

# CHASING ANNE

> > > > > > > THE WOMAN WHO CHANGED MY LIFE WAS BRAVE, CUNNING, DARING AND FREE—AND I NEVER MET HER. >



I am obsessed with a young woman on a bicycle. I bought a bike just like hers. I have chased her through snow-covered cemeteries in icy rain, and across cyberspace. When I ride, I think about her. When I don't ride, I think about her, too.

She is a ghost.

BY PETER ZHEUTLIN



COURTESY MARY LEVY GOLDNER; TOM CAPODIECI

**Above; Annie Londonderry (Kopchovsky), 1894**

## CHASING ANNIE

One Monday in late June 1894, a slight, unprepossessing woman in her early 20s climbed onto a Columbia bicycle in front of the Massachusetts State House in Boston. Annie Cohen Kopchovsky was 5-foot-3, about 100 pounds. Aside from two quick lessons in the previous days she had never ridden a bicycle in her life. All across the country, women who'd never balanced atop two wheels were taking to bicycles, but not merely for recreation or transport. Women used bikes as vehicles of political and social change, too. The women's suffrage movement and the cycling craze went hand in hand. On two wheels, women found independence and freedom of movement. Because pedaling in billowing Victorian skirts and corsets was impractical, for instance, female cyclists popular-



Portrait of Annie, taken in 1895 in Chicago at the end of her trip

and complete the trip in 15 months. She had to procure the signatures of American consuls in certain foreign cities to prove she'd been there. And, she had to earn \$5,000 above expenses en route. A \$10,000 prize awaited her if she succeeded. This was not just a test of physical endurance and mental fortitude; it was a test of a woman's ability to fend for herself in the world.

At the State House to see her off that June day was a crowd of 500: suffragists, friends and curious onlookers. A few speeches were made, then Kopchovsky proved she was clever enough to start earning her way. As she'd arranged, a representative from New Hampshire's Londonderry Lithia Spring Water Company stepped forward and handed her \$100 in crisp bills, payment for hanging an advertising placard on her bike—and for

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ized bloomers. To critics, these changes symbolized moral corruption. Frances Willard, one of the most famous women of the times, was a leading suffragist and president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, then the largest women's political organization. She learned to ride at 53, and mastery of the bicycle as a metaphor for women's mastery over their lives was the message of her 1895 book, *A Wheel Within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle* (reprinted in 1997 by Applewood Books). She wrote that she rode “from a love of acquiring this new implement of power and literally putting it underfoot.” Indeed, fellow suffragist Susan B. Anthony said in 1896 that the bicycle “has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world.”

Even in this context, the bike ride Annie Kopchovsky was about to begin was, as the *New York World* declared more than a year later, “the most extraordinary journey ever undertaken by a woman.” The married mother of three children under six was attempting to become the first woman to ride around the world. A man, Thomas Stevens, had done so a decade before—riding 13,500 miles in 32 months. While he rode for glory, the stakes for Kopchovsky were higher: She was settling a bet between “two wealthy clubmen of Boston,” as one newspaper said, that no woman could match Stevens. The wager: \$20,000 to \$10,000 the woman would fail, a huge sum when the average yearly salary was about \$1,000.

Why Kopchovsky was chosen is unclear. Outwardly, she was an unlikely choice. Besides her lack of cycling experience and slight physique, she was a Jew in a city where, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once wrote, “anti-Semitism seems to have reached its American pinnacle.” And for a woman of the 1890s to abandon her family responsibilities was almost unimaginable; in Boston's small, tight-knit Jewish community it must have been scandalous. Indeed, on the day she left, Kopchovsky lamented to a reporter that her brother, Bennett, who was in the crowd, didn't come up to say good-bye.

The wager required her to start penniless, accept no gratuities,

using the last name “Londonderry” as a promotion.

Then, packing only a change of underwear and a pearl-handled revolver, Annie Londonderry “sailed away like a kite down Beacon Street,” according to the *Boston Evening Transcript*, and my great-grandaunt rode into history.

I don't know why my family never talked about Annie. She wasn't an outcast. In the early 1890s my great-grandfather, Bennett (Annie's brother) and his wife and children (my grandfather among them) lived with Annie and her family. She'd been famous in her lifetime, making headlines throughout the United States and Europe, appearing in advertisements for bicycles and Londonderry water, and celebrated from Saigon to San Francisco.

In Chicago, Paris, Marseilles and other cities, she earned money

## ANNIE'S CHASE

ANNIE'S JOURNEY BEGAN IN BOSTON (1) ON JUNE 25, 1894. SHE HEADED WEST VIA PROVIDENCE, RI (2), NEW YORK CITY (3), ALBANY (4), SYRACUSE (5), ROCHESTER (6) AND BUFFALO, NY (7), CLEVELAND, OH (8) AND CHICAGO (9).

