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A City on Wheels: The Bicycle Era in New Orleans

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Sports have played an interesting role in the American search for recreation since colonial days when Virginia gentlemen rode to the hounds or wagered on their favorite thoroughbreds and a few atypical New Englanders frolicked around the May-pole. But it was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that sports developed the characteristics and importance associated with this prominent social institution today. Before the Industrial Revolution, American sports were mainly rural, out-of-doors activities. Hunting, fishing, horse racing, cockfighting, and animal-baiting were the chief sporting diversions of agrarian America. The dearth of athletic amusements led one observer to write in 1901 (with some exaggeration), "Until the middle of the century just closed we were practically without sports."¹

When industrialization caused violent shifts in the basic structure of society, sports reflected the transformation. As thousands and then millions of Americans made the pilgrimage from farm to city, they felt a more pressing need for organized recreation than they had experienced in the sylvan environment of their pre-industrial society. To ease and to escape the pressures of urbanization and industrialization, Americans

¹Quoted in Harry T. Paxton (ed.), *Sport U. S. A.: The Best from the Saturday Evening Post* (New York, 1961), 3. For accounts of the rise of sports, see John A. Krout, *Annals of American Sport* (New Haven, 1929); and Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreation, 1607-1940* (Gloucester, Mass., 1959).

fashioned what historian Frederic Logan Paxson termed the "safety valve of sport."² Its rate of growth was phenomenal. At the turn of the century a contemporary could in all honesty designate the period as the "era of sport. Practically every man and boy, every woman and girl, takes part, or wishes to take part, in some branch of it," he explained. "And it is fortunate that the field is broad enough for all."³

This rage for competitive sports developed like a rising tide, reaching flood proportions in the 1890's, when an interest in sports permeated every level of society. Professor John Higham has suggested that this intensified interest in sports, with a corresponding enthusiasm for nature cults and martial music, reflected a desire "to break out of the frustrations, the routine, and the sheer dullness of an urban-industrial culture." While Higham doubtless exaggerates the docility with which Americans submitted to "the gathering restrictions of a highly industrialized society," there is no denying the spectacular growth of sports at the *fin-de-siècle*, particularly those activities that emphasized speed, strength, and rugged exercise.⁴

Of the sports that attracted nineteenth-century Americans, none enjoyed a greater popularity than cycling. For the athletically inclined, the bicycle was a pleasurable type of exercise, a passport to the tonic freshness of the open countryside, a speedy racing machine, and a low-cost, convenient mode of transportation. In the age of the automobile the bicycle's appeal seems limited and remote, but during the height of the cycling craze in the 1890's, a *Munsey's Magazine* writer assigned this conveyance a high position on his century's honor roll: "Today, in reckoning the achievements of the nineteenth century, to such epoch making discoveries as the railroad, the steamship, the telegraph, and the telephone, we can hardly refuse to add, as the latest item on the list, the bicycle."⁵

The bicycle of the 1890's was the result of almost a century of

²Frederic Logan Paxson, "The Rise of Sport," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, IV (September, 1917), 145.

³Quoted in Paxton (ed.), *Sport U. S. A.*, 4.

⁴John Higham, "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890's," in John Weiss (ed.), *The Origins of Modern Consciousness*. (Detroit, 1965), 27.

⁵"The World Awheel," *Munsey's Magazine*, XV (May 1896), 131.

experimentation. In 1816, Baron Karl von Drais of Germany invented a wooden velocipede shaped something like a modern bicycle without pedals. Although the *draisine* enjoyed only a brief vogue, the concept of self-propelled transportation fired the imagination of inventors, who continued to tinker with the contraption. In the 1850's two Frenchmen, Ernest Michaux and Pierre Lallement, developed a wooden velocipede with pedals attached to the front wheels. Introduced in this country, the velocipede attracted ardent devotees in 1868 and 1869. Interest in the machine subsided when velocipedists found the machine ill-suited to outdoor rambles. British inventors perfected the high-wheeled bicycle, which Americans first observed at Philadelphia's Centennial Exposition in 1876. Since the front wheel had a much greater diameter than the rear one, this bicycle was difficult to mount and not entirely comfortable to ride. Nevertheless, the high-wheeler established a taste for cycling that was to be universally gratified after further technical improvements. By the mid-1880's British enthusiasts had developed the "Rover," a chain-driven vehicle with wheels of equal size known as the "safety." In 1887 the Overman Wheel Company began to produce "Victor" safeties in this country, and other manufacturers soon followed. After the introduction of the pneumatic tire in 1889, the bicycle had practically assumed its modern form.⁶

Safety bicycles made cycling less a sport for specialists and more a general pastime. Soon men and women of all ages were pedaling the highways of the country to the tune of "Daisy Bell," "My Love's a Cyclist," "A Merry Cyclist," and countless other period tunes that reflected mass interest in the sport. In 1892, Luther H. Porter, a national authority on the wheel, said, "Within the last five years cycling has attained the dignity of being the most popular form of outdoor recreation indulged in by Americans as well as by Englishmen."⁷ Technical improvements and mass production gave the country a

⁶For a history of the development of the bicycle, see Arthur J. Palmer, *Riding High: The Story of the Bicycle* (New York, 1956).

