

14 THE BICYCLE AS A COMMUNICATIONS MEDIUM

A COMPARISON OF BICYCLE USE BY THE U.S. POSTAL SERVICE AND WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY

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The bicycle is widely recognized as an important technological development for both recreation and sport and to a lesser degree as a practical form of transportation.¹ Despite this acclaim, there has been little attention paid to its role as a communications medium for carrying messages. For example, the numerous histories of the United States Postal Service, including the Service's own website (www.usps.gov/history/his1.htm) describe the history of mail delivery and the many modes of mail transportation and delivery in some detail, but barely mention the bicycle as a means of delivering mail.

One exception to this lack of interest in the bicycle as part of a communications network is a study by Gregory Downey of telegraph messenger boys, in which he discusses bicycle use.² However, his focus is on the use of messenger boys, rather than on the bicycle per se.

Before the development of the automobile, it is not surprising that the bicycle was one of several methods of transportation used by letter carriers and messengers to deliver physical messages. Other methods included travel on foot as well as animal-powered transport and, in cities large enough,

carriers and messengers used public transportation systems. It may be surprising that bicycle use for mail delivery continued well into the later part of the twentieth century, despite the dominance of the automobile on American roads by that time. In addition to the bicycle's importance to physical message communications systems, Downey points out that messengers, including those on bicycles, were also an important adjunct to developing electronic communication systems such as telegraph and telephone before coverage of those systems was extensive.³ Messengers would deliver a

physical transcription of a telegraphed message or a physical message that someone was trying to reach the recipient by telephone and they should go to a telephone and call a particular operator who would then connect them with the party that was trying to telephone them. This latter service occurred from 1895 at least into the 1930s.⁴

The first section of this paper examines the evolution of the bicycle until it became a practical means of carrying messages in its modern form of the safety bicycle. The following three sections describe its use by the U.S. Postal Service and Western Union Telegraph Company. The paper concludes by showing that the bicycle's unique advantages continue to this day, allowing it to carve out a small communications niche starting in the 1970s for delivering documents and small packages in urban environments.



Fig. 14.1. American postman. (From the cover of *An American Postal Portrait*, 2002)

BICYCLE EVOLUTION AND EARLY COMMUNICATION USE

As the two wheeled single-track bicycle evolved from the heavy pedal-less running machine or draisine to the boneshaker with its pedals on the front wheel, to the lighter more sophisticated high-wheel ordinary bicycle, to the modern safety bicycle with chain drive to the rear wheel, entrepreneurs pondered its usefulness as a means for delivering messages and small packages. Baron von Drais, the inventor of the draisine, reported in a German magazine that the machine was used to deliver mail in Britain in 1820. However, Roger Street is skeptical. He argues that the British Post Office Archives contain no reference to hobbyhorse use, so that if it occurred, it must have been experimental. Street notes that a Post Office "Green Paper" does refer to experimental use of a few "velocipedes" prior to 1880, but he believes those are likely pedaled bicycles or tricycles.⁵ This reference is consistent with Charles Spencer's 1870 observation of rural bicycle use by postmen in Britain.⁶ France also reported considerable "boneshaker" (as the heavy iron and wood pedaled bicycle developed in the 1860s was known) use for mail delivery at this time.⁷ In the United States, the *Journal of the Telegraph* recommended boneshaker use for messengers by 1869:

It has all the elements of excitement which would suit and captivate a spirited boy—a boy of pluck and metal... He would glory in showing to admiring crowds how he could spin along on his mission, blowing his whistle at crossings, and would claim 'good time' on his return."⁸

The earliest reported use was the Post Office in Port Jervis, New York, in that year.⁹

As the steel-tubed high-wheel bicycle and tricycle developed, experiments in bicycle use for message delivery became more extensive. Caunter notes that Bayliss Thomas of England obtained a contract to supply carrier tricycles to the British postal service as early as 1881.¹⁰ A private messenger service opened in New York in July 1884 using bicycles not only to deliver messages, but also to patrol the neighborhood at night.¹¹ By late in that

year, the Western Union office in Washington D.C. used four bicycles to deliver messages.¹² Although little documentation exists, it seems likely that various post offices continued experimenting with bicycle delivery during the high wheel era. An 1874 article on the new post office being built in Cincinnati notes that the correspondent heard that the postmaster had “already ordered bicycles for the clerks.”¹³ This is consistent with an 1895 article in the *Detroit Free Press* which said that government-owned bicycles were experimented with by the Detroit Post Office in about 1888, but that the experiment was abandoned because the cost of repairs became too high.¹⁴ The Post Office then switched from providing carriers with bicycles to providing them with a \$2–3 monthly maintenance allowance for use of their own bicycles in their official duties.¹⁵ *An American Postal Portrait* (2000) shows a high-wheel letter-carrier from Salem Oregon in 1888 (see Fig. 14.2). Similarly, the book *Riding High* contains a photo of a Boston area telegram messenger boy on a high-wheel bicycle in 1889 (see Fig. 14.3).¹⁶

