



THE SUGARBUSH MAGAZINE

# Sugarbush's Sweet Beginnings

CANDICE WHITE, DECEMBER 20, 2018

The history of a mountain, and the glamorous crowd that flocked there

There was a dash of genteel sophistication at Sugarbush from the very beginning. Take, for example, Peter Estin, a Czechoslovakian-born Bostonian with an impeccable resumé. Estin was educated at Phillips Academy in Andover, went on to Dartmouth College, and then completed his master's work at Harvard. After school, Estin served as a second lieutenant in the Air Force Reserves, and spent several years as a financial analyst in Boston. While Estin was fulfilling his civic and professional duties, he was also pursuing his art, publishing cartoons in notable magazines like the *New Yorker* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Peter Estin was going places. But where he really wanted to go was skiing.

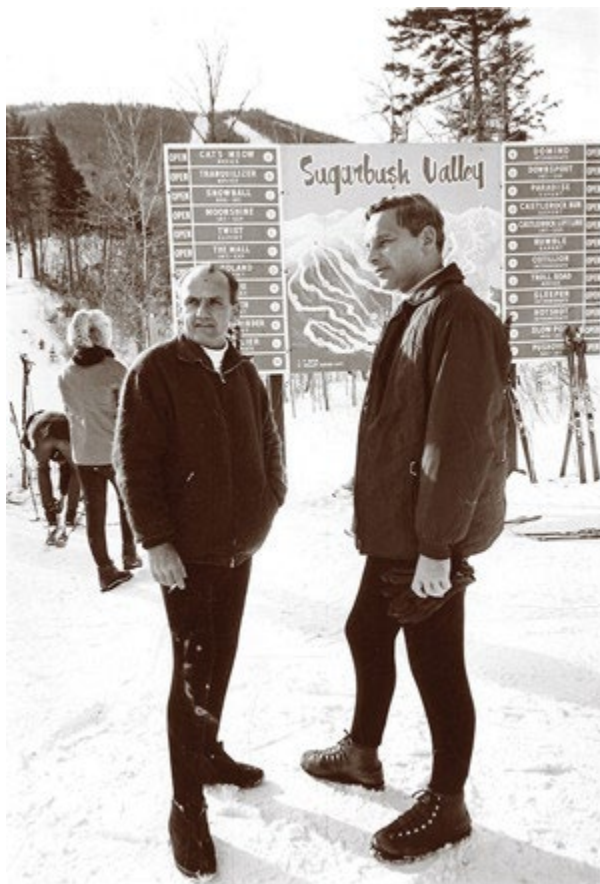
While in college, Estin was a leading member of the Dartmouth Ski Team. He took his wife to Aspen on their honeymoon in the early 1950s, and they returned several times after that so he could compete in the FIS Alpine World Ski Championships. Estin had recently won Sun Valley's Harriman Cup, regarded in the industry as the precursor to the World Cup.

The charming and worldly Estin had a knack for making friends, and while in Aspen, he encountered a threesome from the East who shared his passion for skiing. Damon Gadd, a Yale graduate and the son of a New York City developer, had moved from New York City to the tiny town of Fayston, Vermont, in 1954, along with his wife, Sara. Damon and Sara had become skiing regulars at Mad River Glen, which opened in 1948, and were living in and running the nearby Ulla Lodge. Accompanying Damon and Sara in Aspen was Jack Murphy, whom they had met while skiing at Mad River Glen, where Murphy served as general manager. Murphy had moved to Vermont with his wife,

Audrey, in 1952, after years spent in the Army's 10th Mountain Division, as a ski instructor in Sun Valley, and as general manager of Mont du Lac in Duluth, Minnesota.

The Gadds had experienced skiing in Europe, and had a hunch that the ski business in the U.S. was on the rise. Damon Gadd had been flying with Murphy over much of New England in a small borrowed plane, scrutinizing the landscape and shooting aerial photos to find the ideal location for a ski resort. As a trained pilot, and with his experience in the 10th Mountain Division, Murphy was intimately familiar with weather patterns and how they affect the mountains. The pair searched for an area with a good microclimate and terrain-enhanced snowfall. **After examining more than fifty potential locations, they concluded that Lincoln Mountain, practically in their own backyard, was the most promising choice: a northeast-facing, wind-protected bowl with near ledgeless terrain located in a mass of high mountains that would receive greater snow than isolated peaks, all within the northern Vermont snowbelt.** Murphy began to sketch out the ski trails, drawing fat white lines on his aerial photos.

