

EAST IS EAST

*Tackling The Continental Divide
By Mountain Bike, Part I*

by MIKE MOE

photography by DAN MOE



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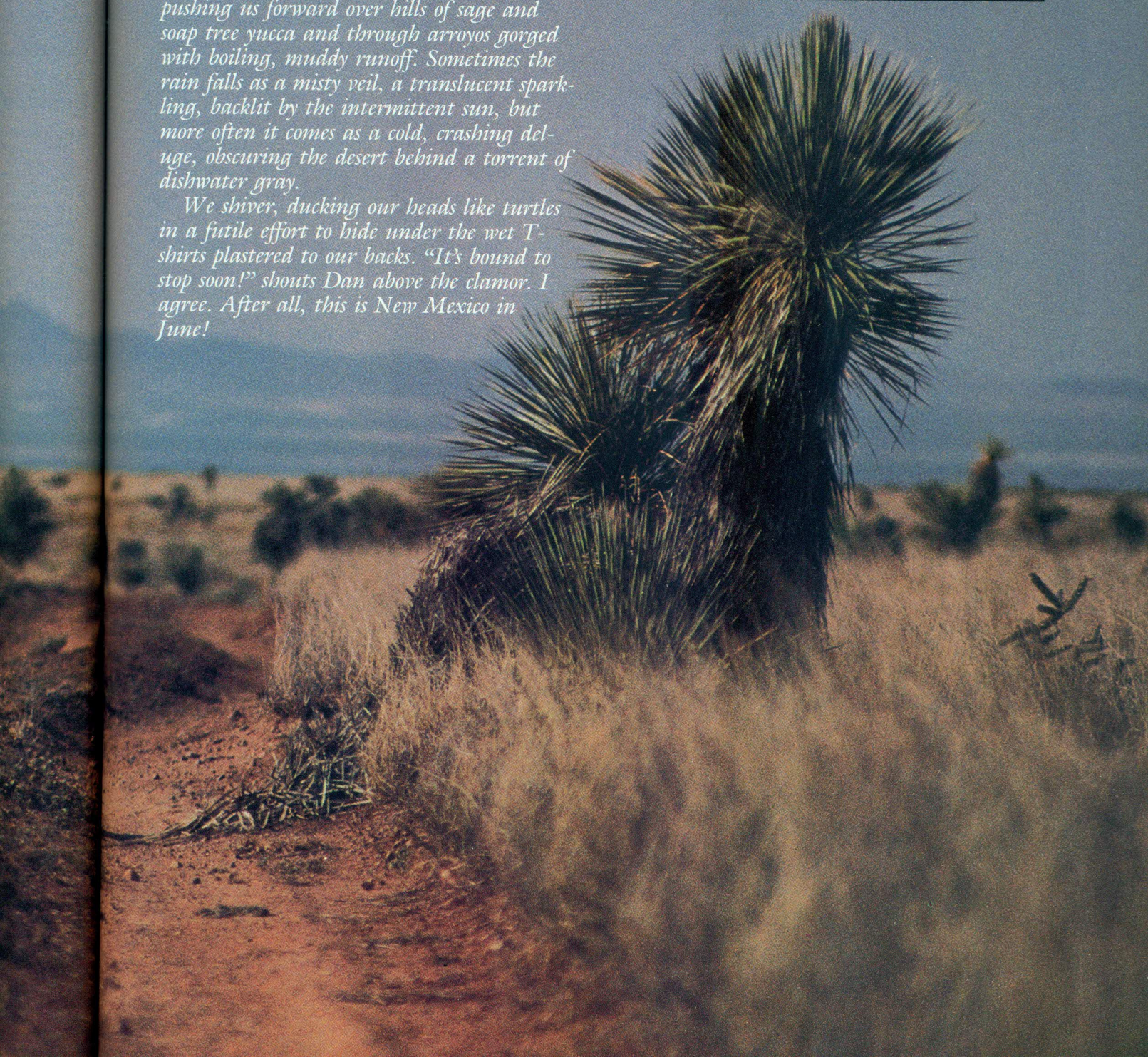
Last summer two brothers may have changed the traditional notion of touring as a highway sport. From June 24 to August 28, 1984, Mike and Dan Moe of Laramie, Wyoming peddled, pushed, coasted and carried bicycles for 2,500 miles, from Mexico to Canada, along the rugged mountain wall of the Continental Divide. Their trek exemplifies an exciting renaissance in touring, that of long-distance mountain biking.

