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INGEAR

THE NEWSLETTER OF PEDALS FOR PROGRESS



CYCLING COWBOYS
by Patricia Hamill

Cycling Cowboys By Patricia Hamill

When asked to think about ranches and cowboys, many Americans picture John Wayne charging after rustlers or even James Stewart riding easily along, bell gently ringing as it swings from his saddle horn. Some think about modern ranchers using helicopters to move the herds and blocking off watering holes to force the animals (and local wildlife) to move to new sources of water and grazing. The first is not accurate, the second, disruptive and wasteful. But do we think at all about cowboys outside of North America? In fact, there are choices that ranchers and cowboys in Nicaragua make that are not only forward looking, but directly related to American industry. No, this is not about where to get your next burger, this is about how the cowboys alleviate a concern that many a cowhand has had to ponder since the business of cattle came about: How do I do my job with the least expense to myself financially and physically?

The answer, for some, is simple: Use a bicycle. This at first seems unrealistic. The amount of ground to be covered each day and the uneven terrain to navigate together make you think that this is not a good long-term answer. But, it is. And Javier Venegas is one of many who can attest to the practicality and financial pluses of replacing a horse with a bike.

The owners of large farms have regular need of cowboys out with the herds. They need men to move the cattle from pasture to pasture and to protect the cattle from being rustled by thieves and the poor who may think that one or two missing cattle won't count to the owner. Traditionally, the cowboys rode around on horses all day—and some still do—but not Javier. Javier is a mountain bike rider and, on a daily basis, he herds a hundred head of cattle for the owners of a ranch named Plazuelas.

Work in the countryside begins at 5 a.m. and lasts until noon and, after a rest period, tasks are resumed for the afternoon. Now, not all work on a ranch requires use of a horse; but, even so, the horses can only be on the job for about 40 hours a week.

Just like many of the cowboys in America (in movies and real life) these men own their own horses—they are not provided to them. This means that part of their earnings goes back into feeding their animals, shoeing or trimming their feet, and any vet bills that may be necessary for treating injuries or for maintenance (worming, vaccinations, floating (filing) teeth, etc.). This can cost as much as \$50 (U.S.) a week in Nicaragua and this is very expensive for a rural population that is quite poor. The bike, however, is always at the ready and is much cheaper to maintain. In fact, Javier is a bike lover, so he is fortunate to be able to ride his preferred method of transportation and get paid while doing it.



Javier Venegas working on the ranch.

The first thought that came to me while writing this was that it seemed like a lot of extra physical effort would be needed to herd cattle with a bike. Professional trainers and competitive riders will attest that riding a horse is not a passive effort, but if most of the cowboys' day is spent at the walk, with occasional trotting and cantering, they really don't get much

exercise. According to Javier, the bicycles are not difficult to maneuver and often offer easier access to some terrain than the horse. As well, many of the men prefer the extra exercise on the bikes and view cycling as a chance to become fit on the job. The only job the horse seems to do better than the bikes is move quite fast at sudden notice, but they can only maintain that for so long and this is not a regular need.

Overall, the trend in the Rivas area is toward eliminating the use of horses and purchasing mountain bikes from EcoBici instead. This is a much more cost efficient decision for the cowboys of Nicaragua and certainly presents a much lighter economic and ecological footprint option than helicopter wrangling or disrupting the local wildlife habitats by blocking watering holes. Yet again, American bicycles have a multifaceted impact on a multitude of lives and lifestyles. Maybe some of our own cattlemen should read this newsletter.

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ON A BICYCLE On a Bicycle Built for Two

by Patricia Hamill By Patricia Hamill

While many of our readers have seen some fun and funky bikes being ridden by their happy new owners, we thought it was interesting to include this photo of a model that we don't often see around our own towns. Well, yes, if you live by the seaside, it may not be such a novelty, but tandem bikes are not the norm for certain. This great ride was collected by Henry Hansen and the Vineland Rotary Club. Judging from the group of kids around



Adu and Yaa on their tandem bicycle.

it, you can probably bet it's a fun distraction as well as practical vehicle. And it is without a doubt a very practical and necessary acquisition for the adults you see riding it. The photo gives the impression of a serene and possibly rural road, but these people are posing in a location that is anything but isolated. Oshee is a suburb in Accra, Ghana. This heavily populated and extremely busy area is where this couple resides. Their commute to work at Awoshie, also a suburb in Accra, is about a 6 kilometer journey (3.73 miles).

