

## Meet the Wheelwoman

### Fact Sheet

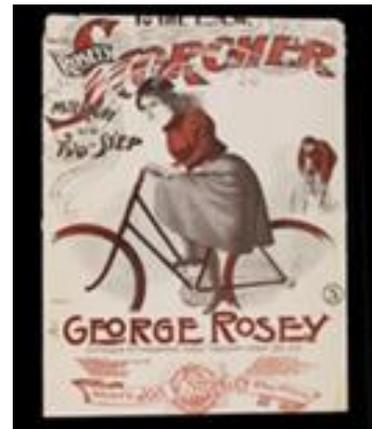
#### Wheelwoman="Untrammelled Womanhood"

The newest program in the "History Alive!" theater series at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History hits the road beginning July 1 when visitors get the opportunity to "Meet the Wheelwoman."

In the program, the fictional character of Louise Gibson is based on real women and their experiences at the forefront of the bicycle craze sweeping America in the late 1800s. The year is 1895, and Louise has just ridden in on her bicycle, "Sylvia," from the recently established railroad town of Takoma Park, Md. to visit the nation's capital and the Smithsonian for the day. Join her at the wheel, as she rides through the Smithsonian and around the National Mall, discovering new sites and newfound freedom.

Louise Gibson and her husband, a railway man, have moved to Takoma Park from an urban area, leaving Louise in need of transportation. Not willing to keep a horse, her husband buys her a bicycle, allowing her to travel freely wherever she pleases. From the 1880s to the 1910s, Americans took to the wheel, sparking a nationwide bicycle craze. In the era before automobiles, bicycles were a means of affordable personal mobility. Americans went to new places and felt differently about themselves.

Americans got their first look at bicycles—high-wheel "machines" from England—at the Centennial Exhibition in 1876. Within two years, brisk sales of imported bikes led to domestic manufacturing as more Americans caught wheel fever. The introduction of chain-drive safety bikes in the late 1880s that lowered the rider's center of gravity, then air-filled tires and coaster brakes in the 1890s, made bicycles more accessible.



Louise draws inspiration from contemporaries such as Annie Londonderry, who in January of 1895 began her cross-country bicycle tour; Frances Willard, the leader of the Women's Temperance Movement and the author of "A Wheel Within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle" and from guides such as "Bicycling for Ladies" written by Maria E. Ward. She also observes and imitates the female members of a local D.C. bicycle club. As such clubs emerged throughout the country, small outings turned into large social tours and closed the distance between cities and towns. Bicycle racing became as big as baseball and the boom of bicycle sales had every man, woman, and child learning how to ride.

Throughout the 1800s, the Rational Dress Reform Society promoted garments that allowed women to move more freely compared to the heavy petticoats of the past. A proponent of rational dress, Amelia Bloomer developed a style of bi-furcated baggy trousers worn under skirts to replace petticoats. However,

they were only worn by a small minority of women until after her death in 1895, when the bicycle captured the imagination of women across the nation. Only the most daring of American women chose to wear bloomers; many opted for specialty cycling skirts with buttoning panels or other features. Most wore sturdy wool skirts that were just a bit shorter, or gathered their skirt with a special clip.

Not only was appropriate dress essential for riding a bicycle, but so were good roads. The roads Louise would have traveled were passable, but many country roads were found to be poor, bad, or even “vile” as one road guide warned, and thus unsuitable for bicycling. Bicyclists in the League of American Wheelmen such as Louise grew tired of the poor conditions and eventually began a movement to pave country roads and improve infrastructure connecting cities, called the Good Roads Movement. With good roads, rural areas could enjoy the same transportation benefits as urban citizens and bicyclists would be able to see more of the country. By 1892, the movement went national when the League began publishing *Good Roads Magazine* and by the 1920s a national highway construction campaign had been signed into law.

The museum’s “Wheelwoman” Louise is played by costumed interpreter Julie Garner, who will be riding an authentic 1898 safety bicycle named “Sylvia” around both the museum and the National Mall. Louise will be discussing movements such as Rational Dress, Good Roads, and women’s rights with visitors and how the not-so-ordinary bicycle played a most crucial part in shaping these movements and our world today.

### **Wheelwoman=Untrammelled Womanhood**

By the late 19th century, the safety bicycle allowed women such as Louise to leave their homes and demonstrate their independence and self-sufficiency. At the age of 35 with two children out of the house, Louise would have been one of many women in a time of self-discovery, wondering where a woman’s place in the modern world lay. Many women were involved with the Temperance movement including Louise, which leads her to contemplate other women’s issues such as suffrage. If a woman can ride a machine all on her own across the country, there must certainly be endless possibilities for what else a woman can do.

### **HIGHLIGHTED OBJECTS**

- **Mrs. Mary Noble (Mittie) Wiley’s Bicycle, 1896**

“Object Project” features a Columbia bicycle that was customized by Tiffany & Co. in 1896. It boasts a nickel-plated frame with gold-plated sterling silver ornamentation, ivory handlebar grips, and a sterling silver lantern with a rock crystal lens. The bike bears the monogram of its owner Mrs. M.N. Wiley, the wife of a wealthy congressman from Montgomery, Alabama (whose initials are embellished with tiny diamonds and emeralds).

- **Hands-On Carts**

In facilitated activities, visitors will be able to handle authentic objects cyclists would have needed for a road trip and piece together the stories they hold. Louise will be interacting with the objects and visitors at these carts.