

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Bicycle Town USA

Tucson has been praised as a "Bicycle Paradise" and the "No. 1 Bike Town in the US." Let's review where bicycles came from and what Tucson has to offer.

Bicycle History

In 1817, 36 years before Tucson became part of US Territory, a German baron invented a walking machine with two same-size, in-line wooden wheels (front wheel steerable) on a wood frame which you straddled and propelled by pushing your feet against the ground.

The first bicycle you could ride appeared in 1865, when pedals were applied directly to the front wheel. This machine, called the velocipede (fast foot), was popularly known as the "bone shaker" because it was made entirely of wood, then later with metal tires, and produced a very uncomfortable ride on the cobblestone streets of the period.

The high wheel bicycle came on the scene in 1870. This all metal machine had a huge front wheel and solid rubber tires – the combination making for a very unstable conveyance. To improve safety, the smaller wheel was put in front.

The next innovation came in the 1880s and 1890s when improved metallurgy allowed the use of a fine chain and sprocket to position the pedals between same-size wheels. Speed control was obtained through variable gear ratios. Pneumatic tires became available at about the same time. Now bicycles were relatively safe, comfortable, affordable and extremely popular.

Kid's bicycles were introduced just after the First World War and evolved into glamorous, ostentatious, and heavy designs. Cruiser bikes were the bicycle standard in the US from the 1930s to the 1950s, with heavy frames and balloon tires for comfort, single speed operation, and coaster brakes. Some of us remember the lighter "English 3-speeds" of the 1950s and 10-speed derailleur bikes popular in the 1970s.

Today, bicycle types have expanded to match specific kinds of riding, like road riding or off-road riding. Road bicycles are designed for traveling at speed on paved roads or bicycle paths, with a fine frame, thin tires, and a short wheelbase. Mountain bikes are designed for off-road cycling, featuring highly durable frames and wheels, wide-gauge treaded tires, suspension systems, and hydraulic or mechanical disc brakes. Modern cruiser bikes come with three to seven speeds. Hybrid bicycles are a compromise between mountain and road style bikes, like the popular comfort bikes designed for easy riding. Other types of bicycles are intended for specialty riding, like touring, racing, or motocross (BMX).

Visits to two local bicycle shops showed me that bicycling is big business today. Although starting in the low hundreds, prices range up to \$10,000 for sleek specialty machines. "Custom fitting" the rider to the bicycle is a standard service as is maintenance and repair. Accessories – everything from seasonal clothing to GPS navigation systems – are sold alongside the bicycles.

Bicycling in Tucson

So what kind of bicycling does Tucson provide for today's enthusiastic bike riders? The answer is, all of the above – and a lot of it!

Tucson boasts more than 500 miles of metro road cycling paths. These “bicycle boulevards” are usually shared low-volume, low-speed streets that have been set up for through bicycle traffic with signage, pavement markings, and intersection crossing bicycle paths.

Tucson's exceptional road cycling route is the 55-mile Urban Loop, the popular bike and pedestrian path that follows the Rillito and Santa Cruz Rivers before “looping” around south and east Tucson. Pima County will soon add the Pima Sun Trail, another loop of 59 miles, that will follow the Central Arizona Project canal through Avra Valley and across Tucson's west side.

But it's mountain biking that cements Tucson's reputation as a leading cycling town for natives and a destination for tourists. Cyclists can ride more than 300-miles of varied singletrack trails at more than 25 locations in and around Tucson, including our nearby mountains. These trails range from steep, technically difficult trails, that provide speed or endurance challenges, to easier trails for all skill levels.

The Tucson Metro Bike Map, available on the web at www.bikeped.pima.gov, shows where all these road cycling and mountain trails are located. Just *Google* “Tucson bicycle trails” for descriptions of individual trails.

Special Events

Tucson celebrates its cycling popularity with two special annual racing events.

For the last 26 years, the Tucson Bicycle Classic, a three-day challenging stage race, has been held west of Tucson on desert terrain. This year's program on March 2-4, 2012 included a short time trial, a road race, and a circuit race. Riders have to complete each stage in order to start the next stage. This well organized event has men's and women's categories for professional, amateur, master, and junior cyclists. Entry fees and prizes are based on category.

Tucson's blockbuster cycling event is El Tour de Tucson that has been held for 29 straight years on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, this year on November 17th. This charity-fundraising happening draws more than 9,000 people “from around the US and beyond,” with events for all ages and abilities, from novice to professional. This year the 111-mile main event, that circles the perimeter of Tucson, will start and finish at Sixth Avenue, south of Broadway Boulevard, across from the Children's Museum in downtown Tucson.

Combine all this with Tucson's fabulous desert and mountain environment, and outstanding weather, and you can see why Tucson is “Bicycle Town USA.”

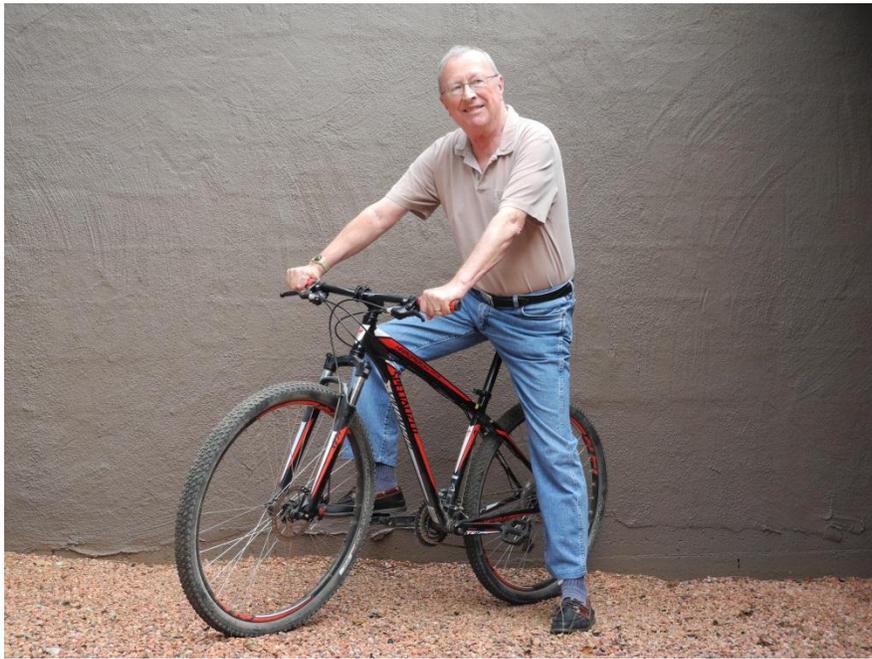
Additional Sources and Information: *Arizona Daily Star* (July 19, September 20, 2012), *History of the Bicycle* (Wikipedia), *pedalinghistory.com*, *tucsonbicycleclassic.com*, *visittucson.org*.



The high wheel bicycle of the 1870s was very unstable. (Courtesy of Wikipedia Commons)



*Bobby Ring proudly shows off his brand-new Schwinn 3-speed bicycle.
(Courtesy Ring family album, 1952)*



Bob Ring tries out David Wood's Hardrock Sport Disc 29 mountain bike. (Courtesy of Pat Wood, 2012)