SANDPOINT MAGAZINE

WINTER 2007

Tales from the Edge
Mayhem and Magic on Schweitzer Ski Patrol

What a Century: Bonner County Turns 100

Fantastic Forms: Photos on Ice

INSIDE: SANDPOINT TRAVEL PLANNER

+ Selkirk Snowcatting, Film Festival, Acoustic Musicians, Backcountry Ski Adventures, Mark Story Interview, Ice Skating, Family Businesses, Thrift Shopping, Ben Olson's 'Wanderlost,' Calendars, Dining, Real Estate ... and more

Stories from the

SKI PATROL

Schweitzer patrollers recall the highlights of working on the mountain

By Sandy Compton

It's not quite light and nukin' snow, as ski patrol says. A snowmobile with two men on it sweeps past the Great Escape, skis and poles balanced on the machine with them. In the gloom, I just make out white crosses on their backs before they are out of sight. The silence closes back together, and I hear the creak of a wind-blown chair swinging on a lift cable.

Ski Patrol has gone to work.

PHOTO BY DICK O'NEILL

In 1974, a 15-year-old girl came to Midway of Chair One at what was then Schweitzer Basin and told the lift operator her brother was buried in an avalanche. The operator called the patrolman at the top of the chair, 21-year-old Duane "Blackie" Black, who told the liftie, "Send her up."

"We had three radios on the mountain then," Black said, "so I phoned the bottom to notify our posse of a possible burial." The "posse" was every able-bodied skier working on the mountain.

While this group mobilized, the girl took Blackie to where she had last seen her brother, 15 feet into the no-ski zone that the South Bowl was then.

"Everything from A-chute to the C's had come down," said Black, "a slide 200 yards wide."

With Tom Anderson calling cadence, "Probe left. Probe right. Probe forward. Move up," a line of searchers using 16-foot aluminum probes began across the rubble pile.

The boy's chances dwindled fast. At 6 minutes, survival rate for someone buried in an avalanche is 50 percent; at 10 minutes, 25 percent; 15 minutes, 5 percent. It was at the 90-minute mark that Anderson's probe hit the buried skier, and the digging began.

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John Olson, patroller since 1971, says that the difference between fairy tales and patrol stories is that fairy tales begin "Once upon a time," and patrol stories begin, "No (expletive deleted), there I was, and I thought I was gonna die." Not every patrol story begins like this. Some end like this, and when you ask, "Well? What happened?" the teller says, "So-and-so showed up and got me out of the jam."

Writing about Schweitzer Ski Patrol is like writing a Russian novel. There is a lot of snow and wind and a huge cast of characters to whom numerous and sometimes not-so-pleasant adventures happen. (It's easier to remember the names, though – and I'm not making any of this up. The stories all belong to someone else.) Black is expert at telling ski patrol stories. "In 1963 – or was it '64? Let me think ... "

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He's only been on patrol since 1972, so Black didn't actually witness this, but patrol stories often have vague time frames. After you've patrolled for 30-plus years, it ceases to matter when it happened as much as it does that you survived it. Not everyone does when things go sideways on the mountain.

"Maybe it was '64," he continues. "Anyway, a woman skiing in South Bowl got onto a big patch of ice, slid into a tree and died. Sam closed South Bowl for 13 years." (Everything 100 yards south of Chair One and above the top of the T-bars was closed.)

Any monolithic statement about "Sam" refers to Sam Wormington, who supervised the installation of Chair One and ran Schweitzer for 14 years.

Wormington hired original patrol director Jessie Mask – qualified by the fact

Schweitzer Ski Patrol goes into action when local telemarker Brandon Moon, a member of the U.S. Team, fell during training for the World Cup finals, breaking his leg. Bill McPherson, right, pulls a sled down to Moon, who is being assessed by patrolman Hal Schmidt and assisted by Jim Doudna. "Ironically, I used to be a patrolman," Moon said later. "It was good to see familiar faces at the time."

that he was painting bathroom floors at night – and put him in charge of other young men who couldn't ski either. They learned together.

"I paid $35 for a new pair of wooden skis." Mask said. "Broke one tip off the first week. By the time we had our first aid, though, most of us could ski – and get a toboggan down the hill."

