

# St. Michael Historian



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## Foxtailers Snowmobile Club

### Celebrating 50 Years of Community Activism and Winter Fun

By Bob Zahler



Above: A vintage Foxtailers Snowmobile Club patch. Below: Ad for the 1963 Ski-doo.



It was toward the end of the winter season of 1969 that a group of guys from the St. Michael area founded the Foxtailers Snowmobile Club. At the time, snowmobiles were still very much a novelty item and not built to withstand the kind of beating they take today. Most of the early riders will tell you that for every hour they spent riding, they spent two hours fixing and tinkering on their machines. But the joy of riding and the desire to make sure the hobby could be enjoyed by future generations is what inspired the formation of the Foxtailers. The club started when snowmobiling, as a recreational activity, was still in its infancy.

Just who invented the first snowmobile is somewhat debatable because the first machines developed to travel on the snow were not made for pleasure. In the early part of the 20th century people experimented with putting skis on Model-T Fords. According to Kat Eschner of Smithsonian.com the prototype to the modern snowmobile was a machine patented by Carl Eliason of Sayner, Wisconsin in 1927. While others also produced snow machines, his “motor toboggan” was the first that was mass produced. Joseph-Armand Bombardier of Quebec had also invented a snow machine as early as 1922, but his invention would not be patented until 1937. Many would agree, however, that the first modern snowmobile, one that was practical in its use as a recreational vehicle, was invented in the early 1950s by Edgar and Allen Hetteen and David Johnson of Roseau, Minnesota. They started producing Polaris snowmobiles in 1956, but even these machines weighed over 1,000 pounds. Bombardier followed with his own model that he sold under the brand name Ski-Doo in 1959 (apparently, had it not been for a typo, it would have been Ski-Dog). Edgar Hetteen left Polaris in 1960 and started producing Artic Cat snowmobiles in Thief River Falls in 1962. In 1964 Mickey Rupp, who had been producing go-karts and minibikes in Mansfield, Ohio since the early 60s, joined as another competitor in the snowmobile craze that was really starting to take off in the northern states and Canada.

Taking advantage of the interest in recreational riding (both summer and winter) Everett Berning started selling Rupp minibikes and snowmobiles out of his garage near the Millside Tavern in 1967. Everett ordered several models of minibikes and snowmobiles



*Above: a 1970 Rupp Sprint owned by Rupp collector Dennis Berning, grandson of Everett Berning, who ran a Rupp dealership and snowmobile parts shop at his Millside Tavern. Photo courtesy of Dennis Berning*

from the manufacturer in Ohio, had them shipped to Minneapolis, and then picked up the crates and stored them in his brother Leon's barn up the hill from the tavern. In this way, Everett could have a few machines on display in the garage and assemble crated machines for customers upon request. As a result, the Rupp brand was one of the popular brands in this area, although there were certainly many Ski-Doo, Polaris, Scorpion, Sno-Jet, and Artic Cat machines as well. One of the challenges with the new developing hobby, however, was where to ride your snowmobile. While there were plenty of open fields in the 1960s, these fields were owned by farmers who were not necessarily open to the idea of having trespassers running across their fields, even in the winter months. One of the aims of early snowmobile riders was to be able to go from town to town (from bar to bar) on their sleds, but this would be a challenge if property owners in between the destination points were unwilling to allow snowmobiles on their property, or if the trail was not passable. These two aims, obtaining the cooperation of property owners and the development of good, marked trails, were among the major purposes for forming the Foxtailers Snowmobile Club in 1969.

The Foxtailer name was inspired by the shared hobby among some of the founders which was the hunting of foxes. Exactly who came up with the name is not certain; the records of the club are incomplete, but they do state that the club was formed in April of 1969 with Les Gutzwiller as its president, Ditto Kilian as vice-president, and Ken Schumacher as secretary-treasurer. In November of 1970 Ditto Kilian was elected president, Norm Berning vice-president, and Tom Becker secretary-treasurer. The club held its meetings in the Sportsman's Club building, or clubhouse, down at Riverside Park, across the river from Berning's Millside Tavern. By 1971 the club could boast of having over 70 members, although the records are not clear if all of them had paid their dues. The first club members were largely from St. Michael, Albertville, and Rogers. The large size of the membership roster gives an indication of how quickly the hobby of snowmobiling had become by the early 1970s.

