

The Making of a Gnarly Dude

Last Valentine's Day, the bride of my youth and I discovered with giggling delight that we had chosen identical cards to accompany our gifts to each other. From the hundreds of possibilities available, we had both fixed on a card that featured a handsome, spiffily dressed gray-haired couple dancing the night away on the deck of a cruise ship. In fact, we have never taken a cruise, nor even had any burning desire to do so, and we both much prefer shorts and baggy T-shirts to formal wear. What seems to have attracted us to these models of modern maturity was their vitality, their clear proclamation that folk who are, say, fifty-four or fifty-five (just to pick a couple of numbers), can still retain a good bit of zip. One needs good health, of course, and part of that is luck. In addition, endurance and energy need to be maintained by pumping modest loads of iron, trekking through the TV room on the NordicTrack, or walking swiftly through neighborhoods where young lawyers are building houses the size of depots. But the best strategy I know for maintaining optimism, enthusiasm, fitness discipline, and a fanny-pack full of fine memories is a regular visit to Crested Butte, Colorado.

Crested Butteicians often speak of their idyllic little town and its environs as Paradise and, at its best, it can indeed cause one to suspect that going to heaven might be strictly a lateral move. For several years, we have spent the Christmas holiday there, gathering our grown children together for a week of skiing, reading, eating, getting acquainted with new babies, empathizing with the freshly injured, and trying to hold our own in a ceaseless round of conversations and competitions ranging from age-handicapped downhill races to take-no-prisoners bouts of made-up card games that reward hand-eye coordination and require a great deal of shouting. I can think of only one vacation I like better than Christmas in Crested Butte. That's summer in Crested Butte.

Friends sometimes say things like, "Crested Butte--I think maybe we've driven through there." That's possible, but not likely. With the exception of a few weeks a year, when Kebler Pass thaws out enough for cars to make it over the mountain to Aspen on a dusty gravel road, folk don't drive *through* Crested Butte. They drive or fly to Gunnison, hook it up Highway 135 north for 28 miles, and when they've had all the fun they could handle, they come back out the way they went in. Access by air has improved greatly in recent years, but the lack of a superhighway and the presence of only one mountain developed for skiing has kept the area from becoming a big, booming, ultra-chic, and hyperexpensive spot like Aspen or Vail. Residents disagree as to just how much growth and development is desirable, but nobody whose opinion I've heard in person or read about in the Chronicle and Pilot, my weekly link with fantasy, wants the place to lose many of the advantages afforded it by relative isolation. I'm on their side. For that reason, I hesitate to recommend that you go there. On the other hand, I'd feel selfish not telling you about it.

From the 1880s until the mid-1950s, Crested Butte was a mining town--some lead, zinc, and copper, and a little bit of silver, but mostly coal. It was never really a boom town, and when the last mine shut down the population had dwindled to around 200 and the little clutch of soot-blackened cabins and stores nestled in the valley at the foot of Mount Crested Butte seemed headed into the same grave that had swallowed

Gothic and Pittsburg and Crystal and Irwin-Ruby and Marble, where the milk-white stone for the Lincoln Memorial was quarried. An initial effort to tap into the burgeoning enthusiasm during the Sixties ended in bankruptcy, but a second try a decade later caught and held. Texans were the main foreign visitors--the first run off the basic lift is called "Houston"--until the Eighties oil bust forced many of the formerly rich to spend more time "takin' care of bidness" and depressed revenues and real estate values, but the lean years seem to have passed. Last winter saw many more skiers on the mountain than the year before, and a new high-speed lift should bring even more for the coming season.

