

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Wheelers, Away!

"Who can look upon a wheel
Its noiseless bows and arms of steel.
Or gaze upon the silent steed
Carrying its load with utmost speed.
Without feeling a thrill at joy
To see the old man once again a boy?"

The above is the opening paragraph of a story written 68 years ago in the Monterey Cypress telling of a visit on Monterey by the San Francisco Bicycle Club and of the reception given the members at the home at Harry Greene in New Monterey. Mr. Greene had been a fellow member at the club but had been prevented by illness from taking an active part in the organization for some time.

This well-known club in those days had been in existence for some 15 years or more and was the oldest organization of its kind in the United States. At one time it counted among its members ex-Governor Perkins, who was one of the organizers, and many gentlemen of "the governor's caliber" and the elite of the city.

The Sunday event about which we write today was the club's 15th run, intended especially to visit Harry Greene. To illustrate the type of journalism used in the Cypress almost 75 years ago, we will repeat a paragraph describing the men who were interested in bicycling and referring to the bit of poetry above:

"These and many other thoughts have frequently flashed through our minds as time and again we have seen these men, whose beards had been sprinkled with grey and whose pantaloons in some cases had become a world too small for their 'shrounk shank,' paddling along on their silent steed; moving or rather gliding by like a passing vision until turning a corner they have vanished out of sight. Many a time we have wished that the world was less skeptical, less prone to look upon the cyclist, through the glasses of ridicule that we too might enjoy the passing sensation which one must undergo when cognizant of the fact that, like a fairy, he is vanishing from the sight of human eyes, and were it not that our avoirdupois is against us, we long ere this would have joined the army of cyclists which is yearly growing in numbers."

Then the following praise:

"But it not until Sunday morning that the climax of our admiration for the wheel was reached. To see thirty strapping, well-built young men, springing with cat-like agility upon their wheels, and then a well-drilled regiment glide noiselessly along through our public streets, should be enough to make anyone feel friendly to the vehicle. It was just such a sight that completely captivated us."

Mr. Greene had heard of the event and so had prepared for a gay reception for the San Francisco Bicycle Club. A "unique and commodious tent" had been stretched on the green lawn south of the "elegant mansion," and with the assistance of the "female members" and visitors of the family, festoons of flowers and evergreen encircled the tent; the door being surmounted by the wheelman's emblem, the wheel being made of flowers, and in the center a genuine pair of wings - the handiwork at Mr. Greene's only daughter."

The article goes on to relate that there were three long tables stretched under the tent where the visiting wheelmen were entertained at a real Spanish luncheon. To say the boys did justice to the chile con carne, enchiladas, tamales, frijoles. etc., capped with American roast beef, mashed potatoes, French wines, and Yankee pies, would be putting it lightly, but for such a jolly crowd nothing would have tasted bad, so the reporter thought and recorded.

The club presented Mr. Greene with a beautiful bicycle made of flowers, and then after a run through the Grove and Monterey, and a swim in the bath house of Del Monte, the 30 light-hearted lads "mounted the bars and were soon rolling, headed for the iron horse."

Harry Greene's home still stands on Lighthouse avenue in New Monterey, directly opposite Scholze Park, a two-story white building set in what was formerly a charming and extensive garden. We remember when the house was painted red and the moon-shaped cut-outs on the upper story were fascinating. There was a large redwood tree to the east of the house which became, under Harry Greene's reign, probably the first lighted Christmas tree on the Peninsula. The tree has been cut down recently and an apartment house has taken its place.

Greene was owner and manager of the Monterey Hotel for many years. He was also a real garden lover and assisted in making many of the home gardens and the municipal gardens the beautiful spots they are today.

His nick-name was "Tin Can Greene" for the reason that he grew in cans all sorts of trees and shrubs to give away to those who wished to plant and care for them. By city ordinance, after his death, the little island in the middle of El Estero Lake was named Harry Greene Island, in honor of the man who had done so much to make Monterey beautiful.

Greene was born in San Francisco in 1852 and he claimed before his death to be the only person alive who had attended the first Admission Day ball. Sept. 9, 1850, asleep in the cloak room, while his parents danced.