

the greening of the bicycle

by David Schleich

Pardon me while I thrust a cliché your way: "the bicycle is in". Everywhere the "bicycle revolution" is in full swing, etc., etc. It seems worthwhile to me to pry into that phenomenon of the sixties, to see what kind of consciousness made it possible and to see what kind of consciousness makes it a probable fact of life in the North America of the seventies.

First off, we must discount the claims of the bicycle merchandisers who might insist that they created the new bicycle markets all by themselves. The interest in bicycling, thank the gods, derives from something far, far more integral to the human being than his propensity to buy what the media tell him to buy. In my judgment the renewed popularity of the bicycle is linked to what I want to call the "malaise of experience" in our way of life here in North America.

We all know about the "mechanized" way of life: cars, matchbox houses, electrical appliances, labour-saving devices, and so forth. We also know that the "young" never had to carry water, read by coal oil lamps, chop wood, walk six miles to school... But do we all know that the "mechanized" aspects of our life all have one thing in common?—they deliberately refuse us experience.

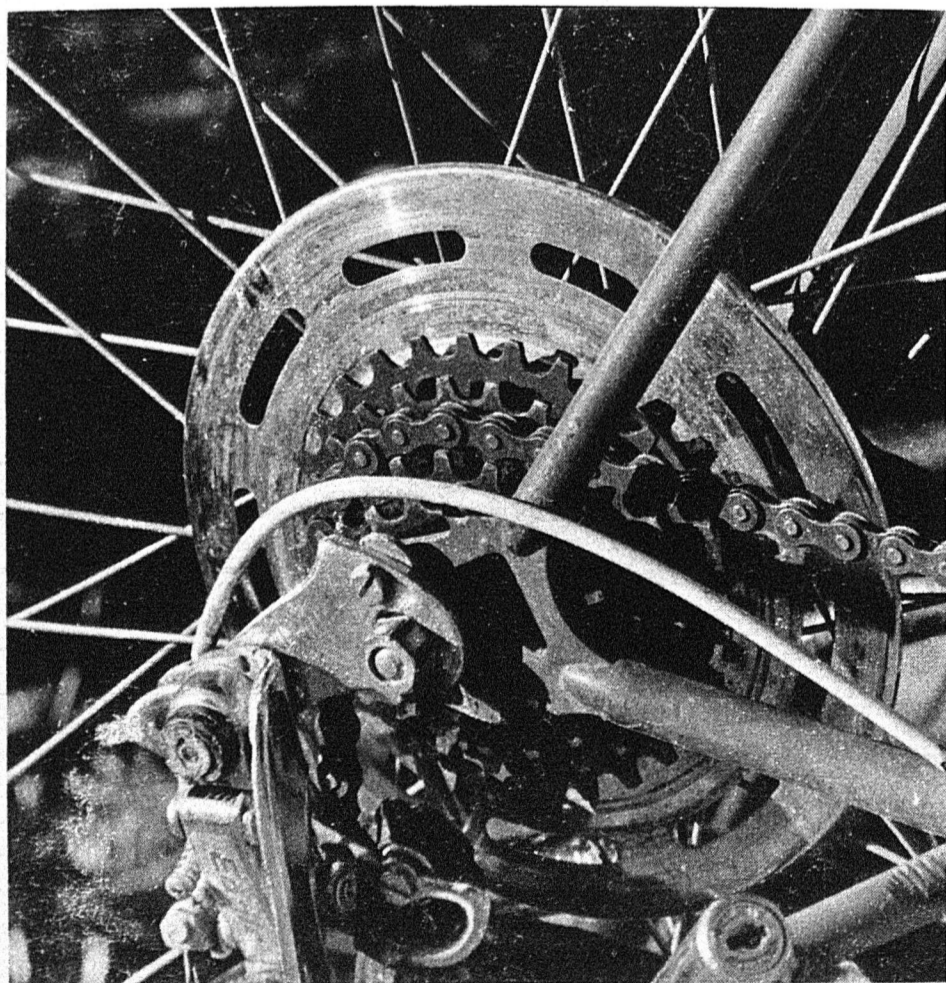
I'd best explain what I mean by EXPERIENCE. When you drive through the country-side in a car the

best you can get is a picture-postcard flash of road, trees, fields. Perhaps you stop the car and get out from time to time. But invariably, you will not have EXPERIENCED the hills, will not have FELT the land in your muscles, in your bones; will not have FELT the wind, the rain, the dust. Automobile experience is experience atrophied.

This malaise is common to nearly every aspect of our way of life on this continent. We have developed vicarious ways of living. Our bodies are not allowed to penetrate into the environment in the way they had to in the days of coal oil and cord wood. Yet, just as much now as in those days, our bodies crave experience.

When they travel these days tens of thousands of young people take their bicycles with them. They want to smell the air, taste the dust, feel the hills; and, at the end of a cycling-day they expect to be genuinely hungry and genuinely exhausted. At the end of the day a multitude of sensations will be whirling around in them, filling up their memories with images unlike those images left over from the prosaic continuum of an automobile's environment. During the day a gust of wind might have made them cold, or, alternately, might have cooled them off after a long hill. Water will have soothed a thirst ten miles old. The top of a hill will have been a reward and not just some vague undulation in some vague terrain.

The entire body is involved in bicycling. That trenchant and recurring



split of experience so rampant in the mechanized society can be no more when all that's between a rider and his destination is himself, rather than the price of a car, the price of gasoline, the price of a train ticket, bus ticket, plane ticket, and ultimately the price of the economic position which makes these possible.

Some have called the bicycle a compromise. They remind us that the ten-speed bicycle is very much a product of refined technology. But it is also a product of selective participation, a product which lets us be flesh and blood alive.

Two and one-half years ago my wife and I sold our shiny car. We bought ten-speeds a few days later. The sale price of the car paid for the bikes and bought us four months of holidays. If we had kept the car we might have managed the standard two week whiz. Instead, we let the city dribble off behind us and we headed

out to Vancouver Island. On the island we followed old country lanes, isolated secondary roads, beach trails. When one long hill had been conquered and we were gliding down the other side I remember thinking: no gas! no insurance! no oil! no car payments! The bikes were mechanical advantages under us but absolutely dependent on us to be functional. Our bodies were responsible for the movement; our bodies were responding to the movement. We were moving through our world in a kind of harmony with it that no automobile could accomplish. We were not taking resources from it in nearly the proportions a car-tourist must. As we went down the long hills gravity pulled us for free. When we went up the long hills we gave our energy back in repayment. Our lungs pulled in air and pushed it out in long, full breaths. Our hearts pumped blood everywhere in us, delivering the energy we needed to carry on.