



📖 Riding 🌿 Collecting 🌿 Restoring 🌿 Research 🌿 History 📖

The Bicycle Uniform from Head to Foot

The high wheel bicycle was an expensive piece of sporting equipment, and its proud owner donned special sports attire to suit. The cycling costume was of stout material for tumbles and was snugly fitted to avoid being caught in the wheel. Besides being highly practical, the outfit had a sporting and military style, the latter enhanced by the brass button on the tunic, the erect posture of the rider, and the tendency to ride *en masse*.

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The wearing apparel of the new sport had some very special requirements. The breeches should allow rapid motion of the leg and yet be tight enough to avoid the catastrophic header if a fold of cloth should catch in the small clearance between the tire of the large wheel and the fork. Jackets also were tailored to fit snugly. Top it all off with a cap, or safer still, a helmet, and the outfit is complete: knee socks, tight breeches, tailored jacket, and cap.

We have scrutinized many an old group picture of cyclists to see what they really did wear, and we have studied close-up photographs for details of how to make it. We wanted to be able to give you an authoritative story so that you could take action accordingly. We have seen an original uniform from Lawrence, Massachusetts, in heavy green corduroy. Figure 1 represents a complete uniform located by members of the Wheelmen. It is made of tough heavy corduroy, and has full high wheel buttons. The entire bicycle is depicted on the nickel-plated brass buttons. (For additional information see: 1: The Wheelmen magazine Volume 2 Number 1, Pages 2-6, or contact the Publications Chair for duplicate copies, 2: England's Southern Veteran Cycle Club's News and Views #204, April 1988, and 3: bicycle catalogs such as Gormully & Jeffery Manufacturing Company.)

In the pioneer days, the Club was the riding unit, and each adopted its own uniform, with each member dressed in a uniform similar to the others and of the same color. For authenticity and for practicality, we suggest that Wheelmen also adopt the cycle uniform, each state division selecting its own color and cap design, perhaps based on local history.

This, briefly, was the sporting uniform of cycling in its first decade. Further details are best obtained by scrutinizing old pictures with a magnifying glass. We believe that such uniforms were almost universal in America, but perhaps less fully adopted in England. This influence is perhaps attributable to the powerful League of American Wheelmen and its giant conventions, to the club structure

of the new sport, and to the inescapable fact that bicycling was a sport before it became transportation.

AVAILABILITY OF CLOTHING — Individuals in the 1880-1900 period bought their costumes from sporting goods and mail order houses in somewhat the same colors. Despite several vigorous efforts, we have not yet found a clothing manufacturer to supply authentic copies of the 1880-1900 uniforms. It should be noted in passing that there were many styles of cycling uniforms in the old days. In *The Wheelmen* magazine of Summer 1971, Bob McNair and Karen Knudsen Hetzel have presented photographs and advertisements of the day which show these styles.

Our club has decided that each state division would aim for a distinctive style and combination of colors to emphasize the uniformity of each division and to distinguish each state at national meets. Many states have established colors and uniforms. If you need help on a uniform for yourself or a member of your family, call your state captain or a neighboring member. They can help you locate sources of clothing and information. If you are located in an area that has no captain, contact the Membership Chair and you will be given the names of Wheelmen to help you.

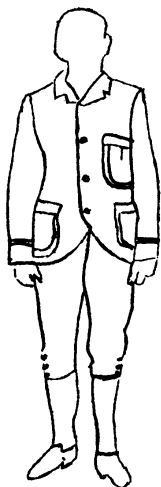


Figure 1.
Original Uniform

BREECHES — The knee breeches are the most important and most characteristic part of the uniform. Make them first. It is not difficult because you can buy snug-fitting corduroy work trousers (e.g., “Big Yank”) and modify them. They are cut straight and close fitting, quite unlike the knickerbockers popular in the safety bicycle decade that followed. The breeches were held with three buttons below the knee. The easiest way to procure breeches is to visit an army and navy store and buy a pair of tough, fairly closefitting corduroy work pants.

