

## OLD WHEEL MYSTERIES.

EVEN DEALERS CAN'T TELL WHAT BECOMES OF THEM ALL.

Some Traced to Colored People in the South; Others to Mexico and South America—No Age Limit on Their Usefulness—The Trade in Second-Hand Bicycles.

"What becomes of all the old bicycles?" slowly repeated the manufacturer's agent to whom the question was put. "Well, I have frequently asked the very same question and never received two answers alike. I do not know whether any person has succeeded in discovering a profitable means for utilizing antiquated or discarded bicycles or any of their component parts. There might be a highly remunerative field for some genius who can devise a useful employment for the wheels frames and other important parts of the bike's makeup; but then I don't know where the genius would be able to collect his abandoned machines. Certainly not from the manufacturers or their agent, because I never know one of them who was burdened with discarded or out-of-date machines which could be sold so low that a genius who wanted them for their material could make a profit out of the deal.

But that's not answering my question. Most bicycle manufacturers will tell you that the old wheels drift away in lots of small sizes, some to the rural districts of the United States and Canada, some to the Italian trade, which at one time was quite extensive, and others to the countries of South America or Mexico. Many old-fashioned wheels are sent by my own particular factory to the Southern States, the colored people being the principal purchasers.

There are thousands of bicycle riders here in New York who buy a new wheel at the beginning of every season, and return their old ones for part payment. They would do more think of disposing themselves about town and its vicinity on wheels of last year's pattern than they would of going for a ride in Central Park in a hearse and I know of several cases where bike enthusiasts have refrained from riding for weeks merely because their wheels were a month or so behind the reigning style. This ambition to have a new machine every season is not confined to any particular class or to those cyclists who never know what it is to need ready money. Many young men and women of extremely modest means procure a fresh mount every year, and in order to be strictly up to date and gratify this whim they will forego almost any other pleasure. This accounts for the fact that old wheels which were new less than two years ago are seldom seen on the streets of New York. But as less than 55 per cent of the machines find their way back to the agents who originally sold them, there are still thousands whose disappearance and continued absence are matters of unsolved mystery.

The annual exchange of old wheels for new ones brings a great number of second-hand wheels in all conditions to the repair shops of the manufacturers. These are carefully repaired, re-ensmelled and put in the best of ornamental condition. Some are in nearly the same good order as when they were sold, and it is seldom indeed that a wheel is in such poor repair as to render its renovation impossible or unprofitable. The restored machines are then sent to the city stores and are kept in reserve for beginners or are placed in establishments in the neighborhood of good roads and pleasure resorts to be rented.

The second-hand wheels were used by our stores are a great aid to salesmen in disposing of first-class machines. For instance a man or a woman does not know how to ride comes to one of the warerooms and wants a wheel. He or she will inquire if we have not got a good second-hand wheel, which we can sell cheap and, of course, we promptly supply the demand, generally without an effort to sell a new bike. In two or three weeks the old wheels in nine cases out of ten will be brought back and exchanged for a new one. There is nothing so contagious as this ambition to skin about on the very latest thing in wheels. Warerooms, too, have many calls for second-hand wheels for boys and girls, as they generally subject a machine to rather hard treatment. As in the case of adult beginners with a desire to take their first falls from an out-of-date wheel the second-hand affair purchased for the children are returned in the course of time and replaced with new ones.

There was a time, and not so long ago at that, when the majority of the second-hand and out-of-date wheels found a ready and exceptionally fine market in the riding academies and renting shops, but things have come to such a pass now that it is impossible to rent wheels of the '97 or '98 pattern. Every one of the first-class establishments has a full complement of '99 wheels, as well as ultra-fashionable deviations from the straight bike.

Hundreds of obsolete wheels are put to

excellent use by the promoters and managers of fresh-air institutions in the rural districts and orphan asylums in the interior of the state. These kind hearted men and women turn the old wheels over to amuse the boys and girls under their care, and persons who live near such homes and institutions can tell many interesting stories of barefooted boys and girls endeavoring to ride old-fashioned machines without saddles, minus spokes, or with rat-trap pedals, scorching away through sand, dust or mud for hours, running hilarious races and learning droll tricks. The children will play for hours at a time with old-discarded wheels converting them into imaginary mills or spinning wheels, if unable or too small to ride, and taking the best of care of them.

In the South, as I said, and in the West you will find a great many old wheels, particularly in the country and small villages. As you travel westward from Jersey City the wheels seem to date further back the further you go. To be sure, there are many people in each of the many towns you will strike on your journey who have wheels of the latest pattern, for the ambition to be strictly up to date in the matter of bikes and biking is confined to no particular region, but I am talking now about the poorer people and the farm-hands. In the manufacturing towns you will find that nearly every workman and shop or factory girl encountered is spinning along to and from work on a wheel, and it seems to make very little difference to them what it is or when it was made so long as it performs its mission. One thing is particular which I have noticed in the small manufacturing cities of the United States is that on a rainy day the collection of wheels seen is more rare, that is from the standpoint of antiquity, which inclines me to the belief that a great many people in smaller communities possess two wheels and that instead of turning in their old one when they purchase the new bike they keep it to ride on rainy days. Perhaps this is also the case in New York, and it may account for the large number

of wheels which never return for exchange nor find their way to the junk dealers, for the junkshop is the final repository of thousands of obsolete machines. Passing along Centre street, or some of the thoroughfares on the east side where dealers in miscellaneous articles are found, you will find at least one such wheel standing lonely and rigid in front of every junk shop, and very often the proprietor carries a line of five or six. Besides this, he has usually two or three supply wheels on hand—that is, if he purchased four or more utterly dilapidated wheels he will take one apart to replace the broken and missing parts of the others. In case the substitution should fail to answer, what then? Oh, the dealer is bound to make them fit in some way. On one of the cranks of the refurbished wheel he will place a rubber combination pedal taken from a woman's wheel and bestow upon the other crank a tremendous rat-trap pedal which would make a No. 13 boot feel lonely.

