



Jenny Abraham took the two attached photos of a volunteer work day on the Gateway Trail in which they built a berm for turning:

## CREATING THE GATEWAY TRAIL

# The plantation and the tunnel trails

Part four of five  
By Kathy Medina

With the endorsement and backing of the Mount Shasta Trail Association, Drew Braugh and Shawn Raley felt confident enough to approach Priscila Franco, who was, in 2009, District Ranger for the Shasta McCloud Management Unit of the Shasta Trinity National Forest.

"When we presented our vision to Priscila of a network of 100 miles of trails linking Mount Shasta with Weed, McCloud, and Dunsmuir, she just laughed," recalled Raley. "Then she suggested we come up with something smaller and more do-able as a first step."

"The Gateway Trail probably didn't help further my

career," Franco, who retired in 2011, admitted. Franco knew that enormous bureaucratic hurdles stood in the way of the approval and funding of any trail on federal land, both from inside and outside the Forest Service. In fact, she was not aware of any legal trail built on federal land by a non-public entity in the Shasta-Trinity Forest.

"The Shasta-Trinity National Forest is not investing in the development of new trails, new facilities or new campgrounds right now," she said. "People have to find other ways to make it happen."

She knew the odds were stacked against Braugh and Raley to obtain funding for a trail project, especially for mountain bikes.

"Most grant money goes to fund boots on the ground," she said, for projects planned and ready to go. The new trail was an unplanned pipe dream.

And there was another problem. Historically, the Forest Service and mountain bikers have been at odds with each other. While the Forest Service is charged with conserving and protecting public lands, renegade mountain bikers, impatient to gain access to the forest, have built illegal trails, ramps, and jumps straight down the fall line causing erosion and damage to delicate ecosystems.

Knowing this, Ranger Franco encouraged Braugh and Raley to consider a plantation area on the mountain close to town that had recently been thinned and that already had completed the environmental impact surveys required. The area included a series of recently recognized but previously unauthorized mountain biking trails that could be improved and incorporated into the National Forest trail system.

No one understood better than Mike Hupp, the District Ranger who preceded Franco, why Franco steered Braugh and Raley toward that particular area for their first trail

project.

In the 1960's, the area above Mount Shasta City was a relatively open Manzanita brush field with isolated stands of trees, swept every ten to fifteen years by fire. After a fire came perilously close to town in the area now known as Quail Hill, the Forest Service decided to do something about it. They cleared the area and planted a series of pine tree plantations to create wood fiber wildlife habitat and increase the potential for recreational use. Eventually they expected the plantations to provide income for the Forest Service from timber sales.

During the 1960's, when the land was cleared to plant the trees, brush fields were dozed into windrows of slash, roots, and soil that eventually created a rolling landscape with easy hills, an ideal landscape for mountain bikes.

In 1985, when the plantation trees were about twenty years old, local resident Sig Orwig explored the area, looking for interesting trails upon which to ride his fat tire Schwinn Excelsior. Today, Sig Orwig is something of a local legend, known for his ability on all types of skis, his mapping skills, backcountry trail design and construction, and his land use advocacy.

Orwig, who has a degree in Recreation from the University of Utah and grew up near Redding riding bikes with his dad on wilderness trails, discovered evidence of an old overgrown road just above town in the plantation.

"We were always hiking around out above town and we found an old road up there buried in Manzanita on federal land. There was a rumor," Orwig said, "that the overgrown road might have been the first road up the mountain."

Orwig, with friends Steve Sias and Jay Barney, developed the road into their first biking trail, calling it the Tunnel Trail because of the way the low trees arched over and

**(Continued on A11)**

**(Continued from A10)**

hid the trail. They left the vegetative ceiling purposely low so the trail could not be used by horses or motorcycles and hid the opening and exit with piled brush so no one would find it.

Orwig knew the trail was on public, not private land. "I would not have trespassed on private land," he said, but he also knew the Forest Service would not sanction his trail building activity. The Forest Service's Recreation Officer had warned him that he would be cited for destruction of public property and arrested if he was found cutting trails in the forest. Mountain biking on trails was not an accepted use.

Orwig and his friends used the natural rolling terrain, the path of least resistance as he calls it, to eventually build a system of mountain biking trails in the area, adding trails called, "My," "Fern," "Stump," along with others.

By 2002, the plantation had grown overly dense and proper forest stewardship indicated the trees needed to be thinned to be returned to a healthy state. In the middle of the plantation was the network of heavily used but unauthorized Tunnel Trails.

According to Hupp who

"Those trails never had a tool on the ground," Orwig recalls, "they were walked and ridden into the ground." Over years of use, layers of pine needles naturally became packed into the trails, preventing erosion. During the three years it took to build the system of trails, only a few people knew about them, but eventually word got out and locals began to use the trails for hiking and mountain biking. The trails became so popular that the cross-country team from the high school used them regularly for their workouts.

The Tunnel Trails were challenging for mountain bikers. Orwig estimates it took him six years of riding the trails before he could do the entire system without being bucked off his bike.

supervised the Mountain Thin Project, "when you have all one kind of tree growing closely together, the same age and the same size, they can become stressed from competition and occasional drought, which makes it easier for pathogens and insects to attack them. The growth rate slows, trees are crowded out and die, this creates a fire hazard," Hupp explained.

The Forest Service had been aware of the Tunnel Trails and was concerned about protecting them, even though they had never been officially sanctioned. In 2002, then District Ranger Bob Hammond approached Orwig about how to save the trails during the thinning operation.

"I told him, feel free to take out the trails if you need to, we'll just re-do them later. But Bob Hammond put a lot of effort into saving the trails," Orwig remembered.

Hammond created a website about the proposed Mountain Thin Project and asked neighbors and trail users to write letters in support of the trails. "The area around the trails provides the only National Forest land with direct access from Mount Shasta City," Hammond wrote on the website, "...an important recreational opportunity for the community; especially for kids who don't drive."

By resolution, the Mount Shasta City Council supported the need to protect and authorize the trails. During the Forest Service's scoping period, a time for public comment before the thinning was approved, local residents became so vocal in support of the trails that the Forest Service produced a Memorandum of Understanding promising to preserve and protect them.

**Next week:** The Forest Service and the Conservationist

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