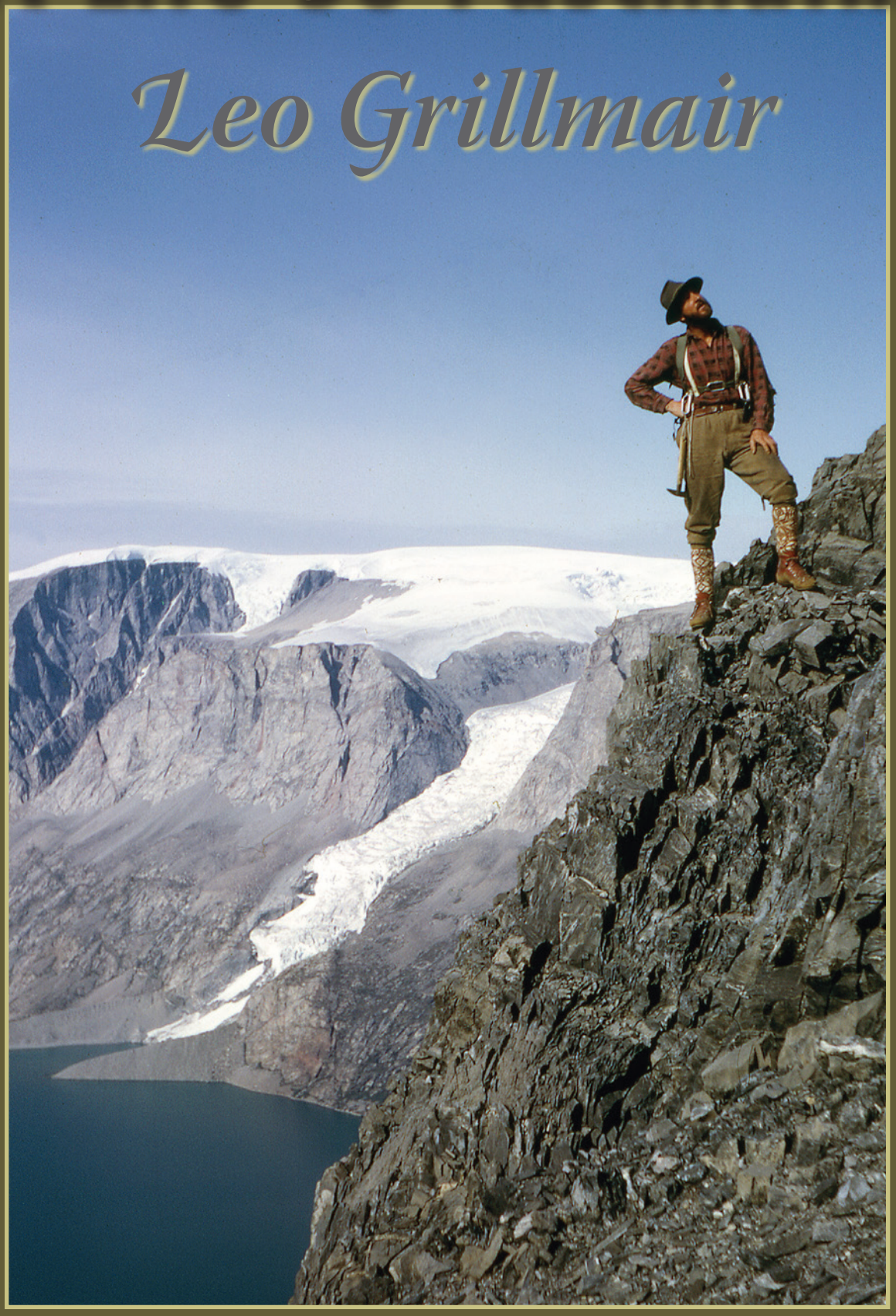
A Life So Fascinating:

Leo Grillmair



by
Lynn
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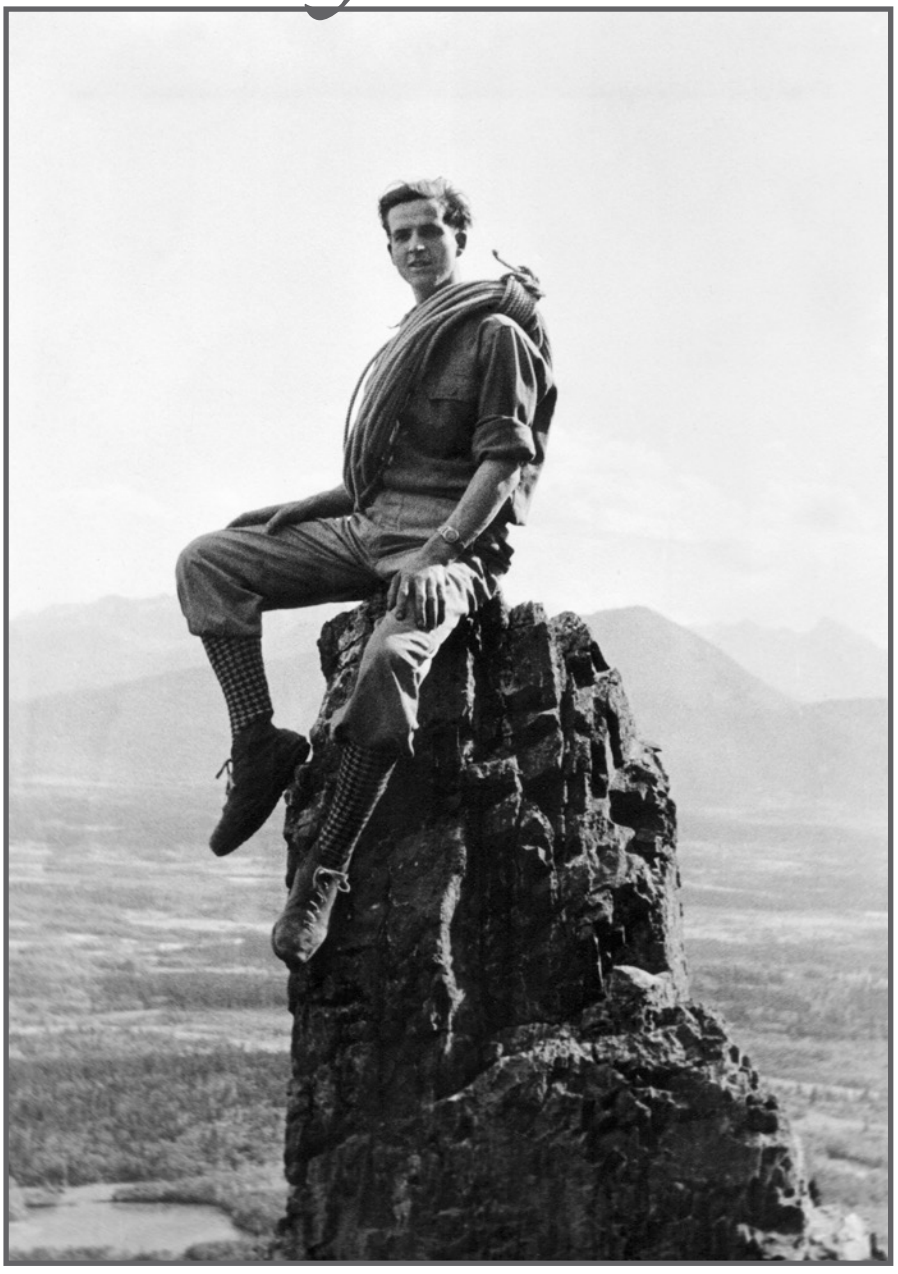

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The Alpine Club of Canada
P.O. Box 8040
Canmore, Alberta
T1W 2T8
403.678.3200

Association of Canadian
Mountain Guides
P.O. Box 8341
Canmore, Alberta T1W 2V1
403.678.2885

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LAFARGE

A project such as this one is, like climbing any mountain, a team effort. A big thank you to Leo and Lynne Grillmair for their warm and delicious hospitality and for their generosity in sharing their time and stories; to Lynn Martel for her passion writing this book; to Lloyd "Kiwi" Gallagher for his valuable help collecting and identifying photos; to Suzan Chamney for her exceptional layout wizardry; to Rod Plasman for scanning the cover image; to Laurie Venance and the staff of McAra Printing of Calgary; and an extra big thank you to Chic Scott for sharing his formidable knowledge and research, and for collecting so many photos.

Front cover photo:
Leo Grillmair dreams of his next adventures while working in Greenland, 1966. Photo by Don Gardner.

Back cover photo: Leo and Lynne Grillmair share a moment while on a ski touring trip at Fairy Meadow, Selkirk Mountains, B.C. Photo by Inge Stolz.

Title page photo: Leo strikes a pose on a pinnacle of Mount Yamnuska, Alberta Rockies, circa early 1950s. Photo by Franz Dopf.

Introduction

On a hot sunny day in the hamlet of Wilmer, in B.C.'s Purcell Mountains, Leo Grillmair walks with the confident stride of a life-long mountain man onto the outdoor stage. Stepping up to the microphone as the musicians around him tune their instruments, Leo speaks in his Austrian-accented English. The audience of two hundred at the Conrad Kain centennial celebrations in July, 2009, listens with anticipation. Well-loved for his often ribald and hilarious story-telling talents, Leo is equally admired for his singing voice. The rough workman's dialect, the gruffness of a man with a common-sense approach to life's tumultuous ups and downs – all soften into the soft summer's breeze as a melody – strong, clear and magical – fills the mountain air.

