

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Bicycles in New Orleans**

Bicycles were first introduced in the 19th century and now number more than a billion worldwide, twice as many as automobiles. The precursor to this ubiquitous form of transportation was the dandy horse, also called the *Draisienne* (invented by and named for German baron, Karl Drais von Sauerbronn) or *laufmaschine* (meaning "running machine", the term Drais used for his vehicle whose rider sat astride a wooden frame supported by two in-line wheels and pushed along by his or her feet while steering the front wheel). Baron Drais was the chief forester of the duchy of Baden, and used the *laufmaschine* for his inspection tours. It was the first human means of transport to use only two wheels in tandem. Drais introduced this forerunner of the modern bicycle to the public in Mannheim, Germany, in summer 1817 and in Paris on April 6, 1818.

It is believed the word *bicycle* was first used in 1860s (from *bi* for two and the late Latin *cyclus*, from Greek *kuklos* for wheel), but it is widely reported that the Belgian newspaper *La Gaulois* coined the word in the 1890s (Peter Oliver, *Bicycling Touring and Mountain Bike Basics*, 1995). "Before that — and in some places, thereafter — bikes were primarily known as velocipedes," Oliver writes. That part is true, but the notion that *La Gaulois* coined the word *bicycle* appears to be erroneous, as *bicycle* was in widespread use in the Crescent City at least as early as 1880 when the New Orleans *Bicycle Club* was formed.

*Vélocipède* was coined in the early 1800s by French inventor and photography pioneer Nicéphore Niépce and comes from the Latin for "fast foot". It is an all-encompassing term for any human-powered terrestrial vehicle with one or more wheels (the most common type today being the bicycle).

A Scottish blacksmith named Kirkpatrick Macmillan may have produced the first "mechanically-propelled" bike as early as 1839 (although the claim is disputed). Evidence backing up this provenance is the existence of the first recorded cycling traffic fine reported in 1842 in a Glasgow newspaper. In the early 1860s, Frenchmen Pierre Lallement and Pierre Michaux each souped up the *vélocipède* design by

the addition of a rotary crank drive with pedals affixed to an enlarged front wheel. Another Scotsman, John Boyd Dunlop, introduced the first practical pneumatic tire in 1888, which soon became universal.

Invented in 1871 by British engineer James Starley, the "Penny Farthing", the first truly efficient bicycle, was made with rubber tires and consisted of a small back wheel and a large front wheel pivoting on a simple tubular frame. In 1885, Starley designed a "safety bicycle" with a steerable front wheel featuring a chain drive connected to an equally-sized rear wheel.

The "American Star" was patented by G. W. Pressey in 1880. In this version of the bicycle the rider was placed between the wheels and securely supported to prevent one from "taking a header", a frequent bicycle accident of the day.

Also in 1880, on Tuesday, June 29, Lafcadio Hearn wrote a sketch in the New Orleans *Daily City Item* on how "no many ever lived — not even Moses or Solomon — who could discover any principle of action, any law governing movement, in the gyrations of the wild, treacherous, diabolical, and "unspeakable velocipede."

He went on to say, "The velocipede is like a vicious dog, because it always attacks any one who runs away from it; but it is also like a lion which attacks any one who dares to face it boldly. It is like a fox in treachery, like a panther in agility, like a tiger in cruelty, like a gorilla in ferocity, like a greyhound in speed, like a badger in taking a good hold of the calf of your leg, and like the Devil for impudence.

You cannot turn a corner so quickly that a velocipede cannot turn after you still quicker. There is but one possible means of escaping a velocipede. Velocipedes are like grizzly bears; they cannot climb trees....

