

History of Crystal Lake Ski Center

By John Manifold



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Part 1

Introduction

This is the history of Crystal Lake Ski Center as told by me, John Manifold. In the over 50 years that I have been involved with Crystal Lake I remember many people, both employees and volunteers, all with their special contributions. There were some years that I was not at Crystal Lake so I cannot comment on them. As I share my memories, I will include a few names and though everyone is appreciated, I just don't remember all the names to include everyone.

The Crystal Lake Camps property was purchased by the Alford family in 1948 to be used primarily as a summer camp for children, I have no knowledge of winter use at Crystal Lake in the 1950's. I first attended Crystal Lake Camps in the summer of 1964 as a "counselor-in-training" and then worked in the summer program for a number of years.

The winter use of the property was limited during the 1960's. There were occasional groups that used the camp property for weekend activities and for "winter camp" around Christmas and New Year's.

I visited Crystal Lake in late April of 1970 when I raced my kayak at the Loyalsock Slalom. The camp road coming in from the Main Gate was one long axle-deep mud hole. Our car barely made it in or out, but I do remember that Andy Sim was staying at the camp at that time working on his PhD and merrily driving his VW bug through the mud. The poor road drainage made for a definite "mud season" in the springtime.

The Alford's had a home in Montoursville, where Joe taught mathematics at Lycoming College. I do not know the year that Joe and Dottie moved full time to the camp, but when the Dining Hall was built in 1970, they began looking for ways to use the facilities year round. Dottie helped manage the Highland Ski Area near Huntersville for downhill skiers. However, Highland Ski Area closed in 1971 due mostly to the lack of snow at its lower elevation.

In the winter of 1970-71, I brought a group of cross-country skiers from Columbus Ohio to Crystal Lake for skiing between Christmas and New Year's. Just as any normal year, we spent most of our winter vacation at Crystal Lake waiting for the snow. However, we were fortunate to get enough of a snowstorm for one or two days of cross-country skiing. We skied up Boardpile mountain, past the Project Cabin and towards what is now called South Ridge Trail. We then headed down a narrow logging road into the Hemlock

Springs valley. Using our wood skis, 3-pin bindings, soft leather boots, and our novice skill level, the basic technique for control at that time was to just sit down. This adventure was why I later named the steep trail "Big Sit." Although our skiing was limited, this trip did however show the potential for cross country skiing at Crystal Lake.

Part 2

The Downhill Slope: Mont SaintOnge?

My wife Sally and I moved to Crystal Lake following the summer of 1973 to help with the year-round activities. Outside of the summer camp program, the fall and winter was called the “off-season.” Lodging at Crystal Lake was focused on attracting large groups as the overnight accommodations were not suited for individuals or small families. After the nearby Highland Ski Area had closed in 1971, Dottie would sometimes take visiting groups to other downhill areas, which required quite a bit of travel time. Being mostly interested in downhill skiing, she and Joe realized that it would be better to have their own downhill ski area for their guests. The Alford's at that time did not express much interest in developing cross-country skiing. They started to explore their own property for a possible downhill ski location. Near the end of the summer camp in 1971 Dottie hiked the Hidden Pond trail and noticed the hill on the south side of the trail at an area we called “the dump”. Back then, there was no garbage, recycling, or waste service to haul the trash away. We had to deal with waste and non-reusable items on our own. Joe purchased a large commercial trash compactor. The nonburnable trash was compacted in heavy plastic bags, placed in “the dump” and covered with dirt. We were quite surprised when Dottie and Joe announced that the location of the new ski hill was to be at “the dump”. This location eventually became the bottom of the beginner ski slope near the base of the rope tow. The exact location of “the dump” is marked today by the depressions on the lower slope.

As Highland Ski Area was closed, the local bank was selling off the equipment at rock bottom prices. Joe and Dottie considered buying the Poma lift and moving it to Crystal Lake. Joe consulted with the Poma company and purchased the lift. He asked myself and Gary Dermott to go to Highland Ski Area to dismantle the lift. I was not sure how we were going to move the ski lift with just the old pickup truck, but we could at least try and take the arms off the towers. We first lowered the bull-wheel to the ground and took the main tow cable off all the sheave wheels of the towers. We put a ladder on the tower at the top of the hill. I climbed the ladder and with a large wrench pulled on the first nut to loosen it. The top of the ladder that I was on started to slide up and down against the tower. I called to Gary, “Hold the ladder”. Gary called back that he was holding it and it was not moving on the ground. It was then that we saw with consternation that the tower itself was moving. It seems that the towers were not tightened properly to the bolts on the concrete bases, but had only been held in position by the weight of the ski cable over the sheaves. Oops, how many years had people skied at Highland with a ski lift that had not been properly attached to its bases? We

then went back to Joe and urged him to hire a local heavy equipment company to get the ski lift moved. That was the first indication that the rock bottom price of the lift, would require a larger investment to get it operating.

