

Rough Road Cyclists Display Political Power: The League of American Wheelmen in the Good Roads Movement as Reported by *The New York Times*, 1880–1900

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The automobile and today's roads have been intimately related for decades. Because of the strength and intimacy of this relationship it is probably difficult for people to divorce themselves from the notion that the automobile was a great contributor to the early formation of the American highway system. In actuality, the bicycle, moreover, its riders were influential in the formation of this system.

A great testament to the popularity of bicycling was the formation of the League of American Wheelmen (L.A.W.) on May 31, 1880 at Newport, Rhode Island. Charles E. Pratt was elected President of the L.A.W. which consisted of 14 clubs. The following objects were set forth in the L.A.W. constitution: "To promote the general interests of bicycling, to ascertain, defend, and protect the rights of wheelmen; and to encourage and facilitate touring." One of bicycling's "general interests" was the condition of the surface upon which the bicycle and its rider must travel. Road

conditions in the late 1800s were difficult if not impossible for bicycle riding. The condition of the roads became an increasing concern for the League of American Wheelmen.

The purpose of this paper will be to examine the political endeavors of the L.A.W. in their quest for good roads as reported by the *New York Times*. In 1957 Phillip P. Mason completed a dissertation at the University of Michigan entitled *The League of American Wheelmen and the Good Roads Movement, 1880–1905*. The work was a thorough examination of the Good Roads Movement during that period. Mason examined other forces active in the campaign for good roads. Besides the L.A.W., the Office of Road Inquiry in the Department of Agriculture, professional engineers, the manufacturers of carriages, bicycles, automobiles and road machinery, and farm organizations all played a role in the Good Roads Movement. Mason concluded that the L.A.W. was the: “most active force. . . [deserving a] majorshare of the credit for the establishment of state aid to roads.”

This paper will test this very conclusion. Mason’s dissertation utilized newspapers as sources. The *New York Times* was chosen as the source for testing Mason’s contention because of its nationwide appeal and coverage. The paramount utility of this inquiry lies in the recognition and explanation of a lesson or lessons. What does the progress of the past L.A.W. endeavor mean for our present and future?

The L.A.W. was from its inception a highly structured, political body. The League was governed by an elected board of officers that consisted of a President, Vice President, Commander, Corresponding Secretary, Recording Secretary, Treasurer and two representatives from each state. The large degree of structure possessed by the League was due to cycling’s ever increasing popularity, subsequent membership increases, the nature of League activities and a seeming militaristic propensity for order and record. The strength and organization of the League’s governing body became the backbone of its political endeavors in the name of good roads.

The evidence presented has shown that the L.A.W. was the genesis for, and a great initial contributor to the movement for good roads. *The New York Times Index* makes no reference to a good roads movement prior to the L.A.W. activities. The *New York Times* research corroborates the findings of Mason in his 1957 dissertation. The dissertation, in fact, stands as a more complete look at the Good Roads Movement because of the large numbers of sources enlisted and because the history was not written solely on the L.A.W. perspective.

The nature of the movement required the enlistment of several other groups and individuals. Many cycling clubs initiated their own good roads activities locally, without the aid of the L.A.W. The farmer was enlisted in the battle for road improvement. Newspapers and other publications became a part of the good roads movement. Few citizens of the U.S. went untouched by the Wheelmen’s activities. In 1895 the *New York Times* stated: “Already we owe very much to the wheelmen in improving roads both in town and in country . . .”

In its fight for better roads the L.A.W. had no choice but to enter the political arena. The L.A.W. knew that “politicians respect votes.” They used this knowledge to their advantage. The wheelmen showed great political strength. Their deep belief in the good of road improvement led them to educate the public, to organize and finally to fight for their belief.

Certainly the rights of the wheelmen to organize and successfully petition the U.S. Government is recognized as a cherished freedom in this democracy. Our lesson should lie in the knowledge that we too may be able to affect change. If the members of the L.A.W. lived in our society today, what crusade would they adopt? Over the past two decades North Americans have become increasingly conscious of the environment. Air pollution in cities has never been worse. No corner of this planet is unaffected. Our natural surroundings and personal health are threatened.

Concern over air pollution and our finite supply of fossil fuels leads one to question the value that we have placed on the automobile. The same transportation freedom that was a part of bicycling became a part of the automobile. Now, after decades of automobile emissions our freedom is ultimately restricted by the pollution that threatens our health and environment. The bicycle is offered as an alternative means of transportation for us.

During the 1890s, road conditions were of paramount importance to the L.A.W. Today, the environment is a focus of concern. Could the bicycle play a major role in the decrease of pollution?

Efficient and effective mass transportation coupled with bicycling and discretionary use of the automobile may be an answer.