

RAGBRAI XXVII

by Curtis Mobley

In case you don't know, RAGBRAI, the (Des Moines, Iowa) Register's Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa, is the grandfather of all cross-state bike rides. It takes a different route from west to east each year, but you always start with your rear tire in the Missouri River and stop when your front tire reaches the Mississippi. It is always held the last week of July. Ann and I did the ride in 1999.

First of all, I know you may have been shocked to read reports in the tabloid press about nudity and other rowdy behavior during this year's RAGBRAI. I assure you than Ann and I did not behave in this manner (due to the fact that at our ages, we look better with our clothes on than with them off).

Many of you shared our pain on the virtual RAGBRAI site at www.RAGBRAI.com. However, that site is G-rated and biased towards showing only the positive side of RAGBRAI. I feel that it is my moral duty to tell the story like it really was....

Day -1: Our bikes were shipped via UPS 3-day guaranteed delivery. Ann's bike took 8 days to arrive. Fortunately, I shipped the bikes 9 days ahead of time, so her bike arrived the day before the start. UPS won't even refund the premium I paid for 3 day delivery. Some people's bikes still haven't arrived, and UPS just can't find them. Moral: don't *ever* ship something via UPS; use FedEx, you get what you pay for.

Day 0: We were mooned by an entire bus load of bikers from Texas on their way to the starting town. I knew then that everything was going to be OK.

Day 1: 73 miles, hot, humid, headwind—the essence of RAGBRAI. Not really too bad. I thought the headwind was better than the sections going with the wind, which left you in a bubble of superheated, stagnant air that just traveled along with you.

Day 2: More of the same, but at least we had a nice thunderstorm that night to cool things off to 80 deg (while keeping the humidity at nearly 100%).

Day 3: More of the same. Iowa has 4 different vegetation zones, and you pass through all of them. They are (1) corn on both sides of the road, (2) soy beans on both sides, (3) corn on the left and soy beans on the right, and (4) soy beans on the left and corn on the right.

Day 4: More of the same, but I did get to pass one really good wreck. A tandem and 6 or 8 singles all in a pile. Teeth, hair, and eyeballs all over the road. Ambulances loading bodies just like in the war movies. Undoubtedly the singles were drafting behind the tandem at 30 mph when somebody made a booboo.

By the end of day 3, Ann's right arm was really swollen from accumulated fluid—a nasty side effect of her cancer surgery. She had to go to Davenport to get checked out by a Dr. I figured the Doc would either fix her up and she would rejoin us down the road, or she would die and I would sell her bike and party on, so we sent her bike on ahead with the sag wagon while I road days 4 and 5.

Day 5: This was the day I had been worried about: 90 miles with 2300 feet of climbing. It turned out to be no big deal at all. The hills were nothing much by Seattle standards. There were a couple of miles of dirt road (with hills), but again no big deal. However, lots of people were really blown out by the hills and the dirt. I guess they've just never been mountain biking.

Ann returned in the evening. The Doc had packed her arm in ice and elevated it overnight to drain the fluid. She retrieved her bike and road again for days 6 and 7.

Day 6. The Black Hole of Calcutta meets the Bataan Death March. This was the big day. Without doubt, this was the most grueling day of riding I've ever done. Over 100 deg, and so humid it was actually foggy at times. It was so hot that the tar used to patch the road actually melted and ran into puddles. (Extra credit homework problem: figure out why anyone would live in a place like this.) Everyone's tires built up a frosting of tar, which then collected dirt and gravel, which plugged up the brakes. There were 3000 feet of climbing, which totally wasted lots of people. Over 1/3 of the riders either didn't start or dropped out that day because of the heat. Ann and I figured it would only prolong their suffering if we stopped to help the poor wretches who fell by the wayside, so we just kept riding...we were deaf to their piteous cries for a drop of water or a moment of shade in their dying minutes.

Day 7. Finally, at last, a day of good weather. We had a thunderstorm the night before that cooled things off and gave us clouds all day. The riding was really quite pleasant, and we even had a tailwind. We just flew to the last town. I just missed the best wreck of the week. There was one really steep downhill just an hour from the end. I hit 48 miles a hour, the fastest I've ever gone on a bike. I debated letting it run and breaking 50 just for the record, but decided this might not be prudent. Anyway, just behind me three people were coming down side by side and one bumped another and took down the third—at somewhere around 50 mph. Witnesses say that there was nothing left of them but three greasy streaks ending in large meatballs. They had to close the road to clean up the mess. A really big owiee!

Old timers said that 4 of the ten hardest RAGBRAI days ever were on this one, because of the heat, which was 15-20 deg above normal. Day 6 was said by all to be the hardest RAGBRAI day ever.

Would I do RAGBRAI again? Yes, its really a blast. 8500 registered riders and several thousand more unregistered; the estimate was 13,000 riders. A 7 day folk festival, with every town along the way rolling out the red carpet with homemade pies, lasagna dinners, and lots of GatorAid. Live bands at night, with people dancing in the streets (and doing you know what else) until late at night. Next year, though, I'd rather do a different state, just for a change of scenery.

Some amazing things seen along the way:

One guy had a 55 gallon barrel mounted crossways over his rear tire to make a mobile bar-be-que pit, complete with smokestack.

A woman from Saudi Arabia, doing her 24th RAGBRAI. She was not able to train for the ride, because it is illegal for women to ride bikes in SA. Each year she flies to the US, buys a bike, rides in RAGBRAI, sells the bike, and flies home. It is her week of freedom each year.

A most amazing collection of bikes, from \$4,000 titanium jobs to old clunkers doing their 20th RAGBRAI. The oldest, a 1941 Westfield. The longest, a quint, and a triple recumbent. An equally amazing collection of T shirts, each expressing some profound philosophical statement.

Team "Killer Bees"... old guys with potbellies and really cute black and yellow striped bumble bee costumes. Team "Dragbrai"...who each day rode in different ladies wear, including formal evening gowns and helmets with feather boas trailing behind. Team "DairyAir" composed of Wisconsin dairy farmers, riding bikes decorated as cows, complete with pink udders hanging from the downtubes. There's nothing like that in the Tour de France!

Youngest person riding his own bike, 8 years; oldest, 80. Average age was around 35, I would guess.

Quite a few paraplegics doing the ride on recumbents with hand cranks. I can understand doing 530 miles with big leg muscles, but to do it with arm muscles is really amazing. I really respect such people.

Most importantly to me, Ann gets the Lance Armstrong award for doing this ride less than two years after being wiped out by her chemotherapy. It was really impressive to everyone that she could come back for the last two days, including the extreme day 6, after having to see the doc.

BTW, this would be a really great place to find a spouse, or take a vacation from the one you already have. However, Ann was keeping a close eye on the latter possibility, so I don't anything more to report.

Now go to www.ragbrai.org and sign up for next year's ride. Just do it!!