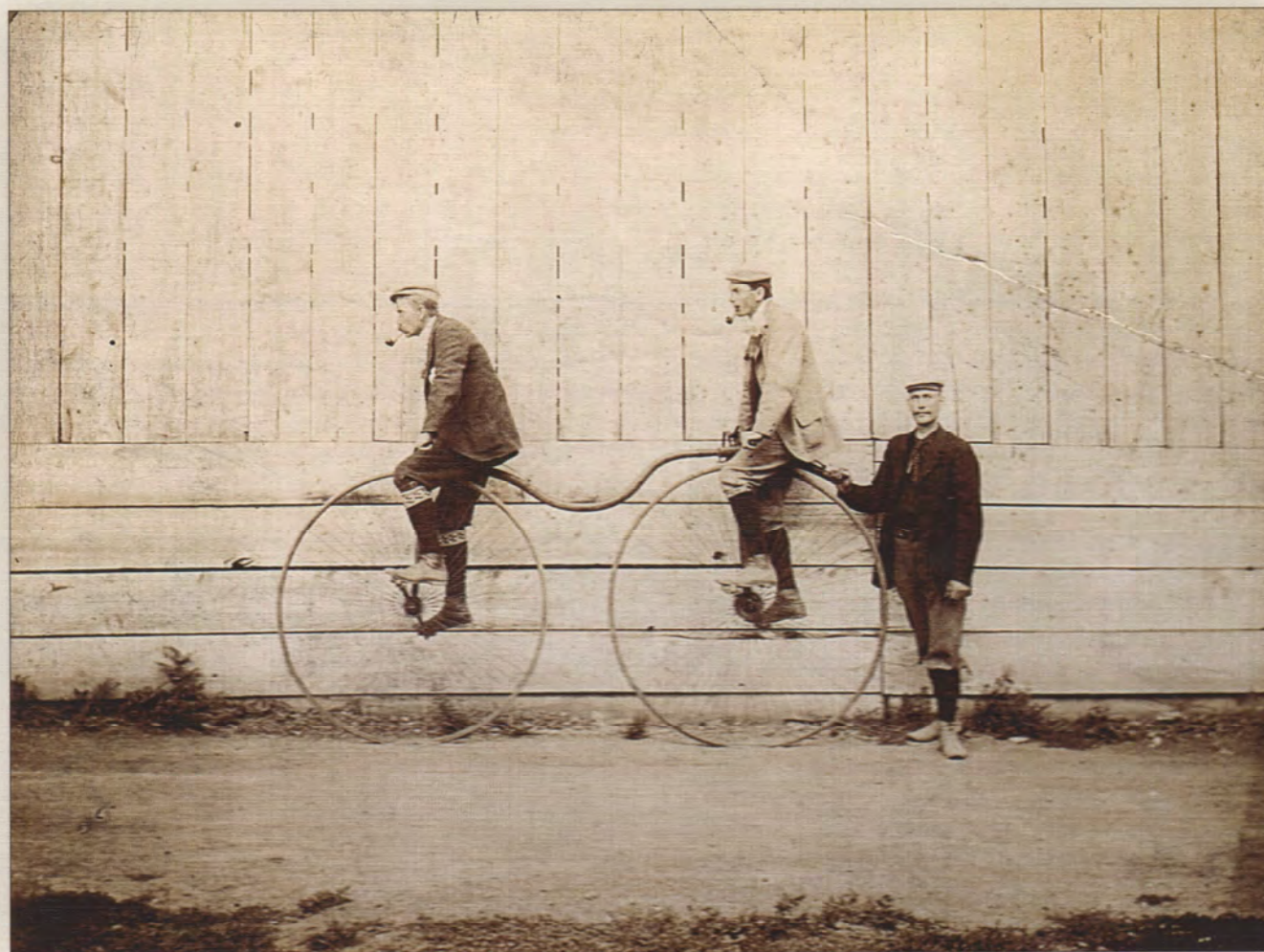


THE WHEELMEN



NUMBER 105
NOVEMBER 2024

📖 Riding 🌿 Collecting 🌿 Restoring 🌿 Research 🌿 History 📖





A Message from Your Commander

by RANDY OLEYNIK
Carleton, Michigan



REETINGS,

It is an election year in our country and in our club. It is time for me to pass on the Commander's position to our new Commander, Nyle Blanck. It has been an honor to serve our organization for the last two years, but I am excited about bringing in young blood to revitalize our group.

While Nyle doesn't officially start as Commander until January, he has already started to update our club on the social media front. You will see articles in the newsletter about our members only Facebook page plus Instagram. Please join these groups if you can, as much information is being shared on those platforms.

By the time this is published, most of our events will be over for the year and it will be time to start all those winter restoration projects. This is the first year since I learned to ride a bike, that I have been unable to ride due to an unfortunate accident, so I will be restoring myself this winter to be ready to ride next year. Remember we have great sources available in our club with Craig Allen, our restoration chair, and Bill Smith, our librarian and



Andrew F. Sanderson, Editor

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resource chair. They, along with many members, can assist you to get those bike projects moving forward and finished.

Thanks again to my executive committee, and all the captains and volunteers plus all the members that make us such a great organization to belong to. You are all appreciated. 🚲

Until we meet again,
Randy Olynik
National Commander

Commander Randy Olynik,
Gary Musser, and Tim Holmes, helping
Commander Elect, Nyles Blanck,
to keep moving along.

Major Taylor – The Early Years Part II

by BUCK PEACOCK, Atlanta, Georgia



IN MY PREVIOUS ARTICLE, IT WAS revealed that Major Taylor misrepresented the time span covering his close relationship with the Southards, a wealthy white family in Indianapolis. Major wrote that he was eight years old at that time. He turned eight in late November 1886. The Southards in fact settled in Indianapolis in April of 1883. The relationship, instead of beginning when he was eight years old, began when he was not yet five. Many biographers have estimated that his relationship lasted three or four years, ending around 1890. The Southards left Indianapolis and moved to Chicago in May of 1886, marking that as the relationship's actual end point. A seemingly small fact, but one that now makes apparent, that there has not yet been any biographical information regarding his whereabouts between 1886 and 1890.

One possible issue to fill that 1886 to 1890 gap involves the possibility that the child in the Clarksville picture (see "Major Taylor – The Early Years", *The Wheelmen Magazine*, Number 103, 2-9) could well be the young Marshall W. Taylor.

