

4 NATIONAL CYCLE ORGANIZATIONS

IN BRITAIN, FRANCE, AND THE UNITED STATES, 1875–1905

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National cycle associations were important to European and North American cyclists in the late nineteenth century. Because they organized and concentrated resources, they disproportionately influenced the conditions of cycling in each country. Cycle historians mention them frequently, but only one recent work devotes significant space to them,¹ and no work has analyzed them comparatively.

Voluntary associations are usually considered part of the development of democracy in the West. I will argue that national cycling organizations were typical of voluntary associations of the time, but were ultimately more important to the development of consumer markets than to politics. These organizations directly supported the use of a consumer product on a national scale. Such organizations were similar in formation, structure, and activities, similarities which depended on

common patterns in industrializing, commercializing societies, and on the common problems of cyclists. National associations differed because of national conditions; such differences coffee houses in the early eighteenth century.²

Their number in Britain increased tremendously in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As they grew they formalized their rules and officers. The number of such associations in America and France grew over

affected membership issues and programs the most.

I will first discuss the background of national voluntary associations in this period in Britain, France, and the United States. I will then compare the formation processes of cycling organizations, organizational structures, and the touchy issue of membership. Finally, I will compare the support activities of these associations, which were both political and practical.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

Voluntary associations were a common feature of life in nineteenth century Western Europe and North America. In contrast to groups or categories into which people were born, individuals joined these organizations by choice. The earliest such groups,

political discussion societies, originated in British taverns in the middle and late nineteenth century. Anglo-American associations could form on their own; French law required any association of 20 people or more to register with the French state, a restriction that ended in 1901.³

Social historians apply the term “civil society” to the aggregate and networked set of voluntary associations in any country, and discuss how they supported the development of democracy.⁴ Voluntary associations supported the extension of suffrage, the rise of mass media, and the expansion of political parties.

Such associations were rooted in the adult, male, urban middle classes, who had the education, the leisure, and the funds to participate in such organizations, helping elites carry out political and social programs.⁵ However, many other types of voluntary associations existed, such as charitable societies, temperance societies, working-class mutual aid societies, business associations, and sports and leisure clubs.

An equally significant development of the time was transforming daily life. The economies of all three countries were shifting to a market basis, through the creation of national rail networks; the expansion of corporations; the development of national advertising, distribution, and retail networks; the shift from farming to urban wage labor; and a tremendous increase in transactions.⁶ Voluntary associations existed on both sides of the resulting national markets:

business associations and trade unions for producers,⁷ and leisure-based organizations for consumers. However, historians have under-researched the role of national associations that supported leisure use of one product.

SIMILAR PATTERNS OF FORMATION

The development of geographically national bicycle markets spurred formation of national cycle associations. As manufacturers built and retailers sold bicycles around Britain, riders formed local clubs and started publishing periodicals. By the mid-1870s, riders around Britain were aware of common problems: hostile people, bad roads, and a lack of knowledge of those roads.⁸ They discussed these problems in the cycling press, and in 1876 someone suggested a “governing body” for the sport.⁹

Club representatives met in April, 1877, and formed a subcommittee, which reported to another meeting in November, which sent the report recommendations to every cycle club in Britain. On 16 February, 1878, 24 club delegates met and formed a “Bicycle Union.”¹⁰ Tourists followed a similar process of letter-writing in the cycling press, and contact between clubs and individuals. In August, 200 riders from 32 clubs met to form the Bicycle Touring Club.¹¹ In 1883, the associations changed their names to include tricyclists: the National Cyclists Union and Cyclists’ Touring Club, respectively.

American and French riders repeated this process. As bicycle use increased in the United States, cyclists faced increasing legal restrictions around the country,¹² and discussed a national organization in the cycling press. Club officers also wrote each other, and in May 1880 representatives of over 32 clubs met to form the League of American Wheelmen.¹³

Later that year, in France’s only national cycling magazine, *Le Sport Vélocipédique*, French cyclists advocated imitating British and American organizations.¹⁴ Club members met in a national congress in January 1881 to form the Union Vélocipédique de France (Bicycle Union of France).¹⁵ True to its name, the U.V.F. focused heavily on racing, which immediately displeased tourists.¹⁶ By 1885 riders formed an alternative organization, which failed for lack of funds.¹⁷ Dissatisfaction remained, and despite the fact that by 1890 the U.V.F. finally had hundreds of member clubs and thousands of members,¹⁸ that year a group of tourists formed the Touring-Club de France, which soon gained thousands of members. The T.C.F. was a general touring organization that emphasized cycling.

