

Traver

Mike Zobbe circles the trailhead on his mountain bike
It's late August, and the aspens lining this Summit County,

Colorado's

Great

sing

By Hannah Nordhaus

Photography by Beth Wald

as I suit up to join him on a climb to the Continental Divide. Colo., dirt road are threatening to turn. In a couple of months,



A skier greets the morning sun on top of Boreas Pass, with views of South Park far below to the east.

Divide



Snowshoers descend Boreas Pass amid the towering Rocky Mountains.

deep snows will close the road to automobiles and bikes, but today we're going to cycle through dramatic mountain scenery and 150 years of mountain history to see a ski-in cabin that once housed railroad workers on one of the highest rail passages in the United States.

Zobbe, operations manager of Summit Huts Association, explains that the Section House hut sits atop Boreas Pass, a windswept, lonely saddle named for the Greek god of the north wind. In November this former rail corridor, which traverses the steep valleys outside Breckenridge to the wide-open grasslands of the Rocky Mountain foothills, morphs from a road into a 21.5-mile cross-country ski and snowmobile route. "Boreas Pass Road is the most popular cross-country ski trail in Summit County," says Zobbe. "It's easy, it's a moderate grade and it's wide."

The climb is relatively easy—a fast, 1,100-foot ascent to an exposed pass surrounded by 13,000-foot peaks. As we climb through meadows and stands of aspen, lodgepole pine and blue spruce, we journey back in time—retracing Colorado's history of booms and busts; from the placer gold rush in the 1860s to the silver

boom in the 1880s, to the fossil fuel economy of the mid-20th century, to tourism and outdoor recreation today.

The Colorado gold and silver rushes of the second half of the 19th century transformed small mountain settlements such as Breckenridge and Leadville into instant cities, as thousands of prospectors flocked to the state. While ore was plentiful, getting it to market was something of a feat. In 1872 businessman and former governor John Evans spearheaded an effort to build a railroad that would transport supplies and ore between Colorado's mountains and Denver, purchasing the right-of-way to an old wagon road that crossed the spine of the Rockies. The Denver South Park & Pacific Railroad, as it was named, worked its way up the South Platte River to tiny Como in the coal-mining region of South Park in 1879, then climbed over the divide to Breckenridge in 1882. In 1884, the line finally reached its terminus in Leadville.

The rail line—a narrow-gauge track snaking around obstacles rather than blasting through them—covered almost 63 miles of mountain terrain to negotiate the 20-plus miles of the pass. With an average four percent grade, the climb was difficult even in

the best of weather. Because mine tailings, ash from the trains and rocks blasted from the bed, had been used to even out the grade in the rush to complete the line to Leadville, tracks bent and swayed in the middle, causing cars to lurch backward and forward. For this reason, the DSP&P soon acquired the nickname, "Damn Slow Pulling, Pretty Rough Riding."

After truck transport became a more economical option for getting supplies over the Divide, the line was shuttered in 1937, its ties torn up for salvage. In 1952, the corridor was reworked as an auto road on the Breckenridge side of the pass; in 1956, the road was completed on the south side of the pass to Como. After the Breckenridge ski area opened in 1961, the route also became a destination for cross-country skiers.

A QUESTION OF USE

Most winter visitors approach Boreas Pass from Breckenridge, as do Mike Zobbe and I. The climb covers almost seven miles and takes us a little more than an hour by bike. But it takes only a couple of minutes to reach the trail's first breathtaking view. As we round a curve at Rocky Point—a narrow, car-width cut through the upswept cliffs

Baker's Tank, a railroad water tank dating from the 1880s, is one of the many examples of historical preservation on Boreas Pass.



A spring snow dusts Robert's Cabin at the Peabody Spur of Boreas Pass.



Skiers cook with a woodstove in the Section House, a restored cabin and part of the Summit Hut System.

of a hogback ridge—the entire Blue River valley and ski slopes of Breckenridge unfold before us.

