

SLEDDING ADVENTURES: YANKEE BUMPS AND FLEXIBLE FLYERS

Sledding in the Winter Olympics, though it is lightning fast, is conducted on tracks carefully designed with safety in mind. Back when some of our area's current senior citizens were still young and foolhardy, some hair-raisingly dangerous sledding took place around here. On most neighborhood sled riding hills, there were no helmets or goggles, no aerodynamically designed sleds, no sledding courses designed with safety in mind – and no easy way to stop as you neared the bottom of the hill.

Jim Beaver of Uniontown, who was raised in Newtown patch on Brownsville's South Side, remembers the homemade bobsled that he and his friends built in the late 1930s.

"When I was living at 1002 Water Street," Jim told me, "my friends and I would ride our homemade bobsled from High Street, down Hollow Road to Second Street."

Hollow Road is a long, steep hill with several curves. A low stone wall hugs the southwestern edge of the road, and beyond the wall is a precipitous drop into the hollow below. Near the bottom of the hill, the road veers sharply to the right – a tough turn to navigate on a speeding sled.

"How did you build your bobsled?" I asked Jim.

"We built it from scrap wood," he said. "It was long enough to fit five or six kids on it. We shined up flat curtain rods, fastened them to the bottom of the sled as runners, and smeared them with lard to make the sled go faster."

"Hollow Road would be an unforgiving sledding course," I said. "How in the world did you guide the bobsled around the curves?"

"The boy at the front of the sled sat facing front. He wore only one ice skate, and he would use that ice skate to help guide the bobsled. Meanwhile, the boy at the back of the sled, known as the 'swing' man, would shift his weight to try to turn the bobsled."

"Was anyone ever seriously injured?"

“I remember one boy who was killed sledding down Hollow Road,” Jim said. “By the time he got to that sharp right turn near the bottom of the hill, he was out of control. He couldn’t make the turn, and his sled hit the stone wall along the edge of the road, killing him.”

We tend to nostalgically think of sledding as an idyllic winter pastime of our youth. A moment’s reflection may yield the realization that on some treacherous hills and streets, sled riding may have been the most perilous activity many children ever attempted.

Some sleds were not homemade. Mary Anne Butler, whose email about her memories of sledding in Brownsville inspired this series, mentioned the Cadillac of manufactured sleds.

“The Flexible Flyer was THE sled to own,” Mary Anne wrote. “My 1931 model is now displayed as a collector’s item in my daughter’s living room in Phoenix.”

Kern Birkle grew up at 507 Spring Street on Brownsville’s North Side. He says his Flexible Flyer was his ticket to sledding fun on Front Street.

“Like Mary Ann Butler,” Kern explained, “I am also a Front Street sled rider from the late 1930s and early 1940s. Living on Spring Street, Front Street wasn’t normally my turf, but because I had a six-foot Flexible Flyer, probably the largest they made, I was ‘permitted’ to cross Market Street and sled on Front Street.”

Minna Lee Conn Mori grew up on Front Street in that same era. Now residing in sunny Jacksonville, she has not forgotten her Brownsville sled riding adventures.

“How well I remember,” she declared. “We started at the top of Front Street where it meets Route 40 (Old National Pike), and we sledded all the way down to the castle and sometimes beyond. My southern friends in North Carolina talk of sled riding ‘stomach first,’ but no self-respecting Flexible Flyer rider would say anything but ‘belly guiders!’”

The magical allure of the Flexible Flyer, invented by S. L. Allen in 1889, resulted from its groundbreaking design. According to Allen’s daughter Elizabeth, the sled had “only one pair of runners made of rounded steel, and these runners were weakened at one point about halfway back to form a sort of hinge, so they could be bent sidewise there. This gave the steering effect of a double-runner sled.”

Wanamaker’s in Philadelphia and Macy’s in New York began selling the Flexible Flyer, and the sled’s popularity zoomed until it was outselling all of its competitors combined.

Of course, even having a steerable Flexible Flyer beneath your body did not guarantee a mishap-free ride, which Brownsville native Wally

Mulligan and his sledding buddy discovered one snowy evening.