With the perfection of the modern chain-driven pneumatic-tired safety bicycle, the early 1890s saw both the development of a bicycle boom in the United States and throughout much of the developed world, as well as a dramatic increase in

bicycle use as a means of communication. At this point, the bicycle offered several advantages for this task.¹⁷ At ten miles an hour the bicycle and rider are four times more energy efficient than a man running at that pace and sixteen times more efficient than a horse and rider at the same pace. Even a person walking at four miles an hour consumes three times the amount of energy as a cyclist at ten miles per hour.¹⁸ Thus, the bicycle could travel faster and further than a delivery person on foot and could carry a larger load as well. Of course the horse, while more expensive to purchase and maintain, can pull a wagon carrying much more weight than a cyclist could carry on a bicycle. In larger cities with public transportation, delivery people would use public transportation. Not only did this cost fare-money to use, but often also required some walking to get to a public transportation stop and each delivery destination. Eventually, the private gasoline-powered delivery vehicle replaced nearly all of the earlier forms of message delivery (except walking), despite its lower level of energy-efficiency and higher acquisition and maintenance costs.

The advantages of safety bicycle use were documented in Australia. In July 1898, the Melbourne General Post Office, after a one-month trial, leased 14

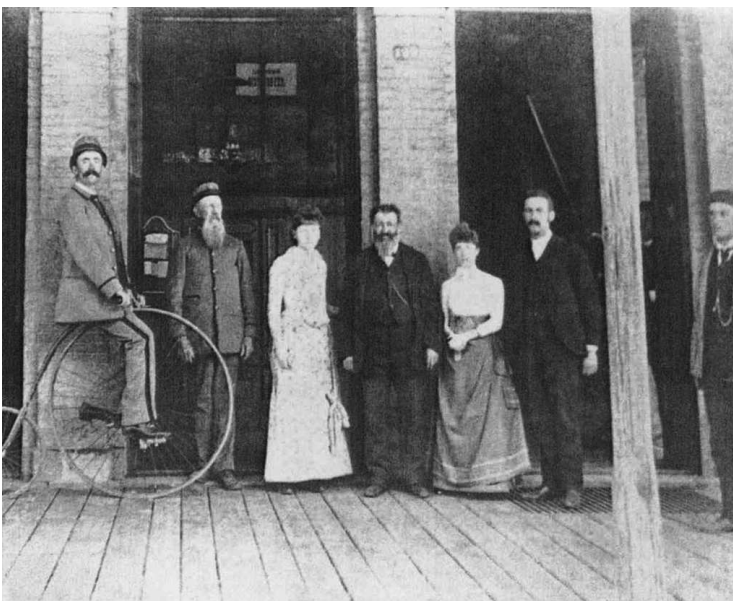


Fig. 14.2. Bicycle mail delivery in Salem, Oregon, in 1888. (From *An American Postal Portrait*, 2002)



Fig. 14.3. Bicycle mail delivery in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1889. (From Arthur Judson Palmer, *Riding High*, 1956)

bicycles for use by 18 men in shifts to carry mail throughout the city. One cyclist reportedly could do the work of a team of horses, wagon, driver and box-clearer, so that the post office saved 2000 Australian pounds per year. Each bicycle was leased for only 9 pounds per year. It was not unusual for Australian postal bicycles to carry 50 lbs of mail in all sorts of weather and last for fifteen years or more with minimal maintenance.¹⁹

ADOPTION BY THE U.S. POSTAL SERVICE

Much of the promotion of the bicycle for message-carrier use in the U.S. was sponsored by the military. The Connecticut National Guard formed a bicycle squad for courier and reconnaissance work in 1891, followed by Rhode Island, New York, Massachusetts, Colorado and others state militia and guard units.²⁰ The League of American Wheelman, under Army direction, demonstrated a series of relays: between New York and Chicago in 1892 and 1895, over a 2,037 mile course in 1894, and between San Francisco and New York in 1896. In the 1895 Chicago–New York relay, a postal squad delivered a note from the Chicago Postmaster to his counterpart in New York in just 66 hours, defeating an Army messenger team.²¹

