
SCORCHERS, HEADERS AND WHEELMEN

Bicycle Path Detectives

*Written by John Burchill, President
June 30, 2026. Winnipeg Police Museum*

This past week, the Winnipeg Police rolled out its [new bicycle patrol program](#) to help increase police visibility and enable officers to access areas they can't patrol with other vehicles, such as parks and bicycle paths.

As a follow-up to my article about the [Park Police](#), I thought I would touch on another type of officer that patrolled the city's streets and bicycle paths - Winnipeg's Bicycle Path Detectives.

The "high wheel", later known as the "ordinary", was an early type of bicycle distinguished by its large front wheel and small rear wheel. The large front wheel enabled high speeds, owing to the greater distance travelled per wheel rotation. However, the rider could be thrown headfirst if the bicycle struck a rock or rut, or during hard braking. "Headers" were not uncommon and posed a significant hazard. Riders coasting downhill often took their feet off the pedals and put them over the tops of the handlebars, so they would be thrown feet-first instead of head-first in case of an accident.



Winnipeg Tribune-Aug 20, 1890
Bicycle Races at Dufferin Park



Winnipeg Free Press, Sept 9, 1889
Frank Povah takes a 'header' at Winnipeg race

The high-wheel was popular in the 1870s and 1880s but became obsolete by the early 1890s with the advent of the modern “safety” bicycle, which provided similar speed via a chain-driven rear wheel and similarly sized wheels, making mounting and dismounting easier and reducing the danger from a fall. At this time, the term “ordinary” began to be used to refer to the high-wheel bicycle, distinguishing it from the safety bicycle.

As the high wheel was relatively expensive and not particularly suitable for Winnipeg’s packed mud roads traversed by horse and oxcart, it was not that common and principally a novelty of the young and wealthy. However, cycling enthusiasts did form the first Winnipeg Bicycle Club in 1883 and began competing in races at fields such as Dufferin Park¹ and later the Exhibition Grounds.



Bicycle Race at Old Exhibition Grounds on McPhillips Street, c 1894.
University of Winnipeg, WCPI 13604_a0420

The advent of the “safety” bicycle transformed bicycling in Winnipeg from a fad into a full-blown recreational activity. Increasing numbers of bicyclists, called “wheelmen,” rode on sidewalks, and frequent collisions made shared spaces dangerous. A cyclist who rode aggressively at high speed in public was called a “scorcher” or a reckless driver. In addition, the silence of a bicycle could scare an approaching horse, especially at night without lightning or a bell.

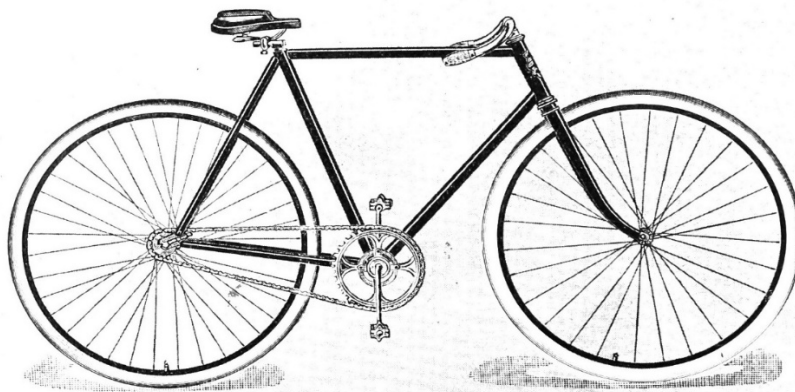
¹ Dufferin Park was a privately owned park that was incorporated in 1878 to promote games and athletic sports. It held baseball, lacrosse, track and field, and bicycle races. A portion of the land was acquired in 1894 by the newly created Winnipeg Parks Board. The park still exists on a site bounded by Gwendoline and Gunnel streets, and Logan and Alexander avenues.

To address the growing problem of reckless cycling, bylaws prohibiting bicycle riding on public sidewalks, including those in parks and on the footpaths of bridges, were passed. Cycling paths were set aside on which cattle, horses, wagons and carriages were prohibited. In addition, cyclists would be restricted to a maximum speed of 8 miles per hour and required to carry a warning bell or whistle and a lighted lantern on the front of the bike. A breach of the bylaw could result in a fine of not more than \$10 dollars.²

It would be the responsibility of the Winnipeg Police to enforce the laws regarding bicycles and bicycle paths.³

On April 22, 1897, to carry out their duties, the Winnipeg Police Commission authorized the purchase of three “Perfect” bicycles from Turnbull & McManus at a cost of \$90 each. At the time, Turnbull & McManus was the exclusive agent for Welland Vale bicycles.

