

Rhode Island Wheelmen—Pavement Pioneers

By MILDRED C. TILLEY

YOUR great grandfather may have ridden a Kangaroo, an Antelope, or even a Spider. Any of these odd trade names for his high-wheeled bicycle probably seemed grimly appropriate to great grandpa before he mastered the art of riding it.

Albert Greene Carpenter, who introduced the high bike to Providence in May 1878, rode his \$150 English import publicly only after weeks of rigorous private practice in the loft of his family's ice-house barn at Mashapaug Pond. There he made a narrow alley between bales of hay, loosening armfuls of it to cushion the sides. Mounting the small saddle on top of the front wheel that was almost as tall as he, with its small trailer wheel, both rimmed with hard solid rubber tires, the 27-year-old Carpenter bumped and swayed through this padded tunnel until he had learned to subdue the wobbling wheel and maintain his balance.

His public performance converted some of the onlookers to the "ordinary" as the high bike was called, because a little more than a year later the Providence Bicycle Club was founded, soon numbering more than 30 members. They represented the state when Newport became the scene of the first national bicycle meet on the Memorial Day weekend of 1880. Drawing enthusiastic cyclists from New York, Chicago, Washington, D. C., Saratoga, Philadelphia and Baltimore as well



The Columbia was the first American-made Bicycle.



In 1886 high wheelers met in Fredrickton, New Brunswick. George R. McAuslan, whose scrapbook is a mine of cycle facts and fancies, trails the line at the left.

as nearby Massachusetts and Connecticut cities, the convention organized the League of American Wheelmen.

"By actual count there were 132 riders in line and as they wheeled down Bellevue Avenue they presented a spectacle never before seen in this country," crowed the *Newport Daily News* of the grand parade held that Monday.

"Their bright machines looked very attractive with the sun's rays shining upon them," the *News* went on. "The uniforms were, as a general rule, neat and tasty, and they, as well as the wearers, came in for considerable comment of a very favorable nature. Kay Street and Bellevue Avenue were lined with spectators, but to the annoyance of the riders many carriages were in the way."

That last comment foreshadowed the battle of wheel versus hoof. Horses would not yield their sovereignty of the road easily. Under the heading "Bicycles . . ." appearing for the first time in the Providence Business Directory of 1881 there was only one name, that of Charles F. Handy who had a bicycle sales agency and riding school on Westminster Street near Grace Church. The same page listed no less than 56 "Blacksmiths" catering to the well-shod horse.

Providence champions of the horse began carping about the "dangerous" high-wheelers as soon as they appeared, complaining that the wheel caused horses to shy or run away, menacing drivers and pedestrians.

Pioneer cyclist Albert G. Carpenter, first president of the Providence Bicycle Club, made a courteous gesture toward peaceful co-existence early in the contest. Any owner of horses, he suggested, would be welcome to the help of his club members in breaking the animals to the wheel. He offered the road at Mashapaug Pond for the purpose. Among the first to give the offer his prestigious blessing was Colonel Isaac L. Goff, owner of race-track and show-ring winners. He drove one of his animals over the Mashapaug Pond course for an hour during which, horse, cyclists and driver shared equally in the excitement. The road home could probably have been lined with cyclists without causing the tired animal more than the twitch of an ear.

In spite of this conciliatory effort on the part of the club, horse owners continued to complain bitterly about the high-wheeled menace and pedestrians joined the chorus. The pioneer cyclists used the Promenade mile around the Cove (that



Victor in a national championship race would be welcomed home with parades and feasting.

body of water at the foot of what is now the State House hill) for practice when they had completed their indoor apprenticeship. City streets and sidewalks were their ultimate goal, however, and Providence police had instructions to turn cyclists away from the most traveled thoroughfares. A wheelman finally forced legal recognition of the bicycle as a vehicle when he sued a driver for running him down on the right-hand side of the road. The defendant questioned the wheel's status, but the judge ruled that the bicycle was indeed a vehicle and as such entitled to use the right side of the street.

Each town had special regulations for bicycle traffic and often the laws were both made and enforced by the same local constable. The League of American Wheelmen tried to have uniform regulations adopted, and divisions of the league appointed agents or "consuls" from among their members to aid cyclists who became involved in accidents or trouble with local authorities.

By 1895, the Rhode Island division had 11 consuls in Providence, six in Newport, five in Pawtucket, three in Woonsocket and one in each of 34 towns and villages from Abbott Run to Westerly.

The first cyclists were daring fellows who persisted in spite of unavoidable falls. Reports of early road races contain references to sprained fingers, barked knees, bruised faces and "headers" that left contenders insensible for moments. Usually the plucky racers remounted their wheels and finished as best they could.

