



**Figure 1.** *Conversation between Buggy and Cyclist, 1900.* Source: Merced County Courthouse Museum.

## **The Bicycle Craze and its Spread to Merced, California**

*By*

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<sup>1</sup>The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

## Introduction

The city of Merced is home to roughly 80,000 inhabitants located in the heart of California's Central Valley.<sup>2</sup> Although situated in the middle of the state, far away from the coast and big cities, it is connected to the rest of California and the United States. Merced was founded in 1872 and became an important center of business and economic activity in Merced County.<sup>3</sup> By the 1890s, it was a city of agricultural and material production. Furthermore, it became a departing center for all of Yosemite's lumber.<sup>4</sup> In that same decade, Merced's little population of 2,009 residents<sup>5</sup> had four newspapers, in which one could explore the latest news and trends, further connecting it to the world outside of the Central Valley.

In the 1890s, the United States was experiencing the Safety Bicycle Craze. The Safety Bicycle Craze was the massive growth in popularity and use of the modern-day bicycle. One would not have expected the young city of Merced to have a passion for this craze. After all, the city was still relatively young and many of the roads were dusty and unpaved. However, this research demonstrates the impact a given craze can have on a small city. Rather than glossing over Merced, the bicycle craze proves to be a pervasive phenomenon. The bicycle craze and the sport of cycling peaked the interests of many in Merced. Although the craze began in big cities, it grew so much in popularity that it hit even the smallest towns across the United States. I argue that Merced was directly impacted by this craze in the 1890s. This reveals that a nationwide phenomenon does not just have a place in big cities. Rather, they hit small cities in the biggest way. Merced was not the birthplace to the bicycle craze, but the bicycle craze found a place in the social landscape of Merced.

## California and Organizing for Cyclists' Rights

In the 1800s, the bicycle craze was a nationwide phenomenon and had spread west into California. With this craze came changes that needed to be addressed in the state. Cycling brought up issues concerning the local authorities, roadways, and environment. Bicycle clubs, shops and aficionados became the new past time and popped up everywhere. The bicycle craze not only illustrates the connection of the United States from coast to coast in terms of common culture and consumption, but the subsequent organization of riders and demands for roads had consequences that reverberated back from the local to the national level.

In California, we see public and private organizations begin to lobby for the rights of cyclists and for a bicycle friendly environment. In fact, George W. Blum wrote the *Cyclers' Guide and Road Book of California of 1896*, which provides maps and directories of hotels that offered special rates to cyclists and bicycle mechanics. It also included information cyclists needed in order to survive a cycling trip in California. The map below is an example from Blum's guide for cyclists. It showcases all the roads available for cyclists. They are marked in red and accompanied by a legend which describes the condition of the road and its grade, or characteristics, such as if the road is hilly. It is important to note the sides of the map as well. Here we can see many ads for bicycle products, thus indicating how large of an industry cycling was at this time as it appears to

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Report on Population Schedules of the Twenty-Third Census of the United States," (Merced, California), 2010.

<sup>3</sup> John Outcalt, *History of Merced County, California 1925* (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1925), 363.

<sup>4</sup> Outcalt, *History of Merced County, California 1925*, 253.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Report on Population Schedules of the Eleventh Census of the United States," (Merced, California), 1890.



**Figure 2.** "Map of California Roads for Cyclers," George W. Blum. Source: Library of Congress American Memory Map Collection.

be attempting to appeal to a consumer base.

It is only in the mid to late 1890s that there is an appearance of the advancement for cycling rights in the state. The *Good Roads Magazine* was an official branch of the League of American Wheelmen, and its job was to promote bicycling culture, inform the public and record friendly roads.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it also served as a base of praise or shame of city roads, advocating for road improvement and seeking public support for their cause. It is at this time that the idea of maintaining roads was considered a city's job. Many argued that this was beneficial for everyone and a public good. In *Good Roads Magazine's* June 1901 issue, it reported on two new developments happening in California that favored cyclists. The first one calling for a new type of road surface. According to an article Al Bancroft published in the magazine,

California is coming to the front with a new discovery—the kerosene road. In many ways it is considered superior to the stone roads on the Pacific coast, and it is rapidly replacing macadam. Most of the Californian earth roads are made of sand or gravel, which contain excellent cementing materials in the shape of admixtures of loam, clay or iron ores. These roads are much smoother and more pleasant to and they are not so likely to raise the dust.<sup>7</sup>

Due to the advances in pneumatic tires and bikes lacking suspension, better roads were strongly desired and became a serious issue that cyclists lobbied for. Comfort needed to be addressed for cyclists. If cycling became a sport associated with pain no one would do it. For the comfort of the cyclists and the new automobilists, roads needed to be in better conditions for safety, as well as pleasure.

