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## Part One: The Influence of Fashion. Chapter 6, Bicycling and the Bloomer

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BICYCLING  
AND THE  
*Bloomer*

ON THE SURFACE OF IT, BECAUSE OF ITS SINGLE-MINDED IF SLOW DRIVE TO free the female body, clothing for swimming offered the greatest change in women's dress worn in public. As the early Olympic experiences show, however, the underlying demands of modesty—the need to cover limbs and the constancy of skirts prevailed even in that realm until the second decade of the twentieth century. Even then, although they were created for the specific purpose of competition, the streamlined new suits stirred up disquietude, ambivalence, and a certain amount of embarrassment. The task of that clothing was not easy. It had to break not only from the iron-bound restrictions caused by the clothing itself, but also from an outdated moral code enforcing puritanical standards of modesty. Different from swimming but with its own peculiar set of requirements, one last sporting pastime must be mentioned because of its importance in its own contemporary setting. That activity was bicycling. In its time, which in fact was relatively short—broadly speaking, from 1887 to 1903, with a fashionable peak from, roughly, 1895 to 1897—it took the nation by storm, generating untold numbers of articles in all kinds of the popular press. Commentaries and even entire magazines were devoted exclusively to it. Sports clubs and racing meets proliferated to respond to the demand. Clothing for both men and women was designed for it, and even today, over a hundred years later, the myth of the wholesale acceptance of the bicycle bloomer is still alive

and well in costume histories. The bicycle bloomer may be said to be the first media creation of the modern era. That it existed cannot be denied; that it was worn much is another story entirely.

In order to understand where it stemmed from, we must first go back for a brief look at the dress reform movements that struggled throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, since they eventually had an impact on the clothing for cycling. Much has been written about dress reform by twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors, in part, perhaps, because they are struck by the realization that other women were willing to take on the struggle for sensible dress long before modern-day women had to tackle the problem.<sup>1</sup> Of course, every era has struggles of its own over the subject of clothing. Nonetheless, each generation happily embraces the fashion of its time, no matter how ridiculous it may come to look to that generation's daughters and granddaughters. The twentieth century, with its preference for physical comfort literally supported by stretchy manufactured fibers that became lighter and freer as the century grew old, particularly found the two previous centuries' clothing unfathomable—beautiful, but ferociously uncomfortable. So to find stalwart women swimming upstream in their search for sanity in dress offers us a glimmer of reason in the midst of convention. That is what the dress reformers, however difficult it was for them, and however unsuccessful they ultimately were, do for us: they give a promise of reason. We have had a tendency to enfold them into our free-breathing, gossamer-elastic underwear sisterhood as the pioneers they were, determined and righteous enough to insist on shorter skirts, light-weight corsets (or no corsets at all), and simple, unhooped and unbustled skirts—in fact, to embrace early versions of the kinds of clothes *we* wear. These, of course, were clothes that included some version of the trouser.

The dress reform movement began in the United States with the Turkish trouser outfit that Amelia Bloomer introduced to a wide and unwitting audience through her temperance publication *The Lily* in 1851. Called by a variety of names—including the “freedom dress” (the term preferred by women's rights advocates), the “American costume,” and finally, lastingly, the “bloomer,” its beginnings are clouded. Gayle Fischer gives as clear an explanation as it is possible to find, and sets it well within the framework of the utopian communities and water cures that abounded in the early nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> One thing is evident: no matter what it was labeled, it had



Amelia Bloomer wearing her "freedom dress," 1851. Library of Congress.

full trousers gathered at the ankle, which were more often than not referred to as Turkish. On top of those, women generally wore the fashions of their day, with a skirt cut off just below the knee. At least one version, however, a very early representation of Amelia Bloomer herself, shows an entire outfit that reflects Turkish origins. It consists of a fitted dress with open sleeves in the style of the time, buttoned from the waist down but left open in the bodice to show a full-sleeved blouse underneath, and a sash

belt. Although it retains the silhouette of the early 1850s, the details are very much Middle Eastern.<sup>5</sup> Bloomer herself, writing in *The Lily*, suggested: "We would have the skirt reaching down to a little below the knee, and not made quite so full as is the present fashion. Underneath this skirt, trousers made moderately full."<sup>4</sup> But she makes no reference to Turkish dress at all. In another instance, an 1852 issue of *The Water-Cure Journal* published an illustration of an obviously Turkish costume, complete with a short-sleeved overdress worn over a long, straight-sleeved underblouse, both decorated, as well as the skirt of the overdress and the cuffs of the straight-legged pants, with embroidered motifs.<sup>5</sup> One wonders if the adaptation of a Middle Eastern style of dress was meant to lend an exotic aura to the outfit, one that might take away from the shock of the new, the shock of women wearing trousers. Perhaps the reformers reasoned that if it were foreign, it might be acceptable. If so, they were wrong. The costume was ridiculed widely by the national and international press, the church, and was even disdained by more conventional women (let alone men), who, it turned out, were far more numerous than the reformers in their own country.

Forty years later the Boston social reform publication *The Arena* devoted two issues to dress reform, one in 1892, the other the following year.<sup>6</sup> Amelia Bloomer had written an article for the *Ladies' Home Journal*, looking back at the furor caused by her "freedom dress." *The Arena* reprinted it in its entirety in 1893. In it, telling her own story as she remembered it, she stated that both Elizabeth Smith Miller and Miller's cousin Elizabeth Cady Stanton, then living in Seneca Falls and a neighbor of Mrs. Bloomer's, wore the garment before she herself did. Then in April 1851 her *Lily* article on her own adoption of the style was picked up by the *New York Tribune*, she recalled,

and made known to its thousands of readers . . . and from this it went from paper to paper throughout this country and countries abroad. I found myself noticed and pictured in many papers at home and abroad. I was praised and censured, glorified and ridiculed, until I stood in amazement at the furor I had wrought by my pen while sitting in my little office at home attending to my duties. . . .

It consisted of a skirt shortened to a few inches below the knees, and the substitution of trousers made of the same material as the

dress. In other respects the dress was the same as worn by all women. At the outset, the trousers were full and baggy; but we improved upon them by making them narrower and gathered at the ankle, and finally by making them entirely plain and straight, falling to the shoe like the trousers of men.

To some extent, I think the style was adopted abroad, but not largely, or, for that matter, at home. . . . None of us [referring to other early women's rights activists, such as Lucy Stone and Elizabeth Cady Stanton] ever lectured on the dress question, or in any way introduced it into our lectures. We only wore it because we found it comfortable, convenient, safe, and tidy—with no thought for introducing a fashion, but with the wish that every woman would throw off the burden of clothes that was dragging her life out.<sup>7</sup>

Such a fond hope. Fashion, strong as ever, won the day. Stung by the devastating results of their attempt to adopt functional attire, women waited some twenty years before reintroducing the idea. This time, the thrust and direction came from England under the aegis of the Rational Dress Society, led by the stalwart Viscountess Harberton, who is credited with inventing “the divided skirt” sometime around 1876.<sup>8</sup> (It didn't hurt the movement that the Rational Dress Society was led by a titled lady.) The Americans followed her lead, climbing back on the battered reform bandwagon. By the 1870s, however, with experience their guide, those involved were well aware that if they were to succeed, some deference must be paid to fashion. As Abba Gould Woolson explained in her introduction to an 1873 published collection of five lectures titled *Dress-Reform*, the originators of the Bloomer had assumed that the great numbers of dissatisfied women who longed for more sensible clothing would adopt the new outfit, regardless of its source and configuration, and “make secure . . . its reign.” Alas, she mourned, the women who stood behind it in principle lacked the courage to wear it in person, while

the majority of thoughtless women [held it as] an object of indifference or of ridicule. For them, nothing could be right which was not fashionable; and nothing could be fashionable which had not come

from Paris. They were strengthened in their hostility by that half of humanity whose favor they chiefly sought, and who, as they had never experienced the miseries of the old attire, could never appreciate the comforts of the new. Men sneered at the costume without mercy, and branded it as hideous. As made and worn by many of its followers, it was certainly not beautiful: but had it been perfection itself, it would have utterly perished; for arrayed against it were the force of ignorance and of habit, and the persistent prejudices to which they give rise. Those who devised it had taken no pains to humor long-established tastes. . . . A few clung to it resolutely: but they learned at last that the mental discomfort it brought . . . outweighed the physical comfort it gave.<sup>9</sup>

