

The Clunker Revolution

AND BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

"California bikies are 'mountainside surfing,'" claimed the headline for an article by road racer and journalist Owen Mulholland in a 1978 issue of *VeloNews*. The "real roadies" in California had "discovered yet another stairway to nirvana ... sort of cycling's answer to third-class rock climbing" on Mt. Tamalpais. Mulholland introduced readers to some of the stalwart leaders of this off-road biking phenomenon known as "clunking," including Mill Valleyans Joe Breeze and Charlie Kelly. Word was out to cyclists around the country about the Marin subculture that was to introduce mountain biking to the world.


BIKES IN MARIN ● The decade of the 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a nationwide bike craze as anti-automobile sentiment and a burgeoning environmental movement aligned with a renewed cultural focus on fitness and recreation. For the first time since the 1890s' "Golden Age" of cycling, many adults in America were riding bikes. *Time* magazine reported in 1971 that 64 million Americans were routinely using bikes. While the nation's love affair with bicycles waned within a few years, it endured in Marin, thanks to a happy confluence of both cultural and geographic factors. The region's adventurous ethos, rooted in a long history of opportunistic westward expansion and immigration, coalesced with Marin's environmental awareness and stunning beauty and topography. The sum total of these forces planted seeds of com-

munity in Marin, which embraced the outdoors and sought out new ways to access nature. According to Joe Breeze, "This whole bicycle thing was about the environment, and we just got healthy along the way."

Born in 1953, Joe Breeze spent much of his childhood like many Mill Valley kids of the day, constructing forts in the hills and riding Flexi-flyers, skateboards, and bicycles. In the late 1950s President Eisenhower suffered a series of heart attacks. He told the nation we were becoming too reliant on machines, and what we needed was exercise. He started the President's Council on Physical Fitness, which President Kennedy later ran with. The upshot was that Breeze and his Park School classmates were now doing jumping jacks out on the blacktop. It's only natural that some would find their life revolving around health. Charlie Kelly, born in 1945, remembers he and his brother Jim taking on Kennedy's 1963 challenge to walk 50 miles in a day. Hundreds of students left Redwood High School at zero-dark-30 and walked almost to Point Reyes Station and back.

Breeze's father, Bill Breeze, was selling Formula 3 Coopers and Lotus racing cars at his Sports Car Center in Manzanita. He was a machinist in a combine that not only repaired cars, but built one-off racers. Bill Breeze rode a European road-racing bicycle to stay

BY **MARISSA FRIEDMAN** WITH **JOE BREEZE**



Howie Hammerman, Otis Guy, Chris McManus, and Joe Breeze pause at Kent Rock near Potrero Meadows, November 1977. View is looking toward Tomales Bay. Photo by Wende Cragg. © Rolling Dinosaur Archive.

ABOVE: Custom Cruiser Design II (detail) by Joe Breeze, May 30, 1977.

in shape for car racing. Cycling to work in the 1950s did not go unnoticed by Bill's sons—they realized bikes had a lot to offer. In the U.S. at the time, a bicycle was pretty much seen as a kid's sidewalk toy. By age 13 Joe did his first 100-mile ride, and by 1970 he and his brother Richard had ridden twice to the Sierra and to the state of Washington and back. By then, Bill Breeze had retired and moved what machinery he could to their home on Country Club Drive. Joe and Richard had been told by their father they wouldn't be allowed to get drivers' licenses until age 18, but they were used to getting everywhere on bikes, so both eschewed driving, Joe until age 26.

It was about then that the "Bike Boom" hit. In 1971, Joe and friends, in conjunction with the Community Church of Mill Valley, went on a bike trip through Europe. In Milan, Italy, he was able to meet world bike guru Cino Cinelli at his factory. This meeting changed Breeze's life pursuit from architecture to bikes. In 1974 he would study under America's preeminent custom frame builder, Albert Eisentraut of Oakland, and build his first bicycle frames.

