

George Heasley

George Heasley has more than one claim to be included in the Ski and Winter Sports Hall of Fame. In late 1941, he was a "Goodbye dear, I'll be back in a year ... " draftee and that year became four and half after Pearl Harbor. A farm boy from Manor, PA, he began to look for a winter time activity upon discharge. There were several small ponds in the area that froze each winter, providing a ready made recreation spot. George with a few of his buddies formed an amateur hockey club and played against other nonprofessional groups in the region including some pick-up college teams.

January thaws often played havoc with make shift hockey rinks, wiping out many scheduled games. In the second year of hockey participation, George heard about Laurel Mountain and the sport of skiing. With some urging from George, the hockey team decided to give it a try and proceeded to Honus Wagner Sporting Goods Store in Pittsburgh where they purchased Skis, bindings, poles and boots for under \$ 50 each. With their new equipment in hand they went to Laurel Mountain and learned to ski.

Skiing was not completely new to George. In 1931, at the age of 11, he obtained his first pair of skis as a birthday gift from his father. Their farm was located on a hilltop outside of Manor PA and George took to conquering the hill on a pair of jumping skis, no edges, a strap binding and lots of courage.

Skiing at Laurel Mountain, George heard about a farm called Seven Springs that offered skiing and decided to give it a try. The area was still rather primitive and at times climbing skins could still be useful. The pasture gate still had to be opened and closed in order to get to the slope. The major lifts were rope tows. Grooming was performed by side stepping up or down a slope to insure that the snow would be packed well enough to hold in the event of a thaw. The ski patrol and volunteers performed the task and George was always there to lend a hand, sometimes supervising the operation.

At day's end, George would join patrolman Tyler Davis in sweeping the slopes to make sure everyone got down before dark. While not a member of the Patrol officially, George was always around when needed.

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In the late forties, George and his small group of skier friends began calling themselves the Manor Red Birds. George designed a logo. It consisted of a Red Bird on Skis hovering like a hawk. The group agreed that it would make a fine looking emblem and proceeded to investigate the cost of producing an embroidered shoulder patch. However a minimum order was three hundred and the Red Birds numbered about a half a dozen. The design was put away in a drawer as the Red Birds continued to ski incognito.

While Hockey continued to be an interest, skiing was more consistent because Seven Springs located in the mountains seemed to always have snow, even when the thaw melted all the ponds. While Laurel Mt. had the most challenging slope, Wildcat, it had a westerly face and often was unskiable due to the late afternoon sun.

In the middle of the 1950s, George received a post card from Bill Tilley, a newcomer to the Pittsburgh area, requesting anyone interested in forming a new ski club to meet in Tilley's home on a given date. Always ready to join efforts to promote skiing, George accepted the invitation and attended the meeting. That night gave birth to plans for a new ski club in western Pennsylvania.

The new club needed a place to meet and the Heasley farm had an old rabbit coop that had recently been vacated and cleaned. The first meeting of the Westmoreland Ski Club, the third club to be organized in western Pennsylvania, took place in this humble shed. Bill Tilley became president, George Heasley was named vice president and the Red Bird emblem was resurrected and adopted for the club logo. The Heasley farm would host the first dry ski clinic and attract several people from the area who then joined the club. The following year, through the efforts of vice president George Heasley, the dry ski clinic would be held at Bushy Run Battlefield Park and the club would begin to meet at the Manor American Legion Post where George was a member. Both of these moves increased club membership.

Always a diplomat, George persuaded Seven Springs to rent an old duck coop for use as a weekend club lodge. George and Bill examined the building and organized a

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group to clean up after the former tenants. They procured some rough green lumber to use for partitions to provide male and female dorms. Drills were needed to make pilot holes for nails which could not penetrate the green, rough cut, boards. The lodge spawned an increase in membership that year but all good things end.

After two years, Seven Springs launched an expansion program that called for the removal of the building in order to construct a new lodge. The club now began a search for a new place to hang their hat. This led to a summer cabin about four miles away from the slopes near the village of Trent. Located on Kimmel Lane, about a half mile from the main road, it became a test of endurance when the snow drifted across the lane and stalled a snow plow. For the remainder of the season, lodgers had to hoof it into the area on a narrow path dragging tanks of gas, as well as bedding, food and clothing for the weekend. In all of this, George kept spirits up comparing the trek to adventures in the Klondike, Mount Everest and the South Pole. The following year, efforts to establish a permanent lodge got underway. While using a partially built cabin for that year, several members, led by George Heasley, purchased a lot across the road from the unfinished cabin, and made plans to erect a building. When spring arrived, a group of hardy souls led by George, began to clean away the brush and trees. Soon a parking area was clear and then the work began in earnest. In the meantime, George was recording this endeavor on film. In November of 1963, the A-frame lodge was ready to occupy for the season. The lodge continues to serve Westmoreland Ski Club to this day.

George, an amateur artist and an employee of the Westinghouse Printing Department, initiated the Westmoreland Ski-zette, a newsletter for the club which still exists. In addition, he served as program chair and arranged for various films to show at meetings as well as contacting ski shops and ski areas for speakers and demonstrations. An accomplished photographer and cinematographer, George recorded many club functions as well as activities of Western Council. His movies of ski clinics, banquets,

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the building of the lodge and on the slope action shots are part of the Westmoreland legacy.

As the cofounder of Westmoreland Ski Club, George Heasley promoted organized skiing. He served the club in many areas as president, vice president, lodge chair, program chair, photographer, public relations, and historian. Through his supporting role in Westmoreland Ski Club, he influenced many people to become active in organized skiing. He encouraged some members to participate in the Western Pennsylvania Ski Council and the Pennsylvania Ski Federation and directed many to join the Ski Patrol as well as fostering young racers to become competitive.

Always conscious of safety, he would personally remove hazards on the slopes or inform the patrol about unsafe conditions. While standing in a lift line, he would gently inform people about loose scarves and safety straps. He aided patrolmen when they were short handed and was always on hand to help in whatever endeavor would be undertaken. George Heasley has been a guiding force in Westmoreland Ski Club who encouraged aspiring skiers to advance their proficiency and enjoy the sport. He was also instrumental in the formation of the Mon Valley Ski Club by inviting John Dudas and Pat Dodaro to a Westmoreland clinic. They then attended a Westmoreland meeting. They were concerned about the distance from their home to Westmoreland which at that time met weekly. George suggested they form their own organization and proceeded to help them get started.

His retiring personality never placed him in the limelight but his guidance and encouragement did much to further the promotion of skiing in western Pennsylvania. George Heasley has been a strong force in the growth of skiing in Western Pennsylvania.