I was sauntering down Centre street just a few days ago and paused in voiceless awe before a rehabilitated machine which graced the assorted show before one of the junk shops. The proprietor remarked me and scenting a possible customer, came bowing out to talk about the merits of the contraption.

"I jest fixed that wheel up good as new myself," said he, swelling with pride, "and dere ain't a better on th' street. It weighs fifty six pounds, and I'll sell it cheap as it stands."

"But fifty-six pounds! Don't you think that's too much?" I protested. He looked at me in astonishment, apparently holding my knowledge of wheels in great contempt.

"Certainly not," was his emphatic response. "A heavy wheel is worth a great deal more than one of dere cheap little light ones what falls apart when you ride 'em. It's got more stuff in it, don't you see, an' holds you tetter."

That seemed to be the prevailing idea among the Centre street junk dealers, as I ascertained on inquiry. One of them informed me quite confidentially, on learning that I was connected with the bicycle trade, that the business in old wheels was languishing because capitalists and corporations had reduced the price of good and new wheels to a minimum. Working-

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men, said he, can afford to buy new wheels now, so the junk dealers do not keep so many as formerly. There was a good trade in the obsolete wheels a few years ago, but at present the Centre street trade is almost wholly confined to supplying young men from the Italian quarter, who are the most enthusiastic wheelmen among our foreign population.

"What ever became of all the old-fashioned 52-inch wheels—the high wheelers, as they were called?" asked the reporter.

"Well, I have often wondered what became of the dangerous old giants, which those high wheelers certainly were," replied the bicycle man. "I was in Washington 1888 and 1889, about the time the safeties first began to get a hold on the population and the work of revolutionizing wheelers began. There were more high wheels in that city then there were in many of the States, and when the low safeties began to glide around I remember what a howl of derision went up from all the bicycle clubs and wheeling enthusiasts. Many were the confident predictions that the low wheel would go out like a candle, and those who persisted in riding it were subject to all manner of chaffing from cyclists astride the high wheelers. But in less than two years the few men who continued to mount the 52 inch machines were gliding around the sequestered parks of the city in order to escape the remorseless ridicule heaped upon them by the growing army of safety riders. It was the quickest victory and most complete annihilation in the history of sports, and even within three years after, the introduction of the low wheel a man mounted on a high wheel was sufficient of a novelty to draw a crowd."

Hundreds of the high wheels found their way to Mexico, Brazil and other countries in South America, but there were tens of

thousands which have never been accurately accounted for. One of our agents who travelled through Brazil some time ago told me that he saw quite a number of the old high wheelers down there. Besides he saw several of the very early safeties, with nice hard tires, spring forks, and the whole outfit of backbone shatterers peculiar to that period. The low wheels, however, were unpopular, the people preferring the high wheels because they were understood to be harder to ride and, therefore, a man who would straddle a low wheel was looked upon as a coward.

## SPINY LOBSTERS.

Curious Creatures From the Waters of Bermuda.

The spiny lobsters at the Aquarium are a queer lot, with their curiously marked and light colored calico coats and their remarkably long and tapering feelers, that are pretty thick at the base and that look and are carried like long attenuated fool's caps. As they are seen in the tank, striking in appearance as they certainly are, they do not seem to have the gumpation of the lobster of Northern waters, and they back around and fall over one another with more clumsiness that, would commonly be looked for even in lobsters, and yet after all the queer creatures do not seem to be utterly without intelligence.

In their native waters they would scramble about and climb over the coral rocks in search of food. Here they try to scramble up the corners of the tank, and they succeed in climbing for a greater or less distance a rubber pipe that comes down in one end of their tank. Two of the smaller spinies the other day had climbed this pipe the upper one to a point two-thirds of the way up from the bottom, the other one being close behind the first. It was slow, laborious work for them to climb it, and the pipe was as hard for them to hold on to as a smooth slender sapling would be to a small boy, but they slowly inclined their way up and hung on tightly, the second keeping all the time well closed in.

While these two lobsters were thus engaged climbing the pipe there stood on the bottom of the tank at a little distance from the foot of it, a third lobster, that was apparently looking up to see how they were getting on. This one had his fool's caps tipped up at an angle of about 45 degrees and held steady, as though he were intent on the movements of the youngsters that were up the pipe, and it seemed as though he were waiting to see how they made out before undertaking, with his rather more portly body, the great task of climbing the pipe himself. And he didn't have very long to wait, for in a minute or so the lower one of the two lobsters lost his hold and slipped and fell and tumbled down, to fall finally across the end of the rubber pipe. It did not hurt him a bit; he had checked himself some as he came down and scrambled about more or less, and the water was buoyant. A moment later the other lobster, the one that had got higher still, came tumbling down in like manner and with equal scrambling clumsiness, to fall as the first had done in the same bungling way across that end of the rubber pipe. They gathered themselves together finally and got around to the foot of the upright section of the pipe as though they were going to try it again, but the lobster that had apparently been watching them seemed now to have seen enough; he started off in the other direction.

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