

Riding My Bicycle

For my 50th birthday some friends wrote a poem that poked fun at my fondness for cycling. I don't remember most of the words, other than of course a reference to being "over the hill" and the last line "It's too early to recycle Michael."

Fast forward a few years: Now, when the snow has melted, and in what has become a sure sign of spring, I bring my bicycle up from the basement, dust it off, pump the tires and head for the Meewasin Trail. Bliss.

There have been quite a few bikes in my life since I was very young. I like bikes because for me they represent mobility, which is another word for freedom, they are a healthy and economical alternative to powered vehicles, they don't burn fossil fuels and they get me out of my house and into the world.

My earliest memories of being on a bicycle are when my father put me (age 6) on the crossbar of his bike and my brother (age 8) behind him on the carrier, and took us to a small airfield near Limerick City to behold the wonder of light aircraft landing and taking off. I had my own tricycle by then and progressed from that to learning how to ride my Dad's bike. I did this by putting my foot on one pedal and reaching under the crossbar for the other pedal and propelling myself forward until I fell off. Repeatedly.

My brother Mahon and I were given our own bikes in our early teens. They were hand-me-down fixed speeds and we envied boys who had new bikes with Sturmey-Archer three speed gears. But we did get dynamos, which allowed us to ride after dark without a flashlight. We used our bikes to get us around our neighborhood and to ride to and from school. In the summer we rode about 60 miles from Cork to our grandparents home in the village of Hospital, County Limerick, much of it uphill, fortified only by Fox's Glacier Mints.

In our late teens we biked with a few other lads from Cork to Killarney, where the lakes are one of Ireland's major tourist attractions. It was tough going, about 80 miles, with some very long and steep hills along the way. When we got to Killarney, we pitched our tents and it started to rain. It poured for two days, by which time we and our tents and clothes were thoroughly soaked. We swallowed our pride and took the train home to Cork.

When my family moved to Dublin I moved up in the world by buying a Honda 50 scooter and then a car co-owned with my brother. When I came to Canada I didn't have a bike, just a series of older cars. I bought my next bike when I went as a CUSO volunteer to Zambia. There I saw the importance of bicycles to very poor people, who transported possessions, produce and "passengers" on crossbars, handlebars and saddles from village to market, from garden plot to home and from home to school.

I saw this even more vividly when I went to Vietnam and saw the bicycle traffic in Hanoi. It was just amazing, a tidal wave of bicycles that held back cars, buses and taxis on the crowded city streets. I noticed that the child seats on the bikes carriers faced the streets so that the little ones got to see the action on the streets and sidewalks instead of their parents' backs.

When I returned to Canada I car-shared with my son's mother and rode a bike when I didn't have the car. Saskatoon is a small city and I lived close to my workplace, a delightful downhill ride from Caswell to Riversdale. My first bike was stolen, I bought a replacement at a Police auction, I wore that one out, I was given an orphan bike by a friend, I found a fine bike in our back alley (I didn't steal it, it had a sign that said "Please Take Me Away.") and I rode that one until I needed a bike that had a step-through frame. That's my current bike, a 21 gear CCM (fourteen more than I need), which I bought at Canadian Tire and had four punctures in the first few weeks that I owned it. The Bike Doctor diagnosed the problem, which was that our street sweepers (the machines, not humans) leave tiny shards of metal on the streets that wreak havoc with bicycle tires and tubes. He fitted a heavy duty tube and the problem was solved, but I did buy a foot pump just in case.

I'm very much in favour of bike lanes and I don't like people who say we don't need them. Last year I took part in a bike rally when we rode from Broadway through Saskatoon to City Hall asking for more bike lanes. What was really great about the ride was that we had an escort of six police officers on bicycles. Two of them went ahead and blocked the traffic at intersections, including Idylwyld at 20th Street, (I don't expect to do that ever again), two rode with us and two rode behind.

Today there are fat tire bicycles for the brave souls who ride their bikes year round or off-road. There are also electric bikes for people who are just too tired to pedal. I'll never ride one of those! Well, maybe I will, but only if some kind person or people give me one as a gift.

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