

RIDING WITH LEGENDS

“SOMETIMES RIDING A BIKE IS HARD,
SOMETIMES IT’S FUN, AND
SOMETIMES IT’S A PRIVILEGE”

On Thursday morning we rolled back into Fairfax, Marin County’s hippy town, and home to a couple of hippies we particularly wanted to meet.

Charlie Kelly needs no introduction. He started this whole thing with his Repack races back in 1976, and at the age of 67 he’s still riding. For the time being he’s making a living moving pianos, but there’s a book due out soon and he has ambitions to live off the proceeds. He’s full of stories and he tells them like a polished after-dinner speaker – a Kelly lecture series would be no bad thing.

Jacquie Phelan needs no introduction either – mostly as she needs no encouragement to introduce herself. Once known by the pen name of Alice B. Toeclips, Phelan was Norba champion three consecutive years between 1983 and 1985, formed the Women’s Mountain Bikes & Tea Society (Wombats), was an early inductee into the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame, and is married to the frame building pioneer

Charlie Cunningham. They live together in town; always have. He’s sort of shy, which makes them averagely outgoing as a couple – it’s rare you come across anyone as extrovert as Jacquie Phelan. And that’s probably a good thing.

We met Kelly and Phelan in town, drank coffee, and arranged to ride. Charlie needed to change out of his work clothes and into his riding gear, so we pedalled up the hill to Gestalt Haus, the bike-friendly drinking hole that sits next to the Repack memorial.

We hung our bikes on hooks in the bar, bought a round and waited for Charlie to make his entrance. By the time he did, Jacquie had accosted a young guy by the name of Steveo who just happened to be passing and made the mistake of looking in. Turned out he’s a Shimano tech rep and, when his arm was twisted, he was happy to come for an eight mile spin with us, switching off his phone and going awol for the afternoon.

History Lesson No. 1

“Everyone who needed to know, knew about the Repack,” says Charlie, looking at the reproduction posters on the memorial. “I just made the posters so there was something with a date on.” Hippy entrepreneurialism, y’see. What did I tell you?

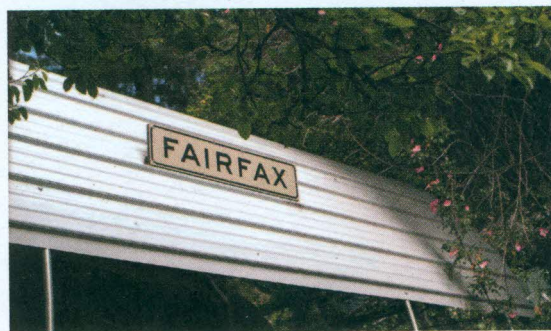
The memorial is actually pretty smart, with sponsored plaques and historical reproductions of the things that put the town on the mountain biking map. It’s funny it should be there at all. Historically Fairfax has at best tolerated mountain biking.

The whole time we were talking to Charlie, young Steveo was really getting the schtick from Phelan. Dan and I just couldn’t stop laughing as she tried to get him to ask for Charlie’s autograph. “Do you know who this man is?” she asked in mock outrage as Kelly squirmed and we giggled at the surreal scene.



[Above] Jacquie leads Charlie up the hill,
with Steve in his borrowed helmet

[Left] Fat Tire Flyer





Finally we got on our bikes and made our way to Jacquie's house to collect her proper bike and borrow a relic of a bike helmet for Steveo. We didn't go in but the garden was as you would expect: old Cunninghams strewn about the place, Wombat memorabilia pinned to the walls, and a silver JetStream jettisoned at one end amid rose bushes.

We laughed like children as Phelan embarrassed Kelly with her inappropriateness and Charlie, to divert attention perhaps, told us stories of the good ol'days. It came as some relief to actually go and ride, up into the forest.

There was no singletrack and very few adrenaline hits, but it went down as a great ride nonetheless. The company kept us laughing, the views were spectacular, and the pace was casual enough that we could actually take it all in, look around, make our own jokes. It felt good to be out with people who knew their stuff and had stories to tell.

As we climbed the hill, Kelly pointed out native plants, trees and flowers and,

when we reached a dam, Phelan was quick to spot turtles sunning themselves on logs in the water. Who knew turtles lived wild in California? Not me.

The singletrack offshoot trails we saw diving off into the woods looked enticing, but all have prominent 'no biking' signs at the entrance. Not long ago armed rangers would be camped out to enforce the rule, ticketing anyone they caught poaching the trails. Nowadays things are a little less fraught. The cost of paying rangers to keep bicycles off the trails was prohibitive and, by and large, riders steer clear anyway. With legitimate singletrack riding just up the road on the Tamarancho Scout Camp land, risking a fine and the wrath of the riding community probably isn't worth the bother.

After playing on some wooden stepping-stones at the top of the hill, trying to ride the lot without falling off, we descended back into town and finished off back at the Gestalt Haus. Back in the '80s Kelly ran the magazine

Fat Tire Flyer from an office across the street and he was kind enough to bring some copies along for us. Steveo wasn't even born when these came out but, flicking through, it was amazing how relevant things like Charlie's 'Universal Bike Review' seem today. We drank and laughed until eventually Kelly called it a day, and Jacquie had to head home to welcome a house guest (British adventurer Cass Gilbert) who was staying the night.

Dan and I drove back down to our hotel laughing the whole way about our surreal, informative and hilarious afternoon. We'd met a couple of legends of the sport who turned out to be wittier, warmer and more interesting than we'd ever imagined on the drive up, and we'd had a thoroughly unique bike ride as a result. It was a reminder of just how much of a leveller mountain biking is; how it brings people together and broadens your horizons. Sometimes riding a bike is hard, sometimes it's fun, and sometimes it's a privilege.