Leo Grillmair is quite likely the mountain community's best known right-hand man for his long-standing partnership with Hans Gmoser, the force behind the world's first and largest helicopter skiing company, Canadian Mountain Holidays. As one of ten children, Leo's beginnings cast him perfectly in that role, as he learned from a young age how to manage within a team, but also how to assert himself – the perfect complement to Gmoser's driven and authoritarian leadership style.

Having grown up in Austria during World War II, both Leo and Hans flourished under the optimism with which Canada empowered them. Although life in their adopted country was filled with challenges, none of the difficulties they encountered in Canada would ever match what they'd survived in the old country. In Canada, Hans' imagination and ambition found an arena that knew no bounds, and the men fostered a friendship and a loyalty that saw them succeed far beyond even their own imaginations.

At Hans' side on mountains, in business and friendship, Leo was bold, practical, adventurous, willing and inexhaustible as he ran CMH's Bugaboo Lodge for two decades, often flying by the seat-of-his-ski pants with enviable chutzpah as he figured out how to do a job that no-one had ever done before him.

Before Leo and Hans left Austria, neither knew much about North America beyond what they'd seen in a few Hollywood westerns. In Canada, they developed their own unique brand of Wild West. They learned the language, seized on opportunities as seemingly limitless as the peaks of the Rockies and the Selkirks themselves, and blended their own customs and culture with that of their adopted home, ultimately creating an entirely new mountain culture.

We hope Leo's unique and valuable gifts to Canada's mountain community resonate clearly from the pages of this booklet.

Lynn Martel

Six of ten

Leo's school photo, 1941. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

Leo Grillmair was born October 11, 1930 in Ansfelden, Austria, the sixth child of Martin and Ida Grillmair. With four more siblings arriving after Leo, including one adopted sickly little girl who died four years later, the Grillmair household was a bustling one.

Martin shovelled coal for the railroad, pedalling his bike into Linz, 20 kilometres each way, to work twelve-hour shifts. In winter, Martin sometimes caught the train five kilometres away if the train schedule coordinated with his shift.

At home, Ida set an equal example of strength and resilience.

"My mom, she had a tough time," Leo recalls. "She had a disease of some kind, her legs didn't grow. She learned how to walk when she was six years old. Her legs never fully grew, she was very short. But she was a powerful lady. She could walk with anybody."

Leo's oldest brother was born in 1920, weighing sixteen pounds! Ida had a caesarean, which in that era, she was fortunate to survive. The doctor told her she'd been lucky, but she wouldn't have another child. Leo's fourth brother was born on a hay wagon.

"All of a sudden she said to the farmer, you'd better come up here, I need help. And my fourth brother was born. She delivered them like rabbits. She was a tough little girl!"

In all, seven of Ida's children lived to adulthood.

They lived in a 400-year-old house in Ansfelden, but in 1938 moved to Traun. Though financially poor, the Grillmair home was filled not only with children, but also with the rich sound of music.

"My father, he was a poor man, but he had a beautiful voice," Leo says. "He loved singing. He brought up his kids – made sure they all could sing. We were always invited to farm weddings. They invited us so we could sing for them. For that we could eat and drink all we wanted – that was a big deal for us."

Leo, Hans and Franz Dopf attended school together in this building in Traun, Austria. Photo by Chic Scott.

Apprentice

Leo was such a small boy that when he was six Ida walked him the long way to school, where the principal declared him too tiny to walk the distance every day and suggested Ida keep him home for another year. In 1941, Leo was in hospital with a badly broken leg, where he acquired a nasty infection in his ribcage. His aunt was the head nurse, and Leo believes her extra attention is the only reason he survived. Between starting school late and missing a year while he was sick, Leo wound up in the same class as Hans Gmoser, who was two years younger. Serendipity kindled a life-long friendship.

From the age of twelve, Leo was a member of the Hitler Youth, at that time compulsory for all males in Austria between the ages of ten and eighteen. At its peak, the organization boasted upwards of eight million members. By 1943, Nazi authori-

The Grillmair family, from back row left, Leo, Franz, Gottfried, Anni, Martin and Alois; front row, Ida, Martin, Hermine, circa late 1940s. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

ties began turning the Hitler Youth into a military reserve to beef up its depleted ranks. For hungry, poor Austrian boys, participation had many rewards.

"We were in there with enthusiasm," Leo explains. "We could go to the mountains, we could camp there. Sure, it all aimed for one thing of course, but for us, it was fun."

It was in the Hitler Youth that Leo acquired his first pair of ski boots. But then footwear wasn't a big priority through much of his childhood.

"When the puddles on the street froze solid, that was the sign that we put on shoes," he laughs. "Until then, we were always barefoot. Then we had wooden shoes with the leather top. That's what my father could afford."

Leo and his closest brother, Martin, marched into town at the front of their unit, singing, leading the troop with their voices.

"That was beautiful," Leo recalls. "People stopped on the street when we came down."

Part of his training included learning to shoot a Panzerfaust anti-tank weapon. Fortunately, the war ended before Leo had to see any action.

"In the army, we always had food," Leo states. "That's another reason we loved to be in those training camps." Then he pauses, and shudders. "Except, towards the end, the bombing got so brutal, some of my friends died right beside me. That's when it hit home. I don't like to think about it."

Leo's father and four brothers fought in WWII. They all came home; including one they thought was dead for six months. By the age of thirteen, done with school, Leo was apprenticing to be a plumber. School learning was simply not a priority in the world of his youth.

"My father was perfectly happy that all his boys could learn a trade," Leo explains. "That was far better than what he had."

Leo preferred to be active outside anyway. After a three-year apprenticeship in Linz, he acquired his journeyman's ticket and, not yet seventeen, began working for a small firm.

"During the war, I only worked with Italian prisoners of war," Leo recalls. "All of our boys were on the front line. I learned pretty good Italian. I was a kid, and they kicked me around like you wouldn't believe. They were supposed to be our prisoners – ya! Mama mia! But I loved them."

To the hills

In Austria, climbing was a national sport. During the war, Leo spent a lot of time in the mountains and afterward he joined the Naturfreunden mountain club, where he met Fritz Kögler.

"He was my best protector and teacher," Leo says. "He was very patient, because I was a ragged little bastard. He supported me in every way. I just loved him. He could teach us anything."

As a young man, Leo climbed many mountains, including the Grosser Priel, Spitzmauer, Ortler, Vajolet Towers and the Dachstein.

Fritz Kögler, centre front, was a climbing mentor for Leo, centre back, in Austria in the late 1940s. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

The Grosglockner, Austria's highest peak reaching 3797 metres, was among his first big adventures. With four weeks' holiday in the summer of 1946 but no climbing partner, he packed up what food he could gather, plus his crampons and ice axe – which he'd never used. He travelled first by train then walked for hours to reach the Heinrich Schweiger Haus am Wiesbachhorn [hut], where he hooked up with some other people to climb the Wiessbachhorn. The following day the group was planning to climb the Grossglockner, and when they consented to his request, he enthusiastically joined them.

Leo and his brothers started skiing when they were young, in the 1930s. One of his brothers had the first pair of skis around with a groove in the base.

"We stood around watching those skis," Leo laughs. "The shoes we had were like moccasins. We had our work shoes, and we filed a groove in the back for the cable to fit into. Those were our ski boots. We'd go to work all week and on Friday we'd go with the same shoes, skiing."

They skied at Bosruk hüte and Bürgas Gaterl, where Leo and his friends built a hut to replace one belonging to the Naturfreunden that had burned down.

"We spent a lot of weekends up there building the hut," Leo says. "In the evenings somebody pulled out a guitar and let's go!"

Here starts my fortune

In 1951, Leo was about to be laid off because of a work shortage. At that time, Canada was actively recruiting immigrants, and Leo's boss suggested he apply, even phoning the travel agency on Leo's behalf. Leo remembers hopping on his bike, riding over to the Hauptplatz and filling out an application to go to Canada. Later that evening in Traun, he ran into Hans Gmoser and, mentioning he'd just signed up to go to Canada, suggested Hans join him. A few days later, after breaking the news to his none-too-happy mother, Hans

told Leo he too, would go to Canada. Leo left town on his twenty-first birthday.

"All the mountain club was there, singing and waving goodbye," Leo recalls. "Then the people disappeared as the train pulled out, and I thought, holy shit, what am I doing? That's the first time when I started thinking, my God, now I'm going alone across the big water. I don't speak the language, I don't have a job. Ohyo!"

He arrived in Bremen, Germany, and while waiting a few days for the ship to be ready, Leo hooked up with six other young men booked on the same voyage.

"There were seven of us young guys, hell-raisers," recites Leo. "We didn't know what to do with this time, so we dreamed up all kinds of things. On the last evening, we said, why don't we blow every cent we have tonight, and then we start fresh when we get to Canada?"

They didn't have much, but after a lively night in Bremen's red-light district, they all boarded the ship with empty pockets.

"Then as soon as we stepped on the boat, they made an announcement over the loudspeaker. It said we're looking for dish-washers. You get a dollar a day. I said, hey, I'm on. Here starts my fortune."

Unfortunately, Leo's optimism was short-lived, when after only four days seasickness left him unable to do anything more than feel miserable. Crammed into the bow with nearly fifty other seasick men, life on the ship was hell.

"It took us thirteen days to come across on the ocean. We were in a hell of a storm. For two days we stood still, totally, just fighting those waves. I'd never seen the ocean before, then to get in an ocean like that. At times I thought we're not gonna make it anywhere, we're gonna go under. Then one day a guy came running in, hey, there's land! We all rushed up. We made it!"

