

The History of Flin Flon Ski Club

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from Dave Price and Bill Friesen

Skiing has been a Flin Flon tradition since the earliest days. It was introduced around 1932 by Scandinavian residents who wanted to continue to pursue one of their favourite winter sports. Names such as Sjoberg, Wahlenberg, Rjunnehelm, Hammersted, Stenbeck and Overland are often associated with a ski hill above Ross Lake, just below Wahlenberg heights near the north end of Bellevue. The Red Lawrence rooming house on First Avenue was the location for the "Swedish Coffee Ring" and most ski meetings were held there. Ole Overland formed a group, and came up with the idea for a "Sons of Norway" trophy. They would compete for this trophy amongst themselves, and would often go on ski tours in the surrounding area. Neil McLellan, a well-known local scoutmaster, along with Eric Rjunnehelm and Mrs. Hammersted taught skiing and the art of waxing skis. The scouts used a ski hill that went down onto Spirit Lake.

Right after the war, even without an official club, the hills were alive with skiers, especially young men in the scouting movement. Interest in the sport seemed to wane in the late '40s but then, around 1956, there was a revival, and a group of dedicated enthusiasts - with some input from the Flin Flon Community Club - established the "Flin Flon Ski and Toboggan Club" in the Valley south of what is now Centoba Park. George McRae became the first President, with John Nikkel, and later Art Lyon secretary-treasurers. According to receipt books, one of the first to buy a membership was Philip Maclellan - for the sum of \$2.00. One of the first families to buy a membership was the Fred Bexton's (it cost them \$10.00 for a family of 6). Other names that appeared in the club roster for that first year were: Ogmundson, Barry Beischer, Cliff McArthur, W. Johnson, Bill Phillips, B. Donald, D. McFadden, J. Bennett, J. Hillier, J. Struch, G. Struch, L. Lycan, Lish Dembinsky, G. Wichert and Bruce Long. In the early days, downhill skiing took place on the Main Hill adjacent to the chalet (with an elevation drop of about 28 metres), and on the narrow winding 'Neck Twister' hill that descended from the ridge on the other side of the Valley down to the beaver pond. The first chalet, which was - to quote Ivor Hedman - 'just an old wooden shack', burned to the ground in 1959. A new concrete-block chalet was built under the direction of the then-president Vic Quinell. Among the builders were handy guys such as Art Lyon, brick layer Alf Kaus, and a host of other club members. John Nikkel had a small ski shop at the chalet. The ski lift system in the early '60s, before the power line was constructed, was a rope tow driven by an old 1937 automobile. The car had been stripped of its body, leaving the

chassis, motor, drive train, and the seat behind the steering wheel intact. The rope was threaded around the rear rims and up over a pulley on telephone poles to another pulley on a tripod at the top of the hill. Getting the old car started on a cold winter morning was a co-operative effort of many people. After warming the oil pan with a blowtorch and hooking up a warm battery, the engine was turned over by someone on the starter, someone on the crank, and several people pulling on the rope to turn over the rear wheels. When it did finally start a cheer reverberated through the valley.

Even though in the early days the Club's main interest was in alpine skiing, there was always a group who had an interest in the nordic events. In the late '50s, a ski jump was constructed on an open slope just south of the Main Hill with a long run-out into the swamp below. Club races in the early '60s always included ski jumping and cross-country as well as alpine. Some of the top awards went only to those who excelled in all three. In the mid to late '60s, interest in the nordic events waned and during development of Baldy Hill the jump was dismantled and its material used to construct a ramp for the rope tow there.

Since Flin Flon straddles the Manitoba/Saskatchewan border, and since the Ski Club was mostly, but not all in Saskatchewan, the Club first affiliated with the SSA. But in those days the Flin Flon club and those in Saskatchewan were less accessible to each other than they are now, and eventually the Club affiliated with the MSA. It was then able then to interact with clubs in Winnipeg, The Pas , Snow Lake, and Thompson.

