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# Hub Of The Wheel: Bicycling Around Boston in the 1880s

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The prominence of Boston area bicyclers was evidenced by formation of the first bicycle club in America, publication of the specialized journal *Bicycling World*, and acclamation from other leaders across the country. A letter from the president of the Detroit Bicycle Club written in 1881 to the Boston Bicycle Club noted that all of the bicycle spokes in the country were centered in Boston.

Bicycle clubs were the order of the day. The Boston Bicycling Club, organized on January 5, 1878, was the first such club in the country. Occupations of the members ranged from architects to carriage makers, artists to clergymen, physicians to stenographers, and capitalists to schoolmasters. The clubs not only provided places of assembly and fellowship, but also served as organizers of bicycle races. In celebration of July 4th, 1881, races were held on the Boston Common by clipping the grass and cutting rolls of turf to form a track. Bicycle clubs held lengthy discussions and voting sessions on the uniform to be adopted, and changes in color and style were regularly reported in the journal pages. The hottest issue focused on the headgear featuring the polo cap vs. the helmet.

The League of American Wheelmen was formed at Newport, Rhode Island on May 31, 1880, with Charles E. Pratt of Boston as the first president. Boston was chosen as the city to

host the 1881 assemblage of League members from across the United States for their first grand meeting.

As bicycles began to accumulate on the streets and roads of the Boston area, there was increased concern over tight-of-way, interactions of horse and carriage with the two-wheeled vehicles, and legal use of roads. Other practical matters of the day involved the actual techniques to be used in mastering the bicycle. Discussion ebbed and flowed around the issue of whether it was safer to go downhill with feet on the rests or legs over the handle.

The bicycling boom brought a new industry to New England with the birth of the Pope Manufacturing Company. All parts were made by machine so they could be interchanged and a customer could expect to pay \$130-\$145 for the top model.

Social customs of the day drew attention to bicycling on Sunday and the relation of the activity to church matters. An 1879 court case involved five members of the Brockton Massachusetts Bicycle Club who were accused of violating the law by riding on Sunday. Eventually the judge declared that they could ride on Sunday just as any other day. The Boston *Herald* carried a feature article focusing on bicycling clergymen in the Boston area. One minister wrote that men of faith should view the innovation of the bicycle as evidence of the immanence of God rather than an invention of the Devil.

Initially there were few female bicyclists due to the customary dress code and social decorum of the times. Editorials noted the depressing contrast between the glorious description of a man's bicycling venture and the deplorable and unhealthy restraint of the woman's life at home. Letters to the editor from bicyclers' wives gave interesting viewpoints on the issue.

The bicycle boom of the 1880s touched many other facets of society. Development of the Edison electric light was eagerly followed since it would allow clerks and other daytime workers to view evening bicycle races. Import tax collectors and bicyclists clashed over the issue of whether bicycles should be liable to the 45% *ad valorem* rate prevalent for steel machinery or the 35% rate currently assessed for carriages. The virtues of the bicycle as an emergency vehicle were extolled by physicians. Cavalry bugle calls were adapted and published to accommodate the needs of directing bicyclists in parade. As a last remembrance to a fellow bicycler, members of the Boston Bicycle Club rode from Trinity Square to Calvary Cemetery in nearby Waltham carrying bunches of flowers to present at graveside services and suggesting that this tribute become standard practice for fallen comrades of the wheel. Perhaps the zeal of the nineteenth century bicyclists was best reflected in a popular riddle of the day: Why is the bicycle like a volcano? Because it is a fiery mount.