

Pedaling for a Cause

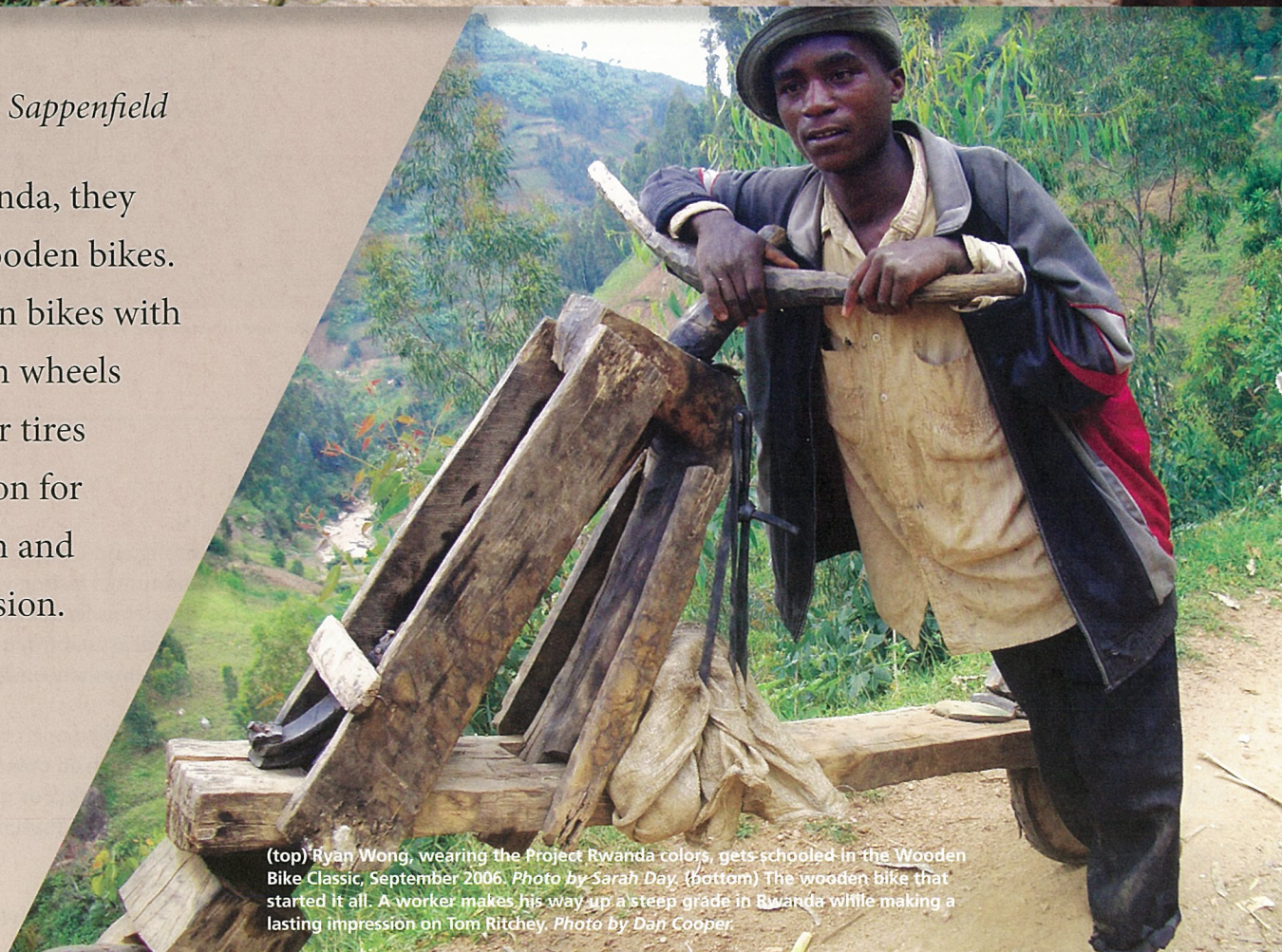


Project Rwanda

A Tool and a Symbol of Hope

by H. E. Sappenfield

In Rwanda, they ride wooden bikes. Wooden bikes with wooden wheels with car tires nailed on for traction and suspension.



