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The History of Kohout High-Wheel Bicycles

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Since the development of cycling in what is today the Czech Republic is relatively little known, we have chosen to present a broader view not only of Kohout bicycles themselves, but also their manufacture, the time when they came into being, and the level of cycling and the emergence of clubs and journals in Bohemia at that time. The reason is that cycling in the 1880s was closely connected with the Kohout brothers and Kohout bicycles.

We have spent two years now hunting for all the surviving Kohout bicycles, and in the end have discovered 47 of them. Comparing them all, we have hopefully gained some key information on this brand, although a number of issues still remain unclear. Those 47 bicycles we have discovered account for

probably five per cent of the total number manufactured. Between 1880 and about 1891, some 900 Kohout bicycles were made; the highest manufacturer's number known is 872.

As we all know very well, the high wheel was born in England. If in the 1880s you had asked Czech



Fig. 0201.
The hub with roller and crank of
the Kohout No. 39.

cyclists what they knew about James Starley, most of them would have answered that it was the first time they had heard of him. If, on the contrary, you had asked about William Crowl, certainly each of those cyclists would have known that name. Why have you yourselves not heard the name? You are not to be blamed for that. Even in England, he was just a young boy known only to his club friends. But in Bohemia, Crowl became a herald of progress. In 1879, he became a lodger in his uncle James Piricho's family at the house of Jan Kohout, a manufacturer in Smíchov near Prague. He had brought with him from England his Excelsior High wheeler, an object totally unknown in Bohemia, then part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire.

Jan Kohout (10 May 1819–30 December 1884) was a carpenter by trade and earned his living making and fixing water-mill mechanisms. In 1849, he settled for good in Smíchov. At that time, Smíchov was a community just outside the Prague city limits; (today it is a district of Prague quite near to the city centre). Kohout built a small factory there for mill machines, and prospered. He gradually expanded the range of his products to include farming machines and, being an able businessmen and skilled in many crafts, he was able to enlarge his factory successfully. In 1869, he founded the Smíchov Brewery, today part of the Bass transnational company. He used some of his own

land for the brewery and ranked among its major shareholders.

By 1879, when the English family moved into his house, Kohout had a thirty-year track record of engineering manufacture. And there was one other favourable circumstance — Jan Kohout was a father of six, of whom four were boys. The eldest was František (11 February 1860–8 November 1918), who was 19 in 1879, and his brother Josef (10 June 1863–1 April 1946) was then 16.

We do not know exactly why the Anglican pastor Piricho arrived in Catholic Bohemia and settled in Jan Kohout's house. He may have taken his nephew William Crowl along to oversee the education of his two daughters during his Prague sojourn. In a contemporary photograph, William appears to be a young man of about 20. His Excelsior bicycle was a model with ball bearings and an open pivot steering. When Crowl first rode his machine around the factory yard, the Kohout boys fired with enthusiasm. They even invited their slightly older friend Karel Schulz (a well-known boneshaker rider) to see the machine.

Boneshakers were known in Bohemia, their manufacture is documented, and some affluent fans had imported them directly from Michaux. Several Michaux bicycles have been preserved in Bohemia. Both of the Kohout older boys, František and Josef, reminisced about having seen the first boneshaker rider as early as 1875. However, the high wheel was a totally different story.

