

VIBE

MT WASHINGTON VALLEY



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PART OF THE CLUB, PART OF THE COMMUNITY *By Lauren Clem*

Inside the Ski Clubs of the Mt. Washington Valley

On a frigid February night, cars line the frozen lot outside a house on Kearsarge Road. In the distance, the twinkling lights of Cranmore are visible from the front porch, marking the start of school vacation week in the Valley.

Inside, members of the Ski-Bees Ski Club are relaxing after a day on the slopes, swapping stories over drinks in the main room. Seventy years' worth of ski history line the walls, providing ample fodder for tales of renowned racers and legendary ski parties from long ago. Suddenly, a rush of members pours through the front door. Fresh from an event at a neighboring ski club, they bustle inside, prepping dinner and making plans to head back out into the snow the following morning.

The Ski-Bees is just one of the many groups around the Valley that continues the tradition of the ski club. For years, these clubs were a haven for visitors from southern New England looking for cheap lodging and the companionship of other skiers, both on the slopes and after. Today, changes in the ski industry have forced the clubs to adapt and change, but they remain a central point in the Valley's skiing and social life, as they have for the past 90 years.

BEGINNINGS OF THE CLUBS

The rise of ski clubs in the Mt. Washington Valley coincides with the start of skiing in New England a century ago.

According to Jeff Leich, the former New England Ski Museum executive director who retired from his post last summer, the sport grew quickly in the 1930s as new ski areas and marketing efforts brought snow enthusiasts from other parts of New England. Beginning in 1931, ski trains carried weekend skiers from

Boston to the Mt. Washington Valley and other regions.

"Skiing as a recreational sport was really nowhere in, say, up to the mid-1920s or a little bit later," he says. "Then it got very, very popular in the U.S., particularly New England, from about 1930 into World War II. It was a really quirky, dorky kind of thing for people to do in 1927, and by 1940, every metropolitan daily had a ski writer and carried a Sunday winter sports section."

As the number of people traveling north on the weekends began to increase, skiers banded together, many of them looking for a place to stay. Organizations such as the Appalachian Mountain Club and Dartmouth Outing Club had already helped popularize the sport through the 1920s, but the new model that began to emerge followed a different pattern, whereby ski clubs would lease or purchase a house near existing ski areas for member use. The first ski clubs in the Valley included the White Mountain Ski Runners (1933) in North Conway and the Innitou Ski Runners (1938) in Glen.

"I think they were similar in that their interests were the same," Leich says of those early ski club members. "They wanted to meet people that skied, they wanted to learn how to ski better, and not inconsiderably, they wanted to come up with a place to stay on winter weekends. Buying a clubhouse became something of a big deal."

Other clubs soon followed, and names such as the Schussverein, Ski-Bees, Drifters, and Massa-Schussers became commonplace around the Valley. Some clubs took their names from traditional German ski words, while others, like the Prospectors—founded by skiers of Waltham's Prospect Hill—named themselves after their hometown or a point of interest



LEFT: Formerly Russell's Inn in Kearsarge, is now home to three separate ski clubs, the Ski-Bees, and the Ski-Wheelers purchased two of the inn buildings, while the Makusues moved into the former employee lodging house. ABOVE LEFT: Members from the Innitou Ski Runners Ski & Social Club break for a classic Wildcat photo opportunity in 2014. TOP RIGHT: Members from various EICSL clubs break for a group photo at the inaugural 2019 EICSL XC ski outing at Jackson XC. TOP BOTTOM: Various members from Bartlett's Wedeln Ski and Outdoors Club recently traveled to Utah's Solitude Mountain and met for this photo. Ski clubs tend to be quite active, and not only love to ski, but are very active in supporting the Conway community as well. The Wedeln Ski Club has deep routes in the Conway community and raised over \$4,300 in donations during the coronavirus pandemic, including over \$1,000 raised for End 68 Hours of Hunger in Conway.

close to home.

