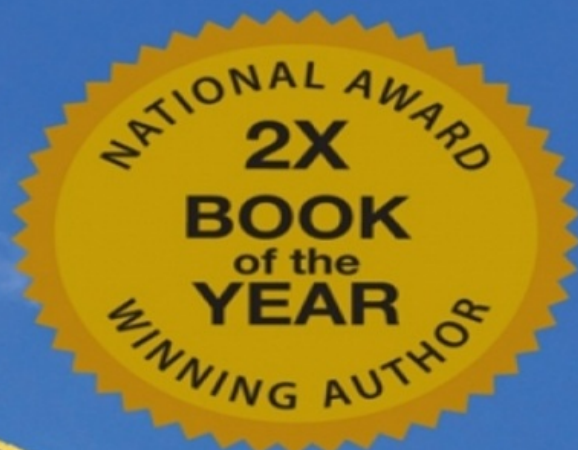


NATIONAL BESTSELLER

Brian David Bruns

Author of  
*Cruise Confidential*



**RUMBLE  
YELL**

**Discovering  
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# **Rumble Yell: Discovering America's Biggest Bike Ride**

# Excerpt

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Pilot Mound was a small town. Strange, then, to see the giant People's Saving Bank. This huge, gorgeous brick two-story structure knocked our socks off. Perhaps my favorite thing about RAGBRAI thus far was the exposure to so much amazing architecture from the mid-late 1800s. It was a different era, a time when the expanding frontier was hacked out by hardy men and women, the townships peopled by bold entrepreneurs, men of vision who jockeyed for county seats or, far more lucratively, access to the burgeoning trans-continental railroad. The bank was a masterpiece of that era, and equally dead. The bones of a once-mighty beast rising from the dust, sad and lonely and forgotten. The dirt-caked windows had surely not been cleaned since WWII. They wore no protective boards, for who would vandalize in a town such as this? Barely half a dozen structures lived in the present, each small and humbled by the dominating monument to a hopeful past.

Cheek all but fell into someone's backyard to lay down in the shade, Aaron stumbling along after. Both lie down next to each other, arms laid across chests in repose, like two fallen warriors. The only sign they yet lived was a gentle groan that escaped Aaron's parted lips. As Cheek drifted off, I barely heard him mutter, "Sorry, Brian. Sucks to be you." The words were so quiet, I wondered if I had imagined them. The admission was surely unconscious.

While they napped I wandered the town. I wanted to give them plenty of time to rest up before the day's toughest challenge. Twister Hill lurked nearby. Its dread name was born of the filming here of several scenes in the blockbuster movie *Twister*. The beast lay between us and our final destination. The hush that accompanied its very mention was a testament to the fear the hill evoked. It might as well have been the dragon rather than the Lonely Mountain from *The Hobbit*.

I worried for my companions, seeing how they were really, really hurting from the heat. They weren't alone. Everywhere I looked were men and women collapsed in the shade, shaking their heads in wonder. Most were too tired and too hot to speak intelligibly. Mumbles about Twister Hill droned low through the hot air, like an agitated but smoked beehive. When I returned, Cheek was gone. No surprise there. A few minutes later Aaron woke up. Though smiling ruefully, he gamely said, "Let's do this."

After Pilot Mound, the road dropped into the forested valley of the Des Moines River. At the bottom, the bridge was not particularly big, nor the river particularly wide, but—like my ex-wife—its abrasiveness belied its size. Beyond, the road sloped upward, ever upward, rising out of the valley straight and true as an arrow shot into the sun.

The road-side scenario on that climb began to confuse me. Copious riders left the

road to huddle under the nearby trees as if it were raining. At first I thought there was a popular vendor hiding in the recessed forest. Considering the oddly vacant faces, I suspected a beer tent. Everyone panted with sawing, gasping breaths like fish out of water. Even their eyes bulged grotesquely as they glanced about. No, those weren't signs of inebriation, but looks of shock, of horror, of hurt.

