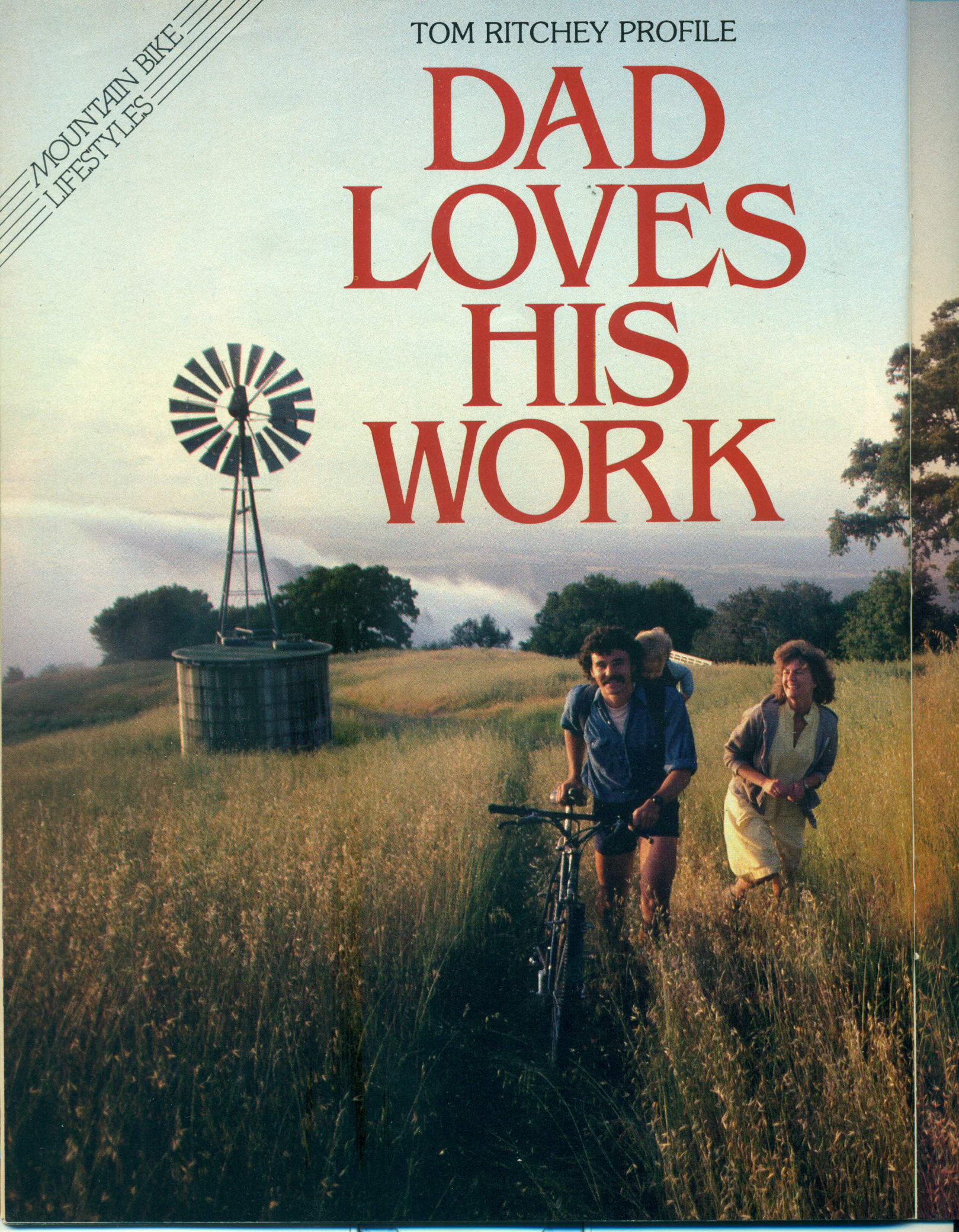


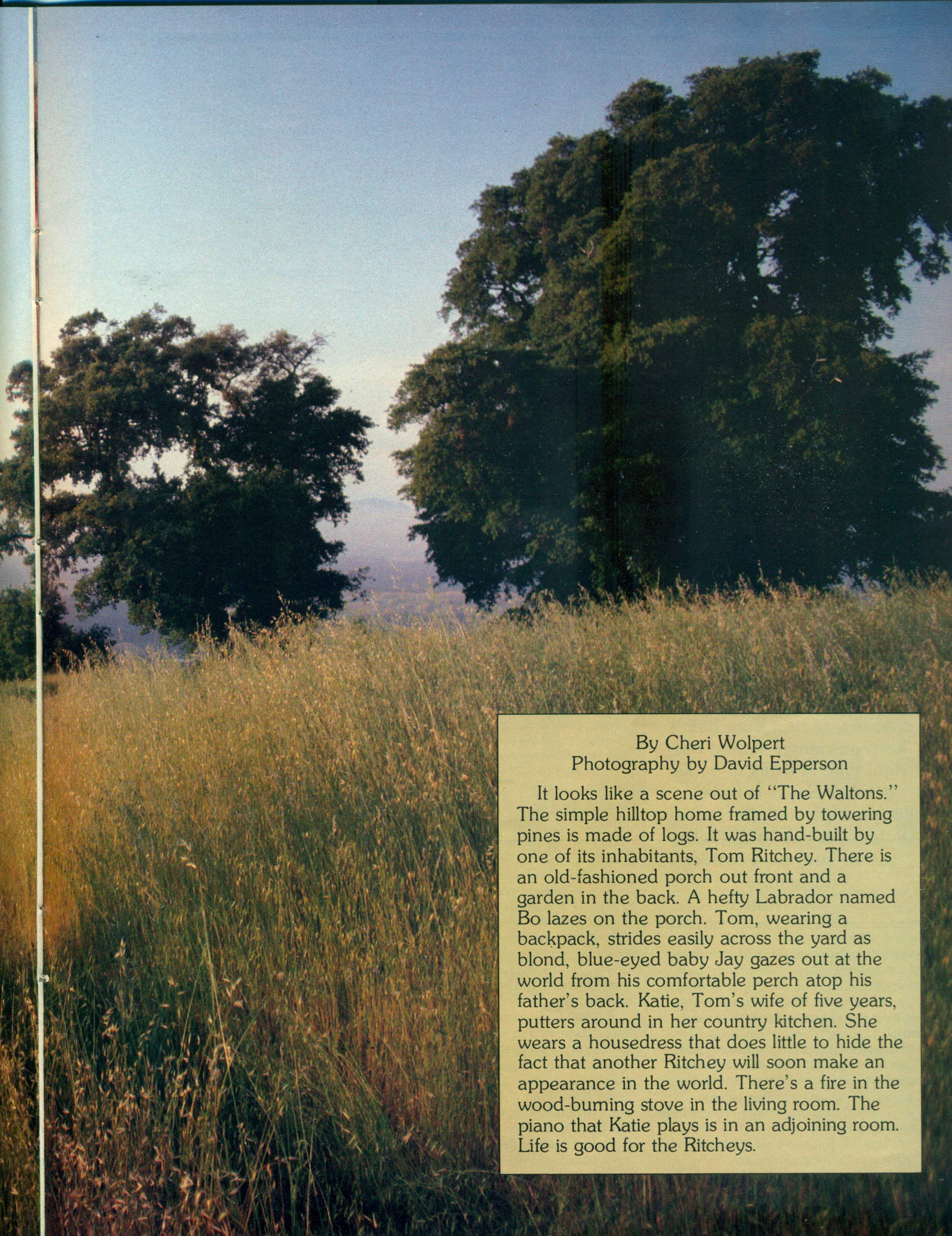
MOUNTAIN BIKE  
LIFESTYLES

TOM RITCHEY PROFILE

# DAD LOVES HIS WORK







By Cheri Wolpert  
Photography by David Epperson

It looks like a scene out of "The Waltons." The simple hilltop home framed by towering pines is made of logs. It was hand-built by one of its inhabitants, Tom Ritchey. There is an old-fashioned porch out front and a garden in the back. A hefty Labrador named Bo lazes on the porch. Tom, wearing a backpack, strides easily across the yard as blond, blue-eyed baby Jay gazes out at the world from his comfortable perch atop his father's back. Katie, Tom's wife of five years, putters around in her country kitchen. She wears a housedress that does little to hide the fact that another Ritchey will soon make an appearance in the world. There's a fire in the wood-burning stove in the living room. The piano that Katie plays is in an adjoining room. Life is good for the Ritcheys.



it that a shop owner snorted within Ritchey's earshot that a monkey could have built that bike. Evolution aside, how many 15-year-olds have ever designed and built a frame? Ritchey does admit, "When I was 15, I was really cocky; I thought I had the definitive way. I thought that the first bike I made was going to be the last bike I ever made. I thought it would be the bike." It wasn't. The world wasn't ready for the young upstart's designs. And his designs weren't yet ready for the world.

treating certain metals to improve their tensile strength, about ductility and stresses.

