

The History of the Woodstock Cycling Club

By Heather A. Rennalls

Bicycling During the 1880's and William H. Martin

In the 1880's, Woodstock was famous as one of the greatest cycling centres in North America both on an amateur and professional level.

William H. Martin, known as the "Daddy" of Woodstock's early cycling days, had numerous credentials to his name. He was a bicycle dealer; a repair shop owner; a rider and a racer. Martin was also a charter member of the old Woodstock Amateur Athletic Association (WAAA), as well as a trainer of champion bicycle riders. In an article in *The Daily Sentinel Review* on May 3, 1919, Martin reported how in 1879, James Hay became the first person in Woodstock to buy and ride a "high wheel bicycle" or "penny farthing."

A "high wheel bicycle" was made out of all steel and equipped with a 5/4 inch hard rubber tire. The front wheel measured 50 inches in height and the rear wheel was about 12 inches. The rider sat atop the high wheel, with handlebars close to him. The bicycle was difficult to mount as the wheels were out of proportion, often times causing the rider to do an endow-falling over the handlebars.

Martin and four of his friends decided to form a club. At a cost of \$186.00 each, five Penny Farthings were ordered from Coventry England and took six weeks to be delivered. The club "had a captain, first and second lieutenant, buglers and whippers-in. At the beginning, members all wore helmets like a policeman, tunics with brass buttons and black knickerbockers and long stockings to match".¹

Once or twice weekly, members (mostly men) would provide noontime parades and club runs that went to Ingersoll or Tavistock and back. It was a common sight to see sixty to one hundred riders out on these club runs. The captain would give a signal to the buglers to form either a single file or double up in threes or fours. It is reported that in one day, riders rode their high wheelers from Goderich to Woodstock.

Members Sergeant McKay, Herb Clark, Alf. Pilkey, Jim Eagan, W. Merritt, and Martin himself purchased lighter bicycles for racing. Since they had no track to train on, they rode their bicycles on the sidewalks, which were made of planks laid cross-wide and stretched from the Presbyterian Cemetery on Vansittart Avenue to the Old North American Hotel on the corner of Dundas Street. Horses now had two elements to frighten them – automobiles and bicycles!

In 1884, after he left the post office, Martin became a charter member of the WAAA. As manager, he was in charge of the bowling alleys, billiard rooms, and cigar stand. Not only had he become a noted racer, he was also a trainer for some of Woodstock's champion riders like Herbert Clark, A. E. Pilkey and Bill Carman to name just a few.

¹Martin, W. H. "History of Woodstock's Early Bicycling Days", *The Daily Sentinel Review* (Saturday May 3, 1919), p. 10.

Around 1888, Martin left the WAAA to open a bicycle and repair shop, located immediately behind the Royal Bank, off Dundas and Finkle, which operated until 1918 after he retired. In that same year, the shop was operated by the late Jack Chipperfield and moved to Light Street behind Frank Hyde's drug store. The bicycle shop was still called "Martin's Repair Shop"; Chipperfield had been Martin's chief mechanic for many years. The shop continued until Jack's death in the fall of 1944.

In 1945 eighty-one year old William H. Martin, died at Victoria Hospital in London. Prior to his death, failing health saw him confined to Woodstock General Hospital for two-and-a-half years. He never married and was predeceased by two sisters. For over fifty years, Martin was prominently identified with the business and bicycle community of Woodstock.

The Woodstock Amateur Athletic Association (WAAA)

The Woodstock Amateur Athletic Association (WAAA) was created in 1883, after an amateur lacrosse club called *Beaver* joined with local amateur baseball and bicycle clubs to form a local multi-sport regulatory agency. (In that same year, the Canadian Wheelmen's Association of Canada (CWA) was also established.) The WAAA encouraged and regulated "all amateur athletics in the town and [created] a community-based organization to provide sporting and social entertainment for the town's two big civic holiday celebrations, Queen Victoria's birthday, May 24th and Dominion Day, July 1st,"²

In 1889, Ingersoll formed its own Amateur Athletic Association (IAAA) but the Woodstock association was ranked with Montreal as one of the two earliest amateur athletic associations in Canada.