And the two men agreed that they'd already found their ski school director: Peter Estin.



Jack Murphy (L) and Damon Gadd (R)

Top-ranked Austrian ski racer Paul Ruetzler recalls first meeting Estin at a ski camp in Zurich, Switzerland, in the late 1950s, where Estin was scoping out potential instructors for a new resort back in the United States. Several days into the camp, Estin invited Ruetzler to lunch. Soon after the lunch meeting, Ruetzler received a letter from Damon Gadd and Jack Murphy, who would soon be coming to Europe to research ski lifts. They inquired if Ruetzler would be able to help them. Estin had a way of making his friends become friends themselves, so Ruetzler complied. Shortly thereafter, he met Gadd and Murphy at the train station in Bregenz, Austria, and accompanied them to their first stop: the Doppelmayr lift factory in Wolfurt. Ruetzler then helped Gadd and Murphy plan a visit to a second ski lift manufacturer, in Italy. There, Gadd and Murphy would find the linchpin of their new ski resort: a Carlevaro-Savio gondola.

## The Valley

Prior to the opening of Sugarbush, the Mad River Valley was mainly a farming community with lumber mills. “This valley was poor, really poor,” recalls Gussie Graves, a Valley native who began working for Jack Murphy at Mad River Glen when she was thirteen years old. Graves’s original family home is now the arts building at the Green Mountain Valley School (GMVS), the nationally recognized ski academy started in 1973 by Al Hobart. She recalls walking to and from school each day along a rambling path to the end of Moulton Road, through the woods, and down to school at the corner of Route 17 and Number Nine Hill. “You could ride the bus if you had money—it cost twenty-five cents each way,” she says. When Graves graduated from eighth grade at the Fayston Elementary School, there were just three children in her class, including herself.

Henry Perkins and his wife came to the Valley in 1948 and opened the Perkins Lodge on Route 17. As Perkins recalled it in an article in the *Valley Reporter*, “During the first few years, Route 17 was mud except for the first mile from the junction with Route 100. Since the town couldn’t afford to pave the road, the businesspeople on Route 17 collected money, which the state and federal governments matched. Back then it cost us \$20,000 to pave one mile of road. Every year we would pave a mile. It came to be known as ‘Perkins Partial Parkway.’” Route 17 ended at Mad River Glen, leaving a dirt trail to continue to the top of the Appalachian Gap.

## The First Years



Lixi

Lixi and Trodd Fortna in the Golden Horse Lodge

Czechoslovakian-born lawyer Felicitatem “Lixi” Redlich came to the United States in 1939 and never returned home. She met her husband, Trodd Fortna, while modeling in a photo shoot at California’s Strawberry Mountain, and within several years, they had adopted two children and moved to a farm in Moretown, Vermont, where Lixi raised chickens and turkeys. In the summer of 1957, Damon and Jack stopped in to see her at the farm. They shared their plans for the new ski area, and offered her a job as office manager. Lixi was reportedly elated by their offer, but confessed to them that she was “awful with figures,” couldn’t type very well, and didn’t like to talk on the phone “because of my funny accent.” According to her daughter Rosie, they promised Lixi she “wouldn’t have to talk much, and didn’t have to do the books.” Soon, Lixi found herself reporting for work for a dollar an hour in a trailer located in what is now the Gate House courtyard at Lincoln Peak.

Fortna later recalled the original plans for the Carlevaro-Savio gondola, written in Italian and detailed in metric measurements. Neither she nor Gadd nor Murphy spoke fluent Italian, so she persevered through discussions of “bull wheels” and “stanchions” with the manufacturer using a combination of French, German, and English. The metric system measurements were left for Murphy to decipher.

