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Cycling Through History: Making an American Sport 1880-present, Blog 2

Katey Damian

Virginia Commonwealth University



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Damian

How have the reasons for cycling changed over time?

The heyday of the bicycle occurred during the late nineteenth century. Although steam engines had already revolutionized travel through the advent of the railroad, the American public discovered that bicycles provided not only a personal method of convenient transportation but also a means of recreation and sport that encouraged health and competition. Bicycles originally were integral to both personal transport and social leisure, but the rise of the automobile age reduced the public's reliance on cycling. Since then, bicycles have made several comebacks, providing utility in times of need but also contributing to a national desire for recreation and sport, harkening back to the golden age of cycling. The reasons for cycling have thus evolved from transport and necessity to leisure and recreation, going through each phase several times as the needs of the public changed throughout the World Wars, the Great Depression, and the suburbanization of society during the Cold War era.

The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of the automobile for personal transportation, providing independence for those unable to afford a horse. Although many traditionalists decried the automobile craze for negating the pleasures of riding horses and bicycling, journalists like E.S. Nadal acknowledged that once an invention becomes essential, it ceases to be interesting, so the automobile becoming essential could actually encourage bicycling for leisurely escape from gas engines. (Future of the horse, 1900) Unfortunately for the bike in the pre-World War I era, the dangers of speeding automobiles in the cities (Cornell, Bicycles and Policing, 1912) and the terrible road conditions, which had never been improved since the horse and buggy days and were continually deteriorating from automobile use (Fisher, Bikes and

Health, 1912) limited their utility. Leisurely use of the bicycle had greatly declined, but the advent of gas restrictions on Sundays and the occasional gas shortage during the First World War did cause some to go back to the bicycle for utility purposes.

After World War I, the nation experienced an economic boom, and the automobile became essential and ubiquitous for personal transportation. However, during the 1920s, a resurgence in leisurely sport and recreation occurred, bolstered by the automobile allowing quick transportation to golf courses and biking trails further out from the cities. Because bicycles were no longer necessary for transportation, their appeal and novelty increased. (Poore, *Sporting Events*, 1928) The rise of Women's Rights also encouraged independent women to ride bikes. Safety regulations and innovations also encouraged bicycling, and many of the badly damaged road conditions were improving. However, the Great Depression of the 1930s hindered much of this progress. Instead, the bicycle was again a means of personal transportation for utility, as many could no longer afford to buy or maintain automobiles in the financial crisis. (Robbins, *Bicycle Comes Around*, 1933) As the Depression waned in the late 1930s, the role of the bicycle changed again as youth embraced the inexpensive means of leisure and competition they provided.

From the late 1930s onward, the bicycle was often no longer viable as a means of transportation within the cities, as automobile traffic rendered them excessively dangerous. However, they achieved a resurgence in popularity for recreation that has arguably continued to this day. Marshall Sprague wrote in 1938 of numerous cycle clubs, mostly made up of young people, who travelled to areas outside of the cities in groups to socialize and ride around. A culture of illegal bike racing also re-emerged, with youth meeting up at secret locations early in the morning to stage races. (Sprague, *Bicycle Army*, 1938) Here, the automobile helped popularize bicycling, as transportation out of the cities was easier than ever. By 1940, there existed 240 youth hostels, mostly in rural areas 15-20 miles apart, and many young people took advantage of the low costs of this form of travel to set out on bicycling adventures across the country and

meet new people. (Preston, Youth Goes Hosteling, 1940) The Girl Scouts organization helped to promote an interest in transportation and cycling for young women, while also campaigning for better bike safety awareness. (Parker, Girl Scouts and Cycling, 1940) Sunday joyriding had become a popular American pastime, but oil supply problems abroad caused the Federal government to ask people to stop driving for pleasure. Cycling was encouraged and embraced as an alternative means to get out and about on the weekends. (Gasless Joyriding, 1941) Along with continued petitions for better roads, many began encouraging building bike lanes along roadways to create a safe means of returning the bicycle to an everyday method of transportation. (William Pierce Randal, 1942) However, in most areas bike lanes did not take off, relegating the bike to recreation and sport again, especially in the emerging suburban areas.

In the 1960's and 70's weight gain became a larger issue as more and more men, women, and children became overweight. Many of these issues were caused by society's shift to living in the suburbs and commuting to the city, reducing the time spent walking to work and encouraging quick consumption. This had become such a problem that The Bicycle Institute of America posted an article about how riding a bike can help with weight loss. It was said that riding a bike every day for an hour or two can burn 600 calories an hour, slim the hips, and strengthen the calves and thighs and reduce the waist. (Bicycles are urged as aid to Slimming, 1963) As exercise became a common modern day obligation, bicycles offered a form of freedom that did not feel like hard work for many children and adults. (Anne Fremantle, Everyone, 1974) Due to the universal indulgence introduced by the car and the sedentary lifestyle they caused for many, setting away specific time for exercise became important. (Ulick O'Connor, Exercising Can Be Beautiful, 1977) After many studies were published the benefits of exercise and its aid on prolonging life became more known by the general public. Although bicycling did not become the most popular method of losing weight, bike riding did involve into a family activity and a highly competitive sport.

The reasons for embracing the culture of bicycling have gone back and forth since the 1890s, first providing independence through the utility of personal transportation, then as a source of leisure and recreation, and finally as a hybrid of both, allowing youthful independence and a source of exercise but still proving useful in times of struggle and gas shortages. Recreational biking has retained its popularity, while a recent revival in the last few decades of bicycling as transport has provided an economical means to get around cities for young generations.

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