Minnesota Unraveled

EP111 - History on Two Wheels: Bicycles and Bike Paths in Minnesota

Publish Date: 4/10/2025

Chantel Rodríguez:

In St. Paul, spring has sprung. From my spot at this Como Avenue red light, there's another sign of the changing seasons. The bicycle paths on either side of me are swarming with cyclists. As I kept heading west, I decided the weather merited a walk in the sun. I pulled off to park the car and started to stroll around Como Lake. I left the road behind, but the bike path stuck close to the sidewalk. As the cyclist wheeled past, it got me thinking, where did all these bike lanes, bike paths, greenways and amenities like bike racks come from? When and why did Minnesotans embrace bicycling? As I started looking into these questions, it became clear that there is no simple answer. Location matters to how people have experienced biking and people use bicycles and cycling infrastructure in different ways for different purposes. Keeping these things in mind, I spoke with two people who share a love of cycling, but who live in different places. Peggy Prowe has been living in Northfield, a town outside of the Twin Cities since the 1960s.

Peggy Prowe:

I grew up in Kansas and bicycled with my mother and family, a string of four children, and we went out for picnics and it was a wonderful way to get around without getting in the car. I came to Minnesota to the Boundary Waters and they convinced me that this was the place to live, and I taught physical education, mainly aquatics at Carleton College for 26 years. It was a great way to interact with the community of Northfield and eventually I became a city councilwoman and spent 10 years in that position.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And José Luis Villaseñor, founder of Tamales y Bicicletas who lives in Minneapolis.

José Luis Villaseñor:

My name is José Luis Villaseñor. He/him/his. Am first generation Mexicano. My family is originally from the state of Michoacan, grew up in Alaska, and have been living here for a long time in Minnesota, and I do a lot of work around environmental justice, work, food justice, but if anything, just pushing back on systems that continue to exploit and/or ignore our perspectives as immigrant indigenous people of color.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I also spoke with historian and bicycle planner, Peter Bird.

Peter Bird:

My name is Peter Bird. My background before being in the position that I'm in right now is actually urban planning, transportation planning, specifically working as a bicycle planner. For the last about three years I've been working with the university I'm with right now, the Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands. And so working with some people who are historians, specifically historians of technology and of innovation, and then working with other more traditional mobility scholars who are focusing on policy on a lot of the things that cities and that locales are facing today. And so the project that I work on is with a group called Cycling Cities. It's historical in nature, but tries to understand why it is that some cities globally have developed as what we call true cycling cities while others haven't.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In order to understand why Minnesotans have a strong biking culture, I needed to dive into the past and figure out when bicycling first became popular in Minnesota. For that, I spoke with Peter Bird.

Peter Bird:

I would say that in the 1880s, that's when the bicycle really starts to become a technology that people... On one hand, it's safe enough that they can use it for actual mobility, and then on another hand, its production is actually affordable, that it's not just something for the upper, upper, upper class, but a middle upper class user, which is what the Victorian cycling is.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In the 1870s and 1880s, the popular bicycle style was one called the high wheeler, also known as the penny-farthing. The high wheeler had two different-sized wheels, a large one up front to help with speed and a smaller one in the back. The tires were made of wood in the early days, then solid rubber once that material was more available in the 1880s. These tires made for a bumpier ride. Cyclists would perch in the front. It was a somewhat top-heavy arrangement. Head-first falls over the handlebars were a real hazard.

Cycling's increase in popularity in the 1880s was partially due to a new technology, the safety bicycle. This looked more like the bikes we're familiar with today. It had two wheels of equal size, but could reach similar speeds to the high wheeler thanks to its gear and chain technology. Perhaps the biggest improvement came in 1892 with the introduction of pneumatic tires, AKA, hollow rubber tires with air inside. These technological developments not only meant safety bikes were a more comfortable ride, but far less accident-prone due to the same-sized wheels.

I've only seen the pictures of the penny-farthing bikes in any way, shape, or form, and I always sort of wondered how are they staying on there? How do they get on there? Those kinds of questions.

Peter Bird:

I think there were a lot of crashes on those.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Yes, I can only imagine. And I can see why the modern safety bicycle with two wheels that are the same size, the seemingly is easier for both women and men and children to get on, and presumably just easier to keep your balance, I would imagine.

