

The Legacy
Issue 6: The Competition. The Nemesis.
by Bill Cline



The Bay City Wheelmen, San Francisco. Captain Frank Bollo (left) pictured with his team sporting the club's famed Maltese cross. Circa, 1902. The RW went against BCW twice, winning both. In Sept 1902, the race came down to only six feet after 50 miles of racing. Photo courtesy of Joel Metz, www.blackbirdsf.org/bcw.

Just who was the competition, anyway? Clubs from Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco and San Jose all took turns trying their luck against the Reno Wheelmen (RW). Make no mistake. These clubs were loaded with great riders.

San Francisco was a noted stop on the 6-day circuit and hot-bed of cycling talent. Competition amongst local Bay Area clubs was fierce. "Unsporting," outright cheating and even violence characterized many a race.

A few riders from San Francisco's Bay City Wheelmen (BCW) and San Jose's Garden City Wheelmen (GCW) raced the 6-day, east coast and European circuits. BCW's William and Harry Terrill raced professionally and successfully in Europe. Pro racers F.A. McFarland, Wilbur Edwards, and Clarence Davis amongst others further boosted the GCW's reputation to national acclaim. In addition, the pros brought their reputations, resources and training

techniques home for the benefit of the amateurs in their respective clubs (see for example, "Lace Downing: The New Cycling Wonder Developed in San Jose," *San Francisco Call*, 11 Dec 1899, p. 6). The competition and renown didn't end there. Mr. E. F. Ross of the San Francisco Olympics was noted as "the phenom" and had punished the RW on occasions prior to the Sept 1900 50-mile championship in Reno. Sacramento's Capitol City Wheelman J. Hirsch held all sorts of Pacific Coast speed records. In sum, these riders and clubs granted untold stature to the RW's competition—and made the RW wins all the more impressive.

The Downings of San Jose. As Reno relied on combinations of brothers for success, San Jose's Garden City Wheelmen had its own dominant cycling family — brothers Harding, Lace and Burton Downing. Harding was one of the most famous pro racers of the era, racing on both coasts, in Europe and Australia. He was the chief domestic antagonist to America's first pro World Champion and first black athlete-icon Marshall "Major" Taylor. Harding, a pro, never raced against the amateur RW, but he clearly set a high bar for his brothers.

The GCW also boasted Harding's brother Lewis or "Lace," often referred to in the San Francisco press as the "fastest amateur on the coast." Lace, too, raced on the famous tracks back east, earning his

share of wins (for example, see “Lace Downing Wins from Warren Zurbrick,” *San Francisco Call*, 17 August 1901, p. 11). San Jose’s ability to turn out high caliber riders should be no surprise. San Jose alone had three cycling tracks in the day, and today’s Hellyer Park Velodrome hails from that very era.

Burton Downing turned out to be one of the top American amateurs in the early 1900s and remained an amateur throughout his racing career. He featured in major 6-day and other races on the east coast from 1901 through 1905. He won numerous national amateur championships in various disciplines and held world speed records. His amateur status would turn out to earn him quite the Olympic legacy—he is now recognized as having won six medals at the 1904 Summer Olympics in St. Louis. Two golds, three silvers and one bronze. For this, Burton Downing was inducted into the Cycling Hall of Fame in 1998. Not until 2008 in Beijing did the UK’s Bradley Wiggins finally better Downing’s six.

For perspective, however, in 1904 the Olympic experience wasn’t quite what it is today. In fact, only Americans competed in cycling events at the “Olympics,” which really was a grouping of athletic contests organized to help boost attendance at the St. Louis World’s Fair. Noted cycling historian Peter Nye states that, “...the International Olympic Committee doesn’t recognize the medals won because only Americans competed.” (*Hearts of Lions: The Story of American Bicycle Racing*, W.W. Norton Company, 1988, p. 222). Interestingly, the August 6, 1904 *New York Times* reported that the actual winner of the meet, based on points accumulation was Frank Kramer of East Orange, NJ in the professional category with 49 points. In all, there were seven different events, with points earned in each event depending on placing. The *Times* sub-titled the article “Frank Kramer Made Best Showing in World’s Fair Races.” Apparently, the American audience in 1904 didn’t pay much attention to the “Olympics,” much less its amateur ideal of the day.



Burton Downing. Garden City Wheelmen. 1901. Member Cycling Hall of Fame. Holder of world speed records, numerous amateur national championships and Olympic victories.

After describing Kramer’s feat, the *Times* said “...The meet was under the auspices of the National Cycling Association, and formed part of the Olympian games.” This is the only reference to cycling and the “Olympics” found in the 1904 contemporary press. Further, the *San Francisco Call* referred to the races that Downing competed in not as “the Olympics” but rather, “the Amateur National Championship of America” (6 Aug 1904, p. 11).

On the amateur side, *the Reno Evening Gazette*, *The New York Times* and *San Francisco Call* all reported that the winner —again, based on points—was Marcus Hurley of the New York Athletic Club with 22 points. Downing was second with 18. The *Call* did headline, however, that Downing had been victorious in St. Louis in individual events, but sub-titled the article “San Jose Rider Wins 25-Mile National Championship,” not 25-mile Olympic gold. As “the Olympics” were not highlighted, no contemporary news account mentioned “medals,” much less medals of gold, silver or bronze.

