

Carroll Yesteryears

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Wheeling in the Years with Early Bicycles

By Mary Ann Ashcraft and Catherine Baty

By the end of the 19th century, bicycle riding and bicycle racing were wildly popular outdoor activities in the United States. Bicycles were an inexpensive means of transportation, but also popular for recreation. According to Westminster's *Democratic Advocate* newspaper, I.A. Miller owned the first bicycle in Westminster. Then A. H. Wentz, William Seabrook, Joseph Krichton, Charles Fink, and John Cunningham got "wheels." In 1883, these men formed a club called the Cycling Ramblers and in 1884 the club took the first of many excursions when the members rode to Natural Bridge in Virginia.

Although riding the early high-wheel bicycles proved exciting, it was also quite dangerous and more popular among young men than with women. As bicycle design evolved to having two wheels of equal size, women rode more often and minor modifications kept their long skirts from becoming entangled in the wheels. Cycling provided them with freedom of movement they had never known. In 1896, Susan B. Anthony wrote, "The bicycle has done more for the emancipation of women than anything else in the world."

In 1890 Joseph Krichton opened his Rambler bicycle shop on Liberty Street in downtown Westminster. The Cycling Ramblers Club was still going strong, and in September 1897, it organized a "Century Run" to cover a distance of 100 miles. Wrightsville, Pennsylvania, on the west bank of the Susquehanna, was the halfway point. To complete the "Century Run," bikers needed to reach there and return to Westminster in 16 hours or less.

The event was a grand success with 50 of the 55 riders covering 106 miles in the required time. It wasn't a race, so not all the riders left at the same time. The first set off at 5:30 a.m. and the last almost two hours later. It was a Sunday, so some riders even stopped along the way to attend church services. Joseph Krichton and his wife rode a tandem bike and were among the first to return. Only one injury was reported – a rider was thrown when a wheel broke. He was taken to Hanover unconscious, but was soon revived and expected to recover.

In the early summer of 1898, Carroll's bicycle riders and racers were filled with excitement over an event to take place at the Pleasure Park, a new horseracing track with a grandstand located one mile north of Westminster on the road to Littlestown. County newspapers announced, "Riders from all parts of the country will be requested to compete for the handsome and valuable prizes offered... There will be races for all classes of riders, including multicycle races for two, three, four, five and six-seated machines. These monster affairs can reel off miles in a minute and thirty seconds with apparent ease. The track will be put in fine condition, and no doubt records will be broken... It is estimated that at least fifteen hundred wheelmen will be present... Some of the speediest riders from Philadelphia and Washington will enter for the prizes, which aggregate \$300.00."

The June 25, 1898, edition of the *American Sentinel* announced the much-anticipated race as follows:

Thursday, the 30th day of June, will be the greatest day among cyclists in Carroll County that has ever occurred in its history. The great Bicycle Race Meet under the supervision of the Cycling Ramblers of Westminster, the third oldest club of its character in the State, and the leading bicycle organization in Carroll county, will take place on that day. Carroll county has between four and five thousand riders of the silent steed, and with the influx of visiting wheelmen from Baltimore, Hagerstown, Frederick, Hanover, and elsewhere, who have already signified their intention to participate in the meet, it will make the occasion a red-letter day in local history and one long to be remembered by the citizens of Carroll.

A meet of this character will certainly be a novelty to the majority of our citizens, as heretofore we have been denied the pleasure of holding similar events of such magnitude in our beautiful city. The chief reason for this has been the lack of a suitable racing track and the necessary accommodation for the public.

The Cycling Ramblers, however, have entered into the spirit of the meet, and with untiring energy and with the cooperation of progressive citizens, have overcome every obstacle. Every place of business in Westminster will promptly close at 12 o'clock noon on the day of the meet, and the city will be put in holiday attire in honor of the event. The people of Carroll County and the citizens of Westminster will demonstrate conclusively that they have truly earned the right to be called the most hospitable people in the State of Maryland. The bicycle suit worn by the visitor on that day, will be the "open sesame" to the cordial hospitality of the city, and all will be accorded a rousing reception.

The members of the club who have charge of the details of the meet have worked with indefatigable energy, and with splendid results. The race track is being put in perfect condition; the quarters for the racers, their trainers and pace makers, have been provided for; while every accommodation in respect to the visiting wheelmen's comfort and entertainment has been attended to in detail. The Carroll County Band, the pride of every Carroll countian, with its full quota of members, has been engaged for the day, and will not only take part in the parade and be one of the features at the track, but will give an open-air concert from 8 to 10:30 o'clock at night. Railroad facilities have also been provided for, and excursion rates from Baltimore will prevail, costing \$1.00 for the round trip. A special train for the excursionists will leave Westminster at 10 o'clock p.m. which will give the visiting wheelmen ample time to see the "sights" of our city.

Valuable prizes for the winner in the different events have been selected carefully by the committee in charge. These prizes are not only intrinsically valuable, but are appropriate and beautiful in design.

No records were broken that afternoon, perhaps because of the "extreme heat" reported later. The best time turned in was for the mile tandem, amateur, for Carroll County riders – just over 2.14

minutes. First prize for the winner of the twenty-five-mile paced open race was a diamond ring valued at \$35.00. Riders and spectators no doubt enjoyed the affair from beginning to end.

Authors Mary Ann Ashcraft and Catherine Baty are involved with the Historical Society of Carroll County, Mary Ann as a volunteer and Catherine as the Society's Curator.



Photo 1: John Cunningham, dressed for cycling, was one of the founders of the Cycling Ramblers Club. Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County.



Photo 2: Joseph Krichton opened his Rambler bicycle shop on Liberty Street, Westminster, in 1890. Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County.



Photo 3: This early twentieth-century photo was taken in front of William Keefer's Grocery Store on East Main Street, Westminster. Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County.