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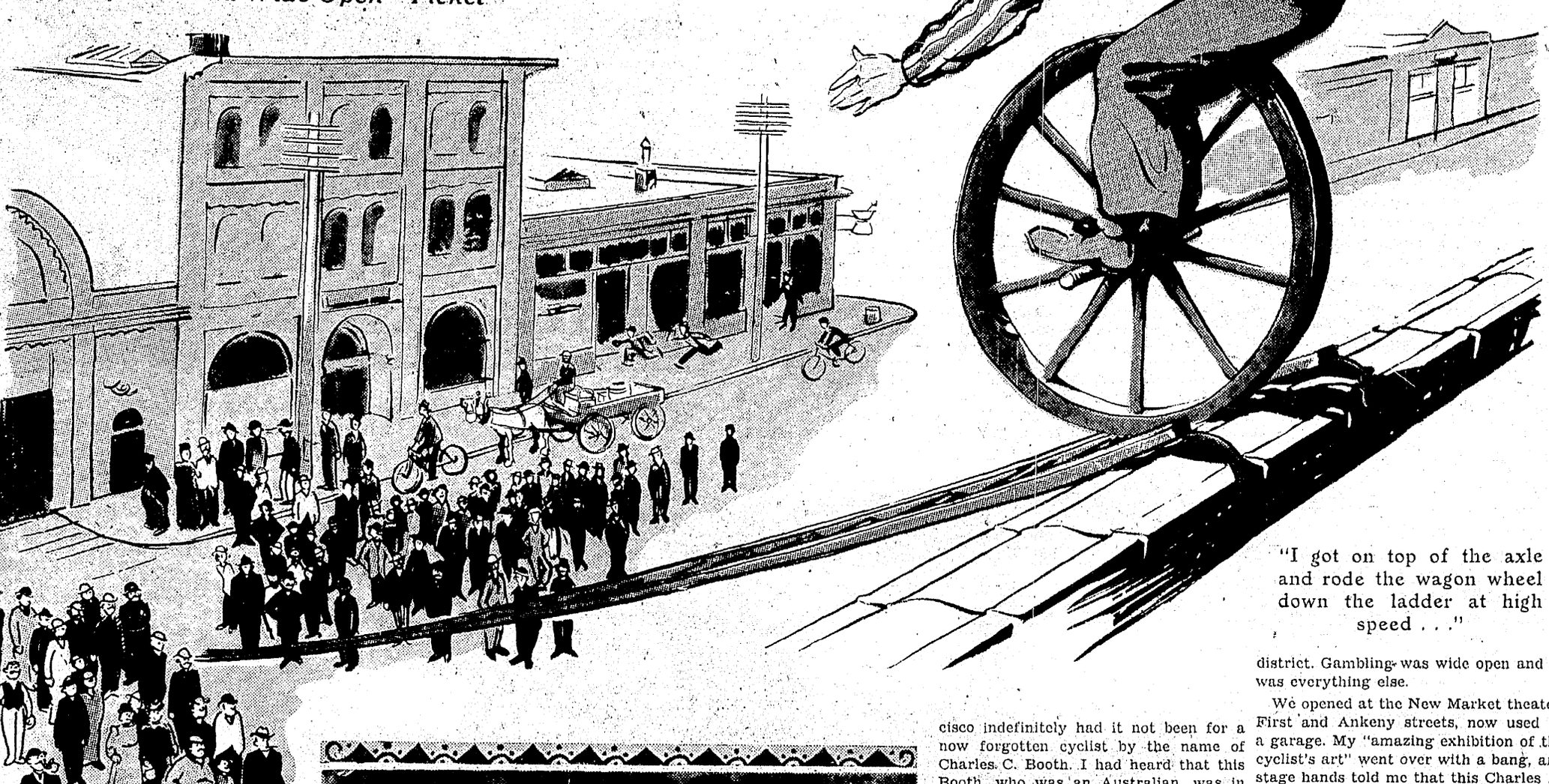
The Life and Times of Fred T. Merrill

Being an Account of a Spectacular Young Man on the Flying High-Wheel. . . . He Sold 52,000 Bicycles in the Pacific Northwest . . . Became the World's Champion Trick Bike Rider . . . and Contributed to the Alarm of Citizens When He Ran for Mayor on the "Keep-Portland-Wide-Open" Ticket



RALPH LEE

"I got on top of the axle and rode the wagon wheel down the ladder at high speed . . ."

For more than half a century one of Portland's liveliest and most colorful sporting and political characters, Fred T. Merrill has never before told his real story in print, or out of print.

First of all, Merrill was for a decade the undisputed champion trick and fancy cyclist of the world in a time when the world had gone bicycle-crazy. He imported the first high-wheel from England. He staged and rode in the first six-day bike race; and he was the first artist to race against running and trotting horses on the track.