On the sunny road itself, cyclists flowed to the side and slowed to a crawl, bikes wobbling, struggling to stay upright. Soon I was forced to weave around and through the retreating riders in an effort to keep my momentum going.

"What the Hell...?" I muttered as yet another cyclist before me all but exploded and flared down and out, billowing smoke. I swerved, sped up, slowed down, ducked and surged. Climbing the hill became chaotic as an aerial dogfight: the Battle of Britain, the assault on the Death Star—choose your metaphor. About halfway out of the valley, I realized what was going on. Twister Hill!

The hill was long indeed, and steep, but not as long and steep as I had envisioned. Straight up it stretched, ever longer, only at the very top did it curve and disappear into the surrounding forest. But compared to the 5-mile ascents up rocky, sun-seared desert mountains I had trained on, this was short and sweet. I was not cocky about it—a real rarity, to be sure—because I well knew that we all had our own challenges. Measuring up to ourselves was all that mattered. And my thighs burned pleasantly from the exertion.

At the top were several dozen people sprawled upon the grass in the shade or, at best, leaning heavily upon their bikes, panting. Directly before me a rider of perhaps retirement age collapsed. Bike, gear, and all slammed to the pavement to clatter roughly over the road. I swerved and loosed a cry of warning, even as bystanders rushed to retrieve the fallen warrior from the battle zone. The hapless man was pulled into the shade—still with a heat-index over 110°—and the good folks of RAGBRAI took care of him like pros. In a blink he was holding a bottle of ice water in one hand and a banana in the other, while the crowd stayed back to give him room to breathe. A kindly lady fanned him with a magazine.

Oh, and Aaron nearly died.

The man from Portland refused to be defeated. Slow and steady he pushed up the long, steep, heated slope. At the very top he slowed to almost a standstill. His bike wavered dangerously, and I thought for sure he was going to collapse. But with brow set firmly, he determinately pressed harder and harder, on and on. Slowly, agonizingly slowly, the rhythmic force moved him, inch by inch, over the brow of the hill. He passed right by where I waited, never once looking at me, at the forest, at anything but the concrete beneath his tires. And onward he went, beyond my sight and around the bend.

A mile later I caught up to where Aaron came to rest. He couldn't have found a more inviting place: a small, single-story farmhouse whose cropland had been rented out. A retired couple had lovingly crafted a paradise of numerous gardens and copious flowers, complete with shrub-lined pools and fountains. Watermelon in hand, Aaron stumbled through the paradise, looking for a free spot. He gravitated towards a lush hedge of ten-foot lilac bushes. Amazingly, we found Cheek there. He was fast asleep, beefy arm draped over his face. Two slabs of watermelon lay destroyed beside him.

Aaron plopped down into the soft grass beside Cheek and tore into his watermelon.

"Sorry I passed you by," he finally said over a mouthful of melon. "But I had to keep going. If I stopped, I don't think I could have gotten up again."

"I think you did great!"

"Let me guess," he said ruefully. "You never lowered out of top gear?"

“Actually, I dropped from 24 all the way down to 21,” I admitted.

“You da man,” Aaron said. His simultaneous spitting out a watermelon seed revealed how he really felt.

I struck a weightlifter’s pose but, after a disparaging remark from a passerby, sheepishly dropped it. When I turned back to Aaron, he had passed out cold. So rapid had been the onset of sleep, he hadn’t even set aside his watermelon. With a smile I regarded my companions as they literally snored in the peaceful garden, cheeks glistening with watermelon juice and seeds even stuck to their whiskers.

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Brian David Bruns is a nationally bestselling and internationally award-winning author with books lauded by the Travel Channel, Today Show, and USA Today. He has contributed to The Daily Beast, BBC, and CNN. Brian's Cruise Confidential series has twice been featured by ABC 20/20. A script for a TV show is being written by Matt Jones in association with Furst Films and Olé Entertainment.

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