

Whistler's Big Birthday



DAVID MCCOLM



PAUL MORRISON

Left: The PEAK 2 PEAK gondola links Whistler's Roundhouse Lodge with Blackcomb's Rendezvous Restaurant. It's the first lift to connect the high-alpine terrain of two side-by-side mountains, passing over the valley floor at a world-record height of 1,427 feet. It was built by the Doppelmayr Group at a cost of CDN \$53 million and opened in 2007.

Above: Led by Norwegian-born Franz Wilhelmsen, a group of Vancouver businessmen chose London Mountain—75 miles north of Vancouver, British Columbia, in the Fitzsimmons Range—as the site for a new ski resort. Renamed after the whistling marmots on its alpine slopes, Whistler Mountain officially opened on January 15, 1966. After merging with its sister mountain Blackcomb in 1997, today it's the largest ski resort in North America, spanning 8,171 skiable acres.

Five locals tell the story of five decades of progress at Whistler Mountain in British Columbia.

BY MICHEL BEAUDRY

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. All the ski experts agreed: The place was too stormy, too big and too isolated to succeed. The proposed resort was on the edge of the world, way out on the western coast of Canada, and there wasn't even a direct road. It was inconceivable that something so different could work.

And they were right...sort of. This was an era when skis were long and boots were low, when being able to "carve a turn" was reserved for elite practitioners. Skiing in the early 1960s was an adventure. Who needed steep slopes and big vertical? Just getting down a mountain was accomplishment enough. To even conceive of such a wild place was a departure from convention. But to actually build it?

Fortunately, Franz Wilhelmsen didn't listen to his detractors. Based in Vancouver and well known as an entrepreneur with a flair for the dramatic, Franz had seen firsthand what Squaw Valley and Walt Disney had done for the 1960 Winter Olympics. He'd also travelled extensively in the Alps and skied its most famous slopes. He was convinced that British Columbia's biggest city deserved nothing less than a world-class, Olympic-caliber ski hill. And he knew exactly where to build it.

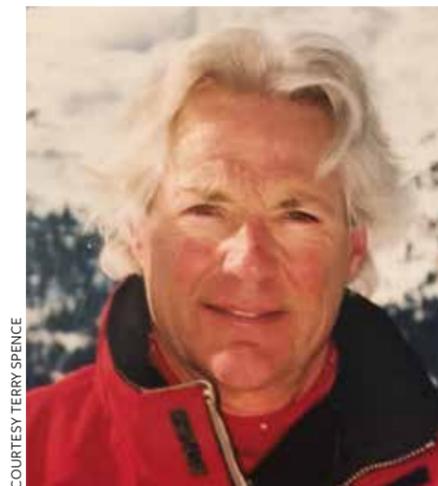
The saga of Whistler Mountain's construction could fill a book (and it has; for a review of *Whistler Blackcomb: 50 Years of Going Beyond*, see page 36). Nobody in the North American ski world had built on this scale before. Nobody knew if it was possible. Still, it's worth noting how much past and future combined in the mountain's construction: The first ski area to use helicopters to carry the massive load of concrete needed to pour footings for its lift towers, Whistler was also one of the

last to use mules and horses to carry supplies to timberline to feed the construction crews living up there.

When the new ski hill officially opened for business on January 15, 1966, the brash young newcomer didn't make much of a bang on the international ski front. But for those adventurous enough to make the long trek out to Vancouver and then suffer the white-knuckled four-hour drive to Whistler, the ensuing ski experience was something to rave about. What follows is a brief trip through Whistler's first five decades, seen through the eyes of five long-time locals.

DECADE 1: 1966-1976

500 people and 5,000 vertical feet of skiing



COURTESY TERRY SPENCE

Terry Spence is a longtime ski instructor and one of the original Whistler ski bums; in the early 1970s, he lived in an abandoned lumber camp on Green Lake.

