

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the off-road mountain bike revolution is that it opens up thousands of miles of fireroads, hiking trails, and cross-country terrain — free of traffic, noise, and cityscapes. The possibilities for exploration are endless.





MOUNTAIN BIKES: BACKCOUNTRY EXPLORING ON THE NEW PATHFINDERS

Story and Photography by David Epperson

The group slowly inched ahead, stopping every 50 yards or so in exhaustion. Three miles from the summit and the going was getting a bit tough. In the rarified air of the nearly 13,000 foot elevation, even minor

exertion was taxing and many of the climbers were sucking air — uncontrollably trying to feed oxygen to their muscles. But these athletes knew what to expect, in fact, most had trained for months for this assault.

NEW ORGANIZATION FORMED TO PROMOTE MOUNTAIN BIKING

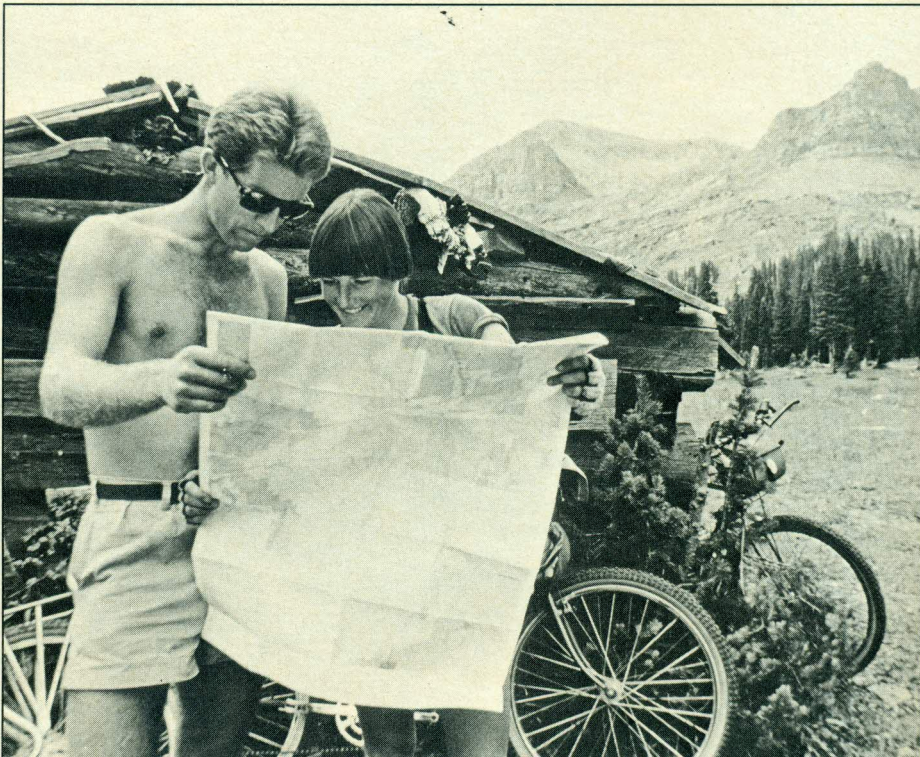
Mountain biking is another step closer to being recognized as a legitimate sport with the formation of the National Off-Road Bicycle Association (NORBA).

The Mill Valley, California-based organization was finally established in January after two years of discussion by fellow mountain bike enthusiasts, according to one of the founders, Charles Kelly. NORBA's objectives are to promote the sport through touring, competition, and recreational riding; act as a sanctioning body for off-road events; and be the voice of mountain bikers in securing access to public lands.

To alleviate the fears of the Sierra Club and other environmental groups, NORBA officials say that it will encourage the responsible use of public facilities by off-road cyclists, research the environmental impacts of mountain bike activities, and contribute towards the upkeep of trails.

To join NORBA, individuals must send \$15 and their name and address to NORBA, P.O. Box 5513, Mill Valley, California 94942. Industry members can obtain a sustaining membership for at least \$200 a year, and dealers should pay between \$25 and \$50, depending on their size, for a similar designation.

