

## Tidbits of Victorian Velocipede Happenings

By Lorne Shields, Toronto, Canada

Collectors, researchers, and scholars often uncover interesting aspects of a subject that seem important, even if limited in scope. Over the years, I have located some fascinating aspects of velocipede history that have never seen the light of day. This, the 31st ICHC, is the perfect venue to share some of those finds. The findings originate from England, Europe (mainly France and some Germany), the United States and Canada.

From England, I uncovered information about Charles W. Booth, a champion velocipedist and skater in 1869. Locating these images has led me to see an important aspect of velocipede racing's history in a new light: That a whole genre of velocipede racers is either undocumented and/or unrecognized for their accomplishments because of

Figure 1. Charles (C.A.) Booth, Champion, with his Michaux pattern Velocipede with acorn drop pedals.



the unorganized nature of the documentation. I have found a few other such champions and will discuss them later.

From America, I recently found a previously unknown (likely unique) and important Velocipede Riding School poster. I will explain its significance and how it was acquired, researched, conserved, and brought to the attention of fellow collectors.

From Canada there is an original manuscript document of a charter for a velocipede club, dated June 3, 1870, but indicating the formation being May 1, 1870. With other graphics and information, we can now extend the date that the velocipede fad in North America ended from the summer of 1869 (more or less) until at least July of 1871.

These tidbits are all here to intrigue, educate, and entertain those interested in cycling's history. But, most importantly, they are here to inspire others to carry on research.

These tidbits of champion moments

Figure 3. Mrs. C.A. Booth, Trainer.



in velocipede history bring to light a few poorly known stories from the bicycle's past. *The Velocipede – Its History, Varieties, and Practice* by J.T. Goddard, published by Hurd and Houghton, New York, in 1869 has a chapter on Velocipede Racing. It mentions many rinks, clubs, courses, parks, etc. with organized races. Some of the cities mentioned are Paris, New York, Chicago, Boston, and Brooklyn. The world wide web allows one to be a Christopher Columbus, Vasco de Gamma, or Marco Polo from the comfort of ones home. The ability now exists to search vast amounts of material instantaneously, facilitating the search for participants, venues, and champions. Some important modern cycling history books do mention this past but lack a detailed narrative. The current lack of detailed information about the Velocipede era can be understood. It is easy enough to conceptualize the lack of contemporary recording bodies since the sport was so new. It was just too early to have many (if any) organizations concerned with this as a sport. These selected nuggets are here to spark fellow interested parties to take on the task of chronicling

Figure 2. Reverse of the carte de visite photographs of both Mr. and Mrs. C.A. Booth. The photographer is Laroche, Birmingham, England, who was born William Henry Silvester and who successfully challenged William Fox Talbot's patent for the Calotype.





Figure 4. Close-up of C.A. Booth. The bicycle medals sported on his chest are similar in size and pattern to others of the era won in the U.K. for other Velocipede events. Note also that, in his hat bank, he sports a pin of a lady Velocipedist.



Figure 5. First prize medal awarded by the Royal Gymnasium for a Velocipede race.

much more. These few selected items (photos & memorabilia) inspired me to locate other riders, events, and information. My aspiration is that this will nudge others to become more involved in this genre. I truly hope this chapter will stimulate that hunt.

### CHARLES W. BOOTH ~ a Velocipede Champion ... and others

About 4 years ago I acquired a wonderful pair of Victorian carte de visite photographs (4-1/2" x 2-1/2") from the internet [Figures 1, 2, & 3]. The pair are of a man and a woman, each posing with a velocipede (obviously, it is the same machine). Script is written at the base on the obverse: Both were written by the same hand being that of Charles.

Having never heard of a "Booth" as a Velocipedist let alone as a Champion, I scanned the images and then tucked

them away for research at another time. When time allowed, I began a study of these interesting photos that represented an important and scarce curiosity of a husband-and-wife each posing with a velocipede (possibly relating to Vaudeville).

The man was identified as (Charles) C. A. Booth, Champion and the lady as Mrs. C. A. Booth, Trainer: The word "Trainer" was surely a loving ruse.

A few years later an occasion came about where I had to review some velocipede images and these two came back in hand. I became intrigued and decided to do some research. The reason for this is because, unlike the high wheel racers, very little is written about these early velocipede racers. Likely the notable exception to this was James Moore who won the Paris to Rouen race in Nov. 1869 riding a Michaux. On the other hand, the high wheel racers are, for the most part, documented and famous for their feats on the Ordinary.

