**150 Years of Bike Lane Battles**

After the war, only children rode bikes, so bikes became a symbol of childhood.

By

**GRANT PETERSEN**

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**Watch out for the Golf Carts**



A bike lane near Los Alamos, N.M. *PHOTO:AP PHOTO*

**In all of literature,** there is no greater example of the spell cars cast than in Kenneth Grahame’s “The Wind in the Willows” (1908). Toad’s giving Moley and Ratty a ride in his fancy new horse-drawn cart when a motorcar passes, scaring the horse and toppling the cart and passengers. Toad watches the car disappear down the road and exclaims: “O what a flowery track lies spread before me, henceforth! What dust-clouds shall spring up behind me as I speed on my reckless way! What carts I shall fling carelessly into the ditch in the wake of my magnificent onset!”

Substitute bikes for carts and parked cars for ditches and you nicely explain why cyclists regard motorists as Toads. “Bike Battles: A History of Sharing the American Road” by James Longhurst is about the challenges riders have faced since the earliest days to gain respect, fair treatment and a safe place to ride. Those battles have involved politics, patriotism and war, social change, technology, one-upmanship and popular culture. The way they were waged and won or lost explains where bikes sit on the totem pole of transportation today.

**BIKE BATTLES: A HISTORY OF SHARING THE AMERICAN ROAD**

*By James Longhurst*  *Washington, 294 pages, $34.95*

Mr. Longhurst, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, begins his history in 1870, with road rights. In these pre-auto years, it was Horse Carriages vs. Cyclists, and he tells about a bike-hating, road-raging farmer in Chicago named Absalom Wycoff, known for horsewhipping any cyclists riding past his property. In 1891 he attacked the wrong guy, who tore off his coat (it would have padded the blows) and gave Wycoff a lashing with his own whip, plus two black eyes in the bargain. Cyclists feared Wycoff no more.

Classism and racism were rampant in cycling’s early years. Bikes were so expensive that only the rich rode—a virtue in the eyes of many, because it allowed showing off and kept out the riff raff. The League of American Wheelmen (now the League of American Bicyclists) wanted bikes to remain high-brow and, in 1894, banned black members. Currier & Ives was as bad, with lithographs that would trigger protest marches and riots today—featuring exaggerated physical features and goofy clothing to make the black riders look like clowns. It was a bad start for cycling, and could explain why recreational bike riding among adults in the U.S. is still a mostly white affair.

Women were treated slightly better. If you were a female cyclist back then, it was cool to go on club rides accompanied by men, but was not cool to ride without a male chaperone. Practical women’s cycling attire was mocked, too, as in an 1895 news report quoted by Mr. Longhurst: “a couple dressed exactly alike—caps, coats, trousers, and stockings . . . I couldn’t tell which was the man or which was the woman, and went home in despair.”

A measure of any book is whether it makes you think beyond its pages, and “Bike Battles” did just that for me. As I was reading, I wondered how a black woman cyclist back then would have been treated solo on the road or as a customer in a bike shop. In my own niche-y bike company, we get about two black female customers a year. The idea of “targeting” this or any other group is more business-like than I feel comfortable with, but I’m not comfortable with the status quo, either.

In any case, the bad bike isms became less relevant in the early 1900s when bike sales fell more than 80% as rich white males switched to cars, allowing an even greater display of conspicuous consumption, with more speed and less sweat.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, roads that had until then been shared by pedestrians, street vendors, cyclists and horse carriages were turned over to cars, making them dangerous for everybody else. Mr. Longhurst talks about World War II’s effect on bikes, too. The war effort required rubber and steel, and only two bike makers (Columbia and Huffy) were allowed to produce in these years. To conserve materials, wartime bikes had smaller tires, fewer gadgets and paint substituted for chrome. They were called “Victory bicycles” and riding them was seen as patriotic sacrifice.

