

'Young Rovers' and 'Dazzling Lady Meteors:' Gender and Bicycle Club Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Small-Town Ontario

Rebecca Beusaert

Volume 36, Number 1, 2013

Canada's Usable Past: Consumer Technologies in Historical Perspective

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1025788ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1025788ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Beusaert, R. (2013). 'Young Rovers' and 'Dazzling Lady Meteors:' Gender and Bicycle Club Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Small-Town Ontario. *Scientia Canadensis*, 36(1), 33–61. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1025788ar>

Article abstract

During the bicycle “craze” of the 1890s and early 1900s, men and women across Western Europe and North America embraced this novel form of recreation and modern mode of transportation. Undoubtedly, the invention of the “safety” bicycle in 1885 aided women’s enjoyment of the machine, yet in many respects cycling remained an androcentric mode of recreation. This is most evident when examining the paternal structure of bicycle clubs. In the existing literature on cycling, however, little attention is paid to gender dynamics within clubs, especially in the context of smaller towns and rural areas. Using the towns of Tillsonburg and Ingersoll in southwestern Ontario’s Oxford County as a case study, this article examines how cycling clubs in these communities were sites of both change and resistance to the prevailing gender norms of the time. Once membership was opened to women, club activities became more heterosocial and less focused on cultivating virulent masculinity, but women were never fully accepted as full-fledged members.

‘Young Rovers’ and ‘Dazzling Lady Meteors:’ Gender and Bicycle Club Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Small-Town Ontario

Rebecca Beusaert

Woodstock Museum National Historic Site

Abstract: During the bicycle “craze” of the 1890s and early 1900s, men and women across Western Europe and North America embraced this novel form of recreation and modern mode of transportation. Undoubtedly, the invention of the “safety” bicycle in 1885 aided women’s enjoyment of the machine, yet in many respects cycling remained an androcentric mode of recreation. This is most evident when examining the paternal structure of bicycle clubs. In the existing literature on cycling, however, little attention is paid to gender dynamics within clubs, especially in the context of smaller towns and rural areas. Using the towns of Tillsonburg and Ingersoll in southwestern Ontario’s Oxford County as a case study, this article examines how cycling clubs in these communities were sites of both change and resistance to the prevailing gender norms of the time. Once membership was opened to women, club activities became more heterosocial and less focused on cultivating virulent masculinity, but women were never fully accepted as full-fledged members.

Résumé: L’engouement pour la bicyclette durant les années 1890 et au début des années 1900 s’est traduit par l’adoption de ce mode de loisirs et de transport par les hommes et les femmes en Europe occidentale et en Amérique du Nord. Sans aucun doute, l’invention de la «bicyclette sécuritaire» en 1885 a permis aux femmes de s’approprier cette technologie, mais à bien des égards le cyclisme est demeuré un loisir androcentrique, ainsi que le démontre la structure paternaliste des clubs cyclistes. La littérature existante accorde peu d’attention aux rapports de genre au sein de ces clubs, surtout dans le contexte des petites villes et des zones rurales. En utilisant les cas des villes de Tillsonburg et Ingersoll dans le comté d’Oxford dans le sud-ouest de l’Ontario, cet article examine comment les clubs cyclistes étaient des sites à la fois de changement et de résistance face aux normes genrées dominantes de l’époque. Une fois les femmes admises au sein de ces clubs, les activités cyclistes sont devenues plus hétérosociales et moins axées sur la culture d’une masculinité virulente, même si les femmes n’ont jamais été pleinement acceptées en tant que membres à part entière.

The bicycle is remaking society by breaking down conventionalities that have withstood the effect of time, especially in relation to the restrictions governing women. Riding the wheel was at first an experiment of utility by workers who could afford no more luxurious means of transportation; then it became a fad, and now it has settled down to the dignity of one of the acceptable means of locomotion.

“A Bicycle Dinner,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 28 (31) (3 Aug. 1895): 617.

Roughly between the years 1895 and 1899, a phenomenon developed across Western Europe and North America that nineteenth-century contemporaries and historians thereafter dubbed the “bicycle boom” or “craze.”¹ Often described as a saviour for middle-class women, the bicycle was one of the most highly-coveted consumer technologies and novel forms of transportation to emerge in the later nineteenth century. Cycling historian Clare S. Simpson writes that for women “the bicycle offered unique opportunities to move spontaneously and independently beyond accepted geographic and social boundaries.”² Some reformers and more evangelical social commentators demonstrated little enthusiasm for cycling, worried that this new cross-gendered mode of leisure facilitated inappropriate relations between men and women. A number of medical professionals condemned bicycles for supposedly disrupting women’s reproductive systems and prompting sexual immorality, arguing it did more harm than good to their constitutions.³ In spite of these and other concerns from cycling detractors, as the above excerpt from *Harper’s Bazaar* indicates, many viewed the activity positively, especially from the standpoint of utility. The polarity that developed between supporters and opponents of female riders was not unique to cycling alone; across rural and small-town Ontario, as women increasingly began participating in sports and leisure activities once the preserve of privileged men, local citizens became privy to and participated in both sides of the debate regarding female appropriateness and shifting gender dynamics in public.

Undoubtedly, the appearance of the safety bicycle in the mid-1890s was critical to the entry of women into the traditionally male-dominated culture of cycling. A great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to

1. Anita Rush, “The Bicycle Boom of the Gay Nineties: A Reassessment,” *Material Culture Review* 18 (Fall 1983): 2; A number of historians offer different definitions of the cycling ‘boom’ or ‘craze,’ but the span of time proposed by Anita Rush is used here because it best describes the cycling club phenomenon in Ingersoll and Tillsonburg.

2. Clare S. Simpson, “Capitalising on Curiosity: Women’s Professional Cycling Racing in the Late-Nineteenth Century,” in *Cycling and Society*, edited by Dave Horton, Paul Rosen, and Peter Cox (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 49-50.

3. See “Female Cyclists,” *Dominion Medical Monthly and Ontario Medical Journal* 7, 3 (1896): 255-256.

women's recreational cycling, but few studies have examined their experiences within the formalized structure of bicycle clubs. Initially organized to meet the interests of male cyclists, by the mid-1890s a number of bicycle clubs in small-town Ontario had opened up their memberships to women. They serve as a notable example of how barriers to women's participation in sport and physical recreation were being dismantled (albeit slowly and selectively). This article will examine the Rover Bicycle Club of Tillsonburg and the Meteor Bicycle Club of Ingersoll as sites of both change and resistance to the prevailing social and gender norms of the time. Small-town Ontario is an apt medium for such a study because population constraints meant fewer options for sex-specific organizations. Cities and bigger urban centers contained large enough populations of female cyclists that a separate cycling club was warranted, whereas clubs in smaller towns were often forced to accommodate female riders in order to bolster numbers. The rigidly militaristic and hierarchical structure of the Ingersoll Meteors and the Tillsonburg Rovers confirm that a gender order still existed, but by eventually including women, they challenged socially-constructed ideas about male-female interaction in public. Opening up participation to women forced club dynamics to be altered so that less focus was placed on participation in masculine feats like military-style drilling and racing and more on designing social outings suitable for heterosocial groups. Women's admission to the two organizations suggests that prevailing notions of the frailty of the female constitution had been replaced by desires to use bicycle clubs as a reputable forum where men and women could interact. However, women were never completely accepted as full-fledged members or equals, as evidenced by their absence from official membership lists and club executives.

