THE OLD MAN MOUNTAIN STORY

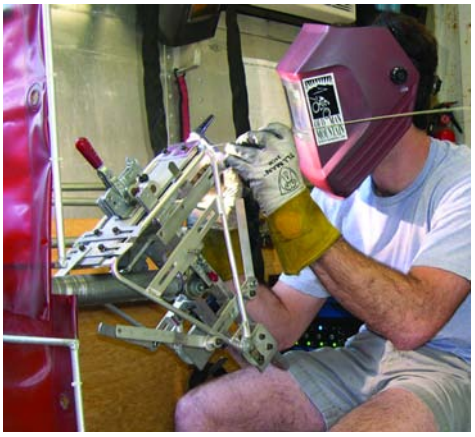
Millions of mountain bikes couldn't accept racks. Then Channing Hammond solved the problem.

by John Schubert

When mountain bikes were first sold two decades ago, the enticing prospect of true expedition touring loomed large. Those hut-to-hut tours high in Colorado, Adventure Cycling's own Great Divide Mountain Bike Route, and all sorts of eye-opening third-world adventures danced in people's heads. And then racing took hold of the mountain bike business.

Mountain bikes lost their rack-mounting eyelets, their user-friendly sales pitch, and much of their practicality. As marketing-think and product design goals focused on the wanna-be racer, those lovely hut-to-hut tours receded into the deep background of the industry's mind.

Then suspension arrived, making conventional rack mounting points impossible. It was yet another step away from the activities that racks allowed us to do with our mountain bikes, whether it be a once-in-a-lifetime expedition or a thrice-weekly trip to pick up a a few groceries.



Channing creates each individual rack himself.

In 1996, a former bike shop employee named Channing Hammond, then twenty-three, decided to do something about it. He owned a GT LTS full-suspension mountain bike, and darn it, he wanted to do some backcountry touring in the majestic Sierra Madre mountains that lure many adventurers from his native Santa Barbara, California.

So Hammond started Old Man Mountain — a company to make racks for bikes that weren't intended to accommodate racks.

Hammond already knew lots about rack making. He had just spent a year setting up Jandd's rack production facility, and he was restless enough to want to strike out on his own. Never much interested in road touring, Hammond saw great possibilities in off-road touring on suspended mountain bikes. And so he founded Old Man Mountain (named after 5,525-foot high peak in Santa Barbara County) and started selling racks.

Also in 1996, Adventure Cycling had started selling maps for the first thousand miles of the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route. The demand for mountain bike touring equipment had a focal point in that route. Hammond met up with Adventure Cycling at the annual trade show that year, and an alliance was struck. (Adventure Cycling has been selling them ever since through its *Cyclosource* catalog and online at www.adventurecycling.org/store.)

Hammond brought an unusual background to this endeavor. "I have no college engineering training. I grew up in a metal fabrication business that my parents own. They did a lot of really neat high-end aluminum satellite enclosure work and aerospace work. I've had a unique look at how things are put together, because I've seen so many fabrication jobs through the business," he said.

And a family hobby gave additional training in how to keep things from breaking:

"My father has been racing Bonneville land-speed-record cars for thirty years. He had an open-wheel car made from a drop tank of an old F-86. As those became available, they were perfect bodies for cars.

"We rebuilt the car, and I built the roll cage. In August 1996, I got to set a record of 270 mph in that car. More recently, my mom and dad both set records of 305 mph.

"And then, even more recently, my father was going 325 mph when he lost control and rolled the car. The roll cage held, though, and his injuries were fairly minor."

Pretty impressive. That metal fabrication skill translates into the racks' reliability record, which we'll get to in a minute.

Hammond's original design for his racks has seen only evolutionary changes. To his credit, that design has been very adaptable as suspension bike design has changed. The reason is simple: the points of attachment are the axle and the brake bosses. (For bikes with disc brakes and no bosses, Hammond provides clamps that circle the frame tube, and spacers so the axle mounting fit kit clears the disc brake.) Hammond's attachment hardware is elegant (more so in recent years), simple, and sturdy. And it works.

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Brake bosses come in a wide variety of locations on different suspension bikes, but wherever they put the brake bosses, Hammond can reach them. Extenders from the rack to the brake bosses come in a variety of lengths, and the variety can expand with a simple phone call. "People call up saying, 'I have eight-inch extenders and I need X or Y.' It's not a problem," Hammond said.

"Having a universal frame and a bolt-on kit allows us to easily and quickly adapt brackets for all the bikes that are out there."

This allows the rack to fit bikes that weren't envisioned in the original design — such as the folding small-wheel Bike Friday, the Whiz Wheels trike, the folding small-wheel suspended Peregrine Bicycle Works bike, and the Softride tandem.