But when the war ended, our unbridled, auto-obsessed country went nuts designing urban environments and roadways around cars. Only children rode bikes, so bikes became a symbol of childhood, which killed the adult market. To make bikes more palatable to youngsters eager to grow up, manufacturers gave them car-like features: Storage compartments were dressed up as fake gas tanks. Fenders had hood ornaments. Paint schemes copied cars. Those multicolored plastic handlebar streamers? Exhaust! Television luminaries including the Beaver and Opie Taylor reinforced the notion that bikes were just for kids—Mr. Longhurst quotes my own boyhood hero, Jiminy Cricket, telling children flat out, “A bicycle is to you what a motor car is to a grown-up.”

No wonder bike riders in the ’50s and ’60s turned to cars as soon as they were of driving age and didn’t look back. Car-favoring laws and road designs have had staying power, and 50 years of car domination have given us generations of motorists who have never known anything else and understandably consider the road their birthright. Their parents and grandparents did, too. Mr. Longhurst made me better understand the history of the tension between motorists and cyclists, while steeling me for the equality challenges ahead. He thinks most of these challenges are already being met by our suddenly more inclusive urban planning and our not-so-bad current bike infrastructure and advocacy. Maintaining the book’s credibility, he makes no predictions of some Hollywood happy ending of shared-road harmony—which would have blown his credibility among cyclists, for sure. He points to an opportunity, and that’s enough.

“Bike Battles” reads well, and even randomly opening it reveals stand-alone nuggets:

In the 1920s, auto clubs invented “jaywalking” to shame pedestrians and benefit drivers. Mr. Longhurst fails to explain the “jay” part of that, and that is my reviewer’s obligatory criticism of the book. An Internet search reveals that “jay” is an early 20th-century term for a “rube” or “bumpkin.” I like “bumpkin walker”!

“Park” became a verb in the early 1900s when there were small greenways—parks—alongside roads, and motorists left their cars there while they shopped or walked.

In 1923, Panasonic had a huge success with a battery-powered bike light. In 1946, Honda’s first product was a bike motor. In 70 years, will they be making hovercrafts?

In 1919, a silent comedy titled “Bill Henry” starred Charles Ray as a bike-riding salesman selling vibrators (a cure for sore muscles apparently) door-to-door. About half a century ahead of its time, it is not on YouTube or DVD. A remake might do well.

Life magazine in May 1963: “There are 30 million bikes in the U.S. today, and proud owners use them both to limber up and to satisfy a gypsy urge.” Those proud owners would have been children mostly because adults drove, but this quote and its curious claims really got to me.

My dad used to tell me that if I got only one thing out of a book—an interesting fact, a point of view I hadn’t previously considered, something helpful to my life or just entertainment—the book was worth its cover price. By that standard “Bike Battles” is a bargain. It allowed me to see the last 150 years of riding in America like a mosaic on the wall. I won’t look at parked cars the same way again. I’ll continue to look askance at bike makers who design their wares to look like Tour de France models or motorcycles, but it’ll be easier to understand, now that I know this has always been the case. As riders did more than a century ago, I’ll ride in traffic as necessary, but long for a path of my own. I’ll accept a certain amount of conflict as inevitable and feel like a vital ant in the bike’s ongoing history. The book ought to give today’s bicycle advocates a sense of their place in history and make them proud to continue the battle.

Finally, “Bike Battles” made me wonder: the average age of adult bike riders is now over 40 and most of them wear the same clothes and ride the same bikes as professional racers. Is that why hipsters wear plaid and jeans and ride fixies? I wonder, also, if the old guys riding bikes these days—the ones who were reluctant riders in their youth and gave them up in their teens—still deep down harbor a “bikes are for kids” bias and are using the bike to fend off aging or to make up for miles not pedaled as young adults. A good use.

—Mr. Petersen owns Rivendell Bicycle Works in Walnut Creek, Calif., and
is the author of “Just Ride” and “Eat Bacon, Don’t Jog.”

