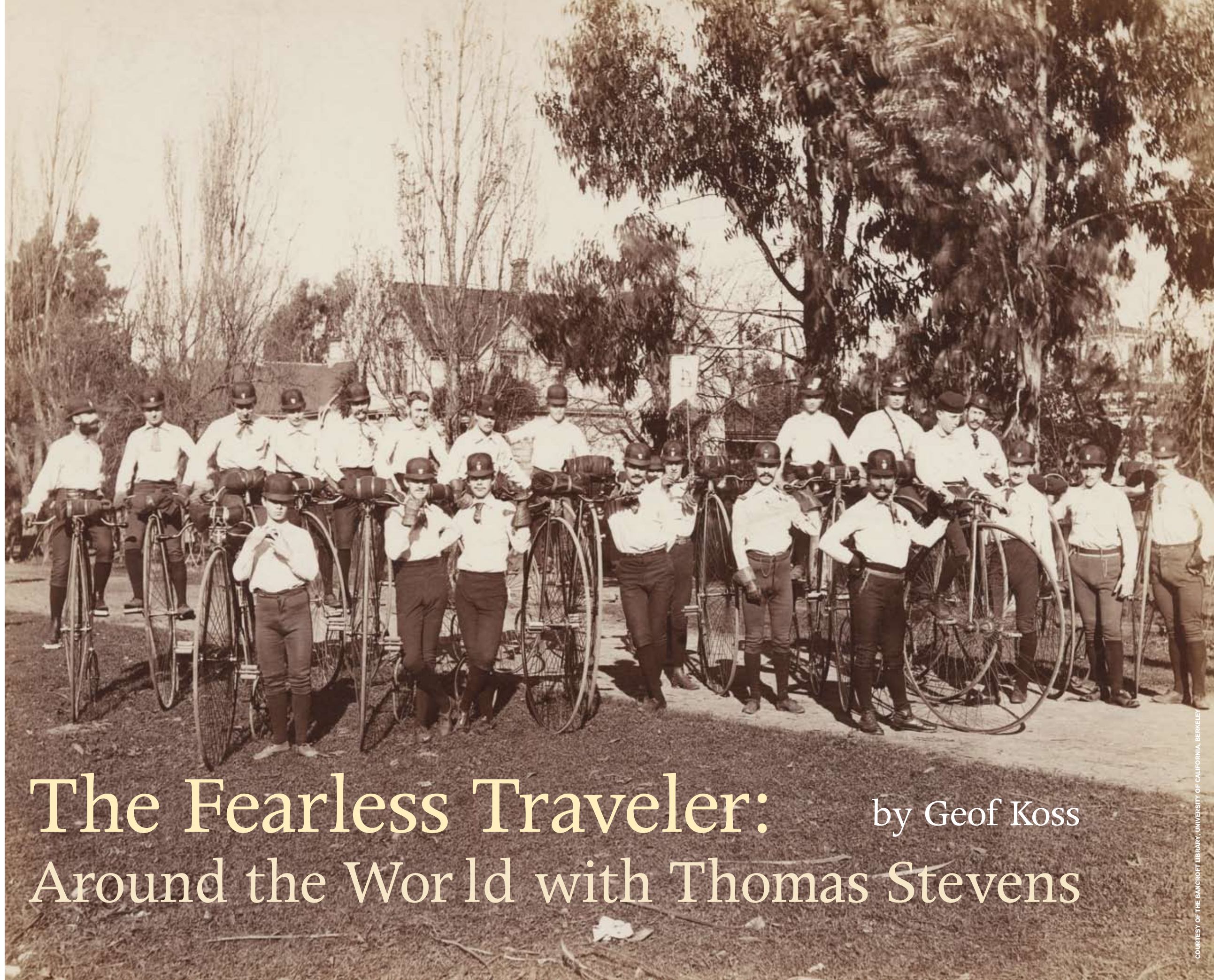


**O**n the afternoon of June 3, 1884, a crowd gathered at the post office in the frontier town of Cheyenne, the capital of what was then the Wyoming Territory. The center of attention was a man of medium height, wearing an oversized blue flannel shirt over blue overalls, which were tucked into a pair of leggings at the knee. Tanned “brown as a nut,” the man was covered from head to toe in mud, as was the 50-inch Columbia Standard high-wheel bicycle he had ridden into town. A mustache protruded from his face.

