6.

Bicycle Touring in the Late Nineteenth Century

Duncan R. Jamieson

MIDWAY between the completion of the trans-American railroad in 1869 and Orville and Wilbur Wright's powered flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903, a lone English immigrant to the United States rode a high-wheeler across North America. Starting in April, 1884 the twenty-eight year old Thomas Stevens rode a fifty-inch bicycle across the United States, from San Francisco to Boston, and then the rest of the way around the world, reaching Yokohama, Japan, in December, 1886. He saw people and places unknown to the western world, and wrote about them for interested readers. He attracted huge crowds, mostly friendly, wherever he went. He proved the feasibility of long-distance bicycle travel. Stevens showed others that there need be no limits. It was an age of the possible, with America beginning its second century and England expanding its empire.

Part I

For about a generation the bicycle provided swift, inexpensive, reliable, independent transportation — something that had never existed previously. As soon as people began attaching motors to two- and four-wheeled vehicles, the bicycle became, for most, little more than a child's toy. In its March, 1900, issue, the premier American sporting publication *Outing* (which began some twenty years earlier as *Outing and the Wheelmen*) listed for the first time a section entitled "The Automobile." A couple of years later the magazine dropped its section on "Bicycling," indicating the change in times. A scant fifteen years after Thomas Stevens became the first person to ride around the world, the bicycle had been relegated to obscurity. Granted, people continued to ride bicycles on long, interesting journeys, including several

round-the-world adventures, but the public's interest in their feats declined appreciably. During the bicycle's heyday, it allowed people to explore, to travel, and to tour. As such, it provided a way to tie the world together. Stevens proved it possible, and the others who followed simply confirmed that conclusion.

It is important to make a distinction at this point; these men and women rode bicycles and loved the experience, but they had no other viable alternative. For many of them the bicycle simply provided a means to an end, and probably none of them ever saw the bicycle as the end in itself. However much they enjoyed bicycling, and however attached they became to their bicycles, none of these people made a career of cycling. The people who rode were ordinary citizens. They had no government connections, they were not particularly well-to-do, and with only an occasional exception they did nothing extraordinary in their lives, other than bicycling. Their thoughts and opinions, then, perhaps more accurately reflect those of the common people of their day.

These nineteenth century bicyclists provide a glimpse into a society that no longer exists. Trains, planes and automobiles, along with radio, television, email, and the world wide web, have obliterated distance, and with it much of the distinctive characteristics of other societies. While people continue to travel cross-country and around the world by wheel, both the travel and the world are different; therefore to do what these intrepid travelers did cannot be replicated. For example, in 1984 a group of bicyclists rode their high-wheelers in the century-old wheel tracks of Thomas Stevens. However admirable a ride, paved roads and graded mountain passes meant their experiences in no way matched those of Stevens. In a similar vein, Mark Jenkins crossed Siberia by bicycle nearly a century after the Englishman Robert Louis Jefferson's epic ride. While Jenkins had to deal with severe privations, he still had twentieth century advantages Jefferson could not even dream of.[1]

In the late-nineteenth century, cycling literature filled a significant portion of the pages of the popular press. Mainstream magazines with large circulations carried articles on bicycle travel, which instructed readers on how to choose and maintain a wheel, and how to learn to ride. Many of the travel articles included sufficiently detailed directions and maps to allow the reader to follow the route. Several magazines devoted specifically to cycling appeared, some lasting only a few months while others ran for years. The *New York Clipper*, a well-established sporting and theatrical paper, included a weekly section on the wheel. Major newspapers from San Francisco to Chicago to Boston all included wheeling sections as well as sports news.

The single most important criterion for long- distance bicycling has nothing to do with physical strength – rather it is commitment. The bicyclist must decide to complete the ride, and once that decision has been made, the physical training becomes relatively easy. As with any physical activity, the more one rides, the easier it becomes to ride. To complete a transcontinental tour, or to circumcycle the globe, after the first few days the body conditions itself to the rigors of the road, and it simply remains to convince the mind that the goal is worth pursuing. The second most important aspect in long distance touring is the ability to devote sizeable blocks of time to the endeavor. To ride across the United States requires several weeks, as would a bicycle ride from England to Turkey, or Moscow, or the Holy Land. To ride around the world would require a couple of years. If commitment and time represent the two most important criteria, financial resources must also be considered. If the rider lacked sufficient financial resources, a sponsor might be found to underwrite the adventure. Thomas Stevens had saved enough money to cross the United States; without the backing of *Outing* his journey would have ended in Boston.