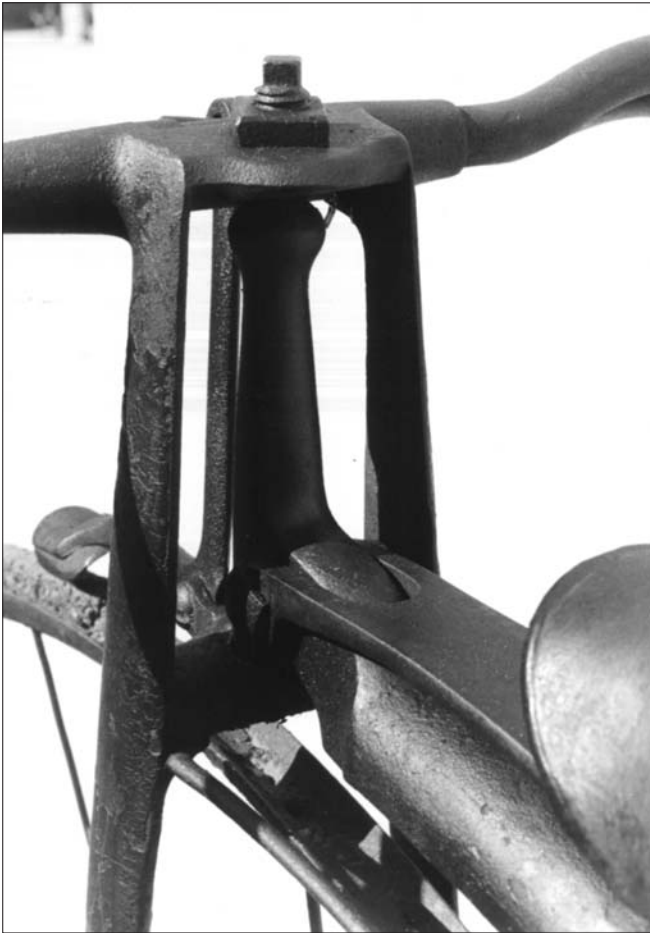
When Schulz tried the Excelsior he borrowed from Crowl, he immediately placed an order with the Kohout factory for a similar bicycle. But he had to settle for a machine with the front and rear wheels made of wood with metal tires. The factory workers were probably not able to make spoked wheels. By the end of 1879, the first three Kohout high wheelers had been made. There were three because both the Kohout boys, as well as Schulz, wanted their own bicycles. One of the original three is now in the National Technical Museum in Prague, unfortunately missing its rear wheel. Its weight, workmanship and uncomfortable saddle explain why the cycling trio would only ride their bicycles a short distance outside the factory gates.

The young men did not let these first prototypes discourage them, however. In the spring or early summer of 1880, another three, redesigned and with spoked metal wheels were made, which can be regarded as the true prototypes of the Kohout brand. They already had wheels with spokes, a V rim, plain

Fig. 0202. Label on the backbone of the Kohout No. 423.



bearings, open head and straight handlebars. One of this second set has also been preserved and is now kept in the National Technical Museum in Prague — an incomplete 52-inch bicycle. It was modelled on the



Above: Fig. 0203. Open head of the Kohout No. 423 (outdated model for insolvent enthusiast).

Excelsior, and the Excelsior influence on the bicycle is immediately evident. It is easy to see that a smith rather than a mechanical engineer made the machine. In spite of that, it bears all the characteristic features of future Kohouts, i.e. lock-nutted spokes, bolted sliding spring and the characteristically shaped rear fork. Also its open head, solid front fork and straight handlebars were typical of the first Kohout models. Unlike all the future Kohout bicycles, this oldest preserved machine does not have on any of its parts or components any manufacturer's number or, as would become the rule later, a J. Kohout label on the backbone. When complete, the cycle weighed 25 kilograms. This is the only known Kohout with cone bearings. Eleven years later, Josef Kohout would write about its manufacture: "Designing each individual part required long consultations and practical tests. When everything was ready, assembling all of the parts into one perfect whole posed considerable difficulties. How difficult it was, for instance, to fix the rubber to the steel rim, how many different tests were needed before a glue was made to keep the rubber firmly on the rim."

In the summer of 1880, four riders — the two Kohout brothers, Karel Schulz, and William Crawl — took longer trips on these bicycles, Crawl, naturally, riding his Excelsior. Another happy coincidence occurred that summer. In early August 1880, an Englishman, Theodor Bock, was passing through Prague. He traveled on his British Challenge from London via Germany and Austria-Hungary to France.



Right: Fig. 0204. Label "Champion Bicycle" on the Kohout No. 864.

