

# A ROUND TRIP BACK TO HOUSTON

By David V. Herlihy



A BICYCLE TRIP BOUND THE WORLD—MESSRS. ALLEN AND SACHTLEBEN.

After touring the British Isles during the summer of 1890 on their first set of “safety” bicycles, Thomas Allen and William Sachtleben reached London. There, they acquired from a London manufacturer a new set of bicycles (shown here) and a pair of Kodak cameras. After announcing their intentions to circle the globe, they posed for this studio shot.

Photo courtesy of John Weiss.

Seven years ago I was putting the final touches on my 2010 book *The Lost Cyclist*, a non-fiction work about Frank Lenz, a forgotten cycling pioneer who helped spark the great bicycle boom of the 1890s. In May 1892, young Lenz set off from his home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to circle the globe on a new-fangled “safety” bicycle with inflatable tires, the prototype of the present day vehicle.<sup>1</sup>

Another period cyclist from Alton, Illinois, William Sachtleben, also interested me since *Outing Magazine* (Lenz’s sponsor) had sent him to Turkey to search for Lenz, after the latter disappeared there two years into his journey. A famous wheelman himself, Sachtleben completed his own “round the world” ride with college chum

Thomas G. Allen, Jr., which I also chronicled in *The Lost Cyclist*.

While researching, I periodically plugged “Sachtleben” into Google books to see if any new leads appeared, and one day I stumbled on the book *Armenian Karin! Erzerum* by Hovannisian.<sup>2</sup> The snippet online suggested that UCLA had a substantial collection of papers relating to Sachtleben, and of course, I was eager to find out more. The book itself had a chapter by Gia Aivazian, then a cataloguer at UCLA’s Special Collections, giving a detailed breakdown of the collection, including several diaries from the bicycle ride, numerous papers relating to the search for Lenz, and some 400 nitrate negatives of unknown content, which were in storage.



*Thomas Allen (far right) enjoys a drink near the Athens train station in early February 1891. He is about to board a train for London, where he will purchase two new bicycles to replace their broken London-made machines for the planned ride across Asia. So as not to be recognized on board, Allen has disguised himself in elegant attire borrowed from his wealthy Greek friend Basilios Kapsambelis (center). On the left is Serope Gürdjian, an Armenian rebel who befriended the American cyclists during their winter stay in Athens.*

All photos courtesy of UCLA Charles E. Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, Sachtleben Collection unless otherwise noted.

According to Aivazian, an unidentified man rescued the entire collection in the 1960s, when he spotted a group of workmen tearing down an old house near downtown Houston. One tossed an old valise out an attic window in the direction of a bonfire raging in the back yard. The case barely missed its target and broke open when it hit the ground, spilling out old photographs on the lawn. When another workman began disposing of the materials, the man witnessing the act intervened and bought the remaining items.

Some years later, around 1982, thanks to Aivazian's brokering, Jean Zakarian of Carpinteria, California, donated those papers to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Special Collections. I promptly contacted UCLA to see the collection, but the papers, with the exception of the nitrate negatives, remained in Aivazian's personal possession. After making several trips to Los Angeles, I finally arranged to see the papers at the library, and it was well worth the extra effort.

Especially intriguing was a tiny diary packed with miniscule cursive lines. Written by Sachtleben in early 1891, it chronicled the winter he and Allen spent in Athens while preparing for their epic ride across Asia. In vivid detail, he recounted both the routine (e.g. visits to cafes) and the extraordinary (such as the elaborate funeral of Heinrich Schliemann, who discovered Troy).

Sachtleben also described a colorful cast of charac-



*Sachtleben rides his Humber through the Acropolis, while a dismounted Allen looks on. The guards originally refused to allow the Americans to enter the ancient city with their wheels but relented after being promised riding lessons.*

ters that came into their lives, such as Seropé Gürdjian, an Armenian rebel who had just been expelled from Constantinople, and Winnie Manatt, the winsome daughter of the American consul who plucked Sachtleben's heart strings. These revelations offered tremendous insights into a primary character in my book.