With a growing membership scattered all over the country, NORBA publicity director Barbara Edelston expects the membership figures to increase dramatically throughout the year because of the many activities the group will be conducting. For more information, write to NORBA at the above address or call (415) 381-2594.



Group expeditions on mountain bikes are becoming more popular as riders learn the advantages of off-road touring. Honing your map skills is important, especially if you explore new territory off the beaten path.

Now well above the tree line, the terrain is rugged and barren, the rock walls broken only by the patches of snow and an occasional mountain lake. The trucks and jeeps following to offer aid and moral support had been forced to turn back long ago. The terrain was impassable, even for the most powerful of vehicles.

Cresting the final hill, new life was pumped into aching legs and backs as the group traversed the final yards to the top. At the summit, the climbers placed the traditional American flag into the rocky ground, cheering in delight with each short breath. Posing for a group photo, arms were raised high in tribute to their achievement.

The toughest part was over, but the ascent down the other side would require a great deal of skill and sharp reflexes. As they mounted their bicycles to begin . . . wait a minute — bicycles? What sounds like a hiking expedition is actually the annual off-road bike assault on Pearl Pass, part of the Crested Butte to Aspen Klunker Ride staged each September in Colorado.

Crested Butte to Aspen, like many other popular off-road bike rides springing up around the country, demonstrates the enormous possibilities for off-road cycling. Whether climbing high in the Rocky Mountains or simply taking a peaceful afternoon ride in your local foothills, the mountain bike begs us to reexamine what is possible in cycling.

Combining bicycle touring with the finest elements of backpacking opens up thousands of miles of previously unexplored trails throughout America — trails free of traffic, pollution, noise, and cityscapes. Now, a family vacation into the backcountry can be a cycling vacation, too. The opportunities for exploration are untapped and just waiting for you.

