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Transcript

Speaker

I. The.

Speaker 1

It's time for the outspoken cyclist to weekly conversation about bicycles, cyclists, trails, travel advocacy, the bike industry and much, much more.

Speaker

The.

Speaker 1

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Speaker

The.

Speaker 1

Now here's your host, Diane Janks.

Speaker 2

Hello and welcome to the outspoken cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. Thanks for tuning in to day. The holidays are literally around the corner and to day I wanted to offer up one of my favorite year end opportunities for giving. Liamz back day is one of the founders of World Bicycle Relief and World Bicycle Relief is about to turn 20. In the years since its inception, it has grown from 1820 thousand, 351 people in Sri Lanka. After the 2004 tsunami, to 850,000 bicycles on the ground. In seven African countries and in Colombia, South America, these bicycles have helped girls to go to school, has helped health workers to deliver lifesaving aid and have helped farmers to get their goods to market. The Buffalo Bike provides a sturdy, reliable machine that offers not only transportation but safety to the thousands of people who ride them. We'll speak with Leah about the history, the work and the goals of WBR in a moment. In the second-half of the show, I'm joined by Bill McGann. Bill started out as a bicycle retailer in a 750 square foot shop in California back in 1974 with a \$3000 bank loan and a lot of hutzpah. In his new book, Why your bike is made in Asia, my career in bicycles as I watched 2 continents squander in industry takes us from early bicycle history through the 10 speed

craze and on into the industries moved to Asia as a result of some wrong thinking on. Part of American and European manufacture. It's an interesting look at the bike industry from a very different perspective. Calling it 50 kilograms of love, Lea, Miss Bagday joins me to talk about World Bicycle Relief and the bicycle that is changing lives all over the African continent and beyond. With some new component innovations as well as an independent study that showed incredible results, WBR lives up to its motto of empowering individuals to access education, healthcare and economic opportunities through life changing bicycles. Hi, Leo. Welcome back to the outspoken cyclist. For joining me. Boy, it's been a long time since we caught up. How are you?

Speaker 3

Oh yes. Hi, Diane. Great. I think the last time we came together and spoke was in the heart of the pandemic.

Speaker 2

I think it was actually prior to the pandemic.

Speaker 3

We were.

Speaker 2

I'm not sure you know what. I looked it up. Now of course I don't remember.

Speaker 3

I took a minute and I listened to what we talked about, OK talked about all these interventions we were doing with people kind of hamstrung because of the of the pandemic, OK?

Speaker 2

So that it was pandemic, OK. Well, we're post pandemic. Goodness. So. This is the time of year when I like to talk to people like you who are involved in great cycling related opportunities for people's giving, and I think what we talked for to people for bikes, which is a whole different way of. At it but this. Little bicycle relief is pretty special and I know that you were one of the you were the founder of WBR, yes.

Speaker 3

Ma'am, I sure AM.

Speaker 2

You sure are. So let's talk about what is World Bicycle Relief and when you started it and what it's.

Speaker 3

Alright, well gosh, you know we are almost 20 years old, Diane. Well, basically. Almost hit that young adult stage. Where we're maturing, we're getting our act together. We're really being focused and. You know biblical, you start in 20. That's no small amount of years you learn as you go and we are over 850,000 bikes into the field.

Speaker

And.

Speaker 3

We've got so much to share with you today.

Speaker 2

850,000 bytes I can remember when that number was very, very small relative to that. That's amazing. Just amazing. When you started, as I remember, the bikes were being built sort of in place and only in Africa is that true?

Speaker 3

When we started, we started in Sri Lanka. Oh. Yeah. The railroads are in Sri Lanka after the Indian Ocean tsunami where we provided 24,351 bicycles to people recovering from the disaster.

Speaker 2

But who's counting? I can't believe you had that number. To the number.

Speaker 3

Oh, the e-mail bowled me over when we got the e-mail. It was like, holy cow, they took us seriously. What do we do?

Speaker 2

They took us. They took us seriously. They. This is, well, it's a serious organization. Do really, really good work. What WBR does? What the bikes do?

Speaker 3

Yeah, it will.

Speaker

You know she's.

Speaker 3

So miraculous, if you ask. And I do love talking to a group of people who are so passionate about bicycles because at all bicycle relief, we mobilize people through the power of bicycles. We envision a world where distance is no longer a barrier to

education. Health care services and economic opportunity. You know, we're a catalyst. We're catalyzed change. Well, basically helps people in need in low income regions to realize their potential. A. It's a tool that will support people in accessing schools, market health facilities and vital services they need to thrive, and we love this word's life. Size means better thrive means more productive. Thrive means feeling good about your day-to-day.

Speaker 2

I know that the bikes help people from sort of young adults, maybe or even high school kids. The way through older people, they serve different purposes. Explain what the Buffalo bike is, because it's not what we think of as. Even a utilitarian bike. I think now we pretty much look at cargo bikes as our utilitarian bikes. Buffalo bikes are very different.

Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah, it's overall. We're mission driven global not for. I just want to be clear about that piece and talk a little bit about our model, which is all about the bicycle. But you know, we manage this highly refined bicycle supply chain from the design to the final distribution. So we own this brand, this Buffalo. Now that isn't something we always did and we started out in Sri Lanka with Sri Lankan bicycles, lumala bicycles, and then we went into Africa and we used to brand for quite some time. Time. But then we decided through many trial and errors with our good friends at Tata, that it was better to design and control our own supply chain. So we have this rugged bicycle now called the Buffalo Bicycle.

Speaker 2

It's.

Speaker 3

A spiritual purpose design. Built to. It's, you know, it's built to last as rough and carry big. This is not. All termed areas know the words are rugged, they are silky or sandy or rocky or filled with potholes and rugged vivacious in the road. And there is the bicycle can easily haul this. A key feature that it can easily hold 100 lbs. On the. Carry. We like to call it 50 kgs of love. This bicycle and we've created this ecosystem of sustainability where we train community, selected mechanics who serve the local network of bicyclists, and to date we've trained more than 250,000 of them.

