

# Wheelm

## (and now women, too)

By Lauren Uhl, Museum Project Associate

In the early 1880s, when bicycling became the rage, young professional men from Pittsburgh's East End formed the Keystone Bicycle Club. The club gathered for social activities and bike tours and, for several years, hosted annual races at Exposition Park. Initially, races were strictly for amateurs, but by the early 1890s, biking was so popular that there was pressure for the best riders to turn professional.

Pittsburgh's George Banker was one of cycling's earliest professionals. He was born in 1874; his father, W.H. Banker, owned a bicycle shop in East Liberty on the corner of Highland and Centre avenues. George became a household name throughout Europe, but today he is virtually unknown in his hometown.

Banker won his first race in Brownsville in 1892. Anxious to race as a professional but unable to do so in the United States where games were still strictly for amateurs, Banker sailed to Europe in 1894 where professional races were sanctioned. He went as the racing companion of A.A. Zimmerman, a beloved, internationally known cyclist. The Union Velocipedeque Français had invited Zimmerman with a promise of \$10,000 cash plus \$150 for each race he joined. Banker hoped to make a name for himself as well by competing against professionals in Europe. That he did; over the next two years, Banker won the Grand Prix de Paris and the Austrian Derby as well as races in Antwerp, Roubaix, and Cologne. In 1895, he was stricken with typhoid and withdrew from racing for several years while recuperating.

Banker returned to the European circuit in 1898 where he proved himself again by winning the world pro sprint championship in Vienna and 80 other professional races throughout Europe. He retired for good at the end of the 1899 season.

In the late 1890s, the automobile began to overshadow the bicycle and Banker returned to the U.S. where he invested his winnings in turning the Banker Brothers Bicycle Shop into the Banker Brothers Company, an extensive complex to repair, store, and even manufacture automobiles. George Banker died in Philadelphia in 1917 at the age of 43.

Bike racing's popularity waxed and waned over the years. Overshadowed in the early 20th century by the advent of the automobile, it returned during the Depression in the form of six-day bicycle races. Bike racing went through periodical revivals from the end of World War II until the 1970s when the Allegheny Cycling Association was formed.

Western Pennsylvania has been the site of exciting races featuring famous names in cycling, and it has been home to cyclists who have distinguished themselves in the field. In the 1930s, Bobby Walthour, Jr., won a six-day race at Duquesne Gardens in Oakland. In the 1990s, the Thrift Drug Classic drew the finest competitors from around the world, including a young Lance Armstrong before he won his first Tour de France.

Here are brief profiles of four Western Pennsylvania cyclists.



George Banker from a  
c. 1920 card advertising  
Felix Potin Chocolate.

Gift of Lauren Uhl



Courtesy of Bud Harris



Mat Harris winning the International BMX Federation World Champion trophy, 1983.

## Mat Harris

Born in Pittsburgh in 1964, Mat Harris began BMX racing at age 10. Turning professional at 17, he signed with the Kuwahara Pro team, then the Huffy Pro team. In four years as a professional, Harris won more than 30 races. In 1983, he won the International BMX Federation World Championship in the Pro Cruiser class in Slagharen, Holland.

Courtesy of Matt Eaton

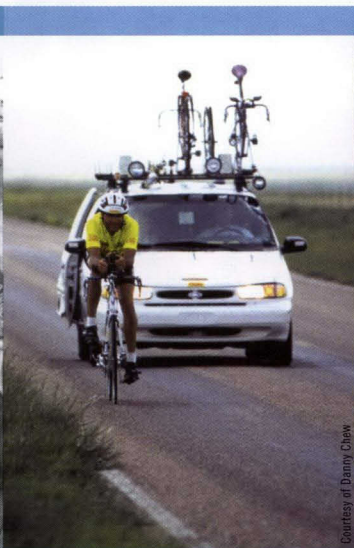


Matt Eaton celebrates as winner of the Milk Race, 1983.

## Matt Eaton

A native of Guilford, England, Matt Eaton began racing at age 9, shortly after his family moved to the United States. After graduating from high school in Butler County, Eaton was invited to the U.S. Olympic Training Center, and was a member of the U.S. national cycling team for four years. Eaton became the first American to win the British Milk Race, a 1,056 mile, 12-day stage race, in 1983.

Courtesy of Danny Chew

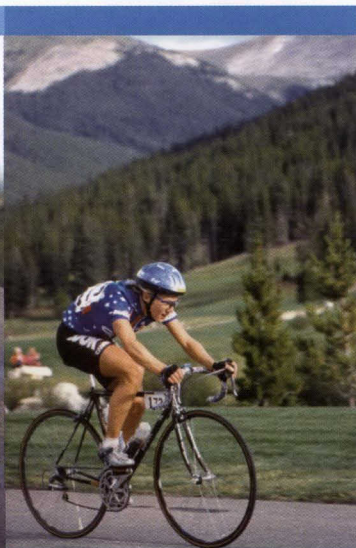


Danny Chew and his support van during the Race Across America, 1996.

## Danny Chew

Pittsburgher Danny Chew got his first taste of long-distance biking when he was 10 and his entire family rode in a 200-mile bike tour starting in Lima, Ohio. One of a handful of ultra-marathoners, Chew found his niche with the annual Race Across America, a 3,000 mile, non-stop race from the West Coast to the East Coast. He completed the race eight times and placed first three times. Chew's goal is to bike one million miles – he is more than half way there.

Courtesy of Jan Bolland Tanner



Jan Bolland Tanner in Celestial Seasons Stage Race, 1992.

## Jan Bolland Tanner

Jan Bolland Tanner grew up in New Brighton where she played a variety of sports, including volleyball and softball. After graduating from college, Tanner turned to road-, and then mountain bike racing. In 1992, she and her team placed first in the 50K Team Time Trial World Championships in Benidorm, Spain.