

A tall tree falls: Recalling late ski entrepreneur and former selectman Thad Thorne

By [Tom Eastman](#)

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CONWAY — Another of the valley's treasured tall trees has fallen.

Thaddeus Thorne, 87, of South Conway — described in his obituary in Friday's paper as a “surveyor, businessman, forester, fisherman, community leader, ski industry pioneer, entrepreneur, and beloved patriarch” — died from natural causes at his home Saturday, June 25, with many members of his large family at his bedside.

Born May 25, 1924, in Pasadena, Calif., Thorne was the eldest child of Harold W. and Margaret Comstock Thorne. He grew up in New Canaan, Conn., and spent his summers on Conway Lake in New Hampshire.

Ironically, Thorne — a former president and general manager of Attitash Ski Area — died just shy of the observances held Friday at Attitash to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the opening of the Alpine Slide, the attraction that he was responsible for bringing to the ski area in summer 1976.

He was also the fund-raising chair for the community effort that led to the building of the Ham Ice Arena in Conway in 1998.

In conversations with many of his friends this week, as well as one of his daughters, the former three-term Conway selectman (1958-1967) and ski area leader was remembered as an energetic man who loved the active life, whether blasting rocks from a ski trail, working with a team of oxen, or of running his South Conway sawmill.

A veteran of World War II and Korea, Thorne was — to borrow newsman and author Tom Brokaw's term — a member of “The Greatest Generation,” who did their military service, came home, raised their family, worked hard, and did the job right.

“With Thad, you did what had to be done. There was never a question of failure — of thinking that you couldn't get through it. With him, there was always a feeling that you could do anything,” said Jim Wilfong of Stow, Maine, who started working for Thorne's surveying crew when he was 17, fresh after graduating from Fryeburg Academy.

Together with Dave Douglass of Thaddeus Thorne Surveys of South Conway, they and others helped Thorne lay out the trails for what became Attitash — known as “the Red Carpet Ski Area” — when it opened for its first season in the winter of 1964-65.

Thorne had been ski patrol director at Wildcat, and was hired by Attitash developer Phil Robertson to come lay out the trails. He then became operations manager and later general manager and president before “retiring” in 1990.

The word “retiring” is put in quotes, because there was nothing retiring about Thorne, a ramrod-straight, wiry splendid splinter of a man who never stayed still long.

As his obituary noted, he “loved his large family. He cherished time spent with his many grandchildren. He traveled to places like Fiji, China, and Costa Rica with his adventurous relatives. He climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, skied the Haute Route across the Alps from France to Italy, and explored the jungles of Samoa. He especially loved fly fishing in the New Hampshire lakes and rivers.” He also commercially fished with his family in Alaska.

Whether during his Attitash and surveying years or afterward, he remained on the move — including serving as fund-raising chair to get the Ham Ice Arena built in Conway in 1998.

“I never, ever saw Thad behind a desk the whole time I worked for him at Attitash. I'm not even sure if he had one,” said Darrell Umlah, executive director of the Ham Ice Arena, who worked as ski school director at Attitash for 18 years, and who then worked with Thorne to bring the valley's dream of building an ice arena to fruition.

“He and I had a term when I was at the ski school — ‘MBWA’ — which he came up with, which meant, ‘Management by Walking Around.’ I'd be doing the ski school lineup, and he would walk by there at the base of Attitash, talking as he went. Somewhere along the way, that really stuck with me — he brought that to every project,” said Umlah, who says he would not have made this alley his home for the past 30 years were it not for Thorne.

“He had such integrity that when he lent his name to our effort, it meant so much. He worked to build the arena because he felt it was good for the valley, period,” added Umlah.

He said that the leaders of the community of the past generation — Thorne, Bob Morrell of Story Land, Doug Philbrook of the Mount Washington Auto Road, Herbert Schneider of Cranmore, Carroll and Kay Reed of Carroll Reed's, Stan Judge at Wildcat, Sherman Adams at Loon, to name a few — had a hands-on approach that was inspirational.

“All those visionaries were people of extreme independence. I'm not sure if we're now in a new era, in the ski business of the valley or of business in general, but if you look around, it's different,” said Umlah. “And I would have to ask: before the Schneiders, the Morrells, the Thornes, did the Conways exist, because, what was before that? Since they left their mark, I am not sure if anyone can ever have that impact again.”

