Trips Awheel: Where to go and how to get there

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Cycle Route No. 7 (1897-1898 series)

Two Excellent Pikes: An easy out-and-home spin on the Montgomery Pike and the Lancaster Pike

(The stroke line indicates the route; hatched lines, wherever used, represent railroad tracks.)

For short suburban out-and-home spins over good roads and through charming surroundings, commend me to the Montgomery and the Lancaster pikes. The amount of toll charged us for their use is admittedly a drawback, and is keenly resented by the thousands who consider the bicycle a road-maker, not a road-destroyer. The adjustment of that question like that of many others, is only a matter of time, let us hope.

About forty years ago the cars of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company used to be drawn from the depot by horse or mule power, out Market street and across “the Schuylkill Permanent Bridge,” at the west end of which they were taken in tow by the steam “locomotive” (don’t smile, if you please; that’s how a railroad engine was called in those days), and away they went on their westward way through Libertyville, Athensville, White Hall, Morgan’s Corners, etc.

Now, good friends, will you choose whatever route is most convenient to you to the west end of Girard Avenue Bridge (our map of Philadelphia’s Main Outlets, May 16, will help you so far,: and there we, too, will get fairly on our road towards the very localities mentioned above, unknown though they may be to the modern cyclist under the names I have just given them.

Just beyond the bridge, let us turn sharp R under the railroad arch, enter West Fairmount Park, and follow L after we drive through its ups and downs and all its meanderings between Memorial Hall on our left and Horticultural Hall on our right, on to Belmont avenue (4 ½ m. from the Public Building).

All these we must revisit more leisurely one of these forthcoming hot days. For the nonce, we turn R and follow the noble avenue as it makes the straightest of beelines for the City line.

One mile of slow climbing brings us to the bridge that spans the new trolley track, and a quarter of a mile higher, we take a turn L which bears the label “Conshohocken Ave.,” but which is, for us, to all intents and purpose, the commencement of the Montgomery Pike.

WELSH, RIGHT AND LEFT.

We go straight through at the City line. The railroad station on L is Bala. “Bala” has a smack of Welsh about it; what else can you expect when we are so near Montgomery county or “Montgomeryshire” as they would say on “the other side.” The very next county to Montgomeryshire, in Wales, is Merionethshire, and in this latter shire is the town of Bala near the famous lake of the same name, and
amid magnificent wild scenery. Are you fond of salmon? I mean, the genuine article, fresh and luscious, a few moments after it has been “gaffed.” Think of me, if you ever take a ramble awheel to Lake Bala in North Wales. By the way, don’t forget a waterproof cloak of some kind; it’s one of the rainiest spots in Christendom or out of it.

St. Asaph’s, the handsome church on R, was the first in our section (so far as I know) to invite cyclists to attend its services. “St. Asaph” is another importation from Wales (you may have read of the little cathedral city of that name in Flintshire).

At the tollgate, on top of this first rise, we pay 1 cent to Academy, 2 cents to Narberth or 3 cents to Ardmore.

As we do so, notice how abruptly the course of our road northwestward is cut here. It went straight on toward Conshohocken once upon a time; you may see its continuation yonder on the other side of the railroad track and station for whose benefit it was made to deviate here.

We cyclists need not feel greatly concerned about the matter. The Conshohocken State Road, in spite of its many bits of romantic scenery, is practically defunct for us, so poor is its surface. You will find it easy enough to negotiate the first two or three hillocks, to go down Rock Hill to picturesque Juniper Lake and up again as far as the Roberts family estate, say a couple of miles in all; but beyond that point you cannot ride with comfort, much less with pleasure.

In any case, on our present errand, we cross the bridge, pass Cynwyd Station (how is this for Welsh?), and leaving the Conshohocken road to the tender mercies of future generations, we make straight for the rise ahead of us and coast down the other side to the tollhouse at Academy, better known as “Charlie’s Tollgate.” Charlie is an obliging fellow, and will save you the trouble of dismounting if you slacken speed and give him half a chance of tearing your ticket.

On R, before passing the tollhouse, notice a good road to the Belmont Driving Park, 2 minutes’ ride distant.

We pass the tollhouse and turn R into what used to be the old Lancaster road.

OLD LOWER MERION.

This is Academy now. Formerly it was Merionville, and farther back Merion; and time was when Gabriel Thomas spoke of “Merioneth” and “Radnor” as “countrey villages” round about Philadelphia; this was in 1694. Two years later, the Lower Merion Meeting House, which you can see on R just beyond the General Wayne Hotel, was erected.

