



The Ancient Skier

P. O. Box 331 Kirkland, WA 98083

April 2014

PERSPIRATION LED TO INSPIRATION

The history of the rope tow gripper

By the mid-1930s, the sport of skiing was becoming very popular in this country, thanks in great part to the immigration of our Norwegian, German and Austrian forebears. Then, to ski was to climb. A thin application of ski wax applied to the bottom of skis would allow snowflakes to stick so one could walk up a slope. At the top of the run, the skis were slid back and forth to remove the clinging snow so the downhill run could begin.

It was discovered that strips of seal skin with the hairs pointing to the back of a ski worked very well to keep from sliding backward. Some models were strapped to the pointy tips of skis, some were stuck to skis with wax, and one version clipped to 1/8-inch metal rods installed in the grooves in the bottoms of skis and held by straps at tips and tails.

Also, canvas ski socks slipped over the backs of skis were very popular due to their low cost.

Then came the rope tow

In the 1930s, the use of mechanized uphill conveyances spread across the North American continent. The installation of tows and lifts essentially started the ski area as we know it today.

The first rope tow in United States was up and running on Gilbert's Hill in Woodstock, Vermont, by late January 1934. It was based on an earlier tow erected near Shawbridge, Quebec, in 1932. These first tows were powered by running a rope around the tire rim of a Dodge or Ford Model-T car set up on blocks. The rope tow was ridden by just gripping it with your gloves, taking care that the glove cuffs and clothing didn't twist into the rope.

Rope tows became very popular as they provided so much more downhill running than before. Spectators would come just to watch skiers being hauled uphill. Today's skiers who have never ridden one missed a

character-building phase of the sport. The weight of the rope had to be carried by the skiers themselves and if the snow under the skis happened to be wet, the skier would find the rope pulling the arms forward while the skis lagged behind.

Within a few years of the first successful installations in the East, rope tows were increasingly installed at ski slopes from coast to coast. In 1936, the Mount Spokane Ski Club installed a rope tow on its club grounds near Mount Spokane and in California, at the Sierra

Club's Clair Tappaan Lodge near Lake Tahoe, the first rope tow in the Sierra Nevada Mountains was installed.

An idea was born

The tow was very popular but skiers complained about having difficulty holding on to the rope because of its speed and its often wet and slippery condition. Just getting onto the rope was tricky. If the skier grabbed too hard, the rope could yank the skier off the snow. If the skier did not hold on tightly, the rope would zip through the skier's hands. One of the Sierra Club members, George Dondero, started skiing in 1936 and knew the problem.

He envisioned a solution. George was pattern maker for a metal casting foundry in San Francisco. He thought that a U-shaped device that would fit over the rope with sufficient length to provide friction could essentially serve to bend the rope and, thus, grab it to carry a skier uphill. So he carved a wooden pattern and

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THE HISTORY OF THE ROPE TOW GRIPPER

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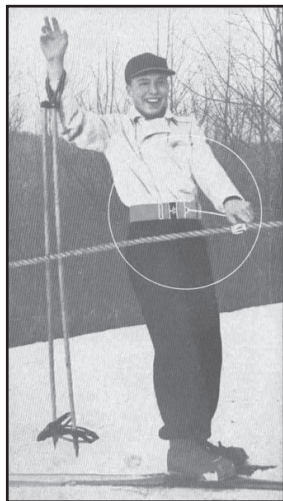
cast several out of aluminum. A hole was put in the end of the handle so the grip could be attached to a skier's belt with a light cord that could break easily if a skier fell.

Recognizing the wide market possible for a rope tow gripper, he applied to the U.S. Patent Office on May 12, 1939, and received Patent No. 2,217,946, for his "UP-SKI TOWING DEVICE" on Oct. 15, 1940, the first patent for a rope tow gripper.

Dondero's invention was manufactured and marketed by the Tigrip Ski Products Co. and also distributed by Irving "Goode" Goodman of Los Angeles.