Speaker 4

Bicycles.

Speaker 3

They're just. They're kind of like our, you know, fingers into the community. We also have over 100 Buffalo bicycle shops now. And this is in the countries of Zambia,

Zimbabwe, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda. We're now freshly in Tanzania, Tanzania. And we're also in one country in South America when Colombia. But there's these shops 'cause. They're so cool. Most of them are brick and mortar, and they're beautifully branded. They're concept. They're like, you know, they're like a an Apple store or a Swatch shop or, you know, it's just only a Buffalo bikes, whole bicycles and spare parts. And. Customers even don't have a Buffalo bicycle convenient by our spares because our tires are quality. Our cranks are great, our chains are beautiful, our spokes, you know, our tubes, our wheels. See all that? Central changeable. We're part of the eco. System, but we have our own strong brand.

Speaker 2

And.

Speaker 3

You know, it's a newer clothes thing that we're experimenting with. Great success, great outcomes. As these were calling them mobile shops and we equipped spans that go around and now they bring the spares and the service to the people. So that's just we're. That's just far more efficient, because if people have trouble accessing things because of their walking, you know, then they can't always walk to the shop. If there's a distance barrier. So. We're now going to the people and. A lot about that approach.

Speaker 2

Let me take a moment to reintroduce you. We're speaking with Liam Mizbic day. Is the founder of World Bicycle Relief. It's going on 20 years old, which is just mind blowing to me. 850,000 bicycles. Originally I'm trying to remember now, like rewinding my memory about the bikes being built in place that you didn't actually build bikes in the US and ship them to Africa as I remember. Or to Colombia you built them? In country, right?

Speaker 3

Yes, we build them where we serve. We source the parts from Taiwan and China through giant group of the manufacturers, proud of our manufacturers. In fact, we honored them this year at our Trailblazer award and our year end event here in Chicago. I'd love to tell you. Story. That because giant it's such an honour. Like, if you're like deep into the weeds of the bicycle industry, you sort of understand that this Asian culture, this Chinese culture, is very honorable of loyalty and their founding and the elders are always the main people. And so, you know, when we were frustrated with our former bicycle manufacturers, FK went up to. Phoebe Liu and she's the great granddaughter of King Liu from Giant, he told her. Our vision and what we've been doing and. Says oh. The bicycles to us. We will do it and we'll do it right. Know I've. I mean, she meant it, and they do this. And so today, let's just let's just. It like in numbers. If giant produces. 1.3 to one. Million bicycles per year, and we purchased maybe 80,000. We're like 6% of their business, 6%. Like we're like little nothings. Like little little. Let's call it little cheese of their business. The fact that they're very proud. To. Be

manufacturing our bicycles and they feel like our bicycles are extraordinarily necessary and invaluable to the world. It's just it's a huge. They give us an office space. They put us in their museum. Have a bicycle museum in the front of their. You know their their main facility. In Taiwan, it's really, really cool. And so this year we honored them and our Trailblazer Award and Phoebe Lou came and personally accepted the award.

Speaker 2

I have a question for you and we you may not be able to answer it now and we may have to look at it down the road. What do you think tariffs are gonna do for? And the. So the Buffalo bike, I know they're they're made in. Well, in the giant factory and and I think all of us in the bike industry are are really kind of it's a wait and see.

Speaker 3

That's a curiosity. I'm not sure. The new presidential regime will interfere with the situation for us because we're not importing anything into America, importing from China to.

Speaker 2

True.

Speaker 3

Countries where we serve the components and then we assemble in the warehouses in these seven countries. That we work in so EDD, but it's a great question.

Speaker 2

Yeah, you know, it almost gives me an idea that maybe the industry ought to look at that model to bring in parts and assemble them in plants here as opposed to try to bring in containers of bicycles already built. If there's going to be a difference in tariff, I don't. It's just, you know, this is the buzz in the industry right now. Are freaking out.

Speaker

You like about.

Speaker 3

That guy is. You know, because we assemble in. This is jobs for people you know in inefficient cost wise and shipping wise. But it's jobs for people and I don't know if that's one way in or around the tariff issue, but you know, more jobs in America is always the the goal, you know, right.

Speaker 2

Let's talk about some of the impact that World Bicycle Relief has had on communities, especially with young girls. Because I know young girls want to go to school and that is not always. What a family might want, but it has changed girls lives.

Speaker 3

Yes, as one of the photographers wrote well by Stirling, this is a question that's near and dear to my heart because you know the girls and this educational opportunity that access to school provides for them. It's it's huge, it's. The the impact on the outcomes are. The the better grades, the finishing school, the get into school regularly. When I say. It's important for the kids to get to school on time, and the bicycles help that. We're talking about what happens when they're late. It's a little different than our schools here in the states when the students are late. In these countries where we serve, the head teacher may do any number of things like one not allow them access into the classroom. Or two. Them out back to work in the cotton fields and pick cotton or go clean the latrines. Or go home. They might even be turned away. And so that's a big, huge. And when we said the kids are on time, this makes a big difference. You know, there the whole teenage well-being a teenager that's rejected flat out is not going to be inspired to keep trying, right? Going to feel humiliated and just give up.

Speaker 2

Yeah. No, I know of. The bicycle has made a huge difference, you know, and everything from carrying water.

Speaker 3

I have a little story for you if you'd like. Yeah, so?

Speaker 2

To getting kids to school. Oh. I love stories.

Speaker 3

Because there's another outcome that was unintended, you know? Yes, they can carry water. They can get to school.

Speaker 4

But.

