

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHERE THE Indians cut paths through the woods before the white man settled? Has an overgrown branch of a well-traveled trail ever piqued your curiosity? Have you noticed embankments or cuts through rock and suspected a long-forgotten railroad? Pondering these questions leads people to pathfinding, the art of rediscovering old trails or establishing new ones in the backcountry.

In Colorado, Crested Butte's mountain biking fame is well-chronicled, and its extensive network of single-track continues to attract thousands of off-road cyclists. What isn't well known is that many of its trails were rediscovered by a small local club, The Pathfinders. In fact, it provided the inspiration for this story. Brothers Steve and Don Cook, both members of the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame, are its chief trailblazers.

Before the Cooks do any field work, they study maps to gather information about drainages and lakes, hills, mountains, and human corridors. They survey ridge tops, valley floors, and geologic benches. Then they take their curiosity into the backcountry, being careful never to be overly optimistic.

"Be ready to make mistakes and not worry about them," says Steve. "Be prepared to backtrack and expect trails to fizzle out."

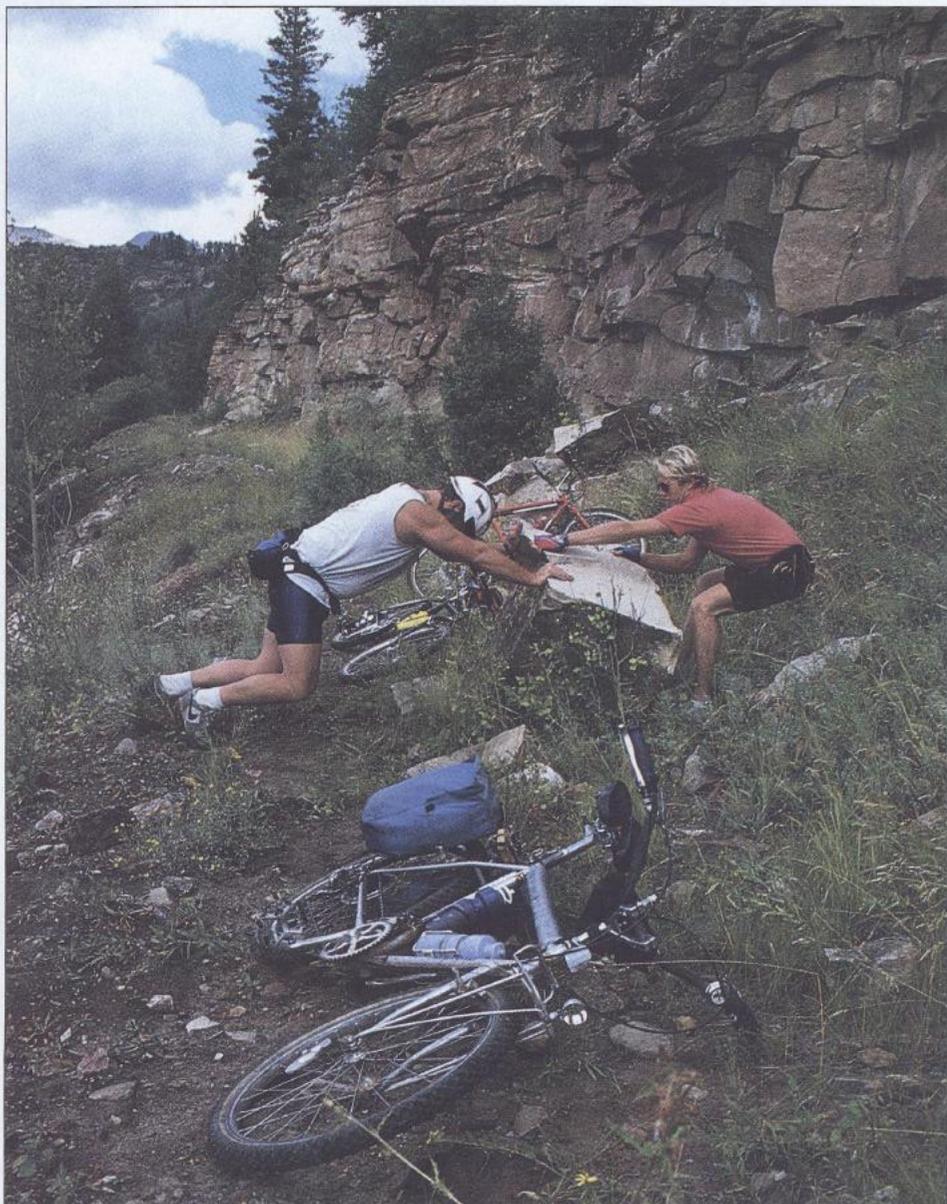
The Cooks ride as far as they can, keeping an eye for side trails. If they reach an open field where grass obscures the path, they'll walk the circumference, looking for the trail's exit.

