

# BIKING IN THE BAD OLD DAYS

My bicycle awakening came on January 19, 1970. Yes, there was a woman involved, but that's another story.

On my morning commute aboard the "F" train from my parents' apartment in Windsor Terrace to Cooper Union in the East Village, there was a moment when I realized I never wanted to ride the subway again. It was probably right after the train pulled out of the elevated 4th Avenue and 9th Street stop in Brooklyn. I looked up and saw...Manhattan shining brightly, the subway car its dark counterpoint. On this cold day, two major themes of my life started: Manhattan and bicycling.

I went to my first class. Cut my second, and walked to the neighborhood savings bank (now mostly extinct), and withdrew \$100 of my scholarship money. My friend, bicycle mentor, and ex-classmate Francis worked at Stuyvesant Bikes, a powerhouse of bicycle retail. I purchased a three-speed black Raleigh, a rack with a spring, and a lock. Real bicycle helmets were a thing of the future.

I rode back to school and locked up, to the disbelief and awe of my classmates. I remember freezing on the way home, and searching for the Brooklyn Bridge stairway. I was hooked—on bicycling, and on Manhattan; Chinatown, Little Italy, the Bowery bums, the Brooklyn Bridge. That night, I saw the Statue of Liberty from the bridge for the first time, I'll never forget it. When I arrived home, my mother was freaked. She knew bicycling was a phase I would outgrow.

The bike lasted two weeks.

Within 90 minutes, I was walking out of Stuyvesant Bikes with my second bike and a better chain. This bike lasted nine months. U-locks were two years, and secure chains 25 years, in the future.

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An advocate was born one fine spring day in 1971. I was pedaling off the Brooklyn Bridge, ready to dismount for the sixth set of steps that channeled everyone off (and under) the bridge. A fellow cyclist was dismantling a strip of fence beside the steps. It was an "Aha!" moment, and I saw the Holy Grail: direct access to Centre Street. I pulled out my tools and helped. The City replaced the fence a few months later. It lasted a day.

Shortly afterward, I was cycling past the Municipal Building, headed north, when I was knocked from my bike. I remember lying on the ground, taking inventory: Arms and legs work, head seems okay. A woman started yelling at me for scratching her car. Yep, there was a gouge about four feet long where my handlebar took the paint off her side panel. My anger was fully engaged. A polite pedestrian kept me down and saved me from causing an "incident." The police refused to take a report, as I wasn't really hurt and my damaged property was "only a bicycle."

Four years later, I became Executive Director of Transportation Alternatives, and three years after that I opened my bike shop, Bicycle Habitat, all because of a woman whose name I never knew, a friend who filled my head with cycling, a youthful rebelliousness, an unknown stranger showing me things could change, and the drivers who spit at me—especially those who hit me.

When all is said and done, it's the small moments that create our lives.

*Charlie McCorkell is the owner of Bicycle Habitat in SoHo and has logged tens of thousands of bicycle miles on the streets of NYC.*