Mask put current Patrol Director John Pucci on patrol in 1965. He told Pucci, an operator on Chair One, that the only way he would get on patrol was if someone broke something, so when Gary Valliers broke his leg, Pucci had mixed emotions. Valliers patrolled again. When he stopped in 1977, Pucci was his boss, having become patrol boss in 1975.

Pucci's training was not as exacting as patrolmen receive now. Toboggan class was short and not-so-sweet. On top of Chair One, Mask told him, "Take this sled to the bottom and bring it back up." Pucci did, in less-than-graceful fashion, prompting a lady skier along the way to say, "Thank God there's nobody in there." Pucci was already doing that.

Sled training isn't the only thing that has gotten more thorough. In the '60s, patroller Bill Currie's dad, Fred, taught a day of basic first aid to patrollers in exchange for a ski pass. Now, an 80-hour Outdoor Emergency Care course is required for patrol, with a two-day refresher every year.

Currie began on patrol in 1965, when "we didn't patrol above Midway, which was OK. Nobody knew how to ski powder anyway, and Sam had the South Bowl closed. The most common injuries now are wrists, tweaked knees and backs. Then it was broken legs."

Mask recounted splinting a dozen breaks in a single day in 1965. Broken legs still happen, but not as often; and Michael Thompson recalled an incident on Headwall when both he and an injured skier thought it was a broken leg. "I felt the leg and something sure was wrong. So, when Jonah (Pucci) and Jay Leeper showed up, we put him in a traction splint."

This device tucks up into the crotch of a victim and very assertively pulls the leg straight, preventing further damage inside the leg from the broken bone. In this case, though, it pulled the skier's dislocated knee back into place.

"In the meantime, his wife is thanking me for saving her husband's life."

All in a day's work, ma'am.

The workdays have changed. In 1966, Mask said, "Patrol's first duty was to shovel the steps and balconies of the day lodge, then shovel and pack the ramps at the bottom, Midway and top of Chair One."

"Take this sled to the bottom and bring it back up." Pucci did, in less-than-graceful fashion, prompting a lady skier along the way to say, **"Thank God there's nobody in there."**

Now, early day is not so mundane, but time for avalanche control work, something that has also changed over time. Avalanche control in the '60s was minimal but interesting.

"We had a nitrogen cannon on the knob just south of Midway," Mask says. Using compressed nitrogen, this

PHOTO BY KEN BARCELOU/ZERO GRAVITY PHOTOGRAPHY LLC

John Pucci and Arlene Cook on patrol in 1999.

device lobbed finned "beer cans" full of explosives at the cornice in the South Bowl, with the idea that concussion would knock them down. Sometimes it worked.

A cornice, if you don't know, is a big overhang of snow built by the wind on the lee side at the top of steep slopes. They are prime avalanche starters.

"The cannon was used when we got it," Pucci said, "and didn't have all its parts. The charges were lit, stuffed into the gun and shot toward the ridge. Once, we put a lit charge in, pulled the trigger and nothing happened. It was like a cartoon – everyone diving off that knob in all directions."

The charge turned out to be a dud.

"In the '70s, we knocked down cornices in the South Bowl in the middle of the day 'cause no one could get over there anyway. Took out the top of T-Bar 2 twice. Then Sam sent me to Whistler for an avalanche course, and I wrote a snow plan for Schweitzer."

In 1977, with avalanche control work minimizing the danger, Wormington reopened the previously forbidden portion of South Bowl.

"We bought our first defibrillator by giving tours of the South Ridge for a dollar each," Black recalls.

Part of patrol's job on a daily basis is to make sure snow slides down the hill on demand rather than piling up to dangerous weights that might release unexpectedly and, well, kill someone. They do this by various means, but the most common is the use of dynamite "bombs." Everybody's got a bomb story and an avalanche story. Sometimes, they are the same story.

"The most exciting part of the job," Greg Gibson said, "is shooting the cornice in the North Bowl when you can't see the edge."

Six years ago, when Harbor Properties began to guarantee lift opening, control work became more important still.