The construction itself created some unforeseen problems for us as we had never put up a ski lift. With Joe using his transit, and myself holding the survey stick, we laid out the locations for the ski lift towers. Joe sent the profile of the hill to the Poma Company engineers. Because of the shape of the hill, Joe found that he had to purchase an additional tower. The reinforced concrete bases for the new lift also needed to be much larger than we anticipated. The top tower itself required the concrete to extend down 12 feet into the ground. Joe at first thought we could just dig the holes and fill them with concrete, but the backhoe digging that deep made the holes much more elongated. We had to build large plywood boxes as forms and suspend them down in the holes. Inside the wood forms were large cages of reinforcing rods. On a day that started with nice weather, I crawled into the hole for the top tower to wire the cages in place. After working for some time, I heard commotion up at the surface. I looked up through the hole at the top of the box to see snow blowing by with a strong wind. Although I was warm working in the bottom of the hole, the other workers on the surface were struggling with an unexpected early season blizzard.

We were in a hurry to get the lift operating as soon as possible but erecting the drive tower was at first a near disaster. A steel frame at the bottom of the tower holds the large electric motor and gear box which supports the rotating drive post. The gear box is hinged to allow the angle of the post to adjust to changes in tension of the main ski lift tow cable. With the tower lying on the ground, a steel cable was attached to the top of the tower and then hooked to a bulldozer to pull the tower up. A large rope was attached to the opposite side to prevent the tower from falling once it was up to near vertical. I was on the side guiding the smaller support brace. The bulldozer operator pulled the tower to vertical, but the rope meant to hold it in position snapped. The tower continued to slowly rotate on the gearbox hinge, and then began speeding up as it crashed to the ground. We were all in shock. We thought all our work was lost and the ski lift damaged beyond repair. The ground however was soft enough to allow the large drive wheel to sink in just enough to absorb the force of the fall. The good result was that in the process of inspecting the tower for damage, we found some of the bearings of the support sheaves needed to be replaced. Having it near the ground also allowed us time to install much needed new rubber liner to the large drive wheel.

Another problem was that the electric motor powering the lift required three phase power while the electric service to Crystal Lake was single phase. This

required the purchase of an expensive three phase converter. Before starting the ski lift motor, the converter would have to be started. As Crystal Lake is at the very end of the rural electric service line, this would put a drain on the power line such that many neighbors down the mountain would see their household lights dim while the lift was starting up. At least the neighbors would know when the lift was operating for skiing.

The amazing thing was that we began the actual construction of the bases for new lift the first week of October and while working even through snow squalls, the ski lift was operating by the end of December. The rope tow for the beginner slope was built at the same time by Ned Fox and his son Bobby, the local car repair guys. The rope tow was powered by an old Ford sedan with the rope wrapped around an extended rear wheel. Before supplying power to the ski rope, that car had served as the "staff car" for the summer camp staff.

I had thought that we would be building a new structure for the ski lodge, but we were again surprised when Joe and Dottie decided to use the old nature cabin, called Koash. It was an empty, abandoned cabin located then on the hill near the current climbing wall. Koash was dragged out the camp road behind a bulldozer. A "new" addition doubled the size of Koash to allow it to be used as the downhill ski rental shop and snack bar. The first rental skis were the old skis from Highland Ski Area, though newer ski equipment was added later. The new/old ski lodge had electricity, but there was no running water or sewer. After each day of skiing, a lucky employee was chosen to take the portable potty back in to the dining hall to service it. Oh, the memories....

Dottie's maiden name was SaintOnge. She named the new ski hill Mont SaintOnge, in honor of her father who taught her to ski when she was growing up in Maine. Dottie and Joe laid out the initial downhill trails. The trails were at first narrow near the top of the hill with a number of tree islands. Many hours were spent by workers and volunteers to clear rocks with rakes and by hand to make the slope skiable. Over the years the trails were widened to make a larger skiing surface and to help with snowmaking.

The first grooming machine at Crystal Lake was the Cushman Trackster, initially used at the Highland Ski Area. I'm sure there are many who remember even in the summer getting exciting rides with Dottie driving the Trackster. There were also two old well used snowmobiles that sometimes ran.

Friends from the local community came to work and ski at the downhill slope. Stories could be told by many others about working and skiing at Mont Saintonge, with experiences about running the rope tow, the tubing hill, snow

making, night skiing, the Ski Patrol and more.

