LAKE PLACID — In 1929, Godfrey Dewey had a dream: to bring the Winter Olympics to Lake Placid.

To win the bid, though, Lake Placid would have to build from scratch a bobsled run — the first in the Western Hemisphere, where virtually nobody knew a thing about the sport.

Today, more than 70 years later, the abandoned channels and curves of the first half mile of Dewey’s history-making bobsled run still snake down the slopes of Mount Van Hoevenberg, still discernible through the brush that’s grown up in the course’s track.

What would it be like if that bobsled run were cleared of brush so that visitors to Mount Van Hoevenberg could hike its channels and curves, experiencing it for themselves, with interpretive plaques along the way to help them understand what they were seeing?

That’s the idea brought to the table earlier this year by Liz de Fazio, executive director of the 1932 and 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympic Museum, and Jonathan Becker, a member of the museum’s board of directors. Along the way they gathered support from others interested in preserving the ’32 bobsled run, including the U.S. Bobsled Federation, based in Lake Placid, and the Olympic Regional Development Authority, which operates the Verizon Sports Complex at Mount Van Hoevenberg.

‘If you build it ...’

Godfrey Dewey himself deserves most of the credit for the success of Lake Placid’s 1932 Winter Olympic bid, since Dewey traveled solo to Switzerland in March 1929 to press the village’s case. The Lake Placid Club, founded by Dewey’s father Melvil in 1895, had already helped establish the village’s reputation as a winter sports Mecca. Dewey knew that, besides the routine construction of an indoor arena and a speedskating track, all Lake Placid needed to host a Winter Olympiad was a bobsled course.

Before leaving on a steamer for Europe, Dewey was able to win a guarantee from then-Governor Franklin Roosevelt that the state would pay for a bobsled course if Placid won the Olympic bid.

That left only two problems:

1) Nobody in North America had ever built a bobsled run before — indeed, only a handful of Americans had even ridden in a bobsled by 1929; those who had were expatriate Americans who trained and raced in Europe.

2) The best sites for such a project were on state land in the Adirondacks, where construction was forbidden by the famous “forever wild” clause in the state constitution.

Before leaving Europe Dewey solved his first problem by securing the services of famed German bobsled engineer Stanislaus Zentzskysky.

By the time Dewey returned to Lake Placid that summer, however, the second problem was far from being settled. Zentzsky was asked to develop separate designs for bobsled runs at each of three potential sites: the Wilmington Notch and Scarface Mountain, both on state land, and Mount Jo, overlooking the newly rebuilt Adirondack Loj, both owned by Melvil Dewey’s Lake Placid Club.

As an interim measure, Dewey and Zentzsky designed a temporary practice run for the LPC’s Intervales ski-jump site.

“This would at least enable workmen to become familiar with both construction and maintenance of the walls of snow and ice, and would give Americans a chance to practice the sport,” wrote Chris Ortloff in his definitive history, “Lake Placid: The Olympic Years, 1932-1980.”

The practice run at Intervales was a half mile long, compared with the Olympic’s one-and-a-half miles, with just seven curves versus the 26 that would later be constructed. The
Intervals course was finished in time for the winter of 1929-30, when the very first North American bobsled practice runs and competitions were held.

It wasn’t until March 1930 that the courts finally ruled that the bob run could definitely not be built on state land. Rather than proceed with construction on Mount Jo, however, Dewey wrote Zentztsky that he’d found another site owned by the Lake Placid Club that was far more suitable: South Meadows Mountain, which would later be renamed Mount Van Hoevenberg for the late, revered LPC engineer.

“On Aug. 4, (1930,) the workmen walked into the wilderness of Mount Van Hoevenberg,” Ortloff wrote. “A remarkable 148 days later, there stood a completed bobsled run.”

The full length of that original course, which ran for a mile and a half down Mount Van Ho, was in steady use from the winter of 1930-31 until 1939, according to reliable sources. That summer the upper half-mile of the course was shut down for safety reasons, never to be opened for bobsleds again.

The reason: While even a few of the older, lighter sleds (average speed: 46 mph) had shot off the mile-and-a-half course, none of the newer, heavier sleds could handle the long track safely.

While the latest bobsled run on Mount Van Hoevenberg, completed just 3 years ago, follows the course of the old track, with the start house located where the treacherous Whiteface Curve used to be, only a DEC hiking path (No. 79 in the latest ADK guide to High Peaks trails) now follows the old top half-mile. The trail runs parallel to and about 20 feet uphill from the overgrown contours of the abandoned Olympic relic.

**1932 bob run facts**

- Bobsled racing, even in Europe, is a relatively new sport. The first artificial bobsled run was built in 1904 in St. Moritz, Switzerland.
- The Mount Van Hoevenberg bob run was the only such course in the Western Hemisphere until a second run was built in Squaw Valley, Calif., for the 1960 Winter Olympics.
- The original MVH bob run was 2,350 meters (about 1-1/2 miles) long, with an average drop of about 10 percent. The run was shortened in 1939 to 1 mile because greater speeds by heavier sleds had made the longer run unsafe.
- In 1930 engineers moved 27,374 cubic yards of earth and stone to build the original MVH run, which was literally dug and blasted out of rock and forest.
- On the straightaways the run is 2 meters (6-1/2 feet) wide, while on the curves the width varies from 10 to 22 feet.
- Some of the curves are 22 feet high, their towering banks of stone running up almost at right angles to the bottom. Of those from the original track, the only such curve that still survives is the No. 2.
- The original MVH bob run contained 26 curves. Most altered the straightaway only slightly, but the course had three hairpin curves (the old No. 2, Whiteface and Shady) and the famous S-shaped Zig-Zag curve.
- To re-ice the run at the end of each day, 8,000 feet of pipe were run four feet underground from a huge reservoir at the foot of Mount Van Hovenberg to the top of the run. About 20,000 gallons of water were needed every 24 hours while the run was in use.
- In 1931 the Saranac Lake Red Devils held the world bobsled record with a 52-second run down the 1-1/2-mile MVH track. That team’s average speed was 46 mph. Today the passenger bobsleds run by ORDA down the MVH track regularly exceed 70 mph.

**Reviving the ’32 run**

“I’ve been thinking about restoring that run for years, ever since I first read about the (bobsled) track and its condition in the Ortloff book,” said Jonathan Becker, a member of the Lake Placid Winter Olympic Museum board of...
This former warm-up building for the 1932 bobsled run now serves as a post office for the Cascade Acres trailer park in Lake Placid. It was moved from its original site.