

The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Bicycle Police

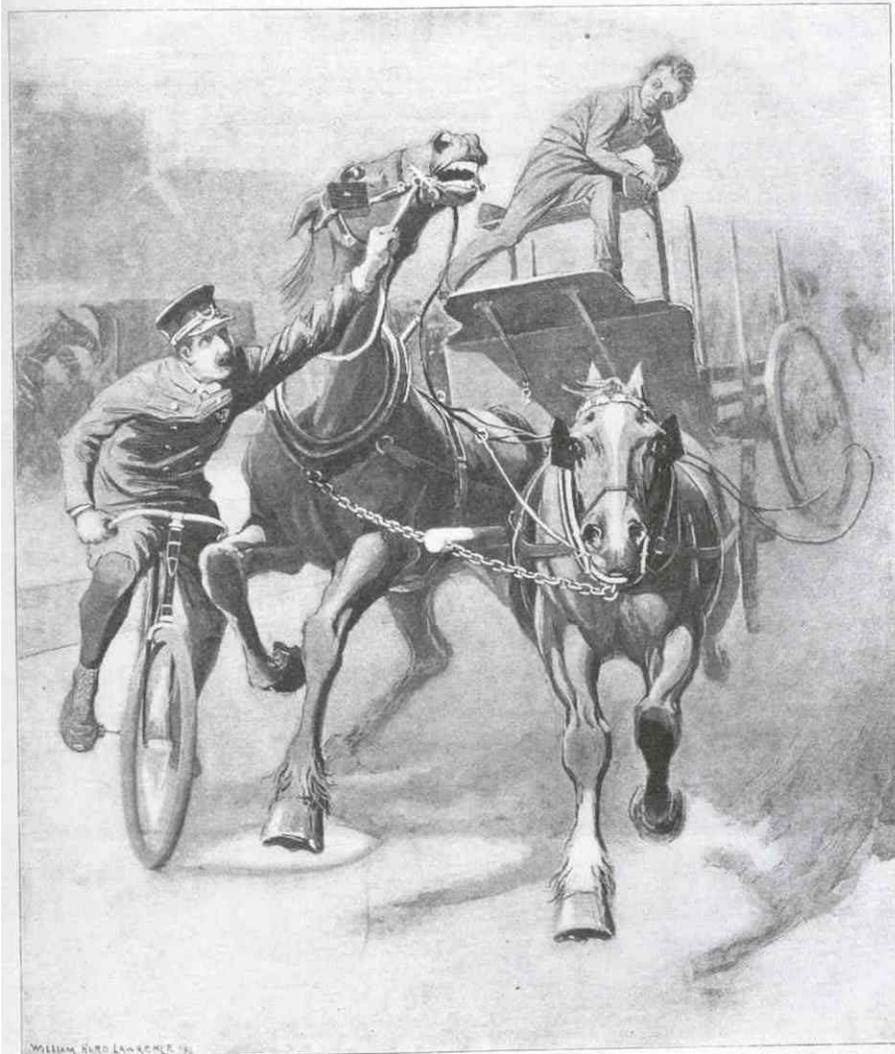
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Introduction

The concept of police patrolling originated in England in 1818, after private rewards failed to deter crime and people were outraged when troops were called into Manchester to quell a civil disturbance and left 11 people dead. Sir Robert Peel introduced the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829, which set up metropolitan police districts, staffed by paid constables (Trojanowicz et. al., 1998). These “Bobbies” (nicknamed in honor of Sir Peel) were on duty 14-17 hours of the day and often patrolled 20 miles a day for weeks on foot without a day off. To verify their diligence, early constables had to leave a ticket at a designated home on the farthest point of their patrol.

Boston developed a similar paid night patrol in 1801 and in 1804 Detroit appointed its first team of civilian police officers. In 1844, New York City was the first American city to model its police department after the principals in Peel’s law that included offering service to all members of the public and maintaining a good relationship with the public (<http://www.leineshideaway.com/PoliceHistory.html>). Riots in many major U.S. cities from the 1830s through 1850s led to the formation of police departments in virtually every major U.S. city by the mid-1860s (Trojanowicz et. al., 1998).

