
An Outhouse on Skis May Seem Strange, but These are Yoopers—Michigan's Upper Peninsula Hosts Annual Privy Race; The Frozen-Sneaker Trick

by Bryan Gruley | 05 March 2003 | *The Wall Street Journal*

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TRENARY, Mich. -- The snow blew sideways, the wind whistled and Annie Forshee adjusted her feather-boa hat and fake plastic posterior.

"I think we've got a fighting chance," she told her racing partner, Michelle Thurston, as they stood ankle-deep in snow, preparing to push an outhouse on skis through a gantlet of beer-swilling spectators. Ms. Thurston, her own fake derriere protruding from red long johns, didn't look so confident. "We're going to have to win for something other than speed," she said.

What does it take to make an outhouse go really fast?

Each year, that question grips Trenary, population 400 or so, when it plays host to the Outhouse Classic. Last month, more than 2,000 people came to watch pairs of "pushers" race the clock as they propelled outlandish outhouses over a 500-foot track stretching between the First Lutheran Church and the Silver Dollar Bar.

"It's pretty boring up here in the winters, so we've got to do something," said Clyde Morgan, 57 years old, a retired U.S. Agriculture Department researcher

from Negaunee, Mich. He and his racing partner, retired accounting professor Frank Kerwin, 63, built a squat outhouse disguised as a North Korean nuclear reactor, complete with black-and-yellow caution signs and, as required by Outhouse Classic rules, a toilet seat.

Entries must be 3-feet by 4-feet by 6-feet tall. Most are made from wood, cardboard and other household materials. "Some outhouses are very simple and some are so elaborate you wouldn't mind having them in your own backyard," an event brochure says. Seeking an edge, Mr. Morgan equipped his with four skis instead of just two.

Todd Arnoldi, 30, and his pals from Sheboygan, Wis., quaffed bottles of Leinenkugel's beer while preparing "The Big House Outhouse," a jail cell made of PVC pipe and two-by-fours, mounted on skis from the Salvation Army. Sizing up the competition, Mr. Arnoldi worried that the outhouse might be too heavy. "We kind of sc-d ourselves by putting a 70-pound toilet in," he said.

Strutting past in a straw skirt was Lori Walsh, a 39-year-old waitress from Munising, Mich., dressed as "Yum-Yum the Can-ibal." After losing her leg in a

motorcycle accident a few years ago, she raced as a peg-legged pirate. "Life goes on," she said.

The Outhouse Classic is slightly more serious business for Trenary, an Upper Peninsula farming town of two bars, one flashing traffic light and a grocery store that posts snapshots of customers in its window. This year's race raised \$7,000 for new town welcome signs and other community projects through entry fees, souvenir sales and donations from the bars. In the packed Trenary Tavern, owner Cindy Pilon said she's trying to sell the place, "but not today."

Other towns hold outhouse races, but few try during the winter. Lifelong Trenarian Toivo Aho, 70, started the Outhouse Classic in 1994 after hearing about a similar event in another state.

Though he has never raced, Mr. Aho remains the event's driving force. One year he disqualified a friend who brought two mules to pull his outhouse. "I told him, 'You're not ruining my track,'" says Mr. Aho, whose black Outhouse Classic cap perches over pale blue eyes and leathery cheeks. "He was madder than hell."

Around midnight before this year's race, Mr. Aho parked his beat-up Olds Cutlass near the church and watched a front-end loader scoop snow from roadside banks and dump it on Trenary Avenue. Fresh snow fell through the truck's blinking yellow lights, but Mr. Aho wanted more for his track. "That's not bad snow, not too much salt in it," he said. With salt, "it gets so hard, you can't break it up and you get lumps."

By 1 p.m., the street was a sea of people in Detroit Red Wing hats, Carhartt coveralls and Mardi Gras beads, carrying cases of Busch Light and bottles of Dr. McGillicuddy's schnapps, a race sponsor. Bratwurst sizzled, country songs blared and "Welcome Race Fans" banners snapped in 28 mph gusts.

Cash prizes and miniature outhouse trophies awaited the swiftest runners in each of four age groups. Three judges rated outhouses and costumes for humor, presentation and theme. They roamed the area wearing red vests emblazoned: "All bribes considered."

One by one, 43 teams lined up at the start of the 10-foot-wide track. Some wore boots, some wore football spikes, and a few, such as Ron Genschaw, 46, of Marquette, Mich., wore sneakers. "You let 'em freeze the same temperature as the air. Good traction."

Awaiting their turn, Ms. Forshee, 30, and Ms. Thurston, 36, jiggled their hips for passersby seeking photographs. The sterile-processing technicians at a Midland, Mich., hospital were racing for the first time. Last year, they got so excited that they believed someone who told them they could rent an outhouse at the grocery, where "they looked at us like we were crazy," Ms. Forshee says.

This year they dressed as trolls, which is what the "Yoopers" of Michigan's Upper Peninsula call people who live in the state's lower half, on the other side of the Mackinac Bridge. The women decorated their wooden outhouse with troll dolls and a glow-in-the-dark toilet seat under a battery-powered black light.

Pushing an outhouse isn't easy. Skis get stuck. Push handles break off. If one pusher doesn't keep up with the other, the outhouse veers. Outhouses slide faster if they're light. They can seem heavier to pushers who are drunk.

Ms. Forshee and Ms. Thurston limited themselves to just a few pre-race swigs from a flask of schnapps. They watched as an outhouse from the Detroit area swerved off the track and crashed into the hooting crowd.

Others slammed into the scaffolding at the finish line. The wind shredded an entry made mostly of duct tape and plastic sheeting. Some racers collapsed in exhaustion at the finish. Mr. Kerwin, the retired professor, pointed at his wife and said, "Next year, you're doing it."

By the time Ms. Forshee and Ms. Thurston ran, the track was rutted and horizontal snow was pelting their faces. To win the 31-49 age bracket, the women in red flannel had to beat 36.44 seconds. They raced well -- staying on the track and never bogging down -- and the judges cited them for best presentation.

But their outhouse weighed too much. They clocked in at 49.60. The winners, who collected a \$75 cash prize, were Brian Gauthier and Mr. Genschaw, wearing his frozen sneakers. ❖

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