

THE HARD WAY

An Un-American Activity

What gets the equivalent of 1,000 miles per gallon, doesn't pollute, will save the world, and transports you in breezy style? Your bike.

By Mark Jenkins

When I was 13 my family left the high plains of Wyoming and moved to a small town in northern Holland. We went from living in a land so dry that tumbleweeds bounced down the street to a country so wet that canals had been carved through the neighborhoods to drain the rainwater. In Wyoming the dominant color was brown, nothing but snow fell from the sky, and the sun was indomitable. In Holland the dominant color was green, water poured ceaselessly from heaven, and the sun hid atop a mattress of clouds. With fewer than five people per square mile, Wyoming was one of the least populated places on the planet. Holland had 900 people packed into every square mile.

My parents looked upon this year abroad as shock therapy for the soul. My brothers and sisters and I were six white-flour kids from middle America. We left a tract home on the edge of the prairie for a brick duplex, with a thatch roof and a tulip garden, on a cobblestone street. Mom put us directly into Dutch schools. None of us spoke a word of Dutch. The Vietnam War had made Americans unpopular in Europe. We learned how to argue in Dutch in three months, were fluent in six. We learned about Rembrandt and van Gogh, how to play chess and do multilingual crossword puzzles. And we learned how to bicycle.

Not physically, of course—we all knew how to ride—but philosophically. We'd left a cowboy culture in which most people drove pickup trucks and we resurfaced in a land of bicycles.

Everybody rode bikes. The factory workers, the cops, the carpenters, the plumbers, they all wheeled to work, tools protruding from voluminous canvas panniers. The mailman delivered mail by bicycle. The shop owners bicycled to their shops in the rain, umbrellas up, and the farmers bicycled to their fields in yellow slickers and wooden shoes. Our town, Haren, was seven miles from the city of Groningen. Every morning people on our street commuted into Groningen by bicycle. The accountants, the attorneys, the bankers, they all pedaled to work, their black briefcases strapped to their black bikes. Teachers biked to school, and so did the kids.

My brother Steve and I went to a junior high whose bike rack extended the length of the school building and was always chock-full. In Laramie only a couple dozen kids—out of a thousand—rode bikes to school. At our school in Holland kids biked in from all over. One of our best friends was a 13-year-old boy named Jan Bart Busquat, the finest athlete in school. The quickest soccer player, the fastest runner, the strongest cyclist; his thighs were already so well developed that in tight pants he looked like he was wearing jodhpurs. Jan Bart Busquat was a farm boy who lived 12 miles from school. He'd been biking the



Mark Jenkins

Dutch armada: the liberating force of two wheels

24-mile round-trip since he was seven years old.

We lived in Holland for one year and then returned to Wyoming, existentially altered. For all the trauma of leaving, re-entry was even more difficult. We suddenly saw our hometown with a foreigner's eyes. Why were the streets so wide? Why were the cars so big? Why were all these people driving such big cars such short distances? We couldn't believe how many kids were being chauffeured to school by their parents. What with warming up the car and stopping at all the stop signs, it took more time to drive than it did to bike. (It took us seven minutes to ride the mile and a half to our school.) Besides, in a car you missed out on all the puddles and the smell of fall and the taste of snow.

A few years later, Steve and I bought a car for \$100, a faded blue Comet date-mobile, but apart from girls we continued to bike everywhere. Which made us very uncool in a Wyoming high school where every boy was saving his bucks for a pickup. Some kids even saw cycling as un-American. Which it is. Americans drive.

Americans drive nearly two and a half trillion miles a year—the equivalent of five million round trips to the moon. Every day the average adult American drives almost 40 miles and spends an hour in the car. The average American household makes 2,321 trips by car every year.

"Forty percent of these trips are made within two miles of our homes," says Jody Newman, the executive director of the Washington D.C.-based League of American Bicyclists, an advocacy organization founded in 1880. "What's more, over half of the working population lives within five miles of their workplace. The problem is not so much physical, but psychological. Americans believe bicycling is the hard way."

But this wasn't always the case. "At the turn of the century, cycling was the rage across America," Newman says. "Everybody bicycled. To work, to the store, as a form of recreation." In 1893 cyclists successfully petitioned Congress for the first \$10,000 grant to study the possibility of a paved highway system. As Newman points out, "Cyclists actually started the push for paved roads."

Bicycling was also a tool for social change. "I think [the bicycle] has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world," feminist pioneer Susan B. Anthony said in 1896. "It gives a woman a feeling of freedom and self-reliance. The moment she takes her seat she knows she can't get into harm unless she gets off her bicycle, and away she goes, the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood."