“Sometimes after supper,” Wally explained, “if the moon was full, we would sled ride on Lyons Hill, which was at the junction of Bull Run Road and the place where High Street Extension turned into Telegraph Road.

“My friend David ‘Heinie’ Sloan was the last of six children,” Wally remarked, “five boys and Virginia Leigh, who was called ‘Girl’ by the boys and all their friends. Heinie was my hero, three years older than I was, and he would let me ride with him on his Flexible Flyer sled.

“One cold night while I was on his back flying down the hill, we hit a ditch. The sled stopped, and we kept going. Heinie had all the buttons torn from his coat, and I ruined my jacket when I landed in a barbed wire fence. At home, we both caught the dickens over our torn pea coats and got the ‘money-doesn’t-grow-on-trees’ lecture.”

Was it worth it, Wally?

“It was a small price to pay for the exhilaration of those sled rides!” he declared.

Just about anything could be converted into a sled. Homemade sleds of all types were always exciting to ride because of their frequently unpredictable steering.

“My father was a coal miner,” recalled Baltimore Street native Bernard (Barney) Sabo. “With six children in the family, he could not afford to purchase a sled for us, so we used old metal signs that advertised soda pop.”

Former Catherine Avenue resident Chris Hatfield recalls hair-raising rides on a salvaged part of an automobile.

“Somebody dragged out the hood of a 1952 Chevy or a similar car whose hood had a rounded top,” Chris told me.

Placed upside down on the snow, the highly concave hood took on the appearance of a sleek, aerodynamic bathtub, and what a wild ride it could produce!

“With a rope tied to the upturned end,” observed Chris, “it made for a seriously death-defying ride down the hill, which often was totally ice. The ‘sled’ was virtually unsteerable, ridiculously fast, and laden with sharp metal edges. Riding on it was certainly one of the most dangerous things I did as a kid. More than one person wound up in the water-filled ditch at the bottom of the hill, which ended their fun for the day.”

John (Beeb) Lowery, who grew up in Rows Run in the early 1960s, also remembers a spectacular ride on an inverted car hood.

“One day, our car hood was full of kids,” John remarked, “and while flying down the slope it got turned around. We veered off course and headed directly for the fire that we had built earlier for warmth.

“We crashed right through the flames and scooped that fire right onto the hood with us. In the resulting excitement nobody really got hurt, although one fellow we called ‘Bumper’ got his hair singed.”

Yet another unusual contraption that was sighted on Brownsville’s snowy slopes resembled a ski with a seat.

“I remember Donna Edwards had an antique device,” recalled Chris Hatfield, “that consisted of a single ski with an upright post and a seat. This device had a name which now escapes me, but it resulted in many a ‘face-plant’ when you hit the cindered surface of Catherine Avenue.”

Richard Wells grew up on nearby Gray’s Lane and remembers a similar apparatus that was owned by his friend.

“We rode our sleds on what I called ‘Tony’s Hill’ at the far end of Catherine Avenue, where my friend Tony Iaconni lived. It was a steep course that ran through the woods.

“Tony would join us on his unusual sled. It had a two-by-four as a single runner, and another two-by-four was attached vertically to it, supporting a seat made of a one-foot-long two-by-four. It took a lot of skill to ride one of those. Tony had a metal strip on the bottom of the runner, and it was extremely fast.”

Occasionally one would spy a serpent of sledders slithering down a snowy slope. Reader Jerry LaMonica explained, “On the hill where we sledded in Newboro, we would sometimes form ‘trains’ of sleds. Five or six of us would hook our feet into the front of the sled behind us. When we would make the turn at the crossroads halfway down the hill, just before reaching the streetcar tracks, the sled at the tail end would really be whipped around. That was always exciting.”

Grace Winterhalter Amaral enjoyed sled riding in Republic on a sled that sported a very unusual feature.

“When I was about twelve, I used a sled bought for me by our neighbor, Maggie Crawford,” Grace told me, “and since I would occasionally sled at night on a hill near our church, I had flashlights added to the front of my sled!”

Sledding down a snowy hillside was exhilarating. Trudging back up the hill while pulling your sled behind you was a real drag. Carmen Stanza, Jr. and his Brownsville Township buddies solved that problem.

