

The Bicycle Boom and the Bicycle Bloc

Cycling and Politics in the 1890s

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On October 9, 1896, readers of the *Indianapolis News* learned that about three hundred cyclists planned to gather that evening for a parade before boarding a special train bound for Canton, Ohio. The cyclists were to carry flambeaus and lanterns; their bikes would be fitted out with “bicycle locusts,” noisemakers designed to catch the attention of passers-by.¹ The group left for Ohio soon after the parade, making several stops along the way in places like Anderson, Indiana, to pick up additional “wheelmen.” On board the train was a special bicycle, carefully wrapped in a blanket, and stored in a place all to itself to prevent damage. Upon reaching their destination, the Indiana wheelmen were met by a bicycle escort and led to the house of Governor William McKinley, then in the final stretch of a hot race for the presidency. After addressing the crowd of cyclists, McKinley was presented with his shining new bicycle. “Major McKinley is not a bicyclist,” the *News* reported

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¹“Wheelmen Leave for Canton,” *Indianapolis News*, October 9, 1896, p. 8.



McKinley Campaign Button, 1896

In the 1890s, the popularity of bicycling and the new phenomenon of political buttons combined to produce a new motif in campaign advertising.

Courtesy of the author

on the following day, “but has frequently expressed his admiration for the sport, and no one will be surprised to see him at one of the cycle schools with his new wheel in the near future.”²

It would be easy to brush off this story as just another sign of the cycling craze of the 1890s. Large groups of cyclists were, after all, a common sight at the end of the nineteenth century. 1896 was the height of the “bicycle boom,” a period of almost ten years when Americans of every age, class, sex, and race fell head-over-heels in love with a novel form of transportation that promised health and happiness, personal

²“The Indianapolis Crowd,” *Indianapolis News*, October 10, 1896, p. 1.

liberty and social equality. As Richard Harmond has observed, the success of the cycling craze was due in large part to the “paradoxical attraction of the bicycle—as an instance of inventive progress and as a means of flight from the consequences of such progress.”³ On a more basic level, however, this success can be attributed to major improvements in bicycle design in the late 1880s that resulted in a safer, more comfortable form of transportation, one essentially no different from the bicycle we ride today. Thanks to these improvements, millions of ordinary Americans became cyclists in the 1890s. “Everyone was supposed to ride a bicycle and one was not what they called ‘in the swim’ unless you mastered the wheel,” one contemporary later wrote.⁴ America was “wheel crazy,” and the sight of large groups of cyclists was not unusual.

What was unusual was the fact that only a week before McKinley addressed the crowd of Indiana wheelmen, the governor’s front lawn had been trampled by an even larger crowd of cyclists. On that occasion, at least 3,000 wheelmen had come from as far away as Chicago, Cleveland, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Louisville, and Cincinnati. They were men who, according to one member of their ranks, represented “no particular section of the country, but all sections; no particular occupation, but all occupations; no particular interests, but all interests; no particular rank in life, but all ranks.”⁵ In spite of the group’s diversity, however, they did have at least one thing in common: they had all been bewitched by the tactics of the GOP. Almost all summer long Republican leaders had been trying to transform America’s ongoing infatuation with the bicycle into a love for the Republican Party and everything it stood for. Although the chairman of the Republican National Committee, Mark Hanna of Cleveland, Ohio, employed many clever strategies for bringing voters into the Republican fold in 1896, his attempt to win over the nation’s legions of enthusiastic bicyclists addressed several major problems that faced the party that year: the vast geographic expanse of the American interior, widespread economic and psychological depression, and, not least of all, the Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan, who, to the dread of many Republicans, had embarked on a campaign to appeal

³Richard Harmond, “Progress and Flight: An Interpretation of the American Cycle Craze of the 1890s,” *Journal of Social History*, 5 (Winter 1971-72), 236.

⁴Edith Harrison, “Bicycles and Billiards,” box 19, folder 952, Papers of Carter H. Harrison Jr., The Newberry Library, Chicago.

⁵“His Record is Broken,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 4, 1896, p. 5.

directly to the American people via an unprecedented “whistle-stop” campaign tour. An understanding of Hanna’s tactics casts new light on his genius as a political strategist and on the desperate measures to which the GOP was willing to resort in order to win the election. The events of 1896, however, were part of a much larger story, for even though it was the Republicans who finally won the support of the “bicycle bloc” during the 1896 McKinley-Bryan standoff, a very different scene played out in 1897, when two Democratic mayoral candidates—Carter H. Harrison Jr. of Chicago and Thomas Taggart of Indianapolis—succeeded, at least in part, by seeking and securing the support of cyclists. For their part, cyclists were far more than passive participants in the political process. They were, in fact, masterful politicians in their own right, and, as I will show, they turned a national craze for an exciting new form of technology to their personal and political advantage. Historians have already recognized the importance of the bicycle in the women’s rights movement of the late nineteenth century.⁶ In this article, I demonstrate that, in the same period, the bicycle also helped middle-class white males—politicians and cyclists—reshape the nature of the political establishment and acquire power in doing so.

Before delving into the details of the relationship between these elections and the bicycle boom, it is worth taking a moment to answer the question of what exactly the bicycle bloc was and how it came into existence. Although representatives of the bicycle industry often advertised the bicycle as an appropriate vehicle for a forward-looking, egalitarian, democratic nation, and stood to reap some very tangible rewards from the establishment of a bicycle bloc, the actual creation of this bloc was the work of the League of American Wheelmen. Founded in 1880, the LAW was a national organization of cyclists whose members worked to promote a greater appreciation and awareness of cycling, to encourage cycling-friendly legislation, to stand behind cyclists who felt they had been mistreated by state and local governments or other entities such as railroad corporations, and, above all, to encourage the construction and maintenance of good roads. Its membership grew steadily, numbering over 70,000 at the height of the cycling craze, and although in 1896 more than half its members hailed from New England, New York,

⁶Ellen Gruber Garvey, “Reframing the Bicycle: Advertising-Supported Magazines and Scorching Women,” *American Quarterly*, 47 (March 1995), 66-101.