It's fair to say that the first ten years of Whistler's existence were somewhat chaotic. The sheer size of the place—the monster snowfalls, the vicious shifts of weather, the huge verti-

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WHISTLER PIONEER

FRANZ WILHELMSSEN

As a young man, Norwegian Franz Wilhelmsen emigrated to Vancouver, where he pursued ventures in ship-ping, marinas and construction. An avid skier, in 1960 he led a group of lo-cal businessmen in a quest to bring the Winter Olympics to Vancouver. They began searching for a site and settled on London Mountain, at the south end of Alta Lake. By December 1965, Wilhelmsen's Garibaldi Lifts Ltd. had built the Whistler Mountain ski area there. Vancouver lost its first four Olympic bids, and though Wilhelmsen remained president until his retirement in 1983, he died five years before the 2003 an-nouncement of its successful bid for the 2010 Games. He was inducted into the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame in 1996.



Wilhelmsen points toward Whistler Mountain, circa 1966.

cal—dictated a new form of mountain management.

The mountain had no groom-ing machines. As for snowmaking, forget it. You skied what was there. Bumps the size of Volkswagens, open creek beds, uncovered stumps, blow-downs, wind crust, sun crust, frozen crud. And to ski from top to bottom, nearly a vertical mile, you had to pre-pare yourself for screaming thighs and pounding heart.

But the young people kept coming. They came to ski, to party, to explore, to re-invent themselves. Some even set-tled down. After all, it's not every day that you stumble onto a magical moun-tain valley where building lots can be had for under \$5,000. By 1971, Whistler's ski bum reputation was made.

"Whistler was an amazing place to be a local back then," says Terry (Toulouse) Spence. "There were prob-

ably 500 people living here, and we all knew each other."

Toulouse is one of Whistler's most revered elders, and something of a trickster figure too. Ever heard of the notorious Toad Hall nude poster? That was the work of Toulouse with photographer friend Chris Speedie (to learn more—and check it out—go to <http://blog.whistlermuseum.org/2013/07/10/the-story-of-the-toad-hall-poster/>). Remember the hard-charging Crazy Canucks? Toulouse was their masseur and start coach for over a decade. Recall the time Prince Charles visited Whistler with his two sons? It was senior ski-instructor Toulouse who guided them on the mountain.

The one-time Xerox salesman is full of tales. But it's his stories of early Whistler that are the most fun. "It was Speedie who first invited me to Soo Valley," he begins. An abandoned lumber camp at the north end of Whistler's Green Lake, the complex had become the communal home for a group of longhaired skiers who'd solved Whistler's notorious housing shortage by squatting in the derelict buildings.

"Living conditions were primitive," he says. "It was very rustic, especially in winter. I would sleep inside three sleep-ing bags, and still wake up freezing!"

But they had fun. Take the notori-ous 1973 St Patrick's Day affair. "Well," he begins, "nudity wasn't that big a deal in the old days and..." Again, it was a Speedie and Toulouse caper. This time the two comedians doffed their clothes at the summit's Round-house Lodge, and fortified by a few hits of Irish whiskey, streaked the popular Green Chair zone wearing

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HUGH SMYTHE

In November 1966, at age 20, Hugh Smythe was hired for a Whistler Mountain patrol job that included setting out chairs and cleaning outhouses. Working his way up to mountain manager by age 26, he pioneered the use of helicopters and avalauncher guns for snow control. From 1974 to 1978, he re-vised the bankrupt Fortress Mountain ski area in Alberta for the Aspen Ski Company. When that group won the bid to develop Blackcomb Mountain in 1978, he returned to Whistler to plan and build the new ski area as its president. Blackcomb opened in 1980 and competed with Whistler until the 1997 merger. Smythe retired as Senior VP of Intrawest in March 2009. He was inducted into the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame in 2010.

nothing but skis and boots.

"We skied right under the chair-lift," says Toulouse, who now helps his wife, Anne, run one of Whistler's most popular bed-and-breakfasts.

"We had a pretty good laugh at the shocked faces staring down at us.

"You know, I moved to this place for the skiing," adds the 73-year-old. "But I stayed for the people."

DECADE 2: 1976-1985

Two mountains and a professional ski patrol



Cathy Jewett was hired as a lift atten-dant in 1976 and became a patroller in 1980—a job she still holds today. "I found my life's work," she says.

The next ten years ushered in some of the biggest changes in the young resort's history. In 1980, Blackcomb opened with 24 runs and 350 acres on the next peak north, facing

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Smythe and Whistler mayor Pat Carleton in 1980 at Blackcomb.

