

JohnnyRide 2014

A View From the Back of the Pack

Ellen Durand Olson

The JohnnyRiders didn't seem to mind the late start. Sharing hugs and high-fives, sipping coffee, readying bikes, and making a last dash to the bathroom, no one noticed me standing on the front porch, officiously clanging an iron triangle to get their attention. Eventually they did, and slowly gathered at the steps to hear a few words of welcome. As I looked out at their familiar and loyal faces, a heart-swelling lump of gratitude rose in my throat, and my voice was not quite my own when I spoke.

This brief welcome before each JohnnyRide brings it all home to me: the culmination of months of planning; the commitment of time and effort by riders; the generous contributions of supporters; the time and effort of all who come to the potluck year after year and bring their cheery goodwill and a dish-to-pass. Little wonder – that lump in my throat!

The riders listened politely to my halting words. Then, with whoops and hollers, wide grins, fresh legs, and a shared spirit of purpose and adventure, they turned their bikes around and pushed off on JohnnyRide 2014. It was a stirring sight to see the plucky band of riders, now helmeted, gloved – and this year wearing snazzy lime-yellow safety vests donated by A-P Construction – ride out the front gate. (Thank you for the vests, Jack Webber!)

Before I even got on my purple, secondhand, 20-year old bike, the pack of riders was well on its way. No matter, I'm always one of the last to finish. Every year I offer a plausible reason why I'm always last (if not the more truthful and obvious reason – I'm just slow).

As I pedaled out the long driveway, MaryFrances Evans and daughters Frances (Frannie) and Audrey of Des Moines drove in. We had expected them the night before and had wondered at their absence. All was well, reported MaryFrances, except that Frannie had eaten a “bad taco” and

suffered some miserable consequences. They almost didn't come, but the girls had insisted, and here they were at last – the very best of reasons to stop for long hugs and some visiting before I continued.

JohnnyRiders often face a stiff north wind for the first four-mile leg to County Road G. This year was no different. Struggling up the first hill, I thought, “Lordy, this is going to be hard!” But after turning east on G, the wind calmed, the sun prevailed, and the road stretched ahead past farms, fields, and woods burnished with the beautiful reds and golds of a Wisconsin fall day. Now, my breath almost normal and the first substantial effort behind me, I thought, “Ahhh, this is going to be fun!” Far ahead, small, brightly clad figures pedaled steadily out of sight. It would be the last I saw of most of them for the rest of the ride.

Back at the house, the kitchen crew of *Chargé d'affaires* Anna Webber, Jack Webber, and Jennifer and Ahmad Bayoumi, had been scrambling for hours. At 8 am that morning, two men had arrived to set up a huge 30 x 50 rented tent between the house and the barn. (A similar, albeit much stealthier arrangement had worked beautifully for our surprise 50th wedding anniversary celebration last May.) The persistent wind made for a challenging set-up, but before long, two white tent peaks pointed skyward. “Shall we put up the side flaps?” one of the men asked. “No, thanks, we'll take care of it,” Anna replied. Later, though, the kitchen crew waged a hilarious battle to secure the large, heavy side flaps against the strong wind: *whappa, whappa, whap!*

While JohnnyRiders pedaled on, the kitchen crew worked steadily to connect snaking electrical cords to appliances, set up serving tables and chairs, organize the serving tables, fill several coolers, welcome new arrivals, and attend to the myriad details necessary to feed 50-60 hungry folks. Virginia and Dan James had arrived a little early for the picnic and pitched right in to help, as they always do.

By the time JohnnyRiders began returning through the entrance gate, the scene was very different from when they left. Bobbing blue balloons lined the short road to the tent. Clusters of red, white and blue balloons festooned the tent corners. Tables were graced with heavy (hopefully

wind-resistant) vases of flowers. An impressive display of 8 x10 photos of all the JohnnyRide scholarship winners to date hung against a tent wall. Serving tables held pans, pots, bowls, and trays of delicious eats. Jack Webber was cooking to perfection dozens of bratwursts donated again this year by Olson's Meats of Woodville. The table of donations for the raffle was heaped high. And the many folks who'd come for the potluck and raffle were visiting inside and outside the tent, some looking for sunshine, and others hiding from the wind. The kitchen crew had pulled off the finale again.

