



Bulletin # 1

Reviewed 1980
Revised January 1994

☞ Riding ☞ Collecting ☞ Restoring ☞ Research ☞ History ☞

Advice on Buying a High Wheel Bicycle

Recent years have seen an ever increasing interest in the restoration and collection of antique bicycles, particularly the High Wheel (Ordinary) bicycles of the 1870s and 1880s. With this increased interest in High Wheels, The Wheelmen have undertaken to prepare a series of bulletins on the purchase, restoration, and riding of the High Wheel bicycle, as well as other subjects of historical or technical value to those persons interested in these machines.

Some prospective buyers have asked about the advisability of purchasing one of the reproduction High Wheels. Members of The Wheelmen recommend purchasing an original machine when available. Reproduction High Wheels may look quite authentic because in some instances specifications of the 1880s machines are used; other reproduction machines made by manufacturing companies do stand out as not being authentic. Reproductions may not maintain their value.

Caution in purchasing any bicycle is necessary in order to be assured the machine is what the buyer expects. Bicycles generally have name tags identifying them as reproduction or original machines, but such tags can be removed. Look for holes in the frame and inquire as to how the builders attached identification tags.

Members of The Wheelmen estimate that there are as many as 5,000 authentic High Wheels still in existence in this country. Because the vast majority of these machines are in need of restoration and tender loving care, The Wheelmen strongly urge, and will happily aid, any prospective buyers to scout up one of the authentic ones. The investment protection and many years of riding pleasure will more than compensate for the necessary effort.

How and where do you locate an available High Wheel? Quite simply, you ask and you look and you wait. Wherever you go, you keep a sharp lookout for the machine and you ask everyone you come near if they know the whereabouts of a High Wheel bicycle that is available. Most commonly they are found in storage in barns, attics, or basements along with other family heirlooms. Many

times you will come across one off in a corner of an antique shop or offered in an auction. Many antique auto carriage collectors either have one or more High Wheels or know of the whereabouts of one. You watch the want ads in magazines or newspapers, especially those for collectors of antiques, including The Wheelmen Newsletter published quarterly, or you insert your own ad in the "Wanted" column. Above all, talk to and ask people. Most High Wheels are located by the chance asking of a person who happens to know where an available one is located.

Every collector of HighWheels has numerous stories in connection with his or her search for that first machine. The lucky ones located their's within a year or so while others have looked for five or more years before locating their first one. One thing all of these people have in common in their stories, though, is the fact that they asked everyone they met whether or not they knew the whereabouts of a High Wheel. This method paid off for them and it will eventually pay off for you. Above all, ask members of The Wheelmen as they often are in a position to know where an Ordinary or other style of High Wheel may be purchased.

When you have located a High Wheel that is available, inspect it to be sure that it is complete, authentic, and in a restorable condition. The price you are willing to pay should be determined primarily on this basis. Many times you will find pedals, brake, trouser guard, seat, or nameplate missing. The seat or pedals may not be original. Above all, make sure the rim and the spokes are sound, especially on the big wheel. Check that the bicycle's tubing

is sound (i.e. intact) by tapping the handlebars, forks, and backbone with anything metal such as a key ring. If the tubing is sound, a decided ring will be heard. If the sound is dead, check for cracks or rust on the inside due to condensation. Be cautious when buying a machine which has a dead sound. Some rusting is unavoidable, but excessive rusting, particularly on any plated parts, makes restoration extremely difficult and expensive. Any nickel plated parts must be in a condition that they may be rendered smooth for successful replating.

Many missing parts can be fashioned and replaced and do not pose any large problem. However, missing pedals are very expensive to replace, and replacement of a large number of spokes can prove tedious as well as expensive. The leather seat can be, and often is, replaced, but the original seat mounting brackets are important articles and are difficult to duplicate. It is often necessary to replace a worn tire, so badly worn or missing tires are not a large problem. For safety sake, we recommend that you read our bulletins on tire mounting (#4 and #25) prior to having a tire replaced on your High Wheel.

Consult The Wheelmen Restoration Chairman and Bulletin 3a, Restoration Data Sheet, for any help needed in restoration work, parts, tires, etc.

High Wheel bicycles range in size from a front wheel diameter of 42 inches to 60 inches. The most common ones fall in the 48 to 54 inch range. Even though you may be able to mount and reach the pedals of a large machine, it is heavier and harder to push on a hill. Too small a wheel will result in bumping your knees on the handlebars. Generally speaking, a 48 inch wheel is recommended for persons with 31 inch legs, 50 inch wheel for 32 inch legs, 52 inch wheel for 33 inch legs, 54 inch wheel for 34 inch legs, 56 inch wheel for 35 inch legs, 58 inch wheel for 36 inch legs. These figures are not of great importance, however, in that a wheel four inches too small will not usually pose any serious problems.

Ordinaries have the large wheel up front. The most common make is the Columbia. There are some English High Wheels in this country as well as many anonymous makes. The more unusual High Wheel safety machines may drive the large wheel in front with ratchets, levers, chains, or gears. The Star and the Eagle bicycles had the big

wheel in the rear with a steerable small front wheel. These machines are heavier and more awkward, but safer than the common Ordinaries.

Most High Wheels can be dated somewhat by the equipment they possess. This does not necessarily hold true, however, in that many companies had one or more concurrent models during any given year. If the machine has straight handlebars, radial spokes, and a seat mounted on a leaf spring, it is generally denoted as from the early 1880s. If it has ram's horn handlebars, spade handles, tangential spokes, and a suspended saddle, it generally is considered to date from the late 1880s. Most Ordinaries were equipped with ball bearings. However, many from the 1870s to about 1882 had plain or cone bearings.

A fair price for a machine that is sound and complete, but unrestored, is difficult to predict. With prices rising with inflation and antiques of all kinds bringing much higher prices every year, we cannot predict what they will bring in a permanent document such as this. However, talking with Wheelmen who have recently purchased an antique should provide you with reasonable estimates. (Additionally, the price of an antique bicycle is dictated by any accessories which are with it, such as bells, lamps, cyclometers, etc.) Many members have been willing to pay higher prices so that they could stop looking and start enjoying their machines. Restored High Wheels should bring more than unrestored ones, particularly if a good nickel replating job has been done.



While looking for your High Wheel, keep your eyes open for the safety bicycles of the 1890s and arrange for the rescue of any of them you can. The early ones, with solid tires, are scarce and worth almost as much as a High Wheel. The pneumatic tired safeties of the 1890s bring much less. Chainless (shaft drive) bikes bring more than other pneumatics, as do tandems. Tires for the safeties are available. **See Bulletin 3a for further information.**

When you have bagged a High Wheel, let us know. Your active membership in The Wheelmen is desired so that we may further the lore of the High Wheel and the time in our history that it represents. Those years were exciting ones and can be relived in pleasure by owners of all types of High Wheels (as well other antique bicycles and tricycles) who are also members of The Wheelmen.