

The Legacy

Issue 4: Miscellany and Side Bars

by Bill Cline

Research for *The Legacy* continues to turn up interesting tidbits and sidebars. Here's some Reno Wheelmen trivia you won't ever see on *Jeopardy*.

Cigars and Cycling. The legend of the Reno Wheelmen being conceived in the back room of Charlie Becker's cigar store on Commercial Row in 1896 is well documented in the archives of the Nevada Historical Society, the papers of the Nevada Press Women, and local newspapers of the era. More than government operates in smoke-filled rooms! Less well-known, the Reno Wheelmen were organized and registered in the State of Nevada as a "domestic corporation" on Oct. 5, 1900.

Cigars and Cycling 2. After organizing, Charlie Becker continued to offer his store as a "headquarters" location for the club, but it soon outgrew the generous offer. From Becker's, the club HQ moved to an upstairs location at what is now 2nd and Sierra, and finally, the club built its own "Wheelmen Hall" on the grounds of what became St. Thomas Aquinas. It even had a tennis court. The hall burned down in 1909 and was never re-built.

Rags to Riches. The club had its own clubhouse? How? Race receipts---that is, gate receipts---poured in as the relay team continued to win. Held at the state fair grounds in Reno, the club leased the track for races and charged admission. Race crowds for championship races drew 1,000-3,500 spectators, most paying. One news article chastised those that lined the back curve, where they could get in and watch for free, for not supporting the club by paying their fare share. By 1906 however, lease rates went too high, and the club held no races that year---or thereafter for that matter. 1905 was essentially the last year of racing for the early Reno Wheelmen.

What were the track conditions? Compacted clay. A one-mile oval primarily used as a horse racing track at the Nevada State Fair Grounds in Reno. It was located near what today is the rodeo grounds. Today we all ride paved road surfaces we can't claim are smooth and flat, but this? Of course, the horse track may be better than we ride in places today! Still, makes their accomplishments even more remarkable.

Rail service to the track? The contests at the Reno fair grounds were so well attended that the Central Pacific Railroad extended a rail spur straight to the track to accommodate the demand.

How about those bike-horse conflicts? On July 11, 1904, one of the Kornmayer brothers, Will, was run over on his bike by a speeding horse and carriage as he pulled out of the Peckham's ranch onto Virginia Street. (The ranch was located at what today is essentially the Atlantis parking lot at Virginia and you guessed it, Peckham Lane.) Will was ok, but his bike was completely demolished. The carriage driver at least had the decency to load Will and the pieces of his bike into his carriage and return them home. A couple days later, Will rode a race against Gardnerville no worse for the wear.

Speaking of the State Fair... After relocating to Fallon, getting married and serving that area in the State Senate, RW ace Art Keddie was the one who introduced the bill that eventually moved the state fair to Fallon in 1915, where it remained until after WWII. Keddie Street in Fallon is also named after Art.

Photos in newspapers. In the day, c. 1900, photos *rarely* appeared in newspapers. One of the first is a picture of none other than the RW relay team before a big race against Garden City Wheelmen. *Nevada State Journal*, July 17, 1904.

Home burglary during race. On Sept. 17, 1900 as the RW were fending off the very first challenge to its newly won Pacific Coast Championship, Judge Richard "Dick" Nash was one of the 3,500 in attendance. Upon his return from the track, he surprised two burglars ransacking his home. The judge (father of team co-founder Charlie Nash) chased the pair from his home with a pistol and fired 4-5 shots, but didn't hit either one. They

made off and were never caught. They'd readied the the judge's collection of fine silverware and other valuables for their booty-bags, but quickly left it as they'd arranged it all when the judge appeared toting his gun.

Longest surviving original Wheelman. That honor goes to Benton Sparks, who lived to the ripe age of 98. He passed away in 1980 in the Bay Area.

Unfortunately the shortest surviving original member. Will Hart (remember that great photo of him in Issue 3 showing off his positioning) died June 29, 1904 of apparent heart disease. He had raced in San Francisco a few days before his death, continued to train upon his return and told family and friends the very morning of his death he merely had a chest cold and otherwise felt fine. The Wheelmen band played at his funeral, and family and team members together with Will's bike, accompanied him to the grave site. He was only 19 years old, and was survived by his brother and teammate James "Jap" Hart.

Speaking of the band... Just why was there a band, anyway? Well, they played at all the races, positioned on the infield in front of the grandstand, stirring up atmosphere and otherwise providing entertainment. They also played other community and club functions, too.

More flying bullets. On July 3, 1904 the owner of Nevada Cycle and Manufacturing Co., V.F. Mershon, father of team member Claude Mershon, chased off two burglars late at night at the end of his gun. The perpetrators had been hanging about the neighborhood for a few days and finally tried to pull off their deed. Like the Judge, Mr. Mershon didn't hit anything—innocents or otherwise.

Returning troops. When the First Nevada Cavalry returned home to Reno from the Spanish-American War, there was no celebration. When the RW Relay Team returned home from Sacramento with its first coast championship trophy a year later, the revelry lasted days. (*Nevada State Journal*, "Victorious Cyclists," July 6, 1900) History does repeat itself.

Tech Addition. One additional thing. That nifty "crank hanger" on the Racycles? Not only did the design pre-date today's BB but further, it was "self-oiling." That is, self-lubricating. The BB of 1900 required maintenance only every 1-2 years. I've replaced sealed-bearing outboard BBs before that!

King Ryan before Reno. Before coming to Reno by way of New York, King Ryan was a known cycling trainer. A Dec 29, 1897 article in the *New York Times* describes Ryan as the "handler" for very popular 6-day racer Charles Henshaw of Brooklyn. Henshaw had been an amateur, but turned pro in 1897 and was set to race his first pro 6-day on Jan 24, 1898 in Pittsburgh with Ryan at his side. Still looking for the race results.

Who sanctioned these races? There is an excellent discussion on the creation of the California Associated Cycling Clubs, or the CACC on the website <http://www.blackbirdsf.org/bcw/>. Suffice it to say, CACC grew from a west-coast conflict with the east-coast dominated League of American Wheelmen. The CACC grew to govern racing for most all the western US and even western Canada in the early 1900s. So yes, the Pacific Coast Championships were done under sanction and a standardized set of regulations and race rules, legitimizing the events and claims of "champion." Further, the Reno Wheelmen had a "Racing Board" that made all decisions about making and accepting challenges for all the club's racing endeavors, especially the championships.

Gentlemen Racers. The RW had quite the reputation for sportsmanship, humbleness and integrity. It also didn't hurt that they apparently threw great parties for the vanquished California teams who came all this way only to get handled! In June 1904 the New Century Wheelmen of San Francisco wrote a letter to the RW, to "...express thanks to [the RW] for the kind way in which they were treated while in Reno and ... they never met a better crowd of club men since their [club's organization]." (*Nevada State Journal*, June 30, 1904) Not only that, the letter went to say that consequently, in show of support, New Century wanted to be on record saying that it hoped the RW would take down Oakland's Acme Club that coming 4th of July in a championship title contest! Does that say something about what they thought of the Acmes? New Century got their wish.

Finally, Correction: The two citations in Issue 1 attributing the information on Art Keddie to Kim Torp of NHS should read *Nevada Historical Society Papers*, Vol. III, 1921-1922, pp. 204-206.