



Two riders cycling from Chicago to Iowa City

Part 5: Splashdown on the farm

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Day four began with a spectacular ride across the Mississippi on the I-74 pedestrian and cycling bridge that traverses Arsenal Island, a perfect example of how a city can lay out infrastructure to support pedestrians, cyclists and cars in an aesthetically pleasing way. Once on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, we took to the Riverfront Trail which took us to Credit Island where we had to join the roads. The roads along the river through Buffalo and Montpelier were paved and not busy but not bike friendly either. To get to the farm, we planned to travel almost directly west and a little north to approach Iowa City from the south because the farm is on the southern outskirts of town. We made good time moving west along the river and looked forward to turning north away from the busier river front road toward Wildcat Den State Park. Based on our research, the state park would be our last opportunity to use a restroom and take on water before the 45 mile run to River Hill Farm in Iowa City.



Being a Delaware flatlander myself, I was not expecting an ascent in Iowa, but indeed, we had a short steep one while heading north to Wildcat Den State Park. It was only a couple hundred feet but sported a 9% grade at one point. We referred to this northerly leg of our journey as the “Iowa highlands.” The shoulders were not very wide, but it didn’t matter because there were almost no cars on the road and when there were cars, they were very considerate about sharing the road. Upon arrival, we enjoyed some shade at Wildcat Den State park and had a quick look at the historic steam powered mill at the site. Portending our misfortunes to come, the concession stand was closed and so were the exhibits because an army of volunteers were having a work day, cleaning and refurbishing the mill. The volunteers were very friendly, and even though the concessions were closed, they offered us water bottles for free. We knew that we were going to have to finish the remaining 40+ miles with the water we were carrying from this point onward.





New Era Road is a road that betrayed us and marks the beginning of tough times. Backing up a bit, our greatest concern about traveling the roads of Iowa was farm and vehicular traffic, and New Era Road started out very friendly, paved and for the most part, empty of vehicles. After some miles, it bent to the north. There is an intersection where New Era Road takes a 90 degree turn to the left and if you continue straight ahead, the road becomes 180th St. Straight ahead, 180th St continues north and then winds to the west toward Iowa City. To the left, New Era Road winds west and south

away from Iowa City, so we opted to go straight. I'll add that on a map, 180th street looks like a fine road, just like any other road you might see on a map. We were not too concerned when we saw a stretch that was unpaved and covered in deep gravel. We could handle that for short distances. After a while, it became quite challenging and technical on our loaded bikes. Our tires did not claim much purchase on the surface, and even a shallow turn was challenging. The grooves carved by farm truck traffic provided lanes where it was easier to remain stable, but these grooves did not form a single long continuous track. Instead, they seemed to fade away and reform on other parts of the wide road. If you look carefully at the picture of Noah heading down the gravel road, it looks like there is a steep climb through the gravel at the far end. That's not an illusion, and it was a nightmare 8% 100 foot climb in the deep gravel, followed by a tense descent on the backside. To make things worse, a large agricultural vehicle would come rumbling along every once in a while pulling a long, dense train of brown dust to test our pulmonary systems. Perhaps the hardest part was not really knowing when all this would end. In all our planning, we did not look carefully at these particular road surfaces all along the route. A 65 mile day that we thought was quite doable had turned into a slog. The road conditions were tough both in distance and time duration because it took us longer to work our way down these roads. We hoped that when we turned north onto Sweetland Road, it would be paved and happily it was.



Sweetland was a 2 mile northward zig before we zagged back to the west on 155th St. for a fairly long 10 mile run to the west. At this point, we were hot and tired, but we hoped to have good paved road conditions for the final 35 miles. We were in the midst of the flat Iowa farmlands, and we felt fortunate that the expected prevailing headwinds out of the north-north-west were mild. We took turns drafting for each other, expecting about 3 hours of hard riding in the midday heat. As mentioned earlier, the maps did not show a single store or service station anywhere along our route. If we wanted to detour to the town of West Liberty, it



would take us several miles out of our way. We were weary of encountering more gravel roads if we departed from the major route that we were on, so we opted to follow our original plan and traverse Iowa on 155th St, take another zig to the north and then go west again on 520th St. Our route was just beautiful farm after beautiful farm, checkering the landscape. Every once in a while, we

saw children playing in front of a

farmhouse, and they always gave us a friendly “hello!” Unfortunately, the gravel was not done with us yet. Just 2 miles shy of our northerly zig from 155th St., the road turned back into gravel, and then the northern zig was also deep gravel, so we had to push through about 4 miles of gravel before reaching 520th St. for our last long westerly leg.



The tiny town of Hills IA (pop. 939) now lay about 10 miles ahead, and after days of biking through the unknown territory, we both felt the tug of the familiar. Hills was just south of the farm. In fact, some years ago, my father-in-law and I rode mountain bikes down the railway bed adjacent to their farm into Hills for lunch. Noah and I rolled into downtown Hills and then made our last turn to the north. We stopped briefly at a bar to see if there was anyplace in town that made milkshakes. Learning that there were none, we headed north and cruised up Oak Crest Hill Rd SE toward Iowa City. Noah knew the address, but thought it was fun to keep looking at the farms to the right calling out, “Nope. Not that one. Nope. Not that one...” While my ability to miss turns and get lost on familiar ground is well known, we were never in any danger of missing the farm.



We ended our journey through hundreds of miles of unfamiliar places and conditions at my in-laws farm, a destination that was very meaningful to both of us. As if to accentuate that point, we were surprised to see that my in-laws and wife had constructed a finish line for us at the farm and were waiting on the driveway for us as we arrived. My career objective was to be an astronaut, and though I was never selected, I’ve been fortunate to have had many “splashdown moments” in my life, sometimes alone, sometimes with my wife and sometimes with family and friends. Each one involves both completion and revelation. I never make comparisons about one being more rewarding than another, but this one was a special combination of physical activity, discovery and introspection.





Epilogue: You may be wondering how we made this one-way trip work. We rented a car in Iowa and brought both bikes back with us to Chicago. The cardboard box was still in good enough shape to carry my bike home, and my Kona Jake made its second flight – with a second TSA inspection – and arrived home without any damage.