



MT. ASSINIBOINE
LODGE



At Home in the Backcountry

CELEBRATING THE LEGENDARY HOSPITALITY AND RICH HERITAGE OF ASSINIBOINE LODGE.

A Rockies tradition since 1927.

Compiled/Edited by Meghan J. Ward



Strom's cabin with roof blown off, Mt. Assiniboine, 1936, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Erling Strom fonds (V612/lc/accn3045/na66-1377)

For nearly a century, Mount Assiniboine Lodge has been a haven for mountain enthusiasts who are eager to spend time in the glorious terrain that surrounds the “Matterhorn of the Rockies.” The lodge’s guest books read like an encyclopedia of mountain personalities. Its masterfully crafted log walls tell the stories of comings and goings, of tales of adventure, of people gathering and experiencing the *magic*.

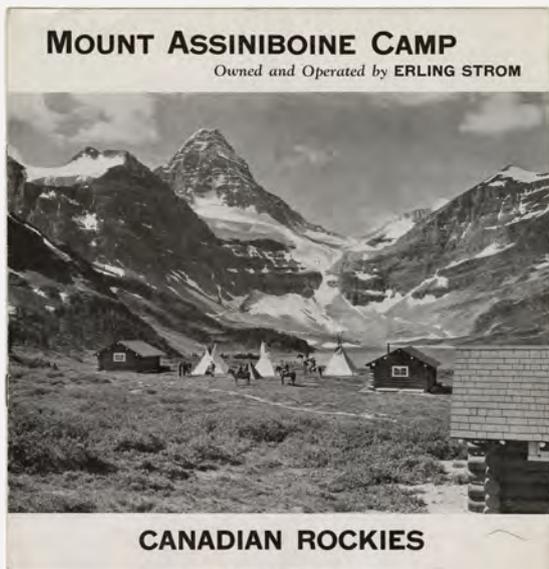
Merry Christmas
and a
Happy New Year
from The Stroms

And yet, a lodge does not become famous by setting or by construction alone. Having a cozy fire to read by is

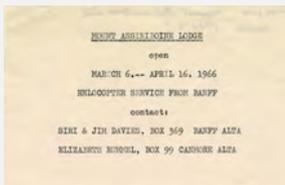
only a part of the warmth and welcome of this place. It’s in the passion of the people, past and present, who have built Assiniboine Lodge into what it is today. Meet them here: those who first dreamed of a backcountry ski lodge and those who ensured its survival, those who continue the legacy of hospitality and those who have raised their children with the wonders of Assiniboine in their backyard.

A Chronology

Currently owned by the B.C. government, Assiniboine Lodge has changed hands, endured multiple lease renewals, undergone repairs and renovations and, ultimately, stood the test of time. Mountain historian **Chic Scott** (also the author of the forthcoming book *Mount Assiniboine – The Story*) chronicles the colourful history of this well-loved establishment.



Mount Assiniboine Camp – owned and operated by Erling Strom – Canadian Rockies, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Erling Strom fonds (M110/1)



Mount Assiniboine Lodge open March 6 – April 17, 1966, Helicopter service from Banff, contact: Siri & Jim Davies, Box 369, Banff, Alta, Elizabeth Rummel, Box 99 Canmore, Alta, Mount Assiniboine Lodge Infofile



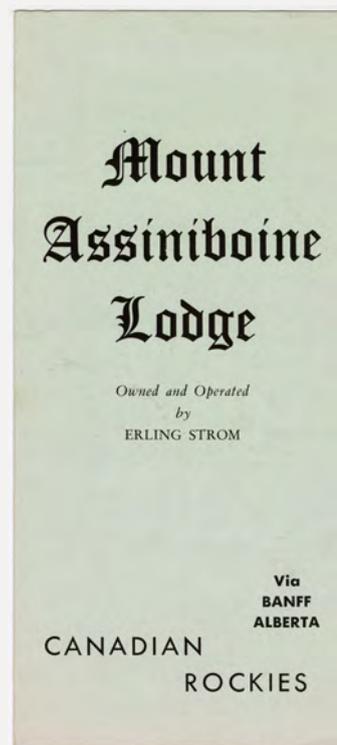
Mar-Apr '62 - Liz, this picture of you and your kitchen created quite a few conversations here in Detroit - Marge, 1962, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Elizabeth Rummel fonds (V554/iv/a/pa-677)



[Jim Davies and two unidentified people by airplane – Assiniboine], April 1962, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Elizabeth Rummel fonds



Digging up roof, Mt. Assiniboine, ca. 1935, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Erling Strom fonds (V612/lc/acn3045/na66-1378)



Mount Assiniboine Lodge – owned and operated by Erling Strom via Banff Alberta – Canadian Rockies, ca. 1940, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Mount Assiniboine Lodge Infofile

1922: Due largely to the efforts of A.O. Wheeler, the founder of the Alpine Club of Canada, Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park is created on February 6, by Order in Council #174.