Another twenty years passed, and *The Arena* still sang the same woeful song, albeit with a snappish edge: “If the Bloomer dress had come from a Paris milliner, it would have been welcomed in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.”<sup>10</sup> The prevailing notion of beauty—as we have seen, a factor in keeping women out of the earliest Olympics—played its role here as well. The anger and frustration the reformers lived with exploded in *The Arena*, caps, italics and all: “The women [of the 1860s] were beautiful in [hoop skirts], as they are *in anything which the majority of them wear*. . . . Were they beautiful? . . . They were frightful! and the fact is, women will wear anything under the sun that is fashionable; and THEIR WEARING IT *will, for the time, make it seem beautiful*.”<sup>11</sup>

Even with the insights gained by the 1870s, the reformers had progressed little. By the 1890s, when the symposium reported in *The Arena* took place, women still struggled to create a worthy, accepted, functional costume. Again, those involved were leaders in the women’s rights movement, and though vocal in their dismay and protest, they ultimately achieved as little immediate change in the area of dress reform as they did in the area of female enfranchisement.

Nonetheless, a growing number of influences helped renew the vigor of dress reform by the last decade of the century. The participants in the symposium gave credit over and over again to the increasing involvement of women’s higher education and the need for women to dress comfortably

when in competition with men on campuses. They expressed hope that with education, woman would “reach a plane where fashion will no longer enslave her.”<sup>12</sup> Along with this, they mentioned the gymnastic costume frequently (“the style is graceful, and is becoming to almost everyone”).<sup>13</sup> They liked its efficiency, and one of the movement’s leaders, Frances Russell, even went so far as to suggest that it would be well accepted if, by some miracle, every college girl would appear in the streets wearing it in a modified form:

Just imagine the college girls and society belles, who are *already* emancipated from the long drapery and corsets for the “business” of “physical culture,” simply *extending the occasions upon which a comfortable and convenient costume may be worn*. The high-school girls would follow the college girls, and the clerks, typewriters, and all working girls would be with them; and you and I, with gray in our hair, would soon join in the glad procession, little girls of all sizes skipping in freedom by our sides.<sup>14</sup>

As we will see in Part Two, those college girls had the inclination to lead the way, but, initially at least, were held in check by their teachers, who represented an older generation and society at large. Clearly, Frances Russell understood the theory of fashion diffusion, but she misread her times. She would have to wait another generation for that diffusion to happen. But happen it did, and the gymnasium was the venue of success.

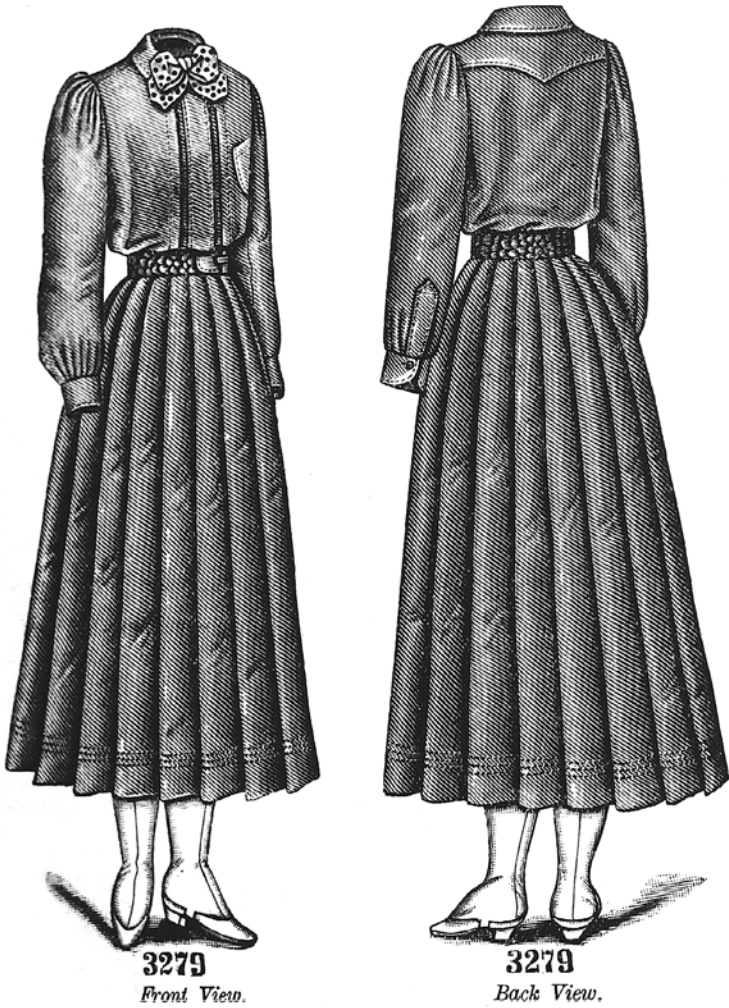
The dress reformers recommended the gymnasium dress for the housewife as well, with the suggestion that it would “materially lighten her labor.” They made it clear, however, that she was to wear it only in private. Alice Stone Blackwell offered a neat compromise: “If it were necessary to go to the door, a long apron, which could be slipped on in a moment, would hide all peculiarities.” Her comment reveals how deeply ingrained customary dress was even for these struggling women. Once again, we see that they argued vehemently for reform but remained timid in the application of it. Even their language betrays them. Blackwell hoped “that men, seeing their wives wearing a gymnastic dress during their working hours, would get accustomed to the costume, and would no longer be struck by it as some-



thing hideous and *outré*.”<sup>15</sup> “Popular out-of-door sports and pastimes” provided another “potent aid” for their cause, according to the reformers:

The seaside and mountain resorts have aided wonderfully in breaking the spell of conventionalism. Then the great and growing popularity of the bicycle with women is another factor not to be overlooked . . . even the universally loved and respected president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union chose a safety bicycle in preference to an outing at a resort distant from her charming home. The one drawback to women’s ease and comfort on the wheel is the long skirt. The bicycle is one of the many agencies acting for reform.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of 1893, the second symposium on the rational dress movement was held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition, to assess the impact of the reformers’ dress at the Chicago World’s Fair, held during the six months from May through October.<sup>17</sup> Although the fair was a resounding triumph, reform dress was not. Visitors had demanded patterns for the reform dress (by now referred to as rational dress), which was basically a walking suit in all its fashionable guises, but without corsetry or long sweeping skirts. Above-the-ankle skirts with gaiters, and the divided skirt along the same lines as the gymnasium dress, were the alternatives to the fashion skirt. Patterns for looser bodices, often bloused, had appeared in *The Delineator* as yachting, tennis, and “outdoor sports” costumes as early as 1889, but these still called for a full-length skirt to complete the outfit.<sup>18</sup> The next year, however, versions of a new style introduced for “pedestrian and other athletic sports” featured skirts, shortened to low calf, that hid “Knickerbocker drawers” beneath them.<sup>19</sup> A separate pattern for knickerbockers, to be made, *The Delineator* suggested, out of wash silk, appeared in the same issue, with the recommendation that the garment be used for “traveling and outing uses.”<sup>20</sup> Although these new styles for recreational activities seem, to our eyes, to answer the need of the dress reformers, the fair-goers complained that no patterns for rational dress were available to them. Eventually, Butterick introduced a pattern for the gymnasium bottom in response to the demand, but not in time for the fair. In fact, the complete patterns for bloomer costumes, including a variety of trousers, jackets



"Ladies' Costume. (Desirable for Pedestrianism)." Below the skirt, the legs are covered by gaiters.  
*The Delineator*, September 1891, 189.

and hats, did not appear in *The Delineator* until November 1894.<sup>21</sup> "Many women and men went home from the Fair disappointed because they saw not a single woman dressed in the new styles."<sup>22</sup> Chicago summers can be sweltering, so the demure and natty gaiters proved too hot, as did the sensibly firm fabrics used for the outfits. Besides that the clothes had no pockets. The leaders of the National Council of Women wore the reform dress only



"Ladies' Knickerbocker Drawers. (Desirable for Travelling and Outing Uses)"—as long as they remained hidden under a skirt. *The Delineator*, May 1890, 363.

