

SANITIZING THE FACTS:

How BIKE Magazine Butchered an Honest Tale of Moab's Last 20 Years.

Jim Stiles

I am in most ways an un-ambitious writer. Even downright lazy. While I've contributed to other magazines and periodicals over the years, and finally threw a book together in 2007, I confine most of my scribbling to The Zephyr. Recently, my subject matter has been too controversial for most of the politically correct, Pablum-prone Progressive-leaning rags I sometimes contribute to. But every once in a while I long to write an essay that isn't preaching to my own little loyal choir—to step into the Lion's Den as it were and rattle some cages.

Such an opportunity came my way recently, or at least it appeared to.

In early June, we had just posted the new Zephyr and I had been away from the canyon country for way too long. So I headed west to my hideaway in San Juan County. My plan was to avoid the computer altogether and get back into the red rocks. There were a few secret places I hoped to re-visit.

But on June 3rd, I foolishly fired up my PC anyway. Waiting for me was an email from a man I had never heard of, Rob Story. He said he was a Zephyr "longtime listener/first-time caller" and his inquiry took me by surprise. He was contacting me on behalf of BIKE magazine, of all things, and was, in fact, its founding editor. Now he was putting together its 20th Anniversary Issue. Story made an offer that appealed to me on a couple levels. He wrote:

"I assume you might have ambivalent feelings toward mountain bikers, but we'd really like you to contribute to BIKE Magazine's 20th Anniversary Issue. We want to run a short feature on how Moab has changed/improved/Mormonized/whatever since the late-'80s explosion of mountain biking....I'm sure you possess anecdotes and pithy one-liners galore on this subject. You could write it as an editorial/opinion piece if you wish. We wouldn't even mind if you ranted against mountain bikers; we simply want a true, knowing piece."

The idea of writing a "true, knowing piece" about the recreation industry in Moab and how it transformed the community had a warped appeal to me. To lay this kind of Truth on an unsuspecting readership of Lycra-clad, neon gearheads was almost enough to make me drool. Amidst all those high gloss images of bikers and their machines, they might actually find some honesty. Imagine that.

Second, the magazine would actually pay a fair fee for the work. Three months ago I was becoming increasingly concerned about declining Zephyr revenues. We were down to 13 advertisers and several dozen Backbone supporters. When I write for other magazines, I'm lucky to make a hundred bucks. Often I donate the essays. I kept telling our readers we were just trying to keep beans on the table. But now, even beans started to look like luxury food. So when Story offered a dollar a word for an essay that could run to 1600 words, it seemed like an opportunity to write something I could be proud of and be compensated for as well—a combination almost heretofore unknown in my writing experience.

So I gave the idea serious consideration. The catch was, he needed the piece in eight days. And I had a catch as well. I wrote back:



from OUTSIDE MAGAZINE

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Rob Story, BIKE Magazine

(NOTE) You can read the unedited version of this story, with all the deleted components of the story highlighted, elsewhere in this issue, titled:

'OH FOR AN INSUPERABLE MOAB'

Indeed a week's worth of work had been hacked to pieces. Entire paragraphs vanished. In my version, I explained the transformation of Moab in the late 80s and the pork belly housing boom that followed, when mountain bikers came to Moab to ride and left town the next day, owning four homes for less than \$100K. DELETED.

My story began like this:

"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."

"You must be a very open minded person to ask me, of all people, to write about the influence of mountain biking in Moab. Right now, a 9 million dollar building project is underway, creating a concrete and steel "Elevated River Bikeway" that runs, not across, but parallel to, the Colorado River. It is an abomination; yet, few in 'New Moab,' a place I scarcely recognize anymore, expressed any objections."

"Moab is a zoo," I said. I told Story I would take the assignment, but I warned him, "it would hardly be a piece that even remotely suggests that becoming the 'Mountain Bike Capital of the World' was a positive experience for most of us who lived there before 1987."

Story replied simply, "Awesome, Jim! Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead! Thanks again for writing this; can't wait to read it."

And so, for the next week or so, I hunkered down at my keyboard and hammered out a history of Moab's last 20 years—a sad and sardonic tale of how my old home got from

When Story was done, this was the opener:

"Moab had already begun dominating mountain bikers' daydreams when this magazine launched. Indeed, we featured the ninth Canyonlands Fat Tire Festival in Bike's first issue. Even then, in 1993, Moab was so internationally renowned one had to wait behind brightly plumaged Germans wearing roadie jerseys on the Slickrock trail—easily the most famous path on the planet, then and now."

