

## FRANCIS PICHE – THE MAN BEHIND THE INVITATIONAL

Written By: Carol Lee Anderson

Gunstock Ski Club, New Hampshire's oldest organized ski club, recently hosted the Francis Piche Invitational event at Gunstock Mountain Resort. Our talented New Hampshire team proudly won this highly-competitive Giant Slalom.

The first run of this race was made in 1970, beginning its life as the Tompson Trophy Race. It was renamed the Francis Piche Invitational in 1995 after Bob Bolduc, along with Kevin Hayes, now Gilford's newly-elected Selectman, campaigned for the name change.

Bolduc gave a simple, straight-forward answer when he explained why he took on the daunting task of renaming an already-established Alpine skiing event. "Well, Francis Piche just did so much for the sport of skiing," he said.

Piche, the founder of Piche's Ski Shop, grew up on Morrill Street in Laconia, the oldest of seven children. He sold his first pair of wooden skis during the Great Depression of the 1930's, figuring he could make some much-needed money, however little it might be.

It remains an amazing fact that recreational skiing in the East grew at an astounding rate during a time when the basic necessities of life were so difficult to obtain. Piche, selling Lund Factory seconds from his family's converted chicken coop, had no problem selling out of skis.

While continuing to supply skis to local residents, he coached the Laconia High ski team for two seasons, earning a meager two dollars per week. Possessing an incredible work ethic, Piche worked at the Belknap Recreation Area, recovering rope tow handles, when the Area opened during the 1937-38 winter season. Again, pay was minimal.



Francis Piche, left, shakes hands with Bob Bolduc in 1978, the year Bolduc purchased Piche's Ski Shop in Gilford.

Throughout the time he worked in the ski industry, Piche became an accomplished skier in his own right, winning medals in three different dash events at the 1939 Winter Carnival in Meredith.

The 1940's brought major changes to skiing in America as well as to Piche's life. Skiing in this country began primarily as a Nordic event. During WWII, a flood of Austrians entering the United States brought with them downhill skiing, along with the excitement of its speed, to the slopes of eastern ski areas. That same war took Piche overseas in 1942 to battle the raging war in Europe. He returned home in August 1945, when he was discharged from active duty.

Upon his return, he went to work for Scott and Williams, a local company, while running his ski shop on Batchelder Street on nights and weekends. At the same time, he was very actively involved in local skiing groups such as the Winnepesaukee Ski Club and the Gilford Outing Club.

Working at the local post office was the last job that Piche would hold outside of his ski shop. In 1951, he went to work full-time at the shop, a bold move that raised a few eyebrows at the time. The business was moved to its present location in 1953.

In 1978, Piche sold his ski shop to Bob Bolduc, after the pair had worked side-by-side for 20 years. Bolduc possessed the same work ethic as did Piche; neither thought anything of working an additional 40 hours just on a weekend.

The two met at Gunstock where Bolduc was working in the kitchen. Bolduc, who was just entering his teenage years, was also working on the family farm in Gilford. Piche allowed him to juggle work on the farm with work at the shop. Eventually, Bolduc became Piche's manager, and it became a natural step for him to purchase the business when Piche was ready to sell.

After the purchase was made, Bolduc expanded the product lines as well as the store itself. Last year, Bolduc's sons, Pat and Rob, took over the reins of the business and now run both sport shops, one in Gilford; the other in Belmont.

Over the years, Piche's Ski and Sport Shops have been actively involved in reaching out to the community. Each year, they proudly sponsor the Francis Piche Invitational event, providing product demonstrations and equipment maintenance for race competitors.

Piche died in 1999; however, if he were alive today, he would be justifiably proud of the sport shops and the invitational event that bear his name. All are well-run with the utmost consideration taken for the people involved-exactly as he would have wanted it.

Gilford's Thompson-Ames Historical Society always welcomes historical stories. If you have a story you would like to share, please contact the Society at: [www.thomames@worldpath.net](mailto:www.thomames@worldpath.net). Please visit our web-site at: [www.gilfordhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.gilfordhistoricalsociety.org) for a complete listing of upcoming programs and events.