To avoid cutting off too much, before cutting, put your foot on the mounting step to see how far the breeches pull up. You will open the side seams all the way to the pocket to make them snug in the thighs. But they must not be so tight around the knee that they cannot slide up and down. The top button comes right at the knee. Note that there is no bagginess in the knees, no gathering below the knee. Another trick is to line the last two or three inches of the breeches with a smooth material that will not bind on the stockings.

Figures 2, 3, and 4 show details of the knee breeches worn during the period of the “Ordinary.” Note the location of the buttons at the knees. The top button should be at the break in the knee, not above. The knee area of the breeches is to be snug, but not so tight as to prevent the knees of the breeches from sliding up and down with the pedaling of the bicycle.



Figure 2

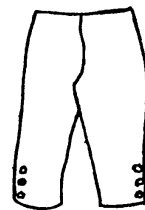


Figure 3



Figure 4

Both the pants to be made into breeches and the jacket can be obtained from several types of outlets. Matched sets of Levi or Lee corduroy trousers and jackets are one of the methods of obtaining a uniform. Thrift stores are resources for suits that can be converted to a full uniform.

BUTTONS — Through good fortune, we have found the original dies for two sets of bicycle uniform buttons. We have had buttons made up for uniforms. One set has a big wheel and is definitely high wheel era. The second set has a circa 1895 safety racer. These would look fine on your sport jacket. Each design has two sizes: the large ones for the front of the coat, the small ones for the sleeves and breeches. Six large and ten small is the normal quota for a complete uniform.

These buttons are available from Fred Fisk, 2815 Moraine Ave., Dayton, Ohio 45406, with a check made out to “The Wheelmen”. For current prices and postage and handling charge, contact Fred. Be sure to state which design and how many of each size (see Figure 5). Originals are very scarce, but can sometimes be found in antique shops. Wheelmen National Pins are also available from Fred (see Figure 5a). **NOTE:** All monies go to The Wheelmen treasury.



Large Safety



Small Safety



Large Wheel



Small Wheel



Figure 5a.

Figure 5. Wheelmen Buttons

SHIRTS — Shirts were white, striped, or checked, cotton or flannel, buttoned or laced. Most seem to have been worn with the coats. Collars were turn-down, straight-

up, or wing. Some clubs doffed coats in hot weather and wore identical shirts and ties. In a parade or special demonstration, your state captain may obtain special shirts to dramatize the event. A white shirt with short sleeves is common on warm weather rides and is the easiest to obtain and most suitable article.

STOCKINGS — Stockings are worn inside the breeches and should come above the knee to avoid any shocking exposure of bare leg when mounting. Look for extra long stockings—you might drop hints to someone who knits. Wear elastic garters above the knee, or as some have done, sew girdle hitches inside the breeches. The problem is sometimes solved by wearing tights under the breeches. Men's panty hose are sold in some men's stores. Since the stockings go under the breeches, they should go over the knee. Conventional length knee socks are too short and a gap opens between pants and stockings.

Rather than use an elastic garter, a workable method of holding the stockings without their gapping is to sew a ladies' replacement girdle garter buckle on the inside of the pants leg, both on the inside and on the outside of the knee area. This added stitching will strengthen the knee area, they are easy to replace when needed, and the stocking and knee area of the breeches will slide as a unit, returning to normal position automatically.

In the Potomac Division, the socks are brown wool for winter, stretch nylon for summer. These are knee length socks sold for "tall" men, usually available in department stores or men's shops. A single pair, you will find, will not cover the knees when riding a bicycle if the breeches are cut off right at the lower end of the knee cap. To cover the knee take an extra pair of stretch socks and cut off the "feet." The "tube" part remaining is then fitted to cover the entire knee. Some riders wear other items, such as body hose, to eliminate this problem. Some Wheelmen have compensated by leaving the breeches two inches longer to cover what otherwise would be a knee gap. Until we find a manufacturer to make the thigh-high cyclist's hose, these measures will have to do.



