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RICHARD HARMOND

PROGRESS AND FLIGHT: AN INTER- PRETATION OF THE AMERICAN CYCLE CRAZE OF THE 1890s

“The machine cannot be divorced from its larger social pattern; for it is this pattern that gives it meaning and purpose. Every period of civilization carries within it the insignificant refuse of past technologies and the important germs of new ones; but the center of growth lies within its own complex.” Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, pp. 110-11.

As the nineteenth century neared its close, Americans had a good reason to celebrate the technological accomplishments of the past several generations. Conveyor belts and interchangeable parts had sharply altered the system of production; the reaper and other farm machines had expanded enormously the output of food; the steam engine had revolutionized long distance transportation on water and land; and the utilization of electricity was transforming methods of communication, lighting and local travel. For a people who tended to measure progress in quantitative terms, especially by an improvement in physical well-being, an increase in utility, or a growth in power and speed, the mechanical advances of the nineteenth century were truly dazzling.¹

There was another side to the story, though, for the material progress wrought by machines had been costly. Within a brief span, as history measures time, technology had changed the United States from a rustic, primitive land to an industrial giant.² That shift, involving as it did great social and economic dislocations, required extensive and often wrenching adjustments on the part of the populace. During the 1890s the process of adjustment became particularly painful.

It was no coincidence that the bicycle rose to popularity at this time. Some years before, because it had been difficult and even

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hazardous to manipulate, Americans had built up a prejudice against the bicycle. But after the appearance of the safety bicycle, their prejudice subsided. Once this was accomplished, Americans discovered the bicycle to be a craft of speed and liberation, as well as an efficient and highly useful device. At the same time, the vehicle enabled them to escape some of the less desirable conditions associated with their technologically oriented society. And it was this paradoxical attraction of the bicycle—as an instance of inventive progress and as a means of flight from the consequences of such progress—which substantially explains the great cycle craze of the years between 1893-96.

I

There is no question about the heightened interest, even the fervor, with which Americans greeted the bicycle in the mid-1890s, though it had not always been a widely popular vehicle. We should not forget that less than a decade earlier, in the era of the ordinary, enthusiasm for the bicycle was distinctly limited. Indeed, in those days the general public entertained serious reservations about the wheel.

The object of these negative sentiments, the ordinary or high wheeler, was the standard bicycle in the years before the rise of the safety. With its tubular steel frame, ball bearings, and hollow or spongy rubber tires, the ordinary of the mid-1880s was a vast technical improvement over the “bone shaker,” a vehicle which had exhausted the patience and vigor of riders in the late 1860s.³ Unfortunately, the high wheeler was hard to master and dangerous to use. The prospective rider usually devoted weeks of effort and endured frequent spills acquiring the knack of mounting the vehicle; and he often spent further months of practice becoming a proficient cyclist.⁴

Nor was this the limit of his trials. Once confident of his ability to remain aloft, the rider ventured out to confront the challenges of the highway (if, that is, his locality permitted him on the highway). Gliding along, perched warily over the large front wheel of his cycle, he had to be prepared for several dangers. Among these might be the frightened reaction to his approach of a bicycle-shy horse, harassment from prankish youngsters or the malicious determination of a teamster to drive him off the road. A

more common occurrence was for the cyclist to hear a “yelp” and a “bound” and, turning, see “some large fearless dog” rushing after him. Besides these risks, the rider also continually had to be alert for a jarring encounter with a rock or some other obstruction in the road, which could send him hurtling over the handle bars of his rather unstable vehicle.⁵

All in all, wheeling in the 1880s had its drawbacks. “The greatest wonder to me,” one rider aptly recalled, was “that not more cyclers who rode high wheelers were killed.” We can readily appreciate why the hazards of riding the ordinary were, according to another contemporary, “commonly imagined to be about the same as those which beset the professional tightrope walker.”⁶

Nevertheless, the ordinary had its hardy band of devotees. To those bold and persistent men who were able to manipulate it, the high wheeler was a source of healthy outdoor exercise, pleasure and, if need be, transportation.⁷ But the number of such riders, thought it grew steadily, was never large and clearly had a limit. Bicycling in the 1880s was an activity restricted to athletically inclined men. Most probably it would have remained so had the ordinary not been supplanted.⁸

Even as those youthful athletes rode about, proud and high on their ordinaries, ingenious men were at work devising a machine for the average person. As early as the 1870s, but more especially in the years 1885-90, the cumulative achievements of a group of largely European inventors resulted in a bicycle that was at once safe to ride and relatively easy to pedal. Its notable features included the tubular construction and ball bearings of the ordinary, along with two equal-sized wheels (thus eliminating headers), chain-gear drive, a diamond-shaped frame and pneumatic tires. This, of course, was the safety bicycle, and it was quickly made available to the American public.⁹

Americans did not, however, become an eager army of buyers. In the first place, early models of the safety were subject to criticisms. The machine was, for instance, quite heavy, some versions weighing seventy pounds or more. The pneumatic tire was also considered overly puncture-prone.¹⁰ Moreover (and the difficulties just mentioned did not help matters here), because of real or vicarious experiences with the old high wheeler, people remained suspicious of any kind of a bicycle.¹¹ Lastly, at a list price of \$125 or more for top grade models, the new vehicle was

expensive and seemingly beyond the means of a large part of the public.

