

VICTOR VINCENTE OF AMERICA

A mountain-bike pioneer, blazing trails ahead of his time.

by Jeffrey Hansen

Victor Vincente of America was locked up in a pack of riders barreling down a nine-mile grade below Mount Wilson, north of Los Angeles.

Rooster tails of dirt flew off the mountain bikes' rear tires, giving the distinct impression the cyclists were racing.

Unfortunately, that was not what they were supposed to be doing. Vincente, known as VVA, had organized the ride and promised the forest rangers the event would not be a race but a friendly, orderly affair, held in harmony with nature.

Somewhere up ahead, two riders were banging handlebars for the lead as they charged past two rangers on horseback. What really captured the ranger's attention, however, was the next rider, who overrode a corner and slid underneath one of the horses.

When VVA rolled up, the rangers had stopped everybody. So, guess who got the blame?

"They definitely did not want us to race there," Vincente said. "So, I didn't even try to



Gary Johnson

hold the event there the following year."

A short time afterward, Vincente was riding with two friends on Catalina Island, when he collapsed from heat prostration—and having eaten very little.

One of the riders went for help. He brought back a member of the Catalina Conservancy, who helped revive Vincente. Right after that, the Conservancy decided to ban mountain bikes because they were obviously life-threatening.

"It was because of me," Vincente said.

Now, this is the truth, so help him. But variations of these stories, have blown them, as well as his other exploits, out of proportion.

For instance, some people tag Vincente as the rider who nearly collided with the rangers. Or some say he was in much worse shape on Catalina than he was.

"Yes, well, I think sometimes it happens that people exaggerate when they talk about me," Vincente said. "And sometimes I have the impression that people think I'm crazier than I am.

"But when I sit down and look at myself, I don't see myself as that unusual or weird. I suppose that's because of my varied interests."

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This is the story of VVA's life. He is a man who always seems to be out of sync with the times he lives in.

In the late 1950s, Vincente was known as Michael Hiltner, a teen-age road racing phenomenon out in Southern California who was winning more trophies than his mother had room for at their Santa Monica home.

By 1965, Hiltner was the USCF's first officially recognized national road racing champion.

In addition, Hiltner had already competed on both the 1960 Rome and 1964 Tokyo Olympic teams...and then he dropped out of sight.

As it developed, a Brazilian lady turned his head. They married and lived in South America for some time. When he re-emerged in the USA—with a new wife, artist Helga Vanden Berg—Hiltner decided to re-establish himself in cycling.

The event he selected in 1975 was the double transcontinental record, Santa Monica to Atlantic City.

What better way to gain publicity, he thought, than by adopting a new name, one that epitomized winning and superhuman effort?

"I was intent on succeeding at that and being victorious," Vincente said, "and that name (Victor Vincente of America) just burned into my brain," he said, "largely as a title of success, of being a victor.

"This concept has been with me for awhile. A victor, a creative victor, does what he wants to do and succeeds at that. And a certain event always selects its own champion. And that's what he sets out to do.

"And I've certainly won my share of races, but in my later years, I said, 'I want to do my own creating.'"

Unfortunately for Vincente, his round-trip record of 36 days and 8 hours was set in the early days of cycling. At the finish, only five people welcomed him.

The achievement was good enough for a couple of lines next to the obituaries in his community newspaper, the "Santa Monica Evening Outlook."

The record stood until 1981 when Lon Haldeman shattered it by pedaling the same distance in 24 days, 2 hours, 34 minutes. Haldeman arrived to cheers, clamorous media coverage, lucrative offers from sponsors and his face plastered on posters all over America.

Vincente shakes his head, recalling the contrast:

"I just couldn't believe it."

Worse, the name change did not sit very well with his mother. It took her more than a year to stop calling him Michael.

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These days, as 44-year-old VVA lounges on a cushion sofa set up on the floor of his Reseda, Calif., home, he looks a bit like a free spirit, a carry-over from the era of flower children and anti-war marches.

