

AURELEA MAHOOD / Riding the Shore

I learned to ride a bike as a kid on the North Shore in the late 1970s. I started in my backyard and gradually moved out onto the sidewalk. Next it was up and down the alley, around the Boulevard, and across the playing fields at school. Then down into the ravine with its tangle of trails and dirt jumps. Little did I know that as I was learning bike basics, the North Shore was already on its way to becoming a by-word for steep technical stunt-heavy riding in the wet deep green rocky rooty slopes of the North Shore mountains. The bikes that now make their way up Cypress, Fromme, and Seymour in all seasons and all weather have a story that begins in California back when I was learning to ride my first two-wheeler.

The impulse to yoke together the pleasures of riding with those of the trail had been coalescing up north too. In the mid-1980s, there were the guys a few grades ahead of me who turned up at school on their bikes in toques, black leggings, and grey woolen jerseys. I had no sense that my friends' older brothers were in the woods and that my childhood backyard could be navigated in ways that bore no relation to our family walks in Lynn Canyon and along the Baden Powell.

What was going on had been going on since the early 1980s. School friends Ross Kirkwood and Brian Ford were among the earliest trail builders on the North Shore.¹ In 1980, Ford lived on Peters near Lynn Canyon. From there the most direct route to Capilano College was across the suspension bridge, up the Baden Powell to Lillooet Road, and then down to campus. Ford's daily woodland commute and early mountain bike races on the Warden's Trail—an old fall line skidder road on Mount Fromme—inspired the friends to look for trail building locations that could link up existing access roads and remnants of old logging and fishing trails.

One of their earliest collaborations “Kirkford”—an amalgam of their last names—is now part of a chain that can be ridden from the seventh switchback

¹ Brian Ford and Ross Kirkwood were of invaluable assistance in confirming the construction dates and stories behind many of the original trails on Mount Fromme and Lower Seymour.



on Fromme: “Seventh Secret” to “Lepperd” to “Kirkford” to “Crinkum Crankum” to “Upper” and “Lower Griffen” before heading out on to McNair. Each trail name in this chain has a story. Kirkwood had no difficulties naming Seventh Secret: the opening section of Seventh was blazed off of the seventh switchback on Sunday July 7th in 1985 by seven local riders. The final two sections in the chain—Upper and Lower Griffen—were completed in the late 1980s with the help of Marcia Wood and Kevin Barlow while their three-year old son Griffen played on the forest floor. This is just one way down the mountain.

Spin up the access road beyond the yellow gate at the top of Mountain Highway. Decide how far up you want to go. It is about ten kilometers from the yellow gate to the Grouse Mountain ski area boundary. This decision will determine which of the roughly forty trails on Fromme that you might take back down. The rider with an etymological streak will know what to expect.

Kirkwood’s choice of “Crinkum Crankum” for the mid-mountain trail is apt. The dictionary definition of “narrow twisting, passage” conjures perfectly the slivers of passable terrain—or at least passable for some—winding down Fromme. So too do the noun’s anatomical associations partner nicely with Fromme’s Pink

Starfish and Severed Dick and C*** Buster over on Seymour. Body parts are frequently left tender by epic rides but this discomfort is not really worth pausing over as suggested by the names of another trio of Fromme trails: Squeaky Elbow, Crippler, and Natural High.

While Kirkwood and Ford were busy building on Fromme, Todd “Digger” Fiander was doing the same on Cypress. In 1982 he built his first trail, “Crosscut,” on Hollyburn Ridge. Like most of the early trails, “Crosscut” did not feature stunts. It was a fast flowing trail with switchbacks, tight corners, and steep drops. But his trails did not stay low for long. Bridges, ladders, and teeter-totters soon became his trademark. Fiander’s intensely technical trails, of which there are about twenty-two, inspired a generation of other builders. Skinnies, ladder bridges, log rides, and rock gardens have become staples of North Shore riding.

