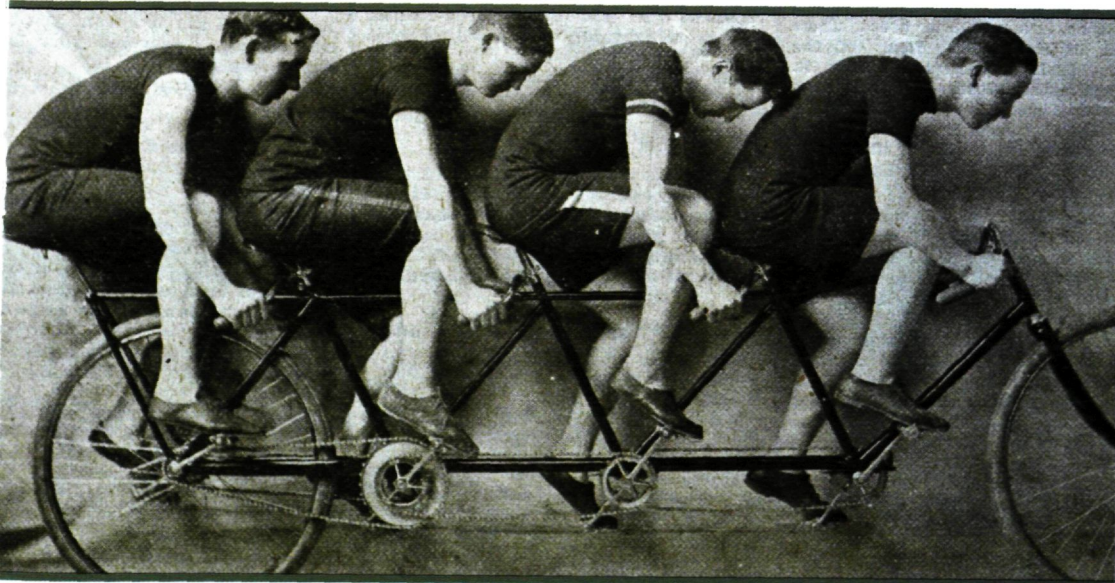

ROCHESTER HISTORY

Bloomers & Bicycles: Health and Fitness in Victorian Rochester

By Karen McCally, Ph.D.



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Front Cover: The quadricycle or "quad" allowed the combined power of four riders to help pace top bicycle racers. On this quadricycle, these four men paced W. J. Edwards on his world record-breaking ride of one mile in 1:34. The photograph appeared in the March 30, 1895, evening edition of the Rochester Union and Advertiser.

Inside front cover: James G. Lennox, an original member of the Rochester Bicycle Club, poses with his "ordinary" in this 1883 photograph. Photo courtesy of the Rochester Historical Society.

Back Cover: 1895 bicycle racer also published in the March 30, 1895, evening edition of the Rochester Union and Advertiser.

A Cycling Center

"No one would dare affirm that this is not the age of the bicycle."

– Rochester Union and Advertiser, March 30, 1895

It takes a leap of the imagination today to envision what was a common street scene in downtown Rochester just over a century ago. In the spring of 1901, automobiles arrived on Rochester's streets while bicycles still held sway as the fastest form of non-public transportation. Speeding, a problem bicyclists had posed for at least a decade, was now held in check and it was automobile drivers who posed the latest menace to the roads. In January 1901, the Rochester Common Council passed the first ordinance concerning automobiles, a speed limit of six miles per hour on city roadways. The Rochester Police Department was well-equipped to check speeding autos because, since 1893, it had equipped its policemen with bicycles. A speeding motorist could not long surpass the bicycle cop who whizzed by on his high-tech "machine" (as bicycles were often called), summoned the motorist to pull his vehicle to the roadside, and handed him a fine.

As we know now, this scene was quick to change. The dawn of the twentieth-century marked the sudden demise in Rochester and other cities across the United States of what is widely called the "bicycling craze." But its brevity hardly diminishes its significance. From the late 1880s to roughly 1900, people in cities and towns throughout the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, embraced the bicycle with a remarkable degree of intensity. In the United States, the appeal of the bicycle as a means of transportation and recreation grew rapidly and steadily, reaching a peak in 1895. Today, in an era of jets and high-speed rails, it is hard to recreate the unprecedented sense of power bicycle riders felt as they propelled themselves forward at speeds it had once taken a fast moving horse to achieve (and with a much rougher ride). Never had they glided so smoothly or moved so swiftly along the roadways and sidewalks of cities and towns. As one historian has written, bicycling marked a "glorious debauch in speed and freedom, the likes of which Americans had never seen."¹

Rochesterians reacted especially warmly to the bicycle. In 1895 a visiting editor from *Bicycle World* magazine said, according to the *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, "I think Rochester, New York, is the greatest bicycle town in the country. A stranger visiting the city would think the whole place moved on wheels." Indeed, in downtown Rochester, and in the center of many surrounding villages from Fairport to Scottsville, bicycle racks were as common as hitching posts, and could accommodate as many as fifty bicycles.² At the same time, the bicycling craze brought challenges to cities and towns that now had to adjudicate between the interests of bicyclists, who demanded better roads, and pedestrians and carriage riders who sought to limit bicyclists' speed and restrict riders to roadways that were ultimately unsuitable for cycling. In the end, however, these conflicts had a beneficial result. By 1900, Monroe County boasted the most extensive network of bicycle "sidepaths" anywhere in the nation. The completion of the paths brought "almost a revolution," according to the members of the Sidepath Commission that facilitated their development. Distances that once seemed large were less so. Communication improved between city people, townspeople, and rural people, leading to social as well as economic benefits.³

Excluding the weather, which caused a shorter bicycling season than in many other cities, the natural features of the Rochester area made it an ideal location for bicycling. From the center of the city, roads led north to Lake Ontario, a popular beach resort, and south through the peaceful and scenic Genesee Valley. Well-traveled, well-surfaced roads connected Rochester with towns on both the east and west.

