

N o r t h w a r d

B o u n d :

T H E

F U T U R E

O F

S K I I N G

*ONE TOWN BANDS TOGETHER TO CREATE A
NONPROFIT SKI COOPERATIVE. ANOTHER OPENS A SKI
AREA WITHOUT CHAIRLIFTS. IS THE FUTURE OF
SKIING IN NORTHERN BC?*

B Y

A a r o n T e a s d a l e



IT'S NO

surprise the rumours came from British Columbia. The province's car-burying snowpack, never-ending big mountain terrain and panoply of ski towns are legendary, so when I heard that two BC communities were launching grassroots experiments to retake skiing from an increasingly corporate ski industry and return it to the people, the only thing that came as a shock was their names. Or more specifically, the fact that I'd never heard of them.

Northern BC has always been a bit of a no-man's land. Far from the large commercial centres of the south, its hardscrabble small towns have survived on logging, mining and a hearty serving of self-reliance. The town of Terrace, population 11,000 and shrinking, is one of the few towns here that successfully added downhill skiing to its rough-hewn mix. At least until its small ski area, Shames Mountain, with one chairlift and one T-bar on 90 hectares of terrain, threatened to shut-

ter itself after a series of unprofitable seasons. That's when something remarkable happened.

Gary Maltin's truck rolls through 20 centimetres of fresh snow as we pull into the Shames Mountain parking lot, 30 minutes from Terrace in the Bornite Range of the Coast Mountains.

"At Shames, we call this 'a trace,'" Maltin says with a grin. The mountain averages a staggering 12-plus metres of snow a year, more than Whistler or any other lift-accessed area in Canada. In an age of climate change, it's common for ski areas to delay opening day due to lack of snow. Shames' opening day in 2011/12 was delayed two weeks because there was *too much snow*. Volunteers spent countless hours shovelling off parking lots, snowcats and buildings.

It was the last week of March when I arrived to see Shames firsthand. After picking up a \$50 lift ticket in a base "lodge" barely bigger than my house, Maltin and I headed over to a line-less lift where we met Maltin's friend, Josh McDonald. They both greeted the lift operators by name and as we rode the lone double chair, paint peeling on the seat's wooden slats, I got my first look at the mountain's respectable, if unspectacular, 487 metres of vertical. But the in-bounds terrain isn't the reason

Shames is spoken of in reverential tones by the few that have skied here.

At the area's high point, we unloaded from the T-bar and I followed Maltin and McDonald to a gap in the roped boundary line where a sign warned that we were entering unpatrolled backcountry terrain. We put climbing skins to our skis and followed a well-defined track for 10 minutes before we emerged from the forest at an open ridge offering my first look into the Shames backcountry. Clouds lingering from the storm concealed the peaks — typical for a place that gets this much snow — but I could see glimpses of steep, white mountainsides in all directions.

With Maltin leading the way, we plunged down a 300-metre pitch of perfectly spaced, north-facing trees. The few days' worth of unconsolidated snow under-ski felt like a downy 60 centimetres. As we whooped and cheered at the bottom, I was starting to understand why Maltin's delicately worded pet slogan for the area is, "Shames: home of the boner pow."

Shames opened in 1990 and quietly became legendary for its snowpack and easy-access backcountry, but never managed much of a profit. A few skiers came from Prince Rupert and ▶

Admiring the view in Hankin-Evelyn Backcountry Skiing Recreation Area, Smithers.





When required, trees
are hand-felled
in Hankin-Evelyn
Backcountry Skiing
Recreation Area.

Kitimat, both an hour or less away, but as the logging industry declined through the 2000s the population of Terrace followed, dropping seven per cent from 2001 to 2011. Tired of hemorrhaging money, the locally owned Shames Mountain Ski Corporation put the area up for sale. By 2008, after several seasons with no buyer, the mountain threatened to close. That's when Terrace's ski community took action.

