



*Summit meeting*  
**PIKES**  
Story by Liz Carman

# PEAK HILL CLIMB

Photos by Nancy Carter

On November 25, 1806, a young Lieutenant and three companions set out from an area that is now Pueblo, Colorado, in an attempt to reach the base of a huge mountain that loomed in the distance. The Lieutenant was Zebulon Montgomery Pike, and his three companions were soldiers under his

command. Pike and his men had been exploring the area for some time, hoping to eventually locate the source of the Arkansas River which flows through southern Colorado. It was hoped that upon reaching the "Grand Peak," as Pike called it, they would be able to climb to the summit and map the surrounding



area. This was not to be.

On the morning of the third day, after spending a miserable night in a cave with no blankets, food or water, the four men were faced with nearly three feet of snow that had fallen during the night. Nearly freezing, having had nothing to eat or drink for two days, the men reluctantly decided to return to their base camp, 50 miles to the south. Zebulon Pike never got closer than 15 miles to the summit of his "Grand Peak" and he later recorded in his journal, "I believe no man could have ascended to its pinnacle." After spending years wandering around the flatlands of eastern and southern Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico, the 14,000-foot-high peak must have seemed awesome, indeed.

Just a few years after his encounter with defeat on the slopes of "Grand Peak," Pike would find himself accused of treason, along with Aaron Burr and a few other notables of the early American counter-culture. The charges were never proved, one way or the other, and the attempt to climb to the pinnacle of the "blue mountains"

would live on in history as Zebulon Pike's only lasting claim to fame. Pike continued to refer to the mountain as the "Grand Peak" for most of his remaining years — but to the rest of the world, the majestic, purple mountain would come to be known and loved as Pike's Peak. Little did the young Lieutenant realize, as he stood there in waist-deep snow, shivering before the harsh winter wind, that the imposing mass of rock and ice that lay before him would someday serve as a monument to his short and troubled life. Had it not been for his rash remarks about man not being able to climb to the pinnacle, he would most likely have been forgotten entirely or, at best, remembered as a traitor.

As it is, the man now has schools, public parks, libraries, and a sporting event named after him. The sporting event is the annual Pikes Peak Auto Hill Climb. It's called the Pikes Peak *Auto* Hill Climb because it's primarily a car race. The fact that the event is organized and run by the United States Auto Club may have something to do with it. It's no

secret that the USAC gang would just as soon not have to mess with anything other than cars come July 4th, but the economics of the situation have forced them to rethink the issue. The simple fact is that if the Pikes Peak Hill Climb committee ever decided to throw out the motorcycle classes, the attendance figures would drop to the levels they were at before the cycles were invited to run. No one denies the fact that the motorcycles are only there each year to make sure the spectators get their cookies so they'll keep coming back.

But enough of this petty whimpering. The most fascinating aspect of the annual climb to the clouds is the thought that not only did man finally succeed in ascending to the mountain's pinnacle, these days he has contests to see who can do it the fastest. Granted, building a road up the thing in the early '20s helped a lot. Whereas Pike was forced to turn back after two days of struggling, now, some 170 years later, men are reaching the top in 12 minutes.

"How did you gear your bike this year?"



"Oh, right around a hunnerd, I guess."

Ridiculous. Bobby Unser actually got up the rough, 12-mile road in 11'54" back in the early '60s, a record that still stands. In fact, most of you probably don't know that Bobby Unser got his start back in the '50s on this old mountain. You see, the Unser family has sort of owned this little piece of real estate ever since old Louie started kicking ass on the road back in the '30s and '40s. The Old Man Of The Mountain, they call him. He used to drive the pace car year after year after his retirement until his nerve started to exceed his eyesight. Nowadays, you can see him around the pits or the starting area as the official Grand Marshal of the Hill Climb. These days, his nephew, Bobby, usually drives the pace car. Bobby had another brother, Jerry, who used to dominate the Hill Climb back in the '50s until his untimely death at Indianapolis in about 1958. Bobby carried on the family tradition by establishing records in the championship, stock car and sports car classes before moving on to bigger

things. The Unser family has also been represented at various times on the mountain by Louie Jr., Al, L.J. and, this year, by Bobby Jr.

So much for the background, what you want to know about is the motorcycles, right? The bikes started racing up the Peak in 1971, and have been tacitly allowed to continue as long as the attendance figures remain high. The motorcycles are not allowed to pit with the cars, or have much of anything to do with the racing program, other than to come up to the starting area at the last minute, and race 50 at a time to the top of the mountain. The bikes race after all of the cars have gone up and are allowed to come down the road after all of the spectators have gone home. They say it's done this way to keep things orderly. Mostly, it's done this way because there's no telling what a bunch of long-haired motorcycle riders are liable to do if you don't keep them in their place.

About the bikes themselves. There are four classes of motorcycles racing up the Peak: 250 Sportsman, 250 Pro, Open Sportsman and Open Pro. What this means is that if you ride a bike under 250cc, and you don't want to race against Steve Scott, the California flash who comes out every year just to win the 250 Pro class by miles, then you sign up 250 Sportsman. If you ride anything over 250cc, and you don't relish the thought of racing a bunch of AMA pros, you simply sign up in the Open Sportsman division. What it all comes down to is this: If you don't have 750cc of killer bike, you might as well kiss off any chance of picking up any money at Pikes Peak. You see, only the Pro classes are paid any money for winning; the rest of us apparently being more interested in trophies than money. The only problem is that since each rider is allowed to decide for himself whether he's a Pro or not, you end up with a lot of cherry-picking going on in the Sportsman classes and a lot of turkeys creating traffic in the Pro classes. There's a chance that this whole system may be revamped for next year's run. Let's hope so.

The race itself is considered by many to be the social event of the season for Colorado's biking lunatic fringe. This is the one race each year that brings out the gasser in all of them. Even guys who completely retired from racing years ago still

drag out their old scoots, paint them up, and head for the Hill. It's wonderful, the camaraderie that appears at this time each year. Racers who wouldn't speak to one another at any other time of the year can be seen helping each other jet, loaning tools and giving advice on how to take a particular hairpin up near the top. By the way, the penalty for missing one of those hairpins is often a several-thousand-foot drop down to the town of Colorado Springs. Fortunately, most of the bikes that go off the road manage to do so on one of the lower stretches, where there are still trees growing to stop your forward motion. This year, the most serious accident occurred on the first turn of the race in the Open Pro division. Several riders were taken to a local hospital with rather extensive injuries. This is the first time there has been quite such a serious accident among the motorcycles.

If Lt. Pike could somehow look out the mouth of that dark, cold cave where he huddled with his men, and see into the future for a moment, it would surely bring a tear to his eye. As far as he could see, down the side of the mountain, his gaze would find the glow of hundreds of pop bottle rockets, roaring bonfires, strange blue and red glowing van windows and the diamond-like sparkle of the homes of a quarter of a million people blanketing the valley below. The canyons and hillsides would echo with the laughter of a thousand people gathered together to have a good time, and the creaking of van springs would frighten away the little night creatures that spend the rest of the year scampering about in peace on that mountainside.

Surely Lt. Pike would wonder about the wisdom of allowing civilization to penetrate this far into the wilderness. Surely he would marvel at the advances that mankind has made since that cold night 170 years ago. He would question these things, but there is one thing about which he would have no doubt; the very thing that most people today have the greatest difficulty understanding. The question has been asked almost since the beginning of time and the answer has always been the same. The answer is the same for Bobby Unser as it is for Steve Scott, and as it was for Zebulon Montgomery Pike. ●