Bicycling and Violence

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"The fellas and I were hanging
out on our corner one afternoon
when the strangest thing happened.
A white boy, who appeared to be
about eighteen or nineteen years old,
came pedaling a bicycle casually
through the neighborhood. . . .
It was automatic. We took off after him. . .
and knocked him off the bike. He fell
to the ground and it was all over.
Nathan McCall, Makes me wanna holler[1]

Anyone familiar with bicycling knows the old adage: "there are only two types of bicyclists—those who have fallen and those who have yet to fall." Especially in these days of clipless pedals, this is so true. The fall, however, involves little more than a few scrapes, if that. Even a more serious fall rarely involves more than road rash or perhaps a broken bone. Far more serious is the accident involving the bicyclist and a motor vehicle, which often results in very serious injuries or even death. However tragic, none of this involves what one normally considers "violence," which usually implies "malice aforethought." Except for the case of road rage, in which the automobile driver specifically targets the bicyclist, these examples are accidents. Nathan McCall and the "fellas" engaged in an act of violence against the bicyclist who unwittingly entered their "turf."

Violence and the sport of long distance bicycle travel are not separate and distinct subjects which have nothing in common. Beginning with Thomas Stevens, the first to ride a bicycle around the world, and continuing to the present, there are multiple instances of violence directed against bicyclists. While most involved little in the way of serious injury, at least two women cyclists survived attempted rapes and one man was murdered riding through eastern Turkey.

Frank Lenz took it as a favorable omen when the sun broke through on May 15th, 1892, following six days of rain. Given his work record and the positive economy when he left, Lenz had few worries when he wheeled out of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Weighing one hundred forty-five pounds, plus one hundred ten pounds for bicycle and luggage, he "dashed away from the post office" in high spirits. In Washington, D.C. he gathered the necessary official documents, including a letter of introduction from Secretary of State James Blaine to "all diplomatic and

consular offices of the United States" before riding north to New York City and then west across North America. Twenty-five, single, and interested in travel, Lenz proposed another around the world expedition to Outing. Since Thomas Stevens' serialized adventure dramatically increased circulation, the editor hired Lenz for $2000 a year plus expenses. With a publisher, Lenz convinced President A. H. Overman, of the Overman Wheel Company of Chicopee, Massachusetts, to provide equipment, in return for his favorable comments, which appeared regularly in Lenz's articles.[2]

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on February 15, 1867, Lenz moved with his parents to eastern Ohio before settling in Pittsburgh. While studying in public and Catholic schools he worked as a newsboy, saving some of his earnings to buy his first bicycle in 1882. After graduating with honors he joined the firm of A. W. Cadman, moving up to the position of bookkeeper, earning $1200 a year in 1891. He joined both the Allegheny Cyclists and the Pittsburg Century Club. Living in western Pennsylvania made him well acquainted with hills, as he climbed the Alleghenies in all sorts of weather. He arranged his work schedule to allow him to ride longer and longer distances. In 1890 he and Charles Petticord rode to St. Louis, Missouri, approximately six hundred miles, and then the following year the pair went to New Orleans, Louisiana, more than eleven hundred miles.[3]

