

The Story of SOUTHPAW

[00:00:00] From Talking Mouths.

[00:00:05] KATE WHITE: My name is Kate White, and I love riding mountain bikes. I'm here on the top of Southpaw. I'm also a mountain bike instructor, and so I ride bikes with kids and adults. Southpaw is one of my absolute favorite trails to bring people on, because this is a trail that was designed with flow in mind. And I tell you, it felt like I found magic the very first time I rode it. I actually sent Scott a message after, and the message probably was like, "Omg, this is the most exciting thing I've ever ridden. This is so beautiful. This trail is so, so great!"

You pick these lines, these lines that I wouldn't have seen necessarily had I been walking through the woods trying to figure out where I was going to, like, put the bike trail. I'm so excited anytime someone gets to ride this trail because it is magic. Like, this tells people that biking is fun. This lets them feel how the bike feels when they're doing it right, and that is so special. So, this trail.... I love this trail.

[00:01:09] SCOTT KEESEY: Let's stop talking and go ride.

[00:01:11] KATE WHITE: All right, let's ride.

[00:01:15] MARK: You're listening to Every Trail Tells a Story.

In this podcast series, we explore the origins of our favorite Yukon trails, guided by the dreamers, planners, bushwhackers, builders, obsessive personalities and, yes, the rogues who brought these trails to life. In this episode, Scott Keeseey and friends share their memories of building one of Whitehorse's most popular mountain bike trails.

This is the story of Southpaw.

[00:02:11] SCOTT KEESEY: We had two kids. We *have* two kids. They were four and two at the time, so home was really busy and either of us could only get out for about an hour at a time. Our short rides were kind of limited to an hour. I did Boogaloo and El Camino over and over and over. And I was starting to daydream a little bit about what some other opportunities might be for trails beyond those two.

On my birthday in 2010, in early June, I broke my thumb. I broke my right thumb riding in Carcross. And I really wanted to stay connected to the mountain bike community and couldn't go for rides. So, I was in a cast for a couple of weeks and then tender for a couple weeks after that, narrowly avoided surgery. The recovery wasn't as long as it could have been, but it was long enough to take my daydream about a new trail idea... and do something with it. So, I did a lot of the early work on the trail with limited use of my right hand. For those of you who aren't baseball fans, the southpaw is a left-handed pitcher.

[00:03:21] JEFF O'FARRELL: We all know Scott publicly as such a creative person. He's a snowboarder, he's a wake surfer, he's a guitarist, a vocalist, a DJ. So, we all know him as a creative person. But those of us who know him really well know how incredibly disciplined the guy is as well. Rather than sit on the couch and feel sorry for the loss of his mountain biking season, he decided to make a contribution to the community by building Southpaw.

[00:03:55] SCOTT KEESEY: I wanted to call it Air Tilt Cruise. Back in the day, the high-end cars had air tilt cruise, and so one of my original concepts was to start the trail off with a jump—the air part—and then tilt

and cruise. Am I blowing this by explaining the whole air tilt cruise thing? I've talked to a few people lately who think all mountain bike trail names are.... "Why do they have all these *stupid* jokey names for trails?" Naming is part of the culture of trail building, right? You're building a trail, you're thinking of all these goofy names. It's kind of like, "Oh, that'd be a good band name," right? It's either a good band name or it's a good trail name.

So, I started thinking about the downhill side of the Grey Mountain Road and that big blank space between El Camino and Your Trail. I just wondered: what's the potential in there? Took a look on Google Earth—that was pretty new at the time—and there was some really nice new high resolution satellite imagery of that area. I just started scoping it out and I could see from Google Earth that there were some sweet ridges. I was all about the sweet ridges. I figured that's what made a good trail. The next step was to actually go and ground truth it. I started walking around the area that I thought would be the start, off Grey Mountain Road, and a little bit from the bottom. I don't know how much foot traffic there was, but there were certainly some game trails and remnants of dirt bike activity. Not really full-fledged, cleared trails, but on the ridges for sure there were dirt bike scars. And the original vision for the trail was to have it terminate on My Trail just before it meets Long Flat, kind of in that amphitheater. So, I started walking up that area, too, and found a really good finish for the trail.

