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Cover overleaf detail photos by John G. White, taken at the Healy House Museum, Leadville, Colorado
The COLORADO TRAIL

Photos by Peter Runyon (top) and Buzz Soard

From dream to reality, the year-round recreational trail between Denver and Durango takes shape

Story by David Sumner
When completed, the 480 mile Colorado Trail system

Photos on this page by Blair Hansen, David Sumner, Judy Sumner and the US Forest Service
will reach across the very backbone of the Rockies

In 1973 it was only a dream, but a good one: the Colorado Trail, a 350-mile intermediate hiking route from Denver to Durango crossing six National Forests along the way. The idea was to create a genuine recreational trail to serve increasing numbers of hikers, horseback riders and ski tourers anxious to get out into the high country and experience the mountains first hand.

At that time no map lines had been drawn; no work had been done in the field. The trail had neither a program nor an organization to guide its destiny. It was little more than a dream of a few visionary men and women in search of fulfillment—uncertain, open and hoping.

Three short years later, all this has changed save the basic idea, and the trail is now growing far beyond the sketchy notions and blueprints of 1973. Some examples of what has happened:

• Well over a thousand volunteers have already worked on the trail exploring possible routes, surveying them and doing the necessary, backbreaking work to make the path a reality.
• Over 100 miles have been inventoried, and some 60 miles of trail are at least partially complete.
• As the trail has taken shape, planners have drawn a firmer bead on the main system which has grown to 480 miles in length. A large number of secondary access trails will add substantially to this, creating an entire network rather than a single path.
• The non-profit Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation has been formed to shape and direct the development of the trail system, and also to launch an array of educational programs which may well become larger than the network itself. This summer, six Colorado colleges and universities are offering courses along the trail. Many high school students have already been there.
• A three-year, $306,000 grant from the Gates Foundation has assured that the bulk of the system will be complete by the end of 1980.
• Plans are firming up to extend the trail right into metro Denver via the rapidly developing Platte River Greenway, a 10-mile route of city walking and bicycle paths. Down the road is the likelihood that the Colorado Trail will eventually reach north to join Wyoming's Mountain Man Trails network.

"The possibilities for the Colorado Trail are expanding faster than any of us expected," explains Bill Lucas, former Rocky Mountain Regional Forester and newly designated President of the Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation. "The idea is stimulating to almost everyone who comes in touch with it, and many people are adding their own thoughts. This is going to be a continually evolving thing. That's the only way it can really work."

To go back to the beginning: the initial concept of the Colorado Trail was developed in 1973 by US Forest Service personnel and a handful of private citizens. Basic elements at the time were three: first, it would be a dual-purpose, year-round trail serving hikers and
horsemen in the summer and ski
Tourers in the winter; second, it
would be designed for the richest
possible recreational and educa-
tional experiences, and third, it
would be a network with many
short loops and spurs so that peo-
ple could hike as much or as little
as they wished. The plan was not
to make a long, difficult, break-
neck route, but rather one that
was strictly intermediate at its
toughest.

That first summer, the initial
reconnoitering took place. Work-
ing under Forest Service super-
vision, four crews of college and
high school students set out to
begin surveying possible routes
west from Denver through the
mountains toward the historic
mining camp of Breckenridge.

In many ways, the early work
of these 30 young people has set
the tone of the Trail. They headed
into the hills schooled to be alert
to everything of interest they
might find: elk trails, historic cow
camps, glacial till, wood lillies, old
forest fire scars, hawk nests, tim-
ber cuts, grazing allotments, rab-
bit scrapes. The idea was to design
a true recreational trail.

The need for this has been well
demonstrated; it’s also becoming
more acute. In the Rockies, the
number of hikers heading off into
the woods, valleys and mountains
has been increasing about 20 per-
cent annually. Across the nation,
a total of some ten million hikers
are in search of new paths on
which to stride out. And yet, in
the entire US there are only
about 100,000 miles of trail — less
than the total rural foot and horse
paths in England and Wales.

“Give thanks,” recently wrote
Forest Service researchers Rob-
ert Lucas and Robert Rinehart,
“that not everyone hikes, and that
all hikers do not hit the trail at
the same time. If they did, they
could all hold hands.”

Despite the growing demand
and the tightening pinch, trail
miles across the US are declining.
This is especially true on the Na-
tional Forests; there mileage has
dropped 33 percent. Many trails
have been developed into roads,
while others have simply been
abandoned.

Certainly more trails are needed,
regionally as well as nationally.
However, building routes suited
to modern recreational styles is
another matter — one that only
now is receiving the attention it
needed a decade ago. Today, though
hikers are fanning out
along one path after another, pre-
cious few of them realize that
hardly a yard was designed with
their needs in mind. Even now
planners are groping for ideas on
true recreational trails. This is
because, historically, all trails
have been designed for efficiency
rather than fun, interest or en-
lightenment.