June 24, The Mexican Border

"Hasn't rained since October!" the darkly tanned customs officer laughs as we pedal off into the storm, leaving behind the lonely Antelope Wells border station on the Mexican border. The adventure has begun!

Around us the rain falls in noisy waves, pushing us forward over hills of sage and soap tree yucca and through arroyos gorged with boiling, muddy runoff. Sometimes the rain falls as a misty veil, a translucent sparkling, backlit by the intermittent sun, but more often it comes as a cold, crashing deluge, obscuring the desert behind a torrent of dishwater gray.

We shiver, ducking our heads like turtles in a futile effort to hide under the wet T-shirts plastered to our backs. "It's bound to stop soon!" shouts Dan above the clamor. I agree. After all, this is New Mexico in June!





(Above) Mike, Emily Thomas, Dan, Lester Jackson and "Pop" relax at the Break 21 Cafe in Pie Town, N.M. (Far right) Another dead windmill on the plains of central New Mexico. (Below) The plains of the Gunnison National Forest in Colorado.



June 25, Hatchita, New Mexico

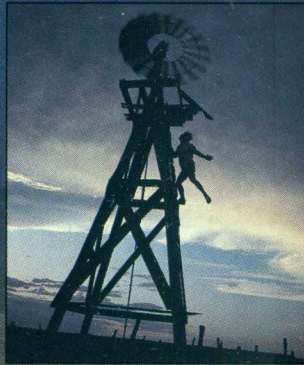
The second siesta of our trip finds us gathered with the locals on the porch of Freddie's Grocery, in the dirt street town of Hatchita. The snake man has stopped off to wet his parched throat. Freddie says that he sells the snakes up north in Albuquerque, but I figure it's only his off-season hobby. He's really a cattle rustler.

The instant he stepped out of his rusty pickup, I knew it. I can tell them. Dark clothes, black cowboy hat (sporting a snakeskin band, of course), and a roll-your-own poking through a shaggy mustache. There was no doubt about

his occupation. I had read enough Louis L'Amour westerns to know.

He caught sight of us right away: two skinny, white-legged fellows eating ice cream bars next to a couple of shiny new bikes. "Wanna see a rattlesnake?" "Sure."

About seven of us watch him untie a dirty canvas bag from a mirror on the truck. "First time I got a red 'un, seven feet long, too," he winks. With every step a dry rattling shakes the big bag, a not-so-polite reminder that someone would rather be shading elsewhere under a cool cactus. As we stepped in for a closer look, the snake man suddenly swung the bag in a circle at us all. I don't believe that I jumped back and yelped like everyone else, but Dan says he didn't either, and I'm sure he did. Peeking into the bag, we discover that the snake is kind of red, more pink really, but as for its being seven feet long, we'll never know. Some people wouldn't trust a cattle rustler enough to let him take it out.







(Left) Mike pedals hard near Rollus Pass, above Winter Park, Colo. (Above) It doesn't look like it, but these were among the hardest miles of the trip—Colorado's San Juan Mountains. (Below right) Andrea and Nancy Sharps joined the Moes for a week. (Below) Dan quenches his thirst in Gila National Forest in New Mexico.



June 28, Black Range

Not all of our travel through New Mexico is along the desert plains. About half of New Mexico's Divide is above 7,000 feet. Today, we cycled up into the Black Range, a land of tall evergreens, cool springs and beautiful canyons.