Figure 6
Original Stockings

CAPS— There is a great variety of authentic styles from which to choose, ranging from corduroy caps to match the rest of the uniform, through various military-looking caps, to the cork-lined helmets for safety. Only the

conventional golf cap seems to be missing from the cycling scene. The club badge may be worn on the front of the cap or a special design for your own division would be suitable. Caps were varied and, next to color, provided the most distinctive differences between clubs. From simple polo caps, they ranged through head covering with short, steep visors, pill-boxes without visors, cadet or soldier-type hats, to the safety helmet with cork lining. The easiest to obtain is the simple corduroy cap that some army-navy stores carry in colors to match their corduroy trousers. Some of our divisions may have special hats made up to give them a different look. We have experimented with abbreviated safety helmets, adding a visor at the rear and covering them with the same cloth as the uniform to resemble the old bicycle helmets.

Figure 7, 8, and 9 show the various styles of caps worn for cycle riding. Figures 7 and 8 are cap styles of corduroy or "bicycle cloth", while Figure 9 is a helmet style head cover with corduroy material covering.

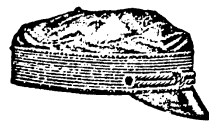


Figure 7.

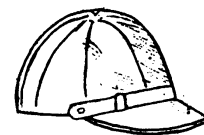


Figure 8.

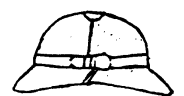


Figure 9.

The cap used by Potomac and Michigan is one of the many "Greek seamen" styles now available. This is fairly close to the old style Wheelmen cap (Figure 7), a much superior style to the regular soft cap, which tends to be without a satisfactory riser in the front.

COATS — From pictures and from the description above, we know that despite small differences, coats were generally close-fitting and suggestive of the military tunic. The material was "bicycle cloth," whatever that was, flannel, or corduroy. The uniform sketched in Figure 1 is tough heavy green corduroy. Many divisions have adopted corduroy material for its known authenticity, durability, and availability.

Coats are generally form-fitting and of the same material as the breeches. They button up the front, with four to six buttons, have small collars, either turned up or turned down, and they have rounded or squared bottom corners. They are similar in fit to the "Nehru" jacket, and we suggest acquiring a pattern for one of them and adding the proper collar, corners, and buttons. Not all clubs specified coats, but they are very handsome. On gala occasions, century run and other medals are displayed on the jacket.

Levi and Lee have made the corduroy outfits (trousers and jacket) in gray, light and dark blue, black, green, and

light and dark brown. Many Wheelmen have adopted this approach to a uniform because of lack of a source for matching tunic-style jackets.

Figure 10 is a sketch of a coat in the A.G. Spalding and Brothers' catalog section of bicycle uniforms. It represents the tunic-type coat often worn by cycling clubs. Many Wheelmen have had custom-tailored coats made to match their breeches.

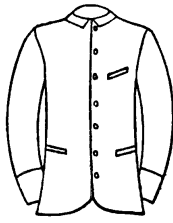


Figure 10.
Wheelmen Coat

SHOES — Shoes should be black or brown, depending on your state's choice. We suggest a composition sole rather than leather, which is too likely to slip on your mounting step. Shoes should have stiff soles and fit snugly because some steps are very close to the wheel and very small. In such case, you can only place the tip of the shoe on the mounting lug. The Potomac Division uses medium brown athletic shoes, which are made of soft leather uppers and rubber soles. They are helpful in gripping the step of high wheels and in helping to absorb the impact of the off-the-back dismount. Shoes should be lightweight, to allow high pedal speed. If using standard athletic shoes, please black out modern printing (e.g., Reebok or Nike.)

TIES AND RIBBONS — Neckties were much more imaginative and varied in those days. Study the old pictures. The red ones worn by the Pennsylvania Division

were inspired by the picture on the front of *The Wheelmen* magazine, Volume 1 Number 1. The tie used in the Potomac Division is small and brown and can be purchased at a tie store. These are also available in school uniform outlets and elsewhere. They are also easy to make by using bright cloth, lining (optional), and interfacing. Others use a three-foot length of one-inch width ribbon purchased in a millinery, yard goods, or department store. In parades, a large neck scarf may be worn, particularly in cooler temperatures.