SHE THEN REVERSED COURSE AND FOLLOWED THE SAME ROUTE BACK TO NYC. FROM NYC SHE SAILED TO LE HAVRE (10), ON THE



riding through the streets with advertising banners, placards and ribbons attached to her bike and pinned to her clothing. She was, at times, virtually covered from head to toe with ads for everything from milk to perfume. It helped that Annie was also very attractive. “[A]ny horrid man who says she is not good looking ought to be taken out back of a cow shed and knocked in the head with an axe,” enthused the *El Paso Daily Herald*. Proclaimed one French newspaper, “she seems made only of muscles and nerves and in spite of her petite size gives the impression of remarkable energy.”

Even if she hadn’t achieved celebrity, Annie was the sort of colorful, larger-than-life ancestor families ordinarily celebrate in stories told around holiday tables. Annie herself delighted in spinning tall tales and creating her own legend. She told newspapers that when her trip was done she’d finish her studies at Harvard Medical School, that she had a doctorate in law, that she was an orphan with a substantial fortune. None of this was true. The breathless sensationalism characteristic of American journalism in the 1890s required a gift for hyperbole, and Annie was more than up to the task. In her first-person trip account, published in

about Annie contacted my mother, who had never even heard of her and was unable to help. About 10 years later, when the same historian wrote us again still looking for information about the elusive Annie Londonderry, I decided to give chase myself.

I was 49, and just becoming an avid cyclist. As I struggled up the modest hills west of Boston on my superlight carbon-fiber Trek 5200, dressed in neon-green breathable fabrics, cell phone in my saddle bag and a Gatorade bottle in my cage, I found myself thinking of Annie, dressed in long skirts, going over New York’s Hudson Highlands on her 42-pound ladies’ Columbia bicycle, or, later, in bloomers, crossing the Arizona desert on her men’s Sterling, a hundred miles from nowhere with nothing but the hope of a passing freight in case of misfortune. Annie became my cycling muse.

She became an outright obsession a few months later, when I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. At the very least, the word “cancer” has a way of focusing your mind on the way time slips through your hands. I didn’t think I was going to die anytime soon, but it became vitally important for me to know the end of Annie’s story before writing the end of my own. I bought a restored 1890s men’s Sterling and a 44-star American flag to match

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the *New York World* on October 20, 1895, she described brief imprisonment while in China during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95: “The cell was merely a hut with lattice-work sides. There was no protection from the bitter cold and I suffered keenly. While thus imprisoned a Japanese soldier dragged a Chinese prisoner up to my cell and killed him before my eyes, drinking his blood while the muscles were yet quivering.”

Annie’s flamboyance generated great popular appeal. Arriving in Marseilles in January 1895, a huge crowd lining the streets, she pedaled with one bandaged foot propped on her handlebar—the injury reportedly suffered during a robbery at the hands of highwaymen—and the Stars and Stripes flying from her bicycle. “The intrepid traveler,” gushed a Marseilles newspaper, “has quickly captivated the love of the people of Marseilles.”

So why didn’t she captivate my own—her own—family?

In the early 1990s, a cycling historian seeking information

the one Annie carried, and for the next 18 months I spent thousands of hours, and thousands of dollars, chasing the ghost of a woman who died almost exactly six years to the day before I was born—a woman who, despite her fame in the 1890s, disappeared into the stream of history with hardly a trace.

Annie’s journey did not start well. After leaving Boston, she rode to Providence and New York City. She didn’t reach Chicago until late September, when she decided to abandon the trip, realizing, perhaps, that she couldn’t cross the plains and mountains before winter.

“Mlle. Londonderry...has decided not to complete the journey,” reported the *New York Times* on October 11, 1894. She had set out to wheel around the world and win a fortune, and barely made it into the middle of her own country.

She decided to pedal back East but, before leaving Chicago,

NORTH COAST OF FRANCE, THEN RODE SOUTH THROUGH PARIS (11), LYON AND VALENCE (12) TO MARSEILLES (13).

SHE SAILED FROM MARSEILLES TO ALEXANDRIA (14) AND PORT SAID (15) IN EGYPT, TOOK A BRIEF SIDE TRIP TO JERUSALEM (16), THEN TRAVELED TO ADEN, YEMEN (17),



## CHASING ANNIE

acquired two key items: bloomers and a men's Sterling roadster, ivory with gold trim, and some 20 pounds lighter than the Columbia. Riding was easier, faster, and more pleasurable. She decided she'd give the world a go once more. Nearly four months had passed, leaving only 11 to make the circuit, which would now end in Chicago (where technically she'd restarted her journey). Annie pedaled to New York City and, on November 24, 1894, boarded the French liner *La Touraine*, bound for Le Havre on France's north coast, where she arrived on December 3rd.