Suppose it was true, as Taylor recollected in his autobiography, *The Fastest Bicycle in the World*, that his time with the Southards did begin at the age of eight. Then, when the Clarksville photo was taken in the spring of 1886, he would not have met the Southards yet, and would not have been introduced to the bicycle, let alone ever even ridden one. All that makes it highly unlikely that it is Major in the photo. There is nothing to explain his presence at a bicycling event posing for a picture with some of the best bicycle racers in America. However, when the truth is that the date of the picture is late April 1886, just a couple of weeks before the Southards left Indianapolis for good on May 11 of that year, the scenario changes.

At that time Taylor's relationship with the Southards was rapidly coming to an end, if not already come and gone. The Southards employed Taylor's father as a coachman that they no longer had a need for in Indianapolis; they would be packing up their household for their move to Chicago. As Taylor had put it in his autobiography, he was back on the streets as "a common errand boy." Though now he was in possession of a bicycle and could ride it and display a few tricks on it. Instead of speculation, it becomes downright plausible that it was him in the Clarksville photo. Any circumstances that took him there are still somewhat of a mystery, but I don't think it is out of the realm of possibility.

EARLY RACING... MORE SKEWED DATES

In his autobiography, Taylor listed some of the first races he participated in, but mostly with incorrect and out of sequence dates. I have tried to sort all of that out to refine how his racing career progressed.

In Chapter I, he described his first race.



FIGURE 1. TOM HAY, Founder of the Indianapolis Zig-Zag Club, and co-founder of Hay and Willits Bicycle Shop. He gave Major Taylor his first job in the bicycle business. *The American Cyclist*, Volume 4, No. 1.

He said he was 13 years old but didn't give a date for the race. He was 13 in the summer of 1892. Local bicycle enthusiasts Tom Hay (Figure 1) and Burt Willits had opened a bicycle shop at 113 West Washington St. in

Indianapolis in September 1889.¹ Shortly after that, they began to plan for a 10-mile bicycle race to Maywood, an Indianapolis suburb, as a promotional event for their shop. Taylor wrote that during a visit to Hay & Willits for a repair on his bike, he wrangled a job with them through his ability at trick riding. While working there, he often admired the impressive gold medal that had been put on display as the grand prize for the Maywood race. Taylor wrote in his autobiography that on the day of the race, he only went there as a spectator, as he had never seen a bicycle race before. His boss, Tom Hay, cornered him and cajoled him into participating, fairly forcing him to do so, the result being that Taylor was crying when he started off. One thing led to another, and with the persistence and positive motivation from Hay, Taylor finished the race, and won the gold medal. Again, all of this story is consistent with verifiable facts, except for one important detail... the date. According to period newspaper accounts, that race took place August 9, 1890. Taylor was only 11 years old at that time. He was off by two years, recalling his age upon entering (and winning) his first race. And a notable fact about this race that Taylor failed to mention, but was reported in another period newspaper article, is that he was riding a 42-inch wheel.² That describes a child-sized high-wheel bike, apparently the one left to him by the Southards.

In Chapter II, he pointed out that his next race was in Peoria, Illinois. Taylor stated that it was in the summer of 1892, when he was 14 years old. But again, according to news accounts, the actual race date was September 13, 1890, about five weeks after the Maywood race. Major was not 14 years old. He was still 11. He only finished third in that race, but he garnered a lot of attention. One account

singled him out for creating quite a sensation.³ The race was classified as One-mile Boys Under 16 – “Ordinary,”⁴ so he was still riding his 42-inch high-wheel there. Fred Orr, the winner of that race, was also Black.⁵ He was described as a “big strippling”⁶ who rides a man’s wheel.⁷ He must have towered over little 11-year-old Major. *The Wheel & Cycling Trade Review* said Taylor “cried a little over his defeat, which he attributed to a lack of condition.” Still, it noted that he had “all the snap and style of a veteran.”⁸

Taylor’s book does not mention the next year’s Peoria race, 1891. He was listed in preview newspaper articles leading up to the event,⁹ as being registered to race there. Although members of his employer Tom Hay’s Zig-Zag club were there (Figure 2), his name was not mentioned in the results after the race.

The next year, Taylor’s name was not mentioned in any pre- or post-race stories for the 1892 Peoria race. But one newspaper account stated, “The race for ‘Boys Under 16’ had 21 entries, including one colored lad, who paused trembling at the tape.”¹⁰ Given that Major Taylor’s autobiography included a recollection of an 1892 Peoria race, one wonders if the trembling boy was Taylor.

Then the autobiography gets even more confusing. The next race Major mentions is the 75-mile road race to Matthews, Indiana. The date for that was June 30, 1895, five years after the Maywood race and the first Peoria race. Major wrote that he was employed at the bicycle shop of Harry Hearsey at that time. He noted that his participation at the Matthews race necessitated secrecy because of color prejudice from other racers. To emphasize that issue, he then veered off into an episode that had happened “a few months before,” which would seem to indicate early 1895. He stated that the well-known professional racer Walter Sanger had been in Indianapolis for an attempt to establish a 1-mile record for the brand new, five-laps-to-the-mile Capital City Track built by George Catterson (the promotor behind the Matthews Road Race). Per Taylor’s account, Sanger set a track record that day of 2 minutes, 18 seconds. Afterward Taylor and some of his “friends” had a plan for him to try to better that record, but because of an expectation of possible racist issues, it had to be

done surreptitiously. He wrote that he was sneaked into the dressing room to prepare, and then “smuggled” onto the track. The excitement of the crowd for Sanger’s feat had barely died down, and the crowd went completely silent as he came out and warmed up. Long story short, he said he

even allowing him on the track. To Taylor, that event was an important early encounter with the racism that followed him throughout his career.

