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The bicycle seems an unlikely symbol of women's liberation, but a century ago, in 1886, when a young American named Margaret Valentine Le Long bicycled alone from Chicago to San Francisco in two months, carrying only an extra skirt and underwear, toilet articles and a pistol, it was precisely that --as bold a statement of feminist independence as burning the bra would be in the 1960s. Riding a bicycle, many nineteenth-century Americans believed, was a manly pastime, an activity that no woman of refinement would even consider. The reasons were many: Some argued that bicycling would destroy "feminine symmetry and poise" and affect pelvic muscles, thus increasing the labor pains of childbirth. Others said women would be sexually stimulated by the saddle. Beyond that, there was the simple question of morality. A senior Chicago police official warned of "con-tamination" when "women of refinement and exquisite moral training addicted to the use of the bicycle are not infrequently thrown among the uncultivated and degenerate elements of both sexes." On proper dress, the League of American Wheelmen advised women to abandon skirts in favor of trousers. "It is not enough to wear trousers under a short skirt," the league said. "The skirt is lifting with every wind more or less, and attracting curious eyes."

Women had tried tricycles when the big-wheeled penny-farthing bikes captivated the fancy of American men in the 1870s, but the three-wheelers never really caught on and the few women who tricycled alone were often verbally abused by pedestrians and horsemen. The solution, *The Wheelman* magazine advised, was for women to find a male companion: "In this way the lady learns with ease; she is provided with a suitable escort; and if anything goes wrong, she has assistance at hand." The 1880s turned bicycling into a sport more popular than baseball, boxing or horse racing, and turned the attention of manufacturers to how to exploit the untapped market of millions of women. In 1888 the first bicycle with a dropped top-tube to accommodate riders with skirts hit the market. In 1889, Starley Brothers began mass producing the first women's "safety" bike, a

model called the Psycho Ladies' Bicycle. In 1894, Albert Pope, the bicycle manufacturer from Hartford, started featuring bloomer-clad female riders in his advertisements. A West Virginia man sold Cherry's Screens --a shield resembling large bat wings attached to the front of bikes to block the view of women's legs and ankles --and another company offered all-black "mourning bicycles" to attract widows. *Outing* magazine suggested women sew weights into their hems and wear leather-lined skirts lest anyone catch a glimpse of their legs and undergarments in a stiff wind. If ever so slowly, bicycling was losing its gender affiliation.

Speaking of the increasing number of women "awheel," the popular *Munsey* magazine reported in 1896:

It is as though a new language had been given to her, and the books of its literature opened before her. Hitherto a weak, helpless creature, she can at her own sweet will cover great stretches of country without appreciable fatigue, and all the delights of motion, sun, and air come without any more effort than has been given to dawdling about the streets. . . . The wheel means too much to woman, when it is fully appreciated and enjoyed, to be considered lightly, or trifled with. It is the best gift that the nineteenth century has brought her.

The feminist movement was taking root in the United States about that time, and Susan B. Anthony, the seventy-six-year-old activist for women's suffrage, said of the bicycle in an interview with the *New York World*: "I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything in the world." The boldest reformers of the day dared play billiards or order a beer at the bar. Others referred to God as "She." Many argued "rational dress" should replace corsets that gripped the waist with wire fingers and turned figures into hourglasses. And indeed, because of the cycling craze, skirts did become shorter and bloomers --short, full pants fastened at the knee with drawstrings, similar to the knickerbockers men wore -- became popular. The corset was fading into history. But women still had to battle for their independence on the bicycle, and the propriety of bloomers was hotly argued.

In Chicago, the police department closed down a "bloomer dance" and threatened to treat women in bloomers as prostitutes. A group of males in Norwich, New York, formed an Anti-Bloomer Brigade and vowed not to associate with women in bloomers. Some small communities forbade bloomer-clad women from bicycling in their streets, and the mayor of Chattanooga proposed an ordinance to keep bloomers off the streets because they were a menace "to the peace and good morals of the male residents of this city." In Flushing, Long Island, three female teachers were ordered by the school board not to ride their bikes to school. When the board met to consider the women's objections, board member A. W. Reimer revealed the real reason for the prohibition:

It is not the proper thing for ladies to ride the bicycle. They wear skirts, of course, but if we don't stop them now they will want to be in style with New York women and wear bloomers. Then how would our schoolrooms look with the lady teachers parading about among the girls and boys wearing bloomers. They might as well wear men's trousers. I suppose it will come to that, but we are determined to stop our teachers in time, before they go that far.

Women bicyclists, however, persevered, and in finally winning acceptance to venture off into the countryside unescorted, in bloomers instead of billowing skirts, they struck a blow for the rights of women everywhere. Many of the nation's leading women of the day became bicycle advocates, including Frances E. Willard, a reformist and president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. She took up biking at the age of fifty-three, while suffering from bad health and exhaustion following years of traveling, lecturing and organizing. In her later writings the mastery of the bike became a metaphor for life itself, and the qualities needed to master it, she contended, were the same ones required to advance reforms: steadiness, confidence, determination, discipline. She wrote a book about bicycling and her bicycle, nicknamed Gladys, published in 1895 under the title, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*:

I began to feel that myself plus the bicycle equaled myself plus the world, upon whose spinning wheel we must all learn to ride, or fall

into the sluiceways of oblivion and despair. That which made me succeed with the bicycle was precisely what had gained me the measure of success in life --it was the Spirit that led me to begin, the persistence of will that held me to my task, and the patience that was willing to begin again when the last stroke had failed. And so I found high moral uses in the bicycle and can commend it as a teacher without pulpit or creed. He who succeeds, or, to be more exact in handing over my experience, she who succeeds in gaining the mastery of such an animal as Gladys, will gain the mastery of life, and by exactly the same methods and characteristics. . . . One of the first things I learned was that unless a forward impetus were given within well-defined intervals, away we went into the gutter, rider and steed. And I said to myself: "It is the same with all reforms: sometimes they seem to lag, then they barely balance, then they begin to oscillate as if they would lose the track and tumble to one side; but all they need is a new impetus at the right moment on the right angle, and away they go again as merrily as if they had never threatened to stop at all."

Bicycles helped bring to an end the era of the Victorian woman, and without its trail blazers willing to endure taunts and ridicule, perhaps I never would have met Norma Witherbee and Evie Weber on the road to Texas. Bloomers lost their popularity by the turn of the century, and so did bicycling in general, but the social impact of the "wheel" had been profound. As the English novelist and playwright John Galsworthy wrote:

The bicycle . . . has been responsible for more movement in manners and morals than anything since Charles the Second. Under its influence, wholly or in part, have wilted chaperons, long and narrow skirts, tight corsets, hair that would come down, black stockings, thick ankles, large hats, prudery and fear of the dark; under its influence, wholly or in part, have bloomed weekends, strong nerves, strong legs, strong language, knickers, knowledge of make and shape, knowledge of woods and pastures, equality of sex, good digestion and professional occupation --in four words, the emancipation of women.