While not all ski clubs owned houses, those that existed became important gathering points for social events. One common tactic was to purchase a former inn and stock its rooms with bunk beds. The Innitous rented space from the Oak Lee Lodge, now the Shannon Door Pub, in Jackson before buying their own house in Glen. The Prospectors, where Leich's wife grew up as a member, purchased the former Dearborn Inn on Hurricane Mountain Road, eventually adding an addition to the four-story house. One property in Kearsarge, formerly Russell's Inn, is now home to three separate ski clubs. After it went up for sale in 1960, the Ski-Bees and the Ski-Wheelers purchased two of the inn buildings, while the Makusues moved into the former employee lodging house.

Many of the ski clubs took up residence in North Conway and Intervale, where former inns clustered near the base of Cranmore Mountain, though Leich notes that Bartlett was also a popular choice due to the presence of old boarding houses for logging workers. One club, the Melrose Hickory Hawks, took over the old train depot in Glen, using the station as a club room and gathering space while members slept in a purpose-built bunkhouse next door.

Though the skiing took place up north, most of the clubs held regular business meetings in the greater Boston area or wherever their members lived. In the 1980s, the Chateau

Restaurant in Waltham served as the meeting location for at least nine different clubs, as described in a 1984/85 directory of ski clubs on file at the New England Ski Museum. Today, clubs still hold regular meetings, but the presence of new technology and the pandemic mean many clubs now meet over Zoom and save their in-person time for skiing.

LIFE IN A SKI CLUB

The first decision any ski clubber encounters is which club to join. Much like rushing a fraternity or sorority, the clubs have different personalities and reputations, and most clubs encourage members to test out a few before they commit.

"Each of the clubs definitely has their own individual personality," says Margie Pleau, a Ski-Bee from Millville, Mass. "You see someone and you're like, 'You're a Makasue.' You can just tell."

Diana Lu, a Wedeln Ski and Outdoors Club member from Boston, says she tried several clubs before visiting the Wedeln house off Hurricane Mountain Road. In her 30s at the time, she had recently broken up with her fiancé and was looking to find a new group of friends with whom she could enjoy the outdoors. She later met her current boyfriend in the club and has been a member for 14 years.

"I walked into the living room, and everyone was just so welcoming," she recalls. "You know when you just walk into a



TOP LEFT: Paul Harrop, longtime Ski-Bee member from West Yarmouth, discusses one of the many trophies from the club's trophy cabinet all from the Ski-Bee race team, earned for their placement in EICSL races through the years. BOTTOM LEFT: Ski-Bee members socialize after dinner. RIGHT: Susanne Madison and Lisa Alan from the Ski-Bees Ski Club enjoy some quiet time after a day of skiing in the Valley.

party and you feel a connection with people? That's how it was. I'm a very extroverted person, so that club was just right for me."

With between 60 and 80 members, the Wedelns is one of the larger clubs in the Valley, attracting around 30 members on a typical winter weekend. Members sleep in single-sex dormitories on the upper levels of the former inn. Many of the clubs were originally singles clubs, though few enforce the requirement today. In the case of the Wedelns, Lu says, about half the members have a significant other in the club, but they still maintain the dorm-style sleeping arrangements.

"Even though they're married to each other, at the end of

felt like an ashtray in here."

Today's club culture is a bit more subdued (and less smoky), but socializing is still a big draw for members. On Saturdays, clubs take turns hosting après ski gatherings and evening events. Many clubs in the Eastern Inter-Club Ski League (EICSL), an association of clubs in the Valley, host signature events open only to EICSL members. Perhaps none is more popular than the ice bar, a Polecats tradition held annually in March. Marcia Minahan, a member of the Polecats and EICSL president, describes the event: "We have a band, we get Porta-Pottys, and we build an actual bar made out of snow and ice,"

Today's club culture is a bit more subdued (and less smoky), but socializing is still a big draw for members. On Saturdays, clubs take turns hosting après ski gatherings and evening events.

the night, they're like, 'Goodnight, honey!' and they walk off to their bedrooms," she says.