When a trail seems to end, they'll approach it from the opposite direction, looking for openings in the trees that point to their original position. This is how the club blazed one of Crested Butte's longest

THE ART OF PATHFINDING

PURSUING SIDE TRAILS REVEALS THE LAND AND ITS HISTORY

BY GARY SPRUNG



The rewards of pathfinding come from locating overgrown trails, then restoring them, too.

and most spectacular singletracks, Deer Creek Trail. The club approached the area from north and south by following a variety of cow and game trails.

"Because cattle are so dumb," explains Don, "they follow each other and use the same paths year after year, going to the same watering holes and feeding grounds. If you're in or near public cattle lands, there will be great riding."

For a different perspective on Deer Creek possibilities, Don even surveyed it with his lightweight experimental aircraft. It's easy to maneuver and can make low, slow passes over an area for close inspection of obscure paths and an overview of the land's topography.

Using aerial reconnaissance, the Cooks found several promising connecting trails and then informed the U.S. Forest Service, which assigned an expert trail locator to the area. Their combined efforts led to the identification and marking of another route, a 30-mile loop that's been used for racing.

ESSENTIAL MAPS

In addition to ground investigations, old maps and aerial photos are excellent sources for finding trails. Countless miles of logging and mining roads were built earlier in this century, and many have fallen out of use.

To find these old maps and images, first call your local public land management office. When park and forest offices update their maps, they usually keep the old ones for historical and scientific purposes. For example, Crested Butte cyclists want to find a route along the backside of Whetstone Mountain. The latest map, however, shows no trails in that area. But an old national forest map identifies one. This summer we plan to practice our pathfinding skills by trying to follow it.

Each Bureau of Land Management office keeps a comprehensive set of stereoscopic aerial photos of terrain, says Tom Christiansen, a BLM official in Durango, Colorado. His office wants to find new trails and roads for mountain biking, so he invites pathfinders to come in and use the stereoscope.

Susan Rutherford, the U.S. Forest Service trail coordinator in Washington, DC, suggests contacting regional

Forest Service offices, which keep archaeological and historical archives. In the first few decades of this century, "administrative trails" to aid rangers crisscrossed national forests and national parks. But by the '30s, as the automobile became the accepted mode of land manager transport, these trails declined. "You may find that the trails are now underneath roads," she says.

The government's primary mapping agency is the U.S. Geologic Survey, a branch of the Department of Interior. The USGS provides maps for mineral and water exploration. Current topos can show where out-of-use trails still exist.

Fortunately, USGS archives include topos and aerial photos recorded in the '30s. The maps were saved to solve boundary or easement disputes and to locate abandoned routes. They're preserved in 2 forms: microfilm and original plates. The microfilm is stored at the USGS Earth Science Information Center in Denver. The plates are kept in Reston, Virginia.

A USGS employee in Denver says the agency can make reproductions from both. The microfilm produces a lower quality map for \$6. The plates yield better quality and cost \$12. Quality may be crucial, because thin or dotted lines can disappear in a grainy reproduction, and the scales used on older maps are larger, making all features smaller and tougher to spot. Today's topos cover a 7.5-minute arc, yielding a scale of 1:24,000 (1 inch equals 2,000 feet). Older maps were drawn to 30 minutes, for a scale of 1 to 100,000.

TIES TO THE PAST

Another excellent way to resurrect old routes is searching for abandoned railroads. Jim Schmid of South Carolina investigated abandoned state lines for his master's thesis. First, he studied early editions of the Rand McNally railroad atlas, which has been published since 1917. Schmid compared this information with current county maps and then spent a whole year mountain biking around the state, exploring potential rail trails.

Besides using maps, Schmid interviewed rail buffs from the National Railroad Historical Society, which has chapters throughout the nation.

"They try to find old routes and

then walk them looking for date nails," says Schmid. "The railroads put a nail with the date on it into every other tie, so the railroad company would know when to replace the track. I got a lot of information from them."

Schmid also suggests talking with state transportation departments or calling on local old-timers who



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walked or rode horses in the area. Miners, ranchers, foresters, outfitters, and Native Americans can also be helpful.

Maps and experts are invaluable sources. But pathfinding begins with your own curiosity and depends on perseverance. The search can be time-consuming, but it's never boring. Every backcountry exploration reveals something new about the land and its heritage. Your search may even uncover a sensational new route, something like the Deer Creek Trail.

"But plan to bushwhack and hike," says Don Cook. And, "When you lay down your bike to investigate an area on foot," warns brother Steve, "don't forget where you left it."

For old maps, write Earth Science Informational Center, USGS, Box 25046, Mail Stop 504, DFC, Denver, CO 80225. The USGS bases its maps on aerial photos, which are available. For western aerials, write the Denver office. For the east, write ESIC, USGS, 1400 Independence Rd., Rolla, MO 65401. When pathfinding, remember to ask permission from private property owners and plan for safety. Carry food, water, and survival equipment. ●