

Brooklyn and the Bicycle

by

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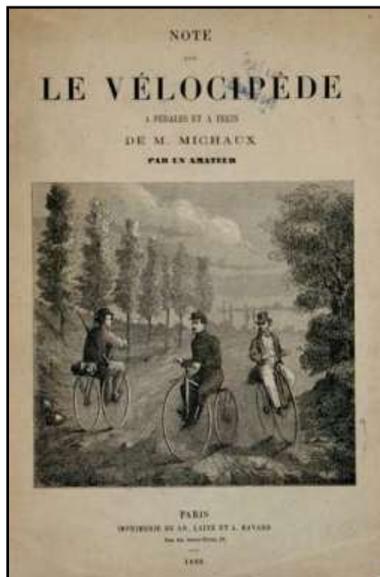
Across the United States, cycling is flourishing, not only as a recreational activity but also as a “green” and practical means of urban transportation. The phenomenon is particularly pronounced in Brooklyn, a large and mostly flat urban expanse with a vibrant, youthful population.

The current national cycling boom encompasses new and promising developments, such as a growing number of hi-tech urban bike share networks, including Citi Bike, set to launch in New York City in May 2013. Nevertheless, the present “revival” reflects a certain historical pattern in which the bicycle has swung periodically back into, and out of, public favor.

I propose to review here the principal American cycling booms over the past century and a half to show how, each time, Brooklyn has played a prominent role. I will start with the introduction of the bicycle itself (then generally called a “velocipede” from the Latin for fast feet), when Brooklyn was arguably the epicenter of the nascent American bicycle industry.

Velocipede Mania

The first bicycle craze, known then as “velocipede mania,” struck Paris in mid-1867, in the midst of the Universal Exhibition. The pioneer company Michaux, named after the blacksmith who supervised production, caused quite a sensation. Though some feared that the clever little vehicle would prove a menace to carriage drivers and pedestrians, if not to the riders themselves, many expressed at least cautious optimism that the elusive “mechanical horse” was at last at hand.



Of course, by today’s standards, these early bicycles were laughably crude and of no practical value. With a solid iron frame mounted on rickety wooden carriage wheels, generally fitted with iron tires, the affair weighed between fifty to one hundred pounds. The beleaguered rider had to stretch out his legs to reach the pedals attached to the front hub, while trying to steer the same wheel and remain upright. Nevertheless, the surprising discovery that a slender two-wheeler could be steadily and continuously propelled opened an exciting new path for development.

One of the velocipede’s early admirers was the *New York Times*’ Paris correspondent, who marveled in August 1867 how the “scarcely visible” vehicle could eclipse twelve miles an hour, giving the rider “the comical appearance of flying through the air” (22 Aug. 1867). Among the many advantages he anticipated were “great

economy of time as well as money,” “immense development of muscle and lung,” and the fostering of “independence of character.” For women, he predicted it would “force adoption of the bloomer or some other more convenient costume.” For urbanites, it would vastly improve circulation. “Is it not a disgrace to the inventive age we live in,” he concluded, “to see a man obliged to employ, in order to get through the street, a great vehicle, as large almost as a house? So let us have the velocipedes.”

They were not, however, fast in coming to the United States. A handful of individuals brought over French velocipedes in the latter half of 1867, while a few carriage makers imported specimens for study. Most, however, hesitated to launch production. As a carriage trade journal later explained, the proposition was daunting given the costly materials and laborious production required. Moreover, there was no guarantee that the French fad could be replicated in the United States, or last long enough for makers to “get at it profitably” (*New York Coach-Makers Magazine*, Feb. 1869).

The first to aggressively market the bicycle to Americans were the Hanlon brothers, a famous acrobatic troupe comprised of five natural (and one adopted) brothers. They were touring France in late 1867 and early 1868 when they came across the novel vehicle, and reportedly brought one back to the United States (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 14 Jan. 1913). They recognized that riding a bicycle on stage might prove an amusing new act, and perhaps even spark a lucrative demand for the vehicle.

In July 1868, the Hanlons were granted an American patent that claimed certain improvements in velocipede construction, notably adjustable saddles and cranks (*American Artisan*, 23 Sept. 1868). About that time, they engaged the H.B. Witty

Carriage Manufactory of Brooklyn to produce a distinctive velocipede of their own design.



George Hanlon

No doubt the Hanlons turned to a large and successful firm because they were confident that demand for their novel vehicles would soon soar. Founded as a livery stable in 1852 by the brothers Henry and Calvin Witty, the busy three-storey building on the corner of Flatbush Avenue and Nevins Street had been recently expanded to accommodate an increasing workload and a growing workforce (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 12 June 1954).