Trails in the Rockies go far, far
back into prehistory — long before
ancient man first entered the
region perhaps 12,000 years ago.
Trail makers in those dim days
were animals — mammoths, cam-
els, prongbucks — and they made
their routes with instinctive prac-
ticality. Time has long since ob-
literated the last signs of these,
but today’s elk and bighorn sheep
trails show what these earliest
paths might have been like.

For example, elk trails, even
on steep and forested slopes, are
almost always gentle, rarely an-
gling sharply upward. Climbing,
after all, is grueling, and no elk
in its normal daily round wants
to overexert itself. Elk paths also
lead to sites of practical impor-
tance — low passes to adjoining
valleys, sheltered bedding areas,
water and meadows.

When Indians wore mountain
trails of their own, these too were
made for utility — tracing the
most sensible paths between hunt-
ing grounds and encampments.

White man did likewise. Great
Western routes like the Oregon,
Overland and Santa Fe Trails
avoided the high Rockies alto-
gether because the terrain was too
up and down and broken for pack
trains, let alone Conestoga wag-
ons. Early mountain trailblazers
— Pike, Bridger, Carson, Fremont,
Gunnison — searched for the low
passes which were the most prac-
tical routes through the high
country.

As the region was settled from
the late 1850s onward, the same
necessity prevailed and trails were
designed to get people from Point
A to Point B as efficiently as pos-
sible. Shepherders created moun-
tain trails (called “drive ways”) to
move their flocks as easily as
possible from one choice grazing
area to the next. Prospectors and
miners blazed, hacked and blasted
routes to their strikes.

Even most 20th century trails
in the Rockies have their direct
purpose. Many of today’s National
Forest trails were built for fire
control, and most early recrea-
tional routes were insistently des-
tination oriented.

For all of these trails, the idea
of a route which would bring rich
hiking experiences along the way
was quite foreign. The ruling no-
tion was just to get somewhere —
and never mind how so long as it
was practical. On the whole this
has made for plain dull hiking.

Today, in fact, there is hardly a
trail in the Rockies designed with
“the trail experience” in mind —
the idea that the true pleasures
of hiking are the joys and discov-
eries en route without worrying
where the trail leads.

Colorado Trail planners aim to
help remedy this; they are explor-
ing the cutting edge of trail design
in the US today — doing things
that, a mere ten years ago, would
have been written off as both
meaningless and silly. A glance at
the most advanced part of the
system, the nearly completed
route from the foothills south of
Denver to 10,000-foot Kenosha
Pass, bears this out. Here the
Colorado Trail does the following:

◆ Wanders through the Little
Scraggy Burn, site of a 400-acre
forest fire back in 1967. Hikers
can see what fire does to a forest
and nature’s remedy afterwards.

◆ Veers up to panoramic over-
looks at the prominent Chair
Rocks and Little Scrappy Peak.

- Digresses into the Shingle Mill timber sale area where ponderosa pines were selectively cut in 1968 so trail travelers can see what happens after the chainsaws leave the forest.

- Meanders through a variety of ecosystems (north and south slope, riparian, meadowland, lodgepole pine, aspen, spruce-fir).

- Traverses wildlife areas including everything from anthills to elk trails.

- Passes within clear view of several unique geologic areas.

- Deliberately takes in several historic sites including the ghost town of South Platte (where there’s an old hotel, one house and an early day railroad grade) and the Rock Creek cow camp (where only a delapidated cabin and several corrals remain from this turn-of-the-century site).

As the Colorado Trail system bends southwest toward Durango, the route takes in more of the vast natural and historic diversity of the state’s mountains and valleys. When the trail moves beyond Kenosha Pass, the exact route remains open to the combined judgments and discoveries of the many people who are now working hard to develop the system.

To date, this is where the educational dimension of this project has been most prominent. High school and college groups have been in the field from the beginning, and the extent of their participation is expanding. Heading the development and coordination of these programs has been Mrs. Gudrun (“Gudi”) Gaskill, who until recently was the Mountain Trails Foundation’s field director. The list of courses and seminars she helped shape is impressive.

Many Denver and Colorado Springs area high schools have had sessions along the trail. At suburban Denver’s Arvada West High School, for example, about 100 students yearly enroll in a “senior seminar” where they are involved in designing their own education. One part of this course takes the students out into the “real world” to explore vocational possibilities, another to become involved in community service.

Both these requirements have been fulfilled on the Colorado Trail; last fall, a group of 26 seniors traveled to Kenosha Pass where they learned first hand what forest recreational work can be like. Their job was to build a segment of the trail, and for four solid days they cleared away trees and brush, put in a bridge, wielded pick and shovel — and also discussed the meaning of what they were doing.

On the college level, chances of involving students in the actual trail planning have already been many. Dr. Hugo Fervau of the science faculty at Western State College in Gunnison has had classes in the field for the past several years — performing environmental inventories, analyzing possible impacts of the trail and participating in a winter monitoring program.

Thanks in part to a special Colorado Trail seminar for educators held last fall, five more colleges are now offering academic credit for various kinds of work on the new route. Denver’s Regis College lists a six-week field biology course — with four of those weeks to be spent on the trail. This summer, the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs will have 15 students along a proposed segment of the trail in the Mosquito Range near Breckenridge. The group will inventory a broad array of physiographic, environmental and historic factors — everything from lichen to log cabins to lateral moraines.

