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## Chris Sweet

Mike McCurdy  
*WGLT Radio*

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Chris Sweet: Proximity to the river, the Illinois River, for barge shipping and it was a railroad hub. There were plenty of lines going back and forth going between Chicago. During that time period, the railroad stretched from coast to coast so it was easy to get the finished product out and it was easy to get raw materials for producing the back, and so it really was just a simple geographic location that led to it.

Mike McCurdy: Well that makes sense for manufacturing, but why bikes? They could have been manufacturing tractor tires or tractor wheels.

Sweet: From what I've seen, they really— the factories and industries were quite nimble. They almost all evolved from something else, so if you look at a lot of these manufacturers and even the ones in Peoria and Chicago, some of them made sewing machines first and then moved into bikes, a lot of them made carriages, some of them made agricultural implements, so they had the tooling and they saw the opportunity and they were able to turn around their factories much faster than anything we have today. You know, they saw that bicycles were selling well. John Deere is an example of this. John Deere was— it seemed like pretty happy, you know doing good business and with agricultural equipment, they saw that bikes were selling, they started putting their name on some that were made by other companies and they, for a couple of years, tried making their own.

McCurdy: And we're really talking about what's known as the "safety bike", bikes with a frame pretty close to what we see on the streets today, wheels of the same size or close, a chain, a chain ring back on a bicycle, right?

Sweet: If we are, yeah, we're talking about central Illinois manufacturing that's correct. There were Chicago manufacturers of the high wheel, the ordinary bike with the really big front wheel—

McCurdy: Also known as a penny-farthing.

Sweet: —yes, a penny-farthing high wheel, yeah. Those were made in Chicago, none of those were made in central Illinois, although a company in Peoria sold— they were probably the largest wholesaler of other people's high wheeler bikes. They were one of the first mail-order sort of companies.

McCurdy: What role did Illinois, or central Illinois specifically, play in sort of phasing out the high wheel?

Sweet: It phased out really quickly once it— once that safety bicycle started being manufactured first in England and then over here in the states. That really killed the ordinary— so the a more modern bicycle with a relatively close, same size wheels, was very much easier to learn, safer to ride on one of those. So, people picked it up really quickly, it didn't— the high wheels were famous for taking headers. So you're sitting up on top of a, let's say, fifty inch wheel, you're up above that, the weight can come forward very easily and take a header to it was quite dangerous. There was a big boom as soon as those safeties started hitting the market.

McCurdy: And let's talk about that boom in the late 19th century. Can you describe the scope of this boom?

Sweet: It's a— to people who really haven't heard about it or read much about it, cycling was THE popular sport. You know, this really predates the popularity of football and basketball. Baseball was big in America at that time, but in many places, cycling rivalled baseball and more people did it pretty quickly when women started taking up cycling as one of the first sports that they really became involved in. Only a few raced, but many were a part of the clubhouses and they had their own group rides, so there was a— it was, that was the big part of the boom.

McCurdy: There was some concern about women riding. I mean, you see a lot of women in the advertising, and I don't know if that was actually marketing designed toward women or just the age old practice of using women in ads to try and sell products.

Sweet: Oh it was definitely both. But I think it's an interesting aspect of my research where traditional capitalism drove positive soulful change, right? So the bicycle companies, they just wanted to sell as many bikes as they could and there was a huge market. You know, if they could sell to women, that's you know, 50% more people they could sell bikes to. So they did all kinds of creative marketing campaigns, they hired physicians to attest to the health benefits of cycling for women 'cause some physicians said, "No, this is dangerous, women shouldn't be allowed to do it, it should be a male-only sport," but the bicycle companies, they wanted to sell bikes, they realized there was a big market out there; they spent a lot of time reaching out to women.

McCurdy: I flipped through your presentation and read over your paper and one of the things that seems to be missing is bikes for children.

Sweet: Yeah from the boom period, from this— we're talking 1890 to about 1900, there was a big crash after that, there was not a children's market. They didn't see that as a market. Children themselves, by and large during that time period, were not going to be able to afford bicycles. They were quite expensive, I suppose that's another— it was a very much middle and upper-class pursuit, so a bicycle— a safety bicycle in the 1890's, around a hundred bucks for that time period.

McCurdy: Can you put that into today's dollars?

Sweet: For a working class, you know, laborer, at that time they maybe would have made two-hundred bucks over the course of the year. So it'd be about half of their salary. So the bikes have gotten much cheaper over time and then they've been— as that happened, other classes, other classes of people were able to access the bike and a lot of people would say that's kind of what killed the bicycle.

McCurdy: The boom led to some bike clubs. Can you talk about some of the bike clubs in Bloomington and Peoria?

Sweet: Right, so it was very much a social phenomenon. People wanted to participate in these, often, elitist clubs. They also had fairly high monthly fees involved with them and they had just elaborate club houses, particularly up in Chicago. A Chicago cycling club house and there were fifty clubs up there. But the bigger ones, they would've had a billiard room, they would've had a smoking room, they would've had their own library, they would've had their own gym, they had a coach on site at a lot of them, so they were, they were really— you know, if you think about the Gilded Age, they would just exemplify the Gilded Age, conspicuous consumption, that sort of thing. So that also occurred in central Illinois, people were— they wanted to ride together, you know for safety and to just talk about each other's bikes, so—

McCurdy: That hasn't changed.

