started, we climbed out of our saddles to explore a bit. We enjoyed reading some of the plaques and learning more about the history. The heat of the day was building, and there was not a lot of shade at the ruins. We knew Morris was still a long way off, and it was our first day. We did not know for sure what lay ahead and in many ways, and we were still getting to know how our bodies and our bikes would do on this extended journey, so we opted not to stay for too long.

Preparing for the unknown is both fun and challenging. Our work and family schedules pretty much limited us to making the trip at the end of June. We decided early on that we would save weight and ease logistics by staying in hotels rather than camping. The midwest is known for late afternoon thunderstorms in the summer which could disrupt our plans. We could count on the weather being hot and humid with prevailing winds out of the west to northwest, but we were not experienced enough to know where we could count on there being any shade on the route. We could research the rail trails in Illinois, but Iowa lacked any cycling infrastructure connecting Iowa City to the Mississippi River. So, we prepared ourselves to handle many unknowns and allowed an extra day or two in case we had a serious mechanical problem or a day of thunderstorms.

As the hours went by, we were further from home and therefore, further from familiar sources of supplies. If something went wrong, we would need to sort it out where we were, or cycle/walk to a place with supplies. Of course, we checked our bikes before we left and made sure they were in good shape. Noah's bike was less than a year old. We both carried extra tubes, inflators, air cartridges, and minitools. I decided to bring a pair of extra spokes because my wheel set is not new. A broken spoke means the wheel goes out of true. I could end up dragging a brake pad, and all sorts of drama. We knew we would have to carry water. We brought some Gatorade, a drink that neither of us drink normally, because we knew that our bodies would lose critical electrolytes as the days ran long. We carried a light lunch and energy bars as well.

After Joliet, the rail trail evolves into stretches of narrower overgrown paths, sometimes single tracks, punctuated by paved areas moving through town parks every once in a while. On the paths, we would often have to travel single file, slowing down for the occasional grooves and trenches from erosion or tree roots. Like most of the route, the trail was level, so we could keep a steady pace. One of the advantages of the overgrown areas is that the trees provide shade from the midday sun. Just the same, the route to Morris seemed to draw longer and longer.



Our original thoughts were that this would be a lunch stop, but water and bathroom stops plus the trail conditions slowed our real-time pace below what we were thinking. I also found that the bike computer could work against me. There is a tendency to look down and say, "Ah. Only 15.3 miles to go." Then, look down a little later and lament, "Still 15.1 miles to go! And, only a few minutes have elapsed, and my legs are tired! How much longer can I do this!" I adopted a strategy I have used in hiking and sailing where I would identify a tree or a bend in the road as far ahead as possible and commit to not looking at the computer until I was past that point. It frees my mind to think about other things and enjoy the scenery and the beauty of participating in the motion of a bicycle.

Occasionally, you get to meet other cyclists and exchange news at water stops, restrooms and road crossings. Sometimes, it was simply to admire the equipment. Here we have someone on a pleasant afternoon ride. There, we see a composite frame or someone wrestling with a flat tire. Elsewhere, we have a retired couple who just purchased e-bikes together and are rediscovering their state from a different perspective. One of my favorites was an 83-year-old riding an e-bike with a fully loaded set of panniers, front and back. He told us he came from Naples, Florida where he used to spend his days at a bar with his buddies. He bought an e-bike and one day, he told his friends that he wanted to ride it all the way to the state line. They scoffed at him. So, he loaded up for the trip, made it to the state line and sent a selfie to his buddies. He just kept on going, and now he's in Illinois. He's not in a hurry. He told us that he takes his time and enjoys a breakfast with a view every morning. He charges up his bike and tries to go about 30 or 40 miles a day. His goal is to reach Seattle. When he heard about our plan, he asked us about our plan for getting from the Michigan-Illinois Canal rail trail to the Hennepin Canal trail because there is an 18 mile gap between the two. He thanked us for

sharing our complex routing with him. We exchanged good luck wishes and moved on, our pace being a little faster than his.

The arrival in Morris was a cause of celebration for us. It was our first decision point, and we were able to keep a 12+ mph pace for four and a half hours. Now we could sit down for lunch somewhere with air conditioning. Morris was a cute town with many options. We chose a little Italian place called Corleone's. There, we would take in a lot of fluids and discuss whether we could do another 30 miles or so to Ottawa. Since it was 2 in the afternoon, the place was mostly empty. We were wearing our cycling kits, covered in sunscreen and dust, so we decided to sit in a booth away from a large family on the other side of the restaurant. While sitting in our booth, two young women took the booth next to us. I noticed they kept looking at us over the top of their bench. Finally, one of them turned all the way around and asked us, "Are you two professional cyclists?" It was the best compliment we had received in a long time. After rehydrating, eating a bit and sitting in the AC for an hour, we felt fresh and ready to go. We were ready for the next leg to Ottawa. It felt good because if we could make it there, we would be on our four day plan. The five day plan was much more irregular because the overnight stops were unevenly spaced. One day would be unnaturally short. On the four day plan, every day was a good long ride although Day 1 would be the longest.



The trail segment to Ottawa was mostly overgrown with narrow grooves where tires were keeping the weeds down, so we rode single file. We did not encounter many people on this leg, but we made a few other friends. We're not sure whether it was the terrain, the vegetation or the fact that the sun was getting lower, but there were more insects flying around us. With the sun sinking in the west in front of us, there was a steady swarm of illuminated bugs circling all around us as we cycled along. At last, we made it to Ottawa. Once we left the rail trail, the town was not bike friendly at all. But, that didn't matter too much as long as we would find a hot shower and dinner somewhere which we did. Noah thought the Mexican food at the Fondita Mexican Grill was some of the best he had had. It was a great meal, but I reminded him that when you are working hard, every meal – no matter how humble – feels like a gourmet feast.



End part 2