PITH HELMET PREMONITION

<u>In Memory of Clarence Pickard ,</u> India 34 Volunteer Specialist—Died December 27, 1982 (This posting dated 3 August 2011 thanks to Ruth Alliband, India 34 Volunteer)

Clarence and Mildred Pickard in Indianola, Iowa, 1976

The Oliver Tractor Company used to reward solid customers with white pith helmets. Indianola farmer and retired extension agent Clarence Pickard must once have purchased an Oliver because he owned one of those helmets. It was to come in handy when he volunteered for Peace Corps service at the age of 76.

In 1966 Clarence wrote Iowa Governor Harold Hughes and volunteered for some useful task he could perform for his state or country in his retirement years. The Governor and his aides couldn't think of a suitable unpaid state advisory position, so they suggested perhaps Clarence might wish to apply to the Peace Corps. Clarence was positively thrilled by that off-hand suggestion. His wife, Mildred, was dubious, but probably not for the first time in their life together his enthusiasm swept her along and they both applied.

The Peace Corps recruitment office was apparently impressed with his credentials—master's degree in agricultural economics (Iowa State University—1922) and years of practical experience as an Iowa farmer and county extension agent. And Mildred was a retired schoolteacher. The Pickards were invited to a program training volunteers to be stationed at Indian agricultural extension offices in the state of Uttar Pradesh. That pith helmet had foreshadowed one of the Pickards' greatest adventures.

Clarence and Mildred were from my home state and were in my Peace Corps training group, India 34, at State University of New York at Albany in the fall of 1966. They struggled through the 5-hour language lessons with patient little Mrs. Deyani, a rural woman from the foothills of the Himalayas. The final month of our training was at an Indian training center for extension workers, Asafpur, UP. By now we knew more of what we were getting into. Mildred was quietly doubtful; we did see her perk up and become more hopeful when our India training site was visited by Charlotte Wiser, a missionary woman who had lived for seventy-five years in a North Indian village. Copies of Charlotte and William Wiser's book *Behind Mud Walls* had been given to each of us as a reference resource. Mildred must have reasoned that if Charlotte Wiser could thrive in India she stood a chance too. But it was Clarence's optimism which buoyed them through the grueling 3-month training session in which India 34 lost a third of the trainees who had entered the program.

The Northern Regional Office of Peace Corps India took extra measures to see that the Pickards remained healthy and safe. Through tips from the staff, Mildred was able to find familiar cooking ingredients at venerable comestible stores established during the British Raj on Connaught Circus in New Delhi. The Pickards were assigned to Bulandshahr, about 40 miles southeast of Delhi by good roads. Clarence became friends with the Block Development Officer there and began working with farmers interested in raising hybrid chickens from Ranikhet (near Almora), of the HyLine lineage bred in the 1940s by Henry B. Wallace of Iowa.

Research by Peace Corps India staff determined that at the time the Pickards served in the Peace Corps, Clarence was officially the oldest volunteer to serve in the Peace Corps. Most of our group were in their '20s; the Pickards were fifty years older. Our attitude was to adopt Clarence and Mildred as our mascots. But Clarence believed he could boost our morale and contribute to our success as well. The Peace Corps office had responded to volunteer complaints that we hadn't received enough technical skills by organizing a short course for our group at Pantnagar University about six weeks after we had been assigned to our sites. I think that high on the staff agenda was to check on our emotional well-being. Bill O'Connor, Peace Corps' Assistant Director for the Northern Region threw out an open-ended question, asking what had surprised us most at our new sites. Clarence spoke up: "What I find so interesting is how many monkeys there are…" The whole group howled!! He continued, "Why at home, we have to PAY to see monkeys in the zoo. Here we just see them along the sides of the road and in the trees…" At a time when several volunteers were asking whether they had signed on for Mission Impossible, Clarence's wide-eyed wonder cheered us all.

All of us were experiencing the bewilderment of residents at our sites: many Indians wondered why we had come. Clarence expressed this at the training session: "Yes, they wonder about us. I'll bet they wonder what awful thing we did back in the US to cause us to be transported over here. 'Look,' they'll say, 'There are some black men. I hear they have a lot of trouble in the United States. And why over there there is an OLD guy!! I bet they wanted to get rid of him because he was too old to work…'" Again, we howled. He had hit the nail on the head. I'll bet anything that there are still people in my Peace Corps village who are trying to figure out why we were sent there…

Clarence also amplified for staff and the rest of us a story Frank Miller, a black volunteer from Houston, TX, had told when Clarence was present. Frank was outgoing and personable, but had experienced some racist questioning in larger towns near his village site. And then an event occurred which changed the way his village regarded him: Frank was stationed at a town near Benares right beside the Ganges River. One day he was near the river when he heard several people calling frantically. A girl who couldn't swim had stepped into a hole on the river bottom and was being dragged downriver by the current. Frank ran to the bank and dived in. He was a strong swimmer and had taken the Red Cross lifeguard training. He reached the area where the flailing girl had gone under and began diving to search for her. He found her and dragged her to the bank, where he performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until she could breathe on her own. The villagers had never seen anything like it; from that moment in that little corner of India Frank was a hero.