Stands of smooth, white aspens frame the road along much of the grade, their very presence reflecting the railroad's imprint. The trees, which thrive on disturbance, grew up after fires sparked by steam engines burned the pine forest near the tracks. Just before the halfway point to the pass, Baker's Tank looms before us on the uphill side of the trail. The huge, painstakingly restored wood tank held 9,305 gallons of water drawn

from a nearby stream to supply passing trains. Above the tank, the Baker's Tank Trail drops into the road. This winding single-track parallels the road between the winter trailhead and the tank and offers a more secluded alternative to the main grade. It is also off-limits to motorized vehicles, which have, in recent years, created numerous unsanctioned trails veering from the road in every direction. "Five years ago," says Zobbe, "none of these were here."

As on much public land today, growing numbers of ATVs (all-terrain

vehicles) and dirt bikes on Boreas Pass have become a simmering issue. Although snowmobiles don't wreak the same kind of damage as wheeled off-road vehicles, increasing snowmobile traffic at Boreas Pass has spurred controversy, generating frequent complaints about noise, exhaust fumes and speeding. While land managers work to establish rules governing off-road use of motorized vehicles on the pass, the U.S. Forest Service and the Summit Fat Tire Society, of which Zobbe is president, have built alternate trails for those who prefer a more pristine wilderness experience. The Baker's Tank Trail is one of those. It navigates a steep, snaking climb which can make for an exciting luge-run downhill in winter. Skiers uncomfortable with tight, fast descents may want to ascend on the Baker's Tank Trail and use the main route to go back down.



A father and daughter ski and snowshoe along Boreas Pass, which gained popularity as a recreation trail in the early 1960s.

DEDICATED PRESERVATION

Zobbe and I continue up past the tank and the turnoff to Indiana Creek and Dyersville, a town named after a Methodist minister and “snowshoe itinerant” who brought mail and religion to the mining camps around Breckenridge. From there, the trail climbs more steeply to a stump-littered meadow. The tree line ends prematurely here because every tree in the vicinity was logged for railroad and mining operations. Zobbe points to the saddle, which looms a little more than a mile away. “This is the last hump,” he says.

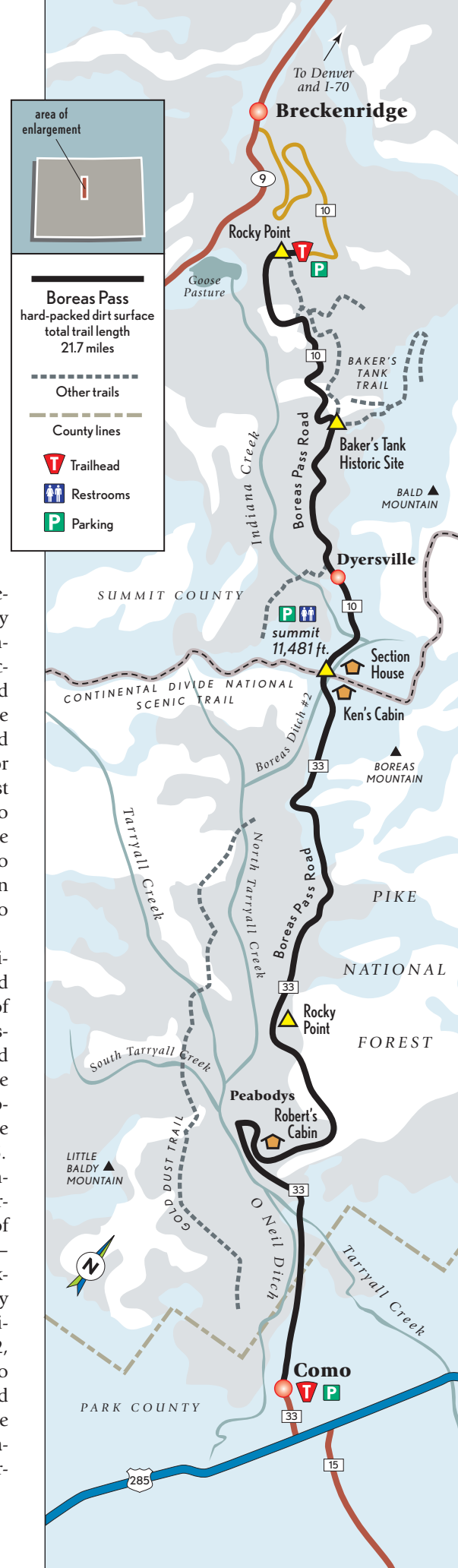
As we top the last climb and spot the two-story Section House standing sentinel over the open expanse of South Park and the valleys to the south, the wind picks up. It almost al-

ways blows on this saddle, swirling up from the Front Range and racing down the western slope of the Rockies. In winter, these cold winds can quickly generate white-out conditions, making a map and compass must-haves for skiers. Even in summer, extra layers of clothing are essential.

