



# UNITED SPOKES: TOGETHER IN AMERICAN STREETS

Understanding our shared history of bikes  
and American society

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# INTRODUCTION

Bicycles have long been a vehicle for social change in the United States, from the Good Roads movement to today's community rides.

But for many of those we'd like to reach, the bicycle's potential can be dismissed with a few key descriptors: unsafe, privileged, entitled.

Our work as advocates often focuses on remedying the historical shift from human-scaled streets to highways, but this exhibit draws attention to another form of separation that is intrinsic to U.S. history: segregation by race.

To move forward together, we must understand our shared heritage.

This is not an exhaustive list of advocacy achievements, or a "who's who" of the movement. Rather, it is an attempt to tell through cycling a story about American society.

*How have social attitudes about transportation transformed our streets?*

*What has been the place of race in cycling?*

*Will our streets bring us together, or keep us apart?*



# THE BICYCLE BOOM

**1860-1900** Since the beginning, cycling has brought people together and disrupted existing social orders. After several decades of experimentation and invention (photo 1), high wheeler and safety bicycles opened new possibilities for individual mobility.

1868: The velocipede travels from Paris to New England and sets off a craze, but the fad fades by the end of 1869.

1878: Albert A. Pope and others start selling high wheeled bicycles imported from Europe and manufacturing their own copies, such as the Columbia.

*Even as bicycling opened new possibilities for individual mobility, early enthusiasts enjoyed spending time together and formed military-style clubs, starting with the Boston Bicycle Club in 1878.*

1880: The League of American Wheelmen forms as a coalition of cycling clubs organizing to address the issue of cycling access to parks and roads. The membership grows to more than 100,000 by the mid 1890s (photo 3).

1894: After several attempts, white southern members of LAW manage to push through legislation barring non-whites from the organization. 10,000 members leave as a result, and some chapters refuse to enforce the color line.

1896: The New York chapter of LAW defies the color line and admits Marshall “Major” Taylor as a professional racer. (photo 6).

The same year, the U.S. Supreme Court validates the doctrine of “separate but equal” in the case of Plessy v. Ferguson, which dealt with racial mixing among rail passengers. Taylor rises to the top of the racing world at the height of the 1890s bicycle boom.

1897: With streamlined bicycle production, prices fall and cycling reaches the masses.

*Around the turn of the century, cycling would lose its luxury cachet but became part of a transportation landscape. The LAW dissolved, but the Good Roads movement continued. Bicycle clubs segregated by race became the norm.*





# WORKINGMEN AND WOMEN

**1900-1940s** As cheaper bicycles made the gentleman's sport of the 1890s more accessible, working people expanded cycling in a utilitarian direction. The Cycle Trades of America advertised the frugality of bicycles to streetcar users, and during the Great Depression and World War II, families turned to bicycles to save resources. For a time, it seemed the bicycle could be a unifying symbol of opportunity and resilience.

*Telegraph boys (photo 7) were an urban fixture in the early 20th Century. The 1890s boom also pushed women's rights forward by making the case for rational dress and expanding individual mobility. By 1922, a woman worked as a messenger on the staff of the National Women's Party in Washington, D.C. (photo 8)*

1932: Major Taylor dies in poverty in Chicago while selling his autobiography, *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World*.

1936: U.S. companies produce 1 million new bicycles in a year for the first time since the 1890s bicycle boom. The League of American Wheelmen is revived, and in 1937 Phyllis Harmon joins. She goes on to be a central force in the organization.

*In the mid-1930s, bicycles bought by women went from 10% to a third of sales, perhaps in part due to endorsement by celebrities.*

1942: Bicycles become a patriotic symbol during World War II, when the federal Office of Production Management approves materials for 750,000 "Victory bicycles." Cycling means cooperation as Americans conserve resources for the war effort.

