

FEATURE STORY

BUSTING W

MYT

MYTH (/MITH/)

NOUN

a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, especially one that is concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practice, rite, or phenomenon of nature.

a widely held but false belief or idea.

WHISTLER

BY MEGAN LALONDE

Going by the first definition for **myth** that pops up in Google search results, Whistler was built on one.

The resort lies within the shared territory of the Lil'wat and Squamish First Nations. According to their history, the area was once known as Spo7ez, an ancient village the Lil'wat and Squamish people shared where Rubble Creek and the Cheakamus River meet. **For** many years the members of both nations lived peacefully engaging in trade and commerce, **explains** a story on the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre **website**.

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FEATURE STORY

That is, until villagers began disrespecting each other, and the Thunderbird decided to take action. The supernatural creature flapped his wings, igniting a volcano eruption and a massive rockslide that buried the village. Survivors were sent home to spread the message that these neighbouring nations needed to work together.

Most know the iconic spire of volcanic rock that looms over the area today as Black Tusk, but to the Lil'wat and Squamish people, the black, jagged rock formed during an eruption roughly 170,000 years ago is the Thunderbird's favourite perch.

First Nations communities have used stories like these not only to explain geography and catastrophic events, but to pass teachings, culture, and history down through generations for thousands of years.

The Lil'wat Nation in particular divides its oral history into two categories: "sqwéqwel' (true stories) and sptakwlh (legends)," according to the 2007 Lil'wat Fact Book. "Our ancestors used the landscape to anchor events much in the way other cultures used calendars," it reads. "Both sqwéqwel' and sptakwlh told dramatic stories of magical transformation, mystery and fierce power."

It seems the freewheeling ski bums who settled into the valley in more recent years took a cue from the people who were here first.

In the almost six decades since Whistler Mountain's chairlifts started spinning, locals have steadily built up their own collection of true stories and legendary tales recounting the outrageous occurrences that shaped Whistler's unofficial history.

"It is such an incredible part of the world—just the beauty of the nature here," says Stephen Vogler. The local author, playwright, and musician has called the valley home since moving to Whistler as a kid in 1976.

"And it's very dynamic," he adds. "The valley drains out of both sides. It's a very energetic place, so I think it lends itself to really interesting stories and myths, from whatever era and

whatever culture."

You only need to ask members of the Whistler Winter Facebook group to leave a comment naming a favourite local myth/urban legend/actual legend to find out just how many of those stories there are.

Vogler detailed a few of them in *Only in Whistler: Tales of a Mountain Town*, his 2009 non-fiction follow-up to 2007's *Top of the Pass: Whistler and the Sea-to-Sky Country*.

"I had a lot more material about Whistler that I wanted to include, but couldn't include in [*Top of the Pass*]," he says. His publishers offered up an opportunity to write another book, "so then I could really delve into those stories of all the different characters I'd gotten to know over the years growing up here."

There isn't enough room in *Pique's* pages to lay out the backstory behind every piece of local lore, but here's an attempt to bust a few of Whistler's wildest myths.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF TOURISTS

Let's get this out of the way: Whistler's economy runs exclusively on tourism. We need visitors; we love visitors, but it doesn't mean we can't mess with them a little while they're here—especially those few vacationers who leave their critical thinking skills at home.

It's a common enough practise that *Pique* included a "Best Lie to Tell Tourists" category in its annual Best of Whistler survey for several years.

The responses are chock-full of wildly unbelievable myths perpetuated by mischievous locals: that Whistler's black bears are domesticated creatures released from their enclosures each morning; that those bears only attack a couple of tourists each year; or that Green Lake is drained annually so crews can repaint the bottom a bright shade of turquoise. (That colour comes from sediment in glacier runoff rather than a can of

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Locals Bart and Sue Ross took Dusty for a ride after winning the taxidermied bronco and more importantly, his vintage saddle during a fundraiser at Dusty.

PHOTO BY BRIAN HYDESMITH,
COURTESY OF STEPHEN VOGLER

Benjamin Moore, believe it or not.)

It's tough to imagine the kinds of questions that prompted those inside jokes in the first place, but the origin of the mythical "Dual Mountain" is easier to trace. Back when Whistler and Blackcomb mountains were operated by two different companies, long before the Peak 2 Peak gondola, skiers could buy a "Dual Mountain" ticket to access both hills in one day. You can't blame visitors for flocking to guest services windows and concierge desks to ask, "Where's Dual Mountain?"

Just as you can't blame those employees for replying "It's in Pemberton."