Peter Bird:

Yeah, definitely easier to balance on. And what always strikes me is that that technological change, what came out of it is very, very similar to the bicycles we ride today, that we've made them more efficient with gearing and aerodynamics and things, but it's essentially the same machine. Compared to when you go backwards in history from that period of 1890 or so, and the bicycles look like very different types of tools, but the transition from the high wheel bicycle to the safety bicycle is really the technological one that makes the bicycle a mobility tool instead of a toy.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Safety bikes really took off in the 1890s. In the 1880s, a safety bicycle and a high wheeler cost roughly the same, $100 to $150, or about five months' wages for the average person. By 1898, Twin Cities bike shops sold the safety bike for about $30, making it a fairly accessible means of mobility, broadening the population of cyclists.

Peter Bird:

I would say that towards the end of the 1890s, as the demographics who are biking start to broaden, that you see maybe not a different technologies necessarily, but different use of the technology. So as it's not solely these young, adventurous wealthy men who have bicycles, which is the case pretty early on as it transitions to, like you mentioned earlier, women biking, which is one of the big stories out of the Victorian era, of the freedom that it offered women, children biking. It's still very upper class at that point, but the demographic gets wider.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Bicycles gave women a new freedom of movement, the ability to travel around the city chaperone free. They could now meet and organize, especially for political reasons like the women's suffrage movement. On top of this, bicycles contributed to the women's clothing revolution. The clothing required to safely ride a bike was a far cry from the long skirts women of the time were wearing. So women began wearing bloomers, loose-fitting pants that resembled men's pants in public, and not only when they were riding bicycles.

The popularity of bicycles meant there must have been a good bit of demand. It made me wonder about where people went to buy bicycles and who was making them. Turns out one of the most important materials for producing the safety bicycle was the natural rubber. Between the popularity of cycling and the growing automobile industry, demand for it skyrocketed.

Peter Bird:

It's also important to note that the rubber that was available to produce those tires like that came out of a lot of exploitation in the what then was the Belgian Congo. And so a lot of times the global trade that existed enabled these new technologies to be changed and to be more available, but in a lot of ways the people who used them really had no idea what the cost was of some of that technological development.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Companies operating in West and west Central Africa forced local people to tap wild or natural rubber under the threat of imprisonment, violence, and even death. These horrific conditions eventually became global news in the first decade of the 1900s. This news among, other things, helped to shift the market away from natural rubber to synthetic rubber. By the 1920s and 1930s, it was being used to make pneumatic bicycle tires. All of this brought me back to my original question, who was producing these bicycles?

Because of the rubber, it made me think about supply chains? And so if people want a bike, could they just walk into a bike shop and they had what they needed or did they have to place an order? Where is it coming from? Do you have a sense for that at all in your research?

Peter Bird:

I can say that especially in the 1890s that a very strong and robust bicycle industry develops across the country and really across the world, but the US' American manufacturers are really where they are able to push that from an invention into something that can be mass-produced. And so in research we've done across... I have colleagues who've done research in Johannesburg and you see bike shops advertising American-made bicycles in the 1890s in shops in Johannesburg, that there's this global transfer not only of technology but of products as well. And so a whole global network chain of bicycles, that's an industry that develops then.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Could you tell me in some of the research that you've been doing on Minneapolis for that early period, 1890s in particular, what were the kind of maybe businesses that supported bicycles in that time?

Peter Bird:

So I think a good starting point for it is understanding what technologies and mobility were available at the time, which was not very much. There was essentially walking in the city, you had long distance trains, and then really at the same time you have streetcars becoming electrified and starting to grow the network. And so for most people at the time, the bicycle was really the only feasible way they had then to travel more than walking distance away from where they lived. And so, yeah, you see bike shops popping up all over the place, and what's interesting is they are called bicycle shops, but they sell a whole array of mobility items that are somewhere between bicycles and eventually motorcycles and automobiles. They're playing with self-powered ones like traditional bicycles versus electric-powered versus gas-powered. There's even evidence of some steam-powered vehicles, and they're all being sold out of the same shops, which is really interesting to see.

One thing I found that is interesting is a shop called Tenvoorde Ford dealership, which exists now in the Twin Cities that they originally were a bike shop, that there're images of their storefront with a whole bunch of bikes either in boxes or laid out during this time period, 1890s, and then it's during the following 20 years or so that they make the transition just from bicycles to motorcycles to automobiles. And so I think that would've been a case for a lot of the bike shops that existed back then, that they sold a lot of different things that they at the time probably wouldn't have thought of as very different in the way that we do now. But then over time, as the industry grew, it consolidated into different power players, especially as they're able to be more mass-produced. And so it's this period of technological fluidity where everyone was really excited about being able to self-power how they moved. And the bicycle was really the beginning of that, but it ushered in a lot of technological creativity.

