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A longtime Stark County group is about more than exercise.

Legs pumped machine-like on a bicycle cruise along the wave-lapped shores of Lake Erie in Cleveland.

Randy Williams and his fellow members of the Stark County-based Folks on Spokes club were on a destination bike trip.

The Jackson Township resident was now immersed in the moment: The scenery picturesque, the exercise invigorating, the company of his friends rewarding.

“Sometimes you’ll be out on a ride and you’ll get in a rhythm pedaling,” Williams said. “You’re just in the right gear, and it’s effortless to ride and you’re just flying along and enjoying nature.

“You’ve got the breeze coming in off the lake,” he said. “All that stress that you have at work or home, it was all left at home when you get on that bicycle.”

Rides that transcend physical exertion are among the reasons why Williams and other members belong to the bicycle touring club.

Founded in 1996, the group’s core philosophy remains today, said Williams, road captain: Riding safely as a group at a moderate pace, and no one is ever left to bike alone.

‘Anyone who wants to ride’

New members are welcome to join or try out the club, he said. For more information, visit: <https://www.folksonspokes-stark.com/>

“We’re open to anyone who wants to ride,” Williams said enthusiastically.

Riding season is typically from March through October or November, weather dependent.

Although its 2020 season was delayed amid the onset of the pandemic, Folks on Spokes is riding again.

“I guess by the very nature of bicycling, at least with our club, we were social distancing before social distancing was a thing,” Williams said.

Road club

New members will be given an introductory ride focused on bicycle etiquette “and how we ride and stay in a group,” Williams said.

“We kind of mentor them along just so we’re safe out there.”



▲ HIDE CAPTION

4/4

Jerry and Mary Ann LaRocca, of Jackson Township, prepare for a ride earlier this month at North Park in Jackson Township. Both are charter members of the Stark County-based Folks on Spokes bicycle touring club. (IndeOnline.com / Kevin Whitlock)

Riding with the club since its inception are retirees Jerry and Mary Ann LaRocca, of Jackson Township.

“We’ve been riding together since 1985,” Mary Ann LaRocca said, straddling her bike before a short group ride. “And we didn’t ride for exercise. You just ride for being out in the fresh air, and it was stress relieving when we had jobs, so now it’s just fun.”

Jerry LaRocca said biking is now about spending time with friends.

“Two dirty words in bicycling for me are training and exercise,” he said, triggering laughter from his wife. “I don’t do it for either of those reasons. I do it to get out in the fresh air and to do something that we can do together.”

Ages range from 50 (Amy Simmons) to 81 (George T. Cutter). Most members are between 60 and 70.

Simmons said the club has provided a break from her job as regional director of operations for a national restaurant chain.

“I have a pretty high stressful job,” she said. “I work a ton of hours, so this is absolutely my time to decompress.”



▲ HIDE CAPTION

1/4

Members of the Folks on Spokes bike club pull into North Park’s gazebo area in Jackson Township after a recent ride cut short by rain. Leading them is the eldest member of the group, George Cutter, of North Canton. (IndeOnline.com / Kevin Whitlock)

The Suffield Township resident bikes with her mother, Debbie Godfrey, 69.

About six years ago, Godfrey discovered the club while she was jogging with her dog at Wingfoot Lake State Park.

From there a connection was made.

“It’s just fun,” said Godfrey, club president. “You talk and you see beautiful sights and drive through beautiful areas and see some things you hadn’t seen before.”



▲ HIDE CAPTION

2/4

Debbie Godfrey, of Suffield Township, takes off her Crocs and puts on her biking shoes prior to a recent ride with the Stark County-based Folks on Spokes bicycle touring club. (IndeOnline.com / Kevin Whitlock)

Cutter has ridden with the club for about six years.

“I love it,” the North Canton resident and former bricklayer said. “These are all great people ... and they keep me young.”

Smiling, he said: “They take care of me.”

And his bicycling approach is simple: “All I want to see is that front wheel rolling along,” said Cutter, grinning infectiously. “I don’t care where it goes as long as it’s rolling.”

'A lot more options'

Folks on Spokes is primarily a road club with trail rides included occasionally.

Twice-a-week rides and longer trips are scheduled in advance and posted on the group's website.

Most rides include around 10 members.

"We are a touring group and like to go see and do things," Williams said. "We prefer the roads because you've got a lot more options."

From Sugarcreek to Portage Lakes

Forty-mile rides offer a 20-mile leg for those who don't want to go the full distance.

Trips have featured the rural landscape of Tuscarawas County and a ride at Portage Lakes.

Miles pedaled along Lake Erie are especially inspiring, said Pamela Feit, 64, of Massillon.

"We were up there in the fall and it felt like the summer," she recalled. "Boats still were out and there was still swimming at Edgewater."

Points of interest also have included the "World's Largest Cuckoo Clock" in Sugarcreek.

"It's basically where anyone wants to lead a ride, we're willing to go," Williams said.

"It's like a one-day vacation," he said. "You always go and see things and it's fun to do it with a group."

Friends and fellowship

Socializing is an invaluable benefit of the club, Williams and other members emphasized.

"You are friends all year round, not just when you get on a bicycle and ride," he said.



▲ HIDE CAPTION

3/4

Roger Gray, of Plain Township, prepares his recumbent bike for a ride with the Folks on Spokes bike club recently at North Park in Jackson Township. (IndeOnline.com / Kevin Whitlock)

Fellowship also extends to lunches and dinners. Out-of-the-way, lesser-known eateries have been discovered over the years, from root beer stands to casual dining.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, riders have been opting for picnic-style meals or carryout food eaten outside.

For new members, an element of surprise awaits, Williams promised, a sense of intrigue in his voice.

Details are cloaked in a playful sense of mystery. All he'll reveal publicly is the coded title of the special trip: "Meet the Giant."