

Skiing

by
Gerald W. Williams Jr.

Something interesting happened when I was in high school. No, I didn't set a track record or anything like that. My Dad, Gerald Sr., and I became interested in skiing. Don Clucas, one of dad's close friends said he was sure we would break our necks. Don always smiled after saying it so I think he was halfway kidding.

Dad and I learned to stay on skis by sliding down a hill on pine skis. Leather straps kept our feet on the skis most of the time. We had the beautiful Big Horn Mountains to ourselves back then. The location was near the old Masonic campground where an Indian once served buffalo meat to all of us. There was plenty of snow and lots of sagebrush. We didn't slide down the mountain too far or we would have fallen a thousand feet into Shell Creek.

"We learned how to slide and fall down," said Dad in summary.

We studied ski books, purchased Head skis, boots, poles, bindings, ski trousers and wool sweaters. Then we went to Jackson, Wyoming. After we took the chair lift to the top of the mountain we looked down the very steep hill. At that moment we had our doubts. Still, there was no other way down. We took a deep breath and audaciously crept over the edge. By noon we surprised ourselves and skied to the bottom without falling down. We were using stem turns to keep our speed down.

On our next trip we went to the Sleeping Giant ski run. It was about twenty miles west of Cody. We used a rope tow. The odd thing about it was the rope went over a pulley that was attached to a tree. Who would ever think of doing that? We had to pull ourselves forward and grab the rope on the other side of the tree. Ray DeSombers operated the Gibraltar Theater in Greybull. He knew how to ski so he came along. Instead of getting past the tree he hit the tree. Everyone agreed that it was a dangerous place. Ray survived but he quit skiing.

Next dad and I went to the Meadowlark ski area east of Worland. We had to walk on skis across a frozen lake with animal hides under the skis. We slid forward with the grain of the hair. In the reverse direction the hides provided resistance and kept us from sliding backwards. In order to get to the top we had to use a rope tow. The second time I used the tow my parka got caught in the rope and iced up. I didn't know it until I found I couldn't get off at the top. I was about six feet in the air before the parka unraveled. I landed on my ass. Fortunately, both skis popped loose from my Cubco bindings.

“Young kids are resilient,” dad said.

After that episode dad and I went to Red Lodge. We liked the chair lift. We were intermediate skiers by then. Young people tend to like the feeling of speeding down a slope, the wind blowing in your face and hair. I was no exception. High speed falls can end your skiing life. Dad and I took plenty of hard spills, but we survived to ski another day.

We felt confident so we drove to Aspen. Dad signed us up for skiing lessons. Bright and early the next morning the ski school instructors observed our prowess on boards. Dad took it slow and easy. I took it faster and more awkwardly. Dad was placed in a class that was a step above me.

When my instructor called her group together I felt blessed. She was a sweet, attractive Swiss gal with long flowing blonde hair. Her name was Gretel. Gretel taught our group of intermediate skiers the fine points of skiing. She liked to schuss the hills too. I was right behind her. She noticed the sparkle in my eye. Later on dad said he was with a bunch of old fellows and that he would have learned more in my class.

Dad and I learned how to ski parallel and make telemark tracks in virgin snow. We learned what happens if I catch an edge. I went all the way down a hill on my posterior when I caught an edge in powder. The trouble with powder is you can't see your skis!

I was like a rocket on packed slopes.

"Wow! Who was that," the ski bunnies would say as they fell down.

Dad was better than I was in powder. I excelled at full throttle. Through our adult life we skied Aspen, Snowmass, Alta and Purgatory. Aspen was my favorite. Alta, Utah posed a problem we hadn't experienced before. We skied in a blizzard and fog. When it was time to go sip some cider we I had no idea where we were. If we started in one direction we fell down. It was vertigo. Our internal compasses went awry. No thanks. The fog lifted and we made a beeline to our car.

Dad skied in Montana and he was on the ski patrol in the Big Horn Mountains. I skied in northern Arizona when there was snow. Skiing gets in your blood. It's an empowering individual sport!