Lenz believed that the safety bicycle equipped with pneumatic tires could withstand the strain of any terrain anywhere in the world. When he reached San Francisco, Lenz had ridden over fifty-four hundred miles, averaging forty-five miles a day. The quality of roads varied widely, from excellent in India to poor in Germany and the United States to non-existent in China. Across North America people met him with "fervid acclamations . . . not so much to any reason personal as to the fact that my venture is, in a certain sense, typical of my country's energy." Wherever he met them, the local wheelmen expressed an interest in his trip and wanted to compare notes, telling Lenz of their own adventures. Throughout the United States, men, and sometimes women, in bicycle clubs feted, hosted, and generally supported Lenz. The president of the St. Paul, Minnesota, bicycling club "courteously tendered his services, introducing me at the bicycle club-rooms to all the wheelmen--as hospitable a set as I have met on my tour, so far." The fifty members, mostly businessmen "royally entertained me by a theatre party and grand dinner in my honor." In small towns local bicycle clubs escorted him to their headquarters, where people asked the same questions: where was he going; where had he come from; why was he riding; did he get tired; who sponsored the adventure; what was his favorite experience; what was his worst experience? "I am heartily weary of answering these seemingly silly inquiries." In Portland, Oregon, where two bicycle clubs entertained him, he spent a restful three days. In response, Lenz named the people and clubs who fed, sheltered, and gave him advice. Well aware of his sponsors' needs, Lenz provided sufficient detail so other bicyclists could follow his route. He also included clear descriptions of the roads, tow paths, and railroad rights of way.[4]

To have ridden across North American was an accomplishment few could claim, but Lenz still had an eight hundred mile ride down the Pacific coast to the Golden Gate "ere I could leave our own vast land behind and say that I had fairly started for foreign shores." Every day's beginning reminded him of his transient status. Days off only made the leaving harder, as he wheeled away from new friends to continue the adventure. "I had toiled hard many times, and been in peril more than once, but I had seen and learned enough to repay me ten times over." Once his ship sailed, he realized "no compromise was possible; come weal or woe the world-

girdling must then be completed if the wheelman's health and strength could stand the ordeal." While he wondered what lay ahead, he felt it could be no worse than what he had already endured.[5]

Lenz arrived in Yokohama, November 14th, 1893. Through the United States and Japan Lenz had "listened with no serious attention to many warnings received, and had laughed at and surmounted difficulty after difficulty as it arose." Once in China, where he understood none of the language, "my supreme confidence in being able to complete my self-allotted task came very near wavering." In Shanghai, under western domination, Chinese, badly treated by the foreign police, labored for as little as ten cents a day. Lenz understood why the Chinese despised foreigners and he contemplated the treatment the Chinese should "in justice mete out to a prowling American wheelman." One has to wonder, based on this comment, if Lenz would have understood, if not supported, Nathan McCall: "when I consider white America and the way it's treated blacks, our random rage in the old days makes perfect sense to me." After an eight-day delay, he obtained a travel permit and started on December 23rd, 1892, "possessed of a feeling closely akin to dread."[6]

Once out of Shanghai, Lenz followed the road toward the interior. In the countryside, "the curiosity of the Chinese was something fearful. A tremendous crowd, jabbering, yelling and laughing, would follow me through the narrow, mere alleyways of streets." Traveling thirty-eight miles the first day was a chore, as irrigation ditches constantly interdicted the wheelbarrow road along which he rode. He slept in the open that first night, reaching Soochow the next day, where the crowd grew larger and larger, entertaining itself by pushing one another against Lenz and his wheel, and then by throwing rocks at him. On another occasion he had to fire shots in the air to clear a path. He rode for more than a mile through a gauntlet of hoes and rakes until the mob stopped him, damaging wheel and camera in the process. Though Lenz thought his "earthly career seemed about to end, . . . not once did I show fear to the cowardly wretches," who assumed him a demon. Soon, though, his "distrust of the natives had partially vanished, and I rubbed shoulders with them in their towns and inns as unconcernedly as though they were the friendly Japanese."[7]

When he crossed the Burma border, he found himself again in "comparative civilization." Despite the doubts of everyone in Shanghai, he had safely crossed the empire. He had survived numerous attacks and had no interest in ever crossing again. In Burma, "the hardships, privations, insults, coarse foods, poor accommodations, miserable roads, and general dislike of the Chinese against foreigners were at last things of the past, never to be forgotten." After Burma he crossed India on the Grand Trunk, averaging fifty miles a day, and completing at least one century. Lenz went by ship from Karachi, India, to Bushire, Persia, to reach Teheran before the heat of summer. He left Bushire on and followed the eight hundred mile caravan route through the Persian cities of Shiraz, Ispahan, and Qom.[8]

