



Bikers on the Black Rock Trail



MOUNTAIN BIKE MECCA

**Former timbertown
finds new tread in its
backyard**

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JAMES JOHNSTON

Falls City, Ore., used to be a fashionable destination. By 1910 it was being advertised as the “Queen City” of Polk County, with direct rail service to Salem 35 miles to the east and more than a thousand residents. Main Street was packed — there was a bank, two hotels, a Ford dealership, furniture store, bakery, feed store, livery stable, confectionary store, hardware store, jewelry store, barbershop, photo gallery, two doctor’s offices, a dentist, an attorney, theater, opera house, pool hall and five saloons. The town’s prosperity was driven by no less than four sawmills on the outskirts of town, with a fifth sawmill operating three miles up the road at a small trading post named Black Rock.

The timber, which was supposed to last forever, played out in less than 15 years. By the end of the Roaring ’20s the mills had been disassembled, packed up and shipped to a new timber town — an ill-fated burg named Valsetz — another 40 minute drive deeper into the Coast Range. The jewelers, dentists, bakers, doctors and most everyone else moved to Dallas or points further north or east.

I grew up just outside of Falls City, blessedly within the orbit of the Dallas school district. We Dallas High School kids viewed Falls City sort of like folks in Arkansas look at Mississippi: Thank god for Mississippi; it makes us look good.

The funny thing is, Falls City has recently become something of a trendy destination. Shockingly, the timber is paying again, in a way, drawing *mountain bikers* from all over the country to one of the premier downhill “free style” mountain bike runs on the West Coast.

There is a scenic back route to Falls City that follows the old Applegate Trail and takes just about an hour and a half from Eugene. You drive Hwy. 99 north through Corvallis (or bike the back way to Corvallis via Harrisburg and Peoria). About 10 miles north of Corvallis, take a left on Airlie Road (one of the most scenic legs of a road bike tour of the Willamette Valley). At a four-way intersection with Airlie Road, Gardner Road and Hwy. 223, go straight onto the Gardner Road for two miles to Bridgeport Road, where you take a left and drive another two miles to Falls City. Almost all of the last four miles are on gravel roads.

To get to the Black Rock Mountain Bike Trail system, take a right on Bridge Road in the center of Falls City, cross the bridge over the Little Luckiamute River and take an immediate left on Mitchell Road. Drive Mitchell Road for three miles. Take a right

on Socialist Valley Road, park at the gate, consult the map and bike uphill.

The Black Rock trail system is a network of more than 10 miles of singletrack downhill mayhem. These trails are built with the latest style of mountain bikes in mind — big, heavy machines with giant tires, beefy suspensions, disc brakes and aggressive geometry designed for catching big air off jumps. The “free ride” bikers “were like snowboarders were at first,” says Rick Bontrager, President of the Black Rock Mountain Bike Association. “It was a fringe sport. It had that rebel thing going on.”

The Black Rock trail system has something of the feel of a ski run. On any given weekend, dozens of bikers trudge uphill pushing their heavy bikes, pause to catch their breaths and then zoom downhill through the misty, moss-draped Douglas fir jungle, screaming around high banked corners and flying off 15-foot wooden jumps. The riders look like test pilots in motorcycle helmets and arm, leg and chest protection.

Three weekends ago, Jared, a computer animator from Portland, was back on the trail for the first time since breaking his wrist on a ride last November. On his first run, he jumped off a narrow, slippery wooden walkway, lost control of his bike on the next turn and slammed into another set of wooden obstacles. “Goddamn!” he exclaimed, flipping his bike upside down. “My timing’s a little off,” he explained as he stripped a broken chain off the sprocket. No chain means the bike has no power. He just shrugged, stuffed the chain in a backpack and flipped the bike back upright. “I can still go downhill.”

There are a number of trails where rank amateurs can pedal slowly and practice on tiny jumps. But all in all, Black Rock is ground zero for a serious sport that requires a fair amount of disposable income, or at least a steady job with a good health insurance package. The Black Rock Mountain Bike Association volunteers build and maintain all the trails with the blessing of the Oregon Department of Forestry, which owns this 1,000-acre tract of forestland. The BRMBA hopes to build an additional six to 10 miles of trail to create a true cross-country loop, which would put Falls City and Black Rock on the mountain biking map in a big way.

“Mostly what I hear in the local community has really been positive,” says Bontrager. “I think Falls City would love to see it grow and more people coming in. I think they’re excited about what mountain biking can bring into the town. Having something like this in their backyard is not something everyone has.”

These days the main drag though Falls City features a tiny high school, the fire department, a small Qwest building, a tree planting business, the Luckiamute Clinic, three churches, the high school, the Home Town Grocery, the Boondocks Tavern and five completely empty buildings. It hasn’t changed one bit, as far as I can tell, from 20 years ago.

Or has it? The Boondocks has a brand new wooden façade and it serves microbrews. A sign on one of the abandoned buildings across the street announces a café coming soon. The Home Town Grocery is selling glucose sport drinks and Allan Bros. coffee.

There’s something just a little different about Falls City these days.

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