The mud was a souvenir of the soft roads from Laramie, a day’s ride to the west, but this man was no tourist out for a day trip. His name was Thomas Stevens, and for the past six weeks, he had been riding, pushing, and pulling the bicycle across the rugged terrain of the American West. Leaving San Francisco with little more than a spare shirt and pair of socks, a thin, waterproof coat that doubled as a tent, and a revolver, he’d already crossed the Sierra Nevada range, the Great Basin desert, and the Rocky Mountains.

Stevens’s destination was Boston, nearly 2,000 miles to the east. Whether he’d make it remained an open question. Seven people had already tried to cross the U.S. by bicycle, and all had failed. But Stevens, who was 29, possessed an advantage over the earlier cyclists. His brain was wired with a sense of purpose and determination that bordered on the superhuman. Once he set a goal for him-

**Returning hero.** Members of the Bay Area Chapter of the League of American Wheelmen pose with Thomas Stevens on his return to San Francisco.



# The Fearless Traveler:

by Geof Koss

# Around the World with Thomas Stevens

self, he was relentless in seeing it through to completion.

This iron will, along with an insatiable case of wanderlust, would lead Stevens on a string of seemingly impossible adventures that would make him an internationally known figure during the late 19th century. He's best known as the first person to ride a bicycle around the world, but over the course of his 10-year exploring career, Stevens also drank champagne in the wilds of Africa with the famed explorer Henry Morton Stanley, interviewed novelist Leo Tolstoy while riding a horse across Russia, and roamed India with a camera while investigating the strange powers of Hindu mystics.

Stevens's path to best-selling American writer and adventurer was an unlikely one. Born on Christmas Eve 1854 to a British grocer of modest means, he grew up in the London suburb of Berkhamsted. From an

early age, he excelled in sports and showed an interest in history and travel literature. As a child, it was obvious that he marched to a different beat. According to an 1887 profile in *Outing*, an American magazine that was to play a major supporting role in his career, his neighbors recalled "how little Tommy Stevens would select the gustiest days of March in which to climb to the tops of the tallest trees and there sway to and fro in the wind like a mad imp of the upper air, reveling in the fury of the storm as though in his natural element."

In his youth, Stevens developed the extraordinary discipline that characterized his later adventures, when he would squirrel pennies away for months to buy something he desired. What he wanted most was to strike out across the ocean for America. The dream appeared within reach when his father went to Missouri in 1868 to

clear land for a homestead, leaving him in charge of the family and its store. But the dream was delayed when his father was forced to return to England after Stevens's mother became seriously ill.

Stevens then proposed going by himself, and although his father initially rejected the plan, he relented when his son produced his savings — enough to pay for the passage. "Go. Young as you are, you are well able to take care of yourself," his father said. With that, the 17-year-old Stevens sailed for America with a half-brother.

At an age when most youth were still in school, Stevens found himself laboring as a ranch hand in the frontier state of Missouri. His family eventually joined him, and after he helped them establish a homestead, he grew restless and struck out on his own. Stevens wandered the American West for the next several years, supporting himself by a string of jobs. A two-year stint in a Wyoming railroad mill ended when he was run out of town after it became known that he was importing British laborers in exchange for part of their salaries. He later found work in a Colorado mine where he came up with the idea of riding a bicycle across the country. That he neither owned nor knew how to ride one was of no consequence, for a few months later Stevens was learning to pedal his newly acquired Columbia high-wheeler in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park.

The adventures began shortly after his departure on April 22, 1884. Stevens mostly pushed the bicycle across the Sierra Nevada range along the railroad tracks, which were shielded from late spring avalanches by snow sheds. Next came the infamous 40-mile desert of Nevada, a barren wasteland so dreaded that California-bound wagon trains crossed it at night when possible to avoid the scorching heat. Encounters with wildlife were unavoidable. Outside Elko, Nevada, Stevens chased away an approaching mountain lion with his revolver. In Nebraska, a rattlesnake bit him in the leg, although its fangs sank harmlessly into his thick canvas gaiters.

