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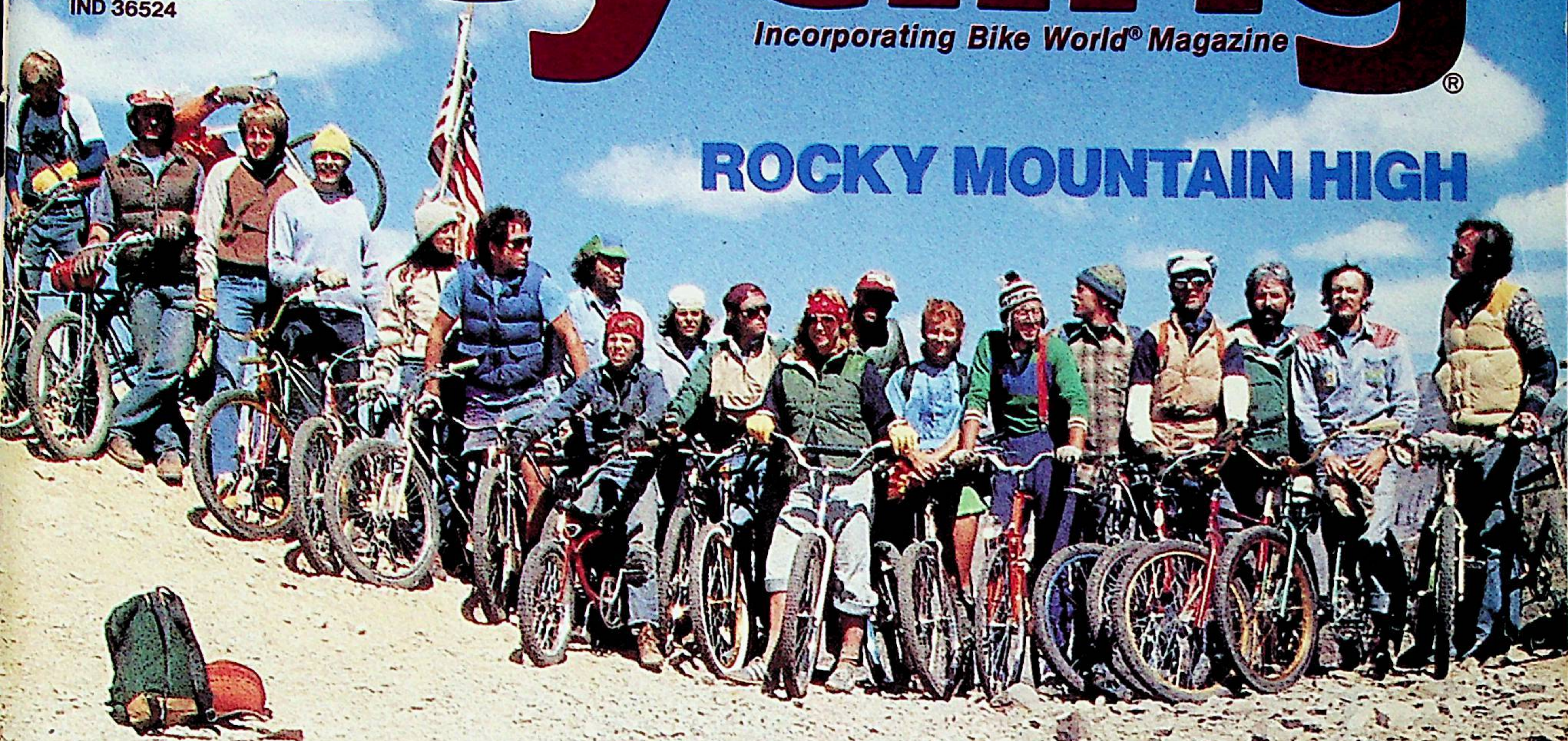
IND 36524

April 1980 / \$1.50

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## ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH



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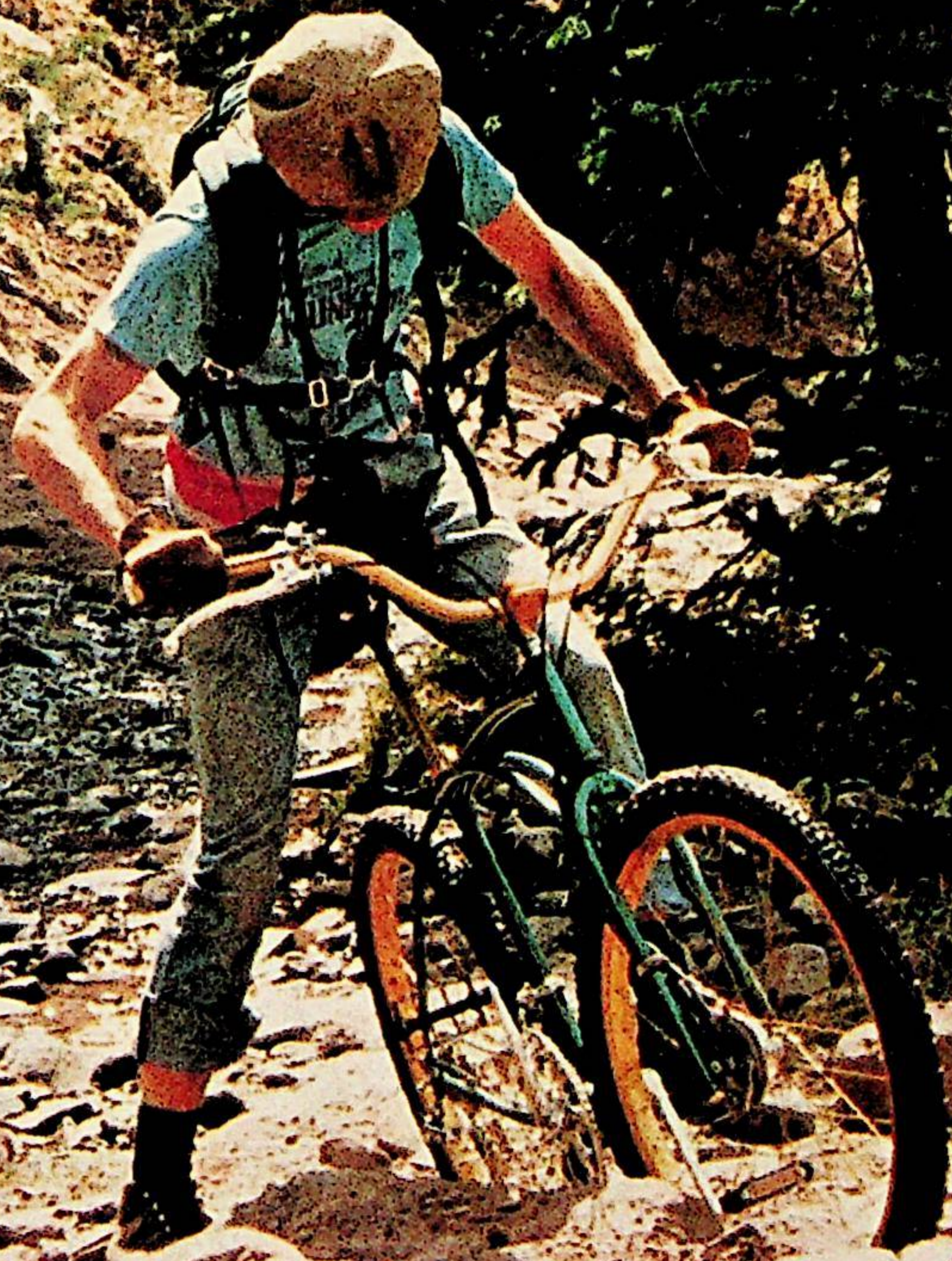
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# Rocky Mountain High

These Bikes Went Where Four-Wheelers Couldn't

CHARLES R. KELLY





Rick Verplank fired both barrels of an antique shotgun. And the riders were off, leaving Crested Butte, Colorado, in their dust. The Fourth Annual Clunker Tour to Aspen had begun.