Breeze and his friends from Mill Valley and nearby towns, many of whom worked at local bike shops, were keen on road racing. Several had raced in 1971 and '72 in Marin County's high school road-racing program, founded by David Smiley of Mill Valley. To race nationally, membership in a sanctioned club was required, and the only one in the county was Marin Cyclists, a shade too staid for these young riders. So they formed their own road-racing organization, Velo Club Tamalpais (VCT), in 1972. Charlie Kelly, an original VCT member, recalls in an oral history for the Lucretia Little History Room, "We were a bunch of hippies, much younger, not on the same cultural page as most of the Marin Cyclists. They were older, they were straight, they had jobs. And we were kids, but we wanted to race our bicycles ... [and] order cool matching jerseys and all that stuff." The development of the club and the emergence of a cohort of serious (and seriously talented) young road racers in Marin helped lay the groundwork for a mountain biking community in Marin.



FRED WOLF (FAIRFAX) WENDE CRAIG (CA.) MARK LINDLOW (FA) ROB STEWART (AKA) CHRIS LANG (PA.)

MT. TAMALPAIS AND EARLY CLUNKERS ● Many of these young Marin roadies shared a desire to reintroduce their country to the bicycle as a practical vehicle. Breeze and his racing friends Otis Guy and Marc Vendetti were intent on finding sophisticated bikes from the previous century, when bicycles were king of the road and a leading technology. They hoped to share this little-known heritage with others.

In 1973, on a foray to Santa Cruz, Breeze paid \$5 for a balloon-tire bike, not what he was looking for but a "crusty" 1941 Schwinn. He decided to ride the bike down Mt. Tamalpais's old railroad grade, and it was "a blast!" he recalled. He next rode it to a Velo Club Tamalpais meeting. Fellow VCT members quickly dug up old bikes, and added off-road fun to their riding mix. They weren't the first, of course; shortly after the Tam railroad was scrapped in 1930, Mill Valley riders led by Bob Phillipi (whose father owned Elroy's Garage on Camino Alto) enjoyed riding the grade, even into Muir Woods. Now, in the 1970s boom, news spread fast. Soon scores of fat-tire riders were traversing the mountain.

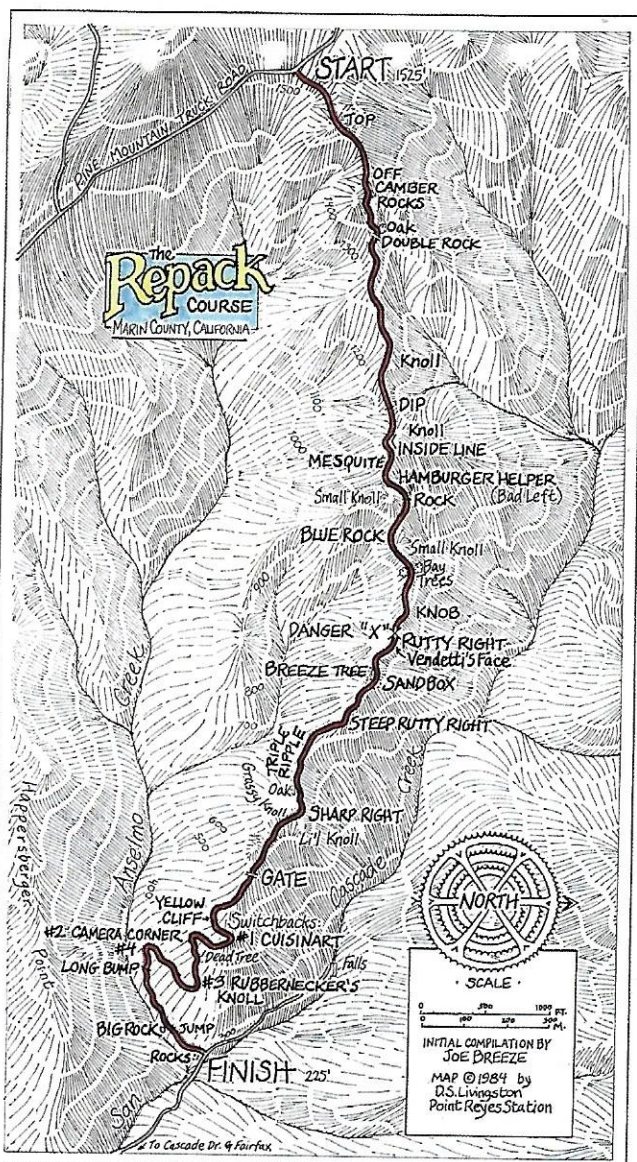
On October 21, 1976, a handful trekked up to a starting point on a steep dirt road on Pine Mountain above Fairfax, north of Tamalpais proper. This exceptional downhill had been discovered two years earlier by Kelly's Mill Valley childhood friend Fred Wolf, and now the plan was to see who could make the fastest descent. Dropping 1,300 feet in elevation in two miles, the course was harrowing for both bike and rider. Racers braked so much that by the time they reached the bottom, all the grease in their coaster-brake hubs had vaporized into a contrail of smoke, requiring them to repack the hub with grease, hence the name of the course: Repack. Alan Bonds was the only

