Mountain of Dreams

Rudi Gertsch

by Lynn Martel

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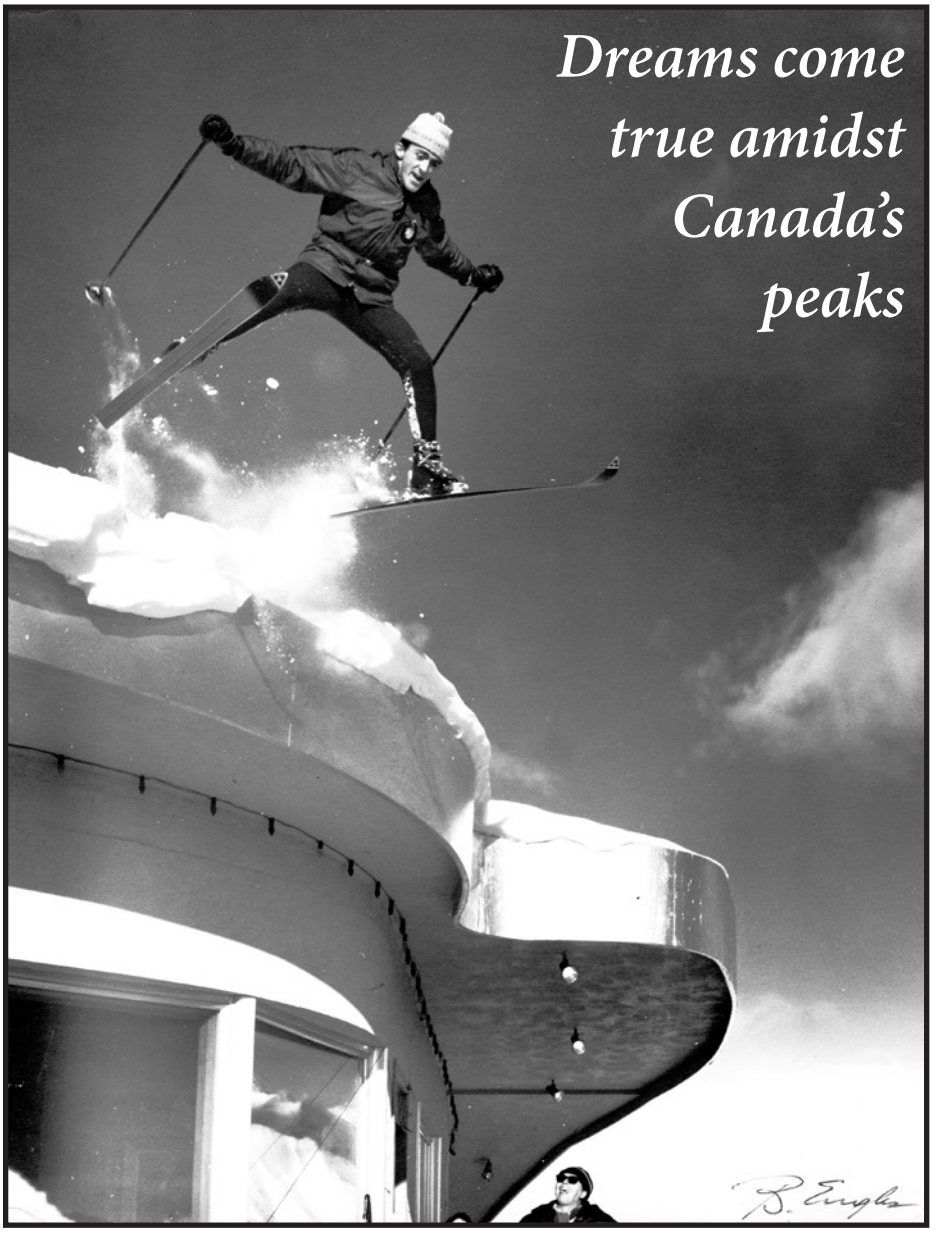

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Front cover photo: Rudi demonstrates the dulfersitz rappel technique in the mid-1970s. "Those socks were air conditioning. If you got warm, you pulled your socks down; if you got cold, you pulled them up." Bruno Engler archives.
Back cover photo: Rudi and his son, Jeff, enjoy their home mountains, BC's Purcells.
Title page photo: Rudi launches some really big air off the roof of the Mount Norquay Teahouse in 1967. Bruno Engler archives.

Introduction

You can tell a lot about a man by his hands. Rudi Gertsch's hands are tanned and strong, like the sturdy roots that support and nourish the tallest trees in the forest. Rudi's hands tell a story of tremendous labour and capability—creating a business, leading industry groups and professional organizations, running a farm; always willing to embrace one more task.

Throughout his life, Rudi's hands have connected him to the mountains—whether grasping a firm hold on cool, hard rock as he guided clients up ridges to lofty summits, shovelling snow pits and planting ski poles as he guided people on touring and heli-skiing adventures across untracked wilderness slopes, milking cows on cold winter mornings, digging in dirt to plant potatoes or clear a field of boulders and stumps to plant acres of hay, or milling wood harvested from his own forest to build a staircase for his home. Rudi's life has always been driven by his connection to nature, to the mountains, the earth, high alpine tarns and the wildflowers blooming in alpine meadows.

As a second-generation Swiss guide and a second-generation farmer, Rudi embodies a depth to both crafts that runs as deep as the braid of the Blaeberry River that runs through his land—both crafts are balanced components of a full life.

In both his Purcell Heli-Skiing lodge/office in Golden, or at home on his farm a few kilometres further up the Columbia Valley, Rudi wears his Swiss roots on his sleeve—or his knickers—but the story of his life is a lot like the balance he finds being both farmer and mountain guide; the balance that evolves from a life filled with adventure, good fortune and hard work as a Swiss Canadian who embodies an unbridled love for the mountains of both his homes.

Here is Rudi's story.

—Lynn Martel

In the shadow of the Eiger

For a climber, there is hardly a more iconic mountain in all of the European Alps than the enigmatic Eiger. As such, anyone born under the shadow of such a notable landmark carries for life a distinguished pedigree.

The son of a Swiss mountain guide, Rudi Gertsch carries just this pedigree. The third of Rose and Oskar Gertsch's four children, Rudi was born in 1945 at the foot of the Jungfrau range in the Bernese Oberland village of Wengen. On a visit to his homeland in 2011, Rudi traced his family tree back 12 generations to 1620; a house built by those ancestors still stands, complete with its still functioning wooden chimney. Rudi's grandparents ran a hotel and general store, a business which his father was expected to carry on. Oskar however, decided he liked outdoor work better and forged a career as a mountain guide. A dedicated, industrious farmer, he also raised prize-winning Simmental cattle.

Rudi's grandparents, Margaret and Ulrich (back row), ran a hotel and general store, which his father, Oskar (front row, centre) was expected to carry on.

From left, Oskar Jr., Chris, Rosemary and Rudi show off their ski gear in front of the famed Jungfrau Hotel with their "coach", their mother, Rose in 1951. Rose celebrated her 90th birthday in 2010.

Family life for the Gertsch children was typical of those living in villages in the Alps not accessible by car (and still not today), tending to farm chores including milking cows. During the sunny summer months Oskar Sr. guided clients to the lofty peaks surrounding the village and in the winter he ran the local ski school. Situated at 1300 metres, Wengen is the home of the International Lauberhorn downhill ski race, founded by Rudi's uncle Ernest in 1930, and run by the family to this day. Naturally, Rudi and his siblings learned to ski as soon as they could stand in their boots, keeping warm in clothes their mother sewed and caps she knit for them.

"The only way to get to school in the winter was on skis," Rudi recalls. "My mother was my coach. Every year she would teach another kid how to ski, then at the end of the season we would ski away from her and she would start the next one. Finally, by the time the last one skied away, she was so discouraged she almost gave up skiing."

In the summer, Rudi and his siblings, Rosemary, Oskar and Chris, would explore the local mountains.

"We used to go up and pick edelweiss and sell it to the tourists. That's how we got extra money to buy our ski pass for the winter."

From an early age, the Gertsch kids had their priorities figured out. With money not being in

abundance during those post-war years, the kids' ski equipment didn't always fit quite right, though.

"My boots were always one or two sizes too big for me; it didn't take much to come out of those boots," Rudi recalls.

One day, Chris crashed, and as he fell, his foot pulled right out of his frozen sock.

"There was this frozen sock sticking out of his ski boot, going down the hill with his ski," Rudi described. "This English lady just happened to watch and she just passed out. She thought he broke his leg off altogether!"

Recognizing a good joke, the Gertsch boys repeated the trick numerous times, undoing their boots and crashing on purpose for unsuspecting spectators.

From a young age, Rudi pushed his skills on the ski slopes, racing at the junior national level, competing in the four-way combined disciplines—ski jumping, cross country, downhill and slalom. For several years, racing and training was quite intense. Then right at the time he was set to make the Swiss national team, while he was out free skiing one day he caught an edge at the end of a long flat section, fell and broke his leg. His coaches told him by the time his leg was healed he would be too old to make the team, but undeterred, Rudi continued racing for another year just to prove he could.

While the Gertsch kids shared plenty of laughs and good times on the ski slopes, they also helped out on the family farm carrying out their daily chores, milking the cows early on cold winter mornings before school, and carrying loads of hay on their backs to store it up in the rafters of the barn.

Rudi demonstrates his impressive technique (in bear trap bindings!) in a Junior Slalom race in the late 1950s. "You didn't hit those poles; you made sure you made a big circle around them!" he recalls.

