

Bicycle Riders

A 300-Mile Journey (1898)

By Homer Clark

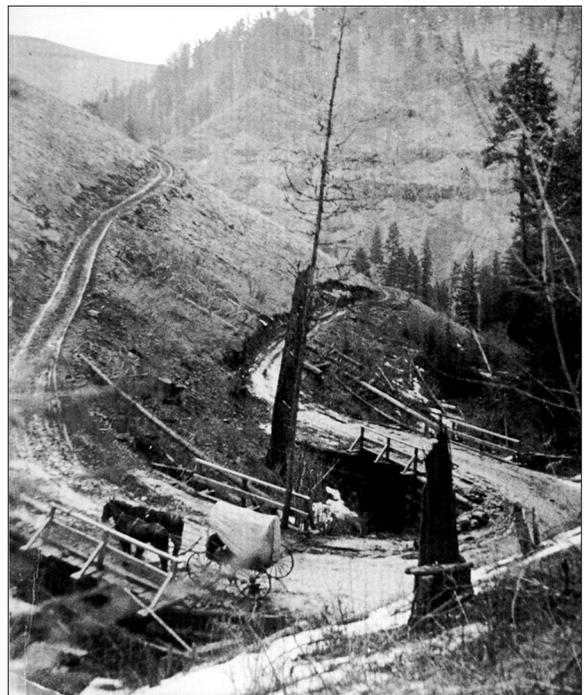
Desirous to take an outing through Wallowa County in order to see the country as well as to enjoy a visit among friends, I secured as a companion Mr. Hugh Davis of Elgin, who is perhaps as well acquainted with Wallowa County as any Union County boy. We left La Grande on bicycles Saturday July 16. Before we reached Willow Creek bridge one of my pedals dropped off, and I picked it up and rode on, propelling my wheel with one pedal until well in the canyon, when the storm which had been gathering burst with all its fury.

One minute sufficed to effectually put a stop to all bicycle riding for the day. We then went down to the railroad track, where we made our way the best we could to Elgin, sometimes walking in the grass, sometimes on the track, and occasionally riding a short distance in the middle of the track. We finally reached Elgin tired, wet through, and our wheels covered with mud. Then, going to my friend's home, we built a fire, dried our clothes, and after supper retired.

Our experience on the railroad track suggested the ease with which a good bicycle road could be made by properly ballasting the track. This suggests another advantage in government ownership of railroads, for the tracks will never be so fixed as long as they are owned by private corporations. Sunday we could not travel, so we went to church in the morning.

Monday morning looked threatening but it soon cleared off, and at 8:45 we left Elgin. Owing to the recent rain the roads were very rough. A crew of men were at work hauling gravel from the river onto the hill toward Wallowa. A few miles of travel brought us to the well known Wallowa Hill, where we walked down the trail, something over a quarter of a mile, instead of going two miles in the winding wagon road.

We crossed the Wallowa River at eleven o'clock at the mouth of the Minam River and found ourselves in Wallowa County.



Wallowa Hill

The Journey

The year was 1898. William McKinley was in the White House and the Spanish-American War in the newspapers; baseball wouldn't hold its first World Series for five years, and Henry Ford wouldn't roll out his first Model T for ten; and folks in rural America rarely saw a paved road or an electric light. It was also in the summer of that year that Homer Clark started out on a remarkable adventure: a 300-mile bicycle trip across some of the wildest terrain in the Pacific Northwest. "Homer Clark, foreman Observer, takes a vacation," read the headline in the August 12 issue of the *Eastern Oregon Observer*, where Clark worked as a printer foreman. "Numerous breakdowns meet with regular printer nerve. He and his companion overcome all difficulties." For 12 days Clark and his friend Hugh Davis pedaled through the canyons and over the mountains of the land where Oregon and Washington and Idaho join. Along the way they faced rain storms and muddy roads, fixed flat tires and broken axles, battled fatigue and hunger. In an age before lightweight sleeping bags, backpacking tents or freeze-dried food, Clark and Davis relied on their own resourcefulness, the reliability of their one-speed bicycles, and the hospitality of the people they met in the small towns and homestead villages that stood in isolated pockets along the route.