Mike Rogers, patroller since 1982, says: "A couple of guys take the early-early call, go to the top in the dark, generally on a snowmobile. One guy goes to Six, the other to One, and we assemble bombs.

"It's hard to read the mountain; wind, snow, what the load is, so if I think we need 10, I make 12. It's not good to get out there and not have enough. Then the early-call folks show up and we go throw bombs."

Jay Hall, Steve Brown and Assistant Patrol Director Arlene Cook were throwing bombs in the North Bowl, ready to drop one at Shot Point Ten, just above the Banana Chute. "I had the explosives," Cook said, "and Jay had Brownie on belay. The snow was hard, and not much had been falling (from the bombs). Steve put a hole in the cornice with his pole

Ted Cook launches off the cornice in the South Bowl, pulling a Cascade Toboggan behind him.

and a crack opened right between his feet. The whole thing ripped out from Upper Kaniksu to us. Jay pulled Brownie out, and the slide took all the ice out of Colburn Lake."

Cook has also had the thrill of hearing someone on the radio say: "Ted (her husband) just went over. I'll call you back when I know more." Ted survived the slide, but he skied to Number Six Midway on one ski and shaky legs. Rogers has ridden one, too. "It made me realize that my greatest fear wasn't being suffocated but being pummeled to death at 120 miles per hour," he said. Black's slide ended with him buried, but when he picked up his head, it came out of the snow. His patrol buddy Frank Stonebarger then skied over and stood on his chest. Patrol humor is sometimes on the dark side.

Pucci rode one under Chair One. "Three of us were ski-cutting the Face, and Jon Jaeger (then patrol director) yelled, 'Hang on! You're going down.' It picked me up and buried me. When it stopped, I couldn't breathe. That's about as scared as I've ever been, but the slide started again, and I ended up buried to my waist. Phil Owens was there, but Glen Phillips was missing.

"A liftie riding up the chair yells, 'Over there! Something's moving over there!' Glen had one finger out of the snow, and it was wiggling."

It's not all about adrenaline. Arlene recalls the satisfaction of finding an autistic boy who bolted from his mother at the bottom of Chair Six. Scott Hadley, who patrolled for 30 years, said: "The most satisfying thing was taking care of the injured, wiping a tear out of their eyes. Working with the kids, making sure that they were happy. That's what the job was about, making sure that people were taken care of, kept healthy and happy."

It's about family, too. Pucci met his wife, Joan, in a lift line at Schweitzer, as Hadley met his bride, Jackie. Ted and Arlene Cook have almost as much time married as they do on patrol. They met on the mountain. Pucci's sons, Jonah and Allo, both patrol, and there are some other patrol family members coming up who will be wearing the red coat with the white cross

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GIBSON LEAVES LEGACY OF CARE BEHIND
Brought skiing, cancer care together

Heather Gibson, avid skier, rower, lover of life and wife of ski patroller Greg Gibson, died Aug. 8, 2006, of complications from her eight-year battle with cancer. She would be quick to point out that it wasn't cancer that got her but something else her weakened immune system couldn't handle. Before she left, though, she made sure anyone going through the same fight has lots of help – and help on a local basis.

Heather's House, the location for Community Cancer Services (CCS) on Cedar in Sandpoint, is one of several critical accomplishments that came of Gibson's desire to make cancer care more available.

CCS Executive Director Lisa Porter said: "Heather had a certain vision of what she wanted this to be. The focus now is to support cancer patients and their families."

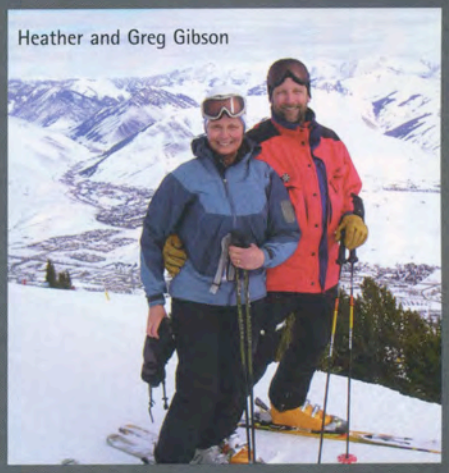
After being diagnosed with cancer in 1999, Gibson worked endlessly to make life better for herself and others who suffered. Her decision to focus on local programs came after she realized there was not much help available in town. She and fellow cancer sufferer Sharon Bezecny spent a lot of time on the road to Coeur d'Alene for chemotherapy treatments.