Jack Murphy was the jack-of-all-trades at Sugarbush. If Gadd was the visionary, Murphy was the one who made that vision happen. Murphy designed and cut the original trails,



enlisting the assistance of local residents—both farmers and horses. He created the resort's original master plan, and oversaw the lift installations. Murphy became so knowledgeable regarding the intricate gondola that he would become the company's United States representative for a time. And everything Murphy accomplished, he did with kindness and respect. "To me, he was a first-class gentleman," recalls Graves.

Friends of Sara and Damon, including Arthur Williams and Harlow Carpenter, helped them pool together the initial \$550,000 to open the resort. This cash, along with a ninety-nine-year land lease from the National Forest Service, allowed Sugarbush to open on December 25, 1958, with the gondola, a T-bar, and the Valley House base lodge. The first in the U.S., the gondola, at a length of 9,300 feet, was at the time the longest lift in North America, and served the highest vertical drop (2,400 feet) in the East. Each cabin sat three skiers. Guests could choose between a handful of ski trails: Jester, Organgrinder, Paradise, Sugarbush Glade, Moonshine, Cat's Meow, Gondolier, Gigolo, Downspout, and Tranquilizer. Day lift tickets cost \$5.50.



Peter Estin (R) giving tips on riding the T-bar

Mad River Glen's opening in 1948 had put the Valley on the map as a bona-fide place to ski, but **Sugarbush's arrival ushered in a new class of visitor, from outside New England and beyond, including talented Austrian instructors recruited to the Peter Estin Ski School of Sugarbush Valley.** "

All the ski instructors were gorgeous,” recalls Dick Frost, at the time a Harvard undergraduate who shared a rented A-frame ski house on Route 17 with a group of college friends that first winter.

### **Estin’s influence on Sugarbush reached beyond the ski school.**

Along with his brother Hans, a former Harvard varsity lacrosse captain, Peter founded the high-octane Ski Club 10. The private social club was named for its ten founding members, who included (according to Hans’s daughter Alex) fashion director Oleg Cassini and his brother Igor (a syndicated gossip columnist with the pen name Cholly Knickerbocker); *Tonight Show* conductor Skitch Henderson; New York restaurateur Armando Orsini and his brother Elio; society doyenne Nan Kempner; Madison Avenue advertising executive Harry Thompson; and Greek shipping magnate Harry Theodoracopulos.

Ruetzler, who had come to the Valley in 1962 at Estin’s invitation, had the task of greeting the ski school guests, lining them up according to their ability, and pairing them with an instructor. Often, he would assign himself to a private client for the week. At the time, the client list was a who’s who of East Coast society, including Ethel and Joan Kennedy; the actress and singer Rosemary Clooney; and wealthy New Yorkers like Vera Swift (of Swift & Company meatpacking). Ruetzler recalls one such client, during a cold snap at the mountain: “Darling,” his client said. “It is just too cold to ski. Let’s go to New York.” The next thing Ruetzler knew, he was on a plane to New York City, and then in a taxi to his client’s Manhattan apartment, “which took up the entire floor.” The night went on to include a Broadway show and dinner at Sardi’s, the restaurant owned by another Sugarbush skier, Vincent Sardi.

**Estin served as director of the ski school until 1963, right through his final months nursing a broken leg that led, tragically, to his premature death at age thirty-five.**

**The Norwegian Olympic gold medalist Stein Eriksen followed Estin, continuing a legacy in the ski school of international panache.**

Eriksen was known to perform aerial forward somersaults in his signature Bogner outfits on Sunday afternoons at the top of Lift Six (now the Village Quad). Three years into his five-year contract, Eriksen was hired away by Snowmass, a Colorado resort poised to open in the winter of 1967. Though Gadd initially refused to allow Eriksen to break his contract, he eventually relented.

Eriksen’s shoes were filled by Austrian Sigi Grottendorfer, who ran the ski school for thirty years. Grottendorfer’s arrival coincided with the reversal of a several-year period of low snowfall, which he jokingly attributed to Eriksen. Grottendorfer had many accomplishments at the resort, among them working with the prolific sportswriter Denise McCluggage in the 1970s to launch Centered Skiing workshops, which injected ski instruction with Zen and tai chi philosophies. (Veteran ski instructors M. A. Raymond and Paté Weston continue to use some of these techniques today.)