Pique's records show a Dual Mountain Unlimited Pass cost \$1,385.65 for the 1995-96 winter season. That translates to just over \$2,500 in today's money, according to the Bank of Canada's inflation calculator—significantly more than the \$1,352 price tag Vail Resorts is charging for a 2023-24 Whistler

Blackcomb Unlimited Pass this September. Day tickets, however, were \$49 for each mountain, and \$51 (or \$92 today) for dual mountain access.

Maybe season pass price hikes are another myth to add to the list?

THE STUFF OF LEGEND

Whistler is the setting for countless events that would sound far-fetched, if it weren't for numerous eyewitness accounts confirming their validity.

That friend of a friend wasn't exaggerating, for example, when they told you about the time they saw The Tragically Hip play a surprise show at The Boot pub, or witnessed KISS bassist Gene Simmons jump into a jam session at Alpine Cafe just a couple of summers ago.

The New Jersey Hot Pack saga is one cautionary search-and-rescue tale with all the makings of an urban legend, and a lesson about what not to do when lost in the backcountry. Unfortunately for everyone involved, says retired ski patroller Ian Bunbury, this one's true, too.

Bunbury is the man responsible for coining the Urban Dictionary-worthy moniker, though he admits he didn't respond to this particular search-and-rescue call first-hand.

In case you haven't had the pleasure of hearing about a New Jersey Hot Pack, the story goes something like this (here's a warning to skip ahead about four paragraphs if you're easily grossed out): around the mid-2000s, four skiers visiting from New Jersey made the not uncommon mistake of venturing beyond the ski-area boundary, into the Cakehole on the south side of Whistler Mountain in search of fresh tracks. Like many before them, the four men got lost in the unforgiving backcountry. "I think we were having one

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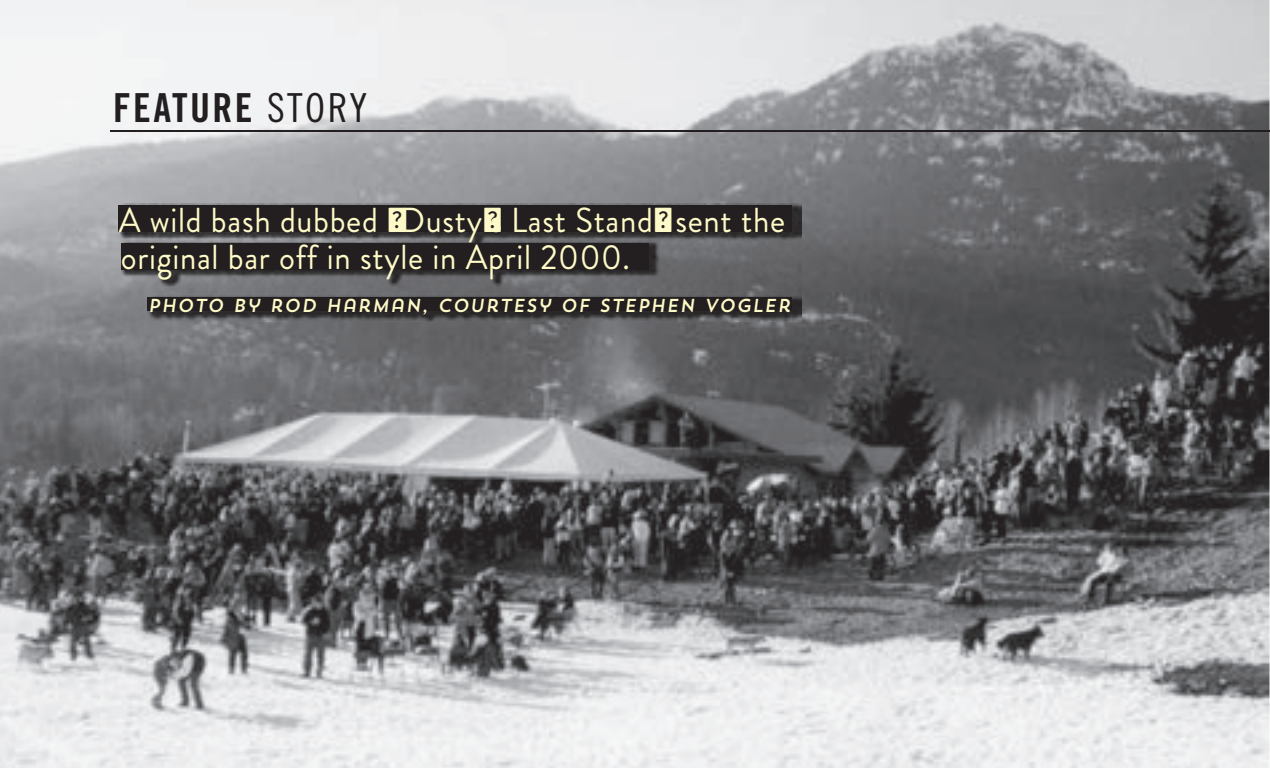
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A wild bash dubbed **“Dusty’s Last Stand”** sent the original bar off in style in April 2000.

