Bicycling across Persia and into the Russian Empire in 1891

By David V. Herlihy

In our past two annual historical issues, author David V. Herlihy traced the journey of American cyclists William Sachtleben and Thomas G. Allen, Jr., from Athens, Greece, to the eastern edge of Turkey. In this final installment we follow them across Persia to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where they would once again pause to wait out the winter. Like the other two articles, this one is illustrated with photographs taken with an early Kodak camera, drawn from UCLA’s Special Collections. Collectively, these articles highlight one of the three years (1891) the two spent on the road during their famous “round-the-world” adventure. All photo captions are Sachtleben’s original notes for each negative.

PHOTOS: UCLA Charles E. Young Research Library Department of Special Collections Sachtleben Collection
On the afternoon of July 4, 1891, Thomas Allen and William Sachtleben proudly planted an American flag on the 17,000-foot summit of Mount Ararat. No American had ever climbed the biblical peak in present-day Armenia bordering, at that time, the empires of Turkey's sultan, Russia's czar, and the Iranian shah.

After spending a few excruciating days trudging upward through the snow with a handful of hired guides and a bare minimum of supplies, the young men had a lot to contemplate.

Exactly one year earlier, following their graduation from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, they had landed in Liverpool, England, to start their great adventure. Their first order of business was to acquire two new-fangled “safety” bicycles on which to tool around the British Isles. They had learned to cycle a few months earlier when the diminutive new mounts invaded their campus and began a bold bid to topple the so-called “ Ordinary,” the fleet but precarious two-wheeler defined by its enormous front wheel and tiny trailer.

By the end of that summer, the tourists had concluded that there was simply no more effective or enjoyable way to see the world than from the saddle of a low-mount bicycle. “Traveling always by first class,” Sachtleben would explain, “is like staying in your own country. There is such a thing as too much convenience. For our part, we have long since tired of trains and artificial modern hotels. We love to roam on our bi-cycles, unfettered, among the scenes of unsophisticated nature and the common people.”

So enthralled were they by cycle touring, the pair decided that they would somehow continue to pedal all the way around the world. In London they hastily made preparations, engaging the help of a reluctant Robert Todd Lincoln, the eldest son of the late president and the American ambassador to Great Britain, to secure Chinese passports.

They also purchased two novel Kodak cameras designed by George Eastman of Rochester, New York. Remarkably compact and using lightweight film rather than conventional glass plates, the cameras were ideally suited for cyclists. The two travelers acquired two new London-made Minnehaha bicycles with forgiving “cushion” tires (tubular rather than solid). Finally, they arranged to send periodic progress reports to the Penny Illustrated Paper.

The lads could look back on their first year on the road with immense satisfaction, having successfully crossed France, Italy, and Turkey by bicycle, punctuated by a lively winter spent in Athens.
True, not everything had gone smoothly. By the time they had reached Athens in early 1891, they had had a falling out with the editor of PIP, prompting an abrupt end to their correspondence. And their dainty Minnehahas were falling apart, compelling Allen to head back to London by train where he acquired two new Humber bicycles. A few months earlier, in Sivas, Turkey, Allen had come down with malaria, forcing the two to suspend their journey for several weeks.

Still, as they stood on that frigid peak, their mood was optimistic. They were prepared to carry on even without sponsorship, thanks to the wealth and support of their families back home. Their Humbers — not to mention their Kodaks — were holding up admirably. And they had just crossed Turkey, arguably the most perilous portion of their journey.

One crucial question remained, though. How exactly were they to cross Asia, a daunting continent 7,000 miles wide?

They had three basic options: the southern, central, or northern route. The first, through India, was the default solution given that it required no additional papers. It was their least favorite option, however, because it was presumably the “easiest” of the three. Moreover, given that it was the route mapped out by Thomas Stevens, the original “round-the-world” (highwheel) cyclist, it seemed to lack originality, at least to their minds.

The other two options both required heading into the Russian Empire. Traveling the northern route, they would stay in Russian territory and reach the Pacific coast from Siberia. The central route would take them across China, widely considered an extremely hostile destination for Western travelers. Unable to make up their minds, they hatched a short-term plan that would keep all options on the table: enter Persia and head to Tehran, its capital. There they could seek permission from Russian authorities to visit their territory. If successful, the southern option would be eliminated and the cyclists could continue to Uzbekistan before having to choose whether to cross Siberia or China.

