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## High Wheeler

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# High Wheeler

I've been reading David Herlihy's book, *Bicycle: The History*, and I'm drawn to the *high-wheelers*. Those were the bicycles with the huge front wheel and the small back one. You may've heard them called Penny Farthings because the big and little wheels look like those old English coins, laid side by side.

But let's back up for a moment: Evolution of the modern bicycle began when German inventor Karl von Drais *unveiled* his velocipede in 1817. It was a two-wheeled *aid* to walking with a saddle and no pedals. The word bicycle was *coined* after commercial velocipedes were *equipped* with front wheel pedals, around 1867. Less than twenty years later, the bicycle found its present form with a chain driving the rear wheel - the so-called safety bicycle.

But, in that interval after the first pedalled bicycles appeared, it became clear that each rotation of the pedalled wheel would carry the rider *farther* if the diameter of the pedalled wheel were *increased*. The high-wheeler era began after pedalled front wheels appeared, and it ended with the safety bicycle. By the mid-1870s, front wheels had become nearly as tall as riders themselves.

*Mounting* a high-wheeler was an athletic *feat*. One ran down the road with the bike, then swung one leg over the wheel and made a running *leap* into the saddle. Makers finally added a step over the back wheel. That helped; but then the rider had to catch the *whirling* pedals with his feet to gain control of the machine.

No matter, this was *heady* stuff. The high-wheeler caught on. Bicycle clubs and bicycle races drew people in. Cyclists first *conquered* the four-minute mile. Then they cut that down to a little over three minutes. They raced horses and often won. Next, *endurance* trials: A cyclist did fifty miles in four hours; soon after, one did 650 miles in seven days.

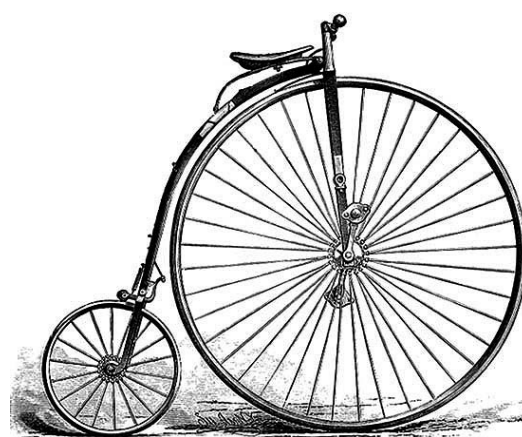
Herlihy recounts a *telling* transaction: An agent of the new *Bicycling World* magazine *scolded* the editor of an American encyclopaedia who hadn't included an entry under bicycle. The editor told him that bicycles were only toys. The agent shot back, "Is the telephone a toy? Or the Type-Writer? Or the Passenger-elevator?"

Well, what new invention isn't frivolous? What good is a newborn baby? The high-wheeler was not yet the *utilitarian* machine that everyday people wanted and needed for getting from one place to another. But then

modern safety bikes appeared, and they were the bridge between the horse and the automobile. A half century later, my first job was biking drugstore orders to local citizens.

Bikes were then as common as cars. And they've remained so (until now) on the streets of Shanghai and New Delhi. And the newborn babe, from which all that utility sprung, was to be found in that brief bright epoch of the high-wheeler - that Courier & Ives relic of carefree frivolity, that strange, seemingly unmountable machine that was the *prelude* to utility. ■

Prof. Dr. John Lienhard, University of Houston



<i>aid</i>	Hilfsmittel
<i>coin, to</i>	prägen
<i>conquer, to</i>	erobern
<i>endurance</i>	Ausdauer
<i>equip, to</i>	ausrüsten
<i>farther</i>	weiter entfernt
<i>feat</i>	(Meister-) Leistung
<i>heady</i>	berauschend
<i>high-wheeler</i>	Hochrad
<i>increase, to</i>	vergrößern, erhöhen
<i>leap</i>	Sprung
<i>mount, to</i>	besteigen
<i>prelude</i>	Auftakt
<i>scold, to</i>	ausschimpfen
<i>telling</i>	aufschlussreich
<i>unveil, to</i>	enthüllen
<i>utilitarian</i>	funktional
<i>utility</i>	Nützlichkeit
<i>whirl, to</i>	wirbeln

**Das Hochrad ist der Urahn aller Fahrräder, machte es doch das Radfahren erst richtig populär. Doch die Erfindung des Kettenantriebs ließ die filigranen Monster fast über Nacht verschwinden.**

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