

BICYCLE RIDING

Learning to ride a bicycle marked an early rite of passage. Wagons, scooters and tricycles quickly gave way to the fleet two-wheeler.

The tricycle provided my first means of self propelled locomotion. Pedals drove the big front wheel but it never went faster than my feet could move. That limited my trips to the sidewalks around my house and those around the church and school across the street. Those were big city blocks with sidewalks as long as my young legs could handle.

Wagons were faster. With the handle pulled back against the seat, one leg stayed inside and the other pushed against the sidewalk underneath. A hard push would set the wagon gliding and a hill would set it speeding. On a hill, the foot that provided the push would also act as a brake. Our neighborhood had an abundance of hills, providing frequent opportunities to pick up speed before the inevitable braking at the bottom of the slope.

Scooters were even better. The L-shaped vehicle could glide as fast as a wagon. Better yet, it had a brake - a metal tab that pressed against

the back wheel. The scooter could go down the hills with ease and back up with no more effort than a wagon.

One afternoon, the scooter and the wagon lost their places in the world of speed kings. Two of my young friends joined me on a trip around the block that surrounded the church and school. Richie Smith rode his wagon and I rode my scooter. Billy Farrah, unfortunately, rode his new bike with training wheels. Richie and I tried to keep up but Billy was always far ahead of us. The bicycle was the clear speed king and I had to learn to ride one.

My brother Paul had a 24 inch Schwinn bicycle and my brother Chick had a 26 inch bike. Neither rode bikes when it came my time to learn to ride. Chick, being five years older than me and a year and a half older than Paul, got the call to be my teacher. He took me to the ball field at Langley High School, a block and a half from our house. A chain link fence surrounded the field and a single gate opened onto a ramp. At the bottom of the ramp, a sharp right turn took the traveler onto the walk bordering two tennis courts. A less than sharp right turn took the traveler into the hedges lining the walk.

We wheeled the 24 inch bike up the ramp, through the gate, and onto the deserted ball field. Chick held the bike while I climbed on and ran beside me as I began to pedal. After running twenty feet, he let go of the

bike. Lacking training wheels, I promptly fell to the side. This process repeated itself several times before I learned to keep my balance.

Wobbling from side to side, I rode off into the open field, moving faster than I ever had on my own.

Next came the challenge of making it through the gate. The first time the handle bar knocked against the right gate post. The second time I made it through the gate but missed the turn at the bottom of the ramp. The third time I made the turn and rode off into my neighborhood, far beyond the limits of my tricycle, wagon, and scooter.