Became Promoter Of Many Sports

He not only rode cycles, but he sold them, and by the turn of the century he was nationally known as the Bicycle King, having sold no less than 52,000 bicycles from his store in Portland and elsewhere in the northwest.

Later he became widely known as a promoter of horse and auto races; of boxing, wrestling and roller-skating, and of many other sports, both indoor and out.

For six years he was city councilman from the big and good-and-bad old Third ward, which took in everything—and that was a lot—from Washington street north to Gilsan, and from the river west to the city limits. In 1906, he ran for mayor on the Keep-Portland-Wide-Open ticket and was defeated by a slim margin in a hell-roaring campaign that old-timers still talk about.

Owned Twelve Mile House

A younger generation knows Fred Merrill as the owner and proprietor of the once justly celebrated Twelve Mile house, whose rococo facade, somewhat tarnished by the elements, is still to be seen on Base Line road, not far from what was formerly Merrill's Twentieth Century Race track and Rose Vista farms.

Seventy-seven years old on December 30 last, Mr. Merrill is as active, both physically and mentally, as most men of 50. His long and personal acquaintance with Portland's upperworld and underworld of an earlier day makes him a most interesting historian. "I may rattle a few skeletons in the closet," he says, "but they will be rattled only to keep history straight, and with malice toward none." Mr. Merrill still makes his home in Portland, at 3714 Southeast Stark street.

BY FRED T. MERRILL

As told to

STEWART H. HOLBROOK

EVERY little while, during the past half-century and more, I have had strangers introduce themselves to me by saying: "Mr. Merrill, I was in the old Mechanic's pavilion the night you fell from your bike in that race. I saw you take the terrible crash that put that scar on your face."

Hundreds, possibly thousands of persons have made that or similar remarks to me.

Then, there have been hundreds more, who were at a Seattle race track, they tell me, and saw me kicked and trampled by an unruly horse. And there are many others who will tell you they know I got the scar on my face when a woman, quite unruly, broke a full quart of Old Taylor on my left jaw bone.

Scar Brings Many Tales

It must be that a scar is in itself interesting or there wouldn't be so many hair-raising stories made up about mine. I received my facial scar 69 years ago in Lynn, Mass. It was caused by nothing more nor less than ulcerated tooth complicated by typhoid fever.

But stories that have been told for years are hard to down, and I don't care much, anyway. If the fall from the bike, or the kick from the horse, or the blow from the woman with the bottle makes a better story than an ulcerated tooth and a bum dentist, it's all right by me.

I came pretty near to being born in the other Portland, the one on the Maine shore, but the place was Elsworth, in the same state, and the date was December 26, 1858.

On my father's side, I am descended from W. L. Brewster, the preacher-warrior, who came over in the Mayflower, and both father's and mother's names are to be found in The Book of Mayflower Descendents.

Ancestors on Mayflower

When the civil war broke out, my father marched away with a regiment of raw recruits from Bangor, and the family moved to South Portland, Maine, where we lived at Fort Preble until father returned from the south. One of my earliest memories is of my mother dressing me in clothes made out of worn soldiers' uniforms. When I had been a good boy, she would add little stripes on the sleeves, raising me from the "rank" of drummer boy to that of corporal.

Another early memory was of hearing of the arrest and trial of Jesse Pomeroy, America's most notorious sadist who lured small Boston boys and girls into the Mystic river swamp and then trussed them up and stuck them full of pins. Last I heard, Pomeroy was still alive in a Massachusetts prison.

Following the disastrous Portland fire we moved to Boston, living in East Boston, Chelsea and Lynn, where I got my famous scar.

It was in Lynn, also, where I learned to ride a velocipede, as the first two-wheeled bicycles were called. The pedals were on the front wheel. My father imported several of these from Coventry, England, for they were not then made in this country, and opened a velocipede riding rink in Lynn.

