

The Braked Rescue Sled

Seven decades ago, Roger Sylvand and Emile Allais invented a safer new way to get injured skiers off the mountain. **BY THOMAS SYLVAND**



Roger Sylvand encourages his son François to demonstrate how little muscle it took to operate the rescue-sled prototype.



The Sylvand-Allais braking system is still manufactured, in this example by Tyromont in Austria.

During the summer of 2019, Bonneville, the ski-resort town in the French Alps, lost a landmark. The factory *Traineau Sylvand* (Sylvand Sleds) was torn down to make way for real estate development.

For six decades, beginning in 1947, that factory produced rescue sleds (*traineaux de secours*) for ski patrols across France and around the world. The inventor of that sled was my grandfather, Roger Sylvand. He created the prototype at the request of Emile Allais, the world champion skier who was the guiding light for French ski resort development in the post-war years.

The Sylvand family has lived in the high mountains for many generations. My great-grandfather Louis, wounded in World War I, moved his young family to Praz-sur-Arly, just outside Megève, in 1922, when Roger was 11 years old.

As my father, François, tells the story, Roger was greatly impressed by Robert Flaherty's classic documentary *Nanook of the North*, and especially fascinated with the dogsleds. He built his own sled, from barrel staves, and tested it with his infant brother André as passenger. Naturally, the sled came to pieces on a curbstone. Fortunately, André was wrapped in layers and layers of swaddling, and came to no harm. Roger suffered a severe scolding.

The family lived in a hillside cottage. Like the neigh-

bors, in winter they hauled groceries and firewood on sleds and sledges, and throughout the 1920s witnessed the rapid growth of alpine skiing (Megève was the first of the French lift-served resorts). As a teenager, Roger helped to set up the first ski-tows, on land owned by cousins, and drove buses hauling skiers uphill. He became an inventive mechanic, rigging up a rack-and-pinion system to simultaneously operate all the window-shutters on one side of the cottage. In the years leading up to World War II, he served in the mountain artillery and was tasked with devising over-the-snow transport solutions. He got to build more sleds.

Hilaire Evrard, a maternal uncle, owned a hardware store in Megève and an up-to-date factory in Bonneville that produced steel cable and elevator machinery, plus skis sold under the Brévent, Buet and La Para brands, and the Swiss-designed "Luge de Megève." Evrard died suddenly in 1946. The family split up the businesses—the Evrards took over the hardware store and Roger Sylvand managed the factory, gradually buying ownership. He dropped the cable and elevator operations to focus on wood products: skis and sleds.

Roger set to work modernizing the carpentry operations. After a loose router bit nearly killed him, he focused on safety issues, ventilating sawdust to the basement to reduce fire hazard, installing an elaborate fire-alarm system he designed himself, and even setting up a system to stop the machinery automatically whenever a stranger came through the door.

It was an era of rapid innovation in ski resort management. Emile Allais returned from the Americas, where he had designed new trail systems and set up new ski schools. He brought with him Howard Head's new metal skis, and a lot of great ideas about mechanical slope grooming and ski patrol operations.