"Don't say 'tireless effort,' when you talk about Heather," Bezecny says. "There's no such thing. Heather got tired, but she kept doing it. She persisted."

Her persistence is paying off. Porter listed the programs at Heather's House. "Road to Recovery" provides drivers and travel vouchers for getting patients to treatments. "Look Good, Feel Better" is designed to help patients overcome the effect of cancer on their looks. Laney's Library, named for cancer victim Laney Deem, provides literature to help patients and families learn about the disease and better cope. The center also hosts two cancer support groups and offers one-on-one counseling and post-mastectomy fitting. Porter also hopes to add a nutrition and exercise program as well as yoga classes.

It was Gibson who inspired and helped organize the first Cancer Care Challenge ski event at Schweitzer in 2000 to raise money for a local center. It has become an important annual event. Even in the "no-snow" year of 2004-05, the Challenge raised thousands.

Cancer fund-raisers are not the only things Gibson organized. She was a founding member of the legendary Schweitzer ski group, "Powder Pigs." Originally made up of five women, their Wednesday ski days became sacrosanct. Fellow Pig Marie Warren says: "Heather was a social person, the Emily Post of Sandpoint. She loved getting people together, for whatever reason."


Heather and Greg Gibson

If there were a picture beside the word "indomitable" in the dictionary, it would be of a smallish woman with a turned-up nose, freckles, a brave grin and curly, auburn hair. Her name was Heather.

–Sandy Compton

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on the back.

This family goes beyond blood. Currie, who has been back on patrol for five years after a hiatus in Alaska, said: "We're a family group who helps each other. We're concerned about each other's welfare. I'm the oldest guy on the crew, but it keeps me about 12 years old every day I go up there."

Meanwhile, back at Eichardt's, Black finishes the story of the first avalanche probing back in 1974.

"When we found him, we started dinging, and when we got about three feet down, we came to his head. He was breathing! We dug him out and strapped him to a sled and took off for the lodge. We get him to First Aid, and the doctor takes his temperature. He's 92 degrees. He's supposed to be dead."

Black grins. "So, (Craig) Harris and I strip down to our skivvies and get under the covers with him. He was cold to the touch, but we warmed him up."

All in a day's work for a patroller. All in a day's work.

Black finishes his beer. "Wanta hear the best part?" he asks.

Of course I do.

"The next day, I'm working at the top of Chair Four, and about 11 o'clock in the morning, I look out the window, and here comes that kid, riding up the chair."

Another Schweitzer Ski Patrol success story.

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It's snowing hard and a bit foggy to boot. I'm riding beloved old Chair Six out of the back side. It's last ride, I'm the last man on the chair and it's completely silent except for the hum of the cable running over the tower rollers. As my chair comes up out of the woods, swinging up the hill above Kaniksu, a single, dark figure comes out of the gloom and stops almost below me. "Clo-osing," the figure sings. "Clo-o-o-osing." I watch over my shoulder as he goes on his way, making graceful arcs into a white oblivion. I can barely make out the white cross on the red coat, but I know who he is.

All in a day's work. SM

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Ski & Board Parties

2006-2007

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Dec 27 Hooties at the Elks
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Jan 10 The Beach House
58 Bridge Street • Sandpoint, 255-4947

Jan 24 The 219
219 First Ave • Sandpoint, 253-9934

Feb 8 The Long Bridge Bar & Grill
South end of Long Bridge, Sandpoint • 265-7929

Feb 21 Pastime
209 North First Avenue • Sandpoint, 255-4412

Mar 7 A&P's Bar & Grill
222 North First Avenue • Sandpoint, 263-2313

Mar 21 Captain's Wheel
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Apr 7 Schweitzer (Spring Carnival)
Schweitzer Mountain, 263-9555

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SKI PATROL

PHOTO BY DOUG MARSHALL/EL PHOTO GRANDE

MUCH MORE THAN JUST SKIING
MOUNTAIN ACTIVITY CENTER CREATES LOTS OF OPTIONS

If your husband doesn't ski and the rest of the family does, you can reduce your guilt level as you head for Schweitzer's Great Escape Quad by turning him over to Paulie Cohen at Schweitzer's Mountain Activity Center in the Selkirk Lodge. Be forewarned, though. He may be on the tubing hill when it's time to buy dinner.

