

Interview with Dave Holli
December 18, 2001
Interviewer: Dr. Russell Magnaghi
Ishpeming, MI

RM: Okay Dave. I'd like to start with the first question, what is your birthdate?

DH: 3-7-38

RM: Could you give us some background on where you were born? And where you grew up and some early involvement with ski jumping?

DH: I was born here in Ishpeming and I grew up in Ishpeming. I went to school at Northern and I studied music education for several years. Then I transferred into conservation and biology. From there I transferred to Michigan Tech. I got a degree in forestry and went on to work in professional forestry after that. I eventually ended up back here in Ishpeming. I essentially spent most of my working life in the central upper Michigan area, although I worked at several different places out of Ishpeming. I was in Ishpeming until I graduated from school and I left for a short period of time and I've been here ever since.

RM: How did you get interested in the ski sport?

DH: It goes back when I was a youngster in the Cleveland location. Everybody ski jumped. That's what we did. It was prior to television. Every location had it's ski jumps. Up in Cleveland location we had more than our share of ski jumps. Cleveland was divided into two area, Upper Cleveland and Lower Cleveland. It was a very competitive spirit between them. They had their ski jumps and we had our ski jumps.

RM: What was the divide?

DH: The dividing line was Jasper Bluff. The bluff as you go on Business 28 by the Masonic Hall. South of Jasper Bluff was Upper Cleveland and north of it was Lower Cleveland. Between the two areas, we were all friends. We were out there...we

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maintained 8-10 different ski jumps in the winter, the different hills. All of us ski jumped as kids. When we had the winter the big recreation activity was the ski jumpers, Ralph Bietela, Coy Hill, Rudy Makki, Joe Perrault, and Wilbur Rasmuson. These guys were out here. When we went out to the hill we were out to jump like they jumped. I guess it was a time kids can't relate to now days. Now it's rock stars or baseball players or football players, or basketball players. In our day it was ski jumpers. Consequently everybody ski jumped.

RM: But you didn't pursue it.

DH: No, I didn't pursue it. I ski jumped until I was maybe a sophomore in high school. I skied with the junior ski club. Maybe a freshman. Then I became quite involved in other activities. I also played in a couple bands. I was quite involved with music. I pretty much took that route but I continued to maintain my interest in skiing. As a worker of the Ishpeming Ski Club because I knew all the fellows skiing. I was always willing to work on the projects. Be one of the famous snow shovelers when they needed some grunt snow shoveling done, I was always happy to participate.

RM: Can you tell us a little about your involvement in reconstructing the Suicide Bowl?

DH: In about 1969-70 Suicide had got in a very deteriorated condition due to the age of the infrastructure, due to the scaffold rotting in some places, and also the further deterioration of the scaffold...at one time some kids lit a fire and part of it burned. The scaffold was in a very precarious condition. Us fellows that were involved with the ski jump, we were propping it up every year. It was getting more and more difficult to put the hill in ski-able condition. In 1969 it looked like maybe the Suicide Ski jumps were on

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their last legs. They had a community meeting at the Phelps School. They brought in a professional fund raiser. They talked about how they might mobilize the community and raise money and go ahead to do the job. The number that sticks in my mind is they had a rather large retainer fee up front to get involved with the activity, way beyond the means of the community seemed to be. Everybody was pretty discouraged and they dropped the idea of a professional fund raiser and it was just languishing along. At the 1970 ski tournament when it looked like the future of ski jumping was in jeopardy, I talked to several of my friends and said I think this is a project we can do locally. We have enough people that could participate and contribute some cash. We have a lot of engineering expertise, we know all the engineering and design people at Cliffs. So I founded the Hundred Club. A hundred dollars doesn't seem like a lot of money today, but it was in 1970. I went around to my friends at the ski meeting in 1970 and I got 15 of them to say they would throw \$100 into the kitty to start the rebuilding of Suicide Hill. I went to the Ishpeming Ski Club meeting and the ski club, they weren't very moved by me coming in with \$1500. In fact maybe they were even kind of disturbed. It was only \$1500 But I had only tried that week. The ski club meetings were weekly so I went out and pounded the meet and I had \$4000 committed. Then that really got their interest to push the Hundred Club. So from there we continued to move forward. Quite a few people jumped on board to raise money for the Hundred Club. As the thing went on into the summer it started to look positive like a job we could do. During that time I went up and talked to Earl Lindert, he was the Senior Design Engineer for Cliffs. I told him what we were doing and could he find time with all his duties at Cliffs, because the mines were