As for the theoretical and academic worlds, Ritchey had no use for them. After just one quarter of college, he impatiently shoved his physics and chemistry texts aside in favor of practical knowledge. This radical departure from the traditional engineering education worked for Ritchey, but he freely offers, "I'm sure that in a lot of ways, there are limitations. I never found textbooks or professors to be that understandable. I

This American Dream-come-true belies the fact that Ritchey attained it in a very nontraditional way. This confident young man (he's 26) declared at an early age that he never wanted to work for anyone. He hasn't.

Tom Ritchey is a framebuilder. A very good framebuilder. He builds frames for Ritchey MountainBikes, an outfit in Northern California that makes rugged bicycles that are billed "the best engineered all-terrain vehicle for less than \$35,000." That accolade comes from no less an authority than *Car and Driver* magazine.

The bike is well engineered, but Ritchey is no engineer. That is, he doesn't have a degree that says he is. But no one can build bikes the way Ritchey does unless he understands the

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**"Tom (Ritchey) beat Jacques (Boyer) when they were both punks. I'd say they were of equal ability at the time. It's unfortunate that Tom didn't keep on riding; he had the right type of skills to be as good as Boyer is today. Jacques just took his racing to the next step and Ritchey quit to become a builder instead."**

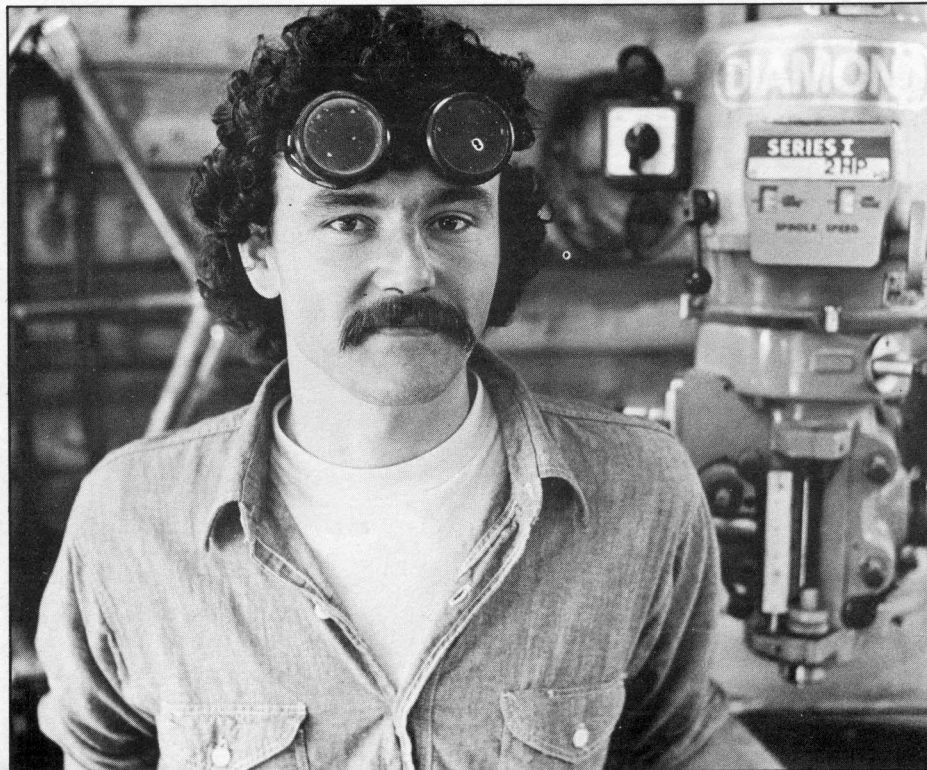
— Gary Fisher

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engineering principles involved in the geometry, the careful placement of every braze-on, the exact amount of flux in a perfect joint. Ritchey knows what he's doing; he just learned it the hard way.

Ritchey's enterprising activities date back to his early childhood; he mowed lawns when he was only 6. By the time he was 10, he was building electric go-carts and charging neighborhood kids a penny a ride.

At age 15, Ritchey built his first bike. There was nothing particularly impressive about that bike. Legend has



*This dad loves his work — and he's invested his time and energy into perfecting his craft. Here he's pictured in his workshop with some of his trade: protective goggles, drill press, supplies on his shelves, and complete frames hanging in the background.*

Ritchey reflects that he was humbled by the experience and has never forgotten the lesson he learned: "You can either fail and learn something or fail and not learn anything. If your failure is looked upon as another defeat, that's the end of the learning process; it stops right there. You end up starting something else that you know you're not going to fail at and you find yourself doing that for the rest of your life. You bury your life into some little area that you can handle."

