

Bill & Mitzi Oakes



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There's no title or position in VAST of "founding father and mother," but if there was, Bill and Mitzy Oakes would certainly be nominated for it.

It was the Oakes who started collecting names of snowmobilers from around the state and came up with the idea of forming them into an organization. It was the Oakes who pushed for the first statewide meeting of snowmobilers at Bolton Valley in late spring of 1967. And it was the Oakes who came up with the name, Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, and started publishing a mimeographed newsletter to keep snowmobilers informed.

"Anti-snowmobilers were coming out of the woodwork," recalls Bill Oakes, "saying we were killing the mice, the bugs, the bees, the birds and everything. We were hearing so many antis, we had to get something going."

What they got going was an organization that has now grown to one of the most respected, well-organized and active snowmobiling organizations in the US, with more than 15,000 members [22,094 in 2017] and 153 clubs [121 in 2017] and a trail system that is renowned for its scenic and extensive riding.

Bill, currently Grand Isle director, [He sadly passed away in 2012.] and Mitzy, who became famous in her own right for her chatty, funny and opinionated "Ramblings" column in VAST News, had no idea things would end up where they are today.

Explains Mitzy, who has been treasurer and secretary and remains as active as ever in VAST affairs, "First off, we just wanted to find people to snowmobile with. Bill always loved engines of any kind."

Bill Oakes saw his first snowmobile back in the winter of 1961-62, and the memory is still clear in his mind today, and it still makes him laugh. At the time, he was dairy farming in upper New York State and active in sportsman's affairs and came to Vermont with some friends for a forum on deer. At the session, they had a couple of snowmobiles, though you'd hardly recognize them as that today.

"It looked like an inverted manure spreader with big cleats and cross-links. There wasn't a two-cycle engine in the bunch. The things weighed 1,000 to 2,000 pounds. They were like an old work horse, a tractor or truck." "I was quite impressed with them," he adds.

In 1962, the Oakes moved to their home near the UVM Dairy Farm in South Burlington and began work for the University of Vermont, but no one sold snowmobiles in the area at the time. It was 1966 when Oakes got his first machine, a Moto-Ski. He built cargo sleds to haul around his three kids, and began riding

around the area, which back then was all open farm fields, or he trailered to other areas to ride.

"We had group outings out of here a lot," he recalls. Ten or 15 riders would show up and park in his yard and then just take off, and then they'd return and sit around the kitchen table and be sociable. During those talks, says Mitzy, the riders decided to organize one of the first clubs in the state, the Green Mountain Sno-Cats.

"We were just going to get a fun group together," says Mitzy Oakes. "But then we realized that there were problems coming down the road, that some people didn't like us." A key moment in VAST's birth came when Bill Osborne of the Adirondack Snow Travelers Association paid a visit and warned "You really better organize or you're not going to have any sport."

Bill Oakes had recently changed jobs and was driving all around the state. When he saw a place that sold snowmobiles, he'd stop in to chat and collect names. Slowly, he built up a list of fans of the new sport, and from that list pulled together the first-ever statewide meeting at Bolton Valley, which drew around 50 people. That meeting marked the foundation of VAST 25 years ago, and it also marked the first organized effort to control and promote the sport, and the election of the first president, Wayne Flynn.

Mostly, there was a lot of talk about all the abuses and complaints snowmobilers were facing. "Everybody agreed that they had seen the same thing we had," says Bill. Those attending also discussed the fact there was no law governing snowmobiling. The sport was so much in its infancy, recalls Bill, that to cross the road, the state was requiring snowmobilers to get "motorized wheelchair permits," apparently unable to classify them any other way.

The Oakes felt, along with many other snowmobilers, that there had to be some rules and control over where



snowmobilers could ride if the sport was to survive.

"They were in everybody's back yard and in everybody's front yard, and some people didn't want them in ANY yard," he recalls.

The next few years brought often heated debate within VAST on where snowmobilers should ride and on the laws that were passed by the Vermont Legislature in the late 1960s and early 1970s to regulate snowmobiling. But throughout it all, Bill Oakes, who was VAST president from 1971 to 1973 following John Hall, says VAST members always aired things openly and directly.

