Mike McCurdy: Get two people together and you’re likely to see some sort of competition. What was the bicycle competition or racing culture like in central Illinois in the late 1800’s and who was Major Taylor?

Chris Sweet: The racing culture at that time was just phenomenal compared to what we know today. It’s, compared to today– today, racing would be a “fringe sport”. Bicycle racing was a huge spectator sport, as well as just having a lot of participation across cyclists. So along with this boom, everybody was getting into cycling, of course they wanted to see people go as fast as they could, and this took place in a couple of different formats. They did, what we would consider a traditional road race, you know, out on the roads. Some of them would of been paved, a lot of them would’ve been gravel, fairly rough terrain–

McCurdy: The gravel grind (laughter).

Sweet: Yeah, yeah, that would've been fairly common, even in Chicago not all the roads were even close to paved at that time. So they also raced on then more paved dirt tracks, like the famous one over in Peoria was the Lakeview Track, and that hosted some of the best racers, some international racers, but the best racers in the country for sure–

McCurdy: And Major Taylor fell into that category.

Sweet: Major Taylor fell into that category. He is a great story from the early history of cycling. He grew up in, near Indianapolis, and he’s significant because he was really one of the first African American world champions. So in that time period, obviously still a lot of segregation. You know things were changing, it’s well past the Civil War, but segregation obviously still rampant. And then, he started as a very young kid, and some of the accounts that I’ve found have him starting in Peoria even younger than any of the books document. So around 12 or 14, he came over to some of his very first races on the Peoria track, racing in the kid’s division, and he came on to be the best American rider and the best in the world, he did win a world championship as well. And there were kind of all the expected racial tensions associated with that. He really was not welcomed to race in the south and even when he raced in the north, there were often– the other riders would conspire against him, try to knock him down, so he’s a really interesting character. So he started out racing in Peoria and then he returned a number of times to do some races in Chicago, as well.

McCurdy: And the speeds and times were astounding. Can you imagine some of these people on a carbon fiber today?

Sweet: Yeah, I mean, they really took it serious, they had trainers, they had massage therapists that traveled with them to races. So some of the technique and the training protocols are not that different from what we would do today, but they made, money-wise, much greater salaries than almost all the cyclists today.

McCurdy: Let’s talk about a couple of other characters: Leonard “Baby” Bliss.

Sweet: “Baby” Bliss is a great central Illinois, and actually Bloomington, character who made his way into the bicycling world as the “world’s heaviest cyclist”. So he, at different times, quartered his weight at mid-500 pounds, later on he was saying 700, you know there’s never a picture of him standing on a scale, but he was a very big guy. He was tall, but he was just a very large individual.

McCurdy: And he was used to sell bikes. I mean, I would assume that if you have a big guy riding a bike, it attests– it’s a testament to the strength of that bike.

Sweet: Right, so if you can imagine there being 400 different brands in Illinois alone, in addition to all the other brands from around the country, how do you distinguish yourself and what can you do marketing wise that’s going to distinguish yourself. And some of those smaller brands were not durable, you know, they would break down after a year or two of use. So there were all kinds of ads of ten people balancing on a bike to show its durability. But “Baby” Bliss was in high demand to ride the bicycles, he even rode them in races sometimes for different companies as a spokesperson to show the durability of the bicycle.

McCurdy: And he ran for political office in Bloomington?

Sweet: Right, then he kind of tried– he leveraged his bicycle celebrity to run for office here in Bloomington. He was involved in a lot of things, real estate, but there was something from the McLean County Museum of History, he was running for police magistrate and I'm sure he won that election. But really one of the interesting characters from Bloomington that I’ve come across.

McCurdy: And I’m astounded by the accomplishments of Thomas W. Davis, tell me about him.

Sweet: Thomas W. Davis is someone I’m still working on researching and other than some of the periodicals of that time, he seems also to have been forgotten to history, so I kind of like uncovering those sorts of stories. Thomas W. Davis was from Peoria originally and he got into cycling really early on for the sport, he was an older guy, he didn’t really start riding until, I think he was, around 60 and he would’ve been on the old high wheels, really for the first decade he rode the high wheel bikes, which we talked about how dangerous and more difficult to ride they are. As the safety boom came along, he continued riding and he was well known for having– he claimed to have ridden the most miles of any cyclist in the world. It’s hard to substantiate those sorts of claims, but he made that claim a number of times, at least for somebody his age, so he would routinely ride you know 10–12,000 miles a year and in his case, he kept a meticulous log.

McCurdy: Where did he go?

Sweet: Same routes, I imagine. I imagine he rode a lot of the same routes around peoria. They had some routes that came across the river and, you know, if you stay kind of in the riverbeds along the railroad tracks, at least you’ve got a fairly smooth grade. A lot of the roads were constructed next to the railroad track grade, so–

McCurdy: So an astounding number of lawns.

Sweet: It is. By the time of his death it was around 140,000 miles, he just kept plugging away at it every year.

McCurdy: And you recently found his grave, or you think?

Sweet: Yes, yes. So, we knew from newspaper stories that he was buried in Springdale Cemetery over in Peoria and I was over there last weekend, so I convinced my wife to come out in the freezing temperatures and walk around the cemetery with me trying to find the gravestone and we had a general location from the cemetery of where he was used to be, but we wanted to find the tombstone because he had a bicycle engraved on top of the stone and then he had left space for his final millage. He wanted that number engraved on his tombstone and there are contemporary pictures of it that I was able to find that show the stone, but it’s not there anymore. And somebody else has noted that this has disappeared over time. There’s still a marker, but it’s clearly not the one that used to be there. So there’s another story about why a bicycle gravestone has gone missing.

McCurdy: Someone should mount a fundraising campaign to restore the stone.

Sweet: Yeah.

McCurdy: And note his place in history.