

Cycling in Davis, California – An Update

By Christian Wignal, San Francisco, California, USA

Davis hosted the 16th ICHC in 2005, and excellent papers were presented there by David Takemoto-Weerts on the cycle infrastructure and culture of Davis, and by Bob Sommer on Bikeway Research at the University of California at Davis. Rather than repeat or rehash their contributions here, my goal is to fill in some blanks and bring the story up to date.

The City of Davis lies 15 miles west of Sacramento, the capital of California [Figure 1]. It lies on the main railroad and main interstate highway (I-80) connecting the San Francisco Bay Area and Sacramento. Until the fifties it was a small agricultural town with a population of a few thousand people [Figure 2].

Its earliest claim to cycling fame was on 23 April 1884, when Thomas Stevens passed through Davis on the second day of his famous round the world cycling trip. In his account of his adventures *„Around the World on a Bicycle*, pub-

lished in 1887 he wrote:

..the Sacramento River is flooding the country, and the only way I can hope to get through is to take to the Central Pacific track and cross over the six miles of open trestle-work that spans the Sacramento River and its broad bottom-lands, that are subject to the annual spring overflow.

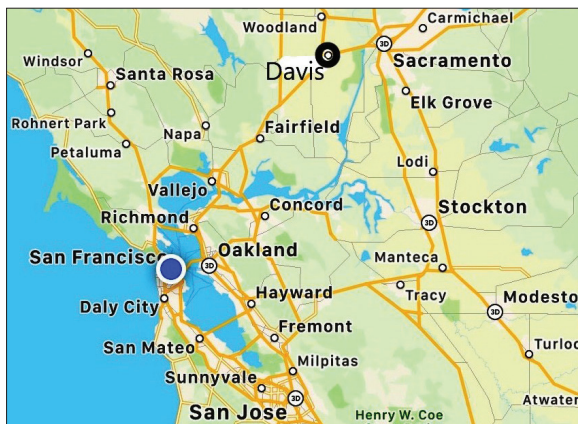


Figure 1. Map showing location of Davis. (Google Maps).

Already I realize that there is going to be as much "foot-riding" as anything for the first part of my journey; so, while halting for dinner at the village of Davisville, I deliver my rather slight shoes over to the tender mercies of an Irish cobbler

of the old school, with carte blanche instructions to fit them out for hard service. While diligently hammering away at the shoes, the old cobbler grows communicative, and in almost unintelligible brogue tells a complicated tale of Irish life, out of which I can make neither head, tail, nor tale; though nodding and assenting to it all, to the great satisfaction of the loquacious manipulator of the last, who in an hour hands over the shoes with the proud assertion, "They'll last yez, be jabbers, to Omaha."

Reaching the overflowed country, I have to take to the trestle-work and begin the tedious process of trundling along that aggravating roadway, where, to the music of rushing waters, I have to step from tie to tie, and bump, bump, bump, my machine along for six weary miles. The Sacramento River is the outlet for the tremendous volumes of water caused every spring by the melting snows on the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and these long stretches of open trestle have been found necessary to allow the water to pass beneath. Nothing but trains are expected to cross this trestle-work, and of course no provision is made for pedestrians. The engineer of an approaching train sets his locomotive to tooting for all she is worth as he sees a "strayed or stolen" cyclist, slowly bumping along ahead of his train. But he has no need to slow up, for occasional cross-beams stick out far enough to admit of standing out of reach, and when he comes up alongside, he and the fireman look out of the window of the cab and see me squatting on the end of one of these handy beams, and letting the bicycle hang over.

That night I stay in Sacramento, the beautiful capital of the Golden State, whose well-shaded streets and blooming, almost tropical gardens combine to form a city of quiet, dignified beauty, of which Californians feel justly proud.

Even today the railroad east of Davis runs on trestles over the flood plains of the Sacramento River [Figure 3], and the flood plain is still an obstacle for cyclists attempting the short journey from Davis to Sacramento. You must either brave the shoulder of the congested Interstate 80 or make a lengthy detour down farm roads.

Davisville became simply Davis in 1907 and in the following year, UC Berkeley's College of Agriculture established University State Farm on the western edge of the town. The town



Figure 2. Aerial view of Davis in 1953. (Yolo County Library).



Figure 3. The railway trestle traversed by Thomas Stevens. (Photo by the Author).



Figure 4. Cycling at UC Davis in 1963. (UC Davis Library).



Figure 5. Bicycle parking on campus in 2015. (Photo by the Author).

