

road to nowhere

HOW MOUNTAIN BIKERS IN
VERNAL, UTAH, STOOD UP TO
BIG OIL AND GAS ... AND WON

WHEN MOUNTAIN BIKERS THINK ABOUT HIGH-desert heaven, this is what they talk about: red-rock arches and plateaus, free camping anywhere you want, singletrack peeling across the landscape, a setting orange sun and not a building in sight.

It's late October and five of us are riding a trail called Retail Sale at McCoy Flats, a 40-mile network of roller-coaster ribbons on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) property in northeastern Utah's Uintah Basin. A handful of local riders built the trails starting 18 years ago, though 'built' might be an overstatement. Mostly they just slid their sneakers along existing antelope trails until the tracks were ready for bike tires. The singletrack turned out to be fast and swoopy and fun, drawing riders from across the American West, Canada and even Europe. But anyone who rides McCoy Flats knows the surroundings are just as much of a treasure as the trails. It feels like you could be a hundred miles from the nearest 7-Eleven—when in fact downtown Vernal, Utah—one of the most infamous oil towns in America—sits just a few miles to the east.





Tonight, the dirt is grippy and the air at 5,500 feet above sea level is a crisp reminder that winter is bearing down. We are nearing the end of a 90-minute loop when two locals leading the way, Troy Lupcho and Tildon Jones, stop to point something out.

"Those survey sticks are the centerline of the bypass," Lupcho says, stretching his index finger toward a pair of nondescript wooden markers 50 yards away.

The bypass, also known as the Ashley Valley Energy Route (AVER), has been a hot topic in Vernal for the past two years and a simmering one for nearly a decade. Originally proposed as a way to get big rigs off of Main Street—as many as 8,000 trucks carrying hazardous materials pass through downtown Vernal daily in busy times—once momentum to build it picked up in 2014, the bypass turned into a rallying cry for mountain bikers and business owners who feared it would ruin a way of life that took decades to create.

The Uintah County commissioners had 13 potential routes from which to choose. They favored the only one that intersected the trail network at McCoy Flats. Suddenly the 50 or so locals who ride there, as well as hundreds more regulars who drive in from places like Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and Park City, Utah, faced a daunting prospect: a four-lane highway running through the middle of their crown-jewel trail system.

An environmental assessment (EA) by the BLM to create a right-of-way through McCoy

LEFT: Local high school racer Brennen Deegan leads the author through one of the many unique red-rock formations that line Vernal's trails.

BELOW: Tildon Jones played a key role in preserving the trails at McCoy Flats.





Flats is still in the works. But even if the BLM approves the route, it is highly unlikely the road would be built any time soon. Last fall, with construction slated to begin in the spring and the county having been approved to receive \$15 million for the first phase of the road, commissioners unexpectedly tabled the project. Some of their decision had to do with the fact that truck traffic has slowed with the oil and gas industry, which plunged from record heights in 2008 to arguably the worst bust in Vernal's history. But mostly they just listened to a group of angry business owners and mountain bikers who, in an improbable turn of events that still has some shaking their heads in amazement, stood up to big oil and won.

ROUGHLY 35,000 PEOPLE LIVE IN the Ashley Valley around Vernal, including 10,000 in the city proper. Suffice it to say you don't see a lot of bike racks. So on our second morning, when photographer Scott Markewitz and I began following Lupcho out to a trail network

called Red Fleet, our two vehicles stuck out. As Lupcho passed a truck pulling a heavy load of drilling equipment, he saw the truck's passenger window roll down out of the corner of his eye. A second later, he heard a piercing bang. He pulled over to find his rear window shattered. There was no question in his mind that someone in the truck had shot or thrown something to shatter his window, possibly because of his bike.

As Lupcho dealt with the mess in a vacant parking lot, Markewitz and I continued on our way to meet Brennen Deegan, a 16-year-old, part-time employee at Lupcho's Main Street bike shop, Altitude Cycle. Lupcho called Deegan and told him about the broken window. I brought it up again when we got to the trailhead, still kind of incredulous that it happened. Deegan smirked. "Welcome to Vernal," he said.

Deegan is like a lot of kids in Vernal, in that his family's income is tied to mineral extraction. His dad works as a mechanic in the oil fields; his mother drives a school bus. He started moun-

tain biking two-and-a-half years ago and has lost 40 pounds since then, finishing ninth at last year's state championship. He says most boys at his high school play football or wrestle and that he takes some flak for mountain biking, especially since his stocky build is suited for those sports. "It's kind of frowned on at school," he says. "Just because it's not the normal thing to do. But I like doing it, so I'm going to keep doing it."

