

Ride to Survive - Goreville Illinois 26 June 2004

The Shawnee National Forest is part of the oldest mountain Range in North America, the Ozarks. Split by the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, Southern Illinois a.k.a. Little Egypt, is another world. Settled by the French and later folks from the Carolinas from 1700 many towns predate even St Louis. Revolutionary War battles were fought here, the farthest west of any pitched fight. Fact is that Shawneetown National Bank refused to bankroll a little settlement on Lake Michigan, as it would not amount to much. Well that turned out to be Chicago. Well, this is the real downstate Illinois and it is one of the best places to bike in the nation. I grew up here, amongst the hills and valleys. This is apple and peach, and now wine country.

Local bike clubs and shops sponsor this ride in conjunction with the Lance Armstrong Foundation. It is a fully supported ride with sag and wrench. Routes varied from the usual short to what came out to the climax ride of 102 miles. Advertised as "insane" the hills both up and down are something to experience. Hills, you think hills. The Cheaha come close and I believe that this ride is more intense. Of the 102 miles, less than 10 miles were anything approaching flat. There were numerous climbs approaching 15 or more percent grades.

Much of this route follows the 1976 Bike centennial cross-country route. I had much to do with setting up this course and looked forward to riding on roads I had not seen in 25 years. Some of the great sections included Water Valley, a virtual roller coaster climbing all the way to Alto Pass for a total gain of 800 feet. Then down a road dropping about 400 feet and a 3 1/2 mile 800 foot climb to the second highest point in Illinois, Bald Knob. Atop this is a large 80-foot white cross that is visible for many miles. You can see Missouri and Kentucky from this vantage.

On ridge roads, we rode north towards Pomona, known in my youth as a hippie hangout, now a hub for great local vineyards. Climbing up Jerusalem Church Road we rode up a series of climbs very similar to Lock 15, steep. After a couple more downs and climbs liken to Lock 15, we had gone 55 miles and now the easy part was on us. Following the Bike centennial route, we rode south of Carbondale and began the return climb into the Shawnee National Forest. At the Smiley Face Water tower we had climbed back some 500 feet. Descending down, up and the down nearly 400 feet we rode into Makanda and Giant City Park. Round the park we went ascended numerous 300-foot hills, and descending back to Makanda, we faced the Wall.

The Wall is but a short 1/2 mile hill climbing 250 feet, 180 of that in the first 1/4 mile. Years ago we challenged to see who could ride up that in the big ring. Older and perhaps smarter, I used the little ring. Finally back atop ridges we rollercoasted the next twenty miles though Crab Orchard Wildlife Refuge to Devils Kitchen Lake. Less

than 15 miles to go, I stopped to assist with the fourth flat of our group. We turned south onto Wolf Creek Road. I forgot that we had to climb again so many more times. Forget the Step Machine at the gym this is Momma Natures' overkill. Up 150, down 100, up 150, down 100, keeping this up for miles we turn to Goreville keeping up the routine. Some folks complained that the route was too hilly, no way just wusses! So just, ride in the cornfield next time.

I will ride this again, assuming they use this type of challenging course.