There is a lot to be cleared up in all of that. The whole story is totally skewed. That event did not occur in 1895, or even 1894. It was in early September 1896, over a year after the Matthews race. Major was not working for Harry Hearsey at that time. He had left Hearsey long before and had been formally connected with Birdie Munger at least since the spring of 1893. He and Munger left Indianapolis in the fall of 1895 to settle in Worcester, Massachusetts, both working there at the Worcester Cycle Company. Taylor had gained wide acclaim in the interim as a very fast rider. An article in *The Worcester Daily Spy* for April 5, 1896, stated that he “well deserves the title of colored champion, which he now is.” Munger severed his connection with the Worcester company in June, 1896¹¹, and Taylor returned to Indianapolis shortly after, in early August, supposedly taking a job with the Hay and Willits Bicycle Company¹² (he stayed until November 16,¹³ when he returned to New York to participate in the December six-day race at Madison Square Garden). He made good use of his visit home. He had family there, as well as a lot of local prestige through his friends in the bicycle business and racing community, not to mention his close relationship with Munger, who was one of the most influential men in all of bicycling back then. So, his participation in the mile record chase is not a surprise. George Catterson, who was the driving force behind the Capital City Track and the races there, knew Taylor from his winning the Matthews 75-mile race the year before. Catterson lived at 808 Meridian Street, about one block from where Taylor’s friends the Southards had lived, and not too far from his own family’s neighborhood in Sleight. The Sanger one-mile track record and Taylor’s besting it, as well as his setting a fifth-of-a-mile track record, did not even happen at the same meet. Sanger set his mark at a meet on August 18.¹⁴ Taylor’s meet was two weeks later, on September 2.¹⁵ Neither of the record-breaking attempts were races; both were exhibitions set up by Catterson. Taylor was not “secreted” onto the track by his friends. He was part of the evening’s program. There was favorable newspaper



FIGURE 2. ZIG-ZAG CLUB RIBBON from the 1891 Peoria, Illinois Race Meet.

The club was there.

Major Taylor was possibly there.

Collection of Buck Peacock.

reeled off a mile in 2 minutes, 11 seconds, besting Sanger’s just-created track record by 7 seconds. Then he later took a go at the track record for the one-fifth of a mile distance. He broke that record, too. He said those records stood as long as the track remained. As he left the track, he wrote, he heard “threatening remarks aimed at him,” and the other racers (all white) were angry with him, as well as the track manager, for

coverage before and after the September 2 meet, saying that he was the "chief attraction of the meet"¹⁶ and "did such sensational work on the track"¹⁷ and that "his work was well received".¹⁸ Another interesting point to be reckoned with in Taylor's telling of this story is that he said that his performance led to his being banned from racing at any track in Indianapolis because of his color. I believe that did eventually occur, but he was doing another exhibition mile record attempt at the same Capital City track one week later.¹⁹ And he was there again the week after that, September 16, not only for another mile record attempt, but he was also scheduled for three match races with another Black rider, A.S. (AKA Harry/Henry) Stewart who "styles himself the champion colored rider of the world".²⁰ Stewart was not listed in any results from that meet, so it is not clear if he did, in fact, participate.

Incidentally, Taylor was never referred to as "Major" Taylor once in all the newspaper coverage of those meets, and there was a lot. He was referred to as "Taylor, the crack colored rider", "Taylor, the colored rider", "W. F. Taylor" (??), "Marshall Taylor", and "W. M. Taylor" (??), and quite a few times just as "Taylor", with no reference to his race. But never as "Major" Taylor.

Taylor's autobiography has things sketchy and totally out of sequence, and the confusion continues. Taylor says that "several weeks after" he set the track record, he participated in a 10-mile road race held by the all-colored See-Saw Club of Indianapolis. As far as I have been able to determine, the only See-Saw Club 10-mile race that happened during that era was on July 4, 1894; no race was reported in 1893, 1895, or 1896. If the three match races mentioned above actually did occur on the 16th, there was no reporting of them. After Taylor's supposed win in whatever race it was, he wrote that Stewart challenged him to a 5-mile re-match at Rushville, Indiana. The race at Rushville did happen, but a year earlier, on September 2, 1895. Taylor wrote that he beat Stewart (he did) and then won three other races at the same meet. In fact, he won only two other races there, the half-mile and the quarter mile.²¹

Taylor said the winner of the See-Saw race was supposed to get an all-expenses-paid trip to a 10-mile race in Chicago. That race, held by Chicago's colored

Douglas Cycling Club, took place July 27, 1895, before the Rushville race, not after. Unless there was an unreported 1895 See-Saw race, his trip to Chicago was not "all expenses paid" by the See-Saw Club. And he was not first over the tape. He was second, but he did win the time prize (This was a "handicap" race, where lesser riders were allowed to start ahead of stronger riders. Major was the fastest rider to complete the distance but was unable to catch a rider who started before him). And Harry Stewart was there. Taylor did beat him over the line. It really seems like this was the event where Stewart challenged Taylor to the Rushville re-match. Who knows? Taylor's narrative compared to period newspaper accounts is all very confusing.

Taylor finished his chapter by getting back to the story of the Matthews 75-mile road race. As previously mentioned, that race was on June 30, 1895 — before any hypothetical July Fourth See-Saw race, before the July 27, 1895²², Chicago/Douglas Cycling Club race, before the September 2, 1895, Rushville race, and way before the September 2, 1896, event where Taylor lowered Sanger's record. Matthews was a newly formed town developed by George Catterson. The race to Matthews was meant to promote the new town, as the winner was to receive a deed to a lot there worth \$150.00²³ (about \$4,400 in today's money). Taylor said that "due wholly to the fact that I was colored, the greatest secrecy surrounded the arrangements for this big event." However, there was not much secrecy about it. By that time Taylor was well known and respected by all the other local riders. One newspaper said, "Everybody knew that 'Major' would ride the distance if anyone did."²⁴ He was associated with Birdie Munger and at that time was riding a Munger Bicycle. He had several friends who paced him along the way. The weather that day was horrible. There were torrential rainstorms almost the entire day, and for much of the time there was water up to the sprocket wheels. There was a five-mile stretch of muddy road where he was forced to walk. The other competitors dropped like flies, and Taylor was the only rider to reach Matthews. He won! It was said that his muddy clothes weighed more than his 13-pound Munger racing bike.²⁵ It was a race that earned Taylor much admiration and notoriety. It had been estimated to be

about a four-hour race, but it took Taylor 8 hours and 20 minutes. It is also interesting to note that Taylor said he tucked the deed into his pocket and rushed home to show his mother. He finished at 3:35 in the afternoon and had to take a 75-mile train ride back to Indianapolis, scheduled to arrive at Indianapolis at 10:55 p.m.,²⁶ probably putting him home a little before midnight. That was not much of a rush. Also, he intimated that his mother was not aware that he had been participating in a race. I wonder where she thought he had gone.

