



SPINNING THEIR WHEELS

With summer finally here, thoughts of dusting off the bicycles silently **hibernating** in garages all over Vermont are in the minds of many. A little oiling, some repairs, perhaps, and they'll be whizzing down a country road

towards a swimming hole as bikes have in Vermont for over 100 years.

"I am better in every way than I was when school let out. A bicycle now has no terrors for me. Have mastered the art." So wrote Dorman Kent of Montpelier in his diary on July 7, 1895. Dorman had seen the bike races at the fairgrounds the summer before and was hooked. As his entry shows, he had caught the bicycle fever that swept the United States during the last half of the 1800s.

They nicknamed bicycles "bone-shakers." These early **contraptions** lived up to the name. They shook the spines and rattled the limbs of riders.

The first models had no pedals. The rider had to **propel** the bicycle with his or her feet. Even after pedals were added in the 1860s, the heavy wood and iron-wheeled bike remained a job for the very strong.

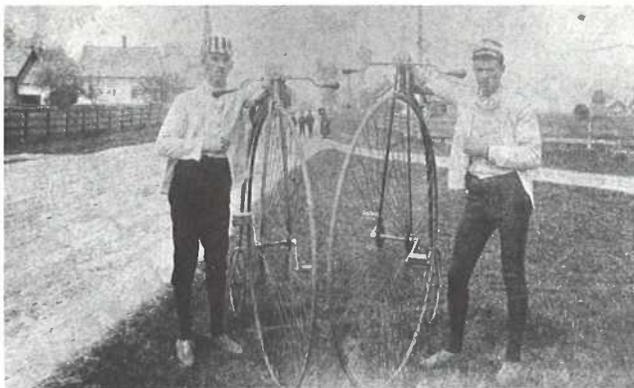
In 1876, the year of the United States centennial, a more popular, if not safer, model was available to buyers. The "high wheeler," (often called an "ordinary" or "penny-farthing" after two round British coins — one small, one large) came with a crank and pedal mechanism as well as rubber tires. Mounting the contraption was a feat in itself. One got it going by running alongside it while pushing. Then one leaped onto the seat perched near the front tire which was sometimes five and one half feet high. Once seated, the rider faced a whole **array** of other problems. The high wheelers were unstable and tipped over easily. Most did not have brakes so stopping once you got started was an ordeal. For models with brakes, stopping too quickly often flung the rider over the handlebars in a "header."

Safety-conscious American companies tried to solve the "header" problem by redesigning the high wheelers. They reversed the wheels so the high one was in the rear and the small one in the front. But these, too, had problems. Now, when riders braked, the bikes tipped over backward instead of throwing the rider forward. The new bike did not catch on.

Finally, with the development of the "safety" bike in 1890, men, women and children of all ages began to cycle. These new bikes had two wheels of equal size,



Circa 1895 bike club, probably in the Barre area



Two fifteen year old Worcester boys with their high wheelers in 1883

the back wheel powered by a chain and sprocket mechanism. They had **pneumatic tires** and coaster brakes. Now bikes were similar in design to ours today.

Everybody rode bikes: doctors, police (who said they aided in law enforcement), even United States President McKinley's wife. There were bike clubs, races, games, parades, and riding schools. Someone,

“They are contrivances to trap the feet of the unwary and skin the nose of the innocent.”

in 1888, even biked across the United States in 103 days.

The new contraptions frightened horses and caused **chaos** on roads. Bikes collided with **bewildered** pedestrians who did not know whether to go left or right when out-of-control riders came speeding in their direction.

Doctors argued about the bicycle craze. Some felt it was healthful to ride, while others believed that it caused such dreaded ailments as “bicycle walk,” “bicycle heart,” “bicycle hands,” even “bicycle wrists” and “bicycle gums.” If one was unfortunate enough to catch one of these diseases, plenty of patent medicine companies marketed concoctions to cure them.

Perhaps the loudest condemnation of the bicycle came from the clergy. Church leaders recognized that they were losing their Sunday congregations to bike rides in the country. Since most persons worked six days a week, Sundays were the only chance they had for leisure time. Several clergymen suggested preaching along bike routes to keep the gospel in the minds of Sabbath riders. Most, however, relied on their sermons to put the fear of God in anyone who even considered riding a bike.

In 1896, a Baltimore preacher delivered an address to his congregation that included the following message. “These bladder-wheeled bicycles are **diabolic** devices of the demon of darkness. They are contrivances to trap the feet of the unwary and skin the nose of the innocent. When you think you have broken one to ride and subdued its wild and **Satanic** nature, behold it bucketh you off in the road and teareth a great hole in your pants.” Another described a long line of bikers, all without brakes, sailing rapidly downhill to a “place where there is no mud on the streets because of the high temperatures.”

They were not the only complainers. As the health craze associated with bicycles swept the country, tobacco and candy shop owners saw their sales drop. Public houses sold less liquor to the bicycle generation.



