

Memories of Stokely Creek

by Ron Bergin

My memories of visiting Stokely Creek Lodge hearken back to my very first visit in March 1990. A passionate, but relatively neophyte skier, I had been intrigued by a trip listing in a Chicago area outing club's annual trip flyer. This looked like a place that I some day had to check out. And so, on an under-employed graduate student's budget, I splurged for a mid-March birthday present to myself, and headed north to Stokely.

The drive from Chicago was auspicious — 11 hours in mostly a torrential downpour. While committed to making the trip, I was concerned that there would even be any snow left when I arrived. My concerns were belayed when I pulled into the parking lot, ringed by 10-foot snow banks and a substantial base in the woods. Outfitted with a complete new complement of equipment — white Landsem combi skis and neon yellow-cuffed Alpina combi boots, I was anxious to try out the new gear. The rain had rendered the trails a dense oatmeal-like substance, too soft for skating (even if I knew how at the time) and impossible to groom. But I was undeterred and proceeded to head out into the bush, off-trail for a little exploring. I didn't go far, floundering in ungroomed snow over three feet deep. Any attempt at

removing my skis and walking out was a futile exercise in post-holing. And while I didn't get to test the new skis to the best of their capability, at least I had gotten out.

Conditions remained warm, preventing any new grooming the following day, but the rain had abated. I set out to explore the expansive 120 km Stokely trail system, with a goal of making it out to Norm's cabin, a popular destination on Bone Lake via the Hakon Lein trail, a remote circuitous route around King Mountain. There were remnant tracks, but going was slow. My klister (a relatively new experience for me at the time) provided good grip, almost too much so as I frequently found it necessary to kick and double pole down most of the larger hills. With temperatures spiking into the 40s and higher I shed my ski top and skied bareback for a while.

The Stokely Creek trail system is dotted with remote, scenic lakes. The return route from Norm's crossed one of these lakes, where I skied through four or five inches of standing water (a really new experience). I was understandably anxious, despite over two feet of ice beneath. I later learned that one winter the snowcat groomer had broken through the ice near where I skied.

The day turned into an epic ski of around 30 kilometers, which for me early in my Nordic skiing career, was a personal longest distance. But I was hooked, and thus began my love affair with Stokely Creek Lodge.

Since that auspicious beginning I have returned to Stokely Creek on many occasions each contributing to a growing library of fond memories.

A popular event in its day was the Stokely Marathon,





which I attempted a couple of years later. Principal among my memories of that experience was 42 km and four hours and 15 minutes of no kick and no glide as my klistel job failed miserably.

One of Stokely's signature annual events is the Wabos Loppet, a non-competitive backcountry tour that starts with a bus ride into downtown Sault Ste. Marie followed by a train ride 80 km into the bush and finishing with a 29 km ski back to the lodge. I first skied this event with a broken hand and my ski pole lashed to a partial cast with an ace bandage. Tracked only by the skiers that preceded you, the Wabos was a true adventure ski. The event is a little more genteel these days, with most of the trail machine groomed, but my first introduction to the Wabos was true "cross country" skiing. That same weekend I hooked up with Stokely enthusiast Dan Harrison from downstate Michigan. Dan guided me to some of Stokely's finer out of the way destinations including a gorgeous ice falls along the Upper Taylor Trail (Dan wrote an article for a regional outdoor publication and his photo of me in front of the falls still hangs in the Stokely Lodge basement) and a bushwhack up to the top of King Mountain (there was no groomed trail at the time) that required sidestepping up a steep, snow covered rock face to access the plateau above.