Just to throw one other "misinformation" claim in the mix, he said that after the Rushville race he won three races, the quarter, half-mile, and mile, at the Lexington, Kentucky, Fair, under the auspices of the colored citizens. There was a Lexington Fair event scheduled for one week later, on September 7, 1895. The only report I could find for that event stated, "The bicycle races that were down on the program did not come off."²⁷ However, Major had won a 1-mile race at the Lexington Colored Fair years earlier, in September 1892.²⁸ And on August 2, 1894, a year before the Rushville race, he did win three races, the quarter-mile, the half-mile, and the 2-mile, at a U.B.F. and S.M.T. (Rev. Marshall W. Taylor's organizations) celebration in Indianapolis.²⁹ More mixed-up years and events.

So, to sort all of that out, Taylor's last race as a resident of Indianapolis occurred at Rushville on September 2, 1895. On September 21, a notice in the *Indianapolis Freeman* stated that "Major Taylor, the bicycle rider, is in New York, making arrangements to meet some of the 'crack' riders of the East." He was 16 years old at that time. His mentor Birdie Munger had settled in Worcester, Massachusetts, in early September to begin work at the Worcester Cycle Manufacturing Company. Taylor was soon to follow.

The next news report on Taylor was concerning his participation in a 10-mile road race put on by the Albion Cycling Club, an all-colored club in Worcester. Taylor was one of the entrants. He said in his autobiography that he won the event. In fact, he came in third, but he did win the time prize.³⁰

Taylor's autobiography was written at least 30 years after the events mentioned above. Most of the later stories in the autobiography, after he had developed

into a significant national and international racer, were pulled directly from the tremendous number of newspaper clippings in the scrapbooks that he kept. He must have had to rely on memory for the early stories. As for why all the date and location errors and omissions were made, on the surface it seems that he just had difficulty recalling exactly when the events had happened. That would not be unusual. Memories do fade as time passes. But omitting certain things and changing others ultimately put a different spin on the narrative of his early life. The portrayals of the Sanger challenge and the Matthews race as racially charged events, when newspapers did not report them that way at all was not really necessary. But racism was ubiquitous in that era, and I think he wanted to make his readers understand from the outset that this was something he had to deal with throughout his entire career as a racing cyclist.

The events and timelines in Taylor's autobiography and subsequent biographies do not tell the true picture of his childhood development into "The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World." It is obvious that he had substantial natural talent, but as it was told in a newspaper article in 1896 regarding the development of bicycle racers in Indianapolis:

It takes time to make a racing man. He is not the product of a mere notion to become a fast rider, and he is not the product of a few months training, but if he would ride in

the front he must put in many long months of training and hard work and live on rare beef and diet himself as a prizefighter diets just before entering the ring. There is much privation to be suffered, and this is not for a single month, but for many of them. One season of hard work seldom makes a racing man worthy of the name, for if he does not begin until he is fully grown and has developed the necessary muscle, he is too old to ever expect to become one of the crack riders of the country, and if he begins when younger it requires the development that time alone can give to put him in the front rank. These conditions make it impossible

that time. I think a good indication of what we are missing was revealed when after the 1890 Peoria race it was said that he "cried a little over his defeat, which he attributed to a lack of condition," and that he "had all the snap and style of a veteran." That does not sound like someone who, as he had written in describing his first race just one month earlier, had never seen a bicycle race before. It sounds more like someone who knew what he was supposed to be doing and what was expected of him, but his results did not meet those expectations. He must have had someone looking after him and encouraging his progress. And then, whether it was through oversight or intentional avoidance, he offered no explanation of how he got to Peoria from Indianapolis

(approximately 212 miles) possibly three years in a row, at the ages of 11, 12 and 13 — not to mention other races that would have required significant travel, all the way up to 1895. A child would have needed some adult assistance in these endeavors. This gives a big hint to what he has been doing in the unreported gap between 1886 and 1890. These issues feed into the possibility of Munger

or others entering Taylor's life a good bit earlier than the commonly accepted era of Munger's bachelor quarters in 1893, when Munger was 30 and Taylor was 14.

A closer look at Munger's life and background might shed light on the beginnings of his relationship with Major Taylor. Ultimately, Taylor dedicated his autobiography to Munger, calling the older man his

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FIGURE 3. ADVERTISEMENT from one of Birdie Munger's first employers. 1883-1884 Detroit City Directories.

that many men should become fast riders in one year.³¹

This article was directed to specific riders in Indianapolis by name, but Taylor was not one of them. And odd, because I believe that Taylor's development was exactly along these lines, and he was without a doubt one of the best bicycle racers in Indianapolis at

"true friend and advisor" and "one of my staunchest supporters and advisers." Writing about his time working at Munger's bachelor quarters in Indianapolis, Taylor wrote, "Had I been his own son he could not have acted more kindly toward me."

Birdie Munger shared a lot of his father's traits, but violence was not one of them. He was a genial, happy-go-lucky fellow, loved and admired by many.

MUNGER'S INTRODUCTION

EARLY "BIRDIE"

Theodore Munger and Mary Jane Pattee, were married on Christmas eve 1859 in Cedar Falls, Iowa. Theodore, who had been born in Canada, was variously a farmer, a patent rights agent, an inventor and patentee, a mechanic, a laborer, a carpenter, a peddler, a tree pruner, and a horticulture/olericulture researcher. He was a bit eccentric. In 1867 he received a patent on an "improved farm gate."

The Mungers' second child, Louis deFranklin, was born in 1863 in Cedar Falls. The family relocated to Windsor, Ontario, when Louis was a child. Around 1873, they moved over the river into Detroit. Louis inherited his father's mechanical and creative mind. By the age of 16 he was working as a machinist for C.P. Rabaut, a sash, door, and blinds manufacturer. His abilities then led him to the Detroit Ladder Factory, as engineer and co-proprietor with G.A. Burch (Figure 3), where he worked until he was introduced to the bicycle. It was during the bicycle years that Louis became "Birdie," although the origin of this nickname, more commonly applied to young girls or old women, is unknown.

