

Smith, Robert A. A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE BICYCLE (New York: American Heritage Press, 1972).

The bicycle "craze" reached its peak of popularity in the America of the mid 1890s. The design of the safety bicycle and the use of pneumatic tires made cycling practical, safe and comfortable. The bicycle had far reaching implications from technology to its social

consequences. It was functional and could be ridden by both sexes and all ages. Technologically, the cycle was important because experimentation with it led to the development of motor cars and airplanes. Development of the cycle also had significant applications in engineering, manufacturing and marketing techniques. Organized cyclists' clubs successfully pressured for improvement of roads thus making the motor car a practical vehicle.

For anyone interested in the impact of the bicycle upon American society, *A Social History of the Bicycle* by Robert A. Smith is a fascinating and entertaining book. Mr. Smith leaves few stones unturned: from the military role of the "birotate chariot" to involvement of the iron wheel in divorce proceedings. He captures this American love affair with style and humor. In his preface, Mr. Smith states, "Although far from definitive in treatment, this book tries to describe some of this influence and impact on American society, especially in the areas of technological advances and alterations of the transportation system." This statement is a fair assessment: Mr. Smith provides his reader with good coverage of the early development of the cycle, the radical experimentation involved in its development, its effect on other industries and marketing techniques, and such innovations as the bicycle ambulance and wheels for postmen. The book also encompasses a broad range of social topics which include ramifications of the bicycle in connection with morals, social etiquette, health and clothing styles.

For anyone interested especially in the topic of women and cycling, there are both pleasures and disappointments. Although it was not Mr. Smith's purpose to explore thoroughly the implications of cycling by women, it is disappointing that he whets the appetite and does not fully develop such themes as the moral and health questions which surrounded the female cyclist. Mr. Smith's occasional disapproval of some of the more unique facets of women's cycling and his approbation of negative stereotypes will be somewhat irritating to feminists. In view of one of his conclusions that "in all probability the most lasting social consequence of the bicycle craze was the effect it had on American women," (245) it is surprising that Mr. Smith does not spend more time exploring these consequences. He states that the most vigorous debates on the influence of the bicycle upon health arose when women began to ride (65) but he falls short of amplifying this issue.

Mr. Smith tells us that most women did not ride cycles in the nineties; strictly, this is accurate, but neither did most men. In the mid 1890's, women constituted from twenty-five to thirty percent of the bicycle market, and this would seem a significant percentage of the cycling population from any vantage point. This understatement seems to be another example of what is characteristic in reporting women's sport history.

The best features of the book with regard to women's cycling concern the problems and delights posed by cycling in relations between the sexes, the attention devoted to female costume and some unexpected information. Mr. Smith uncovers a black women's cycling club in Georgia, and he relates the enterprising business venture of promoting "Wheels for Widows" for cycling respectfully while in mourning. Questions of

social etiquette include whether the lady should ride on the front or back seat of the tandem, should she speak to a male cyclist with whom she is unacquainted, and would the accessory of a safety night light spoil romance. In terms of a suitable costume, Mr. Smith opens up the debate between the advocates and opponents of "rational" dress. Cycling undoubtedly found its way into this hotbed of controversy because it opened up the possibility that the bifurcated garment might translate into everyday wear. Mr. Smith credits the bicycle with increasing the visibility of ankles and calves and with uncorseted figures. While the bicycle probably did contribute to the change in fashion, I think Mr. Smith glossed over the important issue surrounding trousered women which far exceed the alterations in hem lines and loosened corsets. In the 1800's trousered women were considered immodest, but most importantly, they represented an invasion of male prerogative.

While Mr. Smith's book has some useful information on women's cycling, the virtues of the book lie in his general treatment of cycling, his careful development of the technological implications, the excellent sources upon which he draws, the marvelous illustrations, and his pleasant manner of handling the subject.

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