

Earl Purdy and the Founding of Dodge Ridge Ski Resort

By Ralph Purdy and George Purdy

Earl Purdy was the founder of Dodge Ridge, and it's a fascinating story how that came to be. Dodge Ridge Ski Resort opened in the fall of 1950. It had a large lodge with a dining area, ski rental shop, and a ski sports shop. On the slopes there was a chairlift and two double-rope tows. The season that year was only three months long. Nevertheless, it attracted 19,000 skiers, a harbinger of the fact that the resort would be consistently profitable throughout its existence.

In 1944, Earl, his wife, Mary, and their sons, George (5) and Ralph (3), lived in an apartment on the second story of a general merchandise store that Earl ran. The store was located near the small towns of Manteca and Escalon in the San Joaquin Valley.

In 1945, the family spent the summer in a cabin owned by Mary's parents in Long Barn. Earl stayed at the general merchandise store during the week and drove to Long Barn to be with his family from Saturday evening until early Monday morning.

George, the elder son, had severe asthma living in the Valley. However, the asthma essentially disappeared when he was in the mountains in Long Barn. Earl and Mary realized that there was no way they would be willing to move back to the Valley. So, Mary stayed with the children and Earl continued to work at the general merchandise store and come up to the mountains on weekends.

The winter of 1945-46 was hard for the family in Long Barn. The small cabin was located down a steep road off Highway 108. There was a small general merchandise store in town and a single telephone, located at the Long Barn Lodge. During the winter, Mary pulled a toboggan up the hill to the store to buy items like bread and milk, and also ice for the icebox at the cabin. Then she would tow the loaded toboggan back with a rope as she descended the hill. Earl would



Source: George Purdy
Mary and Earl Purdy with infant, George - 1939

bring groceries and supplies up each weekend. In 1946, Earl and Mary bought a small home across the road from the store, and Earl continued to commute to the Valley for the next three years.

Earl was looking for any opportunity to find work in Tuolumne County so he could move back with his family. Then, in 1949, a series of events occurred that provided that opportunity. George and Ralph recall that Earl was up for the weekend and was across the street at the little general merchandise store having a cup of coffee. The owners there casually mentioned that the U.S. Forest Service was soliciting bids to develop a ski area at nearby Dodge Ridge. They asked if Earl was interested. On a whim, he said yes, and added his name and \$100 to cover the application fee. Then he forgot about it. About three weeks later, the Forest Service contacted Earl and asked him if he was interested in building and running a ski resort. What a surprise! Among the applicants, Earl was chosen because of his prior business experience and excellent credit record.

Earl's decision to build Dodge Ridge Ski Resort was influenced by his skiing experience at several small ski resorts in the area. Long Barn Lodge had a rope tow on a hill near the lodge that was a very popular winter destination, beginning in the 1930s. About eight miles east of Long Barn, on Highway 108, was a small ski slope called, "Little Sweden." It had one rope tow

CHISPA

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CHISPA, the title of the quarterly publication of the Tuolumne County Historical Society, is a word of Spanish origin. Although it has a variety of meanings, ranging from *sparks* or *embers* to *cleverness* or *wit*, locally it acquired an additional meaning as it was also used to describe any nugget or specimen of gold, especially one of great beauty or high radiance. The term was introduced to the diggings of Tuolumne County by pioneer miners from the State of Sonora, Mexico, and was quickly adopted into the vocabulary of the many nationalities who mined here.

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and a warming hut where you could get hot chocolate and snacks. There was also a ski resort at Cold Springs built by Jasper Meuli. Jasper installed a J bar lift, which was a step up from a rope tow. It consisted of a bar attached to the moving cable overhead and a horizontal bar attached at the bottom of the bar. You sat on the horizontal bar to be pulled up the ski slope. (In 1952, Jasper became assistant manager at Dodge Ridge and worked there with Earl for many years.)

Perhaps the most interesting local ski resort for our story about Earl was at Pinecrest Lodge. It had a rope tow, but more important, it had two extremely accomplished ski instructors, Don Paulsen, the recreation director there, and Otto Steiner.

