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Cycling Through History: Making an American Sport 1880-present, Blog 4

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Patel

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASSES OF CYCLISTS THROUGH HISTORY

SEPTEMBER 24, 2015 [PATELNN6](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

By Nidhi Patel

Bicycles are widely used in this century as a form of transportation that almost anyone can utilize. What would take hours on foot, can take minutes by bike. As we grow up, learning how to ride a bicycle becomes a rite of passage. Most children have memories of someone that they love and admire teaching them how to ride their first bicycle. For me personally, I remember how I made my transition from riding with “training wheels” to riding without them. A sense of freedom came with this transition. I was able to navigate myself through the streets of my neighborhood with the wind in my face and my feet on the pedals without the constant worries of my parents thinking that I would fall or get lost. As my house behind me got smaller and smaller, I realized I was moving faster and faster. With the distance and my speed increasing, the feeling of freedom grew throughout my body.

Over time, these kinds of stories and feelings among children are more common. Not only children, but adults also have memories of these milestones. The class of cyclists has changed considerably from the past century to this one. Now people of all backgrounds, male and female, upper class or not, ride bicycles either recreationally or competitively and either as a mode of exercise or as a mode of transportation.

In the late-nineteenth century, cycling was mostly limited to men from the upper class throughout Northern Europe where cycling was mostly popular. Even though the “velocipede [bicycle] craze had largely subsided in Great Britain by the end of 1869, as it has in France and elsewhere” there was a “community of makers, racers, and riders remained intact and resolved to keep improving” the bicycle (Herlihy, 159). There was a “growing number of ‘gentlemen riders’ that continued to practice and promote the recreational sport” which led to increased innovations of the bicycle (Herlihy 159). As the number of men who involved themselves with the sport grew, the need for a ‘better’ bicycle also grew.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the cost of the bicycle went down which led to a growing participation of the middle class in cycling. After the turn of the century the “media attention to cycling faded away” and the “bicycle became more and more available to the lower classes” (Carstensen, 24). Cycling, once “the status symbol of the European bourgeoisie before 1900 became an increasingly common and unremarkable mode of transport after 1900” due to the downfall of prices (Carstensen, 24). Because of this, more backgrounds of people were able to buy a bicycle and be able to ride it. However in the United States, this led to the formation of hundred of clubs that “developed along ethnic, racial and class line” and many different backgrounds of people were able to participate (Goodman).

In Essex County, England in 1897, the first race between racers of different color was held. An article published in the New York Times on August 29, 1897, called Major Taylor the “little negro the lion of the meeting” even though he did not win (“News”). The inclusion of people of color and different class increased through the early-twentieth century, however a major group of people were still excluded from the group. Women!

Women still were unable to ride the bicycle without getting backlash. It was socially unacceptable for women to do something that men were doing. Even though back in 1895 women started to wear bicycling costumes called “bicycle

suits”, people still did not approve of women riding bicycles (Banton). Initially the struggle for women stemmed from the belief that machinery and athletic activity should stay as a part of the men’s world and that the women’s world should stay separate (Ritchie, 148). Many people questioned what women should wear when they ride a bicycle, with whom they should ride with, when they should ride and whether or not they should be allowed to race.



“The smart set of New York City taking a spin on Riverside Drive at the peak of the boom, in a drawing by W.A Rogers, 1895” – (Herlihy, 273)

Picture Credits: *Bicycle: the history*

In the early-twentieth century due to lower bike costs and less media interest more people were able to ride without attracting negative attention. The understanding that bicycles were being used by not only elite people helped put the bicycle to good use. On October 21, 1962 a story was written which say that a group of young Spanish workers of the lower middle class arrived from Madrid by motorcycle and bicycle for a Sunday picnic beside a pool on the Jarama River (Adams, 388). Men of the upper class are not the only ones using the bicycle. It is now seen has the only mode of transportation for some people. Its low costs and easy transportation ability increased its appeal amongst people of the middle and lower class.

In the present, everyone has the ability to use a bicycle. Mainly you see children riding bicycles in their neighborhood or adults riding their bicycles to classes in college.

Some students say that they are living on strict budgets and a bicycle is the only mode of transportation that they can afford (Ragan). Rarely do we see adults in the business world riding their bicycles to work but everyone has a right to ride a bicycle. No one is restrained either socially or lawfully of being able to sit on a bicycle and feel the freedom it gives when riding it. Due to social evolution and evolved thinking, people are now able to accept that women can do the same things as men and people of color are able to do the same things as others. It is because of this that more people are able to ride bicycles. The ethnic diversity alone is incredible and to be able to see people from all over the world doing something cohesive and that they love is truly a great opportunity.

September 25, 2015 In Uncategorized

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