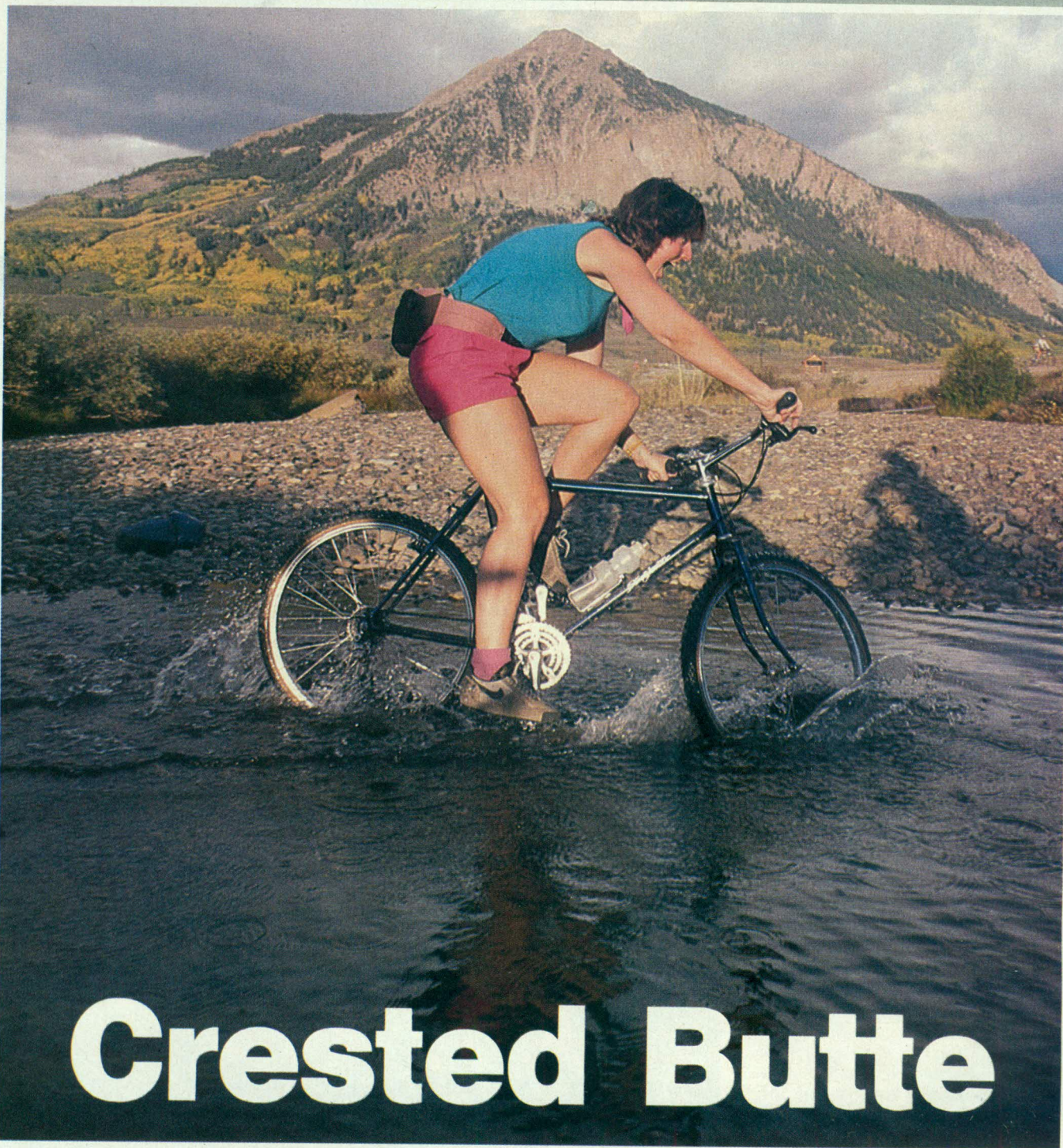


MOUNTAINBIKES



Crested Butte

Is the party over?

JANET TAMARO joins the crowds at the cradle of mountainbike legend, and develops a bad case of the post-pioneer blues...

