The Early History of Skiing in Canaan Valley

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“We have been told that the site of the Cabin Mountain ski slope, ten miles from Davis, Route 32, was discovered in 1954 by an airplane pilot, a member of the Washington Ski Club. He reported it to his ski club, and in cooperation with the Blackwater Civic Association and a Davis Ski Club Council, Ed Filler, Gerald Parks, Belmont Cleaver, Ralph Good, H. A. (Jim) Meyer, and William Miller, made plans to lease the Cabin Mountain area and develop a ski slope. Belmont Cleaver stocked skis, boots, and poles for rent at his department store, where he also had a repair agency. Frank Roby operated equipment for beginners. Ed Filler who had ski training while in the army, was administrator and engineer of this ski area.”

“The first skiing week was January 23-29, 1956, at Cabin Mountain, altitude, 3,600 feet, and at Weiss Knob on Lindsey Reed farm, 3,900-foot altitude, one-half mile south of Cabin Mountain under the management of Robert T. Barton III, who developed and operated this area. Thus began the coming of winter tourists, the forerunner of the great Canaan Valley State Park development. The Winter Carnival was a success. Canaan Valley is the only skiing resort south of the Mason-Dixon Line. When we schoolchildren waded the deep snows in the 1890s, we never thought snow could bring a blessing to the people who would be living here eighty years later; and that many would be coming here to enjoy skiing, tobogganing, and ice-skating.”

The Ski Club of Washington DC was formed in 1936 by a small group of pioneer skiing enthusiasts who traveled to nearby hills in Pennsylvania, “herringboned” up, skied down, and bought coffee and sandwiches from locals. In 1951 the club made its first visit to Canaan Valley. A fascinating account of those earliest years of the ski club in the Valley is contained in a collection of home movies made by club member, Joe Gray. In that account, it’s stated that two members of the club toured the highlands of West Virginia, including Canaan Valley, in February, 1951, searching for a suitable place to ski that was within a reasonable driving distance of the DC area.

A slightly different version of events that led to the ski club coming to Canaan Valley is provided by Bob Jordan in a video he produced for the Timberline Resort ski school in 2005. As he relates in his narrative, the Washington, DC area was experiencing a “green winter” in the winter of 1949-50, and several ski club members were trying to locate a ski slope in nearby Virginia or West Virginia that might be suitable for them to use. The story of Washington’s “green winter” is credible: the winter of 1949-50 is only winter in the city’s history in which no measurable snow was reported by the US Weather Bureau.

Club member Hal Leich had a friend who was a pilot who had flown over and seen snowcovered hills in nearby West Virginia. He suggested the club look there for a ski slope. On Feb 23, 1950, Hal Leich and Gorman Young drove west from DC, reaching the Seneca Rocks area where they first observed snow on the Allegheny Front. From there, they drove to Harman, WV, then north into Canaan Valley via West Virginia Route 32. Only a short distance into the valley, they saw abundant snow on hills to the right of the road. They stopped and asked the land owner (the Heitz family) for permission to ski there. Permission given, the two men skied that hillside the rest of the day, spent the night in Davis, and skied there again the next day.

The club members who came to Canaan Valley at that time found a place vastly different than it is today. The beginning of tourism was still years away. Landowners were mainly farmers who made a very modest living in beef or dairy cattle or a variety of other small enterprises. Crops were grown to feed livestock and fill family larders. Unfortunately, cool summer weather with the threat of frost even in July and August discouraged the cultivation of any significant cash crop. Canaan Valley people experienced mixed results over the years in making their livelihood growing cauliflower, selling Christmas trees, raising turkeys, or trapping small game. When the Ski Club of Washington DC started looking for a place to ski, the realities of life here would probably have made any land owner eager to rent them a hill.

The Heitz farm seemed to be an ideal location for a ski slope. It was on the north-facing flank of Cabin Mountain and the main road through Canaan Valley, Route 32, passed close to the base of the hill. This 60 acres of Cabin Mountain hillside was owned by Irene Heitz Mauzy and her sister, Christina Heitz Harman. (Heitz rhymes with “pets”; Mauzy is pronounced “moe-zee”.) After some negotiations, an agreement was signed between the ski club and the Heitz sisters on October 14, 1951 allowing the club to have access to erect facilities needed to operate a ski slope. They called it Cabin Mountain Ski Area.
The site chosen on the Heitz farm was ideal. Two small streams had shaped the hillside into a bowl, a “spoon” as some of the early skiers called it, that collected two monster snowdrifts in the wintertime. With a few exceptions, those snowdrifts lasted well past the time in the spring when most snowcover elsewhere in Canaan Valley had disappeared; they resembled small, temporary glaciers left behind after each winter, sometimes more than 12 feet deep. In the early years, some of the skiers called their new ski slope “Driftland”

On July 3, 1954, the club signed a new lease agreement, inked by Hobert and Irene Heitz Mauzy and ski club president, James L. Bostick. The agreement was for a period of ten years calling for payments of $100 per year plus 15 percent of the club’s annual net income from operating the ski slope.

