

The Mystery of Mike Rust

A pioneering mountain biker vanishes into thin air, leaving a few troubling clues behind — but no answers

by Dan D'Ambrosio

Five years after he disappeared near Saguache, Colorado, on March 31, 2009, Mike Rust's family still does not know what happened to him. They're certain he is dead and that foul play was involved, but Rust has simply vanished into the vast emptiness of Colorado's San Luis Valley, where he had retreated to the isolation of 80 acres of land and a ramshackle house he built himself.

Rust was a pioneer of mountain biking, helping to establish the sport in Colorado at the same time it was gaining a pedal-hold in California. Together with a partner, Don McClung, Rust started Colorado Cyclery in Crested Butte in 1985, moving to Salida in 1986 where the business quickly became a magnet for the growing legions of mountain biking enthusiasts.

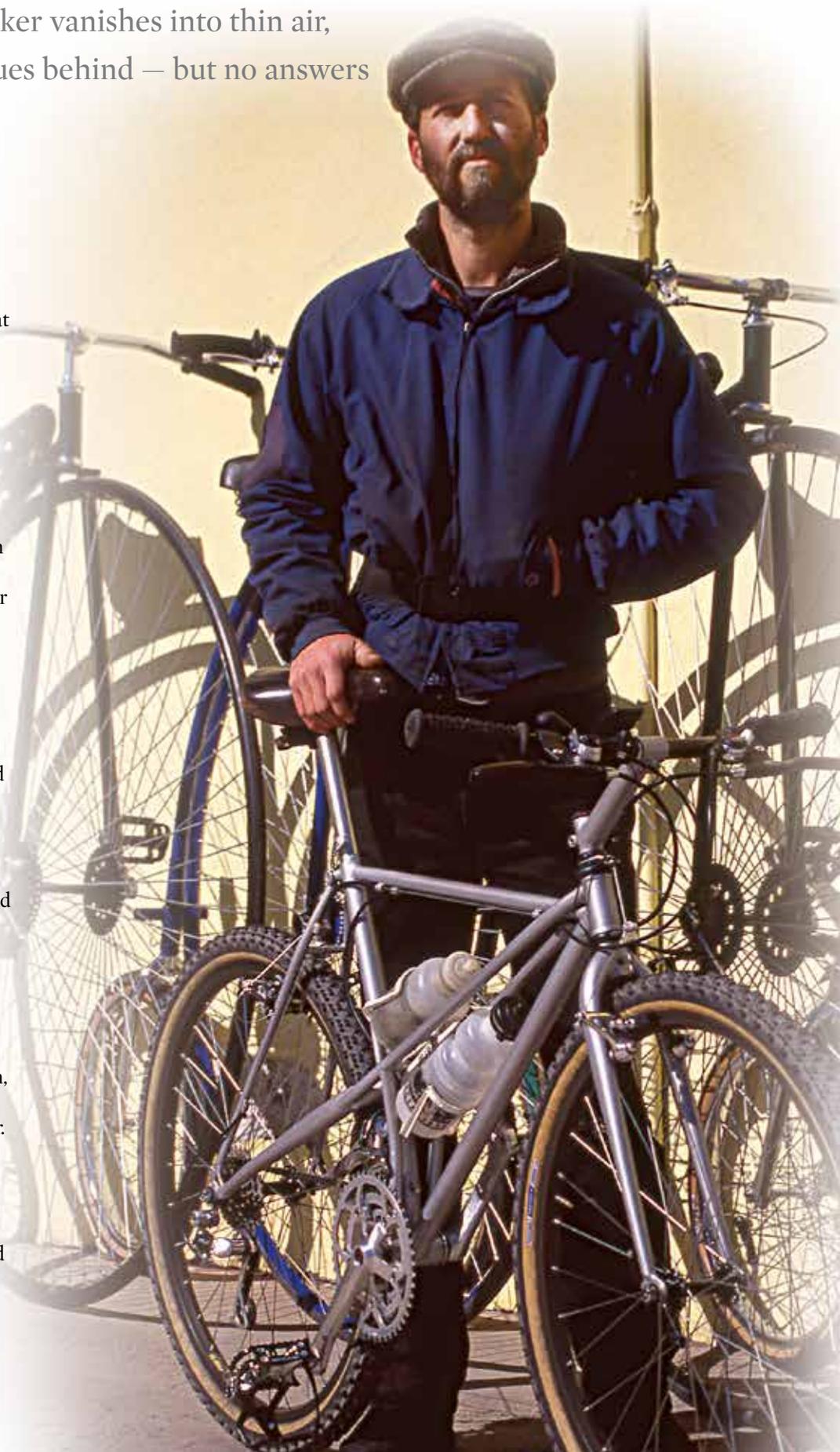
Rust's older brother Paul, the second of seven children that included six brothers (Mike was number four), remembers joining Mike for an epic ride to the top of Monarch Pass, then back down to Salida on a hiking trail that had never been biked.