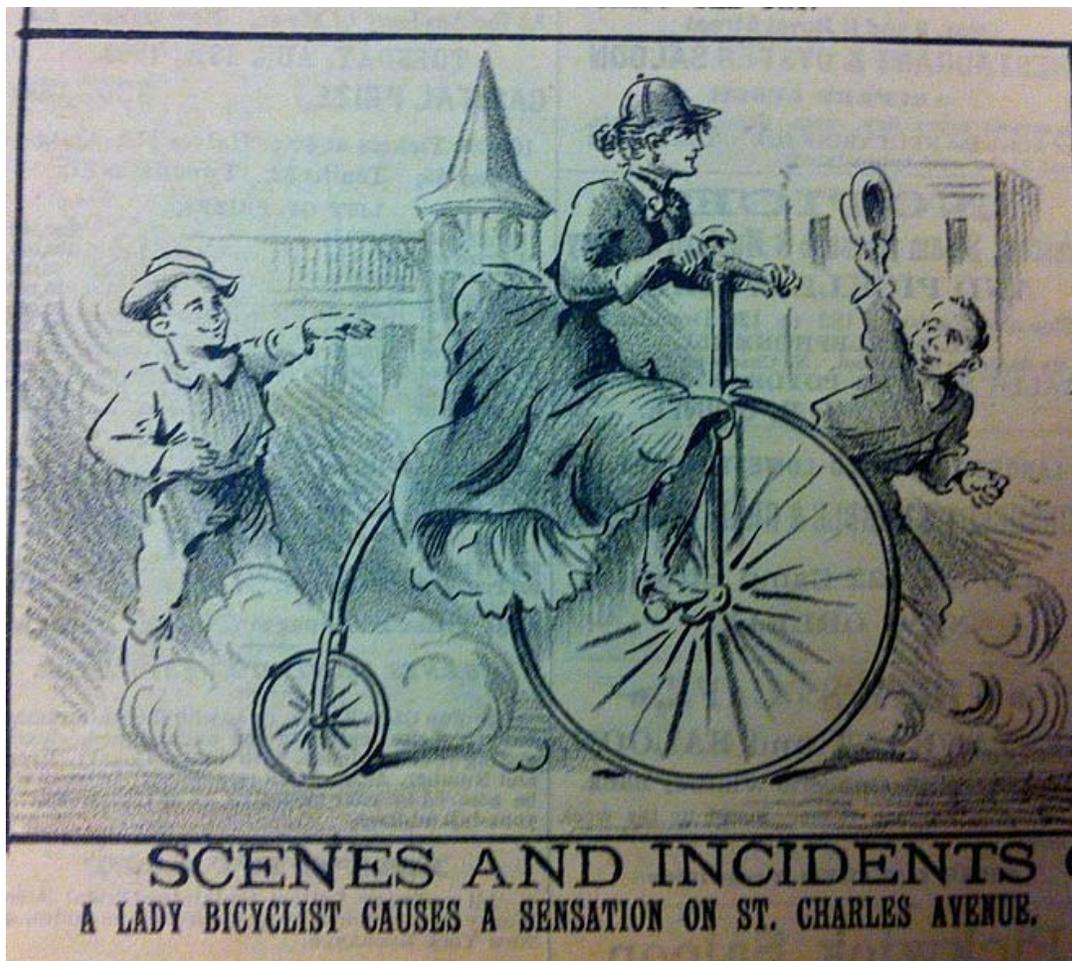
The only way to attack the velocipede successfully is to attack their riders — as the Romans learned to do in fighting against trained elephants. Trained elephants sometimes turned and trampled down their own supporters. So with velocipedes. If you stand your ground well and direct your just rage and wholly excusable indignation against the rider, you will find the velocipede treacherously abandon its owner and fling him in the dust and trample wildly upon him."

He, of course, was referring to the early bicycle, but the term velocipede is (and was) used as a collective term for the monowheel (where the rider sits either within it or next to a single wheel), the unicycle, the bicycle, the dicycle (two wheels ide-by-side with seat(s) in between), the (three-wheeled) tricycle and (four-wheeled) quadracycle.

From Lafcadio Hearn's comments above, one can begin to see what a subversive device the velocipede was in the 1880s, changing New Orleanians' concepts of social and gender equality, the proper modes of dress for new fads and an increased demand for modernizing the city's streets. Locals discovered an activity that both sexes could enjoy together, even though at first shocking Victorian sensibilities.

Three daring New Orleans cyclists rode their bicycles to Boston in thirty days' time, as the *Daily Picayune* reported in four and a half columns on July 23, 1886, quite an accomplishment when one considers the quality of roads, bridges and accommodations in those years.

In New Orleans, by 1891, the term "bicyclist" was being used for a person powering a velocipede.



