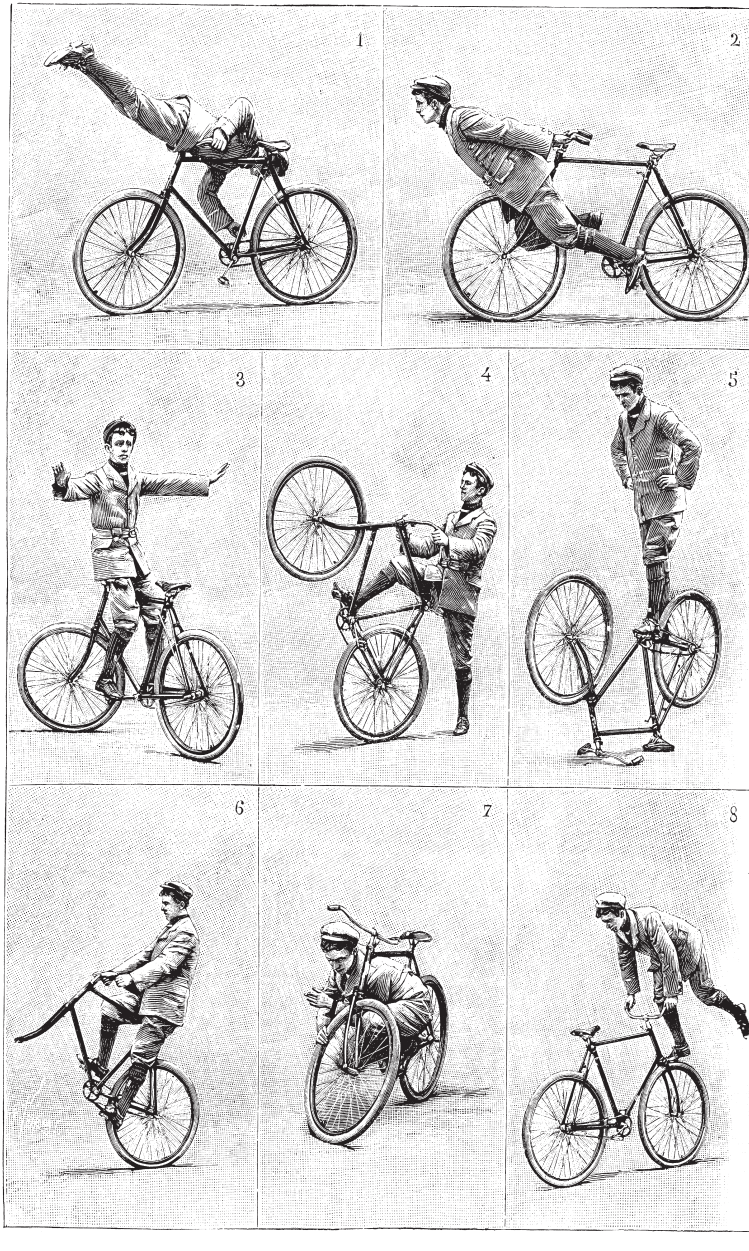
BICYCLE CULTURE RISING #4

How Kittie Knox Made Bicycling for Everyone

JOE BIEL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Let me tell you about my hero.

Kittie Knox is *the* reason that bicycling is more than just another leisure sport for the wealthy. As a Black teenager, she created the world that she wanted to see from the seat of her bike. Today, you can see the results of Kittie's success in the hundreds of cities around the globe where a bicycle is used to have a happier commute, as a social galvanizer among disparate individuals, as a political leveraging tool, or for tall bike jousting.

Much has been written of the bicycle as the great liberator of wealthy women from restrictive clothing. But as you will see here, it was working class women like Kittie who changed the paradigm and made the bicycle into an actual liberator of women. While the upper classes clung to long, awkward skirts and tried to prevent women from embracing social bicycling at all, Kittie was out there showing them how it was done; what the future would hold.

Ideas of feminism have evolved in tremendous ways over the past 130 years since Kittie's day and Knox's version essentially won history—not for accepting the norms of her time but for rejecting them in favor of her own view of the world. Naturally, this made for an unpleasant and bumpy journey as she offended each and every stalwart. But that's what is involved in political change—not everyone is going to like it.

Kittie Knox was born in 1874 near the African American community in Cambridgeport, a suburb of Boston. Her mother was white, from rural Maine, while her father was Black, relocated from Philadelphia to become a tailor and cleaner. Her father was a lifelong activist. In 1850,, as the country braced for its first race war, he petitioned Massachusetts for the right of Black men to join the state militia.

Kittie's neighborhood was a cultural melting pot of poor Blacks, Irish workers, recent immigrants, poor whites, and absentee landlords. Next door to her childhood home, a Black barber shared a property with a Russian-Jewish cobbler, adjacent to an Irish bar and liquor store. Throughout the next decade, southern Italian and eastern European Jewish people began to displace the formerly affluent residents of Boston's South End, creating greater cultural acceptance for disenfranchised people through the city.

Boston held a long legacy of abolitionist thinking, particularly in Kittie's neighborhood. The Civil War had ended a decade before Kittie's birth and middle class lifestyles suddenly felt attainable for Black families. When police began raiding and hassling transient bars for liquor violations in Kittie's neighborhood, it was Black leaders, including Kittie's father, who held a protest. The Black leaders demanded more police protection from the white people's "disorder." Let's think about that for a minute. It's hard to imagine Cambridgeport of the 1880s where Black leaders felt like the police were in service to their communities rather than existing as a threat.

In the 1890s, white families worked upwardly mobile—though unskilled—factory jobs. Black families were not offered this luxury. Black workers typically were porters, waiters, and servants. Kittie's brother was a steamfitter, a skilled profession. Her parents separated when she was very young and her father died when she was only seven years old. Teenaged Kittie became a dressmaker and seamstress.

In 1893, the U.S. was hit by an one of the worst economic depressions in its history and suffered high unemployment. Conditions were poor ever prior to that. In Kittie's neighborhood, the average working person earned $500 per year (less than $14,000 in today's dollars). In today's dollars, skilled female garment workers like Kittie earned only about $112 per week.

THE BICYCLE BOOM

In 1860 the Bicycle Boom began in France on penny farthings—bikes with a large front wheel and tiny rear one. In 1876 Alfred Chandler branded himself as the U.S.'s first cyclist. Bicycling was a highly adventurous and dangerous sport. The pedals were mounted directly to the wheel and brakes had not yet been invented so the rider's muscles had to be stronger than the machine's propulsion. Then the rider had to jump off to stop. Of course, one rock or an uneven road was sufficient to send the rider flying—particularly since the bikes were able to reach tremendous top speeds under the legs of a competent pilot.

In 1890, when the "bicycle boom" hit full steam, many cycling clubs rapidly sprung up all over Boston, where cycling was most popular. These cycling clubs would travel to nearby towns for riding competitions, social fun, politicking, and advocacy. Each club's membership was adorned with a signature hat and they had mascots and floats, like parades for modern sports teams. During the off season,

a penny farthing or "high wheeler"

the members bowled, played billiards and baseball, and danced together.

In 1893, a new bike would cost about $2,500 in today's dollars or twenty weeks of Kittie's salary. Somehow she managed to scrape the money together and purchase one, as well as the leisure time to ride it relentlessly. She joined the Riverside Cycle Club, Boston's Black club.

At a time before cars, cyclists would often go on long rides from their homes to the open suburbs and countryside and back through streets clogged with wagons, carts, horses, and trolleys. In 1893, Kittie made the news for the first time. The *Indianapolis Freeman,* 800 miles away, took note of Kittie's "graceful" competitive cycling at Martha's Vineyard. Kittie was still a teenager. She was on her way to stardom. Her homemade outfits resembling a twist on the classic garb of a teenage boy turned heads and when people saw her magnetic personality and stunning appearance, the public took more and more notice of her. She placed in the top 20% of every ride that she ever competed in, many of which were at least 100 miles long. She was a faster and more skilled rider than most men. More importantly, Kittie made cycling appear fun rather than a complicated social activity for the wealth with a lot of rules. As you might imagine, this upset the men—and moreso the women—who benefited from cycling remaining as an exclusive club sport for the wealthy.