1927: Assiniboine Lodge is built by the Canadian Pacific Railway during the summer of 1927 (contrary to the long-accepted history that it was built in 1928).

1928: In March, the Marquis Nicolas d'Albizzi and Erling Strom lead four "dudes" from Banff to Mount Assini-

boine where they stay at Wheeler's Alpine Club Cabins (today known as the Naiset Huts) and enjoy 17 days of perfect skiing. This is considered the start of backcountry skiing in the Canadian Rockies.

1929: In March, Albizzi and Strom lead a group of guests to Assiniboine Lodge for spring skiing. This is the first time the lodge is used and why it's now considered the oldest ski lodge in the Canadian Rockies.

1929: In the autumn, Albizzi decides he is finished with Assiniboine Lodge and tells the CPR they must find someone else to run it. It appears that Strom knows nothing of this and is very upset when he hears about it, but it is too late. The contract to manage Assiniboine Lodge is given to Bill Brewster.

1930: Bill Brewster and his wife take over and run Assiniboine Lodge for the summers of 1930 through 1932. Strom continues to run the lodge for several weeks each winter.

1933: Strom takes over running Assiniboine Lodge both summer and winter. Cowboy Jim Bagley, who has been working for Strom since 1931, purchases a string of pack horses and teaches his boss to wrangle horses and run a pack train. Strom will go on to run Assiniboine Lodge every summer and most winters for almost 50 years.

The Stroms Run Assiniboine For 50 Years!

1935: Belmore Browne packs in 50,000 fish eggs that are then deposited in the lakes around Mt. Assiniboine.

1936: Ken Jones spends the winter and summer working at Assiniboine Lodge. Many years later Jones will become the first Assiniboine park ranger, holding that job from 1967 to 1974.

1936: During the winter, the roof blows off Assiniboine Lodge for the first time. It blows off for a second time during the winter of 1937 and a third time in the winter of 2005.

1936: April 30, Strom obtains a sub-lease on Lot 10555 KD from the CPR and also purchases the lodge and its furnishings from the CPR.

1938: Elizabeth von Rummel (Lizzie Rummel) begins working at Assiniboine Lodge as a hostess during the summer. She also works there during the winter of 1939, the summer of 1940 and the summer of 1941. A decade later, in 1950, Rummel will buy nearby Sunburst Lake Camp from Pat Brewster and operate it for the next twenty years.

1940s: Assiniboine Lodge continues to operate during the summer, but there is little activity at the lodge during the winter. Several factors affect winter visitation, including the Second World War and the completion of a road to the Sunshine area, making skiing there much more accessible.

1948: Al Gaetz begins to fly light aircraft to Mt. Assiniboine, landing on Magog Lake in the winter and O'Brien Meadow in the summer. Strom is very encouraged, correctly surmising that air travel will allow more visitors to access the region in the future.

1952: On July 23, Al Gaetz crashes his airplane on O'Brien Meadow, injuring both him and his two passengers. The wreck will stay there for several decades, during which time the area is known as Airplane Meadow.

1953: Lizzie Rummel hires Hans Gmoser, future founder of Canadian Mountain Holidays, as a ski guide at Sunburst Lake Camp. This is the beginning of his guiding career.

1954: Pilot Stu Ames crashes a plane on a frozen Lake Magog; he and a passenger miraculously walk away from the incident. The airplane is not repaired or moved, and when the lake melts in the spring, the aircraft goes to the bottom, where it remains to this day. This temporarily ends the experiment with using fixed-wing aircraft to access Mt. Assiniboine.

Plane crashes on Lake Magog!

1958-1963: The "new lodge building" (or bunkhouse, as it is sometimes known) is constructed at Assiniboine Lodge by log builder Dave Leslie.

1961: Jim Davies begins flying guests to Assiniboine Lodge during the winter in his Super Cub aircraft. Within a few years, he will begin using a helicopter.

