

Another Face

OF VERMONT SKIING

by Mary Ann Lickteig



LIFE ACCORDING TO LENORD

All sorts of truths bubble up on Blueberry Lake's cross-country ski trails, where the air is cold and clarifying, the spruce trees rise like church spires, and the silence cocoons you, heady and reverent.

It's a good place to sort out what matters in life, a good place to hear the voice of reason.

But if you can't, head in to the lodge and talk to Lenord.

Lenord Robinson is the proprietor here. He's 73 years old. Granted, that alone doesn't make him wise, but think of it this way: The man's waltzed through the calendar 73 times – stumbled, even fallen – and he's still enjoying the dance.

He has milked cows, built houses, reared nine children – eight of whom live within two miles – and sprung back from a soured business deal that drove him into bankruptcy.

Lenord went broke at age 60, a time when most people are planning retirement, and still, he considers himself the luckiest man in Vermont.

"I thank the good Lord every day for all I've got," he says.

You want to know how to be happy?

Learn from Lenord.

He sells his services as a ski instructor – rates are posted on a piece of corrugated cardboard tacked to the wall of his East Warren ski lodge – and he's never more excited than when he's teaching someone new to ski, daughter Sue Robinson says. The life lessons, you get for free. Lenord doesn't appear to intentionally teach those, but you can pick them up if you watch and listen.

He'll be talking about his background, how he grew up five miles from here on the south side of what is now Sugarbush Resort's Lincoln Peak. He became a dairy farmer like his father, but he married a girl from Brooklyn and she didn't like the lifestyle, so one day, when a cattle dealer made his weekly stop to see if Lenord had any calves to sell, Lenord sold him the whole herd.

"I decided that life was too short to spend it arguing about the cows," he says. And there's lesson number one.

He and Gene (that's short for Genevieve) have been married 52 years. They live on a hill above Warren village, a stretch

of clapboard and American flags that slices through the Mad River Valley.

After farming, Lenord worked as a logger and for an equipment dealer and then became town road commissioner, a job that required him to buy a truck and a loader. Four or five years later, he left that post to run his own excavating company. And some 30 years after that, he officially retired.

"The interesting thing about my grandpa retiring is it's not like he worked any less. He worked for free," granddaughter Jennifer Watkins says. "He just went around doing things for people. ... Finally, he discovered golf."

Lenord's skin is taut and tan, his eyes bright blue. Soft, white hair rings his bald pate. He looks like a buff Carl Reiner with Lance Armstrong's legs. He is a no-frills, no-nonsense, self-described shovel-or-hammer man who simply does what needs doing.

Last summer, when one of his daughters needed a house, Lenord and one of his sons built her a house. "Stick by stick," Lenord says. He cut the logs.

Five years ago, when Cate Tierney had water trouble and everybody she consulted told her she needed to dig a new well, Lenord stuck his head down

there and said, you just need to fix this one. And he went and got materials and did the job, but he wouldn't take any money.

"I went to Kenyon's and bought him flannel shirts, gloves and baked him banana bread just because I knew that's the kind of stuff he would appreciate," Cate says.

Lenord started cross-country skiing in his early 40s so he could compete in the local decathlon. He got into the business a decade later because he had built a lake, and he thought it was an ideal spot for ski trails.

Sixty-acre Blueberry Lake is just off Plunkton Road in Warren. Building it was the realization of a 20-year dream for Lenord, who spent five years on the project, only to lose it all – the lake, the land around it, his cross-country ski business and his excavating equipment – after years of court battles with his partner in the project, Jack Keir.

The loss wiped out Lenord's finances, and he declared bankruptcy.

"Among those familiar with the history of the project and its development, there is a feeling that Lenord was wronged by both Jack Keir and the legal process," local newspaper editor Lisa Loomis says.

"But," Lenord's daughter Sue

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says, "he barely skipped a beat. When I found out that summer that he was already out walking the woods on his side of the lake to build new trails, it brought tears to my eyes because I knew he was going to be OK."

Lenord opened another ski center, the one he runs now, down the road the following winter.

