

Oregon's Wheelmen

Oregon Bicycle Culture and Advocacy During the Golden Age of the Wheel
(1885-1900)

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Bicycle culture and bicycle advocacy, as a social and environmental movement, are considerably dynamic forces in Oregon today; yet, to the astonishment of many Oregonians, the history of bicycling and bicycle culture in the state dates back to well over a 120 years. In the 1890's, before the proliferation of the automobile and the subsequent development of related environmental, economic and social concerns, the bicycle enjoyed a brief golden age in Oregon as it did across the U.S. Although the bicycle's Belle Epoch was most evident in the heavily urbanized cities and towns of the north eastern United States, the bicycle frenzy that swept the country in the late 19th century did not by any means pass unobserved by Oregonians. By the mid 1890's a nascent yet considerably extensive bicycle culture had taken root in the state. Unsurprisingly, many of the characteristics and trends that had come to define this early bicycle culture in other parts of the U.S. were consciously and, in many cases, inevitably replicated in Oregon. As they had in more urbanized states, such as Massachusetts and New York, newly formed cycling clubs and wheelmen associations—overwhelming composed of well-to-do white males—became the driving forces behind Oregon's early bicycle movement. Although these groups were fairly exclusive organizations, they came to define a cohesive bicycle culture and became the nearly forgotten symbols of a brief yet intriguing period in the state's history.

Halfway around the world from Oregon, a human powered two-wheeled contraption that could be operated with both feet off the ground was invented in France in 1863. Known as the Velocipede, this wood framed bicycle made its way to the United States by 1866. Velocipedes were relatively difficult to operate and were generally regarded as mere devices of amusement. Nonetheless, the Velocipede would become the earliest form of bicycle to be addressed in the Oregon State Legislature.¹

¹ Act of November 25, 1885. Oregon Laws 32.

Within a decade, general interest in the Velocipede faded as more durable and efficient “ordinary” or “high-wheel” bicycles were soon being developed and manufactured throughout Europe. In the summer of 1876, the first ordinary was brought to the United States and demonstrated at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. A year later Civil War hero Colonel Albert A. Pope, later recognized as the father of the American bicycle industry, established the first bicycle factory in the U.S. under the Pope Manufacturing Company.² The heavy machines Pope produced were relatively unwieldy by present-day standards and cost a steep \$313; yet, this early steel framed bicycle proved to be a far more practical mode of transportation.³ Although the early bicycle’s hefty price tag permitted only well-to-do Americans the opportunity to take part in the emerging world of cycling, interest in cycling grew quickly and held steady throughout the 1880’s. The fledgling western State of Oregon was not excluded from this trend, as professional bicycle races were drawing sizable crowds by 1884.⁴ In general, however, the bicycle movement in Oregon lagged several years behind the more developed and urbanized states of the northeastern United States.

During the 1880’s, cyclists, commonly known as ‘wheelmen,’ had established a considerable presence on American roads and highways. Wheelmen were commonly regarded as a nuisance by the general public, who still relied heavily on equestrian transportation for over-land travel. In many urban centers, such as Providence, Hartford, Brooklyn and Boston, local municipalities went so far as to prohibit wheelmen from riding their bicycles on public streets and parks—effectively banning bicycles from those cities.⁵ In Oregon the first law to mention bicycle transportation was passed in November of 1885, nearly a decade after the ordinary’s

² Robert A. Smith, a Social History of the Bicycle: Its Early Life and Times in America, (New York: American Heritage Press, 1972), 8.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Bicycle Race,” Oregonian, (Portland OR: December 14, 1884)

⁵ Charles E. Pratt, “The LAW and Legal Rights,” Outing, VII (January, 1886): 454

grand American début. Entitled, “An Act to Regulate the Passage of Bicycles, Tricycles, Velocipedes, Traction and Portable Engines on the Public Highways in this State,” the act required wheelmen to dismount one hundred yards from an approaching team of horses. This type of legislation was rather common throughout the United States as many people believed that bicycles frightened horses and were a general irritation to teamsters and riders.

In addition to legal obstructions, wheelmen were also discouraged from riding their machines due to careless or malicious horse drivers and poor roads and highways. Accidents with horse teams were a frequent occurrence, and incidents in which teamsters intentionally brought harm or simply trampled wheelmen were not uncommon.⁶ In both urban and rural areas muddy, rutted and generally poorly built and un-maintained roads also inhibited cycling. When pneumatic tires had become common features on bicycles by the early 1890’s, this problem was exacerbated by remarkably common incidences in which people would deliberately place objects hazardous to wheelmen, and their machines, in the roadway.⁷

In order to combat these difficulties and solidify camaraderie between local cyclists, wheelmen throughout the United States were quick to organize cycling clubs which endeavored to advocate on behalf of all wheelmen in myriad ways as well as organize recreational activities—mainly bicycle tours and races. Such fraternal organizations became colorful and prominent features of the early bicycle movement as they expanded and proliferated throughout the 1880’s and 90’s. Soon-to-be bicycle industry tycoon, Albert Pope was naturally one of the first organizers of such a club in Boston, Massachusetts, the staging ground of his rapidly

⁶ Referee, Good Roads and Cyclist, v.1 no. 3 (Portland, OR.: Oregon Road Club and the League of American Wheelmen, July, 1896) 7

See Also: Mail and Express, Good Roads and Cyclist, v.1 no. 8 (Portland, OR.: Oregon Road Club and the League of American Wheelmen, December, 1896) 6

See Also: Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 185-187.