PHOTO BY ROD HARMAN, COURTESY OF STEPHEN VOGLER



of our cold snaps,” Bunbury recalls. “It was, like, -20, so they were hurting for sure.”

First, the foursome reportedly burned all the cash they were carrying in an effort to keep warm. When their pockets were empty, one skier decided to try filling his pants, and somehow convinced the others to follow suit. “They shat their pants,” Bunbury clarifies. “I can’t imagine ... to be a grown man, and think ‘This is going to make me warmer,’ and not think about the future.”

The men ended up being lost for a couple of nights before rescuers showed up in a helicopter, but the DIY hot pack incident occurred on night one.

“Apparently they just reeked,” says Bunbury. “You can imagine what it’d be like having shit in your pants for 60

hours.” He admits some details may have been exaggerated over a years-long game of telephone, but by all accounts, the stench was real.

There are other, less-disgusting legends shared on chairlifts and in comment threads that sound realistic enough, by Whistler’s standards, but prove a little more challenging to, well, prove.

Like former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau—not to be mistaken for the longtime Whistlerite by the same name—spotted hitchhiking in ski boots on the shoulder of Highway 99, or a massive bunker billionaire Bill Gates is rumoured to have built under his Whistler vacation home.

“I know he had a house up on Blackcomb, near staff housing, kind of,” says Vogler, “So yeah, it probably has a bunker.”

DUSTY’S DESCENT

Sometimes the true story is even better than the myth.

That’s the case with Dusty’s, the Whistler Blackcomb-owned Creekside institution that claims to be “full of legend and lore.” It’s named after a taxidermied horse “that rode into Whistler in 1979 in the back of a pick-up,” according to the resort’s website, where it found a home in the Western-themed bar.

Dusty watched over partying locals for nearly a decade. One fateful full moon Friday, “legend has it a female partier stripped totally naked and jumped on Dusty’s back. Dusty bucked into life, burst through the bar doors, shook the shocked nude woman into a snowbank and galloped off into the night, never to be seen again.”

Dusty the dead horse is one topic Vogler covers in-depth in *Only in Whistler*—and the truth is closer to the mythicized version than you might think.

It was 1983, and Vogler was helping renovate Whistler’s original watering hole, L’Apres. “While the renovations were underway, an antiques salvage company scoured the west coast of the U.S. for odd bits of Wild West memorabilia,” he writes in the book. “This style of decor may not have had any connection to the Whistler Valley, but stuffing old things into bars and restaurants was in vogue at the time.”

Dusty, a famous 1920s Texas bronco stuffed in a permanent bucking position, was among the treasures brought up north to Creekside. He was saddled up and tossed in the corner, and the bar was named in his honour.

“From its inception, Dusty’s became the backdrop for many bizarre and humorous local stories,” Vogler writes, beginning with its grand opening. Shelley Phelan was less than a month into her new job, but to the crowd’s delight, that didn’t stop her from hopping on the horse and ditching her top during the festivities.

Phelan later clarified another (fully clothed) female employee had ridden Dusty during a staff party the night before.

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P: Justa Jeskova





"I had recently been hired as Whistler Mountain's marketing manager, a single, 20-something female on an otherwise all-male management team, most of whom were about twice my age," she explains in a letter to *Pique*, published in Vogler's book. "Unable to attend the staff party the night before, I heard all about the horse-mounting incident many times over at the Grand Opening, and was encouraged by many to follow suit, which I eventually did. Some of my fellow management team then persuaded me to ride the horse bareback. In the spirit of fun, and in a naive burst of what-the-heck exuberance, I obliged them. And the rest is (some-what-distorted) history, which continues to amaze and amuse me to this day."

Despite a harsh warning from Whistler's then-president, she maintains the move was "a stroke of marketing genius, however unintentional it may have been at the time." As Phelan tells Vogler, "There is nothing I could have done to raise the profile of Dusty's overnight any more effectively than ride that horse ... years later they're still talking about it!"

