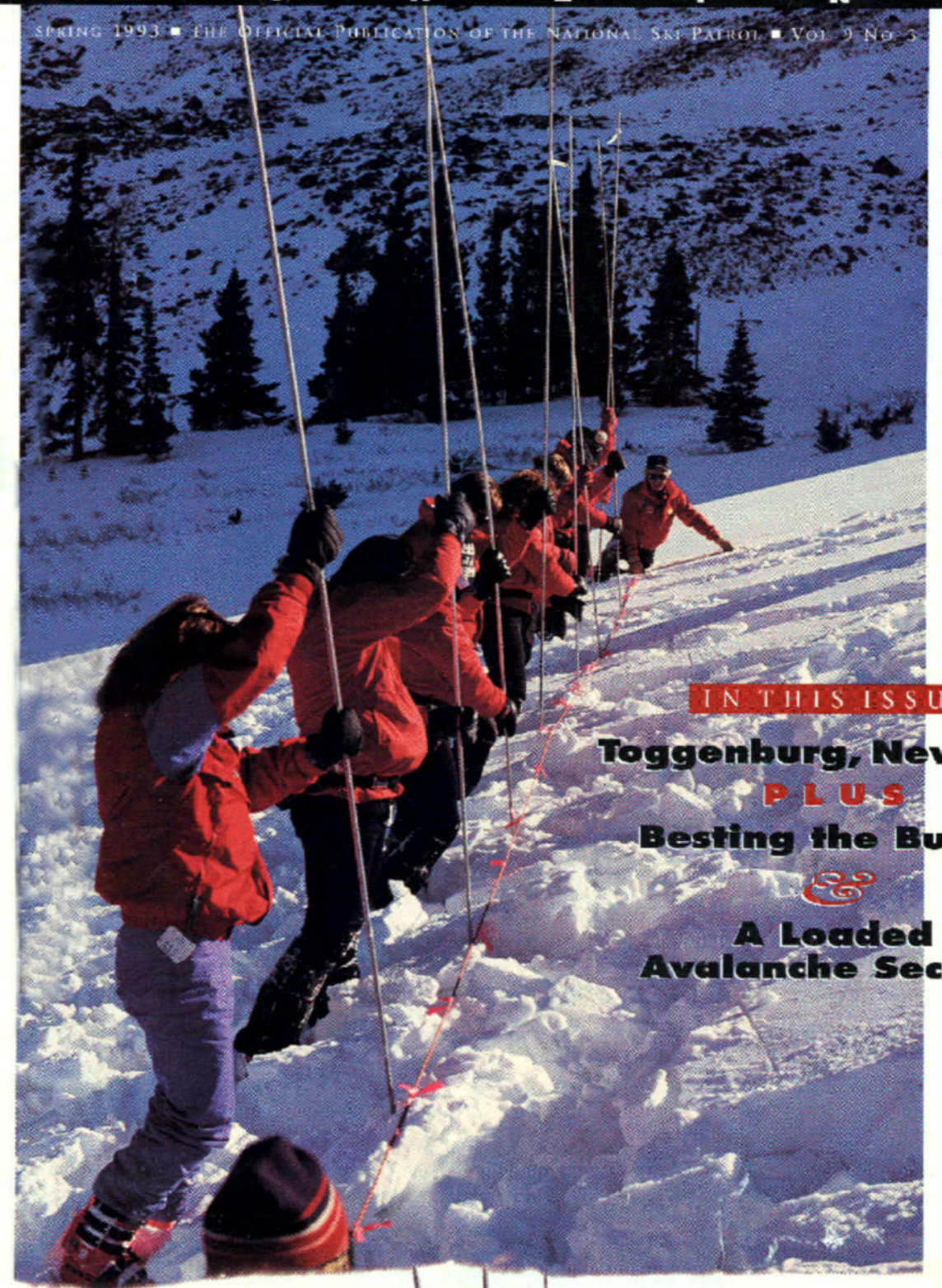


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Toggenburg Ski Center

A Family Treasure

by Patricia S. Beagle

On my way to Fabius, I admired the peaceful, pastoral scenery and the rolling farmland of Central New York State. This really is snow country. My western New York hometown of Buffalo may have a reputation for the white stuff, but locals know that at 110.5 inches, Syracuse averages a foot and a half more snow each year than Buffalo.

