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## TALES OF CRESTED BUTTE:

# Come and follow me, my fat-tired friend, To Crested Butte we go, our spirits to mend.

By Jacquie Phelan



In just a century, Crested Butte, Colorado, has gone from boom town to ghost town to mountain bike town. Each fall, Fat Tire Bike Week draws the most fanatic mountain bikers from all over the country for riding and racing. The highlight is the Pearl Pass Tour, a come-one-come-all ride over the 12,700-foot pass to Aspen. And the highlight of that is camp near the pass with dinner, a warm fire and, well, lots of beer.



"You are going to Canterbury—God speed you, and may the blessed martyr give you your reward! And I know very well that as you go along the road you plan to tell tales and to play, for truly, there's no fun or pleasure in riding along as dumb as a stone."

—Geoffrey Chaucer  
The Canterbury Tales

When September's golden arms fling back the curtains of summer for the last time, when the wind's short temper sets the leaves atremble on the trees, and winter's heavy sleep impends—then folks long to go on pilgrimages, to visit places they've read about and dreamed of all year long. For mountain bike folks, one of those places is Crested Butte, Colorado.

To that remote town come every sort of off-road pilgrim: from solitary backwoods tourists to flocks of itinerant racers, they congregate in mid-September with the intent of rubbing shoulders with the legendary clunker pioneers and following their balloon tireprints over Pearl Pass into Aspen.

The reasons for the annual visit to Fat-Tire Mecca are many: imagine blending the best aspects of Mardi Gras with the highlights of the toughest ride you've ever done. The contagious fun of a huge group ride is fraught with individual meaning, as each rider encounters his or her own demons on a two-day journey far from the civilized comforts we're accustomed to.

Here then, collected during the course of a short autumn's week, are the impressions of a few dirt devotees, a multiplicity, bug's-eye view of an event that no two people would describe alike.

The LOCAL leaned back on the old wooden bench and blinked into the sun, planning his words. Living in a small town for 80 years has a way of eroding all but the necessary words from one's vocabulary, and this venerable Crested Butte native needed time to switch tracks from "gas-station attendant" (and owner) to "historian".

"I guess they started coming to town about eight, 10 years ago. Of course, some folks in town already had bikes, but they were expensive back when I was growing up, and not everybody could afford the 40 dollars to buy one. Now I hear they go for three, four hundred, maybe more. But all the kids got 'em now, you see 'em all over. I walk, myself."

"These new bikes, and the kids on 'em, are real nice. Not quite the same crowd as





## Crested Butte

the skiers in the wintertime: they all roll in driving fancy cars and head for the ski area. The guys on bikes ride into town sometimes, with all their gear right there on the back. They all pass by here on their way up main street, asking for the bike shop. Yesterday a college professor and his wife rode up to the town of Gothic and back on their bikes. They weren't kids, neither. Both about 50. Then late last night, a great pink Cadillac came speeding into town, swerving and skidding all the way up Elk Avenue, with five bikes up on the roof and maybe six guys inside. Turns out it's a rented car, and they're all from Massachusetts. One of 'em told me they were from Fat City, wherever that is."

The MUSICIAN straddled his well-worn (read: "dinged up") mountain bike and jerked a thumb at the sky overhead. "I would have brought my mandolin if it could handle the weather as well as I can," he explained, patting his thickly insulated midsection. Above us the fluffy white centerpieces of a fine afternoon were gathering sulkily in one corner of the sky, darkening the horizon and chilling the air.

"Since I got up here this morning, the weather's changed five times. It's like some three-year-olds I know who like to drag out all their tricks and show off all their toys to strangers..."

We were, at this point, implored to join in the volleyball game being organized nearby. The players were all fat-tire pilgrims who introduced themselves between sets, spikes and fumbles, and told where they were from. There, in the confines of a backyard game court were the "only two women who clank in New Mexico," a trails nut from Virginia, a well-marinated pair of Marinites and a bevy of bearded cutes. Although it was supposed to be a potluck, no one remembered to bring food, and the altitude contributed to the ensuing euphoria as much as the beer.