Lodging

With the creation of the downhill slope, Joe and Dottie worked to provide accommodations for larger groups. Over time, many of the summer cabins and other buildings were “winterized” to provide for at least 180 people. There may have been a few times when around 200 overnight guests were squeezed in. A big work project, every fall and spring, was moving all the beds from the summer set-up to the winter use and then back again in the spring. The Alford's were creative about finding sleeping spaces, even the Wigwam cabin was filled with beds. Unfortunately, the Wigwam guest rooms were above the maintenance garage with the grooming machines and the fuel pump just outside on the lower level. I remember feeling badly for the guests when I had to pull into re-fuel noisy grooming machines and snowmobiles in the middle of the night.

The winterized buildings had small electric heaters to keep the plumbing from freezing, but the main heat for the guests was from wood stoves and fireplaces. The cutting, splitting and stacking of firewood seemed to take a few months each fall. This was time which I wanted to use to get the ski trails ready. And indeed, some years there were a few employees and volunteer groups helping with firewood collection.

The new dining hall was a focus for the camp, and the Alford's wanted to make use of it as much as possible. Joe kept his office in the dining hall and the building was an active meeting place all year round. The Alford's provided their weekend groups with a package that included dinner meals on Friday nights, breakfast on Saturday, a full dinner on Saturday night, and breakfast again on Sunday morning. Weekend lunches were provided to the overnight groups and to the day skiing public with counter service at both the dining hall and limited food service available at the downhill slope.

The Road

Just getting to Crystal Lake has always been an adventure, but especially Friday evenings on those snowy weekends. The Alford's were concerned that their guests could get up the mountain road in the winter. In the 1970's, four-wheel drive vehicles were not common as they are today. 4WD was found then in pickup trucks and jeeps, but most people drove 2-wheel drive vehicles, and very few people had tire chains. The solution was an arrangement with the Mapleton Church to provide a parking area at the base of the mountain. Crystal Lake had two twelve passenger vans equipped with tire chains that were used for shuttle service. Friday evening was sometimes hectic for shuttling the weekend groups and throughout the weekend the service was kept busy for day skiers. The camp pickup truck was used to haul

gear up the hill while the vans hauled the people. Keeping the access road open was always a concern. More than once the road crossing the large field near the Main Gate would be drifted closed. A few times it was so bad that the township plow truck, and even a bulldozer could not push through the huge drifts. The dozer then had to make a new snow road around the drifts and out through the field.

Joe

Joe was always prepared to go out with his truck to help people who were stuck on the mountain. He especially seemed to enjoy plowing the camp road and parking areas. We always thought it gave him a good reason to get out of the office. I have always admired the dedication of both Joe and Dottie towards doing any and all the various jobs to keep Crystal Lake operating. Joe himself could be snowplow operator, sidewalk shoveling guy, fire builder, kitchen cook, dishwasher, plumber, maintenance man, piano man, secretary, greeter, cashier, lift operator, bookkeeper and more, all in one weekend.

While Joe was not a skier, Dottie loved skiing and especially enjoyed teaching and working at the ski hill. If not skiing she was busy providing good food and service at the dining hall.

Joe became quite involved in community work, sometime to help the specific needs of Crystal Lake. The weather then as now, often brought snow to the ski center on top of the mountain, while it was raining down in the valley. This usually required a phone call to the township road crew who did not always seem happy to come and plow the road on the mountain. Joe eventually ran for and was elected to a position of township supervisor. He then had better control of when the mountain road would be maintained and plowed.

As Crystal Lake is located at the very end of the electric service line for the Sullivan County Rural Electric Co-op., Joe served with a position on the rural electric board. Both of the Alfords were also very active in the American Camping Association and their local church. I have always had great respect for how both Joe and Dottie worked tirelessly to keep Crystal Lake Camps operating through lean years, especially when it was a private enterprise without the benefits of a non-profit. With all the work in the "Off Season", the Alfords were still able to do the promotion and organization for the summer camp. I only remember them taking a vacation once, in all the years that I worked for them.

Part 3

The Start of Cross-Country Skiing

The winter of 1973-74 was the first time cross-country skiing was officially offered at Crystal Lake. At first, Joe and Dottie were focused on downhill skiing as the main activity. Their ski brochure and even radio advertisements were for the first few years mainly about Mont SaintOnge and downhill skiing. Of course, the Mont SaintOnge hill has a vertical drop of only about 200 feet, and it was clear that it never had the potential to attract serious downhill skiers. However, the terrain of the Crystal Lake property with its glaciated features, was and is ideal for cross country skiing, Sally and I were encouraging the Alford's to allow us to offer cross country skiing. My main job initially was to be the ski lift operator when the downhill slope was open. When not working at the downhill slope, Sally and I started clipping mountain laurel to improve the existing trails.

