

The Legacy

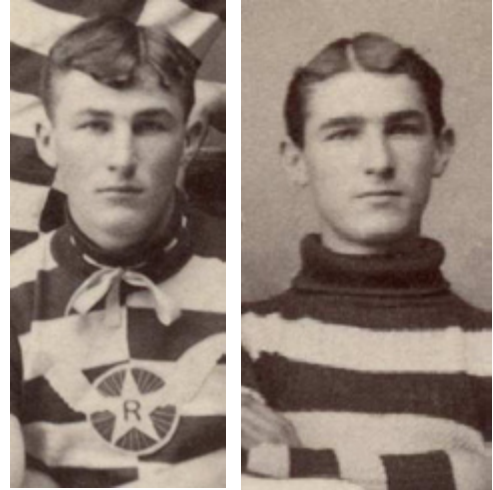
Issue 5: The Reno Wheelmen—Family Connections

by Bill Cline

Early Reno Wheelmen members came from all walks of life. Some were born into prominence, others would make their own mark, and still others would live out ordinary, mundane, or even tragic lives. Aside from racing, their stories give life to the Wheelmen as people, and to the city and region they called home.

Of the many individuals who raced, one thing is certain—the early club was a family affair. Brothers dominated the early RW race rosters:

- Fred and Eli Morrill
- Joe and Granville “Cyclone” Johnson
- Martin and Manuel Simas
- George and Will Kornmayer
- James “Jap” and Will Hart
- Art, James “Jim” and Alf “Ole” Peckham.



The Hart brothers—
James “Jap” and William “Will”
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So, no surprise, the races themselves were family affairs:

- July 4, 1901 against the Capital City Wheelmen of Sacramento was a Peckham family affair—Art up 3rd in the day's rotation, Ole 6th and Jim 8th.
- July 14, 1901 against Garden City again all three Peckhams rode—James 2nd up, Ole 7th and Art 8th.
- August 10, 1902 against Garden City and six of 10 slots were taken by brother combinations—Will Hart and Jap Hart (1st and 7th), Ole and James Peckham (2nd and 8th), and Joe and Cyclone Johnson (4th and 6th)
- On July 12, 1903 six of the 10 slots against Garden City Wheelmen of San Jose were occupied by brothers—Will and George Kornmayer (1st and 3rd in the rotation), Will and Jap Hart (5th and 8th), and Ole and Art Peckham (6th and 9th).

And so it went... In fact, there are only a couple of events of note where the race card did not include multiple members of the same family. Indeed, multiple members of two or more families were often represented.

As a family, however, none was more notable nor as powerful, more spectacular yet as tragic as were the Peckhams.



Photo © Bill Cline, Reno, NV, 2009

The Peckham Farm, center, immediately behind the bright white Reno Convention Center, extended to this photo's right edge. Once the most advanced farm in Nevada now forms part of the Reno urban landscape. The Peckham family home was located at Kietzke and Peckham Lanes, behind the Atlantis Hotel (tall building left center).

Means committee in 1901. Father George was also a well-published man who made many contributions to the local press, mostly on finance—in spite of attending school for a scant seven months, and that at the age of 12. In fact, much of what is recounted in *The Legacy* comes from George E. Peckham's "Reminiscences of an Active Life," Nevada Historical Society Papers, Vol. II, 1917-1920. On the day of his death, Wednesday November 18, 1925 the *Nevada State Journal* said, "...With his memory clear and keen to the last of his 74 years, Peckham became a local authority on the history of Washoe county, including its towns of Washoe City, Galena, Glendale [now Sparks] and early Reno. His reminiscences . . . form an invaluable record of the county's early day history."

No one sets out to raise a family of bicycle racers, but that's exactly what George and wife Emma inadvertently did. Of the five boys, the first son, Elmer, died not even one year old. The fifth and youngest, William Francis was, well, just too young to race with the big boys. Born in 1890, he was but about 12 years old when the Wheelmen were at their zenith. However, the middle three—Art, Jim and Alf—became the lynchpins of the Wheelmen racing team.

