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Table of Contents

	Introduction	9
1. David Herlihy	Who Invented the Bicycle— Lallement in 1863 or Michaux in 1861?	11
	Notes	23
2. Roger Street	The Quest for the Medieval Hobby-Horse Velocipede	27
3. Hans-Erhard Lessing	The Reception of the Front-Wheel-Driven Velocipede in Germany	35
	Notes	38
4. Karl Hodges	Did the Emergence of the Automobile End the Bicycle Boom?	39
	Notes	41
5. Charles Meinert	Bicycles in Flight	43
	Notes	47
6. David Gordon Wilson (with Saleh Tarik)	The Influence of Materials-Developments on the Design and Construction of Early Cycles	49
	Notes	56
7. Hillary Stone	The Development of Unorthodox Frames— Why These “Funny Frames?”	57
	Notes	61
8. Nicholas Oddy	Non-Technological Factors in Early Cycle Design	63
	Notes	67
9. Nicholas Clayton	Hans Renold Chain Production 1882–1910	69
10. Raimond Henry	Albert Raimond and the Cyclo Company	71
	Notes	77
11. Nadine Besse	De l’arme au cycle, en Region Stéphanoise— recherches sur une filiation	79
12. Henri Bosc	René Herse—Renowned French Framebuilder	85
	Notes	87
13. Les Bowerman	John Keen—The Life of a Cycling Pioneer	89
14. Glynn Stockdale	The Diaries of Egbert Tegetmeier	99
15. Kathryn Carse	Bicycling for Ladies	107
16. Rüdiger Rabenstein	The Vienna–Berlin Race of 1893 and Its Influence on the Cycling Movement in Germany and Austria	113
	Notes	118
17. Henri Bosc	The Vélo-Club Béarnais	121
18. Ross Petty	The Bicycle’s Role in the Development of Safety Law	125
	Notes	137

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Delegates of the 4th. International Cycle Conference at the dedication of the Lallement memorial bicycle path in Boston, October 1993. (photograph Henri Bosc)

Introduction

David Herlihy

The International Cycle History Conference: A Tradition in the Making

The International Cycle History Conference was the brainchild of Nick Clayton, a British specialist and the editor of *The Boneshaker*, one of several reviews worldwide dedicated to cycle history. Indeed, “vintage cycles,” as they are known in the hobby, are now the focus of numerous international clubs, swap meets and rallies. Yet until recently, no public forum existed for those interested in exploring the actual history of cycling. And this group is surprisingly large and diverse—comprising collectors, academics and independent researchers scattered across the globe.

Clayton’s idea of uniting these experts on a regular basis to foster scholarly exchanges germinated back in 1990, after he got wind of plans afoot to stage a major summer cycle festival in Scotland. Ostensibly, the event was to commemorate 150 years since Kirkpatrick MacMillan, a local blacksmith, who was believed to have made the first mechanical two-wheeler. And while the historical pretext may not have mattered to most participants, it did trouble Clayton. For he knew that the tale of MacMillan, like other tenets of bicycle history, surfaced a century ago during the original “Bicycle Boom”—but had never been truly authenticated or scrutinized. He was determined to re-examine conventional bicycle history, as well as forge new areas of inquiry within this rich and colorful field.

As one who has had the privilege of attending all four annual conferences held to date, I have witnessed a remarkable evolution. In 1990, we were but thirty pioneers huddled into a tiny theater in the Glasgow Transport Museum, braving relatively austere conditions. Since then, our numbers have grown appreciably, with each new year bringing fresh faces and new countries into the fold. Sponsorship, virtually non-existent at first, now generally permits translators, excursions, and other “frills.” Even the level of scholarship has prospered: new and intriguing historical topics are continually broached, while ongoing research has already benefited significantly from this international collaboration.

The 1991 conference was held in St. Étienne, France—a city with a storied bicycle past. The organizer was Nadine Besse, curator of the local Arts and Industry Museum, which boasts a superb cycle collection. The diverse talks once again tackled even the most controversial of subjects: Prof. Mariononi of Italy—a leading expert on Leonardo da Vinci—defended the authenticity of bicycle sketches attributed to the master. The extensive program also included

visits to the Vitus factory, the abandoned offices of Cyclo (one of the first derailleur manufacturers), and the hilltop upon which rests the venerated bust of Paul de Vivie (“Velocio,” a founder of “cyclo-tourisme”).

The third conference visited Germany in 1992, and was organized by Prof. Hans-Erhard Lessing—an authority on Karl von Drais. Our sponsor and host was the Deutsches Zweirad-Museum located in the attractive town of Neckarsulm. This session was distinguished by the record number of academics participating. Prof. Jan Hult of Sweden, for example, spoke on the parallels between two radical but unsuccessful Swedish designs a century apart.

