

# “Oh for an ‘Insuperable Moab’”

*The Original, Uncensored, Unsanitized Story, written for BIKE Magazine*

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*NOTE: Highlighted passages are those cut out of the final draft.*

**When everything is reduced to the mere counter-balancing of economic interests...when Nature has been so subjugated that she has lost all her original forms, what room will there be for virtue? In the mean time, things are going to get very murky.**

-- Gustave Flaubert

**Welcome to Moab, Utah, the “Mountain Bike Capital of the World. Adventure Vortex of the Universe! The Adrenalin Junkie’s Dream Destination! Wanna take a ride? We’re spending millions to make your biking experience more pleasurable.**

Check out our new “Elevated Colorado River Bikeway.” Our cantilevered concrete and steel bike bridge parallels the river for miles. “It’s a new way to experience the river,” its promoters exclaim, as if the “old way” didn’t cut it any more. Need a break from the bike? We have zip lines and slack lines and you can harness up and rope swing through Corona Arch. “Adventure” activities are everywhere. Need to shop? We’ve got T-shirts and refrigerator magnets **to die for**. Moab, Utah is booming. Is that a good thing? **Do you like Disneyland?**

Moab has always been a boom---and bust---kind of town. Tucked away in the labyrinth of red rock canyons and mesas, it might have become the perfect refuge from the madness of the world, instead of a symbol of it. **In its early years, Moab was noted for its orchards and alfalfa fields and watermelon patches. A tranquil disconnect from the ‘real world.’**

But Moab always had its dreamers and schemers. Decades ago, the exploitation of natural resources fueled visions of glory and wealth. When a bookish geologist named Charlie Steen found uranium where it shouldn’t exist, he ignited the biggest boom in history. Thousands of instant prospectors descended on the once empty Four Corners region. Moab grew ten fold.



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The uranium industry stayed strong through the 70s. But then came Three Mile Island and Chernobyl and falling ore prices. By 1987, Moab’s economy hit rock bottom. Unemployment reached 20%. Empty homes were everywhere. Some thought Moab might dry up and blow away.

Moab’s Old Guard turned to any project they thought might revive the economy. They even pushed for a toxic waste incinerator but burning toxins failed to garner much support. That same autumn, a small article appeared in the local newspaper. It read: “Mountain biking in SE Utah is becoming a popular sport.” Hardly anybody noticed.

But two brothers, laid off in the uranium collapse, had an idea. Bill and Robin Groff opened a bike shop, Rim Cyclery, and started testing their pedal-powered Stumpjumpers on the rugged sandstone terrain. The following spring, National Geographic came to Moab, shooting images of the red rocks and the photographer took note of the bicyclists. When the story appeared, Hank Barlow was

impressed. A Marin County native (the Birthplace of Mountain Biking), Barlow had imagined creating a magazine exclusively about mountain biking and wanted something extraordinary for its premiere issue. This was it.

After that, everything changed. At first it was simply the culture shock. Lycra hadn’t made its way to Moab—some thought we’d been invaded by wheeled naked blue people. There was the inevitable clash with Old Moab—pickup trucks with teenaged rednecks swerved and swore as they passed the hapless bicyclists. A few fights broke out, but the negative sentiments were more bark than bite. The truth was, Moab suffered from severe economic depression and its residents were desperate. **We were easy pickins. The vanguard of bikers came from places like California and Colorado, young urban**

**professionals, affluent, and always in search of a good investment. Few could miss the plethora of “for sale” signs that lined residential streets. Inevitably a curious biker called a realtor and inquired about prices. Whoever it was must have been dumbstruck. Every home imaginable was available, but a house that sold for \$50,000 five years earlier could now be had for half. Word spread like ticks on a reservation dog.**

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**one; they simply couldn’t resist a great deal. Even a few realtors were offended. “They’d arrive with their checkbooks and ask, ‘What can we steal today?’” A Four-fer could be bought for under \$100,000**

**By 1990 the sea of ‘for sale’ signs faded. But many of the recently purchased houses remained empty. The new owners hired property managers and waited for the market to drive prices up. It was a pork belly housing boom. An absentee “neighbor” put a \$70,000 price tag on his \$25,000 cinder block shed. Even the realtors urged their clients to show restraint. But the new owners knew more than the professionals. They’d bought the homes outright. They’d simply wait for the market to come to them. A year later, the cinder-block shed owner got his asking price (In 2013 it would fetch \$250,000). Moab’s cachet as a New West town grew legs.**

Moab was now Mountain Bike Capital of the World and the development of residential housing projects accelerated. Ground was broken on a multitude of condo developments. They had such lovely names: Solano Vilejo....Mill Creek Pueblos....Coyote Run...Orchard Villa.

