

GETTING A HANDLE ON MICHAUX

The Editor

MICHAUX IS unquestionably one of the best-known names in the veteran cycle pantheon and yet paradoxically the least understood. Even among serious collectors, confusion continues to reign. At the recent Jubilee meet of the NAVCC the first entry on the programme was a diagonal framed velocipede described as 'Michaux boneshaker 1865', roughly equivalent to saying Johnson hobby-horse 1816 or Rover safety 1883. Whilst Michaux has, in some circles, become the generic name for the boneshaker, René Olivier, entrepreneurial powerhouse behind the Michaux brand, seldom receives a mention. The reason is simple - René allowed Michaux's name to hang above the shop and to be stamped on the company's bicycles. If all machines made by Compagnie Parisienne had been inscribed Olivier Freres, rather than Michaux, the company history would be seen differently today. It is therefore important that as collectors, riders or cycle historians we should grasp the working relationship between the parties and understand particularly that Pierre Michaux had no involvement with Compagnie Parisienne or consequently with most of the surviving machines that carry his name.

Quite surprisingly extensive records of the most influential company of the velocipede era still exist in the Olivier family archive. Highlights of the hoard

include personal diaries of René's father Jules, several hundred letters written to the Michaux company during the first quarter of 1868 and a company ledger from the same period. We also have testimony from René to his attorney in the 1869 court case against Michaux, which importantly includes René's version of the invention story. Had these documents been known of at the time of the Michaux memorial dedication, the inscription on the monument might have been very different. In addition there is a revealing letter from Aimé Olivier to his brother Marius in January 1870, reproduced here.

Two researchers, Keizo Kobayashi¹ and David Herlihy², have made extensive use of this archive and yet their published conclusions appear not to have been fully absorbed by many Michaux and Compagnie Parisienne owners when identifying, dating or describing their own machines.

Most of the detail in this article derives from these two authors.

PIERRE MICHAUX'S EARLY LIFE

Pierre Michaux was born on 25 June 1813 in Bar le Duc and apprenticed to a metal worker before making his tour de France in this trade around the provinces. He married in St Brieuc, perhaps in 1841, and by 1845 had five children: Jules, Marie, Ernest, Emile and Henri. In May 1844 his

¹ Keizo Kobayashi *Histoire du Velocipede de Drais a Michaux 1817-1870*, Tokyo 1993. Also 'The Olivier Brothers' in *Proceedings of the 2nd ICHC* published 1995.

² David Herlihy, *Bicycle*, Yale 2004.

business failed and he moved back to Barle Duc and then Commercy. By 1854, Jules, Emile and Henri had died and Edmond, Elise and Paul-Henri born. Pierre moved to Paris, working as a carriage maker's ironworker, and around the end of 1858 he took his own premises for this trade at cite Godot de Mauroy. He died in 1883 and his son Ernest two years earlier.

FIRST VELOCIPEDA PRODUCTION

Evidence for early, two-wheel velocipede production is found in letters from J Townsend Trench to *The Irish Cyclist*.³ Trench initially wrote that he visited Michaux the blacksmith at a time when he had made only a few machines and when they were 'quite unknown' in Paris. Seven years later he discovered a letter he had sent to his sister which confirmed this event as having occurred in July 1864. It said that Michaux had just invented the two-wheel machine, had made six of them and had one left.⁴

René Olivier, in his 1869 testimony to his attorney, seems to confirm this scenario, saying that Michaux made several of these bicycles which he kept for a long time (he does not say how long) in his workshop before finally selling them. René sent one in October 1864 to Lyons where his brother Aimé fitted a brake and conceived other improvements.

In August 1865, René, Aimé and college friend Georges de la Bouglise, rode from Paris to Lyons on Michaux velocipedes and a month later Georges made official application [rejected] to show velocipedes at the 1867 Exhibition.