The Rise of Bicycle Use

In the 1860s, the earliest pedal bicycles made of iron and wood called boneshakers appeared. The earliest use of the bicycle by police may have occurred in 1869 when an Illinois sheriff reportedly supplied himself and his deputies with these boneshakers (Dunham, 1956, p. 119). However, boneshakers, as the name suggests, were heavy, not very comfortable to ride on poor quality U.S. roads, and overpriced because of patent license fees, so their fad was short lived (Herlihy 2004, p. 126). British police may have patrolled by tricycle in the late 1880s (McCord 1991), and the Boston Park Commission police patrolled by high wheel bicycles during the same time period (Smith 1972). The Newark, NJ Police Department established its first bicycle squad in 1888 (www.newarkfop.com/museum.html).

By September 1892, the police in Orange New Jersey were being trained to ride modern safety bicycles for patrol and tandem bicycles for quick response to outbreaks and disturbances (Policemen on Bicycles 1892). By this time, the bicycle had evolved essentially to its modern form, the pneumatic tired, modern diamond frame safety bicycle (Herlihy 2004, pp.250-51). This same year, nearby Stamford Connecticut appointed Arnold Kurth as its first bicycle policeman (www.stamfordhistory.org/ph_1100.htm). He is pictured below.



The following year saw Holyoke, Massachusetts also favorably experiment with bicycle patrols (Among the Wheelmen, 1893). By 1894, after some debate, Philadelphia, Brooklyn, Cincinnati, and Chicago all had active bicycle police patrols (McGurn, 1999; Smith, 1972). Thus, 1894-95 appears to be the beginning of wide-spread police bicycle use in the U.S. and indeed throughout much of the world. In Wellington, New Zealand, the police bought bicycles in the mid-1890s. Bicycles also were used by police in Ottawa and Winnipeg Canada around this time (Petty, 2001).

New York City started its unit in December 1895 with two bicycle policemen patrolling the streets most often used by cyclists. Within three months, the Chief of Police proposed making the bike squad permanent and extending it to three more precincts noting that bicycles increased police efficiency and were effective in patrolling and controlling scorchers (speeders on bicycles)

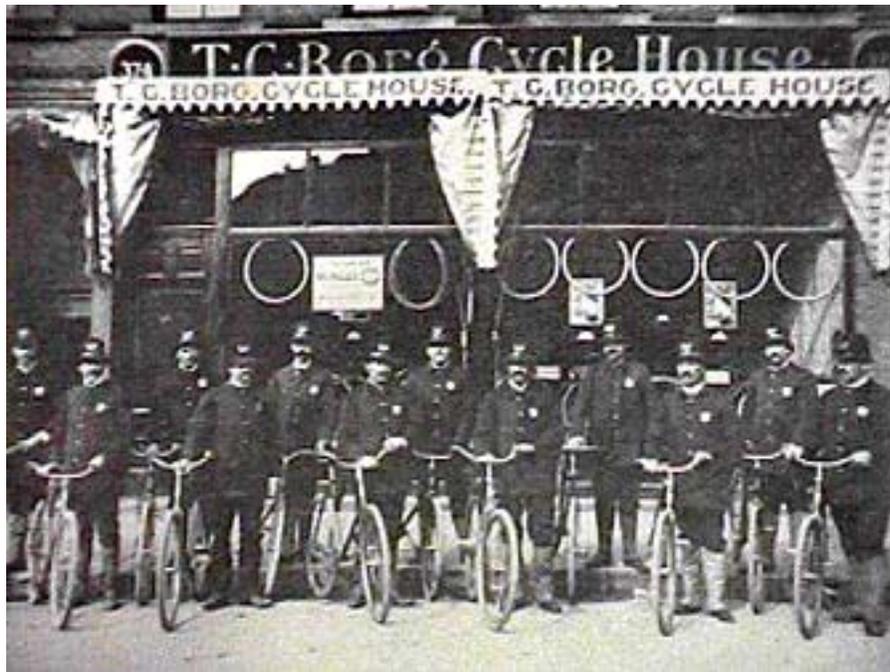
as well as runaway horses. Police Commissioner Teddy Roosevelt, himself a cyclist, approved this proposal and within its first year of service the 29 man bicycle squad was responsible for 1,366 arrests. Soon, the squad grew to one hundred wheelers, including noted racer, "Mile-A-Minute" Murphy, and had its own station house. In his autobiography, Roosevelt praised the squad: "any feat of daring which could be accomplished on the wheel they were certain to accomplish" (Jeffers, 1994, p. 209). The squad is pictured below.



from www.nyc.gov/html/nyc100/html/classroom/hist_info/nycfacts.html.

