

PROUD OF PICKARD

A Hometown Hero for the Summer of '76

Around the Adventure Cycling offices — at least among the small and shrinking cadre of "old-timers" — certain names evoke certain images. "Thomas Stevens" brings to mind a smartly attired pioneer cross-country cyclist, feverishly pedaling his high-wheeler across the Great Plains, bison in pursuit. "June Curry" means nothing if not fresh-baked cookies, and down-home American hospitality. And the name "Clarence Pickard" translates to Heartland hardiness; a youthful vigor and outlook extending far into old age. The name is also practically synonymous with 1976, the year of the Bikecentennial; the Summer of Cycling.

In 1973, *Des Moines Register* feature writer John Karras and "Over the Coffee" columnist Donald Kaul, both avid cyclists, agreed to pedal their bicycles across the great state of Iowa and report in the *Register* on what they saw and experienced. Kaul and Karras belatedly invited readers to join in the fun, but because just six weeks advance notice was given, "only" 300 showed up in Sioux City for the late-August ride.

One of the more intriguing individuals to appear, ready to ride, was Clarence Pickard, an 83-year-old retired farmer from Indianola, Iowa. Pickard admitted that he hadn't ridden a bike much in recent years, yet he was one of just 114 riders to complete the entire state crossing to Davenport, and he did it astride a used ladies' Schwinn.

Intense interest in the singular octogenarian, spawned by the reporters' dispatches in their statewide newspaper, was in part responsible for the amazing growth of cycling's popularity in the Corn State. That relatively quiet "Great Six-Day Bicycle Ride" evolved into the *Register's* Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa (RAGBRAI), which for more than 20 years now, has attracted the largest field of any multi-day cycling event in the United States.

According to the RAGBRAI Web site, "Pickard's attire for the [1973] ride was a long-sleeved shirt, trousers, woolen long underwear and a silver pith helmet." On one particularly grueling day, when Pickard and the others pedaled 110 miles from Des Moines to Williamsburg, the temperature was 100 degrees.

So who was this Clarence Pickard, other than a curious old codger wearing too many clothes for the searing Iowa

heat and stifling humidity? One of his sons, Clarence Mott ("Jack")

Pickard, M.D., wrote to tell us that his father was born on a ranch in the Flint Hills of Kansas in 1890, the first of four children. The parents took the family back to their original home in Iowa shortly after the turn of the century, as they wanted better educational opportunities for their kids.

All four children went to high school in Indianola, then attended Simpson College in the same town. Clarence worked his way through college, and played on the Simpson football team. Later he earned a master's degree in soil science at Iowa State College in Ames, then in 1922, landed a position as assistant to the president of Iowa State. The same year, he married Mildred Mott.

Clarence's subsequent jobs involved county extension work, teaching at Virginia Polytech in Blacksburg, Virginia, and editing the journal of the South Dakota Grain Growers in Aberdeen. Then everything changed.

"Suddenly," Jack wrote, "the Great Depression settled over the country like a wet blanket. By 1930, with a wife and two children to support, my father found that there just wasn't a job anywhere. His father, in farm real estate and land speculation, had lost everything when the banks closed, but managed to save his house and four farms, one for each of his children.

"We moved in 1932 to a run-down farm and a run-down house, with no plumbing or electricity. However, my parents did a great job of hiding their anxiety and desperation."



PHOTO BY SCOTT BREWER

On the TransAmerica Trail, 1976



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PICKARD FAMILY

Simpson College Graduation, ca 1916



On the farm in the 1950s, already sporting his trademark pith helmet.

By Michael McCoy

Clarence's other son, David Charles Pickard — who goes by Charles — told us that during these years, Clarence was among the first farmers in his area to use contour farming, hybrid seed corn, terracing, strip farming and crop rotation.

"He transformed a run-down farm into a highly productive farm in about seven years, with limited resources," said Charles.

"Having gone through the Great Depression," Jack added, "my parents never did learn to spend their money. When savings exceeded spending, they moved off the farm and built a little house in town."

In the late 1960s, at ages 78 and 73, respectively, Clarence and Mildred Pickard answered the call for retired farmers to join the Peace Corps.

"They went to a tiny village in India and slept on a dirt floor in sleeping bags, while Mother taught school and Clarence tried to teach farmers how to increase production," Jack wrote. "He started riding a bike in India. He was a little disappointed there at the passivity and fatalistic attitude of the population."

Following their two-year Peace Corps stint, the couple returned to Iowa, where Clarence set out on a speaking tour. He was determined to convince other seniors that they still had a lot of life to live, and experience to give.

