



Edwin
M.
Ellis

Edwin M. Ellis, above left, upon graduation from Princeton Seminary in 1884

by Nina Ellis Dosker

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Sheldon Jackson, the indomitable Superintendent of Presbyterian Missions for the Western Territory, visited Princeton Seminary during the spring of 1884 in search of men to go to Montana as missionaries. Jackson wanted men with pioneer spirit, resourcefulness, a willingness to endure hardship, and with physical stamina equal to the challenges of the region. Yet he needed more than pioneers; he needed ministers eager to serve the Lord, consecrated men with faith and strong convictions, missionaries with a saving touch of humor and an ample amount of good, common sense.

Jackson found such a man in young Edwin M. Ellis. A few months after he heard Sheldon Jackson's appeal, Ellis found himself aboard a passenger train on the new Northern Pacific railroad, bound for Montana. As he caught his first glimpses of sage-covered hills, the newly ordained minister undoubtedly contemplated his decision and his future.

What lay ahead for him was a forty-year career of service which would take him across the entire state. As he rode westward, he could not have imagined how many miles he was to travel in Montana, how many Sunday Schools he was to establish in church buildings and even tarpaper homestead shacks, or how many Sunday Schools were to prosper.

Even if he had had a hint of the labors that lay ahead, he could not have anticipated how many miles he was to pedal as the Presbyterian "bicycle minister" of Montana.



Ellis with the Columbia Chainless bicycle about 1910, on the Pleasant Valley Homestead of W. E. Barrows, north of Fort Benton. All pictures courtesy of the author.

Montana's Bicycling Minister



EDWIN M. ELLIS was born August 17, 1853, into a Christian home on a farm in the rocky Northern Vermont hills. A hard life, severe winters, his father's serious illness, and a doctor's advice, took the family to a milder climate in the southern New Jersey town of Vineland. His father chose that new community because its charter forbade the operation of saloons, and he felt it would be a good place to start over and bring up children.

Edwin, the eldest son, was ten years old when the family moved. On him fell the responsibility of helping his father chop down the scrub oak and wrestle the stubborn stumps to carve a farm from the new land. Edwin had no desire to be a farmer, however, and looked to a career in law. A large family and a heavy mortgage prevented Edwin's father from supporting his son's ambitions, but he gave his blessing to the pursuit.

In 1874, Edwin Ellis entered Cornell University, but scarcely two years later he gave up his plan to become a lawyer, for he felt called to the ministry. This meant transferring to Princeton for the last two years of college, and three more years at Princeton Seminary. It took hard work to finance five additional years of education, but he succeeded. Ready to graduate and praying for guidance, Ellis heard Sheldon Jackson's appeal for frontier missionaries and became convinced this was God's will for his life.

That summer before he went west, Ellis demonstrated the pragmatic nature that would serve him well as a pioneer minister. Realizing that he would hold meetings where there would be neither choirs nor organs, he set about improving his singing ability. He arranged with an uncle in York Beach, Maine, to spend the summer tutoring his twin cousins in mathematics-in return for singing lessons from the talented family. He left with more confidence in his ability as a songleader, and with a pitch pipe to set the tune.

Even more importantly, he left with the promise of a lovely young lady to answer his letters. She was Lilla Prince of Amherst, New Hampshire, who would become the greatest blessing in his life.

Late one Saturday night in the fall of 1884, Ellis reached the little settlement of Garrison, Montana, a rough railroad town on the recently completed Northern Pacific Railroad. The next morning the young minister secured permission to hold a service in the little schoolhouse, built of rough, upright boards. Over the cracks, cheesecloth strips had been tacked to help keep out the wind. Up and down the valley he went, inviting people to the service.

That night, with a sharp September wind whipping through the cracks, waving torn strips of cheesecloth, flickering a little kerosene lamp, the 31-year-old Presbyterian Home Missionary preached his first sermon in Montana. His theme became the hallmark of his career, devoted to the conviction that "righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." The next morning Edwin went on to Missoula.

