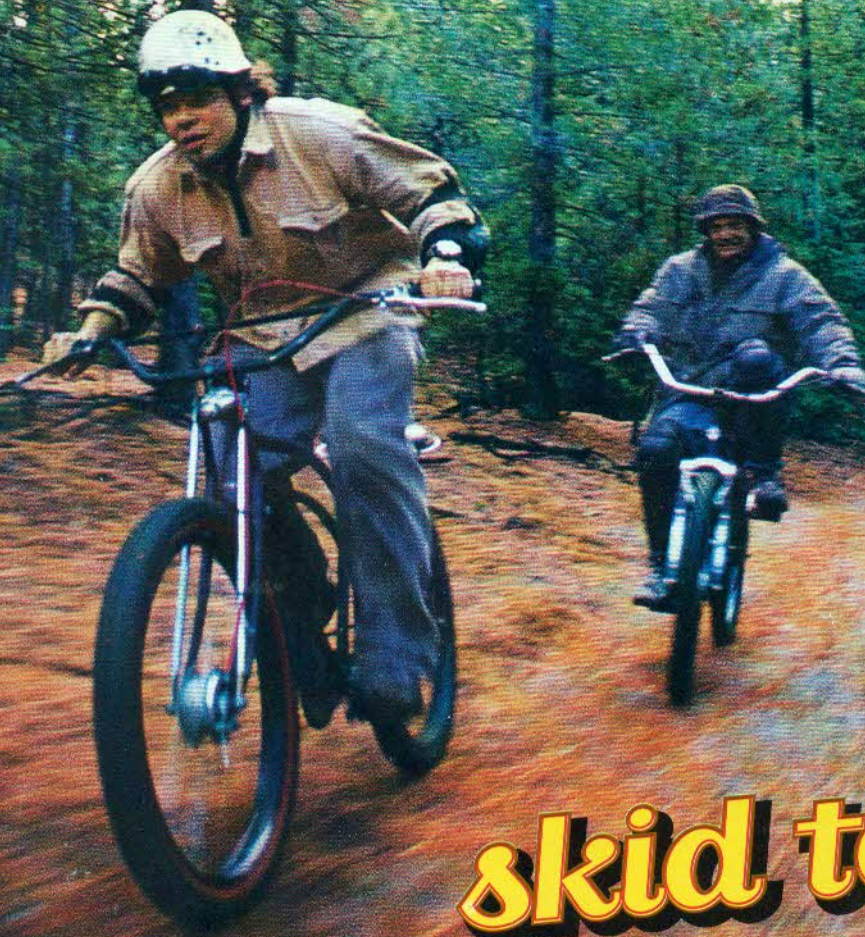


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Keven Krueger and Russ Mahon
bomb California's Mount Bolivar.

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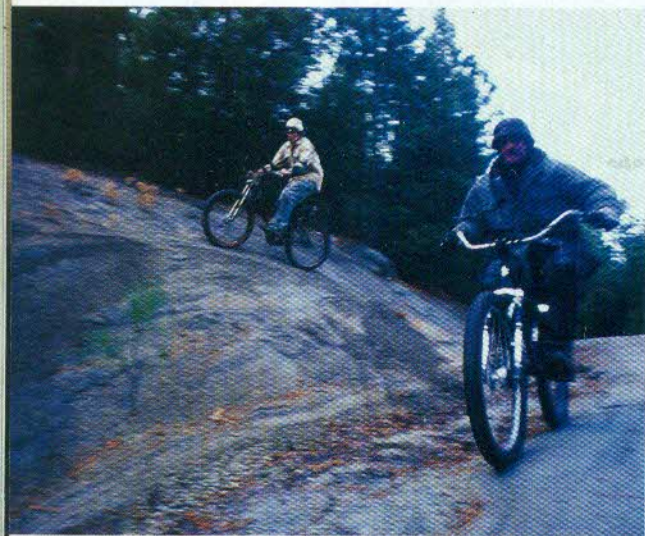
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new riders of the *lost skid*

THERE'S A GROUP OF RIDERS, LED BY MOUNTAIN BIKE PIONEER RUSS MAHON, WHO NEVER LEARNED TO RACE, NEVER BOUGHT INTO LYCRA AND NEVER PAID ATTENTION TO THE BIKE INDUSTRY. HIDDEN IN THE HILLS OF NORTHERNMOST NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, THEY'VE BEEN BUILDING THEIR OWN BIKES, BOMBING THEIR OWN TRAILS AND REVIVING OUR SPORT'S ORIGINAL DO-IT-YOURSELF HIPPIY-PUNK ROCK ROOTS. *B* BY LOU MAZZANTE



A thin coat of new snow covers the narrow logging road winding up Mount Bolivar. Leaves have long abandoned the firs and cedars lining the path and low-hanging branches creak loudly under the weight of the early season storm. Into this scene slides a rusty Ford Ranger, spinning its wheels as it groans uphill, throwing great plumes of snow into the sky.