All of these problems would have to be resolved before there could be any real boom in bicycling. In one way or another—beginning with the safety's design—the cycle industry did meet them successfully, and, in the process, climbed from obscurity to industrial eminence.^{1 2}

The evolution of the bicycle between 1890 and 1895, though less dramatic than during the previous half decade, was nonetheless impressive. In 1891-1892 an improved pneumatic tire was placed on the market, and well before the end of the latter year it had demonstrated its superiority over the rival cushion tire. The attributes of the new tire were essential to the further development of the safety. Because it reduced rolling friction, the air-filled tire added to a vehicle's speed; and because it absorbed road shock, the tire not only increased riding comfort, but also enabled manufacturers to cut back on the weight of the bicycle. By 1893 the machine had dropped to thirty-five pounds, and over the course of the next two years it shed another ten to twelve pounds. Moreover, inventors and engineers made other useful changes in the cycle, such as the installation of a more effective coaster brake and the substitution of wooden for metal rims. By the mid-1890s the American bicycle had reached a stage where the *Scientific American* could describe it as "the most beautiful mechanism, and the lightest and easiest running of any wheel manufactured in any country."^{1 3}

The emergence of a safe and, at the same time, light and comfortable machine did much to overcome popular suspicion of the wheel. Equally effective in combating current skepticism was a wide-ranging promotional campaign. The bicycle industry, seeking to infuse wheeling with a sense of excitement and adventure, supported racing tournaments and subsidized top speed riders.^{1 4} Concomitantly, the industry launched an advertising campaign so extensive that, in the opinion of one scholar, it stimulated advertising in other fields. Bicycle interests allocated thousands of dollars annually to instruct the public about the lightness, swiftness, strength and beauty of their product. Some of this sum was spent on catalogues and posters, but most of the money went for advertisements which appeared in trade periodicals (of which at

one time there were over eighty), as well as the big daily newspapers and the better magazines. In return, by running editorials and regular columns on the wheel, plus special articles by bicycle enthusiasts and medical men, the press and magazines made cycling an increasingly more discussed and respectable activity.^{1 5}

For anyone convinced by what he read in his favorite daily or magazine, but perhaps slightly hesitant about facing the road alone, companionship was available in a variety of cycling clubs. Riders might sign up with the League of American Wheelmen, a large national organization which, like the American Automobile Association of another era, defended the rights and promoted the broader interests (with special emphasis on better roads) of the riding fraternity. Or, if the League did not seem suitable, a cyclist could enlist in one of the numerous local touring-social clubs that were springing up in cities and town across the land.^{1 6}

Advertising and clubs by themselves were not enough, however, for there was still the obstacle of price. To overcome this hurdle, the cycle trade presented its clientele with a parcel of options and inducements.

To start with, the customer was not limited to the top grade machines listed at \$125 and above. He might also shop around among the medium grades, with prices ranging between \$85 and \$100; or he might select from among the low grades, marked at about \$50. The careful buyer knew, too, that all of these prices were subject to change. He realized, for example, that as a result of overproduction, manufacturers and dealers periodically hawked their wares at sharply reduced prices. And, if he followed trade matters closely, he was aware that, because of the use of mass production techniques in the manufacture of bicycles, the drift of prices was downward.^{1 7}

Again, the patron, if he wished, could make his purchase on the installment plan. He also expected the retailer to give him a liberal trade-in allowance on his old machine. This widely established practice, in turn, laid the basis for a thriving second-hand business, where adequate bicycles were placed within reach even of people earning very modest incomes.^{1 8}

As we can see today, installment buying, trade-ins and the larger engineering and promotional effort of which these were a part,

had their intended result. Statistics and some relevant contemporary observations suggest as much. In 1890, at the dawn of the modern bicycle age, there were only about 150,000 riders in the United States. But the new safety began to prove so attractive to segments of the public that in 1891 a columnist for *Sporting Life* felt confident enough to predict that "wheeling is going to be the universal sport." The following year, a writer in the *American Athlete* asserted that bicycling "in the slang vernacular," had "'caught on,'" and some months later an editorial in the same magazine declared with assurance that the possibilities ahead for cycling were "practically immeasurable judged by the occurrences of the past few years."¹⁹

Such optimism was well founded. While estimates vary, it seems likely that by 1893 there were close to a million riders in the United States.²⁰ The old prejudice against the bicycle, as commentators recognized, had finally been overcome.²¹ Any lingering doubts on this score were dispelled in the summer of 1894 as society people took to the safety, and cycling became a "marked feature of the Newport season." Moreover, society was joined on wheels by a flock of literary and public figures, including E. L. Godkin, Richard Harding Davis, Owen Wister, Frances Willard, Lillian Russell, Justice Edward D. White of the Supreme Court and Speaker of the House Thomas B. Reed.²²

And so, with cycling taking on a life and style of its own, the silent steed entered the halcyon years of the mid-1890s. This was a time when it appeared that no one "article of use, pleasure, or sport," in the words of the *American Wheelman*, had ever before retained "such a hold on popular approval, popular taste, or popular fancy as the bicycle." Across the land adults of all ages and both sexes surrendered to the bicycle passion, although it was in the urban-suburban complexes of the northeast and midwest that the largest body of riders was to be found.²³ By 1896, as the cycle craze reached its peak, there were probably four million riders in America. This was a striking figure when compared with the 150,000 or so cyclists of 1890.²⁴

In the meantime, the bicycle, once reviled as a dangerous toy, became the subject of songs, poetry, fiction and earnest social commentary. Talk of its being something of a fad was generally dismissed. More commonly, the safety was credited with initiating

"a new era in the means of passenger transportation." More than that, it was seen as a "new power" discovered by the human race, and "as a new social force," even a "revolutionary" social force which "could not be abandoned without turning the social progress of the world backward." With characteristic understatement, the *Times* summarized the dominant view by announcing that the wheel had "come to stay," and was to be "one of the powerful elements in shaping social habits."^{2 5}

In the long run, these pronouncements turned out to be somewhat overblown; but at the time they represented the very real popularity and importance which the bicycle had attained in the America of the mid-1890s.

II

Advertising and aggressive merchandising undoubtedly sold a lot of bicycles, but the safety achieved its enormous popularity both for what it proffered and for what it came to represent. On the one hand, the safety promised its riders the pleasures and advantages of speed, good health, greater freedom of movement and utility. On the other hand, it beckoned to them to ride swiftly away from their problems and fears. In short, the bicycle was both a mechanism of progress and a vehicle of flight.

