

My Life on Wheels

I practically grew up on a bicycle. I wouldn't go so far as to say that I was riding before I could walk, but it was a close thing. I started out, of course, on a tricycle, then moved up to a 16-inch bike with training wheels. I don't remember anything about those earliest bikes, so I have to rely on old photographs to track my progress. I see that I had ditched the training wheels shortly after my sixth birthday. My sister had a white 20-inch Huffy with a flowered banana seat, and I was soon riding her bike as much as my own.

Within a couple of years I graduated to my own 20-inch bicycle, the first of several that I rode throughout my boyhood. They were all yard sale bikes, cheap Sting-ray knockoffs, nothing fancy but suitable for the hard riding I put them through. I refer to them now as "beater bikes." Wheels wobbled and tires went flat, chains fell off on a regular basis, and loose handlebars had a tendency to suddenly twist sideways at the worst possible moments.

Of course, I was not gentle with them. My usual method of dismounting was to simply jump off at full speed and let the bike go careening across the yard until it crashed into a tree or flipped over one of my brother's Tonka trucks. And I was incessantly popping wheelies, skidding sideways across the gravel driveway, and jumping over makeshift cinder block ramps.

My regular routine each day after school was to ride up and down the driveway, lap after lap: out to the road, turn and race back to the house, around my parents' cars and back out to the road. When my father poured a sidewalk in front of the house, the edge of it made a great curb for jumping and popping wheelies. Eventually the concrete cracked and crumbled, so I used it to brace my cinder block ramp.

There were two persistent mud puddles at the end of our driveway. No matter how much stone my father hauled and dumped out there, by the next year it had all sunk out of sight. Springtime and rainy days meant I got to splash through the puddles on each lap around the driveway. Or I could lock up my coaster brake to skid sideways and send up a wave of water.

I tried it one day in winter when the puddles were frozen solid. I got up a good head of steam, hit the biggest puddle and locked up my brake. Instead of skidding sideways as planned, the bike shot out from under me and I landed flat on my back, cracking the ice with my head.

I don't think that I ever clipped a playing card to my wheels to make a motorcycle noise, but I did slide colorful plastic straws onto the spokes. One of my early bikes had a squeeze-bulb horn clamped to the handlebar. And I once wired a miniature license plate to the back of my seat; I think I got it out of a cereal box.

My favorite accessory was a battery-operated turning signal. It was attached to the seat post and had a wire threaded up to a switch on the handlebars. It was a fun novelty, but the battery compartment rusted out within a few months.

I don't recall that I was under any parental prohibition against biking on the road in my younger years. It seems that I was out there on the highway almost from the beginning. Pedaling up and down West Somerset Road was another activity that I could enjoy for hours on end. I liked to weave in and out of the dotted yellow lines or try to steer straight enough to keep my tires balanced in the center of them.

A strong west wind gave me a chance to go "sailing." I would ride towards Appleton as far as the curve in the road, then turn around, stand up on the pedals, and let the wind push me all the way back home. I can still see myself in the golden light of a summer sunset: standing up with the wind at my back, coasting down the middle of the road, not a car in sight, keeping pace with my shadow.

There was a steep-sided ditch running beside the road across the length of our front yard. It was great fun to pedal in fast from the road and zoom down into that ditch at an angle that launched me with a *whoomp!* up onto the driveway. For years I had a deep path worn through the ditch.

I didn't limit myself to just riding 20-inch beater bikes. My parents had two old 26-inch Schwinn cruisers that had once been the teenage bikes of my mother and her brothers. The blue men's model was too much of a brute for me. It had wide handlebars, and was so big and heavy that I could barely get on the thing.

The purple "Hollywood" ladies model was more to my liking. It was still a beast of a bike, but I could hop on and off quickly if it got away from me—which it sometimes did. I once made the mistake of trying to jump a ramp with it. Once was enough. The heavy bicycle hit the ground with a shuddering jar that knocked my hands clean off the handlebars. After painfully picking myself up out of the dirt, I made a private vow to keep the thing on solid ground from then on.

The bike was made for road cruising anyway, and it was wonderfully fast. It was a heavy single-speed machine, and took some hard pedaling on my part to get it going. But once up to speed the bike barreled along like a freight train—and Heaven help anything that got in its path. The only way I could stop quickly was to lock up the coaster brake and skid a long rut into the back yard, or spray half the gravel out of our driveway. It seems to me that I probably did that more often than I needed to.

