

THE 10-SPEEDS ON WEST STREET

It was 1965, the year of Martin Luther King's Montgomery march, Bob Dylan going electric at Newport, the New York World's Fair ... and my first "touring" bike. Here's what it was like.

by John Schubert

In the summer of 1965, a funny thing happened on a short stretch of West Street. Five kids abruptly acquired 10-speed bikes. All five were boys. All five were either 13 or 14 years old. Four got a French brand, Astra. One got a Schwinn Varsity. And at least three of the five — I was one of them — dreamed of riding the 150 miles from our town of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, to Boston. None of us knew if people did that sort of thing, but we

couldn't see why not.

Sophisticated bicycles were few and far between in the U.S. then — even though the state of the art was reasonably good. (If you knew how, you could order a superb triple-chainwheel touring bike from a European builder. It would have "only" five cogs in back, but it could climb any mountain, carry your gear in waterproof waxed-cotton panniers, and treat you to the delightful handling qualities of Reynolds 531 double-butted steel tubing.) My best guess is that a few dozen bike shops nationwide sold high-quality bikes and supported the clubs and teams that kept the knowledge alive.

But on West Street, we didn't get state of the art. We got entry-level French 10-speeds in your choice of trim levels — \$65, \$75 or \$85 — or the \$66.95 Schwinn Varsity. These bikes were insufferably crude by today's standards, and that \$65 equates to \$439 in today's dollars.

The French bikes were light weight, compared to what we were used to, but their drivetrains stunk. The Schwinn was heavier, but its drivetrain worked better.

I got a French bike, and it was a bit of culture shock in our house. For starters, the French bikes came in different frame sizes. This is still news to many custom-



John's Astra is long gone, but he rescued a similar frame from the trash can at a bicycle flea market a few years back. The frame in the pictures suffered damage from a front-end collision.

ers today; so you can imagine how novel the concept was in the year that *The Sound of Music* debuted on Broadway. We discovered frame-size differences when we lined up my bike next to the bike belonging to my neighbor Douglas. My bike had a 54-centimeter frame and Doug's had a 58-centimeter frame. So the head tubes on the two bikes were four centimeters different in length. (Doug was taller than I, and I suppose the bike-shop owner eyeballed us and gave us each the correct size. But he never explained frame sizing to us.)

My dad, the ever-observant engineer, looked at the difference in head tube lengths and rolled his eyes at what he figured were the world's most casual

manufacturing tolerances. He then noted that we had paid extra to not get a kickstand.

At that point, dad lost all interest in 10-speed bikes. I was on my own to figure the thing out.

Back then, how would a kid in a small town learn what frame sizes were — or anything else about the craft of riding well? I'd already exhausted the pathetic bicycling books in the public library. If you could find *American Cycling* magazine, it might tell you — but it only sold a few thousand copies nationwide. The then-tiny

League of American Wheelmen was just getting reorganized after two decades of dormancy.

All we had were the bikes and the thrill of self-discovery.

No, the French bikes didn't come with owners' manuals. The only written instruction with the bikes said that the cables never needed greasing because they were factory lubed with bisulfide or molybdenum.

Old dudes remember the Huret Allvit rear derailleur. It barely worked. The Huret front derailleur on the French bikes, however, didn't work at all, and spilled the chain with almost every attempted shift. It was a design that

Schwinn had rejected (and gotten Huret to make a different, far better, design). On the Astras, the chain cage was attached to the parallelogram mechanism by a joint that allowed freedom in all directions, and the chain cage could wander in any direction unless it was very securely tightened down. The relevant nut could only be reached by a nine-millimeter socket wrench. I knew of no metric wrenches or even any socket wrenches anywhere on West Street.

So I accepted the fact that I would usually spill the chain when I attempted to make a front shift.

It didn't matter much, because I spent most of my time being a he-man in the highest gear. Wasn't that how you got stronger and rode faster?

The first time I rode a borrowed Schwinn Varsity, I turned my nose up at its heavier weight, but cringed with jealousy at its better-performing front derailleur.

The one-piece Ashtabula-style cranksets of the Schwinn were another annoying superiority. They looked less elegant than the three-piece cotted cranks on the Astras, but crank cotters nearly always failed. If you owned such a bike, you probably remember the cranks getting loose on the spindle, and crude big-hammer home repairs to install new cotters.

On the plus side, the Astras of 1965 had genuine leather saddles. The seat post was freakishly short (I'll guess about 12 centimeters, compared with the 18 centimeters that was standard on better bikes back then, or the 25 or 30 centimeters you see

as standard today). So after a year or two, I grew and the bike didn't fit.

The \$65 bike had steel rims, CLB sidepull brakes, and axle nuts front and rear. The \$75 bike added centerpull brakes and large-flange hubs. The \$85 bike added quick-release wheels. The 10 gears ranged from 39 inches to 108 inches.



In 1965, very few frames had derailleur hangers on the rear dropouts. The derailleur had its own clamp.

As was universal among European bikes at that time, the frames were lugged and brazed from standard-diameter steel tubing. It was undoubtedly an inexpensive carbon-steel alloy with a huge wall thickness. An Astra frame that I acquired years later weighs a hefty 5.84 pounds, about 1 1/2 pounds heavier than most of the touring bikes you would buy today.

My frame had a brazed-on boss for one derailleur. The Huret clamp that wrapped around that boss had a second

boss for the front derailleur. I believe they designed the frames that way so they could build them up with either five or 10 speeds.

The French bikes were branded Astra, but made by Motobecane. At the same time, Motobecane also sold bikes in the U.S. under the Orly brand name.

Why the change in brand names? In 1985, a Motobecane executive explained: "A young man riding one of our bikes at night without lights was struck by a lorry. He sued us. We decided not to respond to the lawsuit. But we wanted to sell bikes in the U.S."

My Astra led a hard life. I rode it with teenage enthusiasm and machismo, maintained it enthusiastically but cluelessly, banged up the wheels, bent the steerer tube, and strapped on all sorts of ill-fitting accessories. Either it had a very low bottom bracket or I was clueless about pedaling around sharp corners, because I would routinely wreck pedals by scraping them on the pavement. From those first five-mile around-town rides, it grew to a series of 50-mile day rides and, in 1971 a three-day tour of the California coast.

My Astra is long gone. One day in 1973, I walked to where I had locked it on campus, intending to ride it to my dorm. All that was left was a piece of my chain.

Damn, I still miss it. **AC**

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PHOTOS BY JOHN SCHUBERT

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