In 1886, 150 people lived and worked at this windblown spot. Buildings included the Section House, a snowshed, a roundhouse, a two-room telegraph office, a few storehouses and a two-story outhouse (the second story was used when too much snow accumulated to enter the lower level). Most of the buildings were destroyed by fire in 1909; the Section House and another small storehouse survived, decomposing slowly in the decades that followed. Concerned about the safety of the structures, the U.S. Forest Service decided to rebuild the Section House in the 1990s. “There was no ceiling and there were barely any windows or doorways,” says Sharon Kyhl, a Forest Service interpretive planner who worked on the restoration. “People couldn’t believe we actually wanted to restore it instead of tearing it down and starting over, but we wanted to maintain its integrity.”

With help from a Texas A&M University historical restoration team and funds from the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Colorado Historical Society, the agency recreated the Section House and storehouse using clues found in vintage photographs and in the old plaster. The restorations were completed in 1996.

That same year the nonprofit Summit Hut Association obtained a permit to take over winter operation of the Section House and storehouse—named Ken’s Cabin after a local backcountry skier who died in a nearby avalanche—as ski-in camping facilities. The Section House sleeps 12, while Ken’s Cabin has room for two or three people. The group equipped the buildings with vintage furniture such as iron bedsteads and an old Majestic woodstove salvaged from a For-



Travel Facts

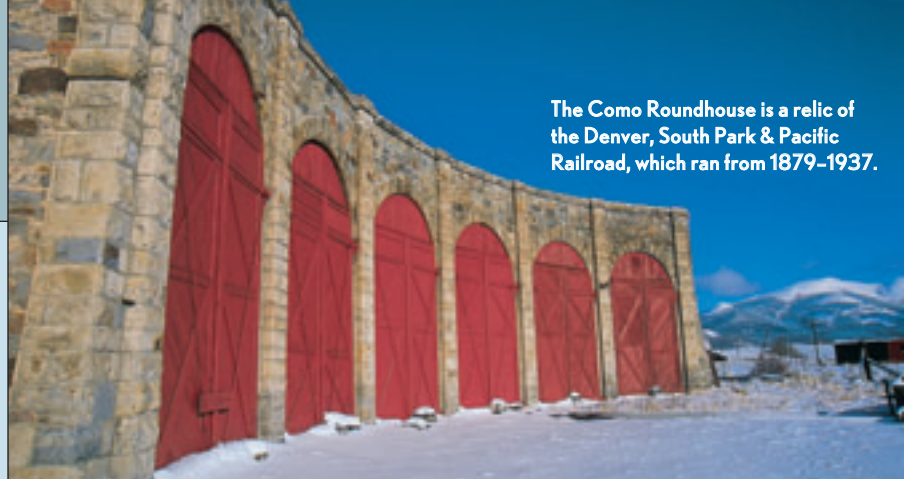
GETTING THERE: *From Breckenridge:* On I-70, take Highway 9 through Breckenridge. From the Conoco station on the south end of Breckenridge, turn left onto Boreas Pass Road and follow the paved road as it winds approximately 3.5 miles to the winter trailhead and the plowed parking lot. Park on the left side of the road if possible.

From Como: Starting in Denver, take Highway 285 to Como. From Como take County Road 50 approximately 5 miles, following the sign for "Boreas Pass Road." After the pavement turns to dirt, travel approximately 1.5 miles to the Boreas Pass turnoff. Depending on snow conditions, you may be able to drive a short distance up the road to the winter gate and park there. If not, park to the side of the road near the turnoff. To access the Gold Dust Trail, continue past the Boreas Pass turnoff through a residential area. Look for a trail register mounted on a metal post on the right (east) side of the road.