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occasionally, shrugging off their dismissal of it by saying, "In this latter day campaign, no one is asked to make a martyr of herself."<sup>25</sup>

Despite the leaders' reluctance to wear the sensible but offending garments, a photograph of "Mrs. Marie Reidesdelle in Her Bicycle Costume" was included in *The Arena's* report on the symposium, which claimed, "This costume won the prize recently offered by the New York *Herald* for the best bicycle costume for ladies."<sup>24</sup> For this, Mrs. Reidesdelle won \$50 (close to \$1,000 in today's money) which surely must have eased any discomfort in wearing it. It consisted of "a divided skirt of two breadths of black cashmere (forty-eight inch goods, one breadth in each division), with tan leather gaiters meeting the divisions half way from the knee to the ankle." (No wonder women were reluctant to wear similar outfits in Chicago in the summertime.) Echoing other voices at other times, the article continued, "It seems a pity that this young woman, riding her wheel, to her business in this costume, feels obliged, because of its oddity, when off the wheel to cover it with a long skirt."<sup>25</sup>

Here, finally, we see the intersection of the dress reform movement with sport and outdoor activity. The report underscores the argument that, even



"Ladies' Bloomer Costume," patterns for reform dress, *The Delineator*, November 1894.

in the face of reform, dress worn in private could be functional, while dress worn in public had to conform to societal standards. And, as we have seen, although these standards were often influenced by the presence of men, women too carried high the banner of traditional dress.

How did the conservatism of high fashion greet the new craze of bicycling, which, by its very nature, epitomized a serious departure from the protected and demure expectations of the past? In a word, it adopted rational dress.

Fashion historiography rarely fails to mention the phenomenon of the bicycle and its influence in bringing about change in women's dress. But as we have seen, many other activities and trends also played significant roles. What bicycling brought to it was visibility. Repeatedly, as in the *New York Herald* article, contemporary American sources reinforced the notion that the bloomer or knickerbocker suit, almost invariably touted by later writers as bicycling garb, was not acceptable off the bicycle without a modest covering skirt, thereby negating much of the effect, and the effectiveness, of trousers.

Although the clothing was problematic, bicycling itself was a craze that engulfed not only the United States but the rest of the world as well. In the United States it exploded from some "100,000 wheelmen and women" in 1887 to universal acceptance by the time the fad ended around 1903. The bicycle became "the people's carriage," the "crowning luxury of the common people and the necessity of the well-to-do," including "the artisan, the millionaire, the professional man, the laborer, the rich merchant, the lady whose name appears in all the 'society movements of the day,' the shopgirl, the

banker and his clerk.” It was the “destroyer of caste and the annihilator of age.”<sup>26</sup> In the three years that marked the height of the craze, 1895 through 1897, *Harper’s Bazar* scattered comments, notices, and articles throughout its issues, offering readers all sorts of interesting tidbits about bicycling, including who was the latest to take up the fad. It turns out that everybody was—from aging women’s rights advocates and female clergy to well-situated foreigners, stage stars, even royalty: “Miss Frances Willard’s example in learning to ride the bicycle bids fair to be imitated by many other women of mature years. The Rev. Phebe A. Hanaford, who has left her first youth some distance behind her, is practising with the wheel”; “Madame Hanna Korany, of Syria, has become so far infected with Occidental ideas that she, too, is taking bicycle lessons.”<sup>27</sup> Popular entertainers jumped on the bandwagon: “Bicycles have appeared upon the stage in variety shows and in exhibitions of fancy riding, but it has been reserved for M. Coquelin the younger to arrange a monologue to be recited from end to end as he wheels about the stage. He makes his entrance and his exit upon a ‘machine’ and varies his recitation by ringing his bell, blowing his whistle, and other appropriate ‘business’”; “A curious but very pretty sight was the costume ride at the Michaux Cycle Club, Tuesday evening. Oddly enough, the bizarre costumes seemed particularly suitable to the wheel, and when the Virginia reel was danced (on bicycles) the effect was exceedingly good.”<sup>28</sup> Not to be outdone, in an activity that should resonate with twenty-first-century readers, “Queen Margherita of Italy has added bicycle riding to mountain-climbing and the other active pursuits to which she has resorted in her endeavors to reduce her flesh. In this last form of exercise, as in the others, her example is imitated by the ladies of her court, no matter what their figures may be.”<sup>29</sup> And in their coverage of the marriage of Princess Maud of Wales, daughter of the Prince of Wales and granddaughter to Queen Victoria, *Harper’s Bazar* concluded, “She is a good shot, a fine wheelwoman, a capital amateur photographer, and an excellent performer on the violin.”<sup>30</sup> The only wedding gift singled out for mention “was a band of white leather studded with turquoise. Six little bells of silver and gold, alternately, were strung on the band, which is attached to the handle bar of a bicycle.”<sup>31</sup> As the magazine pointed out somewhat superfluously in October 1896, “bicycling is confined to no one class in England. Princess Victoria of Wales, Princess Charles of Denmark, and the Duchess of Connaught all ride wheels, and Lady Henry Somerset is said to be an enthusiastic cyclist.”<sup>32</sup> Even an

astonishingly nimble elderly rider was singled out for attention: “Probably the oldest woman who habitually rides a wheel is Miss Christina E. Yates, of Oakland, California. She is eighty years old, and although she has learned to ride within a year or so, she already has such skill that her teacher declares he means to instruct her in trick riding. She mounts her wheel every day, does not mind rough roads, and can cover a long distance without fatigue.”<sup>55</sup>

More than one article reported on the denizens of Newport—“in that part of Newport, it goes without saying, in which fashions are stamped for the rest of the country.” But Newporters, it seems, were slow in adopting the craze—until, that is, they saw that if it was good enough for foreign capitals, it must be good enough for Newport. Even the pronunciation changed, from the standard “bisick-ling” (or, to *Harper’s Bazar*, “bicycling”) to “bicy-cling” (with a long *y* sound). “With this distinction, and this distinction alone,” the magazine reported, “Newport consented to adopt it.” Here, *Harper’s Bazar* unwraps its sharpest critical needle, usually kept well hidden from its middle-class readership:

“Bicy-ling” was to be to the world outside just what it had always been—a convenient means of transportation, a cheap pastime, a wholesome exercise. With those who adopted “bicy-cling” such points of view were ignored. Indeed, they were never possible. Convenience, cheapness, and wholesomeness in Newport! Away with such things! What had they to do with “bicy-cling”? What had they, forsooth, to do with pleasure at all? As well discuss such subjects in relation to functions to be given in their palaces. One only vulgarized the whole affair. The privilege of a favored few is to enjoy the things for themselves.

(Interesting that foreign royalty was never criticized in these terms, only the American rich.)

But how Newport embraced the fad once they did!

Everywhere in Newport, then, and on the roads outside, well-known people may now be seen on the wheel—young girls, middle-aged women, old men and boys, and those well-groomed young fellows who always bear about them unmistakable evidence, though subtle, of the well-to-do world to which they belong. Chaperons are not always

insisted upon. Greater liberty is allowed in going about on the bicycle than at any other time.<sup>34</sup>

Shades of the croquet craze before it! Newport had finally caught on.

