

ALPENTAL—THE BEGINNING

James Griffin

Alpental is not in the dictionary. Bob Mickelson, my partner and co-developer of the Alpental Ski Area, made up the name. Bob combined the Swiss/German words *alpen* (*alpine*), and *tal* (*valley*), to describe the mountain valley located north of the Snoqualmie Pass summit in Washington State.

The genesis of Alpental occurred in December 1964 when Bob and I met for lunch at the Bavarian Restaurant in Tacoma. We ate lunch together two or three days a week to review reports on our retail and wholesale sporting-goods businesses.

Bob and I had met the summer of 1951, shortly after he was recruited from Harvard Business School to work at Day's Tailored Wear in Tacoma, Washington. My father, also a Harvard Business School Graduate, invited Bob and his wife, Mary Lou, for an afternoon swim at our home at Gravelly Lake.

From the view of a fourteen-year-old, Bob looked to me like a Greek God. He was six-feet tall, broad-shouldered, slim-waisted and, like all athletes of that day, had a crew cut. I learned later that Bob had played football and track at the University of Minnesota and was first alternate for the 1948 Summer Olympic Games.

I saw Bob only occasionally over the next ten years. I finished college, married Wendy, and took over management of the Griffin Fuel Company, a home-heating fuel-oil delivery business started by my grandfather in the late 1880s. Then in 1961, Bob called me and asked if I would be interested in helping him to organize a tennis club in Lakewood, a suburb of Tacoma. He knew I had played tennis for Stanford.

I agreed to help. Bob had an impressive business background. He had been manufacturing ski apparel since 1952 and he had been elected to the Apparel Hall of Fame. In 1955, he helped to organize Ski Industries of America, and was its founding president.

We worked well together and, after the tennis club opened, Bob asked me if I wanted to go into the sporting-goods business with him. I did.

"Why me?" I asked.

"Jim, we complement one another. You are like a pit bull. You grab onto something, and you don't let go. We'll make a good team."

Bob asked his friend, Lou Whittaker, who managed the ski department at Osborn and Ulland in Seattle, to become our partner and run our new store because Bob and I had our other businesses. Bob was president and manager of Edelweiss, a ski-apparel manufacturing company owned by Day's Tailored Wear; I owned and operated Griffin Fuel Company. Lou's identical twin brother, Jim Whittaker, became an international celebrity as the first American to reach the summit of Mount Everest.

We bought VIP Sports in 1962 and changed the name to Whittaker's Chalet. One year later, we opened a wholesale sporting-goods business, Sport Chalet, to supply retail stores nationwide.

When I arrived at the Bavarian Restaurant, Bob was seated at a table, writing on a yellow tablet. The sparkle in his eyes immediately alerted me. He was going to propose a new venture.

"What's it going to be this time?" I asked.

"Let's build a ski area."

"You've got to be kidding?"

"Jim, Crystal Mountain is the only ski area other than Hyak [a minuscule operation] to open since Stevens Pass in 1955. Skier days have more than doubled since then. We're already in the retail and wholesale ski business. Why not go all the way?"

It made sense to me. I had been on the Vermont Academy and Stanford ski teams and I loved the sport. I also knew that Bob spoke from experience. He was one of several hundred stockholders of the recently opened Crystal Mountain, and he had been a co-chairman for their capital campaign.

“Do you have a mountain in mind?” I asked with a smile.

“Not yet, but I think we should look in the Snoqualmie Pass area.”

“Why?”

Bob began turning the pages of his yellow tablet, and recited the six western cascade ski-area demographics. The Summit Ski Area had opened in 1937 at Snoqualmie Pass, 40 miles east of Seattle. It had a vertical rise of only 765 feet, a bottom elevation of 3,000 feet, and a top elevation of 3,765 feet. Ski Acres opened just east of the Snoqualmie Pass summit in 1947 and Hyak in 1955, but they gave the Summit Ski Area little competition.

Stevens Pass, located 78 miles north of Seattle, had opened in 1955. It had a vertical rise of 1,800 feet, a bottom elevation of 4,061 feet, and a top elevation of 5,845 feet.

Crystal Mountain, located 76 miles southeast of Seattle and 64 miles east of Tacoma, had opened in 1962. It had a vertical rise of 2,400 feet, a bottom elevation of 4,400 feet, and a top elevation of 7,012 feet.

White Pass, located 155 miles southeast of Seattle and 120 miles from Tacoma, had opened in 1955. It had a vertical rise of 1,500 feet, a bottom elevation of 4,470, and a top elevation of 5,961 feet. Like Stevens Pass and Crystal Mountain, White Pass was accessed by only a two-lane highway. The three Snoqualmie Pass ski areas were accessed by U.S. 10, a four-lane freeway (the name was later changed to I-90).

“Jim,” Bob said, “do you hear what I’m saying?”

Continuing, Bob told me that the Snoqualmie Summit ski areas’ base elevation was 1,000 feet lower than the base elevations of Stevens Pass, Crystal Mountain, and White Pass, and had less than half the vertical rise of those ski areas. However, the Snoqualmie Pass areas had more ski days than Stevens, Crystal, and White combined. So, obviously, the short drive from the Seattle metropolitan area to Snoqualmie Pass, via the U.S. 10 Freeway, would more than compensate for the Pass’s lower-base elevation, more rainy days, lower vertical rise, and shorter ski slope.

“Well?” Bob asked when he had finished.

“I’m in,” I said with confidence. Then I added, “I assume you’ve figured out where we’ll get the money?”

He smiled. “We’ll find a mountain that adjoins private property, and develop lots and condominiums. Bill Janss did it when he bought Sun Valley from the Union Pacific Company. So can we. We’ll raise the rest of the capital through a stock offering.”

Bob’s enthusiasm was infectious, and his Harvard Business School training had stood us well in organizing and building a community tennis club, then opening and operating a successful sports shop and wholesale sporting-goods business. I had no reservations about our ability to succeed.