Dusty was put out to pasture when the bar was due for another refresh, becoming a fixture on the local charity auction circuit. He was returned home during one of those auctions, when the winning bidder was more interested in the vintage saddle than the bronco himself. So sparked another round of adventures for ol' Dusty that included a trip up Whistler Mountain, where pranksters hoisted him onto a lift evacuation practice tower, before relocating him to a liftee shack on Blackcomb via a dead-of-night journey in a Whistler patrol toboggan, towed behind a snowmobile. (Bunbury may or may not have played a role.)

Looking ragged and missing a limb at this point, Dark Side staff sentenced Dusty to the dump. But leaving the once-famous equine to rot in the landfill apparently didn't sit right with whoever was tasked with the job: they opted to toss Dusty in the Cheakamus River instead.

A kayaker who spotted the dead horse called the RCMP. "They brought in a dive team and soon called a crane to pull

the horse from the river where it had clearly stumbled over the rugged bank to its death," Vogler writes. A local cowboy brought in to identify which ranch the horse came from broke the news to Mounties that the animal had been dead for 50 years. "The RCMP officers didn't find the situation particularly humorous," Vogler explains.

Dusty's last journey brought him to Blackcomb's Base II, where he fittingly "left this world in a final blaze of glory that involved a can of gasoline and a match."

In the years since *Only in Whistler's* release, "people have been filling in more little sub-chapters along the way, which is the sign of a good story," said Vogler.

The bucking bronco's legacy is alive and well in Creekside, where his namesake venue remains the scene of many a wild après session. Usually with a little less nudity, though.

WHISTLER'S FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURHOOD GHOSTS

Whistler isn't without its fair share of traditional lore, from crime-related legends like the Brio Beater to the Sea to Sky's resident Sasquatch. (Read *Pique's* Dec. 7, 2014 cover feature "In the shadow of the sasquatch," or listen to a 2016 episode of *Pique's* Mountain Mythic podcast for more Bigfoot banter.)

When it comes to the paranormal, the restaurant that houses Creekside—just across the highway from Dusty's—was known as one of the most haunted buildings in town for decades. So much so that longtime *Pique* reporter Brandon Barrett joined a pair of mediums at the site in October 2012, on assignment for the *Whistler Question*.

Their goal? To help a pair of spirits pass on.

Reports about two ghosts, a mother and a child around 12 years old, had been circulating for years, documented as



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FEATURE STORY

far back as a 1994 *Question* article: “The pale apparitions are blamed for strange occurrences late at night, especially in the loft,” it read.

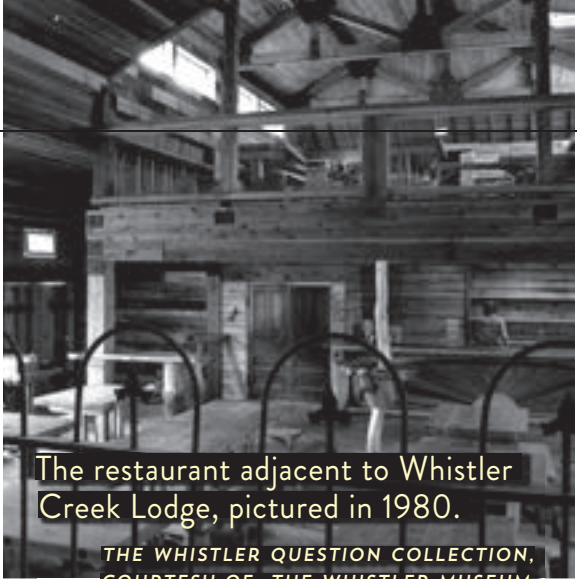
A server recounted being pulled aside by guests who saw a woman and a child in the restaurant’s rafters, when the building housed an Italian spot called Settebello. Staff had heard rumours the spirits were a mother and child who died in a fire, even though there is no record of any blazes in the Karen Crescent building since it was constructed in 1979.

Creekbread’s owners told Barrett about their own encounters while working on the restaurant ahead of its grand opening in 2009. “It was dark, I was looking out into the room and I saw a women in white ... go from the middle of the room and out the doors that lead to the patio. She was high up, maybe 10 feet in the air,” said co-owner Jay Gould at the time. Gould didn’t say anything to oven-builder Mark Jowett, who was also in the room at the time, “because who would believe it?” he remembered. But a few minutes later, Gould revealed, Jowett said: “I think I just saw a ghost.”

