

## Don Jones, Trail Maker

1929-2013

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Don “Sonny” Jones, a man instrumental in building the Tsalteshi Ski Trails, died at his homestead in Kasilof on September 6, 2013 at the age of 84. Today most who ski or run don’t know of Don’s contribution to the trails. But every time you ski on the moose, wolf, bear, raven, lynx and beaver loops you are experiencing Don’s artistry.



The first trails, the green (moose), blue (wolf) and red (bear) were roughed out with a rented cat operated by Hans Bilben then a Skyview High School shop teacher. We pushed aside the trees and some of the brush but the base was still paved with roots. Skiing was okay with enough snow, but we learned that we had to get down to mineral soil to provide a firm base for running, mountain biking and early skiing.

I can’t remember exactly how Don got involved, I think Allan Miller, head ski coach of Skyview High School heard about him from Brian and Yvonne Hakkinen from Kasilof whose boys skied for Skyview. Don had retired and bought a John Deere 450 cat to “fool around with” as he said it. He had time, was a skilled operator, and only asked that we pay for his diesel fuel. “We” was the fledgling Tsalteshi Trail Association and cost was important because we didn’t have a lot of money. All of the trails up to building of the Wolverine loop were built with volunteer “sweat equity”—no tax dollars, no grants, and no corporate partnerships. It was a triumph of volunteerism that is rare in so big an undertaking.

I’d go out before Don and flag a new loop. Sometimes my wife Penny or my son Erik would help, but mostly I’d study the landscape by walking and re-walking, flagging and reflagging until it was as I’d visualized it the night before. It took a month to flag a kilometer. Then I’d call Don.

He was always willing to work on the next project. And so we went at it. We had a rhythm of work that I cherish to this day. He’d follow the flags pushing over trees, clearing off brush: lower the blade, forward and back, tilt the blade, forward and back—

always planning three or four moves ahead. We had a set of signals. I'd use a shovel to indicate "a little lower," "take off a little more on this side" and so on. We'd work eight hours and maybe speak a total of five or ten sentences. Once he got on his cat he didn't get off except for lunch. He was in his 60s and his endurance was amazing. Day by day a trail emerged from the forest. This went on for most summers in the 1990s. Don and I out there building new trails or tweaking old ones to make them flow.

Don didn't ski and he certainly didn't run. Riding his other beloved machine, his Harley, was his recreation of choice. When I'd ask him why he did it he said "for the kids." Only once he came to a high school race and watched from the start/finish line. He was not a man to cry, but there was a tear in his eye. Don couldn't read and dropped out of school early. I think he understood that the curriculum of embracing the landscape and the seasons was another kind of education that he could contribute to.

Helping build the Tsalteshi Ski Trails was one of the defining achievements of his life. Few have done more to create a culture of the north on the Kenai Peninsula than Don Jones. So this winter when you come down a hill, sweep around a bend, and transition into the next uphill, say thank you to Don Jones, the genius with a John Deere 450.