Richard L. Kohnstamm (1926-2006)

Richard L. Kohnstamm was the president and area operator of Timberline Lodge and Ski Area from 1955 until 1992, when he turned the position over to his son Jeff. Upon Kohnstamm's death in April 2006, U.S. Representative Earl Blumenauer memorialized him before the House of Representatives as "a visionary leader who conceived and then for half a century led the Kohnstamm family crusade to restore the jewel that is Timberline Lodge."

Kohnstamm was born in April 1926 in New York City, where his family developed a successful food additive business. He was a gunner during World War II and was part of the occupation forces in Munich. He also visited ski resorts in Switzerland, Sweden, and elsewhere in Europe. After the war, Kohnstamm earned a master's degree in social work from Columbia University and moved to Portland to work at Neighborhood House, a nonprofit organization founded in 1905 that provides emergency social and support services to families in southwest Portland.

When he first saw Timberline Lodge in 1955, Kohnstamm was immediately enamored of the building. Built in 1936-1937 under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration and furnished with art and furniture commissioned under the Federal Art Project, the lodge had opened to the public in 1938. It fell into disrepair and was closed in 1955, when the electricity was shut off for nonpayment of the bill. The U.S. Forest Service, which administers the lodge, revoked the permit and sought a new operator.

With the encouragement of lodge employee and former WPA worker Jim Duncan, Kohnstamm applied for and was awarded the permit. He formed R.L.K. and Company and set about developing the lodge and ski area—a labor of love to which he devoted his life.

Kohnstamm installed a heated swimming pool and the Pucci and Victoria Station chairlifts, and he purchased SnoCats to transport skiers and tourists to snow fields above the lodge's elevation of about 6,000 feet. Kohnstamm created the first summer skiing in North America with the completion of the Palmer chairlift in 1978.

When Kohnstamm lobbied Congress for funds to build a convention center and day lodge for skiers, he told congressional committees that Timberline was both a hotel and a museum. Running the lodge without a day lodge, he said, was "like trying to run an exclusive restaurant in the Lincoln Memorial." Congress added supplementary funds to the U.S. Forest Service budgets for the new wing and the day lodge, The C.S. Price Wing (named after an Oregon painter whose work is exhibited in the lodge), was completed in 1975, and the Wy'East Day Lodge opened for the 1981-1982 ski season.

Public support was needed to help with lodge restoration, and Kohnstamm encouraged his friend John A. Mills to form the nonprofit Friends of Timberline in 1975. Through Friends, the lodge’s original art and furnishings were inventoried and restored and new furnishings were created in keeping with original decor. In December 1977, Timberline Lodge became the first ski lodge to receive a National Landmark designation. In 1992, Kohnstamm received the Aubrey Watzek Award and was inducted into the National Ski Hall of Fame and Museum in Ishpenning, Michigan.

After his death in 2006, Congress designated a 126-acre parcel of land above the Palmer ski lift as the Richard L. Kohnstamm Memorial Wilderness Area, to recognize the balance between wild and developed areas in the national public lands system and to create a tribute to "the man who saved Timberline Lodge."

Written by Sarah Munro

Further Reading:

Munro, Sarah Baker. *Timberline Lodge: The History, Art, and Craft of an American Icon*. Portland, Ore.: Timber Press, 2009.

Rose, Judith, ed. *Timberline Lodge: A Love Story*. Portland, Ore.: Friends of Timberline and Graphic Arts Center Publishing Co., 1986.

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