Good trail design responds to the specific environment. Trail builders attuned to their settings can build the perfect trail. As Kirkwood describes it, a perfect trail is mountain-sized craftsmanship that utilizes the terrain to create a monumental kinetic sculpture. What is possible on a bike animates the kinetic potential embedded in the trail. The thoughtful builder works with works with the landscape creating lines that are thrilling—sometimes spill-making—but in harmony with the changing contour lines and frequent transitions from rocky to rooty to loamy, punctuated by creek beds running from dry to raging depending on the season.

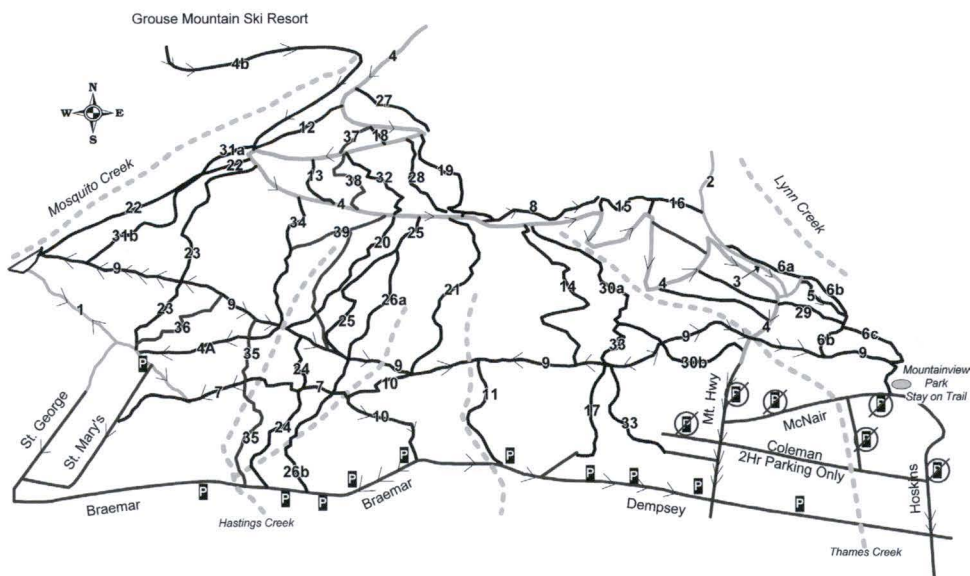
There is no shortage of people in the woods today choosing among the over one hundred trails across three mountains. Homage to all three mountains is paid by the North Shore Mountain Biking Association’s annual “Triple Crown” in early July. The “ripper” is an often costumed big day out that begins on Seymour, moves over to Fromme, and ends on Cypress for seventy or so kilometers of riding depending on each individual team’s route. There are no rules other than begin at the beginning, hit all the check points, and end at the end. The 2008 edition of the Triple Crown included the largest team ever in Ripper history: eighteen female riders of all levels of ability taking on all three mountains and, in true mountain biking fashion, faithfully documenting all of their crashes.

With official maps and events with commercial sponsors, the era of the Secret

Trail Society and unmapped trails ridden and maintained by riders who wanted to build a conflict- and hiker-free woodland playground for themselves has passed. Now there are maintenance days sponsored by the North Shore Mountain Biking Association, local bike shops, Mountain Equipment Co-op and others to help maintain the trails that are ridden by hundreds of locals every weekend along with visitors from around the world.

Some of the older brothers from my childhood now have entire livelihoods predicated on the economic value of the passion for mountain biking. Bjorn Enga is no longer simply a Megan's older brother: his *KRANKED* film series—now in its seventh edition—is staple viewing among mountain biking aficionados. Every *KRANKED* DVD features top riders and killer locations on a global scale—but always with at least one segment shot in British Columbia with local riders thrown in for good measure.

