

# The Two-Wheeled Workhorse: The Bicycle as Personal and Commercial Transport in Winnipeg

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Résumé de l'article

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# ***The Two-Wheeled Workhorse: The Bicycle as Personal and Commercial Transport in Winnipeg***

***John C. Lehr and H. John Selwood***

## **Abstract:**

***The bicycle has yet to be afforded its rightful place in Canadian urban transportation history. Previous interest in the bicycle has centred on the gay nineties cycling craze, when the bicycle was a relatively expensive plaything of the wealthy, leisured classes. This paper outlines that short phase in the history of the bicycle in Winnipeg but focuses on its later utilitarian function as a personal conveyance, giving mobility and freedom to the less affluent but far more numerous working classes. Despite Winnipeg's harsh winter climate, it served not only as a summertime recreational form of transport but also as a year-round workhorse and commuting vehicle.***

## **Résumé:**

***La bicyclette n'a pas encore reçu une place légitime dans l'histoire du transport urbain canadien. Auparavant, l'intérêt porté à la bicyclette a se centrait sur l'engouement pour le cyclisme des joyeuses années 90, quand la bicyclette était un jouet assez cher pour les riches classes oisives. Cet article passe brièvement en revue cette période courte dans l'histoire de la bicyclette à Winnipeg, mais porte sur sa seconde fonction, utilitaire, comme transport personnel, permettant mobilité et liberté aux classes ouvrières moins riches mais plus abondantes. Malgré le dur climat hivernal de Winnipeg, elle a servi non seulement comme forme de transport de récréation en été, mais également comme un moyen de transport fiable de toute l'année.***

Even today, in an advanced technological society where high speed transportation is the norm, the bicycle is still an important conveyance, used world-wide by millions of people. Historically it made a significant contribution to the transportation systems of urban centres, yet it has been relatively overlooked in the urban historical literature. There is still debate as to the true nature of the extent of the bicycle's contribution.

There is still a good deal of controversy as to the importance of the bicycle as a utility vehicle and as an agent of social change. While its impact in the latter regard was perhaps not as great as the bicycle enthusiasts of the day would have had us believe, we contend that during, and especially after, Winnipeg's formative years, as well as having a commonly accepted role as a recreational vehicle, the bicycle also functioned as a practical mode of transportation for many working people.

The bicycle revolution began just over a hundred years ago and took off with the invention of the modern diamond frame safety bicycle. This machine was a distinct improvement over its forerunner, the dangerously unstable high wheel "penny farthing" or *ordinary* as it was known. The ordinary was developed in the 1870s but it was not until the early 1890s that the diamond frame combined with the pneumatic tire and the rear-

wheel chain drive to create a machine which was safe, comfortable, and did not demand a high degree of courage or skill to ride.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1890s the craze for cycling swept through Europe and North America as the machine captured the imagination and spirit of an age which lauded progress and innovation in technology.

At first the bicycle was a new mechanical curiosity; in the early years of the cycling craze it was a plaything of the rich, but after prices fell in the early 1900s it became a practical mode of personal transportation used for both business and pleasure. It came to serve as a vehicle of social change by putting personal transportation within the reach of the working class.<sup>2</sup> It also helped to blur the established behaviour roles of sexes and literally changed the horizons of women by affording them mobility and independence.<sup>3</sup> That the bicycle and its users were the subject of controversy was hardly surprising. The merits of the changes wrought by the introduction of the bicycle were publicly debated by the medical profession, the clergy, and a host of self-appointed experts who ascribed a host of physical, social, and economic ills and benefits to cycling.

This debate, which followed in the tracks of the cycle, extended to the very outposts of European civilization. Winnipeg, which in the 1890s was the gateway to the then sparsely settled Canadian West, embraced the bicycle craze no less enthusiastically than did the larger eastern cities.

Winnipeg was still a small frontier outpost when the first bicycle — a velocipede — made its appearance on its streets in 1875. At that time, the bicycle was still widely regarded as little more than a mechanical curiosity, a dangerous plaything; and cyclists were denounced as "cads on castors."<sup>4</sup> Even its successor — the ordinary — was not a practical vehicle upon which to traverse streets still frequented by lumbering Red River carts. Although embraced by enthusiasts, the ordinary never achieved great popularity since the hazards of riding it were commonly thought to be "about the same as those which beset the professional tightrope walker," and the greatest wonder was that more riders of the high wheel were not killed.<sup>5</sup>

Few, if any, new ordinaries were offered for sale in Winnipeg after 1890, by which time dealers were enthusiastically advertising large new consignments of "safeties." A series of mechanical innovations — the chain driven rear wheel identical in size to the front wheel, the cross frame, then the diamond frame, and the introduction of pneumatic tires — combined to render the ordinary obsolete by the mid 1890s. Cycling enthusiasts had formed the first Winnipeg Bicycle Club in 1883; by 1891, they were advocating the establishment of cycling paths.<sup>6</sup> However, cycling was still a pastime of the young and fit avant-garde of Winnipeg's wealthy society families.