The gunman, who issued the original challenge, looked over the mob and said, not unhappily, "I think I've created a monster."

Monster or not, 35 riders from all over the country came to participate in this two-day, 40-mile ride.

Forty miles might not seem like much to the average tourist who knocks off that distance between breakfast and lunch, but the road to Aspen, which takes you over the 12,700-foot Pearl Pass, is not typical touring country.

The road was built in 1882 for mule teams that dragged ore from Aspen to the railhead at Crested Butte, and has seen little use and no maintenance since the '20's. It has now deteriorated to the point where it is a serious challenge for four-wheel-drive vehicles or even motorcycles. Since the tour offers some of the roughest riding and the finest scenery to be found anywhere, it gives clunker aficionados a fine excuse to test and demonstrate new equipment and techniques while mingling with like-minded riders.

This year's tour drew a variety of riders and equipment. 26 x 2.125-inch balloon tires were the rule, although bikes ranged from stripped-down old one-speeds to handmade "ballooners" with 18 speeds and the best available components. Two riders had old lightweight frames, one-speed, with 1 3/8-inch tires and coaster brakes; one rider from Boulder showed up on his own design of rough-tourer, a handbuilt ten-speed with 700C tires and very rugged construction; and two men who were unable to field appropriate machinery went on foot. The women were represented by two from California and a pair from Crested Butte.

Each rider paid \$20 entry, and this money was used for commemorative T-shirts, food, the support vehicles, rides back from Aspen (100 miles on real roads), and a good supply of beer.



*Neil Murdock carefully maneuvers his way through one of the several stream crossings on the Crested Butte to Aspen, Colorado bike tour.*

### **Beware of the Bull**

While the point had been made repeatedly that this was a tour, not a race, the start certainly resembled the latter as riders charged down the main street, still ranging from curb to curb and even using the sidewalks. Leaving town, we rode for the first two miles or so on pavement, and the wide varieties of equipment and riding ability served to string out the group.

After we turned off the pavement onto a smooth dirt road, the pace slackened although by this time the group stretched out for a half-mile or so. The

first few miles of the dirt road were well-maintained and rolled through beautiful ranch land. A small herd, consisting of two horses and a pig, trotted by in the opposite direction, their casual attitude implying that they see this sort of thing all the time. A Hereford bull the size of a barn and standing facing us in the middle of the road had the lead riders jockeying for second, third, last, anything but first position until his lack of interest became apparent.

Since we had all day to cover about 18 miles, there was no hurry, and stops for rest and regrouping were frequent. At the first of these the entire company reassembled, but as the day wore on and the road climbed through progressively rougher terrain, the group stretched out until this was no longer feasible.

There were three or four major stream crossings and these provided convenient excuses for stops, as the minority who were able to ride completely across got a laugh watching the others make it halfway before stalling and stepping off into water up to 18 inches deep. It is a real challenge to ride a bicycle 50 feet or so across a rocky streambed when each stroke of the pedals dips a leg halfway to the knee.

Mechanical incidents on the climb to the campsite at 11,000 feet were minor: one rider had a flat when he picked up a thumbtack miles from an outpost of civilization, and another had difficulties with a drum brake that had been mounted only the night before. (Some riders had burned midnight oil readying their as yet untested bikes.)

### **"One-Speed to Die"**

Chris, from California, deflated the owners of fancy machines by roaring past them on his borrowed, beat-up, old one-speed. The one-speeders formed a clique, and their rallying cry, "One-speeds to die!" could be heard ringing through the valley at inappropriate moments.

Two hours separated the first arrivals at camp from the last, as one pair of riders had taken the only possible





wrong turnoff. As we relaxed around the campsite through the long afternoon, some of the local entrants amused themselves and the rest of the group with an improvised game of golf, using increasingly battered beer cans for balls and the handle of a splitting maul, sawed off before the surprised owner could protest, for a club.

Dinner was steak, potatoes and corn cooked on an open fire and washed down with beer from a keg. Afterwards, leaving the fire, we found that in the moonless sky the bright, high-altitude stars provided us enough light to find our tents easily.