While farm chores felt just like that—chores—as he was growing up Rudi did recognize the balance the farm brought to his father's skiing and guiding profession.

"My father had 120 ski instructors working under him, but when he came home, after milking the cows for half an hour, he was a different man."

Rudi (left) and his brother, Chris, take in the view from Tschuggen, above Wengen.

A natural born guide

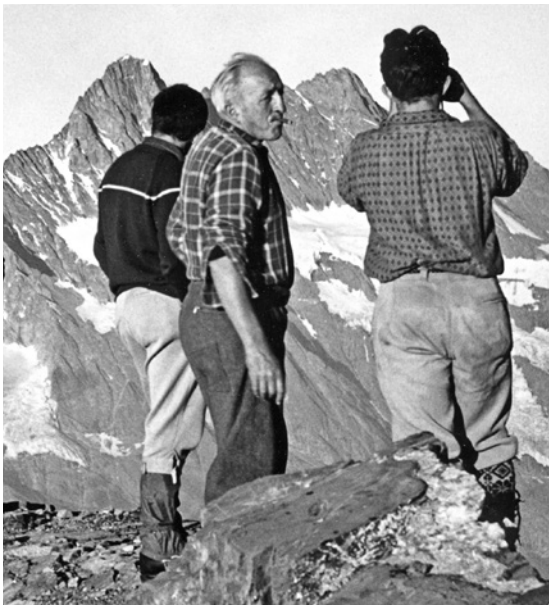
Rudi's father, Oskar (right, in felt hat), ascends a specially-made steel rescue cable to help retrieve the body of Italian climber Stefano Longhi from the steep and daunting Eiger North Face. The complicated recovery mission by the local guides made a significant impression on a teenaged Rudi. (1958).

Rudi knew from a young age that he wanted to be a Bergführer, like his father, and he made a point to sit close by to listen to Oskar's stories about guiding and high alpine rescues. In addition to performing rescues, Oskar also taught guides courses.

It was just one of those stories about a complicated recovery mission on the Eiger's storied north face when he was a young teen that captivated Rudi deeply.

"I was so impressed, how hard the guides had to work together to make the recovery of that body happen," Rudi says. "That really sparked my interest in guiding."

In that era, any time a rescue was needed in the mountains the task fell to the local guides—except for the Eiger Norwand, considered too dangerous a place for men with families to risk their lives. In 1957, a tragic accident on the North Face of the Eiger resulted in the death of one Italian climber, Claudio Corti, while his partner, Stefano Longhi could be seen hanging on a rope, alive. Two other German climbers were unaccounted for and presumed dead.



Oskar Gertsch (left), and Oskar Jr. survey the local peaks from the summit of the Eiger after climbing the Mitteleggi Ridge and traversing the Eiger and Monch. (circa 1963/64).

On that occasion, a German team took charge of the rescue and eventually did pluck Corti alive from the face. The entire process did not go smoothly, however, and in the end much criticism was hurled in the media toward the rescuers and the local guides. In July 1958, the local guides, including Oskar, organized an elaborate mission to retrieve Longhi's body, and hopefully in the process, restore their good reputation.

By then the steel cable had been developed and had been used with a winch to lift injured climbers and their rescuers up steep and vertical terrain. With money from their own pockets, the Swiss guides had special cables constructed and modified, since the steel sliding on limestone would slice a groove into the soft rock. They also needed one long enough, plus they had two 450-metre 12 millimetre hemp ropes manufactured to back up the steel cable. They also rented two enormous, heavy radios.

"It was quite interesting what they did at that time," Rudi recalls. "Because the steel cable was so long and heavy, it took six guides to carry it. It went from one guy to the next, and on his pack he carried a whole bunch of loops. Those six guides, they climbed together to get that cable up there. Then, once it was in place below the Mittellegi Ridge, they had to winch it up, click, click, click, almost 2000 feet; all hand power. Nowadays you

jump in the helicopter, go pick him up and you're gone, five minutes later back in town. To pull a guy off the Eiger North Face it's no big deal anymore, but what it took at that time to organize all that—the Eiger in 1958—that was an important part of my life, watching the closeness between the guides, watching how they worked together, seeing what they could accomplish working as a team."

Today Rudi's nephew, Oskar III, is a rescue helicopter pilot in Switzerland, responding in minutes to calls from climbers in peril on the Eiger Norwand.

By the time Rudi was in his early teens, his dad took him along on trips in the mountains with clients, with Rudi apprenticing as a Träger (porter). To qualify to take his guide's exam, he had to porter for three years. One popular ski trip involved riding the train up to the Jungfrau to ski the Aletsch Glacier, which creeps 30 long kilometres down the Wallis Valley.

"The first time my father took me along, he had guests. We got down in the valley to a little mountain town and we stopped at this inn and everybody had a glass of wine. The guides always had a special place in there, and they used to say to my dad, it's time your son became one of us. That's where I had my first glass of wine, with the guides."

When Rudi was 17, he earned his Träger's badge. Whenever there were extra guests, he was allowed to lead a rope. As a porter, Rudi was also called out to assist on rescues, and there were many. He learned a lot participating in rescues, but after a while the cold reality of the task began to wear on him, and he decided he preferred guiding people.

Oskar Gertsch shows his fine ski jumping form during the Sommerskirennen Jungfraujoch in July, 1938.

The summer of 1965, Rudi served 16 weeks in the Swiss Army. It was, he admits, the last thing he wanted to do, but if he didn't he would not be allowed to do the one thing he really did want to do—earn his Swiss Mountain Guide's certificate. Having broken his leg the winter before, a doctor could have declared him ineligible. If a man was not fit to be in the Swiss Army however, he most certainly would not be fit to work as a Swiss Mountain Guide. Having been assigned as a machine gunner, the senior commanders worried the heavy loads he would be obliged to carry might cause stress on his leg, which still bore several screws to heal the break.

"They didn't want to take the chance," Rudi recalls. "So I had to beg them; please let me join the army!"

As per army rules, any time a recruit screwed up, they were assigned a punishment, often consisting of running extra laps around the obstacle course.

"I really wanted to get back in shape for ski racing, so of course I screwed up, any extra punishment, I was happy to take it. It was extra training. I was begging for it!"

Before long, the officers learned Rudi was an assistant mountain guide, so they assigned him to teach climbing and mountain rescue skills. After that he spent most of his time in the army assigned special jobs and training inexperienced officers on basic climbing skills.


Nr. 900.

GEBÜHR Fr. 5.—

1. TRÄGER-KARTE Carte de porteur

Dem Herrn Rudolf Gertsch

geboren am 26. 4. 1945

gebürtig von Lauterbrunnen

wohnhaft in Lauterbrunnen

wird die Bewilligung erteilt, im Jahre 19 62.

gemäss dem Reglement vom 6. Juli 194 den Beruf als **Träger** im Kanton Bern auszuüben.

REGIERUNGSSTATTHALTERAMT INTERLAKEN

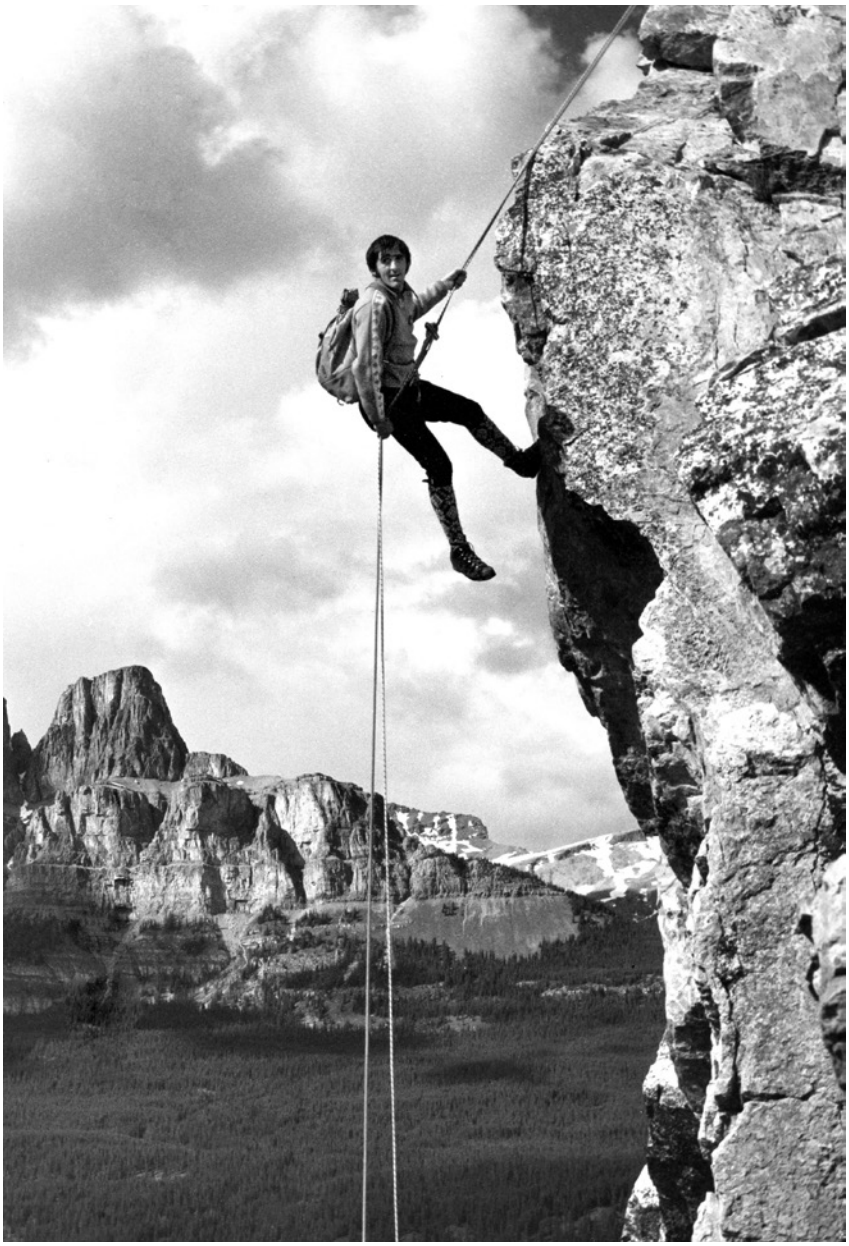
den 12. Juni 1962 19

DER REGIERUNGSSTATTHALTER i. V.:

Rudi earned his Träger (porter) certificate in June, 1962.

