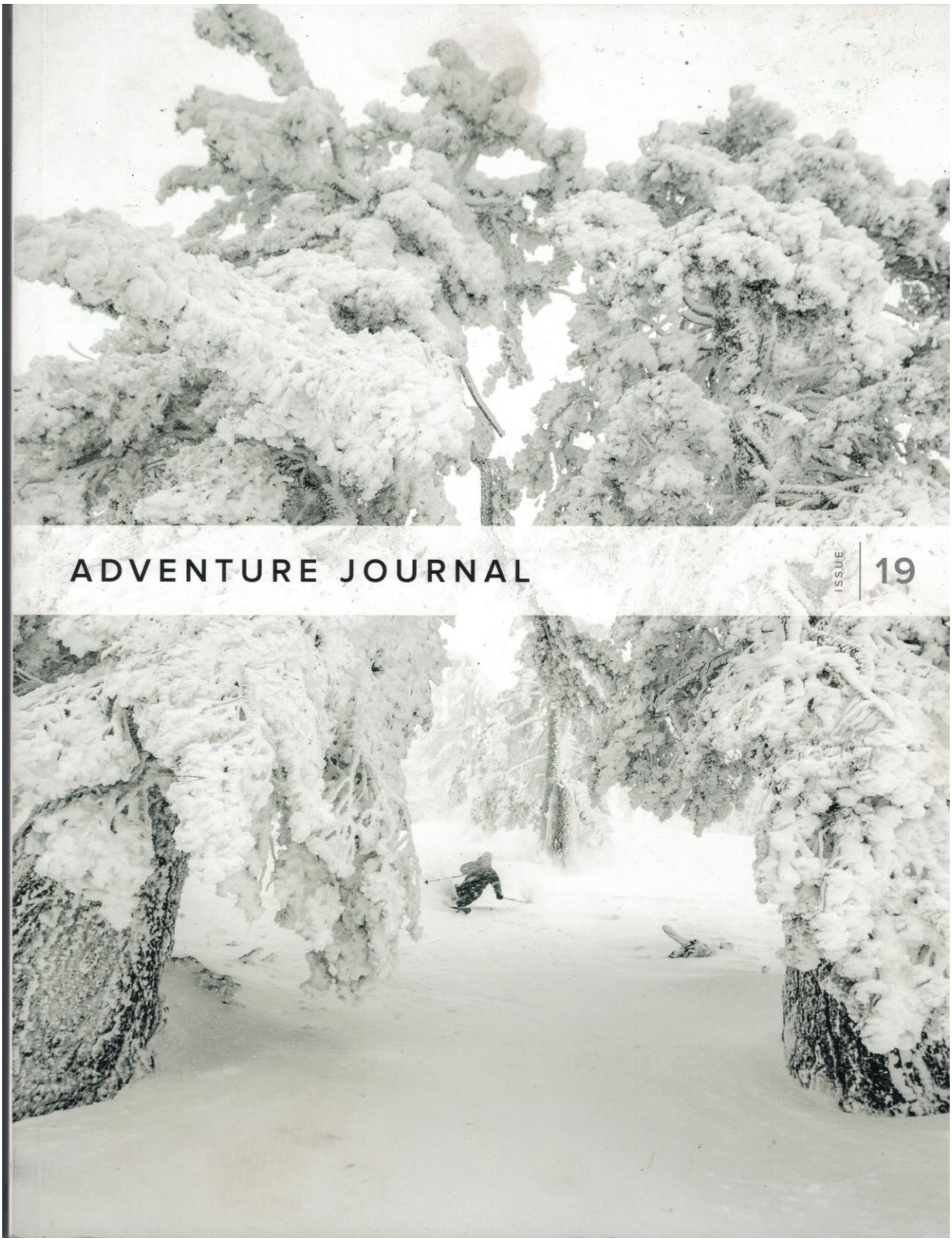

ADVENTURE JOURNAL

ISSUE 19

WHITE GRASS

APPRECIATION

The Telemarking Snow Farmer of Central Appalachia

How a tiny corner of West Virginia became an unlikely gathering place of cross-country ski culture