Meanwhile, we were treated to an electrical storm on the peak of Mt. Crested Butte: a red-orange whirlpool of rain clouds shot through with veins of lightning. As we watched, a wall of hailstones the size of Alaska peas approached, dumped and passed over. Within half an hour, Nature stopped lobbing her prize-marbles on the tin roof of the hostess' cabin, and I made a dash for home, and bed.

*"Now let us ride, and barken to what I say." And with that word we rode forth on our way, and he began with right merry cheer his tale anon.*

As I stood in awe of a kid named Rich Cast performing rude acts on his "Bonzo Fury," I overheard the musings of a well-known FRAMEBUILDER in the crowd. We were being entertained by the creme of the observed trials creme who urged his machine over a picnic table, a tractor tire, a see-saw, and a log three feet in diameter. The FRAMEBUILDER noted that this was a whole new area of expertise, requiring a different kind of rider ("no lungs necessary, just balance and skill"), and a different bike set-up, one tiny chainring, upswept handlebars ("for



popping wheelies") a high bottom bracket ("so's not to saw the log in half"), and even rails under the bottom bracket to protect the chainring teeth. "This is going to appeal to the paunchy ex-BMXer, the radical trickster, the ballerina, and the rest of us without the time to train for speed and strength. Plus, look at the spectators. To them, it's a circus."

"See those guys over there?" The FRAMEBUILDER nodded toward a flotilla of Japanese engineers and manufacturers hovering over somebody's handbuilt racing machine. "They're all in Pierre Cardin suits, taking notes from the bluejays and burlap guys working out of their garages. For years now, they've come to C.B. to check out the latest in off-road technology, which is why you can buy splash guards and ten different kinds of handlebars in a bikeshop, rather than having to make 'em yourself. Naturally, there's a little bit of suspense there, when you're trying to produce something yourself, to see if the Japanese will beat you to it..."

I asked this veteran of five Pearl Pass tours why he keeps coming back, and he laughed. "To see my bikes destroyed! Actually, there's a little truth to that. We'd all like to think our bikes are indestructible, but we'll only know for sure after they've been thrashed in the toughest races by the strongest riders, for years on end. I consider it an ongoing experiment; a kind of sadist's research and development."

The next couple of days were a blur, punctuated by a some good meals and a fitful, sleepless night. Three races in two days, one of them bone-chillingly cold with a slushy drizzle, made for a kind of tunnel-vision recall suitable only for my training journal. I turned to the RACER to help reconstruct the competitive portion of Fat Tire Bike Week. The speaker was a lithe blonde man in his late 20s, sporting a tiny diamond in his left ear.

"I usually like to ride at the front, to keep out of the dust and the crashes, but up at 9000 feet, I'm content to just hang in there and suck wind. I feel like I'm performing in a partial vacuum with these mutants who live up here in the ozone. As it turned out, I beat you by only a few minutes! That's bad!" The speaker was one of the six manufacturer-sponsored teams brought to Crested Butte to acclimate for the NORBA Championships a week away. His objective was strictly business, not pleasure.

"When we got out here, we understood why folks come back every year. Whenever I quit racing, I'll still come out to the Butte to ride. I've never seen such a variety of good trails—there must be 20 three- to five-hour rides radiating from town. I'd need a year to do them all. Right now I feel like a kid in a smorgasbord with chopsticks—no way am I going to get in as much as I'd like. I just have to suffer, and come out a lot earlier next year—then I'll show some results and get in a few hot rides over 'Ob-Be-Joyful,' 'Sidewinder/403' and 'Swampy Pass' to boot."

"This year's race showed who was fit AND acclimated: of the top five, four came from Colorado: Ned Overend, Andy Hampsten, Don Cook, and Dale Stetina. California framebuilder Charlie Cunningham spent a month here thinning out his blood to do the race of his lifetime. Me, I'm just glad to be here,

**The stage race was a valuable tune-up for the National Championship a week later, but Fat Tire Bike Week is more about fun than winning.**

watching history go down."

Once the racers had all the piss and vinegar wrung out of them, it was time to get ready for a leisurely tour, which meant throwing your sleeping bag and tent aboard a four-wheel-drive truck bound for base camp 15 miles from town, and milling around with 250 like-minded fun addicts while the mayor made a speech.