To purchase a bicycle in the early 1890s required a considerable cash outlay. At first the bicycle emphasized social differences since possession of one was a mark of affluence and social distinction.<sup>7</sup> Before the economies of scale combined with fierce competition between manufacturers to force down

## The Two-Wheeled Workhorse

prices, bicycle retailers directing their pitch to the affluent in Winnipeg found it necessary to emphasize their easy credit terms to encourage sales.<sup>8</sup> In 1893 the Timothy Eaton Company was offering a "Gent's New Rapid" for \$165.00 credit terms or \$110.00 cash and Winnipeggers could expect to pay upwards of \$60 for even the cheapest bicycle.<sup>9</sup> Such an amount represented several weeks' wages for the average labourer who then earned only 12½ cents an hour working on the CPR extra gang.<sup>10</sup> Even for a better-paid clerk the purchase of a new bicycle was a major outlay which few could afford and so the cycling fraternity in Winnipeg, as elsewhere, was initially drawn from the middle and upper classes.

Whereas financial constraints slowed the adoption of the cycle, social attitudes also restricted its use by women. If the sight of the male cyclist was not unusual in Winnipeg by 1893, to see a woman on a cycle would have caused some amusement — if not vocal disapproval. The *Winnipeg Tribune* breathlessly debated the question of "Is Bicycling Immodest?"<sup>11</sup> Although the consensus of the "six famous women" whose opinions were solicited was that it was no more immodest than sitting pedalling a sewing machine, it was still admitted that cycling could be "very dangerous." The example of one young lady who fell off her bicycle seventeen times in an hour was cited in support of this. Not all agreed with the feminist viewpoint, for one male correspondent wrote that "whether bicycling in bloomers be immodest or not — and I incline to think it is — it is certainly ridiculous. ... all girls who ride bicycles inevitably get to look like old maids — stern, hard faced, frowsy."<sup>12</sup>

But even the male was not immune to the perils of the bicycle, for the *Tribune* cautioned that:

... their machines are pitched at an angle which causes them to lean forward so that they can obtain a better speed. The result has been in many cases a permanent rounding of the shoulders, with a corresponding narrowing of the chest giving rise to a disease which is recognized in medicine as 'bicycle kyphosis.'<sup>13</sup>

Unmindful of their health, the population of Winnipeg took to the bicycle in increasing numbers. Whereas in 1893 only the relatively affluent could afford a bicycle, with rapidly declining prices after 1899 the bicycle quickly became available to the working population.

By 1895 the price of a new bicycle in Winnipeg had dropped to \$85.00 and some cheaper models were being offered for as low as \$55.00 in the spring of 1896. Prices continued to slide downward rapidly until in 1900 a new cycle could be purchased for \$25.00 and for only \$11.95 in 1908, a price which brought the cycle within the reach of most.<sup>14</sup> There were few employed Winnipeggers who could not aspire to a second-hand model at least.

The appeal of the bicycle was universal. According to an enthusiast writing in *Scribner's Magazine*:

A bicycle is better than a horse to ninety-nine men and women out of a hundred, because it costs almost nothing to keep, and it is never tired. It will take one three times as far as a horse in the same number of days or weeks. ... The bicycle [is] an every-day help to mechanics, factory hands, clerks, and all people who live in or near small towns ... they can live several miles away from their work, thus getting cheaper rents and better surroundings for their children; they can save car-fares and get healthful exercise. For the unfortunate dwellers in cities it offers recreation after working hours and induces thousands ... to get out into the air.<sup>15</sup>

Many Winnipeggers took to cycling because it was the 'thing to do.'<sup>16</sup> It was fashionable to cycle, even the crowned heads of Europe briefly sat on tricycles and bicycles, and the cycle was the "subject of song," poetry, fiction, humour, and earnest social commentary carried by the national and local press.<sup>17</sup> Claims of bicycling wreaking havoc upon the physique of its practitioners became muted, and although warnings of the dangers of over-exertion were earnestly given, the consensus of the press by the late 1890s was that cycling was both physically and psychologically beneficial:

