

Franz Wilhelmsen

Inducted CSHF: 1996
Hometown:
Date of Birth: October 7, 1918
Date of Death: 30 April, 1998
Affiliated Discipline(s): Builder
Active Career Date(s): N/A
FIS Code: N/A
Club: N/A

Franz Wilhelmsen was born in Trondheim, Norway on 7 October 1918. Decades later he would achieve his place in Canadian ski history as a founding father of Canada's largest and best known ski resort, Whistler Mountain in British Columbia.

In 1940, shortly after the outbreak of WWII, Franz Wilhelmsen, on a training mission with the Royal Norwegian Air Force, found himself stationed in Toronto. There he met and married Annette Seagram. After the war, the couple returned to Norway for a year before returning to Vancouver, British Columbia where he tried his hand at several pursuits, none of which challenged his talents or his energy and enthusiasm.

In 1960, the VIII Olympic Winter Games were held in California's Squaw Valley. Canada's representative on the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) suggested that if a suitable site could be found near Vancouver, the province would be in a position to host future games. Wilhelmsen had finally found his challenge. A group of Vancouver businessmen led by Wilhelmsen formed the Garibaldi Olympic Development Association (GODA). Its objectives were to have Whistler Mountain located in the northern end of Garibaldi park serve as the site for the 1968 Olympic Winter Games and to promote development of that area of the park for both summer and winter use.

On 21 November 1960, several of the same businessmen incorporated Garibaldi Lifts Ltd. with Wilhelmsen elected to serve as its first President, a title he would hold for the next 20-years. Willy Schaefer, designer of Squaw Valley's Olympic runs and an authority on ski terrain development was hired to analyze Whistler's development potential. Schaefer's feasibility report confirmed the expectations; Whistler's terrain was ideal for all levels of skiers. The potential viability of Whistler was further confirmed by the fact that skiing as a recreational activity was becoming increasingly important and that the Vancouver area's population was growing.

Franz Wilhelmsen continued on next page

The study recommended that the mountains north face be developed initially as the slope was more amenable to the installation of lifts. British Columbia's government rejected the location as the slopes on the north side had already been staked by mining claims. Garibaldi Lifts Ltd. was obliged to move its terrain development focus to the southwest, Creekside as it is known today.

Developing the mountain would prove to be a challenge. At that time there was no infrastructure at all, no roads, water system or power. The government of British Columbia, however, did commit itself to constructing a highway from Squamish to the area if the capital necessary for lifts and other infrastructure was raised.

Garibaldi Lifts Ltd decided to go to the public for the capital needed, to sell shares in an unconventional way which would not involve underwriters or brokers. The company's directors gave themselves two years to raise CAN\$800,000. They also introduced "...a few creative wrinkles to their offering." All the cash raised from the public was invested in a trust, not to be released until certain conditions had been met: 1. No less than CAN\$450,000 had to be publicly subscribed to ensure sufficient funds to complete the project, 2. the highway was completed, and, 3. government agreements had to be reached on easements, necessary leases and forest clearing at the foot of the mountain. If the corporation failed to meet the conditions, the money would be returned to the investors with interest.

Initial resistance from investors delayed removal of the conditions for the full two years. They were removed, however, and in May, 1964 the enormous task of construction began. BY all accounts the site was "...a hive of activity for the next two years"; Garibaldi Lifts Ltd, was the first company in the country to make use of helicopters to carry concrete up the mountain for construction of the lift towers. There were delays caused by a union dispute, site closures from forest fires, and the diversion of the helicopters to fight the fires. In the absence of helicopters, packhorses were used to ferry food and materials to the men working on the mountain.

By the end of 1965, the original resort was ready. In place were a 4-passenger gondola, a double chairlift and two T-bar lifts, a base lodge, gondola barn, mid-mountain lift station and warming hut on the summit. Six runs were available. On 15 February 1966, Whistler Mountain was officially opened to the public. The Greater Vancouver Tourist Bureau declared Franz Wilhelmsen its "man of the year".

Franz Wilhelmsen continued on next page

Although the company was very successful, there remained one seemingly intractable problem. BC Hydro did not share the Garibaldi Lift Company's vision of the future refusing to install the electrical infrastructure necessary to accommodate projected growth. By the fall of 1968, the problem was becoming serious. BC Hydro reacted by bringing in a diesel powered station housed in rail car. By Christmas of that year, there were three diesel powered stations all housed in rail cars. Disaster struck when the resident Hydro caretaker got drunk over Christmas, neglected his duties with the inevitable result. The power failed, the lifts stopped and extremely low temperatures forced evacuation of the valley. It took nearly six weeks and considerable money to get Whistler back into operation. BC Hydro has learned its lesson and a permanent sub-station was installed.

Since then Whistler has grown to become one of the world's leading resorts. Franz Wilhelmsen contribution was instrumental in both its founding and its successful survival. Hugh Smythe, President of Whistler/Blackcomb said "I think of him as one of the most valuable mentors in my career. Franz was incredibly perceptive, had a great sense of humor and was charming and gentlemanly in every situation".

Franz Wilhelmsen remained President of Garibaldi Lifts unto 1983. His vision has recognized on many occasions. He was awarded the Queen's Medal in 1977, inducted into the British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame in 1988, and was a recipient of the Prestigious W.A.C. Bennett Award given to those who have made a major contribution to sport in the province of British Columbia.