Curious crowds greeted him at every town as did members of the ubiquitous "wheelmen" clubs that were springing up across the U.S. Outside of Cheyenne, he swapped his broad-brimmed hat for a summer military helmet as protection from the inevitable "headers" that occurred when the rider tumbled headfirst over the handlebars.

Stevens endured scorching heat as he trundled east, but the roads at least were



improving. In July, he rested for a week in Chicago where Democrats were meeting to nominate Grover Cleveland as their candidate for president. Stevens was briefly arrested in Cleveland, Ohio, for riding on the sidewalk, a violation of a city ordinance. After detouring to see Niagara Falls, he pedaled to Syracuse, where he followed the Erie Canal towpath and the tracks of the New York Central Railway across the Empire State. In Massachusetts, Stevens again found good roads, rolling into Boston at 2:00 PM in the afternoon on August 4. He made his way to the Bay, to "whisper to the wild waves of the sounding Atlantic

what the sad waves of the Pacific were saying when I left there, just one hundred and three and a half days ago, having wheeled about 3,700 miles to deliver the message."

Stevens spent the winter in New York, where he serialized his adventures for *Outing*. The magazine was then owned by Colonel Albert Pope, whose Pope Manufacturing Company was the largest manufacturer of bicycles in the U.S. Sensing a publicity bonanza, Pope agreed to fund the remainder of Stevens's journey around the world, and in April of 1885, he sailed for England to continue the journey. Although he didn't advertise it, Stevens left a manuscript about

his journey across the U.S. in London with instructions for it to be published in the event of his death.

On the afternoon of May 2, Stevens departed Liverpool in the company of a handful of friendly British cyclists. He journeyed into France, the first non-English-speaking country of the trip, where he recalled riding down the famed Champs Élysees at 11:00 PM "Something to be remembered for a lifetime." The trip across Europe was altogether pleasant as he followed a route that took him through Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria before crossing into the Ottoman



**Caught by surprise.** Stevens dangles his bike and himself off a railroad trestle to keep from being run down by an oncoming train.

Empire, home of the Turks.

It was in Islamic Turkey that Stevens first experienced a distinctly foreign culture. As he made his way east, he was struck by the large crowds that formed and demanded a cycling demonstration when he entered a town or village. He quickly learned it was best to acquiesce with humor, although he confessed that the pressing crowds and constant police inquiries were trying. "I spread myself upon my mat tonight thoroughly convinced that a month's cycling among the Turks would worry most people into premature graves," he wrote after an innkeeper took his food away mid-meal until he rode the bicycle for a crowd of onlookers.

At Constantinople, he rested and gathered supplies for the next leg of the journey, including extra spokes, a small bottle of sewing machine oil, "tire cement," and an extra tire for the rear wheel. In addition, he had a special tent sewn that used the upside-down bicycle as a center pole. Warned repeatedly of the infamous robbers of eastern Turkey, he had 68 dollars in Turkish currency sewn into his pants. When two men attempted to rob him in a remote area near Mount Ararat, Stevens responded by pointing his revolver at



**East of Cheyenne.** Stevens met prairie schooners in the South Platte River Country.

their heads. The would-be robbers quickly retreated. A few years later, a young man from Pittsburgh named Frank Lenz would be murdered nearby, two years into his own round-the-world bicycle journey.

After spending the winter in Teheran, Stevens began pedaling east again in the spring. His plan was to enter Russia and make his way across Siberia during the summer to Vladivostok, a port city on the Pacific coast, which lay some 6,000 miles to the east. But at the Persian holy city of

Meshed, he learned the Russians would not allow him to cross their border. An alternative route lay in India, but to get there he would have to cross Afghanistan, a dangerous land he had been warned repeatedly to avoid. Seeing no other option, Stevens crossed the Afghan border. He made it as far as the western Afghan city of Farah before he was arrested on suspicion of being a spy and deported to Persia. His land route now completely blocked, Stevens was forced to return to Constantinople by train and boat

BRIAN WALKER

and travel to India by steamer.