Shortly after nightfall on May 9th, 1894, Frank Lenz arrived at the Kurd village of Chigani in Asiatic Turkey. In good health and spirits, he spoke to the villagers. Early the next morning he headed off toward Erzurum, approximately eighty miles away, where a ten-pound draft awaited him. When he failed to collect the draft, his sponsors refused to believe the worst; traveling alone by bicycle implies, regardless of the care taken by the rider, flexibility. Illness or injury could have isolated him in some small Persian village. A punctured tube would slow him

down for minutes, but an irreparable breakdown could change the arrival time by hours, days, or weeks. Perhaps he had taken a different route or had changed his itinerary to visit some undisclosed location. He might have decided to visit either Mt. Ararat or the Russian petroleum fields "in which, being a Pittsburg [sic] man, he would naturally be interested." Even when the sponsors confirmed that he was missing, and not lost, that did not mean he was dead. Perhaps someone had kidnapped and held him for ransom.[9]

Because his monthly travel accounts in Outing were several months behind his actual location, the editor included Lenz's actual approximate location in the "News and Comments" section; unfortunately, since the editor had no knowledge of where Lenz was, these comments proved misleading. In July, 1894, the editor falsely reported "after a long series of hardships and perils, Lenz has at last reached Constantinople, and is on his way to Vienna." The editor congratulated him on reaching European civilization, noting that it was his "stout heart, sound sense and unfailing perseverance that alone have brought him through thus far." Actually, Lenz's last known location was Tabreez, Persia, on May 2nd, 1894. The first American notice of Lenz's disappearance came in November, 1894, followed by a flurry of accounts in various sporting publications and the daily press. In early December Lenz's uncle, an attorney in East Liverpool, Ohio, received a telegram from the British consul in Erzurum, which theorized bandits had robbed and murdered him. The consul wrote "it is most unfortunate that I was not warned in time of Mr. Lenz' rash intention, as I should have protested against his uselessly risking his life by traversing alone, a region which was comparatively safe at the time of Messrs. Allen and Sachtleben's journey [June, 1891], but which is now swarming with heavily armed and ferocious brigand bands." This communiqué led the cyclist's relatives to contact their congressman, who initiated a State Department investigation.[10]

Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, Outing's editor believed Lenz remained alive. In January, 1895, he had every expectation of Lenz's imminent reappearance. In February, he believed brigands had kidnapped Lenz and held him for ransom. Although Outing received much criticism for putting Lenz in harm's way, he went freely, and relished danger. "After it became apparent that Lenz was lost or in severe trouble, however, the publisher secured a considerable amount of free advertising through the announcement of relief expeditions which did not start, and public sentiment probably had considerable to do with the sending of the man who was finally commissioned." The editor approached Robert Bruce, who had ridden as far as Minneapolis with Lenz, to search for the globetrotter. When Bruce refused, Outing hired William Sachtleben, even though he held out little hope of finding him alive. Sachtleben organized an expedition, and left New York in early March "to determine [Lenz's] whereabouts, living or dead." He employed an Armenian who "disguised himself as a buyer of old metal and went into the Kurdish district." On May 27th he reached Lenz's last confirmed location. There, villagers told him that in May, 1894 a foreigner came on a wheel. People went to see the rider who felt ill and retired early. He left the next morning, and a few days later the villagers heard of his murder. The Armenian found two pieces of bicycle tires used as a saddle girth, but he could not buy the saddle. Later he met a woman who described some pieces of metal that sounded like bicycle parts, owned by her husband. He did not see them, nor did he ever meet the husband. Still later, in another house, he did purchase a piece of a bicycle bell. He also learned that someone saw Lenz crossing a stream; three days later, villagers found a body in the river, which they buried.[11]