Once the Alford's agreed to also offer cross country skiing, the first problem was: snowmobiles! For many years the local snowmobile groups had been freely riding the trails in the area. It was common for groups of snowmobiles to come over the mountain on Boardpile Trail and roar around on Crystal Lake in the middle of the night or whenever they wanted. They would also freely come and go on the camp road. Joe was at first perplexed when I explained that we could not have both skiers and snowmobiles on the trails. Eventually, signs and then barriers were placed to close the trails to snowmobiles. This created an initial big uproar of complaints from the snowmobile riding neighbors. Some of them even told Joe that they would quit providing services to the camp. Over time, as more skiers came and the neighbor friends saw the ski activity increase, the snowmobile issue faded away. More trails on nearby state and private lands were also improved for the snowmobile community.

Joe's concern about closing trails to snowmobiles showed how the Alford's were always thinking about the people in the community. By Crystal Lake allowing hunting, fishing, and providing employment for local neighbors, these same people were available and happy to help out the camp when problems arose. Neighbors occasionally helped plow and clear the road when our plow was broken or help cut downed trees after ice storms and lend a hand at other critical times.

The Cross-Country Ski Shop

The Longhouse, which was the old dining hall, became the cross-country ski shop. Back then, the sides of the building were covered in old homasote

board. The windows had the summer screens covered in plastic, and there was no insulation in roof or walls. An old wood stove was put to heavy use to keep the ski shop warm.

We first needed rental skis. Rather than purchase rental skis, Dottie offered some of the wooden downhill skis left from Highland Ski Area that were no longer suitable for the downhill slope. With the table saw, I cut off the metal edges, mounted three pin bindings, and smeared pine tar on the bottoms. Of course, we used kick wax on our skis for grip, as waxless skis were new at that time and unproven. We started with maybe 10 to 20 pairs of skis, bamboo poles, and floppy leather boots for our rentals. The rental ski department grew quickly over the next few years.

Arta Delano, our wonderful friend, schoolteacher, and summer waterfront director, drove up every weekend from New Jersey and assisted in the cross-country ski shop in addition to helping to cook meals in the dining hall.

After a few years as the cross-country business grew, we were able to put new siding on the outside of the Longhouse. One of our staff members from Williamsport found some free glass windows available in a building being demolished in town. We finally added insulation and a dropped ceiling to help warm up the inside. Restrooms were also added in the waxing room for skiers.

The installation of the two restrooms upstairs and a remodel downstairs proved beneficial in an unexpected way. The Cafferata family from Eagles Mere had donated funds for a staff lounge in the room under the ski waxing room. The summer staff lounge was in honor of their son Buster, a popular summer camp counselor. The staff lounge had electric heat, paneled walls, and a dropped ceiling, along with a new restroom with sink and shower.

The Fire

One dark cold winter night we came very close to losing the ski shop and all the skis. It was mid-week when Joe and Dottie were in town for the evening. Only one couple was staying overnight, and I believe it was Anna Alford serving dinner for them in the dining hall. My wife and I, living in the trailer received a frantic phone call from Anna that there was a fire in the Ski Shop. I rushed to the Long House, expecting to find a fire around the wood stove, but the fire was in the adjoining waxing room with flames and smoke coming up out of a hole in the floor. I went around to the lower outside level and looked through the staff lounge door. The fire was along the floor of the back wall, up that wall, and into the suspended ceiling. I grabbed a garden hose from the pump house next door and started squirting water into the room. I also saw water dripping out of the ceiling in addition to the flames. Soon our neighbor,

Landy Sheets had arrived and with Anna's help was throwing buckets of water down the hole in the waxing room floor from above. It looked to me as if the electric heater in the lower room had started the fire. We were not able to put the fire out ourselves as it was continuing to burn the large old wooden beams within the suspended ceiling/floor. The Picture Rocks Fire Department finally arrived, and they were able to enter the room and put the fire out.

Soon the fire chief was able to determine the cause of the fire. It was not the electric heater as it first appeared. The hole in the waxing room floor was the size of a garden bucket. It seems that earlier that same morning a staff member was asked to clean the ashes out of the wood stove in the ski shop before lighting a new fire for the day. The staff member was from a southern state and was not familiar with wood burning stoves. The old ashes from the day before seemed to be cold and they were put in a plastic cleaning bucket. The bucket was placed in the waxing room under a ski waxing table. It was normal in the ski shop with the regular feeding of the woodstove to have a bit of smoke and the smell of the fire in the room throughout the day. No one noticed the bucket of ashes quietly smoldering in the waxing room. After sitting all day, the ashes slowly regained heat until later that evening. After the ski shop was closed, the bucket got hot enough to melt and burn a hole through the wooden floor. The burning bucket fell through the suspended ceiling of the room below landing on the floor against the paneled back wall.