or Pennsylvania, the LAW had constituents in every state and territory in the country; moreover, its prominence on the national cycling scene meant that it also had the power to influence the millions of American cyclists who did not officially belong to the league. Even before cycling's popularity took off in the 1890s, the LAW had urged cyclists to unite and put pressure on politicians to meet their demands for better roads and fair treatment. As early as 1881, the league's president called for "laying aside all differences of party politics" in cities where wheelmen had come into conflict with municipal governments, in order that they might "combine, and use their earnest organized efforts to defeat and kill off politically any alderman, mayor, or other official who should attempt to deny their just rights."⁷ Two years later, A. H. Curtiss, addressing a crowd of wheelmen at a banquet in New York, received a round of applause after commenting: "We are a strong body. Take us consolidated together, and we command a great many votes. I think that if we make a little deal with the politicians it wouldn't be very long . . . before you will have both the Republicans and Democrats running after the 'wheel' votes."⁸ Naturally the amount of pressure that the league could apply grew as the number of cyclists grew. By 1896 one wheelman from Anderson, Indiana, was able to declare: "[W]e are of such a number that due consideration must be given us on account of our votes and the influence we can exert in National politics . . . we should urge our L.A.W.'s, without regard to party, to organize political clubs. . . . Enroll every wheelman in the cause, and the organizing of these clubs will say to the party in power, 'We are a factor in politics, and demand that the great cause of Good Roads be given consideration.'⁹ LAW president Sterling Elliott echoed this belief when he said that "if every wheelman in the country was a member of the league we would hold the balance of power, so that even the president of the United States could be elected or defeated by the united forces of bicycle riders."¹⁰

The LAW was remarkable—it was deeply interested in politics and yet remained nonpartisan. Time and time again, the organization's

⁷"The Political Power of the L.A.W.," *Wheelman*, 2 (May 1881), 100.

⁸"Speeches Made at the Banquet of the League of American Wheelmen, Monday, May 28, 1883, at Metropolitan Hotel, New York City," *Wheelman*, 2 (August 1883), 371.

⁹"Good Roads and Politics," *L.A.W. Bulletin and Good Roads*, 24 (September 4, 1896), 337.

¹⁰Joe Ward, "The Trials & Tribulations of the Turn-of-the-Century Cyclists," Louisville Bicycle Club website, <http://www.louisvillebicycleclub.org/misc/hist06.htm>.

literature stressed that it was not affiliated with any political party and would support candidates who promised to work in the best interests of wheelmen. Non-partisanship was, in fact, the key to achieving its goals, for not only would the lack of any obvious party sympathies help to ensure a broad membership, but it would also make it clear to politicians that the LAW represented a large body of swing voters who were willing to play a game of tit-for-tat. "Give us good roads and fair treatment and we will give you our votes and our influence," was the message that American cyclists sent to politicians. Nourished by the bicycle boom, the seeds sown in the 1880s finally began to flower in the 1890s, and, as had been predicted, the American "wheel rider" suddenly found himself being courted by ambitious office-seekers who saw what was to be gained by catering to the bicycle bloc. With this new political power in mind, we return to William McKinley's campaign in the final weeks leading up to the election of 1896.

"Don't you remember that I announced that I would not under any circumstances go on a speech-making tour?" McKinley retorted to one of his aides. "If I should go now it would be an acknowledgement of weakness. Moreover, I might just as well put up a trapeze on my front lawn and compete with some professional athlete as go out speaking against Bryan."¹¹ Despite McKinley's best hopes, he and his party were weaker than they believed as the 1896 campaign unfolded. Although the ongoing economic crisis, coupled with Grover Cleveland's four years of uninspired leadership, had seemed almost to guarantee an easy Republican victory in the coming election, the sudden appearance of William Jennings Bryan in the summer of 1896 changed everything. Bryan's famous "Cross of Gold" speech, delivered at the Democratic National Convention in St. Louis on July 7, touched off a firestorm that the Republicans barely survived. "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold," Bryan bellowed, the "cross" referring to the gold standard, which he and many Democrats believed gave middle- and upper-class residents of the industrialized Northeast an unfair advantage over the poor and those Americans living in areas west of the Alleghenies. His solution was to adopt a bimetallic money standard, whereby silver and gold would be coined at a ratio of sixteen-to-one. This policy, Bryan

¹¹Bascom M. Timmons, *Portrait of an American: Charles G. Dawes* (New York, 1953), 56.

argued, would increase the amount of money in circulation and give a leg up to Americans who had fallen on hard times. Although most experts considered bimetallism risky at best, the genie was already out of the bottle: Bryan had dared to offer a way out to the hundreds of thousands of people from whom the American dream was slipping away. Farmers and laborers in the South, the West, and large parts of the Midwest considered him a crusader, and before long one witness could write: "The people in that section are simply crazy upon the money question."¹² "His own weakness as a thinker was beside the point," one of McKinley's biographers has written of Bryan. Although McKinley could offer material comfort, his platform "lacked the mystical vision of the American dream. Bryan's platform had precisely that dream."¹³

Bryan set about turning the nation's geography to his advantage. Up to that time, politicians had generally traveled only when necessary, largely because of the difficulty of reaching some parts of the nineteenth-century American interior, but also because many Americans considered campaigning to be beneath the dignity of a candidate for high office, particularly that of president. Consequently, Americans tended to vote for parties rather than individuals. Bryan, however, cast tradition to the wind in 1896. He chartered a train and set off on an extensive tour that took him to more than half the states and made it possible for him to appeal directly to the American people, drawing on the force of his character to win their hearts and minds. The Republicans cringed. Thanks to Bryan, "the number of people to be reached, educated and convinced was much larger than in any National campaign in the history of the country," one Republican leader recalled in 1906. "[W]e had to meet an entirely new issue . . . [and] expand our efforts over a much greater territory."¹⁴ To try to undo the damage Bryan was causing from the back of his train, GOP leaders came up with some new strategies of their own.

To begin with, party officials decided that McKinley needed to take on a more active role in the campaign. Nobody said he had to swing from a trapeze. In fact, his front-porch campaign, which had been going on since spring and which operated on the belief that the delegations of

¹²A. B. Farquar to Henry Thurber, May 2, 1895, quoted in H. Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America*, rev. ed. (Kent, Ohio, 2003), 161.

¹³Morgan, *McKinley and His America*, 169.

¹⁴Interview with Charles Dick, February 10, 1906, quoted in Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York, 1986), 139.

voters who traveled to Canton to hear McKinley speak would return to their own towns and states and do the rest of his campaigning for him, would do nicely if only it could be intensified. The Republicans succeeded in this regard, and during the summer and fall of 1896, more than 750,000 people made the trip to Canton.¹⁵ The second part of the Republicans' strategy was to flood the country with Republican literature. While Bryan was out riding the rails and making stump speeches, Mark Hanna was overseeing the printing of millions of posters and pamphlets booming McKinley and the Republican ticket. A bottomless till meant that there was essentially no limit to the amount of this literature that could be produced. Finally, Republican clubs were established to help rally voters, organize political events, and distribute campaign literature. This was a sound strategy in its own right, but party leaders soon realized that at least one thing would bring all three prongs of their strategy together—the bicycle.

