

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: Tour de Force

By Ally Falzone

It is 1895 and the bicycle craze has reached Aurora! According to the Aurora Banner, "The bicycle fever has struck this place badly. More wheels have been sold here this season already than have been sold in any entire season, and still there are more coming into town" (Aurora Banner May 3, 1895). At the end of the 19th century, Aurorans were simply mad for bicycling as it offered a mode of transportation that was quicker than walking and cheaper than a horse. For the female population of Aurora, cycling provided a tantalizing bit of freedom and a glimpse of equality at a time when the women's suffrage movement was gaining momentum. Prior to the mid 1890s, doctors generally condemned the idea of women riding bicycles. They advised against the activity because they believed women would become infertile, and among other things, the puffy red faces caused by women exerting themselves was thought to be unsightly. This began to change when Queen Victoria's daughters, particularly Princess Louise took up cycling and became enamoured with the activity. Loyal subjects wanted to emulate the royal family and soon afterwards it became perfectly acceptable for young ladies to become "ladycyclists".

For these "ladycyclists", there was one obvious limitation, the bicycle could not be ridden side-saddle but rather it needed to be straddled. This called for a fashion revolution. The Aurora Banner published an article that advised women on new styles of outfit that could be worn while riding if the traditional skirts proved too cumbersome. These outfits, popular in France, allowed women to ride their bicycles while securely straddling them. The article mentioned that women "who find this costume immodest, will have to wrestle with consistency as best as they can" (Aurora Banner, January 18, 1895). However, whatever outrage the bloomers may have caused, Aurorans seemed to have overlooked the indecency noting, "if the dainty Parisienne, whose cults the very essence of femininity, approves of this attire there must be something very chic about it" (Aurora Banner, January 18, 1895).

That spring, female cyclists were invited to join the Aurora Bicycle Club and on May 8, 1895 the Aurora Banner proclaimed that members of the club were to meet for a ride at Bond Lake and all "wheelmen" and "ladycyclists" were required to attend. When cycling, women and men were equal, cycling provided an atmosphere of increased personal equality and freedoms. Cycling introduced dramatic change compared to previous decades, as a woman could wear pants, grab her bicycle and travel throughout the town at her leisure. Similarly, women could participate in longer rides that were strenuous and required athletic ability "no doubt resulting in a flushed visage."

Whether it is being used for a leisurely ride, or in a competition, the next time you see a bicycle do not just think of it as a mode of transportation but an unlikely vehicle for change.