As Barrett wrote, another of the restaurant’s owners, Josh Stone, and his wife Amy were working alone late one night around the same time as Gould’s brush with the paranormal. “I came around the last bend in the flight of stairs and the hair on my body just shocked up. It was like getting a blast of freezing air, but it wasn’t cold at all. Something was around the corner, I just knew it, and when I peeked around the last flight of stairs ... I saw a figure whisk into the men’s bathroom,” Josh recalls in the article. “When Amy asked me to explain what I saw, I could only say that it was an adult woman, but I had no specific description.”

Still, Barrett was skeptical when he showed up to meet the two local mediums. That skepticism turned to surprise when he noticed both were “visibly nervous, breathing the kind of long, exhaustive breaths you take when you’re feeling incredibly anxious,” he wrote.

He describes taking a seat in the restaurant’s loft, watching as the mediums reacted to messages they were receiving from



the spirits. They learned the daughter had been taken forcibly from her First Nations mother in the early nineteenth century. The daughter’s spirit had since passed over, but her mom was stuck, still holding onto the guilt and searching for her little girl, the medium said.

Then, one medium started to “sob hysterically,” as Barrett describes: “There was a fire,” the medium said. “Oh God, she was burned alive.”

Barrett hadn’t mentioned anything about a blaze.

The mediums were reportedly able to help the spirit pass on and reunite with her daughter, but the group wasn’t able to revel in that peaceful outcome for long. Barrett and co. were soon pulled to the adjacent Whistler Creek Lodge building, where the mediums managed to connect with a “stubborn” male presence, eventually coaxing him to cross over alongside another female presence spotted on the third floor for years.

That was probably Bill, a ghostly old man housekeepers and employees had reportedly seen wandering the hallways.

For a 2020 Whistler Insider blog post titled “Meet the Ghosts of Whistler,” author Katy Cameron worked with the Whistler Museum to track down information about Bill Bailiff, a U.K. immigrant and former logger who worked in the community in the early 1900s—and fits the profile of the Whistler Creek Lodge spectre to a T.

Archives say Bailiff quit his job on the Pacific Great Eastern Railway to come work as a trapper in Alta Lake in 1913. Two decades later, Bailiff would help build Jordan’s Lodge on the shores of Nita Lake, just a few hundred metres west of the Whistler Creek Lodge.

The Creekbread séance Barrett witnessed appears to have worked: word on the street is the ghosts haven’t been seen since that day in 2012, according to Cameron’s Tourism Whistler blog, but an email to Creekbread inquiring about any recent hauntings wasn’t returned by press time—guess this myth will have to stay a mystery for now.



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A SACRIFICE TO THE SNOW GOD

Praise Ullr, reap the rewards.

It's that myth (and an insatiable thirst for powder) that keeps skiers and snowboarders praying to a Norse deity year after year. Many consider Ullr the Scandinavian god of winter and snow-sports.

In Whistler, those prayers took the form of a ski-burn starting in the mid-1970s, an idea organized by a young group of friends and inspired by an "Ullr" pin their buddy Marco Pfeiffer was wearing at the time. "He said, 'We've got to do a sacrifice for more snow,'" recalls Steve Anderson in *Only in Whistler*.

The first ceremony reportedly took place on Nita Lake, with those in attendance dancing in circles around a bonfire in front of Jordan's Lodge.

The best part? It worked.

