

BACK IN THE DAY: Riverside was bicycling stronghold



FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER/KIM JARRELL JOHNSON

The Riverside Metropolitan Museum's collection includes this photo of Carson Shoemaker and the Dec. 5, 1895, edition of the Riverside Wheel, a Riverside newspaper from the 1890s that was devoted exclusively to bicycling.

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COLUMNIST

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Riverside was hit hard by the bicycle craze of the 1890s. The men who participated in bicycle riding for sport or pleasure were called wheelmen and mention of them and their exploits was common in Riverside newspapers of the time.

The Riverside Wheelman's club was formed 1891 and the club developed Wheelman's park located at today's Houghton and Pine Streets. The park included an oval track which was a third

of a mile in length. Stands were erected for the big crowds of spectators who attended the race meets.

As part of the race meets, long-distance races were also run on local streets. It was at the Wheelman's first meet in September 1892 that the spotlight first shown on a young man named Carson Shoemaker.

The road race started at 8th and Main in downtown Riverside. The male riders were dressed in what the Daily Press said was "a sort of bathing costume." Among the riders was a tall thin-legged 18-year-old who had never before participated in a bicycle race. Much to everyone's surprise, the untried Shoemaker crossed the finish line in first place.

Shoemaker was born in Indiana in 1874. His family moved to Riverside in 1882 when he was 8 years old and bought a 20-acre ranch on Olivewood Avenue. He went to local schools and apparently took up the bicycle in the early months of 1892.

After Shoemaker, nicknamed "Shoe," won the race in 1892 he was not only one of the star riders of the Riverside Wheelman, he became well known throughout Southern California for his skill in long-distance racing. By the mid-1890s Riverside had one of the strongest bicycle clubs in the state. Four of the best riders on the Pacific Coast, including Shoemaker, lived in Riverside.

The Riverside newspapers reported frequently on Shoemaker's exploits. He participated primarily in the longer races, everything from 25-mile team races to what were referred to as "century" races because they were 100 miles in length. He often won handily and broke many racing records. But more than just his racing successes made it into the local paper. On Aug. 29, 1893, it was reported that Shoemaker raced a runaway horse on his bicycle, caught the animal and brought it to a stop.

In June 1894, Shoemaker accepted an offer to race in other parts of the United States. He was gone from Riverside for three months and in spite of some ill health he participated in races in Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri. He won many of the races and the trip cemented his reputation as one of the best riders in the sport.

Shoemaker continued to pile up wins and accolades in cycling until September 1900. That month the Wheelmen held their 9th annual race meet at Wheelman Park. During the 25-mile team race a collision at the 12th mile occurred between Shoemaker and two other racers.

Shoemaker apparently hit his head when he fell and was unconscious for several hours. Many feared he would die. However, after he regained consciousness it became apparent that he was not as seriously injured as feared. Realizing what a close call he had had, Shoemaker announced that he was giving up bicycle racing.

For the next several years, Shoemaker concentrated on his business and personal interests. He purchased more property and bought a livery stable. The papers, which had once carried so many mentions of Shoemaker's exploits on his bicycle, now carried ads for his stable and mentions of hunting trips with friends and family beach trips.

On Dec. 30, it was reported in the Riverside Daily Press that Shoemaker had undergone what was described as a “delicate operation” at the hospital and was not doing well. He died the next day at the age of 34 and was buried in Riverside’s Evergreen Cemetery. He was survived by his wife Clara, whom he had married in 1896, and their two daughters, Ruth and Helen. In 2012, Shoemaker was added to the Riverside Sports Hall of Fame Wall of Distinction.

If you have an idea for a future Back in the Day column about a local historic person, place, or event, contact Steve Lech and Kim Jarrell Johnson at backinthedaype@gmail.com.

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