

A History of Mountain Bikes in Fairfax

by J. Phelan

It happens all the time: the last person to know about a well-publicized high school crush is the loved one. While everyone else is swapping reports of the latest developments, the innocent recipient of all the attention is just beginning to find out what's going on.

Fairfax has been the unwitting object of a decade-long love affair without so much as an inkling of its own popularity. People in Japan, England, Wales, and Canada brighten visibly when they hear the name "Fairfax". The town theater, with its distinctive art-deco neon sign and muralled side wall, has become a highly identifiable landmark to outsiders. Why is this place the envy of every off-road cyclist in the world? How is it that the town doesn't know?

The answer lies in the fact that sleepy little Fairfax, with its municipal teapot tempests and its daily backyard dramas, is too busy to notice. As the gateway to some of the most beautiful countryside in the world, and the unofficial birthplace of the off-road bicycle, Fairfax has become something of a clunker capital, and yet the town politicians and businesses are perennially casting around for ways to attract commerce and tourism.

While Fairfax wasn't looking, it has become to off-road cyclists what Eugene, Oregon is to runners. Top off-road racers have chosen to move here because of the "user friendly" terrain, and the high level of ecological awareness and appreciation of Marin County in general. No jeeps will ever spoil the integrity of the network of fire roads, and runners and horseback riders are learning to peacefully co-exist with the cyclists as yet another fitness boom reverberates across the country.

It all began here in the mid-seventies when a couple of underemployed rock and roll band roadies started riding old junkyard bikes around for cheap transportation. Fairfax residents Gary Fisher, now a successful mass-producer of off-road bikes, and Charlie Kelly, a journalist and publisher of the definitive clunker almanac, the Fat Tire Flyer, combined talents as mechanic and publicist and began producing some of the earliest hand-built machines that would later become the harbingers of an entire new segment of the bicyclist market. Nowadays sales of Japan's mass-produced bikes are in the millions of dollars; but back then, according to Fisher, "there was an eight-month waiting list for one of our bikes... and they weren't cheap. \$1,300 back in the late seventies was a lot of money. Tom Ritchey was the artisan, C.K. (Charlie Kelly) was the PR man, and I was the one who ordered components and assembled the bikes."

For the first few years of the infant business (called simply "MountainBikes"), they worked out of their shared rental house, with one room entirely given over to the chaos of bicycle rims, fat tires, motorcycle brake levers and an imposing pile of paperwork.

In those days they would visit the trade shows and parade the new species of bike around the showroom, unable to afford a booth. Before too long, it got copied and produced in Japan. "It was once considered a novelty bike, definitely in the 'none of the above' category. Now there isn't a company that doesn't produce at least a cified version of the mountain bike," one industry official told me.

Meanwhile, back in Fairfax, an informal brotherhood of riders was beginning to convene for races (I use the term loosely, because occasionally only the race organizer knew the route). The lucky winners would get one of local artist Wende Cragg's elaborately embroidered velvet ribbons. I can still remember one emblazoned with "first dog": Ariel, a German Shorthair with a real sense of humor, would race her owner—and even sometimes ride with him, standing on the pedals, and clinging to his arms. Results were always a hastily-pencilled list of names (first only—everybody knew who "Fred" and "Bob" were) followed by an elapsed time (accurate to the nearest 5 seconds).

"Repack" was the route of choice. For one thing, you couldn't get lost on it: it is a steep two-mile-snake of a road connecting the Pirie Mtn. Truck Road to the Cascades. One feature of the primitive junkyard bikes (the five-dollar affairs that were ridden until they broke, re-welded, and ridden again) was that the coaster-brakes would heat up from such constant use that they would

fry the grease within, and need...repacking. Because it was a small downhill run, it was easy to time and became the thing to do. There was always the hope of improving your time, and getting it down to four-plus minutes to join the immortals like Joe Breeze, Alan Bond, and Gary Fisher. Naturally the price of such glory was high: it took several unsuccessful runs where the hapless (but undaunted) rider would "inspect the bushes" (that's where you do a brief, painful "geological survey," using your face as the principal scraping tool). All in the name of shaving a couple of seconds off the previous try! Alas, the powers that be decreed that this was no way to have fun at Marin's expense, should some twit ever decide to sue the county for his own lack of judgement or concentration on the treacherous, twisting devil of a course. Perhaps that will change as people begin taking responsibility for their own behavior: until that time, no races on Repack (or, for that matter, anywhere in the Water District).

