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BICYCLE TRAVEL:

Exotic Jamaica
Continental Divide
Manitoulin Island

BICYCLE TESTS:

Cannondale
ST 500

Specialized
Rockhopper

Bruce
Gordon
Frames



52



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WEST IS WEST

*Tackling the Continental Divide
By Mountain Bike, Part II*

by MIKE MOE
photography by DAN MOE




July 30, The Wyoming Border

I am falling a lot lately. It has become a popular and anticipated daily tradition for me—at least once—to pitch over the handlebars or slip over sideways. I had logically presumed that as I became a more competent mountain biker, I would fall less. This just hasn't turned out to be true, and why not? I tell myself that it has to do with my increased speed and daring over the rough terrain, but Dan is covering the same ground and he's not diving into the bushes regularly. Perhaps, I thoughtfully speculate, we all have internal gyroscopes and mine is shaking loose. Or, as Dan suggests thoughtfully, maybe I'm just clumsy.

The mountains are starting to look familiar. East of the Divide, we can locate Elk Mountain and the Snowy Range—part of the Medicine Bow Mountains that shadow the Laramie Basin and our hometown of Laramie, Wyoming.

Even though we haven't previously followed this trail, this is our terrain and our general stomping grounds. We put an extra push in every pedal stroke, like a dog pulling at the leash when the walk turns toward home.





We plan to spend a few days in Laramie, taking a little vacation from our vacation. Physically, we really need the break. Our muscles are overworked and torn down, and have been crying out for a chance to rebuild.

Toward noon, the rocky trail begins to drop, and we know that we are descending into Hog Park, a wide cluster of meadows directly on the Wyoming border. A couple of dirt roads lead into the park from the west, so we aren't surprised to flash past a couple of fly-fishermen working up the Encampment River.

Halfway across the park we cruise past a tattered cardboard sign stapled to a tree. "Whoa!" I yell to Dan, and we cycle back up to the tree. It reads, "Wyoming Border." "Hello, Wyo!" we shout to the mountains. Not only is this our home state, but we are also halfway to Canada!

August 4, The Red Desert, Wyoming

The Great Divide Basin, or Red Desert as it is known locally, may be the most unusual part of the entire Divide. Here the Divide splits, opening up into a 100-mile-wide desert. Both the eastern and western rims—and all of the mesas,





gulches and plains in between—are the Divide. Only rainfall on the flanks of either rim escapes into the Atlantic or Pacific watersheds. All that falls in the desert evaporates in the almost constant wind or nourishes the sparse stands of sagebrush and grasses. There are a few rivers and springs in the desert, such as oases, but none flow out of the parched interior.

Our route across the desert is a crooked line from Rawlins to the frontier mining town of South Pass City, at the foot of the Wind River Range. As I make this journal entry, we are somewhat closer to South Pass City than to Rawlins.

For the last several hours, we have been searching for the Bison Basin Oil Field (a large group of oil wells and a caretaker's house). Our two-gallon water bag has been near empty since last night, and we are starting to feel uncomfortable from



(Far left) Wild horses gallop across the Great Divide Basin in Wyoming. (Left) Mount Moran, Wyoming. (Below) The Bitterroot Range near the Montana/Idaho border.





thirst. The feeling is a little like being very sleepy, but instead of wanting to just lie down and close your eyes, you want to keep going until you satisfy the need. We haven't been this thirsty since the lava fields of New Mexico—when we thought we saw fluid, or perspiration, on dry things like rocks. A sort of mini-hallucination.

Dan stumbled across the oil field and found water there when he hiked across this desert two years ago. We are going by his memory, and he thinks we're heading in the right direction, though none of the landforms seem familiar.