These relays and early uses stimulated additional bicycle use for carrying messages. An 1891

article noted that the Washington D.C. Post Office special delivery service, which was initiated in 1885, was handled by boys on bicycles. About 50% of the volume was local letters because local messenger services charged a higher rate than the 10¢ stamp required by the Post Office.²² This use presumably became commonplace in cities because the 1902 special delivery stamp (10¢) pictured a messenger on a bicycle. This design was used until 1922, when the messenger on the stamp was upgraded to a motorcycle rather than a bicycle.²³

While this special delivery use of the bicycle by the Post Office is significant by itself, it also served as a stimulus for letter-carriers to try bicycle delivery as well. Special delivery mail-carriers were not civil service full-time government employees, but rather were paid only on days there were special delivery letters to deliver. After 3–5 years on special delivery in the early 1900s, or 31 full time weeks in 1936, the special delivery carrier could be promoted to regular city letter-carrier. Such carriers might well wish to continue using bicycles to deliver regular mail.

In April 1893, the *New York Times* reported that “quite a number” of letter carriers in Newark, N.J. used the bicycle while making their rounds.²⁴ In July 1893, it noted that bicycles were being used for long suburban routes in Washington, D.C. where the carriers were paid \$25 annually for repairs and supplies. It added that a half dozen carriers in Boston and occasionally carriers in New York City used bicycles, but had to pay their own expenses.²⁵ By September, *The Times* was reporting plans of the Brooklyn Post Office to use the bicycle to pick up and deliver mail, thereby avoiding the expense of using public transportation.²⁶

Similarly, the *Postal Record*, the official journal of the National Association of Post Office Clerks and the National Association of Letter Carriers, noted simply in May 1893 that: “The use of bicycles by letter carriers is growing.”²⁷ In August 1893, the *Postal Record* further noted that in Henderson, North Carolina, a carrier made a forty-mile round-trip each day delivering letters by bicycle and in November the same journal reported that the postmaster of Toledo, Ohio favored bicycle use.²⁸ A book published that year describing the history of the post office did not discuss bicycle use

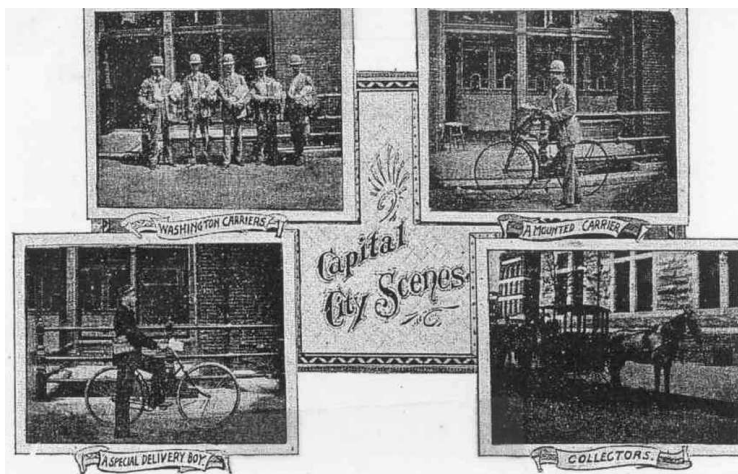


Fig. 14.4. “Capital City Scenes.” (From Marshall Cushing, *The Story of Our Post Office*, 1893)