It was not strange that Americans had come to associate speed with the progress of civilization. A mobile, energetic and enterprising people, they knew that swift transportation and communication had been indispensable to the unification and exploitation of their huge and productive land. They had also witnessed the material achievements of such rapidly functioning devices as the sewing machine, typewriter and high-speed press. It may be, too, that, at a different level of consciousness, speed and the closely related desire to save time had become important goals to Americans because, as a people, they were increasingly more concerned with temporal events, rather than those which were to take place in eternity. At any rate, by the 1890s Americans were captivated by the idea of speed, and much of the attraction of the bicycle stemmed from the fact that the vehicle was able to actualize this idea in a highly gratifying fashion.^{2 6}

Riding a bicycle was obviously a pleasurable activity. Since the men and women of the 1890s belonged to the first and *last*

generation of adults to learn how to cycle, their initial sense of delight stemmed from encountering a new and exciting kind of motion. One rider vividly related his earliest experience with this new form of motion. He was a trainee at an indoor cycling school in New York; the experience the cyclist describes is after a difficult and frustrating lesson.

Toward the end of my session I discovered that I didn't have to keep a tight rein or to be constantly trying to bend the handlebars, and then, all of a sudden, I was going round and round the place, not pushing pedals, but flying. My world took on a new aspect. I was master, or about to become master of the poetry of motion, of what began to seem there and then the most fascinating and exhilarating method of locomotion that man has ever invented.²⁷

As a rider developed more skill and confidence, and as his wheel became "a mechanism of life, the cyclist's other self in steel and rubber," his fascination and exhilaration grew apace. To the joy of motion was now added the delight of a new and "fresh sense of power," which the cyclist received from his relatively effortless passage along the road. Pedaling on, at an "easy and rapid" clip, the rider might be "lifted out" of himself, "up, up from the body that drags." Or, he may have quickened his pace, given himself up to "jolly abandon," and undergone the zestful thrill which inheres in fast and risky flight.²⁸ In the case of some riders, speed became an irresistible temptation. Contemporaries labelled as "scorchers" those consumed by this passion.

If cycling offered the psychic pleasures of motion and speed, it also conferred other more measurable benefits. One of the most important of these, in the opinion of medical men, was a firm and healthy body.

Doctors and others who studied the subject had grown deeply concerned about the effects which the spreading pattern of sedentary living was having on the population's physical condition. Through most of the nation's history, these authorities asserted, the average American had received all of the exercise he needed in his daily round of chores on the farm or in the shop. "Civilization itself was a gym," as a writer in *Outing* pointed out. But as the nineteenth century progressed, and the wilderness was tamed and cities were established, greater numbers of people began to earn their livelihoods at less physically demanding tasks in factories.

offices and stores. Life grew softer in other ways, too. Trolley cars, for example, induced city dwellers to walk less and elevators relieved them of the necessity of climbing stairs. By 1890, according to one alarmed observer, this easier scheme of living had produced a generation of people "prematurely aged," and possessing "easily prostrated physiques."²⁹

The medical men of the 1880s and 1890s concluded that exercise was essential to offset the physically debilitating effects of the sedentary life.³⁰ Hence, they urged Americans to compensate for the missing muscular effort of their forefathers with various forms of artificial activity. And most doctors agreed that among the best of such activities was cycling, for it exercised not only the legs but also the upper parts of the body and, performed regularly and moderately, strengthened the heart and lungs. Moreover, wheeling was fun, exposed the participant to the open air, and engendered "a feeling of brain rest and mental refreshment."³¹

The medical endorsement of cycling played its part in encouraging people to take up the sport. But it is equally apparent that the safety bicycle itself had a very large role in winning converts to what one historian of the Gilded Age calls "the new gospel of physical activity."³² As a doctor, in a paper read before the New York Academy of Medicine in December, 1894, suggested, the safety was "probably the greatest factor" influencing the extension of the doctrine of physical culture in nineteenth-century America.³³

This was particularly evident in the case of women. Most medical men contended that physical recreation was every bit as necessary for women as it was for men.³⁴ Yet an "old and conventional belief," as one lady phrased it, had long limited women's participation in energetic outdoor activities. By the closing decade of the nineteenth century a little progress had been made against this "deep-rooted prejudice." Women, for instance, participated in such sports as archery, tennis, croquet and golf. But these activities had not acquired anything resembling a mass appeal.³⁵ The generality of women needed an easily learned, enjoyable, outdoor exercise which, at the same time, did not tax their strength nor seriously breach current standards of decorum. Cycling met these conditions. Not surprisingly, then, American

women, who had been "starving for sunshine, fresh air" and some sport "to keep their bodies healthy and robust," took eagerly to the wheel. And thus began the widespread participation of women in outdoor athletics.^{3 6}

Not that controversy was absent from the encounter between women and the wheel. The safety was charged with the responsibility of "leading young and innocent girls into ruin and disgrace," and with having women assume an "immodest posture." But the strongest objections centered on the bicycle costume which, in the opinion of one typical critic, invited improper remarks from "the depraved and immoral."^{3 7} If some guardians of public virtue cried out in alarm, however, their protests had little effect on the ladies or, for that matter, the general public. Moreover, doctors and leaders of the women's rights movement, enthusiastic cyclists, doffed their confining whalebone corsets, and donned shorter dresses, split skirts and even bloomers. By doing so these riders conquered their inhibitions, improved their health, and enlarged their sense of physical freedom. Without planning it that way, they also advanced the cause of dress reform by making a rational, freer-flowing garb more commonplace.^{3 8}

Many riders, men and women alike, learned that cycling could be much more than a pleasurable and healthy activity. They found that their wheels furnished them with a novel and, in some ways, an unrivaled form of transportation. It was true that cyclists could not surpass the steam railway in speed of locomotion, and they had to make a sustained effort to equal the electric trolley, which averaged about 15 miles per hour. Still, on a smooth, level road they could take sprints of up to 25 miles per hour. Then, too, unlike railroad and trolley passengers, bicycle riders did not have to pay fares or wrestle with jostling crowds; and above all, they were neither bound by time schedules nor confined to fixed routes. They were independent travelers.^{3 9}

