

## WELLNESS (CONTINUED)

*From the Back of the Pack*

By Karen Johnson

The inaugural River Ramble Ride in Mankato took place on the beautiful second Sunday in October this year. The ride led cyclists onto paved trails and quiet country roads that wound through the river valleys, farmland and rolling hills in south central Minnesota. The tour had two mileage options: a 12-mile loop including the beautiful Minneopa State Park and trails; and the longer Lake Crystal loop (42 miles) that took riders through the quiet little towns of Rapidan, Lake Crystal and Judson. For the more energetic cyclist, both loops were an option for a total of 54 miles.

The ride started at Land of Memories Park where delicious local treats were served such as raspberry crumble and oatmeal cookies along with grapes, apples and pears, all organic and/or locally produced. The music at the park was a delightful mix of blues, Cajun and original tunes performed by the lively quartet, Organic Cowboys, a fitting name for a community bike ride focused on supporting healthy living through cycling (and walking) in outstate Minnesota.

The first rest stop for all participants was the Minneopa State Park where a short hike to a walking bridge provided a view of the lovely Minneopa Falls. More treats were served by friendly volunteers to the music of the Fabulous Fatheads who played new grass (sprung from bluegrass) and acoustic versions of classic rock. With just 3.5 miles under our belt we had plenty of spring in our legs for a few dances.

From the state park we circled the outskirts of Mankato with terrific vistas of the Blue Earth River and countryside along the Minneopa and the Red Jacket Trails. The smell of fall was in the air with rustling autumn leaves and gentle breezes

as we passed through woodlands and farmland with soaring bald eagles observing the two-wheeled troops below.

Rest stop number two was at Rapidan Dam County Park where more friendly folks served us several varieties of pies including blueberry, rhubarb, candy apple, pumpkin and riverberry (a combination of local berries). The Rapidan Dam Cafe across the park made 135 pies the day before in preparation for the ride. There was speculation that all the pies were made by one woman who ran the cafe. This time our rest stop involved polka and swing dancing to the Bockfest Duo who jetted in from New Ulm, with Scott Sparlin on button accordion and Anton 'Tony' Berg on concertina.

After leaving Rapidan, the route wove around several lakes into the town of Lake Crystal. Local volunteers welcomed us with helpful tips about critical turns and area landmarks. After a brief stop to dangle our feet off a dock on Crystal Lake, we headed north on Country Road 20 where we caught a sweet tail wind through the corn country southwest of Mankato. Just before riding into Judson we sailed down an elevator shaft hill where speeds got up to 42 miles per hour according to the officer at the intersection below. He commented on the many smiles on cyclists' faces after the thrilling downhill.

We cycled through the little village of Judson and emerged onto Judson Bottom Road through the forests along the Minnesota River to Minnemishinona Falls. At this final rest stop, the Rain Dogs played gritty porch music including blues, blue grass, jazz and folk. Most



notable was a blue grass rendition of the Beatles song, Come Together. We danced on the wooden deck overlooking the park and feasted on more plentiful treats as our group gathered together to ride the last 8 miles. We had magnificent views of the Minnesota River as we cruised along newly constructed trails that took us through Sibley Park to the Land of Memories ride start. While visiting with ride organizers, we learned that 1500 cyclists had registered and rode on this perfect fall day. We were delighted to hear that the River Ramble will be hosted annually in Mankato as a sister ride to the St. Paul Classic. As one member of our group declared, "I think this was the best community-sponsored ride I've ever been on!"

We ended the day with great appreciation for the efforts of the ride organizers: the Greater Mankato Bike and Walk Advocates and the Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota who provided miles of great bicycling on a fabulous route with full ride support and a bounty of baked goods, organic fruits and freshly brewed Peace coffee. To top it off we were treated to a progressive outdoor concert of eight musical acts that showcased fabulous local talent on a perfect October day. A precious memory from the "Land of Memories" to hold onto during the chilly months to come! ☻