

# Yes, there was skiing in Kelowna before Big White

East Kelowna, Black Mountain and Rutland offered skiing before Big White came along as the local ski hill in 1961

By EVELYN VIELVOYE

This year's snowy winter recalls memories of the many times when the snowflakes came down to make an inviting picture to play in. A clear and beautiful day, sometimes found above the cloud cover that hung over the Okanagan Lake and City of Kelowna was an invitation to head for the hills.

In the early years, we were fortunate to have several inexpensive ski hills around Kelowna for ski enthusiasts.

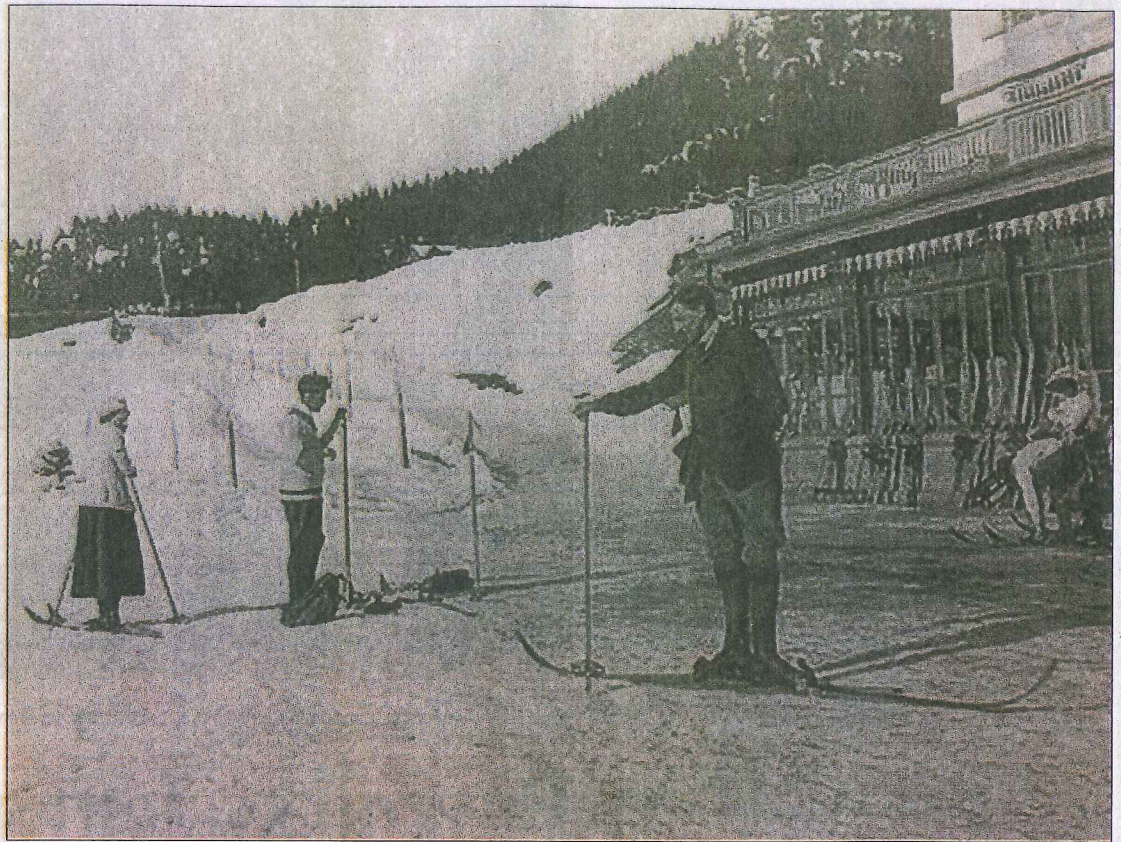
The land just off McCulloch Road beyond Hydraulic Canyon belonged to Joe Casorso, who gave permission for its use as a ski hill especially for the South and East Kelowna people.

Another original ski hill in 1937, was opposite the homestead of Jim and Gert Weddel in the Black Mountain area.

Because of a gas shortage during the Second World War, it was moved in the 1940s to the Rutland Ski Bowl site on what is now Swainson Road, so it would be closer for the people to travel up the slope.

The Rutland Ski Bowl was built around 1944-45.

First they had to finish the last half of the road up to the ski hill.



Contributed

The Rutland Ski Bowl, above what is now Swainson Road. The original ski hill was opposite the homestead of Jim and Gert Weddel in 1937.

They employed a private contractor, tractors, etc., to push in the road. In the winter, they had many problems with the snow. Frank Saucier finally talked with W.A.C. Bennett about the situation and Bennett talked to the highways department.

From that day on, the road was ploughed and looked after marvellously.

Sure made the drive up the hill much easier and fewer long line ups.

This meant people had to take Black Mountain Road (now Highway 33) through the town of Rutland, turn left on what is now Mackenzie Road, up the hill to Swainson Road, then take the gravel road up towards Black Mountain.

Verne Ahrens who was born in Alberta and grew up in Nelson, became involved in the construction industry. During the early war years, he was in charge of building landing crafts for troops accessing the beaches; military barracks at Wainwright and aircraft hangars in Alberta.

He eventually relocated to Kelowna.

Ahrens became instrumental in the development of the Black Mountain Ski Bowl and helped build the chalet in 1948.

The glass front of the chalet was made out of windows from the old Safeway store that used to be next to the old Kelowna post office on Bernard Avenue.

This chalet helped keep the people warm, had a great vantage point to see the ski area and a rope tow. They also served great hot chocolate inside the chalet.

Ahrens also helped build the ski jump that was used by many big name competitors like Alf Johannson and others from all over the world.

Ahrens was also a ski instructor. George Flintoff also helped develop the Black Mountain Ski Hill. In addition to downhill skiing, George was a ski jumper and enjoyed the competitions.

Conditions were not too good at the Rutland Hill and eventually they looked for a better location.

Ahrens helped build the lodge on Silver

Star in 1957 and that was also when they started to build at Big White.

The Rutland Ski Bowl was abandoned around 1961 when Big White opened.

Big White Ski Resort continued to grow and attract local skiers and snowboarders, offering some of the very best dry powder skiing found anywhere in Canada.

In 1985, an Australian, Desmond Schumann purchased Big White Resort.

By 2001 it was voted "Best in the Okanagan" three years in a row and had won 10 "Best of Ski Canada Awards."

This year, with all the many days of fluffy snow, our ski hills are well used.

Many old timers will recall fond memories of the first ski hills and especially the Black Mountain Ski Bowl Hill.

*This article is part of a series, submitted by the Kelowna Branch, Okanagan Historical Society. Additional information would be welcome at P.O. Box 22105, Capri P.O., Kelowna, B.C., V1Y 9N9*