Class Reunion

Fat Tire Week at Crested Butte, Colorado, is the mountain bike world's unconventional convention, a chance to ride and reflect, a chance to look backward and to look ahead.

By Janet Tamaro

It was like getting the Beatles back together again. In the shadow of Mount Crested Butte, three men stood around awkwardly—not looking at each other, but then again not *not* looking. Three of the credited pioneers of mountain biking who once worked as a team, Tom Ritchey, Gary Fisher and Charlie Kelly, were together again for a photo.

In the crisp breeze that blows around the snow capped mountains and into the grass valley of Crested Butte, an old silver mining town in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, it's hard not to make peace. Though it's been two years now since the three dissolved their partnership, each still makes the annual pilgrimage to Crested Butte, a town so small that it's news report includes lost pet announcements. Since 1978, it's been the second home for mountain biking, next to Marin County, California. That was the first year that 13 Californians followed Kelly's lead and went east to ride some of the most picturesque country in America.

For the men who have been steadily building a fat tire empire, going back to the Butte each year is a way to wax nostalgic about a bygone era. It's a way of remembering what it was like to scrimp together enough cash to ride the Gray Rabbit bus through treacherous mountain roads for a chance to meet up with friends and do some "radical" riding up mountain terrain that peaked at 13,000 feet. Those were the days when all you needed was a re-built Schwinn Excelsior to be cool. If you had a Ritchey frame, it was like owning a Rolls Royce.

The town is pretty much the same as it was back in 1978, or 1878 for that matter, though it finally boasts paved roads through more than just the center of town. You can still get eggs, toast and

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They're not partners now, but if you own a mountain bike—any mountain bike—you owe something to Gary Fisher, Tom Ritchey and Charles Kelly. Left, the inimitable Forest Queen in a quieter moment.

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hash browns for under two bucks at the Forest Queen. The forests of aspen trees that flow across the mountain slopes still burst into a brilliant yellow in the fall, and the sky still looks like a painted Hollywood backdrop, puffs of white clouds against a brilliant robin's egg blue.

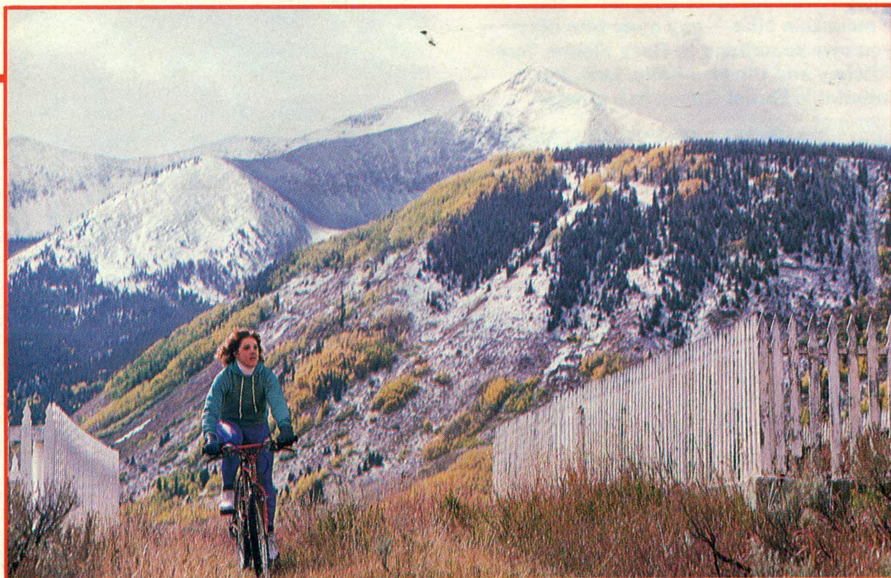
But the bikes that push through the mountain terrain aren't the same. Gears now click into place with quiet precision, wheels float easily over broken granite that once would have destroyed rim and rubber, and pastel pink and peach frames seem at odds with the earth-toned territory. So do the high-tech outerware, the logo-emblazoned skinsuits and the bronzed, clean-shaven legs that hammer up the passes. All these are recent developments.

