

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

By Robert Dunkelberger

Part II

The Bloomsburg Wheelmen sponsored outdoor pursuits in addition to baseball, as in the summer of 1899 when they held a picnic at Island Park in the Susquehanna River near Sunbury, where more than 600 were in attendance. They also worked to provide more opportunities for cyclists. The League of American Wheelmen had been created not only to encourage a greater appreciation and awareness of cycling, but also to campaign for the construction and maintenance of good roads. The Wheelmen could not productively or sometimes safely ride their bicycles on muddy, rutted, rock-filled, or otherwise unusable roads, and so they worked to have governments at every level properly maintain and pave streets and roads for the benefit of all wheeled vehicles. The Bloomsburg Wheelmen were a part of this and when first organized one newspaper felt the primary purpose of the club was for the advancement of better roads.

In June 1899 the Wheelmen solicited money to build a path along Fishing Creek from Bloomsburg to Rupert. More than \$100 was raised and a petition to the Town Council asked for up to \$100 more to complete the work. The Council agreed although later rescinded the action, leaving insufficient funds when the path was laid out along the creek. The work was completed but to less than stellar reviews. Cyclists reported the path to be rough, uneven, and worse than not having one at all. The existing road was better. This appeared to be the end of the local Wheelmen's efforts for Good Roads, although over the course of the next two decades many were paved, which was due more to the influence of automobile enthusiasts than cyclists.

Even though it was created as an athletic club for men devoted to the sport of cycling, the Bloomsburg Wheelmen gradually became more and more of a social club, especially after the fifth and final annual cycling event was held in 1899. It was at this point the cycling craze both nationally and locally began to fade away. Businesses in Bloomsburg essentially stopped advertising bicycles and riding gear by the summer of 1899, with ads for bicycle repair scarce after 1901.



Cyclists enjoying Berwick Highway, one of the better kept county roads, c.1900.

The Wheelmen's move away from cycling activities took hold fully in October 1900. That was when they moved into their third and final club house at 49 East Main Street, a large two-story frame house more centrally located. Although the club did not own the building, it paid for many improvements, such as expanding the pool room by removing chimneys and a partition, painting the house the club colors of crimson and white, repapering and repainting the interior, and installing electric fans. Furniture, including a book case, hall rack and mirror, and rocking chairs, were purchased as well. Expanded and more elaborate smokers were held, with food and music accompanying the smoking of cigars. There were 60 in attendance at a 1901 event and 125 at a very successful get-together in 1905. A great deal of effort also went into decorating the house in 1902 for the centennial of the founding of Bloomsburg, when the building was festooned with flags and bunting.

The games sponsored by the Wheelmen at the club house did not have to be highly competitive or played year after year. When quoits were all the rage around the turn of the 20th Century, the Wheelmen made it available to its members. During the summer of 1901 it was the sport in Bloomsburg and a quoit ground was set up behind the club house and a set purchased for \$5. The following summer it was ping pong, and a few of the members played long enough to become experts. Not all games involved athletic skill, however, and in December 1908 a county-wide chess tournament was held.

The Wheelmen began to sponsor events away from the club house: dances, moving pictures in the Opera House, and a lecture in the Columbia Theatre. The new trolley line in the county became a source of transportation for the Wheelmen in their social activities after it opened in 1901. That year the club chartered a car to take its members to Lime Ridge, accompanied by a three-piece orchestra of mandolin, guitar, and violin. The Wheelmen also put together elaborate performances. In the spring of 1903 it was a military comedy drama entitled "The Scout of the Philippines." They then went beyond any previous efforts that December when the club members staged the most elaborate and successful minstrel show held in Bloomsburg. This type of entertainment was not unusual, as for years local and professional productions of minstrelsy had been performed in town. The production cleared \$240, and a second one put on in April 1905, with a repeat performance due to the demand for seats, netted \$350.



The third club house, decorated for the 1902 Bloomsburg Centennial.

Two traditions began in 1906 that marked the highpoint of the Bloomsburg Wheelmen's social activities. The first was the elaborate banquets held in February on Washington's Birthday at local hotels. The food, music, entertaining speeches, and toasts enjoyed by its members quickly became a Bloomsburg legend. The second tradition was watermelon parties sponsored by local fruit dealer and Wheelmen member William S. Reed. These parties involved trolley rides to Columbia Park along the Susquehanna, the first year accompanied by the Catawissa Military Band, which entertained before the feast of watermelons. The second year also included the smashing of everyone's straw hat. Guests wore a soft hat or cap in 1908 to avoid becoming a target, except for four who unfortunately wore derbies, which met the same fate as the straw hats the preceding year.

