

AN ASSORTED COLLECTION OF NO-NAMES, RECLUSES, AND ECCENTRICS WHO MADE MOUNTAIN BIKING WHAT IT IS TODAY

Charlie Cunningham: Out of the Marin Spotlight

BY CHARLES KELLY

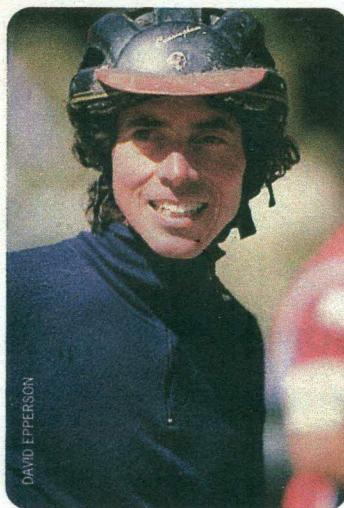
Although Charlie Cunningham has been in the thick of mountain bike design for 15 years, it's hard to get noticed when you share dishwashing duties with rock and dirt star Jacquie Phelan, whom he married a few years back at—where else—the Marin County Mountain Bike Festival.

After all, Jacquie has three national championships to Charlie's one, is the originator of the WOMBATS philosophy, and...oh yeah, this is about Charlie. You see how easy it is to get lost.

Cunningham actually likes it that way. He says with remarkable understatement, "I don't think I do nearly as much to get noticed." It's easy to stand in the shade when you know where the spotlight will be pointed.

Although Cunningham, 45, went to the University of California, majoring in mechanical and aeronautical engineering, he quit "about two inches short of the degree when I got fed up with the system." A lifelong cyclist, Cunningham was probably one of the first of the Marin County gang to take up dirt riding on a regular basis. He used a steel Gitane for a length of time he narrows down to eight or 10 years, starting in the late '60s. "After riding it for about a year, I realized it had its shortcomings, so I modified the frame by shortening the chainstays and raising the bottom bracket." It was his first experiment with bike design.

Cunningham made his first complete bike in 1976, and in typical fashion he didn't start by making something ordinary. The first Cunningham was a folding bike made of chrome-moly. In 1978, he built his first mountain bike, which for a time was an ongo-



ing experiment for different hand-made components such as forks and brakes. The bike is now on display at the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame Museum in Crested Butte.

"In my humble opinion," he says, "that is a very significant bike, and it wouldn't be out of place at a modern mountain bike event. It weighs 22-1/2 pounds, it's made of oversized heat-treated aluminum, it uses modern geometry that was unpopular when it was built, and it has a sophisticated braking system. The fork was light gauge one-inch double-butted chrome-moly. Everyone thought the 135 rear spacing was funny."

When Cunningham decided to make custom frames, demand far outstripped production. Cunningham did no advertising and had a personal relationship with his dozen or so customers each year. He has since suspended this sideline. "I have a list of about 50 people who desperately want bikes, but it's not going to happen any time soon."

While the world had gone through several fashion waves in off-road handlebars, Cunningham still uses drop off-road bars, a legacy of his original off-road machinery. "I have a couple of bikes with flat bars, and they're fine and dandy, but I still prefer drops."

In 1982, Charlie joined forces with framebuilder Steve Potts and designer Mark Slate in a venture called Wilderness Trail Bikes, or WTB. Hey, now we might be getting some recognition, because WTB components were among the first of the high-zoot aftermarket ultracool add-ons you could buy for your mountain bike. The WTB gang, which now also includes fourth partner Patrick Seider, is responsible for many designs used by other manufacturers. They started with the Ground Control, and all the Specialized off-road tires since have been WTB designs. "I heard that Specialized has the largest market share of off-road tires in this country," he says. "That means most of the tires sold in this country were designed at WTB."

Other products designed by WTB include the Trek 8000 aluminum mountain bike and a number of Suntour components.

At the second NORBA National Championships, held in 1984, at Lake Eldora in Colorado, Cunningham took home the veteran title and then-girlfriend, you-know-who, won the ladies' gold. "I raced because it was a way to showcase the bike. People didn't think it was a credible design, but after that it started to attract attention."

Despite his success and his obvious skill, Cunningham's racing career was brief. "I'm competitive in a racing situation, but I don't like racing. It takes the fun out of riding."

Cunningham now has a life mountain bike tinkerers dream of, spending most of his working time riding or in the shop at his house, picking up the phone only after the answering machine screens callers for relevance. "Offhand Manor" is at the end of a quiet street in Fairfax, California, and Charlie and Jacquie sleep in a tree-house/bedroom near the main part of the building. The trails are nearby for field testing the latest design whenever the day gets too nice.

In 1988 Cunningham was elected on the first ballot to the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame. That would get most people noticed, but hey, there was that soon-to-be-wife again, the flamboyant female honoree. Don't point that spotlight at me.