



Unpaved streets, wooden sidewalks, and cyclists atop and in front of C. W. Wilson Bicycle Co., Fergus Falls, about 1900



1890s BICYCLING CRAZE IN THE RED RIVER VALLEY



FEW ARTICLES EVER USED BY MAN HAVE EVER created so great a revolution in social conditions,” opined the United States census of 1900. The bicycle is “of more importance to mankind than all the victories and defeats of Napoleon, with the First and Second Punic Wars . . . thrown in,” asserted the *New York Tribune* in 1895. However hyperbolic, these comments reflect the power of the remarkable craze for bicycling that swept the nation in the mid- and late-1890s.

RON SPRENG

Dr. Spreng is an avid cyclist who teaches history at Oak Hills Bible College in Bemidji.

Although short-lived, the cycling mania helped launch what has been identified as “the first concerted movement for improved roads” and, ultimately, the nation’s system of paved streets and highways. As the craze moved across the country, it also became an agent of lasting social change in Minnesota’s and North Dakota’s Red River Valley, affecting residents’ habits of work, leisure, and entertainment.¹

Cycles first appeared in the United States around 1870 with the introduction of the “velocipede,” a hand-forged contraption weighing an unwieldy 150 pounds with wooden wheels and solid tires. At the 1876 Philadelphia centennial exposition, several English-made bicycles spurred the popularity of what came to be known as the “ordinary,” a cycle with a front wheel four or five feet in diameter and a stabilizing trailer wheel. Although the ordinary’s large front wheel gave increased speed, its rider’s high and far-forward center of gravity often resulted in the dreaded “face plant.” By the mid-1880s the rapidly evolving “safety” bicycle utilizing same-size front and rear wheels came on the market, and around 1890

inflatable pneumatic tires were added, ending the safety’s notorious bone-shaking ride. Would-be cyclists welcomed the opportunity to ride in relative security and comfort.²

Advertisements promoting safeties first appeared in the Red River Valley around 1890. T. C. Canniff & Son, sign painters and dealers of paint and wallpaper, sold Victor and American cycles for boys beginning at \$30, sporadically running ads for “Safeties and Ordinaries” sold on monthly payments during the summer of 1891. But cycling drew little attention until the summer of 1892. That season, bicycling became a regular topic in valley newspapers, in large part because of the clever, illustrated ads of Fergus Falls’ Harry Svensgaard Bicycle Company. Many bicycle advertisers bought space in valley newspapers, but Svensgaard’s persistent hard-sell advertising (“We Are After You!”) solicited agents to sell bicycles in North Dakota and Minnesota communities late into the fall. Cycling’s foothold in the valley, however, crumbled during the economic depression of 1893, and the witty ads gave way to “Hard Times”



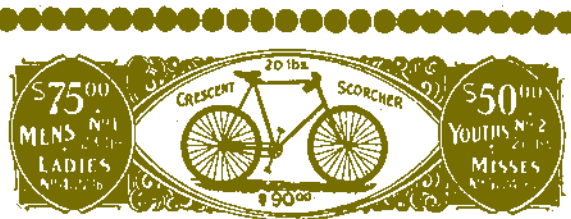
New “safety” bike with kerosene lantern, about 1890

...and... business announcements reflected a local... the discretionary... a bicycling boom.³... of 1894 the area’s busi-... roving, and valley re-... tive recreations such... roquet, and baseball... ng. The Grand Forks... asure Club took 10-... g outings, with both... ding, “under the cap-... Mr. Dressen,” reflect-... ly 1890s’ preference... formations and mili-... pline. By midsummer... ough, female cyclists... bifurcated” skirts had... ding, a newspaper... without benefit of... of the sterner sex.”... soon rode in parties... more and hoped to... ble their number. A... up in East Grand... Minnesota, had the... to undertake a 52-

¹ *United States Census*, 1890, vol. 10, pt. 1, p. 325, and *New York Tribune*, n.d., quoted in Fred C. Kelly, “The Great Bicycle Craze,” *American Heritage* 8 (Dec. 1956): 69.

² *Harpers Weekly*, Apr. 11, 1896, p. 359; Robert A. Smith, *A Social History of the Bicycle: Its Early Life and Times in America* (New York: American Heritage Press, 1972), 10.

³ *Grand Forks Herald (GF Herald)*, June 21, 1890.



Crescent Bicycles

MONEY CANNOT BUY BETTER.

Crescents are widely and favorably known as *reliable, standard machines*; none can be made superior.

Our line is the most complete of any on the market, and their reasonable prices place them within the reach of the public.

Crescents are light, rigid, of the best material, and beautiful in design and finish.

Descriptive Catalogue Free. **WESTERN WHEEL WORKS.** CHICAGO, ILL. NEW YORK, N. Y.

THE C. W. WILSON BICYCLE CO., Agts.,

OPERA HOUSE.

FERGUS FALLS, MINN.

