

---

---

# A Lot of Good It Would Do

---

## THE GOOD ROADS MOVEMENT PAVED THE WAY FOR THE SYSTEM OF TRAVEL WE'VE COME TO KNOW

---

by Eric Butterman

When many of us think of biking today, it's a sport and a passion, but nearing the end of the 19th century it was very different — a revolution. As the horse was just starting to find competition from the automobile, for many the bicycle was a way of getting out to the country, to areas they never considered visiting. Part of the problem was the lack of roads on which to pedal in the first place. The Good Roads Movement began as a means to pave roads, to give an option to those who wanted two wheels to lead them to where they wanted to go. Few people are alive today who remember this period. One person who is alive is a famous bicyclist in his own area — 90-year-old Wisconsinite Ed Braun, who logged more than 1,000 miles last year.

"By the time of the Depression, you could get on your bike and go many places," he recalled. "I remember as a kid biking to my friend's place in Lake Geneva, maybe 40 miles

away. You just went down the highway as cars passed. You felt you could do it safely." Unfortunately, we don't always feel that way today.

But where did this movement really begin so that a young Braun could reap its benefits in the first place? The man he might have to thank is Albert Pope, a Civil War captain. Helping to create the League of American Wheelmen, he was a manufacturer of bicycles and later automobiles through his Pope Manufacturing Company.

As legend has it, he saw his first bicycle at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and proceeded to buy up patents to the point that he received \$10 for practically every bike sold in the U.S. No one could question that his self-interest was involved but with the amount he invested in trying to get roads funded — tens of thousands of dollars, no small amount at the time — you also couldn't question that a deep part of his motivation was to benefit society. "Say





**Synchronized Cycling.** *Symmetry aside, the road these cyclists were about to ride on was best suited to horse travel.*

Pope today and few people will understand his impact or even know the name," says Eric Jaffe, author of *The King's Best Highway*, about the Boston Post Road route. "But he was a visionary who clearly saw a need this country had. People weren't leaving the cities, they weren't venturing out in the way they wanted to. This changed all that." But then he weighs Pope's vision against his business practices, which offered him a strong advantage. Says Jaffe, "He had a great marketing sense and was a capitalist at heart, but that doesn't mean he was a bad person. He bought all patents in the community, yes, and some would say he was denying fair competition. But you could also say it was good foresight. He wasn't using money to go across the globe in lavish manners. Instead, he spent it on civic-minded efforts. If you want to know what he was about, take a huge fire that damaged part of one of his buildings. The first thing he cared about was not the product merchandise but whether some of his Civil War memorabilia from his soldier days had been lost forever."

As published in his address, *The Movement for Better Roads*, Pope made a

prediction which documented his belief in the struggle: "It now remains largely with the representative men of the country whether or not the matter shall be agitated so as to give the people a clear and full understanding of this most momentous subject. When the importance of it

---

**With the Good Roads  
Movement clearly having  
affected the U.S. for the  
better, we wonder when  
the next great bicycle  
movement will come.**

---

is once realized, I venture to predict that it will become one of the leading issues of the time, far transcending in practical importance the tariff, silver coinage, or Republican or Democratic rule."

Living up to the subjects mentioned wasn't an easy task, but there's no question Pope was on the ball in seeing bicycling as more than a fad or just a pressing matter of the moment.

#### **The Wheelmen Unite**

It was the League of American Wheelmen who got together in Rhode Island to become a national group to protect rights of cyclists that ended up making the difference (Pope, again, was crucial to its birth). "It started with making sure carriage drivers weren't able to whip us off the road with impunity," said Andy Clarke, president of the League of American Bicyclists. "They were fighting for a place in the system. They had influence and power with more than 100,000 members back when the population was only a small portion of what it is now. They built all sorts of infrastructure, and when roads were opened they became events unto themselves. The Wheelmen were passionate and self-righteous. If you were a cyclist and not a member, they felt you were in the wrong. It was a philosophy as much as a group of people with a similar interest."

One of the major oppositions to getting good roads in various states was, in fact, sometimes rural residents themselves. According to a 1966 issue of the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, "The major cause for Wisconsin's poor road conditions was the fact that the framers of the state constitution had inserted a clause that prohibited state appropriations or loans for transportation and internal improvement projects. All responsibility for financing and maintaining roads had been delegated to local governments, which in turn was contracted to local residents through the supply of labor and materials in lieu of tax payments. Bound to the tradition of building and caring for their own roads, rural residents were reluctant to give up their accustomed highway-improvement practices in favor of a system that required payment of road taxes in money. Acceptance of the state-aid-to-roads principle, therefore, came slowly because of rural opposition and the widespread belief that the railroads would continue to provide the bulk of the state's transportation needs."

