



Cindy Schultz / Times Union

Bike mechanic Dave Drumm works on an early 1990s Cannondale mountain bike in 2013 at Blue Sky Bicycles in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

CANNONDALE TURNS 50

By Robert Brum

The story goes that one day Joe Montgomery was watching a long-haired “dude” pedaling his bike up a hill

while lugging a heavy backpack.

“He said, ‘God, that’s a crazy way to get around,’” his son, Scott Montgomery, recalled recently.

That moment inspired Cannondale, a brand that’s still renowned throughout the worldwide bicycling community 50 years later.

In rented loft space above Mrs. Forrester’s pickle factory near the Cannondale railroad station in 1971, Joe Montgomery and his small research and development team conceived the idea for a bicycle-towed trailer that became known as “the Bugger.” The tiny company that initially focused on making bicycling accessories and clothing would challenge the industry orthodoxy in the 1980s by rolling out some of the first mass-produced bicycle frames made from aluminum instead of steel.

Cannondale went on to burnish its reputation for innovation through sponsorship of championship racing teams and continues to hold a place among avid cyclists as a premium brand.

The golden 50-year anniversary is being marked by an Instagram campaign with the hashtag #cannondaletales, inviting owners to post photos of their bikes and the stories behind them.

A hometown brand for 50 years

Decades after the brand went international — and following an ill-fated side trip into motorcycles that bankrupted the company and ended the Montgomery family’s ownership — Cannondale’s local presence continues in the town where it all started.

Cannondale quickly outgrew its original Wilton offices, moving to Georgetown and later Bethel. In 2013, it moved back to Wilton, opening its 51,000-square-foot global headquarters at 1 Cannondale Way.

“At one time Cannondale was making all of LL Bean’s dog beds,” Scott Montgomery said, recalling the evolution of the brand. He did assembly work as a 10-year-old and stuck around to launch the

HOW WILTON’S WORLD-RENOWNED CYCLING BRAND STARTED



Left, the Cannondale staff in the mid-1980s in a photo from the book “Cannondale, Handmade in USA.” An advertisement for Cannondale from 1990, at right. Above, a 1997 Cannondale Alison Sydor replica bike.

company’s European operation in 1988.

The first Cannondale bike was the ST-500, an aluminum touring model, “and that was mainly done because Cannondale had made all those bike bags so it was known as a brand that was ideal for touring, you could ride it all the way across the country,” Scott Montgomery said.

The concept of using lighter, stiffer aluminum was the brainchild of an engineer from one of the nearby submarine builders.

“At first, nobody wanted them, or very few, because it was considered odd-looking. At the time all the European steel frames for brands like Bianchi and Peugeot — those were all the ones that everybody wanted,” said Scott Montgomery.

The company soon jumped into the burgeoning mountain biking field, designing off-road models for racers and enthusiasts.

“When people tried it, it was, ‘Wow, this is different, this is better,’” Murray Washburn, Cannondale’s director of product market-

ing, said recently. “If you rode a steel bike and you rode a Cannondale, it was a completely different feel that even somebody who’s not a super-experienced cyclist could feel immediately.”

Cannondale’s sponsorship of the Italian Saeco racing team and its legendary sprinter Mario Cipollini helped legitimize the company’s 10-speed road bikes among serious road cyclists — the same way forming the Volvo-Cannondale mountain bike team drove the popularity of its off-road bikes.

‘Restless, maverick spirit’

Joe Montgomery instilled a “restless, maverick spirit” that fueled an appetite for risk, culminating in revolutionary designs and manufacturing operations, Washburn said.

“Everything is possible, take risks, push things,” was Joe Montgomery’s philosophy, recalled Washburn, who has worked at Cannondale since the late 1990s. “He used to walk around the cubicles and check in on people. It was not uncommon for him to be

jingling the coins in his pocket and be like, ‘Change is good.’ That sort of a mantra.”

Even the failed venture into motorcycles that drove Cannondale into bankruptcy in 2003 was very much in character. “We had grown so much that we needed to look elsewhere to continue to grow the company, and that continual hunger of ‘Is there a better way?’ led into the motorsports thing,” Washburn said.

The cash crunch sent Cannondale into the hands of its largest creditor, Pegasus, but the brand’s popularity among bicyclists was going strong, with the emergence of carbon fiber frames and other advances gaining momentum.

“We actually came out of bankruptcy with more bike dealers than when we went into bankruptcy,” Washburn said.

Pegasus sold Cannondale to the Canadian company Dorel Industries in 2008.

The legend lives on

The brand’s early models retain their legendary status among

scores of hard-core passionistas on social media pages and websites like VintageCannondale, where riders swap stories and photos.

Joe Montgomery, now 81, lives in Florida where he runs a software company, his son said. Cannondale’s founder “keeps an eye on the company the same way a retired baseball coach might follow an old protégé through the leagues,” according to an archival history published by Cannondale.

Years after his family’s ties to the company ended, Scott Montgomery runs a marketing company geared toward outdoor brands and maintains his passion for cycling.

“I still love it as an industry and I’m happy to see the company make that milestone,” said Scott Montgomery, now 60. “It’s a household name within the category of performance bicycles worldwide, so it’s a proud moment.”

Moving into the future of biking

Cannondale has traveled many miles since its brash beginnings above the Wilton pickle shop. The company is now a division of Dorel Sports, which also counts Schwinn, GT, and Mongoose among its holdings.

Although some hard-core enthusiasts feel its huge corporate parent has put the brakes on Cannondale’s pioneering spirit, Washburn does not believe that’s the case.

“The push to be different and disruptive is less, but the appetite for out-of-the-box thinking is still there,” he said.

Cannondale’s sales are almost evenly-split between road and mountain models, Washburn said. And the company has jumped into the cycling boom that accelerated during the pandemic, including electric models under the nameplate Neo, like the Adventure Neo.

“The effect on the market of ebikes cannot be overstated,” Washburn said. “It’s bringing new people who wouldn’t ordinarily be thinking about riding a bike into cycling, whether it’s for transportation or recreation. It’s making the riding experience and the possibility of not using a car so much easier, making mountain and road biking more accessible to people.”

“The industry has grown up and so has Cannondale,” Washburn added. “We’re not focusing on the wild and attention-getting things of the past. We’re focusing on things that will make a real difference in people’s rides, making it easier to use the bikes and service them.”