Cyclists would be the perfect campaigners. First of all, there were thousands of them and their numbers were growing, so much so that bicycle manufacturers could hardly keep up with demand. And not only did cyclists love to be part of a crowd, they also displayed an impressive ability to draw a crowd of their own. In 1895, one Fourth of July bicycle derby in Chicago, for example, drew 25,000 people. Cyclists were also willing to travel long distances to take part in cycling events. Independence, Iowa, celebrated that same Fourth of July with bicycle races that included participants who had traveled as far as sixty miles to compete, and even the wheelmen's tournament that was held in Cheyenne, Wyoming, that day drew spectators from as far away as Denver and Fort Collins, Colorado.¹⁶ Surely cyclists would come to Canton, too. There were hundreds and probably even thousands of bicycle clubs across the country, many of whose members were enthusiastic young businessmen with interests that the Republican Party promised to protect. It was in their best interest to come to Canton. And once they *had* come and seen for themselves what a great man McKinley was, they would go home and start spreading the word about the GOP. They could

¹⁵Morgan, *McKinley and His America*, 176-77.

¹⁶"Good Time at Independence" and "Slayback Wins Three Races," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 5, 1895, p. 4; *Third Annual Bicycle-Tournament Under the Auspices of the Cheyenne Bicycle Club* (Cheyenne, Wy., 1895).

help distribute all that campaign literature, too. A man on a bicycle, after all, would be able to cover more territory in less time than a man traveling on foot. Cyclists could also travel far out into the country and reach small towns and farms that may have had limited contact with more densely populated and politically informed areas.

There were other ways in which the bicycle was a godsend. The bicycle industry was one of the few that had actually *grown* during the depression of 1893-96. Steel mills, rubber manufacturers, mechanics, department store owners, and even tailors and shoemakers all benefited from the cycling craze. The bicycle came to stand for honest industry, and that was something people could be optimistic about. Republicans could also tap into a well-developed bicycle advertising infrastructure; just as advertisements had helped the bicycle industry to prosper during the lean years of the mid-1890s, there was no reason to believe they could not do the same for McKinley. Furthermore, the main issues of the 1896 campaign—money standards and tariffs—were not easy subjects to interest people in, even though, if rather inadequately, both parties did manage to explain these subjects in terms the average American could understand; on a similar note, the economic depression that had led to the debate over the “money question” in the first place was psychologically depressing. The bicycle might well add a touch of lightheartedness to an otherwise serious campaign. Despite the importance of pamphlets in the election of 1896, “education alone,” as historian Michael McGerr has written, “did not win the battle for McKinley or lose it for Bryan.”¹⁷ Amusement, far from diverting attention from the issues at stake, helped to lure people into the debate and thus complemented the GOP’s educational campaign. In short, bikes were both bait and hook.

The bicycle campaign got underway in Chicago on August 5, when the National Wheelmen’s McKinley and Hobart Club was organized. “They Ride for Gold,” the *Tribune* declared only a few days later, adding that cyclists and perhaps other voters as well could be “influenced by the movements of their associates.” “These men, when they see their companions joining the National Republican Wheelmen’s club, will join ‘just to be with the crowd.’ There they will receive the instruction which will make them Republican voters. . . . The Republican leaders have recognized the wheel as an important factor, and look to the new organization

¹⁷McGerr, *Decline of Popular Politics*, 142.



McKinley and Hobart Club Pin, 1896

Bicycle clubs were formed to support candidates and to exploit the cycle as a means of disseminating campaign information.

Courtesy of the author

to swell the hosts beneath the McKinley banner.”¹⁸ At the Republican National Committee headquarters, a special room was set aside for wheelmen.¹⁹ Ten thousand Windy City cyclists were expected to join the club from its inception, and there were plans to establish chapters in other cities.²⁰

In September, for example, the chairman of the Bexar County Republican committee in San Antonio, Texas, received a note from GOP headquarters in Chicago:

¹⁸“They Ride for Gold,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 9, 1896, p. 30.

¹⁹“Good Roads and Politics,” 337.

²⁰“M’Kinley Wheelmen Organize,” *Washington Post*, August 6, 1896, p. 9.

The national committee recognizes that your influence and co-operation will be of great assistance, and you are requested to promote the immediate organization of McKinley and Hobart Wheelmen's clubs in every precinct in your county. . . . Kindly send us the names of one or two prominent business men who ride the bicycle, in each town in your county, who may be commissioned to organize these clubs. Also send list of your ward and township committeemen, whom we will ask to obtain for us the names of all wheelmen of voting age in their several communities, to whom we may send special campaign literature. Wheelmen's clubs will be an important factor in this campaign. Not only will they be attractive features of all local parades and act as escorts for speakers, but all clubs will be expected to detail members to act as messengers for your committee and distribute campaign documents, besides helping to get out the vote and bring in election returns.²¹

Dozens and perhaps hundreds of these clubs popped up. Their activities varied, but parades occupied a large part of their time. In Chicago on the evening of October 1, fifteen-hundred wheelmen paraded down Michigan Avenue to Washington Park. October 17 was designated Wheelman's Day, and Hanna was expected to join the evening procession to Lake Front Park, where he and other Republican leaders would give speeches. On October 24, at least three-thousand wheelmen held three separate parades on the north, west, and south sides of Chicago.²² In addition to showing up for parades, cyclists also served as escorts for political speakers. In Indianapolis on October 30, for example, one hundred Republican wheelmen rode to former President Benjamin Harrison's home on North Delaware Street to escort him to Union Station as he set out on a speaking tour in support of McKinley.²³ Earlier that week, Harrison had been joined by wheelmen for a parade in Fort Wayne, home of the Sound Money Bicycle Club. With four-hundred members, the club took part in parades, held public races, and escorted

²¹"McKinley Bicyclists," (San Antonio, Tex.) *Daily Light*, September 22, 1896, p. 8.

²²"October 17 Wheelmen's Day," *Washington Post*, October 7, 1896, p. 3; "Wheelmen's Day Parade Program," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 16, 1896, p. 2.

²³"His Second Tour," *Dubuque Daily Herald*, October 31, 1896, p. 1.

Republican speakers from Fort Wayne to nearby towns such as Cedarville and New Haven. When Richard Guenther came to the city in September to help secure the decisive German vote for McKinley, sound-money cyclists escorted him to the Princess Rink, where he was to deliver an address on the money question. Gubernatorial candidate James Mount received a similar welcome when he arrived on October 7.²⁴

The Republican bicycle club in Terre Haute grew steadily from 163 members at its inception on September 5 to 850 by the end of October. Invitations to sign the club's roster were extended "to all wheelmen who are interested in 'sound money, steady work and good roads,'" and residents of both the city and surrounding areas were encouraged to attend club meetings "regardless of politics." The club handed out so many campaign buttons that more had to be ordered. African American wheelmen were invited to join, and it was believed that the city would be the first in the country to hold a Republican parade in which women cyclists would take part. On October 3, a party of wheelmen rode to Seelyville, a small mining community ten miles east of Terre Haute, to participate in a Republican rally, and later that month club members joined a demonstration in Marshall, Illinois, which was attended by Abraham Lincoln's son Robert. "Tuesday, October 20, is destined to be a red letter day in the history of Terre Haute," one newspaper declared. The city's wheelmen were to hold a grand illuminated parade that evening in honor of McKinley. Prizes, donated by local businessmen, were offered for the best-decorated bicycles. To the "best high wheel of ye olde time" would go a fishing rod; other prizes included an Oriental rug, a lamp, gloves, a rocking chair, \$7.50 in cash, bicycle boots, a bicycle cape, two hats, a dozen McKinley tumblers, and twenty shaves. One thousand cyclists took part in the parade. Russell Harrison, son of ex-President Benjamin Harrison and chairman of the Terre Haute Electric Railway Company, had a searchlight placed on the balcony of the city's most prominent hotel, the Terre Haute House, to help illuminate the scene below. Many extravagantly decorated bicycles appeared in the parade, including one covered with flowers. Others were more mindful of the evening's theme.