Granted this reportage all came from a woman's magazine, but it is interesting to note that few men are mentioned in this list. Although men most decidedly rode, too, the phenomenon of cycling, certainly in these years of fashionability, seemed to belong more to women. And the magazine's readers were clearly avid for news about their favorite celebrities enjoying their favorite pastime.

There is no question that the bicycle gave women greater freedom than they had ever had before. Previously they had been limited to getting around in private carriages or on horseback, or if they could not afford those luxuries, public transportation and cabs, available only in cities. As a last resort, they depended on their own two feet. Now they were able to range about at will. A further advantage was that, by the time the craze hit, other sports-related activities had been well accepted into the mainstream of American life, so the appearance of women "wheeling" was less a cause for reproach than it might have been otherwise. In fact, as the bicycling craze passed its peak, another—golf—took its place, and the bicycle provided the means for golfers to get to the links. "So popular has golf grown," observed *Harper's Bazar* in 1897, "that it has actually caused bicycling to suffer a little in many places. Wheels are used, to be sure, but not so much for the purpose of taking long trips as for a means of getting to and from the golf course. . . . However, there is no need for cycling enthusiasts to worry. Theirs is, after all, the sport of the people *par excellence*, and can be enjoyed in hundreds of places where golf would be impracticable, and by thousands of persons who cannot spare the time or money for golf."<sup>35</sup> At that point, then, bicycling was becoming an accepted means of transportation.

So much has been written about the development of the bicycle and its evolution from a primitive two-wheel riding toy at the beginning of the nineteenth century to the safety bicycle of the late 1880s that there is no point in retelling that story in detail here.<sup>36</sup> Suffice it to say that the modern bicycle was made possible by two innovations: Charles Goodyear's vulcanization of rubber in 1839 (patented in 1844) and John Boyd Dunlop's invention of the pneumatic tire in 1888, which smoothed out the jarring

and bumpy ride that enthusiasts had had to endure in the past.<sup>37</sup> By 1892, pneumatics had begun to take over the market.<sup>38</sup> Simultaneously with the appearance of the new tire came the safety frame, designed with two wheels of equal size and a reinforcing crossbar, which was “dropped” for women, creating the dropped-frame bicycle that accommodated their skirts.

Although it began life as a rather high-priced item, the safety bicycle was instantly embraced by the middle class. By 1896, Waverley was advertising its high-end bicycles (“America’s Favorites” . . . built in the Largest and Best Equipped Factory on Earth”) for \$85 (“a clear saving of \$15.00 or more”). At today’s equivalent of close to \$1,750, the bicycle did indeed represent an investment, especially when tire ads admitted that the best tires (the only ones “you are sure of getting home on if punctured”) were “expensive”—but after all, they were the ones that made “the high-grade wheel.”<sup>39</sup> Not all bicycles were that costly, of course. Another manufacturer offered a much wider range and advertised “high grade” bicycles at a discount if ordered by and shipped directly to the customer. A bicycle listed for \$100 was reduced to \$62.50; one for \$85, to \$45; \$65 to \$37.50; and \$20 to \$10. From these, you could choose either wood or steel rims, the wood being more expensive.<sup>40</sup> Another, Crescent Bicycles, offered bicycles ranging from \$40 to \$75, giving special attention to ladies with a “22 lb . . . wheel . . . fitted with small rubber pedals, saddle specially designed for Ladies’ use, up-curved handle bars, and high frame. It is, without doubt, the daintiest Ladies’ Wheel on the market.”<sup>41</sup> Yet another ad offered bicycles for as little as \$10. Ads for and articles about bicycles appeared everywhere, in popular magazines, medical journals, cycling and outing weeklies and monthlies, even (and somewhat surprisingly) in the magazines strictly for women, such as *Harper’s Bazar* and the fashion-oriented *Delineator*, whose main function was to display the newest styles and dress patterns available from Butterick. Indeed, on one page of the February 29, 1896, issue of *Harper’s Bazar*, five out of six ads were for bicycles, further evidence of just how fashionable bicycling was during the mid-1890s.

In fact, bicycling, for a while at least, even eclipsed horseback riding. One article declared: “Cycling is far cheaper than horseback exercise, and throughout the last year or two this consideration has had its weight with many who never before thought of economizing in their sports. Its novelty, too, particularly in the case of women, has been in its favor, for a number



who own saddle-horses have taken up wheeling, inspired perhaps by a desire for a change or by a spirit of investigation to see what the new sport is like.”<sup>42</sup> (Note how issues of class insinuate themselves into the language of the women’s magazines, even—or especially—on the subject of sports. As we saw with croquet and tennis, that was part of the appeal. And it is equally interesting to realize that average Americans had a tendency to defuse any hint of elitism by embracing each new sport as it came along.)

Cycling even lent a new look to horseback riding. *Harper’s Bazar* columnist Adelia K. Brainerd commented one July, presumably during the midsummer heat, “I have observed two or three women riding [horses] in shirt-waists and straw sailor hats in the Park, instead of the conventional habit bodice and Derby or silk hat.”<sup>43</sup> These hats and cotton waists, of course, presumably worn with standard riding skirts, were part of the uniform of the New Woman of the 1890s, and a much adopted style for the new bicyclists as well.<sup>44</sup> No doubt, though, even in the summer heat, women wore their customary corsets underneath. Indeed, the question of clothing in general for bicycling, and corsets in particular, occupied a great deal of print space, with fashion mavens, doctors, and sportsmen and sportswomen alike weighing in. But corsets (with some modifications) remained a constant. Generally then, the clothing for the sport was that of the fashionable 1890s, with the additional fillip of the dashing and daring rational dress thrown in, to the delight of onlookers and magazine writers alike. In the words of *Demorest’s Family Magazine* in 1896, clothing for cycling was “a much discussed question.”<sup>45</sup>

One result of the dress reformers’ work, and an alternative to the ever-present corset, was what was known as the “health waist.” This was a firm, sturdy underbodice cut to the natural waist without steels of any kind, but which gave what was believed to be much-needed support to the back.<sup>46</sup> It was designed with shoulder straps (rather like a tank top today), and could have reinforced seaming, or even lightweight boning, but broke from the strapless and tightly shaping tradition of the corset proper. It bound the torso, but not as rigidly as the shaped corset, which could be laced tightly, or not, as the wearer desired. In fact, in an era when even doctors regarded the (looser-laced) corseted body as the ideal female form, this garment really did represent a reform of sorts. So strong was the several-hundred-year tradition of corsetry that to leave them aside entirely was to label a woman

As for the girl bicycle riders who, as a rule, put boys to shame by riding as straight as though they were on horseback, I am afraid that in some cases they only do so because they can't bend over and breathe at the same time. How is it, girls? Are not some of you trying to ride in corsets, or at least tight waists [i.e., bodices] and belts? If so, you are preparing yourselves a future of even greater suffering and unhappiness than the monkey-like boys who bend low over their handlebars; and to you, too, I would say that it were better never to have seen a bicycle than attempt to ride under such conditions. Can you, when dressed for a ride, raise your arms straight above your head and bring the palms of your hands together? Can you stoop over and touch your toes with the tips of your fingers without bending the knees? If you can, your riding costume is all right. If you cannot, it is all wrong.<sup>48</sup>

The next year, *Harper's Bazar* got into the discussion:

The necessity for having the waist-clothing comparatively loose while riding has been mentioned by many writers on the subject, but a little observation will show that it will bear frequent repetition. What pleasure there can be in the exercise to one whose gown is so tight that she has trouble in drawing a long breath it is hard to discover, but the ways of some women are truly past finding out. That there are not so many offenders of this kind among cyclists as among horseback riders is a sign of the increased allowance of common-sense which seems to have accompanied the newer sport. Heavily boned waists are more comfortable than corsets to ride in, but for those who do not choose to discard the latter, there are now special designs, made shorter and more flexible than those for ordinary use.<sup>49</sup>

The corset question as it concerned the bicycle was never resolved. Indeed, it would take another chapter of sports history entirely to bring about change in that quarter, as we will see in Part Two.

