

Southern women and the bicycle

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Daily Charlotte Observer, June 9, 1895.

As you read...

BICYCLES IN THE GILDED AGE

By the late nineteenth century, the bicycle had become a popular mode of transportation. Over the course of the nineteenth century, inventors had tinkered with the basic design of the bicycle until it came to resemble the object we are now familiar with.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, bicycles were quite dangerous machines. They had a large front wheel and the rider sat high above the ground. If the rider hit a rock or bump, he could be thrown from the vehicle and on to the ground.

With the invention of the rubber tire and the development of lighter metals, the bicycle became more practical. The large front tire was replaced and inventors created a design that was fast, stable, safe, and relatively inexpensive.

The bicycle was a radical invention because it gave the rider individual freedom to travel independently at a fast pace. Previously, people had been restricted to horseback or horse-drawn wagons, but the bicycle was much more practical and affordable, especially for people in urban areas.

Upper class and middle class men and women embraced the bicycle. The image of a woman riding a bike became a political symbol of the age: she was an independent woman traveling unaccompanied by a chaperone. To some, the idea of women riding bicycles was scandalous.

BLOOMERS

In the late nineteenth century, women's fashions were very restrictive. Women wore several pounds of undergarments, including a restrictive corset and hoop skirts. This was covered by elaborate dresses that included long, bulky skirts. These were not practical garments, and they restricted women's movements.

There were several attempts by women to reform clothing, but these were generally unsuccessful. One woman, Amelia Bloomer, tried to popularize a style of dress worn by Turkish women: puffy pants with a long coat over top. Bloomer felt that this style of dress was more practical and would allow women to live a more healthy, active life. Bloomer introduced her style of fashion in the 1840s, but few women adopted this style of dress.

With the introduction of the bicycle, however, women began searching for a more practical style of clothing for cycling. Women's cycling outfits were designed along the same style as Amelia Bloomer's pant suits. Most women wore these suits only for bicycling, however, and wore dresses for all other occasions.

Yet, the introduction and popularization of the bloomers had a radical impact on women's clothing. During the late 19th century, women began wearing more streamlined clothing with fewer undergarments

and less elaborate skirts. This new design of clothing, while still cumbersome by our standards, allowed women greater movement than they had previously enjoyed.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why did the author of this newspaper story believe that bicycle riding was not as popular among southern women as it was among northern women?
2. What did this author say about bicycle riding in North Carolina?
3. Did this author believe that women riding a bicycle was good or bad? Why?

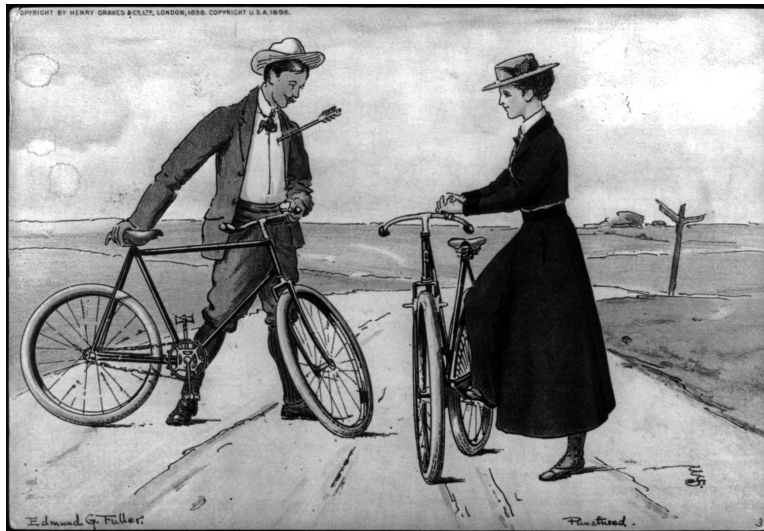


Figure 1. Bicycles gave women more freedom than they had traditionally had -- including, as this illustration shows, the freedom to conduct a courtship out of the watch of their parents.



Figure 2. A magazine portrayed these “diversions of the summer girl” in 1896, which included tennis, sailing, bicycling, and going to the



Figure 3. This sketch from the British magazine *Punch* in 1851 warned of “A probable incident if bloomerism isn’t put down.”

The New York Sun editorializes thus:

The women of the Southern States have been much slower than their Northern sisters in the utilization of the bicycle. They are affected by the conservatism of the South, which looks askance at any novelty, and very many of them yet think that bicycling is highly improper for a woman. We have frequently noticed remarks to this effect in Southern papers, and we recently learned that women in several places there had been brought under discipline for bicycling.

The prodigious cycling boom of this year in New York has already told upon the South.

By this time there are lots of women bicyclers in Virginia and Georgia; there are a smaller number in Alabama and Louisiana; there are fewer yet in South Carolina; there are very few in Arkansas; we have not heard of any in Mississippi; the Northern women in Florida have introduced the wheel there.

We do not believe that the conservatism of Southern women can much longer resist the wheel; the Texas and North Carolina girls seem to be ready for it; we think it is bound to attract the fair sex even in the Bayou State.

It is not undignified for a woman to ride a bicycle. She does not lower herself by wheeling. To ride upon it at full speed does not cut into the pride of womanhood. That pride exists in the North not less than in the South.

The Sun speaks of Texas and North Carolina together because, as it said some weeks ago, it considers these the two most progressive and promising of the Southern States. We can say to it that the bicycle is no new thing to the women of North Carolina — they have been riding it for four years or more, and its popularity is increasing among them.

If the venerable and accomplished editor of the Sun should come to Charlotte again, take another meal at Gresham’s and stay over just one fine evening, he could see numbers of ladies spinning along over the beautiful streets of this city and over the macadamized roads leading out of it. Female bicyclists? Well, we should think! And not only bicycles, but we have been given notice, in the most confidential manner possible, that we may soon begin to look around for bloomers. North Carolina a progressive State? Yea, verily. Her women not only ready for bicycles, but riding them, and now ready for bloomers.

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About the author

L. MAREN WOOD

Maren Wood is a research associate with LEARN NC’s North Carolina History Digital Textbook Project. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, having received a B.A. from the University of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) and an M.A. in British History from Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). Her dissertation is titled *Dangerous Liaisons: Narratives of Sexual Danger in the Anglo-American North, 1750 to 1820*.

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Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, vol. 83 (August 6, 1896), p. 92. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.

Figure 3 (page 3)

Punch magazine, 1851. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.