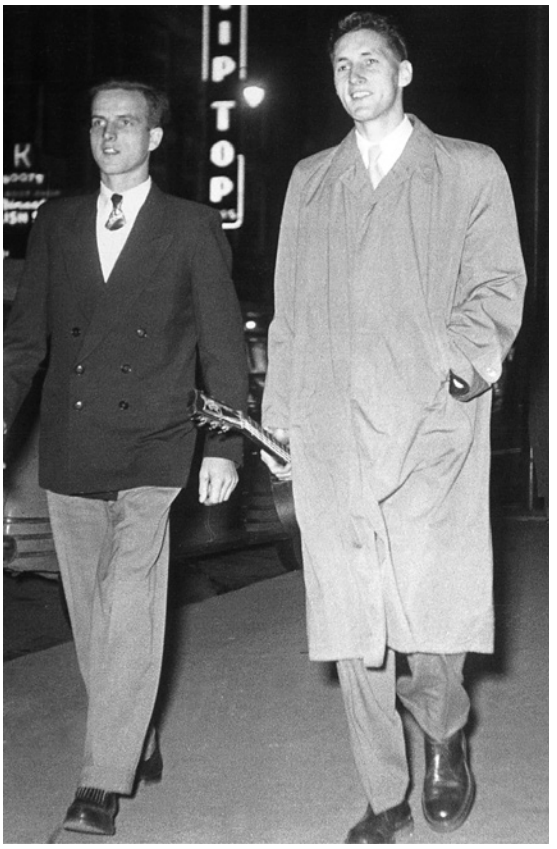
Disembarking in Quebec City with $4, he and his shipmates were waiting for their luggage to be brought to their west-bound train when an older man approached them, offering to show them the old city. Sceptical, they accepted, and were treated to a guided tour and a beer.

"I didn't even know the guy spoke French, because I didn't know the difference between French and English," Leo says. "He was just a friendly guy who wanted to welcome those new immigrants to Canada. I thought that was so nice. I never forgot that."

Leo readily admits that before leaving Austria, he knew absolutely nothing about Canada.

"Hans knew a little bit about Canada. He said, in Canada, we could never go under. You can always be a trapper. We can at least eat. We had no idea what it took to be a trapper! We were already dreaming of what we could do in this Canada. Oh ya, we worked ourselves into a frenzy!"

A dashing young Leo, circa early 1950s. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.



Leo, left, and Hans stroll down an Edmonton street en route from the pawn shop where Leo bought a guitar for Hans, who had just arrived from Austria, 1951. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

Reality, however, was a bit different. Spending four days crossing the country was something beyond the imaginations of Leo and his shipmates, who had seen a promotional movie in which everything in Canada appeared bigger and more beautiful, and the trains impressively fast.

"We got on this train in Quebec, and eventually the train starts pulling out. Of course, it takes time to pick up speed," Leo describes. "Then about an hour later, it was doing the same speed. A day later, it was still doing the same speed. That was my first disappointment. I thought, that's bullshit, our trains are better than theirs!"

There were bright moments too. Stopping at a station on the Prairies, they saw a main road with a row of storefronts.

"There was a bar in front and there was a horse tied up. Just like we saw in the western movies! We expected any minute somebody was coming out, guns blazing!"

Finally, they reached Edmonton. Leo stepped out of the train, looked around and wondered, where the hell are the mountains? The recruitment official had assured him Edmonton was right in the middle of the mountains.

"Then the people say, ah, not too far, 300 miles. Three hundred miles? That's 450 kilometres. In Austria, I'm out of the country! That was another disappointment!"

Fired again

Leo's first job in Canada was in Spirit River, in northwestern Alberta, where he and his fellow Austrians helped build a lumber mill. Once that job was done, they began cutting logs. They lasted a month.

Each working their own machines, Leo was posted to work the green chain, pulling the freshly cut lumber off the assembly line.

Hans and Leo expressing their love of singing and music, circa early 1950s. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

"That was the toughest job; I had to catch those things quick," he says. "But I got 90 cents an hour, the others got 80 cents."

Then the foreman told Leo he would be responsible for greasing and oiling all the machines before each shift and he wouldn't be paid for the extra hour it would take. Leo refused, offering to grease his own machine, but not the others without being paid properly. The following morning, Leo diligently greased his machine. When the foreman asked if he had greased all the others, he said no. "You're fired," said the foreman. "Okay." Leo replied.

"Come on boys. We'd made up our minds if one gets fired, we all go. All of a sudden, oh no! the foreman said 'I didn't mean it'."

Leo shrugs. "I did. We were fed up."

He might have been a newcomer, but he hadn't left his self respect on the other side of the ocean. The group packed up and the foreman had to drive them forty kilometres out of the bush to the train station, so angry he nearly killed them all with his driving.

They reached Edmonton the same day Hans was to arrive. Having written to Hans promising him a job at the lumber mill, Leo worried they might pass each other in opposite directions. Luckily, Hans was a day late. When they rendezvoused, Leo took some of his $50 paycheque, walked into a pawnshop and bought a guitar for Hans.

At the immigration office they signed up for jobs in Whitecourt. On their first day, while felling a tree they bent the crosscut saw and quickly found themselves unemployed.

"We got fired there too! We were skinny runts, we weren't loggers!" exclaims Leo.

Back at the immigration office, the officials were a bit nervous about sending them out again. So they looked up the uncle of their friend, Franz Dopf, in Edmonton. Franz's uncle Louis suggested since it was Christmas, that they wait until after the holidays to try to find work in their professions – Leo as a plumber, Hans as an electrician.

"We had a beautiful Christmas," Leo recalls. "He made us presents, and we felt right at home. That way we weren't quite so homesick. He was very nice to us."

Uncle Louis helped them land good jobs too, with Leo earning 67 cents an hour as a plumber, and Hans stringing power lines. Their stability was short-lived though, when on February 2, Leo broke his leg.

Leo practices his plumbing skills in Cold Lake, Alberta, 1968. Photo Leo Grillmair Collection.

"I thought, oy, what am I gonna do now?

And Hans said don't worry, I make enough to pay for room and board for the two of us, no problem."

The mishap delivered a silver lining though, as Leo had broken his leg showing off for some girls at the Whitemud Ravine ski hill.

"We couldn't ski worth a shit anyway!" Leo laughs. "We went straight down, and those girls were really impressed, because nobody could ski well in those days. They saw us – the fastest skiers on the hill by far."

University students in their last year to become teachers, the girls visited the hospital and offered to teach them English in exchange for ski lessons.

"We said that's a hell of an offer, and we got three girlfriends on top of it! One to spare!"

Leo enjoys his visitors, including a new Canadian girlfriend, while nursing a broken leg in an Edmonton hospital, 1952. Photo Leo Grillmair Collection.

An impressive sight

While Leo was recuperating, Hans hitchhiked from Edmonton to Banff to see the Rockies. In their sleeping bags, Hans and the friend who'd accompanied him slept soundly under the stars. The following day Hans spotted two people hanging climbing skins to dry in a backyard. Lizzie Rummel and Ken Jones had just skied out from Assiniboine, the place that would soon launch Hans' guiding career in Canada.

The first week of June, Leo and Hans moved to Calgary where they shared a double bed for $60 a month, each. While Leo's leg mended, Hans climbed every weekend he could. By Labour Day he and Leo, who was still walking with a cane, set off for Mount Assiniboine, which Hans had seen earlier that season at the Alpine Club of Canada's summer camp. Brimming with enthusiasm, Hans couldn't wait to share his discovery with Leo. Riding the bus from Calgary, they started from Canmore on foot at 7 p.m., hiking to the end of Spray Lake.

"We tried to sleep under a tree, I think we had one blanket, we cuddled up together," Leo recalls. "But we saw a little bear. A bear! Oh my God! We were scared as hell, because we'd never seen a bear before. The bear was more scared of us, if that's possible! We couldn't sleep. Let's walk. We had about an hour's rest; that was it."

They followed the west side road to Bryant Creek, then hiked over Wonder Pass, where it began to snow. With Leo walking on a bad leg in running shoes, Hans realized he'd soon be cold. Hans traded his boots for Leo's light shoes and began running, Leo following slowly in his tracks.

A woman greeted Leo as he reached Erling Strom's cabin in pain, inviting him in for tea and cookies.

"She took me in and doctored me up, and after half an hour she pointed me to the tracks, I could follow them. It's only about a kilometre to Lizzie's cabin. Just as I got there, it was just getting dark a little, and Hans was just putting on his shoes again to look for me. He was getting worried."

After walking 65 kilometres in 24 hours, Leo finally saw the mountain.

"That was an impressive sight, especially then, it was all white with snow," he recalls. "We called it right there, the Matterhorn. It really looks like it."