The ground on which it stands was secured at the time for the sum of about two and a half dollars of our present currency. Edward Rees, who “let it go at that,” could easily spare it, no doubt, out of the thousand acres granted to him by the Founder; still the Friends of Lower Merion got a bargain, that’s sure.
William Penn made a practice to ride to meeting here on horseback whenever he was on a visit with his friend Robert Owen (whose house we shall see by-and-by), and he would bring some fair Quakeress behind him on a pillion. Yes, and the busy tongues of those days did not fail to remark that none but the young and good-looking ever had an opportunity to sit on that pillion, either. On the wall inside the old building, there is still a peg on which (tradition says) Penn often hung his overcoat and his hat.

Among the many notable names that you might see on the tombstones in the Meeting House graveyard, is that of Jesse George, who, with his sister Rebecca, donated to the city (some 30 years ago) that portion of the park known as George’s Hill; we passed it on our left as we came up Belmont avenue a while ago. By the way, don’t call it “St.” George’s Hill, as some people do.

The General Wayne Inn goes back, it is said, to 1704. It was then the Wayside Inn. Owing to William Penn’s frequent calls there, however, it soon became known as he William Penn Inn. Needless to say that its present appellation was bestowed upon it in honor of “Mad Anthony” at the time of the Revolution. And many a distinguished guest it received in later times, among them “Little Mac,” he of the Potomac Army, and the Calverts, of Maryland (the descendants of Lord Baltimore) during the Civil War.

What a beautiful location is that of the Seminary of the Sisters of Mercy, on R.

Notice on L by the side of the old blacksmith’s forge, a turn (Haverford avenue so-called) to Narberth (most of it is good riding) and R, at the toll-box (planted here evidently for the purpose of catching would-be toll-skippers) another road to Belmont Driving Park.

Again, a short quarter of a mile farther, do not pass by, unobserved, a memorial stone erected last fall on the corner of a piece of land on R, to remind passers-by that “on this and adjacent ground Washington’s army camped, September 14, 1777.”

CYCLERS’ REST, NARBETH.

This next hill is generally, if not officially, known as Cyclers’ Rest Hill, a noted spot along the Quaker City Wheelmen’s former five-mile race course.

About halfway up the hill we have the Old Gulf road on R; its continuation on L is now Narberth avenue. Quite a place is this Narberth! A dozen years ago, there were three houses scattered over that land, I believe.

Another turn R towards the said Old Gulf road (a picturesque, shady, old-fashioned cross-country cut) and L, up-to-date telforded Essex avenue, another of Narberth’s thoroughfares.

My map would be somewhat crowded if I were to locate upon it all the Cyclers’ Rests and Wheelmen’s Homes and Bicyclers’ Restaurants that the wheeling boom has called into existence along our highway. The Cyclers’ Rest in the angle of this road, here on R, has a special claim to recognition at our hands, for it was the first of its kind in our vicinity and has kept on growing into well-deserved popularity ever since
the Eisingers timidly opened their doors a few years ago to those fellows on wheels with the Q. C. W. badge on their caps.

202 YEARS AGO.

Half a mile beyond Cyclers’ Rest a remarkable stone house stands close to the roadside on L; do you see the date inscribed on the cornerstone, 1695?

Robert Owen, from Bala, near the Berwyn Hills, in Merionethshire, Wales, bought a tract of 442 acres hereabouts in 1691. The very words in which I have just described his native place sufficiently explain the origin of “Bala,” “Berwyn” and “Merion” as placenames in this section, I guess.

Whether Robert Owen ever dreamt of the future development of his settlement or not, he lost no time in providing a durable stone house for himself and family, and on New Year’s Day, 1695, a little over 202 years ago, he moved into the venerable structure now standing before you.

A dozen years later the house and plantation passed into the hands of another Welsh family, the Joneses, of Merion; they erected their mansion down there in the grove between this and the Lancaster pike, and all this property became known as the Jones estate.

MODERN COMFORT AND ELEGANCE.

My non-cycling readers may think I have very little to say about the condition of the road all this time. What could I say but that it is as near perfection as we can expect turnpikes to be?

Watch this next tollgate – “Old Pop’s” it is called after the good-natured old fellow who keeps it; the left fork of our road is the continuation of what was the Old Lancaster road to Ardmore. If you did not wish to extend your round trip beyond 20 miles, you might turn L here, and return home by the Lancaster pike (see map). But the riding is so easy and the surroundings are so charming; we may as well go a little farther. As to that, between this and Rosemont, the two parallel pikes are separated only by the railroad track of the Pennsylvania Railroad; you may turn, from one to the other at any time and curtail your trip as you choose.

Eleven miles from start, we have the well-known grounds of the Merion Cricket Club on R and Haverton station on L. At the next bifurcation, the R branch is the Gulf road; it was the favorite highway to Gulf Mills until the Montgomery pike attained its present standard of excellence.

