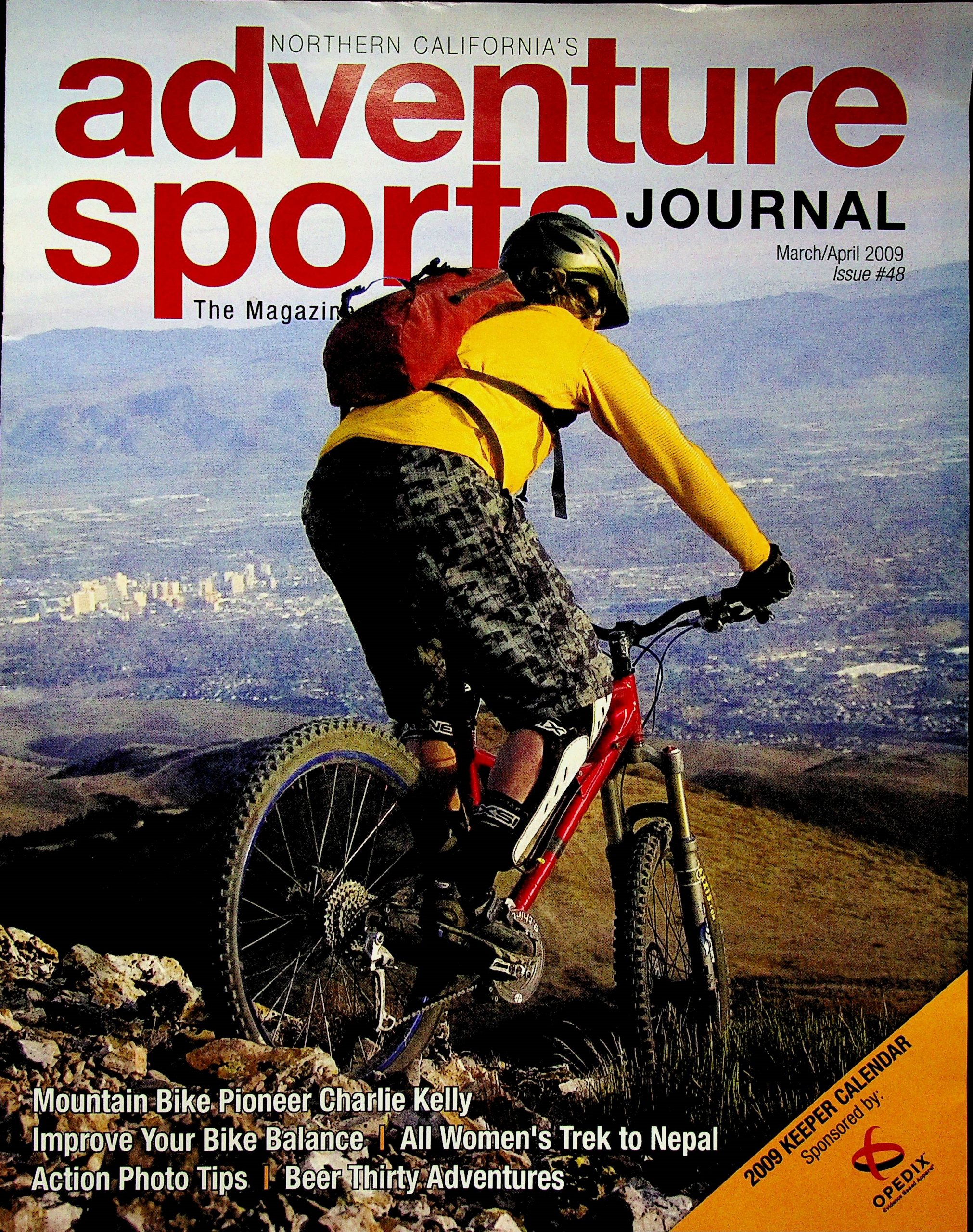


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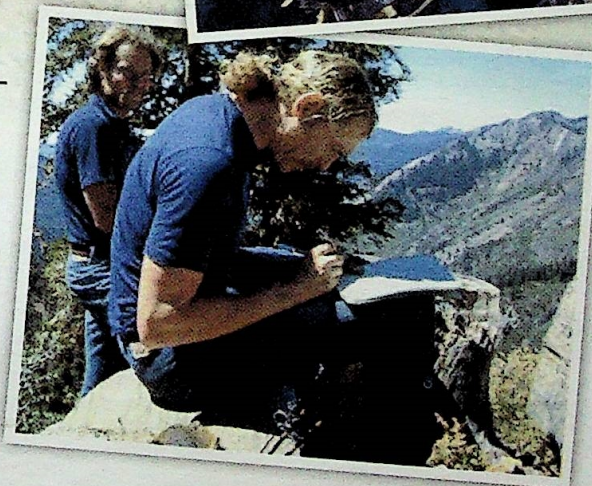
**Mountain Bike Pioneer Charlie Kelly**  
**Improve Your Bike Balance | All Women's Trek to Nepal**  
**Action Photo Tips | Beer Thirty Adventures**

