

Snowsports Builder Award

HENSLEY FAMILY

Kratka Ridge Opertors

Submitted by John Watson

This is a story about a small area in the San Gabriel Mountains of Southern California and the decades of devotion to its survival through every obstacle a ski area could be faced with. Interwoven in this story is the indomitable spirit and determination of the skiing family – the Hensleys - that sustained Kratka Ridge ski area from 1960 on and support its revival even to this day.

Kratka Ridge is named after the ridge upon which the Angeles Crest Highway commences its route across the San Gabriel Mountains from Altadena to Phelan on the north side of the range. The ridge is named after a mountain man who lived in the area.

Kratka Ridge is one of two ski areas, the other being historic Mt Waterman, that are roughly 35 miles from the greatest concentration of skiers and outdoor sports people in the USA. Kratka lies at 7,500 feet with a vertical of 750 feet with 13 runs on 85 acres. The possibilities were enormous.

The Kratka Ridge ski area was founded in 1950 by 11 members of the San Gorgonio Ski Club, each of whom donated 700 hours of labor to erect a day lodge and install 4 rope tows. They opened in 1951 and decided in 1953 to install a chairlift, a single chair capable of 600 skiers per hour and one of only three in the USA even today.

The directors decided that they needed a mountain manager and they hired Ed Hensley in 1960. The Hensleys moved on site. Thus began 36 years of direct participation in the ownership or management of Kratka Ridge by the Hensley family.

Kratka Ridge had a great run of success in those early years, with Ed doing the operations work at the lifts, Ray working at night grooming, blasting, repairing and replacing equipment and Mary and children doing food service, ticket sales and whatever else. By the mid-1970s, Kratka had its unique single chair and 6 rope tows.

Times could be good even without snow making. Those were the early days when skiers would have to make coffee and cocoa in the morning, pre-prepare dinner for the ski team of up to fifty racers, and then sleep – all eight – in the day lodge only to do it again the next day.

Doug Pfeiffer was head of the ski school and he slept over as well. Nights were spent listening to the accordion of Fred Burri, the yodeler for Disneyland's Matterhorn ride. These were the idyllic days of skiing at Kratka Ridge.

While dependent solely on snowfall, by the mid 1980s the Hensleys saw snowmaking as the only solution for the continued operation of the ski area. It was here that roughly 15 endangered mountain yellow-legged frogs intervened. The U.S. Forest Service decided on an alternative supply: that wells would be the preferred water supply and ultimately this failed. Four of the toughest snow years in the prior twenty occurred in the 1990s.



In 2001, the chair was damaged by avalanche and did not operate for months and the lift house burned. A cycle of disputes with the USFS over permits ensued. Kratka Ridge closed in 2001.

The Hensley family invested over 30 years trying to make Kratka Ridge work. Most of those years they were successful, but they had to endure the vagaries of snowfall in Southern California (hard enough without any further difficulties), environmentalist persuasion of the USFS, wrangling over permits, changes of ownership, avalanche and fire. It is a measure of skier determination that the Hensleys kept Kratka Ridge alive and flourishing for over 30 years.