More grippers created

One month after Dondero's patent filing, another gripper idea was devised by Clare Bousquet in Pittsfield, Mass. Bousquet had developed a small but popular ski area on his hilly pasture lands. The Mount Greylock Ski Club frequented Bousquet's "ski grounds" as his slopes were accessible by train from New York City. He regularly improved his ski slopes, and, in fall 1935, he erected two rope tows.



Bousquet not only improved on the earlier Woodstock rope tow designs, but, within a few years, he also invented a rope tow gripper of his own. Bousquet filed for a patent on his gripper on June 3, 1939, calling his device "Bosquet's Ski Tow Rope Gripper." He received Patent No. 2,230,024 on Jan. 28, 1941. His device, shown at left, was sold with a

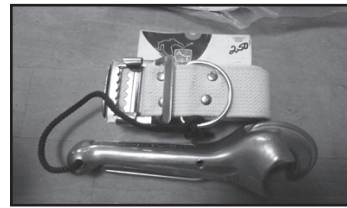
belt which had a pocket to store the hinged handle. Commonly, it was known as "the nutcracker," and over the next 30 years more than 500,000 were sold.



army web belt that fastened around the waist with a T-hook.



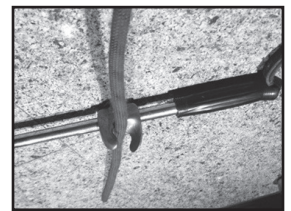
At left, another form of "nutcracker" grip was used in New Zealand. Also, Bertelen Products of El Segundo, Calif., made a wide flange-type nutcracker, apparently using aluminum. It came with an



The Anderson & Thompson Ski Company (A&T) catalog of 1955 shows two models of rope tow grippers, both of which were very

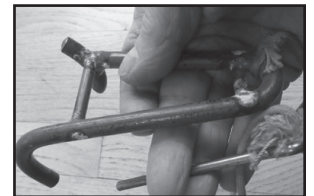
popular with Pacific Northwest skiers. The first was a clamp-type grip with a cord fastened to a canvas belt. The catalog noted that the gripper "always is in operating position" and it "releases automatically" as well as "fits in the hand comfortably with a minimum of pressure and holds firmly for any style rope tow." Its army-type belt fastened around the waist with a T-hook

The second A&T model was a departure from the loose, belt-fastened grippers. It was mounted on a ski pole. This gripper was invented by Robert E. Dye of Oakland, Calif., who filed for his patent on Nov. 3, 1941, and was granted Patent No. 2,340,868 on Feb. 8, 1944. The A&T catalog described the pole-mounted gripper as "light, compact, safe, and mounts to any ski pole." It goes on to note that it "holds firmly while pulling but releases easily when weight is removed."



Homemade grippers appear

During the early days of rope tows, skiers were always looking for cheaper ways to ski, including making their own grippers. One, at right, was made for the Anchorage Ski Club, probably sometime after World War II.



The gripper, shown below, was handmade after the war as well. It was set in a leather holster which could attach to one's belt. This was before the days of stretch pants. and both women's and men's pants were designed for belts.



Grippers' demise follows

The use of rope tows in North America escalated through the decades into the 1960s. By the mid-1950s, some of the larger day-use areas such as Stevens Pass had as many as 22 individual rope tows operating on weekends. The use of other uphill lift devices such as J-bars, T-bars, and chairlifts proved more versatile and long lasting, and, thus, took favor over rope tows, which were being replaced at an increasing rate. By

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the late 1970s, rope tows had mostly vanished, and, with that, the use and knowledge of rope tow grippers has almost disappeared.