*For a few decades, it seemed that bike commuting would join sport and leisure cycling in the ongoing social life of the bicycle. But automobile technology had existed for decades, reaching the masses when Henry Ford's affordable, factory-produced Model-T debuted in 1908. In 1920 alone, more than 8 million Americans registered as drivers.*



**Bicycles to the Rescue!** American families rely on bicycles in segregated government camps during the Great Depression (photo 9) and to get through World War II (photo 10). Police officers patrolled on bicycles in downtown Los Angeles in 1928 (photo 12).





# MOTORDOM, SUBURBS & CIVIL RIGHTS

**1940-1960s** As the car became a symbol of prosperity, cycling would lose its place as a socially valued mode of transport. Postwar, the bicycle became a toy for the new baby boomers while Dad drove to work. This new reliance on cars grew with suburban development and amplified the negative effects residential segregation would have on urban communities.

*In the 1920s and 1930s, the auto industry worked to redefine streets as dangerous places meant only for cars. The term “jay-walking,” which had previously been applied to country gawkers blocking swift city sidewalk users, was reinvented to mean that pedestrians do not belong in city streets.*

1944: The GI Bill — coupled with Federal Housing Administration insurance that minimized risks for builders, banks, and savings and loan associations — encourages developers to erect new, single-family homes on the outskirts of urban areas for veterans’ families (photo 14). Racial discrimination heavily impacts who benefits from these policies.

*Federal funding for highway expansion, in place since the New Deal era, expanded under Eisenhower. Without public funding, privately owned transit systems deteriorated. Streetcars disappeared as General Motors bought up bankrupt systems across the country and replaced them with buses.*

1954: The landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education ends the era of legalized segregation through the doctrine of “separate but equal,” but can’t undo the residential segregation underway in U.S. cities.

*Millions of African Americans move to cities to find work in the first half of the 20th century. Due to racial prejudice, the Great Migration intensified the trend toward relocation in suburbs. Between 1950 and 1960, many older American cities lost a large portion of their urban area populations. The decrease led to a hollowing out of people and jobs.*

1955: Rosa Parks claims a seat at the front of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and refuses to move to the section assigned to “colored” people.

*As the car became more and more central to U.S. life, in many places walking, riding bikes, and using public transit would become markers of poverty and immaturity. At another time, the bus would be revived as a symbol of the civil rights movement and access to opportunity. In other circles, cycling continued as a leisure pastime, and the League of American Wheelmen is revived again in 1966 as a recreational club.*



Legal scholar Sheryll Cashin has noted that “the interstate highway program opened up easy avenues for escape from the city while at the same time destroying vital black, Latino, and white ethnic neighborhoods.”





# TOOLS FOR CHANGE

**1970-1980** Many factors contributed to a bike boom in the 1970s, and the U.S. again looked to cycling as a source of energy. Ecology-minded advocates started to connect the difficulties they encountered riding with the car-oriented development that had changed the residential landscape. For activists, the bike became an alternative to a wasteful way of life and a tool for social change.

1970: Resource conservation gathers steam with the creation of Earth Day and the Environmental Protection Agency.

1971: *Anybody's Bike Book* encourages the everyday user to become an amateur mechanic. The same year, a group of bay area riders calling themselves the Larkspur Canyon Gang (photo 1) start messing around with bikes on trails at Mt. Tamalpais in Marin County. Mountain biking starts in sites like this and goes on to revolutionize the bike industry.

1973: In response to U.S. funding of the Israeli military during the Yom Kippur War, OPEC embargoes oil supplies to this country from October 1973 to March 1974. The resultant gas shortages built even more demand for bikes. Americans purchase 43 million bicycles between 1972 and 1974.

1973: Transportation Alternatives is founded in New York City, one of several new groups that use a combined strategy of political lobbying and street action to promote cycling (photo 20).

1974: John Forester publishes his guide to *Effective Cycling*, instructing cyclists in techniques for riding on streets shared with motorists.

1977: Joe Breeze produces the Breezer One, widely considered the first purpose-built mountain bike made from new parts.

