
HEAR UR
SEASON 5: Cycle Paths: A Biking History of Rochester
EPISODE 1: Free Wheeling Women

By Sarah Knight, Grace Stensland and Grace Timerman

SUSAN B ANTHONY
"Let me tell you what I think of
bicycling..."

MUSIC BED: Pizzicato cello.

SARAH KNIGHT
These are the words of Susan B.
Anthony, speaking with the
ground-breaking journalist Nellie
Bly in 1896.

SUSAN B ANTHONY
"I think bicycling has done more
to emancipate women than any one
thing in the world. I rejoice
everytime I see a woman ride by on
a wheel..."

SFX: Old bicycle being ridden by.

SARAH KNIGHT
The city of Rochester, New York is
the city of women's suffrage. From
Susan B. Anthony to Elizabeth Cady
Stanton, the women's rights
movement made its
nineteenth-century home in this
city. Less well known, however,
is the degree to which the women's
rights movement began not on two
feet, but instead on two wheels.

SFX: Bicycle bell.

I am Sarah Knight.

GRACE TIMERMAN
And I'm Grace Timerman. You're
listening to HearUR, Season 5,
Cycle-Paths: A Biking History of

Rochester. This is Episode 1 --
"Free Wheeling Women."

MUSIC BED FADES OUT.

GRACE TIMERMAN

The evolving relationship between women and cycling is one that tells of a changing landscape in every avenue: from fashion and liberation, to an entirely new way to exist within the public sphere, both equally and independently of men.

SARAH KNIGHT

Although the bicycle was invented in 1817 in Germany, the history of the modern bicycle really picks up speed in the 1890s with the newfound popularity of the "safety bicycle."

GRACE TIMERMAN

When we first said the word "bicycle" you probably imagined a modern construction of the bike with two equal sized wheels and a straight crossbar. If so, your mental image isn't too far off from how the safety bicycle was constructed, even way back in the 1890s; that is... if men were the ones riding. In the late 19th century, bicycles were gendered in their construction, a quality still sometimes found today. For a woman's bicycle, imagine instead a curved, low hanging crossbar to accommodate dresses and skirts.

SARAH KNIGHT

Initially, cycling was an activity restricted to an elite upper class, and white women were permitted to ride in private cycling clubs, on tandem bicycles with their husbands, or on his

property. But following the first industrial revolution, working class women adopted bicycles as a method of transportation to their not-so-shiny new jobs in factories.

SFX: Whirr of machinery, particularly sewing machines. Wisp of smoke. The room is not just warm, but sweltering. The sound of women chatting and the bustling bodies consume us.

GRACE TIMERMAN

We spoke with Dr. Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, a Professor at Case Western University who wrote the book "Dressed for Freedom: The Fashionable Politics of American Feminism." And Deborah Hughes, the president and CEO of the National Susan B Anthony Museum and House. They described the bicycle craze in the 1890s as such:

EINAV RABINOVITCH-FOX

So first of all, right- It's something new and it's also technological... But by the time that the safety bicycle is being introduced, it really is becoming kind of like the horse of the people.

DEBORAH HUGHES

And for a long time, the only way you could get around was with a horse. But even in a buggy- where women were often riding- You had to have somebody who would put the traces on the horse and get the buggy ready to go so women were dependent on men if they just wanted to go anywhere. You have to have your buggy, you have to have your horse. Not with a bicycle. You just get it out of the barn or

pull it out of the garage and go.
I mean- that's such a huge radical
change, and it also meant women
are moving fast, so you're less
vulnerable.

EINAV RABINOVITCH-FOX

This is why bicycle was kind of
like very appealing to women, and
also, right, it enabled them
mobility that other sports did
not. Like you didn't have to have
permission, you can just hop on
your bike and drive somewhere.

SUSAN B ANTHONY

"[The bicycle] gives woman a
feeling of freedom and
self-reliance. It makes her feel
as if she were independent."

Grace T

And Bloomers?

SUSAN B ANTHONY

"Are the proper thing for
wheeling."

MUSIC: *THE BLOOMER WALTZ*, PIANO.