But the bicycle also took hold in Rochester in large part because it attracted two sorts of people the city had in abundance: the technologically innovative and the socially progressive. The bicycle represented the cutting-edge in vehicular technology in a city that by the 1890s had already distinguished itself as a center of scientific innovation. And Rochester was at least as much a center of social innovation. Rochester's many social reformers contended that bicycling was a profoundly effective means towards improving physical and mental health. For a city that had long been home to a robust temperance movement, the bicycle was credited with discouraging alcohol consumption in general, and time spent in saloons in particular. And for women, who embraced cycling with special enthusiasm, it connoted freedom,

a fact not lost on Susan B. Anthony, who famously declared that the bicycle “has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. It gives women a feeling of freedom and self-reliance. I stand and rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a wheel...the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood.”⁴

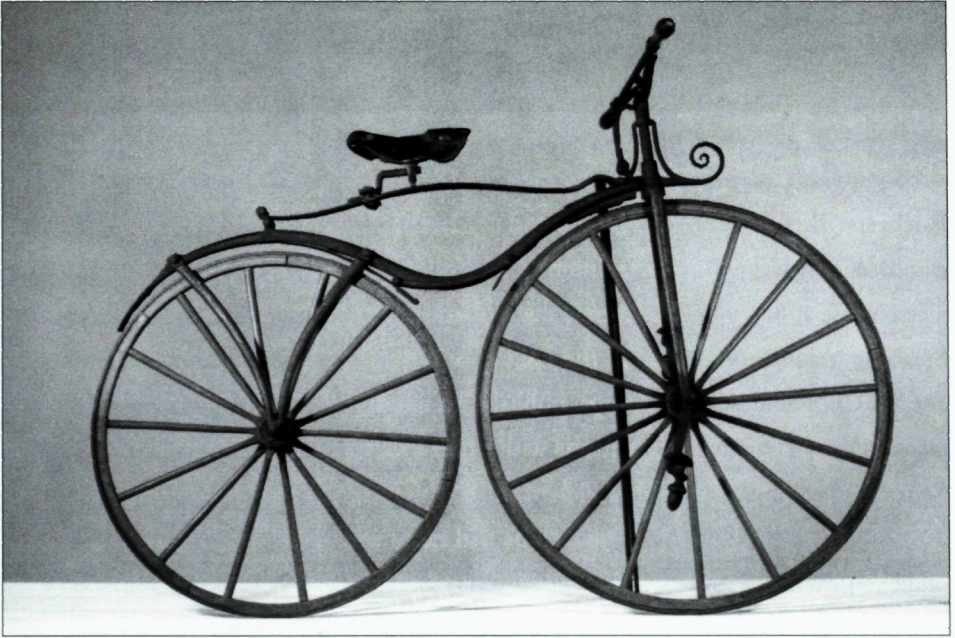


Two women on bicycles, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG02/bendrick/women>.

O rigins

While the bicycle did not achieve a mass appeal until the 1890s, since the late 1860s, some form of the bicycle had captured the imaginations of small numbers of Rochesterians. In 1866, a Frenchman named Pierre Lallement, brought the first bicycle to the United States, a rickety two- and occasionally three-wheeled pedal-driven vehicle, with handlebars for steering. The wooden-wheeled, iron-tired bicycle was called the “velocipede.” Lallement settled in Connecticut, where he rode his bicycle through the streets of New Haven. It caught on, and by the spring of 1869, from Rochester to Buffalo to Lyons to Elmira, newspapers reported the sudden arrival and popularity of this novel vehicle.⁵ In April of that year, Rochesterian Frank Swift leased a skating rink on Allen Street, transformed it into a rink for velocipedes, and opened the city’s first riding school to train riders in the art of balancing a two-wheeler. The opening of the rink on the evening of April 1st “was well attended,” with “many of the best citizens, ladies and gentlemen” present. Although many were there to ride, many more were there to watch the racing competitions that were quickly becoming a popular spectator sport. Significantly, the evening featured one woman called “Mademoiselle Marue,” the first female to ride in public in Rochester, who “made a creditable display of her skill.”⁶

In spite of this initial excitement, “velocipede fever” did not last long. It was always limited to a small minority of mostly upper-crust, mostly male daredevils and tricksters. While some Rochesterians worried about the possibility that velocipedes would soon appear on sidewalks and streets—endangering pedestrians and scaring horses—only rarely did this occur. “Here and there a velocipedist appears in the streets and is looked upon as a curiosity, but as yet the number is not sufficient to discommode or endanger the public.”⁷ Ultimately, the rough ride that earned it the nickname “boneshaker” made the velocipede impractical as a mode of transportation. Interest in bicycles waned throughout the 1870s, and in 1879, the *Union and Advertiser* reported that only five bicycles appeared to be registered in the City.⁸



“The true origin of the cranked, pedal-powered bicycle is somewhat obscure. Possibly the first was made in Pierre Michaux’s shop in Paris during 1861. While repairing a hobby horse, which had no pedals, the Michauxs had the idea of fitting an axle to the front wheel “like the crank handle of a grindstone” that could be turned by the rider’s feet. Later on, they fitted pedals to the axle. Children’s tricycles are still built with pedals in the front axle. The nickname Boneshaker is more a statement about the state of the roads in the 1800s than one about the vehicle itself. Roads being rutted and often passable only on horseback, combined with the lack of any suspension on the bike itself added up to a jarring experience for the rider. This bicycle would literally shake your bones about as you rode it.”

Image and copy used with permission from the Owls Head Transportation Museum, Owls Head, Maine. (See information on the museum, on the End Notes page of this publication.)

Interest in the bicycle resumed and expanded in the 1880s with the arrival of the “ordinary”—the high-wheeled bike. Ordinaries, with front wheels as large as five feet in diameter, were extraordinarily difficult to mount and took great athleticism to ride. They were designed for speed—the large front wheel covered a great deal of ground with each pedal revolution—and, like the velocipede, attracted predominantly adventurous young men. In 1880, fourteen such men formed the Rochester Bicycle Club and, by the end of that season, the Club’s membership had doubled.⁹ The Lakeview Wheelmen’s Club followed closely on its heels, establishing a clubhouse at No. 1 Phelps Avenue that became a regular scene of member gatherings. Sporting organizations such as the Lakeview Wheelmen’s Club and the Rochester Bicycle Club held weekly outings, published a newsletter, and participated in a growing number of racing competitions with other cycling clubs, which received prominent coverage in the *Union and Advertiser*.

The popularity of bicycle clubs and races was part of a larger movement in which sports clubs and racing competitions of all varieties—horse, bicycling, and



Above is a “photograph of a photograph,” the second taken by Albert R. Stone, and courtesy of the Albert R. Stone negative collection of the Rochester Museum and Science Center.

boat—capitalized on the growing interest in spectator sports, a phenomenon connected with the development of the whole concept of leisure in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Throughout the United States (as well as the industrial world), as household production gave way to factory production, a delineation developed between work-time and personal time. The middle class reformers who abounded in Rochester worried that the new availability of personal time be channeled into wholesome activities that would promote middle-class values such as self-improvement. Team sports, individual sports, games and contests were, in most cases, encouraged as a means to that end.¹⁰ In Rochester, regattas and horse races, in addition to bicycle races, were events marked by great anticipation and pageantry.

