

A SAN FRANCISCO PEDAL REVOLUTION:

Charlie Wilson

Writer's comment: I have been riding in San Francisco's *Critical Mass* ever since my freshman year in high school. The *Mass* is an inspiring monthly event that tends to bring out the few little grains of post-adolescent dissent that lurk inside of me, as well as providing me with yet another reason to go to San Francisco and ride my bike. So when Pamela Demory assigned a descriptive essay in my English 101 (Advanced Composition) class, I already had the perfect topic in mind. Initially, I was going to describe *Critical Mass* and the ways it had evolved from when I first participated in it. However, after attempting a few paragraphs, I decided the best approach would be to put it in a narrative form. The result is a retrospective account of all of the *Masses* I have ever been on, but highly condensed into one specific *Mass*.

— *Charlie Wilson*

Instructor's comment: In my English 101: Advanced Composition classes, I often ask students their first essay on an interesting place or event. I tell them they have two objectives: to bring this place or event “alive” for their readers by relying on plenty of concrete, specific detail and somehow communicate the event's significance. In “A San Francisco Pedal Revolution,” Charlie Wilson accomplishes both tasks admirably. He invites his readers along for a bicycle ride, immersing us in the sights, smells, sounds, and physical sensations of the phenomenon known as *Critical Mass*. Along the way he educates us about the political and social significance of the ride-but in such a genial, inclusive way that we may not even realize right away that we've been taught a lesson in social consciousness-raising. As Charlie says, “Welcome to *Critical Mass*.”

— *Pamela Demory, English Department*

crit'i cal mass' n. 2: an amount necessary or sufficient to have a significant effect or to achieve a result.

-Random House Webster's College Dictionary

On the last Friday of each month, Tom, an amiable Jesuit Brother who loves cycling, my best friend, Ron, a few awkward freshmen, and I would all meet at school around 5:00 p.m. We would all be dressed differently: me in my jean shorts, a ratty tee shirt, and my purple helmet; everyone else in a combination of blue jeans, sweaters, jackets, and red or white helmets. The colors of our helmets, clothing, and bicycles constituted at least a perfect rainbow. Wasting no time, we would begin our migration, a race against the fog and its pursuing damp chill, to dominate the streets of San Francisco for one night as a unit, a voice, a symbol, and a mass. On this one night of each month, cars become the minority, the police blocking the intersections to allow the steady flow of 1500 cyclists to flow continuously like a giant, fluid serpent, oozing around the skyscrapers. Fueled by whoops, shouts, high-fives, clanging bells, screeching whistles, rattling chains and fenders, and the mesmerizing, silent symphony of blinking red lights, we would pedal all over the city for our own personal reasons and causes, but also for the sake of cycling, bicycle awareness, and exercising the power of many, the power of the masses. Welcome to *Critical Mass*.

My old high school, Saint Ignatius College Preparatory, is located on the west side of San Francisco, nestled within the gently ascending expanse of residences that comprise the neighborhood known as the Sunset District. Justin-Herman Plaza, the starting point of *Critical Mass* is located almost exactly across town from Saint Ignatius, in the Financial District, right where Market Street starts by the Ferry Building. We had ample time to cover the seven miles of city streets to join the other "massers" by six o'clock. As we neared the beginnings of downtown, we were slowly joined at nearly every block by other bikers heading towards the Plaza. This continued so that by the time we reached Market Street, our small group of six had grown into our own "mini-mass" of fifteen or twenty cyclists. I overheard my friend Ron talking to one of our new additions: "So, is this your first *Critical Mass*?" Ron asked. The dreadlocked, scruffy looking man replied, "Yeah, bro. I just got here from Stockton with my girlfriend last night. Her friend is a bike messenger and told us we oughta come check it out, ya know?" Ron smiled in agreement and they exchanged names. Ron told me later that the man from Stockton was named Ken and that he was "totally anti-car." In that case, Ken had come to the right place, as he was just one of many participants of *Critical Mass* who assume a radical view of the future of transportation, San Francisco, and the planet - the place and purpose of the automobile.

When we finally reached Justin-Herman Plaza at about 5:45 p.m., I began to feel that old childhood giddiness I had had when I was five years old waiting in line to enter Disneyland. I was completely enveloped by the sensory overload of the Plaza. Most notable was the vibrant sea of helmets, bicycles, and people, constantly moving within itself, yet seemingly homogeneous. The police were present in various forms, many on bikes, some on motorcycles, and a few driving the Ford Crown Victoria cruisers. There were also signs, protruding out of the sea of color and movement, advertising an assortment of "out there" sentiments such as "CATHOLICS WILL BURN IN HELL" and "SAVE THE SEWER RATS," along with notices and petitions for more useful political, environmental, bicycle, and sexuality awareness groups. Interestingly, almost everyone with a sign was also accompanied by a bicycle; thus, even those who attended mainly to further their own cause also planned on riding in the mass.