Birdie's mother filed for divorce in August 1886, on the grounds that she had feared for her life for the past six years as a result of Theodore's violent temper.³² The divorce was granted July 12, 1887,³³ about the time Birdie moved from Detroit to Chicago. In 1893 his father, characterized as "a well-known character about town and a crank on inventions,"³⁴ was committed to the Eastern Michigan Asylum for the Insane. He was eventually released from there and died in 1923 at the Oakland County Pauper's Home in Pontiac at the age of eighty-nine. A few weeks after his death it was discovered that he had a bank account with several thousand dollars in it.³⁵



FIGURE 4. BIG FOUR HAT. *Inspiration for the outfits worn by the Boston contingent at the Big Four Tour. The Wheel, A Journal of Cycling, New York, April 3, 1885.*

TO THE BICYCLE AND HIS SUBSEQUENT CAREER

Biographies of Major Taylor tend to downplay the accomplishments of Birdie Munger as a racing cyclist. He was actually spectacular, as the following timeline shows.

1884. Munger applied for membership in the League of American Wheelmen in May.³⁶ On June 12 he was at the Detroit Bicycle Club meet being held at Windsor, Ontario, Canada, competing in the 1-mile dash (Club Championship race), and the 3-mile dash. He crashed at the beginning of both, remounted, caught, and passed the rest of the field and won both. He also came in second in the half-mile dash.³⁷

The next month, on June 28, he was

at Marshall, Michigan, and entered the 5-mile Championship of Michigan race. He won.³⁸

His love for just riding a bicycle was first displayed in early July, when he joined a week-long tour with the Detroit Bicycle Club from Detroit, winding through fifty-some Canadian towns and villages before heading back home, covering a total of 330 miles.³⁹ By August 15, he was the captain of the Detroit Bicycle Club.⁴⁰

1885. This year Munger showed a marked increased interest in the bicycle, starting with racing at a couple of early summer meets and netting a few respectable placings in each.

After an early July race, he headed for the July 2-3 L.A.W. National Meet in Buffalo, New York. Three days after the close of the meet, on July 6, he joined up with 109 other high-wheel riders for the "Big Four Tour"

A 12-day wheeling event from Buffalo to Canada and back to New York City. The tour consisted of men from Chicago, Boston, Buffalo, and New York cycling clubs; hence the "Big Four." Munger was from Detroit but rode in this event with friends he had made in the Boston clubs.⁴¹ It was here that Munger first gave witness to his eccentric proclivities. Preparations for the event gave a recommendation for proper dress: "the uniform of the League of American Wheelmen"...

"gray Bedford blouse, knee pants, stockings, and head covering, with white flannel shirt."⁴² It was soon discovered that Munger had a flamboyant streak about him. His Boston group showed up on the first day of the tour with a different idea from the LAW uniform. A newspaper account reported:

Their costume consisted of black jersey tights throughout, a Norfolk blouse striped with every color of the rainbow, and a monstrous straw hat, with an eight inch brim and a crown twenty inches high, gayly decorated with bright colored ribbons, and a dangerous looking tin horn--the whole forming a rig the likes of which had never been seen before.⁴³

Taking into account Munger's activities

throughout his later career, it seems this was probably his creation. The hat from a pre-event ad was the obvious seed for the idea (Figure 4).

A feature of the Big Four Tour was a 100-mile race on July 11 from Cobourg, Ontario, to the Thousand Islands, an archipelago at the head of the Saint Lawrence River on the Canada-United States border. Munger came in second in that event. At one point he ran into a horse and tried to dismount but landed astride his bicycle's backbone, knocking him out for 10 minutes. His effort in completing the race was so admirable that the others took up a collection to work up a special medal just for him.

A recap of the event said:

Munger, who entered into all the sports of the trip and soon became a great favorite with the boys. Munger is an odd genius, brimming over with fun and frolic, and his pranks on the road, on train, and on steamer added greatly to the pleasure of all parties...⁴⁴

THE AMERICAN 24-HOUR RECORD- CHASE PART I

After the Big Four Tour, Munger stayed with his new friends in Boston for a few weeks, returned to Detroit for a visit (possibly to quit his job there), and then came back to Boston with a new goal in mind. Inspired by his performance in the Big Four 100-mile race, he felt he could better the American 24-hour record of 207 1/2 miles, previously held by Californian Fred Cook. On August 2 he was successful, with 211 1/2 miles showing on his Butcher cyclometer.⁴⁵ He rode a 57-inch Singer Apollo, a bike distributed by W.B. Everett & Company of Boston⁴⁶ (Figure 5).

On August 16, back in Detroit, Munger set a record from there to Pontiac, Michi-

gan, a distance of 26 miles, in 1 hour, 52 minutes.⁴⁷ A week later, at the Cleveland (Ohio) Bicycle Club tournament, he won the half-mile race and placed second in the 1-mile race.⁴⁸ Another couple of weeks, and he was back in Pontiac, where he won a 5-mile race.

THE AMERICAN 24-HOUR RECORD-CHASE PART 2

In Late September, A.A. McCurdy, age 19, bested Munger's 24-hour record with a ride of 233 1/6 miles.⁴⁹ Munger was at a Chicago race meet a few weeks after this,

makers. Their wheels were equipped with highly accurate Butcher cyclometers to verify the mileage. Munger's secondary purpose was to scout out a route for his next 24-hour attempt. Williams was successful in his endeavor, setting a 50-mile tricycle record of 5 hours, 27 minutes.⁵¹

The next day, Munger set out on Williams' record course in an attempt to break McCurdy's new 24-hour record. About five hours into the ride, his foot slipped from the pedal, and when it came back around to hit him, he sprained his ankle. He tried to suffer on, but at 185 miles the severe pain forced him to abandon the ride.⁵²



FIGURE 5. SINGER APOLLO BICYCLE, as ridden by Birdie Munger in his early racing days. Image from the Sterba Bike website:
<https://www.sterba-bike.cz/produkt/high-wheel-52-singer-apollo?lang=EN#gallery2-3>

where he placed third in both the 5-mile and the 1-mile open races against some very strong competition.

On October 23 Munger was back in Boston for an attempt to take back the 24-hour record.

A few days later, on October 26, Munger's friend John Williams, a Black champion tricyclist, set out trying to break the American 50-mile tricycle record, with Munger and Gideon Haynes Jr. as pace-

THE AMERICAN 24-HOUR RECORD- CHASE PART 3

By November 6 he felt his ankle had improved enough for another attempt. This time he used another local Black high-wheel rider, David Drummond, as a pacemaker. Pace making in those days was not just a shield from wind resistance, as is generally known today. A pacemaker was also a coach who persuaded and encouraged the rider to perform at his best. Drummond had a reputation as a very good pacemaker.