⁷ Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 190.

growing bicycle empire.⁸ At first, these nascent organizations simply focused on attaining equal rights for wheelmen; however, due to the generally deplorable state of American streets and highways, such clubs were quick to begin lobbying state and municipal governments for better roads.⁹ By the early 1880's, cycling clubs already existed in countless towns and cities throughout the U.S.—including the west coast city of San Francisco. Nonetheless, by the beginning of the decade little progress had been made towards equal rights and almost no progress was in sight with regards to the advancement of better roads—with exception to the state of Massachusetts.¹⁰ Although most of the legislative challenges that faced these organizations had to be resolved at local and state levels, the failure of most bicycle clubs' efforts to counter mounting restrictions on bicycle use prompted the New York City Bicycle Club to call for a national bicycle advocacy organization.¹¹

Initially established by representatives from thirty one U.S. bicycle clubs, the League of American Wheelmen (L.A.W.) was formed on May 31, 1880 in Newport, Rhode Island. The organization endeavored “to promote the general interests of cycling; to ascertain, defend and protect the rights of wheelmen (which are identical with those of horsemen); to encourage and facilitate touring; to promote the improvement of public highways and an intelligent care and repair of the same, and to regulate the government of all sports connected with use of the wheel.”¹² In the decades to come, the League would prove to be one of the most formidable and effective pressure groups of its time and would claim the title of “the most powerful athletic

⁸ Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 10.

⁹ Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 11.

¹⁰ Pratt, “The LAW and Legal Rights,” Outing, VII (January, 1886): 454

¹¹ Phillip P. Mason, The League of American Wheelmen and the Good Roads Movement: 1880-1905, (University of Michigan, 1957), 37.

¹² “Founding of the L.A.W.,” L.A.W. Bulletin, 5 (August, 1887), 83.

organization in the world.”¹³ Throughout its early existence, L.A.W. pursued a wide array of tactics in its campaign for wheelmen’s rights, better roads, and the general advancement and promotion of American cycling. Aside from political lobbying, the organization also published a number of periodicals, road books, and maps. In addition, L.A.W. provided legal protection for League wheelmen involved in road accidents and organized a network of Inns and Hotels which gave generous discounts to touring members.¹⁴ By June of 1881 the League held a national membership of 1,571 wheelmen—60 percent of whom lived in either New York or Massachusetts, with only 12 percent of the organization composed of members who resided west of New York.¹⁵ At the time, not one Oregonian could be identified among the members of the League.

As mentioned earlier, Oregon lagged considerably behind the rest of the nation in its initial development of an appreciable bicycle culture. The years following the passage of Oregon’s first bicycle law, which required wheelmen to dismount when confronted by an approaching team of horses, were relatively uneventful. Although wheelmen in Oregon and throughout the U.S. regarded such laws as excessive and unwarranted, little appreciable energy was put forth in challenge of the Oregon statute. It was not until the early 1890’s that a handful of Oregon members of the League of American Wheelmen were able to nullify the “odious” law.¹⁶ Despite the belated progress of Oregon’s early bicycle culture, the number of Oregonian wheelmen and wheelwomen would grow rapidly throughout the 1890’s. This was paralleled by an equally rapid rise in public interest in and acceptance of cycling, which, in turn, eased the way

¹³ League of American Wheelmen: Oregon Division: Meeting, Souvenir Programme, (Portland, OR.: Oregon Division, League of American Wheelmen, 1897). “League of American Wheelmen”

¹⁴ League of American Wheelmen: Oregon Division: The Road Book Committee, Road Book of Oregon, (Portland, OR.: Oregon Division, League of American Wheelmen, 1897), “The L.A.W.—Its Objects and Claims for Patronage.”

¹⁵ Bicycling World and Motorcycle Review, 3 (New York; June, 1881), 69.

¹⁶ Oregon Road Club, Good Roads and Cyclist, I (June, 1896) 4.

for further legislative and social achievements. The bicycle boom of the 1890's was not exclusive to Oregon; rather, the bicycle frenzy that consumed many parts of the state was part of a national craze that swept the entire nation during the last decade of the 19th century.

Generally regarded as the heyday of bicycling in the United States, the 1890's began with the swift proliferation of the "safety bicycle" and ended with the collapse and consolidation of the American bicycle industry and the ascendance of the automobile. The safety bicycle was essentially a dwarfed ordinary which brought the rider closer to the ground—thus reducing many of the perils inherent in riding the standard high-wheel. A tremendous breakthrough emerged in 1884 when the Coventry Machinist Company of England began production of the "Rover," a chain driven bicycle similar to the machines of today. The first of such wheels to be produced in the United States was the Victor Bicycle of the A.H. Overman Company—also a Massachusetts based company, which went into production in 1887.¹⁷

By the onset of the 1890's numerous American bicycle companies were beginning to emerge, but the Overman Brothers and Pope had clearly become the captains of the industry and were both struggling furiously to keep pace with demand. The bicycle boom mushroomed steadily throughout the 1890s, paying little regard to the financial panic of 1893. By the mid 90's, there were over 500 bicycle manufacturers in the U.S. and an estimated riding public of four million.¹⁸ It was estimated that, by 1896, Americans had invested roughly \$300 million in bicycles and spent another \$200 million on bicycle sundries—must-have accessories of the cycling craze.¹⁹ That same year alone it was projected that nearly one million bicycles would be

¹⁷ Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 14.

