

Mr. Big Vanilla

Broadway lensman Werner J. Kuhn ran the patrol, taught first aid and shot PR photos at a popular Catskills ski area. **BY JEFF BLUMENFELD**



WERNER J. KUHN

Werner J. Kuhn (left) was a busy man, often greeting visiting skiers in his Tyrolian hat and street shoes that never quite fit his beartrap bindings. That's the author (far right) at age nine with his father, Marvin Blumenfeld, former commissioner of nearby Holiday Mountain Ski Area. The photo appeared in the January 9, 1962 *Long Island Press*.

The image was typical of ski area publicity photos of the early 1960s. That was when skiers, our Long Island family included, received coverage in the local newspaper simply because we were an adventurous family that went skiing.

In the New York Catskills at the time, Big Vanilla at Davos, an upside down ski area with parking at the summit, was a big deal. It attracted 3,000 to 5,000 skiers on a busy weekend, plus a smattering of celebrities, including TV comic Sid Caesar and other entertainers performing at nearby Borscht Belt hotels.

Now defunct, Big Vanilla, with a 330-foot vertical drop, offered a quad chair, a J-Bar, a double, and two T-bars that small kids would ride like a chairlift. When it opened in 1959 as simply Davos, named after the Swiss resort, it became the largest in Sullivan County, outsizing Grossinger's, Kutsher's, the Concord, the Nevele, the Pines and Holiday Mountain.

Located about 85 miles northwest of New York, the area offered 23 trails with typical Catskillian names like

Sleepy Hollow, and a misspelled Rip Van Winkel (sic) Run, all available for a \$4.50 lift ticket, \$3 off-peak.

The New York Times reported at the time, "Its slopes are not long, for the most part, but at least two of them are steep enough to make the skier of intermediate skill take careful stock of what lies below before shoving off."

Nothing much happened at Big Vanilla that avoided the critical eye of the late Werner J. Kuhn. A Broadway photographer by profession, Kuhn was Mr. Big Vanilla. He ran the ski patrol, taught first aid, shot the publicity photos and even posed in them himself.

"If you want something done, see a busy man," goes the saying. When my father and I posed with him for a publicity photo, Kuhn, in his Tyrolian hat festooned with more than a dozen ski area pins, was apparently too busy to close his beartrap bindings. No matter. He was faking the image in street shoes. There I am at the age of nine in 1962, with bamboo poles, tinted "safety" goggles, lace-ups and stretch pants, launching my career in ski promotion. The photo would later appear in the *Long Island Press*, our hometown newspaper, in a column by the late Frank Elkins, affectionately nicknamed a "skiloader" for his propensity to never actually pay for a lift ticket.

Kuhn was frequently in the news, posing with WNBC-TV personality Steve Woodman, and other gung-ho skiers who visited, including my own family who posed for yet another publicity photo with ski school director Boris Dernic. Often you'd see Kuhn's name appear as a Broadway photo credit. He photographed American stage and screen actress Molly Picon in the musical *Milk & Honey*; Ruth Gordon in *The Matchmaker*; and dozens more whose names have since faded from the limelight.

A training advisor for the eastern division of the National Ski Patrol, Kuhn also taught a hands-on first aid class at Sullivan County Community College. Not content with standard drills in CPR and bandaging, he used Simuluids—simulated chest wounds, broken bones, burns, head wounds and puncture wounds, all made out of vinyl.

Kuhn used these gory props to psychologically prepare his students for the sight of a severely injured

victim. It worked. As a young Cub Scout in the course I was assigned a simulated ski-pole puncture; when the “victim’s” hand-held pump ran low on “blood” (water, thickening agent, food dye) and began to spew and spatter, I started to taste yesterday’s lunch rising out of my throat; it was me who needed rescue. Kuhn’s class was about as real as a first aid class gets without actually knifing a volunteer.

Alan Blumenfeld, a retired menswear retailer from Philadelphia, now a resident of Voorhees, New Jersey, remembers meeting Kuhn in 1960 on a Jamaica (New York) High School Ski Club trip, an organization he co-founded.

“Werner and I would ski together whenever he put on his skis, which wasn’t often due to the fact that he also ran the ski patrol,” he says. “When he asked me to become a junior member of the patrol, I jumped at the opportunity. He was a stickler for detail, impressing upon me the importance of being a strong skier rather than just showy, and the importance of being totally in control at all times. These were great lessons that served me well for over 50 years of skiing.”

Kuhn died in December 1982 in Harris, New York, after a short illness, at the age of 67, just one week after being reelected president of the Fallsburg Police Department Auxiliary. An avid skier and enthusiastic participant in community activities, it was curtains for one of the Catskills’ most legendary ski-area promoters. ❄️

Jeff Blumenfeld, a resident of Boulder, Colorado, and native of Monticello, New York, founded Blumenfeld and Associates PR,



WERNER J. KUHN

Kuhn was more likely to be behind the camera, feeding New York-area newspapers with scoops, or whatever else he thought could make an interesting photo. In January 1964, Davos ski school director Boris Deric (far left) was photographed teaching shoulder rotation to (L-R) James Blumenfeld, the author, Big Vanilla ski patroller Alan Blumenfeld, and Marvin Blumenfeld. The ski area would later be called Big Vanilla at Davos.

LLC, in 1980 and today represents Jiminy Peak Mountain Resort, Bromley Mountain Resort and Cranmore Mountain Resort. A skier since the age of five, he’s kept a log of every day he’s spent on the slopes since 1972, but that’s another story.

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