

Forest Hill Skip Jump

by Ron Buckli

A big crowd stood in the snow to watch 117 youths ski down the wooden slide, soar through the air, land on the side of the hill and come to a skidding stop far out on the flat.

Hosted by the neighborhood's newly formed Hilltoppers Ski Club, it was Eau Claire's first major ski jumping tournament for juniors and the site was the South end of the Forest Hill Cemetery grounds.

The date was Saturday, February 21, 1936. Only weeks earlier, laborers in President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration had erected the slide- which stood 18 feet tall at the top of the hill—for city recreational purposes.

The jump looked directly at the heart of the city's Eastside and jumpers would finish their runs near the junction of Summer Street and Huebsch Boulevard.

"It was really scary," said Hilltoppers president and top jumper, Tom Hagen. "When you stood at the top of the slide and looked behind, you were looking straight into the Third Ward."

Hagen said the Hilltoppers marked good use of the hill, skiing every afternoon until dark. Club members were also responsible for maintaining the ski area, bringing their own rakes and shovels. To prepare the hill for ski jumping, they filled baskets full of snow and hauled them to the top.

"I knew when to go home for supper", said Hagen, who lived a few blocks over at 1415 Highland Avenue. "I could see the back of the house from the top of the hill and when Mom turned the backyard light on, that was the signal."

Merle Stewart, another of the club's top jumpers, didn't need a signal. He lived directly below the hill on the south end of Summer Street.

Prior to erection of the scaffold, youngsters would ski down what Hagen called the "Seven Bumps trail" that slanted down the south end of the bluff to Hoover Avenue.

There were about 15 members in the Hilltoppers and the club held city and area tournaments each year.

Hagen, now in his mid-80s and living in the Stevens Point area, remembers that there once was night skiing on the hill – which he said had a one-way dirt road across the top for the end of Dodge Street to Hoover. "Emmett Chaput and Art Harstad drove up there, put a lantern at the takeoff and were skiing in the darkness," Hagen said.

The first tournament was held two weeks before the Flying Eagles staged their inaugural tournament at what became famous as the School Yard jump at the Fourth Ward School in Shawtown.



Glenn Nelson, local WPA Recreation Director was in charge of the meet that included youths from the city and surrounding area. Winners were Victor Nelson, Strum, Senior Class L Bussy Severson, Flying Eagles, A: Jackie DeBow, Whitehall, B and Oscar Severson, Flying Eagles, C. Gerald Larson of Chippewa Falls had the longest standing jump at 49 feet. Later, the length of jumps would range between 50 and 60 feet.

The jump was a beehive of winter activity until the beginning of World War II when it became a liability and was torn down.

A special thanks to Ron Buckli to contributing this article. He recently published a book entitled The Flying Eagles and the School Yard Jump. about the history of ski jumping in the Chippewa Valley. If you are interested in a local history it is a must read! And check out the Flying Eagles' website.