

OPINION

Good days for Wisconsin bicyclists – and getting better



You never know what you'll see on the Ozaukee Interurban Trail near Port Washington. It's one of the delights of Wisconsin's trails. Credit: John Gurda photo

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Wisconsin bicyclists have it good. Anyone who rides in this state, whether puttering around after supper or grinding through a two-week tour, knows that our terrain, for starters, is practically ideal. Wisconsin's landscape offers a pleasant middle ground — rolling, verdant, without the lung-searing ups and downs of steeper states or the feels-like-you're-getting-nowhere flatness of the prairies and plains. (I just returned from riding in rural Indiana.)

But appealing scenery is not Wisconsin's only attraction for cyclists. Since the late 1800s, the farmers of America's Dairyland have had to get their milk to market every day, and a rural-dominated legislature

made sure they could do so on paved roads. Our state has thousands of miles of good blacktop that would be rough gravel elsewhere in the Midwest.

A third advantage emerged more recently. Since the 1960s, Wisconsin has been a national leader in the rails-to-trails movement, so far turning 1,814 miles of abandoned railroad corridors into biking and hiking paths. That ranks us third in the U.S., not far behind our like-minded neighbors, Michigan and Minnesota. California, a fitness-obsessed state with well over twice Wisconsin's land area, has barely 1,000 miles of rail-trails, and Texas, the largest of the lower 48, has not even 300.

Some of the state's finest trails are right here in southeastern Wisconsin. The closest for many of us is the Oak Leaf Trail, a double loop that covers 117 miles in Milwaukee County, including a particularly gorgeous stretch of the south lakefront. The Bugline Trail, another personal favorite, is a 14-mile corridor between Menomonee Falls and Merton that takes riders past active quarries, over clear streams, and, if it's hot, to the swimming hole in Menomonee Park. Ozaukee County's Interurban Trail is a third standout, combining 30 miles of rural scenery with the small-town appeal of Cedarburg, Port Washington, and Belgium. Because trains are allergic to hills, all rail-trails run on easy grades, and the absence of cars and trucks is a major bonus.

Our embarrassment of pedal-worthy riches has drawn the attention of some national groups. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), a Washington-based organization with an annual budget of \$8 million, set itself an ambitious goal several years ago: to ensure that 90% of all Americans live within three miles of a dedicated bike trail. A careful study revealed that seven of the country's metro areas already met that criterion, and two were in Wisconsin: Milwaukee and Racine, who have 340 miles of trails between them.

A Forward-Looking Project

What those trails lack is connectivity. They squiggle separately across the landscape like worms on a wet sidewalk. The RTC, accordingly, set a new goal: to connect southeastern Wisconsin's trails in a 400- to 500-mile network called the Route of the Badger. John Siegert, the project's full-time manager, describes it as "the test case" nationally, an effort to make two plus two equal five by growing an already major investment into a world-class system.

The synergy behind this forward-looking project is compelling, but the Route of the Badger rises from roots as old as the region. Its success would be the culmination of a long history, one, in fact, that encompasses the entire transportation history of Wisconsin.

Before there could be rail-trails, first of all, there had to be rails.

The earliest cross-state lines emerged in the late 1850s, connecting Milwaukee with the Mississippi at La Crosse and Prairie du Chien. Growing with the state, Wisconsin's railroads functioned as iron arteries, pumping agricultural products through the lake and river ports and circulating passengers in every direction.

Trains were Wisconsin's prime movers for nearly a century, and they're still important, but railroads began to share the landscape with gasoline-powered vehicles at the turn of the 20th century. Cars are featured in parades today because they're old; in 1900, they drew spectators because they were new.

The automobile's takeover occurred faster than you might think. In 1910, there was one car for every 84 Wisconsin families. In 1920, there was one for every two, and in 1930, one for every one. A luxury in one generation became a necessity in the next. Convenient, personal and affordable (a Model T cost about \$2,500 in today's dollars), automobiles were soon giving passenger trains a run for their fare money, and motor trucks took lucrative business away from the nation's freight lines.

Railroads were threatened on two fronts, and the pressure intensified after World War II. As the number of automobiles multiplied, America's passenger traffic plummeted. Between 1929 and 1965, the number of passenger cars in use dropped by 85%. In 1971, the bits and pieces of service that remained were consolidated in Amtrak — a wonderful carrier that I use regularly, but one that depends on public subsidies.

Freight lines fared better, but the nation's bulk carriers lost ground to trucks, quite literally. An epidemic of abandonments and bankruptcies pruned America's freight service from a multitude of branches to relatively few trunk lines. To the dismay of rail fans everywhere, thousands of miles of track were left to rust in the weeds.

Enter the bicycle. After a short-lived craze at the turn of the century, bicycles had been relegated to the status of children's toys — a downgrade that lasted for decades. Millions of baby boomers can remember their first Schwinn (mine was a used 24-inch with orange fenders), but most of us quit riding by the time we hit our teens. We didn't get on the pedals again until the late 1960s and '70s, when a new emphasis on fitness, a growing conservation movement and simply better bikes brought Americans back to the road in droves.

For rail-trails, the timing couldn't have been better. Corridors abandoned before the mid-1960s were typically sold piecemeal and redeveloped. Consider the fabled North Shore Line, whose cars could hit 100 miles per hour in the open stretches between Milwaukee and Chicago. The North Shore was abandoned in 1963, just before people began to see the wisdom of rail-to-trail conversions. If it had hung on for only a few more years, today we might have a dedicated trail linking the two largest cities on Lake Michigan.

A movement was definitely beginning, and Wisconsinites can proudly say that it started in our state. In 1965, just one year after the Chicago & North Western Railroad abandoned service between Elroy and Sparta, the Wisconsin Conservation Department — forerunner of

today's Department of Natural Resources — bought the 32-mile right-of-way for \$12,000 and created America's very first rail-trail. Just over 50 years later, there are nearly 2,000 trails in the U.S., and they cover more than 22,000 miles.

An Interlaced Network

Our state was the pioneer, and we're poised to take the lead again. What Vail and Aspen are to skiing, southeastern Wisconsin could become to trail biking. By closing gaps and tying off loose ends, the Route of the Badger could blossom into an interlaced network of trails connecting Milwaukee, Madison, Chicago, Watertown, Fond du Lac, Green Bay, Janesville and even Minneapolis. The prospect is enough to make some of us salivate.

It won't be particularly easy — rail lines by their nature cross multiple political jurisdictions — and it won't be particularly cheap. Gravel doesn't cost much, but bridges and tunnels do, and closing the gaps will certainly require construction of both.

The payoff, however, is inestimable. It's hard to imagine a healthier form of exercise than biking, particularly for those of us whose knees seem to be retiring earlier than the rest of our bodies. It's also healthy for our communities. Bikers bring money when they ride, and they've transformed the economies of towns along the most popular trails, including the Elroy Sparta. An interconnected system also would be a magnet for those young millennials everyone seems to want on their team.

Wisconsin bicyclists have it good. As the Badger project picks up both supporters and momentum, the ride is bound to get even better.

John Gurda, a Milwaukee historian, writes for the Crossroads section on the first Sunday of each month (www.johngurda.com).

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