

SUTTON, A DREAM WELL BEFORE 1960

On December 17, 1960, a new ski resort opened in Quebec: Mont SUTTON. However, long before the first skiers were racing down the runs, developers had clearly seen the mountain's full potential. Harold Boulanger, the father, Réal, the visionary son, and François Lévesque, a lawyer and family friend, were the masterminds behind this venture.



LET'S GO BACK A BIT IN TIME...

The Boulanger family moved to Sutton in 1945. A trained administrator working in the dairy industry, Harold Boulanger decided to found Sutton Dairy Products with two partners, Charles Dionne and Albert Deslauriers. A key enterprise in Sutton that specialized in the production of butter, skim milk powder, protein and pasteurized chocolate milk until 1980.

Sutton Dairy Products was typically very busy for four or five months during the summer but in winter was forced to lay off employees. This situation led the owners to begin thinking about a business that would keep their personnel employed during the winter months. At that time, people were wilderness skiing at Sutton, more specifically on the north face of the slope near Lake Mohawk, the mountain next to the present day ski area. During the winter of 1946, the young Boulangers began their love affair with the sport of downhill skiing. Benoît and Hercule, Harold's sons, often went there to practice skiing in the forest, accompanied by their wives and friends. At the time, Réal worked at the creamery and did not understand why his brothers would spend a whole day, use up a lot

of energy to climb a mountain carrying their skis only to go down once. They came home in the evening tired, wet and frozen... exhausted...

After several years of wilderness skiing, they decided to try out places that had ski-tows. One Sunday early in the 1955 season, eight people crammed into two cars to drive to the popular ski resort in Stowe, Vermont. They were Réal and his wife Lucille, his brother Robert and his wife Josette, Dr. Paul Rioux and his wife Clara, Réal's brother, Benoît and his wife Sylvianne. Only Benoît, Lucille and Paul Rioux had skis! Réal brought his toboggan but wasn't allowed to bring it up on the lift. Once on the peak, the group met at the octagonal restaurant to warm up sipping hot chocolate and admiring the spectacular view. Lucille was reluctant to wrestle with the fog on the mountain and wanted to go back down with her skis... on the chairlift! Hearing this, Réal borrowed her boots which, as you can imagine, were not a great fit. After getting a few tips about how to make turns, he made his first descent along with Paul and Benoit! That one run sparked a passion that grew in Réal from that day forward.

Following this watershed event, the entire family and many friends continued to ski for pleasure but Réal became fascinated with analysing the sport as well. Assiduously trying to figure out why skiers preferred one run over another, he went to Stowe to ski as often as he could to determine the technical details of each trail, observe the chairlifts, the snow conditions and ask the experts about the sport, etc.

A SKI HILL... TO KEEP BUSY IN THE WINTER

The Boulanger family already practiced skiing at Stowe and Jay Peak in Vermont but Réal really wanted to have a place closer to home where he and his brothers could ski. He decided to explore the mountain in Sutton throughout the year. Equipped with an old altimeter and a cable, he measured the flats, the degrees of elevation and the vertical drops. He had to ensure that the trails would meet the needs of beginners, intermediate and expert skiers. Réal also measured the depth of snow in November and in early December, also in April in order to calculate the approximate length of a ski season.

Confident of his information gathering, Réal asked some planning and development consultants from Sno-Engineering Inc., a company based in New Hampshire, to visit the mountain in Sutton to confirm his observations. Because of the scope of the project, Réal had to be sure that the mountain could offer a ski experience at least as good as other ski areas, if not better. During this time, Réal began researching different equipment suppliers and consultants with the objective of developing the mountain at Sutton. He also undertook the task of convincing his father Harold of the viability of creating a ski resort. Harold quickly understood how this project could result in a profitable winter business that could also employ many of the dairy workers during the idle winter months. For him, the two businesses made a great fit.

FROM DREAM TO REALITY... A CONCERTED EFFORT

Things really started to take-off in 1959! François Lévesque, the family lawyer and Édith's friend (Réal's sister), advised the Boulangers to form a company and buy the land on the mountain, leaving the logging rights to the former owner.

