



OPINION

Offbeat Oregon History: Patron saint of bike commutes

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

In recent years, bicycle commuting has had something of a resurgence in Oregon. That's especially true in urban areas, where you'll see these hard-bodied, Lycra-clad road warriors out in all kinds of crazy weather, jockeying for position with larger vehicles in traffic and trying not to get run over by inattentive motorists.

Proud of their weekly mileage though these hard-core commuters are, few of them can hold a candle to the ninth governor of the state of Oregon — who bested all but an elite handful of them using a heavy steel "safety bicycle" in the twilight years of the 19th century.

T.T. (Theodore Thurston) Geer was the first Oregon governor to have actually been born in the state. He served from 1899 to 1903; before that, he was a state representative and a Presidential elector. So, it's safe to say he spent a great deal of time in Salem.

Which was something of a challenge for him, since he actually lived 10 miles outside Salem, on a farm in the Waldo Hills near the unincorporated hamlet of Macleay.

Most legislators and other state politicians solved dilemmas like this by taking a small pied-a-terre in the capitol city, from which they would journey home on weekends. Some of the more determined commuted each day with a horse and buggy, or rode horseback.

As for Geer, when the roads were dry enough, he made his commute most days by bicycle.

Geer was an enthusiastic participant in the 1890s bicycle craze that broke out after the "safety bicycle" was invented and came into widespread use. The "safety bicycle" is essentially the same design used today — two smallish wheels, one driven with a chain. These were called "safety bicycles" for a reason: they were far less likely to kill you than earlier variants, especially the

high-wheeled "ordinary bicycles" of a few years before.

"Ordinary bicycles" (sometimes called penny-farthings) commonly had no brakes, because braking too fast caused the all-too-common-and-occasionally-fatal accident known as a "header," in which the rider rotated over the front of the six-foot-tall front wheel and smashed into the ground. Plus, just getting aboard one required an act of gymnastic excellence beyond the skills of most.

Geer leaped aboard the bicycling bandwagon in June of 1898, a little late by nationwide standards; but he had just been elected governor, so his adoption of this new hobby was headline news. The headline is one of the earliest examples of the penchant for awful puns that newspaper copy editors and headline writers are notorious for. It read, "GEER HAS A WHEEL."

("Wheel" was still common slang for "bicycle" in 1898, because in the old penny-farthing days bicycle riders appeared to be perching atop a single giant wheel. By the late 1890s, the lethal penny-farthings were no longer in use, but the term endured.)

Geer proceeded to use his "wheel" every chance he got. But it must not have been a very good one, because just eight months later he bought a new one — a Rambler brand, bought from bike dealer Fred T. Merrill of Portland.

It was this bicycle that Geer was riding on May 1, 1900, when the Ramblin' Governor set out for his most famous ride.

On that morning, Geer hopped on his Rambler and pointed it northwest. He was riding not to Salem, but all the way to Champoeg — 30 miles distant.

"I shall never forget that beautiful ride," Geer wrote in his memoirs. "It was a perfect day, with a firm north breeze, not a cloud in the sky; the roads were in splendid condition, the crops were growing splendidly, birds were singing every-

where, seeming to be in harmony with Nature's glad mood."

Geer rode north, probably following Howell Prairie Road, to Gervais and on from there to "Woodburn, the 'Metropolis of French Prairie,' railroad junction and all-around pushing town." At Hubbard he turned off to the west, and a few hours later arrived at Champoeg.

Geer was on a mission for the newly chartered Oregon Historical Society. He planned to meet up with the Society's secretary, George Himes, to find and mark the exact location where, 57 years earlier, a group of Oregon residents had voted 52-50 to form a provisional government for the Oregon Territory — the step that had led to the territory joining the United States rather than Canada.

Helping them in this quest would be the last surviving member of the group, François X. Matthieu. Matthieu, in fact, had played a key part in that decision, having successfully convinced a fellow French-Canadian to come over to the American side, with the result that the vote was 50-52 rather than a 51-51 deadlock.