²⁴"In a Big Tent," *Fort Wayne News*, October 26, 1896, p. 1; "The Parade To-Night," *Fort Wayne News*, October 30, 1896, p. 1; "Wheelmen are Mostly for McKinley and Sound Money," *Fort Wayne Gazette*, August 26, 1896, p. 1; [untitled], *Fort Wayne News*, September 12, 1896; "Political Notes," *Fort Wayne News*, October 6, 1896, p. 1; "At New Haven," *Fort Wayne Weekly Gazette*, October 1, 1896, p. 2; "A German Rally," *Fort Wayne News*, September 15, 1896, p. 1.

Two wheelmen, for example, carried a picture of McKinley and his running mate Garrett Hobart. With a trolley supplying the electricity, the image was lit by incandescent light bulbs.

Republicans did not limit their activities to cities. Many small towns had been struck by cycling fever as well. The Plymouth Cycle Manufacturing Company of Plymouth, Indiana, for example, sold bicycles and bicycle parts not only in Chicago and Indianapolis, but also in places like Warren, Indiana; Ottawa, Illinois; Windom, Minnesota; Mt. Sterling, Kentucky; and Coffeetown, Kansas.²⁵ Small-town America's interest in the bicycle did not stop there, however; townspeople also participated in the bicycle campaign. Thirty-five members of a McKinley bicycle club from Rockville, Indiana, rode across rural Parke County in the last week of September to attend a political rally in the little town of Montezuma.²⁶ A month later, a club from Marion, Iowa, rode to Cedar Rapids to take part in a McKinley parade.²⁷ When Senator Julius Caesar Burrows spoke to a crowd of workers on the money question in Menominee, Michigan, a small town in the state's upper peninsula, there was a parade afterwards in which several Republican clubs, "including a battalion of wheelmen carrying flambeaus," participated.²⁸ Two hundred wheelmen turned out again in Menominee a few days before the election, despite bad weather, to join one thousand of their fellow citizens in another show of support for McKinley.²⁹ Cyclists in Kaukauna and Waukesha, Wisconsin, endorsed McKinley and sound money, as did most of the wheelmen of Decatur, Illinois.³⁰ On September 17, McKinley received a note from George M. Ridgen of Streator, Illinois: "Greeting. Fifty wheelmen of Streator local branch of the National McKinley and Hobart club at your service."³¹ Small towns were also targeted by wheelmen from larger cities. "Wheelmen of an oratorical turn," the *Chicago*

²⁵Letters to Plymouth Cycle Manufacturing Company, various dates, in possession of author.

²⁶"McKinley Bicycle Club," *Terre Haute Express*, September 26, 1896, p. 3.

²⁷"The County Capital," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, October 27, 1896, p. 2.

²⁸"Senator Burrows at Menominee," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 29, 1896, p. 3.

²⁹"Greatest in Detroit's History," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 1, 1896, p. 6.

³⁰"Solid for McKinley," (Oshkosh, Wis.) *Daily Northwestern*, October 10, 1896, p. 1; "Ready to Tune Up," (Waukesha, Wis.) *Waukesha Freeman*, October 29, 1896, p. 1; "The Cycling Club Parade Meeting," (Decatur, Ill.) *Evening Republican*, September 14, 1896, p. 8.

³¹"The Big Day," *Fort Wayne News*, September 17, 1896, p. 1.

Tribune reported of a group of Baltimore cyclists, “will make short speeches at the various country stores on the crossroads and at wayside resorts.”³²

By the time of the election, wheelmen’s political clubs operated in all of the midwestern battleground states—Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota—and in towns both large and small. It is clear that these clubs participated very actively in parades and rallies; the degree to which they were involved in the pamphlet war is less well documented, but we may speculate based upon a comment made a few weeks before the election by Chicago GOP leader Chauncey Depew. Addressing a packed house of Republicans, Depew hailed the wheelmen in the crowd as “one of the most active and most intelligent agencies in distributing sound money literature.”³³ The election of 1896 was not even the first time cyclists had been called upon to distribute political pamphlets. In 1892, for example, the short-lived Columbian Party published “An Address to Independent Voters” urging them to oppose the Democratic policy on currency reform. They also published a “Notice to Wheelmen”: “From this time forth the wheel will be a potent factor in American politics,” it reads. “Wheelmen in all parts of the United States who believe in honest money, in a tariff for revenue only, and in the reform of the civil service, are requested to read the accompanying document entitled ‘An Address to Independent Voters.’ Those who are willing to aid in the distribution of this document in the country districts are requested to send their addresses to The Committee of Seven, Box 5234, Boston, Mass.”³⁴ Prior to the coming of the automobile, the bicycle was by far the most efficient means of distributing political literature, not only in the cities, but on the farm as well. To politicians eager to secure the rural vote, moreover, cyclists’ close ties to the Good Roads movement, from which farmers and country merchants stood to profit, must also have made them seem like the perfect campaigners.

Another way in which the Republicans took advantage of the bicycle in 1896 was by adopting it as an advertising logo. This was a brilliant idea—bicycles were, after all, one of the most recognizable and fashion-

³²“Bicyclists to do Campaign Work,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 14, 1896, p. 2.

³³“Chauncey M. Depew’s Address,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 10, 1896, pp. 1, 7.

³⁴“Notice to Wheelmen,” [1892], pamphlet in author’s possession.

able products of the 1890s, and ads for them appeared everywhere. Even the smallest newspapers routinely carried bicycle ads, and readers of big dailies such as the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and the *Chicago Tribune* often found entire pages or even whole sections given over to bicycles. The same was true of more high-toned publications. The popular *McClure's* magazine—edited by S. S. McClure, an Irish immigrant to Indiana, a cycling aficionado, and one-time editor of the leading sports magazine of the day, *Wheelman* (later renamed *Outing*)—was filled with bicycle advertisements during the era of the cycling boom. The bicycle industry knew how to sell its product, and Hanna's realization that he could pirate this advertising infrastructure to sell a political candidate like McKinley was nothing less than a stroke of genius. Theodore Roosevelt said of Hanna that "he has advertised McKinley as if he were a patent medicine!" It would not have been amiss of Roosevelt to say "as if he were a bicycle."