Quite incredibly, he happened to spot Karel Schulz and managed to catch up with him. Bock claimed that he had not met any other high-wheel rider on the European continent until that moment. Schulz invited Bock over to the Kohouts where everyone was interested to see all the technical details of his machine, most of all its front wheel roller bearings. Very soon, this feature appeared on the next generation of Kohout cycles.

At the end of August 1880, both Kohouts were dispatched by their father to go to Vienna on their bicycles. These were the prototypes with plain bearings mentioned earlier. The cyclists covered the 350 kilometers between Prague and Vienna in two and a half days. These were the first high wheelers to appear in Vienna and both Kohout boys were warmly welcomed. They came back home as heroes, thousands of people saluted them. All the Czech newspapers praised them, and crowds of fans were attracted to the Kohout factory yard. The factory logged orders for ten high wheelers in the autumn of 1880.

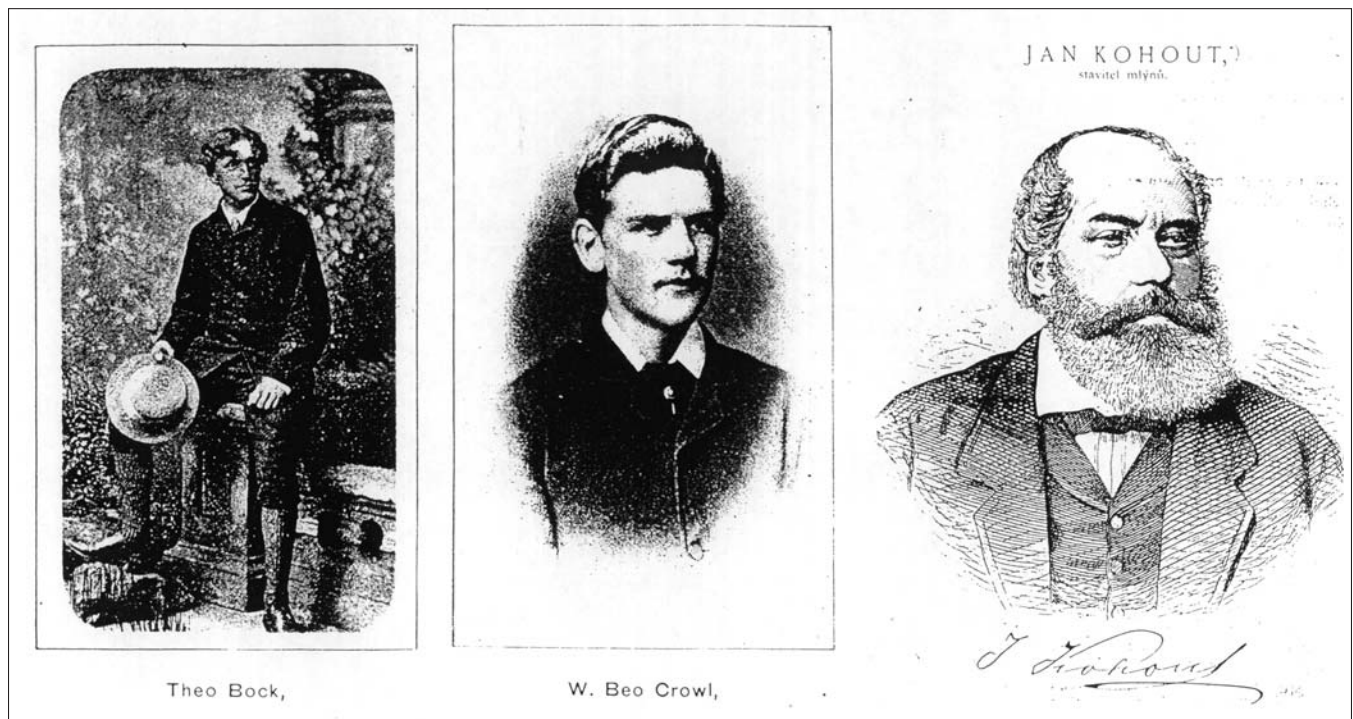
Interest in bicycles and cycling increased. Enthusiasts met at the Kohout factory as early as 16 November 1880, and decided to found the first high-wheel cycling club in Austria-Hungary — the Czech Velocipedists Club (CCV). 23 founding members set out on their first trip in April 1881. Probably