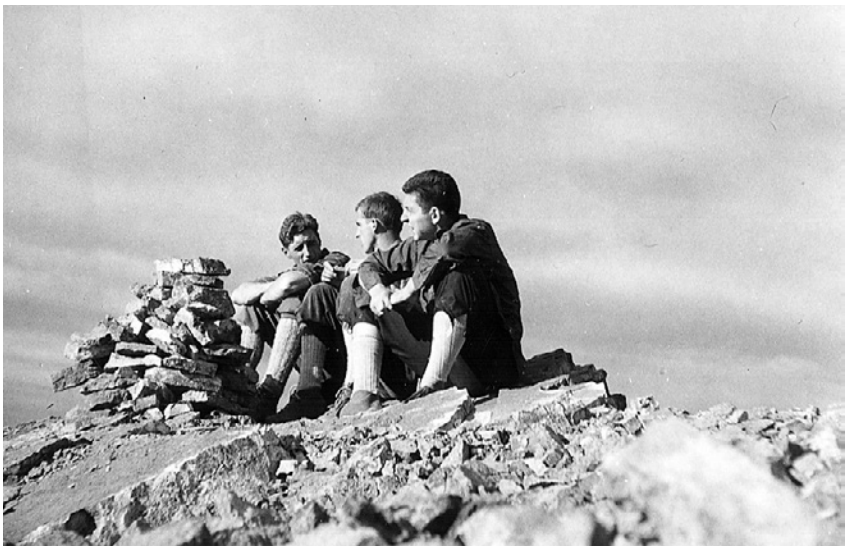
Hiking out over Wonder Pass, at Marvel Lake they encountered a fishing camp run by some Brewster cowboys. Hans negotiated with the cowboys and traded his guitar for a horse for Leo.

"I wasn't much of a cowboy, but it was easier on my leg."

Leo, left and Hans lace up for yet another memorable adventure. Photo Erwin Tontsch.

Making history in street shoes

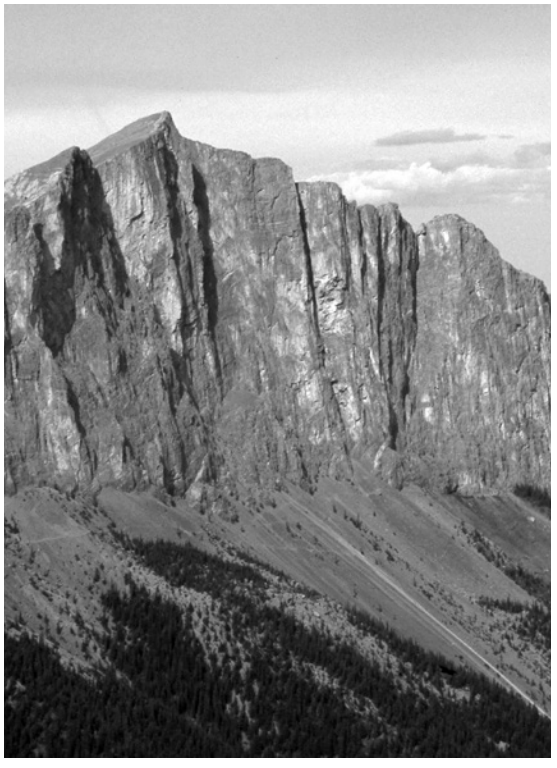
On a warm November day in 1952, Hans and Leo and five others drove west from Calgary to the base of Mount Yamnuska, a vertical south-facing wall at the Rockies' eastern edge. This would be their first climb together. Leo's leg had finally healed and he was keen to explore this new limestone rock face, which was similar to their home mountains. Wearing only crepe-soled street shoes, Leo led, followed by Isabel Spreat, an English physiotherapist and keen climber. Hans climbed with another partner on a second rope, and three others climbed on a third. Soon the others retreated and Hans soloed up to join Leo and Isabel.



From left, Hans, Leo and Heinz Kahl relax on the summit of Mount Yamnuska after climbing Direttissima. Photo Gmoser family collection.

Reaching a wide chimney with very large exposure beneath him, Leo peered up into the dark vertical cave, hoping for a way through. With snowflakes falling in the late afternoon sky, he climbed to the stone ceiling and discovered a hole large enough to fit his body through. He quickly belayed his partners up.

In making that casual ascent on Mount Yamnuska's steep south face, Leo, Hans and Isabel established the first modern climb in western Canada.



Grillmair Chimneys rises to the prominent V notch below the white clouds, in the right third of the mountain face. Photo by Chic Scott.

"We were in a snowstorm at the end," Leo says. "When we got to the bottom of the chimney, it didn't look too encouraging. All of a sudden I saw light, and I thought, Jesus, there's a hole up there! It was just big enough to fit my body through, I was only 130 pounds back then, I could go through it like a snake. By the time we got down to the bottom, my soles were coming off."

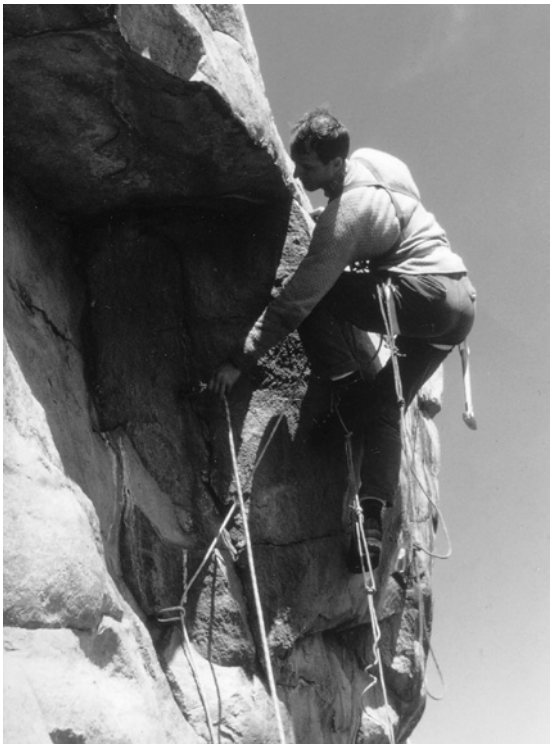
Over the years, Leo repeated his namesake route many times.

"I climbed it many times; I climbed it a lot of times without a rope, by myself," he says. "At the time I had very strong arms. I was a plumber, and back then the pipes were two-inch galvanized steel and we screwed them together by hand first, before we used a pipe wrench. Do that 100 times a day—my grip, my hands were incredible strong. I just

put my arms across and pulled myself up. I could spread my legs and pull myself up with my knees. That was my speciality. We didn't use pitons or anything like that. In those days, we didn't think of those things. First of all, we didn't have it, but it wasn't my style.

"When we came to Canada, Hans and I, the rock climbing wasn't done yet. The Alpine Club, they climbed the easy route to the summit. We looked for the hardest route up. The peak wasn't important. It looked like a nice face for good climbing. After that Hans and I, we put some harder routes up, and then Brian Greenwood and those guys, they put up some really hard routes.

"I read in an American magazine once that gave me credit for starting rock climbing in North America. I had no idea. That easy route? It's almost embarrassing."



Leo executing his technique on a glacial erratic (Okotoks Rock) near Okotoks, Alberta, circa mid 1960s. Photo Lloyd Gallagher collection.

Two-way street

With his leg fully healed, Leo concentrated on earning money to pay the bills that had accumulated. At the end of the year, Louis Dopf helped him acquire work in Cold Lake to work on the construction of a new air force base. There, Leo earned $1.80 an hour, starting out as a plumber, then driving truck. Soon his hospital bill was paid and by Christmas 1954 he'd saved enough money for an important trip to Austria.

"At that time, people always said, once you go to America, that's it, we never see you again," Leo explains. "So I wanted to prove to them it's a two-way street. In those days that was still difficult."

Leo sailed on the Queen Elizabeth from New York to Cherbourg, France, then traveled by train to Austria. Back home, Leo made a good impression – not only had he come back for a visit, he had not returned empty-handed.

"I was the king, let me tell you!" he grins. "I had about $2000, I think. I stayed for three months. I could afford all the things – the ski areas I couldn't afford before. My friends all envied me – wow!"

But while he enjoyed his visit, Leo knew Austria was no longer his home. Before leaving Canada he'd purchased a return ticket. While his official story was that he'd return to Canada for a few more years, make some money and then go "home" to Austria, he knew that wasn't going to happen.

"We were already hooked," Leo states. "The freedom – we could stretch out here [in Canada]. Especially at that time in Austria, it wasn't that good. During the war, and after the war, I sometimes went to work and in my lunch box I had one cold boiled potato. And we had to work in those days. We had a city to build up again, from all the bombing. We worked hard – on one cold potato. I don't know how we could survive."

That first visit in 1955 was not his last; every few years Leo had enough money saved up to visit his family in Austria.

On his way back to Paris, at Innsbruck a young woman lugged a big suitcase onto the train. Speaking German, Leo offered

his help. When she replied in English, Leo spoke English too, much to the woman's delight.

"Well, we spent four or five days in Paris together," Leo recalls. "It was beautiful. She was an American girl who went to University in Paris. So she showed me Paris."

At the train station preparing to say goodbye, they learned Leo's ship, the Queen Mary, would be delayed. The ticket master handed them two days' living expenses.

"Oh what a gift!" exclaims Leo. "So we had another two days in Paris, all paid. It was fantastic!"

Leo, second from left, enjoyed skiing with old friends on a visit to Traunsee, Austria, circa 1959. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

Growing family

On a warm July evening in 1957, Leo and Hans visited the summer home of Hans' girlfriend at the time, Doreen Tynan. Leo was accompanied by his current girlfriend, and the group partied on the shores of Ghost Lake, west of Calgary. Through much of the evening, Hans was engrossed in conversation with Doreen's roommate, an adventurous young Austrian woman named Elfi Steiner. In 1953, when she was just 22, she had travelled from Vienna across Europe on a moped, visiting eight countries over the course of a year. After returning to Austria, she soon set off again, touring Switzerland, France and Spain, and wrote a book about her adventures, called Eine Madchen Seiht Europa. At the party, Hans, Leo and Elfi sang their favourite Austrian folk songs around the campfire. After Leo drove his girlfriend home, he returned and drove Elfi to her home. In May, 1958, Leo and Elfi were married, and a year later, she graduated from the University of Alberta with a degree in geology.

