

The Great Bicycle Protest of 1896

The 1890s popular movement for Good Roads, pushed most ardently by bicyclists, is of note for several reasons. Primarily the fight for better conditions for bicycling unknowingly set the stage for the rise of the private automobile. Within a decade of the big demonstrations detailed here, better roads and improved tire technology combined with breakthroughs in internal combustion to launch the car industry. Obviously the private automobile has played a pivotal role in transferring the cost of transportation to the individual (thereby intensifying financial needs, summed up in the absurd conundrum of "driving to work to make money to pay for my car to drive to work"). It has also been central to the speeding up of daily life, especially in the sprawl of the post World War II era. (Of course if you're stuck in a traffic jam during every commute, you may question how "speeded up" the car has made your life). In any case, the colorful popular demonstrations that filled San Francisco's decrepit streets in the 1890s find a contemporary echo in the monthly Critical Mass bike rides that started in San Francisco in 1992 and spread across the world. The unintended consequences of the 19th century popular mobilization for Good Roads provide important food for thought as we engage in political movements of resistance and imagination.

—C.C.

by Hank Chapot

The bicycle took America by storm in the last part of the 1800s, becoming an object of pleasure and symbol of progress. Enthusiasts hailed the bicycle as "a democratizing force for good, the silent steed of steel, the modern horse." The Gilded Age was the Bicycle Age. Millions of new bicyclists were soon demanding good roads to accompany their embrace of the new-fangled means of transportation.

San Francisco, though the third wealthiest city in the nation, was an aging boomtown. Streets were muddy or dusty, full of horseshit, and increasingly crisscrossed with a hodgepodge of streetcar tracks and cable slots, creating an unpredictable, hazardous mess. The city's old dirt roads and cobblestone thoroughfares were originally laid down for a village of 40,000 were now serving a metropolis of 360,000.

On Saturday July 25th of 1896, after months of organizing by cyclists and good roads advocates, residents took to the streets in downtown San Francisco, inspired by the possibilities of the nation's wonderful new machine, the bicycle. Enjoyed by perhaps 100,000 spectators, the parade

ended in unanimously approved resolutions in favor of good roads, and a near riot at Kearny and Market. The next day's headlines in the *San Francisco Call* captured the rally's success: "**San Francisco Bicycle Riders Disciples Of Progress**"; "**A Most Novel And Magnificent Wheel Pageant Did Light Up Folsom Street.**"

Since the 1880's, riders across the country had lobbied for access to the streets. Increasingly organized, their mission was political and social as cycling became a way of life. Bicyclists demonstrated in large American cities, including Chicago, where wheelmen and wheelwomen held riding exhibitions and mass meetings, forcing the city to withdraw a rail franchise for a west end boulevard. The bicycle's popularity exploded with the Safety Bicycle (circa 1885) that eliminated the danger of riding the giant "high wheelers." The "Safety" had many of the innovations of contemporary bicycles. The invention of the pneumatic tire in 1889 cushioned the ride. Bicycle ownership exploded in the 1890's among all classes, shop owners purchased delivery bikes and businesses purchased fleets.

Yet, animosity toward the bicycle grew with its popularity. Cities passed ordinances restricting hours and setting speed limits. Riders responded by using their organized "wheel clubs" that in addition to political activism, promoted social events, elected officers, ran competitions, sponsored dances and country rides. Many had clubhouses in the city and ran "wheel hotels" in the countryside. The women of the Falcon Cycling Club ran one in an abandoned streetcar near Ocean Beach.

Through the League of American Wheelmen (L.A.W.), founded in 1880 in Rhode Island, cyclists across the country joined the movement. Bicycle organizing was already in full swing by 1887 when the *New York Times* editorialized ". . . since bicycles have been declared vehicles by the courts, they should be declared by statute entitled to the privileges and subject to the duties of wheeled traffic." As local agitation grew into a national movement, the L.A.W. became the umbrella organization for the wider good roads movement. Bicycle agitation spread globally and locally. Candidates for local office found that unless they supported good roads, they stood little chance against well-organized L.A.W. chapters.