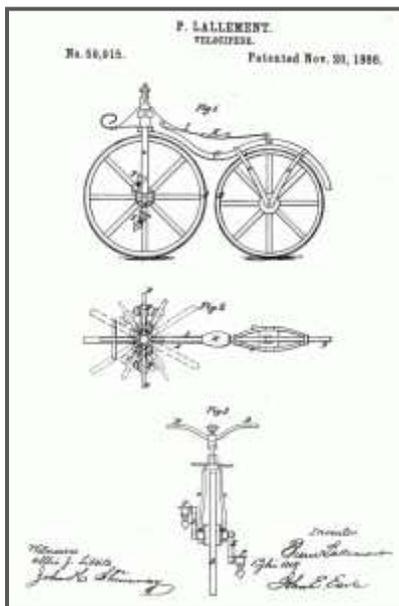
In August, the Hanlons started riding their Witty-built bicycles on theater stages throughout New England, before rapt audiences. In Boston, two of the brothers even raced their bicycles around the Common, much to the astonishment of onlookers (*Boston Evening Transcript*, 18 Aug. 1869). The local and national press spilt much ink on the Hanlons and their velocipedes, frequently citing Calvin Witty as the maker.

The glowing reports helped to fuel an American demand for the sensational vehicle. Apparently, they also caught the attention of a carriage maker in New



Witty Factory

Haven whose employee, James Carroll, claimed to have an interest in a patent covering the basic bicycle, dated November 20, 1866. The manufacturer called on Witty to inform him that he would need to settle matters with Carroll and the patentee, Pierre Lallement, who had recently moved back to Paris. Naturally, Witty was jolted by the news. As a trade journal later explained, “It being understood that [the bicycle] is a French invention, no one supposed that there was or would be any patent on it in this country” (*Eastern Argus* (Portland, Maine), 2 Mar. 1869).



Witty tentatively agreed to buy Carroll’s share of the patent. Pending the results of a private investigation to confirm the validity of the patent, Witty then planned to buy Lallement’s share. For the time being, Witty wisely chose to say nothing publically about the prospective transaction, so as not to disrupt the nascent industry he aspired to control.

About this time, in the early fall of 1868, Witty ended his partnership with the Hanlons and began to produce and advertise his own velocipedes. Joining him in the new trade were several makers in the New York City area, notably Thomas R. Pickering, George H. Mercer, and the Wood Brothers of Bridgeport, Connecticut. Some, like Pickering, who introduced a tubular frame, produced their own distinct designs, while others preferred to emulate the latest French styles.

In the closing months of 1868, velocipede mania struck Manhattan in earnest. The first bicycles were spotted rumbling about Central Park, the New York Athletic Club hosted the first indoor velocipede race, and the brothers Frank and Alva Pearsall, well known photographers from Brooklyn, opened the country's first riding rink on the corner of Broadway and 28th Street.

Ostensibly, the Pearsall rink served to prepare pupils for a “new era in road travel” come springtime. Of course, whether the primitive bicycle could successfully transition from a smooth wooden floor, set within the cozy confines of four walls, to the dirt or cobblestoned roads of the great outdoors, remained to be seen. Such was the general confidence in American ingenuity, however, that practical concerns did little to dampen the public's growing enthusiasm.



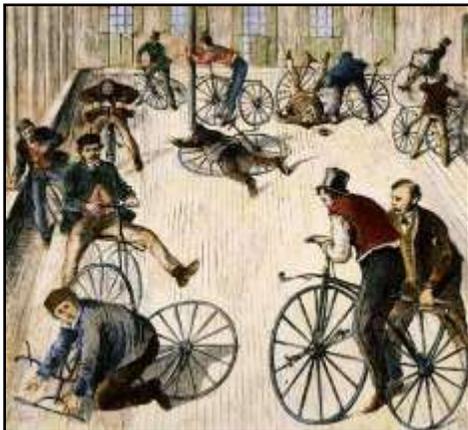
The craze quickly spread to nearby Brooklyn, the country's third largest city at the time with a population approaching 400,000. The *Eagle* elaborated on why the prospect of getting around town on a bicycle held so much appeal: “It is frequently necessary for a man to go from one portion of the city to another. Oftentimes the distance is too far to walk, and he is compelled to rely upon the cars to transport him. It may be the cars do not run in the immediate neighborhood of his destination. Why not then ride a velocipede?” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 Feb. 1869).

On Christmas Day, 1868, the bicycle made a tentative debut on a Brooklyn street. The *Eagle* reported the incident: “Some excitement was occasioned on Fulton

Avenue yesterday by the appearance of a man riding a two-wheeled velocipede, which he handled with great skill. He bowled along over the pavement and over the curbstones with ease, and was followed in his course by a large crowd of admiring juveniles” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 26 Dec. 1868).

Of course, with winter setting in, Brooklynites would have to defer serious outdoor riding for a few months. No matter, the lull would give aspiring velocipedists plenty of time to hone their riding skills indoors.

In January 1869, the well-known gymnast Avery C. Burnham opened Brooklyn’s first velocipede rink at the corner of Boerum Place and Livingstone Street, with a fleet of five Witty-built bicycles. According to the *Eagle*, the crowd was so large on opening night that it “encroached upon the space that is devoted to riding” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 20 Jan. 1869). The paper concluded: “During the evening there could not have been less than a thousand visitors for they were continually coming and going.” Many of these were female, prompting Burham to start a class exclusively for ladies (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 22 Feb. 1869).