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really expanding, could he find time to design the steel structure for us. He said yes he would do it as long as we understood that he could only work on it periodically. During that summer of 1970 and into the fall of 1970 we were raising money. We had a basic design done, a profile done of the hill. It was approved by Stan DaRose. He was the ski association engineer for the central division. We continued to raise money and Earl Lindhert continued to do drawings into the winter of '71. Then in '71 we had the last ski tournament on the hill that was in tough shape. We continued to raise more money in the winter of '71 and we continued with the design. When we tore the scaffold down, there wasn't any turning back. We were still hedging and going along cautiously. We finally got far enough along where we said this is it. Earl had completed the design of the scaffold. We felt we had enough core cash to move ahead. So I went out to 5 different steel fabricating companies and got quotes on it. We awarded the structural steel contract to Stein Fabricating in Rise Lake, WI. The winter of '71, that was the last meet on the old hill. Then it was spring. That summer we tore down the old structure and put up the footings. We put up the steel in the fall of '71. We completed it a week before the ski tournament in '72. Fortunately for us we had...Coy Hill mobilized some workers. There was a lot of building activity. They really...they were the brains and motivators behind how to put up that structure. We put up that scaffold without a crane. We put up 2x6s and making a gym pole. We would just move up periodically and cable it in place. We had a hand winch and would hoist that steel up. Through that means and a very strong support in the community we were able to do that. I don't recall the exact cost, but it was hundreds of thousands of dollars. About a half million dollars if I remember right. We

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did the whole job with less than \$80,000 cash. Prior to that I was always involved with the ski club and I was always involved with the snow shoveling and ski activities. It was the scaffold project where the ski club really needed some help and I felt I could really participate and help push that project. It was a very successful project. The community support was excellent. I believed we proved to the skeptics what you can do with motivation and energy that the community produced at that time to get the project done. One thing we did is, in order to...we did it on a low cost budget. The ??? of a scaffold is a nice smooth curve. We had all the steel beams and fabrication, they were straight beams. It would be a straight shot every 16 feet. Then we took the designer, the joices are like that of the floor of a house. We angle cut them triangular to create a smoother transition without the high cost of bending steel. That was Earl Langsfelt, he's the guy who designed that for us. I don't know how much money it saved, but it was very significant. We used what we had and were as ingenious as we could be and solicited as we could be to people. That's how we got that job done on a very low cost budget.

RM: Were there other ski hill structures you were involved in?

DH: I had a little involvement with the intermediate jump. I was just one of the troops helping to donate money. But when we were on the suicide project, that was a real hands on project. We had lights put up so we could work at night. Then of course we'd go out on weekends. It was really a good project. With the adverse winter conditions and wind, it was remarkable how people participated. Go up there, put your snowmobile suite on and freeze. But if you were physically involved up there it wasn't that cold except for your fingers. When you sit back and look at it, it's amazing that it ran so smooth in that

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way. When you're physically involved, people just do what had to be done. We had good leadership from structural steel people. I think we had a group of people together who slipped into their niche without being nudged there. People who were more effective at fundraising, they really gave it their all. Those people who could solicit special equipment and get it donated for a week and have it back to the business by Monday morning accomplished that. We had the structural steel guys who really knew what to do. And I will say this in a very respectful manner, fortunately we had those 2 hillbillies Red and Bob, and I say it in a very complimentary manner, who knew how to put up structural steel scaffold without a crane. They told us they could do it when we were starting to get the steel design. We knew we could raise enough money to pay for the steel and concrete footings, but we didn't know if we could get enough money for a crane. Red and Bob said don't worry about it. You get the steel here and we'll put it up. Until we started putting it up, I still hadn't figured out how they were going to do it. When they started all it was is plain and simple country boy logic. It was one of the more interesting projects I had a chance to be involved with.

RM: That was your major, besides the...

