

Magazine

# BICYCLE

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**THE CLUNKERS  
ARE COMING!  
400 YEARS  
OF AMERICAN  
HISTORY**

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# CLUNKERS



Everyone's heard of BMX. But have you heard of clunkers? Born in California in the mid-seventies, clunkers have an instantly recognisable hallmark - their wide 26 inch wheels. The elite of the breed is the mountain bike. It is an adult go-anywhere bike with multiple-speed wide-ratio gears. Made of light alloys and fitted with top quality hi-tech components, it often weighs as little as 24 to 28 pounds. It is exceptionally robust and was originally designed for off-road riding. But it also turns out to be the perfect urban vehicle. With its solid-as-a-rock upright position and handlebar-mounted gear controls, it's a real confidence-booster. John Schubert, writing in the *American Bicycling Magazine*, went as far as to say: 'I predict clunkers will overtake drop handlebar ten-speeds as America's favourite bicycle.' He may well be right. Richard Grant starts the mountain bike story in Fairfax, California.

# CLUNKERS

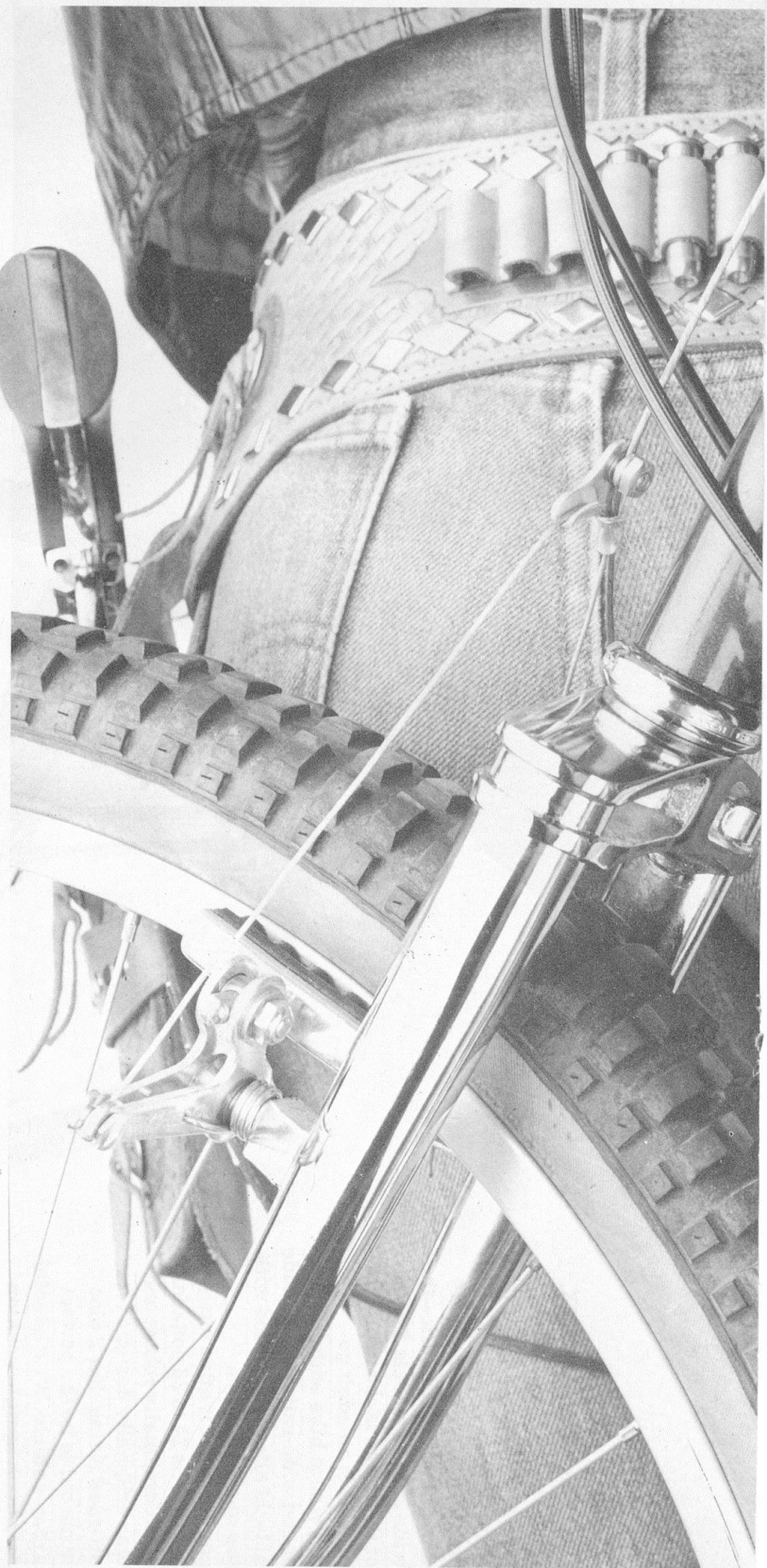
Fairfax is one of those rural Californian towns where the laid back spirit of the sixties still lingers. It has no industry. Jogging, backpacking and using the local jacuzzi are valued activities. Its only notable resident is the rock singer Van Morrison who shipped his parents out from Ulster to run the local record shop. Otherwise it is a haven for escapist hippies. Just the place to start a bicycle revolution. . .

