

## **WE DID IT!**

By John Durand

Yes, we did!

- On Wednesday, August 11, a dozen JohnnyRiders and several support people set off on a grand adventure from Faribault, in Rice County, Minnesota, the original midwest settlement place of the Minnesota-Wisconsin line of Durands.
- For three days these dozen riders pedaled through cold and rain and a brisk northerly wind and up and over hill after hill after hill and ultimately past the homestead of Pierre and Louise Durand in Burnett County, Wisconsin.
- And just beyond, to their complete surprise, they rode under a welcoming arch to the cheers and congratulations of dozens of cousins and in-laws and family friends. And ended a bike ride that earned the Durand Heritage Foundation's scholarship fund thousands of dollars.

Yes, JohnnyRide 2004 actually happened! But as with any grand adventure, ask those who were there and you'll hear a hundred stories.

### **Day One**

How typical of such an enterprise that ten minutes after starting in Faribault we were milling about in confusion and disagreement about which way the route went. This, despite a full-color, turn-by-turn ride guide generously printed *gratis* by Mike Durand, former Foundation chair.

After we finally more or less agreed on a route and were still pushing our way up the long incline that leads out of Faribault into light...we were pelted by a cold rain.

What a beginning, I thought! A gray, gloomy day with wind and rain and a long hill and 170 miles to go! I half-feared that all but the most intrepid to pull up and say, "This sucks! Let's go back and get some coffee and get warm."

But everyone kept splashing along, for the promise of a brightening sky foretold relief from the rain if not from the chill and the wind in our faces.

Which brings to mind a point of theology. In an earlier Newsletter article I asked those who believe in the power of prayer to pray for a prevailing southwesterly breeze for JohnnyRide 2004. I said a wind at our backs would make our task much easier. Well, either no one prayed, or they got confused and prayed for the wrong wind, or their prayers went unheeded. In any event, we battled a darned headwind the whole distance, which at the end was officially measured at 176 miles.

By the time we reached our first checkpoint in Northfield, Minnesota we were already strung out over a mile or so, for each rider had to find the riding rhythm that fit his or her personality and conditioning. Some ride fast, some medium, some slow. Fast for JohnnyRiders was an average of 12 - 13 mph, about the speed of an Olympic marathon runner. Slow was 7 - 8 mph.

Everyone got to our first checkpoint in Northfield more or less on schedule, but those who wanted to be done with this folly started for Cannon Falls even before the last of the riders pulled in. That's the way it went for the three days: we'd start out together in the morning, we'd rejoin to eat lunch together, and we'd end the day together. In between we'd churn along in our individual rhythms with like-rhythm riders.

Northfield to Cannon Falls saw us biking several miles on hard gravel roads that twisted and turned through lovely, crop-rich countryside. Fortuitously, the sun peeked out and began drying things, including our biking outfits, which were of every description. By the time we hauled into Cannon Falls for noon sandwiches made from fixings laid out in the back of a station wagon, our spirits were elevated. Stage One and the hard part of the day were behind us! For the ride to Red Wing and the end of Day One we'd follow an actual bike trail routed along an abandoned railroad bed. And go gently downhill in intermittent sunshine the entire way.

By then our support team had figured out a workable system on the fly. One vehicle went ahead to spraypaint the turns (with bio-degradable paint, of course). A trailing vehicle (pulling a trailer) stayed behind the last riders, and a third vehicle operated

between, keeping everyone informed about who was where and what was going on elsewhere. I can hardly say enough about how great our support was.

After we reached Red Wing and the end of Stage Two (a total distance for the day of just over 50 miles) a carload of people returned to Faribault to bring up our cars. Going back to get the cars was a problem we hadn't really thought through. Childlike, those of us who planned JohnnyRide hoped some kind of magic might get our cars from where we left each morning to where we ended each evening. But there was no magic, and when we have another JohnnyRide we'll do it differently. After spending all day on a bike or in support and wanting little more than to rest and enjoy a good evening meal and a few laughs, who wants to backtrack the whole day's route just to get the stupid cars?

In Red Wing we were treated to an early dinner carted to our motel by Warren and Beth Utecht and Jane Nelson. (Beth and Jane are sisters, daughters of Helen Durand, who passed away earlier this year). Homemade baked beans, sandwiches, salads, fruit, desserts, hot drinks. The food was wonderful, and much appreciated. After our convivial meal we assembled for group pictures, because some people could participate only for Day One.

## **Day Two**

For weeks people had fretted about the prospect of toiling up out of the Mississippi River valley on a hot, muggy, buggy August day to begin the longest haul of the ride. But the new day dawned bright and sunny and cool. After enjoying a communal, calory-laden breakfast (who cares...we're going to work it off!), spirits were high. And almost before we felt really challenged we'd crossed the Mississippi and topped the valley and saw stretching before us miles and miles of rolling Wisconsin farmland.

Did I say "rolling?" Perhaps in a car you say "rolling." In a car getting up a long hill means pressing a little harder on the gas pedal. But those on bikes who pedaled into a steady headwind for that 40-mile, seemingly endless succession of hills of Stage Three might not say "rolling" but "mountinous." Nonetheless, although some of us got lost and some of us were threatened by a dog or two and one of us blew out a knee on a particularly vicious hill, we arrived in Woodville just about on schedule, knowing once again we were done with another stage and the hard part of the day. Only 37 miles to go!