Still a third educational dimension is now just starting to take shape along the trail. Outdoor living it’s called and it involves a person’s learning about leadership, the use of authority and the nature of his own inner strength. This is the kind of experience the famed Outward Bound Schools have been specializing in for years, and it is no coincidence that the Trail’s Foundation and the Colorado Outward Bound School are already exploring possible ways of working together.

“We want this trail to become a 480-mile long outdoor classroom,” explains Foundation President Bill Lucas. “Five years from now, I can see us putting out a whole syllabus of courses you can take on the trail.”
However, formal education is but one of the Colorado Trail’s many opportunities. If students find they gain from their experiences counting deer pellets, studying soils and clearing brush, the many volunteers who are helping make the trail are also reaping their own special benefits.

"The people are doing it themselves," notes Lucas, and he goes on to point out why volunteer workers are the only way to bring the Colorado Trail from dream to fact. "It’s just not a matter of Forest Service budgeting, which allows precious little money these days for recreational trails. It’s even more important to have the people involved in the whole creative process."

One of the most astonishing things about the trail to date has been the steady flow of volunteer energy — people from all over the US who have come as families as well as individually to work on the trail. Many have been recruited as members of the Volunteer Conservation Corps (VCC), a unique and growing government-private program with administrative offices in Colorado Springs. The basic idea is to put together compatible teams of co-workers, give them a skilled and knowledgeable leader, and put them on the trail.

For many, this is a summer vacation — a chance to get out in the woods with a compatible group of people and do something worthwhile. However, statements from this year’s VCC applicants (they range in age from 13 into the 70s) show a wide range of interests.

"By participating in the VCC," writes one, "I feel I will be contributing to the preservation of our wildlands."

"I’m interested in park design and landscape architecture," adds another. "The VCC will give me valuable practical experience."

"If people who hike and camp in the National Forests don’t get active," asserts an asphalt roofer from San Francisco, "then we’re definitely going to lose them."

The last point echoes the basic philosophy of the VCC and also an essential element of the Colorado Trail. "People have to accept responsibility for the land they are using," explains Bill Rusin of the VCC. "It’s time for a whole new philosophy of land use. We hikers, campers, canoeists, horsemen — all of us — can no longer sit back and expect someone else to build trails and clean up."

The VCC will have two 25-person camps on the Colorado Trail this summer — one near Kenosha Pass, one in the high, rumpled foothills near Baily. But that hardly scratches the surface of the total 1976 effort on the route. The Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation is also organizing its own volunteer camps and has another 60 workers signed on.

HELP BUILD THE TRAIL

If you want to help build the Colorado Trail, send in your name and address and tell us how you would like to work on the Colorado Trail. Each letter will be forwarded to the Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation for their review and reply. Write to:

Help Build the Trail
c/o Colorado Magazine
7190 W. 14th Avenue
Denver, Colorado 80215

Over 15 Boy and Explorer Scout groups are scheduled for two and four-day stints. Kiwanis and other service club groups are looking for ways to pitch in and certainly won’t go begging.

All told, Gudi Gaskill figures there will be at least 800 volunteers and students in the field between Denver and Durango this summer. Work on the South Platte-to-Kenosha Pass segment (about 78 miles) will be primarily trail building. However, from Kenosha Pass south and west for the next 400 miles, emphasis will be on data gathering, surveying and route planning.

Then in 1977, the big push will come as the gritty physical work gets under way on a major scale. Present organization plans target some 4,000 man-days of work (most of it volunteer) on the trail in both 1977 and 1978.

In addition to what they learn about themselves, their fellow workers and the natural world, all who pitch in will also discover that the creation of something like the Colorado Trail is a massive, stimulating and surprisingly complex challenge. Clearing brush, limbing trees, moving rocks, building a bridge, putting up signs, checking for elk beds, studying plant associations, clearing a parking lot, installing pit toilets and horse corrals, researching local history in a nearby courthouse, excavating an early Indian campsite: All this is a part of the making of the Colorado Trail.

Down the road, probably in 1978, yet another dimension of the trail system will begin with the building of the first Colorado Mountain Hut — a Rocky Mountain version of the highly popular trail shelters and hostels of New Hampshire’s White Mountains and the European Alps. That same year, major work on the locating and cutting of feeder trails will commence in earnest, and the Foundation also plans to have a formal educational program established.

"This can be a major breakthrough," Bill Lucas stresses, describing the basic philosophy of the Colorado Trail. "We’re really talking about something which will symbolize and focus where the people of this nation must go as we pass our Bicentennial. We’re saying to people in Colorado and also to visitors: ‘Let’s change our life-styles here; let’s hike and ride and ski tour; let’s use less energy and take more time. Let’s slow down and learn about this land of ours and how best to care for it.’"

No question about it: The Colorado Trail is already well on its way to becoming much, much more than a simple path in the woods.