### Here are some tidbits of information I was able to locate:

In the book *Velocipedes* authored by Velox and published by Routledge in 1869 (pgs. 125 & 126) the following information came to the fore: the first part when comparing French racers with those in England: "...and we, too, have had races. On Wednesday, 14 April 1869, Mr. C. A. Booth, the Champion of Skating performed the journey from London to Brighton on a bicycle, 52 miles in 7-1/2 hours." [Figures 4 & 5]

In *Quest For Speed: A History of Early Bicycle Racing 1868-1903*, by Andrew Ritchie, self-published in 2011, page 116, we learn that in January 1878, the *Boston Herald* called English immigrant Charles Booth: "the champion velocipede rider of the world.... Prepared to defend his title against all comers." Booth was a typical show-business professional cyclist who had raced in England and France before settling in America.

Further, we learn in *Quest for Speed* by Ritchie, page 419, Foot-Note 12, that the *Boston Herald*, quoted in *American Bicycling Journal*, 5 January 1878, page 9, that Booth was "born in England, and first took to velocipede riding in Paris by giving exhibitions of trick riding at the Cirque Napoleon, where from skillful tricks and fancy riding, he was

called the Great Velocipedian Ducrow, after which he returned to England, to Agricultural Hall, London, which is one of the largest halls in the world... While there he beat all the celebrated riders, French and English... He has given exhibitions of fancy and trick riding at all the principal theatres in England and



Figure 6. Walter Brown on his 43-inch Demarest bicycle in 1969.

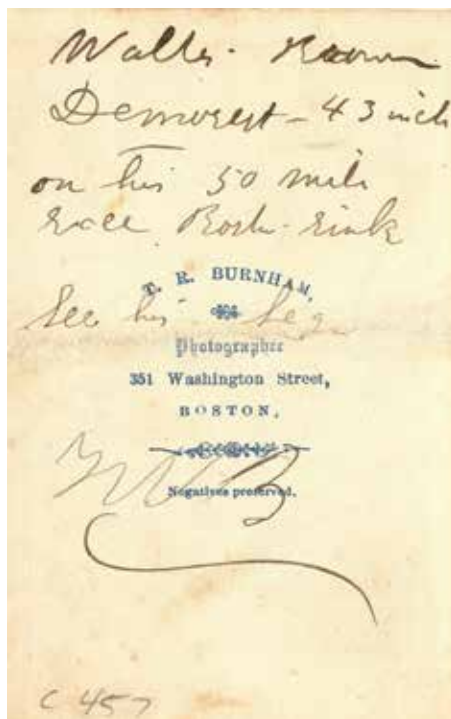


Figure 7. The reverse side of the photograph in Figure 6, indicating that the image was taken after a 50-mile race at a Boston Rink.



Figure 8. *The First Semi-Annual Exhibition of the New York Athletic Club shows Velocipedes racing on a platform around an indoor track, and attendant difficulties.*"

some of the first in America. He arrived in New York in 1870 and travelled throughout the country and Canada giving exhibitions. At last, he settled in Boston, and has been a constable in this city for years."

An important clue for future research (as supplied by John Weiss): Lightwood's bibliography (Appendix in *The Romance of the Cyclists' Touring Club* by James T. Lightwood, Cyclist Touring Club, 1928) includes a publication by C. A. Booth, "London to Brighton, published in 1873." A pamphlet or book (or perhaps magazine article?), but I've (John Weiss) never found it.

### WALTER BROWN ... another Champion

This photograph [Figure 6] is of another American champion, Walter Brown, on his 43-inch (front wheel

diameter) Demarest bicycle. Brown was famous at the time as the American Rowing Champion. Brown had a velocipede rink in Boston at 179 Court St. near Revere House (*Scientific American*, 13 March 1869). Demarest bicycles, built in New York City, were only in the market during 1869 so we know the year of the Brown image was probably 1869. Note the spoon type brake on the front wheel. Demarest no doubt sponsored Brown since a manufacturer's name plate is attached to the left

side of the rear wheel. Text scripted on the reverse of the photograph [Figure 7] indicates the image was taken after a 50-mile race held at a Boston rink. All this suggests that the race was inside in a rink rather than outside on a road or path. Note the rider's fabulous white skintight racing outfit. Script on back of the photo reads "See his legs". Voila, another champion! This carte de visite photograph was taken by T. R. Burnham at 351 Washington St. in Boston.

On page 95 of *The Velocipede* by Goddard (1869), there is also mention of Walter Brown's riding rink.

