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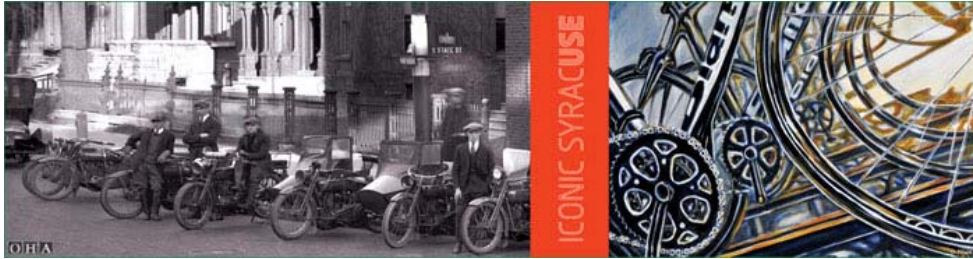
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News: Iconic Syracuse — the hub of the bicycle world



Did you know that in the 1890s, Syracuse was once the “hub” of the bicycle world, and a pioneer in early motorbike design?

November’s Iconic Syracuse series features an original painting by SU industrial design student Greg Mawicke, paired with a historic photo curated by project partner, Onondaga Historical Association. Read more about this rich history below, and then come enjoy the large-scale installation at the Armory Square gateway — the intersection of West Fayette and West Streets in downtown Syracuse. The installation, on view through the month of November, documents a “Motorcycle Day” gathering at the southeast corner of State and East Genesee Streets on May 4, 1920 sponsored by the Firestone [Tire](#) store that once stood on that corner – a location now within the Connective Corridor.

The Connective Corridor is working to establish a thriving new bike culture in Syracuse through dedicated bike lanes that are part of a “greenway” bike network being developed to connect University Hill with downtown.

Can this catalyze a bike culture here? We hope so, and salute folks who are creating a bike community here, like the owners of Mello Velo bicycle shop on Westcott Street in Syracuse — the setting for the modern-day painting that Greg created for this installation. Mello Velo owners are not only biking enthusiasts and entrepreneurs, but are also great urban pioneers. They are the owners of the [TED House](#) – an innovative “From the Ground Up” project in Syracuse’s Near Westside. That’s the neighborhood where the hub of an important early bicycle industry was once located. Just like the [wheels](#) on a bike, what goes around, comes around ... and let’s hope this is the start of something great!

SYRACUSE’S BIKE & MOTORBIKE LEGACY:

The most popular and successful bicycle manufacturer in the city was E. C. Stearns & Company, producer of the popular “Yellow Fellow” model, which was known world-wide. At its height in the 1890s, E. C. Stearns Company employed 2,000 and made 500 bicycles a day.

Barnes Cycle Company was another well-known bicycle manufacturer of that era in Syracuse. Located on East Water Street, it was most known for the popular “White Flyer.” William Van Wagoner, a well-known Syracuse bicycle racer, designed bicycles for the company, and earned a reputation as a tandem builder.

The Syracuse Cycle Company also began [business](#) in 1892 on Wyoming Street and manufactured a brand called Syracuse Bicycles – with a motto: “There is but one Crimson Rim — It is the Syracuse.” 1895, the company participated in the New York Cycle Show, held in Madison Square Gardens in New York City, where they displayed models of the year including the Racer, Special, Spacer, Model C and Thelma, a ladies model.,

Another local company, Westfield Manufacturing Company of Syracuse manufactured pneumatic safety bicycles with “tall cushion” frames in 1898. Worden Hickory Frame Cycle Works, maker of Worden Bicycles, sold their bicycles from the Olive Wheel Store at 121 West Jefferson Street.

A prominent early name in bicycle racing was John Wilkinson, a native of Syracuse and graduate of Cornell University with a degree in engineering. By 1880, Wilkinson was one of the country’s leading bicycle racers. After college he went on to become a champion cyclist and worked at The Syracuse Cycle Company. It was a logical progression for him to develop a keen interest about the inner-workings of internal combustion engines for motor cars. Wilkinson later developed a successful air-cooled engine and teamed with Herbert H. Franklin to form Franklin Automobile Company in

Syracuse. Wilkinson's air-cooled engine was used in Franklin runabouts, touring cars and [sedans](#).