Chantel Rodríguez:

But even as cycling evolved and new technologies with it, I felt like I was missing one part of the story. What was it like to ride a safety bicycle on the streets of the 1890s?

Peter Bird:

Imagine riding your bike. It's not a bike that is solid in the way that you would assume your bike is right now where it can handle any sort of rough terrain. There's no suspension. A lot of the tires are actually just solid rubber. And so while it's better than wood, you still feel every little jut and bounce. And really any of the roads you'd be riding on outside of right downtown are not only muddy and potted out, but they're ones that when it rains become mud and deep mud that you get stuck in. And in the summer they're rutted out from wagon tracks and from horse-drawn vehicles, which are most of what you'd see on those roads. And so in the same way that bicyclists in the city encountered a world that was very much centered around people walking, early streetcars, and then animal-drawn vehicles, in the countryside, that's even more in that way where you have farmers who are using it really just to get goods from farms, to rivers, which would've been where they would distribute them from.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Today we might think about roads as serving the sole purpose of transportation, but this was not necessarily the case in the late 1800s. Peter says that bicycles became popular at a time when there was a lot of debate over the purpose of a street.

Peter Bird:

I think what's even more daunting to imagine is that streets really in the early 20th century were not meant for moving transportation through A to B, that they were considered public spaces where in the same way you'd have parents who would send their kids out to go play in the street, they didn't have playgrounds, that was the place where people were. And so a lot of these pictures that you have of early streets, it is that melee of everything. You've got the horse-drawn vehicles, you've got the street cars, you've got early cyclists, you have people who are walking. And there are sidewalks in some places, but for the most part people walked wherever they wanted to because that process of pushing non-drivers to the edges of the street hadn't happened yet.

A lot of what people were fighting when they were upset about early cyclists and drivers going too fast the street is that they were trying to monopolize street space for themselves, whereas that at the time would've been considered something that was equally shared between everyone. And so it's this really interesting dynamic that I think the way that all of us interpret streets today is hard to imagine. But when you look at some of the sources back then, early cyclists, early drivers, really in some ways early street cars were considered nuisances because they disrupted that space that's more like how we'd consider a park today.

Chantel Rodríguez:

One of those nuisances, young male thrill-seekers speeding through these public spaces.

Peter Bird:

They call them scorchers, exactly because they're just blazing through on these paths. And so I've seen articles in the Minneapolis Tribune really talking about the dangers of scorching, where it's this whole cultural movement of a speed and a way of moving that isn't disrupting what's normal and what's typical there. The people who are the scorchers are not the ones who are out for a nice little Sunday. They're the ones who want adventure. But pretty early on, I think that's most people's... If people had an experience with a cyclist, it was probably with that type.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Out of these tensions came something called The Good Roads Movement. It unfolded in local municipalities all across the country starting in the 1870s in tandem with cycling's popularity. Cyclists were advocating for safer roads and dedicated cycling paths both in and out of the city.

Peter Bird:

Everything was just this muddy mess of tracks that was... There was no central organization at any government level. They were basically maintained by farmers and in lieu of taxes, work agreements. And so cyclists who are organizing these wheelman's clubs, that's the beginning of what we now call The Good Roads Movement, focusing on developing a system, a nationwide system of roads, from cities into the countryside, between cities. There are these amazing maps of groups who are imagining this nationwide network of trails, and a lot of them would start in the urban areas where people lived and then extend out into countryside, but that's really the first impact that you see in the form of infrastructure from cycling.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Here in Minnesota The Good Roads Movement was robust. The movement went beyond the cities into rural spaces around the state. Rugged dirt roads in and out of cities caused problems for cyclists and farmers alike, especially as automobiles became more affordable. These efforts eventually resulted in paved rural roads, albeit with less bicycle-specific infrastructure. Meanwhile, the Minnesota Cycle Path Association, a privately-funded organization, was able to create 35 miles worth of bike paths in Minneapolis by 1900. To use those paths, cyclists had to purchase a tag for their bike. It cost 50 cents. By the end of that year, about 26,000 tags had been purchased. That's about 15% of Minneapolis' population.