I didn't have much trail building experience. I'd been out and helped with a few trail nights. But I knew a lot of people who had experience, and I leaned really heavily on them, and they were very generous. I took Derek Crowe with me, trying to find a starting point. We kind of went up to this little side road that Derek knew about, and there was a little pullout with some burnt garbage. Derek told me a great story about stumbling across some naked German campers in that parking lot.

[00:06:39] DEREK CROWE: You know, I don't actually remember any naked Germans.

[00:06:46] SCOTT KEESEY: By mid-June in 2010, I'd been walking it with a few people and basically had an alignment kind of nailed down in my mind. And then my alignment consultants turned me around quite a bit. I had a whole team of consultants. Derek, Thane Phillips, Chris Milner, Jeff O'Farrell, those guys.

[00:07:09] JEFF O'FARRELL: Southpaw was Scott's project, for sure. He had a vision and he wanted to stick to that vision, but he really wanted to hear what other people had to say about how to execute that vision.

[00:07:23] SCOTT KEESEY: So, we changed it a bit, and I used my lovely little pink flags, and we had what I thought was my preferred alignment down within two or three weeks.

This is kind of a dorky map. I scribbled this out just to give people a sense of what it looked like. I think, in retrospect, what I was really trying to do was build some hype. Some of the people I'd involved were way more competent at trail building than I was. And so, I knew there was potential for some of them to either want to go out on their own or take small groups with them. So, I just put this together to give to them and say, "This is kind of where it goes, and this is what I think needs to be done." I gave all these sections dorky little names like the Gate, the Park, the Pines, the Gully. (I'll tell you all about the Gully. The Gully's got its own story.) I think the map served its purpose.

[00:08:17] JEFF O'FARRELL: Scott used a bunch of different approaches when it came to construction. He would organize work brigades. He would occasionally leverage the support of the local mountain biking club. But he also did a lot of small group building as well, where he and a friend would go out and

chip away at the trail. And that was most of my first-hand involvement in constructing the trail. Just nights where Scott and I would be out there, after dinner, working for an hour and a half, two hours.

[00:08:48] SCOTT KEESEY: I was going back and looking at my emails that I'd been sending out. I didn't do any of this on Facebook. I was kind of doing it all by email. And I realized I was a *fucking* nuisance. Spam-o-rama. I would send out so many emails to the same people over and over, and there was certainly a guilty tone. I'm convinced that some people came out to help me just to get me off their case.

Alex Benitah was one of those people who came out to just shut me up, I think. He ran it with Graham Riske. And I think they were convinced after running it that the bottom quarter that I called the Gully on my dork map, they said that's.... I don't know if they used the term "suboptimal," but they were trying to make it clear that it just wasn't as good as the rest of the trail.

[00:09:38] ALEX BENITAH: We were whipping down this trail probably for a few minutes before we finally came to what was the end of the trail. And at this point we found ourselves kind of down in the bottom of a.... just a horrible place. And we had two options: head back up or drag ourselves through this thing. We were too lazy to go back up and decided "Let's try and push our way through the woods." And I swear it must have taken us a good 20 minutes with our bikes to finally make our way through this mess of trees. When we finally got out, I thought to myself, "I've got to call Scott Keeseey and tell him he's dead wrong on the landing of this thing."

[00:10:16] SCOTT KEESEY: I was pretty convinced that that gully was going to be a sweet kind of half-pipe thing. Kind of like that lower section of B and S. And Paul Gowdie rode it for his trail map and he said the same thing. He said, "I don't see the line in the bottom quarter there." But I said, "Look, that's where it's going, so lock it down."

Alex actually came out to help me start clearing that section once again.

[00:10:45] ALEX BENITAH: All I could see was just a lot of downed trees. And I kept telling him it wasn't the right place to go. But Scott was dead-set on this thing going through this little gully and there was no way around it.

[00:10:57] SCOTT KEESEY: And it was *thick*. It was *really* thick. There was tons of cutting and dead fall and tight little pines and really crap ground.

