

**GOLD HILL KLUNKER DAYS
and
THE SAGA OF BREEZER B.80.15**

GOLD HILL, COLORADO

Gold Hill is an historic mining town of about 150 people located 10 miles northwest of Boulder, Colorado at an elevation of 8,300 feet. The town was founded in 1859 when gold was discovered near the present town site. When I moved there in 1968 the town was an eclectic mix of old mining families, hippies and professionals trying not to look professional. The only commercial businesses were the Gold Hill Inn, the General Store and the Red Store which sold miscellaneous treasures. There was a one room school house, a cemetery and a volunteer fire department...all the stuff one needs to survive in the wild. The schoolhouse now has two rooms, but otherwise not much has changed. Other than a patch of pavement on Main Street, the roads in town are still dirt.

My wife Linda and I met in the Gold Hill Inn in 1970. We raised our family in our 1870 miner's cabin which we still use in the summers when we are not traveling. These days, as we sit on the front porch of our cabin, there's a steady stream of cyclists pedaling up the dirt roads from Boulder to hang out at our local general store or head on back down by another canyon. They're riding competition road bikes, state-of-the-art mountain bikes and everything in between. Some of them barely work up a sweat on the 10 to 12% grades of Sunshine and Fourmile Canyons. Others even ride up Lickskillet Gulch which climbs 1,000 feet in a mile. It wasn't always so.

Cycling has always been part of my life. I grew up in Beverly Hills, California and rode to elementary school and high school until I was old enough to drive. By the early 60's I was riding Campagnolo equipped Italian road bikes with sew-up tires, but was never a competitor. In the late 1960's riding the road bike from Gold Hill down to Boulder meant: don't forget the pump and the patch kit (and the needle and thread too), cuz if the rocks don't get you the thorns on the flats will. The advent of light weight clinchers helped a little, but mostly because the needle and thread weren't needed.

Life in Gold Hill was a wonderful mix of outdoor sports, social events and surviving the throes of snow, ice and winds which reached speeds of over 100 miles an hour. For my wife in the heavy winter storms it was chaining the 4wd on all wheels to get out of the driveway if I was at work. If that didn't do it there was always the winch.

A lot of the things we did eventually lent themselves to the world of mountain biking. To avoid the increasing cost of downhill ski areas, we used cross country skis and 4wd's to reach elevations of 11,000 feet or so and telemarked down the hiking trails or directly through the trees in unbroken snow. In summer we kayaked the rivers in Colorado and Utah sometimes driving over the high passes like those between Crested Butte and Aspen or Telluride and Ouray. In Canyonlands we drove many of the jeep roads and hiked the trails which have become part of the Moab cycling scene. I had done a lot of similar things in the Sierras but the thought of riding a bike in these places never came up.

It was around 1970, down Fourmile Canyon, that some of our neighboring hippie friends Moe Siegel, Cindy Ziesing and John Hay were sifting herbs on an old screen door thinking they might leave the ranks of the unemployed and start a tea business. Cindy and her lady friends were producing remarkably beautiful artwork for the boxes of

different teas. What should they call their favorite product? Why not “Red Zinger”, a name to honor Cindy and a name that became a cycling legend when Moe later sponsored the race in 1975. This certainly kick-started the international road racing scene in Boulder, but the events transpiring on Mt. Tamalpais in Marin County were unknown to our circle of friends.

THE CRESTED BUTTE CONNECTION

Crested Butte, Colorado, although much larger and more commercial than Gold Hill, was somewhat like a sister city. We used to ski there in the winter and hang out there at other times of year fishing, camping and partying with local friends. One of our Crested Butte friends, Don Bachman, was an avalanche expert who often came to Gold Hill as part of his work with the University of Colorado Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research. Don had owned Tony’s Tavern in Crested Butte which he sold in 1971 with the stipulation that the name be changed. The bar became the Wooden Nickel which, along with the Grubstake Saloon, became a hangout for the Aspen dirt bike riders coming over the passes.

