

CHICAGOLAND

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 skiers have perched atop the slopes of Wilmot Mountain, waiting their turn among the crowd of novices, children and old pros before swooping down to the lodge.

Since 1938, Chicago-area skiers have flocked to the modest resort, happy to find quality runs just across the Wisconsin border.

At least they thought it was across the Wisconsin border.

That's been called into question by the resort's next-door neighbor in Illinois, the Lake County Forest Preserve District. Forest preserve officials say a land survey shows that the top of one of Wilmot Mountain's steepest and most popular hills contains a tiny sliver of property that juts into an Illinois forest preserve and rightly belongs to the taxpayers of Lake County.

Now Wilmot Mountain is suing the district in Chicago federal court, trying to keep the right to use the V-shaped swath of land, which gives skiers a place to wait before descending a hill that is big by local standards, even if it falls a few thousand feet short of Vail.

Losing the land along the aptly named State Line ski run, marked with a blue square to indicate intermediate difficulty, wouldn't drive the resort out of business or even shut down the run. But it would make the slope less inviting to skiers and, thus, less profitable, said Dennis Sheen, Wilmot Mountain's general manager. At least 60 percent of the resort's skiers come from Lake County, according to the lawsuit.

"I would think, if anything, we're helping Lake



WILMOT MOUNTAIN PHOTO

Wilmot 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 chairlift, Mike 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 since 1976.

After Gander went out of 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 of the surviving resort's southernmost hill.

Wilmot Mountain paid for a crew to move the concrete and wooden debris and cover it with dirt, creating a flat plane that extends the hill, the lawsuit states. Along with giving skiers a place to pause, the plateau has allowed the wide and unwieldy snow-grooming machine space to maneuver, Sheen said. Ac-

ording to the lawsuit, the contested land is 20 feet at its widest and about 120 feet long, a minuscule part of the 356-acre resort.

Wilmot's lawsuit claims the district agreed to let the resort use the land "even if it minimally encroached on the district's property." This agreement was never put in writing, Sheen said.

Norton, the district's lawyer, said he's never seen evidence of such an arrangement.

"This land was purchased by the taxpayers, not by Wilmot Mountain," he said.

Wilmot's lawsuit asks the court to award the ski hill either a declaration of its right to continue using the land, an easement giving it access to the property or compensation for the loss.

Both sides said they hope to settle the matter without going to trial.

The land battle pits a conservation agency against a family-owned institution that has been a seasonal

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 Midwest.

Its Nordic-themed buildings 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 — written history of the resort.

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 experts.

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 kids."

On the other side of the 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.

Those 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 937 feet above sea level, is not especially high.

"Only in Illinois can you call this Gander Mountain," Tully 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 and a scrap of land small enough to go unnoticed for three decades.



SOURCE: Private survey commissioned by the Lake County Forest Preserve District



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