Maltin and a core group of fellow Terrace powder junkies banded together to form a nonprofit society, Friends of Shames, to save the mountain. After two years of research, business plans and feasibility studies, they formed a nonprofit community cooperative, My Mountain Co-Op, in the winter of

you're back to the roped boundary on top. Wash, rinse, repeat. We skied like this for hours, staying on the safer, wooded pitches closer to Shames and scoring fresh tracks every time. At one point, the clouds parted enough to reveal a long, corniced ridge to the east known, unsurprisingly, as Cornice Ridge. McDonald told Maltin about a guy who hucked a 12-metre cliff there last year and broke his tooth when his knee slammed him on the landing. Now they were trying to change the name to Broken Tooth Ridge.

"You huck a 40-footer and break your tooth and hell yeah that's the name of the ridge!" Maltin boomed, and then proceeded to inform all the locals we encountered for the rest of the day of the ridge's new name.

At one point we encountered a bearded Quebecker on an extended tour of the country's skiing. His problem was he'd gotten to Shames two weeks ago and hadn't managed to leave yet. Maltin quickly invited him to ski with us.

"We like it when people come from out of town," he said exuberantly, marking a clear departure from crowd-worn locals in many areas who fiercely protect their stashes like buried treasure. "We love showing them, 'Look what we get to ski!' Things could never get tracked-out here. There's plenty of terrain for everybody."

"By all rights this place shouldn't exist," Christian Theberge, manager of Shames, told me at day's end over beers in the lodge, along with a half-dozen people and just as many dogs. "Everyone told me this place couldn't survive. If the business guys can't do it, how could you? But we're not business-driven, we're skier-driven. We want this to work and the community is committed to it."

One example of how the new co-op paradigm is making things work: the recent installation of a new lift cable and generator shed (all electricity is generated on site) that should have cost \$600,000 was completed for \$290,000, thanks to the efforts of volunteers, many of them on the Shames board of directors.

As everyone started helping to clear the tables, Theberge said, "We're not about overpriced condos here — this is a ski hill that's still about skiing."

I skied the next day with Polly Rudderham and Dan Nieckarz, two other "owners" of Shames. This time the skies were clear and we climbed to the top of the Dome, where the views threatened to sprain my neck muscles. In every direction were huge, daunting mountains with countless 500- to 1,000-vertical-metre ski lines. Rudderham and Nieckarz pointed out run-after-run in the Valley of Certain Doom, Monkey Bowl and others they'd skied. Considering the amount of snow, the vastness of the terrain, the ease of access and the total lack of crowds, the backcountry skiing here isn't just world class — it's in a class all its own.

Our day was spent exploring a labyrinth of north and east faces on North Bowl, No Dogs and Cats. After floating down thigh-deep, featherweight powder on a 40-plus-degree face, we came to a huge hand-built kicker and a grinning snowboarder who had spent the winter in a wall tent just over the next ridge. Nearby, we met a pair of skiers lounging outside their overnight snow cave. It felt like we'd been transported back to the free-spirited 1970s when the sport was about nothing more than the simple joy of skiing.

That night I drove the magnificent Highway 16 east for three hours through the Coast Range, sunset painting the pearly peaks of Seven Sisters Provincial Park, to Smithers, population 5,400, where an equally bold skiing experiment is taking place.

Brian Hall wore ski boots while he drove his truck out of Smithers for the 30-minute ride to the Hankin-Evelyn Backcountry Skiing Recreation Area.

"I put 'em on in the fall and take 'em off in the spring," he said with a mischievous smile. After navigating a narrow, four-wheel-drive road through a corridor of trees, we clicked into our skis in the empty Hankin parking area. Signs warned of avalanches and declared the area closed to motorized access. A few seconds later we skied through the wooden doorway of a beacon signal detector. Picking up our frequencies, it flashed green. Then came the ski runs. Runs 1, 2, and 3 first. A few minutes later came 4, 5, and 6. They might sound like a preschool counting lesson, but more importantly they're narrow, twisting marvels through the trees.