On one of his trips to Gold Hill in 1976, Don mentioned that a bunch of the local Crested Butte crazies had done the infamous Pearl Pass run with old single speed balloon tired bikes with coaster brakes. Unaware of the Marin County mountain bike evolution, I thought the Crested Butte hippies had a neat idea but that a bike needed some gearing and serious downhill braking to really use in a practical manner on the trails around Gold Hill.

THE FIRST GOLD HILL KLUNKER

Scrounging around town, I found an old balloon tire frame, some steel rims and the remnants of a moped. I welded sections of steel plate to reinforce the frame, installed a 10 speed setup and had the wheels built up with the moped drum brakes and motorcycle spokes to handle jumping over log piles. With motorcycle brake levers and cables on BMX handlebars, the Klunker had absolute breaking control on downhills but weighed close to 50 pounds...not the best for uphill. The bike was quite similar to the Klunkers of Marin County that had an earlier start.

I started bouncing and skidding down the old miner’s trails and through the forest around Gold Hill sometimes riding down to Boulder. This became great fun. Problem was, none of the adult members of the community were interested in joining me. Having spent a lot of time with the kids doing various sports, I turned to Steve Conlin, a teenager who was riding a 20 inch BMX bike as well as an off-road motorcycle. Steve was absolutely fearless and was only limited by the coaster brake on his BMX bike. Rather than the more sophisticated “repack” of Marin, Steve said he cooled his brake by peeing on it when other means weren’t available.

After we had mastered the descent of the local mine dumps we decided to make a kamikaze run down the steeper slope from the Upper Shelf Road to Lefthand Canyon 1,000 feet below. Wearing my multi-purpose Bell rock climbing helmet which also served for white water kayaking and other head knocking sports, I started down the hill trying to slide slip but lost control and ran into a boulder the size of a VW beetle. I came off the bike and landed on the slope getting a little off-road rash. If that level of bleeding wasn’t enough, when we finally arrived at an actual foot trail I careened off landing into a pile of rocks several feet below. With me bleeding more but still OK, we charged down the trail thinking it would take us to the pavement a half mile below. Instead, the trail

went right onto the porch of an A-frame cabin with two stoned hippies sitting in chairs. As I piled into the rail at the end of the porch and lay there tangled in my bike, one of the hippies said in a barely coherent voice “Hey dude where did you guys come from man”?

THE MARIN COUNTY INVASION

After the first Pearl Pass run, the Klunker riders in Crested Butte had discovered a new vehicle of entertainment: cavorting around town in the snow and having beer drinking contests to see who would be the last to still be riding. The spirits were high, but the advancements in technology were low.

In 1978 one of our Gold Hill neighbors, Tom Huth, wrote an anti-nuclear play entitled “The Mystery of the Bung Kurd Noogies”. Tom had been a writer for the Washington Post and was inspired by protests at Boulder’s Rocky Flats plutonium trigger plant and by the anti-nuclear issue in general. The play included several people from town including my wife who acted as her sheep dog Molly. At the time I was part of a team headed by the president of Boeing Aerospace Corporation under DOE contract to plan the future of the U.S. nuclear energy program. I couldn’t quite figure out how bung kurd noogies could be incorporated into a liquid metal fast breeder reactor...better keep my mouth shut. After a successful run in Gold Hill, the play traveled to Crested Butte where I was enlisted to take a role. As a result of my shenanigans in Gold Hill they put me on the stage as a stoned hippie sitting on, of all things, a Crested Butte Klunker!

The news of the Marin County invasion and the arrival of the super bikes for the Pearl Pass run in 1978 reached Gold Hill soon after the event. Based on the information coming from Crested Butte it was obvious that the Marin County guys had a unique set of capabilities: experience with Klunker riding, experience in fabricating light weight road bike frames, state of the art knowledge of road bike components and experience in road racing. Along with the advent of light weight fat tires and aluminum rims, the combination sounded like dynamite. We had to see for ourselves.