"It wasn't under cover, it was all there. Everybody knew what other people thought."

By pulling together and hashing out their views, VAST survived the turbulent years of the early 1970s, when many wanted a total ban on what one letter writer called snowmobiling "Hell's Angels." Today, VAST continues to fight for the sport amidst a very different set of challenges. But while times have changed, the passionate and dedicated leadership and involvement of Bill and Mitzy Oakes hasn't, and the legacy of VAST is built upon their immense contributions.

Remembrances of Bill Oakes

Celebration of Life Memorial, Aug. 8, 2012



There are few people in this world that can truly say they have impacted literally hundreds of thousands of people – by counting up the membership of VAST over the years, members of the International Snowmobile Congress as well as others he met and worked with in the snowmobile community. We have the trails that we have here in Vermont because of a great group of hard working people, and Bill was a part of that group.

A favorite story was from a ride four to five years ago of about 100 miles. Bill was on his Arctic Cat and the trail conditions were a bit challenging, as they can be here in Vermont and Bill was keeping up. He was whipping around corners and going over moguls and as we stopped to have a donut, something you have to do if you are riding with a law enforcement individual. I asked, "Bill, are you doing ok?" "Yes, I am doing great," came the reply.

A couple of times we were moving along at a pretty good clip but Bill never had any trouble keeping up with us. We got to within a quarter mile of our final destination and Bill went to take a corner running at about one mile per hour and he tipped over crashing into a one inch thick maple tree. I think that was the slowest snowmobile crash in the history of Bill Oakes. He had just been on a 99.9 mile ride, never even tipped his sled ten degrees, but at the end of the ride he cleaned out a one-inch maple tree.

– Bob Stebbins, Chittenden County Sheriff's Deputy

I've known Bill from the beginning, Bill was the father of VAST. It all started in Bill and Mitzy's kitchen. In 1987, I was hired to be the trail coordinator and I asked him why he picked me. Bill said "the second guy who came in was wearing black patent leather shoes and you darn well know that he would not be working on trails very well with those on."

We went up on top of Mt Mansfield and when we were coming back one of our group broke a ski. What were we going to do? We were on the top of Mt. Mansfield and it was late at night. Bill pulls out his jackknife, cuts up a branch and lashes it to hold the ski together and we were heading down the hill in no time. Bill solved problems.

– Wayne Pelkey, VAST Trails Coordinator 1987-1997

One night we were having a meeting, and someone came in and announced "good news -- some guy by the name of Bill Oakes on the other side of the state is proposing that all the clubs join together and we build a trail system that goes all the way north and south, east and west to cover the whole state." We all got a good laugh and thought the man was crazy. Bill had the fortitude, audacity and strength to do it. Today we have a 4,700 mile trail system. We used to pay \$2 for dues back then, Bill's club I think was 10 cents. Today we pay a little more than that, but it is well worth it.

I never got to ride with Bill until quite a few years later. One night I was at the VAST office complaining and Bill says "instead of complaining, get involved and change what you don't like". Here I am...

Bill said he had a large collection of snowmobiles. I saw him one day with a snowmobile on his truck and he said he did not know what he was going to tell Mitzy when he got home. "Really?" I asked. Bill explained, "Because when I drop this one off I have to go back because I bought two of them."

– Ken Gammel, Caledonia County Director

VAST Memories

By Ed "Midge" Rosebrook

During an interview with several of the remaining VAST pioneers, in her "neat as a pin" South Burlington apartment on June 21, Mitzi Oakes tells of how it all began. "My husband Bill came from a large and very poor farm family, they had nothing growing up. As a teenager, he had to learn very early how to repair the equipment when it broke down, because they didn't have the money to pay others. Bill could fix anything, he just had that special skill with his hands. As a farm boy, he also learned to love and respect the land."

"His love for snowmobiling came about while Bill was working for Vermont Heating. One day his boss wrecked his new Moto-ski and didn't think it was worth fixing, so he simply purchased another new one. Of course, we never could have afforded a new machine, but Bill's boss sold him that wrecked one very cheap! Well, he brought that thing home, pounded it back into shape and repaired it in no time! Bill just loved to ride!"

