



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017

Volume 13
Issue 3 *Fall 2004*

Article 8

Fall 2004

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Recommended Citation

Deters '05, Anna (2004) "Vehicle of change," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 13 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol13/iss3/8>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Vehicle of change

For a student studying in Amsterdam, the bicycle became a means of exploration as well as transportation.

By Anna Deters '05

The last time I flew down the narrow canal streets of Amsterdam, bouncing over jutting bricks and sunken cobblestone, I didn't perceive the seat and wheels beneath me as being separate from my own body. Nor was the damp wind against my cheeks or the inky ripple in the canal foreign to me in any way. On that last ride down Oudezijds Voorburgwal, Prins Hendrikkade, and Haarlemmerstraat, I wasn't thinking about the traffic or the tourists or any of the obstacles that might have disrupted my course. Maneuvering around them had become second nature. I didn't think about being too short for my feet to safely reach the ground — I had somehow grown, although not in size. I didn't think anything. I only felt the fine, Dutch mist and the thick cloud ceiling and the heady, healthy liberty of riding my bike through the streets of Amsterdam.

Only now that I am back on my own native soil do I contemplate that last ride. And as I contemplate the last one, my memory is recalled to the first. Arriving in Amsterdam last January for a semester abroad, I refused to even consider riding a bicycle. To say I was intimidated would be an understatement. I was terrified by the challenge — the mopeds that weave unpredictably in and around traffic, the trucks full of bricks that parallel park after only a fleeting blinker signal, the mothers with three babies strapped to their handlebars, the distracting confetti of hail, rain, and snowflakes that falls intermittently throughout a February day in the Netherlands, the tram tracks, the trams, and the unwitting tourists that step off the sidewalk into the bike lane.



The author of this piece, Anna Deters '05 (above), is an English writing and history double major from Kenosha, Wis. She is currently a writer for the Office of University Communications. *(Photo by Marc Featherly)*

With all this to detour me, I was determined to avoid risking my life by avoiding, at any inconvenience, putting myself on the seat of a bicycle. In those early days of my life abroad, I thought a bicycle was merely another means of transportation, a non-polluting, inexpensive, convertible of sorts.

Walking was my other option of transportation, and I did plenty of it. Navigating the narrow streets of the city center by foot was not so bad. With a pair of sturdy green boots and a map in my coat pocket, I trekked to and from the academic buildings against the afternoon gusts and through the evening drizzle. Dusk would fall as I passed through the hustle of Dam Square at rush hour. Bicyclists whisked by me, their rear lights flickering smaller and smaller into the distance. Their riders would be home long before I would, snug and warm in their cozy Dutch flats, drinking vanilla tea with their stroopwafels and vla.

Meanwhile, I hiked on alone, damp, and hungry with an umbrella bending inside out in the wind. I tried to quell my growing discontentment by reminding myself of my safety. But my frustration mounted.

Every day I saw myself overcoming the minor and major hurdles of being a foreigner. I learned to leave my umbrella at the door and thereby avoid angry glares from the store clerks. I became skilled at bagging my groceries quickly. But not only did I adapt to the customs of a different culture, I allowed my values to be challenged. From the rigor of being challenged, they evolved into a more sophisticated, questioning, and thereby flexible, perception of the world.

As the variety and intensity of my experiences increased, I discovered capabilities I never knew I had. I developed a knack for turning an anti-American verbal attack into an engaging political discussion. I read and digested tough theoretical articles I might never had been assigned in the United States. I evolved into a happier, more self-sufficient individual, and as I did so my confidence swelled. If I had this reservoir of hidden ability, then maybe I could ride a bike in Amsterdam, after all.



To gain confidence in her riding ability, Deters first practiced on a quiet street near her Amsterdam flat. Gradually, she began to explore the city and surrounding countryside on her bicycle.

I still had some doubts, but it wasn't long before the pedal won the pedestrian. I bought a green bicycle — an investment I never regretted — and began by riding up and down the quiet streets near my flat. After two or three days of regaining my coordination, I ventured out on a serious ride. The seat was painfully awkward, the brakes stiff and hard to manage. I was overwhelmed by the traffic lights, the countless falafel stands, and the constant fear of death by tram — those sinisterly silent trolleys of Amsterdam.

But I survived. I made it to my destination a little (well, more than a little) out of breath and with white knuckles and aching thighs, but uninjured, nevertheless. The ride back to my apartment was a little less stressful, and each successive ride only increased in ease and enjoyment.

My bike took me everywhere, or rather, I took it. I rode it to class at the Oudemanhuispoort, home from the Albert Heijn supermarket with grocery bags hanging from my handlebars, through the Red Light District on my way to Centraal Station, and down the winding alleys of the medieval city center. My bike could be found locked outside of the dance clubs of Muntplein, chained to the canal railings, and leaning against the side of the Buddhist temple on Zeedijk. More than once, I even took my bicycle on the train from Amsterdam to Haarlem or Den Helder so that I could ride through the tulip fields to the sea.

The time between my first and my last ride was a period of conquest. With fenders and a little bell, I explored both myself and my surroundings. My bike is daring and self-assured, and I wasn't wrong

when I felt it to be a part of me. Over those few months, it did become a part of me, and as I packed my bags for America and mourned for the wheels I had to leave behind, I realized that those wheels weren't wheels but wings — and the wings I took with me.