In 1963, Norm Crerar took over as President of the club, with Clark Brewer as secretary. At this point there were 105 paid-up members (45 seniors and 60 juniors). That year, the Flin Flon club members returned from the Manitoba Zone meet with six out of the twelve trophies. The Konantz Memorial Seniors Slalom Race was held in Flin Flon in February, the winners being Norm Crerar, John Nikkel, Bob Bexton, Don Fox, Geordie Wichert and Len Middleton.

Ivor Hedman took over the presidency in 1964, supported by Don Fox and Ann Brandt as vice-presidents, Bob Patterson as treasurer, and Bill Friesen as secretary. That was the year that hydro power came to the club. Most of the materials came from the old dismantled Mandy Mine line. Holes for the poles were dug by club members and their families, though rumour has it that president Ivor did more than his share of this work. The line was strung up by the Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting Company line crew - which included Baldy Reeves, Corky Dadson, Vic Sizer, Gene Danis and Art Shearer. A telephone line and PA system were installed.

The club hosted the Manitoba Division's Douglas MacKay Slalom, and a charter flight of skiers from Winnipeg attended. Dave Donald was chosen that year to compete on the Manitoba Junior team at the National meet in Kimberly B.C.

Ivor continued at the helm in 1965-66, with Don Fox, Harold Ferguson and Bill Friesen on the executive, along with junior directors Charles Morrice, Jim Hillier and Ken Fisher. It was during Ivor's tenure that the Baldy ski hill on the west side of the Valley was developed. With a steep face, and 38 metres of vertical, this was going to be a more challenging descent than the Main Hill. The lower slopes were brushed out, and guys like Stewart Crerar - an expert powder man - did the blasting higher up. Bumps and hollows were evened out with loads of slag supplied by the Company. The ramp along the line of the rope tow utilized lumber from the old ski jump on the east side of the Valley. Officers and men of the 21st Field Engineer Squadron assisted with the erection of the rope towers.

In 1966, the Douglas McKay Slalom was held in Flin Flon, with Bob McNeil winning the senior, Danny Lyon winning the junior and Ed Erlandson placing third in the junior category.

Dick Robertson was president for the 1966-'67 season, and during his tenure four hundred and fifty bales of hay were brought up from The Pas and spread over the rocky slopes.

In 1967-68, Harley Kirby took over the presidency, with Gerry Umbach as secretary.

In 1968-69 the Nancy Green Little League was organized, with Harley Kirby still in charge, and Malcom Scoble, Gerry Umbach and Andy Norlander on the executive. Advisors were Art Lyon, Ivor Hedman and George McRae.

The Crerar family was involved with the ski club in a big way from its earliest beginnings. All the Crerar children skied - Norm, Betty, Manj, David, Bob, Myfawney, Dorothy, Ivy, Raymond and Marilyn. They and their parents, Mary (Ma) and Stewart, all pitched in to help develop and look after the place. Mary Crerar, Ma to all, spent her time at the Ski Club looking after not only her own children but all the skiers young and old in her extended family. There was always hot soup, hot dogs, and hot chocolate in her kitchen at the club, which was later developed into a concession with Ma in charge. Ma continued with this tradition throughout a span of over 40 years long after her

children had grown and moved on to other places. No matter what the occasion - a national, regional or local ski meet, the annual Centaloppet, potluck suppers or just the ordinary weekend skiing, she fed, watered, and hugged us all with great cheer. Stewart Crerar was always available for the big jobs of moving troublesome tree stumps or rock outcrops. He was a mine captain, you see, and knew how to handle blasting powder with great finesse. The most illustrious skier of the Crerar children was Norman.

Norm had a distinguished career as a downhill racer, and gained professional status as ski instructor following a course at Mount Agassiz where his skills were recognized by Senior Examiner Stan Knowles. Norm went on to teach skiing at Sunshine Village and at Stowe, Vermont then he had two seasons instructing in New Zealand. He has been area director at Sunshine Village, and part-owner of Silver Star Mountain at Vernon, B.C. Norm has been involved for many years with Interski, an international association for ski instructors and people involved in the ski industry. This group has members in thirty-six countries. Norm was instrumental in bringing Interski's quadrennial gathering to Mount Norquay in 1987, and in 1995, at the organization's conference in Japan, Norm was elected Interski president.

