Seesaw's Returns

Historic Vermont roadhouse-turned-ski lodge is rebuilt and open for business. **BY PEGGY SHINN**



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First built by Russian immigrant Ivan "Johnny" Sesow in the 1920s, the historic ski lodge closed in 2014. New owners Ryan and Kim Prins bought the property at auction and recreated it, right down to the trademark round, copper-topped fireplace. Local artist Kim Ray and carpenter Chris Knudsen deconstructed the original mural (on the back wall), numbered the pieces, repainted and reconstructed it.

If an historic and much-loved but dilapidated ski lodge came onto the market, what would you do?

If you're Ryan and Kim Prins, you would buy it at auction, then raze the main building. But not without first salvaging every last piece of wood, furniture, memorabilia, and even a few nails. Then you would try to recreate the ski lodge, with its trademark round copper-topped fireplace and its "seducerie." (More on that later.) And you would call it Seesaw's.

Seesaw's is a reincarnation of Johnny Seesaw's, an establishment so strongly tied to the dawn of American skiing that it was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2008. Although that designation was reneged when the restaurant was razed, the Prinses have kept some of the inn's historic flavor in the new restaurant building, as well as the refurbished cabins and lodge. More importantly, they're aiming to keep the sense of community that Seesaw loyals came to love.

The inn and restaurant that the Prinses recreated is based on a lodge built by Ivan "Johnny" Sesow in the 1920s in Peru, Vermont. Sesow was a Russian émigré who settled in Somerset, Vermont, an unincorporated township south of Stratton. The countryside reminded Sesow of his native Russia, and he worked as a lumber foreman. But in 1924, Ivan and his second wife Vinnie, a camp cook, lost their jobs when the lumber industry dried up.

Where some found despair, the Sesows saw opportunity. They purchased a parcel of land in the town of Peru and constructed a residence and a one-story lodge. Sesow designed it in the style of an *izba*, a traditional Russian countryside dwelling made by hand of wood. They named it the Wonder View Log Pavilion.

The idea for the roadhouse was to seize "the opportunity created by Prohibition," said Sesow's son Peter in the National Historic Register application. The enterprise proved popular and profitable, thanks to live music, homemade wine, and bootlegged liquor. The Sesows took clear liquor delivered in maple syrup containers, colored it brown with burnt sugar, then bottled it for sale as "maple syrup." Those who purchased it knew not to pour it on pancakes.

Legend has it that Sesow lost the Wonder View in a poker game. But in reality, the Great Depression took its toll, and in 1932, the Sesows moved on, leaving unpaid loans totaling over $2,400. The property sat abandoned for the next five years.

Enter Lew deSchweinitz, whose widowed mother,

Cordelia, lived in nearby Dorset. DeSchweinitz was a skier, and in the spring of 1938, Cordelia convinced him to look at the abandoned lodge, a quarter-mile east of the new rope tow at Bromley Mountain. It looked promising, particularly if Bromley owner Fred Pabst, Jr., could bump up skier traffic with a second rope tow. To fund his enterprise, deSchweinitz enlisted his sister Mary. She was married to Bill Parrish, a Yale graduate who was working for his family's trailer manufacturing business, and they were ready to settle down.

The trio formed the Bromley Mountain Ski Club (BMSC) and purchased the former roadhouse from the lienholders. Over the summer of 1938, they refurbished the property, saving the original tongue-and-groove oak dance floor, and added a second floor for bunks. They also converted a few outbuildings into bunkhouses, providing room for 60 guests. They named the enterprise after its original owner, Johnny Seesaw's, and opened the doors on December 26, 1938.

Johnny Seesaw's was one of the first purpose-built ski lodges in the area and business grew quickly. And not just because of the lodge's proximity to Bromley. With a circular fireplace and the former bandstand converted to a cushion-filled lounge dubbed the "seducerie," the new owners maintained the spirit of conviviality.

"Johnny Seesaw's was a hit right out of the chute," wrote *Skiing History* contributor Jackson Hogen in "The Improbable Tale of Johnny Seesaw's" (*Skiing Heritage*, September 2004). "Somehow, the word had spread along the northeast corridor and by their third night of operation, December 28, their 60 pillows were sold out. By New Year's they had to turn away more than 200 other guests."