they rode Kohout bicycles. In July 1881, the press reported an outing of 18 club members who all rode the Czech product, the Kohout bicycle. It was customary then for each cyclist to give a name to his machine, and the article listed the names. It is therefore documented that between autumn 1880 and July 1881 at least 18 cycles were made by the Kohout factory, although we expect the number to have been larger, perhaps as many as 30 to 40 machines. In fact, sportsmen from outside Prague had already bought bicycles in 1880, for example Mr. Max Buchar from Pílibam and František ěíha from „elákovice who later sent a congratulatory letter about their experience to the Kohouts.

These first bicycles, made by 1881, were already numbered and differed from the prototype in having front wheel roller bearings. They continued to show evidence of blacksmith work, judging by the preserved cycle No. 19.

The manufacturer's numbers on Kohout cycles are most often found either on the front hub, the saddle spring, the sliding block in which the spring is housed, on either crank, on the handlebar brake, the spoon or on the crank wedges. Some have manufacturer's numbers on only one or two parts, others have numbers all over them. The reason was probably the fact that manufacturing numbers also served as guides

Fig. 0205. From left to right: Theo Bock, W. Beo Crowl, and Jan Kohout.



soon, why the different types of handlebars were included. The head, handlebars, spring, brake, hubs, cranks and spokes were always polished, they were never nickel-plated. We know that foreman Adolf Pato...ka,, was in charge of bicycle manufacture at the Kohouts. He was a cycling fan and among the first to go touring on the high-wheel bicycle.

Throughout their period of manufacture, Kohout bicycles featured a robust design, but were thus also heavy. Promotional leaflets claimed this robustness as an advantage because of the very bad Bohemian roads. But this was only partly true. Another reason was the fact that the factory made primarily heavy-duty gears and large machines, that is, nothing intricate. People who wanted a bicycle from Smíchov had to accept that they would not be getting a racing bicycle. Bicycles remained a marginal, almost accidental business. But utmost care was devoted to their manufacture — Kohout bicycles are characteristic and unique, with their style and elegance of their own.

An important milestone was 11 June 1882, when a race organized by an *Allgemeine Sport-Zeitung* editor took place in Vienna. Josef Kohout won this Austrian one-mile championship in 3 minutes and

41.1 seconds in front of his brother František and German champion T.H.S. Walker. František Kohout won the two- and ten-mile races. The Kohout brothers' victory on Smíchov bicycles gave a name to those machines: the 1883 catalogue already called the Kohout's products "Champion" bicycles. They were manufactured in five sizes, 48, 50, 52, 54 and 56 inches, and sold at prices ranging from 130 to 145 guilders, which represented an average worker's wages for about six months. For comparison, subscription to *Cyklista* monthly cost 2.4 guilders, and a telephone set cost 30 guilders. Standard equipment supplied with the bicycles included a small leather bag, an oil can and a universal wrench. Pictures in advertisements and the original bicycles themselves indicate that they were painted with red and green lines. The 1883 catalogue, apparently the first of a series of annual catalogues, shows various accessories such as lamps, bells, bags, and stands.

There were more than one thousand cyclists in Bohemia in 1884. Many of them rode Kohouts. The years 1883 and 1884 seem to have been the heyday of the factory. Cycling had become quite popular by then, while imports of foreign bicycles were not too much in evidence. Up to 1885, about 600 Kohouts were probably produced. Advertisements frequently offered second-hand "Champion" bicycles for 75 to 110 guilders. The first advertisements of the company, placed in the newly started *Cyklista* periodical, offered various models of tricycles for one, two and even four persons. These were imported English machines to which Kohout merely added his label. In June, Kohout advertised himself as an agent of the Rudge factory. In June 1886, he offered the Rover Safety in his publicity and was the agent for Rudge and also for Singer and Starley & Sutton. After June 1886, there was no mention whatsoever of his own "Champion" bicycles.