By all appearances the Bloomsburg Wheelmen was at its height in 1907, ten years after its founding. Membership had steadily increased since the original 56, with 100 charter members as of 1900 and 125 by 1903. In April 1905, 35 new members were added in just one two-week period, and as of March 1906 the club had 157 of the most prominent gentlemen in Bloomsburg listed in the Membership Register of the Bloomsburg Wheelmen. The names were a Who's Who



The Wheelmen membership register, which has been preserved as part of the Society's collections.

of the town's business elite and included Dillon, Duy, Elwell, Eyerly, Funston, Hartman, Housenick, Ikeler, Law, Magee, McKelvy, Phillips, Pursel, Reber, Roys, Tustin, Wells, Wirt, and Yorks. The club house itself had recently undergone work, with new paint, wallpaper, and furnishings making it as fine a facility as could be desired. At the 1907 annual meeting, the club was proclaimed to be in a flourishing condition, with the future never brighter. The first two annual banquets were a big success and the late summer watermelon parties had been inaugurated. Card and pool tournaments continued to be held and basketball teams sponsored.

Yet this marked the beginning of the end of the Bloomsburg Wheelmen and its decline was more rapid than its ascent. What caused the end of the Wheelmen was exactly what allowed it to last as long as it did, diversifying into a social club. The organization was created to formally bring together cycling enthusiasts, those that raced competitively and ones that enjoyed bicycling as a hobby or for exercise. These men were the professionals in town and could afford to purchase the clothing and equipment needed for the sport.

The Wheelmen survived and prospered following the end of the cycling craze because it was no longer their only reason to exist, demonstrated by the fact that 1899 was the last year the club sponsored a racing meet. Other sports were pursued and then social functions such as dances, smokers, dramatic presentations, picnics, and banquets. The club house became a place where the men could "go and spend a pleasant evening in social intercourse or innocent amusement." The membership fees of six dollars per year (the equivalent of \$160 in 2015) more than paid for all expenses, and additional revenue was brought in from the pool table, euchre parties, and the sale of cigars. Barely two years after moving into the Main Street club house, talk turned to looking for even larger quarters as membership steadily increased, and the call for the club purchasing a home of its own was as strong as ever in 1907.

But this did not happen and would not happen, because that year the new Masonic temple in Bloomsburg, the Caldwell Cathedral, was completed. The same day the glowing report on the Wheelmen was published in the *Columbian*, it was announced a Masonic group, the Craftsman Club, had been organized and would occupy elaborately furnished rooms on the first floor of the cathedral. The rooms were to be used for, among other activities, billiards, cards, and reading, duplicating activities long sponsored by the Wheelmen. A Board of Governors was selected, nearly half being charter members of the Bloomsburg Wheelmen, and the Craftsman formally opened their rooms in August 1907. At first, most of the Wheelmen had a joint membership in both organizations, although this became complicated when the clubs competed against each other in card games and baseball.

At the 1908 annual meeting the Wheelmen's status was still called healthy, with growing membership and the need for a building of its own, but that was the last time the club's condition would be optimistically appraised. Starting that year a steady migration of members began, primarily to the Craftsman. The cycling club that had been transformed into a social club failed when its membership was offered the choice to join a newer and better one with finer facilities, and the Wheelmen no longer had anything unique to fall back on. Its Membership Register offers a fascinating look at the dissolution of an organization, as its members steadily jumped ship over the years. New members continued to come in after 1906 and the membership age limit was lowered from the original 20, but they were not enough and many of these members left after

only a few months. Even former presidents gave up on the club. Three of them, Eugene Carpenter, John Harman, and George Ringler, left in February 1908, November 1910, and November 1912, respectively.

The 157 members of March 1906 had decreased to 102 five years later. But from then on it was only a matter of time until the end. Many members formally resigned, while others just stopped coming to the club house and were suspended for nonpayment of dues. Thirty new members joined in 1911, but there were only two in 1912, the last on September 1. The real blow came in the spring of that year when the club house, which the Wheelmen had never owned, was sold. It had been rented from Isaiah Hagenbuch before Josiah Ralston purchased it at a Sheriff's Sale in August 1908, continuing to rent it out as before. This changed in 1912 when it was sold for office space to the African Ostrich Farm and Feather Company based in Espy, which raised ostriches to provide feathers for women's hats. Having lost their house, in April the Wheelmen were relegated to renting a couple of rooms in the Wirt Building next to the court house.

It was thought the club would end then, but the remaining members, especially the bachelors who were not Masons and had nowhere else to go in the evenings, decided to carry on. Late in 1912, however, the decision was finally made to give up and donate the remaining money in the treasury to the Bloomsburg Hospital. By March, only 11 members were left who had paid their dues. On April 11, 1913, after all the equipment and furnishings had been sold and the debts paid, treasurer Charles Nagle presented \$56.99 to the hospital. The water company then took over the rooms in the Wirt Building. The Bloomsburg Wheelmen was no more and even its memory seemed to quickly fade.

The first president and cycling champion John Harman became a county judge and died in a 1925 traffic accident. Buried at the very end of his lengthy obituary was a note that in the days of bicycling he was county champion, but no mention of being first president of the Wheelmen. Mention of the club was also conspicuously absent from the obituaries of other former presidents. But faded from memory or not, the Bloomsburg Wheelmen was the town's first formal social club. It helped to unite the men of the community who loved sport, and even after the desire to cycle had faded, they never thought of dropping the name but kept it in memory of the days when the bicycle was king in Columbia County.