

Sporting Elites in Late Nineteenth Century Edmonton: The Case of Cycling

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By the 1890s, bicycles and bicycle clubs in America had reached “mania” proportions. There were 106 companies manufacturing bicycles and issuing catalogues, and by 1893 estimations on the number of bicycles in America produced a figure of approximately one million. Canadians fell in love with their machines from the 1870s when Montreal and Halifax led the way in the establishment of clubs for the privileged. Bicycles were ridden for transportation, speed, show, endurance, and independence, and to belong to a bicycle club was just as important socially as it was physically. Consequently, it is not surprising that memberships lists were restricted and controlled by elites of society.

In the small pioneer town of Edmonton, the first bicycle club was not established until 1893, while a second club had to wait until 1896 for its genesis when an elite group of 12 ladies and 12 gentlemen

formed the exclusive North Star Bicycle Club complete with uniform, badge and colours. But cycling was more than a healthy recreation for some, and conflicts inevitably arose between “scorchers,” who terrorized horses and pedestrians alike in their quest for speed, and “tourists”, who were more sedate in their habits and preferred bicycle picnics and parades. Moreover, competition based on the commercial prospects of “the steed that tires not” encouraged not only the sale of bicycles and bicycle equipment, but also inspired participation in several civic events such as concerts, sports days and fairs.

As case studies in elite sport, bicycle clubs in early Edmonton offer not only interesting insights into the development (and decline) of particular sporting bodies, but they serve to illustrate one link in the network of influence through which prominent and influential individuals came to dominate social life, including sporting clubs, in pioneer Albertan society. This paper outlines research into Edmonton’s “ruling class,” their background, their role in society, their interlocking career paths, and examines their marriage of politics and business as it related to the sporting culture of the town during the late nineteenth century. Conclusions drawn from the study pertaining to the relevance of elite theory for the study of sport history in early Edmonton infer that Edmonton’s elites could better be described as “privileged settlers,” that is, people with access to financial resources beyond the minimum needed to bring them to Edmonton wherein they developed a network of social influence often aided by a superior level of education as was to be found among the professions, police, civil servants, teachers and clergy.