For others, just watching the skiers from the parking lot below was a favorite Sunday afternoon pastime.

Of course, skiers always need a place to take a break, eat, and swap stories with one another. The Purnell family from the Parsons area struck a deal with the Mauzy’s to build a refreshment building where they sold chili, hot dogs, coffee, and soft drinks to hungry skiers. For those looking for a bit more life in their lunch, beer could be had with the usual fare of meals at a short-order restaurant just across the road from the ski slope. Open seven days a week and run by retired railroad conductor, C. B. McIntyre, this little eatery was part of a dance hall that had stood there for decades, locally known as “the platform”.

All in all, skiers were welcomed in Canaan Valley as a new source of income for residents and a new venue for entertainment for young people. In its heyday, Cabin Mountain Ski Area boasted two rope tows, a ski run more than 1200 feet in length, and two warming huts. Daily rates were $1 for ski club members, $2 for non-members, and 50 cents for children.

As word spread of this new ski slope south of the Mason-Dixon Line, more and more skiers began coming to Canaan Valley. The success achieved after only a few years was even more than the club had hoped for. The tradition of holding a Winter Carnival in the nearby town of Davis started in 1955, bringing new prosperity to lodging and restaurant businesses in the wintertime. Worden’s Hotel in Davis became a favorite overnight and dining stop for skiers. In Canaan Valley, local residents rented rooms to skiers, just as they had done for years for visiting hunters and fishermen.
Today we are very fortunate that there are still some people in the Valley that vividly remember Cabin Mountain Ski Area during these years. Canaan Valley native Dick Harr is one of them. In the 1950s, Dick owned a large farm directly across Route 32 from the Mauzy place and was witness to events at the ski area from the day it started. In 2005, Dick and his son Carl participated in an oral history to record memories of their lives in Canaan Valley. Among the many interesting topics they touched on that day, one was the ski area. Dick related how he had helped in the construction phase of the ski slope by using his tractor to haul materials up the hill used in building the rope tow facilities and warming huts. Later on, he was hired by the ski club to assist with slope maintenance during the week and help out on weekends when “big crowds were there.” He said sometimes the parking lot was full and cars were parked for a half-mile on both sides of the road. Dick and Carl made a point of emphasizing that this ski area was the very first in Canaan Valley and they were proud to have been part of it.

Dick also recalled the Winter Carnivals that were held each season. A formal ball was held in the Davis High School gymnasium, attended by the governor and other state and local officials. He recalled that on one occasion a party was held at the Meyer House in Davis before the governor was to crown the queen that evening. Dick and his wife attended the party and it was a beautiful event in that beautiful home. But, with a wink, he added that some of the guests partied a bit too hard and the governor and a few others didn’t make it to the gym in time for the crowning ceremony.

Unfortunately, the fun on the slopes and in town didn’t last. By the early 1960s, the winds of change were blowing as word spread that a state park would soon be established in Canaan Valley, including a large, modern ski resort. A tract of 3149 acres of Canaan Valley land had been willed to the state of West Virginia by Sarah Maude Thompson Kaemmerling in the 1950s and actions were now underway to obtain additional acreage for the park through its power of eminent domain. The Ski Club of Washington DC knew the end was coming for their little ski area and made the decision to close it for good in 1962. It was the right decision; more than 30 properties were condemned and taken by the state from 1964 to 1970, including the Mauzy farm.

The story of the state’s actions to obtain properties for the park is one of shameful disregard of the financial and emotional toll it would take on citizens of the Valley. Landowners were stunned by purchase offers far less than true market value, forcing them to take the matter to court. At their own expense, of course. The jury trials that followed most often resulted in sale prices of double what the state had offered and sometimes much more than that. Ruth Cooper Allman, author of three books about the history of Canaan Valley, took great interest in the proceedings during those years and has discussed her recollections with this writer on a number of occasions. The bitter
aftermath of that period of time has not been forgotten over the past 40 years by many of the local residents still living today. Its legacy continues to be a deep seated suspicion of local, state, or federal officials attempting to acquire Canaan Valley land from willing sellers or otherwise.

