THE WHEELMEN



NUMBER 92
MAY 2018

Riding ✣ Collecting ✣ Restoring ✣ Research ✣ History



Baby Bliss: World's Heaviest Cyclist

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Baby Bliss

When Baby mounts his wheel,
The folks all stop upon
the boulevard,
And stand and look and wonder
long and hard.
He mounts so straightly
the pneumatic tire,
That all his pigmy friends can
but admire.
As Cassius said of old,
"He doth bestride
(His wheel) like some colossus."
See him ride!
And lo, it seems when his fair form
has flown,
As if a section of the town
had gone,
When Baby rides his wheel.

When Baby rides his wheel,
His striped stockings radiate
before a
Fellow like the northern lights
aurora;
Bicycle pants of such a
modest size
To take them in requires
two pairs of eyes.
A sweater, cut to hold
four hundred weight,
And jaunty cap, the girls to
captivate.
They all admire, and murmur
as they see,
"He'd look so well in bloomers,
O dear me,"
When Baby rides his wheel.

— Edward Wilson, 1895[1]

The rhyme and meter may be regrettably forced in this tribute to the man best known as "Baby Bliss": nevertheless, Edward Wilson's words can still serve as an introduction to a character who was truly larger than life. Historians who study bicycling are familiar with the golden era of American cycling that occurred during the last decade of the 19th century. During that decade, Americans went bicycle crazy. Bicycle manufacturing was a major industry, joining a bicycle club was a mark of social distinction, and bicycle racing rivaled baseball as the most popular spectator sport in the country.

Victorian entertainment options were quite limited by today's standards. Traveling vaudeville acts, minstrel shows, and circuses were common sources of entertainment. Baby Bliss is one of only a few people who bridged the world of the cyclist and that of the circus sideshow act. Sideshow acts certainly had a history of exploitation from circus managers and other sources, but Baby Bliss was apparently able to leverage his great size to make a living and travel the world promoting bicycles.

Leonard H. Bliss was born in rural Central Illinois on May 4, 1865. Coincidentally, this was also the same day Abraham Lincoln was laid to rest not too far away in a Springfield cemetery. Leonard weighed 12 pounds at birth. Various historical accounts maintain that neither his parents nor siblings were of notable size. By age 11 Leonard was 6 feet tall and weighed 190 pounds. Six years later he had reached 280 pounds and continued to grow. He spent one year studying at Illinois State Normal University (now Illinois State University) and another at nearby Illinois Wesleyan University.

By 1890, Leonard had begun working as a traveling salesman for the wholesale Chisholm Gray Company[2]. In this role he also sold locally made cigars whose box carried his image and the name "Our Baby." This seems to be the earliest mention of the nickname "Baby Bliss." The origins of the nickname derive from Leonard's friend, William McCambridge, the editor of the local newspaper. There was a young girl in the neighborhood whom McCambridge had taken to calling "Baby Bliss." One day when Leonard was with him it occurred to William that "Baby Bliss" would also be a fitting tongue-in-cheek nickname for Leonard. The name stuck and by the mid-1890s Leonard Bliss was commonly referred to as Baby Bliss.[3]

Local newspapers also documented the first of Leonard's mental health difficulties beginning in the 1890s. In 1890 and then again in 1893 the papers mention court-mandated trips to local insane asylums. The papers and courts speculated on potential causes suggesting "dissipation" (a condition often caused by heavy drinking) or digestive problems.[4]

By the mid-1890s, Baby Bliss was well-known in Central Illinois for his tremendous size. Multiple accounts state his weight at this time to have been around 500 pounds. Around the country, and particularly in nearby Peoria and Chicago, the bicycle boom was underway. During the 1890s, Illinois was home to nearly 400 different bicycle companies.[5] The sheer number of bicycle companies meant intense competition between these companies to distinguish their particular bicycle from everyone else's. Assembling teams of amateur and professional racers was a common strategy for those companies who could afford it. Others hired famous artists to create elaborate catalogs, posters, and advertisements. In an era of shoddy manufacturing from many smaller companies, durability and strength were important selling points. Eventually someone had the idea to put the heaviest cyclist they could find on their bicycle for visual proof of durability. Enter Baby Bliss.

How Baby Bliss initially became connected with the International Manufacturing Company in Chicago has been lost over time. One of the most intriguing pieces of

