The Mount Airy Museum of Regional History opened a new exhibit this week.

Many an adult will be transported back to a childhood long ago by the broad display of pedal cars on the third floor.

Pedal cars are small vehicles that a child could use to move about by pedaling like a bicycle.

According to Wikipedia, pedal cars derived from the quadracycle. When the first bicycles were under development in the mid-19th century, the bikes didn't ride very well and weren't stable. At the World's Fair in 1983 in New York City, a quadracycle (or four-wheeled bike) was shown, the earliest recorded evidence.

Similar to its two-wheeled cousin, sometimes called the velocipede, the quadracycle had two huge wheels supporting where the rider sat with two tiny wheels for balance. Over the next few decades, both the two-wheel and four-wheel designs would shrink the large wheels down. The first modern-looking bike reportedly was debuted in 1885. The tiny, children's version of a quadracycle would show up just a few years later, based off a new invention: the horseless carriage.

When introduced in the 1890s, pedal cars "captured the grandeur of a new mechanical and industrial age," says one display in the exhibit. Their styling mimicked both the transportation methods of the day (like early cars) to creations captured in the imaginations of young readers like rocket ships.

The earliest pedal cars were considered quite expensive for their day, but the appeal was so widespread that less affluent parents and children would build their own replicas out of whatever materials they could find.

While baby boomers may think of their childhood days as the golden age of pedal cars, the museum research shows that the real peak was before the Great Depression hit in the early

1930s.

Because of its reliance on metal, pedal car production halted altogether during World War II because all metal production was directed to war efforts.

There was a pedal car resurgence during the baby boom days after World War II.

After JFK made his proclamation that the U.S. would put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s, imaginations turned toward the space age.

Pedal car companies tried to change with the times, offering more futuristic designs, but there was also a growing industry of plastic toys stealing market share. One rival combined both plastic and pedaling with the Big Wheel from Louis Marx and Co. in 1969 — and immortalized in the 1977 horror film “The Shining.”

During the 1970s, one of the pedal car leaders, Murray, converted to lawnmower production.

Since 1979, companies like Rubbermaid and Fisher Price have made all-plastic vehicles similar to pedal cars.

Still, the baby boomers who grew up in the 1950s and ’60s brought a nostalgic revival of the pedal car at the start of the 21st century. The older models have been brought out of attics, basements and barns to be restored and displayed.

Website www.PedalCarPlanet.com is dedicated to the history of these toys.

“They have a fabulous build quality unlike the plastic models that came out in the late 1970s,” says the website. “These pedal cars and other toys were constructed with pure steel.”

If a company were trying to build a new pedal car by the standards of yesteryear, the costs would be a couple of hundred dollars, the site notes.

And for classics in mint condition, the values can be sky high. For example, a 1955 Chevrolet pedal car can go for as much as $1,750, the site quotes. A 1922 Model T Ford would cost a whopping $2,800.

Rather than pay those kind of prices, the admission fee for the museum is only $6 for adults, $5 for seniors, $4 for students and free for children 4 and under.

For more information on the museum, check out the web page at www.northcarolinamuseum.org .