The oldest of the racing trio, George Arthur "Art" Peckham was born on March 2, 1878. Art had numerous and notable race results for the RW. His time of 12:24 in the first championship victory in Sacramento (July 4, 1900) was but four seconds slower than the fastest RW time of the day—that by Art Keddie in that same race. Art's time remained one of the top four times ever recorded by a Wheelman in the 50-mile relay event. The account of Art going to his wheel with the big gear and ripping the backstretch at 40mph in Reno was recounted in *The Legacy* Issue 2, thus preserving the championship against the San Francisco Olympic team in Sept 1900. In life after the RW, Art was a successful, unassuming farmer, taking over where father George left off. Once working the farm, he claimed to have never taken a day off ([Nevada: A Narrative of the Conquest of a Frontier Land](#), James G. Scrugham, ed., Vol. II, *Nevada Biographies*, 1935, p. 46). The farm was noted for growing the most famous potatoes in Nevada, and was "...one of the most advanced farming

The Peckhams. The patriarch of the clan was father George Edward Peckham. He moved to the west coast from New England in 1860 with his single mother and sister at the age of nine. George became one of the most successful farmers in the Truckee Meadows. Together with wife Emma Shepphard Peckham they had seven children—five boys and two girls. Though George was an unsuccessful candidate for Governor in 1894 under the Populist ticket, he served in the state assembly and was a member of the Ways and



Art Peckham
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endeavors in the state.” (“Retired farmer Edward Peckham dies in Reno,” *Reno Evening Gazette*, 30 Sept 1975, p. 18) Art worked the farm together with brother Jim and later with Jim's son Edward. Edward would manage the farm after Art's death and until it was sold. The farm was later developed into what today is Smithridge Plaza and surrounding residential areas. Because of farming, Art became one of the first directors of the Washoe County Water Conservation District. Art married Verna Alma Potter on Nov 12, 1913 and they had one daughter, Mildred. Art passed on August 8, 1939 at age 51.



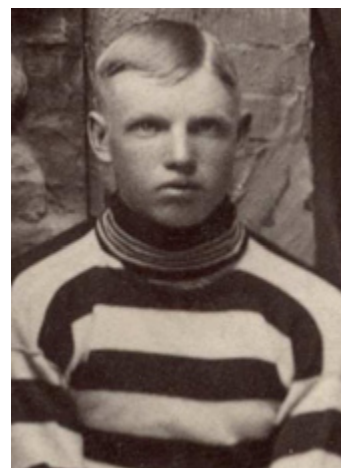
Jim Peckham
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By the accounts of the day, James was the understated one, at least with regards to cycling—never spectacular, nearly always steady. He could be counted on for a sure match result that would always keep the team in the hunt. There is always the exception that proves the rule, of course. Reno's second defeat at the hands of the Garden City Wheelmen on Sept 9, 1904 is that exception. *The San Francisco Call* reported that Jim Peckham was “probably “ single-handedly responsible for Reno's loss, having conceded over a half mile on the first relay of the day—a deficit the RW could never recover from, though “...the Reno men rode gallantly from then on.” (“Reno Wheelmen are Defeated,” *The San Francisco Call*, Sept 11, 1904, p. 32:7) Off the bike, however, Jim became the notable son. Born Dec 22, 1881, he graduated from the University of Nevada in 1903, the same year he married Emily Arvilla Mihills. They had two sons—Edward and Dorlon, a noted Northern Nevada commercial artist. Jim went to work in 1912 in San Francisco with the U.S. Surveyor General and stayed there until returning to Washoe County in 1918. In 1926 Jim ran for the Washoe County Commission and won by “a flattering” vote margin, and went on to be re-elected to the County Commission two additional times (*Pioneer Nevada*, Vol. 1, Harold's Club, Reno, 1951, p. 183). Even in the *Pioneer Nevada* biography of Jim, they could'nt help but mention

that “...away back some thirty years or so...James was a hardy member of that famous Reno Wheelmen's team of ten that so often 'relayed' its way to victory here and at important California meets.” Jim was the longest surviving of the racing Peckham brothers, passing Nov 14, 1961 in Sacramento at age 79.

