



WEBFOOTER EXTRA

January-February 2021

Fred Merrill -- Bicycle King



Display window at the Olds & King Department Store in Portland, Oregon, circa 1925.

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WEBFOOTERS POST CARD CLUB

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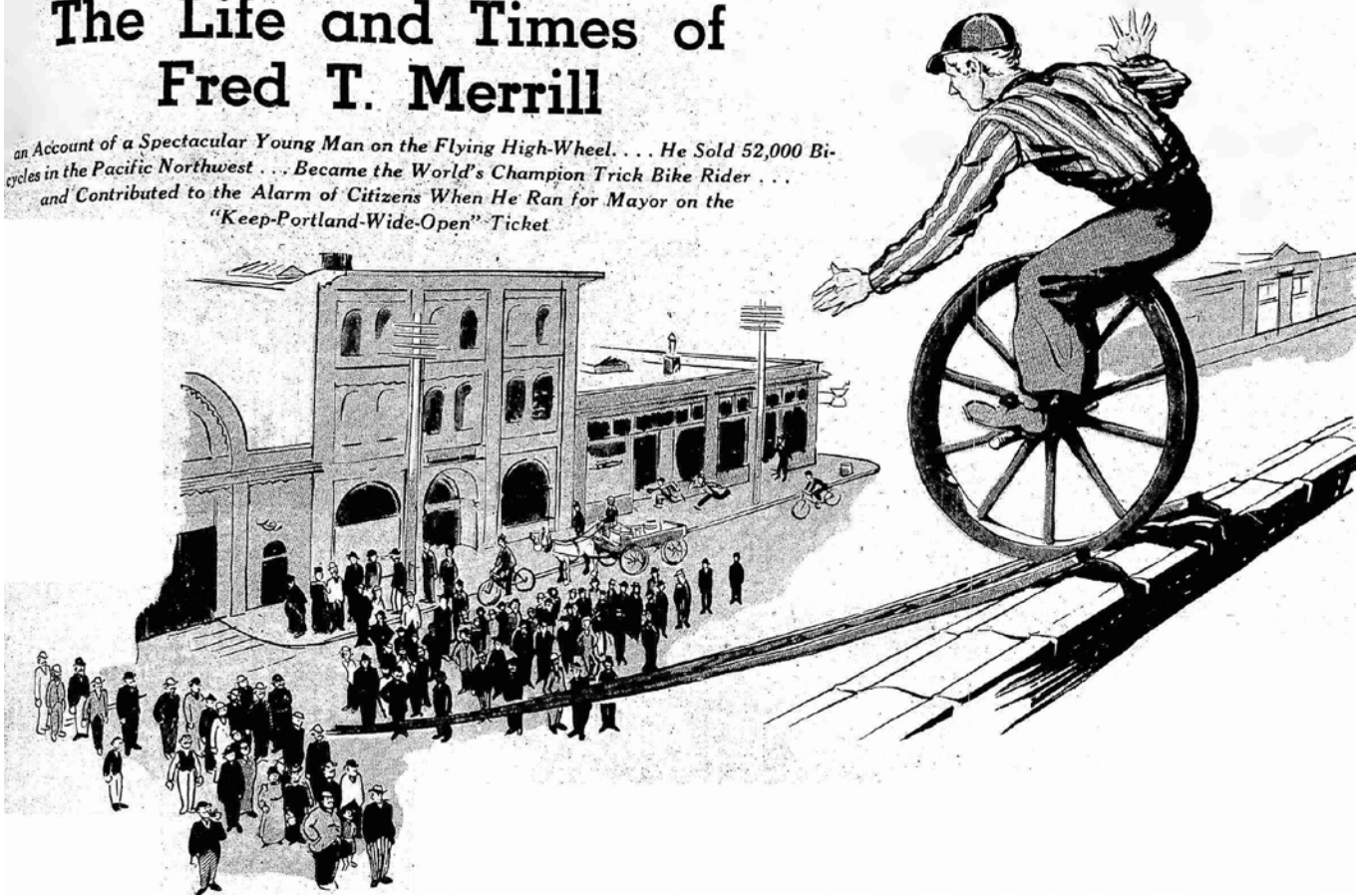


