DEPTH OF FIELD
Young creatives, fresh focus

NOAH HOWELL
Powderwhore no more

SWEDISH LAPLAND
Turns under the Midnight Sun
Just past the urban border of Missoula along Montana Highway 200 is the turn onto Marshall Canyon Road, a small, snow-lined lane flanked by forest. The drive meanders until, near the top, a cheery sign pops out of the woods on the left, proclaiming, "Marshall Mountain: Winter Snowsports—Summer Fun!," with a large pinecone illustration and pink signposts to complete the enthusiastic welcome. Passersby can't miss it.

A smattering of whimsical, pink-roofed buildings exudes a Bavarian fairytale look. Even the chairlifts are painted pink. Sarah, Greg and I can't help but crack smiles as we leave the parking lot, following a defined skintrack up a sloping ridge and through sunny pine glades. We ski a few laps, noodling gleefully through ankle-deep powder. Although the lifts have been defunct for two decades, ski tracks are everywhere, a testament to Marshall's enduring popularity. >>

[Top] "Woof, woof, arf," powderhound Sophie tells the group. Translation: "Thanks for breaking trail, guys."

[Bottom] Meg Whicher and Jeff Kendall-Weed both find Marshall's trail system wheelie cool. © Aaron Teasdale, both photos
TO ME, IT SEEMS AS IF WE’VE FOUND A SECRET OASIS.

To Missoulians, however, this oasis is certainly not a secret: Ever since Tollef Olsen built a rope tow here in 1937, it’s been a community haven for skiing and outdoor recreation. Today, via a city, county and nonprofit fundraising collaboration, it’s slated to become the newest addition to Missoula Parks and Recreation.

However, the story nearly had the opposite outcome. In 2021, Marshall Mountain was under contract to a new landowner who planned to eliminate public access, ending 85 years of skiing history. This worst-case scenario was a long time coming. Owner Bruce Doering had closed the lifts in 2001 and put the 160 acres up for sale. Diminishing snowfall had led to smaller crowds, and making a profit at the lift-served area became impossible. Over the 20 years it sat on the market, Doering and his wife, Kim, allowed free access for human-powered use on Marshall’s trails and to the Lolo National Forest behind it.

Local backcountry skiers flocked for touring, and the Western Montana Avalanche Foundation built a beacon park. In summers, MTB Missoula, a nonprofit, built and improved trails for a thriving mountain bike scene. The Missoula Parks and Recreation Department ran Nordic and beginner ski programs. These included opportunities for children to enjoy Missoula’s outdoor areas and learn about conservation and the environment. This program would have otherwise been unaffordable for many participants. Marshall’s gentle slopes provided a welcome landscape for new skiers, in contrast to the other local ski hill, Snow Bowl, an area of advanced terrain that’s not considered beginner or kid friendly, locals say.

“Marshall is such a beloved piece of property the owners were happy to let everyone use. People were skiing there, and when I was looking for places to run recreation programs for kids, Bruce said, ‘Come on up,’” says Meg Whicher, the city’s recreation programs manager. “It had always been for sale, but no one could come up with a management plan to make a purchase work. But if we lost it, where would everyone recreate?”

In 2021, during the height of the pandemic real estate craze, the news hit that Marshall was under contract. A thoracic surgeon and his wife who were new to the area planned to build a private home there. “Everybody panicked,” says Jeff Crouch, a Missoula architect and Marshall user. Despite some earlier halfhearted efforts to purchase the area, nothing had come to fruition. Now it was too late. “It was about to be gated and gone,” Crouch explains. “As a community we’d had the opportunity to buy it, but the problem was complacency: We already had access. It was suddenly complete panic.”

[Top] Stephanie Viereckl joins decades of skiers who’ve descended the run that was called Upper Aurora when lifts still spun at Marshall. [Middle] The Marshall Mountain map from 1965 shows a variety of terrain. Trees not to scale. [Bottom] Marshall’s rope tows offered beginner and intermediate terrain for new skiers in Missoula. [Both photos Courtesy Carla Green]
Outreach to secure an easement for access at least to the Forest Service land behind Marshall was an iffy proposition, and it seemed the charmed story was over. When the sale was completed, however, the surgeon was not the new owner. Doering instead sold to two families who stepped up with cash via an entity called Izzy Dog, LLC. Ardent supporters of Marshall as a community asset, they stated their intent to act as short-term owners and give the city time to devise a plan and buy the land.

“No one wanted to see Marshall become a private homesite, so we made an offer, and it was accepted,” a representative for Izzy Dog says. “We’re not looking to make a profit. What we want is to see it end up in the right hands as a city park where the public can bike, ski, hike and enjoy outdoor activities. It will provide access the community, including underprivileged residents, might not have otherwise.”

In June 2021, Izzy Dog gave the city a two-year management lease with the option to buy, giving the government, nonprofits and other stakeholders time to create a plan to purchase Marshall. The coalition’s plan is to turn it into permanently protected public land and an official park. But as a public entity, we want a place that is low barrier to entry for people to recreate and to learn new skills,” Valliant says. “We have an incredible heritage as a blue-collar town and egalitarian values. And we have a local government that supports those values. That is why this conversation is about inclusivity, not a pay-to-play enclave.”

The list of supporting organizations is long, from the city and county to nonprofits like Friends of Marshall Mountain, MTB Missoula, Montana Backcountry Alliance and the Five Valleys Land Trust. Once the master plan is completed, those organizations will be part of the capital campaign coalition, and they’ll utilize state and federal grants and Missoula’s existing Open Space bond fund. “This is huge for our community,” says Crouch, who leads the capital campaign as part of Friends of Marshall Mountain. “We’re not going to miss this opportunity again.”

Marshall’s story—and salvation—seems to be on the verge of becoming a real-life fairytale. Longtime locals Selden and Kara Daume have frequented the area for decades for skiing and mountain biking, including teaching their 12- and 15-year-old children about ski touring and backcountry safety there. “It’s a huge part of Missoula. Without it, there’d be a big hole for so many of us. But we didn’t appreciate how good we had it until we almost lost it,” says Selden, who owns Grist Milling and Bakery in Missoula. “When Izzy Dog stepped up, it was the best situation we could dream of.”

The chapter is not closed yet. The master plan must be finished, the final funds raised, official ownership passed to the city and county, and a viable equity stream for Marshall’s future as a city park established.

Public will and support is strong, however, and with the second chance the community has been given, those involved still project confidence in the success of the endeavor, though they acknowledge it will be a lot of work. “We went from about to lose this place to being so close to securing it for public access,” Whicher says. “So many people have such a strong attachment to Marshall, it’s hard to describe. It’s just a feel place, and right now, gratitude is the greatest public feeling.”