

## Quarterly Question *Why fewer women cycle commuters?*

*This issue's Quarterly Question was submitted by Linda Keenan of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association. She asked "Why are so many more male [bicycle] commuters than female?" It's been a popular question, judging by the mail!*

### **Mary Frances Dunham** **Transportation Alternatives, NY NY**

In pondering the question of why there are so many fewer women than men cycling commuters in this country, I think you have to consider at least two groups of women: white collar workers and blue collar workers. (I distinguish "commuter" cycling from "commercial" cycling which is to be omitted here.)

In the case of white collar women, dressing for both cycling and office work presents a problem. Although there are solutions (and I suggest reading a hilarious article about them in the BikeReport some years ago), many women cyclists who may be already timid about riding in city traffic may also find the dress problem bothersome enough to be the determining factor in deciding to stick with public transportation, car pools, etc.

In the case of blue collar women, cycling to work has both economic and cultural drawbacks. Riding a bicycle under city conditions in this country may involve unexpected expenses in case of an accident. For a woman with the responsibility of children, cycling to work is taking risks that public transportation, be it ever so poorly run, can spare her. Besides, if she lives in a neighborhood where families have cars, a blue collar woman may feel she is demeaning herself by setting out on a bicycle—people might think she was too poor to do anything else.

My white collar friends in New York City think that my commuting by bicycle is eccentric, but acceptable. My blue collar friends fear for my safety and hope that I have a reliable "cushion" of financial help in case of lateness to work or an accident.

Of course the association of bicycle transportation with a low income applies to men

as much as to women in the blue collar group. But, by discouraging both sexes in this group, the prestige issue reduces the count of bicycle commuters in the blue collar group as a whole, leaving the largest number of bicycle commuters to be in the white collar group where many women may be discouraged enough by the dress problem to forego commuting by bicycle.

### **Alexander Zuckermann** **East Bay Bicycle Coalition, Oakland CA**

Commuting in an urban environment takes guts and, I believe, an iron commitment. Sharing the road with autos and trucks requires a certain amount of daring, adventure and, of course, skill. Most recreational bicyclists I meet on weekend rides would not even consider commuting in traffic and recently I have found well over half of recreational riders are female. A woman is not as likely as a man to get out there and get mixed up in traffic. Besides there is the little matter of smelling good. In America sweat is considered a no-no and women have more at stake arriving at work properly attired.

### **James Dick, Centralia WA**

I would first ask what evidence there is to show that the ratio of sexes among commuters differs significantly from that among bicyclists over the age of fifteen. I suspect that the ratios are not significantly different. We are talking about a group at the extreme end of the bicycling population, about which there are few valid statistics.

With that let us generalize and talk about why more commuters do not bicycle to work. The answers will vary between areas of different populations. I was raised in a large city, but I have lived mostly in an area of about 20,000 population.

The basic reason for not bicycling to work is a lack of commitment to doing so. First, people have been reared to expect to commute by auto. Or to commute by common carrier if available and less inconvenient than by auto. Second, people perceive a lack of time for traveling between home and

workplace and believe the auto to be faster. So use an auto (and later spend an hour or more at the Health Spa).

Third, not everyone lives in small towns where bicycle-commuting is a matter of only five to 30 minutes. Many people can't conceive of riding a bicycle for 30 minutes. Fourth, people don't want the hassle of carrying lunch, homework, etc. on a bike; it is easier to haul that stuff in a car. Fifth, few people are committed to, or prepared for, riding in inclement weather. In Washington State, if you don't do it in the rain, you don't do it.

Undoubtedly, someone will suggest as reasons for not commuting that the auto traffic is too dense and fast, that the roads are too narrow, or that the employer has not provided special locker and shower facilities. These reasons may have a smidgen of validity in the larger cities, but I believe they are more likely to be excuses.

I recall one racer so committed to his bike that he commuted 50-miles one-way daily. For more than ten school years, a female teacher has cycled past my house enroute to work. I can count on two hands the men I see bicycling to work. Local traffic counts do not compare with those in many larger cities. And our motorists are quite courteous to bicyclists. I'd say the number of working bicycle-commuters is generally far less than the number of students who bicycle to junior high, and that is a negligible proportion of the student body. In most towns of perhaps 50,000 population or less, a bicyclist should find an acceptable route to work. And one can change clothes in the toilet room if necessary. It is mainly a case of commitment.

### **Joyce McAlister, Bicycle Coordinator** **Austin TX**

Women tend to be more afraid of traffic. Men are more adventurous and aggressive, therefore more able to deal with traffic. Also, physical demands and concern for proper dress and hair are concerns women have when debating whether to commute or not. Women also tend to be more vulnerable to harassment which often times occurs while cycling. Regarding physical demands,

I must note that Austin's terrain has a great number of hills.

In talking with the bike shops around Austin, I find that 70% of all new bike sales are to women, and that they are selling great numbers of all types of bike racks for autos which leads me to believe that a lot of people like to drive to the outskirts of town to do their cycling.

### **Cynthia McArthur, MN Community** **Bicycle Safety Project, St Paul, MN**

I think the design and type of bicycle has a lot to do with how practical it is for women to commute. The standard down-handlebar, multi-speed 27" bicycle is not a very comfortable or practical bike for a lot of riders.