Starting with just a handful of old newspaper articles provided by the researcher who'd contacted my mother all those years ago, my search led to small libraries in obscure towns, through miles of microfilm, and into cemeteries in Boston and New Jersey. I tracked down the descendants of people Annie had met along the way. I even trolled eBay, where I found an 1894 Sterling Bicycle catalog bearing the stamp of a bicycle dealer who had hosted Annie when she passed through Kendallville, Indiana, on her Sterling.

But for all her notoriety in the 1890s, Annie remained elusive. I was building a collection of articles about her trip, but still knew little about her. So I set out to find Annie's direct, living descendants, through census, immigration, birth, marriage and death records. In October 2003, a genealogist I'd hired unearthed a death notice in the 1947 *New York Times* for "Anna (Kay) Kopchovsky" with four precious words: "devoted grandmother of Mary." I'd never heard of Mary. Could she be found? Was she still alive? If not, had she had children? Could they be found?

I couldn't locate Annie's death certificate (though I later did), but found her husband's. It told me he was buried in a cemetery just minutes from my childhood home in New Jersey. I called the cemetery and learned Annie was buried there, too. The contact person for her plot was listed as Mary Levy Goldiner, but the information was 13 years old. Even if Mary was alive, and happened to still live at the same address, how would she react to an intrusion from a distant relative she didn't know?

I wrote a detailed letter explaining my interest in Annie and how I found Mary, and mailed it. As I rode my bicycle through the golden light of early October, I sprinted home hoping for some word from Mary. Then, 10 days after I mailed my letter, the phone rang. "Peter," said a woman's voice, "this is your long-lost cousin, Mary."

By the time Annie left France, she had just eight months to reach Chicago, and most of the world still lay ahead of her. Once again, she improvised. Though there is conflicting information, the terms of the wager appear to have omitted a minimum distance to be covered by bike, and Annie literally sailed through that loophole. In Marseilles, on January 20, 1895, she boarded a French *paquetbot*, the *Sydney*, bound for the Orient.

The *Sydney* traversed the Mediterranean toward the Suez Canal then made several stops in the Middle East where, according to Annie, she made "short tours" in Egypt, Jerusalem and modern-day Yemen, then sailed to Colombo and Singapore. By mid-February, Annie was in Saigon, and shortly after that near Port Arthur and Wei-Hei-Wei Harbor—where the Sino-



Somewhere near San Francisco in 1895, Annie staged this photo, possibly for use in her lantern slide show to illustrate her account of being robbed by highwaymen north of Marseilles, France.

Japanese War was then raging. There is scant evidence of Annie's time in China. As she told it, in the company of missionaries and foreign journalists, she wheeled in and around the sites of pitched land and naval battles. She claimed to have suffered a minor gunshot wound in China and to have cycled to Siberia.

Annie sailed for San Francisco on March 9, 1895, from Yokohama, and on March 23, 1895, only two months after leaving Marseilles, she passed through the Golden Gate and was back in the United States.

"She has a degree of self-assurance somewhat unusual to her sex," reported the *San Francisco Chronicle* upon her arrival.

A few weeks after Mary's call in the fall of 2003, I went to New York to meet her. Now in her 70s, Mary is the only child of Annie's youngest daughter, and Annie's only direct biological descendant. When Mary answered the door we embraced and I searched her face for some sign of our shared heredity. I saw none. Mary told me she took after her father's side of the family.

For several hours we laughed, cried, and peppered each other with questions—about the family, about Annie, about one another. Mary had photographs, old newspaper articles and correspondence

## ANNIE'S CHASE *continued*

COLOMBO (IN WHAT IS NOW CALLED SRI LANKA, FORMERLY CEYLON) (18), SINGAPORE (19), SAIGON (20), HONG KONG (21) AND PORT ARTHUR, CHINA (22), NOW CALLED LUSHUN.

ANNIE CROSSED BETWEEN CHINA AND JAPAN (23) A COUPLE OF TIMES. SHE CLAIMS TO HAVE RIDDEN ACROSS KOREA (24) TO VLADIVOSTOK (25), RUSSIA. SHE DID VISIT NAGASAKI (26) AND YOKOHAMA (27), JAPAN AND SAILED FROM YOKOHAMA TO SAN FRANCISCO (28).



Annie had saved, and a collection of 75 lantern slides Annie acquired during her travels and shipped ahead of her to illustrate lectures she gave (for a fee) as she made her way across California and the southwest back toward Chicago.

Just as important, because she was 16 when Annie died, Mary had vivid recollections of stories Annie told about her cycling adventure—and of Annie herself. Mary was as eager as I was to tell Annie's stories. For decades she felt she was supposed to do something with her grandmother's legacy, but hadn't managed to do so.