We left the Bavarian Restaurant with our assignments. I would investigate federal, state, and railroad land; Bob would contact the consultants he had worked with at Crystal Mountain, as well as his friends in the ski industry. A week did not go by before we had our first lead.

“Jim,” Bob said over the phone. I could hear the excitement in his voice. Jim (Sully) Sullivan, who had helped to install Crystal Mountain’s chairlifts and was now their hill manager had said there was a mountain just east of Snoqualmie Pass, with a base elevation similar to Crystal Mountain.

Bob and I met for lunch and scrutinized a topographic map. The mountain had all the attributes for which we were looking: north-facing slopes; 2,500-foot vertical rise and a 4,000-foot base elevation. Unfortunately, it would require a five-mile access road, and the cost to maintain and plow the road would be prohibitive.

Therefore, Sully suggested that we check out Denny Mountain, located on the northeast side of U.S. 10 at Snoqualmie Pass. The mountain was named after Arthur A. Denny, who had prospected in the Snoqualmie Cascades and filed iron-ore mining claims on Denny Creek in 1869. Denny was also given credit for founding Seattle; his party of homesteaders had arrived at Elliott Bay in November 1851.

Bob and I met the following day for lunch at Johnny's Dock, to look at another topographical map as well as a sectional map that showed the land's ownership. Denny Mountain also had north-facing slopes (which would allow skiing well into the spring). Its vertical rise was 2,400 feet, it had an access road from U.S. 10 to the Sahalie Ski Club (an alpine chalet that housed weekend skiers and hikers) near the mountain's base, and it adjoined private property.

Denny Mountain, and the privately owned valley that it formed with Mount Snoqualmie and Guye Peak (famous for its rock climbing), was exactly what Bob and I had in mind. The layout looked too good to be true. The only negative was the valley's 3,200-foot base elevation; it was only 200 feet higher than Snoqualmie Pass where winter rain was common.

Three weeks after Bob and I had met for that lunch at the Bavarian Restaurant, we hiked, on skis, into the Denny valley. It was a bright, blue-sky morning in early January 1965. With us were my brother Ted, Jim (Sully) Sullivan, and Lou Whittaker.

The terrain sloped down after we passed Sahalie. Then it flattened out at the valley entrance, where Denny Creek flowed into the Snoqualmie River South Fork. We plowed through heavy snow along the west side of the river at the base of the mountain. The ground rose gradually as we progressed up the valley. There was no mistaking the boundary line between the Forest Service and the privately owned land. The federal land was heavily treed, predominately fir, with some pine and cedar. The private property was barren except for a scattering of saplings; rotted stumps were all that was left of the old-growth timber that had been cut down before the turn of the century, and the second-growth timber looked to have been logged twenty years ago. We hiked through the trees up the lower slope of Denny Mountain and made long traverses across the hill. The terrain was steep, but there were no canyons or ravines.

Bob and I were ecstatic. Throughout the valley, we envisioned a winding road lined with alpine chalets. The valley road would lead to the walking bridge that spanned the South Fork. Across the river, we envisioned a day lodge and multiple shops. On the other side of the valley, condominiums would rise off the lower slopes of Mt. Snoqualmie and Guye Peak.

At the end of the day, Bob called the recreation manager of the Snoqualmie National Forest and arranged a meeting. Stan Olsen was thrilled with the idea of a world-class ski resort in his district. He told us he would set up a meeting with the Forest Service's Regional Administrator in Portland, Oregon. He also suggested that we bring to the meeting schematic drawings of the proposed ski terrain and private development, as well as aerial photography of the mountain and valley.

Bob then called his friend Warren Miller, the legendary producer of ski movies, and arranged for Miller to come to Seattle. A few days later, Bob picked Miller up at the airport and brought him to Snoqualmie Summit where I was waiting with a rented Bell B-200 helicopter in the Summit Ski Area parking lot.

The chopper took us to the top of the mountain where our future Chair Two would unload. There, Bob, Ted, a member of the U.S. Ski Team (we can't remember her name) and I skied into the bowl on the west side of the mountain, while Miller filmed us from the helicopter. The bowl dropped 1,100 feet to a ridge at the tree line, where our future Chair One would terminate. Bob named the bowl Edelweiss after his ski-clothing line, and the floral symbol of the high mountains. Then we descended through the trees to the valley floor, another 1,250 feet.

On a second run, we skied off the northeast side of the mountain as Miller filmed from the hovering helicopter. We dropped into a narrow chute that funneled out onto a wide slope that was too steep for vegetation to withstand avalanches. We named the run Internationale. *Sports Illustrated* later described it as, “The nation’s steepest ski slope per square foot.”

From the tree line, we dropped to the valley floor, passing over what would become the top of Chair Three, with a vertical rise of 525 feet. To the north of Internationale were other bowls. The largest I named Great Scott after my firstborn son.

The activity generated by the helicopter had brought a crowd of spectators to the Summit parking lot. When the people recognized Miller, rumors of a potential new ski area ran rampant. Bob and I had to move quickly to tie-up the private property before land speculators moved in.

The valley had been divided into eleven twenty-acre patented mining claims. Fortunately, only one person owned all eleven claims: Victor Borden, an Indian fish buyer who lived on the Olympic Peninsula. Bob and I arranged to meet him at the Morck Hotel in Aberdeen, Washington.

Like most mining-claim owners, Borden believed that his claims held valuable ore deposits and he was certain that our story of building a ski area was a ruse. He believed that we had discovered minerals. Therefore, we had to agree to give him a life estate in the mineral rights before he would consent to sell us his claims.

Bob and I then formed the partnership, Alpental Land Company, to hold title to the property. We each owned 40 percent. Jim (Sully) Sullivan, who had agreed to install the chairlifts, owned 20 percent. We signed a \$220,000 purchase agreement to buy the claims on February 8, 1965, subject to Alpental obtaining a Forest Service use permit. It had been only six weeks since Bob had proposed that we develop the ski area.