Cycling was socially complicated. Even in Boston, cyclists had to negotiate their social hubs along the divisions of

gender, religion, ethnicity, and class. In a city full of recent immigrants, most Boston cyclists were upper middle class professionals. So for those in the working classes, cycling was a road map to social acceptance among the wealthy elite.

The League of American Wheelmen was created to unite all of the individual cycling clubs into one national organization for maximum advocacy weight. Early league members included the wealthiest people of the era, including oil magnate John D. Rockefeller. The League collected dues from members and issued cards to participate in their national events. The dues were used to finance a number of national campaigns that still continue today, like the right to use the road in the first place, the right to bring bicycles on transit, and the right to ride without harassment from law enforcement.

For the most part, the League was successful on only two campaigns: the right to ride at night and the right to ride on

Sundays. It's fairly amazing that, in most places, bicyclists are still having the same fights as they were 130 years ago. It might be time to re-evaluate the strategy but at least we can ride on Sundays now.

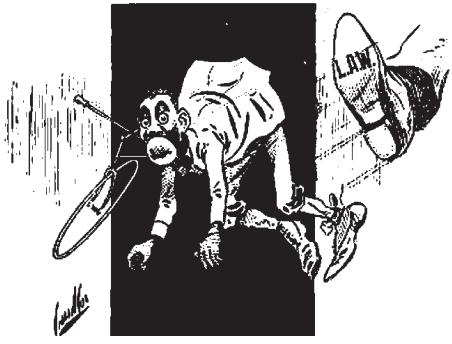
THE COLOR BAR

While the end of the Civil War was expected to heal the lingering pains of racism in the U.S., all was not going as planned. Civil War Reconstruction hit a new low in the late 1880s when Jim Crow laws were introduced to maintain institutional racism. The Federal Election Bill (FEB), drafted by a representative from Kittie's district, proposed that federal supervisors would ensure local elections were conducted fairly. The FEB's true purpose was to ensure that Black men would be allowed to vote in the south as the law now allowed. The FEB failed by a single vote. Seemingly in response, lynchings hit an all-time high in 1892.

In Boston, interracial marriage was socially acceptable, with poor white immigrants and Black laborers often marrying and having children. In 1877, 38% of Blacks in Boston married whites.

But while mixed race children like Kittie were common and accepted in Boston, the cycling community had a difficult time accepting people who were not white. The League of American Wheelmen had membership all over

the country. Starting in 1892, William Watts, an attorney and former Confederate colonel from Louisville, began lobbying for the League to exclude its few hundred Black members from the organization—one of whom was Kittie Knox. The first two votes failed to secure the necessary two-thirds majority to change the organization's bylaws but this only served to further ignite the powder keg. Matters of race were becoming so divisive that clubs disbanded when the second vote to remove Black riders failed. By 1894, the issue had hit a fever pitch and the 36,567 members voted to alter the constitution to say "none but white persons can become members of the League."



1893 newspaper cartoon of the League kicking out Black members

The next day, the Massachusetts state legislature introduced a resolution to denounce "the color bar," employing states' rights to overrule it within their own borders. The League of American Wheelmen had an office in Boston that also vocally opposed the national color bar and the Riverside Cycle Club protested the League's decision.

The League was a social organization for amateur cyclists, meaning only that members did not compete as

professional athletes. There were many affiliated cyclists without membership cards who tagged along to their events. The benefits and meaning of League membership were nebulous camaraderie at best.

Even though the color bar was written by a lawyer, Watts had made a crucial mistake of language. There was the sticky matter of Black cyclists like Kittie Knox who had joined the league before the color bar was passed. They were not excluded by the new rule, though the organization's view of them was clear.

Watts's primary argument in favor of the color bar was that it was the only way to grow League membership, as he claimed the presence of Black cyclists kept white members from joining. In reality the opposite was true: the League's membership dropped by about a third—more than ten thousand cyclists—during the year after the passing of the color bar.

A "MASCULINE" WOMAN

The invention of the modern "safety bicycle," in 1885 drew women to cycling in massive numbers. The new design with two equal-sized wheels resolved the dangers of the penny farthing, which was inclined to face plant cyclists onto the pavement. Prior to 1888, women tended to ride tricycles instead of penny farthings. Aside from the physical dangers and skills involved, the choice of three

wheels was also considered to be one of elegance and femininity. But women were quick to abandon three wheels. The safety bicycle invention made the tricycle so thoroughly obsolete that no one was even manufacturing them anymore by 1892. With the advent of mass production and the bicycle craze in full effect, the price of bicycles plummeted and virtually everyone could afford them for basic transportation. What was once a hobby of the well-to-do became a completely pedestrian activity.

Bicycling wasn't equally accessible to everyone, however. Women cyclists of the era wore restrictive, long, and expensive Victorian skirts. Recent legislation for women to receive the right to vote had failed. Now men were trying to eject women from previously coed cycling clubs as well. Splintering and tension started to coalesce around bicycling.

Wheelwoman was a Boston magazine dedicated to dictating conservative moral norms and publishing snide remarks about the

audacity of women cyclists. The editor, Mary Sargent Hopkins, saw her audience as middle class women and wanted to help them attain "physical perfection" and "erase the tired look in their eyes and the tense lines around their mouths." She believed that women should be adorned in silver and gold and carry a mirror and powder box in their tricycle bags. Mary even believed that women empowering themselves through cycling would heal their husbands of their worst traits, writing "When woman reigns supreme over the kingdom of home, clothed in the royal garments of understanding, she will no longer tolerate or condone uncleanness in husband, brother, or son."

Mary had discovered bicycling in 1884—before the craze captivated the nation. Hopkins was in her forties during the beginning of the craze and went on long-distance tricycle tours with large groups of women. She would arrange for wagons to bring them picnic luncheons that they would enjoy while a cellist entertained them. As cycling was mainstreamed, Hopkins and her husband moved from Brooklyn to the epicenter in Boston and she launched *Wheelwoman*.

Hopkins attempted to frame herself as the foremost expert on women's cycling. In her cultured society that meant proper skirt length, using the correct fork at dinner, and employing manners and attitude that she deemed appropriate. She went on speaking tours to address the "horror of the bloomers" on women and to insist that women should stick to tricycles. During one of these talks, she admitted to

heading outside one night with her husband's bicycle—under cover of darkness—and finding that she didn't much like it. Thus no other woman should either.

1890s woman bicyclist with traditional long skirt and heavy, broad-framed bicycle

Mary Hopkins was a holdover to the conservative values of the previous era. *Wheelwoman* published an apocalyptic visioning of the pitfalls of women participating in such wholesome activities as wearing pants and riding on two wheels. Similarly, another publication, *Wheelmen's Gazette* published an illustration of a man on a safety attempting to kiss a woman on a safety, losing his balance, and crashing onto the ground. While you might see this as a humorous cartoon about a daring man, there was also a certain subtext at the time that this crash was actually the woman's fault.

Mary associated with the upper crust, with an office down the street from the suffrage movement office—a movement born of wealthy women not allowed to have jobs or

hobbies outside of the home. Hopkins is the most likely link between bicycling and the movement for women's right to vote. Hence Hopkins is likely the influence for suffragist Susan B. Anthony's famous quote, "Bicycling has done more to emancipate women than perhaps anything else in the world." Ironically, Hopkins' vision for women's bicycling didn't seem to adhere to that quote whatsoever.

