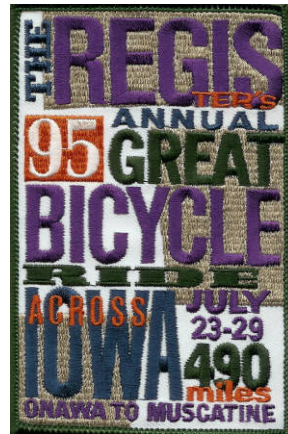


Gary Gilbert – 2020-05-16

It was another hot day in July 1995. I realized the rest of the way was downhill and began to grin. Glancing to my right, on the porch of a retirement home sat a row of residents all waving American flags. I began to cry like a little kid. I could not believe what I had just done --- cycled 490 miles from Onawa to Muscatine, Iowa in 7 days with 15,000 others on RAGBRAI.



Let me back up a bit, I started riding a bike around age 5 with my father pushing me on the sidewalk at Rainbow Beach in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago. Like the other kids, I rode around the neighborhood. When I threatened to run away from home, my mother said it was ok but I couldn't take my bike with me.

Jump ahead a few years, as an adult, I had never ridden more than around the various places I had lived for the previous 45 years, certainly never more than a mile or two and never more than once every few weeks. I noticed an advertisement for a *Bicycle Exhibition* at Rosemont Horizon and with a few friends headed there on a Saturday afternoon. A few weeks later, I walked into Village CycleSport in Elk Grove and came home with a new Trek 750 hybrid. I did RAGBRAI 3 times on that bike and still tour today on it.

In those days I was travelling continually for my job. I flew to California on Monday morning and returned home Friday afternoon for about 18 months. One day I opened the American Airlines magazine from the seat pocket in front of me and began to read a story about this strange and odd Iowa event called RAGBRAI. Could I do that? Was it even possible? WOW!

While I had a bike, I was riding from my house to Lake Arlington, riding around the lake once or twice, heading home and then taking a long nap after my 5 or 7 mile bike ride. I talked to a friend John from Santa Clara California who is a long time cyclist and he responded that yes he had heard of RAGBRAI. John's wife Paula suggested that he should go with me and the foundation was laid. We applied early for the RAGBRAI lottery in February and soon learned that we had both been selected.

I was worried. I was scared. I had never done anything like RAGBRAI in my life. In school, I was always the last kid picked for any sport team. I was a wimp.

Now I had to take it seriously. I began to ride more often and longer distances. I discovered the Wheeling Wheelmen and by June had ridden my first 40 mile bike ride with lots of words of encouragement. I discovered AHBA (as we were known then). I asked members about RAGBRAI and was referred to Terry Zmhal. I wanted to know what I had signed up for. Terry only had one thing to say: "Do It" which didn't alleviate my fears one bit. Bob Hinkle had the same advice. John and I agonized about the logistics. Today one would simply search for RAGBRAI online and have thousands of references to read and plan participation.

By the week before RAGBRAI I had accumulated 1500 miles but had not ridden more than 63 miles in one day or more than 4 days in a row. I rode solo, I rode with Arlington Heights Bike Association (AHBC's legal name), I rode with Wheeling Wheelmen, but figured 1500 miles were sufficient training.

John flew to Chicago, we joined a charter service which deposited us in Onawa Iowa with our bikes and gear and organized a camp ground for each night of the ride. The 1995 route with the overnight towns first:

ONAWA, Turin, Castana, Mapleton, Danbury, Wall Lake,
LAKE VIEW, Sac City, Jolley, Knieirm, Barnum,
FORT DODGE, Coalville, Kalo, Lehigh, Homer, Webster City, Blairsburg, Alden,
IOWA FALLS, Ackley, Cleves, Steamboat Rock, Holland, Grundy Center, Beaman, Conrad (century spur),
Gladbrook, Le Grand, Montour,
TAMA-TOLEDO, Vining, Chelsea, Belle Plaine, Victor, Keswick,
SIGOURNEY, Webster, South English, North English, Parnell, Williamsburg, Iowa City,
CORALVILLE, Iowa City (again), West Branch, Springdale, West Liberty,
MUSCATINE

I had never ridden more than 63 miles in one day until the first day of 70 miles.

John wondered why his shower in Lake View was so cold. He showered in a temporary structure made of 2x4s and surrounded by black plastic wrap with showers made of PVC. The water feed to the shower came from a fire hydrant!! I was more fortunate having showered by swimming in Blue Lake. There was one group of two cyclists, a father and son, who got back to the campground a few hours after I did. The son rode into camp and THREW his bicycle into a corn field and stomped away. I was having a great time and was surprised by his reaction.

I had never ridden more than 70 miles in one day until the second day. By then I was in full swing to the party aspects of RAGBRAI.



I used a 1970s Sear's canvas tent that had been sitting in my basement for nearly a quarter of a century. The tent was by far the tallest structure in the campgrounds. John always said I needed a light on the top of my tent. He liked to camp near me so he could find his own tent in the sea of tents. I had two gigantic duffle bags – one stuffed with camping gear, the other with 7 days of cycling clothes and after cycling clothes.



Day 3 I met all 5 residents of the town of Homer Iowa. There were 2 homes and church in Homer. You can see scenic Homer here: <https://bit.ly/2LBSV77> Despite John's wife Paula thinking that John would be safe with me, we quickly discovered that an experienced cyclist was way ahead of me most all the time every day. It wasn't a problem for us and to this day we laugh about her expectations.

By day 4, I was fully into the swing of things. Remember these are the days before easy internet access. One farmhouse had a number of PCs set up under an awning so riders could send email. The messages were batched up and sent later that evening. Communications to family and friends back home was normally handled by standing in line at a bank of pay phones and waiting for your turn.



I was having a great time. Little did I know that I was about to experience one of the most challenging days on a bicycle in my life? Day 5, Saggy Thursday, was a 60ish mile day from Tama Toledo to Sigourney Iowa. An expected piece-of-cake after riding 5 days and being in great physical condition. Boy was I wrong.

It was HILLY, one after another;
It was HOT in the upper 90s;
It was HUMID;
And it was WINDY with 35 mph head winds.

I did make it to town. Stopping at the top of nearly each hill to rest; Stopping to drink gallons of water and Gatorade; Stopping at several cemeteries where I considered just checking in. SAG wagons were flatbed trucks with dozens of cyclists hanging on. In those days, Ragbrai had a NO SAG policy but local farmers were helping the best they could. I chose to continue on my own.

Day 6 and Day 7 are a blur until I passed that retirement home a few miles from the Mississippi River in Muscatine Iowa. John was waiting for me at the top of the hill. The street was lined with flags, people were waving congratulations. Crying all the way down hill, I suddenly realized that I could ride across Iowa in a week and have a great time doing it. We dipped our tires in the river and the ride was done. Oh, and by the way, it was 511 miles not 490.

YOU CAN DO THIS TOO. IF I CAN, ANYONE CAN.

I went on to ride RAGBRAI 5 more times. Each was exhilarating and fun but there is nothing like my first bicycle tour. I've ridden dozens of other rides across or around other states. I've met some great people who have become lifelong friends.

Written during the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic. It is time to dream for a 2021 ride.

YOU CAN DO THIS TOO. IF I CAN, ANYONE CAN.