An important impetus for these patrols beyond community patrolling was the control of "scorchers" as bicycle speeders were then called. In July 1896, after experimenting with 25 citizen wheelmen to patrol the streets and apprehend scorchers, the City of Denver began its two man team of "scorcher herders." They arrested twenty scorchers during their first day. The Denver "wheelcops" refused to use the sling shot device then reportedly being used in Chicago to hurl small lead balls at bicycle wheels in order to break spokes and bring the bicycle to a sudden stop (Whiteside 1991, pp. 13-14). Similarly, in Grand Forks Minnesota, a bicycle patrol was started in the summer of 1896 to control scorchers and sidewalk cyclists (Spreng 1995, p. 281). Naturally, it fell to the bicycle police to catch the early automobile speeders as well (Held for Speeding Autos, 1902). Indeed, two police managed to catch and pull over a car transporting then President Theodore Roosevelt at a speed of 25 miles per hour when the speed limit was 15 mph (Held Up President 1905). The large chain ring on Arnold Kurth's bicycle from Stamford pictured above would likely have been used to catch scorchers.

Smaller cities also adopted the bicycle for police use before the turn of the century. The St. Paul Police Bicycle Patrol of 1897 is pictured below.

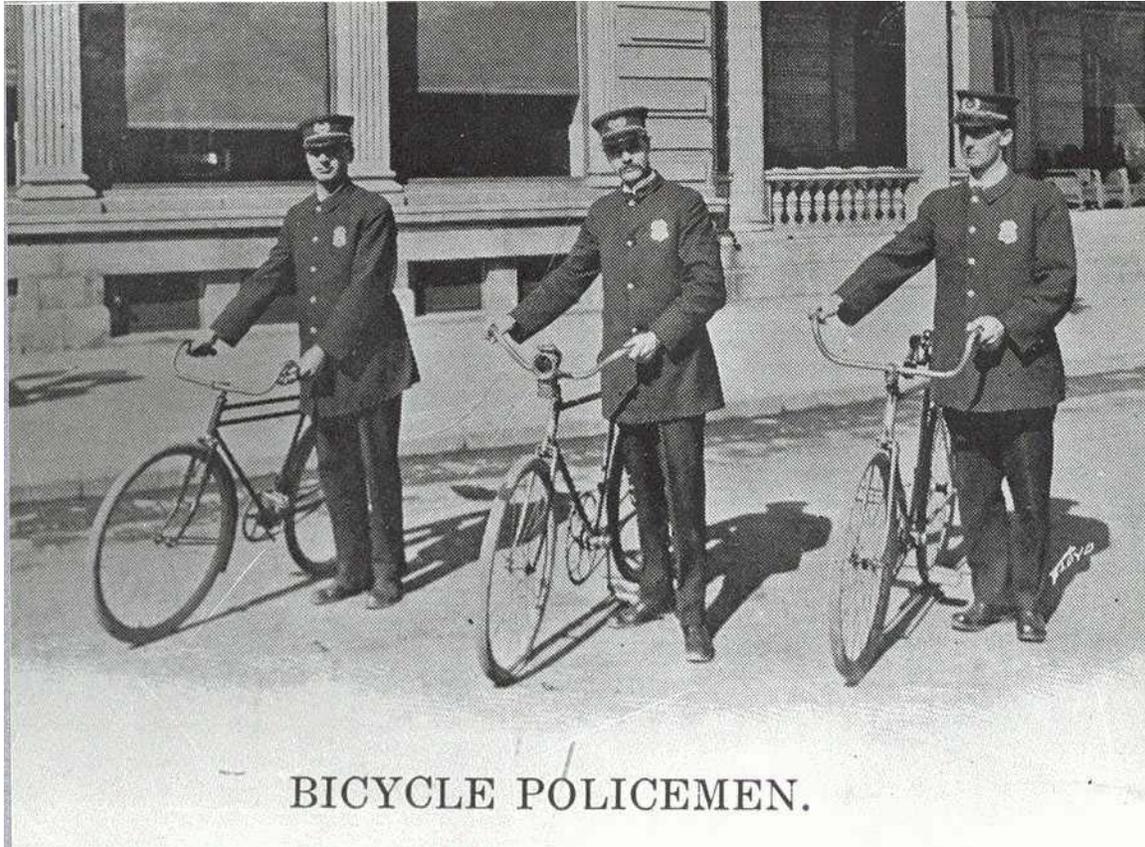


Fargo, North Dakota reports that all of its police were issued “Crimson Rim” bicycles in 1898 to help combat traffic problems. This amounted to at least ten officers (<http://www.cityoffargo.com/police/NewWebSite/AboutUs/historyfpd.htm>). These officers are pictured below, although the exact date of the photograph is not known.



Bicycle use by police continued to increase in the early 20th century. In 1907, Indianapolis reported that its ten person bicycle squad made more arrests than any other police branch. Although, Indianapolis had two police cars by that time, it was predicted that the number of men on the police squad would increase (Gossip About Bicycles, 1907). The efforts of the bicycle squad continued to be exemplary in the following year. Of the 11,000 arrests made in 1908, the dozen members of the bicycle squad received credit for nearly 25% (Herlihy 2004, p. 318, citing *Bicycling World* 16 Jan. 1909). By 1917, a bicycle trade publication estimated there were 50,000 bicycle police in the United States. It also reported that the five boroughs of Greater New York

employed 1200 bicycle mounted patrolmen. These patrolmen could cover eight to nine times the territory of walking patrolmen (50,000 Bicycle Police, 1917-18). This is a tenfold increase over the original NYC bicycle squad of two decades earlier. Other communities also had police patrols at this time. Shown below is the 1917 bicycle patrol from Pueblo Colorado