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Fred Merrill -- Bicycle King

The Life and Times of Fred T. Merrill

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



The Sunday Oregonian March 8, 1936

When Oregon became a territory of the United States, a surveyor general was directed to layout a baseline and a Willamette meridian to be the basic east-west and north-south lines by which the new townships, ranges, sections and land boundaries would be identified. A road was built along the baseline from Portland eastward called the Base Line Road, which opened in 1854. Starting at the courthouse steps in Portland a stone marker was placed each mile to the east, up to fifteen in the 1870s. Their names identified how far they were from the courthouse.

The first known reference in local newspapers to the Twelve-Mile area of Gresham was in The Oregonian in 1899. A post office with the name of Terry was established there on Dec. 30, 1899 and it lasted about two years. The Base Line Cycle Path was built from Montavilla to the Sandy River at Troutdale in 1899. According to the April 9, 1900 issue of The Oregonian, "At the Twelve-Mile House there is a beautiful country where Captain Brown has spent a considerable amount to improve his country place on the corner." It was about this time that Portlander Fred T. Merrill bought Miller's 90-acre property at the Twelve-Mile corner on Base Line Road.

Oregon's first cross country automobile run was announced in The Oregonian on August 25, 1901, "Ten persons with five automobiles, electric, steam and hydro-carbon, will make a pleasure run to the Twelve-Mile House. They will start from the Merrill cyclery at 10 am and arrive at the Twelve-Mile House about 10:45. After breakfast, they will ride to Troutdale and Fairview, thence back to Portland." "Automobiles are fast becoming the fashion among those who can afford to have them. Last Sunday, six autos took a run out to the Twelve-Mile House, on the Gresham road. Two motor bicycles accompanied the party and had no difficulty in keeping up with the procession," according to the Oregon Journal on May 7, 1902.

Fred T. Merrill was born on December 26, 1858, near Portland, Maine. When he was about 10 years old, his father opened a velocipede riding rink in Lynn, Massachusetts. Fred learned to ride a velocipede, as the first two-wheel bicycles were called. He learned to do fancy riding at the rink in Lynn.