The people along this high Divide suit the land well. In Pinos Altos ('high pines'), we meet Tina Ogden and her 83-year-old mother, Chalela Chevas. Both wear the robust good health of the mountain life, and Tina brags of her mother, who speaks no English. "She does all her chores in the old way, won't have no electricity in her adobe-brick home, carries her water up from the stream every day, and can still climb five miles up into the mountains to pick berries . . . oh, and smoking a cigarette all the way up, too!" she proudly adds.

June 30, The Plains of San Agustin

"It's dead!" shouts Dan returning from the stark wooden frame of the distant windmill, "and it's been dead a long time." Silently we dig out our topographic maps and begin to scan them for the next nearest windmill. We are both very thirsty. The temperature is over 100°, and we haven't come across a working windmill since breakfast, six hours ago.

Because we are sticking close to the Divide, away from most towns and roads, the windmills are our lifeline, and we follow a crooked route of cattle drives and ranch roads between them. Most of the windmills indicated on our 'topos' are still pumping water, even though some of the maps date back to



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1917. Interestingly, many of the ranches, and even some of the towns shown have all but blown away over the ensuing years.

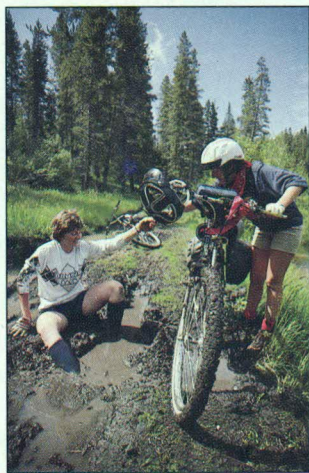
The next windmill is six miles east of here. A road is shown linking us to it, but the road is long gone; it died years ago with this windmill. Dan takes a compass bearing, and we head out into the sea of sagebrush.

July 2, Pie Town, New Mexico

"I would have gone up to Albuquerque to see the torch pass if they'd been givin' out free beer." The orator is Lester Jackson, past proprietor of the Break 21 Cafe where we are watching the Olympics on TV. We had just picked up and packed up our second food drop (from the local post office) and now are hanging around to finish off the two pies we ordered for lunch and to listen to Lester.

"You know, Emily," (Emily is Lester's ex-wife and the current proprietor), "one of these days that old tree is going to come crashing down in a big wind, and the last 15 feet will drop right here on the counter." Dan and I studied the big tree outside the window. We agreed that Lester was pretty close in his calculations.

It is nice to just sit here, relaxed in the pretty little red and white cafe, and take our minds off the miles we still need to cover today. In six days of travel we have already lost 100 miles, according to our schedule. This translates into two very long days on the Divide, and I don't want to think of the exponential possibilities. They conjure up images of ski outriggers on the bikes and dogsled rescues in Montana. But this seems very far away right now. "Re-



member when that drunk drove his jeep through the front window, Emily?"

July 4, Malpais Lava Beds

You can tell just how hardcore a camper is by what he uses for a washcloth. Some greenhorns burden themselves with an actual washcloth, which pounds the scales at about 1.8 ounces. The more experienced will use a towel shared with the dishes. Even more extreme are those questionable sorts who use their dirty, greasy bandana. And at the lowest end of the scale are fanatics who, through a strange twist of ethics, ignorance and pride, carry nothing and use anything.

As I write this, I'm soaking neck deep in the holding tank of a windmill, watching a sparrow bathing on the far rim. My not-much-cleaner clothes are hanging to dry on a wooden plank behind my head, and my little blue washcloth is swinging with the gentle breeze right next to the other sock.

The blood red lava surges of the Malpais bring to life the distant past, when the lava was still hot. How long ago was it, I wonder? Did a grove of palmlike trees, their broad leaves singed and smoking, strain against the cooling



(Left) Muddy going for the Sharps at Roosevelt National Forest in Colorado. (Above) The desolate North Plains of Central New Mexico.

lava, just 20 yards in front of me? And what curious mammals or reptiles crept back through the lush underbrush to investigate the wall of fiery rock that had so recently driven them from their homes? I wish we had the time to explore this frozen mural of history, but our siesta is over, and we need to press on toward the next food pickup in Chama.

