

“Cycling in Perth and Area – Past & Present”

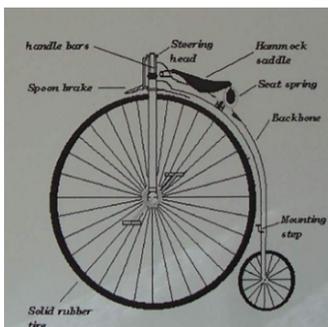
by David Taylor

Recently, the excellent work of the *Cycling Committee* of the *Perth & District Chamber of Commerce* has attracted local interest in bicycling in the area, with the development of new and interesting touring routes and increasingly improved road access (for more information on the routes, visit <http://perthchamber.com/cycling-route-maps/>)

Bicycling as a popular pastime and a hobby is not new to the Perth area, although the equipment and the rider’s livery have certainly changed. In the 1880s bicycle clubs prospered here, as a permanent display at the Perth Museum relates. Amongst other things, touring in groups provided safety for the cyclists from attacks by stage coach drivers who resented having to share the roads. The clubs were usually turned out in full fashion – with uniforms, consisting of tight-fitting knee-length pants and distinctive jacket.

In May 2011, Perth author John A. McKenty provided a presentation to the *Perth Historical Society* on the CCM company and its famous Canadian bicycle. In his recent book (“*Canada Cycle & Motor: The CCM Story*”) Mr. McKenty relates how in its first year of operation (1899) CCM produced 40,000 bicycles. In Perth, their bicycles were sold well into the 20th century by James & Reid Hardware, from their store at the corner of Gore Street and Herriott. Their store sold so many, in fact, that it became known as the “Big Bicycle House.” Bicycles became so plentiful in Perth that in 1892 the Town Council passed a bylaw prohibiting them from the town’s sidewalks. James & Reid also sponsored a popular bicycle race that took competitors from Perth to Glen Tay and back to their hardware store on Gore St. for the presentation of the trophy.

However, it was the style of the bicycle that would have been most novel to us. The ‘Penny-farthing’ bicycle (often referred to as the ‘high wheel’), which was developed in France between 1870 and 1878, was the standard bike of the day, until 1892, when the ‘safety’ model that we know today first came into use. The Penny-farthing’s large front wheel, up to 1.5 m. (60 inches) in diameter, enabled higher speed than earlier models, and also provided a better ride over the rough roads of the era. At its peak, over 500 companies in several countries were producing the Penny-farthing style bicycle. Note: the term comes from two British coins – the large penny and the smaller farthing – the intimation being that the ‘penny’ is leading a ‘farthing’. (With thanks to Wikipedia – see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penny-farthing>)



The Penny-farthing bicycle and its parts
(Source: Les Humphreys ,
Almonte, Ontario)



The Penny-farthing in the Perth Museum
(D. Taylor photo)

The following excellent article, copied with permission from Les Humphreys of Almonte, describes in some detail the bicycles, cycling clubs (aka 'Wheelmen's clubs), competitions, and some of the challenges the cyclists faced in 1898-99.

'Cycling in Canada at the Turn of the Century'

by Les Humphreys, of Almonte, Ontario

A new chapter of bicycling history was revealed recently in Madoc when a local resident was preparing his home for insulation. Stuffed between the rafters in the attic, he discovered a number of issues of a magazine entitled 'CYCLING - the Canadian Authority of Trade and Wheeling Tropics'. The yellowing pages covered a short period between 1898 and 1899, a piece of history which would probably have been lost to posterity had it not been for the fact that the finder was acquainted with the local cycling fanatic, a certain Crichton Harrop. The story that those crumbling covers and fading photos unfold is one of a lost industrial heritage and a way of life that has long since been forgotten.

The bicycle in 1899 did not look very different from the single speed roadster that used to fill the display windows of most bike stores. The stately high-wheeler that characterized the early days had been superseded by the 'safety' in the early 1890s. Now, sporting upright handlebars, leather saddle, lugged frame, wood rims, pneumatic tires, fixed wheel and ball bearings throughout, the 'safety' was pretty close to its peak in 1899.

Each year, the 25 or so manufacturers competing on the Canadian market strove to outdo each other in the race for perfection. The year 1898 was the year of the 'chainless' or shaft drive bicycle. Claimed to be cleaner in dirty weather than the more traditional drive, it was also featured in 1899, but, as one 1899 issue rather prophetically pointed out, 'whatever may happen in the future, it is a certainty that the chain will not be superseded for a season or two.'

