

HOOPS and SKIMMERS

"Stay—you leather-clad, crash-helmeted youth, astride your throbbing Yamaha. Whist not how all this began?" The lad seemed not to heed let alone take in such address from an old 'un—his ears so attuned to noise. "Roll back the years I say! to when I were a lad. No glittering, pulsing speedsters had we; our excitement on the road revolved round hoops and skimmers. This was afore you could even visualise a pedal bike, unless of parents rich enough to spoil. Why, we went for 'hoop runs'—just as you now do flit speedily here and there round streets and parks. But do you get more thrill I wonder, than we with our hoops of iron and craftily bent skimmers as we raced round almost traffic-less streets and lanes?"

"And don't think you had the monopoly of 'showing off' to the girls—oh! no. If you could do a nearly horizontal 'bank' at low speed—without the hoop 'grounding'—you were noticed. Of course girls had hoops too, but flimsy wooden things, made in two layers, which they 'batted' along with a wooden 'stick'—so decorously. There were the timid—boy types, in lace collar and sailor-boy suits, on wood—harsh, (dirty iron was not for them!). Besides, wooden hoops were bought ready made in toy shops—but iron ones had to be 'tailor-made' in the local blacksmith's shop".

First, you had to catch him slack of work to even discuss an 'order'. This entailed many abortive callings, in passing to and from school and home. A really genuine excuse, being late for tea, was that you'd called at the smithy, to do 'business' thus.

Impatient longing would mount until one day would bring concrete action. 'Young' Charlie Hocker would call you to his half-door, seeing you about. What eagerness, as you talked it man to man—the size, the thickness, the expected cost, the time to make and be ready—maybe. It had to be 'maybe', since shoeing horses and repairing farm implements was always top priority. Fascinating as it was to watch Charlie thus engaged, it paled to the ownership thrill of seeing one's hoop materialise from a length of round section iron rod.

As for paying, Charlie never doubted that any hoop order would be beyond one's ability to get it out of Dad. First, the size: Charlie had an unshakable idea on the diameter suitable for age-cum-size—he decided really. Hoops came 2ft to 3ft and up to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick,



with skimmers formed from $\frac{1}{4}$ inch rod. The size set, Charlie—from long experience—took a selected piece of twine to measure off the 'straight'. Then his brawny arms took the cut off length, an end in each large hand, and bent the piece round in a loop as near a circle as he could get.

Two or three inches would be allowed for the join in his calculations—and the two ends were next put in the forge fire. With a roar the bellows blew the cinders red, then white-hot, at which Charlie 'drew out each end with hammer and anvil, to make a 'scarf' joint (as in joining lengths of wood). When his beating had so cooled the ends, back they went to get white-hot again. The next sequence needed a further pair of hands.

When called, old 'Dad' Hocker came from the second forge—muttering hard at being disturbed from his retirement potterings in glowing metal. He'd only one eye, the other put out, in early days, by a 'rogue' hot chip of metal. The two now went through a long practised drill, Charlie's great strength holding the loosely overlapped joint ends over the anvil point and round. Old Dad, still muttering, beat the again white hot two together, 'till Charlie nodded enough.

Our hoop was not yet round, still less finished. Now Charlie took over alone, brought the joined ends to just red-hot, soft to mould and not spring apart, and beat the join over the anvil round until satisfied with its uniformity. Now to quench it gently in the side trough, bring it to the half-door, examine it in the outside light. There remained the further 'rounding' by Charlie's strong arms, a little 'black' heat when needed, until our hoop was a perfect circle. A few strokes with his metal file to smooth off the join, now hard to see, and he would be done. His final test was to bounce the hoop several times on the flagged smithy floor (a faulty join would soon spring apart with this treatment).

Satisfied, Charlie now handed it to me, or other lucky customer, gruffly acknowledging one's profuse thanks. I've not forgotten the all-important skimmer, you might get it at the same time, sometimes not—hard to stifle one's disappointment if it had to come later, but we understood. Skimmers needed fair precision—no haphazard bending of the almost 'shepherd's crook' business end. How this was fashioned made all the difference to full control of a 'racing' hoop—the tricky leans one could do, the progressive braking effects, the many tricks you learned to do.

I suppose a $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft by $\frac{3}{8}$ in iron hoop was our most practical, special size for all the stunts. Three-footers tended to be rather 'bouncy' and two-footers not fitting to the status now earned. On long summer nights we went for 'runs' into the countryside. Even on winter nights we'd go round the streets, carrying oil or candle lamps as our 'lights', the now smooth shiny hoops 'ringing' on the frosty roads, the skimmer 'screaming' as we cavorted about. Hoops and skimmers filled our first, most impressed mobility.

The last I've seen were hanging on the gable end of a cottage in my little home town, complete in two sizes with skimmers to match. T'was seeing these, that time stood still—retreated those many years, to nostalgic childhood.

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