In bicycling's early years, Rochester enthusiasts centered their interest on figures such as Nick Kaufmann, the home-grown hero who would combine his

aptitudes for speed and agility to become among the best bicycle racers and bicycle acrobats of the era. Though he would eventually emigrate to Europe, Kaufmann spent his formative years on Weld Street, where a childhood friend suffered a broken arm in a bicycle accident and sold his bicycle to Kaufmann, who gave up all of his savings and borrowed additional money from his mother to buy it. Before long, Kaufmann distinguished himself as a top racer at Driving Park, setting a world's record for the mile ("on a dirt track"), three minutes and fifteen seconds.¹¹



Nick Kaufman, trick cyclist, March 30, 1895 evening edition of the Rochester Union and Advertiser.

An Innovative Industry

Not until the arrival of the “safety bicycle,” however, did bicycling develop mass appeal. Introduced in the late 1880s, the safety bicycle, unlike the ordinary, was composed of two wheels of the same size, both quite a bit smaller than the front wheel of the ordinary. This new bicycle, which relied on a chain to spread the power equally between the two wheels, was much more stable and took less skill to ride. At the same time these new bicycles introduced the pneumatic tire—a hollow tube of vulcanized rubber—replacing the earlier solid hard rubber tires.

Once a dangerous toy for daredevil young men, the bicycle was now a safe and beneficial means of transportation and recreation for the masses. In 1889, nearly 700 of the new bicycles were sold in Rochester. From then on, the growth was exponential throughout the 1890s. Rochester was home to 5,000 cyclists by 1893, and 40,000 by 1897.¹² Rochesterians from George Eastman, who rode a bicycle each day to work, to the Main Street store clerk, captured bicycle fever.¹³

“The workingman and the capitalist, the shop girl and the society girl dart



“Because the highwheel bicycles had tricky handling characteristics, many attempts were made to build a safety bicycle. In its final form, with equal diameter wheels giving more stable and predictable handling, a lower center of gravity and chain and sprocket drive, it indeed was a much safer bicycle.

The woman’s version

often had a rear guard to avoid entangling long dresses, which were the fashion of the day. This example’s hard tires and construction similar to highwheelers, date it as one of the earliest safety bicycles. The accepted date for the true safety, complete with balloon tires, is set just after 1887. The identity of the builder of this safety is unknown.”

Image and copy used with permission from the Owls Head Transportation Museum, Owls Head, Maine. (See information on the museum, on the End Notes page of this publication.)

hither and yon,” declared the *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, “intent upon the pleasure that the bicycle grants.”^{13b} Bicycle racks lined streets downtown, and trains added special cars to accommodate the bicycles that a growing number of riders took with them as they traveled around the region.

By 1895 bicycles epitomized progress. In a special issue on bicycling in

an 1895 evening edition of the *Union and Advertiser*, the paper boasted, “The rapid growth of American cycle-building during the last ten years affords a most remarkable instance of that wonderful industrial progress which has caused America to become popularly and pedagogically known among all the nations of the earth as a ‘great country.’”¹⁴ Significantly, Rochester observers noted the social progress – in addition to technological progress – afforded by the bicycle. The article described the sheer number of American bicycle factories (126), the high wages paid to industry workers (an average of \$2 per hour), and the fact that the bicycle industry, unlike many industries, whose hiring was seasonal, employed workers steadily year around. American makers “have not only driven foreign-made wheels out of the market, but are now in a position to compete successfully in all the markets of the world... It is confidently expected that bicycle making will soon be in the very front rank of American manufacturing industries.”¹⁵

A Handsome Bicycle Store Full of High Grade Wheels.

An absolute guarantee given every purchaser. Our motto is: Fair dealing, honest representation. The trial of the wheels are considered the highest of all high grades. Quality is strength! Capacity in grace! Lightness in speed! \$100! Terms to suit!



WE ARE SELLING WHEELS BY THE DOZEN.


We can suit all tastes, all tastes, all pocketbooks. Take your pick from lines: Le-Mi-Nom, Ariel, Phoenix, Royal, H. & T. Searcher and Ontario. We invite the ladies especially to examine the Ariel, Phoenix and H. & T. Searchers. We will be glad to explain their good points and why quite sure you will agree that they are the handsomest and most graceful in the market. Don't forget our number. Don't buy until you see us.

MINER & FISK, 32 East Avenue.

An ad from the March 30, 1895 evening edition of the Rochester Union and Advertiser, from the Rochester Historical Society collection.

By 1900 there were at least twenty-five bicycle manufacturers, retailers, and repair shops in the area. Rochester Cycle Manufacturing Company made bicycles from 1892 to 1900, after which it began manufacturing steam automobiles and early motorcycles. In addition, Rochester businesses of all kinds introduced new products and services to appeal to bicyclists. Buckley's Café, at 11 Exchange Street, advertised a "bicycle breakfast." E. E. Bausch & Son, an optical shop established downtown by J. J. Bausch's brother Edward, produced "eye protectors" to guard riders' eyes from dirt and cinder swept up by crowded cycle traffic.¹⁶ Rochester's thriving shoe industry developed new lines of bicycle shoes and boots, and specialty cleaners advertised their skill in cleaning ladies' "bicycle skirts." Finally, George Eastman, who had cycled

Bicycle Kodaks.



\$5.00
\$8.00
\$10.00

HALF THE PLEASURE OF A CYCLING OUTFIT IS LOST WITHOUT A KODAK.

**Pocket Kodaks
Bullets and
Bulls-Eyes**

are especially adapted to use a wheel. They use our light-proof Film Cartridges and can therefore be


LOADED IN DAYLIGHT

They are the lightest and most compact camera made, and with our perfect bicycle carrying cases are entirely out of the way yet instantly available for use. Fitted with improved rotary shutters, sets of three stops, accurate view finders and carefully tested lenses of superior quality.

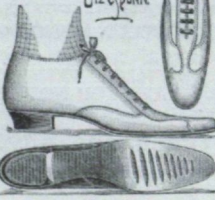
"Bicycle Kodaks" is the title of a little booklet that tells all about them. Free for the asking.

EASTMAN KODAK CO.

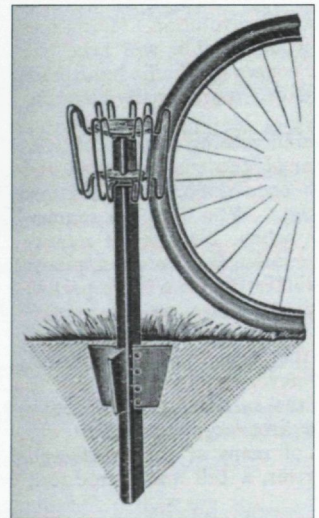
MEN'S
Colored Kid Gore
Bicycle Bal.
Corrugated Sole.
Price,
\$3.00.



LADIES'
Colored Kid
Bicycle
Oxford.
Corrugated
Sole.
Price,
\$2 00.