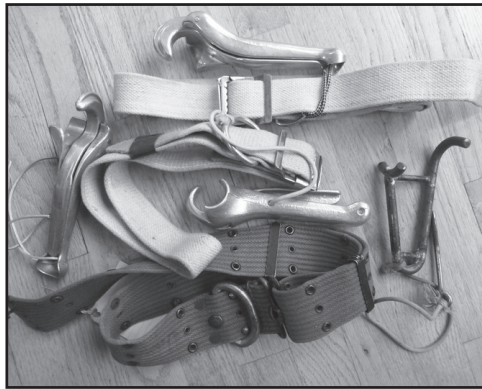
However, where rope tows still exist, one often can find grippers being used. At the Seattle Mountaineers' Meany Ski Lodge, located 10 miles east of Snoqualmie Pass, there are still three operating rope tows serving beginner, intermediate and expert terrain.

The expert tow has a 450-foot vertical rise and travels 15 mph (after State regulations mandated a speed reduction from 20 mph) and ends on a 35-degree slope. The hinged-handle A&T gripper is available for all skiers to use.

Although the need for rope tow grippers has almost disappeared, there are a few hardy skiers still enjoying the sport of downhill skiing by using rope tows and grippers.

~ John Hansen & Kirby Gilbert

And it may be that one of the many choices for rope tow grippers, used in the early years, shown on the right, is still being put to good use.



N.W. HALL OF FAME NOMINATIONS SOUGHT

The Spring Newsletter will request submission of names of persons with notable accomplishments in the sport of skiing in the Pacific Northwest. These accomplishments can be related to fields of ski instruction, ski patrolling, ski manufacturing, ski racing, and recreational skiing. Persons nominated do not have to be members of the Ancient Skiers Association.

Now is the time to start thinking of those whose names should be submitted for consideration.

PLAN A STOP AT N.W. SKI HALL OF FAME

If your travels take you through Leavenworth, be sure to stop at the Enzian Inn on the north side of Highway 2 in the middle of town. Drop in and see the photographic gallery in the lower corridor leading to the Inn's Conference Room. Displayed there are photos of 70 Hall of Fame inductees between 1987 and 2012. They are from Washington, Oregon, Idaho and British Columbia. Many are from the 1930s era and forward who have contributed to our sport in many ways: Olympians, 10th Mtn. Division, promoters, builders, instructors, ski patrollers and others.

The skiing fun we have today is due in a large part to their efforts.

THE HAND ON THE A.S. HELM CHANGES

During the Ancient Skiers Association Board meeting in Sun Valley, Jan. 24, 2014, the Board accepted the resignations of three members: John Hansen who had served three three-year terms as president and one term as vice-president; Frank Leibly, two three-year terms as treasurer; and Ed Taylor, two three-year terms as secretary.

All are to be commended for their many years of contributions to the Ancient Skiers.

Three new directors have been chosen to serve: Leland Rosenlund as Membership and Roster Chairman (he already had taken over these duties after Carole Taylor performed those roles for many years); Kirby Gilbert to be involved with the production of newsletters; and Judy Sweeney, Director-at-Large. Thanks to these new Board members for their willingness to serve.

The carry-over directors all stepped into new positions: Bill Price has his hand on the helm as president (congratulations, Bill); Mary Lynne Evans as secretary; and Tex Steere as treasurer.

They are wished success in their new positions.

YOU'RE AN ANCIENT SKIER IF YOU ...

- used a U.S. Army 10th Mountain Division rucksack to carry your ski gear to the mountains. The tubular frame model was for GIs and the wire frame model (which was the "cool" type) was for officers.
- sorely wanted a pair of leather-soled, leather uppers, lace-up Haderer ski boots. And you knew that Doug Devin could order then for you.

Ancient Skiers Board of Directors

Bill Price	President
Mary Lynne Evans	Secretary
Tex Steere	Treasurer
Judy Sweeney	Director-at-large
Kirby Gilbert	B.O.D. member
Leland Rosenlund	Membership Chr.

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INVENTOR GEORGE DONDERO SELECTED AS FIRST ANCIENT SKIER HONORARY MEMBER

In January, your Board of Directors established a new membership category to be conferred on those persons who have made notable contributions to the sport of snow and making it more enjoyable for the skiing community at large.