As opposed to the diamond frames of today, women's safety bicycles featured smaller front wheels than rear ones to accommodate a woman's skirt. Mary told the *New York Times* "If there is one thing I hate...it is a masculine woman. It has made my heart sore to see the women who have been putting on knickerbockers, riding the diamond-frame wheel, and racing and scorching with the men. It has made wheeling just another way for women to make a fool of herself, bringing cycling into disrepute, and making herself the laughing stock of the people. She has made a hallway sort of creature of herself. She can't be a man, and she is a disgrace as a woman. If a woman wants to dress like a Turk, she should put on the veil as well, so that no one will know who she is."

According to Lorenz J. Finison, author of *Boston's Cycling Craze, 1880-1900: A Story of Race, Sport, and Society,* Hopkins' views were both cultural and generational. He explained to me "I suspect that Mary Sargent Hopkins was reacting against influences in her life to defend the status quo. Both of Mary's husbands were dissolute characters. Her aunt was a freethinker in the 1830s. A lot has been

written about the bicycle as the great liberator of women in this era but that's not entirely true. Mary was the major writer and publisher on women's bicycling at the time and she featured one article after another defending the fact that women should never abandon the long skirt and other conservative values of the era."

After tricycle sales tanked, women stopped going on Mary's beloved tricycle tours and her influence began to slip. As the times changed, Mary reluctantly did too. She participated in a women's group who attempted to make the transition from tricycle to safety bicycle together. She started wearing shorter skirts but abhorred to find that she was no longer the cutting edge of women's cycling fashion and expertise that she craved to be.

Naturally, as teenaged Kittie Knox took the limelight, Mary Hopkins found a new target for her classist and sexist ire, becoming perhaps the biggest critic of Kittie and her activism, attire, and cycling flair. Hopkins cited

young woman on brand new "safety" bicycle with long skirt

grounds for disapproval that Knox rode a men's bicycle, preferred bloomers to a skirt, and was bringing notoriety to the sport in a bad way, She wrote of one of Kittie's public demonstrations, "The whole affair was unpleasant and was given a great deal more prominence by the newspapers than it deserved." And indeed, as Kittie excelled, the mainstream newspapers spent more time commenting on her appearance than her performance.

Finison explained why Hopkins took such an oppositional stance to Kittie, "It took a long time for women's fashion to change. Hopkins was the most influential writer and publisher on women's bicycling in the 1890s and carried a large influence with older women. While, it scandalized the older generation, pushing a heavy, broad-framed bicycle through the mud was just something that young women like Kittie Knox weren't willing to do when they could ride a diamond frame. Look at pictures of women after 1900 and you'll still see long skirts and women's drop frame bikes."

So that's how Kittie Knox, a strong, capable, and confident woman came to embody the perfect enemy of *Wheelwoman*. You can read issues in the UMass library but it's like a torturous issue of *Women's Health* dictating how to trick a man into marriage when you really wanted *Teen Vogue* to tell you about radical history and the empowerment of carving your own path. If Mary Hopkins had her way, a bicycle would still cost what a car does and

it would be reserved for the most wealthy elites to look down and judge the rest of us.

CLASS WAR ESCALATION

In the 1890s, Black social class was largely determined by attitude, stability, occupation, and aspiration. In many ways Kittie Knox was more marginal as a woman than she was for being Black. The times were changing though. The rush for women to trade in their restrictive long skirts in favor of bloomers to ride their safety bicycles was threatening to men in and out of the cycling community, who dubbed them "the bloomer girls." Hopkins went as far as saying that the bicycle was not "for disgusting exhibitions, unwomanly garb, and monkey-like attitudes." It's hard to tell if that final jab was nested in the racist attitudes of her social class and era or if she just hated monkees. But it was probably the former.

Scorchers—fast riders—were looked down upon as members of the lower classes. *Wheelwoman* published a guest editorial saying "I have lifted up my voice with considerable vim against the menace to life and limb and the 'scorcher.' The police, however, have done and are doing much to correct this evil, and I trust the day is not far distant when one can go about our streets free from the terror of this individual" and "Wheeling should be for health and recreation, excess in speed or distance should be carefully guarded against, for it will certainly do

more harm than good, and bring condemnation on the wheel itself."

While Mary Hopkins abhorred long-distance cycling, she participated in it herself and never once spoke ill of Annie Londonderry, who cycled around the entire world in 1894, presumably because Londonderry was a white woman who had become a self-made wealthy entrepreneur. Londonderry was popular in the press and good at marketing herself so it's likely that Hopkins was afraid that by bad-mouthing a popular white woman, her slipping influence might disappear completely.

In July of 1895, Kittie Knox won first prize in a costume contest in Waltham for her homemade gray knickerbocker suit—a major compliment to her skills as a seamstress. Kittie had sewn an outfit similar to what a young boy would wear and improved on its practicality for cycling. The

audience hissed disapprovingly as she accepted first prize. They felt that the winner should be a white girl in an expensive long skirt.

On the same day as Knox's victory at Waltham Cycle Park, the East Boston Carnival Committee hosted a parade with hundreds of cyclists and floats. The Irish Catholic carnival committee forbid the participation of the Mavericks, who were Protestant, as they didn't want trouble. The Boston Board of Aldermen granted the Protestants the right to hold their own bicycle parade separately, lest the more privileged group be left out of the fun. Despite protection from the state militia, the two groups skirmished and riots broke out. One Irish Catholic man died from a gunshot wound.

Mary Hopkins responded to this tragedy by making fun of Irish stereotypes and dialects in her next issue and public lectures. Mary's audience was made up of middle-class Protestants who found her inappropriate humor quite

amusing and edifying of their dominant worldview. Just like today, using one's privilege to make fun of others' tragedy was a socially acceptable behavior. Hopkins' behavior continued to drive a wedge to divide a splintered cycling community.

Despite the tragedy, Kittie was bolstered by her victory in Waltham. Winning first prize convinced her to make the trip in a few days to the League of American Wheelmen's annual meeting. She knew that she would be unwelcome there but also that her presence would be important and that she would be supported by parts of her community.

COLD WAR AT ASBURY PARK

The clubs had been debating whether to have the League's next annual meeting in Boston or Asbury Park, NJ. Boston had greater amenities for cycling and was, by all accounts, more deserving. However, if the event was held in Boston, Black cyclists would be able to participate. So the membership chose New Jersey instead.

Asbury Park was a planned resort community with 3,000 year-round residents on the Jersey Shore. The upper-class resort was not a welcome destination for Kittie Knox, even without the color bar. In an effort to keep out riff raff and make the resort attractive for elite whites, the city didn't even allow trains to stop within city limits on Sundays. But an upper-class resort required a number of visible Black

laborers that rivaled the population. And they visited local restaurants and the beach as well.

Kittie made the trip to Asbury Park by train and boat. She triumphantly rode into town with 30 other Boston cyclists. Newspapers wrote of her arrival as a full member of the League. After all, she had joined before the color bar had passed. Kittie knew that her appearance would be controversial but maintained her pride. She biked up to the clubhouse, performing fancy trick maneuvers until she was asked to stop. Reporters had a field day depicting her riding abilities. The *Trenton Evening Times* insulted Knox's outfit, saying "riding habits so loud that the Pilgrim Fathers must have been shocked…[Knox] was scorned and frowned upon by visitors from Dixie."

When Kittie showed up the next morning and presented her League membership card for a participant badge, she was told that she was "in the wrong house." Rather than make a ruckus, Kittie held her head up high and walked out with her bike. The *San Francisco Call* reported that 99% of people interviewed were sympathetic to Kittie about her rejection.

Leaders argued vehemently about whether or not Kittie could participate. Grudgingly, her membership card was honored and her badge granted. Her agile, expert ridership was described in the national press as "far ahead of her lighter hued sisters" and "when she appears in the street she receives more attention than a half dozen star racing men."

one of very few photos of Kittie Knox. Note: safety bicycle, pants

That night at the dance, Kittie was the most popular woman on the dance floor. She attended the ball wearing a large leghorn hat, a pink waist, and a black skirt. The *New York Times* wrote, "young fellows made her quite the lion of the evening ball last night by dancing with her and she enjoyed the sensation she created as the only colored person in the building." Upon Kittie's arrival on the dance floor, the racists fled the hall like a bomb had gone off and Kittie had more room to dance, impress boys, and steal the show once again.

