

Citizens want to honor 'King of Cyclists'

By KEN HASWELL
Of the Emerald

Eugene will soon have its third bicycle bridge to cross the Willamette, and some Eugene citizens want to name it after Willie Knickerbocker, king of cyclists.

More than 18 years ago, Knickerbocker was known by almost every kid in Eugene as "Willie." He gained his fame through his bicycle antics in the annual Emerald Empire Pet Parade.

Before his death in February 1960, at the age of 92, Knickerbocker was considered one of Eugene's most colorful characters, known far and wide for his famous one-line letters to the Register-Guard. He hand-delivered each one, standing in the R-G's newsroom holding his letter until someone came to take

it. He signed his letters "W.K."

Knickerbocker's writings said such things as: "I saw a rooster in the rain, eating gravel to grind his grain," and "There's something to environment. See how the humming bird is better looking than the buzzard."

One said, "I saw Oregon go from geese to gas."

Knickerbocker was born in Clayville, N.Y., October 5, 1867. He had two sisters. When he was five, his father moved the family to Iowa to try merchandising and then to Omaha to raise cattle. Finally, in 1888, they settled on a 160-acre homestead in the Deadmond Ferry area.

Over the years, the homestead diminished until it consisted of a small house on a single acre where Willie Knickerbocker lived

alone.

It was a 10-mile round trip to Eugene from his house, and some have said "it is not unlikely that WK had pumped some 200,000 miles, or more, just whizzing trips to town."

In July 1892, Knickerbocker received his first bicycle. "Dear Daddy took some white fir wood to Eugene and traded it to Frank Chambers for a solid tire bicycle with a 30-inch wheel," he recalled.

At 86 and after 60 years of bicycling, Knickerbocker had gone through many bikes and bike parts. He had a habit of stripping the fenders off his bike, and according to Bruce Witbeck, owner of the Beverly Park Market, his bikes were direct drive and without brakes. When he wanted to stop, he'd use sheer leg power on

the pedals.

Knickerbocker would pedal his bike to Portland, to the coast, to the Sisters and to the Dalles. Witbeck says citizens of those communities all know Knickerbocker as well as the citizens of Eugene did.

"Willie always wore a baseball cap and rubber boots," Eugene Postmaster Eathan Newman says. He was not the brightest person, says Newman, yet he was very pleasant and the school kids loved him.

Knickerbocker would stop by the old Willagillespie Grade School during recess or after school let out and put on a one-man bike show for the kids. He'd do all of his tricks, including his "High Kick." Newman says the more applause Knickerbocker received from the kids, the more tricks he would do on his bike.

Harlow Schillios, a Register-Guard staff writer in 1953, describes Willie's "High Kick." "His favorite feat while rolling along is to stand on the thin, personalized frame with one foot on the seat, t'other high in the air in a proud arabesque."

Knickerbocker was a small, white-haired man about 5'4" and 104 pounds. He had a healthy tan with "blue eyes watered by the wind his speed creates. His legs

were 'like steel bands,' Newman says. He claims to have clocked Willie at speeds up to 50 miles per hour.

"Willie pedaled his bike to Tijuana, Mexico and back to Eugene before the roads were paved," Hallie Huntington, president of the Historical Society says.

"Willie was the kind of guy that would do anything for attention," Newman says. "If some bystanders applauded Willie as he rode his bike past them during one of the many parades he participated in, Willie would ride his bike around the block just to do more tricks for the people," Newman recalls.

"He even challenged a horse to a race," Newman says, "But I was too young at the time to remember if he won."

Huntington says Knickerbocker was a quiet sort of person, would pedal his bike into town, walk into a local store, point at what he wanted and then pull out a dirty dollar bill to pay for it.

Eugene's annual Pet Parade was Knickerbocker's event. He'd polish his bike and then decorate it with coon tails and crepe paper, roll up his trousers, cock his baseball cap and join the parade. He did handlebar handstands and High Kicks for the crowds. Sometimes a wheelie or two.

Knickerbocker even liked to do his tricks on top of Skinner's Butte, a place where very few bicyclist's go today, Newman says.

Knickerbocker died in a Eugene convalescent home at the age of 92. He had been ill for several years before his death.

Dan Sellard, who wrote Knickerbocker's obituary on Feb. 2, 1960, said Knickerbocker's assets proved to be less than \$200.

"But poor though he was in material possessions, Willie was rich in fans and friends," Sellard wrote.

Sellard now says, "Willie's literature wasn't quite good enough for a library to be named for him. But, by golly, his bike riding was good enough for a bridge."

Keith Martin, assistant city manager, says the city has been trying to avoid naming structures after people, and the mayor's office is not concerned at this time about the new bridge's name.

But Diane Bishop of the traffic engineers office feels it would be a good idea to name the new bridge after Willie Knickerbocker. "It would be great," she said.



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