



## *From The Cheap Seats, by Ted Gross*

### **The Best Job**

So my friend Gene and his wife Cathy retired from their corporate careers, sold the NYC apartment of 35 years, chucked everything else and moved to a college town in New England where their son is teaching and a first grandkid was recently born.

A month in, Gene spotted an ad for a job: they needed a full-time manager for the campus coffee shop.

Gene, with no experience, applied for it anyway, got it, and told me last week it is hands-down the best job he's ever had.

I believe him. At Christmas my in-law's father--99 years-old and sharp and still living on his own--asked me what my favorite job was.

I told him Oz, I don't even have to think about it, it was being a bicycle messenger in downtown San Francisco.

Oz smiled and wanted to hear more. He's an old Harvard guy, started off as a cattle rancher in eastern Oregon until he figured he better put his degree to use.

My gig was before fax machines and cell phones and the internet. You showed up at 7:30, grabbed your bike and radio, and you were gone for the day.

No one looking over your shoulder. You were in a sweat for 8 hours. Otherwise, no 2 days alike.

The dispatcher--wiry dude with a ponytail and thick black glasses named Space--had a wonderful radio voice. His skill when things got hairy, in calmly handling and assigning dozens of pickups and deliveries per hour, was special.

Your main territory was the financial district, but there were longer runs. You had to pick stuff up at the Southern Pacific Depot, 3rd and Townsend, and hustle it to Ghirardelli Square. For that you jumped on Columbus Avenue where you could fly, mindful of the cable car tracks, especially when they were wet.

If you had to drop something in Pacific Heights you took the Broadway Tunnel. Sometimes you'd get a rush order, a piece of videotape in a canister headed to Channel 7.

The messengers back then worked strictly on heavy-duty 1-speed bikes. The big basket over the handlebars. Foot brakes. You learned quickly to never sit on the seat. You stood and cranked the whole time.

The challenge was to do as many deliveries as humanly possible. There were commissions and bonuses, and none of it amounted to much, but that wasn't the point.

You mastered the one-way streets and the best ways in and out of the buildings. I never once locked the bike, even though you were supposed to. Slowed you down.

I didn't grasp it at the time but the main industry in San Francisco back then--behind tourism--was printing. We'd pick up drawings from the architects in the Transamerica Pyramid and run them south of Market to the blueprint places. There was photo lab stuff mixed in. Never thought about the connection.

There were legal documents you had get to City Hall on deadline. When fax machines arrived, and then the internet, a lot of those physical runs were eliminated. As were many of the bike delivery companies.

There are still some messengers. They ride their own bikes, multi-gear jobs, and they deliver into the outlying neighborhoods. They call in occasionally and on cell phones. The pace is slower.

Good to have been part of the heyday,  
the radio crackling, messengers flying  
all over downtown.

You could identify the other messenger  
companies by the bikes or the outfits. At  
ours we had to wear starched white cotton  
jackets with a bowtie.

That part seemed extreme, but now it  
grows on you.

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