⁷Luther H. Porter, *Wheels and Wheeling: An Indispensable Handbook for Cyclists* (Boston, 1892), vii. For accounts of cycling in America, see Palmer, *Riding High*; and Norman L. Dunham, "The Bicycle Era in American History" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1956).

sporting pastime as well as a utilitarian mode of transportation that amused millions of people until it fell victim to a new craze—the automobile.

Residents of New Orleans first evinced a desire for two-wheeled transportation during the velocipede mania that swept the country during the late 1860's. Several months after the craze conquered New York, it struck the Crescent City. In February 1869, a local paper reported that officials proposed to buy twenty-five velocipedes for each of the city's fire companies.⁸ In the following month a few daring young men imported several of the novelties and opened a school to give indoor exhibitions and to instruct anyone interested in mastering the new art. "The school," said the *Picayune*, "is the resort of our most elegant and fashionable young men, and each evening numbers of ladies assemble to witness the performance." Following demonstrations of "fancy riding," riders and spectators devoted the evening to the safer pastime of dancing. More intrepid enthusiasts ventured outdoors with their machines. Riders frequently labored along outlying roads, and it was reported that some could "make their mile in four minutes on the Shell Road, if not in faster time." During the summer, firemen featured velocipede races at their Sunday outings.⁹

Pedaling over dirt and oyster-shell roads soon disclosed the deficiencies of the velocipede. Known as the "boneshaker," this forerunner of the modern bicycle was often painful to ride and always difficult to maneuver. As velocipedists discovered the shortcomings of their toys, they quickly abandoned the sport. Benevolent societies sponsored races as late as 1871, but these infrequent contests did not reflect widespread interest in the velocipede.¹⁰

Residents returned to cycling only after the introduction of the high wheeler. Even then interest mounted slowly. While cyclists in the East enthusiastically embraced the ordinary in the latter part of the 1870's, New Orleanians showed no inter-

⁸Cited in "Velocipede Notes," *Scientific American*, XX (February 27, 1869), 131.

⁹New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, March 20, 29, July 4, 13, 1869. All newspaper citations, unless otherwise noted, are from New Orleans newspapers.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, June 25, 1871.

est in the sport as late as 1880. In May of that year, at about the time Eastern sportsmen were organizing the League of American Wheelmen, the *Picayune* lamented the indifference of local athletes: "It is remarkable that the exercise has not found favor in New Orleans, as the various shellroads offer rare advantages for bicycle practice."¹¹

Shortly after the *Picayune's* appeal, "a few gentlemen who were considered cranks on the subject" organized the New Orleans Bicycle Club.¹² This association was an elite social group that included many professional men and merchants who were "men of affairs of relatively high standing." In a period when bicycles cost from one to two hundred dollars, a club spokesman said, "The fundamental principle, that personal ownership of a wheel is a requisite for membership, acts in itself as a sort of check against indiscriminate applications for admission." Moreover, the club had a "rigid rule" making "two black balls sufficient cause for the indefinite rejection of a candidate."¹³ Toward the end of the high-wheel era, a group of independent cyclists organized the Louisiana Cycling Club, a society that became important after the introduction of safety bicycles.¹⁴

For several years after its founding the NOBC sponsored only a few organized activities. Members devoted much of their riding time to individual jaunts around the city or to nearby amusement places such as Milneburg.¹⁵ Among the more popular events sanctioned by the club were those involving visiting cyclists. In 1882 the NOBC brought Elsa Von Blumen, the "White Fawn," to the city for a race against a trotter and a pacer. Elsa, who was the champion female cyclist of the ordinary era, won two of three heats held at the Fair Grounds.¹⁶ Early in 1885 the Cotton Centennial and In-

¹¹*Ibid.*, May 16, 1880.

¹²*Ibid.*, January 11, 1892; *Bicycling World* (Boston), IV (December 2, 1881), 42.

¹³*L. A. W.* [League of American Wheelmen] *Bulletin* (Boston), III (August 27, 1886), 204.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, V (July 22, 1887), 41.

