



Two riders cycling from Chicago to Iowa City

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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. It was not 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.

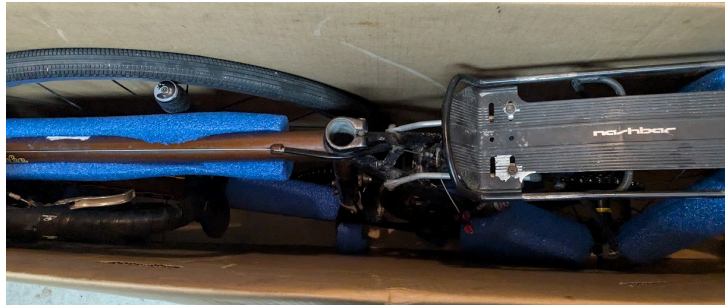


The ride to Morris was a proof-of-concept for our plans for the entire trip. My bicycle had traveled with me on the flight from PHL to ORD intact. To make that happen, I needed to partially disassemble it, pack it tight. After arriving in Chicago, I'd need to reassemble it and make sure all the adjustments 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 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.



Our first morning began very much like the subsequent ones. After breakfast, we suited up, covered ourselves with sunscreen, filled our water bottles with water and ice, and 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.

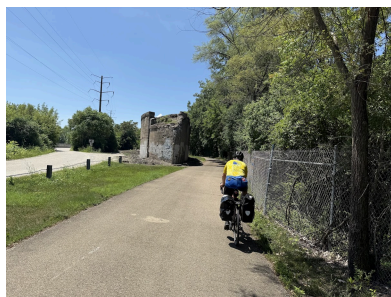
We found our way from the Western Springs train station to the Centennial trailhead without wasting any time. It was our first trip with loaded panniers and cycling didn't feel very different from our training rides. Still, we knew it would be 55 miles of dirt and gravel, very different from the training 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.

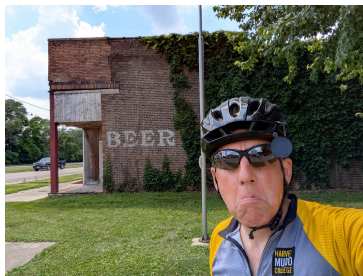


The trail segment to Ottawa was mostly overgrown with narrow grooves where tires were keeping the weeds down, so we rode single file. We did not encounter many people on this leg, but we made a few other friends. We're not sure whether it was the terrain, the vegetation or the

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.



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, 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.

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!

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 for no apparent reason and then possibly 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 everyone 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.