

'A MAN OF LEGEND'

From Tokyo to Missoula, Matthew Cohn Changed the Course of Bikecentennial

BY JUNE J. SIPLE



Above: A young “Cohn-san” in a Tokyo department store, when he was a student at Waseda University, 1970–1971. *Above right:* Waiting for the bus on a Tokyo street corner.



COURTESY MATTHEW COHN (3)

Supporting one of his signature Hawaiian shirts, Matthew Cohn pumped up the tires of his favorite mountain bike, a Ghost FS7 from REI. Even in the mid-summer heat of his garage in Helena, Montana, he never ran out of breath and was obviously in decent shape. Hours later, this boisterous yet laid-back and gentle human being was still spouting bike-speak. The 66-year-old then asked for a lift to pick up his newest and “probably my last” touring bike, a Salsa Marrakesh. A local bike shop, The Garage, had built it from the frame up with components of Cohn’s choice.

His Marrakesh is decked out with primarily Shimano parts, a predictable choice as he was the first American ever hired by Shimano to work in Japan. By his mid-20s, Cohn had eagerly absorbed an extensive informal education in

bicycle componentry, first working for Shimano American Corporation out of New York City and then for the parent company, Shimano Industrial Co., Ltd., at the factory in Sakai, Japan, and finally back to New York working in publications and publicity for the component giant. He remains a component geek to this day.

AN ACCIDENTAL DEGREE

At 18, Matthew enrolled at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and, not drawn to any particular degree program or career, he signed up for Japanese classes.

“In my third year, I experienced a year abroad in Tokyo in 1970–1971 at Waseda University. In Japan I bought a used multi-speed bike with a huge gearshift like a car,” Matthew said. “It was the first derailleur bike I ever used, and I began to

sense the freedom of the bike as I moved easily amongst the Japanese, even though Americans were unusual in Japan at the time. I didn’t know how they felt about the war and Americans as a result of WWII, but I was a 20-year-old blue-eyed foreigner at a time when there were still sections of Tokyo not yet recovered from the war.

“I graduated in only three and a half years when I realized I had earned enough credits in Asian Studies. I didn’t really plan to graduate in Asian Studies, but that’s how things worked out,” he said.

This choice set his path for life.

At 22, Matthew returned to live with his parents, Sylvia and George, in a suburban neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey. “It was difficult for them when I was an 18- to 24-year-old,” he said. “I went to college with short hair wearing a tie and [my dad’s] sports coat, and came back on Thanksgiving in long hair and probably a straggly beard ... pretty full of myself. They were probably thinking ‘What happened to our boy?’ When I returned from studying in Japan, I became very much involved with student protests.”

Matthew and a friend made the ulti-

mate counter-culture trip — to Woodstock — in his mother's borrowed car and with not much more than a blanket.

"My mother said 'Have a nice time dear,' when I asked to go, and then she sees it on TV!" he said.

JAPAN-BOUND

But it was his parents who Matthew said were the greatest influences in his life. "My parents, they gave permission to be me." And after Woodstock, it was his father who connected him to Shimano. "Dad said 'I know you like riding, and you speak Japanese,'" Matthew said. "Dad introduced me to a friend of his, Phillip Kamler, who was in the bicycle industry and knew Yoshi Shimano.

"The timing was perfect. I put on a suit and tie and rode the train to New York City to meet with Yoshi Shimano. I sat down with him and said, 'Do you want me to speak in English or Japanese?'" "In Japanese," Mr. Shimano decided, and that sealed the deal.

"He hired me, although I don't think he was sure what to do with me," Matthew said. "Then I went around as translator for a Shimano engineer and a Shimano salesman, and to do market research."

As part of that work, Matthew traveled with the Shimano Caravan staff around the country to introduce the brand's first road-racing component set, Dura-Ace.

"They were mounted like jewels in a suitcase. Shimano's goal was to become the largest parts manufacturing company in the world, so they had to go for the high-end parts market as well," he said.

Despite the new offerings, Matthew said the caravan received a poor reception in many bike shops due to a problem that still plagues shops today — cheap department store bikes that cost more to repair than a customer had originally paid for the whole bike.

"So the bike shop would say, 'That'll be \$80 for the repair,' and the customer would say, 'But I only paid \$59 for the bike!'" he said.

Then, in 1973, Shimano sent Matthew to the company's factory in Sekai, Japan, for 19 months. "Back in those days, when you went to work for a Japanese company, you're likely going to work there for life," he said. Treated just like any other of Shimano's 1,200-plus workers,

he was housed and fed by the company, earning \$284.72 a month by 1974. "What have I gotten myself into?" Matthew asked himself. He lived in the company's spartan male workers' dormitory. "Sixty square feet was the room for two of us and everything we owned. We ate in the worker's cafeteria where breakfast usually was cold rice from the night before, miso soup, some pickled vegetables, and all the green tea you could drink.

