

## EXPERIENCE THE MOUNTAIN PARKS

### **Hans Gmoser (1932 – 2006) – Canadian Mountain Pioneer**

By Chic Scott

Hans Gmoser, the eminence grise of Canadian mountaineering, died July 5<sup>th</sup> from injuries sustained in a fall while cycling the 1A highway near Lake Louise. In recent years Gmoser had shunned the limelight, content to enjoy his two favourite activities – cross-country skiing in winter and cycling in summer. But during the 1950s, 60s and 70s he laid the foundation of modern mountaineering in Canada. He pioneered rock, alpine and expedition climbing, he popularized ski mountaineering and was largely responsible for creating our professional mountain guides association. Through his films and later through helicopter skiing he made the Canadian mountains world famous.

Born in Brunau, Austria, July 7, 1932, Hans grew up during the troubled war years. As a teenager he discovered the mountains and a lifelong passion was kindled. With his friend Franz Dopf he climbed and skied and developed his mountaineering skills. Then, in 1951, Hans and Leo Grillmair immigrated to Canada. Life was pretty spartan for the pair and their first job was logging near Whitecourt, Alberta.

Soon they made their way to Calgary, where they were joined by Dopf. Linking up with the Alpine Club of Canada they began to discover our incredible mountain wilderness. During the summer months their passion was rock climbing, pioneering new routes on Mount Yamnuska in the front ranges of the Rockies. In the winter it was ski touring near the Stanley Mitchell Hut in the Little Yoho Valley near Field, BC. Here they celebrated their first Canadian Christmas and learned to love their adopted country. Hans played the zither and Leo loved to sing so the wilderness cabin was full of music.

Hans' mountaineering achievements during the fifties and sixties are numerous and a brief list would include early ascents of Mount Alberta and Brussels Peak two of the hardest challenges in the Rockies, a remarkable ascent of the east ridge of Mount Logan, Canada's highest peak, and a new route on the north face of Denali (Mount McKinley), North America's highest summit. As a skier he pioneered new high-level ski traverses in the Purcell Mountains and along the crest of the Rockies from Kicking Horse Pass to the Columbia Icefield. For young Canadian climbers and ski mountaineers he was an icon and inspired several generations of fledgling mountaineers. The idealistic articles he wrote in the Canadian Alpine Journal were music to young ears looking for an alternative lifestyle: "What were we trying to do? Were we trying to show off? Were we trying to kill ourselves? – No! We



wanted to inhale and breathe life again. We were rebelling against an existence which human kind has forced upon itself. We were rebelling against an existence full of distorted values, against an existence where a man is judged by the size of his living-room, by the amount of chromium on his car. But here we were ourselves again: simple and pure. Friends in the mountains.”

But it was as a mountain guide that he really made his mark. He began leading ski tours for Erling Strom and Lizzie Rummel near Mount Assiniboine in 1953. Lizzie became a close friend and confidant, as did Fred Pessl one of Hans’s first clients. Hans never forgot the early friends he made in the mountains. They supported him when he needed help and he repaid their trust many times over. In later years Hans would host ‘Nostalgia Week’ at his lodge in the Bugaboos and invite his early clients and supporters to join him for a week of heli-skiing.

In 1957 Hans founded Rocky Mountain Guides Ltd. He led mountain climbers during the summer but the real bread and butter programs were the ski weeks in the winter, at Mount Assiniboine, Rogers Pass and of course at his beloved Stanley Mitchell cabin in the Little Yoho Valley. From 1957 to 1967 Hans made 10 ski and climbing films that he toured all over North America, from Alaska to California and east to Montreal and New York. One year he had 53 lecture dates on his schedule and attracted a crowd of 2500 people in Detroit. Hans accompanied these films with a romantic narration that thrilled and inspired audiences. A critic in a Milwaukee newspaper wrote, “In narrating the film Mr. Gmoser offered more than entertainment... there was a simple lesson in philosophy.” Hans was a gifted communicator and wrote in the Canadian Alpine Journal, “In the end, to ski is to travel fast and free - free over the untouched snow covered country. To be bound to one slope, even to one mountain, by a lift may be convenient but it robs us of the greatest pleasure that skiing can give, that is, to travel through the wide wintry country; to follow the lure of the peaks which tempt on the horizon and to be alone for a few days or even a few hours in, clear, mysterious surroundings.”

Although Hans loved traditional ski touring from small cabins in the wilderness, he is today known as the father of helicopter skiing. In 1965 he ran the first two commercial heli-ski weeks from an old logging camp in the Bugaboo Mountains, near Radium, BC. Heli-skiing took off, for the timing was perfect: the requisite jet helicopter technology was just being developed. By 1968 the luxurious Bugaboo Lodge was open, welcoming blue ribbon clientele from around North America and Europe. Hans’ Rocky Mountain Guides Ltd. grew to become Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH), with 500 employees and a dozen lodges scattered throughout the interior of BC. Hans was of course in the right place at the right time, but he was also the right man for the job. He developed a heli-ski industry with strong ties to the traditional mountain guiding and mountain climbing communities and he always felt that heli-skiing was a wilderness experience. He wrote: “Our primary aim is to offer our guests a safe and educational mountain outdoor experience. We want our guests to be comfortable and to feel at home in our lodges. We want to keep our lodges free of the electronic noises and images that invade our lives everywhere else. We consider ourselves to be intruders into one of the few large, contiguous natural areas left in the world. Therefore, we ask our guests that they, along with us, respect the sanctity, silence and the spirit of these natural wonders we are privileged to share.”

Hans was also a founding member of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides and its first technical chairman. Throughout his career he took a keen interest in guides affairs and for a number of years was the association’s honorary president. Hans’s pioneering efforts in ski touring and heli-skiing created an industry that today employs hundreds of guides and thousands of support staff.

Beyond all these notable achievements Hans was simply a remarkable man who inspired loyalty and in return would be your lifelong friend. He was a man who, in the words of the poet Rudyard Kipling, could “walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch.” Gmoser numbered among his friends and clients Prime Minister Trudeau (who he guided up Bugaboo Spire), the King of Spain and the King and Queen of Norway, but during his tenure at the helm of CMH he probably knew the name of every guest who skied at his lodges and every staff member who took care of them.

Hans met his wife, Margaret MacGougan, skiing at the Stanley Mitchell Hut and they married in 1966. They have lived all these years in the same modest house in Harvie Heights (near Canmore) and have two sons, Conrad (Lesley) and Robson (who is a ski guide like his father) and two grandchildren.

Hans has been greatly honoured over the years, receiving honorary memberships in the Alpine Club of Canada and the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations and an honorary doctorate from Thompson Rivers University. He was elected to the Honour Roll of Canadian Skiing and to the U.S National Ski Hall of Fame. He is a recipient of the Banff Mountain Film Festival Summit of Excellence Award and, in 1987, was awarded the Order of Canada. Just a few weeks ago he was a founding inductee into the Canadian Tourism Hall of Fame.