In the same issue of *Good Roads Magazine*, a new development in Orange County was covered. The Horticultural Club made a motion to improve the roads because they believed it would benefit everyone. They also supported the lobbying done by the League of American Wheelmen in favor of better roads. The magazine published the following petition, the third resolve being the most important,

<sup>6</sup> Isaac B. Potter, *The Gospel of Good Roads: A Letter to the American Farmer* (New York: League of American Wheelmen, 1891), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Al Bancroft, "The Road Block System," *Good Roads Magazine* 2, no. 1 (June 1901), 1.

That all bicycle paths at present existing, or that may hereafter be created, either by public or private enterprise, are entitled to the protection accorded to them in other places and that we deem it the duty of the proper authorities to enact such laws as shall make it a misdemeanor to drive or ride a horse upon them, or intentionally injure them in any manner." This shows that the movement in Los Angeles County is being felt away from home. The influence of two adjoining counties working at the same time for a common end will each strengthen and help the other. This movement is particularly encouraging from the fact that it emanates from the country element rather than from the town element.<sup>8</sup>

As stated by the magazine, counties thinking about the welfare of cyclists is very important. It called for the ban on automobiles and horses, as well as making laws that would protect cyclists. Furthermore, this goes to show how big cycling was becoming, as it got the attention of the government. It demonstrated that cities, counties and even states were working with each other to provide adequate infrastructure for the cyclists.

### Merced and the Cycling Fever

Bicycles came to Merced and from the photographic evidence, I argue that the bicycle craze stemmed from curiosity. Figure 3 on the right is a black and white photograph of a man on a Penny Farthing bicycle. This photograph was taken on 17<sup>th</sup> street, with Cody Corner in the background around approximately the 1880-1890s. We can clearly see that the man on the bicycle looks happy as seen by his grinning to the camera. The excitement of this young man can easily be equivalent to the look on a child's face when receiving a new toy. Another feature of importance of this photograph is the street, which appears flat and smooth. By 1919, all of Merced's sidewalks were cemented and streets were paved with asphalt. There were fire hydrants and power lines, which further indicates that Merced was not behind, but right on the same page as the rest of America.



**Figure 3.** *Man on High Wheeler.*  
Source: Merced County Courthouse Museum.

In the 1890s, Merced newspapers presented topics centered around new uses of the bicycle. Individuals viewed the bicycle as a means to address various transportation uses, such as military defense. Soldiers would ride into battle peddling or dismounting from these bicycles and then engage in combat. Thinking about this today might sound out of the question, but at the time the bicycle was the fastest personal machine. It required little maintenance and no fuel. Horses on the other hand required grooming, equipment, hay, and water. Furthermore, the *Merced Evening Sun* stated, "it has been estimated that the expense of mounting a cavalryman is \$225 a year while it is only \$15 for the cyclist."<sup>9</sup> This further indicates that the bicycle craze was truly a national adventure because even the defense department was on saddle with the craze.

The bicycle craze was not just for Merced's outdoorsmen, but it was also a new technological craze that everyone was taking part in. Another piece of evidence that gives a taste

<sup>8</sup> Bancroft, "The Road Block System," 7.

<sup>9</sup> Cromwell Childe, "The Bicycle in Battle," *Merced Evening Sun*, November 22, 1893.

of the period is in a newspaper ad in the *Merced Express*. Professional bicycle groups paid for persuasive publicity. This took the form of newspaper ads professing the medical qualities of bike riding. The advertisement states,

A physician pays the following tribute to the bicycle: I have sent patients to the cycle riding school, and they have come back saying that it made them dizzy. They were drunk on Oxygen, and I made them keep at it until they overcame the queer intoxication. Properly used I will say that the bicycle is one of the most efficient remedies of the times.<sup>10</sup>

These advertisements in Merced's newspapers show that the city pushed these ads. Residents were able to stay informed about the benefits of cycling. The spread of these ads became a gateway for Merced to experience the bicycle craze. Merced was soon filled with young men on bicycles riding around as fast as they could, hoping to be a part of this growing phenomenon.

