

A Visit With Chuck Harris

Standing in his cluttered back yard under the edge of a blue tarp with the rain dripping into my ear and down my neck, I watched as Chuck Harris demonstrated how he uses a pedal-powered grinder to clean the epoxy flashes off a newly molded bicycle mirror. He explained through his filter mask that he creates the mirrors in batches of 10 to 50 and that each mirror takes about 10 minutes of labor to create. It adds up when you consider that he has been making them since the early 70s produces about 10,000 per year and does all the labor himself using home-made jigs and molds. For those who don't know him, Chuck is a local cyclist, inventor, and maker of Ultra light Bicycle Mirror. He is polite and soft-spoken. of slight build and curiosity sparkling in his eyes. He and his memorable 'vintage' VW bus have been a fixture at LAB rallies, GOBA, and cycling events that draw a crowd. The idea for the mirror came from an East Coast LAB rally, where he saw a fellow cyclist and cardiologist, Dr. Gene Gaston, with a dental mirror attached to his eyeglasses. Using re-cycled materials (aluminum cans, spokes, mirrors, etc.) he built his own version and wrote an article on how to make one yourself for the LAB newsletter. The article was so well received that he began to get orders through the mail. Sensing the opportunity, his business was born.

His product somehow caught the attention of Playboy Enterprises and was featured in their July 1973 issue, where it was described as the best invention since patent leather shoes. In addition to the mirror, he produced some wonderful hand made bicycle jewelry, but production on that has stopped and he spends all of his time producing the mirrors.

Chuck grew up in the Boston area and graduated from the Worcester Polytechnic Institute. At Worcester Poly, he gained the technical training to go along with the passion for bicycles and their mechanics he gained while in junior high school. His love, curiosity and appreciation for bicycles has never waned. He never raced but at an early age began doing long distance touring and later, when living in New Jersey, spent some time as a bicycle messenger. While there, one of his long trips was up the East Coast to Montreal. He recalled the time he was stopped at the Mystic River Bridge where bicycles were not allowed to cross. He managed to talk his way over the bridge by pretending he could only speak German.

My first encounter with Chuck was on a Columbus Fall Challenge many years ago when we were climbing a very steep hill. Most of us were walking the hill but this slight gentleman on a 1951 Raleigh Clubman with a huge chainring and unfamiliar rear derailleur came slowly motoring by, twice. After going up the hill once, he went back down to visit the ice cream stand at the bottom. While climbing the hill the first time, he saw in his rear-view mirror that a very pretty cyclist he had noticed had stopped at the stand, so he decided it was a darn good time to stop for ice cream.

I asked Chuck about that bike and he pointed to it leaning against a nearby

tree. He still rides it and still thinks it was the best bike made. It had the same home-made 62 tooth chainring on a TA crank and that very unfamiliar derailleur. Soon after becoming involved with bicycling back in Massachusetts, he saw a picture of a new derailleur in a magazine while visiting the shop of Charlie Hamburg, a Harvard professor who imported Rene Herse bicycles. He liked the way the derailleur seemed to hang directly under the chainstay, where it was protected better. He was familiar with the plunger derailleurs prevalent at the time which had a tendency to be damaged easily because they hung out so far. He drew it up from memory and later, made a wire-frame molding to understand how the derailleur worked. Once he thought he understood the mechanism, he built a prototype. It worked so well, he built several more and began using them on all of his bikes. He contacted the Schwinn Bicycle Company and offered to sell them the design but received a curt reply from Al Fritz, their chief engineer in the 1970s, that Schwinn was using Huret-Alvit derailleurs and saw no need for improvement. Over the years, he as built scores of this model for himself and friends but his basic design is unchanged to this day. His boundless imagination, curiosity, and skill resulted in many more innovations. One of these was a hand brazed steam pipe frame built for his daughter. She carved the name of each century completed on the bike into the top tube until she ran out of room. Another was the bicycle-powered lawnmower that he demonstrated by riding across his damp lawn. As I stood in the rain I marveled at the simplicity of his operation, definitely low-tech in what has become (if you believe the marketers) a high-tech industry. How can an ordinary person make a contribution to an industry dominated by titanium, Ergo, and space age fabrics? Yet here it was being recycled all around me, reflecting the utter simplicity of the bicycle itself. Saroyan referred to the bicycle as 'the noblest invention' and it seems to still have some things to teach us. I left realizing that Chuck is no ordinary person.

If you'd like to purchase a mirror, contact Chuck Harris at:

Ultra-Light Bicycle Mirrors

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