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Chris Sweet on the Role of Women in Bicycle History, July 20, 2019

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Chris Sweet, July 20 2019

Willis Kern: The term “scorcher” took on new meaning as the heat index again crossed over 105 degrees. Many attending the Third Annual Bike History Event are learning “scorchers” had a different meaning back in the day; in the 1890s scorchers were people who menaced communities by riding their bikes aggressively at high speeds. Dozens of bicycles from three different centuries are on display alongside two presentations: one of those centers on new technologies and social acceptance of bikes since their introductions as velocipedes around 1817, and the other focuses on the history of women and cycling in Illinois.

Chris Sweet: The bicycle truly was a force for social change.

Kern: That’s Christopher Sweet, a bike historian at Illinois Wesleyan University, discussing the role women played during the late 1800s in bicycle pioneering and how female bike riding impacted society.

Sweet: They were so popular that they had the ability and the power to change social norms: it changed what people wore, it changed the idea of what women could do — they could ride and they could not be injured, it’s a healthy thing for them to do.

Kern: Prior to that, Sweet says women were perceived as too “dainty” to ride bicycles, sitting sidesaddle to limit the chance of injury from falling forward off of the high-wheeled bicycles that were popular at the time. But in the 1890s, women such as Tillie Anderson changed perceptions. The Swedish immigrant landed in Chicago and won most races in which she competed, many challenged by talented male riders. In 1896, famed women rights activist Susan B. Anthony proclaimed bicycling, quote, “did more to emancipate women than anything else in the world.” Sweet says the popularity of bicycling helped pave the way for the automobile, which was in its infancy during the 20th century’s first decade.

Sweet: In one sense, it was literal; they worked on brick streets, they worked on what they called macadam which was an early type of asphalt or pavement, and also then the technology of manufacturing bicycles was directly related to cars. Things like ball bearings were pioneered for bicycles, things like pinion steering—that’s sort of the rack-and-pinion steering—was a bicycle development, pneumatic tires were a bicycle development. So some of the early car prototypes just used bicycle parts.

Kern: Sweet says most of these developments occurred prior to an extreme dip in bicycling popularity around 1900.