

CRESTED BUTTE 40 YEARS ON

Charlie Kelly and Joe Breeze retrace one of the most important rides in mountain bike history, 1978's Pearl Pass tour.

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In 1978, a small group of early 'mountain bikers' rode over the 12,000ft Pearl Pass in Colorado. That event, and those riders, went on to permanently affect our nascent sport. Now, 40 years later, mountain bike pioneers Charlie Kelly, Joe Breeze and a handful of friends went up to re-enact it.

In 1978 I joined my Marin County friends Joe Breeze, Gary Fisher, Mike Castelli and Wende Cragg on an expedition to Colorado for the ride from Crested Butte to Aspen. We thought we would meet people just like us, but were shocked to find that it was just a bunch of folks with town bikes who had taken them over Pearl Pass on a one-time lark, and had no plans to do it again.

They had no plans, that is, until we showed up with fancy hand built bikes and even a girl who rode them. With local pride on the line, a ride was put together on a few days' planning. The 1978 Crested Butte to Aspen ride launched Crested Butte into the forefront of Colorado mountain biking, and the sport took over the town.

For the next ten years or so I trekked out annually to Crested Butte [pronounced 'bute' – Ed] for the ride, but then life, marriage, and a family took priority.

Tommy and Joe Breeze. And a thirties Schwinn Excelsior.



INTERNATIONAL ADVENTURE



Returning to the scene.

Four decades later I was invited to celebrate that milestone with another trip over the top to mark the anniversary. It was tough enough when I was 40 years younger and raced bicycles, so I declined. My friend Joe Breeze accepted the invitation, along with his son Tommy, and the pressure on me to attend ratcheted up. Promoter Austin Weaver asked how much the airline ticket was and when I told him, that amount arrived in my PayPal account within minutes.

So on September 7, I joined Joe and Tommy on the flight to Denver and the drive to Crested Butte, where Joe and I received a royal welcome as the only relics from the 1978 ride.

The ride was scheduled to leave Crested Butte the next morning and as I joined the crowd, someone asked me what bike I was riding. "Beats me, I'm just here." Joe had the use of a full suspension Yeti and Tommy had agreed to take a 1935 Schwinn. In the mountain bike capital of Colorado, suddenly people were scrambling to find me a bike. Jim Harlow, who had joined us on the 1981 ride, said he had an extra bike, and produced... the worst P.O.S. bicycle I have ever stepped over, a period-perfect 1981 Ross 'Diamond Cruiser' - \$160 when it was new and now a loooong way from new. This wasn't even worthy of the original town bikes from the 1978 ride,

and light years from the expensive full suspension, disc braked Breezer Repack that is my normal ride.

But I'm a good sport and I was there, so I figured at the least I could ride it up to the camp 18 miles and 2,000 feet of elevation away. I was doing all right, keeping up with the back end of the ride, until the first minor descent. My ride was equipped with wimpy caliper brakes, and the frame was actually a modified cheap road bike widened for the bigger tires. This was not even the worst part of the track, and the short wheelbase made the bike uncontrollable. It didn't have brakes either. Hauling on the levers with all my strength barely slowed it down at all. I kept waiting for one of the 35-year-old brake cables to pop.

And this was the easy part of the trail, no worse than what I ride on at home. The road ahead had some of the most challenging terrain ever ridden by mountain bikers. I'm not a quitter and pretty tough for my advanced age of 72, but this machine had 'serious injury' written all over it. I rode and pushed most of the way to the camp, 18 miles out of Crested Butte, but when the sag wagon caught up, I threw in the towel and put the bike on the back for the last couple of miles. From that point on I was a passenger.





Time for a reunion.

The 1978 Pearl Pass ride had only 13 people. The next ten years saw the crowds grow until they overwhelmed the route and the supply system. Over the following decades the annual ride dwindled from the mountain bike equivalent of Burning Man into a ceremonial event with just a few hardcore attendees. 2018 marked the 40th anniversary of the original ride, and it was celebrated by the klunker crowd. This event included Joe and me, the only participants from the 1978 ride, along with a few veterans of '80s tours. Add a few people living a dream of going over Pearl Pass on whatever equipment they brung with some guys they had read about for a long time, and the group barely outnumbered the 1978 participants.

On my first trip over Pearl Pass, I found that someone had carved my initials into an aspen tree at a place where riders took a break. It's not anything I would do, but there it was – 'CK' carved into the bark years before I ventured past. I started adding tally marks underneath them every time I passed for the next few years. I was surprised to see the tree was still there and that the initials had not changed, although the tree had healed its bark from my tally marks. At that location the support drivers had conveniently left a cooler full of ice cream sandwiches and other snacks.

In a group that small, you can get to know the others. I already knew the crusty guys who had done it with me in the '80s, but there was a new crowd joining us, just as crusty but a lot younger, most mounted on equipment that was, in some respects, even more primitive than what I'd ridden 40 years

earlier. One speed. Coaster brakes. Tommy Breeze's borrowed bike didn't even have a front brake.

