

In the summer of 1969, at the high point of a cultural and social revolution, my parents gave me my first bicycle. It was an emerald green "banana" bike with a matching metal-flake seat, chrome fenders, "high-rise" handlebars, and a "sissy bar." It was manufactured by the Columbia Bicycle Co. of Westfield, Massachusetts, and although my version wasn't as fancy as some of the others in the neighborhood, as far as I was concerned it was the best two-seater around. At the time, my bike and I were in perfect step with the historic changes that were taking place in our country, in a way that I would not immediately comprehend.

The "banana" bike owed more to Big Daddy Roth, Andy Warhol, and the pop culture of the 1960s than it did to its bicycle ancestors from France or Germany.

Banana bikes began their parade through Middle America in the early '60s, and their popularity continued until the mid-1970s. They originated in California, and took their styling cues from the West

Coast custom car and motorcycle culture that had started some years earlier. The originators of the style are unheralded, but it is commonly accepted that

Huffy was the company to actually produce the first "banana" bike, affectionately dubbed the "Penguin," although the company failed initially to successfully market the idea. That honor belongs to the Schwinn Bicycle Manufacturing Co., which blessed us with the

Banana Appeal

Collecting Banana Seat Bicycles from the '60s and '70s

By Don Hafner

altered fork designs on Schwinn's "Krate" series appeared as a spring front fork suspension that was liberally chromed in the style of custom motorcycles. And then there were the very creative, aerodynamically inspired chain guards. Imagine a chain guard on steroids... these simple metal stampings, on muscle bikes, were fashioned after hood scoops appearing on muscle cars of the 1960s and 1970s.

(continued on B7)

"Sting-Ray" series, and followed the concept to its high point with the "Krate" series of what are referred to as "musclebikes." Other manufacturers followed suit, such as Raleigh, AMF, and a bevy of others.

Banana bikes had great features. There was the T-handle shifter, which appeared to have been plucked from a 1969 Camaro. Shaped like a T, it came from custom car culture, popularized by the Hurst Corporation, a manufacturer of aftermarket automobile shifters and transmission kits. It was used inventively on bicycles with five speeds. The aforementioned sissy bar was a piece of bent tubing found to the rear of the seat offering the passenger a "hand hold" or the driver a back rest. Its special function was that it made leaning back to do a "wheelie" real easy. The pinstriped "cheater slicks" were similar in appearance to the "slicks" found on the rear wheels of cars used for drag racing. (And as in drag racing, they had great names like "The Rail," with white raised lettering on the tires.) Cool

Clockwise from top:
banana seat; bat rack;

stik shift



Banana Appeal

Collecting Banana Seat Bicycles

(continued from B1)

If I've just inspired fond memories of "Hot Wheels," Peggy Lipton (don't ask), or a banana bike from your not-so-recent past, you can still go back. Banana bikes are becoming highly collectible. In spite of their domination of suburban neighborhoods, these bikes occupied perhaps the briefest period in our two-wheeled history. Often lost to the ravages of time, banana bikes are finding favor with collectors in their early forties. Prices for originals in good condition, as well as faithful restorations, are fetching upward of \$2,000. And 20/16 bikes (the 20-inch rear wheel/16-inch front wheel format exhibited by Schwinn's "Krate" series) are generally more sought after than their 20/20 counterparts. Craig Morrow, owner of Pittsburgh's Bicycle Heaven and a restorer of these bikes, indicates that two vintage (still in the box) Schwinn "Krates" recently sold for \$9,000 at auction. As with other collectibles, prime factors influencing a banana bike's value are the condition of the frame (original paint, presence of rust, dents, etc.) and the presence of original parts (fenders, reflectors, etc.).

Of course, the real story here deals with one very specific part - that famed banana seat. The banana seat, and the popularity of bicycling in general (in the United States), is largely due to the prosperity of post-World War II America, which fostered the concept of leisure and recreation time for the "middle class." The seat itself is thought to be a by-product

of this surge in recreational activity, and is presumed to be linked to "bicycle polo," again, probably originating in California. But who would believe that our fascination with the banana seat was purely rooted in leisure time? Not I, for one. The banana seat, I think, epitomized the theme of uninhibited passion in characteristic 1960s style. From the vibrant colors of sun-scorched, metal-flaked vinyl, to "tuck and roll" (upholstery in a pattern that is tucked in a regular, rhythmic pattern), these upholstered icons of newfound sexual freedom quietly and completely infiltrated the carports and garages of Middle America and subverted many a young mind (mine included). The

true beauty of this simple and thoroughly modern design is probably most remarkable for its ability to accommodate two passengers without replication of drivetrain components or controls, which means, namely, that you didn't always need to be in control to have a good time.

