

Cycling Through Life
by Ginger Wolnik
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Why did I bicycle? The short answers are: it was utilitarian, healthy, liberating, politically correct, environmentally responsible, and just plain fun! The longer story reflects the highlights of my life.

At about age six, my parents bought me a small, two-wheeled bicycle with training wheels. My father eventually became concerned that I would never learn to balance and removed the side wheels. For a long time I was afraid of falling and just sat on the sloping top tube of this girl's style bicycle instead of the seat, cushioned with a pillow. I pushed along with my feet on the ground instead of using the pedals. Since I was only going up and down our short, flat, dead-end street, the inefficiency did not matter. Gradually though, I would glide along with both feet held off the ground for longer periods. One day I finally decided to try sitting on the seat again and to my surprise, I was able to balance and actually ride!

When I was nine, we moved to a much longer street that intersected a relatively quiet neighborhood road. My grammar school was about a mile away and I was allowed to ride my bike to school. This was the start of my real passion for bicycling; it gave me freedom and independence. I used to clip a playing card on the fork so it would make a motor noise in the spokes; the sound revved up as the bike moved faster. I even made a pretend license for myself, copying my mom's driver's license.

After about a year, a mean neighborhood boy whom I didn't even know, pushed me down for some reason and broke my bike. My parents complained to his parents but they refused to accept responsibility. Because they would not pay for the damage, I was afraid that my bike would not get repaired. However my parents surprised me the next day by buying me a bigger bike, one with 26" wheels! My dad told me they realized I had outgrown my first little 2-wheeler, but they bought a much larger bike so I could grow into it. Since it was also a girl's style, that was not as bad as it sounds. I was such an accomplished rider by then, I could hop up into the seat and just reach the pedals. Stopping meant jumping off because my foot could not reach the ground if I were sitting on the seat!

I did grow into that 26" bicycle, riding it through high school every place we lived. In addition to riding to school where I could, I ran errands to the store, visited friends, or just went on long rides by myself to explore. The most ridiculous stunt I recall was riding with my siblings on my bike. I would stand and pedal, my brother Keith would sit on the bicycle seat and hold onto my waist and my sister Michele would sit on the back rack and hold onto the sides of the bicycle seat with her feet held clear of the rear wheel. When my brother Wayne was a baby, I even tried this with him in the front basket!

When I got my driver's license at age 16, the utilitarian bicycling ended for a while. However I still rode my bike occasionally for recreation on the nearby trails. I sometimes used my bicycle as a convenient way to explore local farm roads to identify wildflowers; that was during my amateur botanist phase.

In 1980 I moved to California and bought my first 10-speed. The bike shop had a display rack of free newsletters from local clubs and I immediately joined two of them. One was Skyline Cycling Club, a recreational club. The other was a political organization then called the Santa Clara Valley Bicycle Association, since renamed the Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition.

My new social and leisure life now revolved almost entirely around bicycling; I went on at least one ride every weekend. There were also Wednesday evening club rides from May through September, followed by dinner out. There were occasional overnight club trips on the weekends to places like Bodega Bay and Lake Tahoe and longer trips to places like Death Valley. When there was no club ride that interested me, I would do a weekend ride by myself. Often I rode around Portola Valley, stopping to buy a sandwich at Robert's Market in Woodside; and then I continued to the Pulgas Water Temple on Cañada Rd. for lunch.

In 1981, I had my first major vacation ever, a two-week bicycle camping trip on Maui with the Sierra Club! We took our own bicycles and enjoyed the challenge of the hilly, coastal roads. I had fun but was constantly dirty; the greasy sunscreen mixed with sweat and the constant winds blew dust that stuck to me. We always camped at parks on the beach, so each evening I took a swim in the ocean, then rinsed off in the cold fresh water shower on the beach. We were not supposed to use soap or shampoo on the beach but we all did anyway, taking a full shower while wearing a bathing suit because we were fully exposed to the public. What I enjoyed most was the food; we were assigned to rotating cooking and cleanup crews that daily prepared a full breakfast and dinner. Each morning we also prepared and packed our lunches for the day before breaking camp. I usually made myself the sandwich special of the day plus a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. With all the calories burned by the tough but scenic cycling, swimming and occasional hikes in the hot, humid, Hawaiian summer, we were always hungry and eating.

In subsequent years I went on several supported, commercial bicycle trips. A tour in the Canadian Rockies found me on the Icefield Parkway; a perfect road with a wide, smooth shoulder through unspoiled wilderness of glacier covered mountains, wild rivers, turquoise lakes and meadows of wildflowers. On another tour, in Southern Baja Mexico, I remember riding alone for a while through the tranquil desert. Approaching a parked patrol car, I was a little apprehensive about the notorious Mexican police, but the two cops just smiled and waved to cheer me on as if I were in a race. Further down the road, there was a tiny cantina where I was able to buy an ice cold Coke from an old fashion chest dispenser; soda never tasted better! A tour around the Big Island of Hawaii found me riding south from the town of Hawi for miles of downhill in a strong tailwind. It was like being on a silent motorcycle, just coasting fast while watching foam capped waves crashing on the beach to my right, and palm trees and tall grasses bending in the strong breeze to my left. Memories like these make my life feel well lived.

I also became active in bicycle politics. I started by helping mail the political club newsletters and testifying at city council meetings to support bicycle access on expressway shoulders. Today I see lots of riders enjoying Foothill Expressway; most have no idea how controversial that was when first proposed and how hard we worked in 1980 for that option. In those days we were considered the lunatic fringe; today bicycle access is a standard part of urban design thanks to our efforts. My activism culminated with serving two terms on the City of Sunnyvale Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee.

I tried to ride to work at almost every place I was employed. When I worked for GE Space Systems, I was the one who got bicycle lockers added to the new building in San Jose. When I worked for Tandem, I volunteered on their Bike to Work Day committee. I was too far to ride to BMC in North San Jose, but I occasionally biked to the light rail station closest to my house and continued by train to work.

As I've grown older, I rarely bicycle now. Medical problems have given me some balance issues, so I feel more comfortable hiking for exercise and recreation. I also think the common use of cell phones and texting while driving today results in more distracted drivers. I now see more cars weaving and drifting into bicycle space during the day; years ago that was mainly restricted to drunk drivers late at night. In all my years of bicycling I was never in an accident or serious fall, so I'd like to keep that record.

I am still politically and environmentally aware. I bought a plug-in hybrid car that runs on electricity alone for local trips, using no gasoline around town - just like my bicycle. I installed solar panels on my house so that oil will not be burned to produce that electricity; take that, OPEC! I still attend city council and neighborhood impact meetings about bicycle and traffic issues. At a recent such meeting I met one of my old friends, a former Bicycle Advisory Committee member. He is now in a wheel chair and cannot ride, but he is still involved with the issues, an inspiration for me to continue.

I also still attend the social functions of Skyline Cycling Club and keep in touch with those lifelong friends, including some who also no longer ride. Now that I am retired I may start riding more again, but probably just easier recreational rides on the growing local network of trails. The Stevens Creek Trail is now just a half-mile from my house in Sunnyvale because I can access it over the Hwy 85 freeway on the new bike bridge that I testified for years ago!