Advertisement placed by C. W. Wilson Bicycle Co. in the Fergus Falls Daily Journal, April 2, 1895

mile round-trip to Crookston. Bicycle racing also appeared on the local scene, although the number of racers was small. The growing interest in cycling was evidenced by newspaper ads such as one placed by a man desiring to “exchange [a] good bird dog for a bicycle.”⁴

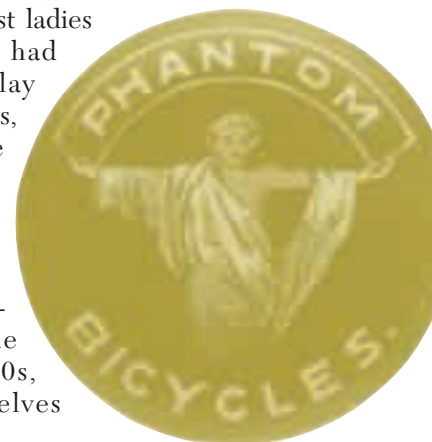
BY SPRING 1895 SOME 300 PEOPLE WERE riding bicycles in Grand Forks, a city of about 7,000, and the count rose to 500 by summer’s end. Businesses began selling “wheels,” as bicycles were called, and newspapers printed bicycling news nearly every day, including complaints about cyclists riding on sidewalks and the attire of female riders. Entrepreneurs converted indoor floor space into “bicycle academies” where novices could take their first falls. Plans were afoot to build racing tracks, bicycles could be rented for about \$2.50 a week, and cycling was touted as the way to a healthy body, mind, and spirit. Noting that “the Boom Continues,” the *Grand Forks Daily Plain Dealer* proclaimed the future of bicycling “a Glorious One.” The only

thing keeping more people from becoming part of the craze, the *Grand Forks Herald* suggested, was the price of a good “wheel.” Bikes cost as much as \$100, equivalent to several weeks’ or even several months’ salary at a time when wheat in the valley sold for less than 60¢ a bushel.⁵

After a bumper harvest in 1895, cycle ads appeared in newspapers as early as January, and regular bicycling columns began a few weeks later. Would-be riders waited impatiently for the roads to dry, meeting in early spring to plan bicycle shows for May and June. Cycling clubs sprang up in valley communities including St. Thomas, Forest River, Jamestown, Fargo, Elbow Lake (where women organized a “Bloomers Cycling Club”), Drayton, Larimore, Minto, Towner, Hillsboro, Pembina, Dickinson, Church’s Ferry, Park River, Grafton, Gilby, Epworth, Neche, Lakota, and Buffalo, North Dakota, as well as Crookston, Moorhead, and East Grand Forks, Minnesota, where members also ordered uniforms. The University of North Dakota in Fargo had a cycling club of its own. Some groups were unofficial and some highly organized. Some emphasized racing; others pushed for good roads, paving, traffic ordinances, and bicycle licensure; and still others viewed cycling as an opportunity to ride in mixed company or enjoy lunch together at a host’s farm.⁶

The sudden popularity of cycling contributed to social controversy about the “new woman,” in part because women now had a practical reason for wearing an article of clothing held in disrepute since its conception nearly 50 years earlier: bloomers. Baggy trousers or pantaloons, initially worn under a skirt, bloomers caused an almost hysterical response because, historians agree, “in 1852 most ladies would not admit they had legs, much less display them.” After a few years, women had given up the cause and returned to being swaddled in cumbersome layers of skirts and undershirts.⁷

But when the bicycling craze swept the country in the 1890s, women found themselves