A Velocipede Rink

In early February, just as the craze was rapidly spreading across the entire country, Witty dropped a bombshell: he had acquired the dormant Lallement patent, and would seek a minimum royalty of \$10 per machine, effective retroactively (a significant surcharge, given that the typical price for

a velocipede was already a hefty \$50 to \$75). The stunned makers reluctantly concluded that they had no choice but to comply with Witty's demands, however outrageous.

Indeed, Witty was on solid legal ground. His investigators had confirmed that Lallement was the original inventor of a useful artifact, generally unknown before the date of the patent. "I paid about ten thousand dollars for the Lallement patent," Witty would testify in a related court case in 1881, "and I was very careful to research personally and to have researches made by my experts before purchasing it for so large a sum" (*McKee Vs. Harrington*, Southern District of New York). According to one report, Witty actually paid \$5,000 to Carroll and \$8,000 to Lallement, through an agent in Paris.

However much he initially invested in the patent, Witty quickly recouped that sum and more. For despite the elevated cost of doing business, velocipede mania continued to spread unabated. Marveled the *New York Times*, "Never before in the history of manufactures in this country has there arisen such a demand for an article" (*New York Times*, 19 Feb. 1869). A growing number of makers worked around the clock to satisfy the seemingly insatiable demand, lining Witty's pockets. By his own calculation, he collected \$25,000 in patent royalties in one month alone.

Witty also made a small fortune from his riding rinks, opened shortly after Burnham's. They were located within the manufactory and overseen by his teenaged nephew Robert Witty. Patrons paid fifty cents an hour to ride or take lessons, or \$15 for a three-month pass. Initially, Witty devoted two floors to velocipede riding, but was soon compelled to add a third. At one point, he even considered installing a floor on the rooftop for open-air riding. The fleet consisted of twenty-five of his own machines kept in

constant motion. In all, the *Eagle* reported, Witty accommodated “from 150 to 250 scholars daily, and he has nearly 2,000 names on his books.” Since many of these pupils were women, Witty dedicated a room exclusively for female riders (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 19 Feb. 1869).

By March, at least five rinks were flourishing in Brooklyn. Not only could the public learn to ride in these facilities, they could also watch skillful velocipedists race around the floor and men, women and children engage in fancy riding. The rinks, which often drew the makers themselves, also served to showcase a variety of models and promising innovations. The Dexter, for example, introduced in Burnham’s rink, featured a freewheel mechanism in the front hub (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 18 Feb. 1869). Witty himself presented a geared bicycle, as well as a lightweight wheel made with metallic spokes. As a curiosity, Witty displayed Lallement’s original American bicycle (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 25 Mar. 1869). According to one report, he had purchased it from the Frenchman’s former landlady in New Haven, who had accepted the vehicle in lieu of board payment (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 14 Jan. 1913).

“Velocipede mania” even began to seep into the popular culture, for such was the title of a long running play staged at Hooley’s Opera House, on the corner of Remsen and Court Streets. The *Eagle* outlined the plot: “An old doctor (Griffin) recommends that all his patients, however afflicted, take exercise on the velocipede. Mulligan and Shepherd display the awkwardness of the beginner very amusingly. Griffin’s make up in imitation of Witty was very clever and was appreciated by those present who knew the original” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 16 Feb. 1869).

Helping to fuel the craze locally and nationwide was Brooklyn's own Henry Ward Beecher, a celebrated preacher who became one of the most outspoken champions of the new vehicle. In a sermon entitled "Rational Amusements," he revealed that he had purchased two velocipedes for his boys and had every intention of learning how to ride himself. "You are none of you too old to learn," he admonished his flock, "and I shall not be at all surprised to see in a short time a thousand velocipedists wheeling their machines to Plymouth Church" (*Galaxy Miscellany*, Apr. 1869).

With the arrival of spring, rinks quickly lost their luster. Many owners, like Witty, slashed rates to bolster flagging attendance, or closed their facilities altogether, never to reopen. The battle to save the velocipede would have to be waged outdoors, where the vehicle belonged, at least in theory.

At first, many velocipedists bent on outdoor riding congregated on Clinton Street, drawn to its smooth wooden surface, an innovation known as Nicholson pavement (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 27 Feb. 1869). Their second favorite surface was the so-called Scrimshaw pavement, a mixture of tar and gravel, often poured over cobblestones to create a smooth surface. They also welcomed hard-packed dirt roads, such as those found in Prospect Park. Most city streets, however, were cobblestoned and extremely unpleasant to negotiate. Weather was another important factor, since rain could make surfaces dangerously slick or impossibly muddy, and a strong wind could bring the velocipedist to a virtual standstill.

