



# **Wheels of Change: How Women Rode the Bicycle to Freedom (With a Few Flat Tires Along the Way)**

*Sue Macy*

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Take a lively look at women's history from aboard a bicycle, which granted females the freedom of mobility and helped empower women's liberation. Through vintage photographs, advertisements, cartoons, and songs, *Wheels of Change* transports young readers to bygone eras to see how women used the bicycle to improve their lives. Witty in tone and scrapbook-like in presentation, the book deftly covers early (and comical) objections, influence on fashion, and impact on social change inspired by the bicycle, which, according to Susan B. Anthony, "has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world."

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Amelia Bloomer List

## Wheels of Change: How Women Rode the Bicycle to Freedom (With a Few Flat Tires Along the Way) Details

Date : Published January 11th 2011 by National Geographic Children's Books

ISBN : 9781426307621

Author : Sue Macy

Format : Hardcover 96 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Childrens, Middle Grade, Feminism

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# **From Reader Review Wheels of Change: How Women Rode the Bicycle to Freedom (With a Few Flat Tires Along the Way) for online ebook**

## **Jennifer says**

I appreciated the slightly cheeky tone, colorful design, and short, meaty chapters of this unusual history book. Teen girls will find the section where health professionals of the day were concerned that “the shape of the bicycle seat, or saddle, could damage or overstimulate the pelvis” particularly amusing:)

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## **Ms. McCall says**

An easy-to-read, colorful and heavily illustrated nonfictional read, *Wheels of Change* provides a fresh, new take on the history of the bicycle and how important an instrument it was in helping women break out of their gender roles as early as the mid 1800s. The book is organized chronologically, although I did tend to find when it came to national and international competitive races nearing the end that it was difficult to comprehend the time frame. *Wheels of Change* uses straightforward vocabulary and is conceptually simple, so I would recommend this book for the younger spectrum of young adult readers. The text would be especially helpful as a nonfiction resource in middle school and high school collections for students looking for an introduction to the feminist movement.

I kept waiting to read about how the bicycle was integrated into civil rights and feminist movements of the 20th century, because throughout school these are the woman’s movements that we become the most familiar with, jumping over the subtleties that we so very often take for granted in this age. But this book sheds light on the details that textbooks tend to jump over entirely, such as the ability for women to use transportation (cycling was especially a conflict in that a rider needs to exert energy; in the 1800s men frowned upon women taking part in physical activity). We’re also given a fresh perspective of the progression in dress, as Macy suggests that the initial purpose of bloomers was to keep a woman’s long, layered skirt from tangling in the spokes.

The fact that I was only able to retrieve this text from a local state college and not from any public library branches may be indicative of the fact that it serves more educational purpose than it does pleasure reading, but because of the heavy incorporation of 19th century advertisements I can see it being resourceful for its visuals as well. Ultimately the time period which *Wheels of Change* covers does not reflect most of the feminist movements in the U.S. including contraception, suffrage and equality in the workplace. Of course because the history essentially revolves around the bicycle, the time frame of the book is short-lived and only covers up to the early 1900s, or to the introduction of the automobile. Therefore this book provides a really great introduction to the feminist movement for teens wondering how it started at the local level. Coming from a credible publishing team, the list of sources for quotes, text and photographic content is extensive.

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## **Betsy says**

A history book for kids can do any number of things. It can concentrate on a topic that has been well-documented in adult books, synthesizing and simplifying the text so that a 10-year-old could understand

what is written there. Or it can do original research, never seen before on the adult page, culling from a variety of sources and coming up with something wholly new. The former nonfiction history book is pretty common. Even bestsellers like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Fast Food Nation* end up with younger dinkier versions like the young reader's *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Chew On This*. The latter is rare, but it happens. Yet every once in a while you'll come across something like Chris Barton's *Day-Glo Brothers* which was the first published book EVER to tell the story of the men who invented that particular color scheme. More recently, Sue Macy has gone a similar route with her newest National Geographic title. *Wheels of Change* pairs the history of the bicycle with the history of women's rights, showing quite convincingly how one influenced the other (and vice versa).