We don't have the background on Don Paulsen's development as a skier, but there were news reports of extensive backcountry ski trips he led. In one story, Don escorted a group of skiers, including Arthur Martin, the manager of Pinecrest Lodge.¹ They took the Gooseberry Trail near the base of the present Dodge Ridge and spent the day and into the evening getting to the Gianelli cabin, which is near the present trailhead for going into the west side of the Emigrant Wilderness. The next day, they climbed to Burst Rock and, from there, spent a glorious day skiing slopes in all directions.

Earl Purdy and Don Paulsen were good friends. The Dodge Ridge Ski Club was formed in 1951, and

Don was the first Club President. His goal was to stimulate widespread interest in competitive skiing.

We know much more about Otto Steiner. Otto was born in 1902, in Munich, Germany. He learned several skiing methods being taught in Europe in the early 1900s: the *Zdarsky* method which involved making snowplough turns on very long skis aided by leaning on and dragging a stiff single pole; the *Telemark* method, well known to cross-country skiers; and the *Arlberg* method in which the skier uses two poles and advances, with training, from the snowplough to the parallel "Christie" turn. Otto competed in the first winter Olympic Games in Chamonix in 1924, and in the St. Moritz Olympics in 1928. At the 1932 Olympic Games in Lake Placid, New York, Otto trained racers, critiqued race courses, and competed in the pre-Olympic races with the world's top competitors. Subsequently, Otto moved to California.²

Otto Steiner was committed to developing a uniform technique of ski instruction. In 1947, he became the founding president of the newly formed California Ski Association and met that year with twenty-five ski instructors at Mount Rose Ski Resort near Reno, Nevada. Steiner, called the "Dean of all instructors,"³ guided the group as they developed the requirements for instructors to win Association certification. By 1949, the organization was renamed the Far Western Ski Instructors Association and offered seminars on standardized teaching techniques and competitions in slalom, downhill, and jumping.⁴

In a 1953 speech Earl Purdy gave to friends and stockholders, he spoke more about Otto Steiner and the events that led Earl to build Dodge Ridge Ski Resort. Otto knew the terrain at Dodge Ridge and saw its potential as a ski resort. In 1947, he worked hard to promote skiing and obtain financial pledges to bid on a Forest Service prospectus for Dodge Ridge. Unfortunately, when it was time for Otto to make the bid, the pledges failed to come through. Earl knew this story because, at the time, he was skiing with and taking lessons from Otto.⁵

Earl was quite happy running the general store near Escalon and had no interest in the ski business. In fact, he said, "anybody stupid enough to go into the winter sports business is either a millionaire with more money than brains or some middle-class individual with no brains." So, you can imagine Earl's surprise when the USFS Supervisor, Allen Miller, called Earl

after seeing his signature on the bid for the 1950 prospectus for Dodge Ridge. Allen told him that, if he was serious, they would accept his bid. Earl asked for a few days to think about it. As he reported in his speech, "I went home talking to myself. I wondered, how goofy can you get? Here is an untried business, except for a few crazy Europeans and some millionaire playboys. What the hell was I doing thinking about that?"⁶

Earl knew what he had to do. He went to a friend whose judgment he really trusted, and who was an engineer with ten years' experience at R.G. LeTourneau. He asked his friend to take a trip with him. They traveled 10,000 miles and visited every ski resort from Colorado west. They took photos and talked with everyone they could. Earl said, "I came home all worked up to go right into business."⁷

Building a ski resort is a big project. The Forest Service had in mind a major investment and estimated a minimum cost of \$150,000.⁸ It would include a ski lodge, chairlift, rope tows, improvements on the dirt road from Highway 108 to Dodge Ridge, and a parking lot accommodating hundreds of cars.

There is a family story that George and Ralph enjoy. Before any building began, the boys were with Earl at Dodge Ridge when he opened up a matchbook. On the inside he drew a miniature plan showing where the lodge, chairlift, and rope tows would be. The final design of the resort matched that little drawing perfectly.