Along with the visual stimuli, my nose sorted through the various aromas of Old Spice deodorant, Sunflowers perfume, as well as more pungent, natural odors. Occasionally the greasy smell of Burger King

fries intertwined with the sweet fragrance of roses from the Power Flower Stand, and drifted slowly through the air. None of the words that bombarded my ears made any coherent sense, but I was not trying to understand them anyway; I was too busy trying to take everything in, trying as I always did, to stamp a lasting impression in my mind of these initial stages of the impending adventure.

At last, a skinny, bearded bike messenger with a megaphone jumped up on a mailbox and began to subdue the crowd. It was 6:02 p.m., and we needed to decide in crude democratic fashion which route the *Mass* would follow to get to its final destination-tonight, the Polo Field in Golden Gate Park. The coarsely amplified voice of the messenger called off the route options, and based on the intensity of the corresponding cheers, a route was chosen. The route was then handed to the police, who faithfully stayed ahead of the *Mass* to barricade intersections ahead of time so that we could progress as efficiently as possible.

Progress was slow in the beginning as everyone filed onto Market Street. Tom suggested we wait a few minutes so that we would not end up too close to the front, thereby depriving ourselves of the “full effect of being immersed within the crowd.” Ron and I agreed, but the suddenly over-confident freshmen felt obliged to try the front for awhile. Obviously, they were not interested in keeping the company of two best friends and a 55-year-old Jesuit. At 6:15, with a rush of bells, whistles, and cheers, our remaining threesome delved into the flow of spokes and blinking lights. As we cruised up the first few blocks of Market, I kept straining my neck upward while simultaneously dodging the trolley tracks and manhole covers, trying to see the few office windows that were open, supporting a few curious employees who dared to lean out and gaze upon the bicycle parade. It must have been a unique sight for them: the viscous train of colors and noise filling an entire half of the street. Four blocks further, the red blinking lights turned onto Sixth Street and disappeared, leaving Market Street clear again.

We continued, taking a right on Howard as the police held back the honking cars. It was difficult to tell if they were honking in protest or in support; the faces on some of the drivers were sullen, others annoyed, and still others wide-eyed and smiling. During previous *Masses*, the car drivers have usually been surprisingly cooperative, but occasionally someone becomes volatile and makes a big scene. When this happens, however, the power of the mass is realized and the purpose of *Critical Mass* is made clear. No matter how much the driver yells and threatens or tries to nose his car into the stream of bicycles, he is always outnumbered. In this, the *Mass* is especially empowering and inspiring for the participating cyclists, and perhaps even for some of the delayed drivers. Furthermore, *Critical Mass* is an active, physical demonstration of cyclists’ right to occupy the streets, and do so without fear.

At Van Ness, we made another right, crossed Market, and headed straight for Civic Center to make the traditional loop around the domed, gray and white fortress that is City Hall. I think that every *Critical Mass* ride I have been on, no matter what the final destination, has always passed by City Hall at some point along the way. Not a matter of coincidence, however, this monthly “ride-by” of the city’s political center is our way of holding a protest on its overburdened, granite steps as other activist groups do, to make our issues known and our voices heard. And just in case that does not work very well, we also manage to upset the general flow of people trying to get home on a Friday evening, for a similar effect.

As we proceeded once again on Market Street, a thin man, wearing a Giants baseball cap and riding a rusty red Schwinn cruiser, pulled a decrepit-looking bugle out of his backpack and blasted “*charge!*” after which we all appropriately yelled, “CHARGE!” On my right, Ron and Tom were talking. Ron said he was looking forward to the beer he would have at the end of the ride. “What, are you getting *tired* already?” Tom chided in response. “*No!*” Ron insisted defensively; “I just want a beer!” Tom smiled smugly at his success in riling Ron, but I could see the ring of sweat forming on his back and I knew that Tom was also thinking of the rewards waiting at the end of the ride. A moment later, Ken rode up to us and offered us a puff on his joint. We declined, but he rode with us a bit further. I asked him how he liked *Critical Mass* so

far. “Dude!” he said, “This is so trippy, man. It’s like all of these people on bikes, and they all want to make biking safer on the streets and try and get everyone out of their cars. I’m way lovin’ it, man.” I had to agree with him.

We made a right off of Market and wiggled our way to the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park by the well-maintained Victorian houses of the Castro and Lower Haight. Once on Kennedy Drive in the park, the entire *Mass* was about half its original size, since many people had split off and gone home along the course of the ride. When we finally got to the Polo Field, everyone laid their bikes down on the damp grass. The sun had already set, but there was just enough light in the sky to give it a dark blue color. The temperature was moderate (in my opinion), but many were putting their jackets and sweaters back on, including Ron and Tom. The freshmen found us almost immediately. They said they had “had a blast” and managed to stay right at the front with the “hotshots.” Good for them. I, on the other hand, was glad to stay at the heart of the mass, where we were a part of something important and wonderful. We were a critical mass—a *velo de force*.