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Business

Nation's Oldest Existing Bike Maker Keeps On Rolling

by Peter Breslow

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Peter Breslow/NPR

Heavy-duty wheels for bicycles, tricycles and carts are made in the Worksman Cycles factory in Queens, N.Y.

Weekend Edition Saturday, November 15, 2008 · The legendary names in U.S. bicycle manufacturing have all but disappeared. But at a factory in a residential part of Queens, N.Y., there's a bike maker that's been around for more than a century. You've probably never heard of them, but Worksman Cycles is the oldest existing bicycle manufacturer in the country.

The next time you're in New York or some other big city and you buy a hotdog from a street vendor or see a pizza delivery guy riding by, check out their wheels. Chances are they're peddling or pushing a Worksman, though the name may be tough to read. Some of these battered specialty bikes are 20, 30 or even 40 years old.

Wayne Sosin, president of Worksman, recently showed off some bright orange, yellow and blue tricycles used for factory work. They run around \$1,200 and provide an emissions-free alternative to golf carts and forklifts.

"These are bicycles and tricycles that are used to move personnel at large facilities," Sosin says. "Workers need a good way to get around. They use Worksman cycles to do that, so a lot of them want safety colors. Safety orange, safety yellow."

From Pizza To Pratt & Whitney

Founded in 1898 by Russian immigrant Morris Worksman, the company started out as a downtown Manhattan toy store. Worksman sold bikes in his shop and liked to tinker. He made a special gear for Harley-Davidson and created vending carts for local merchants.

"Back in the 1930s, this little company called Worksman Cycles was approached by a newly formed company that nobody had heard of, called Good Humor Ice Cream," Sosin says. "And the Good Humor Ice Cream Co. had a vision of doing this through a series of ice cream vending tricycles, and they went to Schwinn. And Schwinn said, 'I don't really think that's something we can do. But there's this small company in New York. They could do this for you, they already make these sort of things.'"

For the next 40 years, Worksman made Good Humor carts. Along the way, it added the factory tricycles, adult trikes for seniors, some heavy-duty recreational cruiser bikes, four-wheelers you might see commandeered by tourists on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. The company also makes dual-team trikes, where two riders sit side by side and peddle independently — perfect for an able-bodied person accompanying someone who can't ride on his or her own.

"On any given day, we could speak to the head of purchasing of General



Peter Breslow/NPR

Wayne Sosin, president of Worksman Cycles, sits on one of the industrial tricycles made by the company.



Peter Breslow/NPR

Roberto Combay paints colorful bike frames at Worksman Cycles. He started out in the tire department almost 20 years ago.



Peter Breslow/NPR

Freshly painted bike frames are stacked on the factory floor at Worksman Cycles, which was founded in 1898.

Motors, Ford, Pratt & Whitney, Boeing, Exxon or we could talk to Tony's Pizzeria, who needs one delivery bike," Sosin says. "And everything in between you can imagine."

Sosin came to Worksman when he felt his ideas weren't being taken seriously enough at a larger company. That was back in 1979. Quite a number of Worksman's 65 employees have been here for decades.

'No Other Bike Like That In The World'

Errol Barrett just celebrated his 30th anniversary with Worksman. He learned his welding craft in Jamaica.

On a trip to Jamaica, he recalls, "I see these bikes in Jamaica. ... I was walking out of a restaurant, a very exclusive restaurant, and there was a Worksman. I said to my wife, 'That's a Worksman bike.' She said, 'How do you know?' I said, 'I made it. There's no other bike like that in the world.'"

"They're outstanding," he adds. "It's more like a Humvee compared to a car. These bikes, I must have made over 100,000 over the years."

Some of these cycles can weigh 50 or even 100 pounds, so they won't match up well against your 19-pound carbon fiber model from Trek or Specialized. Then again, Worksman bikes are just about indestructible. The company is still supplying replacement parts for bikes it sold back in the 1960s.

Sosin says that over the past 15 to 20 years, domestic production of American bicycles has dropped from 10 million a year to less than a half-million. Worksman still fabricates its bikes in this country, but many of the companies that supply its components, like rims, spokes and brakes, have moved overseas.

Business is booming at Worksman. The company won't reveal how many bikes it sells annually, but Sosin says sales are up 10 percent from last year.

He says manufacturers are looking to reduce fuel costs and maybe give employees a chance to work out a bit as they haul engine blocks across the factory floor. Not long ago, Worksman's hand-built three-wheeler got a boost when actress Edie Falco ordered one with a metal basket mounted on the back for carting her dog around, and then showed it off on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*.