From Missoula the young minister traveled by buggy to Stevensville in the Bitterroot Valley, where Ellis would begin his ministerial work.

Eager to become acquainted with the valley, its scattered towns, ranches, and mining camps, to learn its problems, and to discover how he could best meet the needs of the settlers, Ellis bought a saddle horse whom he named "Prince." The wiry, enthusiastic missionary, in his Prince Albert coat and Derby hat, became a familiar sight jogging up and down the valley, coattails flapping and saddlebags bulging with Bibles, hymn books, and literature. His friendly helpfulness and hearty good cheer made him a welcome guest everywhere, and children were drawn to him as a special friend.

Ellis's regular circuit included Stevensville, Victor, Skalkaho, and Corvallis. In the latter community he found encouraging support and succeeded in founding the First Presbyterian Church there on December 14, 1884. Stevensville proved more challenging. That congregation, although organized five years earlier, was but a thin shadow, for most of the members had moved away. Using evangelistic meetings and cooperating with the Methodist Church, South, Ellis managed to increase church membership throughout the community, and in early 1885 he helped organize a Union Sunday School in Stevensville.



TIMES WERE HARD in the mid-1880s, and Ellis's salary was often little more than slabs of bacon, wood for the stove, or hay for his horse. In spite of the lack of money, the Corvallis congregation wanted to build a church. Cleverly, they devised a system of "Bitterroot Turns" to accomplish their purpose without a necessity for cash.

It worked in this way. A farmer, for example, donated wheat and oats which the mill owner needed; he, in turn, paid his subscription in lumber which another man hauled to the church as his gift. Rev. Ellis donated his work, as did others, in sawing and driving nails, but he spent most of his time trying to secure subscriptions and helping to arrange the complicated "Bitterroot Turns" for those anxious to find a way of assisting. By the fall of 1886, Corvallis's little church was dedicated, free of debt.

Through that first year of his ministry, however, Edwin Ellis had not concentrated exclusively on preaching and raising funds. He had also been courting Lilla Prince by letter, and on July 28, 1885, they were married in New Hampshire. Their wedding trip was the return journey to the Bitterroot, back to the valley where Edwin would serve a total of seven years. During those years both their children were born, son Wilder Prince in 1886 and daughter Nina Pauline, the present writer, in 1889.



