



My first bicycle

There are no paved streets on a farm. The only two-wheeled implements we had were a corn planter, one-row cultivators, a push lawn mower, and a wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow was the kind for hauling water barrels (not to be confused with the one wheel type). It had a platform resting on a frame hung between two steel wheels, about 3 feet in diameter. We kids would use it for rides. One of us would sit on the platform and somebody else would push as fast as their legs would go. Up the driveway to the highway and back again. Of course, the vehicle would not have passed OSHA standards. Far too many dangers. All we would have to do is get our hands in the spokes of the wheel and we would have had a broken arm. That never happened, but we did slide off from time to time. That would happen when the pusher raised the platform to a 45 degree angle and beyond to provide a "thrill" for the

My first bicycle

rider. Normally, the rider was prepared for a rough ride, but once in awhile the rider was caught off guard and then went ass over teakettle onto the gravel road with the resultant scratches and tears – and trouble from Mother!

No tricycle. No scooter. No roller skates. Roger Miller says "You can't roller skate in a buffalo herd" and I am here to tell you also that "You can't roller skate on a gravel road".

So I grew up without a tricycle or a bicycle, but I did have a Radio Flyer. Not some POS thing with plastic wheels and plastic box and impact "resistant" handle, but the real thing – crush resistant steel!

A wagon can be whatever you want it to be. A truck. A roadster. A police car. A boat. A chair. A lounge. A bed.

That wagon provided great joy. I used it for scooting – left knee on the wagon and right foot for pushing. The right shoe went before the left in the summer.

You could go fast on the driveway, but always with the omnipresent risk of "rollover". The rollover rate was about once per driveway traverse.

I loved trucks. Indeed, as a kid, I wanted to be a truck driver (and still do). I was in my heyday when we were vining peas. It was long before combines appeared on the scene, so the pea vines had to be cut by a windrowing mower and then loaded onto trucks for transport to a viner. The vines were pitched onto flatbed trucks by "pitchers" (two or three men) as they moved up and down the windrows. Pitching peas was a miserable job in the rain and at night when the mosquitoes were bad. The load was like a hay stack on a truck.

During the day, I would sit in the grove with my wagon and wait for the next load. When it came I would make a beeline for the truck, fall in behind it, and scoot like hell-bent-for-leather. I usually managed to stay tight behind until the truck got onto the driveway headed for the highway. My tactic did not please Mother.

My first bicycle

I built side boards for the wagon so it could be converted to a truck. So when I tired of scooting I loaded the wagon with vines that fell from trucks as they came through the yard and it became a truck.

We kids would make roads in the grove in the summer by raking paths. The finishing touch was signs. One of us was the traffic cop. The rest of us violated the traffic laws.

The lack of pavement was a problem. Scooting on dirt or gravel is energy consuming. We needed a hard surface and what better surface than the floor in the hay barn? Usually the barn was empty of hay by summer, so the only thing necessary was to sweep the floor (what dust!) and then get the wagons up into the hayloft. The barn was about 40 by 60 feet so it made for good roads except for the braces and the two openings in the floor for throwing hay down for the horses. One opening was equipped with a sliding door that we closed, but the other opening was no longer so equipped, but that opening was in a corner of the barn, so we just stayed away from that area. Again not something that would have passed OSHA standards!

Eventually, I came to want a bicycle. Other of my farm friends (until I went to high school I had only farm friends) had them. Why not me? The argument fell on deaf ears and, hence, I grew up bicycleless - talk about culturally deprived!

Years passed. Eventually I find myself in gradual school and living with Dudley (still Susie at that time) at 4304 South 40th Avenue in Minneapolis. The calendar reads 1959. Our first house. It was small, but since all things are relative, it was big to us.

If you know anything about Minneapolis you know that avenues run north and south and streets run east and west and if you know anything about geography you know that the Mississippi river forms part of the border with St Paul. If you are smarter still you would know that the River Road, surprise, runs along the river. And those who are really smart would know that there is a bike path that runs along the road.

We lived about a mile east of River Road and, from there, about 4 miles north to the University. The path was ideal because there was only one street crossing from where I got on the Road to the University - Lake Street.