Other clubs have added family rooms or gender-neutral bunk rooms. A handful were founded as family clubs and have continued the tradition with multi-generation families. Paul Harrop, a longtime Ski-Bee from West Yarmouth, joined in his 40s after meeting a group of skiers in a bar in Hyannis. Almost four decades later, he's the only one from that original group who still skis. Like Lu, he met his partner Sandy in the club, bonding over the long drives up from Massachusetts.

Harrop joined in the late 80s, a time when ski clubs were synonymous with party life in the Valley. A typical ski weekend began on Friday nights, and the party got going as soon as members walked in the front door.

"If you came up here on a Friday night, you couldn't talk in the front room it was so full," he recalls. "Everybody smoked. It

she says. "Sometimes we have to transport the snow. We take the plywood away and there it is. It's probably about six inches thick and five feet tall, so it's pretty hardy. And eventually, it melts away and we have a nice big mud puddle in the spring."

At one time, she says, locals were found in attendance; though in recent years, they've limited it to EICSL members to control the crowd. The event hasn't happened since 2019 due to COVID-19. Barring another global pandemic, she says, they plan to bring it back this spring.

Along with an outlet after a day of skiing, social events offer a chance for skiers to meet members of other clubs. Over the years, many couples have met during such parties, including the parents of Jeff Gately, a second-generation member and current president of the Prospectors. His mother, he says, was looking to find a husband when she joined the Prospectors in the 60s. She met his father, a Snowbounder, during an EICSL event.

The Eastern Inter-Club Ski League (EICSL)



In 1950, a small group of ski clubs banded together to form the Eastern Inter-Club Ski League, better known today as EICSL. The league offered racing for members and would go on to be a major force in East Coast skiing, at one point hosting races for the NCAA and World Cup. In the 1970s, the organization included dozens of clubs with houses across the White Mountains region.

Today, EICSL consists of 24 active ski clubs, most of them with houses in the Mt. Washington Valley. Though not all the ski clubs in the Valley belong to EICSL, those that do can participate in racing and social events. The group also negotiates discounts with ski areas and local businesses on behalf of members and organizes trips to Jay Peak and other locations.

How does the Eastern Slopes Ski Club fit in?



Founded in 1935, the Eastern Slope Ski Club (ESSC) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of skiing for kids. The primary program of the ESSC is the Junior Ski Program, with over 400 volunteers and the

support of countless businesses, provides skiing and snowboarding opportunities for over 1500 elementary school children in the Mt. Washington Valley.

Clubs also engage in charitable activities around the Valley. The Ski-Bees have typically held a Christmas party for seniors from the Gibson Center (the tradition was replaced with gift bags in recent years due to COVID-19), and other clubs raise money for various organizations. Depending on size, some clubs hire a cook to prepare breakfast on Saturday and Sunday mornings (and, occasionally, Saturday night dinners). Others rely on individuals or families to “host” a weekend, cooking meals and coordinating room assignments. Club members share in the responsibility of the house and are expected to complete chores before they leave on Sunday.

“It’s people who want to ski and want to have fun and want to hang out and don’t need to stay at the Ritz-Carlton,” Minahan says. “You make your own bed, you bring your own sheets, and you have to participate in cleaning the house.”