Whistler's new north-side lifts. Be-tween them, in the new pedestrian-only village—planned and built from scratch—guests could access two separate ski areas by taking a few steps in either direction. It was bold. It was creative. And it was all due to visionaries like Al Raine and new Blackcomb president Hugh Smythe (remember that name!).

In the meantime, Whistler's staff was engrossed in the technical chal-lenges of operating such a vast and dangerous physical plant. The ski game had also changed. Supported by high-backed boots and stronger and more flexible skis, the skiers of the mid-1970s were venturing far be-yond their elders' tracks.

This totally changed the game for the Whistler Mountain ski patrol. Led by Smythe—who would soon leave Whistler's employ to launch Blackcomb next door—the team de-vised an innovative avalanche control plan whose *modus* was to control the danger points within the ski area by bombing the critical start zones.

It may sound like old hat today, but back then it was leading-edge stuff that sparked the imaginations of young skiers like Cathy Jewett. Orig-inally from southern Ontario, the outgoing teenager had moved west to live the Whistler dream. She was hired in 1976 as a lift attendant, only to be greeted by one of the worst ski seasons in history. "My first work memory is getting sent to the Green Chair area to shovel snow onto the runs," she says. "I was skiing through snow with grass sticking out."

Cathy can recall the exact date she decided to become a patroller. "It was March 10, 1977. A big storm cycle had just come through, and Shale Slope, a classic north-facing pitch, looked particularly invit-ing." She sighs. "They didn't bomb it, so I knew how good the skiing would be. Face-shots at every turn." She grins. "It was at that point that I found my life's work: Throw bombs. Ski powder. Cheat death. And save lives."

Her dream wouldn't come true until 1980, when Whistler Moun-tain was forced by the sheer size of the new expansion to hire more

women. Thirty-five years later, she's still "Joe patroller," she says. "I don't have any special skills. I'm not the weather forecaster or the avi expert. I just pick up injured skiers. Still, I'm proud of what I do. Proud of what I've accomplished."

DECADE 3: 1986-1995

Blackcomb takes off



Mike Varrin arrived in the early 1990s to manage Merlin's bar at Blackcomb. Since 2000, he's worked as General Manager of Bars for the resort.

When real estate developer Joe Houssian met Blackcomb Mountain boss Hugh Smythe in the mid-1980s, few observers realized that ski cul-ture in the Whistler Valley would never be the same. The Vancouver-based Houssian quickly understood that British Columbia's ski area de-velopment policy favored the bold.

The essence of the policy was straightforward: The more lifts a ski area built on the mountain, the more valley land the provincial govern-ment would provide for real estate sales. But no one had ever pushed the model to its logical conclusion.

That is, until Smythe and Hous-sian teamed up. Millions were in-

vested in new mountain infrastruc-ture. More millions were spent on flashy advertising and sophisticated sales campaigns. Flush with cash and armed with a newly revised master plan, Smythe spent money on high-speed detachable quads like a kid in a candy shop. By 1986, Blackcomb was transformed and Houssian's real-estate investments started to pay dividends.

Meanwhile, Whistler's reputation was also on the rise. Local hero Rob Boyd triumphed on its vaunted World Cup downhill course in 1989 and the victory cemented the valley's reputa-tion as a "go for it" kind of place. Whistler was cool; it had mystique.

Mike Varrin arrived in the early 1990s. "Those were the days when there were still fierce mountain loyal-ties," he says. "Back then you were ei-ther a Whistler skier or a Blackcomb skier. And the twain never met."

Varrin had been recruited to take over Merlin's, Blackcomb's lucrative après-ski bar. He had only one mission: "My new boss told me: 'I want you to break some rules!' And that was it. I just had to make sure my bar was more popular than any of *their* bars."