I returned to Stokely a few years later with my now wife Kathy. It was the first week of April and she had a short break from teaching school for Easter vacation. The lodge had closed for the season and the trails were no longer being groomed, but Stokely owner and founder Chuck Peterson was gracious enough to allow us to stay in the lodge and even cook some of our own meals in the lodge kitchen. We thoroughly explored the trails, skating on the still firm base and snowshoeing the backcountry. Skiing onto one of the remote lakes we found several well preserved wolf tracks melted into the ice and later along the trail the remains of a moose calf. One evening after a full day of skiing and snowshoeing I insisted on going for a hike along the Lodge's ever-so-beautiful namesake creek. The rustic bridge along the Lower Stokely trail had three feet of snow built up on it, so its log railing was pretty much useless. Kathy latched onto what she thought was a water bottle in my fanny pack to steady herself. We hiked out along the creek, spread out a poncho and sat next to the creek. The water bottle turned out to be a small bottle of champagne that we used to toast our engagement that night on the bank of Stokely Creek.

Stokely Today Much has changed at Stokely since I first visited in 1990. Some trails have been widened to accommodate skate skiing and improve drainage, timber management has altered the character of some of the trails and Norm, now in his 90s resides in a nursing home and no longer spends time at his camp. Most significantly, Chuck Peterson passed on in 2000. This threw the Stokely property and the lodge into a state of limbo. The lodge still operated, but there was no one waiting in the wings to take up oversight of the resort and at times its continued existence was tenuous. It took a couple of years, but Chuck's estate was finally settled.

The property and lodge were sold and a new ownership and management picture began to take shape. Much of the 8,000 acres of land that was Stokely was sold to Astina Establishment, a Swiss owned wood products company that already owned 40,000 acres to the north of Stokely. The Algoma Highlands Conservancy (AHC) had been a long-time partner in helping preserve the wild lands around the lodge and had already purchased Robertson Cliffs and King Mountain. The Conservancy went further and also purchased a 1.5 acre parcel around Norm's cabin to insure its continued presence as part of the Stokely landscape.

A 10-year license agreement to use the entire property for year-round silent sport recreation was negotiated. No motorized vehicles were to be allowed except for forest management, grooming and other appropriate management. The Conservancy also negotiated an option for \$1.5 million to purchase the lower 2,600 acres, which abuts the 300 acres Robertson Cliffs already owned by the AHC. AHC also holds a conservation easement to property around the lodge. The Conservancy also had an option to purchase the lodge, but that's when Byker family from Grand Rapids, Mich., stepped up to the plate to purchase the lodge.

The lodge plus 40 acres was purchased by Gaylen and Susan Byker, their daughter Tanya Byker-Phair and son-in-law Ian Phair, all long-time, frequent visitors to Stokely. Each now plays a role in the management of the lodge and trail system. Susan is perhaps the most hands-on and has been instrumental in managing the lodge's marketing. Gaylen has supervised upgrades and maintenance of the trails while Ian has taken the reins of managing the "business" end of things, along with his wife Tanya.


With the uncertainty surrounding the lodge's future during the transition to the Bykers, things were a bit touch and go. "People couldn't plan, not knowing if the lodge would be open," Susan Byker said. "The year we bought the lodge we didn't even know we'd be open until October. And by then, many people had already made plans." But word of mouth help spread the message that Stokely Creek was back. Things gradually improved, with the Christmas

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Stokely is the kind of place that once you experience it, you are not content with keeping it a secret and are compelled to share it with skiing friends. So it was when I dragged a group back to Stokely to ski the Wabos Loppet. By this time the trail had been moved to wider logging roads that were groomed most of the way to a connection with the Stokely trail system. Though somewhat easier, it was still adventure. Changing temperatures made waxing tricky as we worked our way through the complete spectrum of waxes with little success. That is until our companion Marv Franson dug deep into his cache of waxes and Swix Extra Red to the rescue!

The following year we returned again for the Wabos, but this time, the loppet was not my primary objective. It was my 50th birthday, and I could think of no better place to celebrate that occasion than at Stokely, with fun, food and friends. We chose waxless touring skis this time for the loppet, and except for being a tad slow, had no problems. After reaching the lodge and chowing down at the post-Wabos barbecue, I changed clothes, grabbed my skate gear and headed back out for another loop. I had skied 29 km in the Wabos, and was determined to ski 50 km on my 50th birthday.

