

# MEMORIES OF MARIN

*Taking a trip back to when it all began*

By Zapata Espinoza Photos by Wendy "Queen of Klunking" Cragg



be there at the beginning. We couldn't resist getting it all down on the computer. Here is what they had to say.

#### A SORT OF PREMONITION

"I remember," says Breeze with a hint of sadness in his voice, "riding on Mt. Tam with Otis and contemplating this fat tire thing. We were born skinny-tire fanatics and all along the fat-tired bikes were just used as an off-season training device. We stopped on the trail for a moment and thought about what we were doing. We really liked this fat

◀ *A group of the original Klunkers gather at Inspiration Point, possibly to reflect on the sport which they had begun.*

*The Repack race was short on rules but big on action and fun. ▼*

There are many areas all across the country that will lay claim to being the first mountain bike community, but every history book will lead you to Northern California, specifically Marin County. As you will read, the origins of mountain biking were totally innocent. It came into being not as some faddist vision of profit-oriented marketing types, but rather as the product of true cycling enthusiasts trying to find something new to do on two wheels. Despite the territorial and philosophical infighting that plagued the pioneers as their sport evolved into the mainstream, mountain biking has retained its harmonious character, truly a sport of, by and for the people.

We speak a lot about Joe Breeze because, of all the mountain bike pioneers, he speaks the least about himself. Joe was there when it all began—a long-haired teenager in the '60s with a deep affection for the bicycle. As was true with most of his cohorts, high school found Joe deeply immersed in road racing. In the course of testing Joe's latest Breezer mountain bike (elsewhere in this issue), we began talking a lot about the old days in Marin. Joe and fellow pioneer/bike builder Otis Guy were able to spin one story after another about what it was like to



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*Before the housing, speed limits and crowds that accompanied the modern-day mountain biker phenomenon, all of Marin County was looked upon with an eager eye by the pioneers.*



*Getting to the bottom of Repack was the easy part—getting back up required some outside help.*

tire thing, liked getting covered with mud, but we really didn't think many others would like it. Fearing the worst, Otis joked that it was something we should keep to ourselves."

Mt. Tam was, of course, the mountain that gave definition to the as-yet-to-be-conceived sport. Full of fire roads and single-track, Mt. Tam was home to the first Marin County off-road event, "The Repack," so named because the riders would have to repack the bearings in their wheels and brakes with grease after a day of descending. Though the pioneers had total access to the



*There wasn't much in the way of safety gear beyond hiking boots, gardening gloves and a beanie cap.*

mountain, it has since become the focus of debate with other user groups. Mountain bikes are no longer allowed on the single-track and rangers often use radar guns to ticket speeding cyclists—precisely the sce-

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nario that Otis Guy feared years earlier. “I was always afraid that Mt. Tam would be lost if the idea of off-road riding became too popular,” says Guy.

## THE CANYONITES

“As far as I knew these people from Larkspur had a group called ‘The Canyonites’ who started riding on Mt. Tam in the late

’60s,” Breeze recalls. “We had ridden our road bikes up and down the dirt roads. I could actually get to the top quicker on the dirt than on the pavement. The Canyonites didn’t ride road bikes; they rode what we called Klunkers. I rode my first Klunker in high school and thought it was totally inefficient. In 1973 Velo Club Tamalpais was