As with any hobby that involves a financial investment from limited family resources, getting the spouses involved in the hobby is often very helpful. The Foxtailers helped promote "couple rides" and other outings. One of the major events that started in the early 70s was an annual "weenie roast" at Pelican Lake. Events like this brought riders together to compare sleds, do a little racing on the lake, and just have some relaxing fun. The Foxtailers provided the hot dogs and at least some of the beer for the event. The financial records of the club (humorously labeled "Treasury Department") indicate that meat from Dehmers and beer from the Millside Tavern were among the largest expenses annually. Members from the early years admit that riding from bar to bar was a favorite activity. Not that it made it okay, but the sleds back then didn't go nearly as fast as modern sleds. However, in addition to the spending on fun events, there are also expenses for bringing in trainers and renting projectors (for showing 16 mm reel-to-reel training films), indicating that early in its existence the club was serious about getting young people trained in trail etiquette, respect for property rights, and snowmobile safety. Ken Schumacher recalled that at one point they even designated two members, Ken Duerr and Jim Dehmer, to act as "trail police" during some of their rides to ensure that people were following laws and established trail rules. Machines for grooming trails were non-existent, at least in this area, and trail grooming, according to long-time member Dave Hochstedler, was done with a home-made drag pulled behind a snowmobile. Early community involvement included raising funds to help the Village of St. Michael obtain new population signs at the outskirts of town.

Membership in the Foxtailers increased further through the mid 1970s. This coincided with the nation-wide increase in snowmobile ownership. New manufacturers entered the market so that in addition to the ones already mentioned, the swath of available brands included John Deere, Chaparral, Sears, Mercury, Ariens, Johnson, Sno-Prince, Evinrude, Viking, Kawasaki (which superseded Snow-Jet) and many others. But then things took a negative turn for the snowmobiling industry that

would also hurt the Foxtailers Snowmobile Club. The first hit was the Oil Embargo of 1973. The largest impact of the embargo, and the corresponding jump in fuel prices, was that it made the cost of everything more expensive, which meant less discretionary household spending for hobbies like snowmobiling. In the same year, the EPA introduced noise restrictions, which forced manufacturers to invest in noise-reducing modifications that then increased the cost of the sleds. Despite these challenges, the Foxtailers club maintained a fair membership roster through 1978.

By the late 70s, however, Jet Skis and three-wheel ATVs started becoming popular giving consumers more choices on where to spend their recreational dollars. The real blow to snowmobiling was a second oil embargo in 1979 and then several poor snow seasons in the 80s (the winter of 1980-81 was nearly snowless in southern Minnesota). Nation-wide snowmobile sales went from a high of 495,000 sleds sold in 1971 down to 103,000 sold in 1986. Many of the snowmobile manufacturers from the 1970s either went bankrupt or simply dropped snowmobiles from their line of products. A handful of manufacturers like Artic Cat, Ski Doo, Yamaha, and Polaris kept going, but focused on high-performance machines. It was during this period of the 1980s that the Foxtailers Snowmobile Club also became mostly inactive.