Jeff Leich, executive director of the New England Ski Museum, offered the following information about Thorne's war service, having interviewed Thorne for Leich's book, “Tales of the 10th: Mountain Troops and American Skiing.”

“Thad Thorne learned to ski in New Hampshire, primarily at Mount Cranmore, and joined the 87th in 1942 at Fort Lewis. At Camp Hale he was assigned to the 85th and became a platoon sergeant, then was sent to Officer Candidate School with the understanding that he would return to his unit as an officer. When he reported back to his outfit at the port of embarkation, he learned that the 85th had departed two days previously. He spent the rest of the war in a tropical division on Luzon and then served in the occupation of Japan, overseeing the destruction of Japanese munitions. After a second stint in the Army in the Korean War, which he spent in Europe, he was ski patrol director at Wildcat, in its first seven years. He then became involved with Attitash, serving first as its operations manager, then as general manager and president, building it into one of the state’s leading ski resorts. While at Attitash he also did independent ski area consulting, working to plan and build Wilderness and Loon Mountain in New Hampshire, among others.”

Jeff Lathrop — who worked under Thorne at Attitash as operations manager beginning in 1976, the first year of the Alpine Slide, and who worked at Attitash until 1992 before going into the insurance business — said Thorne believed in hard work, and of doing everything right. Like all good leaders, according to Lathrop and others, Thorne asked nothing of his employees that he didn't expect of himself.

“Thad was an incredible individual, a true Renaissance man with extraordinary capabilities, knowledge and wisdom. He was great at what he did, and he was fun to work with,” said Lathrop, who was there at Attitash when the decision was made to go forward with snowmaking in 1981 after the snowless winters of 1979-'80 and 1980-'81.

“I think it [snowmaking] was one of those necessary evils, is what it came down to,” said Lathrop, who now works for the Chalmers Group in North Conway. Despite the costs involved, the Attitash board gave the go-ahead. “Clearly,” said Lathrop, “it became absolutely critical, and Thad recognized that as much as anyone else. The nature of the sport had changed. We were known as the 'Red Carpet' area, and for us to continue to be that, we had to make changes by putting in snowmaking. Typically, Thad rolled up his sleeves, and put in one of the best systems around.”

Wilfong and Lathrop saluted Thorne for having a great influence on their lives — a comment echoed by many in putting together this story, including by former Attitash employee and now Cranmore president Ben Wilcox.

“Thad was my mentor early on in my career when I worked for him at Attitash,” said Wilcox, who went on from Attitash to Bretton Woods before becoming Cranmore's general manager four years ago, and now president under its new ownership. “He was and continues to be a driving force in my career. I wouldn't be in the ski business without Thad,” said Wilcox.

Similarly, Wilfong said, “Thad taught me how to be a land surveyor. He also taught me how to be an adult,” said Wilfong, a Marine Corps veteran and small business, trade and software

consultant who has worked for the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations. He continues Thorne's love for the woods as a sustainable tree farmer with 500 acres in Stow.

Wilfong gave an idea of what it was like to be part of the Attitash crew back in those first years after it opened in '64-'65.

“Thad taught me how to use the Tucker Snowcat and to roll the slopes at night,” said Wilfong, now 64. “I would work on the ski patrol during the day, and get some supper and maybe a few hours sleep, before going out onto the slopes to groom. During the big snow winter of '68-'69, we were running the 'Cat almost continuously. I would be out there all night, and Thad would relieve me at 3 in the morning and take over. With Thad, there was never anything we couldn't do — it was always a great experience to work with him.”

Thorne is rightly remembered at Attitash as the “Father of the Alpine Slide.”

Thorne traveled to Germany in the 1970s to explore smaller but similar alpine slides there with fellow board member Jack Middleton, an attorney in Freedom.

“Thad and Jack went to Germany to look at the slides and they came back and said it would be a good opportunity for Attitash,” said longtime friend Norman “Sandy” McCulloch, 84, this week. “I was skeptical — but it proved to be a real cash cow for Attitash.”