Six miles of rough, rocky road along the side of Wallowa River took us through Wallowa Canyon into Wallowa Valley. I was much surprised to see several residences in the canyon, also a school house and a blacksmith shop. We were interrupted while in the canyon by my front tire being punctured, and at a time when we were the most interested in getting on, for it was nearly dinner time. However, a half hour's work fixed it all right, and at 1:30 we reached Mr. Bramlet's a mile out of the canyon and took dinner.

Good roads soon brought us to Wallowa where we met our old friend Chas. Hunter, formerly of La Grande, now bookkeeper for the M&M [Mill & Mercantile] Co. of Wallowa. While this lively little town suffers from a lack of trees it has some nice buildings, including a fine public school, and seems to be doing lots of business.

From here we traveled about nine miles up the valley to Lostine, then leaving the valley we went north over the hills about nine miles and put up for the night in the

neighborhood of Leap. For the first time in my life, I believe, I was too tired to eat. But a good night's sleep rested me and at 8:45 we started on to Flora.

After crossing Whiskey Creek we climbed up a small canyon at the head of which was a large spring of about the coldest water I ever had the pleasure of drinking. From here on, the road wended its way through an unfenced, rolling country covered with pine, fir and tamarack timber, interspersed with patches of stony ground and supporting a luxuriant growth of fine grass. Before going far we overtook the men who were stringing the telephone wire from Lostine to Lewiston. At 1:30 we were gladdened by finding ourselves at Red Fir Springs, where an old couple live in a log cabin which serves as a station for travelers.

From here on for several miles the road runs along the edge of the plateau, so that the traveler can see down into Joseph Creek canyon. At one place the road approaches so near the edge that without dismounting



Wallowa, left, and the Red Fir Hotel, both about the time of Homer Clark's ride



Route of Homer Clark's 1898 bicycle ride

from our wheels, we could see right down into Joseph Creek. It was like looking from the top of Mt. Emily down into Grande Ronde Valley—about as steep and about as far; only it went right up on the other side just as steep and considerably higher. A small farm lies in plain view on a bend just the other side of the creek away down in that great hole where vehicles never go, and wooden conveniences are unknown.

While gazing on this grand scenery I made the discovery that my bicycle lamp was missing. My coat and vest had been resting on top of it and so hid it from my view, and we supposed it had worked loose and jolted off at some rough place. As my companion wished to meet a friend at Flora, he went on and I turned back in search of the lantern, which I found at Red Fir Springs about four miles back. It had been picked up by a boy on horseback near there.

I rode about six miles and found our old neighbor Chas. Evans at his home getting ready for a "surprise party" given at Mr. Carpenter's that evening. After a chat I rode on to Flora, about three miles.

Flora is a new village in a pine timber region, and includes a post office, two stores, a hotel, blacksmith shop, photograph gallery, sawmill, schoolhouse and church. The school is presided over by Miss Amy Fleet and has 58 pupils enrolled.

The Flora country is situated on the plateau between the Joseph Creek and Grande Ronde canyons, and is covered with timber, mostly pine, with some tamarack

and red fir. Various sized patches are cultivated, though most of the land is pasture, and better pasture is hard to find. The soil is quite productive, and the place will probably some day support a large population.

We spent Wednesday about Flora and on Lost Prairie. Lost Prairie lies north and west of Flora and includes the slope from the plateau down to the Grande Ronde River on the west. It has two post offices, Arko and Lost Prairie, each having one mail a week each way. It is a very hilly country. We spent Wednesday night at the home of James Fleet, near Arko. From here we can look across the river and see a few farms and a great deal of timber in a section of Union County.

Thursday morning we left this section, with the intention of visiting a settlement on Joseph Creek. Riding through timber in a northeasterly direction a few miles, we came to an open flat, where we found about a mile of the finest roads we had on the trip. Then a short turn down a little hill and we found ourselves at Paradise. This merely consists of one residence, store and post office combined, but as it is the only store on the road from Wallowa Valley to Lewiston this side of Anatone, Wash., some little business is transacted there.

