

Carl Friedrich Benz: A New Bicycle (1867)

Abstract

Carl Friedrich Benz (1844–1929), an engineer from Karlsruhe, was a pioneer in automobile construction. In 1885, he built the first three-wheeled carriage propelled by a combustion engine. In this excerpt from his memoirs *Life Journey of a German Inventor*, the cofounder of the Daimler-Benz Corporation recalls how his experience with a rudimentary bicycle in 1867 spurred his ambition to design a comfortable, self-propelled vehicle.

Source

It was 1867. One day a friend of mine, printing-house owner Walter, paid me a visit. He had just returned from a journey to Stuttgart. There, he had seen the elegant racing machine [i.e., bicycle] and—because he was not so steady on his feet—would not rest until he owned it. But, alas, it was easier to buy the machine than to ride the heavy contraption. During almost all of his attempts, riding degenerated into falling. Therefore, he was quickly fed up with this odd sport and looked for a new buyer. Since he knew about my “quirks,” he must have sensed the aficionado in me. I inspected the curious thing and was immediately taken with it. Actually, it had little in common with today’s bicycle except, of course, the two wheels. These were made of wood and held together with iron hoops. In a very primitive set-up, the saddle was mounted on an elongated spring between the front and back wheels. The front wheel, with a diameter of about 80 cm, was slightly bigger than the back wheel and was powered by pedal cranks, which were directly attached to it.

After as little as 14 days of the most demanding trials, I accomplished what my friend had never learned: mastery of the bike. Yet it was by no means a small effort to keep my balance on Mannheim’s bumpy cobblestones. But the gamboling workhorse had to obey; yes, I even expected it—or, I should say, myself—to repeatedly tackle the ambitious task of covering long distances in the countryside (e.g. Mannheim to Pforzheim).

Whenever I stopped off at some inn and leaned my heavyweight bike against a corner—I have never in my life passed up a good inn—many curious folk, adults and children, gathered around the large, awkward machine. And no one knew whether they’d rather make fun of the heavy vehicle and its badly sprung saddle or admire the skillful balancing of the “trick rider on only two wheels.”

All of this mattered little to the “trick rider” himself. He just proudly pedaled off and away. And his eyes gleamed with some part of what raged and burned inside of him—the enthusiasm for the problem of an “auto-mobile” vehicle.

In our day, when little children are practically born on a bicycle, it is difficult to comprehend that the first cyclist pedaling through the streets of Mannheim once upon a time had to run the gauntlet through the crowd’s salvos of laughter and mockery. [...]

One fine day the heavy wooden monster had to make its way to the junk room, despite all the enthusiasm. Its iron hoops were eaten away by rust and the wooden wheels were succumbing to the ravages of time. What did not make its way to the junk room, however, what did not rust and collapse, was the idea of traveling without horses. Quite the contrary: that idea took hold of me, inexorably infused my inquiring instinct, and left me not a moment’s rest day or night.

Two things had become clear to me by then. After these failed attempts, two things appeared as determining signposts on my path as a researcher:

First, my ideal was not to be equipped with two wheels. That was not enough. It had to be a carriage that could compete with the elegant coach in terms of comfort.

Secondly, manpower would have to be replaced at all costs with machine power. But how? That was the question that henceforth preoccupied me.

Source: Carl Friedrich Benz, *Lebensfahrt eines deutschen Erfinders. Erinnerungen eines Achtzigjährigen*. Leipzig, 1925, pp. 25ff; reprinted in Werner Pöls, ed., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1815–1870. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 4th edition. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988, pp. 59–60.

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