

A cycle through time

By [Alan Teh Leam Seng](#) - January 22, 2017 @ 5:32pm



British Small Arms (BSA) advert in Jawi advocating how bicycling can help reduce workload. Pix courtesy of Alan Teh Leam Seng

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As a love of cycling rolls through the country, a collector of vintage bicycles shares his knowledge on the two-wheelers of early 20th-century Malaysia, writes Alan Teh Leam Seng

PEOPLE in the northern states call him the King of Vintage Bicycles. Hailing from Kuala Nerang, Kedah, Nasser Ahmad has been dealing in classic bicycles for the past six years. People say there’s nothing in these old bikes that eludes him. I manage to catch up with him during a visit to the Kampung Berjaya flea market where he regularly sets up stall with his long time friend, Yusni Azman.

“Cycling is considered the cheapest mode of transport apart from

cycling as a hobby,” he begins, before reminiscing about how things were like in the past.

Back in the early days, the bicycle was the single most important mode of travel for the ordinary man, shares Nasseri. Back then, cars were few and far between. “You really had to be a big shot to have a car. Automobiles at that time were mainly used by the royal family, wealthy businessmen and important government officials. The rest of the population depended on buses and trains to travel long distances and their trusty Raleigh or Hercules bicycles to take them to nearby places.”

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Engaged in chat, we hear a voice suddenly interjecting: “Tumpang tanya. Saya cari Encik Nasseri. Saya nak jual basikal lama bapa saya,” (Excuse me, I’m looking for Encik Nasseri. I want to sell my father’s old bicycle.)

The voice belongs to an elderly man who seems to have appeared out of nowhere.

The excitement in Nasseri’s eyes is evident. Like all collectors, he’s always ready when opportunity knocks. To ensure that the item is worth pursuing, he checks it out. “It all depends on luck and the will of the Almighty,” says Nasseri, before proceeding to ask me to join him in inspecting the bicycle.



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It was very common in the 1950s to see cycling groups visiting places of interest nearby. Pix courtesy of Alan Teh Leam Seng

SIXTH SENSE

It’s a short walk to the car park. Nasserı is all smiles when he catches sight of the prospective vendor’s Kancil. Pulling me aside, he whispers: “This is good. If the bicycle is really old, then we’ll be in luck because there’s no way a full-sized bicycle can fit into that car. It must be a valuable child’s bicycle. I’m sure of it!”

And his sixth sense is spot on. To my untrained eyes, the bicycle is old, with badly fading paint. It’s not something I’d want to have. Turning to Nasserı, I notice his poker face as he begins his thorough inspection of the bicycle. Beginning with the headlamp, he then moves on to the body, all the time feeling the surface with his fingers to ensure that everything is in good condition.

Negotiations commence once Nasserı is fully satisfied with the bicycle. After a bit of haggling, the purchase is made. A wad of RM50 notes exchanges hands and seeing his face beam, I conclude that Nasserı has definitely bagged a bargain in this transaction.

The bicycle attracts a lot of attention as we slowly make our way back to his stall. We’re stopped twice by collectors making their rounds, with one offering to purchase the bicycle for RM1,000. His offer is rejected.

Back at the stall, Nasserı shares that his purchase is a rare Hercules child’s bicycle.

“This was made in England and shipped to Malaya back in the 1940s. I’m lucky in the sense that all the parts are original, including the paint work. See, the brakes still function. It’s not easy to find bicycles like this in any condition today,” he explains, before telling me that children’s bicycles are a lot rarer than the adult-sized ones.

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Nasseri's latest acquisition. Pix courtesy of Alan Teh Leam Seng

Bicycles cost between \$100 to \$200 in the past, depending on the brand and country of origin, adds Nasseri. The ones from England were the most popular. During that time, brands like Hopper, Hercules, Raleigh, BSA and Royal Enfield were household names. People could identify with their quality and dependability.

That sum of money, says Nasseri, may not look like much today but back then, it was quite substantial. "It was almost equivalent to a clerk's monthly salary. As a result, most families could only purchase one bicycle to be shared by everyone. Naturally, they'd buy the adult-sized bicycle as the parents would be the ones using it the most."

According to Nasseri, only children from well-off families could afford smaller bicycles and this is the reason why these bicycles are rare. It seems that back in the 1950s, there used to be a shop in Georgetown that rented out children's bicycles. It cost children 10 cents to ride around the block. The shop did brisk business during the Chinese Lunar New Year. During that time, it was common to see kids lining up outside and patiently waiting for their turn to show off their pedalling prowess.

Looking at the faded yellow paint, I suggest to Nasseri that he repaint the bicycle to make it look nicer. He looks aghast. "No. Never repaint a bicycle. Collectors want everything in situ. Making any changes will reduce the value. I don't want to repeat the same mistake I did with my very first bicycle!"



Cyclists riding along busy Batu Road during the early 1950s. Pix courtesy of Alan Teh
Leam Seng

TRUE PASSION

Nasseri's love acquiring vintage bicycles started unintentionally back in 2011. He was already living in Penang then and happened to be back in Kedah for Hari Raya.

"I remember vividly that it was just a week before the big day and I took my family for a spot of fishing at a canal in Kebun 500 near Pokok Sena," he recalls, before adding: "Just as we were about to leave, an elderly man rode past on his old bicycle. Intrigued, I decided to follow him home with the hope that I could purchase his bicycle. You can just imagine all of us in the car trailing him at snail's pace."

Chuckling, Nasserri continues: "I don't know if he was aware of my car at that time as he continued to pedal at the same speed until he reached home, about a kilometre away. Unfortunately, my offer was rejected as he still needed to use the bicycle to tend to his padi fields. But, he must have noticed my downcast look because he proceeded to tell me about a bicycle body in his shed which I could have for RM40!"

For the next two days, Nasserri scoured the old bicycle shops in Kuala Nerang looking for parts to complete the bicycle. He was fortunate that back then parts were readily available. Due to inexperience, he repainted the bicycle to make it look brand new. “I spent that memorable Hari Raya taking my wife on that Hercules visiting our relatives. Everyone was captivated with my acquisition and from that day onwards, my interest in classic bicycles grew from strength to strength. I still have that first bicycle and will never part with it regardless of the price offered.”

In addition to collecting bicycles, Nasserri also collects related paraphernalia. In the past, bicycles were treated like motorised vehicles and licences were issued to the purchasers. The registration fee was \$2 and subsequent annual renewals cost \$1. Larger cities like Penang even

Among his most prized items is a licence issued during the Thai Occupation of Malaya. Completely in Jawi, it bears the heading ‘Negeri Syburi. Lesen kenderaan-kenderaan.’ It’s for a black coloured Hercules bicycle with the body frame number BO 70054. The licence authorises the owner, Matcha bin Pitchay Ghani, living at 17 Pengkalan Kapal to use the bicycle from July 1, 2488 until Dec 31, 2488.

The Buddhist year 2488 used by the Siamese government coincide with the English date 1945. The significance of this piece of paper? The British were back in Malaya by the time it expired and the state had reverted to its former name – Kedah!



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