The estimate of 50,000 bicycle police was based on the assumption that one out of ten policemen used a bicycle and the article estimated a total of 500,000 police in the country. However, U.S. Census figures for 1920 indicate there were about 82,000 police and another 32,000 sheriffs. This would amount to somewhere between 8-11,000 bicycle mounted police or one bicycle officer for every 9-13,000 people. This could represent the high point of police bicycle use in the United States because the post World War I era saw a significant increase in police motor vehicle use. Below are pictures of bicycle police from World War I and circa 1917.



The Decline of Bicycle Use

Police motorcycles started being used as early as 1908. In that year, Detroit bought the first Harley Davidson police motorcycle. By 1909, Pittsburgh, Omaha, Houston and other cities also had police motorcycles. Most of the early police vehicles were wagons used to carry several prisoners or to transport several officers to a trouble spot but gradually, open touring cars were adopted. By the “roaring” 1920s, when police had to deal with crime caused by prohibition, closed cars became more popular not only for patrol work, but for pursuing criminals who frequently attempted to escape in cars that could travel at increasingly faster speeds (McCord, 1991; Gunnell, 1984; The History Channel, 1997).

Corruption and political influence was commonplace in U.S. police departments during the 1920s, which led to reforms in the 1930s. Politics was replaced with professionalism and the police function was narrowed from broad social services to crime control. Technology was emphasized and patrolling was overshadowed by rapid response to calls for service (Trojanowicz, et. al., 1998). As a result, foot and bicycle patrols were replaced by telephone calls leading to radio dispatch of police cars. The termination of bicycle police patrols was not always newsworthy, but we do know that downtown NYC no longer had bicycle police by 1929 and Richmond terminated its bicycle unit in 1934 (Poore, 1929; Bike Patrol in Richmond, 1973). Similarly, the New Haven bicycle patrol, started in 1899 with one officer, was terminated in 1925, after the department started using motorcycles for patrol in 1913 (www.cityofnewhaven.com/police/html/history/dept_history.htm)

Bicycle Police Rebirth

Particularly after World War II, when the U.S. both suburbanized, creating larger areas to patrol, and grew increasingly dependent on the private automobile for transportation, the police grew increasingly dependent on motor vehicles for patrolling and rapid response by radio to emergencies that were reported by telephone to a police dispatcher. Technology-dependent police officers became isolated from the communities they served. Occasionally, at least by the 1960s, communities began to question this approach. For example, the picture below suggests that Minneapolis had at least occasional police officers on bicycles by 1961. There also are reports of undercover bicycle police arresting criminals that preyed on cyclists and joggers in New York City (Sklarewitz 1967).