MADE BY
UTZ & DUNN, Rochester, N. Y.
SOLD AT
MILLER'S, 58 State Street.



**D. LEARY
DYE HOUSE,** | **Cor. Platt and Mill Sts.**
We make a Specialty of
Cleaning Bicycle Skirts.

Coin Operating Cycle Pump.

**A Cent Fills Your Tire Hard.
No Need to Carry Hand Pumps.**

THESE COIN PUMPS ARE LOCATED AT
Charlotte, Scottsville, and
Genesee and Seneca Parks
and other convenient places along the sidepaths.

If you don't find one apply at the office of the
ROCHESTER CYCLE PUMP CO.,
26 Elwood Block, ROCHESTER, N. Y.

The above ads, taken from the March 30, 1895 evening edition of the Rochester Union and Advertiser, illustrate the many products and services made available to bicycling enthusiasts in Rochester, in the late 19th century. From George Eastman's "Pocket Kodak," to ladies shoes, bicycle stands, tire pumps and clothing cleaning services, bicycles created new manufacturing and service industries all over the city.

across Europe in the summer of 1896, recognized bicycle riders as a promising market for his cameras. By the late 1890s, he introduced the “Bicycle Kodak,” a small compact camera that, like other Kodaks, was easy to take “on the go,” and offered recreational riders the opportunity to record the scenery they encountered on their rides.

A Menace to the Roads

In spite of the popularity of bicycling, not everyone was pleased. Cyclists made life difficult for those—still a majority—who had yet to take to the craze. In fact, besides Rochester’s canines, who delighted in escaping their masters to run wildly down the streets and sidewalks in pursuit of fast-moving bicycles, few non-riders were initially pleased with the presence of bicycles on the roads and sidewalks. Perhaps even the dogs themselves had second thoughts when they discovered they had traveled too far from their owners and became another of a fast-rising number of lost dogs in the city of Rochester. Riders, meanwhile, charged that dogs were now a public danger, both in their ability to cut into the path of the rider and in the tendency of a minority of dogs to chomp at riders’ legs and feet. Well-organized



The advent of bicycle and then auto traffic created the need for a city dog pound. By the early 1920s, the pound was well established. In this photo, a Humane Society worker and a policeman stand ready for a campaign to rid Rochester streets of unmuzzled dogs. The photo, from the Albert R. Stone collection of the Rochester Museum and Science Center, was used in the May 12, 1922, Rochester Herald, with the caption, “Mayor Van Zandt says no dog is properly dressed without his muzzle.”

and increasingly prominent, bicyclists demanded greater enforcement of a dog ordinance that already required dog owners to leash their pets. The result, in 1894, was the establishment of a city dog pound, among several changes made in the late 1880s and 1890s in the laws and ordinances of the city to accommodate competing interests on the roads and sidewalks.¹⁷

The speed of the bicycles on roadways demanded the city's first speed limit—six miles per hour, passed by the Rochester Common Council in 1893. Policemen, who were to exercise their judgment in determining whether a rider had surpassed the limit, were equipped with bicycles in order to enforce the ordinance. By 1895, that limit was raised to eight miles per hour, but “scorchers,” as speeders were called, remained a menace.¹⁸ Rochester police reported an astounding 100 accidents a day, on average, in the summer and fall seasons during the height of the bicycling craze, the mid-1890s. The vast majority of these accidents took place on roadways rather than sidewalks. Even the *Union and Advertiser*, long a booster of cyclists, could not contain frustration. An October 1895 article reminded readers of the speed limit ordinance and printed it in its entirety, but not before adding, “The section has been published frequently but as wheelmen continue to violate it, it is evident that all have not yet read it, and it is given again for the benefit of those who have not read it.”¹⁹ The area of greatest danger was reportedly the intersection between Spring Street, Plymouth Avenue and Exchange Streets. Spring Street had asphalt pavement, which was particularly amenable to riders but, approaching intersections at a swift pace made for many accidents. Yet the problem was citywide, leading to the stationing of plain-clothed police officers at street corners throughout the city.²⁰

A crack down on speeders, however, did not solve the underlying problem of competition for space among bicyclists, pedestrians and, the most imposing, the newly electrified trolleys. In the spring of 1896, bicyclists lost the privilege of riding on sidewalks in a new ordinance. The ordinance generated much discussion in the news. The *Union and Advertiser* appeared to speak for many Rochesterians who breathed a sigh of relief. “The sidewalks of Rochester assumed an old-time appearance last evening, being given up exclusively to pedestrianism, and the familiar spectacle of people on foot dodging the bicycle scorchers disappeared.” Parents voiced particular relief that they no longer needed to protect their children from the

dangers of speeding bicycles. At the same time, the ordinance had far-reaching consequences for bicyclists and roadway traffic. On roads with dirt surfaces, “riding is not an unadulterated joy and as the wheels bobbed up and down or zig-zagged into slime or mud uncomplimentary expressions from the wheelmen on the conditions of these pavements were heard.” At the same time, bicyclists made great efforts to identify the roads with the best surfaces, and those roads quickly became congested with the sudden growth of bicycle traffic.²¹