Sweet: — (laughter) that has not changed. It's very much the same, but the numbers have changed. Peoria's bike club was one of their earlier in the country, 1870's, early 1870's I believe and it got up to four-hundred members over there, so I mean it was much larger than it is today. Bloomington had a very early club as well. It was much, much smaller over here.

McCurdy: Do the first paved roads actually owe their existence to bicyclists or is that a myth?

Sweet: The paved roads are certainly partially related to the cyclists. In the late 1800's, so again in this boom period in the 1890's, there was a big national movement called the Good Roads Movement and this was definitely started by cyclists, and the Good Roads Movement, they just wanted more paved roads that were maintained either by the government or by local farmers. So they really needed to work with the farmers to try to get them on board, 'cause if you think of the rural roads, there was no government funding for roads. Farmers were expected to just maintain their own roads outside of their property and you can imagine that was, you know, hit and miss, the same ways you might encounter people keeping up their sidewalks in town now, some do a nice job of it, others let it go. So the cyclists, and they were a significant political lobby at the time, so they banded together to vote as a block and Good Roads was one of their most important issues. So they really started to push to Good Roads—

McCurdy: And with booms come busts. You mentioned a crash, what happened to the bike industry in Illinois? It seems to be absent today.

Sweet: Yeah, it is absent for the most part, although today, let's talk about that a little bit, there's small bike builders are coming back, which I think is interesting, so that's kind of an arc from the very beginning. There were many hundreds bicycle manufacturers in Illinois. A lot of them were small, you know there was a bicycle shop and you know they maybe made fifty bikes a year. Some of that is coming back, you have some small handmade bikes up in Chicago now so that's kind of a continuum. But the bust, everybody and their brother to into building bikes, you know there were probably 400, 500 people, manufacturers of bicycles in Illinois. Not across the

country, just in Illinois, getting close to that 1900 turn of the century. So first problem was overproduction. Everybody thought it was a cash cow, they were going to make a killing doing this and many did, but then it got to the point where the market was just flooded with bicycles and it was driving the prices down, driving the people a lot of business. Then there was a group of investors that got together and said, "Well we're gonna fix this, we're gonna form a trust." This is the age of you know, the big steel trust, the oil trusts, the Robber barons—

McCurdy: Monopoly.

Sweet: —yeah. So they're gonna form a monopoly, so they bought out about twenty of the largest manufacturers that were the biggest producers and they were gonna squeeze the little guys out, that was their idea, they were gonna form this trust, they were all gonna sell together, they're gonna squeeze out the small manufacturers. But the situation was so dire, the companies were really— had more debt than they talked about and so the trust failed and everything just kind of fell apart. Along with, during that time, same time, motorcycles were just coming on to the scene and people wanted to go faster, further, and shortly after motorcycles you could have the first automobiles. So none of that helped to keep the bicycle going.

McCurdy: So not only was there a manufacturing but, there was a decline in riders.

Sweet: Right, right, and it lost its social panache because the prices did go down very quickly, you had the prices at about \$100 in the mid 1890's, early 1900's you could buy a bike from Sears— twenty bucks. So it didn't have that elitism associated with it, so some say that contributed to the bust.

McCurdy: This is Sound Ideas, I'm Mike McCurdy talking with Chris Sweet who is a librarian and historian at Illinois Wesleyan University. He's researching the history of central Illinois bicycling as part of a 2015 sabbatical project. He's speaking Sunday at the Peoria Riverfront Museum. Let's talk about some of the manufacturers, tell me about Luthy & Co.

Sweet: Peoria had about half dozen larger manufacturers and they also have some smaller ones that have really been forgotten over time. Luthy was one of these Peoria companies that had their hands in many things. They started out also in the agricultural business and they may have done some carriages as well. They saw an opportunity that bikes were selling really well, they would've been aware of other Peoria companies so they kind of had their eyes on them and they decided, you know we're gonna get into this market. And Luthy, as well as a couple of the other ones, other Peoria companies, Ide is another one. They decided to make what was known as, "high art" bikes. And this is something that Peoria was known for and Chicago was definitely not known for. So high art would've been the very top end of the bicycle market. They were the most expensive bikes, they were the most ornate, and some of them were really gorgeous. So they would have intricate lugwork, so that would be the parts of the bikes that join the tubes together, that would be like nickel plated, they had some elaborate crank designs, all the high end stuff. So Luthy didn't sell a lot, but they were at the very high end of the market.

McCurdy: For people who don't know cranks are what the pedals are attached to.

Sweet: Right, so that's the arm that spins around, pedals are attached to 'em.

McCurdy: A fair number of the Luthy bikes ended up in Europe. Why?

