

TRAVEL

To Ride Again Another Day in Colorado

By ELI GOTTLIEB SEPT. 5, 2014

If you ride a bicycle more than casually, you probably already know about Boulder, Colo. Its altitude, endless hills and nearly perpetual sunshine make it a big draw for the pedal-powered and regularly ensure it a top spot on lists of America's most bike-friendly cities.

But unless you live in Boulder you probably don't know about the ultimate day ride out of town. It's a ride that morphs from calm, easy pedaling to quadricip-busting difficulty, proceeds upward through spectacular scenery and rewards you at the top with a dusty hamlet called Ward whose citizens hope you turn around and head home A.S.A.P. When I lived in Boulder, I usually made the trip once a year.

The specialness of the ride to Ward lies in a set of connected felicities. It's just long enough at 20 miles each way to take a satisfying chunk out of a day and still leave you an evening to brag about your exploits. The long, fairly taxing climb of 4,000 vertical feet, with a sudden sadistic kickup into an especially steep grade for the last mile or so, means that your athleticism will be tested, but within limits. A winding stream accompanies you the most of the way up, and the scarcity of cars on the route allows you to sink into yourself and enter into a trance of repetitive exercise.

Then there's your destination: the wonderfully strange, improbable town of Ward.

In June I had a chance to revisit that climb for a host of difficult reasons. Among other things, the trip gave me a chance to assess the state of Boulder's cycling health in light of the cataclysmic rains of September 2013 that flooded the Front Range, blocking access to mountain hamlets like Ward for months and forever altering the face of the area.

I had climbed to Ward just a few weeks before that historic downpour, during a

visit from my new home in Brooklyn. On a mild, sultry morning in late August, blissfully unaware of the impending storms, I had set out on the climb accompanied by my good friend Kip Hunter, a Boulder native. At my request, we embarked on the steeper of the two approaches to Ward. (We're both 50-somethings but very physically fit versions of that demographic, and proud of it.)

My first lesson of the day wasn't long in coming, and it was this: You can't live away from Boulder for a couple of years at sea level, as I had, and suddenly return to 6,000-foot elevation without paying a price. The first hill, which I used to whisk up with a serious though never killing effort, now seemed huge, and the grade merciless.

Serious uphill cycling is always a minuet of pain and pleasure. On the Ward climb the steeper grades are usually followed by shallower, gentler slopes, allowing screaming legs a respite, and the in-flight entertainment of the scenery takes some of the sting out of the uphill slog. I soon passed the charming twig tenement of a beaver dam in the roadside stream. Not long after, I saw a pair of amorous cardinals tussling in a nearby tree. Mountain bluebirds flashed their electric colors in the bushes, and the high desert air was bone-dry and pleasantly scented with pine.

Lulled by how good I was feeling, I proceeded to mistake No. 2: forgetting to pace myself. As Kip ground steadily upward in a low gear, I downshifted and shot forward, ignoring my lack of acclimation to the altitude. Everything was perfect until a kind of red fog entered my brain, my legs stopped obeying my commands, and the next thing I knew I was pulled off to the side of the road, dry-heaving over my handlebars.

Failure, in front of passing cyclists and my old friend Kip (who had meanwhile vanished into the distance shouting something about "the tortoise and the hare"), was not an option. Gingerly I got back on my rental bike and limped up the last mile or so on the steep 10 percent grade into Ward.

Situated about 9,500 feet above sea level, this mountain village of 200 is celebrated for its gnarly off-the-gridness, its rusting old American cars parked on the sides of the road as tourist scarecrows, and its one-way signs all turned outward to discourage entry to the city limits. The one business in town is the tiny Utica Street Market where, before the effortless glide back down, I bought and slowly drank my reward for the climb: the most delicious bottle of cold water on earth.

I returned to my home in Brooklyn a few days later, burdened by a new sense

of the limits of my habitual New York rides. The Prospect Park 3.35-mile loop that until my Boulder trip had seemed perfectly reasonable now felt foreshortened and dull. Even the magisterial six-mile-plus Central Park loop had mysteriously become boring and repetitious. After a few days of cycling the old routes, I was beginning to forget my newfound feelings of deprivation, when a friend from Boulder emailed me that a heavy rain had begun falling there and wasn't letting up.

I say rain. It was more the equivalent of a high-pressure fire hose trained on the city. Boulder denizens are used to heavy weather, of course. The town is pressed flush against the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and exposed to nature at its most elemental, with giant skies and three or four Houdini-quick changes of weather in a day. But this was another thing entirely: a deluge, a biblical plague, a thousand-year flood, the biggest monthly rainfall in recorded history.

Over the five-day downpour totaling almost 20 inches (the storm concentrated on Boulder, though it fell heavily in surrounding areas as well), streets became lakes, bridges were carried off, cars were sucked into raging torrents, houses were flung about like playing cards and many mountain communities simply swept away.

Boulder was marooned in a new world of fallen water, and the very thing that had turned it into a biking mecca — its glorious canyon climbs — now rendered it helpless when upriver dams burst and sent 30-foot-high battering rams of debris roaring into the heart of the city. The effects were devastating. In several cases they were also fatal.

The drama of all this was so consuming to a former resident (me) that it wasn't until late in the game that I woke up to my own stake in things. I say "woke up" because that's literally what happened one day at 3 a.m., when I bolted out of bed and flew to the computer, where I clicked through a few links and slumped in my chair with a groan.

Upon moving away from Boulder two years earlier, I had put all of my recently deceased father's rare-book collection in storage. The facility was in a town called Longmont, about a dozen miles away. I had chosen this facility after being assured by the owner that it was "well outside the hundred-year flood plain." The collection comprised thousands of books dating back to the 16th century and included many scientific and literary rarities. Serious collectors have a relationship with objects that stops just short of the familial, the physically embodied. Insofar as it was possible, these books *were* my beloved father.