Peter Bird:

And so early on, they're privately funding these through bicycle tag sales, but probably by the 1890s you have Minneapolis and you have St. Paul governments who are administering bicycle tags, they're collecting revenue, they're paving new side paths as part of the park's development and buying especially water-adjacent land, and they're doing all of that. That's something that's across the US and different cities is really unique, and it's one of the main reasons that the Twin Cities still have such a robust park system, because they committed to this idea of public ownership and public maintenance and provision really early, that even after the wheelman groups had traded their bikes in for cars, which started to happen really in the 1900s pretty soon, that you still have all of these side paths and bicycle paths. Even when they weren't used by bicycles, that they stayed under the parks department and they were able to be resurrected in a way that couldn't happen in other cities 50 years later.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This led me to another question, where did Peter find all this information on how late 1800s city-goers thought about streets and how much traffic was on them?

Peter Bird:

What I initially used, I found some really cool old count data from Minneapolis that the city engineer's office did. It only goes from 1906 to 1911. And they counted downtown the number of bicycles, automobiles, and then horse-drawn vehicles. And see, the first question when you have accounts for five years and then they stop, is why did they stop?

Chantel Rodríguez:

Why, yeah.

Peter Bird:

And what's interesting is that they count the number of those vehicles, but then they also count the mass tonnage for each vehicle and then in total. And what it is they weren't actually measuring traffic and the way that we think of today, they were measuring the load that was on the roads they were building that really weren't designed for the increasing number of personal mobility vehicles like bicycles. Bicycles aren't so heavy, but cars especially. And so I start with that data.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And you were talking about those surveys, it's clear that those surveys were part of can the road itself as a piece of infrastructure handle that load? What were these roads made out of as a result in order to carry that load?

Peter Bird:

Yeah. Yeah, so the best answer I've found, and it's not definitive, but that 1911 when they stopped taking that survey lines up with when they started using more of an asphalt material, which it's interesting because the word for tarmac actually comes from how they added tar to what before was a very loose gravel material called Macadam. And so it's adding tar to Macadam to make tarmac, and that's really a result of having bicycles and automobiles because they had smaller tires and they were going faster, and so they could pick up some of this small grain material and shoot it to the sides of the road. And so the tar actually bound that together and made the street stronger.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Peter told me that by 1907, Minneapolis's street traffic broke down like so.

Peter Bird:

24% of the vehicles were bicycles and something like 6% were automobiles, and then 70% were horse-drawn vehicles.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This does not account for the high rates of streetcar use in the city. By 1920, Minneapolis's ridership was up to something like 220 million trips per year. That type of public transit would not have been accounted for in the surveys of street traffic alone. But the 1920s was also the decade when cars were being mass-produced and became more affordable. The story goes that as Americans bought more cars, bicycling went into decline. But according to Peter, that's not the whole story. Photographs from the era show plenty of cyclists and pedestrians. It's the engineer's data that doesn't. Why the discrepancy?

Peter Bird:

You realize that the people who are taking these counts who are trying to measure traffic or measure how streets are used, that they have their own bias they bring to it. They're choosing who to count, who not to count, and a lot of the... It points to a lot of the count data we have that either doesn't include important users or it weighs some heavier and some lighter than they should be. And so the photographic evidence is a way to see on those streets, what do they actually look like?

Chantel Rodríguez:

Peter is making an important point here. Historians have to interrogate their sources. He can't take the engineer's data at face value. He needed to look for other pieces of evidence to get the full picture. So if the photo show Minnesotans were still cycling after the biking craze of the 1890s, was it still for leisure or had things changed?

Peter Bird:

I think the most important thing to understand is when the transition of the people who were cycling in the 1890s versus the 1900s, 1910s, 1920s, and we've talked about these wealthy, young, especially guys who are biking out into the countryside, but we also see that shift to utility cycling, of people who were using it not to go out on a weekend trip, but to get somewhere that they need to go. But what's unique with Minneapolis compared to other examples is that it's not so much of the home to work trip, the direct A to B. Instead, what you see is people whose job is actually navigating streets that the earliest photos are of, postmen, of police officers, of tradesmen, of telegraph messenger boys, people who aren't just going from one place to another, but that their whole job is mobility basically. And it points to this non-commuting cycling that is tough to pin down because so much of what we think about transportation is commuting, and that's something that I think is important to this day, but at the time, they undervalued that as well.

