

Cycling in the 1890s

An Orgasmic Experience?

BY KATHERINE MURTHA

L'auteure examine les femmes et le vélo dans les années 1890 ajoutant que jamais un autre moyen de transport a été plus concluant comme agent de changement dans la vie des femmes.

Let me tell you what I think of bicycling," Miss Anthony said, leaning forward and laying a slender hand on my arm. I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. I stand and rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a wheel. It gives woman a feeling of freedom and self-reliance. The moment she takes her seat she knows she can't get into harm unless she gets off her bicycle, and away she goes, the picture of free untrammelled womanhood.

—Susan B. Anthony
(interviewed by Nelly Bly)

The "Gay 1890s" were made all the more colourful by the presence of the bicycle. Social historians allege that the bicycle had a great "leveling" effect on society. Upon the seat of a bicycle, anyone, regardless of class or social position, could now ride down the same street or the same park. Onlookers found it increasingly difficult to distinguish the classes. Nowhere was the role of the bicycle as a vehicle for social change more apparent than in the lives of women, and by the 1890s increasing numbers of women took to the road with passion. The bicycle provided them with a freedom, mobility, and sense of adventure previously denied to them. This phenomenon, however, did not come to pass without an enormous struggle.

Reading the newspapers of the time, it is amazing how much space is devoted to bicycle news. Most striking, though, is the amount of ink spilt discussing women and their relationship to this vehicle of modernity. The presence of the bicycle led to an outburst of discussion on women's "proper" nature, role, and attire. It was as if women's new-found freedom and "unchaperoned" mobility unleashed all the fears of the defenders of the traditional moral order. Conjuring up images of "blazing saddles," the editor of the *Dominion Medical Monthly* warned that "Bicycle riding produces in the female a distinct orgasm." He then went on to state that "Toronto's scorching thoroughfares" make the streets of Sodom and Gomorrah look "as pure as Salvation Army shelters" (Roberts).

It was not just men who expressed fear and ridicule toward women on wheels. Kit Coleman, Canada's first woman journalist, wrote in her popular "Women's Kingdom" column:

No girl over 39 should be allowed to wheel. It is immoral. Unfortunately, it is older girls who are ardent wheelers. They love to cavort and careen above the spokes, twirling and twisting in a manner that must remind them of long dead dancing days. They have descended from the shelves in myriads and in a burst of Indian summer are disporting themselves on the highways and byways. (*The Mail and Empire*)

Similar sentiments were expressed worldwide. The term "loose" (which means without a corset) and "town

bike" or "ride" all come this period. These derogatory expressions were used to keep women in their "proper" immobile sphere.

That countless anonymous women persisted in riding in the face of such opposition is truly remarkable. In keeping with the egalitarian spirit of the bicycle movement, it is interesting to note that it was the "sisters, sweethearts, and wives of the young chaps about town, the clerks, the mechanics and such like" (Denison), who broke through convention and took to the road without waiting for the approval and initiation of upper-class women. The mobility provided by the bicycle also inspired working class women to fight for the adoption of pant-like bloomers and the eradication of the gripping wire and whale bone corset. What was the use of having a bicycle, they argued, if heavy elaborate clothing made it virtually impossible to move? The daring and courageous spirit of these numerous, nameless women contrib-

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Natalie Hafez, untitled, 11" x 8.5", pen and ink, 2001.

uted enormously to lifting from women the physical and social restrictions that kept them earth-bound.

However, by the summer of 1895, what was previously deemed unacceptable now became fashionable. The tide of opinion was turned by the sudden and dramatic appearance of the upper echelons of society on wheels. Once the bicycle received the upper-class stamp of approval a bicycle rage erupted. Toronto's trend-setting society women rode the streets and parks en masse parading the latest most exquisite cycling costumes for amazed spectators. The papers were full of information on Toronto's fashion show on wheels. They took note of the most recent "cultured" woman to take to the wheel, or the latest fashionable circle to host a bicycle party—whose invitations popularly ended with BYOB (Bring your Own Bicycle) (Toronto Saturday Night).

The enterprising men of the bicy-

cle industry were eager to tap into this new market of women. To counteract evidence of medical professionals who opposed women's cycling the bicycle industry sponsored other doctors who publicly flaunted evidence attesting to its enormous health benefits.