1984: Inspired by Food Not Bombs, Bikes Not Bombs combines recycling bicycles with protesting the U.S. military's involvement abroad. They refurbish bicycles in Boston to be sent to working people in Nicaragua.

1984: Nelson Vails wins a silver medal for bike racing at the Los Angeles Olympics — the first African-American cyclist to win an Olympic medal.

1988: Bicycle Action Project in Indianapolis pioneers an earn-a-bike program.

*Spending time together in workshops, in streets, and on trails, bike enthusiasts developed new cultural identities. Bike clubs with African-American and Latino members, such as New York's Silver Wheels Club (photo 22), also existed through this period, but the question of how urban renewal's blow to communities of color affected the diversity of cycling merits further study. As mountain biking, European-style road racing, vehicular cycling, and other defined groups of cyclists developed, there remained bicycle users who did not take on a cycling identity recognized by them*



# BACK TO THE STREETS

**1990s** The 1990s saw the rapid growth of the political bike advocacy movement and the grassroots urban movement. Many people crossed over between these subcultures, and the popular energy stirred up on city streets spurred advocacy forward.

1990: A coalition of environmental and transportation groups form the Surface Transportation Policy Project to lobby for more federal investment in alternatives to driving. They are instrumental in organizing political support for the passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1991. ISTEA increases local control over transportation funding and planning, in addition to mandating that each state create a bike/ped coordinator position.

1992: Late in the year, a group of friends in San Francisco decide to stage “commute clots” where they ride together at rush hour on Friday afternoons. As Critical Mass, the ride and its message of “We ARE Traffic” spreads across the world (photo 24). Critical Mass attracts a range of people to the idea of cycling as a fun political statement.

1994: Transportation Alternatives launches the Recycle-A-Bicycle program that empowers city kids through bike repair. Programs using this model become more common around the country.

1994: The Bus Riders Union (photo 23) in Los Angeles sues the local transit agency over a rise in fares under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination by bodies receiving federal funding. Public transit is revived as a civil rights issue again.

1997: Environmental justice scholars Robert Bullard and Glenn Johnson publish a book on “transportation justice” that includes biking in underserved neighborhoods as a rights issue.

*In the late 90s, Major Taylor became a symbol of diversity in cycling and inspired the formation of bike clubs in African-American communities around the country. The Major Taylor Association supported its work through the sale of posters like the one by James E. Ransome (photo 25).*

1999: League President Earl Jones signs a resolution revoking the 1894 decision instituting a ‘color bar’ and issuing an apology on behalf of the organization. The resolution states that “the League, by taking this step, can lead cycling into more diverse and representative participation.”

*Critical Mass revived cycling as a political statement, and community-based social movements and city-level support led to an increasing normalization in cities such as Portland and Minneapolis. Bicycles started to play a significant role in new urbanist plans at a time when gentrification is a growing concern for urban communities. How does cycling fit into the civil rights fights for transportation justice?*





# LISTENING & LEARNING

**2000-2010s** Bike cultures continue to thrive, in more communities and taking forms nobody could have predicted in 1890. The spirit of cooperation that infuses group rides and bike collectives makes it clear that the bicycle is still a tool for social change and empowerment. At the same time, the trend toward using a “creative class” model for economic development threatens to silence that message by making the bicycle shorthand for rising inequality.

2004: The Midnight Ridazz in L.A. set a trend in alternative recreational rides. The same year, the first Bike!Bike! conference brings volunteers from bike repair collectives together in New Orleans.

2005: Dan Koeppel’s “invisible riders” article in the December issue of *Bicycling* draws attention to utilitarian bike users in Los Angeles.

