

Two Wheels to Work?

New Jersey is as flat as Holland, so why not?

by Stephen Kruse

For a small number of Princeton residents, one of the enjoyable aspects of living here is the possibility of commuting by bicycle.

Admittedly, New Jersey does not spring to mind as an especially bicycle-friendly place. It's the most densely-populated state and has the greatest number of motor vehicles per mile of roadway. None of the municipalities can boast networks of paved bicycle trails and pathways comparable to what is rumored to exist elsewhere, nor are we likely to encounter front-mounted bike carriers on public transit vehicles such as can be seen in places like San Jose, Phoenix, or Portland, Oregon. Bicycle advocacy groups here are still somewhat low-profile, and it's not clear whether the DOT will ever factor pedestrians and cyclists into their construction plans.

So despite that famous photo of Einstein gliding around Princeton on his bike (of "tube alloy" construction, no doubt), and despite the fact that the Bicycling Hall of Fame is located in nearby Somerville, very few of us Garden State folk are inspired to use a bicycle for anything but weekend leisure.

But why is that so? It cannot be the rugged terrain — New Jersey is almost as flat as the mecca of two-wheeled travel, Holland, and is undeniably less windy. The weather is generally cooperative here, and the automobilists are well-behaved, at least compared to places like Boston (I never get litter thrown into my spokes anymore!).

Realistically, commuting by bicycle isn't for everyone. It makes sense only for deskbound types who live within about five miles of

their workplace. You can probably rule out anyone who needs to run errands during the day, or anybody who is not mildly interested in the ecological and health benefits of being a regular bicyclist. The typical bicycle commuter would seem to be a somewhat frugal, resolutely unfashionable individual, somebody who won't ever define recycling as "the act of pedaling backwards."

As for me, it's been getting more difficult to incorporate bicycle commuting in my lifestyle equa-

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tion. As a grad student in Pittsburgh (where I majored in Computer Engineering and pothole avoidance) I couldn't afford a car, and caused somewhat of a ruckus in a local pub when I asked if we could switch channels from a Pirates game to the exploits of Greg Lemond in the '84 Tour de France (since I couldn't afford a TV either). Years later, finally in France myself (working at VLSI Technology's R&D center), I became a dedicated bicycle commuter after my first few trips to the gasoline pump, where a fill-up cost close to \$40. Nowadays, between ferrying my 2 daughters to daycare and shuttling around to visit VLSI customers, I seldom average more than a few days per week on my daily route from the Riverside section of Princeton to the Enterprise Business Park in Plainsboro.

Still, bicycle commuting is a habit-forming activity which I'd be reluctant to quit: it gives me a psychological lift in the morning and is the perfect way to unwind after a hectic day. I get a modest

amount of exercise and fresh air, and I get to be alone with my thoughts for awhile. Here's a typical morning:

Having barely digested my Wheaties, I am soon coasting onto Harrison Street just before the slope down to Carnegie Lake. I feel as though I'm running a gauntlet between the parked cars along the curb, any of which could suddenly pop open a door into my path, and the overtaking cars whizzing past on my left. I've had a few close shaves involving pickup trucks with outsized rear-view mirrors on the passenger side, but for the most part I find the local drivers to be courteous and patient. The notorious speedtrap at the bottom of the hill can only encourage their relaxed pace.

Vigilance is also necessary at any traffic intersection, where there is always the threat of an inattentive oncoming driver making a left turn and clobbering me. This is probably the most feared scenario for any cyclist, the notorious "close encounter of the impact kind." Slightly less nightmarish is the car which overtakes from behind and then cuts me off by making a right-hand turn at the intersection.