To the Rockies on the weekend

When Rudi was four years old, he listened as his father and Peter Schlunegger's father (a fourth-generation guide, Peter would found Revelstoke-based Selkirk Tangiers Helicopter Skiing in 1978), deliberated whether to accept guiding work in Canada. Canadian Pacific Railway was looking for young guides with families willing to relocate to Canada and work from their hotels in the Canadian Rockies, much the way they had enticed the families of Swiss guides to inhabit Edelweiss Village in Golden, BC in 1912. Edmund Petrig and Walter Perren signed on to work from the Chateau Lake Louise—the last Swiss guides to do so—and when CP shut down the program in 1955, Perren became the national parks' first alpine rescue specialist.



Rudi shows off his best style for Bruno Engler's camera on a cliff on Storm Mountain, with Castle Mountain in the background, circa mid-1970s. Bruno Engler archives.

When Rudi was a few years older, he met his first Canadian, Doug Robinson, the long-time owner of Banff's Douglas Fir Chalet. An early Canadian ski bum from Golden slumming in the Swiss Alps, Robinson lived below the Gertsch house. Walking past the house on his way to work after lunch, he would pull Rudi and his siblings to the top of the hill in their little sled, all the while regaling them with tales of Canada.

In the spring of 1966, Rudi, his older brother, Oskar Jr., and their friend Stephen Zurcher, took their ski instructors course. In order to earn their Swiss guide certification they would have to demonstrate conversational ability in a second language so they could communicate with the tourists. Knowing a part of their full guide exam would be in English, they decided living in Toronto would help them improve their skills.

"We thought we could always go out to the Rockies on the weekend," Rudi chuckles.

Rudi took a job as an electrician in a factory—his father had insisted he should have another trade in addition to guiding, so he had apprenticed from the age of 16 to 20.

"That was the only job I ever quit," Rudi recalls. "I lasted three weeks. I quit Friday. At lunchtime I went to the office and told them I was going to leave and I wanted my paycheque at 5 o'clock. I snuck out the back door to a travel agent and booked the trip on the nighthawk to Calgary. My brother said, 'You're crazy! You don't know anybody out west.' I said it's better than sitting in Toronto."

After work Rudi picked up his paycheque and retrieved his suitcase. At the airport a German man told him he would like Calgary since it was close to the mountains. Pushing back doubts, he landed in Calgary in the morning, where the flatness was disappointing. Remembering something about a place called Banff, Rudi quickly purchased a Greyhound bus ticket.

"I walked down Banff Avenue and saw a poster for Rocky Mountain Guides Limited in Monod's ski shop," Rudi recalls.

It was Saturday afternoon and Fritz Junginger was waiting for Hans Gmoser to arrive on his

Rudi (right) listens as Hans Gmoser describes his plans to build a *ski hut*e while they took a break on the summit of Bugaboo Spire. Bugaboo Lodge was built the following year.

regular—and brief—stop in at his office in John and Gertie Hartefeld's house before heading off for another week of guiding. Fritz invited Rudi to hang out and soon enough Hans showed up.

"I happened to be there, just at the right time," Rudi says with a grin. "Hans needed an extra guide the next day to go to Lake O'Hara, and I was hired. I quit Friday, 24 hours later I had the job I wanted, and 48 hours later, I was guiding. I went up to Lake O'Hara– it was incredible."

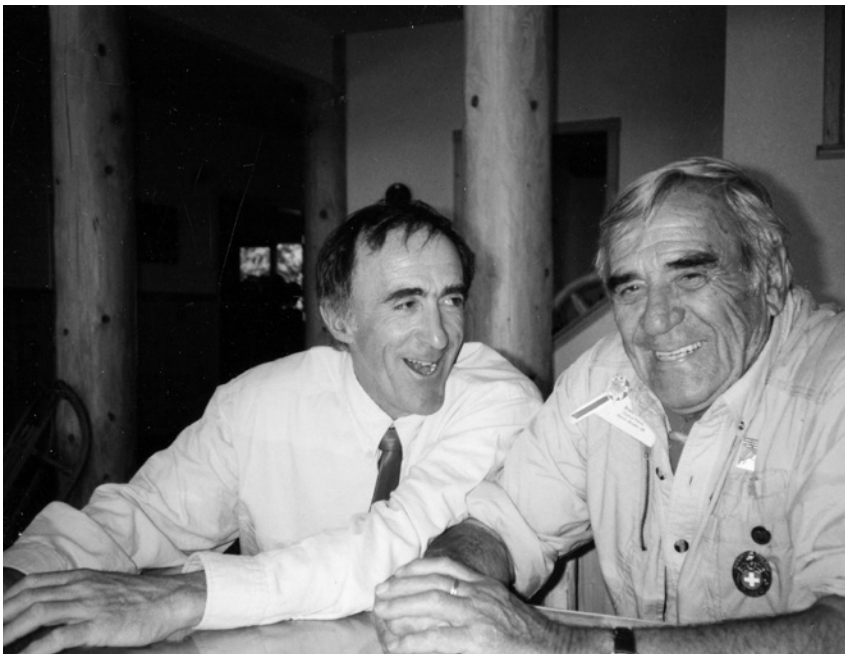
Hans was running his early season week-long climbing camp, and Rudi and Fritz worked under him. The first day they climbed Mount Schaeffer with clients, then the following day hiked up Abbot Pass to climb Mount Victoria.

"Hans had a big Kelty pack. I'd never seen a pack that big," Rudi describes. "In Switzerland you didn't have to pack all that stuff to go out overnight. We carried up firewood so we could cook, and on top of that, all the food and climbing gear for the guests."

For the first time ever, Rudi's pack was so full he had to pull up the extension. At least after all those years hauling hay, Hans was pleased to see his young hire knew how to carry the weight.

While he loved Lake O'Hara, Rudi's first introduction to a Canadian hut was disappointing. Built lovingly by Swiss guides in 1922, in the 1960s Abbot Pass Hut remained CPR property and had fallen into a terrible state of disrepair with panelling ripped off the walls for firewood. The neglect of the historic hut was tough for Rudi to comprehend, accustomed as he was to the high standards of European huts. Years later the hut was turned over to Parks Canada, and it was lovingly cleaned, gutted and re-roofed by volunteers then handed over to the care of the Alpine Club of Canada in 1985. Well-maintained ever since, it was designated a National Historic Site in 1997.

Guiding in the mountains of western Canada, however, was very much to Rudi's liking. Soon he was guiding for Hans in the Bugaboos, carrying



Rudi and his close friend and mentor, Bruno Engler, Rockies' personality extraordinaire, share a laugh at Rudi's Purcell Heli-Skiing office in Golden during the 1999 celebrations marking the centennial of the arrival of the first Swiss guides in western Canada's mountains.

loads up to Boulder Camp from where Hans based his climbing adventures. Rudi recalls sitting on the big boulder where the Conrad Kain Hut would be built five years later.

"I remember so well, Hans told me he was going to build a ski-hute. The next year, he built Bugaboo Lodge."

Rudi's destiny was beginning to take shape, and he decided to stay the winter. Later he would learn that back in Toronto, when Oskar Jr.—also a mountain guide—first learned about Rudi's good fortune, he didn't speak for a week. Oskar spent the following summer in the Rockies, but returned to Switzerland.

Rudi stands next to one of his mentors, Walter Feuz (Syd's father), one of the early Swiss guides who worked from the Chateau Lake Louise in the first half of the 1900s.

For a young man from Switzerland, Banff did provide a few elements of culture shock. The popular night spot, the Cascade Hotel, enforced a ladies and escorts only policy—gentlemen who did not arrive with a date were not welcome.

"We weren't allowed to go and talk to the girls and have a beer," Rudi recalls. "We could only go if we had a lady with us. There was a big sign, Ladies and Escorts. We'd go over there and they'd kick us out and we couldn't figure it out. Why would they want us to go drink with the local drunks? We wanted to meet some girls! And last call was at 6:30."

Rudi worked for Hans Gmoser's summer guiding program based from Boulder Camp in the Bugaboos in from 1966 to 1973.

Indeed, alcohol could not be purchased on a Sunday in Alberta until the law was changed in time for the 1988 Calgary Olympics.

"You could go to the fanciest dining room and they were not allowed to serve you a bottle of wine for supper," Rudi shrugs.

For a time in the late 1960s, Rudi lived at the Alpine Club of Canada Clubhouse on Sulphur Mountain in Banff, quite likely the last resident guide at the historic building which was shut down in 1971 and moved to a new building near Canmore. Today, Rudi appreciates his good fortune to share a part of that history.