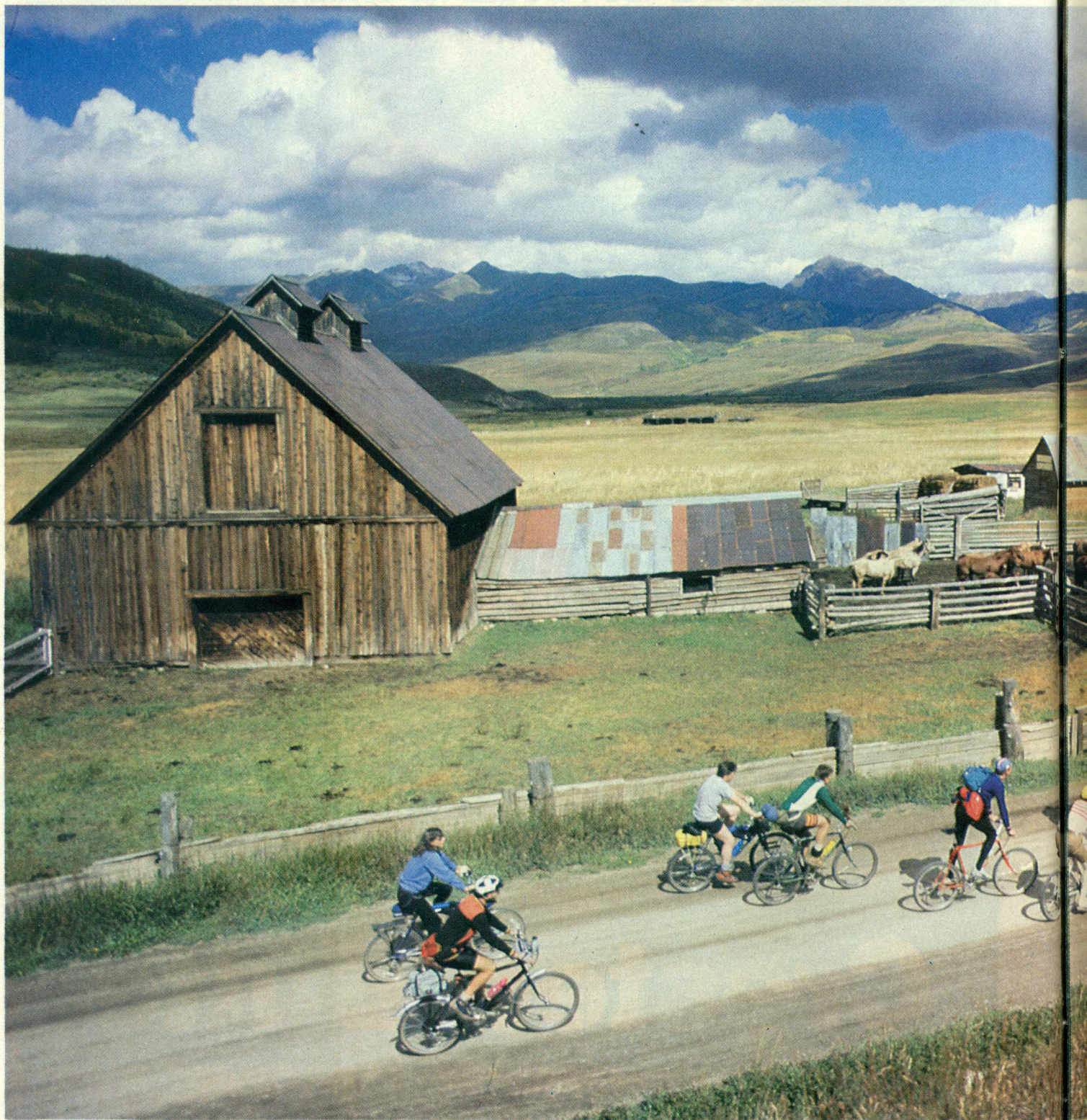
NOT long after I discovered mountain bikes, someone told me about Crested Butte. I'd never even heard of the town, but just mentioning its odd name to anyone who rides off road is enough to evoke a reverie about this tiny mountainbike Mecca in the Colorado Rocky Mountains.

Ahhh, yes! Crested Butte with its peacock blue sky, snow-capped peaks

and brilliant yellow aspen trees. For eight years now, it's been the emotional touchstone for California mountainbikers, their second home after Marin County, California. Its romantic hippy history has evolved into folklore, and anyone who has made the pilgrimage waxes nostalgic about it.

I don't know what I expected when I decided to go to the annual Fat Tire week

this year, but in a lot of ways I've missed the boat. It's like going to see a great band long after they've been engulfed in the mass market; everyone you know remembers them when they used to play at the neighbourhood club, but the first time you see them is in a stadium full of people. Not that Crested Butte's scenery is a disappointment. The wind is crisp and the air smells of clean damp earth. But the



camaraderie, or rather the extended family I had expected to find, isn't to be had anymore.

