

Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois

Paul Brazier Oral History Interview

Jason Stacy, Interviewer

Global Brew Tap House, Edwardsville

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Jason Stacy (JS): This is Jason Stacy, it is the tenth of February 2017. I'm here with Paul Brazier. We are doing an oral history for Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive of Madison County, and we are going to talk about bike culture in the 1980s with Paul Brazier, who is popularly known as "the bike whisperer of Madison County". So, uh, let's get started. Paul you worked for a now famous bike shop called Pedal Shop in the 1980s. Why don't you tell me about how you got started there and what it was like to work there and what you did? (00:48)

Paul Brazier (PB): Yeah, I started working there in the summer of 1980, I was a freshman in high school. Beginning out just doing some menial things around the shop, cleaning up, uh, doing trash, doing windows, and things like that. Eventually moved into doing some basic repairs, flat tires, tune ups and things like that, assembling bikes. And as I went through high school, and through college, I still worked at that shop and moved all the way up to the ranks of managing and running things and the store when I left in 1992. (01:24)

JS: Good, so you were there about twelve years. (01:27)

PB: Yes

JS: So tell me about some of the merchandise you had, some of the merchandise you moved, some of the popular stuff that you were selling. What, what was it like to run a bike shop in the 1980s? (01:39)

PB: Uh, it was a lot of fun for stuff. We had a great time doing it. Um, since I was a little bit younger, the focus of mine was more in the BMX bicycles, the bicycle motorcross. There was racing all in this area for that, nothing really this side of the river, but there were three tracks on the St. Louis side of the river. And a lot of the kids that were, you know, eight years old up to 15-16 years old were spending weekends racing the BMX bikes. So that was a big part of the business at that time. And then also were just the uh, regular family bikes, road bikes, cruisers, three speeds and things for just casual riding. Um, in the 80s there wasn't a huge cross section of different kinds of bikes. You pretty much had kids bikes and you had 10-speed bikes so, uh, of course there were high-line racing bikes for those that wanted to actually race on the road and such. But, um, in this area wasn't a huge thing at that time. (02:45)

JS: So, you know, since you brought it up, let's talk about BM bikes, BMX bikes a little bit because I see a lot of kids today riding around on BMX bikes in Edwardsville and um, you know a lot of them uh, the bikes seem to have kind of street tires on them and they've got the saddles way down on 'em, and it looks like a lot of fashion to me, it doesn't look like these kids are doing a lot of racing, but I don't know. Can you tell me maybe some of the about the BMX bikes, a little about BMX culture, uh in uh Madison

County in the St. Louis area and tell me a little about the bikes maybe. (03:19)

PB: Okay, um, well the bikes you see today are completely different than what we were looking at in the 70s and 80s. The bikes back in the 70s and 80s were more designed for off road racing on a track, basically if you've ever seen a motorcycle off road track, the BMX track is a miniature version of it. And um, it's how those bikes were popular, they had knobby tires for the dirt, um, they're pretty light weight and such, but [Loud noise, inaudible] different design in what you would find today. Today's bikes are more designed for doing tricks, um stunts and things like that, and not necessarily built for racing on the off road. (04:02)

JS: And were a lot of kids, you know Edwardsville was a very different town back in the 70s and 80s, were there a lot of kids riding around on BMX bikes in little gangs like I see them today? Is it the same sort of culture here in Edwardsville as I see among the 13 year olds set today? (04:18)

PB: You know what, yeah it was. I was kind of in on that type of thing at my age when I was doing the BMX stuff. We were rode around town in groups looking for places to jump our bikes and find some dirt to race on or whatever. Um, but that type of thing still was popular with the kids that were riding those types of bikes were banding together in groups and doing stuff like that like they do today. Um, the difference is, is now that there are maybe some places for those guys to go do tricks, but um, for the BMX guys like, like I was, it was getting ready to go race on the weekends was the, that was the big thing. (04:57)

JS: And you think what, what helped the change was skateboard culture? I see a lot more of the tricks that look like street tricks that they are doing on the BMX bikes, uh, was the difference then, they were more modeled on sort of motocross racing or something? (05:11)