Local entrepreneurs and engineers, Alexander T. Brown and Charles E. Lipe invented the two-gear chain in 1894 in order to offer different speeds to the more advanced riders. The gears were produced at the Brown-Lipe Company on the Near West Side who named it the two-speed Hy-Lo Bi-Gear. It soon became installed on all makes of bicycles. The company was located in Syracuse, in the C. E. Lipe Machine Shop, an early business incubator in the city. The firm evolved into the Brown-Lipe-Chapin Company and went on to become the world's "premier automobile gear manufacture." By 1897, special paths were first constructed in the city and every "wheel" rider had to carry a tag showing payment of a tax to maintain the paths. There were "special constables" to arrest those unlawfully cycling on the paths.

The number of bicycle riders in Syracuse during the 1890s totaled 10,000 and the city was a "hub of bicycle production." Bicycles were so popular during that period that streetcar earnings declined. By the early 1900s, the bicycle industry slowed, with the advent of the automobile.

Bicycle races were often used to promote sales. In 1896, the Stearns Company arranged a race between a New York Central locomotive and a 6-passenger Stearns' sextuplet bicycle. The race was to take place on a stretch of railroad tracks in Solvay. The publicized date arrived and the team was ready to show its strength. The riders awaited the appearance of the No. 999 engine and when she came into sight, the cyclists slowly and steadily got up to pace so that when the engine was nearly alongside, they were going approximately 45 mph. The race continued for the prescribed half mile and the specially designed "Yellow Fellow" came out ahead by four lengths. Although it captured a great deal of attention and publicity, the feat was not able to markedly reinvigorate the sport and by 1900, its popularity began to wane.

In addition to manufacturing bicycles and the Franklin, America's most-successful air-cooled auto, Syracuse also was once home to the builder of a unique motorcycle, the Ner-a-Car. The design was developed around 1918 by a local officer of the New Process Gear Company, Car Neracher. Securing funding to begin manufacturing in Syracuse took longer than expected and production was first pursued in England under a licensing agreement with Sheffield Simplex. But by 1921, U. S. manufacturing of the Ner-a-Car (a play on the name of the original designer) was underway in a factory located at the northwest corner of Fayette and Geddes streets. The building was demolished years later, but its stone foundations are still clearly visible at the prominent West Side intersection.

About 25,000 of these motorcycles were manufactured in Syracuse in the years between 1921 and 1928 by the Ner-A-Car Corporation under the Ner-A-Car name. They featured a low-slung steel chassis with hub-centre steering and a transmission-by-friction drive to the rear wheel on early designs. The steel chassis, which was more like that of a car, housed two-stroke engines of 221cc and four-strokes of up to 347cc in sv and ohv configuration.

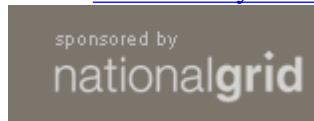
The Ner-A-Car was styled on a monocoque frame, so that the rider sat low down, behind a wide front mudguard, and had foot-boards for protection from the weather. This strange design comprised a frame constructed of pressed-steel channel-section members that ran from the rear wheel, splaying out to carry leading links for the hub-centre steering pivot. Most of the mechanics were concealed by panels that ran on to the front mudguard and that were fixed to the frame, so that only the cylinder could be seen. This rider-friendly design made the car especially marketable to men, commuting to work in suits, and to women. In 1922 the strange little contraptions were soon the talk of the town after Edwin "Cannonball" Baker rode one coast to coast, NY to Los Angeles, in 8 days. He spent 172 hours in the saddle, and averaged 30mph. He stayed off the freeway.

The machine initially sold well in America, but with rapid design advances of the motorcar, the sale of Near-A-Cars began to wane. Sportier American motorcycles, such as those designed by Indian and Harley Davidson, came to dominate the market. Motorcycles of that design dominate the historic billboard image for November. It documents a "Motorcycle Day" gathering at the southeast corner of State and East Genesee Streets on May 4, 1920 sponsored by the Firestone Tire store that once stood on that corner – a location now within the Connective Corridor.

Thanks to OHA curator of history Dennis Connors who helped edit and add to information that our team culled from various reference documents, secondary resources and on-line materials.

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