

APPENDIX

THE MILLER COLLECTION OF BICYCLES AND VELOCIPEDES AT U.C. DAVIS

ANDREW RITCHIE

[With thanks to Jacques Graber for compiling the information about Pierce Miller]

In a storage area of one of the parking garages on the University of Davis campus can be found an extraordinary collection of bicycles and velocipedes. The eventual disposition of the collection is still in the process of being decided, and public access to it is limited to those who make an appointment to see it. However, the presence among the machines of many totally unrestored early three- and four-wheeled velocipedes (as well as several interesting commercially manufactured and 'home-made' boneshakers) meant that many astonished eyebrows were raised among Conference attendees, and a vigorous debate was conducted as to the appropriate approaches towards the conservation of these machines, including how they might be displayed.

There has been recently, it is generally agreed, a shift away from restoration towards stabilization and conservation, and the feeling of most of the attendees with a background in museum and

conservation work was that little else except a tickle with a feather duster should be done to the most interesting and valuable of these machines, if their historical 'presence' and authenticity as artifacts is going to be honored and retained. It was felt that strenuous representations should be made (and I believe were made) to those in a position of control over the most valuable and historically interesting items in the Miller Collection that any restorations currently in progress, or planned in the near future, should be shelved while qualified experts be consulted about what exactly should be done, and that stabilization rather than restoration was the most appropriate way forward. The ICHC is not in a position to offer specific guidelines in such a situation, but it is able to draw on a worldwide network of qualified professionally-experienced experts.

What follows below is an attempt to make sense of the varied history of the collection. I am grateful to Jacques Graber for supplying much of the information on Nilsson and Miller.



Above: Fig. A.1. Thomas Fifth & Sons velocipede, c. 1823.

Right: Fig. A.2. H.B. Smith Co. Star high-wheel safety bike, c. 1887.



WALTER NILSSON

Nilsson was a remarkable individual. He made a successful career as a performer riding his unicycles in a variety of acts, including vaudeville and Broadway-type shows in the United States and abroad. There are many reviews and accounts of his feats performing at movie palaces and vaudeville houses.

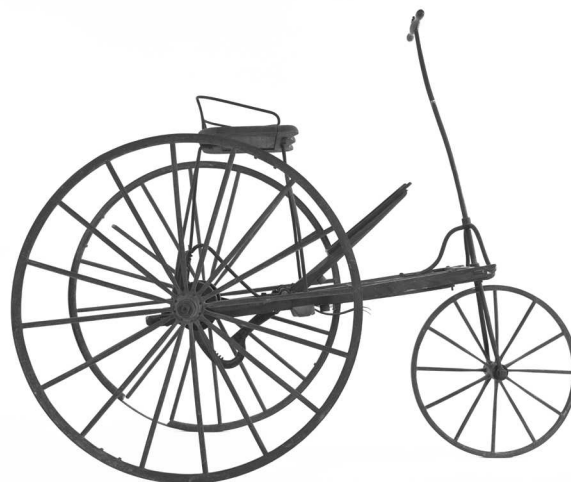
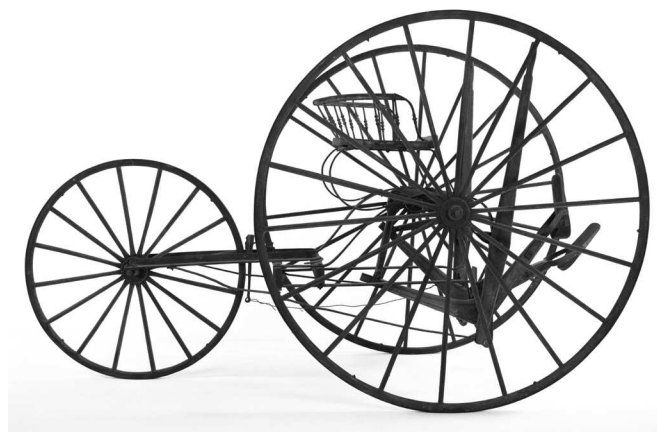
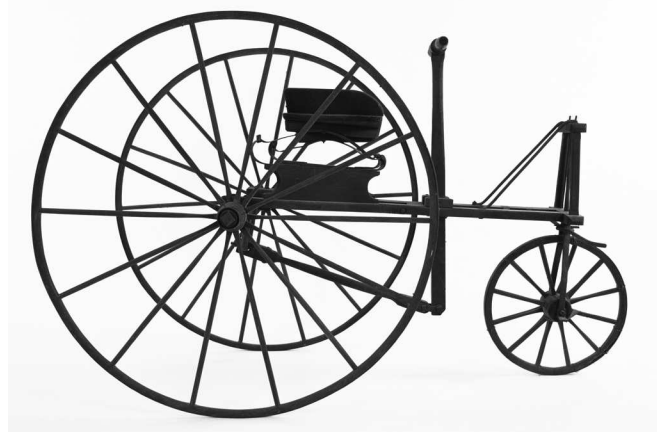
In 1933 or 1934, when he was 33, Nilsson rode across the United States on an 8½-foot unicycle. It is claimed that he rode 3,306 miles in 117 days from New York to Los Angeles on this “giraffe” without falling once.