1941 Schwinn-built B. F. Goodrich, an example of what Marin riders referred to as a Schwinn Excelsior X. Built by Arnold, Schwinn Company, Chicago, Illinois. Joe Breeze bought this bike for \$5 from Branciforte Bike Shop in Santa Cruz in 1973. It was his first balloon-tire bike and was one of five bikes that Breeze won Repack on from 1976 to 1979. On display at Marin Museum of Cycling, Fairfax. Photo by Joe Breeze.



Reading for Alan Bonds' "Enduro" race, the first organized mountain bike cross-country race, which would cover about 25 miles between Fairfax and Kent Lake, and eventually end after descending Repack. Left to right: Fred Wolf, Wende Cragg, Mark Lindlow, Rob Stewart, Chris Lang, Jim Preston, Ian Stewart, Charlie Kelly, Gary Fisher, Joe Breeze, Eric Fletcher, Craig Mitchell, John Drumm, Roy Rivers, Alan Bonds, and unknown. Photo © Jerry Riboli.

STEWART CHARLEY KEUT (A) GARY FISHER (A) JOE BREEZE (M) ERIC FLETCHER (W) CRAIG MITCHEL (A) JOHN DRUMM (L) ROY RIVERS (A) ALAN BONDS (S)



Xerox of 1984 map of Repack, drawn by Dewey Livingston from a 1976 map and notes by Joe Breeze. © Dewey Livingston.

rider who avoided a crash in that first race, emerging victorious. At its heart, Repack was a perfect blend of competition, thrill-seeking, and frivolity. Charlie Kelly played a pivotal role in organizing the 22 Repack races held through 1979. Kelly, who arranged timekeeping and compiled results, commissioned Repack posters with his name and number on them. Larry Cragg, who ran Prune Music on Locust Avenue in Mill Valley, got involved in the movement early on. He and his wife Wende took cameras on their rides and chronicled the sport's birth in hundreds of Kodachrome slides. In 1978 and 1979 Kelly organized Klunker Awards Banquets, with slide shows by the Craggs and awards ranging from serious (Fastest Time, awarded to Belvedere's Gary Fisher; Most Wins: Joe Breeze) to playful (Best Organizer/Most Metal and Mental Breakdowns: Charlie Kelly). Recipients received beautiful appliqué fabric medals created by Wende Cragg. Wende also held one of the fastest women's times on Repack.

Repack became the crucible of mountain biking. The race drew participants on a regular basis from towns around the mountain, even from across the bay, to share a passion for this new kind of bike, and competition improved the breed. Interest in the self-sufficient aspect of bicycling was strong, and in 1977 Alan Bonds put on the Enduro, the sport's first cross-country race. That brought a great need for wide-range gearing, and with gears, Marinites were taking rides even in the High Sierra.

By then, their 1930s and '40s clunker frames, built of weak, heavy thick-wall, curved, mild-steel tubes, were breaking often, especially under the weight of the biggest riders. Charlie Kelly, fed up with his failing clunkers, repeatedly asked Breeze to build him a bike. One day in 1977, running across Joe on the street, Kelly whipped \$300 from his pocket and waved it in front of Joe, saying he'd pay up front for a new frame. Breeze figured he could buy tubing for 10 frames with \$300 and satisfy what seemed to be worldwide demand. Larry immediately placed orders for himself and Wende.

