

# Victor Vincente of America:

The road-kill munching godfather of mountain biking funk

by Rob Story

**“W**hen mountain biking was a tiny, tiny sport I had a big part in it,” says Victor Vincente of America. “Now that it’s a big, big sport I have a tiny part in it.”

For a guy who legally named himself the Latin words for winning and conquering, Vincente is altogether too modest. He may lack an active, tangible role in the sport, but his influence spreads wide and penetrates deep. Rastafarian cosmetics and Missy Giove’s dead fish necklace owe him a great debt: Mountain biking prides itself on nothing so much as funkiness, and Vincente is its spiritual James Brown.

It all begins with the name. Victor Vincente of America. A fitting name for offspring if Wonder Woman and AquaMan knocked boots, but Vincente’s parents named him Michael Beckwith Hiltner. Hiltner was a roadie who competed in the ’60 and ’64 Olympics and was U.S. national champ in ’65. In 1974 he made the first known double transcontinental traverse of the States on a bike and felt it called for some kind of title. Victor obviously means winner and Vincente comes from the root *vincere*, meaning conquer, as does the last word in “veni, vedi, vinci.” Says the victorious conqueror of our nation, “Some people call me Victor, others call me VV of A. Some just call me VV.”

Vincente spent so much time riding in his native Los Angeles that the paved world began to seem small. “I discovered dirt roads in 1978,” he says softly. “I was riding around a canyon in Studio City. Of course I got a flat tire right away, but I thought dirt roads were a neat thing.”

Vincente had worked as a draftsman for a while and, utterly unaware of the successes in the Bay Area, decided an off-road bike could work. He went to his drafting board and drew up a machine with 20-inch BMX wheels on an adult-sized frame, spec’d with seven-speed gearing. Called “Topanga!” (Vincente’s punctuation), it came out in 1980. “I never did big business with it, but in the process I did meet Gary Fisher and Joe Breeze.



WENDE CRAGG

Vincente relaxes in his pantry.

That’s when I hit on the idea of promoting off-road races.”

The Reseda to the Sea Challenge, held in March 1980, was one of the first mountain bike races anywhere and certainly the first time the huge L.A. bike scene encountered off-road riding. Later in the year Vincente founded the Puerco Canyon hill climb and downhill; both those events and the Reseda continue to this day, unfettered by NORBA affiliations and costly insurance. “I’ve always enjoyed competition, but I like the low-profile side where you don’t have to go through all kinds of hoops to do it.”

Vincente came out with another frame in 1983, the “VVA 26 Semi-Custom Dirt Road Bicycle” that was known for perpendicular welded chainstays. Though Vincente still rides one today, it didn’t sell much either and he turned his attention to small riding and camping tours. The tours are secretive, unpublicized affairs that only a dozen trusted confidants are allowed to attend. They’re famous—or infamous—among mountain biking’s old guard, and combined with his races and frames, got Vincente, 53, “abducted” into the Hall of Fame in 1989. “I enjoy being kind of a pioneer,” he says, as mellowly as he says everything. “I’m usually not a good leader, but I enjoy going off on good ideas. I usually don’t care too much if anyone’s following.”

No one’s exactly lined up for another of his enterprises: making owl jerky. Vincente admits to a phobia of running out of food,

so when he came upon a fresh owl carcass while hiking back in 1981, he naturally harvested. “A coyote got it, but most of the breast meat was still there. After it dried out I took pieces on rides with me. I still have some, actually.

“The owl jerky thing is pretty notorious, but the lesser known fact is that there was skunk jerky. Coyote. A hawk killed in a hailstorm, a deer that had been illegally shot by hunters, a couple of rattlesnakes. I came upon a badger once, but it was too far gone. I was into road kill for a few years. See I have some strong theories about recycling, including the recycling of the biomass...”

These days Vincente is working with Eye Cycle, an organization that pairs up blind and sighted riders on tandem bikes and is planning a ride from California to Washington, D.C., to draw attention to fitness for the blind. He earns most of his income laying bricks but dabbles in various arts. “My current fascination is with coins. I started out just collecting and now I produce them. I call it ‘coin art.’”

He’s designing his fourth series now. His third featured a Victor Vincente of America engraving on one side and a depiction of an aurochs, the ox-like ancestor to our cattle, on the other. Vincente chose the extinct aurochs because “it struck me as kind of a tragic loss that the wild ones are all gone and all we have left are the genetically engineered ones.”

Insightful words, whether or not the subject is cows. **b**