

Suicide Ski Hill¹

Living in the mountains year round has always required a flexible attitude toward the weather. Through the decades, Waterton residents faced winter head on simply by embracing it through winter sports.

Early in the 1920s men and women alike took to the outdoors in winter with a vengeance forming skating parties, playing shinny and competitive hockey and planning social snowshoe and cross country skiing treks when the weather allowed.² By early 1933 skiing had captured the interest of many Waterton residents. A newspaper article describing the sport noted “...practically everyone except the halt, the lame and the blind, are the proud possessors of a pair of skis.”³

As elsewhere, Waterton was no less influenced by the innate Scandinavian tradition of skiing.⁴ More than half a dozen early residents in the park and/or their spouses were of Scandinavian origin. Both they and their descendents were keenly interested in skiing.⁵

According to Ken Goble, long-time resident, many people made their own skis.⁶ They used various woods including fir, pine, spruce, white birch, elm, ash and others. It was quite common when visiting a neighbor to see a large boiler of water on the stove with one or more pairs of skis soaking in it. “After being boiled for a few hours, sometimes 24 [hours], they were bent to the desired shape. Most of these skis were seven feet or eight feet long and at least four inches wide,” Goble recalled.⁷

From fashioning their own skis for day-long outings over trails hiked in summer, to putting together a group of like-minded friends for a week-long trip, cross country skiers, either singles or married couples, were dedicated to the activity. It became a regular event to make one trek that lasted a week or more camping out along the way.⁸



Waterton residents of all ages took to the sport sometimes sharing equipment but always eager to give skiing a try. (Photo: Chris Morrison)

Downhill skiing, using the same equipment, also found favor among the locals. As early as the spring of 1933, residents received permission from Supt. Herbert Knight to extend and widen a ski run on Bertha Peak bringing its total length to about a quarter mile which allowed experienced skiers to reach speeds estimated at over 70 miles per hour. The improvements, done by volunteers, resulted in a ski area with two ski runs and a toboggan run which brought out scores of patrons.⁹ There was no rope tow or lift which required skiers to work hard to herringbone up the slope for the descent.¹⁰



*Fear of falling or being unable to stop mingled with the exhilaration of roaring down a slope.
(Photo: John Russell)*

It may have been during the Second World War that the run got its name Suicide Ski Hill,¹¹ but the exact date is not known. No deaths, accidental or intentional, were recorded on the hill but it was a snappy name that got attention from users.

After the war, the newly created Waterton Lions Club took over responsibility for the ski run and asked for permission to construct yet another ski run. Following an initial rejection of the idea by managers in Ottawa, the suggestion was reconsidered with a view to examining all the factors involved.¹² The re-examination was urged in the hopes of putting Waterton's skiing facilities in line with those in comparable communities.¹³

In the fall-winter of 1948, work was begun as volunteers began slashing a new diagonal run at the Bertha trail-head,¹⁴ with the park providing some help.¹⁵ By December as the work slowed, the Lions Club sought help from the government in view that other national parks had been aided in similar efforts.¹⁶ Then, as if a light had come on, Controller J. Smart in Ottawa began to see greater possibilities: "However, it seems that as skiing is becoming so popular throughout the country where there are hills and good snow conditions that we could expect some pressure from various sources to develop areas on [sic] National Parks," he wrote Supt. DeVeber asking if any serious thought should be given to developing a ski resort in the park.¹⁷

In the spring of 1949 the Lions Club was informed that if park help was to be provided in ski run development, the club would have to provide a formal submission based on a survey by an expert skier.¹⁸ The Lions Club brought in Bruno Engler, a Banff ski instructor,¹⁹ to do the survey of the best locations.²⁰ But park officials did not agree with Engler who chose the eastern slopes of Mt. Alderson.²¹ Facing an impasse, the ski club suggested, with additional improvements, Suicide Hill could be used as a practice slope and another inexpensive run be built for the winter of 1949-50.²² The government

agreed pointing out that Suicide Ski Run was not suitable for final development meriting departmental [financial] support.²³