In 1959 Carl was born, followed by Elizabeth (Liesl) in 1960 and Walter in 1962. As if raising three small children and working part time identifying microfossils for an oil company wasn't enough, from 1961 to 1966 Elfi ran the office of Hans' Rocky Mountain Guides Limited from Leo's and her home in Calgary – a job which also required that she cook and do laundry for a steady stream of clients. No doubt, her hard work was invaluable toward the success of Hans' growing company.

Domestic life, however, did not stifle Leo's adventures.

Go north young man

In 1961, Leo, along with Phil Brett, son of former Alpine Club of Canada president John Brett, was hired by Vancouver mine engineer, Rod McRae, to collect samples from a mountainside. Leo spent three weeks at Border Lake, on the Canada/US boundary about 110 kilometres east of Juneau. Since Phil was not an experienced climber, Leo worked on the cliffs alone.

One day, after filling his rucksack with molybdenum, he realized he couldn't build a rappel anchor in the crumbly rock. He also realized he didn't want to downclimb with a pack full of rocks.

As he coiled his rope, the helicopter that was parked on the nearby glacier – a small two-seater Hiller 12 E with floats – started its engine. Flying with no doors, the pilot hovered and motioned to Leo.

Leo dressed and ready for another adventure. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

"Jump! Jump! Holy shit!" Leo exclaims. "Well, I didn't have much time to think, for one, and it was an easy way out. I just picked up this pack, and threw it over into the machine, and he held it down. Then I pushed off of this rock face, and jumped over, landed on that float. Then I put my hands inside. As soon as I hit, he had to lift off, because a small machine like that, I pull him down, and the rotors hit the ledge and it's all over. He had to time it perfect. So I landed, and pshzzzz... was outside and sailing away. Every pilot I ever told that has said this guy was crazy, and so were you. I know that! It was my first time ever in a helicopter, that's my excuse. I thought, this is how they do it! Oh yoi yoi!"

During the summers of 1965/66, Leo worked in the north again, this time hired by geologist Walt Sparling to collect lead and zinc samples for Cominco in Greenland. The first summer Leo was there about six weeks. After the job was done, Leo was invited to return the next year. He accepted, but insisted he'd need proper equipment, for which he turned to Brian Greenwood in Calgary who ran a sport shop from his basement. Both enjoyed a shopping spree on Cominco's dime. For a work partner, Leo approached Don Gardner, thus launching Gardner's life-long passion for the far north.

"Hans was very mad, because Hans was planning to have Donnie that summer, to work for him. Hans was mad as hell at me!" Leo recalls.

They arrived in Greenland as soon as the ice melt made passage by ship possible in the spring, staying until September. Their job was to rappel the cliffs and collect samples using chisels on the crumbly rock. In time, Greenland's Black Angel Mine would be among the most productive in the world.

Leo enjoyed being there, and even found a singing companion in the wife of Captain Oster.

"They were wonderful people. She loved to sing, and so did I," Leo admits. "We sang all those northern sailor songs together, ah, she was as happy as can be. She always said, Leo, you got any laundry to do? We were singing in the evenings, the two of us. Oh, such a sweetheart!"

After the job was done, Cominco paid Leo's way to visit Austria.

Home sweet home, base camp at Mount McKinley. Photo by Gunti Prinz.

Expedition

By the mid 1960s, Hans had a few ambitious climbing and ski mountaineering expeditions behind him, and in the spring of 1963, Leo embarked on his only climbing expedition with Hans. Led by Hans, the team also included Pat Boswell, Hans Schwarz, Gunti Prinz, Dieter Raubach, Tom Spencer and Hank Kauffman. Their objective was Mount McKinley's 40-degree, 4000-metre high Wickersham Wall.

Climbing the Wickersham Wall required hard travel with many heavy loads. Photo by Gunti Prinz.

The group walked fifty kilometres to the base of the mountain, carrying massive loads. On the second day hiking across the tundra, a grizzly approached them. Taking off their packs, they banged their ice axes on pots until it switched direction.

Ten days after starting out they established Camp II at 2750 metres. From Camp III at 3050 metres, the wall rose consistently for 2000 metres, with only one potential campsite. Deciding to keep moving, they ended up climbing 3000 metres in just four days, pitching Camp V at 5050 metres at the top of the wall. Their haste would catch up with them.

The next day, June 11, while Hans Gmoser and Hans Schwarz climbed to 5500 metres to set up Camp VI, Leo and the others descended to Camp IV to fetch supplies. While June 12 had been planned as

a rest day, a sunny, wind-less sky lured them up to Camp VI. When streaks of clouds appeared the following day announcing an impending storm, the climbers were suffering from headaches and nausea.

The following day, Hans, Hans and Gunti reached the summit and descended to Camp VI. Howling winds threatened to shred their tents all through the night. Despite the fact the storm was still raging in the morning, Tom and Hank were so sick they had to descend quickly, so Hans and Hans led them down, battling breathe-sucking winds and poor visibility. After 200 metres they gave up and pitched their tents again and collapsed.

Then things got worse. Waking to two metres of fresh snow, Hans and Hans descended in the storm to get Tom and Hank to a lower elevation. After spending the night in a coffin-sized snow cave where their conditions improved, the following day, Gunti and Pat arrived with the bad news that Leo had lost his eyesight and had passed out after digging a snow cave. Hans and Hans climbed quickly to find Leo in poor shape. Hans Gmoser quickly heated some water to melt a fudge bar and gave Leo two dexodron and two 292s. He then tied Leo to the end of his rope and began walking him down. Fortunately, two hours later Leo's condition improved, but, loaded down with all the tents and gear from high camp, Dieter and Hans Schwarz were exhausted when Dieter announced he'd lost his speech and was paralyzed on one side. Finally, after another night's rest, they all descended to 3050 metres for a solid rest as they waited out several stormy days before they could be flown out.

One of the climbers' camps, notched into McKinley's steep slopes. Photo by Gunti Prinz.

Leo's blindness, he explains, was the result of having split his skull when he was eleven or twelve. The nerves attached to his eyes extended past the scar, and on McKinley the blood flow had been impeded. Today he remembers how his teammates cared for him.

"It was a good team. Everyone was there for each other when they needed help," Leo states.

A few extra runs

Of the life that Leo and Hans discovered in Canada, it was a simple suggestion from a ski touring client to use a helicopter to gain an extra run or two that was to have an utterly unforeseeable – and immeasurable – effect on not just a pair of Austrian-born ski guides who were in love with the mountains of western Canada, but on western Canada itself.

In April 1965, Hans hosted the first two weeks of commercial helicopter skiing in B.C.'s Bugaboos. The skiing was superb; the

adventure unparalleled. The following year, Hans provided six weeks of helicopter-assisted ski touring in the Bugaboos for seventy guests.

Until that year, Leo had been guiding ski touring weeks with Hans from their base at the Stanley Mitchell Hut in Little Yoho, working the season right through.

"We thought, well, the winter is here, this is our season," Leo says. "We didn't think of a week off. We didn't think it was so bad. We liked skiing."

The weeks were not without some challenges – or mishaps.

"I broke my leg once up there, because of the safety [bear trap-style] binding," Leo recalls. "We didn't know yet how to adjust them proper. So I skied down and one of my skis came off while I was skiing. So I kept on going on the other ski, and the ski that came off was turning like a propeller beside me, and all of a sudden it came in from the side and whack! Broke my bone, the little bone just above the ankle."

Ski bindings, Leo says, have come a long way since then.

Franz Dopf, Hans and Leo savour the scenery in the Little Yoho Valley, 1952. Photo Franz Dopf collection.

Another day, Leo was buried in an avalanche on the slopes of Mount Pollinger.

"The first avalanche we had in Yoho, I was in there, and Philippe Delesalle and Kurt Lukas. We cut it off ourselves," says Leo. "But it took me all the way down, over some cliffs, and a long ways down. At the end somehow my body was buried, but my head was up. I don't know how I did that."

Frantic, the others searched for Leo, thinking he was buried high on the slope. Far down the slope, Leo began digging himself out.

"I had two short skis on my feet; they were broken off in the back and in the front. Both skis!" he exclaims. "And my gloves and my sleeves, from the elbow down, was all gone. My steel ski poles, which I was so proud of, the first steel ski poles, they were twisted like somebody put a knot into them. It was a violent avalanche. How I survived, I don't know.

"So finally, I could breathe again, so I let out a yodel, and they heard me on top and they came schussing down. Hans was hugging me – I thought he was going to kiss me! He was so worried."

Back at the hut, dinner became a celebration.

"We had three English nurses with us, and they had all kinds of medicine and they

Hans, far right, and Leo next to him, gather with their ski group at Stanley Mitchell Hut in the Little Yoho Valley, B.C., Christmas, 1953. Photo Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies Archives.

doped me up like you wouldn't believe, because my ankle was quite badly sprained," Leo continues. "We had some wine; we drank it all, we were so happy we were all alive. We were stupid – we caused that avalanche, if anybody ever did."

In the morning they packaged Leo on a toboggan, Hans convinced his leg was broken.

"I said no, I don't think so. Ya, I know. Hans always knew everything," Leo grins. "They dragged me all the way down to Field and by the time we got down there a day later, they released me. I stood up at the hospital, on one leg, and Hans was mad. Jesus, you don't have a broken leg! I said I told you!"

When the touring season was over, Leo would resume working as a plumber.

"In the winter the boss was quite happy to get rid of me, because there wasn't that much work for the plumbing company," Leo says. "So then I'd go with Hans, in the spring I come back; he was happy to have me back again, so it worked perfect."

