

# The Schwinn Panther

by Jerry Woodfill

(Written in the fashion of A CHRISTMAS STORY)

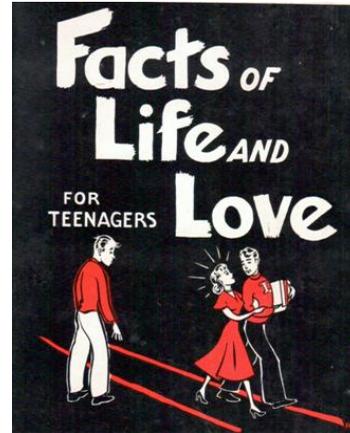
I'd watched in wonder, trying to gage how many times I'd seen it, perhaps, a number approaching infinity. At least, my "watchings" were uncountable in my mind. It was the annual TBN network's Christmas Eve 24 hour repeated showings of A CHRISTMAS STORY.

It began in 1983, after I'd walked this sod two score and one years. Some held that it deified northwest Hoosier family life more than the birth of my celebrated Savior. They cited the late 1930s and early 1940s as its setting. Others, my aging kindred comrades, argued for a place in time a decade later. I could make the latter case eloquently. Had I not lusted after the toy trains, Gilbert Erector and Chemistry sets displayed in the same Goldblatts of Ralphie's longings?



Did my father not work but a mere block down Hohman Avenue during that era? Did I not attend the same high school as Ralphie's author and alter-ego Jean Shepherd? Did we not have the same frosh English teacher Eunice McCullough? Dad's bulbous fender 1942 Pontiac was a like vintage of the movie's auto prototypes. Yes, I could make a

case for my formative years being a clone of Ralphie's. And like Ralphie, I'd drooled over the Goldblatts display of the Red Rider 200 shot range model B-B gun.



But for me, it was not to be mine, even at the promised age of 12. (That was the age my parents deemed as young adulthood, when I would be given my dating confidant, THE FACTS OF LIFE AND LOVE.) And while the Lionel trains and Gilbert wonder toy-gear were bestowed upon the "coming of age" Jerry, there was to be no "shoot-your-eye-out" weaponry.

Never mind that a chemical concoction might be equally damaging externally to the eyes or internally to the bowels. Or that the sharp miniature I-beams, trusses, nuts and bolts might slash and pierce my tender freckled milky white epidermal covering. B-B guns were forbidden in the domicile of the Woodfill boy.

But there was another item, not female, of course, which consumed my worldly young wants and desires. This was an object far more expensive and impressive to my wanton yearnings than a lousy Sears and Roebuck toy rifle. It was the Mercedes of two-wheeled motion-movers, the Lamborghini of luxury launch vehicles, and the Porsche of prestige peddle pushers. It was a Schwinn bike.

I suppose, like those grade school youths who innocently, glance at a copy of *Esquire* or *Playboy*, my

addiction for a Schwinn Panther could be charged to the nefarious Sears-Roebuck company.

Though not exactly a burlesque-club sidewalk "hawker", the enticing Sears Christmas catalog, was dropped by the mailman at 8728 Woodward Avenue in early October of 1949. It was the bike pages which planted the seed. This wanton yearning was something more than a SEARS advertisement could hope to birth. But just as a cigarette tobacco-butt-filled corn-cob pipe might be the child's entry into vile cigarette addiction, actually, it was my December copy of "Boy's Life" which got me hooked with a full-blown addiction for a Schwinn, the virtuoso of bi-pedal locomotion.

The Panther model resonated in my bowels with an inexplicable visceral longing.

Now, the Panther was not the "top-of-the-line" offering. The Schwinn Phantom held that honor.

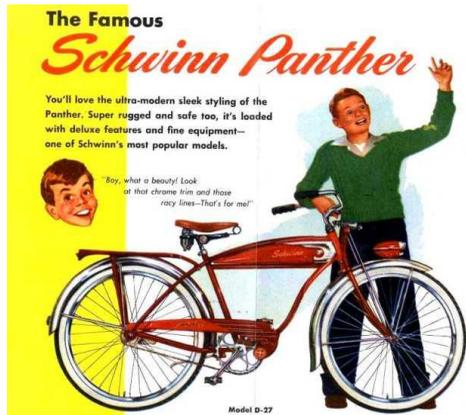
To this day, I am puzzled why I lusted not for the Phantom. Perhaps, I embraced my dad's persona. He refused to entertain thoughts of acquiring a Cadillac.