### Clubs and Hubs in Merced

Cycling became a large part of daily life in Merced. However, owning a bicycle was not cheap. Seeing someone on a bicycle during this period is the equivalent to seeing an electric car today; it is a spectacle that will be talked about long after the machine has passed you by. The bicycle craze reached Merced in 1890. Two years later, Merced had its very own Bicycle Club. It was founded on February 17, 1892 and named appropriately the Merced Bicycle Club. It joined the various organizations that took part in Merced's social order and held many organized social events. The Merced Bicycle club appeared to be a man only club of passionate peddlers. They were founded during the bicycle craze and promoted the new past time. Although there are no meeting minutes to properly document their actions, we can assume that they would meet every so often and bike around town.



**Figure 4.** Men in Costumes, High Jinks Anniversary of the Merced Bicycle Club, Feb. 17, 1893.

Source: Merced County Courthouse Museum.

In 1893, the Merced Bicycle Club had at least seven officers and enough members to hold a grand evening concert at the opera house. This anniversary event was quite popular as demonstrated in local newspapers reporting on the event. The *Merced Star* had this to say,

The Merced bicycle club held their High Jinks anniversary last Friday evening and the Jinks were high without doubt. The oldest, most ragged and disreputable looking of the cast-off clothing of a couple of generations was displayed on the backs and other portions of the anatomy of the individual members. The night was

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<sup>10</sup> "The Bicycle as a Remedy," *Merced Express*, January 21, 1893.

rendered as hideous as possible and all felt better during the night than they did the next morning.<sup>11</sup>

In a short amount of time, cycling allowed for a tight-knit community to be formed around this common passion. These communities not only solidified through this common interest, but they also physically emulated the craze. The Merced Bicycle club held events as well, they celebrated their anniversary with a Mardi-Gras theme party that commenced when they marched through the street in costume led by the Merced Band to their club room where dinner and festivities continued. The *Merced Express* had this to report,

Friday evening of last week the Merced bicycle club held their Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday festivities by marching through the principal streets led by the Merced band. They turned out in full force and their burlesque makeup in which they satirized the follies of the age, was very amusing to those who lined the sidewalks, and when they circled around their large bonfire on the corner of Main and Canal streets, where the principal festivities were being held, their appearance was grotesque in the extreme. After the programme of the exercises had been carried out, they adjourned to their club room where an excellent lunch was served, and the club photographed in their Mardi-Gras costumes.<sup>12</sup>

What we can learn from this is that the cycling club was demanding to be seen. The club "took over the streets" with their festivities and dominated the space of Main Street. Merced's Bicycle Club wanted to be seen because they felt that their club was important. This could also be interpreted as a pull to attract new members. Regardless of their actual reasons, they perpetuated the appeal of the bicycle. Popularity connected to the bicycle grew in Merced. Furthermore, the club attracted the attention of two local newspapers. This demonstrates that the bicycle club had a high social standing and was a powerful organization within the city. Moreover, it indicates the popularity of cycling in Merced, and its love for the sport.

The Merced Bicycle Club was not the only organization having to do with the two-wheeled machines. There was also the Merced Cyclery service station that held a storefront on either Main Street or 16<sup>th</sup> street. The service station was also advertised in the newspapers. The store fixed and sold bicycles and motorcycles. Furthermore, this store became a hub of the cycling culture because it provided and promoted the sport in Merced. In the photograph below, we see men in suits and younger men in sport attire with sponsors written across their chests. Most of the suited men in the foreground are holding numbered cards, while the young men in the background are all holding

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<sup>11</sup> "Happenings Section," *The Merced Star*, February 23, 1893, Vol 13, no. 37.

<sup>12</sup> "Happenings Section," *Merced Express*, February 25, 1893, Vol 19, no. 9.



**Figure 5.** Portrait of Race Participants. Source: Merced County Courthouse Museum.

bicycles. Putting two and two together, we can infer that this was an event, and the photograph was taken before or after a bicycle race.