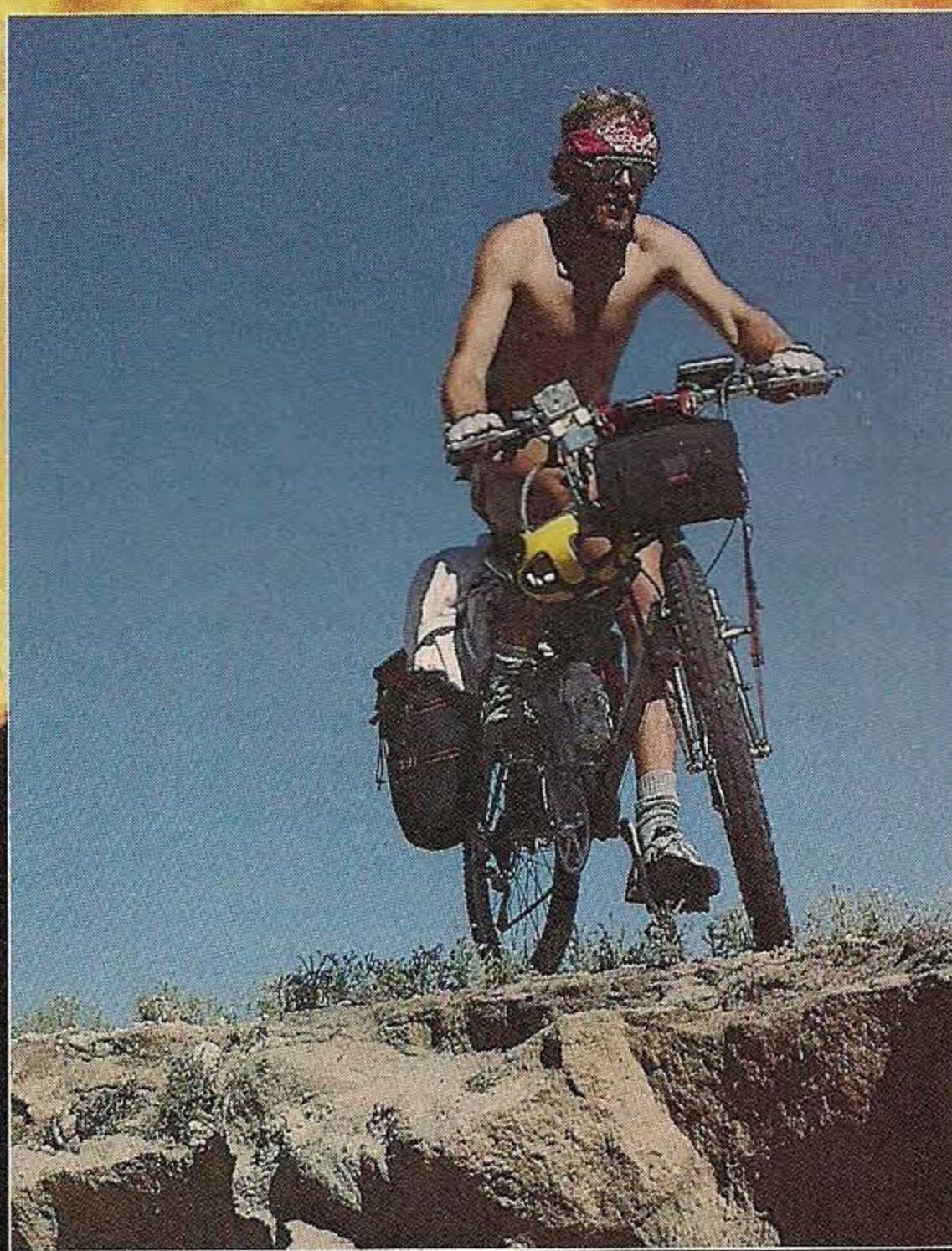
A series of sandy, rutted oil company roads lace the desert, and we follow these in short stretches, changing or leaving them entirely when they veer in what seems to be the wrong direction.

Just as we're beginning to think we've overshot Bison Basin, Dan spots a pinpoint reflection of metal in the distance. He pulls out the telephoto lens, fastens it to his camera, and we take turns peering at the shiny dot about three miles west. Because shimmering waves of heat radiate from all the gulches and plateaus in between, it's hard to separate the reflected light from the swaying cliffs above it.

Finally, we make out the outline of a rectangular metal building. "That's Bison, for sure," Dan smiles, and I breathe a sigh of relief. We take a compass bearing to guide us while we're out of its line-of-sight and drink the last two cupfuls of our water that we have been saving "just in case." Then we slowly begin walking the bikes down a steep mesa toward Bison Basin Oil Field.