The long-distance bicyclists whose exploits appeared in the pages of magazines and newspapers clearly fit *Webster*'s definition of "sport," which includes "any activity or experience that gives enjoyment or recreation" which also requires "more or less vigorous bodily exertion. . . ." Beyond the ordinary pedaling, the lack of adequate roads frequently forced cyclists to cross rivers on railroad bridges. Whenever a train approached, the cyclist would stand on the end of a railroad tie, and dangle the bicycle over the edge until the track was again clear. The cyclist then lifted the bicycle, which often weighed fifty pounds or more, back to the track to continue the journey. More specifically, Allan Guttman defines sports as "non-utilitarian physical contests" against either oneself, nature, or another competitor.[2] The long-distance cyclists competed against nature, simply in their ability to move forward; they competed against their previous mark, be it speed, distance, or location; and they competed against one another, although they all claimed they rode only for themselves

Part II

Change — both positive and negative — resonated through the English and American industrial societies during the late-nineteenth century. Expansion, technological innovation, and urban growth typified the people's lives during the 1880s and 1890s. As the United States witnessed the closing of its frontier and the beginning of its "empire," England's far-flung holdings guaranteed that the sun never set on the British flag. The scientific revolution exploded into every walk of life, from education to medicine, religion, business and industry. People celebrated their ability to manipulate the environment through the industrial revolution. Still, despite the progress, in many ways western societies regressed. Cities were becoming increasingly crowded and dirty as the "dangerous classes" overran the major urban centers in both the United States and Great Britain. As cities deteriorated the middle class, people with both disposable income and leisure time made possible by the rapid expansion of business and industry, looked for ways to escape to the countryside, where they could leave the crime, corruption and pollution behind. The "white man's burden" echoed throughout America and western Europe. While the British subdued ethnic populations around the globe, the United States drove the Native Americans onto reservations, established Jim Crow segregation in the South, and began building its own empire abroad.

Prior to the introduction of the bicycle, other than walking, the horse provided the sole means of long-distance, independent travel. Horse travel, however, suffered from three major drawbacks: it was expensive, labor intensive and time consuming. A good horse cost $150.00 plus an additional $25.00 a month for maintenance. At the same time a new bicycle dropped in price from $150.00 in 1893 to as low as $80.00 by 1897; readily available used wheels cost significantly less. On the road the rider had to provide the horse's maintenance. To Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote of his travels, the horse proved to be "flighty, timid, delicate in eating, of tender health; he is too valuable and too restive to be left alone, so that you are chained to your brute as to a fellow galley-slave; a dangerous road puts him out of his wits; in short, he's an uncertain and exacting ally, and adds thirty-fold to the troubles of the voyager."[3]

The transportation revolution had begun to shrink the world. Steamships and railroads made time and distance less of an obstacle, but they separated people from the places through which they traveled. The rise of bicycles, which typified the people's energy, allowed people to travel and maintain close contact with the land over which they traveled. For those with even limited means and initiative, the bicycle opened new horizons for travel, exercise, learning, and recreation.

Those who traveled by railroad or stagecoach had their mobility restricted because they went only when and where the coach or train went. The bicycle freed its rider from these constraints. The rider could travel alone or with friends with virtually no advance preparation. "There is no rush to a railway station, no preliminary wading through time-table, not even a horse to be harnessed–no anxiety of any kind. A little oil in the bearings, perhaps a few strokes of the inflator or the tightening of a nut, stride over the saddle, and off you go." Even if riding in a group, the individual went at his or her own pace, or changed the route as desired. Always ready to carry the rider wherever and whenever desired, the bicycle dramatically increased mobility at the same time as it kept its rider close to the land. Exposed to the elements, pedaling at a sedate six to twelve miles an hour, the rider retained the intimacy achieved by the walker while expanding the range. Even whizzing along at a scorcher's pace of sixteen to twenty-five miles an hour, the scenes scarcely blurred. One could see the heather in bloom, or visit an historic shrine. "All along the road the imagination is keenly at work; as you pedal on you draw mental pictures of the spot as you conceive it to be, and you wonder how nearly your mental picture is to correctness."[4]

