

The Colorado Trail

Formative Years Remembered by Bill Lucas

As I look back, The Colorado Trail was and is a “field of dreams.” It is an “ecosystem style concept without boundaries.” It has grown and changed by the “dreams” of those who worked on it. It grew from the dreams of those who love the “out of doors of Colorado” which are too numerous to list and that continues to grow annually. We thank them for their work and dedication. It is something the people of Colorado and its visitors will enjoy and express their “thanks for the dreamers.”

As I reflect back, I had the opportunity to learn about some of these dreams as I prepared for a talk with the Colorado Mountain Club on November 3, 1970. This was only a very short and busy five months after my wife, Mary, and I had come to Colorado to spend the rest of our lives as we love Colorado, and its “out of doors.”

In that talk, I acknowledged that it took very little research on my part, to learn that the Club was hiking, asking, and beating the drums for protective management of “a Rocky Mountain Trail.” Others expressed these same dreams when my Forest Rangers were working on the creation of the “off-road travel plans” for each Ranger District within five states. The success of the “off-road travel plan” was another dream turned into reality.

Perhaps the true genesis of The Trail can be traced back to the Roundup Riders, a group of business and professional men who in the 1940’s decided they wanted to see the Rocky Mountains from horseback.

Hal Dahl was the head honcho of the Roundup Riders¹ bunch then and was also working on me. He was telling me about Rick Robertson and Joe Decker traveling in the high country, discussion their love of the country and the fact that they thought something ought to be done to advertise it more. So the Roundup Riders was formed in 1948.

Of course, it was 1970 when Hal was working on me, but that dream, I found out, still existed among the Roundup Riders, and they really showed us “downtown support.”

I think it was those two things, the dreams of the Colorado Mountain Club and the Roundup Riders that really put the matter of a trail in front of me.

Actually the “Rocky Mountain Trail” now “The Colorado Trail” was conceived by the Mountain Club and Roundup Riders, and the opportunity to bring it to reality was what occurred to me.

There was also another chap who was very active at that time – Bill Ruskin from Colorado Springs. He had a group of volunteers in the Colorado Springs area and was working with Forest Rangers to open up trails.

Credit for organizing wide spread public support for the Trail goes to Merrill Hastings and his “Colorado Magazine.” Once he decided to pick it up and back it, the dream grew. He did a wonderful job of bringing the opportunity to the forefront in his magazine.

In 1972, I told Ed Cliff, Chief of the Forest Service in Washington, that I wanted to brief him and the staff on the growing volunteer effort happening in Region 2 in Denver. He asked that we present it as a program at a FS family meeting of all the FS people in the Washington office.

Gudy Gaskill and Bill Ruskin agreed to go and give talks. The presentation was well received. After the meeting, three of my fiscal friends asked “What are you going to do about liabilities for accidents, tort claims, etc?” Of course I said, “I don’t know.” It was left that they wanted to think about it. They did and visited with congressional people who worked out the “Volunteers in the National Forest Act.”

The “Volunteers Act” had an authorization of \$100,000 and was limited to activities on the National Forest. That figure was subsequently raised and usage by other federal agencies was authorized.

At this point, I want to mention some others that helped the “Volunteer” effort.

- First, the “Volunteers” act laid a heavy “safety first’ responsibility on the volunteer effort. Bob Royer responded with a pamphlet published by The Colorado Trail and they were given to each volunteer. Most of Bob’s work was done on his own time – essentially a volunteer effort.
- Second, Ray Adophson, who undertook, largely on his own time, to prepare the booklet “A Guide for Mountain Trail Development,” which then was published and distributed. It has been the guide for crews and has been used in many states and countries that secured copies from the Foundation.

- Third, Bill Rufsynder of Yale, a forestry professor, volunteered to prepare a booklet “Guide to Mountain Hut Development,” which was also published.

- Fourth, Al Flannagan of Channel 9 TV, was asked if Channel 9 would air an appeal for volunteers to work on the CT. His response to my question was “How do I do that? We haven’t done it before.” Anyway, we worked it out and the Channel 9 airing brought in volunteers. So now every time you hear and see a plea for volunteers on TV, I see the dream. Yes, The Colorado Trail project helped build volunteer efforts in Colorado and elsewhere.