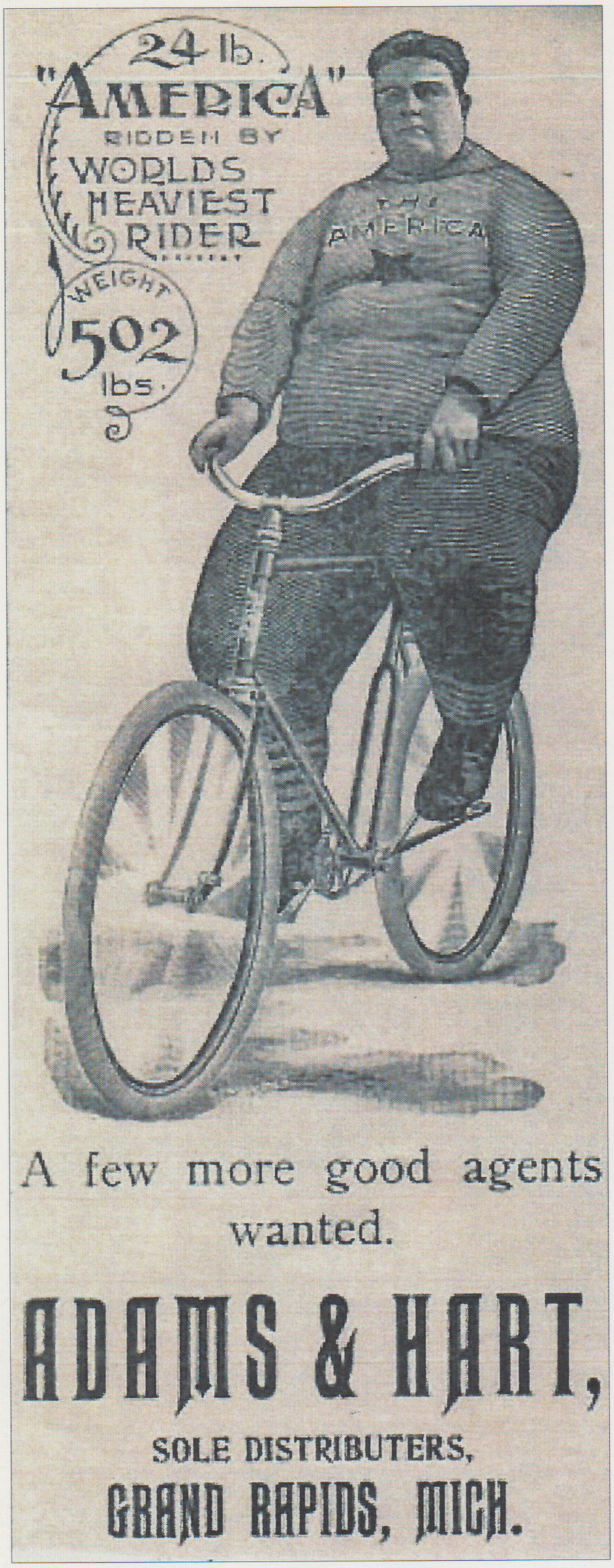


FIGURE 2. 502 POUND BABY BLISS
"America" advertisement.
(Courtesy of Online Bicycle Museum:
http://www.oldbike.eu/iverjohnson/?page_id=582)

documentary evidence from Baby Bliss's early career with International Manufacturing Company is a picture of Bliss with a young Ignaz Schwinn. [Figure 1, see front cover.] In the photo, Bliss wears a jersey advertising for "The America," which was International Manufacturing Company's best-selling model.

It is stated in the Schwinn Company history published in 1945 for their 50th anniversary, Ignaz came from Germany to Chicago in 1891 and "went to work for Hill & Moffat."[6] This problematic statement has since been repeated verbatim in many subsequent histories even though "Hill & Moffat" never actually existed as a bicycle company. What Ignaz was likely saying is that he went to work for Mark W. Hill and George D. Moffatt. Moffatt was President of Moffatt (sometimes spelled with only one "t") Cycles which was incorporated in Chicago in 1891. Mark W. Hill was the treasurer of the company. There was a falling out between Hill and Moffatt that resulted in a slander case filed by Moffatt against Hill. By 1893, Moffatt Cycles was bankrupt and George Hill along with Frank Fowler had incorporated Hill Manufacturing Company.

During this period Ignaz had left Moffatt Cycles to set up a new factory for the Chicago-based International Manufacturing Company. After establishing the factory, Ignaz continued his work as superintendent. Referring again to the Schwinn company history, Ignaz worked for the International Manufacturing Company until sometime in 1894. The next year he would found the famous Arnold, Schwinn and Company.[7]

Interestingly, the first mentions (and there are many) of Baby Bliss as a cyclist all date from 1895. This discrepancy in dates that would seem to have only two likely explanations. One possibility is that even though Schwinn had founded his own bicycle company in 1895, he was still willing to be photographed with Baby Bliss who was advertising for a company he had recently left. The second possibility is that contrary to published histories, Schwinn was still associated with International Manufacturing Company in 1895.[8]

In any case, by the summer of 1895 newspapers and cycling publications were abuzz with stories about Baby Bliss on a bicycle. In May, he served as one of the "limit men" in the Chicago Pullman Road Race. The Pullman was one of the premier cycling events in the country at the time. Limit men were the first starters in a handicapped event; they often started 10 minutes or more ahead of the "scratch men" who started last with no time advantage. By most accounts, Baby never finished any of these longer events; it was less about racing and more about spectacle and advertising. *The Referee* noted that he rode a 24-pound America bicycle in the Pullman race, so it would appear this particular advertising scheme was somewhat effective from the beginning.[9] Accounts over the next few years differ in whether Baby rode a stock America bicycle or one specially reinforced to hold his weight. The bicycle he rode is always listed as weighing between 22 and 26 pounds so a stock frame is quite likely (for example, see [Figure 2] for one of these advertisements).