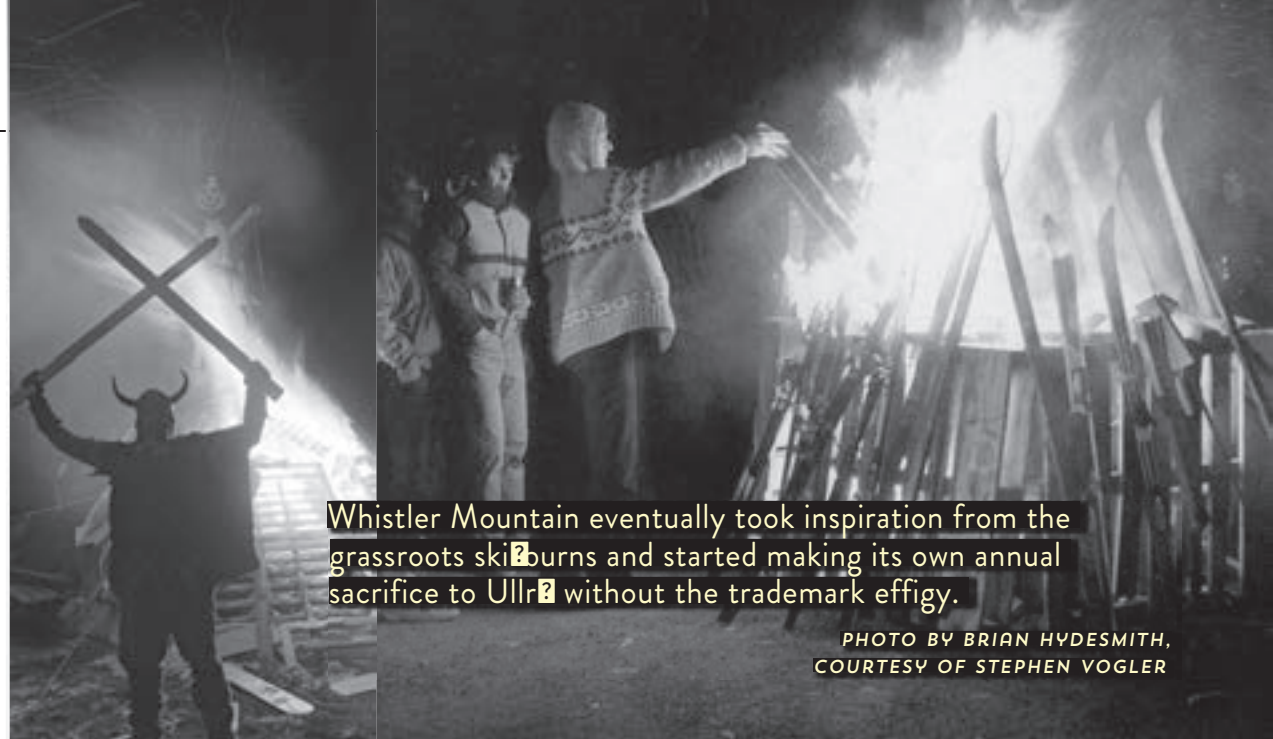
As Vogler writes, buckets of snow fell that winter, launching an annual tradition.

There were rules, Anderson tells Vogler: the sacrificial skis had to be good quality, not destined for the dump—the better the gear, the deeper the snow, generally. An effigy was always modelled after a prominent figure in town, which Shawn Walsh would traditionally ignite with a flaming arrow released from his bow.

"It was a real sort of Pagan, free-for-all party, basically," says Vogler, "but it had at its core, this sacrifice to the snow God, which is kind of [fitting] for a ski town."

The group was emboldened when they skipped the ski-burn ahead of the 1976-77 season, only to spend the next several months scraping down ice-covered slopes.

The event moved around to various venues over the next decade or so, until the mountain climbed on board and started hosting its own Ullr Fests in the mid-'80s. (Minus the effigy...) The event's original organizers remembered that winter as "a crap snow



Whistler Mountain eventually took inspiration from the grassroots ski-burns and started making its own annual sacrifice to Ullr without the trademark effigy.

PHOTO BY BRIAN HYDESMITH, COURTESY OF STEPHEN VOGLER

season," Anderson says in *Only in Whistler*. "I remember we referred to them as unsanctioned burns."

Whistler Mountain "kind of killed it," Vogler admits. The sacrificial ski-burn was "meant to be an underground, grassroots thing."

It likely wouldn't have lasted until today anyways, given society's increased awareness about environmentally-responsible practices. "In those days, you didn't even think about burning Ptex and plastic bases, but nowadays we realize that is not cool, not healthy," says Vogler. "It's just changing times. But yeah, [Ullr Fest] was very underground. Very wild and crazy—when something like a mountain corporation tries to co-opt it, the gods are not happy."

But Whistler has had good snow years since then—could those underground Ullr rituals still be going down in backyards and basement suites around the resort?

Perhaps, says Vogler. As much as Whistler has grown, he sees its irreverent spirit carrying on.

"I always like to think that all the crazy underground things and great stories, these are happening all the time," Vogler says.

Stories about Dusty and ski-burns "just happened to be that era in this town. I was writing about that because I grew up here and was surrounded by all those stories, but I think they're ongoing—I'm a firm believer in that," he continues. "You still hear fun stories on social media, and in some of the local groups and stuff. Some crazy stories emerge."

"There's not any good old days. These are the good old days."

Interested in reading more of Vogler's recollections? *Only in Whistler* is available to purchase locally at Armchair Books, or online on Amazon. ■

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