**2009 KEEPER CALENDAR**  
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Charlie Kelly hauling denim down Repack's Camera Corner, late 1976, on his 50-pound modified Schwinn Excelsior. Notice the safety gear – knee pads, elbow pads, leather gloves and boots – sans helmet.



Photos, top to bottom:  
 1. Wende Cragg and Charlie Kelly after crossing Rainbow Falls, above Mineral King Valley in Sequoia National Forest (later incorporated into Sequoia National Park), September 1978.  
 2. Kelly at Cumberland Basin camp, Fifth Annual Crested Butte to Aspen Klunker Tour, September 1980.  
 3. Kelly writing in his log book with Joe Breeze looking on, above Mineral King Valley, southern Sierra, on a 30-mile loop through the backcountry with Wende Cragg, 1978.  
 4. Before the start of the first cross-country "Enduro" race, promoted by Alan Bonds, fall 1977. From left, Fred Wolf, Wende Cragg, Mark Lindlow, Robert Stewart, Chris Lang, James Preston, Ian Stewart, Charlie Kelly, Gary Fisher, Joe Breeze, Eric Fletcher, Craig Mitchell, John Drum, Roy Rivers, Alan Bonds. Photo: Jerry Riboli

## CRUISERS, CLUNKERS AND THE ORIGINS OF THE OFF-ROAD BIKE

Sitting Down with Mountain Bike Pioneer Charlie Kelly

By Colleen Corcoran • Photos by Wende Cragg

A pickup truck parade that includes a pink 1953 Chevy leaves the last outpost of civilization – the leafy, hippie oasis that is Fairfax – heading up into the hills, with 50-pound bicycles and two chronometers ... To Repack. The Repack trail drops 1,300 feet in 2.1 miles down the east side of Pine Mountain. At the top is an open ridge with views of Mt. Tamalpais, Marin, the San Francisco Bay, and the blue sky beyond. Fred Wolf and Charlie Kelly started the race down Repack, on Oct. 21, 1976, to be precise.

It was here that the words "mountain bike" and the subsequent craze began. Junkers, clunkers, bombers, ballooners, cruisers – paper boy bikes is what they were – \$5 Schwinn Excelsior frames rigged with motorcycle levers, thumb shifters co-opted from five-speed touring bicycles, rear-wheel coaster drum brakes, and, eventually, a ten-speed derailleur.

"Hardly anyone ever asks me," says Charlie Kelly, "but if I had to pick the day mountain biking started, it was the day in September 1977 that Joe (Breeze) rolled out his first Breezer inspired by Repack."

Kelly's ragged Schwinn beater had broken. Fellow dirt cycling revolutionary Joe Breeze built him a new steed – the 18-speed, 38-pound bicycle that would soon open other influential eyes to the possibilities of geared, fat-tire off-road bikes.

In 1979, the revolution shifted gears when Breeze and Otis Guy brought a primitive Breezer to Tom Ritchey on his Peninsula mountaintop. Until then, the mustachioed and wild-eyed Ritchey had been riding wire bead road tires across Santa Cruz Mountain hiking

trails. He decided, upon seeing the Breezer, to build his own fat-tire frame.

This is how it would come to pass that Ritchey, the fastest frame builder in the West, strung together nine beautifully anonymous frames with no thought as to who would buy them or why. From his prolific garage workshop he wandered into the wet fog, thrashed around in the Bermuda Triangle of open space, and returned to fillet braze bicycles by the light of a woodstove.

"Want to help me assemble these and sell them?" Gary Fisher asked Kelly one day.

"Why not?" Kelly shot back.

They collected a few hundred dollars to open a bank account called "MountainBikes" and started assembling their bikes in living rooms and on kitchen tables. Ritchey made the frames, everyone pitched in to assemble them, and Fisher promoted. "It was such a big turn on," Fisher recalls – to transform this gear-head freak show into a somewhat organized eccentricity of common purpose.

