



The Great Smethport Cycling Races



Saturday, September 17, 2016

Go for the Gold in the Great Smethport Cycling Races

Every year in late September, a flash of color and the whoosh of wheels signal the start of the Great Smethport Bicycle Races, a 53-mile chase through the forests of northern Pennsylvania that began in the 1890s.

Riders long ago traded their wool caps and knickerbockers for florescent helmets and spandex, but they're still vying for the same coveted prize: a gold pocket watch and the bragging rights to one of the most legendary races around.

Whisked through the Victorian village of Smethport, Pa., propelled over tree-studded hillsides that once fueled factories and sawmills, and transported across miles of picturesque farmland to the historic Galico Bridge, cyclists race to the finish through a ticker tape parade of fluttering leaves.

The memories are as inspiring as the views.

As early as 1892—a decade before the famous Tour de France—two enterprising businessmen dreamed up this race to capitalize on a craze that was taking America by storm. It was the Golden Age of Bicycling, and Dr. F. C. Pierce and his friend Martin Armstrong were among the sport's most ardent fans.

Pierce, a Smethport dentist and a distributor for Rambler Bicycles, handed out catalogs to every patient who visited his second-story office with a toothache. As soon as their pain medication wore off, he would escort them downstairs to Young's General Store where they could take a gander at the latest bicycles just in from Chicago. An avid cyclist himself, Pierce introduced the first high-wheeler to Smethport in 1883, and in 1895, pedaled his Rambler "Safety" to Des Moines, Iowa, in only ten days.

Martin Armstrong would not be outdone. The town's jeweler, telegraph operator and baseball coach sold the competing Columbia brand from his Main Street storefront, which doubled as a sporting goods store. The high-wheeled Columbia "Racer" had clinched the world speed record in 1886 at 22 miles an hour. Now the Columbia "Century" was selling like hotcakes, even at \$200 apiece. Equipped with pneumatic tires for a smooth, safe ride, these bicycles were no longer the "boneshakers" of the past—they were the transportation of the future. By 1895 American factories were turning out 400,000 bicycles a year.

The two Smethport businessmen knew a bicycle race would capture the thrill of their favorite sport and fill the bustling lumber town with spectators. Pierce sketched a 7-mile loop around the hub of the city and Armstrong donated an engraved gold pocket watch for first prize. The Great Smethport Bicycle

Races were off and running!

Word traveled fast. Wheelmen from as far away as Buffalo, New York, inspired by a little friendly competition and cheap fares on the Erie Railroad, hopped on board, bringing their bicycles with them.

“If you want to come as near to flying as we are likely to get in this generation, learn to ride a pneumatic bicycle,” wrote Philip G. Hubert Jr. in the June 1895 issue of Scribners Magazine.

Women were among the first to take hold of the handlebars. The bicycle liberated them from the confining Victorian clothing they were used to wearing and freed them to go virtually anywhere they wanted. Trousers, split skirts and lighter-weight corsets came into vogue, offering a more comfortable, long-distance ride.

“Skirts, while they have not hindered women from climbing to the topmost branches of higher education, may prove fatal in down-hill coasting,” wrote Marguerite Merington, in Scribners. “Skirts,” she cautioned, “must be fashioned as to minimize the danger of the flying wheel.”

At first newspapers condemned the pastime as unladylike. They railed against the speedsters, calling them “sorcerers.” But it was the Gay Nineties after all, and there was no turning back. Bicycling was just too much fun.

Families toured the countryside, enjoying the scenery with picnic baskets in tow. Couples coasted into cities for dinner, to visit the theater or enjoy the opera. Sports fans followed behind their favorite baseball teams, riding for miles in the hopes of watching them win. And young racers took off for far-flung locations to compete in an important race.

Challenged by rutted roads, poor drainage and ornery wagon drivers, the bicyclists were undaunted. Instead, more than 100,000 cyclists from across the United States banded together to form the League of American Wheelmen, a group that lobbied for better roads and directional signs, literally paving the way for the automobile. Smethport, like many communities, joined in with its own chapter. Ironically, the automobile would soon eclipse the bicycle as the favored form of travel. With the dawn of the horseless carriage, The Golden Age of Bicycling would come to a close.

The Great Smethport Bicycle Races continued its rolling spectacle on wheels through 1899. More than a century later, after a trunk of old race photos was rescued from the trash, the fabled event was brought back to life. Now, every September, the contest once again lures riders in pursuit of the elusive gold watch.

For race entries and more information about the Great Smethport Bicycle Races, visit www.smethporthistory.org.

Lisa Gensheimer