A host of encouraging innovations already introduced, such as rubber tires, might have rendered bicycles significantly more roadworthy. The escalating royalty demands, however, largely prevented them from reaching the market in a timely manner.

Following Witty's decree, the Hanlons demanded another five dollars per machine to cover their patented improvements, prompting the *New York Sun* to protest: "ten dollars [per bicycle] is quite as much as [the business] can stand" (*New York Sun*, 25 Feb. 1869). The paper added that anything beyond that sum "would effectively destroy the business."

Compounding the problem, several pretenders, notably one Stephen W. Smith, claimed to own patents trumping Witty's. In fact, their patents pertained to rocking horses and had little to do with the bicycle. The *Eagle* scoffed, "Every man who ever saw a crank feels called upon to notify the manufacturers that he has a patent covering the velocipede" (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 Mar. 1869). But, hard-pressed makers could not easily ignore Smith's seductive offer to halve royalty rates. The spate of suits and counter-suits among the makers created a business climate full of chaos and confusion.

By early April, it was clear to all that the velocipede was faring poorly outdoors. The *Eagle* reported: "a lady was knocked down and run over on Nostrand Avenue by a velocipede propelled by some unknown man on the sidewalk" (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 8 Apr. 1869). The incident triggered a citywide manhunt and also compelled authorities to ban velocipedes from sidewalks. So strong was the backlash against velocipedists that one officer even ordered two of their number off the sidewalk, even though they were *walking* their vehicles. The *Eagle* protested that the policeman had "exceeded his authority," to little avail (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 14 Apr. 1869). The Park Commissioner, meanwhile, under growing pressure, banned cyclists from the major roads.

Witty, for one, was not about to give up on outdoor riding. Velocipedists met regularly in front of his manufactory at six in the morning to cycle about two miles

through Prospect Park and onto Coney Island Road. At that point, they rode another mile south to Tunison's Hotel where they would stop for a hearty breakfast, before retracing their route. The *Eagle* reported that the excursion on April 12 attracted fully a dozen riders, half of whom made it to the hotel where they were warmly greeted by the proprietor and a host of onlookers (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 12 Apr. 1869). The youngest rider was Calvin's son Willie, not quite six years of age.

In mid-April, the *Eagle* announced the formation of the Brooklyn Velocipede Club whose object was to "increase the good feeling among velocipedists" and to "perpetuate velocipede exercise" (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 19 Apr. 1869). Their first order of business was to appoint a committee to persuade the city to rescind restrictions on riding. The *Eagle*, duly impressed by the members' enthusiasm and elevated social standing, predicting that they would "accomplish much for the velocipedists in this city."

As many proponents saw it, however, the best hope for salvaging and sustaining the velocipede movement lay in outdoor racing on expansive, dirt tracks. The *Eagle* maintained that such facilities would free velocipedists from "the monotony of floor riding" and allow them to pedal "to their hearts' content" (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 4 May 1869). Moreover, the paper predicted, contests could draw as many as twenty thousand spectators, putting the sport on a par with baseball.

At the peak of the craze in March, the owners of two popular baseball fields, The Union Grounds in Williamsburg and the Capitoline Grounds in what is now Bedford-Stuyvesent, announced their plans to build ovals on their premises for outdoor bicycle racing. William Cammeyer, the proprietor of the Union Grounds, even carried out an

ambitious plan to build a substantial wooden track—perhaps the world’s first “velodrome” (*Brooklyn Daily Times*, 10 Apr. 1869).

The results, however, invariably proved disappointing, as this report in the *Eagle* dated April 27 suggests: “The races upon the Union Course yesterday were an eminent fizzle. The track was in poor condition. On one side, large mud puddles had to be driven through, and the balance of the track was covered with an inch of sand” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 27 Apr. 1869). Nor were these affairs, more comical than competitive, drawing good crowds.



The struggling industry received yet another blow on May 25, when Witty’s manufactory burned down. The plucky Witty nevertheless started up a velocipede depot on Seventh Avenue and Union Street (the neighborhood known today as Park Slope), which gave renters easy access to Prospect Park. Still, his efforts to revive the craze were

largely in vain. At the end of June the *Eagle* lamented: “The velocipede may be set down as a played-out sensation. The collapse of the furor has been rather sudden; but it is very complete” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 28 June 1869).

In fact, the velocipede was not quite “cooked.” That October, both the Capitoline Grounds and the Union Grounds attempted to spark a revival, hosting a series of races and exhibitions. The *Eagle* found a glimmer of hope, affirming that bicycling “has charms which no other sport possesses” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 21 Oct. 1869). It

insisted, moreover, that it would be a mistake to conclude that the velocipede was dead, simply because every vacant room in town was no longer being converted into a velocipede rink, or that the telltale rumbling sounds of machines on the streets had become less conspicuous.

Alas, the races fizzled once again. The exhibitions likewise failed to excite Brooklynites or New Yorkers, who by then generally considered the bicycle a great “humbug.” Nor were there any major manufacturers left, save Witty. In one instance, he supplied ten of the twelve machines on display.

