

The rise and fall of Renegade resort

Once promising ski getaway all but extinct

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CRAB ORCHARD, Tenn. — From the ancient Cherokee Indian burial grounds discovered at its summit to the tragic Trail of Tears that began near its base, Renegade Mountain is steeped in history.

Few, however, realize that the resort community near Crossville — recently in the news over a water dispute between residents and the property owners association — was home to one of the first ski resorts in the state.

The ski resort is all but forgotten. About all that is left are the rusted cables for the double chair lift and the crumbling foundations of a four-story lodge. The lodge was destroyed in a suspected act of arson in 2001.

In the 1980s, the mountain resort boasted one of the top golf courses in the state. Today, the golf course is overgrown, the legacy of several failed attempts to resurrect what was supposed to be a world-class resort.

Nobody is certain just why attempts to develop Renegade over the past 50 years have failed. Some people blame the weather. Others blame bad management and inadequate financing.

Local attorney Joe Looney said he's spoken with real estate experts who claim that infrastructure costs on the mountain are too high to support the price developers can expect to charge for the lots.

The real uncertainty about Renegade Mountain today is not its past, but its future.

Renegade standoff

For the past several years the residents of a Renegade Mountain condominium development known as Laurel Hills have been in a standoff with the latest owners of the mountain property over the use of the aging water system.

Several weeks ago the management of the resort area shut off water to mountain residents. It was the second time in as many years that the community has been without water.

Local resident John Moore led a group of homeowners who tried to reconnect their water systems until officials with the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation threatened them with arrest for tampering with the system.

A Cumberland County Chancery Court judge earlier this month issued a restraining order to turn the water back on and has asked the residents and new investors to work together on a solution.

The case is expected to be heard in the coming months.

Recent owners of the property include an organization known as Moy Toy. In a lawsuit filed in late 2011, investors also were identified as JL Wucher, Michael McClung, Michael Haines and Phillip Guettler. The current property owners would not agree to discuss their plans for the mountain.

Moore wonders what the owners plan to do with the resort. TDEC-mandated upgrades to the water system, including a tank for emergency use, have not been completed.

"It doesn't seem as if they want to invest anything in the resort. To them it's just another few thousand acres," Moore said.

The current ownership group is among some half-dozen owners of the property over the years who have tried to make the Renegade Mountain resort into a successful venture since the 1960s.

Renegade Mountain started with high hopes in the mid-1960s, when a Crossville physician named Richard Evans and other investors decided to build a ski resort on the Cumberland Plateau.

At more than 2,500 feet, Renegade is one of the highest peaks in the state outside of the Smoky Mountains. Evans may have been inspired by Gatlinburg investors who opened Ski Gatlinburg in 1962.

After opening in the late 1960s, the Cumberland Plateau resort experienced limited success, usually because of warm weather and primitive snow-making technology that reduced the number of days of operation.

A number of amenities were planned and advertised for the 6,000-acre resort, including an Olympic-sized pool and a golf course. Fishing and hunting also were promised. Many of these amenities would not be built until the 1970s or '80s.

By the early '70s, the resort was in poor financial shape and the first of a series of new owners stepped in. American Recreational Services operated it for a short time before financial problems took over.

In 1973, Joe Looney was a young attorney just out of the Army when he began to work on local collection cases against American Recreational Services.

"There was a lot of collections activity against ARS," he said.

ARS eventually went into receivership and sold the property in the early 1980s to two brothers from Germany.

Harold and Peter Schuster operated the ski slope and decided to invest an estimated \$7 million to upgrade the golf course. Other improvements included purchasing the bar from the historic Hotel St. Moritz in New York City and moving it to the four-story lodge building.

"The Schusters did a wonderful job. They got the golf course going and they had a great restaurant going at the lodge," Looney said.

The Schusters were good managers, who might still be running the resort if not for a polo accident that killed Peter Schuster in the late 1980s, Looney said.

By 1990, DG Bank of Frankfurt, Germany, owned the resort and was making an attempt to operate both the ski slope and the golf course. The bank invested heavily in the golf course.

An uphill climb

Although warm weather put an end to skiing in 1988, by 1994 the golf course was listed as one of the top five in the state, according to Glenn McDonald, general manager of the resort during the '80s and '90s.

"We promoted that golf course all over the country — from Michigan to Ohio and Florida," he said.

The problem was, it was difficult to get a steady stream of golfers regularly willing to pay \$75 to play at Renegade when the Cumberland Plateau is home to other quality golf courses at Fairfield Glade and Lake Tansi, McDonald said.

Maintenance costs also were high because the course was built on a mountainside with numerous drainage and grading problems that had to be continually repaired, he said. So, 2008 was the last year the golf course was in operation.

"They just couldn't bring in enough business to keep the place maintained," McDonald said.

Investors in the resort have always been trying to sell real estate, according to McDonald, himself a local real estate agent. Sales of condos and timeshares on the mountain have never reached expectations, he said. An effort was made to sell up to 1,500 lots on the resort, and as many as 800 lots might have been sold, he said.

Many of the lots are not buildable, mostly because shallow soil makes them unsuitable for septic systems, McDonald said. Condos on the mountain are listed for as little as \$25,000. Lots currently can be acquired at courthouse sales for the cost of paying the back taxes, he said.

Around 2000, the German bank sold 3,000 acres of the formerly 6,000-acre resort for \$3.5 million to a group that includes some of the current investors.

In 2001, the four-story lodge building — home to the grand bar, restaurant and indoor tennis courts — mysteriously burned. According to Looney and McDonald, investigators believed the fire was deliberately set, although no one was charged.

Golf continued on the mountain under the current owners until the course closed four years ago. Now completely overgrown, the course also suffers from unstable earth in many places. It would take millions of dollars to bring the course back to its former glory, McDonald said.

Fewer than 100 residents remain on Renegade. Those few that have decided to live full-time on the mountain have banded together to improve roads and infrastructure, including the water system.

According to Gary Heiser, who lives at the top of the mountain just a hundred yards from the foundation of the old lodge building, the resort's current owners have shut off streetlights in addition to water service. They also laid off the security guard that used to work the entrance to the community, he said.

Heiser is unsure what the current owners plan to do with the resort or if they have any plans to rebuild the amenities or the infrastructure.

Property owners have considered trying to reopen nine holes of the 18-hole course but they can't get the resort's current owners to agree to discuss the issue, he said.

"It's a big mystery to us. Why don't they want to work with us?" Heiser said.