In 1866, Chinese agents in Paris reported seeing velocipedes in the streets.⁵

These slim pickings are about the only references discovered so far to boneshaker production, prior to the Paris Exhibition year of 1867, so we have to conclude that the number of two-wheeled machines

made and ridden in the years before 1866 was quite small.

MICHAUX 1867–APRIL 1868

Townsend-Trench said he found Michaux's views upon mechanics, politics and religion exceedingly clever and entertaining.⁶ The young Olivier brothers from Lyons, studying engineering in Paris, apparently shared this view and actively promoted the bicycle among their college friends, urging Michaux to take advantage of growing potential orders. Starting with only two workers other than himself and his son Ernest, Pierre had, by early 1867, four hearths and about fifteen fitters but he was always short of credit. René lent him 10,000Fr – in installments during 1867 – specifically for the velocipede venture, he asked his friend and fellow-student Georges de la Bouglise to keep a watching eye on the business for him. The account book in the Olivier archive shows monthly turnover for the six-month period Sept 1867 to March 1868 as running at 10,000frs per month, suggesting around 40 bicycles per month, with many of the components being bought in. By the end of the period, even complete frames were being outsourced.

By February 1868, however, René was already beginning to doubt Michaux's abilities to run the growing business profitably and thereby service the loan. He proposed taking the business over, and although Georges declined the opportunity to take up any equity, René and Aimé, both recently married into the wealthy Pastre family, together with their elder brother Marius, concluded a partnership agreement with Michaux on 7 May 1868. Michaux put in his assets and leaseholds, calculated at 16,000Fr, the Oliviers contributed 50,000Fr capital at 6% with an understanding to supply further loans at the same rate if required. Michaux was allocated 31% of the equity, given a salary

3 *The Irish Cyclist & Athlete* 2 May 1888

4 Letter to *The Irish Cyclist* 29 Sept 1895.

5 Amir Moghaddass in correspondence

6 *Irish Cyclist & Athlete*, 2 May 1888, p405.

and restricted to managing the workforce and the fabrication whilst the Oliviers, with 69%, would handle purchasing, sales, publicity and accounts. George de la Bouglise was to be the nominal head of the business although surprisingly he was unpaid. Equally surprising was the fact that Michaux was permitted to continue to sign for the company.

MICHAUX & CIE MAY 1868–APRIL 1869

The Oliviers remained absentee investors living in Lyons as the new partnership swiftly spiraled out of control. Although production increased dramatically from 10 to 60 machines per week, the September stocktaking revealed that Michaux had helped himself to 25,000frs rather than the 2,100frs previously agreed upon. Despite letters of complaint from René to both Michaux and de la Bouglise, the Oliviers found themselves, after six months, committed to an investment of 277,000frs. In December, René visited Paris to bring matters to a head. A trading loss of 7,000frs was disclosed and he proposed new, more restrictive terms to Michaux who promptly refused them. After stormy negotiations, dissolution of the company was eventually agreed upon. Michaux, vehemently protesting that he never wanted to make another velocipede, was to receive 150,000frs and forgiven his 26,000frs loan – this had increased by 800frs taken from the till in the two-day interval between agreement and signing. He was allowed to return to his Ave. Montaigne workshop whilst the Oliviers would liquidate Michaux & Cie. before taking over the manufacture.

THE PATENT APRIL 1868

No patents had been taken out for the original two-wheeled velocipede but the various improvements, instigated by Aimé, René and Georges during the first

year, such as a cord-operated brake and acorn pedals containing lubricant, were incorporated in Patent No. 80637, 24 April 1868. An addition dated 23 June 1868 also covered Aimé's diagonal frame design. As the man on the spot, Pierre Michaux filed this patent in his own name.

THE COURT CASE 1869

René's rather hasty business style, or maybe the failings of his lawyer, resulted in things quickly going wrong for the third time. Pierre Michaux immediately started back in the business of making velocipedes as Michaux & Cie. claiming to be the original inventor. He requested that the Post Office deliver Michaux & Cie mail to himself, he sent a traveler to England to grab the English market and he used dishonest employees as spies to divert orders. He also claimed that the 1868 patent belonged to him personally rather than to the company.