In the spring of 1870, Witty made one last push to revive the velocipede trade. He reopened his rink and placed 100 rental bicycles at the public’s disposal, for indoor or outdoor riding. At last, even Witty was forced to give up. He reportedly shipped his stock of velocipedes to Brazil and refocused on the carriage industry (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 14 Jan. 1913).

High-Wheel Era

For the next eight years or so, bicycles occasionally appeared in Brooklyn, though more often in the windows of pawnshops than on the road. The few who continued to ride were mostly boys who had gotten hold of dilapidated machines. Occasionally, bicycle races were included in athletic tournaments, but by and large, Americans remained blissfully oblivious to the fact that French and British builders had gradually transformed the bicycle into something truly roadworthy.

By 1875, to optimize the direct-drive gearing, the typical British-built bicycle sported a front wheel with a diameter as wide as five feet, and a tiny trailing wheel. The daunting new profile held none of the popular appeal of the original compact bicycle (now disparagingly called a “bone shaker”), but thanks to numerous technical improvements, such as a tubular steel frame, wire wheels with rubber tires, and smoothly turning joints, it had become a popular recreational amenity among young athletic males of certain means.



During the Centennial exhibition of 1876, held in Philadelphia, several new-fangled “English bicycles” were put on display, and a champion Welsh rider, David Stanton, gave riding

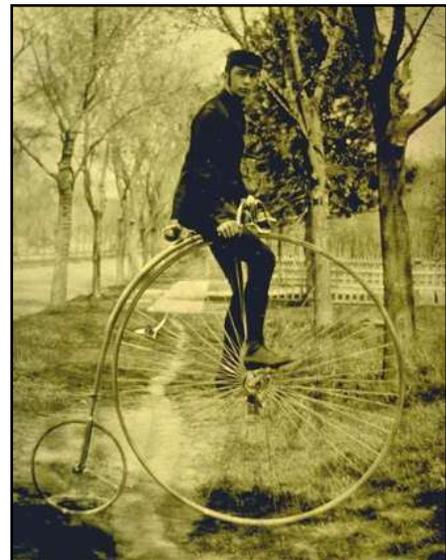
exhibitions on the fairgrounds, piquing the American public’s interest. About a year later, Frank Weston of Boston, an architect by profession, started to import bicycles while launching *The American Bicycling Journal*, successor to the short-lived *Velocipedist* of 1869.

Meanwhile, another Bostonian by the name of Albert A. Pope decided not only to import bicycles but also to have them made at the Weed Sewing Machine factory in Hartford, Connecticut. The old patent was promptly resumed. Indeed, the Lallement patent still had several years of life left, and it still covered the basic bicycle. Pope scrambled to buy it from the new owners, and snapped up other patents relating to the

trade. Unlike Witty, however, Pope exercised his monopoly rights judiciously to control the industry without strangling it. He also proved a brilliant promoter, spending a great deal on advertising to convince Americans that cycling was now a proper and gentlemanly sport.

Although Boston was the hub of the new bicycle movement, New York and Brooklyn were quick to follow suit. The Brooklyn Bicycle Club, founded in 1879, was only the third club of its kind to be formed in the United States, following the Boston Bicycle Club and the Massachusetts Bicycle Club. And in a curious twist, at about the same time, Pierre Lallement himself returned to the United States, renting a room in a flophouse on Brooklyn's Grand Street.

Bicycle racing quickly found fertile ground on Long Island, well known for its love of outdoor sports. "In the early days of American bicycling, Brooklyn took a prominent part," the *Eagle* recalled in 1891. "In 1879 George W. Hooper, of this city, held the one mile record for America, 3 minutes and 42 seconds" (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 4 Jan. 1891). A year later, another Brooklynite named Charles Freiz lowered the mark to three and a half minutes. A few years later, E. Pettus, of the Kings County Wheelmen, became the champion of America. He also set a record, riding from Prospect Park to Coney Island in just 18 minutes and 30 seconds.



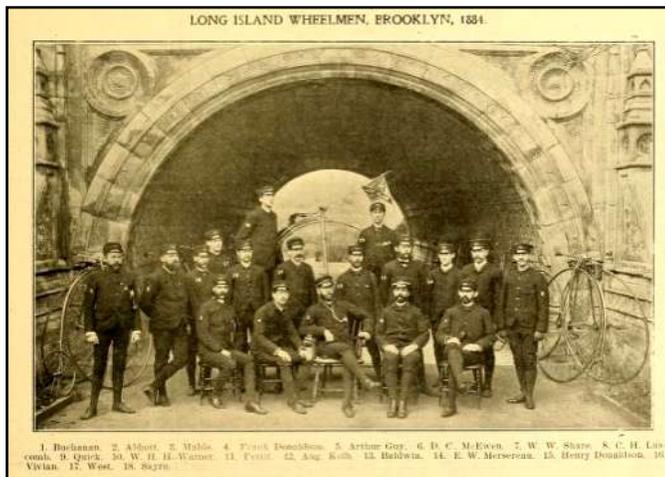
A High-Wheeler

For its part, the *Eagle* welcomed the new vehicle, though it fully recognized its limitations. “In this country, after much chaff,” the paper opined in 1883, “[the bicycle] has settled down into a favorite amusement of young men, riders are now to be numbered in the thousands. Their machines have developed into artistic and speedy vehicles. At its best, the bicycle is a healthful implement of amusement and exercise. It may be frankly confessed, however, that among layman the bicycle is not altogether popular and is especially reprobated by horsemen. For some reason the equine mind has a distinct aversion to motion it does not understand” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 29 May 1883).