"I'd come back from a climb and put my guide's suit on—dress up and go down and have tea. Everybody would have tea at 5 o'clock."

Tea time generated some interesting discussions. Once when Rudi mentioned he was planning to climb Mount Louis the following day, a guest replied, "Ah, we won't see you tomorrow."

"Ya, you will, I'll be back for tea," Rudi promised.

The next day, after climbing Louis with four guests, Rudi was back for tea. Refusing to believe the young Swiss, the clubhouse guests decided they needed proof and set off to climb the Bow Valley landmark themselves. At the summit they read the names of Rudi and his four guests, but having climbed too slowly, they were forced to spend the night out—and miss tea.

"Mount Louis is a tricky one," Rudi says with a confident smile. "With four guests you have to work to keep everybody moving. Those were good days up at the old clubhouse."

Almost as soon as he arrived in Banff, Rudi began hearing stories about an older Swiss guide living in nearby Harvie Heights.

A native of Lugano, Bruno Engler arrived in the Rockies in 1939 and worked as a ski instructor at Sunshine Village. Not only a talented skier and energetic mountain guide, Bruno was a skilled photographer and sought-after cinematographer and film consultant for major Hollywood productions shot in the Canadian West. But while Bruno was highly regarded for all those talents, it was his legendary enthusiasm for a great "parrr-ty" for which he was most famously cherished.

For several winters, Rudi's ski racing background earned him work coaching the Banff Ski Runners, keeping him busy until February, when he would guide for Hans Gmoser's fledgling heli-skiing business in the Bugaboos. Working at Mount Norquay, Rudi began introducing a new style of aggressive skiing to the locals.

"That's when skiing changed. You can't just snowplough around like we did for 100 years. We started to get more air and take bigger jumps—none of this telemarking and staying on the ground." Unlike the kids who catch big air today, Rudi was doing it in leather boots with bear-trap bindings.

That's when he met Bruno, who recruited him for some "action shots". Camera in hand, Bruno "chased me off every rock he knew, at Norquay and Sunshine too!"

When the snow was late to arrive in the fall of 1967, Bruno scored a job photographing ski hills across BC and Rudi tagged along.

"Of course, Bruno knew everybody at all the ski areas. They'd say, 'Bruno, let's have a parrr-ty!' Everybody wanted to know who this crazy skier was that Bruno brought with him. Everywhere the same, one party to the next. We were always hung over. I think that was the longest party I ever attended. It was a real eye-opener for me!"

Naturally, it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. When Bruno—father to 10 children who bore him more than a dozen grandchildren—married his fourth wife, a charming Czech film archivist, Vera Matrasova, in 1996, Rudi stood by him as best man. As a Swiss guide who embodied a deep and full love for the mountains, including Canada's mountains, Bruno was a great mentor to Rudi. So were the Swiss guides.

"I remember old Ed, I used to visit him and Walter [Feuz] in the fall. They were just like grandfathers to me, I had to go and report to them at the end of the season. I even visited Rudolph Aemmer back in Switzerland several times. I was pretty lucky to meet all these guys."

Rudi demonstrates some extreme climbing moves of the late 1960s for Bruno Engler's camera. Bruno Engler archives.

Rudi's friendship with Bruno remained strong until Bruno died at 85 on Friday, March 23, 2000. That very same day Rudi's father also died, at the age of 87. Oskar had been skiing just two weeks earlier.

Skis, camera, action!

In 1969, Rudi grabbed his chance to fulfill his ski racing dream—sort of—working as a ski double on a Hollywood film called ***The Downhill Racer*** starring Robert Redford and Gene Hackman. Telling the story of the international ski racing circuit, scenes were filmed at all the classic downhill courses. As part of the agreement with the FIS to film on the Lauberhorn in Wengen, the Hahnenkamm at Kitzbuhl, Austria, the Grand Prix at Megève in France and the Arlberg Kandahar at St. Anton, Austria—the skiers had to have previous experience skiing those courses.

Rudi (left) poses with E.G. Marshall and Dustin Hoffman, for whom he doubled (cheezy mustache and all) during the filming of *Who is Harry Kellerman* (circa 1970). Bruno Engler archives.

"Robert Redford, he never pulled out of the starting gate, he was so scared," Rudi recalls. "In the next shot, right away it's one of the doubles skiing down."

The shoot was not easy; rather it was dangerous as Rudi and the other doubles skied at speeds up to 120 kilometres per hour carrying a heavy, cumbersome 35 millimetre movie camera strapped to their chests.

"We got footage that at that time was unheard of. Some of it was incredible, but it was never used." The job paid well, but, admits Rudi, "we spent it well too!" While racing on the junior team, partying was out of the question, but this time around he and three other former racers got to know each other well in the weeks before Rudi returned to Canada to guide for Hans Gmoser's growing heli-skiing business.

"After a couple of months the party was over," Rudi says. "By then I was looking forward to the Bugaboos. I knew there wouldn't be any parties there!"

Another film project Rudi worked on with Bruno was the filming of an episode of CBC's ***This Land*** in the early 1970s. Rudi's job was to climb at the back of the Lake Louise using new gear and techniques, while Ed Feuz represented the older generation. It was during that project that Ed climbed up the skinny pinnacle at Abbot Pass, stood on the top and waved goodbye to the mountains.

As they approached the pinnacle, Bruno and Rudi knew what Ed had in mind, but they weren't entirely comfortable with the idea of octogenarian Ed trying to climb in his nail boots without a rope.

"Ed didn't like the idea that this young guide felt he had to look after him," Rudi recalls. "'Get back you greenhorn!' he growled at me. When his nail boot went by my face, I got the message! I still remember Ed saying, 'we never used the piton. When it got tough we used a railroad spike. You pound it in far enough, it holds.' Every once in a while you see a railroad spike—in Rogers Pass you see some—and I think of old Ed."

Working on a film in 1969 though, didn't work out quite so well for Rudi. Filmmaker Jim Rice (an early Warren Miller) was looking for a crazy skier, so Bruno suggested just the guy. The crew set up in Whitefish, Montana. Uncooperative weather delayed the project several times.

"I think by then they were down to plan X,Y,Z," Rudi began. "We met an old cowboy in the bar one night. He said, 'I got this horse, let's go plough this road. That horse can go pretty fast and you can hold on to the lasso.' I figured if it went fine, I could do a flip.

"We built a kicker to get enough lift to do the flip. But I didn't get the speed I wanted, so I pulled a little extra on the rope to get extra lift and I got a little off course and landed in a snowplough pile off to the side. I did the flip anyway and I landed flat and broke my leg right there."

That was the end of the movie and the end of the season, but Rudi's misfortune was good news for Bugaboo Lodge bartender H. P. Stettler who was promoted to guide in the daytime, and also for another Swiss transplant, Sepp Renner.

"Sepp got the Little Yoho ski touring job," Rudi recalls. "There always was a big fight over that job."

For many winters, Rudi guided ski touring trips on the Wapta, Mummery and Freshfield icefields. At the end of a week-long trip on the Mummery Glacier, he found a note from Bruno on the windshield of his car parked at Saskatchewan River Crossing. "Don't shave!" it said. "We need you to

double for a movie."

The star in question was Dustin Hoffman, filming the movie ***Who is Harry Kellerman?***

"Of course, Dustin Hoffman could hardly ski, so we had to teach him," Rudi says.

With Bruno behind the camera, Rudi taught Dustin Hoffman to ski on the Vowell Glacier in the Bugaboos. In the final scene, Dustin Hoffman and E.G. Marshall can be seen skiing across the glacier until they're out of the frame.

The Mummery ski touring trip was one of Rudi's favourites. Starting with a snowmobile tow from Golden up the Blaeberry River, the group would ski onto the Mummery Glacier, camp on the Freshfield Icefield and then take off their skis to climb Nanga Parbat Mountain.

"It was always a great dream to take off for ski touring," Rudi admits. "No radio, no communication. Leave Golden and in a week we'd be at Saskatchewan River Crossing. Another trip was Fairy Meadow, in the Selkirks. Besides heli-skiing, that was our 'week off', to guide ski touring. Every one of us—Hans, Leo [Grillmair], Kiwi [Gallagher]—we always enjoyed ski touring."

Rudi gets his cowboy on

For a couple of summers, Rudi guided a family from the U.S. whose ranch in the southern Canadian Rockies was next door to conservationist Charlie Russell's place. The family children were keen on climbing, so Bruno suggested Rudi could teach them to climb safely. On their first trip, Rudi hiked up Mosquito Creek and over North Molar Pass to rendezvous with the group at Fish Lakes, where they had set up a second camp, complete with horses. As a kid, Rudi had a donkey that was so stubborn that only Rudi—who was equally stubborn—could work with him. Working with horses, however, was new.

As a kid, Rudi had a pack donkey named Etta, but that experience only partially prepared him for horse-assisted adventures in the Canadian Rockies.

Since he hadn't been there when the horses had been unpacked, he hadn't seen how it was done. The next morning with Charlie off, the girls asked Rudi to pack the horse.

"I said I don't know how to pack a horse. They said, 'well, Charlie said, tell Rudi to pack the horse.' But I don't know how to pack a horse! If I had been there to take the boxes off, I probably would have remembered how to do it. But I'm looking at these boxes and looking at the pack saddle and oh my god! I ended up tying all those boxes on with a butterfly and a prussic knot and every climbing knot I knew."

Rudi proceeded to guide the kids on a climb, while some of the others walked the horses over mountain passes back to base camp.