We took dinner and started down Deer Creek canyon, a distance of eight miles to the ferry across the Grande Ronde. Before we had traveled long we met some friends from Asotin, Wash., who invited us to go to their home, assuring us it was not very far out of our way. We decided to go and stay there overnight.

We thought we had gone up and down hills, but now we had a hill eight miles long, steep and stony. There was not a bit of good road on it, though we managed



Flora, Fourth of July parade, 1909

to ride perhaps half of the way, imperiling the safety of our wheels and our necks. A stream of cold, clear water is ever ready to quench the traveler's thirst and every and anon cool springs issue from the rocks.

About half way down we crossed the state line, marked by a stake standing in a pile of rocks. Here we stopped to rest, bathing our heads in the cool water and feeding mountain trout with crumbs. Going off, finally the road takes a turn around a hill and comes down to the Grande Ronde River, presenting a very picturesque sight, the opposite hill apparently having been built of layer upon layer of rock, all laid with the regularity of masonry. Another curve brought us to the ferry.

For the benefit of the children, I will explain the principles of the ferry. A large wire rope, called the cable, is stretched across the river, high enough to be out of the way of everything, and passes through a tower at either side, to hold it in position, then is securely fastened to the earth. The boat has

square sides and a flat bottom, and a rope passes from pulleys on the cable through a pulley at one end of the boat, then around a windlass at the middle of one side, then through a pulley at the other end and then up to the cable again. When it is desired to cross the river, the windlass is turned so as to shorten the rope at one end of the boat and lengthen it at the other, thus turning the boat obliquely with the water. The running water forces the boat across the river just as the wind drives a sailboat or a windmill. The ropes, being attached to the cable, brings the boat to the landing in the same place each time.

We paid the fare, 25 cents a piece, and went over the stoniest road on the trip, down the river some distance, then at 6:15 started north up the Schumaker Grade. This is a canyon road, and gradually becomes steeper until the upper part seemed to be about a half pitch. It is four miles up this hill, and there was no riding up it, but a slow, tedious climb. When about halfway up we

stopped at a spring and ate a lunch we were fortunate enough to have with us. Darkness overtook us long before we reached the top. When once up we lit our headlights and rode on.

After a mile or two we left the main Lewiston road, and after a few miles of travel in various directions we went down a little gully and found ourselves at the home of our friend, John Christman, on Montgomery Ridge. It was almost midnight and, needless to say, we were tired and hungry. After partaking of some refreshments and indulging in a good night's sleep, we awoke in the

morning, feeling we had enough mountain climbing for a while.

As we would have good roads to Lewiston, we decided to visit that town instead of Joseph Creek. A ride of 12 miles, part of which was pretty rough, brought us to Anatone for dinner. On the way we passed through a cloud of grasshoppers. From Anatone a ride of 18 miles on smooth roads, slightly down hill, with little ridges

crossing the track at intervals to turn water, and a favoring breeze, was made in one hour and a half, and brought us to the Asotin Hill, with the Snake River and the town of Asotin lying in plain view before us, while across the Asotin Creek canyon, away up on the side of the mountain, winding around on the surveyor's level, a ditch can be seen, which my companion informed me furnishes water for a new settlement called Vineland. The Asotin Hill is very much like the Wallowa Hill, though there is no vegetation on the hill and it is not stony.

In walking down there we met one of the Holt Bros.' sidehill combined harvesters, drawn by fourteen horses, arranged with six wheel horses, six horses ahead of them and two in the lead. The driver sat on an elevated seat and used four-lines, two on the leaders and one on each outside horse of the next six, while his assistant held a line on each outside wheel horse. The machine ran on three wheels, two 20-inch drive wheels, nine feet apart on the outside, and a 12-inch guide wheel in front.



