

## HAWARDEN....WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

### RAGBRAI: IOWA HOSPITALITY AT ITS' BEST

#### CHAPTER: 32

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When RAGBRAI began in 1973, it was actually just an idea that turned into a challenge between John Karras, a feature writer and copy editor for the Des Moines Register and his fellow employee Don Kaul who wrote the column "Over the Coffee" from his office in the Des Moines Register bureau in Washington DC. These two men were both avid bicyclists and thought a bike ride across Iowa would give them a world of material to use in their columns. And so it began.

The two men enlisted the help of Don Benson Public Relations Director for the Des Moines Register to help plan the route and the schedule. Mention of the upcoming "Great Six Day Bicycle Ride" appeared in the columns, etc. in the Des Moines Register, and when they met in Sioux City to start the ride 300 of their "closest friends, aka the public" were there to join them. By actual count one hundred and fourteen riders made the entire distance that year. Between Des Moines and Ames the crowd swelled to around five hundred riders. Articles describing the ride were published daily in the Des Moines Register and when the ride was over, the paper was flooded with phone calls and letters asking for more advanced information for the next ride, so vacations could be planned and arrangements made.

The "Second Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa" or SAGBRAI was immediately in the planning stages. This year Don Benson enhanced the preparations by involving the Iowa State Patrol, and actually driving the route ahead of time as well as contacting the communities on the route. This year 2700 riders showed up in Council Bluffs that Sunday morning and an estimated 1700 made it all the way to Dubuque.

1975 was the year that RAGBRAI became the official name for the "Registers Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa" and it has become a household word in every city and town in the state since. The 1974 ride across Iowa included an overnight stay in Guthrie Center. This was the first town of its size to be a host community for the ride. The small town experience was so enjoyable that the organizers decided that small communities should not be overlooked as host communities, and in 1975 Hawarden was chosen as the starting point of RAGBRAI III. Starting in Hawarden, was also the first year that the bikers would not be dipping their front wheels in the Missouri River, but since the Sioux River is on the western border and also a branch of the Missouri it qualified.

I mentioned earlier that RAGBRAI has become an everyday word in the towns and homes of Iowa. That has happened over the last thirty nine years. When RAGBRAI III decided to start in Hawarden, no one knew what to expect.

Elwood Bolster, Hawarden Chamber of Commerce Chairman in 1975 announced that 3200 bicyclists and possibly twice that number of visitors were expected to arrive in Hawarden on August 2, 1975. It was estimated that approximately 85% of the visitors would be campers; others were requesting overnight accommodations in homes, churches, etc. Bolster mentioned that many letters had been received from doctors, lawyers and other professional people. Mr. Bolster said, "This isn't a bunch of kids, and riding that far isn't for a bunch of panty-waists either." A Saturday night Bar-B-Que in the park (served 1100) as well as a Sunday morning breakfast (served 1300) for the bicyclists was held. Mr. Bolster ended the interview by saying, "It's not just the Chamber of Commerce, its ALL OF HAWARDEN that need to participate."

And participate they did. Comments after the event were as follows: "Is it over? I guess it is, but what a time it was while they were here!" People came from all over; California, New York and everywhere in between. The oldest was 85 from Indianola, Iowa and the youngest was 8 from Walnut Grove.

The final numbers showed on the RAGBRAI web site indicated there were 3200 registered bikers and approximately 2400 made it to Fort Madison and the Mississippi River. The Mayor of Hawarden, William Hill presented John Karras with a plaque and a gavel to be delivered to the Mayor of Ft. Madison at the end of the trip as well as a bottle of

champagne, and a “golden tire pump.’ At Hawarden’s Annual Chamber Banquet Elwood “Elle” Bolster was presented with an appreciation award for his work with RAGBRAI III which made it a huge success.

Five riders from Hawarden left town with the RAGBRAI bicyclists. They were, Mary Dow, Dave Gregg, Glen Parker, Dick Smith and Shelly Van Egdome.

A few superstitious types wanted to change the 1985 ride to some number other than XIII, but RAGBRAI officials held out. Hawarden had been such a good starting point 10 years before that RAGBRAI went back again that year. Almost 40 communities had written, asking to be included in the RAGBRAI XIII route, so RAGBRAI officials tried to include as many of them as possible. With the gloomy farm economy, RAGBRAI provided a lift to lowans’ spirits, especially in the rural areas. (RAGBRAI web site history page)

In 1985, Hawarden was advised, or warned to expect 10,000 or more people with 7,500 of them on bikes. There will be influential media people with wide audiences along on the ride. In the last two years, 1983 & 84 the ride has been featured in READERS DIGEST, THE SATURDAY EVENING POST, THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE, BICYCLING MAGAZINE, and others. It has been said that no one can ever truly explain RAGBRAI; it has to be witnessed to be understood. The ride this year was 540 miles to Clinton. The longest ride in RAGBRAI’s history to date.

Larry Epperly led the various committees that prepared for RAGBRAI XIII. All the individual committees handled their assignments well and when an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 people left Hawarden, they left with good feelings and full stomachs.

It has been reported that starting in a small town rather than a large city is actually advantageous. Iowa’s small towns have something that the big ones don’t – a rural background of hard work, commitment and pride in their town.

1985 was the year that retired farmer; 72 year old Lee Liston joined the riders on their way to Clinton. Ten years earlier Lee and his wife came to town to watch the bikers leave. He wished he could have joined them then, but thought he was too old. Later he learned of an 80 year old man who was riding, and decided then that he would start training to join them the next time they came to Hawarden.



Hawarden’s most recent visit from RAGBRAI was in 1998 and Don Nolan was appointed chairman of RAGBRAI XXVI. This year it was expected that over 12,000 – 15,000 riders and people would be spending the night in Hawarden. The town was given 27 weeks’ notice to plan the event, find spaces for 7,000 campers, campground space for groups from 10 to 400 including toilets and shower facilities, not to mention food, entertainment, safety, medical facilities, and as was needed this year, storm shelters when the warning sirens start to blow. Most citizens of Hawarden, whether they had planned to or not, opened their homes and basements to complete strangers to give them refuge from the threatening

storms that hit the town around 10:30 PM, just at the height of the entertainment and activity. People who had planned to spend their evening in tents and campers were given shelter in homes, churches and even businesses.

Many letters were received following the event thanking Hawarden and its citizens for their hospitality and friendship.

1998 was the year that the "Great Bicycle" that is now sitting on the corner of tenth and Central to call attention to the 125<sup>th</sup> Celebration was built by Boyer Machine. It was Hawarden's symbol for RAGBRAI XXVI.

Hawarden and the entire community can speak with pride of their hospitality and friendship whenever RAGBRAI chose to begin its yearly journey across Iowa here. It certainly "put us on the map"; whenever you mention Hawarden in a crowd of strangers, there is always someone there who speaks up, "I know where Hawarden is, I stayed there when we went on RAGBRAI!"