

Pierre and Ernest Michaux. The Legend

By Claude Reynaud, Domazon, France.

Pierre and Ernest Michaux are, together with Baron von Drais, are the most well-known names in cycling history. And the reason for this is that in 1894 'La France reconnaissant' decided to baptize Pierre Michaux and Ernest (one of Pierre's sons) as inventors of the velocipede with pedals on the front axle. It should be said that in 1891 and 1892 there had been erected in Karlsruhe in Germany a statue, and then a memorial tomb, in honour of Baron von Drais. Was it in reaction to this German paternity of the cycle that French Germanophobic velocipedists decided to react by also claiming recognition for a deserving Frenchman? So it was that in September 1894, France unveiled with great ceremony a monument to Pierre and Ernest Michaux at Bar-le-Duc. The municipal council of the town had endorsed it on 11 March 1893 in an enthusiastic and somewhat chauvinistic way: 'At the time when the Germans have raised a monument to Baron von Drais, inventor of that unformed machine without practical value which was the Draisienne, it seemed to Monsieur the Mayor that it was our patriotic duty to raise a similar one to Pierre Michaux....' (Archives of Bar-le-Duc. Text taken up by *L'Indépendant de l'Est*, 14 March 1893).

Hence practically all the press praised these inventors and the benefits of their invention. Published works followed amongst which the dictionary Larousse later endorsed this assertion. This national and, I have to say, international consensus on the two Michaux's being the inventors of the pedal driven velocipede has never been questioned despite the warnings of the historian David Herlihy who was already expressing reservations in 1994 (*Cycle History 5: the Proceedings of the 5th International Cycle History Conference*, p.161-169). This fine story continues to be perpetuated even in books written by modern cycle

historians. In 2011 in Paris they even celebrated (though some had reservations and misgivings) the 150th anniversary of the invention of the pedal (or the pedal driven velocipede).

In order to justify the commemoration on this occasion, they cited 'heaps of supporting evidence' which pointed to Pierre and Ernest Michaux as the inventors. Thus the affair is understood and engraved in marble at Bar-le-Duc: 'Pierre and Ernest Michaux [are the] inventors of the pedal velocipede.'

It was while working on my next book, *On the Origins of Cycle History: Sources and Proofs* that I wanted to find what we have as reliable elements in this story of pedals. It will not have escaped the reader's notice that the title is written *Sources and Proofs*. Those are the guiding rules. So to the matter:

Michaux, Pierre and Ernest: It was as necessary for me to find these sources and these proofs as it was for the 500 other subjects that I dealt with in my book. So I questioned certain historians about their writings. Now let us see what we have as 'material' leading to one, or to a number of, proofs. Here are some definitions:

1) The certain conviction (a person's firmly held belief). It must be understood that this, lying outside the scope of this paper, cannot be taken on although I have had my own conviction for a long time. A particular conviction cannot be held as evidence, as it varies according to the individual or, in our case, the historian.

2) Written documents of the time. I have to state that we haven't found a single one. Not in private archives, nor in newspapers, books, or reviews. When I speak of 'of the time,' I am targeting 1861, the supposed year of the invention finally given by Henry Michaux.

The oldest documents from the Michaux Company are the numerous

customers' letters addressed to Pierre Michaux. These have been found by our friend David Herlihy who had the privilege of consulting them at the family archive of the Olivier de Sandeval family (now in the Olivier collection deposited in the departmental archives of Caen). The oldest dates from 21 December 1867. However, Michaux must have started his work before this because his first advertisements date from May 1867. These are to be found in *Le Petit Moniteur Universel du Soir*. This commencement of activity, and that year is corroborated by the magazine *Le Vélo* of 18 May 1893. Here we find ourselves in front of an enormous problem. There is a gap of six years (!) between 1861, the supposed year of the invention and of the first written records. This is a gap that has not been filled to date by any historian. Therefore there does not exist any proof that anything occurred at chez Michaux before 1867.....