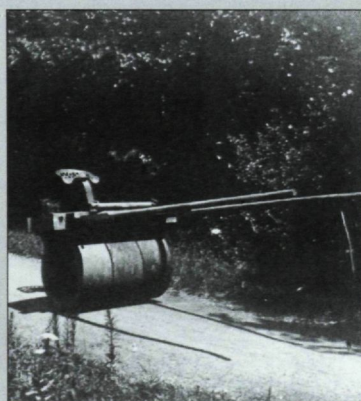
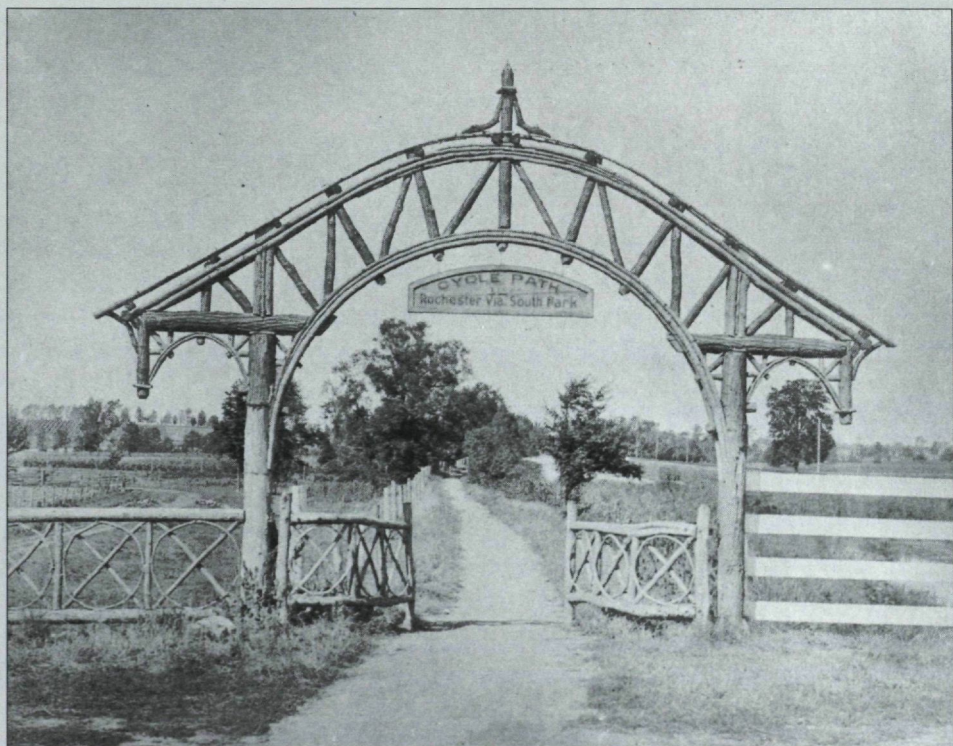
Pictured here is the end of the Scottsville line of the Monroe County sidepath system. It is likely that this picture was taken on opening day of the Scottsville line. The Sidepath Guide reported that official opening of the path “was an event in the lives of the Rochester wheelmen and wheelwomen who rode to Scottsville on that day, and to the Scottsville people it was the greatest event in years. The hospitality which was extended to the visitors was unlimited. Barrels of lemonade, with wagon-loads of edibles were distributed to the hungry wheelmen from tables in the village square.” Photograph courtesy of the Rochester Public Library, Local History Division.

The Sidepaths of Monroe County

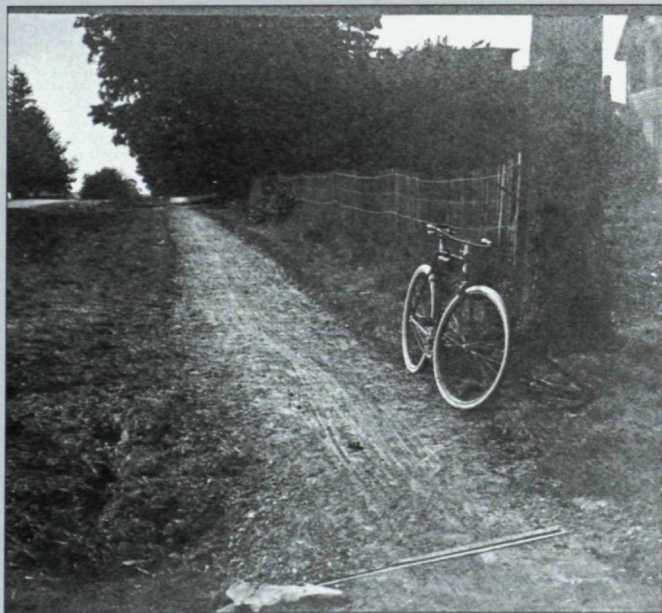
The new ordinance was the impetus for what would become the most extensive network of bicycle sidepaths in the nation. By the turn of the twentieth century, members of an appointed Sidepath Commission could boast that the sidepaths “extend into all the villages and towns, traverse all the principal roads and cross-roads, so that there is not a hamlet in the county that is not easily approachable for the rider.”²²

A group of bicyclists began an organized effort for sidepaths in 1895 when they proposed that all Monroe County cyclists be taxed one dollar that would be placed in a fund for the construction and repair of sidepaths. Not all bicyclists supported the initiative, and it failed to pass the Common Council. Not to be deterred, supporters of that initiative, joined by many of the wheelmen who had opposed it, met in Southeast Rochester to form the Southeast Sidepath Association. The very next day, members of the new association commenced construction on the first mile of sidepath, along Elmwood Avenue from Mount Hope Avenue to what is now called Genesee Valley Park. Similar associations formed in other sections of the city and the *Rochester Post-Express* newspaper joined the effort by establishing a subscription to raise more money for sidepath construction. The culmination of the fundraising effort took place in the summer of 1896, when over 20,000 wheelmen gathered at Driving Park for a “wheelmen’s carnival”—a daylong extravaganza featuring parades, races, and acts by bicycle tricksters.

“It is impossible to recall the names of one-tenth of the men who turned out with teams to assist in the work of drawing cinders, and in the work of leveling the paths and getting them ready to be rideable [sic],” noted the prominent group of Rochester wheelmen who eventually formed the Monroe County Sidepath Commission. Volunteers also constructed sidepaths on central city streets to “benefit working people who live in the suburbs and go to and from their work on wheels.”²³ By the end of the 1897 bicycling season, the county contained 130 miles of sidepaths. By 1901, it could boast over 200 miles of paths.



The Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County recently digitized the 1889 book of photographs published by the Sidepath Commission entitled The Sidepaths of Monroe County. You can find the entire book at <http://www2libraryweb.org>. Pictured here, top: the entranceway to the Scottsville path, looking toward Rochester. The sign above the wood archway reads: "Cycle path to Rochester via South Park," later named Genesee Valley Park. Lower left: The road, the railway, and the sidepath intersect on the route to Sea Breeze. Lower right: Large, heavy rollers, presumably horse-driven, were used to tamp down cinder for a smoother ride.

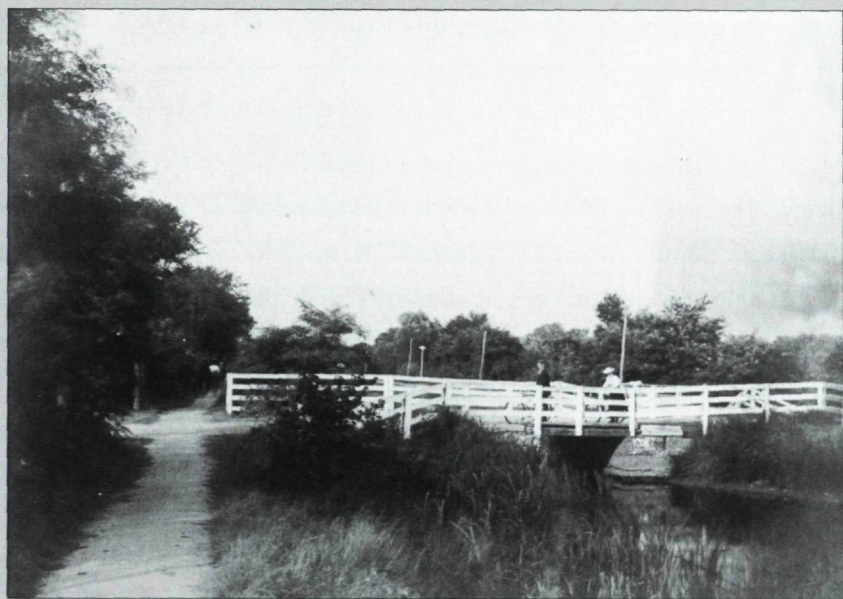


Top: Three men and a boy pose on the Charlotte path. Behind the man is a sign that reads: "Wbeelmen STOP," and across the road, a building marked "Toll Gate." Tolls were required of bicyclists to ride the sidepaths.