"The only thing I have here is customer service. Whatever kind of bike someone has, I try to put a rack on it," Hammond said.

The original design is called the Cold Spring. A simpler and cheaper version is the Sherpa. Both come in front and rear models. Hammond also offers eyelet-mount racks and low-mount ("lowrider") front racks, with one low-mount model that fits suspension forks. The racks range in price from $55 to $125.

I asked Hammond how many warranty returns he'd had. "I can count them all on the fingers of one hand," he replied. "I had one early rack come back from the Great Divide Route. The guy must have had eighty pounds on the rear rack; he went eleven hundred miles with all his weight on one rack and he wondered why it broke after eleven hundred miles. After seeing that, we made some changes to the design to strengthen the rack even more." Hammond now gives a discount to customers who buy both front and rear racks.

One thing that sets Old Man Mountain apart from other high-quality rack makers is that the racks are made from aluminum tubing. (Steel tubing and aluminum rod stock are the more common choices.) I asked Hammond why he made that choice.

"First of all, I'm a fan of aluminum. I have no interest in working with steel. Aluminum is fun, and it's easy to work with." He underscored the "easy to work with" by listing his production machinery: a wood bandsaw, a drill press, and a hand file. A hydraulic press and two World War II era punch presses stamp out parts. He doesn't have a milling

machine, and he doesn't use his small lathe for production.

Old Man Mountain racks are made from aluminum tubing with an outside diameter of three eighths of an inch and a wall thickness of 0.060 inch. Those dimensions provide more strength and stiffness for the weight than aluminum (or steel) rod stock would, but the tubing is thick-walled enough to resist buckling.

Some customers vastly prefer steel because cracks can be welded in the field, and from time to time we hear from expedition tourists who have done that. But Hammond hasn't chosen to follow that route.

"I had a customer whose bike got run into by a bus in Nepal. His rack broke. Within two days, UPS had him a new rack. I have never bought into the notion that you have to have steel items so they can be fixed by some obscure welder. A welder you meet in a developing country is probably set up to weld thick-plate farm equipment, not thin-wall steel, anyway," Hammond said.

Old Man Mountain's factory is in a thirteen-hundred-square-foot shipping container. Hammond has employed up to three people, but right now the company consists of himself and one part-time employee. With that part-time help, he spends four hours per day welding and four hours packing and shipping, making three hundred to four hundred racks per month. "I'm refining my processes. I can do most of the stuff really fast, and I'm kind of a control freak in terms of quality, so I like to do it myself." He adds that he has personally welded almost every rack he's ever sold.

Hammond thinks that today's full-suspension mountain bike is a great tool for touring and camping, and that more people ought to try it.

"The technology has improved to the point where you won't get stranded in the woods. We look at suspension for touring less as a matter of performance and more as a matter of comfort. The technology has made it possible for everyone to have more fun and not get beat up as much."

Hammond plans to start offering an aluminum bike frame for backcountry

A rider sports his Old Man Mountin rack on the Great Divide Route in Montana.

GUY BAREL

camping. He will definitely offer a hardtail version, and is hoping to offer a rear suspension version too. I asked him how he could compete with the big companies on sophisticated rear-suspension design. His answer: suspension is getting simpler.

"In the 1970s, motorcycles went through a similar evolution of complex suspension linkages, and went back to a single-pivot swing arm.

"For us, the difference is the smart shock. The new generation of smart shock is comparable to the initial breakthrough of suspension. It's that much better.

"These new shocks are made to work with single-pivot designs. Now the shock is controlling the bobbing. You don't have to design a linkage to control the bob; nor do you have to design a linkage that both controls the bob and maximizes travel," Hammond said.

With a great one-size-fits-all product that makes millions of expensive bikes far more useful, you'd think Old Man Mountain would be a darling of the bike biz, right?

Nope. After eight years making racks, Old Man Mountain has about 150 "regular retailers that reorder regularly," Hammond said. Another one hundred retailers sell the racks infrequently. (There are over five thousand bike shops in the country, and good accessory market penetration would involve at least a third of them. Or to put it another way, almost all of those shops sell bikes that won't accept conventional racks and racks that won't fit many of the bikes they sell.)

"I haven't felt a lot of love from bike dealers," Hammond sighed. "All the time, I hear about shops that have sold my racks in the past, and someone in the shop will tell a customer, 'It just can't be done.'" Hammond went on to recite, with some dreariness in his voice, the sales mantra that works against him: "We want nationally recognized brand names where the product will fly off the shelf."

"So I do a lot of my business direct on the Internet. Only the people who won't say die are the ones who seek me out."

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