There are 11 comments.



[**Jay Campbell**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_P8cL7KruzsLH0mGqzNhJlw%3D%3D_E1)25 minutes ago

This whole article wreaks of bicyclist snobbery: one white males drove cars, for the conspicuous consumption; cities were laid out to favor cars. Gee, you don't think that a car was and is the most efficient way to move people and goods over long distances? Try riding a bike to work 20 miles. The time it takes, plus the shower at the end to become presentable in a business environment, make bicycles impractical for most.

Let's not forget the elitist attitude of bicylists. I once had a cyclist run a stop light right in front of me. I slammed on the brakes, then honked my horn. The cyclist flipped me off, for saving his life. That and the others whole don't merely use the roadway, but demand more than their fair share (riding on the left edge of the cycle lane) create road hazards.



[**Burns Matkin**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_6qVVuQISZJhMO6WcYkb9Dd%2BtDACCu88faMaayTSb9rLp%2BBI%2BV2V7PcntijtHJ57E_E1)1 hour ago

Here's what the bike Nazis do:  Vancouver BC,  Sat. April 11/2015

A mass of bicyclists rode their bikes slowly across the Lion's Gate bridge blocking traffic intentionally for more than an hour. (both ways)  This causes motorists to drive miles out of their way to get around the obstruction.  Oh.  There are already lanes for bikes on the bridge but that isn't good enough.

Of course during bad weather these same bikers don't ride bikes they take public transport subsidized heavily by a gas tax.

There is a very smug and arrogant attitude by the bikers about health, global warming, redistribution etc. These people are not poor.  They, almost to the person have very good jobs.  A new  chattering class left has emerged on bicycles and they are costing the average taxpayer a fist full of cash.

Later during a rain shower at night, not a bike to be seen, fair weather tyrants indeed.



[**Robert Scheppy**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_MoSlHq9H7DALdjrvyk/X1vlzjtPW2eot5W1bQhirUkccsetZ5hH4nQpVuKflIHRR_E1)6 hours ago

I lived in China for many years, always using a bicycle to get around town. Chinese cities and towns all have wide lanes for bicycles.



[**Marc Jones**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_mdmWbLAS94DJprv8oKReRw%3D%3D_E1)20 hours ago

Now if we could just get the cyclists to pay for their benefits, like motorists do.  If we could just get them to display a clearly visible identification device so they can be held accountable when they endanger others or violate the law and carry insurance to pay for any potential damage they might do, we will actually have made some progress in creating an adult endeavor.



[**Geoff Aronson**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_JxQEFoin%2BXszObiHygxOtg%3D%3D_E1)1 day ago

In a perfect world, every city, town and even rural area would have separate bike and car lanes.  Heck, even separate roadways for trucks.

We don't live in such a world, not even close.  As much as I ride and occasionally have to suddenly avoid idiot drivers and pedestrians, I would rather our government at all levels focus on the the few things it ought to do such as defense, justice system and very few others.

Instead gov't tries to micro manage everything, with cheerleaders holding outstretched arms.  Case in point: an organization called Rails to Trails lobbies incessantly for federal funding to build ever more bikeways.

Shrink government and taxes, not more goodies for everybody's little desire.



[**John Gorentz**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_ets5UFvC9OqSCgfvcKVNVg%3D%3D_E1)1 day ago

[**@**Geoff Aronson](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_JxQEFoin%2BXszObiHygxOtg%3D%3D_E1) Normally I don't care to ride on separate rail-trails.  They don't take me to the places I want to go.  Last summer, however, I started on a project whose destinations often ARE along rail-trails, and I started to make more use of them.   I began to appreciate them more.