The heat of India, which he estimated at 130 degrees in the sun, astonished him. He ditched the U.S. Army helmet he had worn since Nebraska for a pith helmet, noting "in such a temperature ... it behooves the discreet Caucasian to dress as carefully for protection against the heat as he would against the frost of an Arctic winter." After many adventures along India's legendary Grand Trunk Road — including a stop at the Taj Mahal — Stevens arrived in Calcutta, where he sailed for China. Despite the heat, he later declared that India had been the most enjoyable part of the journey so far.

At Hong Kong, Stevens was warned by Western diplomats against trying to cycle through China, but he ignored them and plunged into the mainland at Canton. At no other point on his journey did Stevens feel so much like a foreigner. More than once he was offered cat for dinner, and he was appalled at the extent of the opium addiction he encountered. In the interior, he struggled to make himself understood. Even asking directions was a bewildering experience. "Like a drowning man, I am willing to clutch wildly even at a straw, in the absence of anything more satisfactory, and so follow their directions," he wrote. As he moved inland, the crowds grew increasingly hostile, and on at least one occasion, Stevens drew his Smith and Wesson revolver to dissuade troublemakers. Five weeks later — after narrowly escaping being stoned to death — Stevens emerged at Shanghai, where he hopped a steamer to Japan. It took him a little more than three weeks to cross Japan, where the good roads and friendly population made the troubles of China seem a distant memory. Finally, on December 17, 1886, Stevens rolled into the eastern port of Yokohama, having ridden roughly 13,500 miles in his around-the-world trip. The next month, he sailed into San Francisco Bay and into the history books. Stevens now found himself a celebrity. His two-volume book about the journey, *Around the World on a Bicycle*, became a bestseller, and he traveled the country lecturing on his travels.

However, the familiar restlessness soon resurfaced. As Stevens pondered an adventure sequel, he was contacted in December 1888 by Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* newspaper with an interesting proposal. The paper was seeking someone to travel to East Africa to search for the legendary explorer Henry Morton Stanley. Stanley

## GOODBYE DESK. HELLO PATAGONIA.



Photography by Gregg Bleakney

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had catapulted to international fame 17 years earlier when he found the famed Scottish missionary and Africa explorer David Livingstone. Their encounter near Lake Tanganyika in modern-day Tanzania coined the famous phrase, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" But now Stanley himself was missing two years after traveling up the Congo River to rescue the European governor of the Egyptian province of Equatoria, which was besieged by Islamic fundamentalists. It had been more than 18 months since Stanley had been heard from, and the worst was feared.

Stevens leaped at the offer. "Here, then, was a grand opportunity; the one chance, mayhap, of a lifetime, to spring into fame on the stage of African exploit. How would 'How I Found Stanley' look in the libraries with 'How I Found Livingstone'?" he wrote.

Stevens sailed for Zanzibar in January 1889, and for six months led a massive expedition through modern-day Tanzania and Kenya searching for news of Stanley. He dutifully recorded for *World* readers his adventures climbing on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, traveling among the fierce Masai tribe, and hunting big game with rifle and camera. (For many years,



**High wheeler convention.** Stevens was among fellow cyclists in San Francisco.

his hunting trophies graced the walls of a Manhattan bicycle shop.) But he learned nothing of Stanley's fate.

Meanwhile, Stevens's articles prompted the *World's* bitter rival, the *New York Herald*, to send its own reporter to Africa with orders to find Stanley first — at any

cost and by any means necessary. The months-long journalistic grudge match culminated in a frantic race between the two correspondents into the African interior when news emerged that Stanley was alive and en route to Zanzibar. Despite seemingly impossible odds, Stevens found Stanley's

camp first. Stevens later compiled his dispatches from the year he spent in Africa into a well-received book entitled *Scouting for Stanley in East Africa*, which boosted sales of *Around the World on a Bicycle*.

After finishing the book in the spring of 1890, the *World* sent Stevens to Russia to investigate the peasantry. In typical fashion, he eschewed the comforts of modern travel and instead bought a horse named Texas from an American traveling show in Moscow. Over the next six weeks, he rode 1,000 miles to the Black Sea, recording his observations for *World* readers with pen and camera. A highlight of the journey was his visit to the country estate of novelist Leo Tolstoy, which he described in the resulting book about the journey, *Through Russia on a Mustang*. Acclaimed Russian expert and *Times of London* columnist Michael Binyon has called it one of the best books on pre-revolutionary Russia he's encountered, and Stevens's extended interview with Tolstoy is cherished by modern scholars.