Originally open to the public, Johnny Seesaw's became a private "friend of" establishment during World War II. It happened one night after Lin Yutang was taunted by another guest who thought the Chinese writer and philosopher was Japanese. The Parrishes were shocked and instituted a policy wherein anyone wishing to stay at the inn had to be recommended by a known guest. This policy remained in effect until the Parrishes sold Johnny Seesaw's in 1974, and their clientele was a who's who of global leaders and ski dignitaries, including National Ski Patrol founder Charles Minot "Minnie" Dole.

Sitting around the fireplace in the winter of 1940, Dole began a conversation with Roger Langley (the first member of the National Ski Patrol) and Olympians and Ski Club Hochgebirge founding members Robert Livermore and Alex Bright. The four men talked about the growing war and the important role of ski troops in Europe's snowy terrain. Dole and Langley decided to write to lawmakers in Washington with a plan to introduce ski troops to the American military. Several months later, in November 1940, Roosevelt's Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, charged the National Ski Patrol with starting what would become the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division.

Johnny Seesaw's also had an impact on the local community. Needing reliable power, the innkeepers pushed for the electrification of the area in 1939.

Through the vagaries of winter weather, war, and the economy, Johnny Seesaw's had a loyal following that helped it thrive for decades. The innkeepers also ran a wholesale ski business, selling Johnny Seesaw's skis through the 1950s and 1960s; it was disbanded around 1971.

In October 1974, the Parrishes and deSchweinitzes retired, and a year later, BMSC sold the property for $200,000 to Laurence and Anne Ward, who ran it for six years. In July 1980, the Wards sold Johnny Seesaw's to "The Inn Thing," a corporation started by New Jersey attorney Gary Okun. He revived the business, but the Great Recession of 2008 took its toll. The bank foreclosed on the operation on August 30, 2014.

Exactly eight months later, Ryan and Kim Prins bought the property at auction for $155,000 plus back taxes. The Prinses and their two children had recently moved from Curaçao to their second home in Arlington, Vermont, and were looking to buy an inn. Ryan is an engineer, contractor, and trained chef and Kim has restaurant experience, and they wanted a place of their own. Despite the rundown condition of the lodge and



COURTESY JOHNNY SEESAWS



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Sesow (left) and his family moved on in 1932, leaving the roadhouse abandoned. New owners reopened it in December 1938—less than a mile from the popular rope tow that Fred Pabst had installed at Bromley Mountain. It had a restaurant, dance floor, and bunkhouses for 60 guests.

property, they decided to buy it. "It has that special vibe," said Kim. Soon, they were joined by two partners with local connections and financial resources.

Unable to restore the old log lodge—in part because the mountainside literally drained under it, rotting its wood foundation—the Prinses leveled the old building. But they saved iconic furnishings and memorabilia and stored them on site.

In November 2017, work began on the new restaurant, constructed just west of the old Johnny Seesaw's on what was once the marble-tiled swimming pool. Seesaw's regulars will recognize the circular fireplace, with the decorative copper hood cut by artist Cordelia deScheinwitz, as well as her wood carvings over the stone fireplace. The tables and chairs are Seesaw's originals, as is the china and glassware. Shingles from the old building cover the interior eaves, and yes, those antique radiators along the walls actually work. They just no longer clang.

Modern building code prevented the Prinses from recreating the "seducerie" in all its cushioned glory. But Cordelia's hand-painted mural—disassembled board by board from the old lodge and reconstructed in the new—frames a bench-lined dining section. As for the menu, the famous prime rib is a special on Thursday and Saturday evenings. And in tribute to Fred Pabst, PBR is still on tap, along with craft brews.

Uphill from the restaurant, the Prinses refurbished the entire Seesaw's campus as well. The triplex — a former warehouse, office, and innkeeper's home — is now a seven-bedroom lodge, completely redone with rustic but chic furnishings and spa-like bathrooms. The three cabins still stand behind the restaurant, on "Bootlegger's Alley."

The Prinses opened Seesaw's to lodging guests on July 1, 2018, with the restaurant following in August. The rooms are rapidly booking for this winter.

"So many people told us we were crazy," says Kim. "They loved the place but didn't think it could be done."

To learn more or make a lodging reservation, go to www.seesawslodge.com.



COURTESY JOHNNY SEESAWS



Above: Skiers walk down a snow-covered road at Seesaw's in this undated photo. Left: In the 1950s and 1960s, the innkeepers also ran a wholesale business, distributing its own ski wax brand, various Japanese skis and bindings, and the Aluflex ski, which later evolved into Dynastar.

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