

# In the Days of the Iron Steed

## Bicycling Was a Major Sport in Southern California in the Early Nineties.

By Audrey Henderson Cooke

ONE hundred acres of Los Angeles property offered in trade for—A BICYCLE! And the deal fell through, because the owner of the bicycle, William M. Jenkins, known in those days as "Bill," didn't want any "sagebrush-covered land out in the sticks." And the land was near what is now known as the Mt. Washington district, virtually in the heart of the city! Of course, it was a particularly good bicycle, as Mr. Jenkins pointed out, and was valued at the time at about \$165. It had been won in a hotly contested race, and the land offered in trade was just part of a large estate consisting of the hill section where the Mt. Washington Hotel was later built—the bicycle looked like the best value!

But that was back in the "Gay Nineties" when bicycling was a major sport in Southern California, and Los Angeles was a particularly popular center for cyclists, both amateur and professional. Some idea of the extent of the sport as it once flourished here is gained from the fact that even today a club known as the "Wheelmen of the Past Century" meets here regularly. Most of its two hundred members are genuine "old-timers;" many of them are prominent in business and social circles—all of them boast of a real interest in some phase of cycling prior to 1900. The latter characteristic is the sole requisite for membership in the unique organization.

As far back as 1886 a club known as the "Los Angeles Wheelmen" was in existence here, but of the original membership only Maurice S. Hellman, James Lancaster and R. Baker remain. The membership of the Wheelmen of the Past Century reads like a veritable "Who's Who" of men well known in Los Angeles, and includes such names as Frank A. Barnes, Eugene Biscalluz, Ralph Hamlin, Tracy Q. Hall, Dean Cromwell, Carl McStay, Ed S. Pauly, Louis Schwabebe, William M. Jenkins, Knowlton R. Bradley, J. W. Off, William Wier, Milliam A. Tufts, J. Phil Percival, Harry A. Miller, William Wickersham, and numerous others, all of whom were actively interested in cycling.

Once a year the club holds a get-together meeting, and it is then that there is great talk of the "good old days," and much swapping of yarns and reminiscences of the various sporting events that made bicycle history.

The record established by S. C. Spier, formerly of Los Angeles, who rode on a high bicycle from New York to San Francisco in eighty-four days is still recalled. It was a remarkable feat in those days, back in the '80's, long before there was a paved road in the country.

Many a local wheelman still remembers the annual road races from Los Angeles to Santa Monica, inaugurated one Fourth of July in the early '90's. The race started between Second and Third on Spring street, in front of the old Los Angeles Athletic Club, and covered a course seventeen and three-quarter miles to the beach. When traffic on Spring street increased the start of the race took place on Hill, and the starting point was gradually moved farther out of town as the city grew. William M. Jenkins held the title for several years until William A. Tufts "beat him by accident" when the latter introduced a new type of wheel.

The "first century run," as the 100-mile ride was called, was a yearly event here, as in other parts of the country. The trip had to be finished in not more than twenty-four hours and the recognized course extended from Los Angeles to Pomona, thence to Santa Monica and back to the city. It was won the first time by the late Harry Cromwell.

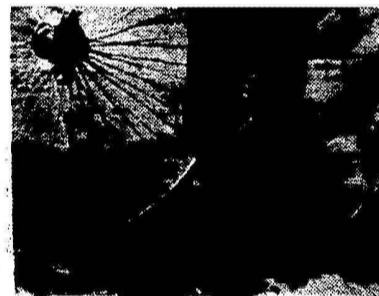
Annual relay races from Los Angeles to San Diego, participated in by various Southern California wheel clubs, were important occasions, but there were strictly local events that attracted equal attention in their time. There were the races held at the old Agriculture Park, now Exposition Park when members of the Los Angeles Athletic Club team, the East Side Wheelmen and the Los Angeles Wheelmen contended for such valuable prizes as pianos, furniture, bicycles, medals, jewelry, etc. They were popularly known as the "piano races," and were for amateurs only. Men with



At right—In 1886 S. G. Spier pedaled from New York to San Francisco in eighty-four days. Above—Tracy Q. Hall; Upper right—J. W. Off.

amateur standing were not permitted to race for cash prizes, but in the early days of cycling extremely valuable gifts were sometimes offered. William M. Jenkins recalls the time when a town lot, diamonds and numerous other notable prizes were given in races held in Phoenix, Ariz., to attract popular wheelmen to contests in that city. On the other hand, many big races were for "honor and glory" only, and the winner may only have drawn a cup or medal. Besides the Agriculture Park track, other well-known tracks included Athletic Park, near where the Southern Pacific depot now stands, and Tenth and Main streets was also the site of one.

The sport became so popular, what with races, cycling trips and the universal use of bicycles here, that it was



Photos on this page from history collection, Security-First National Bank.

finally necessary to have definitely defined cycle paths. In 1896 the Santa Monica Cycle Path was organized and built through the efforts of the late Bob Lennie and Joseph Ostendorf. Their bicycle shop was located where the old Westminster Hotel now stands at the corner of Fourth and Main streets and was said to be one of the best in the city. The cycle path was financed by selling buttons at \$1 a piece and accord-

ing to Ralph Hamlin, who recalls the incident well, no difficulty was experienced in raising funds for it. The path was hard surfaced, in comparison with the dusty roads that prevailed everywhere before automobiles made paving a necessity. The cycle path started at the old Rosedale Cemetery on Washington Boulevard, then a considerable distance out in the suburbs, and wound its way through picturesque, countryside via what is now Palms and National Boulevard. Milestones were placed and at regular intervals arches were erected over the path so that it would be reserved for the use of cyclists only. This semiprivate road was a great advantage to all—wheelmen could no longer frighten the horses! And after a rain cyclists weren't inconvenienced with the road beds being ruined by farmers driving their cattle down them, as Tracy Q. Hall pointed out in commenting on it recently.

Another notable venture in the annals of bicycling in Los Angeles was the organization of the old California Cycleway Company, of which Horace M. Dobbins of Pasadena was president. The purpose of the company was to build and operate an elevated bicycle track from Los Angeles to Pasadena, and it is a curious fact that the right of way for the old path still exists!

With the number of wheelmen in the two cities conservatively estimated at 30,000 at the time the track was started in the '90's, it looked like a good investment. A toll of 10 cents was to have been charged and this would permit a cyclist to ride up and down all day if he so desired, and also included storage of his machine at either terminus until he wished to undertake the return trip.

Despite its flourishing outlook, though, the venture was doomed to early failure as far as commercial success was concerned. The track was actually only in use from the Green Hotel to the Raymond in Pasadena, though it was constructed nearly to Garvanza and the right of way extended for miles.

Paradoxically, it might be said that Mr. Dobbins, builder of the unique cycleway, was also at least partly responsible for its ultimate failure—he owned the first automobile in Pasadena! And it was undoubtedly the advent of the "horseless carriage" that wrought such changes in the character of public interest in the years following 1900. All that most people remember of the romantic days of the iron steed is the refrain of the old song, something about a girl "looking neat, upon the seat of a bicycle built for two!"

A combination automobile and motor boat recently shown in Europe has a speed of six miles in the water and twelve and one-half miles on land.

Los Angeles Wheelmen in 1893. Reading, left to right: Jack Winters, E. Gatensbury, Phil Kitchin, E. S. Pauly, W. A. Tufts, J. S. Thayer, Fay Stephenson, W. J. Allen, T. Q. Hall, W. E. Tyler, Oofty, the Ice-man and E. W. Stuart.