You can imagine the surprise of Joe and Dottie when they got home to find all the fire trucks at the ski shop. Two things helped to prevent the Longhouse and the skis from burning. The couple who had just finished dinner with Anna at the dining hall, walked past the ski shop at just the right time to see and report the smoke. The other fortunate happening was that as the burning bucket of ashes went through the ceiling of the staff lounge it started a fire in the dropped ceiling near where the newer overhead water pipes were located. This heat must have melted the solder connections in the water pipes and created a sprinkler effect within the dropped ceiling of the downstairs room. This helped to slow the fire from spreading through the old wooden building until the fire company arrived. In one sense, Buster helped save the Longhouse, as the leaking water pipes in the staff lounge were in the same rooms, he used to sneak into for evening snacks. There is today still a wood patch on the wooden floor of the waxing room covering the hole where the ash bucket was placed.

Part 4

The Ski Trails

The initial cross-country ski trails at Crystal Lake were the existing logging roads, none of which were laid out for skiing. The old Lake Trail (the narrow single-track around Crystal Lake), Backway, Hidden Pond, Boardpile, Whipple Mill, Bear Creek, Hemlock Springs, parts of South Ridge, and parts of Big Fern were trails we first used for skiing. Our first few years there was no grooming, but I would go out early in the morning and break track by skiing around the lake and up Boardpile and back. I would then go and operate the Poma Lift, while Arta and Sally ran the cross-country ski shop. After a year or two, our neighbor Landy Sheets took over the position of ski lift operator and I spent more time with the cross-country ski program.

A few years before, in the late 60's, Lew Powell and his wife lived in a trailer near the parking lot. Lew designed and built the sewer system for the camp. He also helped at Highland Ski Area. The pipelines for the sewer system required fill material. This fill was obtained by digging into the glacial moraine next to Boardpile Trail just up the hill from the Norman Lodge Cabin. This created the flat area now known as the "soccer field". The sewer line itself runs along the stream through the camp with the fill material providing the surface for "Backway Trail" When later used as a cross-country ski trail, we decided it would be better to call it "Backway" rather than the "Sewer Line Trail". The new sewer system allowed for the construction of the Dining Hall, which was built on what was then the baseball diamond. (Soccer was not yet popular and the new field was originally not a soccer field but called the "new baseball field".)

I recall a photo on a camp promotion in the mid-60's that showed a group of downhill skiers being towed up Boardpile Trail using a rope behind a pick-up truck. They would have been skiing back down Boardpile Trail or using what Dottie called, "Dwight's Trail". Pictures of the period show skiers with downhill equipment, not cross-country skis. Dwight Middleton should be credited with clearing the first downhill "ski trail". It started at what we now call "S- Bend" and extended directly down the hill through the trees towards Wild Rice Lake. (More recently remnants of this path have been a favorite for telemark skiers.) As there was no trail around Wild Rice Lake at that time, the early skiers must have skied across the lake to the old beach or climbed to the "boy's camp" for the return tow back up the hill. This was the era that the bobsled, which was later retired to the ski shop as a sitting bench, was rumored to have been towed up either Boardpile or even the camp road, for brave bobsledders to descend. I have heard that instead of what we use as the main road, the

original access road back to the Crystal Lake area in the early 1900's was the road over Boardpile Mountain.

The Fern Trails

What we now call Big Fern Trail was a logging path with a dead end near a small stream. The first ski trail addition that we built was the connection of Big Fern to make it a loop back around to near the Project Cabin intersection with South Ridge Trail. Sally and I were helped by friends from the Lycoming College Outing Club. This was the first volunteer group that helped on the trails. All of our trail work then was done by hand with shovels, picks, rakes, pry-bars, and clippers. We next added the connection that is called Little Fern. The Fern Trails are named for the large expanse of beautiful hay-scented ferns covering the forest floor in the summer.

Shortcut- Kettle - Hidden Pond Trails

The next trails built were the "Shortcut" and "Kettle" trails. The Shortcut trail allowed for connection to and from the ski hill and allowed a circular route connection for the Backway Trail and Hidden Pond Trail. Initially, the Short Cut was only wide enough through the mountain laurel for the track width of skis and pole planting. Kettle trail was also just wide enough for the width of one skier. The problem with Kettle trail was and still is the very rocky ground and avoiding the southern sun exposure of the hills. The name "Kettle" does not refer to a cooking pot but to the geologic formation. A kettle hole is a depression that is left after a large chunk of ice melts after being buried in glacial till. The depression containing Hidden Pond is a kettle hole, as are many of the depressions nearby.

The great terrain for cross-country skiing at Crystal Lake is due to the continental glaciers which stopped at the base of the ski hill leaving their mixture of ice and rocks. The Hidden Pond Trail makes a delightful rolling ski trail through the glacial debris. I had heard that the original Hidden Pond trail was built by Joe's father Charlie, as an alternate access to the boy's area of the summer camp, although I never confirmed if that was true.