Speaker 3

Safety safety. An issue that's been addressed by the bicycle. And I met Linda, a young student in Zambia, about a year ago when we took our board to see the programs up close and personally. She and her girlfriends, they they wrote a poem. And this is common, this cultural practice of writing poems, play songs. And often they include what's happening in their day. Day so. So I delighted. Written all kinds of beautiful pieces that include the impact the results of having a bicycle and also being, say, a little

of this poem that Linda wrote. She's like I used to walk 10 kilometers from home to school. I used to come late to school because of distance punishment by teachers because of my late coming was my breakfast. Now because of the great Buffalo bicycle, I was given punishment as a store of the past. I said bye bye. Punishment because I am the earliest to. No worries about being attacked. On my way home simply because I am back home on time. Those that had intentions of attacking me on my way, I say Mulayama Bibi Basa, meaning you've got your own back. I am now untouchable.

Speaker 2

Wow.

Speaker 3

When she said untouchable, I had chills. Untouchable, she feels. Flat out bullied.

Speaker

Safe to.

Speaker 3

Just ride on through the trouble.

Speaker 2

Imagine she can outrun anybody on her bike, right? That you know, if they're on foot and she's on her bike, she can pedal her way away. That's really, really cool. Tell me a. Bit about this foray into South America. The newest country. Are you planning to expand more in South America?

Speaker 3

Still being somewhat opportunist, we don't have another country now. The best would be a country nearby. Maybe or Peru or? I know Argentina is a little far. But anyway. We don't really have a leadership calling for the bicycles today or the funding in place for that. We're always open to the possibilities. However, Colombia's really hitting its stride as a productive entity. And the biggest piece there was you. Colombia is not Africa. It's not one of these countries. Do differently. They actually have a somewhat of a bicycle infrastructure, so they. Have a low priced, fairly decent quality bicycles with some you know mechanic opportunities in place there, but not in the rural areas where we're working now.

Speaker

In.

Speaker 3

Local Hero area is really kicking in and the bicycles are serving terrifically. But this program they've they've created, it's pretty neat how they're inspiring the youth. We're telling them we're interested in you and we want you to come be part of their leaf when they've created a. University, where they're teaching young people these mechanic skills formally. Bringing them up and teaching them and giving them the the projects, ideally money, making jobs to take care of people's bicycles. But they're also giving them opportunity, and let's say they're in local hero, which is at a far north and east from Barakia, where warehouses, but they'll bring these youth. So. An IKEA to experience food training and come to a new area, a new place and expand their horizons. I mean, remember when you were a youth and you first got to go to a new city or a big city and your eyes were exploding with ideas and possibilities, because you suddenly saw how different people do, different ways, you know? So that's really exciting what's happening in Columbia.

Speaker 2

And I understand about expansion. Everything comes from the.

Speaker 3

Mm.

Speaker 2

So how is WBR supporting the? I know that donations are one other grants. There other things that. Are in place. To keep growing the organization.

Speaker 3

How to answer that? I'd love to share that we have this bold growth goal of distributing 300,000 bicycles per year, and over these next three years, and by nature of 300,000, that will probably reach. You know and serve 1.5 million people and we just had this strategy refresh and it's a three-year strategy where our mantra is grow partner and influence. And it simuls on expanding into new geographies like we're just talking about scaling the impact dramatically through key partnerships with local government as well as governmental institutions and large scale development partners. And all of this aligns with our vision to provide access. Back to healthcare, education and economic opportunities. You know, with that we are just influencing. That's what I'd like to talk about with the grow partner partner. If you don't mind, it's real to. It's really interesting and it created this opportunity with. Quite a spectacular results. You know, last time we talked, we talked a lot about mobilized communities. We talked about these three different pillars of what we do and how we pulled it all together and put it into these mobilized communities sort of saturated areas with bikes for educ. Bikes to healthcare workers and bikes for dairy farmers and ag farmers, and. Like that. With that, you know, we we learned a lot and we. We did all kinds of data collecting because the baseline was created through a community lead survey. So we were serving what the people asked for, what they wanted, what they designed as their own way of addressing their

needs. And this led to an outstanding, groundbreaking research undertaking with this partner called ID Insight. An ID. This is this is where we get kind of geeky, but it's cool.

Speaker

ID.

Speaker 3

Insight is a global advisory data analyst and research organization that helps global development leaders maximize their social impact with a range of data. And evidence. And they created a tailor made framework for randomized control, trial and randomized evaluation. In the district of Mumbai, Zambia, where one of our mobilized communities was already in existence and you may know that a randomized control study is known as the gold standard of evaluations. Really, the only scientific way. To approach a burning. And it's it's highly coveted and acceptable when we want to reach these. Institutional organizations and governmental organizations like US aid diffident in Britain, Global Fund bill, among the Gates Foundation, you know on and on, and these randomized control studies validate. What we're doing? So what does? Is it designed to answer a question really? And the question then ultimately informs the imperative, right? So our question was. What is the transformative power of bicycles when introduced into the lives of people living in poverty who have mostly only walking as a personal form of transportation?

Speaker 2

Great question.

Speaker 3

Formally stated, that's my interpretation but formally stated. Called it. We aim to rigorously assess how access to bicycles can improve livelihoods, boost economic productivity, create greater social empowerment, improve access to health facilities. And support service delivery by community health workers. That was the formal question. I'd love to tell you how it all came out.

Speaker 2

Well, so let's take a short break and then we'll come right back and we'll sort of get into the weeds with that. I do want to hear how it all turned out. Speaking with Leah. She is the founder of World Bicycle Relief and we're talking about this. Imperative. Oh, I'm so excited to hear what's going to happen. You're listening to the outspoken cyclist. Be right back.

Speaker

I.

Speaker 2

We are back on the outspoken cyclist. Your host Diane. We're speaking with Liam is back day about world bicycle. It is our second in our series of great organizations for giving for year end. I hope you will take that to heart and make a donation to WBR. We'll let you know how to do that at the end of our. So you hired this organization? Is the quote UN quote gold standard that takes a question and gets you real data that people will respect because anybody can say, oh, here are my stats and where did you get them? But if you use somebody who's really. Respected in the field, I guess people go oh, well, let's hear what they have to say. Let's hear what they have to say.

