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Cycling Historiography, Evidence, and Methods

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Cycling Historiography, Evidence, and Methods

What is the purpose of writing cycling history, or any history? What are the available materials? What is the relationship between the historical subject and the historian? The answers to these questions dictate whose story gets told and how.

George Stocking, the eminent historian of anthropology, wrote in *Race, Culture, and Evolution* about the difference between *presentism* and *historicism*. Stocking identified presentism as the tendency to look at past events only as they unfolded into the present. In the context of cycling history this could be expressed in the story of a relentless advance in cycling technology. In its worst application, inconvenient historical detail is simply left out and the result is a “court history.” Court history refers to results of the nobility, or in our age, business or other organizational leaders “buying” the services of historians to write favorable histories. The following recent claim in the League of American Bicyclists’ house magazine illustrates the point: “Nineteenth century leisure organizations were a mix of saloons, trade organizations, and mutual benefit societies organized by immigrants to provide services like health care. All of these groups accepted members strictly along the lines of race, ethnicity, or occupation—*except* The League of American Wheelmen [emphasis added]. The League aimed to unite all bicyclists on the basis of common interests, voluntary membership, and love of cycling.”¹

On the contrary, while the “arc of history” may “bend towards justice” (a modernist claim), it is not without many setbacks, and the League’s color bar, unreported in the “court history” above, was certainly a big one.

Opposing presentism, historicism looks at the past in its own terms. From this perspective, a failed revolution has as much to teach us as a successful one, provided that our goal is to understand thought and action *within a context*. Since failed revolutions frequently leave a smaller historical record, their history is more likely hidden.

My purpose in *Boston's Cycling Craze, 1880-1900*, was to unearth a largely hidden *social cycling history* from the point of view of the ordinary, not the famous. While there were many Boston connections to racing champions like Major Taylor, Eddie McDuffee, and Nat Butler, and there are abundant sources of evidence about them, the research was not *just* about them, nor *just* about bicycle racing, nor *just* about unique or fast bikes. I wanted to write about what bicycling meant to ordinary citizens of Boston and its surrounding towns— and to write about the worsening social climate of the time and the consequences for cyclists and their organizations. Of course, the danger in a thoroughly historicist approach is that it can fall into a kind of antiquarianism, reveling in the past for its own sake, without any attempt to draw parallels or lessons for the present—entertaining but not useful.

I agree with Gordon Woods's view of history. In his book *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History*, Woods wrote: "The drama, indeed the tragedy, of history comes from our understanding of the tension that existed between the conscious wills and intentions of the participants in the past and the underlying conditions that constrained their actions and shaped their future."² *Boston's Cycling Craze, 1880-1900* is about the constrained choices that real cyclists made: How they acted, or didn't act, even though those actions may not have been the stuff of historical legend.

The discussion of Kittie Knox in the Preface is worth repeating here: She was a woman of courage in the face of big barriers. Some Bostonians have recently called her “the Rosa Parks of cycling.” But she was not that, in part because she did not live with the same conditions and possibilities of Rosa Parks’s time. The national culture was not ready for the spark that Kittie Knox provided: it was headed in the opposite direction.

After concluding the research, I came to believe that there were lessons for today, but they should be always carefully examined by both author and reader, in relation to the historical subject. These felt relationships influence how the historian regards the subject, and how the reader will view both the historical subject and the writing about it.

I have tried to avoid the extremes of “dust-bowl” empiricism, which piles up facts without paying much attention to the connections amongst them or, conversely, of selecting evidence to fit a pre-established theory.³ I have reflected on theories about how race, gender, and class intersect, but such categories do not easily translate into simple historical lessons for the present day.⁴

I have used the original language from nineteenth century sources to give the reader a good “feel” for the conflicts of the time. Of course, the language itself has undergone a cultural shift. For example, the appellation “colored,” unused in polite society of today, was eagerly sought by African Americans of the late nineteenth century.⁵ And other portrayals of race and ethnicity (e.g., in minstrel shows and in newspaper descriptions of the Italian colony in the North End) would be called racist today. Cyclists and others in the late nineteenth century, it is clear, had a very different sense of “correct” or at least permissible language.