The engineering invented to create the bicycle—lightweight metal tubing, ball bearings, drive-chains—spawned the automobile and aircraft industries. That may have been the beginning of the end. By the middle of this century, the bicycle had been largely abandoned as a graceful form of transportation and had become a toy for children.

Having learned in Holland that things could be different, I bicycled all through college. It was cheap—free, really. On a bicycle you are immersed in the landscape instead of passing it by. On a bicycle the world touches you instead of touching the glass. A bike blows open your senses just like a drug (but with no side effects). I had a car in college, too, an old Volkswagen bug. How else to go climbing, skiing, backpacking? But the bicycle was still my means of city transport, and sometimes more. One summer my sister Pam and I wound up in Boston after having cycled across the country. We were homeless and penniless, but we had our bikes. A friend at Wellesley let us crash at her place, and Pam and I commuted by bike to jobs in downtown Boston until we had enough money to get back home.

Today my city bike is a ten-year-old Trek mountain bike hybridized for street travel: slicks instead of knobby tires, sissy bars, fenders, a rear rack with big red panniers, plus two bike trailers, either of which can cart anything from groceries to lumber. I'm fortunate to live in a relatively small community where 90 percent of my in-town travel can be done on my bike. Which is not to say that it always is. But if the

round-trip distance is five miles or less, even in a town with limited congestion, it's often faster to bicycle. Not to mention more fun. So for runs to the post office, grocery store, gym, my kids' grade school, Kinko's—I ride.

But let's be honest. we live in a car culture. Except for a few lucky places where public transport is efficient and convenient, it is difficult to live a full life in America without using a car. The automobile is here to stay. Prohibition didn't work for drinking and it would never work for driving. It's driving too much, just like drinking too much, that is the real issue.

There are more than 200 million cars in America. Cars and light trucks blow 16 percent of total U.S. carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere—emissions that may exacerbate global warming. Automobile exhaust contributes to air pollution that degrades the health of tens of thousands of citizens; traffic accidents kill 40,000 Americans a year. Beyond the human costs, there's money. A hundred billion in taxes a year for highway maintenance and construction. Another hundred billion in tax dollars spent on the military budget defending the Middle East, source of 25 percent of our oil. And beyond the hidden costs of paved highways and parking lots and environmental problems, car ownership costs an average of \$6,500 a year.

Don't get the wrong idea. Automobiles and their manufacturers are not evil. I own a car and drive it for longer trips, to get into the mountains, to travel cross-country. But I believe there should be a better balance between driving and bicycling. The bicycle will not replace the minivan for family vacations or the pickup for hauling firewood or the SUV for weekend road trips. On the other hand, the bicycle should be seen as an inspired means of transportation for short urban trips and should be the preferred method for commuting to work.

The bicycle is one of the most efficient machines ever devised. Converting calories to gasoline, a bicycle gets 1,000 miles to the gallon. If American workers biked to the job only two days a week, it would completely eliminate our dependence on Middle East oil. Twelve bicycles fit into the parking space needed for one car. In Holland, a country one-third the size of the state of New York, there are 10,000 miles of bike paths; in New York State, 250. In America, 1.67 percent of our citizens commute by bicycle. In Groningen, 50 percent commute by bicycle.

Why did all my neighbors in Holland ride their bikes? Why do they still do it? Not because the country is flat—it is, but it's also as windy as Wyoming. Not because the weather is good—it's not, it's rainy and cold. And not because the Dutch are poor—Holland is a prosperous country with the world's second-lowest poverty rate. The Dutch bicycle because the Dutch government built bicycle paths and bike lanes. Beginning after the Second World War, for every guilder that was spent on highways, a few pfennigs went to building bikeways. Between 1975 and 1985 alone, the Dutch government spent \$230 million on bike paths and bike parking.

But if America, a country unashamedly in love with the automobile, invested more in bicycle facilities, would people really begin to bike?

In 1990 the New York City Department of Transportation conducted a survey in which office workers were asked whether they would bike to work if bike lanes, indoor bike parking, and shower facilities were provided. Of those living zero to five miles from work, 45 percent said they would ride. Of those living five to ten miles from work, 54 percent said they would bicycle. Of those living more than ten miles from work—a 20-mile round-trip commute—one in five still said they would ride their bikes. Even if half those people were lying, this study shows that many more Americans would bike if given bicycle-friendly conditions.

(I can hear the cynics saying it will never happen. But before antitobacco legislation, 54 percent of Americans smoked; today it's half that. And the National Parks Act, the Wilderness Act, the Endangered

Species Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Clean Water Act show that enlightened federal policy can dramatically shape values and behavior.)

So why isn't our government investing in bicycling? Actually, it is. And much of it is because of one man, a Democratic Congressman from Minnesota named James Oberstar.