If the corset caused controversy, then the bloomer provoked dismay.<sup>50</sup> Early on, women had found that long skirts and bicycle spokes were incompatible



“Bicycling Outfits” from *The Delineator* leave no doubt that corsets were required even in summer to give the proper silhouette. Here, a girl and a woman are warmly covered in the fashionable balloon-sleeved jackets and Syrian divided skirt, whereas the man in the background wears only trousers and a shirt. *The Delineator*, August 1894, 168.

“loose.” No self-respecting woman, certainly not the ones to whom the magazines directed their attention, would be caught without them. But they drew comment when worn on the bicycle. “Heavily boned waists are more comfortable than corsets to ride in,” commented *Harper’s Bazar*, “but for those who do not choose to discard the latter, there are now special designs, made shorter and more flexible than those for ordinary use.”<sup>47</sup>


Kirk Munroe, identified as the “Founder of the League of American Wheelmen,” challenged corset wearers in his article, “About Bicycles,” which appeared in *The Book of Athletics and Out-of-Door Sports* in 1895:

Improve your Complexion and General Health. By riding a **Monarch Bicycle.**

**The Most Elegant Ladies' Wheel in Existence.**

**BICYCLE RIDING** is productive of more enjoyment and grander exercise than any other outdoor recreation.

**MONARCH BICYCLES** have become known as the best that money can produce.



**\*FOUR+STYLES:\***  
**Ladies and Gents'.**

Send for Catalogue.  
Agents wanted in open territory.

**MONARCH CYCLE CO.,**  
Chicago, U.S.A.

Advertisement for a Monarch drop-frame women's bicycle, complete with back wheel skirt guard, touting its healthful benefits. *The Delineator*, Columbian Number, May 1893, xxv.

for safe riding. The dangers of combining the two provided much fodder for commentary. But the fact remained: only two things could be modified, the clothing worn to ride and the bicycle itself. Some women chose the bloomer in one form or another, but many did not. For women who stuck to skirts, a number of possibilities presented themselves, none of them entirely satisfactory. The most notable one, and perhaps the overall favorite, was to modify the bicycle with the addition of a wire cage called a skirt guard. This encased the upper half of the rear wheel to prevent skirts from flapping back and tangling in spokes and chains. Of course, this added weight to the bicycle, which made it harder to manipulate or push when necessary, and prevented easy cleaning of the bicycle chain. Possibly in response to this problem, throughout the mid-1890s manufacturers tried to perfect a chainless gear system. Sometimes women removed either the rear-wheel mudguard or the chain guard (or both) to lessen the weight. "It seems to me that any woman who wears skirts when bicycling is reckless in removing her chain-guard," warned *Harper's Bazar's* "Out Door Woman." "Although one may ride for many miles and not happen to meet with an accident under these circumstances, there is always the danger of the skirts becoming entangled in some way, and when this occurs it almost invariably means a nasty fall." This suggested another solution, but one almost simultaneously dismissed because of fashion trends: "With an extremely short skirt [to the lower calf] there might be no possibility of trouble, but the recent tendency has been towards longer skirts."<sup>51</sup>

That comment was made in 1897, as the cycling craze was beginning to wane. But in the years immediately preceding, several kinds of skirts had been created for bicycling. The first was simply a shorter skirt, also used for and known as a “rainy day skirt.”<sup>52</sup> This “short” skirt was some four to six inches shorter than the usual length. In its most extreme version, it could hit mid-calf. For the bicycling skirt, a favorite device was an opening that buttoned down the left side, or else box pleats falling from a yoke. Another version had a standard gored skirt front with a split pleat in the back (thereby making it a divided skirt), enabling the wearer to straddle the rear wheel. But by far the model most written about was the bicycle skirt that covered a pair of bloomers underneath. In November 1895 *The Delineator* published three pages of “Bicycle Garments” (all illustrated), offering readers some fifty Butterick patterns. Indeed, one wonders if the peak of the bicycling craze that began that same year was a direct result of these paper patterns, which offered cheap versions of the correct clothing to virtually any woman who could sew and could afford a bike and the cloth.

Here, everything a young girl or woman could ask for to look natty while on the wheel was at her fingertips, from full bloomer-bottomed (skirtless or skirted) bloomer suits to short skirts, jackets (Eton, Norfolk, and basque), shirtwaists with the enormous sleeves of the mid-1890s, hats and caps, knickerbockers, leggings, and gaiters.<sup>53</sup> The only thing missing was the health waist. *The Delineator* was very careful in its labeling to spell out the uses for each garment. The suits, or “Bloomer Costumes,” offered a variety of choices: full bloomers, leaner Turkish trousers, or baggier Syrian divided skirts with fitted drawers to wear underneath. In fact, since the bloomers often called for accompanying underdrawers, a pattern for “Ladies’ Knickerbocker Drawers” was offered as well. One skirt revealed that clever device so beloved by riders, “Ladies’ Divided Cycling Skirt, having as Added Front-Gore and Plaits at the Back to Give the Effect of a Round Skirt when Standing,” an all-important effect even when the “skirt” was a pair of trousers.<sup>54</sup> The following spring, Onlex advertised a cycling costume sold through New York’s Best & Co. And lest potential buyers remain in any doubt, the wordy advertisement assured them of the efficacy of this superior garment, “made with a gored skirt in front and divided in the back, but in such a manner that it has the appearance of an ordinary skirt, the division not being perceptible either on the wheel or when used as an ordinary



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Misses' Divided Cycling Skirt, having an Added Front-Gore and Plaits at the Back to Give the Effect of a Round Skirt When Standing (Copyright): 7 sizes. Ages, 10 to 16 years. Any size, 1s. or 25 cents.

"Misses' Divided Cycling Skirt, having an Added Front-Gore and Plaits at the Back to Give the Effect of a Round Skirt When Standing." *The Delineator*, November 1895, iv.



BICYCLING AND BICYCLE OUTFITS.

"Bicycling and Bicycle Outfits": "It is not a simple matter to effect abrupt and radical changes in customs that have prevailed for ages, and many women cyclists, therefore, cling to the essentially feminine skirt. . . . Those who adopt reforms readily have welcomed the new bloomers or trousers as a most radical innovation, and so rapidly has this fashion grown in favor that the so-called 'rational dress' is now worn without provoking comment." Comment, despite *The Delineator's* enthusiastic claim, prevailed. *The Delineator*, April 1895, 579.

walking costume; at the same time it has all the advantages of a full divided skirt. It also has bloomers attached, which are not visible—is stylish, graceful and absolutely safe.” Not to be outdone, on the very same page Best’s rival B. Altman advertised a “Cycling Habit” (note the elite, horsey overtones), “The Improved Roycelle.” Deemed ideal for wheeling, it offered “an ingenious arrangement of the drapery [that] combines many advantages of style, utility, and freedom of motion with a graceful and genteel appearance.”<sup>55</sup> As the magazines had reported, every level of society embraced bicycling, and the ads quickly set out to find the high-end market.

Newport, of course, once it had accepted the new fad, had the advantage of being able to sport both singularly appropriate and more lavish and fragile, if inappropriate, clothes. *Harper’s Bazar* left no doubt which it preferred:

The best dressed women wear leggings and short skirts. Now and then one is seen in high-heeled slippers and silk stockings; but this is seldom, and only when the foot is very pretty and the thin stockings of a new design. And the young girl declares that they all dress this way in Paris without exciting comment, and that Newport is only a provincial old town for questioning the matter at all.