Welland Vale was founded in 1869 as Tuttle, Date, & Rodden. Based in St. Catharines, it was one of Canada’s largest producers of tools and farm implements. Bought by William J. Chaplin in 1874, it was renamed the Welland Vale Manufacturing Company. With the increase in demand for bicycles, Welland Vale devoted most of its production facilities to bicycles between 1896 and 1900. In 1899, Welland Vale was amalgamated with three other major Canadian bicycle manufacturers to form the iconic Canada Cycle & Motor Co. Ltd, or CCM. The Winnipeg Police would continue to use Canadian-made CCM bicycles for the next century.



“Perfect” Model.

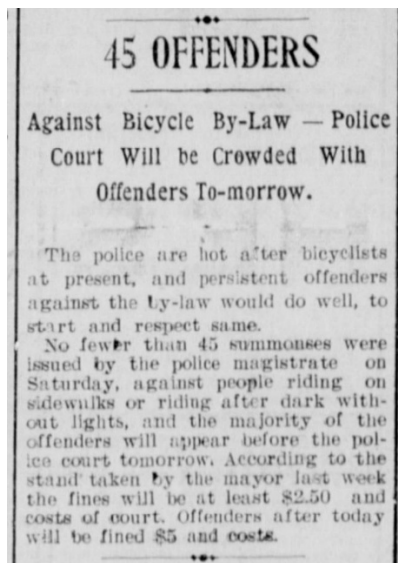
PRICE, \$85.00.

“Perfect” bicycle, Welland Vale Catalogue 1898

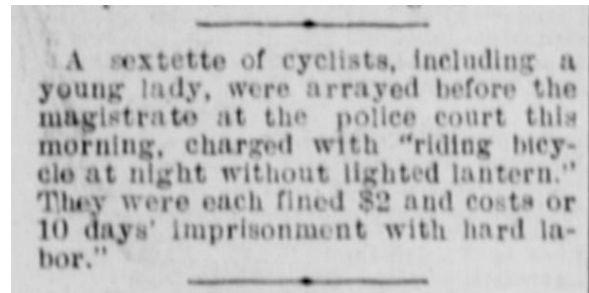
² City of Winnipeg, By-Law No 1198. “A By-law of the City of Winnipeg to regulate the speed of bicycles and provide for the carrying of lanterns at night,” passed October 12, 1896. City of Winnipeg, By-law No. 1314. “A By-law of the City of Winnipeg to regulate the use of bicycles or tricycles on the streets and public places of the City, and to prohibit obstruction on the streets,” passed June 7, 1897. Consolidated in City of Winnipeg, By-law No. 1604. “A By-law of the City of Winnipeg for the regulation of the streets and for the preservation of order therein,” passed in 1899.

³ “An Act respecting the Construction and Maintenance of Bicycle Paths,” Chapter 53, Statutes of Manitoba 1901, s. 19. “City of Winnipeg Charter”, Chapter 77, Statutes of Manitoba, 1902, s. 761.

The police would crack down on cyclists riding without lanterns after dark, including 45 tickets issued in one day in April 1900. Fines could be \$2.50 and costs or ten days in jail !.



Winnipeg Tribune, April 16, 1900



Winnipeg Tribune, April 21, 1897

In a subsequent opinion piece in the Free Press titled "Bicycle Lamps Must Go", the author states the police force is too small to expend its efforts enforcing the bylaw and that the cycling community can be trusted not to "fritter away the energies of the police force in looking after them". With the erection of streetlights, the City removed the requirement for bicycle lanterns in 1902,⁴ however most of the same rules regarding bicycles (including lighting) remain in effect today under the *Highway Traffic Act* and continue to be enforced by the Winnipeg Police.⁵



Warren Beggs, 1898

What became complicated was the enforcement of the bicycle paths licensing scheme. For the construction and maintenance of bicycle paths, the Inspector of Licenses issued an annual bicycle license tag. It was an offence not to get a tag. For licensing purposes, the Police Commission appointed Isaac Coatsworth as a Constable for the City on May 1, 1903, to enforce bicycle licensing.

