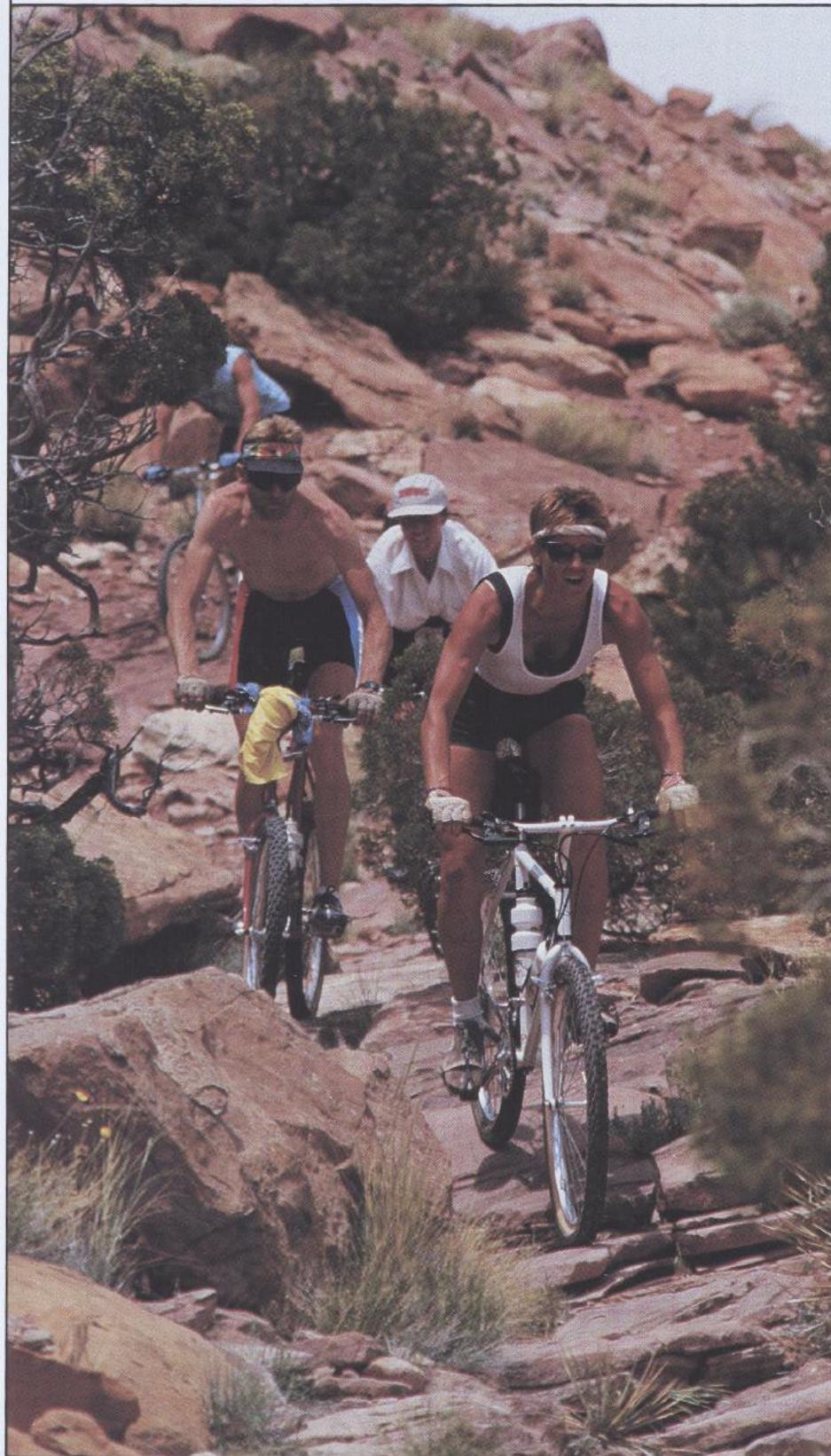


Poison Spider Mesa, Utah



Trails

by Gary Sprung

Mountain bikers have been cut off from an awful lot of America's single-tracks including all designated Wilderness Areas, most National Park Service trails, and too many municipal parks. We can organize and fight for improved access to these lands; we can also lobby for more single-tracks outside restricted areas.

Bicyclists share one common interest with hikers, motorcyclers, horse-riders and cross-country skiers: the need for more trails.

Hank Barlow

Trails in America today are a shadow of their former glory. Before the auto, before the iron horse, Native Americans had created an extensive network of trails through the woods of the East for commerce and travel. White pioneer settlers carved more. The US Forest Service inherited those trails in the 1890s and for the first half of the agency's existence, the network grew. Rangers used them for protection and administration: catching poachers, fighting fires, delivering messages and supplies, even visit-

ing between ranger districts. During the 1930's depression, the Civilian Conservation Crew built still more thousands of miles of trails - and roads.