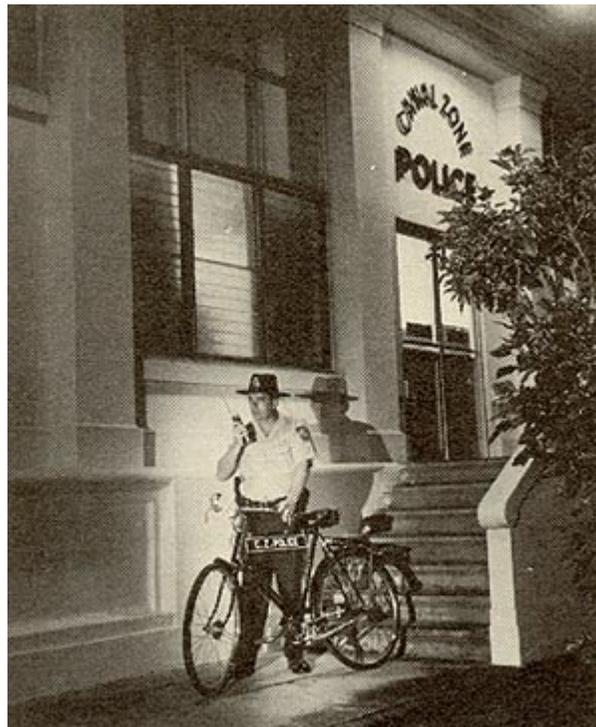
Fig. 69. Some modern police forces have found the bicycle useful for patrolling suburban areas more quickly and silently. This photograph of a Hennepin County, Minneapolis, Minn., officer was taken in 1961.

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This isolation of police in stations and radio dispatched cars was underscored by demonstrations for civil rights and at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. A study by the Kansas City Police Department attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of randomized patrolling in marked police cars. They study found that increasing or decreasing the frequency of patrols had no significant impact on the level of crimes believed to be deterred by police patrols and the change in levels of patrolling was not noticed by citizens. In addition, about 60% of police officer patrol time was “uncommitted” and often used for non-police-related activities (Kelling & Moore, 1974). These problems and three Presidential Commissions between 1968 and 1973 led to the development of community policing where police returned to patrolling neighborhoods and interacting with citizens (Trojanowicz, et. al., 1998).

While most early community police patrolling was done on foot, the concept was consistent with bicycle patrols as well. In 1970, the two square mile community of Lindsay, California started police bicycle patrols. Chief of Police John Beene noted that bicycle patrols covered just about as much territory as police in patrol cars and officers benefited from both the silent approach and high seated view of the bicycle (Coast Town is Patrolled 1975). Baltimore started experimenting with bicycle patrols in March 1972 because police cars had difficulty traveling through narrow alleys. Crime dropped 50% in six months of the four beats patrolled by bike from 8 AM to midnight (Bigart, 1972). In September 1973, two police officers in Menlo Park and Atherton California began a three year experiment of patrolling residential neighborhoods by bicycle (Police Begin Bicycle Patrol, 1973). Some of this activity in the early 1970s was stimulated by the boom in bicycling that occurred at this time and was extended by the gasoline shortage of 1973. The Panama Canal Zone police used bicycles for night patrol during this time as shown by the picture below and by December 1973 (Bikes are Back 1973). This also was a time of increased concern about narcotics trafficking in the Zone. Richmond re-instituted the bicycle patrol with one officer in the downtown area for the first time since 1934 (Bike Patrol in Richmond, 1973).