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“Because, son, there used to be an orchard here.”  
(Long pause) “Daddy...what’s an orchard?”

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Main Street was transformed as well. **Out of town investors, especially from Park City, Utah, saw an opportunity to buy much of the commercial downtown area. Boutiques and T-shirt shops sprouted everywhere.** Two of Moab’s three local greasy spoon cafes went belly up and national fast food franchises took their place. The Atomic Motel became the

Kokopelli Inn.

The economy boomed, but for whom? As Moab gained cachet, immigrant speculators, better financed to exploit the boom, flooded Moab. They opened competing businesses, and home-grown owners felt the pinch. When growing numbers of restaurants, for example, outpaced tourist visitation, businesses saw their slice of the economic pie shrink. But the new arrivals were better equipped to



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ride out the slowdown. With the Millennium, Moab scarcely resembled its old self. Even tourists complained that Moab was losing its “funky charm.” Other towns, like Fruita, Colorado and Sedona, Arizona, tried to wrestle the “Capital” claim from its Utah cousin.



Now Moab’s recreation-based business leaders and politicians sought to further transform Southeast Utah and reclaim its crown. In some cases, the biker-based business leaders became the politicians in the early 2000s.

Kim Schappert, had come to Moab in the late 80s with then-husband Hank Barlow. Remember Hank? He put Moab on the map when he created and published

“Mountain Bike.” Now Schappert was ready to go further. Invested in a local bike shop and elected to the Grand County Council, Schappert relentlessly pursued her vision to create a vast network of single-track trails throughout public lands near Moab. An advisory committee, Trail Mix, and later Moab Trails Alliance, with Schappert at the helm, worked with various federal and state agencies like the Forest Service, BLM, the Park Service, and the State Lands Trust. Cultivating connections at the state and federal level, the ambitious and aggressive Schappert was wildly successful.

Critics complained there were plenty of available trails—particularly those jeep roads from the 50s. But now, with little opposition, enthusiasts began cutting scores of miles of new single-track. Grand County Councilman Chris Baird explained, “Without developed trails our recreational assets would be limited to river running and scenic driving...trails form the backbone of the recreational assets that Grand County markets to the world.”

It was about “marketing assets.” And they were good at it. But they weren’t done. The most extravagant component is on the way. Schappert’s “showpiece” is the \$20 million “North Moab Recreation Transportation System,” now under construction. A new “Moab Hub” and a three mile “Elevated Bikeway” that parallels the Colorado River will be completed next fall. Its proponents insist that the bikeway is needed for “safety reasons.” But it rang a lot truer when Baird complained, “we started seeing newspaper and magazine articles about Moab going stale.”

The fear of “going stale” and losing its Money Mojo has fueled Moab’s transformation. The recreation industry completely dominates Moab’s economy now; any expression of dissent is almost traitorous. Years ago, environmental organizations worried about

tourist economy impacts. The Grand Canyon Trust’s Bill Hedden once wrote, “Industrial-strength recreation holds more potential to disrupt natural processes on a broad scale than just about anything else.” But now, Utah Greens turn a collective blind-eye to the onslaught. The concrete cantilevered bikeway didn’t even raise an eyebrow. The Kool-Aid has been drunk.

Where will Moab go from here? Probably in the same direction, but more so. More amenities. More promotion. **More Disneyesque.** Your biking experience will be planned and packaged and marketed and implemented with great



efficiency and professionalism, from start to finish. All you’ll have to do is swipe your card. **How much “adventure” do you want? What’s your credit limit?**

So that’s it. Moab, for many of us, is gone. We don’t really blame the bikes, or even the riders. They are merely conveyors of a consumer culture, driven by an insatiable thirst for the next Big

Thing—the next Boom. It’s an American story, repeated again and again. **More than a century ago, the writer Henry James could not believe his eyes as he crossed the continent. He wrote:**

You touch the great lonely land, only to plant upon it some ugliness (and), never dreaming of the grace of apology or contrition, you then proceed to brag with a cynicism of your own....I should owe you my grudge for every disfigurement and every violence, for every wound with which you have caused the face of the land to bleed. Oh for an unbridgeable abyss or an insuperable mountain.

In 2013, nothing in Moab is “insuperable” anymore.




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