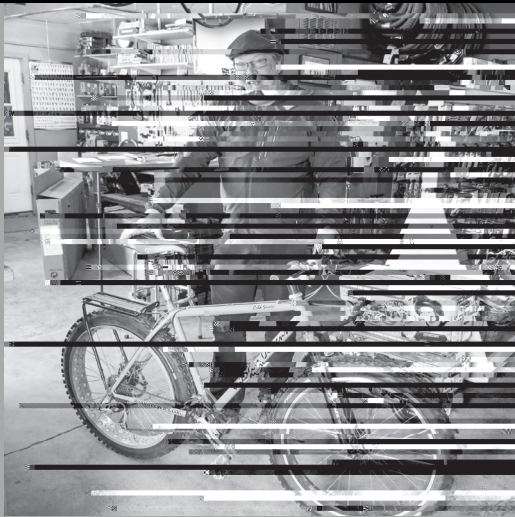


Northern Innovators



A few months after opening a bike shop in Palmer, where winds wage a tug-of-war between glaciers and big mountains, Mark Gronewald traveled to Las Vegas and saw the future. At a trade show in the Nevada desert, Ray Molina unveiled a bicycle with tires as thick as loaves of bread. Molina, who knows Mexico's Copper Canyon like most people know their backyards, had invented a bike for riding on sand.

Gronewald took one look at the balloon tires and envisioned them floating over the snowmachine trails in Alaska. Standing there at Molina's booth a few decades ago, Gronewald ordered five of the sand bikes for his shop in Alaska. There started the evolution of a product now seen everywhere in Alaska, from the squeaky cold trails of 40-below Fairbanks to the wet salt beaches of the Lost Coast of Southeast Alaska.

After placing his order with Molina at the trade show, Gronewald waited. The bikes did not arrive. They still haven't. But Gronewald did receive from Molina some large tires and rims three inches wide, made in Mexico.

Having experimented with his own recumbent version of a bulbous-tire bike, Gronewald had all he needed with Molina's tires and rims. He used them and Molina's idea to create one of the first versions of the fat bike.

"You go around here now, you see more fat-bike tracks than you see ski tracks," says Gronewald, 54, who recently retired as trails program coordinator for Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

Alaskans have been riding bikes on snow for a long time. During the Gold Rush, Alaskans Max Hirschberg and Ed Jesson, with no better options, rode their bicycles from Dawson City to Nome.

One of the few snow-biking breakthroughs of the last century came in the late 1980s, when Steve Baker of Icicle Bicycles welded two rims together and bolted them to the front and back of a bike. David Ford of Girdwood used the four-wheeled bike in 1990 to win the 100-mile Iditabike race when almost one foot of snow fell the night before.

Baker later merged three rims. Roger Cowles rode that "six-pack" more than 1,000 miles from

Anchorage to Nome, making the journey with partners on conventional mountain bikes. He arrived in the dozen villages along the route hours before his friends, who shoved when he could ride.

In the 1990s, Simon Rakower of Fairbanks developed a "Snowcat" rim twice the width of a conventional bike but with much less weight than Baker's multi-tire designs.

Gronewald, then living in Fairbanks — where bikers are just as likely to meet dog teams on the trail as snowmachines — in 1995 saved enough of his wildlands-firefighter money to buy Snowcat rims from Rakower.

"It made a big difference (for riding on snow)," Gronewald said. But he wanted more.

One of those guys who creates a tool when it doesn't exist, Gronewald soon afterward opened his Palmer bike shop, Wildfire Designs Bicycles. A few months into his risk/reward adventure, he received his shot of inspiration from Ray Molina at the Las Vegas trade show.

With the Mexico-made wide rims and fat tires in his shop, Gronewald dreamed of a better snow bike. He enlisted his friend John Evingson, a fellow adventurer, welder and custom bike-frame builder, to help him develop an architecture that could accommodate the big tires. Evingson and Gronewald came up with a frame that looks skewed to the side when viewed from the rear. The three-quarter inch slant allowed the chain to clear the fat tire and set the rear gears in line with the front gears. Their offset allowed them to use a standard mountain bike hub.

"The clever thing was figuring out how to use