PB: Well the bikes then we had was more like motorcycle/motocross it was that style, now I said the bikes are more designed to do tricks. So like skateboarding like you brought up and stuff, you know has a lot to do with it because those guys will ride those bikes at the skateboard park and try, and try to do some of the same tricks as the skateboarders do also. So, yeah, the skateboards, and the guys riding the 20-inch BMX style bikes now are kinda hang out together a lot I think. (05:40)

JS: Good. You also mentioned recreational riding and um, you know, right now Edwardsville, I see a lot of recreational riders on hybrid bikes. I see them out on the trails and the hybrid bikes to me look like, um, combination of uh just a street bike, or a city bike, and a, and a sporty bike, something maybe to give you some speed that you might even put some spandex on and try to ride. But I know that's pretty new, what kind of recreational bikes were you selling back in the 80s when you were at the Pedal Shop? (06:11)

PB: In the 80s, really the recreational stuff would have been more of a three speed bike with fenders and not really a fat tire on it at all, just a regular, you know normal width tire. Just something to basically get you around. Um, you know, it was kind of an interesting culture back then. Um, you didn't have a whole lot of choices, what you got to choose from form a bike. You either had turn-down handle bars style ten speed bike or you got kinda the recreational three speed bike that was a little bit more upright or you had a kids type o bike, a BMX bike or a just a banana seat kind of bike. So there wasn't as many choices as they have today, and I think back in the 80s is when pretty much the bike manufacturers really started paying

attention a lot more to technological advances and starting incorporating that into the bikes. They were going for the lighter weight with different types of materials, aluminum, moving into titanium, and then carbon fiber after that, making the bikes a lot lighter and of course the prices were really good at the time too with that. And um, also, you know during the 80s there were some other bike types that were, starting to come into play. Mountain biking started to come in the mid-80s, and then what you were kind of mentioning is more of a hybrid bike, kind of a mix between a road bike and a, and a mountain bike which kind of give you a little more of an upright riding position but you also had a lot of different gears to go through and you see a lot of that on the trails today for more a recreational style bicycle. Its more comfort. But yet you can still cover quite a bit of ground and it's not, um, you know the big fat knobby tire that is vibrating you to death either while you ride, if you want to ride a quite a bit of mileage. (08:03)

JS: You know it's interesting you bring up the trails because I love the trails here in Edwardsville and in Madison County. I use them for transportation and I use them for entertainment, recreation. But I imagine those trails didn't, uh, exist yet in the 1980s, or if they did what was recreational riding like here in Edwardsville for your customers when you were working at the Pedal Shop? (08:26)

PB: Yeah, the uh bike trails that we find in Madison County now had not even probably been thought of. They were still railroad in use railroad lines that you know had you know had trains on them all the time up until probably the mid-90s is when they started I think abating those trails and turn the train right-a-ways and turning them into trails. So, in the 80s in this area there really wasn't any marked bicycle trails to actually ride. Um, closest thing you could probably get was to maybe go up to Alton and ride the River Road from Alton to Grafton, or maybe up to Pere Marquette. That was probably in this area the only really designated bicycle trail that you could use. Um, at SIU campus had some trails on the campus itself for use, but um there was really no connectors to it or anything like that so you were riding streets until you could get onto one of the trails. Um, the main trail entrance I believe for SIU was off of St. Louis Street, and it's actually closed now, it's not even a useable trail any longer. So, um, but that has totally expanded tremendously as we all know how our trail system here is now is in Madison County is incredible. It's probably pretty much second to none in the state for sure and probably one of the best systems in the country for recreational riding. (09:58)

JS: So was that way to get on SIUE campus, was that the old Morris Trail that they just recently shut down and knocked that bridge down? (10:06)

PB: Yes, that is what I was referring to. Yeah it came off and went across the creek and then took you up into campus, up by Tower Lake area and in campus.(10:11)

JS: That was a pretty rough trail.(10:15)

PB: Yeah it was just um chat rock or possibly you know, um, aggregated line it wasn't super nice and when it was wet it wasn't nice to ride on. So it was, but it you know it was a way to get to campus without riding on the busy highway worrying about maybe getting clipped by a car either, so.(10:37)