Only the horse offered an independence of movement comparable to the bicycle, though on several counts the silent steed was clearly superior to the neighing one. Since a good horse cost about \$150 (without a carriage), and another \$25 or so each month for upkeep, a safety was far cheaper to own than a horse. Moreover, the practiced cyclist could travel at the same, or even a faster rate of speed, and go much farther than an individual lumbering along

in a horse-drawn buggy. And, when the cyclist reached his destination, he did not have to feed, water and bed down his silent steed. He simply picked up his safety and parked it inside the doorway.^{4 0}

Where the roads permitted, cyclists could travel as their mood or mission dictated. Many chose to roam over the world around them. Riders skipped religious services—and thus incurred clerical wrath—to spend their Sundays touring the countryside. People took their vacations on wheels. Some visited neighboring states, and others, more distant parts of their native land. A few even sailed for Europe and, arriving there, set out on their bicycles to explore, in leisurely and independent fashion, the landscape and historic sites of the Old World.^{4 1}

By putting Americans on the move, the bicycle opened up new vistas to its users. This was especially so in the case of young people from culturally limited small towns. One cyclist recalled this of his youth:

On the bicycle you could go where you pleased, fixing your own schedule. It took you to “the city” to attend a theater matinee and be back home in time for the evening meal. Soon after I owned a bicycle I rode with two other boys the sixteen miles from our Ohio town to Dayton and, at a cost of fifty cents for a seat in the peanut gallery, saw Joseph Jefferson in *Rip Van Winkle*, the first good actor any of us had ever seen. That was *living*. Our horizons were broadening.^{4 2}

Others unearthed more practical uses for this new mode of transportation. Thousands of people, some of whom lived in the suburbs, rode back and forth to work each day on their bicycles. Ministers, doctors and salesmen made their calls on wheels. Botanists and geologists found the safety a valuable aid in their field work; while artists, photographers, park commissioners, sanitation foremen, letter carriers, tradesmen and delivery boys, among others, used the vehicle to facilitate their tasks.^{4 3}

With so many pedaling about, New York and other cities established mounted police squads to run down scorchers and bicycling burglars. The men attached to these squads were also adept at capturing runaway horses. Theodore Roosevelt, who was a New York City Police Commissioner in the mid-1890s, observed that the members of that city’s bicycle detail

soon grew to show not only extraordinary proficiency on the wheel, but

extraordinary daring. They frequently stopped runaways, wheeling alongside of them, and grasping the horses while going at full speed; and, what was even more remarkable, they managed not only to overtake but to jump into the vehicle and capture, on two or three different occasions, men who were guilty of reckless driving, and who fought violently in resisting arrest. . . .^{4 4}

As the foregoing discussion indicates, the modern bicycle was a highly versatile device. In an age of utility this alone would have been sufficient to have it counted among the era's distinctive mechanical improvements. But the safety's identification with the forces of progress involved much more than its mere usefulness to the professions, business and government. To contemporaries, it was bettering the people's physical well-being, unifying the nation by breaking down regional and cultural barriers, acting as "the advance agent of personal freedom in locomotion and in costuming" and, most significantly, satisfying the American love of speed. No wonder the wheel was ranked with the great inventions of the age.^{4 5}

To those fascinated by new machines, as most Americans were, the bicycle was even something of a symbol of nineteenth-century technological advancement. As a cycling book of the time presented the situation, an "individual starting out with a twenty-five pound machine, a light cyclometer, a small bicycle clock, and a compact camera" was indeed a "most wonderful example of the world's progressiveness." In a more philosophical vein, the *Scientific American*, impressed with its speed and power, saw the lithe, two-wheeled machine as "one expression of the great world struggle of mind to overcome the inertia of matter."^{4 6}

Coursing through the cycling literature, however, was another less compelling, but nonetheless insistent theme—escape. The very technological progress which the bicycle typified had brought about a tension-prone, and sometimes strife-torn, industrialized society, and the wheel seemed to assure cyclists an opportunity for forgetfulness and flight.

There were few who protested the opinion of a contemporary that "nervousness" was the characteristic malady of the American nation.^{4 7} It was not considered accidental, either, that this nervousness had appeared after several decades of unprecedented technological change or that the condition seemed to be such a marked feature of urban life. Economist David A. Wells, for

instance, suggested that the replacement of the slow-moving letter by electrical communication had so accelerated the decision-making process of businessmen, that the increased mental and emotional pressure on them had led to an alarming rise in nervous and physical disorders. The *Chicago Tribune*, surveying a broader range of mechanical innovations, remarked that it was the American's "fate to live in an age when railways, telegraphs and fifty other inventions" had added "immeasurably to the wear and tear of the individual and separate units of society." Approaching the matter from a slightly different angle, a Harvard professor explained that his was an age of progress, but that the price had been high. This could be seen, he went on, in the big cities where civilization was most advanced, but where life was most rapid and intense. These urban centers, he believed, were "like so many great furnaces," consuming their inhabitants "in order to keep the machinery of our complex social organism in motion."⁴⁸

There was no dearth of advice for the nerve-wracked Americans of the "great furnaces." Cycling restored one's "confidence and cheerfulness," advised a physician, and caused the future once again to look "birght and full of hope." Or, as the author of *Hygienic Bicycling* informed his readers, on wheels "all morbid thoughts take their flight." Others offered similar counsel.⁴⁹ A Boston clergyman, for example, in an address entitled the "Mission of the Bicycle," spoke to his Sunday congregation.

We long to lay aside the dignity of manhood and womanhood, to flee away for a few hours from the serious business of life, but there is no escape.

But suppose you own a wheel. There is your escape. There is your instrument of fun and frolic, and you can take your dignity along. The time for the duties of the day is over. You mount your silent steed, and there is motion and speed and change of scenery; there is forgetfulness, for the time, of cares and duties; you glide along, and lo! you are at the summit of the hill.

