

got a full-sized bike. It was common to see children six and seven years old riding full-sized bikes; a boy would have to stand first on one pedal, then swing over with the off leg to reach the other pedal, then back, because his legs weren't long enough to reach both pedals over the crossbar at the same time.

European bikes, with skinny tires and gears, were all called English bikes and were looked on with disdain as being too sissified for Americans to ride, even though they would have been better, faster and much more comfortable.

Americans wanted the good old-fashioned one-speed fat-tired beasts that Schwinn and Hawthorne made, on which you sat straight up, and if you wanted to go faster, you simply had to pedal harder.

Every boy who had one wanted to go faster. And faster. And still faster.

So the first thing a boy did when he got a bike—no matter if it was a Hawthorne Deluxe with a chrome tank that held a battery-operated

horn and a push-button turn-signal switch and chrome fenders with a light on the front and a passenger rack and mirrors—was to strip it completely.

Off came the fenders and racks and chain guard and horn tank and mirrors and any other adornments so in the end you pretty much had two wheels and a sprocket attached to a frame.

Stripping down brought on a change in the boys as well. It's not that we became outlaws (although there were some who thought of us that way) so much as we just wanted to really, really push the envelope. In those days, people just said, "Look, there go those crazy boys again, trying to kill themselves."

And to be honest it would sometimes appear that way.

The thing is that without television we had very few role models, and the ones that got the most press were not always true sports figures.

Instead, we read about daredevils.

These were men who jumped cars and motorcycles over ramps through hoops of fire, rolled cars, crashed cars, lit *themselves* on fire, climbed into boxes filled with dynamite and set it off, had themselves shot out of cannons and did any number of wonderful and wild things that we all, to a boy, were pretty sure we could emulate if we just got our Schwinn's going fast enough or high enough or hard enough.

Every year at the county fair they would come crashing and banging and burning and rolling, all to the screams of crowds and the roar of unmuffled engines.

And many of them had their own daredevil shows. Hardly a month went by in the summer and fall without somebody setting up at the fairgrounds or in a field, anywhere they could get up a crowd, with old cars or motorcycles and ramps.

We all loved it and between shows would try the stunts on our own.

We built countless ramps with old boards laid on barrels or boxes, at the bottom of a hill if possi-

ble, and we would try to jump over things with our bikes.

Remember, these were one-speed fat-tired bikes with a crowned-up, castrating brace bar and the things we tried to jump were fences, wooden walls, barrels, bikes, each other. On one memorable occasion Alan—after carefully calculating distances and angles—tried to jump his step-father's Ford coupe end to end. He didn't... quite... make it and left a face print on the windshield of the car, but that might have been because he was distracted by the scream when his mother came out just as we finished the ramp and Alan made his jump.

These are images I will carry to my grave:

Orvis zooming down Black Hill, where a road went almost straight down the riverbank in a near-vertical drop, and missing the ramp board with his front tire, slamming into the old wooden barrels we'd put up for a jump obstacle, cartwheeling with his bicycle past the barrels, skipping twice in the dirt and bouncing clean, still hanging on to his bicycle, out over the riverbank

and into the water. It was shallow there, and he stood up, covered in mud and weeds, and held up his hand and yelled, "I declined the jump! I declined the jump!" He had seen riders jumping horses on the newsreel and said that if you declined the jump it was legal to miss.

Alan, again after carefully calculating and measuring (I never quite figured out where he got all the figures and thought it might have something to do with him being smarter because of the Canadian blood), decided that if you got up to twenty-six miles an hour and angled a ramp to ensure (that's how he put it, "to ensure") that you got at least seven point six feet in the air, it was possible to do a complete backward somersault and land on your wheels upright. Alan, having gotten at least seven feet in the air after a screaming run down Black Hill, landed exactly, perfectly upside down, bicycle wheels straight up, spinning, in a cloud of dust and gravel. And then, after carefully calculating and measuring, and not a little bandaging, Alan raised his hand and said, "Aha,

my calculations were for a forward somersault, not a backward flip," as if it really mattered. Then Alan again, leaving the ground like a rocket up the ramp, easily eight feet in the air this time, and landing upside down again.

Alan tried once more, getting a lift from an unsuspecting truck by hanging on to the rear corner and hitting the ramp so fast that it gave way and he went through it like a tank, barrels and boards and splinters flying everywhere.

Wayne completed the only true backward flip off a bicycle but he didn't take the bike with him.

We had become more and more proficient at crashing and bashing, as we called stunting, just like the posters that advertised the daredevil shows. We'd even decided that if we got just a little better we might put on a proper show and charge admission and thereby make A Lot of Money.

Wayne wanted to perfect his favorite trick, which was to jump a line of three barrels and at the top let go of the handlebars, turn sideways

and wave and smile, just like a man named Rock-eting Red, who jumped a motorcycle over two cars, turned and waved, landed and rode through a Hoop of Flame! We had talked Wayne out of the hoop of flame with some difficulty—pointing out that if we lit up a hoop of flame anywhere in town we would all probably wind up in jail, if we were lucky—but he had a good smile and was proud of it. So one afternoon we all set up the ramp and barrels and Wayne got ready for his practice run.

As it turned out we didn't have time to get all the stuff to the bottom of Black Hill and so we just set it up near the Seversons' backyard, which was where we usually set it up for short runs, but there was a major difference now.

Its name was King.

The Seversons were a sweet elderly couple without a mean bone in their bodies but their son Curt had gone off to the army and had left his dog with his parents.

King was perhaps a third pit bull, a third Doberman and about a third crocodile—the mean-

est animal on four legs. The Seversons kept him tied on a chain in their backyard, where he had watched us whipping by on our bicycles on many days, roaring and slaving to get at us, tearing at the earth, ripping up clods of sod and dirt, grinding his bared teeth and hating us, hating bicycles, hating air, hating the world.

And this morning Wayne came careening down the alley, took the jump, turned sideways and smiled and waved at an imaginary crowd just as King made a lunge and found to his everlasting joy that his chain had broken free from his collar.

You've got to hand it to Wayne. He knew instantly that he was in trouble. He hit the ground still smiling—or it might have become a grimace of horror—and stood on the pedals, looking for speed.

He had been moving pretty well to make the jump and had a fair lead. I saw gravel spurt from his rear tire as he slammed the pedals down and I thought he might just outrun King, and in fact I was thinking that if he *did* outrun King there was a

good chance the beast would be coming back after us, and I was wondering about taking off in the other direction to get up my own head of speed when Wayne made his mistake.

Instead of barreling straight down the alley, he thought—as he told us a week later, when he could speak again—that if he cut through the Nelsons' backyard and got out in the street it might confuse the dog.

So he angled right, really moving now, just a blur, with King coming after him—and ran into the Nelsons' clothesline.

Mr. Nelson had worked hard on that clothesline. He had set four-inch steel posts in concrete and strung four quarter-inch-thick steel cables to hang the clothes on, and Wayne caught not the first but the last cable under his chin and it took him off that bike as if a giant hand had come down from the sky and plucked him away.

Up, up, his feet went in a beautiful arc.

Both feet straight out, the bike traveling on, Wayne's body swinging up and up and back over the top of the line and then down to land across all

four clothesline cables and then bounce onto the ground.

King was there in an instant. I thought, Lord, the dog will kill him.

But the dog went past him and attacked the bicycle. It was bicycles he hated and he tore both tires off while Wayne sat up and pointed at his throat, which had a red line across it, and then fell over to the side sucking air and making a sound like a broken vacuum cleaner.

A perfect backward somersault off a bicycle.