(top) Ryan Wong, wearing the Project Rwanda colors, gets schooled in the Wooden Bike Classic, September 2006. Photo by Sarah Day. (bottom) The wooden bike that started it all. A worker makes his way up a steep grade in Rwanda while making a lasting impression on Tom Ritchey. Photo by Dan Cooper.

When you're riding around and seeing how they relate to you when you're on a bike instead of in a Land Rover, you realize all they really want in terms of us was met through the connection of the bicycle.

It's not that there aren't metal junkers around. They ride these homemade babies because metal isn't strong enough, and the bikes have become the tools that facilitate a meager survival for Rwanda's 500,000 coffee farmers.

The people load these bikes with just-picked coffee cherries, haul the cherries to the community washing station where they're sold, then they ride back. The faster the cherries arrive, the better the coffee and the higher the profit.

Rwanda is called the "Switzerland of Africa," and farmers roll upwards of 200 pounds over six to 12 hours to the washing stations. Talk about endurance athletes. Except this isn't recreation; this is survival.

In March, the first "coffee bikes" arrived in Kigali, Rwanda. These high-tech tools are designed specifically for Rwanda's mountains with a single, low-g geared derailleur and long, extruded aluminum rear racks and beefy wheels for 300-pound loads.

The coffee bikes are Tom Ritchey's dream and part of a three-phase plan facilitated by his non-profit, Project Rwanda (projectrwanda.org), which aims to assist this tiny African country via two wheels, pedals and the universal, practical magic that is cycling.

In December 2005, cycling legend Ritchey first visited Rwanda. He was struck by the perseverance and stories of these people and their country, where in 1994, civil war and the ensuing tribal genocide ended in the deaths of 800,000 Rwandans in 100 days.

Ritchey was inspired by the lack of cynicism in the country's people, despite the history, by the beauty of this "Land of a Thousand Hills" and by the role of the bicycle.

"Just like I have my tools and build a bike in the United States," Ritchey says, "they are inspired by the bike so much so that they make a wooden bike. These are people who didn't even know that the mountain bike had been invented."

But he was also touched by the role of bikes as barrier breakers.

"When you're riding around and see how they relate to you when you're on a bike instead of in a Land Rover, you



An intrigued crowd gathers around the first production Coffee Bike. Photo by Jay Ritchey

realize all they really want in terms of us was met through the connection of the bicycle," he says. "You could see them thinking, 'Hey, there's a white guy on a bicycle; that's cool.' They wanted to ride with you, race. The bike eliminated fear and prejudice."

Ritchey gathered a volunteer board and founded Project Rwanda in early 2006. Its mission is to facilitate the bike as a tool and symbol of hope.

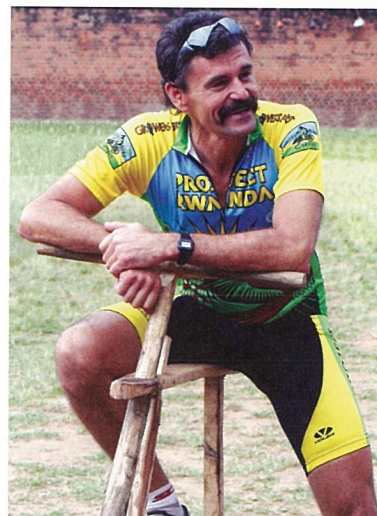
"I had a lot of help with the financial and non-profit logistics. It came into being with a lot of people volunteering, saying, 'What can I do?'" Ritchey explains.

After Ritchey returned to his garage in Woodside, Calif., where he designed some of the first mountain biking frames

for affluent recreation, he took to creating this new kind of bike for survival. The project has gone gangbusters since its inception.

Besides frame design, Ritchey considered Rwanda's other impacts on cycling.

"In the West, so many shipments come from Asia over the sea. For Rwanda, they're landlocked, with security issues in other countries, high insurance; it costs three times as much to ship a container. They



Tom Ritchey enjoys a technology-free moment at the Wooden Bike Classic, September 2006. Photo by Sarah Day



need well-organized cargo to get things as efficiently as possible," he says.

Ritchey responded to this challenge by creating a bike with a simple assembly, cutting down on shipping costs and making assembly easier.

Ritchey's son, Jay, arrived with the first shipment of bikes March 1 and is training local men to assemble and maintain them with the help of mechanics from Scallywags bicycle cooperative in Minneapolis, Minn.