While Warren Miller produced the Alpental movie, Bob and I hired Seattle architect John Graham to prepare schematic drawings of the ski slope and private development. After the schematics and movie were complete, Bob and I joined Stan Olson in Portland and made the Alpental presentation to the Regional Administrator of the U.S. Forest Service. Like Olson, the administrator was supportive, and said he would forward a favorable recommendation to Washington D.C. A use-permit application came in the mail a few weeks later. Bob and Mary Lou and Wendy and I shared champagne that very night and the following day we began our quest.

We spent the spring of 1965 working with Mel Borgersen, a ski-area management consultant, and Jack Sleavin, a civil engineer, assembling documentation to submit to the Department of Agriculture, the lead agency of the U.S. Forest Service. We would not get a permit unless we could document the need for an additional Western Washington ski area.

Ironically, after submitting our application, Janss put Sun Valley up for sale. The price was \$2,400,000, the same amount we had budgeted to develop Alpental. The thought of owning a world-class ski resort was mesmerizing. Bob and I did some real soul-searching before concluding that we were too committed to Alpental to abandon it.

So, Bob talked with his friend Sigi Engl, Sun Valley’s Ski School Director, to get advice on ski lifts. Sigi told Bob that Riblet in Spokane, Washington manufactured the best chairlift. Bob called Riblet’s owner, Tony Sowder, who met with Bob and me and looked over Sully’s tower placements. Sowder immediately went to work preparing cost projections we would need to obtain a bank loan.

About the same time that we submitted our use-permit application to the Forest Service, I sold my fuel-oil business. The sale closed October 1965. In December, I took my family to Klosters, Switzerland for the winter. I thought it important to visit European ski areas to get a better understanding of the Gemuetlich atmosphere of the Tyrolean and Bavarian architecture Bob and I intended to replicate at Alpental. He and Mary Lou had made a similar trip some years earlier.

In late January, I returned to Tacoma to facilitate obtaining an initial \$50,000 line of credit, which the bank authorized. The bank also agreed to loan \$325,000 to build the valley road and to erect three bridges over the South Fork of the Snoqualmie River. Construction would start as soon as the snow was off the ground. We would install the three chairlifts and a day lodge the following summer (1967). Timing was critical. The \$325,000 loan was subject to being secured by lot and condominium sales contracts, meaning that before next summer the valley would have to be rezoned, and then platted into lots. Bob began immediately, and I returned to Switzerland to my family.

King County approved Alpental's rezone in late February, and I returned home again to Tacoma for the press release. It was imperative to get the word out so we could begin accepting lot and condominium purchase reservations. Alpental was on the front page of every Puget Sound newspaper and featured on all the evening TV news shows.

I then returned to Switzerland to stay through the spring. In April, Bob called me with wonderful news. The Forest Service had issued Alpental a temporary-use permit for timber removable, with assurance that the permit for full use of the National Forest was forthcoming. We were almost there. We only needed King County's approval of Alpental's preliminary plat (subdivision), and then we could take reservations for the lots.

My family and I came home from Europe in June. A few weeks earlier, Bob had resigned from Day's Tailored Wear and opened an Alpental office in Lakewood, a suburb of Tacoma. While waiting for King County's approval of the Alpental subdivision, we put the valley road and bridges out for bid.

Every day the building season grew shorter, and Bob and I were in a panic by mid July ... when King County finally approved the preliminary plat. It would be a tight race to complete construction before snow would shut down the valley in just over three months. We sent invitations for a viewing of the Warren Miller Alpental movie to the media, skiers, and anyone connected to the ski industry. We held two receptions a day apart at the Tacoma Sheraton Inn and Washington Athletic Club in Seattle. I am certain that few people came with any intention of buying a lot or condominium; yet within two days, 80 lots and nearly all of the 48 condominium units were reserved, most with backup offers. We had 123 lots in the subdivision; the 40 on the hillside would need additional engineering before they could be sold. Lot prices ranged from \$5,000 to \$10,000; condominiums from \$11,000 to \$30,000. We retained ownership of the land beneath the condominium building and would receive an annual fee.

We assigned the lot-reservation agreements to the bank the following day and obtained the additional \$325,000 line of credit. Actual sales could not be finalized until King County approved the final plat, and that could not happen until we had built the road and bridges and installed the utilities. Contractors moved into the valley the following week. Our engineer, Jack Sleavin, had completed the valley survey in June, during the lot-platting process, and staked the road and bridge locations.

To provide interim access for logging trucks, backhoes and D-8 cats, Osberg Construction, the road contractor, built a temporary bridge over the South-Fork of the Snoqualmie River and a road, along the base of Denny Mountain. Anderson Construction, the bridge contractor, kept the Snoqualmie River stirred up all summer with the installation of bridge footings, which held up the concrete T-beams upon which the bridge floor would lie.

The river was Alpental's Achilles heel. The churned-up silt, which discolored the river's crystal-clear water, brought daily complaints from downstream. We were inundated by visits from the county, state, and federal protection agencies who wrote citations faster than a used-car salesman could pass out business cards.

We amended the Alpental Partnership agreement in late July, to include my brother Ted. We needed his mechanical skills. Ted could fix or make anything. Bob and I now each owned 35 percent, Jim Sullivan 20 percent, and Ted 10 percent.

On August 4, Bob, Sully, Ted, and I met on-site with Forest Service personnel to review locations

for the day lodge, parking lots, chairlift towers, and Heidi Hut, a warming hut at the top of Chair One named after Bob's daughter. The Forest Service was represented by Ellis Gross, the District Ranger, and his department heads, Barrett, Ragland, Bowie, Shaeffer, and Frankenstein. The locations were approved two weeks later.

Sully's mountain crew, most of who had worked for him at Crystal Mountain, immediately began cutting trees. Timber cut from the parking lots and day-lodge site was picked up by artificial claws attached to flexible booms that drivers operated from platforms atop truck cabs. Trees cut from the lift lines and ski slopes were left where they fell; the Forest Service would not allow motorized equipment on the mountain. A Sikorsky 58 helicopter would lift the logs off the hill and set the towers the following summer.