Macy begins her book with a short essay by Leah Missbach Day, co-founder of World Bicycle Relief, which vows to provide bikes to those in need. Through her eyes we see women around the globe coming into their own all thanks to the power of the bike. With this idea fresh in our minds, we watch the rise of the bicycle itself. Its history, its influence, the changes it went through, etc. Slowly, we also see how its very appearance affected women. Suddenly girls had a mobility they'd never encountered before. The new invention caught on like wildfire amongst women as diverse as Annie Oakley and Marie Curie. There was some resistance to the idea of girls on bikes, sure, but Ms. Macy takes care to show how bicycles inspired everything from new fashions to daredevil races. Her story stops in the early twentieth century (in tandem with the slow rise of the automobile) and she includes in the back of the book a hugely helpful timeline of "Highlights in cycling and women's history", a list of Resources (including books, web sites, and places to visit like the Bicycle Museum of America and the Metz Bicycle Museum), Sources, and an Index.

The important thing to establish here is how cooped up and restrained (in every possible sense) women were prior to their bicycle-based escapades. There needs to be a palpable sense of release when you see these women zooming about on their two wheeled contraptions, and I would have liked to have seen a little more of the restriction of women prior to seeing them biked up. The book begins by simply delving into the history of the bike itself, from boneshakers to penny farthings. Then the author slowly works in the women. You might not even notice at first, but near the start there will be a page of bicycle-related patents from the late 1880s and 1890s, as created by women. Or there will be a picture showing a woman in 1893 on a "Lady's Pedestrian Hobby-Horse." By the time the book points out that bikes were marketed to women not as a rights issue, but rather with a mere profit-motive in mind, the book has seamlessly integrated the history of women with the history of the bike. Chapter Three backpeddles (ha ha) a little in showing women's fashions and limitations (has anyone ever considered producing an adequately horrifying Gibson Girl Barbie, by the way?), then nicely turns into a discussion of bloomers and other accoutrements women would wear on their new modes of transportation. Personally, I would have liked the third chapter to have been the second, but it's a small quibble.

Not that any of this went unnoticed by the self-designated guardians of public decency, of course. In fact, it's difficult not to compare the bicycle backlash to the teens-with-automobiles backlash of the 50s and 60s. Where there is available travel (and the chance to escape prying eyes) there will also be accusations of licentiousness and lewd behavior. Of course, the critics of women on bikes were not limiting themselves to merely criticizing the bike's ability to escape chaperones, but rather the very idea of a women balancing on such equipment. Was it or was it not ladylike behavior? In light of their talks it's amazing not that women took to the bikes, but that they had access to them in the first place.

A book of this sort could have come across as dry and dull as old toast, were it not for Macy's sparkling writing, the eclectic design of each and every page (a National Geographic staple in books for kids), and the sheer number of photographs to be found here. In fact, I would like to state for the record that Ms. Macy has gone the extra, yet necessary, mile of locating not just images of young white women on bikes but images of

young black women too. There are at least two photographs and one drawn image of African-American women standing beside or riding their bicycles. Too often when we read accounts of women's rights and the rise of feminism, the authors will forget that it wasn't just a movement of white girls. Macy takes care to find what she can on the subject, scant though it might be, to give the book a more rounded historical outlook.

Part of the reason that nonfiction books for kids that produce original research are so rare is that they don't slot neatly into the five historical categories that elementary school tests will be looking for. No standardized test will ever ask for an essay about the relationship between the rise of the bicycle and the rise of women's consciousness and freedom. For that reason, it will take dedicated librarians, teachers, and booksellers to get it into the hands of its intended audience. Kids are helped by the fact that it's so visually stimulating. Constant photographs, drawings, newspaper articles, advertising cards, and other ephemera crop up to aid in the reading. Some children will be the dedicated sorts who start at the beginning and work their way through to the end, while others will prefer to dip in, skim, and keep to the images and their informative captions. Both are legitimate uses of the book. Both serve a purpose.

Out of curiosity, I checked to see how the Library of Congress categorized this particular book. I found that they prefer to place the book under the subject "1. Cycling for women--United States--History." Well, luck to you if you hope to find a companion novel in your children's section under that subject heading. Macy herself provides many a fine title in her Resources section at the back of the book, but you will find all the titles there are for adults. To find such a book for kids is rare and wonderful. To find that the book itself is ALSO rare and wonderful is just a nice plus. A great idea, a fine follow through, and a subject that has been too little considered until now. It's enough to make you want to grab a helmet and a bike and to try it out for yourself.

For ages 10 and up.

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## **Carol says**

I was absolutely delighted by *Wheels of Change: How Women Rode the Bicycle to Freedom (With a Few Flat Tires Along the Way)*. Of course there are other books that outline the history of the bicycle but the unique quality of Macy's is her look at how it changed and shaped the woman's world in the 1800's wheeling us right into the present day.

