

Heroes of the High Wheel Recall Boneshaken Days



Emmet G. Solomon



C. G. CANAN



KING DENMAN



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GUS EPENETER



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WITH the coming of "horseless carriages," developed into portable bungalows, racy roadsters, limousines of graceful lines and high-powered racing machines in less than a decade, the followers of bicycle riding have been relegated to the limbo of sportsmen, but thirty years ago a bike rider was one of the world's wonders and was marveled at by as large a following as a circus gatherer or the home team commander. There were less than fifty bicycle riders in Omaha in the early '80s and they were looked upon as venturesome souls who cared for neither life, liberty nor the pursuit of happiness.

It was just thirty years ago last Sunday, on May 14, 1882, that Emmet G. Solomon, 16 years old, and his friend, John G. Hitchcock, a lad of 15 years, stirred up the residents of a peaceful, law-abiding city and created a sensation talked of not only in Omaha, but in all eastern Nebraska for many days. The newspapers called it a wonderful feat. People said it meant an awakening to the possibilities of the bike and ceased not in their prophecies until the fall harvest demanded undivided attention. Even the city council of Omaha awoke to the possibilities and the dangers and forthwith attempted to curtail the growth of an infant industry. In this attempt the council was supported by the conservative and the cautious, but youth rebelled and was aided and abetted in rebellion by a progressive corporation.

Farmers Wonder.

This wonderful feat consisted of a Sunday trip from Omaha to Lincoln on the old, high-wheeled bicycle. The machines were the Columbia, manufactured by the Pope company of Boston, with fifty-four-inch wheel, and they were neither comfortable nor safe. Early in the morning the two adventurers rolled their bikes into the street, gave them a mighty shove and swinging into the seat over the big front wheel headed southwest. They arrived in Lincoln that day, visited the state institutions the next day and on the third day returned to Omaha. Farmers had heard rumors of the trip and turned out everywhere along the route to watch the passing of the cyclists.

Lincoln banqueted them and otherwise made quite a fuss about the wonderful feat. Citizens of the capital city hailed their coming with delight. Hotels, business houses and soda fountains were for a time emptied, for the two young Omahans had broken records for speed and distance. The Lincoln Wheel club, consisting of half a dozen members, was elated and gave the two travelers an enthusiastic reception. Solomon and Hitchcock would have been feted for a week, but on the morning of the third day they agreed they had seen the sights, that to remain would be a waste of time. Also, they were eager for the labor of the return journey.

Riders of the Early Days

Solomon and Hitchcock were members of the Omaha Wheel club. This club had a membership of about fifty, practically every bicycle rider in the city at the time. Among the devotees of the bike, each of whom was the proud possessor of an "ice wagon," were Gilbert M. Hitchcock, Emmet G. Solomon, John G. Hitchcock, Thomas McCague, K. C. Barton, Thomas Kimball, Richard Kimball, Tom E. Parmele, W. A. Paxton, Jr., Lydie Dickey, W. A. Pixley, C. J. Canan, Gus Epeneter, Glen Livesey, Tom Mickel, Thomas McCague and T. W. McCullough. They were the pioneers, but ten or twelve years later when the "safety" bike came into general use and hundreds were sold they lost their identity as pioneers and became one of many riders of the less dangerous machine.

Many other residents of the city now recall with satisfaction that they used to ride "the high boy" and live to tell the tale. He was a hero indeed who bestrode one of those old-time "bone-shakers," as the wheel came afterward to be called in derision, but the young fellows of thirty years ago didn't mind it so very much. They were adventurous, even foolhardy, and several now look back upon escapades undertaken in a reckless spirit they would not again try for any inducement, even if they might roll off the accumulated years. The wheel of that day was for the boy whose only outlook upon life was the immediate present, and whose cheerful confidence in his own ability surpassed the wisdom of all the sages.

Were Considered Dare Devils.

Hitchcock, Solomon, Canan and Frank Schneider were four of Omaha's dare-devils in the bicycling

game in the early days. They traveled on every good road in Nebraska and Iowa and some of these good roads were no better than our worst today. Some of them will still groan at the physical agony they endured in these pleasant little excursions, but in their boyhood days it was an excitement that surpassed broncho bustin'. Parties made frequent trips to Waterloo, Blair, Elkhorn, Fremont and Glenwood and nearby towns. A favorite ride was to Florence and return before breakfast. This they would make two or three times each week, getting up at 5:30 o'clock for the majority of them would be at work at 7 o'clock.

Mr. Solomon invited the Wheel club to his fruit farm, a short distance out of Omaha, and the entire membership spent a Sunday there. They consumed untold quantities of grapes, watermelons, muskmelons and grape juice. "I remember Billy Townsend, Gus Epeneter, Walter Morris and others who were there that day," said Solomon. "Such Sunday excursions were frequent and we always enjoyed them." The assemblage broke up when the shadows began to lengthen toward the east. A few who had partaken too much of the fruit of the farm objected to an early start for home, pointing out that the ride would be much more pleasant in the twilight. But their objections were over-ruled and the machines were wheeled into the road and in a few minutes the slowest had disappeared in a cloud of dust toward his home.

Western Iowa Shaken.

On the day President Garfield was buried Solomon, Hitchcock, McCague and Schneider biked over to Glenwood. It was an eventful trip and they will never forget it. They arrived in Glenwood about noon and were given a quiet reception for Glenwood was sated with such excitement. Suddenly an explosion shook every house. It was not in Glenwood, nor had any salute been fired for the intrepid riders, but a car load of powder had exploded in the railroad yards in Council Bluffs. Next morning the boys returned. Passing through Council Bluffs, they dismounted and viewed the wreckage, strewn for blocks around.