But apart from the actual physiological betterment from deep breathing, swiftly coursing blood, and the purer air of the parks, there is a psychic and moral void in the city life which the "bike" goes farther toward filling than any other institution.<sup>18</sup>

Cycling in Winnipeg had a lasting effect upon Winnipeggers' social behaviour and the city's physical appearance. As early as 1895 concern had been expressed over the dangers of permitting bicycles on Winnipeg's sidewalks, and exception was taken to a proposal to allow bicycles on all streets except Main Street and Portage Avenue. To contain the 'bicycle nuisance' a group of prominent citizens in May 1896 advocated passage of a by-law which demanded that:

No person shall ride any bicycle upon or along any public sidewalk of the paved section of any street of the city of Winnipeg, nor upon the sidewalk of any park or the footpath of any bridge of the city, nor along the sidewalk of any street within the limits of [the downtown area].<sup>19</sup>

Anxiety about the dangers of reckless cycling was clear from the demands that all cyclists be restricted to a maximum speed of eight miles per hour on any Winnipeg street, and six miles per hour — scarcely more than walking speed — if riding upon a sidewalk where permitted. All cycles were to have a "warning bell or whistle, which should be sounded if within fifty feet of a pedestrian." If cycling on a sidewalk less than five feet wide "the rider shall dismount before passing any ... pedestrian."<sup>20</sup>

Objections to the proposal, raised during discussion by city council, were minor. One alderman preferred a bell to be rung

## *The Two-Wheeled Workhorse*

continuously rather than a whistle blown, while another worried about the difficulty of recognizing violators of the by-law after dark, until it was pointed out to him that it would then be too dark to ride! Concern for the welfare of the cyclists was shown by Alderman McCreary who argued for inclusion of a clause "providing a penalty for throwing upon streets broken glass, tacks, rails or other materials which would puncture pneumatic tires."<sup>21</sup>

"A By-law ... to regulate the speed of bicycles and provide for the carrying of lanterns at night," which incorporated most of the above suggestions was passed on 12 October 1896. A short-lived by-law sought to control the hazards threatening bicycle tires,<sup>22</sup> but more permanent protection came in the summer of 1897 when a new by-law mandated that:

Any person who shall throw any rails, tacks, glass, or hard substances having sharp points or angles whereby bicyclists would likely be punctured by passing over the same [sic] shall be liable under conviction ... to a fine not exceeding ten dollars.<sup>23</sup>

Further legislation continued to protect the rights of cyclists by making it an offence to "ride or drive a horse, an ox, or other beast of burden, or any cattle, or a wagon, carriage or cart along or across the bicycle paths in the City of Winnipeg."<sup>24</sup> Having sweetened the pill, City Council levied a tax of 50 cents upon all bicycles with a frame of over 18 inches ridden within the city boundaries.<sup>25</sup> In 1904, perhaps as a concession to cyclists' new-found respectability as contributors to the city's coffers, the maximum speed for bicycles was raised from eight to ten miles per hour, though the by-law emphasized that nowhere should the cycle be ridden at a lesser "immoderate rate of speed."<sup>26</sup> At a time when a few people had still not acquired the skill or experience to safely control a bicycle, Council's concern was probably justified. There was, furthermore, a universal condemnation of "scorching"—fast riding or racing. It was the activities of the "scorchers" who rode their cycles "as if their very existence depended upon their most rapid gait," that filled the more staid citizenry with indignation and lent public support to the passage of the by-laws regulating the speed and behaviour of cyclists on city streets. But, as the *Free Press* noted, the cycling clubs repudiated inconsiderate behaviour:

It is the green wheelmen who delight in scorching. The excitement attending the acquisition of a wheel is too much for them and their feelings can find outlet only through their legs, where they seem to carry most of their brains. It was a wise wheelman who said "May the scorcher continue to scorch even after death."<sup>27</sup>

Scorching received universal condemnation, not only because of the dangers it posed to the life and limb of pedestrians, but also because the ungainly 'scorcher' attitude was held to be the principal cause of *Kyphosis Bicyclistarum*, manifested by

rounded shoulders, a permanently humped spine, collapsed chests and even elongated arms!<sup>28</sup>