Jack Keir says it's obvious that the local people would favor Lenord because Lenord is a longtime resident, while he, himself, spent only a few summers in the area. "The court decisions is what I think is clear-cut," he says.

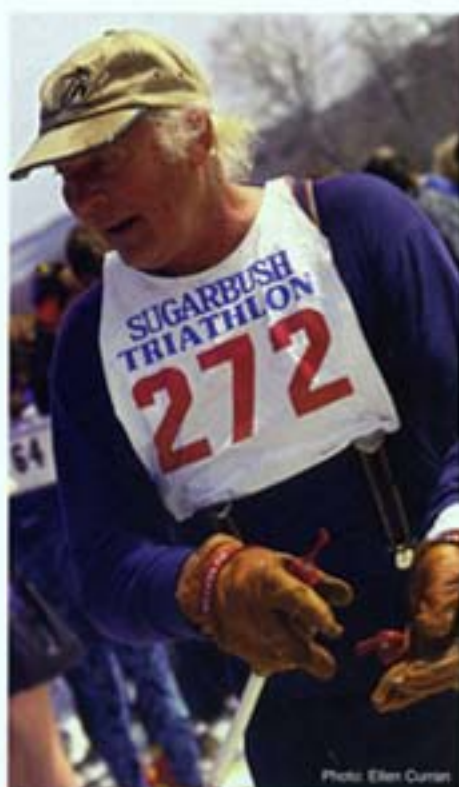
Lenord says he doesn't hate Jack Keir. He says he doesn't regret building the lake. "I'm certainly not sorry I did it."

The U.S. Forest Service owns the lake now, and it's open to the public.

Lenord's new ski center has been open 10 years. The irony is that one of the things Gene didn't like about farming was that it's a seven-day-a-week job and now, after all these years, even though it's seasonal, Lenord is back working seven days a week. Nights, too, if needed. That's when he packs snow and when he makes it.

The work starts in October or November.

"As soon as the good Lord gives me some snow, I go out in the field and pile it up and leave it there for the winter," he says. It stays frozen that way. "And if I need it, I go out and get it." Although he laid out his 30 kilometers of trails so they are mostly sheltered from sun and wind



Lenord is a regular – and usually the oldest – competitor in the Sugarbush Triathlon.

– the prime destroyers of snow – bare spots occasionally appear. When they do, he dips into his reserve, loads it onto a manure spreader and covers them up. The system – born in a eureka moment during an after-dinner nap 15 years ago – is more efficient than snow guns, Lenord says, because it lays snow directly on the trail instead of blowing it into the woods.

Lenord's ski lodge has knotty pine siding and smells like a wood stove. Pictures of Jennifer Watkins, his oldest grandchild, hang on the wall along with the tiny skis Lenord gave her when she wasn't quite 2 years old. Lenord taught

her to ski – she remembers him telling her to stand up straight so her lungs could hold more air – and she made the U.S. Junior Biathlon team when she was 16. One of her medals hangs by the front door. Jars of the salsa and spaghetti sauce Lenord Jr. and his wife make are for sale on the shelves behind the door. And for a time, when Lenord rented the upstairs to an older couple, you could hear their granddaughter roller-skating around up there.

There's no Web site for this place – Lenord does minimal advertising – but last year he joined the '80s, put in a fax machine and started accepting credit cards. "I deal with cash, myself," he says.

Kids from the valley ski free. Dogs are welcome.

Lenord tries to ski daily. His favorite time is after a sleet storm. "I love speed," he says. And he loves to compete. He plans to be skiing when he's 104.

"He just needs to suck every little bit out of life that he can," granddaughter Jennifer says.

That's life according to Lenord: Work hard, take care of people, enjoy life, don't fight over the cows. And for heaven's sake, if the good Lord gives you a few inches of snow, pile it up and pray that you won't need it.



Mary Ann Lickteig lives and writes in Burlington, Vermont.

To get to Blueberry Lake Cross Country Center:

From Warren village, go east on Brook Road about two miles. Turn right on Plunkton Road. Go 1/3 mile and the ski center is on your right, parking on your left. Phone: 802-496-6687