The bicycle represented freedom by providing its riders with a hitherto unavailable means of travel. Few people rode horses or took a private carriage for any distance. A decade after his pioneering bicycle journey, Thomas Stevens rode a mustang across Russia, averaging less than twenty miles a day. If he really pushed the horse he could ride thirty, but the poor beast then developed saddle sores. Even at that, it did not equal his bicycle mileage. A later traveler, Dervla Murphy, who used both bicycle and horse, in the early 1960s rode her bicycle from Dunkirk to Delhi, India, averaging seventy to eighty miles a day. In Pakistan she tried horseback riding instead of cycling for part of the journey. She covered thirty-four miles one day, carrying fodder for the horse behind the saddle, but found it difficult to get enough water.[5]

The bicycle eliminated these problems, as well as bringing the classes together, with the millionaire and the shop girl alike enjoying the healthy benefits of the wheel. Whole families went riding together, with "the parents renewing their youth and joining with their children in a common pleasure which is also a well-spring of health to all of them." Bicycling brought out the best in people. Anyone who has ridden at all is "struck with the uniformly quiet, orderly and decorous conduct of the great army of wheelmen. They are seldom boisterous, and the rowdies are the great exception." One rider argued that "a bicycle is better than a horse to ninety-nine men and women out of a hundred, because it costs almost nothing to keep, and it is never tired. It will take one three times as far as a horse in the same number of days or weeks. In touring with a bicycle I can make fifty miles a day as comfortably as twenty miles on foot, and I can carry all the clothing I need, besides a camera and other traps." Another avid bicyclist, while noting the wheel's faults (it was addictive, it did poorly in inclement weather, and it took some time to learn to ride), continued that walking and horseback riding required more energy and resulted in more discomfort. "One hundred miles in a day is a fair day's ride on the road for an average rider; fifty miles a day is a pastime; a run of ten or twenty miles of an evening, or to a morning breakfast call on a friend, is a pleasant and wholesome diversion." The wheel went anywhere a horse and buggy went, but with less inconvenience, concern, expense, energy, and time. By providing fast, cheap, independent transportation, the bicycle gave people the opportunity to leave the urban wilderness behind for the bucolic countryside. In the process, bicyclists improved their physical health while they stimulated their minds by visiting places otherwise inaccessible. For the more enterprising, the bicycle made possible tours of hundreds or thousands of miles, and for the very adventuresome few, travels around the world. Many more enjoyed their adventures by reading of the exploits in magazines and books.[6]

For those so inclined, long-distance bicycle riding combined a sense of adventure with an awareness of the land and its people and an opportunity for introspection, which gave these riders a singular glimpse at their world. Some combined bicycling with another pastime; the yachtsman Frederic Cavan took his wheel on board and recommended the practice to his fellow sailors. Others used the wheel to travel to places they had never visited, and then took a train when the scenery proved either familiar or too demanding. Some cyclists retraced the steps of earlier travelers. Joseph and Elizabeth Robins Pennell followed the route of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims in one adventure and Lawrence Sterne in another. Many recommended taking a train to a starting point rather than riding there. When their time off did not match their holiday plans in 1896, the Pennells decided to circumcycle London in stages. From the town center they took their wheels on the train to the perimeter and rode for a few days. Then at the next opportunity they went out in a different direction. "We meant to get beyond the town, beyond its sordid suburbs, into the surrounding country, which, within a twenty or thirty miles radius of Charing Cross, is as lovely as any in London."[7]