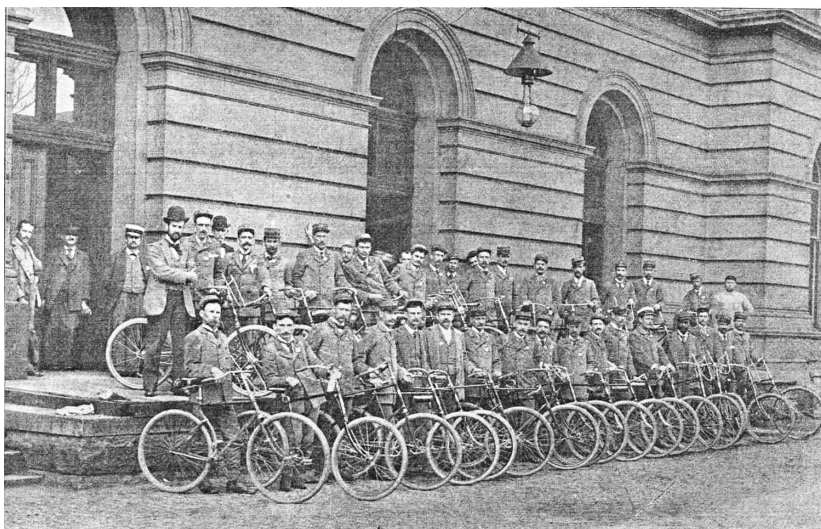
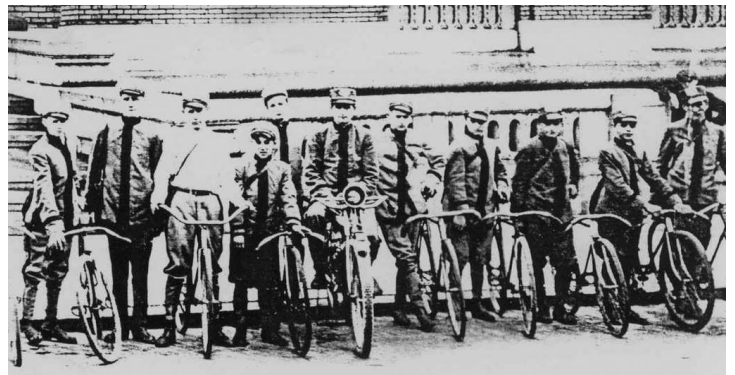
but pictured both a mounted carrier and a special delivery boy on bicycles. The former had a large bag of letters mounted on the handlebars, whereas the latter had a messenger bag over his shoulder (see Fig. 14.4).²⁹

In 1894, the Chicago Post Office conducted two tests that stimulated further bicycle use. On June 21st, A.E. Smith, a special delivery carrier, delivered seven letters in one hour and 41 minutes, defeating H. Staube who used street cars and the elevated railway but took one hour and forty minutes longer.³⁰ The following month, six sets of nine letters each to be delivered along an 18.5-mile route were given to carriers using different means of transportation. The cyclist won the race in one hour and twenty minutes, followed by the horse rider 26 minutes later. The walking carrier took nearly 5 hours to complete deliveries. As a result of these tests and special incentives, the Derby Cycle Company reportedly sold between 250–300 bicycles to mail-carriers in July 1894.³¹

Phoenix and Kansas City also started using bicycles in 1894.³² But perhaps the most unusual use occurred in that year from July 7–18, when a railway strike compelled Arthur Banta, a mail contractor, to form a bicycle relay team to deliver mail along the 210-mile route between Fresno and San Francisco. Three cyclists worked in relays much like the pony express and made the trip in 18 hours, delivering a total of 380 pieces of “mail” during the strike. Income at 25 cents per letter totaled \$108.80, but expenses were \$134.10.³³

By 1895, Chicago had 115 carriers on bikes, at a savings of \$5,000 annually in transportation costs.³⁴ The *Detroit Free Press* reported that “[s]carcely a day passes without requests being received from one or more postmasters that the carriers... be permitted to use bicycles and to retain as an offset to the cost the car fares now given to them.”³⁵ The article further noted that the department did not allow use of the car allowance, but did allow a sum between \$2 and \$3 per month to be granted to cover bicycle repair and maintenance costs. The department favored bicycle use when conditions were favorable, but did not require bicycle use. The bicycle was coming into general use in Buffalo, Cleveland, Grand Rapids and Washington, according to this article.

1895 was the only year that *The Annual Report of the Postmaster General* listed the amount budgeted for bicycle allowances as a separate line item from other transportation allowances. The amount was \$5,000.³⁶ By comparison, the car-fare allowance for public transport use was \$165,000,



Left: Fig. 14.5. The Louisville Post Office. (From *An American Postal Portrait*, 2002)

Above: Fig. 14.6. Special delivery messengers in St. Louis at the turn of the century. (U.S. Postal Service source)

suggesting far greater use of public transport than bicycles. Since the bicycle allowance to carriers had recently been increased to \$3 per month, this amount would support only 1600 months (or less than 140 bicycles for a full year) of bicycle use throughout the United States. The pictures of bicycle carriers at Louisville and St. Louis suggest that many of the bicycles were being used only for special delivery, or that some carriers used bicycles for regular delivery despite not receiving an allowance (see Figs. 14.5 and 14.6).

