

## The Gossip According to Charles Kelly

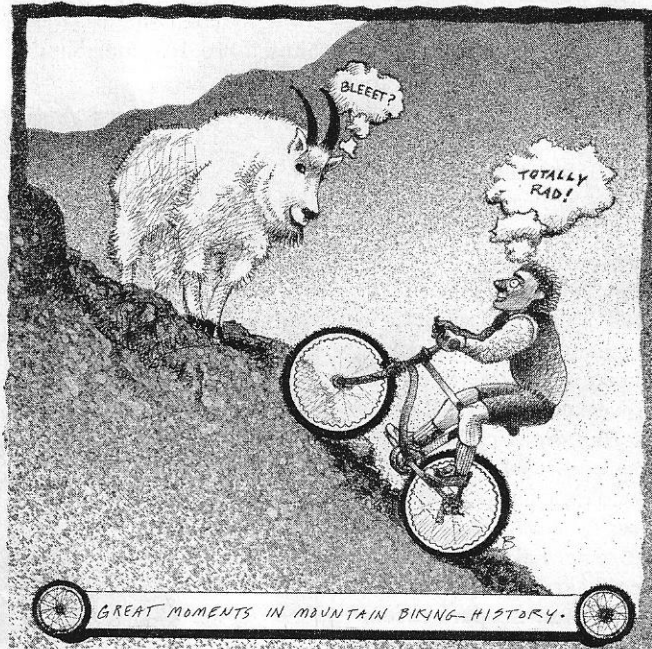
There was a time, not too long ago, when mountain bikes were far from common. In fact, they had just been invented, and Charles Kelly was there to help make them happen. *By Scott S. Warren*

**F**our years before I found out how much Charles Kelly knows about mountain bikes, my friend Vic Stallone came to visit me in Utah from California's Bay Area. This was in 1981. He was ranting about his newest toy, a Ritchey Mountain Bike. Mountain bikes, I thought at the time, were just another West Coast craze. I smiled pleasantly as Vic recounted rides through the hills of Marin county, all the while humming a few bars of "Hotel California" to myself.

A few years later, mountain bikes caught up with me (or I caught up with them) in my present home state of Colorado. Riders were getting serious about them, and the bikes and riders were getting some play in magazines and newspapers. In 1985, I drove to Crested Butte to photograph the last day of races at the town's now-famous Fat Tire Bike Week. The weather was miserable; a cold rain fell most of the day and the light was terrible for photography. About the only good thing to come from this damp excursion was a brief encounter with Charles Kelly.

I recognized his name, of course, as that of a widely published bicycle writer. I knew, too, that he played a seminal role in the birth of the all-purpose machines scrambling for traction that day on the wet Colorado hills. Since I harbor an unquenchable inclination to make the world smaller than it really is, I took my chances and asked if he knew Vic. He thought for a moment and then said, "Yeah, I know Vic Stallone. I sold him his Ritchey."

It turns out that Kelly sold quite a number of people their first mountain bikes,



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and there was a time—not too long ago, either—when he knew, or knew of, virtually everyone on the mountain bike scene. Although Charlie Kelly has a lot to say about the beginnings of fat-tire cycling, he is quick to humble himself and the role he played in the movement. "I am not sure," he begins, "whether I or Gary Fisher or Joe Breeze or Tom Ritchey were anybody but the people in the right place at the right time. Mountain bikes were going to happen one way or another."

The place, of course, was Marin County, California, in the hills across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. The time was the mid-1970s. Charlie and Gary Fisher were roommates. They were both hardcore road riders. They even had identical Colnagos. On a whim, Gary bought a pile of old bikes and parts from a shop in Oakland that was going out of business. From this pile, they built up a couple of one-speed, around-town bikes

for running errands. One day, an old school chum of Charlie's, Fred Wolf, saw the bikes Charlie and Gary had built. "Fred and I had gone riding on Mt. Tamalpais on our three-speeds in the sixth grade," Charlie remembers. "Okay, now we're adults and Fred says, 'Hey, man, let's go bombing on the trails.'"

"The first ride we took, we had two bikes and three guys. One would run along and two would ride the bikes. We were just out experimenting," Kelly broke his seatpost that day and was so disgusted that he wanted to dump the bike off a cliff. Instead, he let Fred ride it back with no seat.

That was Charlie, Gary, and Fred Wolf's first ride in the backcountry as adults, but they were by no means the first grown-ups to do so. Charlie remembers the 1974 State Cyclocross Championship held in Marin. Two riders showed up on cantilever Schwinn frames with drum brakes and multiple-speed gearing. "Those guys were way ahead of us," Charlie quips. "I don't know where they went or who they were, but we saw that stuff and went 'Wowww!'" Realizing that inertia often plays a decisive role in history, Charlie points out, "They could have been the ones, but they didn't follow up on it; I never heard from that squad again."

Another group on the cutting edge of all-terrain cycling hailed from Larkspur, a town a few miles north of Charlie and Gary's home in Fairfax. They were into trucking their bikes to the top of the mountain for a fast coast down. "They, too, were ahead of us at that point, as far as bike technology is concerned. They had clunkers with front brakes. They

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knew what all the cool brakes were," Charlie explains. For jetting down hills, front brakes were a necessity. Coaster brakes weren't really made for stopping 250 pounds of bike and rider and the binders started smoking on really steep descents. For Charlie and his crew, adding front brakes was the first modification they made on their off-road bikes.

Another modification was the addition of front fork braces running from the dropouts to the top of the head tube. Although he is still not sure how functional they really were, Charlie does remember that the cool factor was high. When scrounging for parts, they had to look for girls' bikes because the forks on boys' models were already trashed. "We'd take the forks and throw the frame away."