However, the appointment did not last long, and by May 11, 1903, Warren Beggs, a long-time member of the Winnipeg Police, was engaged as a Special Constable "*to look after delinquent cyclists who neglect to get their licenses and also to keep an eye on the paths to see that drivers respect them*".

Beggs, who was born in Ireland in 1866, came to Canada in 1881. He began his career with the Winnipeg Police on November 30, 1891, and remained so employed until April 30, 1903, when the relationship was severed. He remained employed by the licensing department until 1907, selling bicycle licenses, recovering lost/stolen bicycles, and returning them to their owners.

⁴City of Winnipeg, By-Law No 2408. "A By-Law of the City of Winnipeg to amend By-Law No. 1604 of the City relating to bicycle lanterns," passed May 19, 1902.

⁵ *The Highway Traffic Act*, CCSM, c. H60. "Lamps and reflectors on bicycles and power-assisted bicycles", s 149.

In an interview with the Winnipeg Tribune on November 30, 1905, Beggs reported that 712 bicycles had been reported stolen in the past year, and all but 168 had been recovered. One of the problems he identified was with second-hand shops taking in stolen bikes for resale. While he was sympathetic to the dealers having to turn over the stolen bicycle, which they had paid for without financial recompense, he cautioned they should be wary of entering into deals for bicycles at less than one-third the cost. While Beggs lamented the lenient sentences bike thieves received, just two months earlier, Richard Holmes received a four-year prison sentence from Winnipeg Police Magistrate Thomas Mayne Daly after pleading guilty to nine charges of bike theft.⁶

As bicycles became an increasingly popular target for thieves, a petition was circulated in 1907 seeking the appointment of a “*competent detective*” to work exclusively on bicycle thefts. After leaving his position, Beggs would eventually return to policing as the Chief of the Assiniboia Police in 1914. He remained in that position until 1917. Beggs passed away in 1957



William Eddie, 1920

Beggs' replacement, William (Bill) Eddie, was also appointed as a Constable by the Winnipeg Police Commission on May 7, 1908, as a “bicycle detective” for the City's License Branch. While “*chasing cyclists without tags, or 'scorchers' burning up the bicycle paths*”, Eddie also carried out enforcement, investigating and arresting bicycle thieves. While investigating over 100 bicycle thefts in May 1910, Eddie commented that most were caused by people just “*leaving their wheels anywhere, anytime*”. An easy target for thieves.

Eddie was born in 1872 in Port Hope, Ontario. He came to Winnipeg with his parents as a young boy and eventually worked as a shipper-receiver with his father at Massey-Harris Co., before joining the Licensing Branch in 1908.⁷

Eddie left the License Branch on March 1, 1911, and joined the Winnipeg Police as the Inspector of Morality, replacing Inspector William Leach, who became the new Inspector of Licenses the previous month. Eddie passed away in 1943.

Replacing Eddie as the new bicycle detective in 1911 was John Dennis Grimsdick, who had previously been employed as a Constable by the Winnipeg Police from March 23, 1905, to September 1, 1907, before leaving to join the Mechanical Department at the C.P. Railway. Grimsdick would remain as the bicycle detective until he enlisted for service during World War I and was sent overseas in 1916.

Grimsdick was born in Northampton, England, in 1881 and had served in several military units prior to coming to Canada, including two years with the South African Constabulary. Once overseas, Grimsdick was seconded to the Imperial Forces in France, likely due to his previous service in the British army.

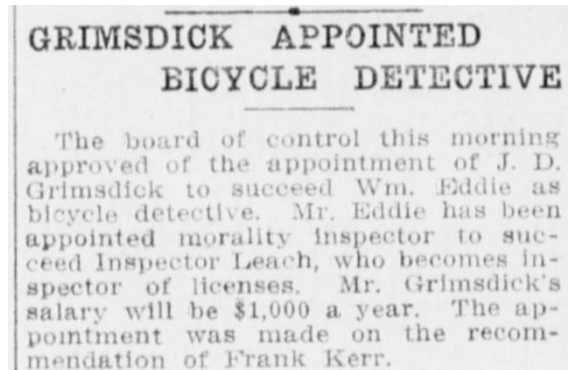
⁶ “Four Years for Wheel Thief – Richard Holmes Gets Richly Deserved Sentence”, Winnipeg Free Press, September 13, 1905.