You place your feet on the coasters and glide away toward the base, and you are a boy again sliding down hill, only you have no sled to draw up, for you ride both ways. Before you know it laughter comes back. Sunshine fills the soul. The cares of life, and its duties thereafter are cushioned with the pneumatic tires, and the fun of youth becomes projected through our maturer years. Try it, and you will say that the half has never been told.⁵⁰

Devotees of the wheel also reminded overwrought insomniacs that bicycling was a "nerve calming medicine," and a "sweet

restorer” and inducer of “nature’s sweetest restorer—dreamless sleep.” It may even be that for some cyclists, scorching—referred to by a disgusted Englishman as “cyclomania”—was a form of escape.^{5 1}

A physical relief from the tensions of society was one benefit. A number of cyclists, though, looked to Nature for peace of mind. They mounted bicycles, fled the city’s “‘maddening crowd,’ ” and headed for the country. Once there, miles from “so-called civilization,” they refreshed themselves with the sights and smells of green fields, brightly colored flowers and stretches of shadowy woods.^{5 2} One poet wrote thusly of the bicycle:

Care-worn city clerks it hurries off to
 nature’s fairest scenes
 Flower-decked meads and, trellised hop-grounds;
 babbling brooks and village greens.
 Round-backed artisans it bears, too, from
 the small and stuffy room,
 To the lanes where trailing roses all the
 summer air perfumes;
 And it makes them grow forgetful of the
 stifling, man-made town,
 As they climb the breezy roadway o’er
 the swelling, God-made down.^{5 3}

In more prosaic fashion, the Pope Company—the largest of the American bicycle manufacturers—explained the benefits of wheels in one of its cycling catalogues.

The man of sedentary habits throws off the confinements of the office, and seeks relief in an enjoyment of nature. To ride into the country with ever-changing scenery, and to breathe the healthy air is fraught with enjoyment. The nerves are relieved, and sound health and sleep promoted.^{5 4}

Inasmuch as cyclists were able to ride away from their problems and themselves, the wheel acted as an emotional palliative. Though far from a unique occurrence—one thinks, for example, of the motion picture projector—it was no small achievement for a machine to be the means by which people temporarily delivered themselves from the disruptions and stresses of a machine-based society.^{5 5}

Yet some contemporaries seemed more impressed with the bicycle as a possible harmonizer of economic class differences. Perhaps there was something to this. The bicycle craze had hardly begun when, in the spring of 1893, the country was hit by a financial panic which soon deepened into the worst depression in American history. Over the next three years the nation was staggered by labor violence, clashes between troops and workers and a farmers' revolt that culminated in the divisive McKinley-Bryan campaign of 1896. These were bitter years for America, and men talked gloomily about the future of the country.⁵⁶ Then the crisis passed. By 1897 the economy had revived, Populism had petered out, and a political peace settled on the land. But during the years 1893-96—a period which coincided with the cycle craze—there were those who insisted that the bicycle had been a mechanism of stabilization.

The ability to own and drive a carriage was a distinguishing feature of the well-to-do urban resident in late nineteenth-century America—and, as such, beyond the reach of the masses. On the other hand, people in the most moderate circumstances scrimped and saved to buy bicycles.⁵⁷ They recognized that they then possessed a means of recreation and transportation which surpassed the horse and trap. And should a rich man purchase a safety, he was no better than anyone else on the road. He had to exert the same physical effort to move his machine and face the same road conditions as other riders, and, at a distance or from the rear, his expensive new wheel was indistinguishable from a poor man's second-hand vehicle.

This was why some observers referred to the bicycle as the "great leveler," or as a democratic machine.⁵⁸ Here also was one reason why the safety may have served as an agent of social peace in the mid-1890s. Thus, John D. Long, President McKinley's Secretary of the Navy, declared that,

The bicycle is the great safety of modern days. The man who owns a bicycle rides his own steed. He throws his dust in the face of the man in the carriage, so that it is no longer pleasant to ride in a coach and four.⁵⁹

Contemporaries believed, too, that possession of a bicycle gave its owner an opportunity to develop a new and diverting set of interests. A poor man, said Senator George Frisbie Hoar of

Massachusetts, used his safety for transportation as well as exercise, and from his machine derived "innocent, healthy and harmless recreation." Moreover, as others suggested, ownership of bicycles admitted rich and poor alike to a new social class—the freemasonry of the wheel. ("There were but two classes of people," explained a contemporary, "those who rode and those who wanted to.") On the road, people from different social strata exchanged friendly greetings, and at rest they might chat about bicycles and related matters.⁶⁰

The safety, according to a columnist of *Bicycling World*, had "made all men brothers." This was claiming too much. But it does seem clear, as a writer in the *Chicago Times Herald* remarked, that the bicycle had cheered "the spirit of man" in a time of economic depression. That we recall the 1890s as gay rather than grim is singular evidence of this observation.⁶¹

III

The time arrived, however, when adult Americans no longer looked to the safety to cheer their spirits. The cycle craze reached its high point in 1896 when the bicycle industry produced about a million vehicles. The following year manufacturers turned out over a million machines, but twice as many of these vehicles as the year before were shipped for sale abroad. Even better indices of somewhat lessened zeal for the wheel were the reduced coverage given to cycling in the press and magazines, the demise of many of the trade journals (in late 1897, for example, three of the big Chicago bicycle magazines consolidated), and the increasing involvement of prominent bicycle manufacturers in the development of a power-driven horseless carriage.⁶²

Between 1898 and 1900, the interest of the American public in the bicycle continued to ebb. The industry manufactured at the rate of a million or more machines annually, but a growing portion of these went into the export trade. By 1901, according to one writer, Americans had even stopped discussing the safety. Three years later the industry's output had fallen to about 225,000 vehicles. The safety remained a factor in adult transportation for a few years more; but the bicycle era had clearly come to an end in the United States.⁶³ Why was this?

