

Sunday River Ski Area by Mike Thurston

Since skiing in Bethel has affected so many lives, economically, financially, physically and romantically I think someone should write the history before it is all forgotten. Since this all started a long time ago many things and names will be forgotten. But here goes.

In the late forties about ten of us thought it would be nice to have a rope tow in town I volunteered to oversee it. Not knowing where to start, I went over to Cannon Mt. in Franconia, NH and made a few sketches. None of us had any money to spare so we signed a note for \$1000 with each ones liability limited to \$150. We picked out a hill on Vernon St. and made arrangements with the owner to use it if we would repair the fence in the spring. It was all cleared with volunteer labor and Addison Saunders used his bulldozer to do a little rough grading. We also built a small warming hut. The daily and nightly fee was 50 cents so it was a break even operation but in fact I think Howard Cole, the last volunteer president, had to pay a dollar or so to close the books.

Then at a Chamber of Commerce meeting, I think around 1958, we were discussing the economy in Bethel and decided the winter was pretty quiet. Those of us who had been at Cannon Mt. and Stowe, Vt. had seen how active they were in winter. We dreamed a few months and finally Paul Kailey, ski coach at Gould and a competitor at Middlebury College, mentioned that Barker Mt. might have possibilities.

Sunday River officers in 1960:

President: Addison C. Saunders;

Vice President: Murray W. Thurston;

Clerk: Henry H. Hastings;

Treasurer: Wilbur R. Myers

Ten of us on snowshoes hiked from where the Sunday River Inn (is in 2007) to look over the slope Paul suggested which was the steep slope facing Steve Wight's place. We finally realized that we needed professional help and I happened to know Sel Hannah who was in the business of designing ski areas. He agreed to help us but his fee was \$50. Per day - a real bargain though since he would drive over from Franconia and be at my house at 7:00 AM and cruise the mountain till 5:00.

He immediately told us the face toward Steve Wight's was too steep. He thought the area where the first lift should go was where the South Ridge now stands. We had previously avoided that area since we would have to build a half mile of road.

At this point it we realized that it had been fun dreaming for us but we had no money. Henry Hastings drew up the incorporation papers at no charge. We set the value of the stock at \$10. We figured could get in business for \$90,000. Our stock was not considered a real hot investment item so we devised a plan whereby 90% of all money raised went into escrow until we reached the \$90,000 mark leaving us 10% for promotion

We applied to the Small Business Administration for a \$40,000 loan. Fund raising involved selling lifetime passes for \$1000 and five year passes for \$500. We reached \$80,000 which seemed to be the end. Gould Academy bought \$10,000 which put us over the top but they drove a hard bargain. They insisted on free skiing (in perpetuity for all students, faculty And Trustees.) they relented on this and settled for reduced rates for students which we probably would have given them anyway.



Barker Mt Lodge Feb 1960



Tucker Sno-Cat 1960

Our loan application was approved.

We then went out to bid on ski lift components. Victor Hall of Watertown, NY, received the contract. Eventually the lift components arrived in the parking lot. Johnny Rolfe, who had cleared the trails, figured out how to get the pieces up the mountain and erect them. We opened on Dec. 19, 1959 with one 3,000 T-bar reaching two thirds of the way to the top. Two

years later we put in another T-bar to the summit and after another two years put in the Mixing Bowl Lift. In the early

Seventies we decided to put in a Chair lift. The Pullman-Berry Company evidently decided to branch out and build chairlifts. For awhile we wished they had stayed in the railroad business but it eventually worked out.

We struggled along for a few years with the directors doing much of the work and even the wives took turns sleeping at the lodge since the furnace was not completely dependable.

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I believe it was in the early seventies that the Killington Ski Area in Vermont made us an offer which we accepted. They sent over as manager a young trainee named Les Otten. After A year or so they decided we didn't have much future but Les did see the possibilities and bought the entire area from them personally. There was a story at that time that Killington loaned him the money to buy it.



On December 19, 2001, Chip Seamans, Managing Director of Sunday River Maine ski resort, and George Driscoll, Vice President of Marketing & Sales invited members of the original group of 16 founders of the Sunday River Skiway Corporation to a Community Reception at Sunday River. Those who could attend are shown above: Left to Right: Paul Bodwell, Milton Mills, Howard Cole, Avery Angevine and Murray Thurston. Second row, Chip Seamans, Managing Directory of Sunday River

As for seeing the future I remember being in his office shortly after he bought it and one whole wall had a sketch of the mountain with several chair lifts drawn on the sketch. Most of them are now In place. I'm not sure of these figures but I think I have heard that there have been days that there have been as many as 12,000 skiers on the mountain and up to as many as 1,000 employees including cooks, chambermaids, parking lots attendants etc. Anyway it has made a tremendous employment engine to say nothing of the increased value of houses, land etc.