¹⁸ Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 30-31.

¹⁹ Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 24.

marketed in the United States, an estimated \$70 million industry.²⁰ The boom did not last forever. The industry ran aground in 1898 when long inflated prices finally collapsed due to a long oversaturated market.²¹ In June of 1899, much of the former bicycle industry was quietly consolidated under the American Bicycle Company, a large trust that, by 1902, would be in the control of none other than Albert Pope and John D. Rockefeller. The collapse of the industry led to a sharp decline in the public's enthusiasm for the bicycle. In the aftermath, many familiar with the former industry accredited much of the decline to the poor management and marketing practices of the A.B.C.²² The ascendance of the automobile in the late 19th and early 20th century sealed the fate of the bicycle, bringing to an end its belle epoch. Although relatively short lived, it was the bicycle craze of the 1890's that brought cycling to Oregon in full force.

In the 1880's Oregon's overall interest in the wheel was quite paltry compared with the urban centers of the northeast; and for good reason. Simple geographic separation from the East Coast as well as basic problems of infrastructural development—namely the lack of quality roads—hindered the early advancement of the wheel in Oregon. Economic development, however, was likely the most salient factor of early bicycle proliferation. Even though Albert Pope was able to reduce the price of his ordinary soon after mass production began, the average running price of a new wheel still ran between \$100 and \$150, which constituted approximately four months pay for the average laborer.²³ Thus the early wheelman was generally of a more leisurely and affluent breed than that of the ordinary American. More importantly, he was of a privileged class of individuals who maintained, at least in sheer numbers, a far greater presence

²⁰ “The Progress of the Wheel: Effects of the Bicycle Business on Other Lines of Activity,” Oregonian from the Chicago Times Herald, (June 15, 1896)

²¹ Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 33.

²² Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 243.

²³ Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 13.

on the East Coast than the West. Regardless of such impediments, the irrefutable virtues of the wheel shone through and the bicycle was making its presence felt in Oregon by the mid 1880's.

In Oregon there was a fair degree of interest in cycling by at least 1884. As alluded to earlier, on December 13th of that year, cyclists Bert Hatch and F.T. Merrill competed for the state championship in a ten-mile track race, Merrill came out on top by a margin of a mere 4 seconds. The race was held at the Mechanics' Pavilion in Portland, on the corner of 2nd and Clay, and reportedly drew a substantial crowd.²⁴ A decade later, in the midst of the nationwide bicycle frenzy, numerous bicycle races were advertised in the *Oregonian*. Not only were such races drawing immense crowds, pre-event reports of such occasions carried such dramatic headlines as "THE CITY DESERTED: Everybody Will Be at the Portland Field this Afternoon."²⁵ Although slow to start, the bicycle craze had reached Oregon and was in full bloom by the mid 1890's.

Despite Oregon's distinctive position as a relatively young and sparsely populated state, the bicycle phenomenon that emerged and developed in Oregon closely paralleled the experiences of other, older states with much more extensive urban development. This concurrence was likely due to the obvious fact that most cycling activity and transportation was concentrated within Multnomah County; Oregon's most populous county and the home of its largest city, Portland.²⁶ That is not to say that Oregon wheelmen were confined to the northwest corner of the state. Salem also had established itself as cycling hotspot with other small pockets in Pendleton, Astoria, Eugene and parts of Southern Oregon. Nonetheless, in the late 19th century the majority of Oregon's wheelmen and wheelwomen were, by and large, concentrated

²⁴ "Bicycle Race," *Oregonian*, (Portland OR: December 14, 1884)

²⁵ "The City Deserted," *The Morning Oregonian*, (July 13, 1895)

²⁶ In 1890 Multnomah County contained 74,884 of Oregon's 313,767 residents; while a decade later the county had grown to hold 103,167 of the State's 413,536 residents. 11th and 12th Censuses of the United States, (1890, 1900)

within Multnomah County where a sizeable bicycling community and relatively decent roads could be found.

As was the case on the national level, it was quite difficult to determine the number of cyclists in Oregon and even within the city of Portland. One account of an 1895 Fourth of July parade, which took place on a typically rainy Portland day, gives some insight into the number of cyclists and the level of public enthusiasm for the bicycle in the said city. Despite the rain and the un-glorifying mud, 1,200 bicyclists took part in the parade in which the most exquisitely decorated wheels were awarded prizes; a bicycle race was then held the following day.²⁷ Races were not infrequent events for throughout the 1890's *The Oregonian* frequently advertised and reported on Portland bicycle races and even the City of Salem was reported to have hosted major bicycle contests of its own.²⁸ Oregonians not only exhibited a great deal of interest in cycling as spectators, but they themselves took to the streets in great numbers on their own two-wheelers—for sport, recreation, and basic transportation. By some accounts, it appeared as though the streets and sidewalks of Portland were congested with cyclists. In a rather perturbed letter to the Mayor of Portland, William Reed described the street scene of East Portland in 1896, in which packs of a dozen or so cyclists roamed the streets and crowded the sidewalks.²⁹ A glimpse into the extent of the bicycle's popularity in Oregon can be observed in an account of one particularly pleasant Sunday, during the height of the bicycle craze, in which three thousand bicyclists were counted traveling the popular leisurely route between Portland and Vancouver, Washington.³⁰

By July of 1896, *Good Roads and Cyclist*, a Portland based publication, estimated that at least

²⁷ Percy Maddux, *City on the Willamette: The Story of Portland Oregon*, (Portland, OR.: Binfords and Mort, 1952), 137-138.