In 1977 on sabbatical from a newspaper and in search of an off-beat story, I happened to be in Marin County, north of San Francisco. A contact had a cousin who had a friend . . . who was into clunkers. 'Clunking' seemed to involve riding strange bikes downhill over rough tracks. Most of the activity was in the forested hills above Fairfax.

I visited Sunshine Bikes in Fairfax itself. It was the first bike shop I had seen since my childhood. I was a total bike novice. Sunshine's owner, upon hearing an English accent, launched into a passionate monologue about Witcombs of Deptford and flourished their 1971 catalogue from beneath the counter. When clunkers were mentioned, the enthusiasm drained from his voice. (The term 'mountain bike' was coined and copyrighted by the locals some years later.) A thumb jerked me in the direction of a one-room shack in the yard. It was the home of Gary Fisher, part-time mechanic, sometime assistant to the US Olympic team, associate editor of *Bicycling* magazine and the first person to put a ten-speed derailleur system on a clunker.

His basic component was a heavy-frame 26inch balloon tyre 'paper boy bike' rescued from a second-hand store for \$5. Balloon tyres had been popular since 1935 when Ignatz Schwinn introduced them to the US market as a sales gimmick. The imitation car tyres caught on and balloon tyre bikes flourished until the sixties when mass-produced European and Japanese lightweight racers rekindled the US bike market. Clunkers were out of fashion but they didn't die. They were too sturdy for that. In Marin the locals rescued them from junk heaps and thrift shops and raced down local fire roads.

Slowly there evolved a typically Californian off-the-wall event, the Repack Race. On Sunday mornings, the fire roads west of Fairfax were full of hybrid machines being pushed towards the crest of a hill. Most of the riders wore heavy-duty boots and thick leather gloves. At the top a stopwatch was produced. At two minute intervals they'd begin their descent with only gravity for a motor. In two miles of gravel, dust, wheel ruts, rock and deep dust, they'd descended from 1300 feet to sea level. Sometimes they topped 40mph. Average time for the distance was about 4½ minutes. A few tried it on lightweight skinny tyre racers. The bikes didn't survive. Even on clunkers, the constant use of the coaster brakes led to them overheating, the grease evaporating and hence requiring a total re-pack.







## OUT OF THE DARK AGES

As parts broke, modifications were made. Motorcycle cables and brake levers replaced normal bicycle levers. Drum brakes replaced coaster brakes. The major breakthrough, courtesy of Gary Fisher, was marrying up European ten-speed derailleur assemblies with American-size bottom brackets and fish-tail drop-outs. Clunker technology was out of the dark ages.

In partnership with Charlie Kelly, a roadie for a San Francisco band, Gary Fisher turned out 200 clunker conversions. They sold for about \$200 and came with a 40/52 front chainwheel and a 14-34 block and Sun Tour GT derailleur. The front drum brake was a Sturmey Archer, the rear was an Atom. Saddles were Brooks B72s with quick adjust levers (run the seat high for uphill, low for downhill). The brake levers were motorcycle Maguras and the tyres were knobblies by Uniroyal. With swept back cowhorn bars, they looked like dirt motorcycles sans motors.

