



Rope Tow 3. Skiers waiting in line to ride up The Wall.



Warren Miller on Rope Tows

Renowned ski filmmaker and narrator, photographer, artist, author, and historian Warren Miller skied Mammoth Mountain throughout his career. He developed a deep affection and respect for Dave McCoy and his endeavors.



David Fritschi, Jr. riding a rope tow on the upper part of Mammoth Mountain, July 4, 1948.

Warren Miller's World

FREEDOM FOR A TWO-DOLLAR BILL

For all of you people out there who aren't old enough to know what a rope tow is, let me describe one. Imagine a piece of rope that stretches from the bottom of the ski hill to the top. Made of hemp and usually spliced in half a dozen places, it ran endlessly around a drive wheel somewhere and dragged in the snow on the way up the hill. On the way back down, it hung loosely over half a dozen automobile wheels, each bolted to a convenient tree somewhere. As the rope dragged through the snow on the way up, it absorbed untold gallons of melted snow. Since it was made out of hemp it could absorb a lot. By mid-afternoon, the wet rope got so heavy that it took a strong skier to hold it while riding (and I use this term loosely) up.

To ride up, you stood with your skis parallel to the rapidly moving rope, held your hand out and put it around the rope, gradually increasing your grip until you started skiing up the hill at the same rate of speed as the rope. This death grip usually caused you to squeeze out a quart or more of wet, slushy, yucko water that squirted all over your ski pants and parka.

If you dared to wear just a sweater and the rope touched it, the wool would automatically get wrapped around the rope by the time you got to the top. There were no safety devices on the ropes until sometime in the 1950s, so as the rope began to climb into the shack where the automobile engine was powering it, a significant part of your sweater would continue with the rope as you fell to the ground exhausted and half naked.

You could ride a rope tow ... until you were so exhausted that you could easily fall asleep in the back of your car, where you were living in the parking lot on weekends.

Sure rope tows were wet, messy, and exhausting, but they were cheap. Anyone with a two-dollar bill could trade it for

an all-day lift ticket. Some people complained, but millions of them took up skiing in the late 1940s and 1950s because it was nonstop, inexpensive freedom. From the moment you put on your skis, you could keep them moving across the snow all day long. Racing down or riding up, it made no difference; your skis were wearing the wax off of the bottom of them all day long.

Dave McCoy was the king of the rope tows for a lot of years. [He] used to start those rope tows at eight in the morning and run them until it was too dark to ski. That was before everyone started suing everyone else for the slightest thing and added a big percentage to the cost of today's lift ticket.

The cost of building a rope tow used to be the cost of a junkyard automobile engine, eight or ten automobile wheels and several thousand feet of Manila hemp. The rope in those days was Army surplus and could be found for as low as ten to fifteen cents a foot, which translated to about \$200 for the entire length. Discounting labor, the cost of building a rope tow was less than a thousand dollars. From then on, the rope-tow entrepreneurs plowed back any rope-tow ticket earnings to eventually go into debt and build their first chairlift. Then, people were no longer tired from hanging on to a rope and they stood in long chairlift lines and complained about the wait.

Those rope tows sure opened up a lot of opportunities for me to make funny movies of people trying to hang on to them. It also allowed me to learn how to ski at a price I could afford while I was starting my ski-film business.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining about the advent of chairlifts. I enjoy that relaxing ride, but I had just as much fun on the mountain when a rope pulled me to the top.

—Warren Miller

Eastern Sierra Saver, October 2000

Mammoth Mt. Ski Tows

Non-Transferable

Not Replaceable If Lost



Five local racers who were named to the 1952 Far West Junior National Team. From left: coach Dave McCoy, Audra Jo Nicholson, Jill Kinmont, Kenny Lloyd, Dennis Osborn, Bobby Kinmont.



Kenny Lloyd



Bobby Kinmont

A New Wave of Junior Racers

For the 1952 Junior Nationals held in Winter Park, Colorado, Dave McCoy borrowed the Lloyd family's Packard station wagon to drive the five Bishop racers who had qualified. Though the racers were disappointed in their performance, Dave let them know that he was proud of them. "If you train, you can win," he said as they were driving back to California, "and with this winter's heavy snows we'll have lots of time to ski!"

To everyone's shock and dismay, during the summer of 1952 Audra Jo Nicholson contracted polio and lost the use of her legs. The promising young skier accepted her new challenges with a courage that inspired the Bishop community.



From left: Jill Kinmont, Don Banta, and Bobby Kinmont. Don is wearing snowflake pins, the coveted awards from FWSA races.



Dennis Osborn



Jill Kinmont



To service his Weasels that transported skiers between town and the ski area, Dave McCoy bought a \$3,000 lot on the south side of Minaret Road about a block up from Main Street and built his own garage, above. In 2007, the site is by The Village.



Penny, Dave, and Poncho McCoy.



Cousins, from left: Pam, Trinkka, and Mike Martin; Gary, Poncho, P-Nut, and Penny McCoy.