Another classic doomed to myth-hood was the Zero-Notch race, covering a route where one unlucky fellow named Zero chanced to crash into rock and permanently score it with a little groove which ever since bore his name.

But the longest-lived event has not been a race at all, only a warm-up to a race. The Thanksgiving Day Appetite Seminar was originally intended to give its participants the necessary advantage (lent by gnawing starvation) needed to do the most damage to the family turkey.

The first year, eight guys showed up. The next year, ten. Now, almost ten years later, it could be 150, or it could be ten again, if it's pouring rain. Once it was the sole property of the Fairfax muddly hipsters, now it has become nationally known as an epic ride—worth killing yourself to attend. People will show up from Denver,

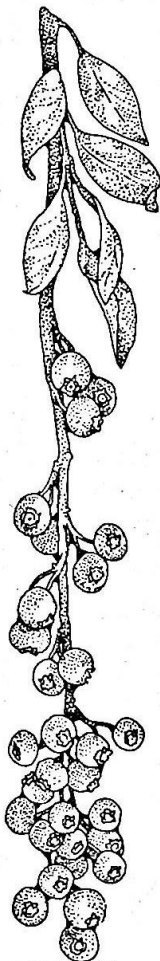
Boston, and Los Angeles just to say they participated.

For many (like myself), it is an induction rite, an initiation to the world of off-road. My own "first time" was five years ago when a friend urged me to pedal over with him from San Francisco. As we approached Mill Valley, I was convinced every cyclist we saw was a "seminarian" (later I would discover that everyone drives to the Fairfax Theater). I endured the scrutiny of a hundred eyes on my legs, my helmet, and especially my bike, a girl's Raleigh five speed (with basket). Later I would find out there were only two other women on the ride. Clunking is not, and may never be, a sport that appeals to women on any significant scale... unless girls are raised to think it's OK to get a little muddy once in a while. Even now, after three years of sanctioned racing, there are only about ten women who will dare to try it.

Despite the fact that it is clearly a sport for men, I chose to make it mine, too. I began racing in '81 and moved to Fairfax to train. A kid named Joe Murray put away his road bike around that time and began training exclusively in the dirt. He, too, moved to Fairfax, where the ideal roads and trails converge.

In 1983, Joe Breeze, the 32-year old off-road bicycle builder and inventor, and Charlie Kelly decided to pull together everyone they knew to create a unified voice to speak for the majority of ecologically aware and environmentally sensitive riders. The result of many months' meetings became NORBA, the National Off-Road Bicycle Association.

In the past three years NORBA has gone from a roomful of Marinites to many thousands of active riders across the country. But Fairfax, with its two national champions (Joe Murray and myself), its custom framebuilders (Charlie Cunningham and Otis Guy) and its hundreds of recreational riders will always be an off-road Mecca in an asphalt world.



WALT DISNEY HOME VIDEO

Making your dreams come true

21 ALL-TIME DISNEY BEST-SELLERS FOR ONLY \$29.95* EACH!

IT'S YOUR BIGGEST DISNEY PROMOTION EVER!



Robin Hood

PETE'S DRAGON

TRON

THE OVER THE HILL

BLACK HOLE



Pollyanna

A New Disney Christmas

Mary Poppins

OLD YELLER

VHS hi-fi STEREO

Beta hi-fi STEREO

BROADWAY VIDEO 23 Broadway, Fairfax

Open 7 days: Mon - Sat 11am - 9pm, Sun 12 - 8pm

456-1187