No one had heard of global climate change back then but by the early '70s, the decline in winter precipitation meant that there was insufficient snow to cover the bumps and hollows on the hills. There were also concerns about the safety of the rope tows. At that time also, people were becoming more aware of the benefits of aerobic exercise. By the early '80s both rope tows were gone, and cross-country skiing was on the move.

Cross-country took off around 1973 with a small group including Tony Spooner, Glen Campbell, Ivor Hedman, Dave Price, Bill Friesen, and the Brons and Trends. At that time, there was a short trail along the east side of the Valley and the downhillers' trail over to Baldy. To make a loop, the group had to pick their way through the swamp. Each fall in those early years, club volunteers got their axes and saws out, and a network of trails rapidly developed. By 1978, with assistance from the Katimaviks - a federally funded youth group - a trail had been cut all the way to Bakers Narrows. Because of the numerous lake crossings, and maintenance difficulties, the south end of that trail was later abandoned, but the north end became part of the McRae Loop (named after the Club's first president). Creeks were bridged by the 21st Field Engineer Squadron, and in 1981 Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting Company made evening skiing a possibility by installing lights around the Valley Loop and up and over Powder Puff Hill. Flin Flon skiers are fortunate in also having access to a network of trails out at Bakers Narrows. These were originally developed by the Manitoba Parks Branch around 1974, but when they

were abandoned in the mid-'80s, they were taken over by the Bakers Narrows Ski Club under the leadership of Kelly Gilmore.

Tracks were originally 'skied in', but then Ivor Hedman designed and built his mark-1 and mark-2 track setters which were towed by a snow machine. By the early '80s the Club had, with assistance from the Kinsmen and other groups, purchased two Skidoo Alpine twin-tracks and a Baechler track-setter. This equipment, together with locally made rollers and graders, allowed us to offer our members well groomed trails.

Many an older skier's best memories of cross-country skiing are from the mid '70s, a time during which the present groomed trails were still under development. These were the days of three pin bindings, wooden skis, pine tar, gaiters, backpacks, and *gorp* - good old raisins and peanuts for energy. This part of the world has superb terrain for this sport - boreal forest, lakes, and rocky outcrops - very similar in fact to the Old World countries where the sport was born. Every Sunday for several years, groups of skiers gathered for a tour of the old bush trails, portages, and chains of lakes in the area surrounding Flin Flon. Sometimes they had to resort to short excursions into the bush with no trail to follow, and onto the untracked open lakes - each taking a turn at breaking trail. In late February and early March when there was heat in the sun they could trade a toque for a ball cap and a parka for a T-shirt. When the lakes snow surface was crusted they could skate ski on top for miles. And when they stopped for lunch they often shared with one of nature's bolder birds - the Whiskey Jack, that hovered above an open hand for the free food.

With a season or two of bushwhacking skiing behind them, a few Flin Flonners decided they were ready for some competition, so they headed south to take part in a ski meet being hosted by The Pas during their Trapper's Festival. When they got there they met the locals - among them Andy Lonquist, Pentti Lehtela and Teuvo Hellsten - Finns who worked at the local pulp mill. These guys not only invented the sport but had probably been skiing since they were young kids. The Flin Flon group didn't win any races that day but they did have fun, made new friends, and were introduced to the sauna. It was the start of a fruitful association between the two clubs, and over the next several seasons a lot of useful tips were picked up on ski technique, race organization, how to cut and groom trails, and so on.

One outcome of that trip to The Pas was the setting up of what was eventually to become the Northern Cup circuit. This involved the clubs in Flin Flon, The Pas, Snow Lake and Thompson. Each of the clubs hosted a two-day event, with interval-start

classic races for all age groups on the Saturday - with saunas and banquets and socializing in the evening, followed on the Sunday by a free-technique loppet.

The first big win for Flin Flon in a cross-country race was when the team of Gerry Clark, Helen Bron, Angie Simpson, Randy Bowman (and coach Dave Price) took the gold in the relay for the Norman Region at the first Manitoba Winter Games in Dauphin in 1978.

