

OUR HERITAGE

Sledding central

Toboggan tradition at Chestnut Ridge Park dates back to the 1920s



Photo courtesy of the Aurora Town Historian's Office

LATE 1920s...A photo from "Photographic Views of County Parks," published by the Erie County Parks Commission in 1927, shows the relatively small pair of toboggan chutes at Chestnut Ridge shortly after it became the first county park in 1925.



POPULAR SITE...A photo of the toboggan chutes during their early days, possibly the 1930s, shows just how big of a winter destination they had quickly become.



THERE WERE THREE...Photos of the toboggan chutes from around the 1940s, above and below, show a time when there were three. The Casino building can also be seen in the background

by Robert Lowell Goller

The tradition of tobogganing at Chestnut Ridge Park is almost as old as the park itself.

Chestnut Ridge opened as Erie County's first park in early July 1925. Known for years as the Grace-Graves Farm, the park became an instant hit. Families flocked to Chestnut Ridge throughout that first summer, even though there were only a few picnic tables.

A major attraction, of course, was the hill overlooking Lake Erie and

in funding from Erie County, and a two-year restoration, the chutes, which are thought to be among the few left in the nation, were reopened on Jan. 8, 2010.

Some questioned the expenditure, but then-County Executive Chris Collins said bringing the toboggan runs back to life was a "quality of life" issue.

the City of Buffalo more than 15 miles away.

It didn't take long for that hill to become a winter destination as well as a summer one. According to newspaper reports of the time, sledders of all ages gave the Chestnut Ridge Park hill rave reviews.

The mammoth toboggan chutes at the top of the hill today have their roots in much smaller ones, which were installed shortly after the park opened.

According to a report published by the Erie County Parks Commission in 1927, two small, primitive wooden chutes had been built at the top of the hill, to add some extra speed to the toboggans. They were only about 12 feet tall, according to a photograph that was included as part of the 1927 report.

The two much taller toboggan chutes in the park today date back to the early 1930s. At one point there were three, according to early photographs, but one was later torn down.

Generations of families enjoyed the chutes until 2005, when they were shuttered due to extensive disrepair, safety concerns and a lack of money to fix them.

However, thanks to \$175,000

He noted that when he took office in 2008, some officials even suggested tearing down the chutes.

At the ceremony to reopen the toboggan runs, officials noted that—when the weather cooperates, of course—grandparents and parents can once again pass the local toboggan tradition down to the next generation.

"For three-quarters of a century, generations of Western New York families have enjoyed coming here and taking the fast plunge down the hill," Collins said. "Countless memories were made right here in Chestnut Ridge."

Erie County Legislator John J. Mills of Orchard Park said at the ceremony that he remembered most fondly the "click, click" sound just before the chute opened and sent the toboggan down the hill.

"The 'click, click,' I always remember that as a young person growing up," he said. "And that walk back up the hill. It was quite adventurous. A lot of good memories, and a lot of young people are going to enjoy these."

Share your memories of the toboggan chutes with us at opnyppress@verizon.net or via mail at 3770 Transit Road, Orchard Park, NY 14127.



File photo by The Orchard Park Press

NO SLEDDING ALLOWED...The historic toboggan chutes faced the possibility of demolition before Erie County restored and reopened them in 2010. They are shown surrounded by a temporary fence during the winter of 2009.