August 11, Yellowstone

This morning we pedaled into Yellowstone National Park. We've been on pavement since yesterday, because park regulations in both Yellowstone and Teton prohibit backcountry biking. But it's not necessarily easy travel—it's dangerous. The last few hours have been real white-knuckle stuff, as risky as about anything in the woods. We were swept into Yellowstone in the midst of a steady stream of oversize campers festooned with lawn-chairs, rearview mirrors and bicycle outriggers. Several times we were forced to bail off the narrow roads, thankful for the extra control afforded by knobby tires. Maybe I'm just not hardened to road touring anymore. I think I'd rather be



(Left) Searching for water in the Red Desert. (Below) A furry friend gets a topo lesson instead of food.

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bouncing along some wilderness cliffside than dodging these campers.

We set up base at the Old Faithful Inn—a log palace really—overlooking the steaming geyser basin. Relaxing on the balcony of the inn, we have a great view of the most photographed wonder in the world, the erupting of Old Faithful geyser. It's a sight hard to tire of, and several times we watch it go off on the hour, give or take a few moments. In between eruptions, we sip Dr. Peppers and work on our tans. "Say, Dan, I think you're shadowing your left ankle a bit." "Thanks, Mike, and could you pass the Coppertone?"

Midway through the afternoon, we notice a couple of hikers striding toward the inn through the colorful crowds of tourists. Their huge, dirty packs, sun-bleached shirts and half-grown beards clue us in that they have been out for more than a couple of days' camping. We guess that they're hiking the Divide, but like us, are too modest to come right out and say so.

"Howdy. You guys look pretty laden down; where ya hiking to?"

"Up north. Are you guys on the mountain bikes downstairs?"

"Yeah. We're headed north, too. Where'd you come from?"

"Down south. How about you?"

"Same."

"So, you following the Continental Divide?"

"Yeah, you too?"

"Sure are. Great to run into you guys!"

Bill Olsen and Mark Young are from Campbell and Santa Cruz, California, respectively. Typical of hikers, they are very entertaining and easygoing, and we became friends quickly.

For the rest of the after-

noon we swap trail stories of the trip up from Mexico. Many of our adventures are similar because we have covered much of the same terrain. In New Mexico we had drunk from the same windmills, and we had followed their tracks along snowy ridges in Colorado, though two months behind them. Like them, we had zigzagged lost across the sands of the Red Desert in Wyoming in search of water.

We interrupt our story-swapping long enough to adjourn to the lounge of the Bear's Den for free appetizers, where we laugh about the interesting people and hardships we've seen.

"So, how did you guys like that road up to Cottonwood Pass above Tincup, Colorado?"

"You mean that unending, uphill slog? Oh, it was charming in a miserable, grueling sort of way."

The stories get funnier and funnier as the night wears on, and the greasy piles of chicken bones rise higher and higher. Especially the mountain in front of Bill. After five days of dried foods, he is not a picky eater.

Finally, before they turn out the lights on us, we get up to leave, making plans to get together for breakfast. On the way out the door, Bill politely and earnestly thanks the barmaid for a lovely dinner. Courtesy is his strong suit.

August 17, Along the Idaho/Montana Border

This 28-mile day rates as one of the most beautiful—and one of the hardest—of the entire trip. We break camp and leave Wagon Wheel Spring, north of Bannock Pass, at our usual 7:30 A.M. departure. The mornings are getting progressively colder, and we start out bundled in polypropylene, wool, pile and raingear, and then shed one layer after another as the



sun climbs in the sky.

At midmorning, I pause to catch my breath and watch a hawk circle lazily overhead. The mountain air is clean and crisp, and the sweet aroma of pine rides a gentle breeze along our high, rocky ridge. Ahead of me, Dan bikes on. I can hear the jingle of bike tools in his panniers as he dodges the sagebrush and stones that clutter the abandoned survey road here on the crest of the Divide.