### CHARLES DELMONICO ... an American Champion.

The New York Athletic Club's first Semi-annual exhibition was held on 11 November 1868, at the Empire Skating Rink in New York City. This event

started at 7:00 p.m., and it was viewed by about 2,500 spectators extending into the wee hours in the morning of November 12th. All the journalists had left by the time the velocipede race had finished. No specific race results have ever been located. Due to the late hour and since the event was held in an ice skating rink the temperature was quite chilly causing many people to depart by the time the velocipede race started.

This wood block engraving [Figure 8] is from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* of November 28, 1868.

Leslie's states: "a velocipede race was run on the wooden platform encircling the enclosure. It is this amusing feature that we have represented in our engraving." Races were run on wooden surfaces in theatres, rinks, and similar venues. I bring this up to reinforce the fact that outside races on paths or roads were not as yet the norm.

The torso picture [Figure 9] is that of Charles Constant Delmonico in 1884, while the belt buckle [Figures 10 & 11] demonstrates the respect that Delmonico's friends accorded him for his accomplishments as a Velocipedist.



Figure 9. *Charles Constant Delmonico in 1884.*



Figure 10. *Front of deeply engraved belt buckle with velocipede and rider given to Delmonico by his friends.*



Figure 11. *Back of belt buckle given to Delmonico by his friends, celebrating him as Champion Velocipedist of America.*

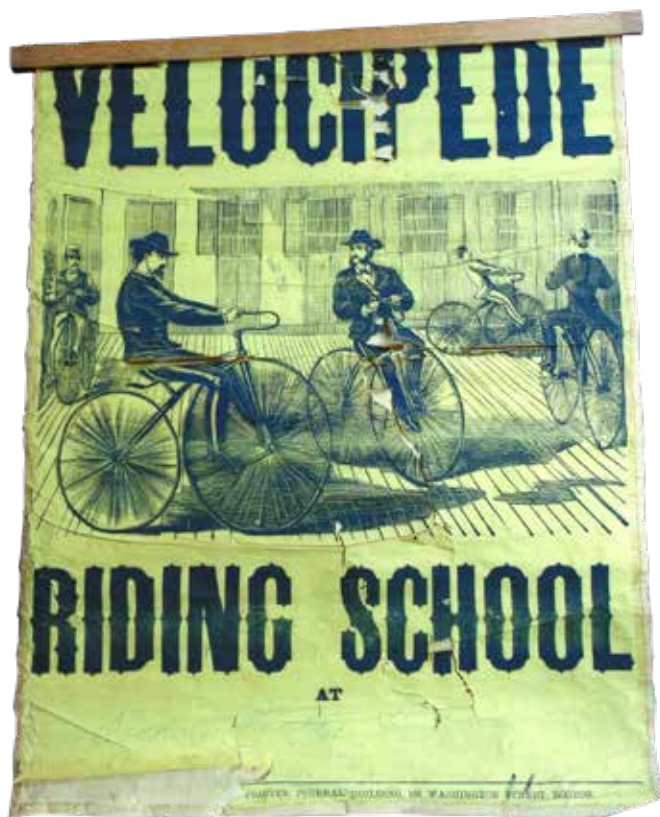


Figure 12. Velocipede poster, circa 1869 as presented for sale on eBay.

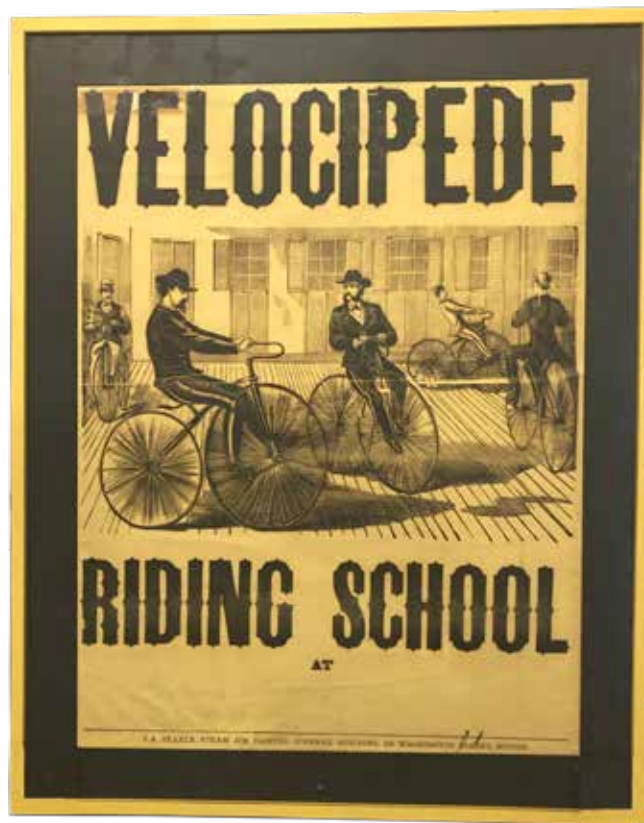


Figure 13. Circa 1869 Velocipede poster after restoration.