In July, *The Referee* noted that Baby Bliss was traveling the country riding Morgan and Wright tires. Morgan and Wright was a large Chicago-based tire company who also tapped Baby Bliss to help prove the durability of their tires.[10] By August, *The Bearings* reported that Bliss weighed 502 pounds and was in Omaha, Nebraska where he "raced" a quarter mile exhibition race.[11]

Someone of Baby's size riding a bicycle was a novelty similar to those promoted by circus sideshows of the time. In 1896, an Iowa newspaper gave a colorful account of a child's perception of Baby Bliss:

> Yo' jes' ought to see him! He's about seven er eight feet high, as wide as th' table. He weighs 502 pounds. How much do I weigh, mamma?...One of his stockins would jes' about make a good sweater fer me. When he walks

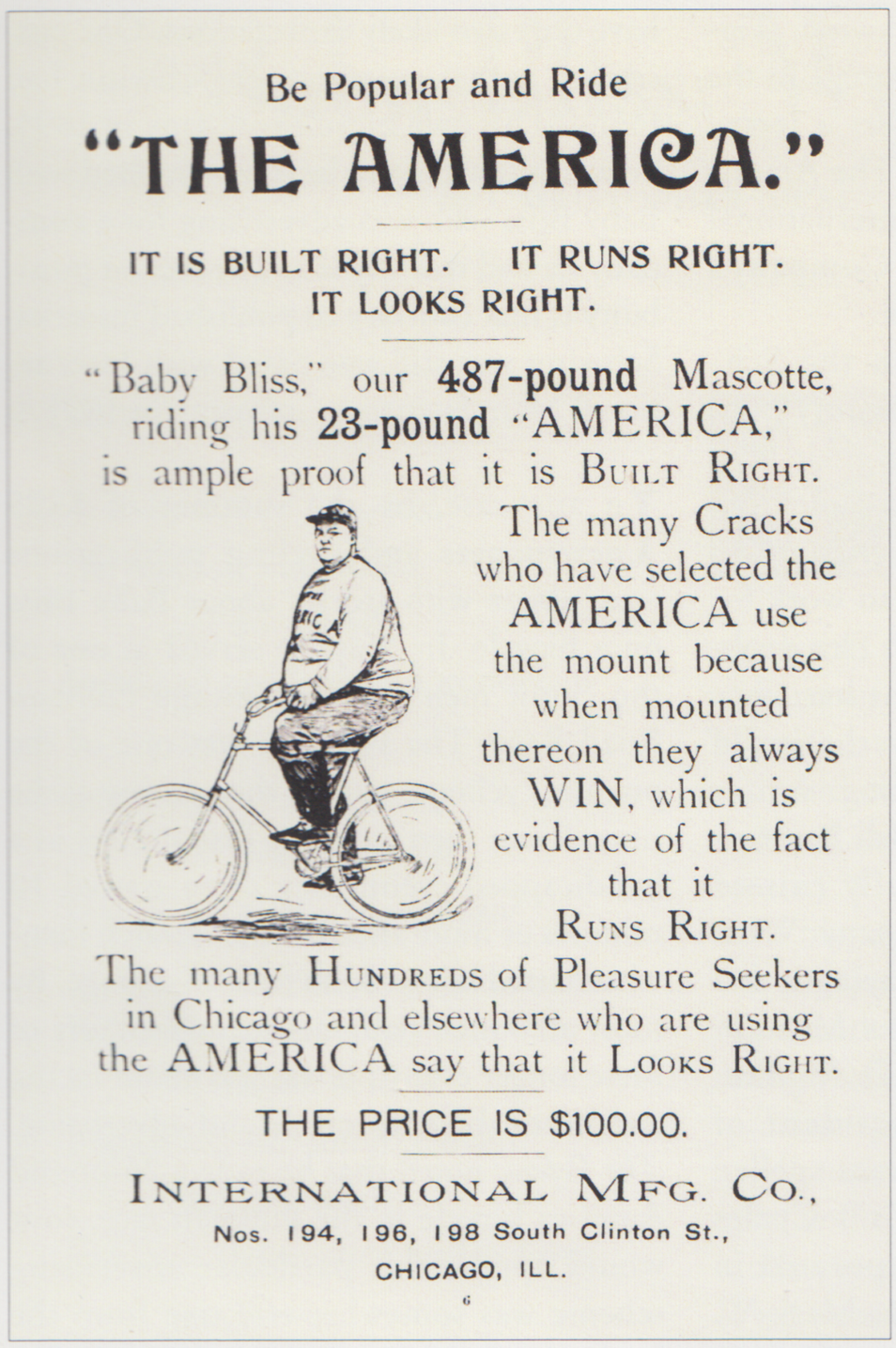


Figure 3. Baby Bliss advertising from the 1890s *for The America. (From the author's collection)*

he walks like a duck. He can't get his heels together — that's no lie, he can't. His leg below the knee is about as big as my body. W'en he gets onto his wheel you ought to see 'im. He's a sight. No, the wheel ain't any bigger'n any other…when he gets on you wouldn't believe it would hold him, but it does. When folks in a lookin', I expect he breaks a good many…He don't ride fur at a time, but you ought to see him. I tell you, he's a sight. He's 23 years old, an bigger'n you, an' papa, an' gramma all put together. He's good natured, too, an' he likes to have th' kids foller him. I follered 'im all th' afternoon an' he never said a word to me excep' when I got too near, an' he says to me, he ses, "get out o' th' way, kid, er I might fall on ye an' squash ye," an' I got out o' th' way, you bet.[12]