Upon arriving at Matthieu's farm, Geer found that Himes was there, and had brought along a Portland photographer to document the occasion; but Matthieu, having forgotten the appointment, had hopped a train to Portland to run some errands.

A long-distance telephone call ensued, and soon Matthieu was on his way back to Champoeg.

While Geer and Himes waited for their host, Himes suggested that they play a game of Horse-shoes.

"This was agreed to, with the declaration on the part of each that he hadn't pitched a horseshoe for more than 20 years," Geer recalled. "But I soon afterward had reason to suspect that (Himes) ... had forgotten his dates."

Himes was a strict Congregationalist, so it's unlikely that any bets were placed. But if they had been, Geer would have been cleaned out. Himes,

it seemed, was something of a horseshoe shark.

Finally, after more than an hour of repeatedly having his head handed to him, Geer gave up on the game and went to join the ladies of the house on the porch. There, he made the mistake of commenting that the lawn needed to be mowed.

"I was at once informed that a very good lawn-mower was in the woodshed!" Geer recalled. "Game to the last, I expressed my undying fondness for pushing a lawn-mower — that, in fact, it was one of my particular pleasures in life; and to prove my sincerity, I mowed something like a half-acre of heavy blue-grass during the next hour and a half, much to the enjoyment of the demon Himes."

Geer does not say so, but one assumes he slept well and soundly that night.

The next morning, he joined Himes, Matthieu and the photographer on the bank of the river, at the spot where the state government of Oregon was born. Matthieu having pointed out the spot, the governor of Oregon borrowed an ax from a nearby neighbor and used it to chop down a six-inch-thick Garry Oak tree. He then chopped through its trunk again to form a heavy stake. Then he handed over the ax to Matthieu and held it while the old ex-Frenchman struck the first blow. The three of them then took turns pounding on it until it was firmly wedged into the ground.

This done, the governor climbed aboard his Rambler and set out southward, heading back to Salem and home. Was he at least a little sore when he arrived, after so much exertion? The record is silent on that score.

The following January, the Legislature approved an appropriation to install a monument on the site, replacing the stake. It remains there to this day — although to look at it, it's hard to avoid the suspicion that whoever designed it was rooting for the British side in that 1843 meeting; it resembles nothing so much as a tombstone.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OP&E enthusiast

Remember Oregon Pacific & Eastern Engine No. One that was donated to the City of Cottage Grove in the late 1950's and was placed in Coiner Park for a while, then went to the ill-fated Railroad Museum at the Village Green, then was GIVEN to Fred Kepner of Merrill, Oregon.

There are three other steam locomotives with OP&E #1, and they look as bad or worse! Mr. Kepner does not care about maintaining them. Also, I believe one of his other steam locomotives is in a field around Dorena Lake.

Also, remember Coos Bay Logging Co. #10, that was owned by Fred Hicks and donated to a group who had promised to repair and restore it... in 1988?? It was in front of the OP&E shop?

Well, it was the same sad story... the group had NO

funding to do the restoration, the "in-fighting" began between the group's members, parts of the engine were lost or stolen, and finally the property owner said: "Move it, restore it, ... or I scrap it!"

The group disappeared, nobody else was interested, and Coos Bay Lumber #10 was scrapped. I am sure if Fred Hicks were alive today, he would not be at all pleased with the fate of the locomotive he spent his hard-earned money on in hopes of preserving it for future generations.

The same would apply to the City of Cottage Grove. They can get grants to restore the Chambers Bridge, but they couldn't take care of OP&E #1!!!

Very truly yours,
Steven W. Coons
Yoncalla, OR

School district

Adults are supposed to set the right example for young people. What did the students in South Lane School District learn this spring?

Perhaps the School District should consider a code of conduct, and the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments would certainly be a good starting point.

Janetta Overholser
Cottage Grove, OR

Have an opinion about a hot topic here in Cottage Grove? Share your thoughts with the community by writing in to The Sentinel. Send letters to the editor to cmay@cgsentinel.com or drop them off at 116 N. 6th St.

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