Clarence had another premonition that came true. Back in the 1950s he and Mildred had hired a local builder to remodel their house in Indianola. That builder was my cousin Wanda's husband, Roy Knight. Clarence asked Roy to fashion a little niche into the dry wall of the living room. Roy built an arched recessed shelf, and then asked Clarence what he planned to use it for. "Oh, that's for my idol," Clarence said. After we had all returned from the Peace Corps, Terry and I went to visit Clarence and Mildred in Indianola. We saw that a beautiful carved sandalwood statue of the Buddha had come to rest in the niche!

The Peace Corps was not Clarence's last adventure. Riding a wave of enthusiasm for the *Des Moines Register's* Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa, he bought a ten-speed bicycle in 1973 and showed up at the western border of the state along with all the other bikers. Two of the Des Moines Register's star writers, Donald Kaul and John Karras, remembered that day in a column they co-authored:

> "He (Clarence) was a source of some amusement when he showed up at Council Bluffs for the beginning of the first RAGBRAI ride. There was his silver pith helmet, for one thing, and his black, high-top tennis shoes, and his silly bike—a

women's model weighing about 45 pounds. He weighed 100 pounds and that was with the layers of clothes that he habitually wore to protect himself from the heat.

Yes, to protect himself from the heat. The first RAGBRAI was to be the hottest we've ever had. It was in the upper 90s day after day—more than 100 degrees out on the road over the concrete and asphalt—and Clarence was buttoned up to his neck and wrists.

He knew next to nothing about long-distance biking. He didn't even know how to shift the gears on his 10-speed bike. He'd just heard about the ride and decided to come along.

He had bought the bike just a day or two before the ride. We asked him how far he had ridden. 'Around the block,' he said. We knew without a doubt that he'd never make it. We had been practicing for months and weren't sure we would make it. We gave him 20 miles at the outside.

His biking style could best be described as majestic. He sat atop his silly bicycle, not really seeming part of it, and pedaled along slowly. We'd never seen anyone bike so slowly without falling over sideways. As a matter of face, he did fall over sideways—frequently. But he never hurt himself. 'I always look for a soft grassy spot when I start to go,' he said.

He finished the first day, a hellish day of heat and hills. We looked in on him that evening in his room at a Storm Lake motel. He was lying fully clothed, that wisp of a man, on his back on the bed, hardly breathing, his hands folded on his chest. 'He's dead,' one of us whispered. It was only a matter of time, we thought.

But day after day, at the very end of the day, there he was.

It was a relatively short ride that year—we hadn't yet figured out how to turn a 350-mile-wide state into a 500-mile ride—but we had one bear of a day, Des Moines to Williamsburg, more than a hundred miles. There was no way that Clarence could do 100 miles in a day, we knew that. He didn't bike fast enough.

He got up before sunrise that day and started out. All of us passed him on the road and shouted our encouragement. You couldn't ride with him for any length of time; he was too slow. When we got to town, we set up a late watch for him. Finally darkness fell, and he arrived to the cheers of the crowd. It seems he'd inadvertently taken a detour along Interstate 80 near Newton because the blacktop shoulder had seemed so inviting. A state trooper had interceded, telling him bicycles were not allowed on the Interstate. Fortunately a Des Moines Register reporter happened along and gave Clarence a ride to the charted course west of Sully.

Clarence observed, 'It's a lot easier to get on the Interstate than it is to get off.' He had some further comments: 'With all of the elaborate grading, it is a shame that some provision was not made for a bike trail. If the Interstate system is to be expanded, the design should include a four-foot strip within the right-of-way for bicycles. You have to popularize a thing before people will pay taxes to support it.' (And that was one of the purposes for the great bicycle ride…)

We've always thought that Pickard, as much as anyone, made RAGBRAI. People felt that if this frail-looking 83-year-old man could bike across the state, they could too.

Pickard said later that he had joined the ride in hopes of demonstrating that age need not end activity and demonstrate it he did. The ride made him an instant Iowa folk hero, and for several years afterward he traveled frequently around the state to give talks to many groups, chief among them groups of elderly.

He preached a doctrine of fitness and nutrition, and lived it as well. Well into his late 80s, he jogged at least a half-mile nightly before retiring.

He never accepted the notion that older people should be unseen and unheard. Near 90, Pickard applied for a job with the city of Indianola and was told by the interviewer that he seemed a little old for the position. 'I was quite put out by that,' Pickard said.

He never rode another complete RAGBRAI, but he did ride in several bikeathons around the state in the late 1970s—always very slowly, frequently getting lost." – *Des Moines Register*, December 28, 1982

Clarence did have one other major biking adventure: in the Bicentennial year of 1976, he joined 4,100 other riders for the Bikecentennial Ride. He flew to Virginia with his bicycle and joined the riders in Yorktown, Virginia. Clarence made his way westward on the trail, sometimes sleeping on the ground, sometimes in a motel. At times he rode in the sag wagon for a stretch. He carried with him a change of clothes, an air mattress, a sleeping bag, a few spare bicycle parts and, of course, wore his silver pith helmet. Clarence made it as far as the Father of Waters, the Mississippi. . By this time his breathing was labored; he had a touch of pneumonia. His physician son Jack of Columbia, Missouri, and a concerned Mildred met him in St Genevieve, Missouri and convinced him to leave the rest of the ride to others. He was in his 86th summer that year.

Five and a half years later at the age of 92, he was crossing Third Street near his home on December 27, 1982 when he was struck by a pick-up truck driven by a 20-year-old man. He passed away a couple of hours later at Iowa Methodist Hospital in Des Moines.