

trail blazers

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Photography by Darren Brown

They helped found one of the region's biggest attractions, but there are no signs in Gatineau Park to commemorate the Trail Riders, Ottawa's cross-country pioneer

Doug Shone slips on his old Trail Riders sweater — the navy blue one with the patches down each sleeve marking off the 1950s, from before the time they had the bright orange 1960s jacket and long before the tomato red version from the '70s and '80s with the fancy crest and big First Aid cross on the back — and all those accumulated years just melt away. He yanks the dark hood up over his soft white hair. A mischievous grin lights up his face. He's 16 again.

Doug, who will turn 71 at the end of November, is a retired technology designer and teacher. A devoted husband and father of two, Doug is now working on writing a children's book. He still gets outside for a bit of fresh air, though. Lots of air, actually. Usually quite fresh.

A keen hiker, Doug is also a passionate cross-country skier. He often calls on some of his old cohorts to help him clear trails found around his home in Manotick. Doug is past president of the Trail Riders, a group he joined in 1951 and more or less stayed with until the melancholy — and, for some, acrimonious — end in 1993.

With roots extending back to the 1920s, the Trail Riders were largely responsible for the network of cross-country and downhill ski trails that have now become a linchpin of tourism and recreation at Gatineau Park. Every year, over 200,000 cross-country skiers glide along the well-groomed trails in the park, now operated and managed by the National Capital Commission (NCC).



Members of the Trail Riders from the earlier days.

"Essentially, without the Trail Riders that trail network wouldn't exist," says John Quarterman, a former Trail Rider who mapped trails, painted signs and trained patrollers in first aid. "It has nothing to do with the NCC."

Doug was a major guiding force behind the group. His life is part of the hidden legacy of Gatineau Park and its trails, many of which have now been left to disappear under new growth.

The Trail Riders were a volunteer group of skiers who had been maintaining and patrolling the cross-country trails in Gatineau Park since 1951, but they were certainly not the first. A hundred years ago, Gatineau Park was not a park at all, only a patch of wilderness in the Gatineau River Valley. In the early 1900's the federal government had been discussing turning the area around Meech Lake into a national park; meanwhile the Ottawa Ski Club (OSC) was making it happen.

By the time the club purchased Camp Fortune in 1920, they had already cut 31km of trails in the area for public use. Recognizing the need for an organized maintenance team, OSC member Joe Morin formed the Night Riders in 1924. They were a dedicated group of young men who volunteered their spare time and hard work, maintaining the trails and developing them to keep up with increasing demand.

At first, the Night Riders were essentially bushwhackers, armed with machetes, saws, axes, and even dynamite. At night, they would line up across the slopes and carefully groom every inch of snow for patrons to enjoy the next morning. In their efforts to increase capacity while minimizing accidents, the Night Riders gradually evolved

Trail Riders membership ranged between 30 and 60 active members patrolling trails twice a day, but Doug Shone says the network of past and present members was much more vast than that. "If the Trail Riders had still been active during the Ice Storm [in 1998] I could have had 150 people up here. We would have had these trails cleared in one day."

into builders, engineers and first-aid rescuers. By the 1950's, cross-country and downhill skiing were becoming more distinct from one another, and the trail system had expanded dramatically. The Night Riders concentrated on the downhill slopes and the Trail Riders were established to care for the cross-country trails.

A map of Gatineau Park today doesn't contain information about the history of the trails. There are no quirky trail names, just a system, colour-coded and neatly numbered from Trail #1A to Trail #40.

Those names once had historic significance. They reminded skiers of the pioneers who blazed those trails. Skiers would gather around a fire in the lodge and discuss the wildlife they spotted on 'Doug's Trail', what kind of condition 'Franks' was in, or who they ran into on 'Chicken Run' or 'Pipe Dream'. As the names of these trails were repeated around the fire for generations, so were their stories.

"Who writes a story with numbers, speaks with numbers?" Doug wonders. "At one time, we were able to really talk about the park. Now you can't... not like we used to."

The Rider's Roost

Shone joined the Trail Riders at 15, when they were first formed. He stayed until the age of 19 when he left to pursue his career and raise his family. He was drawn back, however, when his then-teenaged son, Steven, joined the group himself in the early '70s. Around the same time, Camp Fortune wanted to develop a patrol that could perform search and rescue and first aid operations. Under his guidance, the Trail Riders evolved into an adult group of emergencypatrolled patrollers.

"We weren't just a first-aid group," he maintains, "we were the whole park."
In addition to first-aid services, the patrollers would be around to direct lost skiers and hand out trail maps that the Riders produced. They built their own cabin, the Rider's Roost, to serve as a meeting place, or to store equipment or just hang out for social gatherings.