In Canada, historians have paid considerably less attention to the history of cycling (and bicycle clubs especially) than their British, American, and Western European counterparts. In the last two decades, the scholarship of Glen Norcliffe, Phillip Gordon Mackintosh, Robert Kossuth, and Kevin Wamsley has enhanced our understanding of bicycles as gendered modes of consumption that communicated wealth and status, but much of this research addresses cycling enthusiasts in larger urban centers like Toronto, Montreal, and London.⁴ The extent to

4. Glen Norcliffe, "Associations, Modernity and the Insider-citizens of a Victorian Highwheel Bicycle Club," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 19, 2 (2006): 121-150; Glen Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity: The Bicycle in Canada, 1869-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Robert S. Kossuth and Kevin B. Wamsley, "Cycles of Manhood"; Philip Gordon Mackintosh, "A Bourgeois Geography of Domestic Cycling: Using Public Space Responsibly in Toronto and Niagara-on-the-Lake, 1890-1900," *Journal of*

which “bicycle fever” gripped rural areas and small towns in the later years of the nineteenth century is noticeably absent in the historiography, with the exception of Nancy Bouchier’s work on sport and masculinity.⁵ Generally, historians treat rural areas as idyllic country havens “discovered” by affluent urban cyclists; rarely are non-urban regions analyzed in isolation, or as hot beds of cycling activity themselves.⁶ Contrary to stereotypes that rural areas and small towns were backwards and insular, elites and middle-class citizens in smaller communities like Ingersoll and Tillsonburg willingly adopted sports and leisure trends emerging in urban, middle-class consumer cultures. First from mail-order catalogues and then from local merchants, by the mid-1890s bicycles and bicycle accessories could readily be purchased in Ingersoll and Tillsonburg, and indeed throughout much of rural and small-town Ontario.

The establishment of bicycle clubs in Ingersoll and Tillsonburg fits into the larger Victorian impulse to form and join local branches of fraternal associations and traditionally-male dominated sporting and social clubs. Throughout southern Ontario, as a number of small towns evolved into bustling country metropolises, a sort of cultural enlightenment occurred owing to rising education standards and new modes of transportation and communication. Through newspapers and magazines, literate small-town Ontarians were privy to reports of social, reformist, and educational clubs being established in larger towns and cities. The fact that they provided a suitable environment where men and women could meet, converse, and pursue self-improvement initiatives made social clubs appealing in smaller, more isolated locales. Some clubs were formed as branches of larger urban ones, while others were formed with specific local circumstances in mind. The more established fraternal organizations, such as Masonic Lodges and the International Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF), remained exclusively male, while others like dramatic societies and tennis clubs eventually opened up their memberships to women.

It is around this time, in the 1880s and 1890s, when bicycle clubs began to “sprout up all over the country,” a notable trend that M. Ann Hall

Historical Sociology 20, 1/2 (2007): 126-157; Philip Mackintosh and Glen Norcliffe, “Flaneurie on Bicycles: Acquiescence to Women in Public in the 1890s,” *Canadian Geographer* 50, 1 (2006): 17-37; Philip Mackintosh and Glen Norcliffe, “Men, Women and the Bicycle: Gender and Social Geography of Cycling in the Late-Nineteenth Century,” in *Cycling and Society*, 153-178.

5. Nancy B. Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game: Amateur Sport in Small-Town Ontario, 1838-1895* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003).

6. See, for example, Richard Holt, “The Bicycle, the Bourgeoisie and the Discovery of Rural France, 1880-1914,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 2, 2 (1985): 127-139.

describes as “different” because they were allegedly “more social than fraternal” when compared to other clubs.⁷ In cities like Hamilton and Toronto where larger populations meant greater numbers of female cyclists, separate women’s branches were created in conjunction with pre-existing men’s clubs. Sheila Hanlon notes that among British cycling clubs “the single-sex model prevailed. Chief among factors lady cyclists cited in explaining their preference for women’s-only cycling clubs was dissatisfaction with their second-class status in mixed organizations, a preference for female riding companions, and the attachment of these organizations to socio-political causes beyond cycling.”⁸

Generally, access to power and influence within bicycle clubs varied depending on social differences such as race, ethnicity, class, and most importantly, gender. Though cycling was popular throughout small-town Ontario, most communities lacked a large enough group of interested women that would warrant a gender-specific bicycle club. The result was that female cyclists who desired the opportunity to pursue their hobby and bond with fellow cycling enthusiasts within the parameters of a club were subjected to rules of order guided by the gender politics of the day. When examining bicycle clubs in Ingersoll and Tillsonburg, it is clear that their structures were based on a defined social order and gendered assumptions about “proper” behaviour in public. Indeed, the original and underlying purpose of bicycle clubs was to foster respectability, chivalry, and manliness among members. Once women joined these organizations, however, executives were forced to navigate the prevailing social mores of the day in order to determine how to include female members while maintaining their traditional mandate and purpose.

Located in Oxford County approximately 175 kilometres southwest of Toronto, the town of Tillsonburg was named after the first acknowledged settler, American migrant George Tillson, who arrived in the mid-1820s.⁹ Almost twenty-four kilometres north of Tillsonburg, Ingersoll was originally “founded” by Thomas Ingersoll in 1793 after he obtained a large grant of land from Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada John Graves Simcoe.¹⁰ By the 1890s, both towns had evolved into small yet thriving country metropolises thanks to their strong agricultural bases, a

7. M. Ann Hall, *The Girl and the Game: A History of Women’s Sport in Canada* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), 16.

8. See Sheila Hanlon, “The Lady Cyclist: A Gender Analysis of Women’s Cycling Culture in 1890s London,” (PhD Dissertation, York University, 2009), 157.

9. Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, “George Tillson,” http://biographi.ca/en/bio.php?id_nbr=4746. Accessed April 5, 2013.

10. For more on the history of Ingersoll, see Harry Whitwell, *Ingersoll: Our Heritage* (Ingersoll, 1978).

plethora of enterprising manufacturers, and their reputations for being forward-thinking and industrious. Weekly newspapers (the *Ingersoll Chronicle*, the *Tillsonburg Observer*, and the short-lived *Tillsonburg Liberal*), daily mail delivery, telegraph and stage coach services, and multiple rail lines kept locals informed and well-connected. Both towns were largely composed of Canadian-born men and women, most of whom had ancestral ties to the British Isles, Ireland, and Germany. In 1891, Tillsonburg's population was 2,163, and by 1901 had risen slightly to 2,241.¹¹ Almost double that of Tillsonburg, Ingersoll boasted 4,191 citizens in 1891, with its population rising to 4,573 in 1901.¹² Both towns were predominantly middle class in nature, but due to Ingersoll's larger industrial operations, including cheesemaking, a pork-packing plant, and agricultural implements factories, there was a more recognizable working-class presence in that town.¹³

Almost a decade before bicycle clubs were formed in these communities, enthusiasm for recreational cycling was widespread among local citizens (and women especially), likely due to the close proximity of important cycling centers. Approximately forty-five kilometres west of Tillsonburg and fifty kilometres southwest of Ingersoll, the umbrella organization representing cyclists' interests, the Canadian Wheelman's Association (CWA), was established in 1882 in the small town of St. Thomas. To the east of the two towns, the sizable community of Woodstock regularly held bicycle parades, and even hosted the CWA's annual meet in 1885, attracting dozens of cyclists from across the province.¹⁴ Bicycle factories also dotted the landscape of southwestern Ontario, further indication of how prominently cycling figured in the local cultural milieu.¹⁵ By the mid-1890s, bicycles were being manufactured right in Tillsonburg. A dealer in bicycles and other metal implements, businessman Charles Burkholder refurbished a vacant factory on Broadway into Burkholder's Bicycle Works. When the initial idea for the venture was broached in 1895, the *Observer* declared that "a bicycle works for Tilsonburg [*sic*] would suit everybody all around."¹⁶ In Ingersoll, where "the bicycle fever [was] almost a plague, so virulent

11. *Census of Canada, 1891–Population*, 58; *Census of Canada, 1901–Population*, 74.

12. *Census of Canada, 1891–Population*, 60; *Census of Canada, 1901–Population*, 78.

13. Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 19.

14. Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game*, 43; 46.

15. The well-known Goid Bicycle Co. Limited, for instance, was established in Brantford, located approximately sixty kilometers northeast of Ingersoll and Tillsonburg.

16. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 16 August 1895, 1.