1973: Mount Assiniboine Park is enlarged sevenfold, from 5,180 ha to 38,600 ha.

1975: The B.C. government considers taking over Assiniboine Lodge and turning it into park headquarters and a youth hostel.

1977: Erling Strom celebrates his 80th birthday and his last season at Mount Assiniboine. His daughter Siri continues to operate Assiniboine Lodge until 1983.

1983: In October, Sepp and Barb Renner and their three children, Andre, Sara and Natalie, take over the operation of Assiniboine Lodge.

1994: Annick Blouin works at Assiniboine Lodge as relief cook for the first time. Today she co-manages the lodge.

2010: Sepp and Barb Renner retire after operating Assiniboine Lodge for 27 years.

2010: Andre Renner and Claude Duchesne (Blouin's husband) win a 20-year contract to operate Assiniboine Lodge.

2011: BC Parks undertakes a major project, costing about \$2 million, to completely restore Assiniboine Lodge and bring it up to the day's health and safety codes.

2012 ONWARD: Andre Renner, Claude Duchesne and Annick Blouin operate Assiniboine Lodge and manage the helicopter access, the Naiset Huts and the campground.

Three Generations at Assiniboine: The Renner Family

BY LINDSAY DONOVAN



It was just another Friday afternoon that school let out and Andre, Sara, and Natalie Renner were skiing the 26-kilometre distance from the Mt. Shark trailhead to Assiniboine Lodge. They'd done this, as well as hike in, many times before. Always chaperoned by an adult when they were younger, this particular time they were in their early teens, and on their own, when they came across a group skiing out. They asked the kids, "What are you doing on the trail so late?" The Renners joyfully answered, "Going home!"

Growing up in the Renner family for the past three generations has meant having access to a truly wild yard to play in. Joseph (Sepp) and Barb Renner recall their middle child, Sara, sitting on the front porch, awestruck by the view, pointing and exclaiming: "Wow! Look at our front yard! And side yard! And backyard!" If you've ever been to Assiniboine, then you're familiar with that childlike wonder that hits you when taking in the serene, expansive and historic vistas.

Prior to operating Assiniboine Lodge, Sepp and Barb acquired a wealth of experience working in the lodging and outdoor industries with Canadian Mountain Holidays and other backcountry hike and ski operations. In 1983, they felt it was time for a shift and wanted to take on a new challenge. While flipping through *The Valley Echo*, the local Invermere paper, they saw a notice that the contract to manage Assiniboine Lodge was up for public tender. Without hesitation, they put in a bid and won. They kicked off their first season running North America's oldest ski lodge with their family and approximately 12 guests for Christmas, none of whom was prepared for the cold they would endure. With temperatures reaching close to -50 degrees Celsius, the walls were covered in a thick layer of frost, and large stalactites were found when prying up toilet seats. In fact, it was so cold the propane tank froze. They built a snow cave over the tank, and placed a kerosene lamp under the shelter, which after many hours, thawed it out. To this day, it remains the coldest family Christmas they've had in 35 years of running the lodge.

The kids helped out in all aspects of lodge life and took on guiding responsibilities, which evolved as they grew older. Natalie began with mellow hiking groups, whom she affectionately called "the turtles." She made an agreement with her parents that after climbing Assiniboine she'd be able to lead the more advanced groups, and hence summited when she was 11 years old. For the past two years, Sepp, Natalie and

Aria (Sara's oldest daughter) – spanning the three generations – have been planning to climb the peak together. Due to weather and wildfires, the objective remains on their bucket list.

Being exposed to an abundance of outdoor experience and working around the lodge from a young age provided each of the Renner children with a solid foundation for their future career paths: Sara, as an Olympic cross-country skier and today the co-owner of Talus and Paintbox lodges; Natalie, as a paramedic and ACMG-certified ski guide; and Andre, who continues to carry the torch at Assiniboine Lodge.

Today, Andre co-manages the lodge with his business partner Claude Duchesne and Duchesne's wife, Annick Blouin. For the first time since the operation began, they can think long term. Previously, the Renners operated under five-year and then one-year terms, but when Andre and Claude took over they received a 20-year tenure. This term will allow for more growth and investment back into the facilities.

Each generation has had its unique relationship to the lodge, yet some common themes tie them together: hard work, the pursuit and love of the outdoors, and connection to people and the land. While spending time out there isn't what it used to be for Sepp and Barb, it's still where the family comes together to enjoy the place that will forever be considered home.

