LOS ANGELES

The first stretch of the California Cycleway. | Courtesy of Pasadena Museum of History, Main Photo Collection, C16-12. Gift of Dorothy Dobbins Freeman

PASADENA & ENVIRONS

The 1899 plan to build a bike highway from Pasadena to Downtown

Only two miles were built before the cycleway was turned into a freeway

By **Hadley Meares** | Jun 27, 2019, 11:30am PDT

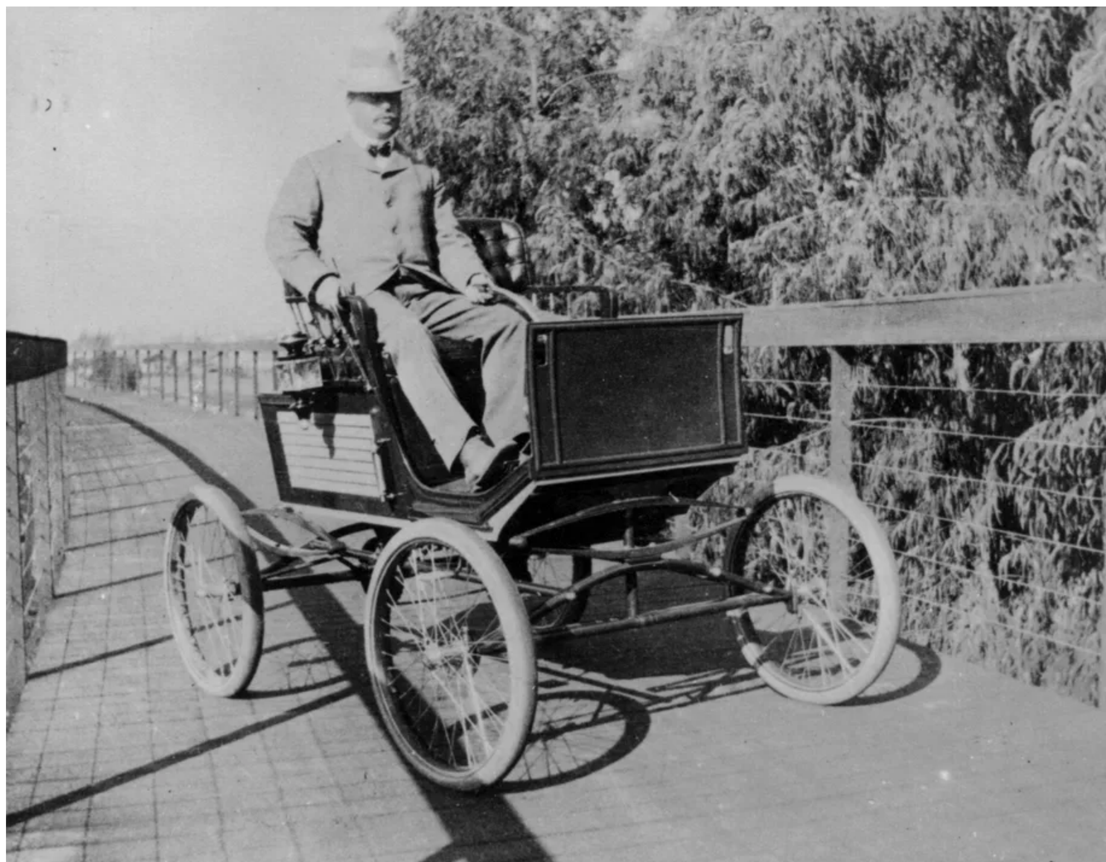
On May 1, 1899, a cocky young visionary named Horace M. Dobbins stood in front of a large group of well-wishers in the warm Pasadena sun. He held up a symbolic spadeful of Southern California dirt for the crowd to see. "The earth turns, and we turn the earth, but this is the first time in the history of the earth that it has ever been turned for a

cycleway," he intoned. Dobbins then tossed the dirt from the spade, which was decorated with satin ribbons of green and white, the official colors of the California Cycleway.