[was] the disease” the *Chronicle* reported in 1897 that eleven different merchants were selling a variety of bicycle models to consumers.¹⁷

From a practical standpoint, bicycles provided a relatively affordable option for mobility and helped a greater cross-section of the population to move about at a quicker pace. Women, especially, benefitted from this new mode of transportation. Some wealthy women could get around town quite easily due to the privilege of having their own buggies while less affluent women were often forced to walk long distances in order to socialize or pursue leisure outside the home. However, the introduction of the bicycle promised to revolutionize travel by replacing the necessity of walking. Though many women enjoyed walking for its healthful properties and navigated buggies and wagons independently, the novelty of the bicycle made it an exciting alternative. An 1896 reprint of the *London Spectator* appeared in the *Tillsonburg Observer* which affirmed that though the bicycle provided men with a “great multiplication of power,” this rang even truer for women because they evidently enjoyed it “much more than men do.”¹⁸

Glen Norcliffe has traced the earliest hints of a cycling “craze” in Canada to 1869 when a contraption called the velocipede first appeared in larger cities like Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax. A decade later the “ordinary” bicycle (also called a highwheeler or penny farthings) was a more mainstream fixture on city streets.¹⁹ These early bicycles cost upwards of \$100.00, an insurmountable sum for anyone outside the upper echelons of Victorian society.²⁰ In addition to their high cost, the awkward height and frames of ordinaries largely reduced their use to younger and more able-bodied men. These aptly-nicknamed “boneshakers” were constructed of heavy, solid iron frames. Their high-wheeled fronts made the machines not only difficult to mount, but also tricky to navigate on streets and sidewalks ill-constructed for their use. When the ordinary first appeared in town, the *Tillsonburg Observer* regularly reported when local men had taken a “header”²¹ and injured themselves. By 1884, the town’s “staidest” were practicing the “graceful methods of climbing upon the ‘iron wheel’ from behind and falling off in front without breaking their necks.”²² For many, the risk of injury and sense of danger attached to these early machines is what drew them to the sport.

17. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 8 April 1897, 11.

18. “People on Wheels,” *Tillsonburg Observer*, 17 July 1896, 3. See Hanlon, “The Lady Cyclist.”

19. Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity*, 30.

20. *Ibid.*, 31.

21. Presumably, this refers to when they flew over the handlebars of the bike.

22. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 25 April 1884, n.p.

Figure 1: Bicycle models for sale at F. Bowman & Co.'s sporting goods store

A LIST OF THE BEST WHEELS

All Standard Machines and Fully Guaranteed.



ROADSTER RALEIGH.
This is a splendid wheel for country roads, and embodies all the latest improvements, including the new semi-tangent spokes and changeable sprocket gear. Weight with brake and mud guards 36 lbs., without 34.
Our Price, \$125.



LADIES' QUINTON.
A first-class ladies' machine, and generally acknowledged to be one of the best on the market. Elegant black enamelling, heavily nicked and fitted with a patent leather dress guard.
Price with Dunlop Tires, \$115
" " Morgan & Wright Tires, 110



THE TOURIST.
A good wheel at a low price. Full bearings throughout, best rubber ball pedals, adjustable handle bars, self-adjusting steel tube frame, powerful brake, ball socket head, good mud-guards, adjustable cranks, rubber toe rests, best spring seats, bright parts nickeled on copper, and fine black enamel.
Only \$75.



HIGH GRADE BOYS' MACHINE



THE SCORCHERS.
Ladies' Machine; weight 33 lbs., Dunlop tires. Go up to last styles. A pretty and very durable machine. Beautifully finished, with black enamel, and handle



BRANTFORD C.



CANADIAN A.
Latest Improvements. Changeable gear. A large number of these machines are already sold this season, and they are pleasing their riders very much, and notwithstanding that some of them have been on the road nearly two months, we have not had one come back to our shop for repairs.
Catalogue Price, \$100. Our Price Greatly Reduced.

WE also have the agency for a number of other wheels, but space will not permit their cuts on this sheet. The names, however, of Boston, Hunter, Raleigh, Rudge and New Haven are well enough known to make it unnecessary for us to describe the machines here.

**

THE BOWMAN SPECIAL

A NEW AMERICAN WHEEL which we have just got in. It is a total "Eclipse." All the boys delighted with it. Selling fast. An "up-to-date" machine in every respect. Weight 26 to 27 lbs. Price with steel or wooden rim.
\$125.
You will make a mistake if you buy without seeing it.



THE SCORCHERS.
Weights 36 lbs. A first-class machine at a low price. Splendidly finished. Morgan & Wright tires, mud guards and brake. Catalogue \$100.
We Sell for \$75.

THE MIDGET REPAIR KIT.
The Smallest and Lightest Repair Kit Ever Made.
WEIGHT, 2 OZS.; LENGTH, 3 IN.; COVERS.

- A—Emery cloth for smoothing surface.
- B—Needle for lacing tire.
- C—Pure gum patching.
- D—Pure rubber cement.
- E—Tire lacing.

The Tube is made of brass, nickel-plated.
Price, 25c.



EYE PROTECTORS.
No Rider should be without them. 90c. per pair.



TROUSER CLIPS.
15c. Pair.

THE POPULAR \$1.50.



The Cyclarm Bell, Price, \$1.75.

WE also have in stock a large variety of all 'Cycle Supplies at all Prices, Bells at 75c. to \$1.75, Whistles 50c., Locks 75c., 'Cycle Oil 10c., Lantern Oil 25c., Cement for Tire 15c., Rubber for Patching 5c., Etc., Etc. Goods sent by Mail and Express on receipt of price. Address all Orders to

F. BOWMAN & CO., INGERSOLL, Ont.

Dealers in Guns, Ammunition, Fishing Tackle, etc. Headquarters for Sporting Goods. Special attention paid to all kinds of repairing.

Most bicycles built prior to the 1890s were androcentric forms of recreation that provided riders with a “unique status signalling both economic stature and a manly physical competence.”²³ However, many of the faults inherent in 1880s bicycle construction, coupled with inadequate road conditions, resulted in injuries to riders and damage to bicycles. Much had changed by the 1890s when both the *Ingersoll Chronicle* and the *Tillsonburg Observer* boasted of the pristine state of their new sidewalks, thanks to recent applications of silica barytic (cement). Now, anyone occupying a town sidewalk could be assured of a clean and even surface, which, the *Observer* proclaimed, was the envy of towns both big and small across the Dominion.²⁴

The patterns of age, gender, and class exclusivity that marked the first generation of bicycle riders were noticeably altered following British industrialist John Kemp Starley’s invention of the Rover Safety Bicycle in 1885.²⁵ Undoubtedly this invention, and its eventual mass production, accounts for the large numbers of women in Western Europe and North America who became cycling enthusiasts. The safety’s frame was constructed of thin-walled tubes of metal that were lighter, stronger, and more durable than that of its high-wheeled predecessors. Two wheels of equal size replaced the ordinaries’ large front wheel, and the recent invention of pneumatic rubber softened the ride considerably once air-inflated tires were used in place of wooden wheels. The first safety bicycles contained a high cross bar fitted between the seat and handle bars, but soon drop-frame bicycles were constructed to provide women with greater ease, comfort, and modesty when mounting and riding the machine.²⁶ Other alterations to the safety bicycle made with women in mind included chain guards to prevent tangled clothing, skirt guards over the rear tire, a more efficient braking system, and lighter mechanical parts for greater ease and manoeuvrability.²⁷ Mass production of the widely popular safety brought the cost down to the point where a brand new contraption could be purchased at the turn of the century for \$30.00, a significant decrease from the bicycles of a decade earlier.²⁸ In Tillsonburg in 1892, merchants Wood & Co. advertised brand new boy’s safety bicycles for \$12.00.²⁹

23. Kossuth and Wamsley, “Cycles of Manhood,” 171; Some historians note that tricycles, or three-wheeled bicycles, as well as tandem bikes were popular prior to the safety bicycle and were much-enjoyed by women.

24. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 3 May 1895, 4.

25. Mackintosh, “A Bourgeois Geography of Domestic Cycling,” 132.

26. Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity*, 53-57.

27. *Ibid.*, 55.

28. *Ibid.*, 31.

29. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 8 April 1892, 5.

