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Tom McGuane on aging with friends PG. 106

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INSIDE: Texas redfish, Keys permit, Long Island stripers, Washington steelhead, Minnesota's Driftless, Michigan's Boardman, road-tripping Alaska, bumming Baja, Chinook from the beach, Henry's Fork Foundation, float-fishing Argentina, fly-tyer Blane Chocklett, steelheading BC, lunch break on the Truckee, and one man's first driftboat

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Campus Life

Abel and Ross Reels settle into their new Western Slope mega-home BY GEOFF MUELLER

MONTROSE, COLORADO, is encircled by five national forests: Grand Mesa, Gunnison, Rio Grande, San Juan, and the Uncompahgre. And over the years, flyfishing brands like Scott Rods, Whiting Farms, and Ross Reels have made this fertile hiking, biking, skiing, and fishing country their home.

The question for David and Doug Dragoo, owners of Montrose-based Ross and Abel reels, was whether or not the same potential they saw in a rural town with a righteous backyard could lure more like-minded companies into the fold. To test the waters, they blueprinted Colorado Outdoors and extended an invite.

“Being a business in a small town, and needing room to expand, we were hoping to do something more,” says David. “We wanted space to grow, but we also wanted to make a difference in our community.”

Colorado Outdoors is a difference-maker on a grand scale. The 164-acre, \$83-million outdoors megacampus will house Abel and Ross’s glimmering new 40,000 square-foot digs. It’ll also take in retail shops, commercial offices, townhomes, apartments, and a hotel. Visitors, when doors open in early 2019, can step inside a brewery for pints, grab a couple of tacos on the way out, and then hit the Uncompahgre to feed a trout or two. The project is the largest of its kind in the country. It’s also one of the more forward-thinking examples, with environmental stewardship playing a leading role in the design philosophy. “Most development projects, frankly, start with buildings and work inward,” Dragoo says. “Developers reduce open space by designing over the natural amenities. We started from the river and worked out.”

That shift began with the construction of a 10-foot wide trail along the Uncompahgre (with the help of a \$2 million grant from the state). The new byway opens public access to 1.5 miles of river that had previously held no-trespassing signs. The trail also acts as a natural buffer between the bustling campus and

the tranquil wetlands.

On the business side of the divide, Abel and Ross will stretch manufacturing capabilities inside their new state-of-the-art headquarters. Just like the river, the reel-making facility welcomes the public to stop by and say hi—but not to buy. “We’re in a compelling environment. Customers can see how their favorite reels are made, and they can then hangout and go fishing,” says Abel VP Jeff Patterson. “This way we give the product a new sense of personality. And if people want to purchase a reel,

there are fly shops nearby.”

Abel and Ross have a January move-in date, and they won’t be alone upon arrival. Beyond fish brands, other outdoors businesses are paying attention to the development thanks to economic incentives from both federal and state programs. The historically slow-to-grow north end of Montrose lives inside a designated federal “Opportunity Zone.” These OZs encourage investment in low-income communities via reductions in capital gains taxes for deep-pocketed financiers. At the state level, a Colorado Enterprise Zone also envelops the campus. The EZ program is another investment-incentive plan, promoting business-friendly environments “in economically distressed areas by offering state income tax credits.”

Will tax breaks lead to job growth? Colorado Outdoors is betting on it. And according to a third-party study by Anderson Analytics, the odds look good. The project is estimated to create 1,900 positions, with an annual payroll of \$81 million. So far, a ski-boot manufacturer and several soft-goods brands have jumped on board. “Companies want to be here because it maybe adds a certain cache to their products,” Dragoo says. “They like that they can raise their families in the outdoors. And they love that employees can afford to live in Montrose. It’s hard for businesses to look at this model and say no.”

Scott Fly Rods, however, is one business that did just that. After exploring possibilities, the high-end rod manufacturer ultimately decided to stay put because it wasn’t the right financial fit. “But as members of the community, we appreciate the project,” says Scott President Jim Bartschi. “Montrose needs economic stimulus and this is a great step in that direction. I hope it brings people into the community who want to stay, work, and play.”

The median home value in Montrose is \$240k. That’s about half of what you’d spend on a similar size dwelling in Salt Lake City or Denver. Plus, the river that flows through town, typically at its best during the low, clear winter months, is another worthy incentive.

“The Uncompahgre may be hard to pronounce,” Dragoo says, “But it’s easy to come and fish. 🎣