Earl created a closed corporation whose investors included family and friends: Earl himself; Mary Purdy's father, Walter Gardner; Walter's two brothers Garl and Will; Fred and Charles Fisher, who were ranchers living near the general merchandise store in the Valley; Dr. Norman Morrison, a physician from San Mateo; Terzich and Wilson Funeral Home of Sonora; and Roy Parks, who ran a sawmill in Tuolumne County. Together, they were able to raise the \$250,000 needed to build the resort.

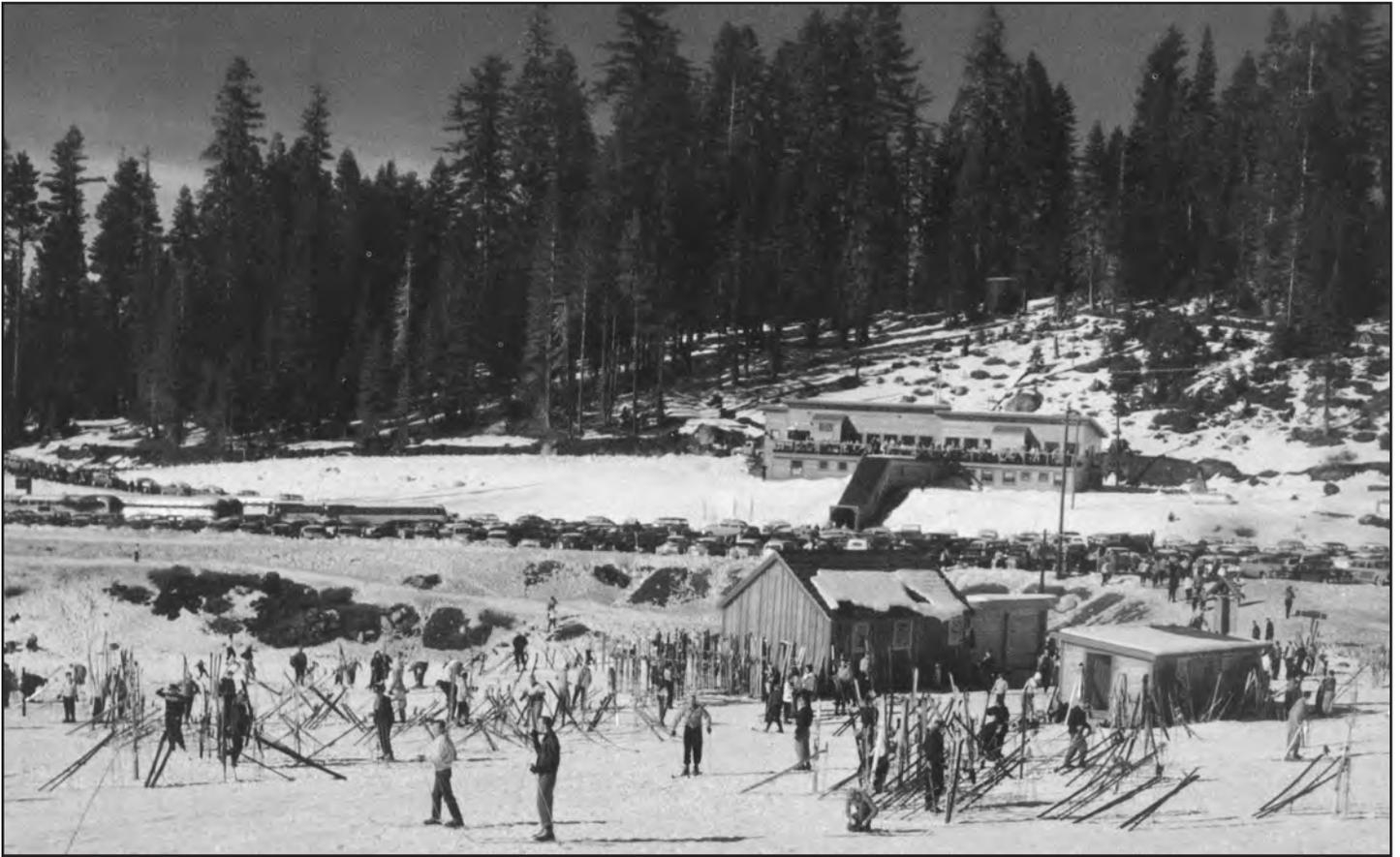
Building Dodge Ridge was an enormous undertaking. There was only a dirt logging road into the area, and the future lodge, parking lot, and ski slopes were covered with trees. Earl secured two special use permits from the Forest Service: one for five acres covering the locations of the future chairlift and parking lot, and the second one for approximately 320 acres covering the ski slopes.⁹

