



STAFF PHOTOS BY TED KIRK

Trailridge readies for opener

Workers are busy putting the finishing touches on Trailridge, the new ski area located between Omaha and Lincoln. The gentle slope at the left is designed for beginners. Trailridge owner Tom Valasek will keep the area open

year-round, with the lodge at the right serving as the hub of the seasonal activity.

By Gary Svoboda
Outdoor Editor

The phrase "Ski Nebraska" used to be a laughing matter, a poster showing a shapely young lass with skis in the middle of a cornfield.

Then, with a growing awareness of cross-country skiing and a series of trails developed by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission on state parks land, Ski Nebraska became a more viable proposition.

And now, thanks to Omaha Tom Valasek and his Trailridge ski area, the phrase is taking a downward turn, and that's all for the better for Lincoln-area skiers who enjoy gliding down the slopes instead of taking off on level terrain.

Five trails

Valasek, a 37-year-old restaurant man, is sinking \$450,000 into Trailridge, developing a series of five trails with varying degrees of difficulty, with a two-story log lodge the focal point of non-skiing activity.

The facility — located about 20 miles from Omaha and 30 miles from Lincoln along the bluffs north of the Platte River — has a projected opening date of Dec. 15, and, weather permitting, the public will have its first opportunity to view it during an open house Dec. 12h from noon to 5 p.m.

"I've always been attracted to these hills," Valasek explains, but the Omahan didn't rush into anything.

Other Midwestern states have supported similar facilities. "After all, Iowa has six ski areas (including Crescent Hills outside of Council Bluffs). The more I looked into it, the more I liked it," Valasek says.

Everything seemed to indicate it could be done from an economic standpoint, including the availability of good used equipment from ski



Map points the way to Trailridge ski area.

areas which enjoyed an excellent year in 1981-82 and were therefore able to purchase new machinery and gear this season. The cost of gas also should be a positive factor for the new ski area, Valasek feels, with fewer people able to afford the more costly trips out west.

New park helps

And the Game and Parks

Commission development in the Trailridge area, including the new Platte River State Park, made the venture even more feasible, according to the Omaha man.

Valasek says the beginners' trail features a modest 10 percent grade, while the longer advanced trails are a quarter-mile long and have grades of 22 percent.

He's been working "eight-day" weeks, and Valasek says things are coming along well. Already in place are two Hedco snow-making machines capable of pumping out 250 gallons of water per minute which are capable of producing enough of the white stuff for all five trails, a large pond has been built to hold the water until it is chilled enough for the snow-making operation, and about 21 1,000-watt light bulbs and a dozen 1,500-watt bulbs to light up the trails for night-time skiing are up and ready to go.

About 80 percent of the 5,600-square foot log lodge — "patterned after those in the Colorado areas," Valasek explains — is done, and power lines for a T-bar lift and four wire rope handle tows are now being put in.

The lodge, by the way, features fireplaces top and bottom, and a lounge and restaurant on the second floor.

90-day season

Valasek envisions a 90-day ski season, with the slopes open seven days a week until

11 p.m., and is hoping the lodge will be the hub of year-round activity. He's tentatively thinking about installing water slides for the summer, and might offer horse-back riding.

Sandy Monico, Omaha, who has worked for Crescent Hills, will head up the ski instruction staff, which will be filled out via an "on-snow" test of 35 applicants.

Tom De Shazo, a retired colonel from Offutt Air Force Base, is in charge of the National Ski Patrol which will patrol the slopes with an eye out for unsafe skiing and medical emergencies. The Gretna Fire Department and Rescue Unit will serve Trailridge, and Omaha's St. Joseph's Hospital will make its helicopter lifeline service available.

Trailridge is not the first such facility in Nebraska, and in fact will be one of two in operation this year. John Weber opened his Prairie Hills Golf and Ski Club last year near Pleasanton (north of Kearney) to some success. It features one slope of about 1,400-feet and a rope tow.

Crescent Hills

And, of course, eastern Nebraskans have gone to Crescent Hills — located north and a little east of Council Bluffs — since 1961. Crescent Hills offers four runs of up to 2,000 feet and stays open until 9 p.m.

Like Trailridge, it features

man-made snow, so it's open for business whenever the temps fall to about 20 degrees at night. This year owner Russ Landeman is planning to open the doors around Dec. 15, "maybe a little earlier."

He's taking an optimistic stance concerning Trail Ridge. "Sure, it may take away some business, but it may add some, too. Having two areas will get more people skiing," he says.

Numbers to call

Colorado Ski Information: 488-2722
Nebraska Snow Reports 800-642-2222
Crescent Hills 712-545-3850