Newspaper articles of the period attest to the pomp and elitism associated with the high-wheel cycling culture of the 1880s. A *New York Times* article described the lavish clubhouse of the Kings County Wheelmen at 1255 Bedford Avenue, established in 1887. The four-story building featured a ground-level storage room for bicycles. The basement housed bowling alleys and a machine shop. On the second floor, toward the front, were the billiard and card room, and in the back, an elaborate bathroom with multiple shower stalls. The plush parlor with its immense fireplace occupied the front of the third floor, adjacent to the library. Medals and trophies won by club members over the years adorned the walls. On the top floor was a gymnasium “fitted up with all the modern apparatus for physical development” and “bachelor apartments rented by members” (*New York Times*, 29 June 1894).

An article from 1888, published in *Wildwoods* magazine, conveys the culture's militaristic pageantry:

On Saturday June 30, the Brooklyn Bicycle Club celebrated its ninth anniversary with a street parade. About one hundred members attended attired in their neat uniform of navy blue cloth with suitable braiding. Heading the procession were three mounted policemen and a mounted bugler. Then came the Brooklyn Bicycle Club contingent in columns of twos on their wheels, followed by the Brooklyn Ladies Tricycle Club, twelve strong, all mounted on tricycles and



appropriately uniformed. Next came sixty of the Kings County Wheelmen who wore a brown cloth uniform, followed by thirty members of the Long Island Wheelmen in light gray uniforms and twenty-five members of the Universal

Cycling Club in blue uniforms. The line formed on St Felix Street in the vicinity of the clubhouse of the Brooklyn Bicycle Club. The route of the procession [led] back to the clubhouse. There, the wheels were stacked in the street and refreshments served in a tent in the back yard (181).

The Safety and the Boom

At about this time, however, a new-style bicycle developed primarily in Great Britain was making a surprising bid to overtake the old “Ordinary.” Known as a “safety” on account of its low profile, it featured a chain and sprocket drive. Though many cycling veterans initially dismissed the diminutive mount as slow and complicated, it appealed strongly to women and older riders who had long been deprived of the pleasures of bicycling. The introduction of inflatable tires in the early 1890s, which considerably cushioned and accelerated the ride, sealed the fate of the high-wheeler and established the prototype of the contemporary bicycle.

With the bicycle regaining a friendly form, the public once again responded with great enthusiasm. This time, however, the bicycle was ready to deliver on its promise to provide healthful recreation and practical transportation, even if some important improvements—notably freewheels and gears—were yet to come. During the great bicycle boom the safety bicycle shed about half its original bulk, typically weighing a scant 25 pounds by 1895. Annual production, meanwhile, went from the thousands into the millions.

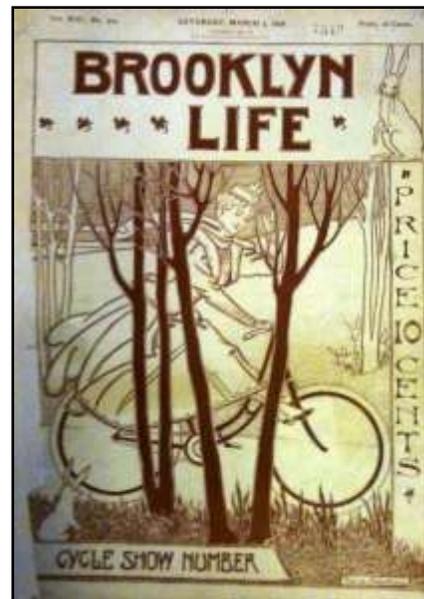
In many respects, Brooklyn’s cycling experience during the 1890s was typical of most large cities nationwide. Though not itself a major producer of bicycles, a number of local firms, notably the Schwalbach Cycle Company, were connected to the thriving trade. And Brooklynites wrestled with a host of pressing social issues triggered by the boom. Should women ride, and if so, what should they wear, given that the traditional

Victorian garb was clearly ill-suited for riding? Was cycling truly healthful, or would it lead to long-term ills? Should cyclists be barred from sidewalks or certain roads? How should the roads be paved and who would pay for that? And what to do about the “scorchers,” the reckless young men who tore through the city streets on their lightweight wheels?

