

A New Joe's

Climbers, federal land agencies, and locals work to preserve Joe's Valley

BY CAROLYN WEBBER



COFFEE, INTERNET, AND SHOWERS. That's all the boulderers asked for. After years of lurking in cars outside the Orangeville Branch Library to borrow Wi-Fi, taking sink baths, and swallowing gritty gas station coffee, the climbers found their call answered by entrepreneurial locals in this once-booming coal-extraction region in the central Utah high-desert. As these climbers were civilized by their new amenities, the boulder fields got a similar makeover—complete with designated trails, restrooms, and campgrounds. Climbers, who have been coming since the mid-1990s, couldn't deny the growth at Joe's. It was time to cash in on the recreation boom, especially in the towns of Orangeville (population 1,439) and Castle Dale (population 1,605), both less than 15 miles from the boulders.

"We decided that, even though we don't have a lot of money," says Orangeville resident Doug Stilson, "let's bootstrap it out of our house."

In the first week of March, Stilson will open the doors to the only coffee shop in an 11-mile radius, Cup of Joe's, in the front parlor of his home. Photos of climbers and the surrounding sandstone boulders and bluffs line the shop walls, and the Wi-Fi will be free.

"It's not just a fad that's going to phase out," Stilson said of all the boulderers. "Climbing is here to stay."

BEFORE THE CURRENT DAYS of bumper-to-bumper parking on the side of Joe's Left Fork, there was not much going on at Joe's, at least climbing-wise. In 1995, the climbing video *Three Weeks & a Day* brought attention to the gritty black sandstone blocks, featuring Dale Goddard and Boone Speed climbing cutting-edge problems like *Smokin' Joe* and *3 Weeks and a Day*. Since then, the area has swollen to encompass 188 bouldering sites with thousands of problems from V0 to V14. According to Jordan Leonard, the economic director for Emery County, some 15,000 climbers visit annually.

"It's the right band of good rock that broke off the cliff band at just the right height so that they could be dispersed around flat landings," says Justin Wood, a former Joe's Valley liaison for the Salt Lake Climber's Alliance (SLCA). Considering the many bouldering sites; the scenic beauty of the canyons, side canyons, and piñon-studded gulches and hills; temperatures that rarely drop below 30 or top 75; and its perfect location between Moab and the Salt Lake Valley, it's no wonder boulderers flood in year-round.

Popularity has its drawbacks, though. The high-desert environment is fragile, with sandy soil and sparse vegetation to anchor it. Heavy rains wash away the roads, like the steep Left Fork Road (Highway 29), as water rushes down the side drainages, pushing rocks downhill. The Utah Department of Transportation delays in clearing these roads because of the area's remoteness, causing traffic

problems. At popular areas like Riverside in Left Fork and Warm-Up in Right Fork, crashpad usage and high foot traffic have sped up erosion—witness the "bath rings" on the rock that mark former soil levels, or boulders like Resident Evil and Goat Milk that have lost vegetation at the base. At some areas, climbers have designed makeshift landings, like the one below A Wrinkle in Time that nearly dams the Left Fork River. Social trails cause problems too, since the brittle desert soil crumbles as climber feet trample through.

Something needed to be done, and climbers sprang into action: In 2008, the SLCA installed two seasonal latrines, in New Joe's and Mansize Camp in Right Fork, and six years later, they brought in land managers to help address the impact issues.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Price Field Office and Price Ranger District of the Manti-La Sal National Forest split the management of the Joe's Valley boulders. In 2014, the SLCA, conducted a baseline assessment of Joe's, measuring the level of use, location of routes and trails, and impacts on the environment, bringing the data to the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the BLM in 2014.

Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the USFS and BLM are building off SLCA's work to map the climbing areas and trails, and determine the best sites for campgrounds and toilets. The two federal land agencies are finalizing an Environmental Assessment draft that should open by May for a 30-day public-review period. Then, both the BLM and USFS can begin conservation work.

Ray Petersen, public lands administrator of the Emery County BLM Office, said the partnership with climbers has been a posi-

tive one, especially since the SLCA began hosting an annual Adopt a Crag cleaning event in 2014, clearing out trash and reinforcing landings. The SLCA also spends \$2,500 annually to maintain the latrines, a cost currently sponsored by climbing companies, grants, and membership dollars.