On the slopes of Repack, the bikes were tested and re-tested, disappearing in a rooster

tail of dust past the Inside Line, the Knoll, Camera Corner, the Knob, the Sandbox – an alias to every twist or pile of rubble – followed by straightaway, out-of-control flashy 50-foot sideways skids to stops in front of a lone three-foot rock called simply the Rock. By the end of the blitzkrieg, the coaster brake grease would all but vaporize in an exhaust of smoke. It needed to be repacked. Hence, "Repack."

Over the course of nine years, 24 races were held. By the end of it, MountainBikes had become "Fisher MountainBikes." Tom Ritchey became "Ritchey Design Inc." Charlie Kelly became Kelly Piano Moving Company. Pianos on strings floated high above the bay. And as the trio divided, an industry emerged – one that could be sometimes greedy, sometimes wonderfully slick, and generally a little bit wild and ridiculous behind the scenes.

In 1996 and again in 1997, with mountain biking in full, ubiquitous bloom, the usual suspects returned to Repack wearing Levis,



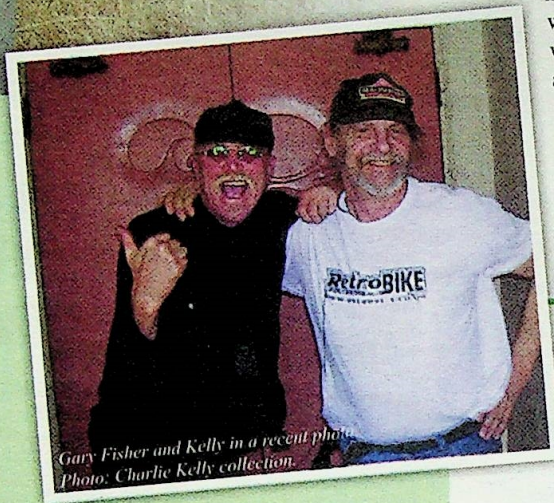


*Charlie Kelly and Roy Rivers approaching Pine Mountain Saddle near Fairfax during "The Enduro," the sport's first cross-country race, August 1977. Charlie is being offered a bottle of water.*

lumberjack flannel, high boots and leather gloves to relive the first 2.1-mile descent.

The grooves had been rearranged, rocks had rolled to other resting places, trees had grown, but the art of it was exactly as it had been – to control your out-of-controlness on banked and rippled surfaces, feathering brakes just so, opening up and crouching low, accelerating fast, and yet living it all in slow motion. The spirit of Repack – the unofficial R&D lab for the first mass-produced mountain bike – remained.

Last year, I sat down with Kelly to interview him in a Mill Valley coffee shop. A swarm of caffeine-loading mountain and road bikers, many on the latest high-cost steeds, provided a time-warp contrast of the evolution of bicycling



*Gary Fisher and Kelly in a recent photo. Photo: Charlie Kelly collection.*

that Kelly's witnessed over the last 40 years. Casual and earthy like the old school Marin native that he is, Kelly still rides frequently and remains in contact with many of the original Repack riders.

### On Adapting Town Bikes to the Wild:

CK: Because we were all such dedicated

hardcore cyclists, the limitations of the money-is-no-object bike are apparent right away. You can't ride this thing to the grocery store, you know, and you can't exactly haul freight with it. So if you're gonna be a committed full-time hippie cyclist living without a car, well, you need something besides your money-is-no-object bike.

And so we kind of went to the other extreme and got town bikes. And it's not like we were the first people who ever thought of that, because town bikes were already happening at every beach in Southern California. Everybody had a town bike 'cause it's level, you walk four blocks, and who cares. You want something that nobody would steal anyway.

So Gary (Fisher) and I got town bikes, and it was like an old one-speed with a coaster brake, you know, bare bones – for 15 or 20 bucks you could have one of these things. And we started riding 'em around. And we

And Gary had brought home one day – he'd bought a tandem. He'd gone to the flea market and somebody had dismantled their tandem, and the thing was just like in a box and would require lots of money and lots of time to make this thing work, but it was like 15 bucks, you know, and what it had that was interesting was this enormous drum brake, 5-speed rear hub which Gary immediately put onto his balloon bike.