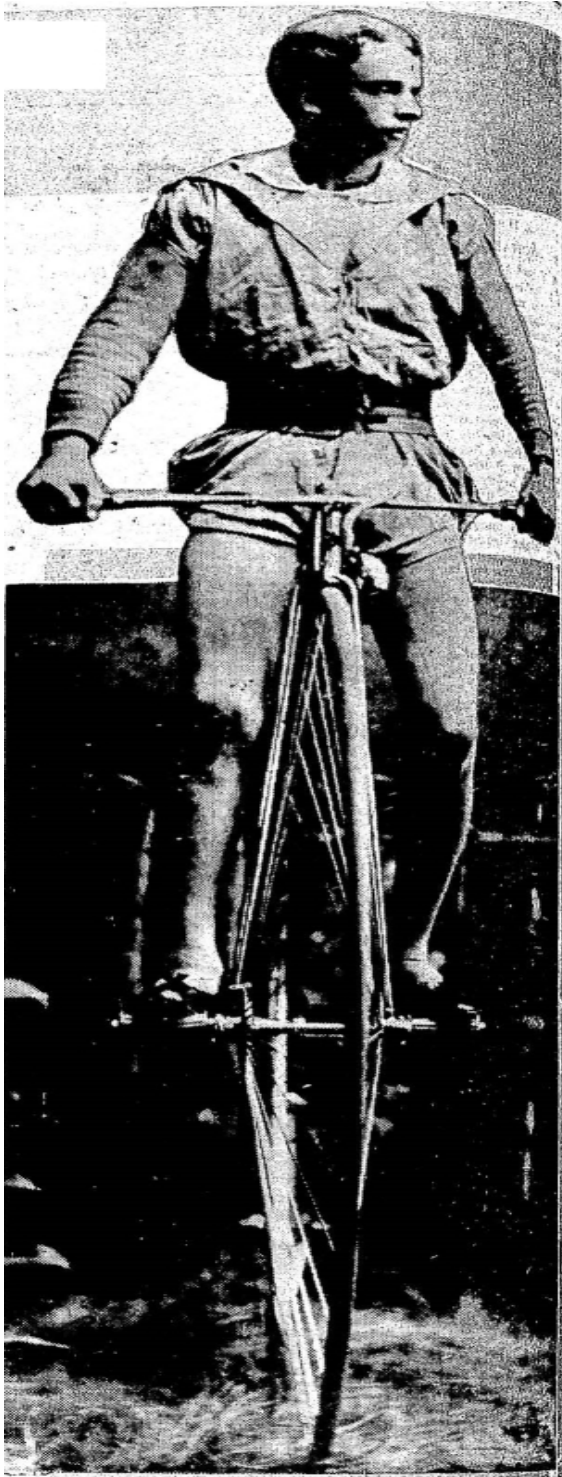
The Merrill family moved to San Francisco in 1873 where Fred became an apprentice to an engraver. In his spare time, he was a trick bicycle rider and he became a featured attraction on weekends at Woodward's Garden Resort in Bay City, California. He purchased a new high-wheeler bicycle from England, one of the first of its kind in America. It had a large front wheel with a small wheel behind. The seat was all of five feet off the ground. In 1879, Merrill invented and promoted the first six-day race in the country.

Fred Merrill might have stayed in San Francisco were it not for a now-forgotten cyclist named Charles C. Booth, an Australian who was in Portland claiming to be the finest trick and fancy cyclist in the world. Booth had challenged all comers to beat him in a trick and fancy-riding contest.

Merrill spent the summer of 1882 performing as an attraction at the California State Fair. After the summer riding season was over, Merrill booked passage on the steamer Columbia and he traveled from San Francisco to Portland to take up Booth on his challenge. While on the steamer, Merrill met and joined a stage company from Stockton that was booked for performances in Portland. Merrill's bike riding act became part of the stage production which was performed at the New Market Theater in Portland.

When Merrill arrived in Portland in November of 1882, he found Portland to be a lively place, even compared to San Francisco. Merrill attempted to accept Charles Booth's challenge, getting acknowledgement from Booth for a future meeting that never took place. Booth had unexpectedly checked out of his hotel room and vanished.

After the stage production ended, Merrill decided to stay in Portland. He took a job as an engraver for H.T. Hudson who had a shop in the theater building. A year after his arrival in Portland, Merrill found a partner and they started a new business together, Hollister and Merrill, Engravers.



Fred Merrill rode this high-wheeler in exhibitions of his cycling skill

The bike craze was now in full swing in Boston and New York and Merrill knew it would get to Portland eventually. So in the spring of 1885, Merrill became the northwestern agent for Columbia Bicycles. He opened his first shop in a large tent near Second and Morrison, opposite Swetland's Confectionery Shop. His stock consisted of 20 to 30 Columbia high wheels. Retail prices ranged from \$85 for the common variety to \$150 for nickel-plated models. Portland was slow to adopt the bike, with its muddy roads and streets. Merrill would sell a bike or two now and again, but the so-called safety bicycle was still a decade into the future. One of his first customers was Wesley Ladd. The "old tent" was the first headquarters for Fred T. Merrill Cycle Company which operated successfully from 1885 to 1905. He sold 52,000 bicycles in that 20-year period.