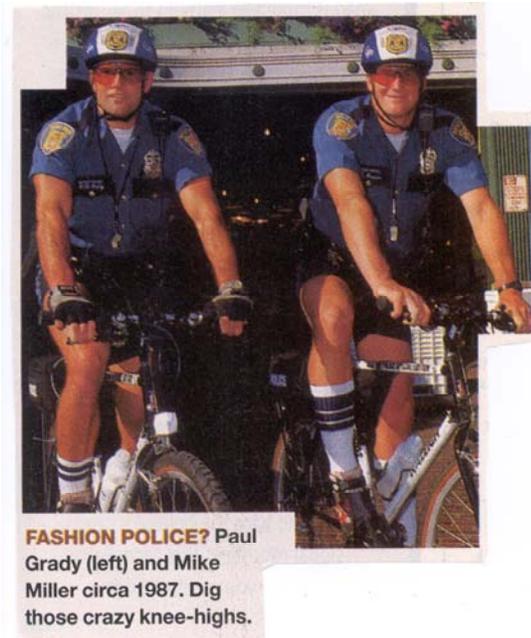


Source: Panama Canal Zone Review Fall 1973, p. 16.

This experimentation with bike patrols continued. Madison started bike patrols of both downtown and the University of Wisconsin campus in 1978. In 1979, San Jose formed a five person bike squad (Petty, 2001). 1985 appears to be a banner year for bicycle patrols. Fort Lauderdale and nearby Hollywood Florida both started bicycle units in that year (Petty 2001). In California, San Diego police patrolled the beach and other areas by bicycle since at least 1985 (Arner 1986) and police in the El Sereno part of Los Angeles began patrolling the business district by bike to reduce street crimes and robberies (Hernandez 1985). On the East Coast, Englewood also started a bicycle unit, the Radio Auto Theft or RAT squad, to combat car radio

theft. The squad patrolled near cars with valuable radios and waited for a thief to take the cheese (Singer 1985). Memphis started its bike patrol in 1986 (In the News, 1986).

Despite some twenty predecessors, the modern rebirth of bicycle patrolling is generally credited to Sergeant Paul Grady and his partner Mike Miller who proposed the idea in Seattle in the spring of 1987 (Police on Bikes, 1991). Bicycles were suggested as a means to get through traffic gridlock then being caused by downtown construction. In 1991-92, Seattle received more than 600 requests for information. By 1993, Seattle had 70 police on bicycles (On Your Bike, 1993).



Source: *Bicycling* July 1997, p 128.

Although not actually the first to adopt bicycles for police patrols in the second half of the 20th century, Seattle does deserve credit for being the first to consider the concept for bicycle patrolling in general rather than for special areas and purposes. It also publicized its efforts to stimulate interest in other police departments in the U.S. and throughout the world. Table One below identifies locations where modern police used the bicycle before the Seattle adoption.

Table One
Modern Police Department Bicycle Patrols before July 1987

Year	Location	Source and Comments
1961	Minneapolis, Minn.	UPI photo
1970	Lindsay, Cal.	New York Times, June 27, 1975 p. 34
early 1970s	Davis, Ca.	San Jose Mercury News, Aug. 23, 1988
March 1972	Baltimore MD.	New York Times, Aug. 6, 1972, p. 45
Sept.	Menlo Park &	New York Times, Sept. 11, 1973, p. 53

1973	Atherton, Ca.,	--just two officers
Fall 1973	Panama Canal Zone	Panama Canal Zone Review, Fall 1973, p. 16. Night patrol.
Dec. 1973	Richmond, Va	New York Times, Dec. 9, 1973, p. 33 --just one officer, hoped to save gas
1978	Madison, Wi.	New York Times, Aug. 18, 1978, p. 20
1980	San Jose, Ca	San Jose Mercury News, Aug. 30, 1980
1981	Dallas, Tx	Southwest Wheelman "Spokesmen", Jan. 5, 1981 --to patrol the mall
1981	Morgan Park,	Chicago Sun Times, May 24, 1981
May 1981	Kelso, Wa.	Boston Globe, May 28, 1981
Sept. 1982	Cincinnati, Oh.	Highland Herald,
Feb. 1984	Beavercreek, Oh.	Beavercreek Daily News, Feb. 11, 1984,
Feb. 1985	Hollywood, Fl.	The (Bergen) Record, Feb. 3, 1985, p. A33
1985	Ft. Lauderdale, Fl.	http://info.ci.ftlaud.fl.us/police/bicycle.html
July 1985	Hudson, N.H.	Boston Globe, July 6, 1985.
Aug. 1985	Englewood, N.J.	The (Bergen) Record, 1985, p. C01.
1985	San Diego, Ca	San Diego Union --Tribune, Feb. 21, 1986, p. B-15
1986	Los Angeles, Ca.	Los Angeles Times, Dec. 12, 1985, part 2, p.3. --two bikes donated by local business to patrol El Sereno area.
May 1986	Memphis, Tn.	Arkansas Democrat --Gazette, May 28, 1986,
July 1987	Seattle, Wa.	http://www.cityofseattle.net/Police/Units/bike_patrol.htm