By sheer luck, another craze—the craze for the newly invented celluloid lapel button—played into the Republicans' hands perfectly. "Everybody is the victim of the craze sweeping the country," one Indiana newspaper reported in August 1896.³⁵ Bicycle manufacturers lost no time in getting in on this latest fad, and all the major manufacturers handed them out. The Republicans, too, managed to take advantage of both the button craze and the bicycle craze, producing at least five political buttons that either advertised the National Wheelmen's McKinley and Hobart Club or drew some sort of parallel between bicycles and the political race. One shows a spry Governor McKinley sporting bicycle stockings and a cycling cap as he rides a wheel toward the White House. On another, we find McKinley and Hobart riding a tandem bicycle down the road to the executive mansion. The caption: "Gold Didn't Get There July 7th (the date of Bryan's nomination), But Watch Us Take It There Nov. 3rd." A pin showing Hanna reveals even more explicitly the similarities between political and corporate advertising. The wily chairman of the GOP is perched on a handsome gold bicycle with cameos of McKinley and Hobart fitted into its wheels. Cautious customers are reassured that the product is "Warranted for 4 Years." A button showing Uncle Sam at the handlebars advertises the "Old Reliable G.O.P. Bicycle."

³⁵"Who Has the Button," *Terre Haute Express*, August 31, 1896, p. 3.



Two views of a bicycle manufacturer's political pin, 1896
 The Orient Bicycle Company produced one pin for both sides of the
 presidential race, even though a majority of wheelmen supported McKinley.

Courtesy of the author

In their own advertising, bicycle manufacturers do not appear to have come out in favor of a particular candidate (although they would presumably have favored McKinley, a supporter of protective tariffs that promised to keep the price of imported European bicycles high). The Orient Bicycle Company of New Haven, Connecticut, however, perhaps wanting to capitalize on the excitement of the 1896 campaign while not committing to one candidate or the other, put out a small hangtag that summer with the words "The Orient Bicycle" and "A Sure Winner" printed on it. On closer inspection it becomes clear that "A Sure Winner" refers not only to Orient bicycles but also to one of that year's presidential candidates: the tag has a small window and a wheel inside of it which, when rotated, will reveal either the name "McKinley" or "Bryan." It is up to the customer to decide who the winner will be.

This little tag reminds us that no matter how much support cyclists may have shown for the Republicans in 1896, some cyclists, in fact, favored Bryan. "Bicycle night at the Exposition was, it might be said, one round of success, in spite of the fact that thousands of people were drawn away by the Bryan gatherings," the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

reported in September.³⁶ Although the article does not explicitly state that cyclists were among those who went to see Bryan, a later article reporting on the activities of the Southwest Cycle Club mentions that “as Bryan was a magnet for the ‘silver’ members of the club last Saturday, the number who attended the Exposition was not as large as it otherwise would have been.”³⁷ Another *Post-Dispatch* report gives further evidence that not all cycling enthusiasts were pro-McKinley. “People who attend bicycle races,” the paper reported on October 9, “are growing tired of the persistent efforts of the politicians to drag politics into all cycling events.” At a race in St. Louis, the crowd had shouted down Republican spokesman Gus Pleus, who had attempted to call a meeting to boom the gold standard under the guise of discussing good roads. “His association of the good roads agitation with the Wall Street money doctrine was what angered the crowd. They got up and howled in chorus, making it impossible for Pleus to hear his own voice. He got as far as ‘good roads and sound money,’ but no further. . . . There were thousands of people there who did not believe that Wall Street money was the right kind of sound money. . . . There are not a few politicians who ride wheels and participate in these meets and their aim is to capture the organization for Mr. Hanna and his candidate. The other wheelmen are aware of the schemes of the Hanna emissaries and they propose to discourage them at every outbreak.”³⁸

Sterling Elliott, president of the LAW and editor of *L.A.W. Bulletin and Good Roads*, faced similar criticism after he published a pro-McKinley article entitled “The Value of a Dollar.” In the summer and fall of 1896, the supposedly nonpartisan bulletin carried a weekly two-page section called “The Money Question.” Criticism poured in. “I like the L.A.W. Bulletin when it sticks to good roads, but in finance it gives me that ‘punctured tire’ feeling,” one reader from Colorado complained, while LAW member number 46,067 declared: “I am a Democrat, and believe in the free coinage of gold and silver at the ratio of 16 to 1.”³⁹ In October, “Sevir” wrote to the editor: “I have been a Republican; am for Bryan now,—not because I have become a Democrat completely, but

³⁶“The Bicyclers and the Band,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 13, 1896, p. 20.

³⁷“Southwest Cycle Club,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 20, 1896, p. 20.

³⁸“Cycling and Politics,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 9, 1896, p. 6.

³⁹“The Money Question,” *L.A.W. Bulletin and Good Roads*, 24 (September 4, 1896), 348-49.

because he is fighting for the masses as against the fast-growing power of centralized capital. . . .”⁴⁰ Elliott received so many complaints that he eventually begged his readers: “Don’t continue to swamp us with typewritten copies made from newspaper reports of Mr. Bryan’s speeches. We have all those, and read them carefully, too. During the last ten days we have received sixty-eight articles of the usual stereotyped sort.”⁴¹

When all was said and done, however, Democrats did a relatively poor job of winning cyclists over to their side. Bryan’s sober, evangelical image clashed with the lighthearted, carefree spirit of the bicycle boom. In Lincoln, Nebraska, a party of wheelmen turned out one evening in July for a Bryan parade, but this was hardly surprising—Lincoln was Bryan’s hometown.⁴² When he spoke in upstate New York in August, a few men rode from Hudson just to shake his hand, but he certainly did not receive from cyclists anything close to the level of support McKinley received.⁴³ Although neither the Republicans nor the Democrats made any mention of the Good Roads Movement in their official 1896 party platforms, the Republican platform, with its focus on economic recovery through protective tariffs and strategies for stimulating industry, including road improvements, must have seemed in line with the goals of cyclists and bicycle manufacturers. The Democratic platform, on the other hand, could offer no plan for prosperity other than tinkering with the currency; moreover, rather than acknowledging the Good Roads Movement, the platform called attention to the need for improving the Mississippi River and other waterways “so as to secure for the interior States easy and cheap transportation to tide-water”—a statement which, to cyclists at least, must have made Bryan seem even further behind the times than he was.

There were a handful of Bryan and Sewall wheelmen’s clubs, but rather than organizing more of these, Democrats often preferred to use the bicycle to make fun of their opponents.⁴⁴ Songwriter Samuel H. Speck wrote a two-step called “An Easy Mark” for H. A. Du Souchet’s musical farce comedy of the same name. The cover of the sheet music

⁴⁰“A Human Man,” *L.A.W. Bulletin and Good Roads*, 24 (October 2, 1896), 468.

