

Cycle Sense

Our Own Rides

“The bicycle is its own best argument. You just get a bike, try it, start going with the thing and using it as it suits you. It’ll grow and it gets better and better and better”. Richard Ballantine, Cycling advocate, journalist and writer.

I asked a number of bicycle riding friends to describe different types of cycling they have done over the years and include any special moments or recollections. Responses ranged from a memorable charity ride to a lifetime of precious family memories. Many of the contributors have biked since childhood and still ride regularly. There are endless ways bikes and bicycling can be part of your and your family’s lives. I hope these stories inspire you to try something new and different on your bicycle.

Steve described his Titanic moments. “When my wife was working in Boston, she would take the Salem ferry. I would ride my bike to Chandler Hovey Park and stand on a rock and wave to her as the ferry passed by. She would be in the bow waving an orange paper so I could recognize her. It made our day. I have made a lot of friends riding to coffee shops and chatting up people. At 75, I find it a great health benefit and look forward to riding every day.”

On trips to visit family and friends, Bill and Linda often schedule an extra day or two for bicycling on local rail trails or country roads. “We enjoy recreational biking on a safe path through parts of the country we have not seen before. There are many rail trails all over the country.” They also describe a bicycling vacation to the Loire River valley in France. An outfitter made all arrangements with a custom itinerary including local events and eateries and other opportunities to meet the locals. But unlike most tours; the two biked by themselves from town to town at their own pace, past scenic farmland, historic castles and villages. In their words, “It was terrific”. Contrast that tour with a single track, mountain bike excursion on the high plateau of Saguaro National Park in Tucson, AZ. Carol recalls, “The scenery was just spectacular, but from the moment we started, the ride required every bit of my concentration. Staying in the track was hard enough, straying out of it could mean a brush-up with the cactus that dotted both sides of the trail! I felt so good having completed the ride but when we got back to our inn, I just passed out from exhaustion.”

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All of us have been asked to contribute to a walking or bicycling fundraiser for any number of worthy causes. Many of us have participated in them. Few have had the experience Rob describes. “Kelly and I rode a tandem bike for a 100-mile, Best Buddies charity ride. My goals were to spend time with my 15-year old daughter and raise money for a good cause. What better way to do that than to practice on the tandem and enjoy a nice Spring day riding to the Cape. Ride day greeted us with snow and hail; we agreed it was still a go. About 18 miles in, I heard, ‘Dad, my feet are really cold and wet’. At the first rest stop, we wrapped her feet in plastic bags over her socks and got back on the bike. Before the second stop, I heard, ‘My feet are very cold’, but she kept pedaling and we made it to the rest stop where we found an ambulance to sit in and warm up. We talked about the weather, how we were feeling and if we should end our ride. I asked the EMT about dry socks. He suggested looking in the back; to my surprise, it was filled with other riders who had given up. When Kelly heard this, she perked up and said, let’s do this. We were back on the bike and made it to the third stop where dry clothes and shoes were waiting. When we reached the finish, the rain had stopped; we were one of the few that completed the ride. It was a challenging day; one we will never forget and one of the highlights of this Dad’s life.”

Sometimes I hear the refrain; I wish I had more time for cycling. Jonathan’s story is such a good example of how choices we make allow us to do more of what we want to. He explains, “I worked at GE Aviation in Lynn. For 35 years I commuted by bicycle from Beverly, pretty much year-round and in all kinds of weather. Over the years I took many overseas business trips and usually took my folding travel bike along to use either for commuting or after-hours recreation and sightseeing.” His destinations included China, Poland, England, Sweden, and France. In Mexico (see photo) he recalls, “Over many visits, my bicycle commute in the cool morning air took me down quiet streets in the city of Queretaro as I admired its beautiful Spanish architecture. In the evenings I went on mountain bike rides with the younger engineers, riding on a borrowed bike with a headlamp, hearing dogs barking as we sped past farms closed up for the night.” Jonathan sums it up, saying, “Bicycling is such a wonderful way to see and feel a place. It allows for an ease of interaction with people along with time to see all that is around you!”