*A New Orleans vixen on a velocipede, now called a "Lady Bicyclist"*

The above cartoon appeared in the *New Orleans Mascot* on July 27, 1891. With the caption, "A Lady Bicyclist Causes a Sensation on St. Charles Avenue," the accompanying text reads:

"A certain well known society leader creates a sensation nearly every evening on St. Charles Ave. She is a good looking, stylish, of good

family and so on, but is inclined to be mannish. She can ride a tricycle, but that style of locomotion is too slow and even for her, so she has secured herself a bicycle, on which she appears, and certainly creates a sensation, especially when there is a breeze that displays a tendency to play sad havoc with the folds of her drapery. Everybody knows her, so that it is hardly necessary to mention her name."

Later that year, on November 22, 1891, the *Daily Picayune* opined, "One of the rarest, raciest products of the wave of modern progress is the bicycle girl".



The sheet music above was published around the turn of the century by White-Smith Music Publishing Co. A march for piano composed by Laurent L. Comes, the work is dedicated to the New Orleans Bicycle Club. The original New Orleans Bicycle Club was organized in 1880, incorporated in 1885, and had its own headquarters erected in 1891 at the corner of Baronne and General Taylor streets. The clubhouse building served as a warehouse for Martin's Wine Cellar up until Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005.

The NOBC began as a "gentleman's club", composed of "men of affairs of relatively high standing". Member Joseph Pennell proudly claimed,

"There isn't a gentleman's club in town that has a better record than ours". In the selection of members he said, "we never forgot that they are to meet socially the ladies of our own families and that they must be worthy". The club promoted the sport of cycling by holding public events around town (including a woman cyclist competing against horses at the Fair Grounds Race Course). She won two out of three races.

This "gentleman's" bicycle club on Baronne, according to an 1891 article, was to have its entire lower story floored with Schillinger pavement, with one side devoted to a "perfect" ten pin alley. "Also down stairs there will be a billiard room, a gymnasium, a lavatory, bathroom, finely fitted up lockers and a big wheelroom."

Another local bicycle club was called the Louisiana Cycling Club, which held a 100-mile race on upper St. Charles Avenue on October 19, 1890. The participants were: R. G. Betts, B. W. Cason, Jr., E. D. Frederic, C. H. Fenner and Ed Newman. Betts triumphed, completing the 100 miles in 7 hr., 18 min., 37.4 sec.

By 1892 the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* was advertising pneumatic tires, and the "safety" (now \$100) was much-preferred. All over Europe and this country, as well, the joy of bicycle riding spread.

Not everyone was enthusiastic about bicycles. Concerned groups didn't like the idea of women abandoning hoop skirts and petticoats for those divided skirts and racy pantaloons (in order to ride). Some citizens thought riders were reckless and their vehicles were a threat to public safety.

Mark Twain once wrote, "Get a bicycle. You will not regret it. If you live." Twain, of course, featured bicycles in "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court". In it, Hank the story's hero and King Arthur are rescued by Sir Launcelot and 500 knights mounted on bicycles.

A New Orleans resident invented a "Marine and Land Bicycle". His invention was illustrated in an 1895 issue of the *Scientific American*. Presented was a bicycle construction designed to travel with equal facility on land and ice and in the water. The improvement was patented by Evaristo Fernandez, of No. 1819 Dumaine Street, New Orleans. Don't laugh about the "equal facility" on ice. It did, after all, snow in New Orleans in 1895.

The modern incarnation of the NOBC was started up in the late 1960s by (as they maintain) "a handful of guys who had just 'discovered' 10-speeds, and for many years promoted most of the racing in the state of Louisiana." The original sponsor of the New Orleans Bicycle Club was Gus Betat & Son, a large bicycle shop once located on North Broad Street in New Orleans. Driving forces behind the club during the

1970s were Greg Gulotta and Jim McFadden.

Gus Betat was an admirer of Paul Tulane and named his bicycle line after him. The Tulane line was at one time made by one of three manufacturers: Schwinn, Rollfast and Columbia. Betat had a falling out with the original Mr. Schwinn over putting Tulane emblems on the Schwinn bikes.

The new NOBC promoted its first race, "The New Orleans 100", held on Lakeshore Drive on March 30, 1969. Within two years, the club had organized and promoted the first "Tour de Louisiana" in 1972. The largest contingent of riders that year (12) was from Ohio with Texas fielding a group of ten.