1884 model “safety” bicycle; later models had equal sized wheels

Stylish Bicycle Clothing.

English Bloomer Suits—Tailor made.
For Coats give breast measurement. For Pants give waist measurement.



The almost universal use of the wheel as a means of pleasure has developed a great demand for strongly made, neat and tasty clothing, which has enough uniform appearance to distinguish the wearer as a rider, at the same time makes a neat business or street suit. Our goods are selected and made up with this view, and we can assure riders that nothing in the market is better made or more tasty in shape.

- 56001 Extra Fine Wool Cassimere, very dressy in small gray or brown checks, coat, four button sack, two lower, one cash and one pump pockets. Pants bloomer, two hip pockets with buttoned flap.
Price, per suit.....\$9.33
Price, coat separate..... 5.66
Price, pants separate..... 3.67
- 56003 Fine Woolen Mixture in gray and brown, gray and black checks and plain black, rich and handsome, coat, four button sack, with two lower, one cash and one pump pockets. Pants bloomer with two hip pockets, with buttoned flap. Price, per suit.....\$7.33
Price, coat separate..... 4.67
Price, pants separate..... 2.66
- 56005 Brown Check Imitation Scotch Tweed, medium weight, very handsome in coloring and designs, coat three-button sack, with four patch pockets. Pants bloomer, reinforced seat, two hip pockets.
Price, per suit.....\$5.33
Price, coat separate..... 3.16
Price, pants separate..... 2.17
- 56007 Same as No. 56005, but is gray mixed.
Price, per suit..... 5.33
Price, coat separate..... 3.16
Price, pants separate..... 2.17
- 56009 Light Brown Mixed Chevoit, neat, strong and good wearing. Coat, three-button sack, four patch pockets. Pants, bloomer style with two hip pockets, buckles and straps at knee.
Price, per suit..... 4.66
Price, coat separate..... 2.66
Price, pants separate..... 2.00

L. A. W. Bicycle Bal.



worn for a regular street shoe as well as for bicycle riding. Sizes, 6 to 10. Width, D, E & E E.
Per pair.....\$1.75

52467 This shoe is made from a plump grade of dull don-go kid, with light sole, lacing nearly to toe. The stock is light and soft, and will give excellent wear, neat and dressy and can be

Theater owners were upset because people were saving their extra cash for new bikes and not for play tickets. The owner of the Howard Theater in Burlington discovered, however, that an increasing number of customers arrived on bikes for the shows. To encourage their **patronage**, the owner arranged special indoor parking places for them.

Clothing, too, was affected by the biking fad just as it is today. Men wore special hats, shoes, waistcoats, and knickers. Women's biking clothes caused quite an uproar in proper society. Many abandoned their long dresses for split skirts or even bloomers.



Shaftsbury woman on her high wheeler with family or friends, circa 1895

Vermonters and their fellow Americans spent a great deal of money on the nation's favorite sport. In 1894 bikes themselves cost up to \$150. That equalled several months' salary for a mill worker. The price soon dropped to the \$50 to \$100 range. But the cost of biking did not end there. Town **ordinances** required owners to buy bells and kerosene lights for their bikes, not to protect the rider but to warn the pedestrian. Custom-fitted seats were another popular item. Sears, Roebuck and Co. began selling collapsible bicycle rifles in 1898 to arm bikers against the growing number of hold-ups in the country.

Perhaps the greatest influence of the bicycle was the pressure its supporters put on communities and government for road improvement. Before bikes came

along there was not a great need for smooth road surfaces. Horses could get through ruts and mud easily compared to the bicycle. As the number of bikers increased, so did their political clout. With sales of four million bicycles in 1900, politicians began listening to this new and vocal group. Bike taxes were levied in many communities to go towards road improvement and bike paths.

But as the first years of the new century passed, so did enthusiasm for bicycles. Those who could afford to turned to the newly invented automobile. Not until the 1960s would another bike craze sweep America.

Contrary to what many felt in the 1800s, bikes were not the way of the future as far as transportation was concerned. We now rely on cars, buses, trains, and planes for most of our travel and save bikes for sport and recreation. The bicycle did, however, usher in many firsts. Variable speed gears, improved ball bearings, tubeless pneumatic tires, publicity for road improvement, road maps and road signs were among the advancements brought on by the bicycle.

Our bikes now have multiple gears. They are lighter. Three-quarters of them are foreign made or built from imported parts. Despite these changes, the old name “bone-shaker” still comes to mind when we bump and shake down a freshly graded dirt road in Vermont.

VOCABULARY

hibernate - to spend the winter sleeping

contraption - a device

propel - to cause to move forward

array - group

pneumatic tire - tire filled with compressed air

chaos - complete confusion and disorder

bewildered - confused

diabolic - having characteristics of the devil

satanic - devil-like

patronage - support

ordinance - command or order