Vernal's economy has mirrored the rise and fall of oil since the 1940s. Extraction is its beating heart. So when the oil companies say they want a road that lets their trucks skip the stoplights and 30 mile-per-hour speed limits on Main Street, usually that happens—and it gets paid for by royalties from oil and gas. Vernal's oil production, however, is not what it once was. "One year ago, there were over 60 rigs in this area. Now there are four," says Rod Severe, a 6-foot-8 truck salesman at Showalter Ford. Severe dabbled in the oil business and made good money, much more than some of the roughnecks who drop out of high school and immediately

start pulling in \$100,000 a year. But he has seen the downsides too.

"Six months ago, we had young kids come in here with tens of thousands of dollars. The cash deals were amazing," Severe says in his showroom. "Now some of those kids are overextended and can't pay their bills. It's very sad."

In 2008, at the height of the last boom, you couldn't get a hotel room in town. Restaurants closed because they couldn't find enough employees. Now, sales tax in Vernal is down 20 percent and local officials are bracing for mass foreclosures. Former mayor Gary Showalter, who has lived in Vernal for 60 years and helped rally the business community against the bypass, describes the state of Vernal's economy as "the living shits."

"I've been through four major busts," Showalter says, "but this is the worst I've seen it."

In many locals' minds, President Obama's policy is to blame—specifically his decision to rescind 77 oil and gas lease offers in the area when he got into office. A smoothie shop called I [Heart]

Drilling, a few doors down from Altitude Cycle, posts separate prices for conservatives (\$5.95) and liberals (\$6.95) as a sort of grassroots protest. When I walk in and order my smoothie, three men are eating waffles at a small round table. One is the owner, George Burnett.

"Are you the only shop in Vernal that charges liberals more?" I ask.

"I think I'm the only one in the nation," Burnett says proudly. "I need to promote it and get more people to do it. I don't charge it to be mean, it's just that liberal policies are costing me a lot of money."

When I let it slip that I'm from Colorado, one of Burnett's buddies quips, "Oh, you *deserve* to pay more." They ask what I'm doing in town, and I tell them I'm writing a story for *Bike*. Suddenly Burnett's tone changes. "Hey, well, my son and I love the trails out at McCoy Flats. We ride there all the time," he says. The portly man who said I should pay more pipes up, "Make sure you write a good article, because we need everyone to come ride out there so there's not a four-lane highway someday."



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Party train; dinosaur country; Troy Lupcho at Altitude Cycle, the bike shop he opened on Vernal's Main Street two decades ago.

TOP: Lupcho led the charge to turn old antelope trails at McCoy Flats into legit singletrack; oil worker-turned-truck salesman Rod Severe has witnessed the economic effects of the oil industry's highs and lows in Vernal.



Vernal hasn't had the greatest press recently. Two years ago, a local midwife blamed a slew of infant deaths on fracking pollution, which stirred the town hornet nest and resulted in feature stories in the Los Angeles Times and *Rolling Stone*—the latter under a headline that read: “What’s killing the babies of Vernal, Utah?” But if getting to know the people of Vernal teaches you anything, it’s that they are more resilient than most.

Two hours after his rear windshield got shattered for no good reason, Lupcho is part of a seven-person group whipping up and down prime singletrack at Red Fleet. I ask if he’s still steaming since he found out the window will cost \$800 to replace. He shoots me a glance and a grin. “Not when I’m on my bike.”

IN MANY WAYS, LUPCHO IS LIKE THE OIL INDUSTRY. HIS 47 years have been filled with booms and busts, crashes and comebacks. He grew up in a single-wide trailer in Kemmerer, Wyoming, before his family moved to Vernal his sophomore year of high school. “I wept,” he recalls. “This was not where I wanted to be at all. It was 1983, an all-time bust. I swore that the day I graduated, I would leave.”

Lupcho had just started racing BMX bikes. He poured himself into it and shot up the ranks. In 1984, he won the 16 and Advanced World Championship in Las Vegas, Nevada, live on ESPN. Six months later, he fell asleep at the wheel and crashed into a used-car lot on Vernal’s Main Street. He screamed for an hour until someone heard him, pinned inside by twisted metal. He had extensive internal and facial injuries, and his foot was partially severed. Doctors wanted to amputate it, but when his parents arrived at the hospital, his father refused to let them. “My dad knew that for me not to be able to ride my bike would be the end of my life,” says Lupcho, who underwent 20 surgeries to save his leg.