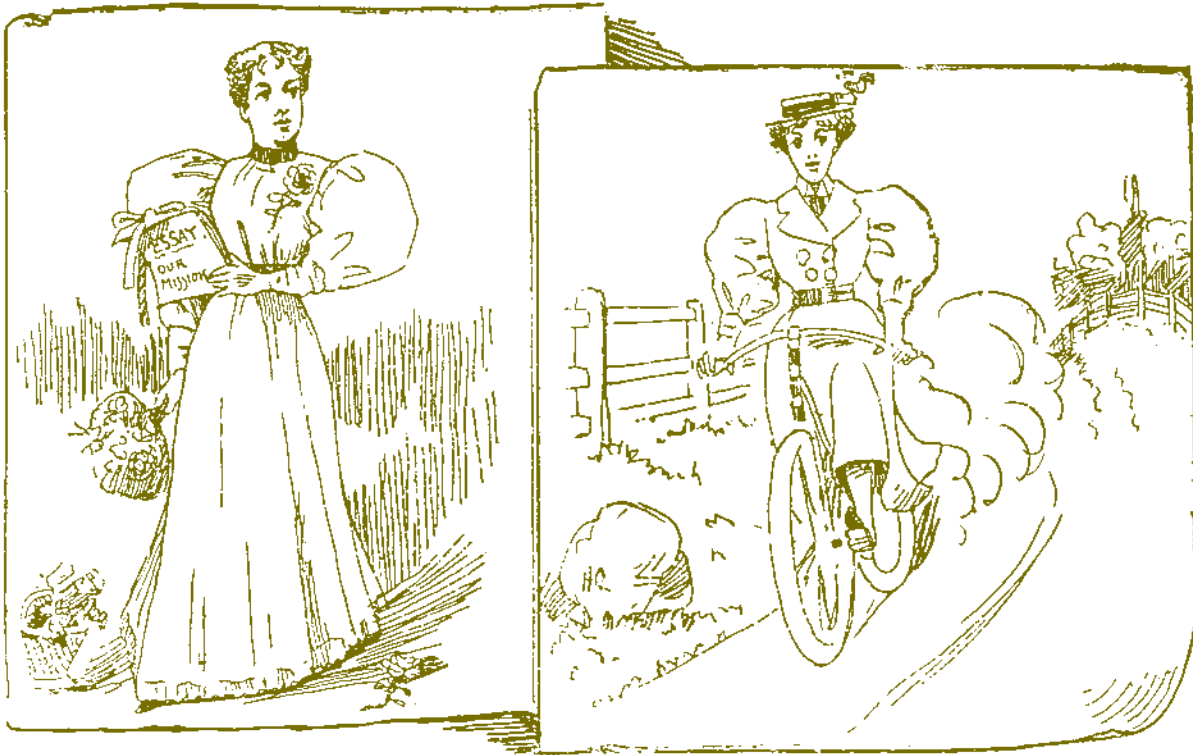


⁴ Page Smith, *The Rise of Industrial America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 114–15; *GF Herald*, June 23, 24, July 5, Aug. 4, 21, 1894; *East Grand Forks Courier* (*EGF Courier*), July 5, 1895.

⁵ *Crookston Times* (*C Times*), Apr. 18, 1896; *Grand Forks Daily Plain Dealer* (*GF Plain Dealer*), July 15, 1895; *GF Herald*, Apr. 10, 21, 1896.

⁶ *GF Plain Dealer*, July 16, 1895.

⁷ Carol Hymowitz and Michaele Weissman, *A History of Women in America* (New York: Bantam, 1978), 102–105.



The “swell girl graduate”—“As she used to be” and “As she is apt to be today,” according to the Duluth News Tribune, June 13, 1895

unable to ride without revealing that they had legs. Cycling was also difficult while wearing tight whalebone-and-canvas corsets that restricted breathing. When female cyclists defiantly took off their petticoats, uncinched their corsets, and mounted their bicycles—bloomers, legs, and all—critical and horrified reactions followed. But the “new woman” had a new attitude as well, and the two came to be regarded as going hand in hand. When, for example, a group of Indiana women “determined not to overwork themselves cooking for threshers,” it was suggested that, as a next step, the “thinking” women might “even demand a bicycle.” Describing the bloomer girl as a person who “stood on her rights,” the *Grand Forks Herald*, always ready to comment on the appearance of women cyclists, pointed out that “the more shapely they are, the more attention” they attract. The *East Grand Forks Courier* saw things differently, admitting bloomers to be “permissible” but “not fashionable.” The *Courier* thankfully continued that many young women did not “take kindly” to bloomers and suggested that if they did, the city council would disapprove.⁸

Bloomer-clad women, however, were warmly welcomed into the valley cycling community, and bicycle races, fairs, and parades regularly advertised themselves as open to “ladies as well as gentlemen.” Area clubs took care to mention that membership was open and refused to affiliate with the League of American Wheelmen, a powerful national organization that did not sanction women’s cycling races. Managers of local riding academies explicitly catered to women: cash prizes were offered to the “lady cyclist” in bicycle parades; stores advertised women’s clothing. Valley newspapers generously spiced with snip poems, cartoons, and anecdote about women on wheels.⁹

Not surprisingly, bloomer-wearing bicyclists next began “wear the bloomers without bicycle” (forecasting the influence of athletic clothing on sports today). Other Red River women who avoided bloomer



⁸ *GF Herald*, July 28, Aug. 1, 1895; *EGF Courier*, Aug. 30, 1895.

⁹ *Moorhead Weekly News*, June 30, 1895; *Moorhead Daily News*, May 19, 1895; *GF Herald*, Aug. 24, 1895, Apr. 11, 1896. By April 1896, the League of American Wheelmen had 377,790 members; *GF Herald*, May 3, 1896.



Bicycle race in Red Wing, about 1896

even riding a bicycle, followed the trend by raising their hemlines, which one writer described as “a consummation devoutly to be wished.” Even after the riding craze waned, shorter skirts and bloomers remained popular with women, and by 1900, nearly two decades before the passage of women’s suffrage, ambitious valley women pressed to run for local school boards.¹⁰

A COMPONENT OF THE BICYCLE CRAZE OF the 1890s was racing. Enthusiasts built racetracks, four or six laps to the mile, in towns such as East Grand Forks, Grafton, Minto, Cavalier, Larimore, Moorhead, and Fargo. Ed Brett graded a track that circled the house and outbuildings on his farm near Park River, and some cyclists spoke of establishing a “racing circuit” in the eastern Dakotas and western Minnesota. Communities lacking tracks held races on the streets, while racers toured the nation performing exhibitions and

taking on local riders in time trials. In Grand Forks, J. W. Risser helped establish a bicycle-racing track at the Young Men’s Christian Association park, a venture in which he invested considerable time and money (reportedly \$500) as planner, builder, and manager. Initially covered with cinders donated and hauled by the Northern Pacific Railroad, the track gained a concrete surface by the end of the summer of 1896, becoming, by one account, “the fastest and smoothest track in the northwest.” For a season, it attracted talented racers, male and female, from Minneapolis and beyond and provided a location for novelty races such as one between Frank Kent’s dog, Juno, and some local “crack” riders. (The dog lost.) Races drew large crowds, and Tillie Anderson, touted as the “world champion” of women’s racing, filled the grandstand and had hundreds more standing when she toured to Grand Forks with her group of “Lady Riders.” Similar meets were held