His vision of ultimate auto-ownership was to be the Buick, and, even at that, not the top-of-the-line Buick Roadmaster, but the heir-apparent Buick Super. So it must have been something in my genetic psyche.

While impressive, the Panther would not be so "showy" as the Phantom. It would not offend too greatly the jealous sensibilities of grade school friends.

But, reflecting on my wants of three score years past, perhaps, the Panther would be an easier parent sell. This would be best with Dad's prejudice against the top-of-the-line. Indeed, the Schwinn Phantom was the ultimate model for youth bicyclists. Studying both motor-less-bikes, I, at once, noted distinctive differences.

Really, no subtle characteristic distinguished them in appearance. However, males of more advanced years than mine given to study of feminine pulchritude, would assign the Phantom a 40' bust-line compared to the Panther's tasteful, size 34. It was the size and share of the electrical horn box which at once, separated a Phantom from a Panther.



The Phantom's horn-case geometry was akin to a Thanksgiving cornucopia with its stem anchored beneath the rider's missile-like leather seat. Flowing forth in majestic wonder toward the Harley-Davidson-like handle-bars, this "horn of plenty" was sure to be the envy of all neighborhood pre-teen lads. (These electrical horn housings, predictably now command \$100 plus prices in vintage bike auctions, more than the entire bike price of the 1940s.) But I would not be so crassly ostentatious as to expect or ask my parents for such luxury.



Phantom Horn Case



Panther Horn Case

I would be content with the proletarian Panther horn *tank* as some designated the electrical container. So what if the Panther's case looked more like a bowling pin at the Highland Ken-Ridge Bowling Alley. Were not the Panther and Phantom's shock absorbers identical? Both had the same Flash Gordon-like bazooka-looking springy stainless steel coil. The magnificent mechanism pointed the bi-ped vehicle into low-Earth orbit parallel to Woodward Avenue, my launching pad.

As far as how the horn sounded, I can't remember except that it was not one of those cheesy handle bar mounted black-rubber-squeeze-ball "duck quackers" sported by kiddie tricycles.

Now, I knew getting a bike as a Christmas present was not a challenge, but the kind of bike would be. I had an unsettling nightmare a few weeks before Christmas. In the dream, somehow, my parents had seen me admiring a bike in that Sears toy catalog. But, before I tell more about the bad dream, I need to explain something about Sears' toys. There is a paragraph in Wikipedia which talks about this serious subject as far as my view of all things Sears:

*Sear sold a wide variety of sporting goods and recreational equipment, including [bicycles](#), under the brand name "J. C. Higgins." These products were well made and were popular with the company's historical core of rural and working-class consumers.*

Note: the final mention of a "core of rural and working class consumers." So having a J.C. Higgins instead of a Schwinn would set me apart, at least in my neighborhood. It would be like possessing a "famous maker" television rather than a 55" SONY LED multi-media entertainment center. I'd rather have no bike than have a J.C. Higgins.

The nightmare had my mother exclaiming, "Look, Jerry wants the Sears bike, in the catalog. He's looking at it. Let's get him one, J.R. (My dad's name.)" So vivid was the dream, that I searched the attic of the garage to make sure no

J.C. Higgins bike was stowed amidst Mom's old dishes and pots and pans. Next, I searched Dad's desk cache of purchase receipts that no Sears J.C. Higgins existed. Satisfied that my dream was not yet a portent of Christmas morning, I set forth on a promotional marketing campaign.

I always, wondered who J.C. Higgins was? Actually, he was a real person. But, in my mind, he was always, a stingy-cheapskate who threatened my most treasured desire, a Schwinn Panther.

Most of the Higgins bikes didn't even have that gun-like shock mechanism. The spring was hidden in the forward frame strut. Even when a Sears bike included one, it did not point proudly forward, in streamlined fashion. Rather, it had a perpendicular orientation pointing unnaturally skyward. Looking at it, reminded me of one of those Chicago Riverview Amusement Park rides where the victims bounced haplessly trampoline-like in endless, mindless, monotony. (Well, perhaps, it was a patent issue. But I really don't know.)



At once, I carefully removed, pages 213-217 from the Sears Christmas catalog. This would, hopefully, discourage my parents from accidentally, being reminded about the Sears' bike. I did not want them thinking, "Jerry is of, bicycle age, and worthy of a J.C. Higgins brand bike." Clandestinely, I, placed a copy of their favorite, magazine, LIFE, on the living room coffee table opened to the ad below:



Unfortunately, the cheap Schwinn featured in the ad, though a Christmas reminder, was a model akin to a J.C. Higgins, not even a horn case, no bazooka shock-absorber, Ugh! However, I was comforted, knowing, this would be the so-called entry level Schwinn which Dad and Mom would never require of me. They would proudly tell the salesman, “Our son is better than the lowest of the line!”