“If we were sled riding on Union Street or Coal Hill,” Carmen told me, “we would hook on to the back of a bus or the bumper of a slow-moving car to pull a chain of us sledders back to the top of the hill!”

Union Street and Coal Hill were certainly great sled-riding venues, but of course, every kid believed that his or her favorite sledding spot was the best one around. Next, some of those former sledders will sing the praises of their favorite venue from many decades ago.

SNOWSTORMS PARALYZED TRAFFIC, ENERGIZED SLEDDERS

The infamous Big Snow of 1950 freed up steep Brownsville streets on which many youngsters had sledded only in their dreams. Market Street, High Street, and West Brownsville's precipitous Pittsburgh Hill were all fair game during the wintry final week of November 1950.

On Saturday, November 25, 1950, the Brownsville *Telegraph* reported that the "Tri-County area today was in the grip of the worst blizzard in history with the record-breaking snowfall variously estimated at between 26 and 28 inches. Late afternoon traffic found it almost impossible to negotiate the Market and High Street hills and thousands of cars were left stranded by their owners."

Eager children all over town struggled into their bulky sled-riding clothes as the *Telegraph* declared, "Today's record snowfall is believed to have surpassed all known records for the area since 1799." With the midday temperature hovering at ten degrees, the newspaper revealed that the "weather forecast for today calls for more snow."

More snow! Words every sledder loved to hear!

"Not a car moved on Market Street for nearly a week," recalled Hiller native Harry Hackney. "Kids sledded anywhere they pleased, although it was brutally cold for several days after the snowfall and few seized the opportunity. I remember the eerie stillness and total absence of life on the streets of Brownsville."

It wasn't only kids who braved the cold to ride their sleds on usually off-limits main streets. Louise Grafinger Jencik, who was ten at the time of the Big Snow, lived at 111 Broadway with her parents, Ernie and Della Grafinger.

"Broadway," Louise told me, "was Route 40, and it was the main highway through Brownsville. The snow eliminated almost all traffic, so my father and I climbed onto our Flexible Flyer in front of our house on Broadway and rode all the way downtown. We had only one real bend to navigate, then it was a relatively straight shot all the way to the Neck. It was wonderful!"

There was one not-so-wonderful aftermath to such a long sled ride.

"It was a *very* long walk back up the hill," Louise remembered.

Sam Loy, whose family lived near the former Hilltop Garage on the old Pike, duplicated Louise's ride.

"The ride down was great," Sam recalled, "but the hike back up was an adventure. We could only get in one or two rides all day."

Brownsville's Jean Kifer and her friends took on two of the longest hills in Brownsville on the same day.

“We rode our sleds from the top of the old Pike down to the Neck,” Jean told me, “then we walked to the top of High Street and sledded back down to the Neck. A fellow with a Jeep would occasionally drive up the hill with about twenty kids hanging on to the Jeep with one hand and their sleds with the other!”

In that bygone era, ash trucks were slow to get to every street, and when they arrived, there might be a man shoveling ashes from the back of the truck. A snowstorm could reduce main thoroughfares to sled-riding courses for hours or even days. David Gratz of Hiller recalled one particular story told by his former boss.

“Howard J. Bradley was my boss when I came to Brownsville,” Dave informed me. “The story he told me happened around 1924. On snowy nights, after the Bradleys’ two boys, Charles and Derwin, were put to bed for the night, Howard and his wife would take their sled to High Street for a few thrilling rides. It was thrilling because of the ‘breakers,’ a flattened section installed in the road to rest the horses as they pulled up the hill.

“Whether they went airborne or not, I do not know, but Brad said they could get up enough speed to go over the Iron Bridge. After one particular exciting ride, they realized that if anything should happen to them, their boys would wake up in the morning wondering where Dad and Mother were! That was the last night they rode their sled down Scrabbletown Hill [High Street].”

Newtown native Bill Clendaniel’s late brother Dan was good at carpentry. Bill told me, “Back in the 1930s, my brother Dan and his friend Herman Swogger, who lived near Hollow Road, built a bobsled. Dan told me that one time when there were no cars on High Street because of the snow, he and Herman started at the top of High Street and rode their bobsled all the way through the Neck.”