The four Boulangier brothers, Réal, Robert, Benoît and Hercule, along with several experts, surveyed the entire mountain to plan the runs. They initially laid out four runs, scouted out locations for two chairlifts, a main chalet and a refuge at the top of the trails and future runs. From that moment on, Réal's visionary skills would prove to be a vital asset. For instance, it was Réal's idea to leave trees on the trails so people could enjoy skiing under a canopy of branches, providing eye pleasure and a challenge for the feet! On several occasions, Réal and his helpers, went into the woods to design the trails, to choose tree by tree which one had to be cleared or not, depending on the desired level of challenge in a preserved landscape. Réal not only wanted to preserve trees for the concept of tree skiing, he also wanted to protect the mountain from erosion and the skiers from the wind. The first glades at Mont SUTTON, which made the reputation of the station across the country, were created just west of chairlift IV. Year after year, they are acclaimed by Ski Canada and SBC Resort Guide as the best glades in Canada.

On April 15, 1960, the spring before the grand opening of the area, Mr. Max Zigmann, owner of Sun Valley in the Laurentians and importer of the reliable Muëller chairlifts, inspected the mountain with Réal and discovered fresh powder on the runs. Excited by the sight of all that snow, he said to Réal, "If you buy the chairlifts from me, I'll trade the equivalent of my commission for shares in Mont SUTTON Inc."



THE SKI RESORT TAKES SHAPE...

The clearing of the trails was started with financing provided by the dairy's suppliers, who bought shares of Mont SUTTON Inc. A group of doctors in Cowansville also invested in the development of the mountain. Their investment allowed the construction of the main chalet at altitude 400.

In June 1960, the Boulangers continued the road leading from the village to the mountain. At that time, the road ended at the Crittenden Farm, today the Auberge Agnes Horth. The Boulanger family began the construction of the main chalet at the mountain a few months later. It was also during the summer of 1960 that Réal began to clear one of the trails, the trail under the chairlift II, the Sutton-Ik. This was a first in the Quebec ski industry: skiers could ski under a chairlift! Thus was born the story of the "did you see me" trail. All trails under the chairlifts are popular because it is easy for the skiers to find their partners on the ski trails from the lift. For many people, it is also a great opportunity to be seen in action on the trails, hence the nickname given to the Sutton-Ik trail - "Did you see me".

Fortunately, the Boulangers knew an architect in Sutton, Mr. Reznicek, who worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway. Réal and Mr. Reznicek went to other ski resorts to check out their chalets and note the elements they loved and eliminate the ones they disliked. They observed the parking lot, the lockers, the cafeterias, all the details. Réal wanted to offer snow lovers everything possible to enhance their ski experience. It is from their observations that Réal and Mr. Reznicek refined the design of Mont SUTTON's main chalet. The Boulangers put their hearts, minds, souls and bodies into the building of the area but they didn't do it alone. Several lumberjacks and tradesmen of the region also contributed to the clearing and construction of the area. Amongst them, the Holmes, Turgeon, Roy and Rancourt families.

The installation of the first chairlift on the mountain was also a concerted effort! After clearing the Sutton-Ik trail, the surveyors marked out where the chairlift manufacturer wanted to put the tower bases. It was then up to Réal to supervise the work. One team was busy making the forms while a second one used a Bombardier Muskeg to transport the bags of cement, sand, gravel and water to each site. When all the ingredients were in place, the cement was prepared using a small mixer. Everything was emptied directly into the forms. Around the same time, the parts for the chairlifts arrived in Montreal harbour from Switzerland. Of course, the lifts still had to be assembled. Mr. Zigmann distributed the plans and oversaw the work while commuting between Sun Valley and Sutton. He also provided a Swiss technician who stayed on and helped for part of that winter.

THE DAY BEFORE DECEMBER 17 1960... THE INSTALLATIONS ARE READY!

Everything was finally ready for the opening of the resort on December 17, 1960. The workmen had completed the installation of the T-bar; a small refuge was ready above chairlift II, where for some 20 years, Mrs. Bourgeois served the world's best hamburgers.