"One of our most favorite trips was to ride up on top of Mount Philo, which we did often. But one night Bill came home very upset and told me we couldn't go there anymore. 'This thing is getting way out of hand,' Bill told me. 'People aren't respecting those fields and trails that belong to the farmers! They're cutting fences, leaving garbage around; it's terrible! There has to be an organization of some kind to help protect the property of others, or there won't be any snowmobiling!'"

Already in the works were two UVM professors with the means and the know-how, thinking about submitting a bill to the Vermont legislature banning all snow travel on private property in Vermont. There to help in this process was none other than the head of Natural Resources who was known to hate snowmobiles. Providing the fuel they needed to move this process forward was the myriad of complaints from landowners pouring in at the time, with near zero accolades being received in support of this new sport. That night the idea for an organization was a goal Bill Oakes was willing to tackle, but he would need his wife's support. "Mitzi, will you help me on this?"

Mitzi agreed to help her husband, (if only she knew what was in store for her and Bill in the next few years!) The first thing on their agenda was coming up with a suitable name for it. Several people were involved in the process of coming up with one, out of the many different would-be titles, but it was Mitzi who thought of VAST. "Why not call it the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers?" It was a title for the ages. The second item on their to-do list was to get the word out to what few clubs there were back then, as well as to all snowmobile enthusiasts. Bill received an old hand crank mimeograph machine that needed repair from a helpful source, which he excitedly brought home, tinkered with and got working.

In her basement, on a bitterly cold 30 degree below zero 1967 January night, Mitzi Oakes began cranking out the



Howard Curtis, Mitzi Oakes, Corky Lawson and Amos Colby recently got together to share memories of VAST's beginnings. (Beth Godin photo)

first single page of information, requesting a meeting in Waitsfield, listing the date for this meeting regarding the state of snowmobiling and what needs to be accomplished, for the good of the sport.

"The ink kept freezing, so my young daughter held a heat lamp over the machine while I cranked. Of course, now the ink was getting hot and runny, messing up the pages. So I had my son gently take each paper as it came out and lay them down flat on a table to dry. Soon they were spread out anywhere we could find space!"

"We then mailed them out to as many clubs and people that we could think of that were snowmobilers. Whenever he took a road call, Bill would stop his company van each time he spotted a snowmobile sitting in someone's yard and pass out one of our fliers," Mitzi says. "We were very hopeful that we'd have a big turnout. But hardly anyone came to that first meeting."

However, there was a person attending that meeting who would become one of their biggest supporters. His name was Amos Colby from Lunenburg. Amos had just won a seat in the Vermont legislature a year earlier and, most importantly, was an avid snowmobiler!

"Mitzi came up to me at that first meeting with tears in her eyes, saying 'Well, it's over. No one showed up and we just can't afford to keep doing this anymore. It's too hard. I'm sorry,'"

Colby remembered, "Now don't you give up," Amos told her with a hug. "There's you and me here, that's a good start. Keep going and don't be discouraged."

Bill, Mitzi, Amos and many others worked hard during the next two years. The Oakes, along with friends, were already involved in a local snowmobile club, the Green Mountain Snow Cats. The town of Lunenburg, where Amos is from, had also already formed a club in 1966, the Lunenburg Polar Bears. The sport of snowmobiling in the state of Vermont was quickly becoming a collective force to be reckoned with. Amos and others traveled around the state speaking to as many snowmobilers and existing clubs as he could, explaining how important it was to legitimize the sport through registrations. "This would help bring an end to the outlaws with straight pipes and wire cutters. Those who do harm to landowners and town residents could now be brought to justice. Plus, some of the money from the registrations can be returned to the clubs. It's the only way we can survive as a sport," He told them. Still, there were many who wanted it the old way. To travel anywhere they please, over other people's land.

Slowly however, they all came around and soon, the lawmakers in Montpelier found out that their jobs may be in serious jeopardy should they vote against this snowmobile bill. On Jan. 30 1968, with the State House packed to the rafters from a standing room only crowd of Vermont snowmobilers, the first bill especially written for the benefit of snowmobiling was passed.