Formation of these three national associations shared three parallels. First, manufacturers got involved early. Nahum Salamon, chairman of the Coventry Machinists’ Company, a leading bicycle manufacturer in Britain, lobbied the president of the Local Government Board for the Bicycle Union in 1878.¹⁹ Albert Pope, the U.S. industry’s leading manufacturer, was at the meeting that

organized the L.A.W., held two days before the congress formalizing the League.²⁰ The first name on the U.V.F. list of members was Adolphe Clément, “the best known manufacturer” in the early French market.²¹

Second, the cycling press was part of the formation process. In Britain, Stanley Cotterell, unofficial leader of the B.T.C., published the *Gazette*, which became the organization’s official publication. Charles Pratt, editor of *Bicycling World*, was elected president of the League, and Devillers, editor of *Le Sport Vélocipédique*, was elected president of the U.V.F. Also, these two magazines were made the “official organ” of their respective national organizations.²²

Finally, the structure of each organization was broadly similar. Clubs constituted the basis of local membership; for instance, when a cyclist joined clubs which were members of the L.A.W. or the U.V.F., he automatically joined these national associations. In Britain the B.U. (later N.C.U.) established local “Centres” in 1880, answerable only to the national organization,²³ but local clubs also joined the organization. The B.T.C./C.T.C. appointed consuls in regions, which provided support for tourism, and in the 1890s divided Britain into “Districts.”²⁴ The U.V.F. followed the “consul” idea, with rather inadequate coverage, but later with consuls all around France.²⁵ The L.A.W. structure explicitly mimicked the federal, state, and local structure of the American state, a common pattern in voluntary associations.²⁶

The League also appointed state and local consuls to support tourism.

MEMBERSHIP ISSUES: WHO GOT IN, AND WHO WAS KEPT OUT?

Upper-middle class men comprised the majority of members of national cycle associations. Such associations were exclusive at the time, so they kept out women and subordinate groups; race was an important issue in the United States, unlike European countries. Early on, however, the most contentious issue was social class.

Many early British riders cared deeply about distinguishing amateurs from professionals. An amateur supposedly participated in a sport because he loved it, while a professional “sullied himself” by taking money for his participation. The only people who could develop sporting excellence without employment were among the landed elite. “Amateur” status in sports, therefore, signified elite status in society.²⁷

The British B.U. set the tone of membership issues by following the contemporary rule for defining amateurs common in British sports. This defined “professionals” and allowed anyone outside the definition to claim amateur status. Professional activities included cycling in public for money, teaching cycling for money, or competing against a professional for a prize.²⁸ However, the association admitted both amateurs and professionals, and rejected the Amateur Athletic Club’s definition, which

specifically excluded mechanics, artisans, and laborers. Many cyclists wanted such groups excluded, to the point that two clubs resigned from the new organization, but the B.U. maintained its more open policy.²⁹

The L.A.W. followed a generally British definition of “amateur,” but simultaneously implemented more restrictive and more open rules around membership than the B.U. did. Some clubs had forbidden professional cyclists as members,³⁰ and the L.A.W. followed suit, unlike the B.U., adopting the definition of amateur of the National Association of Amateur Athletes, which was modeled on the British definition of amateur.³¹ However, another rule provided amateur status and membership to members of bicycle firms,³² again unlike the B.U.

Although few cyclists actually raced, the amateur rule signified that bicycle racing, and by extension leisure cycling, was an honorable field of competition. However, this tradition conflicted with new marketplace norms. Manufacturers found sponsoring riders to be successful marketing,³³ so for decades the League fought with manufacturers who clandestinely sponsored riders claiming amateur status.³⁴

In France, the immediate stimulus of U.V.F. formation was the amateur issue.³⁵ Cyclists in northern France wanted to race against English cyclists, so they advocated following the British definition.³⁶ However, other French cyclists adhered to a less restrictive definition of amateurism than the British one: “An

amateur is someone who does not make a *métier* of racing” [original italics]. This definition held *métier* to be a “profession,” that is, making a living exclusively from racing.³⁷ Thus, amateur racers with other financial means could compete for money and against professionals, but remain “amateurs.” Given the tension between these two tendencies, for years U.V.F. definitions oscillated between the loose, home-grown definition and the restrictive British definition.³⁸ After some years the loose, *métier*-based definition prevailed.³⁹

In addition to keeping the “lower classes” out of national cycling associations, riders in all three countries tried to keep them male preserves. Originally neither the B.U./N.C.U. nor the U.V.F. admitted women, but the B.T.C./C.T.C. and the T.C.F. did.⁴⁰ However, the T.C.F. only admitted women on the recommendation of their husbands, and later of their fathers or brothers.⁴¹ The L.A.W. admitted women only as individual members, as the U.V.F. later did.⁴² Since many local clubs excluded women, probably because they were racing-oriented clubs,⁴³ female membership in the L.A.W. was also limited. In short, racing organizations almost completely excluded women from their membership, while touring organizations limited female participation.