He is not a particularly fast rider, but he knows just how to do it, and had a peculiar way of coaxing his men along.⁵³

In order to cope with the dangers of riding in the darkness of night, Munger rigged an innovative lighting array to improve the situation.

During his night riding he carries three lanterns, one attached to the hub of the bicycle and two others suspended by an ingenious arrangement out over the front wheel. By the aid of these he has sufficient light to ride at a good speed with comparative safety.⁵⁴ (Figure 6)

At 130 miles there was a torrential rain-storm and once again he had to abandon the effort.⁵⁵

THE AMERICAN 24-HOUR RECORD-CHASE PART 4

On Friday the 13th, Munger started a third attempt on the 24-hour record, again using the pace making abilities of Drummond. At a mere four miles into the ride, he was flying at 20 miles an hour when the driver of a dump cart drove directly across his path, causing a severe crash. He was thrown from his bicycle, cutting his forehead and arms, as well as re-injuring his ankle. He remounted and covered another twelve miles, but the pain intensified, and he could go no further. It was not his lucky day.

THE AMERICAN 24-HOUR RECORD-CHASE PART 5

One week later, November 21, vowing to stay in Boston until he had the 24-hour record, Munger made a fourth attempt. The same day, another man, W.H. Huntley, made his own attempt on McCurdy's record. Huntley started before Munger at 1 p.m., and 24 hours later he had a new record of 257 miles. Munger did not start his attempt until 5 p.m. This time, in addition to pacemaker David Drummond, Munger was accompanied by record holder McCurdy himself. At the end of 24 hours, Munger had eclipsed both McCurdy's previous record as well as Huntley's brand-new record, with a new total of 259 13/16 miles. Huntley had his record for only four hours. Both men had ridden in dangerously freezing temperatures.

1886. On January 15 Munger went to New Orleans, ostensibly as a traveling salesperson for the W.B. Everett Company, the Boston Importer for the Apollo bicycle he rode. He planned to combine business with pleasure. While visiting bicycle shops to interest them in the Apollo, his secondary aim was to take advantage of the good macadam roads there to attempt to set records for 50- and 25-mile distances. He was successful, setting a 25-mile record, at 1 hour, 24 minutes, 46 4/5 seconds on March 27⁵⁶ and the 50-mile record, at 3 hours, 27 minutes, 33 seconds on April 2.⁵⁷

During his stay in New Orleans, it was said of him,

Munger is a sort of a bicycle missionary, traveling around to encourage the sport... He is the life of every tour and trip on wheels and will do much to popularize the sport in the South.⁵⁸

During that period the L.A.W. was strictly an amateur organization. Concern arose within the L.A.W. racing board when it became apparent that some racers were receiving payment from the manufacturers of the bicycles being used in their races. Getting paid to race meant they were professionals. It was eventually decided to crack down on anyone who had received compensation and/or expense money from the bicycle industry.

The discussion to decide who fit these parameters was being argued in mid-April, right before the upcoming and very prestigious 50-mile road race in Clarksville, Missouri, the scene of the Clarksville

photograph. Munger's job, of course, was to be a sales representative for W.B. Everett & Company. His travel expenses were covered by Everett, based on his ability to boost their business. In the races he entered, he was able to keep the prizes he won, typically medals or cycling accessories, but he received no money for racing. Munger really was just racing for glory.

Regardless, the L.A.W. board interpreted his situation as professionalism, and the week before the Clarksville race, suspended him from League membership.⁵⁹ At the height of his popularity, when he was one

of the most recognized and respected bicycle racing personalities of the day, as well as a relentless promoter for the sport, the L.A.W. shut him down. He held the American 24-hour record, 25-mile record and



FIGURE 6. BIRDIE MUNGER ON HIS SINGER APOLLO equipped with his innovative three lantern set-up that he used during the nighttime segments of his 24-hour American Road record attempts. Collection of the New-York Historical Society, USA / © New York Historical Society / Bridgeman Images.

50-mile record, and was one of the favorites going into the Clarksville race. But he was not allowed to race there.

On April 24, the day of the race, the quick-to-react Munger came in with a revised plan and showed up at the Clarksville meet anyway. He put on his salesman hat and sold five Apollos there.⁶⁰ But that didn't faze the L.A.W. Their decision stood. No racing.

The race was won by George E. Weber on a Star bicycle. Adding insult to injury, Weber broke Munger's recent 50-mile record by 20 minutes.⁶¹ Weber, who was

only 20 years old, and a bright star for the racing community, tragically died four months later of typhoid fever.⁶²

Munger maintained a very limited schedule for the remainder of the year. The L.A.W. decision did not necessarily hinder his ability to race. Apparently, flying under the radar, he was scheduled for a 10-mile National Championship race on June 24 against Chicagoan N.H. Van Sicklin at a Detroit Bicycle Club meet. He unfortunately sustained a header warming up and had to withdraw from the event.

On July 2, the *Bicycling World and the L.A.W. Bulletin* reported that “Munger arrived at home the day before; he was indisposed, his physician positively refusing to let him race.”⁶³

Perhaps the oddest report about Munger was in a July 3 issue of *The Cycle*. It said,

It is reported that L. D. Munger, the speedy road rider, now traveling through the Southern States in the interest of W. B. Everett & Company, has been paying too much attention to the best girl of a hot-blooded Southerner, and as a result the wheelman has been invited to fight a duel with real revolvers and genuine 32-calibre cartridges.”⁶⁴

I could find no follow-up reporting on that situation.

Shortly after that, several news reports said he “will retire from

the racing path for the balance of the year at least.”⁶⁵

Regardless, he was at a meet in East Saginaw, Michigan, in early July, winning the half-mile and 5-mile races,⁶⁶ and racing again on August 22 at another Detroit Club race meet, where he took second place to Indianapolis racer S.P. Hollingsworth in both the half-mile and 1-mile races.⁶⁷

At about this same time, it was reported that “Munger had severed his connection with W.B. Everett & Company... and will race no more this year.”⁶⁸ Thus ended the relationship that the L.A.W. had found so troubling.

That was the last news of Munger until the upcoming 1887 edition of the Clarks-ville Road Race began to generate interest. That is about a nine-month gap. Whether it was the suspension from the L.A.W., some medical issue, girl trouble, or some other unknown reason, reports about Munger did not appear anywhere during that time in either newspaper or specialized cycling periodical. Munger was a man who loved to be the center of attention. It was unusual for him to be out of the public eye for that long.