But all was not well. Kittie was refused service at many restaurants and hotels in Asbury Park. The *Boston Journal* wrote "the insult to Miss Knox should be so thoroughly resented by those in authority that all promoters of the feeling against her should be disciplined by the organization." But it was clear that Kittie's presence had shifted the conversation, challenged hardened views, and accomplished what it needed to. She was a better rider and had made her case for a seat at the proverbial table.

A CRAZED DECLINE

Even during the bicycle craze, Knox was a true pioneer, sparking a public debate about the color bar and exerting her right to be recognized and admitted as a member of the League. Several weeks after Asbury Park, her presence pushed the League to confront the issue in its Bulletin. "Can a negro be a member of the L.A.W." a member asked, "as it appears Miss Knox of Boston is?" In response, the League explained, "Miss Katie J. Knox joined the League, April 1, 1893. The word 'white' was put into the constitution, Feb. 20, 1894. Such laws are not and cannot be retroactive."

Within another week, Kittie had thrust issues of race and gender into the national spotlight as papers all over the country wrote about the conundrum that she had illuminated. Did fair and equal treatment under the law allow Black people carte blanche to join organizations open to the general public? Would delicate, wealthy white egos be tarnished forever?

After the Asbury Park meetup, Kittie visited the Philadelphia Meteors, a Black Ethiopian cycling club. The Meteors took her to tioga races and to see fireworks. Her time in Philly makes it is clear that Kittie wasn't a bicyclist just to be competitive. She participated in cycling to become part of a community and to have fun. Kittie was the favorite topic of the press but she preferred quietly globetrotting and relating with likeminded people over being a celebrity or building her brand. Kittie's trip after Asbury Park warmed

woman with safety bicycle but long skirt not suited for cycling

my heart because it shows that she valued making friends, building a cultural network of home stays and community, and creating a tradition of shared cultural values similar to what my friends and I value today.

Kittie eventually went home to Boston and was chosen as the ride leader for the League of American Wheelmen's Massachusetts division summer meet, a multi-day ride through the country. A magazine article from this time noted Kittie's behavior during dinner in a restaurant one night with 50 other riders. The writer was impressed by Kittie's enthusiasm and ability to handle long distances without ruining her mood, conversational skills, and while still having fun. Like all articles about her at the time, they also mentioned how attractive she was. And the fact that she was Black in a sea of white men. On that trip, Kittie socialized as an equal in camp and while riding with the men.

In August of 1895, the Partridge White Ribbon Open Century was almost canceled by a thunderstorm.

Nonetheless, a handful of riders—including Kittie—joyfully completed the 100-mile ride, albeit covered in mud. Kittie was the only woman to finish. It seemed for a minute like cycling might have accepted her as one of their best and brightest.

And then it happened again. Knox was refused participation in the next century, despite the event beginning in Boston. The event was run by the Boston Wheelmen, a new club that had formed in her hometown that had decided not to allow any Black participants. When the *Boston Standard* contacted the captain of the Boston Wheelmen, he explained that he opposed the decision but a majority of members had demanded it. He said that he felt overwhelmed by the strength of their views and numbers. Fifteen Black men were also turned away, though not before they had submitted entries and made arrangements to ride.

Black cyclists felt like their country had promised them equality, and responded to this discrimination by organizing in dignified ways

1893 newspaper cartoon depicting racist views on the debate about excluding Black bicyclists from the LAW

through their neighborhoods and churches. Members of the Colored National League launched an investigation into the exclusion of the Black cyclists from the League of American Wheelmen. A member of a different Black club from the West End, Meander Bicycle Club, testified to the Colored National League about the degree with which Black cyclists had been excluded. The Colored National League and Meander Bicycle Club discussed discrimination and expressions of rights as U.S. citizens. Questions arose about whether exclusion from a cycling club qualified under public accommodation laws. The group lacked the political strength that even the League had but it was important for these groups to organize as it would slowly change public views.

Once again, Kittie Knox made her mark on history. Commonwealth was a new cycling club that was created when some men in the Massachusetts Bicycle Club had refused to ride with women. The club was divided in two, one coed and one for men only. On Sept 29, Kittie rode with the coed Commonwealth century to Newburyport. Other Massachusetts cycling clubs responded to Kittie's participation in Commonwealth by enacting their own color bars. Kittie was continually forcing the issue but it just made people dig in their heels instead of accepting that she was a valid and excelling member of their community.

Lines were increasingly drawn in the sand. The *Boston Globe* ran an article about a civil lawsuit for Kittie's retracted invitation from the Boston Wheelmen ride. In

November, Century Road Club of America advertised a century "*without a color line*" and entries were processed by Charles Percival, a vocal supporter of Kittie Knox. But foul weather delayed the ride and when it did happen attendance was poor due to mud, rain, and fog. The pacemaker broke down and riders got lost, ending up 30 miles off the route. The end of 1895 was full of heartbreak, particularly when the civil suit against the Boston Wheelmen was dismissed and the filing parties were forced to pay legal fees for both sides.

Continuing to stir the pot in 1896, Kittie's Riverside Cycling Club attempted to organize their own century ride and Black cyclists formed plans to meet in Washington, DC to create a separate Colored League of American Wheelmen. The founding convention was going to feature a parade and a race for Black riders only. But the organizers were not able to find a track that would rent to a group of Black cyclists and the new organization fizzled before it

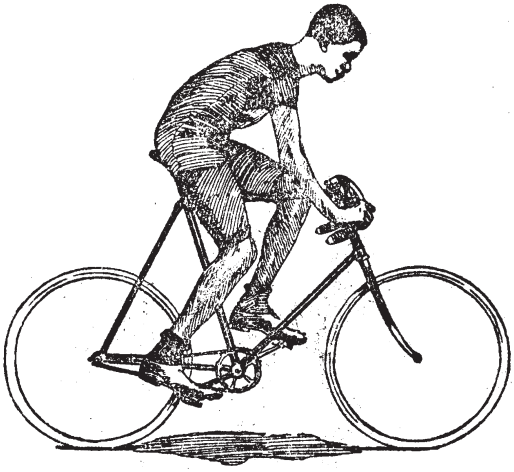
ever materialized. Soon after, the Riverside Cycling Club stopped meeting and organizing as well. It wasn't just the Black community where cycling was fizzling out. Recreational bicycling news stopped filling up papers, which began to focus on professional racers. Bicycle sales dwindled and crashed as the market was thoroughly saturated. Bike manufacturers were no longer able to financially support the League's efforts. It was officially the end of the cycling craze.

THE BATTLE FOR PUBLIC SPACE

In 1896, bicycling laws became ever more complex as police cracked down on scorching. Parks had recently been infused with tremendous amounts of funding and municipalities tried to exclude bicyclists from them. Even on public roads, cyclists were limited to staying under eight miles per hour and forced to carry a lantern at night. Bicycling on the roadway was sometimes outlawed and bicycling on the sidewalk was sometimes outlawed, leading to local confusion about where—if at all—bicyclists were allowed to ride. Landscape designers became the enemy of cyclists and a battle for use of public space raged, both factions becoming highly organized. In an effort to cast shade, bicyclists were branded as scofflaws by their critics in the press. The League began ineffectively demanding dedicated cycle paths, in an effort that is still ongoing 130 years later.

Parks became a place for the wealthy members of society to enjoy tennis courts, leisure walking, picnicking, and golfing facilities. The Parks Commission became the principal enemy of the League of American Wheelmen. Measures were introduced for bicyclists to pay additional taxes and become licensed. Those conversations are also still ongoing today even though no municipality has been able to implement them without losing money by doing so. By the end of 1896, recreational bicycling events could no longer compete with other public sporting events or public amusements. The final amateur race of the era was a particular let down because so many cyclists crossed the finish line at once that the timers and judges could not determine the winners. After 1896, racing became a sport for professionals only and fewer people competed.