Asotin is a very pretty little town, nestled among large poplar trees on the bank of the river, watered by Asotin Creek, a clear, cold mountain stream, and contains many nice residences. From here to Lewiston, a distance of six miles, the road runs along the river, and in places over great beds of sand. A good share of the travel now leaves the river road before it gets to Lewiston and goes through Vineland back on a bench.

Starting up the road we noticed several bunches of cactus growing wild. This road was evidently laid out by civil engineers, for it is graded to a gradual slope. White stakes dot the land along the road, showing the corners of the lots of Vineland.

The Vineland ditch is eighteen miles long, eleven miles of ditch and seven miles of flume, and carries irrigating water from Asotin Creek. The first flow of water through the ditch reached Vineland in July, 1896. There is said to be 6,000 acres below the ditch, though only part can be cultivated. This tract is divided into small tracts of garden and fruit land, which sells for from \$100 to \$200 an acre. It is situated just across the Snake River from Lewiston and contains a small village called Concord. Many nice homes are being built up here, and in a few years this will doubtless support a large population.

Crossing the ferry (they charged us 5 cents apiece here), we rode up through the main street of Lewiston, and I was struck by the fine residences, lined with rows of large poplar trees, giving the town a cozy, thrifty, home-like appearance.

It soon began to rain, and the streets became muddy. Having about worn out my saddle, I bought another. It was made of fine coiled wire, instead of leather, and was destined to call forth many remarks from those who saw it. Stepping into the post office, I wrote a card to send home, telling the folks where I was and not to expect me home as expected. My companion stood by the door, holding my saddle, when a stranger accosted him and asked whether he were the inventor of that saddle.

By this time it was supper time, and inquiring for a hotel, we were directed to the Hotel De France, where we left our bicycles, ate supper and secured a room, although they told us they had turned away ten applicants just before. Going out to see the town, we heard someone singing and at once recognized a

Salvation Army song, so we directed our steps in the direction of the song and entered the hall. Not ten people were in the house, yet the two women officers displayed enthusiasm worthy of a crowd.

Next morning the roads had sufficiently dried to make good traveling so we started out. Seeing a steam boat lying at anchor and I having never seen a steamer since I can remember, we stopped and went through it. This was the O.R.&N. [Oregon Railroad and Navigation Co.] passenger steamer *Almota*, which runs from Lewiston down the river and connects with the railroad there. It is 150 feet long and is driven by twin engines of 250 horsepower each. We crossed the ferry and went to Asotin for dinner, after which we started up the river road expecting to get back to Mr. Christman's that night.

We had gone about half a mile when one of my pedals struck a rock and snapped off, the axle having broken in two. There was nothing then for me to do but go back to Lewiston for repairs, so Hugh went on and I started back. No sooner had I reached Asotin than I saw the *Almota* steaming up the river. It had come up with some lumber. I went on board and waited for them to unload. Then the steamer backed out into the river and turned around.

A half hour's smooth riding brought us into Lewiston. The only diversion on the trip was in watching a man jump out of the boat and swim down to Lewiston. When the boat reached there, it turned to the opposite bank and turned around, stopping with head upstream.



Lewiston, Idaho, near turn-of-the-20th century

Once back I at once hunted up a bicycle repairer, who agreed to make me a new axle for \$1.00. While waiting for it, I visited the office of the *Daily Tribune* where nine men are employed, and besides the usual office outfit a paper folder was used. I bought a lunch of crackers and peaches for supper. Then I started out for Lewiston three or four days journey from home at 7:30, with 50 cents in my pocket. Crossing the ferry I rode to Asotin and bought 15 cents worth of good things to eat, expecting it to serve as a breakfast.

Lighting my lamp, I started up the hill, intending to take the good road and ride as far as I felt like going while it was cool. When half way up the hill, I overtook a man with a four-horse team, who, feeling lonesome, asked me to ride with him. So I loaded my wheel on the wagon and climbed onto the seat, holding the lantern so as to light the way for the team.