"That night I came into camp and Charlie was laughing," Rudi recalls. "He said 'Rudi, after supper, we better go in the back and I'm gonna teach you how to pack a horse! I've seen a lot, but I've never ever seen anything like this. But, in all due respect, the boxes stayed on.' Charlie took a bottle of whiskey and we went out in the back and got his horses. It was great to learn from a guy like Charlie Russell to pack a horse. I learned a lot on those trips."

Like so many mountain guides, Rudi says one of the best things about his profession is the people he's met.

"Some of the people I met as a guide, they were super interesting people I would never have had the chance to meet otherwise. It was because of guiding that I met all these people."

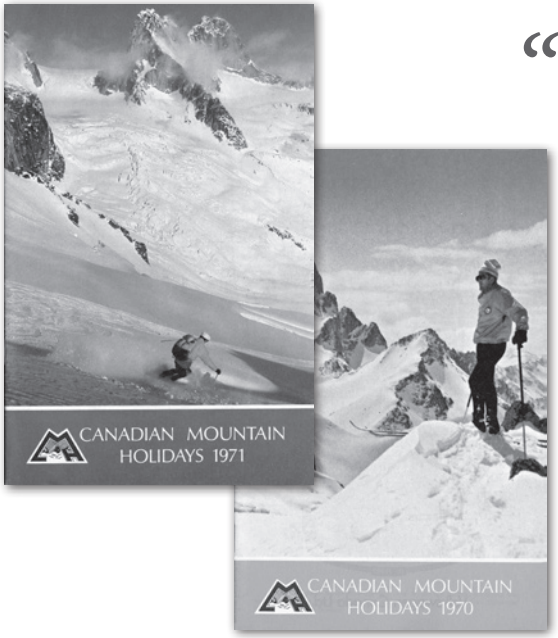
During the mid-1970s, Rudi worked with Hans Schwartz in Jasper, teaching month-long mountain rescue techniques to para-rescue troops for the Department of National Defence. On one outing, Hans and Rudi led the troops up to Mount Colin in pouring rain. Despite the soggy weather, after a night in the hut they carried on up the peak. As one of the troops was signing the summit register, the rain turned to graupel and all of a sudden lightening hit!

"The lightening hit him in the shoulder, it ran down his arm, out his hand and the pencil exploded and burned a hole in the register!"

Boom! With no warning, a second strike hit. Rappelling as quickly as they could, another bolt struck. This time the force propelled Hans, unroped, a metre into the air. He landed on a small ledge down the opposite side of the ridge, and Rudi held him in place until he collected himself. The strike branded a circle in the shape of a carabiner on Hans' backside, right through his wool knickers. A couple of weeks later on Parker Ridge, when Rudi noticed a black cloud sneaking up, he told his group, "We're out of here! Look over there, that group is leaving too." Later he learned that other group was led by Hans Schwarz.

Rudi tows a sled full of gear, dirty laundry and an empty white gas container after a month-long stint guiding ski touring trips from the ACC's Stanley Mitchell Hut in the Little Yoho Valley in 1971.

Skiing the last frontier



"I didn't plan to stay in Canada," Rudi admits. "I thought I would stay for a year."

In addition to guiding heli-skiers for Hans Gmoser in the Bugaboos, he continued guiding ski touring weeks for Hans in Rogers Pass in BC's Glacier National Park, from the ACC's Stanley Mitchell Hut in Little Yoho Valley and at Mount Assiniboine. Rudi had plenty of work and plenty of reasons to stay on in the Canadian wilderness that had by then, completely captivated him.

"After living here for a year, I really appreciated the wilderness in Canada," Rudi says." There were still new climbs to do, still ski runs that had never been skied. If I had stayed in Switzerland, I could never dream of a first ascent with a client. This was the last frontier."

And heli-skiing was last frontier of skiing, as every day the guides would lead clients on first descents, often in steep, challenging terrain. The work pace was challenging too, with the season beginning in February and running until May. For the guides and staff, there were no weeks—not even a day—off.

"On the Saturday it was a treat to go to Spillimacheen to load and unload the helicopter for a couple of hours, just to get out," Rudi recalls. "Hans set the pace; he was a hard worker and he expected us to work hard too. If you weren't

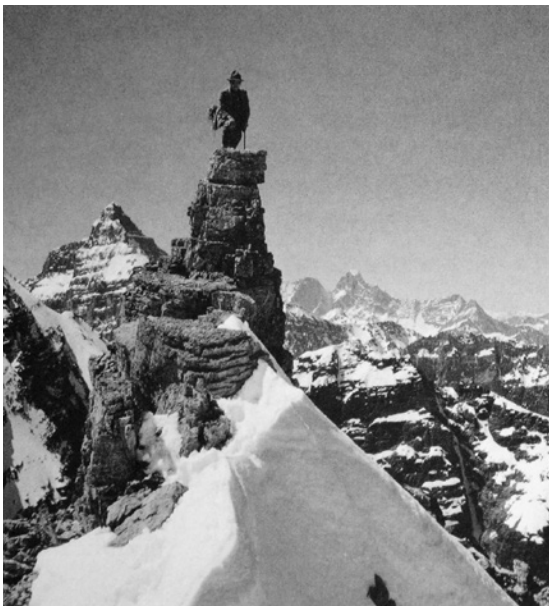
in bed, there was always some work that needed to be done. But all of us were so happy to have a job. We were happy to have a roof over our head, money to buy a rope or pair of skis. We saw a future and it drove us, seven days a week."

After Bugaboo Lodge was built, the guides bunked in the main building along with the rest of the staff—all in one room. Before long however, Rudi moved down to the old logging camp. A week later helicopter pilot Jim Davies had moved back there too, and then Leo Grillmair, Hans' long-time friend and business partner. Hans was puzzled, wondering why they wanted to live in the old draughty camp building after he'd spent so much money building a beautiful lodge.

"It was just a few hours to get away," Rudi explains. "We were under the same roof for six months, no place to go."

In this new business, Hans and the guides working with him were all learning as they went, creating the blueprint for an entirely new industry one helicopter, one lodge, one ski run at a time. And the skiers kept on loving it. In 1970 Hans offered three weeks in the Cariboo Mountains, operating out of the Serac Hotel in Valemount, with Lloyd "Kiwi" Gallagher guiding. The following winter Rudi ran the show at CMH's newest area, the Monashee Mountains, based out of the McGregor Hotel in Revelstoke. For the 1972-73 season, Rudi ran CMH's operations in the Monashees from the Mica Village Hotel, while Kiwi helped build Cariboo Lodge, which he would run for four years.

"Opening new ski areas—the Bugaboos, the Monashees and around Golden—those were definitely very interesting years for a guide. It was very challenging," Rudi says.



During the filming of CBC's *This Land*, under the slightly apprehensive eyes of Rudi and Bruno, Ed Feuz, then 83, climbed in his nail boots to the top of the pinnacle at Abbot Pass between mounts Victoria and Lefroy to wave goodbye to the mountains. Bruno Engler archives.

Start small, stay small

Rudi's father, Oskar, guided heli-skiers in Switzerland into his late 70s. (circa early 1980s).

After three years of running the CMH's Monashees operation, Rudi knew he had the best job, as Hans had made him chief guide. With the title though, Rudi could see that added responsibilities would demand he spend more and more time behind a desk, and less time out in the mountains doing what he really wanted to do—guide. In 1974, he made a big decision, to start his own guiding business.

"I talked it over with Hans a couple of times, to see if there's any way we could make some changes, so he was not as surprised," Rudi confesses. "It was hard. It was hard for both of us."

That spring, Rudi had some brochures printed to advertise his climbing school. He still remembers proudly showing the brochure to Bruno, and Bruno asking if he was certain it said what he wanted it to. Taking a closer look, Rudi realized instead of reading Snow and Ice, it read, Show on Ice.

Purcell Heli-Skiing's guides model the height of late 1980s ski fashion in front of a Bell 212. "Only the best is good enough!"

"Even funnier, I couldn't skate," Rudi laughs. Pat Boswell (long-time ACC member), then publisher of the ***Banff Crag & Canyon***, printed a new run. To this day, however, Rudi laments not keeping one of the misprinted originals. With his brochures, Rudi set up a desk in the Banff ski shop run by Johnny Monod, a former racer who had immigrated to Canada from Switzerland in 1947.

"Johnny Monod was really good to me," Rudi recalls. "Every day I'd be there at 5 o'clock to talk to the guests. If they needed some equipment in the store I could advise them, then at the same time they could sign up for a climb. It worked for both of us."

Living in a basement apartment in Banff, Rudi's walls were covered in maps—several of them strategically placed to hide holes accidentally created by Bruno after a few drinks. Having worked in the Bugaboos, Cariboos and Monashees, Rudi knew exactly what he had in mind.

"I was looking for a place where I could be at home as much as I could. That was the plan. Settle down, have more of a normal life," he says. "I would study the maps and try and figure what would be a good area and draw some circles and see how much potential skiing is in a given area. Golden was always one that I thought would work out really well. The mountains are just as beautiful as any of the other areas. I always say, when you're in heaven it doesn't matter which window you look out."

Securing a tenure for half a million acres to ski in the Purcell Mountains on Golden's west flank, being close to Banff was key. Rudi was not interested in running lodges and worrying about how to pay for them through the summer months. With Golden just a two-hour drive west of Banff—and its dozens of excellent hotels—he could offer day trips and not worry about accommodations. As well, the local ski hills—Norquay, Sunshine and Lake Louise provided a steady flow of skiers. Even today, Purcell Heli-Skiing remains the closest day-trip heli skiing available from Banff.