²⁸ "SALEM BICYCLE RACES: Brandenburg, on his "Rambler," Scoops Everything," *Oregonian*, (August 1, 1895).

²⁹ Letter to the "Honorable Mayor of Portland," signed by William Reed: June 28, 1896. Original letter can be found at the Stanley Parr Archives and Records Center of the City of Portland, 9360 N. Columbia Blvd. 97203-1049

³⁰ Maddux, *City on the Willamette*, 149.

5,000 wheels were in use in Portland, up from the mere 2,000 in use a little over a year previous.³¹

In order to accommodate and control the surging population of cyclists, the State Legislature and local municipalities of Oregon were forced to enact legislation to regulate the use of bicycles. Throughout most of the bicycle craze, the State Legislature passed very few bicycle laws, likely due to the fact that the effects of bicycle traffic were generally negligible outside of the Portland area. The 1885 decree requiring wheelmen to dismount when passing a team of horses was an obvious exception. In the absence of state legislation, Portland was left on its own to resolve the complex matter of regulating bicycle traffic within the city. The first ordinance approved by the City Council was not enacted until October 1893. Ordinance 8561 established the first speed-limit for bicycles at 6 MPH and required wheelmen to equip their bicycles with a light, visible within a reasonable distance, and either a bell or a gong.³² The maximum sentence for not abiding by the ordinance was 25 days in jail or a fine of \$50, a fairly steep penalty given that the average wheel only cost around \$100 and was still considered to be quite expensive. Not all city ordinances, however, sought simply to control cycling. Conflicts between wheelmen and non-wheelmen throughout the U.S. often led many disgruntled pedestrians, teamsters, horse riders and common mischievous youths to place glass, scrap metal, tacks and other hazardous materials in the roadway with the intention of rupturing the wheelmen's vulnerable pneumatic tires. Even profiteering tire repairmen were suspected of such dubious acts. Portland was no exception to such trends, and in July 1895, the Portland City Council was forced to address this

³¹ "The Consolidated Cycling and Driving Association," Good Roads and Cyclist, v.1 no. 3 (Portland, OR.: Oregon Road Club and the League of American Wheelmen, July, 1896) 13.

³² Ordinance #8561, "Regulating the riding and propelling of Bicycles, Velocipedes and other vehicles within the city limits and limiting the speed there of," (Portland City Council: October 18, 1893)—this ordinance and all other Portland ordinances cited in this article can found at the Stanley Parr Archives and Records Center of the City of Portland, 9360 N. Columbia Blvd. 97203-1049

issue through the enactment of Ordinance 9356, which prohibited placing materials hazardous to bicycles in the roadway and defined such actions as a misdemeanor.³³ As in most other major U.S. cities, both Portland wheelmen and vigilante Portlanders opposed to the wheel continued to defy the laws despite mounting efforts to both accommodate and control the bicycle.

The notorious “Scorcher,” or bicycle speeder, was a common menace that seemed to plague U.S. cities from coast to coast. Like authorities in Boston and New York, Portland officials and law enforcement officers struggled to prevent inner-city wheelmen from racing through the streets at a “hot pace.” Although the scorcher was stereotyped as a young reckless male, scorching was commonly practiced by both men and women of all ages.³⁴ Scorching had become such a concern that the *Oregonian* even published an article which sought to warn wheelmen of the perils of scorching down Park Avenue. The article noted that serious accidents were occurring on a weekly basis due to poor road conditions and an abrupt 75 foot plunge into a Chinese Garden at the end of the then well-inclined thoroughfare.³⁵ In his letter to the Mayor, an understandably discontented William Reed recounted an incident in which a scorcher knocked him on his back while he walked down Couch Street on the east side of town.³⁶ Incidents like this sharpened the already strong divide between wheelmen and the non-cycling public. Pedestrians, teamsters, and horse riders alike felt threatened by the growing use of the wheel, be it the result of a genuine concern for their own physical well being or a general disdain for the incursions cyclists made in their everyday lives. Consequently, Oregon wheelmen, like their brethren throughout the country, had to struggle in order to secure for themselves a safe, legal, and at least tolerated position on the road and in American society.