The bicycle won its popularity in part because it had indulged escapist impulses. Its tenure as a vehicle of flight was short-lived, however. To a certain extent this may have been because the feverish class hostility of the mid-1890s subsided with the return of better times and the decline of Populism. Whatever the state of the economy, of course, the stresses and demands of urban-industrial life persisted. But in the Spanish-American War, perhaps those seeking an emotional release from contemporary pressures came upon a more exciting outlet than cycling. As Lewis Mumford argues interestingly in his *Technics And Civilization*, nothing rivals warfare as a release from the tedium and tensions of a mechanistic society.⁶⁴

A weightier consideration was the inability of the bicycle to maintain its place as a progressive machine. For a few years, one cyclist remembered, the safety had fulfilled "the ever-growing desire for greater and greater speed." But by the opening of the new century, people realized that the horseless carriage was superior in this category. Had not a steam-powered vehicle—capable of doing a mile in a minute and four seconds—paced the great Negro cyclist, Major Taylor, when he set the world record for a mile in one minute and nineteen seconds?⁶⁵ While it would be some years before the average American could afford an automobile, to a people enamored of speed the bicycle began to seem old-fashioned.

So, though the bicycle had answered the vague longing for a time-saving, distance-conquering, independent mode of transportation, in doing this it had also "whetted" the "public appetite for wheeled contrivances." The bicycle, as inventor Hiram P. Maxim pointed out, created a demand which it could no longer satisfy. "A mechanically propelled vehicle was wanted instead of a foot-propelled one," he wrote, "and we now know that the automobile was the answer."⁶⁶

In this, as in so many other respects, the bicycle had prepared the way for the automobile. The safety, a perceptive contemporary remarked in *Outing*, was "but a single part in a great and widespread movement in transportation which it was in point of time at least, privileged to lead."⁶⁷

The same point could as validly be made about woman's rights and popular recreation, as about transportation. In the long view,

the bicycle was only one among many factors promoting the cause of dress reform and female equality. And those who wanted outdoor exercises, or an activity to counter nervous strain, had an increasing variety of sports to choose from in twentieth-century America.^{6 8}

The bicycle had risen from its lowly status as a toy to its lofty station as a mechanical marvel because it had served progressive wants and desires and gratified escapist tendencies. By World War I, no longer able or at least no longer needed to fill these roles, the bicycle returned to its earlier place as an American toy. But it would be a mistake on this account to take lightly the safety's earlier prominence. In the mid-1890s the safety bicycle was an influential force in our national life and, what seems of greater note, a major expression of current beliefs and fears.

FOOTNOTES

1. Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 5-8; Victor C. Ferkiss, *Technological Man: The Myth and the Reality* (New York: George Braziller, 1969), pp. 11, 66. For some contemporary statements, see *Scientific American*, LXXV (July-December, 1896), 50-51, *Century Magazine*, LII (May-October, 1896), 152; David A. Wells, *Recent Economic Changes* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1889), pp. 67, 370, 366; *North American Review*, CLXI (September, 1895), 299; Edward W. Byrn, *The Progress of Invention* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1900), pp. 4-6; *Munsey's Magazine*, XXIV (October, 1900-March, 1901), 36, 40.

2. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 343.

3. C. F. Caunter, *The History and Development of Cycles* (Part I; London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1955), pp. 15-17, 20; *Sewanee Review*, V (1897), 50.

4. Robert P. Scott, *Cycling Art, Energy and Locomotion* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1889), p. 118; D. B. Landis, "Evolution of the Bicycle and Its History in Lancaster County," *Historical Papers and Addresses of the Lancaster County Historical Society*, XXXV (1931), 283-84; *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, II (August, 1888-February, 1889), 285-433.

5. Charles E. Pratt, *The American Bicyclist: A Manual* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1879), pp. 106, 124, 125; *The Wheel*, May 15, 1885; *Outing*, I (October, 1882-March, 1883), 5i; Hannibal Coons, "Bicycles Built For All," *Holiday*, IV (July, 1948), 83; Fred H. Colvin, *60 Years With Men And Machines* (New York and London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1947), p. 87.

6. *Bicycling World*, XXV (September, 1892-March, 1893), 214; *Century Magazine*, LII (May-October, 1896), 785.

7. *Outing*, I (October, 1882-March, 1883), 204; *Chautauquan*, VIII (October, 1887-July, 1888), 458-59; Colvin, *60 Years With Men And Machines*, pp. 13-14.

8. Foster Rhea Dulles, *American Learns To Play* (New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940), p. 194; *The Living Age*, CCXVII (April-June, 1898), 856; Chauncey M. Depew, ed., *One Hundred Years Of American Commerce* (New York: D. O. Haynes and Company, 1895), p. 551.

9. Caunter, *History of Cycles*, pp. 33-37; Waldemar Kaempffert, ed., *A Popular History Of American Inventions* 2 vols. (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), I, 141.

10. Henry Clyde, *Pleasure-Cycling* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1895), p. 46; *Twelfth Census of the United States*, X (1900), 332.

11. Cf. *infra.*, note 21.

12. *Scientific American*, LXXIV (January-June, 1886), 4; LXXVII (July-December, 1897), 292; *Fifty Years of Schwinn-Built Bicycles* (Chicago: Arnold Schwinn and Company, 1945) p. 28. In 1890, the bicycle industry consisted of a few dozen shops and factories, employing 1700 people, and with invested capital of some two million dollars. By 1895 the industry was made up of over 300 shops and factories, employing 25,000 people and an invested capital in excess of twenty million dollars. Between 1890 and 1896 Americans spent over one hundred million dollars for bicycles.

13. *Twelfth Census*, X, 332-34; *Scientific American*, LXXIV (January-June, 1896), 2.

14. On the ties between bicycle manufacturers and racing, see the remarks by the President of the League of American Wheelmen in *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, XIV (November 2, 1894), 23.