On Earl's trip to study ski resorts, he found that Squaw Valley, in 1949, was quite modest. Squaw Valley Resort opened that year with a small lodge, one rope tow, and a chairlift built by Heron Engineering. Earl was impressed with the chairlift and contracted with Bob Heron to build the same type of chairlift at Dodge Ridge, at a cost of \$93,000.

The construction work on Dodge Ridge began in early 1950, and continued most of that year. Slopes were cleared of trees, and the chairlift and two double-rope tows were installed. A parking lot for two hundred cars was built not far from the base of the chairlift, and was expanded the next year. The two-story lodge was built on the other side of the parking lot and included a dining room upstairs, with ski sales and rental facilities below. The dining room served breakfast and lunch, but there was no après-ski cocktail bar. Earl wasn't interested in the restaurant or bar business and was committed to a family-friendly ski area.



Source: George Purdy
Mary Purdy and son Ralph on the newly built
Heron chair lift - late summer 1950



Dodge Ridge ski area - 1950

Source: Dodge Ridge Archives

Family members contributed to the operation of Dodge Ridge in the first two months. George and Ralph remember that their grandmother, Frances Gardner, cooked in the kitchen. George and Ralph often joined in with a long line of skiers to side-step up the rope tow slopes to pack the snow. Slope grooming equipment only became available in the second season.

The building of Dodge Ridge was completed in December 1950, opening on January 6, 1951. Robert Frohlich pointed out in his book about Sierra Nevada ski resorts that 3,000 skiers came to Dodge Ridge on its opening day. Tickets sold for \$3 for an all-day chairlift pass, and \$1 for a rope tow pass. The first season was only three months long, but attracted 19,000 skiers. The second year, it drew 25,000 skiers.¹⁰

The first head of the ski school at Dodge Ridge was certified instructor, Ken Floto. Ken taught beginning and intermediate skiers. He was committed to teaching school children, who would be dismissed from classes in Tuolumne County one afternoon a week to come to Dodge Ridge to receive ski instruction. George and Ralph remember their time in high school

when students would ride the school bus to Dodge Ridge for a day of instruction and skiing.

In those early years there were relatively few American ski instructors. The second head of the Dodge Ridge Ski School was Eric Johnson, of Scandinavian origin. He served there from the fall of 1952, through the spring of 1954. When George



