

Crone's Corner

by Judy Holman

"It will be a delight to young girls to learn that their sex is, in itself, not a bar to riding the wheel."

—Frances E. Willard



"A woman awheel is the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood."

—Susan B. Anthony

Crossing the street the other morning, busy with personal thoughts, I almost stepped into the path of what I can only describe as a Flying Female projectile. Thankfully, I need not have worried about being hit. Crouched like a jockey, the young woman rode her machine clear-eyed and alert to any impediments in her path. Seeing me long before I saw her, she eased around my body in one fluid move and left me standing in her breezy, perfumed wake. I watched her with the same soul-filling delight I've felt while watching hawks ride the wind. Her made-for-action, black and neon suit outlined her athletic body which was working in harmony with her made-for-a-challenge bike. Looking neither right nor left, she flew straight-arrowed toward whatever personal goal she had set. I had no doubt that she would reach it, and grinning, sent her a mental salute. With a lighter step I resumed my walk, my thoughts turning naturally to another clear-eyed woman who, in 1892, saw the connection between women, bicycles and freedom. At age fifty-three, against the advice of friends and general public sentiment, she learned to ride. Experiencing the thrill, sense of mastery and health benefits first-hand, she wrote about them all in a little book called How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle. In 1895 it was a best seller.

Encouraged, more women took to the wheel with far-reaching effects. But then, she was a far-sighted woman. Her name was Frances W. Willard.

My younger readers, so used to two-wheeled travel, may be surprised to learn that women and bicycles were not an early or easy match. Much Victorian debris had to be swept off the cultural road before women were allowed their chance to ride. Debates raged about what it would do to women's health (read: reproductive organs), women's morals (read: a woman unchaperoned is a woman unchaste), and women's dress (read: remove the corset and it's a one-way ride to Cultural Decline). It is no surprise that women like Frances Willard, already active in the Reform Movement, saw the women's bicycle as another vehicle for women's emancipation.

From this we might assume that Frances Willard took to the wheel to Prove a Point. In fact, she learned to ride to improve her health. At fifty-three she suffered from "nerve-wear" and for good reason. For twenty years (1879-1899), she was president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the largest women's organization in the nineteenth century. Working in cooperative, parallel step with Susan B. Anthony and others, she focused her prodigious and charismatic energy on the elimination of alcohol and the liquor trade. Alcoholism, a problem today, was disastrous for post-Victorian women totally dependent on fathers and then husbands for survival. Lacking outside help, they sank helplessly beside their afflicted mate. The elimination of alcohol, however, proved to be a massive task. At fifty-three, years of traveling, speaking, writing and organizing had taken its toll. Worn out, and mourning the death of her mother, Frances went to heal in the home of Lady Henry Somerset, her friend and President of the British W.C.T.U. It was here on this estate that Lady Somerset presented her with the bicycle that Frances named "Gladys."

Though a silent partner in this radical act, Gladys proved a patient teacher

with lessons to share. Little by little, day by day, Frances found that "She who succeeds in gaining the mastery of such an animal as Gladys will gain the mastery of life..." (p.33).

How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle is the personal become political. Using her own experience with Gladys, she spoke to women about being focused on goals, the importance of will plus action, persistence in the face of defeat and the necessity of appropriate mentors. She spoke to them about seeing success in order to experience it, keeping calm in the presence of fear, and how the freedom of movement was essential to their progress. In this case, freedom of movement meant freedom to come and go, **and** freedom from tight, restrictive clothes.

Frances was particularly sensitive to this last issue because, as she writes, "I ran wild until my sixteenth birthday when the hampering long shirts were brought, with their accompanying corset and high heels; my hair was clubbed with pins...I remember...the first heartbreak of a young human colt taken from its pasture..." (p.16). The bicycle, she knew, would necessitate a reform in clothing. Today we read with sad humor her "radical" description of an appropriate riding outfit: "a skirt and blouse of tweed with belt, rolling collar and loose cravat, the skirt three inches from the ground; a round straw hat and walking shoes with gaiters...a simple modest suit to which no person of common sense could take exception." (p.75). Tell **that** to the young woman in Spandex!

Women did learn to ride, body-abusing corsets and sharp-eyed chaperones fell by the cultural way, and western civilization did not disintegrate. We owe much to Frances E. Willard who encouraged us on to the bicycle and into the world. In her honor, I suggest you throw on your most comfortable clothes, hop on your bike and ride over to the W.C.T.U. Headquarters at 1730 Chicago Avenue in Evanston. On the same property, you will find Rest Cottage, family home of Frances Willard. Now a historical landmark and newly restored, it sits in

quiet Victorian dignity amid its glass and brick neighbors. It's quiet facade, deceptively innocent, hides the electric energy and accomplishments of one woman far ahead of her time. Inside, you will also see Gladys. She rests under the stairs and looks like many of us Aging Activists-worn out in some places and fraying in others, but still standing proud! Her bell still works. I asked permission, and then rang it once to hear her speak. Then, I rang it again in celebration of the power two good women can exert on the world when they put their minds to it.