I was surprised to see that our library is the only library that owns this book in the state of Connecticut and that's a shame as there is a lot to be learned in these pages. History and stories of women and their boneshakers, velocipedes, sidesaddles, tricycles, and tandems are just part of the story. Bicycle fashion, bicycle races, bicycle advertising, women inventors, this book covers it all. There are quotes, tales of prominent women who loved their cycles, and those who thought women would surely go to the devil if they rode. Bicycle songs, bicycle lore, cycling slang, and bicycling magazines fill in, not leaving many gaps. Oh, and did I say the illustrations are great!

There were so many stories I wanted to share after reading this that's it's hard to choose just one.

### **Annie Get Your Wheel-1892**

Sharpshooter Annie Oakley, pictured in the book, gave an interview to Britain's *The Cycle Record* about her new bicycle. "I am delighted with my wheel," she said. "I am equally as fond of it as my horse."

Oakley went on to make the bike part of her shooting act in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, teaching herself to ride without use of the handlebars and shooting at glass balls thrown in the air. Imagine! this in 1892.

Sue Macy's portrait of cycling history, as both sport and means of transportation, moving women forward and enacting change, is not to be missed.

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## **Kathryn says**

"Let me tell you what I think of bicycling. I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. I stand and rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a wheel." -- Susan B. Anthony, February 2nd, 1896.

Though Ms. Anthony was too advanced in years by the time the cycling craze came about to ride one herself, she saw in it a grand advancement for women's rights as the bicycle led them to more freedom of mind, body and spirit. This, then, is the story of how women "rode the bicycle to freedom." And what a delightful, engaging and inspiring story it is!

I wouldn't call myself a "cycling fan" though I rode bikes as a kid and teen, yet this book utterly thrilled me. I had no idea there was such a cycling fad in the late 1800s, nor that the bicycle was such an important instrument in advancing women's rights. This book is as much a love story to the bicycle as it is a fanfare for women of the late-1800s and early-1900s who dared perch upon the "steel horse" and ride their way toward a more fun and fulfilling life. Macy charts the history of the cycling fad from 1817 when Baron Karl von Drais of Germany built the first "running machine" (prototype bicycle) to the dawn of the 20th century and the automobile, focusing on the bicycle's influence on women and highlighting several famous women cyclists of the day.

Though many physicians, religious leaders and other individuals championed the health benefits women received from riding, there were naysayers, too. Some doctors worried that all that riding would damage women's reproductive systems. Some ministers worried that it was not quite good for the soul (and it certainly wasn't good for church attendance since now people had something \*else\* to do on Sundays!). Even some champions of women's rights felt that the bicycle took things too far; "Many a girl has come to her ruin through a spin on a country road," said Charlotte Smith (who had spent over a decade fighting for the rights of female workers), "...the bicycle is the devil's advance agent..." When women's fashion adapted itself for cycling, calling for women to abandon bulky long skirts and suffocating corsets, many men were alarmed: "These ladies assert their claim to rights, which we of bifurcated [two pant legs] raiment are charged with usurping... they design to evict us. They will enter per force the walks of fame, and honor, and wealth, we now occupy, to compete with us, and strip us of our monopoly," said the editors of The New York Times in 1852 -- hum, it seems that, rather than truly believing women were the "weaker sex," many men were starting to worry about them being superior and taking over their roles! ;-)

I could go on and on about the many charming and fascinating stories contained in this book, but instead I urge you to read it for yourself! In addition to the stellar history, the book is a visual delight, full of vintage advertisements and photographs featuring women cycling. Special segments include "Cycling slang," "Cycling songs," ("Bicycle Built for Two" is the only one of the hundreds and hundreds of songs composed about cycling to stand the test of time), "The Cycling Press" (newspapers devoted to cycling), and "Selling with Cycles" (advertisements). A timeline at the back features "Highlights in Cycling and Women's History."

Highly recommended to anyone interested in the history of cycling, but even more so to those interested in exploring a fascinating and eye-opening chapter in the history of the women's rights movement. (I think adults will love it. It's a bit too advanced for younger picture book readers, but should be suitable for older elementary on up.)

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### **Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says**

Wow. I had no idea that bicycles had such a profound effect upon American society. This book opened my eyes. Bicycles were cheaper than horses, so more people had transportation, especially women. Because of bicycles, a movement began to pave roads for smoother and less hazardous rides. (And here I thought the automobile started that.) Because of bicycles, women began to adopt more comfortable styles of dress, such as bloomers and shorter skirts. (And here I thought these were just styles adopted by women to express independence and equality to men.) Women even participated in bicycle racing and endurance races--and won. Of course, the automobile was taking over by the turn of the century as the transportation choice, but it was the bicycle that started it.