## *SKI WITH STEIN...*



# Sugarbush Valley

Stein Eriksen poster

Perhaps because of the European influence there, Sugarbush was the first American ski resort to have a bar in the base lodge. “They knew how to party, and they knew how to ski,” recalls Michael Ware, a longtime fixture of the local restaurant industry. On Saturdays, Damon and Sara could be found having lunch in the Wunderbar, beginning with martinis and moving on to meals accompanied by Pouilly-Fuissé. Administrative offices for Gadd, Murphy, and Fortna were just across the hall. Fortna would count the cash each night by hand, and since there was no bank in town, they traded off taking the money home in a brown paper bag.

“The crowd had class, money, and friendship,” adds Chan Weller, who came to Sugarbush in 1962 as a part-time ski patroller while a student at nearby Norwich University. “And they partied until the doors dropped off the hinges.”

The Sugarbush crowd was fashionable and fun. Dick Frost recalls that the clientele at the time, himself included, “made an attempt to match the skis with the parka with the hat.” (Today’s helmets have somewhat dampened ski fashion.) Metal Head skis were so popular that “you would get your name engraved on your pair to tell them apart from everyone else’s.”

Longtime Sugarbush skiers recall with fondness the plethora of fine restaurants and bars that were available to them for après-ski drinks, dinner, and nightlife. In 1959, the famed New York restaurateur Armando Orsini opened the eponymous Orsini’s, the



area's first gourmet restaurant. Henri Borel was convinced by close friends Damon and Sara to open the bistro, Chez Henri, in 1964 in Sugarbush Village, where he hosted the likes of Paul Newman and Yoko Ono, providing both authentic French cuisine and wild parties in the Back Room. Ski Club 10 earned fame for its Sunday brunch of caviar, pâté, and champagne. The Sugarbush Inn—a lodging complex with ice skating, Nordic skiing, a pool, and tennis courts, offered dining at the Beef and Bottle. The Blue Tooth was another popular après-ski spot on the Sugarbush Access Road. Valley resident and eventual Blue Tooth co-owner Charlie Brown recalls, “If you had food, you could drink on Sundays, so we rented out tuna and ham sandwiches wrapped in plastic for fifty cents a piece. [Patrons] wouldn't even take the plastic off, so we'd use the same sandwiches every Sunday.”



Armando Orsini and friends enjoying après at the Castlerock warming hut

The restaurant staff and owners took part in the fun alongside the guests. “There was not a lot happening midweek, so we created parties,” Ware recalls. One of his creations at Orsini's (later the Common Man) was the “Waiter's Slalom,” which involved participants from the local restaurant wait staff wearing ski boots and balancing a glass of water and a bottle on a tray, trying to race through the restaurant. The waiter challenge eventually moved from the Common Man to the snow outside Valley House Lodge, alongside a host of other wacky adventures: Sloshwicking, involving a broom, a snowshoe, and a ski; a downhill tube race; on-snow dance contests; and Pond Skimming (see more details in “Let the Good Times Roll,” page 20). “The goofier the stuff, the better,” remembers Weller, who would shoot film of the events and rush it out to regional television stations to run on the evening news broadcasts.



**The crowd was not just fun, but beautiful to boot. Swanky architects and editorial assistants arrived from New York City on the cocktail-laden Sugarbus Express each weekend. During the era when she was starring in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* and in *Strangers When We Meet*, Kim Novak was a regular at the resort. *Vogue* magazine published an article in 1960 that began, “Sugarbush Valley, known on weekends as Mascara Mountain”; the nickname, which referred to the attractive crowd flocking to the mountain, stuck.**

Dick Frost recalls the swimming pool in the middle of Sugarbush Village, behind Chez Henri, where swim lessons were given by none other than Miss Vermont. Even the gondolas were pretty. The mountain’s New York ad agency, Robinson, Donino, & West, masterminded a “Paint-A- Gondola” contest in 1968, launching the idea in the November issues of both *Skiing* and *Ski* magazines (see “Parting Shot” on the last page). Ten contestants won boots, skis, and a Sugarbush season pass for their whimsical car designs—think polka dots and stars and stripes—unveiled later that season.



