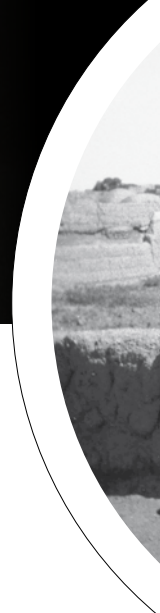


**FEATURE**  
Safety bikes  
& box  
cameras



PHOTOS SACTLEBEN IMAGES COURTESY OF UCLA

# SAFETY BIKES & BOX CAMERAS

In the 1890s, William Sachtleben and Thomas Allen cycled the globe. Around 400 of their photos recently came to light. Historian **David V Herlihy** tells the story

Camera photo: The National Museum of American History

**T**he possibility of a global tour on two wheels was initially the stuff of fantasy. In 1869, the pioneer cycling journal, *Le Vélocipède Illustré* of Paris, carried a series of articles about Jonathan Schopp, an American riding around the world on a bicycle. He was fictitious, of course, for the crude wheels of that time, later dubbed bone shakers, were hardly capable of such an epic journey.

A generation later, during the era of the fleet but precarious high-wheeler, life imitated art. In the spring of 1884, British-born Thomas Stevens left San Francisco atop a Columbia bicycle with a 50-inch diameter front wheel. Three years and almost 14,000 miles later, he returned to the same city an

international celebrity.

But along came the new-fangled safety bicycle, its rear wheel powered by a chain and sprocket. The novel vehicle quickly challenged the grand old Ordinary for road supremacy, promising to bring the joys of cycling to the general population. It was perhaps inevitable that someone should try to top Stevens' feat astride what some were already correctly calling 'the bicycle of the future'.

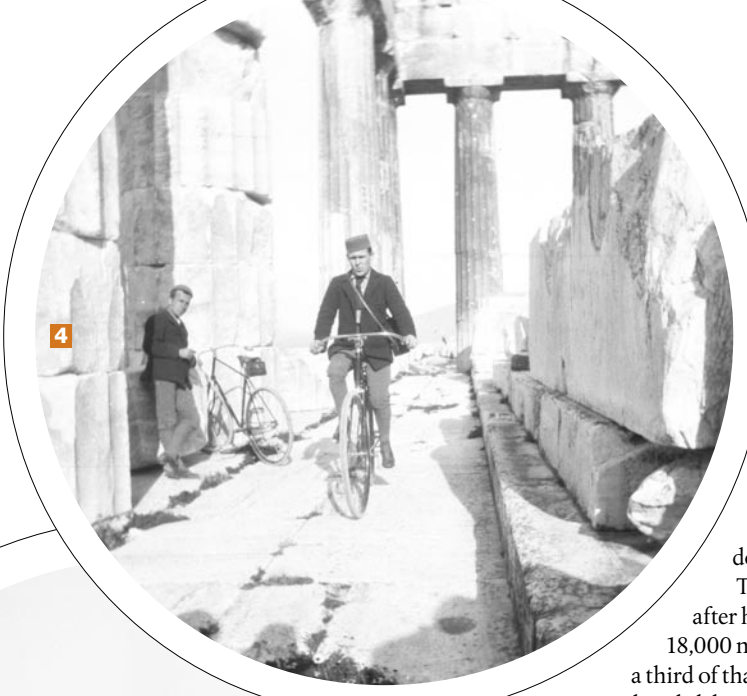
That distinction would fall to two young Americans, William Sachtleben and Thomas Allen, Jr. In July 1890, shortly after graduating from Washington University in St Louis, they sailed to Liverpool where they acquired two hard-tyred Singer safety bicycles. After tooling around the British Isles, they became so enamoured of bicycle touring that

they decided to prepare for a 'round the world' journey.

## BIKES, CAMERA, ACTION

Allen and Sachtleben promptly joined the Cyclists' Touring Club, then a mere 12 years old. The popular London-based organisation lobbied for better roads and signage, and also published cycling maps and guides. The lads shared its ideals. 'Travelling always by first class,' Sachtleben observed, 'is like staying in your own country. There is such a thing as too much convenience. For our part, we have long since tired of trains and artificial, modern hotels. We love to roam on our bicycles, unfettered, among the scenes of unsophisticated nature and the common people.'

The cyclists appealed to the American minister to Great Britain,



more compact than conventional cameras, making them ideal for cycle touring. Moreover, there was virtually no set up involved. As the early Kodak ads proclaimed, 'You push the button, we do the rest.'

Three years later, after having covered some 18,000 miles on the ground, a third of that total in Asia, Allen and Sachtleben would secure their own place in history. One American journalist proclaimed them 'the greatest travellers since Marco Polo', and their remarkable performance helped to spark the great bicycle boom of the mid 1890s.