Due to cycling's growing popularity in the city, bicycle races became common in Merced. Newspaper articles commented on the races and the prodigious lap times Merced's young men completed. Both the *Merced County Sun* and the *Evening Sun* reported "Mercedites make fast time in bike races; Merced's cyclists made a splendid showing of speed in the bicycle race run over the Lake Yosemite course of 15 ½ miles yesterday afternoon, winning the first three places against entries from Stockton, Modesto, Madera and Fresno."<sup>13</sup> These stores and clubs were located in the center of town. With races happening on Main Street, they became the forefront of daily life. People who strolled downtown or passed by these buildings on their way to work would see these machines often. Bicycling in this era must have been a common part of discussion in Merced. My assumption comes from the starting line pictures, such as the one above. Here we see that there



**Figure 6.** Race Start line; June 13, 1916. Source: Merced County Courthouse Museum.

are many young men with bicycles and they are surrounded by older men and boys who are dressed up. The cyclists are lined up to race on either Main or 16<sup>th</sup> Street. There are about twenty racers

<sup>13</sup> "Mercedites make fast time in bike races." *Merced County Sun*, June 18, 1915, Vol 49, No 9.

and if they are all from Merced that means, in a town of about 3,000 residents, most of their male children are participating in this sport.

In Merced, these must have been talk about these events. The thrill of bicycle races with men of all ages taking part in a sport they enjoyed. These races once again fall in line with the popular culture of the time period. Peter Nye's *Hearts of Lions: The History of American Bicycle Racing* is dedicated to this sport. Throughout the work, it shows that in early 1900s American cycling was truly a super sport. Nye states,

The Manhattan beach track drew more the 30000 spectators to each of its racing programs... Some 30000 people paid to see the two champions compete for \$7500... Young Taylor (black racer) was earning as much as \$850 a day where the average working man's average wage was less than \$500 a year.<sup>14</sup>

Cycling was a sport where people earned a significant amount of money and had fun doing so. When put into perspective, a national champion was making almost twice what a normal worker in a year's work, in one day. It is no wonder why it became appealing to young men. The financial possibilities fueled the need for speed for Merced's residents.



**Figure 7.** Young men taking part in bike race, 1900. Source: Merced County Courthouse Museum.

Looking closely at picture above, we can clearly see the racers are all different. Some of the racers are in sport clothes, what looks to be a cotton tank tops and shorts. Going down the line we see a racer in overalls, some others are wearing dress shirts and pants. At the end of the start line we see a black racer facing forward holding his handlebars ready to race. Most of the boys are white in the pictures but some are brown, tan or black, some are old others are young. It shows that the sport allowed for the formation of unique communities unconcerned about differences. With all the pictures of young men racing, cycling must have been a focal point of community life. It provided a serious community center to those young men who enjoyed racing. It was at least a

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Nye, *Hearts of Lions: The History of American Bicycle Racing* (New York: Norton, 1988), 37-63.

common place to gather for those who suffered from bicycle fever. The bicycle fever continued to exist, but like a real fever it calmed and eventually faded, and the need for speed was now being cured by motorcycles and cars.

### **Conclusion: Herb's Cyclery**

When the Great Depression hit America in the 1930s, individuals had no money to spend on leisure activities, such as betting, paying for races, or even affording bicycles. The city of Merced faced those same issues. According to Dick Rasmussen, a journalist with the *Merced Sun-Star*, "The depression hit in 1929 and it was a lulu," but Ray Flynn told the young Joe Herb, who had just bought his store and was about to go into the cycling business, "not to worry, that he would do fine."<sup>15</sup> Herbs Cyclery was founded in 1929 by Joe Herb. It was located on 1621 M Street. This offered a hub for cycling in Merced during this challenging time. Herbs Cyclery managed to stay open far longer than The Cyclery Service Station or the Merced Bicycle Club. Herb was not just a store owner, he was also a community member and his work and legacy was truly appreciated by the people of Merced. In fact, it was Herb's bicycle parts that gave me the idea to research this topic. Herb's legacy as a prominent community member put me on track to explore and research Merced's cycling history.

Although facing a decline, cycling became a phenomenon in Merced. It spread into this small city and left a significant impact. Having an important figure, like Herb, promote cycling aided in the continued popularity of the sport. Cycling did not disappear from Merced because residents had come to love the sport and wanted it included in Merced's social culture. The notion that cycling was beneficial to the environment, the creation of cycling hubs, and the archival of historical cycling pictures and achievements, demonstrates that cycling not only spread to Merced, but became a part of Merced.

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<sup>15</sup> Dick Rasmussen, "Big Wheel," *Merced Sun-Star*, June 21, 1993.

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