I never wore a helmet or other safety gear; the very idea would have been laughable to me at the time. I survived with no broken bones or other major injuries; but I did have my share of tumbles. Most memorable for me is the time I was riding one of my beater bikes out on West Somerset Road and popped a magnificent wheelie—at the height of which the front tire fell right off the bike. I had no choice but to go over the handlebars and hit the asphalt chin first.

I would have been content to stay there for a while until I felt a little less stunned, but a nagging voice in the back of my mind kept telling me that I was lying face-down in the middle of a public highway. I started to untangle myself from the bike and was surprised to see that the front tire was still rolling merrily down the road, straight and true. I thought it a bit unfair that this tire had never performed so well when actually attached to the bicycle.

I encountered other bicyclists now and then and met some odd characters. One day a friend and I were riding from Appleton towards my house. We had just gone around the curve in West Somerset Road

when we heard a holler behind us. Looking back we saw a long-haired teenage boy perched above a wild two-wheeled contraption, pedaling quickly after us.

When he caught up we saw that he was riding one of those home-made chopper bikes, where several front forks are welded or jammed together to form one long fork. Not content with that, he also had a modified frame with handlebars and seat posts that elevated him high above the ground.

There were a few bikes in the Newfane and Barker area during the 1970s that had either the chopper forks or the high-rise seat post; but this was the first time we had seen one with both. He pedaled along with us for a few minutes, looking down from his seat and bombarding us with questions about who we were and where we went to school.

We never learned his name or anything else about him. When we reached my driveway he turned and headed back towards Appleton, vanishing around the curve of the road just as mysteriously as he had appeared. I never saw him or his crazy bike again.

And there was the time another friend and I were riding west along the Swigert Road on a summer afternoon. This was probably just before our BMX phase: we were still on our old rattletrap bikes with the wobbly wheels. We heard a sound and turned to see a bike zooming out of a farm driveway to intercept us. It was an older boy riding a new-fangled 18-speed road racing bicycle.

He circled around us a few times, sneering at our little 20-inch kiddie bikes and extolling the many virtues and overall superiority of his own shiny new machine. To demonstrate, he went back a little ways to gather speed, then raced past us towards the railroad crossing, clicking through the gears as he sped by.

The train tracks crossed Swigert Road at an angle; and of course every bicyclist knows that you must ride your bike straight across the rails. Otherwise your front tire will slip into the gap between the rail and the pavement, and over the handlebars you'll go.

The sneering boy was either ignorant of this or too full of himself at the moment to remember. His front tire went down into that gap just as neatly as you please, and he took one of the finest tosses I have ever seen. It was almost poetic how he soared headfirst over the handlebars.

The way he was standing on the pedals and leaning over the handlebars gave him virtually no time to brace his fall. He hit the surface of the road in a mighty belly-flop, looking very much like a seal shooting out of the ocean surf and flopping ashore. The barking sounds he made as he bounced and skidded along the pavement sounded remarkably seal-like also.

There followed a long pause. Should we go see if he's okay? Naw, let's not.

Of course he tried to pass it off with a "I meant to do that" look on his face when he gingerly picked himself up off the road, but we weren't fooled. Still, he *was* older and bigger than us, so we wisely kept silent and averted our gaze as he slowly pedaled back home. But it was very gratifying to notice as he went by that his bike sported a front wheel that was now just as wobbly as our own.

In 1979, the BMX craze that had started in California a few years earlier reached New York. A new racing track was built in Niagara Falls, and my cousins and I couldn't wait to join the action. We stripped down and tightened up our old Huffy and Sting-ray bikes, padded the crossbars, and practiced jumps in our driveways. When the track opened we got our first glimpses of the new diamond-frame BMX bikes made by exotic-sounding brands like Torker and Mongoose.

The Niagara Falls BMX Park was operated by Bill Robins, who also handled announcer duties from up in the track tower. His wildly enthusiastic commentary gave each race an air of drama and excitement. The racers lined up on the starting ramp, balancing on their pedals with their front tires jammed against the gate. The starter called out "Riders ready! Pedals set!," the gate dropped, and Bill was in full cry:

"Twelve Novice, this is the Main, Twelve Novice off the gate, going for the hole-shot! and Franko pulls the hole-shot! Over the tabletop, it's Morgan, oh they're tight! Ohhh! Franko goes down! Three four piled uuup! Ohhh! Riders down over there, riders down! In the back sweeper there we got fourth place we're going for, it's Morgan, Holthouser, Metchen! Fourth place is Payne! Rider down over there! Please stay off the track! Rider down! Into the tower turn and the whoop-de-doo, we got Morgan, Holthouser, Metchen, fourth place is still pending over there! In the final turn! And the winner's gonna be Mike Morgan, Larry Holthouser, Jeff Metchen!"