And so really after the initial movement of building bicycle paths that we've talked about, there really isn't much bicycle infrastructure in the Twin Cities. It's something that if you take a cursory glance, it looks like bicycles just disappeared. They'd straggle on for a while, they disappeared and then magically came back in the 70s. But what we can see is that that disappearance is really just them receding from the purview of the people who are measuring transportation, in the same way of those early counts in the early 1900s, that there is this connective thread that is, I think, unique in some ways globally. It follows a lot of trends of bicycle growth and then fall and then stabilization and then some of the regrowth that we see today. But it paints a story that I think gives a better explanation than saying bicycles and bicyclists disappeared and then came back.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The evidence Peter has found shows that biking never disappeared in Minnesota. Minnesotans continue to bike in the decades following the initial craze of the 1890s. By the 1960s, a new era of biking was emerging hand in hand with the environmental movement. People worried about the damage cars could have on the environment, the destruction of neighborhoods to make way for highways, and the impact breathing-in emissions and traffic-related smog could have on people's health. Bicycling was a tangible response to these concerns, especially for cyclists living in dense urban areas where pollution from cars and factories was a huge concern.

But how did folks living outside the Twin Cities in less populated areas with fewer concerns about urban pollution experience biking? For that, I spoke with Peggy Prowe. She moved to Minnesota in 1966, took a job with Carleton College in Northfield, and soon after started a family. At the time, Northfield's population was between 8 and 10,000. In a smaller, less dense area like this, cycling culture looked a little different than it did 40 miles north in the Twin Cities. For Peggy, biking during those times was in large part about commuting and leisure.

Peggy Prowe:

Northfield isn't very big, and I built a house a mile from campus. We never got a second car until the kids were teenagers and needing to learn. We just biked everywhere. Diethelm, my husband, taught history at Carleton and he biked to work. I biked to Carleton to teach.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And so you say you were just biking to work. Does that mean that you were biking on sidewalks or you're biking on the road? Okay.

Peggy Prowe:

The unmarked road, but now they're all marked. It isn't like Minneapolis traffic, but the network of trails in the cities, we used to come up and ride the network of trails up here because they were so far ahead of us.

Chantel Rodríguez:

But as her kids got a bit older, Peggy got them involved too.

Peggy Prowe:

My family went hiking in Itasca when my son and daughter were teenagers, and the mosquitoes just about ate us up, and we decided that bicycling was the only way to be in the outdoors in Minnesota. We had a whole bunch of bikes. It was fun. I'm a physical educator. I'm a nature nut. I want people outside, I want people busy. I have friends here in the co-op who walk around the block with me, and that's a little bit satisfying. My mother was a physical educator until she became a high school counselor, and she was pretty convincing raising the four of us kids.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Starting in 1990, Peggy began serving as a city councilwoman in Northfield.

Peggy Prowe:

I'd served on some commissions and I was really interested in the parks and trails part of the city.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This period marked a transition to yet another era of cycling, one with a focus on sustainability where people chose to ride bicycles in an effort to be both eco-friendly and healthy. Here's Peter again.

Peter Bird:

Yeah, yeah. So that's something that you see starting to develop in the 90s, but really in the 2000s is where that begins, and it kind of coincides with people moving back to cities, this new urbanism, a lot of redevelopment of the urban land and urban areas that people had left a generation before.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This sustainability era played out differently across Minnesota. Urban areas like the Twin Cities could redevelop and expand their latent cycling infrastructure, but rural areas did not have as much infrastructure to work with. That brings us back to Peggy. By the year 2000, Northfield's population had grown to more than 17,000. There were bicycling enthusiasts, but not too many places to ride. One of the pinnacles of Peggy's time with the city council was the construction of Northfield's Mill Towns Trail in the late 1990s, so named in recognition of the town's long history with flower and grist mills along the Cannon River valley.

Peggy Prowe:

So I helped organize a friend's group and helped the city of Northfield build the first three miles between Dundas and Northfield in 1998. The Parks & Trails Council of Minnesota was instrumental in buying with Goodhue County a piece of land that made the first three miles in Goodhue County, from Cannon Falls to Billesby Regional Park. In Faribault, MnDOT was reconstructing an intersection between Highway 3 and 21. If they had not put the two underpasses in at that point, we wouldn't have a trail, there wouldn't be connections. And those sorts of almost roadblocks came up from time to time.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The trail runs for six miles over the Cannon River, through some woods behind houses, across a field, over an old rail bed. Its opening was a big deal in the Northfield community. Peggy remembers people showing up to celebrate any time a new part of the trail opened.

