

HISTORIC ROOTS

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SMALL BEGINNINGS: THE FIRST ROPE TOW IN VERMONT

By MARILYN STOUT

Skiing is now big business. It is an important part of Vermont's attraction and its economy. Each year, thousands of tourists come to Vermont to ski. They spend about \$750 million here, on equipment, hotels, restaurants, and lift tickets.

But until the early 1930s, few people skied. There were no lifts or tows in the United States. And there were not a lot of people who were willing to climb up mountains in order to ski down. Some who did climb carried their long, heavy, wooden skis on their shoulders. Others climbed up wearing their skis, making v-shaped patterns in the snow as they went. It was hard work.

January 28, 1934 saw the beginning of a great change. On that day, what is thought to be the first ski tow in the country began to tug skiers up a hill on Clinton Gilbert's farm in Woodstock, Vermont. That little farm soon became the biggest ski area in the country.

One of the people behind this new idea was Wallace Bertram, whose nickname was Bunny.



The line for the tow up Gilbert's Hill, around 1934. Notice what people wore to ski then.

He had been the captain of the first ski team at Dartmouth College. In the winter of 1933-1934, he was a ski instructor in the hills around Woodstock.

Bunny Bertram lived that winter at the White Cupboard Inn, on the Green in Woodstock. There he met three men from New York who had just come back from a ski trip in Europe. Many European ski areas already had cable cars lifting skiers to the top of the mountains. These made skiing a lot easier to do and a lot more popular.

There were no hills in Woodstock big enough for a ski lift. But these men had heard that at a resort in Quebec, there was a rope tow that pulled skiers uphill. They asked Bunny if it might be possible to build such a tow in Woodstock. Holding onto a moving rope was not as comfortable as riding up a mountain in a cable car, but it sure beat climbing up.

Robert and Elizabeth Royce, who owned the White Cupboard Inn, thought it was a wonderful idea. They hired David Dodd, a local mechanic to build the tow. For five dollars, they rented Clinton Gilbert's hill for the rest of the season.

From talk to tow took only three weeks. The Royces wrote to the Quebec lodge, which sent them a sketch of the rope tow there. The Woodstock tow took five days to build and cost \$500. Woodstock Electric, the local power



Woodcock Historical Society Archives

A look down the tow line on Gilbert's Hill. It was 1,100 feet from the bottom to the top.

company, offered to supply the power for it, but Dodd did not want to use electricity. So that first season, the tow was powered by a Model-T Ford truck with tractor wheels.

The truck sat at the bottom of the hill. One rear wheel was chained to the body of the car to prevent it from moving. The heavy rope of the tow was looped around the other rear wheel, which turned, pulling the rope. The rope ends were spliced together to form a loop.

The rope kept moving. Skiers grabbed it at the bottom of the hill and held on until they reached the top. They paid one dollar a day to use the tow, fifty cents for half a day. Pulleys mounted on posts kept the empty rope, which was coming back down the hill, out of the skiers' way.

The system was not perfect. It was hard to hold on, even when the tow was working smoothly. Things could and did go wrong. Bertram believed that he was the first victim of a ski tow accident in this country. He was alone on the tow one day when it speeded up. He was pulled uphill very fast. He tried to let go, to fall off the tow. But his sweater caught on the rope. It "was ripped right off me except for the sleeves," he recalled. Both his skis were broken, but luckily he was not hurt.

When the ski area opened the following fall, in November 1934, Bertram was the manager. From then on, Clinton Gilbert shared in the earnings. The men worked to make the hillside more attractive to skiers. They turned an empty barn into a warming hut. They built a privy.



Woodcock Historical Society Archives

The Model-T Ford truck powering the tow line, 1934.

The Gilberts made coffee and sandwiches to sell to hungry skiers. And from then on, the tow was powered by electricity.

Word of the rope tow spread quickly. Skiers came from all over Vermont and from Boston and New York. There was no fancy equipment or special clothing then. People wore whatever warm clothes they had. Skis did not have metal edges. Bindings were simple—a toe plate in front, with straps at the toe and heel. Some people even used cross-country and jumping skis to go downhill.

Later that second season, Bertram put up lights for night skiing. If no one had come to ski by dinner time, he went home. He didn't mind a bit if people skied when he wasn't there. They were allowed to turn on the lights and ski as much as they wanted. But they had to climb up the hill first. "If you happened to be driving down Route 12 at night [when the lights were on and people were on the hill]," he remembered, "it sure looked pretty."

Skiing is now an expensive sport and a huge business. But a marker on the side of the road on Route 12, a few miles north of Woodstock, reminds us of how small it was at the beginning. Bunny Bertram lived in Woodstock for the rest of his life, but he moved on to other work. Clinton Gilbert ran the ski area on his hillside until 1952. The cost to skiers was still one dollar a day.



Woodstock Historical Society Archives

Bunny Bertram, Ed Eaton, Governor Lee Emerson and former Governor Joseph B. Johnson at the 1954 dedication of the marker on Route 12 in Woodstock.

Rooting Around

If you are interested in skiing or in how things change, you might want to do some research. What do people wear today to ski? What are skis made of now? How much does it cost to use a ski lift for a day or a half day? Are there any rope tows left in Vermont?

The Woodstock Historical Society has many pictures of the ski area at Gilbert's Hill. It also has information about, and pictures of, other historical sites in the area. It is located at 26 Elm Street in Woodstock. The phone number is 802-457-1822.