On the computer screen was an image of the storage facility. It appeared to be almost entirely underwater.

In the days that followed, there was no access to the building, and it was unclear how much damage the books had suffered. But it wasn't only the fate of my father's legacy that I obsessed about. It was the city of Boulder as well. In Boulder I had fallen in love and raised a family, and in the city's canyons I had discovered a passion for cycling that became a lifeline, pulling me through the deaths of both parents and the eventual crash of my marriage. Two thousand miles away, I felt protective of the fragile ecosystem of roads, trails and paths that had made such a thing possible.

So in June I flew back to Boulder, to take stock of my dad's books, revisit storm-battered friends and family and assess the state of the city's cycling culture. Was the pedal-pushing magic still alive and well?

Boulder reveals itself dramatically to those approaching it on the main access road of Route 36, emerging as if from a whirl of a magician's cape when one crests a rise to see the city set out on the plain. From a distance, everything looked normal, and as I entered the town at dusk, that normalcy seemed borne out. The formerly submerged downtown showed no obvious signs of devastation. The only visible clue of a changed city was the earth-moving machinery parked on side streets. Over the previous months, those machines had moved many, many tons of dirt and rocks.

The next morning, eager to assess the state of things firsthand, I stopped at University Bicycles. Living up to its reputation as "the busiest bike store on earth per square foot," the store was jammed — an indication that cycling enthusiasm, at least, had returned to pre-flood levels. If anything, the staff members seemed more buzzed and happy than ever. Whether this was the result of their own athletic activity or a side effect of the many new legal marijuana dispensaries in the area was unclear. I rented a lightweight model and pedaled out onto busy Pearl Street.

Having completed a casual reconnaissance of Boulder's downtown, which appeared unchanged from the storm, I moved out of the city center. It was then, while taking some of the uphill grades to the canyons, that I began to note the real differences. Was I having a senior moment or wasn't that gap formerly filled with trees? Weren't there once park benches there? Wasn't there once a high brick wall rising alongside the road, and didn't the road itself once have a shoulder?

In the words of Mike Patton, director of Boulder Open Spaces and Mountain

Parks, a city agency: “You can’t believe it till you see it. The water tossed this city around like clothes in a rinse cycle. There are canyons, and I’m talking canyons, where there didn’t used to be before the flood. Fifty-foot alluvial fans with Volkswagen-sized boulders for people to climb on. Forests of two-foot-wide pine trees still laying on their side.”

Later that day I enlisted Kip and we rode the Boulder Bike Path, a jewel of urban engineering whose 300 coiling miles extend from the city center to the hinterlands. “After the flood, this entire area looked like a Rocky Mountain Pompeii,” Kip said as we pedaled along the smooth concrete of the path. All around us, the same mysterious forces of subtraction had been at work. The canopy of shade trees that had fringed the path was gone. Debris fields sat in the middle of former meadows. In deference to my silver-lining tendencies, I’d like to say all this was an improvement somehow. It was not.

In fact, as feared, many of the former canyons I had relished climbing in the area either were impassable or their formerly smoothly graded roadbeds were filled with dirt and gravel patches, rendering them useless to road bike riders. The climb to Ward, at least, was back in business, but most serious cyclists had been forced to areas east and south of the city for their rolling sustenance.

“We’ve had to get creative,” said Justin Green, a Boulder sports physician and competitive mountain bike racer. “Cyclists love their routines, but the flood forced us into expanding into whole new areas and trails we barely knew before.”

It may be a changed world for Front Range riders, but it is impossible to ignore the signs of revival and ongoing bike-love in the air. The next day I sat in the infield of the Boulder Valley Velodrome, a new oval outdoor track in the town of Erie, about 15 miles north of Denver, which is still in the beta-testing phase. Doug Emerson, one of its owners (he also owns University Bicycles), told me that he had started out 30 years earlier with “15 bikes and a toolbox.”

“Yes,” he said, smiling as brightly kitted riders whirred around us, “and if you’d told me then that this town would one day have thousands of recreational cyclists with \$10,000 bikes in their garages, I’d have laughed in your face.”

On the streets outside the velodrome, the crush of cyclists out for a spin on expensive bikes seemed to prove his point. Again and again as I continued to ride over the next few days, I heard the same refrain: Cycling recovery in the flood-ravaged parts of the state is a work in progress, but the spirit of the sporting community is unbowed. As John Hickenlooper, the governor and an avid

recreational athlete, put it: “Cycling is about never quitting; just when you think you might have nothing left to give, you find you can give a little more and finish. We’ll keep coming together and we’ll keep pedaling.”

On my last night in Boulder, over dinner at the reliably delicious Brasserie 1010, Kip took up the same theme: “This whole tragedy has had some unexpected positive side effects,” he said. “Bikers pitched in heavily to fund recovery efforts in the mountain towns they loved riding to, and the wary locals up there began looking at them with a new respect. Everybody lost and then everybody won.”

Point taken. Roads can be rebuilt. People’s hearts can be opened in unexpected ways by adversity. But old books once ruined by water cannot (absent huge expense) be brought back to life. I lost an entire first edition of the works of Joseph Conrad and about 20 percent of my father’s collection, despite the best efforts of my ex-wife and stepchildren to salvage what they could. I’m not happy about it, but I’m not shattered by it, either. I try to take the long view, and see it as an entry in the ledger of Necessary Expenses in Life. If Boulder ate some books of mine, it gave me back something far greater in the long run: a lifelong passion for climbing on two wheels.

Eli Gottlieb’s fourth novel, “Best Boy,” will be published in August 2015.

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