Bicycle racing became an organized as well as an

unorganized sport, and because it was attended with great danger it had many followers. Solomon was one of the best amateurs in the game. At the state fair in 1881 he won a gold watch in a race against Dick Kimball and others. That same season he was awarded a silver medal in a contest with Council Bluffs riders. In 1887 he took his last trip on the "high wheel." He pumped that old Columbia from Denver to Colorado Springs, through the Garden of the Gods to Manitou and visited the Grand canons and Piko's peak.

Many and severe were the tumbles the riders of the high wheels took. He was a fortunate biker who could come in from an extended trip with unbruised head, unbruised shins or unscarred physiognomy. Not a street in Omaha was paved in 1882. Street cars were operated by "horse-powah." The street railway company had planked the right-of-way to keep the mules out of the mud. This planked stretch of roadway was the favorite race track of the bicycle riders, for to ride on it meant fewer falls and greater speed. However, the street car company clearly did not respond to the enthusiasm of the Wheel club men and until the mules became accustomed to the unusual sight of a man perched astride a high wheel, grimly enjoying his work, the company did not cease to object to the use of the right-of-way by the bicyclists.

Dog Upsets Wheel.

One day Solomon was riding east on Farnam near Twelfth street and had developed a creditable speed when a pompous little cur barred his way and defied him to pass. Solomon back-pedaled. He yelled. But the mongrel, conscious of its own importance, would not give an inch. There was nothing left for Solomon except to fall as easy as he could. This he tried to do and gallantly plunged for the softest part of the street. But in falling his feet became tangled in the wheel, so that he could not move. A horse car was approaching from behind and Solomon declares he had never seen a mule

travel so fast. The driver was having difficulty in bringing the car to a stop, and Solomon was helpless on the track.

"This time I didn't even yell," he said. "I just closed my eyes and waited for the crunch." But the crunch didn't come. The Missouri mule got over his fright at the houn' dog and the wrecked rider and machine and consented to lapse into the position from which it usually required warm language and a black-snake whip to make him move. Passengers on the car helped Solomon untrangle himself. With the exception of slight bruises he was none the worse for the experience, but he believed he had learned much concerning houn' dogs and mules and it was a lesson he often remembered and by which he frequently profited.

While dogs were dangerous, as any other obstruction in the road would have been, and doubly dangerous when they persisted in frisking about in confusion before the rider, there was one advantage in riding the high wheel. It was a large dog and a good jumper who could fasten his teeth in the trousers or leg of the rider. The danger was in being thrown, in which event the cyclist was often more or less disabled and left at the mercy of the canine. Another danger that required a clear head to avert was the somersaulting of the machine when the small rear wheel kicked up over a hump in the road easily negotiated by the big wheel. Unless the rider was very wise in the ways of the high wheel bike this was the signal for a header.

Streets Set Aside for Cyclists.

An anti-high wheel feeling brought about the passage of an ordinance by the council denying the use of certain streets to the bikists. One of the first dead letter laws in the city was this ordinance, which the Wheel club ignored, after first conferring with eminent authorities. "The bicycle is a nuisance," the council asserted. "Horses are unduly frightened and women and children are

endangered. Traffic is impeded and young men grow reckless and tear through the main thoroughfares at breakneck speed. We foresee an increase of recklessness if such swiftness is not stringently dealt with. We can't force them to a moderate speed. Further we understand that in emergencies these machines become unmanageable, which is a strong argument that something ought to be done. Plainly it is up to us to do it."

And they did it, for the bicycle had scarcely made its appearance until the city council had forbidden the enthusiastic to trundle along streets where it was imperative that they should travel if the bicycle was to be a commercial asset. Also, these were the only streets where they could ride without danger of plunging into a mud-hole and thereby coming to an untimely end or at least sustaining serious injuries. Hence a loud protest was raised. The council was appealed to but remained obdurate. "You'll have to keep off these streets" was the ultimatum.

Bicycling in Omaha might have come to a close then, but the Wheel club had a happy idea. "We'll see what the Pope Manufacturing company thinks about it," said one member and others agreed that the maker of machines ought to be consulted in such an extremity. "The city council has kicked us off the down town streets. If we can't ride on Farnam, Harney, Douglas and Dodge you will not sell many more bikes here. We're up against it. Advise us." This answer was flashed to Boston and back came the answer:

"Pay no attention to that law. Smash it. Disable it. Ignore it. Ride on any street at any time. We will pay your fines." Such enthusiasm was encouraging and the Wheel club fearlessly followed instructions. They mounted their bikes and they rode wherever they wished to ride. The council looked on aghast at this disrespect of the law. There were whisperings in the council chamber and the people were stunned at the daring of the thing. Wholesale arrests were planned. It was believed the council would make a horrible example of somebody. But no rider was molested. Not an arrest followed and from that day the law was a dead letter and bicycling thrived.

Safeties Soon Popular.

Later the "safeties" were put on the market. They made an instantaneous hit and hundreds were sold in Omaha and other cities of the state. The old make lingered for twelve or fifteen years, for there were those who hesitated to part with it, but at last even the latest high wheel, nickel polished but a little scarred, was silently stowed away and finally carted to the junk heap. Improvements were made that eventually forced the owners of the first safeties to discard them for newer models. Then came the automobile and the motorcycle, until twelve years ago used by few. When the automobile was a demonstrated success there were several Omaha bicyclists who could afford one and they invested. But others were never able to break away from the bike habit, although they could purchase a pretty touring car, and so they view with regret the diminishing number of men and the increasing number of boys who ride bicycles.