Both the Woodstock and Ingersoll AAA had strong demographic similarities. For example, club members were exclusively Canadian-born, Protestant, middle-aged Caucasian males. Like other associations across Canada, both the IAAA and WAAA "used the socially exclusive and powerful Montreal Amateur Athletic Association (formed in 1881) as an institutional model. "Strict rules restricted member conduct. No gambling, betting, lotteries, profane language, or alcohol consumption were to be tolerated. Members who failed to conduct themselves in a gentlemanly way were expelled."³ Also, both the Ingersoll and Woodstock AAA organized holiday ceremonies for May 24 and Dominion Day from 1884 to 1896.

In 1883, WAAA built Canada's first quarter-mile bicycle track. The association purchased seven acres of the old racetrack from the Woodstock Racing Club on the banks of the Thames, in the northwest corner of the city, where the Eureka moulding shop once stood (now the sites of Standard Tube and the former Thomas Bus), to build a sports field.

William Martin helped plan and laid out the grounds. Frank Hyde and others took part in management. The headquarters for WAAA was located in the old Bean and Westlake building, on Dundas Street, which became the Recreation Bowling Alleys. The track was built of asphalt,

² Boucher, Nancy. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. Volume 10, August 1993, No. 2, p. 172.

³ Boucher, Nancy. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. Volume 10, August 1993, No. 2, p. 179.

the home stretch was sixteen feet wide and the rest of the track was about eight feet. In 1884, the track had been widened and a new coat of asphalt was re-laid. Although bicycle racing became very popular, and quarter-mile tracks were being built everywhere, the Woodstock track was considered the best in North America, with Montreal ranking second. As a result, many noted riders and racers including Billy Rowe, Willie Windle, Fred Kluge, Billy Campbell, trained here, along with Canadian racers such as Harry Davies, Fred Foster, and Frank Lavender.

Also In 1883, WAAA sponsored annual sporting events every May 24th weekend at the track, as part of celebrations for the Queen Victoria's birthday. This two-day event consisted of the best professional and amateur athletes in the country. The sporting events included high wheel bicycle races, tricycles and bicycle races with no hands on the steering bar, as well as many other sports like sprinting. Even Tom Longboat, the long distance champion, ran in numerous races on the Woodstock track. For several years, hundreds of racers attended races that would draw between one and two thousand spectators. In an article he wrote in *The Daily Sentinel Review* in 1919, Martine wrote; "there was nothing more exciting than a real bicycle race".⁴

The success of the WAAA was credited to a popular president of the club, Malcolm Douglas. Along with William Martin, Douglas was also a charter member of the association who attended the first meeting in the spring of 1884. He was one of the first directors of WAAA. During 1886 to 1887, Douglas was the assistant secretary then elected president in 1888. Douglas worked zealously to provide good programming for the annual Victoria Day celebrations.

Bicycle club runs, bicycle meets as well long distance road riding and racing became increasing popular. The Canadian Wheelmen's Association (CWA) also held meets for many years throughout numerous towns and cities across Canada including Woodstock. In 1885, Woodstock hosted the Canadian Wheelmen's Association's annual meet in which thousands of cyclists from all over the Dominion attended. Clubs such as the prestigious Montreal and Toronto clubs (Toronto had three bicycle clubs around that same time, the "Wanderers", "Toronto's" and the "Royal Canadians") as well as clubs from Stratford, Belleville, Brampton, Brantford and Ottawa attended this meet. The town was 'bedecked in holiday attire' with flags flying everywhere.⁵ Club members cycled from the market square to the WAAA grounds in military fashion singing choruses and performing precision and drill routines.

The CWA presented fancy buttons and medals to any member who rode a "century" (one hundred miles) in ten hours during any weekday. The club also held road races that ran anywhere from ten to twenty-five miles. At least fifty racers would line up for these road races. Woodstock's first class road men consisted of the following: Jack Lee, Charles Dunn, Jack Chipperfield, Mack Codling, Kenrick, Bartholomew, Roy Pascoe, and Bill McKay. Although good prizes were awarded, these men raced more for the love of the sport than for the prizes.

⁴Martin, W. H. "History of Woodstock's Early Bicycling Days", *The Daily Sentinel Review* (Saturday May 3, 1919), p. 13.

⁵Boucher, Nancy. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. Volume 10, August 1993, No. 2.

