



EMIL KOSTOMLATSKY, WHEELMAN, IN 1890



# THE PALIMPSEST

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## In the Bicycle Era

"We have become a race of Mercurys", wrote an ardent bicycling enthusiast in the *Forum* in 1896, "and the joy which is felt over the new power amounts to a passion. Nobody realizes the force of this passion till he rides a wheel himself." At that time it did not seem probable that, having once possessed such a power, the human race would be likely to abandon it. "As well might we expect it to abandon railways, and gas, and electricity!" Certainly the bicycle had already become "a permanent factor" in transportation.

The unequivocal finality of the author's conclusions was undoubtedly inspired by the spirit of the age in which he wrote, for the decade of the nineties was truly the "bicycle era", although the first real bicycle was brought to this country in 1876, being exhibited at the Centennial Exposition. Two years after that, "wheels" began to be manufactured in the United States, but the first models



were designed with one large wheel to which were attached cranks and pedals, and one small wheel connected with the first by a curved "backbone" surmounted by a saddle. This style of bicycle was so difficult and dangerous to ride that bicycling did not become really popular until 1889, when the "safety bike", with two wheels of the same size and equipped with pneumatic tires, was introduced.

In addition to improvements in the design of the machine itself, another factor which played an important part in popularizing the bicycle was the activity of the League of American Wheelmen, an organization formed in 1880. Several hundred cyclists from all over the country met at Newport, New York, on May 30th of that year, and organized a League "to promote the general interests of bicycling, to ascertain, defend, and protect the rights of wheelmen, and to encourage and facilitate touring". The membership of the League grew steadily each year until in 1886 it totaled more than 10,000.

Wheelmen in Iowa were among the most energetic members, and the Iowa Division of the League was one of the largest. League clubs were organized all over the State. If seventy-five per cent of the members of a wheeling club were members of the League, such a club might become



a "League club" by paying annual dues of two dollars, and thus be "entitled to all the privileges accorded League clubs under the constitution."

There was much work for these first clubs to do. Roads were rough and in muddy weather impassable for all sorts of travel, but especially were they undesirable for bicycling. Punctures and upsets were the order of the day and the bicyclist found his path far from smooth. In addition to this natural barrier to carefree touring, there were still other trials which the early cyclist encountered. The law of the road afforded no privileges to the bicycle rider. If he met a team or horse and buggy, he had to dismount and go off to the side of the road, so that the horses would not be frightened by the strange sight of a machine humanly propelled.

In the latter part of October, 1889, three Iowa City bicyclists were riding along the Muscatine road on their wheels when they met a farmer named W. J. Hall. The boys dismounted when they saw that the horses were frightened, but the horses kept on jumping and rearing until finally they broke the wagon tongue and ran into a barbed wire fence. Mr. Hall told the boys that he really had suffered damages to the extent of \$100, but if they would pay him two dollars he would say no more about it. The boys demurred: they



had used all proper care and furthermore had as much right to the road as any one else. But Farmer Hall was obdurate. Have his two dollars he would or he might resort to physical violence. Since by that time several farmers had gathered at the scene and all were of the same mind as Hall, the boys decided it would be the better part of valor to pay the two dollars, which they did and received a receipt for the money.

But the matter did not end there. On the following Monday, one of the boys filed a complaint against Hall, charging him with assault. After Hall had conferred with attorneys and was informed that by extorting payment under threat he had laid himself liable to a fine of \$500 or two years in the penitentiary, he was glad to refund the two dollars and pay all costs. Thus, in at least one instance the rights of Iowa wheelmen were vindicated.

The legal division of the League of American Wheelmen was always ready to lend counsel and aid to members whenever necessary. Largely through its efforts, the bicycle finally was recognized as a vehicle all over the United States and made subject to the same regulations and privileges possessed by other vehicles.

Working in the direction of highway improvement, the Iowa Division of the League of Amer-



ican Wheelmen, in conjunction with the Iowa road improvement committee, published and distributed road maps of Iowa and an Iowa edition of "Good Roads". League members urged delegates to national and state political conventions to support a plank "having for its object a general endorsement of the GOOD ROADS movement", and pressure was brought to bear upon members of the Iowa General Assembly to promote good roads legislation. The League was convinced that "Iowa, the most progressive and enterprising state in the country, with its large area of fertile and productive lands, should certainly be able to excel in securing good permanent highways if only a conscientious effort be made".

