

THE MIRROR MA



Chuck Harris begins work on another rearview mirror, bending a spoke into a bracket for mounting on a helmet.

N OF GAMBIER

Story and photos by Greg Siple



Imagine if you could come up with a simple bicycle accessory that you could manufacture yourself. This device would weigh less than an ounce and require only three parts that can be fashioned from recycled materials, some of which you can find scattered along the roadside as you bicycle through the countryside. The tools required for manufacturing your device will fit on your kitchen table.

With very little marketing effort you are approached by dozens, then hundreds, and finally thousands of enthusiastic customers. As the years roll by you find that you can support your family with your one-man, table top manufacturing plant. And some of your customers write to tell you how your simple accessory has greatly improved their bicycling experience or even saved them from serious injury or death.

This is, in fact, the story of Chuck Harris, who, since 1969, has made 88,000 rearview mirrors that mount on eyeglasses and helmets.

Chuck was born in 1935 in New Jersey. When he was seven years old he contracted Rheumatic fever. The pain and fatigue kept him out of school and bedridden for two years.

“That’s why I took to the bike with such enthusiasm,” he recalls.

After his long convalescence, the bicycle represented freedom and a way to explore and connect with the world. He taught himself to ride a bike with wooden rims and glue on tires from the 1920s. In 1948 he bought a 3-speed Hercules, “my first real bike.”

During high school, he used his bike to deliver telegrams, a job that his older brother had held before him. After school, he was pulling in \$.86 an hour, “plus tips sometimes,” and a \$.02 cents-per-mile vehicle allowance.

Soon, he was looking beyond the streets of town. He set out into rural New Jersey with increasing frequency. In 1950, he did his first 100-mile day (from South Orange, New Jersey, to Nyack, New York, in 14 hours).

After graduating from high school, he went on to Worcester Technical Institute in Massachusetts, where he majored in electrical engineering. He was the only student there getting around by bike. There he spotted a Raleigh Clubman in a bike-shop window where it had been languishing for

two years. He quickly laid down \$75 for the bike and equipped it with a Simplex derailleur that he had to go to New York City to find.

“It opened up a whole new world to me,” he says. He found himself completely distracted by evening rides and weekend overnights to various New England hotels. More than once he made the 104-mile round trip to Springfield because “there was a Friendly’s Ice Cream Shop.” The distraction of the bicycle was complete. He flunked out.

Nonetheless, in 1959 he found work



Every Chuck Harris mirror is handmade.

as an engineer in Stamford, Connecticut, with an electronics firm. His passion for year-round long rides continued. On one ride back to New Jersey to visit his parents, “my eyelids kept freezing shut on the downhills.” On another, “I fell asleep on a descent and woke up in a pile of rocks.” He became active with American Youth Hostel groups in Hartford and Boston, and met Alma “who I tricked onto a tandem” at the Lodlow, Massachusetts, hostel.

In 1961 he was drafted and the U.S. Army sent him to Alaska where he served as a microwave communication engineer. But his thoughts were with Alma back in Massachusetts. He bought a ring at the PX and sent it to her, proposing marriage. She accepted, he returned for the wedding, and they embarked on an unusual (for Chuck) form of honeymoon.

For the first time in his life, Chuck got a license and a car for a five-week meander back to Alaska with the tandem on the roof rack. The roomy 1957 Pontiac got 10 miles to the gallon.

After his discharge from the service, he and Alma returned to New England where Chuck put his electrical engineering skills to work to support his growing family — Louise born in 1964, and Bonnie in 1966.

Chuck doesn’t claim to be the inventor of the eyeglass-mounted mirror. In the mid 1960s, he met a cardiologist on a bike tour. The doctor had a dental mirror taped to his glasses. Chuck thought it was a good idea but it would be a couple of years before he decided to make his first mirror from scratch. He made his prototypes from used spokes and cut the mirror backing from discarded aluminum cans, sticking everything together with epoxy. He handed them out to his cycling friends and began getting orders from strangers. His table-top business was established and became his primary occupation. The mirrors made their appearance in *Popular Mechanics*, *Consumer Report*, *National Geographic* and *Playboy*. Sales took off but he only sold them through the mail and at cycling events.

Over the years, he has faced stiff competition from businesses that sell manufactured mirrors but, unlike Chuck, they come and go.

I first met Chuck in the early 1970s, and after many years of seeing him at Tour of the Scioto River Valley (TOSRV) where he sells his mirrors, I finally had a chance to visit him at his home in Gambier, Ohio. It was a treat. He has a terrifically cluttered “workshop” that has spilled out of the garage into the yard where dozens of projects are simultaneously underway. He is still the engineer and has created a Dr. Seuss meets Rube Goldberg environment in which to work.