JS: So when I go to a bike shop here in Edwardsville today, and I know you sometimes sell some used bikes, you know you get a lot of adults who just want to buy a hybrid and they want to use it for weekend riding and they want to ride the trails and such; when you were at the Pedal Shop if you had you know an

adult come in and just wanted to just do some recreational riding with their family, where would they ride in Edwardsville? What kind of riding could you do on an old 3-speed with fenders like you said, just wanted to sort of treat a bike like a you know, piece of recreation and get a little exercise? (11:12)

PB: Well, mainly, you'd probably just ride the streets in town. You also have to remember you know 30 plus years ago, there was half of the population here in Edwardsville. And so you didn't have as much traffic, the subdivisions weren't, there weren't really too many subdivisions developed. So you know, there really wasn't a whole lot of traffic, wasn't here as much as it is now, so, you know I wouldn't, you know, in the 80s you could ride the streets and not see a lot of cars and you could move around town fairly easy on a bicycle and not have too much trouble with that. Um, you know if you wanted to venture out on some of the country roads you could, you could also do that. But, and mainly the people that were riding recreationally around here were you know just going around town, one place to another, one side of town to the other, downtown by the courthouse, maybe out Mt. Clair, or vice versa type of riding is what you were kinda looking at. Really not a lot of, you know, no where nearly the amount of trails and types of riding that you could get [inaudible] you can get on a trail in Edwardsville now probably just about within a mile of any house, so, a lot more accessibility now than there was back then, to lengthy riding. (12:33)

JS: So let's talk about road bikes a little bit because you know I'm a big fan of, of steel road bikes and old road bikes and when I go into the bike shops here in town I see a lot of carbon and I see a lot of really expensive bikes, and I'm just curious what were some of the road bike brands? I mean you were working at Pedal Shop at the height of the bike boom, at least the last bike boom, and so I'm curious, what kinds of brands you were selling? What the road bikes were like? And what kind of people were riding road bikes? And where they were riding back in the 1980s when you were there? (13:04)

PB: Um, so in the, most the brands that are still around today were still, were also around back then. Uh, kind of makes a cycle of itself. Of course, in the 80s Schwinn bicycles were still probably your most well known bike. If you asked anybody about "name a bike brand?" they would say Schwinn and it's probably pretty much still true today if you ask a lot of people um. But they um, you know, there was some changes in the company and such and they've kind of fallen off out of the mainstream as much as they had been, but you know, if you were to talk about bikes, that's what you talked about for Schwinn's back 70s and 80s. Um, in the shop, in the Pedal Shop, we carried, we carried the Schwinn bikes, we carried the Raleigh bikes, which is an English company, we carried Panasonic bikes which were out of Japan, and we also carried a French bike called Motobecane. And so those were the main brands that we carried. There were multiple other brands available in the market. Bianchi was available. Trek was just getting started. Specialized was just getting started at the time. Um, there's an array of Japanese bikes that were in the market also. Small branded, private branded bikes that were being brought into the country too under, under names. Around here one of them was Takara, was a, was a Japanese bike that was being brought into the, into the uh, in. (14:36) So you know there, it was, there was a lot of different brands you could choose from. Like I said, at that time in the early 80s there was no lot of technological advances going on. If you bought a bike in one year and the next year there probably wouldn't be big changes in what was on the bike or something, maybe they might change a color. And that might be the big change. But, um, it seems like about the mid-80s came along and the technological advances started really kicking in, they started using different, like I said, different frame materials, aluminum, titanium. They were

experimenting with other stuff, plastics and carbon fiber, not necessarily a lot of carbon fiber in the 80s but that was more 90s coming in. (15:22) But it was that type of stuff, the technological advances were just every year coming on and coming on and making the bikes lighter, making them stronger, making them perform better, so they shifted better, they braked better, they weighed less, and they were more, seats were more comfortable. Just all those kinds of things for advances on the bikes. So big changes in that time were going on, so. But you know, for people, normal people they didn't, like I stated earlier, there wasn't a lot of choices. You either bought a 10-speed bike with a turned-down handle bars or that had multiple speeds or you had more a 3-speed kind of a bike with upright type of a bike. So there wasn't a lot so most people were choosing the 10 speed bikes. You know, it was just basic transportation, nothing super fancy or anything like that, so, that's what you saw. You saw a lot of, whole lot of that type of bike. The \$200 range bike was probably the most popular type of thing in the road bike at that time. (16:32)

