

The Early Days of Skiing in Western New York: Wooden Skis, Leather Boots and Studebaker Rope Tows

By W. Richard Ohler

Sometimes, before I point my skis down the steep, black diamond trail called Old Sitz at the Buffalo Ski Club in Colden, I pause just for a moment. While it's true that as a thoroughly mediocre skier I pause to wonder if I can make it down the hill in one piece, I pause, as well, for another reason. I like to take a minute to think of the day when a group of enthusiastic college students from the University of Buffalo, members of a club then called **The Sitzmarker Ski Club** (named for the marks they made on the snow after a fall), discovered this hill, fully treed with oak, black cherry, hemlock and beech and said, "Let's put a ski slope here." So it was that in the fall of 1948 these hardy souls, led by World War II fighter pilot John Doyle, raised the \$365 Mr. Genzel was asking for his 7.3 acres of east-facing, tilted land and began to spend their weekends clearing this hill that my family and I enjoyed in 2002.

It must have been backbreaking labor felling those trees with two-man crosscut saws and double-bitted axes. And once on the ground those trees had to be limbed so they could be rolled into the rugged Old Sitz ravine for fill or hauled to the hilltop to be used for the chalet that would warm



Rope tow.

skiers that winter. To add a little excitement to the occasion, the Sitzmarkers used dynamite to dislodge the most stubborn stumps. And when those projects were finished, there were still mountains of brush to haul to the burn piles. But the skiing bug had bitten these Western New Yorkers, so it all seemed worth it. Besides, says Larry Erb, original Sitzmarker member and Buffalo Ski Club historian, "Sunday's work always ended with a beer party and songfest at the Roycroft Inn in East Aurora." As a testimonial to their deter-

mination, Sitzmarker opened for business in December of 1948 with an old White Truck engine powering a rope tow and a hand-built chalet offering a place to warm up and conduct the après ski songfests. For charter members Dick Barlow, JoAnn (Dagler) Hasselbeck, Dan Schunke, Jerry Blake, Ed Stevens, Warren Schmidt, Jack Holzer, Harvey Holtzworth and Larry Erb, among others, the reward was in the thrill of running Old Sitz.

We are blessed with marvelous skiing in Western New York at several ski areas, none more than an easy drive from Buffalo. Some, like the Buffalo Ski Club and Tamarack, are small and family-oriented; others like Kissing Bridge and Holiday Valley, are expansive, state-of-the-art facilities; and others, like Holimont, are downright luxurious. Each, however, owes its existence in part to the groundwork laid by a group of pioneers who understood that winter, far from being a time to huddle inside, was a time to venture outside and play, ski, race and then gather by the warmth of a fire for food and camaraderie. These were resourceful, ingenious, hands-on folks who formed ski clubs and pooled their talents as mechanics, engineers, carpenters, businesspeople, cooks, plumbers, welders, etc., to turn a forested hill or farm pasture into a bustling ski area. They weren't afraid of



Buffalo Ski Club members boarding a bus in Buffalo bound for a weekend of skiing, circa 1934.