High Street, the main thoroughfare through South Brownsville, was rarely available for sled riding, but there was no shortage of options when South Siders sought a challenging slope for sledding. The kids around Newtown often headed for Goglin’s Hill.

“It got that name because the Goglin family lived at the bottom of the hill,” Willard Peet, one of those former sledders, explained. “We would sled ride from the top of the hill, which was Second Street, down Goglin’s Hill, across Sheridan Avenue while someone watched for cars, and all the way down to Water Street.

“We would make a ‘Yankee bump’ by piling snow and packing it down so that when you rode over it, you would go into the air. If you held on, you were okay, but boy, if you didn’t hold on, look out!”

Water Street native Chuck Hosler also remembers that Yankee

bump. “You would get airborne there and sometimes separate from the sled,” he declared, “but what a great ride!”

Phyllis Barreca Grossi, who grew up on Second Street, observed, “This hill was actually a street, but it was made in such a way that no vehicle could ever go up or down on it, so kids from all the surrounding streets and Frick patch would come to use it.

“The hill was very steep, and from the top we would ride the sled down the hill and cross over Sheridan Avenue and Water Street. Once in a while we would have one of our friends stand down on Sheridan Avenue as a lookout for any car, but it was a rarity when a car would go by, so usually we would just ride with no lookouts.”

A sledder’s greatest adversary was not treacherous ice, packed snow, or Yankee bumps. The real enemy was the borough road crew, which would eventually come along spreading ash and cinders on the streets. Their necessary ministrations to the road surface didn’t go over well with the sled riding crowd.

“We would throw water on the street,” remarked Willard, “so the cars would slip and slide!”

“We would get very angry at the ash trucks,” echoed Jan Rowe, whose favorite sled riding venue was Cherry Alley, which separated International Bakery from the Bell Telephone building. “In retrospect, I realize that it was necessary to ash the hill because the bakery trucks had an entrance or two off that little hill. Sometime the owner of the bakery would come out to put additional ashes on it.”

Up on Shelton Avenue, the sledders knew how to neutralize the efforts of the road crew.

“Shelton Avenue was one of the great places to sled ride,” said Clem Davis. “I remember many a night in the early 1940s that there would be twenty to thirty kids sledding there at one time.

“The bend at the bottom was hard to make when the snow was good and packed, and many a time you would end up in the hedges of the people who lived at the bottom. They would call the borough, and the ash truck would come and ash the hill. As soon as the ash truck would leave, all the kids would go home, come back with brooms, sweep the ashes off the snow and ice, and away we’d go again!”

There is an abundance of steep hills and streets in Brownsville and West Brownsville. To a hill-starved midwesterner, who lives where the slightest incline is called a mountain, Brownsville would be a sled rider’s paradise. Hollow Road was just one of several perilous slopes that challenged South Side sledders.

“My sled was a Yankee Clipper,” noted Paul Thornton. “I lived at South Hills Terrace, so Hollow Road was nearby. We would start at the

service station at the top of the hill, and about two-thirds of the way down the hill, if you were going too fast, you could ‘chicken out’ and veer off onto Catherine Avenue. With the stone wall near the bottom and a sharp right turn there, you had to be crazy to keep going. After two or three trips, our clothes were usually pretty wet and cold, so we’d call it a day and go home to get warm.”

Another hill that could intimidate all but the boldest sledders was Cadwallader Street, a steep hill leading down to Bank Street. Paula Terreta Skrobot was among the brave souls who took a chance to experience the thrill.

“I remember sled riding down Cadwallader onto Bank Street,” she reminisced, “and I don’t know how we didn’t get hit by a car coming around the corner – but it was a great sled ride!”

Those hills were but a few of the popular sledding Meccas on Brownsville’s South Side. With modern snow removal equipment and more rapid road treatment after storms, sled riding on main roads is rarely possible any more. Ah, but back in those good old days . . . !

Next we will venture to the other end of Brownsville, where North Siders flew down their own death-defying sledding tracks, and we will travel across the river to West Brownsville, where one of the most heart-in-your-mouth sled riding hills of all, Pittsburgh Hill, provided thrills that would be remembered for a lifetime.