"It was a blast. In those early days, nobody had done it," Paul Rust said.

Paul also remembers his brother's approach to business.

"It was great. They couldn't keep up," he said. "If you ordered a bike from them, you might get that bike in a few months or you might see it by the end of the year. Their priority was riding. Selling bikes helped pay the rent, but if they had the rent paid, the priority was riding."

Mike Rust was inducted into the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame in Crested Butte in 1991, which notes his cycling experiences were very influential on the early Crested Butte mountain bike scene "both in the technical and com-



petitive arenas.”

“Mike’s first Pearl Pass Tour was in 1980,” the Hall of Fame website says. “He carried his own gear to Aspen, sleeping bag and all, and rode back to Crested Butte the following day over East Maroon Pass on his Littlejohn framed bicycle.”

Incredibly, the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame does not acknowledge Rust’s disappearance, ending its short biography of him by saying, “Currently Mike resides in the sleepy community of Saguache, Colorado.”

A heart-breaking event

At the height of his success with Colorado Cyclery, Mike Rust checked out and moved to his 80 acres outside of Saguache, using the proceeds from the sale of his business, which mystified some people but not his brother Paul.

“Salida got too civilized for him — too expensive, too many people. It just got too crowded,” Paul said. “He wanted out of that. He wanted to be way out where people couldn’t find him.”

His brother was a loner, Paul said, yet “great in a social setting.”

“All my brothers, we all liked a good time,” Paul said. “When my brothers and I got together, we’d ride bikes, go skiing, and party until we passed out at night. It was great, but Mike liked his own company. He was very comfortable in his own company.”

Mike Rust’s remaining siblings — two other brothers have died — created a website, missingmikerust.com, where they are offering a \$25,000 reward for information about Rust’s disappearance or whereabouts.

“Mike’s family needs closure in this case — they need to know what happened to Mike, and they want to lay his body to rest,” the website says. “Imagine what it’s like to lose a family member and not to know what happened to them. It’s a heart-breaking event. If you know what happened to Mike Rust or can help searchers locate his body, please tell his family.”

Rust, 56 years old when he disappeared, bore a passing resemblance to Paul Newman, with piercing blue eyes and handsome chiseled features. In a large black and white photo of him on the website, he leans against the seat of a dirt bike — Rust also loved

motorcycles — wearing a worn leather jacket and a disarming smile, his long silver hair uncombed and unruly. In two more color photos taken on his property, Rust, still obviously in riding shape, conveys the independent, unconventional spirit that took him to the solitary life he was living in the sparsely populated expanse of western Colorado.

Something bad going on

Also a lifelong cyclist, Paul Rust owns Rocky Mountain High Wheelers in Colorado Springs, making state-of-the-art



WARD LEARNED THAT RUST IS NOT THE ONLY PERSON WHO HAS DISAPPEARED IN THE VALLEY. THERE ARE MORE THAN A DOZEN UNSOLVED CASES.

high wheelers that he and his brothers rode across Ireland as well as in Colorado’s “Ride the Rockies” annual tour.