Here, then, is a sketch of their adventures during the year 1891.

**RELAXING IN GREECE**

After traversing Europe in the autumn of 1890, the cyclists settled in Athens to wait out the winter. Thanks to Sachtleben's salvaged diary, we know that they enjoyed a rich social life. The cast of intriguing characters they befriended included Serope Gürdjian, an Armenian revolutionary who had just been expelled from Constantinople; the Kapsembelis brothers, the wealthy sons of a local textile manufacturer; and Anton von Gödrich, formerly an officer in the German Army whose favourite pastime was to ride his beloved high-wheeler.

The cyclists met fellow Americans as well, including Archibald Loudon Snowden, the American minister to Greece, whose son coveted a bicycle, and James Irving Manatt, the American consul, whose comely daughter Winnie became Sachtleben's love interest.

The three-month lull in Athens also gave the Americans ample time to wander through the city and capture spontaneous scenes of everyday life. Their cameras and bicycles invariably drew huge crowds of curious onlookers.

In their spare time, they plotted their ride across Asia. Displeased with the editor of PIP, they

decided to end their correspondence. They also determined that their Minnehahas were too fragile for the journey ahead. Allen thus made a return trip London where he acquired two sturdy forty-pound Humber bicycles, bringing them back to Athens. (Both still survive: Allen's is owned by the London Science Museum and Sachtleben's by the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History.)

So as not to be recognised aboard the train, a potential embarrassment for a round the world cyclist, Allen donned a disguise that included spectacles, top hat, and cane, all borrowed from the elder Kapsembelis. Allen's concern was not entirely contrived. Gödrich, the German cyclist, had taken a strong dislike to the Americans and was regularly bashing them in the German cycling press, denouncing them as frauds who rarely cycled.

**INTO THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE**

Disregarding widespread advice to avoid turbulent Turkey, the lads sailed to Constantinople in March 1891. They moved in with an Armenian doctor and his family and spent several weeks there while they honed their travel plans and roamed about the city, taking numerous photographs.

At last, in April, the doctor's twelve-year-old son led them to the Bosphorus, where they boarded a small boat with their all their gear. Once on the Asian side, their adventures began in earnest. Here they faced entirely foreign languages, cultures, and diets, with little or no recourse to railroads.

At times, rocks were thrown at them and aggressive dogs snapped at their heels. When they pulled into towns to settle into a grimy >



Robert Todd Lincoln, the eldest son of the slain president, to help them secure foreign passports. He reluctantly obliged. And although they were wealthy enough to tour without sponsorship, they accepted two new Minnehaha bicycles with cushion tyres from a London manufacturer. They also arranged to send progress reports to the London-based Penny Illustrated Paper.

To illustrate their accounts (the press was just beginning to publish photographs), the lads purchased two novel Kodak cameras. Because they used film rather than glass plates, they were considerably lighter and

**In the photos**  
**1** Surveying the volcanic terrain  
**2** Original kodak camera  
**3** One of the cyclists flanked by armed guards on horseback  
**4** Riding in the Acropolis  
**5** A mogul's mosque  
**6** Hired guards helping to ford the bicycles and gear across a stream

**“ALLEN AND SACTLEBEN JOINED THE CYCLISTS’ TOURING CLUB, THEN A MERE 12 YEARS OLD”**



inn, the locals invariably surrounded them and demanded a cycling demonstration. The authorities frequently compelled them to hire armed guards on horseback to escort them safely to their next destination.

Riding over gentle hills, the cyclists emerged on the Angora Plateau where nomadic tribesmen tended to the famous sheep, as they had done for centuries. After visiting Angora (now the capital city of Ankara), they witnessed the start of Ramadan, the traditional period of fasting.

They lingered for three months in Sivas, while Allen recovered from typhoid fever. At one point, a mule kicked out the spokes of Sachtleben's rear wheel, forcing him to hunt down a blacksmith. Near Kara-Hissar, they had to carry their bicycles and gear across a furious mountain stream.

#### CROSSING PERSIA

Reaching Tabriz in August, they were forced to suspend their ride once

**In the photos**  
**7** Sachtleben cycles over the Gallatin Bridge linking Pera and Stamboul  
**8** One of the Humber bicycles, with Hagia Sophia looming in the background  
**9** Sachtleben strolls with an officer on the grounds of the Russian Cathedral in Tashkent



again while Sachtleben recovered from cholera.

'They are plucky fellows and are thoroughly American,' their host, the missionary William Whipple reported to an American newspaper. 'We have had them as our guests for three weeks, and have enjoyed talking to them concerning their route from Liverpool [to] here... It seems marvellous how they can travel through Turkey and Persia without the languages or guides. They have had to ford rivers, carrying their wheels, and climbing high mountain passes, etc., and live native-like in every place they stop.'

