

MOUNTAIN BIKE TENDERFOOT

By Gary Preuss

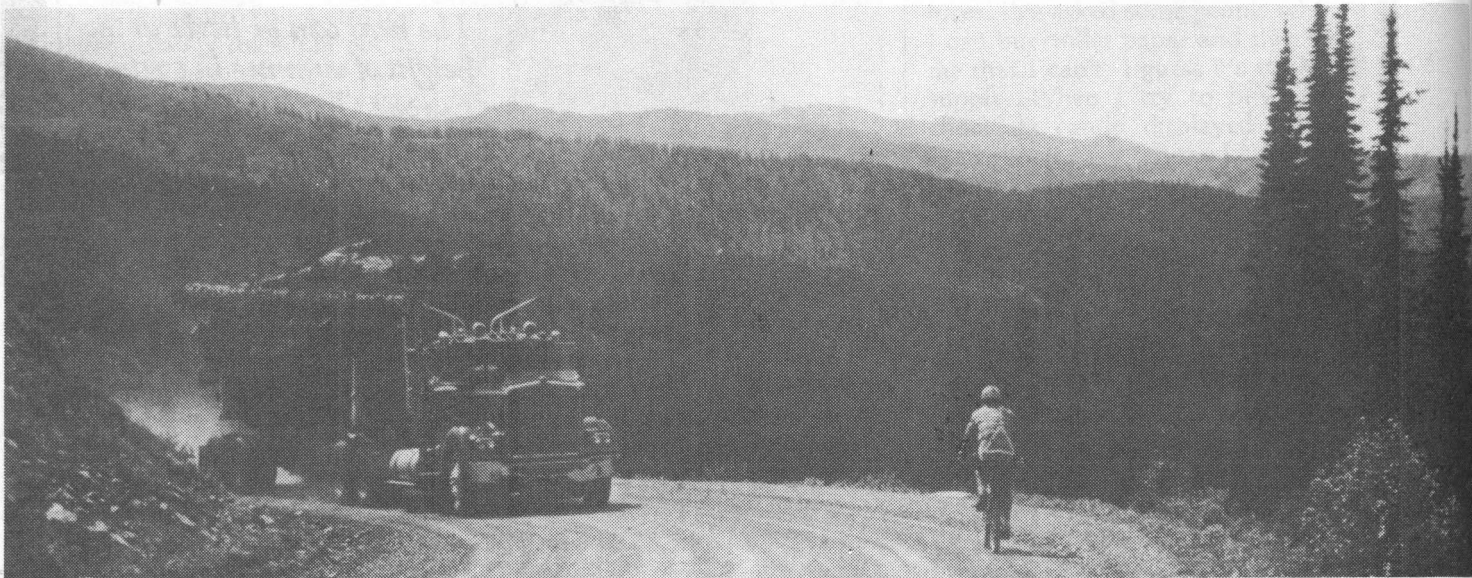


Above: Construction closes a forest road to motor vehicles, but not to mountain bikes.

Below: Cresting Hoodoo Pass on the Montana-Idaho border, we passed a logging truck, one of the few vehicles encountered on these remote roads.

For this past summer, Bikecentennial organized a new mountain-bike tour they christened "Lewis and Clark Ruff Stuff": eight days of bicycling "remote packed gravel forest roads and trails through the best mountain and river country in western Montana and Idaho." At first, I was uneasy about the prospect of subjecting myself to rough terrain on an unfamiliar mountain bike. My bicycling experience over the past couple of years had been limited to flatland commuting. But the lure of taking a bicycle tour through remote high-country with a minimum of competition from automobiles was too much temptation to be denied.

When I arrived in Missoula, Montana, and



Photos by Stuart Crook



Ruff Stuffers wait for pizza and dutch oven brownies at Rocky Ridge Lake Camp in Montana.

narrow trails we rode. Instead, a shuttle truck followed our route as closely as possible, carrying our personal effects, as well as cooking gear and great quantities of food. Consequently, this year's "Ruff Stuff" tour was not an ideal choice for someone hoping to pedal away several pounds of flab during his or her bike trip. We shared hor d'oeuvres and wine every evening and feasted on pizza, chili, and spaghetti, as well as strawberry cheesecake, chocolate walnut pudding, and even homemade huckleberry ice cream. Our tour leader, Stuart Crook, and shuttle truck driver, Don Lange, insured that we were well fed.

The day after arriving back in Midland, Texas, I jumped on my commuter bike and was immediately startled by how rigid the high pressure tires felt. I could no longer hit rocks and holes with near abandon. A stump which

straddled a mountain bike for the first time I was reminded of a cross between a bicycle and a longhorn bull. The handlebar grips are nearly twice as far apart as those on a standard 12-speed.

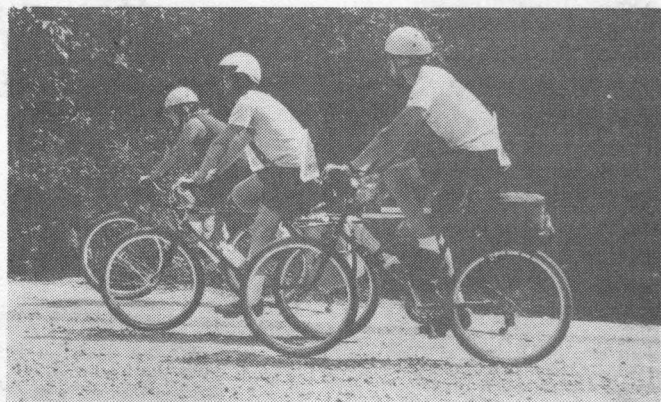
But touring in the backroad wilderness proved the wisdom of the mountain bike's design. The 24" handlebar width helped me immensely in keeping my balance while barreling down rocky roads. Although some of the isolated trails were full of rocks, holes, and branches, no one suffered a flat tire or broken spoke throughout the entire trip. The mountain bike's fat tires, with 25 to 30 p.s.i. pressure, responded to the jar of a cattleguard the way my commuter bike reacts to a few cracks in the pavement. In fairness to Bikecentennial's route planning, most of the roads we followed were hardpacked and smooth, but the condition of a few made me question

whether anyone had passed this way since Lewis and Clark trekked through in 1805-1806.

The exciting advantage of mountain-bike touring is that it allows you to escape the worry of sharing the road with automobiles, leaving you to concentrate on the sights and sounds of your surroundings. Although we occasionally met a logging truck on the wider roads, there were some days when we encountered no vehicles other than our provisions truck. Wise or not, we biked all over the roads, enjoying the quiet freedom of a secluded wilderness.

Occasionally, we startled a deer, sending it bouncing ahead of us on the trail. We also surprised a moose or two. We saw numerous plant species which varied with our elevation. One butterfly decided to hitch a ride on my rack pack for several miles. Because of the wet spring and summer in the area, a collec-

tion of more obnoxious insects accompanied us as well. Our trek through the high ridges of the Clearwater National Forest in northern Idaho was so sequestered from the "real world" that the first stop sign I encountered after several days in the wilderness



seemed to be an unforgivable intrusion.

Despite the isolation, the Lewis and Clark Ruff Stuff tour was not a primitive adventure. The tour leaders had decided against carrying panniers and sleeping bags on the mountain bikes because of the steep and often

would hardly have been felt on the mountain bike might now send me sailing over the handlebars. I missed the reckless freedom of riding in the mountains.

I may get over it. But, more likely, I'll have to start saving up for another Ruff Stuff tour. ☺