

The bicycle explosion: a population problem in Happy Valley

By Jeff DeBray



Blame it on Kirkpatrick Macmillan of Dumfriesshire, Scotland.

The name may not be familiar, but the vehicle he is credited with inventing has provided millions of Americans with a convenient and pleasurable form of transportation, while at the same time incurring the wrath of motorists and pedestrians alike.

The vehicle, commonly called a bike, is defined by Encyclopedia Britannica as a light, two-wheeled, steerable vehicle propelled by human power. To others, it's just another four-letter word.

Whatever it's called, its popularity cannot be denied. Last year, bikes outsold every other form of transportation, including the automobile. But while the sale of bikes is rapidly on the rise (from 1961 to 1971 sales and usage rose more than 100 per cent), so have the number of accidents they have been involved in. During the same period, the number of deaths involving bicycles increased 70 per cent, as opposed to a 44 per cent rise in automobile deaths, according to National Safety Council figures.

This dramatic increase in bike usage and accidents has created a public clamor in many circles for stricter regulations governing bike usage, and stricter enforcement of those regulations. But the often sporadic enforcement of the regulations, and a general ignorance of them by bikeriders, has left many cyclists in the dark.

State College has not been immune to its share of bike problems. In recent weeks, bike riding and regulations have been a highly volatile issue on campus and in town. Last week's Borough Council action, in agreeing to consider recommending a study jointly with the University, may eventually help to dispel the cloud of uncertainty and ignorance of bike regulations now ominously hanging over Happy Valley.

Meantime, the problem remains, and many cyclists are feeling the effects right where it hurts most — in the wallet.

In addition to receiving tickets, one of many sore spots with cyclists, some bike riders must buy additional equipment, including headlights, tail lights and bells, for their bikes to meet the University and borough regulations.

Cyclists with shiny new 10-speeds with all the trimmings, don't have to worry about putting out a few extra bucks for additional equipment. They may have bigger headaches, though, when they find their bike has been added to the Department of Safety's "hot list."

Ten-speeds are more frequently stolen than other bikes, according to Safety's Community Relations Officer Marvin Freed, although less-expensive bikes are prey for bike-snatchers too.

Bike thefts at the University jumped from 34 in 1971 to 152 in 1972, a 400 per cent increase. And since the first of this year, 121 bikes have been reported stolen.

"If there's any pattern to bike thefts, it's that more happen over weekends, and over holiday and term breaks," as compared to the rest of the week, Freed said.

Stolen bikes are rarely recovered, Freed added.

"Recovery is a lot easier, though if they're registered, because we've got the license (serial) number to turn to," he said.

To prevent theft, the best security, is a heavy, steel bicycle chain. But if your bike is chained to "any handrail, handrail post, or door attachment," you may receive a \$1 ticket from the Department of Safety.

Moving violations, including failure to stop at stop signs, or lights, not yielding the right of way to pedestrians, riding on paths or walkways and passing on the left, could earn a \$5 ticket. Failure to register bikes also is a \$5 violation.

These are a few of a strict set of registration and regulation requirements the Department of Safety maintains. If you've gotten away with any of these violations in the past, you may not be so lucky the next time around.

A directive went into effect last week, clamping down on these regulations, according to Freed.

"There are a lot more tickets being given out now than before," he noted. "One of the reasons we had to put the enforcement into effect was because of complaints from drivers and pedestrians."

According to Freed, a similar directive went into effect recently regarding borough regulations. State College regulations also are strict, although their enforcement has been sporadic and infrequent, until recently.

But State College Police Chief Herbert Straley denies there has been any such borough directive.

"There have never been any written directives ordering a crackdown on bicycles coming from this office," Straley claims. He said there have been no oral directives, either, and that he is unaware of any outside department directives.

But there seems to be a difference of opinion among borough officials, some of whom claim a directive has been issued.

Borough Council President Lawrence Perez said he believes a directive, asking for stricter enforcement of bike regulations was handed down by the chief of police. Informed that Straley denied this, Perez said, "Well, where did he say it could have come from then? The only other place is the manager's office."

Borough Manager Carl Fairbanks