Linda and I decided to meet the 1979 Pearl Pass run in Ashcroft where the Pearl Pass road turns to pavement. And there were the bikes and the people from Marin County who were making mountain bike history. We went over to the Jerome Hotel to look over the bikes in more detail and to talk with the guys and gals. It was an exciting experience thinking of what these bikes could do in our spectrum of outdoor sports. It also seemed obvious that a new era in cycling had begun...one with world-wide implications.

BREEZER B.80.15

After talking about the potential of the emerging mountain bike technology with my friend Ray Bowman, we decided to put together an informal partnership to look at how we might become involved in the business. As we both had a lot going in our lives, the business side of things never materialized. We did, however, end up with two new mountain bikes: Ray’s built up of components available at the time, while mine became Breezer B.80.15.

The specifications for the Breezer and Ritchie Mountain Bike looked very similar on paper. I can’t recall exactly what information I received on both bikes, but I chose the Breezer based on my talk with Joe Breeze in Aspen, the fact that he had machine shop capabilities and his use of nickel plating on the frame which would hold up a lot better than paint for the likely banging around the bike would take on and off the trails.

So, after picking a frame size and component options, B.80.15 was born. According to Joe Breeze, the B stands for balloon, the 80 for 1980 and the 15 for the 15th second series bike made in 1980. The bike is likely the 25th mountain bike built by Joe. It was a true work of art...something to really be proud of.

After the bike arrived I took it down to the Spoke in Boulder which was the primo road bike shop at the time. I had been buying road bike parts from them for several years and knew some of the guys. The reaction to the Breezer was interesting (and probably predictable). They were impressed with the quality of the frame building and the beautiful brazing work on the chrome-moly tubing. They were also impressed with the use of top notch road bike components. They were, however, blank on the concept of rough trail riding even though cyclocross was one of the established events.

At this period in time my son Dana at ages 6-7 was racing BMX with two organizations. I was his mechanic and up to my ears in BMX technology. Since Ray and I both had sons racing BMX we decided to give it a try. We had to race in the 26 and older class when Ray was 50 and I was 45. There was always this younger guy winning first place, but we tried - even got some seconds and thirds! I set up the Breezer to shift through two gears with a front chain wheel selected for the course. Standing on the pedals pushing on the starting gate with 7 other riders was always a bit intimidating. Even worse was the charge into the first turn. I would use the first gear out of the gate and slam the shifter into second about half way to the turn. It seemed to make up for some of the age factor.

Not being able to afford a second Breezer, I made my wife a 26 inch mountain bike using a BMX frame. I also made my son a 20 inch mountain bike using a GT frame, 10 speed gearing and a tandem rear drum brake. We were now set for family biking adventures in the mountains, canyon lands and deserts throughout the west. The Breezer became part of my life.

MAKING TRACKS

Now that we could go uphill as well as downhill, we started running our old telemark ski trails in the Indian Peaks area above Boulder. We could easily find drops of 3,000 to 5,000 vertical feet on trails that hadn't seen a bike before and were unregulated except for motor vehicles. We often used 4wd vehicles to get to the starting point, but needed the uphill and on-road capability of the lightweight bikes for the in-betweens. Ray, Linda and I rode the Pearl Pass event in 1981. With a daughter going to college in Durango, Colorado, we began riding the trails in the San Juan Mountains. Durango hadn't yet awakened to the mountain bike evolution.

The same was true for Moab. We had been four-wheeling and hiking for years throughout Canyonlands: the Maze, the Needles, Elephant Hill, the White Rim Trail, Horse Canyon and some of the slick rock in between. I had watched my two daughters slide down the slope below Delicate Arch leaving a streak of their jeans on the not-so-slick rock. Wow, what a potential Mecca for mountain bikes, but look out for the off-road rash. Of course we had to ride it. It's rougher than it looks.