[00:11:05] ALEX BENITAH: I had been asked to sort of carry on behind everybody and sort of clear some trees, get the moss off the ground and move things around. And I was working with a Pulaski and I was pushing through some of the trail at the back end of the crowd.

[00:11:18] SCOTT KEESEY: It was a total slog. The black flies were vicious.

[00:11:21] ALEX BENITAH: I was trying to get a stump out of the way. So, I was pounding away on the Pulaski and all of a sudden, poof.

[00:11:26] SCOTT KEESEY: Alex hits a wasp nest.

[00:11:28] ALEX BENITAH: I'm running down the trail screaming. I'm pretty sure I was saying, "Damn you, Keeseey!" Everybody watched me run and nobody could figure out what was going on until I got closer to

them. By then I'd cleared all the wasps out of the way because it had taken me so long to get through all that deadfall to get to them. It was not pleasant. I definitely got hit at least six times.

[00:11:49] SCOTT KEESEY: That was the end of that evening. A good guy would have carried on with that alignment just to honor that awful evening that Alex had. But I ultimately changed that alignment and I asked Paul Gowdie if it was too late for his map. And I'm going to quote him now. He said, "No, it's too late. I'll make some stickers that say you fucked things up. And by the way, you don't get the \$2 discount on the new map. Hi ho."

[00:12:21] JEFF O'FARRELL: The story of Southpaw is a story of innovation in so many ways. And the approach to safety in building Southpaw was unlike any that I had experienced prior to that.

Our boys, Liam and Ryan, came out on a few trail building evenings. The first evening the four of us went out there, they were very quick to pick up the tools. And I confess I might have been a bit hasty in my own right. Scott's stopping us right away. Because, you know, given Scott's very disciplined approach to building this trail, and perhaps given some of his own life experiences—like surviving a plane crash—he had a very, very diligent approach to safety that involved starting the evening with a tailgate meeting. Even though the boys' attention span for that safety meeting was perhaps a bit shorter than Scott would have liked. I can remember his son Liam saying, "Dad, can we stop *talking* and start *working*?"

[00:13:32] SCOTT KEESEY: Thane organized the first CMBC work party on the trail. It was in early August. So that gives you a sense of how long it took to start putting the tread in and some benching and berming. And there were different people coming out every time. I see this now with our CMBC trail nights. You'll get a couple of the usual suspects, but every event that you have, there's new people.

[00:13:57] SCOTT KEESEY: Hey, everybody. Just before we dig in, maybe just.... Do you guys want to come down for a sec? We'll just go over just a couple of things before we get started. I think most of you have kind of used these tools before, but if you haven't, and even if you have, this is a good reminder. Most of these tools are pretty sharp, so be very, very careful with them. Kind of a rule is if you hold the tool out like this in a circle around you, make sure that there's nobody in your circle. Okay? What else? So, a good rule is just to.... One Pulaski-width on either side of a pink flag is maximum. Even that's a bit much.... One more thing. If you're working here and there's another person working up there, or if you're working towards their line, try and make them match up. Right on, team. That's enough talking. Let's get at her. Have fun.

[00:15:11] SCOTT KEESEY: I had a lazy moment, for sure. The very end of the trail, the last hundred meters, there was this really beautiful, contoured turn. Dropped down into a little bit of a bowl to finish. That was the right way to go, but we were so close, and I just wanted to get it done. It was the very, very end of the trail, and I couldn't see the line. It was going to involve cutting a few pretty substantial trees and a great big willow thicket, and it just wasn't jumping out at me as an easy way. So, I went straight down the end of the gravelly esker just to get it done and hook up with Long Flat. And we ultimately went back and changed it.

Interestingly enough, more than one person I've talked to said they really missed the original end because that was the fun part of the trail. My son Liam, after we made the change, the reroute at the end, he said, "There's a kid in my class who's really mad at you." And, in fact, he went back out and moved all the logs and all the debris that we'd placed over the original alignment and moved it onto the new alignment because he wants to ride the old one. I said, "Get me a name...."