July 5, Cibola National Forest

To avoid the hot sun, we usually rise early and are on the trail by 6:30 A.M. Aside from being the most serene hours of the day, this is also a great time to see wildlife.

The more common animals we have encountered include desert hares, mule deer, antelope and coyotes. We have been lucky enough to spot circling golden eagles, tree a porcupine, and catch the early morning stroll of a family of peccaries (hoglike mammals).

This morning, while biking through a thick stand of ponderosa pine, Dan was nearly run down by six elk who thundered across his path in a disoriented stampede.

New Mexico's less charming creatures are active throughout the day. We've shaken spiders and

ants out of our boots in the mornings and spit out who knows what during long downhill glides. While pushing our bikes along a sandy riverbed, we were startled by a large wasp carrying an equally large paralyzed wolf spider home for the kids. Back in the Gila National Forest, we had the good fortune of finding a tarantula on my panniers after a rest break.

July 9, Colorado

A hot and sweaty climb led us up to a high knob on the ridge. Once there, we were greeted by the long-awaited sight: a slate blue mountain range in the distance. These are the mighty San Juans of Colorado. A half-circle of jagged peaks rise one upon the other, their treeless heights glistening with summer snowfields, and their valleys lush with cool stands of pine and aspen. For us, this is the epitome of the Continental Divide.

Dan and I have little doubt that these will be the hardest miles of our entire journey, even though we must avoid part of the San Juans because of wilderness designation. (All mechanical transportation is prohibited.) Despite this, we are excited to finally reach the "Colorado High Country."

July 17, Chaulk Creek Pass

Even though we carry three different sets of maps, we sometimes find our-

selves facing a stretch of country without any type of trail or road. Some people might view this as a real headache; we prefer to see it as "the charm of the Divide."

This is the case up to Chaulk Creek Pass, and this is mountain biking in its truest form. The jeep road ends in a marsh, so we pick the straightest shot across it and post out in lowest gear. The rule is to not stop in the mush and high grass, as you can't get started again. Of course, you do stop occasionally. At times, the tires and chains jam up with mud and grass. Once out of the marsh, you get halted by branches in the derailleurs, downed trees or slopes so steep that you just have to dismount and push the bikes up them.

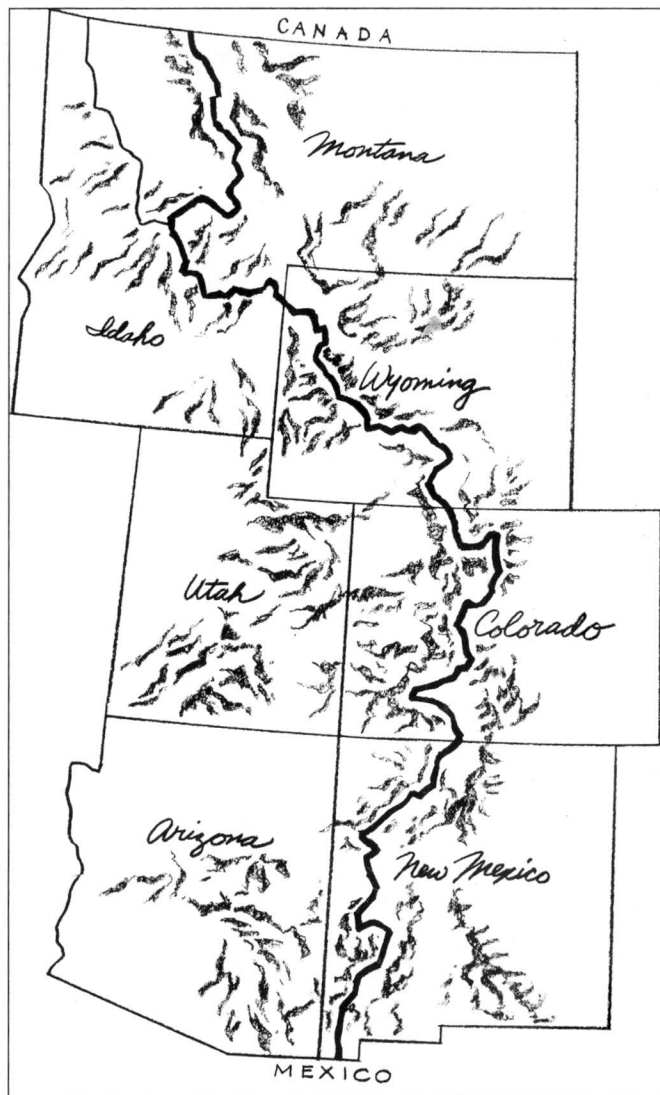
This type of biking is usually very slow. We carry the bikes over talus slopes, ride through shoulder-high willows, plunge back and forth across a stream, and finish the pass pushing up a steep snowfield. Here we average only about two miles an hour. I have a friend who could fish up Chaulk Creek faster than that.