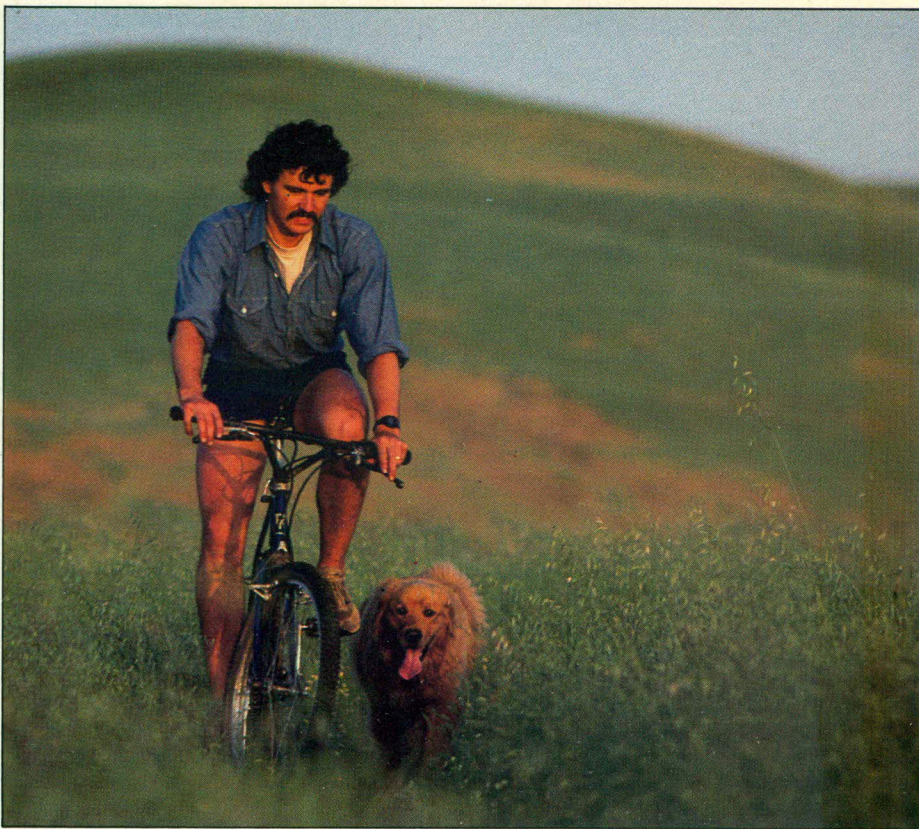
Ritchey learned from his failures; he was determined to continue to learn to get the answers to the countless questions he had burning inside him. He grilled his engineer father. He grilled Jobst Brandt, an engineer, Renaissance man, and virtual guru to bikies in Northern California. He grilled everyone he could think of in his quest to understand. He wanted to know about metallurgical analysis, about heat

have always felt that there were pieces missing. I do take a little bit of pride in just seeing myself in comparison to some friends who have gone through school and have textbook knowledge, but no practical knowledge."

During this time, while Ritchey was refining his framebuilding skills, a group of renegade cyclists in Marin County, about fifty miles north of where Ritchey lived, was discovering the joys of klunking down the hillsides on old Schwinn Excelsior X bikes. The cyclists were limited by the technology of their equipment, but they had a great time anyway, exploring on two wheels the fireroads and trails in the woods.

In January, 1979, Gary Fisher, one of the very best of those adventurous cyclists, invited Ritchey to ride with him. With that invitation came the dawn of a new age in cycling. Although Ritchey had ridden off-road for many years, no one had ever challenged him with the





No leash laws necessary here — Bo has all the space he needs in order to run free. He seems to enjoy these afternoon outings almost as much as his master does.



It's not Grandma's feather bed, but this sight in the Ritchey's room evokes the same feeling of warmth and comfort.

idea that he might build a rugged frame specifically designed for the rigors of trail riding. As Fisher remembers, "I was really impressed when Tom produced that first frame; I had talked with other framebuilders who never did anything. Within four weeks, Tom had produced three finished frames. Those frames are still being ridden today."

It was the start of a beautiful partnership. By the time that Ritchey

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had built ten frames, he asked Fisher what he thought about selling them. They began MountainBikes, which Fisher says, "has grown into what it has." One of the hallmarks of their business is the guarantee that a purchaser cannot break a joint or a braze-on. Ritchey and Fisher have yet to need to make good on that guarantee. Fisher, who hangs the components on the bikes while Ritchey concentrates building frames, attributes his confidence in Ritchey to the builder's respect for traditional, clean and simple designs, his experience in repairing bikes which enables him to detect where the frame might fail, and his uncanny ability to produce a balanced frame of appropriate thickness and strength, one which shows no sign of fatigue or stress.