Somehow I ended up on the Rail to Trails mailing list, which has been lobbying for more taxes, and more government money to be spent on rails-to-trails.  I would be glad to support their cause.  However, they don't explain which taxes they want to cut here in Michigan to pay for new road taxes.  Unless the supporters of the May 5 referendum show which taxes will be cut to pay for the new road taxes, I'm not voting for it. And they don't propose any federal spending cuts to pay for more money spent on trails -- not even so much as Big Bird's welfare check or corporate ethanol subsidies.



[**ROBERT SULLIVAN**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_PWDIfVT6JrlY8LbptoDqZA%3D%3D_E1)1 day ago

Thank you Mr Peterson for your review. My wife and I recently bought bikes to ride locally for exercise. Being in my mid 40's I felt a little foolish when I started riding. When going down hills, I would stand on the pedals with the wind racing through my hair feeling déjà vu from my youth. I couldn't help but smile.

It wasn't until I read this review that I recognized that I had always associated bicycling with childhood. That realization has made smile, for as an adult there are few opportunities to relive your childhood responsibly.

I think it's time to go for a ride.



[**eric sofio**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_vrIKgDPTZyyTjfkeQR90iw%3D%3D_E1)1 day ago

Bicycling is 19th century technology and should be banned from all city streets, people who advocate for them  should be shunned from society, for they wittingly call for the limiting of there fellow citizens freedoms. Similar to gay marriage, meant to destroy religious freedom , bikes are a political tool to limit people's movements a car can take you and/ or 2, 3 or 4 other people any where in the country a bicycle can take one as far as he is able. This is the camel's nose to 1950 china's tent, with the next stop at a cultural revolution where the younger people brow beat and intimidate their elders into submission all for the greater good. If state power is good enough to force a baker to bake a cake how little will it take to get you out of your car? Most leftist are just looking for the right crime, 'suv'  kills family or some such nonsense and the privilege of driving will be gone for all but the politically connected.



[**Harvey Sorenson**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_1K46sP4PKyFrqh6pTTR9Rw%3D%3D_E1)49 minutes ago

[**@**eric sofio](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_vrIKgDPTZyyTjfkeQR90iw%3D%3D_E1) I can't tell if you are kidding, but I think not. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

I find the moralistic tone of most adult bikers very annoying, and I regret that they seem to transmit their total disregard for traffic laws to kids, but most bike riders around here have a BMW and a Lexus SUV in their driveway and are paying taxes for the roads they grudgingly 'share' with me while pretending to be in the Tour de France. I find their public fantasizing faintly ridiculous, but I don't think their choice of exercise equipment is a threat to the nation. It's their self-righteous anti-scientific attitudes that are the threat, and those are shared by lots of people who don't ride bicycles.



[**judy smith**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_bbyIR9D23fH1eQ1XzHLbY9DbxZaFWWBQfndPgyAtbSNS4A7kmjPIoj/Gd8n3dtUY_E1)1 day ago

My dad, born in 1904, was an avid cyclist and member of the Hollywood Bicycle Club.  He instilled a love of bikes in my brother and me, who, like surely every other kid born post-WWII, had a succession of bikes that we loved dearly and relied upon for transportation and freedom (defined as distance from home).  My husband and I in early middle age were early purchasers of mountain bikes. Today, I have a Townie, a forward-crank (flatfoot) bike that is kind to the knees and provides me with fresh air and great freedom -- which I still define as distance from the house.



[**John Gorentz**](http://online.wsj.com/user/profile/public/E1_ets5UFvC9OqSCgfvcKVNVg%3D%3D_E1)2 days ago

1.  I started riding again when I was in my mid 40s.  At the time I said it made me feel like I was 20 again.  Now I don't often ride as many miles a day as I used to, but it's not because I'm older.  Or so I like to think.  I stop and take lots of photos now.

2.  I wear civilian clothes when bicycling, just like when I drive my car.

3.  Bicycles are for us conservative, tea party types.  SUVs and other safetymobiles are for leftists. As Ben Franklin said, "Those who would give up essential Liberty to purchase a little temporary Safety deserve neither Liberty nor Safety."