

Obituary

Phyllis W. Harmon, one of the most influential people in the history of American bicycling, passed away peacefully on August 26, 2016, surrounded by her loving family. She was 99. Phyllis was inducted into the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame in 2009 and honored at the dedication of the Phyllis Harmon Trail in Wheeling, IL in 2014. She is preceded in death by her son, Thomas Hursthouse and husband, Wilfred Hursthouse. Left to cherish her memory are her children, Nancy Smith, Bette Winqvist and her husband, Allan, Phil Hursthouse, Carol Terrazas and her husband Michael, and Jan Gillilan. She will also be missed by eleven grandchildren, forty-eight great grand children, and many nieces and nephews. Her family will be hosting a Celebration of Life in Tampa, Florida on her 100th birthday.

Phyllis W. Harmon, the *Grande Dame of Bicycling*

Phyllis W. Harmon, one of the most influential people in the history of American bicycling, passed away peacefully on August 26, 2016, surrounded by her loving family. She was 99.

Phyllis was born on October 14, 1916, in Chicago, Illinois. Her dedication to bicycling began in 1928, when she purchased a red, single-speed "Ernie McKay Special" with 28-inch wheels for \$28.00, money she had saved from babysitting. At twelve years old, she was one of two girls in her neighborhood with a bicycle and the only one who was allowed to ride her bicycle out of the neighborhood. She soon realized that her bicycle could take her everywhere, and cycling became her life.

At age fifteen, she ventured out on her own to ride eighty miles from Chicago to Tichigan, Wisconsin, and by age eighteen, she was commuting and touring two hundred miles a week. Phyllis blazed the trail and encouraged others to follow. Female cyclists were rare, and she was frequently the only woman riding with a group of men. They would spend the night at a youth hostel or tourist home for \$1.00 a night, with the understanding that she would prepare meals for the group while the men maintained the bicycles.

Phyllis had a long history of tireless dedication to bicycling and promoting bicycle-friendly communities. In the 1930s, she helped create a number of bicycle clubs and nurtured advocacy organizations, including the League of American Wheelmen (L.A.W.), now called the League of American Bicyclists. She served as editor of the League's monthly bulletin for more than thirty years, singlehandedly producing and editing the magazine on an IBM Selectric typewriter that she depended upon until her death. During World War II, she kept the League going by making

sure every member fighting for us in Europe or the Pacific received a copy of the L.A.W. Bulletin. She, in turn, received a great deal of feedback from our GIs letting her know how much they appreciated bicycling news from home.

Again in 1964, Phyllis was instrumental in reviving the League after a dormant period. She served the organization in every role: volunteer, office staff, historian, treasurer, executive vice president, and interim executive director (a position she held for four years).

For much of the League's history, Phyllis was "the heart and soul of the League" as well as "the League's Most Valuable Player, a combination of Lance Armstrong, the Energizer Bunny, Encyclopedia Britannica, and Winston Churchill, all rolled up into one indomitable spirit."

In 1970, after raising six children, Phyllis moved to Wheeling, Illinois, where she married Willard Harmon and extended her family to include his three grown children. That same year, she founded the Wheeling Wheelmen Bicycle Club where she organized, promoted, and participated in the Harmon Hundred, a yearly bicycling event that continues to this day.

In 1979, Phyllis was honored to receive the coveted Dr. Paul Dudley White Award, the L.A.W.'s top national award recognizing an individual who is an "inspiration to others for his or her commitment to the future of bicycling and to significant progress in education, safety, rights, or benefits of bicycling".

At sixty-four, Phyllis led a three-week bicycle tour across New Zealand, and her enthusiasm was so contagious that over the next nineteen years she was able to recruit cyclists from all over the country to join her on a total of seven New Zealand tours. At sixty-seven, she rode her bicycle across Luxembourg and France. At seventy-three, she rode 3363 miles in a seven-week cross-country bicycle tour from Los Angeles to Boston.

In 1985, the L.A.W. established the Phyllis Harmon Volunteer of the Year Award to recognize those making extraordinary contributions to cycling.

Bicycle racing always had a special place in Phyllis' heart, but she never considered participating in a race until her seventy-third year when, on a whim, she decided to compete in the Senior Olympics in both Illinois and Arizona. She surprised no one more than herself when she brought home three gold medals and one bronze in the five and ten mile bicycle races. "I wasn't in it [bicycling] for the racing," Phyllis said. "I was in it for the touring, the camaraderie."

At seventy-four, she arrived at the Yoplait Challenge on her fully loaded touring bike to discover that all the other racers were riding stripped-down racing bikes. She competed anyway in the thirty-two mile race, won the event, and brought home the yellow jersey.

Phyllis never settled for complacency. She continually challenged herself and others to go the extra mile and seized all opportunities to hit the open road. In bicycling circles, a “century” is a one-day, one-hundred-mile bicycle ride. She began riding centuries in the 1930s and rode her last in 1999, at age eighty-three.

Phyllis retired to Seminole, Florida, in 2003, and in 2009 was inducted into the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame for her tremendous contribution to the sport of cycling. Her last bike ride was on Mother’s Day, 2011, at age 95 – riding ten miles on a recumbent bicycle and surmounting three Pinellas Trail overpasses. (<http://www.tampabay.com/news/humaninterest/lifelong-cyclist-94-finds-her-wheels-with-daughters-help/1168455>)

In 2014, Phyllis was honored at the dedication of the Phyllis Harmon Trail in Wheeling, Illinois. A plaque at the entry point reads, “PHYLLIS HARMON BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN PATH – DEDICATED IN RECOGNITION OF HER TIRELESS WORK TO PROMOTE ACCESS TO CYCLING FOR ALL”.

On August 26, 2016, after nearly a century of glorious adventures and achievements, Phyllis applied her brakes, taking her last breath, only 49 days short of her *life century*.

Phyllis is preceded in death by her son, Thomas Hursthouse, and husband, Wilfred Hursthouse. Left to cherish her memory are her children, Nancy Smith, Bette Winqvist and her husband, Allan, Phil Hursthouse, Carol Terrazas and her husband Michael, and Jan Gillilan. She will also be missed by her grandchildren, Dean Frazier, Erik Winqvist, Chris Terrazas, Matt Hursthouse, Karin Kelso, Joy Hopping, Joanna Terrazas, Steve Gillilan, Paul Gillilan, Alex Terrazas, and Elizabeth Gillilan. Her heritage includes Willard Harmon’s children, Carol Harrison, Roger and Jim Harmon, forty-eight great grand children, and many nieces and nephews.

Phyllis’ family will be hosting a Celebration of Life memorial service in Tampa, Florida on her 100th birthday.

By: Carol Terrazas