Peggy Prowe:

When we put the underpasses in Faribault for 3 and 21, there were people walking on that [inaudible 00:33:15] before it was cool. They had just laid it and people were connecting west and the main part of Faribault. I remember the bridge we had people selling T-shirts and a band playing. Dan Bergeson brought his brass band for us for each of the events. And when the bridge at Billesby was built, that was such a major connection to the city of Cannon Falls [inaudible 00:33:55]. DNR really had a huge celebration. We put up a great big tent and there must've been 200 people that were there to do the ribbon cutting, and it was really fun.

Chantel Rodríguez:

That bridge Peggy mentioned, it's got a pretty cool name.

Peggy Prowe:

A good friend named it for me, which is fun. They still call it the Peggy Prowe Bridge, which does impress my son-in-law.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The trail is an ongoing project evolving and expanding. I had an idea of what cycling advocacy had looked like back in the late 1800s with The Good Roads Movement, but what does more contemporary advocacy look like? What is the work of supporting new and existing cycling infrastructure?

Peggy Prowe:

So it's working with six cities, three counties, federal, state, and local. It's been very interesting. I've gotten to know an awful lot of very nice people who feel committed to public welfare, to helping communities.

Chantel Rodríguez:

At the same time that Peggy was advocating for biking infrastructure in Minnesota's more rural areas, my final guest, José Luis, was building communities recycling in the more urban and densely populated environment of Minneapolis. José Luis' introduction to cycling was a little different than Peggy's.

José Luis Villaseñor:

Growing up really poor and my parents not being able to afford to purchase a bike for me where I learned how to steal bikes. I came up in that way that I learned for things that I wanted, I had to establish skills to be able to get the things I wanted. My parents then discovered that I was stealing bikes and I was really good at it, they finally bought me a bike. I would just share all the young people listening to this to not get into bikes by stealing bikes, but it's how I came up. Through stealing bikes, gave me an opportunity to learn about community organizing, be able to organize people.

It gave me a skill of hands-on skills, on working on bikes. It really gave me this element of freedom, of exploring further without fear to interrupt the impacts we were experiencing because of poverty at home. It was able to interrupt that aspect. And become physical, just experience nature, experience freedom, and give a pause to stresses that I would argue white supremacist contexts and elements that existed, and pressures, in my upbringing. And so I was able to disrupt that by getting away from it on a bike.

And I grew up with mostly poor white folks, very diverse, a lot more diverse upbringing than I experienced coming here to Minnesota after going to college here. So it was a crew from people from all over the world, Filipinos, Samoans, poor white kids, black kids that we just grew up riding bikes together, people from all over the world that we use these bikes to interrupt the pressures at home or the stress and frustrations parents would lash out at us because of the pressures of oppression and poverty. Bikes gave us an opportunity to kind of pause that for a minute and get out into the streets and into the hills and bike paths.

Chantel Rodríguez:

José Luis brought his love of biking and the benefits he saw it could bring to his community here in Minneapolis.

José Luis Villaseñor:

It's a Food in the 'Hood killing us tour of South Minneapolis, and the youth walked around and did a survey of all the grocery stores in the community and found outdated food, found a variety of things that were really keeping them healthy and started to produce solutions. And we shared those solutions to legislators and council folks, anyone that wanted to hear about what their loose solutions were to environmental issues and food insecurity. And that just span out to become Tamales and Bicicletas. Tamales and Bicicletas are looking at sustainable transportation and flipping and or reclaiming our understanding to growing food organically, traditionally with our neighbors, our community.

And so our work with Tamales y Bicicletas usually I like to say is that we build community first and we grow and ride bikes last. So we engage our youth in the community on biking, getting out on biking through connecting them to murals, urban farming, growing food over the winter months through biking. We also, through growing food, we connect with young adults and families on sharing stories of our [foreign language 00:39:20], our [foreign language 00:39:21], our [foreign language 00:39:22] that have showed us how to grow food that maybe identified a plant that was important to them. We do a lot of that lifting in the work that we do. So it was a variety of folks that have come and went and build up where we're at now. So when I say the we, it's a lot of elders, it's folks in the community, it's youth, and it's youth that we've buried, it's youth that we've lost, that contributed to the work we continue to do.

