

WHY NOT LICENSE BICYCLES? . . .

By Richard O. Bennett

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IN the course of a lifetime, John Q. Public is frequently called upon to purchase a license to do something or other. Maybe it's a license so that he may enjoy the companionship of a wife, or a dog; maybe it's a license to own or operate a motor vehicle; maybe it's a license to do a job of plumbing; or maybe it's a recreation license, to hunt and fish.

Does Mr. Public ever stop to ponder why we have licenses? No, he just considers them necessary evils. If someone were to ask him point-blank why we have licenses he would probably produce a what-can-you-do-about-it gesture and remark: "These politicians gotta have dough!"

The trouble is Jack, as Mr. Public has come to be known, has the terms "license" and "registration" confused with the term "taxation." True, the primary purpose of some required licenses is to produce revenue, but in a vast majority of cases licensing is for regulation. Certainly this is the case in registering and licensing bicycles.

Can you conceive what a disorderly jumble our streets and highways would be if there were no regulations; regulations made possible through registration and licensing of vehicles and operators?

Certainly conditions are bad enough in spite of our traffic regulatory efforts, but just imagine how confused they would be if everyone drove just as he chose!

Believe it or not, this is the condition that exists with bicycle riders today. Generally speaking (there have been a few isolated efforts to control bicycling) bicycle riders conform only to their own, often adolescent, best judgments which sometimes are not good, or even half good.

Many cities such as Kansas City, Mo., Milwaukee, Wis., and Evanston, Ill., have demonstrated conclusively that the number of bicycle-motor vehicle accidents, can be greatly reduced through strict traffic regulation. If regulation can do the job for the automobile it can do it for the bicycle.

Obviously, we cannot have bicycle safety without regulation and we cannot have bicycle regulation without some instrument of control; in other words, an enforcement weapon.

This instrument is more necessary when dealing with bicycle riders than with motor vehicle operators because, as we said before, bicycle riders for the most part are children.

In most states children are not subject to the same traffic court penalties as are their elders. Something special must be designed as a penalty for juvenile bicycle violators. The courts, juvenile and other, can't impose woodshed penalties as they would like to in many cases, nor can they expect parental cooperation to that extent. It goes without saying that monetary penalties imposed against the parents do not achieve the desired result with the children.

The penalty must be such so that it is imposed on the violator regardless of age.

A bicycle license provides the means for such penalty through the medium of suspension and revocation.

Registration and licensing change the status of the bicycle in the eyes of the child owner. . . . He no longer considers the bicycle a toy to be used as he sees fit.

Through registration a bicycle becomes something of importance. The child recognizes it as an instrument for travel as well as recreation.

He learns that to be able to ride a bicycle on a street or sidewalk only as a privilege rather than a right, and that other traffic and others' rights must be considered.

He knows that when he oversteps the rules of courtesy and common sense as well as those imposed by the community he is not just "another kid on a bicycle."

He knows he has a license number which will lead to his identity. In this again he learns some of the responsibility that goes with using public thoroughfares.

The licensing of bicycles will undoubtedly change the attitude of law enforcement officers toward violations by bicyclists. The officer, upon seeing a violation by a child rider, needs not feel like a brute taking candy away from a baby when he fulfills his oath of office.—The bicycle license gives him an opportunity to make a record or even a citation without the appearance of "picking on a kid." Violations by bicycle riders should no longer be "noddled at" and thus condoned.

It must be remembered that the bicycle riders of today in most instances will be the automobile drivers of tomorrow and it is an indisputable fact that the manner in which a boy rides his bicycle will reflect on the manner in which he will drive a car when he becomes a motorist.

Safe or unsafe driving practices is a matter of habit to a large extent, developed over a long period. . . . The regulation of bicycles

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as afforded by registration can help mold these habits in the direction of safety.

Besides this, the registration of bicycles affords an excellent medium of safety education generally. Through it children learn while quite young many of the traffic regulations which their parents were forced to learn in the hard way.

Properly administered bicycle ordinances provide an annual contact between law enforcement officers and bicycle riders (at the time of re-registration) which is conducive to better understandings of each other's problems. It also affords the officers an opportunity to examine bicycles for mechanical fitness and to see that they are properly equipped with safety devices such as a headlight, a tail reflector, a brake, etc.

Besides the safety factor there is another condition which, in many localities, is deplorable—the matter of bicycle thievery. Nobody knows better than a police officer the futility of attempting to control bicycle stealing when there is no means of distinguishing one bicycle from another.

A would-be bicycle thief knows that unless he is detected by the owner while actually stealing an unlicensed bicycle, the probability of apprehension in possession of the bicycle is highly remote.

It is only when the thief abandons the bicycle that the rightful owner can expect to recover his property. The argument that automobiles, though licensed, are frequently stolen does not hold water, inasmuch as we have no way of knowing what the automobile theft ratio would be were it not for license plates.

It must also be remembered that probably more automobile theft cases are solved than any other one type of criminal endeavor due to license identification. Too often the stealing of a bicycle is the first step toward a criminal career.

The fact that a bicycle can be identified through the license number will be a deterrent to many would-be juvenile bicycle thieves. Licensing facilitates the recovery and restoration, to the rightful owner, of a stolen bicycle.

Before a bicycle registration and licensing law can accomplish the desired ends a number of things are necessary:

Bicycle riders must know the purpose behind each section of the law.

The bicycle riders must know that the law-makers who enacted the law and the police officers charged with its enforcement mean business.

The attitude of law enforcement officers and courts toward bicycle riders must change.

The law must receive a high degree of intelligent enforcement and the courts must support the officers in their efforts.

Parents are important factors in the ultimate success or failure of a bicycle registration law—their cooperation is essential.

Owing to the human element, a Utopian condition cannot be expected. However, there can and must be an improvement in the bicycle accident and theft situations.



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