

Community Bike Ride

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – May 6, 2012

Since becoming a regular columnist, I've avoided writing about trails or bicycles. I get type-cast as an advocate, and there are so many other great topics. But, it's Bike Month, so I can't resist reflecting on the wonders of two-wheeled, self-propelled transportation.

The League of American Bicyclists declared May National Bike Month in 1956 and they've celebrated for 55 years. Today, at 3 pm on the Square, Mayor Ronnie Johnston will proclaim May 2012 Bike Month in Covington, before the monthly Community Bike Ride. It's a gentle, family-friendly ride, suitable for kids and adults of all ages. Join the fun.

I could write about the 60+ million Americans who bike regularly. I could highlight a 70% increase in bicycle commuting in American cities this past decade. Or, I could recite the frightening US health statistics for obesity-related illnesses and research showing active transportation boosts health and saves lives.

But, the joy of bicycling isn't the numbers. It's a deeply personal experience. This is mine.

Like most kids in America's suburbs in the 60s and 70s, biking was essential to my childhood. From the candy-apple-red Huffy of adolescence to the sky-blue 10-speed I rode to high school, a bicycle was freedom. My friends and I found two-wheeled adventure in every direction, discovering new places, people, and experiences. As Sheryl Crow sang: "Every day is a winding road..."

At 16, I found new freedom in a car. The 10-speed languished, neglected and dust-covered, in my parents' basement and eventually some junk heap.

Life went on, and driving lost some luster. Two or three hours a day in traffic was suddenly not so freeing. Every day was a grinding road.

In 1986, Californian Greg LeMond thrust cycling into the sports pages, winning a three-week French bike race few Americans had ever heard of. He captured the winner's yellow jersey of the Tour de France twice more, bringing bicycle racing to the Wide World of Sports spotlight each July.

Sensing interest, my wife surprised me that Christmas with a Schwinn touring bike. It was fun circling the streets of our small neighborhood, but not exactly like racing through the Alps. And, no way was I risking busy Gwinnett roads beyond our subdivision. That bike travelled from Norcross to Lawrenceville, Cleveland, OH, and Conyers – mostly in a moving van and seldom powered by me.

In 2001, a hike to a waterfall along the Blue Ridge Parkway – huffing and puffing down and back – set me on a path back to the bike. Realizing my sad state of fitness, I began walking our Conyers neighborhood. Soon bored, I tried jogging and hated it. Eventually, I remembered that dust-caked, burgundy Schwinn in the basement. With overdue love and care, I nursed it back to life.

At first, five miles was a huge ride. But I kept on, building to 15-miles an outing within a year. One day, I weighed the bike; it tipped the scales at 30+ pounds! Fifteen pounds or less is common today on the pro tour. In 2002, having proven my commitment, I bought a new aluminum-frame bike. Things had changed since the 80s; it had 18 speeds and was ten pounds lighter.

That year, a college friend who moved from Conyers to Tampa was also taking up cycling. Robert had weighed 300+ pounds since we first met in school. He showed up on our doorstep that spring weighing less than 190. It was astounding.

With his wife Carol, we rode the Bicycle Ride across Georgia (BRAG) that summer and the next, logging some 600 miles on each week-long journey. I was going further and faster as months passed. It was no big deal to do four or five “century” rides (100+ miles) a season.

I’ve biked 184 miles roundtrip between Smyrna, GA and Anniston, AL in a weekend on the Silver Comet and Chief Ladiga trails. I’ve twice pedaled from Covington to the Gold Dome and back for Georgia Rides to the Capitol. I’ve biked with friends to Athens, Decatur, Eatonton, and both Buckheads.

For years, like most over-competitive men (and women) I tracked every figure – MPH, RPM, BPM, etc. These days, you’ll see me pedaling leisurely around town, smiling and waving, not hurrying anywhere.

It’s the joy, not the numbers... except maybe one. It’s smiles per hour, and I’m out to break the world record. Join us for the Community Bike Ride this afternoon to see if you can beat my best.

Want to feel young again? It’s easy as riding a bike!