

# CHASING HORIZONS ONE PEDAL AT A TIME

*Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits*

As a way of promoting their group, the Waiontha Bicycle Club published a circular during the late 1800s which included the following in their 1888 issue to promote not only their group but also the advantages of traveling through this area - by bicycle. "To Our Brother Wheelmen, Greetings: Cozily nestling at the feet of gentle hills which change into rugged bluffs as one journeys onward, and where indulgent Nature has been more lavish in the display of her charms, lies the little valley home of the people of Richfield Springs. Not far distant, there rises boldly against the sky one of Nature's fastnesses known in local lore and history as Mount Waiontha. What would the feelings of a patriarch of the forest be but once more to tread the hunts of his youth and know that this quaint Indian name, so associated with his earliest memories, has been bestowed upon a club of cyclists? Verily, time works miracles!

As Waiontha Wheelmen, we would extend the heartiest of fraternal greetings and petition your attendance at the First Annual Race Meet of the Waiontha Bicycle Club. We would clasp hands of good-fellowship with you, one and all. We will earnestly endeavor to entertain you 'right royally' and are positive that you will carry away pleasant memories of your visit. Fair old Richfield has attained the height of her beauty and glory. Her smooth roads afford ample scope for pleasant runs, especially the one of twelve miles around Lake Canadarago which can be made upon a cinder path, along which lie Nature's grandest efforts.

Richfield's accommodations are unsurpassed as thousands of her guests will testify and we know that you cannot but think favorably of this important feature. We bid you come, appreciate Richfield's attractions, enjoy a day of honest, manly sport and stay with us as long as you please. We shall do all that lies within our power to make your sojourn with us one of pleasant memories."

The club had been admitted to the League

of American Wheelmen in 1886 and had continued to practice their 'wheeling' abilities by holding several rides, not only in the Richfield area but, at times, riding to more distant places such as Cooperstown, the Mohawk Valley and even tournaments in Utica, Sauquoit and Rome. It was also a social club, leasing rooms over Buchanan's Hardware which offered a gathering place for members to relax. Money was raised by dues and by holding social functions such as a ball at the Elk Opera House with supper and dancing offered for \$1.50. One of their main objectives was work done for the improvement of the area roads.

Their main attraction was offered at the local Agricultural Fair which was usually held in August. They offered a tournament with varied activities and generous prizes for those participating. At the time, there were nearly fifty bicycles owned in town and a number of speedy riders. An unusual parade of these local bicycles and riders as well as cycling groups from surrounding areas was held prior to the beginning of the actual tournament which was held at the Driving Park.

The list of events for the 1888 tournament included: Parade offering prizes for the largest number of men in line; best drilled club; best uniformed club; handsomest rider in the parade. Races: one-mile dash; half-mile club novice; half-mile open; two mile Otsego County championship; half-mile, hands off; three-mile record; one-mile team race (teams of three men); fancy riding; five-mile (15 minute class); one-mile Waiontha Bicycle Club championship; one-mile dash; and half-mile consolation.

Prizes included a wide variety of items donated by the local hotels and businesses. Among them were: gold mounted opera glasses; silver match safe; a golden pen; road hub lamp; gold and silver medals; silver water pitcher; clocks; silver cup; cyclometer; silver tray; writing set; silver nut bowl; silk umbrella; and, of course, a box of cigars.

Participants came from Richfield,



Waiontha Bicycle Club,

Cooperstown, Utica, Herkimer, Buffalo, Rome and Lynn, Massachusetts. The first annual tournament was deemed a great success with the help of Mother Nature who provided rain the previous day which helped to calm the dust. The attendance at the Driving Park was reported to be the largest of the season and the number of elegant turnouts reported added to the attractions.

The parade of sixty-five wheelmen was led by the Burlington Flat band of fourteen pieces. First in line was the Waiontha Club with 31 men, followed by the Fort Dayton Club of Herkimer with 14 men and the Fort Schuyler Club of Utica with 19 men. The line began at the Darrow House (now VFW on Lake Street) and paraded down James to Elm to Main; up Main and returned to the Spring House. The tournament itself began at quarter past three with everything going well with only two or three falls, none of them being serious. Judges were T R. Proctor, E. M. Earle and G. E. Truman. Timers were Col. Geo. Boker and R. F.



Carman. The starter was Ed. Annan, Jr.

Such events were offered for the next three or more years but by 1898, they held a special meeting of the members of the Waiontha Bicycle Club when they voted to give up the organization which had been in existence for twelve years with the reasoning that the dues had not been sufficient to meet the expenses and interest in the organization was waning.

That did not mean that bicycling was a thing of the past. As Albert Einstein is quoted as having said: "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving!"