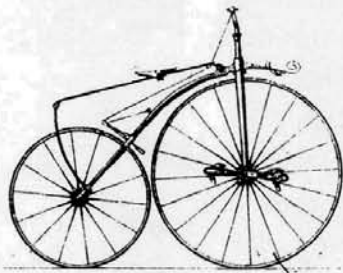
On 16 June 1869, the Olivier's won a court injunction claiming disloyal competition. This prevented Pierre's use of the Michaux & Cie. name and demanded 100,000frs damages. Pierre responded by setting up Michaux Pere & Cie. and continued to make bicycles, but the court case finally went against him and his new company failed after six months.

COMPAGNIE PARISIENNE APRIL 1869–1874

Having rid himself of Michaux, René commenced the hands-on running of a velocipede business for the first time. Olivier Freres [René and Aimé] was founded on 11 April 1869 to acquire the assets of the dissolved Michaux & Cie. To retain the goodwill of the brand, in which he had already invested so heavily, René set up Societe Parisienne des Velocipedes, trading under the cumbersome title Compagnie Parisienne-Ancienne Maison Michaux & Cie (formerly Michaux

Letter from Aimé Olivier to his brother Marius on company notepaper – sometime in January 1870

Translated by the late and sadly missed Roland Sauvaget



ANCIENNE MAISON MICHAUX & C^{ie}

ATELIERS DE CONSTRUCTION

& DE RÉPARATIONS

27, Rue Jean Goujon,

10 ET 12, AVENUE BUGEAUD

Avenue de l'Impératrice.

COMPAGNIE PARISIENNE

SIÈGE SOCIAL à PARIS 27, Rue Jean Goujon (Champs Elysées)

Paris, le

1870

Mon cher ami

*C'est dimanche les employés n'y
sont pas; je ne puis avoir de renseignements
mais les livres sont sous clef au mal.*

My Dear Friend,

It is Sunday, the employees aren't here, I cannot get any exact information; the books are either locked up or are irrelevant.

According to the big book [of accounts] you should have given at 16 January [1870]

	80,194ff
Plus your 50,000	50,000
	130,194
René	74,000
Me	141,000
Total	345,194ff

But I think that René has since put in another 30 or 40 thousand francs I suppose. We have sold 2,500 velos at an estimated profit of 25ff each, that makes 62,500f, which added to the capital gives 407,694ff represented by materials and merchandise in the stores. This is almost believable if one takes into account the stupidities made and that from these figures there is 25,000ff repayable to Michaux and 25,000 to his account = 50,000 net, there remains 350,000ff.

We are making our business with confidence but our confidence is as great as our ignorance, nevertheless without making any major changes, it would be possible to put things in order. If some changes were made things could be O.K. but we would need to roll up our sleeves. Things are in

a mess because of our own faults but we can take care of it.

René pleases himself running the business but he is not doing the real work. He is young and reckless, we have seen healthy people with a good constitution die by not taking care of themselves. It is not outside forces that threaten us, we are our own worse enemies. 3,500 bearing housings, enough for 1,700 velos are in the stores and Leveque is still making them. In a word that sums it up. In the presence of all this stock there are some items we are completely lacking. For example yesterday I had to take pedals from the riding school to sell six bicycles. What next, nobody is thinking of stopping Leveque who is sending in 400 per month.

Finally I could leave my home and come here to deal with this, I can see clearly what needs doing. Nothing needs creating things just need putting in order. It needs a watchful eye but there is not enough work for 2, one good supervisor would be enough for the work which is very simple and I believe that it is more profitable for me to stay and learn a job which may be very useful in the future.

Your brother who loves you.

Aimé Olivier

& Co). Nevertheless demand was still strong and René's marketing flair reinforced the established reputation of the brand. In September he organised the highly successful Paris–Rouen road race. He extended and re-equipped the offices and factories at 27 Rue Jean Goujon and Ave Bugeaud, and maintained a large riding school and manege.