DH: That would have been the major project we worked on. For the cross country ski trails, I pretty much supplied all the equipment there for about 25 years. I supplied the majority of the equipment because I believe it's a good activity. There we were a crossroads where we had to do something more unusual than the ordinary activity a club would carry on now. If the ski club needs a bulldozer we got them a bulldozer. If they need 100 gallons of fuel we get them 100 gallons of fuel. We were fortunate that the

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community allowed us to mobilize them. A guy very active with the cross country ski trails was Norm Beuhela, who was really the leader when it comes to cross country ski trails. He's the guy who really put his heart into it. He was a catalyst that kept the rest of us working. He constantly called me for a bulldozer because he knew we would always produce one. More than once I spent the opening day of deer season getting a bulldozer unstuck at the ski hill. It's been...I think the Ishpeming Ski Club, when you come from the era we come from, it's a relatively young era, the last vestiges of skiing had such an impact on so many people that we had that tradition within us. When the need to renovate come up, there was no hesitation. When you need to get a dozer to the ski hill because Norman had a problem, there's no hesitation. It's just something you did automatically, like run home to shovel the driveway. That was the heritage that was put on people in my generation from the generation that preceded us. Many of them are still around, guys like Coy Hill and Raspuson...if you were a part of that group, there were expectations. When the group needed help, that's what you did.

RM: So that's been the philosophy of the Ishpeming Ski Club.

DH: Correct. Now it's changing. Times are changing. From the generation that I come from, yes. It was something we did willingly and joyfully. It wasn't something...oh do I have to go out there? I think that's what made some of the projects enjoyable and pleasurable. Probably the biggest payoff of redoing the hill was a group of us local people with a very small budget, who just did a huge project. The payoff was the satisfaction of seeing Coy Hill take the first jump on the hill in 1972. There's a real sense of pride. It's personal. It's not something that's published. When you stand shoulder to

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shoulder with your fellow ski club members and you watch that first jump, that's a real euphoric feeling. I can remember it. Everybody was very nervous. We'd been working on this project for a year and a half and we were going to watch the first jump. The hill had never been tested. We were all probably more nervous than Coy was, who took the first ride. I can assure you he had a beautiful ride. If he had fallen our pride would have been hurt.

RM: What do you think is going to happen with the situation today where they have to dismantle all that and move it to a new site.

DH: It's a huge project. What we did for the town was a big project. This is a huge one right now. My feeling is right now that if the community wants to do it, it can be done. If the community has a lot of hesitations and second guessing, the project will be very difficult. But it is a huge project. I just have to go back to 1970 and I believe that if the designer is there and the commitment is there, it can happen. The challenge is right now that the dollar numbers are a very large number and we have very easily in the past been able to solve problems of logistics, people, equipment, moving dirt. We had the ability to do that. Now we have a whole different dimension with the size of the project and the capital investment, things that are beyond us. We can do a huge part of it locally. But this is a huge structure that makes some of these projects look rather modest. I believe if the community wants it, it can be done. I suspect the main challenge I can see is due to the nature of the new facility, it will be much smaller, which means the cash portion has to be bigger. In the past, we put the structure up. We did all these things. Now what would happen if we tried to do a project like that and somebody called OCEA. You

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know what those guys in Ishpeming are doing? They're putting up a 100 foot structure with a 16 foot gym pole. Something like that. I can imagine...for example at the bottom of Suicide Bowl in the parking lot, it had a periodic fill put in since 1925. The city put some in, the cross country put some in. Somebody complained to the DEQ and the city had to remove some of the fill they put in. Now we have all the regulatory apparatus. Things cannot be like they used to be because of the public regulatory apparatus that we have. Russ, I think that means that those of us that like to do these physical things, it's not as much fun anymore. Everything we do requires a permit. We didn't need those permits before.

RM: Is there anything else you want to add that I didn't ask, or you didn't mention?

DH: I think all of us that have been involved with the ski hill are proud of it's past and we protect it rather judiciously and maybe we sometimes protect it too much. Our extreme pride, people view it as prudentialism. It really isn't there's just such strong pride in Coy Hill and some of those guys. It truly isn't. They're just bursting with this pride of accomplishment. People maybe take it as a sign that they're prudential. That's not true.

RM: Great. Thank you.