Just as notable, the joys of summer are attracting almost as many people and pockets to these marvelous mountains as do the chilly thrills of winter. Summer in paradise features a wide range of resort-type activities: dance, theater, photography, and wildflower workshops; a first-rate arts festival to supplement the offerings of a clutch of permanent art galleries; whitewater rafting on the Taylor River and horseback rides through spectacular back country; exhilarating hikes on heavily forested mountain trails that pass roaring waterfalls and rushing streams fed by megatons of melting snow; a spate of footraces of varying length, including the Kendall Mountain Race, which requires runners to climb the last few yards to the top on their hands and knees, and something called the Grin-and-Bear-It Run, which commemorates a local mountain runner's flight from a bear he encountered on the Green Lake Trail; and the undisputed highlight of the season, a funky Fourth of July parade in which at least half the town's citizens and not a few visitors decorate themselves and their vehicles for an uproarious interactive foray down Elk Street, then turn around and come back, to make sure folk feel they have had a full-length spectacle. Later in July, Aerial Weekend attracts scores of hot-air balloonists, para-gliders, hang-gliders, stunt pilots, and parachutists, turning the sky into a two-day celestial circus. One of the finest hours of our summer was climbing to the peak of Mt. Crested Butte, where we eavesdropped on the conversations of several hang-gliders floating lazily on thermals hundreds of yards away and watched skydivers guide their little chutes smack onto second base in the Little League field thousands of feet below us.

But no special event or agenda is required for full enjoyment of Crested Butte's charms. For Houstonians, it is more than enough just to be able to stroll down Elk Street at noon in the middle of July and still feel cool and dry. (If you wait until three o'clock, you'll still be cool, but not dry, since that is when it rains.) Once you have purchased your mug, T-shirt, and gimme cap, to prove you were actually here, chuckled at the uncommon frequency with which purple and teal paint have been used to "restore" this old mining town's original buildings, and checked out the menus of a remarkable collection of fine but studiedly informal restaurants, you can settle in for a leisurely game of Home and Visitor. You won't have trouble spotting the visitors. They're the ones in the starched white shorts and clean shoes. The home team is scruffier looking, with long hair, muscled legs, shorts and jeans and granola-woman loose dresses, footwear that seems pretty well limited to boots (hiking, western, and working), sandals (Birkenstock a common choice), and dirty running shoes. Also, not counting dangerously pre-cancerous skin, countenances that radiate a passion for healthy living. You can sport your mug, T-shirt, and gimme cap, to prove you were actually here, chuckle at the uncommon frequency with which purple and teal paint have been used to "restore" this old mining town's original buildings, and check out the menus of a remarkable collection of fine but studiedly informal restaurants, or settle in for a leisurely game

of Home and Visitor. You won't have trouble spotting the visitors. They're the ones in starched white shorts and clean shoes. The home team is scruffier looking, with long hair, notably muscled legs, shorts and jeans and granola-woman loose dresses, footwear that seems pretty well limited to boots (hiking, western, and working), sandals (Birkenstock a common choice), and dirty running shoes. Also, not counting dangerously pre-cancerous skin, countenances that radiate a passion for healthy living. You can tell by looking that these folk recycle and eat their sprouts and trail mix. If, after a few days, they seem to look alike, it is probably because you have seen the same person answering phones at the real estate office by day, waiting tables in the evening, and working at the bike shop on the weekend. Come back in January and you'll probably find them helping you onto the ski lift.

One of the main things you will notice about the townsfolk, as well as many of the visitors, is their preference for two-wheeled transportation. I was in a store one afternoon when a teenager from Denver poked his head in to ask if anyone had seen "the long-haired guy with the bicycle." He seemed puzzled when everybody within earshot laughed, until a clerk told him, "That would fit just about ninety percent of the guys in this town." It would also fit most of the women. Nearly every store and restaurant has a bike rack nearby, most occupied homes have several sets of wheels arrayed in front, and a car or van without a bike rack looks almost suspicious.

For the most part, the bikes one sees are not those little skinny-tired temperamental rigs that Greg Lemond and his European friends ride, at least until they run over a matchstick and have a flat tire or twist the frame. These are tough machines, with thick, stout tubing, straight handlebars to facilitate quick turns, a geometry designed for both comfort and control, and, above all, fat, knobby tires that absorb shock, resist cuts and punctures, and provide traction and stability on a variety of terrain. These relative newcomers--now the best-seller among all types of bikes--go by several names: all-terrain bikes, off-road bikes, mountain bikes, or just plain fat-tire bikes.