¹⁰ *GF Herald*, June 4, 5, 1895; *GF Plain Dealer*, Feb. 8, 1890; Kelly, “Bicycle Craze,” 69.

throughout the Red River Valley, including challenge races among friends and grudge matches between enemies.¹¹

Among the fastest area racers were Grand Forks' William Cowper and Larimore's Hannah and Olaf Holton. "Scorcher" Cowper was known for covering a quarter mile on the East Grand Forks track in 31 seconds. When Olaf Holton crashed, suffering minor injuries, a man named Peterson also broke a collar bone (a common injury among racing cyclists). Local riders responded by holding a benefit race for the sake of their two fallen comrades.¹²

Many cyclists were by nature tinkerers, and around the nation the bicycling boom produced a steady stream of modifications. At times the vehicles approached the bizarre in design or application. Inventors made snow and ice bikes, tall bikes, wide bikes, tricycles, unicycles, quadricycles, and bikes for use on railroad tracks. In Grand Forks a Professor Wales created a "unique machine . . . propelled by both feet and hands" that was expected to "be the cynosure of all eyes" at the 1895 fall street fair. Bicycles for several people attracted attention, and a six-seater called the Fowler Sextet made promotional appearances in valley communities, providing local scorchers with the opportunity to be photographed—six at once—astride the lengthy contrivance. Royal "Ray" Boulter, who managed the Grand Forks Western Union office, made his contribution to the hybrid menagerie by patenting a "bicycle boat" built from two small canoes that were connected by a bicycle frame. The cycle's rear wheel was replaced by a paddle wheel that propelled the vessel down the Red River. Local wag J. A. Sorley, familiar with Boulter's invention and distressed at the condition of the city's streets in late April 1896, wondered "how a bicycle boat would work in this mud."¹³

Other types of riders joined the fray. In 1895, hobo Ernest Martin rode northward on a dilapidated bicycle to work on a farm. A telephone

¹¹ *Fergus Falls Daily Journal* (*FF Daily Journal*), July 5, 1895, July 25, 1896; *C Times*, Aug. 27, 1896; *GF Herald*, Mar. 12, 1895, Mar. 8, Aug. 28, 1896; *GF Plain Dealer*, July 23, Aug. 28, 1896.

¹² *GF Herald*, June 2, July 16, Aug. 7, Sept. 5, 1896; *GF Plain Dealer*, June 15, July 17, 1896.

¹³ *EGF Courier*, July 26, 1895; *GF Plain Dealer*, May 16, 1896; *GF Herald*, Sept. 13, 1895, Apr. 9, 21, 1896.

A new way for friends to enjoy being outdoors on Decoration (Memorial) Day holiday, 1898





linesman inspecting wire aboard his wheel stopped for a drink of water only to have the “weary willie” attempt to steal his bicycle. After firing a few shots, the lineman retrieved his cycle with no harm done. On another occasion two men held up a “bikist,” who escaped with a bullet hole in his hat by speeding away at a “two-mile gait,” slang for 30 miles an hour. After C. H. Doyan achieved local fame by borrowing a policeman’s revolver and successfully chasing down two hoboos, he suggested putting the police on bicycles, an approach that became widespread during the craze and has regained popularity today.¹⁴

The bicycling craze attracted attention in churches, too, where it drew mixed reviews. While some preachers censured bicycles as “diabolical devices of the demon of darkness” and threatened to excommunicate cycling members, others proclaimed the sport a symbol of human progress to be used to carry the gospel to the lost. Some pastors were forced out of their pulpits for riding, but in the Red River Valley at least two ministers took to the road, the Rev. Longfellow wheeling to Grand Forks “by the bike route” after delivering “a lecture at the Detroit Lakes summer assembly” and the Rev. A. T. Foster completing a 100-mile “century” ride from Casselton to Grand Forks. The *Grand Forks Herald*, quick to support bicycling, endorsed a plan to encourage cyclists to attend church by providing racks, pointing out that “cyclers are numerous” and “to a great extent young and in the fullest need of the instruction and guidance which the church offers them.” A Baptist church threw in its lot with the cyclists when the women’s group sponsored a popular bicycle social.¹⁵

As bicycling gained in popularity, the valley’s newspapers kept a running account of who purchased wheels, as well as detailed accounts of novice riders’ progress. Comments such as “Miss Clara Robinson is breaking in a broncho [sic] and is doing well” and “W. J. Fahey is the latest victim added to the list of bicycle cranks” were common; so were notifications of twisted knees, embarrassing falls, collisions, and other symptoms of a community entering a new age. Constant was the boast that the region had the highest per capita bicycle ridership on earth, there supposedly being as many bicycles as horses in the cities of Grand

¹⁴ *GF Herald*, Mar. 22, July 13, 1895, Sept. 20, 1896, Aug. 12, 1898; S. Martin, “Long Leg of the Law,” *Bicycling*, Oct./Nov. 1889, p. 42; *U.S. News & World Report*, Aug. 7, 1889, p. 10.