3) Testimonies. I have mentioned above the 'heaps of supporting evidence.' What are these exactly? Before presenting these, let us look at the definition of the word témoignage [testimony]. In the Larousse [dictionary]: *Declaration made by a person of what he has seen or heard* and the Robert [dictionary] adds: *servicing to establish the truth*. Everything is clear, a person who reports a fact mentioned by another person is not himself a witness. This will serve for us to understand the lines which follow because I am going to cite all the witnesses to this affair or at least those mentioned as such.

But before that, by way of a résumé, let us see how this wish to establish the paternity of the invention began. It is known that by 1869, Pierre Michaux was already attributing it to himself. In a printed letter which he sent to his customers on 15 June 1869, following the break-up with the Oliviers, he wrote this: '*...the velocipede of which my son and I are the inventors....*' and he signed: Michaux Père & Company. Richard Lesclide in his *Manuel du Vélocipède* of 1869 (p.108 and 109) also wrote: '*M. Michaux, patented inventor of the velocipede with pedals...*' Then, Ernest Deharme in *Les Merveilles de la Locomotion* in 1874 (p.308) allies himself as well with this opinion.

A few years later, curiously enough,

we can read this announcement in *Le Sport Vélocipédique*, No.41 of 17 September 1881: *Handsome reward to anyone who proves – by a newspaper article or other serious document – that the system of pedals was adapted to the velocipede before the year 1866. Please contact the offices of the magazine.* However, reading the copies of the magazine which followed, no reply was found.

One has to wait until the death of Pierre Michaux on 9 January 1883 for this same magazine, in its obituary, to attribute this invention to him but without giving a source. Was there a reply to the earlier announcement?

Then, little by little, texts appear which certain historians take into their 'heaps of supporting evidence.' They are those of:

- Aimé Olivier
- Henry Michaux
- Baudry de Saunier
- Townsend Trench
- Félix Biot, and
- Francisque Michaux

And here they are:

1. Testimony of René Olivier

(Origin: Manuscript of René Olivier from 1869. Titled: Commercial Court of the Seine. Note regarding Messrs. Olivier Brothers against M. Michaux.....16 pages, p.1.) Departmental Archives of Calvados. (A document found by David Herlihy):

It was several years ago that a workman thought to apply cranks to velocipedes as used in earlier times. I do not know whether M. Michaux (the son) knew about this; what is certain is that, having in his hands a tricycle...the front wheel of which was fitted with cranks, he dismantled it and transformed it into a bicycle [and] that is the only invention which he made, that is to say the transformation of a tricycle with cranks into a bicycle with cranks.

This is to some extent an attribution of the birth of the pedal velocipede with two wheels to Michaux even if he said that the system existed beforehand on tricycles and that it was thought up by a workman, who is not named.

In contrast, in a paper written by Aime Olivier in 1894 titled *Les Inventeurs du Velocipede (1690-1863)* and Rene Olivier (1863-1870), one reads this:

The son, Ernest Michaux.....who often amused himself by going down the slope in the Champs Élysées on his little velocipede (in this context meaning a Draisienne) asked one day if they could alter the position of the fixed pedals on which he rested his feet when not in use, for pedals attached to cranks. That is how father Michaux told of the matter. On the same page 7:

Michaux did not invent the use of the pedal nor its application to the front wheel.

Notes:

- a) This is not evidence since René was never present at the time of the claimed invention.
- b) The first note of 1869 is made within the context of a conflictual document (the case of Olivier v. Michaux).
- c) These are not precise dates.
- d) Finally, Aimé said in 1894 the opposite of what his brother had written.

Aimé, who became Aimé Olivier de Sandeval by ennoblement in 1893 (*La Revue des Sports – Le Journal des Vélocipèdistes*, 6 May 1893, No.6, p.121.) again recalled 'The Michaux affair' but here in the form of a story:

I hesitate to criticize those who, on the contrary continue to tell the story of Michaux the eminent inventor, since I have never said anything to contradict it. Quite the reverse: I have spent 1,200,000 Francs in order to create the velocipede under the name of Michaux.

The declaration of Aimé Olivier in 1869 is therefore not admissible. On the one hand it is not a testimony and on the other, he retracts things and gives an explanation for this retraction.