The development of the bicycle fascinated me. Early predecessors, called draisines or hobbyhorses, were propelled by one's feet--rather clumsy, I would think, but quicker than walking. The pennyfarthings (one giant wheel and one tiny wheel) scare me--I don't think I could ever ride one of those for fear of flying over the handlebars. Those things had no kickstands, and early ones had no brakes. In the early ones, too, the pedals were located much more forward rather than beneath the saddle, so that one's feet were stretched out almost straight in front of you to peddle. Bikes for the ladies were made with sidesaddles--can you imagine? I don't know how they were able to keep those upright. Some bikes also seem to have footrests attached to the front part of the frame (see page 52). If both feet were on the foot rests, how did the bike not fall over? In one illustration, a woman seems to have her feet on the rests while coasting downhill. Bikes as we know them today, with two equally-sized wheels, developed later and were called safeties.

Macy not only talks about the history of the bike, but also touches upon how it influenced American culture, by appearing in advertising, songs, language, and literature. It was so popular that bicycling magazines were published, some just for women. She provides brief biographies of some of the women who became famous because of bicycles. Some even invented and patented improvements to the bike.

The foreword to the book is written by Leah Missbach Day, a women who founded the World Bicycle Relief organization, which works to get bicycles into the hands of people in Africa and in disaster-stricken areas such as Sri Lanka after the tsunami of 2004. What a great idea! The bicycle is working even today to change lives.

The only problem--a small one--that I have with this book are 3 errors that should have been caught by the editors. On pages 15 and 54 each there is a word spelled wrong, and on page 27 there is a reference to a photo that isn't present on the page. Aside from that, this is a fabulous and fascinating book that I'm going to have to purchase for my own collection. I'll also have to check into the print and web sources listed at the back of the book for further research.

Excellent, and highly recommended!

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## Sesana says

Brief, with plenty of illustrations, *Wheels of Change* ended up being a much more interesting read than I had thought it would. Macy argues that the bicycle, with its inherent freedom of movement and the freedom of clothing that successfully riding one required, was an important factor in the women's movement at the time. It makes immediate sense, of course. For most young women, this would have been their first and only taste of freedom, something that they would have been unwilling to entirely give up off the bike. It's easy to forget just how much women were restricted in those days, and Macy does a good job of reminding the reader. I won't soon forget the women who had hated to walk, because her skirts made it too difficult to do so. Nor will I forget the doctors who were more concerned about the future ability of women to bear children than they were in the present health and well-being of the women themselves. Overall, it was an engaging read.

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## Katie says

Bicycle history and first-wave feminism are deftly woven into a five-chapter narrative tracing the impact of the "silent steed" on 19th-century America. The historical tour begins in the 1870s, when Albert Pope imported the bicycle industry from England, and then navigates the social commentary of the 1890s concerning women on bicycles. Next the book delves into the significant fashion changes wrought by this new form of transportation and the daring exploits of the first female competitive cyclists. The concluding chapter situates the bicycle amid the broad social change at the turn of the century. Stops along the way feature women inventors, activists, and athletes, and also highlight the role of bicycles in the pop culture of the era. Fascinating archival images illustrate the text at every turn, and the author carefully attributes each quote and picture in captions and appendices. The intriguing focus of this history may provide a strong draw, but it is the rich detail that will ultimately captivate readers and inspire further exploration in a number of directions.

I love the way this book got me excited about history from so many different angles: bicycle design, transportation infrastructure, fashion, women's suffrage, poster art, and biographies galore! It also inspired me to look at the present world with renewed curiosity and enthusiasm. I can't wait to introduce it to many potential readers.

The only disappointing aspect is its somewhat restrictive design. The scrapbook layout works hard to cram as much content as possible into a slim volume of 100 pages and average height, with the result that many background images are compromised. I wish the publisher had let the format expand in height or girth and allowed the rich detail room to breathe.