While growing up in Tillsonburg in the 1910s, Bert Newman reminisced that “[b]icycles weren’t for everybody in those days—certainly not for the working man who made a dollar a day. By the time he raised his family and paid the rent he wouldn’t have enough money left over to buy a bicycle. Very few boys—only rich kids—had bicycles.”³⁰ Tillsonburg’s citizens had been gripped by “bicycle fever” for well over two decades, but interest in cycling largely remained the privilege of the middle and upper classes. The activity had become so popular and pervasive that the *Observer* reported in 1895 that not only was the town’s oldest inhabitant suffering from the “fever,” but also that men from the “mercantile, iron road and clerical callings” had all been seen of late riding at the local race track.³¹ Though the price of a brand new bicycle was out of reach for working-class men and women, reasonably priced used bicycles could be acquired if one perused advertisements in the local newspaper.³²

By the mid-1890s, the cost of cycling was still relatively high when compared to other leisure pursuits, but it was no longer the preserve of the *haute bourgeoisie*. The growing middle class with their disposable incomes and desires to flaunt modernism and prosperity eagerly embraced bicycles for both personal leisure and professional use. Cyclists who meandered about informally became instrumental in “domesticating” and “anesthetiz[ing]” public spaces, altering traditional social and geographic orders and, to an extent, reshaping barriers between the classes and the sexes.³³ By the late-1890s, male and female cyclists in Ingersoll and Tillsonburg were riding together as friends, couples, and for those able to afford it, cycling provided families with a mode of recreation that could be enjoyed as a group outside the home.

A decisive moment in Tillsonburg and Ingersoll’s cycling histories occurred when the first ladies’ safety bicycles arrived in local stores. In the summer of 1891, the *Tillsonburg Observer* reported that two of the “handsome” machines, complete with “cushion tires and all the latest improvements,” had been acquired by local agents connected with Goold’s Bicycle Co. in Brantford, Ontario. One of the bicycles sold quickly, while the other remained in store for public viewing. The *Observer* dubbed the machine “ahead of anything that has come to town

30. Bert Newman, *Once Upon a Time: Further Reminiscences About Tillsonburg*, ed. Dave Stover (Tillsonburg: Otter Printing, 1988), 156.

31. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 3 May 1895, 4.

32. On 17 May 1895, F.J. Frank of Bidwell Street offered a “first-class, high grade bicycle for sale cheap.” See *Tillsonburg Observer*, 17 May 1895, 1.

33. Mackintosh, “A Bourgeois Geography of Domestic Bicycling,” 127.

yet.”³⁴ Undoubtedly, its appearance enhanced the public’s (and particularly women’s) interest in the phenomenon as evidenced by increasing references to female cycling culture in the social columns of local newspapers. Some women even began customizing their machines. In 1895, the *Observer* remarked that “a wheel that is cutting a dash in town just now is made of aluminum, fitted with the latest improvements, and hand painted in a rose design.”³⁵ Women’s personal reminiscences also substantiate cycling’s growing appeal. When the family of former Tillsonburg resident Agnes McGregor hosted visitors in the summer of 1894, she recalled that the group greatly enjoyed cycling together (because it was the “latest fashion”) though they had to borrow some machines to ensure everyone was outfitted.³⁶

After the ladies’ safety bicycle debuted, within the pages of the *Chronicle*, *Observer*, and the *Liberal* greater attention and detail was increasingly paid to both male and female cyclists’ etiquette. As bicycles became more readily available and affordable, hostilities developed between pedestrians and cyclists over space and safety. In September of 1891, the *Observer* reported that “quite a number” of residents were displeased with the cyclists who frequented sidewalks instead of using road-beds.³⁷ In Tillsonburg, a driving park was built where cyclists rode around a specially-constructed track for a fee, but the yearly charge of \$0.50 per rider likely deterred many, and women do not appear to have used the facility.³⁸ Frustrated that riders unashamedly continued to disobey orders, Tillsonburg’s police chief Archie Pow began to use the newspaper as a platform to chastise errant behaviour. In April 1894, the following appeared on the front page of the *Observer*:

Chief Pow requests THE OBSERVER to state in plain English so that it cannot be misunderstood that after this notice has been published he will summon before the magistrate all parties, either gentlemen or ladies, boys or girls, who persist in riding bicycles on the sidewalks in town contrary to the town bylaws. He means business this time, and says that riding on any of the walks in town must cease at once. A word to the wise is sufficient.³⁹

In June of that year, again prompted by complaints from locals, Pow singled out the town’s female population, “who still indulge in riding

34. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 21 August 1891, 1.

35. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 31 May 1895, 1.

36. ANHS, Documentary Artifact Collection, Agnes McGregor file, *Memories* by Agnes Christine McGregor (an autobiography), written April 20, 1959.

37. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 25 September 1891, 1.

38. Town of Tillsonburg, Bylaw 0439 Driving Park To Regulate and Manage, Effective Date: 07/06/1900, <http://www.tillsonburg.ca/site/507/default.aspx>. Accessed May 4, 2010.

39. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 20 April 1894, 1.

bicycles on the walks in town.”⁴⁰ He warned that if they continued to disregard by-laws he would “summon them before the magistrate.” Similar problems were experienced in Ingersoll. The *Chronicle* noted in July 1895 that a recently approved by-law barred cyclists from using sidewalks throughout the township. The penalty was severe with lawbreakers receiving up to a \$20.00 fine or thirty days in jail if caught.⁴¹ Over time, the sidewalk by-laws were altered to provide cyclists with somewhat more freedom, but police still closely monitored riders’ behaviour.⁴² Whether abiding by laws or not, accidents inevitably occurred. In August 1895, for instance, an Ingersoll man and woman collided while cycling downtown and though no bodily harm was done, the woman’s bicycle was slightly damaged and “both received a pretty good shaking up.”⁴³

As early as the mid-1880s when cycling was still a relatively new fad, some residents of Tillsonburg had expressed interest in forming a bicycle club in town. It was not until May 1890 that an information session was finally held for those eager to pledge membership in the town’s first sporting club of the kind. The large audience that attended the meeting resolved that a bicycle club in the community would be a welcome addition to the local social scene. The aptly named Tillsonburg Rover Bicycle Club, likely in honour of the widely popular Rover Safety Bicycle, met twice weekly on Monday mornings at 5:30 a.m. and Friday evenings at 7:30 p.m. for their “runs.” As a group, the cyclists first paraded down the town’s main thoroughfare, Broadway, then in tight formation headed out to the surrounding countryside. In spite of the growing number of female riders appearing in public, women did not have a hand in the initial establishment of the bicycle club.⁴⁴ Cyclists in Ingersoll first gathered to discuss the organization of a local bicycle club in May 1893, but there is little evidence to suggest that the club was active throughout the ensuing summer months.⁴⁵ It was not until two years later, in 1895, when regular reports began to appear about the activities of the town’s main cycling club, the Ingersoll Meteors.⁴⁶ The monikers “Meteor” and “Rover” were common among bicycle clubs in

40. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 29 June 1894, 1.

41. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 11 July 1895, 1.

42. Town of Tillsonburg, Bylaw 0521 Bicycling and Riding On Sidewalks, Effective Date: 04/04/1905, <http://www.tillsonburg.ca/site/507/default.aspx>. Accessed May 4, 2010.

43. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 1 August 1895, 1.

44. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 9 May 1890, 5.

45. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 11 May 1893, 1.

46. There was another bicycle club in Ingersoll that was affiliated with the Ingersoll Amateur Athletic Association (I.A.A.A.), but it was short-lived and did not enjoy the same popularity as the Meteors.

the mid-1890s. These and other popular names, such “Ramblers,” “Tourists,” “Strollers,” “Wheelers,” and “Wanderers,” distinguished bicycle clubs from other social and sports organizations by referencing the cyclists’ fondness for travel, touring and, in the case of the Meteors, moving about at a quick pace.

