

# THE BICYCLE'S EARLY YEARS IN AMBLER

by Newton M. Howard

Thousands converged on the Fair Grounds at Ambler Park in 1876, many arriving by train at the depot near the Park entrance. Main attraction was the Agricultural Society's Annual Fair held in the fall. This year's special feature was a bicycle race on the half-mile track, with many seeing for the first time the high-wheeler, called also the "penny-farthing" or the "bone-crusher". The conventional two-wheeler would not appear for more than a decade.

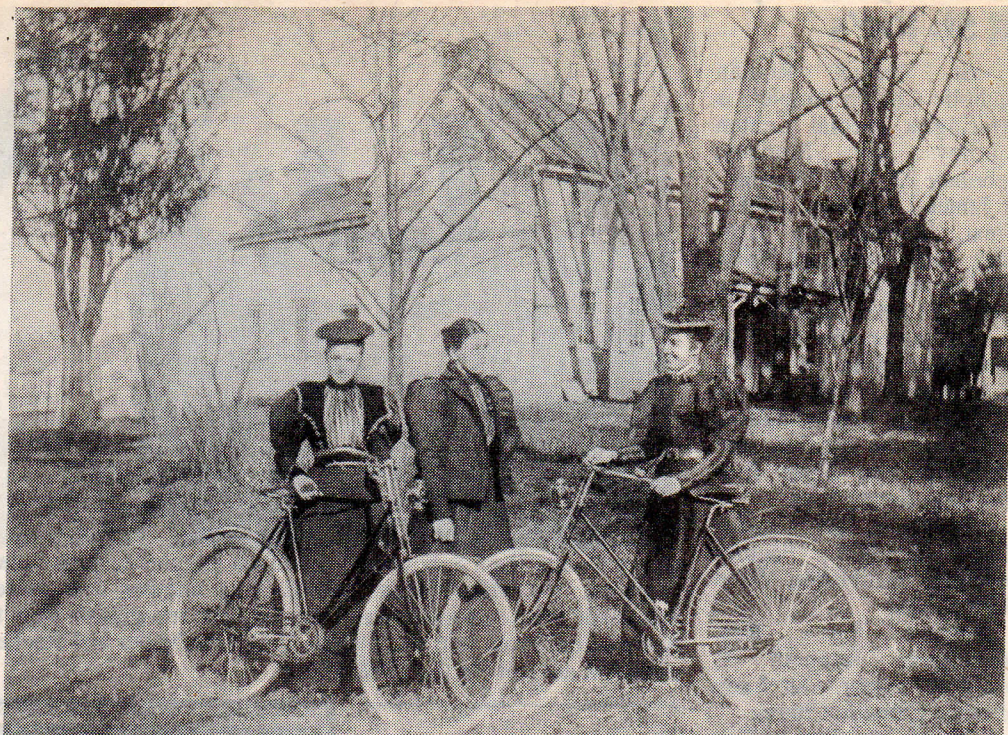
The 1890's saw the arrival of a bicycle acceptable to the public, one with both front and rear wheels the same size. Bicycle clubs formed rapidly, Ambler's being called the Century Wheelmen.

Bicycle road races became popular in these years. Locally a five-mile race was scheduled in the spring when roads were fit to travel. Beginning at Fortside Inn, it ran up Bethlehem Pike to Fort Washington, then up Morris Road to Butler Pike. From there it was on to Broad Axe and back on the Skippack Pike to the place of beginning. Prizes were two silver cups worth \$25 each.

Bicycle races at Willow Grove Park proved to be so popular that they were building a bicycle track of wood instead of dirt, with completion expected for the July 4th crowds. October of 1897 saw a 25-mile race that attracted 8000 spectators, many from Ambler.

So popular was Sunday bicycling, that it became the concern of ministers of the Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches of Philadelphia and vicinity. They campaigned against this 'evil' in a letter to area Wheelmen's clubs.

Bicycling groups from Philadelphia traveled regularly out to the countryside, stopping for meals and overnight accommodations at



Shown with their "Wheels" in the early years of this century are: Elma, Bertha and Gertrude Walker, daughters of William C. Walker. Behind them is the familiar Mary Ambler Homestead, owned during that period by Walker.

Photo courtesy of Richard Johnson, Jr. Johnson Press

local inns. Popular with these riders were Fortside Inn in Whitemarsh, and William Blackburn's Hotel Ambler. Proprietors of both places were members of L.A.W., the League of American Wheelmen, offering members 20 percent discount on meals and accommodations.

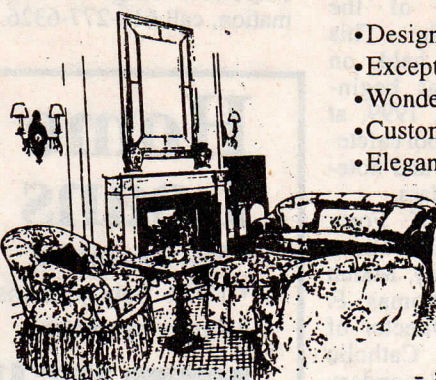
Fast cycling in Ambler was an ongoing problem, with Lindenwold Avenue a virtual speedway. Turning onto Butler Avenue was dangerous, with the possibility of colliding with carriages or frightening horses.

Ambler had strict enforcement of bicycle laws. Because two young men, William Clemens and Charles Ervin, rode their wheels through Ambler on a Monday evening without lights, they were invited by Constable Stevens to visit Justice of the Peace Thomas Biting who impounded their wheels for costs. The boys claimed their "lights just went out."

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*(Continued from page 26)*

So strict was law enforcement in Ambler, that members of L.A.W. suggested that signs be posted at entrances to Ambler warning out of town cyclists that Ambler has ordinances on lights and bells that are strictly enforced.

There were bicyclists in nearly all age groups. Retired Ambler barber William Howard, a 78-year old Civil War veteran, was said to be the oldest bicycle rider in Montgomery County.

Bicyclists were warned of the danger of drinking from wayside wells, pumps or springs when making trips through the country. Because of this great danger to the cycling fraternity, Dr. Richard V. Mattison, a member of L.A.W., erected and dedicated to their use the well-known cyclers' well on his property along the Bethlehem Pike. He was acutely aware of the dangers from impure water, his own daughter Esther Victoria having died from typhoid fever at the age of four years. Water at this well was sanitarily pure, its purity being carefully guarded by the Doctor's own Ambler Spring Water Company, predecessor of Ambler's present water system. This same water was used for drinking by all the employees of Keasbey & Mattison Chemical Works as well as employees living in company homes in South Ambler.

As the century came to a close, it was evident that more automobiles were being seen on the roads. Skeptics were now admitting the automobile was no longer a fad, but was here to stay. It was just a hundred years ago that a gradual decrease in the bicycle's popularity became apparent.