

The Last Run Down the Mountain

By Reginald D. Smith

The insistent buzzing of the alarm went off long before I was ready to wake up and get moving. Reluctantly, I kicked off the covers and recalled that today was the big outing I had been anticipating since the beginning of the school year back in September. I quickly showered, shaved, and then dressed in my long johns, before putting on my ski wear. I had a good breakfast and then set off for the school; Adelpian Academy. I was the editor of *The Shiawassian*, the school newspaper produced by the seniors in the English IV class. The paper was aptly named after a river that meandered through the school campus on its way north to join the Flint River. Similarly, the staff of the student run paper was supposed to report on all the newsworthy items that drifted across the campus during the course of the school year.

The staff and I had planned the kick-off of *The Shiawassian* subscription campaign at a Saturday evening concert in the school auditorium months earlier. The E.P. Weaver Auditorium was a gymnasium with a stage at one end. For concerts, folding chairs were set up in rows in front of the stage, as wide as the proscenium. This left aisles on both sides of the gym, wide enough to drive two cars passing side-by-side. The gap between the front of the stage and the first row of chairs for the audience was more than wide enough to drive a car as well. I had borrowed the model T Ford from a local antique car buff. He had helped me wheel it up the porch steps on a midnight, two nights earlier, while the campus was asleep. We hid it under canvas tarps in the lobby until we were ready to make our grand entrance all dressed in 1920's garb. The plan was to surprise the audience with as many of the staff as we could fit in the model T, singing while being driven into the gym. This was to take place just before the band concert was scheduled to start. We would all be singing our campaign song made up for the occasion. We borrowed the song *Give my Regards to Broadway* by George M. Cohan and superimposed lyrics that said in part

Go get your subs for AA,
Call all your friends and fam-i-ly,
Ask them to get them all sent back,
Before next the Thanks-giv-ing leave...

As a promotion for getting subscriptions, the campaign had promised that each student who was able to get 10 subscriptions or more would be able to go on a special trip to Bear Mountain for a day of winter sports fun. The students who were unable to get the subscriptions ended up staying at the school and doing the regular class schedule.

Finally, the big day of the outing had arrived, and nearly one hundred students had met the subscription requirements. The day was January 28th, 1963. Several faculty members and a number of parents had agreed to show up early in the morning with cars ready to load with students, drive them to the destination, and then return them at the end of the day. The students broke into pre-arranged groups with each parent serving as chaperone for their group. When all the students were loaded, the caravan of cars departed for Bear Mountain in Grayling, Michigan; it was a drive of 3 hours almost due north. By getting on the road by 6 a.m., the estimate was to arrive around 9 a.m., which would provide a good day of activity in the snowy recreation area. Since I was 18 years old and a licensed driver, I

had a group of my friends riding with me in a red 1963 Corvair with a white convertible top. The weight of the load of people in the car with the rear mounted engine gave the car great stability and traction in the snow.

A light snowfall was still hitting the windshield as we drove towards our destination. The cloudy skies had dropped a couple of inches of light snow during the night. On lightly traveled roads it had begun to pack on the surface and turn slippery. The main highways were clear of any accumulation because the constant wind turbulence of the cars and trucks kept the snow moving. The further north we drove, the colder it got, and the deeper the snow. When we arrived at Bear Mountain, there was more than a foot of snow on the ground, with a good base of at least 24 inches on the ski slopes. Snowmaking equipment was in place to augment Mother Nature's snowfall. We were all excited at the prospect of getting out with the winter activities and being away from a day of the drudgery of school.

Plans for the return trip called for the group to assemble and depart by 3:30 that afternoon. Arrangements had been made to stop for dinner on the way back at Frankenmuth; a town settled by German immigrants. The little town was located approximately half the way back to Holly, and Zehnder's Restaurant had a reputation for fine food throughout the region. We were all looking forward to a nice dinner after a busy day in the snow.

Bear Mountain was given the name by Fred Bear, founder of Bear Archery. He had developed the recreation area with a number of ski slopes ranging from the beginners (bunny) slope to a black diamond run for the advanced skier. A large ski lodge was at the base. Inside the lodge, the centerpiece for the lounge area was a huge fireplace with a crackling fire to warm those seeking respite from the cold and snow outside. There was an Olympic sized outdoor ice-skating rink, and a toboggan run formed perfectly in concrete and covered with an inch or more of ice and nearly a half-mile long. It was not uncommon for a loaded toboggan to reach speeds estimated to be nearly 60 miles per hour.

The cars pulled into the parking lot and began discharging their passengers into the 15-degree temperatures outside. The weather forecast for the day was to get up to a high of 20 degrees. Mr. Lewis, the faculty advisor for the *The Shiawassian* had reserved the area, and since the local schools were in session that day, the students, faculty, and parent-drivers had the run of the area. Ice skates and skis were unloaded and groups started off. Some went to the lodge and began making arrangements for ski rentals. A number headed for the toboggan run. As the editor of the student paper, I grabbed my camera and began looking for pictures to capture for the next edition.