"Those over 60 are not foreordained to spend their lives in rocking chairs waiting for the graveyard," said Pickard.

After joining the first cross-state ride in Iowa in 1973, Clarence was on a two-wheeled roll, and there was no stopping him, particularly once he got wind of a Bicentennial cross-country cycling celebra-

ly agreed."

Clarence Pickard's careful choice of words, and his acceptance of personal responsibility, as reflected in a message he sent to Bikecentennial executive director Dan Burden early in May 1976, were from another era. Clarence wanted Burden to be aware of his plans to speak to groups along the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail. The correspondence appears on the letterhead of "Evergreen Farms, Inc. Indianola, Iowa":

"Dear Mr. Burden: ... Now we have never met and probably won't until I get to Missoula. I think it is due you people to have assurance in writing of my self-imposed limitations to the end that 1) Nothing will reflect on the Bikecentennial; 2) I will make no collections from the public in my own behalf or for any causes, nor charge admission for any of the talks requested of me on the Bike Trail; and 3) I will speak in behalf of no candidate for public office or express a preference for any candidate in public."

What Clarence did intend to speak in behalf of — and what he did speak to groups about — was his pet dream of a world without war.

Clarence set out on the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail on May 14, 1976. On his Iowa odyssey in 1973, Pickard's meanderings were followed almost exclusively by Iowans; on the TransAm trip, he enjoyed a national audience. *Washington Post* staff writer Paul Hodge, who reported extensively on the Summer of Cycling, wrote early in May, "Clarence Pickard, an 85-year-old Iowa farmer who was born when the high-wheeled ordinary bicycle was still careening wildly around the American landscape, will be perched atop a sleek 10-speed bike in Yorktown, Va., this Friday for the start of America's Bikecentennial."

"Clarence Pickard, although he has kept in shape running a farm, gardening and biking around Iowa, said he is not as spry as he was in high school in 1908 when he pedaled his bike down into Missouri to 'make my fortune selling vacuum cleaners."

"I pedaled far enough so if I didn't make a go of it no one would know. I didn't ... and had to sell my bike for half price. But it was a clunker, I don't know what kind it was; they didn't have names in those days."

Clarence also told Hodge that he was leaving his 80-year-old wife behind during

the cross-country adventure "because she doesn't like to ride on the handlebars any more."

"After the trip started," wrote his son Charles, "my brother and I were tearing our hair out trying to figure out where Dad would be and when."

Where Clarence was, often, was lost.

Wrote Hodge in the *Post*: "Dressed in an aluminum-painted pith helmet, gift of a high school class in his home town of Indianola, with a Bikecentennial T-shirt, slacks and basketball sneakers, Pickard was the talk of every town he passed through."

"Some of the towns he passed through twice. On Friday, about 30 miles from Jamestown, Pickard was seen pedaling



Peace Corps members Mildred and Clarence in India in the 1960s.



The Pickards at home on the farm in August of 1945, with sons Jack and David enjoying a short leave from the Navy.

tion in the making.

"As Dad contemplated this trip," said Charles Pickard, "I tried to dissuade him, to no avail. As an airline employee it was up to me to get him the passes, and I reluctant-

serenely east along Rte. 5, the old stage-coach road between Williamsburg and Richmond. 'Oh, Oregon's not that way?,' he asked.

"Are you sure? Well, I guess I must have got turned around when I stopped back there."

As he approached the Kentucky border, and his 86th birthday, Clarence told *Register* staff writer Barbara Mack that, although he'd promised his family he wouldn't do it, "I've been riding alone anyhow. This time, I'll try and behave myself."

Riding without companions may not have fazed Clarence, but he did tire of the endless eastern mountains, and their claustrophobic timber cover. He told *Register* staff writer Lori Rotenberk, "I'll be darned happy when I can see a cornfield again. They're not as bad as I used to think."

Chuck Offenburger, who evolved into a popular *Register* columnist and something of an Iowa cycling legend himself, was another staff writer at the paper in the mid-70s.

In one piece, Offenburger wrote about

TRANSAM SILVER

25th anniversary

the occasion when Clarence crossed a toll bridge over the Ohio River into Illinois: "'The sign said the fee was 15 cents per axle,' Pickard said. 'I figured two axles on my bicycle, dropped 30 cents into the basket and got my green light to proceed.



Clarence and his Ford tractor on the farm in the 1960s

"Couldn't he have ridden around the gate and crossed the bridge without paying?"