What does someone get when he buys a Ritchey frame? Ritchey thoughtfully ponders the question, then offers his opinion, "I'd say that a person who hasn't gone through the evolution



of buying a \$150 bike, then a \$400 bike, then a \$700 bike, and then one for \$1,500, he's not going to notice the difference unless he knows exactly what to look for, through research and education.

"I build a very conservative factor into each frame; there's more bike there than most people need and they sense that right away. I'd say only 10 percent of the bikes I've ever sold are to people who use their bikes like I use mine — putting lots of miles on and riding over all kinds of crazy terrain."

Ritchey's bikes are built to take it. According to those in the know — avid mountain bikers — they are sturdy, comfortable, and impeccably detailed. Says Ritchey: "There's a great deal of

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**"There aren't too many more pleasurable activities than taking a friend out to the country for his first mountain bike ride. It's like showing someone a new way of living."**

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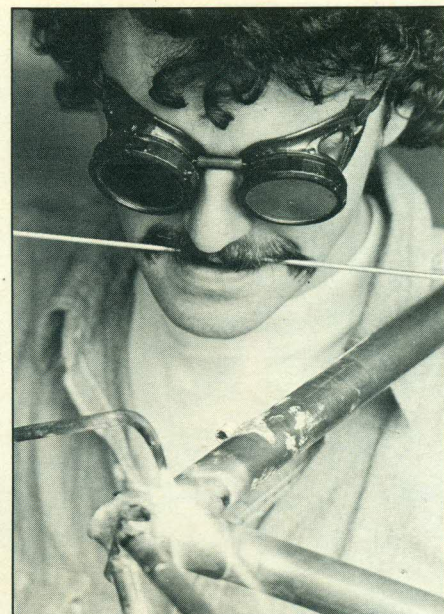
thought to where a joint and a braze-on are placed, how the cable routes easily, how the rear wheel comes out without getting hitched up on the front derailleur, and how it passes through the cantilever brakes."

It has been said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. If that's the case, then Ritchey should be very gratified to see the stream of rugged-looking off-road bikes being built in Japan and Taiwan for sale in the U.S. Ritchey notes, "There are so many details on a bike that are taken for granted by factories over in Japan that put together these bikes. Originally, they took one of our bikes over there and set out to duplicate it. What's come back is an example of what they missed. They got the overall bike, but they missed so many of the details that make it a more well thought-out package. Maybe they saw the differences, but because they weren't educated, they weren't practical

and didn't have the practical application — the makers weren't people who rode the bikes for five years like we did in order to evolve. They didn't appreciate these little subtleties that end up making the package more responsibly built."

Ritchey has examined imitations that, in his opinion, display ill-fitting cable housing, and a lack of attention to detail. But he is a perfectionist and it's his business to analyze what the competition's up to. And there's a big difference from Japanese factories churning out thousands of bikes at a time and a limited production shop meticulously producing a mere fraction of that number. Just as not everyone demands a Ferrari, not everyone demands a Ritchey. (Well, we might have our secret dreams, but that's another story . . .)

No matter what bike you take up into the country, Ritchey agrees that the sport of mountain biking is very special. "There aren't too many more pleasurable activities than taking a friend out to the country for his first mountain



*Knowledge plus concentration equals confidence in the finished product. Ritchey takes pride in creating consistently good, strong joints in his frames.*



*The annual gathering of off-road cycling aficionados in Crested Butte, Colorado, offers every rider the chance to test his abilities. Here, Ritchey and his partner, Gary Fisher, battle each other and the terrain.*