Bikes stacked high in the back rub and grate and bounce on one another. Most are pre-WWII cruisers salvaged from dumpsters—Schwinns and Clevelands and other nameless beasts whose head-badges and decals have long since surrendered to the elements. A few unfor-

fortunate riders sit in the truck bed, bracing themselves against the bouncing bikes and the biting, icy air.

At a small trailhead 7,000 feet up Mount Bolivar, the riders spill from their vehicles and quickly don wool hats and heavy jackets, their breath visible and heavy in the cold air.

They unload bikes, crack beers and tell jokes. The leader of this ragtag bunch stands off to the side, drinking an Olympia and surveying the scene. Russ Mahon is sixty years old now, he is tall and red faced and built like a bear. The others, about a dozen men in their twenties and thirties with their klunkers and Carharts and homemade helmets, are locals from the town of Callahan below. Nearly all of them refer to Mahon as the Sultan, an affectation that refers not only to his stature among this group, but also to his legendary contribution to the mountain bike.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN WILDE



Keeping it real: The first known man to mount a derailleur to a fat-tire bike, Mahon still prefers to keep it "steep and cheap."



Mahon's front yard is a breeding ground for old klunkers and feral coat racks.

Man, I really wish I had a Morrow

today," Mahon says, wistfully hoping for one of the venerable coaster brake hubs that inspired his first forays into mountain biking with the Morrow Dirt Club. Mahon is astride his son Leon's bike, a modified Phat Kaddy cruiser with modern Marzocchi fork and disc brakes, and his ride is doing little for his confidence. It's icy and frigid and the riding will be tricky. He takes one uneasy look at the trail and asks, "Why would anyone want to ride anything but a Morrow today."

Nonetheless, a promise was made. Last year, Leon lost control of the car he was driving and was tossed from the vehicle. He suffered brain damage severe enough to impair his motor skills and prevent him from riding. Yesterday, he asked the Sultan to take one last spin on the Phat before the season ended and a winter's worth of dust began accumulating. That was before it started snowing.

Before the descent, Mahon's son-in-law, Keven Krueger, offers a few final instructions on riding a coaster brake. "It's all about leverage



and pedal placement," he says. A stonemason by trade, the 37 year old coaches the Scott Valley high school baseball team in his spare time. He is short and stocky and speaks rapidly as he continues his lesson.

"You just want to make sure you're in the right spot. Keep your pedal a little higher than normal so you can rock back to engage the brake. It's a different feel, but I like it so much better."

As the riders mount these heavy, rusty monstrosities of bikes, it would be natural to want to

put a stop to this nonsense; to shake the nostalgic stubbornness from them; to rip your own bike out of the trunk of the car and scream, "Look. This is a disc brake. This is a suspension fork. This is a PER-FOR-MANCE saddle. This is what a mountain bike is supposed to look like." But you don't. Instead, you swing a leg over a Cleveland and follow the laughter into the snowy woods.

The legend of Russ Mahon and the Morrow Dirt Club stretches back 30 years. Back then, Mahon and his brother Bernie and a few



others began building bikes from old cruiser frames and motorcycle parts salvaged from dumpsters. They rode their homemade bikes high into the hills above Cupertino and bombed downhill skidding around corners. They called themselves the Morrow Dirt Club. But they had another name, too: the Sultans of Skid.

Then, on a whim in 1974, Mahon and the MDC entered the West Coast Cyclocross Championships and competed on the only bikes they owned. People had been riding modified cruisers around Marin County for a year or two already, but something on Mahon's created a stir. Mounted to his matte-black Wards Hawthorne were two derailleurs—a Suntour VX up front and Shimano Tourney GS in back.

Mahon finished seventeenth, and his brother Bernie only slightly better in thirteenth. Fellow MDC rider Carter Cox finished twelfth. But the spark had been ignited. Among those lined at the start of that race were Tom Ritchey and Gary Fisher and they had taken notice of the Sultan's derailleurs. By 1976, Fisher had adapted derailleurs

to his Schwinn Excelsior klunker and when Joe Breeze sold his first purpose-built mountain bikes in 1977, they would come equipped with either Shimano 600 or Suntour GT derailleurs.