THE SUSPICIOUS SPRINGFIELD REPUBLICAN INTERVIEW⁶⁹

This period was addressed 37 years later, in an interview with Munger published in the *Springfield Republican* newspaper on December 28, 1924. The interview covered some of the highlights of his racing career. It also appears to have a few tall tales and stretches of imagination mixed in. Such embellishment fit Munger’s personality. He told the newspaper that at the beginning of the summer of 1886, he made a 111-day cross-country trip on his high-wheel bicycle, from San Francisco to New York City. While the nine-month gap may have allowed time for such a ride, there are a few details that raise the possibility that it never really happened.

First of all, the *Springfield Republican* article stated that “Munger was the first man to cross the American continent on a wheel.” Not only had Thomas Stevens most famously accomplished the feat in 1884, but per John Weiss’s superb article in *The Wheelmen Magazine*,⁷⁰ no less than three other men accomplished the feat before 1886. They were all lesser lights than

FIGURE 7. TOM ROE LYING ASTRIDE his *Gormely and Jeffry American Light* bike before he lit out for his San Francisco to Chicago cross-country ride in 1889. Birdie Munger is the second from the left standing. Courtesy of the collection of John Weiss.



Munger, yet they all received some notoriety through intermittent news updates that followed their crossings. But for Munger, one of the most well-known bicyclists in the country at the time, I found no mention of any cross-country trip.

We know that he was in Detroit on August 22, and it would have been at least a week by train from Chicago to reach his start in San Francisco, putting the start of a cross-country trip around September 1. Add 111 days and he'd be in New York in mid- to late December. Riding into New York in the dark of winter would be challenging to say the least.

Munger told the newspaper he followed the Santa Fe Railroad route. That railroad line was not even completed into Chicago until 1887,⁷¹ a year later. Continuing the Santa Fe claim, he said that when he ran out of roadway, he would ride on the railroad tracks — just on the big wheel, with his little rear wheel in the air. As any good wheelman knows, that is a formula for an instant header.

He talked about reaching Kansas, encountering the “earliest ever snowstorm recorded” and being snowed in for five days. I did find a mention of a heavy snowstorm in western Kansas around November 20 of that year, which would have been about 81 days into the ride and about half the way to New York. That would have left him 30 days in winter weather to complete his 111-day trip to New York. 81 days to make the first half leaving only 30 days to make the second does not sound like a recipe for success.

Usually, any story about Munger was picked up and published in local papers all over the country. Consider his record-breaking rides in New Orleans in early



FIGURE 8. ANOTHER PUBLICITY PICTURE OF ROE before his cross-country ride. He received a lot of publicity along the road on this ride. There was not one mention of a ride by Munger that he later claimed he had taken in 1886. Courtesy of the collection of John Weiss.



FIGURE 9. CHARLIE “MILE-A-MINUTE” MURPHY for his historic 60 mph ride behind a locomotive in 1899.

1886, which were picked up by at least 15 newspapers. A cross-country bike trip by Munger was never mentioned in any publication until the 1924 article. The dearth of news about his supposed trip is a huge red flag.

Perhaps tellingly, Munger's Chicago Cycling Club pal Tom Roe made a well-documented, high-visibility cross-country bike trip from San Francisco to Chicago in 1889.⁷² He was sponsored by the *Chicago Herald* newspaper, received expense money from his bike manufacturer, Gormully

and companionship, that ride took Roe 72 days. Roe "was received in elegant style in almost every city through which he rode. In fact, in many instances the celebrating commenced as soon as he arrived and lasted until he left."⁷⁷ (Figure 8) Munger's supposed ride had zero support and was done in complete anonymity. I am confident that ride never happened.

There were several other misleading or just flat untrue accounts in that same *Springfield Republican* article, Munger claimed that his good friend and training partner Frank Waller held the six-day race distance record of 2,467 miles. Waller was a great racer, but after much digging into six-day stats, I could not verify that.

The story hit a new low when Munger declared that he had trained Charlie "Mile-A-Minute" Murphy for his historic 60 mph ride behind a locomotive in 1899. At the exact time of that feat, Munger was in Chicago, training and assisting Major Taylor in a 1-mile record attempt paced behind a steam-powered motorcycle, not a train.⁷⁸ And to top it off, Munger told the interviewer that Murphy's ride was on a high wheel. As evidenced by photos (Figure 9) and written reports, it is known that Murphy rode a Tribune pneumatic safety model called a Blue Streak, made by the Black Manufacturing Company. That was plenty dangerous in itself. Murphy's feat would have been impossible on a high wheel. I don't know why Munger threw that claim in, other than to see how far he could push the interviewer. Apparently, it was pretty far.

Munger was a joker off and on throughout his life, and this interview appears to be more fantasy than fact.

In the next installment, I will go in depth about Munger's eccentric personality and his relationship with Major Taylor. (Figure 10) 🚲

ENDNOTES

NOTE: Any time there is a statement "Taylor said" or otherwise is referring to something that should be attributed to Major Taylor, it is a reference from his autobiography: *The Fastest Bicycle in the World*.

Once again, I must acknowledge the incredible editing work done by Lynne Tolman, of the Major Taylor Association. I have added a few things recently which



FIGURE 10. BIRDIE MUNGER AT THE HEIGHT of his high-wheel racing career. This picture was taken during an important race in Crawfordsville, Indiana in 1888. His bike is a Gormully & Jeffry American Light Champion. Courtesy of The Cycling Photographica collection of Lorne Shields, Toronto Canada.

and Jeffery, and was supported all the way, with whatever assistance he needed, by the Santa Fe Railroad Company.⁷³ That crossing pretty much parallels the narrative that Munger provided to the Springfield paper in 1924: Santa Fe Railroad route (completed by the time of Roe's trip), difficult ter-

rain, bad snowstorms, dangerous encounters, etc. But unlike Munger's claimed trip, Roe's ride received regular updates and commentary in newspapers and cycling periodicals, throughout the ride. Munger and a few other Chicago Cycling Club members saw Roe off at the train station on September 14,⁷⁴ when he left Chicago to reach his start in San Francisco on September 21 (Figure 7). It was a very difficult trip for Roe, and when he finally reached Kansas City, exhausted, Munger and other Chicago Cycling Club members met up to ride with him for his last 540 miles into Chicago. Between Kansas City and Carrollton, Missouri, a distance of 70 miles, the roads were so bad they had to ride the railroad bed (as Munger claimed to have done in 1886 — but probably not with the little wheel in the air).⁷⁵ The Ottawa, Illinois, paper claimed that Roe and Munger travelled the 45 miles from there to Joliet, Illinois, using a team (horse and carriage). Roe reached Chicago on December 2.