With a little oiling some doctors were even known to change their mind. Where once the evidence proved that bicycling ruined "the feminine organs of matrimonial necessity," and caused skeleton deformations, hernias, varicose veins, weak hearts, nervous disorders, insomnia, epilepsy etc., it now seemed to prove the contrary.

While the bicycle fad faded before the end of the century, the craze was beneficial in stimulating the production of better bicycles for women. Most of all, it silenced almost all of the critical voices and created a general consensus that it was acceptable and beneficial for women to ride. The ensuing respectability, however,

did not come without a cost in terms of women's quest for mobility and freedom. An unmistakable spirit of boldness and independence marks the initial entrance of cycling women into the public sphere. However, once a certain level of respectability was gained efforts were made to tame their spirit and restrict their movements. Although it was deemed acceptable for women to ride by the mid-1890s it had to be done in a way considered proper for the female sex. Hence the controversy surrounding women and the bicycle did not cease upon acceptance. Pant-like bloomers were eventually rejected. Most upper class women and many men regarded the outfit as too masculine. However, some compromise was made with the demands of the rational dress reformers. Women's skirts were raised two inches and the tight whale-bone corsets of the time could be exchanged for more flexible elastic health corsets. Understandably, the corset industry took a real

interest in the discussions of the time. Fearing extinction, many companies rallied to the cause by loosening the grip of their product and offering such amenities as bicycle insurance with purchases.

Furthermore, while it was now generally agreed that a little exercise was good for the female sex, it must be done with moderation. The public nature of bicycling led to extensive discussions on women and athletics. In the end the traditional view that women were incapable of strenuous exercise was upheld and any attempt by women to exert themselves athletically was viewed in an immoral light. The editor of *Cyclist* expressed the view that came to dominate public opinion:

A woman can best show what little exertion is required in propelling her cycle by riding with modest ease and moderate pace. For feats of speed and protracted endurance she is bound morally, if she respects her sex, to avoid anything in the nature of deleterious excesses of exertion. (Ritchie 158)

Women who persisted in racing and competition were threatened with the phenomenon of "bicycle eyes" or "bicycle face" which medical men insisted results from the strain of cycling exertion. The fear was that once "wild eyes" became fixed upon the countenance they were impossible to erase.

These restrictions put a real damper on the aspirations of women who longed to excel in the field of athletics. During the latter half of the nineteenth century a number of women had achieved some success and fame in racing and long distance rides. Now, as the consensus of moderate exercise solidified, the avenues and recognition that were open to women disappeared. France, which witnessed the beginnings of women's bicycle racing, now only encouraged men, until the 1930s. The League of American Wheelmen

which sanctioned races blacklisted women. Cycling magazines refused to print the results of women's efforts. It was only in 1958 that the Union Cycliste Internationale re-established recognition of women cyclists and resumed consecutive records of their accomplishments. This is not to say that women totally abandoned their desire to participate in the athletic sphere. A number of women who refused to be bound by the dictates of moderation found a congenial outlet for their cycling skills in the circus. Here women were able to take their place alongside men, not as mere assistants but more as equals. Unfortunately, the compromises enforced by the weight of public opinion did mean that much female potential remained undeveloped and much of the history of women and cycling was lost. Sadly, while men's athletic prowess continued to be celebrated women were now more commonly celebrated as "The Most Attractive Lady Cyclist."

Although the bicycle boom died before the new century unfolded, the reform movements in which the bicycle participated continued. While the bicycle may have faded from the pages of newspapers and magazines, it did not disappear from women's lives. In the wake of the bicycle craze women gained access to cheaper and better bicycles. The bicycle became for many a practical means of transportation. Moreover, As Elizabeth Cady Stanton noted, "Many a woman is riding to the suffrage on a bicycle." (Petty 125)

A Canadian Moment:

A New Brunswick lady cyclist in the 1890s returned home from Boston for a vacation and appeared in public wearing a short belted gown and loose trousers, reaching between knee and ankle. At a gathering of the Ladies Sewing Circle, it was agreed that "the hussy must be ostracized." However, a local clergyman when asked to comment noted, "Her dress is a lot more

sanitary than the ground-length style you women wear, and she won't go home trailing tobacco juice and deadly germs that will infect others." (Humber 14)

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