Lake Trail

Lake Trail, as a single-track trail and being on the north side of the lake, was always subject to being degraded by exposure to the direct sunlight. For the first few years we used it but were limited as to when it was skiable. Wanting to keep the narrow part of the trail for quiet walking, the New Lake Trail was later added a bit away from the lake and somewhat protected in the trees.

Catfish Trail

Other than when the lake itself is frozen with good snow covering, there is very little flat ski terrain at Crystal Lake. That's why I wanted to build a trail

around Catfish Bog. Initially in the early 1970's, there was no trail around the bog. The dense growth of hemlock trees made it difficult to even walk through the area on the east and north sides of the bog. There are springs of water that often flow just a few inches under the surface rocks on the east side of the bog. This has always prevented the original single-track trail from being properly improved even later when machinery was available. The other problem with improving many of the ski trails is lack of easy to find fill material in the rocky glaciated terrain.

Pitch Pine Trail

Pitch Pine Trail follows the southeast corner of the camp property line. The trail is named for the pitch pine trees that were common along both sides of the trail. Very few, if any pitch pines remain today, possibly due to natural forest succession. Pitch Pine was a good early choice for making a ski trail, partly because it follows the flat top of the ridge. The work was also relatively easy because the property line had been cleared in 1964 by a group of summer camp project workers led by Donley Johnson. It lent itself to cutting the laurel with hand clippers and weed wacker. From the property line we extended the narrow trail to the top of the Poma lift. This allowed cross-country skiers access to the top of the hill from the ski lift. Skiers could then use their trail pass to ride the Poma lift.

Mountain Trail

Mountain Trail was soon added as a way for cross-country skiers to avoid skiing on the downhill slope. It was however narrow and especially challenging for wooden skis and old 3-pin bindings as it approached Kettle Trail.

Off-Property Trails

Joe Alford had an informal arrangement with the Hemlock Springs Hunting Club where the club could hunt on the camp property in hunting season and the camp could hike and ski on their property. This gave us access to the Big Sit, South Fork, Hemlock Springs, Main Gate, and Look Out trails. As the Hemlock Springs Club eventually did quite a bit of logging on their land, the Look Out Trail, had at one time a beautiful 360-degree lookout. The last time I was at the Look Out, the regrowth of the forest had slowly closed up the view. The Main Gate and Porcupine Trails were also on adjoining lands. A friendly porcupine kept showing up as we were working, so the Porcupine Trail was named after him/her.

Yo Yo Trail

Joe and Dottie had selective logging done on the Crystal Lake property a couple of different times. Prior to the logging, I remember hiking to the Project Cabin in the 1960's and being amazed at the mature oak and maple

trees in the area. There were also huge mature hemlocks and white pines in the Whipple Mill area and a more mature forest on Crystal Ridge. The logging did however leave the remnants of skidding trails, some of which we were able to use for skiing. The "Yo Yo Trail" was pieced together from one of the logging operations. When I showed it to Joe and suggested we name it Yo Yo, because it had some up and down loop sections, he agreed and commented: "You mean you've got to be a yo-yo to want to ski on it?"

Red Faced Bear Trail

Red Faced Bear was also a remnant of a log skidding trail. One day a forester was selecting and marking trees. He left an aerosol paint can in the woods to be used the next day. When he returned in the morning there was red paint sprayed wildly on nearby trees and bushes. The empty can of paint lay punctured with holes matching a bear's teeth. We named the trail, but never saw the red-faced bear.

Sunset Trail area

The Sunset Trail, heading into the sunset, and the "Z Trail" were also initially logging skid trails. North Star Trail has a section that points to the North Star but was also near a location where a group of summer campers lived and learned skills of native Americans.

Lake Ridge area

Parts of the Birch Loop, Birch View, and Lake Ridge Trails were also made from logging skid trails. When I first worked on the Birch View Trail there was an extensive and impressive stand of white birch trees on the north-west hillside over-looking what we then called the Birch Creek valley. The birch have evidently succumbed to forest succession like the pitch pine. The Birch Loop at the bottom of the hill near Whipple Mill, follows the skid path left from taking out a beautiful stand of huge mature hemlock and white pine trees along the creek. The birch are gone from natural causes, the hemlock and white pine from logging.

Through most of the 1970's we did not groom the trails by machine and broke trail by skiing in the tracks for our skiers. At some time however, we did drag a set of bed springs behind a snowmobile to break up icy conditions. In 1978 I attended my first instructor course of the Professional Ski Instructors of America. It was quite an eye opener as I learned that traditional skiing with proper technique required a machine groomed track. (This was before the skate technique was made popular in the early 80's.) I realized that we needed to groom our trails by machine. When I returned to Crystal Lake I built a wooden track-sled to pull behind our snowmobile and began setting tracks for traditional skiing.

