

"Kritchton's Cyclorium"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

The Historical Society recently received an old ledger that contained records of a photography and bicycle shop from the first years of the twentieth century. Only one local business, Kritchton's Cyclorium, fit the records. A history of the earliest years of the business appeared in an April 1896 Democratic Advocate newspaper article:

"The Bicycle is a foreign invention. Those sky-scrappers, with one large wheel and a little one behind, with the riders up in the clouds, were of English invention, and were first imported in this country about twenty years ago. There were several patterns, but all upon the same principle. All riders well remember them, and most of them still have vivid recollections of 'headers' and feeling like they had been caught in a cyclone when picked up. They were dangerous, and yet their use was spreading.

The first one owned in Westminster was purchased by I. A. Miller. Then A. H. Wentz, William L. Seabrook, Joseph H. Kritchton, Charles E. Fink and John H. Cunningham got wheels. These formed themselves into a club, called the Cycling Ramblers, with William L. Seabrook captain, A. H. Wentz bugler, and each of the other four was an officer. This was in 1883, and in 1884 the club took its first excursion, going up the Valley of Virginia to the Natural Bridge in Rockbridge county, about 150 miles from Harper's Ferry. The club was the third organized in the state, the first being in Baltimore and the second in Frederick.

'The sky-scraper' had a short career. The popularity of bicycling was apparent, but the necessity of insuring greater safety was also apparent, and American ingenuity produced a bicycle that made 'headers' almost impossible.

The first wheel of this kind owned in Westminster was one of the 'Facile' pattern, brought here by Charles E. Fink. The wheel looked odd alongside the sky-scrappers, and he was subjected to many jeers and taunts. Before a year rolled around every bicycle rider had a 'Facile' or similar bicycle, and the sky-scraper went rapidly out of use. They could not be given away, for with the coming of the safety wheel the danger of the high wheel became even more apparent.

The bicycle was put on the market as a vehicle of utility, but they were mostly used as a pleasure machine until the American patterns were put on the market. The safety of the domestic machines at once made them popular, and sale of them has become enormous and is constantly increasing. Last year the manufacturers of the most popular machines could not supply the demand. They are used nearly as much as for business as pleasure, and their use is destined to annually increase.

The first bicycle agent in Westminster was Charles E. Fink. The second was John H. Cunningham and the third was Jos. H. Kritchton. Mr. Kritchton has the field now mainly to himself, as has an exclusive bicycle establishment. He recognized the necessity of a bicycle repair shop, and last year he had a building put up, and put Mr. S. P. Bair, an expert machinist, in charge of it. It is the only repair shop between Baltimore and Hagerstown. The building was constructed so as to have a salesroom as well as repair shop, and on Liberty street, this city, is about as complete a bicycle establishment as can be found anywhere outside of large cities.

Mr. Krichton took the agency of the Rambler bicycle in 1890, but did not sell a wheel the first season. He was not discouraged, however, and in 1891 he sold ten. The next year he sold fifteen; the next 20, the next 35, and next 30. He could have sold more in 1895 had the factory been able to supply them. So far this year he has sold 35, by judicious advertising in the Advocate, and his sales are likely to reach 80 or 100 before the frost of fall. While the Rambler is the only high class machine he sells, he has in stock wheels of various makes, ranging in price from \$40 up.

Mr. Krichton is not in accord with the Advocate politically, but he recognizes the paper as a reliable advertising medium, and with him 'business is business.' He is an energetic young man, and as genial as energetic. He is one of the kind that ought to succeed, and will succeed.

He was born in McSherrystown, Pa., about the 31 years ago. He removed with his parents to Baltimore twenty years ago, and at the age of thirteen began the study of telegraphy. He became an expert operator, did some special work, and about sixteen years ago was sent to Westminster to manage the lines of the Western Union. The best evidence of his entire satisfaction is the fact of his long service.

The business of telegraph operator is too slow and monotonous for his progressive spirit. He has launched into the bicycle business with the intention of making it a success, and the chances are he will succeed. While he has the best equipped establishment in the state outside of Baltimore, it is only a beginning of the plans he has in view. He has made the bicycle a study, and his object is to have a bicycle manufactory here. He knows the cost to build bicycles, and believes they can be manufactured as cheaply here as any place in the country.

The writer's comment about Krichton's political leanings may seem out of place but remind us just how partisan our local papers were a century ago.

Photo caption: Krichton's Cyclorium. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Mrs. Harvey Lockard, 1957.