The men behind the invention of mountain biking are now enshrouded in myth. Who's brainchild is the attachment of a rear derailleur, bull moose handlebars, fat tires, chrome-moly tubing? Joe Breeze, Tom Ritchey, Gary Fisher and Charlie Kelly are but a few of the builders and dreamers who initially brought bikes off a tarred surface and into the backwoods. But as Kelly points out, "Who invented water skiis? *Who cares?* Let's just use 'em!"

Mountain biking, for its early Marin devotees, was a way of escaping the mad panic of the Bay Area, with its profusion of upwardly mobile professionals and its stream-lined blocks of $200,000 condos. It was a way of "getting back to nature"—packing a bong in a backpack, pounding (and pushing) to the top of a ridge in first gear (the only one available on a Schwinn Excelsior), and coming to rest under a tree to survey the panorama below, the Golden Gate Bridge and the Marin headlands. Roaring back down the dirt trails was even better, though your coaster brakes were likely to go up—literally—in a cloud of smoke.

Three of the original four were partners in the beginning, Fisher, Ritchey and Kelly. They pooled a couple of hundred dollars and called their new venture "Mountain Bikes." Two years have passed since they officially "divorced," and their estrangement from each other has been as painful as the break-up of a romance.

The three went into business together in September of 1979. It wasn't one of those capital mergers that came together



Rocky horror: The Pearl Pass Tour has always been one of the reasons for Fat Tire Week. The top of the 13,000-foot pass is just ahead for these two, with more of the same on the other side.

in a lawyer's office, though that's where it eventually ended. There are three different versions of how they initially opened shop, but as near as historians can tell, it started with a bike ride in Point Reyes, California.

Ritchey, though a formidable junior road racer, had eventually turned his talents toward building road bikes. On a ride with a few friends on an old newspaper boy's bike that he'd rebuilt, Ritchey "got excited about building a mountain bike." Fisher, who was a senior rider, knew Ritchey from racing. Fisher had tried to get two other framebuilders to build an off-road bike using his own specifications. He says he had always admired Ritchey's road bikes. "He was doing some pretty far-out stuff—all ultralight bikes, with outrageous designs," says Fisher, so when he heard Ritchey might be interested in building a frame, the two went for a "business ride."

Four weeks later, Ritchey had produced not one but three frames. Using his own specs and a few of Fisher's recommendations, the first three frames created a demand for more. Fisher and his roommate Kelly coaxed Ritchey into building 10 frames. In March of 1979, Mountain Bikes, after the required stint in the paper under the "Fictitious Name" column, was born.

The duties of marketing, public relations and research fell to Fisher and Kelly, who had set up a small shop in San

Rafael, California. Ritchey built frames in Palo Alto, some 50 miles away.

The next few years in the history of Mountain Bikes and its three partners saw the kind of tension and conflict usually found in the realm of the soap opera. Mountain Bikes was the Apple Computer of the bike industry and Marin County was the Silicon Valley.

Ritchey was the Steve Wozniak, a technical wizard and sometimes irascible perfectionist. Even with the incredible changes in the marketplace, his bikes still rank among the best in the business.

Kelly and Fisher together made up the Stephen Jobs. Kelly, who had worked as a roadie for the "Sons of Champlin" band for nine years, had the charisma. A '60's kid who'd never gotten rid of his ponytail, Kelly got everybody "stoked" about riding. Fisher, like Jobs a proficient technician, was never the technical star. He was the conceptualizer. Just as Jobs knew computers weren't only for techno nerds, Fisher knew that mountain bikes weren't only for radical renegades to blast down fire trails in Marin. Though he admits, "Sure, I smelled a profit," he insists his motivation bordered on the altruistic. "The mountain bike is the most user-friendly bike. I wanted to get people riding bikes. I wanted to cover the earth with bikes."

In fact, all three shared a devotion to bikes that bordered on evangelical fervor. "We wanted to make cool bikes and turn the rest of the world on," said Kelly. And the world, or at least the bicycle world, responded by buying fat tire bikes. Each year at Crested Butte, attendance grew from the first 13 to, by Kelly's count, "megahundreds," and it was apparent from the sleek mountain biking clothes and expo atmosphere that this sport was turning the corner and heading into the mainstream. Magazines started sending writers to Crested Butte to herald the new "trend" and big bike manufacturers took a second look at the bike they'd scorned only a few years before.