NORTH AND WEST SIDERS HAD FAVORITE SLEDDING HILLS

As we learned previously, South Brownsville was bursting with popular sledding spots. On snowy days, kids from the North Side and West Brownsville also headed for their favorite slopes, several of which cast doubt upon the sanity of anyone riding a sled down them.

“Hibbs Street was the ultimate challenge,” declared Bernard (Barney) Sabo of Sequim, Washington. “Hibbs Street required bravery because at the bottom of the hill was Fifth Avenue, which carried a lot of traffic. If there were enough kids around, someone would volunteer to watch for cars, but if a parent called that kid home, the rest of us were on our own.”

Barney’s sister, Theresa Sabo Everson, told me, “We used to live on Baltimore Street, but the back of our house faced Hibbs Street. Halfway down Hibbs Street, we built a Yankee bump. The goal was to hit the bump, stay on your sled, and continue down to the intersection with Fifth Avenue. I don’t know how none of us was killed. And we wonder why

our parents turned gray!”

Another favorite North Side sledding location was Front Street, which culminates at its lower end in a steep brick hill that plummets from Nemaocolin Castle down to the Neck. This hill saw plenty of activity when students exited the nearby junior high school on a snowy afternoon.

“Upon leaving junior high school for the day,” Brownsville native Willard Peet reported, “we would find a piece of cardboard and ride down the hill on it.”

Jan Rowe recalled inching down the hill as she headed to her Second Street home. “I still remember textbooks sliding down the hill past me,” she told me, “because their owner had fallen further up the slope and lost his or her grip on the books.”

Some of those school books may not have been accidentally dropped. Wayne Miller of Brownsville lived at the top of that hill, directly across from the funeral home. He recalls seeing textbooks pressed into unexpected duty.

“The hill was often glare ice,” Wayne informed me, “and some kids would place their books in the middle of the road and ride the books down the hill. And it wasn’t just the boys!”

North Side resident Clark Sealy can vouch for the abuse that textbooks endured from kids heading home from school on snowy afternoons. “I saw kids ride their books down Angle Street hill to Second Street and beyond,” Clark confirmed. “Their teachers weren’t real happy about it.”

Richard Wells walked from his home on Gray’s Lane to the junior high on Front Street. After school, he would search for a suitable apparatus upon which he could descend snow-covered Front Street hill.

“We would find a cardboard box,” Richard said, “and slide down the slippery bricks to the bottom of the hill near where the street car tracks ended. You had to make sure you could stop or you would slide right out onto Route 40.

“The best part of the riding there was the girls. They enjoyed it so much they would ask the boys if they could ride down the hill with them. Naturally, the boys were happy to accommodate them.”

Higher up North Side hill was another pulse-quickening, steep brick street that attracted only the most intrepid or foolhardy – Union Street. Dorothy Goldstein Stone of La Mesa, California, grew up on Union Street. She and her sister often shared a sled ride down its precipitous slope.

“My sister Betty and I had one Flexible Flyer for the two of us,” Dorothy remembered, “so we would piggyback. I usually steered and

she would sit behind me or stretch out on top of me.

“It was thrilling! The only accident we ever had was when I steered toward the edge of the street and ran into a wire fence. We received some scrapes, but of course, we went right back up the hill.”

Harley Henry of Atlantic Beach, Florida, received frequent warnings about the dangers of Union Street sledding.

“I heard many times about the perils of trying to sled ride on Union Street,” Harley informed me. “The warnings came from my mother, whose younger brother, Billy Conwell, ran into a fire hydrant while sledding down Union Street.”

As hordes of Brownsville youngsters hurtled down treacherous hills all over the North and South Side, kids across the river were also attempting heart-stopping feats such as sledding down Pittsburgh Hill, the towering hill that leads upward from West Brownsville to Blainesburg. That hill was truly terrifying, and therefore it presented the ultimate sledding challenge.

“As you know, it is a very long, steep hill with a curve partway down,” explained Blainesburg native Shirley Beck Johnson of Pittsburgh. “You started your sled ride above the curve in the hill, so you had to master the curve. Once around the curve, you hit a Yankee bump, literally flew through the air, then continued even faster down the hill! You would be going so fast your eyes would tear up and you couldn’t see where you were going. But, boy, what a ride!”