Rudi's timing was perfect, as the Banff Springs Hotel opened through the 1974/75 winter season for the first time. With manager Ivor Petrak's blessing, Rudi set up a booth advertising his services to skiers staying at the hotel. At the beginning, Purcell Heli-Skiing was—until they boarded the helicopter—a one-man show, with Rudi driving the shuttle bus, guiding skiers all day and driving back to Banff. The cost was $55 per day.

"There was never one dull moment in all those trips back and forth," Rudi recalls. "I kept everybody busy, I did the safety talk on the drive out and after a day of skiing I stopped at the liquor

store and bought a case of beer. Then I'd hand the case back [to the guests], and I'd teach them how to yodel on the way to Banff. We'd get back to the Banff Springs Hotel and go to the bar and sing and yodel. And people would come over and they wanted to know what everybody did to make them so happy, and they'd say heli-skiing, heli-skiing! You want to go tomorrow? So I managed to get another group together. I'd go home, the next morning I'd fix the lunches, make the tea, drive back up to the Banff Springs Hotel, drive back to Golden."

Rudi maintained this routine for the first three years—more long winters with no days off.

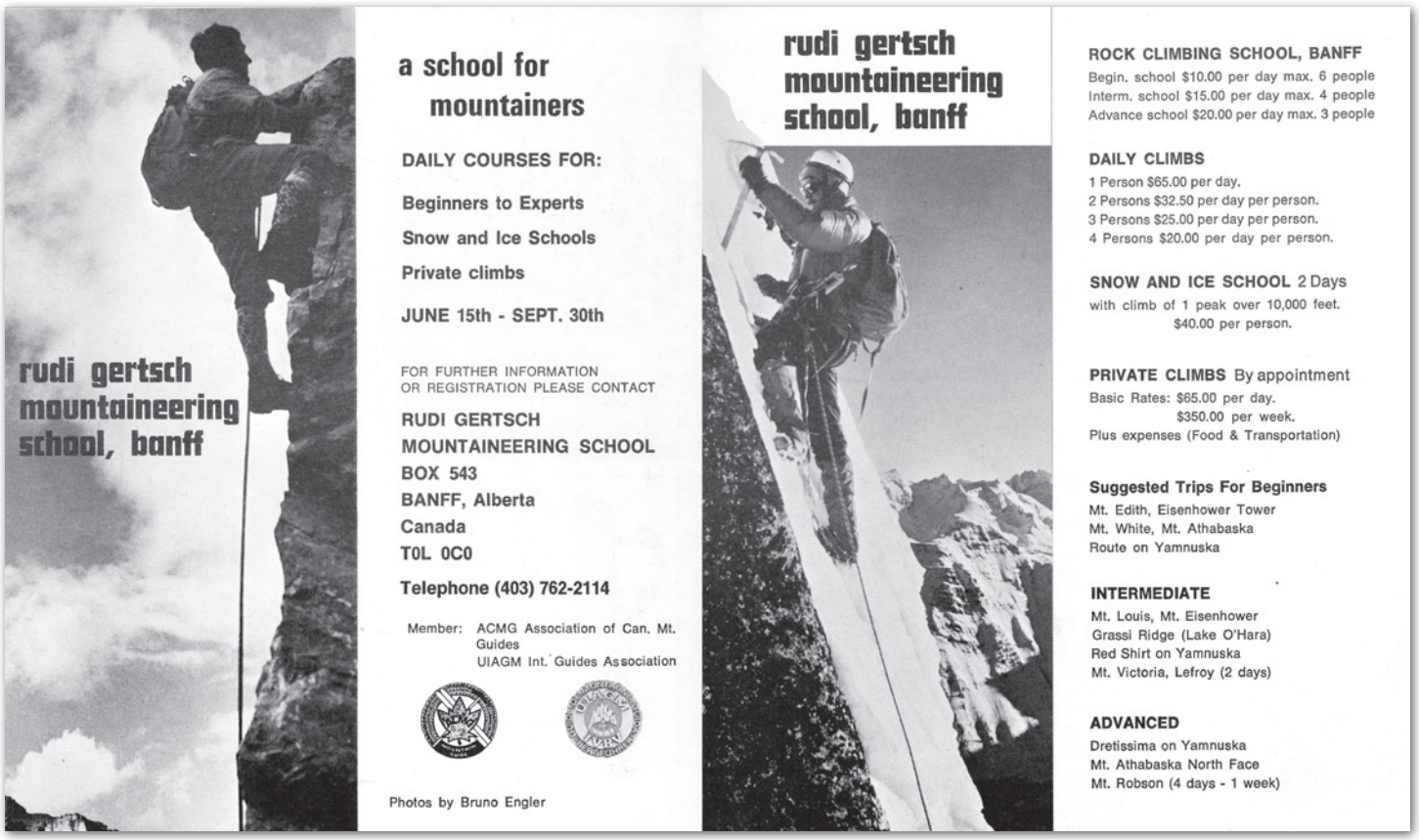
Over time, PHS began offering three-day, five-day and weekly packages to repeat customers. Then in 1978, Rudi moved his entire business to Golden when he purchased 100 acres to start his very own farm, while running his guiding business from a store-front in downtown Golden and flying from the local airstrip.

Four years later, he seized the opportunity to purchase 15 acres on a hill perched like an eagle's nest overlooking the Columbia Valley high above the frequent valley fog where he built his office building. The spacious log beam lodge-style building boasts huge picture windows and a sentimental museum's worth of Swiss memorabilia—old wooden skis with bear trap bindings, Sid Feuz's wooden ice axe, a 150-year-old cowbell. "I used to carry those over in my hand luggage," he chuckles.

Having his own place, he says, cemented his business.

"That's when things started to click," Rudi beams. "I'm so glad I never got into a lodge. I'm a guide, I don't want to be a hotel owner. I was lucky; I had a chance to find out all those headaches. I decided, if I ever start, I'll stay small. That's why Purcell has stayed a family business. If I want to make a change, I can do it; I don't have to talk to a bunch of investors. The best part is I'm still guiding just about every day, and my son Jeff, he's been guiding for me for 10 years. It's a family business to this day."

Rudi's first (the corrected version!) guiding business brochures, 1974.



Setting the right track

When Rudi arrived in Canada in 1966, the three-year-old Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG) had been operating with Peter Fuhrmann serving as president and Hans Gmoser, respected as the strongest guide among its members, as technical director. While both of them had earned their guides' certification under Parks Canada's alpine specialist, Walter Perren, when Rudi joined the ACMG in 1968, having returned to Switzerland in 1967 and passed his final Mountain Guide's exam, he was the organization's first member of the Union International d'Associations de Guides de Montagnes (UIAGM). Known in English as the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations, the organization oversees and sets world-wide standards for guide training and certification, technical proficiency and client care. Respected as a guide with strong skills, the next year Rudi assumed the role of ACMG technical director, a position he would hold for the following decade.

In September 1973, Rudi and Hans Peter Stettler attended the UIAGM annual meeting in Liechtenstein intent on demonstrating that Canadian standards were as high as Europe's. This was Canada's first UIAGM meeting and with Rudi's family name and reputation carrying some weight, the executive unofficially—an official protocol had not yet been established—welcomed Canada as its first non-European member.

From left, ACMG guides Pierre Lemire, Rudi, Lloyd "Kiwi" Gallagher, Hans Gmoser, Leo Grillmair, Manfred Cartellieri, Herman Frank, Frank Stark and Sepp Renner gather for CMH's annual refresher course in 1972. Bruno Engler archives.

Hans Peter Stettler (left), and Rudi pay close attention to senior Grindewald guide Hermann Steuri (Rudi's examiner on his guides course) at the UIAGM general meeting around 1976 where they represented their adopted country, Canada.

The meeting was an exceptionally memorable experience as Rudi found himself representing the ACMG in front of some of his most revered European mentors—Anderl Heckmair heading the German guiding association, Herman Steuri representing the Swiss, Gaston Rebuffat as head of the French guiding association, Ricardo Cassin heading the Italian federation.

"Then there's me and HP sitting at the same table, you see how young we were," Rudi recalls. "Looking back now, definitely, we had a lot of guts. There we were, old enough to be their kids, and we had the same position. But we were so keen to get the country on the right track."

As the heli-ski industry blossomed, so did the need for qualified guides. Many of the Canadians taking the early guides courses, including Don Vockeroth, Bernie Schiesser and Charlie Locke among others, were very strong skiers; many were qualified ski instructors. Under Rudi's direction, the ACMG created an assistant ski guide and full ski guide's program to accommodate candidates who were more interested in skiing, with the courses scheduled so that successful candidates could work the following season.

Meanwhile, with cross-country skiing gaining popularity, Parks Canada began running a ski guides course. That course however, did not include glacier travel. Pointing out it made no sense having separate splinter groups, the ACMG teamed up with Parks to provide the course, with the ACMG setting the standard for the ski guide's exam. Parks' alpine specialists Peter Fuhrmann and Willie Pfisterer were very helpful, Rudi adds, seeing that a Parks representative was present at every exam.

In 1973, Rudi organized the first ACMG guides' refresher course, operating under the belief that

as an IFMGA member, and with equipment and technology changing rapidly, Canadian guides should work to maintain international standards.