Part III

These long-distance bicycle riders fell into general categories. Robert Louis Jefferson lived to ride. He completed solo rides to Moscow, to Constantinople, to Khiva, and across Siberia, along with several other, less spectacular journeys. Others, for example Joseph and Elizabeth Robins Pennell, rode to live. As an illustrator and author respectively, they spent most of their adult, married life, bicycling about Europe, traveling to assignments by wheel. In addition to their other sketching and writing, she wrote and he illustrated dozens of books and articles describing their adventures on wheels. A third category included those who traveled by bicycle because it met their needs. William Hunter Workman and his wife, Fanny Bullock, went to Europe to live after he retired from his Massachusetts medical practice. They traveled extensively in Spain, Algeria, and India by bicycle because the wheel allowed them to go when and where they wanted at a pace that suited them. Despite their different motivations, these men and women recognized that traveling was about the distance and the intermediate sights, not the destination. Bicycle travelers, even Jefferson, hell-bent on covering the most distance in the least time, reveled in the miles covered, engaging the people, scenery and struggle.

Part IV

Travel literature proved to be very popular in the nineteenth century, and late nineteenth century

readers enjoyed a variety of travel books. It was in the nineteenth century that scholars began to recognize Marco Polo's *The Description of The World* as accurate. On his deathbed he confessed to those around him that he never told all that he saw for fear that people would not believe him, indeed a feeling that proved true for several hundred years. More a scientific treatise than either travel literature or autobiography, it records little of what he saw or did. The work circulated in manuscript form until the first printed edition appeared in 1477.

The reading public enjoyed Robert Louis *Stevenson's Travel with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, one of the most popular of the nineteenth century travel books. The year before Stevenson had published his first book, *An Inland Voyage*, in which he chronicled his canoe journey through Belgium and northern France. For those with a more audacious interest, Frederick Burnaby's *A Ride to Khiva* or his later work, *On Horseback through Asia Minor* also proved popular. Because westerners knew so little of the mysterious East, to help readers understand and enjoy Thomas Stevens' narrative as he pedaled through Asia, *Outing*'s editor recommended Arminius Vambery's, *Travels in Central Asia*, and E.D.G. Prime's, *Around the World*, as two books with good information on the regions Stevens would pass through in the upcoming articles in *Outing*.

The men and women who rode and wrote of their experiences awheel simply added another aspect to this genre. When these riders wrote, other bicyclists as well as the non-riding public took a great interest in their articles and books. Readers participated vicariously in the adventures of Thomas Stevens. Because they did not write for general distribution, only a few select readers knew of the Australian pair, G. W. Burston and H. R. Stokes, who rode around Australia, through Java, Burma and India, and then parts of the Middle East and Europe on their way around the world.[8] The public followed the progress of Thomas Allen and William Sachtleben, young Americans who, inspired by Stevens, the day after their graduation from Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, became the first to ride through the interior of China, as a part of their ride around the world.[9] Next, readers followed the wheel-tracks of fellow American Frank Lenz who circumnavigated the globe from east to west. When his letters stopped the interest in, and the search for, Lenz intensified, until the public learned of his untimely death at the hands of Kurdish bandits in northern Persia. Undeterred by his murder, the Englishmen John Foster Fraser, Samuel Edward Lowe and Francis Herbert Lowe caught the public's attention as they successfully completed their round-the-world journey.[10] Readers did not seem to tire, as *The Sunday Inter Ocean*, a Chicago newspaper, sponsored the expedition of H. Darwin McIlrath and his wife Hattie. Hattie may well have been the first, although hardly the last, woman to bicycle around the world.[11] In the early years of the round-the-world cyclists, these riders regularly met people who had never seen or even heard of a bicycle. One can only imagine the amazement of the Chinese or the Persians at the sight of someone approaching on a wheeled conveyance which held itself up as if by magic.