Shirley’s brother, Richard (Chunce) Beck of Brownsville, added another detail.

“During the Big Snow of 1950,” he said, “when they tried to plow that hill, they left huge piles of snow along the roadside. Partway down the hill, we kids used that snow to build a three-foot high wall of snow blocking the left side of the road. About thirty yards further down, we built another wall of snow blocking the right side of the road. The result was a slalom course, and when we were flying down that hill on our sleds, it was just as tough as any Olympic event!”

West Brownsville native George Staib of Carmel, California, told me, “The blast of cold air in my face as I sped down that hill almost took my breath away, and then when I got to the bottom of the hill, I would shoot out onto Railroad Street (now Main Street).”

Cars weren’t the only worry when you reached the bottom of Pittsburgh Hill at top speed. “We had to watch for trains,” said George, “since the railroad tracks went up the middle of Railroad Street.

“Sledding down that hill was sheer fun,” he concluded, “but now that I look back, I wonder if it wasn’t really sheer lunacy. My mother would have had a fit if she knew what I was doing, yet I can’t recall any

of us ever getting hurt.”

How far could your sled go after reaching Railroad Street? According to West Brownsville-raised Thom Stapleton, “When we reached the bottom of that hill, we could coast along Railroad Street nearly to the West Brownsville grade school.”

Sledding on Pittsburgh Hill could actually enhance a youngster’s physical condition, as Willard Lough of La Plata, Maryland, can attest.

“We would huff and puff pulling our sleds up that steep hill to the end of the big stone retaining wall,” Willard remembered. “Then the kid at the bottom of the hill would give the all-clear sign, and we would ride back down the hill and try to turn into the old Collins coal yard (later Collins’ service station) at the bottom.”

Sledding on Pittsburgh Hill was indeed good for physical fitness – except when you crashed. If you were lucky, you might land in a pile of snow along the roadside, but often that snow was not white.

“What I remember about winter and snow in West Brownsville is Black Snow,” George Staib reminisced. “There were coal-burning locomotives that would go up Railroad Street with billowing clouds of steam rising from them in the frigid air, and cinders from the smoke would settle to the ground and cover the snow.”

George joked, “I wonder if Irving Berlin would have written a song lyric, ‘I’m dreaming of a Black Christmas?’”

And then it was over.

After hours of great sledding, there came the poignant moment when a youngster would realize that the light was fading, his clothes were thickly caked with ice and snow, and he really couldn’t feel his toes any more.

It was time to go home.

“There were no water repellent clothes like we have today,” George Staib observed. “I wore wool pants, knickers, socks, and leather shoes, all of which became quickly soaked. I was always wet and chilled. Is it any wonder that I was often sick? All of the kids wore the same type of clothes. It is amazing that we all survived.”

Dorothy Goldstein Stone noted, “We girls wore leggings to keep warm. It was the only time that I recall wearing pants instead of dresses. How times have changed!”

For thawing out frozen toes and chilled bodies, no modern heating system can match the awesome blast of heat from a coal furnace’s hot air register. Standing on the hot air register, gently hopping up and down as your defrosting feet and fingers began tingling with pins and needles, you felt a wonderfully gratifying sensation when warmth began filtering throughout your body.

“When we would come in from sled riding,” recalled Phyllis Barreca Grossi, “my father would make us his special hot chocolate, made from cocoa, vanilla, sugar and milk with a dollop of marshmallow fluff in each of our cups. That was to die for, and we looked forward to having it every Saturday night during the winter.

“Along with the hot chocolate, Dad would have already made a trip to downtown Brownsville and brought home warm roasted peanuts, and from the bakery shop in Snowdon Square, he would bring us a chocolate cake with marshmallow frosting sprinkled with coconut.”

To spend an exhilarating winter afternoon sledding with your best friends, and then to come home to a toasty warm house with hot chocolate and delicious snacks waiting just for you . . .

Is it any wonder folks call them the “good old days?”

READERS RESPOND TO SLEDDING ARTICLES

Our series of articles about sled riding prompted many readers to submit follow-up comments on the topic. In one of the sledding articles, Chris Hatfield described a popular contraption that resembled a single ski sprouting a vertical post that supported a seat. However, Chris could not think of its name. Our readers came up with a couple of suggestions.