Let us keep on to the left, pass by St.Luke’s Church on L, the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church on R, the Bryn Mawr Hotel, and on top of the next rise, opposite Bryn Mawr Railroad Station, take note, for future use, of Morris avenue on R. It leads to Conshohocken, en route to Norristown.

If you took this next turn L for the Lancaster pike and home, it would make a round trip of about 24 miles.

And here is pretty Rosemont where Longfellow resided for a time during our Centennial Exhibition.
AS TO HILL-CLIMBING.

Don’t be afraid of the next couple of hills that you see before you;
“Folks that’s afeared to fail are sure o’failing.”

First of all, most hills, when you come to tackle them, prove less difficult to overcome than they seem at a distance; and again if you avail yourself of it judiciously, there is wonderful virtue in a little spurt. When you come to a rise, make it a study to nurse up carefully the speed you have got up in your machine while going down the preceding incline; the chances are that it will take you up such grades as these without any practical effort on your part, and in the case of long straggling hills which you cannot “storm,” it will help you to a considerable extent.

That fellow Shakespeare, of Stratford-on-Avon, did express the opinion that
“To climb steep hills
Requires slow pace at first;”
but he knew nothing of our modern bicycle, and in this instance he had reference to
“A full-hot horse, who being allowed his way,
Self-mettle tires him;”

And the two cases are by no means parallel, the which need not be demonstrated here.

Here is one, the climbing of which was quite a feat, a few years ago. The road surface has been considerably improved since then, and our wheels have been improved even more. Still if it requires too much labor on your part to ride it up, take a friendly advice, “don’t.” You may possibly strain your mount; you will most assuredly incapacitate yourself from enjoying your ride for a certain length of time after your over-exertion. The childish boast of “having done it” is not worth all that.

THE TURNING POINT.

About a quarter of a mile beyond the top of this hill our road is crossed at right angles by Spring Mill Road; the reason of its name will become apparent if you look at its northeastern extremity on our little map.

Here, we are 13 ½ miles from start; let us cut across to the Lancaster pike; by the time we reach home we shall have covered practically 28 miles.

Spring Mill road on L takes us over the bridge at Villa Nova Station, and down till we strike the Lancaster pike; there we turn L and face homeward up the hill.

The church and cluster of buildings on the summit of the hill are those of the College of St. Thomas, of Villa Nova.

Villa Nova is Italian of course; Villaneuve in France and Neustadt in Germany, and our own familiar Newtown, all tell the same tale.
Among those trees in the field on R, opposite the college, is a spring of excellent water, the fame of which has traveled far and near. Take a note of it, as you pass by; the owners have never yet (to my knowledge) refrained the public from its use.

And now we revisit along the Lancaster pike several localities that we passed by on the Montgomery pike.

ALONG THE LANCASTER PIKE.

Here is Bryn Mawr. “Bryn Mawr,” the “big ridge,” was the native place, in Wales, of the Quaker preacher Rowland Ellis, who settled here in 1686. Even at that early date, he had been preceded here by another Welshman, Benjamin Humphreys, after whom the place was known as Humphreysville. What a wilderness this must have been at the time, 11 long miles or more from the Delaware! An Indian trail through the primeval forest was then the only prototype of the smooth roadway we are now gliding over. Those “good old days,” as some people call them.

And this is Haverford with its well known college on R. This institution is the outgrowth of a school founded here by the Society of Friends some 66 years ago.

And Ardmore, our next place, once rejoiced in the classical name of Athens or Athensville. “Ardmore” is Celtic, of course, and means the “big height.” The “Red Lion” has long been a landmark on this highway.

At the Ardmore tollgate, we are 9 miles from the Public Buildings; that turn on L goes straight to “Old Pop’s” tollgate that we noted on the Montgomery pike.

And is it not delightful riding here, as well as on the Montgomery pike?

See the Wynnewood School on L? That road by the side of it would bring you in a few seconds to Wynnewood Station. And this other, skirting Mr. Clothier’s noble domain “Ballytore” on R, was a favorite outlet to Manoa on the West Chester pike, before the recent improvement of that pike and of Market street.

Before we come to Tollgate No. 2, at the City line, you may observe amid the foliage on the height on L, a group of imposing buildings; that’s the College of St. Charles Borromeo.

A few whirls of our wheel bring us to aristocratic Overbrook – a little bit of fairyland that dropped in the middle of a big field here three of four years back; and we presently pass the last tollgate and reach Fifty-second street.

Thence we make our way home through the park by whatever route suits our convenience best.

Of the Lancaster pike we shall have more to say one of these days.

A.E.