

Long Day for a Good Cause - May 12, 2007 150 Miles for the American Red Cross



For the third year, The American Red Cross is holding its “Heroes Campaign” fundraiser in May. After two years of kayak trips for fundraisers, I decided to do something different. The first year, when I kayaked the length of the Zumbro, I did not know if it was possible. I wanted a similar challenge this year. I considered a one-day trip across the waistline of the state, about 150 miles. I planned the route, but realized it was a bad route in many ways. I decided to ride a similar distance on the beautiful rural roads and state bike trails of SE MN and SW Wisconsin. I rode on Saturday, May 12

The challenge is to raise \$1000. As of the day of the trip, I had just over \$7000 pledged and hoped to raise the total to \$7500 to make it \$50 per mile.

My bike was better prepared than I. This spring has been hectic, so I have not been able to train nearly enough. The last time I rode 150 miles in a day was in 1976. It was with great uncertainty that I planned a single day trip, but knew I could finish in a second day if necessary.

The trip was planned to include roads between Rochester and Fountain, MN, the length of the Root River State Trail, state road 16 to LaCrescent, across to LaCrosse, then the Wisconsin Trail System to Sparta and Elroy. As the date approached, we had predictions of Easterly winds, not rare, but a little unusual this

time of year. In order not to have to fight headwinds, I decided to ride the course in reverse.

My co-worker, Ken Parker, is a native of Louisiana. He is a big fan of the Red Cross and very grateful to them for the help they have given his family in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. He gave a substantial contribution and offered to drive my support vehicle. I gratefully accepted his offer.

We set out Friday evening and drove to Mauston WI where we stayed at a Best Western Inn. We got up at 5am after a bit less than 6 hours of sleep, had a big breakfast at the Country Kitchen, and drove to Elroy. I was on the trail at 6:39 a.m.

The Sparta Elroy trail is celebrating its 40th year, an early entry in the Rails-to-Trails movement. It is historic and a big destination, but for mysterious reasons, it has never been paved. It has a crushed rock surface which is not unpleasant, but it is slow. My speed was about 3-4 miles slower than on a paved surface. In some places it is pock-marked by hoof-prints from horses. Other than those two issues, it was pleasant enough. There are 3 RR tunnels of varying lengths – very DARK! I saw a number of critters along the way including a pileated woodpecker, and a skunk (I stopped to give him plenty of time to get off the trail as I approached, then rode quickly past.)

Sparta was just over 33 miles. Ken met me in there, where I ate and drank a bit, then continued on to LaCrosse, another 21+ miles. I covered the first 56 miles in 4 hours, with a rolling average speed of 16.25 mph. I felt a bit nauseous from fighting the rolling resistance of the trail. I worried if my digestion would hold up to maintain nutrition and hydration for the trip.

Once I left the trailhead north of LaCrosse I zoomed along on the paved roads. What a treat! I felt better immediately. The weather was getting warmer, the sun was out and the easterly winds were picking up speed. From the trailhead through town, across the river to LaCrescent was about 10 miles. I rolled past Ken where he was waiting and onto MN 16, which winds through the Root River Valley. It is beautiful, and the road is very nice in most parts. It is a 2 lane 55 mph highway, but much of it has a very nice shoulder. Where the shoulder was crumbly, the traffic was pretty light, so the ride was quite nice overall. There were several large hills, but I was feeling good and didn't have difficulty with them.

I rolled into Houston (86 miles completed) at 1:10 p.m. Ken was waiting at Loken's Saw Mill Lodge. I ate and drank quite a bit and took a 10 min nap and rested a bit longer. As I prepared to take off, the proprietor of the Lodge, Eileen Loken, came out. We chatted a bit and she asked if I planned to ride the trail from Houston. I knew the DNR had approved funds for the extension from Rushford, but did not know that was completed. She is an advocate for extending the trail further down the valley. It is a big plus for tourism. Eileen is also a Mayo employee, a recovery room nurse, who farms and manages two businesses with her husband, a native of

Houston. We thanked her for the tip and headed off for the Root River State Trail, which now extends from Houston to Lanesboro, then on to both Fountain and Preston.

The trail is beautiful and very natural. Also it has a vastly superior surface compared with Wisconsin trails (And no charge for a trail pass! Keep your cycle-tourism dollars in MN!). I was cruising. I saw deer, hawks, raccoon, many birds, turtles, one small snake (which may have been a young Timber Rattler, though I didn't get a very good look at his head). The river is beautiful through here. (It is less beautiful below Houston, where the Corps of Engineers has channeled and straightened it making it less hospitable to wildlife and less clear. I didn't see any eagles (last year I saw >50 eagles paddling 75 miles on the Root River).

Ken met me in Rushford, 10 miles up the trail. I didn't need food or rest there, so we both headed for Lanesboro, another 18 miles up the trail. I arrived there at 3:40, a bit more tired and a bit concerned about my bike which had developed a squeak in the left crank, and a click in the right crank or pedal (it did hold up for the remainder of the ride and I still haven't had a chance to look at it). I rested a while before heading out. While sitting in the car, Mark Wilhelm walked by with his daughter. They have a house in Lanesboro. We had a nice chat. I headed for Fountain into some rain clouds. Just out of town it started to rain, sprinkles, then a moderate rain with thunder and lightning, then it stopped - not bad!. There were a few sprinkles for the remainder of the trip, but overall I was spared much heavy rain. I learned long ago that I am not water soluble, and anyone who had watched the Tour de France knows that bikes are pretty impervious to rain except for the cooling effect on the rider and the effects on traction and rolling resistance.

The ride from Lanesboro is a 3% grade for quite a few of its 12 miles. On a day when you're fresh, it's not bad at all. After 114 miles it was a bit taxing. I was pretty tired when I got to Fountain. Again, Ken was waiting with many options of food and drink for me (what a guy!). I rested a bit in the car, knowing that I was almost done – 24 miles to go.

From Fountain, the roads are gorgeous SE MN county roads and one stretch of MN 30, also a nice road. The 17 miles to Chatfield was quite hilly, but beautiful. Dusk was approaching. I cruised the mile-long downhill into Chatfield knowing I was nearly done. Ken met me on the East edge of town on County Rd 2. With only a few miles to go, I didn't need to rest. I asked Ken to meet me 6.8 miles up the road where I would finish exactly 150 miles. He took off and so did I. There is a BIG climb on Co 2 going west. I knew that. I didn't know that they had recently stripped the asphalt from the road. The hill climb was nightmarish. The gravel in most places was wet and sticky from the recent rain. It stuck to my tires and clogged in my brakes, under my head tube and behind my bottom bracket. The rolling resistance and the resistance through chokepoints were enormous. I had to stop numerous times to take off my wheels and unclog the mud. I considered calling Ken numerous times, but thought "Just finish it out!" I stopped with 2 miles to go

and felt like walking, but I knew that riding would get me there much faster, so I got back on the bike.

I finally rolled up to Ken where he was stopped, precisely at the 150 mile mark (see photo) at 7:10, with the sun low on the horizon. I was tired. We took a few photos and headed home. When we got there, I thanked Ken profusely for his great support and set about putting things away. I cleaned my bike first, knowing it would be horrible to get that muck off if it dried. I threw my clothes in the wash, rinsed off helmet, shoes and a few more bike parts, took a shower, and after a few phone calls, was asleep by 8:30. I slept well.