Little did I realize that among those on that outing that day, was my future father-in-law, Wayne Keller. He was the father of my classmate, Bonnie, and the Vice President of my senior class. Years later we dated, fell in love, and married. Her two sisters, Linda, a sophomore, and Carol, a freshman were in the group. Their father had gotten up at 2 a.m., in Hillsdale, Michigan and driven to Holly, and once there, loaded a group of girls into his car and chaperoned them for the outing.

Before noon, I got the members of the outing who were skiing, to get a picture of them together. One of the people in the picture was Mr. Keller. When the picture was complete they headed off for the lifts to get on with skiing.

As I was watching the slopes and was looking at all the skiers, I became aware of a figure, stopped at the top and silhouetted against the sky. He seemed to lean on his poles and just take in the view from up there. Had I recognized who it was, I might have surmised that he was reflecting about a day that had started in the middle of the night, and it may have been fatigue that caused him to pause.

The manager of the farm at the Academy, Mr. Wright, brought some skis for the excursion from home. They were an old pair of skis he had moved with him from New England where he worked and lived previously. The skis were wooden from a much earlier era, and were a more primitive style that was made before the break away bindings had been invented. To wear the skis, one simply had to stand on the appropriate place and fasten the leather straps over the arch of the foot. These were more commonly known as “suicide bindings” because when a skier fell, there was no give, or “break away” to relieve the pressure on the foot, ankle, leg, or knee. What was injured depended on how the skier fell. Later I learned that those were the skis on the feet of the man silhouetted against the blue sky at the top of the mountain, standing at the top of the black diamond trail. He seemed oblivious to the meaning of the black diamond signs facing him.

Unknown to almost all of us at the time, was that the man at the top of the run had never been on any skis, at all, ever. This was his first time at trying skiing. He had seen people ski; some here, and some on television. To him, it didn't appear to be all that hard. Just point the skis down the hill, push off with the poles, and away you go.

As I watched, the wind at the top of Bear Mountain seemed to shake the lone figure from his reverie. Then he pushed off with the poles and started straight down with a swoosh. The sudden drop probably caused him to pick up speed a little faster than he had anticipated but he seemed resolute.

The students towards the bottom of the run near the lodge began to point at the figure now cutting a streak straight down the hill. Other people began to point and talk. The skier was identified as Mr. Keller, father of Bonnie, Linda, and Carol.

He quickly hit the moguls on the run. Bumpity bump, bumpity bump he went. Most were sure the moguls would make him fall since he seemed to be making no effort to slow his descent. There was no sign of snowplowing or leaning to a side to turn the skis and create friction to slow his progress. Students, faculty, and parent chaperones now stood transfixed watching his speeding descent across the quick ups and downs on the moguls. I cranked the focus on my camera but never seemed to catch him still enough to get a good picture. I finally gave up and watched to see what might happen.

At the bottom of the ski run loomed the lodge that stretched across the foot of Bear Mountain. To the east of the lodge was a couple of outbuildings; one housed the ski rental shop, and another was a utility building. There were racks out in front of the buildings where one could lean their skis and poles while they went into the lodge to warm up by the fire or get something to eat.

Mr. Keller seemed to be headed towards a cluster of trees. He was still on his feet and sliding pell-mell towards them. A collision seemed inevitable. Just when we thought he was a goner, a snow drift in front of the trees turned his course and kept him from imminent danger. He dropped over the edge of

the hill and seemed to be headed towards the storage racks in front of the ski rental shop. Everyone within range was now staring, expecting disaster at any moment.

Just then his skis seemed to shift direction slightly and he was past the ski rack. There was no stopping him at the speed he was going. He missed the ski racks, whipped past us and then between the lodge and the ski rental buildings. Next there were the logs used to mark the edge of the parking lots. He zipped past the logs and between cars. His momentum carried him across the parking lot, missing all the cars.

From there he disappeared into the woods beyond the parking lot.

Silent expectations and grim expressions crept onto the faces of all who witnessed the downhill run as they waited to see what had happened to Mr. Keller.

In a few minutes, a figure somewhat resembling a white Bigfoot emerged from the woods, carrying the skis and ski poles. He was covered with snow from head to toe, as he walked across the parking lot and back to where we were all standing. He took the skis and poles, and stood them against the rack.

Later I learned that this was his first time on snow skis and it was his last run down the mountain that day. He never spoke about his experience that day, and Bonnie later confirmed that it was never mentioned with any of the family again.

Bonnie and I had been married twenty-nine years in 1997, when the whole family traveled to Aspen, Colorado for a Christmas family reunion. The plan was to simply be together, enjoy Christmas, and of course take advantage of the location for skiing. The family got Mr. Keller a ski pass, and rented the boots, poles, and skis so that he could enjoy the snow. Mr. Keller put on all the equipment in preparation for skiing but never left the immediate area of the lodge. He didn't attempt any skiing at all on that vacation.

His last run down the mountain back at Bear Mountain in Grayling, Michigan, was indeed, his first, and last run down the mountain.