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Cycling Through History: Making an American Sport 1880-present, Blog 3

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Morton

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Cycling Through History

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The Long Term Effects of Socioeconomics on Bicycling

“When the spirits are low, when the day appears dark, when work becomes monotonous, when hope hardly seems worth having, just mount a bicycle and go out for a spin down the road, without thought on anything but the ride you are taking.” -Sir Author Conan Doyle

This quote was recorded during a time when cycling was a luxury leisure activity that only men such as Mister Doyle could afford. Upon their release, bicycles featured the ‘big wheel’ design; one long and tall front wheel, and one shorter and sturdier wheel in the back. The larger wheel allowed for greater speed with minimal pedaling, but was a formidable beast to master. With time, however, came functionality, and the bicycle transformed into a practical machine that others could use for not only pleasure but also for business. Like many things a popular more expensive item that only those with lots of money could previously afford, was eventually made generic and then inexpensive.

In the beginning of cycling’s history, many elites treated bicycles to the liking of a prestigious steed, and would ride them around the countryside. Tandem bicycles as well as female sidesaddle bikes grew in popularity so couples could ride together on the same unit. These bikes were often times highly romanticized and are synonymous with love and romance. The glorification of bikes continued for several years until eventually universities’ took up biking in the form of team racing competitions. Harvard was the first to adopt and compete in cycling races- soon others would follow suite. These intercollegiate competitions would become a huge source of entertainment for many audiences, but the true thrill came later when private showings dressed the women in scanty outfits before sending them in to the ring.

Towards the end of the 18th century, however, one can start to see the emergence of safety bikes, two wheeled bicycles, with a chain. These bikes were not only safer but more affordable and functional machines. The middle class began purchasing them and creating their own bike clubs. Although this may seem like a triumph over the wealthy, it simply created more social stratification in the long run. Despite being a more affordable item it was not available to everyone, bike clubs were often times white only and black cyclists were not commonly spoke of. In an article for the New York Times titled *New for the*

Wheelman, notes Major Taylor the Negro's performance in particular, saying "the negro racer, who by the bye, is pushing the cracks on the percentage table, was one of the chief attractions of the afternoon."

With the new mainstream status of cycling of course arose problems. These were fast and powerful machines that were being employed by average day people. Many cities began to advertise against being a 'scooter' or one who races through the streets spooking horses and knocking people over. In fact an article from 1906 in the *New York Times*, discusses the apprehension of three 'scooters'. The article states that the three men, two white one black, were caught running over women and babies and knocking people to the ground, "the magistrate held Jackson, [a negro] in \$300 for examination, on Sept. 4th. He fined the other men \$3." This continues to show the differences that developed due to race and class. The middle class men who disrupted the peace were fined a rather substantial amount of money for the time, but immediately released and sent home. The African American man in contrast was held on a three hundred dollar bail, making it apparent that biking is not approved for everyone.

African Americans and the lower middle class were not the only ones who struggled with gaining acceptance in the field of biking. In the early 1900's women faced immense amounts of opposition. Bicycles were a source of liberation for many American women and allowed the freedom to travel on their own without aid. Many conservatives of the time found this to be deplorable and assumed that the bikes would lead women to being loose in morals, as well as sexually promiscuous. Along with the movement of the new woman came the introduction of pantaloons, which also created a huge stir. In *A century of Fashion* the author mentions that women have previously been thought of as unipeds and to put them in pants completely alters everything they have previously known in fashion.

One of the main contributing factors to the lower cost of bicycles was the increasing popularity of automobiles. With their rise in popularity the bike was forever replaced in the world of the exceedingly wealthy, and the bike became the main form of transportation for many middle class workers. Additionally with the rise of World War Two the nation began to encourage people to bike as opposed to driving to conserve resources for the war. After the war the bicycle became a favorite past time of American children and primarily a toy until the 1970's gas crisis.

Bicycles for children once more became a social status symbol with the invention of new bigger, better, faster bikes. Children that were lucky enough to come from an affluent family could even afford speedometers for their super fast new bikes.

Bicycles became a lot more than a simple child's toy, however, when the oil crisis of the 1970s occurred in America. Gas prices skyrocketed due to an oil embargo with OPEC, which effected drivers around the entire country, from

your average commuter to long distance truck drivers. Because of this drastic spike in oil prices the nation turned once more to bikes. The population soon began to realize that bike riding was actually beneficial in many ways, and their popularity once more took off. The 1970's was also a huge time for environmental change; following the release of *Silent Spring* the nation was more aware of emissions rates than ever. Bicycling was no longer an occupation of the poor or children, but that of the fiscally aware and environmentally conscious.

Bicycles transformed over the last century to encompass all classes of people. An item that originated with such a high price tag devolved in to an affordable every day style of transportation for millions. Despite the stigma that originally came from the lower classes adaption of the invention, the masses eventually saw past the false propaganda and adopted the bike as a convenient, dependable, and eco friendly form of transportation. The event currently being held in Richmond is a reflection of a hundred year tradition that should be recognized and celebrated. The UCI World Championship is a representation of blended tradition as well as new age innovation and creativity.

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Links Used

- <http://goo.gl/Shv0Ks>
- <http://goo.gl/90ea4g>
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