

The High-Wheeled “Ordinary”

By Robert Fridlington

Few items in the Historical Society’s collections elicit as much interest as the high-wheeled bicycle given to the Society in 1947 by Mrs. Myrtle Taylor Royce, the mother-in-law of onetime Society Trustee Kingsland Ward. The bicycle was originally owned by Mrs. Royce’s husband, James C. Royce, who died in 1946. Visitors are also amused to learn that such bicycles were called “ordinaries,” although the clumsy looking old high-wheeler was anything but ordinary.

The ordinary evolved in Europe, the result of a long-time effort to develop a man-powered wheeled vehicle for transportation. After generations of failure, the ordinary evolved in the early 1870’s. It has been called “the first machine popularly designated as a bicycle.”



Maureen Wakeman prepares to take the Royce High-Wheeler out for a spin. Photo by William Curtis.

It is an awkward looking vehicle, with a huge front wheel ranging anywhere from 40 inches to 60 inches (or greater) in diameter and a much smaller rear wheel (the front wheel of the Society’s cycle is 52 inches). The cranks and pedals are attached to the front wheel, creating a front-wheel drive. Ideally, the size of the front wheel was built to order, depending on the length of the owner’s legs. As practical matter, however, large wheels were in demand (the larger the front wheel, the faster the bicycle would go).

The ordinary was difficult to balance. The seat, or saddle, sat high on the steel frame, moving the center of gravity so far forward that a rock or rut or small bump in the road could cause the rider to take “a header” over the handles bars. The fact that steering with the front wheel could interfere with attempts to pedal created further complications.

The American public first saw the high-wheeled wonder at the giant Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876. It was an instant success. Bicycle clubs sprang up all across the country, and in 1880, a national organization called League of American Wheelman (LAW) was founded in Newport, RI. The Golden Age of the bicycle was about to begin.

Of course, Cranford was not immune to the influence of “the wheel.” In July 1890, the Cranford Cycling Club was organized at the home of Mr. George Teller, one of the town’s foremost citizens.

Twenty men were in at the beginning, including such noteworthy names as Howard Cox, Gus Folk, Edward and Charles Bookout, and Emmor K. Adams.



Cranford Cycling Club, ca. 1890.

Following the fashion of the time, the club joined the LAW and ordered uniforms. Resplendently attired, the members celebrated with a lantern parade. In addition to parades, the club held road runs, hare and hound chases, and, for those who wanted to demonstrate their athletic prowess, century runs.

But the very vogue of the bicycle brought about changes in the machine. The ordinary began to fade in popularity. By the mid-1880's, the new "safety" bicycle was introduced with significant changes in form. The safety had two wheels of equal size (or almost equal size), a tubular frame, and a chain drive. Only a couple of years later a variation of the safety, without a cross bar, appeared for women. Other improvements, such as pneumatic tires and coaster brakes, also appeared.

The "modern" bicycle had arrived. By the late 1890's, the League of American Wheelmen had a membership of 103,000. Surprisingly, some attachment to the ordinary lingered. In the photo of the Cranford Cycling Club, probably taken in the early 1890's, four of the members spurn safety bikes and are pictured with their ordinaries.

But the bicycle craze was in full force. The new safeties were seen everywhere and new areas for their use were constantly being found. Deliverymen, letter carriers, and policemen began using them. In August 1895, the *Cranford Chronicle* informed its readers that the New York and New Jersey Telephone Company was going to provide "wheels" for its linemen. This would "enable the men to reach the scene of any mishap to the line quickly, and so facilitate the making of repairs."



Cranford Cycling Club-League of American Wheelmen badge. Photo by William Curtis.

But the nation's enchantment with the bicycle was not to last. In a few short years, the attention of the American people was diverted from the two wheeler and focused on an even more radical invention—the automobile. By the early years of the twentieth century, the great golden era of the bicycle was over.

It is difficult today to fully appreciate the impact of the bicycle on American life. It modified social attitudes, bringing men and women together. For most it provided relaxation and enjoyment, for others an extended outing. It had tremendous influence on women's clothing and fashion. The bloomer costume or "Turkish trousers" became socially acceptable attire (at least in certain circles).

The bicycle inaugurated the good roads movement (and ushered in the use of road maps!), and, it has been argued, bicycle manufacturing introduced the assembly line to American industry.

In 1900, the U.S. Bureau of the Census, after carefully weighing the evidence, concluded that "few articles ever used by man have created so great a revolution in social conditions as the bicycle."

And it all started with the high-wheeled ordinary.