During the following year, it was reported that Baby Bliss attended every major bicycle show in the country. By the summer of 1896 the International Manufacturing Company decided to use Baby Bliss to help expand their export market. Along with Mr. F.A. Hastings who managed the company, Baby headed to Europe on the steamship Umbria. The pair stayed in London for two months during which time Baby Bliss took daily rides through the streets. Again, using Bliss as an advertising gimmick was effective since the International Manufacturing Company inked a contract with a London company for 500 wheels. [Figure 3] Bliss's time in London included more than just riding the city streets; he also participated in some exhibition races. One county history recounts that Bliss had a personal record of 1:42 for the half mile and that he won a gold medal at Stanford Hill, London for a race between "the American giant and the English midget." [13] After his stay in London, Baby went on an extensive European excursion which included "Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburg, Brussels, Utrecht, The Hague where he rode in the parade with representatives of the royal family of Holland; Dover, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Christiana, Hamburg, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Belfast, Dublin, Londonderry, Cork, and Queenstown." [14]

Baby Bliss appears to be the first of the fat men to advertise for bicycle companies. The cycling magazines and newspapers of the day mention a few others who used their great size to advertise for different cycling companies. In an article entitled, "The Fat Men," *The Bearings* magazine mentions a few of Baby Bliss's rivals:

> He [Baby Bliss] laughs at the idea of "Little Johnny Spark" being larger or heavier than himself, and a comparison of the two gives Bliss the best of the argument. The maker who will secure these two fat men, with their half-ton of *avoirdupois,* and place them on a tandem will secure a great advertising medium. Gen. Joe Poorman formerly had a man named Grimes in his employ in Cincinnati whose weight was 428 pounds and whose size would compare very favorably with that of either of these men, and who undoubtedly could be secured if more of this class of advertising were wanted. Grimes is liveli-



Figure 4. Joe Grimes *on a Cleveland Bicycle — an 1890s advertisement. (from www.thewheelmen.org/the Forum, October 9, 2013)*