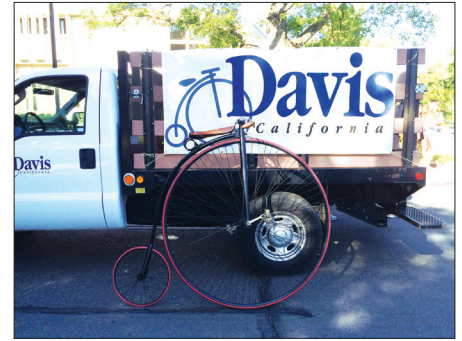


Figure 6. The official logo of the city of Davis. (Photo by the Author)

was formally incorporated as the City of Davis in 1917. In 1959 the ‘Farm’ was upgraded to become a fully-fledged independent campus of the University of California system, UC Davis. The university has given Davis the feel of a ‘college town’, totally dominated by the academic world, and the town and gown have grown side by side.

Located on the flat alluvial plain of the Central Valley, UC Davis was able to acquire a very large area of relatively inexpensive land to the west of the town center, enabling the University to expand over the years, so that today it has nearly thirty thousand undergraduates and a total of 48,000 students, faculty and staff - making it the third largest university in California after UCLA and UC Berkeley. Whereas their campuses are space constrained, Davis can continue to expand on eleven square miles of land (28 square kilometers). It is the only university in California that has its own airfield. Reflecting its roots as an agricultural college, UC Davis today is preminent in viticulture, veterinary science, and all things biological.

Even before deliberate town planning encouraged the use of bicycles, students and residents found the place unusually congenial for cycling: the terrain is as flat as the Netherlands and the climate is Mediterranean. The winters are mild and wet and the summers hot and dry: few are the days when the weather would deter a cyclist from venturing forth.

In the fifties and sixties, when the rest of America was in the thrall of the automobile and Los Angeles was being throttled with freeways, the very high proportion of thrifty students in the local population meant that Davis continued to have a preponderance of bicycles [Figures 4 & 5].

Nevertheless, rising affluence and the rapid growth of the town led to a steady



Figure 7. Davis Burgers. (Photo by the Author).

increase in the car population, leading to growing competition for limited road space, particularly in the town center. Perceiving that the bicycle was beginning to lose ground, local activists swung into action in February 1966. Back in 1963, Frank and Eva Child of the university had spent a sabbatical in The Hague in the Netherlands and came back inspired to create a similarly bike friendly environment in their hometown. Together with Dana and Dale Lott, they lobbied

the town council to establish the first dedicated street bike lanes in the United States.¹ Two candidates for the local city council² campaigned successfully on the issue of providing cycling infrastructure, and Ordinance 442 was passed instructing the public works department to implement the first experimental bike lanes in 1967. They were an immediate success. The university under the pro-bicycle Chancellor Emil Mrak did its bit by erecting barriers severely restricting automobile access to the campus, and Town and Gown both worked actively to improve street infrastructure. Davis was the first town in the US to figure out what works and what doesn't for bicycles.

Riding the wave of enthusiasm in 1981, the City of Davis adopted the High Wheel bicycle as its official logo [Figure 6]. In fact, the bicycle

has become part of the 'branding' - and even a bit of an obsession - for the city and university. A cafeteria on campus names its various offerings with cycling terminology [Figure 7]: you can order a basic 'Unicycle' or a 'Tandem' with a side order of 'Spokes' and 'Rims' and for those with a large appetite there is always the 'Trike'.

A giant metal penny farthing sculpture [Figure 8] adorns the central divider on Russell Boulevard, one of the main roads



Figure 9. The Davis Needle is made entirely of bicycle components. (Photo by the Author).

entering Davis. Penny farthing-shaped bike racks and sculptures are distributed liberally around the downtown area. In May 2019, a 20-foot-tall obelisk, 'The Davis Needle' was erected in the center of the intersection of 3rd Street and University Avenue [Figure 9]. It is made entirely of bicycle components.

At the start of the 20th Century, UC Davis augmented its pragmatic embrace of the bicycle with its very own repository of cycling history, through the acquisition of the Pierce Miller cycle collection in 2000 and the relocation of the Cycling Hall of Fame from New Jersey to Davis in 2009 [Figure 10]. I'll let David Takemoto-Weerts, now retired from his role as bicycle coordinator in the Transport Department UC Davis, tell the story in his own words:

One day at work in 1999 I got a phone call from a man, Joseph Miller, in Modesto. He said his family owned a collection of vintage bikes that had originally belonged to his grandfather, Pierce Miller. Pierce died in the 60s and Joseph's father had recently passed. Joe was the executor of the estate and the family wanted to sell the collection. He was looking for someone who could



Figure 8. The giant Penny Farthing Sculpture on Russell Boulevard, in 1976 and in 2019. (Website: <http://www.davishistorytoday.org> accessed 7/7/2019).

appraise the collection's value. He got my telephone number because he was a member of *The Wheelmen* (only because the family owned the collection, not because he was an enthusiast). We had used *The Wheelmen's California* mailing list to publicize our annual "Cyclebration" events in the late 90s and early 2000s.