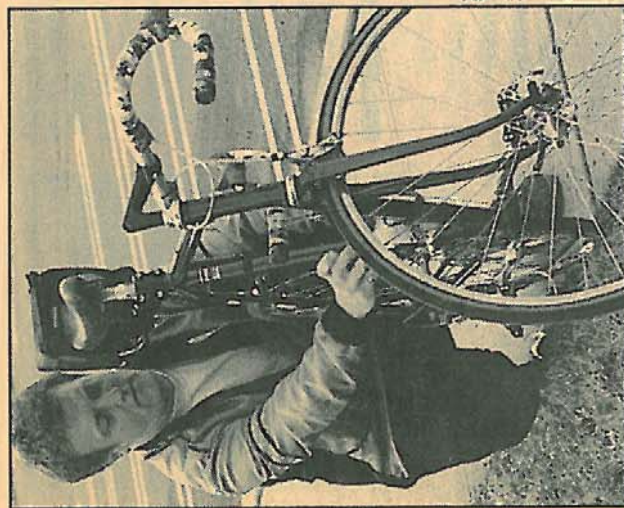
At this point I've identified cars going straight, cars turning left, and cars turning right as the main threats to my welfare. If my bike had a bumper sticker it might read "only the paranoid survive." But it has been my personal experience that falling off the bike usually requires nothing beyond my own ingenuity. Once every few thousand miles I hit a small dent in the road, or a patch of sand, or a slippery manhole cover, or a freshly-painted traffic stripe, or I catch a pedal while cornering, or the pavement is oily and slick due to light rain, and whoops — down I go. If the ensuing skid terminates without incident, I'll be wearing a stripe of "roadrash" the next day as a badge of my clumsiness. For this reason the indispensable parts of my attire are a hardshell cycling helmet and a pocket-festooned reflective jacket which is ugly

along

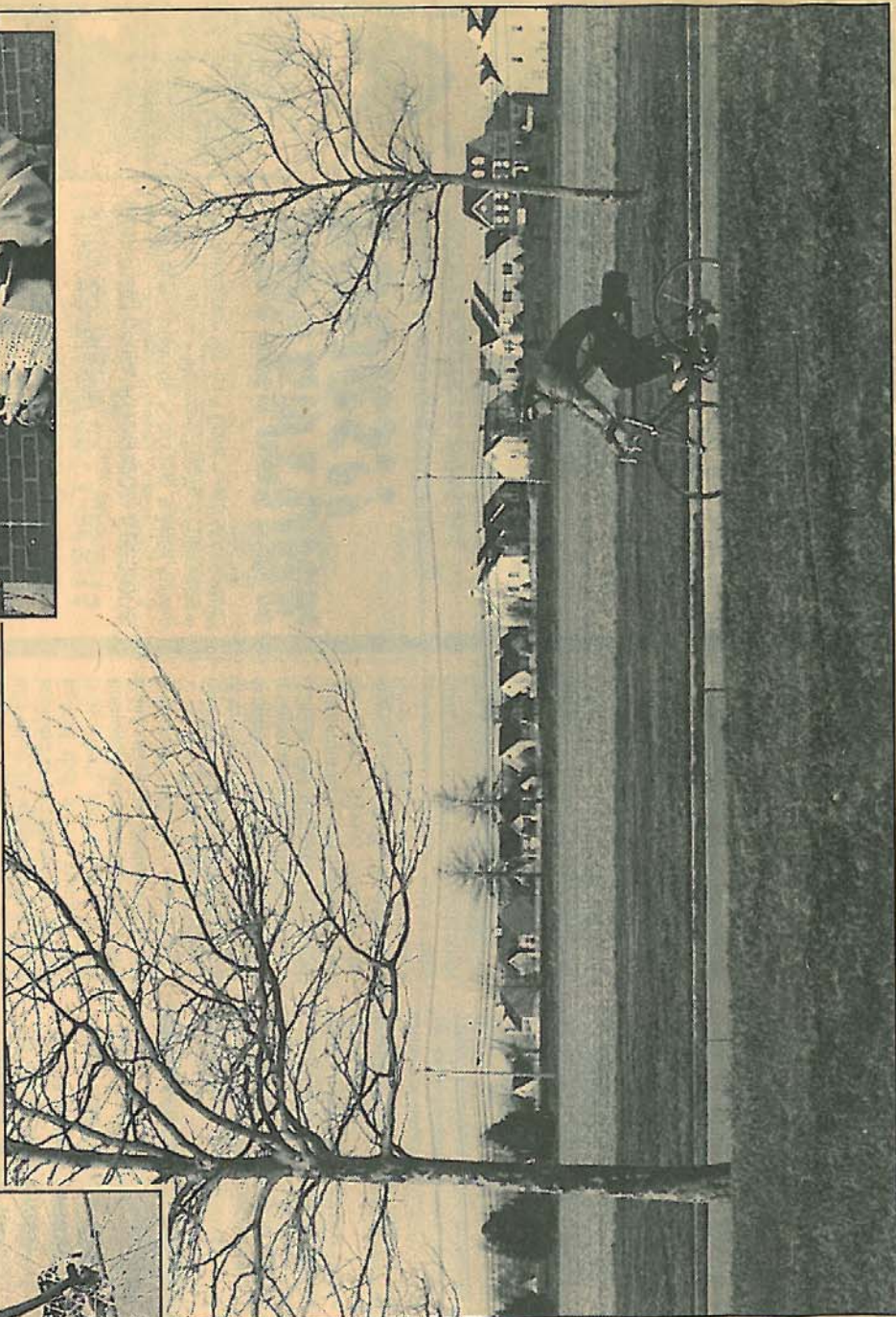
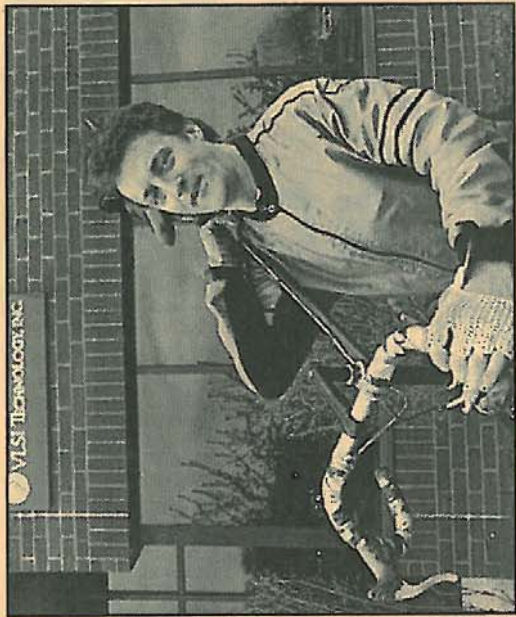
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'Frequent Freewheel Miles.' Steve Kruse has logged plenty of them between his house in Princeton and his job with VLSI at the Enterprise Business Park in Plainsboro. After an adrenaline-charged dash up busy Route 1, he enjoys a tranquil stretch of Plainsboro Road before arriving at work. See following page for tips on coping with car commuters.