Twenty-five miles southeast of Syracuse, Toggenburg Ski Center not only overlooks farms, it is built on one. The area was named for the Toggenburg goats that once grazed on these hills. Longtime patrons even recall a certain scent on the slopes in the 1950s. Current reminders of that aromatic beginning range from trail names such as Billy's Butt, Capricorn Caper, and Rams' Ridge to artistic caricatures of goats on the walls of the lounge... along with an amicable-looking stuffed goat peering down from above the bar.

Toggenburg offers a vertical drop of 650 feet with a terrain mix of 25 percent easiest, 50 percent more difficult and 25 percent most difficult. A triple chair, a double chair, two T-bars, and two handle tows provide an uphill capacity of 6,400 skiers per hour. One of the most noticeable things about the area is the smooth corduroy-carpet grooming. Crowds are manageable, minimizing any deterioration of conditions throughout the day. A busy weekend day turnout numbers 2,300 skiers, with 150 to 700 visitors on a weekday. Skier visits average around 75,000 per year.

Toggenburg's customers come from Syracuse and the surrounding area. Fully half of the patrons are season pass holders. A weekend lift ticket sells for \$23 for adults and \$19 for juniors, with \$10 tickets to the beginner area. An adult season pass goes for \$270, but many family discounts are available, and a family of five or more can ski the season for only \$859. A typical season runs from



FOUNDER DOC HICKEY GAVE TOGGENBURG ITS UNIQUE NAME.

early December through late March and averages 93 days of skiing. This year, Toggenburg's usual 110 inches of natural snow was already surpassed by mid-February, so the current season may extend into April.

Eighteen trails provide variety, and 85 percent of the terrain is lighted for night skiing. You can set your edges and run occasional gates on the steep face of Oh My Goat (known to the locals simply as "Goat"). Bump fans can burn some thighs on aptly-named Kneeknocker. For the aesthetically inclined, stands of pines grace Gotcher Goat, and skiable decid-

uous glades are sprinkled around the slopes. The wide open space on Broadway is ideal for long-radius cruising. Snowboard enthusiasts are permitted anywhere at the area, and a half-pipe has been built for them on Wattles Run.

Toggenburg was born of a love for skiing. Founder Dr. Eugene Hickey (fondly known as "Doc") and his companions Bob Kells and Harry Ehle got tired of driving north to the Adirondacks to ski. Doc selected a site near his home and enlisted the help of farmer and jack-of-all-trades Frank Mueller. Hickey, Kells, and Mueller (Ehle's involvement ended after two years) put in a 1,250-foot rope tow and installed a 10-by-16-foot duck-hunting shack as a lodge. They added his and hers outhouses and opened for business in 1953. Through the years, Doc's wife Ginny has been heavily involved with the business. She still does the payroll today.

Doc skied daily and did everything from cutting trees to greasing lifts while carrying on a full-time oral surgery practice. In the mid-1950s, he freely exchanged ideas and the results of all experiments with fellow snowmaking pioneer Bob Crone of Glenwood Acres in the Buffalo area. "First we tried above-ground aluminum pipes, and we ended up with long ice cubes," Hickey explains. Numerous

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refinements followed. Snowmaking, now an industry standard, currently covers 90 percent of the area and remains one of Toggenburg's top priorities.

Another matter of great importance at Toggenburg has been catering to families. Doc Hickey always kept a special eye on the children. He could be found taking tots by the hand to the rest room, offering cash to a tearful child who had left his money at home, and providing free rentals when a binding broke, or—sadly to say—when skis were stolen. To keep the area safe for families, the occasional lawbreaker was not only prosecuted, but handcuffed by the police and led through the lodge as an example for all to see.

Safety concerns always extended to the hill, too, as Hickey explains. "You can get all sorts of people up the hill, but you have to use your head to balance uphill capacity against downhill capacity to minimize accidents."

General Manager Chic Wilson is still so concerned about that point that he is considering limiting the number of season passes sold in future years to ensure that overcrowding doesn't occur. Already, group sales are restricted on Friday nights.