In contrast to this cross-Atlantic gender pattern, Americans further limited membership on their own unique principles. In the 1890s, whites in the South were establishing a rigid, severe segregation system against

African-Americans.⁴⁴ Black cyclists had joined the L.A.W. through 1892, but that year a League official noted in *Bicycling World* that some members from the South wanted them excluded. His letter sparked an angry debate in the magazine, and a year later the Southern members proposed a “whites only” membership rule at the League’s annual national meeting. The resolution fell short of the two-thirds majority it needed. In 1894 the same resolution finally gained that supermajority—but barely.⁴⁵

National cycle associations were as exclusive as other voluntary associations were in these countries, mostly on the basis of class and gender, but sometimes because of race and ethnicity.⁴⁶

FUNCTIONS: MAKE CYCLING EASIER

The main purpose of national cycle organizations was not exclusivity, but supporting actual bicycle use. Bicycle riding involved the use of a new object manufactured and sold on a market. National cycle organizations developed and practiced consumer advocacy and direct consumer support in an era of rapidly increasing commercialization, when support for new products was still scarce. Consumer advocacy involved political and other activities, which differed depending on national situation. They did this through concentrating money (through dues), expertise, and information at the national level, ultimately providing much more support

than local clubs could. Cycling associations also improved the experience of bicycle riding for members and non-members alike. Thus, such associations had influence out of proportion to their memberships.

One of the B.U.’s main tasks was to organize racing nationally. While this included defining amateurism, it also included sanctioning championships and other tasks.⁴⁷ However, racers made up a small minority of cyclists. Most had other concerns, and national organizations focused on those issues.

Anglo-American legal activity was oriented to road access. As mentioned above, British riders faced hostility on the road from equestrians, carriage drivers, teamsters, and pranksters.⁴⁸ In the 1870s, many local authorities were relatively hostile to cycling.⁴⁹

When the B.U. was formed, its second stated purpose was to try to influence legislation in Parliament that affected cycling.⁵⁰ Members of the B.U. successfully lobbied the Member of Parliament from Coventry to block an amendment to the Highways Act of 1878 prohibiting all bicycles on the roads. Ten years later, both the N.C.U. and the C.T.C. worked to have bicycles and tricycles defined as “carriages” under the provisions of the Highways Act of 1835. This guaranteed cyclists legal access to roads, and ensured that national, not local, authorities regulated cycling on roads.⁵¹

American cyclists faced even more hostility, both personal and official. Skirmishes with farmers,

equestrians, and pedestrians⁵² led to the revival of old anti-velocipede statutes from the late 1860s, and new laws against cyclists nearly everywhere bicycles appeared.⁵³ American cyclists were therefore very motivated to form a national organization, and the organizers purposely chose the acronym L.A.W. as “the platform from which the League proposed to claim its rights.”⁵⁴ Around the country, the League filed lawsuits to gain or increase road access, fought restrictive legislation in state legislatures, worked to open New York’s Central Park to cyclists, and even routinized the work of bringing suit against people who attacked cyclists in the New York division.⁵⁵

The Napoleonic code required voluntary associations to register with the government, so the Union Vélocipédique de France did so within a few months of its formation, as did the Touring-Club de France nine years later.⁵⁶ In contrast to Anglo-American patterns, early French cyclists noticed few legal restrictions on actual riding; the law defined bicycles as carriages and subjected them to common laws. However, by the 1890s various locales had accumulated restrictive cycling laws, so the French associations started to resist them.⁵⁷ Thus, all national cycling organizations became consumer advocates. This benefited all cyclists, whether they were members of these associations or not.

The other political activity of national cycle associations involved road-building, and French and Anglo-American patterns

again differed greatly. France had the best roads in the world at the time. French kings had started a national road network in the Middle Ages, had expanded it over the centuries, and had established the Corps de Ponts et Chaussées, a road—and bridge—building unit, in the eighteenth century.⁵⁸ The Freycinet plan of 1881 expanded the road network into localities. In the 1890s the T.C.F. did have a political program to help maintain roads,⁵⁹ but the U.V.F. and the T.C.F. primarily addressed other issues.

British and American cyclists faced roads that were bad and very bad, respectively. British roads were best under the turnpike system of the eighteenth century. Due to corruption, this was not saying much, and with the advent of railways, roads deteriorated further.⁶⁰ Regional differences had prevented a national road network in the United States. All roadwork was local, and maintenance and improvement relied on the corrupt and unreliable “working out” system, in which taxes were converted to road-building labor,⁶¹ so American roads were abysmal.