¹⁵*Picayune*, September 20, 1884.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, February 20, 1882; *Bicycling World*, IV (March 10, 1882), 209; Palmer, *Riding High*, 182.

dustrial Exposition cooperated with the NOBC to bring John Prince, "champion bicyclist of America," to town for a match with W. M. Woodside, "the Irish champion." After defeating Woodside, Prince claimed the title of "World's champion."¹⁷

Cycling received a great boost in the mid-1880's when members of the NOBC decided to join the League of American Wheelmen. As stated in the constitution, the League's purposes were "to promote the general interests of bicycling, to ascertain, defend and protect the rights of wheelmen, and to encourage and facilitate touring." When the NOBC joined its ranks, the LAW had more than thirty-five hundred members, representing about ten per cent of the cyclists in America.¹⁸ After joining the League, local cyclists showed a marked increase in devotion to their sport. In December 1884, E. W. Hunter and Charles Genslinger, former president of the NOBC, began publication of the monthly *Bicycle South*. By 1886 this paper reportedly had eighteen hundred subscribers. As the official organ of the Louisiana Division of the LAW, the *Bicycle South* kept members abreast of national developments by publishing news about cycling in cities throughout the country.¹⁹

Like all League affiliates, the Louisiana Division held annual races for local championships. During the high-wheel period, members of the LAW (most of whom also belonged to the New Orleans Bicycle Club) sponsored three meetings to determine divisional supremacy. In 1887 the Louisiana Cycling Club also participated, but its members made a poor showing against the more experienced riders of the NOBC. Cyclists practiced strenuously for these meets wherever they could find level ground—in the yards of cotton presses, on shell roads, or on the city's few asphalt streets.²⁰ The paucity of paved thoroughfares prompted the *Picayune* to observe: "It is a sad commentary on the administration of this city that the bicyclists can find

¹⁷*Picayune*, February 12, 14, 15, March 9, 1885.

¹⁸Quoted in Dunham, "Bicycle Era," 203; *Bicycling World*, VIII (March 7, 1884), 223.

¹⁹Karl Kron, [Lyman H. Bagg], *Ten Thousand Miles on a Bicycle* (New York, 1887), 654, 670; *Bicycle South*, III (May, 1886), *passim*.

²⁰*Picayune*, May 4, 1885.

no fit road upon which to have their races.”²¹ But in spite of the discouraging conditions under which the races were held, as many as thirty-five hundred spectators assembled for the championship contests.²²

Interest in League activities subsided suddenly in the early 1890's as Southern wheelmen confronted the spectre of Negro membership in the LAW. In the 1880's many members of the NOBC had opposed the club's affiliation with the League because they objected to the stringency of national regulations. But despite occasional rumblings, the number of members in the Louisiana Division had slowly mounted to a peak of about one hundred and fifty in 1892.²³ In the summer of that year, however, the chief consul of the Louisiana Division, W. C. Grivot, sent the national organization a vigorous protest against “forcing obnoxious company upon southern wheelmen” by admitting Negro members and threatened to dissolve the state organization unless the LAW changed its admission policies. H. E. Raymond, chairman of the LAW's racing board, sent a lengthy reply fully explaining the position of the League:

While I am a thorough Northerner I can still appreciate the feelings of the southern wheelmen on the negro question, and . . . with the class distinction so arbitrary in your section, it would be most unwise for the league to accept applications of negroes for members in any of the southern states.

It is at the same time more or less unfair to ask us to cut out the negro up here, where he is not so obnoxious and does not rub up against us as frequently as he does in the south.

. . .

There is no question of our accepting the negro in preference to the white wheelmen of the south. If it should be narrowed down to a question such as that, we should undoubtedly decide that we want our southern brothers in the league in preference to the negroes of the country.

. . .

We, all of us, both north and south, have a feeling of

²¹*Ibid.*, August 27, 1886.

²²*L. A. W. Bulletin*, V (September 30, 1887), 205.

²³*Ibid.*, V (July 22, 1887), 39; *Bicycling World*, XXIV (February 19, 1892), 468.

antipathy towards the colored brother, but he is not so prominent or so likely to apply for membership in the L. A. W. in the north as he is in the south.²⁴

While the League debated the Negro question, Southern wheelmen began to resign from the association. By June 1893, only fifty-one members remained in the Louisiana Division, and in November only nine in the once-thriving state organization.²⁵ Alarmed by dwindling support in the South, the LAW sought to improve conditions by expelling its few Negro members. At a national convention in 1893, anti-Negro delegates fell only a few votes short of securing the two-thirds majority necessary to revise membership requirements. But at the next quarterly meeting, in February of 1894, the Negro-phobes successfully inserted the word "white" in the section of the constitution outlining qualifications for membership.²⁶ This decision made possible the revival of the Louisiana Division.

Although enthusiasm for the LAW waned for several years after 1890, cycling attracted scores of enthusiasts in this period. As the safety bicycle came into universal usage and as the price of cycles declined, many persons who had formerly disdained the sport now manifested a sudden desire for wheels. Ordinary bicycles had discouraged participation in the sport, not only because they were difficult to ride but also because they were regarded as physically dangerous. As one doctor said, "We have pressure where pressure should never be made, . . . aggravated by the jolting motion, causing a series of rapid concussions."²⁷ Opposition to cycling on these grounds gradually evaporated although cyclists occasionally complained about "old fat-heads who . . . prate about bow legs and crook-spines." And as late as 1895 the *Picayune* cited a "medical man" as its authority in observing, "Now that bicycle riding has become so universal it is feared that the

²⁴*Picayune*, August 16, 1892.