A FAMILY AFFAIR

While most of the ski clubs have strict 21-plus house rules, a few orient themselves to families. One of the best-known family clubs is the Prospectors, who are celebrating their 75th anniversary this year. From the outside, the house on Hurricane Mountain Road looks the same as any other ski club: a former inn with a wide farmer’s porch, a dirt lot that can fit a dozen or more cars on holiday weekends, and an old Wildcat gondola sitting in the backyard. Inside, however,

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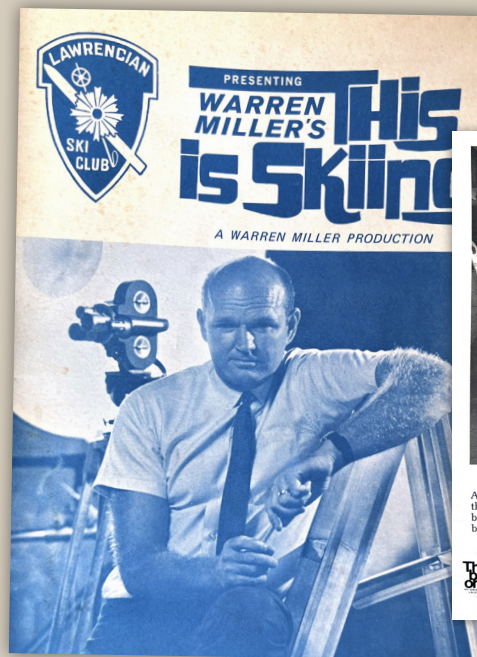
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TOP LEFT: Since 1958, members of the Prospectors Ski Club have enjoyed family-friendly meals in a communal kitchen at their four-season lodge on Hurricane Mountain Road in Bartlett. BOTTOM LEFT: Themed parties were quite common at local clubs, and still are! At the Prospectors Ski Club, the weekend host often chooses a theme. Pictured here is a group gathered at the bar in the adults-only Fireplace Room during a snowy "Hawaiian Weekend." RIGHT: In the late 1960s, the Lawrencian Ski Club of Bartlett would hire Warren Miller productions to help offset the costs of running a ski club. Miller would be hired for a night of speaking, ski films, and even fashion shows, usually in the North Shore area, where many of the club members were from. The 72-page publication shown above would be used to sell advertising space to ski-related businesses. Though most of the advertising businesses were from Massachusetts, the Jack Frost Ski Shops were full-page advertisers at the time.

touches in almost every room point to the fact that in this club, kids are not only welcome, but encouraged. In the boot room (which doubles as a hangout space), a sign on the wall lists the prescribed bedtimes for different age groups.

"Most people love this because they don't have to fight with their kids," says Jeanie Zabroski, a former Hickory Hawk who joined the Prospectors after her daughter was born. "They point to the sign and say, 'Do you want to come to the ski club? You have to follow the rules.'"

Further into the house, a kids' room mixes colorful children's toys on the shelves with ski memorabilia decorating the walls. Downstairs, a teen room offers foosball, pool, ping pong, and a private space where teens can bond away from their parents (no little kids allowed after 7:30 p.m.). Only the fireplace room, a more typical ski club setup complete with a stone fireplace and bar, is a kid-free space. Gately, who grew up driving up to the club from Waltham with his parents, recalls the excitement of being allowed into the fireplace room to watch the 1980 Winter Olympics.

"They brought a small black-and-white TV to see the 1980 U.S. vs. Russia hockey games," he says. "Whenever

I smell a fire, I definitely think of our fireplace room. And it's a good memory. In the fall, when you can smell that fire starting up, it gets me thinking of skiing at the lodge."

Dana Schuh is a lifetime member whose children and grandchildren now belong to the club. Like many ski club members, he prefers skiing at Wildcat for the close proximity and advanced terrain, but his kids usually take their children to Cranmore. He recalled the party-heavy days of the 80s and 90s when members would recruit their teenagers to drive them to events.

"My parents' generation probably partied better than our generation," he says. "When we were all younger, we'd get some of the young-uns, the 16- and 17-year-olds, to be the designated driver and drive us to the ice bar."

The club also attracts single members looking for a more laid-back pace. For lifetime members such as Liz Gill, it's a family tradition they plan to continue for years to come.

"We're changing and adapting because we don't want to lose this. This is our 75th year, and it's been a big part of a lot of people's life for a lot of years," she says.