Sweet: It wasn't just the Luthy bikes. This I had no clue about. I grew up in the Peoria area and didn't even know there was a significant bicycle history. They produced so many bikes and there was so much demand around the world, not just in the United States, Peoria exported a lot of bikes. It's hard to get solid numbers, but many of the bikes weren't for the domestic market. They were shipped overseas, not just to Europe. Luthy definitely sold in Europe, there was a great poster from the 1890's of Luthy bicycles being sold in Paris, but they shipped to South America, they shipped to New Zealand, so it was really an international market.

McCurdy: There was Peoria Rubber and Manufacturing, one of the largest bike factories. What set this company apart?

Sweet: They were new, they formed specifically to do a couple of things. One of them was to build bicycles, but they also wanted to produce tires. The pneumatic tire was really coming into popularity, that was the early 1890's, that was really started catching on, that was part of what made bikes more comfortable to ride, more faster, so there was a big market for US tires. So that was one thing they wanted to capitalize on, they built a new factory in Peoria Heights with all the newest machinery, they're going to capitalize on tires, make some bikes on the side, but it looks like also from the very get-go that they had their eyes on automobiles that they were gonna kind of set this up 'cause bicycles were selling so well, and it would sort of underwrite development of automobiles with Charles Duryea who was from Peoria originally, Peoria area and made one of the first mass-produced automobiles.

McCurdy: And what about bikes manufactured in Bloomington?

Sweet: Bikes manufactured in Bloomington, there were maybe three and sometimes it gets really hard to distinguish between, did they just buy a bike from Chicago and slap a name badge on it, there was definitely some of that going on that was common practice, but also there was another sort of level where you get the parts of a bicycle, you get the tubes, you get the crank, the crank hammer, the different- the head tube parts, and all you gotta know is how to braze them together, they were pretty standard. So I think some of that did happen. Harbor brothers in downtown Bloomington was one of those that looks like they probably did make their own bikes for a while.

McCurdy: Chris Sweet is an Illinois Wesleyan University librarian and historian, he's researching the history of central Illinois bicycles and bicycling, you're listening to Sound Ideas. Tell me about some of your field research, did you try to go to some of the other locations where these factories once stood or where the race tracks once were? Is that important?

Sweet: That is actually of less importance. There are some buildings still in Peoria, but as far as actual archival research, that's what's great about this project for me as a historian and as a librarian and I have to spend a lot of time traveling to various locations that have good archival collections. Often, my students at Illinois Wesleyan think they can just Google whatever and find everything that's online, and we try to convince them otherwise, but a project like this, the great majority of the early stuff is not digitized. I've spent a lot of time in Chicago and Chicago History Museum has been great up there, the Newberry Library has good holdings, Peoria Public Library and Chicago Public Library both have old bicycle collections, Bradley University, I've went to the Henry Ford Museum.

McCurdy: How many of these antique bicycles do you think still remain, hanging, forgotten in a shed, stored in a cluttered basement, lost in a garage?

Sweet: I think actually the majority are now in collectors' hands. There are very active collectors of these bikes and they overtime have found these bikes that are in the garages, in the sheds, so quite a few have survived. It's a very durable sort of good, even if it sits outside for decades, some of them can be restored with parts they can cobble together from other bikes. So I think as time has progressed, there's less and less of those sitting in an attic or a garage. That's for the early stuff, you know, I think some of the mid-century Schwinn's that were made up in Chicago, I think a lot of those are still out there, they're not quite as collectable, but they're becoming more so.

McCurdy: And tell me about the riding difference between one of these 1890's safety bikes and what would amount to a pretty good bike shop bike today, or is it more similar than it is different?

Sweet: It is for a safety bicycle, it feels the same, I mean the weight distribution is sort of the same, you know you peddle the cranks and it goes forward. Most of them did not have gears, all these early bikes were single speed, and the very earliest ones were fixed gear, meaning there was no coasting, your pedals kept moving with you.

McCurdy: Can you tell you're riding on a wooden wheel?

Sweet: No, there might be a little more flimsy if you were to really try to stand up and put some pressure on the pedals, but the wooden wheels were surprisingly effective and they lasted for quite a while.

McCurdy: And any echoes or after effects from the central Illinois bike boom on today?

Sweet: Central Illinois, I think, slightly less other than the way its bicycle manufacturing followed the same arc of midwest manufacturing that we've seen all across the midwest, that there was a boom period that employed many people, they made good salaries and then it kind of dried up, it went overseas. The bicycle follows that same path. So there's still a large distributor near Rantoul in central Illinois, that's part of Bell Sports, they make helmets and they make bicycle racks and it's a huge facility. I didn't realize this, they—

McCurdy: And bicycle lights too, I think, don't they?

Sweet: They may do lights there too, but it's hundreds and thousands of racks and helmets, so that's part of the tradition. And there's also something in southern Illinois, a little further away from central Illinois, but the fa— we're still a good place to distribute. Things still need to go out by semi and by rail, and sometimes by barge.

McCurdy: Chris, thanks for your time today and thanks for your time researching bicycling in central Illinois.

Sweet: Thank you.