While the men in Marin set about pioneering an industry, Mahon and the Morrow Dirt Club retreated to the hills of Cupertino. Nobody had even bothered to ask their names. They wouldn't be heard from again for two decades.

Seated at his kitchen table, inside a house he built by hand five years ago, Mahon ruminates over the industry he helped create but has played only a bit part in since. Old springer forks form a crest over the hallway doorframe and pictures of surviving members of the Morrow Dirt Club hang on the walls.

"When I left Cupertino, there were long periods where I wouldn't ride my bike at all," Mahon says. "Living in Sebastopol, places where nobody was riding, it was just my wife and I on our ballooners."

Mahon's son Leon has heard these stories a mil-

lion times, but still hangs around the kitchen looking at the old photos, smiling proudly at the Sultan.

Through the eighties Mahon moved around coastal California, leading what he calls the "rough and tumble" life, chasing jobs as a contractor. He picked up the occasional magazine to see how mountain bikes were progressing.

He'd smile when he saw things like the invention of dedicated knobby tires for off-road riding and lightweight rims. From afar, he saw the creation of the National Off Road Bicycle Association and cringed silently when racing became the dominant force in mountain biking. "Man, all those guys were just road racers...and that's what they turned mountain bikes into—lightweight road bikes with knobby tires."

He pulls a picture of some original MDC riders. "Check out the chopped knee pads and of course the football helmet," Mahon says. "That's Bernie with the laceration helmet riding the black and orange Panther."

As mountain biking grew further from Mahon's heart, he paid less attention.

But while Mahon was losing interest in mountain biking, the sport was gaining interest in him. In the late eighties, there was a concerted effort to document mountain biking's earliest days, a task that Joe Breeze undertook with enthusiasm. He tried for years to track down that nameless rider with a derailleur on his klunker from the 'cross race in 1974. Then in 1993, he finally found him through a contractor who was building an addition to Tom Ritchey's house.

By 1994, Mahon and all 12 members of the MDC would be inducted into the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame. It was a proud moment for Mahon, but after the ceremony in

Crested Butte was over, he returned to Northern California with little fanfare.

"Oh, I still get things in the mail from the Hall of Fame to vote for new members, guys I've never heard of. But I don't vote because it would be a wild guess. I read them though just in case there's a pioneer. I could help with that," Mahon says.

"I'm not resentful. I feel lucky to even be associated with those guys and the history of the sport," he adds. "I'm happy beyond my wildest imagination. I've partied with Breeze and Fisher. I went to Fisher's house after the Repack ride."

In October, Mahon attended a repack reunion ride organized by filmmaker Billy Savage, who was promoting his documentary on the history of the sport. It was Mahon's first time on Repack and he was surprised by the steep, rugged trail.

"There's no going slow on Repack," he says. "You're going 30 and still risk skidding over the edge. You have to keep off the brakes and go 40 with a little control."

Leon has been silent the whole time, but his eyes finally light up when his father mentions Repack. "Man, I can't wait to get better and go do that," he says.

Six years ago, Mahon's daughter married a stonemason named Keven Krueger. And once this young man learned Russ was a mountain bike pioneer, he wouldn't let the old man sleep.

"Keven got me dragging out my bikes and chasing spiders off them," Mahon recalls.

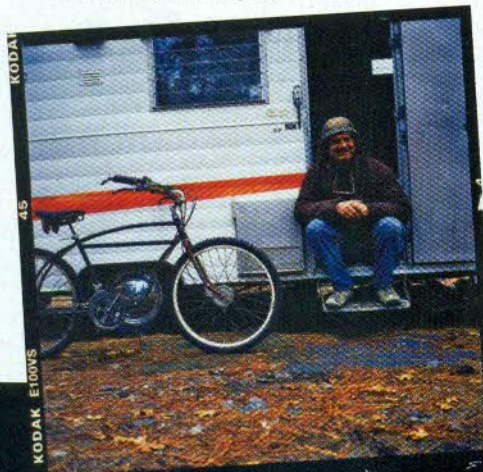
Keven didn't care that these bikes Mahon kept under tarps in his front yard didn't cost a few thousands bucks, that they lacked suspension or disc brakes. He was just happy that they flew down the trails of Mount Bolivar.