Since 1973 Breeze had amassed a squadron of clunkers from junkyards. Now, in 1977, he studied their various geometries to arrive at best angles and lengths, and created a design with strong, light, thin-wall, straight Cro-Moly-alloyed steel tubes. At Tam High, he had taken all of the engineering and architectural drafting classes available. He



From left, Steve Potts, Dave Sigman, and Joe Breeze, on Breezers they had a hand in building at Joe's machine shop in Mill Valley, line up for the start of the annual Pearl Pass Clunker Tour race in Crested Butte, Colorado, September 1980. Fourth and fifth from left: Michael Hewitt and Gary Fisher. Photo by Monte Ward. From the Michael Paden Hewitt collection.

made a detailed scale drawing on his father's drafting machine, showing side and top views with critical part interfaces. In his dad's machine shop, he cut and mitered the tubes and clamped them into his welding fixture. A Repack race was coming up and he hustled the first frame together, slapped on some primer paint, and built up the bike with all-new parts. The next morning, he rode it to Fairfax and won the Repack race. He was able to sell most of his unspoken-for frames then and there. By the following spring he had the others finished and delivered, nine sparkling nickel-plated frames and bikes. Owners called them their "Breezer" bikes. They were clunkers no more.

Word of Repack reached KPIX Channel 5 in San Francisco, where Evening Magazine host Steve Fox was dispatched to cover the January 20, 1979, race. His Repack story attracted so much attention that CBS affiliates aired the segment across the nation.

GROWING A SPORT ● Breeze and racing partner Otis Guy contracted with Tom Ritchey to have a tandem frame built for a transcontinental record attempt that year. Ritchey had been building fine racing and tandem frames since 1972. In January 1979, Joe took his Breezer to Tom's in Palo Alto to explain a structural detail for their tandem, and Tom took an immediate interest in the fat-tire bike. Joe shared ideas for his next run of frames, even providing drawings, and told Tom that Gary Fisher was looking for a modern fat-tire frame. Soon, Ritchey had built

frames for himself and Fisher. A few months later, Ritchey told Fisher he had built nine more framesets. That was the genesis of Gary Fisher's and Charlie Kelly's MountainBikes business, opened in fall of 1979. It was the first business dedicated entirely to fat-tire bikes, and Tom Ritchey would provide over 1,000, beautifully crafted frames. MountainBikes would eventually become Fisher Mountain Bikes. After an attempt to trademark the name failed, "mountain bikes" became the name for the sport.

Charlie Kelly, when he wasn't riding, racing, or running a business, was writing, recording, and promoting the sport. He founded the first mountain biking magazine in 1980, the *Fat Tire Flyer*.

A COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY ● Members of the mountain biking community that united on the slopes of Mt. Tam were nurtured in vocational programs at Tamalpais High and College of Marin. Students of engineering, architecture, machine shop, and metalwork became local frame builders and trained each other, in an extraordinarily collaborative environment.

Developing a global industry to keep up with the growing demand for mountain bikes was a natural next step, as larger companies picked up and ran with ideas from Marin. A litany of innovators from around the Bay Area continued on as important contributors to the mix.

The Koski family's Cove Bike Shop in Strawberry was an important spawning ground for the sport. Koski brothers Erik, Dave,

and Donnie were graduates of Tam High's vocational training, and by 1976 were offering Trailmaster mail order components across the country. In 1978 Donnie created a prototype off-road frame and convinced motorcycle champion Mert Lawwill (of Tiburon) to produce it. The result was 600 Lawwill-Knight ProCruisers built at Mert's Harley-Davidson "skunk works" in Hayward. The relatively large volume lowered the entry bar for a new off-road bike to \$500. In 1980 Erik would produce his Trailmaster bikes, welded together by another Tam grad of exceptional talent, Dave Garoutte. They developed designs that carry on today on the industry's top bicycles.