In some ways, however, Brooklyn’s experience stands out. In 1895 the city established the country’s first dedicated bicycle path, from Prospect Park to Coney Island (along the same route frequented by Witty’s velocipedists). In 1896, it hosted a major cycle show. This time, in deference to the city’s 80,000 cyclists, both the Park Commissioner and the Mayor (the city would be annexed by New York two years later) showed up to heap praise on the bicycle and to promise more paved roads, including a return path from Coney Island.

Another interesting aspect to the Brooklyn experience is the fact that, throughout the boom, the city boasted its own social magazine, *Brooklyn Life*. Though tilted toward the perspective of the upper classes, the magazine gives fascinating insights into how Brooklynites reacted to the boom as it unfolded, and gradually reached the middle and lower classes.

In 1890, for example, it approved of the emerging New Woman on her safety bicycle, affirming: “It is refreshing to see the independent young creature scorn other people’s “thinks” and strike out for health and happiness” (*Brooklyn Life*, 12 July 1890). As women cyclists gained prominence,



however, it disparaged their riding skills. “If women are to be allowed to ride freely through out streets, children must be kept at home, otherwise future citizens will become scarce” (*Brooklyn Life*, 9 Sept. 1893).

On the balance, the magazine welcomed the bicycle’s healthful influence on women and its promotion of “rational dress.” Opined the magazine in 1894: “Some of the woman bicyclists of this town have adopted the split skirt for riding. We must confess we had serious doubts that this costume would ever gain much vogue in so conservative a city as Brooklyn. That these doubts were apparently uncalled for is a matter of rejoicing; for the [revelation] that woman has legs like any one else, and that they are made for use, marks, we believe, the beginning of a new era.”



The magazine was also instrumental in spurring city officials to build the bicycle path from Prospect Park to Coney Island. “Why don’t the city authorities do something to rush ahead that bicycle path?” the editor fumed (*Brooklyn Life*, 28 Apr. 1894). “Bicyclists are being arrested for riding on the sidewalks when the roads are

in such abominable condition that it is quite impossible for them to ride anywhere else. Certainly, if lovers of the bicycle are barred from the sidewalks, some provision should be made for them somewhere else. There ought to be a law passed that every city official be made to ride a bicycle, and then he could treat this matter intelligently.”

Of course, once the path opened in 1895, the magazine implored authorities to rein in scorchers. “A good many young riders are “out for sport,” and they dash along the well filled roads at a pace that is dangerous to themselves as well as to other people. They often ride together in bunches and dispute the right of way with wheelmen going in the contrary direction. This conduct is ungentlemanly and [unsportsmanlike]. The great majority of people who ride for pleasure, instead of records, will be glad to learn that Commissioner Frank Squier has imposed a twelve-mile-an-hour speed limit on the bicycle path” (*Brooklyn Life*, 16 June 1894).

In general, the magazine took a dim view of what it deemed the excesses of the boom. “If the bicycle craze lingers,” it admonished, “the coming generation will have humps like camels. The abominable idea that, to be an expert rider, one must lean way over is doing incalculable damage to the figures of the young. Century runs and other “stunts” are sapping the strength of the silly riders who are, apparently, legion. When will the era of commonsense bicycling open up?” (*Brooklyn Life*, 14 July 1894).

Indeed, the magazine was confident of the bicycle’s future. “Many people call bicycling a fad, and predict for it a rise and fall much like the roller skating craze. But



they are wrong. A fad has no substance; it is ephemeral. It bloometh like the flower and fadeth about as quickly. It is governed by no natural law, and has no real foundation. The safety was at first regarded as a monstrosity. It had no grace and was heavy. Since then, it

has been brought to a degree of perfection never before reached in vehicular construction. It is hard to imagine wherein the safety of today can be improved. A ride in its saddle is the perfection of motion and the acme of gentle exercise. Once there, a man or a woman wants to be there most of their time. The desire grows. And this is why the bicycle is not a fad, but something that is going to last so long as men and women have legs” (*Brooklyn Life*, 23 Mar. 1895).

Cycling in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

By 1900, the boom had nonetheless gone bust and the public was eagerly looking ahead to the prospect of affordable automobiles. With cycling no longer in vogue, the price of a practical bicycle plummeted from a peak of about \$100 at the start of the craze to around \$20, making it truly affordable to the masses. In effect, the humble bicycle had finally delivered on its original promise to serve as the “people’s nag.”

Not until the early 1930s, with the country in the throes of the Great Depression, did the bicycle reclaim the interest of American adults as a recreational vehicle. The new-style adult bicycle, which was essentially an



enlarged version of popular juvenile models, put back a good twenty-five pounds relative to the typical racing-inspired “feather light” wheel of the boom era. Still, the

heavy-duty frames and wide “balloon” tires made for a robust vehicle, and their coaster brakes permitted carefree pedaling.

The *Cycling Herald*, launched in 1938, with its headquarters in Brooklyn, proudly declared itself America’s “only cycling newspaper for sport, pleasure and racing news.”

