

The Bike Barn Yarn

by Lisa Prowse

The year was 1967 when Jack and Jennie Prowse, with their two young sons, John and Chris, emigrated from England to Penticton in search of space and new opportunities. Jack had worked for a number of years as a very skilled carpenter but soon realized after moving to Canada that cedar (the most commonly used lumber at that time) was a source of allergies for him. He then had his own milk route for a few years before selling that and opening Prowse Cycle with Jennie in 1971. As teenagers, Chris and John started to race bikes, but finding high-end bikes and parts in the early 1970's were difficult. Jack and Jennie already had a great interest in cycling themselves (in fact, they met at a bike race in England), so building a family business focused on the sport seemed a logical choice.

The original location (est. 1971) was a very small space on Westminster Ave. (where the Beadz Shop is now). They had the capacity for about 20 bikes and there was workspace for a mechanic or two. In the mid 70's, they moved to Eckhardt and Power St. (next to the Rusty Anvil) and also began selling x-country ski equipment in the off-season. Shortly thereafter, they purchased the Yamaha Dealership which was operated from an A-frame building on Hwy 97, where Red Wing is now. At this time, Chris and John also became partners in the business. In 1981, they purchased an old barn, what was Dyne's Feed store on Westminster Ave. in order to operate all three business interests from one location. Prowse Cycle and Ski and Pacemaker Cycle then simply became The Bike Barn. I believe that the building is one of the Okanagan's oldest buildings in commercial use. It still has a few signs of its historical use including the large warehouse doors that would receive the feed products directly from the rail line that ran alongside the building. I think there are probably even some original cobwebs up high in the rafters.

The recession during the early 1980's was a very tough time for most small businesses. It was no exception for The Bike Barn. By 1983, exorbitant interest rates and an abysmal time with the motorcycle business lead them to sell that part of the business at a huge loss and left the family's financial future hanging by a thread. As good fortune would have it, however the new concept of mountain-biking took root that very year (and just in time) to help the business make it through its roughest time. When the Prowse family decided to sell the motorcycle business, and concentrate on bicycles and skis they wondered how they would ever manage to fill the big old barn so that it wouldn't seem so empty and bare. By 1991, however, the business had been built back slowly and was able to be sustained by bicycles alone.

At that time, another local business person, Ray Keetch had opened Ray's Sport Den with the mind to sell alpine and x-country ski equipment. Ray conveniently purchased all of the ski equipment from the Prowses, thereby allowing Ray to develop his business in skis and the Prowses to concentrate solely on selling and servicing bicycles. They have done so ever since.

In 1995, Jack Prowse retired, followed by Jennie's retirement in 1997. They both continue to actively enjoy life to its fullest. John has also moved on to fulfill a life long passion to act professionally. He currently lives very happily in Vancouver with his wife, Bronwen (also a very talented actor). He has been seen playing a variety of characters on t.v. shows such as Devinci's Inquest, The Chris Isaac Show, Cold Squad, the occasional commercial and always seems to be involved in live theatre productions. So since the mid 1990's Chris and I have been a husband-wife team (I purchased John's shares at that time).

With the rapport that he thoroughly enjoys having with regular customers, Chris primarily spends his time in the sales end of things. He has always had a passion for the sport of cycling himself, and I think that this has really been the key to the success of The Bike Barn. Chris (and all the Prowses) have always had the desire to support aspiring athletes in the sport of cycling to a degree that is rarely seen in any business. To combine this with someone like Chris, who has such a good business sense is even rarer. His head for figures and his memory for certain things still amazes me sometimes. If a mechanic is looking for an old part for a road bike, for instance he has been known to remember that he saved that particular part over 15 years ago – and knows exactly where he put it for safe keeping. He is also a very good and knowledgeable mechanic (his specialty being road bikes). As he is in such demand on the sales floor however, he rarely gets the chance to work on bikes.

