



(TRIBUNE Staff Photo)

SPIKED BIKE--Tire salesman Joe Steinlauf tests the spikes on his icecycle that he built in 1925. The all wood tricycle was made in the 1860s. Steinlauf has about a dozen antique bicycles at his tire store, 3851 Ogden av.

Bike Dealer Spins Tale of Risky Business

BY WILLIAM MULLEN

Once Joe Steinlauf nearly drowned on a bicycle. Another time, he was nearly killed falling from a bicycle into a junk wagon.

Seventy-year old, Austrian-born Joe got his start in business with bicycles, and has made a handsome and happy life out of them. Tho he went out of the bicycle business two years ago, he still keeps about a dozen antique and freak bikes sitting around his tire store at 3851 Ogden av.

"I came here from Austria in 1912," silver-haired and handsome Joe will tell you in his accent-tinted voice. "I got my start in business by spotting bikes in the back of junk wagons. I used to jump on my bike and follow them. Usually I could pick up a bike for two or three dollars, fix it up and sell it for 8 or 10 dollars."

Followed too Close

Once he followed a junk wagon too closely and the wagon's horse stopped suddenly. Joe jammed on his brakes and was jack-knifed head first into the back of the wagon.

"I really hit it hard," Joe chuckled, "and I thought I killed myself. The driver turned around and looked at me like nothing strange had happened, and kept right on going."

Joe started his first bicycle shop in 1919, selling his own manufactured line [Joe's 50 Year Flyers] and his refurbished used bikes. He also rented out bicycles for 25 cents an hour.

Took A Beating

"It took me a few years to get wise to the ways of the city," he said. "I made people leave a deposit with me when they rented a bike, like a watch or their coat or something. They used to take off with the bikes anyway, and I would find out their deposits were practically worthless. I took a beating in those days."

Once six men came into his shop and rented all six of his rental bikes. He ended up chasing them to Milwaukee on his motorcycle, where he eventually caught them trying to sell the bikes.

The men ended up shipping

the bikes back to Chicago at their own expense.

Began to Get Creative

In the 1920s, Joe began to get creative in his bike making.

"One night I was sleeping in my big brass bed and I dreamed I was peddling it down the street," he claims. "So I decided when I woke up I would build a bike out of the bed."

And he did. Two bikes as a matter of fact, one bike from each end of the bed. One of the bikes, made out of the headstand, had everything from a hot water bottle to a folding bed on it.

"So many persons admired the bedcycle, that it eventually made 'Ripley's Believe it Or Not!'"

Built Spike Wider

Particularly close to Joe's heart is the "icecycle" he built in 1923. It's a bike equipped with 6-inch spike wheels to give it traction on ice. It almost proved to be too effective.

"I was riding around on Lake Michigan one day when the front wheel split the ice," he said. "I hung on to the handle bars and smashed my knuckles on the ice as the front end sank."

Luckily, the back end didn't sink and Joe was able to jump off to save himself and the bike.

Joe also has kept his eyes open for antique bikes thru the years, and has collected two and three wheelers that date back to the 1850's. He has an all wood bike built in 1897, and an all wood tricycle built in Abraham Lincoln's presidential days.

Bikes aren't the only things Joe collects. A couple of years ago, Joe sold his collection of 300 antique guns. Altho he has never fired a gun in his life, Joe started the gun collection when he found an old revolver in his father's coal bin.