The primary sources used in writing this book include the era's general magazines and newspapers, as well as cycling newspapers, magazines, and books. Increasing digitization has provided an invaluable tool for collecting evidence. Google, *The Boston Globe* archives, and Genealogy Bank historical newspapers made this book possible.

The U.S. Census schedules and city directories revealed important genealogical information about the cyclists of the 1880s–1890s. This information served two purposes. First, it helped to determine the social background of the cyclists by examining their occupations and those of their fathers. (Few of their mothers had defined occupations, except for “keeping house”). Other social class information such as schooling and literacy was sometimes available. Second, genealogical information helped me find current descendants of nineteenth century cyclists, in the hope that family oral history, pictures, diaries, and other information would be available.

We should approach a historical task with skepticism. To paraphrase an expert voice from the far distant field of statistics, W. Edwards Deming: “There is no such thing as a true value, only estimates, within a probable range, and with a risk of being wrong.”⁶ Skepticism is justified, given that the historical record is never complete; it contains random errors and biases, in that not everything was saved from the nineteenth century, and journalists' accounts are filtered by their own pre-conceptions. At best we are “second hand” observers a century distant in time.

The research also revealed an uneven historical record. While many of the cycling magazines of the period are available, some are rare and in private hands, and others have

disappeared. Thus, some commentary on the key events of the time will be forever missed.

Only some cyclists are heard *in their own voice*. We have direct quotations from Mary Sargent Hopkins, Abbott Bassett, and a few others. But of the black cyclists, almost nothing has been preserved—not newspapers, letters, or diaries, *if* they existed. The Boston black newspapers of the crucial period 1893–1897 were either not subscribed to or not saved by the Boston libraries. Similarly, many of the working-class white racers are not represented *in their own voice*. The critical 1895 issues of *Il Corriere di Boston*, which would likely have contained more information about the Boston Italian Wheelmen, are missing.

One exception is Major Taylor, who kept a scrapbook and wrote many letters—some of which have been preserved—and an autobiography. In addition, he was frequently quoted in the press. Other exceptions are Eddie McDuffee’s retrospective in *Yankee Magazine*, at a distance of 50 years, and the scrapbooks of Alvin Fuller, bicycle racer, automobilist, and Massachusetts governor. From a central protagonist in this narrative, Kittie Knox, we have virtually nothing beyond a few short phrases attributed to her by cycling reporters, with their own biases, from interviews at Asbury Park.

Family lore proved to be a valuable resource in pointing in the direction of additional evidence. But oral history passed down several generations is subject to distortion at each step. And families of well-known cyclists, especially the racers, were more likely to have passed down cycling stories than those of less prominent cyclists. Many descendents were surprised to hear of an ancestor’s cycling exploits—even just

two generations removed. Luckily, some families have an anointed family genealogist, and these people have been a source of precious pictures and mementoes. But what biases are brought in by families' decisions about what to save and what to throw away?

The end of the intensive cycling journalism of the 1890s also creates a problem for the historian. Bicycle race reporting continued, as did an occasional note on the nostalgic dinners of the old-time cyclists and their annual "Wheel around the Hub," with most participants now traveling by automobile. But other more utilitarian bicycle uses (e.g., for commuting and in work situations such as in factories, by paper boys, and for delivery of telegrams) were so commonplace as to discourage coverage. Thus, in an additional way, the historical record is partially determined by the social origins of cycling, as it is up to the present day. The question will always be with us: Whose story gets told?

NOTES

¹ Carolyn Stanford Braff, "The Perfect Time to Ride: A History of the League of American Wheelmen," *American Bicyclist*, Nov/Dec 2007: 18–23.

² Gordon Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 11.

³ Lisa M. Given (Ed.), *Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008).

⁴ See for a discussion of the sociological and legal concepts of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal work: "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43(6) (1991): 1241–99.

⁵ The nuances of language are endlessly intriguing, as for example the abandonment of the term "colored people" (except in the National Association of Colored People) and the advancement of the term "people of color."

⁶ See for example W. Edwards Deming, *The New Economics For Industry, Government & Education* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1993).