

The Bloomsburg Wheelmen and the 19th Century Cycling Craze in Columbia County

By Robert Dunkelberger

Part I

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the United States saw the development of many clubs and societies, as opposed to fraternal organizations, where men with common interests could gather together and socialize. It was no different in Bloomsburg, where the men of the community formed local chapters of national organizations. The Craftsman Club of the Masonic fraternity was organized in 1907, followed later by the Elks, Moose, and Lions clubs. But predating all of them was a social club for men founded around a love of athletics, the Bloomsburg Wheelmen.

The second half of the 19th century was a time of great change and technological development. This included the invention of new technology as society-transforming as the light bulb and telephone, but also the perfection of as simple a form of transportation as the bicycle. The earlier version of the cycle with the oversized front wheel had enough enthusiasts that hundreds got together on May 31, 1880, in Newport, Rhode Island, to form the League of American Wheelmen. Then in 1886, the “safety” bicycle with wheels of equal size was introduced, followed within two years by the pneumatic tire. The air-filled rubber tire was further improved in 1892, and by 1895 the bicycle had been reduced in weight to 20-25 pounds and reached the state where it was called a “beautiful mechanism” that made cycling possible for everyone.

The cycling craze hit the United States in the early 1890s. At least one million bicycles were produced by 1896, with anywhere from two to four million riders. The fascination with cycling expanded across the country, was at its most intense in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest, and did not spare the rural areas of Pennsylvania, which was certainly true of Bloomsburg. Men who worked as professionals, at the State Normal School, and in local industries became the first avid cyclists in the area. Not having local opportunities to compete, these gentlemen sometimes had to travel far afield, and in 1892 three went by train to Harrisburg for a Wheelmen’s meet. It was not easy for cyclists at this time, especially in rural areas, as often the drivers of teams of horses did not take kindly to these new interlopers on the public roads. State law required that bicycles be treated the same as all other vehicles, but often they were not given room and instead crowded into the gutter, risking the well-being of both man and machine.

Retail businesses in Bloomsburg quickly recognized the appeal of the bicycle and catered to its local devotees to take advantage of the financial possibilities of the movement. Newspaper advertisements first began to appear in 1893 promoting the latest in clothing, including suits, pants, and caps. These were now available for the well-dressed cyclist to purchase, which later expanded to include stockings and coats as a type of uniform that had been developed for the serious followers of the sport. By 1895 one store, J. M. Gidding, had an entire department devoted to cyclists, with sweaters and belts added to the other types of clothing. The suits ranged from \$4 to \$12, while trousers were \$1.50 to \$5 apiece, sweaters \$1.50, and stockings 25 cents each. All of this clothing was useless without the bicycle itself and in 1894 Bloomsburg merchants began offering the machines. The first were actually sold through Dillon’s Green

House. The firm offered brands of bicycles at up to \$125 apiece or \$3,450 in 2015 when accounting for inflation. In its initial stages the cycling phenomenon was definitely more for the well-to-do.



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CLEVELAND
CLEVELAND
CLEVELAND

CLEVELAND, \$100.
Stearns, \$100
Envoy, \$75.
Stormer, \$50.

The above line of strictly high grade bicycles I have selected for my line for this year after visiting the New York Cycle Show and inspecting all the different makes. They are the cream of the lot. Space is too limited to describe them, but they can be seen at my store or I will cheerfully mail catalogues to any intending purchasers.

OPPOSITE POST-OFFICE. **W. S. Rishton.**

An advertisement for bicycles by the W.S. Rishton drug store, 1896

The growth in cycling eventually meant more local opportunities for competition and in 1893 there was a 12-mile race from Berwick to Bloomsburg, an informal race of wheelmen held at the Bloomsburg Fairgrounds, and a race between three cyclists in October at the annual Bloomsburg Fair. The following year in October, a Bloomsburg native, John Harman, won a one-mile race in Berwick, and the following week duplicated his feat at a county championship held during the Fair. It wasn't until the summer of 1895 that local wheelmen finally got together to organize their own race meet at the Bloomsburg Fair Grounds on August 17, which featured a program of nine races. Nearly 150 first-class cyclists from around the area were entered and two races had so many entries that heats had to be run.



The 1896 cycling meet at the Bloomsburg Fair Grounds.

The night before the meet a lantern parade was held that passed through most of the town, with more than 100 decorated bicycles on review, led by the Bloomsburg Band. First prize went to A. Bruce Hartman, who turned his set of wheels into a miniature yacht. Admission tickets for the races were sold in most stores in town for 25 cents and hundreds of cyclists flooded in from

neighboring communities. A crowd of nearly 2,000 filled the grandstand and the roofs of nearby buildings to see not only local boys but also those who had come some distance (Scranton, Williamsport, Reading, Erie, and Binghamton, NY) take the prizes. These included fountain pens, diamonds, silver cups, and a stop watch. Another meet was held in 1896, again preceded by a parade. This time the first prize of a gold watch for best decorated wheels went to Don Hughes and Fred Naugle of Espy, who bound together four bicycles topped by the 240-pound superstructure of a trolley car.