Adu, a carpenter, and Yaa, a trader, have to wake up early and board a bus that will take them from Oshee to Awoshie daily. To the American consciousness, this seems a simple and short commute; but, for Adu and Yaa, this is a time-consuming ordeal. They face competition for the overcrowded buses that then must navigate congested roads filled with the surging waves of workers heading in the same direction. The stress resumes for the return home. Riders have to line up and often wait several hours before a bus arrives with available seats or reasonable standing room. Time spent on line and in traffic is taken away from other more productive endeavors.

Now, with the help from P4P's partner in Ghana, WeBike, the problem is solved. Adu and Yaa no longer need to wake up at dawn to join the bus or line up at night. The tandem bike that they now own can glide them quickly by the stalled lanes of traffic and into Awoshie and change an interminable and expensive four-mile journey into a manageable endeavor on their schedule. An added bonus is that the money they save on the bus commute can be used for other necessities.

The benefits of this option for travel extend beyond the advantages to Adu and Yaa. Two less people are dependent on fossil fuels and are not contributing to heavy pollution in the area. Two may be a small number, but as many more people gain access to reliable, cheap, and quick modes of travel, there can only be a benefit to the larger population and environment. If they can affect that change while cruising on a rather unusual set of wheels, even better.

THE SPONGE MAN The Sponge Man

by Patricia Hamill By Patricia Hamill

Opoku is a trader who deals in sponges. A lot of sponges if he is lucky. He reaches his potential customers by travelling around and hawking (calling out) his wares. Before Opoku received his bicycle, a usual day saw him transporting the sponges by hanging them around his shoulders, strapping the rest on his back, and heading off to peddle his goods on foot. Individual dry sponges are relatively light, but hauling large numbers attached to your body is a whole different thing. Then add trying to walk with these crowding your limbs. Covering long distances in a timely fashion and keeping up the energy needed to vociferously attract your buyers is not the most reasonable expectation, but Opoku's family must be fed and he has made use of what he has at his disposal: his body and voice.

While there could be worse options such as no work at all, there is no reason why Opoku and his family should not have every possible opportunity to make their days more profitable and less exhausting. Our partnership with WeBike in Ghana has given Opoku a chance to cover more ground and reach a wider customer base. He might still be crowded by the sponges, but the bike helps distribute the weight and gets him to his destinations with less exertion. Good health and fitness also replace exhaustion. What is extremely important to keep in mind is that Opoku lives in a very busy and often congested area of Ghana called Accra. Covering long distances is not an unusual part of the life of many of the people we have spotlighted over the years, but the type of commute is to be considered. Some of the people who now use bikes travel long dusty roads, some travel rocky and treacherous hills, others busy streets. Opoku's work takes him through large towns and neighborhoods where maneuvering on foot with awkward bulk can become incredibly difficult. Now, any reader can attest to the fact that wheels cover more distance than feet, so, with the bicycle, Opoku has the opportunity to reach so many more customers in this consumer-rich region. All he has needed is a way to cover more ground so he could reach a more inland town like Kaneshie and also reach one more in the direction of the coast like Manprobi. With the bike, he can plan more varied daily routes and make a wider sweep of the map.



The Sponge man, Opoku on his daily route.

Chris Van Dine

<http://goo.gl/cH13L>

Chris Van Dine is a first generation professional racer who grew up living the mountain bike lifestyle from its beginnings. At an early age, Chris developed a taste for speed and won his first mountain bike race when he was eight. His proclivity for travel and adventure has taken him to pinnade experiences and jaw dropping first descents from Alaska to Patagonia. After being confronted with the realities of the developing world, Chris realized that his passion and experience could actually impact peoples' lives on a basic level. From that point, his mission became one of ambassadorship and philanthropy.



Jenna Lollis & Chris VanDine Mt. biking in Guatemala - <http://goo.gl/cH13L>

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