In its fourth season, the center has a lot of options for active folks of all ages and tastes. If there's an alternative form of fun at or near Schweitzer, Cohen and his crew know about it and will be happy to hook guests up.

"We've stepped up our services many notches this year," Cohen said. "We have a huge database of things to do in the area, and we cater to active skiers and non-skiers alike. We can help you plan a day or a whole week of activities."

The Activity Center helps Schweitzer guests arrange a ride down the tubing hill, take a snowmobile tour or backcountry skiing trip with Selkirk Powder Company, or set up on-mountain photography. Snowshoe and cross-country ski tours of the hemlock groves in the lower part of the mountain have been standard for the past few years.

This year, cross-country skiers and snowshoers will be able to take interpretive tours, as well as work their way higher up the mountain and participate in the popular full moon tours. The center-run Selkirk Theater will also be showing up to three movies daily.

"We also have something for kids every Saturday," Mary Weber-Quinn, village events and activities director said, "plus craft activities at Christmas time. We've added new activities every year since we started the center in 2003. We also oversee Refuge, the mountain teen center." Refuge is a safe, friendly teens-only space in the Village.

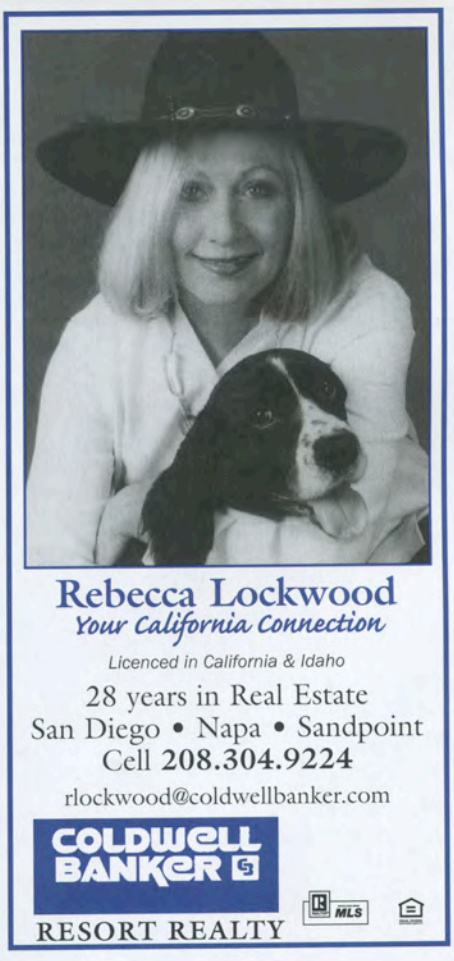
The most exciting addition to non-skiing activity at Schweitzer this year may be dogsled trips with True North Expeditions. Local musher Dan Phillips has moved his Iditarod-qualified dogs home from Snowmass and will be giving a variety of tours on handmade, traditional sleds.

The Activity Center also acts as concierge for Schweitzer guests who wish to enjoy an on-mountain massage, explore Sandpoint to shop downtown (including Coldwater Creek's new store on First Avenue) or visit one of the town's great restaurants for dinner.

By the way, if you think that your husband might want to learn to ski or snowboard, the Mountain Activity Center can arrange that, too.

Contact the Mountain Activity Center at (208) 255-3081 or by e-mail at activity info@schweitzer.com.