While Rudi gained something of a reputation as a tough and unyielding examiner, he was not the only Swiss guide with a strong personality to insist things be done to the highest possible standard. As a second-generation guide and head of the ACMG's standards committee, Rudi was determined that Canadian mountain guides should aim to set the highest standard possible.

"I wanted to make sure that we not only lived up to the standard, but that we set the international standard," Rudi says. "With so much work created by the industry and all that experience of so many guides working in the winter, we shouldn't be just meeting the standard, we should be leading. Standards are usually minimums, and in Canada, we had the chance to set higher standards from the beginning. We can be proud of the standards we've reached now. Canadian guides are leading. We definitely have the toughest winter exam."

Over the years, Rudi made many trips to Switzerland to visit his family, and also to attend UIAGM meetings and also as observer on some guides exams in Switzerland and Italy.

By 1975, Purcell Heli Skiing was operating alongside several other heli-skiing operations in BC, which included CMH, Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing in Blue River, Peter Schlunegger's Selkirk Tangiers Heli-skiing in Revelstoke, RK HeliSki run by Roger Madson near Panorama, and another heli-ski business run by Don Vockeroth in the Valhallas. While for the most part gentlemen's agreements about who would use which mountain areas worked well, as more players sought to enter the scene the boundaries for operational standards and land boundary guidelines needed to be clearly defined.

In the spring of 1975, all of the above players, minus Hans Gmoser, met at the Rimrock Hotel in Banff to discuss forming an organization. That fall the group, this time including Hans Gmoser, met with BC government representatives in Nelson. With Hans serving as its first president, Peter as vice president and Rudi as standards committee chair, the BC Helicopter Skiing Association was formed. Later expanded (and renamed) to include snowcat operators, in 2005 the association was renamed HeliCat Canada.

Rudi demonstrates the newest rope and carabiner techniques for ACMG guides exam candidates (from left) Dave Smith, Ernst Buhler and Tim Auger, circa early 1970s.

The thing about growing an entirely new industry, Rudi explains, is the absence of any rules governing how multiple players should operate to the benefit of everyone.

"We all have common issues, so the only way to be successful is to team up," Rudi explains. "The reason we started the association was to make sure the standards were set by the industry and not by the government. The main thing was that we had to get organized. Then we could go to the government and tell them what standards we needed—that we needed a tenured area that each of us could operate in. Then we would have exclusive right, and lease it like a hunting territory. That was the best thing. Otherwise it would have gotten totally out of hand."

While Rudi had plenty on his plate running his own business and serving on the ACMG, he knew the foundation needed to be built properly for the industry to flourish.

"Looking back, I'm sure glad we did it then," he admits. "It was so new. It was up to us to set the standards. And the government—actually, they were pretty good about it. They said yes, you guys know what you're doing, so tell us what is required."

One of the key requirements was for the land tenures to be long-term. Starting in 1983 with 10-year run-based licenses, today's licenses encompass an area-based tenure for a 30-year period. HeliCat Canada also sets industry standards for safety, client care, environmental stewardship and operating methods. Establishing industry safety standards is important, Rudi adds.

"We used to have a guides' meeting on Saturdays at the Mad Trapper [pub near Golden]. Guides and pilots would come out of the Bugaboos and Bobbie Burns and have a meeting and find out what's going on with snow conditions. Now at the end of the day, with the establishment of the InfoEx, while you're writing the report, there's already information coming in, you know exactly what happened in the whole industry. We should be proud of that; we've come a long way."

One reality about the industry however, is the fact that no matter the precautions, backcountry skiing can never be 100 per cent safe.

"One thing I learned, regardless of how hard you try, you'll never be able to say it's 100 per cent safe, because life is not safe. It's the same on the highway, and you don't think twice. Living is dangerous. We have to accept that there are certain risks. Don't ask for it, don't push it, but don't think it can't happen. In guiding, do it the best we can. We have to work with 100 per cent; over 100 days if I work at 99 per cent, that would be one accident a year and that's not acceptable. In 100 days, we have to work at 100 per cent. But even then, we can't say it's 100 per cent that it will never go wrong."

Rudi, Ed Feuz and Bruno represent three generations of Swiss guides as they take a break at Opabin Pass in Yoho National Park during the shooting of *This Land* (circa 1972).

A farmer his whole life, Rudi embraces the rules of nature. As such, he stresses that environmental concerns are important too.

"People do question sometimes, they say the helicopter to go up versus ski touring or the lifts," Rudi says in his soft, measured tone. "Well, there are places there's no way you could get there, and a lot of ski tourers use helicopters to fly to the lodge. Tomorrow, if you decide to stop having heli-skiing, there's nothing left behind, we didn't wreck anything compared to a ski resort. You can look at it both ways."

Then of course, there's another user group keen on tracking up the same slopes—snowmobilers. Since the early 1980s Rudi has been part of a diverse group of stakeholders who comprise the Golden Backcountry Recreation Access Plan Committee—GBRAC. Including a wide range of recreational user groups, as well as environmentalists and forestry representatives, the group is working to create a land use plan to head off potential conflicts.

"I know why snowmobilers are out there, because they like to be out there too," Rudi says. "They like to find untracked snow just like the skiers. There's good and bad ones in every crowd. Right from the beginning, I worked with the local snowmobile club. We respect each other and that helped me a lot."

Looking at the issue from both directions and working together, Rudi gave up several of his drainages closest to the highway for the snowmobilers to access.

"Overall, the locals have helped me more because I've worked with them, and they've been able to help me a lot more," he explains. "There's room for everybody. It's pretty nice that we can take people heli-skiing, but there's other users too that want to go in the backcountry. I have a machine too, I use it on the logging roads to go touring. We just park and put on the skis and go up somewhere. There's no way you can walk from Golden all the way back there."

Right then, Rudi voices the old guide's lament. "Unfortunately, I don't have as much time as I'd like to go in the backcountry—I've got a long list of all these places I want to go! But that's nice to have my place in Golden, up the Blaeberry. Ten minutes and I don't see anybody. And there's so many places back there I can go to get away from it."

You can take the boy out of the country...

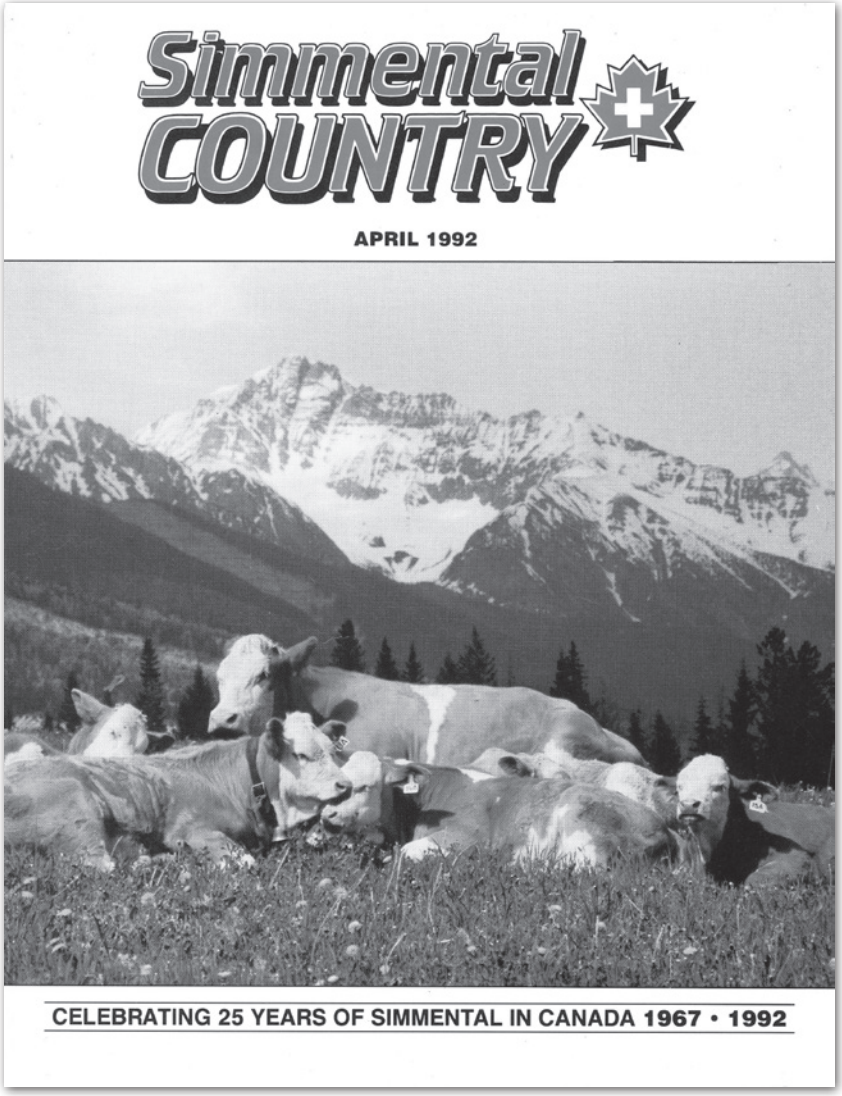
Walking along a dirt lane that leads from Rudi's house for nearly a kilometre to the where the turquoise glacier waters of the Blaeberry River rush through a box canyon, Rudi describes the first time he saw the land that would be his home.

"The first time I came up here, it was all bush. I climbed up a tree and looked around. I knew; this is the place."

It's not all bush anymore. Hayfields open to expansive views of mounts Moberly and Hedberg. At the edge of the woods above the riverbank is a giant pile of rocks, one of several such piles of rocks pulled by hand from those fields. The land had been logged in the 1960s, but by the time Rudi bought 100 acres in 1978, there was plenty of regrowth and old stumps to clear.

