



Bulletin # 13

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▣ Riding ❖ Collecting ❖ Restoring ❖ Research ❖ History ▣

Research Your Antique Bicycles before You Restore Them. You'll be glad you did!

Research should be the starting point for all antique bicycle restoration. Although I am not a research expert, I can share with you some of the practical experience I have had exacting the original appearance and historical background of some of my bicycles. And I hope I can give you a feeling for the fun and excitement of this aspect of our antique bicycle hobby.

Research begins even before the point of purchase. A friend tells you about a rusting old high wheel bicycle hanging in a barn. He knows nothing about it except he thinks it has the big wheel in the rear.

Before you leap into your car and go to look at it, get your pictures of Stars and Eagles and take them with you. Read whatever you have available on these two marques.

When you are “on location” of your new find, try to move it outdoors where you can really look at it. Previous owners have likely made alterations from the original specifications. See if the rims are original. (On most Ordinaries the perch or backbone was built close to the front wheel and clearance should be minimal if it is the original rim.) Is the saddle original? (Most high wheels used leaf or suspension saddles—if not this type, the saddle is probably a replacement from a safety.) Is the patent data and serial number readable on the dust shield or name plate? Do numbers stamped on the front fork match numbers stamped on the backbone? (Usually serial numbers are stamped on the front fork under the head directly in front of the pant guard and on the backbone near the part that connects to the head.)

Of course, in addition to originality considerations, you should be looking for completeness. Parts for Ordinaries that must be duplicated by machining from scratch are very expensive. Sometimes axles are bent, rims—especially the hollow type—are apt to be rusted through. (Pull the tire away and examine the condition of the rim.) Back-

bones and heads are sometimes cracked and bearings may be frozen.

If you are looking at a safety you should also be concerned about the cost of machining new parts and you may find that establishing originality is more complicated than for an Ordinary. Checking it against advertising or catalog photos is the best method of determining originality.

Often the bicycle may be one you don't have information on and may be one you have never heard of. In this case there are a few components that quite often identify the period in which a safety was made. Among mid 1890s and later safeties, for example, the width of spread of the handlebar (early very wide, then narrow, then wide again) the rear hub, the saddle, rims, and chain all changed through the 1890s and early 1900s. You may find that front and rear hubs and rims don't match or that smaller rims have been fitted. Large coil spring saddles and coaster brakes are frequently fitted to mid and late 1890s bikes. Generally replacement parts can be found to make your safety correct. (Saddles, handlebars and other components were usually interchangeable among 1890s manufacturers.) But it may be an expensive and lengthy process to locate parts that fit and look right.

I would be very cautious about buying a safety that is missing the nameplate unless you are sure of what brand it is or unless it is very unusual. Given a safety in excellent rideable condition that has had components replaced with nonauthentic ones and a fully original one that needs full

restoration, I would take the fully original one and in the long run look upon it as the better investment for my collection.

Before you leave with your newly purchased bike, ask the person from whom you are buying it for all the information he has on it. If you are buying from a dealer or from someone who has owned it only a short time, he can usually tell you who he bought it from thereby enabling you to begin tracing its ownership back through the years. If you are buying from a person who has owned it since it was new or nearly new, you can gather a wealth of information about the bike including interesting anecdotes that occurred with it over the years.

With your bike safely home, you are now ready for the next stage in your research which might be described as "finding out what you have."

Contact The Wheelmen Librarian and Restoration Chair. For their cost, most Wheelmen will make photocopies of original materials in their collections. A photocopy of a catalog or even illustrated advertisement is invaluable in ascertaining the original appearance of your bicycle. (Don't be alarmed if your bike may vary somewhat from original illustrations of the same model as mid-year changes were frequently made.)

If yours is an unusual bike and no one has materials on it there are other ways to attempt to find out about it. One is to advertise (free to Wheelmen members) in the quarterly Wheelmen Newsletter for any information on your bicycle. If you know the city where it was manufactured, write to the local history department of the city library and to the Chamber of Commerce and newspaper. This technique has worked for me on two occasions and one time produced the exciting information that the youngest son of the manufacturer was still alive and residing in the city.

Another source is to find out who else owns a bicycle of your marque and correspond with that person. I corresponded with a Dursley Pedersen owner in England. Sending cash to help cover costs and requesting close-up photos and other details, I have received from him all the information I need to keep the bicycle original in its restoration.