“I’ve never been interested in making old bicycles,” Paul said. “They’re meant to be brand new, with chromoly frames and aluminum wheels. They’re strong and lightweight. They just happen to have a large wheel up front and a small wheel in back.”

Paul remembers the phone call he received from Mike’s girlfriend on the night of March 31, 2009. She said she had talked to Mike earlier in the day but now couldn’t reach him. She was worried.

“I said there’s nothing I can do about it now. It’s dark,” Paul remembered. “Mike’s a big boy. He can take care of himself.”

When Mike’s girlfriend called the next morning to say she had been to his place and he was nowhere to be found, and that there were groceries on the floor, Paul said he would be right down. He was joined by his younger brother Marty, who had driven the 160 miles to Mike’s property the night before, arriving at midnight.

Paul and Marty started going through Mike’s things, looking for clues, checking out tracks left around the isolated property. Mike always had motorcycles around the place.

“We jumped on the motorcycles and started following tracks,” Paul Rust said. “We followed tracks for two days, trying to put two and two together. By the second day, we decided we’d better call the police. He was missing. Something bad happened.”

In fact, Paul was already convinced his brother was dead.

“I thought right away by the second day that he was dead somewhere because it was Mike,” Paul said. “He was so strong-willed and tough. There’s no way somebody could have held him. I knew something bad was going on.”

Once the brothers reported Mike Rust missing, the authorities mounted an impressive search for him. Paul said the National Guard came out. There were hundreds of people involved, some with dogs, some on horseback, as well as two Blackhawk helicopters that searched for an entire day with the help of a C-130 refueler.

“We had a lot of resources in the first two weeks,” Paul said. “When we came up with nothing, I knew he had been disposed of rather efficiently.”

The only clues were discovered by one of the dog handlers, who found Mike Rust’s bloody vest on the ground, along with a pistol butt, about three miles from his house on a dirt road about a half-mile off the highway. Rust’s motorcycle was found a month later, 20 miles away, dumped down a steep incline in the remote country. Nothing else has been found.

Not the running kind

Paul Rust has formulated a scenario

of his brother's final hours in his own head. He figures Mike was robbed by somebody who had been in his house before and knew he had guns.

"Any detective will tell you 90 percent of the time robberies are committed by somebody who's been there before," Paul said.

"I think that person came back with a couple of other people. 'Hey, I know someone who lives way out. I know he has some guns in there.' That's what they were after."

Paul sees his brother arriving home from a grocery trip to Saguache and dropping his groceries on the floor when he realized someone had broken into his home.

"He was very observant. Coming in he knew somebody was there,"

Paul said. "He knew somebody took his pistol, which was my brother Joe's gun and had sentimental value. That's probably what enraged him. He probably took off and started following tracks, eventually catching up with them."

Paul Rust doesn't think his brother had a gun with him when he chased after the thieves because all of his other guns were accounted for in the house. One of Mike's best friends in the valley is a private detective who kept a collection of guns at Mike's house and all were still there.

"He could have taken a gun with him but he probably wasn't thinking," Paul said.

Once his brother caught up with

whoever had broken into his house, Paul doesn't have a problem picturing what happened next.

"He was kind of a hothead," he said. "It was easy for him to get mad, and he was never apprehensive about letting



you know it. He was not afraid of a fight and never backed down. He just wasn't the running kind. I can say that about all my brothers."

A great soul

Nathan Ward grew up in Salida in a house just four blocks from Colorado Cyclery. When he was in high school, Ward knew Mike Rust and his partner, although not well. Ward grew up to be a bicycle adventurer, writing regularly for *Adventure Cyclist*, and in February 2013, he and several partners started an independent film company called Grit and Thistle Film Co.

Grit and Thistle's latest effort is a film about Mike Rust called "The Rider

and the Wolf."

"This is a feature film, by far the biggest project we've ever done," Ward said. "All of our actors and bike talents are volunteers. Even Mike's family and friends helped us out by working for free and volunteering."

Ward said the film is "90 percent pure documentary," but does include a re-enactment of the last hour of Rust's life based on the police report and "stuff we found out afterwards."