Returning to Stokely this past January after a several years hiatus, I was again excited to turn several new people on to the beauty of the area, its extensive trail system, comfortable ambiance of the lodge and the great food. All came away with a similar regard for the trails, the lodge and the Stokely experience. One of our group, Dave Tomasula (not known for seriousness on any subject) aptly summed up the trip, "This is the best ski vacation I can remember."

I realize that as a "journalist" I am supposed to retain a detached, objective perspective when it comes to reporting on trails and ski destinations. But as is easy to see, I have a long and very pleasant relationship with Stokely Creek. And with no desire to slight any of dozens of other great destination ski sites across the U.S and Canada, I can with comfort state that Stokely Creek Lodge and trails is quite simply my favorite. 

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holiday 2008 reminiscent of the Chuck Peterson days. Gaylen Byker had projected a need for 16 new groups a year to help the lodge break even, so they were well on their way to a stable footing. "This is a break even proposition for us," added Susan Byker. "It's really an effort of passion; we don't expect to make a lot of money." She emphasized that skiers have been very supportive.

One of the big developments at Stokely is the creation of a system of snowshoe trails. A series of out and back trails with side loops totaling over 10 km is a new option – including an ascent to the 1,800 foot summit of King Mountain.

During my most recent visit, a few trails were not open. The Haviland system to the northwest of the lodge was closed due to active logging and the Hakon Lein; a long circuitous classic trail around much of the perimeter of the Stokely system had been (hopefully) temporarily mothballed due to property ownership issues. And while I was disappointed at these developments, two other trails, Julie's Trail (named for Chuck Peterson's wife) and the Dustin Trail (named for the former managers of the lodge) had been reclaimed after some years of disuse. Skiing out to Norm's was a bit melancholy – it was the first time during any of my visits that he was not there; and for me a poignant acknowledgement of the end of an era. Norm's was a must-do tradition for every Stokely skier. A cobbled together conglomeration of materials, Norm's cabin was a warm, welcome respite in the wilderness. When he was there, he welcomed you in with a cup of hot Red Rose tea and cookies. The ambiance was, to say the least, eclectic. I once described it looking like a "bomb had gone off in a flea market," the walls, ceiling and shelves festooned with every conceivable kind of memorabilia, gadget and doo-dad, including a porcupine quill hat! I was heartened to learn that, despite his absence, Norm's Cabin would remain a destination within the Stokely system, and the cabin will be opened on weekends where there will still be a warm fire with cookies and Norm's traditional hot tea. Sadly, most of his things are gone, but for those who had the chance to visit this one-of-a-kind "warming" cabin in its day, the memories remain.

As to the future plans for the Stokely property, sustainable forest management during summer months will continue with a focus on removing diseased and defective trees to restore the value of forest. Logging practices today will not involve clear cutting, just select harvesting and Astina has agreed to not do any forest management in most of the Stokely system during the winter.

By early 2008 about half of the \$1.5 million to purchase the 2,600 acres had been raised. "Raising money is a challenge," noted AHC president Doug Pitt. "It's difficult enough, but with the current economy the challenge is magnified." Many major foundations require that the lands be of "ecological significance" and the provincial government prefers that property to have some historical significance before considering financial support.

A major new funding commitment from the EJLB Foundation to the AHC King Mountain Legacy Lands campaign was secured during the spring of 2009. The funding from EJLB raised the current total for the land acquisition to approximately \$800,000. The Conservancy was hopeful this contribution represented the first success among several proposals that had been submitted to major philanthropic foundations.

But Pitt remained realistic and noted that if the \$1.5 million doesn't materialize they could seek and probably receive an extension. Or if all else fails and they are ultimately unable to meet their goal, they could negotiate to buy less land and continue to live with the trail agreement.

One thing for certain, Stokely Creek Lodge is not only back, but it will continue and Chuck Peterson's vision and legacy will endure.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Stokely Creek Lodge | www.stokelycreek.com

Algoma Highlands Conservancy | www.algomahighlandsconservancy.org