Speaker 3

Hey, well you thank. Yes, these days are always designed with a baseline where some people get the thing the experimental group gets the thing, the bicycle, and then some don't. And they are the control group. All the rest of the variables stay the same. In our case, geographically everything is the same. Well, in one group district in Zambia. And economically, everyone's about the same in terms of income levels. And so we had 1488 participants, 50% of them were provided bicycles and 50% were not. Know. Always the hard part the have. But anyway, that's what you have to do to prove out. An inquiry. So we compared these effects of this intervention and the key findings, they under score this transformative power of bicycles. OK. We go. Improved resilience to climate impacts. There's drought, OK, there's drought in in Zambia specifically and in other countries where we serve, right? And it's really, it's really real and the resilience that that was provided mitigates food scarcity because people can travel to Florida markets. It continues healthcare for the healthcare provider and for those receiving care and it keeps on obviously asks us to school water.

Speaker 2

How about?

Speaker 3

Oh yeah, you can still go get your well, drought. You can still go further to. Your water, but the economic. Productivity was the mind blower.

Speaker

Hmm.

Speaker 3

Clothes with bicycles reported 43% higher average monthly income. Compared to the control group. Women saw 50% higher work related earnings, 50% I'd bank on. That's bet on bank on anyone that's getting 50% higher returns on their efforts versus you know this is versus those without. Not only were there more financial earnings, but the women's value in the household was dramatically elevated. With healthcare recipients and bicycles with 36% more likely to access the health. When needed. And you know,

this all just runs back to our broader mission and validates the approach to mobility solutions. You can find a whole study. If you're interested at World Bicycle Relief.

Speaker 2

Yeah, we'll put a link to that, absolutely. Think the study will be. It'll show people how important the programs are.

Speaker 3

Yeah. Wonderful. You.

Speaker 2

Yeah, you're talking about this new sort of imperative. Or your your new. 300,000 bytes per year 1.5 million people. How are you going to expand what you're doing? Going to need more. You're going to need more bikes. Going to need more. You're going to need more of everything. How are how are you able to do that and scale it up? In such a short period of time.

Speaker 3

Well, partner influence grows, partner influence.

Speaker 2

OK. What is partner influence and who are these partners?

Speaker 3

Influence that I just referred to with this randomized control study, we'll be able to take this to this institutions and say look, this is proof that the model is effective. And so now that we have that, it gives us a lot more credibility. And validation. So that's that's influential right there. And that leads to partnering because we want a partner which is large organizations, we have a bigger staff than ever. We have more than I think we just passed 300 employees. Wow. And with influencing, we now actually finally have a dedicated director of Communications. He's fantastic. So he is able to bridge our internal work to the outside world, 'cause, before we were just doing our thing and. Inspiring supporters, especially in the bicycle industry. But to get the word out and spread it further isn't as. Easy as we'd. And so he's been doing such a wonderful job, and ideally it all leads to more money, not only from individual donors, but from these institutional groups and governmental groups. But another fun thing. That we worked on, that your listeners will love is. We've got a new product. We have. Did you hear about? We have a one-of-a-kind multi speed drivetrain. So we have two gears now Diane 2 gears.

Speaker

S.

Speaker 2

So I'm showing Leah the gift that she sent me the last time we spoke and it's bicycle. Charles and I don't know. He has a magnet on him for some reason and it is just it's a Buffalo bike with a figure on it and an extra wheel at. Back and I love it and I'm going to post it too, but that I thought you. Going to say, oh, we have a new. New toy you have a new drivetrain. Have.

Speaker 3

A whole new drivetrain. It's called S2 and that's because it has 2 speeds. Literally 2 chains. They go the two different directions outside of the crankset and. It looks really cool in the field because you know, three chains are better than one and. It's an AK-2 freewheel. It's patented and it it's backpedaled technology backpedal shifting to kick back and then you go forward and you have an easy. Speed goes fast and especially on flat and you kick back and you pedal forward, and now you've got an extra gear that can help you go uphill and take your big loads with you.

Speaker 2

A2 speed. Oh my goodness, that sounds so old and new at the same time. So cool.

Speaker

OK.

Speaker 3

Alright. And you know what the the bicycle industry this year has been so fantastic at uptaking it with enthusiasm, with all kinds of articles written about it and. Or award winners. We we won the Eurobike Gold award for the product development. And it's it's in a world that celebrates excellence in design and innovation within the cycling industry, and they chose us of all the parts on the planet being created the slowest 2 got the gold standard.

Speaker 2

You know, it's so interesting all of this modern electronic stuff and all of these hydraulic brakes and all of the through axles and all of the things that have changed the bicycle industry. I'm hoping not forever because I think something like this. Something simple, something effective and something that's affordable is important, and I'm looking at bicycle prices today and going they are outrageous and we need to get our heads back out of the clouds and figure out what it's going to take to get more people on bikes. And you clearly are doing it well.

Speaker

And you know.

Speaker 3

Well, and you know, there's, there's we didn't just. It out of thin air. New component this new. Like model we have this. I think you know that we have this testwriter program. So we have certain writers that we check in with regularly and we have something new that we want to test out. We put it underneath them. And then we send them off to do their businesses and ask them to come back and report. And we meet with them often and regularly. And, you know, we have wonderful examples of a bread seller jacked and the bread seller. Mercy, the egg seller. And how they give us feedback constantly and the need for a new an extra gear was. And you think, Oh my gosh, it's only one year. But mercy, can you know she has a stack of eggs on her on her crate. You know 1 little layer holds 24 eggs and she's got. Stack. Probably a dozen of these 24 eggs and she. Step taller because she now has this extra gear. She's. She's a strong woman, but you know, it's hopeful. She's got a gear jacket. A bread. He's got these big plastic crates on the back of his bike and he, you know, he can just go and go and go because he goes all day. And and you know. The extra gear he's just thrilled to have the energy savings.

Speaker 2

Sure, it makes perfect. I'm really so excited to hear about that. Is there information about the S2 system on the website too?

Speaker 3

Well, definitely.