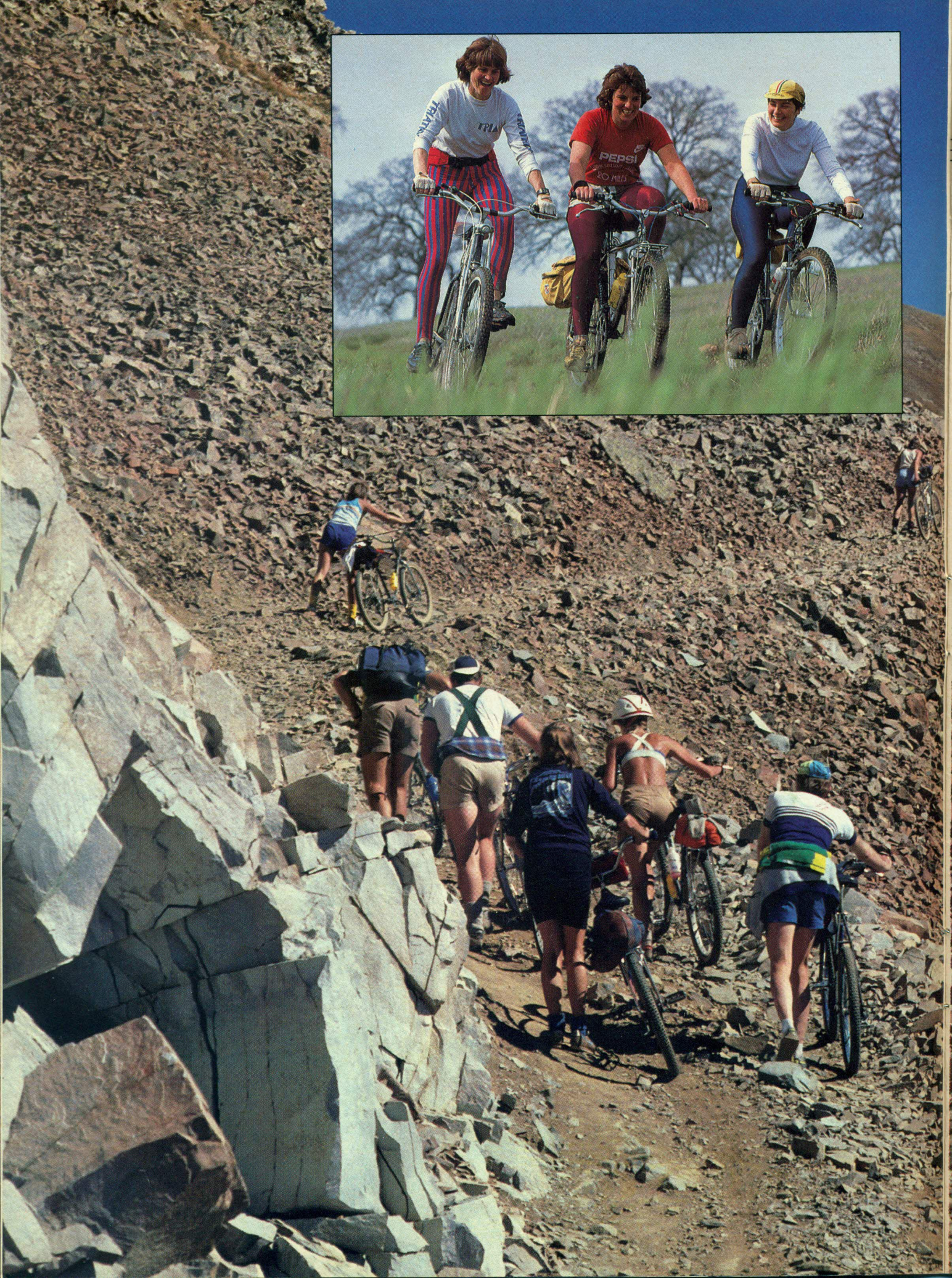
MAKING HISTORY

The modern-day off-road machine is a throwback to the 1930's when the balloon tire bike was originally brought to America by Ignatz Schwinn in 1933 as a sales gimmick. The fat tires of the "news boy" styled bike imitated the look of automobile tires in hopes of aiding the financial woes of the bicycle industry, faltering since the introduction of the car. The bikes remained popular through the 1940's.

The situation changed dramatically in the late '40s when servicemen returning from the war in Europe brought back the "English racer" three-speed bikes, which then gave way

Charles Kelly and Alan Bonds take a peaceful lunchtime cruise through the hills of Marin County, California. Kelly is co-founder of Mountain Bikes and is, as he puts it, "the world's foremost authority on the world's smallest sport."







(Top left) More and more women are discovering the exhilaration of off-road racing, dispelling the myth that it is only a sport for males who have laid aside their motorcycles and BMX bikes. These three women seem to be enjoying themselves as they dice wheel-to-wheel along the American River near Sacramento, California. (Top right) The warm fall colors of the changing Aspen trees paint an inviting portrait in Crested Butte, Colorado. (Spread) The nation's premier mountain bike event is the Crested Butte to Aspen Klunker Ride, which assaults the 13,000-foot Pearl Pass in western Colorado. About 150 enthusiasts make the annual two-day trek, which climbs and drops through some of the most beautiful countryside in America. Under normal circumstances, this trail would be rideable, but the rarified air at 12,500 feet makes even minor efforts seem monumental.

to the stock European ten-speed racing bikes. Balloon tire bikes were cast aside.

In the early '70s, the "klunkers" could be picked up for \$5.00 and were only considered for a quick spin to the corner market. They paled beside the stylish racing bicycles.

But 25 miles north of San Francisco, where the Redwood Highway winds through the small towns of Marin County and hundreds of miles of trails and fireroads criss-cross the rolling pasture lands and heavily-wooded hillsides, the klunker began to reappear.

FIRST RUNS

Marin County is a bicycle-oriented community and boasts a lopsided number of top framebuilders and bicycle racers. They found their sleek Italian racing machines worked great on a 70-mile training ride, but for picking up a carton of milk and a dozen eggs, they were worthless. Klunkers were used as utility bikes.

At the same time, local motorcyclists were thrown off the fireroads by county authorities and they turned to klunkers out of necessity.

The "Canyon Gang," a group of riders living at the base of the mountains, would take their one-speed klunkers by the truckload to the summit and blast home down the fireroads.