After Russia, the still-restless Stevens decided he needed a vacation. Despite his lack of nautical experience, he obtained a 17-foot, gasoline-powered boat he called the *Julia*, which for the next six months he piloted along the rivers of Eastern Europe. He wrote about his experiences on the journey, which took him from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, in a series of *Outing* articles that ran in 1892.

The following year Stevens embarked on his last and most mysterious adventure, traveling to India to investigate the alleged "miracles" performed by Hindu ascetics. First mentioned in the writings of Marco Polo, a wave of interest in the subject swept across America in the 1890s, fueled by a series of stories in a Chicago newspaper that were later exposed as a hoax.

For six months, Stevens roamed India interviewing and photographing street performers and yogis. Much of what he encountered was easily dismissed as sleight-of-hand, but he was introduced to a strange hermit who agreed to allow himself to be photographed while demonstrating his powers.

Stevens was astounded by what he saw. In one trick, the hermit planted a seed in a small pot filled with soil from the ground. He placed the pot on the head of a small boy who served as his assistant. Within minutes, a plant began to grow from the pot, and a mango grew and ripened before his eyes. The hermit picked the fruit and gave it to Stevens who ate it. Next the con-

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juror placed the boy in a basket suspended from a tripod. One by one, the bamboo poles were removed until the boy and basket stood suspended in the air. The hermit performed feat after feat all afternoon, making items levitate and animals appear from nowhere at will. Stevens captured everything on film.

After returning to the U.S., he had the photos converted into a lantern-slide dis-

play that projected the images on a white wall. The accompanying lectures became the talk of New York City in the fall of 1894. Stevens was convinced, he told his audiences, that the displays were not divine in nature, but the result of a natural power that the Indian ascetics had mastered and that was accessible to anyone. "The result of my investigations is that the stories of travelers, from Marco Polo to the latest wit-

ness of Indian miracles ... are quite true," he told the *New York Times*.

The lecture and photos caused a stir but received mixed reviews. Some audience members complained of being unsatisfied by Stevens's explanation. A plan to take the lecture series to London never materialized, and unlike Stevens's earlier adventures, there was no lengthy series of newspaper articles or book about the journey. It's unclear whether disappointment was a factor in his decision, but Stevens decided to end his exploring career. At 40, he had spent much of the past 25 years wandering the world, and he privately confided to friends that he was weary of constant travel and lecturing.

The following year, Stevens returned to his native England and married Frances Barnes, a British widow and mother of two famous British stage actresses, Violet and Irene Van Brugh. For many years, he worked as the business manager for London's famed Garrick Theater. He later penned a children's book and the occasional article about his travels, but with time he faded into obscurity. Little is known about his later years. He remained in England after his wife's death in 1917 and volunteered during and after World War I, making artificial limbs for wounded soldiers. His experiences from his travels affected him throughout his life. In a 1925 letter to his sister in Missouri, he wrote:

"Having seen much of the world, as you know, in many countries, and seen the people from the best Europe and America had produced, to the lowest African savages; I have, as you may suppose, very broad views about religion, etc. I find good in all forms and see that all are striving for the same end by roads that mark the difference in civilization and culture."

Thomas Stevens died of cancer of the bladder in London in January 1935 at the age of 80. One can't help but wonder which scenes from his extraordinary life he savored before he died. Was he thinking of the long ride down the Grand Trunk Road in India? Recalling the taste of warm champagne shared with Stanley in the wilds of Africa? Or reminiscing on the afternoon he spent chatting with Tolstoy? Only he knows his final thoughts, but they surely were accompanied by the satisfaction of having lived life to the fullest. **AC**

*Geof Koss is a staff writer for the CQ-Roll Call Group, a Washington, DC, news service that covers Congress. He is writing a book on Thomas Stevens's adventures.*



**The Pope factor.** An early catalog for the company that supported Stevens.

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