

Black cycling champion getting spotlight

By Aaron Epple
Contributing Writer

Local park ranger Arthur Currence found somebody to help promote Black History Month who isn't on the conventional list of heroes.

Marshall "Major" Taylor, a grandson of slaves, rose to become an international cycling champion around the turn of the 20th century. Although quite famous in his time, Taylor is largely forgotten today.

And so Currence, a ranger for the National Park Service, decided to put together a program on Taylor. The program can be seen Saturday and Sunday at the Wright-Dunbar Interpretive Center.

"Major was a playmate to a son of a wealthy white family in Indianapolis," Currence said. "So he had access to education and (items) that other African-American kids didn't. ... One of the last things the family gave him before they moved was a bicycle."

According to Currence, Taylor used his bicycle to get a paper route, and was then spotted by a Mr. Hayes, of the Hayes & Willet Cycle Shop, doing tricks outside of his store.

"Hayes hired him to do maintenance work, mostly," Currence said. "But he also had him do tricks outside (to attract customers). The Army uniform (Hayes) had him wear was what got him the nickname Major."

Hayes was also instrumental in getting Taylor entered in his first cross-country bicycle race, which he won. Taylor continued to race for a few more years in Indianapolis.

"It was when he tried to expand in the South that (the opposition really hit)," Currence said. "The Southern clubs wouldn't allow him to race. The League of American Wheelmen, which is now the League of American Bicyclists, allowed him to race and pay dues even though they wouldn't officially admit him as a member. But then the Southern clubs pushed to disallow even that."

His national champion status was largely based on races he won in the Northeast. The bitterness of racism in his home country eventually pushed Taylor to Europe, where he was received enthusiastically.

Currence will be presenting the program in a storytelling format, accompanied by photographic images for an intended audience of mainly children, though Currence said the program appeals to adults as well.

In addition, Currence will be showing a documentary called *The Bicycle Corps: America's Black Army on Wheels*. Originally produced by Montana Public Television, the film details how, one summer in 1897, the famous Buffalo Soldiers unit was commissioned to field-test a series of specially outfitted bicycles by riding them from Missoula, Mont., to St. Louis, Mo.

How to go

What: From Slavery to Freedom: The Story of Africans in the Americas, highlighting the achievements of Marshall 'Major' Taylor, and the documentary 'The Bicycle Corps: America's Black Army on Wheels'

When: Saturday and Sunday. 'Bicycle Corps' at 1 p.m., Major Taylor at 3 p.m.

Where: The Wright-Dunbar Interpretive Center, 16 S. Williams St., Dayton

Tickets: Free and open to the public

For more information: (937) 225-7705

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