As the demand for bikes grew, so did the problems at Mountain Bikes. The intrigue includes discrepancies as to who designed what, who paid what to whom, and who contributed too much/too little. Ritchey and Fisher still can't agree on who designed the Montare. Aside from their love of bikes, the three shared something else. "The three of us had one thing in common; we all had monstrous egos," says Kelly. "Some partnerships were made to work, some weren't."

Kelly was the first of the three to leave. Like the early investors at Apple, some potential investors in Mountain Bikes were a little nervous about the company's image. Kelly, Fisher and Ritchey were a little too "intensoid" (Marin-ese for intensely layed back) for one investor, who was willing to put up $13,000 on one condition: Kelly had to get a haircut. Kelly, who calls his lifestyle, "notoriously perpetual," balked at the idea. He washed his hands of the account books and found his calling in writing. He spent his time writing promotional copy and querying magazine editors about mountain bike stories. "He just didn't like business," says Fisher. "He didn't like selling."

Fisher, on the other hand, thrived on business. Son of the famous architect A. Robert Fisher, 32-year-old Gary Fisher is a sort of neo-hippy turned entrepreneur. Fisher started road riding when he was 12 and in the '70's was the best road racer in Marin County, he says, yet his real claim to fame before 1979 was his course record in the "Repack," an ad hoc race down a Marin County fire road that drops 1300 feet in just two miles, a race he won on a rebuilt klunker.

"Only a few years back, people thought it (his bike) was the stupidest thing they'd ever seen. Kids would spit on it. But after the Repack, I was a hero. People would come up to me in the supermarket to shake my hand."

Fisher still bombs around town in an old truck and his speech is punctuated with "like," but no one spits on his bike anymore. This past year, he was featured in the entrepreneur's section of *Money* magazine, and Fisher says he's more surprised than anyone that he now "digs" reading his daily copy of *The Wall Street Journal*.

Impromptu demonstrations in the middle of town are part of what makes Crested Butte unique. This time, trials expert Rich Cast took on a Firebird; the year before, it was a picnic table—with and without benches.

Ahhh, yes. Living the American dream. But as the old adage goes, "Be careful what you wish for; you might get it." Ritchey, Fisher and Kelly are doing what they set out to do, they're turning people on to fat tire bikes, but they're doing it separately, and personal divisiveness has become a division in the marketplace. Fisher and Ritchey broke up in January of 1984 after realizing they couldn't come to mutually agreeable terms, and each now runs his own company and markets his own line of bikes. Meanwhile, their garage operation spawned an industry.

So coming to Crested Butte in 1985 isn't really a vacation anymore. The days of a glorified bar hop are over. Now, for those who still come, it's more like a se-

Crested Butte is business now, whether you dress for it in pinstripes or Levis or spandex.

ries of company picnics. For Fisher and Ritchey, it's a way to compete with each other cleanly—on the trails, the Ritchey team against the Fisher team.

There are other mountain bike celebrities in town. Some of its early pioneers, frame-builders Joe Breeze, Charlie Cunningham and Steve Potts, have all taken time off from building to come. Breeze, who has remained a small-scale independent frame-builder for the most part, is a soft-spoken, articulate man who seems the least interested of any in the fast track to business success. Last year, he even applied for a job at a Colorado Springs bike shop, only to be turned down because he was "over-qualified." He, along with Kelly and Fisher, is part of the original clan from the west that first came to Crested Butte in 1979.

Breeze races in the time trail on one of his "Breezer" bikes, but when he finishes he looks back up at the mountain and the stream of thousand-dollar machines hurtling down the course. He sighs and says, "It was so low-key in the beginning. There weren't any regulations then. It's not what it used to be for me." As he runs his hands over the top of the beautiful machine he built, he smiles and says, "I had the best time riding on my '54 klunker. It was so simple."

Others like the eclectic racer Jacquie Phelan have been pulled into the mountain bike business vortex. Phelan arrives in Crested Butte this year sans her trademark braids. Blue geometric earrings swing from her ears, and both wrists are wrapped in swirls of plastic day-glo bracelets.

