

A Great Decade on the Great Divide

10 Years After: Still Good for the Spirit by Michael McCoy

In the July 1994 *Adventure Cyclist* — the magazine's name had been changed from *BikeReport* just weeks earlier—we ran a two-page spread, written by yours truly, under the bold headline “Ready for the Longest Mountain Bike Trail in the World?”

“Imagine mountain biking from Canada to Mexico, through some of the most stunning landscapes on earth,” the piece began, “along dirt roads and two-tracks reserved for the occasional fisherman’s rig, Forest Service pickup truck . . . and Adventure Cycling mountain biker.”

In the story, I explained the genesis of our dream, which dated to approximately 1990, of an off-pavement route paralleling the Continental Divide, and why we wanted to make it happen: “Historically, cycling enthusiasts have done one or the other — either loaded up with panniers and camping gear, that is, and lit out on the open road, or headed into the hills on a mountain bike for a day’s ride on dirt. Very few have toured off-pavement carrying a full complement of gear. We want to change that.”

I went on to relate how earlier that year then-executive director Gary MacFadden and I had presented our vision to three top officials with the Northern Region of the U.S. Forest Service and how they’d taken right to the idea. In turn, they contacted dis-

trict rangers throughout western Montana, urging them to help us in any way they could with our plans for mapping Stage 1 of this still-unnamed interstate bicycling route.

But will anybody ride it? I asked myself more than once.



Research buddies. Mike McCoy and Ramsey Bentley (left) on the future route.

We were fond of telling people we intended to carry the route south all the way to Mexico, but we honestly didn’t know how realistic the plan was. Montana would be our testing ground. Being headquartered there, we knew the state well; if we ran into unexpected hurdles in our home territory, we realized we could have even bigger problems in less familiar states. Conversely, we suspected that if a decent route could be pieced together over Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest

Service lands in Montana, chances were that one could be figured out through states to the south as well.

Prior to my work mapping the Great Divide, I had done a lot of road-route research for Bikecentennial/Adventure Cycling. I’d helped map the Northern Tier, Atlantic Coast, Pacific Coast, and other routes. With those, it was always possible to do fairly thorough and accurate advance planning using county road maps and sometimes traffic-flow maps. For the Great

Divide, although maps existed showing the roads and trails we would end up using, I would learn that there were a lot more surprises out there on the ground than on our road routes; much more hit and miss was involved, demanding greater use of the process of elimination.

For example, we initially drew out a route east of the Continental Divide in Montana, through the wild wide-open vistas of the Rocky Mountain Front. An exploratory research trip revealed that this would not work, however, because of some unanticipated private-land access problems. So we returned to the drawing board and started over.

That fall (still 1994), we received a publicity windfall. Personnel at Travel Montana, the state’s tourism promotion agency, had caught wind of what we were now calling the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route (GDMBR). They’d become extremely excited at the prospect, and they believed that national publications would too, so the agency put together a press trip proposal and distributed it to an A-list of potential writers. The results were stunning. With rider-writers (and rider-photographers) in tow from *Outside*, *Bicycling*, *BIKE*, *Men’s Journal*, and *Sports Illustrated*, we pedaled several proposed sections of the still-unmapped route, including the segment passing through the spectacular Centennial Valley in southwest Montana, home to Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The coverage our dream route received in these large-circulation magazines in the aftermath was key to getting the ball rolling.

Serendipity raised its beautiful head again when Flanagan Motors in Missoula decided they’d like to provide us with a brand-new

four-wheel-drive Jeep Cherokee to serve as a research vehicle. Now the ball and the Jeep were rolling, full speed ahead.

Still, the question nagged at me: Will anybody ride it?



Great (Divide) couple. Mike and Nancy McCoy in Wyoming.

My first research trip through the newly determined route corridor west of the Continental Divide took place in mid-June, 1995. The outing dished up an eye-opening array of the sorts of challenges I could expect to face on the long trail to Mexico.

At the Grave Creek/Yakinikak Creek divide in the Whitefish Range, just 36 miles from the route’s beginning point north of Eureka, a pile of avalanche snow and timber debris three to five feet deep stopped me dead in the Jeep’s tracks. The deposit covered only about 20 feet of the roadway, but there was no way to get the Cherokee through it (maddeningly, I could walk from one end to the other in about four seconds). So, I spent the next five hours driving almost 200 miles, much of it on bumpy back roads, to get the Jeep to the other side of that pile of snow!

Then, the very next morning, after camping beside the snowmelt-swollen North Fork of the Flathead River, I barely escaped in a very hard rain. (Although I didn’t know it until the following week, I learned that campers who didn’t get out before the North Fork left its banks later that morning were stranded for three days.) As the deluge continued, I plotted a route through the soaking wet Flathead Valley before climbing back into the mountains.

There the rain turned to snow. Halted by a high-country June blizzard, I bagged it and retreated to Missoula, vowing to return the following week.

Flat tires (on both the Jeep and my Fisher mountain bike), cattle jams, moose and bear encounters, and getting myself temporarily misplaced on a ridge outside Wise River were some of the Montana challenges that followed. But they were merely bumps in the trail; after all, we were off and running!

Later that summer, with the Big Sky State’s 700-mile contribution to the Great Divide in the

bag, I wrote in my “Trail Boss” column in *Adventure Cyclist*: “It doesn’t get any better than this [Montana segment], so I’d be stretching the truth to say that the route will only improve as we continue into Idaho and Wyoming. But it’ll be just as good, so stay tuned.”

