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A Small Town's Leap of Faith

By **BILL PENNINGTON**

SALISBURY, Conn. — In the northwest corner of Connecticut, where rolling fields and clapboard homes are common and a covered bridge graces the local river, the town of Salisbury has, since 1926, stood out for a different reason.

It has had a large ski jump just a few blocks from its idyllic Main Street, a wooden structure that eventually rose seven stories atop the crest of a hill. For 85 years, the ski jump has been Salisbury's country curiosity, with the townspeople pitching in every year as volunteer hosts of regional competitions and, twice, the national ski jumping championships.

But for at least a decade, folks in Salisbury knew their beloved wooden jump was growing outdated. So when Ken Barker, the president of the grass-roots nonprofit group that oversees the jump, attended a meeting of Eastern ski jump officials in 2009, someone asked if Salisbury had any plans to replace the old jump with a modern steel and concrete one.

Because if Salisbury did that, Barker was told, it could host the 2011 United States Junior Olympic ski jumping championships.

Barker, for reasons he still cannot explain, told the officials that Salisbury would tear down the old jump and build a new one in time for the event.

Such a project would mean that volunteers in Salisbury, a town of about 4,000, would have to raise \$700,000. Oh, yes, construction would have to begin in a few months.

"As I drove back to Salisbury, I was wondering what I had done," Barker said last month, recalling the 2009 meeting in Vermont. "And when I got back to town and told everyone what I had done, they said to me: 'What? How are we going to do that?' "

Twenty months later, Salisbury's ski jump volunteers have raised about \$677,000. A new steel 65-meter (213-foot) jump and tower have ascended above Main Street. And large posters in the village pharmacy, bank, market, town hall and wine store all proclaim what will be the toast of Salisbury from Feb. 22 to 26 — the [United States Junior Olympics in ski jumping and Nordic combined](#).

"A lot of people doubted we could pull this off, and I don't blame them," Barker said, laughing. "Even when we had raised \$100,000, some people said, 'Well, they'll never get to \$200,000.' And when we got there, they said, 'Yeah, but how are they actually going to build it?' In the end, it got done because the ski jump means so much to the town. People wanted to get it done."

More than 500 donors have contributed to the ski jump fund-raising effort, with some people giving \$1 and others more than \$75,000. The most common contribution was a check from \$25 to \$100. To say it was a townwide crusade is not an overstatement.

The [Salisbury Winter Sports Association](#) watches over the big ski jump and smaller ones used by local children for training. Before the association began its fund-raising in earnest, it held an informational meeting in the town hall. Hundreds turned out in support of the new jump.

Dan Bolognani, the marketing director of the nearby Interlaken Inn, said, "The ski jumps really are the fabric of this community."

Sally Spillane, a resident of Salisbury, said: "I've lived here for 28 years, and it takes a lot of things to make up a town. I think S.W.S.A. and ski jumping are a huge part of this kind of folk culture and tradition in our community."

When the town leaders wanted to support the ski jump project with a line of credit as a way of guaranteeing the bank loan needed to start construction, they had to put the idea to a vote of property owners in Salisbury, which is about 100 miles north of New York City.

The vote, conducted with paper ballots in the Congregational church built in 1749, was 141 to 2 in favor of supporting the ski jump project with town money.

"Which set off a lot of talk in town about who the two opposed votes could have been," said Willie Hallihan, one of the 19 members of the Salisbury Winter Sports Association.

Walking the streets of Salisbury, which is small-town homey but also a cultured place attractive to second-home buyers, it's impossible not to wonder how a large ski jump got here in the first place.

Local legend says that in 1926, John Satre, a Norwegian who immigrated to the area, climbed to the top of a barn that still stands in town. The local mountains, the highest in the state, had reminded him of home. From the peak of the barn's roof, Satre put on skis and flew down the shingles on one side. He landed 30 feet away and lived to tell about it. More important, so did the 200 townsfolk who watched. They left filled with a sense of adventure.

By the next winter, with the grace of local landowners and the grunt of local residents, there was a true ski jump in Salisbury. The national ski jumping championships came in 1933, and a larger, wooden ski jump sprouted in the clearing in the forest a few years later.

In the 1930s, many New England towns had ski jumps, with some municipalities building them on school grounds as recreation for the children. Over time, especially with the boom in downhill skiing brought on by motorized ski lifts, many ski jumps faded away. But not the one in Salisbury; by 1950, it was hosting the world championship.

Six years later, one of Salisbury's own, [Roy Sherwood](#), was jumping in the 1956 Winter Olympics in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy. In Salisbury, the big jump was only part of the appeal to locals as the winter sports association financed programs to teach children, and others, how to ski jump. There was also a small downhill skiing area with a rope tow, where the organization taught children to ski. The current United States ski team's head men's coach, [Sasha Rearick](#), learned to ski there. The Salisbury volunteers continue to finance the equipment for more than 200 schoolchildren to ski or to learn to ski jump.

"Passing on a love of winter sports has always been the mission," said Caroline Gilbert, a board director whose 9-year-old son is a ski jumper. "The big jump just represented what could be. Making it last on into our future seemed like the right thing to do."

Still, going from a creaky structure that looked like something from the movie "The Bridge on the River Kwai" to a modern jump with all the new specifications for 21st-century ski jumping was a big leap, so to speak.

And a costly one.

But Salisbury has a history of volunteer fund-raising for town projects. In 1833, citizens raised \$1,250 to build a two-story brick school. It still sits on Main Street, and throughout 2010, a large sign charting the progress of the ski jump fund-raising total stood outside the onetime school's doors.

The fund-raising last year took on many forms. There was a solicitation letter that went to all Salisbury residents and those in a few surrounding towns. There was a golf tournament, and a professional fund-raiser from the area offered guidance. There were anonymous donors contributing \$50,000 or more. As the collected sum grew and the prospects for success looked more optimistic, more people came forward — the movement gained its own momentum.

"People were very generous," said John Higgins, the association board member who was the chairman of the fund-raising campaign. "A lot of their kids have been going to S.W.S.A. programs for years, and even if their kids were now grown, they wanted to help."

Construction of the jump proceeded on schedule.

"The whole thing was very romantic and nostalgic," said the jump's builder, Rafe Churchill, whose construction company is based two towns away. "People were always coming by to see how the jump was doing. And that's when you come to realize that the roots of the jump are broad and spread through the town. They were going to hold on to their jump."

The new jump is impressive and contemporary. But with natural color tones set close to mature rows of trees, it manages to fit the landscape. The jump may be new, but the setting is old. The view from the top of the jump, which is reached by a long staircase, is a peaceful vista of Salisbury's little streets and farms. Looking down the jump's harrowingly steep runway toward the upward tilted takeoff point, however, is terrifying.

Seventy competitors, ages 12 to 17 from throughout the country, are expected in Salisbury for the Junior Olympics. So are about 2,000 spectators. As a warm-up, Salisbury will host the United States Eastern Junior Championships from Friday to Sunday. The event festivities will include a nighttime chili cook-off and the annual snow ball, a dance with a rock 'n' roll band.

"It's kind of astonishing that this all worked out," Barker said as he stood on the crest of the hill next to the jump on a chilly January day. "Still don't know what I was thinking when I said we'd do it. Now we've got more people than we can count who want to come here and jump off it. Some things never change, I guess."