Most agreed the Kurds, a people who had never been subdued, were responsible for his disappearance. About the time Lenz had ridden through the region, Turkish soldiers massacred Kurdish villagers and razed their homes; Kurdish retaliation further destabilized the region, and it had become obvious to nearly all that Lenz was dead. A British correspondent stationed in Asia Minor reported that Lenz had been shot as he rode, near the Deli Baba pass. A missionary talked to several natives who saw Lenz riding "the two wheeled cart," and then later saw his dead body. Rumors abounded, that Kurds believing the nickel-plated bicycle was made of sliver and murdered Lenz for profit, or that Turkish soldiers who thought him a devil shot him, or that officers high in the Sultan's court had killed him. Finally, the American minister to Turkey received definitive information from the British Consul to Erzurum that Kurds had murdered Lenz. Even though the Americans had no mission in Erzurum, the Turkish Supreme Court paid Mrs. Lenz an indemnity of $90,000. The English thought Lenz guilty of his own murder as he recklessly rode among a "wild and uncivilized race who are tempted into crime at the appearance in their midst of a wandering stranger on a 'safety.'" Despite this, the bicyclist's mother, Maria A. Lenz, and his uncle both praised Outing for its efforts to find him.[12]

Missionaries hosted Sachtleben in Tabreez, who left there as Outing's special correspondent following Lenz's wheel tracks. Once in the countryside, a pair of Kurdish shepherds approached and grabbed his wheel. When they threatened him with clubs he drove them off with his revolver. "The behavior of these two shepherds confirmed what I had previously understood of Kurdish character; that while they invariably extend hospitable treatment to a stranger visiting their camps, they require to be handled quite 'gingerly' when encountered on the road." Conditions did not improve when he entered Turkey. Sachtleben rode over the Kosse Dagh Mountains and entered the Deli Baba Pass, where Lenz met his untimely end. People urged him to wait and pass through with a caravan, but Sachtleben pushed ahead. As he rode through untroubled he noted that a thousand determined, well-armed men could indefinitely hold off a force one hundred times larger. Sachtleben reached Erzurum where, unfortunately, it was "with profound regret that Lenz's World Tour Awheel must be brought to an abrupt close." At this time, January, 1897, the English trio of Fraser, Lowe and Lunn, and the American McIlraths were riding in opposite directions through India.[13]

Frank Lenz fully expected to complete the journey. His cycling companion, Charles Petticord, planned to meet Lenz in either Paris or Naples, and then ride with him through Western Europe. Petticord had just had a gold plated bicycle built for the occasion, but before he could sail, however, an accident left him bed-ridden for months. Then he learned of Lenz's disappearance and death. In Lenz's last communication, from Tabreez, he wrote of his homesickness. He wanted to taste pie and ice cream. Tired of being a stranger, he longed "for the day which will see me again on my native hearthstone and my wanderings at an end."[14]

In one hundred and twenty years of cycling travel literature, Frank Lenz remains the only cycle traveler to die violently. While his is an extreme example of violence in cycling, it is far from the only example. One of the most prolific bicycle travelers is the Irishwoman Dervla Murphy. Born in 1931, she early on developed a passion for travel. On her tenth birthday she received an atlas and a second hand bicycle. Studying the former, she determined to ride the latter to India, the furthest place she could travel by land. Although the following year she completed a fifty mile ride to the Irish coast, her trek to India had to wait for nearly two decades. After the death of her invalid mother, and despite the worst weather in decades, Murphy set off to

ride to India in 1963. In the Middle East, she awoke to find a near naked Kurd bending over her—a pistol shot scared him off. Then between Tabriz and the Caspian Sea three men attempted to steal her bicycle, and a policeman tried to rape her. "It is perhaps understandable that, of all the regions I travelled through, Azerbaijan is the only one I would not wish to revisit alone." Despite this, she still reached Teheran on March 20, 1963.[15]