It seems inconceivable to consider the globe-girdling riders — Stevens, Burston and Stokes, Allen and Sachtleben, Lenz, Fraser, Lunn and Lowe, and the McIlraths — to be other than explorers. Each ventured into territory previously unknown to the wheel, and for at least part of the time, territory unknown to westerners. They also fit Daniel Boorstin's definition of a traveler. Boorstin traced the word "travel" back to the English "travail" and then back to the Latin trepalium, which was an instrument of torture. "To journey — 'to travail,' or (later) to travel–meant to do something laborious or troublesome." Even a cursory reading of their books indicates that the globe-girdlers were all travelers, as were so many other of the early cyclists. Still, some were tourists as well, a word that came into the language in the late eighteenth century from the Latin and Greek for "a tool describing a circle."[12] The difference between the two rested on the amount and degree of energy expended. The traveler worked at the journey while the tourist allowed events to unfold. Circumcyclers like Stevens, Allen and Sachtleben, Lenz and the McIlraths sought out adventure. Burston and Stokes, on the other hand, seem to fit the definition of tourist as well, as they did not venture into areas where roads were few. Fraser, Lunn and Lowe, for all the travail of their journey, might still be described as tourists. They often found rooms paid for in exchange for advertising. They hired eighteen porters to carry their wheels, and in some cases themselves, through two hundred and fifty miles of China where riding proved impossible. Earlier they had taken their wheels on the train on three separate occasions in India.

Readers also followed the less adventuresome George Thayer, who sent updates of his transcontinental ride to the Hartford *Evening Post*,

and Clyde Callan, who wrote to *the Glasgow Herald* about his tour to the Middle East.[13] The public followed the successful attempt of Tom Winder to ride around the perimeter of the United States in three hundred days, and the failure of Frank Murphey and Clarence Darling to ride through every state and its capital in eighteen months.[14] People read of the travels of author C. W. Willis and his wife Lillian, who rode in both the United States and Europe.[15] Charles Edwardes tour of Jutland and Tony Hammerton's rambles through Scotland both found interested readers.[16]

Many of the books and articles produced between 1880 and 1900 provided sufficient detail to allow the prospective traveler to take the same route. The Pennells frequently included maps to guide prospective followers. C. L. Freeston wrote of his riding in the Alps to encourage English wheel enthusiasts to try it. "The vast majority of my readers are more likely to desire as much definite information as can be given within the limits of a work of this length, with as little of the personal as possible, or of the mere impressionism that scorns all reference to useful facts and figures." Other writers told the reader about everything done and seen. If written well it proved interesting; "its practical worth, however, is oftener than not in inverse ratio to its wealth of personal detail."[17]

In addition to the travel books and articles several writers produced novels and short stories in which traveling by bicycle played an important role. H. G. Wells made the bicycle central to his early novel, *The Wheels of Chance*, while Jerome K. Jerome used the bicycle as a vehicle to explore German society in *Three Men on the Bummel*. In Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Sir Launcelot and his knights arrived on their bicycles to save the king from execution. In Frank Stockton's *A Bicycle of Cathay* the hero ventures forth in search of love and adventure, but finds that both awaited him at home. Other writers whose fame has faded, like Mrs. Edward Kennard, Florine McCray or Clinton Ross, also used bicycles in their fiction.[18] Bicycles and their riders even figured prominently in ghost stories. J. W. Allen told his readers of the bicyclist who had been killed seven years earlier when he failed to negotiate a steep descent, but who continued to ride the local roads at night, scaring people and terrifying horses.[19] As might be expected, these writers were all riders themselves.

Part V

To writers of fiction and non-fiction alike, nothing equaled traveling by wheel. A century before Boorstin wrote, Winfred Garrison, who traveled through Europe by train and by wheel, reached a similar conclusion. "The traveler by wheel sees a good many things worth seeing and encounters a good many experiences worth having, which are quite out of the reach of him who travels by the more conventional means." He much preferred to see new places over the handle-bars rather than through a train window, and he wrote to persuade others to do the same. He separated sightseers who rushed from place to place to see it all and return home exhausted from travelers for pleasure who took the time to leave their cares and worries behind while they enjoyed new sights, sounds, and experiences. Travelers for pleasure paused where and when they wanted to enjoy whatever unexpected scenes they happened upon. To do this required freedom from lost luggage and missed railway connections. "So far as I know, these conditions are met nowhere so perfectly as in a bicycle tour. You have no time-tables to conform to, and, with your baggage all on your wheel, you can change plans at a moment's notice. You can go where the tourists seldom go and stop where they never stop. You can be as active or as lazy as you like. In fact, you can ramble and roam more easily on a bicycle than by any other conveyance."[20]