²⁵*Ibid.*, June 12, November 29, 1893.

²⁶*Ibid.*, November 29, 1893, February 21, 1894.

²⁷Robert P. Scott, *Cycling Art, Energy, and Locomotion: A Series of Remarks on the Development of Bicycles, Tricycles, and Man-Motor Carriages* (Philadelphia, 1889), 96, quoted in Dunham, "Bicycle Era," 403.

result of the craze will be a race of hunchbacks.”²⁸ Despite such dire predictions, cycling continued to fascinate people of both sexes and all ages.

The growing appeal of cycling was reflected by a flurry of activity among enthusiasts. Novices emulated veteran riders and organized several new clubs to encourage racing, pleasure riding, and social gatherings.²⁹ In 1891 a cycling school for men and women was established. Bert Spring, founder and instructor, taught riding and took his pupils on tours around the city. Reporting one of Spring’s excursions, the *Picayune* said, “Soda water and chewing gum was the menu of a feast after the ride.”³⁰ By far the most popular activities were the races arranged by the older clubs. Both the New Orleans Bicycle Club and the Louisiana Cycling Club sponsored frequent contests for special prizes donated by club members.³¹

Clubs often encouraged tours to various watering places and other retreats in the vicinity of New Orleans. During the high-wheel era, cyclists usually journeyed only as far as the lake-front resorts, but as they mounted safety bicycles, they pedaled longer distances.³² In 1888 a local correspondent for the *Bicycling World* reported: “Club runs to the sugar plantations above and below the city are all the go now, and many a pleasant Sunday has been spent among the immense fields of sugar cane and in the sugar houses of the hospitable planters.”³³ Bicycle clubs also began to sponsor expeditions to Gulf cities such as Mobile and Biloxi. On one such excursion three local cyclists were lost for two days with only corn bread, fat meat, and creek water to sustain them until they returned to civilization.³⁴

Venturing beyond the confines of the city occasionally presented more serious problems. Nonparticipants throughout the country complained that bicycles frightened livestock, clut-

²⁸*Picayune*, June 21, 1891, April 23, 1895.

²⁹*Ibid.*, June 15, 1890, January 7, 9, April 26, June 22, 1891.

³⁰*Ibid.*, June 22, 1891.

³¹*Bicycling World*, XVIII (March 29, 1889), 388; *Picayune*, August 3, 1891.

³²*L. A. W. Bulletin*, III (August 27, 1886), 204.

³³*Bicycling World*, XVIII (November 2, 1888), 8.

³⁴*Picayune*, June 2, August 16, 23, 1891.

tered the roads, and endangered the lives of pedestrians. City councils and state legislatures listened attentively to grievances and often passed laws to drive bicycles from the public thoroughfares.³⁵ Local riders encountered their share of hostility, but in 1887, Harry Hodgson reported: "There is a better feeling now towards wheelmen than ever before" as citizens "who formerly regarded the wheel as a toy, or child's sport . . . have begun to realize that the wheel as practical mode of traveling is a fixed fact." In 1890 the state legislature recognized cycling's status by awarding riders "the same rights upon the public highways of this state as are prescribed by law in the cases of persons using carriages drawn by horses."³⁶ City officials also gave cyclists "a fair and impartial show" when they clashed with the ubiquitous "Road Hog." In 1896 the city council adopted a code of traffic regulations for bicycle riders requiring wheelmen to carry lanterns after dark, to keep one hand on the handle bars, to stay on the right side of the street, to abjure riding on sidewalks, and to go no more than ten miles per hour in town.³⁷

Statutes alone could not entirely solve the problems that confronted cyclists. Although city and state officials accorded riders full legal rights, private citizens rendered riding a difficult and often dangerous pastime. "The bicycling population is up in arms against two very disagreeable forms of men who ought to be put down with all possible speed," the *Picayune* announced in 1891. "The first and worst is known as the 'road hog', a class of drivers who are unwilling to give a wheelman sufficient room to pass them on a public thoroughfare."³⁸ The second type of offender was the person who acted maliciously by attacking cyclists or setting dogs loose on riders. In August 1891, while New Orleans cyclists were riding in Mississippi, Charles Cox of Biloxi "attempted to bite off the finger" of one of the excursionists. Cox was convicted of assault, a decision the *Picayune* believed would serve as an object lesson to the "few inhospitable residents still in Biloxi."³⁹

³⁵Dunham, "Bicycle Era," 241-74.