⁴¹“Too Complicated,” *L.A.W. Bulletin and Good Roads*, 24 (October 9, 1896), 494.

⁴²“City in Brief,” *Lincoln Evening News*, July 16, 1896, p. 5.

⁴³“Prayer is Offered for Mr. Bryan,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 24, 1896, p. 2.

⁴⁴See, for example, “Wheels to be Forsaken,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 11, 1896, p. 10.



"An Easy Mark Two Step," by Samuel H. Speck, c. 1896

The caricature of Republican chairman Mark Hanna on this sheet music cover reflected the satirical possibilities of the bicycling craze.

Courtesy of the author

shows a ludicrously attired and wild-eyed Hanna about to ride a bicycle over a handful of tacks in the road. Of course, the mockery could run both ways. In September, the *Terre Haute Express* carried a cartoon of Bryan riding an old-fashioned bicycle known as a high-wheel or “penny farthing” (the small rear wheel recalling the tiny British coin of the same name). The cartoonist has taken advantage of the nickname’s reference to money as well as the strange proportions of the wheels to ridicule the Silverites’ campaign slogan “16 to 1.” Bryan’s huge front wheel is an inflated sixteen-ounce silver dollar, while a tiny one-ounce gold dollar trails behind. Uncle Sam, leaning against a signpost pointing the way from Nebraska to Washington, D.C., quips: “You will never get there, my boy, on that machine.”⁴⁵ A similar cartoon, unusual in that it appears in the generally pro-Bryan *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, shows a cyclist seeing stars after being thrown from his bike. The legend, “Sixteen (stars) to one (fall)!,” is subtitled “An Office Boy’s Joke on the Silver Men.”⁴⁶ The same newspaper also carried a cartoon of a distressed secretary of the treasury, John G. Carlisle of Kentucky. A Democrat, Carlisle nevertheless opposed Bryan and the Silverites to such an extent that he joined the National Democratic Party, a short-lived third party whose members were known as Gold Democrats because of their staunch opposition to free-coinage. The cartoon shows Carlisle riding a bicycle with one gold and one silver wheel along a rocky road in Kentucky; the tire of the silver wheel, however, has sprung a leak, suggesting that its rider will only be able to reach his destination if he supports bimetallism.⁴⁷

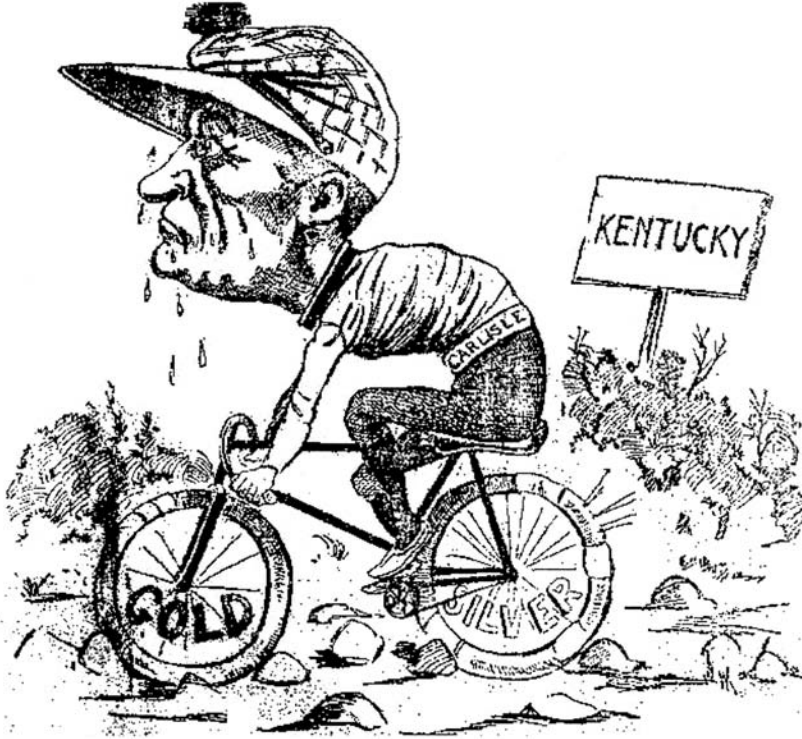
The situation is perhaps best summed up by two campaign pins that have survived from the epic “battle of the standards.” Both sport a handsome bicycle and the motto “For Good Roads,” and were it not for the fact that McKinley’s face appears on one and Bryan’s on the other, the pins would be identical. These remind us that no matter how many wheelmen supported McKinley in 1896, the Democrats still believed that cyclists could be persuaded to cross party lines. Indeed, only one

⁴⁵Untitled cartoon, *Terre Haute Express*, September 11, 1896, p. 5. Penny farthings were notoriously dangerous; many riders were seriously injured or even killed after hitting something in the road and being thrown over the front wheel. The national economy, the cartoon suggests, could be just as easily wrecked.

⁴⁶“Sixteen (stars) to one (fall)!,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 8, 1896, p. 3.

⁴⁷“Those Kentucky Roads Give Him a ‘Bicycle’ Face,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 4, 1896, p. 1.

THOSE KENTUCKY ROADS GIVE HIM A "BICYCLE" FACE.



A political cartoon depicting Secretary of the Treasury John Carlisle coming to grief over the issue of silver vs. gold coinage. The bicycle image was widely used to argue important issues of the day, including William Jennings Bryan's campaign promise of a bimetallic money standard.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, June 4, 1896

year later, cyclists enthusiastically supported two Democratic candidates and turned their backs on the Republican party. The bicycle bloc was always up for grabs, and whoever managed to win its support was likely to come out ahead in the end.

The bond between elected officials and the "brotherhood of the wheel" was well enough known in the 1890s that when two American cyclists attempting to ride around the world in 1897 crossed paths in Benares, India, with three British cyclists set on doing the same, one of the Americans informed the trio "how cordial he would find our cyclists,

mayors, governors, and even the president” upon reaching the United States.⁴⁸ One of these mayors would undoubtedly have been Carter H. Harrison Jr. of Chicago, who profited like no other from the popularity of the bicycle, which he used as a campaign gimmick in the mayoral election of 1897. In his autobiography, Harrison reports that one of his opponents, John Harlan, had been drawing on his background as a Princeton football guard to his advantage with Chicago’s younger voters as the election was gearing up. “He became known as the ‘center-rush’ candidate,” Harrison recalled. “It irked me to be losing ground with the young crowd who flocked to the Harlan meetings adopting him as their own.” Harrison himself was hardly an old man at thirty-six, but one day his younger brother Preston returned from a one-hundred-mile bicycle ride (a “century”) and commented that the “elderly” Harrison would probably have found it too difficult. “His pitying condolence made me secretly mad. I held my peace, but the next day I was out at an early hour, telling my wife I would be away on business until evening. I had in mind an attempt at ‘a century.’” Harrison succeeded, riding 103 miles to Waukegan and back in nine and a half hours, and before the season was out, he claimed to have completed eighteen more centuries. “I now had a brilliant thought: why not utilize my cycling record as an offset to the Harlan football boasting?” His brothers-in-law, Heaton and Harry Owsley, happened to own a bicycle manufacturing company in Chicago.