His last official plumbing job was for Calgary's Foothills Hospital.

Having earned his guides' licence with Walter Perren in 1957, Leo was one of the founding members of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides formed in 1963, the first non-European member of the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations. This 1967 photo of ACMG members shows, from back row left, Don Vockeroth, Ottmar Setzer, Bob Geber, John Gow, Charlie Locke and Bernie Royle. Front, Leo, who served as the ACMG's first treasurer and as an examiner, Lloyd Gallagher, Hans Gmoser, Peter Fuhrmann and Hans Schwarz. Photo Chic Scott collection.

"I was the steam fitter foreman once, and then I built the sterilizing plant, downstairs where they sterilize the water for the operations," Leo recalls. "That was a beautiful job. Woah! And that was actually my last job; then Hans said Leo, I need you all the time, because the next year we built the Bugaboo Lodge."

Project manager

Bugaboo Lodge. Photo CMH.

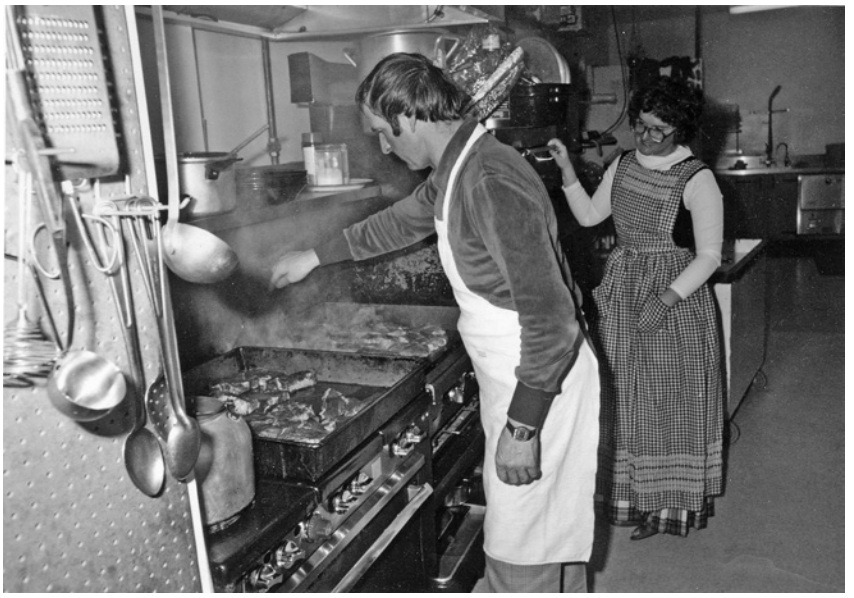
Opening in February, 1968, at first Bugaboo Lodge accommodated thirty-six guests – four groups of nine skiers, which, with one guide, fit perfectly in the 204 helicopter piloted by Jim Davies. Soon they graduated to a 205, then eventually the 212, which accommodated eleven skiers, plus a guide, a formula employed to this day at most of CMH's twelve lodges.

By 1969 Bugaboo Lodge had already been expanded to accommodate more guests, and to provide the private rooms and third-floor toilets and showers they requested. Leo took on the role of lodge manager while he guided skiers alongside fellow guides Rudi Gertsch, Frank Stark, Herb Bleuer, Peter Schlunegger and Hermann Frank, with Lloyd "Kiwi" Gallagher running the ski touring program. Nobody thought much about weeks off.

"At the beginning, we had four guides, and they did everything," Leo recalls. "The generator, the firewood, one guy did the bar, one guy did the paperwork in the office. In those days we were healthy and strong and tough. We didn't know any other way. Don't forget, we just came from a hell of a rough time over there, so we weren't spoiled. We could take it."

Hans was in a hospital bed in Calgary recovering after breaking his leg in a nasty climbing accident in the Bugaboos when he hired a young woman named Lynne Seidler to run the lodge kitchen.

"I walked into the kitchen, and there was this girl. Margaret [Gmoser] was teaching her things," Leo recalls.



Leo shows off his cooking prowess for his wife Lynne in the Bugaboo Lodge kitchen, which she ran for two decades, circa 1970s. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

Lynne Grillmair

While Leo was out guiding skiers, managing the lodge and entertaining the guests with his singing and story-telling, for twenty years Lynne was there too, not just as Leo's wife, but as the kitchen manager working hard to keep forty-four guests per week happily fed.

Lynne had excelled in home economics at high school, winning many prizes. She studied food chemistry and vitamin deficiency diseases.

"But there was so much science, and I really wanted to be a designer," she admits. "But I had been collecting recipes and cooking at home since I was twelve."

Still, she never planned to make a career of cooking, and after graduating from the University of British Columbia with a degree in art history at twenty-two (today she is a talented artist), she took a cooking job at Lake O'Hara Lodge. Knowing she wanted to work a winter somewhere she could learn to ski, when a girlfriend who was dating one of Hans' guides told her Bugaboo Lodge needed a cook, she went to see Hans in hospital in Calgary with his broken leg suspended in the air in a cast. She got the job.

The friend had told her the food was really simple, that it all came out of cans. She had a lot to learn – it didn't all come out of cans – and to explain to her parents.

"My Mom said, 'You didn't get an education to be a cook!' " Lynne recalls. "The work was hard, physically hard."

The hardest thing she had to get used to wasn't the cooking. Having grown up in a strict household with a father who expected certain standards for his daughter, it took Lynne some time to become accustomed to the lodge atmosphere.

"The hardest thing to learn – I think it was the male domination. I came from a liberal arts background," Lynne recalls. "And I'd never heard such language in my whole life. The f-words were a total shock. Even though we knew the skiing was the most important thing... I didn't ask too many questions, I just stayed quiet, did my thing."

Supervising a staff of three in 1970, which increased as the lodge grew, Lynne worked tirelessly to ensure the guests' comfort, overseeing the kitchen and housekeeping duties. In 1974 Leo and Elfi divorced and in 1975 Leo and Lynne married.

Soon afterward Frank Stark took over maintenance responsibilities, with Mark Kingsbury, who would go on to become president and CEO of CMH in 1991, working in the ski shop.

But what did Leo know about managing a lodge?

"Nothing! We all learned from scratch. Hans did too!" Leo states. "What did he know about finances and running a business like that? We learned a lot from guests. I asked the guests all the time, what do you like, what do you dislike? That's how we learned. At one time, I thought, for the ladies, I'll build nice bidets."

When one American guest inquired as to the purpose of the bidet, Leo suggested she ask Frank Stark, who replied somewhat indelicately.

"Well, she said, I can just do a headstand in the shower for that!" Leo throws his hands in the air. "I took the bidet out, put the shower in."

Lynne Grillmair (then Seidler) canoes on the Bugaboo River in 1968 with Leo's two sons, Carl and Walter. Photo Lloyd Gallagher collection.

Helicopter pilot Jim Davies waits as a skier gets on board for another long run of fresh tracks in the Quintets area of the Bugaboos in 1966. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

No doubt, more than once the culture shock between the unsophisticated European guides and the well-heeled, mostly American guests must have flowed in both directions.

"At the beginning, in the Bugaboo Lodge, we had all dormitories," Leo continues. "One room with eight beds. What we said always, what we're selling is outside, not in here. So as long as they have something good to eat – and I think they always did – and have a warm bed to sleep in, good enough. At the beginning, we didn't even want to put the toilets inside. Hans insisted – they'll have an outhouse. But Philippe, he kept pushing, we have to put some toilets and wash basins and maybe a couple of showers in there. Finally Hans gave in. But that was an unnecessary luxury. We were used to Little Yoho; we had an outhouse. That was good enough."

But it wasn't for the guests, and the

requests kept coming, with the willingness to pay for more luxuries.

"I remember a banker from Seattle, I asked him... in those days it was $640 for a week," Leo recalls. "That would have been about 1969. So I asked him, how do you like it? And he said fabulous, it's the most amazing thing I've ever been in. The only thing wrong is the price. I'm thinking, oh shit, here we go again, because people always complained about the high prices. No, no, he said, you misunderstand. It's far too cheap. I already figured it out – you're not making any profit. No, we didn't, we were always in the red. He said, you should charge at least double. I said, are you crazy? We'll only get half the people! He said, isn't that exactly what you need then? Well, it was a pretty shrewd way of looking. He was right. We always hesitated to go up, because nobody could afford it. Well, that was wrong. We would have gone under pretty dam quick if we didn't. But, those were the things we had to learn as we went. Hans was the financial genius there, no question."

From left, Lloyd "Kiwi" Gallagher, Leo and Rudi Gertsch working hard in the Bugaboos, circa late 1960s. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

It wasn't the first, nor the last time Hans and Leo would learn valuable lessons from their well-educated, savvy clientele.

"We were plumbers and electricians at that stage," Leo admits. "We knew we knew nothing! It was guys like that who were teaching us."

Powder paradise

From the start, CMH lodge managers were mountain guides, setting an example that endures today. For Leo, there was never a question.

"I would have been disappointed if I couldn't guide," Leo insists. "I wasn't going to be up there just to sit in the lodge! The guiding was the number one. The managing, well, all the guides had jobs. Then I was lucky, we hired my wife Lynne, and she took over the inside, so that was great. After dinner, we entertained the people. We had a great time, every night."

Run after run after run of phenomenal skiing was the reward. In the early years, after checking on the snow conditions every morning, the guides were free to ski runs of their choice, so long as the helicopter was in the general vicinity. First descents were a regular treat.