Varrin wasn't going to let that op-portunity slip through his fingers. Every local remembers the afternoon

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BOB DUFOUR

In 1972, Bob Dufour moved from the Laurentian Mountains in Quebec to take a job with the Whistler Ski School. In 1981, he took over the directorship of the school from Jim McConkey (see page 15), along the way achieving top certifications with the Canadian Ski Instructors Alliance and the Cana-



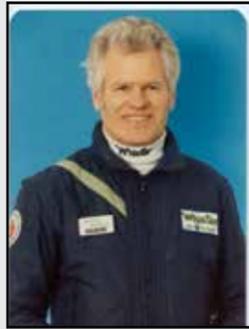
Bob Dufour in the 1980s as ski-school director.

dian Ski Coaches Federation. He took over moun-tain operations for both resorts when Whistler and Blackcomb merged in 1997—and still serves as Vice President of Mountain Opera-tions today.

WHISTLER PIONEER

JIM MCCONKEY

Jim McConkey arrived in Whistler to direct the ski school and retail/rental operations in 1968. By that time, he had taught all over North America and been featured in dozens of films, labeled by Austrian racer Ernst Hinterseer as the world's best all-around skier. He stayed at Whistler for two decades, serving as personal instructor to Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau and wife Margaret during repeated ski trips. Now 89, he still skis Whistler every year; see page 15.



Jim McConkey's official instructor portrait, sometime before 1979.

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when über-entertainer Guita Doug came flying down onto Blackcomb Square on a tandem paraglider, singing and playing his guitar. "The whole patio at Merlin's is looking up and screaming," he says. "Doug has this shtick, where at the beginning of his show he calls out: 'Who's thirsty?' Well, as he's floating down to earth, he calls it out and everyone on the patio responds. Meanwhile I have 75 jugs of margaritas ready to go, one for each table. And while we're serving them, the bylaw officer is right at my elbow saying, 'You can't do this...'"

The Reverend Mike (yes, he's a legitimate preacher) says his hijinks are now mostly behind him. Since the turn of the century, Mike has worked as Manager of Bars for Whistler Blackcomb, overseeing some of the most popular drinking establishments in the valley. "These days, I'd rather be home playing with my two kids," he says. "That's why I have young staff. They can represent while I go home to bed."

DECADE 4: 1996-2005

Whistler comes of age



Anik Champoux landed a job with the ski school in 2001 and passed her Level 4 certification in 2005. In fall 2013, she was named Brand and Content Marketing Manager for the resort.

Nobody predicted how fast Whistler would grow in the 1980s and 1990s. But as the turn-of-the-century approached, the big little-ski-hill-that-could became a leading destination resort. The turning point had come with the 1997 merger of the two mountains under Intrawest, anchored by a village that featured more drinking establishments per

block than just about any other town in North America.

For locals, it was a mixed blessing. The economy was booming and Whistler was getting lots of attention from the global media. But with more than two million skier-visits a year, the ski-bum lifestyle was slowly disappearing. Many of the old guard cashed out and left for Rossland, Fernie, Invermere or Nelson.

But for valley newcomers, Whistler was everything they had dreamed about. And when Vancouver beat the odds in 2003 and won the 2010 Winter Games, after a string of failed Olympic bids, the community's stock soared.

Like many others, Anik Champoux came for the skiing, landing a job with the Whistler Blackcomb ski school in January 2001. "My friend and I were on Eastern carving skis," she says, "and our supervisor took us up Blackcomb to Spanky's. It was so steep and wild...we were terrified! But there's no way we were gonna give up." The next day the two women bought fat skis, and she passed her Level 4 certification—the Holy Grail for many Canadian ski instructors—in 2005.

"Three women from Whistler Blackcomb passed their Level 4 that year," she says. "It turned into a big deal: It was the first time something like this had happened, and it sparked big changes in ski-school culture. We'd shown there was no difference in technical skiing between male and female skiers!"

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AL RAINE

By the mid 1970s, faced with rampant real-estate dealing, the provincial government put a freeze on growth until the town could develop a long-term plan. The man with the plan was Al Raine, provincial coordinator of ski development and husband of Olympic gold medalist Nancy Greene Raine. Along with town councilor Gary Watson, mayor Pat Carleton and planner Eldon Beck, Raine envisioned a village rising from the garbage dump between the mountains. He invited the Aspen Ski Co. to submit a development plan for Blackcomb and navigated everything from municipal politics to sewer construction. "The timing couldn't have been better," says Hugh Smythe. "The first grocery store, drug store and bakery were needed by locals and tourists. It was very helpful."