Indeed, bicycle use was so common by letter-carriers by 1898 that some cycling events would offer a number of different length races open only to Post Office (or police, or firemen) employees. While office clerks who delivered no mail could compete in such events, it seems likely they were designed to attract the many letter-carriers who used their bicycles each day to deliver mail.³⁷

POSTAL SERVICE BICYCLES: FROM LEASE TO PURCHASE

Information about postal service bicycle use after the boom era of the 1890s is sketchy. The Post Office had experimented with Rural Free Delivery from 1895 until 1902, when the service became permanent. Rural carriers had to provide their own transportation and horses, buggies, and bicycles were all used, as well as automobiles beginning in 1907.³⁸ Carrying capacity became more of an issue



Fig. 14.7. Fresno, California, mail carrier with his new bicycle. (Undated Fresno Bee photograph)

for bicycles in 1913, when the Parcel Post extended its policy of accepting packages that weighed less than 4 pounds to those that weighed less than 11, causing large growth in the mail order industry.³⁹ In 1914, a new statute was enacted authorizing payments to carriers injured or killed while on duty. Within a year, motorcycles and bicycles, which had been used on about 8,000 routes, were banned from rural delivery because of the danger. Lack of carrying capacity and lack of shelter in bad weather were also cited as reasons for the ban, which appears primarily directed at motorcycles.⁴⁰

The bicycle ban for rural delivery did not affect its use in urban areas. Roper reports that in 1917 over 400 bicycles and motorcycles were still in use by the Post Office, presumably in urban areas.⁴¹ This is consistent with a later story which noted that bicycles were used on a lease basis in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴² Newspaper reports confirm that bicycles have been used for delivery in Bath, New York since 1899 and St. Petersburg, Florida since 1917.⁴³ Unfortunately, there are no systematic records to detail just how many bicycles were leased and where they were used.

A substantial shift in bicycle policy came in 1944 when the postal service converted from leasing bicycles to buying them outright. As of June 1, 1944, the Postal Service had bicycle rental contracts at about 325 local offices at an average yearly rental of \$43 per bicycle. But in April 1944, the Fresno office purchased fifteen bicycles for only \$45 each, one of which is pictured below (see Fig. 7).⁴⁴

In May the same year, the Postal Service purchased 1,500 Army surplus bicycles for \$23.59 each (they had cost the Department of Defense \$28.09 originally). These bicycles contained front baskets, eliminating the need for the carrier to balance bulky mailbags and were distributed for local use. Areas such as Coal City, Illinois began bicycle delivery service in 1949 with these bicycles.⁴⁵ Official instructions issued in September 1944 stated:

Government-owned bicycles are furnished for use in the city delivery service to service sparsely settled territory, and to provide transportation for carriers when public transportation facilities are not available and a carrier's route begins or ends ½ mile or more from the

post office; also where there is no vehicle relay service at an office and the weight of a carrier's load usually exceeds 50 pounds.⁴⁶

According to the "Report of the Postmaster General" in 1945, the service purchased an additional 720 bicycles. In 1956, the *Wall Street Journal* reported plans to purchase 1,500 three-wheeled motorized scooters and an additional 2,000 bicycles, the latter to be used mostly in Southern areas.⁴⁷ The 1960 Report notes that the number of bicycles owned by the Service had increased to 3,420 in 1952. Bicycle ownership peaked in 1958 with 4,392 and then declined to 4,273 in 1960. Future reports do not list bicycles as a separate line item. Coincidentally, during the 1952–1958 time period, Dr. Paul Dudley White was President Eisenhower's personal physician and a staunch advocate of bicycle use.⁴⁸

The 1960s was a time of "motorization." Most, but not all, bikes were replaced by motorized delivery vehicles during this period. This proposition would necessarily increase expenditures for gasoline and motor oil as well as vehicle maintenance. In 1960, the Service owned nearly 6,000 "very light vehicles and mailsters." This category appears to be delivery vehicles. The Service began acquiring these in 1958. During 1960, these vehicles, plus about 30,000 larger trucks used for bulk mail transport, consumed 56 million gallons of gasoline and 53 thousand gallons of motor oil.⁴⁹ The 4,273 bicycles owned in 1960 required no fuel whatsoever, beyond that eaten by hungry mail-carriers.