STATE COLORS — Check with your captain or review Bulletin #5a on color, material, and cap design for your state division. It is very desirable that all from your area dress alike, but that they be different from other areas for contrast in national tours and parades. Pennsylvania has adopted navy blue, which was the color of the original Philadelphia Bicycle Club. We know that the Boston Bicycle Club, the first in the country, wore seal brown, and that the New York Bicycle Club wore cadet gray. Perhaps you should visit a local library and go through the local publications of the 1880s in search of local color and cap design. The Potomac Division generally wears dark brown breeches, socks, jackets, shoes, and caps, with a white shirt and brown tie. Ohio uses a similar color scheme. Michigan and Pennsylvania also use blue. New Jersey uses blue with a gold stripe and trim. The old club uniforms were:

CLUB	PLACE	UNIFORM	DATE FORMED
Amherst	MA	Navy blue breeches and blouse, gray stockings	September 1879
Boston	MA	Seal brown helmet coat, breeches and stockings	February 1878
Brooklyn	NY	Dark navy blue	June 1879
Buffalo	NY	Blue cap, coat, stockings, gray breeches	June 1879
Capital	DC	Brown	February 1879
Centaur	Phila., PA	Russet brown coat, breeches, cap, white shirt, wine stockings	January 1880
Chauncy	Boston, MA	Gray flannel shirt and breeches, blue stockings	November 1879
Cleveland	OH	Seal brown	September 1879
Germantown	PA	Blue polo cap, gray shirt, breeches, blue stockings	September 1879
Hartford	CT	Gray with blue trimming stockings, polo cap	October 1879
Mass.	Boston	Seal brown coat and breeches, brownish-gray helmet, shoes and stockings	February 1879
Montreal	Canada	Dark blue	December 1878
New York	NY	Cadet gray trimmed with scarlet corduroy, stockings shade darker	February 1880
Philadelphia	PA	Navy blue shirt, stockings, cap, tie, drab breeches	May 1879
Rochester	NY	Blue suit with white belt	February 1880
Yonkers	NY	Grayish brown corduroy	November 1879

ADVICE ON COLORS TO SELECT — If your state or region has not yet selected a color for its uniform, or is considering a change, consider using dark green, black, or gray. You will note that these colors were used in the pioneer days, but have not been widely seen at Wheelmen events. You can also consider mixing colors, such as blue and gray, or using a gold or blue trim or edging. This will add to the diversity of national Wheelmen meets.

Colors to Avoid — Although white was strongly recommended as a desirable suit color, few actually used it. One state division of The Wheelmen abandoned it, as it did not retain a satisfactory appearance. Red, off-whites, tan, and light khaki colors and garments should all be avoided.

Karl Kron (Lyman Hotchkiss Bagg, 1846-1911), writing in "10,000 Miles on a Bicycle," in 1887, devotes a chapter to "White Flannel and Nickel Plate." His contention is that white must be kept clean and is more impressive. "As regards the solitary rider, the sheen of his plush jacket in cold weather, like the whiteness of his flannel shirt and breeches in summer, gives an 'object lesson' to everyone he meets, for it plainly proves that he has not been tumbled into the mud ... It shows, therefore, that the bicycle is a safe vehicle and a clean one ... The glittering spokes of an all-bright bicycle enlighten the stupidest landlord (that the rider is) ... a man of substance ... to be treated with deference." There is an old account of a meet at which they voted a tall handsome man in white, mounted on a full nickel machine, as the best appearing rider.

There were, no doubt, exceptions to the general rule of dress. Quite possibly, someone did once ride with top hat and tails, but it was hardly regarded as proper bicycling attire.

WOMEN'S UNIFORMS — The ladies who ride high wheels usually wear the same uniform as the gentlemen, although many wear white blouses rather than shirts. Some also wear a scarf with the blouse of the same color as their division. Ladies who ride safety bicycles wear the same outfit or the contemporary costumes of the 1890s. See, for example, articles and photographs in The Wheelmen Magazines: Volume 2 Number 1, Numbers 15, 19, 41, and 43, or contact the Publications Chair for copies of these articles.

When reviewing cycling history, it is noted that women did not wear *uniforms*. They wore clothing used for other outdoor activities or created for cycling.

Women high wheel riders were few. Most modern day high wheel riding women should dress like the men for uniformity unless they create a riding outfit modeled after the one Elsa Von Blumen wore as shown on the cover of *Riding High* and in The Wheelmen magazine Number 43,

Page 2 and other outfits Pages 21-24 and 36. The latter would more clearly represent the riding apparel of women who rode high wheel cycles during the 1880s.