enough to repulse pedestrians, cars, and deer.

But beyond the inherent challenge of sharing the road with various heavier-than-thou moving objects, my safety depends on me following basic rules of the road and remembering to (a) "act like a well-behaved car" and (b) not assume that "the other guy" can see me.

Rolling along, I reach the bridge across Carnegie Lake, which provides a good vantage point from which to spy on the Princeton rowing teams. I lack the most basic requirement for being an oarsman, namely the ability to wake up early, but I always find it inspirational to watch the boats gliding across the smooth water. Meanwhile up on the roadway it's time to beware of earnest joggers, who dart from the D&R canal towpath onto the road, and the occasional box turtle.

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at car minute*

Beyond the lake, as Harrison Street winds through the forest towards Route 1, I enjoy the scenery and lament the lack of paved shoulder, proper drainage, or streetlights. However I am mostly concerned with threading my way past the inevitable tailback of cars waiting for the traffic lights.

At traffic tieups is where I really gain lots of time versus being an automobile commuter. One thing about being on the bike is that I know the trip will always take 20 minutes, regardless of traffic conditions, whereas in my car it usually takes 10 minutes, but a traffic accident or a construction site can extend that to 50 minutes. The most likely spot to hit a lengthy bottleneck is on the Scudder's Mill Road overpass, during the homeward commute.

At the Route 1 intersection, I usually need to wait for the light to change, and this gives me a few minutes to daydream. Sometimes I imagine a thoughtfully-located underpass for pedestrians and cyclists running along the bank of the Millstone River, through the grounds of Sarnoff. The Millstone River bypass, unless it includes a pedestrian walkway and a bike path, may make it more dangerous for bicyclists because car drivers will be encouraged to go faster.

I am jolted back to rush-hour reality as the green left arrow blinks GO, and I swing onto the high-speed corridor of Route 1, currently being reinvented as a very high-speed corridor. In the interest of getting this article published, I won't say anything further about Route 1 except that it's no place to stop and smell the flowers unless you happen to drive an 18-wheeler.

