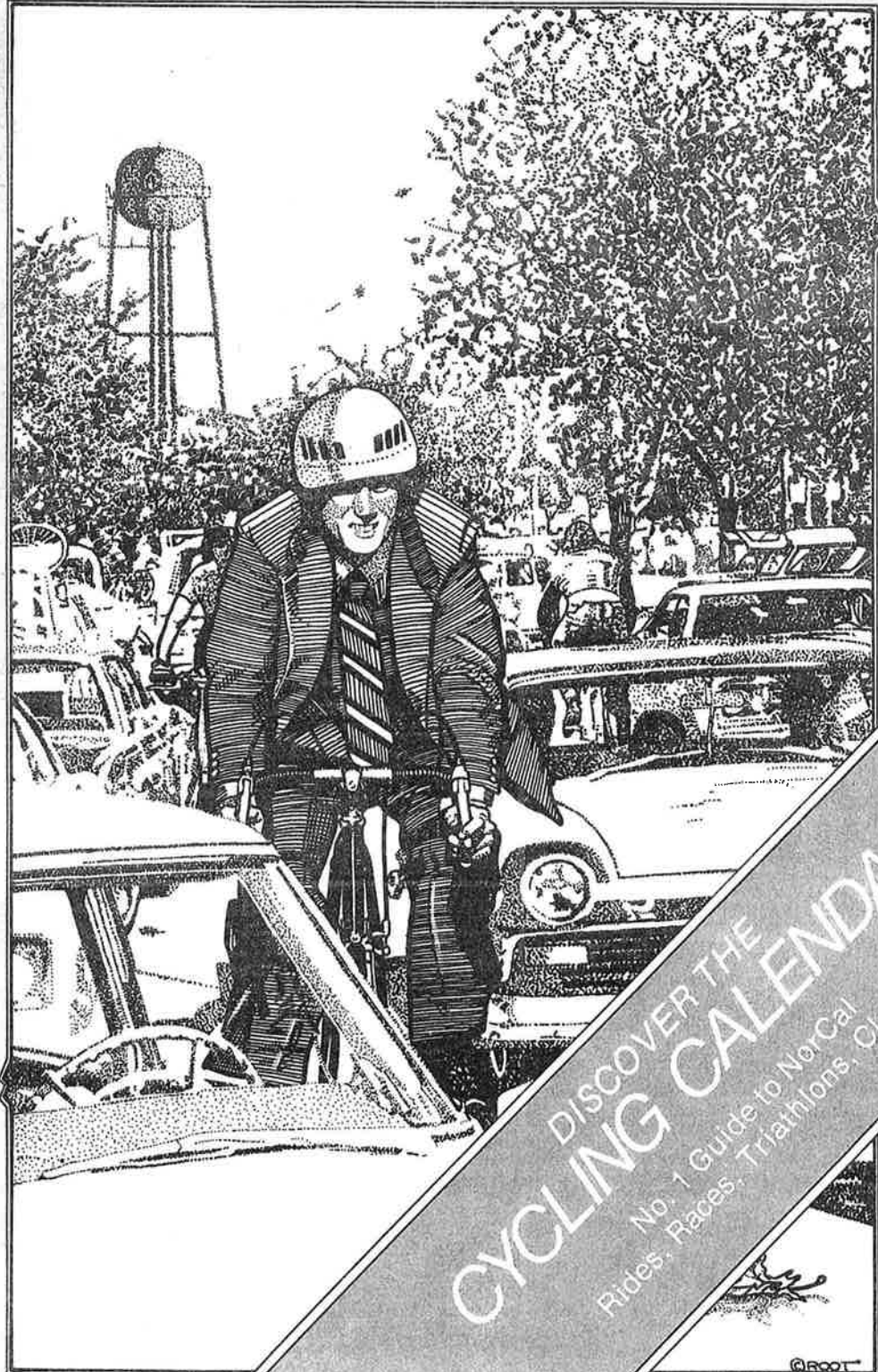


# CALIFORNIA BICYCLIST

## DAVIS

The campus that spawned a city of bicycles

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# THE CITY OF BICYCLES

## Can the "Davis Model" work elsewhere?

by John Finley Scott

**B**ehold fair Davis, the Garden Spot of Yolo County, acclaimed throughout the land as the bicycle statutory stands in public locations, and the logotype printed on city officials' business cards is a rendering of a high-wheeled "ordinary." Davis is indeed a city of bicycles; so far as I know, it stands first among American communities in ratios of bicycle use to population or to use of other transport modes.