If Dobbins had his way, the "world's first elevated bikeway" would soon run from downtown Pasadena to Downtown LA, winding along the often-dry riverbed of the Arroyo Seco. A short while later, the crowd still watching, Dobbins gave the signal and, according to coverage of the event in the *Los Angeles Times*, "four large horses with a plow ripped up the first furrow in the process of cutting down the hills to make an easy grade for the bicyclists."

Dobbins, according to award-winning writer and cycling expert Dan Koeppel, was not the first person to recognize the usefulness of the Arroyo Seco riverbed.

"That pathway has been used for thousands of years," says Koeppel. "It's practically a valley between Pasadena and Los Angeles, with the foothills on either side. It's a really tight squeeze, but it was used by Native Americans. It traces the route of some of the original settlements and Spanish expeditions... even today you drive down the Arroyo Seco Parkway, and you're stuck in traffic out there, and you realize you're in such a natural pathway!"



Horace M. Dobbins in his Oldsmobile on Pasadena Cycleway, circa 1902. | Courtesy of Pasadena Museum of History, Main Photo Collection, D6-5c

Soon after his family settled in Pasadena for his father's health, Dobbins recognized the need for a better road between his new home and Los Angeles. Born in 1868 to a wealthy Pennsylvania family, Dobbins had always been a dreamer and tinkerer.

"He was not content to simply take his position in life as a scion of a wealthy East Coast family," says Charles Hobbs, librarian, historian, and author of *Hidden History of Transportation in Los Angeles*. "Instead, he had big dreams, and wanted to use his resources to try to make them happen."

Dobbins's dream of a modern pathway perfectly coincided with the bicycle craze of the late 19th century. Although bikes had existed for decades, it was not until the late Victorian age that their popularity exploded.

"Two big things happen after the Civil War," Koeppel says. "The invention of chain drive so you could actually pedal a bicycle. And the other thing was the invention of pneumatic tires, with air in them instead of solid wood or rubber tires, which enabled a smooth, fast ride."

The bicycle's small size, affordability, and relatively easy upkeep also made it popular in a young nation increasingly on the go. "It was better for individual transportation in a rapidly urbanizing America than a horse," Koeppel says. "You didn't have to feed it. You didn't have to store it in a barn. You didn't need to clean up its poop."

The bike, which enabled egalitarian exercise and autonomy for all ages and sexes, also fit in perfectly with Southern California's image of itself as a healthy, outdoor playground for the masses. "There is no spot on the globe so favorable for the enjoyment of the wheel in its present or future form as Southern California, the land where every day in the year is a delight to ride, where in all seasons the 'bike' takes the poor man to his work and the heiress of millions to her most exhilarating pleasure," exclaimed the *LA Times* in 1899.

Group photo of the East Side Club members with their bicycles piled in a heap, in front of them, dated 1896. In 1897, it was estimated that there were 30,000 bikes in the Los Angeles area alone | Los Angeles Public Library photo collection

In 1897, it was estimated that there were 30,000 bikes in the Los Angeles area alone. According to the *LA Times*, bicycle riding was a morally upright activity that should be encouraged by city leaders:

> The American woman of today is a rosy-cheeked, large-waisted, clear-eyed creature, who is afield early and late, and who shares with her male relatives the large pleasures of open-air life. The popularization of the bicycle has led to an interest in tennis and other out-door sports, and health and happiness have followed their train… Every improvement in the means of locomotion is a step toward a higher civilization, and when we realize this fact, we may understand that "the foot that works the pedal is the foot that moves the world."

Sadly, for enthusiastic cyclists, Southern California's roads were often little more than rutted, dirt pathways, making cycling long distances difficult and dangerous. Dobbins's revolutionary idea to merge the need for modern roads and the craze for cycling came together in 1897, when he, along with other notable Southern California figures, including former Gov. Henry Markham, incorporated the California Cycleway Company.