Regardless of what you will believe, restored examples of Schwinn's "Krate" and "Sting-Ray" series are regularly posting on eBay and dedicated bicycle collector sites. And, if you just happen to be sheltering a diamond-in-the-rough in Mom's basement... well, NOS parts (automotive terminology for "new old stock"; refers to original parts still out there which have never been used) are avail-



For some, only a chopper will do.

able (try BikeIcons, or Bicycle Heaven for parts sources), and the whole deal is certainly less cumbersome



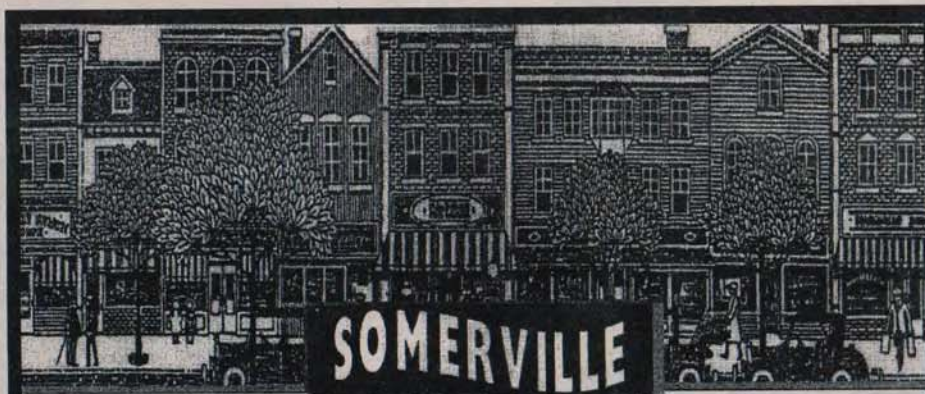
The Orange Krate: an epitome of lowrider design.

than your Dodge R/T Charger. But the entry fee is not cheap. An original disc brake rear wheel will set you back \$300 - \$500, and the accompanying pinstriped slick will cost you another \$350. Craig Morrow notes that there are some reproduction parts and accessories that come close in accuracy, but quality and resale value cer-

tainly play into the equation. For that matter, Schwinn has taken note of all this collector interest, and has released a coaster-brake reproduction of its "Orange Krate" that retails at your local Schwinn dealer for \$450.

So if you find yourself lapsing into the fond memories of your youth, or can't dispel the notion that you and Peggy Lipton have some cosmic bond that may never be fulfilled, you now have an additional reason to get that old banana seater out of the garage: it could be worth its weight in gold.

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PLENTY OF PARKING

Banana Seat Sources

Bicycle Heaven

Craig Morrow, who owns Bicycle Heaven in Pittsburgh, collects and sells banana seat bikes and parts (and other models as well.) He also does bike repairs, and custom restoration work. He can be reached at 412-734-4034; try after 12 noon. Bicycle Heaven is located at 684 1/2 Forest Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15202-2926. Bikeheaven@peoplepc.com/www.bicycleheaven.com

www.BikeIcons.com

great for parts, other information and links

Museums

The Bicycle Museum of America
7 West Monroe Street
New Bremen, OH 45869

419-629-9249

www.bicyclemuseum.com

Auctions

Copake Auction

Michael Fallon & Seth Fallon, P.O. Box H, Copake, NY 12516 Phone: (518) 329-1142 Fax: (518) 329-3369

E-mail:

info@copakeauction.com/www.copakeauction.com

Once a year, in April, this auction house holds a sale devoted exclusively to bicycles. Although normally the bicycles date from an earlier period (like those Victorian "bone shakers," for example), the Fallons will accept a banana seater if it's an excellent example of the style. Copake's next auction is April 21st. Call for details.