When you are satisfied that you have learned all you can about your bike from the person you purchase it from, when you have traced previous owners as far back as you can and attempted to correspond with them, and when you have completed your search for literature and other information on your bicycle, you are ready for the last research step before restoration. This step can be described as "going over the bicycle with a fine-tooth comb."

Begin by carefully disassembling the bicycle. Polish plated parts with SOS pads or fine steel wool to remove grease and to reveal stamped-on numbers and other data. Look for all stampings. Record all numbers and other data that appear on hubs, forks, backbone, nameplate, bearings, chain, brake parts, pedals, and accessories in a folder in which you also keep all other information and before and after restoration pictures of your bike. Avoid using emery cloths at this stage as you could make the data illegible. If data is not readable after this cleaning, try close-up examination under a powerful lamp holding the piece at different angles.

Have others look at it. Copy letters that are readable and try to speculate on the rest. Sometimes rubbing lightly with pencil on a thin sheet of paper held firmly over the piece will produce the inscription. If all else fails take pieces to your local police and ask if they will examine them with special equipment they have that will reveal any pattern that has ever been stamped on a metal piece.

If you don't find serial numbers and patent data right away, keep looking. Some Stars have data stamped on the hub of the large wheel while others have it on the steering rod coupling. Many Ordinaries have the serial number stamped on the backbone just forward of the saddle. Eagles are numbered on the top steering rod coupling.

Sometimes Ordinaries will have a small oval plate screwed into the backbone in back of the saddle. Often this plate will have initials and a number. This is the League of American Wheelmen membership number issued to the owner of the bike in the 1880s. Some Wheelmen have LAW directories and it is possible to trace the original owner through this number. Knowing the owner's name and hometown permits you to do further research on your bike.

On safeties, if the paint appears to be original, remove the nameplate and carefully study the shade of color under that plate. That is your original color. Before you do anything else, take the bike to an automotive store and, outdoors in good light, match the paint to a color in the chip books and purchase your custom mixed paint for refinishing.

If your bike has obviously been repainted and the non-original finish is also under the nameplate, slowly remove the paint coat by coat, with paint remover. When you reach the original paint (it will be a hard finish and will have only an undercoat under it) try to leave the finish intact long enough to diagram with measurements all the striping and painted-on filigree. Polish a section of this original finish with a mild car cleaner and take it to the paint shop to get the color matched. Exercise care in making sure

you see and diagram all the striping on Ordinaries which sometimes had fine pin striping on frame and rims. Also look for original color and striping details on safety rims.

When you have your paint perfectly matched (do not get metallic finishes—if your bike is maroon use a truck paint as most car maroons today are metallic) you are then ready to use more paint remover to get to the bare metal. With all paint removed, carefully study where the bicycle was originally nickeled. Sometimes plating extended part way up the forks and was on only parts of the frame. Mask those areas that were plated before you have your bicycle sandblasted. This will make it easier for you to follow the original plating patterns and will leave a smoother finish on plated areas for the plater to work with. Keep your tape on when you do your priming and filling and this will be a guide for the plater in masking for the nickeling.

If you are unable to do the striping yourself, try a shop that restores antique cars. They will be able to direct you to someone. Avoid using a wide stripe as nearly all bicycle lining was of the pinstripe variety. If possible, photograph close up all striping and trace all filigree. Having a pattern of the filigree is mandatory if it is to be recreated on your restored bicycle.

If you follow these steps and make authenticity your first consideration at every step in the restoration, your bicycle will be a true historic piece. Original colors that may appear drab, will come alive in the restoration and will produce the correct “feel” in the finished piece. When you finish your restoration, be sure your accessories are appropriate to the year of your bicycle. Bull horns were not used on Ordinaries, nor were plastic tool bags used on early safeties.

By doing the research and by strictly adhering to authenticity at every step, you will have preserved some history, you or another owner will not have to re-restore the bike, and you can ride and show it with considerable pride of accomplishment.

In addition to having the fun of doing the research, you will have a collectors item that will increase in value and will be an inspiration to other restorers. And remember, only if you do everything possible to bring your bicycle back to its original condition, will future generations have an accurate understanding of our bicycle heritage.