The older racers were so fast that Bill was hard pressed to keep up with them as they flew around the track.

"And the gate's down! Fifteen Experts, going for the hole-shot! Oh they are tight into the first turn! Oh, three of them side by side! Over the tabletop! Three of them! On the back straightaway it's Fisher, Robins and Tyler! Going into the turn! Fisher! Robins! Oh they're riding hard! And Durfee going into the sweeper! Fisher, Robins, are tight going into the tower turn! It's tight! Over the whoop-de-doo it's still Fisher, Robins, Tyler, and Durfee! In the final turn! And it's gonna be Fisher, Robins, Tyler and Durfee! Good racing! Good raciiiiing!"

The four Robins kids dominated the races to such an extent that, in an interview for PM Magazine, one son insisted, "I don't win *all* the time." But they did win most of the time. The sons were among the top ranked riders in the Northeast. Their sister Rose Ann was the sweetheart of the track who regularly trounced her competitors in the senior girls Powder Puff class.

Kids will be kids, of course. One of the Robins boys got a little too cocky, so when his father Bill handed him yet another first place trophy he also announced over the loudspeaker for all to hear: "You better get that chip off your shoulder if you want to race here next week."

Not only my brother and I raced at the Niagara Falls track, but five of our cousins as well. Weekend get-togethers at my grandparents' house became BMX-centered. Us kids immersed ourselves in BMX lore and learned the lingo: rad, gnarly, endo, hole-shot, "getting air." We debated the pros and cons of alloy cranks, double-clamp goosenecks, Tuff Wheels, and V-bars.

At home I spent hours out on the road in front of our house, attempting to master cross-up wheelies and

bunny hops. I subscribed to BMX Plus! Magazine and made wish lists of all the fancy new accessories coming out: Shimano calipers, Oakley grips, Suntour seat clamps. I especially yearned for a Mongoose double-clamp gold gooseneck.

My parents gave me permission to build a practice track in our side yard, and I hauled wheelbarrow loads of dirt to make tabletop jumps and whoop-dee-dooos. My father built a starting ramp for me and donated a few old tires to line the turns with. The end result was a fine practice track, but I didn't spend as much time out there as I should have; I guess it didn't have quite the same feel and excitement of a real track.

That first year of BMX racing was the most fun. The racers were a mixed bunch: some had the latest bikes and gear, but a lot of them were, like myself, do-it-yourself-ers on a shoestring budget. I started out riding my latest beater bike and wearing a borrowed helmet and a long-sleeved dress shirt. My blue jeans were wrapped with masking tape (to keep them from getting caught in the chain), and I attached a paper plate to the handlebars with twist ties to serve as a number plate.

Towards the end of 1979 I got a new diamond-frame BMX bike. True, it was only a Kmart All-Pro—not exactly top of the line—but I knew my parents weren't about to shell out \$500 for a bicycle. I did my best with what I had, and made improvements whenever I could save up enough allowance money.

By the start of the 1980 racing season I was decked out in a yellow and black racing jersey that my mother made for me, a black helmet with matching blue visor and mouthguard, and a pair of racing gloves. My new green number plate featured a shiny prismatic National Bicycle Association sticker. I also swapped out my handlebars and gooseneck for a V-bar and a genuine Mongoose gold double-clamp gooseneck.

How proud I was of that gooseneck!—and how disappointed when the stupid thing refused to stay clamped tight. The handlebars developed a nasty habit of slipping forward whenever I hit ground after a jump: a very bad moment to suffer an equipment failure. I got in the habit of carrying an allen wrench in my pocket whenever I hopped aboard the bicycle.

I have mixed memories of my second racing season. Some of that initial excitement from 1979 was still there, but overall the fun was starting to drain out of BMX. It was becoming too competitive, too serious. Kids were landing sponsorships and joining factory teams like Redline and Panda. The do-it-yourself days were gone. More racers were showing up with expensive new Schwinn Stings and fancy racing leathers that made my homemade shirt and Kmart bike look like exactly what they were.

I started feeling pretty inferior, and endured a measure of ridicule from the “cool” kids on their flashy PK Rippers. At home I stripped the paint and emblems off my bike in an effort to disguise the fact that it was just a department store model. This didn't help very much.

And it didn't make me any faster. The more aggressive riders were leaving me in the dust every time. The only two trophies I ever won—both in 1979—were a 4th place in a field of five, and a 7th place in a field of eight. Well, at least I wasn't *always* dead last, but I *was* always near the back of the pack.

