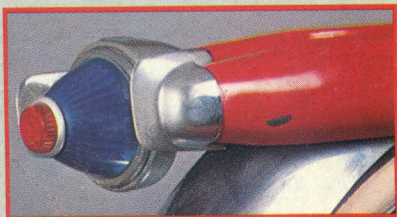


Concours d'Elegance:

1956 J.C. Higgins—A Trip Down Memory Lane

By Leon Dixon

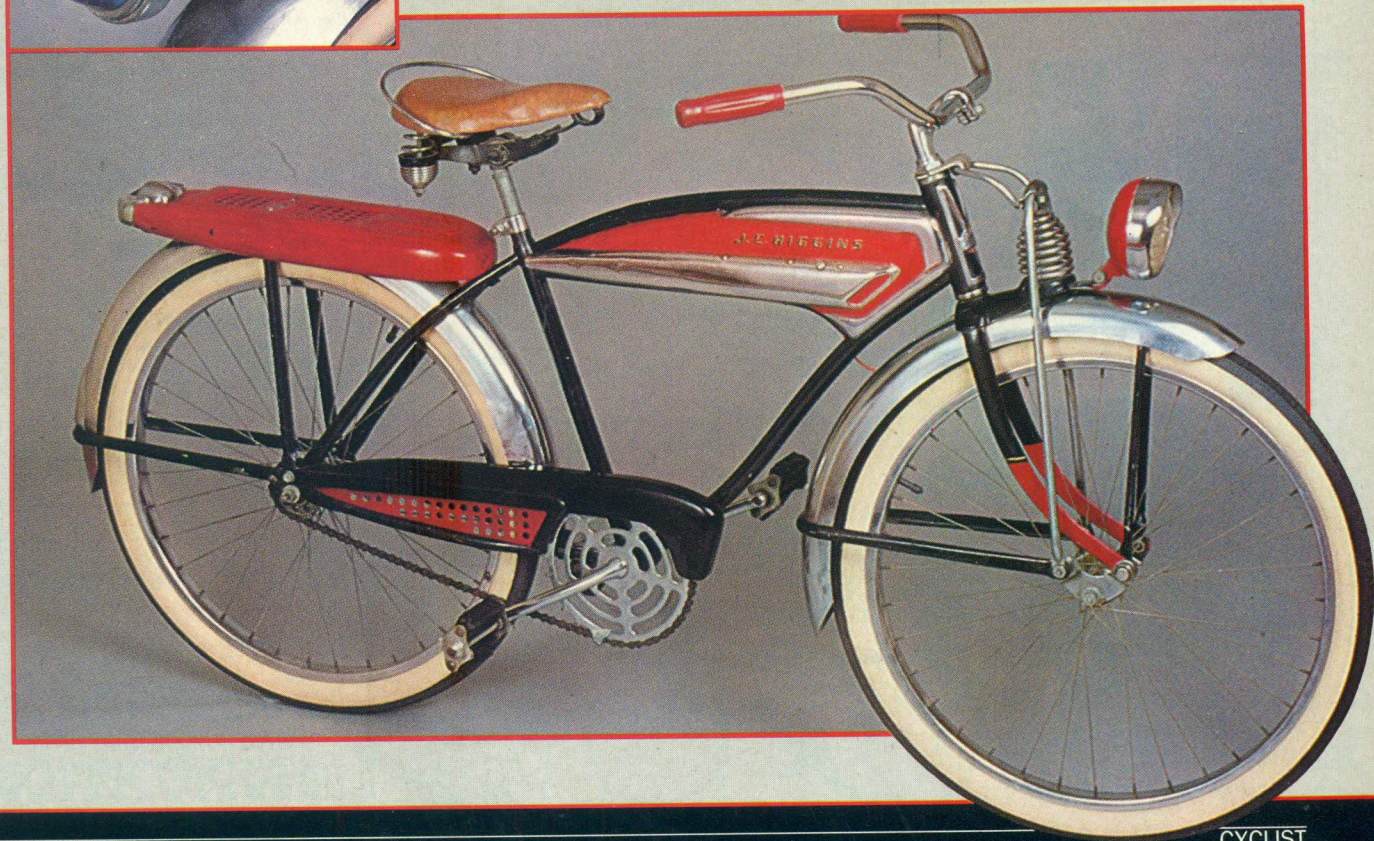


I remember dragging it home in pieces—a frame, fork, front wheel and little more. The sun was already low in the summer sky and I was exhausted from the ordeal of the last few hours. As my dad opened the front door,

I stood there with crocodile tears blurring my vision. "They stole my bike," I whimpered. Some young thuglets who had begun invading the local park stole and stripped my bicycle as I played baseball. I eventually found it laying in the street several blocks away, looking like the skeleton of a dead animal.

Dad was unsympathetic. He'd warned me a zillion times, "Don't take the bike to the park! Don't leave the bike unlocked!" But kids will be kids and I was no different: I had ignored both warnings. The loss was especially painful because I had waited years to get my beautiful bicycle and now I was back to square one. The price of my carelessness would be no help from dad in putting it back together. I was on my own to get my poor raped J.C. Higgins back to life. So for months the parts lay in a sad heap on our front porch.

