

STATE HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

## The Annals of Iowa

---

Volume 73 | Number 4 (Fall 2014)

pps. 401-402

---

### America's Favorite Bicycle Ride

Leo Landis

*State of Iowa Historical Museum*

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2014 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

#### Recommended Citation

Landis, Leo. "America's Favorite Bicycle Ride." *The Annals of Iowa* 73 (2014), 401-402.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12164>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](http://iowa-research-online.org)

the final crisis. The Carter administration partially deregulated railroads in 1980, too late to stave off the company's termination.

Remarkably, liquidation proved successful. In 1984 the Rock Island became the Chicago Pacific Corporation. While maintaining railroad holdings, the corporation diversified into several other sectors and benefited from an improving economic environment. Maytag purchased Chicago Pacific in 1988. The core east-west line, meanwhile, emerged as the Iowa Interstate Railroad, and the core north-south tracks ironically were subsumed by the Union Pacific. All prospered.

The "major culprit" (297) in the demise of the Rock Island, Schneider concludes, was the federal regulatory system. Certainly the failure of federal agencies to adjust to a changing economic landscape led to profound inequities; for example, trucking and airline industries competed with railroads but received billions of dollars in indirect subsidies (via the interstate highway system and tax-financed municipal airports). Yet Schneider acknowledges that several other culprits were crucial, even noting that "the biggest reason for the Rock Island's collapse" was far more structural and complex: "shifts in technology, demographics, communication, and government relations with business" (299). Overall, his evidence supports this more nuanced emphasis, one accentuating an array of forces, from weather to organized labor to determined, even devious, resistance by railroad leaders to the Rock Island's survival. Readers, of course, will judge for themselves how to apportion blame. And many will join Schneider in understandably lamenting the loss of a railroad crucial to the Midwest's past.

*RAGBRAI: America's Favorite Bicycle Ride*, by Greg Borzo. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013. 168 pp. Illustrations, tables, index. \$22.99 paperback.

Reviewer Leo Landis is museum curator at the State of Iowa Historical Museum, where he curated the exhibit, *Riding through History: A River-to-River Legacy on Wheels*.

The *Des Moines Register's* Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa (RAGBRAI) began in 1973, when John Karras and Donald Kaul invited readers to participate in a six-day ride from Sioux City to Davenport. It lacked organization and did not have an official name or vendor support. Today, it is a seven-day ride, and the *Register* claims that it is the oldest, largest, and longest recreational bicycle ride in the world. It attracts an international audience numbering more than 10,000 cyclists.

Two previous publications have chronicled the ride and its history. RAGBRAI cofounders John and Ann Karras's *RAGBRAI: Everyone Pronounces it Wrong* (1999) documented RAGBRAI's first 25 years, and the photographic account *River to River, Year after Year: RAGBRAI through the Lens of Register Photography* highlighted the imagery of the ride (2002). Following RAGBRAI XL, Grinnell College alumnus Greg Borzo wrote this update.

Borzo uses interviews and personal experience as main sources for the work. The strengths include anecdotes documenting memorable characters, days, and events. Reader will learn of figures from the Great Six-Day Bicycle Ride of 1973, including Carter LeBeau of Davenport, who would become a 40-year rider and was known for his mismatched rugby socks. It covers 83-year-old Clarence Pickard of Indianola, who became a focus of Iowans who wondered, "Can an octogenarian bicycle across the state in six days?"

The work includes a few paragraphs on each year's ride, covering topics such as teams, food, and other traditions, and catches readers up on the recent management of the ride by T. J. Juskiewicz, a Floridian who became ride director in 2004. The effort is not without errors. The town south of Dubuque is Zwingle, not Zingle (48), and the Cedar River, not the Cedar Rapids River, flooded Waverly in 1999 (87). Additionally, his brief reference to *Des Moines Register* history misses the mark on Gardner Cowles Sr.'s arrival in Des Moines (88). Cowles did not arrive in Fort Des Moines in 1849; he was not even born until 1861.

The work is, however, a generally sound chronicle of the ride's rhythms and routines, and the table "RAGBRAI Vital Statistics" offers readers a quick reference on each ride's starting point and concluding town. It includes cumulative totals through RAGBRAI XLI in 2013. The timeline captures RAGBRAI's place in the cycling culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s and includes present-day bicycling (62-64). Borzo should also be commended for covering issues such as deaths on the ride and the resulting Crawford County ban of 2007-2008.

Borzo's work is a solid complement to the Karrases' book and an excellent popular look at the ride. It is not the answer for an academic audience but offers incidents, characters, and topics for future consideration. For a casual reader, it is a delightful discussion of RAGBRAI. It is breezy and quick like the best days on the ride, as long as there is a tailwind.