Lilla Prince Ellis
Wedding Picture, 1885



The Ellis Family Home in Stevensville

Stevensville Church

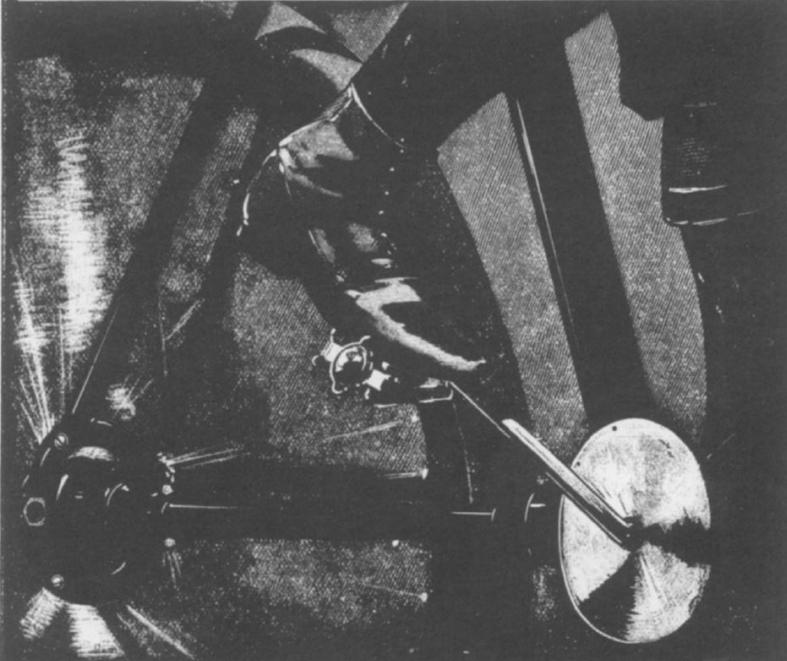


During his seven years in the Bitterroot Valley, Ellis succeeded in revitalizing the Stevensville church, and in organizing congregations in Corvallis, Grantsdale, Victor, and Hamilton. All five of these congregations succeeded in erecting church buildings during his period of service. He had also found time to hold occasional services at smaller settlements such as Carlton, Eight Mile, Burnt Fork, Lolo, and Etna.

He also published a monthly paper called The Light of the Valley, which widened his influence. A man of strong convictions, he opposed gambling, the sale of liquor, and the desecration of the Sabbath. He strove for good legislation and for law enforcement, and stoutly opposed all forces which he felt degraded humanity.

About the same time that Montana achieved statehood, the Presbyterian Church elevated its Presbytery of Montana to the status of Synod, the governing body that usually follows state boundaries and comprises three or more presbyteries. Nationally, the church had become deeply concerned that ministry to children had been neglected. Adopting the slogan "America's Children for Christ," the Presbyterians established a Board of Publication and Sunday School Missions, which published story papers and Bible study magazines suitable for young people.

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THERE IS NO WASTE OF ENERGY.
AT ANY POINT IN THE CRANK REVOLUTION**



We have yet to hear of a rider of the COLUMBIA BEVEL-GEAR CHAINLESS who would willingly give it up for any other wheel.

Direct testimony is always better than hearsay evidence. If you desire to know about Bevel-Gear Chainless bicycles, do not ask a person who has never ridden one, or is in any way connected with a manufacturer who does not make them. Inquire of riders of the Columbia Bevel-Gear Chainless. There are thousands of them throughout the country. They are to be met in every city, in almost every town of the United States—so popular has the machine become in the short space of a year and a half. There are reasons for this. The Chainless is easier to take care of than the chain wheel. It has a longer life. Every ounce of power applied to the pedals is made effective. This last advantage over chain-driven wheels is apparent the moment you mount the machine. The Chainless seems to possess an activity and life of its own. You notice it in starting, stopping, back-pedaling, riding on levels, and especially in ascending grades. **Prices \$60 to \$75.**

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Now began the search for Sunday School Missionaries. As Edwin Ellis had shown special skill in working with young people under the Home Board, he was appointed by the Board as Montana's first Synodical Superintendent of Sunday School Missions in 1891. The state capital, headquarters for one of the three new presbyteries and junction of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific railroads, was chosen as the most suitable location for his home base. In 1892, Edwin and Lilla moved their young family to Helena.

