

Jerry McKeelvy's
WAY BACK WHEN
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THE BICYCLE CRAZE

A bicycle craze hit the United States in the mid-1880s and 1890s. Most of the early bicycles had large front wheels and a small wheel at the rear, sometimes called “a High Wheeler”. These were pretty dangerous because the rider was sitting high off the ground over the large front wheel. If the cyclist hit a bump or a rock, he could be thrown over the handlebars and land on his head. Soon, a “safety bicycle” was introduced with two wheels of equal size similar to our bicycles of today.

Newspapers of that time period ran long articles with instructions of how to mount and dismount from a bicycle and how to operate one safely. One of these articles said “It’s the same principal as rolling a coin across the floor. As long as the coin retains its momentum, it stays upright. As it begins to go less rapidly, it topples and falls. That is all there is to bicycle riding”.

As with any activity of this nature, there could be accidents and injuries. One article in 1889 claimed that bicycle riding was safe and explained that there were more injuries from horseback riding than from riding a bicycle, but of course, many more people rode horses at that time than bicycles.

In Chicago in 1880, bicycles were declared a nuisance because horses were being frightened by bicycles causing accidents. In some cities, bicycles were banned on certain streets.

By 1895, there were over 300 bicycle manufacturers in the United States. The largest company was producing bicycles at the rate of one per minute. The price for a new bicycle was pretty high at first, but some considered it costing less than having to feed and care for a horse.

Soon there were bicycle clubs in cities, but it was mostly men who rode them. Women

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were demanding more freedom in the 1890s, and some brave women started riding bicycles like the men. It was a way for them to escape the drudgery of housework and was a way to get more exercise.

Women riding tricycles was popular in Europe and soon American women could be seen riding their tricycles along with the men on their bicycles. Tricycles for children were not a common thing in the 1890s. They were at first manufactured for women. In 1884, it was reported that tricycles for women were becoming popular in Washington, DC, New York, and Boston and their use was spreading to smaller towns.

By 1890, bicycles had equal size wheels with air-filled tubes and some had gears. Women's bicycles were being produced and designed so that women could ride them with their long, cumbersome skirts safely. One of the criticisms of women riding bicycles concerned modesty. With the new bicycle designs, it was reported that women could ride a bicycle wearing a skirt with no more of her ankles exposed than if she were walking. Some women wore bloomers similar to men's pants instead of skirts.

One of the problems with bicycle riding was dogs chasing a bicycle. A device was invented that was similar to a syringe. If a dog began to chase a bicycle, the rider could release a squirt of diluted ammonia into the dog's face and that usually solved the problem.

The bicycle had a big effect on American life. Streets were improved to make them smoother for bicycle riding. Younger men and women could get more exercise which improved their health. Women had more freedom. Some were calling for women to have the right to vote, but one lady in 1890 said she had rather have the right to ride a bicycle than to have the right to vote. The bicycle craze brought in a big change in women's dress as clothes were designed that were more suitable for bicycling. A special type corset was introduced for women designed for bicycle riding.

The bicycle craze trended on until around 1900 when automobiles began to appear on the scene. The coming of the automobile promised to have an even greater effect on American life than the bicycle.

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TERRAPIN FARMING

I came across an interesting article written in 1893 from the state of Delaware about terrapin farming. I never thought of terrapins as being used for food, but in parts of the country, especially along the Atlantic coast, they were highly prized and considered a delicacy. The article said terrapins over six inches were selling for \$72 per dozen back in 1893.

According to the article I read, the diamond-back terrapin was the most popular for food and the larger ones were highly prized for their flesh. Terrapin farming was said to be a lucrative business. One farm was over two acres fenced with a board fence to keep the terrapins from escaping. The terrapins had to be fed during the summer months, but in the winter the diamond-back terrapin becomes inactive and stays mostly underwater.

The female terrapin lays her eggs in the summer. She first digs a hole in the sand and deposits her eggs in the hole and covers it with sand. She packs the sand with the hard breast shell. The average terrapin lays about twelve eggs. The sun heats the sand and after about two months, the young terrapins emerge.

