

An Echo of Wheels

By ROLLIN KIRBY

ON the fifth day of November, 1895, a man named George B. Selden of Rochester, New York, finally received a patent on an internal-combustion gasoline engine and a cluster of men humped over the handle bars of their bicycles flashed by. The pedestrians looked up sharply as they passed, some in indignation at these speed demons who imperiled life and limb on the public highways, and some in frank admiration of the zanies who perspired so freely and who were so humorlessly intent on completing a century run, which consisted of covering 100 miles within twelve hours.

After this group of "scorchers" had passed came the more leisurely cyclists, those who sat more erect on their Garford saddles and whose handle bars curved upward rather than down. And still they came, the young, the old, and the middle-aged. The whole world was awheel, men, women, and children. Ramblers with their copper rims, Columbias, Victors with their spring forks, Iver Johnsons, Monarchs, Barnes White Fliers—how well we knew the different makes as they spun by with a great whirring of chains over the sprocket wheels. Once in a while an imported Humber or a Rudge or a Raleigh appeared and gave a cosmopolitan touch to the pageant.

Those were the days of the L. A. W. (League of American Wheelmen, in case the reader is either too young or too forgetful), when every town had a bicycle club; when Colonel Albert A. Pope of Hartford was a Henry Ford; when the annual race meet of the league was a sporting event of major importance at which Arthur A. Zimmerman ("Jimmy"); John S. Johnson, the flying Swede from St. Paul; Eddie (Cannonball) Bald; Mile-a-Minute Murphy; little Jimmy Michaels, the Welshman; "Major" Taylor, the Negro sprinter; and a score of others rode and were national heroes.

At the meet at the World's Fair in Chicago "Jimmy" won the last mile open for "ordinaries" and closed the epoch of the old bone-shaker. Mounted on a Star whose little wheel was in front so that a header was impossible and which was propelled by levers instead of pedals, he nosed out John S. Johnson, and with that the old high wheel was relegated to the pile of discards at the back of the bicycle repairman's shop and the ascendancy of the geared safety became complete.

On December 31, 1930, there appeared buried on the eleventh page of the New York *World* the following item:

WHEELMEN'S CLUB QUILTS

NEWBURGH'S BICYCLISTS DISBAND AFTER 44 YEARS'
ANTAGONISM TO AUTOS

NEWBURGH, DEC. 30.—After forty-four years' existence the Newburgh Wheelmen's Club has disbanded. It was decided today that the bicycle craze would never come back and officials of the club sorrowfully voted to disband.

John Daly is the oldest member, a charter Wheelman. Daniel Becker was the club's last president. Mgr. Henry O'Carroll has purchased the clubhouse and added it to the nearby property of the Catholic church.

As though with the touch of a mysterious but awakening wand this little item galvanized into action the recollection of a time when the world seemed fresher (but perhaps wasn't), for it was the time of my youth and I was an ardent, obsessed cyclist; when to possess an imported Humber would have seemed the sum total of earthly bliss, and when an evening spent on my stomach beside the base-burner in the living-room poring over my various catalogues transported me into a realm of infinite joy and interest. Bells, lamps, spanners, pumps—all the gadgets that went to make up the accessories—were of surpassing wonder, and I lost myself in a world of mechanical things of which I have never had any but a very imperfect understanding.

And now the old diehards of Newburgh have capitulated. There is something admirable in the stiff-necked antagonism to the automobile of these old dwellers beside the Hudson. Year after year they have kept the Newburgh Wheelmen's Club together, and year after year Henry Ford has sown the roads with a contraption built around George Selden's idea which has forced them into the ditches and taught them that they were to venture on the highways only at very great peril. Yet they went on hoping that the thing might be only a passing fancy; that when the public was tired of being whirled at forty miles an hour along the roads and the novelty of effortless locomotion had worn off, once more sanity would return and they might with safety venture off on a modest club run, as suited elderly cyclists.

Doubtless they argued a bicycle was safer, less noisy, cheaper, healthier than an automobile and that facts so self-evident must, in the long run, bring people to their senses. One can almost see a meeting at the clubhouse. In the old days there would be copies of the L. A. W. *Bulletin* and the *American Wheelman* lying about and there would be much debate as to the relative merits of a high or low gear, especially on hills, or whether the spade handles of the Victor were as restful on a long run as the ram's-horn handle bars of the Barnes. On the walls would be fading photographs of groups awheel: tight knickerbockers, turtle-necked sweaters, and small caps. The men nearly all wore mustaches and here and there were sideburns. A banner bearing the club's name hung draped over the photographs, while on the mantel were three or four tarnished trophies won by the stout legs and hearts of the Newburgh Wheelmen.

Eheu, fugaces! A few years ago I came upon a crumbling old inn in Connecticut and there, overgrown by vines on a front porch that was a drooping ruin, was an almost indecipherable tin sign which announced that this was an official hotel of the League of American Wheelmen. And on the instant the place became peopled again for me and I saw dozens of bicycles leaning against the porch railing and the great elm that spread its branches over the house. Men and women—for the girls were beginning to perk up at that period—with cheeks ruddy from exercise sat on the steps or in the big chairs and rested from their labors. There

was no sound of jazz nor was there a dancing floor. The few who drank, drank beer.

