

## THE DRIVING FORCE-MOTORIZED REC SCOOP

# Bruce Wick: reflecting on 44 years as a groomer

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Last week I left off with Bruce and Sarah Wick plotting to make their way back to Hayward. The seeds for this idea sprouted when Sarah's parents talked of their plans to expand their supper club, Thor's Kitchen, by adding a hotel. Soon after, Bruce and Sarah quit their jobs in Kenosha and moved north to help Sarah's parents with Thor's. Sarah managed the servers while Bruce kept busy at the bar serving nightclub cocktails and entertaining folks.

Bruce thought they moved back to Hayward around 1980- since that is when he started grooming snowmobile trails regularly. During the 70's, he used to help the Greiners mark the lake trails, and thinks Dick Greiner was probably the first to ever stake Lac Courte Oreilles Lake. Back in the day, they used ice augers to place the 2"x2" markers in the ice- each painted with whatever bright color any of them had in their garages.

He credits his father-in-law for suggesting they run a chainsaw through the ice then slip a thin, painted wood slat into the cut. This shortcut saved time for Bruce and his friend, Jeff Schramm (he owns the land that the Paul Wick Memorial Trail is on) when they staked the lake trails. Jeff would drive a long-track sled, with Bruce perched on the back ready for action- a quick hit with the chainsaw, slap a stake in and voila, marked and ready to on to the next spot!

So, this was their life, working at Thor's, snowmobiling and grooming during the winter, until Angler's Haven came up for sale and caught the attention of Bruce and Sarah. Bruce's brother, Paul, joined forces with Bruce and Sarah to purchase Angler's. The young trio was nervous about undertaking this project — Paul was only 21 years old, Sarah 25, and Bruce 28- when they signed the land contract for the neglected property in 1983. Their years at Thor's acclimated



ICTURE FROM BRUCE WICK

Bruce Wick (left), Jake Leinenkugel, Jake's son, Kirk. The dogs: black one is Wick's dog, Shandy, and the tan one is Kirk's dog Sota.

Bruce and Sarah to the bar-restaurant life right away. Paul hit his stride cooking and people still reminisce about their legendary burgers. Sarah ran the business while Bruce and Paul remodeled the old cabins when they could, some which sat on tree stump foundations. Together, they restored and grew Angler's Haven into a well-known destination on Lac Courte Oreilles- they even earned the title of the very first Honorary Leinie's Lodge- a distinction given out by the Jacob Leinenkugel Brewing Company!

I honestly don't know how they were able to accomplish so much during this period, it must have been their youth. Bruce talked of closing Thor's then bringing boatloads of patrons over to Angler's Haven to finish out the night. This is also when Rick Greiner was racing snowmobiles, and Bruce was busy as his race team's mechanic- Rick won the 1984 World Championship race at Eagle River, Wisconsin, but suffered a crash later that year which prompted him to retire from racing.

1983 found Bruce as the new Sno- Trails Snowmobile Club president — a position he held through 1998. He has also been a trail captain ever since and has an acute recollection of their groomers; Sno- Trails first groomed with Sno-Mads '78 Tucker Snowcat, then

he fondly spoke of the "Bomby" (Bombardier) which had steering brakes, and the SB200 his club purchased later. Clubs also still groomed some trails with bed-springs pulled by snowmobiles.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Sawyer County Snowmobile & ATV Alliance so I asked Bruce how it came together back then. He told me that a group gathered around Herb Schmidt's kitchen table to lay out the Alliance groundwork; Jim Toftness was selected as president, Herb Schmidt was VP, Bruce Wick as secretary, Ernie Preston as treasurer. Herb Schmidt's daughter and owner of Lynn's Custom Meats, Lynn Melton, continues her father's legacy by graciously supporting our sports and club events.

The state-filed incorporation papers show that on July 26, 1984, the Sawyer County Snowmobile Alliance, Inc. was formed with three Board of Directors members: Dr. James Toftness, Mr. Bruce Wick, and Mr. Ernest Preston.

Sno- Trails and Sno-Mads where the first clubs that formed the new snowmobile Alliance, quickly followed by Musky Sno, Birchwood, Winter Huskies, and then other clubs.

The Alliance didn't have money or credit to begin with, so Herb Schmidt financed an '85 Tucker and deemed it the first

Alliance-owned groomer. Bruce described the beating that groomer took:

"We cycled that '85 Tucker through the county just by phone calls. There weren't cell phones. It would go down to the Birchwood system, then back to Hayward to Musky Sno, then Sno-Mads, then down to Winter, then circle back around again. A lot of times, it didn't get shut off for days! It just kept going, you know, through the night- like the groomer would be at your house at 1 am, then at someone else's at 7 am. so he could groom over to the next club. Trails were groomed in one pass, just one-way too- you just drove it down the middle, now everything we do is double".

The Alliance eventually built-up credit and collateral so they could invest in additional grooming equipment. Next, they bought an '87 Tucker, then three LMCs in 1990, and the equipment inventory kept growing from there.

Glancing over Bruce's garage walls decorated with awards, I asked about an engraved plaque from the Alliance, thanking Sarah for her work on the map. Bruce explained that Sarah was a go-getter and didn't believe one should have to repeatedly go back to businesses asking for their map ad payments- she streamlined the process, if they wanted to be on the map, they had to pay and pay now.

The Wick's eventually decided it was time to step back from the bar/resort business and worked out an agreement with Jordan and Kelsey Gensmer to purchase Angler's Haven. Unfortunately, Paul Wick passed away in August of 2013, before the sale closed in 2014.

Bruce and Sarah have since found a quiet retirement place on the lake, in between Thor's and Angler's Haven, where almost all the memories of their lives together were made. Bruce will close out 2024 as his 44th consecutive year grooming snowmobile trails in Sawyer County- is that dedication or what?