"'Well, I suppose I could have,' he said. 'But we try not to do sneaky things.'"

On June 15, 1976, Dan Burden received a Western Union Mailgram signed "Clarence L. Pickard, TAE 514 Independent." It contained this brief message: "Have discontinued riding on doctor's advice because of bronchitis. Presently at home of contact C M Pickard MD Columbia Missouri. Letter follows describing illness and plans."

Hard rains had plagued Clarence's early days in Virginia, which is probably what led to his bronchitis. Earlier, Paul Hodge had written that out of all those intrepid souls pedaling through the area during the drenching downpours of May, Clarence Pickard was "wettest of all because he had only an old tarpaulin roll and no rain gear ..."

Suddenly, the media, and almost everyone else, lost track of Clarence.

"Since he wasn't in any condition to talk to reporters," wrote son Jack, "we thought it best to keep him incommunicado for a few days, so it probably did seem that he had just dropped off the face of the earth. He was really reluctant to quit, and repeatedly spoke of re-joining the group after gaining a little strength."

Clarence never did resume the ride. Rather, he chose to adhere to one of his basic tenets: "It's one thing to demonstrate your hardiness, but quite another to demonstrate your foolhardiness."

Reflecting on Clarence's sunset years, his son Charles wrote, "Being something of a celebrity by now, he took part in the start

of a couple of Iowa bike events. At 88, he was stricken with an illness that confounded Jack, an internist, and his associates. He kind of grew out of it, and at 90 was standing up in his good suit, addressing a crowd of about 200 upon receiving an achievement award from Simpson College."

"After the Bikecentennial," added Jack, "I tried to get them (Clarence and Mildred) to take a little house nearby, or a mobile home in Columbia, but never quite sold them on leaving Indianola."

In 1982, Clarence Pickard, 92 years old, was struck and killed by a truck while he was jogging.

"We didn't mourn his passing," Jack wrote, "but celebrated the life he had had, and the lessons he had given us. It saved him the indignity of deterioration."

"We sold the farm to the city of Indianola for a park. A real estate development would have been more profitable, but my brother and I agreed that Pickard Park would serve to keep the name going in Indianola for another generation or two."

"Clarence was the gentlest of fathers," Jack continued. "He never raised his voice and never swore. He was almost painfully fair in both punishment and rewards, yet he had a sense of humor, too."

"Clarence Pickard was a rip-snorter," added Charles, "who would not act his age, some probably said. He would not sit in a rocking chair at 86 and rock slowly back and forth, and I admired him for that. He always seemed to choose adventure and achievement over security and comfort."

In advance of his planned TransAmerica crossing, Clarence had expressed hopes that the ride would draw hordes of young people to bicycle across the country. Pickard thought such an experience would lead the young to "becoming independent and learning to know themselves, which was Socrates' message, for then they cannot be false to any man."

As the ride drew nearer, Donald Kaul asked Clarence if he had any apprehensions.

"None at all," he retorted. "You have to be some place when your time comes; you might as well be on the road."

He did add, however, that, "I'll have to be honest with you. Lately I've been getting

a little winded when I sprint."

In his "Over the Coffee" column of May 18, 1976, Kaul wrote that he viewed Clarence Pickard as a "curious combination of contradictions, at once wise and even worldly, yet innocent and trusting."

"For example, his lack of preparation for the [Bikecentennial] trip was almost total. Just when you think there's no irony to the man, you learn that he once published a satiric article on learning to smoke. It was during an anti-smoking craze in the 20s, and magazines were running articles on how to quit the nasty habit. The thrust of Pickard's piece, obviously, was how hard it was to start; a delightful comic premise."

"He's a humble, dignified man, yet he's also a ham who loves a crowd."

Kaul reported that Clarence credited his longevity in part to a turn-of-the-century health faddist named Fletcher.

"He was a quack in all but one thing," said Pickard. "He said it didn't make much difference what you ate, so long as you chewed it well. I've always followed that."

On the same day that Kaul's column appeared, May 18, the *Register* ran an editorial entitled "Proud of Pickard," which said, in part: "There's something wonderful about an 85-year-old man setting out on a 4,200-mile bike ride across

the country.

"The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas understood the vitality of men like Clarence Pickard when he wrote:

"'Do not go gentle into that good night.

"'Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

"'Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'"

"We're proud of Pickard."

So are we. ●



PHOTO BY SCOTT BREWER

Michael McCoy is a contributing editor for *Adventure Cyclist* magazine.