2. Testimony of Henry Michaux

The testimony of Henry Michaux is the most well known. Firstly, he addressed his testimony to the mayor of Bar-le-Duc on 28 February 1893 at the request of the latter. *I testify in the name of all the members of my family that the invention and application of pedals to velocipedes is certainly the work of my late father...* (Communal Archives of Bar-le-Duc. Letter published in a dossier in *La Vélocithèque*, No.31, c. 'L'Affaire Michaux' 3rd. Part, p.34-35.).

Let us take this letter for what it is: a sworn statement and not evidence.

Next, let us talk about a letter (of which we do not have the original) that Henry sent to the journal *L'Éclair* who published it on 26 March 1893 in the direct context of the monument to the memory of his father:

In March 1861 (and not in 1855) a hat maker from the rue de Verneuil, Monsieur Brunel, brought to my father his velocifère in order for him to repair the front wheel. That same evening, my brother Ernest, 19 years of age (and not 14), took the machine and went to try it in the Avenue Montaigne. Coming back, he said, in my presence: 'I can keep my balance well, but it is as tiring having your legs lifted up as it is to use them for pushing along the ground with your feet' and father replied: 'Make a cranked axle for the hub of the front wheel and turn it as you would turn a grinding mill, and my brother immediately carried out my father's idea.

Here it would seem that we are face to face with evidence since Henry says that he was present. But is it true evidence? One can legitimately ask the question. In effect, we are a long way from a testimony in good legally correct form. Why? At law today, in order for a testimony to be acceptable, it must have a date, be written in the form of a manuscript, given on word of honour and signed.

We are a long way, with a publication in between, from the affirmations of Henry being legally correct. If, nevertheless, one accepts his testimony, several questions arise:

- a) What does one think of the rewriting of this letter by a publication? Is that acceptable?
- b) What does one think of the testimony of a son for his father? Today, for example, in many cases, a child may be a witness for or against his parents.
- c) What does one think of a testimony from a person who was a child of seven years of age at the time? I do not say that a child of this age cannot have memories, but is he able to judge the importance of the matter and to recollect it many years later with so many details? (recognizing that I have shortened the text a great deal).
- d) What does one think again of a testimony given 32 years later?
- e) What does one think of a testimony that is given with a commercial interest at stake? Henry was in the process of

setting up a bicycle factory when he testified and he needed the publicity. He announced through the press on 23 March 1893 (*Le Petit Journal*) that he had acquired a property at Saint-Cloud where he was in the process of building a steam-powered factory with a training track, stores, etc. and he hoped to be in production by 15th June. This factory was to be set up with an associate, Paul Gaspard. Henry was to put in the balance of the funding (of the Société des Vélocipèdes Michaux from 5 May 1894) (13bis), and give it his name, Michaux, which he valued at a sum of 25,000 francs. This name, Michaux, therefore had a monetary value and all the publicity based upon it was a source of profit for those concerned. This company was created four months before the inauguration of the monument, this latter becoming a veritable windfall for Henry. Therefore he did not lose out in using his association with the monument to launch his new enterprise which was, nevertheless, a failure. He did, however, establish a committee for the monument's upkeep.

And that is not all: in *Le Véloce Sport* of 20 September 1894 (p.792) we read the first prize for the race on the inauguration day of the Michaux works was the 'Prix Henry Michaux' which was for 1,000 Fr. and the second prize was 500 Fr.

Furthermore, publicity which was to come for Michaux cycles referred to 'Pierre Michaux, inventor of the pedal' and even took two crossed pedals for their logo. Actually, a veritable communication campaign was started following the erection of the monument amongst which were posters, catalogues, publicity cards, and newspaper articles putting forward the family invention.

How could Henry have remained objective and impartial in these circumstances?

f) A last crucial question: Would a workman have radically modified a velocipede which did not belong to him?

3. Testimony of Baudry de Saunier

(Extract from *L'Histoire Générale de la Vélocipède*, 1891, pp.31-35).

The idea came to this methodical man (the father).to activate the cranked component with the feet which he had planned in the first instance to operate using a bar. The crank had been invented.and Michaux, impressed by this,

tried using cranks and created the first velocipede in the world.

