

Pokagon Toboggan Slide has Produced Smiles for Decades

By Fred Wooley, Interpreter, Pokagon State Park

Talking about Pokagon State Park in the winter can hardly go more than a couple of sentences without mentioning the famous toboggan slide. It has been a part of Pokagon's past since anyone can remember.

The slide actually got its start in 1935 as the boys from the then recently arrived Civilian Conservation Corps Company 556 built a wooden toboggan run for their own sledding fun. The first run had a huge curve halfway down and then, near the inn, curved down toward Lake James.

The following year, the track was straightened out to increase speed. In 1938 the boys of Company 556 took the fun to a new level by erecting a taller tower of about 20 feet. The fun caught on and Park Superintendent Russell Sprague sought to enhance the operation and a winter tradition at Pokagon was born.

In 1940 a second track was added. Of course, at this point, the toboggan operation depended solely on the weather. Without snow and cold, there was no tobogganing. Well, at least you needed cold.

I have had several people who were around in those days tell me of cutting ice from Lake James and hauling it up to the track and placing it between the sides. A special machine then shaved and chopped it to make it smooth for sledding. This seems like an incredible task to me now. To think that all of that work was done with no assurance that in a few days, a thaw could occur and all of that hard work would melt away. Incredible!

That changed drastically in 1971 when the slide became refrigerated. The design at that time now seems a little primitive compared to what we have today. The bottom line, however, was being able to create enough ice on the concrete to toboggan without snow and in above-freezing temperatures.

The old wooden tower and concrete began to deteriorate, and the new 30-foot tower and tracks we enjoy today were added in 1974. Off to the side and tucked under some tall pines, a converted camper store became the "toboggan-warming hut."

Even with all of the advancements, those 1970's tracks and refrigeration mechanisms were still very high maintenance. When the ice became too thick, it had to be shaved off with a hulking modified Rototiller-type piece of equipment. There are two words that probably still strike fear into the hearts of any park employee who was here during those years—"cut track!" It was tough work to be sure.

In 1984, work began to redo the two tracks. At the same time we built a new rental and warming facility. The new, two-story, "up-north" lodge atmosphere outgrew the old "warming hut" moniker. The new "warming center" was born.

The new track had some bugs to work out and did not reopen until Thanksgiving of 1986. Of course the time it was not in operation was a real downer for park business, particularly at the Potawatomi Inn. Even in town, I had numerous business people comment on how the closing of the toboggan for that time affected their businesses. The impact of this facility in the local area is far reaching.

I don't know why I was surprised. It is only one of three refrigerated toboggan slides in the Midwest. We continue to fine tune the operation. Additional work was done in 1998. It is a winter feature that is the envy of park people everywhere. We are quick to point out that it still takes a lot of hard work, in the cold, and a lot of behind-the-scenes maintenance to keep it all going.

Is it worth it, we sometimes ask? ... Yes! We estimate about 70,000

riders of all ages zoom down it every season. The top recorded speed is now 42 mph. With the 30-foot tower and all of the dips and valleys, the total vertical drop is 90 feet. It takes anywhere from 20 to 30 seconds from the time you are launched to the time you fall back in exhilaration as the sled skids to a stop a quarter mile from the tower. That's quite the speed when you're scooting on your bottom.

And it is still quite the deal. Carnival ride type tickets were sold. A ride in the early days cost 5 cents. In 1984, the price was 25 cents a ride. With the new slide of 1986 came the new way of charging.

For \$13 an hour, you get a sled and you and three friends can get as many rides in as you can hoof it back up to the tower. On busy days, it may only be one or two rides an hour.

We are open Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays starting after Thanksgiving and running through February. Special weekday and weekend hours run on holidays and during the Christmas season. If you live in the area, a less crowded time might be during those evening hours.

If you have your choice, pick a night when a light snow is falling. Bundle up, but after a few runs up and down, the heat will begin to flow from your body. Stand off to the side, look up, close your eyes and let the soft flakes cool your skin. Breathe the cool air deeply and enjoy the sound of people screaming by you on the historic slide. I guarantee you will smile as people have for many decades.

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