By late-Summer 1869, under his management, sales reached a peak of 300 machines per month, although they dropped to 50 in December as winter approached. A letter from Aimé to his brother Marius, in January 1870, describes the chaos behind the enthusiasm that seems to have characterised René's brief management career. (see box)

When the Franco-Prussian war suddenly erupted in July 1870, followed by the Siege of Paris and then the Commune, René fled Paris and his factories were requisitioned. This put a temporary end to production. Post-war, in July 1871, Compagnie Parisienne began advertising again, claiming to have rebuilt the factory after the bombardment. Production was resumed under M. Danjou, a friend of the brothers, and continued at least until October 1872. But the velocipede boom was by then over and, with no guiding spirit to develop the high bicycle, the Company folded in 1874 with debts of over a million francs. Old stock was still being sold off in 1875 the year that René died in a carriage accident. He was 32.

NAMING AND DATING MICHAX MACHINES

We must make a clear distinction between Michaux, Michaux & Cie., Compagnie Parisienne, and Michaux Pere & Cie with these firms being discrete and not confused.

The second distinction to note is between the serpentine frame and the diagonal frame. This change, urged on Michaux by René Olivier, to make the

frame more rigid and also to facilitate steam forging from wrought iron, which could be done by Pastre companies, took place between June and September 1868.⁷ Diagonal framed machines therefore cannot date from before mid-Summer 1868. An intermediate model exists from this time, having the new diagonal frame but the old open socket head (p15 centre right).

The company letter file suggests that other minor design changes were made to the serpentine frame model in early 1868 but these are not identified.

Wire wheels and the option of double suspension were introduced from January 1870.

The addresses below give perhaps a clearer dating guide for machines carrying nameplates.

NAMEPLATES & ADDRESSES

Nameplates are predominantly oval but Compagnie Parisienne and Michaux Pere & Cie plates may be sculpted rectangles either with extensions for the rivets or with the rivets within the rectangle.

Michaux Bte S.G.D.G. Avenue Montaigne 29 (Ch. Elysees) April 1867–March 1868



Michaux 19 R Jean Goujon. Av Montaigne 29. Bte S.G.D.G. March 1868–May 1868

Michaux et Cie. 19 R. Jean Goujon. May 1868–Sept. 1868.

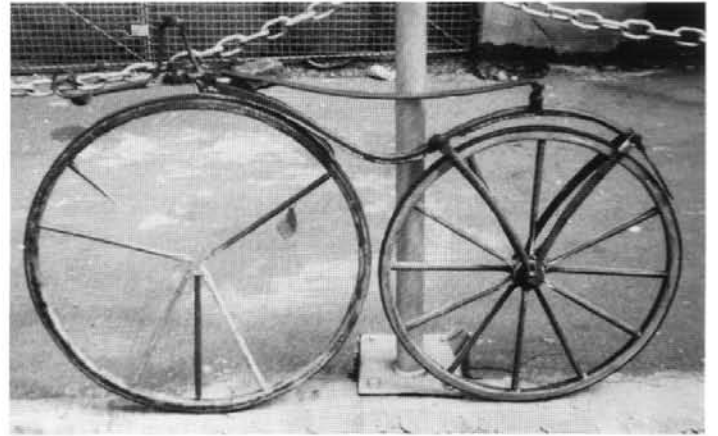
Michaux & Cie. Btes S.G.D.G. 27 Rue Jean Goujon. Sept. 1868–April 1869