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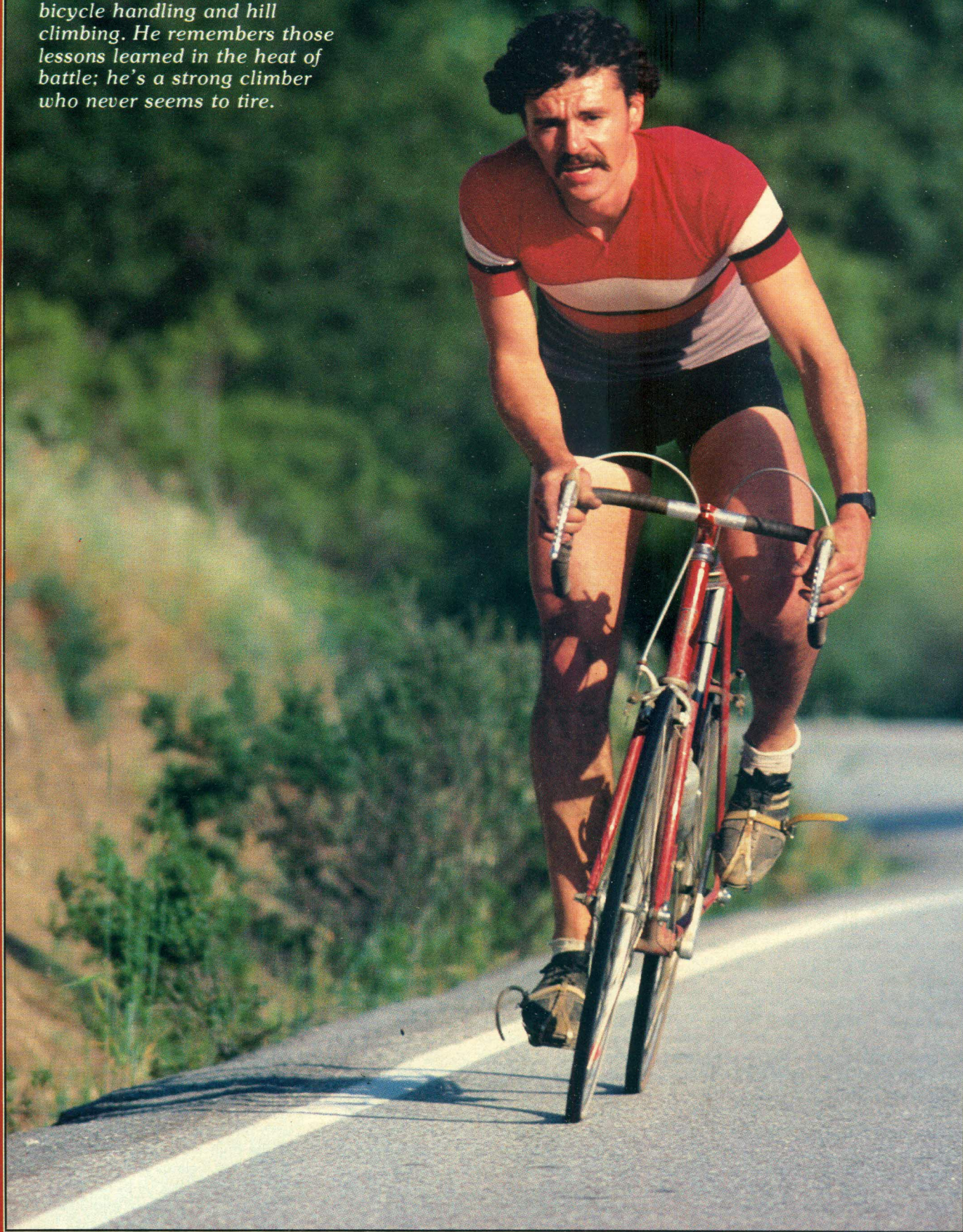
It's a way of living that's not without some perils or politics. Ritchey was arrested in Yosemite Valley in 1978 for riding his bike on the John Muir Trail. He recalls, "They were going to fine me \$100, but I talked them down to a fine of only \$10. But I was lined up with

muggers and rapists! It's a zoo in the Valley."

The Yosemite Valley isn't the only place that is responding to pressure to ban off-road cycling. The people who speak the loudest against the new sport may have little, if any, contact with the cyclists themselves; it's often their fear of the unknown that mountain



*Ritchey's competitive background gave him the opportunity to hone his skills in bicycle handling and hill climbing. He remembers those lessons learned in the heat of battle; he's a strong climber who never seems to tire.*