In the footsteps of Kittie Knox, Marshall "Major" Taylor, born in Indianapolis in 1878, had been a professional racer from early on in his career. Experiencing a series of hate crimes early as a racer, he moved to Worcester, Massachusetts. The state had recently reversed the color bar ruling and Kittie Knox had staged her triumphant resistance in Asbury Park a few months prior. Due to the color bar and racist attitudes in virtually every organization, Taylor only traveled to compete outside of Massachusetts when his presence was clearly welcome. He focused on "clean living," being polite, and not raising a ruckus. In return, white neighbors attempted to buy back his house when he moved to Worcester and he was dragged off his bike and choked unconscious by a white



MARSHALL TAYLOR.

racer from a group who conspired against him. Taylor wanted the racists to see that he was a better cyclist, racer, and sportsman. And he was. Taylor continued to beat preferred racers and was upsetting powerful people within the sport. In many ways his approach of not rocking the boat in the way that Knox did served to push him out of the arenas where he would otherwise be victorious. He eventually developed deep rivalries with white racers and was barred from numerous key races, harming his record. When the white racers couldn't beat him on the track, they beat him with racist bureaucracy.

Finally allowed to compete in the national championship, Taylor became the U.S. sprint champion in 1900. He had long kept himself to U.S. competitions because he was a devout Baptist and European races were on Sundays.

But in the face of constant racism, he reluctantly began to compete in Europe, where he beat everyone who dared race him. Major retired back to Worcester in 1910. He wrote his memoirs and failing to find a publisher, he self-published *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World* in 1928. He floundered in obscurity, developed deep financial problems, and died in 1932. His approach to take the high road could not overcome the racism that followed him through every inch of his life.

1893 newspaper cartoon mocking "scorching" and Black people

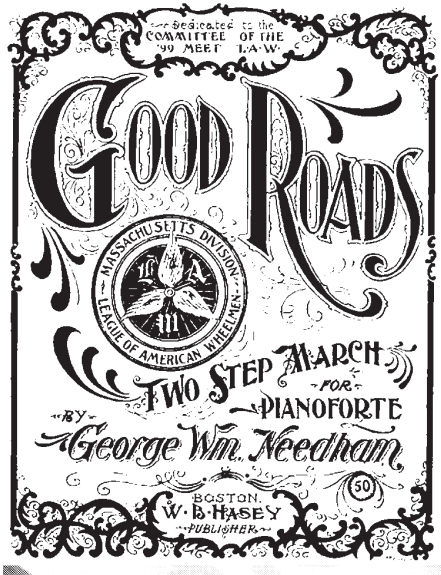
THE BATTLE FOR GOOD ROADS

The League eventually determined that Kittie Knox was definitively a member on the grounds that she had joined ten months before the color bar was passed. Racism is powerful but time is a constant. Even when the majority of membership opposed the color bar, they lacked the necessary two thirds voting majority to remove it. The color bar had always been the product of an organized and dedicated *minority*.

Along with their war against the Parks Department, the Wheelmen were organizing their biggest campaign yet, the "good roads" movement to pave roads nationally for safer and more pleasant bicycling. , So the League was trying to unify, if only their white members.

The Good Roads Movement had begun in the 1880s as the nation's first bicyclists joined forces with farmers to protest the muddy, pock-marked country roads in favor of smoother, safer, and faster paved roads. Outside of urban areas, roads were just loose dirt or gravel. In the winter, dirt turned to mud and in the summer the roads were dusty. The League pointed out that in Europe, roads were built and maintained by national and local governments, paid for by tax dollars. The bicyclists could have a safer route and the farmers would gain economic benefits, even without urban railroads or trolleys. The League created a propaganda arm, *Good Roads* magazine, in 1892 and the partnership with farmers was a powerful coalition. Still, to succeed, the League felt that they needed the 5.5% of their membership from Confederate states and states with notoriously racist memberships like Kentucky and Indiana. In the end, the northern contingent compromised on the racial matter for Good Roads coalition.

The Good Roads Movement became the League of American Wheelmen's first nationally successful campaign.Most of the connecting roads between cities were paved but the victory was short lived. By 1908, the Ford Model T became the first widely accessible and affordable car for Americans.



And as quickly as Americans had taken to the bicycle, they began taking to the car instead. The manufacturers wanted to redefine that streets were for cars. Pedestrians were rebranded as "jays," a derogatory slur meaning "an inexperienced person" for walking in the streets as people had always done. Naturally, pedestrians were quite experienced but marketing them as jaywalkers allowed the cars to develop dominance on the road ways.

The League's victory was in many ways its doom. Membership dropped from 103,000 in 1898 down to 8,692 in 1902. After the collapse of financial support from bike manufacturers, most of the League's funding came from

wealthy hobbyists, who became more interested in a newer trend, the automobile. The League dissolved in 1902 and a new organization sprang up, the American Automobile Association (AAA), which was modeled after the League and took over much of the same membership when it was founded that same year. Just like the League, the AAA provided routes and advocacy for its membership but its financial base proved much broader and longer lasting.

By 1920, cars took priority on the newly paved highways. The Good Roads Movement was the only thing more effective at destroying the League than the color bar. Bicycling rapidly disappeared from public view for the next thirty years. Like jaywalking, bicycling had effectively been branded as an irresponsible activity for poor people who didn't know what they were doing. Today, in most of the U.S., bicycling is effectively painted as either a desperate activity of the impoverished or an entitled manspreading of the wealthy.

ALL BUT FORGOTTEN

Kittie visited Paris to ride her bike and socialize in 1896. She performed in a theater production in New York City later that year, *Isham's Octoroons*. Producer John W. Isham was a Black man who was frequently assumed to be white. He successfully put on many plays to advance the narrative of the Black experience into the American

consciousness. Kittie was one of many women chosen for her attractiveness as well as ability to sing and dance.

Like bicycling, Kittie disappeared from the press after that and then from the world. She died of kidney failure from chronic nephritis in 1906 and was buried in an unmarked grave. To the press she was a cycling superstar, but she was also a very young, poor mixed-race woman in a racist country. She never had children. Her mother died shortly thereafter, followed by her brother's suicide. Over 100 years after all of their deaths, Kittie's importance to the history of bicycling was unearthed when Lorenz J. Finison began to research his book *Boston's Cycling Craze, 1880-1900*. Finison read articles and reviewed old newspaper reports, wondering why he hadn't learned about Kittie Knox previously.

Despite being forgotten, Kittie's reverberations continued to be felt after her death. Even when her legacy was

When bicycling became a mainstream social activity, newspapers began running racist cartoons mocking Black cyclists

temporarily lost, her impacts are not. Cycling re-emerged in Chicago during the Great Depression and this time the movement was much like Kittie's vision. Cyclists in the 1930s and 40s were social and recreational. They bonded together under a common experience on two wheels as fuel and car tires were rationed for World War II. As people tightened their belts in the U.S., bicycles were again a preferred form of transport and the League came back to life as a social club in 1942. In the spirit of Kittie Knox, women began to take a prominent role in club leadership and century riders began to wear casual clothes instead of specialized outfits. Still, while the issue of the color bar didn't come up in the League newsletter or any magazines, the photos from this era exclusively feature white people. I asked John S. Allen, who maintains a prolific blog and Internet comment presence about the League, about the color bar and he responded, "There was very little participation by Afro-Americans [sic] in the League until recent decades, but no outright color bar in the 1942-1955 League, contrary to what you say...you need to be more careful, to avoid muddying the historical record." The history of exclusion in the organization continued to prioritize its privileged membership, even if some people cannot see that.

