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A Sporting Tragedy: The Murder of Bicyclist Frank Lenz

In the late nineteenth century the bicycle provided the first opportunity for independent transportation that was swift, convenient and inexpensive. In addition to commuting and recreational riding, the bicycle created three new sporting venues. Track racing, including the famous six-day races, drew large

crowds in many American cities. Road racing proved popular in both the United States and Europe, and offered opportunities for both bicycles and tricycles. A third form of competition was much less organized than the previous two, and that involved individuals interested in setting records for time and distance.

In this third arena several people chose to ride around the world on bicycles. After five riders successfully circumcycled the earth, Frank G. Lenz, of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a twenty-five-year-old bookkeeper, made it across North America and Asia before succumbing to robbers in present day Turkey. In 1892, *Outing* magazine and the Overman Bicycle Company joined interests to sponsor "Lenz's World Tour Awheel," paying the rider \$2,000 a year plus expenses (over \$36,000 in 2000 dollars). Readers followed his adventures, along with his regular endorsements of the quality of his "steel steed." When the reports stopped arriving at *Outing's* offices, people at first assumed he was simply behind schedule. When that proved unfounded people clung to other possibilities, either that he took an alternate route, or had been kidnapped and was being held for ransom. After all hope that he was still alive vanished, people put forward theories that he had drowned or been killed by wild animals, perhaps in an attempt to make bicycling appear somehow safer. Finally, it became obvious he had been robbed and murdered.

As soon as it became obvious that Lenz had disappeared, and was not simply behind schedule, *Outing* organized a search for him. As the evidence of foul play mounted, the editor instituted a search for the perpetrators. He hired another globe girdler, Thomas Sachtleben, to go to Turkey. Sachtleben was to look for clues concerning Lenz's disappearance, and if he had been the victim of foul play, to identify the perpetrators and have them brought to trial, an endeavor the public followed with interest. While he never succeeded in recovering the body, he did find sufficient evidence that a group of Kurds had robbed and murdered Lenz that the Turkish government brought them to trial and paid an indemnity to the United States.

This paper focuses primarily on the intense interest long distance cycling generated in both the United States and England. Cyclists and non-cyclists alike followed closely the ride of Frank Lenz as well as his ultimate demise. An underlying theme in the paper relates to the tremendous impact the bicycle had on society.

Through the Lenz's writings and other globe girdlers, people in the United States and Great Britain learned about life in far off places. They glimpsed societies about which they had little or no previous knowledge. In this way, the bicycle became one piece of the transportation revolution that has shrunk the world. Scholarly attention regarding the bicycle, however, has been minimal. There are only a handful of books and articles that deal with bicycle history, and in only one of those does Frank Lenz appear. Even there, the evidence does not support the author's conclusion that his violent death ended the interest in round the world cycling. This paper is designed to help correct that record.

I have based on primary sources including *Outing*, newspapers in both the United States and England, and British and American government documents. It examines the ride of Frank Lenz and its impact on the cycling community. It also dispels the myth that round the world touring ended with Lenz's murder. Within the next few years, five other riders went through the same region without ill effects to complete round the world cycling adventures.