...A short time later [four of us] drove to Modesto to see the collection: 65 vintage bikes, almost all pre-1900.

Pierce had bought them from Walter Nilsson at some time in the 40s after WWII. According to one of Pierce's two surviving sons, Pierce bought about half of Nilsson's collection. The other half went to someone in Los Angeles.

Pierce already had amassed a large collection (about 100) of all kinds of horse-drawn vehicles that he displayed in a huge barn on his ranch. Sort of a roadside attraction on Yosemite [Boulevard], at one time a major route between the bay area and Yosemite. [They] also had a cafe on the property and a handful of vintage cars. He added the bikes to the collection, putting them in a separate outbuilding, which is where we first saw them.³

We were very amazed and excited. Here was a bike collection that could become our Davis bike museum (which we all had discussed for a few years). Of course, we had no money for their purchase or a place to display them. However, a short time after we saw them, I found that the federal "Transportation Enhancements" funds available annually (and from which I'd written a couple successful grant apps for in the recent past --bike racks, bike paths, and such) had a "Transportation Museums" category. Long story short: Brodie [Hamilton] and I submitted an application on behalf of the campus and got the funding. We picked up the bikes in 2000 (a short video of that day shows regularly in the HOF basement). We stored them in a secured place in one of our parking structures. There they sat for a few years while we tried to drum up support for a museum. Finally, around 2005-06 we learned that the US Bicycling Hall of Fame in New Jersey had lost its lease, put its holdings in storage, and was thinking of relocating. Six of us flew back there for their annual induction ceremony, met their Board of Directors, and saw the collection (most of which was now boxed up).

Upon our return, we decided to offer to host their next induction ceremony (on



Figure 10. The US Bicycling Hall of Fame came to Davis in 2009. (Photo by the Author).

campus, in Freeborn Hall). I don't think it had ever been outside of New Jersey before. It was a big success, and clearly gave us a leg up on convincing the HOF to come to Davis. And, indeed, we won out against 10 other cities, and the HOF shipped out their holdings (about 250 boxes!) in 2009. We had room to store that with the Miller collection. We had successfully negotiated with the city to lease at a nominal fee the then-vacated Davis Teen Center. We moved about fifteen or so of the Miller collection in along with HOF bikes and others that had been donated or loaned. We now exhibit about 70 machines. The other

Miller bikes are in the original storage area. Most, sadly, are not in great condition (clearly neither Nilsson or Miller provided a true museum environment and did very little restoration).

A cycling culture can't be taken for granted, especially in an American town, so let me relate here some of the many initiatives large and small undertaken by the city and the university to sustain and promote this bike friendly environment.

First, there is the basic pragmatic stuff, the investment in cycling infrastructure. All residential and commercial development plans automatically incorporate facilities for bicycles, be they paths, overpasses and tunnels to cross busy roads, or the abundant provision of bicycle racks [Figure 11]. A 2012 city ordinance specifies that bicycle parking facilities must be provided for all new developments, and sets out guidelines on how many short-term and long-term bicycle parking places must be provided per square foot of commercial space or per bedroom of residential multi-unit developments. The city has given priority to a cycle route, the Davis Loop, which connects all the major schools making it easy and safe for all kids to cycle to school. The city engaged the Dutch infrastructure consulting firm, Mobycom, in 2014 to advise on improving the safety and function of road junctions for cyclists as part of planning new housing developments on the outskirts of the town. The first "Dutch style" junction was completed in 2016.



Figure 11. The Davis Interstate Highway cycle underpass. (Photo by the Author).

Second, the city and the university provide information and support for individual cyclists. The city provides free classes for cyclists, teaching them the basics of good road sense and safe practices. When my son went off to Davis as a freshman student in 2018, he took his bicycle, and, being a protective father, I packed him a tool kit and bicycle pump—but he didn't need them. Right outside his dorm next to the extensive bike racks, the university provides a repair stand with tethered tools and a compressed air pump for communal use. [Figures 12 & 13] To encourage safe cycling, the university hands out free bicycle lights and bicycle helmets. A major landmark is The Bike Barn, a university-run bicycle shop at the center of the campus.