In 1945, a protest was staged against the law prohibiting bicycles from crossing bridges in New York City and it appeared that the movement might again gain steam. That is, until motor vehicles again took over the roadways during the postwar baby boom as conformist attitudes

dominated again. Bicycling was once again relegated as a "children's activity" while "adults" chased their middle-class dreams. When the League published a handbook in 1947, it made no mention of adult transportation bicycling, instead announcing plans of creating a never-actualized youth division. The handbook sold only 37 out of 3000 copies. The League dissolved for the second time in 1955.

And then in 1965, Schwinn's low-cost, mass-produced bicycles with their newfangled multi-speed gearing spawned a new surge in recreational bicycling. To prevent the foreclosure on funds in their bank account after ten years, the League reformed. Fortunately, Americans were becoming fitness-obsessed and bicycling was a key component to that. The current manifestation of U.S. cycling had much more in common Kittie's vision than Mary Sargent Hopkins' ideas about cultural exclusion. The League of American Wheelmen sprang back to life for the third time, and immediately outgrew its membership numbers from the 1950s.

And then the League made yet more critical mistakes. In the early 1970s, they got in bed with "big bicycle," the Bicycle Manufacturers Association (BMA), who attempted a

The 1970s Schwinn mainstreamed bicycling again, but not nearly to 1890s levels

similar model to Henry Ford's vision of affordable (though poorly made) vehicles for all. The BMA paid for and hired the League's first professional Executive Director, assuming that the partnership would lead to further bicycle sales that would support advocacy. The opposite happened. Bicycle customers didn't feel kinship with the League and didn't pay for membership. League members didn't buy BMA's low-end products and soon the League was bankrupted and the ED resigned.

In 1971, John Forester was ticketed for riding on the streets of Palo Alto, CA and successfully contested the ticket, insisting that the street was the safest place to ride. His ticket was overturned, his stance was substantiated, and he took this opportunity to jump to irrational conclusions. In 1975 Forester penned *Effective Cycling*, in which he insisted that bicycle commuting required a series of complex skills, akin to that of an Olympic athlete. Rather than calming traffic, he stressed things like "road position" and maintaining pace with other traffic. Forester saw nothing wrong with urban sprawl, suburbs, and car-dependent culture.

In a 2019 interview, Forester explained, "I had three goals in creating Effective Cycling.

1: To benefit those cyclists who chose to learn how to travel safely on the roads we have.

2: To be a continuing demonstration of both the practicality and the safety of obeying the rules of the road for drivers of vehicles.

3: To serve these goals because it was clear that this program would have to oppose the 'official' government policy of cyclist-inferiority cycling on bikeways. Since government would not do this, it was up to Vehicular Cyclists to do it for themselves."

Citing frequent misrepresentation in the press, Forester was the only interviewee in my 25 years of reporting who required that I quote him fully. I elected not to reprint the three pages that he wrote defining effective cycling. There are old wounds there, perhaps in part because the series of events around his singular vision did not grow the organization. But I would also suspect that any theory that requires three unedited pages to explain would be difficult to turn into a popular movement.

vehicular cycling

When the entire League staff resigned due to unhappiness with the leadership of bulletin editor Phyllis Harmon, Forester became President of the League in 1979. As President, Forester believed firmly that instead of growing the membership, he needed to train cyclists from coast to coast to be law-abiding under his vision of how they should ride. Instead of embracing bicycling as a fun, social activity, the League fundraised by branding bicycling as complicated and dangerous and selling the solution in the form of training cyclists as "League Cycling Instructors (LCI)." The LCI course was about forty hours of rigorous training to teach a bicyclist to predict safe movement in traffic and then share this knowledge with other cyclists. Naturally, these training programs were created by Forester himself. According to Forester's vision, only the most skilled, aggressive, and experienced riders had a place on the road. Even then, he wanted to vet them all as properly law abiding. In doing so, Forester effectively substantiated the media's and critics' portrayal of the scofflaw cyclist going all the way back to the 1890s.

Forester explained that he sees bicycling as an activity in isolation, "I have no goals for 'bicycling as a social movement.' My goals for cyclists do not go so far as a social movement; they apply only to individual cyclists, and they are simple:

1: To preserve the rights of cyclists to operate according to the rules of the road for drivers of vehicles. Note, for those of you who have not yet understood this, this means for

drivers of vehicles, excluding those rules that apply only to those riding bicycles.

1.1 By fighting legal battles against legislation and other governmental actions that infringe upon the right of cyclists to operate according to the rules of the road for drivers of vehicles.

1.2: By maintaining the scientific knowledge that supports rules-of-the-road cycling and criticizing the purported knowledge aimed against that knowledge.

2.0 To increase the number of rules-of-the-road cyclists by the use of written articles and participation in public discussions, and on the road training, such as provided by Cycling Savvy, supplemented by such video presentations as become available."

Forester and his critics alike refer to his approach as vehicularism, meaning that the bicycle is expected to behave like a car. In his trademark, decidedly non-populist thinking, Forester opposed bicycle infrastructure of any kind. Effective Cycling and the LCI course were decidedly anti-government and libertarian. His followers non-ironically point to protected bike lanes as "separate but equal." They appear to shamelessly and unironically compare bicycling on a protected path to the racist outcome of Plessy v. Ferguson. Of course, requiring every bicyclist in the U.S. to attend one of Forester's trainings isn't practical or reasonable. It maintains cycling as a privileged

activity relegated for only the elite. Mary Sargent Hopkins would be proud.

Ironically, it wasn't Forester's ideas that ousted him as the League President after only a year; it was his abrasive personality. A new President replaced him, though Forester remained on the board.

The League attempted to grow by holding a few rallies each year on college campuses throughout this period, similar to other social movements. But creating barriers to entry and participation does not create a popular movement. Garnett McDonough became the President soon after and was adept at politicking. He strategically fired people and delayed elections to stack the deck in his favor. Allegedly, League funds were misused to create the California Bicycle Coalition so that director Ellen Fletcher, a pro-infrastructure candidate, could run against John Forester in the 1983 League board election. Forester explained to me, "I left the board of directors of the League of American

cycling on a separated path

Wheelmen because I was beaten in my re-election attempt by Ellen Fletcher. For that election, the California Bicycling Coalition put up its candidate, Ellen Fletcher. Fletcher and I held a single public debate, on traffic cycling and bikeways. In that debate, Fletcher showed that she was completely ignorant of rules-of-the-road cycling and how cyclist-inferiority cycling endangered cyclists by contradicting rules-of-the-road cycling. Fletcher had swallowed whole—hook, line, and sinker, Motordom's program for incompetent cycling on bikeways, without understanding that she had done so. So the voters elected the candidate most ignorant of the most important issue."

Fletcher won Forester's board seat and the person who oversaw the alleged financial misdeeds resigned. According to several sources, the whole plan was staged from the beginning for the League to dismantle Forester from the organization.

While these shenanigans resulted in an amusing series of mutual criticisms between the League and Forester for the next two decades, it prevented the League from becoming

a popular social movement. While the public favored bicycle paths and protected infrastructure, the League still focused on road cycling, going as far as bad-mouthing paths. The League would begin work on sorely needed initiatives and then allow other organizations to take them over. For example, the Adventure Cycling Association took on the work of maintaining, overseeing, supporting, and advocating for long-distance bicycle touring. Rails to Trails Conservancy handles the conversion of former railroad lines to paths. Off roading was farmed out to the International Mountain Biking Association. Quickly, all three of these organizations had larger memberships than the League. By 1990, Steve Clark became President and resumed League activities that the organization excelled at and that members wanted—advocacy, rallies, and member services like ride support, assessments for how to improve communities, and access to information.

The next President, John Torosian, died from a heart attack while attempting to finish a 1993 ride early and attend the League's national meeting. While the League was grieving and scrambling to replace him, the IRS ruled that bike ride participants should have paid taxes for free services they received from the League. The IRS believed they wouldn't be able to collect this money from individuals and billed the League an insurmountable tax bill. In order to pay the bill, the League had to negotiate this debt down to a manageable amount and shed its member services and national volunteer program.