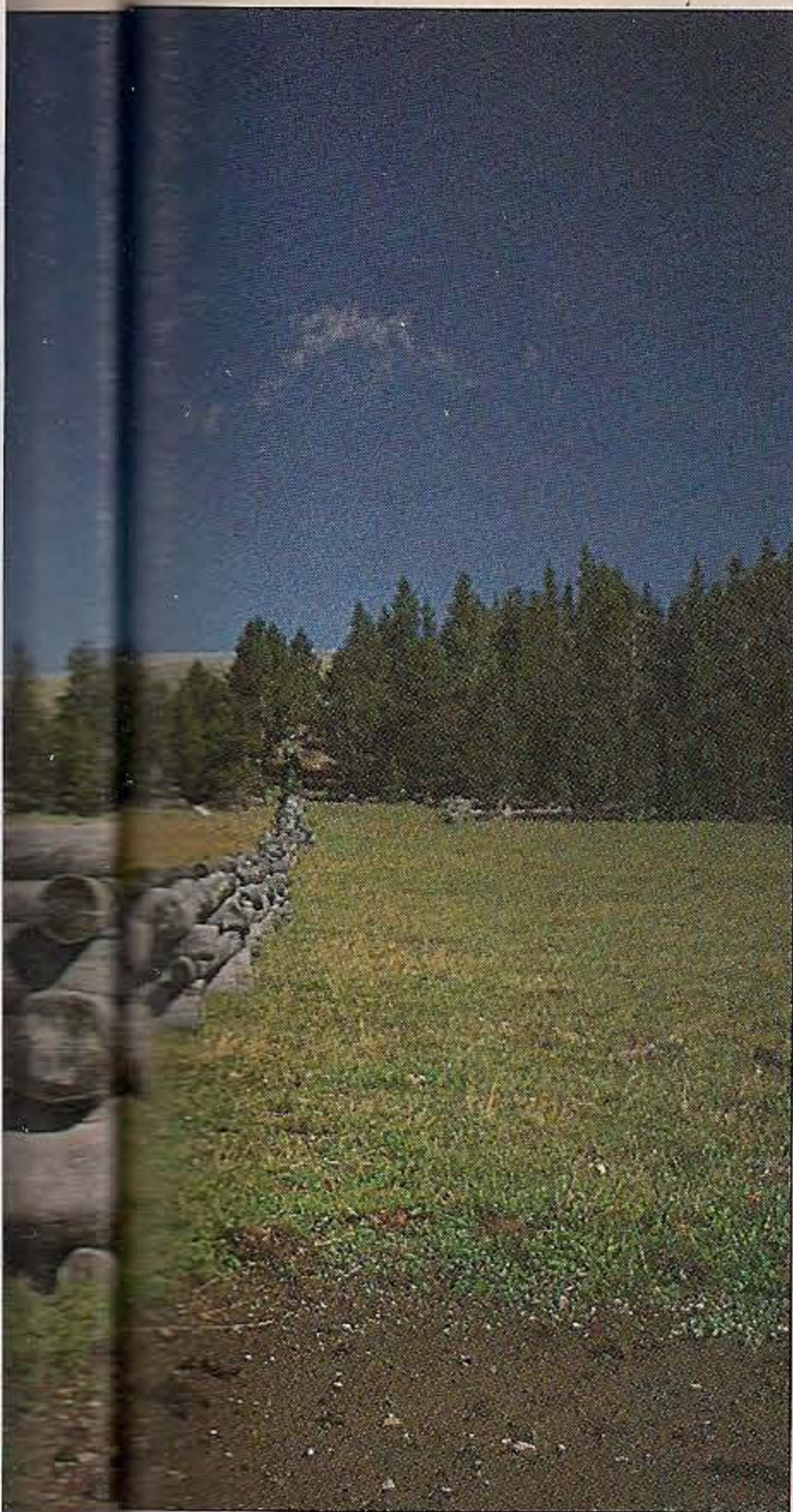
Two thousand feet below the ridge, to the east in Montana and to the west in Idaho, rich green farmlands roll to either horizon. Ahead of us, the jagged line of the Divide snakes westward and then swings north again, passing through the faint rumblings of a slow, gray thundercloud, finally disappearing in the haze of distance.

We stop for lunch on a hill Dan christens "Skeleton Knob." Here, hundreds of giant, fallen trees encircle us, their sun-bleached roots

reaching out like the slender fingers of bony hands. It's an eerie place, even on a bright, sunny afternoon.

After lunch, we wheel down the survey road until it vanishes in the rocky flank of Goat Mountain. We strike out cross-country, traversing the mountain by following game trails. Soon we are wandering in a maze of fallen timber, constantly ducking under the dense wooden canopy and hoisting our bikes over logs every few steps. At the first clearing, we are very happy to make our way back onto the ridge.