*By 2008, the community focus of this bike boom is clear. The National Brotherhood of Cyclists is established. In Eugene, Oregon, Kidical Mass gets more kids and families excited about bikes. Red Bike & Green (photo 28), a ride that started in Oakland, Calif., promotes Black bike culture and inspires more people to combine community identity and cycling. A Streetfilm about the ciclovia travels around the United States and sparks open street events in many cities. All of these lead to new conversations about what role cycling plays in urban change.*

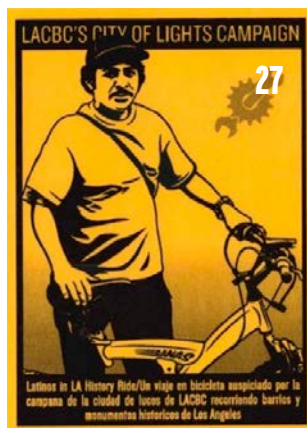
2010: The Brookings Institution reports that by 2008 U.S. poverty had been concentrated in suburbs.

2011: In Portland, community members in a historically African-American neighborhood object to a plan to widen a bike lane on N. Williams St., arguing that the process recalls past municipal projects that displaced families. This controversy and similar ones around the country show that there can be some distance between the vision of urban cycling promoted by bike advocates and what other city residents think about bikes. Additionally, those neighbors’ very different experiences of urban change might shape their understanding of cycling.

2012: The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts bike mechanic jobs will grow by 25% in the next 10 years, signaling the role cycling will play in the new economy. The bicycle is again a vehicle to opportunity.

*In 2013, the League took the lead in bike equity. Through the Equity Initiative, we have formed an Equity Advisory Council of experts who advocate for cycling with communities of color, women and youth, we released The New Majority report that is influencing policymakers, and we are collaborating with the Transportation Equity Caucus to ensure that our bike messaging supports the work of other mobility advocates.*

**Powerful voices are rising to tell us what bicycling looks like for them. Are we ready to work together?**



Groups like Multicultural Communities for Mobility (photo 26) in Los Angeles and Red, Bike and Green in a growing number of cities, including Oakland (photo 28), New York City, Atlanta and Chicago, bring new energy to bicycle advocacy.



