

COLUMN: Fat Tires Grow Up

By John Francis

• WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT, there's no denying that the mountain bike is the most remarkable innovation in cycling in many decades. Consider its numbers: in four years, the number of mountain bikes on the road has grown from 15,000 to 500,000, a phenomenal rate of growth. Consider its fans: what other bike appeals to both road racers and BMXers—and to their parents? Consider its origins: the mountain bike was not the shrewd calculation of a marketing meeting or a design studio; it was the unlikely toy of an unlikely group of renegades, outsiders, day dreamers, pipe dreamers and marchers to different drums. The guys in the marketing meeting would have dismissed them all as crazy, as weirdos going nowhere.

And consider how fast it has all happened. Today, besides those half-million mountain bike riders, there is professional racing, corporate sponsorship, national organization and U. S. Cycling Federation affiliation. Less than a decade ago, there was nothing but rusting cruiser bikes waiting to be discovered.

It's a remarkable story, all right, whether you like mountain bikes or not—and some people don't. Entwined with the mountain bike story is the recurring theme of civil war, brothers against each other. There are road riders, for instance, with a passionate dislike of mountain bikes, and mountain bikers who return the gesture with equal passion. Yet both ride the same wheels, and both need allies against the same indifferent world.

Stranger still, mountain bike riders, many of them with "counterculture" roots showing, are being attacked by their old allies in the environmental movement. The Sierra Club is leading the effort to ban mountain bikes from public lands, to the dismay of the many passionate advocates of mountain bikes who have also been Sierra Club members for years.

The Sierra Club claims the mountain bike destroys trails, but there is little or no evidence of that. Glenn Odell, executive director of the National Off-Road Bicycle Association (NORBA), disposes of their argument quickly: "As long as horses are permitted (off road), you can't base a bicycle prohibition on physical impact." You can't permit 1000-pound horses to use the trails and complain about 200-pound cyclists.



It turns out once again that the real source of the controversy is emotional, not logical. Some hikers see mountain bike riders as outsiders trespassing on "their" trails. Others fear the mountain bike will be the camel's nose under the tent, drawing in motorcycles and jeeps after it. The irony, again, is that even the Sierra Club needs allies. Mountain bike riders are by and large nature lovers, and would rather join the cause than fight it.

Meanwhile, the fight goes on. It has serious implications because Federal land use policies, say for National Parks and Wilderness Areas, tend to be copied on the state and local level. A decision made today over a far-away Wilderness Area may show up tomorrow in your neighborhood park. Odell is fighting hard for truth, justice, and the American Way, but needs your help. For information, contact him at NORBA, 2175 Holly Lane, Solvang, CA 93463; (805) 688-2325.

Still another conflict is centered around the mountain bike. This one, too, probably has more to do with emotion than logic. Janet Tamaro went to the off-road world's annual camp meeting, Fat Tire Week at Crested Butte, Colorado, and brought back the story of how some of the mountain bike's Founding Fathers came together and then came apart. It's here in this issue.

Also in this issue are road tests of three history-making mountain bikes in their 1986 forms: the Fisher Montare, the Specialized Stumpjumper and the Ritchey Ascent. Plus some off-road adventure, as Charlie Kelly goes north toward the Arctic Circle and Jacquie Phelan goes east to Wales. And there's Owen Mulholland's report on the NORBA National Championship. Maybe it's a lot of fuss about the mountain bike, but such a rambunctious youngster is hard to ignore. ■