The shirt-waist is all supreme. Sometimes it is a plain conventional affair of wash material, starched at the neck and wrist. Sometimes it is a dainty affair of mull that looks as though one day’s experience would end its existence. Sometimes, but rarely, it is of chiffon. For the most part common-sense and good taste, which includes an instinct for the appropriate, rule in the question of a dress for the bicycle, and shirt-waists of wash material prevail, as they often do nowadays on horseback too.<sup>56</sup>

An 1895 *Harper’s Bazar* article, “Smart Bicycling Suits,” fleshed out *The Delineator’s* illustrations with suggestions for fabrics and in the process gave home sewers or little dressmakers some tips from the greats. Linen, either English or Holland, was suitable for hot days, and tweed, serge, or even mohair for “uncertain” weather. “The choicest suits sent to Newport, Lenox, and Bar Harbor”—all the elite East Coast summer watering holes—“have a short skirt reaching to the shoe-top, covering knickerbock-

ers buttoned or buckled just below the knee.” Redfern, the famous London couturier (who by this time had expanded into both Paris and New York) known for his exquisite tailoring, and who gained his reputation as a tailor of women’s riding habits, preferred “a kilt skirt with a broad box-pleat in front in genuine Highland fashion.” In fact, Redfern had made two suits for each of the six American women in a company of twelve cyclists who were heading off to England and France that summer, taking their wheels with them. Many skirts opened down the left side, said the magazine, but “tailors consider it better to button them half-way down each side of the skirt front, as they are then very easily dropped.” Skirts were lined throughout, but had no stiffening. Knickerbockers were narrower, even though they took the place of all petticoats. The best ones were sewn to a hip yoke to smooth the line under the skirt. In the summer, silk pongee was recommended for the knickerbockers; those made out of a rough Scotch wool for cooler weather were to be lined, preferably with silk serge or cotton sateen. The bloomers were “short,” but the skirts reached the ankle. Gaiters completed the look.<sup>57</sup>

As for the jackets, in that year of the fullest sleeves ever, they had to have sleeves that were “ample enough to go on over those of a shirt-waist without crushing them,” a thankless if not impossible task. As for the shirtwaists themselves, those of “cotton or of wash silk are precisely like those in use for other suits, each cyclist knowing what best becomes her.” The preferred colors were drab so that dust would not show, but *Harper’s Bazar* also recommended brown, black, and navy, often with a white or cream contrast. Lastly, “summer gloves for bicyclists are of finely woven lisle thread, with the inner side of the palm and fingers covered with heavy kid. They are fastened by four buttons, are worn very large, and cost \$1.25 a pair.”<sup>58</sup>

The following year’s June 13 issue of *Harper’s Bazar* provided a wealth of information about the cost of a complete outfit for the well-dressed cyclist. Ever attuned to its reading public, the magazine offered alternatives, going first for high quality, then for moderate. “Bicycling is to be more the fashion than ever at the watering-places,” it reported, “and at least two bicycle costumes must needs be provided for summer wear—one of serge, cheviot, or covert-cloth for cool days, and one of linen, Russian crash, or the wiry material that looks like hair-cloth, or perhaps white duck for the hot weather.” Much discussion regarding various styles followed,



culminating in the anointing of the preferred one: “The Eton jacket is the most useful, on account of being so light and small that it can be carried on the handle-bar if it is not desired to wear it.” Even so, the writer noted that it had to be cut long enough in the back to cover the belt of the skirt. Heaven forbid the waistband should show. Generally, “the tailors prefer the double-faced cloth for their heavy costumes” since it hangs better. But this cloth “is always expensive,” and a “handsome costume” made from it would cost in the neighborhood of \$50. Of course, this included the waist or coat lined with silk. When we realize that \$50 would equal \$1,020 in today’s dollars (plus another \$25 for the gloves), we can see that this indeed would be a very expensive outfit to wear for bicycling, and far out of reach of the average middle-class budget. Linen, it seemed, offered a better choice. “In the linens there are some marvellous fabrics. One that looks like covert cloth is only 15 cents a yard, makes up very well, and launders well. A costume just made of this material, recently finished, only costs \$7, including all the findings. It was made by a cheap dressmaker, to be sure, who copied the model in one of the newest patterns.” Although \$7 looks much more affordable, it still amounts to some \$145 in today’s dollars. But several of the New York stores were advertising suits that June for as little as \$5. Some were eminently suitable for cycling, with only a little adjustment here and there—taking a breadth out of the skirt back, for example, to make it narrower—and at an equivalent cost of just over \$100 (on sale), it begins to look like a middle-class outfit after all. Of course, the wearer would have to use her own “inevitable shirt-waist” and decide what she should wear underneath. Pongee silk and colored lawn were good, but “Lansdowne or gloria silk” were “very wide, exceedingly cool, and only cost a dollar a yard.” Of course, that is still close to \$20 per yard in our terms. Clothing was clearly not inexpensive in the nineteenth century, even when a woman made it herself or hired a “cheap” dressmaker.<sup>59</sup> Not until the twentieth century, with the invention of manufactured fibers and clothing designed to fit more loosely, thereby permitting mass manufacturing, did the cost of clothes drop.

One thing is apparent from all these articles: bloomers were a highly recommended part of the bicycling gear for women. But equally apparent is the understanding that they were absolutely not to show, especially off the wheel. Recall Marie Reidesdelle’s prizewinning costume from 1893,

designed on the Syrian trouser model and worn with boots and gaiters. Even as the newspaper reporter admired it for its attractiveness and efficiency, he was bemused by the fact that she had to cover it with a skirt while not riding.

The popular press kept the news of the bicycle bloomer alive for its readers. Letters in the Wellesley College Archives, however, tell us perhaps more clearly than anything else just what it must have been like for the young woman of that day to experience the new world of bicycling and the new kinds of clothing she needed for it. Louise N. Pierce entered Wellesley in September 1896. In October, she wrote a long letter home to her mother, bringing her family in Maine up to date on what she was doing at school—or, more precisely, what she was wearing or wanted to be able to wear. She had recently bought a hat, “just like a man’s except that there is a cock’s feather in it. If I don’t like it Papa can have it. I think I shall get a cap. Most all the girls wear one. My hat is soft felt, dark brown, cost two and a half.” She mentions that she has also bought a pair of gaiters, which, as we have seen, were so often included in outfits for bicycling to cover the shins. Hers were the “jersey kind.” They “come above the knee, cost a dollar and a half.”<sup>60</sup> Then, after mulling over what she needed for winter wear, she declared:

If I come back another year I want a new bicycle. Everybody rides here, and I don’t wonder the roads are simply fine. It’s quite flat around, and the streets are broad and smooth, not stony at all, a good deal like asphalt. It’s the best place I ever struck for wheeling.<sup>61</sup> Yesterday Dora and I hired wheels and together with Miss Yeater and Harriet Righter went riding. Had an awfully good time. Staid an hour and a half. Cost thirty cents. I wore my short skirt, bloomers and gaiters. I never rode in a regulation suit before. They’re great. Shant ever ride in any other kind. The skirt is all right, it’s pretty short, it seems very short to me; if I don’t like it I can have it changed at Xmas. The blouse is OK.

Louise’s letters, like so many written home to their parents, tell us a great deal about the lives of the college girls, including a surprising amount about their clothing.<sup>62</sup> Earlier that same October, Louise had written to her

mother about a rainy day skirt. What is interesting here is that it was her mother who had suggested the new style; Louise was reluctant to adopt it. Perhaps, to judge by her comment about the short cycling skirt, she was uncomfortable wearing the new length. But peer pressure had done wonders. (Probably her mother had whipped up the skirt and its bloomers and matching blouse and sent them off to her daughter for her comment. Where else would the new bicycle suit have come from?) Louise wrote:

A good many of the girls here wear short skirts on rainy days, like you wanted to make me, and if you have time, you might want to make me one. Some have them come to above their shoe tops, but I think *to* the tops is short enough. I have measured as well as I can and think it made, but without binding would be about 31 inches. That's 5 in. shorter than this black everyday skirt and make some long gaiters too. Tell me how to measure for them. I think the serge would be better than the broadcloth, even if the bloomers are of that for it isn't so heavy and won't catch the dirt so badly, I don't believe, for I've just been comparing mine with Lena's. And the serge matches the sweater better. They make them with about 6 in. of stiffening around the bottom to keep it down. I can use it for a bicycle skirt when I ride again. about as wide as my usual skirts Lined perhaps with rustle cambric.

