



Up through the trees. The tow rope at the Carnarvon Ski Hill relied on the power of two automobile engines to pull skiers to the top of the hill..

When dreams go downhill

BY
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When people think of skiing in Haliburton County they automatically think of Sir Sam's at Eagle Lake. After all, despite the area's rolling and undulating hillsides, there isn't exactly a long list of potential ski sites waiting to be transformed into winter playgrounds.

But there is one site that lies quietly and almost secretly at the top end of Minden Township, only yards from the cairn of rocks indicating where Minden ends and Stanhope begins. It's long since closed, and the forest has gradually folded in around it, but it's there, trying desperately to withstand the ravages of time.

It was designed and built, operated for three years and then closed even before Sir Sam's Ski Hill was created and before Collingwood became a household name in the world of downhill skiing. Except for some geographic evidence, a bunch of photos and a few pockets of memories here and there, not much remains of the Carnarvon Ski Hill. Yup, the Carnarvon Ski Hill, 1962 to 1964. Hard to believe, isn't it?

The ski hill was the brainchild of Fred Gregory, whose father, Jack, ran the Carnarvon Garage from the late 1940s to the mid 1950s. The family lived in the house behind the garage that now sits empty on the edge of Mirror Lake. They owned the garage, the

cabins, the big house and the laundry/gift shop/restaurant that's now the Mill Pond Restaurant. Hazel ran what was then the gift shop. Jack operated a bait store in the basement.

"I think we were just sitting around at the house and the idea came up. (Fred) went all over the property and figured he could make a ski hill there. We had a talk about it and he went down to the fellow who owned the property and bought a piece. That's how it started," recalls 91-year-old Jack from his home on the other side of Mirror Lake.

Now, despite what some folks thought at the time, building a ski facility wasn't just the crazy notion of an inexperienced man: Fred had spent several winters working out west in British Columbia where he learned a lot about ski hills.

He served with the RCMP in western Canada, married there and later returned to Ontario to become a policeman in Scarborough. In fact, he was one of the first officers to patrol in a cruiser; a major change from foot and bicycle patrols that were common then. While a member of the Scarborough force, he developed an extremely successful anti-delinquency program that eventually employed 68 instructors and three secretaries. The program resulted in major changes to youth crime statistics in the city.

Unfortunately his health wasn't good. "I had three heart seizures. There were no leaves of absence in those days. I had to quit or die, so I quit," he said in a telephone interview from Ottawa where he now lives.

He rested, helped his dad at the service station and left for the west coast.

"I went out west to get a divorce, actually, and on my way home I ran out of money in Calgary," he recalled.

He found a job for the ski season fixing skis in a place called Premier Cycle and Sports in Calgary, and returned to Carnarvon for the summer.

He went back the following year as the manager of the ski department and began running ski tours into the mountains. In 1961,

North Star Mountain and the village of Kimberly, B.C. were virtually abandoned. Fred says with the industry gone and shops boarded up it was like a ghost town.

"There was no one out there, so we put people in hotels to sleep and turned the money over to the local police to give to the owners for using their places while they weren't there," he says.

"I put up signs in stores that said 'have extra room in car' and signs that said 'looking for rides' for ski tours. I created my own demand," he says, adding that he wound up taking about 100 people out on ski tours every weekend.

Jack and Hazel went west with Fred one winter, when Fred was running the pro shop at a ski hill called Paskapoo, just outside Calgary. The three of them prepared the pro shop for the ski season.

"We worked hard. We got the ski shop fixed up, got the stock in and lent an extra hand," says Hazel.

"I was running the pro shop and it was really busy. I watched the doctor who owned the place take all the money and put it into a cardboard box. There was definitely money to be made in this industry," remembers Fred.

As a result, that summer, while they were sitting around the house in Carnarvon, the decision was made. In the winter of 1962, the hill opened.

"There were three good choices of hills here, but



A war surplus Bren gun carrier was used to carve out the trails and tow paths on the Carnarvon Ski Hill.

Carnarvon was the best because it could be seen from the road," says Fred, who still won't reveal the other two spots because, he says, they're still potential sites.

He bought 23 1/2 acres for \$1,000, let the farmer retain a right-of-way into the field, and built his tow sheds in the field.

He hired woodcutters to cut the trees on what would become the runs, while he went door to door selling brushes for the Fuller Brush Company to earn enough money to pay the woodcutters.

"There was definitely no profit. Everything went back into the hill," he says.

When the woodcutters didn't do the job quite as Fred had anticipated, he purchased a war surplus Bren gun carrier and used it to mould the landscape and carve out the rope tow paths.

"Getting the roots out was difficult but in the end we had that hill so you could rake it with a leaf rake," says Jack.

