

Featured

# Long after their heyday, Manitoba-made Sekine bikes still rolling

By: David Sanderson

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JOHN WOODS / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Derek Eidse is an avid cyclist who bikes to work year-round.

In 2005, Eidse became frustrated when, for the second time in as many months, somebody stole an expensive road bike he had left locked up while he was working out at the downtown YMCA. In a bid to thwart future thefts, Eidse went "shopping" for a bike that would get him where he wanted to go but, at the same time, wasn't particularly eye-catching.

"Basically, I went Dumpster-diving," says the University of Winnipeg Collegiate instructor. "I live in the North End and I walked along the back lanes — this was back when we had those auto-bins —

## SEKINE WHEELS KEEP ON TURNING

Richard DeBernardis is the president and founder of Perimeter Bicycling Association of America, a non-profit corporation that, since 1986, has raised more than \$50 million for a variety of charities in the United States.

"And it all started with a Sekine," says

hoping to find a bike somebody had tossed out."

It took a bit of digging but Eidse eventually spotted the frame of a "shoddy old 10-speed" sticking out from a loaded-to-the-hilt garbage receptacle. He slung it over his shoulder, lugged it home and spent the next couple of days bringing 'er back to life — adding new tires, brakes, etc.

A few weeks later, an acquaintance of Eidse's noticed the find leaning against the wall of the married father of two's front porch. "Sekine, eh?" said the fellow, making out the manufacturer's name on the bike's down-tube. "You know this thing was built in Manitoba, right?"

"I had no idea," Eidse replied.

Besides being a teacher, Eidse is also the founder of Eyedz Productions, an independent video production company. Through the years, Eidse repeated the tale of how he found his bike and how he discovered it was produced in this province. Almost everybody he told his story to was surprised to hear about the local connection and was curious to learn more. Eidse began to think that perhaps he hadn't just lucked into a reliable ride that afternoon in the back lane, but also the subject of his next documentary.

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The Sekine bicycle company was established in Japan in 1912. By the late 1960s, the firm was exporting tens of thousands of high-quality bikes to Canada; so many, in fact, that home-grown manufacturers such as Canadian Cycle & Motor Co. (CCM) lobbied the federal government to apply the brakes to their foreign competitors, including Raleigh, Peugeot and Sekine.

In 1973, prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau imposed a 25 per cent tariff on imported bicycles. Not wanting to lose its share of the Canadian market, Sekine adopted an if-you-can't-beat-'em, join-'em stance. In June of that year, the Japanese corporation set up shop at a former Canadian Forces Air Base near Rivers that had been converted into a training centre for indigenous people.

The Manitoba Sekine Cycles plant, a job initiative program funded by the provincial and federal governments in conjunction with the Japanese parent company and a First Nation business group, closed in 1981. During Sekine Canada's heyday, the factory wheeled out as many as 50,000 bikes a year.

DeBernardis, 84, when he is reached at his office in Tucson, Ariz.

In May 1976, DeBernardis purchased a Manitoba-made Sekine bike from a dealer in Anchorage, Alaska. He spent the next 40 days pedalling it from Anchorage to the Mexican border in California. Two years later, DeBernardis set off on a trip billed "around the U.S.A. in 180 days." Between Sept. 10, 1978, and March 8, 1979, the Brooklyn, N.Y.-born university professor rode the circumference of the continental United States on that same Sekine bike — a feat that earned him a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records.

"Because the bike I used ended up in the Guinness Museum in San Francisco, the Sekine company in Manitoba invited me to the manufacturing (plant) in 1981 where they presented me with a new Sekine to use on my next adventure — a tour of the perimeter of Japan's four main islands," says DeBernardis. "I truly loved both of those bicycles. I could never find another one like them, especially my first one.

"In fact, I took that Sekine bicycle out of the Guinness Museum some time ago and it now hangs above my desk in my office, where I am looking at it right now."

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"Not only is Rivers a small town, but the base was located about eight miles outside of Rivers," says Eidse, who, in addition to poring through hundreds of newspaper articles, visited the old site, dubbed Oo-za-we-kwun, as part of his research. "Workers were flown down from reserves in northern Manitoba and were put up in this old military housing."

Eidse found out that at any one point, there were about 25 managers living in Rivers, all of whom had been transferred there from Japan. For his film, Eidse interviewed a former Sekine manager who moved to Winnipeg after the plant closed, and now lives in St. James with his Rivers-born wife.

"We talked about the culture shock of coming to Canada from Japan, and a lot about the history of the Sekine company itself," Eidse says. "I also spoke with some bike-shop owners about the 'Sekine boom' in Winnipeg during the 1970s, and with a couple of guys who used to work in the factory. One of them told me he still gets a sense of pride when he spots a Sekine on the road today."

There is also an amusing bit in Eidse's documentary, which is still in the production phase, when he approaches people attending Ciclovía, an annual bike-oriented street fest in downtown Winnipeg, and asks them if they know how to pronounce "Sekine."

"I just walked along Broadway with an audio recorder. I think the best one I heard was Sea King."  
(For the record, it's pronounced seh-KEY-nay.)

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Tim Woodcock, owner of Woodcock Cycle Works at 433 St. Mary's Rd., was 13 years old when he got a job selling and assembling Sekine bicycles at MGM Sporting Goods on Pembina Highway — and 14 when his parents took him to Rivers to compete in a 160-kilometre road race sponsored by Sekine Canada.

"The plant really wanted to promote its top-end racing bike — the PR-10 — so they staged a series of races to raise that particular bike's profile," says Woodcock, who still races bikes competitively. "It was one of the first bikes to feature Shimano components, before Shimano became one of the most dominant parts suppliers in the industry."

Woodcock says Sekine bikes didn't only perform well — they looked sharp, too.

"They had really neat head-badges (on the frames), some had super nice chrome on the front fork and back chainstay, there were some really wild colours. It was just a cool, iconic brand."

Woodcock's shop includes a large service department. During the last several years, he has noticed more and more people bringing in old Sekine bikes to have them refurbished — a trend sparked, he says, by "bike-courier culture."

"Most of the couriers and younger university students in town commute on super durable, single-speed bikes we call fixies (for fixed-gear). They don't want to have a drive train or any gears that can wear out, so we set the bikes up so they're good for every (weather) condition.

"A lot of them will bring in a (Sekine) frame they picked up at a garage sale for \$1. Most don't know the history of what they've got and when I tell them the story, they're blown away," Woodcock says.

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