

Rails to Trails Conservancy

by Gary Sprung

Railroads once linked every city, town and hamlet in America with a vast network of steel ribbons. Total rail mileage peaked in 1916 at 254,251 and remained at well over 220,000 miles through the 1950s. The figure as of 1984 is 152,000 and decreasing every year. Though the railroads are hauling more freight tons than ever, the companies have found that they make their profits on the main lines and lose their shirts on the branches and spurs. The time when every business sought a location along a rail line is long past. Competition from paved highways, river locks, barge canals, slurry pipelines, and airlines have shrunk the rail system. Some industry analysts say the most "efficient" system would total only 50,000 miles of trackage.

What does this fact of our modern economy have to do with mountain bikes? The corridors left behind when a railroad line is abandoned are invaluable to anyone who likes trails, especially bicyclists.

In Crested Butte the single most popular mountain bike ride, the "Lower Loop", uses the route of a branch of the Denver and Rio Grande Western which once served four coal mines. When coal was king, a dozen or more steam-powered trains plied these routes daily. When diesel engines and the decline of steelmaking eliminated the value of the coal mines, the rails disappeared along with the mines. The land of the railroad right-of-way was sold to various private companies and individuals.

Unfortunately, since those old rail beds make great bike trails, conflicts between the land owners and ambitious bikers have resulted. With a little foresight thirty years ago, the disputes between recreationists and landowners could have been prevented. The routes could have been sold to private organizations or public agencies who would have managed them for public fun instead of private profit.

In many parts of the country, citizens have now realized the importance and value of preserving the continuity of rail corridors after abandonment and removal of the rails. Though the process of converting rails to trails is fraught with difficult obstacles and potential controversies, 95 routes in 23 states have been successfully converted. Most of the conversions have been in the Midwest and East, with a several on the West Coast and a few in the South. In the Rockies and Great Basin, only Colorado has rail-trails.