For the next 14 miles we labor along the Divide, straining our legs up some of the steepest hills of the entire trip and crashing down slopes rocky enough to remind us of the lava beds in New Mexico. At 7:30 P.M., we lean on the handlebars, dead tired, on the last peak of the day. The next six miles are a steep 3,000-foot drop down to camp at Lemi

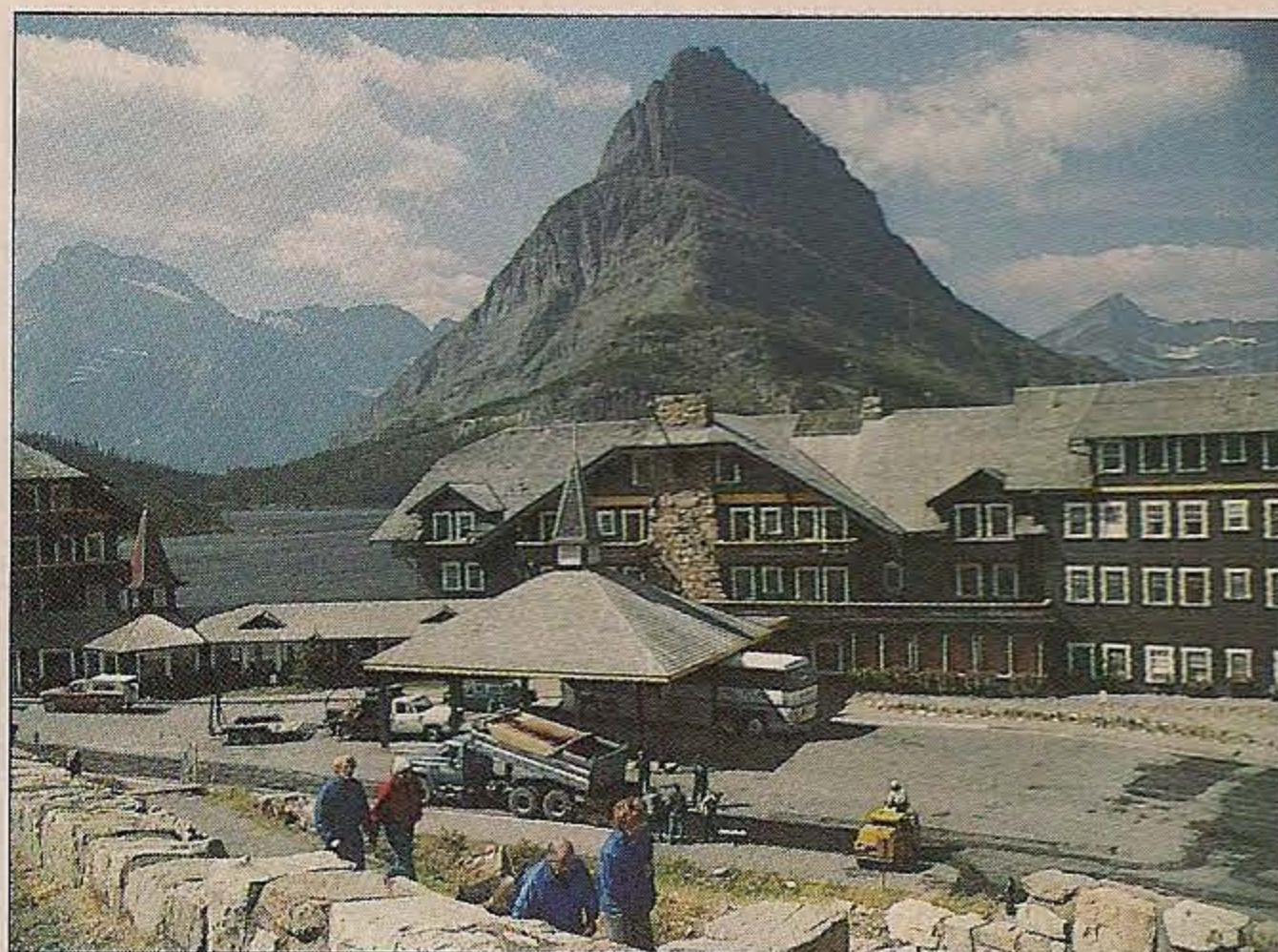


(Above) August 17—the Montana/Idaho border.