In Persia the cyclists quickly adjusted to a new climate, language, and culture. At first, the land was barren, save for a few scattered trees and mountains looming on the horizon. The temperature soared as high as 120 degrees under the summer sun. Their diet of eggs, pomegranates, and pillao, a rice dish boiled in grease, proved surprisingly tasty.

Nevertheless, many of the same pesky patterns they had endured in the land of the sultan quickly reestablished themselves in the shah’s dominion. Wherever they pulled up for the night, curious locals would besiege them. They would be led to a grimy inn where they would collapse onto their rigid cots, only to be roused a short while later by pounding on their door. Then they would
collect themselves and, as requested, head over to the residence of the local khan (governor).

Invariably, after sharing food and drink, the cyclists would be compelled to demonstrate their wheels, to the astonishment of all onlookers. The following morning, the khan would see to it that a pair of armed guards on horseback stood at the door of the cyclists’ inn, ready to greet the visitors as they arose and escort them to their next destination.

The cyclists generally got along well with the locals, although they would sometimes haggle with the innkeepers over the price of their room. And while they often enjoyed the company and services of their imposed guides, called ferashes, they resented having to pay a tip. On several occasions, at the close of the day, they took advantage of their superior speed to leave their unsuspecting guides in the dust.

Five days after entering Persia, on July 12, the Americans rode into Tabriz, an important city in the northwest corner of the country. There they toured its chief landmark, the Ark, a massive and ancient fort. The crown prince invited the cyclists to his palace and showed them his private zoo, complete with tigers and leopards.

Although the city reputedly offered therapeutic air, Sachtleben came down with typhoid fever, forcing a second unplanned layover. Once again, the local American missionaries took in the cyclists and nursed the ailing partner back to health.

William Whipple, an agent for the American Bible Society, spoke highly of his guests in a letter to a New York newspaper, dated August 10:

“They are plucky fellows and thoroughly American. We have had them as our guests for three weeks and have enjoyed talking to them concerning their route from Liverpool to here. It seems marvelous how they can travel through Turkey and Persia without the languages or guides. But they have managed to do so, and with little difficulty; also very cheaply. They have had to ford rivers, carrying their wheels over high mountain passes, etc., and live nativelike in every place they stop.”
From Tabriz to Tehran, the cyclists followed the telegraph poles, spending one night in the home of a German operator and his family. One evening, however, nightfall caught them off guard. They were forced to descend from their wheels and proceed by foot into pitch-blackness as swarms of mosquitoes bit through their clothing.

At last, growing increasingly desperate, they detected a roving caravan of camels and hastened toward the dim, bobbing lanterns to announce themselves to the drivers. Spooked by the sudden appearance of the shadowy cyclists, the nomads screamed and drew their weapons. Fortunately, the Americans managed to signal their peaceful intentions and obtained permission to fall in line. Allen described what happened next:

“Footsore and hungry, with an almost intolerable thirst, we trudged along till morning, to the ding-dong, ding-dong of the deep-toned camel bells. Finally, we reached a sluggish river, but did not dare to satisfy our thirst, except by washing out our mouths, and taking occasional swallows. We fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. When we awoke, the midday sun was shining, and a party of Persian travelers was bending over us.”

They arrived in Tehran in late August to lobby the local Russian authorities for permission to enter their territory. While they awaited their papers, they toured the city and hobnobbed with the local diplomats and missionaries.

Fall arrived, but still they had no papers in hand. The Russian ambassador persuaded the cyclists that they could safely resume their ride eastward to Meshed, the holiest city of Islam after Mecca, where the Shiites buried their pious dead. As soon as the consul received the formal okay from St. Petersburg, he assured his anxious friends that he would telegraph his colleague in Meshed with instructions to issue the cyclists the passports they desired. And from there, they could head north into what is now Turkmenistan.

