



# Two riders cycling from Chicago to Iowa City

## Part 4: The Great River

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July 2025

Our goal for day three was the mighty Mississippi River and the Quad Cities consisting of Moline, Davenport, Rock Island and Bettendorf. My wife has a special fondness for the area because she went to college there. It was also our shortest ride, only 45 miles. After the first two days, this seemed trivial to us, even though most of our training rides had been shorter than this distance. Starting out, we actually experienced our first and only mechanical failure when I could not clip into my ride pedal. It turned out I had lost one of my cleat bolts and the cleat was at an unnatural angle. Not having any replacements, I straightened up the cleat and tightened the single bolt. As a precaution, Noah looked at the bottom of his shoes and noticed that he was missing a cleat bolt as well, so we tightened his up too. Go figure! As I mentioned before, we brought parts for the most common things that might break or fail on the trip. As is more generally true in life, the one thing that did fail was unanticipated, but having a small number of versatile tools kept us moving.



One misconception of rail trails is that they provide a straight uninterrupted route, but this is not the case. They are punctuated by occasional road and rail crossings which often means the trail will wind about and climb an embankment to a place where you need to slow and cross carefully. Almost always, there was no traffic, so this really amounted to a yield. Noah and I



worked out a routine so that whoever was trailing when we approached a crossing would pick up their pace and come even with the lead rider. Together, we would approach the crossing with the left rider scanning left and the right rider scanning right. As soon as we could see on whichever side we were on, we would call out "clear!" if it was or "traffic!" if there was a car

coming. (We never encountered crossing trains.) The trees provided shade and occasional adversity. During our trip, it was not uncommon to find big boughs fallen across the trail, and we would often do our part and move them to the side. This one time, we encountered a whole tree laying across the trail. (I warned Noah that this was a classic set-up for an ambush.) We couldn't move the tree, so we had to do an old fashioned



“portage.” We unloaded our bikes, carried our bikes and panniers over the tree one at a time, and then resumed our trip.

This was a journey of discovery, and not just about cycling and not just exploring a part of the country that most people simply ignore and fly over. Yes, we were testing ourselves and our preparations, but we were also spending quality time together. About half the time, we had to ride single file, and it's very hard to have a conversation when you are riding that way. The other half of the time, we could ride side-by-side, and during those times, we could discuss our challenges, our successes, our values and our hopes for the future. There were also a lot of laughs about past family adventures, and we wondered how this would stack up.

Along the Hennepin Rail Trail, as we pedaled along, the locks stopped climbing up the grade and started descending the grade, crossing the canal twice more on bridges. Eventually, the rail trail ends and a mild set of surface streets takes you to the Great River Trail winding its way along the Mississippi River through East Moline, Moline



and then Rock Island. This was our first day where there was a threat of rain, but we were fortunate to have just a few sprinkles. The Great River Trail has an entirely different character. It's fully paved, flat, wide and fast, passing through city parks. At our first encounter with the Mississippi River, we had someone snap our picture as we had officially reached the state line. We're wearing our former robotics team (MOE 365) bandanas as a tribute to them. Bandanas like these have traveled to many robotics tournaments and also up mountains, under water and all sorts of places. We snapped the picture and then put our helmets back out to finish the day at Rock Island after three and half hours and about 45 miles in the saddle.

Having reached the Mississippi River, our goal and destination started to feel real. We were going to make it. Throughout the journey, we always had a lifeline. My in-laws could always drive out and collect us if we could not proceed. That no longer seemed important anymore. Now that we were within an hour's drive of Iowa City, my in-laws and wife decided to drive over to Rock Island to meet us, and we spent some time strolling around the Augustana College campus and had dinner together. My father-in-law brought some new cleat bolts for our cycling shoes, so that we were all ready for the next day. My father-in-law and I have a deep cycling connection. While in high school, my cycling activities ended when I was involved in a significant cycling accident that destroyed my bike and gave me a head injury and broken wrist. In college I learned to ride a unicycle which was my transportation until I met my future wife and her father in the mid-90's. My father-in-law had just developed a passion for the emerging mountain bike craze and was looking forward to having a son-in-law who could ride with him. Mountain biking soon became a favorite activity for us when we were together whether it was in Iowa or in other

places with scenic trails. I credit my father-in-law and Iowa's Sugar Bottom Mountain Bike Trail with getting me "back in the saddle" again, and I've been cycling regularly ever since.

We were looking forward to a quick ride to Iowa City on day four. While we knew there was no rail trail to ride on and not much in the way of service stations and such, we figured we would be able to carry a fast pace on straight rural roads and so we would not be on the road and exposed for very long. Boy were we wrong!

End part 4