Shortly after the nominations I had the Owsley brothers send a brand-new wheel with scorcher handlebars of the “scorchiest” type to the Morrison photograph gallery in West Madison Street. . . . I then betook myself to the gallery with my riding togs to be photographed head-on, body bent double over the scorcher bars, an attitude that always gave a fiendish expression even to the mildest of faces! What with the rakish cap, the old gray sweater and the string of eighteen pendant bars, I looked like a profes-

⁴⁸H. Darwin McIlrath, *Around the World on Wheels for the Daily Inter Ocean: The Travels and Adventures in Foreign Lands of Mr. and Mrs. H. Darwin McIlrath* (Chicago, 1898), 91. The British cyclists were John Foster Fraser, S. Edward Lunn, and F. H. Lowe. The McIlraths thought they were pompous and condescending, and although they later crossed the United States, passing through Chicago and Indiana, their response to Mr. McIlrath’s comment on the cordiality of American cyclists and politicians was: “We shall not bother about Americans much; after being entertained by the Shah of Persia, we have decided to let your American dignitaries alone.”

sional, a picture which I knew would carry weight with the vast army of Chicago wheelmen. . . . Lithographs were got out in a jiffy; buttons to be pinned to coat lapels followed suit; it was a good-looking kid that faced the world from lithograph and button, if I do say so myself! And the inscription was an inspiration! "Not the Champion Cyclist but the Cyclists' Champion."

The buttons and posters popped up everywhere. "I was billed far and wide like a circus, to the joy of my followers and the deep chagrin of the Harlan camp," Harrison remembered. As the election approached, so did the spring cycling season; the football season, to Harlan's dismay, was coming to an end. "Great were the wheelmen and Harrison was their prophet. The Cyclists' Champion had the center-rush candidate backed off the board!"⁴⁹

Shortly before the election, however, Harrison, through no fault of his own, had come close to losing cyclists' support when the Democratic legislature in Springfield, under pressure from the railroads, threatened to defeat the resurrected bicycle baggage bill. If passed, the law would force railroads to carry bicycles free as luggage—something which cyclists in many other states had been lobbying for for some time and which railroads had been fighting against. A circular signed by several prominent wheelmen endorsing Harrison was sent around in the first week of April in an attempt to secure the votes of Chicago's cyclists and, presumably, to counteract what was, for Harrison, a poorly-timed blunder on the part of the state legislature. Republicans quickly issued a circular of their own, pointing out that "it would not be consistent . . . for wheelmen as an organized body to support any party that has openly arrayed itself on the side of the railroad corporations for defeating the wheelmen in securing the same law in Illinois that has already been passed in eight other States." Party officials suggested that "it would be most expedient" for Chicago's cyclists to support the Republican candidate for mayor; it was the GOP, after all, which had come out in support of the bicycle baggage bill, not the Democrats.⁵⁰ A slightly mocking article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, one week earlier, had suggested that if

⁴⁹Carter H. Harrison, *Stormy Years: The Autobiography of Carter H. Harrison, Five Times Mayor of Chicago* (Indianapolis, 1935), 103-106.

⁵⁰"Cyclists Lean to Sears," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 3, 1897, p. 7.

Republicans sided with the wheelmen by supporting the baggage bill, “all that McKinley cycling vote [could] be thrown to the Republican city ticket. There are clubs in every ward that can be set in motion in twenty-four hours.”⁵¹

The cycling vote, however, was *not* thrown to the Republicans in Chicago in 1897, as might have been expected based on the support the city’s cyclists showed for McKinley the previous year. Harrison won the election, and when he stood for re-election two years later, he still had many of Chicago’s cyclists on his side. Pronouncing himself a “friend of the boys who wear knickerbockers,” Harrison sent out letters to individual wheelmen in March 1899 listing his accomplishments as mayor: new cycle paths, better roads, more paved roads, smoother rail crossings, the passing of ordinances requiring lights to be carried on all vehicles, and so on. “We therefore ask your hearty cooperation in his reelection, regardless of what your party affiliations may be, and we trust you will actively exert your influence in his behalf.” The letter ends with an invitation to drop by “Cyclists’ Headquarters, Non-Partisan.”⁵²

When it came to seeking the support of the bicycle bloc, Mayor Thomas Taggart of Indianapolis was more subtle than his Chicago counterpart, but he, too, benefited from a tacit arrangement with the wheelmen of his city. In the summer of 1897, Taggart was nearing the end of his first term. Like Carter Harrison, Taggart was a sound-money Democrat who had crossed party lines in 1896 and supported McKinley and the gold standard. Taggart began making appointments to a revitalized city park board shortly after his election. Early in 1897, the park commissioners allocated more than half-a-million dollars for the acquisition of land along the White River and various other properties throughout the city. Road improvements, something that delighted the wheelmen of Indianapolis, were also on Taggart’s agenda. Under his administration, the city’s paved streets grew from 26 to 43 miles, brick streets from 15 to 25, and creosoted wood streets from 1.6 to more than 15; the mileage of cement sidewalks increased fivefold. In all, more than four million dollars were spent on public works during his six years in

⁵¹“Cycle for Sears for the Race,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 27, 1897, p. 3.

⁵²“Committee of One Hundred” to “Dear Sir,” March 25, 1899, box 12, folder 633, Papers of Carter H. Harrison Jr.

office. "The Taggart administration," his biographer has written, "laid plans to make Indianapolis the 'park city' of the continent."⁵³

