

10TH MOUNTAIN DIVISION TRAIL IN COLORADO (Aspen to Vail Trail)

by Fritz Benedict, 126-ENG BN

The idea of a trail from Aspen across the mountains to the upper Eagle Valley has been around a long time. When Camp Hale was built in 1942 an Army detachment, which had spent the summer building suspension bridges near Aspen, decided to go overland with their mules to Camp Hale. Local rancher, Had Deane, led the party up Hunter Creek until it was turned back by a snow cornice in the Williams Mountains. The following summer A Company 87th Mountain Infantry made a four-day trek from Hale to Aspen.

Included in the party was Sergeant Friedel Pfeiffer, ex-Austrian ski racer, who had been in the famous Hannes Schneider Ski School at St. Anton. Friedel had been head of the Sun Valley Ski School before the war, but he was keeping his eyes open for a new ski resort site. When the company came down Hunter Creek onto the lower slopes of Red Mountain, Friedel sat down on a rock and looked down on the somnolent Aspen. It reminded him of mountain villages back in Austria. He said to his buddy: "This is it. If I come out of the war alive, this is where I want to live."

Although wounded in the Italian campaign, Friedel did return to Aspen to build its first ski lifts and the world famous Aspen Ski School.

Other Mountain Troopers made the Aspen pilgrimage from Camp Hale—some in the winter on skis. Years after the war a few intrepid souls made the journey—some going the original route up Homestake Creek—others following a route along Cross Creek from Minturn.

Among early trippers between Aspen and the Eagle River country were ex-10th Mountaineer, Bill Mason, Aspenite; Jim War, Snowmass Langlauer; Amund Ekroll and Lars Larsen and ex-Norwegian ski touring guide. Gary Wall, Vail police chief, who was married to an Aspen girl, ran the trail from Aspen to Vail in 13 hours.

I had also been exploring the mountains around Aspen for potential ski terrain. After several trips to the Big Burn area I told my friend Tommy Thomas about the natural flat area above the burn, where he could land his plane. Tommy was very adventurous in his search for ski areas: he cracked up two planes in the process and skied away safely both times. Tommy introduced Janss to the Big Burn, and I worked with Janss to develop the master plan for Snowmass.

In planning the new towns of both Snowmass and Vail, I studied European ski resorts, and I realized the potential for a European-style hut system between Aspen and Vail.

There are three main routes which have been established between the two towns. The lowest route is the best one for winter travel as it has the least amount of avalanche danger and it allows for the construction of huts because it skirts the wilderness boundaries.

In May, 1980, a group (later named the Western Slope Trail Association) formed to implement the trail. I serve as the Chairman of the committee.

During September 1980, trail organizers made a four-day trek on horseback to scout the trail route. They were very enthusiastic and decided to press forward with plans. The U.S. Forest Service became very cooperative and agreed to lease two hut sites.

The Robert McNamara family and friends offered to donate funds to build two huts in memory of Maggie McNamara. Dr. Ben Eiseman has been instrumental in expediting the construction of these huts to be built in the summer of 1982. One will be built in the Hunter Creek Valley above Aspen at the "Burnt Hole." The other hut will be built one-day's journey away at "Rocky Fork" (a

tributary of the Fryng Pan River) which is above the old sawmill community of Lenado.

There are two existing cross-country ski camps that are part of the hut system. The Diamond J Dude Ranch on the Fryng Pan which has a central lodge where meals are served, housekeeping cabins and a hot tub. Jim Ward, veteran mountain man, is one of the owners. Buck and Holly Elliott run the Crooked Creek Touring Center. Accommodations are in log cabins and meals are available.

Future plans call for two more huts between Crooked Creek and Beaver Creek. Expectations are that money to build these huts will come as memorials. This is how the Fred Braun huts were built above Ashcroft.

Naming the trail "The 10th Mountain Division Trail" seems appropriate since mountain troopers from Camp Hale camped and maneuvered in these mountains. Just as 10th Mountain veterans created ski resorts throughout the United

States, much of Aspen was built by former 10th Mountain men after the war. One of them, Pete Seibert, along with Bob Parker, "Sarge" Brown and others went on to build Vail. A beautiful mountain trail, with attractive overnight cabins, seems an appropriate memorial for this magnificent 10th Mountain Division of the U.S. Army.

Volunteers are needed to work on various segments of the trail that have not yet been built. If you are interested, please contact me.

If any 10th Mountaineers wish to make a donation to the Hut System, please send contributions to the 10th Mountain Division Foundation, Inc., Box 1, Colorado Springs, CO 80901.

If any of you are interested in building a Hut as a memorial to a loved one or would like more information about this plan, please contact me at 1280 Ute Avenue, Aspen, CO 81611 or call me at my office 303-925-3481 or home 303-925-7327.