SARAH

The music you just heard is a
piece composed by William Dressler
in 1851 entitled "The Bloomer
Waltz."

GRACE TIMERMAN

With many women incorporating
cycling into their daily lives,
women discovered an opportunity to
adapt their lifestyle - especially
in their style of dress. This
adaptation came about famously in
the form of bloomers, a pair of
loose pantaloons worn underneath a

knee-length skirt, paired with a jacket.

SUSAN B ANTHONY

"It is as I have said - dress to suit the occasion."

MUSIC: Curious pizzicato strings.

SARAH KNIGHT

But even though bloomers saw a resurgence thanks to the bicycle, many women were ultimately forced to set them aside. The bloomer costume was touted as a symbol of radical women who wanted to get rid of gender norms altogether, and who, if successful, would cause the downfall of society.

EINAV RABINOVITCH-FOX

The bloomers themselves didn't end up to be as popular as feminists wanted. Feminists, or women's right's advocate, who really saw the bloomer as a form of political statement hoped that with the rising popularity of the bicycle they could also make bloomers popular themselves, right? Or more mainstream. The bloomers were very practical dress. The problem with a bloomer is that because they looked like pants, they were very much associated with masculinity. And that was a problem.

DEBORAH HUGHES

...Yeah, well there was also a big fear about gender in the 19th century. If you look there's one of the directories from the city of Rochester, and there's one year where it's a \$1,000 fine if you cross-dress, if you're a person who is seen wearing the clothing

of another gender. So when do bloomers become pants?

EINAV RABINOVITCH-FOX

And also because riding a bicycle was a public activity, it's oftentimes a courting activity. So, you know, women didn't want to look ugly or, you know, or what was conceived to be ugly or masculine when they're on a date with someone riding a bicycle.

SFX: Out in the countryside, there are cicadas, a soft wind, grasses brushing against each other. A man and woman share a loving chuckle as they stroll along the sidepath.

EINAV RABINOVITCH-FOX

And so this emphasis on femininity really shaped kind of like bicycle fashion.

SARAH KNIGHT

With the changing times of the late 19th century came the idea of the "New Woman" whose image was often intertwined with the bicycle.

EINAV RABINOVITCH-FOX

"And the ideal of the New Woman is kind of like a younger, more mobile, athletic, woman than kind of like this ideal of this, you know, very fragile seated, not mobile type of woman who just kind of like sits at home and wait for her husband to come. This is not the new woman, right? The new woman is going out, playing sports, doing all those things,

and partly, also, right, like
fighting for her own political
rights."

SUSAN B ANTHONY

"Once men were afraid of women
with ideas and a desire to vote.
Today our best suffragists are
sought in marriage by the best
class of men."

EINAV RABINOVITCH-FOX

So the new woman is kind of like
an umbrella term to this new
phenomenon of young women who are
sent, you know- out to the world,
to do their own thing.

GRACE TIMERMAN

"What do you think the New Woman
will be?" asks Nellie Bly.

MUSIC CUTS.

SUSAN B ANTHONY

(laughs) "She'll be free."

MUSIC: Light, mobile pizzicato strings.

SARAH KNIGHT

So who are these Wheeling women of
Rochester? We have Francis E
Willard, a temperance activist and
author who, when taking up
cycling, was freed from the
limitations of long skirts, high
heels and the confines of
womanhood at age 53. She was even
so taken by the bike she wrote an
entire book *A Wheel Within A
Wheel: How I Learned To Ride The
Bicycle.*

She describes the experience as "I
began to feel myself plus the

bicycle equaled myself plus the world..."

"Indeed, I found a whole philosophy of life in the wooing and the winning of my bicycle."

GRACE TIMERMAN

The bike also transformed the lives of apolitical women in Rochester. May Bragdon's diaries are those of an exceptionally ordinary woman whose life was radically changed by the bike and the ability to commute throughout the city of Rochester.

