

# AFTERMATH

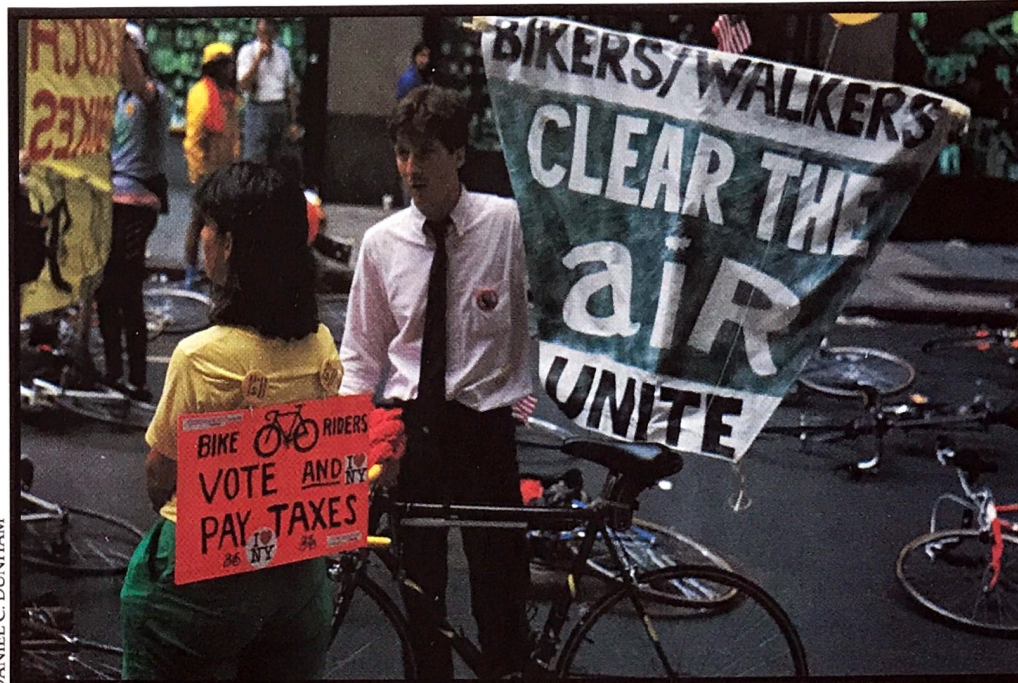
by Mary Frances Dunham

**A**s I was pedaling down Second Avenue recently, a bicycle messenger slowed his pace to speak to me. "Didn't I see you two years ago?" he asked. I guessed that he was referring to the street demonstrations during the summer of '87, when thousands of New York cyclists, myself included, joined together to protest the Mayor's proposed ban on cycling in mid-Manhattan. As an older woman among mostly young people, I was a conspicuous participant. I carried a sign that said: "Grandmas cycle too!"

"Yes," I answered. "I must have seen you, too."

"I saw you," he affirmed as he picked up speed. "Thanks!" he called back. "You people saved our jobs!" I thanked him in return, but he was already far ahead.

This was one of several such experiences lately. Now, well over a year since our court victories (Thank you, L.A.W., for your help!) and almost a year since the



One of the demonstrations that attracted interest groups from all parts of the city.

Mayor gave up the ban for good, I was pleased to know the fight was remembered.

Many non-messenger cyclists like myself protested the ban not just in sympathy for the messengers, who bore the brunt of blame for reckless cycling and whose vital routes were to be banned, but because we ourselves were angered. Cyclists as a group were being punished for the sins of individuals. We were scapegoats for the chronic failure of the city government to control its rampant traffic disorder. Some cyclists, non-messengers as well as messengers, were indeed irresponsible, but the city had done little to educate them or to chastise the larger and more offending sectors of traffic—motorists and pedestrians. Even New York's club cyclists, generally uninterested in pro-bike activism, joined the protest against the threat to the cycling community.

We non-messengers also entered the fray because it was a golden opportunity to advertise the virtues of bicycle transportation and to celebrate its existence where it was most maligned—in the heart of the city. The messengers understood this evangelistic aspect of the non-messenger

collaboration. They acknowledged our mission with more good will than bemusement. Both types of cyclist rooted for the other and reinforced the other's modes of action.