Apparently, Nilsson’s fascination with monocyce transportation got him involved in 1936 with an elaborate motorized form of monocyce, based upon an old 1869 design by Richard Hemmings of Connecticut. The 1869 Hemmings monocyce concept required the seated rider to hand-crank the driving mechanism of ropes, pulleys and wheels which drove inside a larger outside

wheel that would roll along the ground. The picture, from the book by Michael Dregni, *The Spirit of the Motorcycle* (Voyageur Press, 1936), shows Nilsson with his monowheel.

At the Fox Theatre in Oakland, California, according to the *Oakland Tribune* (date not given), “Nilsson has performed many of his cycle stunts in various parts of the world and under strange conditions. One of the most unusual and perhaps one of the most dangerous was when he rode a unicycle around the top of the Cheops pyramid in Egypt. Besides this ride on the pyramid, Nilsson has ridden on the top cornices of many of the world’s tallest buildings... Nilsson’s stunts are not confined to outdoors; he does many almost as hazardous while mounted on a single wheel high above the stage floor at the Oakland theatre, where he is appearing in Fanchon and Marco’s “Up In the Air.”

Nilsson also performed at the old Roxy Theatre in New York, where he was in a popular Olsen and Johnson musical stage performance, “Hellzapoppin,” which ran from 1938 to 1941, which included dancing and vaudeville acts. In the period from 1938 to 1941, he also appeared at the 46th Street Theatre, the Winter Garden theatre and the Majestic Theatre, all of which I believe are in New York.



Top left: Fig. A.3. Treadle-lever-driven tricycle, c. 1870.

Bottom left: Fig. A.4. Lever-driven tricycle, c. 1870.

Above: Fig. A.5. Treadle-driven tricycle, c. 1870.

During the course of his performing career, Nilsson collected many of the vintage bicycles in what later became the Miller Collection (although I think I am correct in saying that it is not known exactly which were collected by Nilsson and which by Miller).

Further information about Nilsson was published by Charlotte Fox Rogers in an article in *On One Wheel* Newsletter, Vol. XVII, No. 1, pp. 4–5, which is extracted below:

Walter Nilsson's Ride: You'd Better Believe It!

Intrigued by the discrepancies in reports of Walter Nilsson's age at the time of his transcontinental unicycle ride, the year of the trip, the number of miles traversed, and the place of completion (San Francisco as in the bet with Charles Johnson or San Diego as per *American Bicyclist*) in 117 days, I decided in August 1991 to make further inquiries.

After his review of these items, the author concluded that though Walter Nilsson had been featured in four Ripley's cartoons (one of which Dr. Rogers had seen on Nilsson's bike shop wall), he had never won the annual Ripley's contest nor had the Ripley organization sponsored nor even monitored Nilsson's cross-country ride.

Three items help establish the facts. One is an undated, hand-written letter to Mr. Ripley from Lillian Sohmer of Bronx, New York, bringing to his attention the fact that Nilsson had ridden from coast to coast (George Washington Bridge in New York City to San Diego) 3,386 miles "including detours" in 117 days. The cities mentioned in the letter indicate that he departed from his projected route at Oklahoma City, go-

ing south to Fort Worth and then west to El Paso, Phoenix, Yuma, and San Diego instead of to the altitude area of Santa Fe, Gallup, and Flagstaff, and on to Los Angeles.

The 1957 Santa Monica (California) *Evening Outlook* article by Pierson states that Walter Nilsson was born in Minneapolis and moved with his family to Southern California in 1900. His father was a railroad engineer, which probably explains the "narrow gauge mule." Walter began performing recitations while a child and built a giraffe unicycle, which he rode in shows at about age 11 or 12.