My *Wheels of Change* haiku:

ladies wear bloomers  
a controversial fashion  
bicycle to blame

And my *Wheels of Change* book trailer (both created for the young adult literature course at the University of Washington Information School): <http://youtu.be/h5Zc67m02cA>



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## **Cynda says**

Apparently written for young people with many graphics and shortness of text. Despite it being written for young people, the book is informative. I had no idea of how much freedom a bicycle allowed women and how it changed their lives and the experience and changed the social experience. Women could go to the market, fetch the doctor, meet up with friends, especially as roads were improved to accommodate the bicyclists, roads that also benefitted others, such as farmers carrying their goods to market. Better roads even increased the value of farmer's land. So cyclists, many women, helped improve the lives of many more.

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## **Caitlin says**

Wheels of Change is a relatively short, fun look at the history of cycling in the United States and how the bicycling craze contributed to the movement for women's independence.

There are only a few chapters and they deal with the history of the bicycle including the move to mass manufacture them via Alexander Pope and the Columbia Bicycling company, the ways in which women became involved in riding bicycles and the freedom that this added mobility gave them, some of the challenges faced by women (including outrage about them wanting to wear more pants-like clothing rather than corsets and crinolines) and even some of the well known female bicycling racers who made a name for themselves in the press and throughout the U.S.

What really makes Wheels of Change a fascinating book is the great use of old photos and advertising which dominate the chapters. The text is simple, fun and easy to read and the photos supplementing it make it feel less like reading a history book and more like watching a documentary. Even for teens who aren't fans of non-fiction, I think Wheels of Change could be an entertaining foray into the genre.

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## **Anastasia says**

This is such a great little book. It's billed as a kids' book, but I don't really think it is one. It's a great, short history of the intersection between women's history and the rise of the bicycle. The section on racing and long distance cycling records set by women was my favorite part. I can't believe how many miles some of those women rode (one woman did a century [100 miles] EVERY day for 20 days in a row!).

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## **Rebecca Binks says**

Wheels of Change was a finalist in the Excellence in Young Adult Nonfiction category for YALSA-ALA in 2011. It uses blended-narrative form to reveal the impact that the bicycle has had on the lives of women. Women today take a lot of their freedoms for granted, but the bicycle was key in terms of both increase self-reliant mobility and less restrictive clothing for women. Many would be shocked to know that the bicycle was initially considered to lead girls "into paths that lead directly to sin." One fact that really struck me was that "doctors and others had argued that any type of physical activity other than dance would jeopardize

[young women's] ability to have children." I think it is important for all to understand how restrictive woman's lives used to be. It is also surprising for me to learn what a radical role bicycles played in woman's lives, because they are such an emblem of childhood for both boys and girls today.

The book is filled with photos, maps, and other primary sources as support. It is well-researched, but at times I found the layout to be slightly busy.

I personally enjoyed this book because my family was involved in bicycle manufacturing from the early 1900s to the mid-1960s. The family company, Lobdell Emery, manufactured bicycle seats along with steam-bent wooden wheel rims.

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### **Heidi says**

There are plenty of bright spots in this piece, like the forward written by World Bicycle Relief co-founder Leah Missbach Day and the graphic quality of photographs, advertisements, and illustrations; my rating relates to the sometimes unfriendly page breaks, placement of features, and the book's overall coherence. Although I loved the idea of the infographic toward the end, I wish it had synthesized the book's premise that the bicycle and women's freedom are interrelated.

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### **Suzette Kunz says**

This is a fun history of women and bicycling. Macy makes the point that bicycles offered women more freedom and tied in with other changes in women's rights. This quote was funny: "I can't see but that a wheel (bike) is just as good company as most husbands. I would as well talk to one inanimate object as another; and I'd a great deal rather talk to one that can't answer than one that won't."

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### **Barbara says**

This is an incredibly informative book that is a treat to read. I've always been a history buff despite the dearth of material on women in the history books I studied in school. Had I been lucky enough to have seen this book as a middle grader, I would have snapped it up. Macy shows how the invention and subsequent popularity of the bicycle led to more freedom for women. Suddenly, women were able to move from place to place on their own, and with that mobility came a need for more freedom, often in the form of less restrictive clothing. Macy reports all this with great glee, writing as though the events she is describing from the 1880s and 1890s had just happened. She even includes detours, details about record-setting women cyclists, and some of the comments made by those who opposed the bicycle because of its tendency to encourage girls along sinful pathways. Not only does the book contain photographs, but it also makes use of trading cards, advertisements, magazine covers, and newspaper clippings. It even contains song lyrics about bicycles. Backmatter includes a graphic in the shape of a wheel that shows the history of cycling and women's history. Obviously, we have come a long way, baby, and this book shows one of the reasons why.