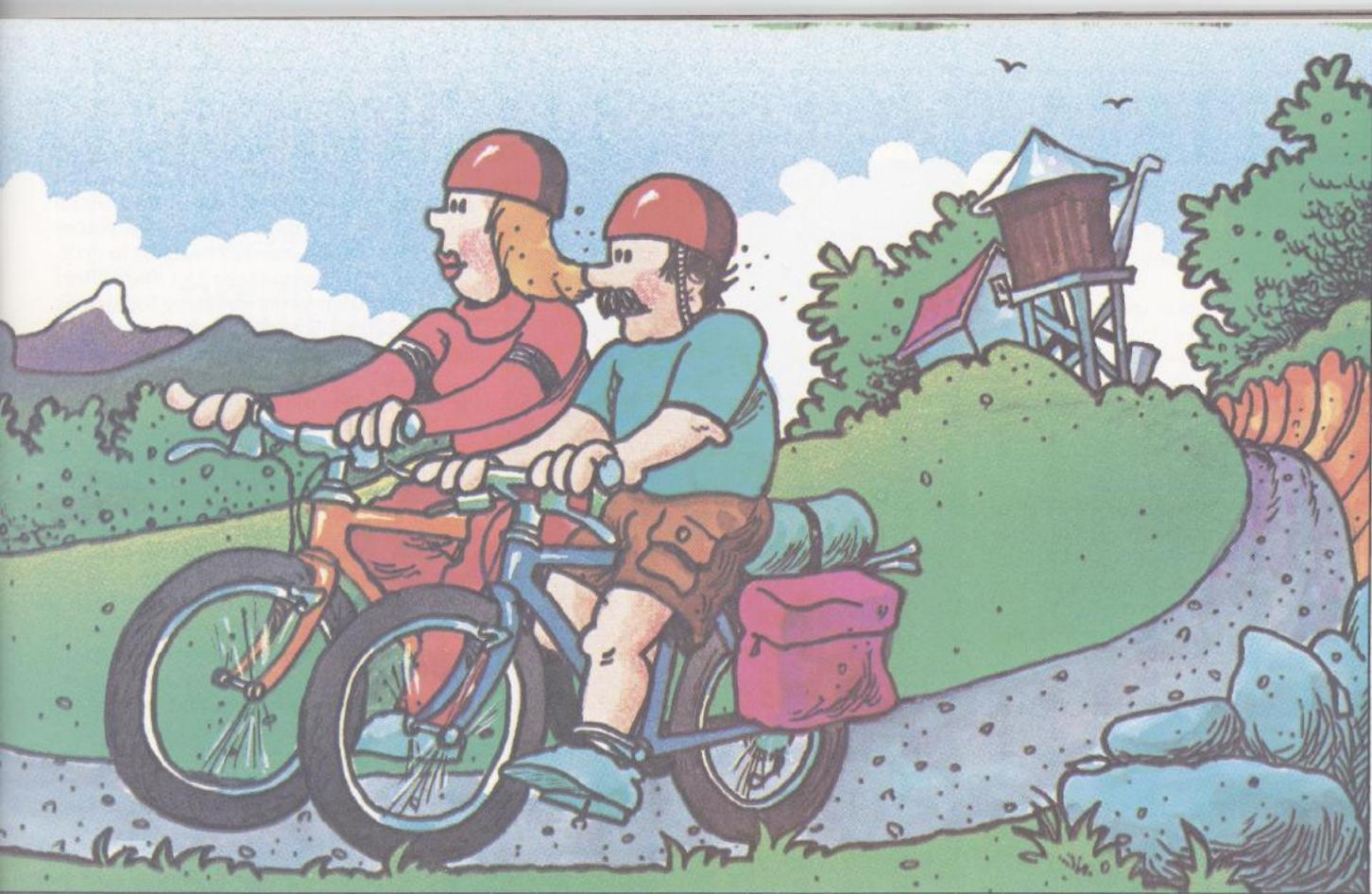
The idea is catching on fast. People increasingly realize that saving these corridors is a now or never situation. A national, non-profit organization, the Rails To Trails Conservancy, was established last year to coordinate efforts and provide guidance to local preservation attempts. Corridor preservationists seeking information and assistance have deluged the group and they've answered the call with sophisticated guides to the conversion process.

"It is truly ironic that this country spends

millions of dollars each year building new trails systems while an already established system of trail corridors along some of our most scenic vistas is melting away before our eyes," said the Conservancy's Executive Director David Burwell in testimony before the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors.

"It's not the rails or the ties that we're interested in, it's the right-of-way," explained Peter Harnik, the Conservancy's programs director. "These 50- or 100-foot-wide ribbons of open space through cities, suburbs, farms and forest are national resources that generally cannot be replaced. Once the linear continuity is broken up by land sales or development, it's lost forever. It's like trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together."

A prime example for mountain bicyclists of the value of saving these rail right-of-ways is the Bizz Johnson Trail in the Lassen National Forest of northern California. This 25-mile, rail-trail park uses the former route of the Fernley and Lassen Railroad built in 1914 to haul timber from Westwood to Susanville. Flanked by steep cliffs and slicing through lush pine forests, the trail traverses the wild Susan River past excellent swimming and fishing holes. Included along the route are two huge tunnels and eleven trestles. The trail is named after a former Congressman from the area who obtained federal funds for the trail and pressed for exchanges of land between the railroad



company and the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. The trail is unpaved and accessible only to people on foot, horseback, and mountain bike. Motorized vehicles are prohibited.

Most rail-trails have been paved or graded with fine gravel and are of less interest to fat tire cyclists. But asphalt is expensive and the rapid rise of mountain biking popularity may eventually eliminate most of the demand for pavement or gravel, thus cutting the costs of rail-trail establishment.