Having cut the 5k and 7.5k race loops by the late '70s, we were ready to host a major event, so in 1980 the Manitoba Provincial Cross-Country Championships took place here. The two-day event was a great success, with 101 skiers from across the province competing. The visitors from down south were particularly impressed with our trails - to quote Provincial Coach Ted Bigelow 'It was unbelievably good and I only wish we some places this good in the south'. Among the locals who picked up gold medals were Ingrid and Helen Bron, Jamie Spooner and Reid Simpson.

In June 1980, at the Canadian Ski Association's annual convention in Halifax, a presentation by Gerry Clark - with backing from Provincial Coach Bigelow - resulted in Flin Flon being selected to host the 1982 Shell Cup Canadian Junior Championships. Putting on a five-day event of this caliber involved an enormous amount of work by a large number of volunteers over an extended period of time, together with the backing of many local businesses and organizations - as well as a very significant infusion of funding by Shell and other donors. Dave Price and Bill Lyle were sent off to learn the ropes of high-level event organizing at the World Cup/North American Championships in Whitehorse in March 1981. They became respectively, Chief of Race and Chief of Timing. Other members of the Organizing Committee were: Rick Korotash, Moira McDonald, John Taylor, Ray Fieber, Angie Simpson, Doug Macaulay, Gerry Clark, Tony Spooner, Farzana Sardiwalla, John Pearson, Rose-Marie Ariko, and Nick Berzenji. Every region of Canada was represented, and later, many of the young participants went on to represent Canada in international competition. One feature of the event was the establishment in the club's parking area of a 'tent village' - each team had its own heated tent (which had been lent and set up by Hudson Bay Exploration and Development). Another feature was the A-frame officials' shelter that straddled the track in the start/finish area. On the ground level, the timers and recorders worked in heated comfort, while above them - on two more levels - were the calculators and other officials. To cap it all, along the top of the structure, and fluttering in the breeze, were the flags of all the provinces and the Maple Leaf. The A-frame was another of Ivor Hedman's ideas - he also supplied the materials, and construction was done by club volunteers. Over the succeeding years, the A-frame served its purpose very well in

numerous events, and was a landmark that will be sadly missed - unfortunately it was destroyed by fire - the result of an electrical short circuit - in January 2005. Again, the Shell Cup was a great success - the weather was reasonably cooperative - and one positive result was that it gave a great boost to interest to skiing in general, and to racing in particular.

A big disappointment was the cancellation of the Western Canadian Championships which we were all set to host - after another major effort at preparation - in 1985. During the week leading up to the event we heard first from one provincial or territorial coach then another, that bearing in mind the unfavourable weather forecast, they had regretfully made the decision not to come. We did not hear from the NWT team however until we got a call from Winnipeg to say that they were on their way. When they got here of course, they got the usual warm Flin Flon welcome - in spite of the fact that the forecasters had got it right - it was 30° below!

In fact, the welcome was slightly less warm than it might have been because our chalet had burned to the ground (again) one evening in October 1984, and our operations that season were conducted out of a fairly cool Atco trailer. As we watched the old chalet burn, we were already coming up with plans for the new one. President Barry Oxby had never dreamed of his added responsibilities for that year, but he spearheaded the re-building, which started towards the end of May 1985, with completion later that year. The grand official opening took place on March 14 1986. The cost was covered in part by insurance and government grants, but also by the generous contributions of members and other Flin Flonners to the 'Square Foot Club'.

In 1986, the Ski Club hosted the Manitoba Winter Games ski events, then in 1988 - for the second time - the Manitoba Provincial Championships, and in 1995 the Manitoba Special Olympics Championships.

In 1981, local educator John Belfry set up and became chief coach for the Flin Flon Flyers team for Special Olympians. In 1986, for the first time, the Specials were admitted as competitors to the Manitoba Winter Games - that year, on her home turf, Shirley Hillier won a bronze. In 1989, John was coach for Canada's national team at the Special Olympics World Championships at Lake Tahoe. In 1993, a very talented local athlete, Jason Robinson, took up skiing with the Flin Flon Flyers, and that year brought home three medals from the Manitoba Special Olympics Championships. Jason went on to compete in the World Special Olympics in Nagano, Japan in 2002. On his return to the same event in Japan in 2005, he picked up a gold and a silver medal.