He walked me around his operation, showing me the various stages of mirror making, his pedal-powered lawnmower, bicycle jewelry, a derailleur made entirely from parts available in a hardware store, various bicycles, and some dentures he was building around a spoke.

Something I found particularly fascinating is the way he goes about bending a spoke for a mirror. He does it with a pair of needlenose pliers. There is no jig or measurement. He can do it with his eyes closed. In recent years he has changed from aluminum cans for the mirror backing to plastic soda bottles. He often sandwiches a postage stamp or a clipping from a magazine between the plastic and the mirror. Unlike



Private fitting. If you buy a mirror from Chuck at an event, he'll take the time to adjust it perfectly for you.



The wild life. Chuck and Alma lead Greg to the ice cream shop.



Bottle cages. Chuck's recumbent with soda-bottle toe clips.



BUILT TO LAST

My brother, Doug Siple, uses one of Chuck's mirrors and rides thousands of miles every year. When I asked him about it, I discovered that he has been using the same mirror that he bought 39 years ago.

"I acquired my first Chuck Harris mirror when he set up his stand at TOSRV72.

Initially, the mirror struck me as a novelty and I even put it away during my racing years. It wasn't the height of style

to show up at a state championship sporting a mirror.

The mirror got it's first major outing when I rode Bikecentennial76 from Oregon to Virginia. In riding 70-plus days straight with the mirror, I'm sure my brain consigned some slacker cells in the occipital lobe to master this special stream of data. What started out as a novelty became a critical part of my perception of my cycling environment. I am aware of the vast majority of approaching cars well before the drivers spot me. As the cars

approach, I can, second by second, assess if they will pass responsibly or perhaps even if the driver is preoccupied with a cell phone. Knowing the status of tons of steel flying towards your back is priceless!

Nowadays, there are all sorts of mirrors on the market which evolved from the original Chuck Harris mirror, generally looking like they emerged from a plastics factory in Shenzhen, China. I like having a simple hand-crafted tool, bought directly from the maker who took pains to use recycled materials to create it!"

Who needs a red cape?



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manufactured mirrors every one of Chuck's mirrors is unique.

In the middle of my visit Chuck and Alma hopped on their recumbent tandem, provided me with a loaner and we biked off on the local rail trail for some ice cream. For Chuck, ice cream is still a great excuse to put in a few miles.

I bought my first mirror from Chuck in 1972, just before setting out to bicycle from Alaska to Argentina. Within a couple of hundred miles, I realized how important that mirror would be to me.

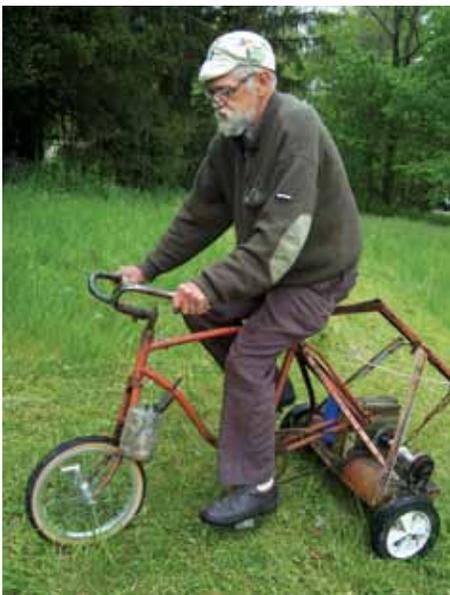
I wouldn't consider riding in a car without my seatbelt in place, and I never ride without Chuck's mirror on my glasses. In fact, it's puzzlement to me why bicyclists do not routinely use a mirror of some kind. Most people would feel very ill at ease to drive without a mirror, yet ride a bike blind to what is approaching from behind.

If you'd like one of Chuck's mirrors, you'll have to call or write. He doesn't have a website or email: *Chuck Harris, Ultra-Light Touring Shop, P.O. Box 363, Gambier, Ohio 43022, (740) 427-3404.*

Or you might catch him at a big bicycle event in the Ohio area. He will be at TOSRV on May 7-8. Look for him at Friday night registration or at the Chillicothe lunch stop.

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Greg Siple is art director and co-founder of Adventure Cycling Association, and a bicycle commuter since 1957. He is old enough that he avoids looking in mirrors unless it's to see what's coming up from behind.



Cutting edge. Chuck demonstrates his emissions-free riding lawnmower.



Plain or fancy. Mirror customers have a variety of designs to choose from.



Jeweler. Chuck has created some tiny scale-model bicycles from brass.