Stardom often follows a trajectory of burning bright and then fading, and so it was at Sugarbush. Roy Cohen, the head of a Washington, D.C.–based company that supplied laundry equipment services, approached the Gadds in 1977 with an offer to buy the mountain. They accepted, and moved aside. Cohen proved to be a much different owner. Though not nearly as revered as the Gadds, he followed their lead and invested significantly in the resort. He also had the wherewithal to hold on to Jack Murphy and Lixi Fortna. Within two years, Cohen purchased the nearby Glen Ellen ski area, and merged the two mountains into one resort. Cohen gave then marketing director Weller the task of renaming Glen Ellen’s trails, thus moving away from original owner Walt Elliott’s Scottish theme for the mountain.

Lixi Fortna left Sugarbush in 1982 to join the Vermont House of Representatives. Jack Murphy’s accomplished tenure as vice president and general manager came to an end that same year when he died from cancer. Murphy had invested twenty-five years of his life in Sugarbush and the ski industry, creating the original master plan for the resort, installing lifts, designing and constructing trails, and ushering in revolutionary snowmaking, grooming, and safety procedures. Murphy had worked with Harold Head on developing the first fiberglass ski, and was a founding member of the National Ski Areas Association. His commitment to the industry cannot be overstated. Cohen relied on him heavily, and with Murphy’s passing, Cohen was done.

He sold the resort to ARA Services of Philadelphia, at the time the largest food services company in the U.S. The new ownership, which was responsible for removing the famed gondola, did not last long, and the resort was sold again the following year, to

Claneil Enterprises. Claneil, a family trust from Philadelphia, owned the resort for the next decade, and during that time also purchased the Sugarbush Inn, a Robert Trent Jones Sr.-designed golf course, a tennis center, a Nordic skiing center, and land intended for future development. Claneil was unable to accomplish other priorities—including upgrading the snowmaking system at Lincoln Peak and completing their master plan—and lost a significant amount of money during their decade of ownership.

Les Otten, the then owner of Sunday River in Maine, purchased the resort from Claneil in 1994 for approximately \$9 million, and launched a \$20 million capital improvement plan. Within six months, Otten had added seven new lifts, expanded snowmaking by 300 percent, and connected the two mountains with the Slide Brook Express Quad, as part of a deal that permanently gave up rights to expansion in the Slide Brook Basin. Otten liked to do things on a grand scale, and formed the American Skiing Company in a 1996 merger (funded largely with high-yield junk bonds) that added numerous eastern and western ski resorts to his collection. He also liked to “stoke up controversy,” recalls Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame member John Egan, who came to Sugarbush during the Gadd era. In 1999, Otten planned a publicity stunt at the Boston Ski Show, pitting Egan against another American Ski Company athlete, Olympian Jonny Moseley, in a boxing match. Moseley lost. Citing Egan’s home-court advantage—Egan grew up in the Boston area and had a supportive crowd—Moseley demanded a rematch. Shortly thereafter, they competed again. This time, the duel took the shape of a ski race, on Stein’s Run at Sugarbush. Practically straight-lining Stein’s with giant slalom turns to the bottom, Egan clinched his second victory against Moseley.

Otten lost local support when rumors suggested that he wanted to replace the Castlerock Double chair with a quad, instigating a grassroots campaign to fight it. “More Rock, Less Otten” T-shirts appeared, along with a sit-in campaign on the Castlerock chair’s bull wheel. The locals won, preserving their beloved and uncrowded Castlerock the way it was. Local dissenters also successfully thwarted Otten’s plans for a Grand Summit Hotel at Sugarbush—and with that, Otten’s days were numbered.