The San Francisco Movement

The 1896 protest was tied to the campaign to pass a City Charter that among other changes, would nullify unused



street rail franchises. New franchises would have to be running in six months. The charter was a core project of the Southside Merchants Association, and the cyclery owners of the Cycle Board of Trade were unanimous in support. The protest offered a chance to rally San Francisco to the cause.

People wanted abandoned rail tracks removed, pavement between the rails and reduction of the height of the slot. They wanted Market Street sidewalks reduced and overhead wires put underground when streets were re-built—common practices in eastern cities. Cyclists risked crashing upon the raised steel slot in the roadbed through which cable cars gripped the cable, or slipping on the unpaved trackways. Most cyclists hated “the slot” and the street railways that ran on it. Companies were killing old franchises to maintain their monopolies but leaving the tracks in place.

Mission District bicyclists wanted access to downtown. Folsom Street was the main boulevard through the Mission and cyclists worked diligently for pavement from 29th to Rincon Hill. The July 25th rally would celebrate the opening of a newly paved portion. They also wanted a road from their

neighborhood to Golden Gate Park, and because thousands were riding there at night, they wanted illumination with electric lights like Central Park.

The *San Francisco Call*, a major supporter of the movement, interviewed owners and managers of some of the numerous cyclerys in town, who spoke as one. Each was a sponsor of “the agitation” and each would close early on Saturday. In San Francisco that July, their demand was “Repave Market Street,” their motto, “Where There Is a Wheel, There Is a Way.”

A five-year wheelman named McGuire, speaking for the South Side Improvement Club stated: “The purpose for the march is three-fold; to show our strength, to celebrate the paving of Folsom Street and to protest against the conditions of San Francisco pavement in general and of Market Street in particular. If the united press of this city decides that Market Street must be repaved, it will be

done in a year.” Asked if southsiders were offended that the grandstand would be north of Market, McGuire exclaimed, “Offended! No! We want the north side to be waked up. We south of Market folks are lively enough, but you people over the line are deadier than Pharaoh!”

Meeting at the Indiana Bicycle Company the Thursday before the parade, cyclists discussed their greatest opponent, the Market Street Railway, whom they blamed for the sorry condition of their main thoroughfare. “A person takes his life into his own hands when he rides on that street” someone said, accusing the streetcar company of sprinkling the street when many wheelmen and women were heading home from work. Another predicted that “with good roads, urban workers would ride to their places of business . . . a good thing because it would cut into the income of the tyrannical street railroad.” They had a friend in the Street Department, a wheelman himself, who promised that all obstacles would be removed from the route Saturday and streets would not be sprinkled.

The Emporium Department Store paved Market Street at 5th at its own expense, using tarred wooden blocks laid over the old basalt as an example of what Market Street should look like. Unfortunately, much of the Emporium's efforts would be undone during the commotion later on Saturday evening.

Several politicians had been invited. "Most sent letters assuring their friendly disposition toward the wheelmen." With the appointment of so many vice-presidents to the parade committee, including the Mayor, two Congressmen, both Senators and the City Supervisors, political notice seemed assured. From the Cycle Board of Trade and the Southside Improvement Association, the call went out to bicyclists and "all progressive and public-spirited citizens to participate."

The Great Bicycle Demonstration July 25, 1896

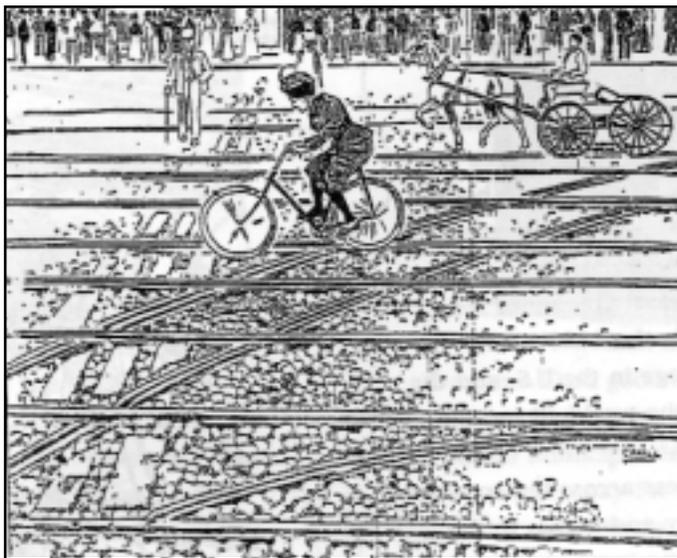
Thousands of spectators from "the less progressive sections of the city" were expected. The decorations committee had provided 8,000 Chinese lanterns, distributed by the Indiana Bicycle Company. Cyclists were encouraged to decorate their wheels, citizens along the route to decorate their properties, with prizes offered for the finest display.