15. James P. Wood, *The Story of Advertising* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1958) pp. 283, 276-78; *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, IX (June 10, 1892), 18; *American Wheelman*, VIII (October 29, 1896), 38; XI (February 3, 1897), 14; *American Athlete*, XII (July 21, 1893), 51.

16. *Outing*, XXX (April-September, 1897), 341-51, 488-94.

17. *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, XI (June 16, 1893), 38; *Bicycling World*, XXXVIII October-November, 1898), 81; Kaempffert, ed., *Popular History of Inventions*, I, 141; *New York Tribune*, August 8, 1897, p. 6. Thus, in 1895 the top grades were generally reduced to \$100, and two years later the price of these models was cut another \$25.

18. Wood, *Story of Advertising*, p. 282; *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, X (February 17, 1893), 44; *Bicycling World*, XXV (September, 1892-March, 1893), 432; XXXI (May-November, 1895), 677; Clyde, *Pleasure Cycling*, p. 45.

19. *Bicycling World*, XXII (October, 1890-April, 1891), 239; *Sporting Life*, XVI (March 21, 1891), 10; *American Athlete*, IX (June 10, 1892), 489; X (December 9, 1892), 403.

20. *American Athlete*, XI (March 31, 1893), 285.

21. *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, XI (March 3, 1893), 27; *Bicycling World*, XXVIII (December, 1893-May, 1894), 579; *New York Times*, January 5, 1896, p. 25.

22. *Scribner's Magazine*, XVII (January-June, 1895), 704-06; "Monthly Record,"

Outing, XXVI (April-September, 1895), 1; *The Critic*, XXIV (New Series: July-December, 1895), 107, 226-28.

23. *American Wheelman*, VIII (July 2, 1896), 25; Arthur Judson Palmer, *Riding High: The Story of the Bicycle* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1956), p. 113.

24. *Bicycling World*, XXXIII (July 10, 1896), 26; *Scientific American*, LXXV (July-December, 1896), 69; *New York Herald*, quoted in *Literary Digest*, XIII (1896), 196.

25. *The Outlook*, LI (January-June, 1895), 1006; *Bicycling World*, XXXI (May-November, 1895), 137; *The Forum*, XXI (March-August, 1896), 680; *Harper's Weekly*, XL (January-June, 1896), 370; *Century Magazine*, L (May-October, 1895), 374; XLIX (November, 1894-April, 1895) 306; *New York Times*, June 21, 1896, p. 4.

26. *Cosmopolitan*, XXXIII (May-October, 1902), 136, 131; Roger Burlingame, *Engines of Democracy* (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), pp. 360, 372.

27. *Scribner's Monthly*, LXVII (January-June, 1920), 635.

28. *Outing*, XXIX (October, 1896-March, 1897), 516; Clyde, *Pleasure-Cycling*, p. 28; *Scientific American*, LXXX (January-June, 1899), 292; *American Athlete*, X (October 14, 1892), 278; *Harper's Weekly*, XL (January-June, 1896), 353.

29. *Atlantic Monthly*, XC (October, 1902), 534; *Outing*, XXXII (April-September, 1898), 383; *North American Review*, CLII (January-June, 1891), 682-83; *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, XLV (January-June, 1890), 617.

30. *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, CXXXIV (July-December, 1892), 230-35; *Hospital*, as quoted in *Scientific American*, LX (January-June, 1889), 185; *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, V (February-August, 1890), 34.

31. *New York Times*, May 21, 1893, p. 12; *Scribner's Magazine*, XVII (January-June, 1895), 708-12; *Scientific American*, LXXII (January-June, 1895), 5.

32. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), p. 316.

33. As quoted in Luther H. Porter, *Cycling for Health and Pleasure* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1895), p. 182. See also, Arthur Train, *Puritan's Progress* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), p. 400.

34. *Journal of Social Science*, XXII (June, 1887), 46-47; *Literary Digest*, XI (May-October, 1895), 637; XIII (1896), 455-56.

35. *Outlook*, LII (July-December, 1895), 349; *Nineteenth Century*, XXXIX (April-June, 1896), 797; Schlesinger, *Rise of the City*, p. 318; Train, *Puritan's Progress*, p. 300.

36. *Bicycling World*, XXXVI (December 17, 1897), 19; Henry Collis Brown, *In The Golden Nineties* (Hastings-On-Hudson: Valentine's Manual, Inc., 1928), pp. 48-49.

37. *Literary Digest*, XIII (1896), 361; *Bicycling World*, XXXV (July 23, 1897), 5; Dr. C. E. Nash, *Historical and Humorous Sketches of the Donkey, Horse and Bicycle* (Little Rock: Press of Tunnah and Pittard, 1896), p. 200; *New York Times*, May 16, 1899, p. 1.

38. *New York Tribune*, May 12, 1895, p. 6; *Outlook*, LIII (January-June, 1896), 752; *Century Magazine*, LIV (May-December, 1897), 473; *Cosmopolitan*, XIX (May-October, 1895), 394; *Bicycling World*, XXVI (January 14, 1898), 8; Andrew Sinclair, *The Better*

Half: The Emancipation of the American Woman (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 107; Dulles, *America Learns to Play*, pp. 266-67.

39. Hiram Percy Maxim, *Horseless Carriage Days* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), pp. 1-2; *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, XIII (August 3, 1894), 17.

40. *Bicycling World*, XXX (November, 1894-May, 1895), 957; *Harper's Weekly*, XL (January-June, 1896), 354; Burlingame, *Engines of Democracy*, p. 372.

41. *The Forum*, XXI (March-August, 1896), 682; *Bicycling World*, XXXIII (May 29, 1896), 11; *The Arena*, VI (1892), 582; *The Living Age*, CCXIV (July, August, September, 1897), 714.

42. Fred C. Kelly, "The Great Bicycle Craze," *American Heritage*, VIII (December, 1956), 70.

43. *Bicycling World*, XXX (November, 1894-May, 1895), 957; *Century Magazine*, XLIX (November, 1894-April, 1895), 306; *Scientific American*, LXXIII (July-December, 1895), 50.