"It's much more controlled now," Leo explains. "At that time it was pretty free. Those pioneer years were beautiful. When we went skiing, sure it was a lot of responsibility, avalanches and everything else. That was the fun part. Making new runs. Every time you went out, almost, from the helicopter you spot a place and think wow, I'm sure that could be skied. So you tell the pilot, could you find a landing up there? And we'd go up and look. Then you ask the crew of eleven skiers, and say okay, we're going to ski this first. They were all, of course, excited.

Oy yoi yoi!"

One day they landed on top of a flat glacier and Leo and Jim McConkey pushed themselves toward a declining slope, a run since called Cannonbarrel.

"It slowly got steeper and steeper and steeper, and I still couldn't see the run, it was steeper yet – so I leaned forward, and finally we saw the actual run," Leo recalls. "It wasn't that steep, it was okay, but at this point, I was wondering, Jesus, you know I got eleven people behind me. Should I turn around now? Or wait until it's too late, or what? So we pushed forward and McConkey was beside me and looking down, wow, it was incredible, about 3000 feet, straight down, without any interruption. Unbelievable! They [the guests] never questioned, they came behind. They trusted us. They expected we knew what we were doing, and hopefully we did!"

Just a few years before Leo retired, one day the pilot flew up the wrong valley on the way back to the lodge and Leo spotted a potential run.

Skiers gather at the helicopter pick up at the bottom of another spectacular run in the backside of Howser Towers, Bugaboos. Photo Lloyd Gallagher collection.

"He found a beautiful big place to land. I had a French group, one guy, Jacques; it was his birthday that day. I said Okay boys, we're doing a new run. And down we went about 3000 feet. It was unbelievable."

Having been instructed not to name any more runs for people, Leo had an idea.

"That evening at dinner, we were all sitting at my table, celebrating, so we said, we'll call it Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques," Leo starts singing, in perfect pitch. "And we had his name in there, one way or another! It's still called that today. It's a beautiful run. You can't always ski, because it's quite tricky.

"Any run, at times, you can ski. At other times, no. If you can't see that difference, you shouldn't be a guide."

Heli-skiers savour some fresh tracks below South Howser Tower in the Bugaboos during the final Nostalgia Week, an annual gathering of long-time CMH guests, in 2005. Photo by Brad White.

A good sportsman

Summer at the lodge presented another challenge.

With not enough summer business to keep the lodge running, they tried a variety of activities, including building tennis courts and canoeing on Bobbie Burns Creek. Hans even sent Leo, who never learned to swim, up to Hinton, Alberta, for canoeing lessons. The course began with eighteen students, and by the time it was over, Leo was the last student hanging in, a natural born survivor.

Eventually Arthur Tauck would suggest to Hans the heli-hiking formula the company kicked off in 1978 and continues to run, ferrying guests into the alpine by helicopter to hike scenic, broad mountain ridgelines and flower-filled meadows.

"That was fantastic, he filled the Cariboo Lodge almost instantly, and we thought, oh my God, this is incredible!" Leo recalls. In the summer of 1980, Tauck filled the Bugaboos too. Meanwhile, Leo had some climbing adventures guiding guests on the Bugaboos' world-famous spires.

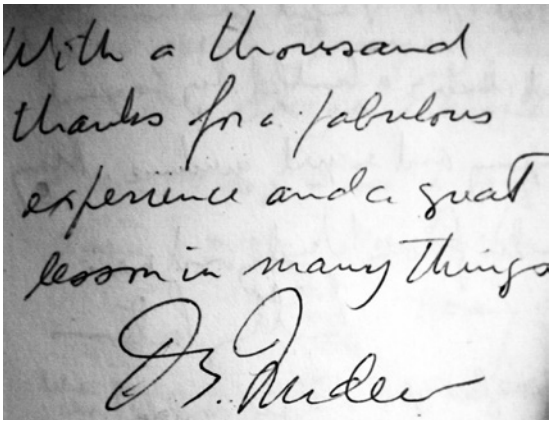
Once, a pair of climbers hired Leo to guide them on Snowpatch Spire. Not far into the climb, Leo realized they were good climbers and asked why they had bothered to hire him. We always get lost, they replied. A little further up the climb, Leo realized he'd been talking too much, and had gone off route. Saying nothing, he kept climbing.

"I figured if we get to the summit, I'm not going to say anything," Leo laughs. "We got there, but boy, that was the toughest climb I ever did!"

Another day on Bugaboo Spire, a guest from New York froze as a lightning storm was rolling in.

"He sits down, he wouldn't go. I just hauled him up and ploughed him one," Leo shrugs. "I thought, oh I'm gonna get it when we get down. But by the time we got down to the hut, he apologized."

On Labour Day weekend in 1968 Leo led an important client. One of Leo's clients had married Tim Porteous, speechwriter and executive assistant to Canada's hip, young Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau. Arrangements were made for Leo to meet Trudeau at the Jasper Park Lodge. Leo drove from the Bugaboos to Calgary, picked up Elfi and sped (for which he is notorious) up the Icefields Parkway.



Prime Minister Trudeau signed Leo's client book. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

When Trudeau invited them to join him for dinner, Leo confessed he only had his mountain clothes, so Trudeau lent him some.

"He said, you come up to my room, I'll fix you up. We're about the same size. He dressed me up very nice, shirt, tie, everything. Then we come down the stairs, and there's a waiter down there stopping us

Leo, left, takes a break on the summit of Mount Colin (2689 metres), in Jasper National Park, Alberta on Sunday, September 1, 1968, with his clients, from left, Allan Moore, RCMP body guard; Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau; Timothy Porteous, speech writer to the Prime Minister; and Wendy Porteous, ardent mountaineer who persuaded the Prime Minister to climb this, his first mountain.

before we got to the bottom, because Pierre didn't have a tie. Pierre was always well-dressed. He had a nice sport jacket, sport shirt. No, you have to have a tie. I was ready to jump him. You asshole, you realize who you're talking to!"

Trudeau stopped Leo from slugging the waiter and put on a bolo tie.

The next day Leo led the Prime Minister up Mount Colin's east ridge along with an RCMP officer, while Willie Pfisterer followed, guiding Tim and Wendy Porteous.

"Trudeau was a good beginner. He was a good athlete, good sportsman," Leo says. "We were talking about politics and this and that. It was 1968, there was also the talk about communism all the time. So at one point, I said jokingly, oh, maybe you'd better know, I once worked for the Russians. Which I did, during the war. And the policeman turns to me and says, don't you think we know? I thought, Jesus, what don't they know? I felt pretty naked!"

After the climb, it was a hot day, and Trudeau wanted beer. Leo said, it's Sunday, there's no beer in Alberta. No problem, Trudeau replied.

"We had lots of beer!"

And Leo talked him into skiing at the Bugaboos. "He only had one thing to know – can you guarantee there'll be no TV and newspapers? He wasn't the greatest skier, but he was tough, he never complained. And he was no chicken shit. As a human being, he was fantastic. He gave me his hot number."

Leo phoned him once to congratulate him on winning an election. He wanted to make sure the phone number was real. They ended up chatting for a few minutes.

Serious business

In the beginning, Hans was at his office in the Bugaboos a lot of the time, while Leo "more or less" followed orders. For Leo, the hardest thing to learn was how to manage other people.

"I'm more a guy that likes to work alone," Leo states. "So, to tell others what to do wasn't really my thing. But I had to learn to some extent. It wasn't my calling. Hans was a born manager of other people. I wasn't always the most diplomatic kind of a guy. I tried my best. Hans was a good boss, but sometimes, boy... we had our blow-outs too, together. But, we talked it out, and that was it. We knew each other from childhood up, we knew each other's faults and good sides. That helped a lot. Still, the business put a lot of pressure on you. Things I hadn't done before. It wasn't that easy."

For lodge staff, life means always being "on".

"From the minute you wake up until you go to bed, they're always there," Leo explains. "People always expect your attention, and, phew, it was tiring. Sometimes, we'd go home after four weeks, Lynne and I, and it took us about three, four days, before we could be ourselves again. We were so under pressure still. So tense with each other. Then by the time Saturday came – back in! Start all over again, another four weeks. And oh, I tell you, it was hard sometimes.

Leo relaxes with his family – Carl, Liesl and Lynne, in the Bugaboos, 2006. Photo by Brad White.

"At Little Yoho all we had to do was get the food up there, shovel out the cabin, make firewood, and get a cook, then do the cooking and we'd go skiing with the people. That was it. The responsibility was still there, but it was lot less trying for us than once we had our own business. For Hans especially, all those lodges. I just had to look after the Bugaboos. He had to look after everything."

Before long Hans opened Cariboo Lodge with Kiwi running it, and later Rudi Gertsch ran the Monashees. From the start, Hans always trusted his lodge managers, and none of them ever stopped learning. When they began using the first avalanche transceivers, Skadis, they only bought enough for the skiers in the first group, thinking they were in the most danger. Before long they bought enough for all the guests.

The guides also made sure they were up on their first aid skills.

"We did some pretty good first aid in those days, I tell you," Leo states. "One time I had a guy, Ed Meade, an English guy, tougher than hell. He broke his leg, he was on a very steep little slope and he fell. Ed, are you okay? Oh ya, ya, I'll just be a minute. But I thought it looked strange, because his leg was 180 degrees from his ski."

Leo packaged him up on a new model emergency sleigh, which gradually fell apart. With the rest of the group already down, Leo and Ed stopped at a mid-way pick up and attempted to radio the lodge.