A Family Affair

Worksman Cycles is still pretty much a family operation. CEO Jeff Mishkin is married to the granddaughter of founder Morris Worksman. And there are lots of familial relationships among the factory workers.

Fathers and sons and cousins sort rivets and true wheels side by side. Roberto Combay supervises painting and has a brother in the assembly department.

On one recent day, Combay was spraying cobalt blue paint over a bike frame dangling from a hook in front of him. Almost 20 years ago, he started out in the tire department. "And I didn't know nothing about bicycles that much," he admits.

"So yeah, I used to change inner tubes in my garage. I could do tires. Then they moved me up here and then I just I got the hang of it. Over here, we do everything," says Combay, dressed in a navy T-shirt sporting the three-wheeled Worksman logo.

"We got to make it perfect, because it's us. May take a little time, but you get a good cycle. Feels good. You know what I'm saying?"

Then, like a master chef, Combay prepares to complete his metallic creation: baking his freshly painted bike in an industrial oven, a half hour at 375 degrees.

Recent First



[mike buhler \(skibum69\)](#) wrote:

I've worked on jobs in a few powerplants in the lower 48 and seen them in use for employees; it's good to see these are surviving the recent era's of offshore outsourcing. Two thumbs up!

Sunday, November 16, 2008 6:15:02 PM

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[JeanFrancois Reat \(osvolant\)](#) wrote:

What is wrong with these people? Don't they know they could make a lot more money by moving the whole operation to China? They need to hire a Harvard Business School MBA to run the business. Maybe they could take it public and cash out on their reputation! Where are the suits when you need 'em?

Seriously, it was practically inspirational to hear of a successful American manufacturing operation, in Queens yet, making a quality product that lasts a long time and that they fully support. The employees' pride in their work is definitely inspirational.

Saturday, November 15, 2008 11:12:24 PM

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[Linda Brush \(LilPal\)](#) wrote:

Last summer I fell from a ladder and can no longer ride a bicycle. I searched on the internet to find a tricycle so I could ride around town and do chores on my own, like I did before the accident. I finally settled on the Workman because it was made in the USA and all of the reviews said it was well-built. I ordered a lavender one in July but because of the gas prices, everyone else was ordering one too! It took 14 weeks to get it, but it was worth it. It is very easy to ride...I even passed a much younger man riding his bicycle. I try to ride at least 3 miles a day and ride 6 miles when I go to the gym to do therapy on my ankle and foot. I go to the grocery store and the library, wherever I need to go in my small town. I have had many people ask where I got the tricycle and drivers give me a wide berth...nobody wants to hit someone on a tricycle with a canae in the basket!

Saturday, November 15, 2008 9:33:13 PM

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[George Gekas \(Laika57\)](#) wrote:

Dear Gus, thank you for your account of your life and that of your father's. I'm sure he's up there somewhere smiling and sitting on one hell of a rugged bright red Worksman Cycle. I know one thing, I'll never be oblivious to a hotdog stand ever again. This wonderful article and responses such as yours are what's great about this country and the real under pinning that drives us to be who we are. Not meaning to come off as Studs Terkel; we are our own mothers of invention, but sadly somewhere along the line that thought has been ignored in preference over the pursuit of meaningless validation. At the time when the so called bail out was being considered I wish that stories like yours had been aired and seriously considered by those who hold the strings to our destiny. Could be we'd be looking at a different approach, maybe someone working out of their garage or kitchen for that matter would've been offered seed money for turning a great idea into a reality that would benefit all of human kind. We'll never know.

Maybe this down turn is just what we need to snap us out of living in la-la land. I can't remember how many computers and cell phones I've been through and thrown away, only to end up on someone else's toxic dump. Maybe that is the crux of the problem, there's no legacy in a throwaway society. I can only ease my personal guilt when every time I step into my shop and sitting there is a table saw weighing in at more than 500 pounds of finest cast steel from a foundry somewhere in Pennsylvania. Man you hit the switch on that puppy and its music to the ears! Always sweet and rock steady...

Saturday, November 15, 2008 3:31:40 PM

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[Randy Minnick \(Handy335\)](#) wrote:

Making a well-made, high-quality, long-lasting product?! What an amazing concept! Gee...you would think that Americans would prefer a high quality bicycle instead of the junk they get from China. Guess not.

Saturday, November 15, 2008 2:08:50 PM

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