³³ Ordinance #9356, “An ordinance providing for the protection of bicycle or an any other vehicles which have wheels with rubber or pneumatic tires,” (Portland City Council: July 17, 1895)

³⁴ S.H. Gruber, “Ride Slowly on Sidewalks,” *Good Roads and Cyclist*, v. 1 no. 1 (May, 1896), 12-13

³⁵ “Don’t Coast Down This Hill,” *Oregonian*, (Portland, OR: July 26, 1896) City News in Brief

³⁶ Reed, letter to the “Honorable Mayor of Portland,” 1896

The cycling clubs and wheelmen associations that sprang up across the United States led the effort to change the general public's posture toward the common wheelman. Although the bicycle movement took some time to gain footing in Oregon, by the mid-1890's, the State, especially Multnomah County, was by no means in short supply of such organizations. Some of the most prominent and active fraternal and athletic organizations that pursued the general advancement of the wheel included the Oregon Road Club, the Multnomah Amateur Athletic Club, the Portland Athletic Club, the First Regiment Athletic Association, the Portland Speed Association, the Zig-Zag Cycle Club and, of course, the Oregon Division of the League of American Wheelmen.³⁷

The first three Oregon members of the League of American Wheelmen joined in 1886.³⁸ League membership remained quite low in the state for the next several years, however, this did not deter early members of the League from organizing themselves into a cohesive and effective pressure group. By the early 1890's definite progress was made towards the improvement of the legal standing of Oregon cyclists, due largely to the efforts of these pioneering wheelmen.³⁹ Oregon became an official division of the national organization in 1896, sixteen years following the initial formation of the L.A.W., when 100 Oregon wheelmen had successfully registered themselves as qualified League members. Beginning on the first of February of that year, a small contingent of Oregon members began a concerted effort to increase its ranks. Within two months their ranks had swelled beyond the 100 member benchmark and were growing at a swift rate.⁴⁰

³⁷ Good Roads and Cyclist, v.1 no. 3 (Portland, OR.: Oregon Road Club and the League of American Wheelmen, July, 1896) 16.

³⁸ "Oregon Division," L.A.W. Bulletin and Good Roads, (Boston, MA: League of American Wheelmen, November 6, 1896) 615

³⁹ Good Roads and Cyclist, (June, 1896), 4

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Aside from paying an initial fee of \$2 and annual dues of \$1, one had to fulfill a small set of criteria in order to join the League. An applicant had to be of 18 years of age or older and receive the endorsement of two league members or “three other reputable citizens.” To ensure that applicants were of good character, the nationally circulated bulletin of the L.A.W. began to publish the names of Oregon applicants in hopes that its readers might identify undesirable candidates.⁴¹ Women, once excluded from attaining full membership, were now welcomed to join, but the League continued to deny membership to non-white wheelmen.⁴² On September 30, 1896, the Oregon Division of the League of American Wheelmen held its first annual board meeting. Although, unsurprisingly, the majority of the organization’s members resided in the Portland area, the meeting was attended by League members from Klamath Falls and the far eastern city of La Grande, which was apparently home to a cycling club of its own.⁴³ By October of 1896, there were approximately 300 Oregon members of the L.A.W.⁴⁴ Soon following its designation as an official division, the Oregon League began to pursue an extensive and multifaceted effort to serve and advocate on behalf of Oregon’s wheelmen.

One of the most original and widely recognized accomplishments of the League was the documentation and publication of information regarding the quality of roads and highways in states throughout the U.S.—including Oregon. In the year previous to the Oregon Division’s formal recognition, League members had compiled and published a remarkably extensive road map of the entire State of Oregon for the use of its members and all touring wheelmen.⁴⁵ The map was quite impressive, but it was not incredibly useful for it left much detail to be desired.

⁴¹ “Applications for Membership: Oregon,” *L.A.W. Bulletin and Good Roads*, (Boston, MA: League of American Wheelmen, August 7, 1896) 213

⁴² *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (June, 1896), 4

⁴³ “Oregon Division,” *L.A.W. Bulletin and Good Roads*, (November 6, 1896), 615

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Oregon Division, League of American Wheelmen, *Road Map of Oregon*, (1895) reprinted in 1976.

Thus, by 1896, work had begun towards the publication of Oregon's first road book.⁴⁶ A much coveted resource for wheelmen in other League states, road books were an in-depth catalog of favorable routes between various cities, towns, and popular attractions. The books also provided a list of hotels with which the organization had arranged to provide discounts for League members.

The information presented in the Oregon Road Book was collected and compiled by the Road Book Committee of the Oregon Division; but the information itself was submitted to the committee by individual members throughout the state.⁴⁷ Thus, the road books not only provide a glimpse into the nature of travel along Oregon's roads in the 1890's; they also give some insight into the distribution of League membership throughout the state. As one would expect, routes leading from Portland to cities such as Astoria, Pendleton, Salem and Eugene are all well documented. The book also includes fairly thorough descriptions of routes connecting more remote southern Oregon cities like Ashland and Klamath falls. Nonetheless, the Road Book Committee did concede that the book was not exhaustive and had left many parts of Oregon unaccounted for. Unfortunately, an improved edition of the Road Book was never published by the League. The following year, Oregon wheelmen would witness the collapse of the American bicycle industry as they knew it. The bicycle craze in Oregon waxed and waned with the rest of the country, and as the bicycle's golden age faded away, so too did the strength and prestige of League.

Although the Oregon Division of the League of American Wheelmen thrived for only a brief period, its efforts to advance the rights and aspirations of Oregon wheelmen were not pursued in vain. United with other bicycle advocacy organizations, the League and its allies

⁴⁶ Good Roads and Cyclist, (June, 1896), 4

⁴⁷ The Road Book Committee, Road Book of Oregon, Preface

pursued far greater goals than the publication of Road Books and Bicycle Maps. As previously noted, the League was instrumental in reforming early bicycle laws to better accommodate and protect cyclists. By the mid 1890's, however, Oregon wheelmen had sufficiently secured their right to the road and were gaining greater acceptance amongst the general public. In these slightly more well-to-do times, the Oregon Division of LAW turned its attention to an exceedingly daunting problem that had plagued American wheelmen since the dawn of the bicycle era—poor roads.