A few years before Murphy's ride June Meyer rode across the United States with a girlfriend. The two women, in their early twenties, met a couple of men in Las Vegas, Nevada. When they split up, the man with June cut off her bathing suit, intent on raping her until he realized she was menstruating. Unlike Murphy who, despite her reluctance to return to Azerbaijan, traveled throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America over the next thirty years, Meyer's days of adventuresome travel ended when she reached the Pacific. Further, when her daughter announced her intent to follow her mother's wheel tracks, she worried incessantly about her safety, even though she bicycled with her husband.[16]

Fortunately murder and attempted rape are not commonplace in cycle travel narratives; gratuitous violence, however, appears regularly across the decades of bicycle travel. Having successfully crossed North America from California to western New York in 1884, on his way to Buffalo, New York, within several days of completing this segment of his journey, a woman drover attacked Thomas Stevens with her stiff buggy whip. She struck him across the face, knocking his helmet off and nearly sending him into the ditch. This was the first of multiple assaults; several times local mobs attacked Stevens as he made his way around the world. Officials in Afghanistan and China arrested him for his own protection. On more than one occasion Stevens vowed to kill at least one of his attackers before killing himself with his last bullet; fortunately he never had to fire his weapon at another human. Other late nineteenth century riders faced similar mobs: considered "dogs of Christians," local officials in Persia provided the Englishmen John Foster Fraser, Samuel Edward Lunn and Francis Herbert Lowe an escort to the gates of the holy city of Kum. "Then the fun began. Stones began to fly, and blows were aimed at us with sticks. We jumped upon our bicycles and scudded along for our very lives, heads low and shoulders high." Thomas Allen and William Sachtleben received similar treatment in the East, as did fellow Americans H. Darwin and Hattie McIlrath. In China a mob separated them and knocked Hattie off her wheel; Darwin rescued her. Among more recent riders, in the 1980's Barbara and Larry Savage faced similar incidents, as did Erica Warmbrunn in the 1990's.[17]

On occasion violence directed against bicyclists resulted in retaliation. Despite suffering weeks of abuse in China, Darwin McIlrath, who had trained as a physician, continued to provide medical services, including extracting an infected tooth, using his bicycle pump as a syringe. As soon as he and his wife mounted their wheels, however, missiles began flying and Darwin secretly resolved "to cripple or poison the next heathen who applied to [him] for treatment. . . . ." While he calmed down, when he asked for directions the man wanted a fight, and Darwin grabbed the fellow's arm, twisting it so violently he either broke or sprained it. In Vietnam, near the conclusion of her ride from Mongolia, Erica Warmbrunn's patience wore thin. When young boys grabbed her bicycle's rear rack she had "no response other than rage. I wanted to hit them, to hurt them, to run crushingly over their baskets." While they thought she would hurt them, she knew she could not. When different children harassed her on a beach she again "wanted to retaliate, to hurt small children, to let loose a backhand against a little body, to crack a small

bone." Fortunately she never acted on her impulse, rather putting these annoyances into the perspective of many more pleasant moments with friendly, supportive, outgoing people who regularly invited her into their homes, sharing their meager food with her.[18]

Overall, bicycle travel is a benign sport not given to violence. People regularly ride millions of miles each year without incident. There exists, however, that very slight possibility that the rider may encounter hostility from the local populace or from others who use the same roads. I've ridden at least fifty thousand miles, and have never encountered an act of hostility, although I was once accidentally hit by a car. A colleague of mine, who rides only very occasionally, once rode a route I regularly use when someone in a passing car swung a baseball bat at him. Incidents of violence are, therefore, random and scattered, and while riding defensively is always a good idea, there is little the rider can do to protect herself or himself.

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3 "Two Days Out," Pittsburgh Chronicle Telegraph, May 16, 1892, 4.

4. Lenz, "Around," Outing, XX, (August, 1892), 340-44 XXII (May, 1893), 132.

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