THE FUTURE OF SKI CLUBS

As the culture around skiing changes, many clubs have struggled to maintain their numbers with new members aging out and new ones are slow to arrive. Others have comfortable membership numbers but have still had to contend with a changing industry and aging houses, most of them decades-old former inns.

According to Minahan, back in the days when many clubs had waiting lists, EICSL included about 3,500 individuals from all of its member clubs. Today, that number is around 1,200 individuals from 24 member clubs.

"It's a struggle I think a lot of clubs are having right now, especially with COVID," she says.

The pandemic affected clubs, forcing them to create new policies to protect members and driving some members to purchase condos in the Valley. House policies have largely returned to normal, but clubs are getting creative in their effort to win back members. Many now host prospective members' weekends and summer recruitment events. Others have ramped up social media efforts, using sites such as Meetup to attract prospective members from the Boston area.

To some extent, these efforts have

worked. Dan Shults, president of the Brettl-Hupfers, describes how he discovered the club after moving to Boston in 2015. He and his now-wife, both new to the area, decided to join a summer volleyball league they found online. It wasn't until they went out for drinks after the first match that they discovered the league was run by Brettl-Hupfers. By the end of the summer, members had convinced them to give ski clubs a try.

"We're both looking at each other like, 'We don't ski, we've never skied. This isn't happening,'" he recalls. "But at the end of the volleyball season, they do a tournament weekend up at the club. I'm saying *they*, but it's really *we* now, because guess who runs the volleyball league now. My wife and I."

Despite owning a timeshare in the area and taking day trips from Wilmington, Mass., Minahan says she had never heard of the clubs before a friend mentioned them in 2015. Frustrated with their timeshare rules, she and her husband decided to join the Polecats, the only one at the time that allowed dogs.

"It was like a dream come true for us. We were like, 'Wow, we wish we'd known about this sooner,'" she says.



SKI CLUB ROMANCE

Brenda and Marty Killourie met through the Lawrencian Ski Club in 1966. The club was founded in 1949 by individuals from Lawrence, Mass., with a lodge in Bartlett. He, a seasoned skier from Lawrence, and she, a new member from Methuen, met when she started visiting the lodge with a friend and attending club events around the greater Lawrence area. Here, the couple recalls how they got engaged during a ski club event at Mt. Whittier a few months after they started dating. Today, the Killouries live in the Mt. Washington Valley and remain associate members of the Lawrencian Ski Club.

Marty: My buddy was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, so he was coming up on an R&R in Hong Kong. Back and forth, he says, 'Hey, why don't you meet me in Hong Kong?' 'Man, that's crazy. Yeah, I will.' That was in February of '67, which was shortly after we had met. Just before I was leaving, there was an EICSL race at Mt. Whittier, and my grand plan was to propose before I left. This was a short-term romance. I was approaching 30, and she was quite a bit younger, so it was like, I better put in a bid here. The plan was, at the top of the mountain, make the proposal, the whole deal. It actually turned out that my buddies and everybody I knew was there [at the top]. Nobody knew at the time. I tried my best, but it didn't work. So we get back down into the muddy parking lot after the day, and that's where I did the deed.

Brenda: And then the next day he left for Hong Kong for two weeks.

Marty: The strange part was when I would leave a hotel or wherever I was at, my phone bill was bigger than my hotel bill. But hey, it was worth it.

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BERLIN SKI JUMP, BERLIN, NEW HAMPSHIRE



ABOVE: The Nansen Ski Club is the oldest continuously operating skiing club in North America. Founded in Berlin, New Hampshire in 1872, the club took on its current name in the 1920s in honor of Norwegian explorer and humanitarian Fridtjof Nansen. In 2011, the Nansen Ski Jump was named as an historical landmark and the club registered as a 501c3 organization. The club is dedicated to providing healthy winter outdoor experiences for locals and visitors, and also maintains a cross-country ski center with over 300 km of groomed trails, including a Garland Mill Warming Hut. RIGHT: The Markusic and Lewenberg families relax in front of the massive fieldstone fireplace during a recent quiet weekend at the Prospector's Ski Club of Bartlett.

