**Fox Hill Ski Jump**

Decades before Fox Hill was bequeathed to the Town of Franconia by the Coffin Family, local kids were flocking to the area for fun. In the spring of 1990 the 96-acre parcel was given to the town, although agreement between the Coffins and the town in 1981 allowed recreational uses on the Fox Hill property. That 1981 agreement allowed quiet use of Fox Hill for such things as “a picnic area, hiking trails, nature walks, cross country skiing and a ski jump.”

One of the three selectmen who signed the agreement was Bob Ball, who years earlier had been one of the local boys who got a few thrills from launching 30-40 feet through the air off a ski jump built on top of a large rock on Fox Hill. During the late 1930s and early 40s “everyone used it,” Ball remembered of the ski jump.

Although there is no record of when the jump was built, Ball believes the jump was built by boys a few years ahead of him at Dow Academy, which then served as the local high school. Bob Ball graduated in 1943. His brother Norwood and other skilled local skiers, Bobby Clark and Roger Peabody graduated five years earlier.

At the time, there were rope tows rigged up in farm fields and on hills throughout the region, including at Forest Hills, where Ball remembered his father and Walter Pelletier setting up a big, old Lincoln touring car to power the heavy rope tow. Skiing was becoming a popular winter sport, both among the locals and for folks who would drive or ride the ski trains north from the Boston and New York metropolitan areas. Cannon Mountain was at the forefront of the developing sport, with the construction of the famous Richard Taft Trail in the mid-1930s and the opening of the Cannon Mountain Aerial Tramway in 1938.

Among the skiing pioneers were Kate Peckett and her parents, Robert P. Peckett and Katherine B. Peckett, who owned the illustrious inn Pecketts-on-Sugar Hill. In 1929, as a young woman, Kate Peckett started the country’s first resort-based ski school on a slope adjacent to the family’s inn. The European instructors she recruited to teach skiing to Pecketts’ guests were influential in developing skiing locally. Kate’s sister Deborah married Joel Coffin. Their son John B. Coffin and his wife Cynthia W. Coffin gave Fox Hill to the town in 1990 in memory of Robert and Katherine Peckett and Joel and Deborah Coffin.

At Fox Hill, there were no lifts, but there was a large rock sloped just right for jumping. The hill, like much of the land in and around Franconia, had been cleared for firewood to fuel the iron furnace in town in the mid-1800s, and when Ball was a kid, the forest had not yet returned to Fox Hill.

He figures the older boys had help building the jump on the rock from Clem Clark, Bobby’s father, who was a highway department engineer and lived on Harvard Street, not far from Fox Hill. The jump was just for fun, although in those days high school skiers competed in all four events – cross-country, jumping, downhill and slalom. The four disciplines were generally completed with only one pair of skis, which would be unheard of in today’s ski racing competitions, where children as young as 10 years old often have separate skis for slalom and giant slalom events!

Skiing, both locally and nationally, saw significant changes following WWII, as ski areas were developed throughout the country, and competitions divided into separate events. The jump was likely not used much during or after the war, as young skiers moved on to larger hills.

Gradually the forest grew up on Fox Hill, and today the woods there provide a quiet place for townspeople, with trails winding along the Gale River and up the hill to mountain lookouts. The rock once used as the base of the ski jump for Franconia youngsters seeking a short flight on skis is now hidden by brush and trees.

The Coffins, who spent winters in the North Country and lived in New Jersey at other times, were a generous clan. Bob Ball remembers each student at Dow Academy had a carton of milk every day from the Coffin Family’s Iris Farm in Sugar Hill. Longtime Franconia resident Elizabeth Welch believes the family also helped fund a trip to Madison Square Garden in New York City during the 1930s, where some local boys led by the charismatic Sig Buchmayr, an instructor at Peckett’s, participated in a ski demonstration.

Elizabeth also knew John Coffin and said he loved the ski jump on Fox Hill and spoke with her about it several times. “John really loved Fox Hill, and was very happy to give it to the town”, she said.

Sources:

Memorandum of Agreement between John and Cynthia Coffin and the Town of Franconia, July 31, 1981.

Conservation Easement Deed for the Fox Hill property, filed in Grafton County Registry of Deeds March 7, 1990.

Warranty Deed for Fox Hill property, filed in Grafton County Registry of Deeds April 19, 1990.

Personal interview of Elizabeth Welch and Robert Ball by Meghan McPhaul, Sept. 21, 2009.

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Alder, Allen. *New England & Thereabouts-A Ski Tracing.* 1985. NETCO Press