

## JIM HEALEY'S BIKE RIDE ACROSS IOWA-July, 2004

I have been riding a bike most of my life, starting at age 8 in 1939 when I learned to ride on a neighbor kid's bike. I bought my first bike at age 9 for \$26 with money from a magazine route and help from my parents. That bike was my major mode of transportation through the eleventh grade at which time I bought my first car.

Pat and I have ridden bikes with our kids through the years, and since the kids left home have used the bikes for daily rides around the neighborhood; however, if we rode more than 10 miles on any given trip, it was the exception.

My son Stu rode in the RAGBRAI (Register's Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa) last year, and he asked me to go with him this year. The RAGBRAI was started by two Des Moines Register reporters who decided to ride across Iowa about 35 years ago. They have continued this every year since, and there are now about 10,000 riders each year from all over the world. It is the largest bicycle rally in the world. It is not a race, but a 7-day rally/endurance test. It starts in a small town on the western border of Iowa (Missouri River) and proceeds for about 500 miles across Iowa on blacktop county roads to the eastern border on the Mississippi River. The object is to dip your wheel in the Missouri at the inception of the journey and the Mississippi upon the journey's completion. The daily travels average about 70 miles per day. The route is changed every year so that many small towns will have the opportunity to be part of the event. The route is always west to east in order to take advantage of the prevailing westerly winds. However, as described in one of the ensuing paragraphs (Wednesday), the prevailing westerlies are not always dependable

When Stu first asked that I ride with him and 3 other people, I didn't show much enthusiasm, considering my age and lack of bike endurance experience. He mentioned that they needed someone to drive the car from destination town to destination town. Most bikers sleep in small 1-man tents, and these as well as other personal items had to be transported for the bikers. He suggested that I be the driver. I could transport the belongings of our group of five to the next destination town, and it would be there waiting for them when they arrived. In order for me to get my biking in, I would drive to the next town in the morning, leave the pick-up truck at our designated camping site, and then ride in the reverse direction on the route to meet them. At that point I would ride with them to the established destination point. That sounded like a good plan except for the overnight tenting. I wasn't sure that I wanted to sleep on an air-mattress on the ground for seven nights. I thought that maybe I could get a motel; however, that idea was soon eliminated for 2 reasons: the small towns on the route didn't have many motels, and if they did have, they were already booked up.

At any rate, I agreed to go. We left Jenison on Friday (7/23/04) and drove to Des Moines (about 8 hours) and stayed there overnight in a motel. On Saturday, we drove another 4 hours to a small town (Onawa) on the western border of Iowa. There we were assigned a campsite for our 5 tents on the grounds of a local high school. We arrived in the afternoon, and there were already thousands of one-man tents in just about every available space imaginable (churches, schools, campgrounds, private homes, etc.). At many of the campsites there were porta-johns available as well as portable shower facilities. At some of the schools, churches and private homes we were invited to use their facilities. Many of the churches were offering meals for supper and breakfast for about \$5.00. This operation was a big money-maker for the destination towns. It is estimated that each destination town would gross about \$500,000 for the single day/night that the bikers would be passing through.

The first night was my big worry. If I could get through that, I figured that I would be able to survive the next six. I slept quite well, except that there were many young people who thought that they should party all night. It was 2 or 3 in the morning until they quieted down. On succeeding nights the partying tapered off as the wear and tear of the ride began to take its toll on their bodies.

I knew that Larry Martin (he is a friend from my church) was riding with a group of about 100 people from Kalamazoo called the Whiners. I ran into him the first Saturday and we spent a little time together wandering about the various vendor displays. There were all kinds of food vendors, bicycle vendors, and gimmick vendors (anything imaginable associated with RAGBRAI and bicycling).

On Sunday AM we packed our gear in the truck and the four bikers of my group left for the next town (Lakeview). It was my job to drive the vehicle. The road was clogged with bikes - - 4 abreast for as far as you could see. Our group left about 7 a.m., but other bikers left as early as 5 a.m., and some bikers didn't leave until noon (probably the revelers). Transporting all the bikers equipment plus all the vendor displays was a giant logistical nightmare. It was like moving a small town of 10,000 to 20,000 people in one day. There were about 1000 vehicles trying to get to the next destination town (about 65-75 miles) before the bikers. These vehicles had to travel a different route than the bikers because the bike route was completely clogged with bicycles. In order to travel the 65 miles to the Sunday destination town, I had to drive 130 miles (the bikers took the shortest route and the support vehicles took the next shortest available route). I arrived in Lakeview about 11 a.m. and parked the truck at the town campground. I then rode my bike toward the oncoming horde of bikers. After 16 miles I met my group and rode back to Lakewood with them.