The camp was already set up by the time I rolled into it riding in the shotgun seat of a Jeep. Folding chairs were assembled around a fire pit, the cooking area had been organised, and Jim Harlow's guitar was being passed around among the three of us who could play it. I got a generational lesson when I played a song and one of the other guitar players said: "That's a great song. Who wrote it?"

"The Beatles. Maybe you have heard of them. Paul McCartney's band before he was famous..."

Dinner came in the form of camping food, dried tikka masala in foil pouches heated in a big pot of boiling water. At this rarefied altitude, you can stick your hand in boiling water, but the food was at least a little warmer than the ambient temperature and by then most of us were ready to eat roots and insect larvae. Give the guy who boiled the water however many Michelin stars he wants.

One of the riders had taken a little acid for the occasion. He sat near the fire, shirtless and barefoot, wearing a towel over his head and grooving to whoever was playing the guitar. He was friendly, but conversations with him were not always... linear. The dude didn't have a tent or a sleeping bag; all he had was a blanket. He heated a big rock in the fire, wrapped his blanket around it and curled up around his rock for the night. In my tent I could hear the rain but the only thing that got wet were my socks, which I'd foolishly left outside the tent.



Damp socks at 12,705ft.

In the morning I found that the dry socks I had brought somehow hadn't made it into my gear, so I had to dry my only pair next to the fire while breakfast was cooking. My white socks took on the colour of a perfectly roasted marshmallow but they were dry and warm, though maybe a little stiff when I put them back on. Breakfast was bacon and eggs and Harley Parson had brought an espresso pot that made coffee strong enough to ride its own bike. Several riders set aside bacon that they planned to cover in foil and wrap around their coaster brake hubs to cook on the way down from the pass.

Even though I no longer had a bike to use, my presence at the top of Pearl Pass was required for ceremonial purposes so I hopped into the Jeep with the support driver and we followed most of the riders to the top. The road over Pearl is a challenge for four-wheelers, and drivers actually come from flatter parts of the United States to test their machines and their driving skill. Despite the remote location there is a steady stream of traffic in the form of four-wheelers and motorcycles, three or

four an hour while we were on the trail.

Joe Breeze is younger and a lot tougher than I am and he had been here before on much more primitive equipment, but it was all he could do to get his borrowed Yeti to the top. If I had anything useful to ride, I might have accepted the challenge myself, but I was off the hook for it and seeing how my friends Marc Horwitz and Joe were suffering, I was glad I had been denied the opportunity.

Once we reached the site of one of the most iconic photos in mountain bike history we hung out for an hour as stragglers arrived and those already there celebrated the occasion. I'd never expected to be there again – and at 12,700 feet of elevation, it's the highest place I have ever stood.

I was surprised to see the acid camper at the top of the pass. By now he had put on shoes and a shirt... and a full-face helmet. The guy who didn't bring a sleeping bag had brought the most expensive bike on that mountain. It was clear that he knew how to ride it and was ready for what lay ahead.



PEARL PASS ROAD

MAINTAINED BY BLUE MESA 4 WHEELERS

GUNNISON COLO.

BIKEM

HAPPY BOTTOM!

BUM BUTTER

FEED ON ARSEHOLES - NOT ANIMALS



Some epic bike-leaning was displayed for eager fans.





Returning to the Butte.

From there the plan was that Joe and Tommy would ride into Aspen, and I would go back to Crested Butte and pick up the rental car to meet them there. Some of the riders were also returning to Crested Butte to pick up their own cars, so my driver and I acted as the sweep vehicle to make sure everyone got back. Even though it is mostly downhill and the surface is better than on the Aspen side of the pass, it was a challenge, especially for one rider who had come from Kansas, where the worst road in the state is better than the one he was on. We stopped several times while riders walked down particularly rough sections. And we stopped to help the Kansas rider fix a flat and made sure he reached the paved road into Crested Butte, then my driver dropped me off and I picked up the rental car to drive to Aspen to pick up Joe and Tommy.

It had taken so long to herd the riders down the hill that it was 4.30 in the afternoon before I left Crested Butte. As short as the distance to Aspen is over the pass, it is well over

a hundred miles by real roads, if 'real roads' include long stretches of gravel over mountain passes. I had a rental SUV and a lot of rough ground to cover and all the incentive I needed to get to Aspen where my friends were waiting. When I got there I asked Tommy to check on his GPS how long it took to cover that distance. He told me that Google Maps gave it as 3:12. I did it in 2:30.

We had dinner and stayed the night, then in the morning celebrated the event with the half-dozen participants still in Aspen. Joe and I jumped back in the rental car for the drive back to Denver Airport. By evening I was back home three days after I left, with yet another amazing mountain bike adventure to tell stories about.

Now and then I feel like I got someone else's share of adventure, because I have had more than any one person deserves. Somewhere there must be a very bored and boring person who never did anything fun, because I got his lifetime supply of it. ■