Bicycle clubs in Canada first appeared during the highwheel era of the late-1870s; Montreal is credited as the home of the country’s first and other large cities soon followed suit. Before long, processions of male bicycle club members atop their machines were the norm on streets in Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax, Hamilton, and London. These earlier clubs were composed largely of wealthy bachelors who had both the time and the money to devote to the hobby. In his examination of London, Ontario, historian Robert Kossuth notes that the purpose of forming bicycle clubs in that city was to “legitimize the activity as a sport and recreation.”⁴⁷ As evidenced by the number of by-laws constructed to control riders’ behaviour, cyclists were not always admired or welcome on town and city streets. Troubling behaviour, such as “scorching,”⁴⁸ soured the opinions of many towards cyclists. Joining a bicycle club, then, “gave some protection against the ridicule, insults and stones which were sometimes aimed at wheelmen.”⁴⁹

The “rigid and hierarchical structure”⁵⁰ characteristic of bicycles clubs established during the sport’s heyday was deeply influenced by American Charles E. Pratt who, in 1879, published a volume of instructions for cyclists titled *The American Bicyclist: A Manual for the Observer, the Learner, and the Expert*.⁵¹ Pratt served in the Union Army during the Civil War and drew on his military experiences to compose a highly-formalized and regimented system of order for bicycle clubs. He believed that these organizations should operate like a well-oiled machine, similar to a successful infantry or cavalry unit. Not surprisingly, given the publication date, Pratt does not offer advice regarding mixed-sex bicycle clubs, or how to integrate female members into pre-existing organizations. Though not all clubs maintained such formality, most (including those in Ingersoll and Tillsonburg) adhered to at least some of Pratt’s instructions. An elected executive governed each club, composed

47. Robert Kossuth, “Baseball, Biking, and Bowling in the Forest City (London, Ontario) 1868-1903,” in *Proceedings and Newsletter-North American Society for Sport History* (2001): 23-25.

48. “Scorchers” were cyclists who travelled at extremely high rates of speed.

49. James McGurn, *On Your Bicycle: An Illustrated History of Cycling* (London: John Murray, 1987), 52.

50. Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity*, 193.

51. Charles E. Pratt, *The American Bicyclist: A Manual for the Observer, the Learner, and the Expert* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1879).

of an honorary president, president, vice president, captain, first lieutenant, second lieutenant, secretary-treasurer, and bugler. Some bicycle clubs also employed a standard bearer who led the procession of cyclists on their runs. The election of officers to the executive was made each year by secret ballot. According to the 1901 census, male club members in Ingersoll and Tillsonburg were, by and large, a mixture of married and single men, ranging in age from early-twenties to early-fifties. Unlike the earliest bicycle clubs populated by wealthy bachelors, these men were predominantly middle class, working as merchants, managers, and tradesmen.⁵² In 1897, president of the Meteors, George Duncan, worked as superintendant of the town's waterworks system while honorary president of the Rovers, E.C. Jackson, was a bank manager. Both Edward Torrens, secretary-treasurer for the Rovers in 1895, and E.F. Waterhouse, secretary-treasurer for the Meteors, worked as merchants.⁵³

Most bicycle clubs organized around this time strove to personify manly chivalry and hero-worship atop their machines. Joining a bicycle club allowed men to "see and be seen," and buttressed popular representations of masculinity. Most local sport associations, such as Ingersoll's lacrosse club, operated in a similar fashion. According to Nancy Bouchier, this comparatively masculine enclave "emphasized camaraderie, an esoteric body of knowledge, and rituals of play and costume."⁵⁴ Indeed, virtually every amateur sport organization in Ingersoll and Tillsonburg barred women from participating and, in doing so, maintained control over the local social order. The masculine hegemony that defined most sporting activities, however, was slowly being dismantled as the turn of the century approached. The sport of male foot racing, for example, had for decades been customary at the celebration of public holidays like Victoria Day and Dominion Day, but in Tillsonburg a separate women's race was added to the bill around the

52. See Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Census, 1901, Oxford South, Ingersoll Town, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1901/001013-100.01-e.php>. Accessed April 5, 2013; Because individual women were never mentioned in local newspaper reports about cycling club activities, it is difficult to gather information about their ages, marital statuses, and class backgrounds. Similarly, few women were mentioned in individual club reports and membership lists published in cycling magazines like the *Canadian Wheelman* and *Cycling*.

53. LAC, Census of Canada, 1901, Schedule 1 – Population, Ontario, Oxford South, Ingersoll Town, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1901/001013-100.01-e.php>. April 5, 2013; LAC, Census of Canada, 1901, Schedule 1–Population, Ontario, Norfolk North, Tilsonburg, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1901/index-e.html>. April 5, 2013.

54. Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game*, 122.

turn of the century. A precursor to the modern track and field day, some local schools held children's races, but as Bouchier points out, the sexes never competed against one another because "biologically based physical attributes" like size and strength called into question women's abilities and issues regarding appropriate gender behaviour.⁵⁵ By the 1890s, women were beginning to take on more of an organizational role by forming their own sports clubs. Spearheaded by an elite group of young women, in 1902 the Grasshopper Tennis Club was formed in Tillsonburg, lauded as the town's first female-centered sports organization.

Similar to tennis, during this period cycling was considered more appropriate for female participants because it was "easily learned, enjoyable, outdoor exercise that was robust and healthy yet did not breach late nineteenth-century standards of proper decorum."⁵⁶ In May 1895, five years after the Rovers' organization, local women were invited to join the club when a "special run" was organized to incorporate new members. It was advertised in the *Observer* that the pace would be slower than normal to allow "less agile" riders to keep up. Women were "particularly urged to be present" so they may lend the "good influence of their society to this occasion."⁵⁷ The rather condescending tone of this article suggests that at that time, male members underestimated the agility of female cyclists, viewing them primarily as a genteel and "reforming" influence on the club. Slightly less derisive, though still with a self-serving purpose in mind, in May 1896 the Meteors' Membership Committee was "instructed" to invite as many female cyclists as possible to join the club for its next run. To entice women, only a "nominal membership fee of 50c." was requested, which allegedly still entitled female riders to "full membership" in the CWA, along with semi-monthly copies of its magazine, the *Canadian Wheelman*.⁵⁸ The following week, women were "specially invited" to attend a "special meeting" of the club in advance of a Carnival Competition to be held in nearby Woodstock.⁵⁹ The *Canadian Wheelman* reported that the carnival carried a cash prize of \$50.00 for any club with a membership of thirty or more members dressed in "fancy costume."⁶⁰ It is likely not a coincidence that women were invited to join the Meteors at a time when their labour in the form of sewing costumes and decorating bicycles was considered highly valuable and integral to the club's successful

55. *Ibid.*, 48.

56. Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 15.

57. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 10 May 1895, 1.

58. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 7 May 1896, 10.

59. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 14 May 1896, 1.

60. *Canadian Wheelman* (date unknown; likely early-mid 1896): 12.

participation in the event. Winning competitions and sporting contests were important markers of respectability and civic pride, so rivalries among citizens of small towns were common in the later nineteenth century. It is unclear which club took home the \$50.00 cash prize, but it was accompanied by important bragging rights among cycling clubs in the district.

Figure 2: The Rover Bicycle Club of Tillsonburg, 1895.



Source: Amundale National Historic Site, Photograph Collection.

The oldest surviving photographs of the first generation of female Rovers and Meteors showcase the gender imbalance that existed within the two clubs. The photographs were taken in 1895, the same year women were invited to join, so it is not surprising that male members outnumbered females. The Rovers were posed in front of the ornate home of businessman S.B.W. Carpenter. When the *Observer* mentioned the photograph was being taken, it was noted that extra copies would be made for sale.⁶¹ The picture contains more than the twenty-six Rovers who were members at the time, but women comprise less than a third of the image's subjects. The dress and stance of the women standing directly beside bicycles suggests a formal commitment to the club, while those hovering in the background were likely the sweethearts or relatives of

61. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 19 July 1895, 1.

male riders, or perhaps member of the Carpenter family.

According to the Ingersoll Public Library, the following image of the Meteors was taken on Frances Street in Ingersoll. This photograph is likely the one that the *Chronicle* mentioned was being taken on Victoria Day in May 1895.

Figure 3: The Meteor Bicycle Club of Ingersoll, circa 1895.



Source: Ingersoll Public Library, Ingersoll Historical Photo Gallery
<http://ingersolllibrary.wordpress.com/>.

