

# BIG SKY JOURNAL

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TOM MURPHY AND DAVID M. LONG TRAVERSING YELLOWSTONE'S WINTER

SMALL TOWN SKI HILLS: CARHARTTS AND TWIN TIPS

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# Carhartts and Twin Tips

Hitting the slopes of Montana's small-town ski areas

Written by Otto Pohl - Photography by Anne Sherwood

You should know right up front that I was never a big skier. I grew up on the East Coast, where I learned that good conditions meant 2 inches of snow covering the ice and that the best part of the sport was après-ski, where I would curl up in fuzzy socks and drink steaming mugs of spiked cocoa until I had chased the humid cold from my bones.

When I fell in love with a Bozeman girl and moved to Montana from New York City, I realized I should reevaluate my attitude toward skiing. I arrived during the summer and I had time to adjust, spending long warm days enjoying the relaxed rhythms of a quieter pace of life. By the time the days grew short and the Bridgers disappeared under a downy mantle of snow, I was surprised to find myself eager to hit the slopes. But something else had happened in the intervening months: Bozeman had come to feel like a big town. Together with Anne, an avid skier and now my wife, we planned a trip into the furthest reaches of the state. Our immediate goal was to find the great snow lurking on the mom-n-pop ski hills that dot the state, but I had another goal in mind. I imagined vintage neon and worn brick buildings and one-street towns with old pickup trucks. I wanted to find the Montana of *my Montana*.

Wherever it was, I knew it would take a long time to get there. The broad valleys of Montana hold you as though in the cup of a majestic, benevolent hand, that's true, but they also don't let go of you very quickly. We began our trip by driving to Maverick Mountain in Polaris, which is a short, three-hour drive from Bozeman. In Montana, it's best to work under the premise that the journey is the destination; otherwise, it takes too long to get there. So we drove and we drove and absorbed the scenery along the way. Red willows stretched filigree branches along a meandering river. Pheasants lined the road like sentinels. At one point, a low fog rolled in over cows and weather-beaten fences; at another, sunbeams broke through the grey sky and illuminated distant mountains. I loved skiing already.

The drama of Maverick's slogan — "Ride the White Thunder" — is both charming in its enthusiastic posturing and hopelessly misleading. If you really wanted to compare this ski hill to a weather event, it's less thunder than a cloudy day, or perhaps a light drizzle. It's a place with rear-entry boots and straight skis, and judging by the pine tree under the lift covered in Mardi Gras beads and discarded panties, the adrenalin doesn't come from fast turns and dangerous

speed. That said, the slopes had received 14 inches in the last 48 hours and I could sense the red-nosed enthusiasm in the air. It was also Rural Racing Day, which meant that kids from all the schools in the area were on the slopes, competing on a slalom course above the A-frame lodge.

We slid over to the lift. I was admiring the scenery when the chair bumped me in the back of the legs. I sat down hard and was swept upwards. "Every 10 seconds a chair goes by!" the attendant called after me helpfully. The snow was soft and deep. The good thing about skiing a one-lift hill is you never have to think about which lift to ski next, and we carved our way through several runs before heading for lunch.

We stepped inside the ski lodge and the smell of wood smoke and french fries greeted us. A dusty monkey puppet on a vintage bike hung from the rafters. Maverick is no high-volume operation: the woman behind the counter served us our chili and then met us over at the register to take our money.

We clumped over to the bottom of the racecourse and found ourselves chatting with Randy Shilling, the owner of the ski hill. He had red cheeks, bushy eyebrows flecked with grey, and a great passion for his job. "I believe in small little ski hills," he said. "This is the way skiing was 30 or 40 years ago. We don't have the glamour and the glitz but we teach a tremendous number of kids." I didn't tell him that I was a recent born-again skier, but I agreed with his assessment. I felt so much more at home here among the relaxed attitudes and mismatched gear than I did in the coddled lodges of Aspen or Lake Tahoe. Presumably no one at Maverick had recently returned from the slopes of Chamonix, and it was a safe bet that no one here would regale me with tales of heli-skiing on a volcano in Kamchatka.