I was a long time from seeing any of this, of course. Pedaling a little beyond the halfway mark of Glenwood City, I felt the need for a little sugar boost. I looked in vain for a sag wagon and its bounty of treats. Sag wagon drivers Pat Keppel and my husband Bob had passed me earlier, but I hadn't seen either for a while. Ahead, about midway up "that big hill" my brother John dreads every year, I saw John and his son Peter taking a break. "Do you have anything to eat?" I hollered. "Well, yes, I think I do," John hollered back. I pulled alongside as John dug deep in a little pack attached to his handlebars. "Here," he said, handing me a tiny, mangled and ancient piece of wrapped chocolate. "This has been in my pack quite a while..." The wrapper and the desiccated piece of chocolate – once a treat-size Milky Way – had become forever one, but as Peter and John rode off, I ate it anyway.

A half hour later, I saw Bob's sag wagon parked at an intersection ahead. Sitting in the passenger seat was "Radioman" Ellis Durand, Peter's son. This was Ellis's second or third time riding JohnnyRide. Each year he rode beside his dad for several miles at the beginning of the ride before getting into a sag wagon. This year, he again rode several miles before he climbed into Bob's sag wagon to assume the heavy responsibility as "Radioman," exchanging location updates with Pat Keppel's sag wagon. Bob and Ellis had made an unscheduled stop in Glenwood City to buy Ellis a box of Skittles. "My *favorite* candy, Uncle Bob," Ellis said. What better reason for the brief absence of one sag wagon?

Also relaxing around the truck before tackling the last four miles were Mike and Michelle Miller, Mike McLellan, Marie Baird, and Peter and John. Now, his break over and his communication duties dispatched, Ellis decided to ride the last four miles. “Not far now,” someone said as the bunch rode off.

The picnic and raffle festivities were well underway when I finally rode in. The only rider behind me, somewhere, was the indefatigable Patricia Durand, who often stops to pick berries or to look more closely at a roadside bush. No hurrying for Patricia – she just enjoys the adventure.

Peter Durand again presided as MC. John did his best to record the proceedings on a computer but admittedly fell short of Julie Durand’s usual competence. Julie had stayed home to help daughter Giselle get ready for her first Homecoming date. As Peter was also anxious to get home for Giselle’s Homecoming, the raffle proceeded apace. Specifics of who won what are incomplete, but the “show” was good-humored and entertaining. Our own Vanna White, disguised as MaryFrances in sweatshirt and tights, silently pointed and rotated each raffle item with flourish and style.

Raffle highlights: David Durand actually declined the usually-most-coveted-item – the signed Green Bay Packers football. (REALLY? He did?) But then, no one wanted the signed picture of former Vikings quarterback Christian Ponder either. On a second drawing, however, the Packers football was awarded to a regular JohnnyRide supporter and a friend of Marilyn Durand, who promised she would deliver it, really. Ellis Durand, applauded as the youngest rider, won the “Kids Mixed Bag” filled with treats and games. There were many other unique and lovely raffle items, and except for the Christian Ponder picture that no one wanted, all were won and happily taken home by someone. (We’ll do better record-keeping this year.)

Bees – lots of sweat bees – also enjoyed the potluck. They buzzed around everywhere. Folks seated would suddenly jump up, folks standing would suddenly wave their arms and dart aside. The jumping, waving, and darting were often simultaneous, so the gathering at times

looked especially lively. Joyce Ripley was stung on her tongue while eating a bratwurst. Ouch! She remained calm and good-natured while holding an ice pack to her mouth during the disorganized quest for an antihistamine.

Mike Durand was the first to finish the ride “by a country mile.” Chuck Fick and Marilyn Durand were likely close behind. Jannyce Barnes, sporting one of the new safety vests, walked up to Country Road G and back, a total of 8 miles. But whenever and however the riders finished, their spirit and goodwill always carry the JohnnyRide day.

Thanks to very generous donations by Scalzo Hospitality, our Canadian cousins Ernest and Gloria Martin, Peter and Julie Durand, and all who contributed to the scholarship fund, this year’s donations exceeded \$4,500. This amount is about \$1,000 more than recent years. At 2014 year’s end, the JohnnyRide investment fund stood at \$36,590.67. The JohnnyRide checking account contained \$ \$4,942.08. Later this year we will pay out the 2015 scholarships and fund JohnnyRide 2015 from the checking account.

We inch ever closer to our goal of having \$50,000 in the JohnnyRide investment fund. In theory, when we have \$50,000 in that fund, it will earn enough investment income to award five \$500 scholarships every year – *without* our annual JohnnyRide. Reaching that goal will be quite an accomplishment, but it will take this year’s 12th JohnnyRide and probably a few more before we get there. Meantime, with our 2015 scholarship awards, our JohnnyRides will have already provided more than \$15,000 in scholarship aid to more than 40 students.

Thank you, one and all, for all that you have done to support JohnnyRide. You have sustained this effort through 11 years, a feat that is nothing short of amazing. Your hearts are truly huge.

I hope to see you this September 19 for JohnnyRide 2015!