

MERZ'S MACHINE

by John Kirkpatrick

It was several years ago that I first met Jim and Virginia Merz. I had hopes of getting a custom touring rack, and rumor had it they would make one for a price. My informant (who wished to remain unmentioned) said the Merzes looked with disfavor on anyone who might request a custom touring rack. "People buy them and then they sit in a closet, so they don't want to make any more right now," he said.

In those days the Merzes managed an apartment house in the old Northwest section of Portland. Their home consisted of the basement, with the main door below the ground. To knock, one need walk down three steps to the wooden door. I did so, with no answer.

Giving up, I turned to walk up the steps and was met by an arriving cyclist. At the same time, the door opened, and there stood the tall, slender Merz with long hair and a beard. He looked past me to the fellow who had ridden up and invited him in. After the biker had gone through the doorway, Merz turned to me and said, "You coming in?"

I said I just wanted to look around and see the shop. He asked who had told me about it. I said I had forgotten. He didn't say anything else, but kept the door open long enough for me to squeeze through. He didn't introduce himself and he didn't ask me my name. In fact, he didn't say another word the entire time I was in his house. When I left and said good-bye, he was sitting at his stool, brazing a seat tube and listening to jazz through a set of headphones.

I'd stop by about twice a week, and each time Merz would let me in as though I were a stray cat. I must admit things had progressed since our first meeting. Now he would greet me by saying, "How's it going?" Then, he would turn and stride back to the stool, put on his headphones, and get back to work.

Occasionally, I'd stumble around the shop picking up an uncut lug or pluck one of the many light wheels from hooks in the rafters. On one side of the room two or three unfinished frames also hung from hooks. But whenever I turned to Merz to ask a question about his equipment, he was long gone under his headphones, torch in hand.

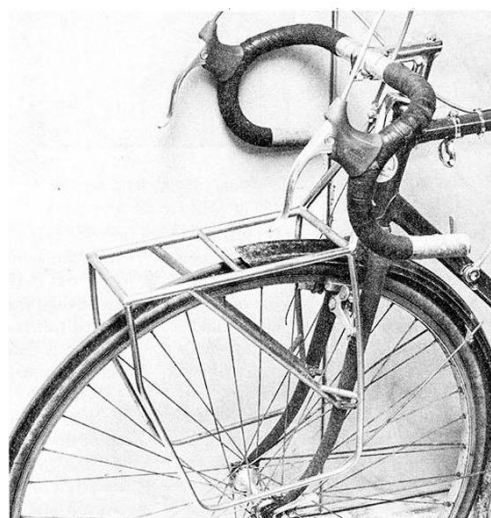
On the fourth visit, Merz's wife Virginia walked in the shop. She was short, and had a full smile. "Who are you?" she asked. "Jim keeps telling me about this fellow who drops by all the time. He says he doesn't know who you are." I introduced myself. She did likewise and then turned to Merz. "This is Jim." He still had the headphones on and hadn't turned around. "Jim! Jim!" Merz turned around and looked me straight in the eye. "Who are you?" he asked.

It took another hour to get up enough nerve to ask Merz to build me a custom rack. I did so only because Virginia was there and I knew that if Merz were to turn the torch on me, Virginia would be standing in the way. As it turned out, he really didn't object that much to my question. But I realized when I left that he hadn't said he would.

I had ordered a set of Touring Cyclist panniers out of Boul-



Merz's skill is evident on every piece he handles. The racks and frames shown here are specially designed and hand-crafted. They are beautiful in their functionality, a quality Merz strives for.

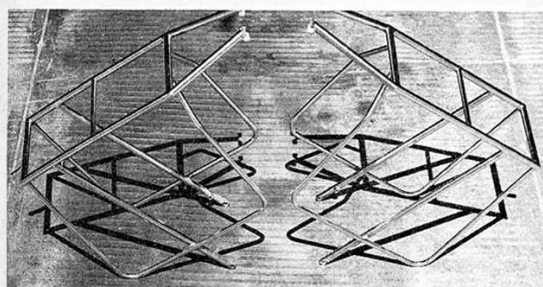
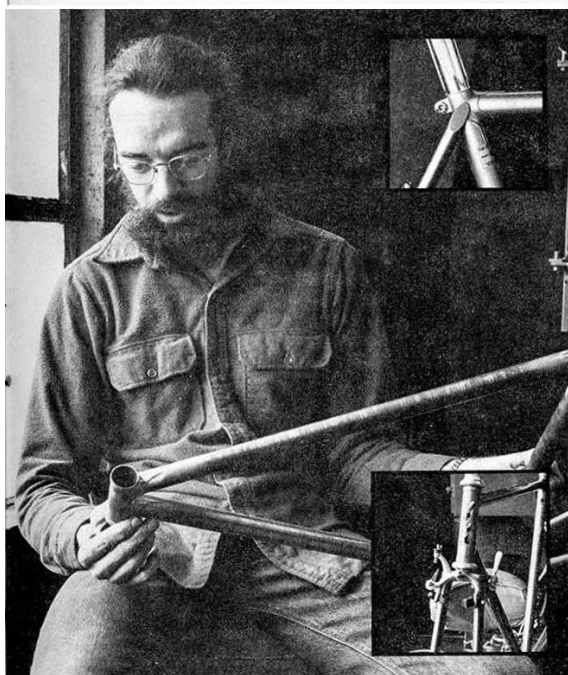


der, Colorado. When they came, I ran them down to Merz. Merz picked them up and looked at them. He yanked, he tugged, he looked at the aluminum backing, and studied the stitching along the seams. "So, you want a rack, huh? Are these the panniers you want to use?" I nodded. "They look pretty good. Leave your bike here so that I can do some measurements." A couple of weeks later, I returned to the Merz's basement home, and there on the floor, next to the couch, was my rack.