Left: Although bicycle theft did become a problem, it was not unusual to see bicycles left at the edges of sidepaths, as here on the Churchville path, while their owners wandered nearby.

Top right: A wooden bridge carries bicyclists over impassable terrain—possibly a small creek—along the Monroe Avenue sidepath.

Below right: Monroe Avenue path.



America's First Fitness Craze

If the safety bicycle gave cycling a mass appeal, the construction of the sidepath system only drew more Rochesterians into the sport, especially given late nineteenth century Americans' general enthusiasm for physical exertion. While a love of strenuous exercise may not fit with our stereotypes about the buttoned-up nineteenth-century Anglo-American middle class, by the 1880s and 1890s this group took to exercise with great passion. At the height of the bicycling craze in 1895, Luther H. Porter, a representative of the New Jersey chapter of the League of American Wheelmen, compiled several years of his writings to create a 176-page treatise on the benefits of cycling called *Cycling for Health and Pleasure: An Indispensable Guide to the Successful Use of the Wheel*. "It is a fact well known to everyone that proper food and sufficient sleep are essential to the maintenance of health," he began. "But it is by no means so generally understood that these alone will not insure it unless fortified by the practice of suitable exercise."²⁴ Physicians were rapidly learning that bicycling was "the sovereign remedy" for the common modern ailments of "indigestion, insomnia, and nervous troubles." The recommended daily ride of one hour, Porter maintained "will cure dyspepsia even of the most confirmed sort, and make it possible to take any food with comfort. After an evening ride, and rub down or bath, the sleep which follows is as certain as it is incomparably calm and refreshing. The nerves are quieted, the muscles rested, the circulation stimulated, and the feeling of physical satisfaction which pervades the system insures calm and invigorating sleep."²⁵

The concern about physical health had been brewing slowly in the cities during the post-Civil War decades. The growth of urban centers was accompanied by an increase in the number of people working sedentary jobs in factories and offices. Furthermore, these same urban Americans were increasingly isolated from the natural world. It was possible to spend days at a time without laying eyes on a green field or forest. The congestion made for poor air quality and many laborers spent large portions of their day pent up in small shops or offices, or in dark factories. The result of this growing sense of confinement was an upsurge in outdoor recreation.

One poet, exhilarated by a bicycle ride in the country, wrote:

Care-worn city clerks it hurries off to
Nature's fairest scenes
Flower-decked meads and, trellised hop-grounds;
Babbling brooks and village greens.
Round-backed artisans it bears, too, from
The small and stuffy room,
To the lanes where trailing roses all the
Summer air perfumes;
And it makes them grow forgetful of the
Stifling, man-made town,
As they climb the breezy roadway o'er
The swelling, God-made down.²⁶

Late nineteenth-century physicians and social critics warned against the sedentary lifestyle in part because it was such a contrast to the vigorous life led by the fabled pioneers, who had "tamed the wilderness," as it was often said, in the earlier part of the century. In the 1820s Rochester had risen out of wilderness to become the fastest growing city in the nation in less than a single generation. Therefore, it is likely that the desire to recapture the vigor of the pioneer generation contributed in some part to the enthusiasm with which the city's elites embraced bicycling. But Rochester was also a hub of social reform, and late-nineteenth-century reformers embraced the bicycle for its health benefits because, in the view of most nineteenth-century social reformers, physical health and moral well-being were inextricably linked.

This assumption found expression at mid-century in the creation of the Young Men's Christian Association. Founded in Britain, the YMCA reached American shores in 1851 and Rochester by 1854. After a rocky start, the Rochester YMCA took off in the 1890s, establishing its own club, as well as equipment and facilities to enhance physical fitness.²⁷

Bicycles and Bloomers

While men had long been encouraged to take part in physical activity, only in the 1890s were women gradually urged to do so. To be sure, many commentators held onto older notions of female delicacy. For example, when one female observer commented in the spring of 1896 that bicycling destroyed “feminine symmetry and poise” and was “a disturber of internal organs and an irritant of external tissues,” she expressed views that were well within the mainstream as recently as twenty to thirty years earlier.²⁸ By the 1890s, these views had been discarded by most, though the change was not necessarily due to a newfound belief in female strength; in the 1890s, women were encouraged to enjoy bicycling and other forms of exercise because they would help ward off the many maladies—most notably, “hysteria”—to which women were deemed particularly vulnerable.²⁹ The physiological expert Maria A. Ward, for example, aimed to demonstrate in her 1896 book *Bicycling for Ladies* “the possible dangers of exercise, and how they may be avoided by the application to bicycle exercise of simple and well-known physiological laws, thus enabling the cyclist to resist fatigue and avoid over-exertion.”³⁰ If the rules of physiology were followed, the results could be dramatic. “A bright, sunny morning, fresh and cool,” she wrote,

“good roads and a dry atmosphere; a beautiful country before you, all your own to see and to enjoy; a properly adjusted wheel awaiting you, – what more delightful than to mount and speed away, the whirr of the wheels, the soft grit of the tire, an occasional chain-clank the only sounds added to the chorus of the morning, as, the pace attained, the road stretches away before you!”³¹

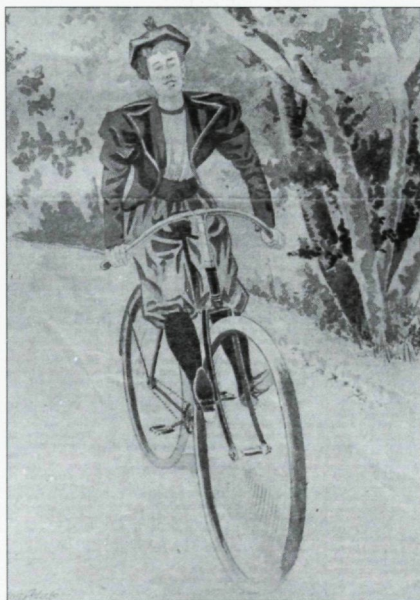
Porter reported observing a similar exhilaration among women bicycle riders, reporting in *Cycling for Health and Pleasure* that “[t]he peculiar and exceptional advantages which cycling offers as an exercise for women are not matters of theory with the writer, as he has had in his own family several very striking illustrations

of its remarkable effects.” What followed were several pages of testimonials from women – women “suspended on the edge of the tomb,” run down, sleepless – who had experienced remarkable reinvigoration through bicycle riding.^{31b}

A year before either Porter’s or Ward’s books were released, the *Union and Advertiser* ran an article with claims similar to those of both authors, pointing to deliberations among physicians at three European societies: The French Association for the Advancement of the Sciences, the Hygienic Congress at Budapest, and the Academy of Medicine in Paris.³² Yet the sight of women on wheels was not without controversy. The bicycling craze prompted some women to become more adventurous—and practical—in their dress. A movement called “rational dress” spread in the 1890s in response to women’s growing participation in sports. Proponents of rational dress urged the adaptation of the corset to facilitate movement for the new, modern active woman.