I will never forget a dispute we had with the Forest Service about a stand of trees near the bottom of Edelweiss Bowl. Sully believed the trees would be difficult for skiers to avoid, but the Forest Service turned down our request to remove them. So, Bob took Paul Frankenstein, a Forest Service ranger, to look at the trees while there was still snow. While skiing down the mountain, Frankenstein crashed into the trees. After he regained his composure, he told Bob to cut down the damn trees. The tree incident was typical of our relationship with the Forest Service. It was a continual educational process. It reminded me of grade school "show and tell."

In late August, I met with O. G. Hunt, manager of Puget Sound Power and Light, and Lamar Gaines, manager of Cascade Telephone, to discuss underground utility installation. Overhead installation was free, but Bob and I did not want to scar the landscape or mountain views with utility poles and wires. The only aboveground cable would be up Chair One for the electric motors, because the Forest Service would not let us trench.

The following week, we notified all lot reservation holders that the lots were staked and they had until September 1 to approve their lot choices. Only four reservation holders decided not to buy, and their contracts were assumed by the backup reservation holders.

The Forest Service issued a permit in October to remove 23,000 cubic yards of mostly pit-run rock from the lower parking lot. We used it for the valley road sub-grade and saved thousands of dollars by not having to buy material from a commercial gravel pit.

In November, Bob and I met with the Kittitas County and Summit Sewer Commissioners to discuss joining their to-be-combined sewer districts merging in 1968. The commissioners voted to allow Alpental to join the new district. It would have been a huge financial burden (\$250,000) if we had had to build Alpental's own sewer-treatment plant. Bob and I celebrated with our wives at his house with champagne.

Snow shut down the valley before Thanksgiving. As the twelve-hour workdays came to an end, Bob and I were under a great deal of pressure. We had only five months after the Christmas holidays to prepare for the following summer's construction. We had to complete the design and engineering, prepare construction documents, bid out the work, and borrow or raise another \$1,650,000; a total of \$2 million to erect three chairlifts, build a day lodge, and install the sewer and water systems. We were able to finance construction of the first condominium, the Goldener Adler, through Washington Mutual Savings Bank. Our immediate need was \$320,000: \$100,000 for architectural and engineering; \$220,000 for King County sewer and water system deposits so King County would give final subdivision approval.

The Puget Sound National Bank agreed to loan Alpental the \$320,000, bringing our total sum borrowed to \$695,000, subject to our pledging the 40 unsold hillside lots as collateral, and obtaining a third guarantor besides Bob and myself. The bank's condition meant that Bob and I would have to take in another partner.

Fortunately, Bob and I had figured on this from the start. I called my friend Booth Gardner, who

later became a two-term Washington State Governor. Bob and I both had long-time relationships with Booth. I had grown up next-door to Booth; and Booth had worked for Bob at Day's Tailored Wear after graduating from Harvard Business School.

Booth and I met in Boston in December 1966 when he was working as Assistant Dean of Harvard Business School. He *was* interested in becoming an Alpental partner and agreed to invest \$250,000 and guarantee the bank loan if I could show him from where we were getting the remaining money to complete the construction. I explained that we no longer needed \$1,650,000; that Riblet had agreed to finance \$100,000 of the chairlift installation, and that we would get \$400,000 from the sale of the remaining forty lots. Booth's \$250,000 would bring our cash requirement down to \$900,000. I told him that Bob was working with our attorneys, Foster & Pepper, who were preparing a \$1 million stock offering. Booth accepted our proposal and became an equal partner with Bob and me. The stars were coming into alignment.

During preparation of the stock offering, our attorney, Lou Pepper, encouraged us to hire a construction-management consultant. He believed that investors would feel more secure knowing that an expert was overseeing the development. So, we hired John Beyer, a Morrison-Knutson international construction supervisor, who would be available by next June at the start of Alpental's construction season.

Beyer helped Lou Pepper and Jack Sleavin prepare the bid documents and to negotiate contracts. He told us we would have fewer equipment coordinating problems if we used one contractor. He also suggested that we give construction management to Coluccio Construction, an interstate utility contractor with which he had previously worked. Coluccio agreed to install the sewer-and-water systems and to trench the power, gas, and phone cables for less than our engineer's estimate. It was great news.

The ski company stock offering, which did not include the valley property, was completed by March. Bob, Booth, and I contacted a number of investors. None was interested in the ski area without the private property.

Next, I contacted the region's two largest insurance brokers, Ken Mueller of the Ward Smith Company and Tom Healy of Sparkman and McLean, to see if they could obtain an insurance company loan. Neither was successful. Insurance companies were not interested in making a loan to a start-up ski area (ski areas were seasonable businesses and not known for their profitability).

Time was running out. April had arrived and the snow would soon be off the ground. Coluccio, Gwinn Construction (day lodge and condominium contractor) Lakeside Industries, whom we had contracted to top-and-cap the road, and Riblet, with completed lift towers, were ready to move into the valley. The contractors did not know we could not pay them. Had they known, they would have started other jobs. We were desperate.

I went back to the bank and explained the situation. The bank said they would try to syndicate the \$900,000 to a correspondent bank. I slept through the night for the first time in weeks.

There was still much to be accomplished while waiting to hear back from the bank. We had to line up prospective department heads and a food-service operator. We needed managers to run the ski school, ski patrol, ski shop, chairlifts, snow removal, maintenance crews, ski ticketing, volunteer ski patrol, first aid, and a host of other positions. We decided to contract out the food service, after hearing horror stories about ski areas that had tried to do it themselves. We gave the business to Volume Food Service, owned by Kick Kolmen whom both Bob and I knew from when he was a concessionaire at the 1962 Seattle World's Fair.