Tim Whiton, current executive director of the New England Ski Museum, says the challenges facing ski clubs reflect larger changes in the ski industry. As skiing has moved toward large, commercially owned operations and smaller ski areas have closed, many skiers, he says, lack a sense of local community. “People are marketed to less from a community standpoint and

individuals visiting the area for the weekend. These short-term rentals have been partly responsible for the Valley’s housing shortage, which in turn, has created a new opportunity for the clubs. Several of the clubs interviewed for this story were recently approached by local ski areas looking to house employees in their extra rooms. While some clubs turned down the

Many local ski clubs host prospective members’ weekends and summer recruitment events. Others have ramped up social media efforts, using sites such as Meetup to attract prospective members from the Boston area.

more as an individual. It’s pretty classic American commercialization. That small community model of the ski club is not how the industry thinks of itself,” Whiton says.

Better vehicle transportation has also made it easier for skiers to access mountains on day trips or in different areas. Passes such as the Epic and the Ikon allow them to ski resorts around the country, reducing their loyalty to a particular mountain or ski town.

Despite the trend toward individualism in the outdoors, Whiton says many skiers still crave community. He points to nonprofit organizations such as the Jackson Ski Touring Foundation and the Eastern Slope Ski Club—a nonresidential club that promotes youth skiing among residents of the Valley—as examples of groups that have successfully harnessed community support to promote outdoor recreation.

In the same way the original ski clubbers were driven by a need for cheap lodging, housing has continued to shape the ski clubs today. In addition to members purchasing condos due to health concerns, AirBnB has proven a viable alternative for

offer immediately, Minahan suspects those that are struggling financially or have empty beds might be more open to the idea.

“Each individual club would have to make the decision for themselves, because each club is responsible for their own rules and their own house maintenance,” she says “We’ll have to see what happens with that. That’ll be interesting.”

Like the rest of the ski industry, Whiton thinks ski clubs will eventually have to attract a wider demographic than they’ve traditionally relied on if they want to continue growing their memberships. Despite the setbacks, he says, the ski clubs are an example of how the industry has continued to move forward.

“They’re emblematic of skiing. I don’t think their story can be overrated because they very much mirror a lot of the changes that have been happening,” he says.

“I think ski clubs are a good avenue for getting into how the ski industry has changed, but also how resilient it is, particularly on a community level. They’re still super resilient, they’re still fighting super hard for whatever it is they really stand for—and if they can put it out there, they might keep it alive.”

Ski Clubs of the White Mountains

This list includes ski clubs, past and present, around the White Mountains region. If you have a story to share, corrections to share, or know of a club we forgot, please email Vibe at info@mwvibe.com.

Ace Ski and Board Club*

Ala-Bye Ski Club*

Abenaki Ski Club*

Blitzschnell Ski Club*

Brettl-Hupfers Ski Club*

Brockton "Skimeisters" Ski Club*

Bumps and Bruises Ski Club

Cannonball Ski Club

Clipped Wings Ski Club*

Diamond Hill Sitzmarkers

Digital Equipment Ski Club

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Fall River Ski Club*

Flopenaufin Ski Club

The Getaway

Greater Boston Ski Club*

Innitou Ski Runners *

Hochflieger Ski Club

Ski Club Hochgebirge

Kettle Ski Club

Lawrencian Ski Club*

Lexington Ski Club

Makusue Ski and Sport Club*

Massa-Schussers Ski Club*

Melrose Hickory Hawks Ski Club*

Nansen Ski Club

Nashua Ski Club

Old Colony Ski Club*

Otter Ski Club

Penguins Ski Club*

Polecat Ski Club*

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Randolph Ski Club*

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