¹⁵ Smith, *Social History*, 1, 72–75; *GF Herald*, July 5, 27, Sept. 12, 1894, June 28, 1895, Apr. 5, 1896, May 9, 1897.



The bike craze extended to the Twin Cities, obvious from the showroom (above) and service areas (facing page) of the Thomas L. Bird Cycle Co., St. Paul, about 1900

Forks County. Every valley community appeared to want to be at the forefront of the bicycling boom, or, as one advertisement in the East Grand Forks paper noted, the earth was now “on wheels,” and “everybody wants a bicycle.”¹⁶

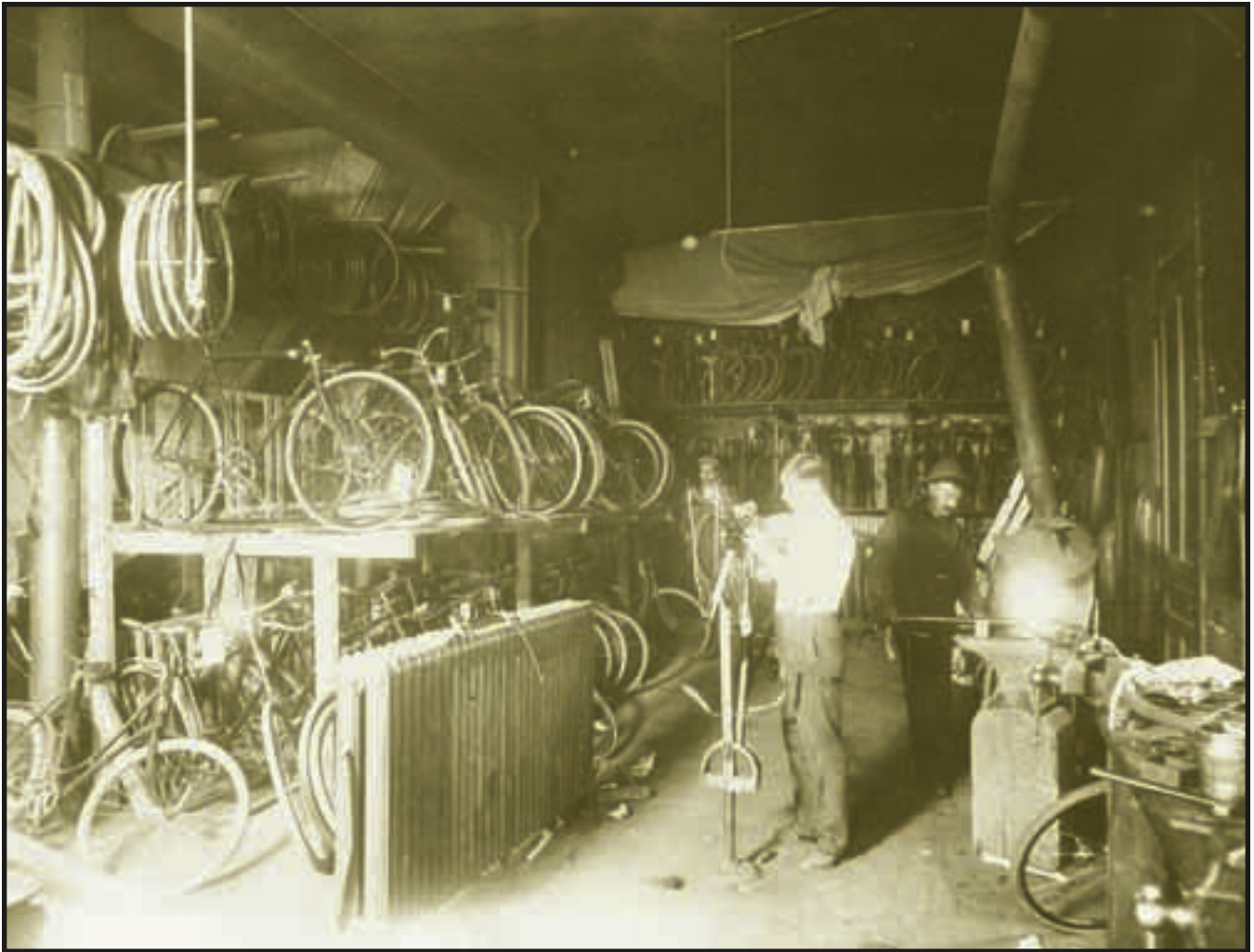
Bicycling had the endorsement of two Grand Forks newspapers—the *Herald* and the *Plain Dealer*. In addition to cycling columns and news, both published special “bicycle editions” in 1896, the *Plain Dealer* devoting the two-color front page and 6 of 12 pages overall to the craze on August 1. *Plain Dealer* editor E. C. Carruth received glowing praise from several newspapers for the special edition, including a grudging compliment from *Herald* editor George Winship. While both papers encouraged the cycling move-

ment, the *Herald* also sold bicycles—the Herald Road King for men and the Road Queen for women. The newspapers also encouraged bicyclists to join the annual street-fair parades, but participation in the 1896 Grand Forks fair, when the *Plain Dealer* was hoping for 1,500 riders, was curtailed by wind and a cold rain.¹⁷

BICYCLING PROVIDED PEOPLE WITH A NEW way to spend their free time and disposable income, and some businesses argued that “the cause of hard times in most industries is owing to the bicycle.” Across the nation laments came from hatters, tailors, and shoemakers (cyclists wore inexpensive clothes and saved their good outfits), from tobacconists (annual cigar consumption

¹⁶ *GF Herald*, Apr. 14, May 23, July 19, 1895, Feb. 8, 1896; *EGF Courier*, Apr. 3, 1896.