Even the purchase of a high wheel had its complexities. The range of sizes from a front wheel diameter of 42 inches to one of 60 inches meant careful selection for height and prices that increased from \$80 for the smallest to \$160 for the tallest. Some young Brown University students paced their growth by turning in their bikes yearly for an average trade-in allowance of \$25.

In spite of all handicaps, the high-wheeled "ordinary" was often mastered skillfully. A veteran Providence wheelman, in his 1928 reminiscences, recalled seeing a businessman of the 80's "pedalling up Broadway, a derby hat on his head, a pipe in his mouth and both hands in his pockets."

Runs, in which 30 or 40 wheelmen participated on their bicycles or on high-wheeled tandem tricycles shared by the ladies, were gay but decorous diversions. Trips were made to Boston, the hardier cycling the distance while others went by train, their bicycles, tricycles and tandems in a special baggage car. From Boston, the cyclists with members of other clubs would wheel through the Hub's quiet, attractive suburbs, sometimes returning to Boston for the theatre.

In 1882, Providence wheelmen entertained the Boston club at a memorable meet and a clambake at Rocky Point.

Well-ordered drills were the pride of the early Providence cyclers as they performed practiced maneuvers at the commands of bugler Charles T. Howard, who later employed his executive ability as vice president of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company.

In 1887, shortly after the Providence Bicycle Club was succeeded by the Rhode Island Wheelmen, the renewed organization made its headquarters at 222 Benefit Street but outgrew the cottage in a year and moved into the famed Joseph Brown house at 50 South Main, then occupied by the Providence National Bank. There the wheelmen proved admirable tenants, receiving grateful acknowledgment when they "politely relinquished" their upper-story quarters for the Centennial reception of their landlord and joint tenant, the Providence National Bank.

Some of the organization's members kept records of their travel by attaching to their wheels cyclometers that registered the miles, and those who covered 1,500 miles or more during a season received medals. In reporting that 20 members won these medals in 1889, the club noted that "the riders are nearly all business or professional men and . . . much of the mileage was rolled up by constant daily use of their machines as convenient vehicles between home and office, for an appetizer before breakfast or as a digestant after dinner, with an occasional longer spin for a day or an evening . . ."

Growth of the wheelmen's organizations reflected the improvement of the bicycle with development of the chain drive, coaster brake and pneumatic tires. Although the resulting "safety," with its smaller wheels of equal dimension, was scorned as a "goat" by the daring high bike riders, it leapt into favor. Even so, its riders followed many of the programs of their high-wheeling pioneer predecessors. Their crusade for good roads gained momentum.

Early highways were suited to hoofs and wagon wheels. Carriages brought a demand for smoother thoroughfares, but it remained for wheelmen to promote better roads with a zeal born of remembered bruises.



Sketch by Pailthorpe. Courtesy of Industrial National Bank.

In an 1889 *Memorial to the People of Rhode Island on Improvement of Highways*, a committee of Rhode Island wheelmen wrote, "An undoubted *legal obligation* to furnish good roads is placed upon town and city authorities and is one of the commonest duties to the whole public . . ."

The 18-page pamphlet went on to remind its readers that the state's laws held the towns responsible for the roads within their boundaries, pointing out that failure to maintain highways and bridges could make a town liable to a fine of "not less than fifty dollars, nor more than five hundred dollars."

There is a familiar ring to this appeal: "Over eight hundred cycles of different kinds have been sold by the dealers in Rhode Island this year (1889), yet many of their owners do their riding and spend their money in *other* States, while poor roads and the accompanying discomforts prevent cyclists residing in other States from touring through many of the beautiful parts of our *own* country, except in a few limited directions."

"The qualities of the different macadam roads are quite various," the committee proclaimed, listing the state's 136 macadam miles by locality, from Providence's 55 miles and Newport's 35 miles of "fine macadam streets and drives" to Middletown's single mile.

Suggestions for ways of improving road construction included a hope for "the assistance of such needed *legislation* as an enlightened General Assembly may see fit to give."

Some six years later, Rhode Island had its first state highway commissioner.

Travelers over today's smooth throughways owe a nod of recognition to the pioneer wheelmen.

Great grandfather on his high wheel seems a quaint figure now in his little cap, tight knee pants and gentlemanly jacket, but he was truly the Independent Man in the history of American transportation. He was the first rider to propel himself successfully on wheels over the roads without the aid of any other living creature.



Bicycles began the battle of wheel versus hoof.