We weren't even the first to do that, because some other guys had beat us to that. But we were the first in our area to do it. And now the first ride with Gary, who's got this bike that now weighs 10 pounds more than even my already heavy bike, but at the same time he just totally trucks right away from us on the hills. It was like, ok, drum brakes, five speeds, we're there. It's a tandem part. You could get it if you special ordered it, and so we did.

### On The Repack Races:

CK: We started putting on a race which was

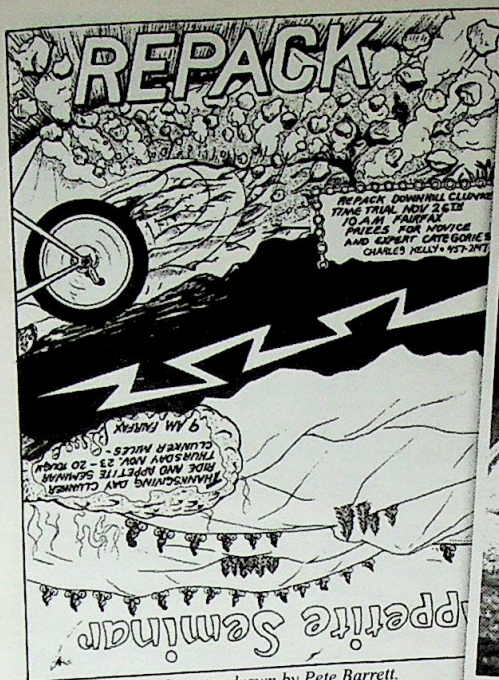
“It wasn't rocket science. You get an old bike and try to make it a little more useful in the dirt.”

weren't even the first people in Marin to take our bikes on the dirt, but we did eventually ...

You gotta understand, this house that Gary and I lived in – bachelor pad was probably not enough of a description. We're talking about a place where you ate standing up. What we considered a dining room – work bench, vise, grease on the wall, bikes hanging from the ceiling.

really the thing that made Marin County maybe more of a hub for this sort of thing than other places. Because we weren't doing anything different than a lot of other people in a lot of other places. It wasn't rocket science. You get an old bike and try to make it a little more useful in the dirt, and other people had done that.

But when we started racing, then people started going, “Well, what if money was no



An original Repack poster drawn by Pete Barrett.

Joe Breeze rounding a corner.



object?" The whole idea was, well, you know, I've got a 50-dollar bike. And that kind of flipped it when we were racing. You go, well, what if I spend a thousand bucks? What would I have? And then... So eventually a few of us did and thought that we had all the bikes of that sort that the world would need. But apparently we hadn't.

### On Joe Breeze and the Origin of Off-Road:

CK: If anybody invented the mountain bike, it'd be Joe Breeze because he sat around and basically decided every element of it. And up until Joe did that, everything had basically been patched together from what was around. And so, I mean, if I've gotta give credit to anyone, I'll give it to Joe, but he won't accept it. So we'll leave that hanging.

I believe that (the mountain bike) was a product of critical mass 'cause nothing we did hadn't been done before. What happened was we did it in a crowd big enough to accelerate the process. 'Cause my friend, John Scott, 1953, 20 years plus before we did anything – he built a bike pretty much identical to what we did in the '70s. But boy, if that market was not ready for it in the early '70s, it was way not ready for it in the early '50s. And so ... he was the one bike geek in the whole wide world that he knew of ... like this lone voice in the wilderness, and nothing ever came of it. But, in fact, he had all the same ideas.

So I think that critical mass, plus I think the world was ready for it a little more, you know. By the time we were hitting the streets with mountain bikes, the '70s was a bike boom, so there were a lot of people on bikes. There was

a lot of bike awareness. I got lucky, and plus I was lucky enough to know Joe Breeze.

### On MountainBikes Inc. Attending its First Trade Show:

CK: We walked in with our entire exhibit in one trip which is, well, it was two bicycles, a card table, and maybe a couple of boxes of cheaply-printed literature. So we've got a pretty funky display there, and right across the road you've got Shimano – spent eight million bucks on their display. It's got sound and lights. It's got dancing girls. It's got models and it's got bicycles. They're paid. They're taking shifts on the bikes because they've gotta ride bikes all day, you know. And they've got this disco theme. ... It's like money is no object.

So we're pretty much getting ignored by all the adults, but the guy from Omaha – the guy who sells lawnmowers and bicycles, he's there. Not at all a bike fanatic like us, but he's walking by and he's smoking a cigar. He's got his 12-year-old kid with him ... (and he) sees the bike – and you don't have to explain a thing to him. The 12-year-old kid makes all the connections. It's like, duh – heavy duty, cool, gears, brakes, big tires.

