

The Bike Basket

My first bicycle had a banana seat with daisies on it. Then one summer Saturday when I was about 9, my mother—a widely renowned connoisseur of yard sales—drove into our yard with her trunk propped open and she wrestled out a used royal blue Schwinn. It had fenders that rattled, no chain guard around its one gear, and a shallow, rectangular, wire basket on the front. I thought handbrakes were cool, which this bike did not have, but it was still a bike of my own that fit me better than Daisy did. And that basket! What would I carry??

The need for a new bike arose when we moved into our house on an infrequently traveled road that spanned 2.5 miles end-to-end, and hosted my dad's side of the family, and now—us. On the more pleasant summer evenings, Mom would get out her maroon 18-speed and we would ride to someone's house to play while Mom and my aunts would visit. My brother would have his grey/black 10-speed with handbrakes, and now I had this beauty.

My dad checked the bike over; oiling the chain, making sure the brakes engaged when the pedals were pushed in reverse, and airing up the tires. A few spins around the driveway and we were inseparable. Fairly comparable to one's first car, my Schwinn meant *freedom*. After chores on weekdays, my brother and I were allowed to bike on our road to see what the cousins were up to. From there, plans would emerge for World Domination. Beginning with conquering nations of adverse beliefs-- namely, the boys. 5 boys against 4 girls, but it was rare that more than 4 of us were out on any given day. It was always a game to find the boys, hide from them, keep secrets from them, and outwit them. We had days more based on theirs than if had we biked in the opposite direction and never looked back.

On those evenings, mom would phone the aunts to send us home and I was typically loaded down with a grocery bag of surplus garden tomatoes or cucumbers in my basket for mom for dinner salads or BLTs. I mean, she couldn't be mad we were late if I came bearing gifts, right? (That logic never worked in my favor.)

When it got hot, World Domination was put on hold and we would join forces with the guys to find somewhere to go swimming where tormenting could resume in closer proximity with splashing and the theft of dry clothes. There were two spots in the river to swim: Rous' and the bridge. The bridge provided more entertainment because we could take inner tubes down the roller dam. We could just shoot the rapids for a quick thrill, or we could float all the way down to a family friend's cabin and walk the road back up to the bridge. The problem with floating all the way down was unless it was really hot, we would get cold on the walk back because the towels were in my bike basket at the bridge. And since my house was closest to the bridge, we would head there for snacks and I would take my wet towel from my basket and lay it out on the pavers in the sun to dry out with my wet river shoes.

Rous' was a largely unused summer house whose owners were friends of the family. Rous' had a pier to jump from, but in the calmer waters were leaches. *That* was a disgusting discovery. (Years later, I exacted my revenge on these slimy parasites when I used them for bait while fishing on Bass Lake. Florescent sinker heads + leaches + bobbers = bass.) I still remember Cousin Allison and I squealing, flailing, and finally calming enough to yank the slimy little suckers as hard as we needed to get them detached. Then we plotted to get

the guys to swim there and not tell them about the leaches just to see if they'd cry like ...well, like little girls.

Between Rous' and the bridge was the creek. The creek ran through two culverts under the road. The culverts there were huge, intended to accommodate flood waters in the spring. We would crawl into them and through them. Not deep enough for swimming, but great when we just wanted to wade to cool off or watch the current drag the leaves or sticks we dropped upstream. I typically rode home with my socks in my basket. Forethought meant dry socks and wet shoes. Mostly I remember wet socks in the basket... *and* wet shoes.

Eventually I figured out that the steering on my Schwinn was stiff enough to ride with no hands. Not a feature available on every bike, but I could ride for a long time with no hands on this one. Mostly I didn't, but it was nice to be able to swat at flies or adjust my hat as needed.

On weekends, I used my bike to join my dad at his projects. He always left earlier than I was willing to get out of bed, but he'd either leave me a note, or tell me where he'd be so I could find him later. Forethought here included snacks and a second layer in my basket. Although he always had a plan that included 8-10 stops and timely meals, completing 5 of those stops without something going wrong or getting sidetracked was considered a win for the day. ...And lunch was always at 2:00 PM. ...And dinner was always after 8:00 PM. Hence the need for snacks and a flannel. Sometimes I got to run equipment from one location to another, and Papa would drop off my bike at Point B for me to bike back to Point A. Or Point C. Or he'd find a way to strap it on the tractor or throw it in the bucket of the

loader we were moving. Things were never where you needed them when you needed them there, but my bike helped that. A little.

...Books, homework, garden veggies, wet shoes, countless articles of clothing, tools, gloves, movies, empty dessert trays from the Fourth of July... That old Schwinn and I ran lots of errands, got into loads of trouble (being late for dinner, mostly), and enjoyed months of afternoons with cousins in the fresh air (or dairy air).

As with all good things, I grew out of the old blue Schwinn and mom found a curly-handle-barred red and white road bike. No basket. Two sets of hand brakes, 21 gear combinations, and I couldn't ride without hands. I have literally only two memories with it, although I rode it until college. My second year in college, I spent my waitressing money on a good mountain bike; complete with seat *and* tire shocks, a gel seat, 21-speeds, water bottle holder, digital speedometer, ...the works.

I still ride it. It's morphed a few times over the years; a rear-wheel cargo holder was taken off and a baby seat put on. Baby seat taken off and a bike trailer hitched up. I just got the bike trailer out of storage again for my youngest to ride in. A few weeks ago, I was at the grocery store check-out and between the registers was a display for grass-woven bike baskets. I noted the flaws in the design, appreciated the craftsmanship and features mine *didn't* have (that probably would have resulted in fewer bruised tomatoes and cucumbers), but my old blue Schwinn with the shallow, wire bike basket still holds a special place in my heart and past.