Chantel Rodríguez:

José Luis founded the Tamales y Bicicletas to support the immigrant community. As of 2021, 15% of the population in Minneapolis was born abroad. I asked José Luis about what the experience has been like for immigrants seeking to get into bicycling.

José Luis Villaseñor:

You could see our communities, they weren't riding the best bikes, they were riding broken bikes at times, but they were on those bikes. And so I just started to see that that was the trend and it had always been a trend, and they would tell me their horrible stories they were having At bike shops, people don't speak [foreign language 00:40:38], "You're not going to pay the full amount." So there was a lot of discrimination or being uncomfortable in a traditional white-led bike culture environment that I was like, "Okay, let's create our own stuff." And so we had a bike shop for about seven years on Lake Street where we fixed bikes. We interrupted the flow and boredom of a lot of youth and young Latino adults to come learn about how to do bike repair, how to just talk about bikes. And eventually we started to get recommendations from bike shops. It was like [foreign language 00:41:21] because of the price and also the language barrier that existed at other bike shops.

And so there was a void that we were filling in, not just because of the language, but also the fact that a lot of the bike culture at the time were not able to equip or service immigrant communities or communities that didn't speak English. It was an opportunity that if you work with young people, whether you're painting a mural, working in a bike, or even growing food, you allow a neutral space to process. So a broken chain now becomes a racist teacher. What tools do I need to deal with that racist teacher? Or unhealthy relationship, so that broken chain or flat tire becomes that. And so those are the opportunities that I saw naturally working on bikes. And yeah, "José Luis, [foreign language 00:42:21]," I'm like, "Oh, so let's talk about the tools you need or let's develop the tools you already have to sharpen them up to be able to respond to that racist teacher or to set some healthy boundaries in that relationship."

And so those are the things that I always say that we do bikes last, we build community first is that that was happening. That was happening when working with young people.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The Tamales y Bicicleta's work is multifaceted. Beyond bike repair, the group also runs youth bike tours.

José Luis Villaseñor:

We've done a lot of bike tours. We did what we refer to as urban solution to pollution tours, and we would do those on bikes. And one of the things that we would always do is we would start with the solution. So we would start, I don't know if you've been to Zapata Park, this little corner, it's embarrassing, it sucks, that's all we got. But we get there, we start a tour there, and I talk about how Zapata, the community when it got here as a gift from the state of Morelos, the sister city that we wanted in Powderhorn Park. And people came out and were really against it, and very racist towards our community because of this monument. But we start there as our culture, we start there, there's some murals nearby. And we bike around looking at the murals, going through the community.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And one of the stops on the bike tours, Tamales y Bicicletas Urban Farm. José Luis told me it's about more than just growing food.

José Luis Villaseñor:

This is created by our hands from traditions, from reconnecting traditions, like I mentioned earlier, from our [foreign language 00:44:02] or our parents, teaching these things, or reconnecting with a loss that we did not... Maybe you did not receive that from your parents. We are trying to reclaim that. We have folks, young adults that may or may not bike but choose to farm with us. We have folks that use bikes as art in our collective or group, and they do bike stuff away. We have neighbors that come by and it may not even grow with us. Some of the elders like Maria and Carmen, they come by every once in a while during harvest. They're around when they can. And they connect, they tell stories, they comment on how beautiful those spaces or come hang out. So it's really not just who's growing there, but who is nearby. We always like to say that urban farming farm spaces are lungs in our city. It's a place to breathe, physically to show up and breathe and take a pause in the neighborhood.

Chantel Rodríguez:

José Luis' work with Tamales y Bicicletas and his experience with biking don't seem to fit neatly within the sustainability era that Peter has described.

As I'm listening to you talk about all these different initiatives and the way that you're talking about sustainability really sounds different than perhaps traditional Western ideas about sustainability. It feels different what you're doing, so I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

José Luis Villaseñor:

Right. We do it with community. And I think for us being immigrant communities of color that we work with closely, our presence is resistance, learning a skill is resistance, growing food together, loving each other is a form of resistance. And so that's the decolonizing efforts of it in the true sense, and not in theory, not in these big words, but in practice. And at the same time, the work is about centering us in the forefront of climate chaos or in the forefront of environmental racism. The solutions won't come out anywhere else, it will come from people like us that are experiencing these environmental impacts on a day to day and that we don't use code words like environmental justice, climate justice. We're saying, "I can't breathe right."