This is good, because here's the thing: forget Kamchatka. If you want an essential ski experience, try Teton Pass, next to the Lewis & Clark National Forest. At Maverick, the whole resort depends on one balky diesel generator and the lift hut is an old chicken coop. The snow was good — deep but a little

wind-whipped — but that's not the main attraction. You're here to meet someone like Shawn Orloff, the young lift operator who skied up to us to make sure we were having a good time. "It's skiing like cream cheese," he said, and thought my fat skis should handle it fine. A little snow tornado funneled past us and Anne shivered. "Is it always like this?" she asked through the gale. "Yes, but sometimes it gets windy," Shawn answered with a smile. The three of us watched a Mennonite in a faded pink dress slide unsteadily on her skis. Her hair was up in a bun and covered by a lace hairnet. She snowplowed to a stop and introduced herself as April, visiting from Kansas. It was only her second time skiing.

The lift operator came out of the chicken coop lift hut to chop some wood. His name was Ray Mills and we ducked into the hut behind him. A wood stove roared. Aphorisms scrawled by bored lifties covered the ceiling.

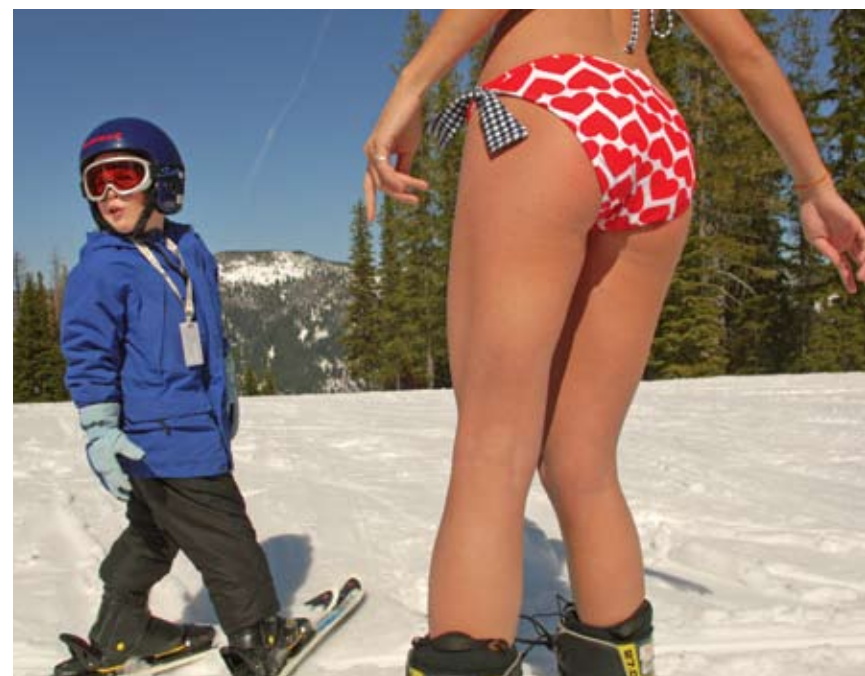
More Mennonites came up the lift. "They come up and ski hard in the worst conditions," Ray said approvingly as he watched them turn downhill, dresses flapping. Two men wearing ranch overalls and the latest skis were on the next chair.

"Carhartts and twin tips. You don't see that every day," Shawn said. Those were the Stott brothers. We met them later by the lodge. That's the thing about small ski hills — it's like a house party. If you don't know everyone when you arrive, you will by the time you leave.

Inside the lift hut talk drifted to David Letterman's ranch nearby until Ray pulled out a battered Panasonic radio to follow the local high school basketball game, in which the Choteau bulldogs were facing the Fairfield Eagles. "It's the battle of Teton County," he said, turning his ears to the game while keeping his eyes on the lift.

AFTER SKIING TWO ONE-CHAIR HILLS we decided to branch out and head to Lookout Mountain, which boasts two lifts and 400 inches of snow a year. Despite silky corn snow and a





plethora of bikini-clad spring skiers, my mind wandered back to the smaller hills. Maybe there is something inherent to skiing that always seeks an extreme. The snobbery of finding the deepest snow or steepest descent can just as easily be turned to trying to find the most homespun place.

You'll find it at Bear Paw, if you can find Bear Paw. We drove into the Chippewa reservation but we found no sign of a ski hill. A man fixing his car on a muddy street pointed us in the right direction. A few bumpy miles later we found

our destination, but the chairlift wasn't moving and cars were pulling out of the parking area.

"This place was hard to find," I told a guy taking off his ski boots.

"We don't want out-of-towners poaching our snow," he said with a smile.