"The bikes have been imprisoned in the customs since April 2, and we will have them emancipated in a few days (fingers crossed)," wrote Jay Ritchey in his blog (ubikerrwanda.blogspot.com) six weeks later. "We will be building hundreds of bikes a day while simultaneously distributing them in cooperatives."

The bikes will be offered to farmers at cost and financed in conjunction with a long-term study on improving coffee production in Rwanda through Texas A&M University. Studies have shown that the coffee bike reduces travel time for the cherries from six to eight hours down to two to four and increases income by

15 cents per pound. Project Rwanda is counting on this increased income.

"Eighty percent of Rwandans are subsistence farmers and don't make profit," says Ritchey. "They're just not earning money." Ritchey hopes this increase in profits will help them not only pay for the bikes but create a small income. Their goal is to get 1,000 coffee bikes to farmers by year's end.

Ritchey had other visions of the bike breaking barriers in Rwanda as well.

"I thought to myself," reflects Ritchey, "these guys are on pieces of junk and they're keeping up with me, eating half as much as me. I wondered, 'What would it be like to give one of these guys a nice bike and work with them and see what level their fitness is at?'"

And so, the Rwandan National Mountain Bike Team was born.

In February, Jonathan "Jock" Boyer, 2006 Solo-Enduro Race Across America winner, traveled to Rwanda to begin coaching the team. After considerable testing, six athletes were selected.

This March, they launched the team by competing in South Africa's six-day, 780-km Cape Epic and were thrown into the chaos of mountain biking extremes, one day suffering 16 flats. They finished a respectable 23rd in a highly competitive, world-class field of 278 teams. They travelled to America to race in the Tour of Gila May 3-6. They will race the Tour of Rwanda June 19 and later the African Games. Their dream is to compete in the 2008 Olympics.

At left, top to bottom) Team Rwanda riders chill out after a day of training.

Photo by Motivity Pictures.

Team Rwanda riders crank out a training session.

Photo by Motivity Pictures

Team Rwanda riders finish a stage at the Cape Epic, South Africa.

Photo by Motivity Pictures.



(Above, left to right) Tom Ritchey presents President Kagame with a Team Rwanda jersey.

Photo Courtesy President Kagame

Future wooden bike champions check out the racing at the first Wooden Bike Classic.

Photo by Sarah Day

Team Rwanda, taking a break from training, poses in a doorway at the Tea Plantation guest house.

Photo by Jock Boyer

A coffee grower tests the Coffee Bike under load.

Photo by Jay Ritchey

"It's a way in which Rwanda can develop a unique identity with the outside world," Ritchey says.

The team's multi-faceted presence will also be linked with Wooden Bike Coffee, ingeniously marketing the small farmers back home. Ritchey hopes it will raise awareness of Rwanda's viability as an economic and travel destination. He also hopes it will give the Rwandan people a sense of national pride.

In the first week of September, Project Rwanda will offer a tour of this country for 15 lucky cyclists. "It will be professionally guided with meetings with government officials, visits to churches, the coffee co-ops, things like that," says Ritchey. "It's going to be staged a bit for cinematic value and will end with the Wooden Bike Classic," a wooden bike race.

He's thinking documentary. For the rest of us schmucks who don't get in, Ritchey advises, "It's beautiful and not that hard of a country to tour on your own."

Wooden Bike Coffee

Project Rwanda is doing more than building better bikes for the Rwandan coffee farmers to transport their coffee. The Project is helping the people use their original wooden bikes as a marketing tool to promote their high-quality coffee worldwide as Wooden Bike Coffee.

Each of Rwanda's 500,000 coffee farmers tends about 200 trees—like farmers with a small garden—which means the plants receive far more care than plantation coffee.

With recent upgrades in coffee production, like more washing stations, Rwandan coffee's quality has grown exponentially, a fact reflected by Costco's commitment to purchase Rwandan coffee and Starbucks' recent decision to base its African operations there.

"By purchasing Rwandan Wooden Bike Coffee you will help Rwandan families increase their income earning potential and provide hope for the future," says the Wooden Bike Coffee website.

It's pretty simple: that essential morning cup or three of java could directly affect a Rwandan's quality of life. Wooden Bike Coffee can be purchased at woodenbikecoffee.com or via the Project Rwanda website at projectrwanda.org.



Tom Ritchey rests above a coffee washing station in the Karongi region, Rwanda. *Photo by Jock Boyer*