According to most historical accounts, mountain biking was born in Marin County, California, in the early 1970s, but since 1976, when a band of intrepid pedalers from Crested Butte rode to Aspen over a forbiddingly rough and steep pass that no bicycle had ever previously traversed, the Fat Tire Bike Capital of the World Including California has been right here. The Mountain Bike Hall of Fame and Museum are here--tucked in behind the Mountain Earth Natural Foods store in an old building about the size of a one-car garage. More importantly, Crested Butte plays host each summer to around a thousand folk who pour in from all over the U.S. and several foreign countries for Fat Tire Bike Week. This extravaganza runs for a full eight days and includes instructional classes for all levels; a chainless race down the seven-mile road from the top of Kebler Pass; a slow race that is actually more of a balancing contest; a bicycle polo tournament; a bicycle rodeo that includes car-jumping, log-pulling, and bicycle limbo (won last year by a middle-aged man about six-five who managed to hunker down on one side of his bike and dip it to one side just long enough to pass under a 28-inch bar); and a spate of age-, sex-, and skill-graded races that send bikers up and down steep hills, over bone-rattling corduroy roads, across ditches and streams, along rock-strewn and pot-holed paths barely wide enough for a single tire, through a maze of alleys, and finally back onto Elk Street.

I had no illusions about entering any contests, but I did plan to take some classes to learn the basic skills required for riding a bicycle down a mountain. Up is hard. Down is dangerous. I tried a bit of “single-track” riding early in the summer and managed to traverse a beginner-level trail without incident, but I felt awkward and uncertain and knew I needed help to make this feel comfortable. I would be quite content to settle for a rubber-tired equivalent to intermediate skiing and felt sure I could reach that level before the summer was over. But first, I needed to adjust to strenuous exercise at 9,000 feet and above.

Flatlanders wary of air they can neither see nor feel often experience a shock to their systems when they visit the mountains. I have never suffered from true altitude sickness, but I knew it would take a few days for these Gulf Coast lungs to adjust to Rocky Mountain high. I took it fairly easily the first few days. Crested Butte, the best place to be in the summer, lies three miles south and approximately 831 feet lower than the village of Mt. Crested Butte, the center of winter recreation. The road between them is paved and most drivers watch for bikers. I began by riding as far as I could, until, even in the lowest of my eighteen gears, I simply could push it no further. I was disappointed and embarrassed at how quickly both my heart and head began to pound, announcing in stentorian tones that it was time to surrender and turn back. I measured my progress by the number of additional telephone poles I could pass, usually only one or two until I finally made it all the way up without having to stop and walk for a few feet.

Then one morning, about two weeks into the summer, I decided, for a change of pace, to see how far I could ride up the road to Kebler Pass. The scenery is stunning, but the road is a bit rough and dusty and has no more than a few yards of downhill slope anywhere on the way to the top. It is a seven-mile uphill ride—no challenge for a Colorado mountain biker, perhaps, but enough to make a mild-mannered college professor reconsider the allure of a cruise ship. It would have pleased me to cover a mile, and my tiny handlebar computer would have told me exactly how long that took and added it to my cumulative distance record. I was astonished when, after about an hour, without stopping, I found myself at the top of the pass, thirsty, trembling, pleased I would not have to pedal a single turn on the way down and already dreaming up ways to spice up conversation with news of some of the things I had thought about “while I riding up to Kebler Pass last Monday.” No matter that I wasn’t worth anything for the rest of the day. It was a fine, fine feeling.