# PHOTO CREDITS

Exhibit #	Credit	Title	Link
Cover	Matthew Almon Roth	Mission Sunday Streets 2010	<a href="http://www.flickr.com/photos/matthewalmonroth/4721779240/in/set-72157624200985919">http://www.flickr.com/photos/matthewalmonroth/4721779240/in/set-72157624200985919</a>
1	Unknown	Men with three types of bicycles	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99402365/">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99402365/</a>
2	Frank L. Hale	Connecticut bicycle parade at Hartford, Conn. view of Main St. looking north from Exchange Corner	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011661554/">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011661554/</a>
3	Unknown	Cover, with illustration, of The LAW Bulletin And Good Roads – Official Organ of the League of American Wheelmen	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003654800/">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003654800/</a>
4	Currier & Ives	Darktown bicycling – a tender pair	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/91724364/">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/91724364/</a>
5	Louis Dalrymple	The biggest people on the road	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2012648527">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2012648527</a>
6	Major Taylor Cycling Club, Columbus, OH	Marshall "Major" Taylor	<a href="http://www.majoraylorcycling.org/">http://www.majoraylorcycling.org/</a>
7	Lewis Wicks Hine	George Christopher, Postal Tel #7, 14 years old. Been at it over 3 years. Does not work nights.	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99402365">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99402365</a>
8	Unknown	Julia Obear, messenger girls at the National Women's [i.e. Woman's] Party Headquarters	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/92522519">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/92522519</a>
9	Marjory Collins	Arlington, Virginia. FSA (Farm Security Administration) trailer camp project for Negroes. Young occupant gets around by bicycle. The community building is in the background.	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa2000056489/PP/">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa2000056489/PP/</a>
10	Unknown	Worker, Biker, Roadmaster	Courtesy of Zack Furness
11	David Bransby	The Bicycle Brigade at Lockheed Vega Aircraft Corporation	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b03236/">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b03236/</a>
12	Unknown	Calif. Los Angeles –squad of policemen on bicycles, Broadway south from 5th	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007678014">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007678014</a>
13	Unknown	Automobiles and bicycles parked along Riverside Ave., Riverside California	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011660902">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011660902</a>
14	Defense Council Records, OSA	A veteran and his wife look at plans and dream about their future together in their new home financed by a GI Bill loan	<a href="http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/pages/exhibits/ww2/after/gil.htm">http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/pages/exhibits/ww2/after/gil.htm</a>
15	Unknown	A girl walks along a Detroit, MI arterial. A city that once thrived as the center of American auto industry now struggles economically.	<a href="http://www.themotorlesscity.com/wp-content/gallery/detroit/09150204_07.jpg">http://www.themotorlesscity.com/wp-content/gallery/detroit/09150204_07.jpg</a>
16	New York City Department of Public Relations	Aerial view of Brooklyn-Queens Expressway looking North, NY, NY. 1950.	<a href="http://archpaper.com/uploads/highway_removal_moses_01.jpg">http://archpaper.com/uploads/highway_removal_moses_01.jpg</a>
17	Unknown (Rights: Los Angeles Public Library)	1955 Demolition on Bunker Hill	<a href="http://photos.lapl.org/carlweb/jsp/FullRecord?databaseID=968&amp;record=34&amp;controlNumber=5059149">http://photos.lapl.org/carlweb/jsp/FullRecord?databaseID=968&amp;record=34&amp;controlNumber=5059149</a>
18	Paul Schutzer, Time Life Pictures / Getty Images	Two New Orleans activists, Freedom Riders Julia Aaron, left, and David Dennis, sit on board a bus as they and 25 others on the bus are escorted by two armed Mississippi National Guardsmen from Montgomery, Ala., to Jackson Miss.	<a href="http://media.nola.com/politics/photo/freedom-ridersjpg-a2b212ee7a071e38.jpg">http://media.nola.com/politics/photo/freedom-ridersjpg-a2b212ee7a071e38.jpg</a>
19	Wende Cragg	Posing on a ride	<a href="http://bikinghistory.com/items/show/399">http://bikinghistory.com/items/show/399</a>
20	Unknown	1973 Ride and Rally	Courtesy of Zack Furness
21	Unknown	Unknown date Whole Earth Catalog	<a href="http://www.ouche.org/fall2010pnca/material/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/wecbike.jpg">http://www.ouche.org/fall2010pnca/material/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/wecbike.jpg</a>
22	John Benefatti	1970s Silver Wheels Club	Courtesy of Zack Furness
23	Unknown	1990s Bus Riders' Union drawing	<a href="http://oldbru.thestrategycenter.org/engli/index.html">http://oldbru.thestrategycenter.org/engli/index.html</a>
24	Unknown (Rights: FoundS)	F 1992 First Critical Mass flyer	<a href="http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=File:First-ever-flyer.jpg">http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=File:First-ever-flyer.jpg</a>
25	James E. Ransome	Major Taylor poster	<a href="http://www.majoraylorassociation.org/images/ransomeposter.jpg">www.majoraylorassociation.org/images/ransomeposter.jpg</a>
26	Multicultural Communities for Mobility	Multicultural Communities for Mobility	<a href="http://drive.google.com/a/bikeleague.org/oldreview?id=0BwU0VeT-U_-Nd3h6UmtrV2dFYVE&amp;usp=sharing">drive.google.com/a/bikeleague.org/oldreview?id=0BwU0VeT-U_-Nd3h6UmtrV2dFYVE&amp;usp=sharing</a>
27	Ernesto Yerena	2009 Jornalero spoke card	
28	Red, Bike and Green	2013: Red, Bike and Green	<a href="http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=565818613436472&amp;set=pb.113883718629966-2207520000.1392409112.&amp;type=3&amp;theater">www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=565818613436472&amp;set=pb.113883718629966-2207520000.1392409112.&amp;type=3&amp;theater</a>