Accordingly, the whalebones that had once provided structure to corsets were replaced with firm elastic cords. And while ladies’ bicycles were designed with their long flowing skirts in mind, the suffragette Amelia Bloomer introduced in the United States the new item of women’s clothing that would bear her name. “Bloomers” were baggy pantaloons that ballooned in the legs and then tapered dramatically to form a tight fit either just below the knee or at the ankles. To many observers, they were frighteningly masculine.

It is unclear in retrospect how many Rochester women actually wore bloomers. One observer wrote, “It is curious how little impetus is needed to set the bloomer movement a-going in any locality. A few days ago a lady wearing the new costume rode



This image was centered on the front page of the March 20, 1895 evening edition of the Rochester Union and Advertiser. Wearing bloomers, the controversial new fashion trend for active women, this “cycling girl” is coasting. By the spring of 1898, a city ordinance would make coasting on city streets unlawful and punishable by a fine of at least \$2 and up to \$25.

through a Western New York town. The so-called craze broke out immediately, whereas before the stranger's advent not a girl in town had dared to don the bifurcated garments."³³ Another local observer shared a conflicting account. In spite of all the excitement over bloomers, a *Union and Advertiser* reporter argued that relatively few women actually wore them. As he noted, a ride along the popular Lake Avenue sidepath that took riders from the city to Ontario Beach would reveal: "a goodly percentage of women. Some of them, but not many, wore bloomer costumes and, here and there, there was a girl sufficiently sure of her figure to risk knickerbockers. The majority, however, clung to skirts, even though they cut them a bit shorter, as much as two inches from the ground." This reporter went on to describe the extraordinary lengths to which women (and their male escorts) would go to enjoy a bicycle ride in traditional attire. "It was one of the accomplishments of a 'lady bicycler' to accurately adjust her skirt so that half of its width hung exactly each side of the wheel," he wrote. "Then her toes, on the pedals, 'like little mice crept in and out.' When the lady failed in mastering this art there was likely to be a catastrophe and work for her escort in slowly unwinding the slack inches of skirt from between the sprocket and chain of the bicycle. In fact every male of the '90s was expected to be expert in this art, which was only second in importance to knowing just how to tuck his lady's 'leg-o-mutton' sleeves into her coat without crushing them."³⁴

Regardless of their attire, women riders embraced the bicycle for the freedom it promised. Poet Madelyne Bridges, in a work entitled "Wheels and Wheels," described a generation of women who were turning in the spinning wheel for the adventures of the bicycle wheel:

The maiden with her wheel of old
Sat by the fire to spin,
While lightly through her careful hold
The flax slid out and in.
Today her distaff, rock and reel
Far out of sight are hurled
And now the maiden with her wheel
Goes spinning round the world.³⁵

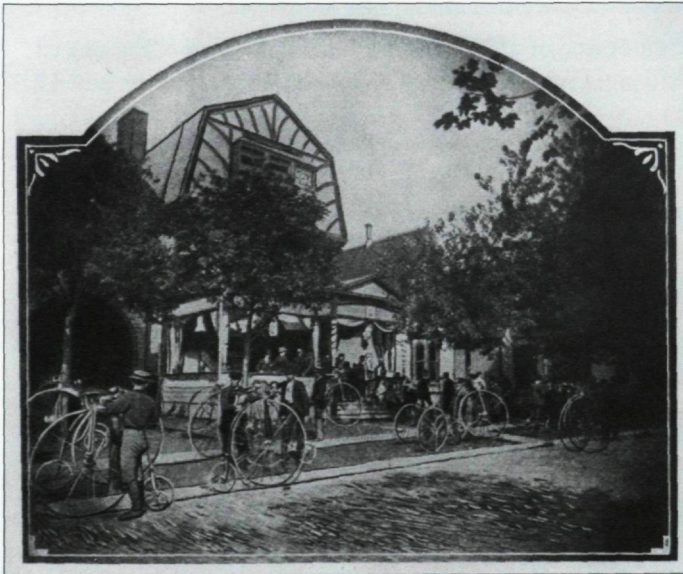
Above all, bicycle riding gave women unprecedented mobility. Wealthier women no longer needed to rely on a male driver, and less well-off women could move further and more swiftly than they ever could on foot. In 1895, the suffragist and temperance advocate Frances Willard joined her friend Susan B. Anthony in identifying the bicycle as a liberating force for women. At age 53, Willard learned to ride a bicycle and declared the vehicle a “new implement of power.”³⁶



A group of Rochester women pose with their bicycles. In spite of a great deal of hype over bloomers, these conservatively dressed women remained the norm. Photo courtesy of the Rochester Public Library, Local History Division.

Wheels or Automobiles?

Unfortunately, this new implement of power would not hold sway for much longer. By 1900, the social revolution that allowed women as well as workingmen the ability to cruise along Rochester's paths on the same terms as their male and wealthier counterparts, was coming undone. The arrival of the automobile, which started its life as a "rich man's toy," briefly re-established class distinctions on the roadways and subordinated better off women once again to the needs and whims of male escorts. To some extent, the bicycle was a victim of its own successes. As one historian concluded, paraphrasing the inventor Hiram P. Maxim, "though the bicycle had answered the vague longing for a time-saving, distance-conquering, independent mode of transportation, in doing this it had also 'whetted' the 'public appetite for wheeled contrivances.'"³⁷ American companies continued to produce bicycles in similar numbers, but increasingly for export to Europe. In the United States, the bicycle was cast aside as the new love affair with the automobile began.



Above: 1894 July 4th parade along E. Main Street, courtesy of the Rochester Public Library, Local History Division.

The clubhouse at No. 1 Phelps Avenue, of the Lake View Wheelmens Club, organized in 1889. It became the scene of many dances and entertainments as the club was prominent in the social and athletic life of the city. The club was consolidated with the Columbia Rifle Club in 1902. Photograph from the Rochester Historical Society archives.