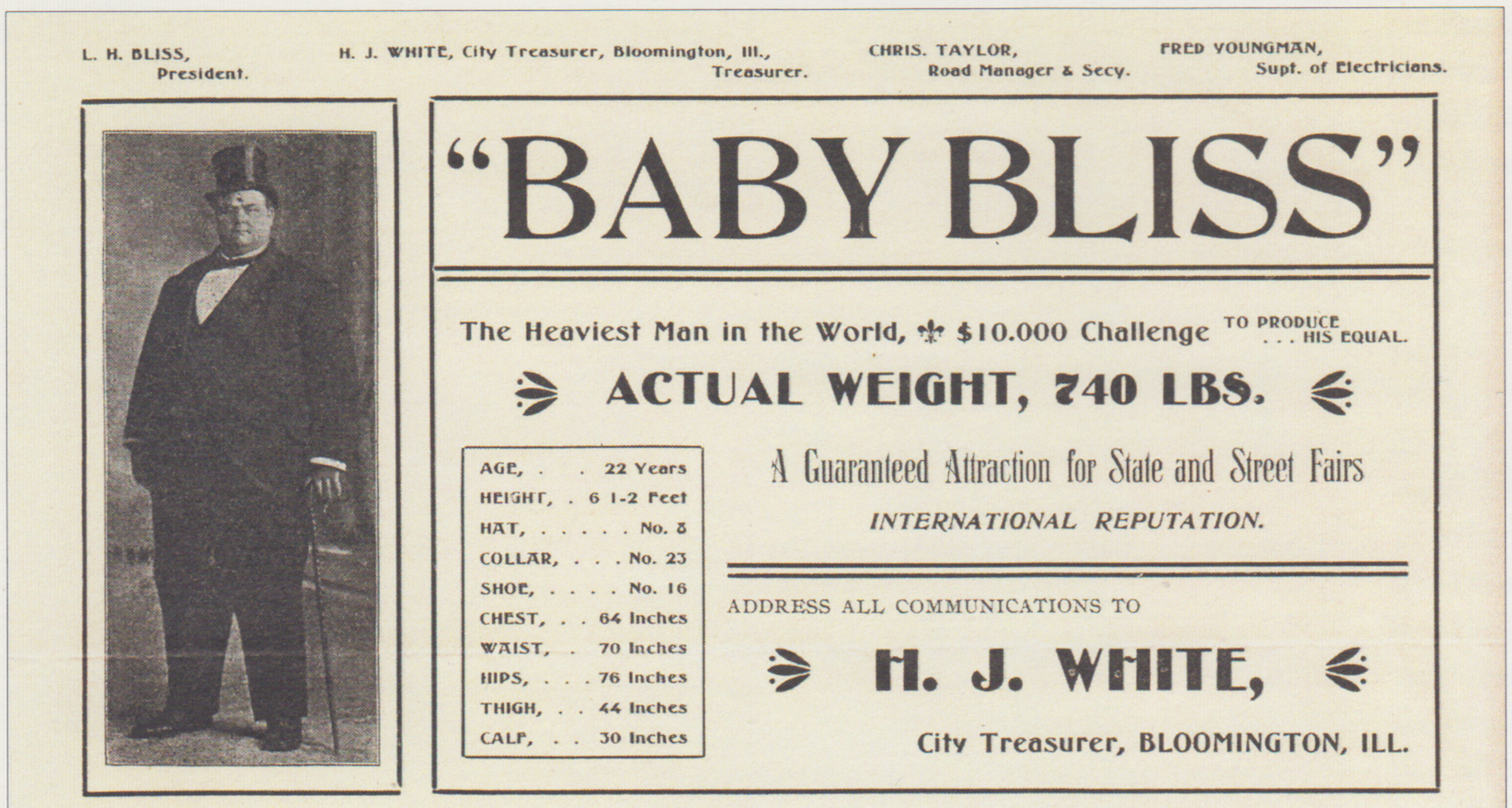


FIGURE 5. "A GUARANTEED ATTRACTION *for State and Street Fairs." Baby Bliss' personal business card.*
(Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History)

er than either Spark or Bliss, being a tower of strength. His muscles are hard, and he can kick to the height of his head without difficulty. Grimes is considerably over six feet, and at one time traveled with the Barnum show as the champion fat man.[15] [Figure 4]

Further research indicates that Joe Grimes was hired in the mid-1890s to advertise for Cleveland Bicycles. In 1896, the *Shenango Valley News* wrote that Grimes weighed 475 ½ pounds on the local town scale. Later, in 1899, *Scientific American* wrote that Grimes claimed to weigh 567 pounds.[16]

Sometime after his short bicycle advertising career, Baby Bliss produced a self-promotional flyer claiming that he was the "Heaviest Man in the World" at 740 pounds. [Figure 5] This figure is surely an exaggeration given Bliss's previous documented weights and given his appearance in the photograph included on the flyer. Sensational, inflated metrics were common at the time.

For the years in which they overlapped as bicycle advertisers (1896-1897), it would appear that Baby Bliss had a slight weight edge, but Grimes may have gone on to take the mantle of "World's Heaviest Cyclist." Of course, the title, "World's Heaviest," should be taken with a grain of salt as no real effort went into determining if there were heavier riders in Europe or other parts of the world. Baby Bliss's self-promoting flyer also claimed that he was a "Guaranteed Attraction for State and Street Fairs." The passage above from *The Bearings*[15] notes that Joe Grimes, "once traveled with the Barnum show."

Taken together, these statements are significant since they establish a direct link between these sensationalist fat cyclists as advertisers as well as their involvement with circus and vaudeville culture. Seen within a historical spectrum, these fat cyclists can be seen as precursors of later circus bicycle performers who were known for their skill and daring as opposed to mere novelty or spectacle.

Between 1896 and 1897 the International Manufacturing Company changed its name to America Cycle Manufacturing Company. Apparently, the change came about to put more focus on their most successful model, "The America," which Baby Bliss promoted. In the end the name change would have little effect since the bicycle boom of the 1890s was quickly coming to an end. Bicycle prices were falling rapidly, a state of affairs exacerbated by overproduction. The America, still priced at $100 could not have sold very well. Indeed, only a year later surplus Americas were being disposed of for a mere $35.

Yet, Baby Bliss continued to make his rounds. In January, he was at the America Cycle Manufacturing Company booth at the big bicycle show held in the Chicago Coliseum; followed by the Boston Cycle Show in February.[17] He rode at least the first mile (in 8:30) of the Pullman race in July.[18]

On September 8, 1897, the *New York Times* reported that an aggregate judgement of $30,102 was leveled against the America Cycle Manufacturing Company after-which the company — like so many others — soon ceased to exist. Mere days after this judgement *The World* (New York), and other papers, reported that promoters were trying to set up a race between 3-year-old cyclist Lester Oppenheimer and Baby Bliss