What produces all this wholesome bicycle riding? Can it be induced or exported elsewhere? Some think so. Hal Bennett's *The Complete Bicycle Commuter* ("The Sierra Club Guide to Cycling to Work," 1982) describes Davis as one of a few cities "whose efforts to encourage bicycling has established. . . models for. . . development of cycle commuting in other cities." Davis city officials frequently take credit for encouraging cycling with their local plans and facilities. Materials distributed to students at the University of California/Davis campus describe Davis as "ideal for bicycle riding, with bike lanes set up on all major streets."

I see things differently. In my opinion local plans and facilities (both of the City and the University) are mostly a response to pre-existing high levels of bicycle use in Davis and are only minor factors in accounting for the current high

level. That level results instead from a mix of campus regulations and demographic and "urban-ecological" factors which Davis shares only with some other college towns, most of which cannot be induced or exported to other American communities. My basis for these conclusions is my review of "transportation research" on cycling in Davis and elsewhere, my own sociological research on that topic, and my 16 years of experience as a Yolo County cyclist-commuter.

The principal reason for extensive bicycle use in Davis is the presence of the large and highly dispersed UC/Davis campus, the largest employer in town (over 50 percent of all Davis residents) and the travel destination of 18,000 students. Once graduate students, faculty, and staff arrive on campus, they mostly stay put in their offices or labs: only about 12 percent of the faculty commute

to campus and almost none of the lower-middle-class staff. But undergraduates may have to travel over a mile between classes during a 10-minute class break. They are *involuntary* cyclists, riding bicycles simply because no practical alternative transport modes are available to them.

College students everywhere are heavy bicycle users, but in Davis they have a striking impact on overall bicycle use because they amount (together with the town's growing "non-student fringe" group of the same age and income) to nearly 40 percent of the population. As Davis students acquire cars, they use bicycles less: undergraduate female students, who have a low rate of car access, are the most regular bicycle users.

Topography and climate affect cycling in Davis, as they affect it everywhere. The fact that Davis is unusually flat does favor cycling, especially among novice riders who cannot imagine that cyclists can contend with hills. The region's "Mediterranean climate" — wet winters, warm dry summers — is also often said to be a positive factor, but this is misleading. In fact, most college towns in California have *better* climates for cycling, and Yolo County weather, with its heavy winter rains, cold depressing in-

version fogs, strong winds, and infernal summers, favors cycling only in comparison to locations outside the state. Rain and wind are factors regularly used in scheduling runs for the campus/town bus system, as they are known to discourage cycling. And I must admit that today, as I write this during a heat wave, I forsook my trusty commuter bike for a motorcycle to make my 6-mile run into town.

Although the campus is dispersed, the city of Davis has been historically compact, about 2 miles square, and most trips — to campus, high school, the post office — are short. They can be done as fast (or faster) on a bicycle as in a car. But as new construction expands the town, residents of the outlying areas tend to use motor vehicles. Most bicycle traffic between the "core area" and newer subdivisions in south and west Davis appears to consist of high school students, who are less likely to have drivers' licenses or access to a car.

Traffic density in Davis is low, and this favors cycling. "Rush hour" is more a "rush minute" and traffic volumes for automobiles and bicycles do not peak at the same time or place. Some bike paths and lanes serve as preferred routes for cyclists through thick automobile traffic.

Because the ratio of cyclists to motorists is so high, local motorists learn to watch for cyclists and inadvertently violate their right-of-way less frequently than elsewhere. While congestion will grow as Davis grows, cyclists who dislike commuting with (say) Bay Area levels of traffic will find riding in Davis to be a veritable paradise.

Casual clothing adapts better than formal attire to bicycle use, and in this respect Davis encourages cycling through its tradition of unusually casual dress, even compared to college towns elsewhere. Professors and campus administrators often go about their business without coats and ties. Dress standards at city council and commission hearings are if anything even more casual, and the city manager — a regular cyclist — is seldom seen wearing a tie.