By 2000, Otten had moved on, leaving the American Skiing Company saddled with debt and under the control of Oak Hill Capital Partners. While Sugarbush was not officially for sale, a group was forming—Summit Ventures—that would soon make a purchase offer. Merrill Lynch International chairman Win Smith had been skiing at the resort with his family since 1984, and had already committed to the area through his purchase of the Warren Store and the Pitcher Inn. Smith teamed up with Joe Riemer—a friend, Wall Street colleague, and GMVS parent—and made an offer. The closing, on September 10, 2001, wound up being unfortunately timed given the next day’s tragic events. The timing was also symbolic of the following few years, which were plagued by the sudden death of Smith’s partner in November of that year, a drought that prevented snowmaking during that first holiday season, and a litany of deferred maintenance needs. The following year, Smith took on a minority partner, Adam Greshin, along with four other minority investing families. In 2004, the resort was still losing money, prompting Smith to move from his home in Greenwich, Connecticut, to Warren and assume day-to-day management.



Win and his children during his years at Merrill Lynch

Armed with a new master plan to upgrade the ailing resort, and a savvy financial road map, Smith slowly began to bring Sugarbush back to the celebrated place it once had been. Smith's family and Summit Ventures invested more than \$69 million, adding, among other improvements, a slopeside hotel, necessary skier services buildings, seven new lifts, and essential snowmaking infrastructure. Smith also brought back a personal commitment to the resort and the Valley that hadn't been there since the Gadd era, and that only comes when owners truly live and breathe the experience.

Those who were here at the beginning see parallels between the mountain's founders and the person who leads it today. "Win and Damon were similar ... approachable," Chan Weller commented. Weller worked for Gadd for many years, and now sees the resort from the guest side, as a frequent golfer and skier. "Win kind of reminds me of my dad," Kelly (Murphy) Wood said recently when recollecting memories of her childhood spent at Sugarbush. "He manages by wandering around," she added, reflecting on Smith's routine of dropping in on different aspects of the resort, from attending mountain operations meetings and dining frequently at the restaurants, to stopping by for unannounced office visits.

"Win Smith saved this mountain. Without him, there would be no Sugarbush," says Paul Ruetzler. But Smith himself deflects the credit, noting instead the dedication of his 155



full-time employees and his 850 or so seasonal employees, many of whom have made Sugarbush a way of life.

Smith's continuous drive to ski as many days as possible—he skied 132 during the 2017–18 season—allows him to have an almost constant presence at the resort. In addition, his family—his wife, Lili, his four children, his four stepchildren, his six grandchildren, and, until recently, his beloved Bernese mountain dog, Rumble—is often there with him. The resort has begun to regain some of its former allure, as well as a respectable amount of glamour.

Over time, the resort has grown into its own, settling on an identity that blends the fame of the past with the authentic and independent values of the present. While the ski school may be less European than it once was, it is still studded with celebrity instructors. The models and actresses may be less prolific, but you can still spot beautiful people hidden under the helmets. The partying may have subsided somewhat, but the Saturday après-ski scene might make you think otherwise. Two years ago, Bill Pennington, who covers skiing for the *New York Times*, called the Mad River Valley “one of my favorite destinations.” In 2017, *Ski* magazine named Sugarbush the second-best resort in the East. And in 2018, *USA Today* named it the best.

Smith likes to quote the Chinese zodiac calendar, which claims that “following the sixtieth birthday, life begins again.” This is significant to Smith, whose sixtieth birthday in 2009 presented both a chance meeting with a childhood friend and a final release from his first career. While Smith had left Merrill Lynch eight years before—the company that his father had helped found, and to which he himself had devoted almost three decades of his life—it had since been on the brink of collapse and then purchased by the Bank of America in a fire sale. Smith dealt with the loss in part by writing a book about the company's success and failure and speaking publicly at the final board meeting, as well as by devoting himself to his second career, whose office was mere steps from the Super Bravo lift. In 2011, he married that childhood friend, Lili Ruane, in a mountaintop ceremony at Lincoln Peak, surrounded by friends and family, and committed himself to a new life chapter whose roots were firmly planted at Sugarbush. Smith had embarked on a new path, as steward of a mountain known for its legendary terrain, its thoughtful development, and its true sense of community. This season, the resort he adopted celebrates its own sixtieth birthday. For the many who consider themselves part of the Sugarbush community, it may be that the mountain's best days are still to come.