In the 500-square-metre Main Lodge, Alt. 400m, several services were available: a cafeteria that is still in operation today, a ski school and a boutique directed at that time by Jean Lessard, the Canadian Slalom Champion in 1960, as well as a ski rental and repair shop in the basement. In addition to a daycare supervised by Lucille, Réal's wife, a medical clinic was also located on the second floor with X-Ray equipment and material for making casts. What's more, Mont SUTTON reinforced its reputation as an innovator by ensuring the security of skiers with a team of St. John's Ambulance trained patrollers.

THE DAY OF DECEMBER 17, 1960

To everyone's delight, four inches of snow fell on the evening of December 16. The opening took place the following day under a blanket of snow. Glen Brown and Heward Graftey, respectively the provincial and federal MPs at the time, were present, as were several ski celebrities including Canadian Ann Heggtveit, the gold medal winner in Slalom at the 1960 Olympics in Squaw Valley. It was a memorable day for all those who attended and one that will be forever engraved in the memories of the Boulanger family.

By the next day, December 18, the snow had melted. The next blanket of snow came only on December 25th during midnight Mass. Mont SUTTON then had an abundance of snow for the Christmas holidays.



THE FIRST SEASON

On Christmas Day, 1960, only the T-bar was operational. The chairlift was not quite ready. The family worked night and day to get it ready for January 5. On Saturday February 16, 1961, Réal's birthday, the evening was planned for the first Sutton Ski Club activity: a dinner and torchlight run. It rained cats and dogs that night, forcing Réal to close the resort. The Boulangers had to reassess the situation and provide additional guarantees to the bank over the short term. The resort remained closed four long weeks, finally re-opening at the end of March. April 23, 1961 was the last day of the season, a season that, despite the setbacks, turned out to be extraordinarily successful. So successful in fact, Mont-Sutton issued its first shareholder dividends. Then, as now, every season is at the mercy of Mother Nature!

Commenting on the success of Mont SUTTON's first season, an article in one ski magazine commented: "On some Sundays, you could count some 2,000 skiers on the hills... One of the reasons for Mont SUTTON's popularity was that it received a total snowfall of 143 inches, allowing skiers to enjoy their sport right up until April 23, well after the sun had laid bare all the hills in the Laurentians." Abundant snowfalls and the number of days of operation are notable characteristics of Mont SUTTON, as indicated in the [season duration and precipitation since 1960](#) chart.

THE FIRST WINTERS

During the second season (1961-1962), Réal decided to install a snowmaking system for the trails located near the T-bar, today the area II west. Throughout the early years, Mont SUTTON was renowned as an innovative ski area: it was one of the first ski resorts in Quebec to use a snowmaking system. At the time, it was necessary to obtain a license to use such a system. It was with the Larchmount Engineering license that the snowmaking was employed. In the beginning the system used 150 gallons of water and 600 cubic feet of air per minute to make snow. Today, 1500 gallons of water and 9000 cubic feet of air are used.

In 1962, the ever increasing popularity of this magnificent mountain with skiers, prompted Réal and Hercule and friends to install two more lifts, the III and the IV. The refuge at the top of the chairlift II (Alt.680m) was also expanded to create a small restaurant seating about 40 people.

The "ski-bobs", a kind of bicycle on skis, were first purchased in 1964. The original idea was to rent them out but the "ski-bobs" quickly became popular with employees working at altitude on the mountain, for example at the top of the chairlifts. At the end of their shift or during breaks, employees used the ski-bobs to get down to the main chalet. Useful and fun!

The next year, 1965, Réal commissioned Sno-Engineering Inc. to survey skiers. Their findings indicated that most ski lovers were of intermediate abilities and preferred to practice their sport on an intermediate terrain. At the time, Réal wanted to expand on an area for expert skiers but he opted to follow the advice of Sno-Engineering Inc in order to better meet the wishes of the skiers. Thus the decision to add another double chairlift to the west, chair I, giving access to more intermediate level terrain. This chairlift was the longest of the four chairlifts at Mont SUTTON.