"I think they threw me in with the Japanese workers to see if I would sink or swim. Then they put me on an assembly line with mostly older women who were widowed from the war. We got paid once a month, in cash, in an envelope," Matthew said, but he had few expenses.

footing in Oda's advertising division as they worked closely together on publications, including the company's trade magazine published in English, *Shimano World* (renamed *Shimano Dealer News* by the 1990s and published until the end of 2000). As assistant editor and English corrector, he also worked on Shimano's book, *The History of Shimano*, published in January 1975. (Matthew had already written most of the articles for *Shimano World* before moving to Japan.)

"It was also my job to correct 'how to install' English instruction sheets. An engineer, [Kyoji] Hayashi, had his desk next to me because he wanted to learn English and we became very good friends," Cohn said. "He taught me a



Outing with friends and their kids in Osaka, Japan, around 1973. Back row, from right to left: Matthew Cohn, Yoshio Oda, and Masayoshi Hara and Tatsuo Yamamoto of Nova Advertising, which was the initial graphic design house for Shimano World.

"After six months, Shimano moved me to my own apartment. It was a lonely time — you work six days a week and I'd go to Osaka on my day off and go to the movies and coffee shops."

Matthew, though, had a skill too unique to keep him on the assembly line: he was a native English speaker.

"They moved me into marketing and advertising; there I met Yoshio Oda [Matthew's boss], who became a dear friend and one of the positive influences on my life," he said. Matthew found solid

lot about components. At the time, 10 percent of Shimano's expenses were budgeted for R&D, far more than European parts manufacturers. In the 1970s, when I worked there, they introduced index shifting [Matthew named it the POSITRON], auto adjusting brakes, and the disc brake.

"I started gravitating to advertising, and bike magazines from all over the world would end up on my desk. I would look for trends for Shimano. Then, in the winter of '73-'74, a *Bike World* magazine

comes across my desk with the American Bikecentennial birthday cake and candles graphic with one paragraph. That's how it all began for me."

Matthew then convinced executives to support the budding Bikecentennial nonprofit. "Looking back, I'm amazed I was able to talk them into it!" he said. Shimano helped sponsor Bikecentennial "probably in excess of \$100,000 in 1970s dollars — it wasn't really a big deal to them, because at the time Shimano had \$150 million in sales worldwide."

SUPPORTING A MOVEMENT

Matthew then reached out to then-Bikecentennial Executive Director Dan Burden and discovered that he was planning to be in Miami in December of 1974 at an American toy show. "It [had] a bike section among all the toys, as bikes were considered toys in the U.S. at the time," Matthew recalled. He, along with Shimano's marketing crew, flew from Japan to Florida and met Burden to discuss ways Shimano could get involved.

"Shimano [would be] the key for publicity in the bicycling world and beyond. Overall awareness of the route/event was increased dramatically when Shimano started promoting the sponsorship. It helped give legitimacy to Bikecentennial — in a time before the internet and social media, it was invaluable," Matthew said.

By 1975, Matthew had been transferred back to New York to manage issues with dealers and shops. And it was there at Shimano's corporate office that he met part-time office manager Mary Ellen Holverson. Matthew was immediately attracted, but Mary Ellen not so much.

"He annoyed the heck out of me, at first," she said. "He sat down right next to me and wouldn't leave me alone." But within six months they were together. "It was love at eighth sight," Matthew laughed. They've been life partners and tandem riding partners ever since.

That was also the year that Matthew flew to Missoula to visit Bikecentennial in the organization's rough-and-tumble office space above Eddie's Club downtown.

"I said 'I'm the guy from Shimano.' I'm wearing a tie and I'm 25 years old. I came there with Oda to finalize the [1976] calendar. Bikecentennial was using

the tops of doors as desks," he said. "This was late fall in 1975. Dan says, 'Let's go for a ride' [in a car] and we ended up at Jerry Johnson Hot Springs in Idaho. We all took off our clothes, and the snow was coming down — all very Japanese. I called Mary Ellen that night from Missoula and said 'I love you, but I think I want to come to Missoula. I want to work for this organization and be in this place.'

"I didn't know much about who I was, but I knew what I wasn't. I wasn't a guy who would live in New York City and wear a suit. The energy of the people working together above Eddie's Club — that's who I was."

Shimano's sponsorship of Bikecentennial took many forms, which included:

- Printing a Bikecentennial full-color touring calendar for 1976, designed by Lynn Kessler in Ohio and distributed to bike shops around the world.
- Printing T-shirts, caps, and water bottles for Bikecentennial to sell and pocket the income.
- Including a Bikecentennial logo in all the company's magazine ads, including *Sports Illustrated*. The ads read "Support Bikecentennial 76."
- Urging "all bicycle-related organizations (retailers, wholesalers, clubs, and trade associations) to stand behind the B76 with tangible support" in *Shimano World*.
- Producing and distributing 5,000 full-color Bikecentennial bike shop counter-top/wall displays with tear-off cards.
- Printing full-color posters in Spanish/English, and "probably copies made in French, Dutch, German, Japanese as well," Matthew said.
- Trading Bikecentennial's list of 3,000–4,000 bike-shop addresses for its own 15,000-address list of contacts.
- Traveling 10,000+ miles on the TransAM during the summer of '76, Shimano's van hauled free Shimano parts for riders in need. Other parts, accessories, and tools were donated by Bud's Bicycle Shop of Claremont, California. Driver/mechanic "Refresh, Revitalize, & Repair" John Sutton donated his labor for free repairs, and handed out cold lemonade. Bikecentennial covered his gas and food.

