

FAMILY-FRIENDLY



After 60 years, a private club remains true to its roots

Sometime in the late '50s, a couple of dozen young people in Toronto decided they wanted something to do in the winter. Something social, outdoors, and out of the city. Even though most of them had never skied before, they decided to form a ski club.

The club they founded would go on to become Alpine Ski Club, one of the best private ski clubs in the country. Alpine is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year.

These days Alpine is known as a club with an amazing clubhouse, superb catering,

an excellent racing program, some of the best skiing terrain in Ontario, and a warm and friendly atmosphere. The atmosphere was there from the very earliest days, but not much else.

“We started out as a travelling club,” says Hans Kent, one of the founders and the club’s first president. “The High Park YMCA used to send people out of town in buses; we couldn’t afford that, so we just put everyone in private cars.”

Every weekend, club members would pile into each other’s cars and drive to the ski hills. Blue Mountain, Beaver Valley, Huntsville, Snow Valley... anywhere they could get to for a day’s skiing. Most were immigrants, and few of them had even skied before, but they had

fun learning and laughing and coming to terms with Canada’s winter.

Before long the club had about 250 members. Coordinating the carpooling had become a massive logistical challenge. And people were getting frustrated with long lineups when they got to the public hills. So they began looking for a piece of property.

Converting a ranch

After a couple of years, they found what they needed – 50 acres of excellent terrain that was part of the Arrowhead Ranch on the Blue Mountain ridge. In 1960 they founded Alpine Ski Club, bought the land, and asked people to chip in for membership. “We thought that most people would come on board,” says Hans. “But coming up with \$100 for membership

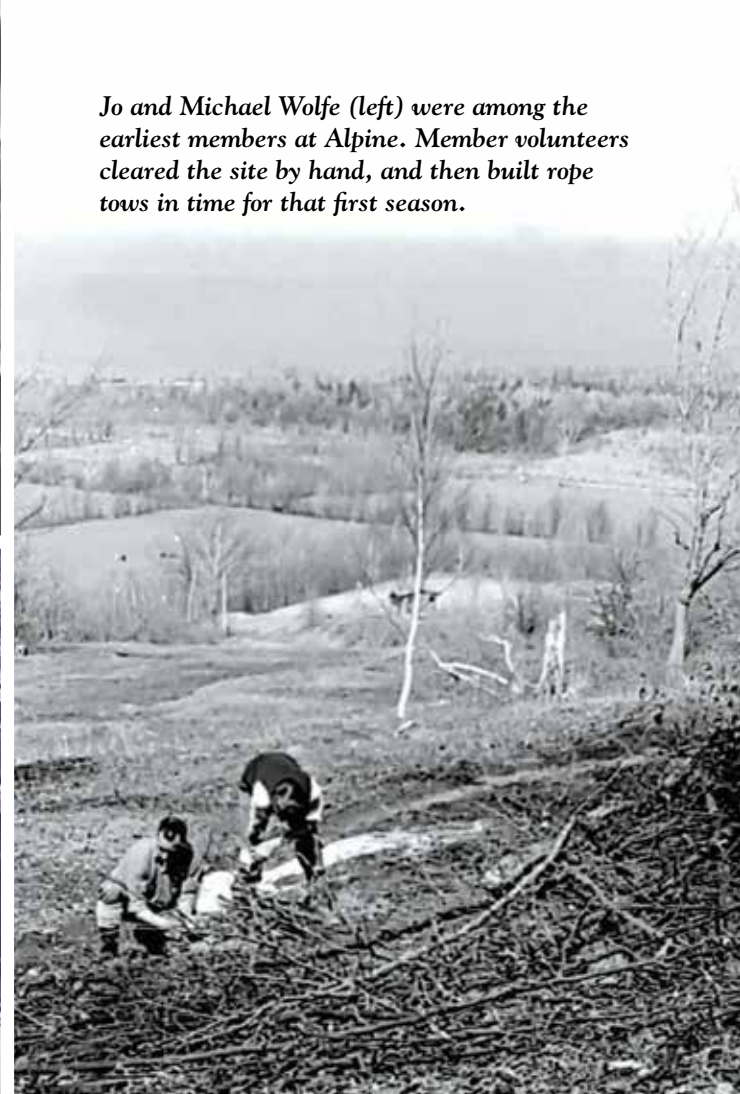
was the end of the world in those days.”

Around 100 people joined the club, and they began an active campaign to recruit new members. They cajoled their friends, set up a booth at the CNE (complete with a cask-wearing St. Bernard dog), and even put leaflets on cars in the parking lot at Blue Mountain. “That didn’t please the owners of Blue Mountain, so we stopped doing that!” Hans chuckles.

At the same time, there was the little matter of where to ski. They had the land, but it was thickly forested. And none of them had ever laid out a ski run or built a rope tow. “We had skied at different places and had an idea of what the place should look like, but that was about it,” says Hans.



Jo and Michael Wolfe (left) were among the earliest members at Alpine. Member volunteers cleared the site by hand, and then built rope tows in time for that first season.



‘Things change over the years – new buildings, new lifts. But the core feelings are exactly the same as they were 60 years ago.’

There was no money to hire professionals, so the volunteers armed themselves with chainsaws and axes, and spent summer weekends clearing the trees. The forest was so dense that people couldn’t always see each other, so they tied balloons to themselves to mark their locations. With no earth-moving equipment, stumps were left in place and surrounded with straw bales – which had to be carried up the mountain by hand.

A family history

“I’m not aware if there was a formal business plan to any of it,” says Ian Wolfe. “It was just a feeling of ‘why wouldn’t we purchase this land and start cutting down trees?’”

His father, Michael, was one of the founding members.

Michael met Ian’s mother, Jo, while recruiting members for the club.

Ian and his brothers grew up at the club, spending every weekend there from opening day to season’s end.

“I don’t recall missing a weekend when I was growing up,” says Ian. “We’d be on the hill by 9, stop for a really quick lunch, and then ski until the hill closed.”

One of the great delights of Alpine membership is the freedom it allows families, Ian says. “As children, we had a sense of absolute freedom to explore the hills with confidence knowing that the entire Alpine family was supporting us and watching out for us. It really is a great

feeling to know that if you ever need anything, someone you know is there for you.”

As the club has aged, the bonds of friendship and family have deepened even further. “Seeing my son ski with my dad, that bridging of generations with a six-year-old boy and a 75-year-old man doing something together... I’ll never forget it.”

Over the years, Alpine has managed to strike a remarkable balance, being a comfortable place for long-time members and a welcoming spot for new members. “We have friends come up who haven’t skied here before, and they can’t believe how friendly it is,” says Ian. “You have this preconceived notion of what a private club is like, and it’s just not there.”

The original 50 acres of land has been expanded to 120. There are 36 runs ranging from green to a cluster of five double black diamond runs known as The Steeps. There are five lifts to ensure that lines range from minimal to non-existent, world-class snowmaking, and a 45,000 square foot clubhouse offering superb food and drink, with views

of the hill on one side and Georgian Bay on the other.

“Things change over the years – new buildings, new lifts. But the core feelings, the core values? Those are exactly the same as they were 60 years ago,” says Ian.

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