One question, however, still haunted me: what was the content of those nitrate negatives? Although they had yet to be scanned and no set of prints existed, I felt certain they were souvenirs from the "round the world" bicycle ride because I knew that Allen and Sachtleben, at the start of their journey in London, obtained early Kodak cameras, which used this same sort of film.

Because of the fragile and combustible state of the negatives, they would have to be sent to a special laboratory for processing, and Simon Elliott, UCLA Special Collections' photo archivist, warned me that it might be years before the library scanned this collection, given the funding and scheduling issues. Although I would not have access to these images in time for my book, I remained eager to see what these negatives would reveal. Finally, about two years ago, Elliott informed me that the scanning had been scheduled.

Once again the results proved worth the wait. The circular black and white images were, for the most part, remarkably crisp and well composed. Moreover, each negative had been enclosed in a small envelope with Sachtleben's notes scrawled on the outside, enabling me to discern where the photographs were taken and precisely what they depicted.

As it turned out, the images were indeed from the "round the world" bicycle ride. Curiously, however, they spanned only one year, 1891, of the three-year jour-



*Sachtleben pedals across the busy Galata Bridge spanning the Golden Horn, towards the center of Constantinople (Istanbul). He draws looks from curious residents unaccustomed to bicycles. In the background on the far left is the base of the ancient Galata Tower in Pera.*

ney, when the cyclists migrated from Athens, Greece, to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. What had happened to the negatives previously taken in Europe, or subsequently in China? Had they literally gone up in smoke? Despite the gaps, this was clearly a remarkable collection of images. I approached Sebastian Clough, the exhibitions director at UCLA's Fowler Museum, offering to guest curate an exhibition of select images for the museum. Clough loved the idea, and in December 2014, *Round Trip* opened, featuring forty-three images scanned from the original negatives and reproduced at 20" diameter, rather than the original negative diameter of 3.5", for better viewing. Divided into four sections, they fairly equally represent the territories the cyclists crossed that year: Greece, Turkey, Persia, and the Russian Empire.

Another question, however, still dogged me: who was the individual that allegedly saved the Sachtleben Collection a half-century ago? I reasoned that he might still be alive, and if so, he could provide the full story to relay in conjunction with the exhibition.

As remarkable as that story of the rescue sounded, it had a ring of truth to it. Sachtleben had settled in Houston to manage the Majestic Theater and lived there until a few years before his death in 1953. So it seemed plausible that his papers wound up in Houston, especially if he had lived in the old house in question.

And what was that unidentified man's connection to Jean Zakarian, the woman from Carpinteria who made the donation years later? Neither UCLA nor Aivazian knew much about the provenance of the papers. Zakarian had died in 2004, and I could not find any of her relatives to shed light on the mystery. Finally, I got the break I needed: Aivazian told me that the man who rescued the



*In May 1891, after a two-week stay in Sivas, Turkey, where Allen recuperated from typhoid fever, the cyclists veered northeast toward the Black Sea. With spring temperatures on the rise, they encountered streams such as this one, swollen by the melting snow from nearby mountains. Fortunately, their hired escorts were on hand to help move their gear.*

papers was Zakarian's second ex-husband. But I still had no name. An online search revealed a record relating to Zakarian's estate, which provided a contemporary phone number belonging to one of the trustees, Elizabeth Mann. Mann confirmed that she had known Zakarian and recalled that Jean's second husband was a man named Paul from Texas. She provided other useful details, such as the fact that Zakarian had moved to Texas after marrying Paul, around 1980, but returned shortly thereafter when the marriage failed. A genealogist from Santa Barbara, Mary Mamalakis assisted me in finding a divorce record from Texas that fit the known parameters: in 1981 a Paul Montague Jr. divorced a Jean Z. after a two-year marriage.