One colorful local named George apparently made at least one run a day for a full year, only stopping to scratch a mark in a water tank on the way down. George spent all his money on gas to get to the top and rode the worst of bikes, but he tried all makes and figured out which frames worked best.

The local road racers caught on and began

to make improvements on their bikes. Gary Fisher managed to attach the first derailleur and freewheel, giving his klunker multi-speed capabilities. The race for improvement was on.

Marin off-road pioneer Charles Kelly points out that if you set your klunker next to your Italian bike and didn't get a million ideas for improvements, you simply weren't looking. One framebuilder, Joe Breeze, was looking very closely, taking the feedback from the Canyon Gang as well as from his own testing efforts to determine that the early Schwinn Excelcior (1935-41) frame geometry best handled the demands of off-road riding. Breeze duplicated the relationships of wheelbase, bottom-bracket height and tube angles, using modern straight chrome-moly tubing. The result was the first successful custom off-road bike. Others showed immediate interest including framebuilder Tom Ritchey, who together with Gary Fisher and Charles Kelly founded Mountain Bikes. Their company's name has since become generic to the sport.

The '80s have seen mass-produced off-road bikes introduced by most major bicycle manufacturers, both foreign and domestic. Cyclists are discovering these new pathfinders in increasing numbers, and off-road events and organizations (see accompanying story on NORBA) are being created to further promote the sport.

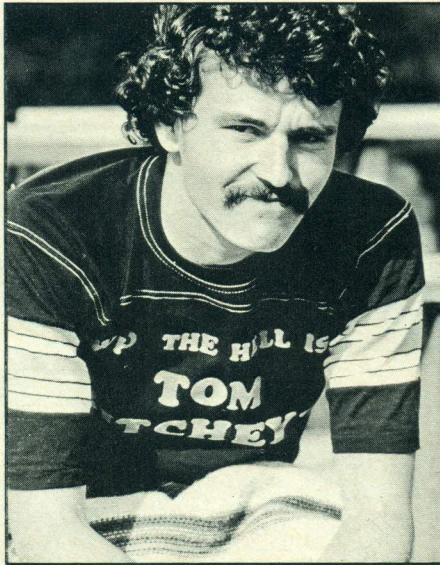
THE MAIN EVENTS

In 1976, Charles Kelly and Fred Wolf stumbled upon a Marin County fireroad that drops 1,300 feet in just two miles, unquestionably the steepest dirt section in that area. Named "Repack" (after blasting down the hill, the grease in the then popular coaster brakes literally went up in smoke, requiring a repack), the descent stands as the ultimate in California klunking.

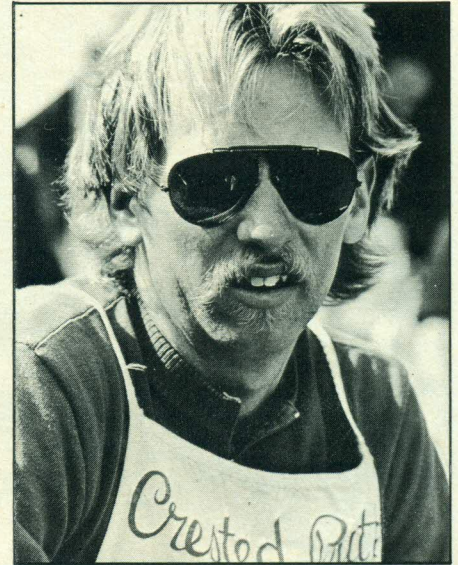
Solo time trials, similar to ski racing, where riders make runs against the clock, have established a course record for Repack (Gary Fisher currently holds the title at 4 minutes, 22 seconds), and breaking into the sub-five minute bracket has become a Northern California klunker obsession. Few have accomplished it, and the experts have memorized each turn on the course.

