

BICYCLE BLUEPRINT; Transportation Alternatives 1993

<http://transalt.org/sites/default/files/resources/blueprint/features/parkandmad.html>

by Mary Frances Dunham

“Fifth, Park and Madison”



Photo: Mary Frances Dunham at 1990 T.A. Queensboro Bridge rally.

Photo: Bill Waltzer.

In July 1987, Mayor Ed Koch moved to prohibit bicycle-riding on three major Manhattan avenues during weekdays. Cyclists responded with an uproarious campaign to win back public opinion and overturn the Midtown Bike Ban. How this campaign unified and invigorated the bicycle community was recounted by Mary Frances Dunham, a longtime cycling activist, in the July/August 1989 Bicycle USA, published by the League of American Wheelmen. Copyright © Bicycle USA, 1989.

As 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, almost a year since the Mayor gave up the ban, I was pleased to know the fight was remembered.

Many 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 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 cyclists rooted for the other and reinforced the other's modes of action.

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 provided the ban? Did we still appear to be "killers," "scofflaws," or, 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. Nevertheless, we made strategic progress. We matured as a community and we grew in numbers.

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 such gifted volunteers as messenger Stephen Athineos, our streetwise Dionysian figurehead; Steve Stollman, perennial goad for the avant-garde; Roger Herz, veteran gadfly of government laggards; Charlie Komanoff, articulate framer of our aims; George Bliss, talented creator of our best visuals; and gentle James Holcomb, our top graphic artist. As well, 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. Leona Gonsalves, a bicycle messenger recently arrived from San Francisco, grew to be one of the protest's most eloquent and effective organizers. Leona has since joined the staff of Transportation Alternatives.

We became memorable campaigners. Messengers in colorful cycling 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 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 Ilic from 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 auxiliaries 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 revived its street-activist spirit from the '70s and supplied a venue for new members and sympathizers. Wheelchair riders and pedestrians swelled our ranks. Not since the 1980 transit strike, 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. The NYC Department of Transportation is listening more attentively and with more respect than it has shown before.

Just the other day, the CBS national evening news showed Dr. Bob Arnot's documentary film on city cycling, a first of its kind. The film compares the adverse cycling conditions in New York to the amenities afforded cyclists in Palo Alto. In the film, Dr. Arnot comments that the contrast is due not so much to the difference in the physical conditions of the two cities as a difference in their respective attitudes toward bicycles as vehicles. New York's Transportation Commissioner 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 better transit and for 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 T.A. members, were cheered by onlookers as they rode through Manhattan in an Earth Day parade on April 22, 1989. T.A. members conducted a bicycle rodeo as part of "Safe Cycling Day," sponsored by city agencies in Brooklyn on April 29. On May 1, T.A. accompanied City Council members and commissioners who rode on borrowed bicycles along the car-blocked Sixth Avenue bicycle lane for a bit of consciousness-raising concerning cycling conditions in the city. On May 17, "Bike to Work Day," T.A. volunteers 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 justified in our determination. 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.