

Remembering the Beef

Montana's first ski area is no longer around, but its lasting legacy is to teach Butte area kids to ski

BY BRIAN SCHOTT

Powder Loop. Slopes Lane. Beef Trail Road. If you find yourself traveling on these newly graveled roads about five miles southwest of Butte, you would be hard-pressed to guess it, but you are rolling through Montana ski history at the base of the state's first ski area.

The ski area is long closed and most of the lots in the new subdivision are marked "sold" with some fancy homes dotting the hillside where skiers once roamed. The old ski chalet is now a residence. But is the story of the Beef Trail Ski Area simply the sad tale of another mom-and-pop ski area gone belly up? Not even close.

While Big Sky, Bridger Bowl and Whitefish generally make the national ski headlines for Montana, Butte skiers hold the honor of starting Montana's first ski area back in December 1938. Originally dubbed "Butte Slide," the ski slopes officially opened on New Year's Day in 1939 when 3,000 people packed the slopes, jump-starting what would become a nearly 50-year legacy of sliding on snow.

Looking at the 860-foot vertical rise of grassy, gentle slopes rising beyond a large real estate billboard for the Butte Ski Club Subdivision, you can begin to imagine skiers with long, wooden, homemade planks and "bear trap" strap bindings, deftly navigating the 20-degree pitch, the sound of an old car engine rattling to power a rope tow. It's also easy to imagine the summer cattle drives between Dillon and Butte that once brought the beef over this small mountain pass to market. ▶



Butte Ski Club Members at the Beef Trail ski area, circa 1955.
| Photo courtesy of the Montana Standard

‘The children of Butte get to experience skiing.... We get letters every year from the school. One child wrote that it was the first time he had ever been out of Butte. There are kids that are like that. Everyone is so very proud of what we have done.’

Marsha Baker, a board member of the Butte Ski Club Charitable Foundation

The Beef Trail was the brainchild of members of the Butte Ski Club, a fast-growing group of hearty skiers who hiked and skied on nearby Thompson Peak. They found this old ranching area to be an ideal location for lifts because of its proximity to town, reliable snow, and an initial free lease granted by the Braiser Sheep Company on the northeast slope of the 1,500-foot ridge. The club later purchased the 960-acre parcel of land for \$2,500 from Will Braiser.

Because of the grassy slopes, skiing could commence early in the winter while grass was still poking through the powder. “With six inches of snow and two feet of hay, we were in business,” recalled Fritz Apostel, one of the early organizers of the area, who passed away in 2009. In the summer of 1938, volunteers cleared trees and rocks, using explosives donated by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company.

The first rope tow was powered by a 1931 Model A Ford engine nicknamed “Clarabelle,” paid for by the 200 club members who each ponied up a dollar for the annual dues. The wheel pushed the rope up the hill at about 8 miles per hour, the only rope tow in the state with this unique design. Members paid \$1 to ski and slide on Saturday and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m., while non-members paid \$5.

Membership continued to soar with the addition of eight floodlights installed on the main slope, the first area in Montana to offer night skiing. After more than 40 broken bones that first winter, the mining company provided first-aid training and helped form the first ski patrol for the area.

While World War II took many young people into service, Beef Trail remained viable, even continuing with night skiing operations despite the fact that Butte was a strategic wartime location for copper. As a testament to the popularity of skiing, ski club members persuaded Butte High School to sanction skiing as a varsity sport for boys and girls in 1950.

Marsha Baker, a board member of the Butte Ski Club Charitable Foundation and daughter of Fritz Apostel, started skiing at 18 months old in rubber boots and on homemade skis. She recalls that “even after the men got called up to the war, they sent back portions of their paychecks from overseas to help make sure the ski club could pay the mortgage on the land.”

Later, after the Montana Power Company ran electric service to the area, electric motors eventually powered four rope tows and one T-bar, taking skiers to Main Hill, beginner-rated South Slope, and the expert-rated Clark Hill. Anaconda Run and Chute were smaller, more technical runs.

But eventually the age of chairlift skiing had hit the nation, and nearby Discovery Basin in Anaconda opened with lift service in 1973. As if a signal for troubles to come, lightning burned the tow shack on the Main Hill in 1974, but the other lifts continued to operate. The board of directors invested in a grooming machine in the



This page: Butte Ski Club members wait for a tow at Beef Trail, circa 1955. | Photo courtesy of the Montana Standard Facing page: Beef Trail beartrap bindings top. | Photo courtesy of Terry Lonner An original Butte Ski Club patch. | Photo courtesy of the Butte Ski Club Charitable Foundation.



late 1970s, and purchased snowmaking equipment in the early 1980s, but warm chinook winds made it impossible to make snow and Beef Trail failed to open, while skiers continued to favor newer and larger resorts like Bridger Bowl near Bozeman, which had modeled its nonprofit organization after Butte’s.

While the closure of Beef Trail in 1988 could be considered just another casualty in a changing ski industry, when its board of directors sold the land and invested the money in a nonprofit foundation, they created a lasting legacy for the children of Butte and instilled an incredible sense of pride among its members.

“If you were a member of the ski club, you owned as much as everyone else,” says Baker. “When the club sold the land, everyone—and I mean everyone—decided that the money should go to a private foundation and the interest off the money should be for the children of Butte with the emphasis on skiing.”

Today, the foundation not only funds a day of skiing

at nearby Discovery Basin, including bus rides, ski rentals and lessons for every child in grades fourth through eighth, it also has funded new soccer fields, hockey rink improvements, a new track and swimming lessons for every child in the third grade.

“The children of Butte get to experience skiing,” says Baker, clearly emotional about the time she spent on the hill and what the legacy of that old hill means today. “This is something that many of our kids would never be able to do. We get letters every year from the school. One child wrote that it was the first time he had ever been out of Butte. There are kids that are like that. Everyone is so very proud of what we have done.”

Like the ghosts of the old cattle drives that gave this mountain pass its name, skiers may no longer schuss in Butte, but a young generation of Butte skiers is in heaven each winter, learning the sport of their forebears. ■

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