My first bicycle

We had one car so how about me biking to school? Good idea, but first I have to get a bike and learn to ride. So one Saturday, early in September, I announced to Dudley that I was going to get a bicycle. Off we go downtown to Dayton's ("downtown" is unnecessary because we left Minneapolis before there was more than one Dayton's. To get to Dayton's you had to go "downtown").

I bought a 3 speed Huffy and started practicing that day. By sunset Sunday I pronounced myself ready for the River Road.

Monday dawns with thunder and lightning (more accurately lightning and thunder but no one says that). Dudley says "I think you should take the car". Being a blockheaded Minnesotan, half German and half Dane, I say I am going to bike because that is what I said I was going to do. God knows that once something is decided that it cannot be "undecided".

Dudley packs my lunch. Outside the sky is black and getting blacker. Lightning all around and not much delay between the flashes and thunder.

Dudley says "It is going to rain" and I say "It won't if it hasn't started by 8" (the pronouncement is the result of a theory based on empirical data garnered over the last few months, while contemplating my biking decision). So I wait until 8. No rain, so I kick the stand back and wobble off.

There I go. Bag lunch clutched in the left hand on the handlebar and my briefcase (the old fashioned kind, not those skinny ones carried by lawyers in 3 piece suits) strapped to the bike rack over the rear wheel.

It gets darker still in spite of my theory. The crackle of lightning is all around, but I don't worry because I am on rubber.

So I grind away with a profile akin to the wicked witch of the East trying to outrun the tornado in the *Wizard of Oz*. My knees hit the handle bar as I push on. I think "I should have raised the seat yesterday" and say to myself "I must do that tonight when I get home".

Minneapolis is on a prairie. So it should be easy going, but it is not! I am pushing hard. "What will it be like when I have to come off the River Road

My first bicycle

and head uphill to the University?" "What the hell is wrong?" I turn my head to see if I can figure out what is wrong.

Now if you know anything about anatomy you know that the neck bone is connected to the hip bone and that when you turn your head everything turns. So when I turned to look back I turned the handlebars and the rest is history. The bicycle leaned toward Joneses and so did I. I hit the curb. The bicycle stopped but I and my briefcase kept going. Eventually I stopped with my shoulder driven into the grass on the curb and my briefcase in middle of the street waiting for a car.

What is the first thing you do when you just finish doing something stupid? You look around to see if anyone is watching. There were no cars and I saw no parted curtains so I was safe in my stupidity. I picked myself up as adroitly as a 6'6" person can and brushed myself off as best as one can after sliding on stones and grass. I fetched the briefcase and strapped it back on and I was under way again, decidedly worse for wear.

By the time I got to the River Road I was getting evidence that my theory was not holding and within the next minute or two the theory was shot!

What happens when it rains? You get wet. I could have, of course, put the briefcase over my head but I worried that I might suffer the same fate as my cousin, Orland Hormann. So I kept going. (Orland put his head in a milk pail and got zapped by lightning. He survived to tell about it, but I think he had trouble hearing after that.)

The pedaling got harder so I dropped into 2nd gear and then into 1st by Lake Street. "What the hell is going on? It was not this hard yesterday. My briefcase can't weigh that much. How can this be?" By the time I got to Franklin Street I was walking. "What is going on? Could it be a bad bearing?" I suppose I would have checked right there were it not for the fact that it was raining pitchforks and hammer handles.

So I walked on. Eventually I came to the Mayo building. I parked the GD bike, retrieved my bruised briefcase and lugged it and my rain soaked lunch to the 11th floor.

My first bicycle

"What in God's name happened to you?" my professor asked. I pretended I didn't know what he was talking about, said Good morning as best I knew how, and walked on.

I dried out about noon. I spent most of the rest of the day debating whether to call Dudley to take me and the GD bike home that night. I truly wanted to call but pride - stupid pride - kept me from doing so. So after five I girded my loins and headed for the bike. It was then, when strapping my briefcase to the bike rack, I noticed the problem. The weight of the briefcase had pushed the bike rack onto the rear brake and, as a result, I had been pedaling against the brake.

I got home and that, ladies and gentlemen, was my first bike trip!

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