His salt-and-pepper hair is thinning and he's shaved recently—about a week ago—and is dressed in cotton, a surgery-green smock and pink pants.

Surrealistic paintings finished in vivid colors by his Belgian wife create a dream-like interior landscape.

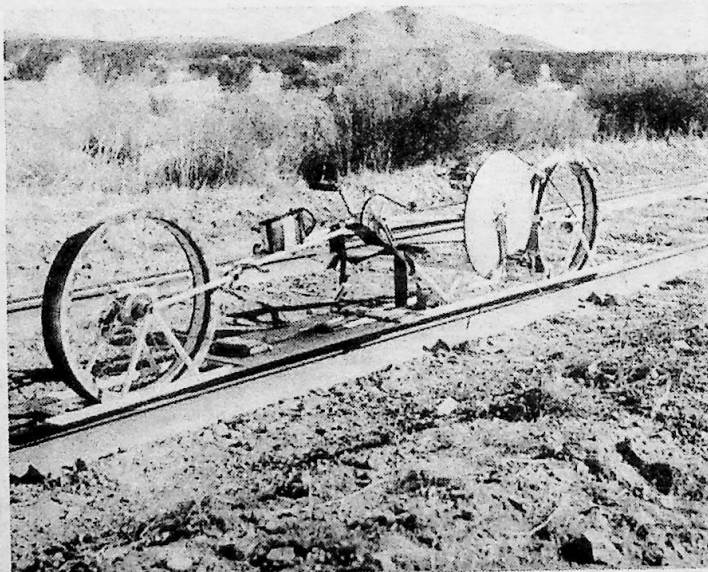
What looks like a giant sea dragon, but is actually a concoction of cow vertebrae, hangs from the ceiling overhead.

An aquarium is on his right and the opposing walls are lined with bookshelves made from concrete blocks and boards.

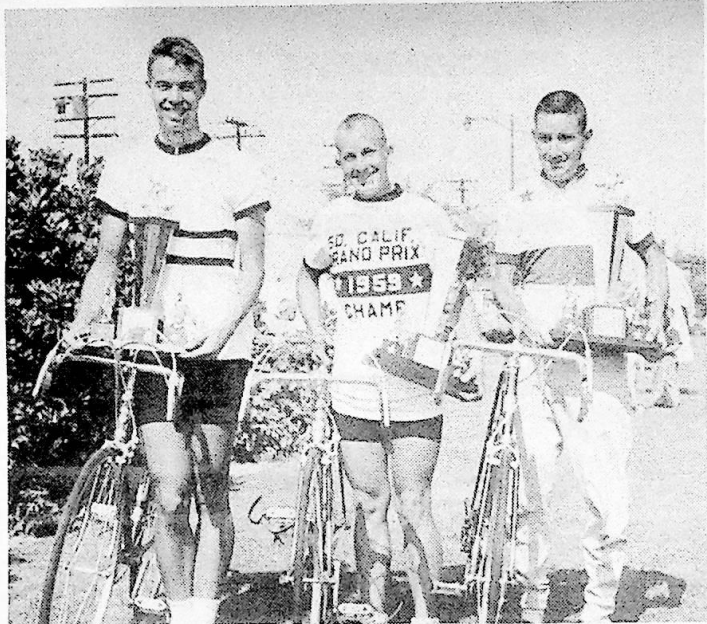
Odd bits of stone, dried plants, a stuffed squirrel, hawk talons and fossils are displayed atop the shelves. None of this seems to be noticed by the family cat, Senecio, who is named after a surrealist painting by the late Paul Klee.

To Senecio, who curls around your ankles like black velvet in a pet-me-or-I'll-trip-you manner, the surroundings are quite normal.

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VVA's Tachy Taxi Two once rode the rails in the Mojave Desert.