It became a commonplace activity for bicyclists to ride across North America or the length of Great Britain, while others attempted around the world rides. The route from Lands End at the southern extreme of England to John O'Groats in the northern end of Scotland became a "classic route," with riders vying to complete it in the shortest possible time. By 1892 the time had been reduced to four days, seventeen hours and eleven minutes. In the United States J. Lillie set a record for crossing the continent in fifty-nine days in 1891. G. D. Mitchell was riding around the world in 1892, reportedly having made it as far as Calcutta, India. These people are known only by a very few, very small articles which appeared in the news. Undoubtedly there are many others, like Canadian Karl Creelman who rode around the world between 1899 and 1901 and George Loher, who rode across the country and kept a diary later published by his granddaughter.[21] Even those unwilling to travel on their own, who wanted the comfort of an organized tour, found opportunities in the tours organized by

Frank Elwell, who annually guided bicyclists through Europe.[22] Even school groups engaged in organized tours of England and the continent. With tens of thousands of bicyclists in the North America and Europe in the 1890s, there had to have been more long-distance cyclists than the literature records, but since they never published a chronicle of their exploits, they have been lost to history. There exist a few citations concerning Annie Londonberry (or Londonderry), who rode around the world on a bet, leaving from Boston on June 20, 1894 and ending her ride September 24, 1895. In this instance, however, the paucity of news coverage leaves the veracity of her feat in serious doubt. The sketchy press coverage, her itinerary and the lack of any cycling references, makes her ride, and even her existence, questionable.[23]

Part VI

In the Victorian Age as well as today, most people with cycles are not cyclers. To ride in Central Park, the Bois de Boulogne, or Hyde Park is fine, but it does not make one a cyclist. According to Joseph and Elizabeth Robins Pennell, "they only cycle in earnest who journey forth in quest of adventures by the roadside, like Borrow in his tinker's cart, like Stevenson with his donkey." Even though millions of bicycles were manufactured and sold during the 1880s and 1890s, cyclists in the narrow definition proposed by the Pennells represented the minority. "Nobody realizes the force of this passion till he rides a wheel himself." Until then he likely thinks cyclists crazy. But once he learns to ride, he finds that he enjoys vigorous exercise, and as "he gains in exact knowledge of his vehicle and its powers, he finds that it becomes really a part of himself." Whenever cyclists ventured forth, they found excitement and joy riding over roads traveled hundreds or thousands of times as well as in forging new routes where the bicycle had never been seen. "To tour is always a joy…" During the late nineteenth century most of the places where cyclists went had never seen such a device before. In the late 1890s, the Pennells visited Spain, which they found interesting for its natural beauty and pioneering spirit: "it is but a year ago that we came to a whole district in Andalusia where a bicycle had never been seen and where the old sensations were revived."[24]

During their lives, their feats on wheels attracted significant attention during that brief period known as the golden age of bicycling, before the automobile eclipsed the interest. Cyclists, generally young and predominantly male, did not make cycle touring, or adventure seeking, their life's work. Those who have made a name for themselves did so in another venue. The Pennells are remembered for writing and drawing, the Workmans for mountain climbing, John Foster Fraser for raising twenty three million dollars in Liberty Loans during The Great War. The one exception seems to be Thomas Stevens, who engaged in a number of adventures before returning to England and settling down with a wife and family. Stevens' obituary in both *The Times* and *The New York Times* focused on his bicycle, as does the brief entry in *Appleton's Cyclopedia of American Biography*.

Unlike the major names normally associated with bicycling — Major Taylor, Eddie Merckx, Bernard Hinault, Connie Carpenter, Rebecca Twigg, Greg LeMond and now Lance Armstrong — the names of Thomas Stevens, John Foster Fraser, H. Darwin and Hattie McIlrath, or Robert Louis Jefferson are bicyclists whose names have been lost to history. The difference between the two groups is that while the first made names for themselves as professional racers, the second used the bicycle as a convenient means to travel to places otherwise inaccessible. No matter how committed to bicycle travel, the second group never saw the bicycle as their livelihood, although many of the around-the-world bicyclers found sponsors for their journeys.

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