

Mackinac Island Is Envy of Wheelmen Organizations in Other States

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“Some people do try to finish first,” said Mr. Oleynik, “but most just visit and talk with each other, or talk to the people on the Island.”

The idea for the century ride is taken from the late 1800s, when bicycle clubs were a huge social activity. A bike in 1885 would have cost approximately \$150, making it an activity exclusive to the rich and wealthy.

Even with the cost, bikes were a transportation revolution, according to Mr. Oleynik. Bicyclists were the first to propose and lobby for a highway system. Bikes also allowed for a bit of a social revolution when women fought to have bikes designed for them.

Along with the century ride, wheelmen (and women) will be involved in a series of other activities on the Island. Saturday morning they will take a 10-mile bike tour around the Island.

All wheelmen participate in the bike tour, riding authentic antique bikes and clad in authentic period clothing. Proper dress is required by the association, so there will be no blue jeans or miniskirts in the parade. The majority of the men will be wearing an 1800s man’s bicycle club uniform. For Michigan, the uniform included blue knickers, a white shirt, and red suspenders and kerchief. Women riding high wheel bicycles will be wearing knickers as well, while women who choose to wear Victorian dresses will be riding safety bikes.

Following the tour will be a luncheon for the wheelmen at Mission Point, which will be followed by bike games. The games are based upon activities performed in the 1880s and will include riding between taped lines and slalom racing between cones.

The final big event for this year’s meet will be an evening lantern ride. Many of the antique bikes are outfitted with gas lanterns, so Saturday evening, those with equipped lanterns will do a ride through town at dusk.

The High Wheelman’s Association is a national organization divided into state chapters, which have their own meets and activities. The Michigan chapter, however, has somewhat of a reputation for holding an especially good state meet and has attracted cyclists from seven other states. This year will even include a couple from the Netherlands.

According to Mr. Oleynik, the reason for the Michigan meet’s popularity is simple: Location.

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– Randy Oleynik,
High Wheelman’s
Association

al state meet on Mackinac Island. It’s an ideal location because it fits so perfectly with what our group does,” said Mr. Oleynik. “We’re the only state meet that can do this in this atmosphere. This is the ideal location for people to ride bikes and fit in with the culture. It’s like going back in time.”

Wheelmen have been especially pleased with the reception they have received on the Island in the past. To insure that this welcome reception has not been misplaced, event coordinators speak with all cyclists upon arriving and give them explicit safety instructions and advice on how to behave around horses and tourists.

Riding a high wheel bicycle is more dangerous than a normal bike for two key reasons: The seat is high and there are no brakes, so the only way to slow down is by backpedaling. Those riding the antique bikes, then, must be especially careful in traffic, since they are not able to stop immediately when cut off by a pedestrian or another

biker, and a fall from an old highwheeler is significantly more painful than off a normal cycle.

Despite dangers, the association draws a number of fanatical bikers, who pay especially close attention to detail. Although there is no judging, and nobody will be kicked out of the organization for having non-authentic gear or bicycle, the association does require period dress and bicycle.

Most members of the association ride on either fully original, or restored bicycles. There are companies that make replicas, but the majority of people ride originals. This is largely owing to the fact that the cost of a good replica ranges between \$3,000 and \$4,000, but most originals can be found for the same price.

State meets, such as the one to be held on the Island, give the association the opportunity to work with its mission and goal: To promote awareness of the bike as an important part of history.

“We are a group of collectors for the era of bikes from 1880-1918, when the bike revolutionized transportation,” said Mr. Oleynik. “This was the first independent piece of transportation after the horse. We collect and restore bikes, dress in authentic clothing, and make the public aware of what the bike industry was like at that time.”

Wheelmen will be working toward that goal on Mackinac Island. Along with the planned events, bikes will be parked outside Murray Hotel during the day. Though there are no presentations, wheelmen are willing to talk to people about their bikes and the history of the bicycle.



The Wheelman’s Association members enjoy a Mackinac Island visit in 2003.

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