

(Photo courtesy of Sylvia Millett.)



Buffalo Ski Club members at Allegany State Park, circa 1933. From left to right: Ludwig Schreiner, (?), (?), Hans Fehm, Willy Weinreich, Cyrill Freudlsperger, (?), Joe Hautmann, Otto Geidl.

hard work, and most of all they knew how to have fun with a little snow and the laws of gravity.

Just the names of those first clubs, those first communities of skiers – Roald Amundsen Ski Club founded in 1929, Murray Hill Ski Club, Buffalo Ski Club, Ellicottville Ski Club from the 1930s and the Sitzmarker Ski Club from 1946 – bring a smile to any skier who is old enough to remember his first leather boots and seven-foot-long wooden skis and the hours he spent tinkering with a balky tow engine or sidestepping a hill to pack the snow.

But before we take a tour of the early clubs, we'd do well to recognize that skiing really began in Western New York because individuals, usually northern European immigrants who had already experienced the joy and freedom of the sport in their homelands, weren't about to spend a Buffalo winter without sliding on God's frozen gift. We'll never know the names of all the alpine pioneers who traversed our hills in the early part of the last century, but if we listen to the story of back country skier Otto Heidinger as told by his pupil, Gerry Stransky, we'll understand why they loved it so much.

Gerry Stransky, at age 75 (give or take a few years), has been skiing for more than 60 years and instructing for almost 50.

He began skiing at age 12 when his cousin introduced him to Herr Heidinger, who had spent World War I on skis as an officer in the 1st Austrian Alpine Troops. After emigrating from Austria, Otto opened a candy store and soda fountain a block from Gerry's house on Broadway between Stanton and Sherman Streets on Buffalo's east side. But his passion was skiing.

As Gerry recalls,

We would meet at Otto's store around 7 a.m., pile into a car and head for the Boston or Colden hills for a day of bush-

whacking. Now this was in the mid-thirties before anyone had seen a rope tow. Otto would ride shotgun surveying the countryside for terrain that had some pitch and run. When something caught his eye, we'd stop and ask the farmer for permission to ski on his land. No one ever said no. We'd fix our boots to our wooden skis with leather straps that allowed the heel to rise and we'd travel cross-country into the hills, through the trees, up and down ravines. We might climb half the day, until lunchtime. Then we'd eat – out in the open in good



Men felling trees to clear the land for skiing.

(Photo courtesy of Larry Erb.)

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(Photo courtesy of Larry Erb.)