He was in an early movie, spent several decades riding unicycles and trick bicycles in vaudeville, including four seasons on Broadway with "Helzapoppin'," and played on bills with Joe Cook, John Barrymore, Eddie Cantor, Will Rogers, Phil Baker, and the Marx Brothers. He did command performances for Hitler and the King of England, spent years entertaining US troops at home and abroad, and appeared on the Milton Berle, Ed Sullivan, Big Top and Supercircus TV shows.

Nilsson designed and built a motor-driven monocycle, built and sold numerous "funny cycles," and collected hundreds of bicycles of all sorts, most of which he sold to other collectors, including Henry Ford and Walter Chrysler.

In the light of John Weiss' documentation (see John Weiss, "Destination San Francisco" in this



Left: Fig. A.6. Bamboo Cycle Company, bamboo ladies' bike, 1896.

Above: Fig. A.7. Elliott Hickory Cycle wood-frame bike, c. 1890.

volume of the Proceedings) of the fact that many of the transcontinental cyclists' trips were in essence publicity stunts and fakes, it seems very likely that Nilsson's unicycle ride was highly questionable.

PIERCE MILLER

Miller was an industrious rancher of the California Central Valley who developed the idea of a tourist attraction built around transportation, and did so by collecting an impressive selection of wagons, coaches, sleighs and bicycles.

Pierce Miller was born in 1886 in a small town in Pennsylvania. In 1906, he traveled by train, working as a cook on the Santa Fe Railroad. He then moved to Los Angeles, where he bought and ran a 40 acre dairy. He returned briefly to Pennsylvania, living there only another year, during which time he married. He then returned to California and bought a peach farm in Hughson, in the middle part of the Central Valley about 10 miles south-east of the then-small agricultural town of Modesto. Here he raised peaches, and as a skilled farmer, developed a pruning technique which enabled him to increase his yield. In 1928, he achieved the highest yield per acre for peaches in California.



Above: Fig. A.8. American dual-suspension bike, c. 1889, maker unknown.

Right: Fig. A.9. Porter-Gilmore Cygnet loop-frame ladies' bicycle, 1896.

Miller worked mainly as a farmer during the Great Depression. Times were difficult, even for farming, and Miller adopted a multi-tasking occupation. He cleverly adapted a truck that he could use in a dual role. He bought a Sageol flat-bed truck, originally of French manufacture and later to become Peterbuilt. It was the first fully pneumatic-tired truck in California for the transport of cargo. Then he developed a unique system which, with a quick switch, enabled him to mount a bus 'module' on the back of the truck. It was a wooden box with open windows but no glass panes. With this, he contracted with the city of Hughson between 1920 and 1930 to transport children to school. This enabled him to support himself and his family during the lean years. The truck is still on the Empire Ranch.

In 1939, he moved to the Empire Ranch, where he carried through with his idea of collecting and displaying buggies and other horse-drawn vehicles. Having lived with old buggies, wagons and similar vehicles in Pennsylvania, he had always had a fascination with these vehicles. He discovered that there were fewer of these vehicles outside Pennsylvania, so decided to showcase them. He assembled one of the most extensive collections of horse-drawn vehicles in California, which still resides at the Empire Ranch location.

But in addition to buggies, etc., Miller also developed a liking for bicycles. He bought many of the machines which are still in the Davis collection in about 1948 from Walter Nilsson.

Miller came up with the idea of creating a historic vehicles tourist attraction along one of the local Hughson roads which was well traveled. So



he put the bicycles he had purchased from Nilsson on display, along with other machines originating from other owners, as well as the significant collection of wagons, coaches and some early automobiles, including one of the first fully electric battery-powered cars.

Along with a small restaurant, this attraction would provide informative entertainment for highway travelers for many years. It was a change of traffic flows [the building of the freeway system? – AR] which brought about the decline and downfall of his roadside attraction. For many years, the bicycles and other vehicles remained hidden from view,

except for special viewings for which an appointment had to be made. In 1987, Jacques Graber was able to see the collection as part of a Wheelmen group traveling back from Yosemite National Park. He was then astonished at the incredible examples of cycling history stored in the old barns.

In the spring of 2000, the collection was made available for purchase. Joseph Miller, one of the sons of Pierce Miller, made the decision that the collection of bicycles would be sold in its entirety to the University of California, Davis, as the seed collection for its future California Bicycling History Center.



Left: Fig. A.9. Well-preserved toy tricycle, c. 1870.

Right: This c. 1920 child's tricycle is one of many "home-builts" in the collection.