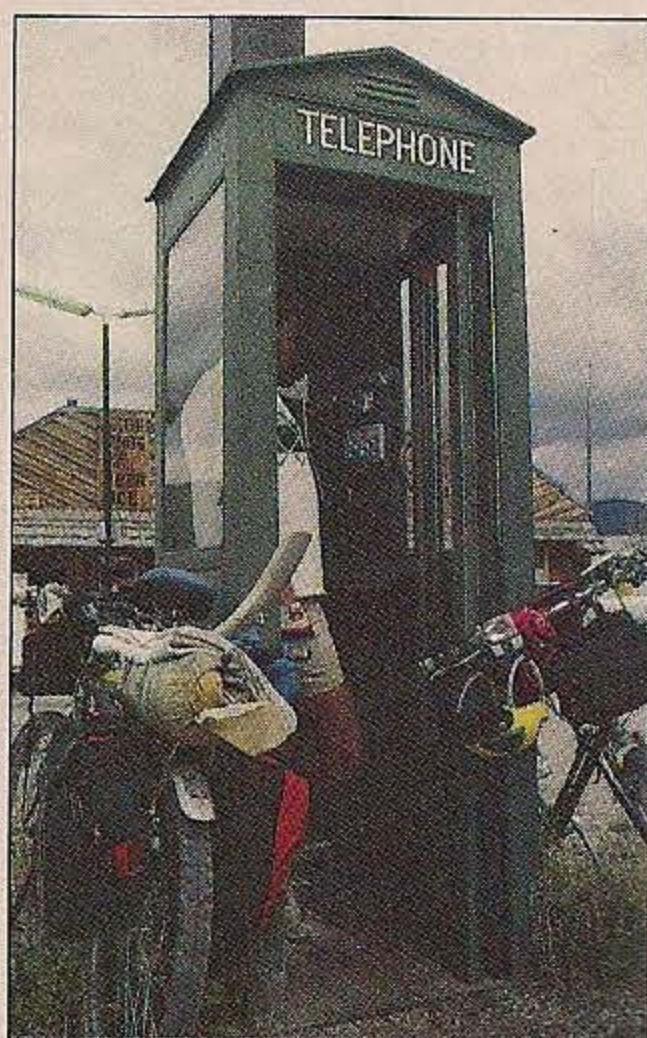
Pass. We tumble onto the pass an hour later, looking forward to hitting the sack early.

Before setting up the tent, we decide to shoot a self portrait, imitating the stalwart Lewis and Clark characters on a sign nearby. While digging out the tripod, I discover that my sleeping bag is missing—it must have bounced off somewhere up on the ridge. Assuming it's nearby, I run up after it, leaving Dan to start dinner.

Around every bend I expect to discover the tan stuff sack, and each time I'm surprised when it's not there. The anticipation presses me on, mile after mile. Dusk falls, then darkness. At midnight I'm still tramping up the ridge, kicking every light-colored object in my path, hoping one will be the stuff sack. The odds of finding it in the dark are low, but I've



(Above) The Many Glacier Lodge, Glacier National Park.



come this far and I'm not in the mood to turn back now. I'll stumble and stagger back up to Goat Mountain if I have to.

A hundred yards short of our last peak I trip over something soft . . . my sleeping bag! "Great!" I shout sarcastically into the blackness. "Looks like I'll get some sleep, after all!" I meet Dan halfway down the pass. He has gotten to wondering where I've scampered off to and has come up searching for me. We laugh about "another typically easy day on the Divide" and shuffle like zombies back to camp, ending the day at 3 A.M.

August 20, The "Trail" to Frog Pond Basin, Montana

"Well, ya sure as hell can't go there!" repeats the burly storekeeper at Sula.

We've stopped in the little store off Highway 93, seeking advice on the best way to circle the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness in southwestern Montana. We've penciled on our maps what looks like an interesting and scenic route and are showing it to the storekeeper, but he isn't being much help.

"But the map does show a trail," I reply, getting more than exasperated at his arrogant, woodsier-than-thou attitude. He has recently horsepacked the trail, and it seems he could at least tell us the current trail condition. But he has already made up his mind that we can't make it; therefore, we don't need to know. It doesn't matter a bit that we've already biked over most of the Rocky Mountains. "Better stick to the roads," he says with a laugh as we leave the store.

