Annie Londonderry’s Extraordinary Ride

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She was a Jewish mother like no other, and in 1894 she rode a bicycle to worldwide fame.

Born in 1870 or 1871 near Riga, Latvia, Annie Cohen arrived in the United States as a young girl in 1875 with her parents, Levi and Basha, and two older siblings, Sarah and Bennett (the author’s great-grandfather). Unlike many in this early wave of Jewish immigrants to American shores, the Cohens came to Boston, a city many Jews avoided because of its reputation for virulent anti-Semitism. They settled in the old West End, near the site of Massachusetts General Hospital today, the most ethnically diverse immigrant community in the country.

By the age of eighteen she had married, and by 1894, when she was just twenty-three or twenty-four, she had three young children under the age of six. This fact alone made her a highly unlikely candidate for the journey that would make her famous. That she was Jewish, had never ridden a bicycle, and was of small, unremarkable stature made it all the more remarkable that she would, on June 25, 1894 mount a 42-pound Columbia bicycle in front of the Massachusetts State House in Boston and, as one Boston newspaper described it, “sail away like a kite down Beacon Street.” She would not return for fifteen months.

Possessed of extraordinary self-assurance, a very modern sense of celebrity, and a gift for self-promotion, Annie transformed herself from a working-class Jewish mother from the tenements of Boston into the world’s first international female sports star.

Resourceful and clever, her transformation began on the very first day of her trip when she adopted a pseudonym, “Annie Londonderry.” The name came from her first corporate sponsor, the Londonderry Lithia Spring Water Company of New Hampshire, which paid her to use the name and to attach an advertising placard to her bike. The name served more than a commercial purpose, however, it obscured her Jewish heritage and while on the road she never made mention of being Jewish, just as she rarely mentioned her marital or maternal status. While Annie was all about grabbing the public spotlight, she eschewed topics that might have inspired opprobrium.

Annie’s chutzpah and ability to capture headlines with dramatic, often false or exaggerated accounts, of her travels, was one reason for her growing fame. Just as important, however, was the historic context of her journey, which occurred at the nexus of three of the most sweeping social trends of the 1890s.

First, the 1890s saw the rise of a powerful women’s movement for social equality, led by such stalwarts as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. The so-called “New Woman” of the era was a modern woman who worked outside the home, was engaged in social causes, and/or believed in the inherent equality of the sexes. She broke down barriers that circumscribed the lives of women.

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Second, the late 1800s were a time of intensive globalization as changes in information and transportation technology made the world a more interconnected place. Americans and Europeans particularly developed a strong interest in the larger world, international travel became accessible to the middle-class, and the exploits of ‘round the world travelers, from the fictional Phileas Fogg of Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* to real people such as journalist Nellie Bly, who circled the world as a publicity stunt for Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* newspaper, captured the public imagination.

Finally, the 1890s was the peak of the great bicycle craze as millions of people took to the pleasurable recreation of riding a bicycle. Indeed, advances in bicycle design opened the sport to women. Gone were the difficult to ride high-wheelers, replaced by the so-called “Safety” bicycle, bikes with wheels of equal size that made it far more practical for women, who were generally unaccustomed to athletic pursuits, to enjoy the sport. Cycling was a general “intoxication,” according to one historian, and the craze swept across class lines. For the “New Woman” of the 1890s, the bicycle was the ultimate symbol of freedom. Its impact on the lives of women was profound: “Bicycling,” said Susan B. Anthony in 1896, “has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world.”

For all of these reasons, Annie’s journey, the first attempt by a woman to circle the world on a bicycle, attracted enormous attention and volumes of press coverage in the United States and abroad.

Her transformation over the course of her journey was far more complete than a simple change of name, however. Though she began the journey in long dresses and traditional Victorian attire, her acquisition of a men’s bicycle in Chicago necessitated a change of clothing for it was utterly impractical to ride a men’s bike with its crossbar in skirts. Donning bloomers (a baggy trouser) and astride a men’s bicycle, Annie cut a striking figure to Victorian eyes. Later in her journey she would ride in a man’s suit, finding it more comfortable and completing her sartorial transition.

The trip also transformed her worldview. At the beginning she was not an active feminist, and the bicycle trip was not intended as a political statement, though she freely adopted the mantle of the New Woman because it served her purpose to be at the center of the lively public debate over the proper role of women in society. But by the time her journey was completed, she would declare, “I am…a ‘new woman,” if that term means that I believe I can do anything any man can do.”

Though she quickly faded into obscurity – she was a journalist briefly and then, for the remainder of her life, an entrepreneur who started two business in New York City – her journey stands today as the perfect symbol of an era when women’s rights, the bicycle, and globalization gave Annie Cohen Kopchovsky the platform to pursue fame and fortune while balanced to two wheels.