After a lifetime of being criticized for their name, the League relented and rebranded themselves as the League of American Bicyclists in 1994. As membership moved more and more to the suburbs, staging rallies proved difficult for the organization. Membership again began to fall after 1997.

image of 1970s John Foreseter

Earl F. Jones became the Board President of the League in the 90s. Jones explained how he became involved: "I was the President of the Louisville Bike Club. We had over 1,000 members and had grown significantly over the past few years. The League was stagnating and a lot of change was underway. I am an attorney and had been one at a large U.S. corporation. If you want to be a national association to advocate for bicycling, you need to be in Washington DC and to modernize other aspects of the League's practices. This was controversial and resisted."

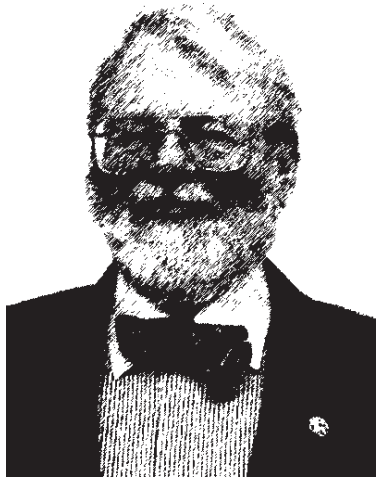
When Jones arrived, he felt a lot of resistance internally, particularly when he moved the organization from Baltimore to DC. "I'm a Black guy...not seeing a lot of people that look like me is part of everyday life. It was not

unique to the League. There was also a lot of resistance to change, in general. The numbers are really critical, not only in terms of revenue, but in terms of the size of membership that represents your effectiveness advocating for these principles. The League's business model was not contemporary. We needed to have members that we could communicate with and increase our revenue as a result. That was a point of stress on the organization, which prevented us from being able to accomplish our mission or even fundamentally re-examine it...There was a large nerd element. We can all be nerdy about our passions but you need to have a broad enough view to make someone outside of that understand our views enough to become an ally."

John Forester was no longer on the board but his bicycle education principles were still being used and his influence continued to be felt within the organization. Jones explained, "There were a lot of issues involving the bicycle education program. I wanted to adopt something more 'user friendly' to get people comfortable and safe on bikes, which seems like an essential element of any advocacy program. The existing program was so long and so excruciating. The throughput was so small that it couldn't have the effect that we should have wanted."

As expected, John Forester holds a different view, "It became obvious that the League's directors preferred to promote the policy of incompetent cycling on bikeways, that stemmed originally from Motordom's program for

frightening cyclists off the roadways. As for why they made this choice, I have no hypothesis for which there is reasonable evidence. So far as I know, none of the directors (nor other similar advocates) has made a forthright statement of their motives. I have repeatedly tried to get such replies, but have failed. Rather, they hide behind shadowy claims that suffice for press releases."



John Forester portrait based on 2006 photo

No matter who you believe, cumulative lifetime attendance for the "Effective Cycling" LCI training never topped a few hundred people. The League removed Forester's argumentative aspects and relaxed the rigorous 30-hour boot camp into simpler, piecemeal trainings. Forester freaked out, insisting that they can no longer call their LCI program, "Effective Cycling."

Executive director in 2019, Bill Nesper explains "Over 6,000 LCIs were certified since the 1970s and there are over 3,000 LCI instructors who say that they still teach these skills today. By the late 90s, the League shifted gears and endorsed both high quality bike facilities and

for riding in traffic. This is part of our current mission to "Build a bicycle-friendly America for everyone."

In 1999, Jones discovered the color bar, still alive in the organization's bylaws. Jones explained "We were 30 years beyond the Civil Rights era. It wasn't revolutionary to look back and correct this real stain on the organization, particularly when you have a perfect opportunity upon return to Louisville, the same city where the deed was done to begin with."

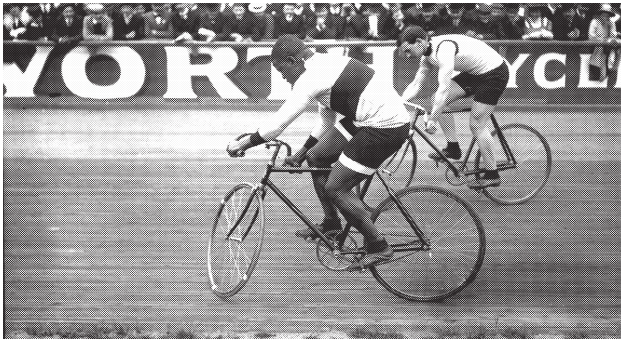
The discovery wasn't that surprising, really. While the League didn't keep records very well, it had no records indicating the ban on Black members had ever been lifted. Jones' fellow board member John Schubert told me, "Frankly, I don't remember a thing about this issue. We had two Black men on the board at that point. Their presence on the board was probably influenced by a mid-1990s effort to get more demographic diversity, i.e. fewer old white guys, on the board. Most of the board was very uninterested in the League's history." Given the photos of cyclists in the League's newsletter, they may never have stopped silently enforcing the color bar. Schubert's lack of memory about this seems to perfectly sum up the organization's perspective on race for the past 100 years in a single shrug.

To understand this issue in a less loaded light, imagine that you are organizing a party. You invite the people that you want to attend that party. Perhaps you invite some people and they look at your other guests and don't see themselves

reflected. Some bold personalities might come anyway but most people wouldn't feel comfortable immersing themselves in a group where they don't feel understood or necessarily welcome.

Jones is a bit more forgiving than I am, explaining "These are very difficult issues to deal with for most mainstream Americans or organizations. I don't want to attribute anything to the League's reluctance, embarrassment, or discomfort in confronting this issue more than any other organization in the U.S. There is some notion of 'we are good people *now*, what do we have to do with what someone did 100 years ago?"

Jones wondered for years why he saw so few Black people in cycling, especially after Major Taylor had become the world champion. "In terms of organized cycling, representation among minority groups is pretty low. There are many reasons for that. The clubs still focus on fitness and speed even if they do commuting and things like that."



Major Taylor during one of his many races

The resolution to remove the color bar did not go quickly or smoothly. The final document did not contain Schubert's signature or those of anyone besides Jones, board secretary David Takemoto-Weerts, and Executive Director Jody Newman, but the resolution was passed and the color bar was overturned and disavowed.

Today, as bicycling continues to skyrocket in popularity all over again and over 300,000 passionate bicyclists exist all over the U.S., the League's membership continues to hover around only 20,000-22,000 people. Perhaps the other cyclists don't feel the need to become League members. Perhaps it's those lingering shadows of the color bar, the Good Roads Movement, and vehicularism that haunt the League's legacy. Most advocacy is handled by other organizations like the Alliance for Bicycling and Walking, PeopleForBikes, and America Bikes. Warm Showers, a private company, now manages what was once the League's hospitality program.

In 2013, the League took another stab at responding to its own history by launching an equity initiative. Hamzat Sani was brought on as an equity and outreach fellow to help the organization recognize and manage the transition of dealing with its own history. It felt like a real opportunity to stop limiting the organization's activities and membership as well as expanding its culture and programming activities. As then-President Andy Clarke explained in an interview, the "Equity Advisory Council was created as we began to grapple as an organization with

what equity is, what we need to do as an organization, what the movement needs to do to be more representative of and connected to the communities that we seek to serve...broadening the reach and what we think of as the bike moment to get perspective on what we can do as a national organization to contribute to that."