A man of French Canadian ancestry, with whom I'm told was possessed of a temperament usually associated with French Canadians, became VAST's first executive director. His name was Carmi Duso, a beloved fellow member by all of those who worked with him. But a good deal of distance it seems, was wisely maintained by those he didn't like. During one recalled incident at the Sixth Annual VAST meeting in the old Radisson Hotel in Burlington, was when then Burlington Mayor Bernie Sanders, who wasn't exactly a huge snowmobile supporter at the time, decided to attend.

"What in hell is that flea-headed son of a # % & doing here?!" Carmi Duso screamed, "I'll throw him out!"

Bill Oakes, possessing a more passive temperament, was luckily standing right next to Duso and intervened, "No Carmi, you stay here. I'll go tell him." Bill calmly went over to Sanders and was somehow able to get him to leave without embarrassing the poor mayor. He was so tactful in the handling of the situation, that he and Bernie Sanders became good friends after that. Bernie is now a great supporter of VAST and the current Lamoille Valley Rail Trail project. For many years, he endured the chiding nickname "fleahead."

The first secretary of VAST was Corky Lawson. "I had no idea what I was getting myself into," She says chuckling,

"They stuck me over on Langdon Street in Montpelier on the third floor of an old factory building for seven years, in a room the size of a closet, with no heat and sometimes water when it wasn't frozen! I only worked during winters back then and I had to bring in my own heater to keep from freezing to death!"

"I was given hand-me-down office equipment that worked when it wanted to! They later put me an office at the Masonic Temple, which wasn't bad. Gladly, I received some help when they hired Eleanor Curtis, and we worked well together. Eleanor, her husband Howard, and my husband and I became close friends." She told us of a funny story with Governor Howard Dean. "He showed up at Annual Meeting with three toddlers under his arms and of course couldn't take them into the meeting. He ended up passing them off to Eleanor, who was stuck with watching them for hours while he attended the meeting!" Corky worked as VAST's secretary for 20 years, making many friends along the way.

Eleanor's husband, Howard, was at the interview and told of a funny story when they were over in Augusta, Maine at a conference.

"We all stopped at a motel and the prices were a little steep, but the desk clerk told us they had a room for half price, because the air conditioner didn't work." "I'll take it!" Bill exclaims. "Well, it just happened that Bill had driven his service truck to Augusta, so he goes into the room, pulls the access cover off the A/C unit, discovers what's wrong with it and fixes the dang thing!"

This merry band of history making pioneers traveled together all over the United States and Canada during

those early years, attending as many International Snowmobile Congress meetings as possible, explaining and sharing ideas to other groups and wishing for the same success enjoyed by Vermont's VAST organization.

A somber, touching moment occurred a few years ago when Corky visited her old boss and VAST's first director, Carmi Duso, at a nursing home, just before he passed away. "Carmi was a great guy," Corky says, as the rest nodded in agreement, "But he was so, so stubborn! You could not change his mind once he made a decision, no matter what, right or wrong! But he was a good friend and a good boss. Before I left, Carm asks me, 'See that big field over there?' I looked out the window of his room and replied 'Yes, I see it, Carmi. What about it?'" In an ironic twist of fate, he nearly brings Corky to tears whispering, "That's my home farm over there. That's where I grew up."

Thank you!

Bill & Mitzi Oakes, Amos Colby,
Norman Hayes, Howard & Eleanor Curtis,
Milan & Corky Lawson, Carmi Duso,
Ray & Marilyn White, Roger & Donna
Ringuette, Jamie & Betty Jacobs, Star
Orr, Marilyn Carrier, Carmen & Charlie
Joselyn, George Kries, Paul Jackson,
Wayne Flynn, Gil Long, Herb Benoit, Lloyd
Church, John Hall, Mary Stratton, Harold
Turner, Elwyn Neil, Wilfred Bourdeau, Bill
Sumner, Keneline Collins and so many
other snowmobile pioneers that did the
tough work 50 years ago!