Gathering for a demonstration.



Bicycle messengers prepare for Labor Day Parade.





*Bicycle messengers joining the Labor Day parade.*

As I look back on the nine months that it took to change the Mayor's mind, I wonder how far we succeeded in improving our status as city cyclists. Did we mollify the pedestrians whose complaints against us had provoked the ban? Did we still appear to be "killers," "scofflaws," and, at best, bothersome "eccentrics"? When we testified at government hearings, did we sway the minds of political leaders more than temporarily? All those City Council members who finally urged the Mayor to drop the ban—how much did they really care about the needs of New York cyclists?

I, for one, doubt that we made many converts, either outside or within the government. Nevertheless, we made strategic progress: we matured as a commu-

nity and we grew in numbers of active members.

New York cyclists have long been factious individualists, not easily organized, although we share many problems. However, in reaction to the Mayor's proclamation, we started to cooperate with each other—argumentatively in our first meetings, but more cohesively as talk engendered action.

We became a formidable host. Our squadrons included many such gifted volunteers as Stephen Athineos, our streetwise Dionysian figurehead; Steve Stollman, perennial goad for the avant-garde; Roger Herz, veteran gadfly of government laggards; Charlie Kamonoff, articulate framer of our aims; George Bliss, talented creator of our best visuals; and



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*Making sure all voices are heard.*

gentle James Holcomb, our top graphic artist. As well as "Athineos," first among equals, there were the faithful "Jerries"—"Jerry One" and "Jerry Two"—who led our processions through rush hour traffic; "R.C.," "J.R.," "B\*C\*," "Ollie," "Albert," and many others took charge where they were needed. A bicycle messenger recently arrived from San Francisco, Leona Gonsalves grew to be one of the protest's most eloquent and effective organizers. Leona has since gone on to become the Assistant Director for Transportation Alternatives (TA).

We became memorable campaigners. Messengers in exotic garb and work-a-day commuters, myself among them, circled by the hundreds through central Manhattan at least once a week. We chanted "Fifth! Park! and Madison!" (the names of the banned avenues) while wooing our spectators with pro-bike signs and with flyers that urged New Yorkers to observe traffic safety rules.

We became adept polemicists for press and media interviews. When we attended government meetings and public hearings, our old-guard pro-bikers surpassed themselves in oratory and shy novitiates revealed themselves as fluent speakers.

We acquired devoted chroniclers. Besides the daily press reporters who publicized our protests, some journalists, photographers, and film makers actually joined us. Fatherly Daniel "Pops" Perez, editor of *El Especial*, accompanied our street demonstrations with a van covered with posters. "Dragan" of Yugoslavia, clad always in black, and "Marlene" from the Upper East Side filmed us from brainstorming sessions to public demonstrations and City Hall hearings. These aux-

DANIEL C. DUNHAM



iliaries enhanced our sense of importance by their dedicated presence and rewarded us with retrospects we could enjoy later.

Our forces increased. Messengers rallied messengers, many of whom would otherwise have shunned meetings and organized causes. Transportation Alternatives, a bicycle advocacy group born in the early 70s but exhausted by the early 80s, had revived in time to supply a venue for an increasing number of new members and sympathizers. Non-cyclists—wheelchair riders and pedestrians—also swelled our ranks. Not since the transit strike of 1980, when pedestrians and cyclists flooded into the city by the thousands, had New York seen so much unmotorized traffic occupying its streets.

Since our victory we have taken more pride in ourselves as a group and we cycle more consciously to please the public. At the moment, the hot winds of its disfavor seem to have cooled. Media reporting on bicycling misdemeanors has almost disappeared and the number of pedestrian-bicyclist accidents reported to the police has come down almost 30% in just two years. Meanwhile, the NYC Department of Transportation is listening up more attentively and with more respect than it has shown before.