Mill Valley-bred custom bike builder Charlie Cunningham produced the first aluminum mountain bike in 1979. Steve Potts took what he learned from his friend Breeze and expanded upon it, cofounding Wilderness Trail Bikes with Mark Slate and Cunningham in 1982. The headquarters of this global player in the bike business are still on Miller Avenue in Mill Valley.

The sport continued to evolve and grow. The upright nature of the bike made it accessible and a lasting hit among people who only briefly partook in the "10-speed Bike Boom" of the early 1970s. The welcoming bike made for a welcoming culture and sport, with fun paramount from the beginning.

Cunningham's wife, Jacquie Phelan, rode into Marin aboard an English 5-speed in 1980, and fell right into the scene. Once aboard a mountain bike she was on her way to three national championship titles and a professional career. In the male-dominated biking world, she carved out space for women as both a competitive and recreational activity. "To me the entire world was a men's club, and since I got into mountain biking after trying to break into road racing and experiencing hazing, shaming, and harassment by the men who didn't want me riding with them, I found myself in on the ground floor of something I could help shape," Phelan said recently. Through her writing, club and event organizing and other advocacy efforts, Phelan helped put mountain biking on the map for a wider, and more specifically female, audience. She and Charlie were cofounders with Kelly, Breeze, and others, of the sport's national governing body, NORBA (the National Off-road Bicycle Association) in 1983.



Charlie Cunningham and Jacquie Phelan pose with their Cunningham bikes on Azalea Hill with White's Hill beyond, circa 1995. Photo © Judie Scalfano.

MAKING HISTORY IN MARIN ● What is it that drew so many in Marin to the slopes of Mt. Tamalpais, sparking a movement felt around the world? For many participants, the impetus came from a shared vision of the bike as both a solution and vector for environmental, physical, and emotional health.

Mill Valleyan Fred Wolf long ago said, "the mountain bike allows you to get away from the cops, the cars, and the concrete," a reminder that safety, away from congested roads and distracted drivers, is a draw. (Seemingly contrary to that, risk was a draw for some, riding on the edge of one's ability.)

For just about everyone biking offered respite and catharsis, a chance to commune with nature and explore the large swaths of undeveloped land difficult to cover in a day's hike. Says Wende Cragg, "If I was on that mountain bike the world was fine. My whole little world was rosy and glowing. It settled my soul. It just made me feel like this is ... so simple.... All I need is to just be out here with Mother Nature and feel the wind in my hair, hear the sound of the birds, and see the leaves twinkling in the light." Many participants found their mountain bike "family" through informal networks and spontaneous rides, or through clubs such as the Women's Mountain Bike & Tea Society (WOMBATS), a social network founded by Phelan in 1987, which grew to include hundreds of members from across the country.

According to Joe Breeze, "The glue that held it all together was the basic utility of a bicycle. Our sport revolved on one of humankind's most useful inventions, and we wanted to share this joyful secret with others."

Marin was certainly not the first place where people rode bikes off-road. That harkens back to the advent of bicycles in the 1860s. And yet what happened in Marin was different, due to Repack. Says Breeze, "The continual draw of that race eventually burst enthusiasm beyond our sphere of influence. It was not just another isolated off-road occurrence, of which there had been many since the early days of cycling. The mountain bike captured the imagination for what else a bike could be at a time when people were receptive to it."

Only 20 years from the first organized racing at Repack, mountain biking became an Olympic sport, in Atlanta in 1996. Repack carried a movement forward well beyond Marin and helped build a community of passionate people who created mountain biking as part of a cycling lifestyle. As Charlie Kelly is quick to point out, "It's not so much that the mountain bike was invented; a culture was created that made the mountain bike necessary to be part of that culture."

These men and women helped to design, produce, organize, build, and promote the technologies, races, and social networks, which catapulted mountain bikes into national and worldwide consciousness and our everyday lives. It all happened right here in our own backyard.

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Joe Breeze is a cofounder and the curator of the Marin Museum of Bicycling, a volunteer-run nonprofit organization in Fairfax.