Neither the Rovers nor the Meteors appear to have adopted a standard uniform, unlike bicycle clubs in larger towns and cities. The male Rovers are clothed in various states of garb, ranging from formal three piece suits to simpler ensembles of jackets and trousers. Many clubs adopted uniforms that were unmistakably influenced by military wear. Their exclusion in these photographs is perhaps indicative of the clubs' desires to stray from Pratt's overly-regimented system of order. Pratt believed that "a nearly uniform costume is desirable in many ways: it is sociable to have it, it lends a better appearance to the club when riding together, and it affords a distinctive mark of membership, and also of club-belonging, where there are several."⁶² It is also possible that some members could not afford to purchase uniforms as they were considered a luxury item. According to James McGurn, the typical club uniform was "dark in colour and consisted of a pill-box hat with the club badge attached, a short, wool-lined, brass-buttoned jacket, tight breeches and stout riding

62. Pratt, *The American Bicycler*, 169.

shoes. The bugler was additionally enhanced with massive tasselled cord. The club captain could be identified by such items as gold braiding or a gilt badge, and the sub-captain wore the equivalent in silver.”⁶³ Among the Meteors, a handful of men are similarly clothed in jackets reminiscent of military wear, short breeches, and knee socks. Instead of the popular pill-box cap, the Meteors preferred yachting style caps adorned with metal face plates. Constructed of solid silver, these plates were for officers’ caps only.⁶⁴ In April 1895, the *Canadian Wheelman* proclaimed that “the days of the club uniform are numbered as are the day of the bugler and standard bearer,” which may explain the lack of consistency in the Rovers’ and Meteors’ attire. Likely to distinguish themselves from the non-ranking members, most officers in the executive continued to don the traditional garb in lieu of the “plain, serviceable suit” that the *Wheelman* advised better “answer[ed] the purposes of business as well as pleasure.”⁶⁵

The female Rovers and Meteors, on the other hand, are dressed rather formally and similarly in loose, white blouses and long, slim skirts. A number of female Rovers are also wearing flat-topped caps and wide-lapelled, puffy-sleeved jackets. Both groups look as though they have abandoned corsets (or adopted a less restrictive version), but the female Meteors’ and Rovers’ riding attire was not altogether different from women’s day-to-day wear. Most women who took up sports and other forms of physical activity in the 1890s generally wore looser versions of everyday clothing to better accommodate a wider range of motion. The women’s cycling attire, however, still presents the highly-coveted “hourglass silhouette” popular at the time, consisting of belted, lighter-coloured shirtwaists (usually white or cream) and “skirts that were dark, usually navy or black, and made of sturdy woven fabrics such as *cheviot* or alpaca in typical outerwear fashion.” To prevent long skirts from becoming tangled in bicycle chains, some women sewed lead weights or leather facings to their hems.⁶⁶ The female Rovers’ and Meteors’ ensembles were certainly far from the scandalous bloomers that some female cyclists in British and American cities were wearing. In June 1895, the *Chronicle* reported that “bloomerines” were all the rage in Grand Rapids, Michigan, but their adoption, according to one unnamed reporter, was not about practicality, but finding a suitable marriage

63. McGurn, *On Your Bicycle*, 53.

64. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 23 May 1895, 1.

65. *Canadian Wheelman* 12, 10 (1 April 1895): 6.

66. Julia Christie-Robin, Belinda T. Orzada, and Dilia López-Gydoosh, “From Bustles to Bloomers: Exploring the Bicycle’s Influence on American Women’s Fashion, 1880-1914,” *Journal of American Culture* 35, 4 (2012): 322.

partner. "As soon as the bloomer should become a thing of reality," the article declared, "then look out for a substantial decrease" in the estimated "3,000,000 inveterate old bachelors" living in the United States. Further, it is stated that "perhaps these fair daughters of the progressive city of Grand Rapids had this idea in mind when they boldly foreswore their conventional attire."⁶⁷

The formality with which Ingersoll and Tillsonburg women constructed their riding wear was likely done purposefully and methodically in order to avoid misguided claims that women cycled in order to achieve sexual gratification or "catch" a husband. Donning more traditional modes of dress was also about convincing male members (who outnumbered them considerably) that they, too, were serious and skilled riders. At the same time, the modestly-cut high-necked blouses and long skirts maintained the women's femininity and counteracted fears that sport and physical activity masculinized the female body. The "social sensibilities" of bicycle clubs, Nancy Bouchier argues, "compelled women to wear respectable, appropriate clothing to avoid charges of immorality."⁶⁸

Recently, a number of historians have argued against the popular assumption that bloomers and other forms of "rational" clothing were universally adopted by cyclists and became a major catalyst for women's dress reform after 1900. Indeed, most women's cycling wear was actually regressive in its style, and not as forward-thinking as some historians have suggested.⁶⁹ In 1904, for example, American periodical *Pictorial Review* provided ideas for "unobtrusive" ladies' cycling costumes.

While their silhouettes are quite similar, the costume on the right consists of a plaited skirt stitched to the knees, allowing greater range of motion for pedalling. The group appears to be out on a casual ride in the countryside, not parading as a bicycle club, but the presence of male cyclists, and the use of the descriptor "unobtrusive," indicates that women were still expected to maintain a low profile while out cycling. The modest costume and genteel demeanour of the models posing in front provides further evidence that socially-constructed ideals of femininity should be upheld while atop a bicycle, and especially in the company of men. Such expectations and this image specifically, buttress claims made by some late-nineteenth century moral and social reformers about women's vulnerability in the public sphere. Because of the so-called predatory nature of rural "ruffians," female cyclists allegedly needed male chaperones for protection when venturing out to the

67. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 6 June 1895, 8.

68. Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game*, 46.

69. Christie-Robin, Orzada, and López-Gydosh, "From Bustles to Bloomers," 324.

countryside. According to Julia Christie-Robin, et. al, these assumptions “had an underlying objective: to limit and retain control of [women’s] behaviour.”⁷⁰

Figure 4: “Two Unobtrusive Bicycle Costumes”



Source: *Pictorial Review* 5 (10) (July 1904): 14.

Within the pages of cycling magazines and local newspapers, cycling and heterosexual companionship were consistently linked with one another, especially after increasing numbers of women began taking up the sport and joining bicycle clubs. Before they extended an invitation to women, the Rovers’ and the Meteors’ activities centred around their

70. *Ibid.*, 319.

weekly runs and competing in interclub races. Competitors usually consisted of clubmen from around the district though occasionally the members of the home club competed against one another. The events typically involved quarter mile, half mile, full mile, and team races. After 1895, however, fewer races were held and replaced, instead, by more heterosocial activities such as concerts, garden parties, and carnivals. In October 1895, the *Wheelman* advised that “bicycle teas” were a trendy way to entertain guests in rural homes. According to one article, “after a good ‘run’ the women and their escorts” are treated to a meal where the theme of cycling can be found in everything from the decoration of the table to ice cream in the shape of tiny bicycles.⁷¹

Desires to deflect any criticism about impolite or rude behaviour could also have prompted the Rovers and the Meteors to extend an invite to female members. At this time, women were becoming more of a fixture at men’s sporting matches, though generally confined to the sidelines as spectators. Their presence, however, legitimized sports as important town-bonding activities and quelled fears that competition inevitably led to raucous and violent behaviour. In June 1895, it was reported that residents of Ingersoll’s outlying areas were concerned with the number of wheelmen using “unnecessarily strong language” while out on their runs. The *Chronicle*, in response, self-righteously declared that “We trust none of our Ingersoll knights of the wheel are guilty of such unbecoming conduct.”⁷² As Norcliffe notes, among bicycle club members “gallantry towards women was mandatory,”⁷³ and the date of this particular article coincides with the year that women first joined the Meteors. In its response, the *Chronicle* insinuated that Ingersoll’s cyclists were more respectable and gentlemanly than the culprits, chivalrous enough to refrain from such “unbecoming” behaviour. “Knights of the wheel” also carries heroic overtones, harkening to a romanticized vision of armour-clad nobles atop their powerful steeds. McGurn argues that much like a medieval knight, members of bicycle clubs “were to act as gallants and adventurers” and always be “conscious of their rights and duties as bicyclists.”⁷⁴

Alongside their ideas about gallantry and male camaraderie, some bicycle clubs viewed the admission of female members as a gainful way to form romantic attachments. As Dale Somers explains in his examination of New Orleans, Louisiana, female cyclists were

71. *Canadian Wheelman* 12, 23 (21 Oct 1895): 25.

72. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 6 June 1895, 8.