It was during this exodus and over the drone of 500 knobby tires on pavement that I made the acquaintance of the ADVENTURESOME COUPLE.

*"You say that oxen, asses, horses and hounds are tried out thoroughly before they are bought, and so are basins, bowls, stools, and all such household equipment, as well as pots, clothes and finery, but men don't try out their wives until they are married, and THEN, you say, we exhibit our faults."*

He was in his 40s, with a successful veterinary practice behind him and many more years ahead as an off-road bike mechanic. With his hand-spun and lovingly woven wool vest and abundant beard, he looked like what The Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia would look like if he trained two hours a day.

His wife, an artist, seemed unable to resist the temptation to embellish her cycling outfit, this time with the addition



of a pair of neon-blue ski socks (soon to have one toe melted over the campfire) and several silver and abalone bracelets, a clam necklace, and a hat spun from the hair of a Great Pyrenees.

"We've ridden forever, it seems," she began, her soft voice barely audible over the hum of the pack. "When they elected Nixon president we took our daughter and our bikes to Europe and lived like gypsies for two and a half years. We stayed with American racers living in France, met Berbers in Morocco, and swam in the Mediterranean. We did

everything we felt like doing, and traded work for food and board whenever we needed to."

Our "trial period" together lasted 19 years," he laughed. "Something legal came up and we decided to tie the knot to make everything easier."

One of the characteristics of the tour was its many knee-deep stream crossings, which for one day became a kind of sports arena for would-be acrobats, photographers, and anyone who cared to dally around the banks while newcomers worked up the nerve to cross. The crowd cheered every attempt, but the ones who managed to remain on their bikes got the loudest applause.

En route to base camp, we encountered enclaves of hacky-sack players who hated to arrive ahead of the legs. After all, it was, at most, a two-hour training ride that would take us four to complete at a pilgrim's pace. When I found them again, the COUPLE were drying out socks and shoes over one of the six camp fires that glowed among the trees. These fires took on the character of the people surrounding them, so that by nightfall there would be a jester's fire, a "press" fire, a Japanese fire (yes, a few hardy engineers and manufacturer's reps would do the entire ride) complete with sake and folk songs, an "outlaw" fire (the enterprising local boys who refused to let penury prevent them from enjoying





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the tour: they travelled self contained to and from Aspen) and a few more I disremember. I caught the COUPLE the next morning, near the top of the two-hour slog to the rocky 12,700-foot saddle that is Pearl Pass. We all had our bikes on our backs, or pushed in such a way that it appeared the bikes were holding us up. Conversation was non-existent. As we thawed out our fingers and toes for the descent, I remembered someone telling me that the only reason for doing this is to say you've done it. The COUPLE agreed.

"We had to do this at least once. When we come back next year, it will be in August, so the weather will be a little

**The FRAMEBUILDER** noted that this was a whole new area of expertise, requiring a different kind of rider.

warmer, and we'll carry all our gear. We're into celebrating the great outdoors without having to be as primitive and inefficient as backpackers. Now all we have to do is convince Washington that a human-powered bicycle is not the same as a gasoline-powered vehicle, and deserves to enjoy a wilderness area as much as a person on horseback."

At that point, we were hot enough under the collar to cut loose down the other side, and we experienced the longest downhill we've ever had the... er, pleasure... to have endured. Imagine an hour and a half of downhill, some so difficult that it requires dismounting. When it's all over, and your forearms have been shaken into twin numb rods, your hands reduced to useless claws, it's time to crawl into the Hotel Jerome, order a Kirin (in honor of your Shimano derailleur having survived the last two days) and ponder the cruellest fact of the entire tour: the return by bus would take eight hours. My entire time on the bike was a mere six and a half!

As I boarded the gaily painted bus I watched them add my bike to the neat stack of filthy machines on the truck bound for C.B. My 40-grit cyclics begged for sleep, yet I instinctively strained to hear over the roar of the diesel engine, as a dozen tales of personal glory unfolded in the seats around me. ■

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