"He was not a cycling visionary, which is the way we cyclists would like to ideally embrace him or idealize him," says Koeppel, who notes that in the only existing photo of Dobbins on the Cycleway, he is in an early automobile.

"What he was, was a freeway visionary. He wanted to create a toll road. And he didn't care what vehicle went on it," says Koeppel. "It's just that it happened to be that bikes were the fastest way to get from point A to point B for a very brief period in the late 19th century."

Like a modern freeway, the project would include stops and exits at places of interest, including Elysian Park and the Ostrich Farm in South Pasadena.

"He wanted to charge tolls," Koeppel says. "He wanted to create a very fast and smooth way to get from Pasadena into Downtown, and he felt people would pay for that. And I'm guessing he was probably right—certainly for years people paid to use trains that way."

A woman sits sidesaddle on her bicycle, photo undated. | Los Angeles Public Library photo collection

He also saw the need to connect areas in Los Angeles County in a more efficient way. "Along with Henry Huntington, Dobbins was one of the first to see the need to connect cities and people by short haul transit, whether it was car or train or bike," Koeppel says.

"The idea that you would connect two cities or create a suburb and city relationship through that connection was pretty radical."

By 1898, the California Cycleway company had obtained right-of-way for six miles between Pasadena and Los Angeles. Although Dobbins and his plan attracted many wealthy investors, many in Pasadena were skeptical about its construction. Citizens' fears that the secluded cycleway would become a lovers' lane was assuaged by promises that it would be "brilliantly lighted from end to end by incandescent electric lamps."

Others worried about the proposed cycleway's safety and wondered if it would mar the natural beauty of the city. There were raucous public meetings, but permission to build the cycleway was eventually granted. At the official groundbreaking in May 1899, hundreds marveled at a representative piece of the cycleway built near the grand Raymond Hotel. The *LA Times* described the scene:

> Just at the entrance of Raymond Park, a fifty-foot section of cycleway was exhibited. The woodwork is stained a walnut, but the actual roadway will be painted a dark green. The boards are treated with a weatherproof preparation, and the floor is sprinkled with sand. As the sand is put on when the preparation is hot, it becomes part of the structure itself, and makes riding very easy, producing just the right purchase for the rubber tire. The bugaboo about the unsightliness of the structure was dispelled… This afternoon's guests climbed up on its roadbed and made futile efforts to shake it. The inspection proved that the elevated boulevard will be pleasing to the eye, strong enough for any test, and built to last.

While the first leg of the cycleway was being built, it was aided by a huge amount of positive publicity in the local paper, so positive it almost seemed absurd. "After a thorough investigation, it can be said that none of the new Southern California enterprises will be built upon surer foundations or be more certain of financial success than the California Cycleway Company," one *LA Times* columnist wrote.

On January 1, 1900, the first 1.4 miles of the cycleway was opened to the public. According to Koeppel, the finished portion stretched roughly from the Hotel Green to near what is now the Glenarm Power Plant.

"The wooden elevated parts pretty much got to the Pasadena, South Pasadena border- maybe a little bit beyond," Koeppel says. "Beyond that, Dobbins did clear the land and

obtain right-of-ways all the way down to about Avenue 43 in Highland Park."

Plans were also made, and land was cleared and graded, for the Merlemont Casino, a bicycler's paradise in Highland Park (now the Audubon Center at Debs Park). The *LA Times* described the planned "pleasure garden" that would sit in the middle of the proposed cycleway. It would include a large resort building with a women-only reading room, reception hall, cafe and Swiss Dairy, sweeping verandas, and bike racks for visitors.

Despite all the hype Dobbins generated, the Merlemont Casino—along with the rest of the cycleway—would never be built. The 15-cent roundtrip toll was not enough to fund construction, and investors began to pull out of the project. While cyclists did use the short cycleway, it never obtained the popularity that had been anticipated by the press.