Source: Dodge Ridge Archives
Cappy Cook, Ski Patrol - 1952



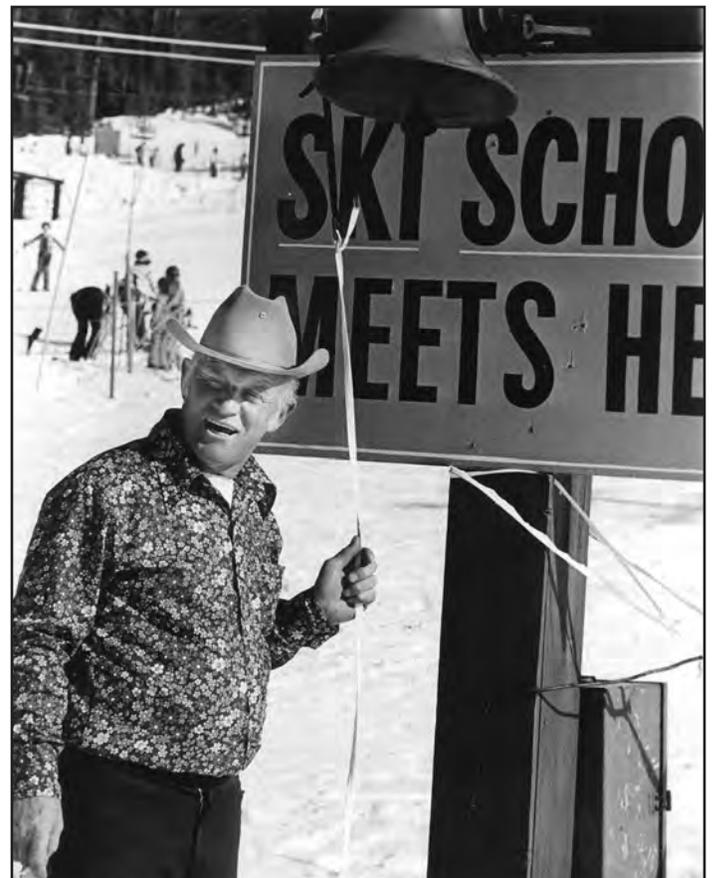
Eric Johnson, far left, and the ski school instructors - 1953-1954

Source: Dodge Ridge Archives

and Ralph were children just learning to ski, their ski instructor was Alghurdus Vokietaitis, originally from Lithuania. He spoke eight languages and taught the *Arlberg* skiing technique. They remember his saying, “much up-down, bend the knees and swing the arms.” Actually, a lot of extra motion and effort was required to ski in those days since the skis were very long and boots were made of soft leather providing little ankle support.

Ray Patton became the head of the Ski School in 1954, and served in that role through 1977.¹¹ Ray started his skiing career in 1949, as an instructor at Badger Pass in Yosemite Valley, under Ski Hall of Fame recipient Luggi Foeger. Ray was known to many Tuolumne County residents who started skiing through a program he established in which school children were brought to Dodge Ridge to receive ski lessons. Ray was also a key figure in the National Veterans Slalom Race held annually at Dodge Ridge. He repeatedly won race championships in his age category. Ray served two terms as president of the Far West Ski Association and was the chief examiner for instructor certification.

Earl loved skiing. He went out on the slopes nearly every day, in part, because he was a hands-on manager and wanted to see for himself how things were