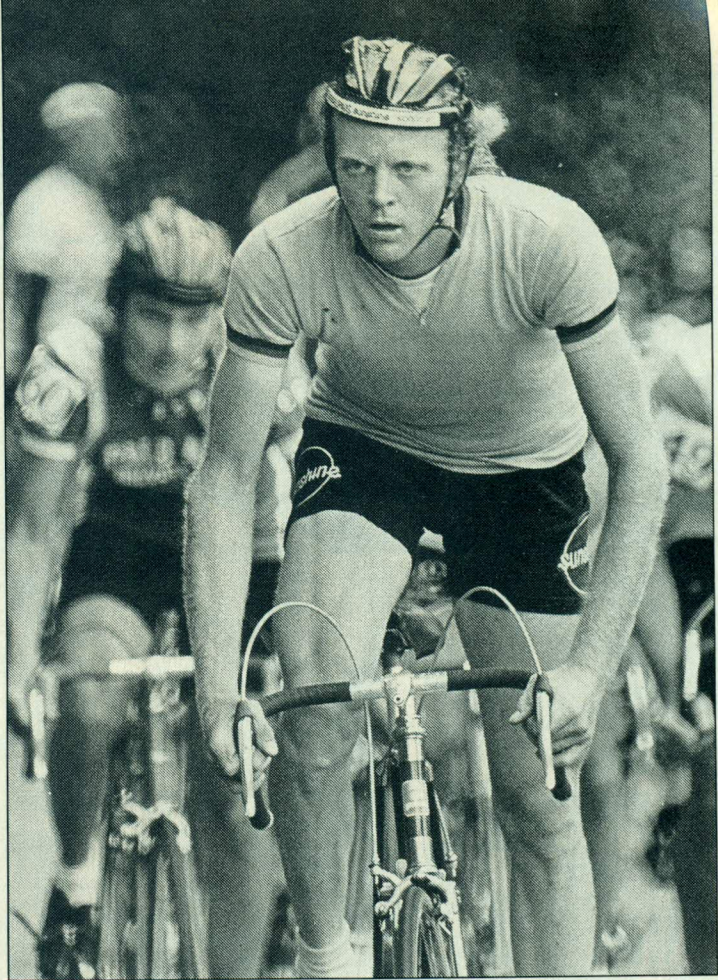
*The bike that started it all: The late Schwinn Excelsior was the bike of choice among the Marin pioneers. The bikes weighed around 45 lb. but the weight dropped significantly with the advent of alloy rims and Snakebelly tires. Gary Fisher’s use of a seatpost quick-release was a revolutionary idea.*

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formed, which was a loose-knit cycling family of road racers that included Otis, Gary Fisher, Charlie Kelly and others. A year later Marc Vendetti joined and he was an ex-Canyonite who was now a roadie. At that point off-road riding was history to him. He, Otis and I were real close and we had this idea to start rebuilding old [circa 1900] bikes to display. The best we could do was a 1941 Schwinn that Marc told me to buy for \$5 from a bike shop in Santa Cruz.

“When we got back to Marin Marc showed me his old Canyonite bike, a single-speed Schwinn. One ride and I was stunned! The contrast with my road bike was what I liked so much—it was like the difference between ballet and football! The stability and comfortable position were great. I went home and stripped down my bike and did my first ride down Mt. Tam. That was the beginning of the love of the sport for me.”

“At the same time,” Otis adds, “Gary and Charlie were riding their Klunkers around [they used Shelby Travelers] and they rode the mountain, too. With a 52×20 gear combination we were limited when it came to climbing, so we would hitchhike up the hill and ride down. It was kind of coincidental that there was a serial killer in the area back then, so nobody was hiking—we had the mountain to ourselves. Rebuilding old bikes became our big hobby and we would visit



◀ Before the days of fat tires: Road bikes were all that mattered for the likes of Gary Fisher (here), Joe Breeze and Otis Guy. Their Velo Club Tamalpais was the breeding ground for the mountain bike revolution. On their way to out-of-town road races they would stop in as many junkyards as possible to find parts for their Klunkers.

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as many junkyards as we could when we would travel to out-of-town road races. It was also helpful that most of us worked in bike shops. That was really important in later years because so many of us had connections in the industry that we were able to have access to product designers who could help us with parts.”

## **LOOK WHAT THE DROUGHT HAS BROUGHT**

Joe recounted how the weather also played a role in their growing fixation. “During ’76-’77 there was a bad drought, so without

the rain we were able to ride off-road year-round; that’s when the whole Repack thing got started. Charlie and Fred Wolf figured that there was a lot of bragging going on about descending Mt. Tam, so they decided to organize a race in ’76. We would have the race every Tuesday and Thursday morning and used two Navy chronometers for timing. Word of mouth got ten people to the first event and it kept growing, so we eventually held it on weekends. We would put the bikes on a flatbed truck and carry everyone to the top—it was all such a big party!

I would walk the course and map it out so that I knew it better. I had the most wins, but Gary broke the record by ten seconds.

“At about that time bikes also started to change. I had already made a big improvement on my bike when I put motorcycle grips on in ’75. Suddenly bikes starting showing up with derailleurs grafted on, along with new brakes. Gary had a a lot to do with all that and his was the first bike to use a seatpost quick-release—believe it or

**FAT TIRE HISTORIAN**



not, that was a real innovation! The great thing was that back then the motivation to change things wasn't there as much as it is now. These days people are always changing things as a way to make money; we were simply content with what we had.