"It came and it went so fast," Koeppel says. "It wasn't complete enough to attract the user base that he needed. It never was what you'd call a hit. It was more a curiosity."

A myriad of problems beset the cycleway from the day it opened. According to historian Celia Rasmussen, bikers quickly tired of having to carry their bikes up steps to the elevated path 50 feet above. Cyclists also discovered that cycling could be hard work.

"Dobbins claimed it was going to be downhill in both directions at some point," Koeppel says. "He had to say the thing went downhill in both directions, because people don't like climbing up hills or pedaling hard or sweating!"

The cycleway had also opened right as the bicycle craze began to cool down, and motorized vehicles began to become more in vogue. "People very quickly were like, 'How do I improve the bicycle?'" Koeppel says, laughing. "'How about I put a motor on it!' You know the Wright brothers who invented the airplane, they were bicycle mechanics."

Pasadena Cycleway looking north from the Raymond Hotel, 1900. | Courtesy of Pasadena Museum of History, Main Photo Collection, C16-13. Gift of Dorothy Dobbins Freeman

According to Hobbs, work had stopped on the California Cycleway—nicknamed the "ride to nowhere"—by October 1900. "Yes, I have concluded that we are a little ahead of the time on this cycleway," Dobbins was forced to concede, according to *Hidden History of Transportation in Los Angeles*. "Wheelmen have not evidenced enough interest in it, and so we will lie still for a time and use it for an automobile service. But those vehicles are not yet common or perfect enough to jump into business. We will preserve our valuable rights-of-way and then later construct the cycleway on a more substantial plan."

Dobbins had perhaps overestimated the amount of goodwill local industrialists and transportation leaders like Huntington felt for him. "There is a very thin line between visionary and kook," Koeppel says. "And there's certainly people who think he was a kook. And he was not successful, possibly because he was too visionary or too kooky. There were people with more power and more money who were able to sweep the business end out from under him and leave him only with the idea."

While Dobbins held onto his valuable rights-of-way, he moved on to a plethora of other civic projects and design schemes, from running a family hotel to serving on the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce to serving as the president of the Pasadena Hospital Association. "He also helped improve Exposition Park in Los Angeles, from a run-down plot of land full of gambling and other unsavory activities, into a beautiful facility with museums, rose gardens, etc.," Hobbs says.

But Dobbins never stopped dreaming transportation dreams. In 1902, he waged a battle with Huntington's Pacific Electric over right-of-way land he owned, eventually settling out of court. In 1909, he formed the Pasadena Rapid Transit Company to build an express rail-service from Pasadena to Los Angeles on land he still owned. The proposed railway was approved by Pasadena voters in 1919, but it was struck down a year later. These defeats did not deter Dobbins from designing yachts, a "Lateral Support Monorail," and "Duplex Monorail" well into the 1920s.

In the 1930s, Dobbins's assurance that the Arroyo Seco was the perfect route between LA and Pasadena was affirmed when the first California freeway, the Arroyo Seco Parkway, was constructed near the route he had laid out decades before. The Parkway was not built on Dobbins's land but on the opposite riverbank. Still, he was nicknamed the "father of the freeway" for his foresight, Hobbs says.

Over the past century, Dobbins's novel idea has been revived by cycling activists. During the 1990s and early 2000s, California Cycleways, a group led by Dobbins's grandson Will and cycling activist Dennis Crowley, advocated for a new cycleway between Los Angeles and Pasadena, but it never materialized.

Although Dobbins's California Cycleway had been completely demolished by 1907, its eccentric founder's unique vision lives on, especially for transportation historians, for whom the cycleway is a bittersweet tale of what might have been.

"If the cycleway had been built and kept until today, bicycling would continue to be an important choice for travel between Pasadena and LA, even with the end of the bicycle craze," Hobbs says.

It also serves as a poignant lesson for those planning the bicycle routes so sorely needed in Los Angeles today. "You've got to make it really, really easy," Koeppel says. "You

actually have to make the bike better than the car.” ■

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