As a part of the League's campaign for good roads, a number of bicycle paths were laid out, usually on the grass-grown roadside parallel with the highway. As a rule the grass was cut close to the ground, after which soft coal, cinders, or screened gravel was put on in a thin layer and so shaped and packed as to slope downward from the center to each side. Under favorable conditions, cycling paths cost from \$75 to \$150 per mile and usually were between four and seven feet wide. "A cycle path is a protest against bad roads" was the opinion of a writer in the *Century Magazine* in 1896. Iowa, then, with its many and



varied bicycle routes must indeed have been the very center of organized objection to poor roads. At any rate, the consensus of opinion seems to have been that the bicycle was "the most important factor in the encouragement of good highway construction since the advent of the railway".

But the attention of the Iowa wheelmen was by no means confined exclusively to such serious matters as legal rights and the improvement of highways. Races, bicycle meets, tours, pleasure jaunts into the country, or just a casual ride — all promised joy to the participant. And women, too, joined with the men in all of these activities except racing. The rules of the League stated most explicitly that "no race meeting will receive official sanction if it is to be held on Sunday, or has upon its schedule any event which is open to women competitors". However, the *Handbook* also declared that the League made "no distinction on account of sex. We have a great many ladies on our rolls, and they pay like dues and are entitled to the same privileges as the gentlemen." Apparently racing was not considered a privilege — at least for women.

There was nothing to prohibit the attendance of ladies as spectators though, and, dressed in their gala best, they cheered for their favorites. Those who were seated in top buggies of course



needed no additional protection from the sun, but those who viewed the races from hotel busses usually found it advisable to carry daintily be-ruffled parasols, lest they acquire a dreaded sun-tan.

Doubtless the young ladies from Oskaloosa waved their parasols in high glee when, on July 4, 1895, in the State L. A. W. meet at Jefferson, Iowa, Emil Kostomlotsky broke the State record of 26:52 for the ten-mile run by nearly a minute — his time being twenty-five minutes and fifty-five seconds. Moreover, at the same time, he lowered the two, three, and five mile records, and established records for the intervening miles. Small wonder that the crowd "applauded lustily" and cheered for "Kostomlotsky of Oskaloosa". Later in the same season he lowered his ten-mile record twenty seconds and set a new world's record of 11:50 for the five-mile run. He used a Syracuse wheel, eighty gear, and Morgan and Wright racing tires.

Mr. Kostomlotsky's achievement was a fitting climax to a thrilling day at Jefferson. Even the weather had seemed in a sporting mood, for though it was drizzly and rainy at nine in the morning, and even the most optimistic observers had opined that "it looks as though it would keep it up all day", the sun came out shortly thereafter



with a torrid heat which hastily dried the track and made conditions ideal for racing.

The mile novice race came first. In accordance with the rules of the L. A. W. it was "open only to those who have never won a prize in a track race" and had to be "the first race of the meet". The twelve entries remained well bunched until the last quarter "when there was a terrific scramble and from there to the tape it was a fight to the death. Joseph Barrels of Sioux City won the race by a foot in 2:36."

Following the novice race were half mile, quarter mile, and mile events, all exciting the enthusiasm of the audience, although perhaps the "hottest event of the day was the final of the quarter mile state championship, run by nine men representing the three winners in each of the section races. Storm, of Grinnell, led from the start and the balance of the crowd never saw him after that. He won in 33  $\frac{2}{5}$  seconds, with McNeill of Oskaloosa, second, and Spaulding of Grinnell, third. The time was very fast considering that the wind blew a gale up the stretch."

Between races the "fancy riding by Mr. Nicolet was a revelation to wheelmen and non-wheelmen". Especially thrilling was his riding with the front wheel of the bicycle in the air. He "gave a marvelous performance which was, alone, worth



the price of admission". Undoubtedly all of the five thousand people who attended the first day's races were "thoroughly pleased and had their money's worth", for the second day of the meet proved to be a record breaker — eight thousand people being in attendance. Several state records were broken and others established.

The races at Jefferson were not exceptional in the enthusiasm they aroused. When Cedar Rapids secured the privilege of entertaining the thirteenth annual State meet in 1896, the city counted it an important event. From ten to twenty thousand visitors were expected. A Cedar Rapids paper judged the L. A. W. meet to be "one of the most important sporting gatherings of the year", pointing out that "last year bicycle races attracted more people, probably five times as many, as all the races in the state".

Bicycling had indeed become a favorite sport. Iowa had "more bicycle riders than any state west of the Mississippi river", there being in 1895 "between 800 and 1000" L. A. W. members, which was "three times as many as Indiana, one and a half as many as Kentucky, three times as many as Nebraska and a few more than Colorado and California". In 1897, the chief consul's report showed that the Iowa Division had 1404 members — "an increase of 670 in the year".



