

Thomas Stevens: The First To Cross

By Dan McIntyre

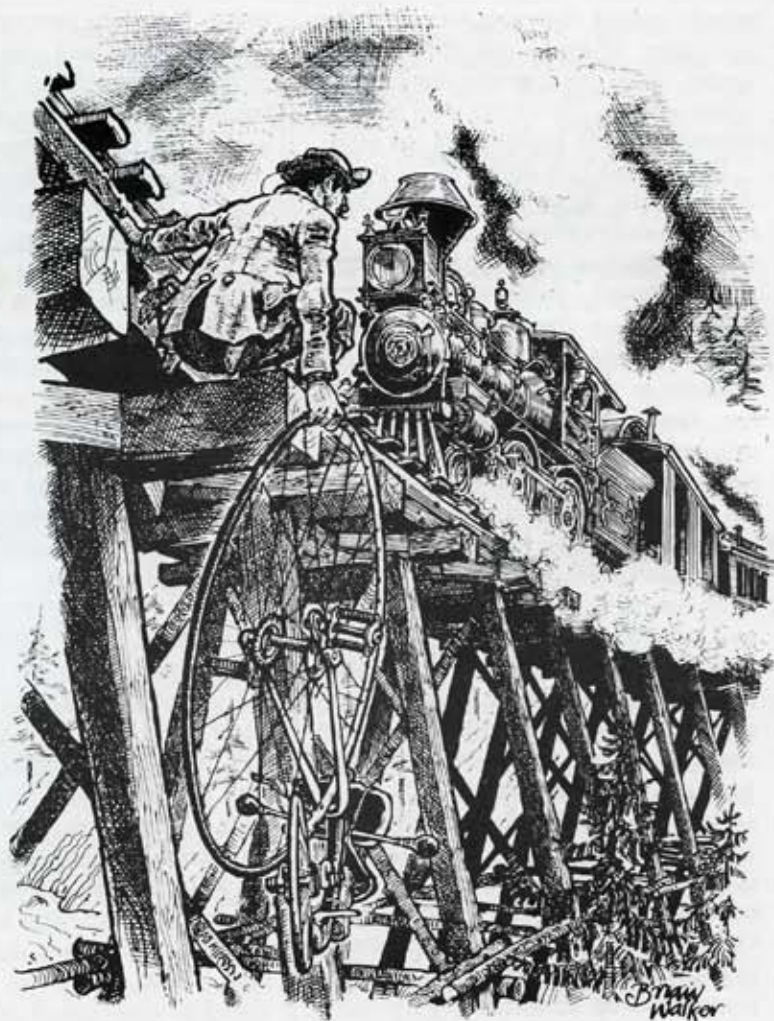
One hundred years ago, at a time when thousands of families were loading their worldly goods in prairie schooners and heading west, Thomas Stevens tied a handful of things to his bicycle and headed east.

On April 22, 1884, astride his Columbia high-wheel bicycle Stevens waved good-bye to a few well-wishers in Oakland, California, and pedaled off toward Boston. As tall and proud as a rider on horseback, Stevens spun silently down the macadam surface of Oakland's San Pablo Avenue.

The easy riding, however, did not last for long. By nightfall he was lost and afoot, pushing his bike through a tuile swamp. Undaunted, he stumbled forward, his way lit by the flames of a nearby range fire.

The going was never easy. He was charged by a mountain lion, nearly trampled by wild broncos and bit by a rattlesnake. He was arrested in Cleveland, bugged-whipped in New York, and regularly ridiculed by cowboys and passersby.

Yet, 3,700 miles later, he made it.



Thomas Stevens, the first bicyclist to cross North America, followed railroad tracks for much of his journey. Caught on a trestle in California, he perched himself on the end of a cross-beam, then hung his "high-wheeler" over the edge.



In 1884, when Stevens was heading east, strings of settlers were heading west in prairie schooners. East of Cheyenne, Wyoming, in the South Platte River country, Stevens met wagon trains nearly every day.



Although Stevens didn't have to contend with cars and trucks, there were cantankerous horses and mules. "The Erie Canal's first mission in life," Stevens wrote, "is to engender profanity and strife between boatsmen and cyclists."

Stevens was frequently called upon to demonstrate his high-wheel bicycle. On one such demonstration ride around a bar-room pool table in the West, he nearly scalped himself on a bronze chandelier.



"At two o'clock in the afternoon of August 4th, I roll into Boston, and whisper to the wild waves of the sounding Atlantic what the sea-waves of the Pacific were saying when I left there, just 103½ days ago," Stevens wrote.

Others soon followed in his track. Before the end of the 19th century, cyclists riding "modern" bicycles with diamond frames, chain drives and inflatable pneumatic tires, had cut the record to 57 days.

In the 20th century, the record continued to fall. In 1949, a solo cyclist made the crossing in 23 days, 20 hours. In 1953, it was done in 14 days, 16 hours.

In 1982, marathon bicycle racer Lon Haldeman rocketed (on a bicycle) from California to New York in 9 days, 20 hours. Haldeman predicts that this year, if weather conditions are favorable, he will cut his time to 8½ days during the annual "Race Across America."

Record seekers aside, tens of thousands of riders have crossed the continent at a much more leisurely pace, many of them on Bikecentennial's TransAmerica Trail from Astoria, Oregon, to Yorktown, Virginia. In recent years, most of these riders have ridden "off-the-shelf" 10-speed bikes, although the crossing has been made on everything from unicycles and cheap clunkers to a computer-equipped, aerodynamic recumbent.

Editor's Note: These drawings, by Brian Walker of Bristol, England, were used as part of Bikecentennial's nationwide press campaign to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Thomas Stevens' transcontinental ride. See the Letter From The Director in this issue for details.