

FROM BIKES TO BUCK\$

*All Across America, Small Towns
Are Doing Big Business With Mountain Bikers*

BY GARY SPRUNG

A decade ago, who would have thought that the fun spawned by the balloon-tire contraptions of the Repack downhill zanies would evolve into a force for economic development?

Well, it happened. Mountain bikes are making a difference. In small towns throughout America, the sport is creating new jobs, increasing retail and service-sector revenues, and attracting outside investment.

Ironically, the mountain bike's economic impact in its Marin County, California, birthplace is relatively low compared to the booming high-tech industries that dot the countryside. Mountain bikes have made their strongest impact moving eastward in the small towns of Utah, Colorado, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania.

Utah

Mimicking the Ski Utah association of ski areas, tourism promoters have formed Bicycle Utah to market the state's excellent cycling opportunities. The first task of this nonprofit group was to spend \$60,000 on a free bicycle vacation planner listing tours, accommodations, and bike shops throughout the state. Because Utah has so many unpaved roads, mountain biking is emphasized. To obtain a copy, write: Utah Bicycling Vacation Planner, Box 738, Park City, UT 84060.

Moab probably tops the list of U.S. towns transformed by mountain biking. The sport has catalyzed a diverse

recreation industry that includes excellent motorized off-road riding, hiking in two national parks, world-class climbing, and even cross-country skiing. But the new sport clearly dominates in spring and fall when bike-topped autos continually parade down Moab's main drag. The legendary Slickrock Trail, built by and for motorcyclists, is overrun by hordes of puffing pedalers. The motor bikers are looking elsewhere.

Media hype, including the cover of MOUNTAIN BIKE's premier issue (June '85), created much of the bicycle tourism traffic in Moab. So did the efforts of brothers Bill and Robin Groff who, with their parents, own Rim Cyclery. All but Robin were once miners. Now, their mining supply store adjacent to the bike shop is the only one left in Moab, and it's a rather quiet place, with overflow bike shop inventory filling its back room. But next door, Rim Cyclery has become a community center.

"Mountain biking has helped me a lot and it's helped the community a lot," says Bill, who also was a corporate pilot. "Mountain biking has increased the seasons. Moab's tourism was oriented toward river running, which lasts from May to September. Mountain biking has extended tourism from March to November."

Moab's Canyonlands Fat Tire Festival, during Halloween week, attracts more than 500 people who are "mesmerized by the country," according to Bill. "It's beyond words. Beautiful, serene. You can walk five minutes out of town and you're alone."

Last November's county commissioner election was testimony to the change. The main campaign issue was a toxic waste incinerator proposed for a high, windy plain above the Colorado River. The old-guard incumbents, who long for the uranium mining days, supported the plant. Proponents of the

new recreation industry saw the incinerator as inappropriate to their culture and a threat to the environment. They defeated the proposal and booted out two of the incumbents.

Groff predicts that recreation will eventually lure light industry, whose employees are attracted to Moab's exciting and clean environment.

Colorado

In tiny Crested Butte, 13 Pearl Pass Tours and seven Fat Tire Bike Weeks have built a solid mountain biking tradi-



Crested Butte, now home to the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame, was one of the first towns to benefit from fat-tire activity.

tion and industry. Probably 90% of the locals own off-road bikes, and most ride regularly. In addition, there's a steady stream of bike tourist visits throughout the summer.

"Mountain bikers love to eat," notes Kay Peterson, co-owner of Donita's Cantina, a Mexican restaurant. "During Fat Tire Bike Week we're jamming, and I've noticed a difference the rest of the summer, too." This year Peterson directed Fat Tire Bike Week.

The political climate is overwhelmingly friendly to mountain bikers. Crested Butte has thoroughly embraced recreation and renounced its mining past. From 1977 to '81, the town fought a pitched battle to prevent the digging of a gigantic molybdenum mine proposed by Amax, the world's second-largest mining corporation. The community of 1,000 inhabitants won, aided by a global recession. Now its Red Lady Mountain is a favorite destination for skiers and bikers.

Mountain bike activist David Lindsey likes the kind of people the sport is attracting to his town. "They appreciate and respect the outdoors, they're wealthy, and they have discretionary income to spend on lodging, dinner and T-shirts," he says. "Also, it's something families can do together."

Mountain biking has also benefited other sports in Crested Butte. "Cyclists have opened trails in disuse for years, like Teocalli Ridge and Double Top," says Peterson. Lindsey adds that people often ride mountain bikes to reach a hike, climb, or favorite fishing spot. "What they used to accomplish in a two- or three-day trip, they now do in one. They're back in town in time for dinner and they see a lot more of the country." And everyone in town benefits from the worldwide publicity, which includes articles about Crested Butte in European bike magazines.

Durango sees much the same phenomena. Ed Zink, CEO and janitor of Mountain Bike Specialists, says the Iron Horse Classic and NORBA Nationals bring 750 people to town for a weekend, filling motels and restaurants. On a typical summer day, 75-100 people will visit to bike in the San Juan Mountains. "I think it has made a significant difference to date, but it's the tip of the iceberg," Zink says.

Cooperation with local governments is developing and Zink sounds encouraged. "We met all winter with the City Recreation Board, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to improve trail access, and nobody fought. We're all looking at the opportunities.

The Forest Service took the initiative and published a summer mountain biking trail guide."

Durango, population 10,000, has five bike shops. Zink estimates that half the residents own mountain bikes. "If you run anymore, you're weird. All the runners now ride bikes."

In Winter Park, the Fat Tire Society, using a municipal subsidy, has marked 200 miles of trails and mapped another 500. At least 60% of residents own bikes and support four shops. Weekly club rides attract people from as far as Telluride, 300 miles to the southwest on the opposite side of the Rockies.

Wisconsin

Mountain biking's biggest event is the Chequamegon Fat Tire Festival in Cable and Hayward, Wisconsin. Last year, its sixth, brought 1,240 registered participants, up 80% from 1987. "This kind of growth will put us over 2,000 in '89," says organizer Gary Crandall, noting that the combined population of Cable and Hayward is only 2,300. This year's festivities will be held September 9-10 (see *Calendar*, page 74).

Cable and Hayward also benefit from non-cycling festivals. The still-thriving timber industry celebrates in July with