



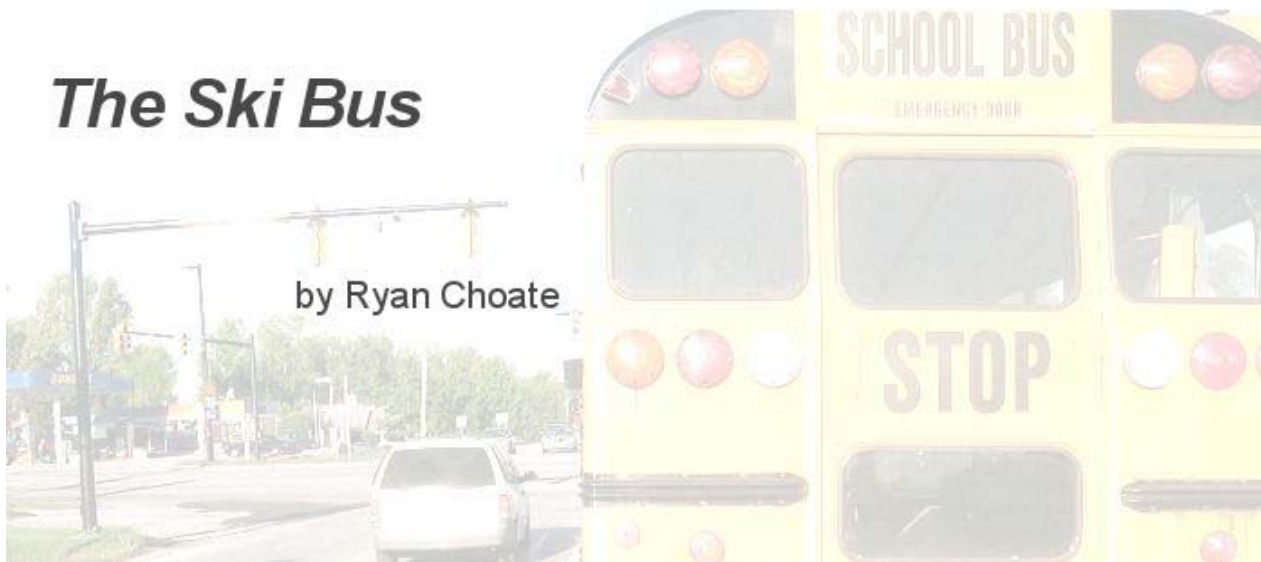
Go to....



Go!

The Ski Bus

by Ryan Choate



I could almost hear the morning crack at dawn. Light sneaking through the blinds, creeping up onto the wall. Saturday morning, early, yet I had long since been awake, eyes slightly squinted, the proverbial wake up call by mom rendered moot. The eagerness besieged my thoughts, though the smell of pancakes wafting to my second floor room was a nice distraction. Anticipation of the day ahead the only thought my brain could devise.

With breakfast all but inhaled, it was a couple arm punches by my older brother, followed by a “get in the back runt”, before we piled into the car. My mom barreled down the snow-covered road, over “Cemetery Hill” before letting us out at the high school, where we jockeyed for position on the bus. It was a 1976 International Harvester school bus full of snot nosed elementary school kids, but it was our ride, and it never failed to safely deposit us at the bottom of the local ski hill, Plumas Eureka Ski Bowl.

Being dropped off by your parents, and put in the care of a stranger to go skiing for the day could be a bit unnerving for some kids, yet, when we hopped off the bus and grabbed our more than a little used hand-me-down K2 skis and made the short hike to the lodge, it became all about making some turns.

Plumas Eureka Ski Bowl, tucked into the tiny Sierra mining town of Johnsville, is considered small at best. It's eight hundred feet of vertical rising gradually toward the granite-encrusted Eureka Peak. It held every challenge a fifth graders' imagination could muster though. From the glove shredding rope tow, to the “big” poma, which unloaded its riders all the way at the top. The one requirement of riding the ski bus (practical yet despised by all) was the dreaded morning group lesson. This idea fell deaf on a bunch of self-proclaimed expert skiers. As a voice yelled out, “Choate, your over here”, I fell in line with six or seven of my friends behind the instructor. We proceeded to make our laps on the “little” poma, in what amounted to a painless two hours of follow the leader. The real problem with the group lesson was that it cut into our exploration time. I mean this huge mountain with its three surface lifts, and we are stuck in a lesson with some guy telling us our plow looks good. Plow? We need time to dissect the beast! The idea of actually

learning some ski technique seemed more than mildly absurd. Surely our raucous style of borderline control, and straight lines could get us down any blue square runs. It was the idea of ripping around unsupervised, hitting "The Rock", "Sunbowl", and the valley of darkness known as the "Back trail" that filled our beanie shrouded heads.