What's to say? ... The adults didn't see it, you know, and so, I mean, that was quite a reaction because the kid would do, "Wait a minute, dad, dad, dad! Dad, I've gotta stop and check this thing out." And a couple of those kids getting so insistent on their dads actually put a crowd in front of our place a couple of times ...

This guy comes up to us and says, "You know guys, I just love your passion. You're what's great about the bike market. But I



Up at 4 a.m. to ride to the top of Mt. Barnaby in west Marin for coffee, doughnuts and the sunrise, October 1977. Left to right: Joe Breeze, Vince Carlton, Fred Wolf, Gary Fisher, Charlie Kelly, Eric Fletcher.



Heading up Paradise Divide out of Crested Butte, CO, September 1979. Left to right: Joe Breeze, Charlie Kelly, Gary Fisher, and James Macway.

gotta tell ya, this stuff is going nowhere. The future of bicycles in America is aerodynamic components.”

We were so bummed to find that out because we were staking our futures somewhere

years of the mountain bike industry ... we had done R&D for everybody ... All they did was copy what we did.

It really jumps out at you when you see this picture of all these bikes collected together

They collected a few hundred dollars to open a bank account called “MountainBikes” and started assembling their bikes in living rooms and on kitchen tables.


else. But it's a great story because the guy was absolutely dead wrong. And he was one of those industry insiders that presumably someone paid to know about that stuff.

### On Early Bike Design and R&D:

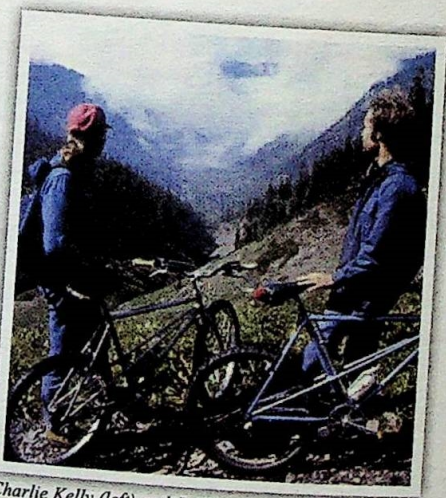
CK: Specialized – those guys bought four bikes from us in 1980, and in about eight or nine months they had their bike on the market and it was basically identical to what they bought from us.

When the bikes were first starting to crack the market, around 1980, there were a number of different designs. I have a roundup of about 15 different bikes that were on the market, and the Ritchey – the bike that Gary and I were selling and Tom was making – is the one that looks like all the mountain bikes that were built for the next five or six years. Because, basically, rather than any R&D, people just knocked off what we were doing, and not a lot is patentable on the bike.

So basically we did the R&D for the industry, and only after all these other companies had a few years of building bikes and had their own stable of fanatic bike engineers and riders and so forth to do their R&D, well then it started branching out. But really, the first four or five

from 1980, and there's one that all the bikes two years later looked like ... So Specialized was one of the first to jump on that. And at this point I don't really care. I cared then. I don't care now. 

Colleen Corcoran is a writer based in San Francisco. She is currently working on a book about adventure sports in California and beyond.



Charlie Kelly (left) and Joe Breeze at 10,000 feet, looking back over Mineral King Valley, September 1978.

## Looking Back from Another Perspective

### The View from Specialized founder Mike Sinyard

The View from Specialized Founder Mike Sinyard

“It was,” says Specialized founder Mike Sinyard, “all about the spirit of exploration. Mountain biking was a culture, a sport, and a rebellion against the road bike.”

In 1974, he launched Specialized bicycles out of a San Jose trailer park that lay between a cemetery and the epicenter of high tech. “Innovate or Die” seemed a fitting motto.

At the time, Sinyard had \$1,500 to his name. On \$300, he lived for two months in Europe. With \$1,200, he bought “specialized” Italian components plus one

Italian business suit, making the old world connections.

Back in the Bay Area, bicycling between bike shops and the Berryessa Flea Market with a hand-written catalogue and a trailer of parts, he collected \$64,000 in sales during one year.

Not for seven years though did Specialized go import-export wild. Sinyard had sent three Tom Ritchey machines to Japan. They returned in mass-production batches and sold as the “Specialized Stump Jumper,” the first mountain bike to be widely sold in bike shops.

—Colleen Corcoran