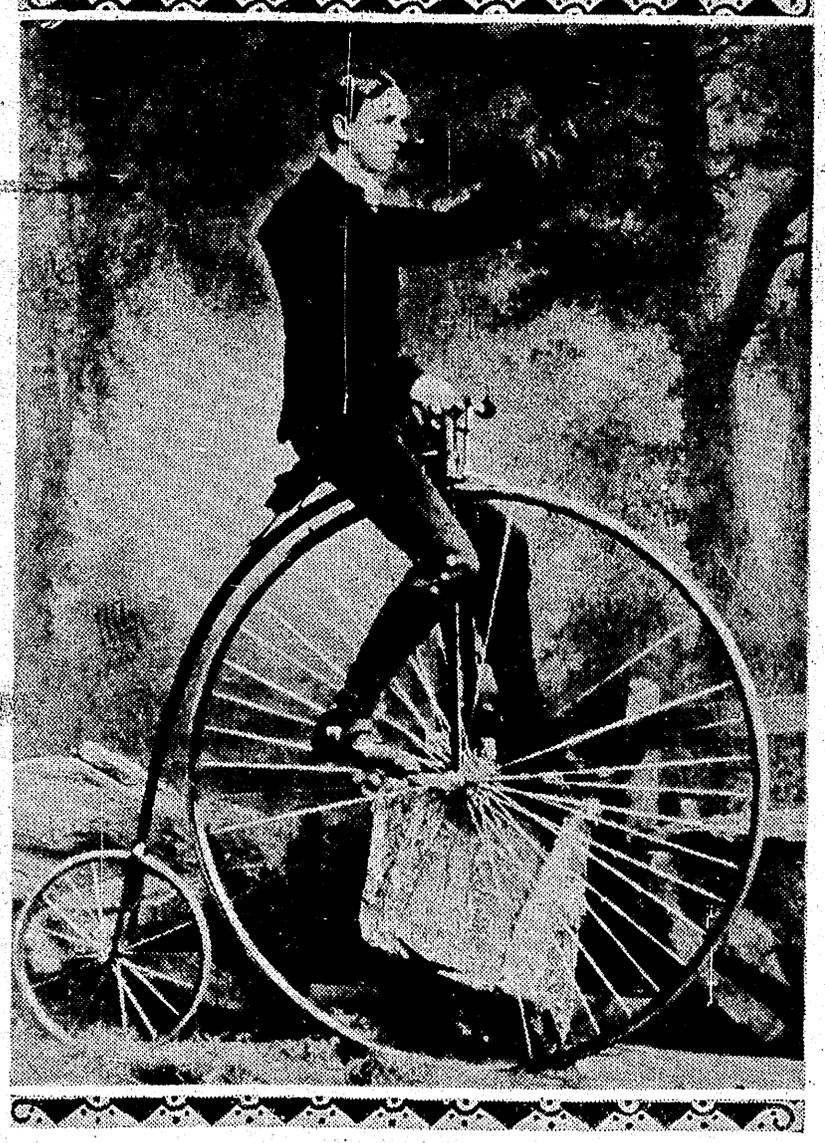
Copied Stunts Of Fancy Rider

He hired Carrie Moor, who was soon to become the champion female roller-skater of the world, to do fancy riding on the velocipede at the rink. I was about 10 years old at the time, and Carrie fascinated me.

I took to watching her at every opportunity, and soon I was trying some of her fancy stunts. Long before we left for the Pacific coast, I was an expert rider, doing all the tricks Carrie knew and inventing some of my own.

The Merrill family came to San Francisco in 1873, via the new Central Pacific railroad, making the trip from Boston in 13 days. I apprenticed myself to an engraver to learn the trade, but I didn't stop riding velocipedes.

During the next two years I practiced on a wheel at every opportunity, especially trick riding, and throughout much of 1875 I was a featured attraction on week ends at Woodward's Gardens, in the Bay City. They paid me $50 for performing on Saturdays and Sundays, which was very good money at the time.



Mr. Merrill when plain and fancy bicycle riding champion of the world

I figured out something to startle the customers. I had imported, for $200, one of the brand new type high-wheels from England. It was the first of its kind in the United States.

This wasn't a velocipede, you understand, but had a big front wheel, with a small wheel behind. The seat was all of five feet or more from the ground. It was nickel-plated and was something to knock your eye out.

I had two younger brothers and I prevailed on them to work as part of my act.

Rides Over Plank Bridge

At Woodward's Gardens, an enormous place, I had a plank bridge, one foot wide, laid from gallery to gallery, over the heads of those in the pit.

Then the garden management announced to the world that Fred T. Merrill, World's Champion Trick and Fancy Cyclist, would ride the Bridge of Death on his new high-wheel, first in America; not only would Merrill do this, but he would carry on his shoulder at the same time two small boys.

I did it, too, much to the joy of my younger brothers, who liked it, and to the amazement of the large crowds we attracted.

Starts First Six-Day Race

In 1879, I "invented" the very first six-day race in the country, and promoted it. It was held in the Mechanic's pavilion, at Market and Eighth street, in San Francisco, and police had to be called, so great were the crowds that tried to get inside. I rode in this race.

All of us were riding high-wheels, and at the end of the six-day grind, Herman Eggers, a close connection of the Spreckles family, was declared winner, with me the runner-up.

We covered around 1700 miles, and there must have been a score of us. Everybody rode a bike in those days, it seemed, although it wasn't until 1898 that the bicycle as we know it today reached its peak of popularity.