For a vast number of reasons, roads and highways in the United States were, for the most part, underdeveloped and in a deplorable state in the 1880's and 1890's.⁴⁸ Oregon's roads and highways were particularly under-improved due, in large part, to the fact that rail and steamboat were the conveyances of choice throughout the state's recent development. Before the rise of the wheelman, most Oregonians were content with the state's rudimentary roads and turnpikes because they could be reasonably traversed by horse or wagon if necessary. Such muddy, rutted roads, however, were not suitable for the bicycle. Thus, in the mid 1890's, with the rights of wheelmen fairly secured and the mounting support of Oregon's growing cycling community behind them, the Oregon Division and its allies stepped-up their "Good-Roads" campaign.

By far, the League's greatest ally in the Good-Roads effort in Oregon was the Oregon Road Club. The Oregon Road Club was organized in 1895 with the expressed purpose of "fostering the speedy development of the Good-Roads idea throughout the country and encouraging by all means in its power the general use of the silent wheel by men and women as the factors in the building and maintenance of good roads."⁴⁹ It was reported that the O.R.C. had started out with the "largest charter membership ever claimed by any similar organization on the

⁴⁸ Mason, *the League of American Wheelmen...*, (University of Michigan, 1957), 3-34.

⁴⁹ "Salutatory," *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (May, 1896), 8

[west] coast.”⁵⁰ The club organized regular bicycle tours in which participating members wore matching uniforms, followed bugle calls, and obeyed regimented riding procedures similar to those employed by the U.S. Cavalry.⁵¹ Additionally, the club maintained a very attractive clubhouse that included not only a cyclery—a bicycle garage and bathhouse for cyclists—but also a library, a reading-room, a card room, a billiard-room, a chess-room, a writing-room, a café, and multiple bowling alleys.⁵² Unsurprisingly, the clubhouse and cycling activities of the O.R.C. effectively fostered a great deal of camaraderie amongst the club’s member wheelmen. By May of 1896, the Road Club’s membership registry had far surpassed that of Oregon Division of the L.A.W., with 750 male and 400 “lady” members.⁵³

In 1896, the Oregon Division of L.A.W. and the Oregon Road Club began to co-publish *Good Roads and Cyclist*; a rather short lived monthly periodical which featured editorials, poems, and local and national articles pertaining to the interests and plight of the wheelman. Articles featured in the publication varied from reports on local bicycle races and tours to updates on pending Portland traffic ordinances. The periodical also ran moralizing reports and editorials about reckless Scorchers and other disobedient wheelmen, who were criticized for compromising the efforts and achievements of the bicycle movement. As its title suggests, the publication was specifically focused on the advancement of the Good-Roads cause. Every issue was filled with editorials of varying length that droned on about the virtues of Good-Roads. Most issues included rather lengthy articles about the proper construction and maintenance of roads and various potential methods to fund and provide labor for such projects. All things

⁵⁰ “Oregon Road Club,” *Oregonian*, (Portland, OR: August 1, 1895), under: “City News in Brief”

⁵¹ *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (May, 1896), 10

⁵² *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (August, 1896), 9

⁵³ *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (May, 1896)

considered, *Good Roads and Cyclist* was quite informative and served to simultaneously educate and agitate the public in the name of good-roads.

By the end of 1896, the Good-Roads Movement in Oregon appeared to be picking up steam, but a rough road still lay ahead. In December of that year, the Superintendent of Streets of the City Portland conceded in his annual report to the Mayor that the condition of the City's streets was "not good."⁵⁴ This, as Portland's wheelmen knew, was an understatement. Cyclists were unsurprisingly prone to riding on the sidewalks, especially in inclement weather, due to their smooth surface and the frequently unrideable condition of the city's streets.⁵⁵ Riding on the sidewalk, however, was dangerous for pedestrians, largely due to the recklessness of scorchers. In 1896, fearing that cyclist might be banned altogether from using the sidewalk, the Oregon Division and the Oregon Road Club lobbied for stricter regulations for the use of sidewalks by cyclists and harsher penalties for those who disobeyed the law. Wheelmen retained the right to ride upon the sidewalks as long as they maintained a speed no greater than 6 MPH and dismounted when passing pedestrians.⁵⁶ Permission to ride upon sidewalks, however, was by no means a permanent solution to the city's deplorable roads.