At least among Wellesley girls, the bicycle suit seems to have been a hit.<sup>63</sup> One would expect that if it were to be accepted anywhere, it would be on college campuses. As for the rest of the world, it is hard to assess just how widespread the use of the bloomer or "divided skirt" actually was. From cartoons, drawings, and other views from popular sources of the time, it would appear that daring and dashing women wore them everywhere, to the amusement or consternation—and even the admiration, in a few rare cases—of onlookers, mostly men. Other sources suggest that if it caught on anywhere, it was in France, where it was worn by women members of cycling clubs who congregated in Paris's Bois de Boulogne. Hattie C. Flower, one of the dress reformers whose work was reported in *The Arena*, wrote in 1893, "The divided bicycle dress is so common in Paris as to excite no remark."<sup>64</sup> We saw earlier the Newport girl's shrugged comment about

Frenchwomen and their dress for cycling. Perhaps she was exaggerating, as American and English women frequently did when speaking of French women, in what would appear to be a mixture of admiration, scornful superiority, and envy. In fact, the truth about the French and the bicycle seems very little different from American and English women's experiences.

France, too, had responded to the bicycle with wild enthusiasm. Indeed, early versions of it had originated in France. As in the United States and England, the French also published magazines, books, and articles detailing every aspect of the joys of cycling. And certainly the bloomer costume appeared there as it had everywhere else. But in 1894 a leading French magazine, *La Bicyclette*, seemed ambivalent in its reaction to women cyclists. Although it used a drawing of a woman bicycling on its cover, it showed her wearing a sailor dress hiked to the knee—sporty, but definitely without bloomers.<sup>65</sup> In fact, very much as in the United States and Great Britain, a reference to the bloomer appeared in a poem making fun of a comely bloomer-clad skater. It was illustrated, again showing the garment hiked up above the knee. The poem ends: “[the skater,] feverishly sportive, . . . pursued her ill-considered course / without fear of what anyone would say.”<sup>66</sup> An article in the same issue, however, “Nouvelles d’Angleterre” (News from England), reported on a meeting of the Ladies Cyclists Club there, where members discussed and “vigorously defended the new costume,” which was being “so cruelly attacked by some distressed souls.” The women were not intimidated by these attacks, indeed were “enchanted” to be able to wear the “culotte,” did not want to give it up, and hoped to be able to wear it not only for sporting exercises but in their daily lives as well. “Whoa! Not so fast, if you please, ladies!” gasped the French magazine. That time had not yet come; the idea was embryonic at best, and “impossible at the moment.”<sup>67</sup>

Later that month the same magazine ran an ad for cigarette papers (decidedly male-directed), using as its come-on a drawing of a woman on a bicycle holding a cigarette and wearing a bicycling outfit with a man-tailored jacket and shirt, but with a very tight (obviously corseted) waist, short, knee-length skirt, and narrow jodhpur-like trousers and boots underneath—saucy, racy, definitely pin-up material.<sup>68</sup> In February, H. Fraenkel, Paris, advertised “Costumes pour Vélocipédistes.”<sup>69</sup> Both the man and woman in the ad are shown wearing men's tailored trousered suits, his a

knickerbocker suit, hers a bloomer. And later that month, another illustration of a poem shows a woman leaning on a fence outside an empty house wearing a bloomer costume.<sup>70</sup> It seems, then, that images of women wearing the “new outfit” illustrated poems, stories, and ads to draw in the reader (usually male), but very few articles actually discussed women bicycling.

Perhaps more than anything else, a three-part serialized story in *La Bicyclette*, “Pourquoi Elles Pédaient, Une Conversation,” carried on between twenty-three-year-old Suzanne and her husband, thirty-one-year-old Octave, reveals the view of women cyclists and the bloomer costume from both sides of the fence. From this tale, we realize that there really is not a great difference between French attitudes and anyone else’s.<sup>71</sup> The story revolves around an ongoing argument between the two centering on Suzanne’s bicycle riding with her friends. Octave doesn’t like Suzanne’s friends and her cycling, and as she leaves, dressed for the sport, the argument mounts. He insists that she go back into the house to change her clothes. She is outraged, but he is adamant, telling her that her outfit is ridiculous and indecent.

“Ridiculous! Indecent!” she gasps. “A costume that came from Redfern!”

“I don’t care where it came from,” he snorts. “It isn’t any the less grotesque! You, Madame, you, a respectable woman, you promenaded in trousers, in broad daylight, all over Paris! It’s disgraceful!”

Essentially she answers that she wears it only in the Bois and isn’t hurting anybody. Besides, all the fashionable women (that is, her friends) are doing it.

“Those creatures!” he scoffs. They and she are only coquettes on “stupid two-wheeled machines,” making spectacles of themselves in the company of young idiots whose cavalier manners are repugnant.

As with any good argument, she counterattacks. While he says it is stupid for her to ride a bicycle, she says he is a beast for not even trying it. Her doctor has told her that fresh air and exercise are good for her health; he retorts that she is refusing to grow up. Is that so, she snaps. Just look at me in this costume. See how well it fits! Look how alluring I am in it! Not too alluring, he answers. But then she tells him how freeing cycling is, how good it feels, like flying, without fatigue, without fetters. “It’s delicious!” Finally, he agrees to go with her, “but not today.” And she must go for walks with him, and with him alone.

The second part of this little morality tale takes place in the shop of Suzanne's couturier, "M. Frédéric." When she consults him on a new costume for cycling, he answers that the matter is very delicate since cycling is "un sport de noblesse," too relatively recent for any rules to have been adopted. But she replies that he must devise some rules. Other sports, he says, have their own rules. Riding, for example. The woman mounts her horse, her habit adjusted exactly and, like the man's outfit, skin-tight. Her long gown covers her feet perfectly, giving aesthetic perfection.

But riding a bicycle is very different, she counters. The wind, the sun, the dust on this machine without any sides require a comfortable outfit.

"But, Madame," he demands. "How important is it, in the matter of feminine costume, to be comfortable? To be hygienic? Is it chic or isn't it chic? Everything boils down to that, says the Prince."

"Ah, the Prince." She had run into him "en bicyclette" along with a delicious young woman wearing "a costume" just the other day.

"Quick! Quick, a description of the costume of this woman!"

Goodness, she replies, they were going by so fast she hardly had time to notice. But, "Wait. I think she wore white cheviot, or very light, in any case, with a matching bolero and culotte bouffante [full bloomers] . . ."

"Stop, stop, Madame, make sure. *En culotte*, did you say?"

"Yes, yes. Bloomers, or at least a combination skirt of some sort, or something like that."

"Was she or was she not en culotte? That is the question, as the divine Shakespeare said. Skirt or bloomers. That is the problem whose solution will eternally single out the master of the art. What's your opinion on this, Madame?"

Their conversation continues.

"Well, it seems to me that bloomers are very becoming . . ."

"Evidently it's becoming, especially on you, with your charming figure. . . . The bloomer would be good-looking on any woman with a good figure. Is it worn well? Would a woman of the world hesitate to sport it in public?" He plunges into meditation.

"The skirt is so inconvenient . . .," she says.

"Didn't I just tell you that convenience, comfort, and so on have nothing to do with feminine costume? Is it chic or isn't it chic?"

"Do you want me to go and ask the prince?"

“What an idea! Interview him adroitly. I won’t make my judgment until I have his high appreciation. The question is too new.”

And off she goes to check out the style with the prince.

The third and final episode returns to the married protagonists. They are now on vacation. Just before going to bed, they talk about going on a bicycle trip the next day. Octave mentions that he has allowed Suzanne to order a new bicycle costume from the couturière. (Notice the feminine form of the word. Clearly, it is not M. Frédéric.)

“Ah, speaking of the costume, it’s very pretty!” she retorts sarcastically. “Thanks to you, I will have the air of a Quaker with my long skirt and my big coattails. . . . My couturière is a provincial. She knows nothing about chic.” As we have learned above, there can be no greater condemnation.