The cycling craze generated an outpouring of advice on topics such as how to ride correctly, how to select a cycle, how to plan cycling trips and what to wear when cycling. Winnipeg's determination to be second to none in adopting the new fad was displayed by the rapid appearance of Eastern American and European fashions in its stores. But even the boosterist *Town Topics* was clearly amazed at the rapidity with which effete Eastern fashions appeared on the backs of the Western male:

A few years ago every really self respecting Canuck regarded knickers in much the same light as he regards the single eye-glass. They were the peculiar badge of the English dude—don'tcher-know. Now as many men in Winnipeg wear knickers, as the elongated articles [trousers].<sup>29</sup>

*Town Topics* worried that the ladies would take to wearing bloomers as was the growing fashion in England, so that Winnipeg women would come to "wear the men's shirts, his ties, even literally as well as metaphorically, some of them, his breeches."<sup>30</sup> The concern was groundless, for the women of Winnipeg remained content to occupy men's breeches in the metaphorical sense only — bloomers never flourished in Winnipeg or elsewhere in Canada.

The cycle certainly had a major impact upon travelling habits and patterns of recreation in Winnipeg. Through cycling, thousands of Winnipeggers achieved an undreamed of mobility, and access to the major parks such as Assiniboine and Kildonan Park, then on the city outskirts, was greatly facilitated. As the popularity of cycling increased, bicycle races drew large crowds at the Exhibition Grounds, where, in 1898, \$1000 in prizes was offered for a two-day meeting.<sup>31</sup>

The greatest impact upon Winnipeg's recreational patterns was wrought by the network of bicycle paths initiated by the Winnipeg Bicycle Club. Even before cycling caught the popular imagination, members of the Club who were dissatisfied with the sorry state of Winnipeg's streets, which made cycling a hazardous occupation, began to build paths of crushed ash and cinders to give them a roadway which was smooth, scenic, and without the hazards of horse-drawn traffic. In the early 1890s only a few streets in Winnipeg's downtown were paved, mostly with cedar blocks. Many suburban streets were not even graded and were little more than rutted muddy tracks.<sup>32</sup> The Canadian Wheelman's Association lobbied City Council to assist in the construction of a cycle path along Portage Avenue "from the end of the [cedar] block pavement to the city limits" by building all the required culverts and crossings at street intersections.<sup>33</sup> Efforts to maintain bicycle paths were often frustrated by people wrecking the surface by driving horses, carts, even cattle along them, breaking and rutting the carefully rolled surface. As *Town Topics* pointed out, any person who wilfully damaged a public roadway would be prosecuted to the full extent of the law and it seemed unjust that the paths of the cyclists received no protection.<sup>34</sup> The