Rudi proudly shows off his farm, where the road from his house to the Blaeberry River is long enough to bring a sweater along. Lynn Martel photo.

Rudi's cows, with Mount Laussedat in the background, made the cover of the industry magazine in 1992.



For 20 years the farm was completely self-sufficient, with 30 chickens running loose and growing to 18 pounds; horses, goats and cows, both for milking—the family made their own butter—and 80 Simmental cattle, which Rudi raised to sell offspring bulls. Like Oskar, he won prizes. It should come as no surprise Rudi served as a 4-H leader and president of the Golden Farmer Institute.

"It's easy for people to criticise about how things are done," Rudi explains. "I like to see the potential. I look back and I can say, well, at least I tried. I did my utmost."

Not long after Rudi bought his land, his dad came for a visit.

"What are you going to do with all this land," Oskar asked.

"When I told him, he sort of chuckled," Rudi recalls. "He said, 'you've got a long way to go, son.'"

In 2009, deciding two full-time jobs was more than enough, Rudi sold all the animals, except a few chickens. But now he's got plenty of time to grow hay for horse owners—with help from his nephew, Mark, and son Jeff too—and tend to his vegetable garden brimming with beans, corn, onions, cabbages, tomatoes, potatoes, asparagus, zucchinis as big as baseball bats and raspberry bushes dripping with juicy red fruit next to apple and cherry trees—all 100 per cent organic, of course.

"I go out there and five minutes later it's on my plate. Any longer than that it's not considered fresh anymore," Rudi declares. "That makes up for all those years we lived on packaged freeze-dried food."

One corner of his land is home to a forest from where he harvests his own trees, milling and cutting the wood all on the property, and like everything on the farm, timed according to the moon.

"It's pretty neat, when you can cut the tree and make the finished product—a staircase, shelves, ceiling beams," he says with obvious pride. "Where else in the world can you live in a place like this, be close to nature and appreciate what's going on?"

Inside the house rimmed with Swiss style balcony adorned with colourful flower pots and even a screen porch, a kauchel ofen made of ceramic tiles provides heat from a wood fire. Family photos adorn the walls, including one of Oskar leading a prize-winning Simmental.

Naturally, Rudi's son Jeff, who was born in 1980, learned to walk on the farm, and to ski too, on the little hill that drops down to the barn. Jeff's first heli-skiing day was at three, and soon afterward he was signed up in the Nancy Green program. Throughout his school years, Jeff's mother, Sue, drove him all over BC from one race to another, while she also worked hard on the farm. When he reached the point of being accepted on the BC provincial team, Jeff decided skiing was fun, but so is climbing and kayaking. Like Rudi, Jeff chose the guiding profession. Now Rudi's business partner and lead guide, Jeff started building trails at Mistaya Lodge, heli-ski guiding for Mica Heliskiing and even working for suit and tie paycheques in Toronto for his uncle for a while. Father and son are building a small cabin on the property overlooking the river.

Just three years old, Jeff Gertsch takes his first heli-ski run in 1983.

"There this old saying about the country boy, you can take the boy out of the country," Rudi began. "It was funny, because when I grew up, as a teenager we had to milk cows every morning and in the evening. When I left, I said that's it, I'll never look at another cow again. Then I bought my place in the Blaeberry. It was quite interesting how it all changed and came around."

Guiding heli-skiers all winter made for quite a contrast from working the farm all summer, Rudi says with gratitude.

"That was quite a change, from the heli-skiing to the farm at the end of the season, but even every day, just doing chores in the morning before I went to the office, having breakfast with Jeff before he got on the school bus, it was good. Going out in the morning, it was a different way to do the weather, but I'd spend an hour out there doing chores and see how it was. I enjoyed it, it really made my day and I didn't get burned out. It was just good to do something totally different for part of the time. The balance goes both ways, from the farm to the heli-skiing.

"Even now, I enjoy every day, because I had a chance to balance it all."

Rudi harvests the biggest head of romaine lettuce this writer has ever seen from his bountiful vegetable garden. Lynn Martel photo.

Bringing the dream home

A few years ago, Rudi and a few of the other Swiss guides who made the choice as young men decades ago to make their homes in the mountains of western Canada, began a new tradition—an annual gathering at Rudi's Purcell Heli-Skiing lodge in Golden.

Scheduled right after another great annual mountain gathering, the Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival, the event draws several dozen transplanted Swiss guides and climbers, plus a few Germans, Austrians, native Canadians and even a native New Zealander. The gathering has come to mean a lot to the group who embraced the potential they discovered in the Canadian wilderness when it was still a wild frontier.

"It's usually 40, 50 people who show up; HP, Leo, Urs Kallen, Hans Fuhrer. It's fun. We get together; make some music, sing and dance."

Of course it's a parrr-ty, complete with yodelling.

Like so many young men, and women too, who left their home countries at a young age to forge a new life far away, Rudi admits he didn't think about it too much at the time. But as the years unfolded, he recognized the world of opportunity that existed in his adopted country, and never hesitated to pursue the possibilities. It took many years, but after lots of hard work, perseverance, guts and a bit of luck, Rudi says it's good to know he was able to make his dreams come true.

"Between 30 and 50, the plan was to work hard," Rudi says. "It worked out pretty good. I have time, and I'm still enjoying doing what I do. I really appreciate I had a chance to do this. We were so lucky; we arrived at a time where we were able to fulfill our dreams. We never had a recession, never had to go broke, the wheels were turning. And I'm definitely lucky I had the chance to buy the land for my farm. But it wasn't just luck. There was a lot of hard work and the willingness to pursue it; going through all the ups and downs. You don't just have great dreams, sometimes you have nightmares too. That's all part of it."

Rudi and Syd Feuz, then in his late 70s, are all smiles on the summit of Pigeon Spire in the Bugaboos in the early 2000s. Photo by Marc Piche.

In the mid-1990s, Rudi and Syd Feuz, who guided for Rudi from the time he was 53 until his late 70s, walked into Monod's sports shop in Banff and told the salesperson they wanted to buy snowboards. Insisting they wanted powder boards, the sales clerk asked where they planned to access deep powder if they were brand new beginners. "By helicopter," Rudi replied. "They won't take you if you don't know how to snowboard!" the clerk exclaimed. "Wanna bet?"

While at the beginning Rudi needed to use his ski poles as "training wheels" to keep his balance, he was soon ripping it up ahead of the guests. All of PHS's guides are proficient on skis and snowboards.

Another part of it, he adds, is being grateful for all the help of friends, colleagues and family members who worked hard alongside him to help grow his dreams.

Rudi remembers the first time he told Jeff, then 10 years old, that he could guide a group down a ski slope. "I said, 'you go first.' He got to guide the group down, I was the tail guide. I knew he could totally handle it."

For Jeff to be running the company with Rudi now is another part of the dream; Jeff is a third-generation guide, one of several who've grown up in Canada's mountains.

"That's part of the dream, to be able to pass some of this on to the next generation," Rudi says. "There's a generation coming up now, I wish we knew as much as they know now. In the guiding family there's good people coming up."

Of course, Rudi isn't the least bit ready to hang up his skis, and he still enjoys teaching his ski guests the finer points of skiing deep powder, and sometimes digging pits to explain the layers in the snowpack.

"People ask if I'm gonna retire. Why? So I can pay someone to take me heli-skiing and some guide can tell me where to go?" Rudi says with a laugh. "As long as you can lift me out of the helicopter and prop me up!"

Then after a moment's thought, he adds with a grin, "I'm thinking of maybe getting a few cows..."

Representing three generations of Swiss/Canadian mountains guides Syd Feuz, Jeff and Rudi pose for a summit shot after climbing the classic northeast ridge of Mount Sir Donald in Glacier National Park in the late 1990s, when Syd was in his late 70s.
"Syd was so happy to get up there, no problem. I'd climb up and look down at the two of them; he'd be pointing out something to Jeff. Syd and I, we used to go for a climb every year, take his dad's ice axe and go up a peak."
When Syd was the Mountain Guides Ball Patron in 1999, he reluctantly donated his old wooden ice axe as the patron's item. "He didn't want to part with that axe because his dad gave it to him," Rudi recalls. "I said don't worry, it'll come back to Golden." It did – Rudi bought the axe.

Mountain of Dreams

Rudi Gertsch: Dreams come true amidst Canada's peaks

As a second-generation Swiss Mountain Guide, some might say Rudi Gertsch's destiny was written in stone and snow—and alpine farmland. Pushing his skiing skills, he competed on the Swiss junior team. Working hard as a porter leading clients in the Swiss Alps, Rudi earned his Mountain Guide certificate at 22. Venturing to the mountains of western Canada, he worked for Hans Gmoser's burgeoning CMH heli-skiing business for eight years before launching his own company, Purcell Heli-Skiing in 1974. The first member of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides to hold international UIAGM certification, as ACMG technical director for 10 years he encouraged Canadian guides to set the international standard for winter guiding skills. A founding member of Heli-Cat Canada, he helped ensure BC's mechanized backcountry skiing industry was built on a solid foundation. Remaining true to his roots, Rudi raised prize-winning Simmental bulls on his farm amidst the BC Rockies.

Guiding climbers and skiers, passing his knowledge to the next generation of guides, working to foster harmony between backcountry user groups and contributing to the cultures of guiding and farming in western Canada, Rudi Gertsch has earned his place well as the 22nd patron of the Mountain Guides Ball.

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