

#266

Ernest C. "Bill" Robes

Born: ? Died: 1987

Bill began skiing in the unlikely place of Medford, Massachusetts, when his father, a machinist, fixed him some oak skis, 4' x 4' x 3/4", steam bent the tips, and nailed on blocks and toe straps for the feet. When the family moved to Dartmouth, Bill had a chance to develop his natural talents, first learning gymnastics and tumbling in the gym, and ski jumping from Dartmouth's first ski coach Sig Steinwall. John Carleton and the two Bowler boys had already developed their knack of doing summersaults on skis; Bill became an enthusiastic pupil.

From 1930 to 1935, a group of "professional" jumpers toured in the east. Alf Engen and Anton Lekang were the most famous. The group did their exhibitions on some horrendous hills – Winsted, Connecticut, for example – and at Bratt, Bear Mountain, and others.

Bill jumped in this tour. His specialty (when hill design and weather permitted) was the somersault on skis. He earned \$50.00 per weekend with no insurance.

In 1935 at the Winter Sports Exposition in the Boston Gardens (a snow-train promotion by the B&M Railroad), Bill did his famous flips on crushed ice – either mushy with body heat or frozen hard – for which he received \$150.00 a night.

This wasn't competitive skiing exactly; there was no one to compete against.

Bill taught "recreational skiing" in the Physical Education Department at Dartmouth from 1931 to 1939. He developed what was called the "Bill Robes School of American Skiing." Weekends he taught at the Marcy Hotel and the Homestead in Lake Placid. From 1942 to 1952, he coached skiing and organized the woodsmen program at Kimball Union Academy in Meriden, New Hampshire. Building competent young bodies through outdoor living, building shelters and log cabins, canoeing, cross-country exploring, were innovations in those days, and the KUA program became famous.

Bill judged ski jumping from 1932 to 1980, starting almost before there was organized judging. He became an Eastern and National Judge.

It was his career-long belief that judges should be out on the hills during training in order to help young jumpers improve. Hence, he developed the "Practice Judging Card" and later the wooden puppet "Olav Longflight" by which judges could explain to jumpers how they looked in flight and why the mysterious "scores" were what they were.

An active member of the Eastern Ski Jump Judges Association right from the start, Bill Robes was always a very positive force for good style and safe hills. For more than twenty years, he and his partner Roger Burt never turned down an assignment. Often they judged 2 meets on a weekend whatever the horrible eastern weather. Committed to skiing, Roger died of a heart attack after one such strenuous weekend of judging. Bill also had a heart attack but recovered. Clearly, they loved ski jumping and ski jumpers.

In late years – 1970 to 1980 – Bill had the special job of training and testing all prospective new judges. He and David Bradley rewrote the Judge's Test twice (it became the National test); Bill scored all the results, decided what further practice judging assignments were needed for Eastern meets.

Bill Robes was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1987.



Ernest "Bill" Robes in 1935