44. *Bicycling World*, XXXV (September 10, 1897), 13; *American Wheelman*, VIII (September 17, 1896), 41; *Scientific American*, LXXIV (January-June, 1896), 291; Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), pp. 182-83.

45. *Bicycling World*, XXXIV (May 7, 1897), 17; *Scribner's Magazine*, XIX (January-June, 1896), 783; *Munsey's Magazine*, XV (April-September, 1896), 131.

46. W.S. Beekman and C.W. Willis, *Cycle Gleanings* (Boston: Press of Skinner, Bartlett and Company, 1894), pp. 10-11; *Scientific American*, LXXX (January-June, 1899), 292.

47. *McClure's Magazine*, II (December, 1893-May, 1894), 305; Schlesinger, *Rise of the City*, p. 433.

48. Wells, *Recent Economic Changes*, p. 350; *Chicago Tribune*, quoted in *Current Literature*, XV (January-June, 1894), 521; *North American Review*, CLXIV (January-June, 1897), 559-60.

49. George B. Bradley, M.D., *Why Should We Cycle?* (New York, 1895), p. 6; H.C. Clark, *Hygienic Bicycling* (Delaware City, Delaware, 1897), p. 12; *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, XI (June 9, 1893), 24; *Universal Medical Magazine*, quoted in *Bicycling World*, XXV (September, 1892-March, 1893), 256; *British Medical Journal*, quoted in *Literary Digest*, XII (December, 1895-April, 1896), 377.

50. *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, XI (May 5, 1893), 30.

51. *Harper's Weekly*, XXXIV (July-December, 1890), 686; Porter, *Cycling for Health and Pleasure*, p. 11; *Bicycling World*, XXX (June 26, 1896), II; *The Living Age*, CCXV (October, November, December, 1897), 470-72.

52. Edmond Redmond, ed., *The Bards and the Bicycle* (New York: M.F. Mansfield, 1897), p. 33; *Scribner's Magazine*, XVII (January-June, 1895), 702; *Bicycling World*, XXXI (May-November, 1895), 53, 93.

53. Redmond, ed., *Bards and Bicycle*, pp. 129-30.

54. Columbia Bicycles (Pope Manufacturing Company, 1892), p. 38.

55. While this account focuses on America, it should be recalled that during the 1890s the bicycle was also popular in Britain and on the continent—and for some of the same reasons. Nor is this surprising. The United States and the advanced Western nations shared many of the same values (such as utilitarianism), and were undergoing a similar process of urbanization and industrialization. Stressing this latter point, John Higham has argued that in both America and Europe during the 1890s a boom in sports and recreation, and a heightened interest in nature attest to a common reaction to the constraints of urban-industrial life. See John Higham, “The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890’s,” in John Weiss, ed., *The Origins of Modern Consciousness* (Wayne State University Press, 1956), pp. 27-29, 32-33.

Higham has also suggested, however, that this reaction expressed itself in a somewhat different fashion on this side of the Atlantic. He notes, for instance, the lead taken by the United States in sports as well as the unusual ferocity found in American sports. It seems likely, too, that the widespread fascination with speed was peculiar to the American scene. But until a full analysis is undertaken of the bicycle in a cross-cultural setting, any remarks on the vehicle’s comparative attractions must necessarily remain tentative.

56. Ray Ginger, *Age of Excess: The United States From 1877 to 1914* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 158.

57. Blake McKelvey, *The Urbanization of America, 1860-1915* (Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 187; Mark Sullivan, *Our Times: The United States, 1900-1925*, 6 vols. (New York and London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925-35), I, 243.

58. *Century Magazine*, XLIX (November, 1894-April, 1895), 306; *Bicycling World*, XXXII (May 15, 1896), 11; *Detroit Free Press*, quoted in *Literary Digest*, XIII (1896), 197; *Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, XX (September 17, 1897), 36.

59. *New York Times*, June 3, 1899, p. 6.

60. *Cosmopolitan*, XIX (May-October, 1895), 394; *American Athlete*, XII (December 29, 1893), 539; *Harper’s Weekly*, XLVIII (January-June, 1904), 906; *Lippincott’s Magazine*, XLIX (January-June, 1892), 605; Kelly, “Great Bicycle Craze,” *loc. cit.*, p. 73; *Scribner’s Magazine*, LXVII (January-June, 1920), 636.

61. *Bicycling World*, XXXIV (February 5, 1897), 23; *Chicago Times Herald*, quoted in *ibid.*, XXX (September 18, 1896), 17; Merrill Deninson, *The Power To Go* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1956), p. 61.

62. *Scientific American*, LXXV (July-Decmeber, 1896), 69; *Bicycling World*, XXXVII (September 16, 1898), 20; XXXVI (April 8, 1898), 29; Kaempffert, ed., *Popular History of American Inventions*, I, 142.

63. *Scientific American*, LXXXII (January-June, 1900), 5; *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, VIII (1910), 475; *Twelfth Census*, X, 328; Victor C. Clark, *History of Manufactures in the United States*, 3 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1929), III, 156; *The Bookman*, XIII (March-August, 1901), 425; *Fifty Years of Schwinn-Built Bicycles*, p. 55.

64. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), pp. 309-10.

65. Andrew W. Gillette, “The Bicycle Era in Colorado,” *Colorado Magazine*, X (November, 1933), 213; *New York Evening Sun*, January 24, 1900.

66. *The Horseless Age*, I (November, 1895), 8; Maxim, *Horseless Carriage Days*, pp. 4-5.
67. *Outing*, XXXV (October, 1899-March 1900), 641. For a summary of the numerous mechanical connections between the bicycle and the automobile, see Allan Nevins, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), pp. 186-90.
68. Frederick W. Cozens and Florence Scovil Stumpf, *Sports in American Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 28-29, 215ff.