The club began to investigate other areas in the park for future ski run development.²⁴ Suicide Ski Hill continued to be slowly improved in the fall of 1949 with the help from skiers outside the park and the government assisted with its bulldozer²⁵ where possible.²⁶

Frank Goble and Ernie Haug, Jr. as well as many others worked diligently clearing, grubbing and burning brush. The ski run, now referred to as “the practice slope” had been improved by widening, pulling stumps and smoothing the rougher spots.²⁷

While interest in commercial ski developments were focused elsewhere in the park, Suicide Hill continued to be used by local residents. By early 1952 the ski club began raising money to purchase a rope tow for the Suicide location.²⁸ The club, however,



Just like the professionals of the day, youngsters wore race numbers while competing although everyone knew their names. (Photo: John Russell)

failed to get permission from the government to operate this tow.²⁹ So in the winter of 1952-53, the ski club moved the tow to Mount Lineham where it was used for two seasons but again without departmental permission. It seemed the club's relations as well as skiers were going downhill.

Two snow slides, one in February and another in April, roared down Bertha Peak in 1951 bringing a heightened awareness of potential hazards.³⁰ In the late winter of 1954 two more avalanches hit the slope at a different area, destroying two cabins near the Suicide Run. Suddenly there was an urgent need to find a new ski location as park officials

reportedly refused to allow use of the Suicide Run due to danger of future avalanches.³¹

In the years that followed the ski club was allowed to use the Suicide Ski Hill again on a members-only, own-risk basis under orders from park officials in Ottawa.³² A new rope tow was installed in 1958 and operated with permission until at least 1965³³ and into 1966.³⁴ After that year, use of this slope seemed to fade and no further mention was made of Suicide Ski Hill in the newspaper. Interest in the club and the site eventually waned and the club discontinued the maintenance of the run. The ski run was allowed to return to a natural state.³⁵



*The run at Suicide Ski Hill, circled in this 1967 air photo, ended across from today's walk-in tenting area at the south end of Evergreen Avenue.
(Photo: WLNP Archives)*

¹ In preparing this piece, the author was sorely hampered by the lack of a clear indication in print of the location of Suicide Hill. Rough, not-to-scale, drawings in the files were of no help at all being mostly in black and white while colored pencils were used on the

originals and these markings are not differentiated. Hand writing on the drawings was mostly illegible. It is known that Suicide Hill was on Bertha Peak behind townsite Blocks 30 and 31 but exactly where it started and stopped was not shown with consistency on any materials. The drawings were sometimes used to show both the existing Suicide Hill and proposed variations in runs. The result is quite simply illegible. Old timers still point to its location: the clearing, directly upslope of the Bertha trailhead parking lot. In fact peak speed of the skiers would have been reached as they swooshed through, what is today, the parking lot.

² “Winter Sports Waterton Lakes,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Feb. 10, 1921, 4. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 26.

³ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Feb. 24, 1933, 3. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 26.

Time and time again, the name of the mountain on which skiing took place was incorrect. In this article the location is said to be “Cameronian Mountain” when, in fact, it was Bertha Peak.

⁴ See “Ski Hill Proposals” in this collection.

⁵ Included among these residents were Carl Carlson, Erik Hagglund, Olga Hagglund, Henry Hanson, Nels Eklund, and Ralph Christiansen, all of whom immigrated from Scandinavia and raised families in or near Waterton.

⁶ At that time, while wooden skis could also be ordered by mail from several manufacturers, money for non-essentials during the Great Depression was scarce.

⁷ E. Kenneth Goble, *Waterton Park History*, (unpublished manuscript, 1981), 53. WLNP Archives, Box 115, Item 8.

⁸ E. Kenneth Goble, *Waterton Park History*, 37. WLNP Archives, Box 115, Item 8.

⁹ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, March 6, 1933, 8. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 26.

¹⁰ Library and Archives Canada, RG 84, A-2-a, vol. 223, file W312-4, pt. 3. Memorandum for file, “Proposals and Applications for Ski Run, Ski Lift and Sightseeing Lift Developments in Waterton Lakes National Park,” S. Kun, March 23, 1961.

