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Cycling Through History: Making an American Sport 1880-present, Blog 1

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Cornick

Cycling Through the Centuries: The Acquisition and Affluence of the Bicycle

The late 19th century can surely be described as a historic time period filled with new discoveries in science, electronics, and transportation. The bicycle, invented in the beginning of the 19th century, attributed to much of the travel done between then and the middle of the 20th century. Many utilized cycling for leisure but for others it was seen more as a necessity. What began as a luxury solely for society's affluent and upper class members is now widely used by members of every social class. The 1870s was a time when bicycles were becoming more and more common especially in the United States. Research and history both reveal that society's elite members were always first to enjoy new luxuries. Cycling was no exception because White, upper class males made up the majority of bicycle owners during that time period. Although bikes were seen as the cheaper alternative to expensive automobiles many people spent a pretty penny on bicycles, clothing, and accessories. A "top-of-the-line superbike, such as a \$500 Fuji, a \$700 Maserati or...a \$1,200 Colgano" was known for their European design and high speed capabilities (Gerston, 1974). Some cycling hobbyists were splurging when it came to purchasing attire, spending hundreds on pants, shorts, special patterned shirts, and even gloves! Surprisingly enough there were barriers within the cycling community. One of the reasons was based on what type of bike people owned. The "superbikes" were seen as the upper echelon of two wheeled vehicles while those who owned three speed bicycles were seen as "average riders". Another cause for divide within the cycling community was race. In the 1890's many individuals belonged to bicycle clubs. This was not only reserved to people of high socioeconomic status because members of the middle and low socioeconomic classes created their own club. Unfortunately many members of the Black cycling communities were prohibited from joining and thus they created their

own clubs as a result. Something that has been prevalent since the foundation of America's first colonization is discrimination against women and cycling only further highlighted this issue. Women cyclists were frowned upon in just about every community; they were seen as having low standards and morals. The bicycle's early construction made it difficult for women to pedal in the dresses worn during that time period, and for a woman to hike up her skirt or even wear pants was seen as disgraceful. Some inventors tried to bridge the gender gap in cycling by creating a "lady bike" but the model was unpopular due to inconsistencies in its frame. Unfortunately it remained sociably unacceptable for women to ride bicycles until about 1939. Even with all those discriminations all of the before mentioned groups who were fortunate to own a bicycle during this time period had more benefits than they realized. Many communities are separated by socioeconomic status; this is true today and was especially true during the 19th and 20th centuries. David Gonzalez shares a story about a group of inner city kids who restored bicycles with recycled parts in his New York Times article. "Since 2 1994 students from four public schools...have rescued and reassembled dusty and rusted bicycles from basements and backrooms around the city" (Gonzalez, 19947). Not only is the program rebirthing life into something that would otherwise be considered trash, it is also birthing life and excitement into eager students. These students are immigrants, first generation Americans, and minorities. The renovated bicycles give these students opportunity to travel and explore beyond their boroughs. Many of the program's participants were even given the chance to travel across country from San Francisco to Washington, D.C.! One teacher described the excursion as "...a symbol of freedom" for the students involved. Today bicycles are still seen as one of the most popular forms of transportation for students across the globe. The dynamic of bicycle riding changed drastically since the late 19th century. Cycling is no longer seen as an activity or sport solely for society's elite. Visit any college campus and you will see plenty of students traveling by bicycle going to and from classes. This is mainly due to the fact that bicycling is a cheap form of transportation. Most students do not want to be worried about the hassles that come with owning a car on campus. Car notes,

insurance rates, and gas prices alone are enough to make any penny pinching college student want to travel by foot but owning a bicycle is way more convenient. As with any pro comes many cons and the one that many cyclists endure is negligence by automobile drivers. In his letter to the editor of the New York Times John Ragan expressed his disdain for New York City's lack of regard for cyclists. "I am a student...and a bicycle is the only transportation I can afford. It makes me angry...that these streets...are open only to those wealthy enough to have cars" (Ragan, 1987). The 20th century saw a transition in how the members of higher socioeconomic status traveled. The beginning of the 1900's saw bicycles being forced off the roads with the passage of new legislation, the establishment of the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), and the creation of driver's licenses. Driving cars became the new norm but high gas prices and property taxes on automobiles kept many people off the highways and out of car dealerships. Today cycling is still seen as an international pastime, many ride bicycles as a sport, as a way to exercise and stay fit, and as a means for transportation. The time period from the late 19th century to the early 20th century saw many transitions in the dynamics of cyclist. Race, socioeconomic status, gender and occupation all impacted the history of cycling in the U.S. and abroad. But perhaps the one thing that has remained a constant over the last three centuries is that most cyclists continue to ride as a way to relieve tension and just enjoy themselves. Regardless if someone belongs to the upper echelon of high society or someone is an everyday blue collar citizen, cycling has remained a pleasant pastime for everyone

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