As with most of Fred's projects, the ski hill was a family affair. His sister Joan and her husband Ron helped out. Ron, a machinist with the former Avro Aviation company (of Arrow jet fighter fame) helped

Fred design and build one of the two rope tows. The other tow was bought in Collingwood.

"Anything my brother gets involved in, the whole family gets involved in. You might not want to be part of a ski hill, but you ended up part of a ski hill," says Joan with a laugh. Joan is now married to Fred Chapple.

(In fact, Joan even helped Fred with his anti-delinquency group in Scarborough when she lived there at the same time. "I knew absolutely nothing about gymnastics, but I was their secretary and I often had to judge the competitions," she recalls with amazement.)

The power source for the tows was an 8-cylinder car chassis bolted to the floor of each tow shed. Jack had salvaged them from the Carnarvon garage. The main qualification for the tow rope operator was that he be able to "drive" a standard shift automobile. When they needed re-fuelling, the local gas truck made a delivery and filled up the gas tank attached to the outside of the tow shed.

The pulleys that guided the rope for the tows were car tire rims bolted to telephone poles, many of which



Spring skiers at the Carnarvon Ski Hill took advantage of the warm sunshine to try some less than traditional apparel on the slopes.

still stand or lie, barely recognizable, amidst the forest's overgrown floor.

The first groomer was a home-made wooden roller with a pipe handle, manufactured by Bob MacBrien. It was pulled up by the tow rope and dragged behind the groomer operator as he skied down the hill. Simple, but effective.

"I groomed the hill myself, at night, by hanging lanterns in the trees to help me see what I was doing," recalls Fred.

Fred's parents, Jack and Hazel, ran the snack bar and the ski shop, along with friend Helen Johnson, whose husband Lloyd was the hill's original First Aid patroller.

"We had known Fred for years. He wanted to get this ski hill started and between his dad and some others they got some equipment and put some tows in operation. My wife was running the snack bar on weekends and I used to splice the tow ropes for him, that's how my involvement started" says Johnson, now living in Blairhampton.

Fred knew what he wanted to do and how to go about it, says Johnson, but he took it one step at a time.

"If we had a problem we solved it as it came along. It was a real jackknife operation," he says.

Johnson, at the time, was the Chief Training

Officer for St. John's Ambulance out of Toronto. His wife had moved to Stanhope when the family bought the Salvation Army camp they renamed Happyland Campsite on the Hawk River. While Helen lived in Stanhope with three of the children, Lloyd stayed in Toronto with two others until they finished school.

"There had to be someone at the hill for first aid for insurance liability. I was professionally trained with St. John's Ambulance so I was on call to provide first aid. Eventually we had other chaps. Andy Murdison, Trevor Pawson, Ross Pawson and others formed a ski patrol and they sort of took over that responsibility," says Johnson, who continued to do the books for the ski hill after giving up the first aid responsibility.

"Fred did a lot of good stuff. He did a lot of organizing, like the ski patrol, which was a brand new thing then. They practised on a Resusci-Annie ... I think it was the original Resusci-Annie," exclaims Joan.

In order to draw families to the hill, Fred offered free lessons and free equipment rentals to children on the weekends but, as so often happens, it became little more than a day-care. While the disadvantage was a big loss on potential memberships, the advantage was that the love of skiing was instilled in many children.

The hill boasted three runs, a slalom course and two rope tows but it wasn't without it's problems. The main problem was local support—or the lack thereof. At the height of it's success, there were about 350 members, back when "membership fees were peanuts" according to Jack. Membership charges went right back into running the hill, more like a co-op than anything else. And most of the members were cottagers.

"There hadn't been any skiing up here and people said, 'what's all this, this is just stupid'. It was more the cottagers who really enjoyed it," says Joan.

"There was a handful of people who helped us out....the Murdisons, the Pawsons and the Warringtons were the backbone of that hill," says Jack with a nod.

"Fred had vision and it was very frustrating for him because he couldn't get people on board until it was too late. He brought a lot of 'firsts' here but people would just look at him and say 'oh no, here we go again with another of Fred's ideas'," says Joan with a touch of disappointment.

"Yes, Fred had the first torchlight parade on the hill. That was really something to see. All the money went to the Red Cross," adds Jack.

The Carnarvon Ski Hill even hosted the first Ontario Red Cross Open Ski Championships, although no one seems to recall in what year it was held. Racers were invited from all over, including Collingwood.



As fragile as the season, this giant ice sculpture skier stood guard for one season near the entrance to the hill.

"Yeah, all the racers sat around the clubhouse and couldn't believe a little hill like that could be a challenge, but they all fell off the course and ended up in the bushes," recalls Fred with a laugh. Incidentally, the winner of both the slalom and downhill races was Fred.

It seems the Collingwood racers fell into a common deception about Carnarvon: that it was just a tiny hill in the middle of nowhere. Although the angle of slopes or height of the hills has long since faded from

memory, a simple walk around the former site reveals that it is higher and steeper than one's first impression.

