

Bell Acres History...

Bikes, Bloomers & Better Roads



Throughout the 1880s and 90s, cycling became a popular pastime. Area cycling clubs sponsored races and group rides on Beaver and Big Sewickley Creek roads and at one point, Sewickley Borough considered implementing a cycling speed limit!

Early high wheel bicycles were difficult to ride, but were soon replaced with low wheel models that were easier and safer to use. Cycling clubs sprang up in virtually every town throughout

the nation as both men and women enjoyed the new sport. Women were now able to shed long heavy skirts and dresses for the freedom of movement allowed by wearing bloomers. There were some who thought bike riding was inappropriate for the female sex and disapproved of both bloomers and the idea that women could now travel independently without a male escort.

The clay, sand and gravel Beaver Road was popular with cyclists aka wheelmen. Not only was the road used by local clubs, but also by Pittsburgh and Allegheny City groups that often raced from the city to Sewickley and back. The route was also used during the great 1893 Buffalo to Pittsburgh race. The sight of hundreds of cyclists at any one time would not have been unusual for Sewickley Valley residents.

"The Sewickley wheelmen are going to have a lantern parade...about 200 wheels are expected to be in line and the decoration of many of them will be very fine." (1894)
"The Sewickley valley wheelmen took in the Beaver valley in two squads, one leaving early and riding to New Castle for dinner, the other starting about 9:00 and making Beaver Falls the turning point." (1895)
"The Sewickley valley cyclers will enjoy a club run to Zelienople today...The organization is growing rapidly in membership, and is doing a great deal to popularize cycling in the valley." (1895)



It was cyclists who first pressed elected officials for much needed road improvements. The wheelmen's national Good Roads Movement was soon joined by the general public that was also tired of rutted roads often deep in mud. As a result of growing public demand for better roads, Allegheny County created a road department in 1895, followed eight years later by Pennsylvania's first highway department. "[Gov. Hastings] realized the importance of the great army of cyclers in the state and the good work they are doing for better roads..." (1896)

As the 19th century came to an end, so too did cycling's popularity. Public interest soon shifted to upcoming "machines" aka automobiles that certainly benefited from the wheelmen's legacy of better roads.

This Bell Acres History article also appeared in the **Sewickley Herald**.