July 18, Tincup Pass

A steep snowfield still blocks the jeep road over the top of Tincup Pass. The snow drops away at a 35 percent angle to the valley floor, so Dan and I set our tires in the footprints of previous hikers and carefully traverse the snow, kicking steps for our own path. Once across, we have to look back and laugh: What will the next group of hikers think of the narrow bike tracks across the steep snow?

July 26, Blue Ridge

Have you ever noticed that as the weather changes, one's temperament changes as well? Whether the mountain skies are gray and stormy, or sunny and



map by Ron McKee

colorful, our moods often seem to reflect the change like a barometer.

An icy rain dogged us from our food pickup in Grand Lake, Colorado, up the dwindling series of logging roads toward Blue Ridge on the Divide. As dusk fell, the two faint ruts we were following disappeared, and we headed on in, battling thick timber, trying to continue up to the ridge on game trails. When we finally rolled to a stop last night, we were all cold, scratched, dead tired—and not very enthusiastic about continuing onto the Blue Ridge.

This morning, when we poked our heads out of the tents, we were greeted by one of the most beautiful days of the entire trip. A sharp flank still separated

us from the Blue Ridge trail. It's too steep to ride, or even push the bikes; so, we ferry up our gear, joking about the Divide wearing out our Nikes before our tires.

Here on top, the azure sky, warm sun and striking panorama of the surrounding peaks—from Rocky Mountain National Park southeast of us to Wyoming's Sierra Madres—rekindle our enthusiasm and remind us why we came up here: to get a good tan!

July 28, Leaving Andrea and Nancy

From camp up on Rabbit Ears Pass it was a 15-mile race through the bracing morning air, down into Steamboat Springs. Today, Andrea and Nancy would end their week with us and

head back home to Laramie, Wyoming.

We cruised into civilization and straight to the local crepe shop to enjoy our last breakfast together. Between bites, we laughingly recalled the past week's adventures: the four of us crowding into a two-person tent to escape the rain during dinners, Nancy catapulting off her bike into a deep mud puddle, the spectacular view from Blue Ridge, and roasting marshmallows in a gentle rain.

This week has been great fun, and Dan and I will really miss the enthusiastic camaraderie.

July 29, Wyoming

We were crashing down a shadow-dappled path in the Sierra Madres, concentrating on avoiding log-size roots and large rocks, when we shot past a torn, white notice tacked to a tree. "Wyoming!" I shouted. We both skidded to a dusty stop and backed up to check out the sign.

Crossing into Wyoming marks the halfway point of our journey north to Canada. Once, several weeks ago, we had talked about Wyoming like it was months away. Now, enjoying lunch under the notice, it seemed that the miles had passed too quickly, that we had not had enough time to sufficiently explore Colorado. I guess there is truth in this: The more you know of the mountains, the more you find of them there is to know.

Ahead of us rises over 1,200 miles of the Divide. We guess that it will take us a month to cover the distance, in which time we will cycle across some of the most dramatic environmental zones in America, including the windswept Great Divide Basin, the volcanic plateau of Yellowstone and the ever snowy ramparts of Glacier National Park. **BR**