Inspired by the advances others had made, Charlie and Gary began improving their own bikes further. One particularly productive visit to a flea market by Gary scored a tandem with a rear drum brake. "The drum must have weighed ten pounds," Charlie recalls, "but it allowed Gary to add a five-speed hub to his cruiser. When he smoked us so bad on a ride, we all went on a rear drum rampage. All of a sudden there was a demand for a dozen drums a week in Marin County. Suppliers must have been wondering, 'What's going on out there?'"

For convenience, they modified stem shifters and mounted them on the bars next to the grip, and motorcycle brake levers began popping up. Shortly after, Gary found some thumbshifters on a cheap five-speed and substituted them for the stem levers. Gary also came up with the idea for the quick-release on the seatpost, but back then the posts were always bending and sticking in one position.

After some months of this, Gary and Charlie found themselves in the business of modifying old bikes. Despite the fact that their finished products went mostly to friends and associates, conversions still cost between \$300 and \$400. Parts never bolted right on. They had to be filed, rethreaded, bent to fit.

Of their custom off-road machines, Charlie says, "There evolved a classic Marin County Clunker." It consisted of an old Schwinn Excelsior frame (mid-1930s was the preferred model) with drum brakes and wide BMX bars carrying thumbshifters and motorcycle brake levers. "So unique were these bikes," he recalls, "that when I saw a guy riding around on one in Golden Gate Park it really bugged me. It was so out of place in

San Francisco that I knew it had to be a Marin bike. It had to be hot. After a half-hour, it finally came to me whose it was because I had worked on it. I ended up getting it back."

Undoubtedly, the most revolutionary improvement came in 1976. The old Schwinn frames were great for all-terrain cycling, with one exception: The complete bikes weighed over 50 pounds, a drawback that no gear ratio could hide during steep climbs. To remedy this, Charlie commissioned a framebuilder, Craig Mitchell, to duplicate the Excelsior's geometry in chrome-moly. What was the first-ever custom mountain bike was not without problems, so Charlie approached another Bay Area builder, Joe Breeze, with the task of building another with some modifications.

Taking almost a year to do the job, Joe Breeze finally came up with ten off-road frames, one of which Charlie bought. Upon seeing it, Fisher decided that he too wanted one, but didn't want to wait another 12 months for it. Gary approached Tom Ritchey. Ritchey built three to start off with. A month later he called Gary and Charlie and asked if they would help him "get rid of" nine more frames he had built. "Ritchey is a prolific builder," Charlie deadpans.

Rearing their capitalistic heads, Charlie and Gary put together a few hundred dollars, opened a bank account and started a company. Tom would build the frames and Gary and Charlie would find the parts and assemble the bikes. "It took an act of faith to get a bike from us because we didn't have the money to go out and buy a bunch of components," Charlie recalls. "You had to give us all the money, then we went out and got the parts. Then we built up the bike and a few weeks later we gave it to you." Charlie attributes the fledgling company's corporate growth to Ritchey's efforts. "The real capitalization came from the fact that Tom took cheap stuff—tubing—and turned it into expensive stuff: frames."

One of the first bikes made was, amazingly enough, purchased by a guy in New Mexico, who evidently felt no compunction about turning his cash over to three complete unknowns. When it came time to ship the bike, Charlie and Gary had to ride three miles to the UPS office, each of them holding an end of the shipping box. The operation was definitely small time.

And that was the start of Mountain Bikes (the fledgling company later became two companies, Ritchey/Mountain

Bikes and Fisher Mountain Bikes, when the business partners split up). According to Charlie, the term "mountain bike" was first written down in 1980. He also believes that Joe Breeze first coined the now-famous designation, but Joe says it was Charlie and Gary. Regardless of the origin, its actual meaning is important. The word "mountain" never carried generic connotations: "It was one mountain; it was our local mountain, Tamalpais, where we rode all the time," Charlie says. Another local name for fat-tire bikes that reflected these riders' reverence for the Marin landmark was "Tam Jammer."

In 1981, Gary and Charlie took their product to the Long Beach bike show. By then, there were a couple of others making mountain bikes, but at the show there were but three on display. "People thought we were a little bit crazy. Eighty-one was the year for full-on aerodynamic bikes and components. People in the industry said this [mountain bikes] was obviously a fad. They weren't going to mess around with it or put any money into it."

Of course, the rest is history. After an acrimonious split, Gary Fisher and Tom Ritchey went on to produce their own versions of the mountain bike. Joe Breeze still designs his own models and virtually every major bicycle manufacturer around has since sunk millions into the mountain bike "fad," despite earlier declarations. Charlie Kelly started the first mountain bike magazine, *Fat Tire Flyer*, and he writes for several other bike publications.

Did he and his friends ever know they were onto something big? Charlie recalls turning to a buddy and saying, "There's going to be money in this. How do we get it?" Looking back, however, he is nostalgic about those early days. He feels fortunate to have been part of the movement, but he misses those innocent times.

He remembers the first clunker race they ever held. There were only seven competitors. It was held on the now-famous Repack Trail, a name given it by Fred Wolf after he joked about having to repack his bike's drum brakes after every run. To time the event, they used an alarm clock and a Navy chronometer. "Most of the competitors crashed and burned partway down.

"Those times won't ever come back," Kelly says now. "It was so classic I knew it could never last." He reflects some more and then adds, "There was a time when I knew everybody who had a Ritchey/Mountain Bike."

My friend, Vic, was one of them. □