However, it was the youngest racing brother Alfred Rufus “Ole” Peckham born Sept 20, 1883 who was “the pride of Reno” and the “neatest little rider on the whole Pacific Coast.” (“Reno Again Wears Palms of Victory,” *Nevada State Journal*, July 14, 1903, p. 1:3,4). Alf would always garner the most colorful ink in the local race accounts and was always referred to as “Ole” the “terrible Swede.” It is unknown how he came upon that nickname as the family heritage is decidedly English, both mother and father. Perhaps it was his blonde hair flailing in the wind when he raced? Perhaps he picked up the name of a European racer of the era, as James “Jap” Hart had done. Someone once mentioned that Hart rode much like the famous Dutch racer of the day Jap (pronounced “Yahp”) and the name stuck (personal interview conducted in 1970 with James Hart by Phillip I. Earl, former Curator for Exhibits of the Nevada Historical Society, as relayed to this writer, Nov. 2009).

None the less, “Ole's” laps around the track would always be well critiqued. One race, they'd say he ripped his five miles in 12:29, the fastest on the day! Or, next, how he'd put 5/8 of mile on his competitor, “magnificent!” But the next, “...[Ole's] relay was slower than an ice wagon. [Ole] and [his Sacramento competitor] just took a friendly spin around the track and swapped chewing gum several



Alf "Ole" Peckham
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times, holding what seemed to be a political argument. They succeeded in going five miles in 17:35." ("The Relay Race," *Reno Evening Gazette*, July 5, 1901.) The contrast was startling. That same race, Art rode a terrible 17:30, but the paper did not criticize that effort what-so-ever. Seems Ole was either smashing, or he did "...some very pretty riding...though the time was somewhat slow." ("Reno Wins," *Reno Evening Gazette*, Aug 11, 1902.) Brilliance while confounding. Spectacular but disappointing—that was Alf "Ole" Peckham, or at least how he was portrayed.

The conundrum seemed to follow Alf into his personal life as well. Relatively late in life, at age 33, Alf married Frances Esther Wickham, but some years later they divorced. In the mid-1930s Alf was living in Lovelock, NV with a new wife. Together they resurrected a mediocre travel lodge and turned it into a successful venture, but that is also where they were both found dead. The *Lovelock Review Miner* of Friday, August 5, 1938 reported that the bodies of Alf and his wife were found in the property's garage, victims of carbon monoxide poisoning. Though remarried, Alf remained despondent over his earlier divorce. His new bride, a widow, likewise never got over her demon, the death of her first husband. Together they entered a suicide pact. They connected a hose to the car's exhaust. One lay down in the front seat, the other in the back. They were found days later in that same position, still holding hands.

Suicide was unfortunately not new to the Peckhams. Less than a year earlier, in Oct. 1937, the non-racing youngest brother William ended his life with a gunshot through the mouth. He was found in a hotel room in Oakland, CA, and left a note saying he could not go on after the death of his beloved wife Susan five months earlier. He asked that his ashes be mingled with those of his wife, and together they be scattered to the wind from the then brand new Golden Gate Bridge (completed earlier that same year, 1937). ("Former Resident is Found Dead," *Reno Evening Gazette*, Oct. 14, 1937, p.2)

The Peckhams. Their name still rings throughout the Reno community. This particular Wheelmen family experienced more than most—brilliance, fame, achievement, flair, the ordinary, disappointment, despair, tragedy. One thing remains certain however. The team could always count on the Peckhams. The Peckham boys and the RW were one-in-the-same. They were always there when the club needed them. They rode the big races, and the small. Their results backed up their stature in the club. Their results earned them, and the Reno Wheelmen, respect. In those first few years of the 1900s, the Peckhams were indeed the lynchpins of the early Reno Wheelmen racing team.