Canaan Valley’s Storied Skiing Destination

How White Grass Got Its Name

*Chuck Nichols*

White Grass Ski Touring Center, off Freeland Road in Canaan Valley, has been a popular cross-country skiing destination for almost thirty years. Over those years, there has been a lot of speculation as to where this touring center got its name. Those in the know say it has nothing to do with our local species of grass—*Leersia virginica*—common name *White Grass*—or with the abundant snow that covers its grassy slopes through the Canaan winters. This little excursion through history will answer the question.

Harold B. “Chip” Chase grew up an Air Force “brat” whose parents were both avid skiers from New England. The family lived in places like Alaska, Colorado and New England, which made family ski trips available. They eventually ended up in northern Virginia where Chip spent his high school years.

As a young man, Chip landed near the western slopes of the Shenandoah Valley near Criders, Virginia in the early 1970s. Later, he spent the winters of ‘77-‘78 and ‘78-‘79 in Vermont where he was introduced to cross-country and telemark skiing. Telemarking is a downhill skiing technique performed on cross country equipment. While in Vermont, Chip became friends with Winslow Ayer and Dickie Hall. They both had grown up skiing in Vermont and had become very proficient telemark skiers. Dickie later established the North American Telemark Organization (NATO). Chip eventually convinced Winslow to move to Virginia.
In the fall of 1979, Chip returned to Crider and established trails on Shenandoah Mountain. He used an old schoolhouse near White Grass Knob as a base lodge. Among the frequent customers at this new touring center were groups from the Rockingham County Recreation Department and members of the James Madison University soccer team, Gene Bell and Mike Sayre, who would later become employees of White Grass in Canaan Valley. In the winter of '79-'80, there was sufficient snow to operate for two to three months but by March, the snow on Shenandoah Mountain was gone. Chip wondered if it was time for a change.

Trail map of the original White Grass Ski Area near White Grass Knob on the Virginia-West Virginia border. Sketch by Chip Chase.

The first seed of an idea for a new White Grass took root when, in a copy of *Nordic Skiing Magazine*, Chip noticed that a United States Ski Association sanctioned cross-country ski race had been held at Davis, West Virginia as part of the Alpine Festival. The contact phone number was Trans Montane Outfitters, located in Davis. Chip called and spoke to a staff member who informed him that plenty of snow was available for skiing, sometimes well into April.
With this new revelation, Chip and Winslow decided to visit Davis and Canaan Valley. They were directed to Canaan Valley State Park where a cross-country touring center was operated out of the golf course lodge. There they met Bill Moore who in the summer worked as a park naturalist and in the winter ran the cross-country center. Bill, being a biologist and avid skier, told Chip and Winslow about the winter weather, snow totals, and wonderful trails and terrain of Canaan Valley. This whetted their appetites to know more.

After poring over maps of Canaan Valley and surrounding areas, they decided to explore the area of Cabin Mountain. They noticed a diamond symbol on the map and figured this indicated where the cabin was located on Cabin Mountain. At the time, the Canaan Valley State Park ski area charged one dollar for a one-way ride on the chairlift. The boys paid their dollar each and skied off the top of the lift toward Cabin Mountain. They were on a mission to find the mythical cabin on Cabin Mountain which might provide a venue similar to the schoolhouse near White Grass Knob. Of course, this wild goose chase never revealed the cabin on Cabin Mountain. No such cabin existed!

However, after skiing all day, they came down Forest Service Road 80 onto Freeland Road. Continuing along Freeland, they saw the lodge and ski slopes that Bob Barton had operated in the 1960s on the Lindsey Reed farm. With assistance from Bill Moore and local realtor Cary Reed (no relation), they were able to contact Randall “Doc” Reed. Randall was a professor at Ohio State University and son of Lindsey Reed. They inquired about leasing a skiing facility from the Reed family.
During Chip and Winslow's visits, they also became acquainted with Tom Preston who was working on the ski patrol at the state park and who had an interest in cross-country skiing. Tom had purchased property in the Valley and planned to build a home in 1981. Bobby Snyder, another state park ski instructor, who also did architectural design with Steve LaFauci, had discussed doing the house plans for Tom. Bobby became acquainted with Winslow and Chip and learned of their home building talents and suggested to Tom that they all work together on building Tom's house on Flat Ridge. The crew consisted of Winslow, Chip, Johnnie Cunningham, and Roger Nemoytin.

In the summer of 1981, Chip and Winslow worked on Tom's house and made arrangements with Randall Reed to lease 'the old ski house” as Doc would call it. They began renovations on the building and surveyed existing trails that might be suitable for cross country skiing. During the days of renovation a frequent visitor was Bob Barton and his wife Anita Love Barton. They were very excited that someone was bringing the old ski house back to life for they had many fond memories of their years there. Bob, with his gift of gab, would go on with stories of winters good and bad and of his efforts in the new art of man-made snow. Johnnie Cunningham also helped with the huge task of getting this neglected building into shape by the winter of 1981. His wife, Mary Ann Yarsinske, came up with the idea of the Cafe.

The kitchen lies in shambles in this 1981 photo. Months of work lay ahead before it would be ready for cold, hungry skiers. Photo from White Grass Collection.

A few years later, Chip's wife, Laurie Little, is busy behind the counter in the White Grass Café. Photo from White Grass Collection.

Posing in her kitchen in the café in 2011, Laurie’s role as a consummate chef has contributed to the success of White Grass as much as the abundant snow, groomed trails and friendly warmth of the old ski house. Photo courtesy of Elaine George.
So now that things began to progress and it seemed that this venture might come together, Chip, Winslow, and Tom decided to form a partnership. They pooled their available funds and went to Vermont to buy ski equipment to use as rentals at the new White Grass Ski Touring Center. It opened for business in December 1981.

In 1982, the White Grass Corporation was formed with the addition of Mary Ann Yarsinske and Chuck Nichols to bring the number of owners to five. White Grass has continued to grow with the number of skier visits increasing to over 10,000 by the 2009-2010 season. It is a vital attraction to winter visitors to Canaan Valley.

White Grass broadened its influence in the Canaan Valley community in 1998 when the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge purchased a tract of land on which some of the cross-county trails were located. In an agreement to join the refuge in partnership, White Grass took on a greater role in environmental and conservation education, sponsoring and supporting outings and field trips along with posting information along the trails to heighten awareness of the fragility of the landscape and local endangered species. This arrangement has been well suited for both parties of the agreement, attracting more visitors to White Grass while drawing attention to the refuge’s mission to protect and conserve the wildlife habitat of the Valley.

In its some thirty years of existence in Canaan Valley, White Grass has been known as a warm and friendly place with good, natural food from the Cafe and a smile on the faces of people who have gathered there. Snow conditions can go from scarce to superb in the winter months but one can count on the pleasant atmosphere that is always apparent at White Grass. Ω
Photos of the Weiss Knob Ski Area in the early 1960s (left) and the same view today. Note that the doorway visible in the old photo is now the doorway that is inside the entranceway of today's White Grass building. The entranceway was constructed in the early 1980s along with the gable now above the current front door. Mature evergreens that stood by the building a half-century ago are now gone, replaced by new mature trees in different locations. Old photo courtesy White Grass Collection. New photo by Friends of the 500th.

The locations of the previous and current sites of White Grass; thirty miles apart as the crow flies but eighty miles and two and half hours by car. The old schoolhouse is shown by the arrow at first White Grass. Maps provided by the Friends of the 500th.

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