³⁶*L. A. W. Bulletin*, V (September 2, 1887), 133; *Picayune*, June 16, 1890.

³⁷*L. A. W. Bulletin*, V (September 2, 1887), 133; *Picayune*, June 24, 1896.

³⁸*Picayune*, July 18, 1891.

³⁹*Ibid.*, August 23, 1891.

For many cyclists, the social aspects of club membership were as attractive as participating in the sport. In 1889 the New Orleans Bicycle Club constructed a spacious clubhouse on the corner of Prytania and Valence streets. Equipped with bowling alleys and a large lawn for croquet and tennis, the meeting place was described as “the nicest and coziest house they have ever had.” Members of both the NOBC and Louisiana Cycling Club held “stag smokers” as well as social gatherings for both sexes. When Colonel Albert A. Pope came to New Orleans in December of 1890, all cyclists in the city pooled their efforts to entertain the “Father of the American Bicycle.”⁴⁰

Although cycling seemed to be progressing from a young man’s fad to a universal mania, interest waned suddenly in the autumn of 1892. As one resident explained, New Orleans had as many bicycles as any city of comparable size, but “riders seem to be contented to pedal them to and from their place of business. Such a thing as getting up a race meet . . . is seldom thought of.”⁴¹ Another resident strenuously denied this report, but the decline of cycling news in the local press told a graphic story.⁴² In March 1893, the *Picayune* lamented, “The sport has almost ceased to exist in this city.”⁴³

For the next two years cycling enthusiasm continued at low ebb. Wheel owners used their conveyances almost exclusively for necessary transportation, taking part in few races or pleasure excursions. But in 1895 a cycling revival occurred, inspired by a surging interest throughout the country and by a handful of local enthusiasts who had organized the Crescent Wheelmen in 1894 to infuse new life into the pastime.⁴⁴ The *Picayune* marveled at the “sudden craze for wheels” as hundreds of residents, both male and female, organized new cycling clubs and reactivated older ones.⁴⁵

Interest in cycling surpassed anything the city had witnessed

⁴⁰*Bicycling World*, XVIII (March 1, 1889), 292; XIX (May 17, 1889), 63; *Picayune*, May 4, 5, December 25, 1890.

⁴¹*Bicycling World*, XXV (October 28, 1892), 119.

⁴²*Ibid.*, XXV (November 11, 1892), 151.

⁴³*Picayune*, March 29, 1893.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, October 24, 1894, April 10, 1895.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, May 13, 18, June 2, 14, July 7, October 13, 1895, May 28, September 1, 27, 1896.

before. Earlier clubs had been fortunate to attract a hundred members; the new associations admitted as many as seven hundred cyclists.⁴⁶ In 1895, as cycling enthusiasm grew, William E. Meyers and G. Abbott Waterman began publication of the *Southern Cyclist*, a periodical issued weekly "in the interest of the Sport and Trade."⁴⁷ Amazed by the sudden preoccupation with two-wheeled vehicles, a writer for the *Picayune* observed that "within a little year the bicycle, from a modest institution in the community, has become one of the powers of progress. It has become a factor for pleasure as well as business and is here to stay."⁴⁸

During the next few years it appeared that the *Picayune's* analysis might prove correct as cycling clubs sponsored scores of races which attracted thousands of spectators. The most active of these associations was the Southern Wheelmen, a stock company capitalized at twenty thousand dollars. Charles H. Fourton initiated this club to finance construction of a race track in New Orleans. Since cyclists had complained for years about the poor roads available for racing, the Southern Wheelmen proposed to remedy the situation by building a concrete oval. In October of 1895 members opened their track at the corner of Carrollton Avenue and Common Street (later Tulane Avenue).⁴⁹

During the remainder of the decade this concrete track was the site of the city's most important races. Local cyclists vied there frequently and often attracted more than a thousand spectators. Track managers also induced professional and amateur riders from other cities to come south. In December of 1895, Peter J. Berlo, a touring professional, raced in the city and set three world records, thus proving "the local race course was the fastest in the union." During the following year, a group of promoters persuaded the LAW to hold one of its meets in the city. The League sanctioned a series of professional and amateur races from coast to coast, and New Orleans was one stop on

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, October 18, 1895.

⁴⁷*Southern Cyclist*, II (February 12, 1896), 2.