SARAH KNIGHT

Andrea Reithmayr previously worked for the University of Rochester's Rare Books and Special Collections, and was responsible for the Bragdon Family papers. According to her, May Bragdon,

ANDREA REIGHTHMAYR

—definitely represents a single, working woman in Rochester and in similar cities. I never saw anywhere, you know, in the later years, um— where she remarks on votes for women. In 1896 though, on election day— of course women couldn't vote yet— her boss, it was a very beautiful day outside, and he actually says to her— and she quotes this— "You can't vote, Miss Bragdon, but you can ride the bike and you better do so today."

SARAH KNIGHT

In the 2016 article written by Bob Marcotte entitled, "May Bragdon Diaries offer online window into Rochester's Past". Reitmayer

explains "[May Bragdon]'s in this transitional period where it's new and somewhat daring for a woman to be out riding alone, or in the company of men to whom she is not related by blood or marriage [...] In the diaries, you can see how May and her friends are constantly negotiating change - pushing their personal envelopes toward new experiences."
(Reithmayr).

MUSIC FADE OUT.

GRACE TIMERMAN

Where women go, the sexualization of innocuous actions follows, and bike riding was no exception to this phenomenon.

SARAH KNIGHT

We also talked with Christine Ridarsky, the city historian for the City of Rochester, and the Director of Historical Services for the Rochester Public Library.

CHRISTINE RIDARSKY

So we know even today that women are sexualized in very unique ways, and women are then judged for their sexual activities. So it was a very similar case in the 19th century that men were being very judgemental about women riding bicycles, you know, afraid it was going to affect their reproductive abilities, afraid it was going to give them sexual pleasure and make them promiscuous. But at the same time men were very intrigued by that idea of these sexualized women. So

there came to be these characterizations of women riding bicycles, being sexually promiscuous.

SARAH KNIGHT

These characterizations are described in *Two Wheels Good: The History and Mystery of the Bicycle* within an aptly named chapter entitled, "Put Some Fun Between Your Legs". It features characterizations such as: "On those rustic roads, in those open spaces, the constraints of society no longer pertain; cyclists can taste true freedom and surrender to their wildest desires."

CHRISTINE RIDARSKY

...and that intrigued many men in the same lewd sorts of ways that women are sexualized today. Men and even many women were critical of women who chose to ride bicycles. You know, there were doctors who would argue that it could affect women's reproductive system. Um, there were people, you know, particularly in religious circles who were afraid that women were gonna experience orgasms from the bumpiness of riding a bike, and you know, they felt that it was sexually unacceptable for women to be participating in those types of activities. So, there was a lot of criticism because of course- as we see in the way Susan B. Anthony was treated- there was a lot of concern at that time period that women were going to become too manly, and that if that happened, they would leave their

place in the home, they would not follow through on their child-rearing duties, that they would try to take men's jobs, and all of those sorts of things. So anything that people saw as putting women in a masculine place was criticized.

MUSIC BED. Heart-warming pizzacato strings.

GRACE TIMERMAN

We can talk about how far women have come, how impressive the strides made in society are, but we would be remiss to wrap up this episode saying that the story of women on bikes doesn't echo a far larger, and perhaps even more frustrating conflict.

SARAH KNIGHT

Since the late 19th century, Women have carved out a role in society that is about more than being quiet, docile, and out of sight, attributed in part to riding the bicycle. But the ability to wheel was not available for all women.

EINAV RABINOVITCH-FOX

Bicycles ranged between kind of like 100 and \$200, which were a lot more back then. They were around kind of like \$800 in today's dollars. For a middle class woman, that's something that she could definitely afford.

GRACE TIMERMAN

As much as the women of Rochester pushed the envelope, the ability to ride bicycles was not universal. Just as the introduction of the bicycle

highlighted how women were not permitted to exist freely in public space, so too did the bicycle reinforce class and racial disparities.

As you'll hear about in future episodes, the bicycle is more than a form of transportation; but rather, a means of moving away from confining social norms, and reimagining a future for Flower City, its people, and especially its women.

SUE B ACTRESS

"And away she goes, the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood."

GRACE STENSLAND

HearUR is a podcast created by students at The University of Rochester.

This episode was produced by Sarah Knight. Our lead researcher was Grace Timerman. Our engineer was Grace Stensland.

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And finally, be sure to check out the other episodes of HearUR Season 5: Cycle Paths at HearUR.com

THE END.