The Trail Riders continued maintaining the complex web of trails by clipping branches, repairing bridges, removing fallen trees, and fixing hazards like holes. The group also marshalled for cross-country races in the area, hosting organizations like schools and sports groups, as well as prestigious events like the Canada Cup. When clubs, tour groups, schools and even foreign dignitaries were looking for a tour of the area, the Trail Riders were the ones to call.

By the early 1990s the Trail Riders were at their peak, even discussing plans for an umbrella group of trail patrols that would operate year-round from the 'Roost'. At the same time, however, the OSC – owners of Camp Fortune – were going bankrupt. In 1993, the NCC purchased the area and acquired ownership of the trails and cabins built by the Ottawa Ski Club, the Night Riders and the Trail Riders.

"They discovered that we were the people that actually went out on their trails. We cut branches off trails without permission, and we removed trees that had fallen across trails without permission, and we built bridges without permission, we kept trails open that they didn't want open, and we were in a lodge that was now theirs," says Shone.



Members of the Trail Riders in the 1980s.

The NCC insists it tried to work with the Riders. "We took over the land and all of a sudden we had those patrollers from the 'Roost,'" recalls Michel Dallaire, Gatineau Park's Manager of Recreational Services. "At the same moment, we had our own ski patrol, all pro patrollers and volunteers, so we asked them to integrate, to create basically a new ski patrol. "It didn't work out."

'A gap in winter'

Many former Riders describe the collapsed negotiations and subsequent dissolution of the group as a very negative experience.

"It was quite hostile," says Peter Sloan, a former Rider who now confines most of his skiing to NCC trails in the Greenbelt. "We felt undervalued and not appreciated." Peter is one of many Riders who felt as though a lifetime of effort and history had been casually, callously discarded. "I have refused to pay to ski the trails ever since in recognition of the trail

maintenance work I had done, unpaid."

Others take a more philosophical viewpoint. "It was the bureaucratic culture meeting the can-do volunteer culture," recalls John, who along with Doug was involved in the final, doomed negotiations with the NCC in 1993.

The first hurdle was insurance. The NCC didn't want to deal with a loose assemblage of 50 to 100 volunteers. They wanted a formal group. When the Riders became a legal entity, they needed to incorporate and acquire insurance coverage since the "Good Samaritan" provisions covering individual volunteers no longer applied.

"It took a lot of time and energy to find a lawyer," says John, "but we eventually found one. An old Trail Rider who did it all for us for \$500 or whatever."

After that, the NCC wanted each member of the trail patrol to be bilingual if they were to be dealing with the public, as well as meet the training standards that they felt were necessary. They also objected to the Riders' use of the Rider's Roost, which was built by Ottawa Ski Club members, but had been acquired by the NCC with the purchase of the land.

"We tried to go along with all their ideas," says John. "We did what they wanted, but basically it was a waste of time."

"...the loss of some of those old trails left a bit of a gap in my winter." - Earl MacEachern, 71, associate member and trail developer with the Trail Riders.

By the end of the 1993 ski season, the two organizations had not reached an agreement. The NCC offered individual Riders membership in the NCC's new patrol organization. After enduring years of tense negotiations, most declined the invitation.

In the years following their exodus from Gatineau Park, the Trail Riders stayed active in the region, maintaining trails at Dacridge Farm and Lowney Lake Lodge in Ontario, as well as the Carman Hostile

in Quebec. They even marked out the course and marshalled the cross-country race at Winterlude from 1996-1998. They remain close, as a social organization of about 26 people.

Today the trails are maintained and patrolled by a private company under contract with the NCC, with help from volunteers on the weekends. Presumably to pay for these private services, skiers now pay admission for the trails and a trail map will cost them \$4.95.

Trails remain numbered, not named, in the interests of bilingualism. "With regards to bilingualism it's almost impossible to offer names, other than (proper names), so we're kind of stuck with that," explains Dallaire, "People don't believe us, but that's the reality."

For their part, the NCC has been making an effort in recent years to restore some of the heritage behind the trails, researching the area's past and installing plaques in places that they feel have significant historical value.

Many former Riders still resent the sudden severance with the park's history, and the loss of so many trails that the NCC can't afford to keep but that the Riders were quite willing to maintain at no cost. "On our own nickel," says John ruefully.

Earl MacEachern, 71, was an associate member of the Trail Riders and helped develop trails

with the group for over 30 years. He said what bothers him most is the loss of so many trails, every year slowly vanishing a little more beneath the undergrowth.

"The NCC abandoned some of the old trails and it certainly — speaking personally, the loss of some of those old trails left a bit of a gap in my winter," says Earl, who still skis in Gatineau Park.

"I've accepted the loss of the ones that are no longer there. It's just the way it is . . . Although occasionally I've made a point of putting some tracks on them."

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