Nancy O’Neil of York, Pennsylvania, emailed, “The sled with one runner like a ski and the seat that sat up high was called a ‘Skipper.’ My husband still has the one he used as a kid.”

Several other readers called the sled by a different name. Victor Kovach of Rices Landing called to say, “When I was a kid, we rode the device you described. It was called a Yankee Jumper. As I remember, it was usually homemade.”

Howard Duff of Dawson added, “The Yankee Jumper I remember was a barrel stave with a seat about eighteen inches high. You would sit on it and ride down the hill on the snow.”

“I had two when I was a kid,” recalled Hiller native Bill Harris, “one that I made myself and a much better one that my Dad made for me. It really took a sense of balance to ride a Yankee Jumper. I had an old pair of strap-on skates that I used when trying to ride the darn thing.

“I had the most fun riding it in an open field,” he continued. “The older Sloan boys, Dale and Lee, Jack Richards, and the Phillips brothers, Wood and Jim, used to ride Yankee Jumpers in Crawford’s Field all the time. They were much faster when there was a frozen crust on top of the snow.

“Kids today get cheated,” Bill lamented. “My grandchildren have never heard of a Yankee Jumper, and even if they had the chance to try one, their parents would probably not allow it. Too bad!”

Raleigh, North Carolina’s Mal Crawford, who lived on Prospect Street as a child, remembers the first time he saw a Yankee Jumper.

“I first saw a Yankee Jumper when the older, more daring guys built a snow ramp in front of our house,” Mal explained. “They would get a good run in front of the Prospect Street School, come charging down the hill, jump the ramp, and sail quite a good distance on their Yankee Jumpers. They sat on the single cross piece, holding each end with their hands. Their legs and feet were splayed out left and right to maintain balance. The successful jumps were less frequent than the crashes.”

Don Swogger of Hiller has no problem remembering what a Yankee Jumper looks like, for good reason.

“My late brother Dale built a Yankee Jumper before World War II,” Don told me, “and believe it or not, I still have it here at my house.”

I visited Don in Hiller, and he showed me the sturdy Yankee Jumper his brother built decades ago. It is a heavy duty version with a metal runner constructed from a diagonal brace that supported a utility pole’s upper cross pieces. The metal runner added speed to the ride. Despite its age, it appears ready for use by a daring youngster.

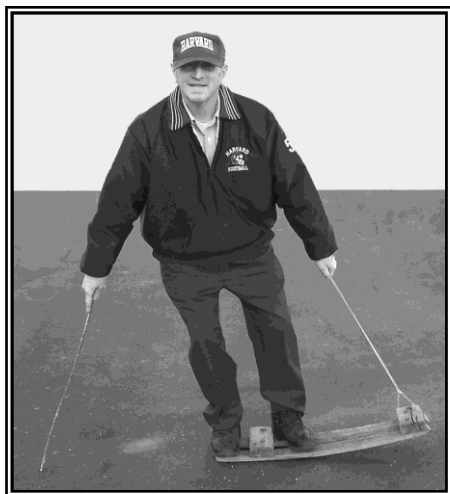


Dale Swogger's Yankee Jumper

Many of our readers told me about other unusual homemade sleds or contraptions that they used or saw in action.

Rudy Sukal of LaBelle stopped by my house to show me a wooden device he built years ago for his kids and their playmates, all of whom had clamored for one when they saw how much fun Rudy’s kids were having with it. It is a double ski, with each ski made from a wooden barrel stave. The two parallel skis are about four inches apart, held in place by a two by four crosspiece at the front and another crosspiece at the back.

The skier would stand sideways straddling the rear two by four crosspiece, assuming a stance similar to that used on a surfboard or snowboard. Rudy stood on his device to demonstrate, holding a stick in



Rudy Sukal demonstrates his own creation, the “double ski”

his right hand for balance while clutching a rope attached to the front crosspiece in his left hand.

“I remembered using a similar device when I was growing up,” Rudy told me, “and I made one for each of my kids. It goes very fast, and when you want to stop, you just pull back on the rope. That brings the front of the ski up in the air and helps you brake to a stop.”

