

THE MACHINE

THAT SET

WOMEN FREE

by David Lamb

The bicycle seems an unlikely symbol of women's liberation, but in 1894, when Annie Londonderry, carrying only a pearl-handled revolver and a change of underwear and leaving behind her husband Max and three small children, set off from Boston to cycle alone around the world, it was precisely that — as bold a statement of feminist independence as burning a bra would be in the 1960s.

The young American, whose real name was Annie Cohen Kopchovsky, rode a 42-pound Columbia bicycle and wore the cumbersome multi-layered skirts, bow tie, and tailored jacket of the Victorian era. At stake was \$10,000, the prize two sugar merchants had offered if she left home penniless, circled the globe as Thomas Stevens had a decade before, and returned with \$5,000 of earned money. She was not allowed to accept gratuities while trying to accomplish what no woman had ever done.

Londonderry sold her autograph, photographs, and candy to make money. She picked up a \$3,500 endorsement from a tire company, making her, at age 23, probably the first female athlete to get corporate sponsorship. Her name soon became a household word, and large crowds greeted her as she pedaled across Europe and Asia, two small American flags attached to her handlebars. "Miss Londonderry is in the process of proving to the whole world ... that women are able to summon up courage and energy that very few men would be able to match," wrote the *Saigon Courier* as she left Vietnam.

If Londonderry is to be believed, she was attacked by highwaymen in France, fell through the ice of a frozen river in Russia, was shot in the shoulder on the front lines of the Sino-Japanese war, and thrown into a Japanese prison on her 10-month adventure that included hopping on trains and boats. She returned to the U.S. in February 1895, having exchanged the billowing skirts

and petticoats of the Victorian woman for the tight-fitting pants favored by male cyclists. She collected her winnings and became a national hero, a trailblazer in the battle of the sexes — just as Billie Jean King would in her tennis victory over Bobby Riggs in 1973.

America was caught up in a bicycling craze in the 1880s and 1890s. Excursion trains carried thousands of cyclists into the countryside from New York City for weekend rides. Male cycling clubs with uniformed riders proliferated in eastern cities. "Everyone who wants to be anybody has learned to ride," observed one newspaper. One-third of patent applications submitted to the U.S. Patent Office were related to bicycles. In 1897, more than 3,000 firms, including the Wright Cycle Company in Dayton, Ohio, owned by Orville and Wilbur Wright, were in the bicycle business. Cycling was so popular that attendance in theaters and churches dropped.

But there was a catch in the early days of the cycling boom. Like society itself, cycling was dominated by men. Women who dared ride a bicycle were often subjected to ridicule and abuse by pedestrians and horsemen or hampered by municipal laws forbidding their participation in what was arguably the country's most popular sport. It took them 30 years to convince a puritanical nation that women and bicycles were not an immoral mix.

By the time Annie Londonderry circled the globe, the bicycle had already been instrumental in changing the way women dressed. Skirts had become shorter, and the tight-fitting medieval corsets that created hourglass figures and gripped the waist with iron fingers had given way to bloomers — short, full pants fastened at the knee and similar to the knickerbockers worn by men. To see any part of a woman's leg in public in those days — an era when women cyclists sewed weights into their hems so their skirts wouldn't blow up — was an eye-popping experience. Many were aghast. "The skirt is lifting with every wind more or less, and attracting curious eyes," warned the *League of American Wheelmen*.

In Chicago the police department threatened to treat women in bloomers as prostitutes. The mayor of

Chattanooga proposed an ordinance to keep women in bloomers off the streets because they were a menace "... to the peace and good morals of the male residents of this city." Many Americans believed no woman of refinement should even consider riding a bicycle, much less pedaling off unescorted to be tempted by a dalliance on some country road. Some non-reformists said bicycles would destroy "... feminine symmetry and poise," affecting female muscles and thus making childbirth more difficult. Others worried that woman would be sexually stimulated by straddling a bicycle saddle. 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 offered an explanation:

"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 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."

Still, women persevered, and their movement for equality — at the voting booth, in divorce courts, and on the bike paths — grew stronger. Women started forming their own cycling clubs. Albert Pope, one of America's leading bicycle manufacturers, began using bloomer-clad women in his advertisements. In Chicago a female cyclist cold-cocked a man who taunted her at an anti-bloomer protest. The Victorian lady was becoming part of history. A "new" woman — self-confident, freed from



Was Annie Londonderry a fraud? While she received much attention and was a symbol of women's liberation, it's now accepted that she did not ride around the world and many of her claims turned out to be false.

domesticity and isolation — was born, and she was riding a bicycle.

"Let me tell you what I think of bicycling," said Susan B. Anthony, a prominent leader of the women's-suffrage movement. "I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. It gives women a feeling of freedom and self-reliance. I stand and rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a wheel ... the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood."

Speaking of the increasing number of women "awheel," the popular *Munsey* magazine editorialized in 1896: "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 19th century has brought her."

Technology made that gift possible.

Gone by then was the "ordinary" or penny-farthing bicycle with a front wheel four feet high, a rear wheel no higher than a basketball, and solid rubber tires. It had been replaced by the "safety" bicycle, essentially the bike we know today. It had pneumatic tires with an inner tube and canvas shell, equal-sized wheels, and was propelled by a chain. In 1889, Starley Brothers began mass producing the first women's safety bike, a model inexplicably called Psycho Ladies Bicycle, with a dropped top-tube to accommodate skirt-clad riders.

More than two million bicycles were sold in the U.S. in 1897, and every major manufacturer offered at least one model designed for women. The more popular cycling became, particularly among the upper middle class, the less stigma women encountered. "It will be a delight to girls that the fact of their sex is, in itself, not a bar to riding a wheel," said Frances E. Willard, president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, who

learned to ride at the age of 53. By the end of the 19th century, women were riding to work and pedaling unescorted on excursions in the countryside.

Hardly anyone blinked an eye. Besides, declared Ann Strong in the *Minneapolis Tribune* in 1895, bicycles are "... just as good company as most husbands." And when a bicycle gets shabby and old, women can "dispose of it and get a new one without shocking the entire community." **AD**

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