⁴⁸*Picayune*, September 1, 1896.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, June 2, 14, October 17, 18, 1895.

the circuit in June 1896. Two of the traveling professionals, Otto Ziegler and Arthur Gardiner, once again demonstrated the advantages of the local track by setting world records.⁵⁰

Cooperation between the League of American Wheelmen and local cyclists terminated abruptly in July 1896, when the League suspended eight riders for racing on Sunday, a violation of its rules.⁵¹ Sunday recreation had been a feature of New Orleans' social life for a century; when the LAW, dominated by Eastern members who had yet to shed their puritanical notions about merrymaking on the Sabbath, refused to allow local option on this question, Crescent City cyclists ceased to follow national rules. Managers of the concrete track continued to sponsor Sunday races, and in May 1897, local wheelmen organized the Southern Cyclists' Association to control racing in the city. The SCA soon extended its influence beyond New Orleans by admitting clubs from adjacent states.⁵² European wheel associations expressed sympathy for the cause of Sunday racing, and in October 1897, the German Cycling Association recognized the Southern Cyclists' Association "as a contemporary cycling government."⁵³ Faced with similar rebellions throughout the country, the LAW gradually relinquished control of racing, and in 1900 decided to devote its full attention to the campaign for good roads.⁵⁴

While racing cyclists struggled with League regulations, the majority of riders who participated in the sport amused themselves with pleasure riding and social gatherings. Members of the New Louisiana Jockey Club organized the Country Club, an exclusive society that frequently went on "bicycle runs."⁵⁵ Another group of cyclists formed the Sunday Riding League, a club "devoted solely to Sunday riding and recreation."⁵⁶ The Louisiana Road Club sponsored numerous excur-

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, October 18, 26, December 14, 1895, June 14, 1896.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, July 22, 1896.

⁵²*Ibid.*, October 25, 1896, May 18, 1897, February 13, 1898.

⁵³*Ibid.*, January 23, 1898.

⁵⁴Dunham, "Bicycle Era," 459-60.

⁵⁵*The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1897, 3rd. rev. ed.), 39; *Picayune*, October 19, 1896.

⁵⁶*Picayune*, August 31, 1896.

sions to Baton Rouge, Abita Springs, Bay St. Louis, and other towns in Louisiana and Mississippi. This club also arranged dances and other evening amusements.⁵⁷

As scores of cyclists pedaled city streets and country roads, complaints about the condition of public thoroughfares inevitably developed. In the 1880's local cyclists had shown some interest in the national movement to improve the country's highways. The Louisiana Division of the League of American Wheelmen had a standing committee on Roads and Road Improvements, and all cyclists supported attempts to pass drainage and paving taxes.⁵⁸ But neither city nor state officials followed a systematic program of road betterment, and when the cycling craze reached its zenith, riders once again attacked the problem. The Louisiana Road Club was formed in 1896 expressly "for the purpose of improving the roads of this state."⁵⁹ When the Louisiana Division of the LAW was reactivated, members devoted much of their attention to the crusade for paved streets. In August of 1896, for example, Chief Consul Harry Hodgson distributed three hundred aprons for horses which bore the inscription, "I Want Good Roads." By September the Louisiana Division had attracted more than two hundred members, who, said Hodgson, "have begun to understand that nothing of importance can be secured without organization."⁶⁰ Although it would be a gross exaggeration to maintain that cyclists singlehandedly brought about macadamized streets and highways, they nevertheless launched a crusade that quite literally paved the way for the automobile.

During its heyday, cycling had a far-reaching impact upon American life. Like many popular pastimes, the sport had its detractors as well as its advocates. Carriage makers and horse traders complained that the sale of bicycles ruined their businesses; and ministers, alarmed by declining church attendance, warned that Sunday riders were pedaling straight to perdition.

⁵⁷Louisiana Road Club Broadsides, 1889-1898 (Kuntz Collection, Tulane University Library), *passim*.

⁵⁸*L. A. W. Bulletin*, V (July 29, 1887), 59; *Bicycling World*, XIX (May 17, 1889), 63.

⁵⁹*Picayune*, June 28, 1896.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, August 12, 14, September 18, 1896.

But even the staunchest critic could not fail to perceive some of the benefits derived from cycling.

Economically, cycling gave the country a booming industry. If the carriage trade suffered the loss of thousands of dollars in trade, bicycle manufacturers more than compensated for this reduction by selling equipment which cost buyers millions of dollars. By the mid-1890's the manufacturing of bicycles reportedly represented an investment of a hundred million dollars.⁶¹ In 1895 the *Picayune*, in a summary of the cycle industry, estimated that each year Americans spent fifty million dollars for bicycles and related equipment: "Besides making millionaires of the manufacturers, this sum supports an industry which gives employment to thousands of bread-winners."⁶²

In New Orleans, retail outlets for bicycles were among the first businesses to exploit fully the demand for sporting equipment. Before the rise of cycling, agents for billiard, baseball, and aquatic equipment had found the sale of sporting goods a lucrative enterprise, but these dealers fell far short of the net sales now registered by firms supplying the middle class with a new device for travel and pleasure. In the mid-1890's the city had more than a dozen dealers acting as agents for national manufacturing companies. During the peak of the bicycle craze, the *Southern Cyclist* reported that residents had purchased five thousand bicycles in a three-month period, and "there would be twice as many sold if the agent received any assistance from the manufacturer" in the form of advertising.⁶³

Although manufacturers advertised only in national periodicals such as *Bicycling World*, local agents hawked their wares extensively in newspapers, trade journals, and club magazines. Hodgin's Riding Academy on St. Charles Avenue offered bicycles for both sexes—the Napoleon for men and the Josephine for women. The Jackson Cycle Company, agent for Stern's Bicycles, told prospective clients, "The only way to do it is to do it on a Stern's." This company also offered a bicycle

⁶¹John R. Betts, "The Technological Revolution and the Rise of Sports," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XL (September, 1953), 251.

