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Cycling Through History: Making an American Sport 1880-present, Blog 5

Claire Shaw

Virginia Commonwealth University



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Shaw

Bicycles have been around since the early 19th century and Americans have always been aware of their dangers, especially for children. Between 1923 and 1999 there was a drastic change in the way people reacted and dealt with the dangers that accompanied the use of this two-wheeled transporter. During the early years people seemed to be aware of the dangers, but newspapers only reported the resulting tragedies after they happened. As time went on these same newspapers focused more on the prevention of tragedies' by educating parents, who could then properly educate their children. A major focus was the implementation of the three R's: registration, recognition and regulation, with the hope that fewer bicycle accidents would take place. Over the years adults have become more concerned about their youth riding bicycles and there has been an increase in education on bike safety for children beginning at a very young age.

In May of 1923 there was a short paragraph printed in the New York Times about a 6-year-old girl named Alice Drew. Alice had been run over by a truck after she had been thrown from the handlebars of a bike that was being operated by a little boy. In July of 1923 there was another very short paragraph printed in the New York Times about a 19 year old teenager named Max Tuck who had been run over by a truck while riding his bicycle. The only information provided in the paragraph was Max's name, his address, the truck drivers name, the driver's address and the driver's statement that "the boy rode in front of his truck". On April 8, 1935 the New York Times published another very brief paragraph about a boy who had lost his life while riding his bike. The little boy, Harry Birckhead Jr., lost his life while riding his bicycle across an airport runway; the undercarriage of a landing plane unintentionally struck him.

These three paragraphs that were found in the New York Times between 1923 and 1935 did not mention the victims families or what was going to be done to prevent further accidents. Furthermore, with children being so naïve of the dangers they were being exposed to, it is blatantly clear that their parents hadn't taken the time to teach them about bicycle safety. Unfortunately for these three children it cost them their lives.

These three Times articles are evidence that in the earlier years of the 20th century people were more interested in hearing about a tragedy after it had taken place rather than trying to prevent tragedies from happening.

By the late 1930's the tide began to turn. On July 2, 1939 Helen Morgan published an article in the New York Times: *Safety for Cyclists*. Morgan wrote about the importance of educating children on the safety of bicycles because the previous year there had been 7 deaths and roughly 400 injuries among children in New York City alone. New York was not the only city dealing with this issue. State authorities decided there needed to be a place where people could be trained on the proper etiquette of bike riding. This resulted in the "Three R's" program, which focused on registration, recognition and regulation. However, the first state to implement an actual bill was New Jersey. This bill stated that all bike riders must be licensed by the state, abide by the same laws motor vehicles followed, and it required bicyclists to take the same precautions motor vehicles were expected to take. In New York City, a safety education program was started for boys in public schools in order for them to be taught the basics of bicycle safety.

In 1964, almost 30 years later, there seemed to be more pressure put on parents to educate their children, not only on basic safety rules, but also the rules of the road that were observed by cars. By educating children about bicycle safety they became aware of their responsibilities as well as the rules of the road for motor vehicles. Despite increased education, by 1978 bicycle injuries had risen to 1 million a year and roughly 1,100 fatal car-bike collisions were occurring annually.

In 1999, Eugenie Allen wrote an article for the New York Times expressing concern that schools were taking their roles as child educators too far. Many schools had incorporated social and safety issues into their curriculum that were beyond the child's comprehension. In Allen's article she conveyed that some children had become frightened instead of reassured. She stressed that instead of schools taking it on as their responsibility to teach children about these topics, they should leave it to the parents, after all that's what parents were for.

American perspective drastically shifted over the course of the 76 years from 1923 to 1999. Americans began to focus their attention on ways to prevent horrific accidents instead of briefly writing about them after they had occurred. Although the methods have changed and the audience has ranged from parents to schoolchildren the overall message has remained the same: bicycle safety has always been and will always be a concern.

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