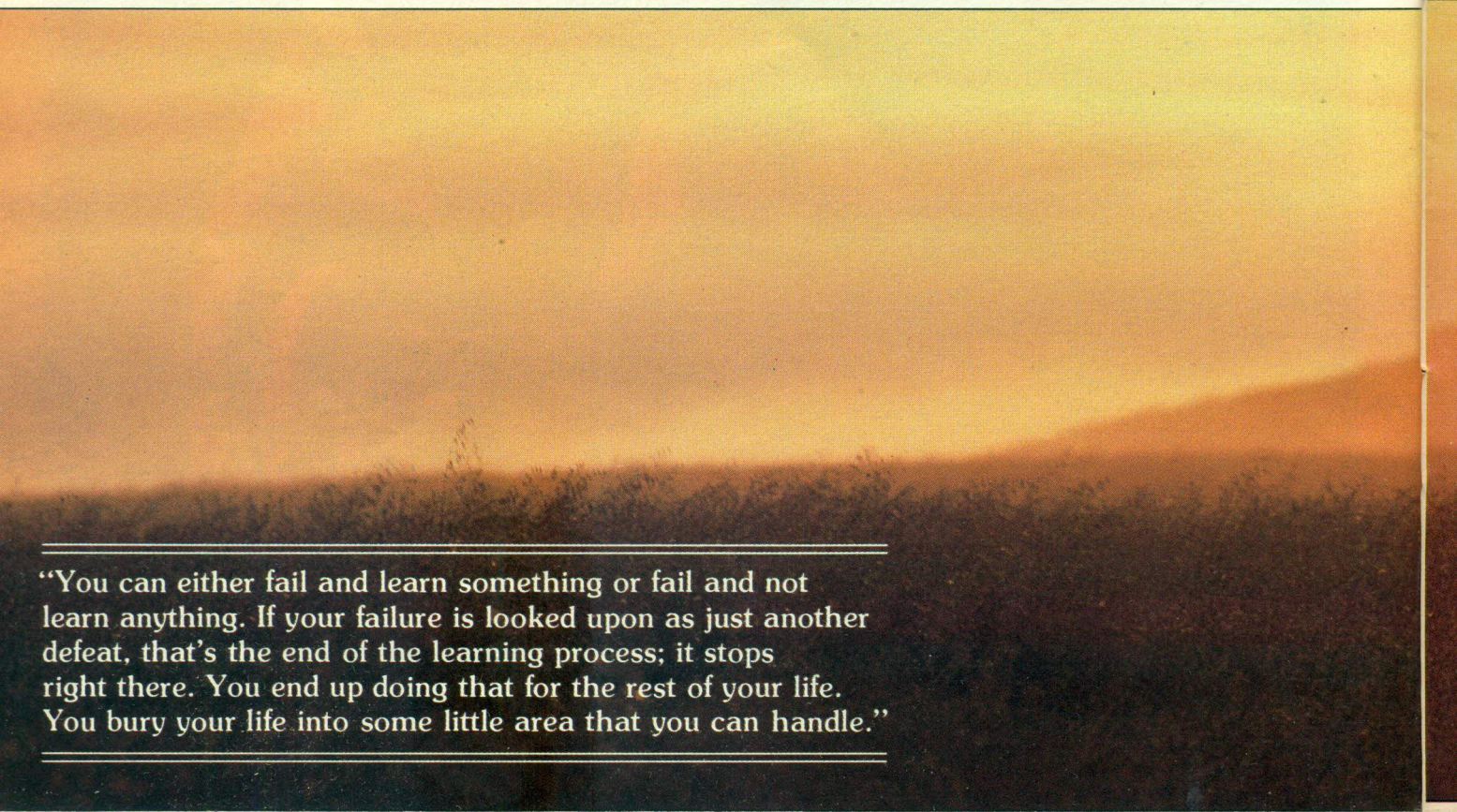




as Ritchey says, "The cyclist is going to have to be reckoned with."

Today, most of the riding Ritchey does is off-road, plus some Sunday road rides with longtime friends and occasional organized mountain bike races. But not too long ago, Owen Mulholland of the Crockett-Martinez newspaper said Ritchey was terrorizing Northern California racing circles as "the new Eddie Merckx of the junior set." One particularly notable clipping from 1973 asks, "Who is this audacious scoundrel, Tom Ritchey?" The clip goes on to explain that Ritchey has been "doling out embarrassment with a

If he'd kept riding. But Ritchey wanted to work instead. He confesses that he always was in a hurry to grow up, to be perceived as mature. And one senses that, as the admonishment goes, when he became a man, he put away childish things. As Ritchey states it, "I have always just felt like getting on with life. I never got involved with drugs or real casual living; I never wanted to go out and boogie every night. I have always taken life seriously and known that there were consequences to the decisions that I made. I have taken my business seriously and I even got married at a



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bike riders must deal with.

Ritchey counters most opposition these days by being courteous to hikers and horseback riders, keeping his distance, and remembering that to many folks out in the wilderness, a bicycle is an obnoxious, mechanized vehicle that reminds them of the civilization they desperately want to escape. A little reason goes a long way and Ritchey offers a sensible suggestion to those who fear the off-road cyclist: "I'd love to see an environmental impact study of the bicycle on the trail. I have all the confidence in the world that a bicycle does no more damage than a hiker or a horseback rider."