The Brush Creek Road begins just the other side of the Skyland Country Club’s golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones. It led me through the bottom of some magnificent scenery I remembered having seen from above on a horseback ride several years earlier. Another ride took me through thick woods on a narrow road that switched back and forth across Cement Creek, which seemed more like a series of cascading waterfalls than a creek. On the way back from that one, down a long steep stretch of washboard dirt road, I achieved my highest speed of the season: 35.3 mph. It was a bit hairy, but I put aside fear and tried to offset the numbing vibration by assuring myself that I was probably achieving a world speed record for this particular stretch of road. About that time, two boys who had passed me going up the hill passed me again going down. I’m not even sure they saw me this time. Let’s see if they can still do that in forty years.

My favorite ride was along the Washington Gulch/Slate River Loop. It’s a twenty-two-mile trip over Paradise Divide, offering what is said to be perhaps the most beautiful vista in the area. I can’t say for sure, because I never made it all the way to the

top on that road. I'd start from one side and then from the other, climbing considerably higher each time, and I felt fairly certain I would make it all the way well before the summer was over. I was in no hurry, in part because I figured what I planned to learn during Tire Bike Week would prepare me for some reportedly tricky terrain at the top of the loop. Patricia asked why I felt it necessary to keep pushing myself. Wasn't it enough just to go out and get some exercise and enjoy the scenery? And wasn't I afraid I might fall booming down hills as fast as I could? If I could answer that one with any precision, I could probably solve a good many of the world's problems. Why pump till it hurts, why push to go farther each time out, why count it important to get to the top of Paradise? Well, it just seemed like a testostorrific thing to do, especially for a man in his mid-fifties.

Then why did I have to ride downhill so fast? Wasn't I afraid of falling? I have never imagined myself immune to danger. I ski within my ability, pay rough allegiance to the speed limit, and stay out of senseless-killing neighborhoods. I had seen enough scabbed bikers to know it was possible to fall while negotiating switchback trails littered with loose gravel and sharp rocks. But why should a man with steel-piston legs, strong arms, steady nerves, and nearly fifty years of biking experience worry about falling in the middle of a road? Be serious.

You may see where this is going. A few days before the big week, when I would take my place in the Brotherhood of Fat Tire Bikers, Senior Division, I scheduled a guts-up endurance run. The afternoon rain lasted a little longer than usual, so I got a late start, but I still had plenty of time to try for a personal best. I took the Washington Gulch road this time, because it's harder than the Slate River portion of the loop. Half an hour out, I knew it would be a good run, even after a couple of young guys passed over the traditional road greeting--"Hey, Dude, how's it going?"--instead of the less fraternal "Sir. Are you okay?"

Like all the main bike routes in the area, the road up the gulch offers nearly unbroken beauty, climbing past an occasional A-frame or log cabin tucked into the mountains on either side, plunging into deep valleys, coasting past blue-green lakes and ponds fed by ubiquitous snow-melt waterfalls, winding through sections of road covered by tunnels of tree limbs, and, at every new crest, rolling out a fresh set of equally striking marvels. And that day, in the relative absence of other cyclers, it was easy to imagine it was all mine.

Before long, I passed the spot where I had turned around the last time out. The road got steadily steeper as I labored up to what was left of an old mining site known as Elkton. I was definitely feeling the strain, but I kept pushing until finally, at a turn when the road ascended sharply and looked as if it intended to keep on ascending for the foreseeable future, I had to surrender. Even in the lowest possible gear, I could not move another yard uphill. Clearly, it was time to head home. I didn't feel defeated. On the contrary, I felt great. I had added at least a mile to my previous distance on this road and had ridden at least ten times as far as I could have just a month earlier. In short, I felt like a giant among old men. Also, it looked like it might rain. And today, in the relative absence of other cyclers, it was easy to imagine it was all mine.