This season, Toggenburg attacked a safety problem in an innovative way. Too many skiers were cutting across T-bar tracks while attempting to cross from Nubian Glade to Saanen Sluice. Area management decided that if you can't beat 'em, give 'em a safe way to do what they're going to do anyway. A wooden tunnel was constructed to allow skiers to cross *under* the T-bar. Passengers on the T-bar glide smoothly over the tunnel's roof. Children love to go through the tunnel, and no one gets hit by passing bars.

Both Hickey and Wilson express tremendous pride in Toggenburg's employees. Doc related in detail the merits of individual workers in department after department. He beamed with pride about the

successes of employees' children, revealing a familiarity uncommon to the average businessman. To Hickey, the employees of Toggenburg are sons and daughters. "We've been blessed with a delightful group of people all these years," he says. "There's nothing they won't do for you. I'm proud of the whole area and my entire staff. I'll stack them up against any place in the country."

In addition to the joys that have been a part of Toggenburg, there have been gut-wrenching sorrows. Perhaps the most difficult battle for Doc Hickey has been the stroke he suffered in 1992, which has kept him from his mountain, his practice, and his accustomed level of constant activity.

Earlier trials included a bitter lawsuit over snowmaking technology that threatened not only Hickey's assets in the ski area, but his medical practice as well. Hickey successfully defended himself in the suit, but shies away from even discussing the unpleasant details. In the mid-1980s, a fire sparked by a faulty rented compressor broke out in the compressor house. That was but a small taste of what was to come.

In June 1987, Toggenburg's cozy woodland lodge, chock-full of memorabilia, was totally destroyed by a heartbreaking blaze. Although the cause was never determined, arson was suspected.

General Manager Chic Wilson joined Toggenburg shortly after the 1987 fire. Wilson and the staff worked feverishly to ready new facilities for the 1987-88 season, pushing the contractor to complete construction of a new noncombustible lodge in time. The incineration of previous records made Wilson's job as a new manager doubly difficult. "There was no paperwork and almost a complete turnover in staff," he explains. Applications for employment were down as well. Despite myriad problems, the new season started right on schedule.

Wilson came to the area with 23 years of experience from Labrador Mountain, a

nearby ski resort owned by his uncle. "We're friendly competitors," says Wilson of Toggenburg's relationship with Labrador. Toggenburg lured Wilson with an offer of part-ownership, and he already holds 15-percent of the company. Since coming on board, Wilson has doubled snowmaking, added more lighting, and made drainage improvements. He has long-range plans to remove a T-bar, add two more chairs and another lodge, and double snowmaking output again. When asked about increasing the area's terrain, he answers, "Toggenburg is the size I am comfortable with and that I want to be associated with."

Wilson is a hard-driving dedicated person who obviously loves his six-and-one-half day work week. I must have hit a nerve in asking how often he skis at the area. He seems to feel guilty that it is only a couple of times a week rather than daily. Wilson is on the hill constantly, however, and he is a fanatic about snowmaking and grooming to the point that he sometimes cannot keep his hands out of Mountain Manager Jeff Higgins' work. Higgins ensures thorough nightly grooming of everything except the moguls and glades, whether the hill needs grooming or not. Wilson is assisted in inside operations by his wife Kris.

Like Hickey, Wilson is quick to praise his staff when asked about his accomplishments. He has, however, personally guided Toggenburg from a difficult period to one of continued profitability since joining the operation. He seems especially pleased with Toggenburg's reputation and with the fact that the area sells itself and therefore doesn't need to advertise.

Although Toggenburg may be known mostly to the locals around Syracuse, this is an area with some fascinating people and a lot of history. The Toggenburgs of this world play an important role in the ski industry. In the words of Doc Hickey, "Big areas wouldn't be around if small areas like us didn't get people interested in skiing." +

Patricia Beagle is a WEC instructor and an emergency medical technician in New York State. She is a member of the Holiday Valley Ski Patrol in Ellicottville, New York.



CHIC WILSON IS ONE OF A GROWING NUMBER OF HANDS-ON MANAGERS.