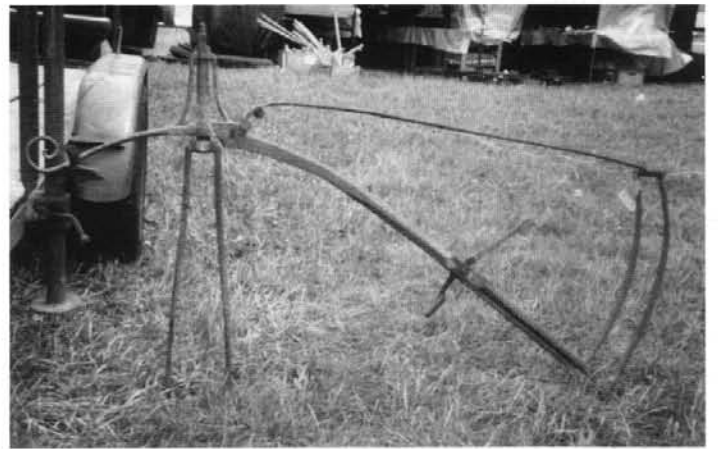
⁷ Two such frames from the Olivier collection were sold by Sotheby's 22 June 1987, Lot 377.



Bill Haylor with his pre-June 1868 serpentine frame Michaux



Remain of a child's serpentine Michaux from the Olivier collection sold by Sotheby's June 1987



Transitional frame from the Olivier collection Summer 1868

SOME MICHAUX TYPES



Compagnie Parisienne diagonal frame 1869



Compagnie Parisienne diagonal frame with wire wheels and suspension in Compeigne museum cl870

Michaux & Cie Inventeur 29 Ave. Montaigne, 5-6-7-8 Cite Godet de Mauro-April–Jun 1869

Michaux Père & Cie. Inventeurs Brevetés S.G.D.G. 29 Ave. Montaigne, 5-6-7-8 Cite Godet de Mauroy. June 1869– Jan 1870.



Compagnie Parisienne (Ancienne Maison Michaux) 27 Rue Jean Goujon & 12 Ave Bugeaud. April 1869–July 1870

Compagnie Parisienne (Ancienne Maison Michaux & Cie.) 27 Rue Jean Goujon. July 1871–Sept 1874



PRODUCTION NUMBERS

No production records appear to have survived but we have several contemporary and later indications of the number of machines being built at different periods. Comparing these with surviving serial numbers we can make some intelligent guesses. Compagnie Parisienne appears to have started a new numbering series after the Michaux & Cie liquidation.

Pre-1866	negligible production
1867–June 1868	1,500
Michaux, Serpentine frame, about a dozen survivors are known	
July 68–Mar 69	1,500
Michaux & Cie, Diagonal frame, wooden wheels.	
April 69– July 1870	4,600
Compagnie Parisienne, Diagonal frame, 3,600 wood, 1000 wire wheel.	
July 1871–Oct 1872	400

Compagnie Parisienne, Diagonal frame with wire wheels – quantity guessed
Total 8,000

We have no reliable information for Pierre Michaux's output for the period March –Dec 1869, trading first as Michaux & Cie and then after a couple of months as Michaux Pere & Cie. Based on the earlier output of the Ave Montaigne workshop however, the figure is probably under 500.

8 Two documents, apparently drafts for his lawyer, in the Olivier archive.

CLAIMS FOR THE INVENTION OF THE CRANK

When a memorial to the 'inventor of the bicycle' was under discussion in 1893, Paul-Henri Michaux wrote to *L'Eclair* saying that his brother Ernest had, in March 1861, modified a velocipede (draisine) for local hatmaker Brunel by adding cranks to the front wheel, at the suggestion of his father Pierre. Journalist Paul Manoury remembered Brunel's velocipede but not as a bicycle, rather as a tricycle with a box behind containing hats. Neither Ernest nor Pierre is recorded as ever having made this claim during their lifetimes so Henri's story and his suggested date, despite being accepted for the memorial, remain unsupported. He did claim to have personally witnessed the transformation of the draisine although he would have been only seven at the time.

René Olivier offers a different invention story, previously unknown to historians, in two documents prepared for his court testimony against Michaux in 1869.⁸ Translations by the late Roland Sauvaget.

