A HISTORY OF THE MOHAWK HUDSON WHELMEN
by Geoffrey Stein

Part I

(This history is based on the records of the Mohawk Hudson Wheelmen, Inc., on a one page manuscript by former club historian Alexandra Roberts, and on the recollections of past and present members. The author would be grateful for corrections and additions.)

The initial wave of bicycling enthusiasm of the 1880's and 1890's produced several flourishing bicycle clubs in the Capital District of New York State. But the general demise of cycling among adults in the early twentieth century resulted in the dissolution of the clubs.

A second period of bicycling enthusiasm began in the late 1960's among aspiring riders who had discovered multi-speed, lightweight bicycles based on the design of European road racing machines. Yet without experience beyond childhood cycling activities, many new owners of "ten-speeds" lacked the knowledge and courage to exploit the potential of their bicycles. The Albany area, then, like other sections of the United States where bicycle sales were growing, was ripe for the establishment of a bicycle club which would offer its members encouragement as well as camaraderie in cycling.

Four men, from a variety of professional and biking backgrounds, provided the impetus and organization which resulted in the founding of the Mohawk Hudson Wheelmen in late 1969. William (Bill) Himmelwright, Jr., of Schenectady was owner of Henry's Schwinn Cyclery on Albany Street in Schenectady. Among his customers was Randolph (Randy) English, a program manager at General Electric Broadcasting. English had an enthusiasm for promoting bicycling, and with his radio broadcasts, an outlet for that interest. Himmelwright was a studio participant in a 1969 public affairs radio program which focused on bicycling. Himmelwright recalls a great volume of telephone calls to the station during the program, which encouraged both English and himself to further promotions. A third cyclist who shared their friendship and inclination to encourage wider recreational bicycling was Peter (Pete) Margiotta, then operating a barber shop in Schenectady and the owner of a new bicycle.

In August, the first of several cycling tours in the Schenectady area that year attracted 45 people who had responded to a general invitation spread by poster, word of mouth, and perhaps radio announcement. Himmelwright led the group, probably from Central Park to the Albany County
Airport and return. The next week 57 people arrived for another ride. In all, eleven bicycle tours were organized by Himmelwright, English, Margiotta, and the fourth member of the founding quartet, Edward (Ed) Somers. On many of the rides, the talk focused on the possibility of organizing a bicycle club. The results of a questionnaire distributed by the four earlier in the summer supplied additional incentive for the organization of a bicycle club in the Capital District.

Somers had long been interested in bicycling. In 1969 his major focus was on bikeways, which were defined as safe routes for bicyclists over public roads. Employed by the State Assembly in Albany, Somers naturally turned to government to foster bicycling. With two other state employees, Richard Randles and Howard (Pat) Malone, he laid out the Albany bikeway, which ran from Washington Park to the State University campus in the western part of the city, and which was provided with signs by the city Department of Public Works. They then organized a widely publicized inaugural ride. It was probably through that event that the Nassau, Rensselaer County, resident Somers met first English, and then Himmelwright and Margiotta.

Discussions between English and Somers in Nassau, among those two and Himmelwright in a Schenectady restaurant, and the three with Margiotta during Thanksgiving weekend, centered on the means to organize a bicycle club in the Capital District. Handbills mailed to participants in the recent tours, as well as to other potential club members, announced an organizational meeting on December 9.
Part II

The organization meeting of the Mohawk Hudson Wheelmens convened on the afternoon of Sunday, December 9, 1969 at the studio building of the General Electric Broadcasting Company on Balltown Road in Niskayuna, Schenectady county, New York. Randy (Randolph) English, temporary "Organization Chairman" and an employee of the broadcasting company, had secured the facility.

An earlier account of the founding by former club historian Alexandra Roberts speaks of twenty-six initial members. But in February 1982 only a list of nineteen charter members who remained with the club probably into 1971 survived. Those early members, none of whom was active in 1982, were

Mark Booth
Alan Boyce
Russell Brown
James Coleman
Betty Connaly
Randy English
Don Gerfin, Jr.
Bill (Wm.) Himmelwright
Robert Hitchcock
Kevin Lewis
Pete (Peter) Margiotta
June Margiotta
Christine Margiotta
Mark Ricitti
Andrew Somers
Angela Somers
Ed (Edward) Somers
Nancy Somers

The initial order of business was the election of officers. The four men selected were the individuals who had been active in conducting bicycle rides earlier in 1969 and who had promoted the idea of a bicycle club. Bill Himmelwright was chosen president; Ed Somers vice-president; English secretary; and Pete Margiotta treasurer.