America's premier mountain bike conquest, however, is the Crested Butte to Aspen Klunker Ride, an epic gathering of well over 100 of the sport's aficionados. The goal of the

Tom Ritchey has been called the "General Motors" of framebuilders, but you'll find no "Body by Fischer" here. Ritchey's designs are state-of-the-art. Also a strong rider, the tall, slender Ritchey had a very successful run at road racing before his passion for the mountain bike. His lifestyle blends perfectly with the sport; he lives with his wife and baby in a log cabin-style home he built himself in Northern California.



Don Cook (pictured), along with his brother Steve, are two of the best riders in Crested Butte, Colorado. Both are also among America's finest telemark snow skiers.

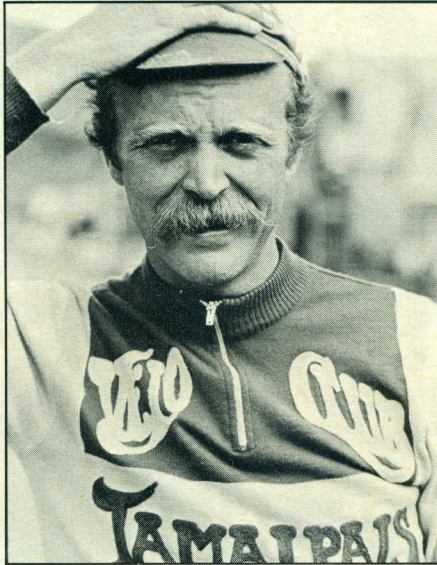


Flanked by the stark, white aspens, Wende Cragg and Denise Caramagno take to the trail to watch the sunset in the Rocky Mountains.

Denise Caramagno is the editor of the *FAT TIRE FLYER*, a magazine devoted entirely to fat tire bikes and events. Caramagno rides frequently around her home in Marin County, California, and is also a top competitor.



Gary Fisher is legendary in off-road circles. He is credited with attaching the first freewheel to a cruiser bike to give his mountain machine full-gear capabilities. Fisher is a co-founder of Ritchey Mountain Bikes, and is a spokesman for the young sport. A former Category 1 road racer, Fisher currently holds the course record for several off-road events.



Marin County framebuilder Joe Breeze, known for his meticulous craftsmanship, is a pioneer in this fast-growing sport. Breeze sells a limited number of bikes of his own design, known as the "Breezer."



Although infrequent, flats will obviously occur, so a patch kit is absolutely necessary, and a spare tube can be handy. On this trip, six bikers got flats after riding over the same exposed nail on a horseshoe.

two-day trek is to reach the 12,700-foot summit at Pearl Pass, but the fun, camaraderie and breathtaking scenery steals the show. The first day's ride to the campsite at 11,000 feet covers 18 miles while climbing about 2,000 feet. It is ridden at a leisurely pace with plenty of time to absorb the fall colors of the changing Aspen trees. Once in camp, riders set up tents before enjoying the four kegs of beer cooling in a nearby stream.

After breakfast the next morning, the gear is

loaded into trucks to be taken back to Crested Butte and the riders start off on a spectacular journey. The road to Pearl Pass gains 1,700 feet in the 3 1/2 miles from the campsite, an average slope of 10 percent over very rough terrain. The rarified air and rock-strewn trail reduces the pace to a crawl; many cyclists take over two hours to reach the summit.