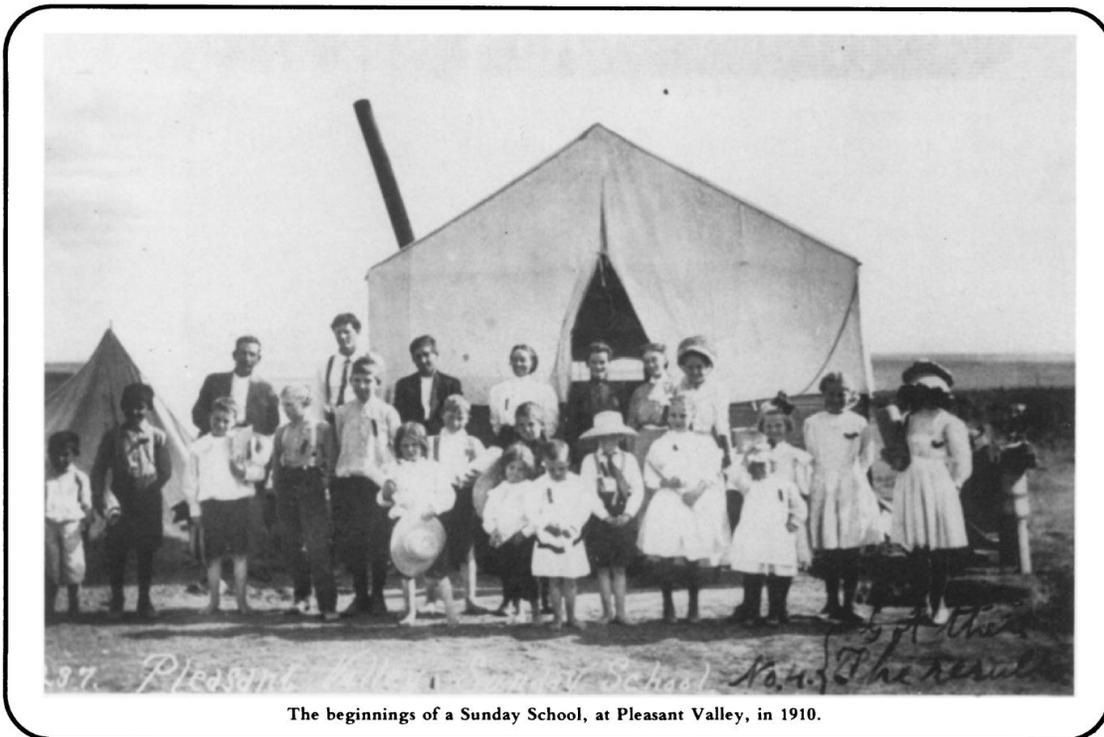
After working in the relatively small area of the Bitterroot Valley, Ellis found the job of supervising Sunday School Missions for all of Montana almost overwhelming. He began his new responsibility with eagerness, but also with deep concern over how to find the most effective way to make contact with people so widely scattered over the new state.

Railroads helped cover long distances, and officials generously issued free-fare Clergy Passes or half-fare Clergy Permits, but trains served only narrow lanes east and west. How could he reach towns north and south, remote ranches, hamlets, and mining camps? Stagecoaches provided a partial solution, but they were not adequate to meet Ellis's needs. Even their routes omitted large portions of the state, and in the minister's own words, "A long stage ride in a Montana 'Jerky' under the most favorable circumstances is usually something painful, but under unfavorable conditions, ah!-the half can never be told."

TO SUPPLEMENT RAILROADS and stages, the new Sunday School Superintendent sought another, more convenient, means of transportation. He began to explore the possibilities of a bicycle. It could be taken inexpensively in a railroad baggage car as far as needed, and could take him immediately wherever he wanted to go. After several disappointing experiments, he saw an advertisement for the Columbia Chainless Bicycle. Chainless! That caught his eye. Enclosed gears with no chain to gather dust, to become clogged with gumbo, or to get tangled in weeds—that would solve his problems.

Upon its delivery, Ellis marveled at the wonderful machine: light yet sturdy, and easy to handle. He felt it was the answer to his prayers, and it became his trusted steed. During the next three and a half decades, his odometer recorded over 36,000 miles pedaled across Montana in the service of Presbyterian Sunday Schools. New tires, spokes, and seats came and went, but the same famous, faithful friend endured.*

So it began, more than a new method of doing his work, it was also a new lifestyle. The tails of his Prince Albert coat dangled dangerously close to the rear wheel spokes, so he fastened them up with hooks and eyes. It proved a bit embarrassing, however, when he forgot to unhook them, or when a hook caught in the rattan seat of his chair on the platform, dragging it after him as he arose to preach. Soon Ellis discarded the ministerial Prince Albert in favor a business suit.



The beginnings of a Sunday School, at Pleasant Valley, in 1910.



The Barrows family of Pleasant Valley in 1910. Active in the Sunday School, they probably hosted Mr. Ellis's visits, even though still in their temporary tarpaper shack. The house was so small three bedsteads had to sit outdoors—one is seen here, another in the picture on page 43.