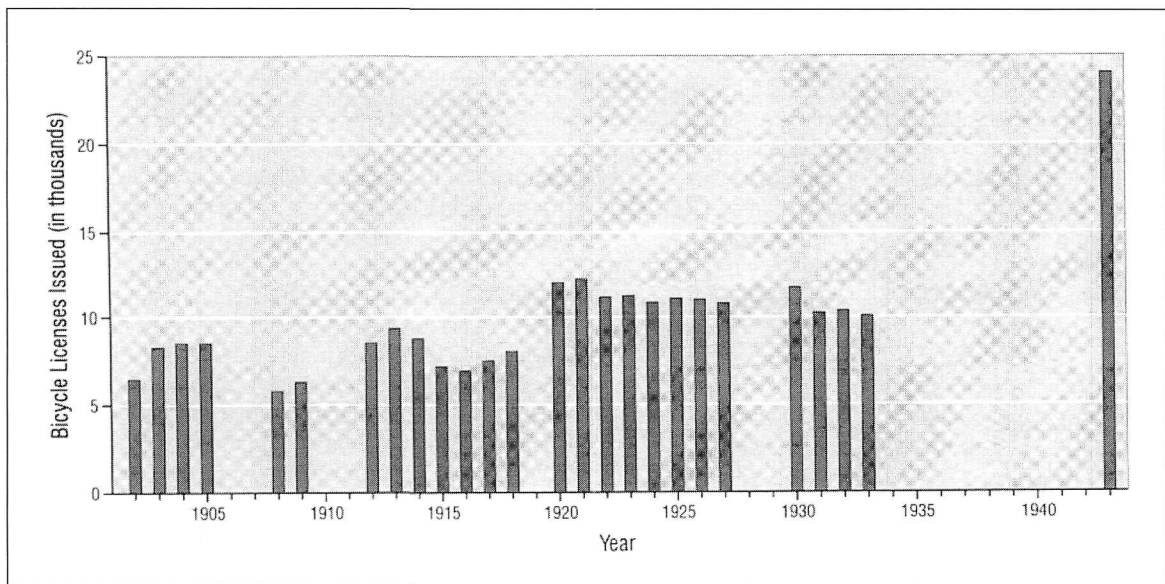
## The Two-Wheeled Workhorse

Portage Avenue bicycle path was eventually protected by the 1897 By-law,<sup>35</sup> but the extensive network of paths developed under the private initiatives of the Bicycle Club remained vulnerable for a further two years until the passage of "A By-law for the protection of Bicycle Paths" which extended legal coverage to all cycle paths in the city.<sup>36</sup>

As the numbers of cyclists grew, and cycling was adopted by those either unable or unwilling to contribute towards the private construction of cycle paths, it became clear that the cycling fraternity needed wider assistance. The city aided the efforts of the Bicycle Club in 1899 when it set aside parts of Portage Avenue for "the purposes of a Bicycle Path"<sup>37</sup> but it is unclear as to whether the city was merely legally recognizing an existing path or whether it was intent upon extending the path on to newly reserved land. The cyclists' cause received a further boost in 1901 when assent was given to an act of the Provincial Legislature which gave the city authority to create a Bicycle Paths Board with a mandate to establish and maintain a system of cycle paths both within and beyond the city limits.<sup>38</sup> This special act, reputedly the first of its kind in North America, also empowered the board to raise the capital necessary for the execution of its mandate through a levy of 50 cents on each bicycle ridden in Winnipeg.<sup>39</sup> No longer was cycling the pastime of the avant garde or eccentric, for the numbers of bicycles registered in Winnipeg rose from 6,500 in 1902, to 8,357 in 1903, and 8,541 in 1904 (Figure 1). In 1905 8,536 licenses were issued and the numbers of *licenced* bicycles stabilized.<sup>40</sup>

By 1903, with the aid of the licencing fees, the Bicycle Paths Board was administering some twelve miles of bicycle paths linking the downtown area with Elm Park and Silver Heights, then two of the city's major recreation attractions (Figure 2). Great pride was taken in the excellent paths which the Board maintained. Portage Avenue's double paths were justifiably popular and the Parks Board claimed that "its excellent trails ... cannot be excelled anywhere for wheeling."<sup>41</sup> Paths were kept carefully rolled and were well patronized by the hordes of enthusiasts 'wheeling' round the city. Since the entire revenue generated through the sale of Bicycle Paths Licenses was devoted to the upgrading and extension of the paths, the system improved yearly; five miles of new path were added in 1904 alone. By using a combination of cycle paths and the less-travelled but well-maintained highways, Winnipeg cyclists pedalled the popular route northwards to Lower Fort Garry, south to Elm Park and "westward from the heart of the city into the beautiful rolling prairie. ... for a distance of twelve or fifteen miles to Sturgeon Creek and St. Charles." (Figures 3 and 4)<sup>42</sup>

Even after Winnipeg's cyclists had secured their bicycle paths all was not smooth going. In 1906, at the Cycle Path Board annual meeting the chairman complained that the "Portage Avenue [bicycle] path was cut up [for] almost a mile ... and buried for the greater part of the summer in sewer excavations," while a path along Logan Avenue "was covered with a new sidewalk a few weeks after [it] was finished." Most of the other paths were "rendered almost useless by excavations and obstructions."<sup>43</sup> This was a reflection of the rapid expansion of the city and its programme of paving, improving and boulevarding the



**Figure 1. Bicycles licensed in Winnipeg 1902–43. (Compiled from Monthly and Annual reports of the Bicycle Department, Committee of Health, Public Health and Welfare 1908-43, WCA. Gaps in the record indicate missing data).**

## The Two-Wheeled Workhorse



Figure 2. Women cyclists in Winnipeg's Elm Park, ca 1908. (Western Canada Pictorial Index)

