

The Blue Birthday Bicycle

by Emory Sheffield

Despite increasing complaints from the mother of the kid who lived just up the street about me riding their kid's 20 inch bicycle from daylight to dark and my constant nagging at my father to purchase me one of my own, I did not become the proud owner of my very first bicycle until my ninth birthday. Both of my two older brothers already had bicycles and I figured it would greatly extend our hunting and fishing excursion range if I had a bike too rather than having to ride double with one of them. I rarely got to ride one of their bikes solo since I was barely big enough to master a full-sized bike and I still crashed regularly, which usually put an abrupt stop to the privilege along with new scars on my shins and elbows.

I can vividly recall my father taking me to the local bicycle sales and repair shop in our hometown of Decatur, Alabama to look for a used bike on my birthday. We had to literally crawl over hordes of various and sundry used bicycles to reach one way back in the rear of the shop that was within our price range. I so desperately wanted a bicycle that I would have been content to own anything that had two wheels and a set of handlebars. The one my financially strapped father eventually purchased barely met these minimum requirements but at least it was my very own bicycle.

I was in ecstasy when we arrived home with my birthday bike stuffed into the trunk of our family Studebaker sedan. I had kept a close watch on it to make sure it didn't try to break loose from the seagrass rope that my father had tied it with and leap out of the trunk to freedom. Or worse yet, I feared that we might have a car wreck on the way home and total my bicycle even before I got a chance to ride it for the first time.

The rest of the family got a fleeting glimpse of my bicycle before I pushed it down the sidewalk and leaped aboard to ride it wobbly up and down Enolom Boulevard. I rode it non-stop until dark and then continued riding under the streetlights until my mother dragged me off it just before midnight to make me come in to eat a cold supper and a piece of my birthday cake before going to bed. She absolutely refused to let me sleep with my new bike since mothers can sometimes be very unreasonable. I slept very little and tossed and turned all night in eager anticipation of riding my new blue bicycle all over our neighborhood at first light the next morning.

The bicycle was not much of a "looker" but what could you expect for five bucks? It was definitely not a well pedigreed bike and I suspected that it had been assembled in the bicycle shop from leftover parts. Someone had apparently brush applied a coat of deep blue enamel to the old 26-inch bike to make all the parts the same color and had not bothered to mask off the bicycle's nameplate so I was never quite sure of its origin or its manufacturer.

The absence of rubber grips on the bare ends of the handlebars left neat little red and blue circles over my kidneys during the frequent painful wrecks that occurred during our familiarization phase. My blue bike had no chain guard and the front and back fenders had no doubt been removed to reduce total weight and aeronautical drag to make it a speedy racing bike. The front tire had white sidewalls and the plain rear one had what remained of a mud grip tread pattern, therefore I figured it would be a great "mudder" bicycle in the flats as well as a hill taming mountain bike.

The left foot pedal was missing one of its rubber pads and the right one had a perpetual squeak that refused to be silenced despite generous applications of my mother's Singer sewing machine oil. But overall, it was a durable bicycle and was actually well ahead of its time since stripped down mountain bikes were yet to be invented.

The nearest thing to a non-essential accessory that my blue bicycle possessed was a hideous looking imitation fur lined seat cover which gave me a clue to the tastes of one of its previous owners. Believe it or not, this monstrosity looking seat cover once served a useful purpose later on when I attempted to convert my conventional bicycle to a sailing bike – but that’s another story.

For the benefit of anyone who has never ridden a bicycle without fenders, you quickly find that they are functional accessories when riding through mud or water. Your face and legs get splattered with small specks of mud flung from the front wheel and the back wheel deposits a distinct stripe of mud right up the middle of your back. The total thickness of the muddy stripe accumulated is directly proportional to forward speed, the tackiness of the mud, and distance traveled times the square root of how many times your mother warned you not to get your clean clothes dirty on the way to school.