The 1993 conference, held in Boston, was the most ambitious program yet: three days of pre-conference activities, followed by three full days of sessions. It all began in grand style, thanks to Tom Maher and Mary Cassidy, local members of the Wheelmen Club who organized a 17-mile vintage bicycle ride along an historic route. The following frantic days included visits to the Museum, of Transportation, Merlin Metalworks (titanium frame makers), and the Quincy Historical Society (guardians of a large antique bicycle collection in original condition).

The sessions which followed covered many interesting topics, as can be judged from the contents herein. Our special focus, however, was Pierre Lallement, the original bicycle patentee buried in this city in 1891, whose historical role has long been disputed (see next note). I presented new evidence to support his claim to the invention, sparking an animated discussion on his place in history. Related highlights included a trip to his grave, and the dedication of Boston’s Pierre Lallement Bicycle Path at the closing ceremony.

Hosting the Boston conference was a great honor and pleasure, and I would like to thank all

those who made this unforgettable experience possible. Topping my long list is Nick Clayton, the originator of this wonderful tradition, and an enthusiastic Boston-booster from the start. Next comes Kathleen McBride, my trusty and talented co-organizer who worked tirelessly to assure a successful outcome. And, finally, special thanks go to all the dedicated researchers who contributed to these impressive proceedings—and to a greater understanding of how the marvelous two-wheeler has shaped our world.

The 1993 Host

The Lallement Memorial Committee

The Lallement Memorial Committee is a non-profit group dedicated to the memory of Pierre Lallement, the original bicycle patentee buried in Boston just over a century ago without due recognition. Our primary objective is the establishment of a fitting memorial beside the local bicycle path which now bears his name. But before we can achieve this, it will no doubt be necessary to clarify his paramount—but long obscured—contribution. Hence we invited the International Cycle History Conference to Boston on the 150th. anniversary of Lallement's birth, so that the experts could reassess his role in the bicycle invention in light of significant new evidence favoring his claim (see "Who Invented the Bicycle?").

In 1989, years have passed since I learned his story while visiting the noted cycle historian Jacques Seray in Paris. I had gone to that city to research the origins of the derailleur for *Bicycle Guide*, but as I pored over Seray's colorful book *Deux Roues*, one image in particular struck me: a haunting antique photograph of a young man atop a primitive "velocipede," displaying a proud, almost defiant, stare.

Seray explained that this was the figure of Pierre Lallement, a bold character who left Paris for the United States in 1865 at the age of 21 with this novel vehicle in tow. Barely a year later he managed to obtain the world's first patent for that remarkable invention. Lallement had faded into obscurity, dying a pauper in Boston in 1891, while others would claim his machine during the great "bicycle boom" which followed. In particular, the father and son team of Pierre and Ernest Michaux was posthumously declared the original bicycle inventors at the unveiling of a memorial in their native city of Bar-le-Duc in the fall of 1894.

Like Lallement, the Michaux pair had worked in the Parisian carriage industry sometime before the original cycling craze erupted in that city in 1867. But

whereas Lallement failed in his bold bid to launch a cycle enterprise, the elder Michaux went on to co-found the first successful bicycle company in 1868. During the 1893 memorial campaign, a surviving Michaux son alleged that the late expatriate Lallement, before applying for his American patent, had simply stolen the bicycle idea straight from the Michaux workshop.

But if the Michaux's were the original inventors, who then was the patent-holder—an unscrupulous opportunist, a bumbling imitator? And why had Michaux himself not asked for a patent? Something seemed wrong. Indeed, Seray even allowed in his book that the Michaux priority is far from proven. Sensing an historical injustice, I resolved to investigate Lallement's adventurous life upon my return home to Boston—the city of his final rest.

Acting on Seray's lead, I began my research by obtaining a copy of *Pierre Lallement and His Bicycle*. Written in 1883 by Charles E. Pratt, a prominent Boston patent lawyer and early cycle historian, it represents our most complete portrait of Lallement and his adventures. But it is also the first in-depth study on the origins of the pedal bicycle—and I was astonished to find that Pratt unequivocally identifies Lallement as the inventor and the Michaux's as developers. Yet as I checked earlier sources, I repeatedly found the same conclusions.

The past few years of intensive research has been an extraordinary adventure, talking me back and forth across the Atlantic and to numerous cities such as Paris, Bar-le-Duc, New York, Washington and London. Along the way there have been important breakthroughs such as the discovery of pre-1867 Michaux patents unrelated to the bicycle, destroying the alibi that they did not appreciate the patent system when they supposedly invented the pedal bicycle in 1861. But perhaps most importantly, we now have the testimony of Lallement himself describing how he conceived the bicycle in 1862, building his first prototype the following year in Paris.

Certain mysteries persist, such whether Lallement and Michaux had in any way collaborated. But here, nonetheless, are the broad outlines which clearly define the silhouette of Pierre Lallement. Indeed, the time may be approaching when the conclusion of Charles Pratt will finally prevail "He [Lallement] may well be placed in the list of inventors in the mechanical and industrial arts, and remembered as long as the bipedaliferous wheel continues to revolve."