They always opted for the mid-range model, whether a lawnmower, refrigerator, car, iron, dishwasher, or bike. The Panther would be their choice for me, the mid-level Schwinn. And so, thinking all was well for my Christmas morning surprise, I rested easy until that infamous day my best friend’s mother stopped by to chat with Mom. I’d come home early because of, I think, a teacher’s institute. They were talking in the den about some kind of unfortunate incident concerning a neighbor boy’s bicycle.

“Helen, it was stolen while the family had visited a relative in Hammond.” I heard.

*Hammond was only ten miles from our home.*

She continued, “The only item gone from the garage was the boy’s Schwinn bike. So it must have been a neighborhood “juvenile delinquent.”

In that day, the name “juvenile delinquent” was all inclusive for any youth one year old to twenty years of age. It included youthful smokers, shop-lifters, snowball throwers, armed-robbers, all in years of puberty. Juvenile delinquents were heinous creatures less than twenty years of age committing any act of mischief, felonious or otherwise. Even depositing spent bubble gum beneath a school desk earned the designation. The movie BLACKBOARD

JUNGLE depicted their kind.

“The police know it was a neighborhood boy because the only stolen item was a BOY’S SCHWINN PANTHER BICYCLE. (Now this really troubled me because it was common knowledge with my friends, and, by now, also with my parents that the stolen item was my most desired treasure.)

“Nothing else was taken, not the family lawn mower, the husband’s toolbox, the youngest child’s go-kart, or even an expensive professional croquet set.

*I thought, What kind of a low-life would a juvenile delinquent be to steal a croquet set?*

But then came the comment that was to be my undoing,

“They had an outboard motor in their garage. It was lightweight and small.

Probably worth several hundred dollars.

Do you know, Helen, they had not even cared to steal it?”

I heard my mom ask, “Why not?”

Her friend’s answer was my undoing as she answered laughing hysterically,

“Because it was a J.C. Higgins,” quickly adding,

”I’m just kidding Helen. Nobody needs to worry about anyone stealing J.C. Higgins, stuff.”

Knowing my parents’ phobia about our garage being unlocked, I was resigned that a J.C. Higgins would be my fate on Christmas morning.

And so it was that Christmas morning of December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1949 as Susan and I rushed downstairs to open our Christmas treasures. Just as Raphie’s elongated Red Rider air rifle’s box was hidden in a remote corner of the living room, I was directed to an envelop by my parents.

“Open it,” was Dad’s instruction.

The message was,

“Dear Jerry, You’ll find what you are looking for in the garage. Signed Mr. J.C. Higgins.”

“Ugh,” I thought, “Dad always had an off-beat sense

of humor.”

Chagrined, I trudged out the front door through the snow and opened the garage door to find my surprise gift.”

At first, I couldn’t find it. Dad’s new 1949 green Pontiac, the first year to have the distinctive sweep-back styling, hid all but the bike’s rear wheel. The bike rested along-side the car so that I had to slowly inch my way around the hood. Finally, I could see the back tire in the almost dark garage. Bikes are like people. You can’t tell much about them from behind.

“Yes.” I thought, “It’s that J.C. Higgins.”

Carefully, I bent my body forward across the rear wheel in the darkened garage. The dimly lit interior awaited the rising sunlight of Christmas morning.

Unable to clearly make out what my bike looked like, I stretched over the seat reaching across the handle bars and felt something.

It was an unusual shape, cold and icy to the touch so that my warm hands stuck to it’s contour. Puzzled, I opened my hand to encircle the apparatus.

My grip grasped an object more precious than the finest jewel a seven year old boy could ever hold, the coiled cold steel spring of a genuine Schwinn Panther.

I had a warm feeling that it was not J.C. Higgins who was responsible but someone else with the initials J.C.

It was His day anyway.