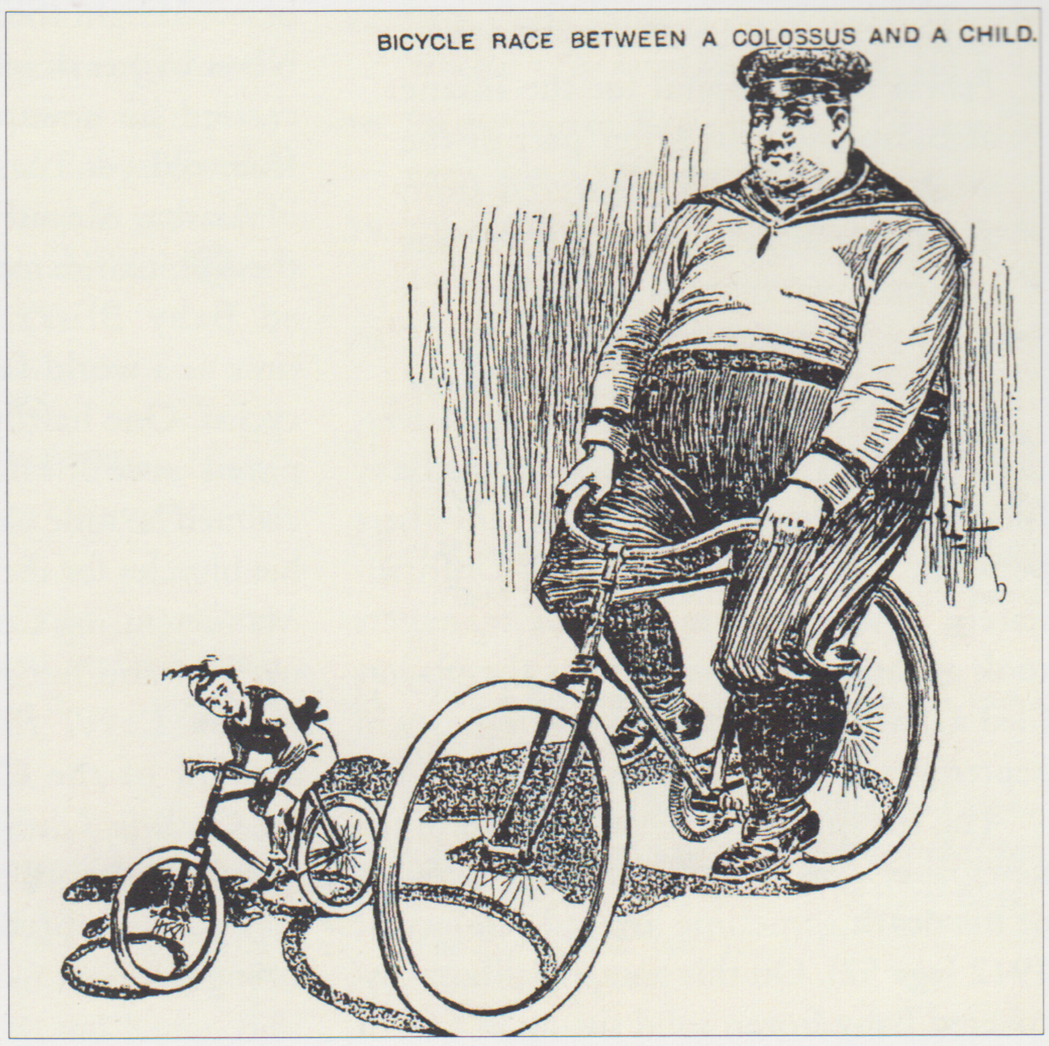


FIGURE 6. "PROPOSED RACE *between Baby Bliss and a 3-year-old cyclist".* (The World *[New York], September 18, 1897)*

at the Chicago Coliseum. In this article, no mention is made of The America and the accompanying illustration depicts Baby Bliss without his signature company jersey. [Figure 6]

Baby Bliss's cycling career ended in 1897, but he would go on to leverage his great size and the notoriety he gained during the cycling boom for future employment. In 1898, he ran unsuccessfully for police magistrate in Bloomington, Illinois. [Figure 7]

Beginning in 1902, Baby Bliss's mental health problems returned. He was declared insane and was in and out of various asylums from 1902 to 1910. A few newspapers even erroneously reported that he had died at the Jacksonville asylum in May of 1907.[19] His asylum stays appear not to have been long as newspapers continued to report on his presence at various fairs, circuses, and sideshows throughout this period.

In 1910 Baby Bliss began the final chapter in his sporting career when he joined the "Fat Men's Baseball Team":

> Under contract to become captain of the Fat Men's Baseball and Amusement company, "Baby" Bliss of Bloomington, who weighs 525 pounds and is conceded to be the heaviest man in the country, will leave in a few days for Waterloo, Iowa, where the team will start on a tour after ten days practice. Bliss is to receive a salary of about $200 a month. He will be released from the Peoria state hospital for the insane at Bartonville the latter part of the week, having fully recovered from a nervous attack, for which he was confined two months ago.[20]

The total weight of the team was advertised as 4,000 pounds. Papers credit Baby Bliss at this time with a weight of anywhere between 525 and 650 pounds. Unfortunately, it would seem that the managers took advantage of the team as the players filed a lawsuit against them for back pay in September of 1910.[21] [Figure 8]

The last time Baby Bliss appeared in the newspapers was for rather morbid accounts of his death sometime around January 4, 1912 (age 52). On this date, neighbors discovered Baby frozen solid sitting in a chair

