ADVENTURE

Blue River Bounty

How Mike Wiegele built a powder skiing empire
deep in the British Columbia backcountry

■ BY BRIAN HURLBUT

Much like the late, legendary filmmaker Warren Miller, not everyone understood Mike Wiegele's vision. As Miller toured the world promoting skiing through his annual movies, Wiegele was busy strategizing how to entice more skiers to the pristine powder he had discovered in the remote mountains of British Columbia.

The owner of Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing turned 80 years old in September, he'll celebrate his 50th year in business next winter, and he shows no signs of slowing down.

In the late 1960s, the idea of bringing paying guests into the backcountry was unheard of—and logistically difficult. Unless, Wiegele thought, you have a helicopter.

"Who would spend money to go flying in the mountains to ski?" said Carman Smith, a third-generation logger who has spent his life in southeast British Columbia's North Thompson River valley. Smith met Wiegele soon after he moved to the area.

"He had a totally different vision than what we had," Smith said. "We hadn't really thought about the mountains for recreation. I never dreamt of skiing up there."

Smith, 82, and Wiegele have now been friends for nearly five decades, and Smith's logging operation helped create some of the runs that Wiegele's clients pay big bucks to ski. But back then, when Wiegele had sketches on napkins and daydreams about creating one of the world's first heli-skiing operations, Smith just thought he was nuts.

Warren Miller and Mike Wiegele were also longtime friends and kindred spirits who met in 1963. Miller came to Blue River, British Columbia, to film for the first time in 1973 and Wiegele's operation appeared in more than 20 of his films. Miller passed away in January 2018 at age 93, but left a lasting legacy of the ski bum-turned-entrepreneur lifestyle, which Wiegele still embraces today.

"He put trust in people and his friends when getting into the business, and that's what I try to [do] today," Wiegele said of Miller. "He's gone, but his spirit is still with us."

Born in Austria to a family of farmers who weren't avid skiers, Wiegele nevertheless gravitated to the sport. Growing up, he skied whenever he wasn't doing farm chores and eventually earned a spot on the national junior race team. By the time he was 21, he wanted out of post-war Austria and in 1959 emigrated to Canada, a place he'd been fixated on since he was a young boy, listening to stories from when his father and grandparents spent time working there.

After arriving in Banff, and then leaving for brief ski-instructing stints at Mount Tremblant in Quebec and California's Sugar Bowl, he returned in 1965 and opened his own ski school at Lake Louise. One of his first students was Ken Read, who at age 20 became the first North American to win a World Cup downhill race.

The same year Wiegele opened his ski school, his Austrian friend and renowned mountaineer, Hans Gmoser, started flying skiers into the Canadian mountains with helicopters. Gmoser and Wiegele spent many days together in the high peaks during the early '60s, touring in the backcountry and looking for the best snow. Gmoser's operation eventually became Canadian Mountain Holidays and is still in existence today, although he died in 2006.

The first flight to Sir Wilfrid Laurier Glacier in the Cariboos, in March 1970.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE WEIGELE HELICOPTER SKIING ARCHIVES

When the helicopters landed on the scene, backcountry powder skiing in Canada became a nascent industry. Gmoser made a film featuring him and Wiegele heli-skiing and Gmoser immediately jumped into the business of taking guests. Wiegele followed suit a few years later, starting in the town of Valemount at the foot of Mount Robson Provincial Park, and eventually settling on a remote British Columbia valley nestled between two striking mountain ranges, the Monashees and the Cariboos. The tiny logging town of Blue River, located between Jasper and Kamloops, would serve as his base area.

"The helicopter quickly made you realize that there was much more to be had," Wiegele said. "We have a vastness of choices and that's heli-skiing—having the choices."

Wiegele's business now has well over a million acres of terrain and more than 1,000 peaks they can access, on public land leased from the Canadian government. Guests can stay at the main lodge in Blue River or one of several private lodges scattered around the mountains. Wiegele has built a luxurious, comfortable experience for his clients, which average about 1,300 per winter. His company has also become the benchmark in an industry with close to two-dozen heli-skiing operations in British Columbia alone.

While the amenities do attract clientele, Wiegele knows that it still boils down to the bounty found on the slopes.

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With an average annual snowfall of nearly 400 inches, he believes the mountains around Blue River are the perfect powder paradise.

"It's truly the most reliable and consistent snowfall," he said. "If you have good snow, you have happy customers."

Wiegele is proud to point out that his company hasn't missed an opening day in 49 years, and that last winter there were only four down days due to weather—the season typically begins around Dec. 1 and wraps up by mid-April.

According to Wiegele, a crucial component to his success is the staff. Treating them more like family than employees, Wiegele has a long history of taking good care of good people. Bob Sayer, 62, earned a trip to Blue River 32 years ago, after winning the Canadian Powder 8 Championships at Lake Louise. He came to compete in the world finals at Wiegele's, and soon after signed on as a guide—his dream job after working as a patroller and seeing Wiegele's featured in several Warren Miller films.