By early evening, homes and businesses along Folsom Street were ablaze with firelight as the committee made its rounds. Businesses decorated their storefronts; one was covered with colorful bunting and flags surrounded by lanterns while a homeowner used carriage lanterns, to cast colored lights onto the street. The Folsom Street Stables were a mass of torchlight.

Promoters had failed to get electric lights strung the length of Folsom Street, but the mansions, businesses and walk-ups "were not content to burn a single hallway light as usual but were illuminated basement to garret a full stream of gaslight in every room commending a view of the street with an abundance of Chinese lanterns strung from eaves to buildings across the street." Calcium lights cast the brightest glow but many windows "were lit in the old fashioned style, rows of candles placed one above the other." Every window bulged with cheering spectators.

The divisions gathered on Shotwell Street in their finest riding attire and street clothes, or their most gruesome costumes. The largest (from the L.A.W.) dressed as street-laborers. The Bay City Wheelmen, YMCA Cyclers, the Pacific, Liberty, Olympia, Call and Pathfinders were all represented. Members wore insignias of their affiliations. "Unattached friends" were invited to join a favorite division.

A few men rode in drag, one "in the togs of a Midway *Plaisance* maiden," another as an old maid. Uncle Sam rode in bloomers next to a down-home hayseed. There were meaner stereotypes: Sitting Bull and Pocahontas; a man in bloomers mocking "the new women;" one in blackface; one "imitating a Chinese in silks and slippers."



Bicycles were adorned with ribbons and painted canvas with lanterns strung from the handlebars or from poles above—"a sea of Chinese lanterns as far as the eye could see." One was decorated with a stack of parasols, another intertwined with flowers and garlands, others "revolving discs of light guided by mystic men in garbs of flame." A few rode the old-fashioned "high-wheelers." Tandems were joined to create a pirate ship, while another pair carried "a little chariot from which a child drove through the air two beautiful little bicycles." Many carried cowbells that "turned the night into pandemonium."

Clubs from as far away as Fremont, Vallejo, Santa Rosa and San Jose lined up alongside worker's divisions, letter carriers, soldiers from the Presidio and sailors from Angel Island. *The Call* stated cheerfully, "Though most of the column was composed of clubs, there was no restraining line to prevent the participation of individuals. Everyone was welcome to the merrymaking"

One club however, did not attend. For three years, the Colored Cycle Club of Oakland had been seeking membership in the L.A.W. Three days earlier they were again denied membership. Nevertheless, the next day's *Sunday Call* would exclaim, "Bicyclists of every age, race, sex and color—bicyclists from every stratum of cycledom, the scorcher to the hoary headed patriarch . . . turned out for the great demonstration in favor of good streets."

The parade president had invited liverymen and teamsters to join the march, and though many southsiders had to rent horses, they planned to "pay a silent tribute" later at the reviewing stand near City Hall, "to that noble and patient animal, for he is still with us."

The Parade Begins

Late in starting, the Grand Marshall "hid his blushes in the folds of a huge sash of yellow silk" and called to march. Orders had been passed down that candles not be lighted until commanded, but the streets were ablaze as the horse-

men began. Fireworks filled the air and the new pavement hummed beneath the wheels. When the order to march finally came down the line, the glowing lanterns bobbed and weaved above the crowds.

The children's division led with the Alpha Ladies' Cycling Club in their first public ride. It had taken some persuasion to induce the Alphas to attend, yet the women's clubs were greeted with enthusiasm. The procession quickly stretched ten blocks and began to splinter—"literally a sea of humanity." The children and a few others dropped out at 8th Street, but the majority of cyclists pressed on, all the while "good-naturedly" bombarded by Roman candles. Upwards of 100,000 San Franciscans "watched the energetic wheelmen speed upon their whirling way."