- Fifth, Dr. Hugh Ferehau of Western State University conducted studies with 20 volunteer students on trails from Taylor Reservoir through the La Garita Wilderness. The studies were organized and developed by Dr. Ferehau into a proposed guide for others to use and for publication. In addition, some 15 students participated in a monitoring program on winter trails in the Taylor River and Creede areas.

In 1974, several focus groups with interest in outdoor use brainstormed and developed a plan. The Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation was born of this process and three goals were outlined:

1. To develop a non-vehicular trail system between Denver and Durango for recreational and educational uses. This system will include the mail train as the backbone and a network of connecting side trails to provide numerous loops and access points of interest and camp areas.

2. To provide educational opportunities for schools, colleges, universities, organizations, communities, and individuals. The corridor is considered to be a linear classroom of nature’s ecosystems where individuals and groups can find the learning experiences they desire.

3. To provide for public involvement, awareness, and appreciation of resource management and to encourage self-development through participation in the voluntary construction, maintenance, and management of the system.

To accomplish these goals, the Forest Service and the Foundation formally entered into a Memorandum of Understanding in 1976. Until this time, the volunteers derived mostly through the Colorado Mountain Club, who, under the leadership of Gudy Gaskill, chairperson of the Trails and Huts Committee, had already begun to rebuild and locate the proposed corridor.

Financially, donations received by August 1, 1976 totaled about \$122,000 and a \$5,000 pledge from the Colorado Centennial - Bicentennial Commission. ²

The agreement between the Forest Service and the Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation marked the beginning of a partnership, with both entities agreeing on cooperation in all aspects of building The Colorado Trail, including financial resources, time commitments, communication mechanisms, and other necessary elements to make the vision a reality. The Forest Service mostly cleared the bureaucratic way and provided technical assistance and personnel, including fostering legislation to encourage volunteerism. The Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation proposed the project, and supplied the gear and volunteers.

Many obstacles faced the project including lack of focus and drive. But in 1980, the Colorado Mountain Club's Trails and Huts Committee made The Colorado Trail its top priority. Gudy Gaskill was the chairperson and champion. And, although until this time, the trail progressed in piecemeal fashion, this commitment through the CMC was a turning point. The Forest service budgets had been cut and were, at first, a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. Gudy saw that the trail could be built for a much lower cost by the private sector using volunteers and fundraising.

The effort enjoyed a boost by the personal interest of then Governor Richard D. Lamm who wanted to see the project completed before the end of his term in 1986. Lamm's interest sparked renewed cooperation between the State of Colorado and the Forest Service over the planning of recreational facilities on federal land in Colorado. It was the first time the state and federal governments worked in partnership in establishing priorities in building recreational facilities.

The Colorado Trail truly swells with the richness of the historical partnerships created between all of its volunteers and state and federal agencies. Indeed, the real heroes in the "dream" are the thousands of volunteers who provided painstaking manual labor to hack the trail out of the mountainside. Led by the persistent and dedicated Gudy Gaskill, volunteers originated not only from the CMC, but they also came from all corners of the country. The stories behind these volunteers are copious, but the commonality between all seems to be the satisfaction derived from having contributed to a tangible natural resource that will remain a legacy for generations -- a legacy which will feed the quest for adventure, and precipitate the special dimension of life imparted by the spirit of the outdoors. The dream has come true.

My “hat” is off to the volunteers and donors who gave resources that inspire so many volunteer projects worldwide.

Notes:

1. F.H. Ricketson, Jr.; A.P. Archer; Elmer Berg; Art Card; Joe H. Dekker; Jack Foster; R.J. Garland; Caleb Gates; Albert J. Gould; Kirk Howry; Fred Knill; H.A. Kugeler; W.L. Petrikin; L.M. Pexton; L.C. Phipps; Jr.; Robert Six; Hugh Terry; H.C. Van Schaack; and L.W. Van Vleet.

2. Robert Maynard; Robert Craig; Harold Dahl; Arthur Bishop; Mahlon White; Colorado Magazine; Bank of Aspen; First National Bank of Durango; International Business Machines; Consolidated Coal Company; American Metal Climax Foundation; Gates Foundation; Gates Rubber Company; Roundup Riders of the Rockies; Public Service Company; Bill Lucas; Moore Reality Company; William Harmsen (Jolly Rancher; Inc.); Margaret McDonald Boss Trust; Federation of Women’s Clubs.