⁶²*Picayune*, August 4, 1895.

⁶³*Southern Cyclist*, II (February 12, 1896), 2.

with yellow rims, and advertisements clearly indicated that the company was courting female riders: "Golden Tresses, Girls so Neat; Yellow Rims on Wheels that Beat."⁶⁴

Agents frequently utilized promotional gimmicks to gain support for their wheels. H. D. Folsom Arms Company advertised new bicycles "at cut prices." Another dealer offered a three-hundred-dollar prize for the rider who registered the most mileage on a Rambler bicycle between April 1 and December 1, 1896, and two hundred dollars for the most miles ridden on any type bicycle with Gormully and Jeffery pneumatic tires. In February 1896, all agents in the city cooperated to sponsor a cycle show at Washington Artillery Hall. With exhibits illuminated by electric lights, salesmen showed residents the latest in bicycling equipment, including ball-bearing shoes guaranteed to make pedaling easier.⁶⁵

Dealers derived most of their income from the sale of bicycles, but many businessmen also relied heavily upon the sale of related goods and services. Most agents advertised lamps, bells, and other gadgets for safety-conscious riders. Folsom Arms Company sold all the "latest Bicycle Novelties," including women's skirt holders and ladies' stocking leggings—"The Latest Parisian Novelty." Dry-goods merchant Leon Godchaux found it profitable to act as the official tailor for the Louisiana Division of the LAW, because all members bought special uniforms. Edward G. Stoddard, an agent for Pope Manufacturing Company, made money by renting bicycles to those unwilling or unable to buy a machine. He was also, according to his advertisements, the "only repair man with factory experience in the City."⁶⁶ While it is impossible to give a detailed accounting of the importance of the cycling industry in New Orleans, the proliferation of dealers and the variety of bicycles and related equipment available indicate that the city's economy profited substantially from the growing appeal of wheeling.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, III (July 14, 1896), 2; *Official Programme of the Southern Athletic Club, Spring Games, at Athletic Park, Saturday, May 2nd, 1896, 3 P. M.* (New Orleans, 1896).

⁶⁵*Official Programme of the Southern Athletic Club, Spring Games, Saturday, May 4th, 1895, 3 P. M.* (New Orleans 1895), 14; *ibid.*, 1896; *Southern Cyclist*, II (February 12, 1896), 2-3.

⁶⁶*Bicycle South*, III (May, 1886), 13; *Official Programme . . . Spring Games, 1896; ibid.*, 1895, 6.

Socially, cycling also exerted a tremendous influence. In a period when most sports made spectators of the masses, cycling encouraged universal participation. Sedentary businessmen and bored juveniles found cycling an attractive pastime offering both exercise and recreation. Perhaps the best indication of the social impact of cycling was its appeal to women. The American woman, trying to free herself from the confining aspects of Victorian society, saw participation in sports as a convenient method of vivifying her struggle for equality with men. Cycling was one of the few activities that offered women an opportunity to disport as actively as men. Few women ventured to the lofty perch of a high wheeler, but with the introduction of safety wheels and the drop frame, the bicycle attracted droves of skirted riders. Conservative elements at first questioned the propriety of a woman on wheels, but this opposition faded as people recognized the healthfulness of cycling. "The bicycle," asserted one free spirit, "is one of the few out-of-door sports open to the average woman by reason of its convenience, comparative inexpensiveness, and pleasure."⁶⁷ On the open road astride her wheels, the athletic female became the symbol of emancipated womanhood.

Women in New Orleans turned to cycling soon after the invention of the drop-frame safety. "The ladies' safety is commencing to loom up," a correspondent told the editor of *Bicycling World* in 1889. "Two months ago there wasn't a rider, now there are three. . . . They are all delighted, too, with their wheels, though that mount does worry 'em considerably."⁶⁸ Easily shocked residents blanched as Southern belles embraced what many prudent citizens regarded as an essentially unladylike sport, but a local girl who rode frequently devised a formula to ward off adverse comments: "Sit straight, ride slowly, have the saddle high enough, use short cranks, never, never chew gum, conduct yourself altogether in a ladylike manner and sensible people will not shake their heads in disapproval when you ride."⁶⁹ When the bicycle craze gripped the city in the mid-'90's, the *Picayune* reported that "hundreds

⁶⁷Mary Taylor Bissell, "Athletics for City Girls," *Popular Science Monthly*, XLVI (December, 1894), 149.