During the '80s, a number of young local skiers made it on to the Manitoba ski team, and competed across Canada. These included Doug Smith, Jamie Spooner, and Paul and Rene Dansereau. A senior skier who was on the provincial team for several years was Daryl Brown - well known for his long hours of training. Daryl a few years ago beat the formidable Solomon Carriere of Cumberland House to win the La Ronge Saskaloppet. Another senior who has done well at La Ronge is Nyall Oberg. One of our masters skiers who competed for many years in Northern Cups, loppets, and Provincial Championships, and who accumulated an impressive collection of medals was Glen Campbell. Flin Flon's most talented senior skier was Zdena Price, a member of the provincial ski team for a number years. She was Manitoba Champion and Canadian Masters Champion several times, and won gold at the World Masters Championship in Oslo Norway in 1984, and also at Telemark, Wisconsin. Some have speculated that had she come to skiing when she was a bit younger, she would have been an Olympian.

The most long-standing Ski Club tradition is the Centaloppet, which takes place in February each year. This event was inaugurated by Ivor and Val Hedman in 1976. The idea - inspired by the Scandinavian model - was to get as many local skiers as possible together just once a year to ski along an easy and enjoyable route - they could race if they wanted to, but the main idea was to be part of the crowd - to participate. These days, the event has a massed start on Ross Lake in the middle of town, heads up onto the Centoba Trail, covers parts of the Moonlight Trail and the Valley Loop, and finishes after a four-kilometer ski at the chalet. The Centaloppet Cup goes not to the first across the line, but to an individual, young or old, male or female, whose time has been adjusted according to an ingenious handicapping system. In the inaugural event in 1976, the cup was won by 61 year-old Fred Bradt, thirty years later, in 2005, it went to 10 year old Callum Spencer. The cup has also been won by 10 year old Marla Fieber, and on more than one occasion by the less young but ever youthful Heather Jacobson. In addition to the Cup, there have traditionally been awards for the happiest face, the largest family, youngest skier, and so on. There has also always been a warm welcome for all participants back at the chalet.

A chalet has always been a great asset to the Ski Club, particularly a spacious one with indoor plumbing, an observation deck, a kitchen, and a cozy open wood fire. A great place to retreat to after an hour or two on the trail, for moonlight socials, for putting on clinics, and for rowdy post-event gatherings and medal presentations - but, oh, the pity of it - chalet number three was consumed by flames on the evening of December 16, 2000 - during the presidency of Darcy Chrisp. Chimney sections had slightly separated,

and sparks found their way through the gap and into the wooden structure of the building. Tom Lewis of Hudson Bay Exploration and Development Company - the group that had been partying at the chalet that evening - kindly set us up with an Atco trailer as a base for our activities during the 2000-'01 winter season.

Richard Korotash, all round outdoorsman, Jackrabbit leader, and hero of many a rousing tale, spearheaded the construction of our present chalet (number four). Building started on July 19, 2001 and was more or less complete by September of that year. The 30x30', very well insulated and electrically heated structure is conveniently located at the foot of the hill, right alongside the trail leading to the Valley Loop. This situation allows it to be used as a shelter for timers and other officials during our races and loppets - which is very handy in view of the recent loss of our A-frame. The earlier chalets had been located half way up the hill - a holdover from the downhill days.

The development of the Ski Club's trails and other facilities has involved an enormous investment in time and energy over the years by many member volunteers - some of these, namely Art Lyon, Val and Ivor Hedman, Tony Spooner, Dave Price, Mary Crerar, and Bill Friesen have been honoured by being granted Life Memberships. The Club has also benefited from the generous help of many other individuals, as well as service clubs, local businesses, the City of Flin Flon, and both federal and provincial governments. At the present time, the Ski Club's operations are financed through membership dues, daily trail fees, and bingos. To find out more about the Ski Club call president Larry Linnick (687-5073) or vice-president Dave Price (687- 8653), and check our web site at www.flinflonskiclub.com.

Revised by Dave Price, to March 23, 2005

(We plan to update this story quite soon - DPP - March 14, 2018)