Rudy laughed, “My wife calls me a pack rat because I save so many old things like this, but I love this sort of thing. She calls me Fred Sanford. She

told me I should burn this contraption that I brought here to show you, but it brings back pleasant memories of skiing in the winter when my kids were young.”

John Batovsky remembered an incident that was described in one of my earlier sledding articles.

“I was also riding on that car hood that John Lowery described in your column,” John wrote from Chester, Virginia, “and I remember us crashing through that fire like it was yesterday. In addition to the Flexible Flyer, two other really good sleds were the Yankee Clipper and the Royal Racer, which was solidly built, but very hard to steer. No kid with any self-respect would have been caught riding a saucer sled like you see today!”

Hiller native Harry Hackney and his buddies found a unique source of material for constructing their own sleds.

“When I went to Isabella School in 1939,” Harry recalled, “the meat market next to the school used to throw their long luncheon meat cans into the trash behind the store. We would flatten these meat containers and bend the bottoms up, forming a bow and a grip. A six-year-old butt would easily fit on this homemade sled.

“Every school seemed to have an ash dump behind the school, which would grow into a mountain of coal ashes and cinders. I guess it was periodically hauled away unless there was a deep ravine behind the building, which was the case at Isabella School.

“After riding my homemade sled down the ash dump during recess,

I used to come back into school with my pants soaking wet from belt to knees. Our teacher, Mrs. Virginia Dearth, would make me stand with my rear against the steam heat radiator until my pants dried, so I tried wearing two pairs of pants. When she directed me to stand against the radiator, I took off the outer pair, placed them on the radiator, and sat down at my desk,

“Unfortunately, that didn’t work. My inner trousers were also wet, and when I sat on the desk bench, my buttocks itched so badly that I was constantly scratching. I had to go into the coat room and change my pants as soon as the others were dry.”

Brier Hill’s Mary Alice Petrosky called to reveal that her brother, Jim Bennett of Brownsville, and his friends had a bobsled with an unusual feature – its own special name.

“They named their bobsled,” Mary Alice laughed over the phone. “It was quite large, and all of the boys called it Lula Belle. They rode Lula Belle all the way from the Hilltop Garage to the Iron Bridge during the Big Snow of 1950, but only once. They said the walk back up the hill was too far!”

In our sledding articles, a few readers described grabbing onto the bumper of a car to be pulled back up their sledding hill. Georges Township native Donald Langley didn’t have to wonder if a car would come by that could unknowingly provide a tow. He and his buddies knew they could catch a regularly scheduled trip back up the hill.

“We would ride our sleds down Fairchance Road from Sycamore Tree,” Donald told me over the phone from Marietta, Georgia, “and if we timed it right, we could ‘catch’ the bumper of the Uniontown-Fairchance bus going back up the hill!”

A different drama played out on Bull Run Road, where Wally Mulligan and his friends sledged. They did not hitch a ride after sledding down a hill, because there was no hill involved. But they did hitch rides.

“We boys would hide in the bushes with our sleds at strategic places along Bull Run Road,” Wally explained. “When a car would come along, cautiously making its way on the snow-covered slippery roads, we would run out behind the car, throw down the sled, hop on, and grab hold of the rear bumper. We would ‘bum a ride’ for about a half mile or so, let go, then hike back and wait for another car.

“Talk about exhaust fumes? It’s a wonder we all aren’t brain damaged!”

Perhaps the most unconventional ‘sled’ reported to us was described by Brownsville native Penny Cross Molk of Lakeville, Minnesota.

“Our family has passed down through the generations a story that when my grandfather, John ‘Wig’ Hart, was a young man, he once

sledded down High Street in a rocking chair. I must admit,” Penny joked, “that it would have been one of the most comfortable rides you could get!” In fact, the mental image of someone riding a rocking chair down snowy High Street hill is enough to produce a smile.

Judging from the amazing variety of our readers’ responses, there was no limit to kids’ imaginations when it came to inventing ways to have winter fun. A big part of that excitement was dashing to the sled riding hills after a snowstorm to see what creative new homemade contraption could be spotted hurtling down the slope with screaming kids aboard.

Spring is officially here – but that’s no guarantee that you may not get one last chance in the coming weeks to give one of these homemade sleds a try!