



## A select group celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary

By Dave Hurst  
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The hexagonal, cut-stone gatehouse stands distinctively at the entrance to Laurel Mountain ski slopes, just as it has since 1941, when Richard King Mellon first developed those slopes for members of the Rolling Rock Club.

Back in those days, a guard would step out, holding out a silver plate. The would-be guest deposited a business card on the plate, the guard would call in the information and upon receiving approval would permit the visitor to pass on through.

Once Laurel Mountain's exclusive slopes were opened to the public, following World War II, the gatehouse lost relevance – until 1975, when it was repurposed as the initial headquarters for a new Nordic ski patrol.

Members of the National Ski Patrol provide emergency and support services. Alpine patrollers do so on downhill slopes. Nordic patrollers have similar responsibilities on the rest of the mountain where cross-country skiers, snowmobilers and other winter enthusiasts play.

While all certified ski patrollers are trained in outdoor emergency care (roughly comparable to EMTs), Nordic patrollers also train in search and rescue, cross-country skiing techniques, rope work and mountain travel. Some alpine patrollers get paid, but Nordic patrollers are volunteers who pay for their distinctive red-with-white-cross outerwear and even some of their equipment.

Fifty years and a quarter-mile from the stone gatehouse, the Laurel Mtn. Warming Hut now serves as the Laurel Summit Nordic Ski Patrol's headquarters. On a recent foggy spring day about 25 people stood on the covered porch for a photograph, commemorating the patrol's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Then, packing into three picnic tables, over paper plates filled with fried chicken and the contents of covered dishes, people reminisced about the founders, early trail builders and patrollers who worked with the Forbes State Forest to make Laurel Summit what it is today: a network of dozens of cross country, hiking, mountain biking and snowmobile trails that draws thousands of recreationists year-round.

Ann Rahn was in her 20s when she helped to build the initial ski patrol in the late-1970s. She and founder Dave Shaffer also patrolled at the 1980 Olympic Winter Games at Lake Placid, NY, then brought back a souvenir: a rescue sled that remains on display in a Warming Hut storage area.

While still a ski patroller, Ann wasn't able to attend the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration but wrote to the group, commending them for their year-round training and eagerness to learn: "This is the only patrol I know of that has more trainers than patrollers."

While the size of the Laurel Summit patrol has expanded and shrunk over the years, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary finds it relatively healthy. Currently there are 14 patrollers, including seven “senior patrollers” who have been certified in a variety of advanced skills.

A few years ago Ann established a “mountain hosts” program, which provides a more-basic level of training in first aid and other skills that enables mountain hosts to be first responders and assist patrollers in emergency situations. Dozens of volunteers also help around the warming hut.

Most of these patrollers have been active for years and also include Paul Balint, Bob and Peg Blough, Katie Boburchuk, Mike Burk, Robert Callahan, Dave Everett, Sue Lee, John Majhan, Megan McGee, Andy Scott and Rob Titterington. Among the newest members is Rebecca Bradnam who, at 31, is also the youngest – not much older than Ann Rahn was when she started.

“It’s really cool to see the people from the ‘70s,” Rebecca told me, explaining that it was training in land navigation, map and compass, and search and rescue that hooked her. “It’s really important to me to learn that stuff.”

For the Laurel Summit Nordic Ski Patrol to continue for another 50 years, more people need to follow Rebecca’s lead. Fortunately, while the Ski Patrol is select, it isn’t exclusive. Anyone willing to put in the time to train is welcome – no business card required.

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If interested, email [LS\\_warminghut@yahoo.com](mailto:LS_warminghut@yahoo.com).

*To respond to this column, email Dave Hurst at [hurst.media.works@gmail.com](mailto:hurst.media.works@gmail.com).*