It was in 1990 that those who hadn't given up on the hobby started facing more and more restrictions on where they could ride. Property owners, who were not necessarily those who owned the land back in the 70s, were complaining to city hall, and the council was considering more austere rules that would have made snowmobiling in and around St. Michael nearly impossible. This was also the time that new housing developments were beginning to pop up on what had once been open fields. Local snowmobile enthusiasts understood that they needed to be proactive in working with property owners, as well as the city, to maintain their ability to ride. Leo Elkie, Lyle Pundt, and Bill Roden were among those who helped revive the Foxtailers Snowmobile Club in the early 90s. Dave Hochstedler, who had been a member back in the early 70s, brought his son Jeff into the club as well. The membership of the 90s was, by and large, a younger generation of snowmobile riders who were investing more money into increasingly more expensive machines, and who were therefore willing to put in the time and energy needed to keep the hobby viable. A new constitution and bylaws were written in 1991 and regular meetings



*Above: posting signs like these are part of what the Foxtailers do to keep good relations with area property owners who allow snowmobilers to trespass.*

were held once again, but this time in the basement of the old Legion Club (the former Security State Bank building on Main Street). By the mid 90s, the Foxtailers' roster was once again growing.

One of the first goals of the revived club was to work with the city to develop reasonable snowmobile ordinances. By working with the city, the club had a vested interest in getting their members to abide by those rules. To appease property owners, the club focused on getting riders to follow the designated trails, which then necessitated having good signs that would have to go up in the beginning of the season and some taken down later. Additionally, in order to entice riders to stay on the trails, the Foxtailers knew that they needed to have well-groomed trails. Grooming machines were, and still are, very expensive. In the 90s there were only a couple of groomers in the entire county, the closest ones were kept in Maple Lake. Consequently, the trails on the eastern part of Wright County were not



*Above: Kurt and Keith Gutzwiller stand by the groomer now used to maintain the trails in the St. Michael and Albertville area.*

being maintained to the satisfaction of the riders in this part of the county. Improving this situation required more active involvement in the Wright County Snowmobile Association which pooled the resources of the area snowmobile clubs and helped get grants from the state of Minnesota to purchase equipment. Eventually, the Foxtailers helped get a groomer that was shared with Rockford and then later they were able to obtain one to be kept here in the St. Michael/Albertville area.

Obtaining the funds for the machines and other trail improvements meant that club members had to put in additional time working at events such as the ISOC (International Series Of Champions) "Hot Country 200" snowmobile races that were held on School Lake in Albertville as well as ISOC events held at Canterbury Downs. Club members worked as spotters and flaggers and thereby earned a cut of the proceeds (ISOC was owned by John Daniels, founder of Long Haul Trucking in Albertville). Continued involvement in events like these and sponsoring other races on their own also allowed the Foxtailers to contribute to various charities. Most recently they established a scholarship at STMA High School.

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Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

*This newsletter is published quarterly for the benefit of the members of the St. Michael Historical Society. Reprints of this or any other newsletter by the Society are not permitted without the express written consent of the St. Michael Historical Society.*

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Despite the more visible presence of the Foxtailers in recent years in sponsoring races and scholarships, and having units in parades, the Foxtailers still emphasize the things they did 50 years ago: training new riders, teaching respect for property owners, and improving and expanding the trail system. It seems pretty basic, but these activities require the dedicated involvement of many people. Snowmobiling is a family affair, and it is promising to see that a new generation of Foxtailers is taking over and continuing the work started by their parents and grandparents. The Foxtailers will celebrate their 50th anniversary on September 14 at the Liberty Bar and Restaurant. There will be a vintage sled display, Happy Hour at 4 PM, Pig Roast at 5 PM and dance with live band at 8 PM.

*Right: the sign represents much of the work of the Foxtailer Snowmobile Club. The map shows the trails they created and groom each year that connect to trails across Wright County. They also direct riders who might be riding these trails for the first time.*



## Upcoming Events

All events and meetings held at the Gries Lenhardt Allen Library Room at St. Michel City Hall

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|--------------------------------|--|
| Monday, September 9, 7:00 PM   | Regular Board meeting  |
| Monday, October 14, 7:00 PM    | Regular Board meeting  |
| Saturday, October 26, 10:00 AM | Genealogist Stephen S. Barthel will present on using Familysearch.org  |
| Monday, November 4, 7:00 PM    | Regular Board Meeting. One week early due to Veterans Day falling on the 2nd Monday. Date and location are tentative. Watch the website or our Facebook page for an update on date and location. |