

Curt Falldorf

Search party unable to locate avalanche victim

By Charles Wohlforth, ADN 12/31/90

Lois Falldorf already knew her husband was dead Sunday, even as more than 50 searchers looked for him under two huge avalanches in the mountains above Anchorage.

The search ended Sunday night without finding Curt Falldorf, 57, or even his snowmachine. He probably was buried under more than 20 feet of snow, searchers said. Only sprint thaw has much chance of uncovering him now.

"I don't think any of us who has lived here and survived avalanches has any real hope," Lois Falldorf said, waiting for news at home Sunday afternoon. "I've lived here too long. Too many avalanches. I gave hope after six or seven hours. All I hope is that he didn't have an air pocket and suffer. You always hope for miracles. But I know better."

Still, she had hoped his body would be found.

"I'd like them to find him, because it's unfinished," she said. "You don't like to think of him up there."

Larry Falldorf, 29, and Dennis Falldorf, 35, Curt and Lois' sons,- had been snowmachining with him and two friends Saturday when the avalanches happened, they said Sunday.

They headed out that morning, as they had many times before over the 23 years the family lived on O'Malley Road. By early afternoon, they were in a small bowl in the Chugach Mountains where the headwaters of Campbell Creek form a small lake, just over a ridge from Powerline Pass.

They were aware of the avalanche danger, the Falldorfs said. Larry and Curt took a class on avalanches years ago. But they thought this would be a safe spot. It always had been before.

Curt Falldorf's machine got stuck at the bottom of one of the slopes. After freeing it, he sat back to enjoy the warm, sunny weather and watch the younger men zoom up and down the slopes. He sat with his back to the slope that ultimately gave way, they said.

"My Dad was back to it," said Dennis Falldorf. "I don't think he knew what happened. I was driving past him 10 seconds earlier, and he was grinning ear to ear and waved me on.

"All his cares were gone in the world and he was just sitting back, enjoying it," Falldorf said.

The slope gave way above him, where Bob Bloom was riding, and where the others had driven back and forth earlier. Bloom was in the middle of the avalanche, and rode it down, Larry Falldorf said. Moments later, another avalanche broke loose from another direction and brought down another mountain's worth of snow stopping just short of Bloom. Both slides buried Curt Falldorf.

"I turned around and saw it," Larry Falldorf said. "And that was it. I knew it was big. And it didn't take 30 seconds to figure out we were missing someone. It was my dad."

The group dug out Bloom who was half buried. Dennis Falldorf went immediately for help. Larry began cutting branches to use as probes. People immediately appeared from all over the hills to help look for the lost man.

"Everybody was helping," Larry Falldorf said. "Everybody was digging and really putting in an effort. The skiers were giving up their skis and polls, saying 'Here.'"

Rescuers arrived within an hour by helicopter, he said. Before the day was over, at about 8 p.m., up to 58 people were searching, almost all of them volunteers, said Bruce McCormick, the incident commander for Alaska Mountain Rescue Group. Two dogs and two experts with metal detectors were carried to the site. About 35 people probed the snow with long poles, marching across the avalanche in a careful bid.

The next morning, avalanche experts bombed the ridge to make sure no more snow would come down, said Alaska State Trooper Claud Kilpatrick. About 50 searchers returned to work as the temperature dropped. But they didn't find any thing.

At some points, the avalanche runoff was so deep that 30-foot-long probes wouldn't reach the bottom, McCormick said. By the time searchers quit Sunday evening, they had been over the search area of 150 by 250 yards four times, he said. Larry Falldorf said if his father had been buried within 20 feet of the surface in that area, he is confident he would have been found.

Now came the time for Larry and Dennis Falldorf's second guesses

"Perhaps we got, I don't know, a little bit careless," Larry said. "But you ride for 20 years, and nothing happens.

"How do you know the snow is weak 10 feet deep? There was no cornice. It was nice and rounded. But there was sugar snow down at the bottom that acted like ball bearings."

The avalanches broke off in fissures 8 to 16 feet thick, searchers said, Leaving truck-sized blocks of snow. McCormick said the slope, prepared by weather for an avalanche, was set to let go like a booby trap. Since Falldorf wasn't wearing an avalanche locator beacon, it was too difficult to find him while he was still alive, McCormick said.

"Where they were out was a real dangerous place, and it reached out and grabbed them," he said.

"We thought we had a nice place there. It turned out we were wrong," Dennis Falldorf said. "When you try to get out into the country and try to be part of it, you get under its control. If you get too worried about it, you'd never get out the door."

Curt Falldorf had gotten out the door a lot in the 36 years he lived In Alaska. Since the mid-1960s the family had snowmachined often in the Chugach Mountains, Lois Falldorf said. In the early days there weren't many other houses and they could go out their back door from the little house off O'Malley Road, near the Alaska Zoo, and up into the hills, she said.

Sunday friends and relatives bearing food gathered in the kitchen and the living room - still decorated with paper reindeer for Christmas - and remembered Curt Falldorf. He worked at the port, but his life was his family and his snowmachines, they said.

"Curt liked toys. He loved snowmachines," Lois Falldorf said. "He really liked doing stuff with his boys," said her daughter in law, Larry's wife, Dottie Rae.

"Well, he did!" Lois said. "That's how we got into it. It was a good thing to with the kids when they were teen-agers."

The family was carrying on that tradition Saturday.

"If Curt could have picked a way to die, would have been on a snowmachine with his kids," Lois Falldorf said.