On the morning of October 4, 1891, the cyclists clambered atop their vehicles and tipped their hats to the large crowd of friends and admirers assembled at a city gate to see them off. Throughout their 600-mile journey to Meshed, the young men faced desert-like conditions. Fortunately, they found frequent stations where they could purchase fresh melons and other welcomed food. Along the way, they clashed with yet another innkeeper, who balked at the paltry sum they had laid down on the morning of their planned departure. As the cyclists attempted to mount their wheels and make their getaway, the irate owner and his son lunged at their guests. The four men tumbled to the ground, and a spirited scuffle ensued. Upon hearing the ruckus, a number of women from the adjacent harem rushed to the scene. After separating the adversaries and delivering a severe scolding to both parties, they imposed a compromise settlement.

The following evening, as was often the case during their travels, the cyclists shifted seamlessly from hovel to palace. As the governor of Bostam sat down on the carpet to dine, his servants rushed in with benches to accommodate his foreign guests. Surrounded by an array of dishes, the attentive official sampled the delicacies before passing them to his servants for delivery to his guests. On occasion, he even fished out the choicest morsels of lamb kebob and stuffed grape
leaves from his own plate to be transferred to those of his guests.

Two weeks after they left Tehran, the cyclists at last reached Meshed. But night had already fallen, and the ancient city gates were shut tight. Allen described the eerie scene: “We knocked and pounded, but a hollow echo was our only response. At last, the light of a lantern illuminated the crevices in the weather-beaten doors. A weird-looking face appeared in the mid-way opening.” The flustered guard explained to his surprise visitors that the key had already been sent to the governor’s palace. No one, but no one, could enter the city at this late hour.

But the ever-resourceful Sachtleben would not take no for an answer. He hastily scrawled a note explaining their predicament and addressed it to the local British consul, who was expecting them. The cyclist then folded the paper over a healthy inam (Persian for tip) and slipped the assemblage through a crack. The suddenly sympathetic guard dutifully delivered the message. The consul, in turn, quickly wrote a note of his own and had his servant run it over to the palace. Before long, the wheelmen could hear a squad of horsemen arriving behind the gate. After “a click of locks, a clanking of chains, and a creaking of rusty hinges,” the massive doors miraculously swung open, revealing a large and wholly unexpected welcoming committee.

The next day, the young men called on the Russian consul general and his elegant English wife. While serving her guests tea, she revealed that the governor of Askabad in Turkistan had indeed granted them permission to proceed there. “The news lifted a heavy load from our minds,” Allen recorded. “Our desert journey, therefore, had not been made in vain, and the prospect brightened for a trip through the heart of Asia.”

The wheelmen promptly took the military highway to Askabad, bending their way northwest. Although they were crossing a rugged mountain range, the road was so hard and smooth that they covered as many as 75 miles in a day, nearly double their typical pace. In early November, after having logged some 1,400 miles in Persian territory, they finally reached the Russian border. There they blew past the bewildered officials. The bright city of Askabad, with some 20,000 residents, offered the weary wheelmen a welcome dose of modern civilization.

The next day, the governor, Aleksei N. Kuropatkin, held a dinner in honor of the American visitors. He implored them to take the new Trans-Caspian Railway to its terminus in Samarkand, some 600 miles distant, to avoid the desert in between. Feeling pinched for time and with little appetite for more hardship, the cyclists relented.

Along the way, they stopped in Bukhara, where they and their...
About six years ago, when I was writing *The Lost Cyclist*, I learned that UCLA had a sizable collection of papers relating to William Sachtleben, including some 400 fragile nitrate negatives that had been kept in storage for decades.

Because Sachtleben figures prominently in my book (he was the man who went looking for Frank Lenz, the lost cyclist), I was, of course, eager to see the collection. I was especially intrigued by the negatives, which I suspected were taken during Sachtleben’s own round-the-world ride, undertaken between 1890 and 1893 with his pal, Thomas G. Allen, Jr. At the time, however, there was no way to confirm this, because the negatives had yet to be scanned.

About two years ago, I learned that UCLA had finally scanned the images. It turned out that they were, in fact, scenes from Sachtleben’s world tour. (Curiously, however, they spanned only the year 1891. The images taken in Europe and China are missing.)

I was also eager to learn the back story, that is, how this remarkable collection got to UCLA in the first place. I had heard a rumor to the effect that a man in Houston, some 50 years ago, rescued his papers and photos from a bonfire.

The story seemed plausible because Sachtleben eventually settled in Houston where he would manage the Majestic Theater for many years before his death in 1953. If the man in question was still alive, I wanted to hear him tell the full story, I thought.