¹¹ First documented use of the name Suicide Hill was used in a letter to Dr. J.J. Dobry of Cardston by H. A. DeVeber, acting superintendent, Waterton Lakes National Park, Nov. 5, 1943. WLNP Archives, Box 152, Item 8. As a matter of style, *The Lethbridge Herald* avoided the word “suicide” for many decades because it was thought to be hurtful and offensive in any use.

¹² Letter to H. A. DeVeber, Waterton Lakes Superintendent, from J. Smart, Controller, National Parks Bureau, Ottawa, Dec. 18, 1947. WLNP Archives, Box 152, Item 8.

¹³ Letter to J. Smart, Controller, National Parks Bureau, Ottawa, from Frank Goble, Chairman of the Ski Club Section, Waterton Park Lions Club, Nov. 23, 1947. WLNP Archives, Box 152, Item 8.

¹⁴ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Nov. 18, 1948, WLNP Archives, Box 152, Item 8.

¹⁵ Letter to Waterton Superintendent (DeVeber) from J. Smart, Controller, Ottawa, Dec. 21, 1948, WLNP Archives, Box 152, Item 8.

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- ¹⁶ Letter to R. A. Gibbons, Lands & Development Service Branch, Ottawa, from A. Roper, secretary, Waterton Park Lions Club, Dec. 14, 1948. WLNP Archives, Box 152, Item 8.
- ¹⁷ Letter to Waterton Superintendent (DeVeber) from J. Smart, Controller, Ottawa, Dec. 21, 1948, WLNP Archives, Box 152, Item 8.
- ¹⁸ Library and Archives Canada, RG 84, A-2-a, vol. 223, file W312-4, pt. 3. Memorandum for file, "Proposals and Applications for Ski Run, Ski Lift and Sightseeing Lift Developments."
- ¹⁹ Superintendent's Report, supplement, Jan. 1-1949 to March 31, 1949, 6. WLNP Archives Box 207, Item 9.
- ²⁰ "Strong Possibility Ski Run Could be Built in Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, April 4, 1949, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 26.
- ²¹ Letter to H. A. DeVeber, WLNP park superintendent, Waterton Park from J. Smart, Controller, National Parks Service, Ottawa, Nov. 24, 1949. WLNP Archives Box 152, Item 8.
- ²² Letter to J. Smart, Controller, National Parks Service, Ottawa, from Frank Goble, Ski Club president, Waterton Park, May 5, 1949. WLNP Archives Box 152, Item 8.
- ²³ Superintendent's Report for 1949. WLNP Archives, Box 207, Item 9.
- ²⁴ Memorandum to J. Smart, Controller, National Parks Service, Ottawa, from H. A. DeVeber, WLNP superintendent, Waterton Park, Nov. 16, 1949. WLNP Archives Box 152, Item 8.
- ²⁵ Letter to J. Smart, Controller, Ottawa, from H. A. DeVeber, Superintendent, Waterton Lakes National Park, Nov. 16, 1949. WLNP Archives, Box 152, Item 8.
- ²⁶ Letter to Waterton Superintendent, from J. Smart, Controller, Ottawa, Nov. 24, 1949. WLNP Archives, Box 152, Item 8.
- ²⁷ Letter to J. Smart, Controller, National Parks Service, Ottawa, from H. A. DeVeber, WLNP superintendent, Waterton Park, Dec. 20, 1949. WLNP Archives Box 152, Item 8.
- ²⁸ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Jan. 30, 1952, 10. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 26.
- ²⁹ Memorandum for File, by S. Kun, Ottawa, March 23, 1961. Library and Archives Canada, RG-84, A-2—a, vol. 2223, file W312-4, part 3.
- ³⁰ "Snowslide Roars Down Bertha Mountain," *Lethbridge Herald*, April 10, 1951, 3. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 26.
- ³¹ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Feb. 26, 1955, 5 WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 26.
- ³² "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Jan. 28, 1956, 3 WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 26.
- ³³ "Good Skiing at Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Feb. 4, 1965, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 26.
- ³⁴ Superintendent's Report, 1966. WLNP Archives digital files.
- ³⁵ No information could be found to confirm the continuation of Suicide Hill. It may have come to an end when other regional ski areas were developed, those less subject to Chinook weather patterns.