What is missing, at least compared with every other ski area in the modern world, are chairlifts. Hankin, and its nearby sister area, Evelyn, form the Hankin-Evelyn Backcountry Skiing Recreation Area, which, in addition to desperately needing a catchier name, is the ▶



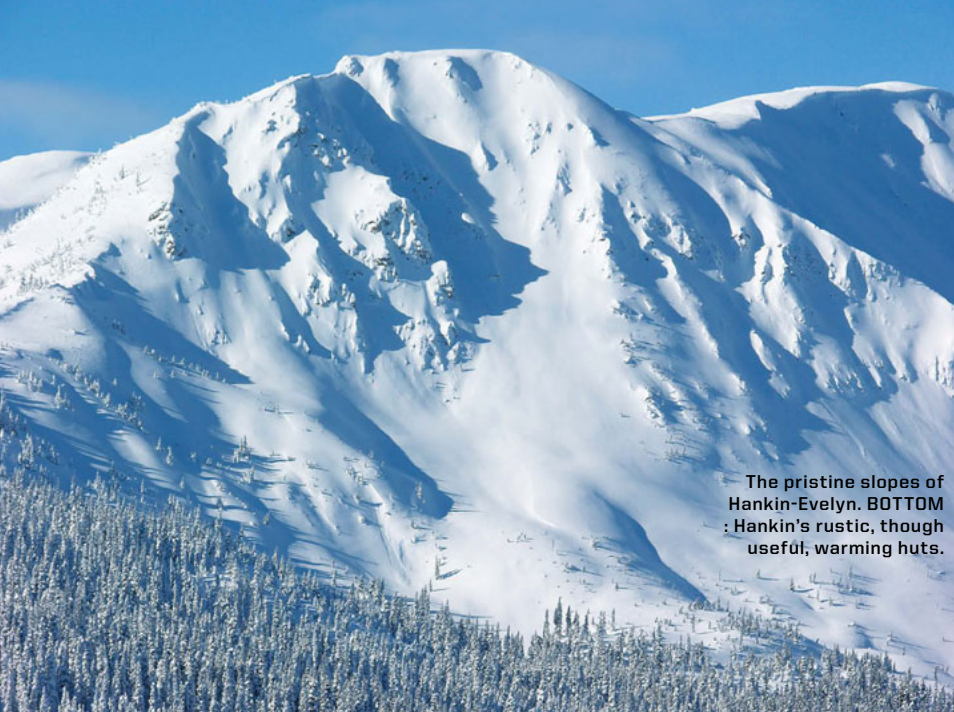
Skiing at Shames in a "trace" of snow.

2010, with the goal of purchasing Shames. Individuals could buy "shares" of the co-op for \$299. Momentum built quickly and soon local businesses started chipping in. Thanks to the spectacular backcountry access provided by the area and its entry road, the local Mount Remo Backcountry Society donated \$29,000. By the start of the 2011/12 season, MMC had miraculously raised enough money to make a down payment and sign a purchase agreement for the mountain. In January of 2013, Shames Mountain officially became the first nonprofit, cooperatively owned ski area in Canada.

The day of skiing with Maltin and McDonald developed an exquisitely simple routine. Drop off the area's backside down glorious, north-facing powder. Climb for 15 minutes to a cat track on the edge of the ski area that leads to the T-bar. A 600-metre ride later



The Hankin-Evelyn
Backcountry Skiing
Recreation Area is all
about inclusiveness
and community.



The pristine slopes of Hankin-Evelyn. **BOTTOM**: Hankin's rustic, though useful, warming huts.

the biggest reason they'd moved to Smithers. His doctor recently had another doctor apply to work at his clinic because of it. Electronic counters at the exit runoff tell a similarly optimistic story: 2,000 skiers in 2011/12, 4,000 the following season.