The weather proved cool enough and I was compelled to put on my coat and finally to walk to get warm. My companion was going about eight miles on the road, and he kindly asked me to stay all night. I was glad to avail myself of the opportunity, and the next morning went on, arriving at Mr. Christman's at 10 a.m. I had out-traveled my friend Hugh, for he had not yet arrived. However, in about ten minutes he appeared, and we spent the rest of the day there feasting on cherries. Mr. Christman has many fine cherries, many of them Royal Anns measuring three inches in circumference.

Monday morning we started back to Wallowa County through those awful canyons, four miles down the Schumaker Grade, a mile or two up the river, eight miles up Deer Creek canyon and we were back to

Paradise. We began to see the philosophy of its name, for from here on we had comparatively level, smooth roads and were soon back to the home of our friend Mr. J. D. Robinson. Miss Ada Robinson closed a successful term of school in the Noble district near Enterprise the Friday before, July 22. She has been engaged to teach at Lostine next winter. Mr. Robinson was cutting some of the finest timothy we had seen for some time. The crop prospect is good in this section, which also might be said of Wallowa County as a whole. Tuesday was spent in the neighborhood visiting friends.

I was sorry that I could not visit the settlement of Joseph Creek for the benefit of my readers. They tell us it is like going down into a great hole in the ground, and it is so hot that grapes and oranges grow there.

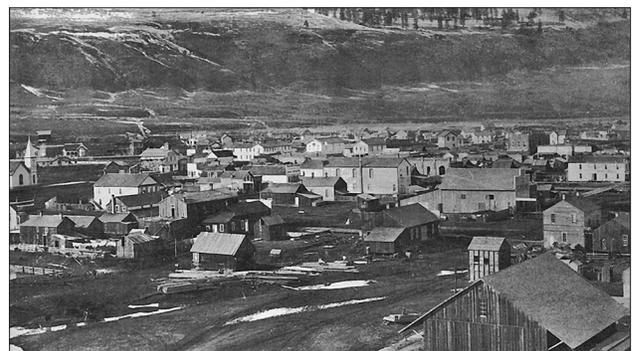
Wednesday we went back to our friend M. Downing near Leap. Mr. Downing has a nice young orchard, and we saw gooseberries in his garden that measured three inches in circumference. He also has a nice patch of vetch now in bloom that he is raising as an experiment.

Thursday morning we started home. In passing through Wallowa we met our old friend Ira Baird. He said to give his regards to the friends at home. At 2:15 p.m. we were again at the Wallowa Hill. Forty-five minutes brought us to the top and soon Mt. Emily appeared in view. We arrived in Elgin at 4:30, where I left my companion and hastened home to La Grande.

We had been gone 12 days and traveled about 300 miles over some of the roughest country in this part of the three states visited, yet I learned more practical geography in those two weeks than I had for two years before.



Paradise, near turn-of-20th century



La Grande, 1898

Bicycling's Golden Age

Sometimes called the “Golden Age of Bicycling,” the 1890s was a time of contrasts for cyclists. For one thing, even though the roads of the day saw virtually no automobile traffic—the Model T wouldn’t come along until 1908—they had almost as little pavement; dirt was prevalent and gravel a luxury.

For another, although bicycles were being mass produced at the time, they were too expensive for most working people, especially in the rural West where dollar-a-day wages were still common, and the price of a decent bike could cost a month’s pay or more. (Prices early in the decade could top \$400, though by the late 1890s they had dropped to less than \$100, with Sears, Roebuck and Co. advertising bicycles in the \$15-\$55 range.) Nevertheless, in 1897 more than 2 million bicycles sold throughout the U.S. (from a population of approximately 75 million).

Yet another concerned the riders themselves. As the cycling “craze” swept the nation, women were discouraged from joining it. Fearing the effects of cycling on a woman’s health, fertility, and femininity—not to mention the potential for inappropriate “sexual arousal” that resulted from straddling a bicycle’s seat—writers across the nation (all male, of course) saw bicycles as a means of carrying women down the road to degradation and ruin, a sure sign of the “depravity and boldness of the nineteenth-century girl.” (What else could you assume about a woman who swapped her corset for bloomers?) Consequently, male cyclists outnumbered females by a 2-1 ratio, and women who bicycled in pants rather than dresses ran the risk of running afoul of the law.

