



Photo by Steve Dykes

Mobile bike repairman Larry Cotton repairs a wheel in the EMU courtyard

Rolling bike repairman provides mobile service

By **DAWN GARCIA**
Of the Emerald

Hitchhikers and hobos carry their lives on their backs. Eugene's "bikeman" Larry Cotton drags his behind his bicycle.

Cotton is a common sight along Eugene's bike paths. He provides the only while-you-wait bike-tune-up service in the area from his cart full of tools.

Cotton's livelihood, his leisure life and his friendships are built around bicycles, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Bike life has a lot to offer," says the 29-year-old bike mechanic. "I'd like to see life revolving around bicycles the way it revolves around cars now."

That idea isn't so far-fetched in Eugene, where bike traffic past one of Cotton's tune-up stands on the footbridge bike path has been documented at 1,000 or more bikes a day.

The number of bicyclists and bike paths in Eugene caught Cotton's eye on a cross-country trip he made in 1975 from his home state of New York. Upon returning home to his bike shop, Cotton says he realized Eugene had more potential for a bike business.

Cotton set up his outdoor shop in March of 1979 and has been here ever since.

"I'd fallen in love with this area," Cotton says. "I was really impressed by the amount of bike usage in Eugene."

Although he began working at an indoor shop, Cotton says he didn't enjoy the tense atmosphere inherent in many mechanic-customer relationships at service centers. People tend to maintain a "car mentality" that way and are likely to feel ripped-off afterward, he says.

"Out on the path, it's not that way at all. Lots of people are surprised and say to me, 'You mean I can have it (a repair) right now?'"

At one of his locations — the EMU courtyard — Cotton could be mistaken for a student

passing out leaflets or an artisan selling wares.

A closer look reveals his bright yellow cart proclaiming "Cycle-Bi Tune-Ups." Rows of neatly displayed tools line one side of the cart. Cotton waits patiently, hands in his pockets, for passersby to bring him their ailing two-wheeled companions.

Looking like film star Gene Wilder with his soft blonde curls, honest face and animated blue eyes, Cotton's success seems to originate from his charm as much as from his mechanical ability.

"I've had people come up to me and hand me \$5 and say 'Here, I want you to have this,'" Cotton says. "And they didn't even have a bike."

Money usually doesn't come that easily, though. And the chilly, wet weather Eugene is famous for doesn't help business much, Cotton says.

"It's hard when times are bad, and this winter things were really bad. Sometimes I work in the rain all day and I don't eat too well, but most of the time I do O.K."

With warmer weather on the way, Cotton expects business to pick up. This summer he also hopes to lead bike tours to supplement his income.

"The best kinds of tours are the real long ones," Cotton says. "Once you start touring, you don't want to stop."

His other future plans include building bike accessories, such as an all-weather cabin that fits over a bike and a light system that runs off a solar battery.

Most of all, Cotton would like to see the world become more bike-oriented. A bike life would include food outlets that cater to bikers, bus service that carries bikes, bike rentals all over the city, and an even more extensive bike-path system.

"It's not just a nice way to travel," Cotton says. "It's a beautiful way to live."



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