In the case of Hobert and Irene Mauzy vs. the State of West Virginia, their trial began on October 25, 1967 with Judge D. E. Cuppett, Jr. presiding. West Virginia was represented by attorneys W. Del Roy Harner and J. Pat Nichols, Tucker County Prosecuting Attorney. The Mauzy attorney was John P. Brown, Jr. A panel of 12 jurors heard the case. After testimony was presented by both sides, the jury rendered a verdict of $32,000 to be paid to the Mauzy’s for their farm. The fee paid by the Mauzy family to their attorney is not part of the public record but several local residents have reported it ranged from 20 to 33 percent of the court verdict. Assuming the $32,000 verdict was reduced by 25 percent to pay their attorney’s fee, the Mauzy’s received $24,000 for their 60 acres. Adjusted for inflation, that amount would now be approximately $160,000 in 2008 dollars. But if that property had remained in the hands of the Mauzy family to this day, its current real estate value might easily be more than a million dollars.

As we now know, the closing of Cabin Mountain Ski Area and subsequent sale of the Mauzy farm did not drop a curtain on the early skiing era in Canaan Valley. Other enthusiastic and enterprising individuals had arrived on the scene at about the same time as the ski club and built slopes nearby that attracted thousands of skiers in the years that followed. Most notable among them was Robert T. Barton III (1928-1991) who developed Weiss Knob Ski Area in 1955 on the site where Canaan Valley State Park operates its ski resort today. After that land was taken for the state park, Barton leased part of the nearby Randall Reed farm on Freeland Road in 1959 and opened a second Weiss Knob Ski Area at that location. That endeavor ended around 1970 just as the state park readied to open its new ski slopes. In 1980, Harold “Chip” Chase, along with Tom Preston and Winslow Ayer, reopened the site of the Bob Barton’s Weiss Knob, naming it White Grass Ski Touring Center.

Cabin Mountain Ski Area as it appears today. Gone are all the buildings, the Mauzy home and barn and any other evidence of posts that supported the rope tow. A very careful examination of the ground near the road shows a few remnants of building foundations, but time and vegetation have almost completely obscured them. The lower half of the slope is now covered in hawthorn trees, easily visible in this photo. This view is from the Canaan Valley State Park entrance road. Photo by the author.
Under careful management and the use of snow fences to create continuous, linear snowdrifts for cross country skiing trails (Chip calls it “snow farming”), White Grass has grown into a very popular and widely known skiing destination today.

Hobert and Irene Mauzy both lived to witness Canaan Valley skiing begin evolving into the huge business it is today; each passed away at the age of 69, Hobert in 1979 and Irene in 1981. At the end of their lives, they saw what had begun in their cow pasture 30 years earlier grow into the even greater enterprises, first at Weiss Knob and later at White Grass. Those accounts are also colorful stories in their own right and in the years ahead we look forward to new narratives being added to the historical chronicles of Canaan Valley.

HISTORICALLY IMPORTANT SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The most important sources of information for this history feature were the author’s personal conversations with people who were here when that history was being made more than half century ago:

- Dick Harr
- Barbara Harr Alford
- Carl Harr
- Sharon Parsons Stavrakis
- Ruth Cooper Allman
- Dorothy Thompson
- Sarah Thompson Fletcher

The historical research of two other individuals was particularly valuable in assembling the chronology of events: Bob Jordan and John Lutz. Their superb work in compiling the facts, dates, and locations in their historical documentation was the principle framework around which this history feature was built.

Finally, to Chip Chase goes the credit for directing this writer to the work by Messrs. Jordan and Lutz, adding his own characteristically colorful tales to the epic. His contributions merit special recognition of White Grass Ski Touring Center.

A history feature such as this appears in every Timberdoodle, the bi-monthly newsletter of the Friends of the 500th, the volunteer group that supports the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge. To join the Friends and begin receiving Timberdoodle, individual memberships are $10/year and for families it’s $20. Mail your check to Friends of the 500th, PO Box 422, Davis, WV 26260. You’ll love it!

A special word of thanks to Chip Chase for his valuable assistance in recalling the early history of Canaan Valley skiing and for sharing photos, documents, and particularly the old Cabin Mountain Ski Area video. Chip and his wife Laurie (and now their sons) have been operating White Grass Ski Touring Center for more than 25 years. Rich in history of its own as the site of the old Weiss Knob Ski Area, Chip takes care of the ski facilities and Laurie manages the very charming and inviting White Grass Café. The latest news and information about White Grass is always available on their fresh and informative website, whitegrass.com. ~Dave Lechler