JS: And what was the bike you were riding? I know you did a lot of road riding, what were you riding and where would you ride in Madison County? (16:40)

PB: Um, I was uh, when I wanted to go on longer rides I actually had a Motobecane that I rode. For a little bit longer rides it had panniers, and racks on it so I could pack stuff along, pack stuff and go if I wanted to camp or do overnight type stuff. That is the bike I rode for that. I also did some road racing in the 80s and I had a Raleigh road bike that I used to race on, for myself. (17:07)

JS: And when (17:07)

PB: Is what I had (17:08)

JS: And you bike-camped, where would you go? (17:10)

PB: Oh we'd do maybe rides like I said up to Pere Marquette, camp at Pere Marquette, or maybe just have friends that lived in the county and we'd ride from town out to the country type of thing because you know your 14-15 years old and you can't drive, so how else you gonna get anywhere but on you bikes? [laughs] so you know, it was your transportation, so you know, that's what, you did that type of stuff. (17:35) For training purposes around here most of the people would ride country roads, and um, sometimes it was a little dangerous. Some of the people out there weren't very friendly to cyclists. So you had to be very careful where you rode, when you rode, and um, and such. But that's where you did most of your training was outside the city on the country roads around here.(17:58)

JS: Gravel roads or paved? (18:00)

PB: Uh, more, eh, maybe blacktop, and maybe some chat roads. Um, that was pretty much what we were on. Most of the country roads were like that around here, back in the 80s. (18:12)

JS: So see I find people generally pretty polite now when I ride out to Marine or ride out to Worden or Staughton and I think that's maybe because they are used to a lot of bicycles on the road. But you've found that you know, people out in the country weren't used to bicycles back then? And they weren't as, weren't as friendly? (18:29)

PB: Oh definitely weren't very friendly. That's probably one of the main reason I stopped riding the road

bike as much, for that reason. And I [inaudible] switched over probably in the late 80s into, actually doing mountain bike racing and riding some, it was a good reason to transfer over, just because that reason, it was getting pretty bad around here with uh, altercations with people out on country roads. (18:55)

JS: You got, you got a story you want to share about an altercation out on the country road? (18:59)

PB: Uh, there were so many different ones. You would get beer bottles thrown at you, people at would cuss at you out their windows and tell you to get off the road and go home. It, you know, stuff, I've had some friends that got you know, pushed off the road by cars and trucks. Um, had some pretty bad accidents too, under that. Luckily I've never had that, just you know people throwing stuff at you and yelling at you more than anything else. But you know it's kind of unnerving when you're riding your bike and they're in a big old pick-up truck, it's a little unnerving when they are coming around you and throwing stuff at you and yelling at you.(19:36)

JS: Do you think people are more used to cyclists or a little more accepting of cyclists now-a- days out in the country or have we all just gotten lucky?(19:45)

PB: Oh I think they've, I think people noticed a little bit more and are a little more aware of the cyclists and I think there's, the people there living in the country are not necessarily as country as they used to be. So with people living out in that area, um, are a lot more accepting of bicyclists. (20:06)

JS: So you mentioned you switched over from road cycling to mountain bikes primarily because of uh, some danger out there in the country, see do you want to tell me about mountain bikes in the 80s and what it was like out here? What the bikes were like? And where you would ride?

And what it was like to ride out in this area in the 1980s on single-track? (20:29)

PB: Yeah, I mean it was actually a lot of fun because it was something completely new and different than anything that you've seen. You know I was a former BMX guy so I was a little bit more familiar for me to be off the road and riding in the dirt. But it was just a blast. We really tried to find anywhere you could off road to go ride. It was a lot of it, times were just starting to abate the railroad tracks so you had some of that area to ride on, so it was more of a single-track muddy area to ride on some of that. Um, we found some old motorcycle trails in the woods that had been around for a long time. There used to be some off of Old Schwarz Road, there's an old coal mine back there that you could go back and try, there were some trails back in there we'd ride. There used to be also some trails back off of Plum, Plum Road area. There used to be an area back there were there was an old motorcycle track that was back there and also some trails cut into the woods by motorcycle riders, off road motorcycle riders. We'd find those. Um but the best trails were out at SIU on the campus, they were called The Sweet William Trails. They were, I guess the best way to put it, they were up on the bluff across from the soccer stadium. They were on that side of the campus versus where they are now on the other, on the kind of other side of there. But there was a ton of trails cut into there. I believe they were originally cut for biology department out at SIU and they were doing studies in the woods out there for different botanical, if I'm saying that right,(22:11)

