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Illinois, Wisconsin and battle of Wilmot Mountain Lake County realizes it owns a tiny sliver of popular ski resort and wants it back

By DAN HINKEL

Tribune reporter

Generations of local sk ers have perched atop the slopes of Wilmot Mountain waiting their turn amon the crowd of novices, chil dren and old pros befor swooping down to the

Since 1938, Chicago-ares skiers have flocked to the modest resort, happy to fine quality runs just across the

At least they though was across the Wiscon

border.

That's been called in question by the resort next-door neighbor in Ill nois, the Lake County For est Preserve District. Fore preserve officials say a lan survey shows that the top, one of Wilmot Mountain steepest and most popul hills contains a tiny sliver property that juts into a Illinois forest preserve an rightly belongs to the tap ayers of Lake County.

Now Wilmot Mountair suing the district in Chica federal court, trying to ke the right to use the shaped swath of land, whi gives skiers a place to w before descending a hill ti is big by local standar even if it falls a few tho sand feet short of Vail.

Losing the land along it aptly named State Line s run, marked with a bls square to indicate interm diate difficulty, would drive the resort out of bus ness or even shut down it slope less inviting to skie and, thus, less profitable said Dennis Sheen, Wilm Mountain's general ma ager. At lesst 60 persent the resort's skiers con from Lake County, some time to the control from the laws of the properties of the properties of properties of the country of properties of the properties of properties of the properties of properties the properties properties

"I would think, if thing, we're helping



Vilmot Mountain, shown in 1938 — the year it opened — became one of the first successful ski resorts in the Midwest.

County: Sheen said.
Standing atop the hill in
question, a few yards from
an idle chairfit, Mile Tully,
the forest district's director
of operations and public
safety, said his agency has
no specific plans for the
land other than to protect it
along with the rest of Gander Mountain Forest Preserve, a sloping, 300-acre
expanse of tall grass, oak
trees and sums.

The district isn't singlin out a Wisconsin neighbor Tully said, but continuing policy of fighting encroach ment onto forest preserval land. Whether that involve errant birdhouses or neighbors expanding their yardonto district turf, the district always tries to guard itborders, he said.

"It's wrong for a private entity to be basically justaking over public property for their own use and, once it's pointed out to them refusing to move or vacate,' said Matt Norton, a lawyer for the district.

for the district.

The land dispute has i

roots in a defunct ski hill that once bordered Wilmot the Gander Mountain sk area. That spot was similar to Wilmot but had more trees and vegetation along the runs, said Chuck Rob erts of Rochelle, Ill., who has taught skiing at Wilmo

After Gander went out or business in the 1970s, the forest preserve bought the land. Around 1979, according to the lawsuit, the district and Wilmot Mountain's owners cooperated to demolish and move the rubble of the former ski area's lodge to a spot along the top

wilmot Mountain pass for a crew to move the concrete and wooden debris and cover it with diricreating a flat plane tha extends the hill, the lawsuistates. Along with givin skiers a place to pause, the plateau has allowed the wide and unwieldy snow grooming machine space to contested land is 20 feet a its widest and about 120 feet long, a minuscule part of the

the district agreed to let the resort use the land "even it minimally encroached of the district's property." The agreement was never put writing. Sheen said. Norto the district's law

rangement.

"This land was purchased by the taxpayers, no

Wilmot's lawsuit asks the court to award the ski hi either a declaration of i right to continue using the land, an easement giving access to the property of compensation for the loss Both sides said they hope it

The land battle pits a conservation agency against a family-owned institution

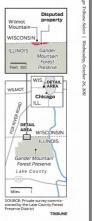
home for outdoor enthusiasts ever since Walter Stopa first leased the land from a farmer more than 70 years ago to open one of the first successful ski resorts in the

ings seem lost in time, and the instructors and skiing enthusiasts who return each winter have started to feel like a club, said Roberts, who has skied Wilmot since 1972 and authored the definitive — and only — writ-

Wilmot veterans such as stanton Kramer, of Skokie, noted that the hill's nearness to Chicago is key to its success, but they also said the resort's runs are perfect for both beginners and ex-

Novices can safely practice, Kramer said, while experienced skiers, hoping to avoid growing bored on the blink-and-you're-done slopes, work on technical skills such as turns and

stops. "It's not Aspen," said Ron



Frake, who owns Snowbird Ski & Patio in Glenview and Libertyville. "But it's convenient, and it gives people a chance to go up there and enjoy the day with their Lide."

disputed property is a nature preserve that, Norton said, is intended less as a play area than as a place for plants and wildlife to thrive.

Inose who do make their way to the preserve and up to its peak can enjoy a panoramic view of the valley below from the highest point in Lake County, which, at 957 feet above sea level, is not especially high. "Only in Illinois can you call this Gander Mountain," Tully said, surveying the

They said, surveying the Fox River below.

The preserve is separated from the ski hill only by a rickety brown wooden fence, an invisible state line

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