

# A Rolling Festival in Iowa

Chuck Offenburger

**W**e may not have major league baseball or NFL football in Iowa, but I'm always proud to remind people that our state is certainly big league in one sport — bicycling, of all things.

We realize that you may know us best for our corn and hogs, but there are people around the world who will testify for us — bicycling doesn't get any better than the way we do it in the last full week of July each summer.

That's RAGBRAI week, when for twenty-three years now cyclists have been coming from all fifty states and usually a dozen other countries to take part in the *Des Moines Register's* Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa. It's a rolling folk festival that showcases life in Iowa in such a fun way that the riders come back year after year, making this the oldest, longest, and biggest touring event in the world. Who'd ever have thought in Iowa, huh?

The RAGBRAI story started in 1973, when two of my colleagues at the *Des Moines Register*, columnist Donald Kaul and copy editor/columnist John Karras, decided they'd try to ride their bikes "coast to coast" from the Missouri River to the Mississippi. Remember, that was very early on in the bicycle boom, and Kaul and Karras, new at it themselves, weren't all that sure they could complete such a long ride. Almost as an afterthought, they invited any readers who were interested to join them.

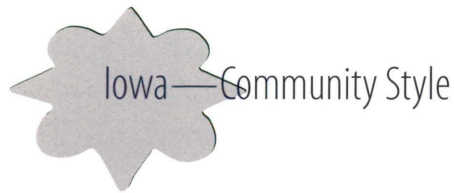
The two of them were astonished, upon arriving in Sioux City to start their trek, to find 300 other adventurers ready and waiting for them! And one of those was eighty-three-year-old Clarence Pickard, a retired farmer, teacher, and Peace Corps veteran from Indianola.

"Mr. Pickard," as he suddenly became known to the whole state, pedaled along ever so slowly on an old Schwinn woman's bike, while wearing a long-sleeved flannel shirt, long trousers, high-topped black tennis shoes, and a silver pith helmet. The story that *Register* readers were grabbing for each of the next six



*RAGBRAI, the Des Moines Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa, occurs during the last week of July.*

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mornings was not so much whether the two forty-year-old columnists could make it all 412 miles to the finish in Davenport, but rather whether Mr. Pickard would. And he did!

More than 150,000 people have now ridden in RAGBRAI. We do our best to try to limit the crowd to 8,000 each summer, but it usually is about 10,000. The route is different each year, averaging 469 miles.

Bicycle clubs have formed among the riders over the years, and groups of friends often come as teams. Their team names reflect the fun — Harlan Huff 'n' Puffers, Team Skunk, Rim Rollers, Team Road Kill, Blasters, Team Graffiti, Team Plunger, Team Gumby.

Iowa communities, realizing that an overnight stay by RAGBRAI can mean more than \$250,000 being spent in their towns, go all out trying to be selected as host towns. They outdo each other in offering street dances, concerts, and the best pork chops, corn on the cob, pie, ice cream, and lemonade.

Several of us are involved in choosing the host towns. We map out a route in December, then keep it a secret until we go drive it in February, with our safety coordinator assigned by the Iowa State Patrol helping us make sure the roads we've selected are safe. Then we ask the Chambers of Commerce in the eight towns we've picked if they'll have us — and they've always said yes.

For Iowans across the state along the route in those communities where bike riders travel that year, RAGBRAI is a significant event. This is where the importance of Mr. Pickard to RAGBRAI's success and growth cannot be overstated. When he was able to complete that first year's ride, along with 114 others, it sent a message far and wide across Iowa — that you didn't have to be a strapping young athlete to ride your bike across Iowa. Anyone can do it.

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*Chuck Offenburger, besides serving as co-host of the Iowa bike ride, is one of Iowa's most popular journalists. He has written the "Iowa Boy" column regularly for the Des Moines Register for nearly twenty years.*