His Derby hat he exchanged for a soft felt hat, or in summer for a Panama over which could be worn an all-important mosquito net. For ease in traveling, Lilla Ellis made her husband shirts of Nun's veiling-wool fabric that was light but warm. The bicycle missionary solved the problem of keeping himself neat in public by using white celluloid collars, bosoms, and cuffs which he could wipe clean. A black bow tie completed his outfit.

Using his Yankee ingenuity, he transformed saddle bags into a sturdy valise, fastened with buckles from old overshoes. For this he devised a strong wire rack, secured in front of the handlebars. It was a heavy load with all the required literature, even though he eliminated everything possible, even cutting out many of the less familiar hymns from his little cloth hymn books.

As Ellis became more experienced in bicycle travel, he added necessary gear to his load. Like cowboys, he realized the need for chaps, which he made of cravenette, or waterproofed, fabric to give warmth as well as shed rain. Wading boots were also needed, since fording icy streams barefoot with trousers rolled up-carrying bicycle and valise-was difficult and time-consuming. He created waders of lightweight oiled silk, to which he sewed rubbers large enough to slip easily over his shoes, and cemented the seams so they wouldn't leak. Of course, in below-zero weather, his equipment included the extra weight of fur cap and gloves, overshoes and heavy coat.

With Edwin away so much of the time, it was very hard for Lilla not to be anxious about him. But, in addition to caring for two small children, she took on the duty of acting as his private secretary. She faithfully sent out Edwin's mimeographed monthly letters, and forwarded the quarterly magazines and papers from the board of Publications to the hundreds of Sunday Schools and Home Classes. Edwin wrote home almost daily to tell her where he was, even if only by postcard.

Edwin Ellis's first annual report as state Superintendent of Sunday School Missions revealed the extent of his pedaling ministry:

929 families have been visited-about 7,940 miles traveled and more than 100 beds have been slept in, or at least lain in.

Some of these places were hotel beds, home beds, spring beds, and slat beds, soft beds and hard beds, beds with too much cover and beds with too little, beds in elegant mansions of the rich and in untidy cabins of mountaineers, while car seats, stage coach seats, school benches, depot benches, and such like have frequently been our beds.



HE NEW CENTURY brought new challenges. With the expanding population of homesteaders in eastern Montana and the many new towns springing up along the railroads, it became increasingly evident that the Synodical Superintendent alone could not take advantage of all the new opportunities. It became necessary to appoint Assistants, so that he could devote time to developing State Sunday School Conventions, and to conduct Sunday School Institutes around the state, attended by superintendents, teachers, and parents.

In July 1903, hearing that the Great Northern was constructing a new division point at Whitefish Lake, Rev. Ellis invited Rev. Alexander Pringle of Kalispell to go with him to investigate the possibility of organizing a Sunday School in the new town. They started on their bicycles, but soon encountered corduroy roads and trails flooded with melting snow. Abandoning their "machines" for a boat, they then faced the rigors of rowing in a swift and swollen river, and the dangers of log jams. Fortunately, they worked their way through to the week-old town of Whitefish, still only a stump-filled clearing in the forest, populated by the railroad construction gang and their families living in tents or covered wagons.

The two ministers slept under the stars that night, and spent the next visiting with Whitefish residents and inviting them to the service that evening. Pringle preached the sermon, then Ellis argued that Christian work should begin at the founding of their new town. Their response was enthusiastic: a Sunday School was organized and met under the trees overlooking beautiful Whitefish Lake. Before the end of the year, a Presbyterian Church had been organized and a chapel completed. Seventy years later, in 1973, the Whitefish church celebrated the anniversary of its founding. Among several memorial windows in the sanctuary that dated from 1921 was one given by the Sunday School honoring Edwin M. Ellis and his dedicated missionary efforts.