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) has criticized three federal agencies - the U.S. Departments of Interior and Transportation and the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) - for the inadequate steps they have taken to preserve rail rights-of-way. The Conservancy has filed a lawsuit against the ICC in a federal appeals court in Washington, D.C. for its failure to enforce the "railbanking" provision of the National Trails System Act of 1983. In Section 8(d) of that act, Congress declared a policy "to preserve established railroad rights-of-way for future reactivation or rail service, to protect rail transportation corridors and to encourage energy efficient transportation use." The section goes on to state that if a state, local government or private organization will agree to assume full responsibility for management, legal liability and taxes on former rail routes, then the ICC "shall not permit abandonment or discontinuance.

The ICC interpreted the act to mean

that rail lines should be banked only if the abandoning railroad company voluntarily agrees. RTC argues that Congress clearly meant to require banking.

The railroad industry has opposed the RTC lawsuit with claims that mandatory railbanking of corridors amounts to unlawful confiscation of private land. RTC hopes the suit will be decided before the end of 1987.

Despite Congress's passing of the trails act, section 8(d) does not mention recreation as a purpose. The idea is that railroads may have more value than present economics suggest and that the nation may one day wish to reestablish transportation corridors. A precedent for that idea is today being set in Aspen, Colorado, where a trails-to-rails conversion process is underway.

When the Rio Grande abandoned the last eight miles of its Aspen branch in the early 1960s, Pitkin County persuaded the company to donate the property to the local government. The county established a recreation trail extending from downtown Aspen along the Roaring Fork River to the small town of Woody Creek. Now a private entrepreneur wishes to reestablish passenger trains from Denver to Aspen using the old route. The proposal created intense controversy in Aspen with significant opposition coming from property owners along the route and limited opposition from the hikers, joggers, and mountain bikers who use the trail. The Roaring Fork Railroad

Company promised to rebuild the trail along a parallel route and in a vote last November the public approved of the idea overwhelmingly. The railroad company is now going through the local planning process, renovating 45 railroad cars and trying to raise the \$18 million in startup costs. It's an important experiment testing the potential for profit from passenger trains.

Conversely, the controversy in Aspen also shows the value of rail-trails to adjacent landowners. Are these people afraid of the noise or sight of the trains? The trains would pass by only a few times a day. The more likely source of their opposition is the enjoyment they get from the presence of an open-space corridor in their backyards and the financial value it adds to their land.

Adjacent landowners are a frequent source of opposition to rail-to-trail conversions. Usually they fear trespassers and vandalism. The conversion advocates may wish to take a closer look at the Aspen situation as a possible tool for persuasion. A study by the Seattle Engineering Department of the Burke-Gilman rail-trail has shown a definite increase in the property values adjacent to or near the trail. Homes within two blocks of the trail were significantly easier to sell and sold for an average of six percent more than would be expected otherwise. Property crime rate along the trail was less than the rate for the neighbor-

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hood as a whole. That despite the 7,000 people per day who use the trail, 10% of whom are bicycle commuters.

RTC has written an excellent guide to the conversion process called "Converting Rails to Trails: A Citizen's Manual for Transforming Abandoned Rail Corridors into Multi-purpose Public Paths". It's available from the Conservancy for \$5, plus \$1.50 for postage. (1325 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005; phone 202/783-0980.) RTC also publishes a legal manual, available for \$25 plus postage, and a fascinating newsletter for members. (Membership dues begin at \$18.)

Another resource particularly valuable to mountain bikers is the wonderful book "Tracking the Ghost Railroads of Colorado"

by Robert Ormes. Colorado once had a fantastic array of standard and narrow gauge railroads crossing almost every mountain range and reaching deep into the wilderness. Some of these routes have become jeep trails but many are sinking into obscurity after reverting to private ownership. Ormes' guidebook gives high quality maps, historical details and good verbal explanations, including the ownership status of the routes.

RTC also recommends "Right-of-Way: A Guide to Abandoned Railroads in the United States" by Waldo Nielsen (available from Old Bottle Magazine, Box 243, Bend, OR, 97701). The book covers more territory but is less detailed and explanatory than Ormes'.