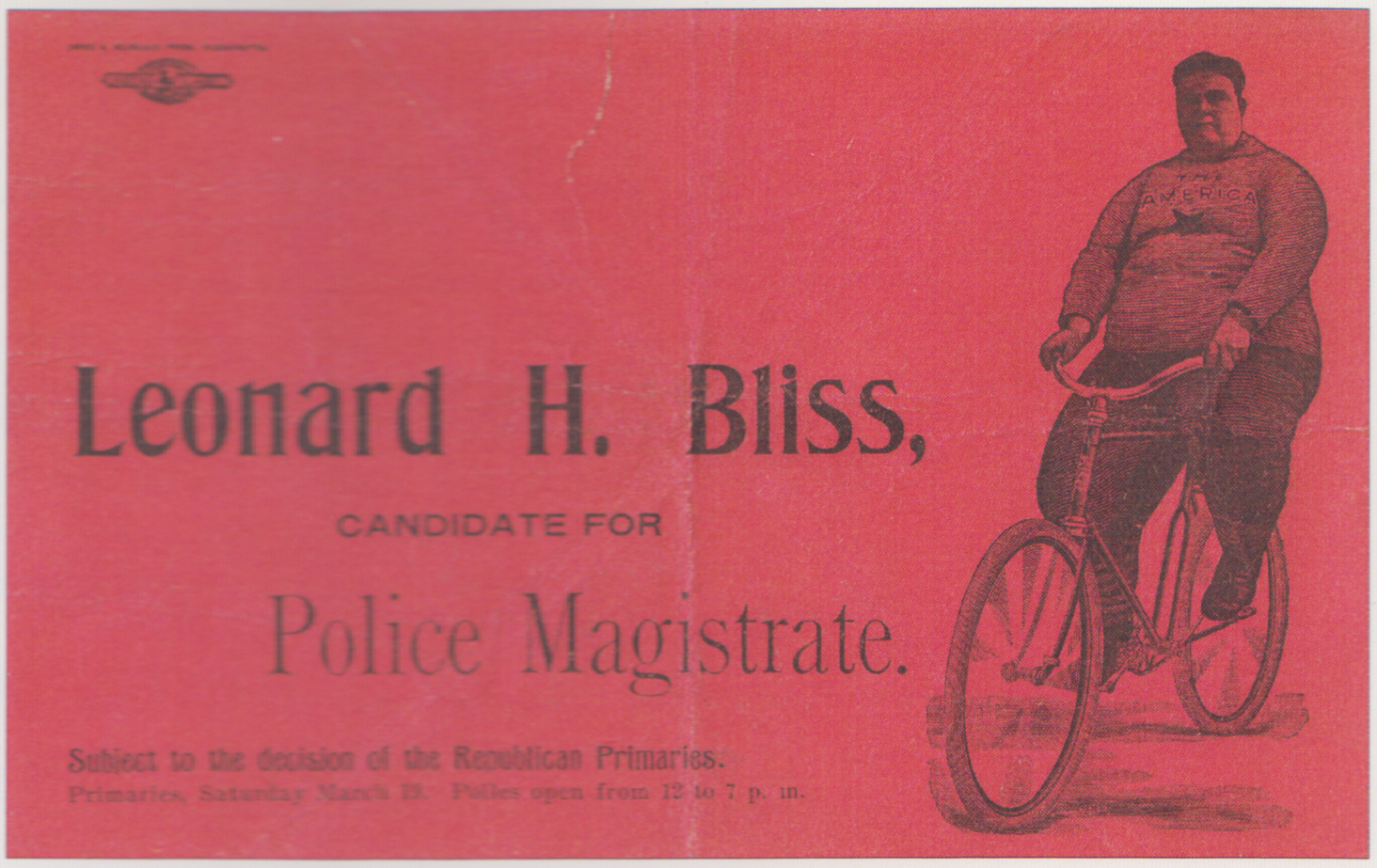


FIGURE 7. BABY BLISS FOR *Police Magistrate.*
(Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History)

in his home. There was a strong odor of natural gas and the valves to the gas stove were open. Friends dismissed the idea that he had committed suicide. The most likely explanation was that Baby had attempted to warm himself by the gas stove and either the pilot light went out or he was overcome by the gas before he could light the stove. News of his death was carried by newspapers from coast to coast and in Alaska. Almost all of these obituaries recounted Baby Bliss's brief time as a world-famous cyclist. One hastily prepared account falsely claimed he rode Columbia bicycles for the Pope Manufacturing Company.[22] In another paper, James Levy, former captain of the Chicago Cycling Club provided an almost mythical account of Baby's strength:



FIGURE 8. FAT MEN'S *Baseball Team.*
(Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History)



FIGURE 9. BABY BLISS *Gravestone, Towanda, Illinois.*
(From the author's collection.)

