

THE WORDS AND WISDOM OF SHELDON "GEAR RATIO" BROWN

"I have always loved riding bicycles, especially for the feeling of freedom and self-sufficiency that they give."

—Sheldon Brown

Bicyclophiles (OK—not a real word, but you get the idea) around the globe may very well know the name, but chances are good that most *Gear Technology* readers have never heard of Sheldon Brown, AKA—“Gear Ratio,” “Gain Ratio,” “Mouldy Oldie,” “Theory,” “Quixote,” “Fixit” and some the Addendum team probably missed.

As the names demonstrate, Brown was indeed a Renaissance man to kindred, bicycle-bound saddle tramps everywhere. We say “was” because, sadly, Sheldon passed away in 2008.

But what a life he had.

A perusal of his website (which is being refreshed and updated as this goes to press) reveals the seemingly endless curiosity and wisdom of the man who claims the likes of Robert Heinlein, Martin Luther King and Bertrand Russell as great influences during his “formative years.” A self-taught bicycle mechanic—his principal claim to fame, aside from his family—Brown’s mechanical genius didn’t stop there, according to John Allen, the site’s bicycle technical guru and co-author of several editions of “Sutherland’s Handbook for Bicycle Mechanics.”

“He also worked for several years in a camera repair shop. He got the job by reassembling a difficult camera that the owner handed him with the expectation that he wouldn’t be able to repair it. This went along with his strong interest in photography. Almost all the photos on the website are his own, including the many that illustrate bicycle parts and mechanical procedures. He was an obsessive tinkerer,” adds Allen.

Also available on the site are Brown’s essays, journals, observations and everything else bicycle-related, including all-things gearing. There you’ll find issues addressed such as gears and drivetrains, derailleur adjustment, tandem synch trains, gear



“My ‘panache’ is a plastic eagle which probably began life at the top of a small flag pole. It is a road find, held onto my old Bell Image by a plastic zip tie.”—Sheldon Brown.

measurement, an online gear calculator and even fixed-gear bikes (remember those!?).

An enterprise like this had to start somewhere, and that somewhere was—of course—a bicycle shop.

“Sheldon started work at Harris Cyclery (in West Newton, MA) in the mid 90s—1996, I think,” says Brown’s widow, Harriet Fell, a computer science professor. “He had already written many articles for *Bicycling* magazine and had also written some instructional pamphlets for (another shop). He started the website to advertise Harris Cyclery and found that it was a great way to advertise himself.”

And the genesis of Sheldon’s love for bicycles? “Sheldon met bicycles as a kid,” she says. “His older sister used to pedal him around on her handlebars when he was two and she was eight. He went on a cycle touring trip to Maine with his Boy Scout leader.” And thus our bike boy was born.

The road got very bumpy for Sheldon in his latter years, spent battling multiple sclerosis. And while the MS is not what finally took him, how cruelly ironic is that? But how did the bikemeister respond?

With a site page entitled, “The Bright Side of MS.” There he refers to his disease as “not so much a ‘tragedy’ but as a Really Major Inconvenience.”

So do yourself a favor—biker or not—visit sheldonbrown.com. There you will indeed find all you need to know to keep your ride moving reliably. But there’s a lot more.

You’ll see.