I might have remained in San Francisco indefinitely had it not been for a now forgotten cyclist by the name of Charles C. Booth. I had heard that this Booth, who was an Australian, was in Portland, claiming to be the finest trick and fancy cyclist in the world.

I didn't like this very well, for I had met all comers for the title in San Francisco and had had no trouble defending my right to the name.

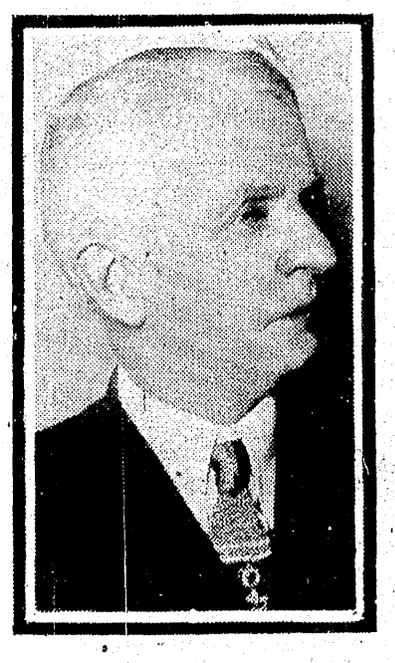
Hears of Expert In Portland

That was in the summer of 1882. While performing as an attraction at the California State fair in Sacremento, I happened to meet a Henry Griffin, who was a police detective on the Portland, Or., force. This was the same Henry Griffin who died last year after serving many years as a deputy sheriff for Multnomah county.

I asked Griffin about Booth, and he told me that Booth was indeed very good and that Booth was challenging all comers to a trick and fancy riding contest.

After the summer riding season was over, I took passage from San Francisco on the old steamer Columbia, planning to slip into Portland and get a match with the great Booth before he knew what he was up against.

On board the Columbia, and also heading for Portland, was Stockton's Humpty Dumpty Extravaganza company, the the stage manager of which was a young fellow by name of William A. Brady. Before we reached Portland, I had been engaged to do my act as an interpolation in the show.



Fred T. Merrill: He made lots of money—and spent it

Portland Lively City in 1882

I think it was in November of 1882 that we arrived here. I put up at the swell Esmond hotel on Front street, then the leading hostelry in Portland, along with the principals of the company, and I found the city a lively place, even when compared with San Francisco.

Front, First and Second streets made up the chief business and amusement district. Gambling was wide open and so was everything else.

We opened at the New Market theater, First and Ankeny streets, now used as a garage. My "amazing exhibition of the cyclist's art" went over with a bang, and stage hands told me that this Charles A. Booth "champion" wasn't in the same class with me.

Mr. Booth Makes Hasty Exit

At the close of my act I made a challenge from the stage, directed at all riders in general and at Charles A. Booth in particular. Booth came forward in the audience and accepted my challenge, the time, place and side-money to be arranged later.

Next day, however, it was found that Mr. Booth had checked out and had left town, leaving no forwarding address. So we never met.

I liked Portland at once, and when the Humpty Dumpty company engagement at the New Market was over, I stayed on. First thing I did was to get a job as an engraver with H. T. Hudson, who had his shop in the theater building. Much of an engraver's work in those days was the etching of name plates for front doors, saking seals, and so forth.

The city and its people treated me well. A year after I arrived here I was a partner in the small yet busy firm of Hollister & Merrill, engravers, with office and shop in the Reed building at First and Pine streets.

All along I had been talking about and riding on bicycles, for I felt that the bicycle was to be man's ultimate method of getting somewhere in a hurry and with ease. The bike craze was now in full swing in Boston and New York and I knew that it would get here eventually. So in the spring of 1885 I became northwestern agent for the Columbia.

Bicycles Were Plenty Expensive

I opened up for business in a large tent, stretched over a wooden frame, on Morrison street between Second and Third. Old-timers might like to know that the tent was manufactured by Henry Wemme.

My stock consisted of some 20 or 30 Columbia high-wheels. Their retail prices ranged from $85 for the common variety to $140 and $150 for the nickel-plated afairs. Nickel-plate was just coming into itsown.

Morison between Second and Third was a busy place in the 1880s. Swetland's candy shop was opposite my tent. Next door on one side was McGuire's fish market, and DeLin's undertaking parlors—later Holman's—were on the other. The St. Charles and Esmond hotels were a block away. So were the magnificent and busy Strowbridge and Odd Fellows buildings.

One of my very first customers was Wesley Ladd. But on the whole Portland wasn't quite ready for the bike. I sold a bike or two now and again, but the so-called safety bicycle, as we know it today, was still a decade in the future.

But the old tent was the first headquarters of the Fred T. Merrill Cycle company which was to operate successfully from 1885 to 1905, when the craze

Continued on Page 10