One of the best parts about biking the Butte is that the hard work gets done early. The road home from all directions is mostly downhill. As usual, I was a bit shaky from the climb, so I didn't try to go full speed until I felt steadier. Still, I was moving

along at about 25 mph (24.6, if I remember correctly). The darkening clouds had caused me to take my sunshades off, but the wind caused me to change my mind about that. I fumbled for the glasses, got them on, and got my left hand back on the handlebar, but not long enough to get full control. I don't know exactly what happened next. I suspect I caught a rut at the wrong angle. Without a millisecond's wobble to let me anticipate a crash, I hit the ground--harder than I have ever hit anything in my entire life and at angles that still defy my comprehension. The instant my head smashed onto the roadbed--not later, on reflection, but at that very instant--I understood the wisdom of wearing a helmet. The helmet itself would need to be replaced, but I was not going to suffer brain-damage or even a concussion. My bike was on top of me, handlebars askew and the seat hanging off to one side, but the rims were not bent and the chain, though hanging loose, was intact. It would probably make it home if I could.

Except for a minor cut on one knee, my legs were fine, but somehow, I had managed to incur deep scrapes on both shoulders, both elbows, and the tops of both hands. My T-shirt was torn at the shoulders and starting to soak up the blood. And then I noticed that blood was beginning to stain the front of my shirt. Where was that coming from? My nose had a minor scratch from the sunglasses-- of which I never found more than one temple piece and a half-inch shard of plastic—but was otherwise fine. The right side of my face, however, had not fared so well. From up near the cheek bone all the way down past the middle of my chin, I had been relieved of a complete coat of epidermis. As I sopped up the ooze and wet grit with a handkerchief, I wondered how deep the scrape had gone. Oh, well, Freddy Kreuger didn't let an accident break his spirit.

Repairing the bike took longer than it should have. I was trembling, my hands hurt, the rain had started, and it was getting dark and cold, probably in the forties in shady sections. But, as one must in the mountains, I had brought along a windbreaker, so I didn't really worry about exposure, and once I figured out a temporary way to reattach the torn-up seat, I remounted my Diamondback steed and rolled gingerly back into town, keeping both hands on the brake levers to ward off any remaining temptation to speed and wondering what kind of price I could get for a slightly wrecked mountain bike. As the cold rain hit pelted my jacket, I noticed that it seemed to be stinging my left arm where I hadn't noticed any scrape. That surprised me until I got home, when I discovered that my arm had swollen to nearly twice its normal size and was rapidly turning black. Patricia thought I should go the hospital in Gunnison, but I was fairly sure it was not broken--I was right--and I just wanted to soak in a warm tub and then lie down on some cool sheets and bleed in peace.

Getting hit by something the size of a planet can leave its mark. I had seen plenty of scabs in town, but none like mine. On my first trip to the Post Office, I expected to hear sensitive parents tell their children not to stare or, worse, to have brown guys in tank tops smirk and ask if I needed a set of training wheels. Instead, I drew comments of wonder and admiration: "Hey, that's a good one," or "I'd guess you were going downhill," or simply, "Wow! A face plant! Haven't seen one of those in a while." And then came a response that made it onto my life list. We have several favorite places for breakfast--the Bakery Cafe, the Paradise, the Forest Queen--but on the weekend, nothing beats the brunch at Penelope's. Our waitress, a lovely young woman whose brilliant smile and excellent posture I had noticed on previous visits, looked first at my scabrous face and asked, "Bike?" I sheepishly nodded. Her comment: "What a stud!"

Fearful I was being patronized, but deeply grateful nonetheless, I said, “That’s very kind of you. Thank you for not saying, ‘Old fool. Why don’t you pick on a sport your age?’”

“Oh, no,” she said, altogether believably. “In Crested Butte, this makes you a gnarly dude!” God bless the children.

I wasn’t able to participate in Fat Tire Bike Week. I got a new seat right after brunch and rode around a good bit on the pavement, but the slightest vibration sent pain bolts shooting up my arm, and my hands were not fit for serious braking--or even shaking hands--for a couple of months. But give up mountain biking? Be serious. Gnarly dudes don’t give up.

I’ll be back. Trust me.