Prices ranged from \$14.50 for a bottom of the line U.S. import to \$90.00 for a top quality chainless. Most Canadian models sold in the \$40-50 range, which, at \$1000-2000 by today's values, made the bicycle an expensive purchase. The 1899 bicycle was, however, surprisingly light in weight. Racers tipped the scale at 18 lbs. a mere 8 lbs. lighter than the average roadster. This was undoubtedly attributable to the absence of accessories, such as gears and brakes. The coaster brake had only just been patented. The three speed did not make its appearance until the early 1900s. Wheels at 28 and 30 in diameter were somewhat larger than they are today, a reflection, no doubt, on the poor condition of the roads, on which the larger wheel gave a smoother ride.

Roads in 1899 were a hot political issue. Conditions were deplorable, ranging from being a quagmire in the spring to a dustbowl in the summer. Hard surface pavement was unknown and maintenance was non-existent. All this was at a time when trains and tramcars were the only automotive transport. Horse-drawn vehicles far outnumbered any other traffic. Bicyclists were prominent advocates of the 'Good Roads Movement', which pressed for legislation to empower local authorities to levy funds for much needed road maintenance and improvement.

Bicycle clubs attracted the social elite, with social facilities to match. The Hamilton Ramblers' clubroom, located downtown, on Gore Street, featured a Hat Room, Reading Room, Sitting Room, Bike Room and even a basement Gym! Clubroom activities that included such unlikely bedfellows as Boxing, Billiards and Musical Interludes, were as much a part of the program as outdoor pursuits. Membership figures were equally healthy. In 1899, the Canadian Wheelmen's Association (now the C.C.A.) numbered 7977 individual members and 57 clubs. Of the latter, Toronto counted 12 clubs, Montreal 6, and Hamilton 2. Today's C.C.A. membership figures are less than half of what they were in 1899. Of 29 clubs mentioned in 'Cycling', only one remains active today, namely, the Queen City B.C. of Toronto.

Outdoor activities included both racing and touring. The 'Red Bird Outing', an early season tour held in April 1899, attracted over 100 riders to Sam Harris's farm, somewhere in East Toronto. Photographs of scenic spots were a regular feature in the pages of 'Cycling'. One such photo depicted a narrow lane flanked by cedar rail fencing, whose only traffic was a flock of sheep grazing contentedly in the centre. That road, located between Port Credit and Toronto, was then known as Middle Road. It is now Queen Elizabeth Way, one of the busiest highways in North America.

Racing activities ranged from short distance events on dirt tracks to time trial events on the road. Distances varied from one mile to 100 miles. Venues were situated as far apart as Vancouver B.C. and Pleasantville Nfid. May 24th, 1899 saw race meets organised in several towns in Ontario, including Kingston, Guelph, Fergus, Blenheim and Woodstock.

Performances were somewhat slower than those of today. The Dunlop Gold Medal for the 1898 five mile championship, held October 5 th on the Kingston Road in Toronto, was won by Malcolm Smith, in a time of 14 min. 48 sec. The same rider was only able to manage 36 min 55 sec for the 10 mile event, some 12 sec slower than the winner, William Gill.

Century rides were popular. Under the auspices of the Canadian Road Club, a national organisation devoted to the promotion of centuries, riders vied with one another to outdo each other's performances over various measured courses. On October 9th, 1898, Ralph C. Ripley, a leading 'centurion' achieved 6 hrs 42 min on the round trip between Hamilton and Niagara Falls. Fastest century, however, went to F.O. Myers, of Napanee, with a time of 4 hrs 58 min. Yet another centurion, O.W. Sugden, of London, set a 24 hr record of 285 miles.

On the professional scene, Major Taylor, the black U.S. rider, was sweeping all before him. Prizes were considerable by today's standards. League of American Wheelman event in Boston, held in August 1899 boasted a purse of over \$3,750 (\$100,000 at today's values) for a program which included pursuit, sprint and paced races. Six day races were popular if somewhat controversial. In the February 1899 'Six', held in San Francisco, the winner, C.W. Miller, of Chicago, achieved a distance of 2,191 miles. In a 24 hour event held in Madison Square Garden in New York, Louis Gimm of Pittsburgh achieved 450 miles to win the first prize of \$1000. Public opposition to these feats of endurance ("on a par with bull fights and dog fights", according to 'Cycling') resulted in legislation prohibiting riders from competing for longer than 12 hours at a stretch. This legislation spawned the two man team event or 'Madison', introduced in 1899 to avoid prosecution under this law.