One result of this is that I came under some parental pressure to race harder, pedal faster. The races were held on Sunday afternoons, and in order to get to the track in time for me to register we had to skip out of church early. This didn't sit well with my parents; and I knew they didn't enjoy giving up their day of rest to go sit in the baking sun and watch me lose another race. If I was going to continue with BMX, I needed to kick my competitive spirit into gear and start getting results. Racing just for the fun of it wasn't enough anymore.

But I really had no competitive resources to draw upon. I didn't have the natural skill or aggressiveness that was needed to do battle with the top riders. With the close of the 1980 racing season my BMX days were over. I don't recall that anybody said anything, but it just seemed like it was time to move on. I never raced again and my bike was eventually given away to a family friend.

I don't know that I missed it very much, for by this time I was graduating to bigger things. In 1981 I received a brand new 10-speed road bike. It was bright red and featured a speedometer. Going fast down the highway became my new obsession. I didn't have to compete with anyone except myself. I was back to riding for the fun of it.

The tendency to tinker with my bicycles was still strong, and over the following winter I took the 10-speed down into the cellar and transformed it into a "stealth" bike. I stripped off the red paint and gave the bike a coat of dull grey. The reflectors, front caliper brakes, and other unnecessary gadgets were all removed. I kept the speedometer until it broke, then it too was removed.

I emerged that Spring with a bike that blended into the scenery and rode almost silently. I could prowl around the greater Appleton area at will, often at night, virtually unseen by property owners who might object to my biking down their farm lanes and through their orchards. I put a lot of miles on that bicycle during the next few years.

At the same time, I was gradually making the transition from a cyclist to a motorist. On my sixteenth birthday I got my Learner's Permit. A few months later I failed my road test by attempting a left turn from the far right lane. I tried again in 1982 and passed the test in a torrential downpour.

I already had my first car by then, a 1972 Plymouth Duster that I bought for \$200. I painted it bright yellow, drove it for two months, broke both torsion bars, and sold it for \$300—the only time in my life I ever came out ahead in any kind of auto deal.

I didn't actually get to drive very much at all for those first couple of years after I got my license. The Department of Motor Vehicles and I had a series of disagreements about my interpretation of posted speed limits; so it wasn't until 1984 that I became a fully-licensed driver, free of all suspensions and probations. By then I was driving a 1974 Chevy Nova. I painted that one bright red.

With a license and a car, and soon a motorcycle, my cycling days appeared to be over. The stealth bike was neglected. It languished in the backyard shed, unriden, until it followed the fate of my BMX bike and was given away to a family friend. It would be twenty-five years before I owned another bicycle.

In the late 1990s my father took up cycling and formed a riding group called the Towpath Riders, who focused on pedaling along the Erie Canal. He put in some serious miles, with others and solo, for several years until his health began to fail.

The year after my father died I began riding his bike, and rediscovered the joys of cycling. A few years later I bought my own bike, a Giant brand hybrid, which I am still riding now. I don't do any rough off-road riding—neither the bike or myself can handle the abuse—but stick mainly to maintained trails. Over the past decade or so I've ridden nearly all of the bike paths in Western New York.

If my riding is a bit more sedate than it once was (no bunny hops and very few wheelies), this is probably all for the best. The Great Bicycle Crash of 2013 brought home to me the fact that I am no longer an indestructible youth. It was the 5th of July, and I was pedaling fast along the Erie Canal towpath—too fast for the amount of dog walkers and others sharing the path with me that day.

Ahead of me I saw two ladies dawdling along side by side, taking up most of the path. This has always irritated me, so I put on a burst of speed in order to blow past them and teach them a lesson about blocking the way. At that moment a fisherman suddenly stepped up from the canal bank—right in front of me. I had no time to react safely. In a panicked last-ditch attempt to avoid hitting him, I locked up my front brakes and went sailing over the handlebars.

I hit the ground hard on my left side, driving my face into the gravel and tearing a gash in my knee that left me limping for a month. I also did some sort of nerve damage to my left arm. Ever since then, after about twenty minutes of bike riding my arm goes numb. I have to stop or ride one-handed for a while until I can shake some life back into the arm.

But I can still ride, and I still do ride. And I can still experience the simple delights of bicycling that I knew in my boyhood. I don't think I'm light enough anymore to stand up on the pedals and let the breeze carry me where it will, but I can still race my shadow along a quiet country road—and still not care which of us wins.