Al Raine (right) led the effort to develop the village in mid-1970s.

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But teaching was only a part-time job, and Champoux wanted more. In 2007 she joined the Whistler Blackcomb marketing department and by the fall of 2013, she was named Brand and Content Marketing Manager. "It's my dream job," she says. "It's all about driving the mountain's narrative. Making this place come alive for people."

DECADE 5: 2006-2016

Whistler embraces summer



Claire Daniels was born and raised in Whistler. Growing up in a fast-changing resort, "our sense of place was tested," she says. She's shown here last summer with her boyfriend, Chris Dewar.

Today, Whistler is far more than a ski town. It's a year-round resort with a booming summer season fueled by mountain biking and hard-core sports. The calendar includes the Ironman, Crankworx Festival, Tough Mudder and a host of Red Bull-sponsored bike contests.

Claire Daniels was born and raised in Whistler. Her mom Kashi started skiing here in the 1960s as a pony-tailed teenager, her dad Bob not much later. They met on the mountain in the early 1970s, fell in love and set down roots. Both belong to that little group of iconoclasts who chose to settle here before there was a village, before Whistler went global.

Maybe that's why their oldest daughter Claire exemplifies so much of what is good about this community. A veteran traveller, elite trail run-

WHISTLER PIONEER

DAVE MURRAY

In the summer of 1969, Austrian ski champ Toni Sailer was leading one of his namesake summer camps on the Whistler Glacier. Dave Murray, 15, attended the camp; two years later, he qualified for the Canadian national alpine team. The downhillers he skied with became known as the Crazy Canucks, and they made headlines on the World Cup for a decade. After retiring from racing in 1982, Murray was named Director of Skiing at Whistler Mountain; he died of cancer in 1990 and was inducted into the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame that year.

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Murray was Director of Skiing at Whistler in the '80s.

ner and cyclist, top-ranked triathlete, and skier and snowboarder *sans-pareil*, Claire also has a master's degree in planning and works for the Squamish Lillooet Regional District.

Growing up in the valley, she says, was a wonderful experience... particularly if you like being outside. "There's always somebody up for an adventure," she says. "As a kid, the sports performance bar is so high, you don't realize how tough an athlete you are until you leave."

But Whistler's still not an easy place to live, particularly if you're young. "Whistler is an intentional community," she says. "Choosing to live here is not a casual decision."

She knows this firsthand. Many of her peers have left, and most will never be able to afford a home here. "It wasn't always easy to grow up in this place," she says. "We were—and are—privileged. But Whistler kept changing so fast, sometimes the local

kids didn't know where they fit in. Our 'sense of place' was really tested."

Articulate, thoughtful, intelligent—the 29-year old seems to have it all. But Claire is far from unique. Whistler's children are scholars and Olympic medalists and award-winning artists; they're scientists, activists and filmmakers. Some are in nearby Squamish, others live in Pemberton, many are dispersed around the world. Still, they're a fitting tribute to the community that conspired to bring them up. It's the stuff great ski towns are made of. ❄️

A Whistler skier since the 1970s, Michel Beaudry is an award-winning mountain storyteller and poet. "Whistler Pioneers" text adapted from Whistler-Blackcomb: 50 Years of Going Beyond by Leslie Anthony and Penelope Buswell. This article was funded by the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame and Museum through a grant from the Chawkers Foundation.

WHISTLER PIONEER

ROB BOYD

On February 25, 1989, 23-year-old Whistler local Rob Boyd won a World Cup downhill race in his hometown. His gold-medal run made history—he was the first Canadian male to win a World Cup DH on Canadian soil—and is still celebrated as a community turning point. "Rob Boyd winning in 1989 was one of the most amazing moments in Whistler history," says resort events projects supervisor Cate Webster. "It put Whistler on the map." Boyd raced for the Canadian alpine team from 1985 to 1997—winning three downhills and competing in three Olympics—and then raced on the pro circuit for three seasons. After switching to coaching, he oversaw the Canadian women's speed team in the lead-up to the 2010 Winter Games at Whistler, then took the reins at his hometown Whistler Ski Club. He was inducted into the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame in 2000.

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Rob Boyd on the race course, circa 1993.