But among the students at least, this may be changing. Student attire is "dressier" than a decade ago, especially among women, and several female interviewees in my surveys of campus bicycle use have stated that this influences their choice of transport mode: "bicycling musses your hair," or "you ride to campus and you don't arrive fresh." Because of this, I expect campus-commute bicycle use among women to decline, even though recreational bicycle use may increase (women's athletics at Davis are strong and growing in popularity). Most Davis cycling is involuntary: bicycles get used because motor vehicles are not available or because parking and access for them is barred. But the town also supports a high level of voluntary cycling by adults who are free to use a car. I attribute this to an "aggregation effect": you are more likely to do some-

thing new once you see a lot of other people doing it. In most communities adult cyclists still stand out, but in Davis so many riders are already on the streets that you don't feel out-of-place joining their ranks. Thus one encounters one-car Davis families where the husband uses the car to commute to Sacramento and the wife gets around town on a bicycle (often with a child in a "kiddie seat," or much more safely, in a bicycle trailer), saving car-required errands for the husband's return.

With so many bicycles, bicycle accidents in Davis follow a distinctive pattern. Experienced cyclists know that safe riding is very much a learned skill, and inexperienced cyclists in Davis appear to

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have a disproportionate share of accidents. Every fall the campus suffers the sanguinary attack of "killer freshman"—killers because they have yet to acquire the skills needed to ride safely in heavy bicycle traffic (October is the biggest month for accidents). Women have a higher accident rate than men per bicycle-mile, with simple ineptitude a factor in many crashes (purses suspended from handlebars that foul the front wheel, incautious riding in wet weather, use of bicycles with inoperative brakes, etc.); males are more likely to "crash-and-burn" simply as a result of going too fast. But, overall, serious accidents are rare.

As for bicycle planning and facilities, Davis has been a pioneer in dealing with special problems. Most American bicycle facilities planning must focus on bicycle/motor vehicle interfacing, but Davis has the rare problem of hordes of cyclists, especially on campus during class changes, and hence must design for bicycle/bicycle interfacing. The resulting bicycle facilities in Davis are a mix of good and bad. University planners have made good use of low-cost traffic circles to bring some degree of order to previously chaotic campus intersections. Several "class 1" segregated bike paths have been built on campus and in town: some safe, some unsafe; some heavily traveled, some seldom used; some cost-

effective, some horrific boondoggles (the worst is a \$700,000 freeway overcrossing paralleling Russell Boulevard). Growing traffic to south Davis must pass through unsuitable railroad subways (including a badly-sited \$500,000 bicycle tunnel), and westbound cyclists cross the road in a variety of illegal and dangerous ways to defeat a tedious signal and gain easier access to the bicycle path/subway. Parking is a chronic problem. Nowhere in Davis is there a single covered bicycle parking facility, a bike locker, or even a well-designed parking rack. The campus has thousands of concrete "rim-bender" parking pods which stress bicycle wheels outside their plane of rotation

and of which cyclists have complained for over a decade (the campus bike shop staff estimates that damage caused by these pods accounts for about 70 percent of all wheel rebuilding), but university bureaucrats do nothing but place more pods. Since public university campuses are widely seen as well-landscaped monuments to the grandeur of the state, the campus administration is reluctant to intrude on the "sacred grass" surrounding popular destinations in order to provide adequate bicycle parking. Parking reflects campus stratification: faculty are allowed to park bicycles inside buildings (as I always do) but undergraduates are supposed to leave theirs outside in the rain and mud.

Thus we may conclude that Davis is indeed a "model for development" of bicycle use — a model, that is, for Chico, Fresno, Goleta and other campus communities where restrictions on auto traffic and parking create an army of involuntary student cyclists. Encouraging bicycle use elsewhere, among populations for whom the choice of the bicycle as a transport mode will be voluntary, must follow a different mode. As for my own cyclocommuting, classes begin in a few days, and soon I will put on my Bell helmet and pedal my cautious way through the hordes of "killer freshman" in a perilous journey to my office and classes. Wish me luck, so that I can survive to hold forth on the sociology of transportation (4 units) next spring.

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