A 1941 article traced the roots of the eight-year-old revival to the “aftermath of the tenth



Olympiad in Los Angeles” which featured track races in Pasadena’s Rose Bowl and a road race from Los Angeles to Santa Monica

(*Cycling Herald*, Nov. 1941). Though American

competitors fared poorly, the spectacles

captivated a number of famous actors, who

took up cycling and helped, in turn, to spark a

popular fad. Female actors on bicycles wearing

British-style “shorts” also helped women gain access to more comfortable and practical cycling attire.

Presumably, tight American budgets contributed to the broad appeal of the relatively affordable bicycle. The 1930s saw a surge of interest in cycle touring, long a popular pastime among European middle and lower classes, and a blossoming of youth hostels nationwide to accommodate budget travelers. Inner city department stores, in an effort to sell sportswear, organized “cycle trains” to take urbanites and their bicycles to the countryside for a day of cycling and socializing.

In the early 1940s, in an effort to conserve scarce fuel for the war effort, the American government encouraged workers to commute by bicycle whenever possible,



and to employ the bicycle in the factory. It set an example, introducing utility bicycles in war-related workplaces like the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Moreover, it decreed that bicycles should shed any superfluous hardware that not only wasted materials but also decreased cycling enjoyment and efficiency.

The *Cycling Herald*, long an admirer of lightweight British bicycles with variable speeds, praised the mandate. “For years, American manufacturers have “played up” to the youngsters of the nation in the matter of “truck” bikes. The heavier the better, the fancier the better, the more gadgets the better, etc., etc. In quite a few cases, the bikes outweighed the rider. Along comes the Conservation Bureau. Now a number of useless gadgets, nothing that really improves the riding quality of a bicycle, must go. Some models will be cut out altogether. A lighter bike is in store for present-day and future bike riders” (*Cycling Herald*, Sept. 1941).

Recent Developments

Indeed, the 1950s saw a steadily increasing presence of lightweight British-style bicycles on the American market. Former GIs who had experienced the joys of riding quality bicycles while serving abroad were reportedly fueling the growing demand, prompting American makers to offer similar models of their own.

One of these was Ross, which began life in 1940 galvanizing the hulls of ships docked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. A decade later, it shifted its attention to wheeled articles, notably bicycles. Its business rapidly expanding, it soon relocated to Queens

and became the third largest American producer of bicycles, after Chicago-based Schwinn and Dayton-based Huffy (Wikipedia).

In the early 1970s, just before the infamous Energy Crisis, the second American bicycle boom exploded. Demand soared for lightweight European-style “ten speeds” with derailleur gears. Once again the Ross factory moved to more spacious quarters, in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Twice that decade the company’s annual production exceeded a million units.

The bicycles sold nationwide during the ten-speed boom emulated expensive road racing models ridden by the likes of Belgium’s superstar Eddie Merckx. Yet many were poorly constructed, surprisingly heavy, and badly equipped. For many casual cyclists, their new bicycles simply did not prove of lasting appeal, and they wound up discarded or ignored.

The 1980s witnessed a new cycling craze, the mountain bike. Borrowing technology from racing and touring bicycles alike, these multi-gear fat-tired bicycles enabled off-road riding over rugged terrain. They proved advantageous for urban riding as well, spawning a new generation of city bikes and “hybrid” bicycles designed for both recreation and transportation.

Ironically, although the mountain bike is arguably an American contribution, originally developed in Marin County by youthful renegades, all the major American bicycle companies from a generation ago have since folded, as the bulk of cycle manufacturing has migrated to the Far East.

Still, the American bicycle consumer today enjoys a broader range of choices than ever before, from carbon fiber models costing in the five figures to inexpensive

steel “fixies.” This vast variety catering to every taste and budget no doubt helps to explain why cycling, once again, has become enormously popular with people of all ages and backgrounds.

Looking ahead, we might wonder, as did that writer for *Brooklyn Life* over a century ago, how the bicycle could possibly get any better than it is now. Optimists might point to recumbent designs that can reach significantly greater cruising speeds than conventional bicycles, or perhaps to electric boosters that make cycling more appealing to the less athletic, without entirely eliminating cycling’s healthful benefits or its “green” carbon footprint.

Looking back, we can only marvel at the bicycle’s timeless, albeit somewhat fickle, appeal. In closing, let us pay tribute to that clairvoyant *Eagle* journalist who, at the peak of the original craze almost 150 years ago, shrewdly anticipated this longevity. “When we see grey-haired old men trying as hard to learn to ride [the bicycle] as the young people,” he observed, “it would seem that there is something about the machine that will give it a longer life than one year” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 Feb. 1869).

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His seminal work has greatly clarified the true origins of the bicycle. He is responsible for the naming of a bicycle path in Boston after Pierre Lallement, the original bicycle patentee, and for the installation of a plaque by the New Haven green where the Frenchman introduced Americans to the art of cycling in 1866.