

MO-PED

by Larry Sutton



There's a new European import on America's roads. It's small and stylish, gets great gas mileage, and costs a fraction of the price of a Fiat, Triumph or Porsche. It is fast becoming one of the nation's more popular means of transportation.

The moped is a motorized bicycle with a funny name (a combination of motor and pedal) and a not-so-funny potential to revolutionize short distance travel. Approximately 65,000 people in 23 states own one, and that figure is expected to grow rapidly once other states approve its use on neighborhood streets. All types of people are buying them, from students looking for a cheap way to get around campus to housewives reluctant to use their gas-guzzling station wagons for a short hop to the market.

While the French and Italians have been riding the bikes since the end of World War II, mopeds have only been legal in this country for the past two years. Since then several European companies, including Motobécane of France, Chianti of Italy and Batavus of the Netherlands, have entered the competition for what they feel is a lucrative American market. Not wanting to be left behind, an American company, Columbia Bicycles, is expected to introduce a domestic model soon.

The moped's main drawing card is its ability to travel anywhere from 130 to 200 miles on a single gallon of gas. Most models are roughly the size of a 24-inch bicycle, and feature a one-horsepower, single cylinder engine. Top speed is about 30 miles per hour, although that can vary upwards for a long down-hill ride or downwards for an uphill climb. It is a functional vehicle, not a powerful one.

Befitting an object that is essentially a cross between a ten speed bike and a motorcycle, mopeds cost between \$300 and \$500. That's twice the price of a good bicycle or half the cost of a motorcycle. The basic model includes a horn, front and rear lights, front rim brakes and rear drum brakes. More expensive versions feature luggage racks, a steering lock, tools for emergency road repair and front and rear shock absorbers. Mopeds are usually sold in bicycle shops, although a number of motorcycle dealers have been carrying them as well.

It's almost impossible to describe the typical moped rider. Initially the bike's manufacturers thought it would be immensely popular with teenagers anxious for a ride around town and fearful of asking to borrow Dad's car one too many times. As things turned out, Dad was as impressed with the moped as his kids. He grew to like it even more when the gas credit card bills came in the mail.

The moped has also found favor with college students. There are dealers on or near campuses throughout the country, from Harvard Square in Massachusetts to Berkeley in California. Young doctors are finding that it's just what they need to make a quick round of house calls, too.

More importantly, environmentalists are learning to love the moped. It emits one twentieth of the pollutants of a car, and makes a lot less noise.

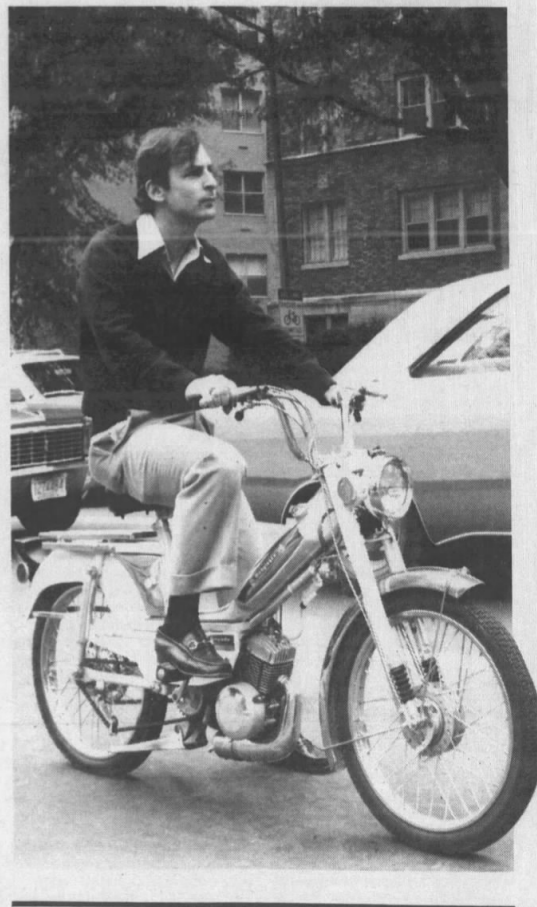
One problem with the motorbikes has been determining who should be allowed to ride them and where they can go. Most states don't allow mopeds on "primary roads"—interstate highways, toll roads and thruways. License and registration procedures, though, vary from state to state. In some places anyone over the age of 14 may operate the vehicle. Massachusetts requires a valid driver's license or learner's permit, and asks that each moped be registered. So does New York, where the bikes are officially called "limited use vehicles." As of Dec. 1, 1976, when mopeds were legalized in that state, New Yorkers may drive a moped without an automobile driver's license but only if they pass a written test on the rules of the road and qualify for a special moped license.

In New Jersey mopeds have been legal since October 31, 1975. Originally all that was required was that the driver be 15 or older and keep his bike off the major roads. Helmets, goggles, licenses and registration were not mandatory. Neither, apparently, was safety. There were 150 accidents involving mopeds in the state in one year, resulting in three deaths.

These statistics prompted the New Jersey Senate to reconsider their moped traffic laws. After hearing testimony from moped dealers and police traffic officers, and viewing the blood-stained moped on which a 15-year-old girl had been killed when her vehicle collided with a truck, the senators voted to toughen the moped restrictions. They recommended the two-wheeler's ban on highways with a speed limit of more than 40 m.p.h., restricted its operation to persons 17 or older who had an automobile driver's license, required the reporting of moped accidents to the police, and required the moped owner to carry liability insurance.

All of these recommendations have been endorsed by the American Automobile Association. In addition, a spokesman for the AAA said the group is supporting the development of a highway safety program for mopeds, and asking that the vehicles undergo further testing for possible shortcomings.

The federal government has applied



motorcycle safety rules to the moped, requiring it to be able to stop within 15 feet after the brakes are first applied. Mopeds are also forced to carry certain equipment, such as front and rear lights, which is optional on ordinary bicycles.

Indiana and Iowa are among the latest states to permit mopeds on their roads, but there probably won't be any further federal regulation of the bikes until a lot more people start riding them. By then the government will

have a better idea of the benefits and problems they can bring about.

For now people are inclined to accept the mopeds for what it is—cheap, short-haul transportation used widely everywhere in the world except here. It doesn't have much speed, it doesn't weigh much. But it does have the potential to become a major tool in an energy and environment conscious society. And besides, it's a fun way to get around town.