"I liked that my road bike was so tricked out, the pinnacle of technology, while my Klunker was more an outlet for my primitive side. After awhile we started to see how we could make the bike better. At first I didn't have a front brake until I found an old cantilever in the junkyard. I remember when us

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ing a 1950 Union drum rear brake was a breakthrough in new technology! Gearing was the next big change. I held out until '77 — 'One speed or die' was our rallying cry. It was a great feeling just to make do with what we had. I really liked the contrast of the one-speed system with my ten-speed. In '76 Charlie had begun badgering me to build him a frame. I had studied frame building under Albert Eisentraut in '74 and had been making road frames for awhile. It took me a year to mull it over, and in '77 I finally built ten frames and they just got called 'Breezers.' "

## WHAT ARE WE LEFT WITH?

With the ten Breezers came copies and different versions altogether, all of which have added to the legacy of mountain biking. We have certainly come a long way since the Marin crowd came flying down Mt. Tam with their 40-pound Klunkers. Ours is a legacy that we are lucky enough to enjoy every time we throw a leg over our mountain bikes. The ride to Mt. Tam may be geographically undesirable for most of us, but it takes little more than a vivid imagination and a hair-raising descent to share in the fun. Long live the pioneer spirit. □

## FAT TIRE HISTORIAN CHARLIE KELLY

• Charlie Kelly was a pioneer like all the others. While many of his friends went on to manufacture bikes using their own names, Charlie went about achieving fame in another way. *Fat Tire Flyer* was the world's first magazine dedicated to the new sport of mountain biking. Created in 1980, it was the official mouthpiece of the little-understood sport. Since then Charlie has remained the unofficial mountain bike historian, writing books and articles for other magazines around the globe. We asked Charlie to add to the discussion on the four big events for which he is best known.

**How it all began:** "There's a lot of revisionist history floating around about the origins of mountain biking—some that's recognized and some that depends on who has the best public relations firm. Mountain biking would have happened somewhere. The three major elements were the BMX movement, the cruisers and the roadies. Off-road cycling was happening in a few different areas of the country. Somebody just had to be the first to stick his neck out and manufacture something; that's why Marin is where it all started. I remember when Gary Fisher and I went to the '81 bike show. There were four people with mountain bikes: Gary, Jeff Lindsay [Mountain Goat], Victor Vincente and myself. The aero craze was the big deal that year and we were totally dismissed. Gary and I didn't want to deal with the hall's union workers so we just brought two bikes and two boxes full of literature and walked the aisles. Victor had a booth where he leaned his mud-covered bike against a wall next to his chaise lounge and just lay there and answered any questions! We were looked upon just like trials is today: too small and specific a market for any big company to get interested in. The next year I counted 14 different mountain bikes at the show; many were done by BMX companies using their cruiser track bikes."

**Ordering the first Breezer:** "I had already owned a bike, built by Craig Mitchell, that was patterned after a Schwinn Excelsior but made with more contemporary tubing. It didn't work as well as I hoped, and since I had a bad bike habit I had to have another. We'd all been talking about bikes, but Joe

*The rag of the times: Charlie Kelly was the founder of the "Fat Tire Flyer" magazine that was a precursor of MBA. Though the magazine ceased publication in 1987, Kelly has remained the preeminent mountain bike historian, and still owns the second Breezer mountain bike ever made.*

was the only guy with the talent to do it. I gave him \$175 to start the bike and it took a year to finish. My bike was actually the second one built; the first one is sitting in the California Museum of Industry in Oakland. When I finally got the bike, it ended up costing me \$875. Joe was so detailed, he even ground down a ball bearing and brazed on half of it to be used as a pump peg!"

**The Repack race:** "Fred found the actual trail on his motorcycle—it was steep! The race ran from 1976-'79 on a regular basis, but the crowds caught on and you'd see people hiking up the hill with their picnic baskets wanting to watch some good racing. A little-known fact about the races is that it was really the misfortune of a firefighter that made it all possible. There was a steel gate that crossed the course and made racing impossible when closed. In '76 there was a fire on the mountain and we found the keyring that one of the firefighters had lost. Having the key to open the gate was a very crucial aspect of the race's continuation. In '79 the CBS television show *Evening Magazine* did a feature on the race and 90 riders showed up to try to get on TV. We got the authorization to run the race in '83 and '84 as NORBA-sanctioned events, both of which were won by Jim Deaton. I know the race had a real impact because the name Repack Trail showed up on the official maps used by the water district, and they even had a wooden road sign once with the name engraved on it."

**Fat Tire Flyer:** "The magazine really started out as a newsletter for a club we formed called the Fat Tire Flyers. Since I was the only one who had been published, I was chosen to write it. Even though the club only lasted for two meetings, the mag continued, never with any real news, just local gossip. People kept asking when the next issue would be out so I kept making them. It lasted for seven years and I'm really sad that it didn't keep going. I think it could be useful even in today's market." •