'Some years ago, a workman conceived the idea of fitting cranks to an old-time velocipede. I do not know if Mr Michaux's son had knowledge of this but what is certain is that having in his hands a tricycle (a velocipede with three wheels) on which the front wheel was fitted with cranks, he took it to

pieces and transformed it into a bicycle; that is the only invention he made, that is to say the transformation of a crank-driven tricycle into a crank-driven bicycle. In those days Mr Michaux, a smith in the coach-building trade, had little to do, he built a few of these bicycles which he long kept in stock and which he finally managed to sell.'

The second document is more enigmatic: 'I am going to show you what role Mr. Michaux played in the company. You know, as well as I, the role Mr. Michaux played in the velocipede. His son, Ernest, conceived the application of cranks to the old velocipede which carpenters used in their tours of France. From there Mr Michaux passed immediately to the so-called serpentine velocipede in malleable cast iron with numerous attachments and numerous possibilities of breakdown, All this took place around the year 1854 or 1855. Up until the year 1863 or [18]64, Mr. Michaux made very few velocipedes, two or three a year.'

We cannot be certain whether by 'the old velocipede which carpenters used' René means a draisine or a velocipede tricycle but his first draft specifically states tricycle. As both he and Henri Michaux name Ernest as the perpetrator, their accounts are perhaps similar enough to be reconciled. We know that LaRoche & Meheux of Chelsea showed an improved front crank-driven tricycle at the 1862 London International Exhibition and it is possible the form was known in Paris at this time. Whilst people often prefer to read of lone inventors having eureka moments, most technological improvements are evolutionary in nature, devised by people working in the relevant trade and aware of current design and fashion. Ernest's modification of a tricycle rather than a draisine seems to fit this scenario and René's testimony is more

straightforward than the somewhat volatile evidence that Henri gave to the monument committee.

A third invention story was provided in 1883 by Pierre Lallement. He claimed to have made a velocipede in 1863 having been inspired by seeing a hobby-horse in Nancy.⁹ He said that he used his machine on the streets of Paris where 'there were a few who took note' of his invention. This story effectively denies Henri Michaux's priority although Herlihy suggests that the 'workman' in René Olivier's second testimony could have been Lallement and the 'old time velocipede' a draisine. In this scenario Ernest would have seen Lallement's machine on the street in 1863 and copied it. The similarity of Lallement's 1866 patent drawing to the 1864 Michaux sketched by Townsend Trench certainly demands that they both had common parentage,¹⁰ but Lallement's claim was uncorroborated and it remains weaker than the evidence for Ernest Michaux. If Ernest was indeed the inventor then we will have to bite the bullet and conclude that Lallement must have taken his idea from this source.

Importantly, René Olivier's testimony was made at an earlier date (1869) than the other two and despite a slight variance in his two documents they have a ring of truth. Certainly, he was engaged in a battle with the Michauxs, and might have been expected to belittle their contribution, but his evidence would have been subject to protest in court had it been factually incorrect. It also seems more likely to this author that the crank-driven bicycle would have evolved from a contemporary crank driven tricycle rather than from the draisine, a machine that had been defunct for four decades. René's story actually achieves reinforcement by Henri Michaux's naming of Brunel. A hat maker would surely have been more likely to carry his goods around in a box

9 Charles Pratt Pierre Lallement and his Bicycle, 1883

10 'Michaux and Lallement: Another approach' Nick Clayton TB159/9

attached to a contemporary tricycle rather than on a forty-year-old, two-wheel draisine – and so, one would imagine, would rural carpenters.

This only leaves us with the date that Ernest transformed tricycle to bicycle. Henri Michaux maintained that the invention was 1861, rather than the 1854–5 suggested here by René Olivier. Townsend Trench said that in July 1864 there was one left of an original batch of six and René Olivier confirms that

Michaux kept the first batch for a long time unsold. On this evidence we should perhaps accept the possibility that prototype manufacture could stretch back to 1863, 1861 or beyond – maybe even to 1854–5, as René bears witness.

Now we only need to establish who first fitted cranks to the front wheel of a tricycle and when.

With thanks to Alastair Dodds, David Herlihy, the late Roland Sauvaget and Keizo Kobayashi.