

Lou's Black Phantom



Back in Nebraska, when I was a kid, my first “vehicle” was one of those very early model toy pedal cars, the one that looked like a pickup truck. It probably would have been a fun thing in town where there were some sidewalks, but out on our farm in Nebraska we only had about thirty feet of concrete, just enough to get you from the farmhouse to the garage. Recently, I saw one of those cars in a restaurant that was decorated with antique toys. You really feel old when you see your childhood toys treated as antiques.

My next vehicle was a bicycle, a full-sized bicycle that I couldn't mount because it was too tall. My dad got very upset with me, even to the point of giving me a swat, because he thought I was too chicken to get on the bike. It finally occurred to him that I just couldn't physically get on top of it so he came up with a solution—he got a wrench and removed the saddle. That did the trick. I spent the rest of the day riding the bike around our farmyard, charging through a few inches of snow and enjoying the frozen ground underneath. I was thoroughly hooked. No matter how inconvenient it might have been to ride a bicycle in that area where there were no paved roads, I wanted to ride my bike everywhere.

I kept that bicycle for many years and came to know all of its parts on an intimate basis. There were no parts of this bike that I didn't disassemble, repair or adjust, and reassemble. I came to know all the joys of keeping a finely tuned New Departure brake assembly. The brakes on my bike were as smooth operating as those on any automobile, and my wheels were always in perfect balance. Flat tires were greeted as joyful opportunities for yet another reason to do repair work.



In 1950, when we were living in San Diego, California, I managed to convince my parents that it would be a good investment to replace my old Nebraska bicycle by spending \$35 to buy me a used Schwinn Black Phantom. I knew that it was a great



bicycle but had no idea that it would become the crème de la crème of American bicycle classics. I saw one a while back on display in a store window. At the time I thought it was a restoration but later learned that Schwinn had briefly put them back into production as a “reproduction” model and was selling them for \$1,500. It looked every bit as beautiful as my old bike and I just stood there and stared at it for a long time. It was like having your past suddenly flash in front of you, hesitating for you to enjoy its presence. It should be noted that since Schwinn no longer makes the reproduction model, new, in-the-box bikes are selling for as much as \$3,000 to collectors. I guess I got a good deal for \$35.

The Black Phantom had three claims to fame: (1) it was built like a tank, (2) it had great styling and (3) it had a “knee action” fork. The front fork was an object of fascination for me as it gave to the bicycle some of the same design features one might find on an auto. It was the precursor to the fully suspended front axle systems found on modern mountain bikes, but nowhere near as functional. However, it was not entirely just a gimmick. My old Black Phantom survived many a shock that caused front axles to snap on my friend’s bikes.

The bicycle was my ticket to far-ranging freedom. With it, I could set out on a day’s journey of some five or ten miles without any concern. Distances of that nature were almost routine and I don’t recall every being especially tired at journey’s end. It was, of course, the continual routine of taking long rides which built up leg muscles and stamina.

All us kids did our best to destroy our bicycles. We rammed into curbs at full speed, jumped over anything which gave us some altitude, and generally did everything we could to put our machines to the test. As with my old Nebraska bike, there was no part of the Black Phantom that didn’t get disassembled, repaired or adjusted. I even removed a few parts to lighten the bike--something that would be totally sacrilegious today.



Sometime in 1956, after I had already bought a workable car (the Frazer in the background of the photo), my Explorer Scout buddies and I decided to take one last big bike ride before abandoning our trusty steeds to the allure of automotive transportation. We gathered at our house and then set off for the long bike ride to Trabuco Canyon. We had no idea where we would actually camp as none of us had bothered to investigate the availability of facilities at that locale. When we finally arrived there late in the afternoon, we

decided to just go through a deep tree-filled ravine and hope that there would be some place worth camping on the other side. When we finally got to the other side we found ourselves on a clear area next to a ranch road. After setting up our old Army pup tents, we were shortly visited by the young fellow who was the caretaker for the ranch we were illegally occupying. He appreciated the exceptional effort we had made to get to that place and allowed as how we could stay there overnight, so long as we didn't start any fires. As he left us he recommended that we take the road when we left in the morning, rather than dragging our bikes back across that ravine, and that we keep our tents closed up tight. Then he reached back in his Jeep and displayed a rather sizeable rattle snake that he had killed that morning.

When you look at the photo above, check out the height of the saddle. At 6' 2" I had to purchase the longest saddle pole you could buy. Quite a change from my original bike problem of being too short to get on board. Also, note that the bike had lost a lot of its styling appendages.

The Black Phantom was an important part of my youth and deserved to be kept and treasured. But I have a horrible track record of keeping things. As my wife will attest, anything that doesn't get used in our house ends up in the trash or the Goodwill bin.