I do not know whether it was a better world than the one I now inhabit, but I am certain it was a more leisurely one and decidedly a quieter one. It seems, as I look back on it, a healthier one, although the statisticians tell me the span of human life has been extended since then. The deaths on the highways were trifling then as compared with those of the motor age, and although life, gauged by the ingenious but inconclusive graphs the actuaries present, may have been shorter, it most assuredly was safer on the main roads.

Gaffer though I am, I should like to throw my leg—whose power of propulsion is perhaps less than it once was—again over my Humber and start in the early morning, while the dew still glistens on the leaves and the sun is just coming up over there by the waterworks, for, say, Newburgh; for although the Newburgh Wheelmen's Club has gone down with the band playing and the flags flying after a gallant fight, there is still a very good, old-fashioned tavern on a wide and very precipitous Main Street in that old riverside town.

In the Driftway

THE Drifter always swells responsively with national pride when Oklahoma is mentioned. Of late years, perhaps, that allotment of national pride has concentrated on Will Rogers, the Last American. But since the inauguration of the new governor the Drifter hopes we have with us also a Next-to-the-Last American. There was a time in Oklahoma, in the early dignity of statehood, when "no gentleman would be seen in anything but broadcloth and no governor without a diamond stud." But Oklahoma has outlived her self-conscious adolescence, and America wakes again. Would that the Driftway had bent its course round Oklahoma City for the inauguration of "Alfalfa Bill"! The news accounts bring a whiff of fresh air that makes the Drifter prick his ears and whinny with delight. "Alfalfa Bill of the clarion voice, the gaunt figure, and the bristling mustaches," weather-beaten farmers, stately chieftains of Comanches and Kiowas in ceremonial feathers, the bent old father of the governor, at ninety-one murmuring, "This is my happiest moment, next to the time, under an elm tree, when I got religion." The American pattern has come alive again in Oklahoma—alive not only in its color but also in its simplicity.

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"RICH man, poor man, beggar man, thief; doctor, lawyer, Indian chief"—Governor Murray is ready for them all. The rich man, he says, has no excuse whatever for violating the law; the poor man should have equal rights before the courts. "I don't believe much in pardons, but I do believe strongly in paroles. If prisoners do not keep the parole provisions, take them back to the prisons to stay." The present emphasis on college athletics is "the most deplorable of all our educational errors." He is for giving every boy and girl a chance at higher education "if they can stand the examination," but "when they are passed into the

university, say to them, 'Do or get out.'" Which sound and simple advice brings the Drifter to the last of his buttons, "Indian chief." And here, of course, Alfalfa Bill is the real thing, or rather his wife is the real thing. For she is a daughter of the Chickasaws and he is adopted into the tribe. (The Drifter has one transient pang of envy, for he himself came within ten minutes of being adopted into the Ojibwa tribe.)

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SUCH a state of affairs, or rather such a State of Oklahoma, should, if noised abroad, send travelers from England and the Continent scurrying for the Southwest. "Where is he?" they will pant as they rush through New York. "Is he real? Alive? Not a Rotarian or a cigar-store Indian?" The Drifter visualizes the procession, crossing ocean, mountain, plain, and three generations—reaching that domeless capital, entering the governor's office. When the Drifter was a boy, a hearty handshake was the governor's greeting and a cordial "I sut'n'y am mighty glad to see you," while the governor's wife, comfortably settled in a rocker in the gubernatorial chamber, looked up from her sewing with a friendly smile. If Oklahoma carries on this tradition of the governor's chair and the lady's rocker, the Drifter hopes for local color's sake that the governor's lady, dressed, needless to say, in the lovely costume of her tribe, may be beading bright-colored moccasins—or bags.

THE DRIFTER

Correspondence

"The Coming of the War"

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: I note the review of a group of books on recent diplomatic history, including Bernadotte Schmitt's "The Coming of the War, 1914," in your issue of December 31 by Professor Frederick L. Schuman of the University of Chicago. If Schmitt's actual views on war responsibility bore any considerable resemblance to those attributed to him by Professor Schuman in the latter's review, I would have little fault to find with them. Professor Schuman's statement, however, to the effect that "Schmitt comes nearer than any of his predecessors to a realization of the futility of the guilt-and-innocence dichotomy" actually raises the question as to whether he had read Schmitt's volumes at all. Professor Schmitt may be right in thinking Germany and Austria guilty, but no writer, not even Judge Bausman, has been more decisive in insisting on unique and black guilt. His volumes might well have been entitled "Let Germany Explain."

As to whether my charges against Schmitt's book are "worthy of serious consideration" or not, this will not be settled by Professor Schuman's inspired gesture of disdain or through reiteration by me. But I may offer in evidence the views of the chief authority on recent European history, who happens to be resident in Professor Schuman's own State of Illinois—Professor Joseph Ward Swain. Writing in the official journal of the history teachers of America, he said of Schmitt's book: "In the reviewer's opinion, Professor Schmitt's prejudices are so strong as to render him unable to write impartial history." In his competent and impartial review in the New York *Times* Professor Parker T. Moon observed: "Where there is conflicting testimony he [Schmitt] puts the evidence against Ger-

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