### The Discovery and Journey of an American Velocipede Poster - The voyage

In early September 2021, a listing came up on eBay of a circa 1869 Velocipede poster in Providence, RI. I had never seen an example of a velocipede poster from America in over 50 years of collecting: posters are often pasted onto walls or sign boards, so they are usually destroyed when they are removed from display. European velocipede posters are rare as well. The graphics, context, size (27-1/2" x 36-1/2"), and obvious collectability of this poster on eBay seemed to fit the bill as an addition for my collection. Upon closer examination of the eBay listing, one could see a lot of the poster's distress, but also the potential for other issues could be recognized. Areas were missing, cellophane tape (the pariah of antique paper) had been applied to some surface areas, it had been tacked onto a wooden rod, there was some flaking, it seemed to have lived a life of poor storage and time had not been her friend. Could it be conserved/restored? Likely, but with what result? I estimated the cost of conservation could well exceed the amount of a successful bid. With some good

fortune, a museum qualified Conservator took a look at the listing and gave me an estimate of what it would take to bring this back to life as best it could be. There were no promises, only caveats. I decided to 'go for it' and take my chances. It was just too important an object not to take that risk. [Figures 12]

The closing eBay hammer price was within the range anticipated. Others had to have considered the poster's condition and decided not to bid.

Upon receipt by me in Canada, I took this poster to the conservator, Rose Newlove of Toronto. After unwrapping the package, it seemed worse than it appeared on eBay. Flaking, tears, and paper loss seemed exacerbated by rough handling or in transit from its former owner to me.

Next, the poster's renovation began. The following overt problems were identified, and the remedies applied are noted:

1. The identity of the printer was missing. All we had was an address at 118 Washington St. in Boston. Research



Figure 14. Engraving published in Harper's Weekly from Dec. 19, 1868. The image used in the poster is a mirror image of the bikes and riders in this engraving, with the head/hats transformed, although the scene in the poster is set within an indoor rink rather than an outside park.

at the Boston Public Library identified the printer as F. A. Searle, Steam Job Printer.

2. The font of the text was not available. It was surprisingly challenging to find someone to recreate the font. Eventually a graphics design professional was located who was able to recreate the missing information with print in its original font.

3. To the left, just above the printer's identity line, there had been some 2 lines of script. The top read 'TOWN HALL'. Under that was a void. Initially it was thought to read 'LAST DAY'. Miraculously, fellow Wheelman, friend and cycle historian Kurt Schaak came up with the answer. It was CHAS (Charles) H. DAY who was a prominent Velocipedian of the era and he had been in Boston at the time that this poster was in use.

4. Not to bore, but to share...these are but a few of the many steps Rose took. (1) A cloth secondary support, edge mounted with animal glue had to be removed. (2) Stretched and weakened paper, lost pieces, and overall brit-



Figure 15. Print from *Harper's Weekly*, Dec. 19, 1868, showing the indoor rink that was combined in the poster with bikes and riders in the engraving from Dec. 19, 1868. The riders are on Pickering & Davis machines.



Figure 16. Close-up of rider actuating brake not available on machine being advertised.

Bros. velocipedes of the Michaux design made in New York City.

The image used in the poster [Figure 13] is a mirror image of the bikes and riders in Figure 14 with their heads and hats transformed and the scene is changed to an indoor rink rather than an outside park. That said, it was a light bulb moment to realize that the poster was created by an artist that took an image created for *Harper's Weekly*, December 19, 1868, and modified it to advertise a Velocipede Riding School in

tle and fragile paper had to be worked. (3) Buckram backcloth had to be separated. (4) Ruffled paper had to be humidified and flattened between thick felts and left to dry wherever possible. (5) Multiple fills were made to missing paper. (6) Inpainting. (7) All the while, the work was being preserved to a faithful conservation standard to retain its authenticity. This goal was achieved [Figure 13]

One of the most exciting aspects of this poster's journey was the identification by Pryor Dodge of an engraving published in *Harper's Weekly* of December 19, 1868, p. 812 [Figure 14]. The riders in this print are on Wood



Figure 17. Charles H. Day, New England Velocipedian. An ink drawing from *Ink from a Circus Press Agent: Charles H. Day*, Wildside Press, 2009, USA.