By 8th Street, the cyclists were forced to dismount and push their wheels through a narrow strip above the rail tracks as the police began to worry about the "overenthusiastic crowds." The disturbance caused by the streetcars and the narrowness of the space available in the center of the street began to separate the bicyclists.

At Market, streetcars were "so burdened, their sides, roof and platform sagged perceptively." The crowd filled the street and only a few lanterns appeared above the crowds. Riders had planned to dismount and push for three blocks to show "the pavement is too bad for any self-respecting wheel to use" but ended up pushing most of the way.

Approaching Powell and Market, "the cyclists encountered a surging mass of humanity." Bells of a dozen trapped streetcars added to the chaos. When the number 21 car got too close to one division, some in the crowd began rocking it, attempting to overturn it.

Not surprisingly, some came with destructive intent, including, "an army of small boys from the Mission who ruthlessly smashed and stole the lanterns." The *Chronicle* reported, "They stole them by the score and those they couldn't pluck they smashed with sticks . . . others filled respectable spectators with dismay by their language."

Before the last cyclists had passed up Market Street a larger disturbance broke out among the spectators. "The hoodlums began a warfare upon the streetcars," according to the *Chronicle*. People

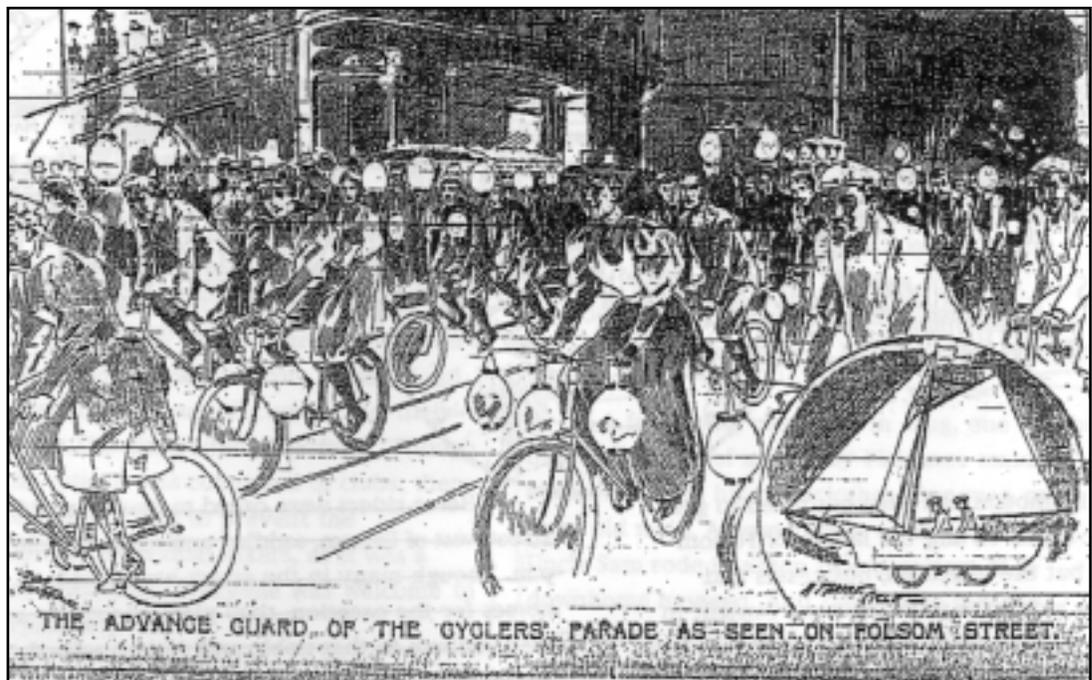
were observed pulling up the Emporium's tarred blocks and throwing them beneath the streetcar wheels and at the cars directly, breaking windows while passengers covered inside. When a car stopped, they attempted to overturn it by rocking it and when one got away, they fell upon the next.

