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THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

# A century ago, a day at the races meant watching bicycles speed by

In the 1890s, the favorite sports in Rock Hill were bicycling and baseball. Baseball, however, never quite drew the crowds that would show up for the bicycle races.

The quarter-mile bicycle race-track was on the south side of Hampton Street. There were grandstands to seat 1,000 people, and the stands would be filled every race day.

**Louise Pettus**



**NEARBY HISTORY**

Two to 10 competitors would vie for prizes offered by the Athletic Association of Rock Hill. Top prizes were diamonds. The most frequent race winners from Rock Hill were James Spratt White, Adolphus Friendheim and Edgar E. Poag, all from prominent local families and members of The Ramblers, the leading bicycle club.

Sometimes the local bicyclists were challenged by professional bicycle riders from out of state.

But as good as the Rock Hill "wheelers" were, they lost to Fort Mill on July 4, 1898.

The main event, won by J.E. Ardrey, was an exciting 5-mile handicap race. S.L. Meacham came in second and W. Ben Ardrey in third. It was an all-Fort Mill triumph.

Bicycle riding was not limited to men and boys. There were some women's bicycling clubs. Bicycling changed women's fashions.

Skirts were shortened several inches; however, the shorter skirts were weighted with lead. In Rock Hill, it became a fad for

the girls to don all-white costumes and bicycle in the moonlight.

There were several bicycle clubs at Winthrop College after it came to Rock Hill in 1896. The Winthrop Training School building, constructed in 1912, was built with an inside wooden banked racetrack on the fourth floor. However, it was against the rules for the Winthrop girls to attend the off-campus races.

The racers' bicycles, with their dipped handlebars, were lightweight (averaging about 15 pounds, compared with 25 to 30 pounds for an ordinary bicycle) and had a front wheel higher than the rear wheel. They also had solid rubber tires. It would be some years before tires with inner tubes came on the market.

In 1895, White (1878-1950) won the championship of York, Lancaster and Chester counties. It was the beginning of a career largely devoted to bicycles and bicycling.

White, a Citadel graduate, was disabled in the Spanish-American War, and his doctor ordered him to take up golf. White preferred a bicycle.

He began riding long distances, partly for health reasons, but largely for enjoyment. Wherever he went, he advertised Rock Hill with signs on his bicycle. One of his signs read, "Rock Hill is a good town." That was the origin of the slogan that was long used by the city.

At his White Cycle Co., 145 E. White St. in Rock Hill, White sold and serviced Columbia bicycles. It was more than a bicycle shop.

People dropped in because they enjoyed his enthusiasm and appreciated his sponsorship of many local projects. For White

and most Rock Hillians, any excuse would do for a parade.

In 1936, White acquired a bicycle he named Old Betsy. The bicycle broke so many records that eventually he rode Old Betsy to its home factory in Westfield, Mass., to show it off. That was in 1947 when Old Betsy was 11 and White was 69. Old Betsy had covered more than 35,000 miles and still had her original pedals. The front tire had run 15,367 miles.

Old Betsy made many interesting trips. In 1939, the Rock Hill Chamber of Commerce sponsored White's 11-day, 750-mile trip to the World's Fair in New York.

White reported back that he got there fine but couldn't find a place to park his bicycle. He observed the fair made a bicycle "about as welcome as a crying baby in an apartment house."

After visiting the fair, White continued his goodwill trip into New England.

Locally, White used Old Betsy to promote his business. After awhile, he began having birthday parties for the bicycle.

White would place bold type ads in the newspaper: "Come and Join the Happy Throng! If you Don't Come, Betsy's Feelings May be Hurt. That Would Never Do."

On Betsy's 10th birthday in 1946, White called for a Victory Parade. He placed a challenge in his ad: "The Horsemen say if we have 100 bicycles, they'll have 100 horses. Let's put them on the spot!"

The horsemen were on the spot. White and Old Betsy were again the highlight of the parade.

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