In Persia, too, they had to cope with throngs of curious citizens, rudimentary inns, and unwanted escorts on horseback, not to mention extreme climatic conditions. In Tehran, the temperature soared to 120 degrees. They were again compelled to stop while they waited for Russian passports.

Finally, the Russian consulate persuaded them to continue east across a desert to the holy city of Meshed, where, he assured them, his colleague would fulfil their request.

Armed at last with the necessary documents, the wheelmen took the military highway heading northwest to the Russian Empire. Although they were crossing a rugged mountain range, the road was so hard and smooth that they

averaged 75 miles a day, nearly double their usual output.

#### THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

In early November, they finally reached the Russian border and blew past the bewildered officials. The bright city of Askabad, in present day Turkmenistan, offered the weary wheelmen a welcome dose of modern civilisation.

The governor held a dinner in their honour, but he insisted that they take the newly inaugurated trans-Caspian railway for the next six hundred miles, to avoid crossing a desert. Feeling pinched for time and in no mood for further suffering, the cyclists complied.

After a stop in Bukhara, they reached Samarkand, an exotic Oriental city filled with blue domes, minarets, and the ruins of ancient >



**“A MULE KICKED OUT THE SPOKES OF SACHTLEBEN’S REAR WHEEL, SO HE SOUGHT A BLACKSMITH”**



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palaces and tombs. Men wearing white turbans strolled about the busy streets, pausing to barter with street vendors.

After a week's stay, the cyclists remounted their bicycles and headed along the highway to Tashkent, the capital of present day Uzbekistan, at that time a major military base and a sprawling city of 100,000, including a few of the czar's exiled relatives.

Digging in for the long winter, they moved in with a German-speaking businessman who pampered them with hearty meals and freely flowing vodka. Thanks to his high social standing, the cyclists joined the city's party circuit, impressing the local

elite with their broad knowledge of world affairs.

**BACK TO SAN FRANCISCO**

Allen and Sachtleben spent the balance of 1892 crossing China via the Gobi desert. The astonished American ambassador in Peking (now Beijing), Charles Denby, interviewed the lads and sent a lengthy report back to Washington, urging that the government consider adopting bicycles for military use.

Reaching San Francisco on Christmas Day 1892, Allen and Sachtleben were swarmed by prying journalists, who made them instant celebrities. The Overman Wheel Company happily furnished them with their fourth set of wheels, shiny black Victor pneumatics.

As they made their way to New York City in the spring of 1893, cycling clubs greeted them and threw lavish banquets in their honour. Thanks in part to Allen and Sachtelben's evangelism and the marvellous photos they took (and that UCLA now holds), the great bicycle boom was underway. 🚲

**CAPTURING THE JOURNEY**

Allen and Sachtleben demonstrated that virtually any one could become a proficient cycle photographer by employing both the safety bicycle and the compact film camera. That was no trivial revelation. The seductive idea of using a bicycle to transport a camera was as old as the bicycle itself, yet a practical arrangement had proved highly elusive. The 'wet process' used to develop glass plate negatives in the 1860s required a portable dark room and an assortment of chemicals, an impossible load for the bone-shaker. True, the 'dry' process introduced in the high-wheel era enabled a few hearty individuals to practise cycle photography (notably Frank Lenz of Pittsburgh), yet the hardware, preparation, and skill required remained considerable.



During their journey, Allen and Sachtleben took about 1,200 circular snapshots, 3.5 inches in diameter. Until recently, these photos were lost to posterity, save for a handful of poorly reproduced images taken in Europe and China that were published in a few magazines, as well as their post-ride book, *Across Asia on a Bicycle*.

Fortunately, some 400 images spanning the year 1891, when they travelled from Athens, Greece, to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, have now been revealed. The University of California at Los Angeles, which owns the collection, recently scanned the fragile and highly combustible nitrate negatives, a costly and complicated process, with excellent results.

How these negatives and related papers got to UCLA in the first place is a remarkable story in its own right. According to Gia Aivazian, a former UCLA librarian, they were rescued when workmen began to clean out Sachtleben's former residence in Houston sometime in the 1960s (he died in 1953). They were dropping boxes of his belongings from a third-floor window into a backyard bonfire, but one missed its target. Its contents exploded onto the lawn and a curious passerby retrieved the relics that now comprise UCLA's Sachtleben Collection.



**In the photos**  
**10** Striking out on the old caravan road, beside the Kizil River  
**11** From left to right: Gurdjian, the elder Kapsambelis, and Allen (in disguise) wait by the train station for Allen's train to London



Photo: The National Museum of American History