



WALLACE "BUNNY" BERTRAM 1908 - 1981



Bunny Bertram

Wallace "Bunny" Bertram was captain of the Dartmouth Winter Sports Team, class of 1931. At that time snowshoeing was the predominant winter sporting event and Bunny was an outstanding snowshoer, receiving varsity letters his junior and senior years.

While Bunny's dedication to the Dartmouth team continued during the early 1930s as coach of the "B" ski team, his destiny lay in the hills surrounding Woodstock, Vermont where **Bunny would erect the first continuously operating ski tow in the nation and go on to develop and operate one of the premier race training hills in the United States.**

The nation's first ski tow (or "ski way" as it was called then) was built on Gilbert's Hill outside Woodstock, Vermont in 1934. Technical problems plagued the tow however, and Bunny, who was then working as a ski instructor for the White Cupboard Inn in Woodstock, set up the tow for the 1934-35 season. He modeled the ski tow after a Ferris wheel he had seen one summer. That tow became the first continuously operating ski tow in the United States. Two years later Bunny moved his successful operation to an adjacent ridge known as Hill Number Six. That hill evolved into "Suicide Six" which Bunny would own and operate for the next 25 years.

From 1937 to 1961, Bunny developed Suicide Six into one of the premier race training hills in the country. Suicide Six and Bunny hosted many Dartmouth championship ski teams as well as several Olympic racers including Tom Corcoran, Brooks Dodge, Bill Beck, Dick Durrance, Betsy Snite and Gretchen Frazier. Sir Arnold Lunn, the inventor of the slalom, said that Suicide Six was the best slalom training hill he had ever seen.

Bunny's other achievements during those years as owner and operator of Suicide Six include:

- Pioneered the first NASTAR type races, skiers race a course down the face of Suicide Six to earn one of three special pins. Open to anyone, to win the gold pin (top prize) a racer had to beat the pace setter.
- In 1948, he oversaw America's first certification test for ski instructors at Suicide Six.
- In 1954, Bunny installed a Poma type ski lift at Suicide Six – the first of its kind in New England.
- In 1956, Bunny assisted Joe Jones in setting up the Mid Vermont Junior Ski Council – the first consolidated youth racing program in the nation.
- President for many years of the Woodstock Ski Runners (one of the first ski clubs in the U.S.). He was also active in the Vermont Ski Council, the USEASA and the Woodstock Chamber of Commerce.

Bunny Bertram was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1981.

But Wait, There's More...



WALLACE "BUNNY" BERTRAM The Rest of the Story



First tow rope at Gilbert's Hill

While Bunny Bertram is credited with commercializing the first ski lift in the United States, he was not the first ski tow rope creator in the U.S. - because someone stole his idea. A year later, he got his revenge, and in the process, Vermont's ski industry was born.

Three cranky New York businessmen inspired the creation of that first tow rope on Jan. 28, 1934. The New Yorkers were staying at the White Cupboard Inn two miles north of Woodstock, VT. Over lunch they complained to the owners, Elizabeth and Robert Royce, about paying for the privilege of climbing up a mountain in order to ski down it. "You ought to be able to think of something to get us up these hills," said one of the New Yorkers, a stockbroker named Thomas Gammack. "Each of us is spending \$40 to enjoy a weekend in Vermont, yet the most we can do in a day is to climb a hill half-a-dozen times. We want to get in all the skiing we can ... We want to be carried uphill."

Bertram, working at the mountain, was in the room when the New Yorkers complained about climbing up the hill. Bertram told them about a tow rope ferris wheel he'd seen in Canada; and thinking he could expand on the idea for the mountain in Vermont, **Bunny asked the Royces, who operated the Inn, if they had a Montgomery Ward or Sears catalog**, explaining he wanted to figure out how much it would cost to build a tow rope.

Instead of helping Bertram, Robert Royce decided to get there first. He rented a former sheep pasture called Gilbert's Hill for \$5 and with an investment from the three New Yorkers, bought pulleys, an 1,800-foot rope and a Model T Ford engine to build the first U.S. tow rope. In that hilly pasture, the

White Cupboard Skiway was born. They sold ski tickets for \$1 a day and 50 cents for night skiing. Skiers grabbed on to the circulating rope and let it carry them up the 900-foot hill. Though the tow rope broke down frequently, that first ski season was a huge success.

The next year, the Royces intended to rent Gilbert's Hill again. Elizabeth Royce gave a cab driver \$100 in bills and asked him to go to the bank and fetch a crisp \$100 bill, which she intended to present to the hill's owner. The cab driver brought back a limp, crumpled bill. While she took the time to clean and iron it, Bertram saw his chance- and rented the hill for \$10 and a % of the hill's income.

Bertram worked out the problems with the tow rope, and the rest, as they say, is history...

Credit to: <https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/revenge-drama-first-ski-tow-rope/>

Story with thanks to The Vermont Standard and the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame and Museum.



The Story of Suicide Six



Suicide Six

Back when the Royces initially started the White Cupboard Skiway, they hired a topographer to map out the local mountains to select the best location. The topographer numbered the hills 1 through 6, and they selected Gilbert's Hill, which was hill # 2. Once Bunny secured the rights to Gilbert's Hill, he changed the name of the area to the Woodstock Ski Hill.

Bunny also made some changes to the original rope tow. He replaced the Model T with an electric motor provided by the Woodstock Electric Company—all Bertram had to pay for was the electricity it used. He improved the pulley mechanism based on a Ferris wheel to make the rope easier to ride.

By the end of the 1934-35 season, the relationship between Bertram and Clint Gilbert had become strained. Worried that he wasn't getting an accurate percentage of the ski business, Gilbert had attached Bertram's bank account. Bertram decided to sever that relationship and find a new hill.

This led him to hill #6 on the topo map, only a short distance from Gilbert's hill. His first target was the south facing side known as the Gully, but how to get access to the land? Enter the Fisk family and primarily Elizabeth "Muddy" Fisk whose husband, Harvey, was an influential New York

banker. The Fisks bought the Gully land, paid to have the power line extended there, and let Bunny use the land rent-free.

Bunny's Ski Tows opened for the 1935-36 season. By the way, the Fisk's daughters became accomplished ski racers—probably with Bunny's coaching. They formed the nucleus of the United States Women's Ski Team for the 1936 Olympics.

Even though the Gully is now part of Suicide Six, it was a year before Bertram could purchase the rest of hill #6, the top of the hill and the land on the northeast side – the steep side. Legend has it that when looking at the steep northeast face of hill #6, Bertram said “it would be suicide to ski straight down that face.” Later, in thinking up a name for his new expanded area, he recalled his comment and from his high school English class, the power of alliteration: hence Suicide Six.

Suicide Six opened on Christmas day, 1937. Bunny Bertram was the lift operator, ticket seller, maintenance man, marketing manager, slope groomer, and occasionally a ski instructor and ran Suicide Six for 25 years.

Credit for the story to: <https://vtskiandride.com/suicide-six-80-years-amazing-firsts/>