To fund the future conservation effort, the BLM and USFS received Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grants. The Access Fund, which plans to do a large amount of the trail work, received a \$40,000 Resource Allocation Committee (RAC) grant and \$40,000 grant from the Utah Office of Outdoor Recreation for 2017 and 2018. With that money, the Access Fund will bring a conservation team to Joe's this fall for five weeks.

"We're hoping to hone folks onto a single, sustainable route instead of multiple pathes," says Ty Tyler, stewardship director of the Access Fund. Next season, they will begin a two-year project to tackle "high-priority areas that are seeing really severe erosion," employing retaining walls, patio-type structures, and water diversion techniques. For their part, the USFS and BLM plan to use their RTP funds to help with trail building, as well as restroom and campground construction.

Yet some who savor the peace and quiet worry that the conservation work may negatively impact their beloved haven.

"There's talk of getting an established campground, and that will definitely change the feel," Wood said. But, the Access Fund, SLCA, and land agencies are set on preserving the boulders and trails over time while not drastically altering the primitive vibes.

"Our intent is to maintain the existing character so it doesn't look all that different when we're done," Tyler says.

If the BLM decides to establish the two campgrounds they are planning, fees are likely to follow. While that could anger some climbers, Tyler hopes that the long-needed facilities, such as bathrooms and parking lots, will make it worth it. Realistically, most climbers will still pile into dispersed campsites anyway.

AS CLIMBERS ALIGN with land agencies to protect the boulders, they're also making connections in the neighboring towns. Before coal mines in and around Orangeville and Castle Dale dwindled to two because of the nation's decreasing demand for coal energy, everyone either worked in coal or on the alfalfa and corn farms. The coal and power generation jobs had a \$200 million economic impact on the town annually, a figure that today has dropped to \$137 million. Residents need alternative ways to pick these towns out of the economic dust.

"What do we have that no one else around us does?" The towns asked themselves. Blessed with the boulders and surrounded by awe-inspiring national and state parks, they had the answer in their backyard, a natural playground that's been bringing in climbers from Japan to Brazil for years.

"Visitors have been coming for years—not just to boulder—but our outdoor recreation in the last decade has exploded," Petersen said. "Our challenge is to see how we can benefit economically."

Locals have come on board to connect climbers and the community. Amanda Leonard, current Emery County events coordinator, messaged the Joe's Valley Bouldering Facebook page to facilitate a bouldering event.

Steven Jeffrey and Adriana Chimaras, climbers who are writing a new guidebook for Joe's (due spring 2018), planned the first annual Joe's Valley Bouldering Festival with Leonard. Beginning it's third year, the festival's attendance tripled in size from the first year to the next, with 150 climbers and an estimated \$25,500 brought into the community. Along with the typical yoga clinics and climbing meet-ups, the festival also connects climbers to the local community through ghost tours, local artisan clinics, and, to sum up the week, a rodeo where climbers race on cowhides dragged by cowboys.

For Leonard, the goal of the festival, besides fostering camaraderie between climbers and locals, is to show the private sector why they should bring restaurants and hotels to Emery County. Without it, the towns are missing out on climber dollars. Castle Dale's new (and only) vacation-rental home, Cox Lodging, might start a trend for Airbnbs or other homestays. Meanwhile, the Food Ranch, the local all-you-need store in Orangeville, started capitalizing on the climbers years ago by selling chalk, crashpads, and their world-famous Butterfinger donuts.

"Anything that climbers want and we can get, we bring it," says Drew Leroy, owner of Food Ranch. If that means hummus and microbrews, then the Food Ranch will stock it. At his shop, Leroy notes, an average climber will spend up to \$60 a day on food, gear, and bouldering-pad rentals. In fact, the Food Ranch did around \$4,500 in crashpad sales and rentals, tape, chalk, chalk bags, and camping-supply business last year. To accommodate visiting climbers, Leroy even built a 12,000-square-foot refuge upstairs from his shop: The Spartan Den, named for the local high school mascot. Leroy advocated to the city council, BLM, and the USFS to improve amenities in town as well as in the canyon, helping in the push for Orangeville's Welcome Park to include bathrooms and showers. Now, those restrooms are scheduled to open in April.

"This is a viable part of tourism that we want to capture. [The climbers] have already proved their worth," Leroy said. "We want them to be able to go up to the canyon and have the experience that they want." Outside of Leroy's shop hangs a simple signs. It reads, "We Love Our Climbers."



A BOULDER WALKS ACROSS

PHOTO BY ANDREW BURR