But, according to the Wisconsin Historical Society, the Wheelmen in this state — 2,300 members strong in 1897 — helped lead the charge to changing roads. They held cycling events to talk about

weaker roads, and they organized related speeches.

The movement slowly gained steam, state by state. Soon people found their way out into the country on their bicycles and used them as a means of companionship and health, instead of focusing solely on the vehicles commercial prospects — which may, in fact, be the reason the bicycle community doesn't always get credit. They weren't after recognition, like other groups whose self-promotion helped many

organizations into the history books.

### The Car Wasn't Quick Enough

Many say there's controversy, though, insisting that the automobile industry was the true starter of the Good Roads Movement. Clarke said that you only have to look at a timeline and rhetoric to prove this wrong. "The movement began before the Ford Model T even rolled off the assembly line," Clarke assessed. "Even then, it took a while to get its footing. This was

## Good Roads Movement Results

- City roads led to the country, causing these areas to be utilized and enjoyed more. This occurred despite opposition from residents of rural areas.
- Part of the impetus of our modern transportation grid was to allow automobiles to travel the length of the U.S. through the highway system. This influence may have helped lead to the controversy questioning who started the Good Roads Movement.
- There was a real, albeit temporary, respect for bicyclists as a powerful group and visionaries for the good of society. Albert Pope, a bicycle and later car manufacturer, led the way by appealing to society's moral obligations to expand.

*Williston, North Dakota*

Take a **Legendary Drive**

Visit [www.visitwilliston.com](http://www.visitwilliston.com)  
for hotel and campground information.

**Williston CVB**  
convention & visitors bureau  
North Dakota

1-800-615-9041

a movement of bicyclists for the common good. We owe the interstate highway system to the car industry, but not this."

Jaffe concurs. "The Federal Highway Administration at that time started on the roads in February of 1893, and we don't get the modern gas engine until September of 1893," Jaffe says. "You can't have more proof than that. It's also documented that Pope had to focus the quarrels in Congress, dealing with the back-and-forth nature of lobbying. Their first offering of \$10,000 couldn't even build three miles of road so it was a slow improvement."

Another way you can tell the Good Roads Movement didn't start with the car is through the roads themselves, according to Jaffe. "Many roads from this time weren't built with the automotive industry in mind at all," Jaffe said. "While a bike would have no problem going over these paths, you'd see dust come up when the cars would speed through. What people didn't realize until later was that the dust wasn't from the tires — it was the road itself being torn up. The kind of weight we're talking about was just too much to handle for the long haul." In fact, in *The Movement For Better Roads*, Pope stated an automotive solution for

just that problem, "Your legislature should enact a law, compelling the use of broad tires, from three to six inches in width, on all wagons built to carry heavy loads. These broad tires would serve as rollers to compact the road instead of cutting it up and destroying it, as is now the case with narrow tires," he said.

### More Movements Needed

With the Good Roads Movement clearly having affected the U.S. for the better, we wonder when the next great bicycle movement will come. Many agree that bicyclists have lost much of the road to automobiles, strange when you consider that the two-wheeler may have made so much possible for four-wheel vehicles. It hasn't stopped organizations like the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition. You'll find them putting together events through their Good Roads campaign, spotting streets eligible for repaving and potholes to report on their monthly Good Roads Ride.

Nevertheless, an occasional passionate group is not quite the same as a national movement that changed the country. You would think that bicyclists, with their history of road expansion, would be able to

occupy a piece of those lanes that drivers enjoy. Clarke believes that the bicycle can't use the first movement to help the present one, however you'd define it. "There's no question that we started this thing," he said, "but no one is going to give us back the road because of that argument. The Good Roads Movement came about for the good of society, not for the cyclist. We need to concentrate on how the bicycle helps the environment, improves social relations, and keeps people healthy. It's great to remember the past, but you have to live in the present if you're going to move forward."

It works for Braun, who has only discovered the power of the bicycle recently. "When I was a kid, I was proud I was able to own a bike," he said. "Now it allows me to be with friends, to stay in shape — I never would have thought as a kid in the Depression that I'd be on a bicycle as much as I am now." Pope, on the other hand, might have had a different prediction. **AC**

*Eric Butterman is a writer based in North Texas who has contributed to Men's Journal and the Sporting News. You can reach him at ericbutterman@yahoo.com.*

# Randonneur® Rack by Arkel

Strong, Light, Stable,  
On and off in seconds

**TRIPLE POINT ATTACHMENT**

- Quick releases to seat rails
- Secures gently to seatpost

**ARKEL**  
WWW.PANNIERS.COM