Disregarding conventional male wisdom, women by the thousands continued to saddle up and pedal along, until in the spring of 1897 the *Chicago Post* could report that “The fashionable girl no longer lolls about in tea gowns and darkened rooms, but stands beside you in short skirts, a sailor hat, low shoes and leggings, ready for a spin on the wheel.”

One result of the change, said Susan B. Anthony, leader in the women’s rights movement of the 19th century, was that bicycling had “done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world.”

When woman wants to learn anything or do anything useful or even have any fun, there is always someone to solemnly warn her that it is her duty to keep well. Meanwhile, in many states she can work in factories ten hours a day, she can stand behind counters in badly ventilated stores from 8 o’clock to 6, she can bend over the sewing machine for about 5 cents an hour and no one cares enough to protest. But when these same women, condemned to sedentary lives indoors, find a cheap and delightful way of getting the fresh air and exercise they need so sorely there is a great hue and cry about their physical welfare. – *Chicago Daily News*, October 17, 1894



Bicyclist winning first prize for cycling costume in 1896 New York parade



Woman cyclist in bloomers, 1897

The alarmingly pessimistic view of the bicycle question is not justified by the facts. It is doubtless true that many young women ride to excess. It is also doubtless true that to the woman of impure life the wheel may offer a convenient means for facilitating the execution of immoral designs, but that the pastime itself has a tendency to degrade or demoralize is a proposition too absurd for a moment's consideration. – *Chicago Times-Herald*, 1896

In cases of breakdown of the nervous system from overwork and anxiety, cycling will be found a most valuable adjunct to the rest which is necessary for recovery, and numerous brain-workers now consider a daily ride indispensable if their work is to remain at concert pitch. Many sufferers from sick headache, neuralgia, and hysteria have reaped much benefit from regulated cycle-riding, and many cases of so-called palpitation have been cured. – *The British Medical Journal*, 1896

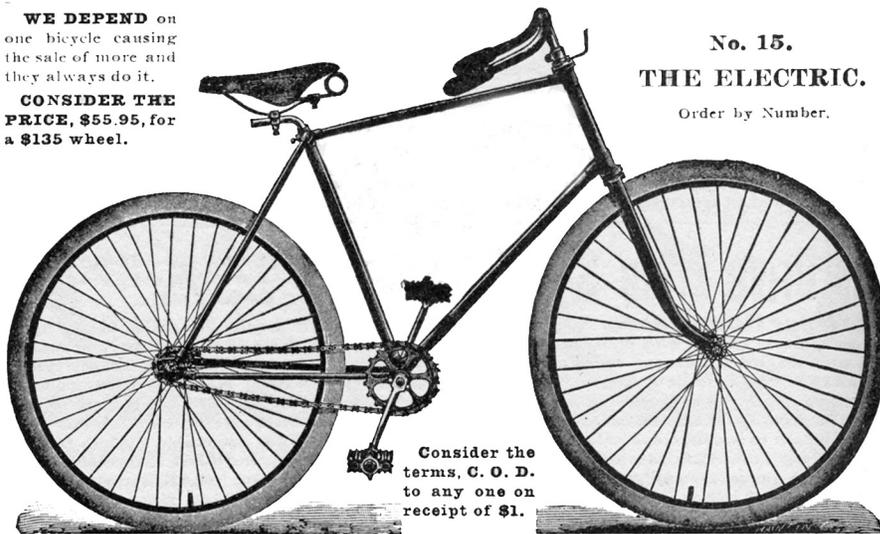
With his wheel at hand, there is no hard-driven clerk who may not look forward each day to a comforting flight from the daily grind. Fat Germans, with their fatter fraus, leave the sweltering heat of East-side tenement rows and skim gayly through the park, along the Hudson, and away into pleasant country places. Nothing else can compare to the wheel as a leaven for the heavy lump of joylessness in our streets. – *Scribner's magazine*, 1896



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Sears, Roebuck and Co. ad, 1894