I've never tried eating a terrapin or turtle, but I know some people like turtle soup. One day when I was working, I had to take a beaver trapper to a beaver pond we wanted drained and, on the way, we saw a turtle crossing the road. He told me to stop and he grabbed the turtle and put it in the bed of my truck. He said "I'll have turtle soup tonight".

Here in Arkansas, we have about 16 species of turtles. Most live in water, but two are land-dwellers—the three-toed box turtle (terrapin) and the ornate terrapin. The one you are most likely to see in Arkansas is the three-toed box turtle. The ornate terrapin is rarer and is a protected species.

Some people like to keep turtles as pets. In Arkansas, you are allowed to keep up to six turtles per household as pets as long as they are not a protected species. Terrapins normally stay in an area of about ten to fourteen acres their whole life. Motorists often see a terrapin trying to cross a highway and some stop and help it across. The experts say to never move a terrapin a long distance from where you found it. They also say to not paint the terrapin's shell.

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Terrapins are interesting creatures and one of the few species of wild animals a person can actually pick up. They will close up inside their shell when they feel threatened. You wouldn't want to pick up some of the other species of turtles such as the snapping turtle. There is an old saying that if one bites you, it will not let go until it thunders. Terrapins usually cause no problems, but they can eat low-hanging garden vegetables such as tomatoes.

THE OSTRICH FARM AT HOT SPRINGS



Hot Springs, Arkansas has long been a destination for tourists. It was considered a health resort and many came to take advantage of the hot springs by taking baths in water from the springs or drinking the water. In the early 1900s, three of most popular tourist attractions at Hot Springs were the Happy Hollow amusement park, the alligator farm, and the ostrich farm.

Thomas A. Cockburn brought nearly 300 ostriches to Hot Springs in 1900 and started an ostrich farm located on Whittington Ave. He offered rides on ostriches to the children, and trained some to pull small carts with passengers. His two largest ostriches were named Whirlwind and Black Diamond. These birds were nearly ten feet tall and weighed nearly 400 pounds. It was a common sight to see these birds pulling a cart filled with

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tourists on Central Avenue. Postcards like the one pictured here were used to advertise the ostrich farm.

Oaklawn Park at Hot Springs is still known for horse racing. Mr. Cockburn organized races at Oaklawn between his ostriches and some of the thoroughbred horses. It was reported that the ostrich could win in a short distance race with a horse, but the horses would win in a longer distance race.

Feathers from the ostriches were harvested twice each year. These were sold in a shop in town and shipped around the country to be used as decorations on hats. Colorful feathers on hats were very popular in the early 1900s.

Mr. Cockburn died in 1936 and his family continued operation of the farm after his death. The Hot Springs ostrich farm closed in 1953 after 53 years in business.

THE ROLLER-SKATING CRAZE

It seems that every few years some fad or craze comes along and everyone jumps on board with it until they get bored or something new comes along. In the 1880s, it was roller-skating. As usual, the craze hit the big cities like New York City and Boston first and then spread across the country.

Roller-skating had been around for a long time, but a man named James Plimpton had designed a new type of skate that was safer and easier to use. By 1883, there were fifteen skating rinks in New York City and an estimated 30,000 rinks in the United States. It took a lot of money to construct a skating rink and many large buildings were re-purposed as skating rinks. It usually took about six people to operate one, so that meant that 180,000 people were employed in 1883 by skating rinks. Skating became so popular that companies couldn't keep up with the demand for skates. About 500 companies were manufacturing skates at the rate of 30 to 40 thousand per week.

Roller skating was somewhat controversial in the 1880s. Some looked at roller skating as a healthful amusement while others thought skating rinks were pits of perdition. Many

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preachers spoke out against roller-skating because many people missed evening church services to go roller-skating.

Some thought roller-skating was immoral. An article in the Indianapolis Journal in 1885 had this warning:

“The roller-skating craze should be generally condemned. There is no particular harm in roller-skating, per se, but there is great harm in the association and mixed commingling of the pure with the impure at these places..... Mothers should never let their daughters go to the skating rink. There is danger in it. Rinks should be avoided as much as though they were houses of ill repute.....”

