

Page 6 — June 4, 2017 Heritage Days

Ski King of Route 66

The place

On rare occasion, in the mundane days of our lives, something occurs which changes the course of our very existence. This was not one of those events. On the contrary, this was only a bit of a wrinkle in the space/time continuum of Kellyville's history. Is it worthy of note? Who knows, but here goes.

It was the spring/summer of 1969 in the rather sleepy little town of Kellyville, Oklahoma. West of town about a mile or so (just off the Heyburn Road) a "gentleman" of dubious character had convinced a pillar of the community to allow him to use a portion of his property to establish Oklahoma's first ski slope during the coming winter. This slope was to be located on a south facing area just around the corner from the rancher's home. The stage was set and act one began.

Somewhat frenzied activity followed as preparations had to be made to be ready for an opening date of the first solid freeze of the upcoming winter. These efforts were impeded at times as the mover and shaker of this enterprise had to secure funds or aid/assistance to move the project forward. Trade-offs, bartering and other means seemed to be a part of his development process. Some in town even likened it to Burt Lancaster's role in "The Rain Maker".

The players

In this historic essay, two prime characters hold center stage. The Snow Maker (perhaps he was a real life embodiment of Don Quixote dreaming the impossible dream) who hoped to bring this miracle of sorts to fruition. The other is a wide-eyed, needing to make money, 1st semester college student (truly a candidate for Quixote's, Sancho Panza). Together they were to sally forth to do battle with the forces of nature and achieve the dream of the creation of Ski Valley. Ultimately proving the doubters and skeptics wrong. It was 1969, the moon just had its Apollo 11 moment, upstate New York had its Woodstock festival, but Oklahoma was to soon have its one and only ski slope.

Character was not quite the term that best described the Snow Maker. He was a trader, grizzled entrepreneur, and convincer if not a conniver. He talked his way into all manner of deals, which

afforded him the means to develop his dream slope of skiing excellence, Ski Valley. His biggest move of course was to obtain access to the hillside; this was followed by the preparation of the site, materials, equipment, etc. It seems so much of this was gained by promising the partners (pawns) free access and skiing at Ski Valley when it opened. They had their promissory notes and anxiously anticipating ski season and he had found a way to have things in place for opening day.

As noted, there was a wide and diverse cast of other people for various reasons looking forward to and awaiting the moment of truthful success. His dream had in some ways become their dream. A slope in Kellyville. This would put us on the map. Few of these individuals had actually seen the beauty and grandeur of Ski Valley. When upon seeing the Ski Valley facilities (or lack thereof), one patron of the Snow Maker quoted Gomer Pyle by saying, "Surprise, surprise, surprise". He and others certainly were.

The other key figure was a skinny, not too worldly, teenager with too much hair for his hat, too many dreams to focus on his matriculation at the area university. He was looking for adventure and excitement in areas other than Southeast Asia. But most all of these experiences required money. Hence his intent and desire to make a few bucks and be a part of this rather amazing foray into the realm of weather modification (snow making) and entering into the strata generally reserved for the rich and famous as a ski instructor in such high class places as Aspen, Vail, or St. Moritz was just too intriguing. He was on Christmas break and since no other opportunities were presented to him he asked and received a position of general flunky, semi-trained mountaineer, and yes, upon request, apprentice ski instructor (the fact that he had never skied, not seen it done or even know how to put on the equipment never phased his desire and enthusiasm). Truly, the stage was set for a monumental success or more likely catastrophe.

As noted previously a number of things had to be done to prepare the site. To mention just a few, dozing the slope, removing large rocks, erecting

fences (5 strand barbed wire) to keep skiers in the friendly confines of the slope, poles and an engine to create the rope lift, hay bales to keep people from the fences (ha) and a portable potty at the bottom of the hill. This was very near the ski lodge a shack of 8' x 12' dimensions which also served as equipment room, sleeping quarters for the Snow Maker, ticket stand/ski rental/infirmary/etc. In addition, a parking area fit for about 15 cars was established just off the road.

Finally, the key component was the snowmaking machine (blowers). His self-proclaimed invention (later found out to be fairly common item back east) of snow maker was prepared and waiting for a cold snap of near freezing temperature to spring into action. As luck would have it this fall and early, winter was not cold at all. So he waited. Finally, Don Woods and Gusti forecasted a cold front with extreme winds (50 mph) to come a couple of days after Christmas. Now the fun would begin, the doubters proven wrong and the profits would roll in. True vindication for a visionary of his era.

True to form, the appointed night fell upon the little hamlet, temperatures fell below freezing and the winds blew in gale force. It was dark and overcast no light to be had. But the intrepid adventurers braved the sting of the cold wind and set the snow machines into action, the compressor roared but was drowned out by the whistling of the wind. The winds blew harder and the snow nozzles put forth more icy powder, which rapidly disappeared into the darkness soon after leaving the trace of light from the Eveready flashlight.

At dawn's early light, it might have been appropriate to quote Charlton Heston from the Ten Commandments movie, "Behold a miracle". In this case, it was only a near miracle. It seems the snow was actually blown (but not discovered until dawn) off the mountain on to the Heyburn Road and across to the neighbors pasture. In retrospect, this was the first indicator of the myriad of unfortunate occurrences, which were to plague this ambitious endeavor.

Undaunted, the leader of this small but determined band of world and

nature changers plotted the next night's snow attack on the barren slope of Ski Valley. On a clear, cold and still late December night the compressor echoed through the valley as snow was being made. It was evident where it was going and elation was the mood when late that night people turn in for a couple of hour's hasty sleep. Before dawn, the onslaught began. As preparations were being made on the hill interested parties started to drive by to see for themselves what was happening. The band of brothers could see the movement by the lights below but were too busy getting equipment out, making last minute arrangements to hay bales, gates and other necessary actions for a grand opening. And it truly it was a phenomenon seldom witnessed, much less experienced. By eight o'clock, the roads were choked with cars and potential participants to the inaugural season of skiing at Ski Valley. It was reported the line stretched out to highway 66 and was back-up a quarter of a mile there.

With the passage of time and in hopes of protecting the innocent, only a few incidents will be shared nearly 50 years later. These will be indicative of the wild west nature of what transpired that fateful day. First there was a run on the equipment and ticket counter, a near riot situation existed and the Snow Maker feared for his well being when it was evident his bartering had produced far too many IOU's for far too few pieces of equipment. Shortly the magnitude of no limitations on free or bartered passes manifested itself on the slopes where there were far too many persons creating a traffic jam of bodies on the single slope. It was slide, bump, fall, get up, get hit from behind, fall (repeat until the bottom of the hill was reached).

Furthermore, there were snow barren spots. A skier or toboggan rider might be going rapidly until they hit the exposed ground; cannon balling crashes became commonplace. Parking ceased to be problem after about 10 minutes because the was no spots left.