No particular locality seemed to have a monopoly on the sport and the smaller towns were represented as well as the larger. The records tell alike of meets held at Oskaloosa or Sigourney, Des Moines or Jefferson, Centerville or Ottumwa, Hedrick or Cedar Rapids. Since the rules of the League governing races applied equally to all clubs, the same conditions prevailed everywhere. Thus the value of a prize "must in no case exceed \$35 in an amateur race and \$100 in a professional race", professionals being classified as "any rider other than an amateur". Amateurs sacrificed that status if they rode a race "for a money prize, for a wager, or for gate money" or if there were "professional competitors" or if they made "pace for professionals in public". Furthermore, all contestants were required to wear a shirt that "shall not bare shoulders", and breeches that "must reach the knee". Boys under fifteen years were not permitted in regular track events and no competition at all was allowed for boys less than twelve years of age. Besides general rules governing suspension, entries, championships, records, and tracks, the League set forth specific rules relating to such things as position in an event, starts, finish, riding, pacemaking, track privileges and decorum, fines, and conduct. Little was left to local discretion — even interpretation of the



League rules — for every point which might prove at all controversial was fully explained.

The official L. A. W. uniform consisted of a single-breasted sacque coat, "square front, to button up close to the chin with six L. A. W. Buttons"; knee breeches with a "reinforced seat" and three small L. A. W. buttons; a single-breasted vest; a flat-topped cap with "falling visor, L. A. W. buttons" and "four ventilators" in the top; ribbed woolen hose of a color to match the suit; and a gray flannel shirt "to button in front". The color adopted by the League was royal purple, and Browning, King & Company of New York City were the official tailors. They supplied coats for \$8 and breeches for \$4, or, if a member preferred, he could buy cloth at \$1.75 a yard and have a uniform made by his own tailor.

Though the League's *Handbook* described to the last button the proper outfit for men cyclists, it made no attempt to set forth an official costume for women. As early as 1888 a woman's wheel was first used on the road, but seven years later "the question of the proper dress for bicycling" was "still in doubt". In Chicago and Boston, notably, the bloomer costume was generally used; elsewhere the tendency was toward the short skirt. While the short-skirt advocates admitted that the bloomer was "a slight gain in conveni-



ence", they felt that this gain was more than offset by "an enormous loss of the gracefulness which every woman should religiously consider". However, if the short skirt costume were adopted, gaiters should be worn with it "as the rider would seem to herself and to her spectators not to be sufficiently dressed without them".

But whether the woman cyclist chose the short skirt, the long skirt, or the "knockabout bloomer costume" was immaterial — the important thing was that she should ride. A physician expressed the opinion that "the lower extremity of the human female has great latent possibilities, but time must be allowed and opportunity for practice given". In fact, one woman who had long been a semi-invalid and who had previously been exhausted by a half-mile walk, took up bicycling and could ride "five miles out and five miles back and return refreshed and invigorated. This surely was a most gratifying expansion of the lady's horizon."

Riding a bicycle was to prove a boon to women in more ways than one, according to Mrs. Mary Sargent Hopkins of Boston, who, in a lecture at a meeting of the Professional Woman's League in New York, prescribed bicycling as "the greatest cure for insomnia ever known". Furthermore, "as a soother of nerves unstrung", it had no equal, and "as a banisher of wrinkles and a rejuvenator"



it was "wonderfully efficacious". Who then can rightly criticize the woman who inserted the following advertisement in a Buffalo paper: "Will exchange folding-bed, child's white crib, or writing desk for lady's bicycle"? Yet, an enemy of the wheel cited this as certain proof of a bicycle "craze", because it disclosed "a mother who appears willing to sleep on the floor or hang her baby on a hook in order to be in the charmed circle of cyclers". But, as an observer notes, "this is a forced interpretation. The mother might have had other sleeping accommodations both for herself and baby."

Of course, all comment regarding the bicycle was not favorable by any means. Dr. Andrew Wilson believed that there was "real danger to health and development in the prevailing mania for bicycling". He did not consider it pleasant to contemplate "the prospect of the evolution of a round-shouldered, hunch-backed race in the near future", yet he felt that this result was "approximately what the bicycle mania" was tending to produce.

Evidently the Iowa belles of the nineties did not fear this dire prediction, for many an Iowa girl was the proud owner of a "bike". One of the favorite picnic trips of the young folks around Cedar Rapids was a ride on their wheels to the Amanas



where chicken dinners were served. In the fall especially, bicycle parties were quite the thing, and after a ride to some nearby town an oyster supper would be served. A tandem bicycle was very useful to the ladies as "a means of riding without exertion" when they became a little weary.

Perhaps, then, it is true that "of no other form of popular exercise, or excursion, can it be said that it is so conducive to good manners, simple conduct, and kindly intercourse as bicycle-riding". And if this be so, then it is cause for rejoicing that the bicycle, which in the early twentieth century was forced to abdicate in favor of the automobile, is again making a bid for favor in many cities and towns. It may prove to be a "permanent factor" after all.

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