In 1970, a Poma lift was installed near the chairlift IV creating the area known today as IV West, an intermediate to expert area designed to meet the needs of racers in the “Stade de Slalom”. The main chalet was also expanded and another 600 acres were purchased to accommodate future growth.

In 1975, Mont SUTTON bought bulldozers to move the snow from the sides to the middle of the trails. Two bulls connected to each other moved the snow up higher onto the trails... heavy work at the time. This rudimentary “grooming” was supplanted in 1980 with the purchase of new Tucker Sno-Cats. Lighter and easier to manipulate, the Sno-Cats, designed and equipped especially for grooming snow, replaced the bulldozers virtually immediately. Those early Tuckers, lovingly maintained by an expert crew, are still extensively employed for grooming in the glades. Indeed, they are the only machines nimble enough to work in the glades.

Innovation has been a hallmark of the Boulanger family from the beginning and always with an eye on meeting or exceeding skiers’ wishes and desires for the most memorable experience possible.

A SUCCESSION OF WINTERS

In conjunction with Sno-Engineering, Réal pursued the development of the mountain. Neighbouring ski resort Mont Echo had closed down in 1978 and put its equipment and double Muëller lifts up for auction. Mont Sutton’s bid was accepted but what of the logistics of dismantling and moving a chairlift? It was unprecedented in the Quebec ski industry. Ever the innovator, Réal came up with the idea of hiring a Bell helicopter to make the move. It took three days to carry out the transport of the towers, etc. and another two months to complete the installation – an organizational and logistical feat that perhaps only Réal could have accomplished – but Chair V was ready for the next ski season!

Réal’s eldest son, Denis was hired as Mont SUTTON’s marketing director in 1979 and maintained that position until 1989 when he became the general director of the mountain.

The 1982-83 seasons saw the introduction of the free shuttle system allowing skiers easy access to the ski area from and to their hotels and auberges. This service is as popular

now as it was then and has also been expanded to provide shuttle service to and from more remote parking areas and the new trail “Zero”.

The untimely and certainly unforeseen death of Réal in 1983 came as a huge shock to all who knew him and will probably stand as the saddest day in the history of Mont Sutton. Fortunately, Réal’s dreams and visions – his drive – didn’t die with him. Robert took over the reins of the area and continued the work of his brother but the entire family as well as many key employees maintains, to this day, Réal’s philosophy.

In the early to mid-eighties, there were announced many joint provincial-federal subsidy programmes. A system of sewers and water mains were established by the Village and the Township of Sutton allowing the development of the Archimede Village for instance. The creation of other lodging projects was also required. Mont Sutton undertook to meet those obligations – most notably with the Val Sutton development. Midstream, the subsidy programme was changed by the authorities and the property investments lost their profitability. Several ski areas in Quebec were in a financial bind but the Boulanger family kept faith and became the owner of the Val Sutton condos. The following period was not a good one financially and it was not helped by the warming climate, the introduction of the GST/QST. The ever rising operating costs associated with snowmaking and grooming operations didn’t help

Snowmaking capacity steadily increased between 1984 and 1989.

In the Summer of 1985, North America’s first Doppelmayr detachable quadruple chairlift was installed, replacing the 25-year-old II Chairlift.

January 1985. A double chairlift, the I West, was added to the West of the chairlift I. That new chairlift gives access for skiers to a beginner and intermediate area and the development of ski-in/ski-out chalets is now available because of the new capacity.

For skiers comfort, chalet Alt.680m was rebuilt in 1985. That same year, a new machine was purchased to groom the trails into the glades. That machine was called a “trans-neige” and was meant to improve conditions in the glades. Despite a lot of effort, it didn’t work well on such tight trails. Tuckers to the rescue again!

In 1986, two new double chairlifts were purchased to replace the Poma at chair IV West and T-bar at II West. That same season, another parking lot was added for the customers accessing the area at Alt.520m, accessible by Chemin Réal. That upper entrance to the resort allowed access to chairlifts IV, V and VII.