Baudry de Saunier would go on to contradict the greater part of this in 1893, saying on this occasion that it was Ernest who was the inventor and not Pierre.... (in *Le Cyclisme Théorique et Pratique*, pp.35-42).(18,18bis) He even wrote that he had obtained this new information from Félix Biot (see below).

a) What can one think of a declaration made 30 years later?

b) What can one think of declarations which attribute different inventors? In another case the father, and in one case the son?

c) What can one think of a Germanophobic journalist (he was not a historian) who popularized the *célérifère* and the *vélocifère*, either knowingly or without verifying his sources – the one being as reprehensible as the other?

In all these cases, he was not present at the time of the invention and therefore cannot be considered as a witness.

4. Testimony of Townsend Trench

(Extract from *The Irish Cyclist*, 25 September 1895 found by the historian Nick Clayton).

This Irishman, on a trip to Paris in July 1864, said he had encountered the first velocipede that he had ever seen, followed by a visit to the Michaux workshop, but especially the memory of the statement of father Michaux according to which he claimed that he had recently invented the machines, had made six and sold five [of them]. Here again, Trench was not present at the time of the invention, and he is simply quoting Michaux. So, this is also not evidence. Question and contradiction?:

a) What does one think of a declaration made 31 years after the facts?

b) Here again, the date of 1864 does not correspond to the date given by Michaux.

5. Testimony of Félix Biot

(Extract from *La Revue des Sports. Le Journal des Vélocipèdistes*. No.5, 29 April 1893, p.99).

Ernest Michaux was born in 1842...., in 1855....having had occasion to repair a vélocifère(sic), dating from the previous century(sic), he wanted to amuse

himself by riding it, but was annoyed by being obliged to push along with his feet on the ground, he modified a cranked arm onto the front wheel.after a number of trials along the Avenue Montaigne he ended up by going without his feet touching the ground and invited me the following Sunday to do the same, at which I succeeded.

It is clearly written that the following Sunday he was invited to try the new velocipede, but he does not say that he was present on the day of the invention. This is an important point because one cannot accept it as evidence. Moreover Félix Biot was a friend of Ernest (see *Le Cyclisme Théorique et Pratique*, p.35).

a) Again, what does one think of a narrative made 30 years after the facts?

b) What does one think of a narrative of a close friend in the context of the erection of the monument which could have enormous financial consequences for the founding friends of the new business Cycles Michaux & Co.? I cannot see how this closeness could not contribute to the strong affirmation of the Michaux's invention of the pedal driven velocipede and the national enthusiasm brought about by this event.

c) Finally what does one think of this narrative which contradicts Henry on the date and which is wrong (if Henry is right) by six years (!) about the event?

6. Testimony of Francisque Michaux

Francisque Michaux, the last of the surviving brothers, born on 9 February 1859 was two years old in 1861, a date corrected by Henry as being that of the invention (in the letter addressed by him on 21 March 1893 to the journal *L'Éclair*).

At the time of the preparations for the monument, as his brother had done several days earlier, he addressed a letter of declaration (under the same reference as that of Henry) to the mayor of Bar-le-Duc to thank him.... for arranging an event in honour of the inventor and propagator of the velocipede and not the velocipede with pedals.

So what does he know?

Francisque also wrote of this family's history when he collaborated in writing an essay published in 1906 under the title *Les Michaux, biographie et souvenirs de*

Pierre et Ernest Michaux, inventeurs de la "pédale. (24) This work has a hagiographic character which does not make it objective and which brings nothing new to what was already known.

Yet again, it is late, very late: 45 years afterwards... Here also one cannot talk of evidence since Francisque was only two years old at the time of the facts... Taking the side of subjectivity, these narratives of Francisque Michaux are necessarily and understandably oriented favorably toward a family character.

Having arrived at this point, a major fact comes to the surface: five out of six of these testimonies are not evidence. Neither Aimé Olivier, nor Townsend Trench, nor Félix Biot, nor Baudry de Saunier, nor Francisque Michaux were present at the critical time. The only one which can be retained as evidence is that of the Michaux son, because he was present at the time. I am speaking of course of the moment when Ernest Michaux adapted pedals to a Draisienne.