Always ahead of his time, road racer Michael Hiltner (middle) sported a mohawk in 1959, more than two decades before Mr. T popularized the current fashion.

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As, indeed, these appointments are to Vincente. In a larger sense, however, items placed around the room tell a story of frustration about a man whose ideas are intriguing but always arrive years too early for commercial success.

Vincente is what aerospace workers in Southern California call a "job shopper," a specialist who subcontracts work at a high rate to perform the really difficult jobs.

When VVA isn't drafting for aerospace firms, he draws logos and design concepts for businesses.

All the same, however, Vincente prefers working on a project of his own, each of which illustrates his affection for mountain bikes and the forward-thinking view he possesses.

For example, with his friend, Chuck Walters, Vincente promotes about six mountain bike events each year from spring through autumn. He gets the word out through his "Topanga Riders' Bulletin."

More than 100 riders showed up for his sixth annual Reseda-to-the-Sea, held in March.

The California Hill Climb and Downhill, held in Puerco Canyon above Malibu, is another of Vincente's annual events.

But if Vincente had his druthers, then he'd do nothing else but make mountain-bike

frames at around \$500 a pop. He has already constructed 25 of them, each tailored to the rider's skill and style of riding.

Each is a chrome-moly, thin-wall tubing delight that has been heli-arc'd for maximum strength and to reduce crystallization of the metal surrounding the welds.

Now, some people assert that Vincente claims he has invented mountain bikes. Vincente more correctly says he developed the concept of mountain bikes simultaneously with those who pioneered the sport in Northern California's Marin County.

Trouble was, who could sell a mountain bike in 1975? The sport was in its infancy, and Vincente saw no immediate market for the concept, except for die-hards who bought one at a time, adapting bicycle motocross components such as tires.

Vincente has developed a knack for making beer, which is a social gesture far more seductive than offering a writer a strip of owljerky, which he once did. And, he was probably lucky the writer's stomach didn't erupt in open revolt. Vincente, you see, told the writer what it was after she'd swallowed.

Vincente's beer, however, is one thing that combines many of his talents, for he has tried 18 different brew variations, complete with his own artwork on the labels. Now, he's devel-

oped a knack for it and feels confident his acquired knowledge is sufficient to design a specific brew from scratch.

If there is a common denominator that runs through all of Vincente's pursuits, then it can be condensed into one word: design.

You can appreciate the machinations of his mind when you look at a one-piece cycling garment, a combination of a suspender-like top and shorts. The unique aspect is the anglet joining the legs to the top, a style now popular, but the original, faded and well worn, Vincente designed years ago.

This bent toward design is also apparent in the electronic jewelry Vincente made in 1978 before disco dancing had reached a peak. Most are one-piece units that clasp around the neck in a style reminiscent of the Egyptians.

A pendant with microscopic lights (powered by a rechargeable battery) is fairly typical. He designed and fabricated the circuit board inside which operates the unit. The lights are arranged in the figure-8 infinity symbol and blink sequentially in reds and yellows.

Said Vincente, "This one really fascinates me."

Someone seeing the jewelry for the first time shares that response and wonders aloud why such necklaces never became the rage among the disco crowd.

"It just happened too soon," Vincente says. "Besides, they cost \$350."

Other things seem to combine the crazy with the conventional. For instance, Vincente has self-published a book of his poetry and drawings called "1991."

On the cover of the volume is a photo of a person wearing an antiradiation suit which he once designed, tried to market but did not sell.

Inside are some drawings, some of which have appeared on T-shirts he's designed and sold. Some are neat, clean drawings of cyclists. One is a sharp reminder of the Jonestown mass suicide, a pitcher of Kool-Aid with a frown.

Still another drawing is of a streamlined bicycle called Tachy Taxi Two. This harkens back to a vehicle that Vincente designed to run on railroad tracks. He built the vehicle and found a suitable stretch of track in the Mojave Desert.