"You'd be surprised how high that is. You get up there and you can see for miles. I remember the government man who came to inspect the operation. He was amazed by the view," says Jack proudly.

It took two seasons to generate interest in the hill. In 1964, just when it seemed as though success was coming into view, tragedy struck. A spark from a wood

There were busy days at the ski hill, but its popularity was just catching on when a fire and new government regulations spelled the end of the venture at Carnarvon.



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stove ignited a fire which razed the clubhouse.

"I had changed all the stoves to oil except for one wood stove. I had the new stove all set to install and was missing a 35-cent part that Windsor and Allcorn didn't have it," recalls Fred.

Finding a fire department to respond to the blaze was also frustrating. "I remember arguing with the fire department because I'm right on the border of Minden Township. They said I was in Stanhope Township (there was no fire department there at the time). I pulled the phone off the wall and yelled at them while the fire burned around me...but (even if they had responded) it wouldn't have mattered," he says.

Fred lost everything except the clothes on his back and an old car. The clubhouse was gone, as was the rental equipment and hopes of the Carnarvon Ski Hill. Every cent he had invested, \$48,000, was gone.

"It was a real letdown for him. He had great plans for that season and people were just starting to come on side with him. The people who had worked along with him were all excited and there he was, he just stood there with ashes all around....," recalls Joan sadly.

For the others who had helped, it was just as much of a shock. Most had volunteered their time

because they wanted to, because they believed in the project and because they wanted to help out a friend.

"It was never a successful thing as far as money was concerned, but then losing all the equipment in the fire was the big financial blow. Everything was gone: all his stock, the skis, the boots, everything. So we never did make any money on the deal and anyone who put money in just said 'well, that's it'," says Johnson.

But the ski hill didn't just fade away after the fire. They rebuilt. The Haywoods from Valley High (now Heather Lodge) gave Fred one of their small cabins to use as the new clubhouse. Friends rallied round and cleared the site where the new little clubhouse was to be located. Insurance money paid for some of the work and the rest, like before, was volunteered from family and friends.

But despite the efforts, that season just didn't go very well. Collingwood was in full swing, and skiing was becoming a very popular sport. Along with skiing's popularity came stricter government regulations.

"We had no money to put the roof back on, so we put a flat roof on. And then the government came along with new laws and regulations. We couldn't afford it that year. The regulations just killed us," says Fred.



Standing before the charred remains of the clubhouse at the Carnarvon Ski Hill, Jack and Hazel Gregory survey the complete destruction caused by a spark from a wood stove.

"Everyone had worked so damn hard to get that new building and everything. It really looked good when they had the big building there before the fire and it was just starting to shape up to look like something when the fire hit...I think people sort of lost heart," recalls Johnson.

"It was very sad because here you are and all of a sudden people don't have a place to go. It was nice for people who cottaged here in the summer to be able to come in the winter and have something to do," says Joan.

And in those days, the early 60s, the area certainly wasn't the winter tourist hotspot it is today. Sure, there were diehard families who visited the cottage in the winter, but for the most part, Haliburton County closed on Labour Day and stayed closed until Victoria Day.

"There was nothing else then. Why, if you wanted to have quiet night's sleep after Labour Day, go out and put a blanket and a pillow across what's now Highway 35 and nothing would disturb you," says Jack with a laugh.

When the ski hill faded after the fire, Fred took his loss and moved to Toronto where he worked in a carpentry shop. He later re-located with the company to an armed forces headquarters in Ottawa. At age 65, he is now the owner of a highly successful, and expanding, company called

Sage Books, a distributor of New Age material including personal growth and self help publications.

"Yes, Sage Books is successful, and he wants to expand. You'd think at 65, when you're getting your old age pension, you want to slow down a little, but then, dad didn't consider retiring until he was about 72," says Joan of her brother.

Besides the Carnarvon Ski Hill, Fred has left his imprint on other interesting, skiing-

related memories. He was an integral part of the initial survey of Sir Sam's Ski Hill that would open in the season of 1965/66. He was asked to provide advice to the developers of both Hidden Valley and Blue Mountain, and he helped form the Ontario Ski Operators Association.

"Yeah, I guess I did a lot. Boy, that seems so long ago," he says.

For others, there are home movies, lots of photos and a pile of memories. It was only for three seasons, but they were three seasons of a new sport for the area that were the result of an unheard of amount of volunteer effort by a group of dedicated people.

"I really enjoyed it. We all became a family because it was a common interest and everyone wanted to see it fly so they worked their butts off for it, just to make it go, not for the money," says Johnson.

"I have a little piece of metal, oh, it almost looks like modern art or something. It was all that was left of the money in the cash drawer after the fire," says Joan.

Movies, memories and a little blob of melted money. A ski hill in Carnarvon? Hard to believe, isn't it?



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