73. Norcliffe, “Associations, Modernity and the Insider-citizens of a Victorian Highwheel Bicycle Club,” 143.

74. McGurn, *On Your Bicycle*, 158.

“reluctantly” admitted to that city’s bicycle clubs only after male members “discovered the pleasures of mixed cycling parties.”⁷⁵ The week after women were invited to join the Rovers, a piece appeared in the *Observer* about a scandalous incident that occurred while the club was out for a run. One warm May evening, the Rovers headed north of Tillsonburg to the village of Mount Elgin (a distance of approximately ten kilometers) where they rendezvoused with the Meteors, a group composed of twenty men and eleven women.⁷⁶ Once both clubs arrived at their destination, they enjoyed ice cream, lemonade, and some “very pleasant social intercourse” with their Mount Elgin hosts. On the ride home, however, one of the male Rovers, dubbed the “Adonis” of the group, was reported missing from the procession until located by fellow riders a short time later. Evidently, “the young Rovers and the dazzling lady Meteors” had established such “pleasant relations” with one another that a Rover stayed behind to indulge in some “leave-taking ceremonies” with the “fairest Meteor of them all.” After a stern reprimand from the Rovers’ captain, the “Adonis” promised not to repeat such “indecent” behaviour.⁷⁷

It is unclear if there were any ensuing consequences from this encounter, especially for the “fairest Meteor of them all.” However, two months later, according to an article in the *Canadian Wheelman*, the Meteors were reminded they “must look sharp, and not fly away from the club, even if the Captain’s substitute is ‘out-of-sight.’”⁷⁸ Romantic scandals like this one reinforced the sexual and moral anxieties that some social commentators attached to female cyclists. The impropriety committed by the Rovers’ Adonis and the female Meteor would have undoubtedly raised the ire of those community members still concerned with the consequences of women’s more observable presence in traditionally male-dominated spaces. Some commentators worried that “excessive bicycling” among women “contributed to physical injury, impropriety, a loss of femininity, and worst of all, moral decline.”⁷⁹ Though cycling was enjoyed as both a homo- and heterosocial form of recreation, as well as a recommended means by which young people could meet and form attachments (particularly with persons from other

75. Dale A. Somers, “A City on Wheels: The Bicycle Era in New Orleans,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 8, 3 (1967): 236.

76. *Tillsonburg Observer*, 17 May 1895, 1.

77. *Ibid.*

78. “Rusty,” “Meteor Flashes from Ingersoll,” *Canadian Wheelman* 12, 16 (1 July 1895): 22.

79. Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 20.

towns), the balance between proper decorum, sexual impropriety, and women's physical health required moral regulation.⁸⁰

Though bicycle club activities offered a degree of sexual freedom, females, especially, were closely monitored by community members who worried that cycling was one step away from moral depravity. Considered both troubling and advantageous, bicycles had the ability to transport couples away from town, and therefore away from the scrutinizing eyes of parents, church officials, and other behavioural monitors. The traditional small-town courting venues, such as supervised visits to a girl's home or attending church-sponsored socials, were supplemented by a host of new leisure activities that were not only secular, but also took place in public. Increasingly, events and activities sponsored by the Rovers and Meteors became venues where men and women could spend time together, begin courting, and perhaps even engage in some light flirting or sexual activity. In June 1896, for instance, the Meteors organized a picnic to be held at nearby Whittaker Lake. They requested that "every member should attend, as a most enjoyable time is assured," but all local citizens (both male and female) were urged to participate. To entice participants, the *Chronicle* indicated that refreshments and "free baths" would be offered.⁸¹

Outside of the formalized structure of clubs, bicycles were regularly used by courting couples as a recognized way to spend time together. In 1897, Ingersoll bicycle dealer W.P. Coyne began carrying "twicers," or attachments fitted to bicycles that allowed cyclists to ride side-by-side. The *Chronicle* stated that the contraption "attracted considerable attention in town," and "can be ridden by two ladies, a lady and gentleman or two gentlemen."⁸² Bert Newman recalled that tandem bicycles were quite popular among courting couples in Tillsonburg. The fact that Burkholder's Bicycle Factory produced tandems right in town likely accounted for the contraption's popularity. By incorporating cycling into their courting rituals, couples could better establish more fulfilling relationships with one another and share intimacies (both sexual and non-sexual) in a more private manner.⁸³ The tandem's unique construction,

80. ANHS, Documentary Artifact Collection, Overview of Tillsonburg Sports and Recreation Highlights, 1900 to Present.

81. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 4 June 1896, 1.

82. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 10 June 1897, 1.

83. Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 115-119; Peter Ward discusses new sites for courtship, including the use of new modes of transportation, in *Courtship, Love, and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 86-92. Dan Azoulay discusses rules of courting in public spaces, including advice to female cyclists, in *Hearts and Minds: Canadian Romance at*

however, reinforced gendered, heterosexual, and patriarchal behaviours.⁸⁴ Newman says, “If a gentleman and a lady went riding together, the lady would ride behind, and she could pedal along with the man in front or, if he didn’t want her to tire, he could pedal it alone.”⁸⁵ Opposed to the freedom provided by the safety bicycle, women were placed in a subordinate position on tandems with the man controlling the speed and direction of the machine.

Though the Rovers and Meteors were forced to alter their ranks and club activities to accommodate female participants, gender inclusiveness did not extend to positions within the executive or certifiable membership within the club. When the Meteors and the Rovers held their first meetings of the cycling season (usually around late-March or early-April), along with the usual club business those interested in joining were asked to submit their names to a member of the local executive. Each year, the *Wheelman* published the names of those who had requested membership in their community’s respective club. Even after they were invited to join the Rovers and Meteors, women’s names never appear on the “request for membership” lists, suggesting their status in the clubs was partial and provisional. In September 1895, the *Canadian Wheelman* reported that the Rovers had a modest membership of thirty-one while the Meteors had a more sizable group at forty-seven.⁸⁶ Seven months later, almost a year after the Rovers had opened up their membership to women, the club’s enrollment remained steady at thirty-one.⁸⁷ Notations about club activities in the *Observer* substantiate women’s involvement in the organization throughout 1895; however, in the club’s semi-regular reports that were published in the *Wheelman*, there is no indication that women were officially part of the club, or even present. Perhaps they were only admitted on a trial basis and thus were seen as disposable if they could not keep up with the club’s schedule or match the endurance of male riders. During this period, some amateur sporting organizations granted women “honourary” memberships at a reduced fee. It is also conceivable that female members were only partially admitted because they were useful at events where they enhanced the club’s physical appearance. With the advent of the safety bicycle, Stijn Knuts and Pascal Delheye note that female cyclists in Belgium were viewed more “positively” because the “‘natural’ feminine ‘grace’ and ‘elegance’ they

the Dawn of the Modern Era, 1900-1930 (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011), 106-110.

84. Hanlon, “The Lady Cyclist,” 66.

85. Newman, *Once Upon a Time*, 156.

86. *Canadian Wheelman* 12, 21 (16 Sept 1895): 35.

87. *Canadian Wheelman* 13, 9 (16 March 1896): 33.

displayed in streets and parks [...] would help further legitimise cycling as a respectable pastime.”⁸⁸ A similar notion may have guided the Rovers’ and Meteors’ executives when they extended membership to women.

Akin to a unit of cavalymen en route to a battle, in small towns bicycle clubs paraded down main street atop their trusty “steeds” in a tight formation, the bugler announcing the club’s presence to all within earshot. While the dangerous highwheeler was still in fashion, male club members strove to project an air of chivalry and hero-worship to the crowds that gathered to see the spectacle and watch them pass by. “Since the thrill and danger of riding a high bicycle was widely appreciated,” Norcliffe writes, “these riders were viewed by their admirers as gallants.”⁸⁹ Along with the bugler’s jubilant tones, many bicycle clubs also adopted a song. In 1895, Ingersoll tinsmith James Sinclair composed an anthem for the Meteors, sung to the tune of “Dixie:”

Like a Meteor’s flash across the sky,
We mount our bike and away we fly.
Away, away, away, and away.
And when we go we do receive,
We tread the pedals and the wheels revolve.
We’re away, we’re away, &c.