It's a huge chore to get to the Butte even if you come by plane. After flying into Denver, a tiny ten-seater will fly you through the turbulent Rocky Mountain air to Gunnison, a town about 40 miles away from Crested Butte. It's inaccessibility has protected it from the wealthy ski bums, who flock to Vail and Aspen and have gradually turned these mountain towns into a cross between the Swiss Alps and the French Riviera. Though still beautiful, the money that has floated into them has made them top heavy with

boutiques and trendy restaurants.

Unfortunately, this might be the fate of Crested Butte because a major airline will be flying directly to Gunnison in 1986, but for now Crested Butte doesn't

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Joe Breeze

seem that far removed from its origins. It was settled at the end of the 19th century

by immigrants who came to mine silver. Laundry swings in front of clapboard houses, and old Chevy's line the streets. It wasn't until last year that the town finally boasted paved roads.

Writer Charlie Kelly, Gary Fisher of Fisher Mt. Bikes, and framebuilder Joe Breeze along with ten others from California first made the trek to C.B. in 1978. Those were the days when most people were riding one-speed cruisers up mountain trails, and the Californians made a splash when they showed up with their 'high-tech' equipment - rebuilt Schwinn Excelsior X models.

It was a glorified bar hop in the old



Horses and bikes contemplate each other up country in the Rockies

and find gold, the three eventually splintered to run their own businesses.

Along the way, Crested Butte has seemed to lose its original magic for those that have come year after year. Like the old familiar watering hole you and all your buddies hung out in at college, time changes things. Going back to C.B. now is a little like trying to recreate the atmosphere in that college hangout eight years after graduation. Everyone's married, has babies or, worst of all, gotten rich. The old chumminess that you felt with each other has been replaced by the pressures of the 'real world' and it's not quite as easy to just kick back and swig beer.

Mountainbiking has grown steadily into a fat tire empire, and the town of Crested Butte is filled with competing factions. 'There's no camaraderie anymore,' said one man who has come for five years. 'Everyone's split off into different camps. All the teams are out on training rides, so you don't get the chance to ride with anyone any more.'

I used to know them all. I partied with them all. Now there are hundreds here and people are so serious about racing.

Charlie Kelly

Kelly, because of his role as a pioneer, is a celebrity of sorts in town, but even that status doesn't erase the wistful look from his face when he comments: 'I used to know 'em all, I partied with 'em all...but now, there are megahundreds here...and people are so serious about racing.'

Even the annual Pearl Pass Tour, an assault on a tortuous peak that rises into the thin mountain air for 13,000 feet, was something of a disappointment this year. The two-day trek has been turned into a one-day stint, presumably because no one has the time to devote to a full two-days anymore.

The tales I'd heard of parking by the side of a stream with a group and taking a breather until everyone had caught up are part of a legend that I guess I'll never see.

Joe Breeze, who in many ways has eschewed the big bike business and remained an independent framebuilder, understands the conflicting desires that those who've turned their avocation into a vocation must feel. 'I think all of the new equipment, money in the industry, and people getting involved in riding, is great'. As he said this he ran his hands along the glistening handlebar of the 'Breezer' he'd built and sighed as he finished: 'I guess though, I had the best time riding on my '54 Klunker...it was so low key then...so simple.' ☺

days; a chance to get together with riding buddies and speed along steep mountain trails in unspoiled, unconquered land.

They were all mountainbike renegades. Kelly, Fisher, Breeze, Tom Ritchey and others discovered a way to ride through picturesque back-country by modifying old newspaper-boy bikes, and eventually by building their own. They were all friends out looking for a good riding time, and Crested Butte had the same kind of allure for them Disneyland has for children.

Ritchey was a successful road bike builder at the time, and in 1979 Fisher coaxed him into building a mountain bike

for him. In four weeks, Ritchey had built three frames. Fisher and Kelly who were room-mates at the time, took the bikes out for a spin and were so enthused that they persuaded Ritchey to build ten more, in order, said Kelly, 'to make cool bikes and turn the rest of the world on.'

The rest of the world - or at least the rest of the bike world - responded by jumping on the fat tire wagon, and in the fall of 1979, Ritchey, Fisher and Kelly went into business together calling their new venture 'Mountain Bikes'. As their enterprise grew, it outgrew the 'garage' background of its origins, and like so many partners who start out with nothing