The decline in bicycle use continued at least through the oil crisis of the mid-1970s. A period of limited re-birth in bicycle use by the Postal Service began in the 1980s, attributable to a 1976 law requiring new houses to have curbside mail boxes so that carriers no longer had to deliver to the front door and a mandate to reduce fuel costs. For example, St. Petersburg, Florida, went from 185 bicycles in 1962 to 14 by 1978. By 1990, it had 30 carriers operating by bicycle.⁵⁰ Other locales to increase bicycle or pedaled-tricycle use in the late 1970s and early 1980s include Sedalia, Missouri in 1979,⁵¹ Decatur, Alabama in 1980,⁵² Davis, California in 1986,⁵³ and Sacramento, California also in 1986.⁵⁴ But the highest level of bicycle Postal Service use

during this time occurred in Arizona, where 400 out of 1,700 post routes were serviced by bicycles, compared with 120 routes in Florida and 20 in California. Arizona estimated annual savings of \$50,000 per year by using bicycles instead of Jeeps in 1981, when a new bike cost only \$200 but a Jeep cost \$5,000. Bicycles also were touted as accident-free compared to the 70 Jeep accidents in 1980.⁵⁵

By the late 1990s, there are some reports that bicycle use was again being reduced. For example, in 1996, Scottsdale, Arizona had 52 delivery routes, 13 of which were bicycle routes carrying about 20% of the mail load. An automatic mail sorter was acquired to reduce sorting time, allowing carriers to spend more time on longer routes delivering mail. Of the 13 bicycle routes, two will continue to use bikes exclusively and three others will use a vehicle to drive to the initiation point and a bike to deliver the mail in a looped route that returns to the vehicle. The Post Office hoped that this would reduce the number of bike accidents which were higher than the number of vehicle accidents.⁵⁶

TELEGRAPH SERVICE BICYCLE USE AT WESTERN UNION

While the "lightning wires" of the telegraph could deliver a message almost instantaneously, once the message was transcribed, it still had to be delivered to its recipient. Thus, for a service whose competitive advantage over the mail system was speed, the speed of message delivery by messenger was crucial.⁵⁷ As noted above, there is one report of the Washington D.C. office of Western Union using four bicycles for message deliveries in 1884.⁵⁸ By 1889, telegrams in the Boston area were also being delivered by bicycle messenger boys.⁵⁹ However, such high-wheel use for delivering telegrams seems rare. Downey notes that the earliest uses he could find included Syracuse in 1892, Omaha in 1893, Philadelphia in 1894 and New York in 1895.⁶⁰ Milwaukee also claims to be the first large city in the United States to have delivered telegrams by bicycles, beginning in 1891, but this may not have occurred until 1895.⁶¹ Bicycles used at this time

would have been modern safety bicycles. Even by 1896, bicycle use was not universal by Western Union as was suggested by a fight which occurred in Elizabeth, New Jersey between Postal Telegraph messengers who had bicycles and Western Union messenger boys who did not.⁶² Downey suggests that bicycles were still quite expensive during this period, about \$90, so this would have been an expense for the office rather than for the messenger. However, with the collapse of the bicycle trust at the end of the century, prices had fallen to \$10–\$20, so telegraph companies could try to hire messengers who could afford to buy their own “wheel.”⁶³ One poor Western Union messenger boy in New York City bought a \$60 bicycle in 1899, paying \$10 down and \$1 per week in installments, but the bicycle was stolen after about two months. This incident, followed by the death of his father, was enough to have him committed to an insane asylum.⁶⁴

By the 1920s through 1942, Western Union bought as many as 5,000 bicycles (at \$20–\$25 each) per year from the Westfield Manufacturing Company and resold them to messengers at cost using an installment payment plan.⁶⁵ (see Fig. 14.8) However, it bought three times more pairs of shoes. If we assume that high messenger turnover rather than repeat purchases from the same messenger is the primary source of shoe and bicycle purchase,⁶⁶ and that shoes are replaced more often than bicycles by continuing messenger boys, then walking messengers would outnumber bicycle messengers less than 3 to 1.⁶⁷ This is consistent with 1929 figures from the Chicago Western Union office that 65% of its messengers were on foot and 35% used automobiles and bicycles.⁶⁸ In 1928, Western Union announced that it depended on 15,000 messenger boys to deliver nearly 200 million telegrams annually in the U.S.⁶⁹ Downey’s analysis of 1930 Census data suggests there were just over 12,000 messengers in the U.S., with over 2000 of them in New York City. The total number of messengers peaked in the 1930 Census and declined in the following two decades.⁷⁰ If foot messengers outnumbered bicycle messengers by two to one, there were between 4,000 and 5,000 bicycle messengers in the U.S. at that time. However, Western Union purchased about 5,000 bikes

per year in 1929 and 1930 and over 4000 bikes in 1928. Even with high messenger turnover, this suggests that perhaps half or more of all messengers used bicycles in 1930. This could amount to as many as 8,000 or more.