As it turned out, we didn't actually get the trail fully done in 2010. I think the snow came early or something and we couldn't quite finish. So, it actually got done.... The first ride of the trail, I think, was at very end of May, start of June, in 2011. I remember Joseph Graham and I set up a mojito stand partway down the trail. We'd done one trail night—I think it was on a Saturday—and everyone knew it was done. We knew people were going to be riding it on Sunday. So, we set up a little mojito stand and there weren't that many people that came by, and Joe and I ended up just kind of getting drunk in the bush. I don't know that there was spewing, but we certainly had booze in the bush.

I know from talking to people that all the thinking that I put into it and all the help and advice that I got from people who knew what they were doing has resulted in a good trail. I think it shares a lot of characteristics with other trails. It's pretty consistent, kind of beginner-intermediate trail. I worked really hard to try to maintain that consistency throughout, so you weren't getting surprised by really challenging features. That was part of the reroute at the end: to maintain the nice flowy consistency of it. And so, I think it appeals to a lot of people.

Some of the unique things?

A few years ago, someone took it upon themselves to put a few garden gnomes strategically along the trail in these high velocity turn sections where you really have to concentrate. So, you just get this peripheral glimpse and you think, "Did I just see a fucking gnome? Was that a gnome?" Someone's totally punked this trail. I think it was Joe De Graff. I *think* Joe did it. I've never actually talked to Joe about it, but somebody told me. I don't know Joe well enough to know whether that's something that he would do. But I like the story that it was Joe.

I think the thing that I love most about that trail is how much people love it. I hear it all the time. A lot of people don't know that I built it. And that's fine. That's not why I built it. But the people who do know or find out, I often hear like, "Oh, I didn't know you built it. That's a great trail." That's awesome. That's great. And I'm really happy to have contributed to this network. It's something that'll persist for a long time. And every time you're on the trail, riding it, you remember the work that went into it and you remember the people who helped at certain spots and conversations you had with them while you were building it... and the decisions that you made. And that's cool.

[00:19:32] SCOTT KEESEY: That's something you don't get from riding other people's trails.

[00:19:53] SCOTT KEESEY: And I forged some really cool friendships on that trail with people who I'd never met before. Lyle Dinn. Lyle caught wind of the fact that there was some chainsaw work needed, and he came out and just said, "Hey, I'm Lyle and here's my saw, and we're gonna go do this." And Lyle's a great friend of mine now.

I'll always have that special relationship with Southpaw, even if it's a bit conflicted about, you know, wishing certain things went other ways. It's a pretty special spot on the face of the earth for me. I got a lot of great memories there. It's a flood of them constantly as you're flying down the trail.

[00:20:41] MARK: Every Trail Tells a Story is a podcast from Talking Mouths. It is recorded and edited by Mark Koepke. The theme music is Blue Ska by Kevin MacLeod. Subscribe wherever you get your podcast. Thanks for listening.

[00:21:17] SCOTT KEESEY: So, I'm gonna drop some F-bombs in here that we can bleep out.

[00:21:20] MARK: I don't care.

[00:21:20] SCOTT KEESEY: That'll be fun.

[00:21:21] MARK: We don't have to bleep them out.

Are you quoting people directly? Are these your own F-bombs or are these....?

[00:21:28] SCOTT KEESEY: There's gonna be a little of both.

[00:21:30] MARK: Are you gonna be talking about dirt-holing at all?

[00:21:32] SCOTT KEESEY: No.

[00:21:34] MARK: Ballpark figure. How many hours do you think you devoted to this thing?

[00:21:38] SCOTT KEESEY: Myself personally or with the team?

[00:21:40] MARK: You personally.

[00:21:41] SCOTT KEESEY: Does that count lying in bed, awake at night with—

[00:21:46] MARK: Your maps while your wife is rolling her eyes? Yeah.

[00:21:48] SCOTT KEESEY: My dork map. Yeah, I would—

[00:21:51] MARK: That's what it was officially called?

[00:21:52] SCOTT KEESEY: I might have hit 1500.

[00:21:54] MARK: Wow.