I arrived on the scene in 1994. I was born and raised on Vancouver's North Shore (regrettably before mountain-biking was really thought of). After graduating from UVic. in 1988, I worked for a number of really wonderful years as the Recreation Director at the North Vancouver Outdoor School (located between Squamish and Whistler). During this time, my parents (Paul & Margaret Dafoe) retired to Penticton and, with each visit I realized that this area had a lot to offer someone in the field of recreation - and it felt like a really good place to be. Before I made the move to the Okanagan, I spent the better part of a year going to school in France, studying the French language and cycling around Western Europe. I met Chris briefly just before I left for that year. I came into the shop looking for something in particular. After explaining to him what I needed and why he looked at my bike and said "you're going to cycle around Europe on that?!" Almost a year later, I rolled my bike (on its last legs) into the shop for servicing. Chris and I linked up pretty quickly after that which led to an unexpected detour in my life. Within a year, Chris and I were married, I became step-mother of two boys (aged 7 & 8 at the time) and had been warmly welcomed into the family business. It's not exactly what I had envisioned myself doing when I moved here but the shop seemed to be a bit of a community center in itself and it all just felt right. Initially, I was more involved with the sales and bookkeeping of the business but I have always enjoyed working with my hands and I had an interest in becoming mechanically adept in the workshop. Now I spend the majority of my time as a mechanic, whilst doing a small amount of bookwork as well as some sales.

Chris and I have always worked remarkably well together. Conflicts are few and far between - which kind of amazes me sometimes since we not only work side by side everyday, we also enjoy a lot of the same activities. We spend most of our free time together either cycling, skiing or playing in our band (Chris sings and plays guitar, and I sort of play the drums). During the winter, we tend to take a good breather from the shop. I spend quite a bit of time as a potter in my home-based studio and we tend to spend a bit of time up at Apex.

We have recently made an exciting change to the structure of our business. Will Pratt who has been the bookkeeper and a key sales person for the past year and a half, is now (as of Dec.1, 2004) an equal partner with Chris, Jack, Jennie and myself in The Bike Barn. We already enjoy his energy and look forward to our new partnership. Raised in Penticton, he has practically grown up on bikes. He has a history degree from S.F.U. and has some background in accounting. Lucky for us he's figured out what he really wants to do. Will is also a gifted cyclist (soon to be triathlete?) with riding and racing being a big part of his life.

We all feel so fortunate to have the staff that we do. We couldn't ask for a better crew. Everyone loves cycling and I think it shows. Our mechanics come from such incredibly diverse backgrounds and bring a knowledge base and expertise that I think is unparalleled in the bike industry. The technological advances over the past ten years have made it so that it's almost impossible for any one mechanic to be 'up to speed' about everything all the time (including the 30 yr. old technology as well as high-end road/tri. bikes, the downhill/freeride, x-country mountain bikes and bmx). So to have seven mechanics that all have different interests and a high degree of expertise in their realm - and the fact that every mechanic is so willing to share their knowledge with the others has created a very dynamic and extremely competent team in the workshop. Our sales staff are equally as good at what they do. We are a pretty big shop with a lot of inventory to keep track of and products to be knowledgeable on but our staff is always up to the challenge. It's a very rare day that we don't look forward to going to work and our staff is a very big reason why we feel that way.

We also have the good fortune of working with some really amazing athletes. The caliber ranges from the very young aspiring ones to people just starting out to some truly world class cyclists and triathletes. Penticton's climate, its road network for roadies and trail network for mountain-bikers as well as its proximity to Apex and Nickel Plate Nordic Centre (for winter cross-training) create an absolutely ideal place for any serious cyclist - and our little gem is quickly being discovered by some very elite athletes. Of course, most of our customers are, like most of us, people who just love to ride their bikes. Having a business in which people come to us to further enhance their lifestyles is such a bonus. Whether people come to see us for service or just to chat over a coffee, the customers, along with our staff make it a pretty nice place for us to hang out.