Speaker 2

Oh, good, good.

Speaker 3

I'll send you the new.

Speaker 2

Well, wrap it up for me. Me. What listeners can do?

Speaker

OK.

Speaker 2

To get involved and to learn more and to hopefully become. Partners with WBR?

Speaker 3

Well, that's exactly it. Want. We want to work together and I, you know, I'd love to encourage your listeners to become part of this movement. It's a movement for sustainable change for through mobility. What we're all. Up to in this enthusiasm for bicycles all together. This year, as you know, the last month of any year is where a not-

for-profit. Earns probably 70% of their funding, so you can donate this month or any time and we'd really appreciate it. Anything helps in the summer months we host our global ride called Petalum Power. And we'd like to see a. There, and there's other ways to. Like you said, there are, you know, donations at worldbestrelief.org are welcome, but partnership matters advocacy using your voice, using your social media as matters, and simply spreading the word. That really, you know, has the ripple effect.

Speaker 2

I appreciate you. Spending time with me today to go bring us up to speed on WBR. It's very exciting the changes. The advancements. The expansion of all of the bikes, it's just amazing what's happened since the first time I spoke with you, which was many years ago now, probably close to when you started.

Speaker 3

True, yes.

Speaker 2

So thank you so much and I hope you have a wonderful holiday and a great 2025 and we will talk again.

Speaker 3

Thank you so much, Diane.

Speaker 2

My thanks to Liam is back day for taking time to speak with me about World Bicycle Relief to day that little chirp you heard throughout the conversation is her little Cockatiel cute as a button? Meanwhile, you can learn about WBR and access the studies, the impact data, and how to get involved. [World Bicycle relief org](http://WorldBicycleRelief.org). Let's take a short break, and when we return, we'll speak with Bill McGann about his new book, *Why your bike is made in Asia*. You're listening to the outspoken cyclist.

Speaker

The. I.

Speaker 2

We are back on the outspoken cyclist. Your host, Diane Jan. In the many conversations I've had with bicycle historians over the years, no one has mentioned the single tube bicycle patents or how Asian made bicycles came to overtake the European and potential American markets back in the 70s and 80s. My next guest, Bill McGahn, lived that transition and he tells us all about it. In his new book, *Why your bike is made in Asia*. My career in bicycles as I watched 2 continents squander an industry. Hi. Welcome to the outspoken. Thanks for being my guest today. Are you?

Speaker 4

Well, thank you and thanks for inviting me. It's a rainy day in the Pacific Northwest, the way it's supposed to be in November.

Speaker 2

Yeah, we're still getting nice weather here in Northeast Ohio, although it's finally getting colder. You're in the Pacific Northwest. Didn't know that. Are you?

Speaker 4

Oregon in the Yankee Valley, midway between Salem and Portland.

Speaker 2

Nice.

Speaker 4

Little town called McMinnville.

Speaker 2

How did you end up there? Or is? Where you from? It's weird.

Speaker 4

I grew up and spent most of my life in Southern California and we moved to Arkansas to take care of my folks after I sold my business. And then from Arkansas, we had been driving all over the country just traveling. And we liked it here. And so here we are.

Speaker 2

You know what? I don't think there's a better reason. It's not like you were forced to be anywhere. So let's talk about the time before you sold your. Tell us a little bit about how you got into the bike. You and I came into this industry at about the same time in the mid 70s. Tell us about your experience of being in the bike business back then and then we're. To start talking about your book.

Speaker 4

OK. Well, I opened my bike shop June 1st, 1974. I had been, let's say a near. Well, I had had a series of dead end jobs for a brush man picking lemons janitor. And finally, I ended up working three years graveyard at a standard station, a company operated. Station on the graveyard shift. And while I was working there, I had rediscovered my bicycle. I had ridden my bicycle to high school when no one did it in the 60s and I found it, dusted it off and started writing it and playing with it. And bothering people with bike shops that had better things to do with someone who just wanted to look at bikes. And I finally decided I should do something with my life. 22 and I had thought I might get a business degree and become a lawyer. And I just found that daunting. I said what I

really want to do. Play with bikes. So I took the \$3000 I'd saved up working in the gas station. And then a very, very nice man trusted me with a bank loan. And with that I was able to open a bike shop in a shopping center that it's been sort of run down, but was supremely well located in my city. It was just in the Center for and it was the first shopping Center for almost half the town. And so I opened up 750 square foot store with 25 Maserati bicycles made in Italy and 10 shattan gypsies. And I had about 300 nineteen \$74. In parts, they fit in the trunk of my 1968 Chevrolet. I remember driving down to United bicycle supply, and I think Glendale and picking up the parts and coming back. And that was all I had. And I opened the. With that.

Speaker 2

So let me ask you a question. About your experience of opening a bike shop and we've always talked about, it's easy to get in to the bicycle business. It's not as easy to make a lot of money and then get out with anything. So did you find it relatively easy to get into the business?

Speaker 4

I had some advantages. Camarillo is a reasonably well off town with a lot of civil service people and people who commuted down to the San Fernando Valley. So I had reasonably well off. Client. I was known in town for being kind of a bicycle. People knew I was the guy who rode everywhere on a bike, and when I opened the store I was profitable from the very first day. I was very, very. It all worked out very nicely for me.

Speaker 2

I'll say I don't think a lot of people can say that at all.

Speaker 4

Well, I had. I had a couple of other advantages. I had no living expenses. Was living in the back of an old lady's house. I had parked my car except when I needed to go and get bike parts and things like that.

Speaker

I know.

Speaker 4

So it didn't need to draw much money out of the business, which is part of the problem. So even though I was profoundly under capitalized. It worked out because I started selling bikes even while I was setting up the bike shop. People were coming in and buying bikes for me.

