

WPA, Dickinson County made Pine Mountain dream a reality

Community support was crucial to Depression-era project

February 12, 2011

By JIM ANDERSON, News Editor

IRON MOUNTAIN - From 1935 through 1943, the U.S. government spent more than \$11 billion through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), employing millions of workers to carry out public works projects.

One of those projects was the Pine Mountain ski jump, which has been the site of national and international tournaments since 1939.

Through the decades, changes have evolved in ski jumping and the hill itself. The key elements, however, have been constant – dedicated volunteers, daring athletes and spellbinding beauty.

Some 75 years ago, the spectacular view from Pine Mountain confirmed a local politician's hunch that a giant ski slide would serve the community well.

Harold Eskil, a Dickinson County chairman who assisted WPA planning, took time in 1968 to offer his recollections of the Pine Mountain project. When the Roosevelt administration announced that recreation projects could be eligible for WPA funds, Eskil acted on a "dormant dream" to build a big ski slide.

"I knew the spot," he wrote, " – the northwest end of Pine Mountain."

He described a hike off an old logging road to approach the location:

"Alone in zero weather, on snowshoes in snow three or more feet deep, I climbed the northwest face of Pine Mountain. It was a difficult, lengthy climb to the top, but from the top I knew I had the right place for the ski slide. At the top of Pine Mountain, I was amazed at the scenery – the miles of it visible in every direction. With a good road to the top, what a scenic sight-seeing area this could become – with the slide and the ski jump adjacent to it."

The Depression-era project was no sure sell. The proposed \$26,000 budget for the scaffold alone would equate to about \$400,000 today.

Eskil, a Breitung Township supervisor and a 1913 graduate of Iron Mountain High School, shared Pine Mountain's panoramic view with dozens of officials, including Ford Motor Co. plant superintendent Fred Johnson and charcoal briquette inventor E.G. Kingsford.

"Everyone was astonished and felt that a major beauty spot had been found," he wrote. "There was much interest created to develop this area as a tourist attraction and recreational center."

Eskil went to bat for the project under the sponsorship of Breitung Township. Later, the Keweenaw Land Association deeded the property to Dickinson County, in exchange for retaining mineral rights and being freed from taxes.

Site preparation and scaffold planning began – the slide would be the highest artificial one in the world – but the project was nixed in late 1936 by the Lansing office of the WPA.

The community rallied.

"There was such an avalanche of letters, telegrams, and telephone calls to Lansing – as well as complaints and criticisms from the public – that the Lansing office of the WPA reconsidered," Eskil wrote.

Still, the WPA wanted a smaller project. "I was ... told that plans for the 165-foot scaffold would have to be cut to 80 feet," recalled Eskil. "But, I did not want just another ski slide – I wanted the highest."

The WPA finally agreed to provide labor if Dickinson County would furnish the material, at a cost of about \$11,000 (\$170,000 today).

The county board approved, much to Eskil's delight.

"Dickinson County had won!" he exclaimed. "They had not only succeeded in obtaining approval from Lansing WPA – it had united the majority of people of Dickinson County whole-heartedly behind the project. The first defeat had resulted in new enthusiasm to put that giant ski slide on Pine Mountain."

As has often been the case in the history of Giant Pine, local talent was instrumental in seeing the dream through.

Among others, Eskil cites the following: scaffold engineering by George Wallner of Ford Motor; construction supervision by Leon Mongrain of Ford; surveying by road commission engineer Henry Wagner; concrete oversight by Wagner and WPA engineer Lawrence Hansen; fabrication by the Dickinson County Road Commission shop; road construction by Wilfred Lagerfeldt, Breitung Township road commissioner.

According to Eskil, WPA wages at the time of the slide's construction totaled \$44 a month for a six-day work week (about \$680 a month today).

On Feb. 18, 1939, the eve of the inaugural tournament, the Iron Mountain News reported that slightly more than \$70,000 (\$1.08 million today) had been spent on WPA projects in the Pine Mountain area, nearly \$61,000 of which was for labor. That work included the road, scaffold, landing hill, parking lot and a few amenities. A crowd of 10,000 to 15,000 was anticipated, the largest ever for a sports event in the Upper Peninsula.

"The dual aim of the WPA was to develop projects which would prove to be a lasting benefit to the community and give employment to those in need," Eskil noted.

This weekend – 72 years since Walter Brottlund soared towards "Sagola!" in the hill's first competitive ride – the benefits endure.

Notes: The Works Progress Administration was renamed as the Works Projects Administration in 1939. ... A copy of Harold and Melba Eskil's "The History of the Pine Mountain Ski Slide," (Feb. 21, 1968) was furnished by Evelyn Thunell, daughter of Wilfred Lagerfeldt.

Jim Anderson's e-mail address is janderson@ironmountaindailynews.com.

© Copyright 2015 Daily News. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.