CHORUS

Light hearted, gay and happy.
On our way, on our way;
And distance fades as on we roll,
The Meteor club of Ingersoll.
We’re away, we’re away,
The Meteor club of Ingersoll.
Our steeds are steel and they never tired.
Though the rider sweats, he don’t perspire.
On the way, on the way, &c.
While neither hunger or thirst he knows,
And the more he’s kicked the better he goes.
On the way, on the way, &c.

Chorus – Light hearted, &c.

88. Stijn Knuts and Pascal Delheye, “Cycling in the City? Belgian Cyclists Conquering Urban Spaces, 1860-1900,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 29, 14 (2012): 1952.

89. Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity*, 196.

He neither kicks, nor bites nor baulks,
 Just shake your feet and away he walks.
 All the day, all the day, &c.
 At nothing on the road he shies;
 He feels no heat and he minds no flies.
 On the way, on the way, &c.

Chorus – Light hearted, &c.

To visit us should you feel inclined,
 Come, right along, don't change your mind.
 Come away, away, &c.
 And you'll find a welcome when you call
 From the Meteor club of Ingersoll.
 Come away, come away, &c.

Chorus – Light hearted, &c.”⁹⁰

First used in antebellum minstrel shows to glorify slavery, “Dixie” is probably best known as the unofficial anthem of the Confederacy during the Civil War. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, countless versions of the song were composed, but likely the Meteors were inspired by the adaptation that intended to rally the fledgling Confederate troops.⁹¹ Every facet of bicycle clubs, from songs and military-style uniforms to the structure of executives, were all part of the organizers’ attempts to construct a carefully-crafted image of respectable local sportsmen. The adoption of new consumer technologies like the bicycle was unquestionably about improving day-to-day living, but competitive bicycle club activities also protected young, middle-class men from concerns that “modern life” had an effeminate influence on them.⁹² In 1882, for example, *Outing, a Journal of Recreation*, argued that joining a rural bicycle club prevented “premature feebleness and decay” among young men.⁹³ According to Norcliffe, male cyclists especially “wanted to be seen, and were very conscious of how they appeared to the larger public.”⁹⁴ James Sinclair’s song is rife with references to the sort of

90. “Meteor Bicycle Club Song,” *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 6 June 1895, 8.

91. For a more thorough discussion of the song’s origins and its usage in the Civil War, see Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks, *Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Family’s Claim to the Confederate Anthem* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993) and Christian McWhirter, *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

92. Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game*, 118-19.

93. C.E. Hawley, “Uses of the Bicycle,” *Outing, a Journal of Recreation* 1, 1 (1882): 22.

94. Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity*, 252.

virulent masculinity that late-nineteenth century sports teams purported to represent.⁹⁵ Even the official colors of the two clubs contain masculine undertones. The Meteors' choice of red, white, and blue⁹⁶ was likely a nod to their American brethren, and Pratt specifically, who recommended that particular trifecta. The three stripes of silk ribbon, according to Pratt, "may be worn by members at any time, and shall be worn by all members competing in club or inter-club races."⁹⁷ For the sum of \$1.00, members of bicycle clubs could order personalized ribbons in their respective club colours from the 1897 Eaton's Christmas Catalogue.⁹⁸ The Rovers' colors—red, black, and old gold—while less obvious in their meaning, are still reminiscent of a strong male presence. Such rich, dark colors, especially red, were often used in the interior design schemes of barrooms and domestic spaces like smoking rooms and libraries.

According to *Cycling* magazine, both the Rovers and the Meteors had headquarters in local hotels, a conventionally masculine space.⁹⁹ When compared to gambling dens or billiards halls, hotels were considered a more respectable setting for social gatherings, but the middle-class women of these communities did not spend time in hotels without male companions. Aside from securing employment as waitresses or using it as a temporary residence, women generally stayed away from hotels lest they become the source of local gossip. Being a member of the bicycle club did not alter wider societal attitudes towards women's presence in such establishments, so likely female bicycle club members did not "hang out" in hotels with their male counterparts. As a result, women did not benefit from the camaraderie and collegiality that occurred among club members during their leisure hours. Indeed, as McGurn notes, a cycling club's "home away from home" often "metamorphosed into men's social clubs."¹⁰⁰ Initially, the Rovers and the Meteors met in retail shops after hours, but owing to their growing memberships were forced to relocate elsewhere. Larger and more affluent urban clubs had the funds at their disposal to construct private clubhouses, some of which even contained separate rooms for women. Such efforts to segregate male and female members, however, dissolved any notions of "full membership" promised to women when they joined a bicycle club. "Patronizing toasts made to

95. See Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game*, 132.

96. *Ingersoll Chronicle*, 21 May 1896, 4.

97. Pratt, *The American Bicyclist*, 182

98. *Canada's Greatest Store: Christmas Catalogue, 1897, the T. Eaton Co. Limited* (Toronto: D.E. Scott, 1897), 33.

99. *Cycling* 7, 10 (8 Apr. 1897), n.p.; The Meteors' headquarters was located in the Atlantic House and the Rovers were stationed at the Queen's Hotel.

100. McGurn, *On Your Bicycle*, 58.

‘the lady members’ by club presidents at social events,” for instance, “testify to the exclusion of women from the power structure of bicycling clubs, where they remained second-class citizens.” According to Norcliffe, “in this respect, cycling clubs were not much different from most other Victorian social organizations.”¹⁰¹

When the bicycle “craze” or “fever” began to abate around 1900, historians generally attribute its demise to an oversaturated market and consumer boredom. The novelty of the safety bicycle had worn off long ago and by the late-1890s, few technological advancements were being made that could reignite riders’ interest. Though new models were manufactured and marketed to consumers, no significant changes were made in terms of safety and durability. Bicycles certainly remained an important mode of transportation, especially among middle- and working-class riders, and continued to be widely used for both personal and professional use. However, there was now little social cachet attached to riding bicycles. The fact that prices had “dropped drastically—from \$150 in the early 1890s to \$10 by the end,”¹⁰² meant cycling no longer communicated the same senses of wealth, status, and prestige that it once had. Norcliffe notes that “trendsetters” began seeking out other emerging consumer technologies, such as “electric lighting, gramophone, radio and telephone systems, automobiles, Bakelite products, and aeroplanes,”¹⁰³ to feed their consumptive and consumerist desires.

Decelerated interest in cycling also meant decelerated interest in joining bicycle clubs. The exclusivity that members of bicycle clubs had once sought and enjoyed was transformed by the mass marketing of the more obtainable and affordable safety bicycle. After 1898, reports of club meets and activities are fewer and far between in the social and sports columns of the *Tillsonburg Observer* and the *Ingersoll Chronicle* though interest in riding singly remained high. A host of newly-formed sporting and social organizations appeared in the two communities which provided a laundry list of benefits to be gained from membership. The exercise, camaraderie, and companionship that bicycle clubs offered could now be found elsewhere, and in environments that were more inclusive and focused on nurturing the betterment of all, regardless of gender. Their unwillingness to let go of masculine and militaristic rules of order, coupled with competition from other groups and loss of social

101. Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity*, 192.

102. Ellen Gruber Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 134.

103. Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity*, 208.

cachet, unquestionably contributed to the demise of Ingersoll and Tillsonburg's bicycle clubs. Though the Rovers and the Meteors were established at a time when increasing numbers of female cyclists were showing interest in the sport, these clubs were not initially built on the idea of nurturing equality among male and female members. Though eventually invited to join, as Nancy Bouchier rightly points out, females had to "tread [...] carefully when they stepped onto male cultural terrain."¹⁰⁴ Though women who joined these organizations were offered a degree of sexual and social freedom and provided with the opportunity to seek out a new and healthful mode of recreation, cultivating manliness and respectability remained a cornerstone of the Meteors' and the Rovers' existence, as they focused on bolstering their numbers, enhancing the club's attractiveness, providing male members with companions, and utilizing women's free labour and other "genteel" qualities. In spite of the fact that they were relatively short-lived, these two organizations provide evidence that shifts were occurring in the long-established gender order of these two small communities. Though some women had begun to form their own physical recreation associations, in Tillsonburg and Ingersoll bicycle clubs were the first example of a formal sporting organization that admitted female members, and made efforts to alter their traditionally-masculine customs and mores to better complement heterosocial interests.

104. Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game*, 133.