ANSWERING THE CALL

Matthew left Shimano at the end of the Bikecentennial summer of 1976 bound for Missoula, where Dan Burden had nicknamed him the "Shi-money guy."

"I didn't even tell them where I was

going, probably a matter of immaturity on my part. They had invested a lot in me, but I just had to follow my passion. I think there were hard feelings, you were expected to take a job for life," he said.

He arrived at the office ready to assume the role of publications director but found that the staff hadn't been prepared for his arrival — including the current publications director Charlie Seastone and his presumed replacement, future Executive Director Gary MacFadden.

"Then Dan said, 'Let's go meet the board members, because they will be the ones to hire you.' I was shocked because I thought I had already been hired, had quit my job and had moved to Missoula," he said.

Matthew got the job, but trouble was on the horizon, and in just a few short months Burden would leave and Bikecentennial's new director Dave Prouty would slash staff from more than 20 to just three in an attempt to keep the organization afloat. Matthew's position wasn't spared.

"My job was short but sweet. I was there when the lifeboats were going over the side and probably was terminated in May or June of '77," he said. "I went on unemployment but hung around the office to help out. But even after I left Bikecentennial, I was always in contact with Dave and Gary. Dave later asked, 'Do you want to help by being on the board?'"

He did, and he would serve on the board of directors for 29 years.

'A MAN OF LEGEND'

Matthew's long involvement with Bikecentennial and Adventure Cycling has given him a unique view — that of a board member spanning the administrations of multiple executive directors and countless staff. And despite all those personalities and challenges, Matthew's career is full of people drawn to him.

"I've seldom worked with anyone more fun to be around than Matthew," Dave Prouty said. "We were both hired at about the same time so we sort of gravitated toward each other as the fall of '77 progressed. Some of the funniest times I remember of living in Missoula were going to lunch with Gary, Matthew, and Greg (Siple). I could barely stay in my chair, let alone eat."

MacFadden recently said, "I've known



Above: Mary Ellen and Matthew relax on the deck of their Helena, Montana home.
Left: On tour in Europe.



him as my surprise boss, as friends, and then on the board. He's been a stalwart, [but] he always stayed in the background." Gary and Matthew helped convince the board to equip the office with computers, and later the internet, although when Matthew first heard of the internet, he said, "What's that?"

And at Shimano, a company that's grown to achieve more than \$3 billion in annual sales, Matthew is still fondly remembered as part of a bygone era at the component giant.

"At our first meeting, he talked in Japanese fluently. It was extraordinary that an American could speak in Japanese," said Cohn's former boss, Oda, now 75 years old. "Matthew was a wonderful guy, many Japanese friends thought. Even now he is a man of legend. When we talk about 'Old Shimano,' many tell humorous stories about Matthew."

Matthew was offered positions with other Japanese companies, "but it's never been about the money," he said. He and Mary Ellen were determined to stay in Montana, so he became a chimney sweep and opened a wood stove shop in Helena, where Mary Ellen had found a good job as director of the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutritional program for the state. After converting the stove shop space into a well-regarded local restaurant, they sold

In addition to their extensive involvement with Adventure Cycling, Matthew and Mary Ellen have become significant donors. "We feel it's important to give money to organizations we care about. We are able to give more, and we choose things that make a difference. We like special projects, and the new million-dollar operational endowment is vital to cover expenses and pay staff during tough times. We just bought a life membership for a friend's grandson, who is only three months old. We donated \$5,000 toward the building remodeling, and \$5,000 toward the TransAm book. I'm confident Adventure Cycling Association will be there 50, 100 years from now, doing the same things it's doing now for cyclists," he said.

it when he became the director of the Asian Center (Taiwan and Japan) for the State of Montana to represent Montana's business interests, again traveling to Japan. Afterward, he became director of the Montana Travel Bureau.

Matthew and Mary Ellen retired in 2006, which allowed them the freedom to begin a series of bicycle tours on the Atlantic Coast Route, the Underground Railroad, rides in a dozen countries, and five tours with Adventure Cycling. And with great pride, Matthew said, "I am a graduate of Adventure Cycling's leadership training"

While cycling in India on one trip, he and Mary Ellen met a local man who said, "You are a lucky, lucky, lucky man!" And that's just how he feels. **AC**

June J. Siple is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist. She thanks old and new Shimano associates for research help: Wayne Stetina, Gary A. Marcus, Bruce M. Galloway, Yoshio Oda, and John Sutton.

How to get the Perfect Bike

Start by asking the right questions:

What are your cycling dreams?

From club rides to global treks.

What are your fit and feel parameters?

Factor-in rider's proportions. Every cyclist is unique.

What are your material preferences?

Steel, stainless steel with finish and components of your choosing.



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