After a stint in the Navy and a lot of drinking and darkness, Lupcho joined his older brother in Salt Lake City, Utah, and got into road racing. One day, while visiting his parents in Vernal in 1996, he saw a For Rent sign for a unit in a strip mall. He’d been looking for the right place to open a bike shop. At \$175 per month, he couldn’t pass it up. He has owned and operated Altitude Cycle ever since.

Three years later, Lupcho was \$40,000 in debt, there still wasn’t a trail in the area, the economy had busted again

LEFT: Tildon Jones samples what he helped save at McCoy Flats.

BELOW: The owner of I [Heart] Drilling isn’t shy about his politics, neither in business name nor pricing practices.





ABOVE: Altitude Cycle has been a mainstay in downtown Vernal for 20 years.

RIGHT: Following the rules and the leader at McCoy Flats.

and his father had just died from hernia surgery three months into retirement. Lupcho had stopped riding his bike while trying to keep the business afloat. He was in a bad place again. His brother urged him to get pedaling. He began exploring the dirt roads at McCoy Flats and one morning stumbled upon an antelope trail.

"I hopped on it, and suddenly I was like, *'We can build trail. That's what I need to do, I need to build trails that I can ride on,'*" Lupcho says. "And I was thinking about me selfishly: I need a place to ride my bike, otherwise I'm going to end up in a bad place again."

The antelope trail became Got Milk, the first of nine in the McCoy inventory. None required tools or money to build, only time and a sense of flow. When Lupcho and Utah State professor Rich Etchberger had built enough to comprise a network, they put together a trail map and began hawking them at Lupcho's shop. The BLM found out and told the mountain bikers to stop building trails on public land, which they did. However, that interaction ultimately led to the BLM's incorporating the McCoy Flats trails into its network and building an \$82,000 kiosk and trailhead facility to legitimize the destination.

It was a landmark move in a town where people track oil prices on their smartphones, where county commission meetings begin with a prayer, where the lobby television is always tuned to Fox News. But while politics can get sticky in Vernal, if there's one place where they disappear, it's on the





TOP LEFT: Post-ride brews and a bonfire behind Altitude Cycle; an innovative flusher inside Lupcho's shop; strong opinions abound in Vernal.

ABOVE: Uintah County Sheriff Vance Norton and many of his fellow cops ride at McCoy Flats to counter the stress of their jobs.

trails at McCoy Flats. You'll find oil and gas workers riding, liberals like Lupcho and Jones, high schoolers like Deegan and a growing contingent of lawmen who comprise the most unlikely subset among Vernal's fat-tire cognoscenti. Led by Uintah Sheriff Vance Norton, 51, and his 62-year-old chief deputy, Ed Spann (the ringleader), 15 cops organize group rides via text, sometimes meeting at 6 a.m. after working until 2 a.m. "It's perfect to just get away from work and go somewhere else in your head," Sheriff Norton says.

Ten of the 37 employees in Norton's department are mountain bikers. He knew exactly what was at stake with McCoy Flats—and not just because his wife, Sonja, is the mayor of Vernal. "I've heard a lot of people say, 'Well, it's just a trail. You can divert this or that, and make it somewhere else,'" Norton says. "But we have a great thing going out there."

Lupcho, of course, is the glue that ties everyone together, including tourists who inject coveted outside spending into Vernal's economy. By opposing the bypass, he knows he has lost friends in town. But such is the price of protecting everything he has ever had.

"My dad always instilled this in me: It's not what you take, it's what you leave behind," Lupcho says. "For me, that has been McCoy Flats."

IT WAS NEVER AS SIMPLE AS JUST building a shortcut, even if that's how the bypass began—as a way to get big rigs from Highway 40 on the east side of town to Highway 40 on the west side—where they have a straight shot to Salt Lake—without looping up through Main Street. All told, the road would run for 13 miles and cost about \$80 million to build. Oil companies, trucking companies and residents in neighborhoods that see heavy truck traffic were all in favor of AVER. It remained uncertain whether the road would only serve hazmat carriers or all vehicles, but the latter possibility is what rankled business owners, many of whom are all too familiar with the fates of Price, Green River and Nephi—three Utah towns that diverted traffic out of their downtown cores and suffered devastating economic consequences.

