

## 1973-2023 Wostawea Time Capsule Story

### “Wostawea, 1973-2023”

#### Story shared by Don Wright, Wostawea President

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First, it needed a name. And so, when a small but dedicated group of ski enthusiasts gathered in the UNB gym to form a cross-country ski club, they tossed around different ideas. The Fredericton Ski Club might have worked, but it was used by the local alpine skiers. Someone suggested – it’s not clear who – that they consult a recently reprinted English-Mi’kmaq dictionary.

Published in 1888, the *Dictionary of the Language of the Micmac Indians* contains 60-plus words related to snow, including wostawea (snowy) and wostawe (covered in snow). According to the club’s first newsletter, published in 1973, it was an “appropriate” name for a cross-country ski club in Fredericton where, in the early 1970s, snow was more predictable and reliable.

Fifty years later, Wostawea respectfully and gratefully acknowledges that its activities take place on the unsundered and unceded traditional land of the Wolastoqiyik/Wəlastəkəkewiyik.

From its inauspicious start in a university gymnasium, Wostawea today has 1,100 members, making it the largest ski club east of Quebec and one of the largest ski clubs anywhere in Canada. In some ways, it would be unrecognizable to its original members. The scale and scope of the club’s many activities are impressive and inspiring, if sometimes head-spinning. But in other ways, Wostawea would be wonderfully familiar because it has remained true to its original “aims and objectives”: “to promote the development of XC skiing as a recreational and competitive sport, on a local and provincial level, and to enjoy and participate in an increasingly popular sport.”

The first newsletter reveals an already busy club that promised something for everyone, from the very young to the very old, and from the novice to the expert: “Barring tropical temperatures, the season should enable everyone to explore the trails around the area.” Among other things, Wostawea offered dryland training at CFB Gagetown, a waxing demonstration, an instructor’s clinic, and bi-weekly lessons for skiers of all ages. It also planned an ambitious series of ski tours on local trails at Odell Park, Silverwood, Mactaquac, Crabbe Mountain, and the UNB Woodlot. A gold, silver, or bronze badge would be awarded to each “tourer” who skied a specific distance over the course of a ski season that stretched into mid-April. And finally, Wostawea encouraged its members to participate in the New Brunswick Cup, a series of three races designed to “upgrade” the calibre and “accelerate” the development of racing in New Brunswick.

A year later, in December 1974, *The Daily Gleaner* reported that Wostawea was “growing by leaps and bounds.”

Indeed, the little club that could was growing year over year, adding new members, and launching new initiatives, including a ski marathon, aka The Wostaweathon. Between 1975 and 1986, the club hosted 10 long-distance events. Although they varied in distance and duration, the goal was always the same: to have fun, to push oneself, and to ski 75-110 kilometers point to point. On a frightfully cold weekend in 1979, for example, Jane Hadley was the fastest woman, skiing from Woodstock to Fredericton over two days in 12 hours and 37 minutes. The fastest man was Harald Piene who clocked a time of 8 hours and 44 minutes.

Wostawea no longer organizes a ski marathon, but it continues to host an annual loppet for skiers of all ages and abilities. In 2022, it staged a 42-kilometer loppet. And in 2023, it will mark its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a 50-kilometer loppet.

Lessons were and are a key part of Wostawea. In 1982-83, it adopted the Jackrabbit Program, a national program that began in Manitoba a few years earlier. According to the Fall 1982 newsletter, the Jackrabbit program will teach children “the fundamentals and proper techniques of cross-country skiing in a relaxed and fun atmosphere.” Forty years later, Wostawea still partners with the City of Fredericton to make possible the Jackrabbit program. Countless children have started as Bunnies and graduated as Track Attackers, first at Odell Park, and since 2013 at Killarney Lake Park.

Recognizing a need to offer organized skiing for kids who had finished Jackrabbits but who still wanted to ski, Wostawea started the Racing Team in 2012-13. The Ski Team, as it is now called, is celebrating 10 years of success: its members have skied in NB Cup races, the NorAm Youth Championships, the Easterns, the Nationals, and the Canada Winter Games. Because of the Ski Team’s proven track record and its commitment to athlete development, Wostawea received a large grant from Nordiq Canada in 2022 to hire a coach! For adults who want to compete, the Club initiated the Masters Group in 2021.

With reserves of energy and a commitment to the club’s original aims and objectives, Wostawea responded to the sudden arrival of Syrian refugees to the Fredericton area when it joined forces with the Multicultural Association of Fredericton (MCAF) to teach skiing to new Canadians. Six years later, the MCAF program has seen over 200 new Canadians from across the globe gather the possibilities of winter while learning the fundamentals of skiing.

What Wostawea is doing with new Canadians is an extension of what it has always done to welcome both old and new Frederictonians into the community. When Eszter Schwenke and her family moved to Fredericton in 1977, a Wostawean invited them to join the club. For Eszter, who had skied with Jackrabbit Johannsen in Quebec, it was a natural fit and confirmed her decision to come to Fredericton in the first place. A few years later, in 1981, Eszter and her husband Julf Schwenke were Club Champions in their respective race categories.

What has made Wostawea such a successful club? There is no one answer. But in broad strokes, it's the people. In fact, some of the club's early members are still involved. With a shared vision of community, over 100 volunteers come together year over year to bring skiing to Fredericton. Every spring, the club presents the Nancy Hamilton Award – named after Nancy Hamilton, an avid skier and dedicated Wostawean – to a volunteer who has gone above and beyond. And every spring, the Executive says the same thing: if only we could present this award to 20 people!

Predicting the future is a mug's game. But here goes. In a word, it's bright. I mean, there's no shortage of ideas or energy. Indeed, we are talking to the city about an expansion to the Killarney Lake Rotary Centennial Lodge that would give us dedicated and much needed space, or rooms of our own. But there are challenges too, not least climate change. New Brunswick's mean annual temperature has increased 1.1°C in the past 30 years. In the winter months, there will be more rain days and fewer snowfall days, as well as more freeze-thaw events.

But for now, let's enjoy Fredericton's trails, and on cold days, let's sing Wostawea's unofficial anthem: "We are Wostaweans and even if it's freezin' we're gonna keep on skiin' because we are Wostaweans!"