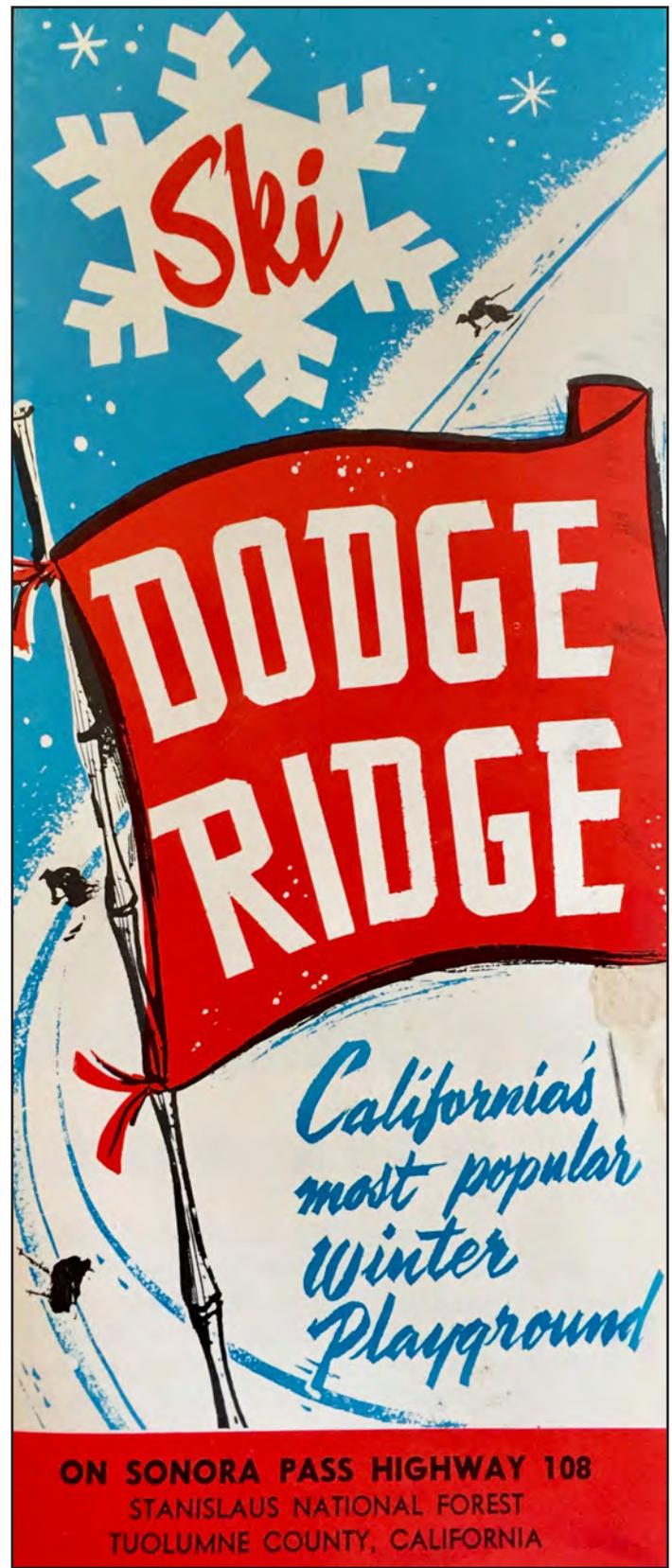
Source: Dodge Ridge Archives
Ray Patton ringing the Ski School bell - early 1970s

going with the lifts, the slopes, and the customers, but also because of the sheer joy of skiing and connecting with the crew—lift operators, ski patrol, and ski instructors. George and Ralph remember fondly skiing with their dad on many occasions.

Earl loved Dodge Ridge and also saw it as a huge benefit for Tuolumne County. In 1950, he joined Sonora Pass Vacationland, an organization devoted to the promotion of recreational opportunities in Tuolumne County. That organization was formed in September 1948, and featured such activities as the Antiques Show, the Mother Lode Quarter Horse Show, and the Miwuk Indian Acorn Festival.¹² Plus, it promoted Tuolumne County as a vacation destination for swimming and boating, fishing, camping, dining, and accommodations at the county's many hotels and motels. In an interview in 1950, with the *Sonora Union Democrat*, Earl stated "Tuolumne County is about to enter the big-league winter sports and Sonora Pass Vacationland is adding a major attraction to its already well filled book of recreational activities."¹³ Margaret Sylva, a dear friend of Earl's, was a Vacationland member. She said, "It was the first time this County had any advertising... We made maps, listings, sponsored trips and tours, advertised and had an exhibit at the state fair for five years."¹⁴ With Dodge Ridge as a part of the picture, many businesses flourished, including restaurants and motels. Earl was a tireless promoter of Tuolumne County, traveling around the state to advertise the county's riches and worked with the community for civic progress. Earl continued to build Dodge Ridge over the years, ending with six chairlifts and two new lodges by the mid-1970s.

It is important to note that Mary Purdy was at Earl's side and was his strongest supporter in the development of Dodge Ridge, Sonora Pass Vacationland, and many other activities. Mary accompanied Earl at many dinner meetings, and, since she was an accomplished pianist and vocalist, she often provided musical programs. To the surprise of many, Earl was an accomplished violinist and would join Mary occasionally with his violin.

Mary also contributed to the life of Tuolumne County in her own right.¹⁵ She hosted a radio show on KROG, Sonora, during the 1950s and 1960s, offering music and commentary on local events. She was the music director for the Tuolumne County Parent Teacher Association and organized music programs at several schools.