The sponsors of the first "Tour de Louisiana" were: Raleigh Industries (who, founded 1887, produced the first "English Racers" in Nottingham England), Gus Betat's Bike Shop (founded in New Orleans a year earlier, 1886), Marcel's Bike Shop, University Bike Shop, Joe's Bike Shop (active for many years on Tulane Avenue) and Lightweight Cycles. The promoters were the New Orleans Bicycle Club and the Donaldsonville Jaycees). The *La Boucherie Gran Prix* was staged through the Vieux Carré for a number of years in the early 1970s, and thousands of tourists and locals came to watch this exciting and popular event. By the 1980s, the club had an active women's team, and became more involved with track racing. Today the club is headquartered in Covington, Louisiana, and remains dedicated to competitive bicycle racing.

In the greater New Orleans area, there are new bicycle shops (with all manner of upgraded bike designs) to take the place of historic ones and wonderful bike paths throughout the city (such as the one along Bayou St. John). NolaCycle is a project aimed to create a high quality cycling map of the Crescent City. These maps include information beyond street nomenclature alone: "pavement quality, car travel speed, lane width and special caution areas (busy intersections, man-eating potholes, or high accident areas".

There's also the New Orleans Community Bike Project, a reasonably priced program designed to help you maintain, repair and even build your own bike by providing a fully-equipped do-it-yourself work and repair space. It is also a source of training, and materials are reused rather than wasted.

The Lafitte Greenway Plan is the city's most ambitious bike path and green corridor project, traversing Mid-City and connecting twelve historic neighborhoods from the French Quarter and Tremé to Lakeview. Greenways are corridors of public open space that connect neighborhoods and that provide access to special places in the landscape, offering safe non-motorized transportation, recreation,

cultural and other public amenities. The corridor exists due to the Carondelet (Old Basin) Canal bed and basin being filled in (between 1927 and 1938) and later being used by the Southern Railroad. Efforts to consolidate all rail lines into the city into the Union Passenger Terminal rendered the Carondelet Canal Corridor less important, which today makes this area perfect for a green corridor.

Precedents and inspiration for the Lafitte Greenway space include the High Line (1.52 miles of park area from an elevated section of abandoned railroad corridor in downtown New York City and the street level space beneath, linking three Manhattan neighborhoods) and *La Promenade Plantée* in Paris, 3 miles of "planted walk" atop an abandoned elevated section of rail line beginning behind the Bastille Opera and continuing to the *Bois de Vincennes*.

A few years back, New Orleans recovery czar Dr. Ed Blakely was a proponent of leading public bicycle rides through New Orleans neighborhoods for a hands-on view of hurricane recovery.

German Scientist Hans-Erhard Lessing has shown by circumstantial evidence that the climate anomaly of 1816 known as the "Year Without a Summer" (brought about by to the volcanic eruption of Tambora that hampered European transportation due to crop failure and starvation of horses) was the underlying reason for Karl Drais' invention of the velocipede (the bicycle's prototype).

Were it not for this, New Orleans may not have had a stylish society lady on wheels causing a sensation on St. Charles Avenue in 1891, a Tulane brand of bicycle or a plethora of pedicabs now serving the French Quarter, Downtown and Faubourg Marigny areas.

But perhaps the most important innovation in bicycles (one without which the bike wouldn't have a leg to stand on) is the kickstand. That metal device that flips down from the frame to facilitate the bike being kept upright (without leaning against another object) is an essential design feature. But the sight of a kickstand on a road bicycle tends to annoy a cycling purist, who believes they add weight and permit a strong wind or passerby to knock over the bike. "A racing cyclist," wrote Eugene A. Sloane in *Popular Mechanics*, "would never have any kind of kickstand." And, so, they're not found on better road bikes.

As for my own opinion, I think the bicycle kickstand is terrific. What's more, it was invented by a local inventor of more than 60 devices, who once served in the Navy during World War I as a bugler in John Philip Sousa's marching band. His name is Joseph Paul Treen (1900 – 1986), the father of former Louisiana Governor, Dave Treen.

**NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"Bicycles in New Orleans"  
Ned Hémard  
Copyright 2012