Well, maybe the forenoon ride was the hard part in terms of hills, but in terms of sore butts and creeping fatigue and strange events I'd say the afternoon ranks right up there.

Item: Somehow (the details are still hazy to me) Bob Olson fell off his bike and into a steep ditch that happened to be nurturing a flourishing crop of poison ivy. Landing awkwardly on his back and pointing downhill, he had to roll this way and that in the noxious weed before he could regain his feet. And later paid the price.

Item: Alice Keppel, driving slowly along in front end support, had a grinning farm dog lope along with her for some two miles. She finally persuaded a farmer on a tractor who knew the dog to take charge of the friendly animal.

Item: When we stopped for a breather by a cow pasture a couple dozen beef cattle came up to the fence to study us. After we got on our bikes again they began racing us along the fenceline in their odd, rockinghorse gait. If they hadn't run out of pasture they'd probably raced us all the way to Turtle Lake.

Item: When I tried to adjust the sensor on my bike computer while riding along I accidentally (foolishly? stupidly? incredibly?) stuck my thumb in my frontwheel spokes. Within minutes my thumb was maroon and swollen and throbbing.

*But we kept pedaling on, pedaling on.*

That's the refrain from a ballad I began composing in my head while riding through the countryside on JohnnyRide. From our inauspicious start in Faribault to the near-mutiny over to difficulty of the route, I came up with a half dozen verses for *The Ballad of JohnnyRide*, each ending with the refrain, *But we kept pedaling on, pedaling on.*

And that's what we did. The last riders pumped their way up the gentle incline into Turtle Lake and the end of Day Two in the dusk of early evening. In theory we all felt pretty good. We'd conquered stages Three and Four of the longest day's ride, which turned out to be just under 79 miles. In fact everyone was pretty exhausted. The day was long and hard and seeming without end, but once again we'd done what we set out to do. I felt so proud of everyone!

Then of course some of us had to go back to Red Wing and get the stupid cars.

### **Day Three**

All along I'd promised everyone that the last day would be pleasureable from beginning to end. For starters, we'd have the shortest day's ride (estimated at 43 miles) and through countryside familiar to many of us. Thus, we assembled at a leisurely hour in bright sunshine after one of those complimentary breakfasts you get at motels. As some of us needed minor bike repairs and to stock up with water and Gateraid and power bars, we started Stage Five a little later than planned, but once again we were in good spirits. The end was in sight, and for several miles the ride was idyllic - a cool morning, a relatively flat route, and little traffic.

But after a couple hours riders were asking each other, what fool laid out this last day's route?

As for myself (being the fool in question), I was often enjoying my thoughts and the sights and smells of northwestern Wisconsin in leisurely solitude, and so didn't hear the half-angry questions and mutinous muttering. But when I too reached the mountainous hills that exceeded all but one we'd faced thus far, I thought, oh! oh! Somehow, after driving these hills earlier in the summer to verify the route, they'd shrunk in my memory to "not so bad." But they were bad. And there were lots of them.

*But we kept pedaling on, pedaling on.*

Well, what else could we do? And who'd give up with the end in sight?

But there were bright spots in that final, hilly misery. For one, as Mike Durand and I were just starting up the steep grade of yet another hill, four cars roared past with waving hands and honking horns. Two of the cars were Mike's and my own. Cousins and in-laws had carpooled down to Turtle Lake to bring our cars up to JohnnyRide's end. Hurray! There was magic after all! We won't have to go back and get the stupid cars! What a boost their kind deed was to my spirits!

Another bright spot was Jack Webber, the JohnnyRider who blew out his knee on Day Two and so joined the support crew. The biggest and burliest of the riders, Jack on the support crew revealed himself to be as sensitive and solicitous and compassionate as anyone you'll ever meet. Of course he felt bad about having to give up riding when he knee ballooned and began to throb with pain that just kept getting worse. But those of us

who knew Jack mostly as big and burly were richly rewarded by discovering another Jack through his mishap, a gentle friend.

As we neared the finish at last, now well into the afternoon of Day Three, we clumped together in little riding groups to enjoy the end of our adventure together. In the last three miles we passed landmarks familiar to many of us...Gaslyn Lake, the farmsteads of Uncle Larry and Aunt Ida (later Aunt Harriet), of Uncle Bill and Aunt Bea, of grandparents Pierre and Louise, of Uncle Art and Aunt Elenore. I admit my throat grew tight with memories of so many gone. Then we were pedaling the final mile.

When we neared the intersection of County Roads A & H and the official end of JohnnyRide 2004 I wondered whether there'd been an accident up ahead. People were clustered in the road. As I drew closer I caught sight of glitter and color and heard noisy voices and at last recognized that a couple people were stretching a banner across the middle of the road and that the banner and cheers and applause were welcoming us to the end of the ride.

What an end! Suddenly I didn't care about my sore butt and sore feet and sunburn and swollen, throbbing thumb. This was great! This was family and friends! This made JohnnyRide all the more worthwhile!

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