"In Washington, there are workhorses and there are show horses," says Jim Berard, Democratic communications director for the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. "Oberstar is a workhorse. He's not here to get headlines; he's here to get work done." Son of an iron miner, Oberstar went to Haiti to teach English before there was a Peace Corps. When he returned, he worked in Washington as a staffer for 12 years before winning his seat in the House in 1974. But it wasn't politics that made Oberstar a leading bicycle advocate.

"As a kid I bicycled all the time, but I left bicycling for many years," says the 61-year-old Congressman. "Then, in 1984, my wife got breast cancer. She had chemotherapy, radiation, everything. The doctor suggested bicycling as a way for her to regain her strength."

Oberstar, a stocky, muscular man, and his wife, Jo, started bicycling together. Several years later, however, the cancer came back. Jo Oberstar passed away in July 1991.

"I was drained and exhausted," Oberstar recalls. "I didn't know what I was going to do with myself, so I went for a bike ride. You see, cycling had become a way of life for me. It's how I regained my energy, my strength, my focus."

That bike ride may have changed the course of history. At the time, Oberstar was a member of the Public Works and Transportation Committee. "After World War II, the federal government started the interstate highway system," says Oberstar. "Forty-five years, 42,000 miles, and \$129 billion later, the project was completed. It's ironic. Bicyclists had started the push for paved roads, and in the end, they'd been pushed right off of them. It was time to re-envision transportation in America, and that's what our committee was up to."

In part as a tribute to his wife, Oberstar began to push hard for pro-cycling legislation. In late 1991, President Bush signed into law a new federal transportation program called the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA, pronounced "ice tea"), which, among its many non-asphalt provisions, stipulated not only that bicycles must be considered in all transportation plans, but that bike paths must be funded. "Because of the enhancement provisions for bicycling in this bill," Oberstar says, "we spent \$734 million dollars on bicycle paths in America in six years." In 1995, Oberstar became the ranking Democrat on the Transportation Committee—"a position of real power," says *The Almanac of American Politics*, "even in a Republican Congress." In 1998, ISTEA was updated and refunded under the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). Again, Oberstar pressed for and won federal funding for bicycle paths. "There is three to four billion available for bicycling in the next six years," he continues. "It's there; communities just have to come together—bicycle manufacturers, bicycle retailers, city planners, cyclists, everybody—and make a plan and ask for it. Bicycles can become a permanent part of the American transportation culture. The challenge is to make bicycling a serious means of commuting for as many people as possible."

Bicyclists and bicycle coalitions across the country are attempting to do just that. To go back to the future, back to the bicycle.

"We have just won TEA-21 funding to build a 2.5-mile bike path along the river in central LA," says Ron Milam, executive director of the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition. "Another 1.8-mile section is on the drawing board. Within two years, people will be able to ride into downtown Los Angeles on bike paths." This in a city that is the urban paradigm for the ills of the car culture. Milam says that his organization's dream is to create a bicycle transportation corridor along the entire 51-mile length of the Los Angeles

River. "It only makes sense. People should be bicycling to the video store, bicycling to the park, bicycling to a friend's house."

Philadelphia received \$11.7 million from ISTEA and 300 miles of bike lanes were planned. Relentless pressure by the Bicycle Coalition of the Delaware Valley managed to get only 100 of those miles on the ground. "You can never go to sleep and let the city take care of it—they won't," says Sue McNamara, director of the Coalition. "It takes bicycle advocates to make it happen. There's a ton of money out there for bicycling, but you need visionary people to lead. You not only have to get your city to go after the money, but you have to stay on their ass to get the bike facilities actually built."

To reintroduce the bicycle as a legitimate means of transportation, McNamara led the Coalition in getting \$424,000 to fund the nation's largest school bicycle education program. "We are creating a whole curriculum that teaches bicycle education," says McNamara. The Coalition will also be installing new bicycle racks at every high school and middle school in Philadelphia. "We talk about how kids don't bike to school anymore, but they need bike racks for their bicycles. Even more important, they need to know that bicycling can change the world."

Idealistic? I think it's realistic. I've been back to Holland a half-dozen times since I lived there as a boy, and the bike racks are still full. The Dutch all own cars; they just don't drive them as much as we do.

Now that we're on the brink of another century and a highly touted new millennium, doomsday preachers, political pundits, and magazine columnists are all laying out monumental New Year's resolutions for mankind. Not me. I say all you have to do is ride your bike.

Just try it. Some frosty morning, wheel to work. Like you did as a child, take the quiet path, the scenic route. Pedal the back roads, slip through the neighborhoods. Suck in the sharp air. Smell the trees. Feel the breeze against your face and the blood in your legs and imagine an America teeming with bicycles.

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