"Why are they closing early?" I asked.

"We had to shut down; a snowboarder blew right off the lift," the man said. He introduced himself as Wayne and began

**Previous page:** A couple enjoys the view from the summit of Bear Paw Ski Bowl in Rudyard, Montana. Few signs lead to Bear Paw, but if you can find it, this one-lift hill offers down-home hospitality.

**Above:** Wearing Carhartts and skiing on twin tips, the Stott brothers unload from the top of the chairlift at Teton Pass Ski Area as Ray Mills keeps a watchful eye from inside the chicken coop turned lift shack.

**Right from top:** A Mennonite girl from Fairfield, Montana skis in a pink dress at Teton Pass Ski Area. • There are still jumps to be made after the chairlift stops at Bear Paw Ski Bowl. Outside the first aid hut kids launch themselves off the roof while inside their parents enjoy beer and conversation or as they call it, Group Therapy. • A bikini clad skier and her new friend celebrate spring skiing at Lookout Pass on the Montana/Idaho border.



putting his skis in the back of the truck. He was tall and thin with a shaggy mane that hung past his ears.

"Local kid?"

"Oh yeah."

"Did you know him?"

"Everybody knows everybody around here," his friend Kris Martens answered.

There was nothing to do but drive to Havre and wait the night. Havre is a loose collection of buildings and grain silos near the top of our country that straddles Highway 2. A sign said "Canada" and pointed across the river.

We returned to Bear Paw the next morning. We pulled in and saw Kris again. The snowboarder from yesterday was stable, she said, but with a badly broken leg and pelvis.

We geared up and walked over to the lift. "Hey, we don't allow short skis here," a big guy named Dave said, greeting me and my 170s. "Nothing under 210." Dave smiled and waved me over to the ticket booth.

It was a beautiful day, with radiant sun and indigo skies. We bought our tickets and headed to the lift. The lift towers had peeling green paint and the backrests sported local sponsorships. We sat behind the Kaercher Grain chair on one ride up, Hi-Line Drilling the next.

At the top of the mountain we had an expansive view that included Mount Baldy while the worn Bears Paw Mountains surrounded us. In the distance, the prairie stretched to the horizon. The snow, especially at the top, was bulletproof and wind hammered but no one seemed to care. We slid down the hill's 900 vertical feet and got back on the lift for a few more runs.

When we were hungry we followed Screaming Eagle to the scent of burgers on the grill. The big attraction on the sunny deck was Lily, the 8-month-old daughter of Sheena McCarthy. The guy working the grill was Joe and introduced himself as the "almost-son-in-law" of Judy Handstede, the ski patrol volunteer we'd met at the top of the hill. Charlie, the guy who took our ticket, was tucking into a Hermie burger, a triple-decker burger named after Judy's husband.

Sheena walked over and ordered two Hermie burgers. "Can I give you a tip?" she asked Joe, waving her change. "I don't need a tip, unless it's 'Don't eat the yellow snow,'"

A snowboarder carves turns down Teton Pass Ski Area nestled on the eastern front of the Rockies in the Lewis and Clark Mountains.

## The good thing about skiing a one-lift hill is you never have to think about which lift to ski next.

he said, turning back to put more burgers on the grill. We'd been at Bear Paw for two hours and already felt like we knew everyone on the hill.

We hit the slopes again and bounced our way down the moguls on Four Souls a few times. As we waited for the lift to take our last run, Dave said, "I like the Bear Paw. It's our own little Yellowstone Club, without the million-dollar condos."

As I rode up the lift I thought about the importance of community in skiing. Among the hard-core set, the sport is often described as the lonely struggle of the skier against the mountain. In the marketing brochures of expensive real estate, skiing is a luxury amenity where exclusivity is the highest goal. But, really, skiing is about the other people on the hill.

On these tiny slopes, there's not that much challenging terrain to set yourself apart — and everything to draw you together with the people sliding down with you.

At 4 o'clock the ski operators invited us to join them for their final sweep of the mountain. Then Dave insisted that we join the locals at a friendly drinking session called Group Therapy in the first aid hut. About eight of us sat around drinking Bud Light and eating Doritos while two young hotshots took turns jumping from the roof on their snowboards into the soft snow below.

That's when I realized I still love après-ski. But, like driving long distances across Montana, the journey is the destination. **BSJ**

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