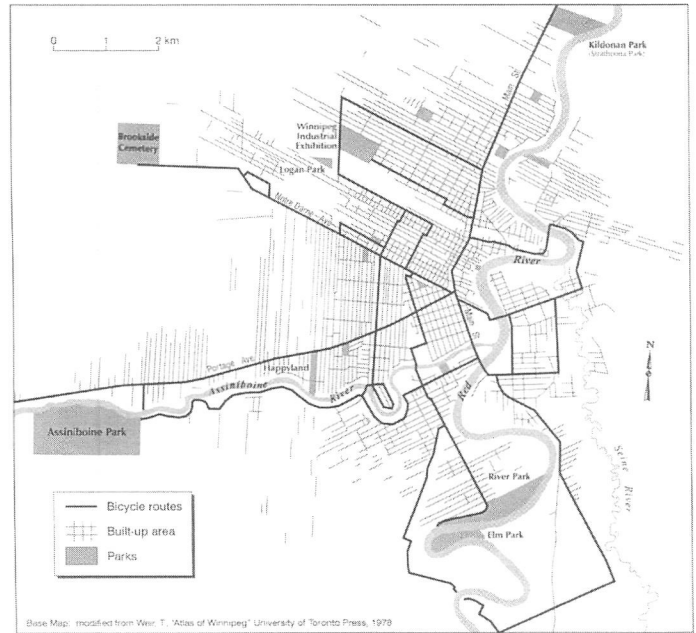


Figure 3. Winnipeg's bicycle path system c. 1905 (Compiled from Winnipeg Public Parks Board, Summer Outings 'Round Winnipeg, 1906).



Figure 4. The Portage Avenue Bicycle Path at Deer Lodge. c 1905 (WCPI)

## *The Two-Wheeled Workhorse*

outlying streets where the cycle paths were mostly found. From 1895 onwards the city had engaged in a determined programme of grading and Macadamizing streets.<sup>44</sup> Cedar block pavements in the downtown were replaced with new asphalt surfaces by 1899 and by 1902 most streets in the downtown were paved and construction crews were extending the pavement of streets into the emerging suburbs within the city limits (Figure 5). By December 1906 the Cycle Paths Board felt that the extension of paved streets had removed the need for the Board and tendered its resignation as a body.<sup>45</sup>

As bicycles became increasingly popular, bicycle thefts became a major problem throughout the city. Some owners complained of having three or four bicycles stolen within two years. Community discontent led in 1907 to the circulation of a petition requesting that a "competent detective" be appointed to work exclusively on bicycle thefts. To fund this, and to assist in the recognition of bicycles, the petition suggested that a tag be issued as was done in former years and "that all wheels be compelled to wear one."<sup>46</sup> Signed by 782 cyclists, including 46 CPR Telegraph workers whose work delivering telegrams presumably rendered them vulnerable to bicycle thieves, the petition convinced City Council to implement the recommendation,

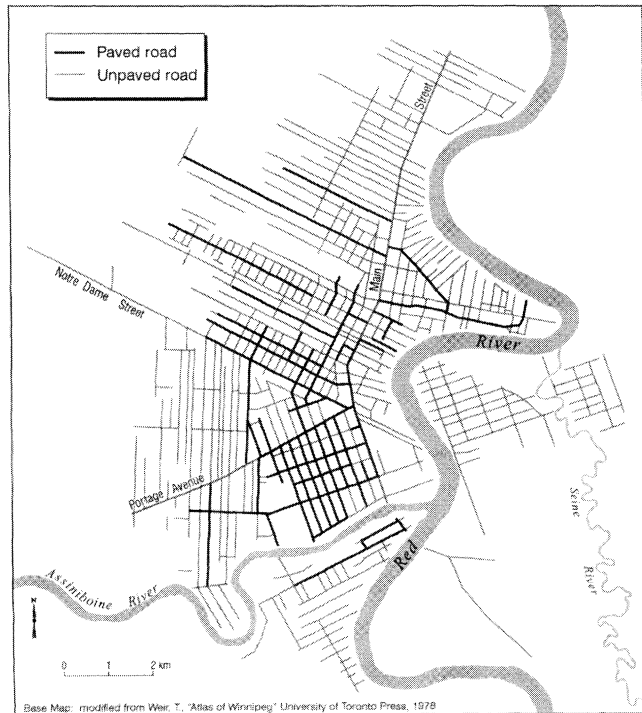
to appoint a Bicycle Inspector, and require that all bicycles ridden within city limits carry a bicycle tag purchased from the city for 50 cents.<sup>47</sup> Thereafter, annual bicycle theft rates fluctuated between seven and 15 per cent of all licensed machines, but recovery rates of lost and stolen bicycles increased to around 80 per cent and the detective was successful in obtaining convictions of scores of bicycle thieves.<sup>48</sup>