So after an adrenaline-fueled 200-meter dash, I reach the tranquility of Plainsboro Road and encounter my next obstacle: the throngs of Canada geese which sometimes decide to waddle single-file across the road to commute from the pond on the FMC campus to their goose offices. I ask myself: why would anyone tune their dial to Howard Stern in the morning when they could experience the cacophony of honking geese and the rhythmic wheezing of their own 30-something lungs?

Just beyond FMC, I come to the Firmenich factory, which produces what can best be described as aromatic compounds. The sweet smell of this place usually reminds me that I'm over halfway to the coffee machine, I mean the office. This is the spot where I once got a flat tire, only to be offered a ride by a compassionate motorist even

before I could remove my back wheel. For a bicycle commuter, the only thing better than a good Samaritan is a good Samaritan in a station wagon.

Next comes a very enjoyable stretch near the woods in the vicinity of Walker Gordon Dairies (where Elsie the Cow rests in peace), and then the quirky little bridge that takes me over the railroad corridor. By now I am literally over the hump and on the final

Rush hour reality: Route 1 is no place to stop and smell the flowers unless you happen to drive an 18-wheeler.

stretch, and when the wind is at my back I don't even raise a sweat.

Suddenly I realize that I've forgotten my wallet... Oh well. One consequence of bicycle commuting is that once you're there, you're there.

Readers can send email to the author (ottoaxel@aol.com) or visit his bicycle-related web page at <http://members.aol.com/ottoaxel>.

To get a biking map of Middlesex County roads, call Keep Middlesex Moving at 908-745-3996; fax, 908-745-7482. Or E-mail to kmm@kmm.org. Or pick one up at Plainsboro Public Library.

Princeton Freewheelers offers support and multi-level rides to bikers. Call 609-921-6685.

Biking Futures

Yes, you can bike to work on the Alexander Road and the Scudders Mill Road overpasses. In part this is due to mayors from 10 communities and three counties who are working to address mobility issues. The Route 1 Mayors Transportation Management Advisory Council, convened five years ago by Peter A. Cantu (mayor of Plainsboro and also executive director of Keep Middlesex Moving), helped to convince New Jersey Department of Transportation to modify the design of Scudders Mill and Alexander Road overpasses to allow walking and bicycling.

"Perhaps in part because of the

mayors' concerns the DOT has hired a consultant, the RBA Group, to work on bicycle and pedestrian access issues within the Route 1 Corridor," says Cantu.

In addition, Keep Middlesex Moving published a Middlesex County cyclists' map last year, with help from the DOT and the Middlesex County Planning Board. But bicycle commuter Stephen Kruse noted that the map is "nice to see, but of limited use to a biker. Its stated intent is to indicate the speed limits and shoulder widths along various roads. It also includes some useful safety tips on the back.

"But the color coding could be improved. Four of the colors are dark enough to be somewhat confusing and they range from Interstates and Parkways (which are off limits to bicycles) to rivers and canals, to roads with no shoulder, on which traffic can go at 30 to 35 miles per hour. Maybe the map could use solid, dashed, and dotted lines instead.

"As a cyclist I'd like to see a map including the height and grade of hills," says Kruse. "Nevertheless, this map is helpful and more people should know about it."

"We had to balance readability against including everything suggested," replies Cantu. The response has been so good that KMM is applying for funds to update and reprint the map. "Of the print run of 5,000 we have distributed more than 2,500 maps and we will send out bulk quantities to anyone who can help distribute the map."

Get a copy by calling Keep Middlesex Moving at 908-745-3996; fax, 908-745-7482. Or E-mail to kmm@kmm.org.

Princeton Borough and Township biking maps are still "in progress." The most recent Princeton maps, published 20 years ago, show that bikers can ride on sidewalks downtown on the Princeton University side of Nassau Street. Bike riding on sidewalks now should be limited to children. "We are not encouraging anyone other than small children to be riding on the sidewalk," says Marvin Reed, mayor of Princeton Borough.

"If you have mixed use of pedestrians and bicyclists, the bicyclists really have to exercise a great deal of discipline not to endanger pedestrians," says Joseph O'Neill, a member of Princeton's planning board. Like many, O'Neill is concerned about the provisions for cyclists on the Millstone bypass and