It is in this phase of riding the Shore that my own relationship with bikes resumes. Five years ago recently returned to Vancouver and struggling with a dissertation, friends noticed how little time I was spending outdoors and my



growing tendency to contradict myself in endless series of counterarguments. Would I ever again be able to respond intuitively to anything—indoors or out?

And so a five hundred loan from a friend. It is early summer, and I have a bike. Helmet. Gloves. Water bottle. And a pair of Andrew Shandro's Dragon sunglasses from the North Shore Sports Swap.

My first mountain bike was an entry-level Kona Nunu, a bike made by a company whose own story is central to the story of local mountain biking.

In early 1980s, two bike shops became synonymous with the new sport: the Deep Cove Bike Shop and West Point Cycle in Vancouver. These businesses grew up in tandem with the trails. Doug Lafavor, Charles Romalis, and Ashley Walker opened the original Deep Cove store down on Gallant in 1981. It was the first mountain bike-only store in Canada. The store was open weekdays from 12 to 5. Otherwise, the owners, employees, and customers alike were out building and riding the local trails. Originally, the store specialized in Californian bikes, but since 1995 their own bikes have dominated the store. Romalis and Walker continue to run the business. They now sell Cove bikes as well as the bikes that Lafavor now makes with Kona.

The Kona story is an extension of the West Point story. In 1981, Jacob Heilbron at West Point Cycle founded Rocky Mountain Bikes, which supplied the Californian Ritchey bikes to Canadian bike stores. Rocky started making their own bikes in 1984 with the design assistance of Derek Bailey and Paul Brodie. Rocky continues to flourish, but since the late 1980s people could also choose to ride Brodies and Konas. Paul Brodie, inventor of the iconic sloping Vancouver top tube, began making his own bikes in 1986 after starting out with Rocky. Kona was started in 1988 by Jacob Heilbron with Joe Murray and Dan Gerhard. Twenty years later, bikes from all three companies are North Shore staples.

Berm. Rollercoaster. Rolldown. Mountain biking requires knowledge of a new language. Until I learn this language, the calls of friends on the trail ahead of me make little sense. They are letting me know whether to gear down or up, to hammer or slide back, to feather the breaks or get off and walk—a practical

option in the face of terrain or stunts that outstrip my ability.

Three bikes and five years and dozens of scars later, there is pleasure in reading a description of a trail and imagining myself spinning along it. Imagining what I would be asking of my body, whether I'd be hanging off the back of my seat or keeping the front wheel down as I slide up the nose of the saddle. Imagining gearshifts in response to changing terrain. Imagining letting the bike run while negotiating tight steep sections of a trail. And knowing that post-ride, that I will be able to convey the specific triumphs and challenges of the ride to others who likewise cannot resist the pull of the trails.

The last parking lot on the northern edge of the Capilano campus gives way to the City of North Vancouver's cemetery. A road leading up to the Seymour watershed bisects the cemetery. From here, walkers, hikers, trail runners, and mountain bikers can access endless kilometers of trails. Like so many other people who live or work on the North Shore, this is my backyard. I am hooked on this warren of trails.

Bottle Top—a section of trail in my post-work loop—is exactly this sort of trail. First built in the late 1990s by Ray Anderson, Bottle Top opens with a punchy little climb that twists up to a ridge as you pick your line between the exposed roots. It flattens out into a narrow clearing that gives way to the ridge that eventually meanders a kilometer or so down to the Seymour River. There is a little bit of up and quite bit of down. Tight treed sections. Rooty sections. Rocky sections. Nice little drops. And then a swift descent down to the river with tight turns, rockwork, and a short laddered section before you are thrown on to the gravel of Fisherman's. It is a fast and moderately technical section, but cleanable for an intermediate rider—a satisfying progress marker that leaves me hungry to become a better rider.

Now with scarred calves and chainring tattoos, I know and seek the pleasures of a clean ride with no dabs. No, not a ride without mud, dirt, water, or sweat. Those are rare and not particularly desirable. A truly satisfying ride ends with a hose turned on both bike and rider.