It weighed less than a pound, including plating. Merz said the tensile strength of the chrome moly was 500 pounds per square inch. "It won't flex as you ride," he said.

The panniers fit the rack perfectly. There were hooks on the bottom of the rack to keep the bags from jumping when the bicycle went over a bump. Hooks at the top of the rack kept the panniers from leaning out. There were eyelets braised onto the top of the rack so that a sleeping bag sack could be threaded in and cinched down. The entire system fit on the front forks.

"The front forks," I said, "I've never seen a rack for touring on the front."



Merz gave me an off-the-cuff look and said, "You are just used to seeing it that way. It's just like a car. The trunk is always in the rear."

"But it doesn't make sense," he continued. "When you sit on a bicycle, most of the weight is on the rear to start with. Today forks are so strong they can stand a lot more weight than you could ever hope to carry in these panniers. If you stand up to climb and the weight is up front, the bike doesn't weave around. It's less strain on the arms and hands because the front end is weighted down and you don't need a lot of muscle to keep it in line. The bags won't hamper the steering either. Go try it."

I paid \$50 for the rack and tried it. The first run was down to California and back, the second was to Missoula, Montana, and the third test was around the United States. The rack worked.

It's been two years since Merz made my touring rack. Since then they have moved their shop three times. Now, finally,

finally, they have established a shop in the upstairs of an old gas station and are in business building custom touring racks and bikes.

Merz does the brazing, the milling and the machine work. He's responsible for the frame and rack construction, hubs, stems, seat posts, and headsets. Virginia paints and files the frame, does the decals, sandblasts, cooks and generally keeps things orderly and smooth. Merz makes most of his own tools, including jigs.

The shop is equipped with a milling machine, sandblaster, painting room, oxygen acetylene tanks, work tables, a lathe, jigs for the fork, frame and wheels.

The Merzes use Columbus, Reynolds and chrome moly for their frames. They have a wide range of lugs and stock Campagnolo and Cinelli accessories. All the racks are plated to match the frame color, and the Merzes will chrome a bike upon request.

They are always on the lookout for better equipment and new tools for frame construction. Their standard touring frame has brazed-on doles to hold the shift levers. The cable guides and pump clips are brazed on, as are the water bottle stops. The Merzes contend that brazed-on equipment adds to the overall lightness of a bicycle, keeps it cleaner and prevents banded equipment from cutting through the paint.

Virginia adds, "Brazed-on equipment is particularly useful for coastal areas and rainy climates. For example, if the shift levers have a wrap-around band, eventually the paint underneath the band will chip away. Salt water will corrode the bare metal underneath, and this requires continuous painting."

Merz's philosophy on frame building is simple. "I'm satisfied spending my time this way. There are not enough people making good bikes in this country. I mean, if you want to tide your bike down to South America or across the US, you have to have a good machine. That's why I do it."

The Merzes have a history of touring. A hundred miles a day for twenty days at a time is not unusual for them. Between the two, they have logged more than two years of touring.

"One of the things we've learned is that you can't buy a good set of commercial racks for touring," Virginia says. "That's why we make ours. Any frame builder, if he puts his mind to it, can build a good machine. But not many build good racks, 40-hole small flange hubs, and all the other little things to make a long tour work."

Jim Merz continues, "I don't pretend to make the most beautiful machine. Functionality is first and beauty is second. There is nothing like a good machine, and for me, something that works well is beautiful."

Merz frames are beautiful. By running a thumb nail around the lug, one feels the craftsmanship. There is nothing rough, no file marks, not the slightest sense that something has been left unfinished. All the holes are threaded, such as eyelets on the dropouts, the fender mount on the crown, the seat stay brace and the water bottle stops. Each hole is filled with an Allen screw.

Today the ultimate Merz touring machine costs around \$900. Three hundred and fifty dollars for the frame, \$100 for a set of custom touring racks, \$60 for a set of Merz hubs, and roughly \$300 to \$350 for the rest of the equipment. Special equipment may include brazed-on brakes with Mathouser brake shoes, the new Cinelli stem, Campagnolo's rally touring derailleur and 15-speed Campagnolo crank sets.

For those who want Merz frames, patience is the word—they are built one at a time. Each must be worked out with the rider for specific shape, usage and components. Nothing is jimmied or rushed, no corners are cut and each machine carries a lifetime guarantee. ●