All the perils and bad circumstances that Munger claimed about for his trip were actually experienced by Roe on his ride. At the time, Roe vehemently denied all accusations of not actually riding the whole way, but in an interview in 1893, he admitted that it was all fake.⁷⁶ He said he suffered from lack of promised financial support and confessed that he rode the train for a good bit of the way. With all of his backing, train rides

she has not had an opportunity to check. I hope I do not disappoint her.

1. *Boonville Standard*, Boonville, Indiana, September 20, 1889.
2. *The Indianapolis News*, Indianapolis Indiana, August 11, 1890.
3. *The Chicago Herald*, Chicago, Illinois, September 14, 1890.
4. *The Daily Inter Ocean*, Chicago, Illinois, September 7, 1890.
5. *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago, Illinois, September 13, 1890.
6. *The Daily Inter Ocean*, Chicago, Illinois, September 13, 1890.
7. Ibid: See Note 5.
8. *The Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, New York, New York, September 19, 1890.
9. *St. Louis Democrat*, September 16, 1891 & *The Inter Ocean*, September 17, 1891.
10. *Chicago Record*, Chicago, Illinois, September 28, 1892.
11. *The Boston Post*, Boston Massachusetts, July 5, 1896.
12. *The Freeman*, Indianapolis Indiana, August 8, 1896.
13. *The Freeman*, Indianapolis Indiana, November 21, 1896.
14. *The Indianapolis News*, Indianapolis Indiana, August 19, 1896.
15. *The Indianapolis News*, Indianapolis Indiana, September 2, 1896.
16. *The Indianapolis News*, Indianapolis Indiana, August 28, 1896.
17. *The Indianapolis Journal*, Indianapolis Indiana, September 9, 1896.
18. *The Indianapolis News*, Indianapolis Indiana, September 3, 1896.
19. Ibid. See Note 18.
20. Ibid. See Note 18.
21. *The Freeman*, Indianapolis Indiana, September 7, 1895.
22. *The Indianapolis Journal*, Indianapolis, Indiana, June 27, 1895.
23. Ibid.
24. *The Daily Muncie Herald*, Muncie, Indiana July 1, 1895.
25. *The Muncie Daily Herald*, Muncie, Indiana, July 1, 1895.
26. Ibid: See Note 19.
27. *The Dailey Leader*, Lexington Kentucky, September 8, 1895.
28. *The Indianapolis News*, Indianapolis, Indiana, September 19, 1892.
29. *The Freeman*, Indianapolis, Indiana, August 11, 1894.
30. *The Worcester Daily Spy*, Worcester, Massachusetts, October 20, 1895.
31. *The Indianapolis Journal*, Indianapolis Indiana, September 13, 1897.
32. *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit Michigan, August 11, 1886.
33. *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit Michigan, July 12, 1887.
34. *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit Michigan, Apr. 5, 1893.
35. *Grand Rapids Press*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, March 5, 1923.
36. *The Wheel, A Journal of Cycling*, New York, New York, May 23, 1884.
37. *The Boston Globe*, Boston Massachusetts, August 3, 1884.
38. *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit Michigan, June 29, 1884.
39. *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit Michigan, July 14, 1884.
40. *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit Michigan, Aug. 15, 1884.
41. *The Boston Globe*, Boston, Massachusetts, July 7, 1885.
42. *The Wheel, A Journal of Cycling*, New York, April 3, 1885.
43. *The Boston Globe*, Boston, Massachusetts, July 7, 1885.
44. *The Wheel, A Journal of Cycling*, New York, New York, July 17, 1885.
45. *The Indianapolis Journal*, Indianapolis Indiana, August 3, 1885.
46. *The Wheel, A Journal of Cycling*, New York, New York, October 30, 1885.
47. *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit Michigan, Aug. 16, 1885.
48. *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago, Illinois, August 28, 1885.
49. *Indianapolis Journal*, Indianapolis, Indiana, September 26, 1885.
50. *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago, Illinois, October 18, 1885.
51. *The Wheel, A Journal of Cycling*, New York, New York, October 30, 1885.
52. *The Wheel, A Journal of Cycling*, New York, New York October 30, 1885.
53. *The Wheel, A Journal of Cycling*, New York, New York November 13, 1885.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. *The Times Democrat*, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 28, 1886.
57. *The York Daily*, York, Pennsylvania, April 9, 1886.
58. *The Wheel, A Journal of Cycling*, New York, New York, January 22, 1886.
59. *The Boston Globe*, Boston, Massachusetts, April 18, 1886.
60. *The Cycle*, Boston, Massachusetts, May 21, 1886.
61. *The Bicycling World and LAW Bulletin*, Boston, Massachusetts, April 30, 1886.
62. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, St. Louis, Missouri, August 30, 1886.
63. *The Bicycling World and LAW Bulletin*, Boston, Massachusetts, July 2, 1886.
64. *The Cycle*, Boston, Massachusetts, July 23, 1886.
65. *The Bicycling World and LAW Bulletin*, Boston, Massachusetts, July 30, 1886.
66. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, St. Louis Missouri, July 24, 1886.
67. *The Bicycling World and LAW Bulletin*, Boston, Massachusetts, August 27, 1886.
68. *The Wheel, A Journal of Cycling*, New York, New York, August 13, 1886.
69. *The Springfield Republican*, Springfield, Massachusetts, December 28, 1924.
70. *The Wheelmen Magazine*, No. 96, May 2020.
71. Atchison, Topeka and Sante Fe Railway, "On the eastern end, it reached Chicago in 1887", <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=Ar001>.
72. *The Wheel and Cycling Trade Review*, New York, New York, October 4, 1889.
73. *The Wheelmen's Gazette*, Indianapolis, Indiana, October 1889.
74. *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, Waterbury, Connecticut, October 5, 1889.
75. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, St. Louis Missouri, November 7, 1899.
76. *The Bicycling World and LAW Bulletin*, Boston, Massachusetts, December 13, 1889.
77. *The Wheelmen's Gazette*, Indianapolis, Indiana, December 1899.
78. *The Cycle Age, Motor Vehicle Review*, July 27, 1899.