I was now working out of the Lakewood office where I could pester the bank and help our accountants, Knight Vale and Gregory, prepare operational proformas. I also attended governmental agency conferences. We learned quickly that, when an owner attends an agency review meeting, there

are fewer delays.

Bob had moved a trailer into the valley to serve as our temporary office and a place to sleep when he was too tired to drive back to Lakewood. He followed up with the ski-area personnel to whom he had offered jobs.

The first managers to commit were Rene Moser and Hans Weissmuehler, former Sun Valley Ski School instructors and Swiss Ski Team members. They accepted positions as director and assistant director of Alpental's ski school. Also from the Sun Valley Ski Patrol, Ed Holmes and Pat Bauman would be Alpental's professional ski-patrol director and assistant director.

By mid June, we still did not have a financing commitment and our contractors were ready to bolt. Puget Sound National Bank was working with Seattle First National Bank, but no agreement had been reached. Therefore, Bob, Booth, and I decided to start construction without a loan commitment. It was a gutsy decision. We had just six weeks, until August 10, before the contractors' first draws were due, in order to obtain financing. Had we waited any longer, there would have been no chance of completing the chairlifts and day lodge in 1967, and Alpental would have been facing bankruptcy.

The Denny Valley became a beehive of activity. D-8 cats, cranes, backhoes, logging, and cement trucks snaked their way in and out like a trail of ants. Work halted only when dynamite charges were blasting rock from the condominium foundations, roadbed, or chairlift tower footings. The shutdowns were costly, and the contractors worked on a guaranteed price. We paid \$10 a minute for a leased Sikorsky helicopter, whether it flew or sat on the ground.

In the middle of construction, one day a private plane flew into Guye Peak. The pilot was flying under the clouds, following U.S. 10 and lost visibility of the highway when it entered a snow tunnel. All of the occupants died upon hitting the mountain. It was a gruesome sight.

Bored teenagers kept our engineers busy replacing road alignment and contour stakes, which they kept removing. We finally installed a gate at the valley entrance that was locked at night and on weekends. Bob hired a Seattle Bon Marche security specialist, Wolf Daub, to patrol the valley. He became Alpental's Chief of Security and a King County Deputy Sheriff.

John Beyer was in the valley every day, overseeing the contractors. It did not take long for them to discover that he was an experienced construction engineer, and they began coming to him with cost and timesaving suggestions. Bob was not as lucky with the Forest Service people; they were constantly after him for violations in river discoloring, dynamite blasting, and timber cutting. At night, he worked on a Chalet Design Guidelines pamphlet, spelling out Alpental's mandated Tyrolean-Bavarian style architecture.

Fire season came early. Our Sikorsky 58, the workhorse helicopter of the Vietnam War, and Bell B-200 helicopters left to fight forest fires. Then the Forest Service put a limit on the number of workers allowed on the mountain during the fire season. They also forbade the use of explosives. We tried to explain that we could not dig lift foundations in solid rock. We were not convincing, however; the restraining order had come out of Washington, D.C.

Under cover of darkness, Sully blasted the ski tower's footing holes. The sheriff never investigated the explosions. Bob and I assumed that Wolf Daub, our security specialist, had something to do with that. We did not ask. We did not want to know.

The Forest Service finally relented and let Sully's chairlift crew back on the mountain. Sully had to use electric Copco drills rather than gas drills, and electric caps rather than lighted fuses, to reduce the risk of fire. Everything—dynamite, drills, rebar (steel rods to reinforce tower footings), food and water—had to be hand-carried up the mountain.

The next problem occurred a few days later. A union boss informed Bob that the Puget Sound Trade Council, an association of unions, was placing an informational picket at the valley entrance. All of the valley contractors were union shops, but Sully's mountain crew was non-union.

Bob and Dan Riviera, a union specialist with Foster & Pepper, met with the Union Council. The Council was upset that Alpental was not using union personnel and not providing eating and sleeping facilities at the top of the mountain. The first grievance went away when the unions could not provide workers who were willing to carry one-hundred-pound loads up the mountain. The second grievance became moot when Bob agreed to install lodging facilities. Bob purchased a tent, which he erected and supplied with a gas cooking stove and provisions. The following night, two members of Sully's crew camped out in the tent, and a very large black bear shredded the tent while they were inside it. That was the last sleepover.

Then another bomb dropped. Bob and I were beginning to feel like Odysseus trying to return to Ithaca after sacking Troy. On a Tuesday morning, I received a call at the Lakewood office from Burl Pierotti, Sully's crew foreman. Bob was out of town at a national ski-area meeting. Pierotti informed me that Jim Sullivan had not been on the job since Friday ... and we worked seven days a week. I asked if this had happened before and he said it had. Then I asked if he knew where Sullivan was. He had heard a rumor that Sullivan was installing a T-bar ski lift near Twisp, an Eastern Washington town on the Canadian border. I told him I would come right up to the mountain.

When I pulled into the parking lot, Sully's red Dodge pickup was there. We talked and agreed that since he had a prior commitment, I would take over running the mountain construction. That was the last time I saw Jim Sullivan. Lou Pepper and Ben Shuey, Sullivan's attorney, negotiated the buyout of Sullivan's partnership interest.

I was now the hill manager. It did not matter that I had no idea what I was doing. We operated two shifts, five a.m. until one p.m., and one p.m. until nine p.m. I was at Alpental every morning to accompany the crew up the mountain. It was a one hour and forty-five minute hike to the top. It took only a few days of my carrying an equal load to win the crew's respect. Looking back, I am stunned at the number of times they kept me out of harm's way.

Wendy still tells the story about my Mickey Mouse lunch pail. I had just gone to bed (I was up at 3:30 so I could get to the mountain by five a.m.) when Wendy screamed. I grabbed my baseball bat and ran to the kitchen. She pointed to my Mickey Mouse lunch pail, which was open on the counter. Two sticks of dynamite fuses, exposed like Fourth of July Roman candles, were poking out.