The idea spread to other police departments as well as private security companies and college campus police. In 1990, the League of American Wheelmen surveyed police departments and discovered that 80 cities in 26 states had bicycle patrol units and others were planning units. Eighty percent of the units in existence in 1990 had been formed between 1988 and 1990, leaving about 16 units that had been formed prior to 1988. The L.A.W. organized the first annual Police on Bikes Conference in Tucson, Arizona in May 1991 (Police on Bikes, 1991). This led to the founding of the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA) in 1992.

Advantages of Bicycle Use by Police

Bike patrols offer numerous advantages. A police cyclist should be able to travel at least twice as fast as a walking or running officer by using between a third and a fifth of the amount of energy (depending on speed) (Payne & Trojanowicz, 1985). Police on bicycles also can reach

areas inaccessible by car and traverse traffic gridlock more easily. Bicycles also enjoy a stealth advantage because they are quiet and tend not to be noticed. They also allow officers to be more approachable than those in patrol cars to members of the community (Ent & Hendricks, 1991). Finally, they have been found effective in crowd control situations (Beck 2001; Goertz 2002, Hudson 2002). The cost of a police bike, about \$1200) is substantially less than a patrol car. Alternatively, police may use donated bikes or federal grant funding for community policing to reduce the cost of bikes. Annual maintenance is about \$300 (<http://www.ipmba.org/facts.htm>). The policing advantages of bicycle use in 1900 compared with 2000 are presented in Table Two below.

Table Two
Advantages of Bicycle Use by Police

Police Bicycle Use in 1900	Police Bicycle Use in 2000
Increasing size of patrol areas.	Increasing size of patrol areas.
	Improved interaction with community.
Catching speeding cyclists, horses, and automobiles.	Traffic enforcement, particularly in gridlock.
Stealth advantage: plain clothes police cyclists apprehend criminals.	Stealth advantage: silent, un-noticed police cyclists observe crimes and apprehend criminals.
Rapid response from telephone stations to needed locations.	Rapid response through radio communication, particularly through gridlocked traffic and large crowds.
Ability to quickly traverse difficult terrain or crowded areas.	Ability to quickly traverse difficult terrain or crowded areas.
	Mobile and effective crowd control.

Conclusion

Today, New York City boasts 3,000 plus bicycle police with another 350 in Los Angeles and 210 in Houston (Wallack 2005). In 2000, it was estimated that in the U.S., over 6,000 police departments have a bicycle unit totaling over 35,000 bicycle officers nationwide (IPMBA 2003). This amounts to one bicycle police officer for approximately every 8,000 people, exceeding police bicycle officers per person in the early part of the 20th century.

In a country long known for increasing “automobilization,” it is interesting that police patrolling also went through a period of increasing “automobilization” but now has recognized the value of the bicycle as one of several means of neighborhood patrol. This recognition of the usefulness of what otherwise is considered primarily a child’s toy in the U.S. is based not only on the relative costs of the two vehicles, but on three other factors as well. First, the open nature of the bicycle that makes bike patrol officers more in touch with their surroundings and more approachable by citizens. Second, the ubiquitous nature of the bicycle allows it to travel most anywhere, largely unnoticed. Third, the level of automobile traffic in most cities, particularly during major events, slows all motorized traffic to a stand still, but still allows police to use bicycles to travel to needed locations efficiently and in a relatively unimpeded manner. These advantages of bicycle

patrol suggest that it is now more than a periodic fad, and should be considered a permanent part of police patrol and travel tactics.

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