Repairing the streets of Portland was certainly a daunting task but the solution was simple. The city simply needed to repave many of the streets with more modern materials such as asphalt, bituminous, and brick. Old macadamized and graveled streets wore out quickly and were quite treacherous for cyclists. Portland good-roads agitators goaded their municipal legislators and administrators to improve the city's streets, but financial and sheer logistical

⁵⁴ City of Portland: Mayor's Message and Municipal Reports, (December 31, 1896) Superintendent of Streets Report

⁵⁵ Committee, "Ride Slowly on Walks," *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (May, 1896) 12-13

⁵⁶ Ordinance # 9941, "An Ordinance to amend section 37 of Ordinance #3983 entitled, "An Ordinance concerning offences and disorderly conduct" as amended by Ordinance #8947," (Portland City Council: September 16, 1896) Also see: Committee on Rights and Privileges, L.A.W., "To the Wheeling Members of the Oregon Road Club and Our Wheeling Readers," *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (November, 1896), 12

limitations made road improvement particularly slow. Even by 1899, only about 30 miles of Portland's Streets were constructed of reasonably durable materials while 79.94 miles remained unpaved and an estimated 452 miles were generally unimproved.⁵⁷

Due to the sluggish progress, the wheelmen of Portland sought to take matters into their own hands by constructing bicycle paths within the city. The Riverside Side Path was the first such thoroughfare and was built under the direction of the Consolidated Cycle and Driving Association, an organization composed of representatives from the Portland Speed Association, the Multnomah Amateur Athletic Club, the Portland Amateur Athletic Club, the Zig-Zag Cycle Club and the Oregon Road Club. The path was paid for through private donations, collected mostly from the members of the involved cycling and athletic associations, and opened on September 26, 1896.⁵⁸ Despite the undoubtedly poor condition of Portland's city streets, cycling in Portland does not seem to have been an entirely arduous task. In fact, an 1896 bicycle map of Portland, produced by a civil and hydraulic engineer by the name of J.H. Cunningham, seems to show a sufficient network of good and fair roads running throughout the city.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, photographs and accounts of dreadful Portland streets, found in nearly every issue of *Good Roads and Cyclist*, attest to the fact that much work still needed to be done.

Agitating for good-roads was certainly a difficult task for Oregon wheelmen, even when it was conducted on their own turf within the urban localities of Western Oregon. Even more onerous efforts had to be made in order to improve the rural roads and highways of the state that ran through large, sparsely populated areas where cyclists could seldom be found. As one would

⁵⁷ City of Portland: Mayor's Message and Municipal Reports, (December 31, 1899) City Engineer's Report

⁵⁸ "Riverside Side Path," *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (October, 1896) 6

⁵⁹ J.H. Cunningham, *Cyclists' Road Map of Portland District*, (Portland OR: Cunningham and Banks, 1896), the Oregon Historical Society reproduced the map in 1973. The maps were at one time obtainable through the OHS but they were all eventually donated to the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (717 SW 12th Ave., Portland, OR.) through which they can be obtained today.

suspect, the problem of funding road improvements was the primary impediment that hindered the Good-Roads Movement. Un-wealthy, rural agriculturalists were hardly keen to fund road development. Not unlike the rest of the Nation, good-roads agitators in Oregon soon found that their efforts did not receive the support required to convince state officials of the need for good-roads. The fact of the matter was that most of the members of good roads associations, like the League of American Wheelmen and the Oregon Road Club, were generally well-to-do individuals who endorsed the good-roads campaign so that they would simply be able to tour their wheels with greater ease and comfort. For all intents and purposes, Oregon farmers had little need for good-roads as steamboats and railroads fulfilled their general transportation needs. Nonetheless, *Good Roads and Cyclist* was dotted with articles and editorials that tried to persuade readers of the economic, political and social necessity of good roads. In formulating arguments for the need of improved rural roads and highways, authors of such articles often adopted patronizing positions.⁶⁰ One such article, that went as far as to attempt to persuade a potential rural reader of the virtues of the wheel, concluded with this flattering line, “The people in rural localities may be a slow about learning all the good points of a good thing, but they are rapidly learning those of the bicycle.”⁶¹

With little doubt, wheelmen constituted the vast majority of good-roads advocates in Oregon during the 1890’s. Despite the fairly narrow scope of this constituency, the efforts of these early good-roads advocates eventually succeeded in attaining a fairly impressive legislative victory. On the 17th and 18th of December, 1896, the Oregon Division of L.A.W. and the Oregon Road Club organized a good-roads convention. The organizers of the event hoped that the convention would provide a forum in which good-roads advocates as a whole could articulate

⁶⁰ James Barton Adams, “Plain Talk from a Farmer,” *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (June, 1896), 14

⁶¹ The Wheel, “The Farmer’s Friend,” *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (October, 1896), 7

common objectives and demands which could, in turn, be formulated into legislative proposals to be presented during the legislative session in 1897.⁶² The convention was well attended and proved to be a general success. The following legislative session, however, proved to be far less successful as the 1897 session failed to produce any good-roads legislation.

1896 would prove to be the climax of the early bicycle movement in Oregon. Although Oregon's cycling clubs and good-roads association carried on their efforts to promote cycling and advance the good-roads cause, the movement had begun to show signs of decline by 1897. The promisingly rapid growth of membership to the Oregon Division of L.A.W. and the Oregon Road Club observed in 1896 had stabilized by 1897. By January of that year, the Oregon Division still could only claim a membership of around 300.⁶³ In April, the Oregon Road Club and the Oregon Division of L.A.W. would publish the last of only 12 editions of *Good Roads and Cyclist*. Despite the sudden turn of fortune for Oregon's early bicycle movement, one particularly triumphant achievement still had yet to be realized.