Chantel Rodríguez:

Talking with these three guests made me realize that bicycles and cycling infrastructure have meant many things to the many people living in Minnesota, and that each individual's relationship with biking changes throughout their lives. Here's Peggy and José Luis.

Peggy Prowe:

I've had such a sequence of bikes. It started with road bikes, thin tires, and a rack to carry. At one point I was carrying a baby and a seat on the back and a toddler on the seat on the front, and that was pretty exciting. And later when I really needed help, I had an electric bike that was bright red, that was sort of fun, but it was too powerful. And then I got a tadpole that was a three-wheel electric bike, and I rode that the last two years. I started a group of senior bicyclists who were slowpokes. We go 10 miles an hour at the most.

Chantel Rodríguez:

That's faster than me. I'm not very good on bicycles, so I think that's really good.

Peggy Prowe:

It pays to practice. But people in their 60s, 70s are still biking in Northfield. I now live in a senior co-op in Minneapolis.

Chantel Rodríguez:

That's something that now resonates with José Luis as well.

José Luis Villaseñor:

Yeah. What's changed is my body. Me, I'm a lot older now and my knees are not the best sometimes, one of my knees, and so what I find now is walking has been the thing I'm into these days. I've been exposed to E-bikes. I'm not convinced, I'm not convinced that's the thing to go, but I have enjoyed my time on an E-bike.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Each of the three people I spoke with felt a deep, long-standing connection with cycling. Each of them also spoke about the ways they share cycling with their loved ones. Here's Peter again.

Peter Bird:

I think that what I've most enjoyed about cycling is being able to involve my own son with that. He's eight years old, and so we go on all sorts of bike adventures. We're lucky to live in a place now where we can get on a bike and we can just travel between cities. We can go on trips like that. But being able to share just the fun part of cycling and the part of it that just reminds you of your childhood, to be able to continue to enjoy that and then pass that on to someone else I think is what I appreciate the most.

Peggy Prowe:

There's a white one that my daughter-in-law is still riding.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Oh, so you passed it on to your daughter-in-law?

Peggy Prowe:

Yeah. That's what bikes do. They go to the next fitting person. Yeah. It did a lot of miles.

José Luis Villaseñor:

Yeah. I have three boys and they love bikes. They like going out. It's not like pulling teeth. It's like, "Let's go for a burger." They were also part of the bike program. And we just had youth of color, immigrant youth, Somali youth, Latino youth come out, we just biked. It was kind of cool, we ended at a park at the [inaudible 00:50:04] eating tamales together. There were some immigrant youth that had never eaten a tamales, they were like... So my kids and others were showing them how to eat one. And so it was not just biking, it was also food, and it was about learning about other cultures. But yeah, if anything, they are passionate not only about biking, but just exploring. "Dad, where are we camping? Dad, can we go snowboarding? Dad, can we get out of the city? Dad, could we go do these things just to be out in nature?" I think if anything, I've exposed them to that being a normal thing for them.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Walking back toward my car, I had a new appreciation for the bicycle path I was walking alongside. It's something that seems modern and contemporary as more cities integrate cycling infrastructure. But after speaking with Peter, I understand that cycling culture's roots in Minnesota go all the way back to the 1870s. This bike path is a legacy decades in the making, the result of advocacy, spanning three different eras of cycling culture. Talking with Peggy and José Luis shined a light on the impact location can have on the experience of cycling. Rural infrastructure and the process of advocating for it looks much different than it does in a more urban space. But across all spaces, cycling's meaning has evolved and widened to include everything from healthy lifestyle to leisure activity, to empowerment, to connecting with loved ones. What has cycling meant to you? What's your favorite bicycle path? And how have you connected with your community through bicycles? Let us know by sharing a photo on social media with the hashtag #MNUNRAVELED.

You've been listening to Minnesota Unraveled, pulling on the threads of Minnesota history. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources, and MNnopedia articles at our website, mnhs.org/unraveled Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Pod People. Special thanks to our production team, Rebecca Chaisson, Angela Yih, and Brett Baldwin. And sound design and editing by Erica Huang. Lead research by me, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. Our theme music is Careless Wander by Arthur Benson. Funding for Minnesota Unraveled is provided by the state of Minnesota, the Legacy Amendment through the vote of Minnesotans on November 4th, 2008, and our generous donors and members. Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious. And remember, the tapestries of history are all around you just waiting to be unraveled.