

CLARENCE PICKARD

In 1976, an 85-year-old retired Iowa farmer exuded the “can-do” spirit of youthful optimism

IN THE LORE OF BIKECENTENNIAL, the name Clarence Pickard resonates with Heartland hardiness, a youthful vigor, and outlook extending far into old age.

In 1973, *Des Moines Register* feature writer John Karras and the paper’s “Over the Coffee” columnist Donald Kaul, both avid cyclists, agreed to pedal their bicycles across the great state of Iowa and report on what they saw and experienced. John and Donald belatedly invited readers to join in the fun six weeks in advance, so “only” 300 showed up in Sioux City for the late-August ride. (Interestingly, John and Donald would both be members of the Missoula-to-Jackson Hole “Old West” tour group led by Greg Siple in 1976.)

One of the more intriguing individuals to appear ready to ride in 1973 was Clarence Pickard, an 83-year-old retired farmer from Indianola, Iowa. Clarence admitted 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 step-through 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 participation in cycling in the Corn State. That relatively quiet “Great Six-Day Bicycle Ride” evolved into the *Register’s* immensely popular Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa, or RAGBRAI.

According to the RAGBRAI website, “Pickard’s attire for the [1973] ride was a long-sleeved shirt, trousers, woolen long underwear, and a silver pith helmet.”

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, MD, said 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 the kids. All four children went to high school in Indianola, then attended Simpson College in the same town.

In the late 1960s, at ages 78 and 73, respectively, Clarence and his wife Mildred answered the call for retired farmers to join the Peace Corps. Following their two-year stint in India, the couple returned to Iowa, where Clarence set out on a speaking tour. He was determined to convince his fellow seniors they still had a lot of life to live and experience to give.

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 celebration in the making.

“As Dad contemplated this trip,” said Clarence’s other son, Charles, “I tried to dissuade him, to no avail. As an airline employee, it was up to me to get him the passes, and I reluctantly agreed.”

In advance of his planned TransAmerica crossing, Clarence expressed hopes that the ride would draw hordes of young people to bicycle across the country. He 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 Clarence’s May 14 departure date drew nearer, Donald asked him if he had any apprehensions. “None at all,” he retorted. “You have to be someplace when your time comes; you might as well be on the road.” He did add, however, “I’ll have to be honest with you. Lately, I’ve been getting a little winded when I sprint.”

On his Iowa odyssey in 1973, Clarence’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, Virginia, this Friday for the start

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

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



Eighty-five-year-old Clarence Pickard clutches his silver pith helmet while speaking to reporters at the inauguration of Bikecentennial at Jamestown Festival Park in Virginia.

of America’s Bikecentennial.”

Clarence told Hodge he was leaving his 80-year-old wife behind “because she doesn’t like to ride on the handlebars any more.”

“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, Clarence was the talk of every town he passed through,” wrote Paul.

“Some of the towns he passed through twice. On Friday, about 30 miles from Jamestown, Clarence was seen pedaling serenely east along Rte. 5, the old stagecoach road between Williamsburg and Richmond. ‘Oh, Oregon’s not that way?’, he asked. ‘Are

riding on doctor’s advice because of bronchitis. Presently at home of contact C M Pickard MD Columbia Missouri.’”

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.”

In 1982, Clarence Pickard, 92 years old, was struck and killed by a truck while out jogging. “We didn’t mourn his passing,” Jack wrote, “but celebrated the life he had had, and the lessons he had given us.”

“We’re proud of Pickard,” wrote Donald, in closing one of his columns about the man. So are we. •