"A lot of help he was," scowls Dan as we climb on our bikes and start up the dirt road. We'll try the route anyway, with or without the blessing of the beer-bellied shopkeeper.

An hour later, just before beginning the climb up the trail to Frog Pond basin—the only landmark up there—we pause to chat with an older couple fly-fishing along the river. They've driven up to spend

the sunny afternoon picnicking, fishing and hunting berries, and they say that they've done so most every weekend of their 60-odd years together. When we tell them what we're doing, they laugh and say, "How wonderful!" "We'd hop on bikes and join you if we were 30 years younger," the man says with a chuckle.

It turns out that they, too, have followed the trail, though many years ago. They are sure we can travel it, though it's steep, and they say we're likely to get lost on it several times. We thank them and wish them a great summer.

"What a difference in attitude between them and the shopkeeper!" Dan and I remark at the same time, once we've biked out of earshot. The shopkeeper, though strong and fairly fit, had limited his mode of interaction with nature to such a degree that he could only understand the wilds while perched atop a horse. On the other hand, the couple, both in their 80s, had measured the trail—and our potential to travel it—by the freedom they knew and had shared in the woods over the years.

About two miles up the trail, under a canopy of Aspen, we discover—by accident—that this route will take much longer than planned. I hit an unseen tree root and tumble into the bushes. (Nothing unusual in that.) But while getting up I notice that the bushes are sprinkled with large, ripe blueberries—in fact, nearly every bush on the hillside is heavy with blueberries. We immediately call a temporary halt to the journey and begin scampering from bush to bush, popping the thumb-nail-size fruits into our mouths as fast as we can pick them.

By the time the sun nudges the eastern mountain tops, the faltering trail has disappeared in the

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waist-high grass of an open hilltop. We plunge into the sea of gently waving grass, unsure of where or when we will reconnect with the trail to Frog Pond Basin.

On the far side of the hill, we discover an old trail with overgrown and darkened blazes on the trees. We've had no luck in our search for the original trail, so we decide to follow this one.

Soon it is too dark to continue, and we are quite lost, apparently having wandered off the edge of our topographical map. We camp in a grove of towering pines, overlooking a valley we hope will lead us back onto our maps.

We feel totally alone in the woods, as if we are pioneers exploring new and untamed country. Though Dan and I have always loved the wilds, never in the past has the great breadth of the land seemed so appealing, and so much an important part of our lives. Surely, this is the most moving and exhilarating night of the trip.

I am just beginning to drift off to sleep when Dan asks earnestly, "Don't you think we'd better lock up the bikes?" We laugh so hard our jaws hurt.

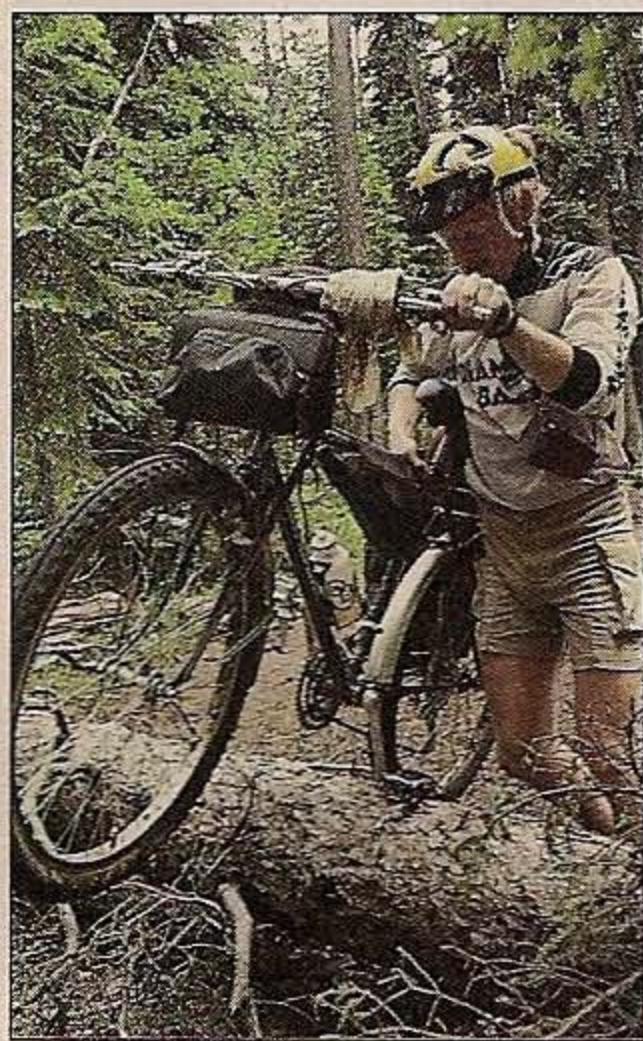
August 27, Reviewing the Maps Before Canada