"Forestry goes up and down, but this can be another important piece," Hall explained. "It's been about resource extraction around here, but if we can get skiers up here and diversify it will be good for everybody."

We left the cabin, which had been built the year before with volunteer labour and supplies, passed another beacon checkpoint and entered into a world of ridgelines, cornices and open bowls. A 350-metre boot-pack delivered us to the ridgeline of Hankin Mountain, where the world opened into a sea of sharp peaks and wide blue valleys rising to white-crowned mountain range after mountain range. Land managers wouldn't let Hall mark runs up here to protect mountain goat habitat, but he pointed out an enticing medley of lines on the plummeting pitches surrounding us. I didn't see any goats, but there was no question we were dancing in their ballroom.

We cut a cornice in brilliant sunshine and watched it tumble down the slope below. Soon we were pointing our skis down a wide-open, 35-degree face of creamy, knee-deep powder. As the euphoria of arcing weightless turns down a glittering mountainside coursed through me, and we glided back to the truck along open corridors (no monkeying through the trees like on most backcountry days), the brilliance of Hall's plan became clear.

"Our hope is that this idea will spread and other areas like it will open," Hall told me at the bottom. "And then we can travel around, meet other like-minded souls and see what their areas are like."

It's a simple vision and like Hankin-Evelyn itself, that's a big part of its appeal. In an era when the ski industry has become obsessed with expansion, profit and high-speed everything, when the inflating cost of the sport takes it out of reach for average people, what's happening in Smithers and Terrace feels like a much-needed correction. Spurred by economic hardship and fuelled by passion for skiing, these people-powered ski areas offer an alternative way forward.

Up here, profits are measured in the glittering gems of fresh snow in afternoon sun. Riches come from the simple, soul-nourishing act of gliding across snow. Few may know about it yet, but it just may be that the future of skiing is in Northern BC. ■

BRIAN HALL (3X)



world's first entirely non-motorized ski area. The low-impact ethos even extends to the run clearing, where the trees were felled by hand.

"I'd had the idea for a backcountry area like this for 20 or 30 years," Hall, a 62-year-old avid skier and former avalanche expert for Lake Louise Resort, said as we skinned. "You see all of these great mountains for skiing, but getting to them can be a challenge here in British Columbia."

Like Shames, it took an economic downturn to birth the breakthrough. After the crash of 2008, Hall heard about government funding for displaced forestry workers through the Job Opportunity Program. He knew it was his shot. First, he found a little-used area capped with a quality alpine zone where the skiing would be good and the potential conflicts few. Next, he secured approval for his vision from Kevin Eskelin, BC's Smithers District Recreation Officer, the Wet'suwet'en First Nations and Pacific Inland Resources, which held tenure on the land. The local Bulkley Backcountry Ski Society also threw their support behind the project. In the spring of 2009, Hall sent in his application. Within a year the runs were cut and Hankin was born.

Non-motorized zones for backcountry skiing are nothing new. Improving terrain and access to the alpine by cutting runs definitely



is. Creating infrastructure — beacon gates, warming huts, trail maps, avalanche education, beginner runs — makes it something new entirely: the first truly backcountry ski area. The fact that it's entirely free (Hall's flyers around town declare: Free Powder!) makes it revolutionary.

After a relaxed, 500-metre climb, we emerged at treeline where a new cabin and composting out-house sat at the skirts of a tangle of higher peaks. There was a local couple there. The young woman had grown up in Smithers and recently returned after college. She'd learned how to backcountry ski at Hankin and, after a friendly chat, Hall, ever campaigning for his baby, suggested she could donate a percentage of the profits from her physical therapy business to it.

Hankin wouldn't exist without the support of the greater community. From the local credit union donating money to plow the access road, to countless people donating their labour and dollars, this is a community project. And like in Terrace, where the population has started to rebound in the last two years, it's beginning to pay dividends. Hall told me he'd recently met a young family and a hydrologist who said Hankin was