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Jonathan (third from right) riding after work with co-workers in Queretaro Mexico

Many of the contributors have bicycled for years. Rides that may seem routine today were not necessarily so back in the day. Devon recalls, “All my life, biking has been a means of transportation. When I was young, biking was a fun and speedy way to get to all the places a kid needs to. Appreciating the utility of bicycling extended into adulthood. Biking all the way from Arlington VA to Mount Vernon seemed like an absurdly long distance to me, but not to my husband so off we went! And I lived to tell the tale. In 2008 I was commuting to Rowley via bike and commuter rail along with several others. As a small group we naturally gravitated toward one another. We were not much appreciated on the train; bikes took up too much space and other passengers tripped on handlebars and pedals protruding into the aisle. The Conductors rarely offered their help. We sat together and had such a nice time that a non-biking commuter joined us, attracted by our conversation and joviality. Others couldn’t imagine, we all looked forward to our commute!” (As a post-script, the commuter rail has been increasingly accommodating to bicycles.).

Another life-long bicyclist, Mimi, grew up in the Detroit area. She describes, “It is flat as a pancake and I rode my 3-speed Raleigh everywhere. It was the way all of us kids got around until we got our drivers licenses. After getting married and moving to Marblehead, I bought another 3-speed and commuted to work on Washington St. I rode that bike for many years until it became just too much effort to get to the places I needed to. Then, I started hearing about electric bikes and one day I spotted one in Salem. Right then, I decided I needed to get one and see if it was right for me. I am on my second e-bike now. Both my husband and I find it 100% fun to run errands and get to tennis dates. It takes the effort out of getting up

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Marblehead's hills and allows you to arrive at your destination without needing a shower. I hope to see more retired bikers on them."



Mimi, on her e-bike, enjoying a late summer ride on a quiet street in town

Living in New England, good bicycling infrastructure is not as common as in other areas. Minnesota has thousands of miles of paved and unpaved trails. Minneapolis boasts an award-winning park system including a continuous 51-mile loop of off-street bicycle trails throughout the entire city. Jane enthusiastically comments, "Yes, the trails here are amazing. There are the city trails that go around the lakes but also the Greenway which is a commuter trail in Minneapolis that I used to ride to work. It has entrances and exits like a highway. We also have limestone trails that go nearly 100 miles. From the local trail near the end of our driveway, I can join the Dakota Trail; it's 26 miles one way, paved and quite beautiful. Or, I can connect with the 73-mile Luce Line." It must be so nice to have those kinds of traffic-free choices.

Elaine fondly remembers her first bicycle being part of learning an early life lesson. "I wanted to learn to ride a bike so I could go places by myself that were further than my feet could take me. My first adventure was to my grandmother's house, several blocks away and across a busy street. When I arrived, she called my mom and asked, 'Do you know where your daughter is?' 'Yes, she's playing in the yard', was the reply. I quickly learned the meaning of being grounded with no bicycle for a week. Fast forward to being the parent of 10-year old George. We peered into his bedroom one Friday night expecting to see him sound asleep.

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Instead, we saw him crawling back into his ground floor window. ‘What were you doing and thinking?’ ‘Just riding my bike into town to see my friend Justin’ was his reply. History and life lessons repeat from one generation to another. Biking became a family gathering time. When the children were old enough, we planned a trip to Martha’s Vineyard. We drove to the ferry, then, with bags strapped on the bikes and carrying our backpacks, we walked on the ferry and then biked to a friend’s home on the Island. This first bike trip taught us we could go to new places, travel light and inexpensively, and still have a great time. The years have flown by; my sons have their own little girls. It is a joy watching them teach their own children to ride their bikes with their pink helmets. They are off on their own camping trips now, cars loaded with bikes. Traveling by bicycle continues the conversation about nourishing our outdoor environment for generations to come. My sons have explored the world on their bikes and now are joined by their wives and children. And I still love feeling the ocean breeze flowing on my face while riding my own bike.”

I hope you have enjoyed these stories; I could not have said it any better.

This is the ninth in a series of articles about bicycling and bicycle safety. The author is affiliated with Sustainable Marblehead (www.sustainablemarblehead.org), BIKE Marblehead, MASS Bike (www.massbike.org), and is a League of American Bicyclists (LAB) Certified Instructor (www.bikeleague.org). Source material from LAB appears in this article.

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