All the French magazines seem to prove that the struggle women had in other countries took place in France as well. There is no question that the bloomer outfit (or the *costume en culotte*) was favored by the Suzannes of the cycling world, but probably there is no question either that their husbands thought very much as Octave did. (Indeed, his reactions remind us keenly of Pierre de Coubertin’s at the time of the first Olympic Games. Both were men of their generation and place.) And there is also no doubt that the women’s cycling clubs, elitist all, gathered in the Bois and cycled together there, wearing their bloomer outfits. But they were not welcome to do so anywhere else in the city. That is equally clear. In fact, most women seem to have worn some version of the bicycle skirt, perhaps with bloomers underneath.<sup>72</sup>

As in the United States, patterns became available for the home sewer or little dressmaker, tucked into the women’s magazines on pull-out tissue. The *Journal de Demoiselles* included patterns for high-style Amazones, or riding habits, in 1891, 1892, and 1894, and bathing dress patterns in 1892, 1893, and 1894. In 1895 the magazine became the *Petit Courrier des Dames*. Not a word about bicycle outfits appeared until June 1895, when two costumes designed by Mme Gradoz were described, but without patterns. Both had bloomers. Another pair of outfits by the same designer, variations on the theme, appeared the next year. Finally, in October 1897, a complete tissue paper pattern for a cyclist’s costume, including jacket, pantalon, vest, and belt, appeared, but without any article describing it or any accompanying illustration other than the one on the pattern itself. By 1898, not a single word about sport or bicycling appeared during the entire

twelve months of the magazine. Nothing could have indicated more clearly that the bicycle bubble had finally burst.

Overall, it is safe to say that Frenchwomen weren't regarded very seriously as bicyclists, and that in fact the Anglo-American belief that Frenchwomen could wear anything without criticism was simply not true. Almost as if in an attempt to codify the stereotype, France's own belittling press seemed to imply that Frenchwomen's only real interest was in the clothes, and in trying to figure out what to wear. As usual, women were made fun of in the process.

England too made fun of its women on bicycles. *Punch* had a field day, publishing cartoons and quips throughout the peak years of the craze, which of course lent the bloomer outfit a certain dubious notoriety. But at least one observer of the time reported in later years that the trousers "were hardly ever seen in reality."<sup>73</sup> Even Lady Harberton, that doughty leader of English dress reform, admitted in a letter written in 1899: "Quite between ourselves I am sure there are less wearing it than there were a year ago, and very many less than there were two years ago. . . . Except for myself I don't think I have seen one this winter!"<sup>74</sup> Most women wore a regular skirt, or if they did wear a bloomer, covered it with a skirt that they carried with them as they rode.

The reasons for this decline are not entirely clear. Perhaps the traditional need to wear skirts at all times, what I call the skirt convention, was too strong to buck. Perhaps the costs of such a narrowly dedicated outfit were prohibitive for most women. Perhaps women simply got tired of defending themselves from the onslaughts of the critics and the ridicule of the populace at large. Whatever the reasons, *Harper's Bazar* commented on the trend away from trousers as early as May 1896. In an "Outdoor Woman" column the magazine revealed a number of things: first, its awareness of the fashion process and the regionalism of fashion in the United States; second (as M. Frédéric had insisted to the feckless Suzanne), that practicality and comfort had nothing to do with fashion; and last, what may perhaps have been the most compelling reason of all:

One of the first things which the opening of the cycling season has brought to light is a fact of much interest to the average woman: it is the decline and fall from favor of the bloomer. The question which



was pending during last season as to whether this costume was destined to succeed and eventually supercede all others has been practically settled—at least as far as New York and the East in general are concerned. Throughout the West the “radical dress,” in all its varieties, is still very popular, and probably claims more adherents than it ever did here. Always fond of novelties, our Western sisters may be loathe to relinquish the garment, which undeniably has several good qualities to recommend it, but, judging from the Atlantic seaboard, the reaction which is now felt here will surely extend to them in time.

There is just one reason for the failure of the bloomers, but that one is all-sufficient. They are safe; they are comfortable; they are entirely modest, despite criticisms to the contrary; pretty and becoming most emphatically they are not, and this has been their death-blow. Occasionally, when exceptionally well cut, and worn by a pretty woman, with a trim, neatly proportioned figure, they were not unpleasing; but this conjunction of circumstances was rare.

To hammer home the point, the writer continued, “Women are too anxious about their personal appearance to be willing to wear what their own eyes tell them is ugly, and though it took a little time to discover it, this was the unfortunate adjective which nearly always applied to the bloomers.” To reassure readers, the columnist lauded the new shorter skirts, even the divided skirt, which, if made “not too long,” presented “no difficulties worth mentioning.” Finally, the writer relegated the bloomer to its proper place: “It ought to be said, by-the-way, that while bloomers as an outside garment are not desirable, they are far and away the best things to wear under a skirt. Petticoats are only an embarrassing nuisance on a wheel.”<sup>75</sup>

Ultimately, the impact of bicycling and its clothing was probably felt more elsewhere than while wheeling. *Harper's Bazar* claimed in 1897 that “the effect of the bicycle as expressed in the dress it introduced has had a widespread influence upon skating costumes this year. The short skirt is worn to a great extent, and has been taken up eagerly by the most expert skaters.” It was safer, more convenient, and more suitable for skating than “ordinary length” skirts, which tended to become wet and “draggled around the bottom” and to get caught in the blades when the skater

attempted fancy steps.<sup>76</sup> *The Ladies' World*, a Boston publication, bore this out in 1898 as it discussed what to wear for “rainy day dress”:

The first move, of course, which naturally suggests itself, is the shortening of the skirt. So much freedom has been conceded to the bicycler in the matter of abbreviated skirts that the suggestion does not send a chill of horror over one's whole being as it otherwise would. So the women who are obliged to be out in all weathers owe much to the wheel, for it is a great comfort to be able to walk the streets in a comfortable, short skirt and not be the cynosure of all eyes, both masculine and feminine. . . .

Petticoats must be discarded, being superceded by warm woolen bloomers. Talk about the emancipated woman! The right to earn her own living on terms of equality with man, to vie with him in work, sport or politics, to vote, to hold office, to be president as well as queen and empress, would never bring the blessed sense of freedom that an outdoor costume, sans trailing skirts and entangling folds and plus a short skirt and bloomers, gives to the average woman. . . .

Bear in mind that these articles [bloomers] are worn in place of the petticoat, *over* and not instead of the ordinary underwear, consisting of woven woolen drawers or union suit, and when the weather is severe, tights should be added, under the bloomers, of course.<sup>77</sup>

Boston was a center of dress reform—*The Arena* was published there—and certainly it was the major metropolitan center closest to many women's schools in the East. And yet, as late as 1898, this article appeared to instruct women on the correct way to manage the “new” garments. Most telling of all is the fact that, after the bicycling craze had completely passed sometime around 1903, pushed aside by the appearance of the automobile, so had the furor over the bloomer suit. It was not seen in public again. It retreated to the playing grounds and gymnasiums of the universities and colleges where it had come from in the first place.

Thus, though it has become much loved by costume historians for its significance, the cycling costume of bloomers and tailored top did not, in the

long run, either last or greatly influence other dress. When the dust had cleared, the skirt convention had reasserted itself, even for bicycling. We get an eerie sense of *déjà vu* at this point when we realize that the fate of the bicycle bloomer was exactly the same as the fate of the Bloomer Costume worn for skating some thirty years before, in the 1860s. While women were out of doors in the company of men, they wore skirts.

The lasting influence for permanent change came instead from the field of women's education and the clothing worn for it. Bloomers continued to be worn in schools, but not for another twenty-plus years would women dare to go out in public wearing knickers, uncovered by demure skirts. Sports, then, embraced by both men and women alike and often played together, demanded a gradual easing of clothing, but certainly nothing outside the fashion impulses keeping step with them.

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