It lacked a chain guard which is likewise a functional accessory since it keeps your right britches leg from getting caught between the drive chain and the teeth on the sprocket. Should this phenomenon occur, it tends to render you virtually incapable of applying the old Bendix style brakes activated by reversing the pedals and applying pressure to slow or stop the bike. This is a feat accomplished only by an expert contortionist when your right britches leg is caught in the sprocket and your left leg is not long enough to allow you to reach the other pedal. Certainly it’s not a maneuver easily mastered by your average nine-year-old.

Stopping your bicycle with Bendix brakes is not even an option if the chain breaks or comes completely off the sprocket when the teeth grab a big enough bite of your britches leg. This is particularly annoying when riding standing up going uphill and applying a lot of torque to the sprocket. When the chain comes off unexpectedly, it usually results in your crotch making painful contact with the frame, especially if you’re short legged or the bike is still too big for you like mine was. Either situation leaves you with precious little clearance between your crotch and the apparently case hardened steel center frame bar. A couple of such occurrences quickly taught me to pedal mostly sitting down since I had always planned on having a family of my own someday and didn’t particularly relish having my future family utensils turn the same color as my blue bicycle.

Boys’ bicycles always came equipped with an extra brace from the seat base to the handlebar column while girls’ models were open at the center of the frame and completely free from this particular painful hazard. I always felt that they should have been designed the other way around since girls obviously lacked these more vulnerable parts in the make up of their anatomy - or so I was told. Common sense did not prevail however, and you were considered a sissy if you were caught riding a girl’s bike - even if they did provide a greater sense of personal security.

The probability of occurrence for britches leg snarl or the chain coming off the sprocket is directly proportional to the steepness of the hill you are riding up or down at the time since it never seems to occur while you are riding on level ground. The lack of suitable real estate to either side of the roadway available for safely coasting to a stop as well as the size and speed of loaded dump trucks whizzing close by are also factors in the probability equation I’m sure. Nevertheless, I never quite found time to calculate their exact relationship during such occurrences, being primarily preoccupied with the business of self-survival instead.

Should the hungry sprocket teeth try to devour your britches leg while you’re going uphill, it’s a relatively simple matter to wait until you lose momentum before crashing provided a suitable crash site is readily available. But, this situation seems to occur most often where good crash sites are scarce and I suppose it’s only human nature to try to prolong extreme pain and agony as long as possible. At any rate, it certainly tends to

complicate things having to look over your shoulder for a good soft crash site while trying to keep your balance rolling backwards downhill at a rapidly increasing speed. The sprocket teeth always seemed to grin at me as I lay bleeding and bruised beneath my bicycle, trying to free my britches leg from their grasp after they had cleverly picked a particularly hazardous site in which to satisfy their hideous craving for britches leg cuffs.

At least you have a little more leisure in selecting a good crash site when the situation occurs going downhill. In this scenario, you merely have to weigh your odds of survival by crashing at a less desirable site at a slower rate of speed or at a choice site while traveling much faster. But either way, most crashes are extremely painful and very difficult to execute with any degree of dignity.

I soon learned from experience to place my uncaught left foot behind the front fork when it was accessible and apply pressure to the side of the rim with my tennis shoe sole to slow the bike down enough to leap off it when suitable crash sites were unavailable. Thus, I sacrificed only my right foot and ankle rather than my whole body. Little did I realize at the time that I had just invented the basic concept of “disc brakes” with my tennis shoe sole and the smooth side of the wheel rim. But, alas, I failed to capitalize on the invention, being totally ignorant of the fact that asbestos pads are extremely more durable than either tennis shoe soles or human skin as well as being absolutely painless to operate. The Wright brothers had the right idea when they apparently gave up riding and tinkering with bicycles in their shop in lieu of the much safer sport of inventing and flying airplanes.