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Friend Phil Gravink of Jackson, Thorne's successor at Attitash from 1993 to 1999, shared his experiences this week as a competitor, successor and friend.

Prior to coming to Attitash, Gravink had worked for former New Hampshire governor, ex-Eisenhower chief of staff and Loon developer Sherman Adams.

“I came to New Hampshire [from New York] 33 or 34 years ago. I don't think I had worked for Sherm Adams more than a month before he introduced me to Thad,” said Gravink. “They were competitors, Thad at Attitash and Sherm at Loon, but they had a great respect for one another. Thad's company would do all the surveying for whatever Loon needed. They had a contest — who would get into the office first, coming in at 6 in the morning!”

“I must say,” added Gravink. “we [Adams and Gravink] were very envious of that [Alpine] slide that Thad put in at Attitash. It was very smart of Thad to put in a non-compete clause, because we couldn't have one.”

All the years they were in business. Gravink says he and Thorne enjoyed a “fantastic” relationship.

When it came time for Thorne to retire, Gravink was hired in spring 1993 by McCulloch, the board chair, and board member Bob Morrell.

Gravink helped negotiate the sale of Attitash to Les Otten's American Skiing Company in 1994.

Under Otten's tenure, Bear Peak was developed next to and as part of Attitash.

Whereas the original Attitash featured classic New England narrow and winding fall line trails, Bear Peak was developed with wider terrain.

“Thad and I always had an ongoing exchange about Attitash and Bear Peak,” related Gravink. “In Thad's mind, Thad's Choice — on the Attitash side — was as wide as he would ever want to make a trail. When I laid out Bear Peak, it was made to be more western style, with wider trails which are ergonomically designed and which are also easier for making snow. I'd say very definitely that Attitash reflects Thad's vision — the trails are narrow, which protects them from the wind and allows them to hold snow.”

Gravink and McCulloch said this week in separate interviews they will miss their fishing trips and other adventures together with their friend.

During one of their fishing trips, McCulloch and Gravink said that Thorne opened up with some of his war experiences and other adventure tales dating back to his prep school years.

They included a story about escaping out a third story dormitory window via tied-together sheets, only to be foiled by the dorm master when he entered his co-escapee's second floor window, thus ending their plans to leave school.

Another story verified this week by his daughter Halorie Thorne Rintel and told to Gravink and McCulloch at the camp was about how Thorne when 15 was traveling in Europe with his favorite uncle when the German blitzkrieg began. They were able to escape from Poland on the very last vessel out, and “Thad stood on the freighter deck, watching the bombing of Gdansk as the boat fled the harbor,” said Rintel.

“This incident inspired him to run away the next year to join the Royal Canadian Air Force, faking his age,” said Rintel. “He was soon discovered and sent home. They told him to come back in three years. When the U.S. entered the war, he was anxious to sign up.”

“Ours was a 50-year friendship, and there are no equals for me. That man had an understanding of how life should be lived,” said McCulloch, a Dartmouth graduate of 1950 and past trustee, after whom McCulloch Hall is named. “Death will not take that relationship away. We agreed most of the time, argued violently at others, but he was the epitome of New Hampshire granite and my feeling of what integrity ought to be.”

MEMORIAL SERVICE: Thorne is survived by his wife of 62 years, Virginia Chandler Thorne; his two sisters, Mary Thorne Gould and Lydia Thorne Lucy and their husbands, Kingdon Gould, Jr. and Chester Lucy; his brother, Harold Thorne and wife, Evelyn McKinstry; his seven children, September Thorne Neville and husband, Richard, Halorie Thorne Rintel and husband, Theodor, Harvest Thorne Doucette and husband, James, Debonny Thorne, Trillium Thorne Evans

and husband, Mark, Thaddeus C. Thorne and wife, Elizabeth, and Jason Thorne; 22 grandchildren; and one great grandson.

A celebration of Thorne's life will be held at 2 p.m. on Saturday, July 30, at the Thorne Residence at 312 Gulf Road in South Conway.

In lieu of flowers, donations in Thorne's memory may be made to: The Upper Saco Valley Land Trust, PO Box 424, North Conway, 03860 or The Ham Ice Arena, 87 West Main Street, Conway, 03818.