It hasn't been that many years since a women's seat came out and women didn't have to feel inferior about why riding was uncomfortable... that it wasn't a matter of "getting in shape" or "being tough" but that there was a real anatomical reason for the discomfort we felt. The rise in popularity and availability of the "commuter" or ATB type bike has reopened the door to bicycling for many people who shelved it after attempting to enjoy bicycling on the traditional multi-speed bike.

The diamond frame bike is not as practical as a mixte frame but is better than the cut frame (otherwise known as a "woman's frame"). When there are so few practical choices, to choose not to ride becomes a practical choice. I feel the mixte frame hasn't gotten a fair billing and isn't available within the high to medium range in terms of price, components, etc.

The cut frame is usually a heavier bike, has lower quality parts and isn't as comfortable to ride. Riding a bike with upright bars will often give an average to inexperienced rider both a real and perceived sense of safety and comfort. Both senses are important to address. Fit and sizing of the bicycle can make the difference between riding in comfort and not riding. I am continually amazed at my students in my bike repair classes who have rediscovered biking after changing bikes or changing their present bike to fit them.

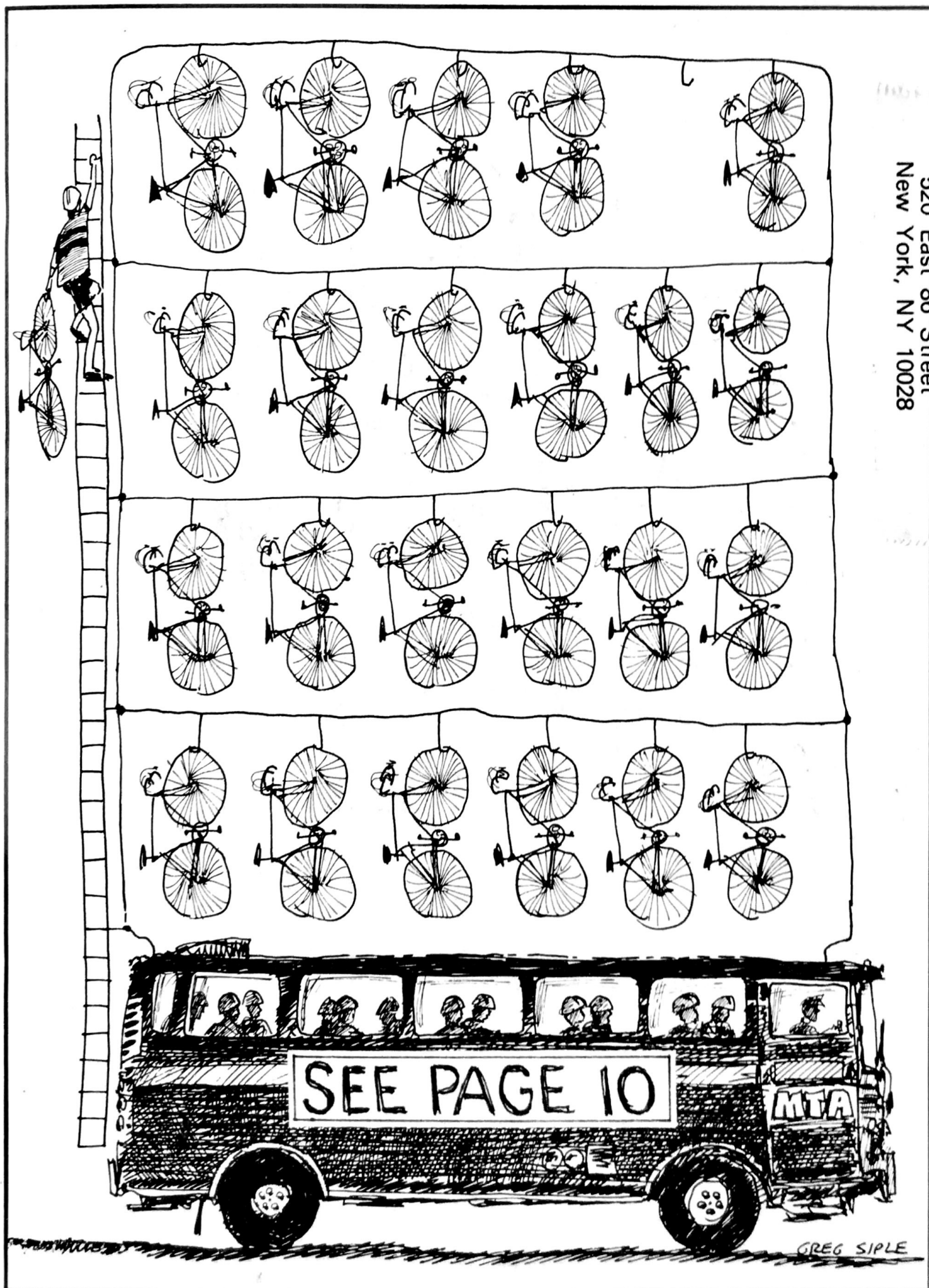
If a woman is commuting or riding mostly

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 15, 16-21, 21-22 (MFD), 27 (MFD), 27, 28  
Helmets

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