The primitive disc brake procedure was somewhat difficult to master without getting my toes caught in the spokes when riding barefooted, which was usually the case in the summertime. It was tricky enough to perform riding forward, let alone rolling backwards where you had to crook your ankle around to the front side of the fork to wedge your toes between the fork and the wheel rim to apply pressure to slow the bike. Thus, attempting the barefooted disc brake maneuver while rolling downhill backwards at forty miles per hour in the dark on a sixty degree incline with steep rocky shoulders on each side of the road in thick heavily loaded dump truck traffic while wincing in extreme groin pain and having your toes caught in the spokes was perhaps the greatest challenge of all. It was definitely not a feat to be attempted by fainthearted riders with high self-esteem or low pain thresholds. The best solution to the problem of the sprocket’s fetish for britches leg cuffs was to take the preventive approach and roll your right britches leg up about halfway to your knee where it would be just out of the reach from the hungry sprocket teeth. This procedure, while extremely effective, made it easy for perceptive students at Sommerville Road Elementary School to determine which kids owned bikes without chain guards.

Often when you merely walked by the bicycle racks at school, some of the more deprived sprockets still equipped with chain guards would leap out and grab you by the britches leg if you were not nimble footed and aware of their sneaky underhanded tactics.

An older kid in our neighborhood once showed me how to place a discarded leather watchband around the axle of your front wheel to keep the exterior of the axle shiny and free of crud. Since I didn’t own a watch and had little reason to worry about what time it was anyway, I didn’t have access to old leather watchbands. Then too, I had concerns that the extra friction created by the leather band would slow me down slightly, so I never bothered to install one. Besides, my front axle and spokes were usually skin flaked and blood splattered anyhow so I figured the leather band would only serve to smear the residue around in an unsightly fashion and tend to draw flies.

I did, however, learn the trick of using clothespins to attach playing cards to my blue bike’s fork tines to create a whirring sound as the spokes contacted the stiff cards. This

afforded the rider with a vivid imagination the sensation and sound effects of riding a motorbike. If one or two cards worked well, then six or eight should work even better I reasoned and it wasn't long before I had half the deck pinned to the front and back forks. With so much drag on the spokes, it became quite a chore just to pedal the bike on level ground, especially for somebody who once thought a leather watchband on the front axle would create too much friction and drag. Eventually the clothespins would fly apart from the relentless attack inflicted upon them by the spokes and I would leave a trail of playing cards, broken clothespins, and terrified mothers of small children in my wake. But for a short while at least, my bicycle sounded like a Harley-Davidson motorcycle as I pretended to be a member of the "Hell's Angels" gang while cruising down Enolom Boulevard on my blue chopper. My mother was not too Gung Ho over my pseudo-motorcycle project however - especially when she came out into the backyard with a load of wash and found her clothesline to be totally devoid of functional clothespins.

The use of playing cards for sound effects also had a tendency to make the spokes work loose, resulting in warped and wobbly wheels. The Jones kid from across the street once loaned me his spoke wrench and I endeavored to rectify this situation by tightening the spokes in sequence until both wheels were about a half-inch smaller in diameter from all the strain. The spokes sounded like the strings on a steel guitar when you stroked them with the wrench in their severely overtightened condition. They were potential time bombs for sure.

I put a lot of miles on my old blue bicycle over a period of about five years before someone absconded with it overnight at the local softball field. My brother Dickie had ridden it to the softball game since his bike had a flat tire. I walked to the field later on and chastised him for taking my bike without letting me know. I left earlier than Dickie did and he erroneously figured that I had ridden my blue bike home so he walked home too. I didn't miss it until the next morning and when we returned to look for my blue bicycle it was gone. Dickie had parked it in the dark a slight distance from the grandstand since he didn't want to be seen riding a bicycle with such a hideous looking seat cover. I only hope whoever took my blue birthday bicycle got as much pain and pleasure out of it as I did and never made the fatal mistake of loosening several spokes on one side only of either of its wheels.

I still have fond memories of my old blue birthday bicycle. Once when riding it home after watching a pirate movie at the local picture show, I got the bright idea to affix a sail to my bicycle and thus invent the first sail bike. After scrounging up the necessary construction materials and affixing a mast and bed sheet sail to the center of the handlebars, I launched my sail bike on its maiden voyage down the street in front of our house. Along came a strong gust of wind and all was going great until . . . but that's another true bicycle story.