

Hard Times for the Bike Club

by Pete Schmelzer

A few years ago when my family was cleaning out the Glenview home of my dad's cousin, John Schmelzer, after his death, I found this decades-old excerpt from a fledgling bike club's newsletter, referencing the club's founder who was also a distant relative, and perhaps explaining why I have cycling in my DNA.

As a worldwide virus stymies AHBC rides in 2020, it's interesting to read how these bike enthusiasts dealt with the international upheaval of their day. It's also a "shout-out" of appreciation to the dedicated volunteer leaders who serve everyone in the AHBC!

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"Due to the sudden and untimely death of the organizer and first chairman of the Bicycle Committee, William J. Schmelzer, Jr., this account of its activities is of necessity incomplete. The Committee sponsored 17 rides during 1942, held from March to November, its first complete season. The rides were two or three hours long, and for the most part, were held on Sunday mornings, although a few Saturday afternoon rides were organized and favorably attended.

"The average attendance was about 12; the largest went up to 35. The plan was to have the rides in the different sections of Chicago in order to give the cyclists a few chances to ride in their own section or to use their own bicycles, although each ride always began where bicycles could be rented. Toward the end of 1942 came the rationing of bicycles and dealers were unable to replenish their stocks for rental purposes. Bicycle rental shops became very scarce. This situation remains for the duration.

"The success of this first season is a tribute to the unflagging zeal and indefatigable efforts of its chairman, who during his lifetime, never missed a ride. His genial personality was instrumental in making the rides pleasant for all who attended." Albina E. Saidl, Secretary

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WWII started in 1939 and "the duration" was 1945, so their trouble renting bikes for Club rides lasted another three years, although I think bikes were still quite important for transportation, given the cost of maintaining a car back then.

I wonder... what were the road conditions of the day for bikers?

I wonder...how did they determine the length of a ride in miles without a GPS measuring everything? It would be another 15 years before a satellite would even achieve orbit, and another 60 years before we would experience turn-by-turn navigation.

And I wonder...who will be reading the AHBC newsletter 78 years from now? What will they think of cycling restrictions during this pandemic? And what will they think of our ancient bike technology...way back in 2020?