"It's a joke," I explained as I watched tears run down her face. "The crew is playing a joke on me."

The bank called at the end of July. Seattle First National Bank had agreed to loan \$600,000. Puget Sound Bank was loaning the remaining \$300,000. We broke out the champagne once again.

The loan required personal guarantees from all partners. My brother did not want to be liable for the bank loan, which now totaled \$2 million. So he asked us to buy him out, and we did. It was back down to Bob, Booth and me.

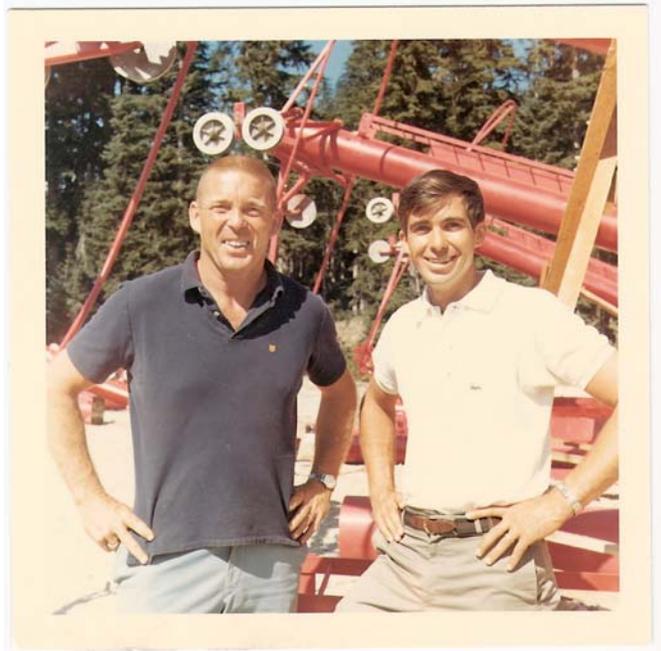
In August, King County tested Alpental's newly installed sewer system, and water was inserted into the line under pressure. In several locations, water bubbled to the surface, so the pipe was uncovered. The King County engineers found that Coluccio Construction had not bedded the pipe in the required amount of sand (sand was expensive; it had to be hauled from a gravel pit down the mountain), and the pipe had broken when rocks were pushed against it during back filling. The entire system, more than a mile of pipe, had to be uncovered and repaired. It cost \$200,000. The following year, Alpental prevailed in a two-week trial and received a judgment sufficient to cover the costs, but the extra expense at the time of the repair had been devastating.

Fortunately, there were no leaks in the water line installed in a separate trench on the opposite side of the road. Power and phone cables had been laid together in a third trench alongside the water line.

Shortly after the water system was operational, an insurance investigator came to check the

hydrants flow. The day lodge and the condominium garage level were framed, and the insurance company did not want to take a loss if the buildings burned down. John Beyer, Bob, and the investigator watched as the first hydrant valve was opened. Only a trickle of water came out. It was a terrifying few minutes until Pierotti happened by and told them he had closed the gate valve at the reservoir, to do some work on the water intake pipe (two large culverts inserted in the river), and had forgotten to reopen it.

Upon receiving the investigator's report, our insurance agent, Graham Anderson, told Bob that the insurance broker, Petit and Morey, was making a significant premium back-charge. Bob had to do some fast talking to get the hydrants retested and the surcharge canceled.



The Sikorsky and B-200 helicopters returned in September. I witnessed their first day. It was surreal. Like a hawk after its prey, the Sikorsky swooped down from above the trees, with a log dangling from a fifty-foot cable. Simultaneously, like a hot-air balloon, the B-200 lifted straight up and ferried a twirling bucket of cement. I shuddered as the helicopters crossed paths. Somehow, the logs and buckets missed each other.

Below, lumber, cement, and logging trucks darted in and out of the parking lot. The B-200 returned for more cement. Beneath the hovering B-200, a ground crew member caught the oscillating bucket, which looked like an oversized farm milk-canister. He held it in place while the cement churned out of the truck's spigot. Once the container was full, the crewmember radioed the pilot, who rose from the hovering position and lifted the swinging bucket.

A hill crewmember waited for the helicopter at a tower footing hole that was laced with steel rebar. The pilot positioned the bucket over the hole, and the crewmember pulled a lever, releasing the cement into the footing.

My gaze shifted back to the parking lot. The Sikorsky pilot, Tommy Gurr, was hovering fifty feet off the ground, while a crewmember unhooked the choker cable that encircled a log like a hangman's noose. Once the log was free of the choker, the helicopter lifted skyward and a self-loading truck moved in and picked up the log. Seconds later, the Sikorsky was hovering back above the ski slope, waiting for the two loggers, who were wearing yellow hard hats and tattered jeans held up by red suspenders, to set another choker.

This loop was broken only when a helicopter refueled. Tommy Gurr set down the Sikorsky next to

his fifty-gallon gas barrels and waited for the rotor to quit turning. Then he climbed out of the cockpit and stood on the landing skid where an attendant handed him the end of the fuel hose. Before inserting the hose into the helicopter's fifty-gallon fuel tank, Gurr carefully wiped clean the end of it because dirt in the fuel line could cause the engine to quit and the fifteen-hundred-pound dangling log would pull the helicopter to the ground, causing a fiery crash.

Time was running short. *Seattle Times* sportswriter, Bud Livesley, and staff photographer, Bruce Kim, interviewed Bob and me for an article that appeared in the October 8 Sunday edition. Livesley wrote, "But the challenge now is man versus mountain—and a December 2 target date. 'Opening-day ceremonies are set, and the deadline will be met,' Griffin said, 'surveying a scene of hundreds of uprooted trees, unfinished buildings and near-impassable roads.'"

The sewer pump station, septic tank, and drain field—all located near the temporary bridge at the first river crossing—were completed in mid October. This was a makeshift solution until Alpental would connect with the new district being formed by Kittitas County and the Summit Sewer District. It was a great relief to Bob and me when all of the governmental agencies—King County Health Department, Washington State Health Department and Washington State Pollution Control Commission—approved Alpental's temporary system.