The second business item, according to Roberts, was the selection of a club name. "Mohawk Hudson Wheelmens" was chosen from eleven suggestions with blue and gold picked as club colors. In 1981, English recalled that Somers had put forward the Mohawk Hudson Wheelmens name which was construed to relate to the "wheelmen" suffix of bicycle club names dating from the 1880's and 1890's. The revival of the League of American Wheelmen in Chicago in the late 1960's
was probably a factor in the naming of the Capital District group, also.

Betty Lou Bailey, the member longest associated with the Mohawk Hudson Wheelmen, recalls attending a early meeting in which the name was discussed. Having come to Schenectady from southeastern Pennsylvania where she had been president of the Valley Forge Cycling Club, she argued for a name with the word "bicycle" in it, for she had experienced the confusion of having "Cycling" equated with motorcycle activity. However, she learned that embroidered patches had already been ordered with "Mohawk Hudson Wheelmen" lettered on them. Those patches were medallion shaped with the image of a lightweight bicycle in blue and yellow on a white field. The border was blue. The words "MOHAWK WHEEL MEN" appeared above the bicycle with "HUDSON" below.

The author has located no minutes of the early meetings. And at this point it is difficult to determine the precise format of the subsequent gatherings. Similarly, it is not possible to state with assurance the cost of membership. However, if the dues structure remained constant for a year, as seems likely, it can be surmised that an initiation fee of $1 was charged for each individual. Members under eighteen years old were assessed an additional $1.50 yearly, while those older were billed $3. Married couples paid $5 annually and family groups $6.

The next few club meetings took place at the same venue, probably until warm weather and the start of cycling activities. A "publicity statement" from the "Publicity Committee" in March 1970 headlined the "Tri-City Bicycle Club off and Running". Probably written by English whose home address was listed for information, the release mentioned forty members. A "Bikeways" committee was reportedly engaged in locating rights of way which could be restricted to bicycle use.

The first recorded bicycle "tour" of 1970 took place on April 26, when eighteen riders departed, probably from the General Electric Studios, for a twenty mile spin into Colonie. The next week the club may have met at Central Park in Schenectady for a combined business meeting and ride; in the early years, Music Haven, an outdoor theater in the park, was the site of a meeting the first Sunday of each warm weather month. Fifty-two participants rode ten miles that day.

Over the summer, tours were conducted almost weekly on Sundays. By September, seventy-five people had joined the club, and the first edition of a newsletter, written and printed by English, appeared as the Bikeabout. It was a four page, mimeographed sheet which recorded twelve tours with three still scheduled. A copy of the first Bikeabout
remains in the club archives. Whether any additional issues reached members in 1970 is uncertain at this point. A bulletin distributed in early 1971 mentioned a temporary discontinuance of publishing because of a suspension in club meetings. The author recalls no more than the initial issue.

The bulletin reports an Albany "Bikeway" tour in the fall of 1970, an event not listed in the September Bikeabout. This was not strictly a club event. Rather it was probably largely the work of Richard Randles and Howard Malone, who as the Capital District Bikeways Committee, were attempting to publicize a single, east-west bicycle route between Washington Park and the State University campus in Albany. Fifty-five riders took part in the November "test demonstration" and "on very short notice" according to Malone in 1971. Somers, Malone's professional associate, was vital in getting the Wheelmen involved.

The club archives house a list of seventeen rides for 1970, all taking place on Sundays. Most were in the Schenectady area but five Rensselaer County rides and a few elsewhere were included. Tour length ranged from ten to forty miles. Turn-outs ranged from eleven to five riders on regular rides with 77 noted for the Albany Bikeway run.

With cold weather, all club activities ceased because of the loss of the previous meeting place. English was no longer employed by General Electric Broadcasting. A search for a meeting hall had resulted only in potential rental quarters, which at $10 a month would soon have depleted the club's $135 treasury.

Thus at the beginning of 1971, a group of sixty-five cyclists, thirty-eight of whom lived in Schenectady, were members of a bicycle club without a home. It might be of interest as a footnote, to record that 29 women and 36 men comprised the Mohawk-Hudson Wheelmen. All resided in the Capital District except one man who drove to Schenectady for meetings from Monsey.