"I didn't pick up a bike magazine, never watched a video. I just wanted to bomb downhill," Keven says. "And Russ didn't feed me a lot of information about his history at first. He never handed me a pamphlet. He fed it to me slowly. He probably still has stories he hasn't told me."

"I didn't think you were juvenile enough to enjoy it," Mahon replies.

"Juvenile? This is as juvenile as it gets. Adults on bikes riding downhill on Sunday instead of chopping wood."

They began collecting Morrows, rummaging



Just skidding. Keven Krueger bombs down the hills of Mt. Bolivar.



through barns for frames, making weekend trips to the Bay area, site of Faber Schwinn, one of the largest collectors of vintage, klunker-era bikes and parts.

The bounty of those trips fills Keven's garage. Frames, some rusty, some restored, hang above piles of tanned deerskin. Cabinets are filled with Morrow hubs ("Three years ago we started getting crazy. We'd buy a few and would say that's enough to last the rest of my life. Then we'd buy two or three more," Keven says).

They developed their own riding style—fast and relaxed, legs dragging around corners, seeking out berms on the loamy fire roads. They ride high in the corners and man, do they skid. It's an art form.

Soon, they began recruiting riders...what few kids lived in Callahan were piling into trucks and bombing down Bolivar, riding whatever bikes they could get their hands on. One kid even created a klunker for his high-school senior project. The scene was growing. It didn't cost a penny. There were no special clothes. There were no rules. Anyone was welcome to join.

Officially, the town of Callahan has 457 residents, but that's a generous assessment that includes residences 10 miles from town. A few years ago, one of the locals took a can of green spray paint and covered up the 4 on the welcome sign outside of town. Now, it reads "Callahan, population, 57." Everyone seems to agree that that's a more accurate representation. To the riders who bomb Mount Bolivar, this is SkidTown.

Once a stop on the Oregon Trail, the town is a blip on State Highway 3. Only three buildings are visible from the road: the post office, housed in a long, two-story structure that at one time also housed Farrington's General Store ("Scott Valley's oldest General Store. Since 1860" is still written on the yellowing glass window); the Callahan Ranch Hotel, which closed three decades ago; and the Emporium, the combination bar/general store attached to the now-closed National Bank of Benteen.

Most of those who remain in town are descendents of miners and loggers—rugged, thick-skinned individualists who take pride in finding utility in their surroundings.

Just up the hill from the Emporium, riders

gather in Keven's garage after another icy descent down Bolivar. A small wood-burning stove kicks off enough heat to stave off the winter chill. Inside the house, Keven's wife and mother-in-law prepare dinner for the riders and the rest of the family.

Scanning the garage full of salvaged bikes and decades-old parts, Mahon says, "You can see why these bikes are popular here. There's not a lot of money. But you gotta do something. You gotta ride. So you take what you have. That's the Morrow Dirt Club concept."

Keven pulls a bike from the ceiling. A low-slung, matte-green frame based off an old Cleveland design with swooping steel tubes and modern parts: Marzocchi All-Mountain fork, Kenda tires, Sun rims, Avid mechanical discs and newly welded longhorn handlebars. Shining in front is the bike's headbadge that depicts a trail snaking through the mountains. The brand is engraved: "SkidTown Bikes." Fresh from the factory, the bike is missing only cranks and has yet to be ridden.

Eventually, Keven plans on removing the Marzocchi and adding a custom springer fork,



Ghosts in the Machine: In a double-exposed photo from the West Coast Cyclocross Championships, the upright style, hockey helmets and longhorn handlebars of the MDC riders stick out in a sea of 'cross racers.



The New Riders of the Lost Skid don't care what bike you ride, or the clothes you wear. They just want to rip downhill. Below: Mahon on banjo with local singer Johnny Callahan in the only bar in town.

built with internal and external springs and gas compression cartridges. He digs out a prototype from a drawer. The outer spring is lifted from a Harley-Davidson seat; the internal is a Briggs and Stratton valve spring.

"It's just a different feel, the springer fork, because of the fulcrum action. When you're coming into a berm, when you're really surfing on your bike, you want the bike to spread out, almost like pumping on a skateboard," he says. Then he points at the fork on the bike now. "These things seem to slow you down."

Keven plans on selling SkidTown bikes for as much as \$4,000 apiece. It's more than anyone in town can afford, but he possesses little buying power or industry connections. It's the best he can do for now.

He's shown the bike to a few shops in the Northwest and entered a few races on older models. He says the reception has been positive.