Source: Dodge Ridge Archives
Brochure, lift ticket cost was \$4.00 - early 1950s



Source: George Purdy

Earl and Mary Purdy - 1970

Mary played a central role in getting funding and government approval for the building of the Long Barn schoolhouse in the early 1950s. This was important given the history of where children had been going to school in Long Barn. In 1946, George went to second grade in the Knights of Pythias Hall. When that building burned down, the students were schooled, first at the U.S. Forest Service Office in Long Barn, and then at a converted bakery at Slide Inn. It was an enormous relief to finally have a real school.

Earl finally decided to retire in 1976, and sold Dodge Ridge to Frank Helm and his family. They continued what Earl had started. Over time, they tripled the size of Dodge Ridge by adding chairs 7 and 8. Frank and Sally also made enhancements to the lodges and other facilities, including the family lodge. As with Earl, they always put the customers first. Frank and Sally shared Earl's vision of Dodge Ridge as a welcoming and family-friendly resort and have pursued that vision to the present day.

Endnotes:

1. "Pinecrest Resort Ski Group Discovers Topflight Conditions at Burst Rock, Ski Tours Seen As Future Sport," Arthur R. Martin, *Union Democrat* (Sonora, CA), March 21, 1946.
2. Wolfgang Lert, "Otto Steiner: For the Record," *Skiing Heritage Journal*, Winter 1995, 41.
3. "123 Placer Student Will Open Winter Sports Activities at Soda Spring During Weekend," Bill Berry, *Sacramento Bee* (Sacramento, CA), January 2, 1947.
4. Ibid.
5. Personal family documents – speech by Earl Purdy in 1953.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

8. "Ski Lodge bids by Forest Service for Dodge Ridge," *Union Democrat*, November 3, 1949.
9. "Huge Dodge Ridge ski-tow provides new facilities for skiers [skiers]," *Union Democrat*, August 10, 1950.
10. Robert Frohlich, *Mountain Dreamers, Visionaries of Sierra Nevada Skiing* (Truckee, CA: Coldstream Press, 1997).
11. "Ray Patton Now in Charge At Ski Incline," *Union Democrat*, October 3, 1978. Obituary, "Ray Patton, July 24, 1925 – April 12, 2006," *Union Democrat*, May 2, 2006.
12. "Vacationland Assn. to Begin Membership, Publicity Campaigns," *The Banner* (Sonora, CA), October 29, 1948.
13. *Union Democrat*, August 10, 1950.
14. "Earl Purdy worked to promote county," *Union Democrat*, April 2, 1991.
15. Obituary, "Mary Jane Purdy," *Union Democrat*, January 13, 1989.

Ralph and George Purdy were born in Stockton, California, and when they were very young, four and six-years-old, the family moved to Long Barn. Both boys went to Long Barn Elementary School, followed by Sonora Union High School. They overlapped for one year at Modesto Junior College and then went their separate ways. George graduated with a degree in business administration from Sacramento State and then went to work at the Motherlode Bank in Sonora. Later, in 1967, he went to work at Dodge Ridge. He did every job there was to do in the office, including bookkeeping, ticket sales, and answering the myriad of questions from customers every day. George retired officially from Dodge Ridge in 1997. However, he continued to work there occasionally on special projects for several more years. He also served as a volunteer firefighter at the Long Barn station for fifty years and is a longtime member of the Mount Calvary Lutheran Church in Sugarpine.

After Modesto Junior College, Ralph earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Pharmacy and also a Masters degree in pharmacology from University of the Pacific. He married his wife, Leslie, in August 1969, and they both went to UCLA for doctoral studies, Ralph in pharmacology. After one year of postdoctoral study at UCLA, Ralph joined the faculty of the pharmacology department in the medical school at UC Irvine, where he spent his entire career. Ralph, Leslie, and eventually, their two sons and their families, have joined George skiing at Dodge Ridge many times over the years. George continues to reside in Tuolumne County and Ralph lives in Novato.

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Source: Dodge Ridge Archives

Dr. Fran Conlin, representing the National Ski Patrol Association; Earl Purdy; and Frank Helm - 1976