Just the other day, WCBS-TV devoted news time to Dr. Bob Arnot's documentary film on city cycling, a first showing here of its kind. The film compares the adverse cycling conditions in New York to the encouraging amenities afforded to cyclists in Palo Alto, thanks in part to the work of Councilwoman Ellen Fletcher. In the film, Dr. Arnot comments that the

contrast is due not so much to a difference in the physical conditions of the two cities as a difference in their respective attitudes towards bicycles as vehicles. New York's Transportation Commissioner, Ross Sandler, appears briefly and noncommittally; he and New York viewers of the film may now realize that city cycling is not just an "issue," but a valuable institution that our city should foster more seriously.

Maybe bicycles on city streets are still a concept too alien, "futuristic," or "Third World" for most New Yorkers to embrace at present; we have a long way to go before they are welcome here. However, as city dwellers become more aware of how they are "fouling their nest" with excessive car use, the desire for more mass transit and for more human-powered vehicles to replace motorized ones may, at last, take root in New York as it seems to have done in Palo Alto.

The fight that began against a decreed ban on cycling continues today as we protest the de facto ban—the threatening traffic, bicycle thefts, and lack of parking facilities—that deter the City's one million recreational riders from cycling for transportation. Now we attend the Department of Transportation Bicycle Advisory Committee meetings with sharpened demands and in unprecedented numbers. We are exploring ways to enlist support from the Police Department, taxi drivers, and others whose cooperation we need. We are seeking to correct the lack of bicycle education for the city's children. We continue to exhort the public to observe traffic rules and to value bicycle transportation.

At this printing, Transportation Alternatives has initiated or participated as a group in a number of springtime events. About 100 cyclists, mostly TA members, were cheered by onlookers as they rode through Manhattan in an Earth Day parade on April 22, 1989. TA members conducted a bicycle rodeo as part of "Safe Cycling Day," sponsored by city agencies in Brooklyn on April 29. On Monday, May 1, TA accompanied city council members and commissioners who rode on borrowed bicycles along the car blocked Sixth Ave. bicycle lane for a bit of consciousness raising concerning cycling conditions in the city. TA has planned Wednesday, May 17, as "Bike to Work Day," with volunteers who will escort novice bicycle commuters and staff tables on bridges and at main intersections, handing out flyers and encouraging the public to use their bicycles for transportation. We are planning more such events, introducing our cause to the widest public possible.

We city cyclists may be mavericks, but we are certainly justified in our determination. More properly, our cause lies near the center of mankind's deepening concern for a healthful environment and a society built to human scale. We are determined to belong to this movement and to help it grow.

*Since 1970, Mary Frances Dunham has used a bicycle for transportation in New York City. She has taught Bengali literature and music and is a member of Transportation Alternatives and Bicycle Transportation Action.*



A group of bicycle messengers meet to plan involvement in upcoming demonstrations.



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## The Great Australian Rain Ride







Bicycles in America p.16



Australia p.7



Aftermath p.17

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# BICYCLE USA

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## FEATURES

- 7 **The Great Australian Rain Ride** *by Arlene Plevin*  
A tour down under, where the koalas, kangaroos, wombats, and wet cyclists roam.
- 16 **Bicycles in America** *by T. A. Gordon*  
Return to a time when bikes had built-in horns and were limited only by the imagination of the children riding them.
- 17 **Aftermath** *by Mary Frances Dunham*  
Thoughts on the outcome of the bike ban implemented two years ago in New York City.

## DEPARTMENTS

- 2 **Editorial: Some Thoughts on Multi-Purpose Bicycling** *by Linda Keenan*  
Who can be encouraged to bicycle?

### Letters

### League Notes

Election Results...110th Anniversary...PEDAL FOR POWER.

### Cycle News

National Bike Month...Florida Legislative Efforts...HPV Race...Pedaling Utah...Adopt-a-Highway.

- 6 **Club Plunderings**
- 12 **What's New** *by Harold Wooster*  
Bikemaran...Side by Side...Product Review...Calling All Bikies: A Test on Your Favorite Obsession.
- 14 **Government Relations** *by Andrew Clarke*  
Summer can be the best time for bicycling and advocacy.
- 15 **Dear Doctor** *by Stephen Giles, M.D.*  
Can you suffer from exercise withdrawal?
- 22 **Calendar**
- 30 **Classifieds**

## COVER

Dan Burden shot this photo of cyclists on the Great Australian Bicentennial Bike Ride moments before they became considerably less dry.