L-R: Sepp Renner, Sara Renner, Natalie Renner, Andre Renner, and Barb Renner, circa 1994. Photo courtesy Sara Renner

[Unidentified man holding skis by cabin door looking at Mt. Assiniboine], ca. 1930, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Peter and Catharine Whyte fonds (V683/III/A/1/1/pd-1/34-3)





Accessing Assiniboine Lodge

Assiniboine Lodge is located in Mt. Assiniboine Provincial Park, British Columbia, near the Banff National Park border. Most guests fly in from either the Canmore Alpine Heliport or Mt. Shark Helipad. Those hiking or skiing in (approx. 26 to 30 km one way) can begin from either Sunshine Village in Banff or the Mt. Shark trailhead in Kananaskis.

Alternate accommodations in the region include the Naiset Huts, the Hind Hut (climber's hut), various rustic cabins, as well as approximately 85 wilderness campsites.

Find more information at assiniboinelodge.com.

A Formidable Peak

At 11,870 feet, the lodge's namesake peak is the highest mountain in the Southern Continental Range of the Canadian Rockies. In 1885, George M. Dawson of the Geological Survey of Canada saw a similarity between the peak and the teepees of the Assiniboine in Manitoba, so he named it after them.

Mount Assiniboine was first climbed in the summer of 1901 by James Outram and guides Christian Bohren and Christian Hasler. Lawrence Grassi made the first solo ascent in 1925, and in 1967, Chic Scott, Don Gardner and Eckhardt Grassman made the first winter ascent.

Guiding Assiniboine into the Future

BY SKY ENGLAND



Over a beer that night, Claude said to Andre: "Let's do this."

In the spring of 2010, Andre Renner asked Claude Duchesne to be his business partner: *How about co-managing Assiniboine Lodge for the next 20 years?* The question came as Claude was wrapping up his seventeenth season managing CMH's Gothics Lodge. He also had a six-week sail from Québec City to the Azores Islands planned.

When his 42-foot vessel touched the other side of the Atlantic, he thought of his teenage kids, Anne-Marie and Alex, and his wife, Annick. They were headed to Assiniboine, where Annick had worked as a relief cook since 1994. Claude jumped on a plane to Calgary, where a friend picked him up and, at 3 a.m., deposited him at the Mt. Shark trailhead. From there, he set out into the darkness with no headlamp and Andre's proposal buzzing in his mind.

In the early 1980s, Claude and Annick had moved from Québec to British Columbia, where the backcountry became their place of work and play. Annick worked at Temple and Skoki lodges before landing at Assiniboine, while Claude took his position at Gothics in 1993 and, in 1995, became a fully certified ACMG ski guide.

Every summer, Claude would bring their kids out to visit their mom at Assiniboine. He first braved the 26-kilometre hike with kids when Anne-Marie and Alex were just four and six, respectively. While Annick cooked and Claude helped around the lodge, the children would explore the meadows with white-bearded Ken Jones, the first Canadian-born mountain guide. During those years, the Duchesnes and the Renners became good friends.

Claude's family's bond with Assiniboine already ran deep by the time he found himself trekking through the darkness, contemplating his next move. *How many times in my life will I have an opportunity like this?* he thought.

Over a beer that night, Claude said to Andre: "Let's do this."

A crew renovated the lodge in 2011 and the entire family returned in summer 2012. After more than a decade working in separate, remote locations and handling the challenges that came with that, Claude and Annick were delighted to be together, with their children.

Annick's new management role put her at the front of the house, which she found challenging at first. Anne-Marie cooked. Alex learned carpentry and fixed up the cabins. Claude hosted and guided the guests. Running the lodge demanded long work days for two-week stretches, but Claude and Annick focused on making it fun. In the afternoons, they let the staff loose to scramble, hike, fish and explore. Claude, Annick and Andre "always supported each other and grew together," says Annick. And the rest of the staff: "All of [them] are like our kids!" says Claude, laughing yet sincere.

As Alex (24) and Anne-Marie (22) embark on their careers (mountain guiding and nursing, respectively), Annick and Claude are halfway through their tenure at Assiniboine Lodge. The reward of sharing a place so beautiful that it can bring guests to tears is never lost on them.

"I always find I can have a better connection in the backcountry with people because we have time for each other," says Claude. "It has been a great life." ▲