But will anybody ride it? I was starting to believe they would.

Armed with bolstered confidence and a strengthened resolve that what we were doing might actually be embraced by the cycling world, we enjoyed a few additional windfalls. REI bought into the idea of the Great Divide, ultimately providing us with \$40,000 through their Great Outdoors grants program. And, working again with Travel Montana, Adventure Cycling’s marketing director Kevin Condit

and I got our shot at 15 minutes of fame when we “starred” in an episode of *Men’s Journal* on ESPN. The segment was filmed in three different locations on the Great Divide in Montana in October 1995 and would air the following spring. Meanwhile, Adventure Cycling’s membership began kicking in generously to the project, contributing \$100 per mile through a dedicated adopt-a-mile program. In this manner, we raised more than \$60,000 between 1996 and 1998, the three years that we published two map sections of the route per year.

Simply put, the cycling and greater outdoor communities were getting psyched about Adventure Cycling’s new off-pavement bike-packing route.

As the route’s chief planner and researcher — my title at Adventure Cycling had changed from assistant director to national coordinator of the GDMBR — in 1995 I migrated south along with the trail. In July, my wife Nancy and I moved from Missoula to our current home in Teton Valley, Idaho. Throughout the dry months of the following year and a half, I continued with researching the route from south-

ern Montana through Idaho and Wyoming and into Colorado. This leg included the extremely challenging Great Divide Basin of south-central Wyoming, where very little water and virtually no services are found for more than 200 miles. Our knight in shining armor here came in the form of Ray Hanson, an Adventure Cycling life

member who also happened to be a recreation planner for the aptly named Great Divide Resource Area of the BLM, headquartered in Rawlins, Wyoming.

By the fall of 1996, with the route plot-



Great Divide donkey. Flanagan’s donated Cherokee.

red well to the south of Steamboat Springs, the proposed “Longest Mountain Bike Trail in the World” was more than 50 percent mapped. By now I was thinking, “This thing is spectacular. People are gonna go crazy over it!”

As I scan the maps and reflect on my research adventures of more than a decade ago, I’m flooded with memories. Like the occasion when I literally flooded the Jeep after getting it stuck in rain-swollen Rock Creek outside Kremmling, Colorado. (It’s a long story, but suffice it to say that I expected to see trout swimming at my feet as I descended Gore Pass and all the water inside the vehicle came rushing forward.) Then there was the climb from Del Norte to Indiana Pass and the apex of the Great Divide. And New Mexico’s Polvadera Mesa, a 20-mile-long ramp to the sky composed of solidified volcanic ash; the crazy maze of dirt tracks etching the wildly eroded badlands between Cuba and Grants; and camping out next to Abiquiu Reservoir as the setting sun transformed the New Mexico desert into a Georgia O’Keeffe painting ... and lying down on my back for 10

full minutes in the middle of the paved road leading to Antelope Wells, just to see if it could be done. (Neither car nor rattlesnake disturbed my repose.) Finally I walked across the international border from Columbus, New Mexico into Palomas, Chihuahua — where Pancho Villa himself once infamously crossed — to acquire a proper bottle of tequila for toasting a job well done, with my sometimes research compadre Ramsey Bentley, my long-ago University of Wyoming roommate.

No doubt, the research got me up close and personal with a constantly changing spectacle of amazing landscapes and great riding. But it also put me in contact with a

mix of terrific individuals: people like retired schoolteacher Rich O’Brien of Mankato, Minnesota, who pedaled the route over the course of two summers (1997-98) becom-



Bovine Blockage. Even the Great Divide Route has traffic jams.

ing, we think, just the third Great Divide through-cyclist to pull up to the Mexico border. Of that approach he wrote:

“Of all the miles, the most memorable had to be the last. I could see the border buildings up a gentle rise ahead of me. I stopped and then rode very slowly. Mixed emotions: I was glad it was over, but not so.

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To think back over all I’d gone through to get to that last mile. Hot, cold, mud, rain, ups, downs, bike breakdowns, flat tires, the ‘where’s the water?’ Bugs, camp food, the pie and hash browns in Pie Town, all the really great people, and the wind, the damnable wind. Then there was the solitude, just the sound of your tires crunching along with you. No fences, no electricity or telephone poles, no contrails above, no houses ... just you and the crunching tires. Unique. Good for the spirit.”

I wonder if Rich thought to stop and take a nap in the middle of the road on his

way to Antelope Wells.

10 years ago, in the May 1998 *Adventure Cyclist*, I wrote another piece titled “The Great Divide Mountain Bike Route Is a Done Deal!” In it, I admit that on occasion when I’m having trouble sleeping, instead of counting sheep, “I put myself at the Canadian border and think my way south along the Great Divide. In particular, I try to picture the turns where the route goes from one road or trail to another. The farthest I’ve gotten before falling asleep is somewhere around Yellowstone.”

I still do this. But, as time marches on,

the passes and turns and mountainscapes become foggier and fainter in my mind. Maybe it’s time to get out there again to refresh my memory. But this time I’ll leave the Jeep behind and travel strictly by mountain bike.

After all, as Rich O’Brien said, it’s good for the spirit. 

You can read more about the genesis and evolution of the GDMBR in Mike McCoy’s book *Cycling the Great Divide*, available through Cyclosource or online at www.adventurecycling.org/store.

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