The League secured funding through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to hire Dr. Adonia Lugo as the Equity Initiative Manager. The board prioritized equity, diversity, and inclusion as part of the organization's mission and vision. But the movement quickly fizzled. Longtime board and staff members were resistant to the cultural shifts and within two years, Lugo quit, citing internal opposition to the stated purpose of her job, explaining, "I reviewed the grant narrative used to secure the funding and concluded that I could not get this work done due to the conditions that I was experiencing." Allegedly, money that was supposed to be used for the equity initiative was also being used for other salaries and programs. Elly Blue and I made a short film about this, *In a League of Their Own* (2015, watch free: vimeo.com/126722542). The fallout from the equity initiative was a major event for the League and by the time that we had finished production, every single person that we interviewed, including President Andy Clarke, was no longer employed by the organization. Kittie Knox's problems with the League in 1894 appeared to be alive and well, still affecting the culture of the organization 120 years later.

When I recounted this history to Earl Jones, who resigned from the board in 2000, he responded, "I'm actually quite surprised to hear that things were not fully embraced between then and now in a way that would make sense for something that is an urban mode of transportation."

THEN TO NOW

Kittie had been born into a world that promised big. She paid her dues in every sense of the meaning and tried to take everyone up on the promises made to her. She pushed back when things were not as advertised. She knew how to pick a fight and was comfortable doing so. And more importantly, she has influenced the shift of bicycling from an elite upscale sport to a hobby that can be enjoyed by people from all backgrounds and experiences. As a result, she's a powerful icon and inspiration to re-calibrate bicycling advocacy around today.

In a 2019 interview, executive director Bill Nesper explains "Looking back at magazines from the 1930s, 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s, you're not seeing a representative sample of America. [Since then] the Washington Area Bicycle Association and Adonia Lugo helped us to focus on a more diverse candidate pool." According to a study in 2011, a third of all cyclists are from the poorest 25% of the population while only 23% are from the wealthiest 25% that the League focuses so intently on. Cycling growth rates among Black and Latino people are double and quadruple

those of their white counterparts. Aside from the fact that the underserved populations need and would benefit from these services the most, these populations are the big tent that the League needs to incorporate into their work if they ever want to restore 100,000+ members like in 1898. But the institution is still haunted by the spirit of Mary Sargent Hopkins' views of proper manners and etiquette. The prim and proper bicycle establishment switched from condemning "scorching" to condemning "scofflaw behavior." The false promise is that if they could just force everyone to follow the laws religiously, that we would receive rights and respect.

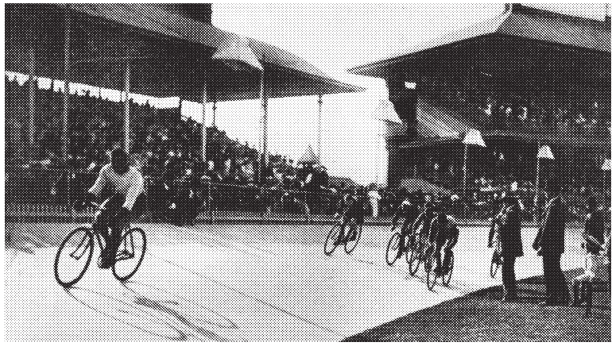
Modern bicycle advocacy seems to have learned little from the Good Roads Movement or Vehicularism or Kittie Knox, defaulting back to thinking that the most effective way to change the system is from within; creating influence by befriending elected officials and public employees. The forgotten reality is that people working together in the streets is the only thing that has ever changed anything, even if the politicians get credit afterwards. Or as Margaret Mead put it "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Today, the League's primary function is to provide tools and resources to 350 state and local advocacy groups and 800 bike clubs. Executive director Bill Nesper explains to me in a 2019 interview, "John Forrester is brought up less and less these days. While we're not doing everything right

and despite losing our major funding from Trek Bikes in 2016, our membership has again grown to around 18,000 members. Seven out of our nine current staff members worked at the League through the Equity Initiative and were influenced by it. We now look at how to include a broader base of membership into the organization, perform a broader analysis of ridership across different demographics, translate our materials into other languages, consider where LCI trainings will reach new instructors, and ask cities to evaluate if their infrastructure actually reaches impoverished neighborhoods."

Sometimes I close my eyes and imagine a historical biopic where Kittie Knox was a bit more militant, akin to Malcolm X, the charismatic Black leader who led his followers to defend themselves against white aggression "by any means necessary." I picture her working alongside a more peaceful advocate, Major Taylor, who repeatedly states "if you give me what I want you won't have to deal with her," akin to the dynamic between Malcolm and Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s. Indeed, these dynamics are what influences leaders and changes the world. You need the loud firecracker

Malcolm X portrait by Josh MacPhee



and the person of influence who understands the issues sufficiently to take a seat at the table.

Kittie followed in the activist footsteps of her father and their community. She was a better performer than the men, especially in her dramatic, off-beat, homemade outfits. But at the end of the day, that wasn't enough. Even when numerous notable Boston celebrities spoke up in favor of Knox's participation in the sport, built on a long history of abolitionist spirit, that wasn't enough either. It would be another 80 years before the color bar was outlawed by the Civil Rights Act and stripped from U.S. culture and even then, the attitudes didn't change. Even when businesses and employers were forced not to discriminate against Black people, they couldn't be forced to respect them. These shifting attitudes were changed only as generations died off and new ones recognized the errors of their parents' ways. Well, that and massive lunch counter protests and marches on Washington built from cornerstone coalitions. These things will continue their dramatic shift but Kittie isn't alive to see her vision through.

Still, while Major Taylor went on to the become the world champion, Kittie Knox had an even greater impact on bicycling. When you go on a bike ride to the corner store or to nowhere in particular with your friends, that's Kittie Knox. When you can buy a bicycle for less than a week's wages, that's Kittie Knox. When you go on a ride wearing street clothes instead of dayglo or spandex, that's her too. When you attend a bike fun event and meet people from other cities and the only thing that you have in common is your love of the bicycle as cultural ambassador, think of Kittie Knox.

The historical record of the League's activities no longer resides in the organization's offices but in the UMass library in Boston. However, you still won't find mention of Kittie Knox in it. And while you can find archived versions of Mary Sargent Hopkins' sexist *Wheelwoman* magazine at UMass library, you won't find any copies at the Library of Congress, as they have "lost" *all* of their originals.

A shorter version of this article appeared in *Sisu* magazine and online and the response to this reporting has consistently reminded me how uncomfortable people still are with issues of race in the world of bicycle advocacy and many people diminished Kittie's role in cycling.

That only gave me further resolve. We don't need to internalize racism. If nothing else, at least we still have one more teenage girl as a role model. I think we owe her at least that much. So if you'll excuse me I have a Civil Unrest Bicycle Club ride for disabled people to attend.

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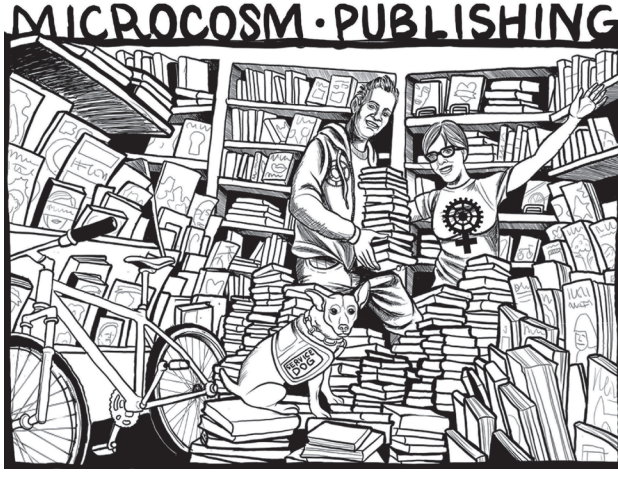

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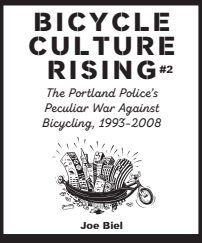

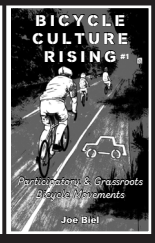

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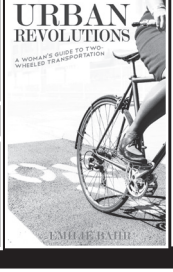

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