At City Hall, both sides of Van Ness were "black with people." When the firewagon finally appeared, well after 9:30 p.m., it was greeted by a great roar. At the grandstand in the gathering fog, accompanied by bursting fireworks, the crowd cheered as each new division straggled in. On the reviewing stand sat many important San Franciscans; a Senator, a Congressman, several Supervisors and the fine ladies and gentlemen of San Francisco's southside community.

A gigantic bonfire blazed in City Hall Square, another burned at Fell and Van Ness; fires glowed around the plaza. Behind the stage hung a huge banner lighted by the ubiquitous lanterns stating simply, "FINISH FOLSOM STREET." Under a festoon of lights, speeches of "varying qualities of oratory" received tremendous applause.

Julius Kahn, an enthusiastic wheelman, preached good roads and great civilizations. Senator Perkins promised pavement to the Park, and lighting too. The next speaker claimed the bicycle had solved the age-old question that perplexed both Plato and Mayor Sutro, who rarely left the Heights in the evening: "How to get around in the world!"

Although the disturbance at Kearny and Market was not completely out of character for San Francisco, the cyclists, to say the least, were not amused. Meeting Sunday after the parade, argument raged. Someone offered "Chief Crowley is dissembling when he declares he could not put enough men out for a bicycle parade when he can spare men enough to preserve order at a prize-fight" and a Mr.



Wynne agreed. "They are perfectly able to be out in force around boxing night at the Pavilion when some 'plug-uglies' are engaged in battering each other."

The final resolution declaring victory was approved unanimously. "The parade exceeded any similar events held west of Chicago and the objects of the demonstration have been fully accomplished and we have aroused the sympathy and secured the support of the well-wishers of San Francisco."

They decried the inefficiency of the Police Department and especially condemned the Market Street Railroad Company's "outrageous, high-handed actions in operating and insolently intruding their cars into the ride, thus breaking into the route and materially interfering with its success."

A vote of thanks was extended to all who participated in the Street Department for the fine manner in which it had prepared the road.

The Sunday papers estimated five thousand riders had taken part. The *Examiner* was effusive: "it was the greatest night the southsiders have had since the first plank road was laid from the city gardens into the chaparral and sand dunes where 16th Street now stretches it's broad road." The *Call* heralded "An Enthusiastic Outpouring of Devotees of The Wheel."

That Sunday morning, the *Examiner* sent a reporter to Golden Gate Park to count cyclists, who had exclusive use of the drives. He recorded the number of women and men, types of wheels and clothing styles. "The men riding in the early morning, erect and never exceeding six miles per hour, wore knickerbockers, sack coats and scotch caps." These were "the best type of cyclist." Later, "the hard riding element appeared with a perceptible change in attire, their speed increased." The clubs followed and finally those on rented wheels, their garb "apparently hastily improvised." He

observed numerous tandems. "Bloomer maids outnumbered their sisters in skirts 4 to 1." The paper published hourly figures totaling 2,951 cyclists between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m."

Aftermath

Great changes took place, and swiftly. Cyclists rode in victory on a paved Market Street in 1898. But that victory would be short lived. Roads were improved at about the same time the bicycle lost public fascination to the automobile, and oil began to power transportation. Membership in the L.A.W. slipped heavily by the turn of the century. National bicycle sales dropped from 1.2 million in 1899 to 160,000 in 1909.

The bicycle remained an important option for workers and businesses for decades before being redefined as a toy following World War II. Its popularity rebounded in the 1930's and again strongly in the 1990's. In much of the world, it never left. Appearing between the horse and the automobile, the bicycle had helped define the Victorian era. It aided the liberation of workers (and especially women and children) as it changed concepts of personal freedom. On two wheels, individuals were free to move themselves across much longer distances at a greater speed than ever before, not dependent on horse or rail.

The Great Protest remained unique for 101 years until, on another July 25th, in 1997, bicyclists again took over Market Street. This time the Mayor used the police to attack the riders in an ill-fated attempt to "shut down" Critical Mass. Since then, the monthly rides have continued strong. Nearing its ninth birthday, Critical Mass provides an ongoing space for cyclists to assert their right to the streets, show their numbers, and celebrate the bicycle—in direct lineage from the wheelmen and wheelwomen of 1896. ❧