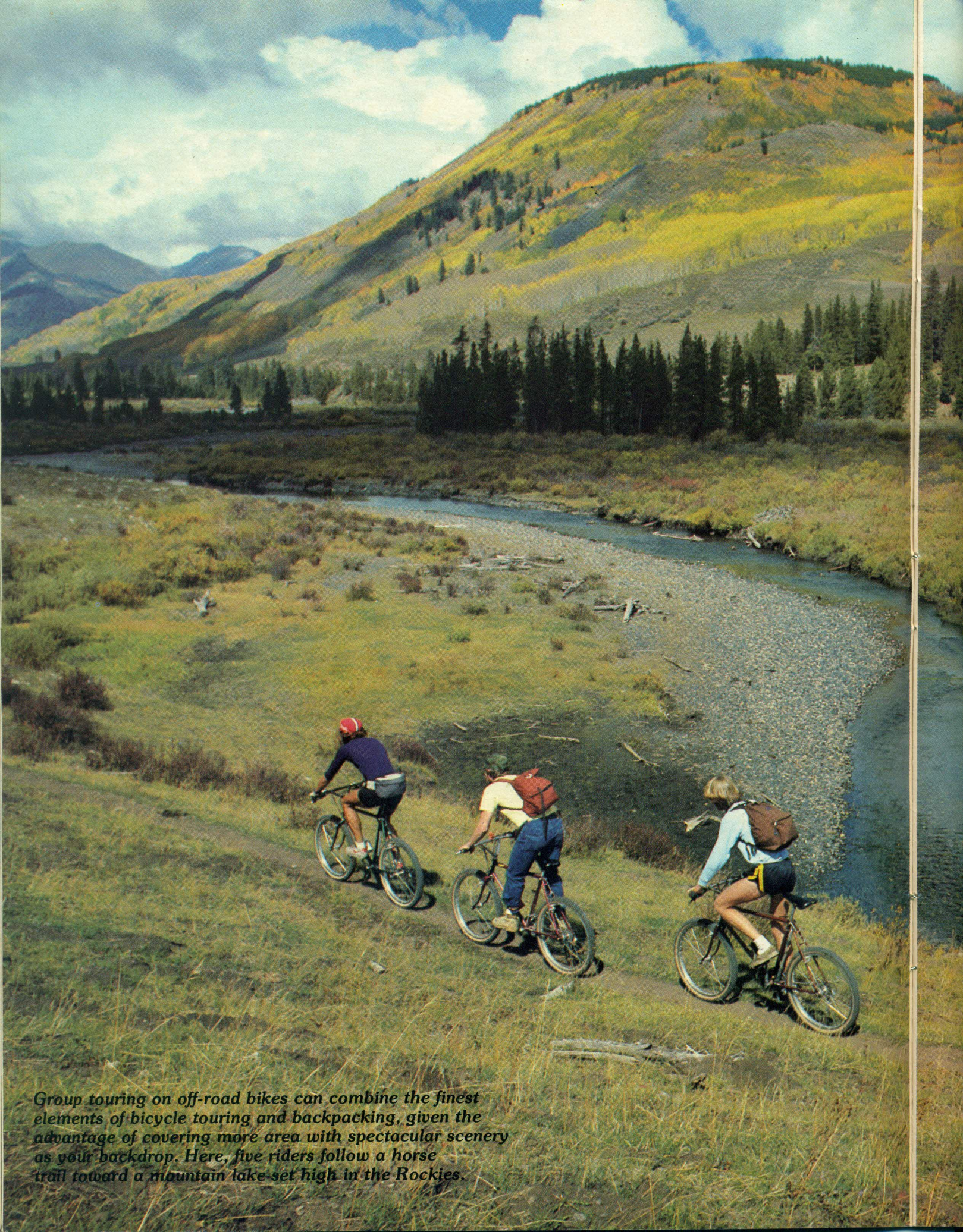
The descent into Aspen offers a rare opportunity to travel over what has to be the worst road in the country. Boulders, ranging in

size from bathtubs to watermelons, cover the trail, and as visiting riders from Marin County put it, "It's like being hooked up to a paint shaker for an hour." For anyone who's ever ridden that road, that's an understatement!

After a bone-jarring ride that tests your bike's handling ability to the limit, you will find the paved road into Aspen and the subsequent watering hole — The Hotel Jerome, where beer awaits your arrival — a welcome relief. Tired and sore, you feel exhilarated nonetheless knowing that you have just accomplished what nobody had even considered 15 years ago.

As the sport gains momentum, the unthinkable will be the norm. But whether you are taking chances in the wilderness or making a trip to the store, fat tires are here to stay.

As Charlie Kelly puts it, "Who knows, by the mid-'80s, you will probably be lining up to see a movie entitled "The Man Who Klunked Down Everest." ☛



Group touring on off-road bikes can combine the finest elements of bicycle touring and backpacking, given the advantage of covering more area with spectacular scenery as your backdrop. Here, five riders follow a horse trail toward a mountain lake set high in the Rockies.