The next legislative session began in 1899 and by mid-February, the good-roads efforts of the Oregon Division and the Oregon Road Club finally bore fruit. Rather than pursuing a broad effort to improve the thousands of miles of Oregon turnpikes, lobbying wheelmen were able to pass a bill that provided for the construction of state bicycle paths. Entitled, "An Act to provide for the levying and collecting of a tax on bicycles for the building and protecting of paths, and defining a bicycle," this law placed a tax of \$1.25 on all bicycles; the proceeds of which were to be used for the construction of state bicycle paths which were to be used solely by pedestrians and cyclists.⁶⁴ Wheelmen who paid the tax were to be given a tag to place on their bicycle as

⁶² "The Meat of the Nut," *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (December, 1896), 7

⁶³ Eugene, D. White, "Work of the League of American Wheelmen," *Good Roads and Cyclist*, (January, 1897), 6

⁶⁴ 1899 Oregon State Legislature, "An Act to provide for the levying and collecting of a tax on bicycles for the building and protecting of paths, and defining a bicycle," S.B. 143 (Salem, OR: February 18, 1899)

proof of their compliance. Unfortunately, although the act was quite certainly one of the greatest achievements of the early bicycle movement in Oregon, the law was in effect for only a brief period.

The following year, Sheriff William Frazier of Multnomah County appointed one J.W. Johnson as a county bicycle tax collector. On June 22 of that year, Johnson seized the bicycle of one J.A. Ellis for failure to pay the special bicycle tax. In response, Ellis filed a lawsuit against the Sheriff for the return of his wheel claiming that the flat tax was in violation of the state's Constitution.⁶⁵ The court ruled in favor of the plaintiff on January 28, 1901, effectively nullifying the law.

By the time the court had made its final ruling, the early bicycle movement was well in decline, both in Oregon and throughout the U.S., and few cyclists were left to continue the fight for the rights of wheelmen and the advancement of good-roads. Following the collapse of the American bicycle industry and the concurrent rise of the automobile, serious public interest in the wheel fell sharply. Consolidated under the American Bicycle Company, the bicycle industry drastically changed its marketing tactics; a blunder that some, like Abbott Bassett, perennial secretary of the L.A.W., ultimately blamed for the wheel's decline.⁶⁶ Before long, the bicycle was once again rendered a mere instrument of amusement by the general public. The automobile was becoming the America's favored mode of transportation and it had already begun to rapidly proliferate throughout the U.S. The first automobile to reach in Oregon arrived in 1898; by 1905, there were 218 in the State.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ellis v. Frazier. 38 Or 462, 63 Pac. 642, (argued 24 December, 1900; decided 28 January, 1901)

⁶⁶ Smith, Social History of the Bicycle..., 243

⁶⁷ Maddux, City on the Willamette, 151

Today automobiles, in many respects, are considered the arch-nemesis of the avid cyclist. Over the past 100 years, the nature of bicycle advocacy organizations have changed a great deal from those of the golden 1890's. The bicycle experienced a brief revival in the 1930's, when over a million bicycles were being produced annually even in the midst of the great depression. This revival, however, seems to have been confined to children and youngsters. It wasn't until the oil crisis of the 1970's that cycling was once again was looked upon as a serious and practical mode of transportation. In 1972, more bicycles than cars were sold in the U.S. for the first time since the ascendance of the automobile (15.3 million bicycles being sold by 1973).⁶⁸ Although such trends did not continue, the oil crisis and the rise of the modern environmental movement the 1970's fostered a rebirth of the bicycle advocacy movement.

The general character of today's bicycle advocacy organizations is markedly different than that of the wheelmen's associations of the 1880's and 90's. In Oregon, cyclists today enjoy many of the same rights and privileges as other vehicular traffic.⁶⁹ To the benefit of modern cyclists, the automobile has advanced the progress of road improvement far beyond the comparatively humble objectives of the Good-Roads Movement. Given these developments, the objectives of Oregon's contemporary bicycle advocacy organizations have certainly shifted in focus. Groups like the Bicycle Transportation Alliance, founded in 1990, endeavourer to promote cycling for environmental and social reasons.⁷⁰ Such motivations would likely have been looked upon with great puzzlement by the Oregon Division of L.A.W. and the Oregon Road Club. The currently active, Portland based, counter culture (mutant)bicycle club,

⁶⁸ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Office of Planning and Evaluation, Bicycle Transportation, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, December, 1973) 5

⁶⁹ ORS 814.430 (c): stipulates that a bicyclist may occupy a full lane of traffic in the absence of bicycle lane

⁷⁰ <http://www.bta4bikes.org/>

C.H.U.N.K. 666, would have certainly been looked upon with even greater query.⁷¹

Nonetheless, parallels can be drawn between the bicycle culture in the 1890's and the bicycle culture of today. Like the wheelmen of the late 19th century, the cyclists these days find themselves as the underdogs, contending with a previously established, well entrenched mode of transportation that can often pose a threat to the inherently vulnerable cyclist. In light of this reality, contemporary bicyclists, such as those who participate in the monthly Critical Mass bicycle rides in Portland, look for camaraderie with other cyclists, much like wheelmen of Portland's former cycling associations.

Today, many Oregonians are unaware of their state's extensive cycling history and are surprised to find that cyclists were scorching the streets of Portland well over a century ago. Cycling has been and continues to be an intriguing facet of Oregon history. As economic, social, and environmental pressures incurred by automobiles continue to mount, contemporary bicycling advocates may wish to reflect upon past struggles, victories and failures of Oregon's pioneering wheelmen.

⁷¹ <http://www.dclxvi.org/chunk/>

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