Witty, a little campy and something of an enigma, Phelan, as always, has found her own way of coping with racer-as-commodity. Taped to her cycling cap the first day of racing is a cut-out logo from a box of cereal. "They sponsoring you?" someone asks. "No," she replies. "But I eat this stuff every day. I was hoping they might start."

The riding is intensely competitive now during Fat Tire Week. Lycra racing suits invade the country atmosphere of places like the Paradise Cafe and the Grubstake Saloon. The Forest Queen, with its potato-sack wallpaper and its bunkhouse upstairs, is filled with tense, anxious faces as racers shovel down breakfast. Crested Butte is business, now, whether you dress for it in pinstripes or Levis or spandex.

"It used to be you race for fun and live with whatever happens. Now you have sponsors. People are so serious about racing," comments Kelly.

People walking the streets of Crested Butte are pretty serious about everything, it seems. You don't have to be a local to spot an outsider. The people that filter into Crested Butte for a "fun" week have a purposeful intensity about them. An avocation has grown into a vocation. Says 27-year-old Jeff Day, who's been coming to Crested Butte for five years, "There's no camaraderie anymore. Everyone's split off into different camps. All the teams are out on training rides, so you don't get a chance to ride with anyone anymore."

At the end of Fat Tire Week is the fabled Pearl Pass Tour. It used to be the highlight of the week even in recent years, but this time it's more like the anti-climax. It began as a two-day assault on a steep, rocky pass that rises into the thin mountain air to 13,000 feet. It had been the one event that brought all the little cliques of riders together for one ride.

Fisher, Kelly and Breeze are the only ones who've made the trip every year. Until this year. Fisher has taken his team home to rest for the Nationals the following week. Kelly is out with a sore ankle. Only Breeze rides the pass, though he starts hours after the first group has gone.

Pearl Pass has become a one-day event, presumably because no one has time to kick back for a whole weekend. The usual congregating at every stream crossing to hang out, talk to people and wait for everyone to catch up doesn't happen this year. Everyone is in a hurry to get to the top.

Ken Rieman, a 30-year-old medic, follows the procession with first-aid supplies and water. People excuse themselves as they maneuver by his panniers, but few say hello.

"Pearl Pass isn't fun anymore," Rieman says. "After this year, I think I'm going to find another remote town like Crested Butte was a few years ago."

But there's no going back for the mountain bike or for the people who have hitched their lives to its rising star. Ritchey sits on a corner near the bakery in Crested Butte, munching on cheese and crackers. His hands are stained with bicycle grease, and his handsome face carries a brooding expression that only slips away when he talks about one of his three children. As he speaks, he gestures frequently, and seems always to position himself in a coil, as though at any minute his long, lean legs will spring into action. He talks about his new warehouse, his contract with a Japanese company to build the Ascent bike. He is tense from the energy he seems to be exerting to remain still, and laughs at himself as he finally gives up the struggle and stands, dumping his half-eaten lunch back into a bag. "I don't know how to relax anymore."

Fisher stays with his team for the week, sequestered in a new hotel at the edge of town. On the night of the first day of racing, Fisher takes his team out to dinner at one of the fancier restaurants in town. He is seated at the head of the table, his young riders clustered around him, and the candlelight that glows over his face gives him the look of a prophet. The next day at the trials competition, Fisher stands with his hands pushed into the pockets of his bright red Fisher Mountain Bikes jacket, studying the event with an intent expression. This time, he looks like a man who misses his *Wall Street Journal.*

Of the three, Kelly seems happiest in Crested Butte. "I'm more of a celebrity here than I am where I live. I get an ego stroke just being here," Kelly says. "They treat me like a local." No longer involved in the business of mountain bikes, Kelly makes his living as a writer and photographer. He still has his pony tail.

On the last day of their sojourn in Crested Butte, Ritchey, Fisher and Kelly stand next to each other for a photograph so that a single frame can preserve their collective contribution. The photographer calls, "Get a little closer together." A soft, luminescent light drapes over the mountain, and a steady mist-like rain swirls around the three. "You're asking a lot," intones one soft voice. And then as the photographer curses and bends over to change his film, a hand goes out, and then another and finally the last. They stand there staring at each other and gripping each others' flesh, remembering what it was like, for one of life's short pauses, to have been comrades and to have shared each others' dreams. ■