The bicycle quickly became prized as a practical mode of transportation by a variety of government agencies, commercial enterprises and commuters. The number of licensed bicycles on Winnipeg streets rose from 5280 in 1908 to 9429 in 1913. After a decline during the war years, numbers increased to over twelve thousand in 1920 and 1921 but remained stable at around eleven thousand through the twenties and early thirties (Figure 1). By 1943 the number had doubled.<sup>49</sup> Licensing data do not indicate whether the cycle was used as a recreational or commuting vehicle, so it is difficult to assess the true importance of the bicycle in the journey to work. However, the C.C.M. [Canadian Cycle and Motor] company directed its advertising at the suburban commuter:

"I'm through supper before the fellows who walk or take the street car are half way home," laughs the man who rides a C.C.M. ... C.C.M Bicycles take thousands of men to work every day and bring them home again at night. Many of them get home for a hot dinner at noon as well. These are the men who have energy left at the end of the day. They get more joy out of life.<sup>50</sup>

Residents of suburban St James commuted to work in Winnipeg on their bicycles and complained about having to purchase a City of Winnipeg Bicycle license in order to ride within the city limits, whereas Winnipeg cyclists could ride out to St. James "and use the streets at no charge."<sup>51</sup> The City sold 234 bicycle licenses to commuter residents of St. James in 1924 and over twice that number to St. Boniface cyclists in the early 1930s, suggesting widespread employment of the bicycle in getting to work.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, to working class men the bicycle appears to have been almost essential. To Misha Korol the bicycle was "absolutely indispensable" for commuting to work during the summer months.<sup>53</sup> In Winnipeg's working class North End bicycles were not bought for recreation but for work (Figure 6).<sup>54</sup> James Grey in his autobiographical memoir recalls the bicycle being used by construction workers to commute to their work sites at the St. Boniface stockyards.<sup>55</sup> The CPR telegraph service in Winnipeg, as elsewhere in Canada, employed messengers on bicycles for telegram deliveries year-round.<sup>56</sup> Railway companies also relied heavily on bicycle messengers, known as "call boys," to summon train crews to work when required.<sup>57</sup> Bicycles, modified to be able to travel along the rails, were used in lieu of the more conventional hand-pumped track carts by some railway employees in their work (Figure 7). Small businesses within the city had light goods delivered by bicycle. Barney Kohm recalled working as a teenage bicycle delivery boy for



**Figure 5. The extent of paved Streets in Winnipeg 1902. (Compiled from Reports of the Committee on Works, Minutes of Council 1887–1902 WCPI)**

## *The Two-Wheeled Workhorse*



**Figure 6.** *Manitoba Government Telephone System workteam with their cycles c. 1910. (WCPI)*



**Figure 7.** *Bicycle modified to run on railway track. Winnipeg, c 1910. (WCPI).*

Saphron's Drug Store and, during the Christmas season, for Oretsky's Department Store, helping out their full-time bicycle delivery boy.<sup>58</sup>

It has been claimed by Rush and Babiain that the rigours of the Canadian climate restricted the use of the bicycle to the summer months thereby minimizing the cycle's use as a commuter and work vehicle.<sup>59</sup> While it is true that the principal use of the bicycle was as a summertime recreational plaything, the evidence from Winnipeg is that it was used year round in its other capacities. Between 1908 and 1934 bicycle license sales peaked in the early summer but continued throughout the year, an indication of the bicycle's year-round use. The limiting factor for bicycle use in Winnipeg was not so much the extreme cold of winter but the heavy going through deep wet snow and muddy conditions. In fact, the extreme cold temperatures and hard-packed snow conditions generally experienced on Winnipeg streets in winter provide better traction than the more moderate and wetter weather conditions prevalent in other parts of Canada. Winnipeg's flat terrain undoubtedly encouraged more widespread adoption of the bicycle as a working vehicle in both winter and summer. Even today, as Babiain reports, in Manitoba a greater proportion of commuters use the bicycle to get to work than in any other province.<sup>60</sup>



## *The Two-Wheeled Workhorse*

The bicycle also challenged the role of the horse in police and military duties. Winnipeg's police supervisors used the bicycle to check on patrolmen on their beats (Figure 8). However, the bicycle had to defer to the horse on parade when the thirty members of the mounted militia felt it beneath their dignity to have to follow behind the police sergeant leading the troop on his bicycle.<sup>61</sup> Before leaving for service in France, Winnipeg's Fort Garry Horse used bicycles in lieu of rented horses in training exercises (Figure 9).<sup>62</sup> However, bicycles carried on the strength of the Fort Garry Horse were not modified to carry arms in combat as were some in other armies but were used mostly for communication behind the lines.<sup>63</sup>