"We re-created it using his brothers as the bad guys, which is odd," Ward said. "There are two bad guys in the film. No one knows, it could have been one, it could have been four."

As a native of Salida, Ward is familiar with the desolate valley where Rust had chosen to retreat to his 80 acres and handbuilt home.

"There are no building inspectors. You can do anything you want," Ward said. "It's a land of independent people, armed to the teeth, who are known to shoot at cops if they come on their property. This is the cultural setting. The geographical setting is stunningly beautiful. You can see 70 miles as the crow flies. There are big peaks, big sky, and lots and lots of open space."

Ward learned that Rust is not the only person who has disappeared in the valley. There are more than a dozen

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FAMILY OF MIKE RUST

An advertisement for Bicycle Quarterly magazine. The background is a scenic landscape with a river, rocks, and a forest. On the right, three covers of the magazine are displayed. The text on the left reads: "The Passion of Cycling: • Tests of today's best bikes • Rides off the beaten path • Technical articles • Cycling history". At the bottom left, it says "4x year, \$ 36" and "www.bikequarterly.com".

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36
THE MYSTERY OF MIKE RUST

unsolved cases.

"I'm sure statistically almost everyone is a good person. We don't want to give the county a bad name," Ward said. "But, yeah, you could get killed. It happens. That area is the perfect place to hide a body. People from out of the area go there to hide bodies. There are hundreds of miles of back roads with hardly any people or law and lots of mine shafts."

Covering about 4,000 square miles, the San Luis Valley has only about 6,000 residents in eight small communities and just eight law enforcement officers, according to Ward.

"The law doesn't have the resources whatsoever to cover an area that size," Ward said.

Ward talked to some of the law enforcement officers who described driving, "running lights," for 45 minutes before they get to the scene of a shooting or domestic violence, and when they get there, they're alone.

"There's no backup. That's another 45 minutes away," Ward said. "There has been criticism for not attacking these problems, but they don't have the resources to do it."

Paul Rust said he never stops thinking about his brother's disappearance, but "it doesn't run my life, I'm not obsessed by it." Paul said his brother has friends who have vowed to never stop searching, but he believes the case will only be solved if someone's conscience forces them to talk.

"If we were going to find him, the bones would have surfaced by now," Paul said.

In the meantime, Paul remembers the "great soul" his brother was.

"He was somebody you would have wanted to cross the country with 100 or 200 years ago in a wagon," he said. "Lewis and Clark would have liked to have had him along for the trip." **AG**

Dan D'Ambrosio is a staff writer covering business for the Burlington Free Press in Burlington, Vermont.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19
ROAD TEST - AZUB SIX

distracting noises from Azub's chain management system.

If you're just getting into recumbents, the Six isn't a bad choice for a first bike. The riding position isn't too extreme, the bottom bracket is pretty much even with the seat height, and the seat isn't as laid back as a high-performance bike. Low-speed handling is also outstanding and very user friendly. This is very important on a touring bike that may be trundling up mountain roads with a full load at little more than walking pace.

The Six's performance won't disappoint more veteran riders either. This is by no means a racer, but the stiff frame and hardshell seat minimize any power loss and help this Azub fly along. If you order it with just the rear rack and use some faster tires, it would fit right in on weekend group rides.

I was obviously quite impressed with the Six, but of course no bike is perfect. When Azub first started

making a name for themselves, it was as a lower-cost alternative to other hard-core touring recumbents from companies such as HPVelotechnik. This is no longer the case. The Six starts out at \$3,000 but almost no one orders it that way. I spoke to a few dealers and more common configurations cost somewhere in range of \$3,500 to 4,000. You can easily drop five or six grand on one if you go crazy with options. Spending that much on your bike may be worth it in the long run, but it can really cut into your travel budget.

That said, you are buying a bit more personality. The Azub Six isn't only one of the most capable touring recumbents in the world, it is also endlessly customizable, comes from a great company with incredible knowledge, and is rare enough that you're not likely to encounter another one. **AG**

Bryan Ball is the managing editor of 'BentRider Online (bentrideronline.com).