Encouraged, I searched for Montague and discovered a man with that name in his eighties living in Blanco, Texas, about an hour outside of Austin. An obituary for his sister listed his four children as survivors, including a daughter Meredith living in the Boston area, my base. I contacted Meredith who, after consulting with her father, confirmed that he was indeed the man I was looking for. I called Paul and found that he had clear and vivid memories of the rescue operation in Houston all those years ago. After I requested an interview, Paul graciously invited me to his ranch, and on December 10, 2014, just days before *Round Trip* opened at the Fowler, I flew to Austin. My friend William Hudson drove me to Paul's home in Blanco and recorded the interview.

Paul not only confirmed the gist of Aivazian's account, he also added quite a few details. He explained that while living in Houston in the mid-1960s he had a construction



*Sachtleben's Humber bicycle, resting on a pedal, attracts a small crowd in Constantinople. In the background is Allen on his bicycle and the famous Hagia Sophia, built in 537 AD as a Greek Orthodox basilica. Nearly a thousand years later, after the conquest of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmed II, it was converted to an imperial mosque.*

project that put him in the market for good wood. One day he noticed a demolition site near downtown where workmen were tearing down an old house, salvaging and selling off the valuable lumber from the frame, and burning unwanted debris in a bonfire.

Paul stopped by periodically, whenever he needed more lumber. One day, while waiting in line curbside, he noticed a workman appear in a dormer window holding a small valise. The workman then pitched it out the window in the direction of the bonfire below. When it missed its target, the old photos spilled out, and Paul bolted from the lumber line to examine the strewn contents.

A photographer and a history buff, Paul sensed that the discarded materials were of some interest. He reached into his pocket and all he could find was a \$20 bill, which he promptly handed to one of the workmen in exchange for the right to collect and keep the materials.

Paul did not know whose records these were (nor was that easy to unravel, in a time before the Internet). But he reasoned that they must have belonged to a reporter who had spent time in Armenia around the turn of the century, judging from the gritty photos of a mass burial in the aftermath of a massacre. Paul stored the valise in his attic and went about his life.

Years later when Paul remarried, he showed the collection to his new wife, Jean Zakarian, whose late first husband was an Armenian American. Jean found the collection of interest and took it with her when her marriage to Paul broke up. The two agreed that it meant more to her than it did to him.

Jean thus took the valise back to Carpinteria. Shortly thereafter Aivazian learned about the collection through mutual contacts at a local Armenian church and persuaded Jean to donate at least a portion of it to UCLA.

In another interesting twist to this story, Jean did not donate the entire collection to UCLA. She kept a major portion of it, until about fifteen years ago when she real-

ized that she was dying, and gave the remainder to a niece of her first husband. Whether the complementary material relates to the "round the world" trip, the search for Lenz, or other Sachtleben adventures (such as his trip to the Klondike during the gold rush of 1896-1899) remains to be seen. Who knows? Maybe the missing negatives from China will turn up.

In any event, I am thrilled to see the exhibition come to Houston, truly living up to its title, *Round Trip*. The Asia Society-Texas Center, which is hosting the exhibition, stands but a few blocks from the demolition site where Paul rescued those negatives decades ago. And, yes, it seems that the doomed house was indeed Sachtleben's old residence at 4819 San Jacinto Street.

**David V. Herlihy** is the author of *The Lost Cyclist and Bicycle: The History*, winner of the 2004 Award for Excellence in the History of Science. A leading authority in his field, his work also has appeared in numerous general interest and specialty magazines. He is responsible for the naming of a Boston bicycle path after Pierre Lallement, the original bicycle patentee, and the installation of a plaque by the New Haven Green, where the Frenchman introduced Americans to cycling in 1866. He is the guest curator of the *Round Trip* exhibition.

*Round Trip Bicycling Asia Minor, 1891* will be on display through September 27 at the Asia Society-Texas, open Tuesday through Sunday at 1370 Southmore Boulevard. Admission to this exhibit is free. Visit [www.asiasociety.org/texas](http://www.asiasociety.org/texas) or call 713-496-9901 for more information.