Naturally bicycle purists despised them. (My imported clunker was politely evicted from most leading UK bicycle establishments.) But in Marin the bikes were becoming a cult and a cottage industry rolled into one. Charlie Kelly and Gary Fisher began publishing their own irreverent newsletter the *Fat Tire Flier*. Word spread and they accepted an annual invite from another outpost of post-60s hippiedom in Colorado to race 40 miles over a 12,000 ft rock-strewn pass in the Rockies.

Necessity began to push the technology forward. Supplies of the curved cantilever framed balloon bikes were running out. Instead of \$5, secondhand stores were asking \$50. The first custom built frame was manufactured in a back yard garage by a local racer, Joe Breeze. His major contribution was to raise the bottom bracket height one inch allowing longer TA cranks to be fitted. But weight was still a problem. The Breeze frame was lighter but the overall weight was still 38lbs, a reduction of only 7lbs. Cantilever rim brakes were substituted for drum brakes, saving 4lbs back and front. Apart from the drive chain, obtaining lightweight quality parts was a problem. The only rims available were mild steel. The only tyres were heavyweight gunwalls.

Then the BMX boom happened. Like clunking, BMX is an off-road sport, but it's for kids who ride single-speed 20inch wide-tyre bikes. By the end of the seventies it was the largest two-wheeled sport in America. Most of the products for BMX were branded in the US but produced in Japan. Bicycle manufacturers, realising that their customers were going to grow up, began to produce 26 inch versions of BMX bikes known as cruisers. To stay in step with the de rigeur tastes of BMX, the manufacturers toolled up and produced 26 inch cast aluminium alloy rims and 26 inch skinwall tyres with the tread extending over the edge for better traction.

But the 26 inch cruiser boom never really got off the ground. Instead the parts were snapped up by MountainBikes and the other backyard clunker builders who had mushroomed across the western United States.

## GO-ANYWHERE BICYCLE

At MountainBikes, Gary Fisher had introduced the quick release seat-post bolt, handlebar-mounted thumbshifters, motor-bike brake levers and BMX pedals. MountainBikes now added a third member to the team - Tom Ritchey, a former member of the US national team and hailed by *American Bicyclist* as 'a gifted craftsman'. Ritchey concentrated on re-creating the mountain bike into a go-anywhere bicycle, versatile as a tourer, commuter or downhill cross-country trail-blazer, carrying 18 wide ratio gears and weighing in at 28lbs. The frames also introduced tandem forks and sealed bearing bottom brackets. But Tom Ritchey's most significant contribution is his Bullmoose handlebar stem, an all-in-one triangulated design that gives more side to side strength.

In 1981, at the New York Bicycle Fair, MountainBikes received the first of several international accolades. The Japanese BMX manufacturers bought the Ritchey MountainBike models and shipped them home to copy. Next year the Japanese were back. For once they had failed to unravel the stress-spreading system of brazed filleting that makes Ritchey MountainBikes stronger than cosmetically-alike copies. For MountainBikes it was a turning point. From a one-room shack they had created Fairfax's first real industry and had sold several thousand hand-crafted frames through a network of appointed distributors.

Cheaply produced rival rip-offs could threaten their position. They hit back by joining forces with some of Japan's more respected builders. Tom Ritchey and Gary Fisher each spent several months in Japan discussing technical innovations. The first fruits of this co-operation have already come from Sun Tour in the form of their Alpine Gear (AG) range. Already tested are the wide ratio 14-38 five speed block, which meshes perfectly with the AG derailleur, and the first really effective triple changer. Using an inner ring of 28T this combination glides down as low as a 19 inch gear - low enough to take a fully-laden rider through a one in four quagmire.

The bike has been picked by the International Cycling Guide as its 1983 Bike of the Year and the latest innovations will reach these shores in time for Harrogate and Europe's first-ever off-road mountain bike ride.

In the UK, the mountain bike story is only just beginning.

You should expect to pay approximately £400 (or more) for a quality mountain bike. Frame and forks will cost about £200. Although prices may drop slightly, it just can't be done on the cheap!