In the early years, Merrill was doing more riding than selling. In the winter of 1886, Merrill took his wheel and went east, riding in championship races held in Springfield and Lynn, Massachusetts and in Hartford, Connecticut. He won a number of events in competition with the best America and Europe had to offer. When he returned to Portland, Merrill was now well-known as the "Bicycle King," and that attracted a number of great riders to Portland.

SATURDAY, JUNE 14, 1902.

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Ideal
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**That's Why Thousands
and Thousands**

Of them are being ridden in the Northwest. That's why
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their hard running "skates" for

The
1902 *Rambler*

The Best Wheel on Earth.

Chain, Chainless and Cushion Frame Models

✦ \$25, \$30, \$35, \$40, \$50 ✦

It means something to be riding a wheel that is represented, has been represented, and will be for some time to come. Ask some rider of a "here today—gone tomorrow" wheel who has met with an accident and cannot get repairs.

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Safety bicycles from about 1910.

When the safety bicycle came on the market in the early 1890s, Merrill moved to larger quarters, ordering all he could buy. He was now selling Columbia, Victor, and Rambler bicycles. The first safety bikes sold for \$100 to \$125. Merrill, being somewhat of a daredevil, staged a stunt before a large crowd. He placed a wagon wheel atop a building on Fourth and Morrison. Then he got on the axle and rode the wagon wheel down a fire department ladder at high speed, coming to the ground safely and stopping in front of the fire engine house across the street.

Portland, like the nation had become bike crazy. Bicycle tracks were opened in Portland and East Portland. Merrill became a featured attraction at the State Fair in Salem and he gave exhibitions all over the northwest. Merrill opened branch stores in Spokane, Seattle, Tacoma, Walla Walla, and Salem. The peak of the bike craze came in 1898 when Merrill sold 8,850 Ramblers. Demand remained steady for the next five years or so.

Merrill would sell more bicycles than any other dealer in the Northwest. He was elected Portland city councilman from the third ward. Three years later, he was reelected to a second three-year term. In 1905, he ran for mayor but lost, ending his political career. When the bicycle business all but disappeared, Merrill looked to retirement and the prospect of developing the Twelve-Mile property he had bought from A.J. Miller.

As reported in The Oregon Journal on August 6, 1905, "The destruction of the Twelve-Mile House by fire has removed one of the pleasure resorts of the motorists of Portland. The run to and from the famous roadhouse has been the favorite ride since motoring became the popular pastime in this city." Merrill began working to get a new Twelve-Mile House for the following summer.

After the Lewis and Clark Exposition closed in October of 1905, Merrill bought the Telephone Building for a few hundred dollars and moved it to the southeast corner of his property at Base Line and Fairview roads (now Stark Street and 223rd Avenue). It was one of the show houses at the Fair and it had been built in the east in 1904 for the World's Fair in St. Louis. The 28-room building was taken down, piece-by-piece, and sent to Portland for the Exposition. Watch for Part 2—Twelve-Mile House—The Rowdiest Roadhouse in the West.

Oregon Post Office Sesquicentennials in 2021*

Oregon is too young to have any bicentennial post office establishments, and few offices are celebrating centennials as few were established in Oregon in the 1920s. However, there are fifteen post offices in Oregon that opened in 1871 and they will celebrate their 150th anniversary this year.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>County</u>
April 13	Prineville (established as Prine)	Crook
June 22	Coos Bay (established as Marshfield)	Coos
July 12	Halsey	Linn
July 14	Alsea	Benton
July 18	Turner	Linn
August 7	Antelope	Wasco
August 16	Canby	Clackamas
August 16	Columbia City	Columbia
August 28	Shedd(s)	Linn
August 31	Hubbard	Marion
November 6	Gervais (changed from Belpassi)	Marion
December 1	Clatskanie	Columbia
December 11	Klamath Falls (established as Linkville)	Klamath
December 18	Cornelius	Washington
December 28	Woodburn	Marion

*Source: Alan Patera—Oregon Country Magazine—Winter 2020-21



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