The biggest event on the 1899 calendar was the World Championships, held in August in Montreal. Commencing with a Grand Masquerade on wheels from Dominion Square, the 1899 World's were as much a social occasion as they were a competitive event. Each day would start with a tour and finish with a reception. Racing took place in the afternoon at the Queen's Park Track. Visitors were encouraged to swim in the 'blue waters of the Saint Lawrence', to inspect the Fire Department's facilities on the Champs de Mars, to attend a Grand Muster in Dominion Square and to ride up Mount Royal on the Incline Railway. The finale of the whole affair, which lasted six days, was a Grand Banquet at the Windsor Hotel.

"Hotels and 'Wheelmans' Headquarters" were a regular feature in the pages of 'Cycling'. A total of over 190 were listed, including 170 in Ontario, nine in Quebec, seven in Nova Scotia, four in New Brunswick and two in Manitoba. Of the 16 listed in the Quinte Area alone, only five remain today. Of the rest, some are now private homes, the others, long forgotten. Rates varied from \$1.00 to \$2.50, the highest being the Toronto rate. Toronto hotels listed included Walker House (Front & York), Nurse's Hotel at the Humber, Lambton House, at Lambton Mills and the Popular Hotel, at Newtonbrook. Two hotels, in Preston and Belleville even offered mineral spring baths!

Repairmen were also in abundance in the pages of 'Cycling'. A total of 29 were listed, including 23 in Ontario, five in Quebec and one in Manitoba. All were located in large towns in buildings which probably still stand today. Funnily enough, none were listed for Toronto. Two companies even offered bike insurance. For \$2.00 per year the Dominion Burglary Guarantee Ltd. and the Canadian Railway Accident Insurance Co. offered varying measures of coverage.

It would appear that even before the days of the automobile, there existed a feeling of prejudice towards bicyclists. To the editors of 'Cycling' it appeared to emanate from envy, hatred, malice and 'all uncharitableness'. The hosts of insults and unpleasantries with which roadside rowdies saluted passing cyclists required 'a good stiff backbone and a disregard for public opinion', qualities that would not be out of place today.

Bicycling was not without its more eloquent critics. *The Presbyterian Synod of the Diocese of Kingston and Toronto* had this to say: 'Sabbath visiting, which, in many centres, is becoming alarmingly prevalent, unnecessary cycling on

the Sabbath, which is doing even more harm than Sunday (street) cars, and all other forms of Sabbath desecration should be faithfully dealt with from the pulpit. If we lose the Sabbath, we lose all.'

Of course there were some bicyclists who evidently deserved all the scorn they received and more. Such were the 'scorchers' - schoolboys or 'fresh young men' who, mounted on bicycles equipped with the 'new high handlebars' or the obsolete 'rams horn' handlebars, exceeded the 'regular rate of speed'. 'Cycling' advised city cycling clubs to form a vigilance committee to bring the miscreants to a sudden stop, if necessary by taking the law into their own hands. Apparently these vigilantes would be better judges of speed than the Montreal police, who, slow by virtue of their patrolling on foot, set too low a standard, resulting in some instances in 'totally unwarranted' charges being laid. Not all police forces deserved this criticism, however. In fact, Collingwood's Chief Maidens actually appeared in an advertisement for Goold Cycle Company's 'Red Bird' - 'Canadian by birth and not by adoption'. Had the burly Chief Maidens read some of the advertisement's small print, claiming the Red Bird to be the 'daintiest bicycle creation', he may have preferred anonymity.

The days of the Queen's Own Rifles B.C., the Victoria Rifles B.C., the Montagnards, the Voltigeurs and the Royal Canadians have long since passed, and along with them a golden age of elegance. Names like Planet, Eclipse, EZ, Red Bird, Racycle and King of Scorchers are all that remains of Canada's early bicycle manufacturing industry, a heritage that has long since been eaten away by takeovers, bankruptcies and diversification. Perhaps today, amid the aftermath of the energy famine, we may yet live to witness the rebirth of people power and a return to the pollution-free days of elegance.

Although Ladies' bicycles were being sold to the general public, the sport of bicycling seemed to be an all male pursuit. The only explicit reference to female bicyclists was a quote from 'The Wheel' of England in which a lady rider visiting a well-to-do gentleman was mistaken by the gardener for a man, since as he observed she wore 'as neat a pair of pants as ever a man could wish for'.

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