Tricyclists riding early 1880s machines most generally wore dark colored costumes because Victoria's mourning set much of the fashion of this period. Long skirts with high necked blouses and tightly fitted jackets were the fashion of the day. Gloves and a hat are a must as no "lady" left the house without them. Late in the 1880s Turkish trousers or bloomers might have been worn by some of the adventurous and color became fashionable again.

The "Gay Nineties" and the safety bicycle came on the scene about the same time. Riders of safeties should try to find a dated picture (not a drawing) when choosing a model for a suitable costume. In the old pictures you will note that women did not wear uniforms at this time. Costumes varied from calf length skirts to bloomer outfits. The sleeves were very full and needed lots of stiffening to prop them up. Hats and gloves still were worn by ladies and color was in full bloom. Many modern day fashions are a repeat of the 1890s look; therefore, resale shops are good sources for ready made costumes. See Appendix I of this Bulletin for additional contacts.

Original costumes are lovely, but should be preserved for gentle activities such as demonstrations and displays rather than the exertions of riding.

To complete costumes for cycling, most shoes and hose should be inconspicuous, if you are unable to find laced or high buttoned shoes. Purses with clips that hang from the skirt band make nice additions to a costume. Jewelry such as cameos, lapel watches, and hand painted china brooches are nice touches.

Ladies well costumed help to make The Wheelmen parades and demonstrations more interesting for the public. See The Wheelmen magazine Number 15, Pages 2-13 and inside the front cover.

CHILDREN'S CLOTHING — Perhaps as important as any aspect of The Wheelmen is to engage the interest of the children by getting them into a uniform, particularly during the summer outdoor activities. In the pioneer days, the children wore the same styles as adults. In some Wheelmen costume contests, special awards are given for the best outfitted family. Providing uniforms for the children encourages their participation and stimulates their interest in cycling.

SUMMER UNIFORMS — The standard uniform should be designed for the warm portion of the year, since most events will be in that part of the year. The Capital Bicycle Club of Washington, D.C., wore white caps in the summer because of the oppressive heat. The Massachusetts Club

also wore white caps. Summer white caps made of butcher linen are quite cool. If you can locate a suitable visor and frame, you can make your own covers. A lightweight white dress shirt and tie or ribbon and stretch nylon stockings round out the summer uniform.

WINTER UNIFORMS — Turtle-neck sweaters were cold weather racing attires, but the Pennsylvania Division adopted them at first because the coats are harder to arrange for. Such sweaters must be solid color and match the breeches. In cold weather, most Wheelmen add two-piece thermal underwear, substitute wool for cotton shirts, and add extra socks and gloves. Try to avoid knit tassel or “Navy” caps in winter. If your ears suffer, try the cap with the fold-down ear covering flaps.

MEET UNIFORMS — Wheelmen events are usually one of two types: a public parade or demonstration, and the club meet. The public parades and demonstrations require a higher degree of uniformity. Bob McNair best capsulized our thoughts on these events:

“We hope you will decide to go authentic. Safety (of members, as well as of bicycles) is important. Now, as ninety years ago, clothes should be snug and yet give freedom for action. The old style breeches are the most important, now as then, but snug shirts, sweaters, and jackets are also wise. We do not just display an assortment of quaint machines. We take a strong interest in the human and social aspects. The rider and his appearance are as important as the high wheel. The overall spectacle that our riders create has much to do with our reviving the traditions and rebuilding the prestige of American cycling. We must be sharp and we must show we are proud of our hobby. When our members travel hundreds of miles for an event, it must be so memorable that they are happy to do it again. The show must enthrall newsmen so that they put our message over to the public. From the publicity comes new members, new leads, and invitations to parades. Remember, the parades are what make us financially solvent. Our policy of putting on a good show, whatever we do, has much to do with our success. Sometimes, other people ride high wheels wearing top hats and tails. This was not done in the old days and is a distortion of history.