¹⁷ *GF Plain Dealer*, Oct. 10, 1896; *GF Herald*, Apr. 5, 1896.



dropped considerably), and from saloonkeepers, theater owners, booksellers, and stable keepers (who lost out when cyclists went riding). People who rode to improve their health smoked less and ate less candy. Piano sales plummeted, barbers suffered, and watchmakers noted that young men received bicycles, not timepieces, for their twenty-first birthdays. Valley jeweler J. Gansl attempted to cash in on the bicycle boom by engraving name plates, eventually running ads for “jewelry, engraving, wheel repair,” while other local entrepreneurs sold bicycle insurance. Some endeavors such as the sale of chewing gum unexpectedly prospered during the cycling boom.¹⁸

Noting the change, an area newspaper cartoon depicted a distressed livery horse, grieving over

the loss of its job to a bicycle, and the creation of a “bicycle stable, where wheels are to be let.” Even after the craze had begun to wane, the owner of the opera house announced there would be “comparatively few summer shows” because the popularity of bicycling had reduced attendance. While racing declined in appeal, valley residents continued to ride or save their money in hopes of purchasing or renting a cycle.¹⁹

Some local businesses took advantage of the boom, setting up bicycle shops or adding cycles and sundries to the existing product lines in department stores, mercantiles, gunsmith shops, newspaper offices, and bookstores. Farrel’s in Warren sold bicycles on the installment plan. In Grand Forks, Ontario’s ran an illustrated ad for a

¹⁸ Smith, *Social History*, 50–55; *Scientific American*, June 20, 1896, p. 391; *GF Herald*, Apr. 1896, Oct. 16, 1896.

¹⁹ *GF Plain Dealer*, Apr. 13, 1895; *GF Herald*, Apr. 30, June 18, 1895, May 30, 1897.

Bicycle Sundries.

Sweaters, fifty different kinds, from 50c to \$4.50 each.

Kangaroo High Cut Cycle Shoes, \$1. L. A. W. Special Shoes, \$3.50.

Oxford Cycle Shoes, 90c and \$1.00. Suits to order, \$5.50 to \$15.00.

Ladies' Bloomer Suits to order, \$8.50 to \$15.00. Caps, Delta, Stockings, Gloves, etc.

Largest Stock of 'Cycle Sundries at lowest prices, ever shown in the northwest. Call and examine.

100 BICYCLES NOW IN STOCK!

C. W. Wilson Bicycle Co.

OPERA HOUSE BLDG.

Fergus Falls, Minn.

Fergus Falls' C. W. Wilson Co. carried bicycle sundries including shoes and bloomer suits, as advertised in the Fergus Falls Daily Journal, June 1, 1895

"bicycle waist and bust supporter." Many department- and clothing-store ads hawked special garments or pictured models in cycling poses. Stockings became "bicycle hose." Battle Ax chewing tobacco advertised its plug as "built for two" (meaning it would serve two chewers) and a "scorcher" because it "sells so fast." Successful bicycle racers such as James Michael endorsed medicines including Paine's Celery Compound, which supposedly cured nearly every known affliction.²⁰

Some skeptics continued to view cycling as unhealthy, predicting enlarged hearts, jarred internal organs, and other vague maladies. Concern focused on bicyclists' bent-over posture driving them "to victory and death." Bicyclists instead "should be . . . as erect in the saddle as cavalymen." Most citizens nonetheless considered biking a healthful form of recreation, and local newspapers provided cyclists with advice on eating and cycling and exhortations to avoid excessive training and alcohol.²¹

Cyclists found themselves at odds with a powerful opponent, however, when they began to cross swords with the railroads. Trying to take their bicycles on trains as baggage because they

intended to make a return trip by wheel, cyclists found that railroads preferred selling round-trip tickets and viewed bicycles as cumbersome and fragile. The Northern Pacific's policy that "baggage men are instructed not to check any more bicycles or baby carriages" resulted in a "crusade" by eastern wheelmen "to establish . . . that bicycles are baggage." Cyclists won the conflict in nearly every state when the courts ordered the railroads to convey bicycles (and baby carriages), also suggesting how powerful a lobby cyclists had become.²²

