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Downhill club's 30-year history no uphill story

By TOM THINNES
Gazette Regional Editor

Thirty years ago, long before skiing peaked as a popular winter pastime for the masses, a group of Kalamazooans banded together.

They had at least one thing in common — they enjoyed the challenge of trying to get from the top of a snow-covered slope to the bottom on their feet, and doing so without ending up in Brown Hospital.

They were ski buffs, and a relatively small group they were, especially when compared to the multitudes who today enjoy a winter sport that caters to both the typical family and the jet-setters.

On Jan. 26, the Kalamazoo Ski Club will mark the 30th anniversary of the date that its articles of incorporation were filed in Lansing. Three decades later, the club, with some of its charter members still intact, is alive and well and offering one of the best skiing bargains around.

Recently, a group of the pioneer members joined with the club's current president, T. Kenneth Young of 1518 Spruce Drive, to talk about the organization's founding days and its future.

Even without sitting by the lodge's central fire place before a crackling good blaze, the men dipped into their knapsacks for warm memories about starting something, watching it grow and working hard to insure its survival.

The charter members who talked to The Gazette about the origins of the Kalamazoo Ski Club included George Gerphede of 817 Dobbin, David Thompson of 1623 Schuring, Walter Klette of 2410 West F Ave., and attorney Richard Morris of 4903 Interlaken, Richland. There is a fifth charter member still active — David Crawford.

Back in late 1948, this quintet and about 40 other persons had a common denominator — weekend trips up north to go skiing. Thompson even was a member of the Caberfee board of directors when it was still a private ski lodge.

"I had been going north since the late 1930s," Thompson said. "You wasted a lot of time on the road back then. The state didn't have the freeways. We finally asked ourselves why go north. Let's ski around here."

By word of mouth, the idea spread and the group, with an initial limit of 50 members, took shape.

The first officers included Martin Bekken as president, Thompson as vice president, Ruth Pett as secretary and Marjorie Lum as treasurer. Gerphede, Morris and Edward (Mike) Hindert constituted that first board of directors.

Thompson's skiing days go back

But what good is a ski club without a slope to the board arranged to lease the hilly land behind the Blue Goose Mobile home park on Douglas Avenue.

"We rented that hill for \$25 a season," Morris recalled. "Then inflation hit and the price went to \$5 a season."

The club members went to work, charted five runs down the slope and installed a rope tow. A dozen years later, massive excavation would hit town and the Michigan Highway Department sent the club searching for a new home. When state highway planners plotted the path of the new US-131 interconnector into the northern part of Kalamazoo, they cut right through the heart of Blue Goose hill.

In May of 1960, the club began leasing Zaccres in Cooper Township in the northern part of Kalamazoo County. That land is located on AB Avenue between Douglas and 12th Street. Eventually, club members entered into a purchase agreement and the mortgage was finally burned this past year.

Work parties installed two rope tows and a parking lot. A club house was built, complete with an open fire place in the middle to warm frost-bitten digits. A picture window looks towards the thrill-filled slope.

There are five main runs and an incline for beginners. The main run, Thompson said, features about 150 feet of vertical drop over a 600-foot distance. Some back runs wind their way through the wooded property for 1,500 feet or more. In comparison, Thompson said, Timber Ridge northeast of Gobles offers seven runs and about a 300-foot vertical drop.

"The dues were originally \$2 a year, along with a \$10 initiation fee," Gerphede said. "After all, we had to finance the construction of a rope tow back on Blue Goose hill."

Today, the Kalamazoo Ski Club charges a \$5 initiation fee. A single membership for one skiing season costs \$30. A family membership is \$40.

"And that's it," Klette said. "There are no towing fees and no extra charges." The only "hooker" is that members must participate in work parties to get the slope and lodge ready for another season, mow the hill, and help run and take care of the equipment during the winter.

"Membership is open," Young said. "Anybody can join. We were once limited to 50, but we can handle about 90 families or so. Right now, we are about at the 65-family level. It's been a family organization over the 30 years. An awful lot of youngsters have learned how to ski because of it."

Thompson's skiing days go back



KALAMAZOO SKI CLUB PRESIDENT T. KENNETH YOUNG LOOKS OUT OVER ONE OF THE RUNS

—Gazette photos by Jerry Campbell

to when the slats were wood, the boots were leather and there were no safety releases on the bindings. Broken legs and arms were skiing's "red badge of courage." "We were really excited that first year," he recalled. "The winter of 1947-48 had brought a bunch of snow, but it was almost a dry run our first season."

From that "dry run," ski club members have progressed to a facility that offers skiing all day Saturday and Sunday, and night-time skiing on Tuesday and Friday evenings, thanks to a lighting system.

"We usually have full work bees," Thompson said, "to get the hordes out of the clubhouse, to cut fire wood for the lodge, to grade the road, to string the rope tows and to mow the hills."

"If you work on a bee," Morris added, "you get \$10 knocked off your dues."

During the skiing season, three members are assigned on week-nights and weekends to run the ski tows and to supervise the operation. As part of their membership commitment, they also serve as a make-shift ski patrol.

In the old days, blue jeans with long "hanks" was the uniform of the day. Others came in paint-splattered bib overalls. Then Madison Avenue took over, and peeks and greens and purples and reds became fashionable hues on the slopes. If you wanted to be a macho skier who would the girls (or the guys) at the lodge, you needed a flashy, skin-tight ski pants and a suitcase full of rainbow-colored sweaters. "I think that the trend is coming back to the simple fatigues," Thompson said.

"But the equipment improvements during the past 10 years make all the difference in the world," Thompson said. "It is a lot easier to learn to ski than it used to be. The ski-and-boot combinations are so delicate now that you can wriggle your toes and the skies will turn. Better and tougher materials are now being used."

Toboggans and sleds are not allowed on the Cooper Township premises. "It would be too dangerous," Morris said. "We also discourage jumping, but wherever you have kids and a hill, there will be jumping."

The current slate of officers in the non-profit corporation are Young, president; Ed Stiller, vice president; Shirley Heranson, treasurer; and Linda Bryant, secretary.

"Our bill faces the north," Gerphede said, "so we retain our snow and base. You have to bring your own equipment and members can bring a guest once. You can take food out there and spend the whole day. And what's really great is that you seldom have to wait in line."

Other than taking a big whack out of the cost of skiing, there is another benefit to belonging to the Kalamazoo Ski Club. You can be skiing in a matter of minutes. The only fond memories that the charter members have about those long drives north in the 1940s is that gasoline sold for less than a quarter a gallon.

Alaskans uncrowded

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Of Alaska's 375 million acres, only about 180,000 have been cleared, settled and altered by man. That's less than .001 percent of the total. Half of Alaska's fewer than 400,000 residents live in or near Anchorage.



CLUB MEMBERS TEST ENGINE THAT POWERS ROPE TOW
Paul Herick, standing, and pioneer member David Thompson



OPEN FIRE PLACE IN CENTER OF LODGE OFFERS RETREAT FROM WINTER
From left, Larry Hartman, Ross Herick, John Hartman, Kevin Thiel, Bill Hartman, Tim Young

An Open Letter From H&R BLOCK

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January 1979

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