The first person to receive this honor is George Dondero, a technical expert who has brought many new ideas to our sport.

Our honoree was born October 13, 1913, and grew up in San Francisco. He ice skated there and also formed a youth small-boat sailing organization on San Francisco Bay. In 1936, he started skiing at the Sierra Club's Clair Tappaan Lodge at Norden, California, near Donner Pass.

George, who, by then, worked as a pattern maker in a metal casting foundry, turned his inventive mind to the difficulties of riding the lodge's rope tow and created and obtained the first patent for a rope tow gripper. (See accompanying tow gripper story.) In 1940, the gripper was sold for \$1.75 as the "Tigrip, A Sensational New Rope-Tow Device." Such rope tow grippers were a boon to skiers from the '40s until T-Bars, Poma lifts and chairlifts took over the ski scene.

In those early years, George installed metal edges on skis for all the ski shops in San Francisco. He also made a wooden ski with a radical side cut which he thought would make turning easier, but it was too "squirrely," so the idea was abandoned.

During World War II, George worked in the metal fabrication industry for several different firms on the West Coast as his contribution to the war effort.

Upon retirement to Sun Valley in 1975, his ski knowledge was put to use more and more. The Ski Free

"safety" toe binding was being developed but needed refinement. George applied his metal fabrication know-how to bring the toe piece to the market, and it became the first widely accepted toe release.

He went to work for Ed Scott, who had invented the tapered aluminum ski pole and was moving into the ski boot field, so George made the molds for the Scott rear-entry, light weight boot. Then he turned his ingenuity to eyewear and made intricate, face-fitting molds for Scott and Smith goggles. He also developed the JTUSA line of sunglasses, motorcycle helmets with improved airflow, and body shields for motocross riders.

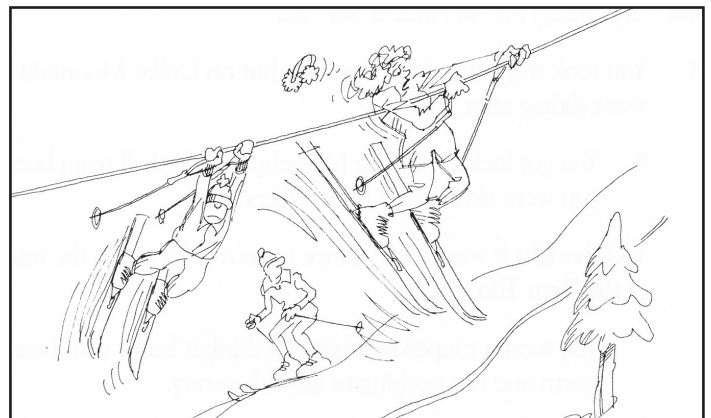
George is a renaissance man. He's a great photographer, both in still and motion pictures. While skiing at the Sugar Bowl, he was at a party given by the manager, Mr Morrison. Also present were the manager's very attractive 20-or-so daughter, Janet; prominent actress Norma Shearer; and her husband, Marty Arrouge, who had been her Sun Valley ski instructor. Norma asked George to take some photos of Janet so Norma could show them to the head of her motion picture company, as she was very impressed with Janet's beauty and personality. The pictures were taken and shown to the studio heads, and Janet became the movie star, Janet Leigh, whose many starring-role films included Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho."

Now, George lives in a retirement home on Mercer Island, Washington, to be near his daughter, and he is still leading an active life at age 100!

~ John Hansen



SAVE THE DATE - OCTOBER 12, 2014 FOR BIENNIAL BANQUET
The Ancient Skiers' banquet will be held at the Nile Country Club and will include induction of those newly chosen for the Northwest Ski Hall of Fame. Details for registration will appear in the Summer Newsletter.



You know you're an Ancient Skier if you used to ride the upper rope tow at Stevens Pass that lifted you ten feet off the snow if you weighed less than 135 pounds.. Bob Cram cartoon, of course.