As the cycling boom continued through the summer of 1897, so did the heavy advertisement of wheels and sundries. In Grand Forks a dealer sold a shipment of new bicycles "like hot cakes," perhaps because prices were steadily dropping. Dealers hoped that the new paving being laid on many valley streets would increase the bicycle business. When a visitor expressed an interest in finding "a boarding house where something else beside bicycle talk is served at breakfast, lunch, and dinner," he was told that "he might go to Devil's Lake and try the deaf and dumb asylum." Still, the YMCA track in Grand Forks had lapsed into a state of disrepair, and baseball players wanted it torn up. Some local racers had shifted their energies to the track in East Grand Forks, which drew 25 competitors on a typical Friday evening and was being improved by the efforts of M. A. Walsh, but the fervor for racing had diminished significantly since the previous summer. Cycling, while remaining popular, had become a less competitive and more commonplace activity. By the fall of 1898 there were nearly 1,500 bicycles in Grand Forks, but the little interest that remained in racing or organized riding was limited to the "East Side." Most area cyclists passed up the bicycle parade at the fall street fair and watched the fireworks instead.²³

Nationally and locally the cycling craze peaked in 1896-97, as cycling became a more modest but permanent feature of American life. Only in larger cities did six-day and other races, many by professionals, attract considerable attention into the twentieth century.

Although the craze lost momentum, its influence remained. Nationwide, bicyclists are credited with having started the movement toward

²⁰ See *GF Herald*, Apr. 1, 1897, and Mar.-June 1896; *Warren Register*, May-Aug. 1896; *C Times*, May 11, 1895.

²¹ *EGF Courier*, June 5, Aug. 7, 1896; *FF Daily Journal*, May 21, 1895; *GF Herald*, Sept. 11, 1895, Apr. 5, 1896; *GF Plain Dealer*, May 6, Aug. 1, 1896.

²² *EGF Courier*, Aug. 16, 1895; *GF Herald*, May 30, Sept. 15, 1895, May 6, 1896, May 9, 1897; Smith, *Social History*, 222-23.

²³ *GF Herald*, Mar. 31, Apr. 20, May 9, 30, June 6, 13, 1897, Oct. 8, 1898.





A newly mobile Little Falls-area family, about 1900

decent roads. After distributing 60,000 copies of its pamphlet, “The Gospel of Good Roads,” the League of American Wheelmen followed with 3 million copies of *Good Roads Magazine*, both of which helped win the support of agricultural interests. When farmers saw that better roads would bring higher property values, improved mail delivery, and easier transportation of farm products, they readily endorsed the movement. Legislators then fell into line, as the *Grand Forks Herald* pointed out in 1895: “Over a million is the estimate of the sale of bicycles this year . . . and all the political candidates are becoming enthusiastic for good roads.” The *Herald* also claimed that bicyclists did more “to advance the good roads idea than all other efforts combined.” Valley cyclists also called for bicycle paths, including one from Crookston to Grand Forks, but the automobile would soon ascend over the bicycle, and the notion of bike pathways disappeared (until recent years when communities such as Fargo, Moorhead, and Grand Forks began developing new cycling routes).²⁴

Several factors working together enabled valley communities to accelerate the paving of streets and improvement of sidewalks during the summer of 1896. The previous year’s bountiful harvest meant that more money was available, and some residents had been hoping to

paving for months. A wet
 ing had turned streets into
 agmires that disheartened
 residents and forced eager
 bicyclists onto the side-
 walks. The resulting con-
 flicts led both pedestrians
 and cyclists to press for
 aving so that cyclists could
 ce their wheels back to the
 ets. Many valley riders also
 l enviously at the long
 et in Moorhead, where
 ing “an elegant time” since
 the previous summer. Competition among valley
 communities, especially Fargo and Grand Forks,
 also stimulated paving, since by early April Fargo
 streets were “fairly alive with bicycles” while
 Grand Forks cyclists had to wait six to eight weeks
 to ride until the mud dried. Observations that



Collapsible drinking cup, with tandem cyclists in bas-relief on lid, about 1900

Fargo had “more red headed women, white horses, and bicycles than Grand Forks” and was able to hold “a big bicycle parade . . . right on the streets” in mid-May spurred Grand Forks to lay cedar-block pavement in 1896. The following summer the first automobile, a Benz Velo brought by a cigar promoter, arrived in town, its way having been paved in part by the town’s interest in bicycling.²⁵

NOT ALL VALLEY RESIDENTS, OF COURSE, accepted bicycling and riders with equanimity. Riding on sidewalks, “scorching” or speeding, cycling-related traffic accidents, spooked horses, riding at night without lights, the need for warning bells, and other issues were frequent topics of discussion and litigation throughout the country during the 1890s. Because cyclists liked to press their claims, cases sometimes went to the state supreme courts. Angry dog owners criticized cyclists who fired at aggressive canines with ammonia-squirting “ki-yi guns,” and other opponents waged covert war by sowing bicycle routes

²⁴ *Harpers Weekly*, Apr. 11, 1896, p. 362; Kelly, “Bicycle Craze,” 69; *FF Daily Journal*, July 24, 1895; *GF Herald*, May 14, Aug. 18, 1895.