The legend goes something like this: In the winter of 1979 or '80, twenty-seven-year-old Harold Beverly "Chip" Chase III telemarked twelve hundred feet down Cabin Mountain's milk and honey powder into West Virginia's Canaan Valley and stumbled upon an abandoned downhill resort called Weiss Knob. He looked back at the broad meadow scalloped from the timeworn hills and funneling into a wealth of mountain wilderness. He peered into the windows of a derelict outbuilding and was smitten with a vision of the future. He struck a deal with the landowner, then rebuilt the barn into a lodge. He mapped out a trail system and christened his creation the White Grass Ski Touring Center. The Washington Post ran a story, and soon Chip and his wife, Laurie Little, whose natural foods cafe would become as instrumental to White Grass's renown as the skiing itself, were trying to figure out where to park all the cars.

In a region best known for its timber industry, the little freeheel skiing center became a bastion of communal stoke. This, despite its vagaries of snowfall (in recent years less than half its advertised annual average of one hundred sixty inches), temperature (either fifty above or twenty below, depending), and the absence of snowmaking (Chip "farms" snow through the use of snow fences). Still, White Grass is regularly lauded as one of the nation's top ten nordic ski centers, especially in rankings decided by reader surveys.

Why? The plenitude of wild terrain doesn't hurt. Two downhill resorts bookend White Grass, but the rest is protected land: a state park, a sixteen-thousand-acre national wildlife refuge, and the seventeen-thousand-acre Dolly Sods Wilderness, the combination of which makes the twenty-five-hundred-acre White Grass a front-country portal to back-of-beyond skiing. Canaan's microclimate, which approximates the boreal forest biome six hundred miles north, provides a twelve-week season. North-facing slopes weave through hardwood glades, and the crew—Chip and Laurie employ seventy seasonal workers—machine-sets thirty of the sixty kilometers of trails, stocking a dozen shelters with snacks and, occasionally, Mason jars of hooch. Wind chimes and Tibetan prayer flags flutter on the property. Indoors, the rustic lodge smells of spiced cider, and vintage posters, XC skiing gewgaws, and photographs and stickers plaster the walls ("Chipper for Mayor" "Carpe Skiem"). Meanwhile, Laurie and staff sling homemade soups and veggie chili, along with ale from the local brewery. Come winter, White Grass thumps with live performances from local bands.

But White Grass's power plant, its thermal core (all five feet six of him) is the omnipresent, effervescent, and elfin Chipper himself, humming like a Tuvan throat singer, chirpily dispensing bons mots, decanting mushroom tea and sometimes bevies much stronger than that, standing on tippy-toes to embrace his patrons, whom he addresses, male and female alike, as *sweetheart* and *darling*.

After stints in Colorado and Anchorage, the Air Force assigned Chip's father to the Pentagon and the family settled into suburban Virginia, where the youngster was swept up in the back-to-the-land craze, grew out his hair, and skied into the incipient North American telemark craze. He road-tripped to New England and out west to learn from the likes of freeheel pioneers such as Art Burrows, Rick Borkovec, John Tidd, and Dickie Hall.

Once settled in Canaan, Chipper and Laurie raised three boys, whom they taught to ski and eventually put to work alongside an expanding tribe of paddlers, climbers, and mountain bikers drawn to the valley for its outdoor riches and cheap housing, but also by Chip, the self-described hillbilly snow farmer who gave them a nordic reason to overwinter. Simply put, there was a Canaan Valley B.C.E.—Before Chip Era—and it's never been the same since he skied into the Land of Canaan.

Head to White Grass come winter and you'll likely find Chip tele-bopping down Boutros-Boutros Gully, stoking the psyche of a first-timer. "We were into it the real way," Chip says, reflecting on forty years of community. "It was something we loved, we adored, we weren't doing for any reason other than wanting you to ski...Our whole clientele is cool as shit."

BY BRAD RASSLER