Speaker 2

That's. Let me take a moment to reintroduce you. With Bill McCann. His new book is Why your bike is made in Asia. My career in bicycles as I watched 2 continents

squander an industry fascinating topic. Especially for people like me who've been in the business my entire adult life and. Wondered what has happened from the early days of. The 10 speed sort of explosion to what we have today, which is carbon fiber all the way down South. Let's let's pick up the story a little bit about. A brief picture of the rise and fall and the rise and fall of the bicycle here in this country. So we know what sort of happened in Europe, the beginning of the book is a. Comprehensive but not terribly involved. Like a David Hurley, he book, it's a much more abridged version of the of the history of the bicycle. Tell us about history as you saw it. That brings us up to. We'll get to. A very specific thing about wheels that change the sort of trajectory of bicycles in this country.

Speaker 4

Well, the bike I had was a Sears bike, but it was made by Steiner P in Austria. So it had the traditional. You know, I was 11. I think when Dad gave it to me, so that would be 1962. It was sears, but it was like, say, it was made in Austria. It had your retaili derailleurs, nerve steal, cuttrack. Ava aluminum bars made in France. Thiami Yellow label clincher rims, but it was very traditional. European mainstream componentry. And. My introduction the bikes was a nice lightweight lumped bike. And when I opened my bike shop in 1974. The bikes I was selling were almost identical. Gear turns that I was selling had steel cluttered cranks. They had simplex rear derailleurs rather than U ray, but that was one of the two companies that were making derailleurs. They had steel clutching rims, of course, but they were fundamentally the same bike in 1974. That my father mother had given me in 1962. There will be no particular advancements in the consumer bike the bike companies were quite content they to make what they had been making all along and they didn't see any reason to change. And then when I opened my bike shop. There was a guy across town really nice. Came real bicycle center and he had. Raleigh's Peugeot's all the European bikes and he was selling the Shikis and he was recommending that his customers buy those. They were superior, and indeed they were. For instance, they had. Center derailleurs. Which had that beautiful slant parallelogram in which the derivative tracked the freewheel, and so the chain was always the optimal distance from the freewheel. It shifted 10 times better. They had aluminum cordless cranks which were easier to surf. The the real advantage of a new cuddles crank is it's easy and serviceability. I'm sure you have memories of getting rid of old, removing old crankcodters from crank sets of bicycles, and sometimes having it drill them in their own mash as the guy wrote it with a loose. Crank.

Speaker

Right.

Speaker 4

And yet, with a coddleless crank. Just. Just putting the polar and it comes right out for 5000 reasons and the other reason is when I first opened my bike shop in 74, I had about six months later I got Raleigh's. The Raleigh's were poorly made. I could. I had

one where there were gaps in the lugs. And should I back up here to explain what's going on here? Lug bikes? The lug is a socket at the joint on a traditional steel bike and the frame builder heats the lug. And then draws in liquid brass to make a nice clean fur joint. And if you look at a good lunch bike, it's a nice, beautiful joint all around. No caps, no nothing. And I had gaps in lubricants that are cheapest bike that I could stick my thumbnail under. Were so poorly made. And I have mentioned to people that I'm going to burn in hell because I sold those Raleigh bicycles to my trusting customers, and when I need my maker, he's not going to be happy with me for having done that.

Speaker 2

Yeah, but that was. I don't think you were the only one in that in that department. Much everybody. In Europe, and I think of Italian bikes similarly that they're. Perfect bikes.

Speaker 4

Well, these were particularly. Now there's a tons which I got now chaotic was importing. 74 they had a place in Hawthorne, CA, Southern California, near Los Angeles, and they brought in the frames and components and put together bikes. And box them up there. And I always thought that would be a wonderful time to do quality control, but they didn't. When I would get shot on bicycles, I would have to string them, and I'd have to straighten them because they were all out of alignment. Always did it at night, so no one would see me doing it in the bike shop in the back. But I would have to string the bike and straighten it so that the customer got the wheels in the same plane and the crank sets and the free wheel lined up properly so that the bike works properly and loaded.

Speaker

Actually.

Speaker 2

So I think if you had one of those early French bikes, which by the way, they were all French threads, it was, you know, they were separate and apart and it didn't allow the chain to stay on. It probably had a lot to do with alignment.

Speaker 4

It. That was all about it.

Speaker 2

Right. Right. Let me, let's back up a second. 'cause I wanna I we're talking about the bikes in the US. And many of the people who listen to this show ride classic steel bikes, lug scale bikes, they're. And of course, it's what I love and it's what my husband builds and it's what we were building up until Waterford closing last year. But I guess my question goes back to this whole reason that that the manufacturing in the United States didn't work and you kind of had to go overseas to get reasonable bikes because of

something that went on with inner tubes and wheels. Explain that. Phenomenon because I don't. I had never heard of it before. Read your book.

Speaker 4

They're talking about the single tube bike.

Speaker 2

The single tooth bike, yes.

Speaker 4

OK. I'm reaching back in my memory here, OK? Hey man, I believe his name was pardon Tillinghast. They don't name babies the way they did then.

Speaker 2

No they don't.

Speaker 4

He invented the single tube bike, which was basically a round piece of garden hose that would go on a wooden rim. And the patent for that changed hands several times and ended up in the. Of us. Robber and US robber bought all the bicycle tire patents. I don't think it was us rubber back. It was the name of the company, but it might have been, but in any case. They ended up with all the patents for bicycle tires and the beauty of a single tube tire is it's irreparable. So if you are a person selling these, you think, oh boy, this is wonderful. They'll just have to buy another one. In fact, my father's bike, when he was a boy, had single tube tires and he would still 70 years after that. Just grit his teeth about it. But he had monopoly. So. It made a bicycle difficult and. It was fundamentally irreparable if you had a flat tire and that's what happens to a guy if something is going to go wrong with the bicycle. 99% of the time is a flat tire, which with a nice clinch of tire, even if it's got nudded a. You just take wrench and in 5 minutes you're back on the road. But single tube tires irreparable. You have to change the. You have to spend money. It's expensive and. Historians, whom I basically trust and think the world of, concluded that this is the reason why Americans did not take to the bicycle as a serious form of adult transportation, and for this reason the bicycle was an impractical piece of serious, reliable transportation. So. Got on cars, got into cars and drove.