More than three decades later, Sayer is now a lead guide and the operations manager for the business. He was one of the few guides back then with a family, and Mike Wiegele made it possible for him to make a living in the mountains.

"He didn't have to—I was just another young heli-ski guide—but over the years I have been always really well taken care of by Mike," Sayer said. "He wants the best for his company and his clients, and he knows that you will get the best out of people if you treat them well."

These days a top Wiegele guide can make six figures; it's hard work and long hours, but the dedication can pay off.

"We're attracting high-quality people," Wiegele said. "It has developed into a profession where you can make a living. The myth is gone that it's a bum job."

During the winter, the small community of Blue River swells with Wiegele employees. From dishwashers and housekeepers to massage therapists and cooks, Wiegele has about 240 people on staff during the peak season. That's more than the entire town's population, which has shrunk from about 650 to less than 200 in the nearly 50 years since Wiegele started. In an area where the logging and railroad industries once reigned, recreation now drives the local economy.

"Mike is really community minded," said Carman Smith, the logger. "He has always been there for us."

Smith described an event, many years ago, when one of his workers was hit in the head by a tree and badly injured. They were in a remote area that an ambulance couldn't reach, and Wiegele happened to have a rare down day because of low fog.

"He took a helicopter and flew just above the highway, and followed the logging road all the way in," Smith recalled. "He had a German doctor on board and we loaded my guy into the helicopter and flew right down to the hospital." Smith credits Wiegele for saving the man's life.

There was also the harrowing rescue in 1990, when Wiegele pulled survivors, including his own wife Bonnie, out of a burning helicopter that had crash-landed. These acts earned Wiegele a Medal of Bravery from the Governor General of Canada and helped cement his place in the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame. But the awards don't mean as much as his innovations in snow safety and the impact they have had on the industry. He founded the Canadian Ski Guide Association in 1990, and that same year initiated avalanche research with the University of Calgary—something that all heli-ski operators now participate in.

"Many of the things that are standard operating procedure in the industry started with Mike—he's always five steps further down the road than everybody else," Sayer said. "His focus on safety has no limits, and his belief that nothing should get in the way of safety is his legacy."

This focus on safety indirectly led him to be a pioneer of wider, shorter powder skis. In the early days, clients would often want the stiffest, longest skis available—up to 225 centimeters—for powder skiing, but Wiegele thought there was a better way. He started drawing up prototypes in the 1970s, but it wasn't until the late 1980s that he was able to convince Atomic to make a ski specifically for deep, untracked powder.

"Just make me a ski for the skiers and not for the racers," he told them. "We have to make a better ski."

The Atomic Powder Magic debuted in 1988. With a 115-centimeter waist, they were not for the average skier, but in the mountains above Blue River they were ideal. The Powder Plus followed, becoming a standard that helped usher in the fat ski revolution.

All of these safety and product innovations are driven by one fact: Mike Wiegele loves to ski and he loves to take people skiing. Yes, he's built a successful business over the years, but what hasn't changed is his devotion to the sport he loves.

For his 80th birthday last fall, Wiegele again rode his bike 512 kilometers, from Banff to Blue River, in his annual Tour de Blue event to kick off the 49th year in business. The ride is part of Wiegele's Get Fit for Winter program, designed to inspire his team for the upcoming ski season. And he did it with a bum knee, which was surgically repaired in late September. He plans to be healed in time to ski by February, the peak of the Blue River ski season.

"He's as driven now as much as he was when he was 50," Sayer said. "Mike doesn't sit still."

Sayer likes to tell a story from 1988 when Wiegele built the existing main lodge and chalets in Blue River. After construction was done, Wiegele lived in a small room in the basement, because he just needed a place to sleep for the winter.

"Here was this big, beautiful lodge and the owner lived in a storage closet because that's all he needed," Sayer said. "Mike is the consummate ski bum. He's done well in life but all he really wants in life is to go skiing. And if he can go skiing everyday then he's happy."

Wiegele echoes this sentiment. After all, he moved halfway across the world as a young man to explore the Canadian mountains and to seek out the best powder. It's what many winter enthusiasts do at some point in their lives, but in Wiegele's case, he's managed to create and sustain a business that empowers other snow lovers to follow their dreams. Much like the inspiration that Warren Miller evoked with his annual ski films, Wiegele wants people to experience the freedom that comes from gliding through powder.

In 2020 he'll celebrate the 50th year of Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing, and it's a safe bet that he'll be just as excited as he was during that first season of flying clients to the high peaks of British Columbia.

"I'm motivated by the quality of skiing, the quality of snow, and the quality of friendships you develop," Wiegele said. "That turns into a package of having fun living."

Mike Wiegele is clearly still having fun. While some people his age dream about winter retreats to palm trees and sandy beaches, this skiing pioneer is waxing his boards for another season in the mountains—and he wouldn't have it any other way. 🐎

Above: Wiegele hosts an annual, 512-kilometer bike ride called the Tour de Blue.

PHOTO BY DEANNA KRISTENSEN

Below: Mike Wiegele pictured at the helipads of his Blue River Resort.

PHOTO BY JOHN SCHWIRTLICH