⁷ Massy-Harris was also one of the amalgamated companies that became CCM. [Lyman Melvin Jones](#), former Winnipeg Mayor, MLA, and Senator, was the General Manager for Massy-Harris at the time and later its President.



John Grimsdick, Courtesy
Douglas Glasgow

One of Grimsdick's first posts in France was with the "Cyclists" in Base Camp, and later with Salvage operations. He was awarded the Order of the British Empire on January 1, 1919, for his service during the war. After his discharge, he did not return to policing. Grimsdick died in 1943.



Grimsdick appointed new Bicycle Detective,
Winnipeg Tribune, February 28, 1911

Returning to the Winnipeg Police, the Board of Commissioners authorized the purchase of six new bicycles on May 21, 1904: three to replace the original ones, which had become worn out, and three for use by the Morality Officer, the Patrol Sergeant, and the Sergeant.⁸



Winnipeg Police Inspection Day, Victoria Park, 1909
Four of the department's six bicycles in the front row. Winnipeg Police Museum, G-202301

⁸ On May 22, 1909, both the Winnipeg Free Press and the Winnipeg Tribune reported that there would be six bicycle patrol officers. Two each in the south, west and north ends of the city.



Patrol Sergeant Joseph Outerson and Sergeant Charles Knox, 1913
Winnipeg Police Museum, 1609-53200

In the mid-1930s, as bicycle thefts increased, Police Chief George Smith again looked to the licensing department to investigate, saying they collected \$6000 in license fees and should be responsible for investigations as well. However, the Police Commission responded that theft was a crime and the police's responsibility. As such, for the summer months, the police hired two temporary constables to specifically investigate bicycle thefts in 1937, 1938 and 1939. Several of these officers, including Laurence Eddie, the son of former Inspector William Eddie, would be taken on full-time with the Winnipeg Police.⁹

As the bicycles wore out, the Winnipeg Police would buy new ones from dealers such as C.H. Harness and J.S. Davis. With the popularity and mass production of bicycles, the outlay for a new bicycle by the police dropped to \$60 in 1916, \$55 in 1926, and \$50 in 1939, almost half of what a new bicycle cost 40 years earlier.

In the fall of 1933, CCM donated six new frames to replace broken old ones. The last bicycle purchase was in 1962, when three new ones were acquired. Four of the bicycles were subsequently sold off at auction in 1967, with the remaining two sold in 1971.

One of these bicycles was bought at auction by Inspector George R. (Bob) Taylor, who rode the same or a similar CCM bicycle when he was first hired as a Constable in 1953, doing patrols of residential properties during the summer while the owners were away on holidays. Inspector Taylor, who served on the Winnipeg Police Museum Board from 1986 to 2013, donated the bicycle to the Museum before moving to British Columbia. Bob passed away in 2019.

⁹ Laurence Eddie, first hired as a temporary constable in 1938 at \$3.50 a day, was appointed a signal operator and constable with the Winnipeg Police on June 19, 1939. He remained with the police department until 1944, when he left to join the RCAF during World War II. He was killed during the war on November 3, 1944.



Winnipeg Police CCM "Imperial" Bicycle
Donated to the Winnipeg Police Museum by former Insp. Bob Taylor.

Former Deputy Chief Joe Gallagher, also a member of the Winnipeg Police Museum Board from 2016 to 2022, recalls riding the same or a similar bicycle for two years after he was first hired as a Constable in 1965 to check properties during the summer.

The bicycle is occasionally taken out for Museum events today.



Staff Sergeant Terry Macyk (retired) with Inspector Rick McDougall takes out the Museum bicycle, June 20, 2014, for Take Your Bike to Work Day.

In 1993, the Winnipeg Police reformed a full-time Bicycle Patrol Unit during the summer months. The Unit lasted until April 2010, when the Service announced it would no longer have a dedicated Unit, although Community Support Officers could take them out on a limited basis.



Winnipeg Police Bicycle Patrol. July 30, 2004

With today's transition to e-bicycles, the Winnipeg Police reinvent the past with the aid of modern technology. Just as the Welland Vale and later CCM bicycles would begin to replace the horse as a means of patrol on Winnipeg streets in the 1890s, the use of e-bicycles are faster and more efficient than their single-gear forerunners.

For those interested in knowing more about the rules of the road regarding bicycles, power-assisted bicycles and bicycle safety, see Division IV of the [Highway Traffic Act](#), sections 145 to 152, along with Regulations [39/2013](#) and [119/2014](#).