"Even if it goes nowhere. I did what I tried to do. At least it's a vision. I wouldn't mind getting up every morning and building bikes. It's better than being a stonemason or a logger. Now, that's what we are, were contractors and electricians, and my brother is trying to make a go of it in the rodeo, and we're okay with all that, but if I can make this work, well...." His voice trails off.

Four grand for a bike is a long way from the dumpster diving, use-what-you-have ethos Mahon has practiced for so long. "I don't want to squash any initiative, but it's a long-shot

gamble," Mahon says. "I don't need to spend thousands on a bike. But the whole world seems to be throwing money away. I'm the only guy who's cheap."

Back in 1979, Mahon recalls, Charlie Kelly approached him at a cyclocross race and tried to sell him one of the first purpose-built mountain bikes. "He showed me this brochure and I was horrified he thought I would throw away \$1,600 on a bike," he says. "I can kill myself real good for fifty bucks."

"But Keven's into this. He's not just doing this to keep my legacy going. It's bigger than that. I don't think he could get very far if that was his only motivation. He does it because he thinks it's fun."



Those first turns on the snow-covered

Bolivar trail are sliiii-ick. The bike wobbles and the long handlebars jerk at the slightest movement. Tires beg for traction. And riding a coaster brake, no matter what the brand, is an exercise in failed muscle memory.

Early on, the trail is mostly straight and at a modest incline. And as we slide through more turns, the bike's balance



In Callahan,
it's not called riding...
it's dirt surfing.



MAGUIRE'S

Heavy Metal

MAHON'S REVOLUTIONARY '74 WARDS HAWTHORNE

Mahon stores his Hawthorne, the first known mountain bike to be fitted with a rear derailleur, in the back of a rusty 1950 Chevy Suburban 3100. He's changed very little on it since 1974. And, on occasion, he still takes it for a spin. This is the bike, in his own words:

"Well, okay, I modified this bike a lot for the race. I took off the rear caliper and the springer fork and put on a rigid. I knew there was going to be uphill. I didn't need to go slow. I needed go. But this is the bike in that photo, the one from the race, so I wanted to keep the same parts. I can't put the springer back on...."

"Oh, the shifters? I had thumb shifters. Then the right one here broke. I wanted to keep it true to the picture, but I needed to ride, so I added the bar-end shifter.... This bike, see, doesn't have a Morrow. It has an Atom coaster brake. A really good brake.... What's that front hub? Okay, let's check that out. There's something on there. Can you see it? No, I can't make it out either. I'm pretty sure it came off a German ice-cream cart."

"I don't consider myself the inventor of the mountain bike. Even my dad must have bombed downhill in the twenties with a paperboy cruiser and a Morrow. The only reason I got any recognition at all was the transmission....I'd have to say unequivocally Joe Breeze invented the mountain bike with his purpose-built design.... Maybe we influenced Marin, but it seems like Fisher took two or three years before he took his transmission bike out on Repack. I'm not sure what took him so long...."

"We all had the idea to put a derailleur on our bikes, every one in the Morrow Dirt Club thought it was a good idea. I was just the first one to scrape together enough money to get one.... In the seventies people were throwing away Schwinn's and Hawthornes. Dumpsters were filling up with them as people followed the lightweight road craze...."

"You guys are the ones that probably know all the brands better than I. What kind of brake levers are these? Oh, I don't know, what's that say on the logo...? Berto's manifesto, *The Birth of Dirt*, claims I couldn't have invented the mountain bike because I used plastic levers. If I had known, I would have used Maguroos, or whatever those guys had...they just hadn't shown up in the dumpster yet."

point reveals itself. The long wheelbase stretches around corners. Leaning into turns unlocks the bike's control algorithm. Weight the front, lean in through the apex, hold on, slide back for the exit and stand on the outside pedal to scrub unnecessary speed. When necessary, inside legs become outriggers.

The klunker caravan slows before an impossibly steep slope. Two men on cross-country bikes pedal past and pitch over the edge. One crashes into a tree, the other slides and slows to a stop, then walks a few yards before re-mounting. Keven drops in behind them. The snow here is thin and the loamy dirt below offers solid traction. Barely standing, feathering the Morrow, he descends gracefully and rapidly. Everyone follows close behind.

Last to descend is Mahon. A bad back usually prevents him from riding this section, but today he makes the plunge. They may call him the Sultan, but he looks more like Sergeant Schultz, wearing an army surplus jacket and camouflage laceration helmet. As he rolls over the top he's wide-eyed and off the back. He slides off the

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