At around noon the agony of the group lesson ended and a mad dash for lunch commenced. The masses bombed down the hill to the lodge, kicking off skis at the bottom, trying to score prime real estate next to the fire. The lodge was small and rustic, probably built what seemed like a hundred years ago. It was lined with bench seats. Backpacks piled in every corner, filled with peanut butter and jelly's no doubt. In the center was a circular rock fireplace. Around the fireplace was a makeshift clothesline that hung a privy of sopping wet gloves, hoping to achieve some semblance of dryness before the afternoon go out. On the walls hung pictures of old miners from the late 1800's, standing stoically next to their ten-foot wooden long board skis. It conjured up images of wool cladden wildmen, thundering down the mountain in an outright speed duel.

Having scarfed down a quick lunch, packed with care by mom, it was time to lay out a plan for the afternoon assault. Gathering a couple of friends for the mission, we hovered close and whispered as if we had some secret information. Not to be too careless as to divulge a stash, we made a quick exit and headed for the lineup at the big poma. We shimmied up, waiting for our turn, watching each person take off.

The lift operator was usually a local ski bum working for a ski pass. They were stereotypically granola eaters, single-handedly keeping the wool outerwear industry alive. They dawned strange leather ski boots, which somehow attached to a binding with three pins to hold their foot in. When they skied, it looked like they were about to fall, awkwardly lunging with every turn. I thought to myself, "That looks really hard, why would you want to ski like that?"

Standing there with the poma between your legs waiting for some sort of cosmic blast off, the liftie yells, "you ready!" I say "sure". The big poma was a fast take off. If the plastic disc were not properly placed between the legs, a 30 foot dragging (because you couldn't let go in front of the lift line!), followed by an embarrassing walk of shame with skis in hand to the back of the line would surely bestow you.

The ride was a slow slog to the top. The pomas resembled some sort of archaic erector set with leaning towers here and there. They were mostly held together by duct tape and chicken wire. At the top it was decided to ski the Backtrail. If the place had a ski area boundary it would be so out of bounds! Get lost back there and you might run into some crazy family living in the woods, with wild wolf dogs, just waiting for disoriented skiers. Leaving the lift and traversing out to an open area, the Backtrail turns into a glade through pines and manzanita. It slowly descends below an area known as "The Cornice", before stopping above a giant boulder.

This boulder would be the stage for many a dramatic performance. It was a steep in-run to a 6-foot drop, then to flat. It would often take several runs, and some serious flutter gut before hurling yourself off the rock, and into an all gear losing yard sale, while hearing the ooh's and aaah's of several spectators, some of which were girls. After unpacking the snow from your goggles, locating skis, and the remnants of your pride, the trail makes a nice trip through some glades, followed by a fast single-track to the bottom. It's not exactly a tour in the San Juan's but it sure felt like the backcountry to us. After several laps on the Backtrail and Sun Bowl, legs burning, it was time to call it a day.

The single greatest fear of any ski bus rider is missing the bus. As the sun starts to fade over the mountains, you grab a quick time check and look for an instructor to find out when the bus leaves. Now, for the several years I rode the ski bus, it always left at 3:30. For some reason there wasn't a kid on that hill who could remember that number. The incessant asking of the question "what time does the bus leave?" became such an annoyance, the instructors had sweatshirts with "The bus leaves at 3:30!" printed on them.

One last run and we all piled into the Harvester. The bus rumbled down the curvy mountain road.

Inside, a sea of sun burnt faces, the smell of boot feet, and a bunch of exhausted kids with huge smiles on their faces. As we pulled into the high school parking lot, full of anxious parents, I heard my friend say, "see you at school Monday?" "Yeah", I said. "You going to the mountain next weekend?" "Heck yeah!"

Some almost twenty years later I returned to the mountain, where I seemingly spent every weekend of every winter, riding the bus, and learning how to ski. The town of Johnsville is still the same. Plumas Eureka Ski Bowl though lies dormant, like some old west version of a ski area ghost town. The place was sold to a corporation that builds golf courses in the area a few years back, and the tattered poma lifts haven't ran since. The corporation wanted to put in a chairlift. Since it's on state park property, the powers that be said no way, and in the end a whole generation of kids are missing out on the opportunity to learn how to ski.

After tromping around ski resorts and backcountry trips the last several years I always look back with a smile, thinking about everyday I got to ride the ski bus, and my first backcountry experience, kind of. I can only hope that someday again the bus will be leaving at 3:30.