I talked about the impacts of recreation and tourism on the land and included this quote from the Grand Canyon Trust's Bill Hedden: "Industrial-strength recreation holds more potential to disrupt natural processes on a broad scale than just about anything else." And how Greens had caved to the tourist dollars. DELETED.

While Story didn't seem to have much use for his younger peers (he called them "mawkish and gooey."), they won him over to their point of view. Their perspective, he explained, "doesn't jibe with the piece you submitted."

Story came up with fluff like this:

"These days, you don't even have to pedal to see that recreation has transformed Moab in ways uranium mining never could. You can tour the town with Moab Trolley Tours. You can sip Uintah Blanc at Castle Creek Winery. You can get a hot stone massage at Spa Moab. In addition to the expected bike rentals and tours, there's also Moab Mountain Bike Instruction, which offers private lessons for just \$100 per hour! We don't know anybody who would ever pay for such a thing."

He added little factoids like:

"According to a Colorado State University study, mountain bikers annually add \$8.4 to \$8.8 million to the small town's economy. The study, released in 1997, showed that the average mountain biker stayed four days in Moab, along with 2.74 other friends. Whether hotel-dwelling gourmet or brown-bagging camper, each Moab rider spends about \$200 there."

Had I known BIKE wanted factoids, I could have provided a plethora. For example:

- * An average home that sold for \$30,000 in 1985 now fetches close to \$300,000, making home ownership for people of modest incomes virtually impossible.
- * Of the 2712 homes in Grand County, barely half are occupied by the owners. A fourth of them sit vacant, kept available for occasional recreational visits.
- * The cost to rent a home has skyrocketed as well—from \$300 a month in the early 90s to often more than a thousand now.
- * Yet the median income is below the state average.



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In the original essay, I explained the latest insult to the canyon backcountry, as a small core of Moab bike activists push to construct more single-track bike trails into wild country where no trails had existed. I described the new \$10 million "Moab Hub" and the "Elevated River Bikeway." The outrage turned to mush in the article:

"Still, mountain bikers can be fickle. Once incredible trails began popping up in other parts of the Four Corners (like Sedona, Cortez, and Fruita, to name three of the finest networks), riders started grumbling that Moab may enjoy the best sandstone riding anywhere, but it could use more singletrack."

The backstory on the Elevated Bikeway disappeared altogether. Rob Story made one



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concession; perhaps the most obnoxious line in the 'new' piece was his absurd declaration:

"The next time someone tries to tell you mountain biking hasn't helped Moab, laugh in his face."

He removed the line, at my insistence and left a few of the more aggressive passages from the original. Specifically, he allowed a quote from the 19th Century novelist, Henry James, to remain. It was key to the essay and, in fact, summed up the story nicely. James 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."

Now, the finished product was just plain weird. While the byline indicated the piece was co-written, it read like an essay at war with its own conscience, throwing out cheerful platitudes one moment, while grieving over the town's loss of identity the next. As Story reminded me, it was "too late" to make changes, so all I could hope was that, at the very least, readers would come away bewildered and confused.

I thought the editing was over. I never again heard from Story or the other editors about the content of the essay. I assumed Story's revision would at least make it to hard copy. But again, I was wrong. Without discussion, his younger, "mawkish and gooey" peers went to work with their own red pencils.

The Henry James quote, the key to the story, vanished. Other lines were deleted. Any references to Disneyland comparisons were chopped. Key words were altered. In the

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end, 90% of the 'hard stuff' in my version was deleted. A few lines slipped by their editing fingers. My guess is, either they didn't understand the comment to begin with, or perhaps found no issue with an idea that would make some of us recoil in revulsion.

The concluding paragraph in the final cut was still a line I wrote:

"The Moab that preceded the mountain-bike phenomenon is gone. The old timers 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."

Of the 1641 words I submitted to BIKE, I would hardly have expected them to find that sentiment any more palatable than the others they cut. And yet, maybe that's the point of all this.

In their minds, is it possible that a "consumer culture, driven by an insatiable thirst for the next big thing," is something to be desired and not loathed? Despite all that's happened to Moab, you can still, it's true, "sip Uintah Blanc at Castle Creek Winery" ... and... "get a hot stone massage at Spa Moab."

Is that what really makes a true community? For "New Moab," the answer is 'yes.'