²⁵ *GF Herald*, July 30, Aug. 6, 1895, May 19, 1896, June 30, 1897; *Annual Report of the North Dakota Weather Service for 1896* (Bismarck: North Dakota Weather and Crop Service); *GF Plain Dealer*, July 15, 1895, Apr. 1, 18, 1896, June 29, 1897; Carl F. W. Larson, “A History of the Automobile in North Dakota to 1911,” *North Dakota History* 54 (Fall 1987): 3.

with carpet tacks.²⁶

Conflicts increased as pedestrians protested bicycle riding on the sidewalk and complained about “imperious wheelmen” who rode in the dark and stole flowers from a local cemetery. In 1895 the Grand Forks police chief had announced he would enforce an ordinance prohibiting riding on the sidewalk; the first offender after the crack-down was a prominent local businessman. Throughout the year pedestrians agitated for more restrictive ordinances, and bicyclists demanded their rights (paralleling today’s issues about skateboarders and in-line skaters).²⁷

During the spring of 1896 the enforcement of the bicycle ordinance in Grand Forks was reportedly “the subject of more back talk to the square inch than any other subject,” and many citizens clamored not only for regulations but taxes on bicycles to be used to help pave the streets. The *Herald* pointed out that in Helena, Montana, such a plan was underway, but “a riot is imminent if the project to tax bicycles goes much further.” Although the police attempted to enforce City Ordinance No. 55, which restricted bikes to certain streets and sidewalks, severely limited speeds, and required the use of bells and lanterns, cyclists riding on sidewalks remained a problem. Papers announced the numbers arrested on a daily basis. As fines of one dollar accumulated, interest grew in taxing bicycles. Tax assessor John Abrahamsen (also a bicycle-club officer), pointed out that it would be “impossible” to collect if bikes were not licensed. In East Grand Forks, cyclists were forbidden to ride on any sidewalk, while in Mayville city fathers admitted that they did not know how to handle defiant riders who ignored the local ordinance.²⁸

In Grand Forks a new corps of “bicycle police” helped reduce the numbers of sidewalk scorcherers, and the bicycle club met with the city council and encouraged a large turnout at a bicycle parade to “show the city government that the cyclists are entitled to some recognition and have some rights.” As the summer of 1896 wore on, dry streets and new pavement helped reduce the level of conflict.²⁹

During the next two summers, bicycle legislation remained controversial. The Grand Forks city council wrangled over ordinances and the possibility of taxation, assigning the city attorney to determine the constitutionality of some proposals.

²⁶ Smith, *Social History*, 185.

²⁷ *GF Herald*, June 13, 1894.

²⁸ See *GF Plain Dealer* and *GF Herald*, 1896.

²⁹ *GF Herald*, June 4, 19, 23, 1896.

SOME ADVICE



“In the rage for light wheels, brakes have been freely dispensed with, particularly this year, thus introducing an element of danger that is serious. There are times in the experience of every rider when it is necessary to stop quickly, and when ‘back pedalling’ is not enough. To apply the sole of the shoe to the tire on the front wheel as a brake is a dangerous practice. It is a serious question whether in the interest of safety the law should not step in and compel the bicycle manufacturers to put brakes on all their wheels, and whether going abroad without a brake should not cause the rider’s arrest. A foot-brake will serve in the case of experienced riders, but no novice, at all events, should venture upon city streets or park drives on a brakeless bicycle.”

—*Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, May 21, 1895, reprinting from the *New York Tribune*



M. L. Dibble Bicycle Shop, Rochester



Cartoon commentary on the intractability of scorching cyclists, Grand Forks Daily Herald, September 4, 1899

Bicyclists continued to press their case to the city council but suffered a setback when a two-year-old girl had her leg broken after running in front of a cyclist. The bicycle club responded quickly by setting up a “subscription list for the benefit of little Laura Jones.”³⁰

In July 1899 the council passed an ordinance that included a tax of one dollar on bicycles owned by persons age 15 and older. The bicycling community hinted it would refuse to pay and declared it a revenue-generating rather than a traffic-control measure. The cyclists also formed a new club, the bylaws of which emphasized an inclusive, hopefully large, membership devoted to “the promotion of the cause of good roads and the interests of cyclists.” The club also presented the city council with a petition listing more than 100 persons opposing the tax. In the ensuing stare-down, the council blinked and repealed the ordinance after collecting only \$75 in taxes from the

owners of the more than 1,500 city bicycles.³¹

In April 1900 a new, bicyclist-prepared ordinance passed the city council. It contained no provision for taxation or even registration of bicycles but did state that no one could place “tacks, etc.” where bicycle tires might be damaged. Cyclists had earned a place not only on the streets and sidewalks but in the political process as well, and the city council gained some valuable experience negotiating with owners of vehicles. Soon, city ordinances would deal not only with bicycles but automobiles and motorcycles.³²

The bicycling boom in the Red River Valley had concluded, and in the twentieth century adults turned their enthusiasm to the automobile. Left behind, however, were new roads, styles of dress, attitudes toward women, legislation, and technology—vestiges of a fad gone by and precursors of the age to come.

³⁰ *GF Herald*, June 27, 30, 1897.

³¹ Grand Forks City Council, *Council Proceedings*, July 3, p. 499, July 24, p. 512, Aug. 7, p. 514–15, 517, Sept. 4, p. 526, 527—all 1899; *GF Herald*, July 25, 27, 28, 29, Aug. 1, 3 (quote), 8—all 1899.

³² Grand Forks City Council, *Council Proceedings*, Apr. 17, 1900, p. 38.

*All the photographs and objects are in the MHS collections.
Photos of bicycle, cup, and buttons by Peter Latner.*



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