

[White on Gilles, 'Women on the Move: The Forgotten Era of Women's Bicycle Racing'](#)

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The following book review from H-SHGAPPE may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

Roger Gilles

Reviewer:

Samantha White

Roger Gilles. *Women on the Move: The Forgotten Era of Women's Bicycle Racing*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. Illustrations. 360 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4962-0417-2; \$29.95 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-4962-1041-8.

Reviewed by Samantha White (Rutgers University-Camden) **Published on** H-SHGAPPE (February, 2019) **Commissioned by** William S. Cossen (The Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science, and Technology)

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During the latter part of the nineteenth century, spectators in the United States gathered to watch female competitors race around tracks across the country. Participants cycled at dazzling speeds while sometimes sustaining injuries in the process from crashes and falls. In *Women on the Move: The Forgotten Era of Women's Bicycle Racing*, Roger Gilles traces the era of women's competitive racing during the years 1895 to 1902. With an emphasis on relatively unknown competitive female cyclists, Gilles provides readers with a clear and accessible history of "forgotten" athletes.

Gilles's work is a welcome contribution to the scholarship on Progressive Era women's sport and physical culture. During the end of the nineteenth century, cycling emerged as a new leisure pursuit for both men and women in the United States. For men, cycling connected to themes of rational recreation through its focus on physical exercise and improvement. For women, however, cycling became seen as a form of freedom. Such works as *Wheels of Change: How Women Rode the Bicycle to Freedom* by Sue Macy (2011) and *Claiming the Bicycle: Women, Rhetoric, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America* by Sarah Hallenbeck (2015) examine the role of the bicycle in the suffrage movement and restructure the relationship between physical culture and femininity. In *Women on the Move*, Gilles does not explicitly address the relationship between cycling and feminism. Rather, his emphasis is on the individual economic and social freedoms the sport gave female participants.

Drawing primarily on newspaper sources, the book weaves together the stories of several of the most decorated female racers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Originally inspired

by his wife and children's book author Sue Stauffacher's work on cyclist Tillie Anderson (*Tillie the Terrible Swede: How One Woman, a Sewing Needle, and a Bicycle Changed History* [2011]), Gilles pieces together Anderson's story as well as stories of other cyclists, including Lizzie Glaw, Dottie Farnsworth, and May Allen. Rather than develop a singular biography, Gilles approaches women's racing through a collective approach. These women often competed with each other, making their paths quite intertwined. While the newspapers that Gilles draws from help the reader understand the lives of the women, at times, the book relies too heavily on direct material from these sources. One particular chapter, "A Gala Event on Wheels," is primarily composed of quotes from a journalist from the *Columbus Dispatch*. I would have liked to see a deeper analysis of the material.

The young women featured in the book competed in the public arena in such cities as New York, Chicago, and Minneapolis. While the book describes the racers as women, it is important to note that most of them were quite young, as some started competing at the age of sixteen. Managers of cycling events tended to recruit girls and younger looking women as well as unmarried women. Gilles notes that "it was simply too much for male sensibilities of the day to imagine these tough, athletic, ambitious women as wives or mothers" (p. 73). Another linking thread between these young women is their position as immigrants to the United States. Anderson, Allen, and Glaw came from Sweden, England, and Germany, respectively. While the book notes their status as immigrants, the text does not interrogate the relationship between biking, assimilation, and immigration. How did biking allow these women to fold into the fabric of American sporting culture? And how did new definitions of whiteness allow certain women to become visible in racing while others, such as African American women, remained completely outside of the arena?

Through analysis of newspaper accounts of both racing competitions and the competitors, Gilles examines the ways in which cycling challenged and reinforced traditional notions of femininity. Events as long as six days, for several hours a day, proved to be mentally and physically difficult for racers. Challenging notions of Victorian femininity and embracing the role of the New Woman, Gilles details how female racers competed against each other through grueling races under the public eye. In newspaper coverage, women relished their athletic bodies. Anderson, in an exchange with a writer from a newspaper, stated, "I'm solid muscle," while exposing her bicep (p. 147). Rather than feel shame for their bodies, certain female athletes embraced muscularity, much to the chagrin of journalists and doctors.

A focus on the outward beauty of the female competitors placed value on their physical appearance. As detailed by visual images included in the book, event promoters marketed cyclists and depended on their looks to draw crowds. Photographs of women with and without their bicycles drew on their physical beauty to counter assumptions about the effect of the sport on their body. For male journalists and doctors, there was a fear that bicycling not only was bad for women's health but could negatively affect their beauty as well. Doctors claimed participation in the sport could disrupt women's internal organs, and other experts erroneously claimed bicycle face could affect female riders, which included "wild eyes, strain lines around the mouth, and a general focus of the features toward the center" (p. 115). For the women in Gilles's text, athletic bodies were both a source of internal satisfaction and external scrutiny.

Ultimately, Gilles argues for the importance of understanding women's competitive cycling as a critical point in the history of sport. As he notes, during the late nineteenth century, "women's racing

was already popular—every bit as popular as the men’s marathon events or any other major sport of the time” (p. 143). For scholars of sport history, women’s history, and Progressive Era history, *Women on the Move* addresses the ways in which the bicycle proved to be a critical tool for the growth of women’s sport and physical culture.

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