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# SKIING HISTORY

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# Wilmot Mountain

In the 1940s and '50s, the "Matterhorn of the Midwest" made its mark on skiing. **BY CHARLES C. ROBERTS, JR.**



Left: An aerial view of Wilmot Mountain, circa 1964. Above: Walter Stopa founded the Illinois ski area in 1938. He died in 1986.

**W**ilmot Mountain in Wisconsin is celebrating its 75th season in 2013. Though the ski area is small, it played a big role in introducing the sport to skiers in Chicago—and across the Midwest—starting in the late 1930s.

In 1938, Walter Stopa, a Polish-born architect, was disappointed by the limited skiing facilities in the Chicago area, where he lived. He would take occasional trips to Sun Valley, but wanted to ski closer to Chicago, where he worked for the architectural and engineering firm Holabird and Root. After researching local topography with a fistful of contour maps, he made a deal with a farmer, Charles Pagel, leasing land just south of the town of Wilmot, Wisconsin, just 40 miles southwest of Milwaukee and 55 miles north of Chicago. The land encompassed a terminal glacial moraine with a variety of slopes facing northeast, making it an ideal site for a ski area. A 25-foot-square garage served as a warming hut, and Stopa installed a rope tow after consulting with Hermann Nunnemacher from Milwaukee, who had installed a rope tow at Holy Hill in rural Wisconsin. A 1920s Fordson farm tractor powered the tow.

Word got around among Chicago skiers, and when Wilmot Hills opened in 1938 after a big snow, more than 300 skiers lined up to try out the 190-foot-vertical slope. The following weekend, 500 skiers showed up. By 1939, Stopa had added two additional rope tows and weekend crowds exceeded 1,000 skiers. A daily lift ticket was 50 cents and the season lasted from January to February on natural snow. Wilmot Hills operated on weekends through the 1940s, relying on natural snow, which was often rained out the following day, resulting in about 10 days of skiing per season. Still, more and more skiers visited the hill.

1952 was a pivotal year for Wilmot Hills. Joe Tropeano, an agricultural spraying expert, was marketing artificial snowmaking equipment, which intrigued Stopa. He purchased a "bull horn" system from Tropeano—basically a modified lawn-watering device—and installed it on the hill. The sprinkler heads did make snow, but suffered from frequent freeze-ups. To solve the problem, Stopa bought TEY snowmaking guns, which he refined with the help of his son, John. Other apparatus manufactured in the Wilmot shop included towed snow-





The Ski Meister Ski Club, circa 1938, was one of many Chicago-area clubs that convened at Wilmot on winter weekends.



Early "bull horn" sprinkler units being deployed to the slopes, circa 1952, when Stopa first installed a snowmaking system.



1955 NBC *Tonight Show* national broadcast with radio personality Irv Kupcinet (second from left).

packing devices and various utility vehicles. During the 1950s, Stopa's focus on superior snowmaking helped to make Wilmot one of the most successful ski resorts in the Midwest.

In the infancy of national electronic news media, Wilmot was at the forefront of introducing skiing to the nation. Irv Kupcinet, a popular radio and TV talk show host, would often broadcast from the Wilmot ski lodge, discussing snow conditions, instruction, equipment and fashion. One of the first live TV broadcasts entailed dragging heavy cameras to the base of the hill, along with the associated power cables. Skiers would glide down the hill in view of the camera, with the talk-show host describing what was happening. In 1955, when Stopa added lights for night skiing, it was such a novelty that the story made *The Tonight Show*.

During the late 1950s, advertising executive Harry Leonard decided to stage a ski show in Chicago, inviting reps from regional ski areas, equipment dealers and local celebrities. Wilmot hosted a large information booth, with instructors providing skiing demonstrations on special mats. The show became an annual event, and Leonard went on to build a long and successful ski-show career.

In 1966, the Wilmot Ski Patrol developed a safety training film describing how to handle injuries sustained by skiers on the hill, covering such topics as how to perform a preliminary injury diagnosis, how to comfort the skier, and how to evacuate safely. Bill Black and Dick Holsten produced the film, while Jerrie Fowler handled writing, directing and editing. It was shot by professional photographers in 16mm format and distributed nationwide by the National Ski Patrol.

As it celebrates 75 years, Wilmot carries on Walter Stopa's tradition of improvement and innovation—little wonder, since the ski area is still owned by the same family. A modern base lodge houses a rental shop, ticket sales, several cafeterias and two pubs; not far from the lodge, a 20-lane snow tubing facility opened in 2012. Wilmot also has an active recreational racing program, with weekly training and weekend slalom and GS races on two main runs. ❄️

For more information on Wilmot Mountain, go to [www.wilmot-mountain.com](http://www.wilmot-mountain.com) or call (262) 862-2301.



Wilmot instructors offer demonstrations on a ski mat at an early Chicago show organized by Harry Leonard, circa 1965. Left to right: Norm Johnstone, Helmut Teichner, Eddie Becvarik and Cal Beisswanger.



Wilmot Ski Patrol demonstrating avalanche-training techniques, circa 1966.