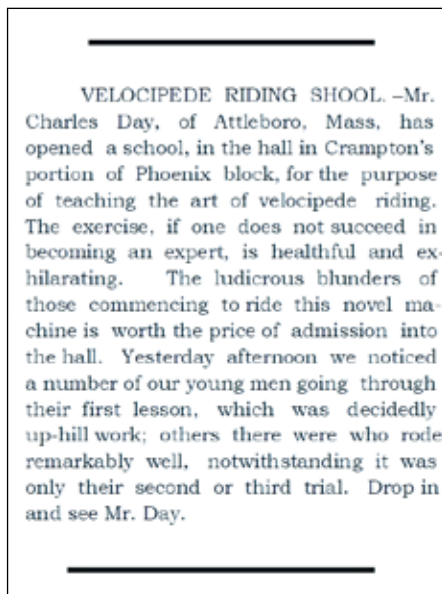


Figure 18. Notice of the opening of Day's Velocipede school in Attleboro, MA, from the "Rutland Independent" Feb. 20, 1869..

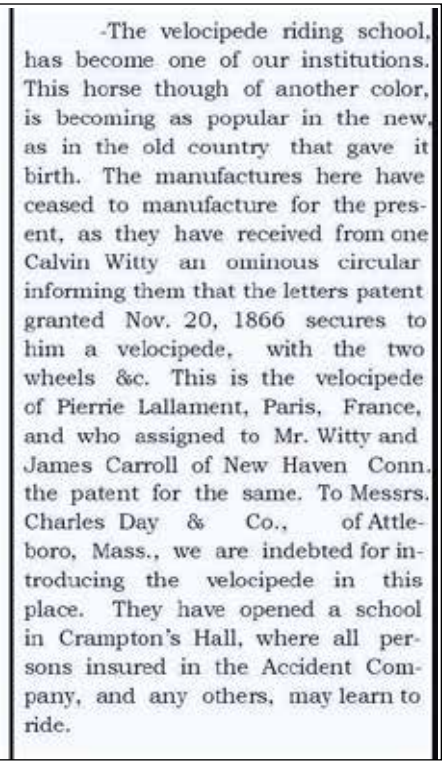


Figure 19. Notice of pending difficulties in the Velocipede business, including mention of Charles Day, from the "Rutland Daily Herald" Feb. 18, 1869

an indoor rink.

Much more could have been added to this report, but I end by saying that I am honored to share some of the history of this poster, likely a unique American treasure. Others who assisted me in this project were (in alphabetical order): Elizabeth Allard, Ed Berry, Jr., Glenn Eames, David Herlihy, Gertjan Moed, David Toppin, John Weiss, and Carey Williams.

The image shown in **Figure 15** was published on page 109 of *Harper's Weekly*, February 13, 1869, and it shows student velocipede riders in the difficult process of learning to ride these two in-line wheel machines that are relatively new to the world. Note: The rider who is leaning back is actuating the rear wheel back brake on a Pickering &

Davis machine. **[Figure 16]** That rider's image within the school crystalized my conclusion that the two prints were the basis for the poster. The date of the poster was likely very late winter or early spring of 1869.

#### **THE POSTER and Mr. Charles H. Day.**

Fellow Wheelman, collector, and friend Kurt Schaak of Waukesha, Wisconsin, USA, was able to identify the script at the bottom left of the poster **[Figure 13]**. It reads: "Charles H. Day". We know Day to have been an active Velocipedian in New England at the time and seeing his name on this poster leads us to believe that Mr. Day is the owner of the Velocipede Riding School that is being advertised by this poster. **Figure 17** shows Mr. Charles

H. Day. **Figures 18 & 19** show extracts from local newspapers that tell about a velocipede riding school set up and owned by Charles H. Day, a respected citizen of the area. Note: The 'Problem' mentioned in the newspaper article shown in **Figure 19** relates to US Patent 59,915 (Nov. 20, 1866) granted to Pierre Lallement that was owned in 1868 by Calvin Witty who was demanding \$20 for every velocipede made in America.

The critical missing pieces of the puzzle were now located, and all the pieces of the puzzle seem to fit. Of course, there is more to the story, but it rests comfortably for tomorrow's researchers to further develop these stories and to deepen our overall knowledge of cycling history. ●

## Conference Flash Back • ICHC 2016

Photo by Greg Siple



*The 2016 ICHC in New Haven, Connecticut, included a display of old and new bicycles on the Green in the center of town. A number of the participants rode their machines to a nearby cafe for lunch, which resulted in this curious pairing of parked bicycles in front of a building perhaps as old as the high wheel locked to the parking meter.*