Not only was Bliss a man of tremendous frame, but he was possessed of extraordinary strength. At one time he was employed by J.E. Foreman, a bicycle manufacturer at Cincinnati. His task was the shaping of handle bars. The ordinary worker at this line was forced to heat the steel before he could get the desired shape. Not so with Bliss. He took the cold steel in his hands and bent it into the desired form with seemingly little effort.[23]

Since this is the only account of Bliss working in Cincinnati, it is likely that Mr. Levy was actually remembering Bliss's fat cyclist competitor, Joe Grimes.

As soon as his death was known a special rush order for an oversized casket was sent to Chicago: "It measures 6 feet 4 inches in length, 3 feet wide and 2 feet and 1 inch in depth. It is built of the heaviest oak." The newspapers further reported that it took a few days for Baby's body to thaw from the sitting position that he had been found in. 300 people attended his funeral and 10 pall bearers braved 20 degree below zero temperatures to lay Baby to rest in a nearby Towanda cemetery.[24] [Figure 9]

What does Baby Bliss's life have to teach us about bicycle history and American history in general? Baby Bliss's success as an advertiser derived from the same sort of human spectacle that circus sideshows and fairs relied on to attract crowds. Many of these acts featured people with extreme physical deformities and were exploited by circus managers and promoters. College-educated Baby Bliss, on the other hand, actively marketed himself to these venues and was able to leverage his weight into a livelihood.

As discussed above, during the bicycle boom of the 1890s manufacturers sought any sort of gimmick or strategy that would help their product stand out from the crowd. As evidenced by the volume of contemporary newspaper and magazine references, putting Baby Bliss on a bicycle was an effective marketing strategy for the International Manufacturing Company. Seeing the 500-plus pound Baby Bliss riding along on an America bicycle was surely a powerful testament of durability.

ENDNOTES

1. Wilson, Edward. "Edward Wilson Diary". Nov.-Dec., 1895. McLean County Museum of History.
2. "Baby Bliss' Top Weight, 565." *Daily Pantagraph*, Jun. 5, 1942 and McLean County, Illustrated Brookhaven Press, 1899, 715-717.
3. "'Baby' Bliss, Bloomington's Giant, Dead." *The Pantagraph*, Jan. 5, 1912, 6.
4. "Leonard Bliss Insane." *The Pantagraph*, Apr. 30, 1890; and "Taken to Kankakee." *The Leader*, Jan. 28, 1893, 8; and Kemp, Bill. "Celebrity Life of Baby Bliss Mired in Tragedy." *Pantagraph*, Jul 3, 2016. *http://search.proquest.com/docview/1803243467*.
5. These numbers are derived from the list of bicycle manufacturers compiled by the Wheelmen: *http://www.thewheelmen.org/sections/bicyclebrands/bicycle-brands-companies.php* combined with those identified through the author's research.
6. Arnold, Schwinn and Company. *Fifty Years of Schwinn-Built Bicycles.* Chicago: 1945, 7-9.
7. Ibid.
8. (Editor's Note: A third possibility is that the picture was actually taken in 1894 or earlier, at least sometime before Ignaz Schwinn left the International Cycle Company.)
9. "The Chicago Road Race." *The Referee* 15, no. 5 (May 31, 1895): 192.
10. "Morgan and Wright Victories." *The Referee* 15, no. 10 (July, 1895).
11. "Banker is Defeated." *The Bearings* 12, no. 1 (Aug. 1, 1895).
12. "Baby Bliss on a Wheel." *The Upper Des Moines*, Jun. 17, 1896, 5.
13. *McLean County, Illustrated.* Brookhaven Press, 1899, 715-717.
14. "'Baby' Bliss, Bloomington's Giant, Dead." *The Pantagraph*, Jan. 5, 1912, 6.
15. *The Bearings,* Vol. 12, Issue No. 25 (January 16, 1896), p. 28, "The Fat Men", an article within the Section titled: "AFTERMATH OF THE SHOW".
16. "Big Joe Grimes." *Shenango Valley News*, Jul. 17, 1896, 1. and "Grotesque Forms of Cycles." *Scientific American* 81, no. 27 (Dec. 30, 1899): 421-422.
17. "Big Cycle show is on Wheels! Wheels! Wheels!" *The InterOcean*, Jan. 24, 1897, 7.
18. "At the Start of the Great Race." *Chicago Tribune*, July 6, 1897.
19. "'Baby Bliss' Dead." *Rock Island Argus and Daily Union*, May, 9, 1907.
20. "Baby Bliss as Base Ball Captain." *The Pantagraph*, Mar. 29, 1910.
21. "Fat Ball Players Sue for Back Pay." *The Pantagraph*, Sept. 13, 1910.
22. "Leonard 'Baby' Bliss, Bloomington's Largest Citizen is found Dead." *The Daily Bulletin*, Jan. 4, 1912, 2.
23. "'Baby' Bliss, Bloomington's Giant, Dead." *The Pantagraph*, Jan. 5, 1912, 8.
24. "Leonard 'Baby' Bliss, Bloomington's Largest Citizen is found Dead." *The Daily Bulletin*, Jan. 4, 1912, 8; and "Funeral of Baby Bliss." *The Pantagraph*, Jan. 12, 1912.