If today we think of Burton Downing in terms of gold, silver and bronze, why not? It puts his accomplishments in terms the average, non-cycling fan can relate to, and there’s no question but he had those first, second and third place results in St. Louis. However, it is equally important to view Downing as his contemporaries would have, as his fellow competitors would have. Simply stated, Downing was awesome on wheels, whether Olympic champion or otherwise. Besides his many other feats, how else can you describe a man who broke the world’s motor-paced 5-mile record with a time of 8:48 in 1901, riding a 112 inch gear? (“Burton Downing of San Jose Sets a New Five-Mile Figure,” *San Francisco Call*, 18 March 1901, p.6)



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The Nemesis. We dwell on Burton Downing and his Garden City Wheelmen since they were the RW's chief nemesis. Between 1901-05, the two sides went against each other a grand total of seven times in the 50-mile relay: once in 1901, twice in '02, once in '03, twice in '04 and once in '05. Each time but one the match-up had the Pacific Coast championship on the line. Of the seven contests, the RW won five times (four championships). When Reno took the 50-mile relay coast championship from Sacramento in July 1900, GCW is the only club that would later defeat them in this discipline, doing so twice--in September 1902 and again in September 1904. The RW raced no other club more than three times.

Burton Downing raced with GCW in at least three of those seven contests, as did crack teammate Carl Limberg and brother Lace. On July 14, 1901 Downing rode the 10th and anchor slot, matched against RW's Art Keddie. By the time the 10th leg rolled around, however, the RW had already lapped the GCW which is how the race ended—Reno by a mile, literally. Keddie's head-to-head against the man who would become a US cycling legend is recounted in this July 15, 1901 piece in the *Reno Evening Gazette*. Reno was well in the lead, "...but it was so arranged that the men started off together [at that time when B. Downing finally entered the track a lap down]. They rode

around at pretty much a fair clip and it was known that each rider wanted to try the other in ... [a] sprint. On Keddie's fifth mile [Downing's fourth] they were well together at the stretch and the sprint began. Down the quarter they came like a runaway railroad train, first one ahead and then the other until at the last Keddie shot away and beat his man by about twenty feet." Keddie was finished, but Downing had another mile on an empty track before his day was complete.

Carl Limberg was matched with Jim Peckham who took 24 seconds out of Limberg on that day. Jim turned the five miles in 12:41, his fastest RW result, and helped the club secure one more victory.

On August 10, 1902 Downing went up first for the GCW, this time matched against the RW's 17 year old Will Hart. Downing bested Will by 1/8 mile on that rainy and windy day, but Will's gap was easily closed later. Carl Limberg also rode that race, but dropped 20 seconds in the ninth leg to RW's Ed Stanley (a Reno native but a prior member of the SF Olympics club). Lace Downing rode in 10th spot but GCW messed up



Four Pacific Coast 50-Mile Relay Championship trophies the Reno Wheelmen secured from San Jose's Garden City Wheelmen: 12 Jul '03, 14 Jul '01, 10 Aug '02, and 2 Jul '05. Photos made possible by the cooperation of the Nevada Historical Society. Photo by Danny Knoll.

his relay with Limberg, and Lace was sent out a half mile early. On noticing the error, Lace rode but one mile that day and then abandoned, handing the victory to Reno.

The very next month, Burton Downing went up against Jim Peckham in the first relay on Sept 22, 1902 in San Jose—one of two times GCW bettered the Reno Wheelmen. Downing beat Peckham by only “...a few feet” but set the stage for a convincing GCW victory (“Reno Champions are Defeated,” *San Francisco Call*, 22 Sept 1902, p. 6)

More Burton Downing ... We dwell on Burton Downing for one more reason. In July 1904, immediately prior to the St. Louis Olympics, Downing went east to race at the Manhattan Beach cycling track in New York. The *Nevada State Journal* of July 19, 1904 headlines “Reno Boy wins Race in the East.” The article reported that Burton Downing rode and won the five-mile event in Reno Wheelmen colors. He beat out San Jose teammate Carl Limberg in that contest. Later, Limberg bettered Downing in the half-mile. Interestingly, neither the *New York Times* nor *San Francisco Call* make any mention of Reno. For example, “Burton Downing and Carl Limberg, the two young riders from San Jose, CA, made a clean sweep of the two events in their class [amateur].” (*New York Times*, “Italian Cycle Racer Hurt,” July 18, 1904). Other local accounts, too, mentioned that Downing once briefly rode in RW colors, such as the *Reno Evening Gazette*. A month later it reported on 5 August 1904 that “Downing Wins Second Place—Former Reno Wheelman Secures Honors in National Bicycle Meet,” again, referring to what is now called the St. Louis Olympics. This writer is still trying to learn of and confirm the details—not the least is, why did he wear the RW kit?



BCW's Fred West hits the rollers during an indoor training session. Circa 1900. Photo courtesy Joel Metz, www.blackbirdsf.org/bcw

An additional note on Carl Limberg. He raced tag-team with Burton Downing in various 6-day races back east. Individual 6-day efforts were banned in 1898 for “humanitarian reasons,” and Downing and Limberg could often be seen together racing the 6-days.

And Others... Other RW competitors were not only worthy competitors but also plain interesting people. Bay City's George Wyman was one. In Sept 1902, rather than board the train to Reno with the rest of his team, he rode his motorcycle from San Francisco to Reno and back—in 1902, over the Sierra! At the time, he was likely the very first to have done so. The feat emboldened him to try a trans-continental crossing. In 1903 George Wyman became the first person who is known to have

ridden cross-country, San Francisco to New York City, on a motorcycle.

(<http://www.blackbirdsf.org/bcw>, Joel Metz, 2007) And by the way, Reno barely eclipsed BCW on that occasion in 1902 by six feet after 50 miles of racing.