## Vocabulary

| Word           | Meaning           |
|----------------|-------------------|
| 1. kindred     | 1. kind           |
| 2. prototype   | 2. model          |
| 3. chagrined   | 3. exasperated    |
| 4. domicile    | 4. home           |
| 5. nefarious   | 5. evil           |
| 6. prejudice   | 6. unfair         |
| 7. cornucopia  | 7. horn of plenty |
| 8. proletariat | 8. average        |
| 9. monotony    | 9. bore           |

- |                   |                |
|-------------------|----------------|
| 10. felonious     | 10. criminal   |
| 11. puberty       | 11. mature age |
| 12. epidermal     | 12. skin-like  |
| 13. prestige      | 13. importance |
| 14. phobia        | 14. fear       |
| 15. vile          | 15. nasty      |
| 16. virtuoso      | 16. expert     |
| 17. heinous       | 17. hateful    |
| 18. elite         | 18. respected  |
| 19. persona       | 19. character  |
| 20. contour       | 20. surface    |
| 21. pulchritude   | 21. Beauty     |
| 22. crass         | 22. rude       |
| 23. ostentatious  | 23. showy      |
| 24. clandestinely | 24. secretly   |
| 25. infamous      | 25. terrible   |

### Comprehension Questions:

- Jerry's bike's name was an animal with the name \_\_\_\_?  
 a. Cheetah  
 b. Rabbit  
 c. Road Runner  
 d. Panther
- Jerry's dad's favorite car was a \_\_\_\_?  
 a. Nash Rambler  
 b. Cadillac  
 c. Oldsmobile  
 d. Buick
- Jerry did not share Jean Shepherd's \_\_\_\_?  
 a. High School  
 b. English Teacher  
 c. Indiana County  
 d. Theatric Reading Talent  
 e. Suburban Hammond Community
- Jerry's parents had promised Jerry a B-B gun at/when \_\_\_\_?

- He had read the FACTS OF LIFE AND LOVE.
  - He had completed a Boy Scout fire arms merit badge.
  - At the age of a seventh grader.
  - When he was deemed old enough for his first date.
- Why didn't Jerry's father buy the "top-of-the-line" automobile?  
 a. It was too expensive.  
 b. His neighbor would be jealous.  
 c. His boss would be offended and not promote him.  
 d. He did not want to be too "showy" and offend friends.
  - J. C. Higgins was....?  
 a. A president of the United States  
 b. A stingy-cheap-scape from the Dickens' classic THE CHRISTMAS STORY, actually Scrooge's brother.  
 c. A fictitious person used to sell merchandise.  
 d. The name Sears assigned to their products.
  - What did Jerry do to prevent his parents from surprising him with a Sears bike for Christmas?  
 a. He told them he liked J.C. Penny's better than Sears toys.  
 b. He let the dog eat the Sears toy catalog.  
 c. He severed pages from the Sears catalog.  
 d. He put the catalog in the bath room for toilet paper in case the toilet roll was empty.
  - Whose signature was on Jerry's Christmas morning note?  
 a. Santa Claus  
 b. President Harry Truman  
 c. J.C. Higgins  
 d. Jerry's dad
  - The 1949 definition of a juvenile delinquent did not include....?  
 a. Youthful smokers, shop-lifters, armed robbers  
 b. Snow ball throwers  
 c. Under-the-desk gum depositors.

- 20 year old felons
- What movie of Jerry's youth personified the juvenile delinquent? \_\_\_\_  
 a. High Noon  
 b. Cinderella  
 c. Blackboard Jungle  
 d. Singing in the Rain  
 e. The War of the Worlds
  - How did Jerry know his gift was a Schwinn?  
 a. He saw his dad hide the bike in the garage.  
 b. He dreamed that would be his gift.  
 c. His parent would want the best for Jerry.  
 d. By the shape of the shock-absorber
  - Why did Jerry think a chemical set was dangerous?  
 a. The box had sharp edges.  
 b. It was heavy and could drop on your foot.  
 c. It could damage your eyes or stomach  
 d. The chemicals could give you a rash.
  - Jerry realized someone else had the initials "J.C." That someone was ....?  
 a. Julius Caesar  
 b. J.C. Penny  
 c. The cartoon character Jiminy Cricket.  
 d. None of the above.
  - For extra credit. Who was it, and why did Jerry know it was this person?
  - For homework, you are requested to compose A CHRISTMAS STORY of either fact or fiction. Consider your past desires for birthday or holiday gifts. Is there a specific treasure like Ralphie's air rifle or Jerry's bike that is memorable in your life? It might be a car, a boat, a piece of jewelry, a vacation, or something else. How did you plan to let others know of your desire? What innovative ways were employed to achieve your desire? Remember, your account need not be factual but can be a combination of fact and fiction. Your story should not exceed five pages double-spaced. Of course, the narrative will be composed in the first person. It is your story to tell.