After the timber was off the lift line, Tommy Gurr started setting towers on the reinforced concrete pads. I watched his first placement. With a tower dangling from a cable, the Sikorsky hovered while two men below struggled to place the swinging tower over four bolts imbedded in concrete that protruded from a two-foot-square steel-base plate. The tower was finally jerry-rigged into place, like threading a needle, and nuts were quickly screwed onto the bolts.

Another crisis occurred when the Chair One carriage frames, to hold the cable, were secured to the towers. Pierotti was not able to pull the gearbox up the hill using a cable and winch. The gearbox, which was riding on a sled, was too heavy for the Sikorsky helicopter, which had a limit of 3,500 pounds. So, Bob went to North Bend to talk to Ken White, the assistant district ranger, to see if the Forest Service would let us pull the sled up the hill behind the D-8 cat. As Bob was explaining the problem to Ken White over lunch, a logger overheard the conversation and said, "That's no big deal. I bet you a fifth of whisky I can winch it up before the day is over." And he did.

I was not at the mountain to witness the crisis, but Bob talked about it for days. Once the gearbox was in place, a small diameter wire rope was pulled down the hill and fastened to the lift cable, which was wrapped around a giant roller like a spool of thread. As the gearbox pulled the cable off the spool over the second tower, the pulley frame came apart.

There was no welder in the valley. I called my brother, Ted, who could fix or build anything. Ted was at the Seattle Marine Aquarium, a facility he had built himself.

Two hours later, with a welding pack on his back, Ted was scrambling up our tower. He repaired the frame within minutes, and soon our crew was back at pulling cable.

Then the next day, the wire rope broke loose from the cable and the cable went flying backward out of the pulleys, leveling every small tree in its path. Two teenagers, who had ignored the warning signs, were struck as the cable snaked its way down the hill. They were taken to the North Bend Hospital. Fortunately, they were not seriously injured.

Ski season was rapidly approaching and we needed to begin publicizing the opening of Alpental. Bob arranged for a ski demonstration by our Swiss Olympians, Rene Moser and Hans Weissmueller, on a grass ramp at the Seattle Ski Fair. The *Seattle Times* featured Moser and Weissmueller in their Sunday Ski Addition, and the article made Alpental a household word.

The following week, I hitched a ride in the B-200 helicopter to the bottom of Internationale. Burl

Pierotti said we needed to cut more trees from the trail to funnel skiers across the ridge to the top of Chair Three. I went to take a look; if more trees needed cutting, it had to be done before the Sikorsky helicopter left the valley.

As we descended, a wind shear blew the helicopter against the cliff. I was on the B-200's landing skid, preparing to step off onto the ridge, when the rotor blade struck rock. I dove to the ground beneath a rain of shrapnel and took cover behind a granite outcropping. The helicopter's rotor blade disintegrated as it tore into the cliff, like a bomb in a Fourth of July fireworks display. A continuous volley of metal daggers flew into the rock that was protecting me.

The rotor finally stopped spinning, and the air grew still. I heard raindrops bounce off my slicker. I stepped from behind the granite outcropping, expecting to find the pilot cut to pieces. The helicopter's bubble cabin, fuselage, rotors, and tail section were scattered across the slope. But he was still strapped in his bucket seat. Bulbous veins protruded from his arms and hands, as he was still gripping the cyclic control lever. His eyes were expressionless. I asked if he was all right. He did not respond. I unbuckled his seat belt and helped him to the ground.

Some minutes later, he said, "I couldn't let go. I would have been disemboweled. I flew two tours in Vietnam and took some hits, but nothing like this."

My own chest and left arm were throbbing. I reached under my sweater and felt something sticky. I slipped off my rain jacket and pulled up my sweater.

"My God!" the pilot exclaimed. "You're bleeding."

My shirt was covered in blood. Had the shrapnel sliced in an inch one way or the other, I might not have walked away. We were both happy to be alive.

A few days before Thanksgiving, the Forest Service tested the chairlifts. Bob and I were like two college teenagers before a final exam. The motor engaged and a chair rounded the bull wheel. The attendant grabbed the chair and held it in place until Ken White, the Forest Service's Assistant District Ranger, was seated. Then the attendant let go and the chair swung forward.

I looked at Bob, and a smile spread across his face. We were thinking the same thing. We had erected three chairlifts in one season. That had never been done before, despite losing our helicopters during the worst fire season on record.

The following week brought bad news, though. The liquor control board denied Alpental's application for a draft-beer and wine license. I met with the liquor inspector. He suggested that we reapply and ask for a bottled-beer license because there were complaints that keg-beer patrons would create a rowdy atmosphere. We reapplied, and Bob and I made the presentation to the board. Our license was approved. Another champagne night!

Twenty-four hours before the opening ceremonies planned for December 2, a contractor severed the telephone line to Bob's trailer. Coordinating last-minute details, Bob raced back and forth between the trailer, day lodge, and a public phone at the Snoqualmie Summit gas station, while delivery trucks raced in and out of the valley.

As the sun dropped below the Cascades the evening before the opening, a crane dropped the lift operator's hut into place at the bottom of Chair One, and carpenters waited to apply shingles. Eldon Morrison, our electrician, hung lights on the walking bridge. Reid Sand and Gravel delivered cement to secure the "Welcome to Alpental" sign. An eighty-foot flagpole was erected in front of the day lodge, a gift from Mary Lou and Wendy to Bob and me. Alpental's electrical contractor hung from the rafters in the bier-stube, attaching light fixtures. Cafeteria table-and-chair sections were passed hand-to-hand from a delivery truck into the day lodge, as in a fire brigade. After the truck was unloaded, Frank Pattison, Alpental's furniture representative, headed for the door exclaiming, "I forgot the screws!"