The mountain bikers did everything they could. They formed an IMBA chapter, handed out flyers, created a website to spread the word. Lupcho, Jones and others attended meetings and spoke to the commissioners, pushing alternative routes to no avail.

A handful of factors made them think something fishy was taking place behind the scenes. A well-known developer bought a bunch of land along the proposed route even



though it wasn't zoned for commercial-industrial use. The mountain bikers say they never got a detailed explanation for why alternative routes weren't selected, though Mayor Norton says pushing the right-of-way south of McCoy Flats, as they requested, would have increased costs by millions of dollars. And in February 2015, Cheri McCurdy, the director of the Uintah Transportation Special Service District—the primary agency planning the bypass—resigned under mysterious circumstances (the *Deseret News* later reported McCurdy's alleged improprieties were unrelated to the bypass).

The BLM, which has to approve the road for it to move forward, estimated the cost of building a trail network equivalent to McCoy Flats would be around \$500,000. Still, the agency accepted 206 letters in favor of the McCoy route and only 35 in opposition. Two BLM employees who were crucial to getting McCoy Flats incorporated into the agency's trail network, Jason West and Dan Gilfillan, resigned within a couple weeks of each other in September 2014, at least partly due to their

frustration surrounding the bypass. I talked to Lupcho at various points over the past year, and each time, he seemed more resigned to the fact that the road was going to happen.

"Everyone's gone from the boom; this town is a ghost town," Lupcho said last May. "And what's left is a great recreation resource. With the river rafting and the camping and the biking and the hiking and Ashley National Forest being 30 minutes away, it's amazing. But the town doesn't support that. It's oil and gas. It always has been, and it always will be."

Finally, last September, after publicly supporting the bypass for more than a year, Mayor Norton changed her stance. She says she had an epiphany that the state might someday deem the bypass the official route through Vernal even if the city says it's only for hazmat trucks—a designation that would cripple Main Street businesses. With supporters of the road having gone quiet and mineral-lease revenue drying up, the city asked the county to table the project. Commissioner Mark Raymond, who oversees all transportation-related issues,

ABOVE: Brennen Deegan drops into nature's playground.

BELOW: Uintah County Commissioner Mark Raymond.





TOP: Lupcho, Jones and the author pause to admire a majestic McCoy Flats sunset.

ABOVE: A makeshift shrine to Vernal lore at the sign for Jackalope to Serpendipity, one of McCoy Flats' signature loops.

obliged their request, even though it went against his personal opinion. "I tried very hard to do the right thing," he said at his office one day. "It actually only crossed their trails in two locations. It was very close to a couple of other trails, but the ones where it crossed, we offered to put in very nice underpasses." He sighed. "But you can't please everybody."

EVEN THOUGH THE BYPASS IS NO longer an immediate threat, Lupcho, Jones and the rest of the local riding community know it could still happen. As such, they speak in guarded tones about their success. "The BLM could give them a right-of-way, and even though they're not going to build it right now, if oil comes back and they're flush with money, they would have a right-of-way ready to go and they could break ground as soon as they have the money," Jones says. Lupcho, for his part, believes a bypass is "inevitable" and will happen within 15 years. He just hopes it doesn't destroy McCoy Flats.

Once the BLM completes its EA and officially recognizes the right-of-way, the route

will be good for five years, though the county could request an extension. Still, Raymond, who will run for a third term later this year that could keep him in office until 2020, says public pushback was enough to dismiss the project in his mind. "As long as I'm commissioner, we'll never build that road," he says.

On our last day in town, Markewitz and I set out on one of McCoy's signature loops: Jackalope to Serpendipity. Jackalope, which would be one of the trails potentially ruined by the bypass, brings us on a sustained climb to a bluff overlooking the valley. We admire the grandeur, snap a few photos, then drop into a long, luge-like descent that spits us out at high speed onto an open prairie below.

About that time, a herd of antelope appears. A dozen of them sprint alongside us, bounding through the sagebrush at the same speed we are riding, their antlers and white rear ends bobbing up and down above the flora. I feel like an honorary wild animal, which seems fitting at McCoy Flats. The antelope turn back just before we reach the road, perhaps wary of traffic and civilization. We continue onto a different trail, as pristine and empty as the last. ▣