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Growth threatens Old Spanish Trail

By BILL HAGGERTY
 The Daily Sentinel

Saturday, February 23, 2008

It was a cold, cloudy, dreary day when I met Bill Clark at the south end of the Old Spanish Trail between Whitewater and Grand Junction.

How appropriate. With development threatening the Old Spanish Trail and the Gunnison River Bluffs Trail from both ends, Clark himself was in a cloudy mood. So are a number of Orchard Mesa neighbors and members of the local chapter of the Old Spanish Trail Association.

It was fitting that we hiked the Old Spanish Trail on this gray day, following an ancient hunting trail along the east side of the Gunnison River.

Native Americans used these trails for centuries, following game along the paths of least resistance. These same trails were utilized by traders and trappers who made them famous from 1825 to 1850 as the main north-south route toward the famous man rendezvous in Brown's Park.

Today, thousands of locals enjoy these trails as they meander through a checkerboard of private and public property along the lower Gunnison River.

Clark visits these trails a few times a week. They're dog friendly and open to non-motorized uses such as hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding.

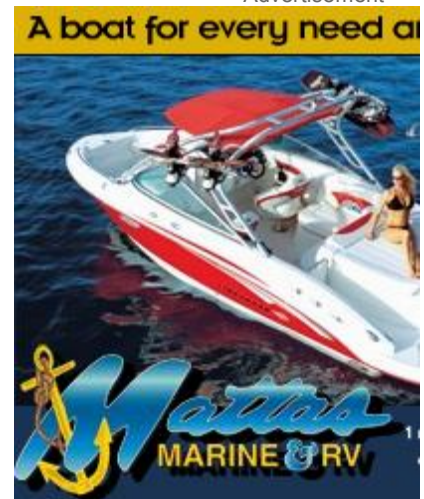
"It would be a tragedy to lose access to these trails from either end," Clark noted sadly.

But that could happen.

Whitewater Building Materials has already begun a huge gravel extraction operation only a few miles from the southern end of both trails. On the north end, a developer who is being sued by more than 20 homeowners in Greeley, is attempting to annex 17 acres of property so he can build 30 to 40 homes — effectively closing these trails to public use.


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To reach the trail head, take U.S. Highway 50 south to Whitewater Hill. Turn west (right) at the landfill road (31 Road) toward the Mesa County Landfill.

After passing the county's excellent composting facility, take a left on the gravel road leading south. Travel 1.5 mile parking corral at the trail head.

The Gunnison River Bluffs trail travels 6.7 miles along the bluffs of the river. You'll find cottonwoods, piñon and juniper rock formations leading down to the riparian zone along the banks of the Gunnison.

The North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail travels 3.6 miles and runs between Highway 50 and the bluffs trail.

Because of all the snow this winter, the rolling hills look splendid in white, but the trail may be muddy and icy in some spots.

During the summer months, many people consider parts of this trail "moonscape." In this barren desert that receives inches less rain than the rest of the valley, it's hard to imagine what kinds of plants and animals can eke out a living.

Yet, Clark, a retired biologist for the Colorado Division of Wildlife, proudly displays photos of colorful Desert Daisies, Mallow, Princess Plume with 12-inch tall spikes, Evening Primrose, Water Leaf, yellow and pink Prickly Pear Cactus, even Moon Flower, all taken along these trails.

"At first glance, it looks barren, but on closer inspection, there's great beauty here," he said.

Both trails end in a quiet little neighborhood behind the old Orchard Mesa Lions Club Park, about a quarter-mile south of County Fairgrounds along Highway 50.

All users are asked to respect private property. If it weren't for the landowners, we would not be able to tread along as ancient Native Americans, or the trappers and fur traders who followed them.

But, as those same private landowners and neighbors worry, the trails may be blocked from public access by the new developments.

Portions of the trail cut across Bureau of Land Management lands, and while the BLM would love to see these trails in public use, "protecting access to public lands is a challenge nationwide. In many cases such as this, we have no legal access to the private property," said BLM spokesperson Mel Lloyd.

"But then," she added, "what a frightening thought that the feds could come in and tell you what to do with your private land."

Good point.

The Old Spanish Trail is designated as a national historic trail, traveling more than 2,700 miles from Santa Fe, New Mexico through Colorado, Utah, Arizona, Nevada and California.

It will be a cold, dreary day, indeed, if and when this trail is blocked from public access.

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OLD SPANISH TRAIL

- Drive time, distance: 13 minutes, 8.5 miles.
- Length: 6.7 miles one way on Gunnison Bluffs Trail; 3.6 miles one way on Old Spanish Trail
- Hiking time: 2-3 hours
- Difficulty: Easy to moderate

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