From the western side of Montana to the eastern, Ellis traveled by train and bicycle literally night and day, more than once lost and backtracking on rutted dirt roads or temporarily thwarted by accidents. Once, pedaling the Columbia Chainless, he set off on a thirty-five mile ride from the railroad to a Sunday School in the Bear Paw Mountains that had asked for his help. At a fork in the road after Fort Belknap, he chose the more-traveled side, but it, alas, came to an end in the woods where logs for cabins had been cut.

Clouds rolled in and darkness came early that night, with Ellis still far from his goal. He continued onward, following the ruts in the road by feel. Eventually he was walking the bicycle, taking advantage of a well-defined stretch of road along the rim of a coulee, to relax stiff muscles. That proved disastrous when his foot slipped off the edge and he tumbled down to a dry creek bed, head over heels. He heard his cycle crash on the rocks but knew nothing further.

When he came to, head throbbing with pain, it was still night. Prairie wolves answered each other in howls from the hilltops. Clambering up the coulee, Ellis made out a shape in the darkness—a house and barn. Upon reaching it, though, he found the house abandoned, doors locked and windows boarded up. Happily, the barn was open, and Ellis soon made himself fairly comfortable in the straw of an abandoned stable. In the morning he hastened to his precious bicycle, fearing it might be badly damaged. Bumped and scratched, it was still usable, and got the minister to his destination by noon.



In addition to her administrative duties for Edwin, Lilla Ellis took on the running of this Sunday School in Helena, 1907-1913. The former Northern Pacific Depot had been turned into a church to serve the transient community of railway workers and their families.

Ellis loved to recount his experiences, including one adventure he fondly dubbed his "Elijah Story." Leaving the train at Rosebud, he rode his bicycle forty miles or more into cattle country, went around to widely scattered homes and invited everyone to the schoolhouse for a meeting that night. A good crowd gathered, and after the sermon Ellis broached the possibility of organizing a Sunday School, which children and adults both heartily endorsed. They chose a superintendent and teachers, then Rev. Ellis distributed literature and lessons to assist in the effort.

At the close of the meeting, one hospitable man invited him to his home for the night. On learning his host lived five miles still farther from the train, which he must catch the next day, Ellis regretfully declined. Others, thinking the missionary was cared for, excitedly discussed plans for the new Sunday School and left. After the last wagon had driven away and the saddle horses were all gone, Ellis shut the schoolhouse door, put on his chaps and coat, and lay down on the floor with his valise for a pillow.

At dawn he was up and away early, with many miles to cover. He dared not stop at any nearby ranch to ask for food, lest local residents feel chagrined that they had inhospitably left him to sleep at the school. Wanting to avoid neighborhood embarrassment at all costs, he kept pedaling, getting hotter and hungrier.

Suddenly he was startled as a hawk whirred up from the sagebrush close by. As the bird circled overhead, Rev. Ellis investigated, finding a freshly killed prairie chicken. Like Elijah's raven the hawk had provided for his wants. Using a wire from his tool kit, Ellis fastened the skinned drumsticks to a branch of sage. He gathered dry brush, crumpled some Sunday School papers, and soon satisfied his hunger. The rest of the feast he left, with gratitude, for his benefactor. Mounting his bicycle, waving his thanks to the hawk still circling overhead, he hastened on his way. Farther down the road, well removed from the neighborhood of the previous night's meeting, a farm wife graciously quenched his thirst with fresh milk. She was glad to hear about the new Sunday School, and he was able to catch the return train in the nick of time.

IN THE FALL OF 1913, Edwin Ellis suffered a siege of inflammatory rheumatism. After over twenty years of service, the Columbia Chainless was stowed away in the attic. "There goes my faithful 'war horse,'" he said, weeping. "Will I ever be able to ride it again?"

During his illness and recuperation in Cleveland, where son Wilder was a medical student, the title of Synodical Superintendent was dropped, and each Assistant was made a Sunday School Missionary responsible for his own area. When the Ellises were able to return to Helena, the next summer, Edwin began tinkering with his old bicycle, even though his former traveling position no longer existed. One day, he announced nonchalantly: "Tomorrow I think I'll just ride down in the valley to see how the Morning Star Sunday School is getting along." Thus began many more years of labor, limited to the Helena Presbytery but still devoted to Sunday School work.