Anglo-American cycling associations addressed this problem because of its obvious impact on bicycle use. The C.T.C. in Britain undertook to improve the roads, with middling success at best. They published a pamphlet on road improvements; founded the Roads Improvement Society in 1887; and had local districts work on local roads.⁶² The N.C.U. tried to help improve roads around Birmingham; when government road surveyors

protested, the N.C.U. successfully brought suit against them.⁶³ In the United States, the L.A.W. helped initiate a “Good Roads” movement; worked to have road-building legislation passed in most state legislatures; helped form a national office of roads; and published research on road-building techniques.⁶⁴

In addition to political and legal action, national associations in all three countries undertook three main tasks to support bicycle use directly. First, they produced items to help cyclists ride, such as roadbooks, maps, and handbooks.⁶⁵ This was extremely important in an era when maps for many regions simply did not exist, and when the diffusion and use of the maps that did exist was rare. In addition, handbooks described the sights and amenities for particular rides.⁶⁶ Such items were free to members and often for sale to non-members, thus helping many cyclists.

Second, national associations worked to provide their members discounts on railway fares and hotel stays. British national organizations had pioneered both of these discounts, but they were common problems. Again, different solutions developed in response to differing national conditions. Rail discounts were necessary because railway companies charged extra for bicycles everywhere. In the United States, the League worked to have railways define bicycles as luggage, which mean that they could be carried for free, and had its local consuls negotiate hotel discounts.⁶⁷ The T.C.F. also worked to reduce carriage rates, but

focused especially on having rail companies guarantee the condition of the bicycle on arrival. They had only middling success with this project.⁶⁸ Early on the T.C.F. developed a list of recommended hotels. It provided discounts to T.C.F. members in order to get on the list, which expanded tremendously in the first years of the Club's existence.⁶⁹ Again, rail discounts and bicycle-friendly rail policies helped members and non-members alike.

Finally, national associations had their local affiliates put up road signs and help boxes. The British pioneered putting up such signs, which warned riders of dangerous hills.⁷⁰ The C.T.C. and the N.C.U. worked together on this problem into the 1890s. The League of American Wheelmen and the Touring-Club de France also put up signs, often collaborating with local or national authorities.⁷¹ The T.C.F. also put up "help boxes" or *boîtes de secours*, which held medicines, bandages, and such for cycling-related injuries.⁷² These also helped cyclists and non-cyclists alike.

National cycle organizations concentrated resources at the national level, and much of the actual activity that they undertook made cycling easier for all cyclists, not just for members. In this way national associations supported the expanding national

bicycle market in a period when few consumer supports existed.

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT

The market-support role of national cycle associations becomes most obvious when we look at early relations with cycle manufacturers. As mentioned, manufacturers involved themselves in national associations very early. However, such involvement continued for decades. For instance, the Pope Manufacturing Company, and its sister organization, Hartford Cycle Company, conducted League business on company letterhead for years, discussing annual meetings, officials, and road signs⁷³.

The U.V.F. president published articles in an industry journal,⁷⁴ and another president had been a Peugeot company official.⁷⁵ Just after 1900, both French associations held design competitions to which all manufacturers were invited.⁷⁶ It is difficult to measure how much the activities mentioned above made cycling easier, but they surely had some impact. Industry involvement shows that manufacturers were very aware of their dependence on bicycle use. They knew that increased usability would lead to increased sales, so their

ongoing involvement in cycle associations makes sense.

CONCLUSIONS

Social historians have so far emphasized the political function of voluntary associations. National cycle organizations in Britain, France, and the United States did undertake political action to help cyclists. However, their primary purpose was market-oriented: support for consumption of a product.

Actions to support use, such as publishing maps and road-books, obtaining discounts for members, and putting up signs, as well as manufacturer involvement, show the market-oriented aspect of these organizations. These support actions were very sensitive to national differences, but the process of formation, the structure, and membership issues demonstrate that such associations were still much like other such national associations at the time.

These findings suggest a larger question for cycle historians: what are the common problems that such organizations face, and how do such problems differ from country to country? Research on such questions would be especially interesting if conducted on other parts of Europe, and on other areas in the world.

ENDNOTES

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- 73 Letter to Jas. R. Dunn, president, New York L.A.W., 24 October 1890, Hartford Cycle Co. collection; letter to S.A. Miles, 27 June 1891, Hartford Cycle Co. collection; letter from H.E. Raymond to Geo. Collister, 6 April 1893, Hartford Cycle Co. collection; and letter to David Post, 22 December 1891, Pope Manufacturing Company collection. Both collections at Connecticut State Library.
- 74 *Journal des Machines à Coudre et Vélocipèdes* [JdMàCetV] 15 January 1893, p. 6.
- 75 JdMàCetV 30 November 1897, p. 513.
- 76 *U.V.F. Bulletin Officiel*, 10 May 1901, p. 1109; RMduTCF August 1902:340; October 1902, pp. 434–449; September 1905, pp. 389–393; October 1905, pp. 438–453.