The USFS trail system peaked in 1941 at 164,000 miles. By 1974, the mileage had decreased to 94,776 then slowly grew again. Mileage in 1986 stood at 99,761. Trail use also increased -dramatically. In 1960 there were nineteen visitor days of trail use recorded for each mile of trail within the system; twenty years later, each remaining mile

of trail supported 126.5 visitor days of trail use.

Blame for the trail mileage decrease can be laid at the feet of America's love affair with the automobile. In the late '40s and '50s, cars symbolized everything modern, progress, the way to go. The Forest Service switched to cars and trucks and replaced trails with roads for its protective and administrative duties; trails decreased in apparent value. The recreation explosion of the past 20 years renewed the importance of

How to Build a Trail

You want to build a trail? You have already completed step one of the process: identifying a need for a trail. Thomas Edison said that genius is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration. This is a brief outline of the perspiration.

The next task is to get a clearer idea of what you're talking about. You may have ridden a bike in that vicinity and hiked there a bit but did you examine the land with numerous side trips? Check out the topographic map? Identify nearby private landowners?

Step three is convincing other people, especially the manager of the land the trail would cross, that it's a good idea. With the a federal agency like the US Forest Service, that may be a lot harder than you might expect. Gudy Gaskill, who has spent sixteen years coordinating volunteer trail building for the Colorado Mountain Club, says she has experienced three types of USFS District Rangers. Some just don't want to be bothered; the trail will cause them the extra work of directing the project. It will cost them money yet return none to the agency. Some resent the idea of "civilians" accomplishing agency work. Another kind of District Ranger reacts with skepticism but tolerates the effort and cooperates to some degree. The rare third breed endorses the project wholeheartedly and provides considerable assistance, even to the point where the boss himself (or herself) gets out there with a pick and shovel.

Once you've got the boss convinced, the agency will conduct an Environmental Assessment of the impacts and benefits of the trail. This involves a scoping process where the agency seeks public input on issues and concerns. If no significant objections arise, the agency may not need to perform a full scale assessment and will instead call it a "Categorical Exclusion" and write a one-page discussion. On the other hand, someone may find an endangered species in the trail's path or a local landowner may organize every property owner in the valley to

oppose the trail. Such problems don't necessarily mean the end to the project, but they can draw the assessment out to a half year or longer. So it's best to get started early.

If you create a really strong case for the trail, the agency might decide to build it themselves or hire a private trail crew. In that unusual case, you're done. More likely, though, you will need to promise a heavy volunteer commitment, including a contract with the Forest Service. The volunteers become temporary agency employees.

Assuming the District Ranger says okay, the next hurdle planning. First, who is going to use this trail? If it's just hikers in the wilderness, the construction standards are much lower than for motorcyclists in a roadless area. Mountain bicyclists are perhaps more sensitive to grades than any other user so the trail design must try to minimize steep inclines and maximize a smooth rolling surface.

If there are any private lands involved, the Forest Service must obtain a legal easement from the owner. That may involve money so now you're talking about the federal budget.

To design and locate the trail, you've got to walk it to make sure it feels right, probably the most fun step in the process. The Forest Service will send a recreation manager and an engineer to the site to provide technical expertise. These professionals have tight schedules. Again, it's best to start early so the agency personnel can plan to be available. Once a route is determined, it is flagged with red or orange tapes tied on trees or posts.

All problems that may be encountered must be listed and planned for. Will you need ten water bars or a hundred? Does this trail need a bridge across a raging stream? Must you build retaining walls along steep slopes or puncheons to elevate the trail above bogs? Materials and tools must be assembled in advance. Will you need to provide tents, too?

Now comes the hard part. The difficulty is not the actual sweat of pick and shovel

work. It's getting the workers to the site.

"You need to make it something people want to do," Gaskill advises. She suggests including a fun feast, like a barbecue and party on Saturday night between two weekend working days, or a pancake breakfast. If the volunteers are going to spend a whole week, be sure that there is plenty of time set aside for simple enjoyment of the area, for play instead of work.

Extensive publicity is essential. Beside providing press releases to all media, you can contact chambers of commerce, service groups like the Kiwanis, or college recreation clubs. Other recreation groups can enlist.

Food: A crew of fifteen to twenty costs \$500 to feed for a week. An enthusiastic District Ranger may pay all of this. He or she may even provide a small per diem payment to volunteers. Or you may get nothing and then will have to go to the community for support. Grocery stores may be convinced to sponsor the project with a donation of food.

Trail crews need at least one leader for every fifteen people. As the number of workers increases, the need for leaders increases faster. A crew of forty may need four leaders. Leaders should have prior experience in trail building.

You don't just go out and start swinging axes and sawing logs. All workers must go through a training session of a few hours on safety and proper utilization of tools.

A crew of fifteen people can build a mile of trail through a forest in two to four days, depending on terrain. A mile on grasslands might be finished in a single day. Across a talus field, it can take a week or more.

This is hard physical labor and workers should be told to expect that. For some, it may be a refreshing change from a desk job. Most will get some satisfaction from feeling they are making a useful, tangible contribution to the world.

The greatest pleasure comes later when you enjoy the fruits of your labor. If the first project is a success, later efforts will come more easily.