–Sandy Compton



Schweitzer Mountain 2006-07 Season

PHOTO BY CHRIS GILBERT

Acreage: 2,900, 82 named trails plus open bowl skiing and riding

Terrain: 20% Beginner, 40% Intermediate, 35% Advanced, 5% Expert

Longest Run: Little Blue Ridge Run, 1.7 miles

Vertical Drop: 2,400 feet

Top Elevation: 6,400 feet

Average Annual Snowfall: 300 inches

Cross Country Trails: 30 kilometers

Lifts: "Stella" high-speed six-pack; "Great Escape" high-speed quad; plus four double chairlifts, Idyle Our T-bar, a beginner's Musical Carpet and a handle tow

Total Uphill Capacity: 9,267 per hour

Hours of Operation: 9 a.m. to 3:50 p.m. through Jan. 31; open until 4 p.m. after Feb. 1

Night Skiing: Fridays and Saturdays from Jan. 5 through March 17; plus Dec. 22-23, Dec. 25-31, Jan. 14 and Feb. 18 from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Season: Thanksgiving or early December through April 8

Lift tickets: Adult $49, junior 7-17 $36, child 6 and under $5, college or seniors 65 and over $42. Night rates: adult $15; junior 7-17, college or seniors 65 and over $10; child 6 and under $3. Cross-country: $10 adult,

Schweitzer's Outback Bowl

CHASING CHASSE

Schweitzer's new leader hails from Attitash

"I've been here two weeks, and already I know we've made the right decision," said Schweitzer's new president and chief executive officer, Tom Chasse (pronounced like the word chassis), about the decision he and his family made to move from their home of 29 years in North Conway, N.H., to Sandpoint.

One sunny day in late August, a road-weary Chasse drove up the Schweitzer Mountain Road at the end of his long drive from the East Coast and was greeted by an impromptu welcoming committee that gathered upon seeing his vehicle with the "Attitash" stickers on it.

"I've since removed those stickers," said Chasse. Then he added, "But I left the 'Yankees Suck' sticker on there."

Chasse had been president and managing director of Attitash in New Hampshire for eight years. Originally from Lynn, Mass., he's been skiing all but the first two years of his life. His wife, Donna, two daughters Jenna and Amanda, and son Brennen are all excited about the change.

"My wife and I have always talked about moving out West," said Chasse. A series of events took place that caused the Chasse family to realize that life is certainly fleeting. Donna had a bout with cancer and has been free cancer-free for two years. In March 2006, Tom's father passed away, and then a good friend passed away.

It was then that talk became action.

CEO Tom Chasse plans to "sample the product" at Schweitzer regularly.

Tom and Donna heard about the available position at Schweitzer, so they came out in June. "It felt right," he said. The scenery, the lake, the friendly people – this town has it all, they decided.

PHOTO BY DOUG MARSHALL/EL PHOTO GRANDE

$8 junior. Snowshoe: $4 all ages.
Website: www.schweitzer.com
Phone: (208) 263-9555, (800) 831-8810
Activity Center: (208) 255-3081

Tom has been involved in the ski industry in various capacities for 26 years. His aspirations to become a professional ski racer were unfortunately dashed in a ski accident in 1976, ironically, at Attitash. That's when he got into ski instruction and found a new passion. He became involved in the Professional Ski Areas Association as an examiner for the Eastern Division.

During ski season, you won't likely find Tom sitting behind his desk. He is more likely to be outside "sampling the product," as they say in the industry, or interacting with guests and employees and getting to know how the resort works and feels during busy and slow times.

In baseball season, if the Red Sox are playing, he will more likely be at the Chimney Rock Grill. And if you go, you might want to think about cheering for the right team.

–Lisa Gerber

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Located in Sagle off Spades Rd. is this 3 bedroom 1 bath rancher on just over one acre. Outbuildings include a 24 x 36 shop, fruit trees, large area for a garden with great southern exposure. Great location fronting a paved county road, just minutes from Sandpoint and near public boat launch/beach at Springy Point. Priced at **$219,900.**

Country Charmer, this 4 bedroom 2 3/4 bath home is on 2 landscaped acres on paved Westmond Rd. off Hwy 95. Featuring an attached 2 car garage, large rec. room, hot-tub room, a large shop, and a barn for the horses! Public lake access on Cocolalla Lake nearby, and an easy commute to either Sandpoint or CDA. Priced at **$359,900.**

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