

Bend cross-country ski race to honor 1800s mail carrier

Organizers of this year's annual historic event are hoping for a large turnout

By Inge Scheve
for the Emerald

The historic John Craig Cross-Country Ski Race, Tour and Wilderness Mail Carry takes off March 24, with activities and races for all ages and abilities.

Unparalleled views, once-a-year grooming and the historic nature of the race place it in a category of its own, said Toby Bayard of the Tumalo Langlauf Club in Bend. The race typically attracts between 100 and 140 racers and spectators.

"The John Craig has as much history and character as any cross country ski event in North America," said John Downing, Tumalo Langlauf Club president.

"There is growing consensus that the Oregon Nordic Club can build the event into one of the premier annual western 'ski happenings' if we can get the participant numbers up and also, starting next year, resolve some of the logistical challenges of the event," Downing said.

This year, the legendary race sports a new race organizer: the Tumalo Langlauf Club, which is a chapter of the Oregon Nordic Club.

"We are investing heavily in the race in an attempt to grow it to a 500- to 700-person race within five years," Bayard said. "We want this event to become the premier cross-country ski race in the Pacific Northwest."

Backing that attempt, the Oregon Nordic Club has organized for more than \$3,000 in raffle prizes, and the club is still looking for more sponsors, Bayard said.

The legend behind the race celebrates the efforts of John Templeton Craig, who died in 1877 while trying to carry mail by foot on snowshoes from McKenzie Bridge over the McKenzie Pass to Camp Polk. Craig, born in 1834, was described as a hardy bachelor and a pioneer, Bayard said.

He was in charge of the McKenzie Salt Springs and Deschutes Wagon Road Company for 25 years and helped build the toll road currently known as the McKenzie Highway (242) in the mid-1800s. With the road in place, the U.S. government decided to route mail over the road by horseback in the summer and by snowshoes in the winter.

An epic snowstorm resulted in the tragic death of Craig. Seeking shelter from the elements, Craig huddled in a cabin near the summit of the pass. A search party found his body two months later when they dug out the buried cabin. Craig most likely died from hypothermia, Bayard said.

"Evidently, he had built a fire before falling asleep," Bayard said. "Perhaps confused by hypothermia when he later awakened, or perhaps just unable to rekindle the fire, Craig crawled into the ashes to stay warm. He never woke again."

Craig's tomb at the cabin site is now a historic site along the Mail Carry course two miles west of the summit.

To commemorate Craig's efforts, this race was organized in the early 1930s.

"The race was abandoned after a few years as war intervened and alpine skiing became more popular," Bayard said.

In the 1970s, the Oregon Nordic Club revived the event and has been running it until this year.

The way the race is organized, racers choose from seven different options varying from 30 kilometers (18 miles) to short children's races and classic or freestyle ski techniques. In the 30 kilometer race, participants actually carry a piece of commemorative mail up and over the McKenzie Pass in honor of Craig.

In addition to the historical mail-carry race, there are two separate 20 kilometer (12 miles) races, one in classic style and one in freestyle, and a 10 kilometer (6 miles) classic race. There are also two children's races, one for kids 11 and younger and one for those 12 to 17 years old. Finally, a citizen touring event allows the average day-tourer to enjoy the spectacular views that are afforded on National Forest land along the McKenzie Pass in the winter.

The 30 kilometer and 20 kilometer races climb close to 1,250 feet, and the 10 kilometer race course has a 700-foot elevation gain. The children's race is a gentle ride that should accommodate everyone.

"The lava fields stretch for miles, and there are opportunities to see the Sisters, Mount Jefferson, Mount Washington, Three Fingered Jack, Black Butte and even, on a very clear day, Mount Hood," Bayard said.

The race is an out-and-back effort, Downing said.

"That should be perfectly fine for this year, given the participant goal is in the couple-of-hundred-skier range," Downing said.

Those interested in participating or watching the events should call Toby Bayard at (541) 617-1485, send an e-mail to tumalolanglauf@tumalolanglauf.com or check the Oregon Nordic Club Web site for more details at www.tumalolanglauf.com/JCinfo.htm.

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