JS: Yep (22:12)

PB: type of things. Um, and so those trails were all cut and the mountain bikers found them and started

working on them, made them a little bit bigger and improved it, some improvements on them and they got a ton of use. But eventually you had some people that mistreated them and would go out and ride on them when they shouldn't have been riding on them, when it was wet and muddy and nasty. And they thought that was a lot of fun to tear them up, and so eventually the university had to shut those down just because they were unsafe and they were doing a ton of damage to that area so the science people couldn't use the trails anymore for their studies that they wanted to ride themselves. So they shut down but I believe within the last probably eight years or so that they developed another set of trails on the other side of the campus. I guess the north side of the campus that are the trails now, those are really nice set up, they kind of connect up with the cross country course and stuff like that. So that's actually really nice place to, to ride also. (23:15)

JS: And these are rigid mountain bikes you guys are riding, right?(23:19)

PB: Oh yeah! There was no, there's no suspension on these. These were basically some of them were modified road bikes or whatever, modified BMX bikes to made in to put some gears on and let them go. I mean the original mountain bikes that came out from manufacturers were super heavy and they weren't very durable and such. But when we said that technology stuff kicked into that part of the bicycle industry too and they started developing lighter weights, stronger materials, and stronger bikes. And then probably in the early, early 90s is when suspension started kicking in. You had your first bikes offered that had suspension on them, so. There was front suspension, wasn't very lightweight either, they added even more weight to the mountain bike if you even needed that. But it did make the ride a lot nicer. (24:12)

JS: So were you one of the first adopters of mountain bike riding in the area? Like were you doing that kind of stuff even before Pedal Shop had them? Or did you get your first mountain bike when Pedal Shop got their first mountain bike? (24:24)

PB: I got my first mountain bike when they, at from the shop, it wasn't anything I put together and just made. But um, uh it was a production bike, it was a Raleigh production bike that I had bought. It was in its beginning years and everybody, as I said, every manufacturer had bikes, mountain bikes, had different stuff going on with them. And I think even the industry really didn't realize that how big it was really going to get for you know ten, fifteen years. That's what everybody was wanting to buy. Everybody wanted a mountain bike, with the fat knobby tire bikes and you know wanted them to be more durable they could jump off of curbs and you know whatever they wanted to do with it. So it became really really popular thing. Um, not, I wasn't necessarily a pioneer in riding mountain bikes in the area. I mean I was doing it, we were doing races, and it was just a group of us that were working in the shops and other avid cyclists. And the guys that were road bike racers and wanted to do something on the, in the off season so it gave them something they could do ride different kind of bike. They weren't on the road you go in the woods, a little more cover, not so cold, still get a good workout. So it was, it was a good crossover activity plus, it was just a lot of fun. (25:42)

JS: I got just one last question for you Paul, and you can decide whether you want to answer it or not. But I heard a story about you, some friends, BMX bike, ice on Cougar Lake and SIUE officers - are you willing to relate any of this story? (25:59)

PB: Oh my goodness, uh, that's probably, uh, that's a long long long time ago. Yeah, I might say I was

involved in that.

JS: [laughs]

PB: There was a large group of people there on Cougar Lake, yes. We, no harm no foul.(26:18)

JS: Were there any arrests? (26:20)

PB: Not that I know of. (26:22)

JS: And did anyone end up in the water? (26:23)

PB: Nobody ended up in the water. The water was solid. (26:27)

JS: Good! That's good to hear! Well this has been Jason Stacy interviewing Paul Brazier on bike culture in the 1980s in Edwardsville in Madison County for Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive of Madison County. Thanks Paul, I appreciate it.(26:43)

PB: Thank you, Jason. (26:44)

JS: Talk to you later. (26:45)