The WAAA's bicycle road rides were held on Sunday afternoons. Beachville was a popular starting spot during the 1880's, due to the shade trees along the Thames River and two road houses that sold cold drinks and ice cream on the route. About four hundred wheelers could be seen. "The men and boys wore tweed caps shirt waists and knickerbockers. The ladies wore caps and some dandy little hats, fluffy blouses, short skirts, high tan shoes and a few wore puttees [strips of cloth wound round the leg from ankle to knee for support and protection.] just to make up."⁶

"The Next 100 Years"

Due to the advent of the automobile, cycling lost its popularity during the 1950s. There is no evidence that a cycling club existed in Woodstock during this time until 1974 when Ken and Jean Ross opened their tiny bicycle shop "Pedal Power Bicycles" in Woodstock. As a result of their concern for the environment, the Ross's were advocates of using the bicycle as their mode of transportation. With a few of their friends; Mike Tierney, John Pennesi and Gerard Streef, the Woodstock Cycling Club (WCC) was founded. These three men cycled in Europe before immigrating to Canada and helped Ken run local and provincial bicycle races.

During July 1st weekend in 1977; Woodstock hosted Canada's First Great Canadian Bicycle Rally. Over 800 people participated. The rally consisted of races for both licensed and novice riders and various bicycle tours. (One tour included the games at Zorro Highland Games.) Jean Ross received a Recognition Award from the Ontario Cycling Association (OCA) for the rally's success. The Woodstock Cycling Club would continue to host the Great Canadian Rides until 1981. These three day events became known as "the gathering of the bicycle clans" and continued for four more years with participation peaking at 1,100 in 1981. The 1981 Rally also featured the Ontario Cycling Association's Provincial Championships where Ken Ross received a gold medal in the Veteran (35+ years) 40 km time trial and silver in the road race.⁷ On July 14, 1984, Woodstock once again hosted another event - the Woodman Triathlon. Held at Pittock Park, this event consisted of a 1 km swim in Pittock Lake, a 10 km run and a 40 km bike ride.

Once again cycling in Woodstock declined; however, the following group of cyclists "rekindled the Club's flame: Mike Tierney, Gerald, Martin and Teus Streef, Warren and Leighton Davies, Tim Carter, Fred Vandersteen, Harold Donnan (now co-owner of *Pedal Power* with his wife Sheila), Mike Robinson and Scott Ross. Tierney's new jersey design was adopted along with his Club Constitution."⁸

Scott Ross convinced the WCC Executive to host their first mountain bike race which was held on December 2, 1990, a day before a snow storm, and was won by the National Champion Cyclocrosser Brain Pedersen. Now known as the Dairy Capital Classic, the WCC still hosts this race. Ross also founded "title rides" like the "New Year's Day Ride", "Tour de Pizza" and the "Moonlight Madness" rides. Mountain biking continued to flourish. Due to the efforts of Mike

⁶Martin, W. H. "History of Woodstock's Early Bicycling Days", The Daily Sentinel Review (Saturday May 3, 1919), p. 13.

⁷Ross, Scott. "Woodstock Club History."

⁸Ross, Scott. "Woodstock Club History."

Poole and Kerry Redden in 1992, the Club leases land from the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority (U.T.R.C.A.) to build mountain bike trails at the Pines. The Pines is a tract of land located off Regional Road #4, on the other side of the Innerkip Bridge. Until the recent clearing at the Pines, the trail system contained about 15 kms of both easy sections and technical challenges for mountain bike riding.

In 1993, Past Club President, Chris Hooper re-introduced OCA road racing in the Gerard Streef Memorial Criterium. The Woodstock Cycling Club held this race annually for nine(?) years. However, due to the decline in road riders, the Gerard Streef Memorial Criterium was cancelled.

In 2003, the Woodstock Cycling Club were 175 members strong. Club members usually meet two nights a week for fun rides and to beat the clock on both mountain and road bikes. 2006 offers some challenges for the Club due to the recent clearing of trees at the Pines. However, newly appointed Club President, Ryan Ludington, is the man to face this challenge. Over the past few years, the Woodstock Cycling Club is trying to fully incorporate both mountain and road biking back into the Club. Whether a new rider or an advent racer, the Woodstock Cycling Club has something for everyone.

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