In the morning after breakfast we drifted, in small groups and singly, out of camp toward Pearl Pass, 3½ miles and 1,700 vertical feet away. From the campsite to the pass the road surface is nothing but loose rock varying from the size of baseballs to watermelons. Very little is rideable and even the owners of the more sophisticated machines were reduced to pushing them. Gasping in the thin air, stumbling over rocks and aching from the effort, we were in bikey heaven.

The scenery from the top of the pass is stark, since there is little vegetation at that elevation, but in the distance and far below us we could see the bright colors of the aspens turning, contrasted against the dark green of the evergreen forest. In the immediate vicinity of the pass the landscape is lunar, with permanent snow patches in shady places, and rugged peaks towering above it all.

### Too Tough for Four Wheels

While we waited for stragglers and our sweep vehicle at the summit, we were amused by a driver in a four-

*Rough riders of the Clunker Tour gather at the summit of 12,700-foot Pearl Pass to marvel at the view—and their accomplishment.*

wheel-drive truck attempting to cross the pass from the Aspen side. Three times he slid off the road, bouncing 50 feet downhill, backwards and out of control. Probably the last thing he expected to see in this remote area was a crowd of bicyclists observing his efforts and shouting suggestions to the effect that he get a bicycle. Fortunately, our own support drivers were able to negotiate the bad spot, but not without a few nervous moments and only then because they were going downhill.

After emergency bailing wire repairs to damaged bikes, we started the descent with a spontaneous, whooping, yodeling rush across the rocky, snow-spotted base of Castle Peak.

The descent of Pearl Pass on a bicycle is a unique experience. It would be hard to find another place where that much bad road is coupled with that much vertical descent. For seven miles the road drops sharply, and our perception of the road surface changed drastically with the difference between the plodding climb and the rapid drop. Imagine bolting a pair of handlebars onto a paint shaker and hanging on for a half-hour.

Of course, everyone set his or her own pace, and some took their time. This was, after all, a tour, not a race. Some of the riders liked to "tour pretty fast," though, and they would be upset if anyone were to "tour" any faster. So, without actually racing, a group of a half-dozen had an impromptu "touring contest," disap-

pearing down the mountain elbow to elbow.

The rough roads and higher speeds took an immediate toll on equipment. The rough-tourer with its narrow tires collected a pair of flats, and one rider from Crested Butte flatted at a place his friends now call "Albert's Flats," because, "that's where he gets 'em every year."

One rider flipped his bike and emerged without a scratch, but he had to chase his front wheel downhill and then beg a wrench from another rider to make repairs. The two modified Schwinn three-speeds were both thrown into a snowbank and had snow packed around the rear hubs to cool the sizzling coaster brakes. Two fast tourers managed to link their machines at high speed and had to take a short break to untangle.

After what seemed like an hour of vibration and jolting we reached a paved road, and the first 15 or so tourers regrouped for the 15-mile downhill run into Aspen.

The paved descent makes for high speeds, and our group of identically dressed riders (jeans and blue Tour T-shirts) made an impressive sight as we zipped along. Three girls in a small car passed in the opposite direction, then turned around and passed us, pulling over onto the shoulder. As we went by at 40 mph one yelled, "Who are you guys?" Unfortunately, we didn't have time to tell them anything.

The pace was rapid, some of the fastest touring ever done, and one by one riders dropped off the back; by the time we reached Aspen the group was down to five. The finished sprint on the outskirts of Aspen carried us past an astonished rider on an expensive ten-speed. He no doubt had never realized that anyone could ride that fast on balloon tires.

Our Tour banner was hung on a fence next to the Jerome Hotel bar, and this was where we all headed to regroup and celebrate. As more and more strange bicycles were piled in front, a few citizens asked what was going on. When told where we had been, they would usually walk slowly away, shaking their heads.

After celebrating and exploring Aspen for a few hours we packed bikes into several trucks and climbed into an assortment of vehicles for the three-hour ride back to Crested Butte.

Back in town, we headed for the local hot tub-sauna-spa to relax and wash off the accumulated grit, a perfect way to end the perfect adventure. □