The Sierra Club representative contacted said that he had never even heard about the sport of mountain biking. So it looks like a study, at least by the Sierra Club is a long way off. But

shovel" as he won the Davis Criterium with a "ferocious drubbing of the cream of Northern California riders." Ritchey was a junior riding in a senior event — he was disqualified from the race and later suspended for a month.

He was recognized as an excellent handler, climber, and criterium rider. He and American pro Jacques Boyer rode against each other in those days, and as Gary Fisher observes, "He beat Jacques when they were both punks. I'd say they were of equal ability at the time. It's unfortunate that Tom didn't keep on riding; he had the right type of skills to be as good as Boyer is today. Jacques just took his racing to the next step and Ritchey quit to become a builder instead." Fisher has noted that Ritchey could have been the first American to ride in the Tour de France instead of Boyer, if he'd kept riding.

time when most of my friends were just playing around. I've been able to see that there was real genuine quality to my parents' lives and it had to do with finding the simple pleasures of life. There's a certain security in being satisfied with life and not grasping for things. They can drive you to the point where you forget about the values that are important: a family and just being responsible in life. I gain a lot of satisfaction and security in living simply."

There's probably a certain mindset that allows a craftsman to value the simple life. One who makes his living with his hands can scarcely be a devotee of the high technology world. Ritchey makes his feelings known about heeding the historical lessons in his field, "There's 100 years of evolution in the bicycle. If you compare a bike built 100 years ago and one built today, aside



from the derailleur, the two are very similar geometrically. We've refined the bicycle by making it with lighter tubing, nice tires, and alloy rims, but basically, we're still working with the same metal, steel, and aluminum. We work with rubber tires, steel on the chain and leather on the saddle. There are subtle changes that have been significant in making the bicycle better as far as the ride. But a person on a bicycle 100 years ago could go 90 percent as fast as someone on a bike these days.

"There are always creative and talented people out there who think that they're going to reinvent the bicycle.

not really able to put much of a dent in what was made 100 years ago."

Although he's considered to be a master at his craft, Ritchey remains modest as he says with a sigh, "There's too much mystery in a simple, nine-piece tube set. My stomach turns when those guys in lab coats tell people how it should be done. They really want the security of keeping the lid closed. I do sense a lot of responsibility in making everything right when people place their confidence in me, spending anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000 on a frame and then riding it all over the place. But I'm not nearly as impressed with my skills as

"I just hope that through the newness of the business, its growth, and all that draws me into it, that my kids grow up to know who I am and love me for what I am. I don't want them to see me as married to my work. I don't think that the work part of my life is the most important thing. I think that having children who know that their mom and dad love each other and grow up with a healthy dose of self-esteem is, ultimately, what's most important.

"I guess that's probably the biggest challenge in life, the one that will be most satisfying to me. If I just have the same wife I'm living with right now and



They come up with bio-cam drives, elliptical chain wheels, and longer arm and backward-riding bicycles. But the basic idea of the bicycle didn't evolve out of thin air. But it's people who come from other fields who just take it all for granted that technology is going to take over everything that's ever been thought of in the past.

"The overall concept of the bicycle is going to stay. The two wheels, geometry, diameters, tubes, tires — that's going to outlast bikes made of huge aluminum tubing, titanium, plastic, and graphite. The bicycle is just too well thought-out to change dramatically. Until we come up with anti-gravity materials, we're stuck with what we've got. What can you do with a microprocessor on a bike? It can tell you your speed, but it can't make you go any faster. So the latest in technology, in my opinion, is

I am with other things that I see in the world." When it all comes down to it, he admits, a frame "... is just another pretty collection of the same tubes."

Tom Ritchey does a good job of putting together those tubes. He knows that. Yet that doesn't keep him from striving to do a little better, saying, "For me to say I'm trying to design a better bicycle is a little arrogant. Of course, I'm trying to do that, but it sounds like I'm trying to design a new type of bicycle."

He isn't. Ritchey is content to continue to be a craftsman, a framebuilder who cares about the slowly dying art of solid workmanship. And although he admits that he loves his work, Ritchey has a sense of perspective for its place in his life. He looks forward to the day when he can spend more time with his family, enjoying the good life together.

*This top-of-the-world setting has a view of the Pacific Ocean on one side, the San Francisco Bay on the other. During the spring and fall, banks of fog obliterate everything with their own unique beauty.*

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grandchildren when I'm 80 years old, I will be a content man. Whatever I was known for, as far as being a craftsman or whatever, will just be icing on the cake." ○●

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*Cheri Rae Wolpert is a Northern California-based freelance writer and an active cyclist and triathlete. Her last story for BICYCLE SPORT on John Howard appeared in the September issue.*