In the summer of 1897, a unique opportunity presented itself to Taggart, one that offered him the chance to show off the great strides Indianapolis was taking under his administration, gain support for further improvements, and perhaps get himself re-elected in October as well. The League of American Wheelmen had held their annual convention in Louisville the previous summer, drawing about 30,000 cyclists from across the country. The 1897 meet had already been set for Philadelphia, but Indianapolis had been put forward as a possible host for the following year. Taggart was determined to secure the 1898 LAW meet for his city. At the beginning of August 1897, he traveled with the Indiana delegation of wheelmen to the Philadelphia convention. Having already made a name for himself as the proprietor of some of the best hotels in Indianapolis, Taggart set himself up in Philadelphia's Hotel Walton and began "doing some royal entertaining." Although many Hoosier wheelmen were "out hustling like beavers for additional support," Taggart was "chief among the Indianapolis boomers."⁵⁴ The delegation's headquarters at the Walton were a "suite of handsome parlors which are filled with the story of Indianapolis. The parlors are decorated with streamers, pictures of the city and cycle path, [and] the parks and principal buildings."⁵⁵ "We have the best of everything," Taggart told reporters. "Our competitors can not offer anything to speak of to attract wheelmen, while Indianapolis has everything. The wheel-riders of Philadelphia and other large cities will be delighted with the streets of Indianapolis. It will be worth the trip to enjoy a ride over the streets where a century run can be made without leaving asphalt and without covering the same territory twice."⁵⁶ Indianapolis competed with Omaha for the 1898 meet, echoing the previous year's battle for the White House, and just as Bryan had been unpopular with many American newspapers, his fellow Nebraskans likewise failed in their attempt to enlist the press's support for Omaha. Taggart, on the other hand, hit it off

⁵³James Philip Fadely, *Thomas Taggart: Public Servant, Political Boss, 1856-1929* (Indianapolis, 1997), 34-38, 43-44.

⁵⁴Untitled clipping, *The Bicycling World*, August 6, 1897, p. 6, from Zig Zag Cycling Club Mss., 1895-1897, Manuscripts Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis.

⁵⁵"Indianapolis in Favor," *Indianapolis News*, August 5, 1897, p. 1.

⁵⁶"Tom' Taggart Very Busy," *Indianapolis News*, August 5, 1897, p. 1.

with Philadelphia's newspapermen almost from the start. He threw them a banquet one evening that lasted into the small hours of the morning, and they voted him "to be one of the best fellows in the world."⁵⁷ "Hoosiers are A-Hustling," one of their headlines declared. Taggart and his men "have struck this town like a cyclone does a windmill, and if you want to know why Indianapolis should have that meet, or why Indianapolis is the greatest town that ever came down the pike, or in fact, any old thing, simply glide up to parlor D, at the Walton. . . . 'Let the thirsty have their fill' is the motto that pervades the atmosphere at the delegation's headquarters, and no man goes away with a desire left within him."⁵⁸ In addition to the press banquet, Taggart also held an all-night "smoker" for anyone who cared to drop in. Philadelphia's mayor gave Taggart the keys to the city and remarked that "within the week the name of Thomas Taggart was better known in Philadelphia than his own."⁵⁹ "I never met so many people together in all my life," an exhausted Taggart commented upon his return to Indianapolis.⁶⁰ The hard work paid off. Indianapolis got the 1898 LAW meet, and shortly after his return from Philadelphia, Taggart, "the good-roads mayor" and "the bicycle mayor," was re-elected. He served as president of the meet's executive committee, and his smiling face appears in the official guidebook, along with a list of the city's parks.⁶¹

In spite of its ability to make candidates more visible and mobile, the automobile has, according to historian Michael McGerr, *decreased* rather than *increased* political involvement at the grassroots level.⁶² McGerr also comments that in the twentieth century, a tidal wave of new and novel forms of entertainment such as movies, radio, and automobiles "diffused the enchantments of leisure and consumption" and consequently "helped to overshadow politics as an entertainment" by

⁵⁷"Banquet to Newspaper Men," *Indianapolis News*, August 10, 1897, p. 12.

⁵⁸"Hoosiers are A-Hustling," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, reprinted in *Indianapolis News*, August 5, 1897, p. 1.

⁵⁹"Entertained the Press," *Indianapolis News*, August 6, 1897, p. 1.

⁶⁰"Mayor Taggart's Return," *Indianapolis News*, August 9, 1897, p. 9.

⁶¹League of American Wheelmen, *Official Information Book for the Annual Meet* ([Indianapolis?], 1898), 1, 15-16, 48.

⁶²McGerr, *Decline of Popular Politics*, 182.

competing with it for the American consumer's attention. At the same time, new technologies softened the boundaries of local communities. "The radio, the railroad, and the automobile did more to weaken the experience of community than to strengthen it." When once-distant places were suddenly only a few hours' drive away—when with a flick of the wrist one could tap into the radio waves and hear what was going on halfway across the country—Americans became more aware of a national community.⁶³

If these things were true of the automobile in the early decades of the twentieth century, they were less true of the bicycle at the end of the nineteenth. Although the national craze for cycling undoubtedly distracted many Americans from important developments in politics and society—just as the bicycle's critics argued that it distracted wives from their domestic responsibilities, men from their duty to God and family, society from more proper literary pursuits—it clearly also helped others find their political voice. The real importance of the history of the "winged wheel" in American politics lies in the fact that, as the turn of the twentieth century approached, the bicycle still represented the nineteenth-century world of close-knit communities, mass spectacle, and educational politics, but also looked forward to the new world that was to come: a world of nationally advertised politics in which political parties adopted corporate advertising strategies. This duality raises some interesting questions. First, assuming that technology played a leading role in the decline of popular politics in the early 1900s, at what point had enough gadgets and new opportunities for amusement appeared that we can safely say that politics as entertainment had finally taken a back seat to the "enchantments of leisure and consumption"? The story of the bicycle in the 1890s suggests that these twin enchantments do not necessarily oppose—and may even foster—intelligent political involvement. Given that complexity, we might also ask if it was a particular *quality*, rather than quantity, of technology—such as the ability to attain higher speeds and travel greater distances on one's own than ever before—that finally pushed society into new territory? What happened as those speeds and distances gradually increased? The bicycle, like the automobile a generation later, was a fashionable new technology that offered almost unparalleled opportunities for entertainment and

⁶³Ibid., 182-83.

personal freedom. On a bicycle, as in an automobile, anyone could escape from the pressures of industrial society into nature, even if just for a few hours. And yet the bicycle did not necessarily diminish Americans' sense of community, their sense of their own political worth, or, more importantly, their overall interest in politics, as the automobile allegedly has done. Was this because the speed and comfort of bicycle travel never reached those of the automobile? Both cyclists and motorists indulged in escapism, but because of the bicycle's design and its demands on the human body, it was hard for cyclists to stay away from home for long periods of time; the shelter provided by the automobile, on the other hand, meant that it could be, if necessary, a home away from home. Although cyclists did occasionally travel long distances, cycling remained primarily a community-based, social activity, and only with the coming of the automobile did a significant number of Americans finally attain the ability to journey to faraway places easily and in relative privacy. Cyclists' ties to the Good Roads movement, moreover, are also evidence that local issues, rather than the lure of distant horizons, were foremost in their minds.

The story of bicycling and politics in the 1890s offers a glimpse of a world in which grassroots political involvement and intelligent activism were combined with and even spurred on by fashionable consumption and a technology of leisure. In light of the vast amount of new technology being produced and marketed in the United States today, as well as periodic declines in political involvement on the part of voters in general and particularly of young voters, whether that world can ever be created again is perhaps a question worth asking.