Speaker 2

So I had never heard of this single tube bike wheel before. Before I know what pneumatic tires are.

Speaker 4

Yeah, these are pneumatic. This is. It's just fundamentally in irreparable piece of of numeric tire numeric tire.

Speaker 2

It's not what I'm. Is that you're alluding to the fact that we might have had a different outcome in terms of bicycles and transportation and maybe even infrastructure if the bicycle had been more reliable and these? American manufacturers, who insisted on buying up all these patents, hadn't been so arrogant as to say this is what's this is the only thing that's going to work. What's going to give me my profit margin more or less?

Speaker 4

Exactly. It was extremely short sighted and it is my belief that that is what destroyed the potential of the bicycle being serious about transportation in the United States. And it's not because we were a rural country with bad roads. Italy. Is people ride everywhere and it's not like they don't love cars and drive nice cars in Italy.

Speaker 2

Right.

Speaker 4

I believe it is a terrible tragedy that that happened, but it was people who were short sighted. They had a monopoly. Would enforce it. It made a bicycle fundamentally unusable. Yeah.

Speaker 2

So. What ended up being, and this this is explained very clearly in the book as the bicycle was thought of as a toy, it was. Became a children's toy because it wasn't reliable for adult transportation and how tragic is that whole thing? It's terrible.

Speaker 4

Well, and we breathe. Air that is not as clean and our bodies are not as healthy because of that.

Speaker 2

There you have. Let's take a short break when we come. I want to talk about Howie Cohen, who really sort of changed the way we do business or we did business in this country and then to the real crux of the book, which is why our bikes are made in Asia, like carbon fiber, all the way down. We're speaking with Bill McGahn. His new book is Why your bike is made in Asia. Career in bicycles as I watched 2 contents. Squander an industry? You're listening to the outspoken cyclist. We'll be right back.

Speaker

The.

Speaker 2

We are back on the outspoken cyclist. Speaking with Bill. He is an ex bike retailer, which at we would all like to be able to say that at some point. Your bike is made in Asia. Is his new book I. Found it fascinating. I learned so much, even though he and I entered into the bike business at the same time. So let's talk about Howie Cohen. Mr. West Coast cycle. For those who don't know, a bike dealer back in the day, let's say the late 70s, early 80s would have a Rep come in every week. And they would go through your inventory and they would bring out their big green and white striped print outs. And help fill in your inventory. Everything from bearings and and spokes to built wheels and bikes. So let's talk about Howie Cohen. Who was he and how did he change the way we did business in this country for bicycles?

Speaker 4

How are you going? Grew up with bicycles. His father began importing bicycles and. How we mature? To the point that he was participating in the management of this company. He became extremely dissatisfied with the English spikes that had been imported, and he wanted something better. And he had been told. That the Japanese could do this and he made a series of trips to Japan visiting. Untold number of Japanese spike factories, and he'd visit them, spend weeks looking and and then come back and his mother, Rosabella would say, well, did you find what we were looking for? You'd say no and say well, go back and look again. And I think she sent him back three times and finally he was contacted and told there's a company that can do what you want. And he found power more he he visited the calamari factory, and he saw that they could do it. He brought a bunch of bicycles to them so they can examine what he wanted. He couldn't exactly tell them what he. He could just point to what he liked and ask them to do that. What he really wanted was a nice, reliable, well made bicycle and the calamari people visited him several times and looked at what he had and sent them back and forth till they all had an understanding of what they wanted. And finally, he got his courage to the sticking point and signed a purchase order for a container of bicycles of all sorts. 'S bikes, adult spikes, everything, and the bike that became Mishiki showed up a container load and they sold almost instantly because. How he understood what it was that people. They wanted a nice, decent lugged bike that you could ride it. It would work and you could repair it. And it would be easy to repair. And so he opened the door for Asian bikes. Now I open my bike shop with Raleigh's and Jetans and Peugeot's, but about two years after I opened my store, the sales representative for Centurion, which was another Japanese made bike, brought a Le Mans in for me to look at. Had been the Peugeot representative. And changed companies and he brought us some training in. And I put it on the work stand and I had been a eurofile, I thought, because this was the home of bicycles. And this is where the Tour de France was the Deer Italia. These people knew bicycles. And then I worked on this bike and put it on the stand and really spent some time with it. And I realized that I was wrong. I had been really really wrong, so I started caring Centurion bicycles and pretty soon my shop was all Japanese bikes with one exception. I thought the Peugeot PX10 Reynolds bike with strong cranks was the perfect semi pro bike for someone who wanted to be competitive. If you didn't win

the race, it wasn't because you want a Peugeot PX10. It was because you weren't. Enough. So I kept the Peugeot PX10. And then I had centurions and my customers were. One of the things I did when I opened my bike shop because I had lots of time and no customers. I offered two years free service with every bike. I did all the adjustments for two years on the bike at no charge. And. I gave him a written promise of that with every bike I sold and. European bikes of 1974 came back regularly. The centuries went. The door came back for the 30 day check up and then I saw them when they wanted to get. Tires fixed. They were just better.

Speaker 2

They were better.

Speaker

They're.

Speaker 2

There's no question about. I mean everything from Fuji and Panasonic and Miata and. Some of the even smaller brands like Lotus and Zebra Kinko they were magnificent bicycles. But so if you look at that part of the market, this Japanese market, it began to shift. And I remember seeing the 1st and I think I'm trying to remember who made this bike. It was a wasn't it IKEA? So they make. So it must be South Korea that suddenly we were starting to see other Asian bikes that were not the quality of the Japanese bikes with Centurion shifters and Shimano of course began to take over. You have index shifting. You have all these. Wonderful. Things coming out of Japan. But suddenly you're starting to see a much less expensive Asian bike. How did that happen?

Speaker 4

Well, the first lists expensive Asian bikes that weren't of high quality, came from Taiwan, right?