The bicycles that were imported to Bohemia were more expensive, because of the import duty imposed on them to protect domestic production. But the novel features displayed by the imported machines put pressure on Kohout to continue upgrading his bicycles. In 1885, whole-page advertisements began to offer Howe, Hillman, Herbert & Cooper brands, while small advertisements offered second-hand Club, Premier, Challenge and other models.

What did the "Champion" bicycle look like by the mid-1880s? Among those that we know, number 331 was the first to feature a Stanley head. No more accurate information can be given because we do not

Fig. 0207. Advertising in *Cyklista* magazine in 1885.

know of any other “Champion” bicycle numbered between 107 and 331. Also, Aeolus ball bearings started appearing more often.

Number 564 is the first to have a hollow fork, then follow numbers 637, 699, 707, 739, 752, 764, 839, 864 and 872. The hollow forks are adjusted to hold Aeolus ball bearings. Number 650 is the lowest known to bear the first oval label engraved with a rooster (the name Kohout means rooster) and the text “Champion Bicycle, J. Kohout, Smíchov”. This label cannot be found on all of the other pieces but only on numbers 699, 707, 752, 764, 833, 839, 864, and 872.

In short, this was not full-scale production but piecemeal assembly, manufacture undertaken to a particular order. For example, number 637 — a beautiful 58-inch model — has an Aeolus rear ball-bearing. The hollow front fork is fluted, its cross-section is an eight shape. Also the last two known numbers, 864 and 872, have their rear wheels with ball bearings.

For how long “Champion” bicycles were made and how many of them were assembled also remains unknown. Let’s hear what Josef Kohout has to say. In 1891 he wrote: “After 1885, Czech production started facing keen international competition. English machines in particular were imported to Bohemia. When in 1887 bicycle design again progressed in England because new, safety bicycles were made, Czech production unfortunately stopped competing. Today, we see English and German products in Bohemia almost exclusively, despite high custom duties which are supposed to protect domestic labor from foreign competition.” The high wheelers and the safeties with their chains were beyond the capabilities of small manufacturers, and for large Czech companies the bicycle market was too limited. Did the manufacture of “Champion” bicycles come to an end, then? According to Josef Kohout, writing in the book *One Hundred Years of Work*, published to honor the Jubilee Exhibition held in Prague in 1891: “Of Czech companies engaged in bicycle manufacture, the

following were represented at the Jubilee Exhibition in Prague: J. Kohout, mill machinery factory at Smíchov (two high Champion bicycles with accessories), Václav Zwetschke, mechanic at Kolín (low safety bicycle), Adolf Lewinter, bicycle factory in Prague (various models) and Karel Hlavsa, mechanical engineer in Kladno (children’s bicycles, safeties and safeties with cushions).”

Kohout himself thus confirms that high-wheelers were made at Smíchov as late as 1891. A patent from 1888 also confirms that they were serious about high-wheel bicycles at Smíchov at the end of the 1880s. Messrs Havlík and Kohout patented “a safeguarding device for bicycles against falling forward, called Insurance.” This was a small metallic gadget, mounted on the spoon to allow rotation. When the machine hit a hole in the road or a rock and started tipping forward, the metallic piece was stopped by the rubber tire and prevented the bicycle from turning over completely. The inventors were responding to Fischer’s similar anti-cropper device from 1887, published in *Bicycling News* No. 565 of 13 August 1887. It was probably as ineffective and useless an invention as the Kohout-Havlík gadget. Nevertheless, it suggests that Smíchov was still seriously involved with the high wheeler in 1888.

Since the highest known number of a Kohout is 872, we assume that a total of about 900 were made. It is not known when exactly the last bicycle was built. This is the extent of our modest knowledge of the first high-wheelers in Bohemia, and in Austria-Hungary in general.

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