A photographer taking head-on pictures through a telephoto lens underestimated the velocity of the vehicle rapidly closing the distance to his camera.

Consequently, he failed to jump clear as Vincente approached. The resulting collision left both men badly shaken up and limping away with cuts and bruises.

Aside from satisfaction and money, Vincente looks at his ideas as something that might make their mark on the world, leave a lasting impression for all to remember.

"It's really a trick to be on the leading edge," Vincente said. "I've put a lot of effort into my creations, things that just haven't made it for one reason or another."

That's an elusive finish line, to be sure, but you'll have to pedal awfully fast if you ever want to catch him. Vincente is riding miles ahead of the pack.

An excerpt from

1991: A Dirt Road Rider's Trek Epic

By Victor Vincente of America



A few years ago, before the Disasters, you could take the freeway from L.A. into Ventura or Santa Barbara; but that won't be possible for some time, not with the half-life of Strontium 90 at seventy-eight years!

So, now it's up into the Zelzah Street Maintenance Road, through the one-look-and-you-know-it's-too-steep-to-ride stretch to the dead-end, take the 200-meter hikeable link to the upper road system, on to the Sunshine Mountainway along the ridge, to enjoy the patches of shade, call back to the friendly cattle along the dusty roadside, and gaze upon the smooth watery surface of the pools down the hillside.

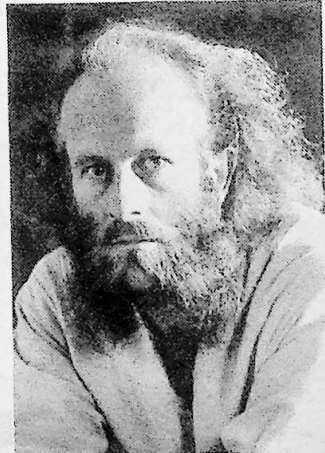
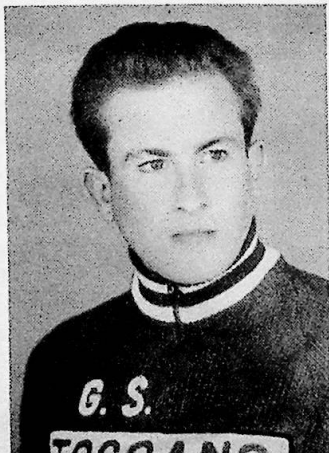
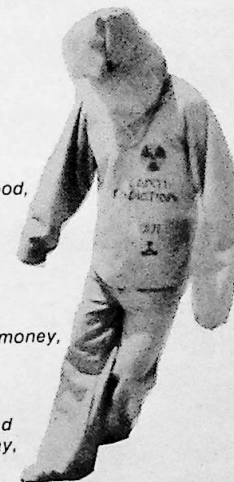
Even in the blazing oven summer heat it's worth it to wait

for the shaded breeze under the palms after jumping right in with the bullfrogs in the oak and wildflower oasis pool at the County Line community.

But first, a short stop at Long Low Cave to drop off two more bottles of home brew. The ale is stashed way in the back with the food, and the smokes are up in the sitting room. All will keep, and be welcome another day.

So, it's back on the bike, doing that easy descent past 'The Lump' and then by Big Thumb Rock, and before you know it, LaVen, to exchange L.A. County dollars for Ventura money, and guzzle one of their iced home brews in the shaded breeze under the palms.

A few miles further down the road, taking the turnoff down the steep canyon road that touches close to the creeks along the way, heading for Pirú, the good fortune of finding a bluejay's feather during the rest stop in the olive grove. Better yet the fortune of locating three more a short distance down by the bubbling, splashing stream: the cool refreshing water that makes this oasis a perfect place for reflecting on the peace that is in the world... four bluejay feathers for the loved one's headband.



Michael Hiltner (left), 60s road-racing phenomenon, transformed into Victor Vincente of America, a free-spirited designer, writer and mountain-bike racer.