Speaker 2

OK. Right. Right. Right, right.

Speaker 4

And but they quickly formed a an agreement in which they would not sell junk bikes into Western. Markets and very soon the Taiwanese spikes. Not on the Japanese level. We're perfectly fine bikes. Now we look upon a Taiwan bike is is well, that's where the good stuff comes from, and the less expensive stuff comes from mainland China. Or. Or something like that. Taiwan bikes are simply superb. In fact, I'm pretty sure my Mongoose commuter bike that I ride around town is. Stop, Megan. I'm pretty sure this I want.

Speaker 2

Yeah, probably a giant has a big factory in Taiwan. Everybody has gone to Taiwan and yet they're still using Japanese parts. Was still Japanese. Is. I think it it comes out of.

Speaker 4

All their production to the Far East.

Speaker 2

Right. So then the question is, how did? Shift from. Steel. And we had sort of this interim aluminum fad, but into carbon fiber. And why is everything carbon fiber today and what is? Mean it isn't just about weight, no.

Speaker 4

It really is.

Speaker 2

Oh, that's sad, isn't it?

Speaker 4

Well, you pick up a 16 pound, 15 LB bike and it takes your breath away. You know, compare. You know Schwinn Varsity's are 42 lbs.

Speaker 2

Well, that's true.

Speaker 4

You know, we're we're less than half the weight, right? Quality of a carbon. Is not. As good as they ever. Still, biking everyone acknowledges that I don't think anyone would say it is a although carbon bike. The ride of carbon bikes is getting better. In the last year of of Turtley, we were reporting carbon bikes and we had a very knowledgeable, capable guy guiding us who made very good decisions on my behalf and finding sources. And he had a carbon maker make us a carbon bike. Who's? Approached but did not equal steel. But it was very light and it was. And here's the other thing. They never came back. None of the carbon bikes we sold it were made in Taiwan ever were returned or with a problem. 0% failure.

Speaker 2

Well, until you crash it, carbon fiber is not very forgiving in a crash. That's a different. A different.

Speaker 4

Is it if that that's not a warranty question. Of course it's not.

Speaker 2

No, it is not a warranty question at all.

Speaker

So tell me tell.

Speaker 2

Me why you wrote this book?

Speaker 4

I felt that no one had told this story, and I was right there. I was right in the middle of of watching the industry completely change and factories and people who. Live, eat, breathe and drink bikes. States swims were made in Chicago. Ross Bicycles were made in the Pacific Northeast. In fact, Ross sold more American made bicycles in the Pacific NE than Schwinn did at some point. And those people in all the various factories in. Italy when KO and I would go to Europe, we'd go visit factories and shops and busy hustling and and go to lunch with you. And you just want to talk about bicycles. Were people in love with bicycles making bicycles? And it's gone. I remember Antonio Mandono built beautiful custom high end steel frames and we were watching the demand for his frames taper off. And he was ready to retire anyway. But we were just watching all of the the demand for them. Changes people wanted. What you're wasn't making and you're. In the United States did not switch over. Know there were. You know Alan made some bikes with aluminum tubes scrubbed, but they weren't properly a good high quality. Carbon fiber bike. But as all these things changed as sum tour and Shimano made superior derailleurs, and you're a simplex just made the same old stuff they were begging. Say please please. They were getting away with what they could get away. Rather than thinking about doing the very, making the very best thing they could for their customers, which is how they got there in the first place.

Speaker 2

So I think that. A new chapter might want to be written. That picks up where you leave off, but I think that this is a great entry into why our bikes are made in Asia, which is the title of the book, Why your bike is made in Asia. My career in bicycles is I watched 2 continents squander industry. I think when you read this you will understand how we got where we are today with no American manufacturers making production bikes here in this country. Mean Trek is allegedly an American manufacturer, but the Waterloo factory is not making. All of the bikes that they used to make, they're still going to Taiwan.

Speaker 4

And this was something going on in American manufacturing. My 64 Chevrolet had I had to put rings and journal drinks on the crankshaft at 40,000 miles. I had a little Scion xB. I sold it at 160,000 miles and it was almost new, you know, made by Toyota. This was happening in industries in Europe and America. I believe I'm telling the story of American industry in microcosm and European industry and microcosm.

Speaker

So how can?

Speaker 2

People get a copy of the book, though.

Speaker 4

Well, first of all, my preference is that they go to their local bookstore and patronize the rich and that in their town and order the book. Should they not want to? It's available on Amazon, both in print and as a Kindle book. And justice, before I came to this podcast, the man who voices my audio books just told me he voiced, I think, chapter 5. This will be available as an audio book rather soon. Well.

Speaker 2

I really appreciate you taking time to talk with me today. Been speaking with Bill. He is a long time bicycle. He owned his own bike shop for many years. The name of the book is why your bike is made in Asia. Career in bicycles as I watched 2 continents. Squander an industry. Thank you so much for talking with me. And thank you for writing the book. I hope my listeners want to get a copy.

Speaker 4

It's a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Speaker 2

You have a great day. My thanks to Bill McGann for giving us some insight into how and why bicycles are no longer made in the US. You can ask your local book shop keeper to order why your bike is made in Asia or get it online at all the usual places. I hope you enjoyed the. Remember that you can find photos, links and a written transcript of each episode at outspokencyclist.com. And you can subscribe to the podcast on your favorite app and never Miss an episode. Follow us on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, X and YouTube. I'd like to take a moment to wish you a very happy, healthy and peaceful holiday season and New Year. Please stay safe. Stay well and remember there is always time for a ride. Bye bye.

Speaker

The. The.

Speaker 1

Thanks for joining us today on the outspoken cyclist with Diane James who welcome your thoughts and contributions on our Facebook page or visit outspokencyclist.com to leave a comment on any episode.

Speaker

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Speaker 4

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Speaker 1

We'll be back next week with new guests, topics, conversations and news in the world of cycling. Subscribe to the show in your favorite podcast app and you'll never miss an episode.

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