“May we comment that our uniforms are the real thing, not a cheap fanciful theatrical takeoff; and as the practical and proper attire for the sport, we do wear them whenever we ride, whether for show or for fun. Of course, all are welcome to our meets and tours regardless of how they are dressed. We do enjoy having everyone come out for the fun. If you do not have the

authentic attire, we simply ask that you ride near the rear of the column so as not to disappoint any photographers. Everyone will be happy to help you gather the correct attire. The breeches are the basic part of the simple uniform, and this article explains how to make them easily.”

“When you ride your high wheel, look your best. Shining enamel, gleaming nickel, neat uniform, all show you are proud to be a Wheelmen and proud of the American cycling heritage.”

PARADE UNIFORMS — As discussed in the preceding section on meet uniforms, the policy of The Wheelmen is to put on a good show, and good uniforms are an essential element of our successes around the Nation. If you have any questions on the proper parade attire, contact your state captain or parade organizer.

CONTESTS AND JUDGING — The Defiance Ohio Meets awarded prizes for the most authentic uniforms and to the best-dressed state unit and family. We strongly urge Meet Organizers to schedule, and announce well in advance, contests for the most authentic men’s, women’s, children’s, family, and state uniforms. It may not be possible to have a contest in every category, but try to have at least one uniform judging category at each meet.

L.A.W. UNIFORM REGULATION — The Constitution, Article VII, Uniform and Badges, Section 1: “The League uniform shall consist of coat, knee breeches, and cap or helmet made of the regulation L.A.W. cloth approved by the Executive Committee in 1885, dark brown hose, and low quarter shoes. The coat is to be made as follows: a single breasted blouse, cut to fit close to the form, made to button close up to the neck in front with six large League buttons, a turn-over collar, one plait, two inches wide each side affront and back stitched down, two breast pockets and two shirt pockets, all patched on the outside, French facings, the cuffs with two small League buttons, no belt; the length of the coat to just clear the saddle when mounted.

“The breeches are to be made with two hip pockets and one watch or cash pocket—no other front pockets, to close at the knee with three small League buttons, loops for the belt, the seat reinforcement to extend to the bottom of the leg.” — L.A.W. Bulletin, February 29, 1886.

Of course, club uniforms varied from this in small details, sometimes with turned-up collar, for instance, as well as in color and material.

CLUB SPIRIT — The clothing worn by Wheelmen for parades, demonstrations, and meets is important as much for its comfort and suitability in riding a bicycle as it is a mark of participation in our club’s spirit. Next to restoring and riding an antique bicycle, the proper uniform is the

most important achievement of a Wheelmen because it sets you in the proper frame of mind while at the same time putting aside your concerns. Even a solo ride in uniform can readily transplant a Wheelmen into the nostalgia of the

1880s. We likewise urge non-riding members to wear their uniforms or cycling costumes at Wheelmen events. The effect on you will be electric. Clothes do not make a man, but they make a difference.

Resources

Dover Publications, Inc.
31 E. 2nd Street
Mineola, NY 11501

Books:

American Dress Pattern Catalogs 1873 - 1909
Edited by Nancy Villa Bryk
Bloomington's Illustrated 1886 Catalog
Paris Fashions of the 1890s
Old-fashioned Ribbon Art (by Ribbon Art Publishing Co.)
Victorian Fashions from Harper's Bazaar 1867-1898
Victorian and Edwardian Fashion by Alison Gersheim a Photographic Survey

Amazon Vinegar & Pickling Works Drygoods
2218 E. 11th Street
Davenport, IA 52803-3760

Books:

From the Neck Up
American Mail Order Fashion
The Ladies' Self Instructor in Millinery 1853

Patterns:

Folk wear
Past Patterns

Shoes:

High button
High laced

Fabrics and Notions

Martha Pullen Co., Inc.
518 Madison Street
Huntsville, AL 35801 (205) 533-9586

Books on French Sewing by Machine to construct antique clothing (white wear only)

Magazine:

Sew Beautiful

Seminars on French Sewing by Machine

Campbell's
P.O. Box 400 Dept. SNJN-2
Gratz, PA 17030-0400
Patterns

Roly
730 W. 400 N
Salt Lake City, Utah 84116 (801) 539-8475
Tailor: does reproduction cycling outfits

Premier Designs
818 Selby Street
Findlay, OH 45840 (419)427-0907
Tailor: reproduction costumes; Victorian, Flapper, & '50s