Tonight after dinner we clear our dishes, slide the stove out of the way, and lay out our maps to review the next day's travel, as we've done every night for the last two months. Canada is close, but it surprises us both when Dan points out that if we really push it, we can make the border tomorrow.

The thought of reaching our destination is exciting, but sad as well. It will mean the end of a trek we've grown accustomed to. We've shared many



(Above) Trip's end. Hello, Canada!



frosty mornings, exciting days and fiery sunsets along the Divide. In a way, it will be like leaving friends when you move away from your hometown. You know you'll see them again, but things will never quite be the same.

August 28, Glacier Park and Waterton Park, Colorado

We are roused out of our sleeping bags this final morning by the noisy flapping of the tent canopy. A few stars still sprinkle the lavender sky of dawn, promising clear skies. We pack quickly, shivering so much against the cold that we decide to skip breakfast. Before the first rays of sun break over the silhouetted peaks, we are riding, our tight muscles warming with the exercise.

Once we get to Glacier Park, we'll follow the Going-to-the-Sun High-

way. As in Teton and Yellowstone Parks, mechanical vehicles are prohibited on the trails.

The wind blows violently as we start up the winding canyon of Logan Creek, inside the park border. But our attention is held by the high, angular peaks that are common in the park. Four thousand feet above us, their glacier-sculpted cirques are just catching the morning sun. The rock faces radiate a soft peach glow, and the steep snowfields are a subdued gold. It's amazingly beautiful to us, even though we've seen a lot of great mountain sunrises lately.

Just short of Logan Pass, powerful winds roar at speeds of 70 mph. This is the strongest wind we've felt in more than 2,500 miles. Sometimes the gusts push us up the road faster than we can pedal, and in the next instant they spin around against us, forcing us to stop and brace hard, our arms in front of our faces to protect us from the small stones and branches being tossed about. On the rocky flanks around us, sparse stands of white pine bow in sweeping waves, and we witness the glacier-born waterfalls being snatched as they plummet into space and are thrown skyward in wispy, white ribbons.

Dan yells that the wind

is a farewell from the mountains; such a powerful farewell seems appropriate from the Divide. We laugh and shout above the tempest as we cross Logan Pass.

A dirty, gray haze nestles against the hanging valleys and mountain ramparts on the eastern side of the park, reminding us of the heavy smog of a city. Descending out of the park, we cruise past hillsides of blackened, smoking timber, glimpsing bright streaks of flame on the distant fireline. The smog is really smoke, and a park ranger tells us that this is one of several fires burning out of control in Montana.

We leave the fire area behind and cycle out into the open plains between Glacier and Waterton parks. A single formation, Chief Mountain, stands lonely sentinel over the plains, far apart from the other groups of peaks.

Canada is just 12 miles away. We push hard for the border, flashing up and down the last hills like we're riding 19-pound racers. The wind has eased up, and only a whisper in the trees breaks the steady hum of our chains. Neither of us speaks. Vivid memories of the last two months fill our thoughts.

In my mind, I can again taste the sweet waters of the Firehold River in Yellowstone, and I laugh out loud recalling when we pushed our bikes over the steep snow at Tincup Pass in Colorado. It seems as if we were riding over the high plains of New Mexico only yesterday, and I can almost feel the cold rain pelting my back as it did when we left the Mexican border 2,600 miles ago.

Suddenly, the border is right in front of us. For Dan and me, this is the end of one very special dream, but the beginning of many others. We grin at each other, raise our hands high, and coast into Canada. **BR**