

Morse Farm Ski Touring Center

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Winter was always a slow time for Morse Farm Sugarworks. By the third week of October, the colorful foliage is brown and under foot and the last of the tour buses have pulled out of the parking lot heading for the interstate.

Several years ago Burr Morse began working on an idea that would utilize this down time. He saw the land surrounding the farm as no less scenic in the winter months with rolling fields, sugarbush and dramatic views of Camel's Hump and the Worchester Mountain Range. In Burr's mind, the farm presented itself as an ideal location for a snowshoe and cross country ski touring center. The idea of a ski touring center also appealed to long time neighbors Chip Stone, Bill Kaplan and Nat Winthrop. Together they began working on a business plan that would include land and an initial investment from each family.

John Morton, a Nordic Ski Olympian and trail designer, was brought in to create a trail system that would take advantage of the physical beauty of the land as well as provide a variety of trails that would appeal to different skill levels. Onion River Sports agreed to set up and coordinate snowshoe and ski rental equipment and offer lessons. When it came time to start the work of clearing trails, Burr asked the community for their help and was surprised and touched by the outpouring of support from volunteers eager to see the ski center become a reality.

As anyone starting a new business knows, there is any number of concerns to lose sleep over. Burr Morse is an astute businessman and had worked hard with his partners to consider all the variables, within their control, that would make this venture successful. The skiing industry is of course at the mercy of Mother Nature who doesn't give a hoot about variables. Last winter, as many will recall, she was generous with snow but cruel with sustained sub-zero temperatures. Ominous forecasts kept many out-of-state alpine skiers off the slopes and snow machines off the VAST trails. There was another concern which proved difficult to gauge. Burr worried whether people would pay to ski on his trails. VAST trails are easily accessible from many roads. Skiers frequently take advantage of the networks of the paths groomed for snow machines.

Last winter the dream was realized when Morse Farm launched the first season of Morse Farm Ski Touring Center. The center opened December 20th with

15 kilometers of trails. As it turned out, lots of cross country skiers already knew or discovered how enjoyable it is to ski on trails groomed specifically for them without the noisy accompaniment of snow machines and all that comes with them. Not intimidated by cold temperatures, locals made up the majority of skiers and were treated to a variety of trails that ranged from gentle rolling slopes for novices to climbs and descents designed to challenge the advanced skier.

Trails and maps are marked with signs that indicate difficulty of terrain, and every night the trails are freshly groomed. People enjoyed the cozy glassed-in deck with the wood stove, homemade soup and snacks. They could spend the whole day exploring different trail loops then come back to the center to warm up with a hot drink. The first season ended rather abruptly in the beginning of March when temperatures went up for a few days and the snow quickly disappeared. The season was successful because it was calculated that they had come out right in the middle somewhere.

This year the touring center has added 10 kilometers of new trails that will cross over the County road and continue northwest of the farm. This means more than a 60% increase of trails from last winter. They've also improved their grooming capabilities with the addition of a Pisten Bully trail groomer purchased from Mount Ascutney Cross Country Ski Area. Looking ahead, Burr and his partners would like to continue to be able to add trails and improve the ski center, but slowly. Advertising is limited to brochures in rest areas and information kiosks as well as on their website. The Morse Farm Ski Center is small, affordable and very appealing to local folks. The success of Morse Farm business comes in part from a willingness to look to the future and evolve and adapt to stay current with a changing world.

Does Burr ski? When he was a kid there was a rope tow set up on the hill on the west side of County Road. He skied there many winter days and became quiet proficient. After a twenty minute break from the sport, he decided it was time to give it another try at Sugarbush. On his fourth trip down the mountain, he had an unfortunate run-in with a birch tree. The tree won, and Burr spent nine weeks in a body cast with a broken back. That pretty much wrapped up his alpine skiing career. A few years back, good friends made him a generous gift of cross country skis, boots, poles and bindings. He now enjoys the stark beauty of winter from the trails, as much as his busy schedule permits.

Ellen Magurn lives in East Montpelier with her husband Hal Mayforth and their three sons Nick, Fran and Charlie.