⁶⁸*Bicycling World*, XIX (July 5, 1889), 269.

⁶⁹*Picayune*, August 9, 1891.

of women” could be seen riding daily. Girls from Newcomb College joined the movement, and those who did not own bicycles said they intended to “torment their papas to death until they had one.”⁷⁰ Teachers rode bicycles to school to save carfare. Ida Barrow, who taught at Girls’ High School, declared, “I don’t think anything is so beneficial to a woman’s health and nerves as a long spin in the open air.”⁷¹ Another female cyclist simply stated that women were “better and happier for the wheel.”⁷²

Male riders accepted female cyclists reluctantly at first, but as they discovered the pleasures of mixed cycling parties, their reservations vanished. Both the New Orleans Bicycle and Louisiana Cycling clubs sponsored “ladies’ nights” at their club houses “to reward the ladies for the great interest they have taken” in the clubs.⁷³ Moreover, the NOBC even considered the formation of a “ladies’ auxiliary to assimilate with the organization.”⁷⁴ When the cycling fad reached its peak in 1895 and 1896, both the Southern Wheelmen and the Crescent City Cycling Club agreed to admit ladies to full membership, a feature of these organizations which the *Picayune* described as “especially adroit.”⁷⁵ The Crescent City Club had two undeniably sound reasons for opening the association to both sexes. Members first conceded “that man had never created anything great without the assistance of his natural helpmate in life” and then added that “if it be desirous that a club should be made known to the world there was no advertising medium in the world to rival the tongue that forever wags.”⁷⁶ Those ladies who failed to secure a position in one of these predominantly male clubs could join the Olympic Club, a cycling association composed exclusively of women.⁷⁷

Besides giving women an opportunity to participate in sports, the bicycle mania aided in the reform of women’s dress. As

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, October 7, 1895.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, September 21, 1895.

⁷²*Ibid.*, October 7, 1895.

⁷³*Ibid.*, November 13, 1891.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, January 11, 1892.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, July 7, 1895, August 25, 1896.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, August 25, 1896.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, December 4, 1896.

women everywhere fell prey to the wheel, it became obvious that fashion changes were in order; the bulky skirts so long favored by the American woman were palpably ill-suited to cycling. When women began to abandon trailing skirts and tightly corseted waists, the bicycle was recognized as the catalyst of change. Said a writer for *Puck*: "The bicycle makers have accomplished more for dress reform in two years than the preachers of that cult have accomplished since clothes began to be the fashion. Today, thanks to the bicycle, there is every prospect that woman will soon be able to dress sensibly, comfortably, and modestly, all at the same time."⁷⁸ Thus the bicycle, which at first attracted women because it symbolized their desire for freedom, also assisted in the struggle; the bicycle's appeal to women was both a reflection of, and a stimulus to, the cause of female emancipation.

Like their counterparts in other cities, female cyclists in New Orleans found bulky skirts an acute problem. In 1891 the *Picayune* reported, "Ladies are puzzling their brains to know what to wear on a wheel. . . . If any lady can suggest a becoming and suitable costume for the southern wheelwoman, she will confer a great favor upon many of her sex who ride the wheel, and also many more who are very anxious to ride, but find the question of skirts a burden to manage."⁷⁹ Although conservative elements scorned the bloomers adopted by girls in the East, local women soon capitulated. Within a few years numerous female cyclists were seen wearing bloomers, divided skirts, or other garments that resembled men's pants. The discriminating woman at first covered herself with a cloak because "she looks queer in her divided skirt or knicks," but as the novelty of bloomers wore off, false modesty also disappeared.⁸⁰ By 1897 the *Picayune*, which at first opposed what it regarded as immodest clothing, conceded that the style made famous by Amelia Bloomer in the 1850's had at last gained public acceptance. In its fashion column of February 27, the paper included a pattern for bloomers accompanied by the observa-

⁷⁸*Puck*, XXXVII (August 7, 1895), 391, quoted in Frank L. Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1885-1905* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), 359.

⁷⁹*Picayune*, July 18, 1891.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, September 10, 1894.

tion that "if bloomers are to be, then this pattern is certainly preferable to immodishly scant ones."⁸¹

As the electric streetcar came into wide usage and the automobile made its appearance, the bicycle era was rapidly drawing to a close when America entered the twentieth century. By the 1920's the League of American Wheelmen had collapsed, cycle racing had all but disappeared, and riding had become a source of amusement primarily for young boys. Although the craze was short-lived, cycling accustomed people to individual transportation and a higher degree of mobility than they had ever known. As an agent of social change, this middle-class pastime occupied an important position in the history of the latter nineteenth century.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, February 27, 1897.