This was a time when female’s clothing pretty much covered every part of the body. Some thought it was indecent for young girls to take a tumble while skating and parts of their body or undergarments might be exposed in front of spectators.

There was also the danger of injury while skating. Many suffered broken bones and skinned knees occurred when a skater took a tumble while skating, especially those new to the sport.

Like most crazes or fads, the roller-skating craze died down in just a few years. Many who had invested large amounts of money in building skating rinks went bankrupt. Roller-skating didn’t completely disappear, but soon things got back to a somewhat more normal status (*at least until the next craze came along*).

Little Red Wagon – by Don Mathis

Little Red Wagon, bought for my brother,
Dad would pull him through fields of clover
My kid siblings would have such a thrill
coasting fast down the neighborhood hill
Dad used it for planting and hauling dirt,
he didn’t want his back to get hurt
And that wagon really helped out
when my brother got a newspaper route
It was left in the garage to gather dust,
then it was left outside to gather rust
Red color was fading, growing faint,

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so, Dad applied a new coat of paint
Brushed over the words, 'Radio Flyer,'
scraped off the rust and replaced the tire
The restoration gave our mother smiles;
it was good to go for many more miles
My brothers grew and left the nest,
the wagon in the backyard would rest
Holding flower pots and garden gear,
and other stuff you'd want to keep near
After Dad died, the wagon was neglected –
but grandkids caused it to be resurrected
I'd give my nieces and nephew a ride,
they traveled the universe sitting inside
And I don't know who had the most fun
when I got the chance to pull my own son
But even those kids grew and lost interest,
poor little wagon sat alone at rest
Mom asked if I had a use for this heirloom,
I could have it if I had enough room
So, the little red wagon came to my place,
I had in mind by the storage shed a space
When I wanted to make a flagstone track,
the wagon saved me from an aching back
It was the perfect place to place my socket
or screwdriver or wrench before I'd use it
For a while, it held a huge cactus pot,
I'd use it to hold anything and what-not
Wheels got all wobbly and the bed was rusty,
but it was always there, ready and trusty
I parked it by the fence under the tree one day,
when I got home, my neighbor called to say
he heard a banging like metal in my yard,
he apologized for not being on guard
But he saw someone drive up in a van
and take something red from my land
It was my old red wagon I'm sorry to state,
its loss left me feeling sad and irate
I wonder if they stole it for the metallic worth
or would it ever see a little kid's mirth
I kind of hope they scraped off the mud,
repainted it, showed it some love
And renewed its life for a new generation
rather than melting it down for refabrication

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Sergeant First Class Mathis -- by Don Mathis

Daddy retired from the Army in 1963; I was 12. Dan Mathis was a recruiter in San Antonio, Killeen, and Texarkana, Texas; and Little Rock and Hot Springs, Arkansas. The fathers of all my friends were World War II veterans so it didn't seem unusual for us to move frequently.

Since Daddy was the first contact with the military for many people, he had to make a good impression. And that meant his family had to make a good impression too, including the house and yard. We all had to be "spic and span," he would say, "clean as a whistle, looking sharp, and polished to a high gloss."

Daddy used to tell the story how he would recruit the backwoods boys of Arkansas. "The Army will give you a new pair of shoes," he would tell them, "shiny black oxfords." Those sons of farmers never had a brand-new pair of shoes in their life, Daddy said. "They would enlist just to get a free pair of boots."

Every once in a while, a recruit would come over for dinner so Daddy could show him the standard of life the Army could provide. My brothers and I would run up and down the hall in our socks to polish the wax on the floor. Mom would bring out the fine china and silverware.

Sometimes, the family would visit Daddy at his recruiting office downtown. And Daddy would show us off, proud as a peacock. It made us proud too. In this photo from 1959, Daddy holds Ted, Jeff holds his arms around Benny, and I'm holding my hands in my pockets. We were an all-American family.



Sergeant First Class Dan Mathis

U. S. Army Recruiter – Hot Springs -- 1955