In summer of 1982 we bought a desert home in Borrego Springs, California and entered a new period of desert riding. Not only were there trails and washes in the Anza Borrego Desert which hadn't been ridden, but there was the whole Mojave Desert to mess

around with, again looking back to years of off-roading which might lend itself to our new means of transportation.

Some of our favorite places for exploring had been Death Valley, Panamint Valley and the surrounding mountain ranges. In 1983 we took our bikes in our 4wd van and tried out a number of the canyon descents. It was great fun. Coming out of Titus Canyon, our son Dana clamped down on the drum brake on his 20 inch BMX/mountain bike and skidded for such a distance that his rear tire was wiped out. In Surprise Canyon on the way to Panamint City we met our first desert mountain bikers. It was clearly evident that mountain bikes were just as at home in the deserts as in the mountains, although tire width was a limiting factor in soft sand conditions.

AUSTRALIA

In 1987 the Breezer was disassembled, put in a crate with other possessions and shipped out of Long Beach to Sydney in New South Wales, Australia where we planned to live for a year to explore the continent. With our son Dana, we rented a house in Palm Beach, a beautiful community north of Sydney with fantastic surfing conditions. We were having such a good time exploring the eastern half of Australia that we ended up staying for two years, then moving to Perth on the west coast for another year and a half.

While our adventures lay more in surfing around the perimeter of the country and in exploring the outback in our 4wd's, the Breezer got its share of on-road and off-road fun. One time it nearly ended up in Davy Jones' locker. We were in a 70 ft. twin-hulled ferry boat heading to Rottnest Island west of Perth with all the bikes cabled on the rear deck. The seas were running about 12 feet and the captain was getting the boat airborne between the crests. People inside were getting sick and concerned that the boat would break up. Hitting a wave that went clear over the boat, the 30 man life raft on top of the boat inflated and flipped off dragging behind on its line. The bikes went off too, disappearing into the depths of the Indian Ocean. Did the cable hold? Fortunately it did. It took the crew and a bunch of passengers to pull in the raft and the bikes. Amazingly, the Breezer survived with no long-term damage other than a little rust on the outside of the Phil Wood hubs. All the bearings were fine.

LIVING IN A VINTAGE WORLD

Now, in 2015, Breezer B.80.15 is in its original condition except for the Brooks saddle, handle bar stem and, possibly, the rear derailleurs. It has been my constant companion for 35 years and shows no significant signs of old age. I, on the other hand at 79, certainly do. We're happy that our grandson Munir is racing mountain bikes with his Roseville, CA high school club in NorCal events. Linda and I, however, seem to be living in a time warp. Gold Hill is definitely in that category. A lot of our sporting equipment is from the 60's, 70's and 80's. Most of our vehicles are vintage as well as our Airstream trailer.

With all of the advancements in mountain bike technology, why would I still ride a 1980 era bike? Part of the reason is that we have been involved in so many adventure sports that it's been financially impractical for us to keep up. The other part is that there is a special feeling about the people who developed these technology advances and the special times in which they took place. When I ride the Breezer I think of Joe's creativity and talent in conceiving and building the bikes. I think about the countless fun times the bike has brought me. I think about Charlie Kelly, Gary Fisher, Tom Ritchey and the

others who were part of this incredible period of reckless fun and emerging talent. It reminds me of the characters and innovations in other sports that I was fortunate enough to be involved with: the early surfers, the cavers, the Yosemite rock climbers, the free divers, the whitewater kayakers and the Baja racers. If you look at the worldwide impact of mountain bike development and its widespread practical use, the Marin County mountain biking contribution has to be at the top.

I want to thank Charlie Kelly and Jacquie Phelan for coming to Borrego Springs and giving me the opportunity to think back on all of these fun times and to thank Joe Breeze for making old B.80.15 such a cool part of my life. I also want to thank Dave Duncan of Bike Borrego for co-sponsoring the event and for giving me a copy of Charlie's book, the "Flat Tire Flyer" which our family will enjoy for its memories of adventures past.

Jack Laughlin