Like the Post Office, Western Union experimented and eventually adopted motorized delivery methods. As early as 1939, Western Union began to purchase and resell motorbikes to messengers. Motorized messengers were treated like bicycle messengers in that they had to provide their own vehicles and repairs, but they were older teens and adults, and therefore earned higher wages and were included within union contracts. By 1941, motorized messengers reportedly had taken over all trips of ten miles or more.⁷¹ Furthermore, beginning in 1939, child messengers became subject to the federal minimum wage of 25¢ per hour, thereby reducing their cost advantage over adult messengers.⁷² Moreover in 1942, the government required that bicycle messengers using their own bikes on company business receive .5¢ per hour and 1¢ per hour at night when they had to use headlights and batteries. This would amount to between \$10 and \$20 annually per messenger and was expected to cost Western Union at least \$100,000 annually.⁷³ This requirement further eroded the cost advantage of bicycle messengers over motorized messengers.

After World War II, Western Union, now a complete monopoly in telegraph services with its 1943 merger with Postal Telegraph, faced increasing competition from both airmail and telephone service. Demand for messenger service was also reduced by the number of large businesses with in-house telegraph terminals. By 1948, the price of sending a telegram was up 20% over the price from the 1920s to 1946. Of the 11,000 messengers employed by Western Union, foot and bicycle messengers now earned 65–70¢ per hour with automobile messengers averaging \$1.10.⁷⁴ In December 1949, Western Union opposed raising the minimum wage for its 8,100 foot and bicycle messengers from 65 to 75¢ per hour.⁷⁵ By 1951, Western Union averted a strike by promising a 10¢ per hour raise for its 8000 foot and bicycle messengers.⁷⁶ This marks the beginning of ever-increasing costs for telegram service, along with declining

volume and levels of service. A 1950 article on the 300 boys (down from a peak of 1000 during the 1930s) attending Western Union Messenger School noted that the bicycle messenger boys who owned their own bicycles attended school on Saturday, which was a quiet work day for them.⁷⁷

So there were still bicycle messengers in 1950, but they are always reported as part of a larger group with foot messengers, so that it is not clear what proportion of foot and bicycle messengers used bicycles. Messenger service continued to decline. A 1970 report indicated that 43% of the 70 million telegraph messages handled annually were received by teleprinter or facsimile equipment in customer offices, with another 25% delivered by telephone. Only 27% of all telegrams were physically delivered by messenger at this time.⁷⁸ One cause for this decline was the 1968 decision to abolish free messenger delivery and begin charging 75¢ for such service. Furthermore, the number of Western Union offices dropped from 3,500 in 1945 to 1,400 in 1970.⁷⁹ Telegram volume also fell from 194 million in 1945 to 46 million in 1970.⁸⁰ Finally, in 1970, Western Union contracted with the Post Office to wire messages to local post offices to be delivered as Mailgrams by letter carriers on the following day. By 1973, the volume of Mailgrams exceeded that of telegrams.⁸¹ At least in

the Wall Street area of New York City, traditionally Western Union's largest market, bicycle messengers were gone by 1973, replaced by "old people whose gait suggests foot trouble."⁸²

CONCLUSIONS

The past 150 years have seen the development and growth of the postal and telephone communications systems and the rise and virtual demise of the telegraph system, which today has been nearly replaced by internet e-mail and instant messaging. While precise numbers are not available, it seems clear from anecdotal evidence and occasional comprehensive numbers that the bicycle, as a mechanical innovation of the late 1800s, played an important role in the development of both delivery of physical messages as well as physical transcriptions of electronically-transmitted messages.

It should be noted that the bicycle's role in message delivery was "manned" almost exclusively by men and boys. There may have been an occasional woman letter-carrier who used a bicycle, particularly in more modern times. Women also became messengers starting in World War I, but under New York State law, they had to be at least 21 years old. Furthermore, even in World War II,



Fig. 14.8. Western Union Telegraph Office, Tampa-Hillsborough district.

they were not allowed by the telegraph services to use bicycles or motor vehicles. They only worked on foot and they were not allowed to carry heavy parcels or operate in unsafe areas of New York City.⁸³

Downey notes that the fact that bicycles were used by messenger-boys emphasized that the messenger's job was a child's job. With the exception of an adult bicycle revival after the great depression, the bicycle was considered a child's toy through most of the first two-thirds of the 20th century.⁸⁴ This perception would have been reinforced in the early 1900s by boy special delivery messengers used on a contract basis by the Post Office. However, bicycle use by adult Postal employees, not to mention police in the first two decades of the 20th century, would have presented a contrary image of adult bicycle use for particular transportation purposes.