In 1987, a second quadruple chairlift, the VII, was added. That new sector offers great challenges for expert skiers! It was and still is a heaven for glade skiers! People had access to that area by foot from the Exil but it wasn’t served by a lift. The installation of a new chairlift was proposed by Luc and Denis (Réal’s sons), after studying the feasibility of installing a chairlift anticipated by Réal’s original plan. The proposed chairlift gave access to another summit to the east of Round Top. As this area was very steep at the top,

flat in the middle and moderately steep at the base, why not install a chairlift allowing skiers to ski better terrain? Thus locating the chairlift where it is today.

Circa 1987-1988, the Boulanger family purchased the Auberge Paimpolaise. The family retained ownership of the inn until 1993.

1988 saw chair IV replaced by a third quad. That same year, Benoît replaced Robert who passed away in 1986, making him the third Boulanger brother to become President and General Manager of Mont SUTTON. It was he who promoted his nephew Denis to the post of General-Manager in 1989. Denis hired his sister Christine as the marketing director in 1996 where she stayed until 2002. Since her departure as a marketing director, Christine has continued to offer an important contribution to Mont SUTTON over the years, particularly helping out Marguerite (Margot), her elder sister in the ticketing and customer service areas. Denis left the General Manager position in 1998.

Luc Boulanger has been immersed in the ski world almost since birth. Since younger than he can remember, Luc went with his father Réal grooming trails. Luc was about twenty years old when he started to work full-time at Mont SUTTON. He did the maintenance of the trails and the chairlifts. Following the death of his father Réal in 1983, Hercule asked Luc to be the person responsible for operations. Gradually, Luc took on more responsibilities and made decisions about the operations at the mountain. He then became director of the operations of Mont SUTTON and still holds that position today, never having lost sight of his father's passion for skiing. Two of Real's children Marguerite and Luc, Réal's sister, Michelle and his two brothers Benoît and Hercule are still very much involved in the day to day operations on the mountain.

In 1990-1991, Jean Lessard decided to retire and sell his boutique and ski school. Guy Duquette, an exceptional young skier and member of the Canadian Exhibition Team at Interski since 1987, offered to continue. Guy founded the SUTTON Ski School, today known as the Snow School, recognized throughout Quebec for the quality of its instruction and its services. As for the boutique, the popular ski store chain Sport Experts opened a boutique at the main chalet.

The 96-97 seasons brought something entirely new to world of skiing in Quebec – the Fantasy trail. Thus named by Denis Boulanger, the Fantasy is a unique, unpatrolled, natural snow heaven. There are no lifts to get you out and there is no snowmaking or grooming. It is pure skiing – ranked by Ski Canada as the best new ski area in Eastern Canada in 1998. The Fantasy does not appear on any trail map ... be careful one must exit it using a healthy traverse.

Between 1999 and 2004 there were a number of changes made at the ski area. Perhaps the most visible was the construction of the 6000 sq.ft. Sports Expert building next to the main chalet. Less visible were major improvements to the snow-making operations, the additions of new Bombardier grooming machines, a total replacement of ticketing software to ease those lines and other, perhaps minor, details such as expanding the outside ticket offices.

Even more innovations were in store at Mont SUTTON for the 2004-2005 season! New chairs were purchased to replace the benches on chairlifts III and IV West. New software was installed to speed transactions at the ticketing booths as well as in the cafeteria. Finally, several renovations to the different chairlifts and chalets were made in order to always better meet the needs of skiers.

For 50 years, Mont SUTTON has demonstrated its unwavering commitment to enhancing your skiing experience by constantly adding new lifts and trails, new snow guns, etc. The maintenance equipment, new chairs and more efficient engines for chairlifts are all part of that. Mont SUTTON now offers a total lift capacity of 11800 people per hour. The day care has been expanded and welcomes all children two years and up. Other additions in the past couple of years include the Ambassador Guide service, a very welcoming and free service offered to newcomers to the ski area and the quickly becoming famous Bar Le Tucker – wonder why it is named that. For whatever reason, the Bar Le Tucker has become the place for après-ski and corporate events.

