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Preston Leete Smith

Born: 1930



Information from nomination letter to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame – Sponsor: Cal Conniff

When Preston Leete Smith sold his publicly owned company in 1996, it owned and operated six resorts in Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine and California.

In 1955, at the age of 25, Preston Smith hiked the mountains of New England conducting a methodical search for the perfect mountain to develop for his ski resort. He settled on Killington in Vermont. In 1955, he married Susanne Hahn and, together, they pursued their dream. The public was eager for recreation and the timing was right. They caught the wave and rode the crest.

Preston had no money and no ski area management experience. What he did have was a love for the sport and a vision. His career in the ski business is the American Dream personified. Hard work, determination, and a love for what he was doing were the elements that made his dream come true. The Sherburne Corporation (Killington) was registered with the State of Vermont on April 6, 1956. They had a total of \$1,250.00 in the bank.

Preston became capital fundraiser, contractor, and designer of the area's trail system by assimilating what was already being done at other areas and projecting his own fresh ideas. With \$85,000 that he raised by calling on his friends and "knocking on doors," he built four platter Pomalifts and opened for business on December 13, 1958. It was a "shoestring start" with 8,000 skier visits for the season and revenues of \$43,000. A chairlift was installed the second year and from then on the company experienced dramatic growth. Despite the vagaries of New England weather, the company consistently showed a good profit.

Preston had an all-important philosophy: to continually strive to improve the skiing experience. He instilled a strong sense of that philosophy in his employees, encouraging them to be creative and innovative in seeking ways to enhance the ski experience and introduce better ways to serve the public. He had one of the best management teams in the country, many of whom stayed with him for years.

Before detachable lifts came along, Preston was always seeking (and finding) new ways to maximize the efficiency of his operations, from lifts to snowmaking, to improve guest satisfaction and insure greater profitability. By encouraging his talented management team and pushing industry suppliers towards greater innovation, Preston often changed the status quo. Probably his greatest achievement was his commitment to constantly improving and expanding snowmaking, which ultimately earned Killington a worldwide reputation for dependable snow conditions. In the early years, Preston and his crews pressed to make a Thanksgiving opening an annual reality, and the rest of the industry soon followed. He then pushed the limits of his snowmaking year after year, eventually extending the ski season at Killington from October to June.

He always thought that there must be a better way to teach skiing and was the first in the nation to test and use GLM in a big way. His ski school business skyrocketed with GLM. He catered to beginner skiers in every way possible to make sure they had fun while learning. He was, indeed, a visionary.

Preston was active in community, state, and ski industry affairs. He encouraged his management staff to also get involved. He was a past president and longtime treasurer of the Vermont Ski Areas Association, treasurer and director of the National Ski Areas Association, and a trustee of the United States Ski Educational Foundation. He was appointed by Governor Davis to the first Vermont State Environmental Board. In 1996, he received the "Lifetime Achievement Award," the highest honor bestowed by the National Ski Areas Association.

Preston's dedication to ski racing is manifest by the consistent allocation of funding, as well as provision of time and space at his ski resorts to promote the development of young athletes, consistent competitions schedules and, finally, the many years of service on the U.S. Ski Education Foundation in support of the U.S. Ski Team.

As a result, Killington has probably produced more than its share of U.S. Ski Team competitors. His daughter, Leslie Leete Smith, raced in the 1976 Olympics and was also the first four-year All-American skier for Middlebury College. His son, Scott, was named to the U.S. Development Team in 1979. Gold medal winner Donna Weinbrecht learned to tame the moguls on Killington's Bear Mountain's section and there were a host of others.

Preston Leete Smith was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 2000.