It is therefore established today that one cannot speak of supporting testimonies because only one of them, that of Henri, could eventually be accepted as such. The testimony of Henri, as tempted as we are to accept it, seems fragile, unverifiable, and subject to doubt knowing that his interests were linked to the history [of the machine]. Moreover, it is only a single testimony. *Testis unus, testis nullus* [One witness is no witness] is often said in law and in the writing of history.

So, we find ourselves face to face with an established situation: the five declarations which are not proper evidence all come from the same source, that of Michaux père or Michaux fils:

- René Olivier: Aimé said: *Michaux, the father, told me himself of the invention by his son.* La Revue des Sports – *Le Journal des Vélocipédistes*, No.6, 6 May 1893, p.121.
- Baudry de Saunier: from the son. *Le Cyclisme Théorique et Pratique*, pp.34-42. and from Biot.
- Townsend Trench: from Pierre Michaux. *The Irish Cyclist*, 25 September 1895.
- Félix Biot: from the son. La revue des

Sports. *Le Journal des Vélocipédistes*, No.5, 29 April 1893. And finally.....

- Francisque Michaux: obviously from his family.

So, following up on these elements, it is a fact that up to today, we do not have a single proof of the invention of the pedal by Michaux.

The most incredible thing about this whole story is that the mayor of Bar-le-Duc did not have any proofs either. He was happy to cover himself by the two statements of Francisque and of Henry, which, as we have seen, contradict one another, and he ignored all the opposing ones. Madame Lesclide noted (*Le Vélocipède Illustré*, 31 December 1896) that no article had been written in the review about the monument because she had found the patent of the invention of the pedal by Lallement. [*Editor: Presumably, Madame Lesclide believed that the evidence indicated that Lallement was the inventor.*]

One now knows that the erection of the monument was a very important event in this story for it was the springboard of an assertion which still continues to this day without [any] foundation.

So, where may we place Michaux today in the history of the cycle? At the beginning of this text, I evoked the Larousse dictionary which for a long time had in its entries that Pierre and Ernest Michaux 'had invented and commercialized the velocipede with pedals.' (example: edition of 2008, p.1521). Today (since the edition of 2012-2013), like ourselves through an absence of proof, this dictionary has become more cautious:

Michaux (Pierre), b. Bar-le-Duc 1813 – d. Bicêtre 1883. French manufacturer. The pedal velocipede which he conceived in the 1860s was commercially very successful and established, with the assistance of the brothers Marius, Aimé, and René Olivier, the cycle industry in France and throughout the world.

One can see that Larousse has taken the path of wisdom. I remain, while waiting for further information, with this version knowing that my exposé goes beyond the small circle of specialists present here today, because it deals with an important link in the history of the cycle and therefore also engages

with the general public - the passage from the Draisienne to the pedal velocipede.

It creates a problem of conscience for us researchers. Now, knowing this story better, with those qualifications which Aimé Olivier made to it in 1893, what should be our position toward the uninitiated? Are we going to go over the facts which have not been established, for example, and leave the teachers to tell this nice story to their pupils? Or recognize that we do not know? Because...we do not know! It seems to me that our role is not to perpetuate unsubstantiated beliefs, however old they are, even if they form part of the beautiful story of our country, but to explain as well as we are able, that we don't know.

Good. Let us not un-bolt the Michaux statue at Bar-le-Duc, but perhaps we should explain, as Larousse has already done, that these men, like their precursors, contributed, with the help of the Olivier brothers, to popularizing the pedal velocipede throughout the world. And that is already a huge thing.

Let us finish with the announcement of a reward by the *Sport Vélocipédique* in 1881 of which I spoke at the beginning of this paper and which remained without response. I said it again in a journal (*Dossier de la Vélocithèque*, No.41, p.2, 16 March 2010) just changing the wording a little:

Handsome reward to anyone who can prove, through a serious document, that the velocipede with pedals was invented by the Michaux.

I never received any reply either. Perhaps tomorrow. Or perhaps today from those present at this Conference. One never knows. ●

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Note: *Declarations of opponents of Michaux from the period are not dealt with here, nor are the claims of others to the invention of the pedal velocipede, nor is the probity of Pierre and Henry. Such was not the purpose of this paper - that would take us too far.*