Third, the university devotes considerable effort to monitoring and understanding commuter behavior. Good planning depends on good data. Why, when, and how far do people cycle? What influences their decision whether to walk, ride, or drive? To answer these questions, UC Davis conducts regular surveys of commuting patterns, and the latest survey shows that out of a total complement of 48,000 students and faculty, nearly half commute regularly by bicycle and there are about 30,000 bike racks on campus.⁴

The Institute of Transportation Studies at UC Davis is a resource for urban planners throughout the United States, and today UC Davis heads the federally funded 'National Center for Sustainable Transportation'. A recent offshoot of the Institute of Transportation Studies is the 'BicyclingPlusResearch Collaborative' which undertakes studies on such hot topics such as e-bikes and dockless rideshare



Figure 12. A bike repair stand at UC Davis. (Photo by the Author).



Figure 13. Free air pumps are available throughout the campus. (Photo by the Author).

schemes.

Today Davis has over 120 miles of bike paths and lanes. The combined population of the city and university is about 80,000 when the university is in session, and there are about 53,000 bicycles. It is estimated that about 25% of local journeys are undertaken by bicycle, a percentage comparable with many towns in the Netherlands. (And Davis folk, like the Dutch, usually don't wear helmets.) The city has a goal of reaching a 30% target by 2020, but with just one year to go that is clearly not a realistic target. Still, 25% is an astounding figure for an American town.

San Francisco, Portland, Boulder, and many other places in the United States have followed Davis' lead in introducing bike lanes and other cycling infrastructure so the Davis environment no longer feels as unique as it did in the eighties. Davis itself has grown considerably in size. Not quite as compact as the nearby conurbation of Sacramento, Davis is home to more automobile commuters, but it cannot take its bicycle culture for granted. It is perhaps 'resting on its laurels' muttered one local. On some of the outer suburban streets, away from the limelight, the bike lane stripes are badly in need of fresh paint.

Sensing that Davis was losing some of its missionary zeal and leadership in bicycle planning, the city adopted a Bicycle Action Plan in 2014.⁵ The Action Plan sets goals to revitalize the cycling culture, ensures that cycle infrastructure is upgraded and maintained, and advocates policies that not merely accommodate cycling but actively encourage it. There are some signs that these efforts have led to a mild revival in bicycle usage.

Cyclists and town planners have also

had to cope with new problems brought about by modern technology. A popular route planning phone app, Waze, cleverly routes motorists along side streets when the main thoroughfares are congested. Hitherto quiet country roads and suburban streets ideal for cyclists now face surges of aggressive rush hour drivers, diverted by their apps away from the commuter crawl on the Interstate Highway. Based on historic data, formerly quiet roads had been redesigned, shrinking them down to just two automobile lanes to accommodate new bicycle lanes, but with the recent changes in traffic flow they are now choke points on Friday afternoons.

In April 2019, road planners faced a mutinous audience of locals and acknowledged they would probably have to backtrack and restore a stretch of Mace Boulevard to four lanes, having recently shrunk it to two lanes to accommodate protected bike lanes.

Thomas Jefferson supposedly said *Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty. Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must, like men, undergo the fatigue of supporting it.* The same might be said of cycling. Eternal Vigilance is the price of a cycling paradise. Those who expect to reap its blessings must undergo the fatigue of supporting it.

Nobody should take Davis for granted. ●

Note of Appreciation

Many thanks to David Takemoto-Weerts for permission to use his e-mailed account of the retrieval of the Pierce Miller collection.

Sources

One of the fullest accounts available is *Fifty Years of Bicycle Policy in Davis CA.* by Ted Buehler and Susan Handy of UC Davis. 2008: http://www.des.ucdavis.edu/faculty/handy/Davis_bike_history.pdf

Endnotes

- ¹ For an excellent oral history of the pioneers of Davis Cycling see <https://projects.journalism.berkeley.edu/radio/story/spencer-bowen-on-bicycles-in-davis-ca-extended-cut/>
- ² The two cycling advocates elected to the council were Maynard Skinner and Norm Woodbury
- ³ More information about the Pierce-Miller Collection is available at: https://taps.ucdavis.edu/bicycle/resources/pierce_miller_collection
- ⁴ Results of the 2017-18 Campus Travel Survey June 2018 Albee Wei: <https://its.ucdavis.edu/campus-travel-surveys/>
- ⁵ <https://cityofdavis.org/home/showdocument?id=1073>

Conference Flash Back



GREG SIPLE

When the 2014 ICHC came to Baltimore it featured a lively demonstration of fully functional vintage machines for the general public. The conference venue, the Maryland Historical Society, included a large parking lot perfect for the show. Here we see Larry Black looping the parking lot astride his 54" Columbia 'Ordinary' bicycle from the 1880s.