

*Bike Battles: A History of Sharing the American Road*

By James Longhurst

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Americans have been riding bikes for more than a century. So why are most American cities so ill-prepared to handle the cyclists who wish to take to the streets today? James Longhurst, a cyclist and historian of urban and environmental policy, tackles that question by tracing the contentious debates between cyclists, motorists, and pedestrians over the shared road.

*Bike Battles* explores the different ways that Americans thought about the bicycle through popular songs, merit badge pamphlets, magazine advertising, cheesy 1950s bike safety films, small town newspapers, silent films, comic books, and TV sitcoms. Those cultural associations impacted what actions governments and courts took through vehicle codes, traffic design, transportation funding, and engineering standards. Over a century and a half, these policies have shaped how Americans chose to get around, and where they could ride.

Starting in the late 19th century, when biking boomed as elite recreation, courtroom fights established bicyclist's equal rights to the road. Even as that battle was being decided, a turn-of-the-century plan was hatched to create a separate system of "sidepaths" for bikes, connecting cities across the nation. Political fights over taxes, social divisions among cyclists, and the end of the bike fad doomed that movement. While the upper-class boom faded in the early 20th century, bicycle riding continued for workers, commuters, and children. As the automobile became more popular, engineering and traffic control increasingly ignored cyclists. Bikes briefly returned for adults during World War II: after intense internal debate, the federally controlled "Victory bike" program encouraged and rationed bicycles as a strategic resource for wartime transportation. After the war, the flourishing car culture and its accompanying sprawl meant bicycle use was limited mostly to suburban children. It wasn't until postwar policies contributed to the rise of the Japanese-made "10-speed" that bicycle use returned among adults. New riders again appeared in the 1970s amid a burgeoning energy crisis, triggering yet another battle over where bicyclists should ride.

Cycling in American urban centers remains a challenge today; city planners, political pundits, and residents continue to argue over bike lanes, bike share programs, law enforcement, sustainability, and public safety. It is an unsolved problem because sharing the road is like other difficult environmental debates over managing a common resource. As transportation choices evolve and environmental pressures become more acute in the 21st century, we're in the middle of yet another bike battle.

Combining fascinating new archival research with a true passion for the topic, Longhurst uncovers the rich history of America's obsession with the bicycle to address the larger question of who is-and isn't-welcome on our roads.

Praise for *Bike Battles*:

"James Longhurst gives us a whole range of new ways to look at those moments of confusion, uncertainty, and rage experienced by anyone who has spent much time on roads shared by cars and bicycles. *Bike Battles* is academically rigorous but easy and fun to read. This is really my kind of nerdiness. I recommend it for anyone who feels stuck in polarized conversations about how we use our roads. –Elly Blue, author of *Bikenomics: How Bicycling Can Save the Economy*

"*Bike Battles* offers a significant contribution to both the growing literature on the history of American bicycling and the immense, well-established literature on urban policymaking. It is scholarship written by a sophisticated historian who draws on sources ranging from the traditional to the wonderfully unusual in order to shed light on the changing history of bicycling's place in American cities."  
–Christopher Wells, author of *Car Country: An Environmental History*

"*Bike Battles* is masterly in its treatment of public policy toward the 'roads as commons,' and has given new depth to our understanding of cycling in America. I envy the light and easy style of the author."  
–Glen Norcliffe, author of *Ride to Modernity: The Bicycle in Canada, 1869-1900*

James Longhurst is an associate professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and the author of *Citizen Environmentalists*.

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