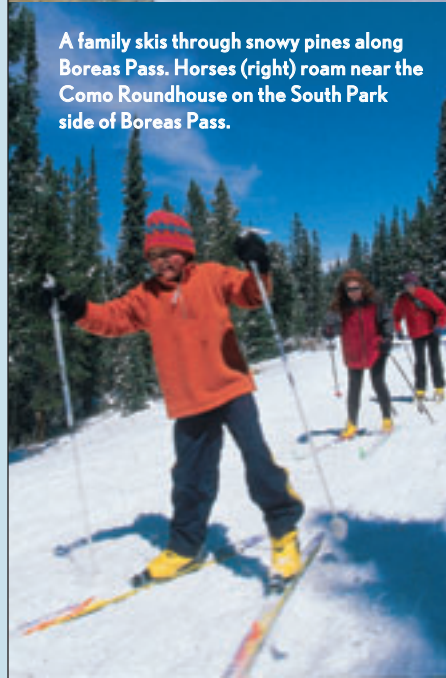
WHERE TO STAY: To stay at the Section House on top of Boreas Pass, book an advance reservation at www.huts.org. Cost is \$26 per person for the 2004/2005 season. The hut is open from late November to early May. To learn more about the Summit Huts system, visit www.summithuts.org. Breckenridge (www.gobreck.com) offers countless lodging facilities, from luxury condos to a Super 8 Motel (970-468-8888) in nearby Dillon. For historical charm, try the Ridge Street Inn Bed & Breakfast (800-452-4680).

SKI RENTAL: Mountain Outfitters, 112 S. Ridge Street, Breckenridge (970-453-2201), offers the gamut of ski options, from skinny cross-country skis to light touring skis with metal edges to beefier telemark and alpine touring equipment. The store also sells trail maps.

OTHER ACTIVITIES: Breckenridge has everything from world-class downhill skiing to ice-skating, sleigh rides, and dogsledding, not to mention restaurants and pubs. The historically inclined may want to visit the Edwin Carter Museum (970-453-9022) in Breckenridge, the Summit Historical Museum (970-668-3428) in nearby Frisco, and the National Mining Museum (719-486-1229) in Leadville. Also in Leadville is the 12.5-mile Mineral Belt Trail. For a map, call 800-933-3901.



The Como Roundhouse is a relic of the Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad, which ran from 1879–1937.



A family skis through snowy pines along Boreas Pass. Horses (right) roam near the Como Roundhouse on the South Park side of Boreas Pass.



est Service guard station. Summit Huts stocks the buildings with firewood, pots, pans, plates, silverware, toilet paper and other necessities; visitors bring their own sleeping bags, warm clothes and victuals. Because of the powerful winds that scour the pass, however, the site offers more by way of austere beauty and historical charm than epic powder skiing. "It's exposed and windy, and it's not great skiing," says Zobbe. "But there's nothing else like it in terms of the unique, historic experience of staying there."

As rain clouds threaten, Zobbe and I bomb down the road to Breckenridge. Because of the late hour and the long distance, I decide to tackle the Como side of the pass in my car. I wind down the valley in the shadow of Mt. Silverheels and Little Baldy on a grade that is gentler, but no less scenic, than the Breckenridge side, passing three spectacular overlooks

and a short spur trail that leads to a reconstructed stretch of the original railroad track. In winter, the trail ends at a plowed parking lot just above the Roberts hut, a picturesque old mining shack a few miles outside of Como.

Because the Como side of the pass faces south and experiences more wind exposure, it sees a less consistent snowpack than the other side. From January to March, though, it is usually possible to ski down to the trailhead. For those seeking a snowmobile-free experience, the Gold Dust trail follows old ditches and wagon trails through the trees, rejoining Boreas Pass Road a few miles before the summit.

The full Breckenridge-to-Como round-trip is not for the faint of heart. Even with an overnight at the Section House, the 42-mile round-trip on skis over an 11,000-foot pass is an ambitious undertaking. No more ambitious, however, than the vision of those who carved this bold passage over Colorado's highest mountains. Lucky for us they made the going so smooth.

Hannah Nordhaus is a Boulder-based freelance writer who spends all the time she can exploring Colorado's high country.