The bicycle's speed, maneuverability, and efficiency made it a low-cost means to deliver individual messages, whether telegrams or special delivery letters. From this experience, letter-carriers began experimenting with the bicycle to carry a whole parcel of letters and cover their regular delivery routes. Indeed, a reasonable argument can be made that bicycle mail delivery became so ubiquitous during this time that no one bothered to note how extensive it was. In the early part of the 20th century, both the Post Office and Western Union delivered packages, catalogs and magazines, sometimes by bicycle.⁸⁵ This was as close as Western Union came to assigning set delivery routes to its messengers. Even as motorized vehicles replaced horse-drawn vehicles, the bicycle continued to be used. Its greater speed, load-carrying capacity and

lower energy consumption per mile continue to give it advantages over walking as a means for delivering mail in all but the most dense urban neighborhoods (delivery to multiple high-rise office buildings in the same neighborhood may be more efficient by foot in climbing stairs or using the elevator, without the need to secure a bicycle outside).

The bicycle also became a symbol of modern speedy delivery for both the Post Office (on special delivery stamps from 1902–1922) and Western Union. For the latter, it helped replace an image of lazy foul-mouthed messenger boys on foot with the image of diligent, responsible (and uniformed) bicycle messenger boys who would go to great lengths to deliver their messages (see Fig. 14.9).⁸⁶

Provision of the bicycles changed over time, particularly for the Post Office. Initially, bicycles were relatively expensive and appear to have been provided by post and telegraph offices that were experimenting with bicycle use. When prices dropped at the end of the 19th century, the standard procedure appears to have been for carriers and messengers to provide their own bicycles at the Post Office. In contrast, Western Union purchased bicycles in bulk and offered them to messengers to be purchased over time, so that boys could afford their own bicycles. At some point in the 1920s or 1930s, the Post Office shifted to leasing bicycles for its employee carriers, although special delivery messengers and contract carriers still provided their own means of transportation. After World War II, the Post Office shifted again to purchasing and maintaining bicycles, along with other vehicles in its fleet. With renewed interest in bicycle delivery in the 1980s, it appears that the Post Office continued to provide either old bicycles (or tricycles) from storage or purchased new bicycles.

Today, bicycle post office use is rare and telegram delivery is non-existent in the United States. Yet bicycle-messenger services thrived in many cities throughout the world in the 1980s and still persist in many today.⁸⁷ These bicycle messenger services, independent of any larger communication system, but still serving a communications function, are not new. They date back at least to 1893, when one such service was established to Evansville, Indiana and charged 15¢ per trip.⁸⁸ In 1907, six teenagers with two bicycles started the American



Fig. 14.9. The old and new ways of delivering telegrams. (From *Telegraph Age*, 1895.)

Messenger Company in Seattle. When the spread of telephone service reduced demand for message delivery, this small company focused on package delivery and is now known as United Parcel Service or UPS.⁸⁹ In fact in 2000, the Atlanta office of UPS returned to its roots by using two bicycle messengers to pick up next-day letters from downtown office buildings. The bikes could travel more quickly (and cheaply) through downtown traffic than the larger delivery trucks.⁹⁰

Bicycle-messenger use diminished over time, becoming scarce in the 1930s,⁹¹ but like post office bicycle use, couriers revitalized in the late 1970s and early 1980s because of traffic congestion and rising fuel prices. In American cities, bicycle-messenger services peaked in the mid-1980s, with New York boasting some 5,000–7,000 messengers at that time.⁹² Organizers of the Cycle Messenger World Championships which began in 1992 in Berlin estimate that, in 1998, when Washington D.C. hosted the championships, there were roughly 10,000 bicycle couriers worldwide, delivering more than 73 million packages annually and saving about 18 million gallons of gasoline daily.⁹³

Post Office and private courier use of bicycles in the United States continue today. The postal services in many foreign countries also continue to maximize delivery efficiency by using the bicycle in urban areas. In addition to the British experience, the Danish Postal Service has used front-box delivery tricycles for many years, having more than 40 trikes in service in 1997.⁹⁴ The Swiss Postal Service uses more than 3,700 delivery bikes.⁹⁵ *Bicycling* magazine notes that one bike postal service route saves about \$5,000 per year over a truck. If just half of the 40,000 U.S. postal offices switched to cycling delivery, the U.S. Postal Service would save about \$100 million per year.⁹⁶

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ENDNOTES

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