Okay. So you're wondering about this Higgins guy who made the neat bikes. Well, it wasn't a *person* who made the bicycle. Nope, it wasn't even a single company. J.C. Higgins was simply a brand name from none other than Sears Roebuck & Company (er, you've heard of *them*). Sears had used the Higgins name on a line of sporting goods since at least the early 1900s, but by the end of World War II the name use was expanded. The giant retailer decided to retire the famous old Elgin brand bicycle and so the J.C. Higgins was born.



Contrary to popular belief, J.C. Higgins bicycles were made by a cornucopia of different companies who manufactured Sears' own designs according to Sears specifications. From Austria to Ohio, J.C. Higgins bicycles rolled out of the assembly plants to dazzle youngsters everywhere. But we digress. It was my assembly that was of concern then.

Finally, it was together again, and with Dad's permission my shakedown cruise would be to a place nearly 65 miles from my front door. No one could dream of a prettier spot. Imagine nearly flat, but gently rolling fields of golden wheat and green corn. Envision a red brick European-like cathedral rising out of these fields and tenderly dominating the countryside. Now imagine a crystal-clear river, happily gurgling its way past the stained glass facade and disappearing into the fields.

Top this all off with narrow, black-oiled roads intersecting and then crossing the river over a bleached-white humpback bridge. *That*, my friends, was my destination . . . my uncle's farm in Canada, believe it or not.

Now I know it might raise eyebrows today, but touring trips on my "heavy"

mono-g geared machine were nothing unusual back then. Today, some might call it punishment, but then it was fun.

So throughout the summer of 1959, my cousins and I rode our bicycles on endless safaris down dusty backroads and picturesque two-lane blacktops. Through it all, my resurrected companion rolled on without a hitch. No elaborate gearing, no special shoes or gloves, no computer, no ultra-light alloys—not even a macrobiotic diet (aside from a few freshly picked apples). These things never even occurred to us as kids. By summer's end I had racked up nearly 300 miles on my little Cadet speedometer and I never even got a chance to use my wrench or screwdriver! The only really difficult part of it all was saying goodbye and going back home.

And so it went. The J.C. Higgins continued as a faithful companion until a Ford convertible and a stint in Viet Nam relegated the poor bicycle to the back of the garage. But we had been through too much together, that bicycle and me. So by 1968 my prized Higgins and I were rolling once again.

This time the bicycle underwent a full restoration back to original parts

and appearance. You see, I was determined that the J.C. Higgins would survive even another theft. Never again would it be without parts. I bought everything. J.C. Higgins this. J.C. Higgins that. Before long, there were enough parts to build my bike three or four brethren. Only in looking back did I discover that the theft of my bicycle had started what became a giant collection of two-wheeled wonders. The J.C. Higgins sits happily holding court among them all now.

What about the river, you ask? It wasn't as lucky as my bicycle. On my last visit, the river was choked with reeds and cat tails (among other things). The general store is long gone as is the one-room school house. The farm? Subdivided years ago for suburbia. Things, as they say, have changed.

Sure, I wouldn't dare go skinny-dipping in the murky liquid in that spot now. But then, I guess I'd have to admit a reluctance to jockey 300 miles on a bicycle without multiple gears. Still, I just can't help feeling a little wanderlust and a tad of nostalgia whenever I look at the Higgins. One touch of the electric horn, one glance at the flashing red and chrome, and it's daydream time. *That*, my friends, has not changed. Like I said, my bicycle and I have been through a lot together. ■

Leon Dixon is an authority on bicycles of the "Classic" era, 1920 to 1965. His personal collection includes more than 1000 bicycles. Dixon publishes "Classic Bicycle And Whizzer News," P. O. Box 765, Huntington Beach, CA 92648.

SPECIFICATIONS:

- Model:** 1956 J.C. Higgins "Deluxe"
- Manufacturer:** Sears Roebuck & Co. (This particular model was made by Murray-Ohio Company for Sears.)
- Price:** About \$65. (Price varied according to area of country.)
- Frame:** Special J.C. Higgins, hydrogen brazed. (Sizes were not measured on frame, but on wheels. This frame was only available in 26-inch size.)
- Rims:** Murray-Ohio flat syle, 26-inch chrome-plated steel.
- Drive:** Special J.C. Higgins ribbed coaster brake with Musselman internals. One-inch-pitch chain and sprockets.
- Saddle:** Troxel deluxe with "Koroseal" covering.
- Tires:** Special Sears "Allstate" with "zig-zag" tread, 26 x 2.125 whitewalls.
- Weight:** 70 lbs.
- Finish:** Black frame & forks with red trim. Gold decals & pin-stripe on fork. Bright parts chrome plated.

Author's note: Not all J.C. Higgins were made by Murray-Ohio and not all were deluxe spring fork bicycles. Designs varied from year to year and sometimes changed during the same year. Several models were made each year in varying styles and prices. Catalogues cannot always be consulted for historical purposes since illustrations sometimes differed from the actual bicycles as sold. Also it should be noted that designs could vary from one area of the country to another during the same period. The bicycle pictured here is one of a series which was made with certain trim changes for several years during the 1950s.

You used to get a lot of bike for your money. Like a Koroseal-covered saddle, a Musselman coaster brake, a deluxe spring fork and Allstate whitewalls, all for less than a dollar a pound.