"Our radios didn't work worth a damn, I could see the lodge right there and I couldn't connect it," Leo recalls. "So, I said, well Ed, I'm afraid we're gonna stay here tonight – it was getting dark slowly. I gave him all the clothing I could spare. I wasn't going to be facing a nice night. We had one chocolate bar in my pack. I said this is our dinner. Then I saw the lights at the lodge, and I thought yeah, they're gonna have a roast beef dinner, and I'm having half a chocolate bar."

Images like this helped entice a lot of people to experience heli-skiing. Photo by Brad White.

Of course, the other staff, particularly Lynne, realized Leo was missing. Just before dark, the helicopter retrieved them.

"Home we went," Leo says. "And we had roast beef that night."

At the lodge, Leo and Hans set Ed's leg.

"I put my foot in his crotch, and pulled on the leg as hard as I could, and turned it around, because the toes were pointing backwards," Leo describes. "So I was hoping

Veteran CMH guides get together in the Bugaboos for CMH's 40-year anniversary in 2006. From left, Herman Frank, Leo, Peter Schlunegger, Rudi Gertsch, Lloyd "Kiwi" Gallagher, Hans Gmoser, Sepp Renner, Ernst Buhler, Hans Peter Stettler, Bob Geber, Kobi Wyss. Photo Lloyd Gallagher collection.

I turned it the right way! But I did. And Hans was putting the cast on, and I had to keep holding, so the muscles don't contract. I held it until it was dry."

Ed sat contentedly by the fire until Saturday, when they flew him to hospital in Golden, B.C.

"They made an x-ray, they said perfect setting. They never even took the cast off. Charged him a bunch of money. I said hey, I did the work!"

Ed was back skiing the following winter.

The company's first avalanche fatality happened in 1974, in the Cariboos. Leo answered the call from the officer manager, Pat Lever. "That was always the hard part," he admits.

"Another year, a lady from Germany got killed, and one other person. A year later her daughter came over to work in the Bugaboos. And one day, the helicopter came back to pick up lunch, and he could pick up two or three staff members from the lodge to go out. But the one girl didn't make it. The helicopter crashed, and the other two girls were killed. Ya... Could you imagine if the other girl had been in it? Her father..."

Heli-skiing involved a lot more variables all working together at a much faster, more complicated pace than ski touring. With only a single strap holding the skis down in the basket, the wind generated during flight had lifted the tips. The skis hit the tail rotor. Miraculously, the pilot survived his injuries and undeterred, returned to flying.

"I've been in many avalanches," Leo shrugs. "If I stopped [skiing] each time, I would have stopped a long time ago. But I managed somehow, always to get out of it, many times."

Hans Gmoser, Chic Scott, Mireille Delasalle, Skip Pessl, Lynne Grillmair, Margaret Gmoser and Leo Grillmair gather in front of Mount Assiniboine Lodge during a multi-day ski tour in 2001. Photo by Chic Scott.

Feeding the beast

During the twenty-two years that Leo ran Bugaboo Lodge, CMH grew from one to ten lodges. Did Leo and Hans ever look at each other and say, whoa, what's happening?

"Many times," Leo replies. "We often wondered, what the hell did we create here? What a monster. It was, eventually, running us. It was a challenge, all the way through, from one end to the other."

As the business grew, so did expectations.

"I think by the guests pushing for it so much, they also lost something – the camaraderie around the fire, and so on," Leo shrugs. "They have all their private rooms, so they go to their room in the evening, rather than sit together in the living room and sing with each other like we did in the beginning in the Bugaboos. Hans, Rudi Gertsch, myself and so on, we were yodelling and singing. We had a great time, and they loved it. But that sort of disappeared. That was not the idea. The idea was to have this camaraderie, together in the evening.

Hans and I, we talked about it many times, but you couldn't stop it anyway. A long time ago, they asked for TV in their rooms. Hans always said no way, not as long as I'm alive. So we never had TV."

Time and technology, however, answered that debate, as today's heli-skiers travel with laptops and personal size DVD players.

"They can't tear themselves away for one week, and be really in the mountains and forget everything else," Leo sighs. "They're so plugged in to the city, still. That's the sad part. That was the whole idea, to be really out there, in nature, and enjoy it. But... I guess you can't turn the times back."

Undoubtedly, the reason for the business's success was simply the hard work and drive of the people behind it.

"Hans always had Conrad Kain as his idol, and that's the standard he wanted to eventually achieve," Leo explains. "He was his idol, and mine. Conrad Kain did a fantastic job, what he did. But so did Hans, in a different way. I don't think Hans needed to look up to Conrad Kain. Hans did his own thing, just as great, in my opinion."

Lynne and Leo enjoy a sunny day at the Conrad Kain Centennial Celebrations in Wilmer. B.C., 2009. Photo by Lynn Martel.

Leo (left) and Hans sing, accompanied by zither music at Mount Assiniboine Lodge, March 2001. Photo by Chic Scott.

But no matter the heights he reached, Hans always aimed higher, with Leo beside him.

"He was never satisfied with himself," Leo says. "That way, I must say, was almost a sad thing, because he could never relax. He always had to achieve more. He expected so much from himself. Sometimes too much. But, the company would have never grown to what it did without that. I went along for the ride, and for the joy of it a lot of times. But, for tough work too."

At the beginning, it seemed perfectly logical to build the Bugaboos, and even Cariboo Lodge, he says.

"We had nothing to lose, and we managed to pay it off," Leo says. "But then after that, when Hans said he wanted to build another lodge, I said Jesus Christ Hans, we have such a nice thing now. Why risk it? But Hans, he couldn't stop. Then with the Bobbie Burns, he really did risk it. Some guests rescued us. Lots of times, guests helped us lots."

Does Leo ever go back to the Bugaboos?

"Oh ya," he grins. "I love going up there. It's like my home almost. We put so much into it, for so long, that you cannot pull away from that and just forget about it. No. I go to the other lodges too, sometimes. I just invite myself!"

Brisco

About ten years ago, Leo and Lynne, Hans and Margaret and Philippe and Mireille [Delesalle] hiked from hut to hut across Austria's Oetz and Ziller valleys.

"We went to sixteen huts, and Hans brought his zither along, that was always a must for him," Leo says. "After supper, he unpacked his zither and started playing. Often, the owner of the hut, he'd play an accordion or something. In no time, we had all the people sitting around us. They said, my God, we haven't heard this for so long! One lady was from Innsbruck, she said I'm trying to teach my boys a little. It's impossible. They just want to watch the television. She was so discouraged. We had great fun, every night. But it's a thing that's dying out."

Many years ago, Leo and Lynne bought eight acres of land in Brisco, not far from the start of the dirt Bugaboos road. When he and Lynne retired, they finally had time to live in the house they built there, where Lynne tends to a bountiful vegetable garden and Leo indulges his first love, woodworking, in a spacious and impressively well-equipped workshop.

Plumbing, he explains, was his mother's choice.

"I wanted to become a woodworker. That was my love. But my brother was already a woodworker. My mother said we already got a woodworker. What do we need? Plumber – you're gonna be a plumber."

Today, Leo's sister Anni is his only surviving sibling. Liesl lives in Calgary with her family, Carl is a PhD physicist living in California, and Walter died in the early 1980s.

I had to ask Leo – was running CMH anything like being on an expedition with Hans?

"That's a loaded question," Leo replies. Then after a moment's thought, continues. "I was always on an expedition with Hans! He expected you to perform at all times, and he had a high standard and his standard was the only one that counted. It was okay, I learned a lot from that."

As Leo said this, I couldn't help remember when Mark Kingsbury was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident in 2001. His memorial drew more than 1000 people, including loyal CMH guests who flew from around the continent. I thought about how that spoke volumes to the respect and admiration those guests felt not just for Mark, but for the company Hans and Leo and countless staff nurtured through the decades. I remembered how Hans stood on that stage in Canmore's Centennial Park and said how much he had appreciated Mark's personality traits that were different from his own, particularly Mark's diplomatic skills. I have no doubt, had Leo left this world first, that Hans would have been speechless with gratitude for Leo's loyalty and friendship.

Looking back on his life, Leo summed it up.

"I wouldn't trade my life for anybody's. It was so fascinating this way."

Leo enjoys himself in the Bugaboos during CMH's 40-year anniversary. Photo Leo Grillmair collection.

A Life So Fascinating:

Leo Grillmair

From poor and weary post-WWII Europe to the wild and free mountain wilderness of western Canada, Leo Grillmair's life story is one of terrific adventure. Arriving in Canada from Austria in 1951, Grillmair and his life-long friend and business partner Hans Gmoser seized on the opportunities their newly-adopted country presented them and introduced Canadians to a whole new way of climbing rock faces. Brimming with optimism and industriousness, Grillmair applied an unwavering work ethic to help build a seasonal ski touring business to a 10-lodge helicopter skiing empire, which changed the face of backcountry recreation in the western hemisphere. As manager of Bugaboo Lodge, the world's first heli-skiing lodge, in the world's first and still largest helicopter skiing company, Canadian Mountain Holidays, Grillmair was instrumental in nurturing an entire industry that continues to employ hundreds of mountain guides, cooks, housekeepers, maintenance workers, pilots, engineers, massage therapists and numerous other office and lodge staff every year. Plumber, climbing pioneer, novice lumberjack, skier, professional rock collector, mountain guide, first-aid whiz, lodge manager, singer and storyteller extraordinaire, Leo Grillmair's life is the stuff of which great stories are born. The Alpine Club of Canada is proud to celebrate its 20th Mountain Guides Ball with Leo Grillmair as Patron.

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