Forty-five minutes later, Pattison called from North Bend to tell us he had the screws but could not

get back because the pass was closed due to heavy snowfall. So, Bob went to the ski shop in the basement of the day lodge and scrounged screws from bindings that had not been mounted yet onto the rental skis. Then Bob, Burl Pierotti, and Eldon Morrison assembled the cafeteria furniture, while Mary Lou cleaned the restrooms. It was after midnight by the time Bob and Mary Lou finished washing the windows.

Seven hours later, the sun peeked over Mount Snoqualmie. Washington's governor, Dan Evans, cut the yellow ribbon strung between two skis. A crowd of friends, family, Alpental employees, Forest Service personnel, and government dignitaries looked on. Then Bob's wife, Mary Lou Mickelson; my wife, Wendy Griffin; and Booth's wife, Jean Gardner, broke a bottle of champagne on a Chair One pylon, after which everyone went into the day lodge to celebrate ... there was not yet enough snow to ski.

Even two weeks later, stumps were poking through the snow on the lower slopes. But we had to open. We had a payroll to meet. We had expected a normal snow year and filled twenty-five jobs. Ty Rice, an Alpental pro-patrolman, sustained the first broken leg on the mountain by catching a ski under one of those snow-covered logs.

The winter of 1967-1968 was the worst snow year on record and by April Alpental needed more capital. Bob and I took in three additional partners Sam Brown, Jack Galbraith and Tom Murphy. Then in 1968-1969, there was too much snow. Some weekends, we could not keep the lifts operating; others, we had to turn cars and buses back because the snow was too deep to get them into the parking lots. In 1977, when Westours offered to buy our ski area, we accepted the offer. Bob and I had convinced ourselves that Alpental's resort ambiance would motivate skiers to switch from Snoqualmie Pass's three other ski areas. That did not happen—because Alpental's beginner and intermediate terrains were limited and could not compete with the larger and better-groomed slopes. Bob and I also had expected a large percentage of advanced skiers to come from Stevens Pass, Crystal Mountain, and White Pass, because the drive to Alpental was considerably shorter and Alpental's vertical rise and steep slopes were similar. But that did not happen, either. The advanced skiers preferred the lighter snow and fewer rainy days at the other areas... and were willing to drive a further distance for it.

And that was the beginning...

In August 2005, forty years after conceiving Alpental, I met my old friend Bob Mickelson over a long lunch in Sun Valley. He had moved there from Tacoma in 1978, and we got together now and then. By now, he was over eighty. I asked Bob what came to mind when he thought of Alpental. He looked out the window, with frown lines on his forehead, and then chuckled. "I had to be up at four a.m. every morning to call in the weather report. It always seemed to be thirty-five degrees and raining. The track came off the Tucker Snow Cat when your brother took it for a test drive after the opening ceremonies."

His eyes returned to mine, with a smile. "I will never forget watching Ed Holmes (the pro-patrol director) out the day-lodge window, skiing down Chair One with a chain saw slicing off the tops of fir trees poking through the snow ... and when Pat Bauman tried it, he cut off the end of his ski boot."

Bob laughed. He was on a roll. "Remember when Holmes and Bauman fired the Forest Service's 75-millimeter recoilless gun, trying to knock the cornices off the top of Edelweiss bowl and Internationale?" His smile deepened. "They misaligned the gun's site and sailed a shell over the top of Denny Mountain. Only by the grace of God did it not hit the freeway."

His eyes twinkled as he continued. "Remember when Rhody Lee and Bill Dempsey built their chalet and asked our dynamite crew to blast a hole for their wine cellar?"

I nodded. "A boulder from the explosion went through the roof of your trailer and landed on your foam mattress."

He smiled. “Which exploded, covering the inside of the trailer with tiny white particles. Of course, it wasn’t funny at the time.”

Then he asked me, “Jim, were you there when Rockefeller’s (a chairlift crewman and later a pro-patroller) arm got tangled in the cement bucket’s cable and he was pulled fifty feet off the ground?”

“Yes. Thank God he hung on.”

“I remember when my chalet caught fire,” Bob continued. “Frank Pattison had installed a metal fireplace but forgot to insulate it. I went to sleep with the fire burning and woke up with the cabin full of smoke.”

With another smile, he added, “Speaking of the chalet, Burl Pierotti plowed the snow bank away from my front door so I wouldn’t have to crawl through a snow tunnel. Then with the weight of the snow gone from one side of the cabin, the other side rose up like a teeter-totter. Until spring thaw, I had to block up one end of my bed to keep from falling out of it.” He laughed.

Then he looked out the window again. “One of my biggest rewards was the Alpenbees.”

Bob had put kids to work in the summer, building trails, like FDR’s CCC camps during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Then Bob added somberly, “How our lives would have changed if Alpental had been selected to host the Winter Olympic Games.”

Alpental had been Washington State’s representative at the Olympic selection-committee meeting in New York, December 17, 1967. If we were selected, we already had a commitment from Walt Mearsheimer, a representative of the Swiss Von Roll Company, to install and finance aerial trams from the day lodge to the tops of Mount Snoqualmie and Cave Ridge.

After three hours of reminiscing, Bob and I were emotionally drained. We shook hands and departed.

As I drove away, I asked myself, would I do it again? The first thoughts that flashed through my mind were the heartaches, frustrations, and disappointments. I thought about the unrelenting stress and the heavy toll on Bob and me and our families. It was as if we were in a maze, running into one seemingly blind alley after another.

Yet we had accomplished so much. We removed three-million board feet of timber, built three miles of roads, constructed three bridges over the South Fork of the Snoqualmie River; installed water, sewer, electrical, and phone systems; built parking lots for a thousand cars, developed 123 lots, erected three chairlifts without motorized equipment; built a day lodge and constructed 150 plus condominiums. To do this we raised nearly \$2,500,000, which would be equal to \$16 million today.

The experience was priceless ... and led to a successful forty-year career in land development.

I smiled. Nope, there was no denying it. I would do it again.