

New Mexico Cross Country Ski Club

Report on Francie's Hut Trip – 6-7 January 2003

by Guy Miller, Grand Suzerain of Hut Trips and leader of the Francie's Hut trip



Our trip to Francie's Hut is now history, and what a history it was. The account that follows is, to a large extent, true. Accuracy may be substituted for a minor variation thereof where the latter makes for better story telling or where actual events cannot be recalled with certainty. Truth, after all, is nothing more than a collective agreement that a particular rendition of events represents the group's concept of reality. As Franz Friggenhutz would say, to be sure, you had to have been there, and

now it's too late. Maybe next year, ya?

Some last-minute cancellations reduced our group of 20 to 17, which, while we lamented the absence of a few of our comrades, did make for a tad more elbow room in the hut. Mike Martin and Nurse Betty Spafford joined myself and Ginger "Flash" Larkin, along with John Thomas and Dr. Jean Hanson, not to mention the venerable Bonnie Putzig and globetrotter Bill Davey. Hut cherries Phyllis Pryor, Regina Michaelis, Janine Bulot, Dave Wegner and Bob Long made their debuts with this distinguished group. Dave Saylor, whose last hut trip occurred before some of our group members were born, qualified as an honorary hut cherry. Marilyn Harper, Lynda Dale and Bill Heitz, on their second hut outing, graduated to the status of hut veterans. Our representative in Breckenridge, Jim Mikkelson, was able to join us also. Franz Friggenhutz showed up unexpectedly and joined us briefly for afternoon tea before resuming his sojourn over the next valley to some undisclosed destination.

We found Francie's Hut to be truly luxurious, and the first timers may have been a bit spoiled. Those going on to McNamara and the Lake City yurts later in the season may feel a bit of a let down. Hut vets who have on previous trips staggered outside in the blinding fury of a late night storm to find relief were delighted with the indoor composting powder rooms that, contrary to popular belief, did not produce objectionable olfactory responses. That alone might make this spot worth a return visit, but the fabulous sauna was the real killer.

Not everyone chose to partake, but those who did are now truly enamored of this amenity. Prior to the trip there had been discussion about whether or not clothing would be required, and there was a limited amount of anxiety about how that would play out. Put it this way: some got naked,



some didn't, and some, well, we just couldn't be sure. Hut protocol precludes disclosing further details other than to allow the narrator to proudly proclaim that EVERYONE who got in the sauna actually



got out and rolled in the snow. Some more than others. For those who have never utilized a backcountry sauna, be assured that the overall effect is the same as having a bath; all of the grunge is expelled from the surface of the skin, not to mention a variety of other bodily and mental toxins, and the saunee is clean and refreshed after the experience.

This trip write-up, which was supposed to have been limited to a few brief paragraphs, would not be complete without at least a brief mention of our dinner arrangements. Mike and Betty prepared a group dinner our first night, and Lynda Dale and Sailor Dave concocted a feast the second night. Both dinners were to die for, although no fatalities actually occurred. Our thanks go out to our selfless chefs who created an extra dimension to our experience.

The snow conditions we encountered were just this side of perfect. There was a snow storm the night before we skied in; just enough to freshen up the trail, but not enough to make the going difficult. The ski in to the hut took a few leisurely hours, and was generally enjoyable. The following day we divided up into three groups that later fragmented into several units. The skiing around the hut, contrary to what it says in Litz's book, was varied and interesting. Areas of avalanche danger were readily discernible to most half-wits and easily avoided, although it was noted that a snowshoer the day before had set off an avalanche that buried him up to his knees, chest, or neck, depending on which version one heard. My group visited the site and did some practice avalanche work, digging in the debris with our shovels and using our probes to find out just how truly difficult a real-life avalanche rescue would be. Another group explored a network of roads in the vicinity of the hut and also practiced some downhill technique under the watchful tutelage of Capt. Thunderbolt. Mike Martin did a solo venture upon the upper ridges surrounding the hut, always in radio contact with the trip leader, who at one point thought he had visual contact with the lone skier, only to realize later that he had actually been looking at a small tree that he had thought was moving very slowly.

Our departure from the hut came at just the right time, as we could tell that the snow was starting to get a bit mushy. One more day and we would have had less than desirable conditions. It seems we hit it just right.

We had a brief period of anxiety during our exit, as three of our group became separated from the rest. They were never in any danger, but the rest of us didn't know where they were, which is never a good thing. A little common sense, good instincts, and some extra effort on the part of Mike, who went back to look for the lost lambs, was all it took to remedy the situation. The radios helped us facilitate a search effort, as those in front were able to determine what those at the back of the group were doing, which helped formulate the decision making that governed the group as a whole. Yes, this is another pitch to get more people to get two way radios. The 5 mile range, rather than the 2 milers that we had, would have been just the ticket. They're getting rather affordable now, with a pair costing well under \$100.

It seemed that the overall consensus was that Francie's was a remarkable trip, and that a return there would be of interest to most, if not all, of the participants. The communal experience also reinforced the importance of selecting group members who are predicted to work, interact, and

function well with one another, as proper group dynamics can make the difference between serendipity and catastrophe.

Next year I will try to snag reservations at Janet's Hut, which is the twin of Francie's. More on that later.