Professor discusses path to a bike friendly La Crosse

Bicycle craze on Riverside Drive in New York City in 1895, from the magazine Punch.

As the City of La Crosse creates a master plan for bike and pedestrian traffic, it’s important to consider American bicycle history, says Jan UW-L assistant history professor.

All the pedaling seen today is nothing new. Bicycles were also booming more than 100 years ago.

“We are now in the second big bicycle boom in America,” explains Longhurst.

His research focuses on the forgotten first boom of the 1890s and early 1900s. In between horse-drawn buggies and automobiles, special roads were made just for bikes, says Longhurst. But by the 1920s the “Good Roads” movement succeeded in paving dirt roads for all users. Bike paths were buried well below layers of concrete. By the end of World War II, energy was cheap and city streets were designed with fossil fuels would always be affordable, so cars took over.

“People like to think roads were always built for cars, but it’s not true,” says Longhurst. “Cars are huge, fast and furious and they pushed the road.”

James Longhurst, UW-L assistant history professor, tours bicycle lanes and accommodations of Portland, Oregon, with historians and representatives of the Portland Bureau of Transportation in 2010.

Longhurst notes these days it has been difficult to reintroduce bicycles to city streets, which have long been dominated by cars. He has been asked to assist with updating La Crosse’s Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, which aims to help the city move from a silver to a gold designation by the League of American Bicyclists. The plan will likely be introduced to the public in September.
He praises La Crosse for creating a master plan that involves bikes. Some cities simply have short-term solutions to accommodate what he calls a bike fad.

The cities with the best bike plans have had long-term infrastructure for bikes in place, he says. For instance, Minneapolis is routinely ranked nation for best bicycling city—despite being below zero for a good portion of the year. That city’s 2010 bicycle master plan acknowledges— not the bicycle will always be part of the culture, says Longhurst. Some of the historic bike paths are still around Minneapolis, he adds; he has been researching the history of bicycling in the Twin Cities and other cities such as Rochester, N.Y., and Chicago, which were shaped to be friendly to bikes and pedestrians. Some adapted well keeping bike paths; others covered them up.

Longhurst encourages cities to consider this history and have street designs that allow for walking, biking, public transit and cars, considering energy will likely never be as cheap as it was in post-World War II America.

“We can’t predict the future, so our plans should be as flexible as possible,” he says.

**Longhurst to present on bicycle culture at St. Paul conference**


This paper is a part of Professor Longhurst’s work on the history of the legal and physical infrastructure that made bicycle commuting difficult and privileged after the automobile. This invited paper will be presented along with research from historians from across the nation on the environmental history of Minnesota. Topics include exploration and settlement, urban growth, infrastructure, and suburbanization; environmental justice; and environmentalism; urban-rural linkages; open space, parks, and recreation; energy, waterways, and resource flows; waste and waste transportation and infrastructure; and comparative work on Minnesota and the upper Midwest.

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