By 1923, Lilla's health forced her to leave Helena's high altitude. Edwin spent winters with her in Detroit but returned to his beloved Montana for the summers. Finally, in 1927, he retired after forty-three years of what he called "this pleasant labor in Montana." Lilla died four years later, and Edwin himself died in 1940, at the age of eighty seven.

His monuments are scattered all around Montana, in the form of churches--not all of them Presbyterian--that have grown out of the Home Missions and Sunday Schools he established. He had more than answered Sheldon Jackson's call for resourceful and dedicated ministers with pioneer spirit as he traveled the miles and the years on his faithful Columbia Chainless bicycle.





An Ellis family portrait about 1906, l. to r., Nina, Wilder, Lilla, and Edwin. The two children followed their father in religious service. Wilder Prince Ellis served as a medical missionary in Urumia, Persia, for twenty-four years beginning in 1915; one of his four children, Paul Osgood Ellis, also became a Presbyterian minister. Nina Ellis, author of this article, married the Reverend Richard J. Dosker and served with him as a missionary in Japan, 1916 to 1926; their son Richard became a minister, and their daughter Dorothy married a seminary professor.



Wilder Prince Ellis
high school graduation, 1906



The author
high school graduation, 1907

Reverend Edwin M. Ellis's Columbia Chainless Bicycle, ca. 1899.
It is one of the Montana Historical Society's treasures.



[Reverend Edwin M. Ellis's Columbia Chainless Bicycle, ca. 1899, MHS 2002.45.01](#)

In the early 1890s, the national Presbyterian Church increased its efforts to minister to children. Consequently, in 1891 Reverend Edwin M. Ellis (1853–1940) was appointed as Montana's first Synodical Superintendent of Sunday School Missions. Tasked with supervising Montana's widely scattered Sunday schools, Ellis visited settlements all over the state—traveling nearly 8,000 miles in his first year. Railroads and stagecoaches couldn't deliver him to every remote congregation, so he used this chainless bicycle to reach them. In 1913, Rev. Ellis relinquished his post due to health problems, but continued his ministry in Helena. By the end of his three-decade career, he had biked over 36,000 miles across the Treasure State. In 2002, Rev. Ellis' grandson donated his bicycle, hymnal carrier, and portable communion set to the Montana Historical Society. The poor condition of his well-used bike illustrates his dedication.

COLUMBIA CHAINLESS BICYCLE



Title

Columbia chainless bicycle

Description

This bicycle was used by Reverend M. Ellis. Ellis arrived in Montana in 1884 and for the next forty years served the state's Presbyterian churches in a variety of capacities, most notably as the Superintendent of Sunday School Missions. As superintendent, Ellis traveled all over the then roadless state establishing and ministering to Sunday Schools—by bicycle.

Bicycle (a) Wheel (b) Tire (c) Spare tire (d) Columbia Chainless Bicycle. Black painted over red under paint. Shaft driven/ upright handle bar with wooden hand caps/ metal spokes/ wooden wheel rims/split padded saddle seat on springs made of horse hair covered with leather/ wire frame toe clips/ front holder made of heavy gauge wire attached to handle bar for holding suitcase/ cross bar, seat tub, and downtube/ handle originally leather covered (remnants remain)/ tires are tubeless canvas covered in rubber/ wire above fork with piece of wood for holding a light/ wire twisted across top and bottom of body, possibly for added stability.

Date

ca. 1899

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Identifier

2002.45.01 a–d

Materials

Metal/Wood/Paint/Leather/Horse hair/Canvas/Rubber

Height (inches)

25

Width (inches)

40

Length (inches)

59

Source

Montana Historical Society Museum Collection

Credit

Gift of Richard J. Dosker