

Her Bit of Magic Keeps Youths Rolling

By Helen Humrichouser

"Kids are my main business; bikes are secondary," says the Pied Piper of the Glenville area.

A new-look magician, this one is female and black. Her "magic pipe" is a discarded telephone truck, which bears the legend—Road Runner Mobile Bike Shop—and her "tune" is a medley of mechanical know-how, sincerity and caring that the kids dig.

For the last four years, she has been leading the neighborhood youngsters away from the oblivion of stealing, into the security of self-respect, by motivating them to build and repair bicycles for themselves.

IN RETURN, the project developed into a small business for Mrs. Gwendolyn Pickett, divorced mother of five.

It all started when she took her four sons to a neighborhood "Y" to register them for baseball teams. "They didn't have a coach for one age group so . . . you guessed it," chuck-

led this woman who is often involved in volunteer work, "I became the coach!"

Her place was overrun with 12- and 13-year-olds. "They wanted to practice. Our house became a community center . . . and still is," she sighed.

"ANYWAY, their bikes would be falling apart . . . if they had one to fall apart. Many had lost bikes to thieves. Others never had bikes but wanted one. Unfortunately, too many youngsters believed stealing was the answer."

A trip to a West Side second-hand store changed that. Mrs. Pickett bought 25 beat-up, out-of-style bicycles for \$25, and began teaching the children to strip them and build new ones. "We got 10 good bikes out of the 25," she said.

Mrs. Pickett's explanation of her fix-it expertise is a shrug of the shoulders and a modest, "I'm just mechanically inclined."

SHE GREW UP working on cars with her father, who enjoyed caring for his own automobile during spare time from his job as an interior and exterior decorator.

It's likely, too, that Mrs. Pickett inherited some of her mechanical talent from her great uncle, Garrett Morgan, a Cleveland inventor of the first automatic



Gwendolyn Pickett, the Pied Piper of the two-wheeler set, checks stock before beginning a neighborhood tour.

Plain Dealer Photo (Charles Harris)

traffic signal in 1923. He was more widely known as the hero of the 1916 waterworks crib explosion here, in which he and others used gas masks he had invented in the rescue work.

But Mrs. Pickett prefers to credit him with another accomplishment, one which has more meaning to her. "He was always happy! And I've learned that's a most important thing."

BUT LEARNING how to be happy took a bit more effort. "At a low time in my life, my mother got me interested in studying metaphysics. It really helped me.

"Everybody owes themselves one thing"—(it turned out to be two)—to be happy and to help others," explained this serene and unhurried individual.

"Kids are the ones I enjoy helping." When the youngsters began wanting smaller, modern bikes, she came up with a plan: "If each of you can get \$20 together, I'll buy the parts and you can build your own and learn to service them."

IN A TWO-YEAR period, more than 100 boys and girls built new bikes under the supervision of Mrs. Pickett and her trained teenage helpers.

Eventually the garage workshop had to be closed

because of zoning laws, but Mrs. Pickett had another idea. "If they can sell ice cream from a truck, why can't I sell bike parts and repairs? Last Christmas I decided to get a truck and try.

"I was kidding a telephone repair man about buying his truck. The next day he stopped back and told me they were going to sell some old trucks. I went to four auctions before I got one."

PUTTING her automotive experience to work, she overhauled it, painted it and equipped the inside with work space, shelves and drawers.

"When it was stocked and just the way I wanted it, I hired a couple of kids to help (all it takes is one kid to attract others), and started touring the streets. There was so much work, it took two months, daily to cover 10 streets in this area. Our repairs cost the kids about half the usual amount."

By now, Mrs. Pickett does little more than drive, order parts and keep records on their thrice-weekly tours. She has trained so many children, besides her own, she has a ready crew of part-time employees. "But they have to complete the job before they get paid."

HER TWO oldest sons,

Anderson, 16, who has another job, and Lawrence, 15, aren't interested any more. But the other three work for her. "Karen, 10, and Theodore, 13, are saving for racing bikes. Lamont, 12, already got his. And they all help buy school clothes."

Formerly, Mrs. Pickett worked as a professional photographer, real estate saleswoman ("Selling is not my thing!"), and as a supermarket cashier. "I like cashier work and still do it part time," she said.

"But bicycle work is the best for me. It keeps me home with my children, I make a little income and have time for my special interests."

WHEN Mrs. Pickett first bought the truck, she didn't

know what to expect. "At worst, I figured I could take everything out and make a camper," she laughed.

Instead, she hopes to buy two more trucks and hire other women, who like kids, to help in the business. "Every kid either has a bike (which will need repairs), or wants one."

And she's pleased that "her" kids are working on the right team. Every time a bike is stolen from the neighborhood, kids for blocks around rush out to help find it.

"AT THE end of our second year, we had 12 expensive bikes stolen, but all were recovered. These kids always get them back. And they often get them back for other people, too."

SALE