Along the bike route there were Iowa State Troopers directing traffic at all major intersections so that there wouldn't be any tragic traffic mishaps with automobiles. Unfortunately, a 48 year old biker was killed when his front wheel caught in a rut. He was thrown head first and apparently sustained severe spine injuries. He was helicoptered to the hospital, but to no avail. Many of the bikers reach speeds of 35-40 mph (down hill), and they travel in packs (2 abreast and 10-20 deep), so there is a very small margin of error. I average about 12 mph and will reach a top speed of 25mph on a downhill run. I would never travel in a pack, so I was quite safe. That is not to say that some wildly maneuvering pack might run me down.

On the second day (Monday), it was decided that I would ride the whole distance to the destination town (Ft. Dodge), a trip of 65 miles. Iowa has many long gradual hills which can wear one down, but the second day trip appeared to be relatively flat. It wasn't too bad. I made the trip in about 8 hours (about 6 hours riding time). Each day the trip had us going through 3 or 4 small towns, and each town had food booths and entertainment, so just about all the bikers would stop from town-to-town to enjoy the sights and amenities. Also, many farmers had water and cool drink stands set up along the way for refreshment. It should be noted that Iowa is known as the state where the tall corn grows. It was mile after mile after endless mile of corn fields. Occasionally there would be a variation, and we would be treated to a soy bean field. On Monday night we set-up our tents on the lawn of the Fort Dodge Presbyterian Church. Fortunately, since I was the last one to arrive, my group already had my tent set up. We ate supper and breakfast there for about \$4. We were also able to use the church's facilities (showers, toilets, etc.).

I had my golf clubs with me, so on Tuesday I drove to the next town (Iowa Falls) and played 18 holes of golf to kill the time while waiting for the bikers. At Iowa falls our group stayed on the grounds of the high school. We had our meals at the school thanks to the hospitality of the local athletic boosters (\$4-\$5).

On Wednesday, I decided to ride the 65 miles to the next destination town (Marshalltown), and this turned out to be a bad decision. We had 20 mph head winds for about 55 of the 65 miles. I ran into Larry just as we were leaving Iowa Falls, and we rode together for about 2 or 3 hours, but I could see that I was holding him up (I was only able to make a speed of 5-6 mph into the strong wind). I told him to go on ahead, and that I would eventually get to our destination. After that I never saw Larry again. With 10,000 bikers, it was difficult to distinguish one biker from another, especially with helmets and sunglasses. Note: I didn't ride with any of the people from my group---they averaged about 18 mph whereas I could average only 12 mph with calm wind conditions.

I called Pat on my cell phone from a farmer's refreshment stand at 3:30 PM and told her that I still had 25 miles to go into a very strong head wind, and she surmised that I was very tired (she was right). She thought that I should quit (there is a SAG wagon that will pick you up at any time at your request---SAG is a support vehicle that will help with bike repairs and/or bikers that can no longer continue), but I told her quitting was not an option. When I had about 10 miles to go, the route turned perpendicular to the wind, so that it was no longer a factor. I thought that I had died and gone to heaven. I finally arrived in Marshalltown at 8:00 PM---just before sunset. I had been on the road for 13 hours, probably 10 hours on the bike and 3 hours resting. Fortunately, the temperature had been in the mid-eighties, and not in the nineties as is the usual case in Iowa in July. Without the wind, I probably would have ridden the equivalent of 100 to 120 miles (10 hours at normal average speed of 12mph). One thing about a long hill, it eventually ends, but the wind is relentless----it just keeps "comin' on comin' on". In reflection, I think that that day's bike ride was the single most difficult physical thing that I ever did in my lifetime. I'll probably have nightmares about that Iowa wind the rest of my life

The Wednesday marathon was my last day of riding. I had had enough. On Thursday I drove to Hazelton, Iowa (not too far from the bike route) where my aunt is buried, and I visited her grave and then drove on to the next destination town (Cedar Rapids). We spent the night at Cedar Rapids in the yard of a private residence.

Friday I played golf and then drove to the next destination town (Maquoketa) where we again camped at a private residence.

On Saturday I drove to Clinton, Iowa on the banks of the Mississippi. My bikers arrived there about 11:00 AM after a 65 mile ride. We loaded up the truck and arrived in Jenison about 6:00 PM.

All in all, it was a great experience. I only rode about 200 miles of the 500 total, but that was pretty good for a person of my age with minimal cross-country training---I think I was one of the older bikers to partake in RAGBRAI. As I told Pat in several cell-phone calls, the experience was very difficult to describe. The endless train of bicycles and support vehicles, the sea of multicolor one-man tents, and the outpouring of good will from the Iowa residents made each day an unforgettable experience.

Jim Healey