End Notes

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17. Joseph Barnes, "The Friend of Every Friendless Beast: A Centennial History of the Humane Society of Rochester and Monroe County," *Rochester History* 35:4 (October 1973), 16.
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27. Blake McKelvey, "The Y.M.C.A.'s First Century in Rochester," *Rochester History* 16:1 (January 1954), 13.
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30. Maria A. Ward, *Bicycling for Ladies* (New York: Brentano's, 1896), x.
31. *Ibid*, 7.
- 31b. Porter, 15.
32. "Women on Bicycles," *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, November 6, 1894, 8.
33. *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, March 30, 1895, 2.
34. This segment comes from an unidentified newspaper clipping in the archives of the Rochester Historical Society. The article, accompanied by an image of "the Boulevard" near Riverside Cemetery, goes on to describe the great lengths women went to in order to ride in skirts.
35. As reprinted in Smith, *A Social History of the Bicycle*, 76.
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NOTE: The photographs and copy on pages 5 and 8 are courtesy of The Owls Head Transportation Museum, which houses more than 100 historic aircraft, automobiles, bicycles, carriages and engines. The vast majority of this collection is maintained in operating condition, and demonstrated regularly. The Museum is open seven days a week, year round and is located in Owls Head, Maine, just three hours north of Boston. For more information, visit the Museum's website, www.owlshead.org or call 207-594-4418.

Dear *Rochester History* Reader,

The Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County is pleased to collaborate with the Rochester Historical Society in publishing *Rochester History* magazine. This local history publication will be issued twice a year, except in 2008 when four issues will be published in order to cover issues that were not published in 2007.

To review previous issues of *Rochester History*, please visit the library's website at www2.libraryweb.org on the Local History and Genealogy page.

Paula Smith, Interim Library Director

About *Rochester History*

In January of 1939, Assistant City Historian Dr. Blake McKelvey published the first quarterly *Rochester History*, focusing on Rochester and western New York. Subjects researched and written by him and other scholars were edited, published and distributed by Dr. McKelvey to expand the knowledge of our local history. Studying local history as a microcosm of our nation's history has brought insight and understanding to scholars and researchers around the globe.

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The Rochester Historical Society is a membership organization which has, for nearly 150 years, been collecting, preserving and interpreting the archives and artifacts that are part of this community's history. Meredith Keller is the Interim Executive Director. For information about us and our programs and services, please visit on-line at www.rochesterhistory.org or call 585.271.2705.

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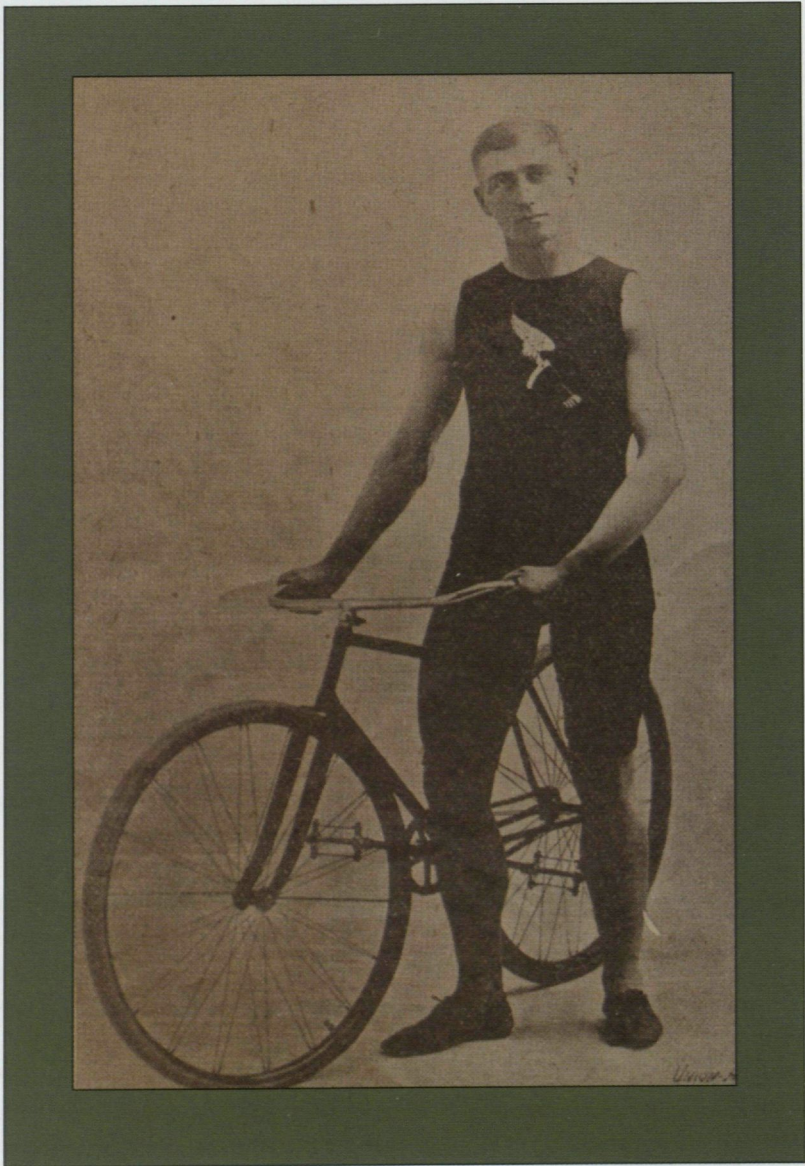
Pictured above are the 1890 members of the Genesee Bicycle Club, which operated from 1883 until about 1893. Photo courtesy of the Rochester Public Library, Local History Division.

Reader response to Previous Issues of *Rochester History*

We are grateful to receive kudos, questions and comments on the stories contained in this publication. After the last issue, *Building the Barrio: A Story of Rochester's Puerto Rican Pioneers*, we received a note from J. Roberto Burgos who commended the story and pointed out the existence of many more “historical facts about the Latino community that are not included in this document.” We recommended that he contact RMSC, the organization the Latino Alliance has been working with to collect and house their grant-funded Latino Archives Project.

We also heard from Richard Vega, a member of the Mayor's Senior Management Team, and “a proud Puerto Rican.” Mr. Vega shared with us his inspiring life story, which, because of space concerns could not be included here, but which would also be a good candidate for inclusion in the Latino Archives Project.

If you have a comment, a correction, or more you would like to add to this story, please e-mail us at mkeller@rochesterhistory.org. Appropriate comments and addenda will be published in the next issue of *Rochester History*.



Photograph from the March 30, 1895 evening edition of the Rochester Union and Advertiser.



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