Another ski experience that shaped my thinking was during Christmas week of 1979 when skiing at the Telemark Ski Area in Wisconsin. The trails at Telemark are on glaciated terrain similar to that as at Crystal Lake. Skiing their “World Cup” trail provided a few ideas that I later used when designing features at Crystal Lake. I also gained trail ideas later while serving as an examiner conducting clinics for the Professional Ski Instructors of America and skiing at many other ski centers.

The 1980's

In the 1980's the interest in cross-country skiing was increasing, and Joe and Dottie Alford were seeing the potential for improving the Crystal Lake cross-country ski trail system. The existing trails would sometime become crowded, especially on single track trails with sharp up or down sections causing skiers to wait in line for their turn. I spent many hours exploring and studying the terrain at Crystal Lake. In the spring when the snow was melting, I would take notice of what areas held the snow the longest and tried to devise connecting paths that would maintain snow cover. I often sat in the woods eating lunch and imagining where the trails were to be. Finally, Joe agreed to lease a bulldozer to build new trails. We first leased a bulldozer for 30 days in October of either 1983 or 84. I do not remember which trails I worked on that first year. I did however go over most of the existing trails to improve them by widening the logging paths for better skiing and especially to make them easier to groom. We leased a machine for a month a second year also.

Wild Rice Trail

Wild Rice was one of the new trails built the first year with a machine. The full loop around the lake was a welcome addition as the original trail went only from the horse barn area to the dam. Kettle Trail and the Shortcut were also widened and slightly re-located.

Laurel Trail

Laurel Trail was an early trail added in the 1980's. As the ski center was drawing larger crowds, Laurel and Pitch Pine were designed to be a one-way loop. Laurel Trail was laid out at a distance just far enough from Pitch Pine that skiers on the other trail were not easily seen through the mountain laurel. This was to give the feeling of remoteness, less crowding, and make better use of the relatively level terrain. The trails made a favorite loop when the Poma lift was operating. Many skiers would ride on the poma lift to get to the upper trails, as the cross-country pass allowed skiers a trip up the hill.

Blue Moon Trail

Blue Moon is meant to be a fun trail of moderate difficulty. The name is a double entendre. One being that during construction, staff member Arta Delano pointed out that there was a celestial blue moon taking place. The

other meaning is that before the days of lycra, many people came skiing wearing blue jeans, especially those just starting in the sport. During the 1970's and early 80's jeans were not pre-washed, so that when they got wet, especially from falling in the snow, the blue color bled out. It was quite common to see blue "sitzmarks" along the trails.

Hungry Bear Trail

The name for Hungry Bear is from an incident that happened during construction. To get the most use from a leased bulldozer, I would start working at near sunrise and stop for the day as the sun was setting. I would leave the machine on the work site in the woods and walk in for the night as driving it would take too much time and fuel. One morning when I returned to the bulldozer, I found that the operator's seat was almost totally in shreds with teeth and claw marks. The remaining bits of the seat were spread about on the ground. The bear ate the seat! Maybe it was the work of the same bear who sprayed the red paint some years earlier? Maybe it was a relative?

Blueberry Trail

Just as the wild blueberries growing near the trails are sweet yet sometimes a bit sour or tangy, so Blueberry Trail is mostly gentle but with a fun hill to add a bit of spice as it approaches the Birch Spring Cabin.

"The Steep Stuff"

When skiers returned to the ski shop and we asked which trails they skied, they quite often would say they did the "Steep Stuff", meaning the trails leading into and out of the Grand Central Station area. These trails were designed for accomplished skiers to test both uphill and downhill technique at speed. They are one-way directional for both safety and for best use of the terrain, especially with the "Flume" of Super Loop, the "Chute" of Zinger, and of course Wazoo. Remember, skiers should always ski the right direction and never go up the "Wazoo".

Sassafras Trail is the best way to enter Grand Central Station. The trail was lined with many sassafras trees and the terrain provides a challenging climb for skiers to earn entry to the downhills that follow. Though it is tempting, novice skiers should be discouraged from getting on the more difficult trails as they tend to destroy the grooming and mess up the snow for the better skiers. The Rocky Road Trail can be skied to get into the area, but because of the very rocky ground, it was mostly intended as an access for grooming machines.