THE IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTIONS OF RÉAL BOULANGER

Réal, now well known as an expert in the development of ski resorts was hired on occasion by Sno-Engineering Inc. to help in the planning of several ski resorts in Quebec. Mont Valinouët, Mont Orford, Mont Arthabaska, Mont-Comi, Mont Ste-Marie, Bolton Ski Area in Vermont and even Blackcomb in British Columbia amongst them. Throughout the ski world, Réal had a sterling reputation. His contributions are immeasurable. It was also Réal the first to foster cooperation between the various ski areas in the townships – Sutton, Bromont, Owl's Head, Mt Glen and Orford.

It was also Réal who created the “Ski East” program. In 1961, Sutton, Jay Peak, North Hatley (today Montjoye) and Orford joined forces to offer weekday tickets valid at any of the four resorts. This promotion proved to be very successful in attracting skiers from the north-eastern United States. Today, Sutton, Owl's Head and Orford work together to offer a greater variety of runs to this US market. Réal not only had talent for designing the mountains, but he was a man close to the people's needs.

Réal also implemented the Iniski program in 1966. First offered for free at Mont SUTTON, the program has since been implemented across Canada. At the time at Mont SUTTON, an Iniski session lasted a full day with an instructor: in the morning, it was the theory and in the afternoon, it was practice.

About 1967, Réal participated in the creation of National Ski Week (snowboard now included), still widespread across Canada. This week in mid-January aims to celebrate the favourite season for millions of Canadians: Winter! Every year the industry invites people of all ages to visit their ski area to discover the pleasures of winter.

Of course, some winters are tougher than others, take 1979. That winter there was a dearth of snow in the Eastern Townships. In a generous show of support for his friend Réal, Jean-Claude Tremblay, the owner of the Quebec City ski resort Le Relais, invited Mont SUTTON's season's pass holders to ski for free at Le Relais. Together, Jean-Claude and Réal went on to found an association between the ski resorts of Quebec, in order to help and build an alliance and a collaboration between them. They founded the APSSQ (Association of Quebec Ski Resort Owners), today called the ASSQ. Over the years, more and more ski resorts in Quebec joined the APSSQ. Today the ASSQ counts 75 member's areas, offers 3 programs for the development of skiing (manege experience, mountain experience, Iniski and Inisurf at the school) and several other services. As well, the ASSQ gives a "J. Réal Boulanger" award at its annual meeting. This award, in memory of Réal Boulanger is given to a person who has dedicated his career to the ski industry and whose achievements over a long period have made an exceptional contribution to the ski industry.

Of course, Réal had a philosophy of development for skiing and had a grand vision for the sport, supported by his brothers, sisters, children and friends. Today, we look back at Réal's visions, dreams and we are awestruck what prescience he possessed .



AN AUTHENTIC NATURE SINCE 50 SEASONS

Over the years, the resort has welcomed a growing number of visitors, making a significant contribution to the region's economic development and tourism industry. Condos, chalets, small hotels and quaint B&Bs have sprung up to accommodate visitors. Numerous restaurants and boutiques have opened and an increasing number of activities have made the Brome-Missisquoi area a true four-season destination for many.

Every generation of the Boulanger clan has contributed to the success of this family-run resort. Whether in the family kitchen, at the dairy or at the ski area, family members and employees have worked as a team to meet the challenges and make Mont SUTTON the success it is today. They continue Réal's work. Benoît is president and general manager of the area, Hercule is vice-president of administration and finance and Michelle, Réal's sister, is vice-president of marketing. Réal's children continue to contribute significantly to Mont SUTTON - Luc as operations manager and Marguerite (better known as Margot) handling customer service and day ticketing. Denis and Christine no longer officially work at the mountain ... they simply remain indispensable turn-to people. And the family

tradition continues – Paul, Margot’s son is the head groomer. Oft times you’ll find Ariane (Denis’ daughter) tending bar in the Tucker. Mont Sutton is, was and always will be a family affair.

Réal was the catalyst triggering a sea of change in the perception of skiing. He not only made it seem possible, he was very much instrumental in making it possible. Well, he was an extraordinary man. There really isn’t much more to say ... hopefully Réal’s legacy will live forever on this mountain he so lovingly designed for us.