Local merchants continued to cater to cycling enthusiasts, offering equipment for bicycles such as bells and well-crafted clocks for timing races. New bikes also continued to be sold but, even though prices were coming down, advertisements appeared for used sets of wheels. To further assist the cost conscious, the Bloomsburg Cycle Company made its appearance in 1897, offering not only secondhand bicycles in fair condition but first class repair work to keep the machine running. The development of a new commerce in selling used bicycles helped to further spread the sport, allowing people of very modest means to own their own set of wheels. In response to this, advertisements for new bicycles became even more alluring, touting models with the name "Scorcher," and the "Envoy" wheel that could take a cyclist 100 miles. In addition to ads, the newspapers also ran advice columns for cyclists. One urged them to sit upright instead of the unhealthy practice of bending the spine and riding with the chin resting on the handle bars. It ended with the admonition: "Don't ride a wheel like a monkey; ride like a man."

The wheelmen of Bloomsburg by 1897 had managed two highly successful races, but they still had no formal organization. As there were clubs of this sort across the country at this time, there was agitation that the town not be left behind and have one as well. This situation finally changed on April 12 when 56 men met to form a club and select John Harman as president. Additional officers were elected, as well as a Board of Governors which ran the operations of the club. The membership demographics of the Bloomsburg Wheelmen followed that of the League of American Wheelmen, with the large majority being from the middle and upper classes. A look at the occupations of the ten men who would serve as club president shows among them three lawyers, two druggists, and a banker, bookkeeper, clerk, insurance salesman, and printer.

One of the first orders of business was to locate a suitable facility for a club house, and after several possible sites were rejected, the Richardson house at Fourth and Center Streets was rented. The lease was for \$15 a month, a committee went off to Wilkes-Barre to purchase furniture and other furnishings, and the first meeting in the new club house was held on May 25. The maintenance of a house would occupy a great deal of the Wheelmen's officers' time over the years.

Although begun as an association of cycling enthusiasts, what would also occupy the Wheelmen increasingly over the years were recreational pursuits far beyond cycling. A baseball team was organized in June 1897, which played a game against a team called the "Stars." The members of the team were not Wheelmen, however, but veterans of other local squads who were signed specifically for the game to represent the Bloomsburg cyclers. The admission fee at the Town Athletic Park was ten cents, although not having team uniforms, the players wore golf suits.



The second Wheelmen club house, located at 140 West Third Street

The Wheelmen would continue to sponsor a baseball team off and on through 1909, and even feature players who were club members, but they were at their most ambitious in June 1899. Eager to compete with the Normal School, which always featured excellent teams, the cyclists signed the battery at nearby Bucknell University in Lewisburg to represent them. The pitcher was a 6' 1" hurler from Factoryville, Christy Mathewson, who would go on to become an inaugural member of the Baseball Hall of Fame. His

opponent on the mound was the ace of the Normal School team, David Williams. The two of them had been teammates the preceding summer for a semi-pro team in Honesdale. The contest turned out to be a pitcher's duel, which Mathewson won by a score of 1-0.

Where the Bloomsburg Wheelmen eventually made a greater athletic impact was actually on the basketball court. The first team was organized in January 1899 and, after a month of practice, felt themselves ready to face the Normal School. This was no small challenge, as it featured one of the top teams in the country in a newly emerging sport. The game was finally held on February 23 and it was no contest as the Wheelmen were soundly defeated 36-12. Since the next two games were also crushing losses, it was obvious that newer, better, and more experienced players were required. This did not occur until the Normal School ended its season. Then, nearly the entire Normal team joined the Wheelmen, leading to far greater success.

While baseball and basketball teams were irregularly sponsored over the years, two games that were consistently played every winter on a competitive basis were billiards and the card game euchre. The first club house was quickly equipped with a pool table, as were the two subsequent ones. The table was used by club members for friendly competition amongst themselves and raised money for club expenses since a fee was charged. It was the pool tournaments, however, that gave the Wheelmen a chance to further the honor of the club. The first was held with 12 contestants and the winner received a gold mounted Wirt fountain pen manufactured in Bloomsburg. The tournaments progressed to include those where individual contestants entered to ones against outside groups. The first was with a social club from Danville, while over the years others were against fire companies and picked teams of pool "sharks."

Even more competitive than the pool tournaments were the Progressive Euchre parties, the first one held in February 1898, a week after the initial pool match. These parties were very successful with numerous tables and more than 30 participants. As with the pool tournaments, prizes were awarded and the Wheelmen were very careful at each party to award both the best and worst performances. First prizes given away that year included a silk umbrella in a leather case and a diamond pin, second prizes were a silver mounted cane and an opal pin, while the

consolation or “booby” prizes were more imaginative. One was an egg beater and a second a toy drum, to signify the recipient needed help in beating anyone or anything, and the fact they had been beaten by everyone in finishing last. Although somewhat cruel by today’s standards, this practice went on for a number of years and records of the euchre matches were carefully kept in the Wheelmen’s minute book.

After less than a year on Fourth Street, in early 1898 a more spacious club house was secured at 140 West Third Street, across Murray Avenue from the Methodist Episcopal Church. One of the first events in the Wheelmen’s new quarters was an opossum supper and the first annual organizational meeting, which was held in early March. That year, the members also entertained the basketball team of the Clover Wheelmen of Philadelphia after it had played a game with the Normal School, hosted a Hard-Time Smoker, and had a grand Fourth of July festival on the club house lawn that included “ice cream and all the delicacies of the season.”