"If you write my grandmother's story," Mary told me, "it will be the fulfillment of her dreams."

It was when Annie was closest to her goal that she suffered some of her worst hardships. Shortly after riding out of San Francisco, Annie and another cyclist were nearly killed by a runaway horse and wagon. Thrown hard to the ground, their hands and faces were bruised and cut. Annie made the story even more dramatic a week later, when she told the *San Jose Daily Mercury* she'd been knocked unconscious and carried to a hospital in Stockton where she coughed up blood for two days. In fact, on the evening following the accident Annie lectured at Mozart Hall in Stockton, about 10 miles from the accident site.

Crossing southern California and Arizona, she followed the Southern Pacific Railway tracks, de rigueur for long-distance riders in the 1890s. The tracks not only prevented riders from getting lost, but frequently featured adjacent service roads, likely no more than hard-packed dirt but roads nevertheless, running alongside. Section houses built for train crews offered shelter and, perhaps, a meal or bath. Still, this was the worst terrain for cycling Annie encountered on her journey. Sixty-one miles outside Yuma, Arizona, Annie suffered a tire puncture, hoisted the Sterling onto her shoulders and soldiered on through places such as Dry Camp and Volcano Springs. Passing train crews sustained her with cold milk and ice, but she declined a ride aboard the Southern Pacific offered by an engineer who stopped his train for her. Exhausted and dirty, Annie knocked on the first door she found on the outskirts of

Yuma. The woman who answered—perhaps frightened by the spectacle before her—refused Annie a drink of water. This was Annie's version of events. There were those who suspected Annie hopped the Santa Fe across parts of the desert.

After reaching El Paso, Annie turned north and reached Cheyenne. Just two days later she was across Nebraska, forced onto a Union Pacific train, according to Nebraska's *Fremont Daily Tribune*, because of "very muddy roads."

Near Gladbrook, Iowa, while coasting downhill, Annie had another serious accident. She collided with "a drove of pigs," fell, and broke her wrist. She rode on, reaching Chicago on September 12, 1895, escorted by two cyclists she'd met in Clinton, Iowa. When she returned home to Boston a couple of weeks later, she was, according to the *New York Times*, still wearing a cast.

After collecting her \$10,000 prize, Annie moved her family to New York where, under the byline "The New Woman," she had a brief career writing sensational features for the *New York World*. The story about her bicycle trip begins: "I am a journalist and a 'new woman,' if that term means that I believe I can do anything that any man can do."

For cyclists, inspiration comes in many forms. Last September, my neighbor, Susan Retik, a 9-11 widow, rode from Ground Zero to Boston, where her husband began that fateful day. Cancer survivor Lance Armstrong climbs the Alps. My inspiration is Annie.

As we face mortality we yearn, I think, to see ourselves as more than the sum of our own years. If we look up the road, we gain a measure of reassurance in the knowledge that we will live on, in some way, through our children or other relatives and their progeny. And if we look back, we see our parents and grandparents, or someone like Annie. Both views give us a greater understanding of who we are.

Like Annie, I found freedom on a bike. At 51, I'm fitter and healthier than I was at 31. And sometimes, when the pavement is smooth and the light just right, I feel as free as a Jewish mother on an ivory-and-gold men's Sterling wheeling down the California coast in spring. ■

FROM SAN FRANCISCO, SHE TRAVELED TO STOCKTON, SAN JOSE (29), SAN LUIS OBISPO, SANTA BARBARA (30), LOS ANGELES (31), SAN BERNARDINO, RIVERSIDE AND INDIO, CA (32), THEN CROSSED INTO ARIZONA TERRITORY AT YUMA (33). SHE ALSO VISITED PHOENIX, TUCSON (34), DEMING, NM (35) AND EL PASO, TX (36).

FROM EL PASO ANNIE HEADED NORTH THROUGH ALBUQUERQUE, SANTA FE, LAS VEGAS, NM (37), AND RATON, NM (38), CROSSING RATON PASS INTO TRINIDAD, COLORADO. SHE TRAVELED FROM

TRINIDAD TO LA JUNTA (39), COLORADO SPRINGS AND DENVER, CO, (40), AND TO CHEYENNE, WY (41). SHE TOOK A TRAIN (42) ACROSS MUCH OF NEBRASKA TO FREMONT THEN CYCLED TO OMAHA (43) AND ACROSS IOWA THROUGH THE TOWNS OF MISSOURI VALLEY (44), AMES, TAMA (45), CEDAR RAPIDS AND CLINTON (46). THEN SHE CROSSED INTO ILLINOIS AND RODE THROUGH ROCHELLE (47), AND TO CHICAGO (48), WHERE HER TRIP ENDED SEPT. 12, 1895.

