



Two riders cycling from Chicago to Iowa City

Part 3: Ups and downs

Louis F. Rossi
July 2025

Day two turned out to be one of our more challenging days. We left Ottawa and finished the Michigan & Illinois Canal Rail Trail at La Salle. The next trail trail is the Hennepin Canal Trail which starts at Bureau Junction some 18 miles away. We had planned out a route through the towns of Peru, Spring Valley and DePue to the Hennepin Canal Rail trailhead. Even though we would have the additional mental overhead of navigating through a long list of turns and streets to work our way through these towns, we were anticipating a quick transit because we would be on pavement. In fact, it ended up being a slog. The temperature was in the mid-90's with high humidity and the sun shining right on us because there were no tree canopies along our route. Spring Valley and the surrounding area had a desolate feel to it. There was some industry, but

many of the businesses were permanently closed and abandoned. We saw some people moving about, but it had an apocalyptic vibe. To top it off, we erroneously assumed that the Midwest was always flat and found that Peru and Spring Valley had a number of steep ascents. I'll add that up until this point I did not really feel much difference when cycling with the wider gravel tires that I put on my bike for the trip and the extra load I was carrying. On upgrades, I certainly felt the 30 extra pounds and the extra rolling resistance. On this day, we ascended almost 1100

feet, most of it traversing the towns between the rail trails. At their peak on some of the ascents, the slope was as much as 13%.

We were relieved to arrive at the Hennepin Canal Rail Trail, but the first half of the day, with the climbs and the heat, took its toll on us.

Noah agreed to pose for a photo after we arrived at the trailhead because the effort reminded me of our first Amish Country Bike Tour together in 2013 when I snapped this photo at the



end. In that photo, he's leaning against my bike and back then I was even using the same water bottle that I brought for this trip.

The Hennepin Canal Rail Trail is a pleasure to ride. Rather than milestones, you can count the consecutively numbered locks to mark your progress. The canal is over 100 years old and was originally constructed because rail fees were high. By the time it was finished, rail prices had fallen so it's never been used for commerce, only recreation. Most of that recreation is fishing as near as we could see. On one of the plaques, it said that some of the lock designs were used later for the Panama Canal. All day, we worked our way up the canal, meaning the locks held back water as we looked at them, and we climbed steadily. You start out on the south side of the canal and end up crossing an ancient bridge to the north side about halfway along the trail, and this leads to the second challenge of the day. In our planning, we expected a 65 mile ride



that day. So, from our pre-planning, we expected to reach our destination, Annawan, about 25 miles or so down the Hennepin trail. As we made our way down the trail, when we checked our position



against Annawan, it was a fair bit farther away. In fact, 10 miles more than we expected. With the heat, the climbs and extra miles, it seemed like everything was breaking the other way for us on day two, so the last miles felt especially hard for both of us.

Unlike the previous day, the rail trail did not pass through a convenient town anywhere near midday, so we took a mile detour to the tiny farming town of Tiskilwa, population 740, where there was a single restaurant called the Indian Valley Inn which I highly recommend. Once again, we turned heads with our attire which led to some story-telling with the staff. The bartender worked in the Chicago burbs, and lived in Tiskilwa with his girlfriend helping her with her farm. The restaurant was just a side job. Great food. Great company. Cash only.



For the long stretches between towns, we carried water bottles, energy bars and sometimes other snacks. Before the trip, we had images in our heads of being like the Tour d'France riders drinking from bottles while ascending the Pyrenees. For a trip like this, why do that? We weren't in a hurry. It works much better to simply stop under the shade of a tree, take a drink and relax

for a few minutes. I also found that my appetite dropped to zero while riding, so I ended up giving most of my energy bars to Noah. As the days wore on, the water bottles got warm and covered with dust and the energy bars took on the texture of well-worked clay. One of the packing choices I made that I was not quite certain about was to bring my hydroflask with me. A hydroflask can keep a bottle of water ice cold for a day or more, and bringing it turned out to be a great choice. I kept it in reserve, tucked away in one of my panniers. Late in the day when we were far down range, sweaty and exhausted, I would take out the hydroflask, and the ice cold water would give us a lift that would carry us to our destination.

We were relieved to arrive at Annawan late in the day after six and half hard hours in the saddle, traveling 75 miles in the Midwestern heat. At the end of this day, like all days, stepping off the bike stirred an odd emotion in me. When you occupy a space for a while, it becomes your whole world, no matter how large or small it is. It could be the living room or the office or the backyard. Sometimes when I step back and look at these spaces, I am taken by how small they feel. I am a sailor, and I always experience this emotion when I drop the anchor for the night and go for a swim. During the day, the boat is my whole world and has everything I need. It feels large. Then, while I am splashing about next to it, I am taken by how small it looks. I experienced the same thing looking at our bikes. For the whole day, we participated in our motion. Our bikes connect us to the world as we move through it, and all the things we need are there on the bike. It feels large and powerful. Then, when I step off, it appears minimal, elegantly encapsulating space like a spiderweb of metal and rubber. And, it too was transformed by the journey. Every component on our bikes plus our gear, helmets and shoes

were covered with a

thick layer of dust from our journey. To illustrate the point, I can compare photos from the start of day one and the end of day four. As is often the case in life, we do not pass through the world and leave the path entirely behind us. We bring some of it with us. The only place in town we could find for dinner was a Subway inside a gas station convenience store. Yep. You guessed it. They really were the best sandwiches we had had in a long time.



End part 3