But I had very little to go on. I knew only that Jean Zakarian, a resident of Carpinteria, California, had donated the collection to UCLA in the early 1980s. Because she died in 2004, I had no way to interview her. Finally, after considerable research, I learned that the man in question was Jean’s second husband. Interviewing a few of her former neighbors, all I could glean was that his name was Paul and that he was, in fact, from Texas. Around 1980, Jean had moved to Texas to live with Paul, but she returned a short while later after the marriage broke up with the papers Paul had rescued years earlier. Shortly thereafter, Jean gave a portion of that collection to UCLA. (Yes, I have confirmed that there’s more to the collection out there, but that’s another story!)

With the help of genealogists in Carpinteria, I eventually tracked down my man: Paul Montague, who now lives in Blanco, Texas. He graciously agreed to receive me at his ranch and be interviewed. You can watch an edited version of our conversation online at adventurecycling.org/sachtleben.

Briefly, Paul had a construction project in Houston in the fall of 1966. Whenever he needed lumber, he would stop by a demolition site near downtown, where an old house was being torn down to make room for commercial development. The workmen were extracting the valuable wood from the house’s frame, stacking the lumber curbside for resale. Meanwhile, they burned unwanted waste materials in a bonfire that raged in the backyard.

One day, while Paul was there to get more lumber, he saw a workman appear at an attic window. He tossed out an old attaché case in the direction of the bonfire. It hit the nearby ground instead and broke open. Out spilled a number of old photographs. Meanwhile, another workman began to grab fistfuls of the material to toss into the bonfire.

Paul, an amateur photographer and self-proclaimed history buff, abandoned the lumber line and sprinted toward the bonfire. He asked the workman stationed there if he could keep the valise and its remaining contents. The workman relented after Paul reached into his pocket and pulled out a $20 bill — all he had on him at the time.

Further research indicates that the old house was almost certainly Sachtleben’s longtime residence on San Jacinto Street. He had left the premises around 1950 after his wife died. Evidently, the subsequent owners either knew nothing of the valise in the attic or they had no interest in it.

—David V. Herlihy
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wheels attracted much attention. At Samarkand, they found a delightfully exotic Oriental city filled with blue domes, minarets, and the ruins of ancient palaces and tombs. Men wearing white turbans strolled about the busy streets, bartering with street vendors. The newly constructed Russian quarter boasted broad and quiet boulevards lined with comfortable houses. After a pleasant week’s stay, the cyclists remounted their bicycles and headed along the highway to Tashkent, 180 miles distant.

Four days later, at the end of November, they reached the capital of Turkistan, a major military base and a sprawling city of 100,000, including a few of the czar’s least-favored relatives. Digging in for the long winter, they found lodging at a hotel before moving in with a German-speaking Russian businessman who pampered them with hearty meals and a steady flow of vodka. Thanks to his high social standing, the cyclists joined the city’s party circuit and impressed the local elites with their intellects and broad knowledge of world affairs. Sachtleben even managed a return trip to London and back to secure fresh supplies for the remainder of the journey.

The following spring, the cyclists headed to Vernoy (now Almaty, Kazakhstan). They had decided to cross Asia via Siberia, but upon receiving assurances from the local missionaries that it was indeed possible to cross the Gobi desert into the heart of China, they at last decided to put their Chinese passports to use.

That decision would ensure their cycling immortality. When they reached San Francisco at the close of 1892, they were “discovered” by local journalists and proclaimed the “greatest travelers since Marco Polo.” As they began their last leg of the journey across the U.S. on brand new Victor pneumatic cycles, they would be constantly fêted by the growing legions of wheelmen and wheelwomen inhabiting every city and town through which they passed.

The great bicycle boom was under way, and its chief poster boys were none other than the celebrated “globe girdlers,” Allen and Sachtleben.  

David V. Herlihy is the author of The Lost Cyclist (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), and Bicycle: The History (Yale University Press), and the winner of the 2004 Award for Excellence in the History of Science. He is responsible for the naming of a bicycle path in Boston after the French mechanic Pierre Lallement, a former resident and the original bicycle patentee, and for the installation of a plaque by the New Haven Green (Connecticut) where Lallement introduced Americans to the art of cycling in the spring of 1866.