

Pedal-pushing heroes of post-war Geelong



GEELONG Amateur Cycling Club's strong membership in the post-war years reflected the important role the humble bike played in daily affairs.

According to veteran cyclist Jack Griffin (pictured fourth from right in this 1946 photograph), cycling champions were household names and youngsters dreamt of emulating the feats of Russell Mockridge or Eddie Smith.

"When they knocked off work at Ford's, hundreds of riders would be racing each other into Geelong," Jack said.

"Everyone rode bikes. Petrol was scarce because of rationing and cars were too expensive anyway."

Bicycle retail and repair shops were more common than car yards today and Jack recalls almost a dozen in the central city area. Bike sellers included Elsworth's, Bernie Diamond, Malvern Star, Fred Foster, Mick Hede, Homecraft Cycles, Gene Cowley, Athol Eagle, Gerald Tate, George De Grandi and Bill Pilgrim.

Bill Hehir of Belair Cycles and Radford Star were prominent retailers in Geelong West.

Jack said the picture was taken in McKillop St, outside the club's head-



quarters. In the background is the Elephant and Castle Hotel, which has changed little over the decades.

About half the club's 40-odd members were about to set off on a weekly race down the Bellarine Peninsula.

Two weeks later, a new member entered his first race, astonishing old-timers with his speed, strength and endurance.

The rookie cyclist was the legendary Russell Mockridge — considered the world's best until tragically killed in a road race in 1958. Although Mockridge won his

first race with the club — starting off the generous mark of 12 minutes — his time was unrecorded.

Usually the timekeeper and club president Alex McPherson would follow the backmarkers by car until three-quarters of the race was run, then drive around the field to be back at the finishing point to time the placegetters.

"By the time the timekeeper got back, Mockridge was well and truly finished," Jack said.

"His co-marker Tom Ivory realised

Mockridge was holding back. Tom told him he was not compelled to stay with him, so Mockridge said 'thank you' and off he went.

"He would have won by a greater margin if he hadn't been concerned about doing the right thing."

Jack regarded Mockridge and the recently-deceased Sir Hubert Opperman as cycling freaks.

"Blokes like Opperman and Mockridge usually come along only once in a lifetime."

Other great Australian cyclists of the era

included Billy Guyatt and Jack Hoobler, as well as Alf Strom and Roger Arnold. They were Australian cycling's most successful ambassadors in the late 1940s, dominating six-day events in Europe.

Now 72, and still racing at veteran level, Jack first competed at Wangaratta in 1911.

The same year he rode from Wangaratta to Melbourne — 233 kilometres — in nine hours, 55 minutes. "Including stops," Jack.

Now, he's about to join the cycling promotion circuit. And what a circuit.

With another ex-serviceman, Jack Doughty from Wollongong, Jack heads off on July 3 on his third ride around Australia.

The ride has been sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs who wants Jack and Eric to spread the message among older Australians that it's "Not Too Late".

"We'll be telling people that although they're 75 or 80 the best years of their life could still be ahead.

"That instead of sitting around in a waiting room, they should get out and exercise."

After leaving the Geelong-Hawthorn football match at Kardinia Park, Jack and Eric will ride anti-clockwise around the country, aiming at covering about 1000 kilometres a week, arriving home in mid-October.

In the meantime, Jack urges any former athletes or cyclists who feel they need exercise to consider cycling.

"It doesn't put as much strain on the joints as running, but it's a great cardiovascular activity," he said.

The Geelong Veteran Cycling Club stages a weekly race over a circuit of Paraparap.

— BERNIE SLATTERY