Within little more than ten years the bicycle's status changed from curious novelty to that of an accepted and well-established component of the social and business scene of Winnipeg (Figure 10). It subsequently became so much a part of the workaday scene that its presence was scarcely deemed worthy of comment, yet the growth of Winnipeg's working class suburbs in advance of the public transportation system strongly suggests that the bicycle was the only available form of conveyance for the majority of those who moved there.<sup>64</sup> In 1921 about 50,000 people lived in Winnipeg's suburban communities, not all of which were well served by public transportation.<sup>65</sup> It is clear

that a proportion of these commuters relied on their bicycles for their journey to work, some, perhaps, on a year round basis.

The bicycle's utility most definitely outlasted the "gay nineties" bicycle craze. It opened new vistas for thousands of Winnipeggers; it placed the parks and amusement grounds within reach of all those with the means and health to cycle (Figures 2 and 3); and it helped to give the women of Winnipeg a new found freedom from the rigid constraints of impractical clothing.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the bicycle gave them a hitherto undreamed-of mobility. Changes in attitudes, often subtle and always difficult to measure, are nonetheless crucial in determining the course of social change. In this respect the bicycle in Winnipeg, as elsewhere, was a part of a widespread social revolution changing the status and role of women in society and a portent of the more radical changes forged during the economic turmoil of the First World War.<sup>67</sup>

It has been claimed that the bicycle craze literally paved the way for the automobile by popularizing the cause of well-paved roads and highways.<sup>68</sup> Presumably this claim could be made on behalf of Winnipeg's cyclists too, since the locally influential *Town Topics* editorialized on the role that the cycle was playing in educating Winnipeggers about the value of good roads.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, there is no direct evidence that the massive programme of street paving undertaken in the city in the late 1890s



**Figure 8.** *Winnipeg police supervisors used bicycles to monitor their patrolmen. (WCPI).*

*The Two-Wheeled Workhorse*



*Figure 9. Fort Garry Horse Bicycle Troop, c. 1915. (WCPI)*



*Figure 10: Before the automobile became a common sight bicycles were the common vehicle of choice parked along Winnipeg's downtown streets. (WCPI)*

## The Two-Wheeled Workhorse

and the early years of the twentieth century was connected in any way to the enthusiasm for cycling. It is equally probable that the Macadamizing of streets was spawned by the boosterist mentality prevalent in Winnipeg at the time.<sup>70</sup>

In Winnipeg, as elsewhere, the bicycle was an important transitional transportation mode between the railway and the automobile. It gave the working class unprecedented personal mobility, and in freeing them from the rigidity of the fixed-route radial streetcar system extended the commuter range for the working population. As such, the bicycle contributed to the expansion of Winnipeg's suburbs. Far from being a mere plaything for the amusement of the elite, the bicycle became the unsung workhorse of Winnipeg's small businesses and the working class population.

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### Notes and References

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3. Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 55.
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5. Richard Harmond, "Progress and Flight: An Interpretation of the American Cycle Craze of the 1890s," *Journal of Social History* 5 (1972): 237.
6. *Manitoba Free Press*, 19 March 1882 and 5 June 1891.
7. Anita Rush, "The Bicycle Boom of the 1890s: A Reassessment," *Material History Bulletin* 18 (Fall 1983): 2–3.
8. *Town Talk* 1, 22 March 1890, 12.
9. *Programme: Championship Bicycle and Foot Races* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Bicycle Club and Rover Bicycle Club, 9 September 1893); T. Eaton Company, *Spring and Summer Catalogue*, 1893, p. 103; and *Eaton's Christmas Catalogue*, 1894, p. 98.
10. D. McIntosh, Roadmaster CPR, Prince Albert, to W.F. McCreary, Commissioner of Immigration, Winnipeg, 25 July 1898. National Archives of Canada, R.G. 76. Vol. 178, File 60868, pt. 1. By 1897 labourers working on City of Winnipeg contracts were receiving 17½ cents an hour and an upper level city official — the Clerk of the Health and Leisure Department — received \$75.00 a month. Minutes of Council 1897–98, City of Winnipeg, 20 December 1897, Winnipeg City Archives (hereafter WCA).
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12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
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16. James Townsend, "The Social Side of Bicycling," *Scribner's Magazine* 16 (June 1895): 704–708.
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## *The Two-Wheeled Workhorse*

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