As there were no other employees available, I did most the bulldozer work alone. It did make it, so I did not have to worry about knocking trees down on anyone or backing over spectators. But one particular time I could have used

some help. Because of the very rocky ground and often no topsoil, making a new trail requires a great amount of going forward and back, digging out rocks, trees and vegetation. The one machine that I was driving had a winch tucked down below the seat and hanging out the back. Without me being able to see it, the hook on the winch cable came loose and the cable got snagged in the thick mountain laurel. I was working on the Flume of Super Loop going back and forth while the winch cable was winding itself around the drive train and undercarriage of the dozer. Finally, the mess of steel cable caused the dozer to stop and could not be moved forward or backward. This was before the era of battery powered tools and grinders. My only choice was to walk back to the maintenance shop and find a hack saw to take back out to the machine. I still remember the exact spot at the bottom of the Flume where I spent most of a day on the ground under a bulldozer, slowly sawing through the twisted nest of cable.

Eventually as the cross-country business grew, the Alford's quit advertising the Mont SaintOnge ski hill and began using the name Crystal Lake Ski Center to include both downhill and cross-country skiing. Of course, the cross-country skiers were outnumbering the downhill skiers. I cannot remember the date but on one perfect day in the late 1980's we had the biggest day ever for skiing at Crystal Lake. It would now be called "epic". We had sold about 200 trail passes to the weekend group. On Saturday the parking lots were completely full, and our parking crew was working to make use of every available space. Cars were parked bumper to bumper on both sides of the road from the boy's camp all the way out to the downhill slope. With 400-day skiers there was a total of 600 skiers on that one special day. The skiing was great too.

Although I had planned many more trails to complete the trail system at Crystal Lake, a few years of thin snow cover slowed the trail building projects. Joe bought the snowmaking gun, and we tried making snow by taking water from Hidden Pond with limited success. Also, the new slope was created as a beginner teaching area with the handle tow lift. That area eventually became the tubing hill. The snowmaking pond was later constructed nearby to make snow for downhill skiing and tubing. Sally and I left Crystal Lake to work in British Columbia in the spring of 1991.

In January of 1996 I got a phone call from Joe Alford telling me about the blizzard and the over 4 feet of snow that hit north central PA. He said I should come to Crystal Lake to see it. I jumped in my Geo Prizm and headed across the country from Washington state. As I was crossing the Midwest, the flooding began in Pennsylvania. I arrived at Crystal Lake the day after the flood. Fortunately, there was still plenty of snow left, 3 to 4 feet, but the flooding had damaged the trail system. At almost every culvert and many

other places the running water had created steep sided open crevasses, four feet deep across the trails to expose bare ground. The ski trails were impassable. Tom Deljonavan was the trail groomer, but he had to go help his family who were affected by the flood. Fortunately, the ski center still had the old Thiokol type grooming machine that was used on the downhill slope. With the blade of the large groomer, we were able to repair the damage to the cross-country trails and we had good skiing for the rest of the winter. Without the larger groomer the cross-country trails could not have been repaired.

I returned again to Crystal Lake in the fall of 2004 to help Dottie and Anna with the ski business. The downhill slope had been closed for a few years and much of the equipment was sold. Coming back to Crystal Lake it was evident that although in the past the cross-country program had a larger following, the downhill slope had provided a source of energy to the whole ski center. To see the slope neglected and the equipment left to fall apart was sad.

There was then some question about how to keep the cross-country ski program going at Crystal Lake. The volunteer groups that come and help clear the trails are a great help and do wonderful work. I know there are many who have helped at Crystal Lake when I have not been there, but I must mention a few people that I have been associated with that have done much to keep the skiing going:

- Paul Gawblich, who passed on this past summer of 2020, did much to unselfishly help the ski center. Paul loved to work in the woods and was an amazing skier who took up skiing when many people would head for the rocking chair.
- Tom Deljonavan has been the consistent worker, both grooming trails in winter and cutting firewood.
- Pete Gstalter and his family have helped for many years.
- Louise McCormick, PSIA certified ski instructor and her husband Jack.
- Neighbors Michael and Rickie Gross have been great supporters in addition to Joe and Chris Smith.
- Jim Keeley and all his work over the years, and his wife Michelle, a local girl who came up to ski.
- Everybody else may fill in your name here.....

These people and many more continue to make the skiing happen at Crystal Lake. The only additional ingredient is of course SNOW. Many years hard work is done throughout the fall months and at times continues into January before the snow does its part. Some years the skiing has only lasted for a few days with thin coverage on the trails. That is why it is so important to keep the surface of the trails in good shape to allow for skiing in marginal conditions.

Thanks to the volunteers for this.

As I write this, in the winter of 2021, it is one of those epic winters for skiing. Although Crystal Lake often has snow when there is none in the valley, when the snow is in peoples' back yards, they then come up the mountain to ski, and the snow has been in a lot of back yards this year. It's been a great year for skiing. May the Crystal Lake Ski and Outdoor Center and its trails continue for many more years of good snow and enjoyable skiing.